Hyperlocals and Legacy Media
Media Ecologies in Transition

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Abstract

Declining legacy media seriously affects local journalism in Sweden. Since 2004, nearly every second local office for local newspapers has been closed, and local coverage is diminishing. In a parallel development, new types of hyperlocal media are growing, according to a national mapping of local media ecologies. The study presented here is based on two surveys: one of local municipalities and one of independent hyperlocals. The key question is: are hyperlocals filling the gap? In many cases, the motivation behind new hyperlocal media has been discontent with declining media coverage from legacy media. In general, however, the pattern is more complicated; most hyperlocals grow in places where legacy media is also present. The main conclusion is that hyperlocals are only partly filling the gaps from declining legacy media, while parts of Sweden are becoming "news deserts." Another important result is that hyperlocals are developing both in print and online, often in combination, to create a sustainable business model.

Keywords: local journalism, media ecology, free newspapers, local online news, news deserts, hyperlocal

Introduction

Something fundamental is changing in the Swedish media system. Strong local media have been the backbone of Swedish media since the 19th century, but recent research has shown rapid changes in the past 10-15 years. Traditional media are retreating and new types of hyperlocal media are developing both on paper and online – mostly free weekly newspapers and online news covering parts of a large city, small municipalities or rural areas. Social media platforms, predominantly local groups on Facebook, also play an increasing role in the local media ecology (Nygren & Althén 2014, Ohlsson 2016, Leckner & Nygren 2016, SOU 2016:80).

The purpose of this article, written within the framework of the Hyperlocal Publishing research project at Södertörn University and Malmö University, is to give an overview of this changing local media landscape in Sweden. This is done by focusing on legacy media on the regional and local level as well as hyperlocal media organizations on a more local level. The consequences are discussed from a perspective of journalism as an important part of the local democratic infrastructure in society. The key question

is to what extent new hyperlocal media are filling the gap created by declining local legacy media.

The hypothesis is that the local media landscape is becoming more of a hybrid media system (e.g. Chadwick 2013), where different forms of new media compete with legacy media, but where there also are important forms of interdependence between old and new media. In this hybrid media system, roles are changing and new patterns are developing both in old and new media forms. New local media ecology is developing where both new and old media find new places in the system (Anderson 2016, Coleman et al. 2016).

Overview: the Nordic model of local media

Sweden is part of the Nordic region, where daily newspapers have held a very strong position. Newspaper reading has for many years been at the very top of media consumption in Europe, and in 2016, Sweden placed first in the EU Barometer of media use with 67 per cent of the respondents stating that they read a newspaper every day (European Commission 2016). The Swedish newspaper industry has traditionally been locally anchored, with the local newspaper being the marketplace for the local community and the square for the local public sphere (Weibull 2000). Local newspapers were never controlled by national media companies, even during the era of party press when newspapers were locally connected (Gustafsson 1996). These local newspapers were also sources of high profit for many years, with local monopolies producing returns of 15-20 per cent (Melesko 2013).

Other important parts of the Swedish model have been press subsidies and a strong public service media sector. Thanks to state press subsidies, the second largest newspaper was able to survive in many regions. Since the 1960s, public service radio and TV expanded with a network of regional news outlets, and today there are 27 regional radio stations and 21 regional news shows on public service TV. Still, news via public service channels is more regional than local, and public service media lack the strong local close ties developed by newspapers (Nygren & Appelgren 2015). Behind the state subsidies for newspapers and public service media has been a strong political emphasis on the role of media in democratic processes. Since the press subsidies were introduced in the 1970s, state committees have many times emphasised the important role of the media in providing information for citizens, creating spheres for public debate and scrutinizing all kinds of power in society (Weibull & Wadbring 2014).

Strong newspapers and public service media were the basis for the professionalization of journalism from the 1960s onwards (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2001). The party press gradually vanished and the professional journalistic ideology replaced old journalists connected to the parties (Nygren 2008). The media system developed to be very close to the ideal model described by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as "democratic corporatist". The backbone of this system was the local and regional media, which formed a strong infrastructure for local democracy.

