

The value of local news

**Unpacking dynamics of local newspapers' value
creation for audiences and society**

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Acknowledgements

There are ample metaphors used to describe the dissertation process – a journey, a marathon, a roller coaster, perhaps even a nightmare and definitely a struggle. I can recognize them all. Still my favorite metaphor is the one suggested by a friend who had finished his thesis long before I even started. In his vivid description the PhD process resembles the letter W. It typically starts on top with all the enthusiasm of the rookie – how hard could it be? Then the steep downwards slope towards the first valley of doubt as the extent of the work ahead starts to dawn on you. All these doors opening up to new theoretical territories – one after the other - making it impossible to feel anything but overwhelmed. Then the slow climb towards another top as you experience the satisfaction of diving into your empirical data, of applying the insights on research method that you have recently acquired and of finding results that provide you with new knowledge. “How rewarding, how satisfying”, you enthuse. Then - as you finally think you have something great going on, something for the world to see, something... publishable, you are on the brink of another downward turn as you are heading towards the academic territory of article publishing and its valley of revise and resubmit, maybe even its darkest corner of reject. Then, somehow you manage to crawl you way back up, cumbersomely, learning to respect the slow pace of knowledge production, admitting that your contribution is not the gigantic leap that you initially anticipated, but a baby step, a missing piece, a thread in the weave that constitutes research. This is when your dissertation is handed in and you are at the end, the final top of your double W. “Well”, another friend commented, when hearing my enthusiastic description of this PhD process metaphor, “Thank God it’s not an M”.

Experiencing the PhD “W” has been hard and wonderful. I would do it again. Any day... provided I had all the good people around that have contributed in so many ways to making this possible. I will start with those nearest – Herman, Pål, Mum, Dad and Solveig. Thank you for your endless support. I am so incredible lucky to have you around. I have also been very lucky with my supervisors, Eli Skogerbø at The University of Oslo and Anne-Britt Gran at BI Norwegian Business School. Thank you, Eli, for making me believe in this project and for your many insightful comments and your advice along the way - and to the Institute of Media and Communication for being so welcoming. Anne-Britt, without you and the Digitization and Diversity project (DnD) at BI there would not have been a dissertation with my name on it. I am truly grateful that you brought me onboard the DnD research group and for your investment in my research. As part of the DnD team, I have been fortunate to have a “bonus

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how local news organizations aim to create and capture value in their two-sided market, how audiences perceive the value of the local newspaper product, and how these dynamics of supply and demand affect the value that local newspapers create for society. Using the implementation of online paywalls as a catalyst, which exposes the strength of the audience-newspaper relationship, I examine local newspapers' value creation from a social responsibility, a business and an audience gratification perspective and identify areas of overlap and conflict between the different value perspectives. I investigate these areas empirically using a mixed method research design combining interview data, survey data and web site traffic data. Based on the empirical findings in the dissertation's five articles (Part 2) combined with the theoretical perspectives discussed in the dissertation's introduction chapters (Part 1) I develop an analytical model capturing *value flows* and *value flow gaps* between local newspaper organizations, audiences and society.

Based on the empirical findings, I argue that local newspapers maintain an important role as information sources, as integrators in local communities and as arenas for local public discourse. However, challenges of pluralism, payment and personal interests among audiences stimulate detachment from local journalism, particularly among younger audiences and people with lower income and education. The findings encourage more research emphasis on understanding what makes local journalism valuable for people rather than what *should* make it valuable from a normative standpoint. They challenge the industry to bridge the gap between value proposed and value perceived among audiences to sustain a business increasingly dependent on user payment. For media policy, findings suggest that supply measures alone might not be enough to stimulate actual use of local journalism in a high-choice media landscape.

Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen undersøker lokalavisers strategi for å skape verdi i deres tosidige marked, publikums opplevelse av verdi i det journalistiske produktet som avisene tilbyr, samt de implikasjoner denne dynamikken mellom tilbud og etterspørsel har for lokalavisenes verdiskapning for samfunnet. Jeg bruker innføringen av betalingsmur på nett som en katalysator som synliggjør styrken i forholdet mellom avisene og publikum, og anlegger tre ulike perspektiver på lokalaviser og verdiskapning - et samfunnsansvarsperspektiv, et forretningsmodellperspektiv og et brukerperspektiv. Jeg identifiserer områder der disse perspektivene er sammenfallende eller i konflikt med hverandre og undersøker disse empirisk ved hjelp av metodetriangulering som kombinerer intervjudata, surveydata og webtrafikkdata. Basert på de teoretiske perspektivene som blir diskutert i avhandlingens kappe (Del 1) og empiriske funn i avhandlingens fem vitenskapelige artikler (Del 2) utvikler jeg en modell som beskriver verdistrømmer og brudd i verdistrømmer mellom lokalaviser, publikum og samfunn.

Basert på empiriske funn argumenterer jeg for at lokalavisene fortsatt er viktige for lokal informasjon, integrasjon og for lokal debatt, men utfordringer knyttet til mangfold, betaling og personlige interesser hos publikum stimulerer avstand til lokaljournalistikken som avisene tilbyr, særlig blant yngre brukere og blant folk med lavere inntekt og utdanning. For forskningen viser avhandlingen behov for mer kunnskap om det som faktisk gjør lokaljournalistikk verdifull for folk, enn det som *bør* gjøre den verdifull fra et normativt ståsted. For bransjen og dens voksende avhengighet av brukerinntekter, utfordrer funnene lokalavisene til å tette gapet mellom verdien de tilbyr og verdien publikum oppfatter i det journalistiske produktet. For mediepolitikken tyder funnene på at det å sikre tilgang til lokalaviser ikke alene er nok til å stimulere bruk når utvalget av medier og innhold er stort.

1 Introduction

How do local newspapers create value? This deceptively simple question is rarely asked in the research literature, even though the answer is undoubtedly central to our understanding of the role local newspapers play in post-industrialized Western societies and for their sustainability as a business. This dissertation is concerned with local newspapers' value creation in a high-choice, digitally advanced media landscape. Taking the momentous changes in the newspaper business as its point of departure, it examines how local newspaper organizations aim to create and capture value by providing local journalism to audiences, how audiences perceive the value of this journalistic product and how these dynamics of supply and demand affect local newspapers' value for society. The underlying normative premise for this research is that local newspapers have value for society by providing information, by serving as community integrators and as arenas for local public discourse. They are societal institutions that belong to democracy's infrastructure, and they are instrumental in the realization of media diversity as a key, normative principle in Western liberal democracies. My research interest lies in the digital transformation of this role in a commercial media environment.

The relationship between local newspapers' role as societal institutions serving the interests of local democracies and as businesses operating according to the commercial logic of the market is complex. Journalism research is rife with distrust of market forces emphasizing the negative impact of a commercial logic on journalism (e.g. Baker, 2001; Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, & White, 2010; McManus, 1994; Sjøvaag, 2019). On the other hand, the provision of local journalism in local democracies depends on viable media businesses. The fundamental role that commercial media operations – particularly newspapers – play in funding journalism on a market basis means we must understand economic factors if we are to understand professional journalism (Nielsen, 2016). The centrality of the conflicting between societal and commercial interests in research on journalism and news media in general means that this dissertation ties in with a 'densely populated' research field. Given this vast scholarly legacy, I appreciate that my own contribution will only be able to encompass a fraction of the wealth of perspectives in this tradition. The purpose of my research is to enhance the understanding of local newspapers' 'way of doing business' in the transition from print to digital and how this influences their societal role in local democracies. I do so by combining normative and economic perspectives on how local newspapers create value to capture the two sidedness of local newspapers as societal institutions and as business operations (Morlandstø & Krumsvik, 2014).

In a local context, the commercial foundation of journalism has become increasingly apparent with local newspaper businesses' intensifying struggle to reinvent their business model. The digital transformation of the news industry, and the subsequent revenue crisis facing local newspaper organizations, threatens the very existence of local journalism. If local journalism, despite its faults and shortcomings, is important for democracy, as ascertained by an extensive body of local journalism research (Hess & Waller, 2016; Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2018; Nielsen, 2015a), local newspaper organizations' business model, as well as local audiences' willingness to spend time and money on the journalism that these organizations provide, are increasingly matters of societal interest and democratic urgency.

The research interest in this topic has so far been limited in the otherwise rich field of journalism research. Economic questions pertaining to the future of news media organizations represent a "blind spot" in digital journalism research (Pickard, 2017, p. 49) and the lack of familiarity with the economic underpinnings of journalism is a "serious limitation" to the understanding of journalism's role in society, its institutional preconditions and how these are changing (Nielsen, 2016, p. 52). This also concerns local newspaper audiences who are expected to bear more of the costs of local news production. Consequently, there is a growing need for more knowledge about people's relationship to their local newspapers from both a scholarly, business and media policy point of view.

I address this gap in the research literature by examining the interplay between local newspapers' business model and audiences' relationship to local news and information. I am mainly concerned with local newspaper organizations' digital operations and the consumption of local journalism online. In the digital sphere, local newspapers, once a commanding force in local commerce, information dissemination and political discourse, are facing unparalleled competition for people's time and money. The enormous diversity of content delivery systems and content providers available online means that legacy news media like local newspapers can no longer take audiences' attention for granted, and this has profound implications for the value creation of news organizations (Picard, 2010). The objective of this dissertation is to unpack supply and demand dynamics between local newspaper businesses and audiences, and the implication of these dynamics for local newspapers' value creation for society.

My research is mainly conducted in Norway, which owing to its extraordinarily rich and digitally advanced local media system, serves as a local media diversity and digitization "laboratory". Against concerns over emerging local news deserts and the negative

implications they have for local civic life (Abernathy, 2018; Howells, 2015), the Norwegian media system offers an opportunity to study the opposite, with its more than 220 local newspapers serving a population of 5.3 million people. Moreover, the Norwegian media system has state subsidies in place to counter market failure. Here, market failure refers to the inability of the market to sustain a local newspaper structure, which is deemed necessary for a well-functioning democracy. As such, Norway serves as what Flyvbjerg (2006) defines as a critical case. It is a “most likely” case (p. 231) which is likely to confirm presumptions about the positive impact of a diverse supply of local newspapers on people’s consumption of news and information. Conversely, if this is not valid for this case, then it is not valid for other less favorable cases. The latter will have important implications for our understanding of media diversity mechanisms on the local level.

The dissertation draws on theory of news media’s social responsibility in a local context. This concerns local newspapers’ value as societal institutions – both as local democracy’s ‘watchdog’ and as community ‘glue’ that ties people and places together. By combining the social responsibility framework rooted in democracy theory with value creation and uses and gratification literature, I aim to broaden the scope of the normatively oriented local journalism research. As such, my research is multidisciplinary in nature. The value creation concept is central in the business model literature. In the present context, it refers to how a source (e.g. local newspaper businesses) generates and proposes value to a target (e.g. audiences and society) and how value is captured and shared in the process. The perception of value by the target plays a key role in the value creation (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000; Lepak, Smith, & Taylor, 2007; Picard, 2010). The uses and gratification paradigm concerns the needs and wants of audiences and how they relate to local news and information from a value perception perspective.

I appreciate that the choice of theoretical framework underemphasizes certain perspectives, for example related to local media, power and culture, and that the value creation of local news operations relates to a wider field of societal, cultural, political and economic dimensions beyond the limits of this dissertation. As such, my research focuses on one key facet of how local newspapers create value for society – its provision of journalism that serves social responsibility functions – and how this relates to local newspapers’ business model and local audiences’ news and information preferences. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine (1) the value creation and value capture efforts of local newspaper organizations in an increasingly competitive local media environment; (2) the audiences’ perception of the

local newspaper products' value against the offering from a vast array of other news and information sources; and (3) the implications of this supply and demand interplay for local newspapers' value creation for society. The value perception among advertisers and other local newspaper stakeholders is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

My empirical material is drawn from the level of the individual media users and of the local newspaper organization. Findings from these levels form the basis for my analysis of local newspapers' value creation on the societal level. I draw on three different theoretical perspectives of value creation in relation to local newspapers – a social responsibility, a business and a gratification perspective – combined with findings in five empirical articles to develop an analytical model that captures value creation dynamics between local newspapers, local audiences and society. By means of the model, I demonstrate how diverging and converging interests between audiences and local newspaper businesses have implications for local newspapers' role in society, as well as their sustainability as a business. This integrated value creation model is one of the contributions I aim to make to the research on local journalism in this dissertation. With this model, I also aim to demonstrate how a value creation lens can aid the understanding of the relationship between local newspapers, audiences and society. Moreover, I aim to bring more empirical insight into the field regarding the supply and demand dynamics between local newspapers and audiences, and to propose new methods for exploring these dynamics.

Local newspapers are rarely clearly defined in the research literature (Hess, 2013). The term is used interchangeably with local journalism and it is often difficult to discern if it is local newspapers as organizations or products that are under study (See e.g. Hess & Waller, 2016; Nielsen, 2015a). In this dissertation, I am interested in both aspects. For the sake of clarity in my analysis, I will make a distinction between the local newspaper product and the local newspaper organization that provides this product¹. The local newspaper product is interpreted as a local journalism product. In its broadest sense, it refers to a certain media type that is used for local news and information. I align with Hess and Waller (2016) who describe local journalism as a product that reports on the people and events connected to a specific geographic area, and interprets national and international events and issues from a local angle. This product can generate different types of value. I will refer to this as the “local newspaper

¹ This is consistent with the interpretations of the term “local newspaper” in the dissertation’s empirical articles, even though these distinctions are not made explicit in the articles. When writing about empirical findings from the articles in the introduction, I will use these distinctions explicitly for the sake of analytical clarity.

product” and use the term interchangeably with “local journalism” and the “local journalism product”. This include the newspaper product online as well as in print. When a separation is required, I distinguish between “newspaper in print” and “newspaper online”.

My interest in local newspapers as organizations concerns their way of doing business, i.e. their business operations and their role as societal institutions serving public interests. This dual nature of the organization distinguish news media like local newspapers from other media, and news enterprises from other enterprises (Allern & Blach-Orsten, 2011; Morlandstø & Krumsvik, 2014). I will refer to local newspapers in this capacity as “local newspaper organizations”, as “local newspaper businesses” or simply as “local newspapers”.

The way I address the relationship between local newspaper organizations, local newspaper products and audiences with different theoretical lenses has encouraged a liberal approach to terminology for audiences. During the course of this dissertation, I use the term audiences interchangeably with media users as well as citizens and customers. I am aware of the extensive scholarly debate regarding different meanings of these concepts (See e.g. Picone, 2017; Syvertsen, 2004). However, I will argue that, for my purposes, they have one central characteristic in common – they all refer to people who, to a varying degree, use media to orient themselves towards a public world. Whether these people feature as customers in the business model literature or as citizens of a democratic order in the literature on journalism’s social responsibility, they are ultimately individuals who do or do not consume the local newspaper product.

In my analysis of value creation in relation to local newspapers, the implementation of online user payment or subscription regimes in local newspapers online plays a key role. For journalism scholars concerned with the relationship between local audiences and local newspapers, the introduction of such barriers to public content access, often referred to as “paywalls”² in the research literature, serves as a catalyst, which exposes the strength of the audience-newspaper relationship. By requiring their online readers to pay, local newspaper organizations put their product to the test: Is local journalism perceived as worth paying for by their audiences?

² The term paywall has been criticized in the newspaper industry for being negatively loaded. Arguably, the term “wall” referring to a barrier to access is not used to describe newspapers’ user payment strategies for their print editions. I have sympathy for this argument. Still, the paywall is a well-established term in the research literature and I will follow suit in this dissertation and use the paywall term.

This question, as well as the answers and the implications thereof, have engaged me both as a journalism scholar and as a media practitioner. I have experienced “from the inside” how the local newspaper industry attempts to reinvent its business model by building paywalls. From 2012 to 2014, I worked with digital transformation in Edda Media, later part of Amedia, Norway’s leading local media company. As head of analysis in Amedia I was tracking audience development in the company’s 60+ newspaper operations and witnessed how online reader revenue became an increasingly urgent matter. In 2012, the company started experimenting with paywalls, and my responsibility was to analyze how audiences received this shift.

Since then, paywalls have become a common feature in news sites throughout the Western world and the newspaper industry is becoming increasingly dependent on revenue from readers (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017). However, the implications of this transformation for local newspapers’ value creation, for the value perception among audiences and for local newspapers’ role in local communities are mainly unexplored in the research literature. In four of my five empirical articles, I specifically examine the impact of paywalls from different angles related to the dynamics of value creation. In one of these articles, I broaden the scope from a Norwegian context to a Danish one, providing a comparative analysis of paywalls’ implications across different media markets and points in time. The fifth article is not specifically concerned with paywalls, but more broadly with how local audiences experience the value of the local newspaper product and other sources of local news and information in a high-choice media landscape where paywalls have become the norm.

1.1 Research questions

In line with the stated purpose of my research outlined above, the dissertation addresses the following main research question and three sub-research questions.

Main RQ: How is local newspapers’ value for society influenced by the value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspaper organizations and audiences?

Sub-RQ 1: How do local newspaper organizations aim to create and capture value in their two-sided market?

Sub-RQ 2: How do audiences use and perceive the value of the local newspaper product compared to other local news offerings?

Sub-RQ 3: When local newspaper organizations change their way of capturing value from audiences, what are the implications for audiences’ relationship to the local newspaper product?

The sub-research questions are further detailed in article-specific research questions in each of the five empirical studies presented in Part 2 of this dissertation. The insights from these studies are combined with perspectives presented in the theory chapter to address the main and sub-RQs in Part 1 of the dissertation. An overview of the articles and their position within the framework of the dissertation is presented below:

Table 1 Overview of the dissertation’s empirical articles

Article number and title	Article specific research questions	Relation to the Sub-RQs
Article 1: “Reinventing the business model for local newspapers by building walls”	<i>What are local newspapers’ paywall strategies and how do these strategies affect their offering to users and advertisers?</i>	This article provides empirical findings to address Sub-RQ1
Article 2: “Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls”	<i>How do people in their early adulthood perceive the worthwhileness of local newspapers?</i>	This article provides empirical findings to address Sub-RQ2
Article 3: “Connecting people? Understanding media’s role as democratic resources for people in digitally advanced local environments”	<i>To what extent do different local news and information sources serve as resources for people’s orientation towards the local public world?</i>	This article provides empirical findings to address Sub-RQ2
Article 4: “Bouncing off the Paywall – Understanding Misalignments Between Local Newspaper Value Propositions and Audience Responses”	<i>How well are local newspapers’ paywall value propositions aligned with customers’ value perception and behaviour?</i>	This article provides empirical findings to address Sub-RQ1 and Sub-RQ3

Article number and title	Article specific research questions	Relation to the Sub-RQs
Article 5: “Paywalls’ impact on local news websites’ traffic and their civic and business implications”	<i>How did the number of pageviews and unique visitors develop after the introduction of paywalls in Norwegian and Danish local news sites in a short term vs. longer-term perspective?</i>	This article provides empirical findings to address Sub-RQ3

1.2 The dissertation's structure

The dissertation follows the standard structure for article-based dissertations at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo. This means that it consists of an introduction (Part 1) and a collection of empirical articles (Part 2). I combine the empirical findings from the articles in Part 2 and theoretical perspectives presented in Part 1 to develop my analytical model. The model is presented in the empirical findings chapter in Part 1 of the dissertation. The structure of the dissertation is detailed below:

Part 1: Introduction

Chapter 1 outlines the dissertation's motivation; its research aims and research questions.

