

Essay

Wiebke Möhring

The need for local, everyday information

The importance of local journalism in the world of digital media

Abstract: Information about where they live is very important to readers – people have a fundamental need to be well-informed about their surroundings. Local journalism is also considered extremely relevant and important at society level. So why does Communication Studies so often take such an anxious view of it? This essay looks at the local journalism on offer, the state it is in, and the challenges it faces.

The ways we can communicate and gain information and the opportunities to access them have changed at lightening pace over recent decades. Today, finding out what damage was caused by the recent tsunami in Indonesia or how the protest movement of the *gilets jaunes* is progressing takes no great communicative or financial resources. There can be few people who have failed to hear, at least via third parties, that the Merkel era is drawing to a close or that there is a lot of discussion about banning diesel vehicles – or that it was not Bayern Munich but Borussia Dortmund that topped the Bundesliga in fall 2018. Access to information about national and international political and social events is now available to everyone, at any time. Anyone who wants to can gain comprehensive information from the wide range of journalistic sources available to the public.

But what if I am interested in local events? What if I want to know why the town hall has been covered in scaffolding for months now, or whether it is true that the local university's laboratories are conducting experiments with unknown bacteria? Whether there is an alternative candidate in the mayoral election and how much it costs to keep the city's orchestra going?

When it comes to local reporting, descriptions of the status quo and assertions of importance often contradict one another. But before I address this and the quality and importance of local journalism, we must first look at what is on offer.

Local communication services – information vs. journalistic classification

Those looking for local information will find a significantly larger and broader range than ever before. Almost every local institution, organization, and company provides information online, directly available to an interested public. Everything from refuse collection dates, church events, kindergarten parties, and discussions on the latest construction plans to the résumé of the new Head of Dispatch is easy to find on the relevant website. I can also find statements, assessments, and evaluations of social and political events. I can follow local companies and societies on Facebook, or meet and talk to fellow residents in local Facebook groups or neighborhood portals. Free local advertisers keep me up to date on local events, while my local radio station lets me know about traffic jams and interviews the coach of the luckless local handball team.

Perhaps my town also has a local or hyperlocal blog. In recent years, the emergence of blogs and local news portals has seen the development of new ways of communicating, albeit varying greatly in their professionalism and the type of content, and with high fluctuation rates. Not all of these services provide proper, journalist-prepared content – some are operated by amateurs, others by those with journalist training, still others by editorial communities with or without editorial connections to traditional media companies (Möhring/Keldenich 2018). Some of the services provide up-to-the minute news, while others concentrate on fewer, but more detailed, articles every week or month. Some specialize in a few local topic areas, such as the fashion scene in the city, local sport, or political developments in the town; others attempt to report on a town or district as a whole (Röper 2016: 67-86). These (hyper)local blogs and news portals enhance diversity, provide access to additional information that is not covered in the established media, and offer an opportunity for participation (Möhring/Keldenich 2018).

Last but not least, I can use the local daily newspaper (be it in print, online or via social networks) to gain information. Despite its reach having shrunk significantly, it remains the most-used source of local information to this day. In almost all local communication spaces, the media structures are still dominated by traditional media houses. But, as described above, the local newspaper is facing new competition. It no longer has a monopoly on local news – a development that local editorial offices are watching with concern (Neuberger/Langenohl/Nuernbergk 2014). In addition, local newspapers – not only in Germany – are struggling with challenges such as a massively reduced reach, an aging readership,

and financial problems caused by a collapse in advertising income (Kleis Nielsen 2015; Jenkins/Kleis Nielsen 2018). There is undoubtedly no shortage of local information. The local sphere of communication today is more open and diverse than it was twenty years ago. Access to it is easy, if sometimes a little arduous.

However, although the range of local communication available appears enhanced at first glance, a closer look reveals risks for communication in society. The local sphere of communication is becoming fragmented, with the local audience increasingly splitting into sub-sections interested in specific topics. What has primarily increased is the range of local information on offer – this is not the same as the range of local journalism. On the contrary: In many towns, journalistic reporting – based on professional editing standards, independent, offering scrutiny and critical classification – is now just one voice in the crowd, and a quiet one at that. Editorial offices suffer from a lack of staff. As a result, many simply copy pages from other offices or leave reporting to freelancers who do not always have the appropriate professional training. There is often not enough time for research-intensive topics: The pages of the print edition have to be filled at all costs.

