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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Reporting Through Patriotic Lenses: How Journalists and Political Actors Understand and Assess the Community Role of Local Journalism

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## ABSTRACT

Local news media are seen as key to local democracy and communal cohesion. This article asks how the community role of local journalism is understood and assessed by journalists and political actors. The study builds on 26 in-depth interviews with local journalists and local political actors involved in conflicts over localisation of hospitals in two different regions in Norway. Theoretically, the article draws on research into the roles of local news media and the place-making features of local journalism. We conceptualise the community role as an overarching role of local journalism, where characteristics related to, e.g., the watchdog and advocacy roles of local journalism may serve a community function. Our analysis shows that local patriotism is regarded as a key aspect of local journalism, where local news media are expected to report through specific spatial lenses to the benefit of the local community. Yet although local journalists and local political actors largely agree on key ideals of local journalism, they advance different perspectives on what form of local news reporting is in the best interest of the community. In sum, local patriotism is considered both a force and an obstacle when journalists are serving the community.

## KEYWORDS

Local journalism; journalism; roles of journalism; community role; patriotic reporting; journalistic roles

## Introduction

Local news media are perceived as key to local democracy and communal cohesion. Fulfilling these roles includes tasks such as informing citizens on issues of local importance, being a watchdog, representing the voices of and campaigning on behalf of citizens, and contributing to a sense of community and social belonging (e.g., Costera Meijer 2010; Franklin 2006a; Nielsen 2015). Hence, the roles and practices of local journalism are tightly interwoven with notions of place and community (e.g., Freeman 2020; Gutsche Jr 2014; Örnebring, Kingsepp, and Möller 2020).

Research on the roles of local journalism have shed valuable light on the overall role expectations towards local journalism. This includes how the roles and practices of local journalism are understood and assessed by local journalists (e.g., Hanusch 2015; Hanitzsch 2006; Perreault 2021) and by citizens/audiences (e.g., Costera Meijer and Bijleveld 2016; Freeman 2020; Olsen 2020). Extant research has, however, tended to study

various roles of local journalism as distinct and to some extent conflicting features of local journalism. Our starting point in this article is the community role of local journalism—its cohesive function in local communities and contribution to a sense of community. We conceptualise the community role as an overarching role, where, for example, the watchdog and advocacy roles in principle may serve a community function in local communities. Based on the understanding that an emphasis on place forms a key part of the role of local journalism, the article asks *how the role of local journalism in serving the local community is understood and assessed by local journalists and local political actors*.

To explore the community role of local journalism, we focus on two Norwegian regions where over time there have been heated conflicts concerning the localisation of hospitals which have received extensive coverage in local news media. By focusing on two conflicts where key public health care services were at stake for local communities, and based on in-depth interviews with local journalists and local political actors, the article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the community role of local journalism. This includes how the role is understood and assessed, how the role entails drawing boundaries to an “other”, and what implications journalistic practices may have in terms of contributing to cohesion and conflict within and between communities. Since existing studies have tended to focus on overall role perceptions in relation to the range of issues that local news media report, there is a dearth of insights into how the role of local news media is perceived, assessed and balanced in practice, in relation to specific issues of key concern for local communities (but see e.g., Firmstone 2016; Freeman 2020). Research on role perceptions assumes that journalists’ role perceptions influence their decisions about news selection and presentation (Donsbach 2012). In practice, however, other issues, such as resources, may interfere with the journalists’ normative role perceptions (Wolfgang, Vos, and Kelling 2019), and scholars have pointed out that the literature on journalistic roles has largely failed to distinguish between role intention and practice (Hanitzsch and Vos 2019). By taking specific cases as its starting point, this paper aims to account for the distinction between role perceptions and practices of journalism (cf. Hanitzsch and Vos 2019; Hanusch 2015). Moreover, the study adds to our knowledge of how key political actors in local communities experience and assess local journalism practices, and also the features and possible consequences of the ways in which local journalists carry out their community role, which remain underexplored.

For the sake of clarity it should be pointed out that our definition of and approach to “local journalism” overlap with what some scholars call “community journalism” (for an overview, see Meyer & Spearman [2019]). In line with most of the work we cite in this article, we have however opted for the term “local journalism” (see e.g., Hanusch [2015, 817–818] for a discussion of terminology when it comes to local journalism).

In the following, we present the theoretical framework, before we give contextual background to the cases that we study and present the research methods. We then present our analysis before we discuss our findings and conclude.

