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Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls

Abstract

Within the context of a high choice, digital media environment, this study explores how people in their early adulthood perceive the value of news from the small town where they reside and their attitude towards paying for it. Based on qualitative data from in-depth interviews and a media landscape sorting exercise, the study demonstrates how those willing and unwilling to pay differ in terms of lived and anticipated value experiences with small-town newspapers. The study posits that there is a misalignment, for them personally and for the local community, with regard to their perception of small-town news medias' value. What might not be important for them as individuals is nonetheless experienced as important for the society they live in. The study expands on studies of perceived worthwhileness of news media in a small-town context and introduces the concept of societal worthwhileness to encompass media users' incorporation of collective interests in their value assessment of news media.

Keywords

Small-town news, local journalism, audiences, paywalls, worthwhileness of news media, willingness to pay

Introduction

The digital transformation of local newspaper businesses and their relationship to their small-town audiences have so far been mainly off the radar in journalism research. However, as

demonstrated by Nielsen, (2015a) **small-town newspapers are keystone media which play important roles in local democracies.** They are part of the press structure's local media foundation that shape and support the local public sphere and served as mediators of local identity while providing a sense of belonging (e.g. Nielsen, 2015b; Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). **As such they serve as an essential component of local democracy. This democratic infrastructure is under threat as the business model upholding it is crumbling due to declining print readership, advertising and subscriptions. As a result, the future of local journalism can no longer be taken for granted (Nielsen, 2015).** In an attempt to secure print revenue and generate new online revenue, small-town newspapers have implemented paywalls (Olsen and Solvoll, 2018a) and the **funding of small-town journalism is increasingly dependent on a paying readership.**

The implementation of paywalls takes place in a context of unparalleled news and information abundance where free content providers ranging from Facebook and municipal webpages to government-funded public service players are competing for the audience's attention. The assumption underpinning local newspaper's paywalls, is that local journalism is so valuable that people are willing to pay for it (Olsen and Solvoll, 2018b). Such belief in the value of "the local" belongs to one of professional journalism's "deepest mythologies" (Pauly and Eckert, 2002: 310). Several studies have supported this myth by demonstrating high interest in local news among audiences in the US and UK (Cisarova, Macek and Mackova, 2018). However, interest in local news is unevenly distributed among countries (Newman, Levy and Nielsen, 2015) and the experiences from the American and British markets should be supplemented by insights from other media systems (Cisarova et al, 2018). Furthermore, audiences' relationships to sources of local news and information are dependent on demographic factors, particularly age (Rosenstiel et al, 2011), and the use of

local newspapers varies considerably between generations with lower levels of use among younger people (Wadbring and Bergstrøm, 2017). Although such insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of audiences' relationships to local journalism, we know little about the value of small-town journalism for individuals. The question of whether small-town news really matters to people living locally has not been addressed in the literature, which leaves an important aspect of local newspapers' sustainability unexplored. **With the increasing reliance on user payment to fund local journalism, this question ultimately concerns the future of small-town newspapers and their role as civic institutions in local democracies.** The purpose of the present study is to fill this gap by exploring how people in small towns relate to news and news providers in their locality. Extending uses and gratification literature on the perceived worthwhileness of news media concept (e.g. Schrøder and Kobbernagel, 2010), this study makes a dual conceptual and methodological contribution: On the hand, it introduces a distinction between individual and societal worthwhileness of news media in a small-town context and explores how this relates to local news consumption and people's willingness to pay for small-town journalism. On the other hand, it proposes a methodology for examining individual and societal worthwhileness inspired by Q sorting and media landscape mapping methods. Furthermore, by zooming in on people in their late twenties to early forties who are in early adulthood (Levinson, 1986) and living in a media rich (Chaffee and Wilson, 1977) small-town environment, the study provides new knowledge about an age group which journalism studies have mainly overlooked. According to Levinson (1986) early adulthood is the season for pursuing professional aspirations, establishing a niche in society and raising a family. As the strong connection between starting a family and starting a newspaper subscription has weakened with the increased consumption of news online (Høst and Vaage, 2010), the early adulthood segment represents a particular challenge for small-town newspapers aiming to build a digital subscription base for the future.

The article proceeds with a literature review of relevant research on small-town newspapers and the value of proximity, and on the worthwhileness of news media concept in uses and gratification research and its relationship with willingness to pay for local news. Following this, the methodology and the case market are described and results are subsequently presented before the discussion and conclusion of the article.

