LOCAL JOURNALISM

THE DECLINE OF NEWSPAPERS AND THE RISE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Edited by RASMUS KLEIS NIELSEN

About the Book

For more than a century, we have been able to take local journalism for granted. We no longer can. The newspaper industry that has provided the most local coverage is in decline and it is not yet clear whether digital media will sustain new forms of local journalism. This book provides a cross-country overview over the challenges facing changing forms of local journalism today. It identifies the central role that diminished newspapers still play in local media ecosystems, analyse the relations between local journalists and the politicians, government officials, community activists, and ordinary citizens they interact with, and examines the uneven rise of new forms of digital local journalism. Together, the ten chapters present a multi-faceted portrait of the precarious present and uncertain future of local journalism in the Western world.

Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media offers a detailed, research-based and comparative account of developments in local news and journalism at a time of structural change and transition in local news ecosystems. Rasmus Kleis Nielsen reasserts the significance of local news and journalism for local communities and their economic, political, social and cultural life. Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media sets a benchmark for future studies of local news and journalism during a period of change and uncertainty.
Bob Franklin, Professor of Journalism Studies, Cardiff University

Journalism is changing, nowhere more rapidly than in locally produced news. This edited volume provides an on-the-ground glimpse of these changes as they are taking place across Europe, the UK, and the United States. An invaluable snapshot of a fast-moving process … and an important touchstone for research yet to be done.
David Ryfe, Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa

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What follows is a short extract from this book.
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The Reuters Institute would like to acknowledge the assistance of David Ryfe and Ian Hargreaves as editorial advisers on behalf of the Institute.

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Preface

This book deals with local journalism. This is not a sexy topic. But it is an important topic, one that is intellectually interesting, often overlooked, and deserves more attention.

The book is structured as follows. The introduction presents an overview of existing research on local journalism as well as the structural changes currently underway. Part I (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) focuses on the role of local journalism as part of the *news media ecosystem* in a range of different communities in Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Part II (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) focuses on *local journalism and its interlocutors* with studies from Belgium, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Part III (Chapters 7, 8, and 9) focuses on *new forms of local media* emerging that offer various degrees of and kinds of support for online-only forms of journalism and has studies from France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

Several of the chapters included were initially presented at a conference 'Local Journalism around the World: Professional Practices, Economic Foundations, and Political Implications' hosted at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in Oxford in February 2014. It was an interesting and wide-ranging event with papers from 16 different countries, underlining the many differences and similarities not only between local journalism in different countries, but also local journalism in different communities, and the differences between local journalism and national and international journalism.

We would like to thank everyone who took part in the conference for two days of discussion that has done much to inform and improve much of what is presented in this book. In addition to the contributors to the book, the participants included Aleksandra Krstic, Ana Milojevic, André Haller, Annika Bergström, Annika Sehl, Birgit Røe Mathisen, Daniel H. Mutibwa, David Ryfe, Diana Bossio, Dimitri Prandner, Dobin Yim, Helle Sjøvaag, Ingela Wadbring, Ioannis Angelou, Jonathan Albright,

Introduction: The Uncertain Future of Local Journalism

Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

For more than a century, most people in the Western world have taken local journalism for granted. From small rural communities covered by weeklies to larger towns covered by their own daily, newspapers have been an integral part of local life, and their journalists have chronicled events from the mundane to the monumental, publicised local debates, and kept a more or less watchful eye on those in positions of power. Local media have represented their area and helped people imagine themselves as part of a community, connected in part through their shared local news medium, bound together by more than geographic proximity or politically defined administrative boundaries.

Journalists and journalism scholars alike are and have been ambivalent about the quality of local journalism. On the one hand, local journalism seems *terrible* to many. It is frequently seen as superficial and deferential, as skirting controversy, and as catering to advertisers and affluent audiences over the wider community. Commentator George Monbiot, for example, sees the local press as one of the 'most potent threats to British democracy, championing the overdog, misrepresenting democratic choices, defending business, the police and local elites from those who seek to challenge them' (Monbiot, 2009). On the other hand, local journalism is also seen as *terribly important*. It provides information about local public affairs, it holds local elites at least somewhat accountable, it provides a forum for discussion, and it ties communities together. The reality of local journalism probably lies not between these two extremes, but in their combination. Like journalism more broadly, local journalism may well be frequently terrible and yet also terribly important.

Local journalism does not always play its roles well, but the roles it plays are important.

