

Chapter 8

Local political communication in a hybrid media system

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the local media and local political conditions in the Nordic countries from the perspective of power. The rapid changes in the local media system described in this chapter have led to a redistribution of this power in the local community in different directions. The starting point for our analysis is the four variables defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to describe different media systems and to identify change in power and power relations. We find that local media structures are changing, with downsized newspapers and decreasing use of local newspapers while social media is becoming more prominent. Norway and Sweden try to balance decreasing commercial conditions with state support, while there is a strong regional public service in all Nordic countries. Political parallelism in the old sense of political power and control of newspapers has gone. Professional journalists have become only one group among many different producers of local media content, duly losing power over local agendas.

Keywords: local media, local journalism, Nordic countries, media system, hybrid media

Introduction

In this chapter, we analyse the local media ecosystems and conditions for local political communication in the Nordic countries. We approach this topic from the perspective of power and the way in which changing local media also reflect or influence power relations in the local community. Local news often provides critical information on issues that people in the locality find important – schools, public health, housing, building, and planning. To this end, local media play an important role in empowering citizens as actors in the local community, serving a dual role as watchdogs in the locality as well as providing an arena for actors in local conflicts (Peterson & Carlberg, 1990; Weibull et al., 2018).

The quality of the media ecosystem is related to the power that is exerted to control the information flow in local communities. This power has at least

two dimensions: the power of different media platforms to influence local communities and the question of which actors have the power to influence the content of these local media platforms (Asp, 1986). Both of these power dimensions are important in analysing the role of different media platforms in local political communication.

The frame of reference for our study is the model used by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to analyse media systems, adapted to the local framework. In this context, identifying the changes in the power to influence local communities and media content is essential. However, we also acknowledge the change in the media ecosystem, such as the rising importance of social media, which Chadwick (2017) calls the “hybrid media system” – hence the use of the term “hybrid” in the title of this chapter. Chadwick (2017: 3) notes that “the rapid diffusion of new communication technologies creates a pressing need to rethink the complex and multifaceted forces that are reshaping the political communication environments”. Moreover, hybridity means that we do not need to make the either-or distinction, for instance, between “new” or “old” media, but treat them instead as parts of the media system (Nygren, 2018). Nonlinearity is thus an important characteristic of hybridity.

First, we identify the actors and institutions in the local media ecosystems. Second, we briefly explain the role of the state in relation to local media, and third, the degree of political parallelism in the local setting and local political journalism in the Nordic countries. Fourth, we go into the degree of professionalisation of local journalism. In all four perspectives, we also analyse how changes in local media impact power and power relations in local communities. After this broad presentation of the local media system in the Nordic countries, we discuss the central theories applied to analyse local media and political journalism and present some challenges and suggestions for research in the field. Lastly, we discuss what happens with regard to local political communication, using notions such as the fragmentation and hybridisation of the local media system.

The local media ecosystems in the Nordic countries

A local media ecosystem is a concept encompassing all media actors and media institutions in a geographically defined area, including advertisers, news sources, and news consumers (Anderson, 2016). Local media are an important part of the media landscape (Napoli et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2015) and form a vital basis for political communication and dialogue. The same goes for the Nordic media systems, which are characterised by a decentralised press structure consisting of a great number of local and regional newspapers spread throughout the countries. Weibull (2005) notes that, for a long time, Finland, Norway, and Sweden

constituted the region with the highest level of newspaper circulation and the region where newspapers had the largest share of the advertising market. In the *World Press Trends 2017 Report* (WAN-IFRA, 2018), Finland, Norway, and Sweden are still ranked high in terms of printed newspaper circulation per 1,000 inhabitants. Moreover, when it comes to online news, the Nordic countries rank highest in the world, with Norway at number one with 42 per cent paying for online news during 2019, and Sweden second with 27 per cent. By way of comparison, the proportion paying for online news in the US was 20 per cent (Newman et al., 2020). According to the report, Norway and Finland also have the largest supply of local newspapers. In addition, all of the Nordic countries have strong public service broadcasting at the regional level and share a long democratic tradition characterised by stability of and confidence in political institutions. Taken together, this forms a Nordic “welfare state media model” based on strong commercial, local, national, and regional media in combination with public services (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

