Chapter 9

The missing link

Blind spots in Europe's local and regional news provision

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This chapter examines the recent and ongoing developments in the field of regional and local news provision in Europe, investigating the circumstances under which the latter contributes to creating and/or reducing inequalities. We ask ourselves: Does online offer a true alternative to offline when it comes to local and regional news? What about the "hyperlocals"? Do these new online initiatives, driven by entrepreneurs who are not necessarily journalists, offer an answer to legacy media's retreat from the centre of local communities? This chapter concentrates on editorial choices, business models and innovation (im)possibilities revolving around regional and local journalism. In particular, our lens focuses on the Dutch experience with local and regional news provision as our case in point. The Dutch experience and other examples in Europe show us that, so far, new media initiatives have not filled the gaps left behind by traditional media, thereby increasing local and regional news inequality. Consequently, there is a danger that technology organizations (often not European) will colonize the local territory.

This book deals with several types and dimensions of media inequality. In this chapter, we look at what happens when media inequalities occur at the local and regional levels and the possible negative effects that these may have on audiences. We provide an empirical analysis measuring inequality in regional and local news media and offer ways to promote equality in news provision so that people can act to their full capacity (see also Therborn, 2013) by taking part in public deliberation and practising democratic control. This is the goal. In reality, local and regional journalism is withering away, while government communication aimed at cities and townships is turning more professional, thanks to ever more competent communication collaborators. Furthermore, local politicians developing information channels of their own through social media are becoming less dependent on the local media. Although digital technology is available as a fourth power to innovate locally, it seems to be increasingly difficult to assure polyvocality and control over local and regional governors at this scale.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the recent and ongoing developments in the field of regional and local news provision in Europe, investigating the circumstances under which the latter contributes to creating and/or reducing inequalities. Furthermore, the chapter will study the role of digital technologies in this process. The terms "regional" and "local" are open to multiple interpretations, covering print, broadcast and digital media. Our focus is on news media operating at the sub-national level. When it comes to giving voice to communities at the regional or local level across Europe, strong differences regarding the availability and implementation of legislation for regional broadcast media exist across the EU member states. National sovereignty is full in Europe in this sector (Cappello, 2016), as media pluralism has always been excluded from the audiovisual media services directive. Moreover, licensing agreements for broadcasting services and media ownership have never been subjected to harmonization efforts (Cappello, 2016).

Regional media have been affected seriously by the financial crisis. This has had dramatic results for regional pluralism and participatory democracy, because regional journalism is expected to facilitate the "public discussion of, and engagement with, regional politics and issues" (McGonagle & Van Eijk, 2016: 11). In 2009, a Dutch government commission (the so-called Brinkman Commission), looking into the future of journalism, came to alarming conclusions regarding the state of regional and local journalism in the Netherlands. While national dailies suffered from a clear-cut decline in circulation and loss of advertisement revenues, regional dailies seemed to have received an even harder blow. Due to ongoing business restructuring, increasing numbers of journalists were being made redundant. Consequently, not helped by a hostile economic context, what was once a tight network of local "watchdogs" was slowly but surely being replaced by an accumulating number of "blind spots" and "missing links" in municipalities no longer covered by a professional journalistic presence. Differences in inequality regarding local media provision can be predicted by the type of region (e.g., Nygren et al., 2017). Urban areas with dense populations tend to be serviced by traditional local media as well as digital platforms. In contrast, sparsely populated areas often lack local media provision, traditional as well as digital local media. In other words, nowadays, some regions receive little or no attention from journalists. This lack of proximity between regional journalistic media and their target communities is also political in nature (McGonagle & Van Eijk, 2016), leading to far less plurality in local media or no plurality at all. Although we acknowledge that regional journalism is not only about politics, as much content concerns human interest, court cases and miscellaneous stories, we refer to McQuail (in this book), who establishes a close relationship between equality and objectivity, the foremost norm of journalism. Hence, we ask ourselves: Can these blind spots gradually be replaced by other local media infrastructures, which take on the role of a local watchdog? What context proves to be a more advantageous breeding ground for an emerging alternative news infrastructure so that greater equality in the news provision at the local and regional level can be promoted?

