

Covering Regional Blind Spots

Commentary journalism in the regional public sphere

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Abstract

A significant trend within journalism is the growth of the commentary genre. Another trend is the regional withdrawal within news journalism. News media are closing down district offices, which raises concerns over media shadows and blind spots in coverage. This article addresses both of these trends through a case analysis of the Norwegian newspaper *Nordlys*. Launching its commentary innovation *Nordnorsk debatt*, *Nordlys* aims to exceed its geographical area within these columns, facilitating a regional public sphere in the Arctic region. The article discusses the role of opinion-based journalism in the regional public sphere, within the theoretical perspective of media ecology and institutional theory. We argue that covering the regional level in society is a vital part of journalism's institutional role. In addition, from an ecological perspective, the role of being a regional voice is important in the national public sphere.

Keywords: Blind spot, media shadow, opinion-based journalism, media ecology, regional media

Introduction

Traditionally, local and regional journalism has seen little scholarly attention, as journalism research tends to focus on large and national media (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitsch, 2009). However, Waschková Císařová (2017: 15) sees this as “no longer the case” in a newly published book about local journalism. In recent years, scholars have shown an expanding interest in local journalism both in Europe and in the United States (see also Nielsen, 2015). A vital part of this research focuses on small hyperlocals (Nygren et al., 2018; van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014; Williams et al., 2015), whereas the regional level has not received the same scholarly attention. However, placed between the defined local coverage of small local media on the one side, and the national and global perspectives of national media on the other, regional media is an important level for research; it addresses questions about the geographical scope of coverage.

In a Norwegian context, media researchers have studied the trend that regional media have narrowed their news scope (Engan, 2016; Holand, 2013; Omdal, 2013), becoming

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more like local patriots for their publishing towns (Mathisen, 2014) than addressing matters concerning a wider region. Within the perspective of media ecology (Anderson, 2016), this raises questions about media shadows or blind spots in the coverage of important political and geographical levels (Høst, 2016; Nord & Nygren, 2002), with a consequent democratic deficit (Nygren, 2016; Howells, 2015; Omdal, 2013).

At the same time, scholars have paid attention to another significant trend within journalism: a distinct expansion of opinion-based and interpretive journalism in several countries, where public debate and opinion-based journalism are growing on behalf of news journalism (Esser & Umbricht, 2014). This implies an increase of public debate being considered to have democratic value (Nord & Stür, 2009).

This article examines the role of commentary or opinion-based journalism in regional media within the perspective of institutional theory and media ecology. More specifically, it explores the role of the expanding regional *opinion-based* journalism in a regional public sphere, based on a case study of the regional newspaper *Nordlys* in Norway. The research question asked is how does the Norwegian regional newspaper *Nordlys* facilitate the regional public sphere through its opinion-based journalism *Nordnorsk debatt*.¹ This specific case is an innovative venture of opinion-based journalism, aiming to exceed the geographical scope and facilitate the *regional* public sphere. The case is well suited to address overall questions about the regional level of the media structure. The empirical data cover a time span of three years and are limited to journalistic columns, excluding audience contributions.

The article is organised as follows: first, we present the theoretical ground for this discussion. This is followed by a brief presentation of the expansion of opinion-based journalism, before presenting the context of the Norwegian media landscape in general and the regional newspaper *Nordlys* in particular. Then we present the methodological approach for the study (which the article is based on) before proceeding to the analysis and discussion of the empirical data. Finally, we conclude and discuss the findings.

Theoretical framework

Theoretically, this study is rooted in institutional theory (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011; Cook, 1998), a theoretical perspective underlining news media as societal institutions fulfilling a public role within democracy (Nielsen, 2015). The public discourse, managed by the news media, implies that a common space of political and cultural conversations and experiences are available for citizens (Gripsrud, 2017a). This common space constitutes the public sphere: a communal communicative space where a society organises discussion and information. The public sphere is a virtual structure that is imagined, but with real consequences for, and connections with, the political and material realities within which society exists (McNair, 2018). Journalism plays a vital role within the public sphere, related to functions such as information, interpretation, interrogation, representation and advocacy (McNair, 2018). An important institutional feature of journalism and news media is their role as channel and arenas for communication (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011).

Journalism is committed to a societal contract (Peters & Broersma, 2017) that requires a link between journalistic professionalism and democracy. Democracy, publishing technology and journalism are closely intertwined (McNair, 2008). Democracy presupposes

a public discourse where ideas and perceptions may be freely debated, in which news media is an important arena (Aalberg et al., 2015). Journalism's role within the public sphere is to fuel, encourage, facilitate and act as a platform (Graham, 2013). Knapskog and colleagues (2016: 165) argue that opinion-based journalism might be the genre that renews this societal contract with the "increasingly demanding and fragmented audiences for professional journalism". Nord and Stür (2009: 40) claim that audiences need guidance and analysis in an increasingly complex and fragmented world, and that opinion-based journalism can help audiences to better understand society.

