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Local Media Ecologies

Social media taking the lead

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Abstract

Legacy media and social media are intertwined in a complicated relationship in local media ecologies. The recent national Swedish SOM survey on media use shows that people use Facebook more than local newspapers (both paper and online) to stay up to date with local events. In contrast, though, users still regard legacy media like subscription newspapers and the regional public service as more important sources than social media. Local newspapers are experiencing a decline in their number of users, but new hyperlocals are showing more stable numbers. Nevertheless, newspapers produce most of the original news reporting, and the public service and hyperlocals have more complementary positions in local media ecologies. They are all meeting the audience in the expanding public sphere of Facebook.

Keywords: media ecology, local journalism, social media, Facebook, local media use

Introduction

The local media landscape is changing rapidly. Old legacy media is downsizing and closing local offices, and new kinds of local media are developing on all platforms, such as free printed weeklies, hyperlocal online news sites and local community radio (Nygren et al., 2018; Olsen et al., 2018; Williams & Harte, 2016). At the same time, Facebook has developed into a general platform for people to stay up to date with their local community through both social networks and links to media outlets.

This development is not uniquely Swedish or Nordic, but rather has also been observed in many Western countries (Nielsen, 2015). It presents an opportunity for analysis from an ecological perspective, and studies of local media ecologies have looked at different actors in the system (producers of news, local actors and audiences). These studies focused not on individual newspapers or newsrooms, but instead on how the system works – how different types of media and audiences in an ongoing collaborative process produce and consume news (Anderson, 2016; Napoli et al., 2017; Nygren, 2016). The questions investigated with an ecological perspective concern local media infrastructure, how stories develop and travel in local society, and the performance of

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different actors in the local media system in relation to the needs of local society and democracy (Napoli et al., 2017).

The purpose of this article is to describe local media ecosystems in Sweden and how they are changing due to media development while focusing on the growing role of social media platforms like Facebook. The article analyses the position of actors within local media ecology using the responses from the national SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017 on media use and attitudes towards local media.¹ This article also uses results from case studies of local media ecologies in five local communities. Journalism is only a part of these local media ecologies and is increasingly mixed with many different kinds of media content and messages on platforms like Facebook and the websites of local actors, including local municipalities and local politics. The main contribution of the article is the ecological perspective, focusing not on single forms of local media but on how local media systems change when new platforms like social media are established.

Media ecology from a local perspective

Over the past few years, an ecological perspective has become increasingly important in research on media development (Anderson, 2016). The key assumption is the idea that media development can only be understood as a complex system, and the effects of new media and new technologies can only be understood by looking at how both new and old media are influenced by the change. In the ecological system, a change in the balance between different types of media influences all of the “species”.

The notion of media ecology was first used by Neil Postman in the 1960s to describe media as a surrounding environment, which also includes the users. More recently, this notion has mostly been used in a more limited scope to describe the media system itself and relationships between different forms of media as well as how this system contributes to the needs of the society (Scolari, 2012). This “inter-media dimension” of the concept has been used by researchers in the USA in studies of media systems in large cities such as Baltimore and Philadelphia. These studies research the flow of news between different platforms and the development of news stories, for example the position of traditional newspapers in relation to expanding digital platforms (Anderson, 2009; PEW, 2010).

Large differences have been found in other studies of communities of various sizes and social structures. A study of three local communities in New Jersey analysed different dimensions of the local media ecology: the infrastructure of local journalism, the supply of local journalism on different platforms and the role of journalism in the local community. The results show large differences. In small and wealthy Morristown, residents have access to much more local news than in the large suburbs of Newark. This difference is evident in local legacy news outlets as well as social media and other online news sources, which has resulted in an information gap between rich and poor local communities (Napoli et al., 2017).

The results of a large research project in the UK in the city of Leeds describe how media platforms like blogs and websites, as well as social media platforms like Facebook, play important roles in the local media sphere, but they do not replace traditional media like newspapers, TV and radio. Instead, they serve as complements and fulfil important roles in combination with new media platforms. The system is becoming more “hybrid”,

and both old and new media are changing. The Leeds study is less about the crisis in legacy media and more about how people are telling stories and sharing knowledge, and how new practices are developed in a changing media ecology (Coleman et al., 2016).

This hybrid perspective is emphasised by Hermida (2016) in an overview of social media and the news. He describes a major shift in how the public are learning about the world around them; news is always present in people's social media feed, and it becomes an ambient news environment: "[T]he development of lightweight and always-on socially networked devices enables the pervasive, persistent and perpetual awareness of news" (Hermida, 2016: 83). Social media does not replace traditional media, but it changes the context for journalism when traditional genres are mixed with personal messages. Audiences use social media to connect with friends, and users are simultaneously in the middle of a never-ending flow of all kinds of news. For journalists, social media is present in all parts of the working process: to find ideas and sources in news work, to distribute news and to interact with audiences (Appelberg, 2018; Hedman & Djerf-Pierre, 2013).