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the five empirical articles.

Chapter 3 contextualizes the dissertation within the field of local journalism studies and details research gaps that this project aims to address. Moreover, it presents the country-specific context of the research.

Chapter 4 presents the main theoretical perspectives that I apply in the dissertation.

Chapter 5 describes the methodological approach in this dissertation. The mixed method research design is presented, and its strengths and weaknesses are discussed.

Chapter 6 addresses the dissertation's research questions by presenting empirical findings from the five empirical articles. The analytical model is presented.

Chapter 7 discusses the empirical findings based on theory and previous empirical research.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation. Implications for research, industry and media policy is discussed, the dissertation's main theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions to the field of local journalism studies are summarized and areas for future research are suggested.

Part 2: The five empirical articles

2 Summary of the articles

This section provides a short overview of the articles included in the dissertation and their relation to the dissertation's overall research questions. Each article's main findings are presented along with its main contributions:

Article 1 Reinventing the business model for local newspapers by building walls

Published in Journal of Media Business Studies, April 2018

This article explores how local newspaper businesses aim to monetize online news and how the implementation of paywalls affects their offerings to readers and advertising customers in their two-sided markets. Using a business model lens, the study analyses the role of paywalls for local newspaper businesses' value proposition, target customers, customer relationship and distribution channels. The study demonstrates that local newspaper paywalls represent two different strategies. First, a brake strategy in the user market, whereby the newspaper businesses targeted existing print customers with bundled and differentiated products to secure subscription revenue and protect print from web cannibalization. Secondly, an acceleration strategy in the advertiser market, focused on improving advertising services with more relevant and valuable audiences and user behavior insights from user data harvesting. Although there is a risk that this combined accelerate and brake exercise will result in a burnout effect, with shrinking and ageing audiences and the subsequent loss of advertising, the analysis suggests that local newspaper businesses have been relatively successful at balancing these two strategies, providing some optimism regarding paywalls' potential contribution to the funding of local journalism.

Original contribution: The study advances the understanding of the paywall strategies of local newspaper businesses and how this affects the way they propose and capture value in their two-sided markets. The use of in-depth interviews with commercial managers in small local newspaper organizations provides insights into strategic decision-making and business logics, which are rare in the local context.

Article 2: Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls

Accepted for publication in Journalism, March 2019

This study explores how people in their early adulthood perceived the value of news from the small town where they reside and their attitude towards paying for it. It shows how the value of the local newspaper product was experienced very differently among those willing to pay for local news and those unwilling to pay. For the latter group, the study demonstrates that there was a misalignment with regard to their perceptions of small-town news medias' value for them personally and for local democracy. What might not be important for them as individuals was nonetheless experienced as important for the society they lived in. This inconsistency reveals how perceived worthwhileness of news media exceeds the personal realm and how the individual's experience of local news' value is not only self-oriented but also other-oriented.

Original contribution: This study makes a dual theoretical and methodological contribution: Theoretically, it introduces the concept of societal worthwhileness to encompass media users' incorporation of collective interests in their value assessment of news media and explores how collective interests relate to local news consumption and people's willingness to pay for local journalism. Methodologically, it proposes a methodology for examining individual and societal worthwhileness inspired by Q sorting and media landscape mapping methods. Empirically the study provides new knowledge about local news consumption among people in their early adulthood, an age group mainly overlooked in local journalism studies. These audiences represent a particular challenge for small-town newspaper organizations aiming to build a digital subscription base for the future.

Article 3: Connecting People? Understanding Media's Role as Democratic Resources for People in Digitally Advanced Local Environments

Published in Digital Journalism, October 2019

This study investigates local media's democratic role for citizens in complex, information abundant environments. Using mediated public connection as its theoretical lens the study examines how people used and experienced different sources of local news and information including the local newspaper product. Findings demonstrate substantial overlap in the media people used and convergence around general interest media and Facebook. There was little evidence that media use created media enclaves. Instead, people spread their attention widely across the local media landscape. Moreover, the most shared media were also most strongly associated with democratic roles. Findings challenge concerns regarding legacy media's failing capacity to serve as common public sphere sites in a high-choice media environment

but conclude that, overall, citizens' experiences with local media's democratic roles were not very strong.

Original contribution: This study makes a theoretical contribution by introducing two distinct dimensions of people's mediated public connection: A *practice dimension* capturing use patterns and thus levels of local audience fragmentation, and a *perception dimension* capturing media experiences and thus the democratic roles that media play for local audiences. The study makes a methodological and empirical contribution by presenting a democracy function score based on media experiences among local citizens and combining this with network analysis of media use across online and offline sources for local news and information.

Article 4: Bouncing off the Paywall – Understanding Misalignments Between Local Newspaper Value Propositions and Audience Responses

Published in International Journal on Media Management, October 2018

This article studies local newspaper businesses' potential to build sustainable digital revenues by means of paywalls by conducting a two-sided analysis of paywall value propositions and local news audiences' responses to these value propositions. The study identifies a major gap between the value of paywalls intended by local newspaper businesses and customer value perception and behavior. These are misalignments between the intended attractiveness of paywalled content and audiences' attitude towards this content, and misalignments between access to paywalled content and use. Findings show how paywalls were generally not very well received and stimulated changes in behavior resulting in "thinner" consumption of the local newspaper product. The study demonstrates how the offerings of local newspaper businesses were particularly misaligned with younger audiences and people with lower income and lower news interest. These groups were most likely to "bounce off" when they hit a paywall.

Original contribution: This study's double lens approach combining qualitative interview data from local newspaper managers and quantitative survey data from audiences in a mixed method design provides new insight into the interplay between value propositions and value perception and behavior concerning paywalling of local online news. By exposing misalignments between the two sides, the study provides deeper understanding of the local newspaper industry's challenges when trying to build sustainable business models based on

reader revenue, as well as the potential negative effect of paywalls on local newspapers' information and integration role in local communities, particularly for younger users. The theoretical and analytical model that confronts value propositions from the newspaper business with the perceived value and behavior of audiences offers a starting point for further research of misalignments between the two sides in other fields of firm-customer interactions.

Article 5: Paywalls' impact on local news websites' traffic and their civic and business implications

Published in Journalism Studies, June 2019

This article examines the effect of paywalls on traffic to local online newspapers, i.e. use of the local newspaper product, and discusses its societal and business implications. Comparing audience metrics on a sample of eight local news websites before and after paywall introduction, the analysis shows that the traffic to mobile and desktop versions decreased after the implementation of paywalls. Sites with soft paywalls as well as those with hard paywalls experienced a decline in traffic and the traffic remained at the decreased level. Findings demonstrate that traffic development in Norway was somewhat better than in Denmark. The study posits that while paywalls may provide an important revenue stream for local news operations under financial pressure, they also challenge the civic function of these media since fewer people consult their content.

Original contribution: In this study, we propose a methodology for exploring empirically the consequences of the introduction of soft and hard paywalls based on audience metrics data. By combining pageviews and unique visitor numbers from the eight case newspapers (four Norwegian, four Danish) and applying a temporal perspective on how these metrics developed, this study enables empirical analysis of how paywalls affected the breadth and depth of local news consumption in both a short term and longer-term time span for different paywall types.

3 Background

In this chapter, I will contextualize my research within the local journalism research field and expand on gaps in the research literature that I aim to address in this dissertation. I will position my research in relation to three main areas: Local journalism in a digital world, the digital transformation of the local newspaper business and the introduction of paywalls. Following this, I will present the Nordic and specifically the Norwegian context where my research has been conducted.

3.1 Local journalism in a digital world

A common denominator among the leading research contributions to our current understanding of local journalism is the relationship between the increasingly globalized, digitalized world that we live in and local news media's emphasis on serving a distinct local area (Aldridge, 2007; Ali, 2017; Císařová, 2017; Hess & Waller, 2016). Life is still lived locally, even though it is less locally bound. Digital technology as well as patterns of migration, political centralization, and commercialization have all contributed to bringing the wider world closer and to the blurring of distinctions between the local, regional, national and global. Engan (2015) describes how this has put the importance of local under pressure because our notion of place and space has changed character and the 'what' of matters has become more important than the 'where'. As described by Nielsen (2015c), this makes it increasingly challenging for local news media to identify in ways that resonate with its audience regarding what is local, what makes it local and why the local is relevant for them.

Others emphasize that the local rootedness in place remains important to people (Aldridge, 2007; Císařová, 2017) and stress the need to "give credence to geography at a time when much social theory has tended to downplay the importance of location" (Hess & Waller, 2016, p. 38). This latter perspective resonates with the present development in the media world where everything gets tracked, tagged, and mapped; where mobile phones have become location-aware, computer games move out into the physical world and we are seeing the rise of a new, location-aware generation (Thielmann, 2010).

The pivotal point in these different accounts of the importance of place is the audiences and their perception of the value of the local in local journalism in their everyday life. The underlying premise is that local journalism, despite its many faults and shortcomings, is valuable to people and society. Local journalism is, as expressed by Nielsen, both important

and imperfect (2015c, p. 2). Claims like this are expressively normative, suggesting what news media *should* provide and what people *should* value, rather than what people actually find valuable. According to Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2017b), such normative ideals ascribed to civic cultures and the democratic order of society are typical for the ongoing academic discussion on news media and news consumption in a shifting media landscape. However, it is unclear how well these ideals correspond with audiences' media perceptions and practices because the audience dimension is insufficiently explored in local journalism research, as pointed out in several more recent contributions to the scholarly literature (e.g. Císařová, 2017; Hess, 2013; Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019b; McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017).

Swart et al. (2017b) suggest repositioning the academic debate on journalism based on the practices and preferences of the news user instead of normative ideals. Broersma and Peters (2016) argue that journalism research needs to move beyond top-down functionalist conceptualizations of news media's role in society towards a "functional" approach that captures the actual functions of news in the everyday lives of people. Similarly, Costera Meijer and Bijleveld (2016) emphasize the importance of identifying what counts as "valuable journalism" from a user perspective, an insight most urgently needed among scholars as well as producers of regional and local news. I follow the call from these scholars when applying an audience centric lens in this dissertation. However, rather than replacing a normatively oriented 'top-down' perspective on local journalism with a practice and perception oriented 'bottom-up' perspective, my aim is to combine the two and add a business dimension as well. I posit that we need to explore the interplay between audiences' media practices and perceptions, local newspapers' business operations and the normative ideals of local journalism's value in society within its specific sociocultural, political, technological and economic conditions.

According to Hess and Waller (2016) "local" in relation to news media and journalism is a slippery concept that means different things to different people depending on their place in the world. Furthermore, as described by Ali (2017) its meaning is often taken for granted as default localism based on the assumption that everyone implicitly knows what constitutes the local. Pauly and Eckert (2002) suggest that local is a myth invoked to signify a sense of connectedness in society. Despite such murkiness regarding its meaning, there is substantial agreement in the literature that local media and local journalism have an obvious spatial, geographical essence and that they are strongly associated with social life (Ali, 2017) and

people's emotional connection with place (Buchanan, 2009; Císařová, 2017). Hess (2013) has introduced the term “geo-social” to describe news outlets that have a solid link to geographic territory while simultaneously playing a role in a wider social space. The concept acknowledges both the fact that local journalism is not necessarily entirely produced or consumed within a given geographic area, and the powerful role local journalism and the news media that provide it actually play in constructing the idea of “community” and “local” (Hess & Waller, 2016). I align with this understanding of the geo-social nature of local journalism and news media in this dissertation.

Consequently, I see local newspapers as providers of geo-social journalism that contribute to an individual's sense of place, defined as an affiliation with a particular location. Such affiliation can have social, emotional or economic foundations; it can differ from one individual to the other and it does not assume that individuals who share such affiliation have common values, points of view or interests (Hess, 2013). Local media produce locality, such as subjects and spatial location. For example local newspapers' notices and stories of rites of passage – births, deaths, marriages – play an important part in producing local subjects, whereas news and debates about roads, buildings, housing, commercial development, cultural amenities, etc. aid the spatial production of locality (Buchanan, 2009).

The production of locality is guided by a set of news values (Shoemaker, Lee, Han, & Cohen, 2007) and normative ideals among news workers regarding the role of local journalism (Hanusch, 2015). These roles involve providing information and educating people, serving the interests of local communities by spurring political involvement, offering a community forum, and advocating for communities, as well as serving as a watchdog in society by keeping power accountable (Ibid). I will return to these roles in more detail in the theory chapter of the dissertation. Suffice to say for now that these ideals persist even if the local media landscape is changing: recent empirical research finds that local journalists remain focused on providing journalism that serves the needs of their communities based on traditional news values, such as proximity and public service (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018).

3.2 The local newspaper business

The local media environment is going through a momentous structural transformation, which has proven particularly challenging for local newspapers. The changes taking place in the local media landscape are largely related to digital technology, which has increased competition and destabilized local newspapers' readerships. This, in turn, has had a negative

impact on local newspapers' revenue and threatens the sustainability of their two-sided business, i.e. their operation in both the audience and advertising market. Even though there are notable differences between media systems and markets regarding how local newspapers manage and experience the transition from print to digital (Ali, Schmidt, Radcliffe, & Donald, 2018) there are commonalities in the challenges these media are facing in terms of generating revenue and covering costs (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). These challenges relate to key characteristics of the local newspaper business, such as the *public good* nature of the local news product (Ali, 2016). Public good in this context refers to the local journalism product's non-rivalrous and non-excludable character, as well as the positive externalities it engenders (Ibid).

Non-rivalrous means that once a local news story is produced, many can use it without interfering with the use of others, i.e. it "can be shared endlessly without reducing the benefit to the original consumer" (Gaustad, 2002, p. 249). The public good characteristics of the local journalism product are also related to non-excludability, which means that people are able to access journalism even if they do not pay for it directly. Gaustad, drawing on the work of Adams and McCormick (1993), argues that it is useful to distinguish between marketable public goods, which are excludable, and non-marketable public goods which are non-excludable (pure public goods). The online provision of local journalism challenges the product's excludability. The internet transforms otherwise excludable products to non-excludable products and turns marketable public goods into non-marketable public goods.

Positive externalities are defined as "the value some item has to someone who does not participate in the transaction" (Baker, 2001, p. 10). In this context, this refers to the benefits of local journalism for those who do not directly pay for it or consume it (Ali, 2016). For example, when people become better informed by following the local news, they do not only profit personally, but society as a whole benefits because news consumption stimulates better informed decisions (Van der Wurff, 2012). According to public good theory these benefits are underappreciated by the customer, i.e. she will pay for the benefit for herself but "is deterred from purchasing by being required to also pay for the benefits to third parties" (Baker, 2001, p. 42).

As a result, local journalism is under-produced by the commercial market despite the societal benefits it provides. This underproduction of public goods by the commercial market is referred to as 'market failure' which is exacerbated by the free rider or non-excludability

problem on the internet where consumers can use the public good without paying for it (Ali, 2016). Arguably, local journalism is not only a public good, but also a *merit good* which in common parlance means “products that are ‘good’ for you, even though we might not particularly like them” (Van der Wurff, 2012, p. 235). Merit good theory holds that people underestimate the benefits of news consumption and are less willing to pay for the product than they should and would be if they could see its ‘true value’ (Ibid). I will return to this concept in the theory chapter.

Relying on reader revenue alone has traditionally been insufficient for the newspaper business. Instead, media companies have operated in both a readership and an advertising market, i.e. as a two-sided business as noted above. Advertising has played a key role for the profitability of the business (Picard, 2010). For centuries, advertising, particularly classified advertising, was a goldmine for local printed newspapers because of their niche geographic markets (Hess & Waller, 2016). Typically, these newspapers enjoyed a dominant position in their circulation areas with only limited competition, leading to a near-monopoly in local advertising. Newspapers sold relevant audiences to advertisers seeking markets for their products and advertising revenue subsidized newspapers’ journalistic production so that newspapers could keep prices artificially low for readers and grow audiences, which in turn could be sold to the advertisers (Picard, 2010).

As audiences and advertising are increasingly moving online, this virtuous cycle has been disrupted (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017). In the digital sphere, local newspaper organizations encounter fierce competition for advertisers’ investment from a vast array of players, including global companies like Google and Facebook, which draw a large share of audience attention and can offer advertisers cheaper and more targeted options. Local newspapers with their limited geographical markets have fewer opportunities to pursue scale in their business. Furthermore, these digital super players do not carry the same costs of journalistic production as local newspapers do and as such, audiences and advertisers have moved from newspapers that invest heavily in journalistic production towards digital media that invest very little (Nielsen, 2016).

Adding damage to injury, the growth in newspapers’ online advertising business appears to exacerbate the overall decline in print advertising, suggesting that newspapers are cannibalizing their print advertising business with their online advertising offering (Sridhar & Sriram, 2015). With print advertising and subscription revenue in steep decline, and digital

advertising unable to make up for these losses, many local newspapers have been facing an emerging revenue crisis, which has led to substantial cost cutting measures and even local newspaper closures (Abernathy, 2018; Barnett & Townend, 2015). Cost cutting measures include reduction of staff and newsgathering costs by decreasing the number of journalists, beats and attendance at news events, increased office bound, passive news gathering, centralization of editorial and back-office functions and the reuse of material across outlets and platforms (Aldridge, 2007). Davis (2014) describes how there have been steadily increasing demands on newsroom staffs to produce more news copy in less time and with fewer people.

A key challenge for the local newspaper business is the attractiveness of the content they offer to their audiences. People in general are not necessarily deeply interested in news nor particularly interested in paying for it (Chen & Thorson, 2019; Lee & Chyi, 2014; Picard, 2010). As long as the options for audiences to get news, information and entertainment were limited in the pre-internet days, and news was firmly bundled into a standardized one-size-fits-all news product, this lack of interest was not a problem for newspapers. However, with the enormous variety of content delivery systems and content providers that are available to audiences today, opting out of news is much easier for people. The increasing media abundance has changed the relationship between audiences and news media from a dynamic of push, whereby audiences wait for whatever the media serve them, to a dynamic of pull, whereby audiences pick whatever they want to consume and are increasingly dependent on intelligent digital technologies to sort out relevant content for them (Neuman, Park, & Panek, 2012).

