

The importance of place in local journalism

Insights from two collaborative action research projects

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Abstract

This paper explores what happens when local newspapers in Sweden try new and unexpected collaborations to meet challenges, for example by collaborating with local libraries. The research draws theoretically on the place-based public sphere and the mediated public sphere and empirically on workshops and semi-structured interviews with readers and Swedish journalists in two separate collaborative action research projects. The results show an increased importance of *place* when local media attempts to connect with its readers and increase civic engagement. Local media could also think more outside the box and increase the amount of participatory journalism. Furthermore, the paper concludes that local media needs to take more space in the local community, thus increasing its position in the local public sphere. Local media companies could increasingly investigate how to return to the local place-based public sphere they once inhabited, thus gaining a clearer place-identity.

KEYWORDS

local journalism, public space, place, action research, participatory journalism, civic engagement

Introduction

Local journalism in Sweden is currently facing significant challenges. Globalisation and digitalisation have entailed shrinking advertisement revenues and the need to adapt to new forms of media platforms and new technologies (Nygren & Tenor 2021; Napoli et al. 2017; Kleis Nielsen 2015). During the past decade there has been a trend towards more centralisation of local journalism at the expense of a reduced physical presence at the local level (Napoli et al. 2017). At the same time, the readership of local newspapers is diminishing, a trend that is most evident among young adults, who are turning to social media for news about their local community (Nygren 2018).

This paper explores what happens when local newspapers in Sweden try new ways of practising journalism and undertake unexpected collaborations to meet current challenges. Drawing on theories on the place-based public sphere and the mediated public sphere (Wessler 2018), the overall aim is to see how these collaborations can change the position of the local newspaper in the public sphere. The study builds empirically on two collaborative action research projects at Swedish local newspapers. These were carried out in 2021 and 2022, respectively. By combining the results from these projects, the aim is to answer the following research question: (1) What are the consequences when Swedish local media tries new unexpected collaborations?

Background and literature review

Local journalism under constraint

Local journalism in Sweden has traditionally held a strong position in society. Media and independent journalism are essential for local democratic structures: as an important source of knowledge, to hold those in power accountable, and to create a forum for exchange of different standpoints (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2014; Nord & Nygren 2019). The position of local journalism in Sweden can still be regarded as strong. A survey on use and trust for local news in Sweden (Bergström 2024) shows that, among the different media formats for local news, almost half of the population consumed local news from the Swedish public service broadcasting company (Sveriges Television, SVT) at least three days a week in 2023. Around 40 percent of the population listened to the local radio news broadcasting (Sveriges Radio, SR) at least three days a week, and 25 percent read the local newspaper, in print or online, at least three days a week. These numbers have changed over time, with the printed newspaper having once been dominant.

Other local online news sources have a regular readership of around 10 percent, according to Bergström (2024). Sweden, along with Norway, has consistently been at the top internationally when it comes to people paying for news online, and Swedes predominantly access their news online even if numbers are declining, according to Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Westlund 2024).

The use of traditional local media is age dependent and dominated by the older generation. This is particularly evident in TV and newspaper consumption, although there is less of a difference between the younger and older generations in the use of local radio news, according to Bergström (2024). When it comes to the use of online local news, the survey shows no differences between age groups. Earlier research shows that media consumption also differs based on where the user lives. Users living in smaller towns tend to prioritise local news more than those living in larger cities (Kleis Nielsen 2015). The level of trust is high for the local newspaper, according to the survey by Bergström (2024). Around 50 percent of the Swedish population feels strong or very strong trust for the local newspaper. The level of trust is also higher among those living in smaller cities and towns (Bergström 2024).

However, local media companies in Sweden have been exposed to major challenges as society becomes increasingly digitalised (e.g. Nygren & Tenor 2021; Nygren & Nord 2017; Karlsson & Hellekant Rowe 2019). Advertisement revenues have dropped sharply, as have subscription numbers for local newspapers. This trend is most evident among young people (Andersson 2021). Also, actors such as Google and Facebook have taken over significant shares of the digital advertisement market, which has hit the daily newspapers hard (Lindén 2020). Starting in 2023, many media companies announced new savings measures and cutbacks as well as a reduced number of publication days (Lindberg & Facht 2023). A similar trend is present in the other Nordic and European countries (Newman et al. 2024).