Local reporting as a particular challenge – the daily tightrope walk in editorial offices

One of the key ways in which local news differs from other fields of reporting is that it covers a much more diverse range of topics. Editorial decisions are made based not on the topic, but on the geographical location; what is included in reporting depends on the local sphere of communication and the needs of its actors (Möhring 2013). Alongside special occasions and events, this largely means stories of everyday local life and the people behind it. The very nature of this focus results in another key difference: Local editorial offices cannot rely on agency material. Instead, they have to research and place stories from their distribution area themselves, separate the relevant from the irrelevant, and rely on material and information from local companies and institutions. To do this, local journalists have to be well integrated into their local spheres of communication – part of a close-knit structural and communicative network of professional, social, and often personal contacts. This faces them with the specific challenge of permitting close social relationships while also maintaining a professional distance. Local journalists have a very particular self-image that they want to maintain: Not only do they see themselves as responsible for communicating up-to-date information in a neutral way, they also want to explain complex situations, reflect reality, and act as a source of critique and scrutiny. On top of all that, they see themselves as advocates of their region, showing the best sides of a town and a positive image of life there. The consequence of this is that local reporting observes and reflects local events that local editorial offices themselves play an active part in shaping.

A comprehensive recent content analysis shows that local journalism has mixed success in this publicity function. The results of numerous previous studies have seen local journalism described in largely negative terms, including [royal] court reporting, proclamation journalism, chronicler journalism, and courtesy journalism. Too little criticism, too many elites, too little politics. This latest study, however, shows that change is under way. The diversity of the topics covered and the people given a chance to speak has increased, while newspapers and their online editions are providing more balanced, neutral reporting. But many of the core problems remain: too little criticism, too little background, too little discussion, too little participation. In addition, the gulf between different newspapers and between urban and rural editions is enormous (Arnold/Wagner 2018: 188).

If one focuses not only on the criteria of journalistic quality, but also on the contribution that local journalism makes to social cohesion in a town, studies show that social cohesion plays an important role in reporting. The local print media examined – local newspapers, advertising papers, and tabloids – were found to report more positively on dimensions like social networks, cohesion, and helpfulness, and more negatively on deviations from social rules and norms (Leupold/Klinger/Jarren 2018: 977). However, they vary widely in terms of the dimensions they emphasize (*ibid.*). Another recent study shows that people want local reporting to address their worries and concerns more and to be dominated by solutions, rather than problems (Dinter 2018).

The desire for local orientation as a central motivation for use – reason for hope?

The problems facing local journalism are not down to people's lack of interest in local issues as such. On the contrary: In times of unrest and insecurity in society, people have a strong sense of needing social and local orientation. The desire to be able to act and participate independently within one's own environment creates a need for local information, ideally provided by professional local journalism. People's interest in where they live and their connection to it are key parameters of local media use, regardless of factors such as age, gender, and the size of the town.

The need for local information is both a gift and an obligation. Given the public duty of the press, it falls to local journalism to meet this need. That is the source of legitimation – a fact confirmed by local journalism itself. The problem is that fewer and fewer people are using local journalism in its current form. With so many sources to choose from, younger people in particular no longer see it as the central source of the information they need. There are plenty of reasons for this: Local journalism is considered too expensive, too banal, too traditional, and not relevant to their specific interests.

This falling use of local journalism ultimately has just one logical consequence: Local journalism has to change. In digitalized media worlds, the structures of local public life have changed just as much as the usage habits and repertoires. But it will take more than simply providing the same content online: The changes will have to be far-reaching. How does reporting need to change? What new narrative forms and new topics could be used? What do local people want? How can people become more involved in reporting? Which participative formats could enrich local reporting and how? How can local journalism be reinvented, for example by making use of technological potential (Kramp 2018)? Journalistic virtues such as curiosity and mistrust remain important, the basic steps involved in research and writing remain the same – but the form of presentation needs to change. This new way of thinking, this reorganization of previous processes and working routines will be a hard road (Jenkins/Kleis Nielsen, 2018). The destination and the result remain to be seen. What will be the business model (Lobigs 2018)? How will digital income develop? Do we need to talk about charitable foundations? Instruments of media policy? Cross-financing from other revenue streams? The answers to these questions are yet to be found; established media houses and new providers are still experimenting.

We can only hope that local editorial offices are bold enough to tackle these experiments head-on. The statement »stand up and startup instead of copy and paste« (Brouwers 2018: 561) refers to the need to approach local issues in a totally new way. We must also hope that sufficient time and resources are (made) available. After all, however much local editorial offices are lauded as the heart of every media house, the conditions under which they are forced to work tell a different story.