On the normative level, independent media is crucial for "the informed citizen" in a democratic society (Dahl 1999). Independent media is a prerequisite if citizens are to have the ability to take part in deliberative democratic processes and make informed choices in elections. This democratic role is the basis for the social contract of news media, for a media policy where media is regarded as a part of the democratic infra-

structure of society (Kovac & Rosenstiehl 2001, Nord & Strömbäck 2012). Reports on declining local news media and the consequences for local democracy were one of the factors behind the state inquiry on media policy and media support that was conducted in Sweden in 2015-2016 (SOU 2016:80). The proposals from the state inquiry for renewed state media support follow the tradition of the democratic corporatist media system in northern Europe.

The decline of local legacy media

As all over the western world, newspapers in Sweden have been in decline for the past 20 years. There has been about a 40 per cent decline in circulation since its peak in 1989; revenues from advertisements have decreased even more, by almost 50 per cent. Newspapers in the three metropolitan areas have had the largest reduction in circulation, especially the two daily tabloids, Aftonbladet and Expressen. Local and regional newspapers have managed better, both regarding advertisements and paid circulation, but are still demonstrating a general decline, even if the development is uneven and some regional newspapers still make good profits due to increased prices and downsizing of the organizations (all figures from the State Media Inquiry SOU 2016:80).

   In spite of declining circulation, there has been no massive closing of local newspapers in Sweden; only two local newspapers have closed in recent years (Folket and Dagbladet, both second largest in their respective areas). Instead, there has been a strong concentration of ownership. Since 2000, more than half of the newspapers/media houses have had new owners, and the eight largest groups have increased their share of circulation from 71 to 89 per cent. These eight groups now control 76 of 93 daily newspapers (Ohlsson 2016). The State Media Inquiry concludes that the most important structural change in the newspaper market is the transfer of power from local media companies to the central level of large media conglomerates. In this development, there is a conflict between the central pressure for more rational and coordinated production and the demand for the newspapers to be locally anchored (SOU 2016:80, p. 76). With this centralized production, it is still possible to keep many titles, although a large part of the content is the same within the same group of newspapers (Nygren & Appelgren 2015).

   One important change in the last ten years is downsizing of newsrooms. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of journalists working at daily newspapers decreased 25 per cent, and by even more in the local offices (Nygren & Althén 2014:26). This has been part of a centralization of content production; local newspapers are increasingly produced and printed in a few places with parts of the content being similar in many titles. Centralization has also been observed in Norway, which has a media system similar to that of Sweden. Coverage is concentrated to regional centres, and areas outside these centres get less coverage (Sjovaag 2015). In Sweden, large regional newspapers have reduced their staff by 35-40 per cent since 2001, and locally 55-65 per cent. Remaining journalists now have to produce more content for both the paper and online versions (Nygren & Appelgren 2015).

   Radio and TV is covering regions more than local municipalities, and the development is more complex. TV4, the only commercial TV channel with news production, closed all 21 regional newsrooms in 2014, arguing that regional news was not profitable, whereupon 140 local TV journalists lost their jobs. In public service, the situation is

more stable. The number of journalists has increased slightly, and Sveriges Television (SVT) has opened a few new newsrooms in expanding metropolitan areas (Nygren & Appelgren 2015).

While public service is about as big as before, in terms of number of employees, the relationship to commercial local and regional newspapers has changed due to the heavy downsizing of print. Newspapers have become more regional, and in relation to shrinking newspapers public service has become stronger.

Research on hyperlocal news and media ecologies

The decline of local and regional media is not unique to Sweden; on the contrary, it is visible in most western countries (Nielsen 2015). But there has also been another trend observed by research in western countries – the growth of hyperlocal news outlets outside traditional media companies (Williams & Harte 2016). The term "hyperlocal" has been used in different ways. In the UK, the term covers news that is more local than traditional media, but the size of the area can differ (Radcliffe 2012). In the USA, hyperlocal has been defined by Metzgar et al. as "geographically based, community oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement" (2011:774). Based on this definition, researchers in a growing number of countries have studied new forms of local media. Most research focuses only on the Internet (e.g. Kerkhoven & Bakker 2015), although some research also includes local media on other platforms (Williams et al. 2015).

The concept of media ecology has become more important in recent years in research on media development (Anderson 2016). The key assumption in the notion is that media development only can be understood as a complex system, and the effects of new media and new technologies being introduced can only be understood by looking at how both new and old media forms are influenced by the change. In the ecological system, all "species" are influenced when the balance is changed between different kinds of media.

