

Hype or Hope?

The Democratic Values of Swedish Hyperlocals in the Media Ecology

Lottie Jangdal

Main supervisor: Professor Lars Nord

Co-supervisor: Ass. Professor Elisabeth Stúr

Faculty of Science, Technology and Media

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Hyper or Hope?

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Faculty of Science, Technology and Media

Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall

Phone: +46 (0)10 142 80 00

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Abstract

Local media are often credited with an integral role in the local community, tying individuals together in a shared identity or community, where local news can foster community engagement and audience participation, providing more agency in democratic processes (Lie, 2018b; Nelson & Kim, 2020; Wenzel, 2019).

This doctoral compilation thesis focuses on so-called “hyperlocal media”, which are typically citizen-led, participatory and largely independent (Turner, 2015), with content concentrated to a small geographically defined community (Radcliffe, 2012).

Earlier research about hyperlocals has mostly concentrated on presence and sustainability (Harte, Howells, & Williams, 2019), but the most relevant aspects today are not only where they exist or their financial issues. Instead, it is more interesting to analyse their democratic contributions and triangulate how they fit into today’s hybrid media system, where hyperlocal media is a comparatively new tributary in the so-called “media ecology”.

Herein, five adjacent studies aim to address areas that are less researched. Swedish hyperlocal media are studied from several vital democratic perspectives: geographic placement, media density, owner autonomy, audience interaction, source representation and civic information.

They are further analysed in the context of the main media functions as defined by a Swedish press inquiry (SOU 1995:37). The results combined clearly indicate that news from a close range has an important function in the media ecology, and that hyperlocal media can be significant to their audiences if they shoulder a gap not covered by other media providers.

Positioning the hyperlocals in today’s fragmented media landscape is an important contribution of this dissertation, shedding new light on autonomous news producers and their audience in the enormous competition between information providers, including traditional media such as newspapers, TV and radio with their digital platforms, international tech giants, social media, citizens distributing content and alternative media.

Sammanfattning

Lokala medier tillskrivs ofta en integrerande roll i det lokala samhället. De knyter samman individer i en delad identitet eller gemenskap, där lokala nyheter kan främja samhällsengagemang och publikdeltagande, vilket ger ökade möjligheter att påverka i demokratiska processer (Lie, 2018b; Nelson & Kim, 2020; Wenzel, 2019).

Denna artikelbaserade doktorsavhandling fokuserar på så kallade "hyperlokala medier" som vanligtvis är medborgarledda och till stor del oberoende (Turner, 2015), med ett innehåll inriktat på ett begränsat geografiskt område (Radcliffe, 2012).

Tidigare forskning om hyperlokala medier har mestadels fokuserat på närvaro och hållbarhet (Harte m.fl., 2019) men de mest relevanta aspekterna i dag är inte bara var de finns eller deras ekonomiska situation. I stället är det mer intressant att analysera deras demokratiska bidrag och triangulera hur de passar in i dagens hybrida mediasystem, där hyperlokala medier jämförelsevis är ny biflod i den så kallade "medieekologin".

Här syftar fem angränsande studier till att behandla områden som är mindre utforskade. Avhandlingen undersöker svenska hyperlokala medier ur flera viktiga demokratiska perspektiv: geografisk placering, mediatäthet, ägarautonomi, publikinteraktion, källrepresentation och medborgerlig information.

De analyseras i kontexten av mediernas huvudsakliga uppgifter, definierade av en svensk pressutredning (SOU 1995:37). Resultaten visar tydligt att nyheter från nära håll har en viktig funktion i medieekologin, och att hyperlokala medier kan vara angelägna för sin publik om de axlar en annan roll än andra medieleverantörer.

Att positionera hyperlokala medier i dagens fragmenterade medielandskap är ett viktigt bidrag i denna avhandling, inklusive att belysa autonoma nyhetsproducenter och deras publik i den enorma konkurrensen bland alla informationsleverantörer, inklusive traditionella medier som tidningar, tv och radio med deras digitala plattformar, internationella teknikjättar, sociala medier, medborgare som distribuerar innehåll och alternativa medier.

List of Articles

Article I

Local Democracy and the Media: Can Hyperlocals Fill the Gap?
Published in the special issue *Hyperlocal Media in the Nordic Region*, in *Nordicom Review*, 2019.

Article II

Hyperlocal Journalism and PR: Diversity in Roles and Interactions
Co-written with Asta Cepaite-Nilsson and Elisabeth Stúr.
Published in *Observatorio*, 2019.

Article III

Hyperlocals Matter: Prioritising Politics When Others Don't
Published in *Journalism Practice*, 2021.

Article IV

The Importance of Being Nearest: Audience Perceptions of
Hyperlocal Media in Sweden
Published in *Problemi dell'informazione*, 2021.

Article V

Towards (Hyper)Local Public Sphere: Comparison of Civic
Engagement Across the Global North
Co-written with Jaana Hujanen, Olga Dovbysh and Katja Lehtisaari.
Published in the special issue *Spaces, Places, and Geographies of Public
Spheres*, in *Media and Communication*, 2021.

Introduction

Local journalism has been my focus since I started studying media and communication in 1988. During my education, I was very fortunate to work part-time as a reporter. The newspaper where I freelanced belonged to the party press and was significantly smaller than the family-owned large daily in the same town, where also public service had editorial offices for both radio and TV broadcasting. In the early 1990s, the commercial national TV4 established a newsroom locally as well. In addition, there were local TV and radio stations, where we as students were able to broadcast. The diverse media situation spurred an exciting rivalry between the many news providers. The desire to be first and best was very apparent. If a competitor scored something unique, the others did not follow suit. As rewriting was a no-no back then, it was better to bank the idea, hash out a fresh angle and launch the story as your own later.

Intrigued by finding a local perspective, I embarked on a freelance career abroad after my degree. My niche was to find interesting Swedish stories and sell articles to local newspapers back home. When the Internet arrived, I was thrilled to be able to submit material quickly but could not imagine how the web would transform the entire field of media and my future field of work.

Today, stories transcend among different news providers at the speed of lightning. This bidirectional flow of information — tributaries of the current media landscape — can be correlated to concepts of ecology: the study of relationships between living organisms and their physical environment. Through ecological metaphors such as ecosystems, food chains, diversity and ecological niches, it is possible to analyse how the media system is changing (Chris W. Anderson, 2016; Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough, & Renninger, 2017). Within the frames of media ecology, trends suggest that when blind spots (or thematical issues) are not covered by local media, they are neither likely “brought onto the national mediated agenda, at least not from the periphery, rural or regional points of view” (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a, p. 11).

During the late 1990s, I was working at a local newspaper in a rural community in north-western Canada. Many important topics never saw the light of day due to questionable ethics on the part of the publisher. I realized there was a gap to fill. Together with three fellow reporters I left traditional media and launched a quarterly regional news magazine that focused on local issues and culture, with a strong sense of place. This perspective is still important to me, even though I have left my entrepreneurial venture, returned to Sweden, resumed a career within traditional media, and as for the last ten years have resided within academia, educating future journalists.

In 2016, I was thrilled to get the opportunity to participate in a research project about hyperlocal media — locally focused reporting targeting a well-defined geographic community and usually delivered online (e.g. Metzgar, Kurpius, & Rowley, 2011; Pavlik, 2013; Radcliffe, 2012). The phenomenon is the focus of this dissertation.

The media development on this side of the millennium has had large implications for local news. The industry in Sweden is characterized by both centralizations and consolidations. Nearly every second local newsroom of the daily newspapers has closed (Nygren, Leckner, & Tenor, 2018), and now only six media companies own over 90 per cent of the daily newspapers in Sweden (Nygren, 2020).

In the world at large, the foundations of journalistic values such as objectivity and impartiality have been strongly shaken throughout the twentieth century. Technological changes, globalization and increasing public distrust challenge the media's distinctive position in society (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021).

My hometown, where I live once again, is a textbook example of the changes seen in the industry during the last two decades. The government-subsidized second newspaper, where I started working as a reporter, was first acquired by the larger daily and eventually shut down after 115 years of producing news. The ownership structure of the sole remaining newspaper has gone from being a family business, to be incorporated into a regional media group, and subsequently purchased by a national news corporation. Several of the local radio and TV stations that existed when I entered the field have disappeared, and in 2014 the newsroom for commercial TV4 shut down.

The changes in my town mirror the transformation in Sweden in general, which will be described under the headline The Changing Media Landscape.

Anchored in democracy theory, this dissertation will examine the values of hyperlocal media in Sweden from several different perspectives: geographic placement, media density, owner autonomy, audience interaction, source representation and civic information. These aspects contain levels of democratic significance and are important for understanding hyperlocals in today's media ecology.

Disposition of Dissertation

With this introduction I will summarize the most important findings of the studies included in this compilation thesis and analyse my results from a broader perspective.

The introduction consists of several parts. It takes its starting point in the theoretical framework, with a chapter on the democratic significance of media. It is subsequently narrowed down to the impact of local media presence. Next, the changing media landscape in Sweden is described, with a brief historical retrospective and a focus on the digitalization of the industry. In all, this provides an important context for my research field: the niche of hyperlocal media in the media ecology — a concept that is defined and presented thereafter.

This is followed by the purpose of the dissertation and the associated research questions. I also reflect on my scientific perspective and methodological approach.

After that, the results of my studies are presented and discussed in relation to democratic values and media functions. Finally, I provide a summary of each of my five published articles, which are included in this dissertation and incorporated at the end.

Theoretical Framework and Context

The Democratic Significance of Media

There is extensive literature about how media can contribute to democracy by, for example, providing freedom of expression, promoting awareness of the demands of marginalized groups and holding the powerful accountable (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). The relationship between democracy on the one hand, and media and journalism on the other, can be described in terms of a "social contract" (e.g. McQuail, 1992; Strömbäck, 2004). This two-way dependency endorses the notion that journalism requires democracy for its freedom and independence of media from the state and, in turn, democracy needs journalism for civic information, public discussions about political issues and as a watchdog function.

The connection between democracy and the media has been articulated through theories about the public sphere since the 1960s. It is generally recognized that for modern democracies to function, it is imperative that people consume news, take an active interest in politics and participate in elections (Habermas, 1989). From a citizens' perspective, people need to participate to influence their surroundings in order to form a better world or to prevent it from changing for the worse (Dahl, 1998).

In Sweden, the democratic roles of media were first formalized during the 1970s. A press inquiry in 1972 had a particularly large impact (Strömbäck, 2003). It analysed the role of mass media in relation to Swedish democracy and formulated four central functions (in Swedish "funktioner") for the press (SOU 1975:79, pp. 127–129):

The mass media should provide the information necessary for citizens to be able to take a stand on societal issues. The elected representatives should through mass media receive ongoing information about the views of individuals and organizations on political issues.

The mass media should independently or as spokespeople for organized societal interests comment on the course of events in society.

The mass media should as the representatives of the public scrutinize and control the influential in society.

The mass media should promote communication within and between political, trade union and non-profit groups in society.

Gradually, however, criticism arose that the approach was too centred on society, rather than the needs of citizens, which a new press inquiry took note of (SOU 1995:37, p. 158). The new report formulated three functions (in Swedish "uppgifter"), all of which were considered of particular importance for free opinion formation (SOU 1995:37, p. 159):

The information function; the responsibility to provide citizens with such information that they freely and independently can take a stand on societal issues.

