

Local journalism and its audience

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Abstract

Local media outlets are merging, cutting jobs, or closing, due to a loss in audiences and in advertising revenues in an era of digitalization of information environments. This development raises the question how local media outlets can respond to the ongoing digitalization of information environments to retain or even regain audiences and, hereby, their attractiveness for advertisers. This study uses a mixed methods audience research approach to examine the wants and needs of local journalism audiences, tapping into audiences' functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic values. Since local journalism cannot survive without an audience, an understanding of audience wants and needs is fundamental to secure the future of local journalism. In conclusion, the study provides information on the different perceptions of local journalism held amongst citizen who pay for local journalism, who may be willing to pay, and citizens who do not want to pay for local journalism. This information is crucial for local media outlets to improve their strategies to retain and possibly even regain audiences

Keywords

Audience studies, local journalism, mixed methods, research methods: qualitative, research methods: quantitative

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Introduction

Local journalism appears to be caught in a vicious circle. Declining revenues trigger cutbacks in staff and resources, which leads to a product of lower quality, making more people drop local journalism and, thus, leads to ever lower revenues, and so on. For more than a century, local journalism has thrived and held sizable shares of audiences, but the 21st century has brought major challenges, for instance because of the rise of the Internet and social media which led to a profound change in the way local media is produced and consumed. Local media have found the information they used to provide (e.g., local events, classified advertising, traffic news, or cinema listings), migrating to social media such as community Facebook groups (Barclay et al., 2022). As a result of these shifts, audiences have become increasingly reluctant to pay for local journalism, creating a negative spiral in which a continued decrease in readers/subscribers leads to even less advertising income for local journalism outlets (Abernathy, 2020). This description of a negative spiral has been supported by numbers in a recent report from Reuter's Institute. The report confirms that a large part of digital subscriptions goes to a few big national news outlets underlining that a winner takes all dynamic (Newman et al., 2022).

The newspaper industry that has historically provided most local coverage is in decline, and it is not yet clear whether digital media will sustain new forms of local journalism (Nielsen, 2015b). In many countries the current local journalism landscape is unrecognisable compared to 25 years ago. Today, local media compete offline and online with a myriad of other (often freely accessible) content providers, including individual voices on social media and national and international news sources. At a first glance, this development may be seen as positive for citizens, as the market assumably now is better at addressing individual wants and needs. However, this development also has resulted in regional communities left with no or very little local reporting, coined as 'news deserts' (Stites, 2011). These 'deserts' are defined as a geographic area where there is no continuous journalistic coverage. The consequences of this decline in local journalism are weakened democratic systems with reduced accountability, and local communities lacking critical information (Ferrier, 2017).

The question therefore is what local media can do in response to the current development in information environments to retain or even regain audiences for local journalism and, thus, regain attractiveness for advertisers. Therefore, this study investigates local journalism audiences' wants and needs and thereby provides input as to how local journalism can be transformed. Research examining today's local news audiences mostly consists of online audience metrics enabling the study of movement and habits of audiences in digital spaces. However, the perspectives and expectations that audiences have of local journalism is often overlooked in scholarship (Hess et al., 2022). In this study, we examine local journalism audiences in greater depth, employing a mixed methods research design, to chart audience wants and needs based on both quantitative and qualitative survey data. The article first provides an overview of existing research regarding local journalism, and hereafter, we present the empirical study divided in the sections: method, analysis, and discussion. The key findings from

this study show that non-paying local news audiences do not value the symbolic and emotional functions of local journalism to the same extent as those who already pay or who might pay.

Literature review

In the present study, local journalism is defined based on geography and goal. Local journalism is provided in communities, both urban and non-urban, rural, and regional settings, and the ambition of local journalism is to serve the wants and needs of the areas in which they are located. Thus, local journalism aims at providing relevant content in a specific geographic context, at playing a role in networking the local community, and at serving local interests.

Local journalism's connection to a geographic area becomes visible in the selection and presentation of content. Hence, [Buchanan \(2009\)](#) describes local journalism as a production of locality where subjects chosen are relevant in a specific spatial location. Therefore, content such as notices and stories of rites of passage – births, deaths, marriages – play an important part in producing local subjects, while information and debates about infrastructure, buildings, commercial development, cultural facilities and so on, aid the spatial production of locality ([Olsen, 2020](#)). Whether local journalism matters to the audience depends on the audiences' interest in this production of locality, and to what extent the production of locality is unique, as described by [Goyanes \(2015\)](#). Well-functioning local journalism has at least four functions that makes it unique and different from national journalism.

