

Local Democracy and the Media

Can hyperlocals fill the gap?

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Abstract

Local news media in Western countries are undergoing major changes, including cutbacks, centralisation and consolidation. In this study, Sweden has been scanned to map the presence of digital hyperlocal media and to investigate which online channels of communication they offer their readers, in order to determine their set-up for democratic functions. The results reveal that very few hyperlocals are positioned in rural areas; instead, the majority of them favour metropolitan or urban municipalities. The hyperlocal media presence on social networks is limited to a few platforms, and about half of the hyperlocals offer commentary fields on their news sites. As the democratic structure varies, coupled with the fact that hyperlocals favour high-density population municipalities where traditional media already exist, this study indicates that the democracy dialogue in the local public sphere may be at risk.

Keywords: hyperlocal media, democracy, digital journalism, Sweden, social media

Introduction

The media market in Europe has experienced dramatic changes during the last decade, including declining subscriptions and advertising revenue. This has resulted in downsizing of newsrooms, centralisation and consolidation, leaving gaps in geographic news coverage (Radcliffe, 2012, 2015).

Earlier research (Baker, 2007; Firmstone & Coleman, 2014; Gandour, 2016; Habermas, 1989; Nord & Strömbäck, 2004) pointed to how the lack of media coverage is ultimately a question of democracy, and that media centralisation poses problems for public dialogue. Journalism is essential for the exercise of freedom of speech and opinion. Without independent and free media, the general public would not be able to receive impartial information in order to exercise their democratic rights, including choosing political representation and participating in the public sphere.

Digital technologies and the internet have reduced the tough entry barrier and made it easier to produce and disseminate news. New agents can now access the public space independently and become alternatives to legacy media (Hansen, 2015). In the wake of

the decline of traditional media, independent hyperlocal media has emerged: hyperlocal news refers to locally focused news reporting about issues and events that are targeted within a well-defined geographic community and usually delivered online (Metzgar et al., 2011; Pavlik, 2013; Radcliffe, 2012).

But are they contributing to democracy? Previous research has focused on studying hyperlocals in terms of structure, resources and business models (Kurpius et al., 2010; Leckner et al., 2017; Nygren et al., 2017; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2015; Williams & Harte, 2016). Research shows that hyperlocal media is a growing phenomenon in the Nordic region, but it has not received much scholarly attention. In Sweden, Leckner and colleagues (2017) have studied why hyperlocal media operations have come to exist, and how they are organised and funded. We know very little about whether and how they can sustain local democracy and civic engagement, and where they are located in terms of population density and media void. So far, no research has focused on the democratic framework and set-up of digital hyperlocals in the context of today's digital maturity.

Sweden will be used as a case, as the country is relevant in terms of both media development and the level of digitalisation. Since 2004, nearly half of the local editorial offices for local newspapers have been shut down (Nygren et al., 2017), leaving every fourth municipality in Sweden without a newsroom. Consequently, 73 Swedish municipalities do not have any staffed weekly paper, free sheet, news site or other media (Leckner & Nygren, 2016).

This article will first review the theoretical framework around media development and democracy and include the new dimension of hyperlocal media. Thereafter it will aim to make an empirical contribution in terms of today's hyperlocals and democracy, by examining whether hyperlocal media have the necessary structures in place to facilitate a democratic dialogue, and how the hyperlocal media operators regard the importance of democracy. Before presenting the research questions, let us explore the theoretical concepts they are derived from.

The definitions of hyperlocal

Research about citizens and media spans terminology such as “community journalism”, “participatory journalism”, “citizen journalism”, “hyperlocal journalism” and “ultra-local journalism”, to name but a few, with the last four all being different types of community journalism – reporting about a local community.

The term “hyperlocal” was coined in 1991 by cable news pioneer John Hillis, to describe his innovation in the context of locally inserted news in a 24-hour news channel (Pavlik, 2013).

New types of local media are often referred to as “hyperlocal”. Hyperlocal websites principally serve local residents and tend to be produced by local reporters or residents. Metzgar and colleagues (2011: 774) have proposed the following definition: “Hyperlocal media operations are geographically based, community-oriented, original news-reporting organisations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement.”