The scrutinizing function; the responsibility to operate as independent actors and scrutinize the influential in society.

The forum function; the responsibility to allow different opinions and cultural expressions to be heard.

A decade later, another press inquiry — with a focus on diversity and reach — referred to the same functions (SOU 2006:8, p. 13). No revisions in this regard have been implemented since.

National, regional and local media naturally have different coverage areas, which in turn affect their choices of content and focus. Since local media are the ones that monitor politics and elections on the local level, the absence of editorial presence has implications. Several researchers (e.g. Baker, 2006; Dahl, 2002; Firmstone & Coleman, 2014; Gandour, 2016; Nord & Strömbäck, 2012) have pointed to how the lack of media coverage is ultimately a question of democracy, and that media centralization poses problems for public dialogue, which can be detrimental on local levels and harm the political discourse (van Kerkhoven, 2020). Fenton (2016) has argued for the plurality of ownership in order to ensure that communities have access to a diverse range of media and to prevent the excessive concentration of media ownership: "Only then can the relationship between news media and democracy have any chance of survival" (p. 40).

The Swedish media system has been characterized as democratic corporatist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), although these authors have later reflected that there is a risk of oversimplifying the processes and features involved (Hallin & Mancini, 2017). Today, Sweden has a dual

model of public service and commercial broadcasting (Strömbäck & Luengo, 2008), along with a high degree of professionalization and a strong state role in media policymaking (Wadbring & Ohlsson, 2021).

This is not unique to Sweden. All Nordic countries are democracies with traditionally strong local media, stable regional public services and emerging hyperlocal media (Lindén, Morlandstø, & Nygren, 2021). The model with strong and institutionalized media freedom has been referred to as the “Nordic media welfare state” (Syvertsen, Mjøs, Moe, & Enli, 2014). Public service and media subsidies are the two most important tools in the government’s media policy toolbox, with which the political system can support the media’s role in democracy, but without going in and politically controlling the media’s content (Nord & Ots, 2019). One such example in Sweden is the so-called “white spots support”, a government funding to strengthen democracy by promoting public access to independent news coverage throughout the country (Nesser, 2021).

Which model of democracy a country resembles or is striving to become does not only depend on its citizens and their political representatives. Of large importance is also how media and journalism contribute (Strömbäck, 2005), for example regarding civic information, social representation and the watchdog function. Strömbäck therefore argues that news standards cannot be addressed in isolation of models of democracy.

A common distinction identifies two major *groups* of models: the liberal and the republican. Simply put, the liberal is a minimalist concept of democracy, which emphasizes the role of citizens in selecting representatives through voting. The republican model is a maximalist position, focusing on direct participation (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021).

In a comparison of four models of democracy, spanning both groups mentioned above, Strömbäck shows how the implications for journalism increase (Strömbäck, 2005). They go from respecting democratic procedures and media acting as a watchdog in the first model (procedural democracy) to focusing on the political actors in the second (competitive democracy). In the third model (participatory democracy), media need to mobilize the citizens’ interest, engagement

and participation in public life, and link citizens together. The most far-reaching media implications are found in the fourth model (deliberative democracy), where the media must act for inclusive discussions and mobilize citizens' interest, engagement and participation in public discussions, and link discussants to each other (Strömbäck, 2005, p. 341). Trappel and Tomaz (2021) agree that it is crucial to clarify the conceptual assumptions about democracy that lead to normative expectations for the media. If media do not comply with certain normative standards, they are unlikely to play a favourable role, the authors assert.

For the purpose of this dissertation, it is not relevant nor feasible to present and discuss the breadth of different models of democracy that exist, as this falls more under the umbrella of political science. It is relevant, however, to note that all models have implications for the media, which in turn affect democratic significance.

Impact of Local Media Presence

Local news is a broad category that includes multiple media providers and platforms. The most obvious are traditional local media: newspapers, TV and radio. Truly local news involves a range of content, all of which has proximity as the principal news value (Reader & Hatcher, 2020).

A long tradition of research has demonstrated the strong connection between local journalism and local community in both metropolitan and rural areas (Kleis Nielsen, 2015a). According to Baines (2012), local media generate and reinforce representations of place and, through the dimensions of connectivity and representation, strengthen people's sense of belonging. Such media create a communicative space of civic, social and cultural engagement, which in turn fosters economic interactions.

Local media are further considered to be crucial elements in the political debate (Kaufhold, Valenzuela, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010). Kleis Nielsen (2015b) articulated that it is important to critically reassess concepts that assume the existence of coherent democratic public spheres and media systems, as the processes of the localized public

sphere and civic engagement are closely connected to local media available.

One dilemma of the ongoing media development is the reduced diversity in local journalism, both in terms of fewer media companies but also the aligned content due to consolidations (Halvorsen, Bjerke, & Aker, 2021). Several scholars have voiced their concerns about the survival of local facilitators of civic engagement and the democratic process (Carson, Muller, Martin, & Simons, 2016; Fenton, 2011; Kleis Nielsen, 2015b). In the United States, for example, cities have experienced significant drops in civic engagement following the closure of local newspapers (Shaker, 2014). Shaker (2009) noted that local media are important for local political knowledge, and that inhabitants who are knowledgeable about local politics do not mirror the profile of those who are well informed about national politics. In addition, another American study (Gao, Lee, & Murphy, 2019) found that expenses increase for local authorities when a local newspaper closes down.

Due to media closures, but also because of new digital media habits, traditional local news media are no longer the obvious entrance to local information for all citizens, for example during the electoral process. Social media has taken over as a hub for large groups of voters in the information flow (Nord & Nygren, 2019). There are, nevertheless, important differences between social media and local news media. Although platforms such as Facebook have networking possibilities that enable new forms of online mobilization and interaction, it is not their prerogative to offer impartial or objective sources of information. The local press, on the other hand, constitutes a shared public sphere in which news consumers can receive information and gain awareness of local events, politics and volunteering, tying individuals together in a shared identity or community (Lie, 2018a, 2018b).

Firmstone and Coleman (2014) have cautioned that we are in a period of transition with new notions of democratic citizenship due to digitalization. Firmstone has further emphasized the importance of ensuring that future policies and actions are justified when “bolstering” the democratic value of local news, as audiences for local

news are larger than ever, but “the challenge of making content about civic issues interesting to them persists” (Firmstone, 2016, p. 936).

According to Radcliffe (2012), visibility and engagement in dialogue with the local population is a valuable opportunity to identify local needs, learn about the local community and win trust. In addition, local news can foster audience participation, providing communities with more agency in democratic processes as societal engagement is closely affiliated with media consumption (Nelson & Kim, 2020; Wenzel, 2019).

What people actually experience as informative and useful local journalism is coined by Costera Meijer (2020) as “valuable journalism”, both from a democratic and a commercial perspective, which van Kerkhoven (2020, p. 252) agrees with: “Local news has reclaimed attention and importance, both as a foundation for democracy and as a commercially attractive product.” A local community can be constituted through several forms of connections to the physical place, and the local community can also include former residents and second-home dwellers (Halvorsen, 2021).

Another important perspective is that research has found that young people interested in society take part in news media at a much higher level than those who evaluate their public interest as low (Andersson, 2019). Media and journalism are thus vital mediators of local culture and identity in everyday life as well as in framing the past, present and future of local societies (Lindén, 2017; Skogerbo & Winsvold, 2011).

Close ties are not unproblematic, though. Empirical research about local and hyperlocal media in Australia revealed an interesting paradox of distance. While closeness between newsrooms and audiences was found to develop a sense of community, media outlets at a greater distance from smaller towns were found to be more likely to offer balanced political coverage of public-interest matters (Freeman, 2020).

The Changing Media Landscape

For more than 300 years, newspapers have dominated the media landscape in Sweden (Weibull & Wadbring, 2020). The newspaper industry has traditionally been locally anchored, providing a marketplace for the local community as well as being the dedicated arena for the local public sphere (Weibull, 2000).

Advertising began to play an important role in media development during the 1800s (Gustafsson, 2005). Gustafsson argues that without advertising we would not have had any mass media, and that advertising as a source of funding is a prerequisite for a multimedia system with diversity.

In Sweden, radio broadcasting started in the 1920s, followed by TV 30 years later. In the early 1960s, regional radio broadcasts were initiated. As in many other countries, this was followed by increasing demands for broadcasting outside of public services, with commercial actors wanting to establish private, advertising-financed radio and television. In 1979, the so-called "near radio" was allowed. It had to be locally produced and limited to an area 5 kilometres from the transmitter. It was not until the 1990s that commercial radio and TV were permitted in Sweden (Weibull & Wadbring, 2020).

This brought a surge of local stations with very local content. Around this time, public service radio was reorganized into a separate company with both national and regional channels. Twenty-five regional stations now cover all of the 21 counties in Sweden (Radiofakta, 2021).

After the turn to this century, the map of the Swedish media landscape has been redrawn in terms of ownership and power. Since 2004, nearly every second local newsroom of the daily newspapers has closed (Nygren et al., 2018). In October 2020, only six media companies owned over 90 per cent of the daily newspapers in Sweden (Nygren, 2020). A recent account regarding the status of journalism in the country confirms that the ownership concentration is increasing, but that the number of newsrooms for now appears stable (Carlsson, 2021).

The number of freesheets (newspapers that are distributed free of charge, paid for by their advertisers) has also decreased significantly,

which has further reduced the amount of local information available. A study published in 2005 estimated the number of titles at as many as 350 in Sweden (Andersson & Wadbring, 2005), whereas by 2017 they had reduced to 291 (Gratistidningarna, 2017). Today, a fifth of Sweden's 290 municipalities now lack a freesheet (Gratistidningarna, 2021).

The decline of local and regional media is visible in most Western countries, leaving gaps in geographic news coverage (Kleis Nielsen, 2015b; Radcliffe, 2012, 2015). The biggest change in the Swedish media history came with the development of the Internet and the advent of digital media platforms, primarily on this side of the millennium. Digitalization has had a pivotal effect on the media structure. Over time, online services have become a natural part of the public broadcasters as well (Nord & Grusell, 2012). The digital renewal of public services in Sweden has amounted to new hybrid production practices, which has a societal significance for news in the digital age both on the local and national level, with issues framed and interpreted in such a way that they become relevant and usable to each reader individually (Widholm & Appelgren, 2022).

The rapid digitalization process (here interpreted as the use of digital technologies to change a business model and provide new value-producing opportunities) has amounted to a gradual transition to journalism online and social media, which in turn has impacted the basic conditions for journalism overall. For example, the only commercial TV channel with news production in Sweden, TV4, closed all of its 21 regional newsrooms in 2014 (Nygren et al., 2018).

There have been, however, deliberate efforts to increase local TV presence. During 2021, Swedish Television launched four new local newsrooms, and they are currently planning to have a presence in 50 cities by 2024 — an increase of 25 per cent in three years' time (SVT, 2021).

News, however, is no longer only considered a distinct commodity produced by journalists and shared with audiences by established media organizations. According to Arnold and Blackman (2021), mainstream media have lost traction in the ultra-local space. Professional journalists have become only one group among many

different producers of local information content, and as such have partly lost power over local agendas (Lindén et al., 2021).