First, local journalism holds local government and authorities accountable. Second, local journalism supports community identity and cohesion by keeping citizens informed about local matters, covering community events, and advocating for the community ([Park et al., 2021](#)). Third, local journalism tends to be less sensational ([Park et al., 2021](#)). Fourth, local journalism covers human-interest stories about the people living in the community. By doing so, local journalism serves communities, provides the opportunity for citizens to discuss and solve local problems, and connects citizens in doing so ([Hess and Waller, 2017](#)). The four functions underline that well-functioning local journalism plays a key role for citizens as well as democracy. Hence, there are societal and normative benefits of local journalism, but these benefits are not necessarily translated into financial viability if the perceived value of the content and the local journalism user's willingness to pay are not connected ([Toff and Mathews, 2021](#)). [Park et al. \(2021\)](#) note that studies have found that among those who are willing to pay for local journalism, the decision is made based on the editorial content. People are more willing to pay for unique, non-substitutable, high-value local journalism ([Goyanes, 2015](#)).

Digitization is a key driver of change in the media industry, including local media. According to [Nielsen \(2019\)](#), digitization in the news industry is marked by three key trends: first, an increase in choice and competition; second, a rise of large platform companies that compete for readers and advertisers; and third, a change in news organizations' business models. Digitization also creates possibilities for developing new services and business. For local media this development has led to structural

transformation, resulting in significant changes to production, distribution, and business strategies (Jenkins and Jerónimo, 2021). In this context, Nielsen (2019) emphasized that news organizations (including local media) must develop a distinct and valuable news product. For local media, this means that they should not mimic the core characteristics of competing digital platforms but differentiate their content offers, particularly at the local level (Jenkins and Jerónimo, 2021). Many local and regional journalism outlets are developing new online offers while still depending on print editions to drive earnings (Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020). Identifying and producing the local content offers that is most valuable regarding audience wants and needs is no easy task, since there are longstanding print traditions, logics, and behaviours which must be changed.

Research on local journalism also has taken an interest in audiences, however this branch of research is less developed than, for instance, research on the production side of local journalism. Audience-centred research has demonstrated that the fundamental changes in the production and consumption of local journalism influence audience practices. As a result of cost-cuttings, mergers, and closures local journalism audiences currently find local journalism distant and too commercialised. Consequently, according to audiences, local journalism is challenged in providing community glue, and people increasingly get information about local issues from other sources (Barclay et al., 2022). Research has suggested that contemporary local journalism audiences have a strong sense of individual responsibility to stay informed. Therefore, they seek out local information themselves to stay sufficiently informed about their local area. Unfortunately, this effort is not always enough to feel properly informed (McCullough et al., 2017). Our study builds on this strand of research by addressing the wants and needs of local journalism audiences in an era where the condition of local journalism is characterised by massive change.

Audience wants and needs

Audience wants and needs regarding local journalism include both audience's preferences for what is socially appropriate norms and standards, but it also entails an audience member's personal preferences which might go against the normative expectation. Delivering local journalism which is valued by the audience demands facts and insights about the target group. To chart audience wants and needs we follow the approach of Rintamäki et al. (2007). They outline how the value of a product or service can be described along the lines of four dimensions: functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic value. These values motivate consumers, in our case audiences, to use and perhaps also buy a product. Values, needs, and wants are closely connected, since a value is typically described as a fundamental belief or practice about what is desirable, worthwhile, and important to an individual.

Functional values of local journalism

Barnett (2009) identified various democratic functions local media perform: informing citizens, broadcasting popular opinion, campaigning, and critically questioning. Ali et al. (2020) explain how the democratic function of local journalism also includes an essential

agenda-setting function: defining the topic and tones of public discussions leading to higher voter turnout; and civic engagement more broadly. Local media also perform the role as *keystone media* (Nielsen, 2015b) since they are “primary providers of a specific and important kind of information and enable other media’s coverage” (p. 51). In other words, local media is often the only and most important source of public service reporting in communities. Empirical research has also shown that both the audience and journalists believe that a normative function of local journalism is to hold local government accountable, thus local politicians are more careful with financial public spending when there is an active local news media presence (Lund, 2010). Traditionally, the democratic function was fulfilled through investigative reporting. This genre, however, has decreased at publications of all sizes, as it is expensive and time-consuming to produce (McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

