PAPER

David Baines and Agnes Gulyas

Ethical implications of key concepts and issues in current local media research

This paper reports on current issues in research into local media and journalism, and identifies ethical implications emerging from these investigations. It explores the key concepts of locality and community – and considers in turn six key issues: power relations, historical continuity/discontinuity, sustainability, local media gaps/deserts, a collaborative turn, regulatory intervention and subsidy systems. We find these explorations keep returning to the tensions between forms and models of local journalism which deliver benefit for the public and for the elites – powerful commercial, corporate or political interests. A journalism which serves public benefits, we suggest, facilitates and is immersed in the practices and processes of community. Research suggests that, in some regions, local media are at a point of transition from a predominantly profit-seeking approach towards one which focuses on sustainable delivery of public benefit. But we find that on that point of inflection, the future of local media and journalism is finely balanced.

Key words: ethical journalism, locality, community, sustainability, public benefit, local media research

Introduction

Local media are key pillars supporting communities across the world. At their best, they deliver trusted information and analysis pertaining to local public and political institutions, structures and processes, help build and maintain social connectivity, generate and reinforce representations of place, community and a sense of belonging. They create a communicative space of civic, social and cultural engagement, host advertising and generate economic activity (Baines 2014: 340). All of which give rise to, and invite scrutiny of, a range of ethical concerns and considerations. Yet for researchers, local media have until recently tended to lie in the

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shadows of their national and global counterparts. The canon of work on local media is fragmented across disciplines, national and regional boundaries, and platforms – newspapers, broadcasting, online and social media. Each segment comes with its own investigators and theoretical approaches.

The fragmented nature of the field is reflected in the varied definitions and approaches that have emerged, and it is important to revisit key concepts and consider ethical implications which merit further consideration. The pandemic has refocused attention on the salience and significance of local media in their communities and this special edition of *Ethical Space* on local media and journalism is timely in responding to the recent surge of academic interest in the local. This opening paper of the special double edition first explores two key concepts of the field, local and community, then considers six key issues that emerge from our comprehensive survey of current research into local media and journalism, each of which raises concerns that invite interrogation from an ethical perspective: power relations, historical continuity/discontinuity, sustainability, local media gaps/deserts, the collaborative turn and regulatory intervention and subsidy systems (Gulyas and Baines 2020).

Key concepts: Local and community
The terms 'local' and 'community' are in everyday use, their meanings taken for granted; rhetorical, ideological, charges they carry pass under the radar. 'Local' is defined, at its most simple, in place-based terms – nearness, where we live our everyday lives. It carries positive connotations of familiarity. But it is to the symbolic category of localism that means 'different, often contradictory, things to different people at different times. … not a single, static site', to which Christopher Ali (2017: 5) draws our attention. He invites us to interrogate the concept by going 'beyond place to include elements of culture, identity, and language' (Ali 2015: 107). The local is also a mediatised social space, which Lefebvre (1991) conceptualises as a compound of interrelationships between perceived space (people's activities in a landscape), conceived space (spatial representations) and lived space (imagined through myths, symbols and ideologies).

When we speak of local media, definitions of local are also geographical. (This remains largely the case in respect of online and social media platforms, for example, neighbourhood WhatsApp and Facebook groups.) However, such spaces are also created by local media companies as part of an organisational strategy, a model based on an audience within a distribution area or transmission footprint. But here too, the local refers 'both to the merchandising strategy that sustains a newspaper and the editorial philosophy that defines its mission' (Pauly and Eckert 2002, cited in Lee 2020: 419). Irene Costera Meijer similarly argues that from the

media business's point of view, 'What counts as local, community or regional journalism may be clear. … From a consumer angle it depends on people's feelings of connection to a particular space, for some a neighbourhood, for others a province' (2020: 358).