However, the rise of social media and the internet has affected the media environment, the public sphere and the working methods of journalists (Westlund & Lewis, 2014). Digital communication has gradually changed the public sphere (Enjolras et al., 2013). On the one hand, citizens gain a variety of avenues to participate (Gripsrud, 2017b; Nielsen, 2017). On the other hand, the public sphere is becoming more fragmented (Gripsrud, 2017b; Owen, 2016). This tension between democratisation and fragmentation leads to the concept of news ecology, defined by Anderson (2016: 412) as:

... the entire ensemble of individuals, organizations and technologies in a particular geographic community or around a particular issue, engaged in journalistic production and, indeed, in journalistic consumption.

The concept of ecology might contribute to an understanding of how the different parts of the diverse media landscape relate to each other by describing two different aspects. One concerns how new media entering the scene changes the ecology, while the other illustrates how the different parts of the media system relate to each other. For example, how news is distributed by local or regional media and is then picked up by national media and spread to a wider audience (Anderson, 2016). The latter is the focus of Nielsen's (2015: 51) concept of *keystone media*. Ecologies are interdependent and relational, and shifts at one level are potentially far-reaching (Peters & Broersma, 2017).

Furthermore, the ecological perspective might also shed light on the role of the different levels in the media landscape, as well as the diversity or lack of diversity, and address concepts such as *blind spots*, *media shadows* and *black holes* in the media coverage (Nord & Nygren, 2002; Nygren, 2016). Høst (2016) uses the concept of *blind spots* to describe regional withdrawal discussed earlier in the text and the lack of issues on the news agenda. The related concept of *media shadow* emerges when news reporting from a specific area is either completely lacking or rare and seldom (Nord & Nygren, 2002: 32). The media shadow might be either geographical or thematic and imply democratic shadow. Howells (2015), in her analyses of news *black holes* in Wales, concludes that the lack of news with the consequent democratic deficit is damaging of the larger public sphere.

A rapidly growing genre

From the discussion of ecology and media shadows, we now turn to an elaboration of the genre, being the issue of this article. Being one of the oldest genres of journalism, opinion has played an important role in the development of the news institution (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011). Opinion-based journalism is a rapidly growing genre across the Western world (Esser & Umbricht, 2014; Knapskog et al., 2016; McNair, 2008; Nord &

Stür, 2009; Salgado & Strömbäck, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitsch, 2009). It is part of a critical tradition characterised by interpretation and analysis. Based on a study of the development of both American and European journalism over decades, Esser and Umbricht (2014) describe a change in journalism from observation to interpretation in both the news and the columns. This shift from “news” to “views” is explained by the level of education and the status of the profession of journalists (Umbricht: 245). Economy is another factor, as desktop opinion-based journalism is regarded as “cheap” compared to resource demanding investigative reporting and reportage (McNair, 2008: 118). In addition, profiled columnists become essential for the branding of the media company and drawing in digital readers (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011; Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016).

Moreover, due to an ever more complex and faster information flow in society, the need for interpretation and context is growing (Le Masurier, 2015; Neveu, 2016; Nord & Stür, 2009). However, the growth of opinion and interpretation is also subject to criticism and public debate (Enli, 2009; McNair, 2008; Patterson, 2000): the critique problematises whether opinion-based journalism is replacing fact-based and investigative journalism.

Norway as a newspaper country

The rise of opinion-based journalism is a distinct trend in Norwegian journalism, which brings us to the specific context of Norway. An important feature of all the Nordic countries is the diverse press structure (Hallin & Mancini, 2009; Syvertsen et al., 2014): Nordic newspaper ecology includes local papers, regional papers and national papers. The local press remains of key importance, particularly in Norway and Finland (Syvertsen et al., 2014), and is described as the backbone of the Norwegian media structure (Høst, 2005). This diversity is vital in securing public debates in smaller communities. It also reinforces local identity and supplements the national news arena (Syvertsen et al., 2014), as local media are regarded as vital mediators of culture and identity (Skogerbø & Windsvold, 2011).

The number of newspapers is high in Norway compared to other countries, with 223 newspapers in 2017 distributed in 184 locations, and most of them being local (Høst, 2018: 5). However, both circulation and readership are decreasing in Norway alongside the rest of Europe. The digital shift implies that audiences prefer online news rather than print. During 2014, the readership of news in Norway was, for the first time, higher online than in print (Vaage, 2015: 58).