An ecological perspective makes it easier to understand the social role of local media. Research that applies an ecological perspective analyses local media as an ecological system both in the relationships between media platforms and in the relationships with users (who have also become producers). The ecological perspective also fits with the perspective of "hybrid media systems", where old and new media logics compete with and adapt to each other – a media ecology where old media is still present but is also changing to survive in the new media environment (Chadwick, 2013).

Local media are placed at the crossroads of this development. They are based on the "space of place", they cover life in places where people work and spend their daily lives. But at the same time the role of local media has been reduced to become one of many nodes in the global networks, situated in the virtual space of flows (Castells, 1996). Local media ecologies are parts of the network society, but the basic condition for them is the connection to certain places, and a "geo-social" approach has been developed to provide a framework for understanding local media in relation both to geographical territory and global communication networks (Hess & Waller, 2017). Earlier research also shows there is still room for media connected to local places – people are still as interested in local news as before, to the same extent as the national news and much more than international news (Nygren & Leckner, 2017).

Local media ecologies in Sweden

Most of the earlier research on local journalism in Sweden has focused on media coverage of local municipalities and local politics. This has been considered the most important part of the democratic mission of local media – to inform about local politics, to be a watchdog on local political power and to offer a space for local debate. One of the first studies was conducted in the 1980s on the introduction of regional public service radio (Sjölin, 1985), and since then other studies have been conducted on, for example, the relationships between local politicians and local journalists (Larsson, 1998) and to what extent local newspapers function as watchdogs of local politicians (Ekström et al., 2006; Nygren, 2003). When the audience is included in the studies, the perspective has also been on local politics (Johansson, 1998).

There have also been some attempts to analyse local media in a broader sense. There has been a lot of research on local newspapers and their role in local communities (e.g. Wadbring & Weibull, 2000). The notion of “media shadow” was introduced in 2002 to describe suburban areas that are only covered by traditional media when it comes to crime and social problems (Nord & Nygren, 2002). Another element of this shadow is that there are similar patterns of media use, i.e. residents in poor suburbs are left outside the mainstream media flow since they do not use traditional media. That said, however, local free newspapers still play an important role in local identity and local community in many different places (Nygren, 2005). The media shadow was defined using studies on the metropolitan Stockholm area, but over the past few years the decreasing coverage of sparsely populated areas in Sweden has also been analysed as a kind of media shadow (Nygren & Althén, 2014).

In other countries areas with little or no local media have been defined as “news deserts” (Napoli et al., 2017) or “blind zones” (Höst, 2016). In the Swedish state media inquiry of 2016, the notion “blank spots” was used, and an important task for media policy was defined to guarantee the development of local journalism in all parts of the country (SOU, 2016: 80).

Recent projects on local and hyperlocal media in Sweden have also described the changing structure of local media. The decline of legacy media and the growth of new forms of hyperlocal media have been studied in a national mapping of local media (Nygren et al., 2017). From this mapping, it has been possible to identify different kinds of local media ecologies from metropolitan areas to rural and sparsely populated areas in Sweden. This mapping focused on local media structure – both traditional media (subscription-based local newspapers and the local public service) and new hyperlocals, such as local free newspapers and hyperlocal online news. However, there has still not been very much research on the role of social media platforms like Facebook in local media ecologies: for example, the importance of social media platforms in keeping local audiences informed and how social media is integrated in the local media ecologies alongside traditional media.

Purpose, methods and material

The purpose of this article is to analyse local media ecologies from the perspective of the media users. The article focuses on the rapid changes in media use and how social media platforms, like Facebook, are integrated in the local media ecology. Three main questions are posed:

1. How are the patterns in local media use changing?
2. How are different local media outlets and platforms positioned in relation to one another in the local media ecology?
3. What is the role of journalism in these new media ecologies?

This article draws on the results from the large SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017 as well as a series of case studies of local media ecologies. The national SOM survey has been conducted by the University of Gothenburg since 1986, and it has always contained questions about media use and public attitudes toward political and social issues. The survey

is sent to a representative national sample of Swedish citizens between the ages of 16 and 85. In 2017, the survey was carried out in six versions, with some questions found in all versions while other questions were only included in one or two of the versions. The number of respondents varies from less than 2,000 to more than 10,000, depending on the question. The 2017 survey was conducted between September and November, and the overall response rate was 55 per cent (Andersson et al., 2018).