In recent years, a perspective of "media ecology" has been used to describe the media system in itself and how this system contributes to the need of the society (Scolari 2012). This kind of "inter-media dimension" of the concept has been used by researchers in the US in studies of media systems in large cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia. In these studies, the flow of news between different platforms and the development of news stories has been studied, for example the position of traditional newspapers in relation to expanding digital platforms (Anderson 2009, Pew Research Center 2010). In other studies of communities of various size and social structure, large differences have been found (Napoli et al. 2015, Pew Research Center 2015). These local media ecologies have been analysed with questions concerning both infrastructure and what content local media offers citizens; other questions have concerned performance and to what extent local media fill the needs of citizens in a democratic society.

Another project in the UK, in the city of Leeds, shows that new media platforms such as blogs and websites, as well as social media platforms such as Facebook, play important roles in the local media sphere. However, while the new platforms are important, they do not replace traditional media like newspapers and broadcast TV and radio; instead, they become a complement and have important roles together with legacy media

platforms. Thus, the system changes to become more "hybrid"; both old and new media change, whereupon a new media ecology emerges (Coleman et al. 2016).

Research questions and methods

The purpose of this article is to describe and discuss the local media landscape in times of rapid change. Are growing hyperlocal media filling the gap after declining legacy media or are parts of Sweden becoming "news deserts" without local media covering the community? And, if the latter is the case, what consequences will this bring to the conditions for local democracy in different parts of the country? The analysis is based on local media presence in different parts of Sweden, both legacy media and new hyperlocal media organizations. In addition, the analysis of new hyperlocals is based on a survey of independent hyperlocal publishers.

In the article, some key notions are used to describe different kind of local media. *Legacy media* is here defined as media organizations developed from traditional daily newspapers (at least 2-3 days/week) and regional news in public service media (SVT and SR). *Hyperlocal media* is defined not only as local online news sites, but also local free newspapers, local subscribed newspapers and community radio. Common for hyperlocal media is, in our definition, that they are more locally produced and distributed than legacy media. Most of the hyperlocals are published by small independent companies, and some by larger media companies with 30-40 titles. For further discussion about our definition see Leckner et al. (2017).

Three questions are posed to describe the development both in general and in different parts of the country:

- How is presence from legacy media changing in local municipalities?

- What types of hyperlocal media are growing and in what kind of local communities?

- What do we know about the motives, production and sustainability of hyperlocal media initiatives?

To answer these questions, results from two different surveys are used. In the Hyperlocal Publishing project, local and regional media in Sweden was mapped in an e-mail and telephone survey. The survey was conducted from November 2015 to June 2016 to information officials on local municipality offices; notably, officials from all 290 municipalities answered the survey. Both legacy media and new types of hyperlocals were included in the overview, and missing information was taken from websites of the media outlets. In part of the survey, municipality officials also related their experiences with the changes in local media coverage (Tenor & Nygren 2017).

On the basis of these results the local media structure is analysed in different types of municipalities. The size and character of the municipalities in Sweden varies from the small and rural Bjurholm, with 2,500 inhabitants, to Stockholm, with 923,000 inhabitants. The average size of a Swedish municipality is 34,000 inhabitants. This means there are many very small (regarding population) municipalities in mostly rural areas.

For the analysis, the municipalities were divided into ten different types as defined by the Union of Municipalities and Regions (SKL)[1]. These types include everything from large cities (3) and their suburbs (38), large regional towns with 50,000-200,000

inhabitants (31) and their suburbs (22), commuting municipalities (40), municipalities dominated by industrial production (54), municipalities with a lot of tourism (20), municipalities in sparsely populated areas (36) and other municipalities in regions with high population density (35).

The second survey was made of a sample of independent hyperlocal media organizations in the autumn of 2016. From the information collected during the mapping, a sample of locally based hyperlocal media outlets was selected including 179 hyperlocal media organizations independent of large media firms (both on paper and online). The reason behind this selection is the lack of knowledge about this growing segment of hyperlocal media outside large companies and the legacy media sector. An online survey was sent to them and responses were received from 97, publishing about 140 titles (response rate of 54 per cent). Among these responses, 43 were local news sites, 39 free newspapers, 9 community radio and TV and 6 pay newspapers 1-2 days/week. The questions in the survey were related to motives behind starting the hyperlocal media, content production and financial matters.