## **Theoretical Perspectives: The Roles of Local Journalism and Notions of Place**

Research on the roles of (local) journalism have typically distinguished between the following roles: An informational role, where journalists should inform citizens about local

issues. A watchdog role, holding government institutions to account on behalf of local citizens. An advocacy role, where local news media proactively campaign on matters concerning the local community, often taking a patriotic position on behalf of the local community. And, finally, a community role, where local news media serve a cohesive function and contribute to a sense of community (see e.g., Hanitzsch 2007; Hanitzsch and Vos 2019; Hanusch 2015; Heider 2005; Poindexter 2011). Distinguishing between these different journalistic roles is no doubt useful in conceptualising and analysing the ways in which journalists, audiences, and other stakeholders understand the role of local journalists. However, and as alluded to above, few studies have discussed how the roles are inter-related and may serve common purposes. Instead, the various roles have tended to be presented as distinct, and to some extent conflicting (cf. Hanusch 2015; Poindexter 2011; Heider 2005; Firmstone 2016). In this paper, we approach the community role of local journalism as an overarching role, where the watchdog, advocacy and informational functions of the local news media may all play a role in fulfilling the community functions of local news media, including contributing to a sense of community.

In line with previous theorising in journalism studies, we approach notions of place as ever-changing and contested social and cultural constructions (where local journalism is seen as contributing to (re)producing a sense of place and community [see e.g., Freeman 2020, 525; Gutsche Jr 2014; Gutsche Jr. and Hess 2019; Hess and Waller 2014]). A number of studies have pointed out that contributing to a sense of place forms a key part of how local journalists and citizens understand the role of local journalism (e.g., Costera Meijer 2010; Olsen 2020; Winsvold and Skogerbø 2011; Freeman 2020). Local journalism tends to highlight issues and perspectives that are perceived as relevant to citizens in a particular geographical area and local political context, and contribute to construct a sense of place based on specific notions of locality, both material and imagined (cf. Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015; Hess 2013; Hess and Waller 2014, 2015; Peters 2015). Moreover, studies have pointed to how local journalists often live in and are part of the local community where they work, and may be regarded as community or citizen stakeholders (Perreault 2021). Meyer and Speakman (2019) note that “the two necessary elements for community formation are for a group of people to have something in common, and something that differentiates them from other groups”. Hence, we argue that contributing to a sense of community may be achieved in several ways, including through providing information, being a watchdog and advocating on behalf of the community. For example, the watchdog role, which entails scrutinising (local) government institutions, and the advocacy role, which entails proactively campaigning on behalf of the local community, may serve to “defend” local citizens and local communities from alleged wrongdoing by local and central government, bring about local patriotism and a sense of local belonging. A key aim of this article is thus to contribute further insights into how the community role is understood and assessed.

A related aspect that we address, and that remains underexplored, is how the community role of local journalism—contributing to a sense of place and community—also entails drawing (on) boundaries pertaining to an “other” (Gutsche Jr. and Hess 2019). Drawing on notions of “spatial identity”, social science scholars have pointed out the inextricable link between identity and location, where for instance notions of “us” require symbolic and/or physical boundaries with an “other” (see for example Benwell and Stokoe 2016 for an overview). Along these lines Cramer (2016, 8, 12) foregrounds how (group) identity serves as reference points by which people compare themselves to others,

noting that “place-based consciousness matters for the way people make sense of politics”. As such, place-based identity plays a part in categorising who belongs to us and them, in assessing how power and resources are and should be distributed, and, thus, may also be an asset in political mobilisations (Stein et al. 2021). In this article, we draw on these notions in studying the role of the local news media, including how local journalism, through the ways in which they carry out their (community) role in political conflicts, may contribute to construct notions of “us” and “them”, and shape and maintain (notions of) cohesion and conflict within and across local communities (cf. Dickens, Couldry, and Fotopoulou 2015; Gutsche Jr. and Hess 2019; Peters 2015).

## Case Study Background and Research Methods

### *Conflicts Over Key Public Health Care Services*

Over several years, decisions regarding the localisation of hospitals have been the subject of heated debate and extensive news attention in several regions and local communities in Norway. At the centre of these conflicts were plans for the re-localisation and/or closure of (smaller) hospitals, with neighbouring regions and municipalities fighting to have hospitals located in their geographic area. This entailed local communities risking losing their local hospital in favour of bigger regional hospital units. Hospital (re)localisation has important consequences for local communities in terms of travel distance to receive medical help, for job opportunities, infrastructure and thus also potentially for influx and depopulation, and, hence, for communities’ attractiveness as a place of residence.