The technological metamorphosis of the media environment has changed who creates content and how; it has changed the organization and methods of news work and it has altered the ways in which individuals interact with content (Picard, 2010). These are structural conditions with momentous impact on media businesses. For local newspapers, competing for people's attention in this environment is increasingly challenging, particularly with regard to younger people. Research suggests that the traditional bundle of local news combined with other information about the weather, movie listings, sports results, and various forms of advertising is less attractive to younger audiences and local newspapers have typically lower reach among younger people in their communities than they have had historically among their older print readers (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). Supplementing this, other contributions suggest that proximity in local news is not as important to audiences as it is to journalists and that the

availability of information from all over the world has devaluated the relevance of proximity with decreasing interest in “news close to home” among the audience (Armstrong, McAdams, & Cain, 2015; Engan, 2015).

On the other hand, local newspapers may stand a better chance in the competition for people’s attention than general news providers do. According to Goyanes (2015), the value of local information increases in relation to uniform, general, homogenized, national, and global information. Other scholars also emphasize the maintained importance of geography in defining people’s interest in news and information (Elvestad, 2009; Hollander, 2010; Lee & Chyi, 2014; Mersey, 2009). Moreover, the growing number of hyperlocal media initiatives, whose operation is specifically geared towards audiences’ preference for news from the very near, also suggest that locality remains important for people (e.g. Barnett & Townend, 2015; Hess & Waller, 2016).

As audiences are increasingly expected to bear the cost of production without heavy subsidizing from advertisers (Ohlsson & Facht, 2017; Picard, 2010; Sjøvaag & Krumsvik, 2018), the question is if their preference for local news and information will stimulate user payment that can sustain local journalism. In other words, if audiences are willing to pay the costs of this societal institution. The public good nature of local journalism suggests that this will not be the case. However, this mainly empirical question has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature. It is against this background that this dissertation sets out to explore the interplay between how local newspapers aim to create and capture value by means of local journalism and how local audiences perceive the value of local newspapers’ journalism product.

3.3 The implementation of paywalls in local newspapers

Local newspapers’ main tactic to build user revenue in the digital sphere is to implement paywalls in their online edition (Hess & Waller, 2016). A paywall refers to any type of digital mechanism that separates free content from paid content on a website (Chiou & Tucker, 2013). Research into different paywall models and their development has demonstrated how such payment regimes can be constructed in different ways (Arrese, 2016; Williams, 2016a). Some newspapers allow micro payments to access content on an article-by-article basis; others require customers to sign up for a subscription to access content behind the wall. Some market paywalled content as stand-alone digital premium services, whereas others offer bundles of print and online content.

An often used typology of paywalls distinguishes between *metered paywalls*, which allow access to a limited number of free articles for example on a monthly basis, *hard paywalls*, where no content is accessible for free, and the *premium* model, sometimes referred to as a ‘freemium’ model, which allows free access to low-end content, whereas high-value content comes at a cost (Sjøvaag, 2016). The metered and premium models are sometimes also described as soft paywalls (Carson, 2015). Such soft solutions are most common, whereas the hard paywall is less in use (Simon & Graves, 2019; Williams, 2016b).

There is some optimism reported from the local newspaper business regarding the state and future possibilities of digital user payment (Ali et al., 2018) and there is extensive monetizing experimentation going on throughout the industry (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). However, the emerging research on people’s willingness to pay for local news online and their response to paywalls does not unanimously support the industry optimism. Studies in Denmark and the US suggest that paying intent for local newspapers online is limited (Chyi, 2012), and that paywalls drive digital users away, particularly the younger generation (Chiou & Tucker, 2013; Kammer, Boeck, Hansen, & Hauschildt, 2015), even though loss of traffic is not necessarily massively bigger in paywalled newspapers than in those without paywalls (Chyi & Tenenboim, 2017). Findings in the oft-cited Digital News Report from Reuters Institute, though not specifically concerned with local newspapers’ paywalls, suggest that with the exception of Norway and Sweden, the share of people who pay for online news remains low (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019).

As demonstrated by Goyanes (2019) older readers tend to be more prone to pay for local news services, especially when they are concerned about the financial situation of local outlets. Among younger people willingness to pay for local news is lower (Goyanes, 2015). A Norwegian report on willingness to pay for local news found that among people between the ages of 30-39 only 21% subscribed to a local newspaper or belonged to a household that subscribed, whereas among people aged 60+ years, the share was 70% or more (Olsen, Solvoll, & Gran, 2018). Combined with other research pointing to the youth challenge of local newspapers (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018) this suggests that paywalls may exacerbate local newspapers’ problem with attracting younger audiences. The negative effect of paywalls on news consumption in certain audience segments has caused some concern in the research literature over increasing information gaps in the population (Myllylahti, 2015; Newman et al., 2019; Pickard & Williams, 2014). However, audience response to paywalls is mainly

unexplored in the local context specifically with regard to younger news audiences' consumption of local journalism.

Another concern is the implications of paywalls for local newspapers' advertising business. Given newspapers' double market logic, whereby the audience in one market is monetized as eyeballs for advertisers in the other, a decline in traffic due to paywalls would potentially damage attractiveness to advertisers (Athey, Calvano, & Gans, 2016; Dekavalla, 2015; Myllylahti, 2016; Pickard & Williams, 2014). However, there is also some research suggesting that paywalls will not necessarily limit audience reach (Carson, 2015) and that the harvesting of user information facilitated by paywalls represents an important business asset enabling more targeted advertising and editorial content (Evens & Van Damme, 2016). This, too, is mainly unaccounted for on the local level in the research literature. The present dissertation will examine the implications of paywalls for local newspapers' value creation against the somewhat ambiguous and sparse findings from previous research presented in this section.

3.4 The Norwegian context

As noted in the introduction, my dissertation is predominantly based on empirical research from Norway. Four of the articles in the thesis are based on Norwegian data, whereas one is based on Norwegian and Danish data in a comparative research design. Both Norway and Denmark belong to the distinct cultural and geographical entity known as the Nordic region in the Northern part of Europe. The countries in the region are characterized by a comprehensive welfare state and structures for social and economic governance aimed at fostering democracy, civic participation, and equality among citizens. In Norway, as well as in the other Nordic countries, media have played an important role in establishing and maintaining the welfare systems (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, & Moe, 2014). The Nordic media systems are described as democratic corporatist (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) characterized by universal communication services, editorial freedom, a cultural policy for the media governed by arm's-length principles, and policy solutions that are consensual and durable, based on cooperation between the state, the media industry and the public (Syvertsen et al., 2014).

The local newspaper structure expanded in two main waves. First with the growth of the number of print presses around the country from 1830 to 1870. Secondly, with industrialization and the expansion of party politics from the turn of the century onwards. By 1940 most places where newspapers were published had competing party papers (Holand, 2019; Skogerbø, 2020). However, after World War II local newspaper markets went through a

process of monopolisation, and competition for market shares gradually became more important than political content (Østbye, 2019). In the 1960s the country experienced a local “newspaper death” resulting from the lack of market strengths among the small party newspapers combined with competition from nationwide popular newspapers, public service radio and TV. To compensate for market failure and to support a diverse newspaper landscape, governmental press subsidies were launched in 1969, introducing public responsibility for securing citizens access to a diversity of media (Skogerbø, 2020).

3.4.1 Media policy and local newspapers

The media subsidizing system has later expanded to include grants to selected publications, such as political newspapers, newspapers for minorities or special groups. Today, production grants make up the largest share of direct press subsidies in Norway. This support is provided in proportion to the newspapers' circulation and market position. In addition, Norwegian newspapers receive indirect subsidies in the form of VAT exemption on newspaper sales (MediaNorway, 2019). This support scheme appears to have played an important role in maintaining a diverse press structure in Norway (Slaatta, 2015; Åmås-Commision, 2017). A comparison of the newspaper landscape in the Nordic region from 2017 shows that Norway has the largest number of newspaper titles overall – 227 in total – and that the number of titles has stayed remarkably stable over time (Harrie, 2018).

The overarching policy goal is to support a diverse media system where public media coexist with commercial media (Sjøvaag, 2019). According to Article 100 of the Constitution of Norway, the state has an overarching responsibility to promote freedom of speech and democracy by creating “conditions that facilitate open and enlightened public discourse”, known as the “infrastructure responsibility” (Solberg-Government, 2017). In the field of journalistic media, the primary policy objective is to promote well-informed news production and a broad public discourse in the digital media society. Journalistic media are regarded as critical for the exchange of news, views and trustworthy information on which democracy is dependent. Against tendencies towards a fragmented public sphere and individualized media diets, general news media are also regarded as important for the strengthening of cohesion and social bonding (Åmås-Commision, 2017). These roles are part of news media’s social responsibility, which I will return to in the theory chapter of the dissertation. Suffice to say for now that these ideals serve as foundational premises for media policy.

Local newspapers play a key role for the overall policy goal of securing the citizens’ access to a diverse provision of independent news and current affairs media. Local media are described

as central for local democracies, for civic engagement and integration in local communities all over the country, and protecting existing small local media and encouraging new local media start-ups is seen to benefit media diversity in general and local communities in particular (Solberg-Government, 2019; Åmås-Commision, 2017). Simultaneously, the provision of local journalism is increasingly threatened by local newspapers' failing business model. The way Norway is populated, with a small and geographically dispersed population, makes market conditions extra challenging for small local newspapers. In the 2019 White Paper on Media policy, small local newspapers' key role as local democracy infrastructure is accentuated and given additional prominence with increased support schemes to these media for the years ahead (Solberg-Government, 2019).

While these measures are focused on securing supply of diverse media outlets and content on the structural level, the media policy diversity goal is increasingly discussed in relation to consumption on the individual user level (Åmås-Commision, 2017). The governmental White Paper maintains that stimulating such diversity in use is complicated. Therefore policy measures are modelled on the presumption that facilitating critical and investigative content from a diversity of providers, local media in particular, will stimulate diversity in media use (Solberg-Government, 2019, p. 65).

3.4.2 The local newspapers in the current media landscape

The majority of Norwegian newspapers are small (circulation 2000 - 5000), subscription-based titles, published less than six days a week and serving one or a few local communities (Østbye, 2019). The local newspaper industry in Norway is dominated by a few corporate players even though there are still a considerable number of newspapers with their own, local owners (Østbye, 2019). The leading local newspaper corporations in Norway are Amedia and Polaris (MediaNorway, 2019). In addition to the many local newspapers, the public service broadcaster (PSB), NRK, is a key local journalism player in the Norwegian media landscape.

Despite being among the world's most newspaper reading countries, print circulation of newspapers in Norway has plummeted over the last 10-15 years, albeit less steeply for small local newspapers than for the big national and regional titles. In the digital realm, the local press holds a weaker position in terms of total reach, compared to the biggest national news outlets. This suggests that local newspapers, which have traditionally been the cornerstones of the Nordic media landscape, are losing ground in the battle for the online news audiences (Harrie, 2018). Such development may well be the result of the relatively slow shift from print to digital news provision among local newspapers described by Syvertsen et al. (2014). At the

beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, there were still local newspapers in Norway that only produced a few online stories per week or lacked an online news offering all together (Høst, 2013). Still, in an international perspective, Norwegian local newspapers are digitally advanced and the majority offer some electronic news service, predominantly with a digital payment scheme (Østbye, 2019).

From 2014 to 2016 the number of Norwegian newspapers with paywalls more than tripled (Harrie, 2018) and the country's media organizations have been labelled world-leading in persuading people to pay for online news (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018). 34% of the population pay for online news, mostly through subscriptions – either digital only subscription or bundled with the printed newspaper (Newman et al., 2019). However, as the majority of Norwegians are unwilling to pay for news and do not see themselves as paying for news in the future (Moe & Sakariassen, 2018) the Norwegian newspaper industry is still facing substantial challenges in building a sustainable digital business.

4 Theoretical discussion

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for my dissertation. First, I outline relevant perspectives on value in relation to news media based on moral and economic philosophy and dynamics of value creation and value creation tension in this context. Building on this, I detail three perspectives on how local newspapers create value. I focus on a social responsibility, a business and a gratification perspective on value and value creation in the local newspaper context and identify areas of overlap and conflict between these value perspectives. I argue that this tension between perspectives and the different interests they represent plays a key role for our understanding of local newspapers' value for society.

4.1 Value, value creation and news media

Value and value creation are seldom discussed in their own right in media and journalism research and even less so in local journalism studies. There are some notable exceptions concerned with the perceived value of local journalism among audiences (e.g. Chen & Thorson, 2019; Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016; Lee & Chyi, 2014; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017a), and with value creation and innovation in local news organizations (Morlandstø & Krumsvik, 2014) but the two value perspectives – that of the audience and that of the news operation - are rarely combined. Moreover, there is an extensive literature on news values, exploring and theorizing what makes news content newsworthy (e.g. Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). This research is often framed within a newsroom production context, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Another strand of research on media and value is concerned with the field of cultural production and its relationship to other power fields, particularly the economic. This research applies a critical approach to market forces within the culture and media industries and questions the relevance and appropriateness of the logics of valuation from the market in culture and media production (e.g. Bolin, 2016).

The insistence on the autonomy of the field of cultural production (including journalism) and the imperative of “seeing to it that the field is not contaminated by other value forms” mainly economic (Bolin, 2016, p. 134) makes this approach less suited for my stated goal of examining the supply and demand dynamics between local newspaper organizations and their audiences and the implications of this interplay for local newspapers' value creation for society. Rather than insisting on keeping these different value spheres apart, I am interested in their interdependence.

This resonates with the work of Robert Picard on value creation in relation to news organizations (2010). In the following sections, I will draw on his contribution and supplemental perspectives mainly from the marketing literature to describe central aspects of value and value creation in the context of news media in general and local newspapers in particular. Taking the challenges of sustaining the news industry in the digital sphere as his point of departure, Picard describes how news organizations operating in a commercial environment must produce value from both a moral philosophy and an economic perspective. By taking this position, the author combines the mainly economically oriented value creation literature with normative views on journalism's societal value. In the following sections, I will outline these two perspectives building on Picard's account. I appreciate that these are vast theoretical fields, and I can only hope to capture a fragment of this theoretical legacy when describing value distinctions that are particularly relevant for exploring and interpreting value creation dynamics in the local newspaper context.

4.1.1 A moral philosophy perspective on value and news media

Writing about the moral philosophy perspective of value in relation to news organizations' value creation, Picard distinguishes between social versus individual value, and intrinsic versus instrumental value. Social value is that which supports broader collective interests. It relates to the functioning of the community, to culture and collective knowledge and understanding. Individual value concerns the wants and needs of individuals and these will differ among persons and contexts. Needs are an expression of necessity, whereas things and states that are desired but not necessities represent wants. Intrinsic value is traditionally said to exist when something is good in and of itself and cannot be bad or indifferent (Zimmerman, 2014). Such value is not established by its relation to something or some other alternative; it must be perceived for it to exist; and it requires deliberate mental engagement. Something that is good not in and of itself, but for the sake of something else to which it is related in a causal way is traditionally defined as having instrumental value. This involves utilitarian, functional value in achieving intrinsic value. Instrumental value can benefit us without our awareness of it, whereas intrinsic value requires our deliberate mental engagement (Picard, 2010, pp. 16-50).

In the context of news media, the moral philosophy value perspective concerns normative ideals of news organizations' role in society. It is important as "a foundational concept in determining the value of news and information in society, in the professional philosophy of journalists, and in the non-economic decisions by readers, viewers and listeners" (Ibid p. 45).

On the societal level, these benefits include the contribution to an informed and educated public, to social interaction, engagement and participation in public life, as well as correction of errors and resolution of conflicts in society. On the individual level of media users, value creation concerns functional benefits such as informing audiences and helping them understand their place in the world and events around them, emotional benefits such as stimulating feelings of involvement, belonging and community, and self-expressive benefits such as providing opportunities for participation through various forms of interactivity (Ibid).

This understanding of value resonates with social responsibility ideals of the press in a Western liberal democratic context. These ideals, briefly mentioned in relation to media policy in the background chapter, have been one of the most influential contemporary normative theories of journalism. It is deeply embedded in journalists' self-perception and professional ideals, in public media ideals, in academic assessments of journalistic performance and in the norms guiding media policy formulation (Roppen & Allern, 2010). According to this view, news media have a contract with society which sustains the legitimacy of its publication powers and directs the purpose of its journalism: It is undertaken for the benefit of the citizenry (Sjøvaag, 2019). The press should make a contribution to the maintenance and development of a free society by providing information, by serving as a watchdog on power and a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, as well as presenting and clarifying the goals and values in society (Baker, 2001; Christians et al., 2010). I will elaborate on these ideals later in this chapter, particularly how they translate to a local context where additional social responsibility interpretations are applicable.

The way Picard describes the moral philosophy perspective on value in relation to news media suggests that value emanates primarily from consumption of journalism of a certain kind that these media provide. In other words, journalism is valued for its utility as a mechanism to achieve states and things outside the news and information itself. The benefits provided to individuals are "effects of the content on the user", something people "receive as a result of their use of the news product" (p. 79). This, in turn, creates value for society. This premise plays a central role in my research. It suggests that local newspapers create value for individuals and society when they provide journalism of a certain kind that is used by people. In other words, the value of their journalistic product is primarily instrumental. Furthermore, to stimulate equality between citizens, it is arguably beneficial for individuals and society that the number of people who use local journalism is maximized. However, value from a moral philosophy perspective, does not automatically lead to consumption, let alone monetary

investment in journalism among people. In a commercial environment, other and potentially conflicting conceptualizations of value and value dynamics come into play.

4.1.2 An economic perspective on value and news media

The economic value perspective concerns the way news organizations integrate different resources to create a product that is made available in the marketplace, and it concerns customers' willingness to invest time and money on the product. For companies to be successful in a commercial sense, they must integrate resources in such a way that their offering to the customers has more value than the combined value of the resources used. The resulting surplus value is captured and combined to produce profits. A firm "captures value from capital sources, suppliers, labor, and customers and seeks to maintain it within the firm" and to use some as profit (Picard, 2010, p. 65). The willingness of consumers to pay more or less than the aggregate cost of the producer depends on their perception of value, which is affected by issues of uniqueness, scarcity, necessity and availability of substitutes. Scarcity exists when an individual or society wants more of something than is available, so each has to make choices in determining what consumption will provide the greatest benefit at what cost (Ibid).

Here, two different conceptualizations of value come into play: First, the distinction between *exchange value* which involves what the customer is willing to pay monetarily or temporarily for the product and *use value* which is related to the product's usefulness for users in achieving individual goals. Secondly, the distinction between value proposed and value perceived. The first concerns the value creation process on the side of the company³. The other concerns the value outcome determination on the side of the customer (Gummerus, 2013). Perceived use value subjectively defined by the customer, defines exchange value (Bowman & Ambrosini, 2000).