Results for legacy media

The results show that traditional local and regional media are concentrated in large regional towns, regions with high populations and municipalities with production industry (Table 1). There are also parts of Sweden that have a very low presence of traditional media – mostly municipalities in sparsely populated areas and municipalities dominated by tourism. Fifty-five per cent of these lack any kind of local legacy media presence. However, the suburbs of metropolitan areas and the suburbs of large towns also have very low levels of legacy media presence. In fact, 90 per cent of all suburbs have no local office for legacy local media. This is well known from earlier research, and the result is a kind of "media shadow", in which local news in these areas is basically not covered at all by legacy media (Nygren 2005).

The net number of local offices for local and regional newspapers has fallen by 47 per cent since 2004, according to the results from the present study (Table 2). An analysis shows that a majority of closures concerns the large media companies. One example is Mittmedia, where all of the company's more than 20 daily newspapers belong to the same editorial organization and central resources are producing the content in common technical systems. This media firm has reduced the number of local offices from 62 to 20. The reason behind closing is often financial, and the chief editors assure readers that they will continue to cover the local market even without a local office. But recent content analyses show that there is a drastic decline in the coverage when local offices are shut down. In Jämtland, in the northern part of Sweden, local newsrooms of both newspapers were shut down in Strömsund 100 km from the main newsroom. The coverage was reduced to less than half, local debate has disappeared and local news is much less critical (Pålsson 2017).

Responses from local municipalities indicate that local authorities place a high value on local presence. This presence can take on different forms, such as a local office or the local journalist living in the community. When local journalists are not present in the community and the newsrooms become more centralised and reduce their resources, both the amount of coverage and the quality of coverage rapidly decreases (for further

Table 1. *Degree of local presence of legacy media in different types of municipalities (number of municipalities)*

	None	One local office	Two or more local offices	Main newsroom for daily news-paper	Both daily newspaper and local office for public service	Daily newspaper and main newsroom for public service	Total
Large cities	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Suburbs of large cities	34	3	0	1	0	0	38
Large towns	0	1	0	1	7	22	31
Suburbs of large towns	12	8	1	0	0	0	21
Commuting municipalities	21	28	1	2	0	0	52
Tourism municipalities	11	4	0	3	1	1	20
Industrial municipalities	12	29	3	7	3	0	54
Sparsely populated municipalities	11	7	1	1	0	0	20
Municipalities in high density regions	2	11	6	10	6	0	35
Municipalities in sparsely populated regions	1	8	2	3	2	0	16
Total	104	99	14	28	19	26	290

Comments: Legacy media is here defined as media organizations developed from traditional newspapers (at least 3 days/week) and regional news in public service media (SVT and SR).

Table 2. *Number of local offices for local and regional newspapers*

Newspaper group (with number of titles in parenthesis)	2004	2016	Change, per cent
Ander (9)	17	8	-53
Bonnier (2)	13	5	-62
Center party (3)	18	6	-67
EK-group (3)	7	5	-29
Gotamedia (11)	44	29	-34
Herenco (7)	23	12	-48
Independent newspapers (6)	16	16	0
Mittmedia (22)	62	20	-68
NTM (11)	22	15	-32
Stampen (7)	12	7	-42
Social democratic party (2)	9	6	-33
VK-group (2)	7	4	-43
Total (85)	250	133	-47

Comments: Based on newspapers published at least three days per week. The division between owner groups is based on ownership in 2016 (nationally distributed newspapers are excluded). Figures for 2004 from Nygren and Althén (2014).

discussion, see Tenor 2016). To counteract this development, some regional newspapers are trying new methods to develop production of local content together with their audience. For example, Kristianstadsbladet and Upsala Nya Tidning are trying to recruit readers as local correspondents in news projects (Lundqvist 2016). At Dalarnas Tid-

ningar, a closed Facebook group was created to gather readers for active participation in production (Appelberg 2016).

Results: growing hyperlocal media

The decline of local and regional newspapers is only part of the story about the evolution of local journalism. The other part is the expansion of hyperlocal media on different platforms, both in print (mostly local free newspapers) and online. The results of the present project show a flourishing and differentiated sector of hyperlocals all over the country. Our definition of "hyperlocal" is broad: news outlets covering parts of the areas covered by traditional media (parts of towns or rural areas) and publishing general local news at least once a month. Many different types of platforms are included: subscription newspapers, free newspapers, online news sites, community radio and TV (cable).