Much of the news reporting and public debate on the issues played out in local news media, and the topic ignited heated debate, both internally in municipalities and cities, between municipalities, between regions, and between municipalities, regional health authorities, and central authorities. Overall, the conflicts were characterised by the local communities objecting to central authorities and their decisions, and vying for their local hospital at the expense of the neighbouring municipalities’/region’s hospital. The decisions to shut down and re-localise hospitals led to the development of local protest groups. These groups in particular foregrounded the severe consequences that longer distances to hospitals could have for citizens of local communities, in particular for women giving birth, and they made use of rhetorical strategies which, for many, would connote national romanticism, foregrounding cultural values and symbols pertaining to rural life. In discussing the importance of locality in political debate in Norway in recent years, Eidheim and Fimreite (2020) note that several conflicts “played out in a political context where the centre-periphery dimension was increasingly visible, at least in part due to structural reform, centralising by government”, pointing to an increase in “mobilisation and resistance against state policies, based on the perception that central authorities do not understand the life of people in the districts”. In general, “the periphery” holds a strong ideological position in Norwegian politics and equality as a political goal is not only particularly important but also closely tied to geography (Angell, Flo, and Grimsrud 2016). Angell, Flo, and Grimsrud (2016, 7, our emphasis) point out that “[...] localisation issues—that is, *where* public services and jobs should be placed and *which community will benefit* the most from the localisation—feature higher on the political agenda than issues linked to the content and quality of the services”.

In order to better understand the conflicts in focus in this study, it is relevant to briefly introduce how politics in general and hospitals in particular are organised in Norway. Norway has three administrative levels: state, county municipal and municipal. The political actors we have interviewed for this study belong to the municipal level, which is also the political level that local news journalism primarily focuses on. Norway is characterised as a welfare state and has tax-based universal health and social insurance coverage. The vast majority of health expenditure is financed by public funding (accounting for 86 percent of health expenditure in 2020 [Statistics Norway 2021]) (The Ministry of Health and Care Services n.d.). Since 2002 the specialist health services, including the hospitals, have been organised as health trusts, entailing that public hospitals, which previously were owned by county municipalities, now are owned by the state (Byrkjeflot and Neby 2005). Hence, in the analysed cases, the central authorities had the authority to make the final decisions regarding hospital localisation, not the local political actors that we have interviewed. Yet, and as noted above, hospital localisation has a range of municipal-level consequences and can hardly be regarded as detached from local politics.

### ***Data, Analysis, and the Local News Media in Norway***

The paper draws on 26 in-depth interviews with local actors involved in political conflicts over localisation of hospitals in two different regions in Norway, including local journalists (7), local politicians (7), municipal administrative managers (8), and representatives of activist groups (4).<sup>1</sup> The study focuses on a national context (Norway) where local news media hold a strong position, enjoying some of the highest readership figures in the world (e.g., Schulz 2021; Syvertsen et al. 2014, 56). Local newspapers still dominate as citizens' preferred source of information on a range of topics, including local politics (Schulz 2021, 46), and local newspapers continue to hold central positions in communities throughout the country (e.g., Elvestad and Johannessen 2017; Lindén, Morlandstø, and Nygren 2021; Mathisen 2021; Schulz 2021). This makes Norway a pertinent case for studying the community role of local news media. Yet, similar to other countries, the migration to digital platforms has caused economic decline in recent years and led to cutbacks of staff and resources. These developments have led to concerns regarding the ability of local journalism to fulfil democratic functions, including concerns that particular geographical areas may end up as "news deserts" or "geographical media shadows" (e.g., Abernathy 2018; Mathisen 2021; Nygren and Althén 2014), receiving no or scarce media attention. The economic decline, including editorial cutbacks, forms an important context for our study.

The interviews were carried out during autumn 2019 and winter 2020 (before the Covid-19 pandemic) in two different regions in Norway. In both regions, hospital localisation was a key issue in the period before and during the interviews were carried out—garnering extensive attention in local news media in both regions and mobilising local communities. The hospital localisation cases are used as entry points to explore the role of local news media when issues of key importance for local communities are at stake.

The two regions consist of several local news outlets and several municipalities. Our study includes local politicians and municipal administrative managers in six municipalities and local journalists in two different newspapers (one newspaper in each of the two regions). Both newspapers studied cover several municipalities. The two newspapers publish daily online, and they publish four and five print editions weekly. There are 226

print newspapers in Norway (Medienorge 2020), and in terms of circulation numbers, one of the newspapers in our study is among the top fifty, whereas the other is among the top hundred. The larger of the two employs close to twenty journalists, while the smallest slightly more than ten.