This article uses results on questions from the SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017 on the use and evaluation of different kinds of local media, including social media. The questions were:

- How often do you use different kinds of local media? (list of media presented)
- How important are different kinds of local media for staying informed about local society? (list presented)
- How often do you do the following in local groups on social media (e.g. Facebook)? (list of activities presented)

In addition, the study also uses the results from five case studies of local media ecologies carried out by students in journalism at Södertörn University. Five local municipalities were chosen in a strategic selection to cover different types of communities: part of a metropolitan area (Södertälje), a regional centre (Helsingborg), a small commuting municipality (Gnesta) and two municipalities in sparsely populated areas (Sollefteå and Strömsund). The local media structures were mapped and interviews with local journalists, local politicians and information officers in local municipalities were conducted. A content analysis was also performed on the local media outlets to specify the role of various local media platforms. Examples from the five case studies have been used in this article to illustrate the trends identified in the SOM survey and an earlier mapping project of local media in Sweden (Nygren et al., 2017).

Five spheres of local media

Five spheres of local media were identified in the analysis of media use and the five case studies. These spheres have complementary functions and are not mutually exclusive: local subscription-based newspapers, regional public service media, hyperlocal media outlets, media produced by local municipalities and social media such as Facebook. These five spheres influence each other, and news and discussions travel between them in all directions. They overlap and fulfil different purposes for both users and producers, but they are also dependent on one another.

Local subscription-based newspapers

Both the printed and online versions of local subscription-based newspapers are in decline. Since 2004, nearly half of the local editorial offices have been closed (Nygren et al., 2017), and the number of journalists working in this sphere has been reduced by 30–40 per cent. Readership of the printed versions is also declining. In 2017, 41 per cent of respondents said that they read the local printed newspaper three days a week, which is a sharp decline from the 57 per cent of two years earlier (Table 1). The printed

newspaper is still strong among people over the age of 50, but in the age group 30–49 the figure is only 23 per cent (Table 2). The online versions of subscription-based newspapers have a stable number of readers, but the online audience is still only half the size of the audience of the printed newspaper. Among readers below the age of 50, the online local newspaper is more popular than the paper version, but readership of the online version has been declining in the last two years among both younger and older audiences, probably due to the introduction of paywalls. The combination of shrinking readership and the disappearance of advertising revenues to other channels, such as Google and Facebook (Ohlsson, 2016), means that newspapers face ongoing economic problems.

Table 1. Regular use of different local media in 2015 and 2017 (per cent)

	2015	2017	Difference	N *
Local subscription-based newspaper (paper)	57	41	-16	10,812
Local subscription-based newspaper (online)	25	22	-3	10,812
Other local online news	8	8	0	10,812
Local free newspaper (weekly)	33	33	0	1,828
Public service radio (SR P4)	50	43	-7	10,812
Public service TV (SVT regional news)	61	50	-11	10,812
Facebook (e.g. local groups)	41	46	+5	1,827
Twitter	5	6	+1	1,827
Other kinds of social media (e.g. local blogs)	14	15	+1	1,827
Website of the local municipality	6	6	0	1,827

Source: The national SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017

Comments: "Regular use" implies use at least three days per week. *The results are based on different parts of the SOM survey. Some questions on media use are based on all six subsurveys (10,812) and some only on one of them (1,827 and 1,828).

Table 2. Regular use of different local media in 2015 and 2017 by age (per cent)

	16–29		30–49		50–64		65–85		N *
	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	2015	2017	
Local subscription-based newspaper (paper)	20	10	40	23	64	47	81	67	10,812
Local subscription-based newspaper (online)	18	15	25	26	27	26	25	18	10,812
Other local online news	9	10	9	11	9	8	6	5	10,812
Local free newspaper (weekly)	14	12	31	35	34	36	46	40	1,828
Public service radio (SR P4)	16	14	36	31	61	51	73	63	10,812
Public service TV (SVT regional news)	22	19	38	30	72	59	91	79	10,812
Facebook (e.g. local groups)	66	61	57	59	38	46	16	27	1,827
Twitter	14	15	5	6	4	5	1	2	1,827
Other kinds of social media (e.g. local blogs)	32	24	18	17	10	10	4	8	1,827
Website of the local municipality	3	6	9	5	7	8	5	5	1,827
Minimum number of answers	229	276	433	534	369	478	419	539	

Source: The national SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017

Comments: "Regular use" implies use at least three days per week. *The results are based on different parts of the SOM survey. Some questions on media use are based on all six subsurveys (10,812) and some only on one of them (1,827 and 1,828).