As some of the most important decisions affecting our communities are made elsewhere, the intrinsic motivation to follow local politics is reduced. Nevertheless, there remains a clear need for a "glocal" take on issues (i.e. focusing on the local impact of global trends), which comes with a challenge: namely, the ability to cover local affairs in ways that resonate with the audience (Nielsen, 2015). News makers should also take into account the varying search strategies and news consumption patterns of audiences. These are mainly threefold: direct to the brand or title, via search engines and on social media. Such strategies operate alongside one another but differ widely across age groups and across countries. Well-to-do regional and local journalistic platforms extended to social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) help to foster public discussion. However, growing audience fragmentation is taking place, with bigger collectivities falling apart in smaller communities and with a platform for every "niche" and "filter bubbles" possibly becoming bigger and more resilient. Moreover, traditional institutions are losing trust, while individual experts and peers are gaining authority and the wisdom of the crowd wins over traditional experts. In such a context, regional news media could reclaim and enhance citizen involvement by adopting citizen-centred practices with news consumers turning into news producers (e.g., Hermans et al., 2014; Rosen, 2008).

Against this background of societal trends, the unfavourable development of consumption patterns and the question of economic viability, we ask ourselves how these general trends translate into news production at the regional and local levels. More concretely, what is the current state of regional and local news provision? Which topics tend to be covered? Does online offer a true alternative to offline when it comes to regional and local news? What about the *hyperlocals*: do these new online initiatives, driven by entrepreneurs who are not necessarily journalists, offer an answer to legacy media's retreat from the centre of local communities? This chapter's focus is on editorial choices, business models and innovation (im)possibilities revolving around regional and local journalism. In particular, it concentrates on the Dutch experience, with local and regional news provision as a case in point. This chapter offers a quick review of several studies conducted by the Netherlands Journalism Fund aimed at mapping both the quantity and the quality of locally or regionally oriented online and offline news media in the Netherlands. A distinction was made between hyperlocals and news aggregators, examining the nature and the diversity of the news content provided as well as the size of the community for which it caters.

Local editorial anchoring: Out of touch?

Local media suggest local editorial anchoring and a news media product that is essentially meaningful and relevant to citizens of a specific geographic region within a nation (Engan, 2015). First and foremost, local journalism has been fed by local newspapers. The most important role of local media is to hold power to account and

to keep people informed about public affairs. This role is associated with the notion of journalism as a *watchdog* (e.g., Hanitzsch, 2011). Local media represent their area and help people to imagine themselves as part of a community, connected through their shared local news medium and bound together by more than geographic proximity (Nielsen, 2015). Local journalists may present themselves as gatekeepers of the news, but leading policy makers and some activist groups may feel that they have considerable influence on the news media agenda. Independent local news media function as a democratic keystone in the community. However, this independence does not automatically ensure that journalists are in touch with citizens' changing needs. Qualitative research conducted with local television audiences in the Netherlands shows that people expect local media to perform as follows (Costera Meijer, 2010: 327):

1. supply reliable, fast, unbiased background information on community matters;

2. foster social integration;

3. offer inspiration and good examples;

4. ensure representation of different groups and neighbourhoods;

5. raise local intra-community understanding between groups;

6. share a civic memory of local affairs;

7. promote a sense of belonging to the community.

Consequently, when a community loses its local news media, it also loses the institutional memory to raise the profile of the community, to inform citizens and to campaign on issues of local relevance (Currah, 2009). Therefore, the emerging news gap is a serious threat to democracy. Empirical studies have shown that local news media play a vital role in public life and political debate, enhancing political knowledge and participation (e.g., van Kerkhoven, 2016). Furthermore, with the decline of local newspapers, the sense of community may disappear. The quality of local journalism has already been studied extensively. On the one hand, local journalism is seen as vital for the creation and maintenance of a democratic political and public arena and a general sense of social cohesion and public connection, as it provides information about local public affairs (e.g., Aldridge, 2007; Couldry et al., 2007). Moreover, local journalism holds local elites accountable, provides a forum for discussion and ties communities together (Nielsen, 2015). As social action arises at the community level, local media have a responsibility to motivate citizens to be involved in their environment and seem to be more proficient than national media in doing so (e.g., McLeod et al., 1996). Currah (2009) states that local media might survive through digitization because of these functions in the community. The main question, however, remains: How do local news media succeed in connecting with their audiences?