The following emerges as an overview of the hyperlocal landscape, both hyperlocals owned by large media companies and small independent ones.

Free newspapers

There were 286 titles of free newspapers, including many different types of free newspapers issued by both large media companies and small independent hyperlocals. This is nearly double the number of titles found in a 2004 study (Andersson & Wadbring 2004), although there are some differences in the methods used. These newspapers are not very old; three out of four started in the past 20 years. Two-thirds are published every week, and the rest every other week or once a month. Free newspapers are most common in metropolitan areas, suburbs and large cities. In these areas, there are many advertisers and distribution costs are low.

There are three types of ownership among free newspapers. Three large companies own about 105-110 titles: Mitt i, Direktpress and Lokaltidningen (owned by the Danish media company, Politiken). About 60 free local newspapers are published by legacy newspapers; these free papers contain mostly feature content. Local companies, often companies with a background in advertising, publish about 120 titles.

The free newspapers vary quite extensively; those produced by large companies often have strong professionalism and well-developed content, while other independent, free newspapers in small municipalities are sometimes not much more than advertisements (but also ads are often an important kind of local news for the readers).

Local news sites

Ninety-four independent local online news sites with no connection to legacy media were found in the mapping. These are often situated in large towns, suburbs and industrial municipalities, and many of them are newly started and often dependent on one or a few persons behind the initiative. In some cases, these founders are former journalists who left their jobs and realised that the local journalism that they had worked with for many years is slowly disappearing. In other cases, the founders are "happy amateurs". A majority of the local news sites report they are breaking even or making a small profit, but in many cases, they are dependent on unpaid labour, from volunteers or the owners themselves. In some cases, they also publish printed products to improve the business

finances by selling more ads. One example of such a local news site is Sydnärkenytt, which is published in Kumla. Kumla is a mid-size industrial municipality in central Sweden. The news site covers five municipalities and has 2,500 daily visitors, and it also publishes a printed newspaper 5-6 times a year with local feature reporting and many ads. Other examples include sites that start up in areas where legacy media closed their offices and decreased their coverage, like Bjuvsnytt in Skåne and 321-an in Jämtland. The most common type of local news sites, however, is those started in large towns or cities, for example Bättre stadsdel in Stockholm, which covers some parts of the city, and the expanding chain of local sites in southern Sweden under the name 24 Malmö, 24Kalmar, etc.

Hyperlocal subscribed newspapers

The state press subsidies support general subscribed newspapers published at least once a week and with at least 1,500 subscribers (Presstödsförordning 1990:524). One result of this subsidy has been the growth of low frequency, subscription newspapers; in the past 20 years about 15 new titles were started in different parts of the country and published once a week. In total, 51 local subscribed newspapers are published once a week. Some are regional and some focus on areas where traditional media have low coverage. One of these companies in the northern and sparsely populated areas of Sweden states that their goal is to "enlighten the media shadow where other media have retreated" (Tidningar i norr AB n.d.). Other actors started local weeklies to offer alternatives to local media monopolies (for example left-wing ETC, which has nine titles).

Table 3. *Hyperlocal media in different types of municipalities*

	Free paper in print	Local online news	Subscribed newspaper 1-2 d/w	Community radio and TV	Total
Large cities (3)	50	8	8	0	66
Suburbs to large cities (38)	58	16	5	5	84
Large towns (31)	55	23	20	4	102
Suburbs to large towns (21)	10	4	0	0	14
Commuting municipalities (52)	24	8	3	0	35
Tourism municipalities (20)	12	6	1	2	21
Industrial municipalities (54)	27	15	5	3	50
Sparsely populated municipalities (20)	8	2	0	0	10
Municipalities in high density regions (35)	30	9	6	3	48
Municipalities in sparsely populated regions (16)	12	3	3	0	18
Total (290)	286	94	51	17	448

Comments: Hyperlocal media is more local than traditional newspapers and public service. The definition of "news media" is to publish or send updates at least once a month. Every title is defined by their "main channel", the dominating platform both financially and in publishing. Many outlets publish on different platforms, for example free newspapers often have some kind of digital publishing (PDF or news sites).