One consequence of this decline is that newspapers have become less local: almost all local and regional newspapers have been bought by the eight large groups controlling 89 per cent of the circulation (Ohlsson, 2016). In 2019, this concentration will increase after Bonnier News took over Mittmedia with 28 newspapers. These groups have centralised production, and less content is being devoted to the local market in both print and online versions (Nygren & Nord, 2017). When local newsrooms are shut down, the coverage of local issues related to the municipality declines, and content becomes less local and more weakly connected to local society (Hellekant Rowe & Karlsson, 2017). In Strömsund, the number of articles devoted to the local municipality decreased from 70–80/month to about 30/month when the coverage was moved to the main office 100 km away. The current coverage also contains less debate and is less critical (Pålsson, 2017). Even in mid-size towns where the local newspapers are still present, the content has been changing. In Södertälje, the local newspaper *Länstidningen* is more likely to cover crime and accidents than community issues, local culture and local business compared to 20 years ago. The newspaper has decreased its staff of journalists by half, and those left concentrate on publishing breaking news online. The type of online content is also different compared to 20 years ago: for example, it now features online TV and summaries of local news in Arabic (Heppling & Said, 2017).

Many newspapers develop a symbiosis with the local social media networks. Daily coverage of local Facebook groups creates news for the local newspaper, and activist groups on Facebook have a clear focus on promoting coverage from local newspapers. The “travel” of news from Facebook groups to newspapers is of mutual interest. For local newspapers, Facebook has also become the main platform for interaction with their audience. In Helsingborg, both the old subscription-based newspaper and the new, local free weekly newspaper use Facebook extensively. They publish news articles on subjects that generate a lot of reaction from their audience, and the weekly *Lokaltidningen* in particular uses Facebook for daily updates on crime and accidents. In the newsrooms, journalists emphasise that interaction on Facebook is the most important way to get comments and share the local news in wider networks. For the large daily *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, about 15 per cent of all visitors on the newspaper’s website came from Facebook in the spring of 2017 (Martin & Skeppstedt, 2017).

For the local newspapers, social media has become a competitor in terms of which channel will serve as the main local public sphere. Local newspapers try to connect with their audience via Facebook, but at the same time they are reluctant to become too dependent on Facebook since it is a competitor in terms of both audience share and advertising revenue.

People also still regard the local newspaper as an important source for staying informed about the local community. The share of respondents who answered that the printed newspaper is very or quite important decreased from 58 to 47 per cent in two years, but the online version is as important as before and equally important as the printed newspaper (Table 3). There are more people using social media like Facebook than reading the local newspaper, but the newspaper is still regarded as more important. Local newspapers have some kind of “trust capital” from serving the local community for so long, and the evaluation of the importance of local newspapers changes much more slowly than the actual use.

Table 3. *Perceived importance of different local media for staying informed about local society (per cent)*

	2015	2017	Difference
Local subscription-based newspaper (paper)	58	47	-11
Local subscription-based newspaper (online)	44	44	0
Other local online news	27	28	+1
Local free newspaper (weekly)	39	36	-3
Public service radio (SR P4)	55	55	0
Public service TV (SVT regional news)	75	69	-6
Facebook (e.g. local groups)	32	35	+3
Twitter	5	6	+1
Other kinds of social media (e.g. local blogs)	13	12	-1
Website of the local municipality	30	30	0
Number of answers	1,597	1,827	

Source: The national SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017

Comments: The percentages shown indicate the share of respondents who answered “very important” or “quite important” on a scale with four steps. (The question was: “How important are different kinds of local media for staying informed about local society?”)

Public service media

In Sweden, public service media is broadcast regionally via two companies: SVT and Sveriges Radio. These companies have about 25 regional newsrooms each; there is a separate regional channel for radio (P4), and news is broadcast on TV several times a day (plus a growing online presence for both). Public service media has not experienced the same decline as other legacy media; on the contrary, it has the same level of resources and SVT has opened new local offices in expanding areas such as Helsingborg and Södertälje (Nygren & Appelgren, 2015).

The regional public service still has considerably fewer resources than local media, though, and it is in many ways dependent on the original news produced by local media outlets. In Helsingborg, for example, the regional public service (SR) produced 23 local news stories concerning the town over a two-week period, compared to the 255 articles produced by the daily local newspaper during the same period. For the regional public service (SVT) there were 51 local news items published on their website, and nearly half were crime and accidents (Martin & Skeppstedt, 2017). These figures are typical for other communities as well – local newspapers produce about ten times more news items than regional public services (Karlsson, 2016). Both SR and SVT take many of their news stories from more local news outlets down the “nutrition chain”. But at the same time, the regional public service is an important alternative to the large monopolies in printed local and regional press, often the only alternative.

The audience for public service regional news demonstrates the same pattern as printed newspapers. Daily use is declining for both radio and TV, but the audience share is still higher than for printed newspapers (Table 1). A strong majority of the audience over the age of 50 (60–70 per cent) use public service regional news at least three days a week, but the figure among users under the age of 50 is below 30 per cent. Nevertheless, the regional public service is regarded as an important source of information about

the local community. The figures show a minor decrease, but 55 (radio) and 69 (TV) per cent regard the regional public service as very or quite important (Table 3). It is clearly the most important source of news.