It is because it is important and imperfect that we – whether as journalists, as journalism scholars, or as readers, viewers, users – should try to understand local journalism, how it operates, what its consequences are, and where it is heading. The first thing to recognise is that local journalism, like journalism more generally, is changing today as part of a wider structural transformation of our media environment, driven in large part by the rise of digital media (but also other factors). This unfinished media revolution involves changes in how we communicate, share content, get informed, are advertised to, and entertain ourselves (e.g. Grueskin et al., 2011; Levy and Nielsen, 2010; Nielsen, 2012). The changes are not identical from case to case, community to community, or country to country, but they are profound and share certain commonalities across most high-income democracies: print, the mainstay of the newspaper business, is in decline, broadcasting has been transformed by the growth of multi-channel television, and digital media provide new ways for accessing, finding, and sharing media content that challenge the inherited business models and journalistic routines of established news media.

This book takes these changes as its starting point and focuses on the uncertain future of local journalism. Much has been written about how these changes affect the news media and journalism generally (e.g. Fenton, 2010; Lee-Wright et al., 2012; Russell, 2011). But the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on national media, on the most prominent newspapers, the biggest broadcasters, and the most successful digital start-ups. Though local journalism actually accounts for the majority of the journalistic profession, and though much of the news media industry is local and regional rather than national or international, less attention has been paid to how contemporary changes are affecting local journalism and local media specifically (for exceptions see Abernathy, 2014; Fowler, 2011; Ryfe, 2012). In several countries, legislatures, media regulators, and advocacy groups have all noted the serious challenges facing local and regional news media. There has been much less independent research into these issues. This limits our understanding of journalism (most of it is local), of the news media (much of the industry is local), and of local communities (tied together in part by local journalism and local news media). The chapters collected here push beyond these limitations and advance our understanding of the distinct characteristics of local media ecosystems, local journalism and its various interlocutors, and new forms

of local media, providing a fuller and more nuanced picture not only of local journalism around the world, but also journalism more generally.

The uncertain future of local journalism

The premise of the book is twofold.

First, while we have in the past been able to take the *existence* of local journalism, its practical feasibility and its commercial sustainability, for granted, this is no longer the case. The business models that local newspapers have been based on are under tremendous pressure today as readership is eroding, advertising declining, and overall revenues plummeting. Digital growth has far from made up for what has been lost on the print side of the business. Most newspaper companies have responded by cutting costs to remain profitable or at least limit the operating losses. Seeing little potential for growth, investors have lost interest in the sector, as demonstrated by the collapsing market value of publicly traded local newspaper companies. While broadcasting has so far weathered the digital transition better as a business, both radio and television are more often organised regionally than locally, and in any case they typically make at best limited investments in local journalism. (The US has a more robust local television industry than most other countries, with a greater emphasis on local news. Yet research there has suggested that the coverage is often inadequate, episodic, and superficial – and rarely genuinely local. See for example Fowler et al., 2007.) Public media, especially licence-fee-funded public service broadcasters in Western Europe, face fewer challenges to their resource base (though in some cases well-known political pressures). But, like their commercial counterparts, they generally provide more regional news than genuinely local news.[1] The emergence of new digital forms of local media has occasioned much optimism about the future of local journalism. But so far, the evidence that digital-only operations can sustain local journalism on a significant scale is inconclusive. And after the cyclical challenges that have come with the global financial crisis and prolonged recessions in many countries, the advertising business is changing in ways that make it harder to fund local content production – Facebook, Google, and other large digital players are increasingly offering locally targeted forms of advertising, making specifically local media less distinct. As one advertising executive has put it, 'Local isn't valuable anymore. Anyone can sell local' (quoted in Suich, 2014). So this is the first premise: developments

in media business across print, broadcasting, and digital media mean that we cannot take the existence of local journalism for granted any more.

Second, while the structural transformation that has challenged the economic and organisational underpinnings of local journalism is tied in with the larger change in our media environment affecting national and international media, we cannot simply deduce from studies of national media what will happen at the local level, or indeed assume that local journalism is the same throughout a given country. Journalism at the national level is, for example, increasingly oriented towards a non-stop 24/7 breaking-news cycle and characterised by intensified competition between multiple news organisations covering the same stories and appealing to the same audiences. It is not clear that *any* of this is the case at the local level. Similarly, the *Guardian*, the *Banbury Guardian* (local paid daily), and the *Croydon Guardian* (free weekly) are all UK newspapers, are all affected by the changes in our media environment, and have all launched digital operations in response to these changes. That does not mean, however, that one can rely on the (many) analyses of the *Guardian* to understand how the *Banbury Guardian* and the *Croydon Guardian*, their place in local media ecosystems, their local journalism, and their position online, are changing. To understand the uncertain future of local journalism, we need to take into account the often pronounced differences not only *between* countries (international variation in, say, the structure of local media markets and the practice of local journalism) but also differences *within* countries (intranational variation between urban and rural areas, between different regions). French local journalism, for example, is different from US local journalism. But there are also considerable differences within France, between relatively strong and commercially robust regional newspaper chains like *Ouest France* in Brittany and weaker individual titles elsewhere in the country. Similarly, local journalism in a major metropolitan area is different from local journalism in a medium-size provincial town or a sparsely populated countryside. That is the second premise: we need to take the specificities of local journalism, the international and intranational differences between local journalism in different areas, seriously.