Community radio and TV

These are owned and produced by local organizations on a non-commercial basis. They seldom have regular news coverage, but in a few cases local municipalities in the survey consider them to contribute to general news coverage. These are mostly found in suburbs and large towns.

Motives, production and sustainability

Taken together, all these hyperlocals show a diverse picture. The survey of hyperlocals outside large media companies shows that the most important motivation for starting a hyperlocal media outlet is, according to 76 per cent of the responses, to strengthen local identity and the local area (Table 4). Offering a new channel for local advertisers is also an important purpose of the hyperlocal. It is also clear that many hyperlocals define themselves in relation to traditional local media – one purpose mentioned is discontent with what is perceived to be too little and too negative coverage. One typical response was: "We want to be a complement to established newspapers, they often make a selection that does not mirror our area in a fair and democratic way." And another: "We become more important for local democracy when the large newspapers are declining."

Other reasons such as creating jobs and making money are also important for some hyperlocals, but not as important as other reasons related to societal needs.

Table 4. *Purpose and motivations for starting hyperlocal media (per cent)*

	Important	Quite important	Neutral	Not so important	Un-important	Total
To strengthen local identity and the local area	76	14	6	2	2	100
To offer a new channel for local advertisers	50	19	11	6	14	100
To be a forum for local democracy	43	24	20	8	5	100
Bad coverage from old local media	41	29	15	7	8	100
To make money for the company	28	26	20	10	16	100
To create work for employed	10	24	26	11	29	100

Comments: The number of respondents was 97 (response rate of 54 per cent).

The production of editorial content for these independent hyperlocals can be described as semi-professional. In every second hyperlocal outlet, professional journalists produce all or a great part of the content. Other groups also produce content: employees who are not journalists, readers and the audience, local organizations and local municipalities' public communications officials. The mix in content production is evident, and there is no monopoly for professional journalists in this field. But many respondents also comment that it is difficult to get content from the audience and local organizations – it takes time and considerable effort to organize broad content production. This finding is

in line with other research on local news sites; pure "citizen journalism" is very rare in Sweden (Karlsson & Holt 2013).

Table 5. *Producers of editorial content in hyperlocal media (per cent)*

	Almost all	A large part	Half	Some part	Nothing	Total
Journalists	39	13	10	10	28	100
Employees (not journalists)	17	8	5	24	46	100
Readers/audience	2	8	4	56	30	100
Local municipality	0	5	2	36	57	100
Local companies	0	2	1	27	70	100
News agencies	0	2	3	19	78	100
Local associations	4	4	6	47	39	100
Other	6	2	3	32	57	100

Comments: The number of respondents was 97 (response rate of 54 per cent).

For the independent and small hyperlocals, economy is a difficult area. Most of them rely on advertisements, but revenues from owners and members are also important. Subscriptions and state press subsidies make income possible for some (table 6). One often-mentioned model in the survey is the use of free labour – owners and other locals behind the outlet who work for free for the hyperlocal. One comment: "I see this as voluntary work, and I don't think in these financial terms. If it grows it is because of efforts from those of us who are committed to showing our local events."

Financial problems have been noted earlier as a reason for a low degree of sustainability for hyperlocals (van Kerkhoven & Bakker 2015). In the survey with Swedish hyperlocals the picture is different; two-thirds of the actors are optimistic about their financial position. Forty-one per cent say they made a profit in 2015, and 30 per cent broke even. Two-thirds believe they will make a profit in three years – "local newspapers will also be needed in the future", one comment says.

Table 6. *Revenues in hyperlocal media from different sources (per cent)*

	All (≈100%)	Nearly all (≈80%)	More than half (≈60%)	Less than half (≈40%)	Some (≈20%)	None (≈0%)	Sum
Owners/members	13	2	3	3	8	71	100
Donations	0	1	1	1	5	92	100
Advertisement	53	8	5	8	13	13	100
Subscriptions	0	0	1	7	4	88	100
Public support	1	1	0	0	3	95	100
Press subsidies	0	2	0	4	2	92	100
Other	0	2	2	3	5	88	100

Comments: The number of respondents was 97 (response rate of 54 per cent).

Results: Are hyperlocals filling the gap?