During the last decade, this stable situation has become more fragile while local media systems have simultaneously become more fragmented and more consolidated. Subscription-based newspapers have transformed into multiplatform publishing houses, but have at the same time become more centralised and downsized to adapt to the shrinking economy. Public service broadcasters have also developed multi-platform publishing, albeit affected by shrinking resources to a lesser extent, which has increased the conflicts between public service broadcasting and the commercial media (Grusell & Nord, 2012). In addition, most local forms of media – freesheets, hyperlocal online news, and small subscription-based papers – are growing. Besides traditional local media, social media platforms, mainly Facebook, have become the most frequently used sources for people when they want to stay updated on local news (Nygren, 2018; Olsen et al., 2018). Social media, especially Facebook groups, have developed into major platforms for local news and debate, building on participation and interactivity. However, platforms also absorb economic resources from traditional media, since the vast majority of digital ad revenues end up in the hands of Facebook and Google, also in the Nordic countries (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017).

Local media have tended to attract little attention from media research compared with national media. Media researchers have been criticised for focusing mostly on the largest media companies, the biggest media events, the most prominent media personalities, and the most visible journalists. Aldridge (2007) and Nielsen (2015) add that, despite being central and vital arenas for public debate, local media are ignored, not only in research, but also in professional debates. This lack of attention means that there is less awareness and knowledge about the formation of local and regional opinion and the role of local and regional media in democratic and political participation. Accord-

ing to Waschková Císařová (2017), this attitude is changing. In recent years, scholars have shown an expanding interest in local journalism both in Europe and in other parts of the world. Hess and Waller (2017) argue, for instance, that local media are resilient in a digital world and that their value has become clearer and more interesting. Nielsen (2015) argues that local newspapers are the keystone media in local societies and help people understand themselves as part of a community. A vital part of this reorientation is research on small hyperlocals, that is, new forms of local media such as community websites or online news startups not connected to legacy media (Lindén et al., 2019a; Nygren et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2015).

There are some recent examples of research on the local media structure in the Nordic countries, especially in Norway and Sweden (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016, 2018, 2019a; Nygren et al., 2018). In Finland, local media and journalism are largely overlooked by researchers, with a few exceptions (Lindén, 2017; Ojajärvi, 2014; Ojajärvi & Valtonen, 2012). In 2017, the Danish School of Media and Journalism conducted a large study on the content, role, and importance of local and regional media in Denmark (Svith et al., 2017), supplementing historical narratives on the subject (Jørgensen, 2016; Søllinge, 2005), but aside from these studies, current research with a local focus in Denmark is minimal (Lund, 2018).

Even though the Nordic countries all have a decentralised media structure, some differences can be found. Finland, Norway, and Sweden have a much higher distribution of newspapers compared to Denmark. Norway and Finland have more than 200 newspapers and Sweden just over 150, while Denmark has only around 30 subscription-based newspapers. Most newspapers in Denmark, in turn, are daily newspapers, while many newspapers in the other Nordic countries are published only weekly or a few days per week. Norway is also distinguished by having most of the smallest newspapers, with low circulation and limited distribution.

Most of these daily and weekly newspapers in Finland, Norway, and Sweden are local, but differences emerge even here. Norway and Finland have had very stable structures in this respect (Finnish Newspapers Association, 2019; Høst, 2019). In Sweden, however, every other local newsroom has closed down since 2004. The number of local journalists decreased by 30–40 per cent (Nygren, 2018), while 35 municipalities were without any editorial presence in 2018 (Truedson, 2018). The backbone of the Finnish press system consists of regional papers (Björkroth & Grönlund, 2014), and “more than half of Finland’s paid-for newspapers are local weeklies” (Harrie, 2018: 24). However, in a media policy report for the Finnish government, Ala-Fossi and colleagues (2018) pointed to serious diversity risks at the local media level since many municipalities have no newspapers, and where there is a media presence, only one title exists.

The major difference compared to Denmark lies in the number of free newspapers. Almost all of the households in Denmark (82%) receive one (or more) free local weeklies once or twice a week. Some are pure advertising publications, whereas others constitute the only journalistic news channel in local areas, because all of the subscription-based media (newspapers, television, and radio) are regional, not local. Thus, with far fewer newspaper subscriptions in Denmark, free weeklies, television, and local radio have a more dominant role than in the other Nordic countries. Harrie (2018: 13–14) characterises this as a “continental feature, with television news dominating in another way than in Finland, Norway and Sweden”. This also applies locally, which may be exemplified by Nordjylland, the region of northern Denmark. In addition to the regional media company Nordjyske medier, which has local television and radio channels (they also publish daily and weekly newspapers and magazines), both the public service company – the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) – and the commercial television channel TV2 have regional radio and television stations in Nordjylland. Regional television and radio stations are also important local media actors in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, but since the number of local newspaper subscriptions are relatively low in Denmark, radio and television play a far more dominant role.