The interviewed journalists had covered the hospital localisation issue for their local newspaper. The local political actors interviewed (local politicians, municipal administrative managers and representatives of activist groups) had played a role in the conflicts: they had worked to get their preferred solutions across, been sources in and/or worked strategically toward the local news media. Including municipal administrative managers under the umbrella term “political actors” entails that we operate with a broad definition of political communication, where “any use of symbols and any attempts at influencing the outcome of political processes” is regarded as political communication (Skogerbø et al. 2020, 18). Civil servants are generally expected to contribute with policy advice (Figsenschou et al. 2020) and, in the cases we analyse, the municipal administrative managers were also important sources in the news media, foregrounding the municipalities’ position related to hospital re-localisation. All the interviews were carried out face-to-face following a semi-structured interview guide. Interviewees were asked questions regarding their perspectives on and challenges related to local news reporting of the hospital cases. The journalists were asked questions such as how they perceived the role of the local news outlet where they were employed and how they had worked with the hospital cases. The local political actors were asked questions such as their communication with local news media and how they assessed the role of local news media.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were transcribed, read and analysed by the authors. First, both authors read the transcripts separately. Then we discussed key aspects of the interviews and sorted the material, focusing specifically on what the interviewees said about the role of the local news media. Based on this preliminary sorting, the material was again sorted based on the two preliminary categories “watchdog role” and “cohesive community role”. These preliminary categories were loosely based on previous theorising, distinguishing between a community role and a watchdog role of local journalism (see e.g., Firmstone 2016; Hatcher and Haavik 2014; Hanusch 2015). We used the sorted material in carrying out the initial phase of the analysis. The two categories served as a useful starting point to sort the material and initiate the analysis. However, carrying on with the analysis it became clear to us that the two categories overlap. In fact, and as noted above, we argue that in relation to the cases studied here, it is fruitful to conceptualise the community role as encompassing the watchdog role as well as other roles of local journalism. In later phases, we therefore went back to the full interview transcripts, reading them again, and sorting the material in terms of what the interviewees said about the role of the local news media in terms of serving the community and how they assessed the enactment of this role, and its implications. Hence, the research process included both inductive and deductive features (cf. Blaikie 2007), where we started out with loosely defined theoretical concepts, before refining these categories, based on preliminary analysis of the data.

## Analysis

Our interviews show that the overall understanding of politicians, municipal administration, activist groups and journalists is that local journalism is essentially expected to

serve the interest of the local community (cf. Hanusch 2015; Hatcher and Haavik 2014; Freeman 2020; Perreault 2021). From the perspective of the interviewees, this role includes conveying information, serving as watchdog and common deliberation platform, and providing a sense of cohesion and belonging in the local community. Simultaneously, and as elaborated below, the different actors forward different perspectives on how the roles should be carried out in order to serve the local community, and how the ways in which the practices of local journalism contribute to establish and maintain cohesion and conflict across and within geographical areas.

In the first part of the analysis, below, we focus on the interviewees' understanding of the role of local journalism in political conflicts, and we show how patriotism and serving the local community is seen as key to all aspects of local journalism's roles. In the second part of the analysis, we turn our attention to the local political actors' critical reflections on how the local news media carry out their role, and its consequences in terms of informing citizens and playing a cohesive community role. Furthermore, both of the below sections shed light on how patriotic features of local news media entail the construction of an "other".

### ***Serving the Local Community Through Patriotic Reporting***

The local journalists interviewed highlight how their roles are anchored in the geographical situatedness of the local media. According to the journalists, this entails that the local news media takes the side of their town, municipality or region in questions regarding for example where hospitals should be located. This is done by focusing on what is best for the particular geographical area they serve, and the citizens residing there, and through investigating the (negative) consequences that (re)localisation of hospitals may entail for the local community. One of the journalists expresses it like this:

[O]ur starting point needs to be the opinions and interests of the local population [...] We are a local newspaper and we see it as our duty to serve the interest of the population here. Some may say that, 'No, we should reflect society'. But if we aren't serving the interest of the population here, then no one is. My impression is that people here [in the local community] are very satisfied with our health journalism. But if you ask people in [the neighbouring municipality] they will say that we are completely wrong. That's just how it is when you have a public service mission on behalf of your local community. (journalist 5)

The quote highlights that a central part of serving the local community entails bringing perspectives and angles from specific geographical lenses which may, on the one hand, contribute to local solidarity, while on the other hand may serve to create and maintain conflict between local communities and between local communities and central authorities.