Small-town newspapers and the value of proximity

Despite its centrality in the media structure in countries worldwide, the locally-based newspaper enterprise rooted in a small town is not clearly conceptualized in the literature. According to Lauterer's definition, such operations fall into the category of "community newspapers" described as largely commercial ventures with circulations below 50,000, published daily to bi-weekly and serving people who live together in a distinct geographical space with a clear local-first emphasis on news (2006: 1). However, as noted by Hess and Waller (2014), the term "community" in relation to newspapers and journalism has become increasingly complex with the incorporation of highly diverse phenomena, such as alternative, independent underground and radical media challenging mainstream media, as well as journalists who share a strong connectedness to their audiences and processes of increased citizen empowerment and social development. Furthermore, the use of the term "community" in relation to media serving a fixed geographic territory and people living there, it is contested in the literature, as described by Hess (2013): "while individuals may engage in similar communication channels or reside in a similar geographic area, it does not necessarily make them part of the same community" (p. 50). As an alternative to the notion of community, Hess (2013) offers the concept of "geo-social" to define news outlets "that have a solid connection

to geographic territory while acknowledging the wider social space in which they play a role” (p. 49). Embedded in “sense of place” the geo-social concept links audiences to people and places without assuming shared values or common interest between them or even assuming that they reside in the same area. Instead it acknowledges that one’s connection or identification with the geographical area that a newspaper serves is individual and unique. Drawing on this, the present study defines small-town newspapers as geo-social news outlets with a geographic connection to a town or small city.

Small-town newspapers’ connection to this geographic territory is manifest in their selection and presentation of content. Buchanan (2009) describes this as a process of producing locality, such as subjects and spatial location: Newspapers’ notices and stories of rites of passage – births, deaths, marriages – play an important part in producing local subjects, whereas news and debates about roads, buildings, housing, commercial development, cultural amenities, etc. aid the spatial production of locality. Ultimately, the question of whether small-town newspapers matter to their audiences depends on the audiences’ interest in this production of locality and to what extent the production of locality is what Shapiro and Varian (1999) describe as inimitable and non-substitutable. According to Goyanes (2015) the newspapers’ value is based on the daily interpretation of local realities and on the knowledge and understanding of a shared message and language that feel close and are irreplaceable. As such, these newspapers propose value of proximity as their core offering to their audiences. Whereas some research maintains that proximity remains fundamental in defining news value and news interest among people (Mersey, 2009; Schaudt and Carpenter, 2009) and stimulates a growing number of hyperlocal media initiatives, other contributions suggest that proximity in local news is not as important to audiences as they are to journalists and that the availability of information from all over the world has devaluated the relevance of proximity with

decreasing interest in “news close to home” among the audience (Armstrong, McAdams and Cain, 2015: 94)

The worthwhileness of local news media and audiences’ willingness to pay

The value of proximity for the audiences of small-town newspapers links to what Schrøder and colleagues (e.g Schrøder and Larsen, 2010; Schrøder and Kobbernagel, 2010; Schrøder 2015) have conceptualized as the perceived worthwhileness of news media for the individual. In their definition, such worthwhileness denotes individuals’ subjective assessment of whether a medium is worth their while or not. Without ignoring the habitual aspect of media use, the authors describe a process of relatively rational calculation of worthwhileness among individual media users: from becoming aware of a medium through trial consumption and intermittent use, to ending up on their list of routines (Schrøder and Kobbernagel, 2010). The factors that constitute a news medium’s perceived worthwhileness include the subjective experienced material as well as situational and functional circumstances that characterize the medium’s practice of use (Schrøder and Larsen, 2010). The individual’s assessment of worthwhileness weighs the resources required to use a particular medium, such as time and money, against the benefits of using it. One such key benefit is what Couldry et al (2007) have defined as mediated public connection, referring to a medium’s ability to deliver content which satisfies users’ needs as citizen-members of the democratic order as well as participants in cultural and social networks (Schrøder and Larsen, 2010). The factors in the “worthwhileness equation” determine “why some news media and not others are chosen to become parts of an individual’s news media repertoire” (Schrøder, 2015, p. 63). This cost versus benefits perspective connects perceived worthwhileness of news media with the field of customer perceived value research. In this tradition, customer value is a subjective

assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988, p.14). For customers to perceive an offering to be of positive value, benefits have to outweigh undesired consequences, such as monetary and non-monetary costs. Customers determine an offering to be of superior value by comparing it to competing offerings, expectations or past experiences (Kumar and Reinartz, 2016).

The concept of perceived worthwhileness is related to people's willingness to pay for news due to the fact that price constitutes an important factor in the judgement of worthwhileness (Kammer et al, 2015). **Findings from the paywall literature demonstrate how newspapers tend to paywall their most valuable content to stimulate user payment, (Myllylahti 2017; Sjøvaag 2016). Highly specialized content such as local news, may stand a better chance as a payable online product than uniform, general, national and international news (Goyanes, 2015). As people feel a personal connection to local topics from their hometown, willingness to pay may increase (Himma-Kadakas and Kouts, 2015). However, previous paywall research has found limited paying intent for local newspapers online (Chyi, 2012) particularly among younger people (Goyanes, 2015) who are more likely to reduce their consumption of local news due to paywalls (Chiou and Tucker, 2013; Olsen and Solvoll, 2018b). In an international study of small and large newspapers Myllylahti (2014) concludes that paywalls do not offer a viable business model in the short term.**