Local journalism has been criticized on a regular basis for not achieving its own aspirations, as journalists often uncritically follow the local elites ("the watchdog that

didn't bark"). Consequently, as controversy is frequently avoided, local journalism is perceived as being artificial and too deferential to local elites (Nielsen, 2015). Furthermore, local media coverage has been subject to much criticism for not being local enough and for prioritizing soft news over more substantial coverage of local problems (Franklin, 2006). As journalists aim for a large audience, they have to adapt their media offerings to the public's taste. As a result, the social role of journalism is undermined and overshadowed by the priorities of the market (e.g., Oosterbaan & Wansink, 2008). The reality of local journalism undoubtedly lies in the combination of the two perspectives (Nielsen, 2015). Although local journalism plays its role sub-optimally, the role that it plays is important.

Innovation in the region

Local media companies are suffering from the present economic rationalization, such as business restructuring. All of them have been occupied with cutting costs and layoffs. Two innovation approaches are put to the test as driving forces of innovation: 1) convergence and 2) alternative local news business models.

Van Kranenburg (2005) recognizes convergence as follows: 1) selling the same product to a larger public and 2) selling more products to the current audience. A good example of this scale approach, which allows for risk spreading and more flexibility, is that of the Norwegian media conglomerate Schibsted; its newspapers *Aftenposten*, *Bergens Tidende*, *Stavanger Aftenblad* and *Faedrelandsvennen* have joined editorial forces to take advantage of the economies of scale that editorial and commercial collaboration can offer (van Kerkhoven, 2016). Schibsted is also a typical example of a company selling more products to the same people, as it has managed to centralize the advertising sales for its different news brands.

Furthermore, local journalism is changing as part of a more widespread structural revolution of the media environment, driven mainly by the upswing of digital media, which have affected both journalists' work and news content. If screen devices (i.e. televisions, PCs, smartphones, etc.) prove to be the only sustainable media in the near future, important transformations for local news media may be required, as these channels are general as well as global. They correspondingly do not favour journalism in the printed press, and they convey content and standards other than the specifically local (Engan, 2015).

Convergence may affect local media companies in multiple ways. This ongoing transformation comprises changes not only in the newsroom organization and structure and the journalistic routines but also in the audience relations (Deuze, 2007; Hermans et al., 2014). New company structures might offer synergy. The profit derived from control over diverse media outings could lead to more efficiency and in so doing to cutting costs. To keep the tradition of investigative journalism alive, some local media have constructions to allow their journalists to investigate deeply the actions and

events within their community. For example, a Dutch local newspaper, *Dagblad van het Noorden*, has an editorial office of three journalists. Each of them combines four weeks of research with two weeks of reporting. Thus, investigative journalism remains possible. Another example of convergence can be found in the United Kingdom. In February 2017, the public service broadcaster, the BBC, announced a partnership with the entire local news sector: from main press publishers to news agencies, commercial broadcasters, hyperlocals and local television. The service will be funded by the BBC, but the network of reporters will be employed by other news organizations. These journalists will report on local public affairs, not only filling their own medium but also adding this coverage to a central system, which will be accessible for all local partners. A similar British initiative is the *Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, in which a network of journalists and tech experts across the UK works together on investigative journalism in local communities. The aim is to combine and support the skills and expertise of British journalists and technologists to cover news stories that are too time consuming or technologically complex to be covered alone.

Furthermore, there is the prospect of expansion into new markets and the broadening of the media scope to attract a new audience (Currah, 2009). Finally, not only the way in which the public is informed and entertained but also the method for communicating and sharing content has changed (Nielsen, 2015). New communication forms, such as social media, facilitate audience production of information and provide journalists with more opportunities for interaction with relevant others. Thus, these new channels enable relatively easy input for stories from a variety of sources and perspectives. Two-way communication means an improved understanding of the audience's needs (Jenkins, 2006), and, as the consumers are changing, advertisers are using cross-media platforms too (Thurman & Herbert, 2008). To enable convergence, it is necessary to create partnerships with other media organizations to provide and exchange news content as well as cross-media production (Deuze, 2004). In the regional media centres in the Netherlands, in which several public and private regional and local media platforms collaborate in an innovative way on news production, the freed editorial capacity paves the way for research, current affairs and opinion pieces.