Today, news is a concept in “flux” — something that constantly changes and is shared across many different platforms with alliances spanning from human to artificial intelligence. Not only can the audience enjoy an almost endless supply of information regardless of time and space, but they can also create and spread their own content. They are hence not as dependent on media companies for receiving local information (Wadbring & Jangdal, 2019).

Another aspect of digitalization is the significantly lowered threshold for starting a media company, since the cost of distributing news digitally is a fraction of newspaper printing and distribution. New agents can now access the public space independently and become alternatives to legacy media (Hansen, 2015). In Sweden, there is an increasing occurrence of local news sites online (Nygren et al., 2018), with no connection to legacy media, often situated in large towns, suburbs and industrial municipalities (Jangdal, 2019; Nygren et al., 2018, Nygren & Tenor, 2019).

Media Consumption Today

In Sweden, media usage has traditionally been extensive, with high subscription levels and a robust public service (Weibull & Wadbring, 2020). In 2020, the country experienced a record-high media consumption of almost seven hours per day per person, likely due to the extraordinary Covid-19 pandemic situation. Audiovisual media was the most popular, but half of the population also had access to a subscribed daily newspaper (Hellingwerf, 2021).

Around 90 per cent of the population in Sweden aged 16–85 say they are interested in news about their own municipality and about hyperlocal content — what happens in their own immediate area (Andersson & Ahlbom, 2018).

The Media Ecology

The local media landscape is becoming more of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), where different forms of news providers compete with traditional media, also known as legacy media. The rapid changes have led to a redistribution of power in the local community (Lindén et al., 2021). Different types of news providers and platforms complement each other, which continually opens up opportunities for additional actors and possibilities, and where old and new local media live side by side (Chris W. Anderson, 2016; Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009; Nygren, 2018).

The term “media ecology” was formally introduced in 1968 by the researcher Neil Postman (Strate, 2002). According to Postman (1998), a technological change can be ecological, with implications for society at large. For example, when the printing press started to get widely used during the sixteenth century it not only changed the media industry, but it also changed the Western world.

In response to the changes in news distribution, where social media has been given a far greater role in news dissemination, media researchers have often taken an ecological perspective on news coverage (Chris W. Anderson, 2016; Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019b; Nygren, 2016). Nygren (2019) identifies five spheres of local media: local subscription-based newspapers, regional public service media, hyperlocal media outlets, media produced by local municipalities and social media such as Facebook. Twitter, municipality websites and local bloggers are also part of the media ecology nowadays, but at significantly lower levels (Nygren & Tenor, 2019). For people under the age of 50, Facebook is the most used source for local information. In addition, people contribute to social media groups much more than to legacy media (Nygren & Leckner, 2016). Another important aspect regarding social media is that the platforms can provide traditional local media with an additional arena for dialogue with their audiences, as well as for research, newsgathering and for distribution of news (Appelberg, 2018).

Even though the digital transformation has changed media habits (Facht & Ohlsson, 2019), studies have shown that local media still have

a central position in the media landscape (Kleis Nielsen, 2015a; Mathisen, 2013) but in fierce competition with global giants such as Google and Facebook and other free content. Journalism in the digital society cannot be organized in the same way as during the pre-digital society. Instead of competing, the media must find common solutions (Lindén, 2021). A lively local news ecosystem is vital to a local community, where news media inform people as voters, foster integration and are key to political checks and balances (van Kerkhoven, 2020).

A Norwegian study of blind spots and diversity in a local media landscape (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019c) raises the question of how local and regional newsrooms manage their agenda-setting power, and how these editorial choices impact public discourse and opinion making. In addition, local or regional press deal with national issues “to inform citizens and to interpret consequences and impact for the communities in the region, as well as to fulfil a role as a voice on behalf of the periphery” (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019c, p. 84).

An online local newspaper can have a prominent role in the media ecology, according to Halvorsen (2021): “It helps, in interaction with local social media, to glue the geographically dispersed local community together” (Halvorsen, 2021, p. 250). In the UK, hyperlocal media symbolizes a twenty-first century style of community news provision, which exists on the margins of the local media ecosystem, according to Arnold and Blackman (2021).

The Concept of Hyperlocal Media

To address the terminology surrounding hyperlocal media, this section of the dissertation introduces common vocabulary utilized in conjunction with the concept. The phrases are formatted in italics below.

Very local news is far from new, but the expression *hyper-local* was first coined in 1991 by cable news pioneer John Hillis to describe locally inserted news in a 24-hour news channel (Pavlik, 2013). Other early vocabulary used to describe very local news includes *ultra-local* and *micro-local*, visualized by Wadbring (2007, p. 31) in a model to illustrate

how very local media relate to other local media, regional and national media, based on Høst (1996, p. 32), who documented print-based very local media in Norway.

Since the mid-2000s, the expression *hyperlocal media* has primarily been used when referring to new, online approaches providing local news (e.g. Barnett & Townend, 2015; Kurpius, Metzgar, & Rowley, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012). In 2011, Metzgar, Kurpius and Rowley proposed the following definition: “Hyperlocal media operations are geographically based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in the coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement” (p. 774). The authors recognized that the proposed definition does set boundaries but argued that it allows a range of operations to be classified as *HLMOs* (*hyperlocal media operations*). Their definition has been used in mapping the field of the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden and was also the point of departure for a special issue of *Nordicom Review: Hyperlocal Media in the Nordic Region*, in which the first article of this dissertation was published.

Although widely used, there have been critical voices raised about the definition. Harte, Tuner and Williams (2016) suggested that the web criterion is insufficient to distinguish hyperlocals from other news operations, as it is well known that almost all print-based local newspapers have launched subsidiary web operations. Cook, Geels, and Bakker (2016, p. 7) avoided the born-on-the-web principle by defining hyperlocal media as “online news or content services pertaining to a town, village, single postcode or another small, geographically defined community”.

Researchers have further recognized that hyperlocal media differ from *traditional local media*, also known as *legacy media*, which generally refers to newspapers, TV and radio, in being citizen-led, participatory and largely independent (Turner, 2015, p. 48). In addition to being independent of mainstream media, they are often positioned in opposition to them (Barnett & Townend, 2015; De Meulenaere, Courtois, & Ponnet, 2020). More recently, the term “*bottom-up hyperlocal media*” has been suggested (De Meulenaere et al., 2020).

I have used the definition by Metzgar and colleagues (2011) during this dissertation work but agree with other scholars that the web aspect is problematic, and maybe too limiting. I think it is more important to emphasize their autonomy, as proposed by Leckner, Tenor, and Nygren. In a survey of Swedish hyperlocals, they underscored the criterion of independence and narrowed their selection to “independent local news media operations not related, attached or sponsored by any established news media organization in Sweden” (2019, p. 6). The scholars Halvorsen and Bjerke (2019) also call for a more precise operationalization of the hyperlocal definition. In a mapping of Norwegian *web-indigenous start-ups*, they used the criterion independence of *legacy media groups*. I suggest a possible classification in this particular regard could be “operated independently of other media groups”.

The *hyperlocal practitioners* in Sweden span from professional entrepreneurs to local enthusiasts, both with and without journalistic experience. Practitioners are typically locally anchored individuals who perceive local media as important (Hujanen et al., 2020). Their ventures can both be for-profit and non-commercial (Tenor, 2017b). Dissatisfaction with the coverage of smaller communities in wider publications is a common motivation for the creation of *hyperlocal news outlets* (Leckner et al., 2019).

Most *hyperlocal news sites* in Sweden are run by a company, including one-person set-ups. A minority (20 per cent) of the online practitioners are hobbyists or non-profit associations. One in four makes a profit and slightly more than a third of the initiatives break even, while as much as 28 per cent run a deficit (Hujanen et al., 2020).

The situation is very similar in the other Nordic countries, where hyperlocals are at the crossroads of hobby, community work and media business (Hujanen et al., 2020; Hujanen, Lehtisaari, Lindén, & Grönlund, 2019). A recent study in Norway (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019) found that a great majority of 67 hyperlocals identified in the country follow a low-cost strategy based upon a large degree of self-exploitation by the editors. This mirrors earlier findings by several researchers, for example Kurpius et al. (2010), van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014), Leckner et al. (2019) and Hujanen et al. (2020). Drawing

on subcultural theory, Hess and Waller (2016, p. 199) even stated in their article *Hip to be Hyper* that they do not view hyperlocals as “a product that must generate income to survive” and conclude that some small hyperlocals should not be considered as commercial enterprises, but rather as social projects.

Most studies about hyperlocals have focused primarily on the online platform, which Leckner et al. (2019) contend has resulted in an incomplete picture of the *hyperlocal media field*, which can also be described as a cluster of *hyperlocal outlets* or individual operations, and argue for a broader approach including other platforms.

Tenor (2017a) has further pointed out that when talking about hyperlocals it is usually the journalistically driven hyperlocal news sites that are implied. However, there are other local players who yield local content, albeit not professional news, including sites for community participation, Facebook groups, aggregating news sites and local portals, stakeholder-driven sites, and politically driven news sites (Tenor, 2017a). According to the Swedish Journalist Union, journalism presupposes editorial management, and independent work with editorial material without the involvement of advertisers in the content (SJF, 2021). As such, information supplied by local groups that create public spaces on different platforms does not qualify as journalism but can still play a significant role in the local public sphere.

It is imperative to note that *hyperlocal content* — very local coverage — can be provided by several types of media operations. For example, a large media house can, from time to time or regularly, produce very local news from a geographically well-defined area, without having a local editorial presence or a local newsroom, but this would not be defined as hyperlocal media as it is not an independent operation.

In contrast to journalists making decisions “chained” to their desks and relying solely on news algorithms and data sets, “hyperlocalism has seen journalists break free from the shackles of modern newsroom culture” (Downman & Murray, 2020, p. 257). Working practices are not revolutionary but defined by adaptation rather than innovation (Arnold & Blackman, 2021).

Since the terminology hyperlocals was introduced, just over three decades have passed. During this time, scholars have paid attention

both to the definition and the development of this media segment. So far, most research on hyperlocal media has been concentrated around presence and sustainability (Harte et al., 2019). It is the aspect of viability “that has been pointed out as the main Achilles heel of hyperlocal operations” (Leckner et al., 2019, p. 18). Hyperlocal news sites often suffer from unsustainable revenue streams, and even professional, for-profit hyperlocals are known to have economic difficulties (Reader & Hatcher, 2020). As Downman and Murray (2020) summarize, although many of these enterprises are underpinned by a spirit of altruism and passion connected to the important democratic and social functions of journalism, they are not always sustainable. Non-profit media organizations have proved to fill information gaps and serve marginalized populations well, but such initiatives could benefit from employing formalized news production methods (Crittenden & Haywood, 2020).

Meanwhile, digitalization and other changes on the media market have significantly impacted the delivery of local news. As the bearing of local media and its importance for democracy is nevertheless the same, some research on hyperlocals has focused on the potential of these news sites to fill the news gaps due to retreating traditional providers (Downie & Schudson, 2009; Freedman, Fenton, Metykova, & Schlosberg, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Williams, Barnett, Harte, & Townend, 2014).