Previous research shows that the definition of hyperlocal media is quite fragmented and diffused (Lacy et al., 2009; Metzgar et al., 2011; Radcliffe, 2012). Radcliffe (2015)

argues that there is nothing that can be defined as a typical hyperlocal site, and no one who can be called a typical hyperlocal producer. A hyperlocal media operator can operate on several platforms and have several hyperlocal products. What drives the production of hyperlocal content can vary and includes professional journalists, social activists and concerned citizens, as well as people who do not have previous media experience (Radcliffe, 2015).

Turner (2015) concludes that hyperlocal media differ from established local media in being citizen-led, participatory and largely independent. For many residents, hyperlocal media is “key to an everyday understanding of their neighbourhood, a network of local information and events sitting outside of corporate or mainstream media that can encourage unexpected forms of civic engagement” (Turner, 2015: 48).

Hyperlocal media thus refers to an independent media operator that is based in the community where it operates. This differs from legacy media in having a local editorial office, or a dedicated section in print or on the web from the community in question, or occasionally reporting from the area.

Leckner and colleagues (2017) argue for a broader framework of what defines hyperlocal, suggesting it should include platforms such as print, TV and radio. However, as this article studies the digital set-up of hyperlocals for democratic dialogue, the definition by Metzgar and colleagues (2011) will be used.

Before focusing on the aspect of hyperlocals and democracy, it is necessary to provide an overview of how the technical development has affected the democratic potential of today's media.

Media development and democracy

The relationship between democracy and the media has been articulated through theories about the public sphere since the 1960s. It is generally recognised that for modern democracies to function, it is imperative that people consume news, take an active interest in politics and participate in elections (Habermas, 1989).

However, the use of the internet calls for new reflections on the possible relationship between media, the public sphere and democracy (Hansen, 2015). Dahl (1999, 2000) drew attention to the correlation between informed citizens, independent media and democratic societies. According to Dahl, an overwhelming majority of citizens value the rights and opportunities of their democratic system.

In order for a democracy to work, there needs to be a system for debate and bidirectional information supply (Nord & Strömbäck, 2004). Citizens need to know what elected politicians do and think, as well as receiving information about current affairs and problems. At the same time, politicians need to be aware of citizens' opinions and values.

In the current decade, there has been a tremendous change in the commercial news media, which has had a definite impact on democracy. Company expansions have proven to be important for gaining network effects for technological investments. This has, in many countries, led to the concentration of a few large media firms, with a strong concentration of ownership. In Sweden, the eight largest media groups now control 76 of the 93 dailies (Ohlsson, 2016).

This has shaped a new situation for the traditional role of media as bearers of public discourse (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009). A recent study in the United

Kingdom (Firmstone, 2016) concluded that media changes rarely lead to improvements in terms of democratic value of news. Instead, there is a perceived decline in the informational role of local news, a growing gap when it comes to fulfilling the watchdog role, a lack of resources for research and a decline in the quantity of major news campaigns.

Participation and democracy

Dahl (1998) concludes that citizens need to participate in the democratic mission to influence their surroundings in order to form a better world, or to prevent it from changing for the worse. According to Radcliffe (2012), visibility and engagement in dialogue with the local population is described as a valuable opportunity to identify local needs, learn about the local community and win trust.

Voluntary participation involving citizens in the process of producing content has the potential to boost civic engagement in public discourse (Holt et al., 2013), but as user-generated content is not the focus of this study, the theoretical framework herein is concentrated around hyperlocal journalism and the participatory aspect of public debate since studies have indicated that the use of social media for political purposes has a positive effect on political participation (Holt et al., 2013).

The development of social media platforms has offered new participatory opportunities for everyday media users. The ability to like, share or retweet content on social media platforms is frequently cited as a way for hyperlocals to reciprocate the contributions from their audience, such as promoting local interests, thereby creating a wider community benefit (Harte et al., 2017). A meta-analysis of current research shows a positive relationship between social media use and participation. More than 80 per cent of coefficients are positive (Boulianne, 2015). Therefore, it is relevant from a democratic perspective to look at whether hyperlocal sites provide social media channels and commentary fields for discussions.

An analysis by Almgren and Olsson (2015) reveals that online newspapers prefer to allow users to comment on lightweight news, such as sports and entertainment. The users, however, prefer to post comments on news covering changes in proximity space, politics and health care.