Although various local and regional media have already experimented with the opportunities of converging to cross-media publishing (i.e. the same content on different platforms), convergence may also be assumed to compromise the quality of journalism. It might destroy craftsmanship, because former news text writers may be forced to learn new skills, such as technological skills. This may undermine basic journalistic skills and standards (e.g., Bromley, 1997). Thanks to a remarkable number of digital newsgathering and publishing tools that are now available (e.g., Twitter, Wordpress or Tumblr), many of these local news media are able to gather, analyse and publish local news.

Due to crowdfunding, *Mediacités* in France was launched as a counter-reaction to the lack of regional investigative journalism in the national press outside Paris. This online platform investigates political, economic, social and cultural powers in the

region, with a focus on four cities: Lille, Lyon, Nantes and Toulouse. Furthermore, in the larger French cities, despite some isolated initiatives, the media landscape is almost always dominated by a single newspaper, with little focus on investigative journalism (Mediacités, 2018). *Correctiv* (correctiv.org) in Germany is an independent investigative journalism platform collaborating with several regional newspapers that also regularly focuses on local issues: in its *reporters' factory*, it trains citizens to collect local information and become active in local journalism.

Hyperlocals

A promising innovation approach next to convergence is an *alternative local news business model*. Freedman and colleagues (2010) proposed the development of local news hubs, which could act as news production centres with shared resources as well as training centres through collaboration with universities and research institutions. Such local news hubs could reinvent local newsrooms with a business model that supports local news in the twenty-first century. Online news models will play a leading role in local news markets, as they are more flexible and cheaper regarding production and distribution (Nielsen, 2015).

The web has supported a new generation of community-oriented local news outlets. High hopes are set on new initiatives, the so-called *hyperlocals* (online local initiatives that produce and distribute news gathered in and focused on a designated geographic area) and the locally oriented *pure players* (i.e. born-digital local news media including for-profit, not-for-profit and citizen journalism initiatives) (e.g. Smyrnaios et al., 2015; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2015). Metzgar and colleagues (2011: 785) demonstrated that "hyperlocal-ness does not exist as a solitary point on a single measure". They suggested that "it is a composite of measures on a variety of continua", focusing on geographical elements, community orientation, original news reporting, origins on the web, filling perceived gaps and civic engagement. Hyperlocals range enormously in reach, type, purpose, aims and regularity of reporting (Moore, 2015). A hyperlocal site is not just a blog (Lowrey, 2012); hyperlocal news operations need to be regular and frequent and to follow a few basic journalistic rules and professional standards (e.g., Anderson, 2013). However, van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2015) reported that hyperlocals are not particularly concerned about journalistic ethical codes and standards. Journalistic practices are rather instrumental instead of conditional. Consequently, hyperlocals risk losing credibility and public trust.

Inside journalistic start-ups, daily operations include interaction and permanent adjustment between journalists and a particular segment of the public that can hold the role of expert, informant and analyst as well as reader (Smyrnaios et al., 2015). This segment of the public, far more active than the average citizen, is predominantly highly educated, possesses strong cultural capital and is intensely interested in politics (Smyrnaios et al., 2015). This type of journalism has a higher degree of accountability

towards the readers than the mainstream media, engages in permanent discussions with the audience and is more flexible concerning time constraints. Most hyperlocals are committed to producing news that fulfils the watchdog function of holding elites to account. A UK survey showed that many hyperlocals are performing similar democratic functions as local newspapers (Williams et al., 2015): 81 per cent of the hyperlocals covered local council meetings; 79 per cent reported about local government planning issues; and 75 per cent covered local businesses. Nonetheless, Smyrnaios and his colleagues (2015) identified two important shortcomings. Firstly, the majority of the population is not yet familiar with hyperlocals, limiting their influence in comparison with traditional local media. Secondly, purely local players mostly fail to break even, certainly if their business model is based on traditional advertising or subscriptions. Successful purely local players instead draw on non-journalistic activities, such as PR film production and advertorials, endangering their independence from local business and policy makers (Smyrnaios et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the quality of non-professional contributions is a point of discussion. Although journalists consider themselves as representing the public interest, they are not engaged directly with the public (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). For example, mainstream news media are rather sceptical about the quality of non-professional contributions and only allow audience comments for publication and content in specific sections (Paulussen & Ugille, 2008). Moreover, the comments from the audience on online news articles are rarely replied to by journalists or local elites (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015). At best, these are horizontal conversations between citizens, but often the comments are not heard at all. Mainstream media have been slow to embrace the opportunities to interact and to host conversations generated by citizens (Paulussen et al., 2007).