However, the extent to which much of local media can claim to be 'local' is questionable. Bob Franklin (2006) has observed of largely corporate-owned organisations, 'local newspapers are local in name only; the town or city emblazoned on the newspaper's masthead may be one of the few remaining local features of the paper', a criticism equally valid of nominally local TV and radio in Britain and the USA (McDonald and Starkey 2016). Ultimate owners of titles or broadcasters may be national or multinational corporations, while reporters are often transient professionals, trainees, based in a central remote hub; editors and advertising staff are serving many titles and much content is shared across the chain. Yet local media content matters to their critical political function. Rasmus Nielsen's analysis of local newspapers in Denmark identified them as 'keystone media' within local media ecologies; the '*primary provider* of a distinct and important kind of information' (Nielsen 2015: 64 – original emphasis), highlighting their roles as both news producers and suppliers to other media, underpinning political communication and democratic processes.

'Community' is an equally complex concept, also favoured for its positive connotations. In the local media field, 'community' and 'local' are sometimes synonymous, reflecting the importance of social context in understanding the 'local'.[1] But conceptualisations of 'community' have had a critical influence on practices of local journalists; local media legislation, regulation and policy formation, as well as the business models on which local journalism draws. Journalists historically construct professional identities as community champions – delivering the 'glue holding communities together' and representing community interests in the democratic sphere (Robertson 2012: 96).

For commercial media, 'communities' become audiences and in an advertising-based business model 'it is the sale of audiences that is the crucial media operation' (Tebbutt 2006: 857-858). Rachel Matthews argues that public benefit has historically been, and remains, incidental to profit (2017: 4), while Meryl Aldridge highlights (2003: 492), referencing Anderson (1991 [1983]), that 'creating an "imagined community" is seen as a market imperative' by Britain's local press – for such communities can then be commodified. Processes of commodification entail the categorising of groups in a locality as either audiences or advertisers, each defined by revenue stream – but advertisers (businesses, professionals, social, cultural, charitable organisations) also play critical roles in communities. This advertising model entails further categorisation of 'audiences' by

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income and class into those more or less attractive to advertisers, which means that local newspapers have typically been found to provide poor representation of minority groups and trade unions (Aldridge 2007: 27; Baines and Chambers 2012). The model in turn informs the practices and news values of local journalists: the bigger the audience a story attracts, the higher the sales, the greater the value to advertisers. This inevitably informs editorial approaches and journalists' news values (Harcup 2020a). Such categorisations become problematic as local media engagement with communities tends to lead to division and fragmentation, rather than cohesion – Robertson's 'glue' (2012: 96).

In the conceptualisations set out above, 'community' is defined as object: local residents, a group, an audience to be divided, subdivided, commodified. But alternative conceptions consider 'community' as process: 'action, activity, purpose' – 'face-to-face being-ness' realised through sociality and communal interactions (Studdert and Walkerdine 2016: xii). Community in this sense resists commodification and objectification and invites alternative approaches to journalism practices, regulation and media policy, and business models. It invites journalists to consider their practice as public benefit in processes of community cohesion rather than commodification. It invites policy-makers to consider local media's potential to enhance communities' sustainability, rather than as an economic sector. It invites the development of media businesses which approach communities holistically and offer benefits communities may consider worthy of support.

Key issues in local media research

Power relations
The analysis above of the concepts of locality and community demonstrates the importance of challenging taken-for-granted understandings of transformation in the field. Chris Anderson notes that the literature can be 'a rather presentist account of local journalism developments, one lacking a robust intellectual structure which allows it to be more easily integrated with other research in media sociology' (2020: 146). He points to the predominance of analyses which adopt the frames of innovation, business models and the fourth-estate role, but suggests that 'a perspective more indebted to a political economy analysis would argue that a discussion of innovation and so on is simply a mask for the continued consolidation of the ruling class, a class that uses the media to advance its class interests' (ibid). Power issues permeate local media scenes. Nielsen (2012) points to the purchase by political interests of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in the USA while Ilya Kiriya (2020) highlights the increasing control of Russia's local media by local oligarchs and Jingrong Tong (2020) identifies the erosion of journalistic autonomy by China's increasingly autocratic centrist state. The growing economic precarity of much of traditional

local journalism and technological advances that lower entry costs to local media ecologies leave these increasingly vulnerable to domination by political and economic elites as critical voices are silenced.

