Public Organisations as News Producers

An odd species in the local media landscape

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to shed light on a new phenomenon in the media landscape, namely public organisations taking on the role of news producers. The analysis focuses on the digital news site VGRfokus, which is run by the Swedish county council Region Västra Götaland (VGR). The articulated goal of VGRfocus is to fill a perceived news gap in the county. Using previous literature on hyperlocal media as a lens for the analysis, we discuss how a regional news outlet produced by a public organisation can be characterised and understood. Based on our case study, we show that, while VGRfokus partly resembles other newcomers, it also has features that make it a very special news producer. This distinctiveness relates in particular to the fact that VGRfokus is part of a large, public organisation and holds ambitions to promote the work of the county council and represent its geographical area. This places issues concerning trustworthiness and credibility at the centre of the discussion and raises questions about democratic implications.

Keywords: local media landscape, hyperlocals, strategic communication, news production, county council

Introduction

The ongoing decline of legacy media has been described as a transition from "a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices" (Deuze & Witschge, 2018: 167). One aspect of this transition is the growing landscape of hyperlocal media (Metzgar et al., 2011; Nygren et al., 2018). While such media tend to be grass-roots initiatives and often take the character of citizen journalism, this article sets its focus on a new type of local media: public organisations taking on the role of news producers. In Sweden, and elsewhere in the Nordic countries (e.g. Winsvold, 2007), recent studies have shown that municipalities increasingly see it as their task to fill local news gaps and inform citizens of what is happening in the community and how local taxes are being spent (e.g. Tenor & Nygren, 2017). As local and regional newspapers decline, the number of communication professionals within municipalities and county

councils is increasing while at the same time communicators are taking up new roles and working tasks (Tenor, 2017). This trend coincides with – and is partly spurred by – news management and branding playing an increasingly central role in public organisations (Dahlqvist & Melin, 2010; Fredriksson & Pallas, 2013; Wæraas, 2008).

In this article, we concentrate our analysis on one particular newcomer in the growing landscape of media: the digital news site VGRfokus. The site was launched in November 2017 by a county council on the west coast of Sweden, Region Västra Götaland (VGR), with the articulated goal of providing journalists, employees and citizens in the county of Västra Götaland with news updates related to the core business of the county council: mainly health care, public transport, regional politics and culture, but also trade and industry. VGRfokus was launched with an article written by VGR's director for communication and public affairs. In the article, which was presented as an "editorial", the director labels the channel a "news site" with an "independent editorial office of civil servants" (VGRfokus, 2017a). According to the director, VGRfokus will provide "open, trustworthy, clear, and straightforward information" and has the ambition to be a complement to legacy media. Furthermore, it is stated that a news gap exists due to the fact that VGR's activities are given limited attention in legacy media – a news gap that VGRfokus is intended to fill. As far as we know, VGRfokus represents an approach that is to date unique in Sweden – explicitly using not only a journalistic format but also a journalistic rhetoric.

The purpose of this article is to shed light on and discuss the phenomenon of public organisations as news producers and their possible role in the media landscape. Based on earlier research on the transformation of media and the emergence of hyperlocals, we show how VGRfokus both resembles previous examples and stands for something rather unique. We focus on the differences and show that the news production of VGRfokus is characterised by disparate conditions compared to many other new media operations.

In the following, we analyse this new form of news production by public organisations through the lens of earlier studies of hyperlocal media. We turn to the growing, but still nascent, literature on hyperlocal media (e.g. Leckner et al., 2017; Metzgar et al., 2011; Nygren et al., 2018; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014) and compare and relate existing definitions and studies to VGRfokus. In the concluding section, we discuss implications of the distinctive features of VGRfokus – for the media landscape as well as more broadly for society and democracy. Our approach is explorative, and we seek to understand what kind of actor VGRfokus is. In line with this, we are guided by and seek to answer the following question: How can a regional news outlet produced by a public organisation be characterised and understood in relation to its organisational conditions for news production?

Local media in transition

As the entire media landscape is transforming, it is not possible to fully foresee the consequences. In Sweden, the concentration of news reporters in the capital, Stockholm, has increased in recent years, while regional media organisations are radically downsizing (Nygren & Nord, 2017). These changes create what has been called "news gaps" or even "news deserts" in certain parts of the country (Tenor & Nygren, 2017).

At the same time as local news coverage is declining, municipalities are increasingly producing their own messages and spreading them through their own channels. Based on a nationwide survey of civil servants in communication departments in Swedish municipalities, Tenor and Nygren (2017) show that ever more municipalities are developing strategies and have ambitions to fill perceived news gaps. According to their study, public communication officials state that they are trying to fill the gap in multiple ways, such as facilitating the work of constrained local journalists, developing content that can be published in legacy media but also in other outlets, and developing channels owned by the organisation itself, in which they can publish their own news stories.