This introduction presents an overview of main trends in terms of what is happening to local news media, discusses different perspectives on the role of local journalism, and then proceeds to summarise key points from existing research to provide an overview of what we know about local journalism in terms of three areas, namely (1) accountability

and information, (2) civic and political engagement, and (3) community integration. It is important to underline from the outset that research on local journalism is neither as detailed, extensive, or systematically comparative as research on national news media. Much of what we know about local journalism is therefore based on individual case studies or research from one community or country, sometimes work completed well before the current changes in our media environment picked up pace. While we have reason to expect that many of these findings apply more generally, substantiating that, and fully understanding the practice and consequences of local journalism in different settings, will require more research than has been done so far. Nonetheless, key overall trends can be highlighted.

What is happening to local media?

Contemporary changes in local media are tied in with a wider change in the way in which we live our lives, the way in which the economy works, and the way in which politics works. At least since the 1990s, social scientists have increasingly stressed that we cannot take the idea of 'local communities' for granted, especially if we think of these as socially, economically, and politically self-contained. We still live local lives, but our lives are less locally bounded, as people move more often, as more and more people commute to work elsewhere, as more and more of the goods and services we consume are produced far away, and as some of the most important decisions impacting our lives and communities are taken elsewhere. The sociologist Anthony Giddens, for example, while underlining the continuing relevance of locality and community as enduring features of the modern world, also argues that many parts of social life have become 'disembedded', that social, economic, and political relations have been 'lifted out' of the local context of interaction (Giddens, 1990: 21; see also Castells, 2000). This is not simply a case of centralisation, of the increasing importance of financial centres, large multinational corporations, and national capitals, but also of developments where people, goods, services, and power circulate in new networks that cut across traditional distinctions between the local, the regional, the national, and the global (Sassen, 2006). These changes impact local media too. Transient populations represent a different kind of audience from long-term residents, local business news is less important for people who work and shop outside the community, and the incentive to follow local

politics is reduced if power is perceived to be elsewhere. Local journalism increasingly faces the challenge not only of covering local affairs, but also of identifying in ways that resonate with their audience what is local, what makes it local, and why the local is even relevant.[2]

Local media themselves have changed significantly too since the 1990s. Already then, journalism scholars warned of a bleak present and worse future for local and regional media (Franklin and Murphy, 1998), noting how newspaper circulation was declining, advertising revenues were shrinking, and many local and regional media companies were responding by cutting investments in local newsrooms and often consolidating operations in regional centres, leading to media that were 'local in name only' (Franklin, 2006: xxi). There are considerable variations in how the local and regional media have developed even within the Western world in the postwar years – some countries, like Germany, have a media market characterised by very strong local and regional newspapers and public service broadcasters with a strong regional orientation, whereas others, like the United Kingdom, have much more nationally oriented media systems, dominated to a larger extent by media based in the capital. (These differences in part reflect wider structural difference between, for example, a federal political system in Germany versus a more centralised one in the United Kingdom.) But in most countries, local media markets have been highly concentrated for decades. Typically, local newspapers have enjoyed a dominant position within their circulation areas, facing only limited competition from regional and national media and in some cases from community media. Structural diversity has been low and incumbents often highly profitable due to their near-monopoly on local advertising.

The pace of change differs from country to country, and there are important variations, but the overall direction since has been the same. Private local and regional newspapers have lost whole categories of advertising (classifieds, much of automotive, jobs, and real estate) to online competitors and are going through a structural transformation as their historically profitable print product declines in importance and their digital operations cannot make up for the revenue lost (even in cases where they reach a considerable audience). Commercial broadcasters make limited investments in local news (with the US being a partial exception). Public service broadcasters are primarily regionally oriented. Forms of alternative, citizen, and community media increase media diversity in important ways in some areas, but their resources and reach are often limited, and most localities are primarily served by market-based

and public service media. People everywhere rely on wide and diverse media repertoires to be entertained and stay informed. But when it comes to local news, local newspapers have historically played a central role. These newspapers are under tremendous pressure today.