According to Chadha (2016, pp. 704–706), the function of hyperlocal practitioners is closely connected to their identity negotiation in the community and neighbourhood — reporting on the side of the community, serving the neighbourhood or being community campaigners. A fresh case study in Norway, yet to be published, has examined a new online-only hyperlocal with a niche focus on one community, also covered by an established newspaper. A quantitative comparison between the two showed a local patriotic lean by the hyperlocal and an important contribution to local democracy by putting local issues on the agenda and by providing an editorial voice in the societal debate. The successful entry was made possible by several factors, including a weakened newspaper and the opportunity

to go directly online. The great winners of the media competition, the author concludes, are the inhabitants (Halvorsen, 2022).

Several media researchers agree there is a need for more research about public and social spheres in connection to media. Bennett and Pfetsch (2018, p. 250) suggest “bringing politics and democracy back into the forefront of the field is crucial to better understand communication in fragmented public spheres, weak legacy media systems, and disrupted democracies”, and Hess and Gutsche (2018) argue the relevance of the social sphere when examining the social functions of journalism.

Harte, Williams, and Turner (2017) did examine the social value of hyperlocal journalism’s news-making, community-building and place-making roles, and discovered that they can enable and foster relationships of sustained reciprocity that improve and strengthen both hyperlocal news and the communities they serve.

So far, however, we know little about hyperlocal practitioners’ perceptions of their roles as a part of media ecosystems (Hujanen et al., 2020), while a lot of attention has been paid to their business models (C. W. Anderson, 2012; Cook et al., 2016; Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019; Kurpius et al., 2010; Leckner et al., 2019; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014). This is why I find it interesting to analyse their democratic values and how they fit into the media ecology.

Purpose and Research Questions

Based on the information provided so far, the purpose of this dissertation is to answer one overarching question: Which democratic values do the hyperlocal media have in the media ecology of Sweden? The purpose is fulfilled through five adjacent studies presented in five published articles enclosed. The research questions formulated in the respective articles can be summarized as follows:

Article I: Where are hyperlocal media located in terms of geographic location in relation to population density, and do they have the necessary set-ups in terms of digital communication channels to contribute to democracy in the local public sphere?

Article II: How do hyperlocal media practitioners perceive their role in the local society, particularly regarding owner autonomy including their dependence on, and interaction with, local public agencies and organizations?

Article III: What type of media content do hyperlocal media prioritize, and how does political media content differ between a normal news week and in an electoral context?

Article IV: How do news consumers perceive local news in general, and the role of hyperlocals in particular, in today's hybrid media ecology?

Article V: How do hyperlocal media practitioners perceive their civic role in the local public spheres of Sweden, Finland and Russia, and what types of practices have they implemented to enhance civic engagement?

Scientific Theory Perspective, Methods and Material

My viewpoint on research is that it can fulfil one or a combination of several important goals. It can investigate new terrain, explore and question already available information, solve a problem, fill the gaps of under-researched areas, or provide new understanding to a well-researched field by adding additional perspectives and insights to further nuance previous theories. The latter two are primarily in focus herein.

This dissertation appeals to the philosophical stance that structural features are interconnected with social activities, and that we cannot understand the one without the other (Layder, 1993, p. 56). I agree with Habermas (1989) that there is a need for collaboration between an interpreted understanding and causal explanation. For me, that means considering how and why hyperlocal media have come to be, which democratic values they can have and how this type of media segment can fit in today's media ecology. A broad approach was necessary to grasp the values of hyperlocal media, and hence my research includes a mix of research methods.

The five different articles in this compilation thesis are pieces in a research puzzle. To begin with, a systematic review of hyperlocal media in Sweden was carried out. All 290 municipalities in the country were researched on the Internet, including trade-related news sites. The results were compared to an open-source database (Institutet för mediestudier, 2019). The identified hyperlocals were thereafter studied online to determine their geographic locations in relation to population density, according to the categorizations metropolitan, urban, countryside and rural (Jordbruksverket, 2022; note: new reference here compared to Article I due to gov. update). My first study also included researching the hyperlocals' digital communication channels and platforms for audience dialogue. As this study partly overlapped with a qualitative interview study for Article II, I took the opportunity to add a question about democratic ambition to 16 hyperlocal practitioners (see Appendix I, number 9).

A possible limitation of the methodology for my first study is that it investigated hyperlocals with a digital presence, as most definitions contend that hyperlocals are usually delivered online (e.g. Metzgar et al., 2011; Pavlik, 2013; Radcliffe, 2012). However, it would not have been methodologically comparable to include other platforms for the digital dialogue mapping, nor for a planned digital content analysis in another study. It is important to note that the selection was not limited to those who *only* had a digital presence. Some published on several platforms, including print.

The second article had a qualitative approach with 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The hyperlocals were selected to ensure geographical representation across the country and different population densities. The interviews were carried out with an interview guide (see Appendix I) with a few themes aimed primarily at leading the conversation in the areas of hyperlocal roles and interactions in regard to public relations (PR), while encouraging the interviewees to speak as freely as possible.

Since the selection was based on the mapping in the first study, the practitioners interviewed hence represent hyperlocals with a digital presence, which potentially could be a limitation of the study. It is, however, not certain that the views regarding roles and interactions would necessarily be different if including other platforms. As only 19 interviews were carried out from among the 75 identified digital hyperlocals in the first study, it is possible that some perspectives were not discovered. The selection did, however, include practitioners from north to south and should fairly well illustrate the field of hyperlocals in Sweden.

The third article was based on a quantitative content analysis. First, however, the media density in the municipalities where the hyperlocals were located was examined. The municipalities were divided into three categories of media clusters, based on a media density categorization that I developed to form three even groups. Ten hyperlocals were then selected from each media cluster according to a systematic, standardized procedure. As this study was carried out during an election year in Sweden, the study took the opportunity to collect data from two separate weeks, to include a comparison between

a normal news week and an election week. The study included 1,008 articles, which were coded according to a multitude of variables (see Appendix II). An intra-coder reliability test was carried out with a satisfying result.

One limitation, although not significant, is that the material was collected from the start pages of the hyperlocal websites. This means that the material analysed was prioritized by the hyperlocals themselves, which was intentional. A total selection, or a random selection of all editorial material, could have rendered more exact percentages of topics, for example.

The method for the fourth article was qualitative, with the use of focus groups for data collection. Three hyperlocal media operations were strategically selected to illustrate variations in the field and geographic placement. All three had been in operation for more than five years, were operated independently of other media groups, and represented different financial models and output. As it is recommended that researchers facilitate three or four different groups to ensure a good respondent mix of perspectives and ideas (Lotich, 2011), the decision was made to organize three focus groups per community, nine in total. The focus group sessions were held face to face in the three respective communities. The participants were encouraged by a moderator to discuss their thoughts freely concerning three themes: local journalism, hyperlocal journalism and the role of local media (see Appendix III).

As the method encompassed three different locations with three focus groups in each, common findings are likely representative of hyperlocal media in Sweden, which is a strength in terms of method. Since the focus group participants needed to be well acquainted with both traditional and hyperlocal media, it was important that they were recruited by someone with local connections. The hyperlocal practitioners assisted by inviting voluntary readers. This potentially could have rendered more positive views about hyperlocal media, but steps were taken to mitigate this. For example, the practitioners were not present during the sessions and the views of the participants were anonymized when transcribed so that individual responses could not be tracked to either focus group or participant.

The fifth and final article used a comparative method, with a combination of qualitative interviews with hyperlocal media practitioners and an analysis of selected initiatives. The main data consisted of 53 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted during the period 2017–2019 in Sweden, Finland and Russia, of which I provided 23 from Sweden. An analysis of the 19 previously transcribed interviews from Article II was used and complemented by an additional four interviews regarding civic engagement specifically. The group of interviewees overall represented a somewhat diverse group of actors in terms of their professional background and current activities. Some respondents had professional experience in legacy media, while others had never worked as professional journalists. Some pursued commercial goals, while many had non-commercial motives. To gain a better understanding of the context and practices mentioned by the respondents in the interviews, hyperlocal websites were observed online, focusing on what forms of civic engagement were offered.

As a basis for this comparative research, three parallel sets of empirical data were used, independent of each other but within geographical proximity, which provided a unique opportunity to broaden the scope of understanding about hyperlocal media as agents of the local public sphere. The selection of the three countries studied was motivated mainly by the authors' access to comparable material in these countries, which is a limitation of the study. Although there are differences regarding the size and content of the interview data per country, in addition to the media systems in the countries, the data are still sufficient to illustrate key similarities and differences in practitioners' perceptions. The comparative analysis has contributed to my understanding of the values of hyperlocals in the Swedish media ecology.

Formalities

The five articles herein have been included with the permission of the publishers of the scientific journals in which they were published. All five are written in British English.

Whenever Swedish or Norwegian source materials were quoted, including quotes from interviewees and from other sources, I carried out the translation to English. This also applies to the titles in the reference list.

Two of the five articles are co-written. In the second article, Asta Cepaite Nilsson, Elisabeth Stúr and I are equal authors. We conducted a third of the interviews each and collaborated on the results. In the fifth article, I gathered the Swedish empirical data, Jaana Hujanen and Katja Lehtisaari the Finnish material, and Olga Dovbysh the Russian counterpart. Jointly, we analysed and discussed our findings. The remaining three articles are single authored by me.

Results and Discussion

Democratic Values of Hyperlocals

I believe that society's most important foundation is democracy. Around the world we can see how the democratic system is being challenged. Never before in the annual ranking of the press freedom index, launched in 2002, has the situation been classified as "very serious" in as many countries – 28 in total (Carlsson, 2022). Although the Nordic countries can be found at the top end of the list, with Norway, Denmark and Sweden currently placed first, second and third on the index, this is not something we can take for granted. In a time of openness of social space, decline of local journalism and expansion of global giants, the localized public spheres are impacted. Without independent media, free opinion formation and freedom of expression, there is no democracy. Declining diversity of news is also a threat. Citizens need civic information to be able to vote and media to make their voices heard. When the information landscape changes, we need to examine how new actors, such as hyperlocals, contribute.

As introduced earlier, up until recently much of the research about hyperlocal media had focused on presence and sustainability, including structures, resources and business models (Harte et al., 2019; Kurpius et al., 2010; Leckner et al., 2019; Nygren et al., 2018; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2015; Williams & Harte, 2016). Their potential democratic function was less studied. A growing field of hyperlocals and their democratic niche in the local public sphere and the media ecology was therefore of interest to research. Although each of the five articles in this compilation thesis has different aims and research questions, there is a common thread that boils down to their democratic values. The richness of this dissertation is that it examines Swedish hyperlocal media from different democracy perspectives.

To visualize the democratic perspectives investigated in this dissertation, I herein present a figure: "Building Blocks of Democracy". The figure resembles a pyramid, where each layer correlates to one of the three main media functions mentioned earlier, as defined by a Swedish press inquiry (SOU 1995:37): the information function, the

scrutinizing function and the forum function. I find it relevant to apply these functions, as hyperlocals operate in today's hybrid media system. It further allows me to relate the perspectives investigated in this dissertation to what is expected of media in general.

Within each building block of democracy, there is a headline for a perspective examined in this dissertation, followed by three bullets providing aspects that can impact the democratic significance. More examples can naturally be listed, but these are the key ones as I see it. On the subsequent pages, the figure is explained and discussed under three subheadings correlating to the layers of the pyramid.