Researchers in Denmark (Buch & Svith, 2013) pointed to a regional democracy problem, as very few people actually practise their freedom of expression. They conclude that “the Danish regions suffer from a corresponding democratic deficit” (Buch & Svith, 2013: 140). According to Barnett and Townend (2015), hyperlocals can create a close relationship with the audience as well as receive and maintain frequent participation from different parts of the community.

Hyperlocals and democracy

Barnett and Townend (2015) conclude that a dispersal of media ownership is fundamental to a healthy democracy and, therefore, recommend policy initiatives to promote plurality through invigorating hyperlocal sites as a viable alternative to democratically impoverished local communities.

Studies show that hyperlocal media play an important democratic role in helping people root themselves in the local community as well as providing the geographic location with meaning (Radcliffe, 2015). Radcliffe points out that most of the surveyed hyperlocal producers identify their work as a form of active civic participation.

Other research (Harte et al., 2016; Kurpius et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2015) has found that hyperlocal sites aim to fill the gap in the availability of information that can stir public discourse. They recognise that hyperlocal sites can have a vital democratic role and are able to hold local power to account.

Hess and Waller (2016) write that there is an unmistakable hype around the hyperlocal phenomenon. They acknowledge that there is a growing interest in technology, business and democracy and note that researchers in the United States have argued for the democratic importance of hyperlocals. However, they focus on the cultural values of hyperlocals, which generate a sense of belonging and connection to others.

In the United Kingdom, a study by Firmstone and Coleman (2014) looked at how hyperlocal sites have enabled citizens to engage in local democracies, due to the changing role of local news media, digital maturity and the engagement strategies of local governments. Interviews reveal that hyperlocal news sites engage the public in a totally different way with the input of professional journalists and news organisations, in terms of specific local areas and issues. The researchers concluded that we are in a period of transition with new notions of democratic citizenship.

Sweden has been compared to the UK, the Netherlands, France and Belgium, as these are countries with a similar hyperlocal media landscape in regard to growth, challenges and innovation (Cook et al., 2016). A study by Leckner and Nygren (2016) reveals that hyperlocal news sites in Sweden are fairly young. Two out of three have started during the last ten years. The study shows that hyperlocals tend to cover only one municipality each, or part of one. Hyperlocals are almost exclusively digital.

Research shows that the primary reason for starting a hyperlocal medium is neither economic nor strategic. The main motivation for hyperlocals in Sweden is to raise the sense of community and strengthen the local identity. The third most important factor is to be a forum for local democracy (Leckner et al., 2017).

The actors behind the new hyperlocals in Sweden vary greatly, according to Tenor (2016). They can be initiated by local entrepreneurs or non-profit enthusiasts, with or without a journalistic background. This, in combination with digitalisation and the use of social media, has meant that the balance and system have changed between the three actors in the local democracy: local government, local media and citizens. Hyperlocal media is a new element to take into consideration in the local public sphere.

The Swedish context

Although the decline of traditional media and the pop-up of hyperlocal initiatives are evident in many Western countries, Sweden is particularly interesting to study both from a democratic and a digital perspective. State committees have repeatedly emphasised the importance of media in the democratic process in order to scrutinise those in power, provide civic information and offer a forum for public debate (Weibull & Wadbring, 2014).

As far as digital maturity is concerned, Sweden has the internet availability, technical know-how and social media penetration for a democracy potential online. The country

is ranked third among the EU's 28 countries when it comes to the level of digitalisation (European Commission, 2016a). Having an extensive broadband coverage is a priority in Sweden, where one of the government's goals is to provide 90 per cent of all households and businesses with 100 Mbps by 2020 (European Commission, 2016b).

In Sweden, 93 per cent of the population are internet users compared to 50 per cent globally. Two out of three people in Sweden are active social media users, which is almost twice the global average (Cape Digital Foundation, 2017). Swedish people spend several hours every week on social networks and social media is a big part of most residents' everyday life (Findahl & Davidsson, 2016). The top five social networks among Swedes are Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, with Facebook being by far the most popular when it comes to being used for news (Reuters Institute, 2016).