These pressures are important not only for owners and employees of local newspapers, but also for the communities they cover, as a number of studies have shown how central newspapers are to local media ecosystems, especially in terms of the sheer volume and variety of locally oriented news they produce (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010; Lund, 2010; Anderson, 2013). In many countries, people more often identify television and sometimes radio as their main *source* of local news than they name newspapers. But in terms of news *production*, newspapers remain central. Their decline must raise concerns over a growing local 'news gap' between the information we would ideally want communities to have access to, and the information that is actually made available from independent sources of news (Currah, 2009). In areas where local newspapers are not only cutting back on coverage but closing altogether, and where broadcasters and digital media provide little substantial local coverage, we face the prospect of local 'news deserts' where communities are not covered at all, and have to rely on the local grapevine of interpersonal communication and information from self-interested parties (politicians, local government, businesses) to stay informed about local affairs (Friedland et al., 2012).

The growth of digital media has been accompanied by considerable optimism that new forms of local media would thrive online, where low entry and operating costs could potentially allow lean, efficient operations to focus on local communities and cover them in depth and in detail and thus produce distinct content and carve out their own niche in an increasingly competitive media environment. The ease with which digital media could potentially allow people to collaborate and produce new forms of alternative media, citizen journalism, or community media has also given rise to hopes that non-market forms of local news provision would thrive online (similar to the hopes that once formed around community radio and public-access television). Faced with growing concern over the future of established, legacy local and regional media, this optimism has been embraced by policy-makers in several countries. In the US, the Federal Communications Commission has stated that 'independent non-profit websites are providing exciting journalistic innovation on the local level' (FCC, 2011: 191). In the UK, the media regulator Ofcom

(2012: 103) has highlighted how digital media have 'the potential to support and broaden the range of local media content available to citizens and consumers at a time when traditional local media providers continue to find themselves under financial pressure'.

So far, however, the evidence is very uneven and the optimism and high hopes surrounding digital local media are not always well-supported. A number of impressive new local media initiatives – some professionally organised and commercially run, others non-profits, sometimes with a stronger volunteer component – have been launched (e.g. Barnett and Townend, 2014). But the wider field of new forms of local media is characterised by very uneven quality, a high turnover (as many new ventures rarely last long), and genuine concerns over their editorial autonomy and independence (e.g. Kurpius et al., 2010; Thurman et al., 2012; van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014). Furthermore, there seem to be pronounced national differences in the number and vitality of digital local news media. There have been very few launched in Denmark, despite high levels of internet use and a large share of advertising going to digital, in part probably because of the strength of legacy media, whereas there has been a substantial number of local start-ups in countries like France and the United Kingdom. Individual examples of local news start-ups from the US are often brought as reasons for optimism, but the most systematic review of the US scene produced so far provides a sombre picture. In it, Matthew Hindman (2011: 10) writes that 'there is little evidence […] that the Internet has expanded the number of local news outlets'. He continues, 'while the Internet adds only a pittance of new sources of local news, the surprisingly small audience for local news traffic [also] helps explain the financial straits local news organizations now face'. Digital advertising is a volume game, dominated by large players like Google and Facebook who are increasingly offering geographically targeted advertising at low rates. Local news media, who in Hindman's study in the US on average attract well below 1% of all monthly page views in most media markets, have found it very hard to develop a profitable digital business. Freely accessible, advertising-supported online-only local news organisations – the most common form of new local news media – who typically have more limited audience reach than established newspapers and broadcasters and have no legacy business to subsidise digital operations, have had an especially hard time achieving sustainability.

Beyond the news media, digital media have underpinned the growth of new forms of social and interpersonal communication, online additions to existing forums for and networks of person-to-person communication at home, on the job, and elsewhere. Daily conversation with family, friends, and colleagues has been, is, and will continue to be an important part of how people follow local affairs (e.g. Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995) and the 'story-telling networks' that tie local communities together are only partially intertwined with news media (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Today, these conversations increasingly have online components and manifestations, on bulletin board debates, listservs, social networking sites, and the like. Even though, so far, research suggests these various sites produce little original news, they can facilitate communities of interest and in addition play an important role as 'alert systems', disseminating information produced by others and drawing people's attention to issues of common concern (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). Digital media have also presented various organised actors in local communities, politicians, local governments, local businesses and community groups with new ways of communicating with people via websites, newsletters, and social media. (More broadly, many of these actors are increasingly investing in their own forms of communication, sometimes going beyond PR, marketing, and various digital platforms to include media like the so-called 'town-hall Pravdas', papers published by some city councils in the UK to announce council business.) These developments underline that even in communities where there is only one or only a few local news media, local journalism does not have a monopoly on providing local information. People have other sources. But so far, surveys suggest that local newspapers in most places still represent the most widely used sources and the most important source of independently produced information about local public affairs.

What is the role of local journalism?