Local journalism also has a ‘practical’ information function which is to assist the audience in their everyday lives and provide information about a community. For instance, by providing weather forecasts, advertising, sporting schedules and mentions of birthdays, jubilees, and deaths. In 2012, the Communications Policy Research Network reviewed the literature on local audiences’ information needs and found eight categories of ‘critical information needs’ of communities: emergencies/risks, health/welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities, environment, civic information, and political information (CPRN, 2012). These subjects will differ according to contexts and geography, but this list gives an impression of the basic functional value of local journalism seen from an audience perspective. In our view, this list of local audience’s wants and needs appears to be rather normative, and thus, we find it relevant to expand this list to include empirically derived personal preferences. Prior a quantitatively oriented study has examined how audience information needs differ, and whether the critical information needs of communities are met by local media (McCullough et al., 2017). However, to achieve a more in-depth understanding of local journalism audiences’ wants and needs, we use both a qualitative analysis of open-ended answers and a quantitative overview.

One important question related to the difference between the bifurcation of audience’s wants and needs in norms and personal preferences is which needs and wants audiences state they want to consume; another question is what they in fact consume. In the 2021 Digital News Report, the Reuther’s Institute asked respondents which local topics out of a list of 15 they had accessed in the previous week. Across 38 markets, two topics were rated as most important: local information about the coronavirus or other health news (53%) and local weather forecasts (50%). For all other topics, reported access rates were low. Only a third said they had accessed news about local politics (32%), which came in third in the ranking across all markets. The rest of the topics had been accessed by less than a quarter of the respondents (Newman et al., 2021). Countries that tend to access less local news include the UK and Japan, but also Denmark, where between 21% and 24% had not accessed any of the topics on the list (Newman et al., 2021). These numbers point to the fact that there is a misalignment between the functions of local journalism that people acknowledge as important and what they access and engage with in their daily lives.

Symbolic values of local journalism

The notion of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) refers to an actor's capacity to create and transmit norms, myths, and traditions. The media mainly hold such power, since they can produce and disseminate symbolic content to large audiences, thus, contributing to the shaping of social reality. Local media also has symbolic power in a community, and this power translates into a symbolic value for local audiences. Local journalism serves as the symbolic centre of the community by telling the community about itself (e.g., Abernathy, 2014), and set the standards and norms of the community (Costera Meijer, 2010). Research on social and cultural perspectives has shown that local journalism shapes the audience's sense of belonging to a certain geographical place and to orient themselves toward each other (Nielsen, 2015a). As Karlsson and Rowe (2019) noted, prior research suggests that local media play a role in the symbolic shaping of "a sense of place", while other research underlined that local journalism creates social glue (e.g., Hess and Waller, 2016; Reader and Hatcher, 2012), or community integration. In a recent study, Matthews (2022) explored audiences that lost their primary local news source. The participants explained that without their local newspaper, they missed out on events, leading to a decreased sense of belonging to their community. In line with this research, our study dives into which specific symbolic wants and needs local journalism audiences have and where audiences look for media content fulfilling these wants and needs.

Emotional values of local journalism

The emotional values of local journalism deals with audiences' emotional benefits, for instance feelings of involvement and self-expressive benefits such as experiencing opportunities for participation through various forms of interactivity (Olsen, 2021; Picard, 2010). Local journalism can have an emotional value to audiences on a personal level, due to its capability of making audiences experience emotions, such as pride when reading about good people and nice events in one's proximate area and feeling less alone or isolated because of reading local journalism. As described above, Matthews' (2022) study showed that audiences without a local news source experienced consequences for their symbolic needs, but it also resulted in emotional discontent, such as feeling isolated or a lost sense of pride in their communities. The question we want to address is whether different types of local journalism audiences seek this dimension when consuming local content.

Local journalism has been characterized by a deeply ingrained intimacy between the local outlet and the audience (Rosenberry, 2012). Research has shown that local proximity plays an essential role in how the audience values local news. It is of emotional value to the audience that a local journalist has social capital in local knowledge or a shared identity with the audience (Hess and Waller, 2016). This feeling of proximity has also led to local journalists being described as having a journalistic role as 'neighbour'. In a recent literature review on local journalism's role as neighbour (Moon and Lawrence, 2021), it is suggested that audiences may prefer local journalism to be community advocates (neighbours) rather than watchdogs, because it is important to audiences that local journalism cares about the community (Ali et al., 2020). Matthews (2021) goes one step

further, as he argues that local media can act as *community caretakers* and shield the community's reputation, its local officials, businesses, and citizens. According to [Matthews \(2021\)](#), the community caretaker role extends beyond previous research on how local media reflect the concerns of the powerful especially in times of crisis. In times of crisis, local media protect "not just the powerful, but the community as a whole, especially its reputation to outsiders, and many of its ordinary citizens" ([Mathews, 2021](#), p. 681). Journalists' willingness to support something or someone has also been studied from a journalist point of view. [Hanusch \(2015\)](#) notes that in local journalism advocacy and watchdog roles coexist, since advocating for communities also includes acting as watchdogs of those in power.