It is difficult to compare the significance of legacy media and new hyperlocal media. There is a large difference between a daily newspaper and a free newspaper published

once a week or more seldom, between content produced by professional journalists and the hyperlocals produced by a mix of people with small resources. At the same time, it is difficult to avoid the question of whether hyperlocals at least partially fill the gap after traditional media leave the local community. And what is the general pattern – are hyperlocals stronger in places where traditional media is not present?

An analysis of the correlation between the presence of traditional media and the number of hyperlocals in the communities shows the opposite (see Table 7). The general pattern is that municipalities with strong legacy media also have many hyperlocals, mostly in large towns and cities with strong ad-markets. It also shows that there are municipalities that have neither legacy media nor hyperlocals; 37 municipalities have no local journalistic presence at all. Additionally, 30 municipalities only have one hyperlocal outlet, which could be a monthly paper with mostly ads. This means that the presence of local journalists is missing or very weak in nearly a quarter of all Swedish municipalities.

Table 7. *Editorial presence of local and regional legacy media and the number of hyperlocal media outlets (the number of municipalities with different levels of editorial presence and the number of hyperlocal outlets)*

| | The number of hyperlocal outlets in the municipality | | | | | | | |
Editorial presence of legacy media	None	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six or more	Total
No editorial presence	37	30	22	13	2	0	0	104
One local office	34	41	16	8	0	0	0	99
Two or more local offices	2	8	3	1	0	0	0	14
Main newsroom for daily local newspaper	7	9	11	1	0	0	0	28
Main newsroom for daily paper and local office for public service	4	6	5	4	0	0	0	19
Main newsroom for both local newspaper and public service	1	4	2	6	6	1	6	26
Total	85	98	59	33	8	1	6	290

Comments: The correlation between the degree of presence of local legacy media and the number of hyperlocal outlets is positive (0.40) and significant at the .01 level (Pearson's r).

A complicated picture

Behind this general pattern are several explanatory factors as well as details that offer a more nuanced picture. In some areas where traditional legacy media is weak, hyperlocals are an important addition to local journalism. Other areas can be regarded as "news deserts", with no local media present at all. A more detailed analysis of the groups of municipalities based on the figures in Tables 1, 3 and 7 show the following:

Large cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö): Here, traditional media cover mostly regional issues and the local issues are covered by hyperlocals in different parts of the cities. In these three cities, there are 66 hyperlocal outlets, most of which belong to the three large chains of free newspapers.

Suburbs in the metropolitan areas: Here, legacy media have a very low presence, with local offices in only 4 of the 38 municipalities in this group. However, there are two or more hyperlocals in 70 per cent of these municipalities, in total 84 outlets.

Large towns (31): In these mostly regional centres, all but two have both their own newspapers and public service media. More than 70 per cent also have two or more

hyperlocals, in total 102 outlets. These towns are very well covered by both legacy media and hyperlocals.

Suburbs to large towns (21): Here, there is more of a mix, with both local newspaper offices and a few hyperlocals.

Commuting municipalities (52): In these municipalities, the old structures of legacy media are still in place, with local offices in 60 per cent of the municipalities. Hyperlocals are rarer, with only 35 outlets in these municipalities.

Industrial municipalities (54): In this big group of mid-size municipalities based on industry, legacy media still have an editorial presence in nearly 80 per cent of the municipalities. Hyperlocals are also present, but on average only one in each municipality.

Sparsely populated areas and places based on tourism (40): In these types of municipalities, many local offices have been shut down and a majority (55 per cent) have no legacy media. There are some hyperlocals, but less than one on average in each municipality.

Other mid-size municipalities (51): Here, the old media structure is still in place with local newspapers and local offices, but one or two hyperlocal outlets are also present in almost all municipalities.

The conclusion is that the same factors are positive for both legacy media and hyperlocals – a dense population and with this also a basis for advertising markets. In some areas where the old media structure of newspapers does not reflect changes in society, hyperlocals have been able to grow and take this market. The typical example is metropolitan suburbs, where traditional media have failed to capture the local ad market. In other areas of Sweden, where the population is decreasing, the distances are long and the commercial basis for trade is declining, both legacy media and hyperlocals are less present.