Journalists and journalism scholars alike typically see journalism's most important role as holding power to account and keeping people informed about public affairs. This role is associated with the notion of journalism as a 'fourth estate' and reads journalism through the lens of liberal representative democracy. A frequently used metaphor for this role is the idea of journalism as a 'watchdog', and indeed, research has shown

that many journalists in the Western world primarily see themselves as 'detached watchdogs' (Hanitzsch, 2011). The metaphor is particularly associated with investigative reporting, the work of independent journalists who toil diligently and often at length to unearth secrets and expose corruption.

Popular as the watchdog metaphor is for the autonomy, importance, and moral purpose it ascribes to journalism, it has never been a particularly good description of how the profession actually works. This is illustrated by the frequency with which it is invoked by critics as a way of highlighting how journalism often falls short of its own aspirations – 'the watchdog that didn't bark' – and it is contrasted with a negative metaphor of journalism as a 'lapdog' that uncritically follows the lead of local elites. The notion of journalism as a 'guard dog' has been suggested as a more appropriate canine metaphor by a team of researchers on the basis of years of extensive research on journalism in different communities in the United States (Donohue et al., 1995; Tichenor et al., 1980). In their view, journalism is not a watchdog working on behalf of the public at large or the whole community. But it is not a lapdog at the beck and call of the local elite either. Instead, they suggest we recognise that local news media are deeply influenced by local community structures, including local political fault lines, the relative strength of different community groups, and indeed the social structure in terms of class and ethnicity, and that it serves most effectively those groups in local communities who already have some influence, power, and resources. In their analysis, this is so not because journalists explicitly *aim* to serve these groups, but because journalists and the news media they work for *depend* on these groups as sources (for journalists) and as readers (both subscribers and as attractive to advertisers).

The guard dog metaphor still sees accountability and public affairs coverage as at the centre of what local journalism does, even though it comes with a more modest view of the extent to which, and the conditions under which, journalism can actually hold local elites to account. Guard dog journalism depends in part on local elite conflict and competition for its ability to effectively monitor people in positions of power, just as national news journalism often turns out to provide the most diverse, revelatory, and multi-perspectival coverage of issues when political elites disagree (Bennett, 2005). It presents journalism and local media with a more modest, but still important, role as an institution that publicises key aspects of local public affairs – especially elite competition

and conflict – helping citizens understand the actors and the stakes and make decisions on whether and how this impacts them and whether and how they want to get involved.

If journalists and journalism scholars expect journalism to hold power to account and keep people informed about public affairs (or hope that it will), what do people themselves expect of (local) journalism? Here, research from the Netherlands and the United States identifies a significant overlap between what journalists and journalism scholars expect from local journalism and what people more broadly expect, but also a wider range of roles beyond those that professionals and academics normally associate with local media.

Qualitative research with local television audiences in the Netherlands suggests that people there expect local media to do seven things:

(1) supply relatively diverse, reliable, timely, and unbiased background *information* on community affairs;
(2) foster social *integration* by helping people navigate their local community;
(3) provide *inspiration* and good examples;
(4) ensure *representation* of different groups in the community;
(5) increase local intra-community *understanding* between different groups;
(6) maintain a form of *local memory* or chronicle of local affairs; and
(7) contribute to social cohesion, a sense of *belonging* to the locale (Costera Meijer, 2010).

The information role and to a lesser extent the representation role overlaps to a significant degree with the journalistic self-conception and the guard dog metaphor. But it is clear that people also expect much more from local media than a conventional focus on public affairs coverage would suggest. Journalists may prefer to see themselves as independent – detached – from the community they cover, even if in reality they are highly dependent on it, both in terms of sources for their reporting and resources to sustain the news organisations they work for. Their audiences may appreciate the ambition to be impartial and unbiased that lies behind the notion of detachment. But they also expect local media to be engaged with the community they cover.

Quantitative research from the United States further substantiates the idea that people expect more – and different – things from local media than accountability reporting and regular coverage of local public affairs. On the basis of a survey of local community members, a team of

American researchers suggest that people *do* expect their local media to provide accurate and unbiased regular local news coverage on a timely basis and to serve as a watchdog holding local elites to account. But, more than anything, they expect local media to be 'good neighbors' (Poindexter et al., 2006). They expect local journalists to care about the community, to understand and appreciate its values, and, crucially, to prioritise solutions as much as problems in their coverage – in the US surveys, especially ethnic minorities, less affluent and less well-educated groups, and women say they expect local journalism to emphasise solutions as well as problems (Heider et al., 2005). These broader conceptions of local journalism and its role overlap only partially with how the journalistic profession conventionally sees itself and its mission through the image of the detached watchdog. They represent a communitarian supplement to a liberal self-understanding, and are better aligned with what some community media have been aiming to do (Dickens et al., 2014) and are, especially in the emphasis on community values and solutions, reminiscent of what the public journalism movement called for in the 1990s in the US (Rosen, 1999).[3]