What distinguishes Denmark, Finland, and Sweden from Norway is that a number of free newspapers have been established in recent years, in print as well as on the Internet – the so-called hyperlocals. Some of these have been established in areas that no longer have their own newspaper, but most have appeared in larger cities or suburbs where there are also several other traditional media present but where the population density is greater and the advertising revenue correspondingly better (Nygren et al., 2018). In Sweden, a doubling of free newspapers has been reported since 2000, with approximately 300 local free newspapers in 2016. Two-thirds of these are published weekly (Nygren, 2018). Denmark has approximately 260 free weeklies as well, most of which are published by the same companies that run the local subscription-based newspapers. This trend is not found to the same extent in Norway, where free newspapers have had less favourable conditions. At the end of 2017, only 13 free newspapers came out weekly in Norway, with most of them appearing in cities. In Finland, there is no clear trend, but in 2018, Sanoma decided to start publishing three new freesheets in the metropolitan region.

Newspaper markets in the Nordic countries have long been dominated by local and regional ownership and control (Gustafsson, 1996). This has changed during the last 10–15 years with the growth of large newspaper groups. In Norway, about 60 per cent of the newspaper market is owned by the three largest groups, while the rest are owned by other, often local players (Medietilsynet, 2020). In Sweden and Finland, the same development has occurred, with a few regional and national ownership groups in each country controlling most

of the local newspapers. Denmark has five major newspaper conglomerates publishing the majority of the local dailies and the local weeklies (The Agency for Culture and Palaces, 2018). The concentration of ownership gives media companies options to centralise production and standardise formats, administration, and IT development. Content is used across many titles (syndication) and newspapers have gradually become less local (Nygren & Nord, 2017). In other words, the power and control over media content has moved to the national level.

Media use has changed a great deal in recent years as well. The Nordic countries have high Internet usage compared to other countries. Local newspapers were generally late in developing their own online services. Many local newspapers were in a monopoly situation where it felt inappropriate to develop competing online editions for their own paper editions, and they have traditionally had a weaker position on the Internet compared to national newspapers (Harrie, 2018; Ottosen & Krumsvik, 2012). Local media companies are suffering from digital isolation; using relations between web pages, and the structure of hyperlinks, Sjøvaag and colleagues (2019) have shown that local newspapers in Scandinavia are largely disconnected from the digital ecology.

As online news consumption has passed print readership, local newspapers have been forced to rethink their business models. One important result has been the introduction of digital subscriptions and different forms of premium services behind so-called digital paywalls. Though online news in general has become a commodity with little value, local journalism is less resourced and has greater value for the community it serves (Goyanes, 2015).

In Norway, both Amedia, with 63 local titles, and Schibsted have recently been able to attract a substantial number of digital subscribers and are now at the forefront in the world (Lehtisaari et al., 2016). Norway has become something of a shining light, as 42 per cent of the population pays for online news (Newman et al., 2020), but research by Olsen and colleagues (2018) shows that media managers are still struggling to understand what content the audience really is prepared to pay for. The misalignment between the supply of content and perceived value is particularly prominent among customers that are young, have low income, and low interest in news.

State impact on local media

In the 1960s and 1970s, all Nordic countries developed systems of state subsidies for newspapers. This was a result of the “democratic corporatist” model where news media were regarded as part of the “democratic infrastructure” in society. With this perspective, systems were introduced to support newspapers

in preserving diversity of opinion and to support daily newspapers without interfering with the independence of the news media (Picard, 2013).