This perspective is echoed by local politicians, municipal administrative managers, and leaders of activist groups, which emphasise local news media as central in forwarding the interests and perspectives of the local community. Related to the hospital conflicts, through reporting the issue, the local news media provided information on processes concerning localisation of hospitals, and contributed to setting the issue on the agenda, thereby possibly leading to decisions being altered or reversed, to the benefit of their local community. Several interviewees say that they perceived decision-making in the regional health authorities as tending to be poorly or ill informed, not taking the (negative) consequences for local communities sufficiently into account. Here the local news media are seen as key in setting issues on the agenda, facilitating debate, and



creating a pressure that could potentially contribute to get the municipal actors' messages across and influence decision-making. One of the local politicians for example says:

We quickly realised that we as local politicians had little possibility of being heard [by the regional health authorities]. Therefore, we had to use all channels, including the media, to get our message out, in order to get our viewpoints and the viewpoints of the local community out—and hopefully to the board of the regional health authorities. (local politician 6)

Thus, local political actors used the local media strategically to get their message across in the local news media, forwarding perspectives that they believed were in the interest of their municipality. Although the strategy was not necessarily regarded as particularly successful in terms of reversing decision-making processes in regional health authorities, the interviewees nevertheless foreground it as crucial in terms of providing public debate on the consequences for local communities.

The latter perspective is echoed by local journalists, who foreground that they experienced it as challenging to get comments from the regional health authorities. As stated by one journalist, “You have to fight a battle to get a comment [from the regional health authorities]. Every time they receive criticism, they make themselves unavailable” (journalist 1). The interviewees' experiences with the regional health authorities illustrate how, in the conflict between municipalities and regional health authorities, each local community, including local journalists and local political actors, stood united against decisions made by the regional health authorities. Moreover, it illustrates a tension between the centre and periphery, where local communities (authorities, journalists, activist groups) experience that they are not heard in decision-making processes, that there is a lack of transparency, and that decisions are poorly informed (cf. Cramer 2016). As such, the local newspapers became important arenas for media-friendly demonstrations (activist groups), and news reports and op-eds bringing forth and questioning the decisions made by regional health authorities.

It should be pointed out that although the local journalists underscore that the local news media should stand on the local community's side, they hold that this should not entail completely servile reporting, but rather entails criticising local authorities when necessary. Although local journalists and local authorities have partly overlapping goals (forwarding the interests of the local community), the local journalists also see it as their duty to be critical towards local authorities on behalf of local citizens. In other words, the journalists hold that being critical towards the local government and local administration is also part of their role as “serving the community”—even though criticism of local authorities may lead to conflict within the community. One of the journalists describes the balancing act like this:

It is very difficult. Because our job is to praise [the municipality and region]. But it is also our damn duty to be critical. It is our job to ask the critical questions. To managers and politicians. It is our duty. But we experience that if we write anything divisive the reader easily shoots the piano player, the newspaper. Saying that we contribute to conflict and polarisation. It is an interesting balancing act. But we have to do both. We have to praise [the municipality and region], but also be critical towards decisions and processes. (journalist 6)

As elucidated further below, while local journalists hold that the critical spotlight is in the best interest of local citizens and the community, local political actors in part see local news reporting as un-nuanced and overly critical.

Although the local political actors interviewed underline that the local news media worked as an arena for and facilitator of information and debate regarding health care services and hospital relocation, they hold that local journalists to a lesser degree engaged in investigative journalism on the topic (cf. Firmstone 2016; Franklin 2006b). From the perspective of local politicians and municipal administration, a key explanation for this is that local journalists tend to lack in-depth understanding and knowledge of the issue, including knowledge of decision-making processes related to public health care services. From this perspective, since local journalists tend to be “all-rounders”, they simply do not have the necessary knowledge to provide deeper analysis and engage in investigative efforts, and thus, largely convey comments from involved actors and minutes from board meetings. An interviewee from municipal administration says that:

The big localisation conflicts involve lobbying, politics, powerful forces are in play. The local media is not even close to understanding the forces and mechanisms at play in processes like this. [...] That is a weakness of local newspapers, that they do not have the good, ‘heavy-weight’ journalists, like the national news media do. The local news media have not managed to keep track, to follow the speed of the process and see the full picture. They have attended a board meeting and then written a story about that particular meeting. And they have been dependent on me and [a colleague] to find the good stories. (municipal administration 5)

Several of the political actors question the extent to which the local news media actually have the necessary competencies and resources to fulfil ideals of being an independent watchdog/investigator, and thus to adequately inform the local community. It should however be noted that there were some differences between local news media, where some local journalists had specialised in health journalism, and thus according to the interviewees were well equipped to report the hospital localisation issue.