Historical perspectives

Local media have a long history, yet understandings of their development, continuities and discontinuities, and how these shape contemporary realities, are limited. Our attention is often on the present and the future, but understanding historical contexts also helps unpack the taken-for-granted. If we take a historical perspective we can identify, for example, similarities between the ways local media have been shaped by Norwegian social and cultural values (Skogerbø 2020) and those in Japan informed by concepts of 'care journalism' and tsunagaru journalism, a term capturing understandings of connectivity of local journalists with communities (Meissner and Tsukada 2020: 430). Local TV news today follows a global formula – two news anchors, weather person, sports person – and enjoys big audiences. But Madeleine Liseblad (2020: 74) traces the 'peopleization of news' to one local TV station in the 1960s USA, where innovation was inspired by media consultants applying sociological theory relating to class-determined preferences. Liseblad's findings invite a reappraisal of journalism practices and values. Does the 'peopleization of news' divert journalistic scrutiny from structural factors underlying issues of social justice? Yet in another example, Juliette Marie Storr demonstrates that understanding contemporary Caribbean media environments, power relations and journalistic practices is impossible without considering colonialism's legacies (2020: 66). Post-colonial and black studies perspectives offer promising insights into the manner in which systemic factors, which have become invisible over time, have informed local media. The Marxist historian C. L. R. James (1901-1989) argued: 'To talk to me of black studies as if it concerned [only] black people is utter denial. This is the history of Western civilization' ([1986 [1969]: 4]). Matthews observes that in a digital landscape we tend to a perspective in which 'rapid introduction of technologies and platforms means transience can be mistaken for innovation … mastery of the latest digital tool replaces contemplation of fundamental shifts. It truncates institutional memory and reinforces the obsession with the immediate that condemns our consideration of events to a "collective amnesia"' (2020: 26-27). The focus on the immediate and technical can serve to obscure the relevance of deeper values informing local media development.

Sustainability

Running through the increasing scholarly – and political – interest in local media is a growing concern with sustainability. In considering the need for richer theorisations, comparative analyses and

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historical perspectives, the necessity emerges of widening the lens from individual organisations to local media ecosystems *in toto*, the roles communities play in sustaining them and media ecosystems' contributions to sustaining processes and practices of community. Nielsen (2015) points to the complexities of local media ecologies and the critical roles local newspapers play in them. Marco van Kerkhoven and Piet Bakker (2014) have challenged the idea that new media formats move in to fill a vacuum. They discovered new actors more likely to emerge in healthy ecologies rather than in depleted ones. Financial sustainability of local media is an issue in many regions, but patterns are more varied than dominant discourses of decline suggest. Bill Reader and John Hatcher find that: 'Globally, the appetite for quality local journalism appears healthy' (2020: 205). And while alternative revenue streams such as sponsored community events, voluntary memberships, premium content and monetised archives are gaining traction, 'subscriptions and advertising remain viable where residents (including advertisers) happily support local media' (ibid). This community focus of sustainability, and in many contexts a turn towards direct audience funding through memberships, sponsorships and crowd-funded projects, is highlighted by Elizabeth Hansen et al. (2018). It seems self-evident that sustainability depends on 'the willingness and ability of a community to support local media and the strength of the wider local media ecosystem' (Gulyas and Baines 2020: 11).

Reader and Hatcher conclude that local news organisations 'which prioritize community service may be the most sustainable … [C]itizens reject media for whom "community service" is empty rhetoric and support media for which "community service" is an observable practice' (2020: 210). But a community may be reluctant to support a for-profit organisation, especially if that enterprise cuts local staff and coverage to maximise profits.

Many scholars, journalists and policy-makers assess the quality of local news narrowly, in terms of investigative journalism (Hallock 2010). But equally important are local media roles facilitating, sustaining and maintaining processes and practices of community, connectedness and belonging – a journalism that is a service to the community, 'caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups, understanding local community, and offering solutions' (Heider et al. 2005: 961). Irene Costera Meijer's decade-long inquiry into what Dutch communities valued in local journalism revealed different perspectives to those of many journalists' news values: an emphasis on history, nature and the natural environment. Alongside serious reporting 'people love so-called talker news items … Not because they are important, but because they facilitate (brief) conversations between relative strangers, thus strengthening people's feeling of belonging and connection'

(Meijer 2020: 362) – processes and practices of community. This suggests a richer understanding of sustainability in local media ecologies demands a concern with community sustainability as a whole. André Jansson framed this as: 'The enduring potential of a particular community to maintain the social and cultural interests of its inhabitants, including equal access to various services, good opportunities for political and cultural participation, expression and integration and an enduring sense of community' (Jansson 2010: 180). Local media ecologies are integral to these wider indicators of authentic community engagement.