In Norway, the maintenance of press subsidies is seen as absolutely crucial for supporting the large number of local media companies in the country, and in 2019, the government sought to increase press subsidies for local media (Ministry of Culture, 2019). In Finland, press subsidies were abolished as early as 2008, and media companies, including local ones, are expected to tackle the financial and existential crisis in the newspaper sector mainly by developing innovative content and business strategies, which has been a common response in other countries as well (Brüggemann et al., 2016). Instead of financial support for distribution and other functions, Finland has focused innovation support for the media sector through the state innovation agency Tekes Finland (now Business Finland). A general problem for media groups focusing on the local level is the lack of financial resources and the innovation culture needed to reinvent their business models (Krumsvik et al., 2013). A report addressing changes in media policy in Finland suggests that the most critical environment for the national media system is at the local level, where the lack of diversity, namely only one newspaper title or no media at all, is a threat to democracy and public debate (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018).

In Sweden, the government has gone in the same direction as in Norway, proposing increased support for local journalism and news media. The proposal, “Journalism in the whole country”, in early 2018 included a 20 per cent increase in press support and the introduction of a new kind of support for media to increase the local coverage in “blind spots”, as well as state support for media innovations (Ministry of Culture, 2018). It could be argued that this increasing support in Norway and Sweden helps local media to maintain power over media content.

The other facet of Nordic media policy has been strong public service broadcasting, also at the regional level. A major part of public service regional journalism in all Nordic countries is produced in a net of regional newsrooms, from ten regional offices in Denmark to 18 in Norway and 25 in Sweden. Still, public service is more regional than local, and most of the original news stories are produced by local newspapers. In Sweden, the ratio is one to ten when comparing the news production output in regional public service with that in local newspapers (Nygren & Schaerff Engelbrecht, 2018).

In recent years, public service media have been criticised by both commercial media and the political right (Olsen et al., 2018). In Denmark, media policy has undergone the most radical change from a Nordic and even a European perspective. In 2018, the government cut financial resources to balance the budget (Jensen, 2018), but according to DR, this will not influence key areas like news, nationally or locally.

Political parallelism in the local media system

One of the features that previously characterised the northern European media systems was the close relationship between the media and political parties (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This party press system no longer exists, at least not in terms of ownership and direct control. The ties to political parties have long since been broken, even though we can still find media that are clearly sympathetic to and supportive of certain political directions. Moreover, and more generally, there is a broad consensus that the media still have a social mission to be watchdogs on behalf of the citizens in a society (Hanitzsch, 2011). The media are supposed to contribute to a functioning democracy – that is to say, there should be a focus on political processes, and citizens should be able to follow and participate in political activities and engage in political advocacy (Ihlen et al., 2015). This mission requires journalists and politicians to have close relations. The end of the party press, however, has weakened politicians' power over media content in favour of journalists.

The relationship between media and politics is obviously somewhat different in terms of expression in the various Nordic countries. Much of the research in Norway shows that local media are still an important arena for political communication. Engan (2016), who studied the role of local media in the Norwegian municipal and county elections in 2015, found that local and regional media still formed an important arena in the election campaign. He showed that local politicians, on the one hand, are critical of local media, considering them unable to adequately reflect the real political issues in communities. On the other hand, they regard them as important to be visible to the local public by getting their message across and being depicted in the local media. Engan (2015) has also interviewed local politicians in three different communities about their relations with their local newspaper. He found that, despite considerable dissatisfaction with local journalism, they consider the local newspaper to be one of the most important arenas of communication with their voters: "Politicians depend on the newspaper in order to reach out with the message and to profile both the party and themselves, either by giving interviews or by using the 'opinion' columns" (Engan, 2015: 152).

Other findings show that political issues are dominant in editorials and columns in regional newspapers in Norway (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016, 2018). As much as 62 per cent of editorials and commentaries concern politics (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). In addition to focusing mainly on political issues, politicians themselves – local, regional, and national – make up 30 per cent of those who are active as commentators in the traditional media (Mathisen & Morlandstø, forthcoming), showing that the regional and local media arenas are considered important and relevant to politicians and political communication locally.

As shown by Svith and colleagues (2017), Danish local and regional media also cover politics. However, their study shows a mismatch between the political journalism that readers demand and the one that is actually practised. The study reveals that journalists believe it is important to convey political decisions in regional and local media but not the views of the political debate. However, citizens want journalism about what politicians think and how they act prior to decisions being made (Svith et al., 2017). This criticism resembles Engan's (2016) findings about his local political informants, namely dissatisfaction with local journalists' ability to understand what is relevant to cover.