There are a number of potential reasons for the strong position of the regional public service. One is the strong general trust people have in public service media (Andersson & Weibull, 2017). Another is that both the broadcast and online news produced by the public service is free; they have not introduced paywalls as local newspapers have recently done.

Hyperlocal media

A new group of local media that is more local than traditional media and more semi-professional, in content as well as production, is the group of hyperlocal media (Williams & Harte, 2016). A mapping of hyperlocal news outlets in Sweden in 2016 shows that there are at least 300 free printed newspapers, about 50 paid-for local weeklies and about 90 independent local news sites. The market is showing large growth compared to in 2004 (Nygren et al., 2017). A survey of independent hyperlocals shows that the most important motives for starting a hyperlocal are dissatisfaction with the coverage in traditional media (“too little and too negative”) and a wish to contribute to the development of the area. The level of journalism and how often news is published in the hyperlocals vary substantially, from once a month in printed outlets to daily updates on news sites. Content is produced by both professionals and amateurs, and many hyperlocals define themselves as more patriotic than critical (Leckner et al., 2017).

In the SOM survey, hyperlocals are visible as local free newspapers and independent local online news. In general, hyperlocals are used less than legacy media, but their figures are stable. One-third of the audience reads a local free newspaper every week (Table 1), but this figure is clearly higher in communities without local legacy media offices. In these communities, 45 per cent read weekly newspapers for free every week, an indication that these hyperlocals tend to flourish when legacy media are not present (Table 4). These local weeklies are especially important in the three large, urban regions where subscription-based newspapers are weak and have low or no coverage of local news. But also in other places where the local office of the newspaper is closed, the use of free newspapers is on a higher level. For other kinds of local media platforms like public service radio and TV, it seems not to matter whether there are local journalists present or not. They are used to the same degree everywhere.

Different kinds of hyperlocals are present in all five case communities. In Strömsund, a free monthly newspaper covers local business, but it hardly fills the gap created with the decrease of local news in the local newspaper. In Sollefteå, a paid-for local weekly produces a lot of local news and complements the daily local. In Gnesta, a free newspaper every second week profiles itself as “the positive newspaper”, and the coverage is semi-professional and focused on positive local initiatives. In Helsingborg, the local free weekly newspaper is part of a chain of 30 weeklies owned by a Danish media company (Politiken), and the content is quite mainstream with a focus on crime and accidents online (easy and cheap news production).

Table 4. Regular use of local media in municipalities with differences in media presence (per cent)

	Municipalities with main newsrooms	Municipalities with local offices	Municipalities with no local media presence	Number of answers
Local subscription-based newspaper (paper)	41	45	35	10,812
Local subscription-based newspaper (online)	24	23	16	10,812
Other local online news	9	8	7	10,812
Local free newspaper (weekly)	31	28	45	1,828
Public service radio (SR P4)	41	48	44	10,812
Public service TV (SVT regional news)	50	52	50	10,812
Facebook (e.g. local groups)	46	49	45	1,827
Twitter	6	6	5	1,827
Other kinds of social media (e.g. local blogs)	15	17	14	1,827
Website of the local municipality	6	6	4	1,827

Source: The national SOM survey in 2017

Comments: The degree of local media presence is based on Nygren and colleagues (2017), and a special analysis was done combining data on media presence and SOM data on media use. "Regular use" implies use at least three days per week.

In Södertälje, other kinds of hyperlocals are present since the community is multicultural with 52 per cent of the residents having immigrant backgrounds (most of them from the Middle East). In Södertälje, only 22 per cent of households subscribe to the printed local *Länstidningen* (the figure was double that 20 years ago). Södertälje also has media for immigrants, for example Assyria TV, which covers the large Assyrian minority in Södertälje, and other channels for Syrians (Suryoyo TV with its main office in Södertälje). These ethnic media channels cannot be defined as local media, but they still cover issues that are important for large groups of local citizens in the local community (Heppling & Said, 2017).

In general, hyperlocal media in the five studied communities have a complementary function in relation to traditional media. They cover local issues that are not finding a place in traditional media, and their angle is often more local and "local-patriotic". Their share of the audience is lower, as is their volume of produced news (mostly weeklies), but their share of the audience is stable while legacy media's share is declining.

Local municipalities

Local municipalities have become increasingly important actors in the local media ecology. In a study covering all 290 municipalities, many stated that they have expanded their own channels as a result of the declining coverage in local newspapers (Tenor & Nygren, 2017). Between 2004 and 2014, the number of communicators employed by local authorities more than doubled and the number of journalists in local newspapers

decreased by 25 per cent (Sundling, 2015). Many municipalities have employed former journalists to produce local news for their websites. Regions like the large Västra Götaland region have also created their own media department to produce online media content for large audiences – text, audio and video (Rehnberg & Grafström, 2018).