The countermovements within local journalism

For the past 20 years, with the aim of cutting costs, media companies have been closing smaller local newsrooms and instead trying to centralise the local news coverage. Reporters today cover some regions from the central editorial office by means of digital and remote monitoring and occasional visits. The lack of local media and community media is an increasing problem in many parts of Europe – not only in rural areas but also in densely populated regions, partly because local editorial coverage has struggled to keep pace with urban expansion (Schibsted 2024).

However, there have been several countermovements in Sweden recently. Local newsrooms are no longer being closed, and new local newsrooms have instead opened in several locations in Sweden, not least by major players such as *Dagens Nyheter* and *Sveriges Television*. Nygren and Tenor (2021) argue that the trend of closing local editorial offices is now turning. Many local media companies are instead talking about the new possibilities of local journalism. In a global world, the local perspective is becoming more important to make sense of what is happening. Local journalism can link the local public sphere to the global world by explaining how the local community is connected and affected by national and international developments (Nygren & Tenor 2021). Four trends that point to the return of local journalism are highlighted by Nygren and Tenor: (1) People want local news, and the local perspective is becoming increasingly important as a counterweight to anonymous bigotry and globalisation. People live a local life even in a globalised and connected society, and local media plays a key role in the cohesion of local society. (2) Local journalism is built on both a closeness to the local community and a measure of critical distance. It is both a social glue and a scrutiniser of local power holders. All local journalists face the challenge of balancing proximity and distance in their daily work. (3) Local journalism must be based on sustainable economic models. Re-localisation is a current trend among the large media groups as they move away from the centralisation that has been the norm for the past ten years. New hyperlocal media channels are also emerging, for example local news sites, free newspapers and new subscription local weeklies. (4) Local media companies are a necessary part of the democratic infrastructure, which includes local news outlets, knowledge about and identification with the home area, involvement in local issues, and democratic participation.

In short, Nygren and Tenor (2021:6) believe that local media plays a very important role in local communities, not least as a social glue: “Local journalism has a key role in creating common frames of reference, a common arena where big and small things are reported and discussed. In this process, the local identity is created, the pride in a home place and a home village.”

Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe (2019) also point out the importance of local journalism and its connection to a specific place. They present the concept of “the geography of news”, which points to the fact that the physical presence of journalists is decisive for news coverage. In this case, presence does not mean that the journalists only show up when something dramatic happens, but rather that journalists are in the place that they cover for a long time to get to know the people, the society and its important issues. The fact

that there is a well-functioning local newsroom in a town is therefore crucial to creating journalistic work.

In their study, Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe (2019) also examine whether digital technology or hyperlocal media can replace the journalists who are no longer in the area due to savings measures and the closure of local editorial offices, but they conclude that this is not possible. Neither digital technology nor hyperlocal media can compensate for the local journalism created by newspapers and broadcast media *in situ*. Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe argue that the conditions for investing in local journalism are perhaps better than ever right now, and that is a good incentive for anyone who wants to protect the local community.

Challenges facing local journalism and the role of “place”

Local journalism is not only about how many local newsrooms there are in the country, although that is, of course, important. Local journalism is largely about creating a sustainable relationship with readers, viewers or listeners. There needs to be active relationship building between local journalists and the audience, a type of branding for the local media, and the local journalists also need to have a great deal of knowledge about the audience's needs, interests and life situations to help local media meet the readers, viewers or listeners in their everyday life.

News organisations in various countries work to improve the relationship with their audiences by seeking interaction with them, but today many people do not read, watch or listen to news. As a consequence, these persons do not engage or participate actively in the media discourse and are therefore difficult to connect with (Mentzel et al. 2023).

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) examine the so-called news gap, the gap between what news organisations publish and what the audience actually read. The users prefer news about sports, crime, entertainment and weather, while the major media organisations provide them with stories about politics, international relations and economics. This news gap has considerable implications for the media industry and democratic life in the digital age (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein 2013).

Steensen (2026) argues that the state of the media and information environment is just one of many things that have an impact on how democracy develops. Democracy is grounded in the social micro-exchanges of news, opinions and actions in local communities. If trust in democratic institutions deteriorates at the local level, it will eventually collapse at the national level as well (Steensen 2026). He continues by stating that everyone has an agenda. For pro-

fessional journalists, their agenda is shaped by their professional role, while other agendas could be more personal. The consequence is that some groups of citizens may be very active while others find it challenging to find relevant information and participate (Steensen 2026). He argues that there must be a public sphere suited to inform about matters of public interest in inclusive ways. This requires diversity in terms of spaces and platforms, topics and modes of discourse, and voices and perspectives (Steensen 2026).