Since new technology and digitalisation are a large part of the changing landscape of media, the development brings possibilities for journalism – or at least for news services – and creates opportunities for niche media as well as for individual actors with less financial support (e.g. Nygren, 2016). Consequently, digitalisation has repeatedly been emphasised as one of the enabling forces behind the emergence of new initiatives whose aim is to fill perceived news gaps in local areas, some of which have been classified as hyperlocal media (e.g. Metzgar et al., 2011; Radcliffe, 2012). Most often, hyperlocal media initiatives are taken by companies and various types of interest organisations organisations that experience a need for more coverage in a specific region or community. The news channel of VGRfokus – being initiated by as well as being part of a *public* organisation – is a different phenomenon. Metzgar and colleagues (2011) use the term "HLMO" (hyper local media operations) and highlight a number of common features for common features for those hyperlocal media iniatives that have been researched so far. Generally, these features are geographically based and aim to provide original news in their ambition to fill news gaps. Furthermore, they tend to be web-based, have a connection to a community and carry ambitions to promote civic engagement.

Yet another aspect, discussed in Kurpius and colleagues (2010), is the importance of developing sustainable business models. Kurpius and colleagues identify four funding types among hyperlocals: privately funded (most often through individual donors), non-profit (can be either through a foundation or membership), publicly traded, and employee-owned. The authors also state that "advertising is a potential source of revenue across all types" (Kurpius et al., 2010: 365) and conclude that sustainable long-term funding models are one of the most pressing issues for newcomers to manage in the local landscape.

Other scholars have thereafter critically discussed these features and suggested partly different understandings. To some extent, discussions have focused on the issue of geography, and the need to also include media initiatives focusing on somewhat larger areas, including regions, has been highlighted (e.g. Metzgar et al., 2011; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014). Another example of a slightly broader understanding of the hyperlocal concept is presented by Leckner and colleagues (2017). They include not only online news sites but also, for example, local free newspapers and community radio. To sum up, the term "hyperlocal media" has been used in different ways and it includes components that can vary greatly.

For our purpose, hyperlocal media functions as an exploratory concept: in this study, we use it to grasp and understand the ongoing transformation of the media landscape with a specific focus on the newcomer VGRfokus.

Method and material

In order to compare and analyse VGRfokus with other types of hyperlocals, as well as to understand its position in and consequences for the media system at large, we conducted a case study drawing on multiple data sources. The characteristics of a hyperlocal, as outlined in previous studies and as briefly presented above, function as a point of departure for our analysis. However, as VGRfokus, with its very explicit use of a journalistic rhetoric and as being part of a public organisation – is a new phenomenon that is still rather unexplored, we have tried to be as explorative and open-minded as possible. Consequently, VGRfokus is understood and analysed as an example of yet one additional type of local media, and its partly unique characteristics allow us to complicate present understandings of different kinds of local media while at the same time to raise questions about the role of such newcomers within the media landscape.

The case study: VGRfokus

VGRfokus is intended to be VGR's main channel for regional news according to the official guidelines of the site (VGR, 2017). It is aimed at being a trustworthy channel with news value, targeting co-workers in VGR, legacy media, citizens and partners (e.g. municipalities and other authorities). The articles on the website, consisting of written text and photos, are sometimes complemented with videos. The website very much resembles a legacy media website, with content sorted into categories such as Politics, Healthcare, Traffic, Environment, Trade and Industry, Entertainment/Culture, General and Editorials (see Image 1). During the first six months of its existence, 108 articles were published (which makes a monthly average of almost 18 articles). The largest category was Healthcare, representing half of the articles, and the second largest category was General.

The editorial staff is part of the press service, which in turn belongs to VGR's department of communication and public affairs. The director of this department is also the publisher of VGRfokus. One person, with a background as a local print journalist, works more or less full-time as the editor-in-chief and is supported by three other communicators/editors, two of whom have recently been recruited to strengthen the influence of journalistic methods since they have fresh experience and knowledge of digital journalism and new journalistic working methods. Furthermore, freelancers are hired to produce content for the website, and communicators working in different departments of VGR are expected to contribute.

The launch of VGRfokus in November 2017 received attention in both legacy and social media. A number of legacy newspapers published articles about the new media outlet, and in several opinion pieces VGRfokus was criticised for being county council information and even branding in a journalistic costume.