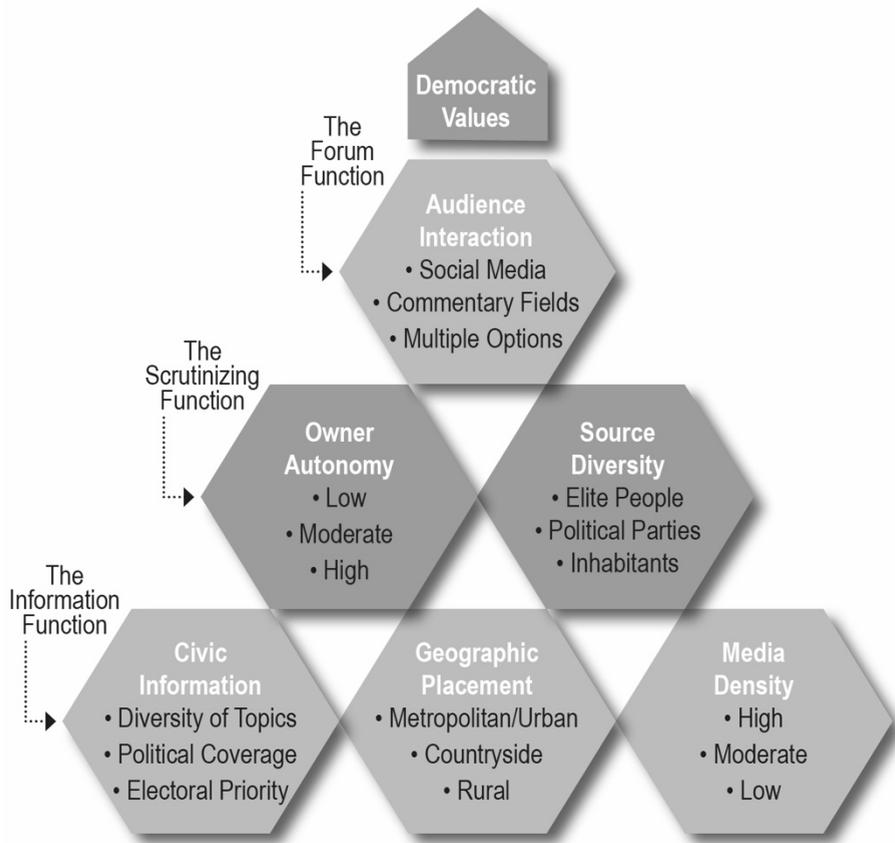


Figure 1

Building Blocks of Democracy.

Each block correlates to a democratic hyperlocal media perspective examined in this dissertation, with three main aspects listed that can impact its significance. The layers correspond to the media functions defined by a Swedish press inquiry (SOU 1995:37).

The Information Function

The base of the pyramid in Figure 1, with its three building blocks, corresponds to the first media function of three as stipulated by a Swedish press inquiry (SOU 1995:37, p. 159): the function to provide citizens with such information that they freely and independently can take a stand on societal issues.

The existence of this layer can be seen as a foundation for the other building blocks. For example, providing civic information is a prerequisite for source diversity above. Three democratic perspectives examined in this dissertation are placed in the bottom layer: civic information, geographic placement and media density. They all have relevance for the information function and will be addressed separately.

Civic Information

What type of civic information hyperlocal media provide is closely linked to democratic value. I recognize that democratic ambition can vary among practitioners and range from explicit objective and action to subordinate or non-existent aim. Nevertheless, the significance of very local media can, regardless of objective, have an important function, by raising local issues that otherwise would not be recognized or discussed.

I have listed three important aspects that influence the democratic value of civic information: diversity of topics, political coverage and electoral priority.

My content analysis (Article III) shows that hyperlocals publish a wide variety of topics, with a clear emphasis on local material (85 per cent) as opposed to regional or national. Although not surprising, this confirms that the hyperlocals really have a local focus — even more so than traditional local media (Wadbring & Jangdal, 2019).

The articles were also coded according to journalistic approach. Almost nine out of ten had a descriptive approach, which is when a journalistic news article focuses on objective reporting as opposed to a subjective evaluation found in a chronicle, analysis or review. Only 4 per cent of the articles took an interpretive approach, which differs

from traditional media, where journalism is increasingly becoming more interpretive (Roosvall & Widholm, 2019).

As the data set was collected on two separate occasions, during an election week as well as during a normal news week half a year prior to that, the editorial material could be compared. When considering all the news articles collected and coded in this study, regardless of the week, the main topic was clearly politics. This substantiates previous theories about hyperlocals. One of the recurring findings of the few international studies that have been undertaken regarding hyperlocal content is their common orientation towards producing news about local politics and civil society (Williams & Harte, 2016).

It is important to note that the coding definition for politics included articles about the election, reporting about the local council and the political process, the working environment for politicians, and stories with a clear political content. This means that the dominance of politics as a topic could have been even greater if the coding process had been less specific.

My analysis showed further that during the election week there was a dramatic increase in the number of political articles, which shows that hyperlocals both have the ambition and the ability to prioritize politics when needed, which is an important finding not researched previously.

Geographic Placement

As introduced earlier, recent media development with consolidation and centralization has resulted in areas in Sweden without any media representation, typically in less populated areas (Nygren & Althén, 2014; Nygren & Schjærff Engelbrecht, 2018; Nygren & Tenor, 2019). Sweden can geographically be characterized by long distances between settlements, a low population density in rural and remote areas, and harsh climate conditions, which influence the role local media play in local communication. According to Freeman (2020), physical spaces between places have generally been overlooked in journalism research but could add a useful dimension when examining the construction and consumption of local and hyperlocal news.

For hyperlocals, physical location is fundamental as they operate within a well-defined geographic community (Metzgar et al., 2011; Pavlik, 2013; Radcliffe, 2012). A Swedish study showed that hyperlocals tend to cover only one municipality each, or part of one (Leckner & Nygren, 2016). Since hyperlocal media have a well-defined geographic coverage area, where they are located is central to whether they can provide citizens with such information that they can freely and independently take a stance on societal issues.

The first article of this dissertation set out to map the presence of hyperlocals in Sweden, and their respective municipality location in terms of population density: metropolitan, urban, countryside or rural. In Figure 1, there are three levels of geographic placement: metropolitan/urban, countryside and rural. Here metropolitan and urban are combined, as there are not many metropolitan municipalities in Sweden.

Although hyperlocals were found to be established in all kinds of municipalities and geographical niches, a majority was located in metropolitan or urban municipalities.

Very few hyperlocals were rural — only four in total. Three of them were in western Sweden, close to the Norwegian border, and one in a remote community in northern Sweden. At the time of writing this introductory chapter, I discovered that three of the four no longer exist. This did not surprise me. Local news markets can be described as “organized social fields with great barriers to entry” (Halvorsen & Bjerke, 2019, p. 115), and previous studies have shown the vulnerability of hyperlocals from a sustainability perspective (e.g. Cook et al., 2016; Harte et al., 2019; Kurpius et al., 2010).

Where they are located according to this categorization cannot alone determine, of course, which democratic impact they have. Hyperlocal media can be just as important in a defined metropolitan area as those in a rural setting. The fact that hyperlocal media locate in more populated areas is likely for financial reasons, although that was not examined in the study. To make ends meet, they need to be able to attract advertisers or secure other income. Media that are ad-dependent have always been known to be dependent on the economic situation (Gustafsson, 2005).

Earlier theories about hyperlocal media (e.g. Radcliffe, 2015) suggest that they play an important democratic role in helping people root themselves in the local community and provide the geographic location with meaning.

The practitioners (Article II) emphasized that hyperlocals provide a conversation and information space for local governments and organizations, as well as a channel for local events that are relevant for the community. The focus group study (Article IV) revealed that respondents are partial to locally anchored editorial newsrooms and a sense of place. Locality is thus a critical perspective for both hyperlocal practitioners and their audiences.

As democracy theory has identified, a lack of media coverage is ultimately a question of democracy. Media centralization therefore poses problems for public dialogue (e.g. Baker, 2006; Dahl, 2002; Firmstone & Coleman, 2014; Gandour, 2016; Nord & Strömbäck, 2012), and the issue of geographic placement is hence of democratic relevance.

Media Density

The presence of other media in the municipalities where the hyperlocals are located was factored in during my third study. This is an important aspect in addition to geographic placement.

Although place is acquiring a more social meaning in the boundless digital era (Usher, 2019), I argue that hyperlocal media can be of more significance the less other media are present, as there are fewer alternatives for the audience to obtain local information.

In Figure 1, the range of density goes from high to moderate to low. The categorization was done prior to the content analysis of my third study. The municipalities in which the hyperlocal media outlets were located were researched to determine other media presence. The hyperlocals were sorted in sequence of additional newsrooms and then evenly divided into groups for a comparative option, which thus determined the classifications. The review clearly showed a lean towards locating in a community where other media already exist. I believe this is also tied to the sustainability issue discussed previously.

An important finding of my content analysis (Article III) is that media competition appears to be of significance. In municipalities with a low media presence, politics was in fact more common as an editorial topic than in moderate- and high-media-density areas. This suggests that hyperlocals tend to prioritize politics even more when nobody else does, or at least very few.

From a democracy perspective, this is essential. Hyperlocal media can provide fundamental information when others do not. This can have implications for participation in the electoral process, as democracy theorists have stated that it is imperative that people consume news, take an active interest in politics and participate in elections (Habermas, 1989).

The Scrutinizing Function

The second layer in the pyramid is connected to the second function as stipulated by a Swedish press inquiry (SOU 1995:37, p. 159): the function to operate as independent actors and scrutinize the influential in society. Two of the democratic perspectives examined in the dissertation are placed here as building blocks: owner autonomy and source diversity.

Owner Autonomy

Owner autonomy can be examined in terms of dependence on public agencies and local organizations. Having local connections and affiliations may in many cases be necessary for survival but can also compromise journalistic integrity. The layers in Figure 1 are not mutually exclusive, but owner autonomy can be indicative of how hyperlocal practitioners perceive their democratic role and sovereignty, which in turn can affect the function of scrutinizing. Drawing on interviews, Williams, Harte, and Turner (2015) found that many hyperlocals are “committed to producing news that fulfils the watchdog function of holding local elites to account” (Williams et al., 2015, p. 700).

A relevant question is whether, and how, the liaisons affect editorial content. As Mellado (2015) has found, journalistic professional roles can be associated with three independent dimensions of role

performance, based on the understanding of the audience as either citizens, clients or spectators.

Providing independent and balanced editorial content is by no means an easily achieved goal. I think it warrants a dedicated editor and staff, journalistic standards and systematic ethical procedures — all important aspects associated with owner autonomy.

In one of the studies included in this dissertation (Article II), we found various modes of interaction, from high levels of dependency to no collaboration at all. The relationship between hyperlocal media and local authorities is a complex process. Some interviewees voiced caution against such connections as it could contradict the media watchdog purpose. Others argued it was paramount for their existence, and that, in fact, it improved their democratic function. The diversity found is in line with previous research (e.g. Hujanen et al., 2019; Lindén, Hujanen, & Lehtisaari, 2019; Radcliffe, 2012, 2013, 2015; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2015). “Rather than considering hyperlocal media in the context of typical publication forms, these newcomers can be best described according to a set of dimensions” (Hujanen et al., 2019, p. 101).