The future of local journalism

So far, it is unclear whether the new forms of local digital media can countervail the decline of local newspapers. Some have expressed considerable optimism, arguing that the digital environment will provide the basis for journalistic innovation at the local level (e.g. Waldman, 2011) and has "the potential to support and broaden the range of local media content" (Ofcom, 2012: 103). Nielsen (2015), however, stated that the digital growth has far from made up for what has been lost on the print side of business. Whereas broadcasting has so far weathered the digital evolution better, television and radio are more often organized regionally than locally (Nielsen, 2015).

Traditional as well as new news services are still a long way from establishing sustainable business models for local news provision, partly because there has been insufficient innovation (Moore, 2015). Public policy towards local news is focused on managing the decline rather than enabling transition and experimentation. However, there is opportunity for innovation in local and regional journalism, due to a myriad

of digital newsgathering and publishing tools. Moreover, Thicket (2014) identified a significant increase in the number of citizens searching for local news content online and on mobile devices.

Hyperlocals may thus play a major role in compensating for the decline of local newspapers and become the key actor in holding public authorities accountable in the future. However, to be an effective watchdog, hyperlocals need support (Moore, 2014). Therefore, US foundations, such as the John & James Knight Foundation and the MacArthur, Rockefeller, Open Society and Ford Foundations, have supported innovation at the local level. Furthermore, private funders have invested in digital services that connect citizens within a community.

Over the last decades, foundations, philanthropists as well as governments have increasingly recognized the opportunities of funding contests. McKinsey and Company (2009) found that competitive funding is a powerful instrument for change and innovation and identified seven reasons for why: identifying excellence, influencing public perception, focusing communities on specific problems, mobilizing new talent, strengthening problem-solving communities, educating individuals and mobilizing capital.

Many European countries make public policy interventions at the local level and provide subsidies for the coverage of local news. Some EU countries maintain discounted VAT rates; France, for example, has approved legislation to align its discounted VAT rate of 2.1 per cent for newspapers with its rate for the digital press. In the UK, print newspapers benefit from a VAT zero rating. Hyperlocals do not receive the same subsidy and are taxed at the normal VAT rate (ENPA, 2014). More recently, as of October 2018, the European Council allows member states to apply reduced, super-reduced or zero VAT rates to electronic publications, thereby allowing the alignment of VAT rates for electronic and physical publications. This new reality is provisional in anticipation of a "definitive" VAT system.

Another policy option would be to assist charitably funded media (Townend, 2015). Charitable status brings both financial and reputational benefits. Charity law in most European countries does not recognize journalism as an explicit purpose, but there is no prohibition on producing media or news content as part of a company's charitable activities. Local journalism and many hyperlocals are undoubtedly making important contributions to information, knowledge and democratic accountability. These civic gains need to be recognized through a more flexible charitable system that would both facilitate the growth of new and existing local news services and boost new initiatives (Townend, 2015).

Another example of growing *hyperlocals* is the Swedish local media landscape, which has become more complex in the digital era. The decline in centrally produced traditional media has affected local journalism in Sweden, and local newsrooms have closed down (Nygren et al., 2017). While traditional local media lick their wounds, new types of local media are growing. However, most *hyperlocals* grow in places where traditional media are present. In other words, these *hyperlocals* are only partly filling

the gaps left behind by the traditional media. Overall, the traditional media still offer good coverage in many places in Sweden, although the number of newsrooms is declining. Consequently, the future is not clear. In some parts of Sweden, the expansion of hyperlocals is making important contributions to the local democratic infrastructure. However, sparsely populated parts of Sweden often do not have local news providers, either on traditional platforms or on digital ones (Nygren et al., 2017). Understandably, urban, densely populated areas offer a better economic basis.

Case in point: Local news production in the Netherlands

In at least five Dutch cities, the regional newspaper has ceased to exist in recent years (affecting about 2% of all Dutch citizens), and, in almost one out of three cities, there is no longer an active local radio and television station. This evoked a central question: How many locally or regionally oriented news media are there actually in the Netherlands? More precisely, how many different news media channels can citizens on average choose from to obtain information about their municipality? Taking an interest in these developments, the Netherlands Journalism Fund has been conducting several research projects into the quantity and quality of the local news supply as well as the demand.