Material of analysis

In order to include many different perspectives of VGRfokus, we combined four data sources: (1) interviews with employees in the VGRfokus editorial office, (2) Region Västra Götaland's document "Policy for the digital news channel VGRfokus", (3) content published on VGRfokus.se, and (4) content about VGRfokus published in legacy

Image 1. *Screenshot of the entry page of VGRfokus.se*
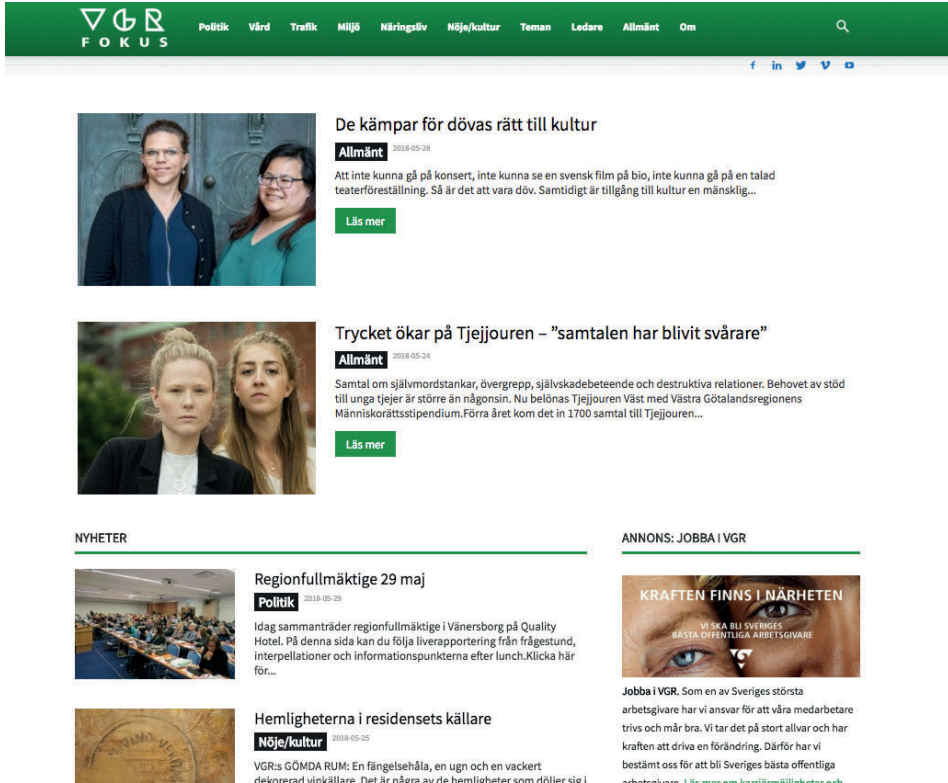
Comments: The screenshot is from 30 May 2018.

media and on the internet, more specifically, opinion pieces making references to VGR-fokus. We began our data collection with the first published article on 7 November 2017 and continued for the next six months until 6 May 2018.

The interviews allowed us to understand the motives behind the founding of VGR-fokus and the considerations before, at the time of and after the launch of the news site. The interviews also allowed us to develop an initial understanding of the everyday work at the news site, the ambitions among the employees, their understanding of success and what they found challenging in their work. Three key civil servants with different positions and roles were strategically selected for the interviews: the director/publisher (who carries the title Director Communication and Public Affairs), the editor-in-chief and one other member of the editorial staff. We held individual interviews with all three twice using a semi-structured interview method. The first round of interviews was conducted in November–December 2017 only a few weeks after the launch of VGRfokus, and the second round was held in April 2018 when VGRfokus had existed for approximately five months. All six interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

While the ambitions and goals are stated in both interviews and the policy document mentioned above, the actual output of VGRfokus gives yet another, complementary perspective of the role and function of public organisations as news producers. In our analysis, we include all the articles published during the first six months of VGRfokus' existence (i.e. 108 articles published during the period 7 November 2017 to 6 May 2018).

All articles were downloaded and coded according to an inductively developed set of variables in order to detect patterns regarding key issues such as themes, spokespersons, tonality, use of visuals, image of VGR and tone in the article (e.g. neutral, positive, negative). To understand the role of VGRfokus in the media landscape, we also included content about VGRfokus produced by actors outside the county council – more precisely, critical opinion pieces. To find these articles, we searched in the Nordic digital database Retriever Research using different versions of the search word "VGRfokus" (e.g. with and without a hyphen).