As mentioned previously, a survey in Sweden revealed that the main motivations for hyperlocals are to raise the sense of community and strengthen the local identity, but the third most important aim is to be a forum for local democracy (Leckner et al., 2019). There are thus different motives for starting and running a hyperlocal media operation. It is further likely that with limited staff, one person may need to undertake contradictory roles, to both be a critical voice and sell advertising.

Not all hyperlocal practitioners are professional journalists, and consequently it is not possible to generalize, but it is safe to say that interaction and dependence can encompass a range of relations, including with the audience, public agents and organizations, both in terms of editorial production and business models, which can compromise or enhance democratic significance. Impartiality is ambiguous and difficult to quantify. *How* liaisons are handled is more relevant than *whether* those liaisons exist, I conclude.

In the comparative study of hyperlocals in the Global North (the co-authored Article V), interview data and digital observations revealed three civic roles of hyperlocal media: information provider, community builder and civic mediator. We could see that Nordic hyperlocal practitioners regarded themselves as an alternative to non-existing or negative-slanted professional news media, while Russian hyperlocals perceived themselves as a counterweight to biased and non-independent local professional media.

Therefore, it is difficult to apply a monitoring instrument to empirically assess and compare the performance of hyperlocals by surveying their structures of production and distribution, and ownership and governance, as is done with leading news media in mature democracies (e.g. Trappel & Tomaz, 2021).

It may be worth noting that while newspapers in Sweden tend to have an opinion editorial declaring political lean, hyperlocal media do not generally declare political affiliation.

Source Diversity

In order for a democracy to work, there needs to be a system for debate and bidirectional information supply (Nord & Strömbäck, 2004). Citizens need to know what elected politicians do and think, as well as receive information about current affairs and problems. At the same time, politicians need to be aware of citizens' opinions and values.

In Figure 1, the building block source diversity exemplifies three groups of spokespeople in editorial content: elite people, political parties and inhabitants. The elite can be considered a small group of powerful people who hold a disproportionate amount of wealth, privilege, political power or skill in a group. If only elite people would be used as sources, there would not be adequate representation in media to mirror the society. The same applies to political parties. If only certain parties would be represented, the democratic value would be lessened. The reason the word "inhabitants" is used instead of "citizens" is to not limit this group to people with citizenship.

The three groups are, of course, a simplified way to illustrate different spokespeople. As the representation of sources is of democratic importance for scrutinizing the influential in society,

I coded the data set extensively for the content analysis (Article III). My study showed that the political representation followed quite evenly the distribution of mandates in the Swedish government. The two largest parties were most frequently referenced, which was also the case in local legacy media during the election (Nord, Nygren, & Volny, 2019).

The study further revealed that local politicians are far more common as sources than regional or national politicians, which mirrors other studies of legacy media. Traditionally, local government has been considered the single most important news source for local newspapers in Sweden (Tenor & Nygren, 2017). An interesting finding in my study was that the main sources proved more diverse during the election week than during the normal news week. Allowing more voices in an electoral context can be one measure of democratic contribution.

If only elite spokespeople were used as sources, it would impact the editorial content. The same goes for if only selected political parties were used as sources. Having inhabitants as sources, often those affected by political decisions, is of great democratic importance. The more types of sources there are, the higher the democratic value – and hence the ability to scrutinize the influential in society.

The Forum Function

The top layer in the pyramid is connected to the third function as stipulated by a Swedish press inquiry (SOU 1995:37, p. 159): the function to allow different opinions and cultural expressions to be heard. One democratic perspective investigated in this dissertation belongs here: audience interaction.

Audience Interaction

Hyperlocal studies in the United Kingdom have previously indicated that practitioners identify their work as a form of active civic participation (Radcliffe, 2015). Turner (2015) concluded that hyperlocals can encourage unexpected forms of civic engagement, which is one aspect of democratic dialogue.

Research about hyperlocals has documented both ambition and intention, but some earlier studies have used practitioners' self-assessment as a method, which may not reveal the full picture. I therefore set out to examine for Article I whether, in fact, the hyperlocals in Sweden have the necessary communication channels to facilitate a digital democratic dialogue in the local public sphere.

I found that a majority of hyperlocals offered commentary fields, which was interesting after having observed how legacy media in Sweden have successively shut down commentary functions, in favour of steering discussions towards social media. The fact that hyperlocals provided commentary fields could have a positive effect on political participation and is also in line with reader preferences, which earlier studies have shown. According to Almgren and Olsson (2015), readers prefer to post comments on topics such as politics and healthcare.

Utilizing social media platforms is another way for hyperlocals to contribute to both democracy and community benefit, by offering a forum for debate where anyone can participate in the local public sphere. The fact that the majority of hyperlocals provide social media forums for debate, which my first study showed, indicates that they considered it important to participate on platforms where their audiences are. However, as the results showed that the number of social media options utilized by the hyperlocals is limited, they were hence not fully taking advantage of the vast options for interactivity that existed. A recent study in the UK revealed another limitation. In studying two hyperlocal Facebook pages, the analysis showed that whilst public opinion was formed over civic matters, directly challenging such authorities was rarely followed through (Turner, 2021).

Fostering public discussions requires ethics. Impartiality and equality are paramount journalistic ideals of relevance. As not all hyperlocal media entrepreneurs are journalists, this is a difficult, albeit not impossible, task.

In Figure 1, I exemplified three alternatives for the forum function: social media, commentary fields and multiple options. A wide variety of options could be argued to have the largest democratic significance, but it presupposes that an actual debate occurs. For example, a recent

study of regional newspapers in Norway revealed that public discussion is primarily a forum for the elites, although opinion pieces from grass-roots representatives are mostly shared (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2020).

A forum for debate is one type of audience interaction; another is producing content. In the UK, a study by Firmstone and Coleman (2014) looked at how hyperlocal sites have enabled citizens to engage in local democracies, due to the changing role of local news media, digital maturity and the engagement strategies of local governments. This is important as voluntary participation involving citizens in the process of producing content has the potential to boost civic engagement in public discourse (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013).

Citizen engagement cannot, however, be equated with "normative good". Citizen participation in the news-making process became a hopeful promise in the 1990s, but since then a bleak flip side to these utopian ideas has surfaced — a concept that Quandt (2018) calls "dark participation". It is important, though, not to confuse so-called "alternative media" and partisan-interest communication with community-oriented hyperlocals with a multidimensional content and news focus. Disinformation, social media, bots and astroturfing (the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organization) should not be overlooked as challenges in the digital democracy (García-Orosa, 2021).

In the comparative study of hyperlocals in the Global North (the co-authored Article V), we found that although hyperlocal media shared similar practices oriented towards civic engagement, the rationales behind similar practices differed. In other words, even if hyperlocal media act in comparable ways, practitioners seem to make sense of them differently.

Diversity in the Media Ecology

The changes on the media market have obviously affected all media actors. Not only has the technical development paved the way for new digital solutions, but the consolidation and centralization of traditional media have provided hyperlocals with an opportunity on the media market.

Previous research has shown that the definition of hyperlocal media is quite fragmented and diffused, as previously mentioned. They vary widely in type of funding, professional training, size of staff and ability to attract an audience (Kurpius et al., 2010). Therefore, Radcliffe (2015) argues that there is nothing that can be defined as a typical hyperlocal site, and no one who can be called a typical hyperlocal producer. They can range from digital hyperlocal projects, produced by one or two people, to “communal projects with submissions from many people, all of whom have a commitment to, and an interest in, maintaining processes of community within a locality” (Gulyás & Baines, 2020, p. 11). There is consequently no way to define a specific role that hyperlocal media have in the media ecology.

In today’s digital hybrid media system, it is a challenge for media outlets to both encompass journalistic professionalism and offer a sense of identity (Ugolini & Colantoni, 2017). My audience study (Article IV) revealed that media consumers recognize that hyperlocals contribute something different compared to other local media. The participants said that the hyperlocals provide a sense of place, and a pride of place. They felt that the hyperlocal content reflects their community.

Via the comparative approach in the co-authored Article V, we were able to conclude that journalists’ and media practitioners’ role conceptions should not be detached from their cultural contexts. The results combined clearly indicate that news from a close range has an important function in the media ecology, and if hyperlocal media shoulder a gap that exists, they become important to their audiences.

So, let me return to the title of this dissertation: *Hype or Hope? The Democratic Values of Swedish Hyperlocals in the Media Ecology*. There has been a recent research hype around the hyperlocal phenomenon.

Hyperlocal media have been feted as the answer to a largely receding mainstream local press (Kleis Nielsen, 2015b; Metzgar et al., 2011). A lot of research and scholarly discussions about hyperlocals have taken the legacy media downsizing and consolidations as their point of departure. I find this relevant as the last 20 years have been characterized by major changes for local news organizations and the publishing footprint.

After a few decades in the local media space, hyperlocal media continue to be championed as a hope “for journalism to reclaim authenticity, credibility and trust in the profession” (Arnold & Blackman, 2021, p. 1). According to Downman and Murray (2020), hyperlocal journalism has the capacity to unify and empower diverse communities despite being shrouded in a veil of uncertainty and experimentalism, which also makes them vulnerable.

While some media researchers suggest that hyperlocal media can take on monitorial and civic roles (e.g. Harcup, 2016), others are apprehensive that such ideals may be asking too much (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015), and that civic engagement is endangered (De Meulenaere et al., 2020). Just because the Internet is “open” does not warrant democratic practices. We also need to bear in mind that with a range of hyperlocal media practitioners and output, the democratic significance will vary.

I do not expect hyperlocals to replace legacy local media, but in the absence of traditional media or subservient coverage, hyperlocal media can be a democratic force to be reckoned with. I may conclude that hyperlocal media to a large extent have an ability to play a democratic role in the local news ecosystem, particularly in locations where other journalistic coverage is not performed, not performed well or performed from elsewhere. Building strong relationships with sources, readers and advertisers is key regardless of media type. My studies have shown how hyperlocals safeguard local content, expand political editorial coverage during elections, maintain a diversity of sources and are near their audiences not just in a geographical sense but also in editorial focus — thereby providing a sense of place. Their news also get picked up by other media providers, and as such, hyperlocals are important tributaries in the media ecology.

The idea of how news will sift through the ecosystem was anticipated in the early era of online news. Much-cited Bowman and Willis (2003) predicted two decades ago that the future would hold in store a “we media”, where audiences would participate in shaping the news — the social media reality we have today. In 2022, this is very apparent, where modern public spheres are overlapping, circulated and interactive.

Wikforss (2021) elaborates on how at the turn of the century we had a digital hope that the public conversation would finally be accessible to everyone, not just a select elite. Two decades later, we know that things are more complicated. A deep polarization in media has increased in Sweden in recent years (Grusell, Jendel, & Nord, 2022). The inequalities that previously existed have intensified, according to Wikforss (2021). Thus, citizen-led, online community media serving at a neighbourhood level with audience participation can play an important role. Whether this is carried out by hyperlocal media or other media providers is of lesser importance, I believe.