Within economics and its offspring discipline, marketing, there has been an increasing emphasis on use value as a defining premise of economic reasoning. According to this view, value is fundamentally derived and determined in use, co-created with the customers; and experience and perception are essential to value determination (Vargo, Maglio, & Akaka, 2008, p. 148). Following this rationale, companies cannot deliver value to customers, only make value propositions (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). The value proposition thus describes what the company can offer to its customer, i.e. a company's promise of value to customers that

³ I use the terms company and firm interchangeably referring to a business operation.

combines benefits and price (Lanning & Michaels, 1988). The ability of a business to identify and deliver superior value propositions, which their target customers find desirable, is widely regarded as imperative to competitive success.

There is a lack of agreement among scholars with respect to the conceptualization and measurement of perceived value, sometimes referred to as perceived use value or customer perceived value. I will use the terms interchangeably. One of the most cited definition is offered by Zeithaml (1988) who defines value as the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given. This benefit/sacrifice ratio approach to value has been criticized because it sees value as the result of consumers' cognitive information processing. Supplementing this there are more complex conceptualizations which emphasize hedonic components of the consumption experience and encompass numerous intangible, intrinsic and emotional factors with the consumer experience which affect perceived value (Gummerus, 2013; Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). In Holbrook's (1999) account customer perceived value is interactive, relativistic, preferential and experience-based and it may be self-oriented as well as other-oriented. I will draw on both Zeithaml and Holbrook in this dissertation, as I am interested in audiences' perception of value as a trade-off between perceived benefit and sacrifice as well as value as different types of experiences with local journalism among audiences.

In their extensive review of the literature on perceived value, Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo (2007) describe value as the outcome of an evaluative judgment, and values as the standards, rules, criteria, norms, goals, or ideals that serve as the basis for such an evaluative judgment. Values derive from the individual's social context, one's family, friends, education and organizational belonging, as well as the community one belongs to or once belonged to (Picard, 2010). When valuing something, a person takes up a certain kind of positive attitude towards it, judges it as having worth and believes it to have worth based on certain ideals and standards (Magendanz, 2003). Value is socially constructed through subjects' interpretation of objects within a socially and historically defined space where standards, measures and criteria of value are agreed upon but also contested. Even if value standards are agreed upon within a system, this does not mean that everyone arrives at the same conclusion regarding an object's value (Bolin, 2016).

In the local newspaper context, audiences invest time and money in local newspapers' journalism when they find that local newspapers' value proposition confers more use value than other feasible alternatives. Moreover, audiences' perceived use value determines the

exchange value of the local journalism product, i.e. their willingness to pay for it. This dynamic is complicated by the fact that the use value of journalism cannot be established by individual consumers until after consumption and its significance is in its use rather than its mere existence (Picard, 2010, 2018). Picard maintains that the use value for most single pieces of news and information is low to moderate, and the exchange value is relatively low. This encourage news organizations to bundle single news stories together to benefit from greater collective use and offer them as subscription services to increase exchange value (2018). This is an important premise for the subscription model that local newspapers have implemented online when introducing paywalls. Notably, exchange value also refers to the price that advertisers are willing to pay for access to local newspapers' audiences. Exchange value in the audience market and the advertising market are thus related. The four key concepts laid out in this section related to an economic understanding of value, i.e. exchange value, use value, value proposition and perceived value are important concepts for my examination of the supply and demand dynamics between local newspapers and their audiences in this dissertation.

4.1.3 Value creation, value flows and value flow gaps

Value creation defined briefly in the introduction to this dissertation as a process whereby a source generates and proposes value to a target, and value is captured and shared in the process, encompasses different activities and players. This in turn, creates value flows, i.e. transfer of value between the involved parties. Bowman (2010) describes value flows between the company, their investors, suppliers and customers, as well as between employers inside the company⁴. The flows are described as exchange value flows and use value flows. However, the way value is described as a multifaceted concept with different meaning to different stakeholders in the value creation process encourages a liberal interpretation of the type of value that flows between the involved parties. Based on this I define value flows as value transfer between a source and a target in a value creation process. Value flows entail value sharing in the ecosystem that a firm is part of and concern value transfer to stakeholders and society at large encompassing a wide network of involved parties (Hlady-Rispal & Servantie, 2018; Vargo et al., 2008; Verstraete & Jouison-Laffitte, 2011).

⁴ There is also a strand of research concerned with value flows or value streams in the field of lean management and engineering (See e.g. Antony, Escamilla, & Caine, 2003; Rohac & Januska, 2015). However, this literature is concerned with production processes and supply chain management, which is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Lepak et al. (2007) have introduced a multilevel perspective on value creation suggesting that value can be created for and by individuals, organizations and society, i.e. all three can be both sources of value creation and targets in the value creation process. The value creation for society is potentially a somewhat different process than the one taking place on the individual or organizational level. Sources may act intentionally or unintentionally to create value for society as well as for themselves. Value creation by society takes place, for example, when governments contribute to a favourable economic environment for an industry through programs and incentives aimed at expanding the industry's value to society and its members. Taken together the contributions by Bowman (2010) and Lepak et al. (2007) provide a framework for identifying value flows between society, organizations and individuals in the value creation process which I build on in this dissertation.

The way value creation involves different actors, activities and interests means that is not a friction free process. As described by Gummerus (2013) value creation processes may clash between customers, firms, and other stakeholders, because the actions of the different parties need not be aligned. Picard writes about this in the context of news organizations describing how newspapers' most important stakeholders, "the society at large, its audiences, its investors, its journalists and its advertisers" have interests that converge and diverge (2010, p. 70). Moreover, he describes how newspapers' sustainability requires a balancing of these interests.

In Picard's account of news organizations' value creation, their emphasis has shifted from creating value for journalist and society relatively shielded from market pressure ("the golden age of journalism"), to creating value for investors and advertisers focusing on high profits and reaching mass audiences ("the corporate age"). The quest for mass audiences and profits threatens the independence of media production and puts journalistic values under pressure. Media organizations' emphasis on delivering value to advertisers and shareholders has "been a factor in declining use of news, journalistic dissatisfaction, and social criticism of the performance of news organizations" (2010, p. 72). This argument resonates with a large volume of research examining and discussing journalism's complex relationship to commercial forces and expressing concern over the way the market corrupts journalism (e.g. Baker, 2001; McManus, 1994; Sjøvaag, 2019). A central topic in this research is how news organizations and the journalism they provide are drawn between different poles – a normative and a commercial – with different standards and rationales.

In Picard's account, there is a gulf between the content provided by established news outlets and audiences' interests and needs. "The available content is increasingly being seen as less valuable by many readers, listeners, and views" (2010, p. 26). Similarly, Lee and Chyi (2014) find that there is a misalignment between what news media, including local newspapers, publish as newsworthy and what audiences perceive as noteworthy. This is typically the case if a company claim advantage for features that provide little or no benefit to target customers or lack superiority relative to alternative offerings as described Anderson, Narus, and van Rossum (2006). When there is a mismatch between the value intended and designed by the company and customers' perception of this value, a perception gap occurs (Van der Haar, Kemp, & Omta, 2001). As a result, customers are unwilling to make significant temporal and monetary expenditures on the product or service (Picard, 2010). Consequently, there is no value flow between the customer and the company. I define such gulfs in the value flow as value flow gaps, i.e. a breach in the value flow between sources and targets in the value creation process.

4.2 Value perspectives in the local newspaper context

The previous sections have laid out the foundations for my understanding of value creation perspectives and value creation dynamics in this dissertation. In the following, I will extend the different value perspectives described by Picard to the local newspaper context and examine how local newspapers create value according to these views. I will start by outlining a normative perspective on local newspapers' value rooted in the moral philosophy value tradition. This concerns local newspapers' social responsibility and I will refer to it as a social responsibility perspective on how local newspapers create value.

Subsequently, I will turn to the economic value perspective. The tension described in the previous sections between news companies and audiences in the value creation process is particularly relevant in my research. Therefore, I will distinguish between the value perspective of the newspaper business and that of its audiences. The first is concerned with how local newspapers operate as a firm, specifically their strategy for value creation and value capture expressed in their business model. I will refer to this as a business perspective on how local newspapers create value. The second is concerned with audiences' value perception, specifically how they seek and obtain gratifications from news. I will refer to this as a gratification perspective on how local newspapers create value. The latter perspective differs from the others in the sense that it is not concerned with local newspapers as a value creation organization, but with perceived value of the product that newspapers provide.

There are other dimensions of tension between local newspapers and different stakeholders such as sources, employees, and owners. Arguably, these are also relevant for local newspapers' value creation in society. However, based on the stated research purpose of this dissertation, I will focus on the interplay between local newspapers, audiences and society and the social responsibility, business and gratification value perspectives. In doing so, local newspapers' value creation for advertisers will be included since this is a significant part of newspapers' business model. However, as stated in the introduction chapter, value perception among advertisers is beyond the scope of my research.

The social responsibility, business and gratification value perspectives and their different understandings of the type of value that local newspapers create, as well as how and for whom it is created, relate to broad and complex theoretical landscapes in the research literature. It is arguably difficult to treat these perspectives in sufficient detail within the limitations of this section. While acknowledging this restraint, I will engage primarily with three strands of literature. For the first perspective, I will draw on research regarding the social responsibility of the local press. Based on theoretical and empirical contributions in this literature and the dynamics of value creation described previously, I identify value flows between local newspapers' audiences and society. For the business perspective, I draw on business model literature to describe local newspapers' value creation and value capture efforts. Finally, I will apply uses and gratification literature to detail the gratification perspective of audiences and to capture how local newspapers create value from a user perspective.

4.2.1 Normative position

When discussing the different perspectives on value creation, I apply the social responsibility perspective as a reference point. This means that I hold the other two perspectives up against the social responsibility perspective. As such, I position my research within a normative research tradition concerning the relationship between local newspapers and society.

According to Althaus (2012), journalism and news media are often discussed as something valuable for society without reflection on the normative assumptions that undergird such accounts. He argues that greater transparency regarding these normative standards makes it possible to spot theoretical inconsistencies in empirical research and broaden the theoretical foundation of the research. This is particularly important in a situation where local newspapers as well as local democracy are challenged by changes that are likely to have different meaning and implications depending on the normative lens through which they are interpreted.

Making the normative basis of one's research explicit should not be confused with making explicit normative claims about how things ought to be in the world (Althaus, 2012).

Openness regarding normative perspective clarifies the relevance of empirical findings for core debates related to local newspapers' social responsibility, rather than engaging directly in debates on how local newspapers should operate. Moreover, by shifting the lens from the social responsibility to business and gratification perspectives in this dissertation, I will challenge normative assertions about local newspapers' importance for people and society and open up for a broader discussion about the realism of normative ideals in the local newspaper context.

The social responsibility ideal of local journalism is, as noted, central to normative thinking about local newspapers' role in Western liberal democracies but it is far from uncontested. I am aware of the criticism of this normative mindset – such as of its paternalistic bias, its way of concealing and preserving power structures in society, and its failing capacity to stimulate popular participation and social change (Baker, 2001; Hess & Waller, 2016). Moreover, it can be argued that this normative rhetoric is detached from the realities of how news media actually operates and how they are consumed (Broersma & Peters, 2016). While these are important criticisms, there is also a growing concern about local newspapers' ability to provide journalism in accordance with social responsibility ideals, demonstrating how these standards remain foundational for the public, scholarly and professional reasoning about local newspapers' value for society. Indeed, even though the rhetorical claims of journalism and its ability to realize these are growing apart as described by Broersma and Peters, this does not mean that the ideals are not worthwhile. My choice of normative basis for my research is motivated by the concern over news media's declining capacity to live up to these ideals and the remaining centrality of the social responsibility model of news media as it is interpreted in a local context.

4.2.2 The local social responsibility perspective on how local newspapers create value

According to social responsibility ideals, local newspapers create value for individuals and society when they fill normatively defined roles that pertain to accountability and information in local communities, to community integration and to civic and political engagement among citizens (Hess & Waller, 2016; Kösters & Jandura, 2017; Nielsen, 2015c; Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2011). I will refer to these as local newspapers' information, integration and arena roles aligning with the terminology used by Skogerbø and Winsvold (2011). These roles concern the local newspaper product and the benefit it provides as well as local newspapers as

societal institutions. In this capacity local newspapers are perceived as central for people's public connection, i.e. their orientation towards a public world, where matters of public concern are addressed (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2016). Consequently, local newspapers' value creation concerns their ability to satisfy what Schrøder and Steeg Larsen (2010) describe as people's need to equip themselves for the role of citizen-members of the democratic order, and for the role as community-members in a broader sense. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how local newspapers are seen to fill these roles and present some central empirical contributions to the understanding of local newspapers' value from a social responsibility perspective. Then, I will describe the value creation dynamics that underpin this view on local newspapers' value. This functionalist understanding of how local newspapers serve the interests of the public and work for the common good "tries to explain the role of media in society in terms of societal and private needs" (Broersma & Peters, 2016, p. 11).

4.2.2.1 Social responsibility in the local context

The ideals of accountability and information as well as civic and political engagement resonate with the "Fourth Estate" ideal of the social responsibility model of the press and its celebration of news media's "watchdog" function in society. This model, first sponsored in the American post World War II Hutchins report (Hess & Waller, 2016; Roppen & Allern, 2010), requires the press to supply balanced, comprehensive information by means of objective reporting and to serve as a forum for public discussion; to enlighten the public so that it is capable of self-government and to hold power to account (Baker, 2001; Christians et al., 2010).

However, in the local context there is also another side to social responsibility concerned with social integration and patriotism. Engan refers to this as "the other social responsibility" of local news media (2016). This ideal emphasizes the way local newspapers and the journalism they provide serve as society "glue" (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019b). According to Hess and Waller (2016), the glue metaphor is another reading of accountability in the local media context, namely that of connecting the community, seeking to resolve conflict, bringing people together, performing boundary work towards the openness of the wider world and upholding expected social and moral norms in the community. It involves production of locality and a sense of place (Buchanan, 2009), contributing to a belongingness to the Heimat of the audience (Hess & Waller, 2016; Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2011). Neither objectivity nor critical investigative reporting are particularly fitting ideals for this function, nor are the news values that shape metropolitan, national or international news. Instead, local newspapers are

seen to reinforce community identity by emphasizing localness in the choice and framing of stories (Bowd, 2011) and even embarking on advocacy and campaign journalism to promote community interests (Hess & Waller, 2016). As such, there is tension between the two types of social responsibility (Engan, 2015). I interpret the information, integration and arena roles of local newspapers to encompass both sides of the social responsibility ideal and apply this two sidedness in my understanding of how local newspapers create value from a social responsibility perspective.

The integration, information and arena roles relate to local newspapers' function as public sphere sites. In this context, the contested public sphere concept denotes communication arenas, which play a role in public debate and where expressions are available for the different members of a given community so they know that people with access to the same arena have been exposed to the same argument, relate to it and potentially act upon it (Winsvold, 2009). I wish to set aside the debate on the desirability of such communality that relates to different democracy models (e.g. Baker, 2001; Christians et al., 2010; Karppinen, 2012). In line with the chosen normative framework, I will align with the view that by providing audiences with a common basis of issues and knowledge, local newspapers contribute to the citizenry's self-perception as one collective for identity-building and political participation (Kösters & Jandura, 2017). With growing audience fragmentation resulting from unparalleled media choice there have been growing concerns over the declining capacity of legacy media to shape such common experiences and promote shared discourses. Tendencies towards disintegration are identified as pathologies of pluralism (Karppinen, 2012) with negative implications for a well-functioning democracy (e.g. Gitlin, 2002; Sunstein, 2009), whereas audience convergence around general interest media outlets serving as common public sphere sites is interpreted as beneficial for democracy.

4.2.2.2 Empirical finding regarding local newspapers' social responsibility

The normative ideals of local newspapers' social responsibility is underpinning a substantial body of empirical research. Hess and Waller (2016) describe a long tradition of studies celebrating the role of local news media in facilitating community integration and civic involvement, including Park's (1922) work on newspaper reading and community integration among immigrants, Janowitz' (1967) research demonstrating the community newspapers' role in helping people define and maintain neighbourhood identities in large cities, and Stamm's (1988) writing on the temporal relationship between local media use and community ties. Moreover, Friedland (2001) has described how local news media help create

communicatively integrated communities. More recently, Yamamoto (2011) found positive association between community newspaper reading and a sense of social cohesion, indicating that these media are important for community engagement, and Buchanan (2009) and Hess (2015) have documented ways in which local news builds a sense of place and connection in geographic communities.

With regard to local newspapers' information role, including their function as watchdogs, empirical findings paint a complex picture. Research from the US on community journalism has demonstrated how local news media seldom live up to their watchdog aspirations and instead operate as guard dogs serving the interests of those with power, resources and influence, thus conserving existing social structures (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995). A more recent Norwegian study found only five percent critical or investigative journalism and extensive use of "one source" news stories indicative of superficial journalistic investigation (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a). Similarly, a Swedish study concluded that thorough investigations and disclosures of political wrongdoings barely exist in local journalism (Ekström, Johansson, & Larsson, 2006), and a Danish study found that local journalism was hardly hard-hitting and investigative (Nielsen, 2015b).