Both qualitative and quantitative research suggests that people have a positive image of what local news media are, or at least positive visions for what they might be. This is well in line with numerous surveys reporting that many people say that local news is important for them. But one should not exaggerate the bonds that tie local communities, local journalism, and local media together. In 2012, a majority (51%) of Americans said it would have *no* impact on their ability to keep up with information and news about their community if their local newspaper closed down (even as the same research project showed the multiple ways in which many actually depended on newspapers) (Rosenthiel et al., 2012). This is probably at least in part because the very social significance of what for example 'journalism' means may be changing as people access and get information from more and more different sources, also about local affairs. Not only the organisational, but also the cultural forms of news are changing today. Though most people clearly have certain expectations and ideals that local news media can leverage to define a broadly speaking positive and important role for themselves in local communities, local journalists cannot simply assume that their work is appreciated and valued, let alone that it will be so in the future. Especially when it comes to younger people and people who live less locally rooted lives, local news media and local journalism has to constantly prove its relevance and earn people's trust.

What do we know about local journalism?

What does existing empirical research on local journalism tell us in terms of how it performs the various roles assumed by journalists and assigned to it by others? The main points can be broken down in terms of three areas: (1) *accountability and information*, (2) *civic and political engagement*, and (3) *community integration*. These areas all combine a normative concern with the ideal role of journalism in local communities with an analytical ambition to assess its actual implications. (They all also take more or less for granted the existence of local journalism, a relatively clearly defined journalistic profession, and a shared understanding of what constitutes (local) news. All these seem less stable today.) Within each, there are several insights into the actual practice and consequences of local journalism that have been well-substantiated across a number of studies in different contexts.

Accountability and information

Local journalists often work at news media with limited editorial staff, a wide number of potential stories to cover in the community, and a considerable news hole to fill (especially with the growth of additional digital publishing platforms). It is therefore no surprise that a number of studies from different countries and contexts have all found that local journalism is mostly reactive and often based on single sources, frequently self-interested ones like politicians, local government officials, or businesses (Franklin and Richardson, 2002b; O'Neill and O'Connor, 2008; Örebro, 2002). More proactive reporting based on multiple sources and points of view makes up only a minority of local news, and is mostly produced by local daily newspapers, much less so by regional broadcasters and local weeklies (Lund, 2010; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2010). Local journalists, as much as their national and international peers, 'co-produce' the news in collaboration with sources (Cook, 1998).

Locally, politicians and government officials have in many cases been found to be the most frequently cited local sources, with local businesses frequently coming second, community activists much less frequently, and ordinary citizens rarely making it into the news (Kaniss, 1991; O'Neill and O'Connor, 2008). In individual cases, media-savvy community activists can help drive a story (Anderson, 2010). But routine coverage is typically organised around a limited number of privileged sources that occupy

key positions in local politics, local government, and local business. This pattern is an old one, found as often in the 1970s as in the 2000s (see Lund, 2012; Svendsen, 1979). These institutionalised forms of co-production, characterised by routine interactions with a limited number of local elite sources, rarely results in the independent, investigative reporting associated with autonomous accountability journalism.

This does not mean, however, that local journalism offers no substantial coverage of local public affairs. Though critics have lamented a rising focus on sensationalist accounts of crime and softer, more entertainment- and lifestyle-oriented local stories (e.g. Franklin, 2006), systematic large-scale content analysis has in several countries shown that local journalism on the whole is in fact both informative and wide-ranging (Franklin and Richardson, 2002a), plays an important role in publicising what local authorities are doing (Ekström et al., 2006), and also offers some degree of critical debate and scrutiny, especially in those communities where local elites disagree amongst themselves (Tichenor et al., 1980). More generally, research has shown that news coverage helps reduce government corruption (Brunetti and Weder, 2003) and make elected officials more responsive to their constituents (Snyder and Strömberg, 2008).

We also know from a growing number of studies that local journalism is genuinely informative. The positive side of this is that people who follow local news know more about local public affairs (Shaker, 2009; Tichenor et al., 1970). (This is in line with a growing body of research that documents that news media users more generally are more informed about public affairs than those of their peers who do not regularly use news, e.g. Aalberg and Curran, 2012.) The more negative side of this is the persistent 'knowledge gap' between regular news users and those who do not regularly follow news, a gap that, because of the socio-economic profile of local news users, tends to reinforce pre-existing differences between the relatively more affluent, well-educated, and locally engaged (who know more about public affairs) and the relatively less affluent, well-educated, and locally engaged (who know less) (Donohue et al., 1995; Tichenor et al., 1970). (This too is in parallel with research showing growing differences in political information levels driven in part by many people opting not to follow the news regularly, e.g. Prior, 2007, and with research suggesting many young people – even if they express an interest in politics – do not feel that conventional forms of journalism speak to them, follow the news less, and know less about some aspects of public affairs, e.g. Buckingham, 2000.)