Likewise in Sweden, local politics are important facets of traditional local media news coverage. But there is also a strong trend of the political system creating its own platforms for political communication when traditional media close the local newsrooms or decrease the coverage of local politics. Local and regional authorities hire former journalists to build their own media platforms online, and the number of local officials working with information often outnumber local journalists (Rehnberg & Grafström, 2019). Between 2004 and 2014, the number of local communicators more than doubled, and during the same period, the size of newsrooms in local media shrank by 30–40 per cent. In Gothenburg, for example, 145 communicators are employed by the city, far more than the number of reporters in the only local newspaper (Tenor & Nygren, 2017). Local communicators produce public service information but also politically related information. They also produce information subsidies for local media, and representatives of every other local municipality say that the downsized local newspaper often or very often publishes their press releases without any major changes (Tenor, 2017). In Denmark as well, we find more and more well-staffed information websites controlled by local authorities, presenting local news edited as journalism.

In Finland, the Association of Local and Regional Authorities has established its own newsrooms that produce online articles about what is going on at the local level. For instance, Kommuntorget was founded to compensate for the withdrawal of journalists from less inhabited areas. The journalists produce original content for the site, which also aggregates articles from local newspapers. The newsroom is still an experiment and only operates in the minority language Swedish, but there are plans for expansion. In Norway, Kommunal Rapport, established in 1987, is owned by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) but is an independent daily news website and weekly newspaper that covers municipal affairs. In this case, the audience includes politicians and executive officers of the local municipalities and counties of Norway, and its reporters have won several awards for journalism.

During elections, websites and Facebook pages of local political parties become more important as local political arenas, since they are used for campaigning and creating content for social media that is easily disseminated. In the

local elections in Sweden in 2018, these channels were equally or more important for voters under 30 compared with traditional media (Nord et al., 2019). This means that the power of traditional media as a political arena is diminishing; their role as gatekeepers becomes weaker when media content travels through the social media networks. The power of local authorities and local parties is strengthened and becomes more important in direct communication with citizens and voters at the expense of the traditional media. At the same time, research shows that for local politicians, Facebook and party websites are mostly a new platform for one-way communication during party campaigns, with dialogue being regarded as less important (Skogerbø & Krumsvik, 2015). However, local media still form an important platform where local political voices can be heard, at least in Norway (Sjøvaag, 2018).

The degree of professionalisation in journalism

Journalism in the Nordic countries has been characterised by a high degree of professionalism, in national as well as in local media. The profession has a strong autonomy, upheld by professional organisations, professional education, and a professional norm of acting as independent watchdogs in relation to power (Ottosen, 2005; Wiik & Nygren, 2016). The strong public service media in all Nordic countries have made journalists adopt public service ideals in commercial media as well, and the common ethical standards are regulated in developed systems of self-regulation (Krogh, 2016). Local journalists must be just as professional as those working for larger media outlets, namely by maintaining the same distance and integrity in relation to sources and advertisers.

Journalism performs a dual role in society, serving as a critical watchdog on the one hand, and as a supporter of the area in which the media operate on the other – often denounced in Norway as “glue and loupe”. For local journalists, it may be easier to act as a patriot on behalf of the local community than to direct a critical gaze (Mathisen, 2013). Local journalists often face the dilemma of closeness. The advantages of being close to the community in which you operate may be difficult to reconcile with the need to maintain a critical distance when necessary. In addition, local media are often dependent on local support and local alliances in order to secure and legitimise their activities, and sometimes innovative changes, in order to fulfil their role as a critical voice (Morlandstø, 2018).

That said, there have been clear tendencies towards a deprofessionalisation of journalism in the last 15–20 years (Nygren, 2008). This does not point to a steadily declining level of professional quality, but rather, the borders of the profession have become less clear, and it is becoming more difficult to define journalism at the local level as well. Legacy newspapers are dominated by a

commercial-technical paradigm, and the focus has been moving from publishing towards economy (Andersson, 2014; Kunelius & Ruusunoksa, 2008). Professional organisations for journalists are also in decline with fewer members, and in Denmark, the union now represents all kinds of media workers, including public relations and advertising employees. In commercial media, local news has been downsized, for example in Sweden, where commercial TV4 discontinued all regional broadcasts in 2014 and local newsrooms were closed down (Nygren & Nord, 2017). Commercial local media also developed a new kind of paid content (native advertising, content marketing) far removed from any public service ideal. The same trend is visible in Norway: both national and regional news media are closing down district offices, which raises concerns over media shadows and blind spots in the news coverage (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019b). The power of national and regional media as watchdogs in local and regional communities has been weakened.