This digital transition has emerged alongside the aforementioned regional withdrawal within the Norwegian media landscape. Since the 1990s, several district offices throughout the country have shut down, raising concerns that the unifying function of the regional newspapers is disappearing (Engan, 2016; Omdal, 2013). Similarly, national media have also reduced their coverage of the regions (Lavik et al., 2017: 568). Paradoxically, this is contrasted by a general regionalisation, where several public tasks and political authorities have been transferred to larger regional units. Examples are the merging of universities, police districts, municipalities and counties. Waschková Císařová (2017) argues that changes in media and journalism connected with economic and technological trends produce possible disruptions for the geographically-specific content – in other words, it implies distinct ecological implications.

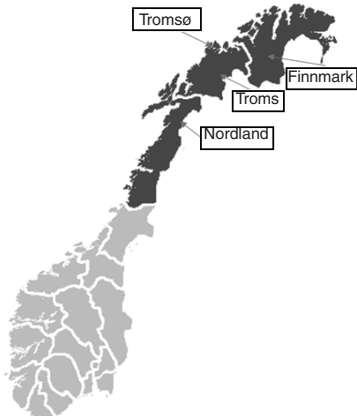
The issue discussed in this article is opinion-based journalism from a regional perspective. Regional media as well as national media prioritise this growing genre. With daily columns both in print and online, and with profiled commentators, they are fulfilling their societal roles: agenda-setting, enlightenment, critique and patriotism (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016).

The regional newspaper *Nordlys* and *Nordnorsk debatt*

Placed in this context, *Nordlys* is published in the town of Tromsø² in the northern part of Norway and is the largest newspaper in the region³ (see Table 1a). Distinct opinions from a regional viewpoint have always been a vital aim for the newspaper (Christensen & Tjelmeland, 2002). After the decline of the party press, opinion-based journalism and the facilitation of public debate became important in order to legitimise the institutional role of the press (Christensen & Tjelmeland, 2002: 467ff). For *Nordlys*, regionalism became its brand through both news prioritising and commentaries. The agenda was to build and support the northern region culturally, economically and politically, and to stimulate opinion-making and public debate. However, during the 1990s, *Nordlys* made the same geographical withdrawal as other regional papers and chose to concentrate its news coverage on the publishing town of Tromsø (Christensen & Tjelmeland, 2002).

In 2014, however, *Nordlys* launched its commentary innovation: *Nordnorsk debatt* online. A website being part of *Nordlys* that had opinion-based content: both editorial columns as well as chronicles and letters from the audience. Its aim is to facilitate debate in the *regional* public sphere. In other words, in contrast to the described withdrawal of regional newspapers, the newsroom's aim is to exceed its geographical scope to cover the entire northern region consisting of three counties⁴ (see Table 1a) and containing 488,647 inhabitants.⁵ The media structure in this region is characterised by a rich variety of local newspapers (Holand, 2013) and local offices of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) (see Table 1b).

Table 1. Media landscape in the northern region

<p>A</p>  <p>The map shows the northern part of Norway, highlighting the counties of Tromsø, Finnmark, Troms, and Nordland. Tromsø is marked as a specific location within the Troms county.</p>	<p>B</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 regional newspapers (circulation 20,000-24,000) • 39 local newspapers (circulation 1,000-9,000) • 18 local offices of NRK
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The story of *Nordnorsk debatt* is tied to the role of other news media in the regional public sphere. From 1992 to 2012, NRK as a central news actor aired a simulcast radio programme in all three counties, produced by the three large district offices in the north. This programme was shut down in 2013 (Holand, 2013) and replaced by programmes covering each of the three counties. This shutdown created a void in the regional public sphere which *Nordnorsk debatt* partly filled. In addition, the withdrawal of national media from the regions and fewer journalists stationed throughout the country might be important. Consequently, changes in the media landscape or media ecology constitute an important premise for the origin of *Nordnorsk debatt*. Furthermore, the internet implies new possibilities. In the online world, old print distribution barriers vanish and the columns are shared by a keystroke and discussed on social media, as social networking sites are becoming more important to how people find information online (Nielsen, 2017: 81f).

Data and methods

Before going into the empirical findings, the methodological approach for the study will be presented. To answer the research question – How does Nordlys facilitate the public sphere through its opinion-based journalism? – our methodological approach covers a content analysis of the website *Nordnorsk debatt*. A content analysis has been chosen as it will draw a picture of the large patterns of editorial opinion-based journalism. The empirical data cover all signed editorial columns published in January, February and March of 2015, 2016 and 2017; they consist of 244 columns. Both the editorials and columns are produced every day for the website, even if the columns are also printed in the paper afterwards.