Civic and political engagement

While local media could no doubt often do more to mobilise people to take part in local public affairs, a growing number of studies have also documented that local journalism significantly increases people's civic and political engagement. Studies have shown that local newspaper use, controlling for socio-economic variables and interest, has a positive influence on involvement in local politics (Scheufele et al., 2002). Across print, broadcast, and digital, attention to local news has been found to influence civic engagement more broadly (Shah et al., 2001). The closure of local newspapers in various American cities has been shown to be followed by significant drops in civic engagement (Shaker, 2012). A range of studies from different countries has also shown that local news media have a positive effect on local election turnout specifically (e.g. Baekgaard et al., 2014; Gentzkow et al., 2009). Conversely, the absence of local news leads to lower turnout than in comparable communities (Filla and Johnson, 2010) and a reduction in the number of newspapers covering a community can reduce political participation even when other local media continue to cover the area (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2012).

Clearly, many factors influence overall levels of civic and political engagement, including socio-economic resources, individual motivation, as well as mobilisation efforts, just as many other organisations beyond local news media mobilise people to get involved in local public affairs. But despite fears that superficial journalism and possibly more immediately appealing alternatives like entertainment might depress political participation, most studies seem to suggest that, even with its shortcomings, news generally has a net positive effect on levels of civic engagement. As with the effects of local journalism on political information levels, there is likely to be an 'engagement gap' parallel to the 'knowledge gap' discussed above, where the positive net effects of media use combined with differences in media use result in a growing difference between those who are attentive and engaged and those who do not follow local news and are less engaged in local public affairs (e.g. Jeffres et al., 2002).

Community integration

Finally, researchers have long highlighted the important role that local journalism has played in defining and tying together local communities,

and many local media have been as attuned as any social scientist to the intimate connection between communication and community. The great American newspaper editor Horace Greeley famously likened a local newspaper to 'the printed diary of the home town'. Walter Lippmann (1997: 210), working off Greeley's analogy, highlighted how coverage of prosaic aspects of daily life as much as news about public affairs could help people develop a sense of community through shared experience that goes beyond what comes from simply living near each other in an area administratively defined as this or that district, municipality, or canton. Local media help 'orient' us towards each other within a shared geography, they mark the weddings, anniversaries, and funerals of those around us as relevant; they provide a common set of references that goes beyond news to include social events, sports, and the offers of local businesses.

A long tradition of research has substantiated that the connection between local journalism and local community is a significant one. Sociologists have shown how local community papers help people define and maintain neighbourhood identities in large metropolitan areas (Janowitz, 1952) and connect and identify with each other in sparsely populated rural areas (Kirkpatrick, 1995), just as national news media are seen as having been integral to the development of the 'imagined communities' of nation-states (Anderson, 1991). Recently, one team of researchers has shown empirically how what they call 'local media connectedness' increases not only information levels and civic and political engagement but also gives people a sense of community belonging (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006). Even as more and more media – competing for attention in a crowded field, often available over vast distances and differences, in the case of digital media, almost globally – are perhaps more closely tied to distributed communities of interest or commercially attractive segments of consumers than to geographically delineated and localised communities, journalism scholars have highlighted the role of specifically *local* news media in offering people a 'sense of place', something that sets their locale apart from the seeming boundlessness and openness of the wider world (Hess, 2013; Hess and Waller, 2014). Having a local news medium dedicated to covering you and people around you helps mark the identity of the place where you live as *somewhere* and helps mark people there as *someone*. The close ties between local journalism and community integration are not unalloyed boons. Local news helps cultivate consensus, coherence, and stability within a community (Janowitz, 1952) – whether that is a

good thing or a bad thing depends on your personal perspective and position in the status quo. In either case, local news media help create what one scholar has called 'communicatively integrated communities' (Friedland, 2001).

Conclusion

Local journalism today is changing in part because of the larger changes underway in our media environments. This transformation puts the future of local journalism as we have known it in question because the business models that have for more than a century supported the profession are under tremendous pressure, and because the very social significance of categories like 'news' and 'journalism' that we have taken for granted sometimes seem in flux. The digital media environment undoubtedly represents considerable potential for inspiring new forms of local journalism, but so far few have managed to realise that potential and establish sustainable forms of born-digital local journalism. Both market and non-market forms of online-only local news production have so far struggled to survive. It is possible that various forms of distributed information production, sharing, and networked journalism in the future can provide many of the same kinds of things local journalism and local news media organisations offer and have offered without having to build similar kinds of organisations with all the costs associated with them. But so far that is largely hypothetical. Meanwhile, newspapers continue to see their print circulation decline, readership decrease, revenues erode, and often in turn cut their investment in local journalism.