In those parts of the local media ecosystem that are growing, deprofessionalisation is obvious. Content in the new hyperlocals is produced by many non-journalists, and the borders between journalism and business become blurred when the same people produce editorial content as well as ads. The ideal for many hyperlocals is more about promoting the local area than being a critical watchdog, and more about confirming a positive image of the local community than being a critical journalist (Leckner et al., 2017; Mathisen, 2014). Other actors in the local ecosystem are also producing content close to journalism, not only in the political sphere (see above). Actors such as the police, local organisations, and local commercial interests are building their own platforms for local communication. On the most important platform outside of legacy media, namely social media like Facebook, the content production is completely deprofessionalised. User-generated content in the local Facebook feed can be regarded as a democratic achievement, but nonetheless, there is no professional level regarding ethics and verification. Still, in Sweden, Facebook is used more than the local newspaper for staying updated on the local community (Nygren, 2018). Taken together, these trends point to the fact that an increasing share of the local mediated communication is produced by actors other than journalists. This indicates a change in the power over media content and the opportunity to influence local communities.

However, a Norwegian study on the working conditions of local journalists shows that although features of deprofessionalisation can be identified, journalists nevertheless express a strong sense of autonomy in their work. True, Lamark and Morlandstø (2019) found that the number of employees in the editorial staff have been reduced in recent years and that web-based platforms and tools have led to more deskwork. Yet, they found that they have the opportunity to make their own choices and to prioritise the journalism they believe is the most important for the local community. They also talk about managers who

encourage them to set their own priorities, even when they decide to pursue cases that require considerable time and resources. Hence, deprofessionalisation is definitely an issue, but there is also greater awareness of the responsibility that local journalists have in relation to their own work.

Media content and the development of hybrid media systems

Local journalism has often been criticised for being “poor”, characterised by single-source journalism, lack of critical and investigative journalism, and many soft and sentimental news stories (Mathisen, 2010; Nielsen, 2015). With regard to the degree of critical and investigative journalism in local media, this criticism is probably justified. Both the Danish (Svith et al., 2017) and the Norwegian studies (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a) find little agenda-setting, critical, and investigative journalism in the regional and local media. In Norway, on average, only 5 per cent of the coverage can be called critically investigative, while in Denmark, less than 1 per cent is referred to as “labor intensive and focused journalism” (Svith et al., 2017: 44).

In Sweden as well, the share of independent or critical journalism in local newspapers is rather modest, according to a study from 2003. Only 9 per cent of all coverage by local municipalities fulfils the basic criteria for watchdog journalism, namely to be about power and politics and to have at least two independent sources and critical questions. But the study also shows that the watchdog function of local newspapers is larger than this, as it is also about providing publicity for local issues and scope for local debate. In addition, the existence of independent local media and the potential publicity regarding misuse of power and corruption is an important part of the critical function of local media (Nygren, 2003).

A recent Swedish study shows that the absence of local journalists leads to fewer community news stories and more crime stories. Institutional actors are also quoted more often when journalists are not present (Karlsson & Hellekant Rowe, 2019). A Danish study shows that as much as 82 per cent of the content deals with topics that meet a “vital information need” locally (crime and accidents, emergency situations, health, education, transport, environment and planning, finances, civil society, and politics) (Svith et al., 2017: 33). In Norway, this figure was found to be 67 per cent (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a).

The Norwegian study also found that politics is the second largest content category in local media after sports, and that most political content is found in the smallest newspapers. This means that the media themselves regard political issues as an important subject area to cover. Another study of political journalism in the Norwegian media, conducted by Sjøvaag (2018), found that local and

regional politicians are often heard in local and regional media. However, they do not seem to be seen as relevant sources in national media, which are more inclined to use national and international politicians as their sources (Sjøvaag, 2018). Sjøvaag's (2018: 17) conclusion is that "maintaining a local newspaper structure will be relevant in order to maintain platforms where local political voices can be expressed" and that this is what "ensures a critical control of political power in a decentralised political system, such as the one in Norway".