In short, users of local journalism expect local journalists to understand what it means to be a community member ([Lowrey et al., 2008](#)), also on an emotional level.

Economic values of local journalism

Literature on the audience perspective on economic values of local journalism is scarce, but it seems reasonable to expect that local journalism audience wants and needs regarding economic values exist. The economic value of local journalism to audiences can be positive content about local culture, heritage, events, and attractions which creates awareness. Local journalism can assumably have significant impact on the local economy by encouraging those who already live in the area to participate in the local economy. Hence, local journalism can contribute to keeping money in the region and keeping shops and services open creating economic value for audiences. This value does not need to be positive for all members of a local community. [Gutsche \(2015\)](#) found that the economic role of local journalism can veer into 'boosterism', meaning that local media promotes dominant ideologies and potential prosperity of the community (private citizens and local business owners) over the welfare of particular social groups, often vulnerable groups such as homeless people and drug addicts. Hence, the question is to what extent the audience actually has wants and needs based on economic values.

In short, the value of local journalism to the audience is conceptualized as the sum of functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic values. It is important to underline that the four dimensions can overlap, and that audiences can expect local journalism to deliver on several values at the same time. The review of these four value dimensions will guide the subsequent analyses of which wants and needs local audiences have, addressing the research question: Which wants and needs do local journalism audiences have?

Case and method

This study is based on data gathered in Denmark, a Nordic country with a population of 5.8 million, located at the digital forefront. The Danish media market has two major broadcasters, The Danish Broadcasting Corporation and TV 2 Denmark. In addition, several brands receive an annual public subsidy. In general, the Nordic media markets are healthy, scoring high on trust and have low media polarisation ([Schröder et al., 2022](#)). Local journalism is challenged in Denmark suffering from decline in circulation and

advertising revenue. We thus consider this case an ‘intensity case’ which has an inspirational character (Neergaard, 2015). Today, 73% of Danes have an interest in local journalism. Younger demographics express significantly lower interest in local journalism (49%) than older (86%) (Schröder et al., 2020). Local newspapers have a weekly reach of 16% and local TV reaches 29% (Schröder et al., 2020).

Data and analysis

Online survey data was collected in January 2022 by Wilke A/S. The sample size was $N = 1027$. The representative survey contained two types of questions, close-ended questions (Yes/No, multiple choice) and open-ended. The qualitative data comes from participant’s answers to open-ended reflective questions. The data analysis was conducted separately, in two consecutive phases, as a quantitative data analysis and a qualitative data analysis and then integrated. Therefore, we classify this study as a mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Ivankova et al., 2006), where we first determine a set of quantitative results, and then use the qualitative data to reach an in-depth understanding of the results. Consent was given electronically. The sample is composed of 52% women, with a mean age of 52 years ($SD = 15.8$) from across the country (Capital region: 31%; Zealand: 13%; Southern Denmark: 22%; Central Jutland: 23%; Northern Jutland: 10%). The median household income reported was between 500,000 and 599,999 DKK annually. The survey included multiple-item measures of media use, experiences, and satisfaction with local journalism. Socio-demographic information measures were also included. In this paper, we analyse data from items regarding the following: whether participants pay for local news media (yes/no; 11% yes), and how much they are willing to pay for “good journalism covering your local area” (6-point scale from 0 to more than 200 DKK per month, or “don’t know”). We also asked respondent whether they thought it was “relevant” to be informed about local news or stories (yes/no, 62% yes).

Qualitative data analysis

Data for the qualitative part of the study were obtained by asking survey participants to respond to the following three open-ended questions:

1. From what kind of journalism do you benefit the most?
2. What would it take for you to be willing to pay for local journalism?
3. What do you miss in local journalism today?

Participants were not required to complete the open-ended questions. In the analysis, we use participants’ answers to these three questions and regard it as one pool of information wherefrom we can identify patterns about user needs when consuming local journalism (Halkier, 2014). This approach also means, that we do not address the three questions separately, but cut across searching for the different user wants and needs expressed. The coding of the data corpus was undertaken by one of the authors of this article. In the development of a coding list, several iterations were made to arrive at a satisfactorily consistent way of coding. The coding process consisted of two steps. First,

the data were grouped into coding units that expressed similar ideas or actions. Second, by reviewing the extracted data corpus in each unit a definition for each set of grouped coding units was developed. The analysis of the open-ended data was based on principles of qualitative data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998), and it resulted in two data displays (see Tables 1 and 2) which visually represents the main themes found in the data.