### *A study on the news infrastructure in regions*

First, the Netherlands Journalism Fund monitored all the existing online and offline news media channels that could potentially provide local and regional news in all of the 418 municipalities in 2012.[1] In an average Dutch municipality, one can turn to 28.6 different channels for news about one's community (see Figure 1). Traditional offline media account for around one-third: 10 different media that potentially produce local news can be found outside the online world. Every municipality has on average 1.2 regional newspapers, 1.9 television channels, 2.2 radio stations and 4.3 local weeklies (some to be paid for and others free). Earlier research on the topic in the Netherlands showed similar numbers, although in 2005 there were still 11 traditional offline media per municipality, indicating a decline of 8 per cent. Furthermore, the study showed that on average 18.6 online news channels made up about two-thirds off all news channels. This is a huge number, considering that none of them existed a couple of years ago.

However, not all of the online channels provide news that has not been covered by traditional offline news channels: 6.6 out of them are online equivalents of newspapers and television/radio broadcasters. This leaves a staggering total of 12 independent online journalistic initiatives that are unaffiliated with traditional news channels. Here is the catch: only 1.5 are so-called *hyperlocals*. The other 10.5 online news chan-

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1. In 2012, there were still 418 municipalities in the Netherlands; due to government-issued aggregates, the current number is 388.

Figure 1. Local watchdogs: Breakdown of news media
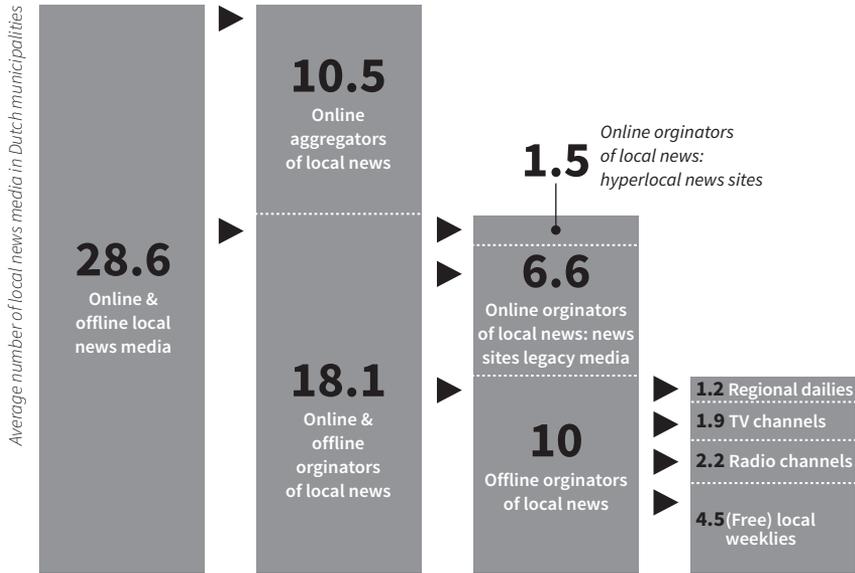
Source: Dutch Journalism Fund/www.svdj.nl

nels are *aggregators*: websites that, be it manually or automatically, crawl through the internet in search of news.

Hyperlocals turned out to be difficult to classify: some of them produce highly original content, daily updated material and hard news stories with professional journalistic standards, while others are a different ballgame entirely. Hyperlocals cannot always be seen as fully journalistic but usually involve benevolent amateurs who make news stories because they feel some sort of obligation towards their community. Due to lacking datelines, dates, sources and so on, some websites had to be dismissed because they were simply not produced along journalistic lines. As a result, only one out of every three *hyperlocals* could be indexed as original content creators.

The study revealed a trend of declining offline news channels and an increase in online news channels, although most of them did not create original content and did not contribute to the diversity of local news. In contrast, the ratio of original versus copied content has worsened considerably in recent years. If solely looking at original content, there are on average only 11.5 news channels, both online and offline, in each municipality. Why is this number so low? Most traditional media still see their online output as secondary, often resulting in them putting minimally adjusted offline content on their website. Thus, while a regional newspaper could potentially provide original content both on- and offline, in reality it publishes almost entirely the same material. This applies to local weeklies and local (commercial) radio as well as television stations.

So far, new media initiatives do not fill the gaps left behind by traditional media. On the contrary, in municipalities with a strong journalistic network and multiple traditional players, new initiatives like *hyperlocals* are more likely to sprout, in accordance with the so-called *flywheel* theory, stating that "news attracts news".