Local news shares characteristics of a public good as well as a merit good: They are non-rivalrous, non-excludable products that are expensive to produce, provide little financial return and are under-appreciated by consumers. However, their positive externalities engineer numerous benefits for local democracy (Ali, 2016). Such benefits include keeping the public

informed, providing an arena for local debate and contributing to a sense of belonging (e.g Nielsen, 2015b; Kösters and Jandura, 2017; Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). According to Ali (2016) audiences' under-valuation of local news is one of the main reasons for the present crisis that local journalism is experiencing. There are, however, some indications in the literature that audiences do consider the societal value of journalism when making decisions on paying for news. Cook and Attari (2012) found that the prospect of a news provider going bankrupt had a positive effect on audiences' willingness to pay, and Swart, Peters and Broersma (2017) demonstrate how paying for news was considered a "civic obligation" among the audience – a support their informants felt compelled to provide because the place they lived in "deserves its own newspaper" (p. 1355). Such motivation suggests that customer perceived value, in this case worthwhileness of news media, is not only self-oriented, but also other-oriented as described by Holbrook (1994). Even if this sense of civic obligation only applied to non-digital media in the study by Swart et al (2017), the increasing number of people paying for news online (Newman et al, 2018) indicates that this could also be the case for digital news.

The present study addresses the ambiguity identified in the research literature with regard to perceived value of news from the geographically near. It investigates how people in their early adulthood perceive the worthwhileness of local newspapers: the value of its "production of locality", its inimitable and non-substitutable character and its relative importance for them as individuals and for the small-town society that they reside in. Ultimately, the study asks if small-town news matters to people in early adulthood and if they are willing to pay for it.

Method

The study was conducted in Fredrikstad in Norway, a digitally advanced country with more than 220 newspapers spread all over the country (Østby, 2018). With its population of 81,000 and 110.4 square miles Fredrikstad has city characteristics in terms of demography, geography, economy and local governance but remains a small town “at heart” with a distinct geographically rooted identity. The case market has a wide variety of digitally advanced and traditionally oriented media outlets making it a media-rich (Chaffee and Wilson, 1977) environment. Its largest newspaper, *Fredriksstad Blad*, has a combined digital and print circulation of 19,169 (Høst, 2018) and a forward leaning digital strategy. The second largest newspaper, *Demokraten*, has a combined digital and print circulation of 4,468 and receives governmental support as part of the country’s press subsidizing system (Østbye, 2018). Both newspapers have online paywalls. *NRK Østfold*, the regional public service broadcaster (PSB), has its headquarters in Fredrikstad. The case market also has a wide variety of digitally born media, ranging from municipal webpages to local businesses and civil society representatives with their own communication channels. The media richness of the case market is not generalizable to other small-town contexts but provides an alternative to studies of emerging local news deserts (Abernathy, 2018) which have caused scholarly and industry concern. The chosen case market offers a unique insight into the attitude and behavior of those living in a media rich environment with regard to small-town news.

The study combined in-depth interviews and a media landscape-sorting exercise with 20 informants aged 26-44 living in or just outside Fredrikstad. They were recruited through interpersonal contacts, referrals and invitations in local Facebook groups. A quota-sampling strategy was applied to secure a balanced mix of subscribers and non-subscribers of the small town’s newspapers. **The resulting non-random sample consisted of 8 men and 12 women**

with high levels of education and a homogenous geographical background¹. The size and composition of the sample is a limitation of the study that should not be ignored in the interpretation of findings. Despite being limited in number and thus not generalizable, the informants' in-depth qualitative accounts offer constructive insights that are useful for developing theory. Data were collected in February and March of 2018. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour and took place at the premises of an educational institution in Fredrikstad. An initial day-in-the-life-interview was conducted where informants were asked to describe their media consumption during an average day. This prepared them to talk about the value of keeping informed about the area where they lived and their relationship to various sources of local news and information. After the interviews, the informants were asked to arrange a stack of cards with the names of local media sources along a continuum from “important to me” to “not important for me”. This media landscape interview technique described by Tammi (2016) is inspired by the Q sorting applied in research by Schrøder and colleagues (e.g 2010) but deviates from this method by allowing the participants to freely define a) the number of cards in the sorting based on the media they are familiar with and b) how to position the cards along the continuum. As the purpose of the sorting was not to generate data for statistical factor analysis, these adjustments were deemed suitable to overcome the limitations of Q sorting described by Schrøder and Kobbernagel, (2016) such as forcing informants to evaluate media they do not know or use. After the cards had been arranged based on their relative importance for the individual, the counterpoints of the continuum were changed to “important to local democracy” and “not important to local democracy” and the informants were asked to arrange the media cards again with the interests of their small-town society in mind. The aim of this exercise was to visually reflect the informants' valorization of different media sources and facilitate a

¹ 8 with a Bachelor's degree or similar, 8 with a Master's degree or similar and 4 with no higher education. All but three were “born and bred” in the Fredrikstad region. One was an Eastern European immigrant.

comparison of self-oriented versus other-oriented worthwhileness of the media sources based on the assessment of importance.