VGR as a news producer

In this section, we use the literature of hyperlocals as a starting point and structuring lens to develop an understanding of the role and position of VGRfokus in the transforming media landscape. We have structured the section according to the motivations of VGR and the functions of the new communication channel, starting with why and how VGRfokus came about and thereafter discussing how it works and what it does.

How VGRfokus came about: ambitions and motivations

The most recurrently mentioned rationale for the existence of hyperlocal media in general is to fill a perceived news gap, either of an issue or a region (cf. Metzgar et al., 2011). Hyperlocals have therefore largely been understood as a consequence of a quest to fill a void created by the decline of local and regional legacy media. However, empirical studies show that the actual distribution of hyperlocal media does not always seem to reflect such news gaps. Instead, areas that still have a rather high concentration of legacy media are also those with the highest number of hyperlocals (Nygren et al., 2018). Williams and Harte (2016: 3) also suggest that there is likely "an element of wishful thinking" to some of the accounts regarding the filling of news gaps. It is therefore often more appropriate to understand ideas about filling news gaps as more of ambitions and not something that hyperlocal media necessarily is always achieving.

In the case of VGRfokus, the ambition to fill a perceived news gap is stressed strongly and often by our respondents. The interviewees and also the article published at the launch of VGRfokus stated that reporters who specialise in matters regarding the county council are almost non-existent today. The argument goes as follows: while there used to be at least one dedicated county reporter in every regional editorial office around the country, these reporters are now very few in number, and less attention is given to county councils' activities. The result is a gap in knowledge about these activities, which are stressed to be crucial on a daily basis in citizens' lives. In the article published at the launch of VGRfokus, the director asks:

> If the journalists don't write about the county council, how will our citizens have any insight into what's going on? How can our elected representatives show their voters what results they have achieved? And how can those of us who are employed by the county council know what is going on in our own organisation, which is so broad and varied that it requires the media to observe it? (VGRfokus, 2017a, authors' translation)

Several motivations related to filling the news gap are mentioned in the interviews, such as a desire to spread information about the county council's activities, influence the everyday lives of the citizens, let more voices be heard, spread information about issues that tend to be deselected by legacy media, and present the news related to the county council in a more contextualised way and from new perspectives compared to legacy media.

At the same time, all the interviewees stressed that VGRfokus is neither a substitute for, nor a competitor to, legacy media, but rather a complement. In this assertion lies an aspiration to fill the perceived news gap not only by producing and publishing news content on the news site, but also by helping legacy media organisations to extend their coverage of the county. This is a motivation similar to what Winsvold (2007) describes in her study on Norwegian municipal websites and their function as a source of content for legacy media.

Filling the news gap, however, is far from the only motive behind starting a hyperlocal media outlet. In a survey of the Swedish hyper local market, the most commonly stated purpose was "to support the community and strengthen the local identity" (Leckner et al 2017: 10). The second-most mentioned purpose in the study was to offer a new channel for advertisers, while the third was to become a forum for local democracy. Filling the news gap was only fourth on the list of aims and motivations for starting a hyperlocal operation.

Similarly, our study of VGRfocus uncovers a plurality of motivations behind the news site. The ambition to support local/regional democracy is also evident in our case study. The official guidelines for VGRfokus state that the content on the news site aims to:

> … increase participation in the democratic process by helping citizens understand what VGR is and does, why changes take place and what and how they can influence both through elections to the regional council and between elections. (VGR, 2017: 2, authors' translation)

According to the same document, VGRfokus shall also promote and make VGR well known nationwide "through the reflection of content and through our experts and spokespersons being sought after and quoted", and the content on the site furthermore aims to "engage and create topics of conversation" and "to be a part of VGR's voice in the public debate" (VGR, 2017: 2). The news site is therefore not only a way to strengthen local democracy by making content more available to citizens, but equally a way for the organisation VGR to strengthen its position and role.

The director said in our interview that when he started working at VGR he was given a list of things that were "in the pipeline", a list that he is now ticking off. The list included broader goals like "put Region Västra Götaland on the map" and develop both the brand and the employer brand of the county council. As shown above, VGRfokus can be understood as one part of these ambitions. Since the organisation VGR is intrinsically tied to and represents a specific geographical region, we can understand the ambitions to strengthen the organisation VGR as being intertwined with ambitions to brand the place (cf. Kavaratzis et al., 2016).

Many of the stated motivations for VGRfokus correlate, and they may positively influence one another – as spreading information to legacy media, for example, is also expected to increase the opportunities for citizens to learn about what is going on in the region. Similarly, an article about new innovative solutions within health care may

strengthen the organisational brand, making VGR an attractive employer, while at the same time informing citizens about how taxpayer money is used and what to expect from health care in certain areas.