It can be easy to look down on local journalism. Even within the sector, local journalism is often the subject of jokes, both openly and behind closed doors. Its topics are considered too everyday, its events too fragmented, too little major politics, too much local cronyism. On some days, some local sections confirm this stereotype. And local journalism is often seen as a ›beginners'‹ section, used as practice for one of the ›big‹ sections. But sports reporting and business and politics pages can be just as banal, deadline-driven, and elite-oriented. Foreign reporting is not always balanced. What some see as local gossip is for others the charm of local reporting: reporting on the everyday and scrutinizing everyday structures. If done well, this can result in real journalistic gems.

Local journalism plays a vital role, even – or perhaps especially – in digital media worlds. From the point of view of both society and democratic theory, effective local journalism is more than just desirable: Information enables participation. At the same time, local journalism can serve as a useful yardstick for the credibility of the entire profession. Unlike the subjects of much journalistic reporting, many of the facts and conclusions published in local journalism can be

immediately checked by its audience, which is why trust in local media is so high (Guess/Nuyhan/Reifler 2018). This added trust must be rewarded with professional and up-to-date local journalism.

Translation: Sophie Costella

About the author

Dr. Wiebke Möhring (*1970) has been Professor of Online and Print Journalism at TU Dortmund's School of Journalism and Mass Communication since 2016. Having studied Media Management and Philosophy in Hannover, she worked first at the Department of Journalism and Communication Research in Hannover and then at Hannover University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Her research is conducted in the fields of journalism research; processes and content of public communication, focusing on local communication; and methods of empirical social research and research ethics. Contact: wiebke.moehring@tu-dortmund.de

Literature

Arnold, Klaus; Wagner, Anna-Lena: Die Leistungen des Lokaljournalismus.

In: *Publizistik*, 63(2), 2018, pp. 177-206

Brouwers, Bart: Local news in a digital world: Stand up and start up, instead of copy and paste. In: *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies*, 7(3), 2018, pp. 561-568

Dinter, Jan (2018, Juli): *Kommunikationsstress im Ruhrgebiet: Die Gesprächsstörung zwischen Politikern, Bürgern und Journalisten. Vorstellung ausgewählter Studienergebnisse.* Impulsvortrag und Diskussion am 5. Juli im Rahmen der Ergebniskonferenz »Entfremdung von Politik und Medien? Die Gesprächsstörung zwischen Politikern, Bürgern und Journalisten im Ruhrgebiet überwinden« der NRW School of Governance, Essen

Guess, Andrew; Nyhan, Brendan; Reifler, Jason: *All Media Trust Is Local? Findings from the 2018 Poynter Media Trust Survey.* 2018, <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~bnyhan/media-trust-report-2018.pdf> [06.01.2019]

Jenkins, Joy; Kleis Nielsen, Rasmus (2018): *Digital News Project 2018. The Digital Transition of Local News.* Oxford: Reuters Institute.

Kleis Nielsen, Rasmus: (2015). Introduction: the uncertain future of local journalism. In: Kleis Nielsen, Rasmus (Eds.): *Local journalism. The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media.* London [Springer VS LB Tauris & Co. Ltd.] 2015, pp. 1-25

Kramp, Leif: Journalism in a deeply mediatized city. A locative approach to urban reporting. In: Peja, Laura et al (Eds.): *Current Perspectives on Communication and Media Research.* Bremen [edition Lumière] 2018, pp. 178-201

- Leupold, Anna; Klinger, Ulrike; Jarren, Otfried: Imagining the City. In: *Journalism Studies*, 19(7), 2018, pp. 960-982
- Lobigs, Frank: Wirtschaftliche Probleme des Journalismus im Internet: Verdrängungsängste und fehlende Erlösquellen. In: Nuernbergk, Christian; Neuberger, Christoph (Eds.): *Journalismus im Internet*. Wiesbaden [Springer Fachmedien] 2018, pp. 295-334
- Möhring, Wiebke (2013): Profession mit Zukunft? Zum Entwicklungsstand des Lokaljournalismus. In: Pöttker, Horst; Vehmeier, Anke (Eds.): *Das verkannte Ressort. Probleme und Perspektiven des Lokaljournalismus*. Wiesbaden [Springer VS] 2018, pp. 63-75
- Möhring, Wiebke; Keldenich, Felix: Lokaler Journalismus im Internet. Zeitungsverlage und neue Anbieter. In: Nuernbergk, Christian; Neuberger, Christoph (Eds.): *Journalismus im Internet*. Wiesbaden [Springer Fachmedien] 2018, pp. 183-208
- Neuberger, Christoph; Langenohl, Susanne; Nuernbergk, Christian (2014): *Social Media und Journalismus*. Düsseldorf: LfM
- Röper, Horst (2016): *Bericht zur Medienkonzentration 2015*. Düsseldorf: Landesanstalt für Medien Nordrhein-Westfalen (LfM).