All local municipalities have their own websites to communicate with local residents. They are not used much: only 6 per cent of respondents visit them three times a week or more (Table 1). Despite this, they are still regarded as important for giving useful information: 30 per cent of the respondents said that these websites are very or quite important for keeping up to date with the local community (Table 3). Local communicators say they try to fill the hole left from the closing of local newspaper offices, but they also admit they can never play the role of an independent watchdog on local power. Even with the frequent use of both websites and Facebook, local municipalities are still the voice of the local political power (Tenor & Nygren, 2017).

Other kinds of local actors also have an online presence – the local police, local associations for seniors, local sports clubs and other local civil groups – and provide local information.

Local social media networks

Alongside public service radio and TV, local social media networks have developed into the most frequently used local media platforms. In the SOM survey of 2017, 46 per cent of respondents said they use Facebook at least three days a week to keep informed about the local community (e.g. local groups and pages on Facebook), an increase of 5 percentage points since 2015 (Table 1). The use of Facebook as a local news platform is now higher on average than the use of both paper and online local newspapers. Other kinds of social media lag far behind: regular Twitter use is at 6 per cent and local blogs and websites are regularly used by 15 per cent.

Facebook is now also frequently used by people over the age of 50, although there is a small decrease among younger users. Nevertheless, 61 per cent of all respondents under the age of 30 use Facebook to follow their local community, compared with 10–15 per cent for legacy media (Table 2). Despite this, legacy media is still regarded as more important for staying informed about local society. Facebook is used frequently but it is less important, according to the SOM survey. This difference is shrinking, though, with a decrease for legacy media and slowly growing importance for Facebook (Table 3).

What are people doing on Facebook? Which functions is social media taking over from legacy media, and what role does the network play in local life? A new Norwegian study shows that the local newspaper and Facebook fill different needs. The newspaper is important for the emotional connection to the area and common experiences in the community. Facebook is more important for relationships with other people, that is, various forms of social relations. These functions are difficult to separate, but in a general sense the public sphere created by local newspapers is broader and more important for local identity, and Facebook is narrower in its reach and function (Paulsen Lie, 2018). At the same time, Facebook now provides many of the small news items that keep a local community together: birthdays, local events and discussions. In Norway, a recent survey showed that Facebook is the most widely used source of information about events in the local community (Olsen et al., 2018).

The SOM survey in 2017 had a question on the use of seven functions of Facebook from a local perspective. Among the respondents, 26 per cent said that they never use Facebook, and the remaining 74 per cent use Facebook as a local media platform for different reasons – both *passive* use like traditional media and more *active* use including production of content (Table 5). Among the respondents, 35 per cent said they use Facebook to stay up to date with the local community, and 24 per cent also click on links to news in local media at least three days a week. Among readers under the age of 30, more than twice as many read local news as links on Facebook instead of going directly to the news site of the local media.

The active use of Facebook from a local perspective has become more common, but it is still lower than the daily passive use of Facebook. Each week, 16 per cent of the responders publish pictures and text, 12 per cent discuss local issues and 28 per cent are looking for help. This active use is more common among the younger population; the older audience above the age of 50 is using Facebook passively in a way more similar to traditional local media.

Table 5. *Frequency of various activities in local social media groups, for example local Facebook groups (per cent)*

	Daily	5-6 d/w	3-4 d/w	1-2 d/w	More seldom	Never	Don't use social media	Total
Keeping up to date with what is going on in the local community	20	7	8	10	15	14	26	100
Getting information about local events	14	7	8	13	21	12	26	100
Clicking on links to news in local media	7	7	10	15	20	16	26	100
Buying and selling things privately	1	1	1	4	37	30	26	100
Looking for help and information	5	3	6	14	27	18	26	100
Commenting on and discussing local issues	2	1	3	6	30	33	26	100
Publishing own texts and pictures	2	2	3	9	32	16	26	100

Source: The national SOM survey in 2017.

Comments: The number of answers is 1,827, including the share of 26 per cent who answered that they do not use social media.

Facebook includes many different functions; it is a platform for local journalism produced by local media, but it is also a platform for people and groups outside of media. This is clearly visible in a mapping of local groups in the case studies. Some of the groups have general content, but most of them have some kind of niche profile:

- Small communities, villages and districts of towns have groups as common meeting places. For example, Gnesta, which has 11,000 inhabitants, has a local group “Gnesta together” with 6,000 members. These groups can be very active with 15–20 posts every day and long discussions in the commentaries.
- Local groups for buying/selling things privately often draw the largest number of members and updates. They are the new local market.