Usher (2023) argues similarly that declines in the number of local news outlets in the United States are usually not observed in places that have already been limited in their local news provision because the starting point is already deeply problematic. The availability of local news and information may play less of a role in overall political knowledge, social identity, and cultural cohesion in a hybridised, deeply polarised democracy (Usher 2023). At the same time, she argues that the United States is facing structural inequality and political polarisation that has taken on a distinctly place-based dimension. Taken together, the places of news have changed because of forces both inside and outside journalism (Usher 2019).

According to Quandt (2018), citizen participation in the news-making process has been a hopeful concept since the 1990s. However, when examined empirically, citizen participation has not turned out to be as successful as expected. Instead, Quandt introduces the concept of “dark participation”. He argues that this type of user engagement seems to be growing parallel to the recent wave of populism in Western democracies. Examples of dark participation include strategic, manipulative participation as well as trolling and bullying via comment sections (Quandt 2018).

Participatory journalism and civic engagement

As mentioned earlier, two concepts are particularly important in this context: participatory journalism and civic engagement. The concept of participatory communication (Tufte 2014) deals with the issue of how media users can become more involved and socially responsible in the public debate. It can be described as a bottom-up communication practice for social change. The concept is also connected to how new groups of citizens participate in the public discussion, for example groups that for various reasons do not follow traditional media (see e.g., Andersson 2021; Theorin 2019). Other related concepts include “citizen journalism” and “user generated content” (Gant 2007; Shirky 2008).

Participatory journalism was first considered a historical evolution of public communication (Domingo et al. 2008) and mainly interpreted as online user participation to give readers an opportunity

to debate current events. In contrast, other stages of the news production process were closed to citizen involvement or controlled by professional journalists. According to Lawrence et al. (2017), the rapid expansion of the tools of Web 2.0 opened new possibilities for audience participation in news. The findings suggest variation in approaches to engagement and whether journalists view audiences as more passive or more active. The study argues that while some outlets are experimenting with tools for more substantive audience contributions to news content, there are few outlets approaching engagement as a way to involve users in the creation of news. The study identifies technological, economic, professional, and organisational factors that shape and constrain how news outlets practise “engagement”.

Vos and Thomas (2023) present a study of the metajournalistic discourse about participatory journalism from 2002 through 2021 with a focus on how institutional actors sought to normatively position participatory journalism against a backdrop of technological, economic, and social changes, thereby transforming the institution. Throughout the discourse, commentators treated participatory culture as an empirical given and one that journalists and news organisations had an obligation to respond to and embrace. Vos and Thomas argue that participatory journalism focuses on how journalists can provide opportunities for people to participate in the co-creation of journalism. Once-passive audiences are enabled to create and share their own content. If the “old” approach of participatory journalism emphasised citizen participation *through* journalism, the “new” approach to participatory journalism emphasises audience participation *in* journalism (Peters & Witschge 2015, quoted in Vos & Thomas 2023).

Today, social media community groups or hyperlocal civic media initiatives could potentially serve the same democratic purpose as traditional local journalism. Examples of successful initiatives in local journalism include the establishment of hyper-local publications, news initiatives that proactively involve citizens in news dissemination, podcasts and newsletters (Schibsted 2024).

Civic engagement is defined as an individual’s temporal and monetary investment in the neighbourhood’s problem-solving process (McLeod et al. 1996). In numerous earlier studies, scholars have explored the importance of civic engagement. The study by Kim & Ball-Rokeach (2006), for example, presents the concept of communication infrastructure theory (CIT). This infrastructure consists of “everyday conversations and neighborhood stories that people, media, and grassroots organizations create and disseminate” and also includes public spaces such as libraries (Kim & Ball-Rokeach 2006:176).

Drawing on the study of CIT by Kim & Ball-Rokeach from 2006, Wenzel (2019) highlights the importance of communication between people and groups for building a strong civil society. She concludes that “when local media, residents, and community organizations share and exchange local stories, residents connected to this storytelling network report higher levels of civic engagement and a greater sense of belonging to a shared community” (Wenzel 2019:710).