Table 1. Data display representing the main categories and subcategories found in open-ended data.

Categories	Subcategory	Do not pay	Might Pay	Pay
Functional value	Better quality	X	X	X
	Low relevance	X	X	
	Find information on the internet	X	X	X
Symbolic value			X	X
Emotional value			X	X

Table 2. Data display representing main themes found in data related to four values of local journalism.

Value	Wants and needs	Means to reach unmet wants and needs		
Functional	Understanding, rather than just information	Explanation, examination, critical analysis, synthesis, reflection on potential consequences	Follow-ups	Narrative appeal
Symbolic	Practical information	Niche content offers	Everyday stories	Positive stories
	Sense of belonging	Soft news and gossip		
	Understanding place in world			
	Social bonds and glue			
	Common norms			
Emotional	Shared reality			
	Community building			
	Common consciousness			
	Unique local content	Provide content which cannot be assessed elsewhere	Avoid missing out	
Timeliness	Provide information at a favourable or useful time			
Experience positive feelings, enthusiasm, and engagement	Content which generates positive emotions			
Connectedness and proximity	Journalist role as neighbour			
Economic	Monetization			

Results

Quantitative data analysis

In a first step, we used the closed questions to group participants into three different categories: (1) participants not willing to pay for local journalism, (2) participants willing to pay for local journalism, (3) participants paying for local journalism. The first category covers 61% (including participants who answered “don’t know”) of our sample. The second category who is potentially willing to pay covers 28%. Finally, 11% of our participants stated that they already pay for local journalism. The question is then why most participants are not paying for local journalism. To shed light on this question, we also ask a first, general question whether participants thought it was relevant to be informed about local news or stories. While 62% of all participants stated that it is relevant, we want to know whether there is a correlation between paying for local news and the perception that being informed about local current affairs is relevant.

Of those not willing to pay for local news, 57% said that it is relevant to be informed about local current affairs. Notably, this figure is not significantly lower than the 70% in the group of those potentially willing to pay, of whom 70% responded affirmatively ($z = 1.77$; $p = .08$), or those already paying (67%; $z = 1.00$; $p = .32^1$). In short, the perceived relevance of being informed about local current affairs is sizeable amongst all three groups. Hence, ‘simply’ asking about relevance does not capture why some pay and others do not, we need a more in-depth understanding which is why we also want to analyse responses to a series of open-ended questions.

Qualitative data analysis

In the qualitative part of our analysis, we investigate how the three groups of participants relate to the four different values of local journalism presented in the literature review.

Functional value of local journalism

In the data from this study, the participants in all three groups (do not pay, might pay, pay) touch upon wants and needs covered in the literature review on the functional value of local journalism. They address local journalism as having democratic value for audiences and point to examples which resemble the topics identified by Barnett (2009): informing citizens, broadcasting popular opinion, for example in reader’s letters, campaigning, and holding local government accountable. To mention examples, the need for information is evident in these quotes: ‘*Information about politics.*’ (Not paying), ‘*That is relevant and with some depth, and not just info that there is a new hairdresser in the area.*’ (Might pay). The need for holding local government accountable is also expressed explicitly:

‘More focus on opinions other than those of the incumbent mayor.’ (Pays)

‘[More local journalism which] bites the tin gods in their butts.’ (Might pay)

As the quotes display, the participants point to the importance of local journalism's ability to show a plurality of opinions and the importance of holding local government accountable. This speaks to the democratic value of local journalism.

A functional value of local journalism also is frequently mentioned in the open-ended data, such as the importance of local journalism to provide information about events, health, environment, new restaurants and shops, urban/rural development, business news, sports, and crime reports. Examples include:

'For instance, important and exciting information about culture and children.' (Not paying)

'Information from municipality, companies, associations, about events and things happening.' (Not paying)

'I need a calendar of what is happening in the coming days.' (Pays)

The need for addressing consequences is also evident from a wish to follow up on stories which have been published so that they can get extra details, new facts, later developments, reactions, or new issues which have been raised by the original event.