Nevertheless, we see a tendency for political debates that used to take place in local media arenas to gradually be moving to social media such as Facebook and Twitter. Nygren (2018) refers to an example from Sollefteå, Sweden. Plans to close parts of the hospital in the autumn of 2015 were leaked to the public. The opponents quickly established a Facebook group that soon had 15,000 members and where about 60 posts were published daily. The traditional media linked to this Facebook group in their reviews of the case and also used the group to find sources and tips for their own coverage. In a study of people's media use in two local communities in Norway, we can identify some of the same. Lie (2018) finds that local and social media are used for different purposes. Social media are clearly considered to be the most useful arena for quick information about local events or for creating community engagement, while local legal newspapers are considered the most appropriate arena for the mediation of local achievements and "victories" and for creating and nurturing a common local identity (Lie, 2018: 67).

Both Lie (2018) and Nygren (2018) show that a new local media system is emerging. Nygren (2018: 208) calls it a "hybrid media system", where new and old media do not replace each other but instead live side by side, which changes the conditions for all types of local media. In this local hybrid media system, Facebook and other social media platforms fulfil some of the functions that local media used to fill, like local gossip, news about family and friends, and information about events. Traditional media have to relate to this, and they use Facebook as a source for ideas, for interaction with audiences, and as a channel for "spreadable" news. Traditional media still produce most of the local news, but instead of the old form of distribution, news is now circulating in the local community in digital form and (as always) by word of mouth. A Danish study on news reporting during the past 20 years concluded that traditional media (newspapers, radio, and television) still account for most of the original journalism in Denmark and thus affect what decision-makers perceive as the common political agenda (Lund, 2018). At the same time, the Internet, with actors like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, is increasingly communicating a plethora of mostly unedited news and related debates, which naturally affects what is put on the political agenda.

Content analysis of the Danish regional and local media (Svith et al., 2017), however, shows that content on Facebook is, as in Sweden, more symbolic,

emotional, and entertainingly focused on items such as quizzes, competitions, and celebrities than the traditional media, which focus on more “solid” political issues such as the environment, transport, and the economy. We can argue that these political themes cover the “vital information needs” of their local inhabitants to a greater extent (Svith et al., 2017: 39). The study also shows that Facebook shares less local material and has fewer comments from citizens about local issues compared to the legal local media. Moreover, the study reveals that half of the articles in regional and local media in Denmark have a local perspective, and the smaller the medium, the more dominant the local perspective is (80%) (Svith et al., 2017). In Norway, 66 per cent of the articles in the regional and local media have a local perspective (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a). This implies that when the local media landscape changes and new media actors enter the stage, there is no guarantee that the new actors, such as Facebook, will be able to create an arena for the political communication that in fact takes place at the local level. On the contrary, social media like Facebook have no geographical connection at all – the networks are local and global at the same time.

Adding to the hybrid media system, we are also witnessing a fundamental change in journalism where advanced algorithms are entering the newsrooms, also in local media. These software systems are mainly used to analyse user behaviour and predict who will pay for news, but also for generating news texts from structured data. Companies such as United Robots and Newsworthy in Sweden are providing their customers with thousands of automatically generated texts on anything from sports and the weather to the property market and local crime. These texts are based on templates crafted by journalists but subsequently published without any editorial intervention. One of the customers is the newspaper corporation Bonnier Local News, which tries to compensate for the lack of local journalists with automated texts (Lindén et al., 2019b).

Existing research and the need for new questions

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the amount of research on local media and political communication in the Nordic countries is not extensive. Theoretically, most of the research has a democratic and institutional perspective. The research in Norway is largely focused on local media in relation to local democracy (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2018), both with respect to how media platforms are available for local politicians to express their views (Sjøvaag, 2018) and with respect to citizens’ access to and participation in public debates (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). We find much of the same in Danish research (Svith et al., 2017), but in Denmark, studies also reflect a

media-ecological perspective (Nielsen, 2015). Nielsen describes local media as the keystone media in a local political information environment. Local media is “the primary provider of a specific and important kind of information (news about local politics) and is a medium that enables other media to cover this aspect of the community” (Nielsen, 2015: 67). In other words, local keystone media are a vital part of the media ecosystem. Swedish research also reflects this media ecosystem perspective when studying local media (Nygren, 2018), particularly in relation to the increasing number of hyperlocals (Nygren et al., 2018) and the emergence of local media blind spots (Nygren & Schaerff Engelbrecht, 2018). There are very few studies on local audiences in the Nordic countries (Engan, 2015; Lie, 2018; Lindén, 2017).