The figure presented in this dissertation, “Building Blocks of Democracy”, could be applied to analyse any local news operation. I argue that the more democratic building blocks a media outlet implements, the greater its democratic impact can be. In other words, the more democratic perspectives applied the better. If a media outlet provides outstanding civic information, scrutinizes the influential in society but fails to provide a forum for debate, it is not as democratically sound as another who adheres to all three main media functions (SOU 1995:37).

I want to underscore that I am aware that the boundaries of the building blocks are not obvious. They are not mutually exclusive, nor is their respective placement on the layers. For example, the scrutinizing function does not necessarily only include owner autonomy and source diversity. The topics are also relevant, now sorted under civic information on the bottom layer.

No graphic illustration can be all encompassing. To make it visibly understandable it needs to be simplified. Figure 1 is a visual image of my dissertation project and should not be understood as a complete depiction of all aspects of media democracy. In the future, other

researchers may well add other building blocks that are relevant when examining the democratic values of hyperlocal media. As hyperlocals span from professional entrepreneurs to local enthusiasts with a range of business models, it is only natural that their contribution also varies — among practitioners, within the different democratic building blocks and in terms of the main media functions.

As mentioned earlier, news is a concept in “flux”. There are many different factors that affect a media system. The conditions for how media operate are influenced by politics, technology, economy and the public. The technology progresses, media habits change, and the industry will adapt, not necessarily in this order. Consequently, future press inquiries may define new functions for the media, and the development of the media system will require ongoing studies about different media players in the local public sphere.

This dissertation offers a portrayal of the situation for hyperlocal media right now, but in five years, or ten, the situation will surely be different. My ambition is that this dissertation can contribute to an understanding of this media segment — how they came to be and what they are today. It may be hip to be hyper (Hess & Waller, 2016) but even if the hype trickles down, I am convinced that the hope will remain for very local news tributaries to fill the niche in the media ecology.

Future Research

For a deeper understanding of the dialogue impact of hyperlocal media, an analysis of the actual content and the participants would be beneficial, as it is not sufficient to only provide the structures for public debate. For example, who are the people that participate in the forums for debate that the hyperlocals provide, on social media or in the commentary fields, and what do they discuss?

Future research should also look more closely at the quality of the editorial content of hyperlocal media. A common finding in studies of local media is that they prioritize the role of glue and downplay the role of a magnifying glass (e.g. Mathisen, 2010). Even if hyperlocals contribute to a sense of community, it is vital that they adhere to

journalistic standards of objectivity and impartiality. Cheerleading news can be detrimental to media trust. The media, as power agents in democratic societies, should be questioned. It would therefore be interesting to see whether hyperlocal media in Sweden follow the media industry's press ethical system.

Article Summaries

Local Democracy and the Media

Can Hyperlocals Fill the Gap?

Local news media in Western countries are undergoing major changes, including cutbacks, centralization and consolidation. In this study, Sweden has been scanned to map the presence of digital hyperlocal media and to investigate which online channels of communication they offer their readers, to determine their set-up for democratic functions. The results reveal that very few hyperlocals are positioned in rural areas; instead, most of them favour metropolitan or urban municipalities. The hyperlocal media presence on social networks is limited to a few platforms, and about half of the hyperlocals offer commentary fields on their news sites. As the democratic structure varies, coupled with the fact that hyperlocals favour high-density population municipalities where traditional media already exist, this study indicates that the democracy dialogue in the local public sphere may be at risk.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published in the special issue *Hyperlocal Media in the Nordic Region* and is available in *Nordicom Review* at: <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2019-0027>

Hyperlocal Journalism and PR

Diversity in Roles and Interactions

Hyperlocal media has repeatedly been framed as a potential saviour of local journalism, but the democratic and civic role that is often ascribed to hyperlocals is not obvious or uncomplicated. Hyperlocals' vulnerable economic situation makes them dependent on free content, for example material produced by local councils or organizations. This paper investigates the role of hyperlocal media entrepreneurs and their interaction with local councils and other stakeholders. We examine how hyperlocal media entrepreneurs supply their communities with news in places with a media void, and how they perceive their role in

their communities. Findings from this qualitative study show that media entrepreneurs view their news production as an important part of the local community. They provide a forum for debate and information for citizens, local governments and organizations. Their service also includes a channel for local events relevant for the community. The interactions with the local governments vary, as does the hyperlocal entrepreneurs' evaluation of how the information provided by the councils can or should be handled. The relation between hyperlocal media entrepreneurs and local governments is a complex process, including both interrelated and contradictory goals.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Observatorio* at:

<https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS13120191278>

Hyperlocals Matter

Prioritising Politics When Others Don't

This study examines the democratic contribution of hyperlocal media in Sweden in an electoral context. A quantitative content analysis of digital news material is used to examine which topics are prioritised, and which actors get to participate in the local public sphere. Political content is further studied to learn whether it varies between a normal news week and a week during the election campaign. The analysis also examines whether there is a relationship between media density and editorial focus. The results indicate that this segment of hyperlocals — online and independent of legacy media — fills an important function on several democratic levels, including an increased level of editorial coverage of political topics towards an election, a wider distribution of sources and the facilitation of forums for debate.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Journalism Practice* at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1739551>

The Importance of Being Nearest

Audience Perceptions of Hyperlocal Media in Sweden

This study examines what news consumers in Sweden identify as important for local journalism, and how they regard the role of “hyperlocals” in relation to other media. Results reveal that respondents are partial to locally anchored editorial newsrooms, covet high standards when it comes to ethics and call for coverage that is representative of the area – in particular, positive news. The conclusions strengthen the earlier research finding that journalistic start-ups often pursue a closer and more reciprocal relationship with their audience, but also point to how hyperlocal media can be a natural part of the local media ecology. This adds new relevant information to the field of hyperlocal research, where the knowledge about the media-consumer perspective is limited.

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Problemi dell'informazione* at:

<https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1445/100127>

Towards (Hyper)Local Public Sphere

Comparison of Civic Engagement Across the Global North

The role of hyperlocal media is of increasing relevance as traditional local journalism experiences a decline due to centralization and consolidation. The affordances of the Internet and digital technologies also enable hyperlocal initiatives to enhance civic engagement in localities and serve as a place and resource for local deliberative processes. This study examines how the aims, perceptions and practices of hyperlocal media vary in three countries of the Global North – Sweden, Finland and Russia – and what implications this has for connectedness and civic engagement in local public spheres. The context of different media systems and local political regimes helps in exploring the possibilities and limitations of hyperlocals as agents of place-oriented civic engagement. The data include interviews with practitioners and analysis of selected hyperlocal media. Our

results indicate that hyperlocal media practitioners in all three countries aim to provide local people and communities with a voice, and to enhance resident engagement in local life. We reveal three civic roles of hyperlocal media: (i) information provider, (ii) community builder, and (iii) civic mediator. Practices of civic engagement used by hyperlocal media range from relying on civic journalism to fostering civic debates, and can be classified in two main categories: civic information and civic debate and interaction. The perceptions and practices of these hyperlocal media are, to some extent, similar because of comparable changes and challenges regarding the local media and public spheres. At the same time, the perceptions of civic roles vary, reflecting both the developments and differences in the countries' media spheres and political regimes. This research raises a critical question about hyperlocal practitioners' understanding of their own roles and aims, and in addition, how differences in media cultures and local regimes affect their performance as agents of local public spheres.

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Appendix I. Qualitative Interview Guide

Interview guide for in-depth semi-structured interviews with hyperlocal media practitioners in Sweden¹

Themes (numbered) and follow-up questions (lettered):

1. Identity

- a. Name and address of hyperlocal media outlet (operation/practice)
- b. Year of launch (duration of operation)
- c. Coverage area (editorial content)
- d. Size (scope in terms of publication and audience)
- e. Owner and publisher
- f. Background of initiator (journalist or other)
- g. Contact person

2. Summary of the hyperlocal media focus based on the material published

- a. Journalistic professional/amateur/for-profit/non-profit

3. Background of the hyperlocal media outlet

- a. Why here and now
- b. Purpose and structure/goal of the business
- c. Profile (how they see themselves in the context in which they operate)
- d. Image (what they want to convey/which image they want to portray of themselves and their businesses)

¹ The qualitative interviews were conducted during the autumn of 2015 and spring of 2016, during a three-year research project about local media in Sweden (project title in Swedish: Lokala medier i levande landsbygd). The material was used for Article II primarily, with one question applicable for Article I (number 9, posed to 16 practitioners). The interview guide included a few themes as it primarily aimed at leading the conversation in the areas of hyperlocal roles and interactions in relation to public relations (PR), while encouraging the interviewees to speak as freely as possible.

4. Publishing and content

- a. The distribution of content (what the publication looks like/which platforms are utilized/what the publishing schedule is, for example daily, weekly, etc.)
- b. Reasons for publishing choices
 - a. Editorial content and focus
 - b. The purpose of content

5. Audience and connection to the local community

- a. Who they think the audience is
- b. Involvement of the audience/interactivity
- c. The need for a hyperlocal media outlet in the area, based on the community and its inhabitants
- d. How they view their connection in the local community in which they operate

6. Collaboration with various stakeholders in the local community

- a. How they view collaboration with, for example, public agencies, businesses and organizations
- b. What collaborations they have/have had
- c. What the collaborations look like/consist of
- d. What the outcomes/results of those collaborations are/have been

7. Sustainability and strategies of hyperlocal media outlet

- a. What strategies they have/have had to keep the hyperlocal media outlet going
- b. Finance in relation to business
- c. Media competition (in the area of coverage/distribution)
- d. Sustainability in the long run (how they view the hyperlocal media practice in the future in order to survive and make a living from the business)

8. The view on local journalism and hyperlocal journalism

- a. How they view local journalism in relation to media development on the local media market
- b. The value of local coverage/reporting/watchdog function
- c. The role of the local reporter
- d. What local journalism is for them/how they view the role of local journalism in society in general
- e. Definition of local news
- f. How they perceive hyperlocal journalism (we can provide a background here)

9. Additional question (for Article I)

- a. How do you regard the democratic value of your media operation?

10. Categorization of the local media agency (we do this ourselves after the interviews)

- a. Category (include a variety of media outlets and geographical location)
- b. Participation in the project or not (motivation)

Appendix II. Coding Instructions for Content Analysis

The coding instructions were utilized by the main coder and provided for an intra-coder reliability test²

A. Article number

The number represents the articles from 1 to 1,008.

B. Article code

The code represents:

- the collection week (1 or 2)
- media cluster: low, moderate or high (L, M or H)
- hyperlocal media company in cluster (1–10)
- day of week (Mo, Tu, We, Th, Fr, Sa or Su)
- article sampled (1, 2 or 3)

Example: 1M8Fr3 = article collected during first sample (normal news week), media cluster moderate, number 8 of 10 hyperlocals in the cluster, article published Friday that week, third placement of the teasers on the start page

C. Week

The code represents collection week 1 (normal news week) or 2 (election week).

D. Media cluster

The code represents media density in municipality of hyperlocal media outlet.

1. Low = 0–2 newsrooms in addition to the hyperlocal
2. Moderate = 3–6 newsrooms in addition to the hyperlocal
3. High = 7 or more newsrooms in addition to the hyperlocal

E. Genre

1. News article/feature

² The collection of data was carried out during an electoral week in September 2018, and during a normal news week exactly half a year prior to that; N = 1,008. The empirical data was used for Article III.