The above analysis shows that “local patriotism” is regarded as a key aspect of the community role of local journalism, where local journalism is expected to defend the interests of the citizens in the community. Fulfilling this role is seen to encompass features such as being an arena to voice local perspectives and criticism of (local, regional and central) authorities, set issues of importance to local citizens on the agenda, framing these issues through a (local patriotic) geographic lens, and thus serving as an advocate for and watchdog on behalf of the local community. Yet, as analysed further below, several of the local political actors interviewed question the extent to which the patriotic reporting of the local news media was indeed in the best interests of the local community. Moreover they ask whether local news media, rather than serving a cohesive community role, instead contributed to conflict and polarisation between local communities and among local citizens.

### ***Too Patriotic and Too Critical? Assessments of (the Consequences of) Local News Reporting***

The interviewed journalists expressed that they, through the reporting, directly or indirectly sought to contribute to ensure that citizens in the local community could benefit from quality health care services and closeness to attractive workplaces. However, activist groups, local politicians and municipal administrative managers question the success of local news media in carrying out this role, and they critically reflect on what kind of journalistic reports and frames may or may not be beneficial for the local community.

The criticism toward local news media primarily concerns the extent to which journalism over time contributes to creating and maintaining conflict and dissatisfaction across and within local communities. The local political actors advance three main criticisms of the local news media: First, that local news media are *too patriotic* on behalf of the local community. Second, and relatedly, that they are *too critical*, too insisting and never give up the battle. And third, that the local news media *focus too narrowly on the town where the editorial offices* are located. Regarding the first point, concerning the local news media being too patriotic, the following quote is illustrative:

They have given a lot of attention to the hospital story. But I am at times uncertain what is good and bad [reporting]. We have a local press that has seen the debate regarding hospitals through a specific geographical lens, and specifically placed the local community here at the centre. This means that the journalism isn't always objective, it is rather very subjective. Sometimes I read stories and think that yes, this is happening, but if you had taken a broader perspective, you could see that there also are other arguments and other facts. So the local reporting has been very one-sided. (municipal administration 7)

Hence, although the interviewees point out the importance of the local news media to raise local perspectives and convey criticism against central authorities, they also regard local news reporting as overly patriotic, lacking multiperspectivity, and advancing simplistic representations. Specifically in relation to the hospital localisation issues, different local newspapers all brought arguments in favour of locating hospitals in “their” local community over neighbouring communities, and several interviewees argue that the patriotic local news reporting contributed toward escalating conflict across local communities. One journalist for example noted that,

There are too many insignificant issues that become a story. With no substance, but with a patriotic spirit behind it. It becomes a story to strengthen the patriotic spirit in the local community, but it means that insignificant issues are published. (journalist 3)

A representative from a local activist group advances a similar perspective, saying that:

I question the angle sometimes. That they [the local news media] don't have the ability to put on a different hat. Imagine how great it would be if [a local newspaper] could put on the hat of [the neighbouring community] and vice versa. At the moment [different communities] are sworn enemies [...] The journalists should make sure that they have good sources presenting the other side of the story. Often only one side is presented. (activist group 2)

The perceivably biased reporting concerns not only which perspectives are included in news reports, but also what is omitted and denounced. A local politician, for example, points out that the different local newspapers focused on the hospital solution which would entail the hospital being located in their area, while omitting and/or denouncing other possible solutions. S/he notes that

as editor you write for your inhabitants. That does not necessarily lead to objective reporting. It sets the premises for journalism. In my opinion, the role of the media is to inform and to keep an eye on things that are going on. But I feel that they are stretching the boundaries somewhat. (local politician 2)

Several interviewees, including local journalists, point out that the local news media contributed toward escalating and substantiating conflict across municipalities and regions but also to some extent within the community that local newspapers cover.