'I often experience that follow-ups are missing on cases they have dealt with.' (Might pay)

In the quantitative part of our study, we did ask respondents how often they use local journalism. While the most frequent response for those paying for local journalism—unsurprisingly—is “several times a week”, the most frequent response for both those not willing to pay and those potentially willing to pay is “weekly” use of local journalism. Hence, one may wonder whether those not paying for local journalism credibly can claim missing follow-ups. However, it is possible that this experience with local journalism originates from an earlier point in time where the participant paid for and accessed local news regularly.

While some wants and needs regarding the functional values of local journalism cut across all three groups of participants, the data also shows that participants not paying or who might pay express a need for better quality in local journalism, including better journalists. The non-paying audiences expressed a need for local media to provide higher quality in reporting, so audiences can better understand the perspectives of local issues and the consequences national and international issues have for their local community. According to these participants, this need is often not met in today's local journalism. They argue that in local journalism there is a tendency for journalists to just describe what has happened, but leaving out critical analysis, synthesis, and reflection on potential consequences. As two participants stated:

'More news which are not copies of press releases.' (Might pay)

'News stories with substance; now it is just a line or two, and that's it, there are no analysis or anything.' (Not paying)

Thus, participants express a want and need for in-depth reporting providing analysis and an overview of consequences for their community. In addition, these responses

suggest that the audience could benefit from local journalism being more anecdotal rather than summary lead, and that the frequently used inverted pyramid style might not be what audiences want and need. Following these statements from participants, temporally organized content might be an additional way of presenting local journalism. Typically, people understand events in the world surrounding them through storytelling and narratives (e.g., Bruner, 1986: p. 222) and, thus, a lack of narrativity might be what the participants are referring to when they describe local journalism as lacking ‘depth’ or substance.

Another theme in the data from participants who do not pay or might pay deals with an unmet want regarding topics covered by local journalism. They express needs such as ‘amateur local sports’, ‘events for children’, ‘local politics’, ‘crime’. The common denominator here is that they have niche interests that they do not feel are covered well enough by the local media. All three categories of participants express that they access information about local events/information on the internet. There is no doubt that participants assess local journalism against the richness of news, information, and entertainment available online. On the one hand, one may see the common weekly publishing cycle of local media as an asset, enabling them to take a step back and report the news differently from those caught up in the cycle of daily publishing and around-the-clock updates on social media. On the other hand, according to the participants, a weekly cycle can leave local journalism outlets vulnerable, because others deliver content quicker and more often, leaving local journalism outlets looking antiquated.

Symbolic value of local journalism

The participants who might pay or already pay for local journalism touch upon their wants and needs for local journalism’s symbolic function. In line with prior research on how local media shape a “sense of place” and provide “social glue” (e.g., Hess and Waller, 2016; Karlsson and Rowe 2019; Reader and Hatcher 2012), participants emphasized how local journalism’s symbolic value in this regard:

‘It gives me a sense of belonging in my community.’ (Might pay)

‘It [local journalism] is a part of living in a community, it is the glue. You must follow things happening here.’ (Pays)

In the open-ended data participants who might pay or pay for local journalism point to content such as local gossip and soft news as an important source of experiencing “social glue”. For instance, participants point to soft news and local gossip when asked: ‘From which type of local journalism do you usually benefit the most?’ The participants see the value of soft news and gossip as it can strengthen social bonds, and inform about social norms (Feinberg et al., 2012). This kind of social glue is also an aspect of the norms described in the literature review and what Meijer (2020) calls norms of the community being established. To exemplify what they mean, participants highlight knowledge about other residents living in their community:

‘Something about the people living in the local area.’ (Might pay).

‘Focus on the small, good stories.’ (Might pay)

Apart from being entertaining, small, gossipy everyday soft news stories can also contribute to a connection between journalists and audience (Lewis et al., 2014). Gossip and soft news stories can also connect the audience itself on a deeper level, because they create a shared reality that all audience members are part of. That is, participants ask for “campfire stories” which can help forging a communal bond, community building and provides a common consciousness (Ruotsalainen and Villi, 2021).

Interestingly, participants who do not pay for local journalism do not express wants and needs regarding the symbolic value of local journalism to the same extend as participants who might want or pay for local journalism, and thus, they have a low awareness of these dimensions.