How VGRfokus works: organisational form

While VGRfokus shares many motivations and ambitions with hyperlocals in focus in earlier research, the ambition to also brand the organisation – and concurrently the county – is an obvious difference. Certainly, many news channels, not least among legacy media, strive to brand themselves, but in the case of VGRfokus the object to be branded is not primarily the news channel per se but the organisation behind it, namely VGR. This brings us to the next step in our investigation of VGRfokus: how it works. The fact that VGRfokus is part of a large, formal and public organisation makes it a rather different type of creature in the landscape of local media.

Developing a successful and sustainable business model is a key element and a recurrent topic of discussion in analyses of new media (e.g. Kurpius et al., 2010; Leckner et al., 2017; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014). Problems with funding are often highlighted as the main threat to hyperlocals' long-term existence and their ability to perform high-quality work. According to, for example, Kurpius and colleagues (2010: 360), hyperlocal media varies "widely in the type and reliability of funding that support their operation". Nygren and colleagues (2018: 43) also state that for small hyperlocals, financial issues tend to be "a difficult area". In line with others, they conclude that most of the hyperlocals included in their Swedish study are dependent on advertisements in combination with revenues from owners and members.

As a part of a public organisation, VGRfokus has a very different situation regarding funding in comparison to most hyperlocals presented in earlier research. Even though the existence of the news channel is dependent on political decisions, the funding is at least secured for one year at a time since VGRfokus is included in VGR's yearly budget. This means that the staff can concentrate on the editorial work instead of chasing money. This is clearly an aspect distinguishing VGRfokus from hyperlocals identified and analysed in previous literature since they are most often rather small operations and dependent on the time and commitment of enthusiasts in combination with external funding of different kinds.

Apart from funding, three other aspects are particularly salient and illustrate how the situation of VGRfokus, as part of a large public organisation, conditions its existence and practices. First, a recurrent balancing act for VGRfokus relates to independence. All the interviewees stressed the importance of independence in the practical work with the news production, while at the same time underlining that they are, in fact, not independent since they are civil servants working for an authority. Working as civil servants in a public organisation entails per se an inevitable dependence (no matter how much they are permitted to work in an independent way), which is stressed by the interviewees, as, for example, in this quote: "Communicators can never be independent, because we're not. We have an assignment." Our interviewees all stated very clearly that what they are doing is "county council communication", albeit in a journalistic costume, and that they are, therefore, dependent on VGR.

On the other hand, according to the interviewees, being part of an authority does not mean that they cannot work quite independently in terms of their everyday work. Rather, they suggested that the mandate to work independently is a prerequisite to succeed in engaging news production within a public organisation like VGR, which houses many and partly contradictory opinions, as well as complex hierarchies and decision-making processes. This distinctive context creates certain conditions for their work, and therefore, they argue, they need to have a strong mandate to work independently – at least to some extent – with regard to the rest of the organisation in terms of being able to publish content that is not checked by everyone internally in advance. Altogether, the picture of dependence versus independence as presented in statements made by representatives of VGRfokus (in our interviews and elsewhere) appears quite complicated.

Second, even though the editorial office is a small unit and has few employees, there are a large number of communicators in VGR's overall organisation. VGR houses an internal network for press managers, and the ambition is to engage those communicators in the work of VGRfokus. To realise this ambition, the editorial staff engage in internal information campaigns, and there are plans for more training about journalistic working and production methods. Our interviewees asserted that communicators within VGR are becoming increasingly involved in VGRfokus' news production, possibly as a result of the ongoing information campaigns. In a future "dream scenario", as expressed by one interviewee, the communicators working within VGR would on their own initiative come to VGRfokus with their ideas and content – written in a publishable way and in accordance with journalistic principles.

Third, VGRfokus might be understood as covering itself, or at least the larger organisation of which it is part, as the news most often deals with issues and activities within the organisation VGR. This is not a problem in terms of finding article ideas. According to the director, the activities going on within VGR are numerous enough to let the organisation itself be called a "news factory". Accordingly, our analysis of all published content on VGRfokus shows that almost 80 per cent of the articles explicitly mention the organisation VGR, and only about 6 per cent of the articles mention neither VGR nor any of its organisational subsidiaries. In this context it is reasonable to recall the fact that one of the news site's target audiences is the VGR employees. In the case of VGRfokus, being community-orientated thereby means being partially orientated toward the VGR co-workers – and since VGR is one of the biggest employers in Sweden, the co-workers also make up a rather large section of the inhabitants of the county.