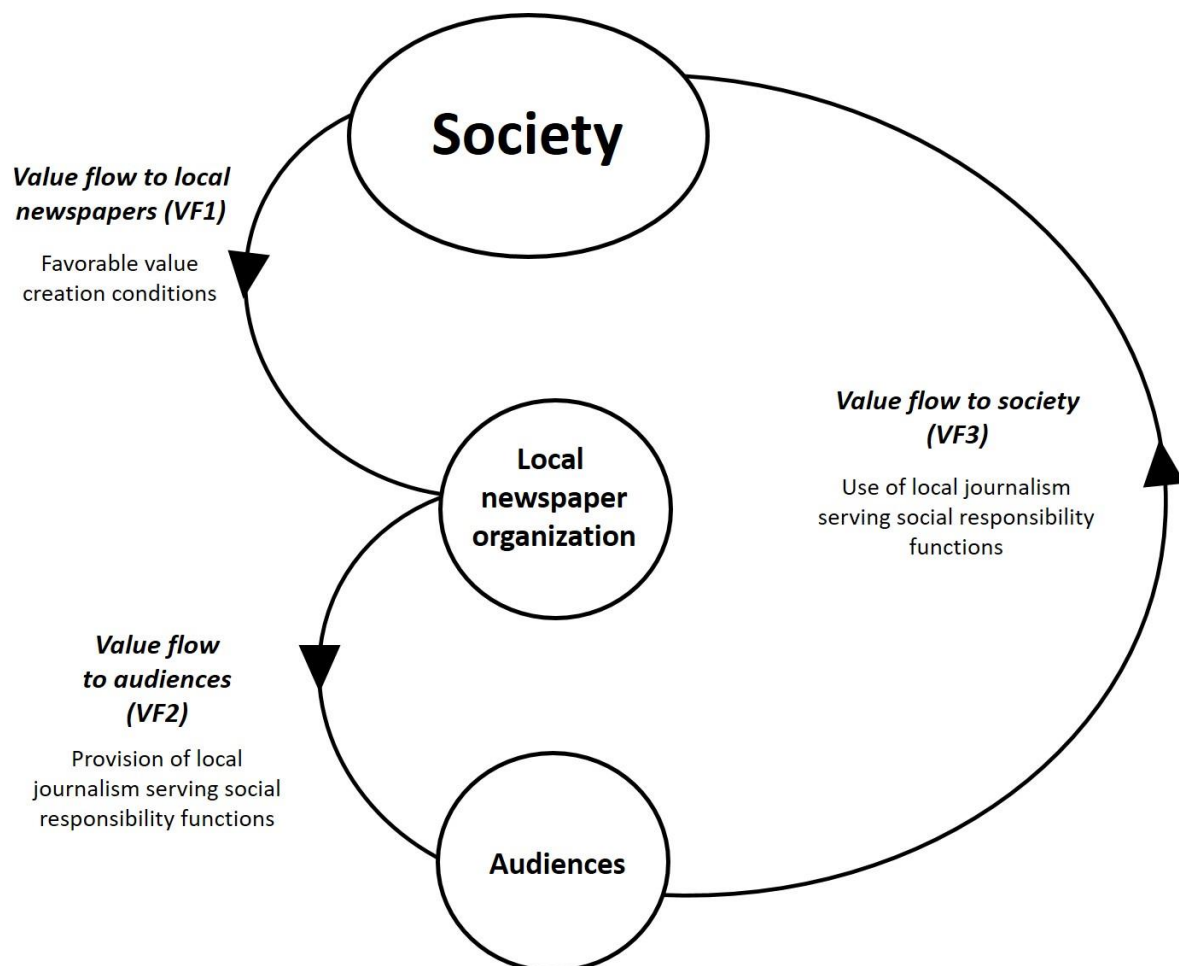
Still, local newspapers are repeatedly found to play an important role in keeping people informed about their local communities. The aforementioned Norwegian, Swedish and Danish studies demonstrate how local news media including newspapers are important providers of information. Without these media information about politics and local governance would be less accessible (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a). Research from the US shows that access to local journalism is important for people's knowledge about local politics (Rubado & Jennings, 2019; Shaker, 2009) and a study from Wales found that a community without the provision of local journalism becomes under-informed, under-represented, and unable to access timely local information or gain adequate access to scrutiny about local affairs (Howells, 2015).

Audience use patterns confirm how legacy media like newspapers remain important for how people keep informed about local matters even though social media platforms are increasingly popular as sources for local news (Gulyas, O'Hara, & Eilenberg, 2018; Nygren, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). Furthermore, several studies demonstrate how local politicians mainly seek to communicate with their constituencies through local news media despite opportunities offered by social media and citizen journalism operations (Engan, 2015; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018) suggesting that local newspapers have an important role to play as arenas for political discourse.

4.2.2.3 Social responsibility and value creation dynamics

In sum, the normatively defined roles of local newspapers described above reflect benefits that local newspapers should provide to people and society by serving as watchdogs, as community glue and as public sphere sites. By providing such normatively defined benefits local newspapers have instrumental value according to this functionalist approach. When combining the social responsibility value perspective with the multilevel understanding of value creation and value creation dynamics described previously, patterns of value flows and value sharing between society, local newspapers and audiences can be identified as a *virtuous value creation cycle*. This cycle expresses the essence of a value transfer logic visualized in figure 1. The virtuous value creation cycle is based on the following key premises:

Figure 1 The virtuous value creation cycle



The first premise of the model is that society provides favourable value creation conditions as described by Lepak et al. (2007). In the Norwegian context, this is manifest in the government's media policy where securing the provision of diverse media supply aimed at stimulating diverse media consumption is a key objective as noted previously in the

dissertation's background chapter. Both direct and indirect subsidies are in place to support the provision of local newspapers with social responsibility functions in local communities (Solberg-Government, 2019). Regulatory conditions that provide structure and stability to the benefit of the newspapers are also part of these favourable conditions, e.g. press freedom legislation. This is visualized as a value flow between society and local newspapers (VF1). Admittedly, the favourable value creation conditions represent only a fraction of the many value flows from the broader society to local newspapers. Sources in the journalistic process, suppliers, partners, investors and other stakeholders are also part of society and sources of value for local newspaper organizations. However, in the present context, I will concentrate on the favourable value creation conditions since these are specifically motivated by a social responsibility understanding of local newspapers' value for individuals and societies and are deemed important to support local newspapers' provision of local journalism in accordance with these social responsibility ideals (Solberg-Government, 2017, 2019).

The second premise for the virtuous value creation cycle is that the favourable value creation conditions actually stimulate local newspapers to provide local journalism in line with social responsibility ideals, i.e. local journalism that is informative and serves integration and arena purposes. The provision of this journalism has use value for individual users. This is visualized as a value flow between local newspapers and news users (VF2). There are some empirical findings challenging the foundation for the assumed connection between subsidies and the provision of political journalism on the local level (Sjøvaag, Pedersen, & Læg Reid, 2019), but the presumption of this sequential causal relationship between structure, content and consumption is nonetheless a founding principle for policy formulation (Van der Wurff, 2011). It is also central in a long tradition of media performance research based on social responsibility norms (McQuail, 1992).

The third premise is that audiences will create shared value for society when they engage with the journalism that local newspapers provide based on social responsibility ideals. In this way, the interplay between audiences and local newspapers engenders benefits for the broader society. i.e. positive externalities (VF3). Arguably, local newspapers also serve social responsibility interests for others than the audience, e.g. by providing a public arena where local politicians and others can make their voices heard. As such, there are also value flows from local newspapers to these stakeholders in society. However, in line with the stated purpose of this dissertation, I will focus on the local newspaper-audience interplay and how this impacts value creation for society.

The social responsibility perspective on value creation is not concerned with how local newspapers aim to capture exchange value, nor with the perceived use value of the journalistic product among the audience. In the next sections, I will bring these aspects “into the equation” by outlining the business and gratification value perspectives of newspaper organizations and audiences respectively.

4.2.3 The business perspective on how local newspapers create value

The business model concept provides a useful framework to describe local newspapers’ business perspective on value creation. A business model represents the design or architecture of how an organization creates and captures value. It reflects a firm’s hypothesis about what customers want, how they want it, and how the firm can organize to best meet the customers’ needs, get paid for doing so, and make a profit in the process (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010; Magretta, 2002; Teece, 2010; Zott, Amit, & Massa, 2011). As such, the business model represents “the money earning logic of a firm” (Osterwalder, 2004, p. 47) i.e. the business interests of the news operation. This makes it well suited to capture how local newspapers aim to create and capture value in their two-sided market.

Notably, there is also a research strand concerned with business model conceptualizations that are not oriented toward profit-maximization (e.g. Randles & Laasch, 2016). However, in the present context I will align with conceptualizations from the mainstream business model literature and the money-making logic described by Osterwalder (2004). This connects with what I have written about the economic perspective on value creation previously in this chapter. I will describe key components of local newspapers’ business model focusing on their value proposition, their customer segments and their revenue structure. Subsequently, I will compare this value perspective with the social responsibility perspective to identify areas of potential conflict and overlap.

4.2.3.1 Business model components in the local newspaper context

The business model as an architecture of how firms create and capture value is often conceptualized as a set of interrelated components or building blocks (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). There is no agreed upon definition of these components in the research literature even though there are commonalities between the different contributions (Shafer, Smith, & Linder, 2005). Synthesizing these different conceptualizations and relating them to the newspaper industry, Hognaland and Saebi (2015) identify four interrelated parts of a business model, namely a company's choice of (1) value proposition which describes what the company can offer to its customer; (2) customer segment referring to who the customers are and how the

company interacts with them; (3) key processes which concern what the company does to deliver its value proposition and the resources used to generate value for customers and (4) the revenue structure, i.e. how the company captures exchange value.

For local newspapers, traditionally operating in two-sided markets, audiences and advertisers represent their main customer segments. These groups can be further divided into smaller segments. For example, audiences can be segmented according to customer relationship such as subscribers and non-subscribers. Local newspapers' value proposition to audiences is their local journalism product and the benefits that it offers to audiences. Their value proposition to advertisers is access to those audiences by means of advertising space in the newspaper product online or in print. The ideal of social responsibility underpins local newspapers' way of doing business, since providing information, serving as local debate arenas and contributing to social integration and a sense of belonging is local newspapers' main value proposition to readers. As described by Matthews (2017), serving the good of the community is the central pillar of the established business model for the local newspaper industry. Since local newspapers are selling audiences to advertisers, the "value of proximity" that local newspapers offer in their journalistic product (Goyanes, 2015) and the attractiveness of this product to audiences is important for their attractiveness to advertisers.

The revenue structure concerns the exchange value that local newspapers capture from audiences and advertisers. As noted in the background chapter of this dissertation, the print operation of the local newspaper business has traditionally contributed the most to their revenue. As this source is in steep decline, local newspapers are trying to find sustainable revenue streams online by means of online advertising and paywalls. Notably, customer revenue is not the only way local newspapers capture value. The newspaper organization "captures value from capital sources, suppliers, labor, and customers and seeks to maintain it within the firm" and to use some as profit (Picard, 2010, p. 65). In the present context, I will focus primarily on the value capture from customers as it records a key aspect related to the sustainability of local newspapers – preserving existing revenue streams and finding new ones. Value capture from suppliers, employee and partners is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Key processes describe the way local newspaper organizations integrate resources into a marketable journalistic product that entices audiences' engagement and willingness to pay and attracts the right audiences for advertisers while simultaneously minimizing costs.

4.2.3.2 Conflict and overlap between business and social responsibility value perspectives

Organizational efficiency and profit-maximization are key aspects of the business model (Randles & Laasch, 2016). For local newspapers, the drive towards efficiency and profits is evident in how they have pursued economies of scale and scope by means of cost cutting, centralization and streamlining of news production as already noted in Chapter 3 (Aldridge, 2007). By keeping costs as low as possible the business strives to maintain a level of profit that enables payments to shareholders and debtors. This has arguably encouraged the industry to try to simplify news by demanding it be produced as cheaply as possible (Matthews, 2017). Even though the resource situation in local newspapers may be demanding, it does not necessarily result in low shares of original reporting or a weak local news profile as demonstrated in a recent Norwegian study (Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019a). Here, “cut and paste” stories were few and original news stories with a distinct local angle dominated.

The money-making logic of the business model is seen to stimulate news organizations to maximize audiences in an increasingly competitive environment, potentially at the expense of quality news reporting. To attract readers, which can be marketed to advertisers seeking cost efficient access to mass audiences, newspapers are accused of choosing more popular and less expensive content over more important and expensive-to-produce content resulting in a softening and dumbing down of journalism (Picard, 2010; Van Aelst et al., 2017). Such concerns also apply to local news media (e.g. Franklin, 2005). The combined effect of lacking resources and nurturing audience maximization could potentially lead to less quality reporting from the locality. These characteristics of how local newspapers’ business models work are mainly cast within a corporate framework of local news operations. Notably, there are alternative ways of owning and running a local newspaper business, less oriented towards profit and more towards community needs, such as hyper-local and non-profit news initiatives (Benson, 2018; Cook & Bakker, 2019). Such nuances should not be ignored in the interpretation of how local newspaper businesses operate even though the dominating model in the industry is a commercial operation geared towards profit. The way this business operation also creates economic value for society for example by employing people, by paying tax etc. is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In sum, the money-making logic of local newspapers expressed in their business model is both overlapping and conflicting with interests expressed in the social responsibility perspective on local newspapers’ value creation. It is overlapping in the sense that local newspapers have modelled their business around providing information and serving as

community integrators and arenas for public discourse and debate. According to Matthews (2017), business and societal interests in the local newspaper context are not so much one of incompatibility, but one of unequal balance of power.

However, when efficiency and profit-maximization goals are pursued at the expense of investment in a local journalism product that serves the interests of the community, the social responsibility and business value perspectives are conflicting. This would typically be the case when newspapers' value proposition to audiences generates exchange value for the newspaper but contributes little to an informed and educated public, to social interaction, engagement and participation in public life, and to correction of errors and resolution of conflicts in society (Picard, 2010). Such tension demonstrating the conflict between different value perspectives would arguably hinder the value flow between local newspapers, audiences and society in the virtuous value creation cycle outlined previously. On the other hand, local newspapers may align their value proposition with social responsibility ideals but still be unable to make people invest time and money in their local journalism product. This could be the result if they are unable to identify and meet audiences' needs and wants and deliver local journalism that audiences perceive as valuable.

4.2.4 The audience gratification perspective on how local newspapers create value

By changing the perspective on local newspapers' value creation to that of the audience, the analytical focus shifts from the newspaper organization, to the newspaper product. To understand audiences' perception of value in relation to the local newspaper product, the rich tradition of uses and gratification (U&G) research provides a useful framework. According to this tradition, audiences select media to fulfil their needs and expectations, which leads to different patterns of media exposure and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Malthouse & Peck, 2011; Ruggiero, 2000). As such, U&G represents an alternative to a structure oriented perspective on media consumption which emphasizes the decisive role of supply factors such as media diversity on people's media diets (Taneja, Webster, Malthouse, & Ksiazek, 2012).

Whereas the social responsibility perspective on local newspapers' value presupposes that by providing opportunities for people to get informed an informed and engaged public will ensue, the agent perspective of the U&G research emphasizes the importance of audiences' preferences and perceptions in shaping an informed and engaged public. Critics of U&G research have contended that this tradition is too functionalist, that it overestimates the role of the individual, her rational ability and freedom to choose and that it overlooks hegemonic as

well as economically motivated structures which condition media use (Ruggiero, 2000). This is an important objection. Without ignoring such criticism, I posit that the U&G framework offers a *bottom-up*, rather than a *top-down* approach to interpret the value creation of local newspapers by focusing on what media users perceive to be valuable about local newspapers and local news in general. As such, it is well suited to identify audience interests that either converge or diverge with the interests of local newspapers and their business perspective on value creation, as well as the public interests expressed in the social responsibility perspective on value creation. Taken together, these different lenses provide a combined structure and agent approach to value creation in the local newspaper context.

To encompass the role of structure within the U&G framework, I interpret situational and structural factors as well as socially and contextually shaped values as integral to the individual evaluation process that influences people's media use. In other words, I interpret U&G as a framework for capturing more or less conscious value assessment processes, influenced by social, cultural, historical and economic contexts on the individual level. As such, the gratification perspective does not represent one common and coherent set of values among audiences. Instead, it encompasses a seemingly endless variety of individual values, standards and preferences in relation to media. In the following, I will outline some key contributions to the U&G research that are particularly relevant for the stated research aim of unpacking value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspapers and audiences. Subsequently, I will compare this value perspective with the social responsibility and business perspective to identify areas of potential conflict and overlap.

4.2.4.1 Different types of audience gratifications

Gratifications are both motivational and experiential, distinguished as gratifications sought and gratifications obtained in the U&G literature (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rayburn, 1980). A multitude of operationalisations of gratifications can be identified in this broad strand of communication research. Lee (2013) synthesizes findings from an array of research on news consumption motivations in four overarching gratification categories: information-driven, entertainment-driven, social-driven and opinion-driven. In an earlier and often referred contribution, McQuail (1983) proposed information, personal identity, integration/social interaction and entertainment as fundamental gratification categories. The similarities between these two suggest that people have fairly consistent and overlapping motivations for using various media over time.

In one specific strand of U&G literature Schrøder and colleagues (e.g. Schrøder, 2015; Schrøder & Kobbarnagel, 2010; Schrøder & Steeg Larsen, 2010) have developed the concept of perceived worthwhileness of news media. In their definition, such worthwhileness denotes individuals' subjective assessment of whether a medium is worth their while or not. The factors that constitute a news medium's perceived worthwhileness include the subjective experienced material as well as situational and functional circumstances that characterize the medium's practice of use (Schrøder & Steeg Larsen, 2010). I find this contribution particularly relevant for my research on audiences' value perception.

The individual's assessment of worthwhileness weighs the resources required to use a particular medium, such as time and money, against the benefits of using it. The factors in the "worthwhileness equation" determine "why some news media and not others are chosen to become parts of an individual's news media repertoire" (Schrøder, 2015, p. 63). This cost versus benefits perspective connects perceived worthwhileness of news media with the field of customer perceived value research described previously (e.g. Zeithaml, 1988). It is also related to people's willingness to pay for news in the paywall literature due to the fact that price constitutes an important factor in the judgement of worthwhileness (Kammer et al., 2015).

With regard to what people value and expect from local news, previous research has found that audiences expect local media to serve community interests by filling a set of specific functions. These include (1) supply of diverse, reliable, timely, and unbiased background information on communities, (2) contribution to social integration by helping people navigate their local environment, (3) provision of inspiration, (4) representation of diverse interests and groups in society, (5) contribution to increased intragroup understanding, (6) serving as a local memory and (7) contribution to a sense of belonging to the community (Costera Meijer, 2010). Moreover, audiences expect local media to serve both as watchdogs holding local elites to account and as good neighbours who care about their community (Poindexter, Heider, & McCombs, 2006). These are local media roles that audiences value either for their own sake or for the common good of their community. As such, the perceived value of local media has both an individual and a societal dimension. It can be both self-oriented and other-oriented as noted earlier with reference to Holbrook (1999).

Supplementing research on what people expect from local news media, studies of their use and perception of different media types find that legacy media like local TV, radio and local newspapers have the strongest position in terms of importance as local news source, but that

use is declining. Simultaneously, there has been a digital shift in consumption of local news with more people preferring online sources for local news and an increasing use of social media like Facebook for local news and information (Gulyas et al., 2018; Nygren, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019; Wadbring & Bergstrom, 2017).

4.2.4.2 Conflict and overlap between gratification, business and social responsibility value perspectives

The accounts of what audiences expect from local news media suggest that there is substantial overlap between their views and the social responsibility value perspective. The way audiences emphasize the value of the watchdog role as well as glue oriented functions of local journalism, demonstrates that there is overlap between the perspectives. The bulk of U&G research demonstrating that information, personal identity and integration/social interaction are main gratifications sought among audiences points in the same direction. On the other hand, audiences' use patterns appears to be somewhat misaligned with their expressed views on the importance of these news media and the local journalism product they provide. Studies showing reduced readership for local newspapers, particularly among younger audiences (Wadbring & Bergstrom, 2017), indicate that what people say and what they do may not be consistent, or as described by Swart et al. (2017a, p. 1356) news users may "not always use what they prefer, nor always prefer what they use".

Moreover, the gratifications sought from local news media among audiences may be well aligned with social responsibility ideals of local journalism but willingness to pay for journalism that serves social responsibility functions may still be low, or more specifically - too low for newspapers to cover the cost of production and make a profit in line with their money-making logic. The audiences' motivation to engage with local newspapers' journalism is important for the role of that local newspapers play in society. As described by Picard (2010), if people do not perceive newspapers' offerings to be relevant in a high-choice information abundant environment, if other offerings are more attractive or more aligned with their needs and wants, or if the cost of consumption is too high in terms of required resources, they are unlikely to spend time, let alone money on the journalistic product.