The data analysis was conducted in two phases: First, using in vivo coding, transcripts of the standardized, open-ended interviews were analysed to capture the essence of the informants' relationship to different news and information sources in the locality. The analysis was structured around four topics: the value of the proximity of small-town news; the role of small-town newspapers for the individual; the inimitable and non-substitutable character of small-town news and readers' willingness to pay for small-town newspapers. Secondly, photographs of each informant's media landscapes were analysed pairwise to capture differences and similarities between the two sortings. Using Excel spreadsheets, the media cards from the photographs were presented as colour coded cells and positioned section-wise: important media to the right, unimportant to the left, and neither important nor unimportant in the middle. Transcripts of the informants' reflections during and after the sorting aided the interpretation of the visualizations.

Findings from interviews

The interviews demonstrated the centrality of market-leading Fredriksstad Blad and the peripheral role of the number two newspaper, Demokraten, for the informants. Small-town newspaper thus refers to Fredriksstad Blad in the following section. With regard to media platforms, informants were digitally oriented. With few exception, they rarely consulted the printed local newspaper. The interviews further revealed that a divide between subscribers and non-subscribers did not fully capture the nuances in subscription relationships among the informants. Some of those who considered themselves to be subscribers to the small-town

newspaper did not pay for a subscription. Instead, they used a subscription paid for by somebody else, mostly their parents, to access paywalled content. Based on this, two groups emerged from the material: those *willing to pay*, who paid for a subscription themselves or indicated that they would do so if their free access was terminated, and those *unwilling to pay*, who did not subscribe or indicated that they were unlikely to do so without a free access option. In both groups there was support for the general principle of paying for online news and the price rarely surfaced as an obstacle to subscription. However, their views diverged on the value of proximity of small-town news and on the role of the small-town newspaper in the informants' daily lives, even though both groups recognized the inimitable and non-substitutable character of the small-town newspaper:

The value of proximity

The willing to pay informants described small-town news as important because it made them feel updated on what was going on in town and enabled them to participate in local civic life: “You have to keep updated on what is happening around you in the local community. If you're not informed and don't care, you are unable to influence others” (Female, 36).

Following the news and local debate was described as important for the informants' sense of belonging; reading about local people and positive development in the locality was fuel for local patriotism: “It's important because I'm involved in this town. It's important to be included, to know what people talk about, to take part in the conversation” (Female, 41).

Small-town news was described as relevant because it concerned the everyday lives of the informants; their children's school and activities, their work, their interest in culture, sports, politics etc. The link between family life and small-town news played a key role: “With little children your focus is on family life and you're more concerned about the town because this is where we live our lives” (Female, 39).

Contrasting this, the unwilling to pay informants described small-town news as less important. A recurring topic in their account of small-town news was its “smallness” and its tendency to overemphasize insignificant matters. Even though the value of news from the locality was not ignored by this group, the newspaper’s chronicle of small-town life was described as unengaging and the news values guiding the journalists’ selection of news stories criticized and ridiculed: “Some time ago the front page of the local newspaper read “The apple tree in Mrs. Hansen’s garden fell over during the storm last night” and I thought: “Is this their main story? With everything that is going on in the world, this is what Fredriksstad Blad chose to write about? That was it for me” (Male, 35).

The data material revealed a sense of detachment from small-town news in this group, sometimes due to a stronger personal interest in topics and areas beyond the scope of the small-town newspaper, such as national and international matters: “I don’t think Fredriksstad Blad writes much about the topics that I’m interested in, like feminism, and education and professional life - unless it’s about local jobs and businesses. I’m more interested in the general trends” (Female, 33). Such preferences motivated use of national and international media, rather than local. Others did not feel connected to the local community and expressed little interest in local news. This was sometimes associated with a sense of guilt: “As a citizen you’re supposed to read newspapers and be well informed, and I’m not. I don’t reveal that to others” (Female, 44).

The inimitable and non-substitutable character of small-town newspapers

When discussing sources of local information that could potentially replace the small-town newspaper, both those willing and unwilling to pay described the uniqueness and superiority of the small-town newspaper. Three alternatives were discussed as potential substitutes: Facebook, NRK Østfold (PSB), and the municipal webpages. Compared to the small-town

newspaper, Facebook was mainly described as chaotic and unreliable. Relying on Facebook for news from the locality would mean missing out on things: “It’s far too messy for that kind of use. News updates – OK. Posting of articles – fine. But it’s not a replacement for a news site where you can find everything in one place” (Female, 36). This emphasis on the overview and order in the small-town newspaper was a recurring example of its superiority and uniqueness, along with its breadth of coverage and balanced presentation of different views. Other reasons why the informants regarded the small-town newspaper as superior included Facebook’s lack of quality control, the risk of one-sided, opinionated information and the impact of commercial interest in the algorithmic display of news.

With regard to the news offerings from NRK Østfold, the local PSB provider, this was also described as inferior compared to the small-town newspaper. NRK Østfold was portrayed as more distant, superficial and lacking the special local feel of the small-town newspaper due to its focus on regional rather than hyperlocal news: “I don’t think they cover local matters that much. There are more small stories in the newspaper because NRK is the whole region and Fredriksstad Blad is only this town” (Female, 41).