More problematic is perhaps the question of how to cover an organisation of which one is also part, especially when it comes to a public organisation. This relates to the branding as well as place branding issues mentioned at the beginning of this section. VGRfokus exists in a somewhat peculiar situation: in one way it can be understood as a channel for balanced and nuanced – sometimes even negatively framed – news content and at the same time the website offers opportunities to spread good news about the organisation VGR, and market VGR as a dynamic workplace as well as to market the county, branding activites that seem to be favoured by organisations in general (Sjöström & Öhman, 2018). This brings us to the next step in our analysis, where we focus on content.

What VGRfokus does: the format and character of the news content

The claim to be a news producer carries expectations that VGRfokus provides self-produced/original news. What is considered to be news is debatable, however. Metzgar and colleagues (2011) argue that for a website to qualify as an original news-producing hyperlocal it is not enough to simply give the citizens any kind of information. They underline that the information needs to be "truthful and accurate and useable by citizens" (Metzgar et al., 2011: 781). The interviewees in our study emphasised an ambition to produce and publish articles with news value – not least in order to be able to attract circulation of the content in legacy media.

Our analysis shows, however, that the content of VGRfokus is not fully in accordance with these stated ambitions. Rather than being interesting and attractive pieces with news value, a number of the articles simply inform citizens about local occurrences, like changes in patient fees or major events that will disrupt the public transport system. Thus, one part of VGRfokus very much resembles a traditional information service that governmental agencies use to inform citizens, employees and other stakeholders. On the other hand, such informative content – which is in no need of any problematisation – can be seen as being in line with the aim stated by the director in the article published at the launch of VGRfokus, where he stresses that VGRfokus will provide "open, credible, clear and straightforward information" (VGRfokus, 2017a).

However, VGRfokus also contains articles that are something more than just an information service. One successful example of this, recurrently mentioned by our interviewees, is a particular news article about missed patient appointments. This article generated extensive attention in Swedish legacy media. It was the result of an innovative, time-consuming and ambitious job, as one of the editors came up with the original article idea and organised an extensive process to engage controllers at the region's hospitals in order to put together statistics on the total cost of missed appointments. The article, entitled "Missed patient appointments cost over SEK 400 million" (VGRfokus, 2017b), reports on the consequences of the fact that over 150,000 patients failed to appear for appointments in 2016:

> When the patient doesn't turn up, this leads to longer waiting times and costs money. The total cost for missed patient appointments in 2016 is estimated to be more than SEK 400 million, which corresponds to the cost of all stroke care and all gallstone operations performed in VGR hospitals in 2016. (VGRfokus, 2017b, authors' translation)

The news presented in this article was spread nationwide, mainly through the national Swedish news agency TT and through broadcast teletext. It even became the top news story in the Swedish Television's broadcast teletext, which our interviewees liked to emphasise. One of them explained how this specific case of successful news production functioned as an ice-breaker and conferred legitimation internally within the organisation. This was, according to the interviewee, particularly important as VGRfokus was still something new and untested when the article was published in November 2017. The same interviewee also explained that the wide circulation of the news article was seen as a "huge success" within VGR, which was not unimportant, since VGRfokus must first and foremost be accepted and gain legitimacy internally in order to survive.

At the same time, our interviewees admitted that news articles like the one about the

missed patient appointments are difficult to produce: "You don't manage to come up with something like this very often; most stories are a bit watered down, you could say", as one interviewee put it. And after five months, during our second round of interviews, the editors concluded that it is not only time-consuming to produce original news articles but also difficult to find appropriate themes to investigate further and to present in a problematised way. One interviewee said:

> These are articles that take a lot of work and time. […] They're also the articles that can be a bit sensitive for the organisation, so you have to check as you go, and they're the hardest articles to write. We really want to have some articles like this from time to time. That's the way we want to work. (authors translation)

The article about missed appointments remained the most prominent example given in our interviews in April 2018 since it was still a unique case in VGRfokus' short history.

In order to appeal to readers, it is the ambition of the editorial staff to present the news in an engaging way. One interviewee stressed the importance of not making a site with "tailored news", but of providing interesting and exciting news that is "a bit more fun". As mentioned earlier, problematisation could be seen as one way of making news that does not appear as tailored or as traditional county council information. However, as already indicated, to many organisations, spreading messages that give a positive picture of the organisation and its activities seems to be easier, or at least hard to resist (Sjöström & Öhman, 2018). VGRfokus is no exception. Our analysis shows that a clear majority of the articles have a solely positive tone, with only about 6 per cent framed in an entirely negative tone. Just under 30 per cent of the articles still contain some negative aspects, but these aspects were either presented together with positive aspects (balancing the negative ones) or framed as something that VGR is working with in a positive way. For example, an article about gambling addiction (something negative) was framed by the perspective of the kind of help that VGR offers (VGRfokus, 2018). The content of VGRfokus thus reflects the situation described in the interviews: although the editorial staff do not intend to highlight only positive aspects in their news production, they want to be constructive and not write about problems without also presenting possible solutions (an approach that at least partially resembles the stance of recent journalistic trends, like constructive journalism; see for example Haagerup, 2017).