Earlier research has discussed to what extent hyperlocals are able to fill the gap when legacy media is declining (Williams et al. 2015, Coleman et al. 2016). The results from our analysis show that this is partly the case in metropolitan areas with strong commercial conditions, but it is more seldom the case in sparsely populated areas.

Conclusions

The results from our studies show that the local media ecology has become much more complicated compared with the pre-digital era. New types of local media are expanding, and old local media is adapting to new circumstances. New and old media logics compete in these local media ecologies.

- The subscribed daily newspapers are in decline and nearly every second local newsroom has been closed since 2004. But they are still important actors with an editorial presence in two-thirds of all Swedish municipalities. Legacy newspapers are more centrally produced, and other research shows content becomes less local.

- Free local newspapers are expanding; since 2004 they have nearly doubled and now number nearly 300. They hold an important role in metropolitan areas not covered by legacy media, but also in other kind of municipalities. There is no general crisis for printed papers distributed for free, even if an expanding number of titles create harder competition in the advertisement market.

- New hyperlocal online news sites are growing; 94 independent such sites were identified during in the project. These sites are important in places not covered by legacy media, but also as a new kind of local media in expanding towns and cities.

It is also important to note that new digital platforms are developing their niche alongside old technologies like print on paper. Earlier research on hyperlocal news has mostly focused on digital platforms, as online news sites, and excluded other old platforms such as the printed newspaper (Williams & Harte 2016). Our research shows a variety of platforms being used for hyperlocal news operations. New hyperlocal media is not about whether or not to be digital, but more about finding a business model and production model that works locally outside the old, mostly subscription-based newspapers. Hyperlocal is more a question about the relationship to the local society than a question about technical platforms.

The results also show growing gaps between different parts of Sweden. Legacy media still offer good coverage in many places, but their future is unclear and the number of newsrooms is declining. In some parts of the country, the growth in hyperlocal media is making important contributions to the local democratic infrastructure, for example, in suburbs of metropolitan areas. Other sparsely populated areas are becoming "news deserts", with neither legacy media nor new hyperlocal media. For both legacy media and hyperlocals, urban areas with dense population give a better economical basis.

Democracy and local media

In this new hybrid local media ecology, it is more difficult to evaluate to what extent local media fulfill this role in the democratic infrastructure. The system is much more complicated, with more actors and more levels in the media ecology. Some parts of this development can be clearly negative for local democracy:

- Even if new hyperlocals develop, they seldom have the frequency and amount of coverage of the local community as the old subscribed newspaper. Problems with economic sustainability make hyperlocals vulnerable.

- Typical for many hyperlocals is a degree of de-professionalization of production and strong ties to the local community. To what extent this might weaken the watchdog function of hyperlocal media compared to legacy media is still to be studied.

On the other hand, many hyperlocals gives something else than legacy media; they regard themselves as complementary to legacy media giving voice to local communities. Hyperlocal media can become new platforms for social action, for defending local communities and giving them voice in the public sphere.

An under-researched area of local media ecologies

This analysis has been based on a mapping of all kinds of local media and a survey of hyperlocals outside the large media companies. There are still important areas to study to achieve more knowledge about the changing local media system.

One important question is how content in hyperlocals differs from that of traditional local journalism. What do the closeness and reduced levels of professionalism mean for attachment to local society? What are the consequences for the need of critical distance

in local coverage in relation to the need to be close to the local society (Röe Mathisen 2010)? There is also a need to study the centralization of news production in legacy media. What does this mean for the local connection to these types of media?

Another big change in the local media ecology not mentioned earlier is social media, for example local groups on Facebook that create new types of public spaces. This is not journalism, but they are still an important part of the local media ecology. In recent surveys on local news consumption, local Facebook groups are evaluated as very important. For people under the age of 50, local groups on Facebook are equally or more important for local information than the local newspaper. Local groups provide the news and offer a space for discussion on local issues, and people contribute to these groups much more than to legacy media (Nygren and Leckner 2016). Other important questions concern the role of Facebook for traditional local media: as a space for dialogue with audience, for research and newsgathering and for distribution of news (Appelberg 2016).

The local media ecologies in Sweden are continuing to develop. Hyperlocal media have emerged and will probably become an even more important part of the system.

Note

1. https://web.archive.org/web/20111102215057/https://www.skl.se/kommuner_och_landsting/om_kommuner/kommungruppsindelning. Accessed 2017-11-20.

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