We have coded the columns with respect to topic, geographical anchorage and argumentative style. We have used eleven categories of topics to analyse the data.⁶ With respect to analysing the geographical anchorage of the columns, we have used the categories local, regional, national and foreign anchorage. Columns with a local anchorage are connected to questions and issues related to the publishing town of Tromsø, while articles with a regional anchorage are related to issues connected to a wider geographical region, for instance the total northern region of Norway (Nordland, Troms and Finnmark – see Table 1a). Concerning the argumentative style of the columns, we can argue that all types of opinion-based journalism mirror a statement and take a certain viewpoint. This contrasts with news journalism, which aims for balance and a kind of objectivity. However, we distinguish between columns characterised by an argumentative or rhetorical style with an explicit argument (arguing for a specific viewpoint) and columns with a more open, reflective and analytical style.

A weakness of the study is in its limitation related to a single case study. Another weakness is that we only examine *Nordlys*' opinion-based journalism and not the *audience's participation* on this opinion site. Analyses of public participation would allow us to discuss the democratic role of *Nordnorsk debatt* in a broader context.

On the other hand, the strength of this study is a thorough case study of the editorials and opinion-based articles over a period of three years, which also made it possible to study the development of *Nordlys* over time. Moreover, *Nordnorsk debatt* is a unique case where the editors have prioritised opinion-based journalism during tough times

(with cutbacks and downsizing in the newsroom), as well as clearly expressing motivations to exceed its geographical scope – in contrast to the earlier described withdrawal in the region.

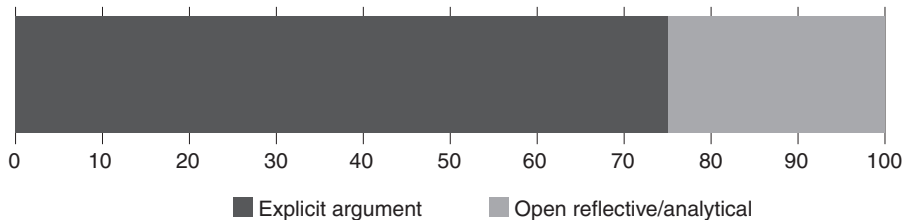
Further, we turn to a discussion of the findings and explore how *Nordnorsk debatt* is facilitating this new regional public sphere.

Results

Explicit argument in politics

An important task for commentary journalism is to set the agenda and propound opinions. Do the columns in *Nordlys* express explicit arguments or do they convey a more open and analytical style? As Figure 1 shows, the specific arguments dominate the columns of *Nordlys*; 75 per cent of the columns are based on explicit arguments for a specific stance, whereas 25 per cent are more open.

Figure 1. Argumentative style in the columns of *Nordnorsk debatt*, 2015-2017 (per cent)



Comment: N=244.

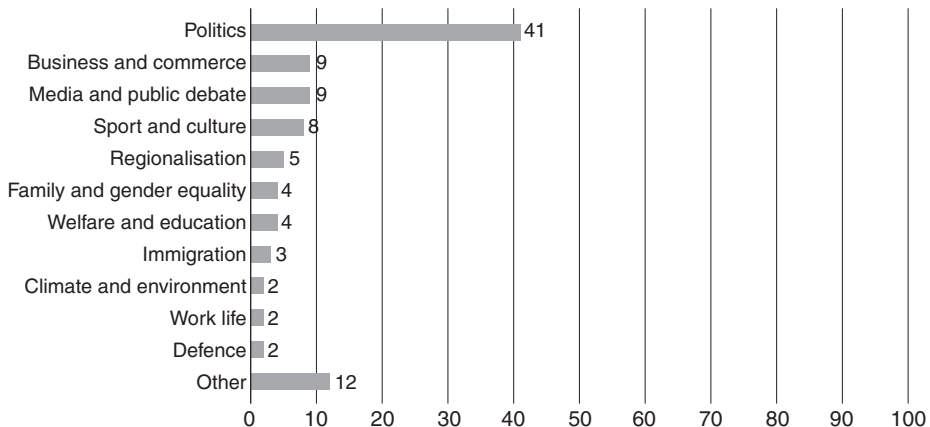
In total, the proportion of columns with an explicit argument has increased from 2015 to 2017; *Nordlys* participates in the public debate as a clear voice. This trend corresponds with a previous study in which *Nordlys* appeared to have a significantly higher score of columns with explicit arguments than the other regional newspapers in Norway (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). The editor-in-chief even stated that opinion-based journalism without explicit arguments is of no value (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016), as the newsroom is aiming to be a distinct voice. Historically, *Nordlys* has acted as the explicit voice of the Arctic, being prominently visible to the public (Christensen & Tjelmeland, 2002), and this tradition has now proceeded online. McNair (2018: 157) states that journalists are political actors with the power to shape opinion in a significant way. The columnists of *Nordlys* participate in the public sphere with a clear and sometimes controversial stance. Consequently, *Nordnorsk debatt* might be characterised as an editorial sphere with a rhetorical style suitable for provoking, engaging and creating debates, as well as for sharing and commenting on social media. *Nordnorsk debatt* becomes an arena where ideas and perceptions are viewed and the columnists both fuel and encourage the public sphere.