Several researchers argue that it is now necessary to ask completely new questions in journalism and media research – research that most often assumes a democracy and a normative perspective in the studies (Broersma & Peters, 2017; Nielsen, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). This view has probably also been the most common for researchers in the Nordic countries, even when researching local media. Broersma and Peters (2017) argue for new methodological measures to understand how the societal mission is changing and how journalism works in this new converged media landscape. They write that researchers should stop taking the ideal norms of journalistic work in society for granted, such as the media having a social mission to safeguard certain democratic values. A narrow focus on these standards can lead us to risk affirming adopted truths about the role of the media, without understanding how the media actually work. Instead, one should turn the focus of the research onto the actual practice and onto the audience. Researchers should be more concerned with how journalism is exercised in the newsroom and how the media are used by the public, rather than being fixated on idealised ideas about how the media *should* work (Broersma & Peters, 2017).

We agree that more perspectives are needed in media research, also in relation to local media. In order to broaden knowledge about local political communication, we need to gain a better understanding of how audiences experience the role of the media, and not only how the media themselves believe they perform this role (Meijer, 2013). In addition, we believe that it is important to study the relationship between legacy media and all the new media that compete in the local market. We know little about this relationship, especially locally. This applies to both social media and the new hyperlocals, which have both geographical and thematic impact areas. It will also be important to gain more knowledge about what it means for democracy that local authorities and politicians communicate more directly with citizens through social media, for instance. Finally, we need more comparative research, particularly research that juxtaposes different trends across various national, political, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Conclusion: Fragmentation and redistribution of power

The starting point for our analysis of local political communication and the role of local media in the Nordic countries was the four variables defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004) to describe different media systems and to identify change in power and power relations. We also added the concept of hybridity (Chadwick, 2017), which reflects the changing nature of media systems, as social media plays an increasingly important part in sharing information at the local level. The results show rapid and extensive changes:

- Local media structures are changing, with downsized newspapers and decreasing use of local newspapers. At the same time, local professional journalists have lost their monopoly over the local public spheres, and new platforms are growing on social media as well as in different kinds of hyperlocal media outlets.
- States try to balance decreasing commercial conditions with state support in Norway and Sweden, and with a strong regional public service in all Nordic countries. This can only partly compensate for advertisements moving to Google and Facebook.
- Political parallelism in the old sense of political power and control of newspapers has gone. However, local municipalities and politics build increasing resources to influence media content. They still use local media in political communication but also offer new platforms outside traditional media for local news and local politics online and in social media.
- Content production in local media systems is deprofessionalised and taken care of by other actors producing local content for online and social media platforms. Professional journalists have become only one group among many different producers of local media content, duly losing power over local agendas.

The notion of fragmentation summarises the development. Before the Internet, the local newspaper represented the local public sphere (besides the local square and meeting places). Now this common local public sphere is divided along different lines – by age and generation, by social class and ethnicity, and by political lines and values. These different spheres are now found in local groups on Facebook, in local news producers outside traditional media, and in the feeds of every social media user. Traditional media still connect people across different local spheres to build a common public sphere in the local community, but this is an increasingly difficult task.

So what are the implications for the distribution of power in the local community? As noted in the introduction, the issue of who controls information

flows in the local community is a question of power. The rapid changes in the local media system described in this chapter have led to a redistribution of this power in the local community in different directions.

The power of traditional media is decreasing, their virtually monopolistic position in the local public arena is now history, and their resources for producing content are decreasing. Instead, some of this power has been transferred to citizens using social media platforms to connect, distribute, and discuss public issues. But power has also been shifted to global actors like Facebook, which determine the conditions for these platforms, for instance, by scripting the templates and determining the rules of engagement. Strong local actors such as local authorities and local politicians increase their influence over media content when newsrooms are downsized and the public relations departments of the actors grow. They also develop new platforms for communication directly with local citizens, bypassing traditional media. In addition, new hyperlocal and semi-professional media are growing where old traditional media are too weak or vanishing – freesheets and online news sites are becoming the main local news organisations in many areas.

Even if national authorities prioritise economic support for legacy local media and regional public services in some of the Nordic countries, we are witnessing a new media ecosystem that is very different from the old media system that we used to know. This development will have consequences for democracy, although it is perhaps too early to judge whether these consequences will be for better or for worse.

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