One of the surprising results of the Netherlands Journalism Fund's research in 2012 was that the northern provinces of the Netherlands had on average almost twice as many news channels providing unique content than the provinces in the south. Why is there such a huge difference? More importantly, what does it mean?

To gain a firmer grip on the quality of regional and local news, all online news stories during 1 week in a sample of 80 municipalities were indexed. More specifically, the focus was on the watchdog function of the regional and local press. The subjects of this research were the websites of regional and local dailies, regional and local weeklies, regional and local broadcast stations and *hyperlocals*. Only media that produce unique content were taken into account for this part of the research. The central question was as follows: How many news productions do we come across in locally oriented media in an average week in 80 cities, and, more specifically, in how many of them does the local government play an active role?

The sample contained more than 5,000 news articles. About 400 of them (accounting for about 8 per cent) turned out to be non-unique – that is, not self-written or produced – material that was either blatantly copied from (local government) websites or minimally rewritten articles from other third parties. The remaining 4,627 news articles were original.

A total of 791 news items (17%) addressed local governmental issues. Furthermore, we found that 70 of the news items were *news-in-brief* – specifically short, basic news articles containing typically what/where/when core information. Not surprisingly, the length of those articles was limited, not even surpassing the 150 words mark, and 1 out of every 10 news items turned out to be a more serious background piece, containing 400 words or more. Additionally, interviews, reports, announcements alongside commentaries, columns and letters to the editor were identified. All those genres together added up to a little less than 20 per cent of the total.

About a dozen different types of subjects were identified, including culture, safety, sports, health care, traffic, housing, economy, governance, education, employment, political parties, finance, immigration and science. The vast majority of the news items – almost two-thirds – dealt either with sport, culture or safety.

City size

There seems to be a direct correlation between the population size of a city and the amount of news articles found, which raised the following question: To what extent does population size coincide with the amount of articles?

One could argue that larger cities by definition mean more activity. One is more likely to find hospitals, schools, universities, headquarters, institutions and, last but

not least, editorial offices of newspapers in large cities or regional capitals than in smaller cities and more rural areas. Those institutions generate news and logically turn a city into a "news machine".

Large cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants have on average 215 news items per week; 36 of them concern the affairs of local government. Readers in cities with 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants see half that amount of articles (98 and 16). In the smallest subject categories, we find almost no news articles written at all. What emerges is an online journalistic wasteland in many smaller municipalities in the Netherlands. In some cities, only 4 articles were found in a whole week, and none of them dealt with local governmental issues. Clearly, there is a direct relation between the city size and the amount of original news content generated (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Average amount of news items per municipality (2013)
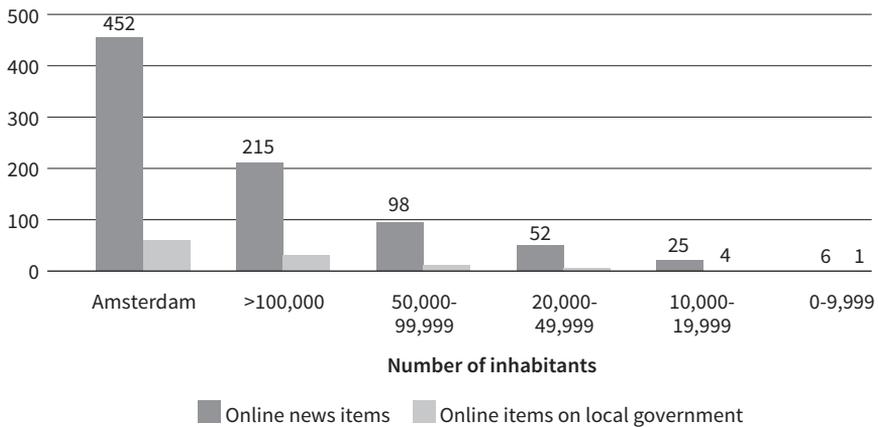
Regional versus local

Regional newspapers and broadcasters are retreating from rural areas, mostly due to cutbacks and reorganizations. Regional media can no longer penetrate the thinnest capillaries of our journalistic bloodstream. One of the particularly interesting issues was the relation between regional and local news media. Does the theory of communicating vessels apply in this situation? Are municipalities devoid of regional news media seeing an increase in local news media or are the latter absent as well?