In addition, digital distribution implies the possibility to reach a wider audience and to increase the visibility of the newspaper. Social media have become an important distribution channel where the columns are shared by a key stroke (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016; Nielsen, 2015). Within the perspective of media ecology, one could assume that provocative statements are more likely to be shared, spread and even discussed in larger

media. This argumentative style is hence more likely to gain attention for *Nordlys* in the public sphere than a more open and analytical style.

Knowing which topics the columnists at *Nordlys* cover can shed light on how the newsroom manages its institutional agenda-setting role and address the aspects of diversity, media shadows and blind spots in the media ecology.

Figure 2. Topics in Nordnorsk debatt, 2015-2017 (per cent)



Comment: N=244.

Figure 2 illustrates that the largest category of topics in the columns of *Nordnorsk debatt* is *politics*: 41 per cent of the columns concern politics in different manners. Opinion-based journalism traditionally has been tightly connected to political journalism through analysing and commenting on political matters and development, which means this is a non-surprising result. The institutional role of opinion-based journalism is to mirror and encourage opinion-making, a role tied to the political public (Graham, 2013; Knap-skog et al., 2016). In mediatised societies, politics and news media have become almost interchangeable (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011). Interpretative journalism has become even more important in the mediated public sphere, as well as the analyst becoming a more vital journalistic role (Nord & Stür, 2009).

Further, we have analysed the political columns (41%) more thoroughly to investigate which part of politics the columnists set on the agenda. This part of the analysis shows that the largest category is columns about *politicians* or *political parties* (33%). In other words, they address the political game and political negotiations, and focus on politicians as individuals more than they analyse and discuss the actual issues. This finding corresponds with Nord and Stür (2009), who argue that the political game has dominated the columns in Sweden during three election campaigns. One could object that the focus on the political game fails to enrich democracy and the public sphere, as it only conveys speculation and empty suggestion, displacing relevant information and news reporting (Lund, 2018: 13; Nord & Stür, 2009). Following this, one might also question the real democratic relevance of the increased political columns in *Nordlys* as well as in other news media. If the audience need guidance and analysis to understand a fragmented world (to cite Nord & Stür, 2009: 40), one could argue for columns elaborating complex political issues and decisions, rather than the political game.

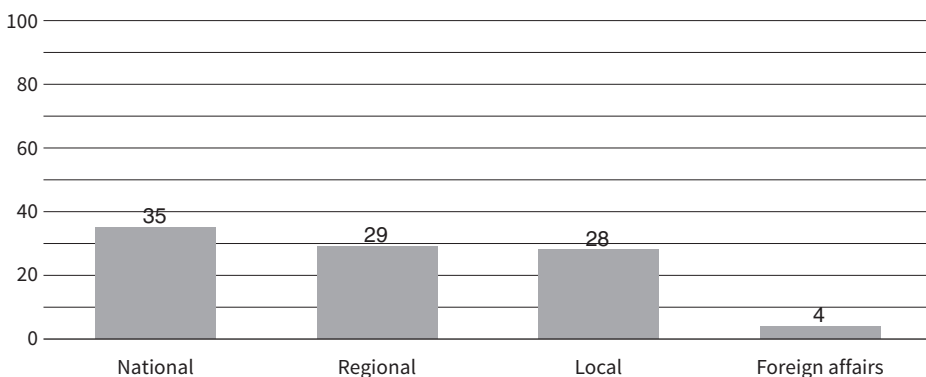
In addition, even if politics is the dominating topic, Figure 2 shows a variety of other topics on the agenda of *Nordnorsk debatt*. The columnists address diverse aspects of societal life, both so-called “soft” themes such as family and gender equality and “harder” themes such as commerce and politics. On the agenda are also topics about media and the public debate in general. For instance, the latter contains several columns addressing the 2015 terrorist attack against *Charlie Hebdo* in France. The definition of what counts as *political* has expanded (McNair, 2018), with many of the different topics addressing political priorities even if the columnists do not frame them within politics.