Adding to this picture, the informants made a clear distinction between the news provided by the small-town newspaper and the information on municipal webpages. Both in terms of user-friendliness (“it’s terrible to navigate”) and news value (“they’re not very updated”), the informants described municipal webpages as inferior to the newspaper: “It’s more information. Not news, really. It’s updates about practicalities, like the closing of roads, opening hours in the local swimming pool. I don’t think of that as news” (Female, 41). The municipality’s information was also described as inferior in terms of depth and critical

distance: “They don’t write more than they feel necessary and they avoid critical questions. So you’ll have to consult the newspaper to get the full picture” (Male, 28).

The role of the small-town newspaper in the daily life

Despite the uniqueness and superiority of small-town newspapers described by informants in both groups, their view on its indispensability for them personally differed, particularly with regard to the paywalled content. Among the willing to pay-informants, reading the small-town newspaper was well integrated in their daily routines as a “first thing in the morning” habit or a checking pattern throughout the day – or both: “The first thing I do in the morning is to check Fredriksstad Blad online. And VG. During the course of the day I check social media and news media, mainly Fredriksstad Blad, VG and Dagbladet” (Male, 27).² For this group, not having full access to the small-town newspaper was not an option. They described how that would have made them feel deprived, alienated and frustrated: “I would have been pretty frustrated because I couldn’t access a lot of content. Not being able to read local news – it will make you feel excluded from the community, I think” (Female, 39). Some of these informants described how the indispensability of small-town newspapers exceeded the personal realm. Local news was regarded as vital for the town and “something one ought to support” (Female, 26).

Among those unwilling to pay, consumption was less routinized and thorough. Scanning headlines and reading stories that did not require a subscription was described as sufficient: “You get an impression of what the story is about based on the headline and photo. If there is

²² VG and Dagbladet are national newspapers published both in print and online.

something that catches your interest, you're always able to dig around on the internet to find out more" (Male, 34). The news sharing on social media and the general abundance of information made paywalled local content dispensable, according to this group: "Think about it – how much do you really need to know about this town? What you need, you'll find out, at least if you're using social media" (Female, 44). Even though the value of small-town newspapers was not altogether disregarded, it was described as something nice to have, rather than need to have: "I think you can operate perfectly well as an inhabitant of Fredrikstad without the local newspaper. It definitely gives us something, but it's not something we *must* have. We don't need it in order to navigate, as we get what we need on other platforms – or I ask my mum" (Female, 33).