In the articles published in VGRfokus, we also discern a pattern in how VGR is presented, something that can be understood as the organisation's image. VGR is often portrayed as a modern, innovative pioneer placing a strong focus on development, competence, dialogue and sustainability. For example, one theme during the first six months of the news site's existence was "the digital patient". Most of the articles published under this vignette presented innovative and modern technical innovations used within VGR's health-care institutions. Among the articles emphasising sustainability is one about a health centre where the co-workers are offered the chance to use electric bikes instead of cars when making homecare visits. Another article is about recycling old furniture. This focus on sustainability mirrors one of the themes in the document "Vision Västra Götaland – The Good Life" (VGR, 2005), where the official vision for the county is codified. In other words, these examples could be seen as proof of an intertextual relationship between the vision document of VGR and the content of VGRfokus. This suggests that VGRfokus is or could be used as a tool to fulfil the vision

of the organisation VGR, an aim that is not made explicit in the article written by the director at the launch of VGRfokus.

As can be seen from the brief account above, striving for a proper distribution between positive and negative news appears to be a rather tricky balancing act for the editorial team. Our interviewees related this tightrope walk to trustworthiness: in order to be trustworthy, it is necessary to reflect both positive and negative perspectives and not censor critical voices. The director stated that for the news channel to appear trustworthy it is essential that the co-workers identify with its descriptions of the organisation and the surrounding world. Trustworthiness, however, is not only discussed and strived for internally at VGRfokus but is also recurrently in focus in the public debate in which opinion journalists, news journalists, politicians and researchers ask for clarity about the mission of VGRfokus (e.g. Nordling, 2017; Perlenberg, 2017).

In accordance with the assurances that VGRfokus is not trying to take over the work of journalists in the county, our interviewees repeatedly stated that it is not possible for them as civil servants to "scrutinise themselves"; being the fourth estate is the function of legacy media. Consequently, it also appears to be a balancing act for the editorial team to work according to journalistic principles and use a journalistic vocabulary (with words like "news angle", "news value", "editorial", and "publisher") and at the same time argue that they do not aim to produce journalism. The journalistic framing of VGRfokus gave rise to some critical opinion articles published in legacy media during the first months of VGRfokus's existence. Part of this criticism can be summarised in the following rhetorical question, posed by a media researcher on his blog:

> Of course, the Region can do what it wants. But I don't really understand why it needs a licence to publish and to have an "independent" editorial staff. Why barge into the journalists' territory and further blur the boundary between journalism and strategic communication? (Johansson, 2017, authors' translation)

A partial answer to this question about why public organisations persists in blurring the boundary between journalism and strategic communication can be found in the following quotation by one of our interviewees, who says that VGRfokus can simply be understood as a way of adapting public communication work to the needs and demands of today's citizen:

> We're adapting to reality, to how it is now. You have to be where the citizens are. […] It changes the way you work with communication. This new, accessible way that suits the citizens' information consumption pattern, or whatever you want to call it. (authors' translation)

Concluding discussion

In this article, we have analysed a news-producing initiative undertaken by a Swedish county council. By using previous understandings of hyperlocal media as a lens to analyse VGRfokus, we have developed knowledge of the special features of news production by public organisations. In the following section, we first outline and discuss our results in relation to the hyperlocals analysed in earlier research. Thereafter, we discuss possible democratic implications of public organisations taking on a more prominent

role as news producers in the local media landscape as well as possible avenues for future research.

VGRfokus exhibits many of the features of previously studied hyperlocals, such as being web-based and having the ambition to spread original news in order to fill a perceived news gap in a geographically defined area, and although VGRfokus could hardly be seen as hyperlocal, that is true also for some of those media operations that have been defined as hyperlocals in earlier research. In addition, VGRfokus also carries – at least to some extent – "ambitions to promote civic engagement" (cf. Metzgar et al., 2011). This ambition is expressed through the stated goal of making citizens in the county aware of what is going on within VGR. This is very much related to the argument from the editorial staff of VGRfokus that their existence is needed due to the lack of legacy media; if VGRfokus does not tell the stories of the county council, these stories will not be told, as the argument goes.