4.3 Bridging theoretical perspectives and empirical examination

To summarize, the preceding theoretical discussion of different perspectives on value and value creation has identified different types of value that local newspapers create, how this value is created and for whom it is created. Moreover, it has identified both overlap and conflict between the social responsibility, business and audience gratification perspectives on

how local newspapers create value and the different interests that these perspectives encompass. Combined, the three perspectives capture how local newspapers are expected to create both societal and economic value.

The way the tension between the different perspectives manifests itself in the relationship between local newspapers, audiences and society and its implications for the flow of value between these three parties is a matter for empirical investigation. Specifically, we are encouraged to explore and theorize the value flows and value flow gaps that emerge from the interplay between the value proposition and value capture strategies of local newspaper organizations on one side and audiences' perceived value and use of the local newspaper product on the other. This, in turn, will enable us to hold the virtuous value creation cycle outlined in this chapter up against the dynamics of supply and demand between newspaper businesses and audiences, thus combining the different value perspectives into an integrated value creation model.

I will follow this route when presenting the findings in the five empirical articles and when addressing the dissertation's research questions in Chapter 6. The overview below describes briefly how the different articles address the four key areas of investigation - value proposition, value capture, perception of value and use - and how they apply and combine the different value perspectives – the social responsibility, the business and the audience gratification perspectives. Insights from these articles combined with the theoretical perspectives presented in this chapter will be used to develop the value creation model.

Article 1, titled “Reinventing the business model for local newspapers by building walls” is concerned with local newspapers' value creation from a business perspective, examining the value proposition and value capture of local newspaper organizations in their two-sided market.

Article 2, titled “Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls” is concerned with local audiences' perceived value of the local newspaper product for them personally and for society, applying an audience gratification perspective on value creation.

Article 3, titled “Connecting people? Understanding media's role as democratic resources for people in digitally advanced local environments” is concerned with how people use and perceive the value of the local newspaper product compared to other sources of local news and information. This study applies the social responsibility perspective on value creation.

Article 4, titled “Bouncing off the Paywall – Understanding Misalignments Between Local Newspaper Value Propositions and Audience Responses” is concerned with the interplay between local newspaper businesses’ value proposition and audiences’ value perception, thus combining business and audience gratification perspectives.

Article 5, titled “Paywalls’ impact on local news websites’ traffic and their civic and business implications” is concerned with the effect of local newspaper businesses’ value capture for the use of the local newspaper product in Denmark and Norway. Here the business and social responsibility perspective are combined.

5 Research design and methods

This chapter introduces the research design and methods applied in this dissertation. First, I present an overview of the research methods in each of the empirical articles. Following this, I return to the aim of this research project and outline how this motivated my position within a research paradigm of dialectical pluralism and the choice of a mixed method research (MMR) approach. Based on this, I describe the MMR design and how this research strategy is applied in the overall design of the dissertation, as well on the level of individual empirical articles. Subsequently, I discuss legitimation, including validity, reliability and generalizability of my research from an MMR perspective, both in relation to each article, i.e. the dissertation's micro level, in terms of the relationship between the articles, i.e. the dissertation's meso level, and in terms of meta-inferences based on the sum of articles, i.e. the dissertation's macro level. I conclude the chapter with reflections on ethical considerations in my research.

Table 2 Overview of method in empirical articles

Note: A dominant quantitative orientation in the study is labelled **QUAN**, a dominant qualitative orientation is labeled **QUAL**, an equal status qualitative and quantitative orientation is labelled **QUAL+QUAN** (Morse, 2003)

Article number and title	Method orientation	Method details
Article 1: “Reinventing the business model for local newspapers by building walls”	QUAL	Data: In-depth interviews with 22 sales managers and commercial directors representing 20 Norwegian local newspapers. Face-to-face interviews based on a semi-structured interview guide concerning value capture strategies and value propositions to advertisers and audiences. Conducted in 2015/2016.
		Analysis: In vivo coding of interview transcripts according to an analytical model based on business model building blocks.
Article 2: “Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls”	QUAL	Data: Semi-structured in-depth interviews and media landscape-sorting exercise concerning perceived worthwhileness of local newspapers and other information sources for the individual and for society. Conducted in 2018 with 20 informants (26-44 years) from Fredrikstad, Norway recruited through quota sampling.
		Analysis: In vivo coding of interview transcripts. Pairwise comparison of media landscape pictures identifying patterns of convergence and divergence between societal and individual worthwhileness of different media
Article 3: “Connecting people? Understanding media’s role as democratic resources for	QUAN	Data: National online survey conducted in 2017 (N=1692) regarding the practice and perception dimension of people’s public connection through local news and information sources.

Article number and title	Method orientation	Method details
people in digitally advanced local environments”		Analysis: Network analysis to examine patterns of audience overlap versus fragmentation in media use combined with experience data gauging people's perception of local media’s democratic function.
Article 4: “Bouncing off the Paywall – Understanding Misalignments Between Local Newspaper Value Propositions and Audience Responses”	QUAL + QUAN	<p data-bbox="896 475 2042 691">Data: Qualitative data on local newspapers' value proposition to paying and non-paying audiences from in-depth interviews with media managers (same as Article 1). Quantitative data from national online survey conducted in 2016 (<i>N</i>=1586) regarding behavior and attitudes among audiences in response to local newspapers' paywalls.</p> <p data-bbox="896 699 2042 857">Analysis: Segmentation of audiences according to perceived value and behavior combined with regression analysis. Findings integrated with findings from in vivo coding of the interviews with media managers.</p>
Article 5: “Paywalls’ impact on local news websites’ traffic and their civic and business implications”	QUAN	<p data-bbox="896 866 2042 1024">Data: Analysis of audited traffic measurement of weekly, average daily pageviews and unique visitors on desktop and mobile platforms to four Danish and four Norwegian local news sites 52 weeks before and after the introduction of a paywall.</p> <p data-bbox="896 1032 2042 1128">Analysis: Statistically significant changes in traffic variables identified using paired sample <i>t</i>-test.</p>

5.1 Research paradigm

The aim of my research and the dissertation's research questions encouraged a broad approach to methodology. Both local newspapers' business models and audiences' relationship to local journalism in an information abundant digital environment have been empirically under-investigated in the research literature. Moreover, the relationship between these phenomena and the value local newspapers create for society has been undertheorized. This suggested a data-driven and explorative research approach aimed at mapping the field, as well as developing analytical concepts and frameworks that could contribute to theory building. In this respect, my research was inductive. On the other hand, I wanted to test hypotheses about audiences' relationship to local newspapers and other sources of local news and information based on quantifiable, social observations. In this respect, my research also had a deductive element.

In addition to such divergent research ambitions, I experienced tension between different disciplines and their ontological, epistemological and axiological outlook in relation to my research subject. One such divide was the age-old schism between the journalism research tradition's normatively oriented view on local journalism as democracy institutions on one hand and the marketing research tradition's money-making logic on the other. Against journalism research's often conflict oriented perspectives with its emphasis on power struggles and diverging political, economic, cultural and societal interests in relation to media and journalism, the marketing literature was more oriented towards strategies and tactics to maximize profits by satisfying diverging needs in the marketplace and overcoming conflicting interests among business stakeholders.

This diversity and tension in my research project motivated a mixed method approach positioned within a dialectical pluralism research paradigm. By research paradigm I understand a research culture, i.e. a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that a community of researchers has in common regarding the nature and conduct of research, including ontological, epistemological, axiological, aesthetic and methodological beliefs (Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Dialectical pluralism challenges the view that quantitative and qualitative research paradigms and their associated methods cannot and should not be mixed (for details on this "incompatibility thesis", see Howe, 1988) and encourages the researcher to "listen, understand, appreciate, and learn from multiple paradigms, disciplines, values, methodologies, standpoints, ethnicities, and perspectives" (Johnson, 2017, p. 156).

Johnson (2017) describes dialectical pluralism as a process philosophy with dialectical and hermeneutic characteristics. The dialectical aspect refers to back and forth disputation, examination, dialogue and reasoning in the research process, whereas the hermeneutic element means a continual process of interpretation and building on past interpretations. Dialectical pluralism is committed to ontological pluralism; meaning that reality is multiple and that multiple ways of conceptualizing reality should usually be articulated and embraced by the researcher. Furthermore, researchers can and should listen to multiple epistemologies, engage with epistemological tension and avoid reliance on a single standpoint in constructing knowledge. In terms of axiology, dialectical pluralism recommends that researchers purposively and explicitly consider multiple important values and value-laden positions, state their explicit values and make their implicit values explicit (Ibid).

With regard to my own research, these elements encouraged a curious approach to different disciplines, theories, and perspectives that, despite their differences had what I saw as workable commonalities and fertile dissimilarities. It inspired me to combine viewpoints from media and democracy theory and marketing and management theory to try to capture my research phenomena from the media managers' and the media audiences' standpoint. The dialectical stance was also well suited for the cooperation between multiple researchers in the research group that I have been part of while working on my thesis. Even though the empirical studies in my dissertation were conducted either by me as a single researcher or in teams of two or three media researchers belonging to the same discipline, the composition of the research group as a whole was multidisciplinary. On the operational level, the dialectical pluralism paradigm inspired and provided guidance for mixing of methods in the cooperation between me and other researchers in the team as well as in the overall research design of my thesis.

5.2 Research design

The mixed method research design in my thesis concerns both the act of designing the research as a process with different stages and the resulting overall design of the research as a construction with quantitative and qualitative components. In the following, I will present my mixed method research design drawing on the primary dimensions for constructing a mixed method research design proposed by Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017). I will focus on purpose of mixing, timing, point of integration, typological use, and degree of complexity. Secondary dimensions, such as validity, data sampling methods, and combination of data (Ibid) will be described in more detail later in the section on legitimation.

5.2.1 Purpose

With regard to purpose of mixing, the motivation was ultimately to answer my research questions with validity. This goal could be further detailed with the classification of mixing purposes suggested by Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989): On an overall level, I aimed for *triangulation* between results to support the development of my analytical model based on correspondence of results from different methods. Furthermore, mixing was motivated by *complementarity* and *initiation*. The first means seeking elaboration, enhancement and clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other method, whereas the second refers to seeking paradoxes, contradictions and discovering new perspectives of frameworks by recasting questions or results from one method with questions or results from the other method. Actively seeking such contrasts, I found that results were sometimes ambiguous, even conflicting. One example of this is the data on use patterns among audiences after the introduction of the paywall. The initial study of my dissertation (Article 1) found that from the media managers' viewpoint, online traffic was not particularly negatively affected by paywalls in a longer-term perspective. However, the follow-up studies based on survey data (Article 4), and traffic data (Article 5) suggested a substantial drop in consumption. In sum, both differences in outlook and empirical findings provided a more nuanced and complex picture of the phenomenon under study and stimulated ontological and ethical reflection: What was the truth or reality of the matter and which data "told the truth"?

During the course of my research project, mixing of methods was also motivated by what Greene et al. (1989) refer to as *development*, i.e. to use the results from one method to help develop or inform the other method and *expansion*, which means extending the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components. For example, the results of the first qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with media managers (Article 1) informed the work with the survey tool applied in the subsequent quantitative study among media users (Article 4), which again inspired the qualitative study among media users in their young adulthood using a combination of interview techniques (Article 2). These examples also show how mixing of methods was motivated by what Bryman (2006) refers to as context and illustration. Context refers to how qualitative research provides contextual understanding to generalizable, externally valid findings or broad relationships among variables. Illustration means use of qualitative data to illustrate quantitative findings, often referred to as putting "meat on the bones" of "dry" quantitative findings (p. 106). Even though these two latter rationales were not the primary purpose of mixing methods in my research

design, they played a role in the overall design of the research and the relationship between the different studies.

5.2.2 Timing

The timing in the mixed research design refers to the temporal order of the qualitative and quantitative components. In the mixed methods literature, a distinction is often made between designs that are concurrent and independent on one hand and designs that are sequential and dependent on the other: In the first instance, the quantitative and qualitative data collection and data analysis occurs (almost) simultaneously and independently as two separate processes. In the other case, the data collection and data analysis of one component takes place after the data collection and data analysis of the other component and depends on the outcomes of the other component (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). However, this categorization conceals how a mixed method research design could also contain concurrent independent components (Ibid). This applies to one of the studies in my dissertation. In the study of traffic development to Norwegian and Danish websites after the introduction of paywalls (Article 5), the data collection was done independently of and prior to the other studies in my dissertation by a third-party data provider. Within the overall design of my dissertation, the study expands and develops findings based on data collected at an earlier stage. As such, it fits into a sequential design framework, but it is worth noting that this fit applies to the analysis of findings of this study, not to the timing of the data collection. The traffic data study represents what Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017) refer to as an emergent component of the mixed method design: It was something I had not originally planned to include, but a component that emerged along the way in my research and provided a valuable empirical contribution.

Timing in the research design of this dissertation concerns the temporal relationship between quantitative and qualitative components within a separate study on the micro level, between separate empirical studies on the meso level and in relation to the conclusion of the dissertation on the macro level. In sum, this can be described as a multilevel mixed design with sequential components. Mixing occurs across multiple levels of analysis, as quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed and integrated to answer related aspects of the same research question or related questions (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017)

5.2.3 Point of integration

The bringing together of one or more quantitative and qualitative components in the mixed method research design is described as the point of integration. Teddlie and Tashakkori

(2009) suggest four points of integration that fit the overall design of my dissertation well - at the conceptualization stage of the investigation, at the methodological stage in relation to data collection, at the analytical stage in relation to data analysis, and at the inferential stage. This took on various forms on the different levels of my mixed method research design as described by Creswell and Clark (2017).

On the micro level of mixing within one empirical study (Article 4), integration took place by collecting, analyzing and making inferences based on two data sets – one qualitative based on in-depth interviews with media managers, and one quantitative based on audience survey data. On the meso level of mixing between different empirical studies, integration mainly concerned a connection from the analysis of one set or several sets of data in one study to the collection of a second set of data in subsequent studies: Insights from the first qualitative study (Article 1) informed subsequent quantitative and qualitative data collection. On the macro level of developing the dissertation’s proposed analytical model, integration concerned merging of quantitative and qualitative findings. When developing the model, I make meta-inferences that bind the different components together. Meta-inference means combining inferences from separate strands of research into one coherent whole (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006).

In sum, the many points of integration in the present mixed method design resulted in a complex iterative and interactive structure of connections between data collection, data analyses and inferences. Sandelowski, Voils, and Barroso (2006, p. 35) describe this as a “contingent design” in mixed method research whereby the cycle of systematic review of outcomes in several subsequent studies “continues until a comprehensive research synthesis can be presented that addresses researchers’ objectives”.

5.3 Legitimation – dealing with validity, reliability and generalizability

According to Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006), assessing the validity of findings is particularly complex in mixed method research because this design involves combining complementary strengths and nonoverlapping weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research. Golafshani (2003) describes how validity and the related concept of reliability are defined within a quantitative research tradition: Reliability concerns the replicability or repeatability of results or observations, i.e. consistency and stability of a measurement over time and the similarity of measurements within a given time period. Validity determines whether the research truly measures that which it was intended to measure or how truthful the research results are. As such, validity presupposes reliability.

Two main types of validity are defined in most standard research methodology textbooks: internal validity, referring to the condition that observed differences on the dependent variable are a direct result of the independent variable, not some other variable, and external validity, referring to the generalizability of results to and across populations, settings, and times (Onwuegbuzie, 2000). In the current context, with research conducted mainly in one specific geographic location (Norway) during a limited time period (2015-2018) generalizability of findings to other media systems may be contested. As described in the introduction, the Norwegian case was chosen for its special qualities rather than its representativeness. The main objective is to achieve what Ruddin (2006) describes as “the supreme sum of information on a given phenomenon”. In this case, the phenomenon under study is the value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspapers and audiences in a high choice digitally advanced local media landscape. The Norwegian local media landscape serves as a critical case where assumption of a causal relationship between diversity in media supply and its implications for consumption can be observed under “ideal conditions” due to the country’s local media richness. As such, the findings have relevance to other media systems with different media structures.

Arguably, the quantitative understanding of generalizability, reliability and validity is not a good match with qualitative research’s emphasis on understanding phenomena in context-specific settings without use of statistical procedures or other measures of quantification. Still, qualitative research, too, needs to test and demonstrate that findings are credible (Golafshani, 2003). Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) describe how qualitative research has redefined the quantitative concepts for example by replacing internal validity with credibility, external validity with transferability and reliability with dependability. To solve the potential complexity created by such diverse conceptualizations related to validity in an MMR design they suggest the overarching concept of *legitimation* that has multiple dimensions.

In the following sections, where I describe methodological considerations and the methods applied on the micro level of the five empirical studies, between separate empirical studies on the meso level and in relation to the conclusion of the dissertation on the macro level, I will mainly focus on what Onwuegbuzie and Johnson describe as *multiple validities legitimation*, i.e. “the extent to which all relevant research strategies are utilized and the research can be considered high on the multiple relevant ‘validities.’”(p. 59). This is primarily addressed by describing validity considerations in each separate study. When relevant, I will also discuss matters of *weakness minimization legitimation*, i.e. how the weakness from one research

approach should be consciously and carefully compensated by the strengths from the other approach, *sample integration legitimation*, i.e. the extent to which the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative sampling designs yields quality meta-inferences; and *inside-outside legitimation*, i.e. the degree to which the researcher accurately presents and utilizes the insider's view (emic) and the observer's view (etic) on the phenomenon under study.

With regard to the latter, my former role as Head of analysis in the local newspaper group, Amedia, during their planning and early experimentation with paywalls called for reflection on my personal beliefs, values, and biases that may have shaped my inquiry. Creswell and Miller (2000) refer to this as researcher reflexivity and emphasize the importance of this procedure for overall validity. On one hand, my experience provided first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon under study from the practitioner's field. This, I believe, enabled me to identify relevant topics and routes of inquiry and helped me in the interpretation of findings. On the other hand, there is a risk that my entering beliefs influenced the way I directed the research and interpreted my material. I have aimed to bracket my researcher biases so as not to put validity at risk. Moreover, by being transparent about my background as a researcher, I aim to clarify my position to the reader.

Transparency and researcher reflexivity are also relevant for the normative basis of my research described in the theory chapter. Rather than advancing a particular evaluative claim about my empirical finding without clarifying the basis of this evaluation, I have aimed to identify evaluative claims that *could be made* about my findings while also identifying the standards underlying those judgements. This follows the guidelines for normative assessment laid out by Althaus (2012). With regard to validity, it should be emphasized that this normative basis concerns the standards that empirical findings are held up against, not the interpretation of data.