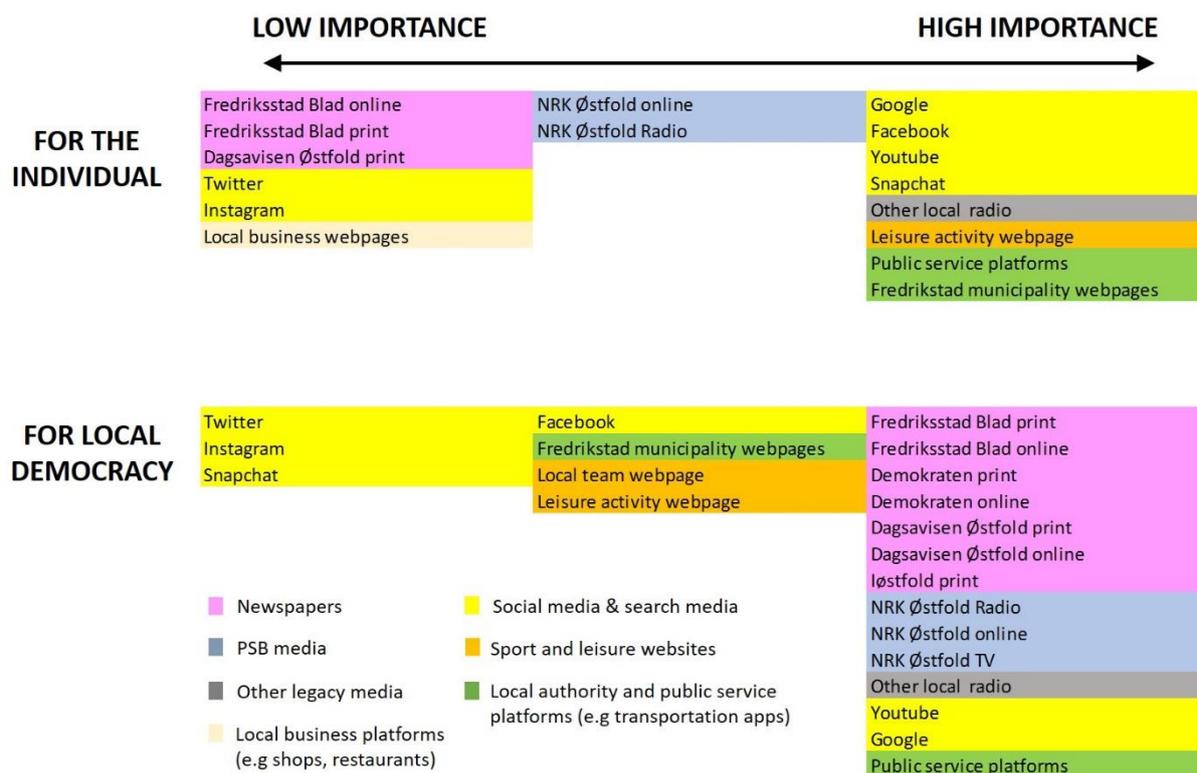
Findings from media card sorting

The informants' sorting of media sources according to importance for them individually compared to importance for local democracy revealed that the local democracy concept was challenging and ambiguous. Some informants approached it as the "political system" in their town, others treated it as a synonym for "people living locally". In both cases local democracy referred to collective interests rather than individual. This commonality guided the analysis of the card sorting, which identified two main patterns of shifting perceptions of worthwhileness when the perspective was altered from the individual to the collective: *The increased worthwhileness of newspapers and other legacy media* and *the ambiguous worthwhileness of social media*. These patterns were manifest both among those willing and unwilling to pay for small-town news. Underpinning the patterns were a set of motivations expressed in the informants' reflections and explanations of their card sorting. These motivations were identified as societal worthwhileness factors as they describe other-oriented benefits of the media sources rather than self-oriented.

The increased worthwhileness of legacy media

This shift entailed the increased importance of newspapers as well as PSB media as displayed in the example in figure 1. This visualization of the card sorting of a female, 44-year-old informant belonging to the “unwilling to pay”-group exhibits how the number of newspapers and other legacy media sources swelled and their position changed from low and medium to high importance as the perspective was altered from individual to collective interests.

Figure 1 Increased worthwhileness of legacy media, example of media card sorting based on high and low importance for the individual and for local democracy



These changes were partly motivated by a *diversity factor*. Both informants willing and unwilling to pay for small-town news expressed the benefits of a diverse local media environment accommodating a wide variety of preferences in terms of platforms and brands.

This appreciation of media diversity exceeded personal interests. As described by one informant regarding the PSB radio and TV offering: “Even though I personally don’t relate to it, I think it’s important for those who like radio and TV” (Male, 27). Such rationale was related to age and the media preferences of older people in the locality: “We have an older population to cater to. I know that many elderly people use the printed edition of Fredriksstad Blad, so I think it is just as important as the online edition for the local community” (Female, 29). Being able to choose between alternative media sources in a diverse media context and stimulate competition on the local media market, also played a part in the informant’s assessment: “Competition between the media is good. Without it, the monopolists can do whatever they like, and we don’t want that” (Male, 28).

A key motivation for the increased importance of newspapers was a *democratic monitor factor*, related to critical journalism which holds those in power accountable and illuminates important societal issues. One of the informants described a specific investigative story on municipal mismanagement as an example of legacy media’s watchdog role and the importance of newspapers for local democracy: “Newspapers, regardless of whether they’re print or digital, have a unique role in realizing democratic principles and making critical voices heard. Without local media, this story would not have been exposed” (Female, 36). Critical and balanced information concerning local matters also motivated the increased importance of the number two newspaper as it represented an alternative voice. However, its actual impact was questioned: “It depends on the number of readers. There is no point in shouting if nobody is listening” (Female, 44).