In this paper, these previous studies are relevant when discussing how local newspapers’ ways of working relate to the scientific discussion about public space and place, participatory journalism, and civic engagement.

Theoretical framework

The place-based public sphere and the mediated public sphere

This paper draws on the theories of the place-based public sphere and the mediated public sphere in the analysis of the collaborative action research projects described below.

Local media has traditionally created a feeling of fellowship and solidarity among different groups in one place (Coleman et al. 2016; Hess & Waller 2017). The idea of creating a place for citizens to gather, get information, and exchange opinions has long traditions. It started with the public market or gathering place, *agora*, in ancient Greece and continued to the tea and coffee houses and other meeting places of the bourgeois society in the 18th and 19th centuries (Wessler 2018:13).

In our time, the place where this conversation occurs has increasingly moved from a physical to a digital realm. The public sphere today is more mediated than ever before (Wessler 2018:69; Kaun 2020:122). Information about developments in the surrounding world is to a large degree presented in the digital public sphere, and it is also here where views and standpoints are exchanged. Consequently, we live in an increasingly mediated public sphere.

However, research shows that the ongoing digitalisation results in the exclusion of different societal groups (e.g., Wessler 2018:70; Andersson 2021; Theorin 2019). Digitalisation has also challenged the role of journalism in the public sphere. Modern technologies as well as structural changes to the commercial foundation of media companies have profoundly changed the conditions for producing independent and free journalism. Yet, independent journalism still plays the same essential role in building strong democratic structures. Free journalism is necessary for information and debate as

well as holding those in power accountable, thus enabling free opinion formation (Nord & Strömbäck 2012).

In this study, the idea of a place for citizens to gather, get information, and exchange opinions (the place-based public sphere), as well as local media's role in creating this place either digitally (the mediated public sphere) or *in situ*, is a lens through which the analysis of the described collaborative action research projects is undertaken.

Methodology and material

Collaborative action research

The methodology and philosophy of action research was originally described by Kurt Lewin in 1946. Action research methodology is “research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to action” (Lewin 1946:35). Galtung (2002) describes the methodology as a way to not only understand a problem but also solve it with the people involved. Kemmis and his co-authors (2014) argue that all action research shares some common key features, for example by rejecting conventional research approaches “where an external expert enters a setting to record and represent what is happening” (Kemmis et al. 2014:4). Two features are apparent, according to their research:

- the recognition of the capacity of people living and working in particular settings to participate actively in all aspects of the research process; and
- the research conducted by participants is oriented to making improvements in practices and their settings by the participants themselves

(Kemmis et al. 2014:4)

Action research in the field of media development studies is part of a transformation where media studies are considered to solve societal problems. Action research can be used to address concepts such as socially responsible journalism (Christians & Nordenstreng 2004), conciliatory journalism (Hautakangas & Ahva 2018), constructive journalism (Bro 2018) and participatory communication (Tufte 2014) to tackle the changing and fragmented media landscape and increase the importance of media in a democratic society. Our research mainly focusses on participatory communication as a branch of collaborative action research.

Newsroom action research in practice

This paper empirically draws on the results from two different collaborative action research projects, of which parts of the individual results have previously been reported. The novel approach in this paper is that the analysis is based on the results from the studies together, with a new and different aim and a different theoretical framework, which allows us to draw more general conclusions about the changing relationship between local journalism and the public sphere.

The first case is *Local Editor 2.0*, a collaboration between Södertörn University and the local newspaper *Sydöstran* in the southeastern part of Sweden. This collaboration was carried out in 2021 with the aim of exploring how the relationship between a newspaper and its audience could be developed and how a newspaper's position within the public sphere could be strengthened (Picha Edwardsson 2021, report in Swedish).

The second case is *Local Democracy in a Digital World*, a collaboration between Södertörn University and three local newspapers and local libraries in three different cities in the western part of Sweden. The aim was to explore how local newspapers and local libraries could work together before the local elections in 2022, thus contributing to strengthened local democratic processes (Picha Edwardsson & Zuiderveld 2024).