Relatedly, local politicians and the municipal administration in particular point out that the local news media is at times too insistent on specific demands on behalf of the local community: Firstly, the local newspapers continue to fight for lost causes, and secondly, they omit perspectives on how decisions regarding hospital localisation could *benefit* the local community. Some of the local politicians and municipal representatives criticise the local news media for operating with too narrow an understanding of notions concerning what is in the best interest of the local community, mainly presenting it as preserving things “as they are”. Some argued that in practice, this narrow understanding led to polarisation and conflict rather than cohesion across and within local communities, municipalities and regions. One of the interviewees, for example, expresses that the hospital story had been “extremely destructive” for the municipality and that they see the local newspaper “as a party” in the localisation debate:

We [the municipal administration] chose to accept the decision that was made [by the regional health authorities] because no one at the national level is willing to reverse the decision. [...] But the local newspaper continues to fight tooth and nail to keep everything. Nothing should be shut down, everything should be as it always has been. (municipal administration 8)

Moreover, local politicians and municipal administrative managers point out that closure of health care services and questions regarding where the hospital should be located overshadow other arguments concerning what is in the best interest of the local community (cf. Angell, Flo, and Grimsrud 2016). Perspectives that are omitted include arguments foregrounding that the best solution would indeed be to locate the hospital outside of the municipality and arguments foregrounding why it indeed could make sense to close down a particular service (i.e., due to a lack of medical expertise in smaller hospital units and the need to establish larger and qualitatively better professional environments to the benefit of patients). Several of the local politicians and municipal administration interviewed hold that arguments concerning the benefits of having stable and robust professional medical environments were largely omitted from the reporting if these solutions also entailed longer distance to health care services. One interviewee for instance pointed out that the local news media largely focused on localisation as a question regarding distance measured in time, saying that “localisation issues are highly prioritised [in the local newspaper]. To the extent that it concerns plus/minus two minutes [difference in travel time between two different hospital solutions]. It’s completely crazy” while “it is hard to get them to publish facts on why it may be a good idea [to relocate the hospital]” (municipal administration 4).

Thus, from the perspective of municipal administrative managers, local politicians and activist groups, the local news reporting tend to be too simplistic, excluding perspectives that, from their point of view, were indeed in the best interest of the community (e.g., in terms of providing better *quality* services, albeit not necessarily closer in geographic proximity). This suggests that the notion of reporting through a specific “geographical lens” is practised quite literally, where local news media present geographic location as the key parameter of assessment. Moreover, the above analysis points out how patriotic reporting also entails drawing boundaries to an “other”. Some of the interviewees who held prominent public roles also pointed out that the patriotic framing of the issue in the local newspaper had led to a polarised debate, which had personal consequences

for them. One of the interviewees from the municipal administration for example said: “My person has been closely tied to this case. And in periods, I have been presented as an idiot, quite explicitly.” (municipal administration 4).

Finally, and as noted above, some interviewees (local politicians and municipal administrative managers) highlight that the reporting of local news media tends to be too centred on the town where the editorial offices of the newspaper are located—even though the local newspaper in principle covers a broader geographical area (cf. Freeman 2020). According to some, this for example entailed that public health care services located outside of the town where the editorial offices are located, which also risked being shut down, received less attention in the local news media. From this perspective, the patriotism of local news media revolves too closely around the town or municipality where the editorial offices are located, with local newspapers promoting one particular local community or municipality at the expense of neighbouring municipalities (that in principle also form part of the area the local newspapers are supposed to cover). Related to this criticism, the interviewees noted that the local newspaper previously reported on a larger geographic area, and they perceived the narrow geographic focus of the local news media largely due to a lack of resources (cf. Franklin 2006b). This points to how through emphasising particular places over others, local journalism contributes toward creating boundaries pertaining to who forms part of the (imagined) local community, and thus for whom local reporting contributes to a sense of community (cf. Freeman 2020, 532, 537). Moreover, it shows how specific geographic areas may end up as news deserts, receiving limited media attention (cf. Mathisen 2021; Nygren & Althén 2014)

## Concluding Discussion

The analysis shows that the overall understanding of the interviewed local journalists and local political actors is that local journalism is essentially expected to serve the interests of the local community. This entails that local news media should take the perspective of their town or municipality and focus on what is in the best interest of the citizens residing there. The roles of the local news media are perceived as geographically anchored, where local news media are expected to bring perspectives and angles from specific spatial lenses, and where the audience’s identity as citizens of the local community is more important than other identities audiences may hold. These findings substantiate previous studies, who have shown that geographical location is key to how the role of local news media is understood, and where local journalism is expected to serve and advocate for the community (e.g., Costera Meijer 2010; Freeman 2020; Gutsche Jr. and Hess 2019; Hanusch 2015; Perreault 2021), suggesting that these are key traits of local journalism across national contexts, and a notion that is also shared by local political actors.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that engaging in advocacy, informing citizens, facilitating debate, and being a watchdog are all perceived as part of the role of local news media to serve the community. Overall, reporting through a specific geographic lens “to the benefit of the community” is presented as the key goal of local journalism, and informing citizens, engaging in advocacy on behalf of citizens, and being a watchdog that defends local citizens from “wrongful” political decision-making are all seen as potentially serving to fulfil this broader goal. As such, this study adds nuance to our