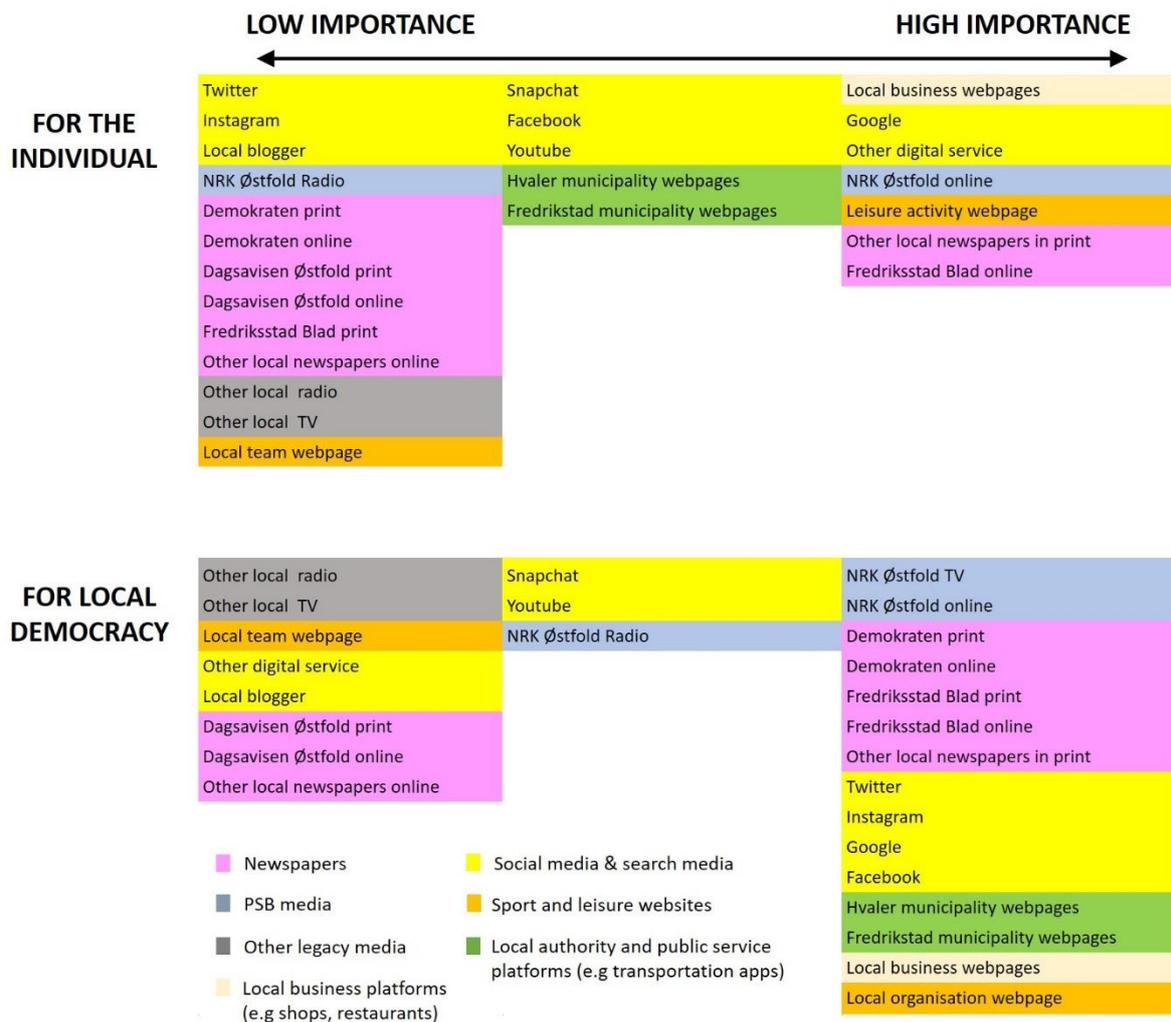
Finally, the increased importance of newspapers was motivated by a *meeting place factor*. Both among those willing and unwilling to pay for local news the social glue function of the

small-town newspaper was appreciated and emphasized when considering the interests of local democracy: “A town like ours definitely needs a local newspaper. People living here should have that offering. Everything identity-building, like a local newspaper, is super important” (Female, 33). This was grounded in a common reference point rationale securing that “everybody reads the same news” (Female, 26) as well as the need for a shared arena “where many people express their views and where local debates take place” (Male, 27). Again, such collective benefits offered by the local newspaper in particular were identified as values beyond the immediate self-interests of the individual.

The ambiguous worthwhileness of social media

Whereas some of the informants clearly prioritized newspapers and PSB media over social media when assessing importance for local democracy, others maintained that social media platforms gained importance when their perspectives shifted from the individual to the collective. This demonstrates the informants’ ambiguity regarding the democratic value of social media in the small-town context. The motivation for disregarding social media’s importance was mainly these platforms’ disability to fulfil legacy media’s information role in society, a concern voiced both among those willing and unwilling to pay for small-town news. As described by one of the informants regarding Facebook: “For local democracy it’s not important. It’s very subjective. It differs from one person to another, depending on what you follow and click on. It’s very arbitrary. And not very local” (Male, 28). Other informants perceived social media as playing a significant role for the collective as displayed in the example in figure 2 based on the sorting of a male, 35-year-old informant belonging to the “unwilling to pay”-group.

Figure 2 Increased worthwhileness of social media, example of media card sorting based on high and low importance for the individual and for local democracy



Here too the *diversity factor* and catering for the interests of others played an important role for the informant’s assessment: “With regard to local democracy, I have to take into account the sources used by others than myself. From that perspective Twitter, Instagram and Facebook become super important” (Male, 44). Informants described how social media added richness to local democracy by extending media diversity: “I think a rich local democracy demands media richness. Of course, quality will vary, but I don’t think you can be snobbish on behalf of local democracy, so everything should be included” (Female, 33). Both among those willing and unwilling to pay for local news, meeting the preferences of young people

was a specific concern when assessing social media's importance for local democracy: "Many young people use social media. If you want to reach them, you have to use platforms like Facebook and Twitter" (Male, 34). This emphasis on reaching different segments of the population represented an *information dissemination factor* whereby the informants associated social media with the benefit of an extended distribution system for news. As such, social media were regarded as "important sources for local news by many people" (Female, 27) which, often in tandem with mobile phones, made local news "accessible just by a click" (Male, 44). Another benefit related to accessibility was their participatory affordances. This *deliberative factor* also motivated the appreciation of social media's importance for local democracy. Social media were described as contributors to diversity by offering alternative and supplementary arenas for public discourse. "For some people, being able to voice their opinion on Facebook and Twitter is important. So having this platform in local democracy is good, although it's not important for me personally" (Female, 41).