According to the Reuters Institute (2016), Swedes (alongside the populations of South Korea and Switzerland) turn more to their smartphones than their computers for news. This is partly because Swedish legacy news media have been developing mobile news-site applications for many years. The percentage of Sweden's population with access to a smartphone increased from 14 to 80 per cent between 2010 and 2016 (Nordicom, 2017). Sweden now has 14.4 million mobile subscriptions, which equals 146 per cent of the population (Staunstrup, 2017). On average, that means that every person has one mobile phone, and every other person has two.

In light of the digital position of Sweden, it is warranted to look at the country as a case when studying hyperlocals, as the decline of the newspaper industry is likely to accelerate worldwide while digital maturity will continue to increase. Given that earlier research emphasises the democratic potential of hyperlocal media, and that hyperlocals are indigenous to the web, it's merited to investigate whether hyperlocal operators have the essential digital framework and correlative ambitions.

The study

The purpose of this study is to examine whether hyperlocal media has the necessary set-ups to contribute to democracy in the local public sphere. It will map the digital hyperlocals in Sweden and their geographical location in terms of population density. The digital communication channels and platforms they provide for audience dialogue will also be examined, and the democratic intentions of the hyperlocal media providers will be included. This study will answer the following questions:

RQ1: In which Swedish municipalities – metropolitan, urban, countryside or rural – are hyperlocal media established?

RQ2: To what extent do hyperlocal media have a presence on the social media networks of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram?

RQ3: To what extent do hyperlocal media provide a commentary function on their news sites?

RQ4: How do the hyperlocal media actors view their democratic role in the local public sphere?

Methodology

In order to map the hyperlocals that have a news focus, are independently owned and operated without a set agenda, and are locally based in the area that they cover, this study includes a systematic review of the Swedish media market. As earlier research has recognised that most of the hyperlocals are digital, and digital maturity is strong in Sweden, this study will focus on digital hyperlocals only.

During late summer and early autumn of 2017, all of the 290 municipalities in Sweden were searched online in pursuit of digital news products, using the truncated search words in Swedish *hyperlokal**, *nyheter**, *nyhetssajt**, *nyhetskälla**, *medieföretag* [*hyperlocal**, *news**, *news site**, *news source**, *media company**] in combination with the names of the 290 municipalities. The search also included an overview of trade-related news sites that regularly report on new media establishments. The results were compared to an open-source database,¹ which found 587 regional, local and hyperlocal news outlets in Sweden (Leckner et al., 2017). As the industry is highly inconstant, the current total of hyperlocals varies as new start-ups are added and failing initiatives are shut down.²

The identified hyperlocals in this study were searched online to determine their geographic location in relation to population density. In Sweden, the municipalities are divided into four regional area types: metropolitan, urban, countryside and rural. Based on the definitions by the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the categorisation was carried out according to these criteria (Jordbruksverket, 2015):

1. Metropolitan: These municipalities only exist in the big city regions of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö.
2. Urban: Municipalities with a population of at least 30,000, or where the biggest city has at least 25,000 inhabitants.
3. Countryside: Municipalities not included in the two classifications above and which have a population density of at least five residents per square kilometre.
4. Rural: Municipalities not included in the three classifications above and which have a population density of less than five residents per square kilometre.

The channels for democratic dialogue were researched, mapping the presence of the hyperlocals on the social media networks of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The reasons for the three choices of platforms are twofold: they are by far the most common for the hyperlocals in this study and they rank high when it comes to social network statistics (Findahl & Davidsson, 2016). According to Reuters Institute (2016), Facebook is the social network used by most people in Sweden. Instagram is placed second. Since Twitter is widely used by media, it was included as one of the platforms researched, even though Reuters' statistics from 2016 show that Snapchat has bypassed LinkedIn and Twitter. To research whether hyperlocal media offer commentary options, the news sites were examined online.

This study also includes 16 semi-structured in-depth qualitative telephone interviews based on an interview guide with a few questions aimed primarily at leading the conversation in the areas that are of interest for the study, as well as encouraging the interviewees to speak as freely as possible but within a clear frame. The interviewees were selected from online observations during the mapping of the Swedish hyperlocal

media market. They span the country from north to south and represent different population densities. The interviews were transcribed and the interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. A selection of quotes regarding democracy is included in this article.³

Results

A geographic lean towards high-density locations

RQ1 asked in which type of geographic location hyperlocal media in Sweden are established: metropolitan, urban, countryside or rural. This study shows that the majority of the hyperlocals are located in high-density areas: 65 per cent of the 75 hyperlocals yielded are located in metropolitan or urban municipalities, where media presence, in most cases, is already well represented. Only a third of the hyperlocals are based either in the countryside or in a rural area. Very few hyperlocals are rural – only four in total. Three of them are located in Western Sweden, close to the Norwegian border, and one in a remote community in Northern Sweden.