2. Analysis/opinion editorial/chronicle
3. Debate/letter to the editor
4. Not possible to determine

Note:

1. If the article is written and presented as an article, regardless of whether it is inspired by, or partly or fully originates from, a press release, it is coded as a news article, as it may be impossible to determine whether it is moderated by a journalist.
2. Interpretive material written by staff or contributors falls under this category.
3. If a story is submitted by a political party concerning their politics it is coded as a debate/letter to the editor regardless of whether it is slugged as a debate/letter to the editor.

F. Visual component

0. None
1. Picture/pictures
2. Slideshow
3. Video
4. Linked video (external)
5. Graphic/map/poster
6. Interactive graphic art
7. Live report
8. Two or more of the above

Note:

Beware that ads are sometimes placed within the article but are not components of the article. They shall not be accounted as visuals.

0. A photo byline, byline picture/illustration or logo does not count as a visual component, nor does a sound recording image.
2. Slideshow refers to when several images are available with a play button to rotate/show all. Several pictures do not count as a slideshow.

G. Main topic

1. Business/economy

2. Culture/entertainment
3. Sports
4. Politics/election
5. Social issues
6. Healthcare
7. Infrastructure/transportation/population
8. Education
9. Media
10. Accidents/disasters (bluelight)
11. Crime
12. Weather
13. Environment/climate
14. Leisure/lifestyle
15. Immigration
16. Other
17. Not possible to determine

Note:

The main topic is coded according to what dominates the article, particularly in headline and lead-in. If the article is slugged a particular topic, that categorization is used.

1. The housing market is included in business/economy. Business courses are coded business/economy, not education.
2. The topics entertainment and culture are combined and can, for example, include art, films, music, theatre, literature and events.
3. Sports covers organized competition sports events included in the National Sports Association (in Swedish: Riksidrottsförbundet).
4. Articles about the elections are coded politics, as are working environment for politicians, local council or municipality, or obvious reporting about the political process. If a political article is about a certain topic, the article is coded as such.
5. Social issues include articles about elderly/senior care and housing, social assistance, addiction, etc.
7. Issues pertaining to traffic, snow clearing and public areas are coded as infrastructure/transportation/population. If the focus of the article is

how infrastructure is affected by seasonal challenges, such as snow and snow clearing, it is coded as infrastructure.

8. Education refers to issues pertaining to elementary school, high school, college or university, private or public. If a school hosts a student concert the article is coded education, as it is part of its educational programme.

10. Missing persons and searches involving police/military and other organizations are coded as accidents/disasters as they are expected accidents/disasters or require resources as such.

11. Crime includes reporting on alleged charges, arrests, prosecutions and legal hearings, as well as reporting on criminal activity/statistics in general.

12. Weather refers to forecast stories or issues mainly relating to the weather.

13. Wildlife, such as animal counts, is coded environment/climate.

14. Articles about pets or hunting are coded leisure, as are yoga and recreational activities with no apparent competitive aspect.

17. Articles without a particular subject are coded as not possible to determine.

H. Main perspective

1. Local level

2. Regional level

3. National level

4. Not possible to determine

Note:

If the article does include a heading identifying geographic placement, verify by reading all parts of the article prior to coding.

1. If the article contains a local angle (for example a source) on a national issue, it is coded local.

2. If the perspective is national, but in a country other than Sweden, but a part of Sweden is affected, it is coded regional.

4. If the article covers two or more levels with equal focus, or if the main perspective is unclear, the article should be coded not possible to determine.

I. Dominant political party (with mandate in the Swedish parliament)

0. No party in the article
1. Socialdemokraterna (Social Democrats)
2. Vänsterpartiet (Left Party)
3. Miljöpartiet (Green Party)
4. Moderata samlingspartiet (Moderate Party)
5. Liberalerna (Liberals)
6. Centerpartiet (Centre Party)
7. Kristdemokraterna (Christian Democrats)
8. Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats)
9. Local party
10. Not possible to determine

Note:

Dominant party refers to which party is given dominance in the text.

10. If two or more are given equal presence, the article is coded as not possible to determine. If the references to political parties or politicians do not clearly identify which party is intended, the article is coded as not possible to determine.

J. Journalistic approach

1. Descriptive
2. Interpretive
3. Not applicable
4. Not possible to determine

Note:

The assessment takes into account the entire article, with an overall evaluation of whether the writer mainly describes or interprets what has happened or what is about to happen.

1. A descriptive approach refers to a journalistic news article, with focus on objective reporting as opposed to subjective evaluation found in a chronicle/analysis.

2. An interpretive approach refers to a chronicle/analysis or review, with personal interpretations by the writer and/or evaluative words.

The demands for considering the approach to be interpretive shall be lower than for descriptive. In order to answer the question as interpretive, it is enough if the writer in important aspects makes own interpretations, showing an opinion.

3. A debate/letter to the editor is coded not applicable as it does not have a journalistic approach.

K. Main source

0. No quote (or apparent/identified/applicable) source

1. Politician/political party

2. Expert

3. Journalist/media

4. Inhabitant

5. (Representative from) corporation/business

6. (Representative from) authority

7. (Representative from) organization (non-governmental organization, unions, associations, sports clubs, etc.)

8. Anonymous

Note:

The main source is the source given the most prominent placement in the article, either by placement in heading or lead-in, or the number of quotes in relation to other sources. The main source refers to an explicit source only, when a source is either quoted with references to name, organization etc., or if there is attribution to a source such as "according to" or "writes on their web page".

0. Implicit sources are coded as 0. In articles about accidents/disasters or crime without quotes – where the information potentially could come from different sources (such as websites, police or court documents, tips or journalistic observations) – the main source is coded as 0, as there is no apparent or identified source.

1. If the genre (D) is a debate/letter to the editor and the information does not contain references to a source other than the opinion of the writer, the position of the writer determines how the main source is coded. For example, if a debate article is signed by a politician, the main source is politician.

2. An expert is a source interviewed for his or her specific knowledge.
3. For an analysis/opinion editorial/chronicle or a review by the media outlet the main source is coded journalist/media. If the article is a rewrite and the information is derived from another media publishing, the main source is coded journalist/media. If the main source is a news bureau, it is coded journalist/media.
4. If a person is quoted but not identified as affiliated with anything, the main source is quoted as inhabitant. This applies primarily to when someone is affected by an occurrence, or speaks on behalf of his/her role as an inhabitant. It can apply to authors, musicians and sports participants, for example, who may well represent a business or club but where it cannot be verified either in the article or by an Internet search. If the genre is a debate/letter to the editor and the information does not contain references to a source other than the opinion of the writer, the position of the writer determines how the main source is coded. If it is written by an inhabitant it is coded as such.
5. If the source is a press release from a corporation/business it is coded as such. If it is clearly a professional artist on tour, the main source is coded as business, even if the business name is not stated.
6. Authority applies to public agency (in Swedish: myndighet). Articles about accidents/disasters or crime without quotes but where there is attribution such as "according to the police"/"the fire department reports on the homepage" etc., the main source is coded authority.
8. An anonymous source is when the author is withholding names or attribution, and deliberately identifying/describing the source as anonymous. References such as "according to the police" or "according to the Liberals" are not considered anonymous.

L. Number of identified sources

0. None
1. 1
2. 2
3. 3 or more

Note:

A quotation, identified with a quotation mark, from a website or press release on behalf of an authority or organization does count as a quoted source. As does an attribution such as "according to" or "x writes". If there are several names signing a debate/letter to the editor, the number of names will determine the number of sources.

If the article is a rewrite of an earlier publishing by other media, and attributed, it is coded as one source. If the rewrite in addition includes a quote provided to the other media company (example: – I am furious, Jane Doe says to ABC News), it is coded as an additional source.

M. Function of secondary source

0. None

1. Corroboratory (in broad agreement with the primary source)
2. Contextual (adding further information in addition to what is provided by the first source)
3. Oppositional (expressing disagreement with the first source)
4. Not possible to determine/not applicable

Note:

0. None applies if there is no secondary source.

N. Are anonymous sources used?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Anonymous sources are applicable when the author is withholding names or attribution, and deliberately identifying/describing them as anonymous. References such as "according to the police" or "according to the Liberals" are not considered anonymous.

O. Do national politicians appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

P. Do regional politicians appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

Q. Do local politicians appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

R. Do healthcare council politicians appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

S. Do journalists/media appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

If the article is a rewrite of an article published elsewhere, this variable is coded Yes. A review by a journalist with a byline is also coded Yes. If the main source (J) has been coded as journalist/media, Yes is coded here. News bureaus are considered journalists/media. References to one's own publication is not coded as a source (for example: "We can now reveal...").

T. Do inhabitants appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attribution (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

Inhabitants refer to people used in the capacity of inhabitants only, as affected by the issue, not in the role of representing a business/authority, etc.

U. Do municipal or healthcare employees appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

V. Do men appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

If an authority or business is identified as a source, without references to a specific person, this variable is coded No. If the gender cannot be

determined by identifying a male or female name, the person is researched online to determine gender.

W. Do women appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

If an authority or business is identified as a source, without references to a specific person, this variable is coded No. If the gender cannot be determined by identifying a male or female name, the person is researched online to determine gender.

X. Do youths appear as sources?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Both direct quotes and attributions (such as "according to") are coded as Yes.

Youths refers to people under 18, but only if identified by age or clearly under 18.

Y. Are there links to social media?

1. Yes
2. No

Note:

Links include icons or symbols where by clicking those the reader can share or post comments on social media.

Z. Does the article contain a commentary function?

1. Yes
2. No

Appendix III. Focus Group Moderator Guide

Discussion themes (only for the purpose of the researcher — not distributed to focus group participants)³

1. How do you view local journalism?
2. How important is local coverage? Why is it important or unimportant? What is the significance of local news in daily life? For you/for others?
3. Do you recognize yourself in the local editorial coverage of your area overall (all local media outlets)? Who is most represented in your local news: the average inhabitant (citizen), politician, entrepreneur, men/women, young people, etc.?
4. What is your opinion of your local media outlets being able to provide a forum for debate (social media, commentary function on articles)? Do you participate? Why/why not? Would you like to take part in the debate? What is stopping you? Do you feel affected by what is being discussed?
5. What would influence you to start using/expanding your use of your local media outlets (topics, content, tone/address, images/video/visual content, regular updates, availability, design, distribution, price)?
6. Is it important to you for the hyperlocal media to survive? How/why? How do you see their role in the media landscape? Advantages/challenges in relation to other media.

³ The focus group sessions were held face to face in three communities, with three groups in each location (nine in total), during the autumn of 2018 and spring of 2019. The participants were encouraged by a moderator to discuss their thoughts freely concerning three themes: local journalism, hyperlocal journalism and the role of local media. The guide was used as a support for the moderator. The data was used for Article IV. In addition to the nine focus group sessions for Article IV, a follow-up session with all nine groups was also carried out three months later to provide an audience analysis for the hyperlocal media practitioners. The focus group participants filled out an anonymous survey, which was distributed to the practitioners. Neither the surveys nor the data from the follow-up sessions were used for Article IV.