Local media gaps

We have explored some of the factors that foster a willingness to support local media but note too that an ability to do so is also required. Poor communities most in need of community-service journalism are least likely to be able to sustain it. Those areas with no local media have been termed 'news deserts' (Abernathy 2016). Philip Napoli and Matthew Weber (2020) report on a study of USA news deserts and at-risk communities that found 20 per cent of sample communities completely lacked local journalism. Consequences included less efficient, more costly, unscrutinised local government, and deficiencies in citizens' knowledge and participation in civic life. They have confirmed the trend for large local media markets in the USA to have 'negative effects on the journalistic output in nearby local communities', with Hispanic and Latino communities within those localities particularly ill-served (2020: 375-376).

But apart from communities which have no local or community media, or media with little or no local content, there are others where the media in place serve particular interests, rather than provide a wider public benefit. Ilya Kiriya (2020: 173) describes local newspapers in Russia aligned with political power: a transition towards irrelevance in which 'our paper' became 'their paper', which became 'what paper?' In China, Jingrong Tong (2020) reports on local news media again obliged to follow central political direction as party propagandists, rather than providing content which serves a community's information needs. Lest we think of this as a blight only on undemocratic regions, we have referred above to Nielsen (2012) documenting political interests in the USA taking over local news platforms. The absence or irrelevance of local media to support and sustain processes of community raises concerns beyond the risk of democratic deficits. So rather than conceptualising a dearth in terms of 'news deserts', we suggest the term 'local media gaps' allows us to consider the depletion of media eco-systems in a more holistic sense – a diminution of opportunities to 'do community', an erosion of community sustainability.

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The collaborative turn

Journalism, particularly in the West, has long been considered a competitive field. But recent research points to the emergence of collaborative approaches which contribute to resilience. There has been collaboration between journalists and communities (Rausch 2020; Rao 2020; Harcup 2020b, 2021) and between journalists and institutional actors such as charities, non-profit organisations and civic technologists (Boyles 2020). Further interrogation of this collaborative turn suggests new understandings of reciprocal benefits such ecologies and resilient communities might deliver. For example, a hurdle to emerging media enterprises is the necessity of access to backroom skills and services provided by different departments in a corporation. Such services are often beyond the reach of community media. In an investigation into four successful local and community news projects in Britain, David Baines (2022, forthcoming) found these resources sourced from community networks, often voluntarily – confirmation of Reader and Hatcher's observation that the delivery of authentic 'community service' is more likely to find support (2020: 210). A local history group voluntarily archived approximately 66,000 pages of the family-owned north-east England weekly newspaper, the *Teesdale Mercury*.[2] They regarded the newspaper as a cultural asset and record of community life over almost two centuries. This importance of local media's capacity 'to construct and maintain community memory and a sense of shared identity' was identified in accessible, participatory local community radio projects in post-war El Salvador (Agosta 2001: 243). The collaborative turn at the level of local media is significant in respect of media ecologies, but also prompts reflection on ethical practice. Tony Harcup, on alternative journalism, notes that 'local audiences are more likely to recognise themselves and to feel themselves represented in media output that is closer to the community not simply in terms of content but also in terms of accessibility' (2020a: 481). Collaborative approaches indicate a journalism embodying social responsibility, and Harcup references Chris Atton's observation that any form of journalism considered by its producers 'as a social responsibility requires ethics to be at its centre' (2013: xii).