In sum, these shifts demonstrate how the informants regarded a diverse media landscape as important for local democracy. When taking the interests of the small town into consideration, they were concerned with meeting the needs of different user groups and providing opportunities for self-expression and participation as well as quality-controlled information from trustworthy sources that hold local authorities accountable while providing common points of reference in the local public sphere. Such collective benefits were appreciated both among those willing and unwilling to pay. The valorization of media diversity demonstrated societal worthwhileness factors that went beyond the personal value experience of each individual media user and the affordances of each individual media type.

Discussion and conclusion

For small-town newspapers, sustainability depends on their ability to deliver a product that their audiences care about. By implementing paywalls, small-town newspapers are putting the relationship with their audiences to the test. If, as suggested by Goyanes (2015) and Himma-Kadakas and Kouts (2015), local news is more easily monetized due to its unique value for local audiences, small-town newspapers are indeed well positioned to develop an online business based on user payment. By asking if small-town news matters to people in their early adulthood and if they are willing to pay for it, the present study demonstrates how the perceived value of small-town newspapers, conceptualized as their worthwhileness, was experienced very differently among audience members. In the midst of an unprecedented abundance of news and information, the informants evaluated the importance, relevance and indispensability of the small-town newspaper's content against the costs of consumption. For some, this worthwhileness "equation" resulted in a favourable evaluation and willingness to pay. The small-town newspaper was well-integrated in their daily routines and vital for their sense of being informed and part of the community. For others the value of small-town news was regarded as low and not worth paying for. This was partly motivated by disapproval of the small-town newspaper's prioritization of news and thus, its production of locality (Buchanan, 2009). The findings challenges Mersey's (2009) and Schaudt and Carpenter's (2009) argument that proximity remains essential for people's news interest, as well as Goyanes' (2015) and Himma-Kadakas and Kouts' (2015) optimism regarding willingness to pay for local news. Instead, the findings lend support to the idea that, at least for parts of the audience, interest in news close to home is decreasing as argued by Armstrong, McAdams and Cain (2015). In sum, the varying worthwhileness assessments demonstrate how value is individually determined by the media user.

The study shows how the availability and richness of news and information in the digital sphere devaluated the significance of small-town news among those unwilling to pay and stimulated a sense dispensability, even nonchalance with regard to paywalled small-town news. Interestingly, this disengagement contrasted with their view on small-town newspapers' inimitable and non-substitutable character. The analysis of both interview and media card sorting data displays how small-town newspapers were regarded as irreplaceable and valuable from a societal perspective both among those willing and unwilling to pay for it. This inconsistency reveals how perceived worthwhileness of news media exceeds the personal realm and, as noted by Holbrook (1994), how the individual's experience of value is not only self-oriented but also other-oriented. By introducing the distinction between individual and societal worthwhileness of news media and demonstrating a misalignment between the two in the small-town context, the present study exposes a complexity in people's relationship to local news and news sources hitherto unaccounted for in the literature. Extending the worthwhileness conceptualization in previous contributions by Schrøder and colleagues (e.g. 2010, 2015), the study demonstrates how value of local news media cannot be reduced to the weighing of benefits and costs for the individual alone. Instead, the informants' appreciation of media diversity and the democratic role of small-town newspapers for the local community show that collective interests are also part of individuals' value perception. However, even if perceived worthwhileness of local news media exceeds personal interests and preferences, willingness to pay may not. This paradox supplements Ali's description of local news as a merit good (2016). The gap between the perceived societal worthwhileness of small-town news and readers' willingness to pay for it alludes to a certain "taken for grantedness" with regard to small-town newspapers among some of the informants: Even if they do not pay for the newspaper, they want it around and expect it to fulfil democratic functions in the locality. These findings moderate Swart, Peters and Broersma's (2017) argument that paying for news

is considered a “civic obligation” among the audience: Such a sense of civic responsibility was unevenly distributed and even if people feel it, they did not necessarily act upon it.

The study provides a deeper understanding of why paying intent for local news is limited (Chyi, 2012) particularly among younger people (Goyanes, 2015; Kammer et al. 2015; Olsen and Solvoll, 2018b). Findings add insights to previous research questioning the revenue potential of paywalls (Myllylahti, 2014) and suggest that turning non-paying young adults into paying subscriber for the future is indeed a challenging task. In lieu of newspapers’ increasing dependency on reader revenue, these findings give some cause for concern. People may be getting used to the idea of paywalls in their local online newspaper, and even support the idea of user payment, but small-town journalists and editors are challenged to explore what really creates value for their readers in order to stimulate willingness to pay. Furthermore, media academics as well as practitioners and policy makers are encouraged to explore ways of bridging the gap between people’s perception of personal and societal worthwhileness of local news media as it has significant implications for the future funding of local journalism.

While this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the experience of small-town news and their willingness to pay for it, it does have some limitations. As the discussion is based on qualitative data from one societal context similar studies in other markets may yield different results and normative implications. Future research is encouraged to expand the present design to encompass other less media-rich markets and broader audience groups. Another challenge is to operationalize personal and societal worthwhileness for rigorous quantitative measurement and results that are generalizable. As such, the present study represents a

starting point for illuminating people's relationship with small-town newspapers and their sustainability in a global, digital context.

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