Emotional value of local journalism

As mentioned, participants in all three groups express a need for functional values of local journalism. However, participants who might pay or pay stress, that if they do not get functional values fulfilled, it has consequences for their experience of local journalism’s emotional value. According to the participants, relevant information from their area must be presented in a timely manner, so they can steer clear of encountering old content or of feelings of missing out:

‘It has to be something which interests me, and something which happened recently, so I do not get old news.’ (Might pay)

‘More news, it is not enough to get 1-2 [local news stories] a week.’ (Not paying)

This issue roots in a functional need, but it also relates to the emotional needs of audiences, because old news is often no longer of interest, relevance, or importance, and therefore they trigger different emotions, e.g., annoyance, concern, and feeling left out. This is both a here and now-issue, but it is also a longer-term issue because it has negative consequences if an audience does not trust their local media to deliver timely information on grave matters. The following quote underlines how this is prevalent when users of local journalism miss an explanation of local phenomena, which makes them worry, and thus gives them an emotional reason for wanting timely local news:

‘I really miss... that a journalist figures out where this terrible smell sulphur which hangs over the entire district several days a month comes from.’ (Might pay)

Another theme in the data from participants who might pay or pay for local journalism deals with a need for local journalism to provide more than just facts on recent developments and events. In their opinion local journalism must include content that they personally benefit from:

'It must be more than just news; it must be something I can benefit from personally.'
(Might pay)

The participants do not go into detail with what “more than just news” means in practice, but they underline that local journalism must provide a sense of being meaningful and valuable to them personally, and not just to the community or society at large:

'That it is meaningful to me.' (Pays)

'[It] gives me value.' (Might pay)

As described in the literature review this need for local journalism to be personally relevant can be related to the emotional value of local journalism, making audiences experience emotions, such as pride when reading about good people in their area, looking forward to or reexperiencing nice, joyful, or severe events; or experiencing feelings of being less alone or isolated because of reading local journalism. Moreover, it is of emotional value to the audience that a local journalist has social capital in local knowledge or a shared identity with the audience (Hess and Waller, 2016). This need is also a theme in the open-ended data:

'Journalists who have their finger on the pulse, and who is in contact with citizens.'
(Might pay)

The need for proximity or local media being “in touch with their community” and to understand what it means to be a community member (Lowrey et al., 2008) is central, also on an emotional level. Hence, participants mention a need for having unique content that they cannot find elsewhere:

'It must be something, I cannot access anywhere else.' (Might pay)

In addition, participants underline the importance of getting the gist of journalists who are passionate about their jobs as reporters. According to the participants who pay or might want to pay they have wants and needs for engaged and thus emotional local reporting for it to be appealing to them, and one way to do this is for local journalists to show their enthusiasm and use emotions in reporting to connect with users on an emotional level:

'Journalists who are enthusiastic about writing and who are good at it.' (Might pay)

At the heart of this quote is emotion, since emotion fuels engagement with news and information, including local journalism (Beckett and Deuze, 2016). As the amount of information about our world increases in a daily flood of information, local journalism audiences have more easily access to more journalism than ever before, participants recognize that emotional engagement is one way for local media to cut through the noise.

The main finding in relation to emotional audience wants and needs is that participants who do not pay for local journalism today do not express needs for emotional values of

local journalism to the same degree as participants who (might) pay for local journalism. The participants who do not pay put more emphasis on functional values.

Economic value of local journalism

Overall, there are few quotes dealing with the economic value of local journalism which causes the analysis of this dimension to be cursory. Themes in the open-ended data show that wants and needs regarding economic values nevertheless exist:

'We have a local business, and therefore, it is relevant to follow what is happening in the district where our business is situated and where we live'. (Pays)

As this participant explains, it is relevant for business-owners to be aware and ready to act on what happens in their local community. If there are events taking place, business-owners can take advantage of the event and monetize it. Thus, there is a need for local journalism to contribute to keeping money in the region and keeping shops and services open creating economic value for audiences.

Summary

The data display in [Table 1](#) provides an overview of the main categories of the analysis of the open-ended data. Since we have scarce data on the economic dimension, it has been left out of the table below.

The main finding is that participants who do not want to pay for local news, do not express wants and needs for symbolic and emotional values of local journalism to the same degree as participants who (might) pay for local journalism. Instead, participants who do not pay and participants who might pay emphasize functional values. Therefore, our results indicate three paths for local media outlets to increase their audiences: (1) communicate and/or clarify the symbolic and emotional values of local journalism, (2) increase quality regarding functional values of local journalism, and (3) increase relevance regarding functional values of local journalism.

In terms of low awareness of symbolic and emotional values local media could prioritize gossipy everyday stories and positive stories. In addition to a higher degree of unique content and timeliness are mentioned by participants, this would increase the usefulness of local journalism and nourish to feelings of connectedness and proximity. By doing so, the role of the journalist can be developed into the role of the journalist as a neighbour who is engaged in and enthusiastic about the local community.