Both cases were initiated and coordinated by the national collaborative platform for media innovation and democracy-related research, Media and Democracy, at Lindholmen Science Park, in collaboration with the participating local newspapers, and in the second case study also with the participating libraries and the regional council of Västra Götaland. The projects have a collaborative action-oriented research approach (see Kemmis et al. 2014 and Tufte 2014), which involves methods such as workshops and research interviews with journalists and managers, and interviews and focus groups with the newspaper audience. In line with the methodology of collaborative action research, the research activities were conducted by the participants with the aim of making improvements in practices by the participants themselves. In both projects, the actual work process around collecting and processing the material became another interesting part of the result of these collaborative action research-projects and a learning process for the participants.

Case 1: Local Editor 2.0 (Sydöstran): Reaching out to the public

The first case was a research and development project that took place in 2021 in the southeast province of Blekinge in Sweden. The

focus of the project was on developing the relationship between the journalists and the audience in different ways, ultimately to investigate how a daily newspaper like *Sydöstran* could become an important actor in the local community. The newspaper has a total of four local editorial offices, two of which were included in the project: Ronneby and Olofström.

The choice of the word *actor* was intentional; it emphasised the importance of taking an active role in the local community rather than a passive role of an observer. *Sydöstran* wanted to be a prominent social actor, a voice to be reckoned with in the local societal debate. But how could this goal be reached at a time when more and more social services were being digitised, including readers' media consumption? What is the most important channel for meeting readers – the printed newspaper or various digital channels? And what place does *Sydöstran* take in the everyday life of its readers? The project explored these questions in close collaboration with the local editors in Ronneby and Olofström.

The one-year project began with a workshop, in line with the methodology of collaborative action research (Kemmis et al. 2014). After the workshop, the local editors increased their knowledge about the residents of Ronneby and Olofström and the surrounding area by going out and asking their readers a list of prepared questions. What do readers' lives look like? What do they want to read about? What do they not want to read about? How long should the articles be? Do they want video instead of text? Is it still relevant to tell the audience what is happening? It was also important to solve the question of how *Sydöstran* could continue to monitor municipal politics and other socially important issues that affect the residents' everyday life and present this information in an interesting way. How could the newspaper make sure that it was where things were happening? And are there more possibilities than the traditional monitoring methods to become the municipalities' so-called campfire, i.e., a gathering place for socially important issues?

The local editors had to actively participate in the *Sydöstran* project in order to succeed with all the objectives. They had to discuss, reflect and find solutions to the project's main questions regarding the future role of *Sydöstran*, so it was important to give them the tools and knowledge they needed to develop the business and create a sustainable relationship with the audience. Therefore, the local editors themselves went out, collected the empirical material in the study, and conducted interviews in their respective beats with both subscribers and non-subscribers.

Before the workshop, the local editors were tasked with describing their everyday life and how they usually find article ideas. Their responses were then discussed at the workshop, and it became

clear that the local editors' inspiration for articles came from living and spending time in the municipality. They met readers at the grocery store or town square or when readers came to the local editorial office. Sometimes contact with the readers was appreciated, and sometimes it was perceived as disruptive when the editors were chasing a deadline or wanted to close for the day. The local editors' own networks were critical to finding good pitches, and some spent more time cultivating these contacts than others.

At the workshop, the local editors were then instructed how to collect research material for the study in the form of in-depth interviews with subscribers and non-subscribers. The researcher from Södertörn University (Malin Picha Edwardsson) compiled a battery of questions that the local editors were to use when conducting their interviews, so that all interviews followed the same template and thus became comparable.

A total of 23 interviews were held in Ronneby and Olofström, of which 13 interviewees were men and 10 were women. Their ages spanned between 20 and 52. Of the interviewed persons, 52 percent were subscribers of *Sydöstran* and 48 percent were non-subscribers. The interviews were held and recorded by the local editors, and the material was later transcribed and thematically analysed in line with Kvale (1996) and Clark et al. (2021) by the researcher Malin Picha Edwardsson. The thematic analysis of the transcribed material was an important step in the methodological process of extracting empirical results in the study.

Case 2: Local democracy in a digital world: An unexpected collaboration

The second case study consists of an unusual collaboration initiated in early 2022 by the local newspapers *TTELA*, *Falköpings Tidning* and *Borås Tidning*. With the upcoming local elections in mind, they formed partnerships with the public libraries in their respective cities. The aim was to explore how they could work together to strengthen local democracy. To their surprise, the local newspapers and the public libraries identified several similarities at an early stage: they all have a clearly stated democratic mission, they are all supposed to be independent and neutral, and they all work with public education and source criticism. In addition, they all are tasked with a general assignment to provide the local community with important social information.