Regulatory intervention and subsidy

Regulation and policy formation profoundly determine the nature, even existence, of local media. Christopher Ali analyses how once-prized localism values were written out of broadcasting policy in the USA (Ali 2020). Federal Communications Commission regulations that encouraged diverse voices, plurality, local presence, community dialogue and accountability have gone. In the USA, 'Broadcast localism, from a policy perspective, is dead. … Broadcast localism is a market failure – the market cannot or will not produce this public good because of a lack of return on investment' (ibid: 90). In Spain, vibrant analogue community TV was wiped out by digital terrestrial

TV regulation (Muntsant 2020). Media policies around the world reflect the balance of power between elite, often corporate, and public interests. Ethical dimensions of this are self-evident.

In Britain, the government-commissioned *Cairncross review* proposed an Institute for Public Interest News for 'channelling a combination of public and private finance into those parts of the industry it deemed most worthy of support' (Cairncross 2019: 11). Local media in Britain already enjoys subsidies – tax concessions, national and local government advertising, and 'local democracy reporters' on corporate-owned local newspapers funded by the BBC licence fee (Baines 2014). Shailendra Singh (2020) argues for subsidies for local journalism in the Pacific Islands, echoing Cairncross's plea for public funding for a public good. But Eli Skogerbø (2020) and Gunnar Nygren (2020) point to marginal benefits from public subsidy fostering start-ups and increasing diversity and plurality in, respectively, Norway and Sweden. And in France, Matthieu Lardeau (2020) finds extensive subsidies have fostered monopoly rather than the diversity and plurality intended, and a local media tied to – rather than scrutinising – local political power. This mixed picture of rationale and experiences highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of regulatory interventions in local media and particularly subsidy systems.

Conclusions
We have brought forward critical concerns and interrogated key conceptual debates relating to local media and journalism and pointed to ethical implications which demand further attention. We have challenged taken-for-granted conceptualisations of 'locality' and 'community'. We have concentrated on the complexities in relationships between local media and local communities and the ways local media ecologies – together with the processes and practices which maintain and sustain them – are shaped by and in turn inform the sustainability of communities themselves. Throughout, we have found these explorations keep returning to the tensions between forms and models of local journalism which deliver benefit for the public and for the elites – powerful commercial, corporate or political interests. A journalism which serves public benefits, we suggest, facilitates and is immersed in the practices and processes of community. Factors which enable this include those we have considered above: an awareness of its historical context, the importance of sustainability rather than maximum profitability, collaborative approaches across communities with which it is involved and a concern to be involved with all the communities in its locality. Jane B. Singer highlights the ethical implications of considering the journalist not as central agent in a linear process of information delivery but as 'one part of an interactive and iterative network' (2012: 67). Ethical components central to that role, she suggests, are 'authenticity, which loosely correlates with the idea

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of credibility, accountability, which is related to responsibility, and autonomy, or independence' (ibid).

We find this to be a useful prism for delineating the divisions between models of journalism which offer a public benefit and those which do not. But the manner in which local journalists' 'autonomy or independence' are negotiated in relation to their community role invites further interrogation. Reader and Hatcher's conclusion, that local news organisations 'which prioritize community service may be the most sustainable' (2020: 210) resonates with Matthews's view (2020: 31-32) that suggests that in some regions, local media are at a point of inflection: approaching the end of an epoch defined by corporate, profit-seeking approaches and entering another in which the sustainable delivery of a public benefit will be more central. But as we have seen, powerful commercial and political interests still seek to shape local media landscapes to their own advantage. On that point of inflection, the future of local media is finely balanced.

Notes

[1] Professionally-produced publications referred to in Britain as local newspapers are known in the United States as community newspapers. In Britain, the term community media generally refers to non-professional, non-commercial enterprises such as community radio stations, heavily reliant on voluntary endeavour

[2] http://teesdalemercuryarchive.org.uk/

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Note on the contributors

Agnes Gulyas and David Baines are the editors of *The Routledge companion to local media and journalism* and co-founders of the MeCCSA research network on local and community media.

Dr Agnes Gulyas is Professor of Media and Communications and Director of Research and Enterprise in the School of Creative Arts and Industries at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK. She has published widely on local media and digital journalism.

Dr David Baines worked for 30 years in local journalism and now researches and lectures in journalism at Newcastle University, UK. He has published widely on changing practices in journalism, journalism and communities, and journalism education. He is a trustee of Headliners, a youth charity giving disadvantaged young people and their communities a voice through journalism.

Conflict of interest

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