However, one could explore why topics such as the fishery and oil industries are not more prominent on the agenda in a region dependent upon income created from fishery, and where interests between the oil industry and fisheries sometimes collide. Moreover, one could object that climate change should be of vital interest for citizens in the Arctic region, while actually only being considered in two percent of the columns, therefore being seen as a blind spot. Politics dominates while other topics of great societal value and regional relevance remain in the shadow of media coverage. Still, *Nordlys* addresses a large variety of topics in its columns compared to other Norwegian regional newspapers (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). Therefore, one might argue that regional opinion-based journalism contributes to diversity, highlighting a diverse range of topics and perspectives in the mediated public sphere. Within the framework of institutionalism, this is of great democratic value as *Nordlys*, as well as other news outlets, acts as a channel and the arena for communication in the public sphere (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011: 94). Concerning the media ecology, an important aspect is that topics set on the agenda by regional media are more likely to be picked up by national media and then spread to the wider public, than if the regional media was not there (Anderson, 2016). This underlines their role as keystone media organisations (Nielsen, 2015).

Increase of Regional Issues

A clearly defined aim of the *Nordnorsk debatt*, as discussed previously, is to manage the regional public and create a national footprint as a voice from the “Arctic” north. In the content analysis, we separated the geographical anchorage of the columns and coded them as local, regional, national and foreign affairs.⁷

Figure 3. Geographical anchorage of the columns of *Nordnorsk debatt*, 2015-2017 (per cent)



Comment: N=244.

Figure 3 shows that 35 per cent of the columns have a national anchorage, addressing national issues, whereas 29 and 28 have a regional and local anchorage, respectively. This means national issues are the largest category. On the one hand, this might raise questions over how *Nordlys* fulfils its *regional* role, as the regional mission is the most vital legitimisation of the regional press. On the other hand, national issues also have a local and regional impact: political decisions made by government and parliament affect citizens living in the entire country. From this perspective, dealing with national issues becomes important for the regional press, both to inform citizens and to interpret consequences and impact for the communities in the region, as well as to fulfil a role as a voice on behalf of the periphery.

It might also be of value to elaborate on the geographical anchorage of the columns that gain most attention. According to *Nordlys*' own measures, the most-read column in the last three years is about national immigration policy,⁸ where the columnist takes a critical stance against the strict policy of the right-wing government. This column, which has been shared 68,000 times and viewed by 128,000 people, might represent a typical example of how *Nordlys* as a regional newspaper becomes a distinct voice in vital national issues related to political values. Within the perspective of news ecology, it becomes important to offer regional perceptions and voices in national debates to address central authorities. In earlier studies, regional opinion-based journalism is described as a counter-voice in the public sphere, contrarian to the pack journalism of national media. Regional commentaries offer diverse perspectives and analysis compared to the national press, enriching opinion-making as well as the political debate (Enli, 2009).

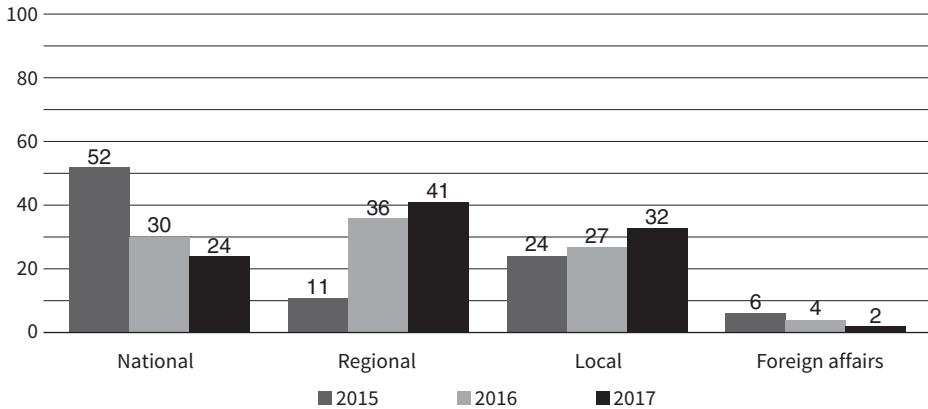
The immigration column mentioned above further exemplifies how explicit stances of the columnist can increase online traffic and stories being shared on social media. The internet and social media have created a new media reality in which digital communication is gradually changing the public sphere (Enjolras et al., 2013). Earlier studies show that regional columnists experienced difficulties reaching the national public; they criticised the national media for being too narrow and near-sighted thus losing vital perspectives from the regions (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2016). However, the internet empowers regional newsrooms and provides possibilities to set the agenda on their own terms, helped by audience sharing and commenting on social media. As Eide and colleagues (2016: 223) state, "Technology, as a structural aspect, not only changes practical news work, but also contributes to alter how editorial organizations and their journalists relate to agents operating outside the institution."