Both local newspapers and local libraries have a tradition of being geographically placed close to residents in the local community; historically there have been at least one public library and one local editorial office in each municipality (Nygren & Shaerff Engelbrecht

2018). However, for local newspapers this has changed over the past decade (Napoli et al. 2017).

The participants of the project consisted of three local newspapers and three public libraries. They were divided into three groups based on their respective municipalities. During the project, they held several joint project-level meetings but mostly worked independently, forming three independent working groups in their respective local settings that developed their own ideas and activities. The main target group was the public, but specific groups of interest were residents participating in the local elections for the first time, young first-time voters, and residents in areas with low turnout in the previous elections. Researchers from Södertörn University (Malin Picha Edwardsson and Maria Zuiderveld) conducted semi-structured interviews with the reporters and librarians during and after the project activities.

The first round of interviews was held in April–May 2022 at the start of the project, and the second round was held in October 2022 when the project was about to end. In all, ten people participated in the two rounds of interviews, which were conducted remotely via video conferencing and lasted approximately 30–45 minutes each. The interviewees consisted of six librarians and four journalists participating in the project. The interviews were all recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Kvale 1996; Clark et al. 2021).

Results

Connecting to the readers

The results of case 1 (Local Editor 2.0) show that the reporters need to meet readers in their own environments more frequently, for example at the local food store, the library or shopping centres. In short, the meeting place should revolve around the readers. For example, the election campaign could present an opportunity to meet people, arrange debates, and let the readers ask the politicians questions. The local editors also discussed how to start the implementation of new innovative ideas and then continue to be persistent. They noted that change does not happen by itself but rather requires careful planning and scheduling.

The results from case 2 (Local Democracy in a Digital World) show that “public libraries and local media companies can advance their positions as arenas for the democratic debate. Local media is active in a mediated public sphere, while libraries have a place-based public sphere” (Picha Edwardsson & Zuiderveld 2024:14). The study shows that there can be potential in merging the respective spaces of both public libraries and the local media. Previous studies

have shown that libraries' democratic mandate can be a complex assignment in practice (Olsson Dahlquist 2019; Coward et al. 2018). The fact that public libraries could be part of the democratic debate and at the same time serve as a neutral meeting ground needs more exploration and reflection, for example by library representatives on different levels.

The social glue in the community

The newspaper subscribers interviewed in case 1 emphasised that *Sydöstran* could take a bigger place in local society – dare to step out of its comfort zone and arrange debates and ask and discuss uncomfortable questions. As a valued media channel, *Sydöstran* could take a bigger place in readers' everyday lives. The newspaper subscribers called on the newspaper to dare to challenge politicians and xenophobic forces and to pursue issues and hold politicians accountable. The project identified that there is also room for extended news services, preferably something that readers need but may not know (yet) that they need. However, this requires innovative, creative solutions and not just traditional coverage of traffic, weather and accidents.

The results align with previous research on local journalism. Nygren and Tenor (2021:6) argue that local journalism holds an important role in the local community as a social glue. "Local journalism has a key role in creating common frames of reference, a common square where big and small things are reported and discussed. In this process, the local identity is created, the pride in a home place and a home village."

In case 2, the conclusion is that the local newspapers could easily slip into a role where they initiate the public discussion while the public libraries could maintain and provide conditions for the public debate in their physical spaces, i.e., the library itself. However, public libraries are not only an arena for the democratic debate but also an actor in society, according to Sundin (2020). In this project, there are several examples of when the public library became an actor in society, for example by arranging lectures on source criticism. Can they play an even more active role in collaboration with local newspapers, for example by initiating courses on different types of democratic topics prior to local elections? This is a question that can be explored further.

On-site presence

Case 1 shows that on-site presence at local newsrooms is essential for successful local journalism. This is perhaps an obvious conclusion, considering previous studies by, for example, Nygren and

Tenor (2021) and Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe (2019). However, the importance of physical presence cannot be overestimated since it is above all through personal meetings that the local editors obtain tips and suggestions for their articles.

Ultimately, local editors need to become even more innovative and create experiences for the readers, while the newspaper becomes an even more important social actor and a voice to be reckoned with in the local societal debate, becoming a municipal campfire, i.e., a gathering place for socially important issues. This is something the local editors who participated in the project were aiming for, and the project showed that their creativity is the only limit.