- Groups for local nostalgia are common, like “you know you are from Helsingborg if you...” Often many members, but a low frequency of updates.
- Local campaigns often use Facebook groups as organisers and platforms. Several such groups were found promoting town gardening and special roads for bicycles.
- Local associations have their own groups as a place to share information and report on activity in the organisation.
- Local actors, such as the municipality authorities, police, political parties and local media, often have their own pages on Facebook for distribution of information and as a platform for interactivity.

In important local and regional issues, a group on Facebook can develop into the central place for organising local opinion. In Sollefteå, a local Facebook group in 2017, to keep the hospital from closing down, gathered nearly 15,000 members, and between 60 and 70 updates were published daily during the most intense period of the conflict. The page functioned as a debate forum, a channel for spreading information, an organisation platform for resistance and a place to collect arguments in opposition to the closing. The group also integrated local media and distributed media content, and it became an important source for local journalists. The group was a crucial part of the campaign to confirm and strengthen the local struggle against the regional political level (Nordlund & Kramsjö, 2017).

Taken together, the SOM survey and the case studies show that Facebook is becoming an important media platform with many different functions. Facebook is the platform for information about local events and local social organisations as well as for keeping in contact with friends, distribution of local journalism and local markets. Facebook has also taken a large share of the local advertisements: in 2016, the giants Facebook and Google had revenues from digital advertisements in Sweden that were five times higher than those from digital ads in daily newspapers in Sweden (Ohlsson, 2017).

Conclusions

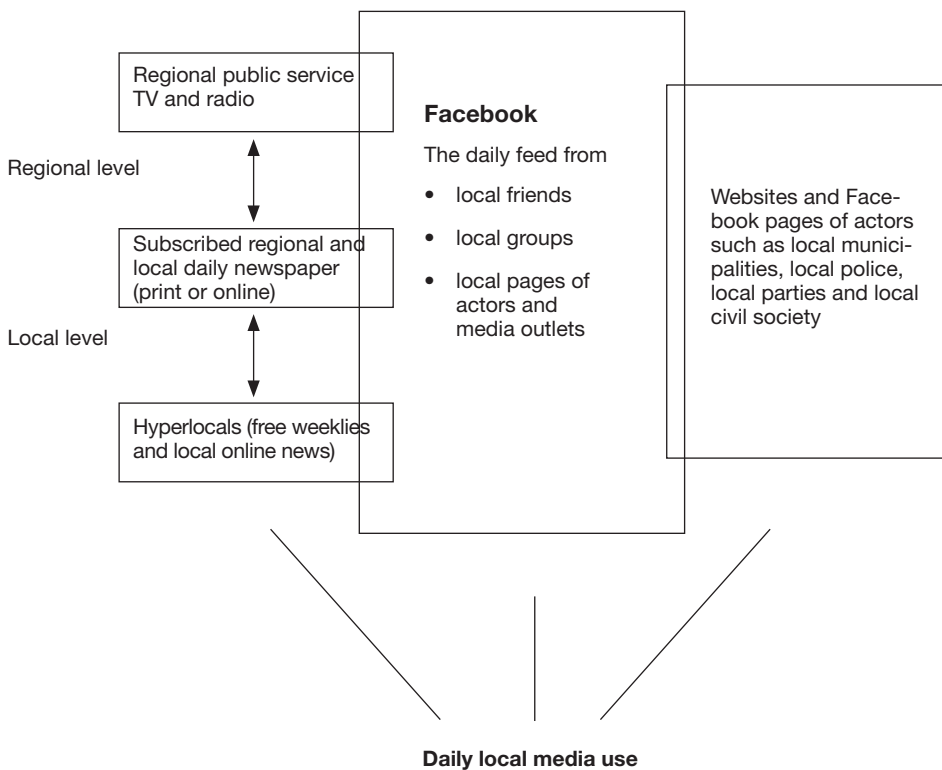
An ecological perspective moves research away from a media-centric approach and considers the perceptions and actions of other actors in the local communication. It moves our understanding of local news closer to the experiences of the audience often neglected by journalism research (Firmstone, 2016). The project on media ecology in Leeds emphasized that news is much more than a product delivered to the population: the city is imagined through the stories told and circulated, news binds people together and creates common understanding about the local community (Coleman et al., 2016).

The results from the SOM surveys and the case studies confirm this ecological perspective. People combine the use of different kinds of local media: legacy media is intertwined with social media and together with other actors they create a local media flow. In today’s media ecology, we are surrounded by news in our daily communication in social media – news has become ambient (Hermida, 2016). This is also visible in the local media ecologies, where journalism, discussions, marketing and personal relationships are mixed in the daily feed in social media and in different types of free media. Local and global are mixed; social relationships, news and discussions about local issues are intertwined in this media flow. Legacy media has a place in the flow, but the close

relationship between local media and the audience becomes weaker when people meet the local newspaper more often as links on a Facebook page.