However, the ambition of *Nordnorsk debatt* was to strengthen and facilitate the *regional* public sphere. Even if national issues make up the largest category, Figure 3 shows that local and regional issues dominate the agenda, confirming this ambition. Considering the ecological perspective, it is also interesting to elaborate on whether the geographical anchorage has changed over time, as our empirical data stretches over three years.

Figure 4 reveals that regional focus has increased from 11 per cent in 2015 to 41 per cent in 2017, which is a significant increase. The results also show a slight growth in the columns focusing on local issues, from 24 to 31 per cent, whereas the national scope is halved with a decline from 52 in 2015 to 24 per cent two years later.

In other words, the geographical scope of *Nordnorsk debatt* has changed from 2015 to 2017; it has turned from a rather large focus on national issues to a distinct prioritising

Figure 4. Geographical anchorage in the columns of *Nordnorsk debatt*, 2015-2017 (per cent)

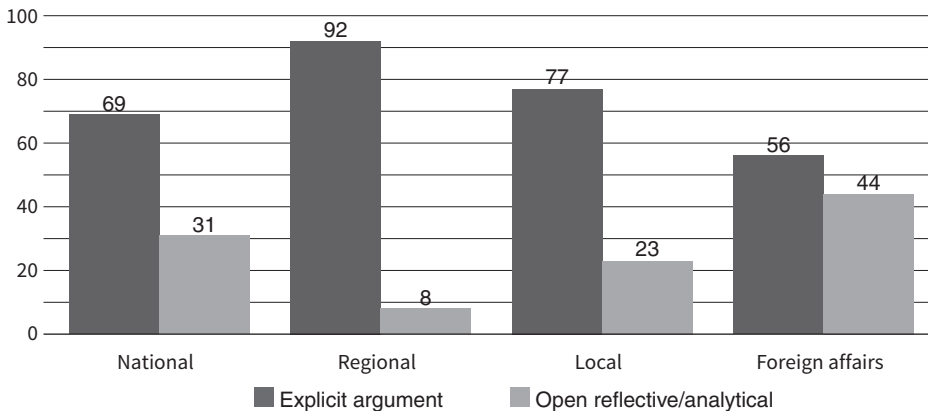


Comment: N=244.

of regional issues. Consequently, *Nordlys* can be said to have succeeded in its ambition of facilitating the regional public sphere.

It is also interesting to investigate how argumentative style (Figure 1) and geographical focus (Figure 4) correlate.

Figure 5. Argumentative style in the columns of the *Nordnorsk debatt*, 2015-2017, and geographical anchorage (per cent)



Comment: N=244.

As one can see, the columnists most often convey an explicit argument or viewpoint in regional issues. A total of 92 per cent of the columns with a regional anchorage express a clear view or argument, whereas only eight percent of them are formulated in a more reflective and open style. The columnists in *Nordnorsk debatt* facilitate the regional public by playing a role in which they convey explicit opinions and arguments. This might also contribute to public engagement and participation, as explicit stances often provoke either protest and reactions or support and agreement. The results also show that a more open analytical approach is most often used when the columnists are addressing foreign affairs. However, this category is rather small and will not be discussed further.

How can these changes in geographical focus be explained? During 2016 and 2017, a much-discussed political issue on the Norwegian political agenda was regional reform. The government decided to reorganise Norway into fewer and larger counties. This provoked both support and protest. A much-disputed part of this issue was whether the three northern counties should be united into one large county (see Table 1a). The issue involved scattering interests and internal conflicts, and conveying deep tensions and conflict lines within the northern region in which the columnists of *Nordlys* participated and engaged.

In several columns, the columnists argued with an explicit stance to unite the entire northern region into one county. “One united northern region might shape contrarian Arctic power against Oslo”, argued one of the columnists,⁹ and even suggested that central authorities should force the three northern counties into unity. The columnists argue along the conflict line between centre and periphery, which historically has been the most significant conflict line in Norwegian politics (Rokkan, 1987). The underlying warrant is that one united, large region will secure the northern region more societal power and impact against central authorities.