Furthermore, the teamwork in case 2 showed that the importance of the place-based public sphere increased as a result of this unusual collaboration. For many local media companies, the physical arena has become more out of focus as smaller editorial offices in Sweden have disappeared and the number of journalists has decreased. The local media companies in this project, however, appear to have once again identified the importance of place for a close relationship with the residents. It is in the physical meetings between journalists and residents that local media companies experience that ideas are born and trust created. The relationships formed in the physical space may be different than the relationships formed in the digital space, according to the project. These spaces can complement one another, but the digital space cannot replace the physical space, which is in line with previous research by Karlsson and Hellekant Rowe (2019).

Increasing relevance

In multiple examples, journalism is trying to find new ways of creating local ties. There has been a countermovement in recent years to breathe life back into local journalism after years of closures of many local editorial offices in Sweden. Notably, public service media companies such as Sveriges Television and Sveriges Radio have opened new, local editorial offices in smaller towns, and hyperlocal sites are now operational in many areas throughout the country. Nygren and Tenor call this “the return of local journalism” (2021:4).

Both case studies 1 and 2 raise two questions. The first is whether it is also possible to talk about the return of place for the local newspapers that participated in the projects, and the second is whether media companies can reconnect with place to secure their survival. Both studies show that the challenge for local newspapers is how to reach the isolated groups of people in local communities that do not

communicate with one another (cf. Fraser 1992). Important questions that are only answered in part by these projects are, how can arenas be created where these groups can meet? Can public libraries be such arenas? And can journalism be another, more theoretical, arena?

Furthermore, case study 2 shows that local newspapers, in collaboration with public libraries, could increase the amount of participatory journalism, which explores how media users can become more involved and socially responsible in the public debate. In this project, both groups identify the need for a physical meeting place for discussions and dialogues in the local public sphere. Through increased relevance in the local public sphere, public libraries and local newspapers could contribute to greater cohesion and engagement in the local context and thus strengthen their local identity (see Wenzel 2019:710). The conclusion is that civic engagement often starts with a place, such as the library.

Analysis and discussion

Changing the positions in the local public sphere

The two case studies presented in this paper show how local journalists are working to regain their place in the public sphere, in both a physical and a digital sense. By taking part in the collaborative action research approach, the local editors realised that they needed to meet readers in their own environments, for example at the local food store, the library or shopping centres. In short, they needed to place the readers at the centre of their work. Furthermore, they needed to be more creative and more persistent with new ideas and become better at planning and scheduling them into their daily activities. The local editors also learned that their respective newspaper titles are valued media channels that function as a social glue within the community and could take up a bigger place in readers' everyday lives. There is also room for increased coverage of important topics and extended news services. Finally, the studies show that on-site presence at local newsrooms is essential for successful local journalism.

Furthermore, one of the conclusions drawn is that public libraries and local newspapers could advance their positions as arenas for the democratic debate. Local newspapers are active in a mediated public sphere, while libraries have a place-based public sphere. There is potential in merging both the public libraries' and the local newspapers' respective spheres. It was also evident from the collaboration that the importance of the place-based sphere has increased. Local media once again identified the importance of place

for a close relationship with residents and experienced that this is where ideas are born, and trust created. Relationships formed in the physical space may be different than relationships formed in the digital space, and while these spaces can complement one another, the digital space cannot replace the physical space. Also, local newspapers could increase the amount of participatory journalism, which explores how media users can become more involved and socially responsible in the public debate in order to strengthen civic engagement in the local community.

Thinking outside the box

Several other conclusions can be drawn from the two case studies. Firstly, local media must be more creative, more innovative and more persistent with new ideas in order to succeed. It is easy to give up on a new idea when it does not pay off immediately. Secondly, new processes and collaborations are needed for local media to attempt to regain its position in the local media landscape. In short, it is important to think outside the box in the current and future media landscape.

Thinking outside the box in media companies often involves cross-disciplinary collaboration, for example in the form of technology development and project-based teamwork. In some cases, this makes communication and implementation of work processes more difficult. The media companies described in this paper, however, worked successfully with librarians despite differences in work culture and a key to success was probably the open communication taking place throughout the project.