Table 1. *Geographic location and channels for digital communication (frequencies)*

Geographic location	Hyperlocals	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Commentary option on news site
Metropolitan	21	20	16	14	7
Urban	28	27	21	18	18
Countryside	22	22	17	10	9
Rural	4	4	4	2	3
Total	75	73	58	44	37

Comments: Metropolitan = big city regions of Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö. Urban = municipalities with a population of at least 30,000, or where the biggest city has at least 25,000 inhabitants. Countryside = municipalities not included in the two classifications above, and which have a population density of at least five residents per square kilometre. Rural = municipalities not included in the three classifications above, and which have a population density of less than five residents per square kilometre.

Sweden’s 290 municipalities consist of 47 metropolitan areas, 46 urban areas, 164 countryside municipalities and 33 rural municipalities. The high-density municipalities – the 92 that are classified as metropolitan or urban – thus make up less than one-third of the municipalities in Sweden but attract two-thirds of the hyperlocals. This means the location of hyperlocals is skewed from a population density perspective. This accentuates the condition that media presence is typically better represented in more populated areas. Hyperlocals choose to locate where more people live, which is logical not least from an economic perspective. This is where hyperlocals can probably survive and draw revenue.

Geographic placement is of democratic concern. As Baker (2007) pointed out, media concentration can be detrimental to local democracy when the production of content is reduced to fewer actors who are located further away from the local areas they cover.

Facebook dominates the social media presence

RQ2 asked to what extent hyperlocal media have a presence on the social media networks of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Those three are by far the most common

social media platforms among the hyperlocals in Sweden, and any presence of additional platforms is negligible, a review of all 75 media actors showed. The three social media platforms included in this study are of course different in their nature, focus and level of dialogue. They cannot be discussed as a totality, as each one serves a slightly different purpose. They are therefore accounted for separately, and not treated collectively (see Table 1).

This study found that Facebook is the dominating platform among hyperlocals. Only two of the hyperlocals lack a Facebook account. Two-thirds of the hyperlocals have Twitter accounts, and slightly over half use Instagram. Only two of the hyperlocals lack a presence on social media altogether. Forty-one of the 75 have representation on all three social media platforms.

The majority of the hyperlocals in this study have an online news site as their main product. Some have a print product, but complemented with a website. Only seven of them have different main products: three Facebook groups, two news apps and two radio stations streamed online. Several of the 75 have more than two platforms for their content. As one of the prevalent delineations of a hyperlocal is that it is “indigenous to the web” (Metzgar et al., 2011: 774), coupled with the fact that this study researches the digital set-up of hyperlocals for democratic dialogue, one of the qualifiers to be included in the study was that the hyperlocals have a digital presence, but no emphasis is placed on ranking which product is primary.

The level of involvement on social media varies greatly among the hyperlocals, but neither the content nor the interaction between the hyperlocals and their readers is analysed in this study. The mapping simply shows whether or not they have a registered account, but the digital set-up provides a picture of the ambition among the hyperlocals to establish channels where they can communicate with their media consumers.

As earlier research found (Boulianne, 2015; Harte et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2013), social media use and participation go hand in hand. Utilising social media platforms is one way for hyperlocals to contribute to both democracy and community benefit, by providing a forum for debate where anyone and everyone can participate in the local public sphere. Enabling several different voices is one aspect of democratic diversity.

More common with commentary option in rural areas

RQ3 aimed to investigate the extent to which hyperlocal media provide a commentary function on their articles. Out of the 75 hyperlocal independents mapped in this study, four do not have a news site at all, and hence cannot offer a commentary option in that regard. Comments on Facebook are, of course, available for all the media ventures in the study, provided they post their news stories there. The mapping shows that just over half of the hyperlocal news sites have commentary fields. Out of 71 hyperlocals that have online news sites, 37 offer a commentary option and 34 do not, as of 25 September 2017 (see Table 1).