5.3.1 Considerations and choices regarding methodology in Article 1

In this article called "Reinventing the business model for local newspapers by building walls", my co-author, Mona Solvoll, and I wanted to advance understanding of how local newspapers aim to sustain their business and how this affects their offerings to audience and advertising customers in their two-sided markets. The research question addressed in the study is "what are local newspapers' paywall strategies and how do these strategies affect their offering to users and advertisers?" This motivated an explorative research design aimed at mapping the field by means of in-depth interviews. As our research question deals mostly with how commercial interests affected the customer interface, we wanted to see the world through the

eyes of those with in-depth customer insight in both the reader and advertising side of the newspapers' market.

In a preceding research project, Mona Solvoll had administered interviews with 22 sales managers and commercial directors representing 20 Norwegian local newspapers. Several of the questions in Solvoll's standardized semi-structured interview guide provided relevant data for our study. The 20 newspapers represented the diversity and breadth of the Norwegian newspaper flora with respect to geography, size of the newspapers, ownership of the newspapers, and their choice of and experience with a paywall. This strengthened the transferability of the findings in the study to the broader local newspaper landscape in Norway. Mona Solvoll and a student assistant transcribed the recorded interview material.

Solvoll and I independently developed codes to categorize the interview transcripts. By using multiple coding that involved cross checking of coding strategies and discussion of interpretation of data, we refined and structured the codes according to our analytical model based on business model literature. By going back and forth between the data and the business model literature, we discussed and clarified each component in the model. These components are the value proposition, the target customer, the customer relationship, and the distribution channel for both advertisers and audiences. In addition, we coded the interviews according to paywall characteristics, market factors and the newspaper's digital strategy. In the interpretation of data, we drew on the two researchers' individual competencies and experiences to enhance inside-outside legitimation: Solvoll's etic viewpoint as the outsider looking at and studying the group of media managers and my own experiences from working with local newspaper paywall strategies in the practitioner's field. The latter provided, if not a full-fledged emic perspective, so at least some insider background information to aid the interpretation and contextualization of data.

The re-use of qualitative data in a study could create problems of "fit" and "context" (Hammersley, 2010). The first problem means that there could be a lack of fit between the data available and the requirements of the second analysis. The second problem refers to the lack of access to the original contexts in which and about which the data were generated. This could make data difficult to interpret. However, as argued by Hammersley (2010) such problems are not exclusive to re-use of data and it is not necessarily a serious obstacle. In our case, the shared research interest of exploring the implications of paywalls for local newspapers' business that guided the primary collection of data as well as the secondary data analysis, reduce the problem of fit. Moreover, since Mona Solvoll and I belonged to the same

research team and worked together on these articles, her knowledge about the data gathering was part of the data analysis, thus reducing the problem of context.

5.3.2 Considerations and choices regarding methodology in Article 2

The title of this article is “Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls”. The aim of the study was to investigate how people in their early adulthood perceived the value of their local newspapers by applying and further developing the concept of worthwhileness of news media. The study asks if small-town news matters to people in their early adulthood and if they are willing to pay for it. This research question was motivated by findings in two previous studies. By zooming in on one age segment in the audience, which had been identified as particularly challenging for local newspapers’ paywall strategies in Article 4, I aimed to add insight regarding the audience perceptions of value in relation to local journalism. Furthermore, I wanted to explore in more depth how local newspapers’ subscription-oriented brake strategy, identified in Article 1, was received in this age group.

This motivated a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and an innovative media card sorting exercise inspired by Q methodology and media landscape interviews. The sorting exercise enabled me to identify and theoretically develop the concept of societal worthwhileness. Informants were recruited through interpersonal contacts, referrals and invitations in local Facebook groups. A quota-sampling strategy was applied to secure a balanced mix of informants in accordance with predefined criteria. The resulting non-random sample consisted of 8 men and 12 women with high levels of education and a homogenous geographical background. The composition and relatively small size of the informant group may reduce transferability of findings. However, despite being limited in number, the informants’ in-depth qualitative accounts offer constructive insights that are useful for developing theory. In relation to the other studies of the dissertation, this weakness is compensated for by the strength of other components as discussed in more detail in the section on meta-inferences below.

5.3.3 Considerations and choices regarding methodology in Article 3

This article called “Connecting people? Understanding media’s role as democratic resources for people in digitally advanced local environments” aims to examine the concept of mediated public connection in a local context. The role of this article in the overall mixed research design of my dissertation is to provide a broad overview of the value of different media as mediators of people’s public connection. Based on the findings from other studies in the

dissertation regarding changing use patterns of the local newspaper product following the introduction of the paywall (Article 2, 4 and 5), I wanted to measure quantitatively the role of the local newspaper product compared to other sources of local news and information. This included the role of local newspapers as community glue against tendencies toward audience fragmentation.

The study uses network analysis to map audience fragmentation. The choice of the network analysis method was motivated by what I saw as a missing link between audience fragmentation studies on one hand, and mediated public connection studies on the other. The latter assumes that convergence in the media people use is a prerequisite for public connection. Such convergence or lack thereof is captured by the network analysis method by identifying patterns of audience overlap between media. I further developed the network approach by adding audience experience data, which capture people's perception of media's democratic function.

Data for this study were sourced from a national online survey ($N=1692$) conducted by the market research company, Opinion. This company has extensive experience in doing audience research for local newspapers, particularly aimed at tracking audience behavior and attitudes. Data were collected from a web panel (Norstat) consisting of 81,000 panelists aged 15 +. Recruiting from the web universe could potentially restrict generalization of findings as certain population segments may be underrepresented. Due to high internet penetration, the Norwegian internet universe is more representative of the general population than in many other countries⁵, but potential limitations to generalizability should not be ignored. It is important to note that online surveys rely on recall, which is often imperfect or subject to biases. For studies of people's news consumption, this may affect reliability negatively (e.g. De Vreese & Neijens, 2016; Prior, 2009).

However, research by LaCour and Vavreck (2014) nuances this concern by demonstrating that self-reported measures reflect relative levels of media exposure quite well. Moreover, questioning techniques, such as the list frequency technique whereby respondents indicate frequency in use of a range of listed media sources, can improve the level of specificity and reliability (Andersen, H. de Vreese, & Albæk, 2016). This approach inspired the survey tool used in this dissertation even though I was not able to list sources on the single media title level in the questionnaire, which entails some loss of detail in the data material. This

⁵ According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019, Norway has 99% internet penetration.

limitation was weighed against the benefit of gathering local cross-platform, cross-media type use data that could be aggregated to the national level of analysis based on one single source of comparable data. To adjust for under-representation of demographic groups, the data were weighted for gender, age, geography, and education in line with national census data.

In the study, I build an audience overlap network based on variables related to use of and experiences with 16 predefined media types. The sourcing of audience data as well as testing the significance of the audience overlap ties between the media nodes in the network turned out to be a particularly challenging and educational experience, as the research community is divided in their view on these matters. This became apparent in the review process where I encountered criticism for my choice of data and statistics used for hypothesis testing. This encouraged me to seek advice on methods from several scholars with expertise in network analysis. In the end, this made me confident that my chosen strategy was appropriate as long as I provided sufficient transparency on its limitations in the analysis and inferences based on empirical data.

5.3.4 Considerations and choices regarding methodology in Article 4

This article called “Bouncing off the Paywall – Understanding Misalignments Between Local Newspaper Value Propositions and Audience Responses” applies a mixed method approach to examine how well local newspapers’ paywall value propositions are aligned with customers’ value perception and behavior. This research question contains qualitative and quantitative sub-research questions. With a two-sided analysis of paywall value propositions and local news audiences’ responses, this article expands on findings in Article 1, where we identified a defensive “brake strategy” in the user market among the case newspapers aimed at protecting the print product and securing the subscription base. In Article 4, my co-author Mona Solvoll and I wanted to explore this strategy in more detail and examine how the users received it.

Qualitative data were sourced from the same interviews among media managers as the ones used in Article 1 but this time, we concentrated on questions regarding the local newspapers’ paywall value propositions. Using in vivo coding we analyzed data regarding editorial profile, quality, design, and features of paywalled content to explore the value propositions’ attractiveness dimension, and data regarding subscription packages, target customers, and benefits that paying customers would receive to explore the access dimension of the value proposition.

Like Article 3, quantitative data were sourced from a national online survey ($N = 1586$) conducted by the Norwegian market research company, Opinion, based on the aforementioned web panel. The survey questionnaire was developed by Solvoll and myself and tested on a small sample of respondents before being distributed to the national panel. Limitations to generalizability of the quantitative findings described for Article 3 above are also relevant in this case. For this specific study, we used two single item dependent variables (experience of superior value, use of paywalled content) and two multi-item dependent variables (willingness to pay, changes in local news consumption) in addition to a set of independent variables (age, gender, income, education, interest in local news, and subscription).

When integrating the quantitative and qualitative component at the analysis stage of this study, we encountered the challenge of constructing mixed meta-inferences from separate qualitative and quantitative inferences based on sample data from different populations. By mixing the generalizable findings in the representative survey with the particular findings from the relatively small sample of cases, we risked making false connections between the two. To avoid such poor sample integration legitimation, we focused on commonalities in local newspapers' paywall value propositions, rather than the specific aspects of each case in order to improve transferability of qualitative findings. Based on this, we were able to make meta-inferences identifying misalignments between local newspapers' value propositions and audiences' value perception and behavior.

5.3.5 Considerations and choices regarding methodology in Article 5

This article, called "Paywalls' impact on local news websites' traffic and their civic and business implications," asks how the introduction of paywalls influenced audience behavior in terms of traffic, and what implications this has for the role of local newspapers in local democracy as well as for the advertising business of local newspapers. Here, my co-authors Aske Kammer, Mona Solvoll and I develop an analytical framework for comparative studies of online traffic development to local news websites following the introduction of paywalls. The study is motivated by inconsistent findings in previous research regarding the impact of paywalls on online traffic, as well as findings in Article 1 and 4, which also yielded somewhat ambiguous results: On one hand, the relative optimism identified among local newspaper managers regarding the potential to introduce an online subscription regime without substantial loss of audience reach, on the other hand, the clear tendency of reduced local news consumption after the introduction of paywalls indicated by survey respondents (Article 4).

The empirical data consist of audited traffic measurement in four Norwegian and four Danish local online newspapers. In our case markets, these data are publicly available from national audit organizations, respectively, ComScore/Mediebedriftene (for Norway) and Danske Medier Research/Gemius and Kantar Gallup (for Denmark). The metrics we analyze are weekly, average daily pageviews and unique visitors on desktop and – where available – on mobile platforms. There is some skepticism in the research literature regarding the reliability and validity of such audience metrics collected for commercial purposes, but as argued by Taneja (2016) these measurements offer opportunities of deciphering media use patterns in theoretically productive ways. Still, as described by De Vreese and Neijens (2016) one should not ignore the potential weaknesses with traffic measurements, such as manipulation of measurements (web robots “visiting” websites in order to artificially raise the number of visitors) and precision of measurement (clicking on a page does not necessarily mean that the user has viewed all information on that page).

By analyzing online traffic, Article 5 remedies some of the contradictions in previous findings. Results showed a mixed development for the newspaper’s desktop and mobile editions, a perspective not accounted for in Article 1 and 4, but overall there was a negative traffic development in the long-time perspective in the newspapers. It should be noted that the relatively small number of case newspapers included from each of the two countries under study do not permit generalization to all local newspapers in the respective markets. This is a limitation that I address in the article and one that I will return to in more detail in the section on meta-inferences between the findings in the different studies below.

5.3.6 Considerations regarding legitimation of meta-inferences

Making meta-inferences is particularly relevant for the writing of this dissertation’s conclusion where I combine the insights from the different empirical studies and populate my integrated value creation model while addressing the dissertation’s research questions. In this section, I will describe how I have approached this and the problems of integration (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006) that I have encountered in the process. In doing so, I will return to the purpose of a mixed method design described previously in this chapter as this provides important support to overcome some of the difficulties of making meta-inferences.

A key premise for the use of mixed method in this dissertation is that the research process as well as the findings are “greater than those produced by the application of either the qualitative or quantitative approach alone” (Nastasi, Hitchcock, & Brown, 2010, p. 321). As such, the different studies in the dissertation resemble a puzzle of pieces that in sum provide a

fuller picture than each of the pieces in isolation. A legitimation challenge when putting this puzzle together concerns sample integration legitimation in the cases where qualitative inferences based on interviews with a small sample of people in one study were combined with quantitative inferences from a different and much larger sample of people in another study. Specifically, I had to be careful not to interpret audience segments reported in Article 4 as generalizable representations of the informants in the in-depth interviews with people in their early adulthood reported in Article 2. Moreover, the informants' accounts in the interviews could not be directly interpreted as "the voice" of the young adult respondents in the survey. Similarly, I had to be careful not to overstretch the connection between traffic measurement in Article 5 and the behaviour, attitudes and experiences reported by the survey respondents and informants in the interviews.

Bearing this limitation in mind, I approached the different audience studies as separate contributions to the triangulation of findings, each adding a separate piece to the puzzle with their individual analytical lens and findings. As such, meta-inferences at this level were concerned with elaboration and enhancement of the findings from the different studies into a coherent conclusion. I encountered a similar challenge when integrating findings on newspapers' paywall strategies with findings on traffic development on local websites. When mixing inferences based on interviews with media managers with traffic data gauging audience behavior, there was sample overlap in the sense that the four Norwegian case newspapers included in the audience measurement study (Article 5) were also among the cases in the studies of local newspapers paywall strategies (Article 1 and 4). This lessened the problem of making meta-inferences based on inferences from different data samples. In the process I became more confident about other meta-inferences regarding newspaper strategy and audience response. Thus, it served as a weakness minimization legitimation enhancing the overall quality of my meta-inferences in the conclusion. When taken together, the findings regarding the local newspapers' strategies and offerings on one hand and audiences' responses on the other, demonstrate how my mixed approach identified contradictions and divergent perspectives in line with the initiation and complementarity purpose of this type of research design.

5.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical tensions, dilemmas and choices are part of the everyday practice of doing research and concern both procedural ethics and "ethics in practice" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The procedural dimension usually involves seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to

undertake research involving humans. “Ethics in practice” concerns the everyday ethical issues that arise in the research process. In the following I will combine these two dimensions by describing how I have approached the ethical guidelines provided by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee and dealt with these principles during the course of my research. I will focus on issues related to respect for the individual participants in the project, to the research community, and to the dissemination of research:

5.4.1 Respect for the individual

The studies in this dissertation involving collection of personal data that required approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) have obtained such approval. Consistent with the guidelines for informed consent by The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee, the participants in the interviews and surveys were informed about the purpose and funding of the project as well as the intended use of the results. With regard to the in-depth interviews with media managers, my colleague presented this information to the informants orally. In the case of the in-depth interviews with media users in their early adulthood, informed consent was obtained in writing. The participant received a brief orientation about the project and its purpose in the recruitment process and then again in more detail at the start of each interview. The survey respondents were presented with an introductory text at the start of the online questionnaire which served as a confirmation of consent to participate.

In terms of confidentiality, anonymity was granted and strictly protected in the processing of data from the audience studies (surveys and interview). With the survey data collection administered by the market research company (Opinion) there was no information linking the individual participant to their responses in the data files that I received from the market research company. In the case of the audience in-depth interviews, access to the audio files with interviews was limited to me and an experienced research assistant who had signed a confidentiality agreement. We are the only ones who have had access to the transcribed interviews from the audio files. The in-depth interviews with the media managers did not explicitly name the informants. However, their affiliation with the case newspapers was specified in the articles and thus, they were not anonymous.

In the direct interaction with informants, I strived to be considerate and concrete to reduce the strain on my informants and respectful of their integrity. In one case, this meant that I had to exclude a participant from my data material, as this informant did not allow the interview to

be taped or transcribed for safety reasons and it turned out that the quality of my notes from the interview were too poor to merit inclusion in the material.

5.4.2 Respect for the research community

Another important ethical aspect is the research community and considerations regarding co-authorship and good citation practice. For the three empirical articles in this dissertation that are co-authored with research colleagues, I have made agreements with my fellow researchers regarding our contributions to the articles and the order of our authorship. I am the first author of these three articles as described in the agreement between my co-authors and me.

Throughout the writing of the empirical articles as well as in this introduction chapter, I have strived for good citation practice in accordance with The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee guidelines. This includes avoiding false connections between researchers and research as well as failing to make such connections when appropriate. I found the mandatory PhD course in research ethics at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo particularly relevant and useful in this respect. I followed this course during the first year of my project period and received valuable insights that I could incorporate in the subsequent work with my dissertation.

5.4.3 Dissemination of research

A final point related to research ethics that I would like to emphasize is the dissemination of research. During the course of my PhD project, I have aimed to contribute to public discourse related to my research field. I have participated in interviews and panel discussions, written commentaries and presented research to industry representatives in seminars and conferences.

6 Empirical findings

In this chapter, I return to the dissertation's research questions and present findings from the five empirical articles in response to these questions. In the process, I develop an integrated value creation model combining empirical findings and theory discussed in Chapter 4 regarding local newspapers' value creation from a social responsibility, business and gratification perspective.

First, I answer sub-RQ1 regarding local newspapers' value creation and value capture in their two-sided market and extract value flows between local newspaper businesses and their customers. Secondly, I answer sub-RQ2 regarding audiences' use and perceived value of the local newspaper product compared to other local news sources. Based on this, I identify value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, local newspaper organizations and society. Thirdly, I address sub-RQ3 regarding changes in how local newspaper organizations capture value and what implications this might have for audiences' relationship to the local newspaper product. From this, I extract additional details regarding value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, local newspaper organizations and society.

Finally, I combine the value flows and value flow gaps identified in the empirical material with the virtuous value creation cycle presented in chapter 4. At this point I would like to remind the reader of the value creation dynamics encompassed in this cycle based on a social responsibility perspective on local newspapers' value for society: The value flow from society to local newspaper organizations based on the provision of favourable value creation conditions (VF1); the value flow from local newspaper organizations to audiences based on the provision of local journalism in line with social responsibility ideals (VF2); and the value flow from audiences to society based on the premise that audiences create shared value for society when they engage with journalism provided by local newspapers based on social responsibility ideals (VF3).

By integrating this value creation logic with empirical findings, I build my integrated value creation model and address the dissertation's main research question, which asks how local newspapers' value for society is influenced by the value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspaper organizations and audiences.

6.1.1 Sub-RQ 1: How do local newspaper organizations aim to create and capture value in their two-sided market?

Findings in Article 1 and 4 demonstrate how local newspapers aimed to secure their relationship to existing print subscribers and transfer subscription relationships from print to

digital, without significant loss of digital reach. In the audience market, this was identified as a *break strategy* focused on securing revenue streams from subscribers. Job number one was to make print subscribers realise the value of the paid local journalism product and encourage these customers to maintain their subscriptions, thus protecting print revenue from online cannibalization. To achieve this, local newspaper organizations differentiated their value propositions to different customer segments. For subscribers, they offered full access to the most valuable journalistic content online and bundled product packages. These bundles included a print and digital “total” package, which gave subscribers access to all content on all platforms at any time, and lighter versions, such as “digital only”, and “weekend combi” packages. For non-subscribers, local newspaper organizations followed different strategies. Some offered access to a portion of their journalism free of charge to non-subscribers. Others reserved all their journalism for paying customers.