A significant causal link was found between the two different types of news media. If regional media provide less news, the chances of finding local media that produce original content decrease as well, and vice versa. This is true for news in general and particularly for news on government issues, advocating the preservation, expansion and strengthening of existing media networks. Concluding, the media still produce more offline content than online. Offline media are rapidly losing terrain and subscribers,

while online media are still struggling to break even, let alone make a profit. Similar to local and smaller media, hyperlocals also appear in regions where regional and/or larger media are already active.

Follow-up research combining news supply and audience use

In 2014, follow-up research commissioned by the Netherlands Journalism Fund was conducted in which both offline and online local news platforms were taken into account. The most prominent result of 2012, that is, the near-absence of local news (especially on politics) in smaller municipalities, was used as a starting point for further exploration. Two periods were chosen for data collection: one constructed week in February–March and a second one in September–October. To gain an indicative view of the Netherlands, 11 big cities (>50,000 inhabitants) and 15 smaller municipalities (<50,000 inhabitants) were selected. First, all local news items were labelled with regard to the subject matter covered (e.g. economics, education, environment, etc.). Second, all news items that concerned local politics were labelled according to the journalistic styles (short news, background article, interview and opinion) and the sources used by the author (politician, businessman, civilian, etc.). In addition to analysing the news content, the consumption of local news was mapped in all of the 26 towns. The study generated the following results: background stories on local politics could only be found in dailies, and, while inhabitants of big towns saw about four of these on a weekly basis, their counterparts in small towns at most came across one background story per week. This evidence points to a discrepancy between a greater need for local content in small municipalities and a considerably thinner supply.

Discussion

The Dutch experience, as well as other examples in Europe, shows us that, so far, new media initiatives have not filled the gaps left behind by traditional media. On the contrary, in municipalities with a strong journalistic network and multiple traditional players, new initiatives like *hyperlocals* are more likely to sprout. The *flywheel* theory turns out to find strong support: "news creates and attracts news". If, for instance, a smaller city lacks a regional daily, it is also less likely to find a hyperlocal in that city. This finding contrasts the *communicating vessels* theory, arguing that, in grey zones with fewer news producers, others will automatically fill that vacuum. This theory was not supported by the Dutch evidence.

A range of positive interventions to address the growing democratic deficit has already been proposed, for example establishing a contestable fund for news, allowing news organizations to establish themselves as charities, creating news hubs and hastening the release of open data. Local journalists now have access to amounts of

open data that were previously unavailable or limitedly accessible (Moore, 2015). This lowers the cost of performing local journalism in terms of finance as well as time. In 2013, the UK set an example in making government data free due to legislation to safeguard the release of data across local governments (Davies, 2013). However, compared with the US, where foundations and private investors have filled the subsidy gap, most innovators in European member states have been starved of funds and the capacity to innovate (Moore, 2015). Hence, the experimentation power is limited in scope and the transition from print to digital is running too slowly. The current differences in VAT regimes within the same markets are not helpful either. If governments want to stimulate online publications, the VAT rates of print and e-publications should be aligned. Preferably the lowest VAT rate should be applied to create a level playing field and foster content diversity.

Consequently, there is a danger that technology organizations (often not European) will colonize the local territory. Digital intermediaries, such as Google and Facebook, have no ambition to perform the public service watchdog function and could thus accelerate the decline in local media. They could also finance experimentation aimed at finding a business model to support local news, and sometimes this does occur. One example is the Amsterdam-based *Bureau voor Lokale Zaken* (Bureau for Local Issues), which, with a starting fund from the Digital News Initiative Fund (Google), became a prototype of a digital online collaborative dashboard, meant to foster the collaboration between local investigative journalists, experts and citizen journalists.

Some national governments have recently decided to free up considerable amounts of money to support local and regional journalism: until 2021, the Dutch government allocates up to 5 million euros yearly to research, local and regional journalism. In the coming 5 years, the Canadian government will invest up to 32 million euros in 1 or more independent NGOs supporting local journalism in remote and disenfranchised communities. This subsidy will also serve to establish new business models. In 2017, the Norwegian government dedicated 2.1 million euros to "journalism important for society". Several cities in the Netherlands have decided to raise money for similar initiatives.

In sum, it is up to us as a society to decide how uncomfortable we feel with local and regional news inequalities, and what we want to do about it.

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