understanding of the role of local journalism and how the various roles of local journalism overlap and may serve common goals. The study, however, also shows that while the different actors largely agree on the overall role of local journalism, they hold different perspectives pertaining to the content of these ideals and how they should be carried out in practice. This includes what form of local news reporting is in the best interest of the community.

Overall, what local journalists see as critical reporting in the best interest of citizens in the local community, local political actors in part experience as un-nuanced, overly patriotic and overly critical. The local political actors largely see local journalism as lacking depth and multiperspectivity. From their perspective, local news media fail to publish reports that are indeed in the best interest of the community, while contributing toward mobilising conflicts within the community and across communities and regions. Based on the perspectives of local political actors, the analysis suggests that the notion of reporting through a “geographic lens” is understood quite literally by local journalists, where local news media present geographic location as the key parameter of assessment. The local political actors criticise the “location-centred” reporting for being too narrow, omitting or denouncing voices that forward alternative perspectives, thus neglecting to fully inform citizens, and contributing to create a narrow and harsh climate of debate. The local journalists emphasise that their role primarily is to serve citizens; they see it as their role to scrutinise local government when necessary, even if this potentially stirs up conflict in the local community. In sum, the findings show that there are important differences in terms of what form of reporting is understood as in the best interests of the community, thus adding to our understanding of how the roles of journalism are defined and understood by different actors. These findings furthermore point to the value of studying local journalism in context in order to more fully understand the distinctions between ideals and practices and to provide a more nuanced understanding of key features of local journalism and its implications.

The criticisms forwarded by local political actors are largely related to the (narrow) geographic perspective taken by the local news media, but also to resource scarcity. The political actors interviewed point out that most local newspapers lack the resources to carry out in-depth, multi-faceted, and investigative journalism. Relatedly, the analysis suggests that what is defined as the local community (“we”) depends on which areas local media has resources to cover. Overall, the geographical lens of the news media speaks to a relatively narrow “us”. Thus, practical realities, in particular resources, interfere with the role perceptions of and expectations to local journalism (cf. Wolfgang, Vos, and Kelling 2019). It should be pointed out that the differences between journalists and political actors also might reflect these actors’ different strategic positions. Whereas local journalists can be said to have an idealistic and commercial interest in creating engagement, the political actors to a larger degree has an interest in forwarding particular (political) perspectives.

It could be argued that the interviewed local political actors display unrealistic expectations towards local journalism, not least if we take the increasingly constrained resources of local news media into account (e.g., Olsen 2020; Jenkins & Nielsen 2020). Simultaneously, their perspectives provide valuable insights concerning how key community stakeholders and sources understand and experience local journalism’s roles and practices in the current situation of increased resource scarcity in local newsrooms, and when issues of key importance to local communities are at stake.

Our findings furthermore highlight how patriotic reporting of local political issues entails defining a “we” as well as drawing boundaries to an “other”, which may serve a cohesive function but also have the potential to lead to conflict within local communities, between local communities and between local communities and regional/central authorities. Such lines of cohesion/conflict may be seen as grounded in institutionalised political structures, particularly the different levels of government (local, regional and state), yet the analysis suggests that they are furthered, substantiated and to some extent constructed through local news reporting.

The study is, of course, not without limitations. As noted above, the focus on particular cases enabled us to move beyond solely studying role expectations, to analyse how role expectations and actual practices of local journalism align, including how local journalism practices are assessed by local journalists and local political actors. The emphasis on specific cases in a specific geographic context is however also a limitation. Our focus is on cases where key public welfare services were at stake, with possibly broader long-term implications for the communities, and where different local communities “competed” to have hospitals located in their region. These factors entail that the patriotic and advocacy features of local journalism were likely to be particularly prominent, and that conflicts between municipalities, regions, and between the local and the central level were particularly articulated. Hence, further studies should include other types of cases from other geographic regions. Future research should also take local audiences into account, and study their understanding and assessment of how local news media carry out their community role.

## Note

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