The hyperlocals that have commentary fields are geographically represented in all four density population options in this study: seven in metropolitan municipalities, 15 in urban areas, nine in the countryside and three in rural areas. Proportionally it is less common to offer commentary functions in metropolitan than in rural areas: 33 per cent compared to 75 per cent.

The fact that hyperlocals provide commentary fields can have a positive effect on political participation, and is also in line with reader preferences. As Almgren and Olsson (2015) found, readers prefer to post comments on news areas such as politics and health care, while ignoring, for example, sport and entertainment.

Hyperlocal operators rate the democratic role as important

RQ4 asked how the hyperlocal media actors in Sweden view their democratic role in the local public sphere. This qualitative part of the study shows that democracy is considered an essential aspect of their journalism, as these three independent quotes illustrate:

I want to stand free from influences from authorities and act as a defender of democracy in the local society.

I see the local reporter as a democracy watcher and defender, and a representative for the democratic system. When you interview a politician, you must be aware of the agenda that the politician has, or you end up becoming a spokesperson for what that political party wants on the table.

Municipal politicians receive a lot of criticism, but the democratic role rests on them. If there is anything I can do [for democracy], I want to help.

Several of the interviewees rate democratic ambitions as high when talking about the goals of their operations. They stress the importance of reporting on a local level. This reinforces earlier findings, which have shown that hyperlocals value local identity, local advertisers and local democracy, in that order (Leckner et al., 2017). One of the rural entrepreneurs interviewed for this article explains that the importance of democratic influence for community members was in fact the initiating factor in why this particular news site came to be, two decades ago:

There was an ongoing conflict in our municipality close to 20 years ago, when locals argued for and against a local school. This was covered by national news, which resulted in a negative impression about our community. [...] This coincided with the local municipality kick-starting a project aiming to increase resident influence. A teacher in our town wanted to publish a school newspaper, which the local government sponsored by paying for print and distribution. The product was so popular by the time the project money ended that we decided to ask community members if they'd be willing to pay for the continuation of the product, which they were.

Several of the interviewees note that some stories are too small to be covered by legacy media but are important in hyperlocal news, where social media can play an integral part in both distributing the content and in interacting with the community.

People here base their reality on Facebook. An important explanation for the spread of my stories is the circulation on Facebook and the links posted on other Facebook pages [...]. When I go to the local grocery story, people comment that I am "that person on Facebook".

The benefit of social media is confirmed by earlier research. Carson and colleagues (2016) found that social media has enabled outlets for hyperlocal journalism to perform its civic functions in the digital age, which this quote exemplifies:

The public dialogue is vital. It is absolutely necessary for the democratic conversion to function. My view of society rests on the fact that there is a continuing dialogue. This is the foundation of journalism and of civil society.

Another interviewee emphasises the connection between media void and lack of public debate:

Areas where there are no journalists or news coverage can lead to discontentment voting, which is a democratic problem [...]. A commentary function is a way to listen to the entire population, and it adds to reader value.

All of the interviewees in the study stress the democratic importance of media. Some of the hyperlocal operators have gone as far as implementing democracy goals. This is one example:

We have two goals with our operations. The first one, of course, is to defend democracy in the municipalities that we cover. The second one is to be a forum for local debate. We want to be the voice and the news distributor in the municipality [...]. We fill a very important function. Unless there is local media, there is nobody to cover the local news and local decisions. Imagine what our area would have looked like if we hadn't been here [...]. If no one had covered the local decisions there would have been a lot of issues that had passed right over the heads of the citizens, that they wouldn't have any idea about. It's a very important role to inform the citizens and to stimulate debate in order to make sure people can have a voice and [be able to] speak their minds.

Among the hyperlocals who offer commentary fields, several emphasize the importance of responsible handling of comments, in order to uphold a democratic forum for debate. Some consider it vital to have moderation, others opt to not have threaded comments in order to stay on topic, while a few go as far as banning certain words. Their experiences vary from extensive moderation and dialogue with their readers about banned content to rarely having to interfere.

We have almost never had to remove comments. People are very proud of the community here, and [our] local business stories are very appreciated. That's the type of content that is most read, but we hardly ever receive any negative comments.