In comparison to many of the examples of hyperlocal media presented in other studies, VGRfokus' organisational placement under VGR appears to be the main difference. Being part of the large and formal organisation of VGR offers the editorial staff stability and some kind of work security. As VGRfokus is embedded in more general communication activities, including, for example, a network of press managers, it is part of a supportive context with resources both in terms of possible content and personnel. The size and importance of VGR also give the news channel a somewhat prominent position outside the internal organisation – VGR is most likely quite a powerful player in setting the agenda in the county.

Related to the size, and in particular the fact that VGR is a *public* organisation, is the funding situation. While one of the key challenges for hyperlocals is generally funding, the situation for VGRfokus is fundamentally different. Even though it is not self-evident that politicians within the county will prioritise VGRfokus in the future, it is at least possible for the editorial staff to plan one year at a time, a condition creating some kind of stability. The editorial staff is not expected to engage in fund-raising or try to secure the economic situation on a short-term basis but can focus on developing the format and content of the news channel.

Furthermore, our case study of VGRfokus raises questions about tomorrow's media landscape and especially about what the implications of news-producing public organisations might be. From the perspective of the organisations themselves, the most obvious concern is credibility and trustworthiness. This is a concern raised, for example, by Winsvold (2007) in her study on the role and use of the websites of Norwegian municipalities. Winsvold (2007: 21) concludes by stating that "if the strategic face of the website becomes too visible, people may stop trusting it". Since investments in strategic communication by public organisations have been understood to be largely tied to and motivated by branding and news management (e.g. Fredriksson & Pallas, 2013; Tenor & Nygren, 2017), it is reasonable to reflect upon the possibilities of VGRfokus fulfilling the ambitions of being nuanced and critical in its coverage. As we have only examined in this study the content of VGRfokus during its first six months, it is still too early to draw any firm conclusions. Until now, the content has been largely presented in a positive light, and there are few articles about problems related to VGR. This is also something that our interviewees were concerned about as they reflected upon the need for, but also the difficulties that come with, more problem-orientated content.

From a broader, societal perspective, two aspects have been highlighted – mainly by opinion journalists from their viewpoint of professional journalism. First, opponents criticise the fact that a public organisation is taking on the role of a news producer, and second, it is possible to detect a certain degree of an experienced threat towards legacy media. One part of the criticism, and one that is expressed by legacy media journalists, is related to the county council's use of taxpayer money to attempt to do the work of journalists. A key argument is that it is not credible – and simply neither possible nor desirable – for public organisations to set out to provide balanced and trustworthy news content in this way. From such a perspective, the existence of VGRfokus is not just any newcomer in the media landscape but a more problematic one than previously studied hyperlocals, for example interest groups providing news about a certain topic or grass-roots initiatives spreading information about the local community. VGRfokus, therefore, may bring to the forefront rather sensitive and complex questions, for example about the funding of media operations in a situation where legacy media is struggling with limited resources as well as how traditional roles in the field of journalism – in particular those of legacy media journalists versus professional communicators – are being transformed and challenged.

While the role of public organisations in the local media landscape is still nascent and emergent, this article has set out to provide a first attempt to highlight this new type of news production and to develop some initial understanding of the conditions of news production by a public organisation as well as the societal implications of such an activity. News producers with public funding are naturally a phenomenon that requires further scholarly investigation. We also need to further elaborate on major questions, such as who is a credible news producer and what does it mean to work according to journalistic principles.

Outside the scope of this article, but certainly a key question for further inquiry, are the balancing acts that are discernible in our study. The Norwegian study previously mentioned highlights the point that municipal websites not only provide "neutral and factual information to the public" but also "strategically use the website to feed the media with stories they want covered, to minimize the newsworthiness of a case they do not want covered and to bring an alternative picture of the activities of the municipality, correcting or modifying the picture presented by the media" (Winsvold, 2007: 21). In particular, the many different ambitions and multiple target groups of VGRfokus lay a foundation for conflicts and constraints. We know also from extant studies that civil servants in general need to cope with conflicting demands, often conceptualised as different logics (e.g. Meyer & Hammerschmid 2006; Svensson, 2017; Thorbjørnsrud, 2015), which most likely is evident in VGRfokus as well. Our study suggests that the editorial staff needs to manage and balance demands from at least three different types of logics: a bureaucratic-professional logic, a strategic-communication logic and a journalistic-legacy media logic. Future studies need to investigate how these different logics enable and constrain the news production of civil servants and the implication of this for the society at large.

Funding

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