Ten years ago, Bob Franklin could conclude in his review of local media in the UK that 'local newspapers are increasingly a business success but a journalistic failure' (2006: 4). Today, not only their journalism, but also the businesses that sustain and sometimes constrain it face an uncertain future. As Clay Shirky (2009) has noted, this is what revolutions are like – 'the old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place'. Sometimes nothing takes the place of that which is broken. This goes for both organisational forms (news media) and social categories (journalism, news). The consequences depend on what one thinks of local journalism as we know it (with variations from case to case, community to community, and country to country). Critics may say that, romanticised images of quaint old hometown papers aside, actually existing local

journalism is in fact often superficial and deferential in its reporting, distant from the communities covered, and no longer an integral part of community life. These are important criticisms, whether raised amongst colleagues or by outsiders, as there is certainly always room for improvement. But empirical research suggests that, while far from ideal, local journalism, even with all its imperfections, has served a number of important functions in many local communities. This is more than a 'legitimist vision' of local news media and their social implications (Kuhn and Neveu, 2002). There is compelling evidence that local journalism, despite its shortcomings, is actually often informative and helps people follow local public affairs. Much work suggests that local journalism also helps generate higher levels of civic and political engagement. Finally, researchers have shown how local journalism contributes to community integration, represents communities, and helps tie people together.

Most people would see these demonstrable impacts of local journalism as we know it as broadly speaking positive. Insofar as local journalism is in peril, these effects too are imperilled. Of course, they are not essentially or necessarily tied to local journalism. We can imagine, and surely identify, forms of local journalism more likely to spread misinformation, depress engagement, and divide communities. Similarly, others, beyond local media and local journalism, can help people stay informed about local public affairs, mobilise them to get engaged, and help people maintain a sense of locally rooted community. But today, local journalism in most places seems to contribute to these areas. These contributions are thrown into question as the profession, and the local news media that have historically sustained it, change. The changes currently underway in local journalism point to an uncertain future where people will have access to more and more media, but may well have access to less and less independently reported genuinely *local* news, and where the differences will grow between a shrinking minority who seek out local news and a growing majority who do not regularly follow it. They point towards a future in which, if the trends continue and existing research is anything to go by, we risk seeing much weaker local news media that do less in terms of holding power to account and keeping people informed, less to encourage civic and political engagement, and less to foster community integration than they have in the past (even as digital media offer both individual citizens and local communities many other benefits in other areas beyond news and journalism).

Different aspects of these changes are in focus in the rest of this book. It proceeds in three sections. Part I deals with local media ecosystems and

presents different analyses of the interplay between different types of actors and media in the circulation of information in various communities. Part II shifts the focus to local journalism and its interlocutors, and examines the actors involved in how stories come about and how different actors in various communities see each other and evaluate each other's roles. Part III is dedicated to analysis of new forms of local media and looks at the business models and motivations behind various kinds of hyperlocal news sites as well as the kinds of content they produce. Each of these parts starts with a short introduction and overview. Each of them can be read in connection with this book as a whole or as a standalone set of analyses of one particular aspect of local journalism today. They take as their starting point what we know about local journalism as an important source of information, a part of civic and political engagement, and as something that ties communities together, but move beyond this to focus on how local journalism is changing today, and on its uncertain future tomorrow.

Notes

1   In the UK, for example, the BBC operates 12 regions and 43 smaller local radio stations across England, and the Conservative–Liberal Democrat government in 2013 issued 19 local TV licences in their attempt to foster a locally oriented commercial television industry. By comparison, more than 300 local websites are part of the network Openly Local, and more than 1,000 local newspapers are part of the Newspaper Society, all serving much smaller areas than the broadcasters.

2   The definition of local media used throughout this book is tied to territory, that is, local media and regional media are media primarily oriented towards covering more circumscribed geographic areas than national and international media. Historically, their orientation has in large part been defined by their circulation or broadcast area, a seemingly 'natural' delineation that is losing meaning as people can access digital editions of local media from elsewhere. But their identity is still primarily constructed with reference to geography, as is both the business of local commercial media and the political rationale and legitimacy behind local/regional public media. The 'local' in local media is thus revealed not as a given but as a construct, a particular orientation and sense of place of what Kristy Hess (2013) calls 'geo-social news'.

3   Interestingly, recent research on the role-perceptions of local journalists in Australia suggest that they see themselves as both advocates for the local community and as hosting a forum for debate – see Hanusch, 2014.

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