Increased importance of the place-based public sphere

Many local media companies are currently working hard to regain their place in the public sphere in both a physical and a digital sense. Research shows that local media in general is valued as a social glue in the community and could take up a bigger place in readers' everyday lives. This is in line with previous research by Coleman et al. (2016) and Hess & Waller (2017), who assert that local media has traditionally created a feeling of fellowship and solidarity among different groups in a single location. Consequently, this paper argues that on-site presence at local newsrooms is essential for successful local journalism.

Today, we live in an increasingly mediated public sphere (Wessler 2018), and people (the public) mainly exchange viewpoints on and obtain information from digital channels. However, as the ongoing digitalisation excludes different societal groups (Andersson 2021; Theorin 2019; Steensen 2026; Usher 2023), there is also a movement

countering the mediated public sphere and emphasising the importance of the place-based public sphere. The case studies described in this paper show that local media once again has identified the importance of place for a close relationship with residents and experienced that this is where ideas are born, and trust created. The digital space cannot replace the physical space, but an increased awareness of this fact might lead to a shift in focus for the local media companies. By expanding their place-based public sphere, local media could advance its position as an arena for democratic debate because independent journalism is important when building strong democratic structures.

Increased importance of civic engagement

The connection to and the relationship with the audience is paramount when local media attempts to regain the position and trust in the local community that it once had. The results of the case studies show that local media companies need to increase the amount of participatory journalism to strengthen civic engagement in the local community. As local journalism is largely about creating a sustainable relationship with readers, viewers or listeners, it is important to actively work on this relationship. An important part of this work entails learning about the audience's needs, interests and life situations and where the local media meets its readers, viewers or listeners in their everyday life.

Today, many people do not engage or participate actively in the media discourse as they do not read, watch or listen to news (Mentzel et al. 2023; Boczkowski & Mitchelstein 2013). These people are especially difficult for news organisations to interact with. The concept of participatory communication (Tufte 2014) deals with the issue of how media users can become more involved and socially responsible in the public debate. The concept is also connected to how new groups of citizens can participate in the public discussion, for example groups that for various reasons do not follow traditional media (see e.g., Andersson 2021; Mentzel et al. 2023; Theorin 2021). Instead, social media community groups, or hyperlocal civic media initiatives, could potentially serve the same democratic purpose as traditional local journalism. A report from Schibsted (2024) points out that successful initiatives in local journalism include the establishment of hyper-local publications, news initiatives that proactively involve citizens in news dissemination, podcasts and newsletters.

In the case studies described in this paper, it became evident that the journalists perceived serious difficulties when reaching out to their audience. Many individual journalists in the projects realised

how little they knew about their readers. According to Lawrence et al. (2017), there is a variation in approaches to engagement and whether journalists view audiences as more passive or more active users. People (the audience) are different and represent a large number of personalities with specific interests and lifestyles. Regardless of this fact, the local media has great potential to reach out to its audience to a higher degree than it does today to increase civic engagement. As Wenzel (2019:710) points out: “when local media, residents, and community organizations share and exchange local stories, residents connected to this storytelling network report higher levels of civic engagement and a greater sense of belonging to a shared community”.

Conclusions

In this paper, the following research question was explored: (1) What are the consequences when Swedish local media tries new unexpected collaborations?

The paper concludes that there are almost limitless possibilities for local media companies to start new collaborations in order to counteract their current challenges. The collaboration with libraries, as described in one of the case studies, is only one example that could be explored further. By collaborating with other actors in the public sphere, local media could gain new insights that could be beneficial and be turned into an advantage.

Secondly, it is also concluded that media companies need to keep up their innovative work when it comes to changing their position in the public sphere since thinking outside the box is paramount in the current and future media landscape.

Thirdly, the audience should be placed at the centre when local media attempts to regain the position and trust it once had in the local community. The results of the case studies show that local media companies need to increase the amount of participatory journalism to strengthen civic engagement in the local community, for example by acting as a facilitator of civic discussion.

To conclude, local media companies need to investigate the road back to the place-based public sphere they once had as the importance of place increases when they attempt to connect with their readers. Swedish media has a lot to gain from exploring this particular road to increased relevance.

Limitations

This study is limited to a Swedish context with a focus on Swedish local media companies. Thus, it can have limited applicability to the media systems in other countries.

Future studies

In future studies it would be interesting to investigate how local media companies could benefit from more collaboration and how they could become more innovative in their approach. Overall, this study shows that there is more to explore in terms of the collaborations between local media companies and other public actors.

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