In terms of quality, further explanation, examination, critical analysis, synthesis, reflection on potential consequences could be a way forward, along with follow-ups and improved narrative appeal. The results from the analysis of the open-ended data on the values are visualized in [Table 2](#), summarizing the main themes found on what the values mean to the respondents and the means which can be used to deliver what audiences want and need.

Discussion

Local journalism publishers are struggling to survive the transition from print to digital, and they are struggling to find a fitting role to play in a high-choice, digitally advanced media environment. Against this background, our study has employed a mixed methods audience research approach to explore local journalism audiences' functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic wants and needs. The main finding is those participants who do not want to pay for local news, do not express wants and needs for symbolic and emotional values of local journalism to the same degree as participants who pay or might pay. Furthermore, the study sheds light on how participants who do not pay experience low quality and low relevance regarding functional values of local journalism. The results thereby provide important input to how local journalism can be adapted to better fit audience expectations.

In the discussion of the functional, symbolic, and emotional role of local journalism, it is relevant to consider the audiences' preferences for both relevant, synthesized, continuous coverage and their need for experiencing positive emotions and engagement along with a sense of belonging. These audience needs speak to the concept of constructive journalism which prioritizes solution-focused news, instead of negative and conflict-based news. An essential aspect of constructive journalism is that a constructive news frame will encourage greater audience engagement and decrease audiences fatigued by negative news (Wenzel et al., 2018). Wenzel et al. (2018) recommend this approach in local journalism, but they also stress that constructive local journalism requires 'a substantial investment in time and resources to avoid slipping into less resource-intensive genres such as good news PR stories' (Wenzel et al., 2018: p. 654). Constructive journalism can be a fruitful way to accommodate some of the wants and needs articulated by the participants in this study, though to reach a proper balance in reporting the constructive approach should be a supplement to traditional local journalism, not an alternative. In further consideration of the practical implications of this approach, there is no doubt that local constructive journalism requires investments both in terms of further education of local journalists, but also in terms of local journalists acquiring deep insights into the needs of their audiences. These deep insights should preferably develop into lasting relationships with audiences.

The participants in this study also call for emotional engagement with local media. However, in journalism there is a tension between emotional engagement and professional ideals of objectivity. Research has shown that emotional experiences impact news use in both positive and negative ways. Emotional journalism can create connections with alienated and distrustful audiences (Lecheler, 2020), but it can also result in distrust (Ihlebaek and Holter, 2021) and in news avoidance (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative for local journalism to find an appropriate balance in using engaging and emotional reporting – a balance which enhances connections to audiences but does not result in distrust and news avoidance. According to Benson (2013) committing to narrative journalism is one way to strike this balance, since narrative journalism prioritizes entertainment over information and personal news stories over general information. In Benson's (2013) view this is advantageous, because it allows a diversity of viewpoints.

Like all studies, our study does not come without limitations. First, the results rely on Danish participants, and thus, generalisations should be made with care. Second, the findings on the economic dimension of audience wants and needs are limited, therefore we suggest further work on this dimension, such as a survey or interviews with businesses/business owners who read, do not read and/or advertise traditionally or via native advertising in local newspapers. Journalism studies tends to take less interest in the business context of journalism, and therefore there is a notable lack of knowledge on this dimension. Third, asking audiences about local journalism as a single entity is in some ways too simplistic, since local journalism is not only one ‘thing’, not one single ‘place’. Therefore, future studies should examine the wants and needs of their specific audience, preferably with qualitative methods. Thus, further audience research is needed, in a wide range of different contexts, communities, and cultures. That said, this study provides insight into audience perspectives and expectations of local journalism which is often overlooked (Hess et al., 2022).

Summing up, this study makes a small, but important contribution to our knowledge about local journalism audience. The study provides us with information on the different perceptions of local journalism held amongst citizens who pay for local journalism, who may be willing to pay, and citizens who do not want to pay for local journalism. This information is crucial for local media outlets to improve their strategies to retain and possibly even regain audiences. Without audiences, local news journalism cannot exist, and without local news local democracy cannot function.

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Note

1. Note that 16 participants responded paying for local news media, but then, on the follow-up question on how much they are willing to pay for local news on their ‘local area’, responded 0 DKK. A possible reason for this discrepancy might be that participants already pay for regional local news but would not pay for local news specifically or exclusively covering their own local area. Excluding these 16 participants does not lead to substantial difference in the results reported here.

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