However, this stance provoked citizens living both north and south of Tromsø (see Table 1a), as citizens in other parts of the northern region feared that one united region would imply a strong city of Tromsø grabbing all the power, and leave other communities weaker. In line with this stance, one could perceive *Nordlys* acting as a local patriot in disguise, more concerned about the concentration of power and position in Tromsø than really arguing for the best for the entire region. In other words, we still see the conflict line between centre and periphery; however, the centre has changed from the capitol of Oslo to the city of Tromsø.

Conclusion

The research question asked in this article is: How can the Norwegian regional newspaper *Nordlys* facilitate the regional public sphere through its opinion-based journalism *Nordnorsk debatt*? The content analysis of the columns reveals that *Nordlys* facilitates the regional sphere as a distinct voice, acting in an agenda-setting role suitable for both provocation and support. It addresses a variety of topics as well. Our findings show that the regional scope is increasingly prioritised, whereas the national issues are diminishing. *Nordnorsk debatt* seems to be an example of how journalism, democratic perspectives and technology are closely intertwined (McNair, 2008). Further, it underlines the institutional role of news media as a channel and an arena for communication in the public sphere (Allern & Blach-Ørsten, 2011), and substantiates journalism as a societal institution fulfilling a public role.

Important premises, however, are new digital possibilities as well as a void created by the withdrawal of other news media. As Waschková Císařová (2017: 25) argues, changes in media produce disruptions for geographically-specific content. In other words, the establishment of the *Nordnorsk debatt* with its regional scope may be interpreted within a media ecological perspective.

According to the fact that regional media narrowed their news scope, our study indicates that regional opinion-based journalism is able to cover potential regional blind spots or media shadows; this helps with the flow of information, opinion and influence

between the different levels of the public sphere (Howells, 2015). When vital societal tasks in Norway are transferred to larger regional units with an implied regionalisation of power, one might argue that covering the regional level is a vital part of journalism's institutional role. Leaving the regional level in a blind spot might contribute to several kinds of democratic deficits. Firstly, a vital part of political decisions and the exercising of power will be carried out without citizens having had the chance to be informed or heard. Secondly, and from an ecological perspective, if regional issues are silenced then regional perspectives are less likely to be caught by the national media and transferred into the national public sphere, addressing central authorities.

Our study is limited to *opinion-based journalism*, leaving news journalism outside the scope of analysis. One could argue that thoroughly covering the regional blind spots also demands an expanding news coverage. Journalism plays its institutional role best when news reporting and opinion-based journalism interact. The growth in opinion-based journalism is criticised, as discussed earlier, for replacing fact-based and investigative reporting. If the opinions, interpretations and analysis in the columns are not anchored in solid, fact-based news reporting, one might object that the opinion-based genre alone is not able to cover the regional perspectives in a solid manner. However, our analysis reveals that the columnists place topics like regional reform, immigration policy and the terror attack on *Charlie Hebdo* on the agenda in the columns. All of these are vital topics and thoroughly covered in news journalism.

The distinct regional focus in the columns of *Nordlys* suggests that opinion-based journalism in the regional media is still an important arena to cover blind spots. Regional media are able to facilitate a regional public sphere in a way neither the local press nor the national media can. Opinion-based journalism is a growing genre, not least because of the need for interpretation and context in complex societies. Consequently, regional commentary or opinion-based journalism might be the genre that renews the societal contract with “the increasingly demanding and fragmented audience for professional journalism” (Knapskog et al., 2016: 165), and strengthens the institutional role of news media in democracy that contributes to shaping public opinion.

Our study is limited to columns produced by the editorial staff of *Nordlys*. However, scholars have called for more research about what journalism does for citizens (Peters & Broersma, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). To discuss the role of a regional public sphere such as the *Nordnorsk debatt* from a broader perspective, it is also necessary to scrutinise how citizens participate in the mediated sphere and interact with the editorials. Answers to these questions will broaden the discussion of blind spots and shed light on how media ecology develops, and how the news outlets act as an arena for communication in the public sphere.

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Notes

1. Translated into English. The name means The High North Debate.
2. Tromsø is the largest town in the middle of this northern or Arctic region of Norway, with a population of 72,000.
3. Opplag og trafikktall

4. Nordland, Troms and Finnmark
5. Which is about 9 per cent of the entire Norwegian population
6. The categories are politics, business and commerce, media and public debate, regionalisation, family and gender equality, welfare and education, immigration, climate and environment, work life, defence, and other.
7. Columns where the geographical anchorage is general. Those not relevant or impossible to define are not included (4%).
8. “Erna, vi må snakke om Sylvi” (Erna, we have to talk about Sylvi)
9. “Skjebnetid for Nord-Norge” (2016, February 16) (Fateful times for the northern region)

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