Concluding discussion

This study shows that there are shortcomings from a democracy perspective when it comes to geographical location; hyperlocal media are not located in the areas where they could fill the gap the most. The fact that hyperlocals avoid media-absent rural areas can be one of many democracy problems. All democratic governments need to consider what policy and political changes might be needed to ensure a sustainable presence of local news in order to secure local democracy. The biggest worry for centralisation and cutbacks is clearly not about the media itself or about the loss of jobs for individual journalists, but whether local journalism leaves some citizens behind. It is a serious threat to democracy if certain areas are excluded from local independent and unbiased news journalism on a regular basis. Having access to reliable information is important

for citizens in order to make well-founded decisions, such as in local elections, and to participate in the local public sphere. Absence of reliable media also opens up the opportunity for non-serious information providers to get established with an agenda to spread lies, hate and stories that serve their own purposes.

When it comes to the communication channels for public dialogue, which are so necessary for the democratic debate, the contribution among the hyperlocal media in Sweden varies. The fact that the majority of hyperlocals do use social media indicates that they consider it important to participate on the platforms where their audiences are. However, as the number of social media options utilised by the hyperlocals is limited, they are not fully taking advantage of the vast number of options for interactivity. Very few hyperlocals use any other social media platforms than Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and only 55 per cent of the hyperlocals in this study have accounts with all three. With the multitude of social media options today it is safe to state that hyperlocal media outlets are tentative when it comes to taking advantage of new channels for communication with their readers. Ambition is closely interrelated with resources, which could partly serve as an explanation, although this is not studied here.

As far as public dialogue goes, commentary fields can be viewed as the most democratic channel offered by media. The dialogue between media producer and consumer can, of course, be carried out through online chat forums, which none of the hyperlocals in this study was found to offer, but which is quite common among legacy media in Sweden today. In favour of social media and chat forums, many media houses in Sweden have steadily limited commentary fields on their news sites, partly because of the difficulties with maintaining good tone and stringent debate when people can freely comment on sensitive articles. That said, the level of commentary options among the hyperlocals is remarkably high, with half of them offering commentary options on their articles. The hyperlocals are, in that regard, more generous than legacy media in Sweden. This could either be interpreted as the hyperlocals value the interaction with their local audience or that they are late when it comes to joining the movement to limit commentary fields. A relevant aspect here is that large media houses have a well-established technical know-how, which small hyperlocals cannot match. This could be a resource or staffing issue and may change over time.

A close relationship with the local audience can no doubt improve the sense of importance and connection for a hyperlocal media initiative, which speaks in favour of them having such channels open for communication.

The fact that the democratic discourse has partly moved to new arenas, as technical development and digital maturity have opened up opportunities for new independent media alternatives, presents both advantages and concerns. Several social media options are owned by digital giants with no journalistic intentions and who also operate outside the jurisdiction of, in this case, the Swedish government's control.

While legacy media have lost resources, new symbiotic relationships have formed between journalists and non-media news providers, thereby adding to the functioning of a democratic society (Carson et al., 2016). Although there is new technological optimism about democratic renewal due to a collaborative network, researchers urge a more cautious approach when it comes to networking democracy (Loader & Mercea, 2011). They suggest that there is potential for social media to facilitate a participative

democracy while acknowledging its disruptive value for challenging traditional interests and modes of communicative power.

So, can hyperlocals fill the gap of diminishing local democracy when traditional media consolidate and centralise? This study shows that there is an ambition but a varying ability to do so.

The quotes from the qualitative interviews show a deeper democratic ambition, more so than the mapping of their channels for democratic dialogue reveals. If the hyperlocals truly value the dialogue with media consumers, the digital means of communicating should be more extensive. But can this article confirm that there is an actual democratic contribution by the hyperlocals? The study should be seen as a first step towards understanding the democratic ability of the hyperlocals, through researching their presence and their conditions for digital communication, which is necessary before investigating impact and democratic contribution. Finding out how they affect the media landscape and society would require a further study looking at practice rather than presence. The next step could be a content analysis, either of the editorial coverage or the material on the social media platforms and in the commentary fields.

Notes

1. <http://mediestudier.se/kommunbevakning/>
2. A full list of all examined hyperlocals can be acquired by contacting the author.
3. Translations from Swedish to English are done by the author.

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