The results from the 2015 and 2017 SOM surveys on media use show rapidly changing patterns, especially when it comes to local newspapers traditionally being a key actor in the local media ecology. At the same time, social media like Facebook has become one of the most widely used platforms for keeping updated about the local community. This development restructures the positions of different kinds of local media, developing a complicated web of relationships and dependencies. Online platforms create a “hybrid media system”, where old media is still in place but is adapting to the new conditions (Chadwick, 2013). The strength of the groups of actors differs between communities, but a general picture can be visualised as in Figure 1:

Figure 1. *The centrality of Facebook in local media ecologies*



Comments: Local media ecologies revolve around Facebook as the square where all kinds of actors meet. But what the individual media user sees depends on the algorithms of Facebook and what kind of content the user finds outside the Facebook universe directly from other media platforms and actors. There is also a flow between news outlets on different levels in both directions. Media and other actors use Facebook to find sources and stories, as a platform for interaction and for distribution of content.

In the centre is *Facebook*, which serves as a public space connecting other actors. Facebook is used by all actors in the local media ecology for both interaction with the audience and as a publication platform. Facebook is now more widely used than the local newspaper for staying informed about the local community, but what is presented in the feed for each user depends on the algorithms of Facebook. The direct connection between media actors and the audience is broken when it goes through Facebook.

Traditional local media firms have based their legitimacy on their role in the local society – their role is to create a local identity and act as independent watchdogs of power. Social media does not have this kind of institutional legitimacy, especially when it comes to its role as a platform for news (Napoli, 2015). When Facebook changed its algorithms in the autumn of 2017 to present fewer links to legacy media, the decision was taken in the US but consequences were felt all the way down to local communities in Sweden. At the same time, revenue from advertisements, which has been the basis for local journalism for decades, is now disappearing to giants like Facebook and Google.

Other creatures in this local media ecology are still alive and struggling for life in this Darwinist world. They have survived, but they have changed:

Local newspapers are still a “keystone media” (Nielsen, 2015), producing a large share of original news. Even if the daily use of the printed paper is in sharp decline and the use of the online platform of local newspapers is refusing to rise, people still regard the local newspaper as more important than Facebook when it comes to being informed about local society. The local newspaper still has a legitimacy as a trustworthy local actor, even if power in the newspapers has moved to large groups of regional media.

Public service still has more users and a much larger legitimacy than Facebook when it comes to importance for staying informed about local issues. Public service is at the top of the pyramid of the news ecology, but in news production is inferior to local newspapers. However, its relative role is growing as local newspapers are forced to close local newsrooms and become more regional. Public service also offers local news for free while newspapers put up paywalls.

Hyperlocal media (free local weeklies and independent local online news) is growing and, in some areas where traditional newspapers are weak, contributes to the local media ecology. The use of hyperlocals is stable from a general perspective, but sustainability is low for many hyperlocals (Leckner et al., 2017).

Strong actors like *local authorities* (municipalities) are developing their own communication channels online and in social media. Also, other kinds of actors (police, local associations, activist groups, sports clubs, etc.) are developing their own channels and interact with their audience on Facebook pages.

Facebook has become the strongest change factor in the local media ecosystems since the introduction of TV. Facebook is changing not only the economic conditions but the whole concept of local media. Facebook has become the viral place where every actor in local society has to be present and visible because that is where the audience is. In the Facebook feed, local journalism is mixed with all other kinds of local interaction and local campaigning, local marketing and local rumours. Facebook is a parasitic animal in the local media ecology, eating the economic resources (incomes from advertising), contributing only a public space. On the other hand, this new public sphere can give social actors a better chance of being heard and influencing public debate, bypassing traditional local media. On Facebook, local media users adapt their feed to their interests, mixing local, national and global news and relations. But behind these individual feeds, Facebook is the network operator controlling the network through hidden algorithms. All other actors have to be on Facebook, but still try to manage their own platforms and direct contact with audiences.

In the end, the role of journalism within local media ecologies seems to be diminishing. The result for the individual citizen is a more diverse information provision when

news becomes ambient in the social media flow, more possibilities for their own expression but also less professionally produced journalism. The question for future research is what this development brings to the sense of local community. If broad platforms of legacy media are replaced by individually designed social media feeds, this will also bring consequences for the sense of belonging to a community (Hess & Waller, 2017). Local news is still important for people, but the platforms offering this news also influence the understanding of the local community.

Note

1. The SOM survey has been conducted yearly since 1986 at the University of Gothenburg. It covers attitudes in current social and political issues and media use. It is a representative national survey with (in 2017) 10,812 answers in six different subsurveys. The response rate was in total 55 per cent in 2017 (Andersson et al., 2018).

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