In any case, the value proposition to non-subscribers was inferior to the value proposition to subscribers. Findings in Article 4 show how local newspaper organizations reserved the more resource demanding, in-depth and investigative local news reporting as well as local opinion pieces and hyperlocal content to subscribers. This was described as exclusive and higher quality content perceived to provide most benefits to audiences, i.e. it was regarded as the most valuable journalism from the newspaper organizations’ point of view. Contrasting this, the value proposition to non-subscribers was mainly headlines and pictures on the front page of the website and in some cases commodified news content that people could also find elsewhere on the internet. This was described as a less valuable offering but potentially “good enough” for some audiences to make them continue visiting the web site.

Maintaining audience reach was perceived as important for the advertising side of the business. Findings in Article 1 show how advertising remained a vital source of revenue for local newspaper organizations that they aimed to harness. In line with this, they followed a forward leaning *acceleration strategy* in their advertising market focused on improving services to local advertisers with more relevant and valuable audiences and user behaviour insights. Local newspaper organizations’ value proposition to advertisers emphasized three main benefits. First, with paywalls in place, the news operations claimed to filter out audiences that were less interesting for local businesses, typically occasional, non-local readers who were unlikely to shop locally. Secondly, the paywall served as a “datawall” enabling user data harvesting and better segmentation possibilities for advertisers. Such consumer insight, as well as a dedicated readership spending more time on the website, were

described as something that was in high demand among advertisers. Thirdly, the local newspaper businesses marketed their unique position in their local market. Among news operations with a soft paywall, maintaining or strengthening digital reach to remain attractive to advertisers was a high priority. The news organizations described how they had been relative successful in maintaining reach. In their account, traffic initially dropped after the introduction of a paywall, but recovered relatively quickly enabling them to offer similar audience reach to advertisers as before the paywall was raised.

6.1.1.1 Value flows identified in the empirical findings

From these findings, I identify value flows between local newspaper organizations and the audience and advertising customers. These are detailed in the table below:

Table 3 Value flows identified based on sub-RQ1.

Value flows between local newspapers and their customers	
Value flow from local newspaper organizations to audiences (VF2).	Full access to premium content for subscribers.
	Partial access to non-premium content for non-subscribers.
Value flow from audiences to local newspaper organizations (VF4).	Payment for content: Audiences paid for subscriptions
	Use of content: Audiences contributed to reach and user data facilitating segmentation.
Value flow from local newspaper organizations to advertisers (VF5).	Relevant audiences to advertisers.
	Opportunities for audience segmentation.
	Maintained audience reach.
Value flow from advertisers to local newspaper organizations (VF6).	Payment to access local audiences.

6.1.2 Sub-RQ 2: How do audiences use and perceive the value of the local newspaper product compared to other local news offerings?

Findings in Article 2 and 3 expose complex use patterns and diverging perceptions of the value of the local newspaper product among audiences. In a high-choice digitally advanced local media environment, I find that people converged around certain popular media types for local news and information. The use patterns mapped in Article 3 demonstrate how the largest audience overlap occurred between online local and regional newspapers and Facebook.

These were the most central sources for local news and information. The use patterns examined, conceptualized as the *practice dimension* of people's mediated public connection, revealed that the local online newspaper served as a common point of reference for many people as they oriented themselves toward a local public world. However, Facebook had surpassed the local online newspaper as the source that most people turned to for news and information about their locality.

Audiences' perception of the value of different media types as democratic resources for their connection to local public life, conceptualized as the *perception dimension* of people's public connection, demonstrated how local newspapers in print and online provided the strongest democracy experiences to their users. This means that they were most strongly associated with information, integration and arena roles by their users, i.e. functions rooted in social responsibility ideals. The printed local newspaper product had the strongest performance in terms of providing such experiences to its users, but it was less popular than sources with lower scores. This suggests that audiences were gravitating towards media that were perceived as less valuable as democratic resources.

Zooming in on audiences in their early adulthood, Article 2 found that the perceived value of the local newspaper product, conceptualized as its worthwhileness, was experienced very differently among audience members. Among those willing to pay for local news, the local newspaper product was well integrated in their daily routines and described as vital for their sense of being informed and part of the community.

For others, the value of local news was regarded as low and not worth paying for. This was partly motivated by a disapproval of news prioritization in the local newspaper product and thus, its production of locality. Among those with low willingness to pay for local news, consumption of local news was not very routinized and thorough; scanning headlines and reading stories that did not require a subscription was described as sufficient. They did not feel that the local newspaper product was important for them personally and questioned its quality and relevance. The study shows how the availability and richness of news and information in the digital sphere devaluated the significance of local news among those unwilling to pay and stimulated a sense of dispensability with regard to local news.

Still, when discussing sources of local information that could potentially replace the local newspaper product, both those willing and unwilling to pay described it as superior to other sources of local news and information. This news source was perceived as irreplaceable and

valuable for local democracy even though people did not necessarily use it themselves. This was identified as a distinction between individual and societal worthwhileness of the local newspaper product in the study. Findings show how people wanted the local newspaper product around as a shared “meeting place” in the community. They regarded it as important for local democracy as it was seen to provide important local information, to hold people in power accountable and to illuminate important social issues.

6.1.2.1 Value flows and value flow gaps identified in the empirical findings

Based on the findings presented above I extract more detail regarding the value flow from audiences to the local newspaper organization and identify patterns of value sharing constituting a value flow from audiences to society. Supplementing this, I also extract value flow gaps between these parties. The table below provides an overview of these dynamics:

Table 4 Value flows and value flow gaps identified based on sub-RQ2.

Value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, newspaper organizations and society	
Value flow from audiences to society (VF3).	Convergence in use of local newspaper product.
	Democratic experiences from use of local newspaper product.
Value flow from audiences to local newspaper organizations (VF4).	Use of content: Audiences who used the online local newspaper product made this source central in the local media landscape.
	Payment for content: Audiences who paid for the local newspaper product because it was important for them.
	Use of content: Audiences who had a routinized use of the local newspaper product.
Value flow gap between audiences and local newspaper organizations (VFG1).	No value capture from some audiences: Audiences who were unwilling to pay for the local newspaper product because it was unimportant for them personally.
	No value capture from some audiences: Audiences who had a non-routinized and superficial use of the local newspaper product.

Value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, newspaper organizations and society	
Value flow gap between audiences and society (VFG2).	No value sharing from some audiences: Audiences who regarded local newspaper products as important for democracy, but not for them personally.

6.1.3 Sub-RQ 3: When local newspaper organizations change their way of capturing value from audiences, what are the implications for audiences' relationship to the local newspaper product?

The introduction of paywalls in local newspapers online represented a considerable shift in local newspapers' value capture strategy. Findings in Article 4 and 5 demonstrate how this change resulted in declining use of local news among audiences. Moreover, Article 4 exposes how the experience of superior value in the paywalled content was generally weak among audiences and not well aligned with the value proposition from the local newspaper organization. There was limited audience support for the view that paywalled local journalism was better than content that could be accessed free of charge online. This was particularly salient among older, more affluent, well-educated people who were already subscribing to a printed newspaper product and among people with lower income and education. The latter group with lower willingness to pay, as well as lower experience of superior value in paywalled content, were among those most misaligned with local newspaper organizations' paywall value proposition.

According to audiences' own accounts, there was limited use of paywalled local journalism and a clear tendency of reduced local news consumption as well as increased use of other media after a paywall was introduced. Findings presented in Article 4 reveal a tendency towards "thinner" news consumption following the paywalls. The audience groups who reported that they did not use paywalled content were substantial and diverse. Audiences showing the clearest signs of detachment from the local newspaper product after the introduction of paywalls, were the youngest with lowest interest in local news, income, and share of subscribers. This group had been "locked out" by the paywall.

Those who stayed loyal to the local newspaper product after the introduction of paywalls, and embraced paywalled content, had the highest score on local news interest and income and the highest share of people with higher education and subscribers. Similarly, those with the

highest willingness to pay were predominantly older, existing newspaper subscribers with higher income and high interest in local news.

Supplementing these accounts of audiences’ use and perceived value of paywalled content, findings in Article 5 show how the introduction of paywalls was followed by decreasing reach for local newspaper sites. Both Norwegian and Danish local newspaper web sites under study had a drop in traffic in a short- and longer-term perspective. Pageviews as well as unique visitors decreased upon the transition from free to fee-based access to local online journalism. Hard paywalls had a more negative immediate effect on traffic than soft paywalls, but this difference was equalized over time and the traffic mainly remained at a decreased level regardless of paywall type. Traffic development in Norway was somewhat better than in Denmark in a short-term perspective, but national differences also evened out over time. The decline in traffic is seen to challenge the role of local newspapers as democratic institutions, since fewer people consult them and the business side of their operation, since audience size remains important for their attractiveness for advertisers.

6.1.3.1 Findings on value flows and value flow gaps

The findings in response to Sub-RQ3 provide further details regarding value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, local newspaper organizations and society. This is summarized in the table below:

Table 5 Value flows and value flow gaps identified based on sub-RQ3.

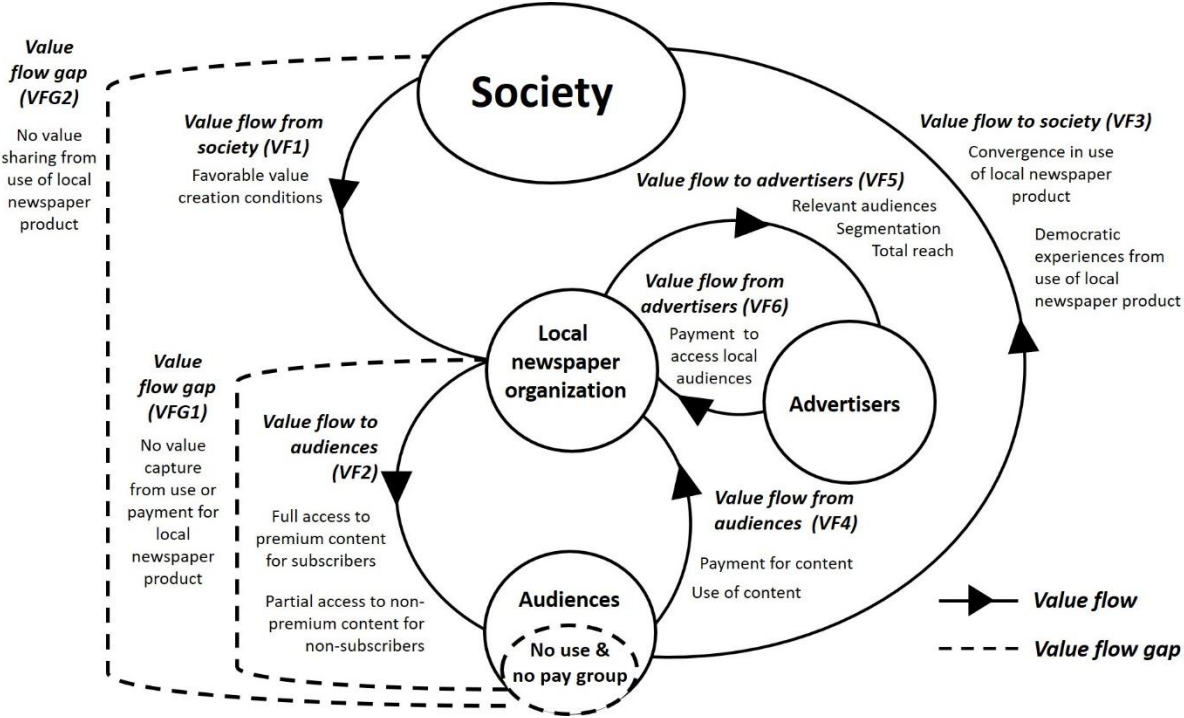
Value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, newspaper organizations and society	
Value flow from audiences to local newspaper organizations (VF4).	Use of content: The audiences with the highest local news interest, income, education and share of subscribers used paywalled content.
	Payment for content: The audiences with higher income and interest in local news, who were older and subscribing to the local newspaper product, were willing to pay.
Value flow gap between audiences and local newspaper	No value capture from some audiences: Younger audiences with lowest news interest, income, and share of subscribers were most detached from the local newspaper product.
	No value capture from some audiences: The younger audiences and those with the lowest education and income were unwilling to pay.

Value flows and value flow gaps between audiences, newspaper organizations and society	
organizations (VFG1).	No value capture from some audiences: Number of pageviews and unique visitors decreased with paywalls challenging local newspapers' business operations.
Value flow gap between audiences and society (VFG2).	No value sharing from some audiences: Number of pageviews and unique visitors decreased with paywalls challenging local newspapers' democratic role.
	No value sharing from some audiences: Younger audiences with lowest news interest, income, and share of subscribers were most detached from the local newspaper product.

6.1.4 Main RQ: How is local newspapers' value for society influenced by the value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspaper organizations and audiences?

As noted previously, the empirical articles in this dissertation apply different perspectives on how local newspapers create value as products, as businesses and as societal institutions. As such, combining the value flows and value flow gaps extracted from empirical findings in the articles into a joint model means that different value perspectives are integrated and contrasted. I will combine these value flows and value flow gaps with the virtuous value creation cycle, which encapsulates how local newspapers create value for individuals and society according to the social responsibility perspective on value creation. By integrating this cycle described in Chapter 4 with the value flows and value flow gaps identified in the previous sections, I will demonstrate how the value that local newspapers' are expected to provide in society based on a social responsibility perspective is influenced by the value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspaper organizations and audiences. These dynamics emerge in the intersection between newspapers' business perspective and audiences' gratification perspective on value and the different interests that these perspectives represent. This is visualized in the integrated value creation model below and described in the following paragraphs.

Figure 2 The integrated value creation model



My empirical findings demonstrate that the value flow between local newspaper organizations and audiences (VF2) is only partly aligned with social responsibility ideals. The value proposition to subscribers is consistent with these ideals but the offering to non-subscribers is not. The business perspective on value creation among news organizations motivates this differentiation between value propositions, aimed at capturing revenue from audiences while simultaneously maintaining reach. The virtuous value creation cycle does not encompass this money-making logic, or the way local newspapers sell audiences to advertisers (VF5) in exchange for advertising revenue (VF6). When taking into account the business perspective of local newspaper organizations, it is evident that this influences the value flow between local newspaper organizations and audiences, since the money-making logic of the newspaper business decides what content will be provided to which audiences.

With regard to the value flow from audiences to society (VF3), findings demonstrate that at least to some extent audiences' use and experiences with the local newspaper product support the societal role of local newspapers envisioned by a social responsibility value perspective. The way people congregate around the local newspaper product as a common point of reference and their experience with its information, integration and arena functions, suggest that they obtain gratifications from the local newspaper product, which in turn will benefit the broader society in line with social responsibility ideals. On the other hand, the value flow gap

emerging due to decreased news consumption and detachment from local newspaper products among certain audiences demonstrates a misalignment between personal and societal interests, as well as between business and audience interests (VFG2). These audiences are disconnected from the benefits that local newspapers' offer in their social responsibility capacity and they do not contribute to the value sharing on the societal level that the virtuous value creation cycle envisions. Moreover, they do not contribute to value capture for the local newspaper business since they do not use or do not pay for the local newspaper product creating a value flow gap from these audiences to the news organization (VFG1).

The nature of the value flow from audiences to local newspaper organizations, as well as the value flow gap between these parties, demonstrate that some audiences' interests are better served than others. The virtuous value creation cycle does not encompass this dynamic. It does not capture how younger audiences and people with lower income and interest in news are becoming more detached from the local newspaper product, whereas older existing subscribers play a particularly important role for local newspaper businesses' value capture. By incorporating this tension between business and gratification value perspectives, it becomes evident that the value that local newspapers provide by filling information, integration and arena roles in society is not equally distributed.

In sum, the empirical findings in my dissertation demonstrate the decisive role of local newspapers' value proposition and audiences' value perception for the value flow between audiences, newspapers and society. Simply put: When local newspaper organizations offer benefits that meet audiences' needs and expectations at a cost that is acceptable to people, they are likely to engage in co-creation of value with the newspapers and "get involved" with the local journalism product to the benefit of themselves and the broader society. In this case, value perspectives overlap, stimulating value flows between individual media users and newspaper organizations and society. However, when the value proposition of local newspapers is not experienced as superior and the worthwhileness of local journalism is perceived as low for the individual, audiences will not engage in co-creation of value with the local newspapers. They will not get "involved with" its local journalism product. In this case, value perspectives are conflicting. This is particularly prevalent among younger audiences without well-established newspaper use and a subscription habit, and among people with lower income and education. Instead of investing time and money in the local newspaper product, they detach themselves from it and move elsewhere, as demonstrated by the value flow gaps between these audience groups, newspaper organizations and society.

7 Discussion

This chapter discusses the dynamics of value creation and value perception between local newspaper organizations and audiences, and the resulting value flows and value flow gaps identified in the previous chapter. The underlying premise for the discussion is the idea of local newspapers' social responsibility, which has been a recurring theme throughout this introduction part of my dissertation. As well established by now, this perspective on local newspapers' value for individuals and society emphasizes that local newspapers have certain roles to fill in society, regardless of market demand. As described by Ali (2016), the positive externalities that local journalism engender for society are so important for a well-functioning democracy that the journalistic product should be provided even if audiences systematically underappreciate it.

Against such claims, the empirical findings presented in this dissertation beg the question: When audiences in a high choice, media abundant local context do not consult the local journalism product that local newspapers provide, can we ignore demand as we theorize the role that local newspapers should ideally play in society? Furthermore, can local newspapers fill their social responsibility role for the public when important parts of that public turn away from the local journalism they offer? The subsequent discussion revolves around these questions. I structure the discussion according to three challenges for the social responsibility ideal of local newspapers that emerge from the empirical material. These are the challenge of plenty, of payment and of personal interests among audiences.

7.1 The challenge of plenty

The ideal of a diverse provision of news and information that plays such a central role in Western liberal democracies, including Norway and its diversity oriented media policy (Åmås-Commission, 2017), is currently being tested against the realities of extreme information abundance. My empirical findings demonstrating how some people distance themselves from the local newspaper product, read less local news and seek alternative sources, which they perceive to be more worthwhile than the local newspaper's offering, point to the challenge of plenty. On one hand, the proliferation of information and communication channels increases people's opportunities to engage with news, to enjoy quality content from all over the world and to find, connect, and form socially mediated publics regardless of distance in time and space. Such multitude of choice appears to represent the very embodiment of media diversity ideals. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the media landscape stimulates a diversion of audience attention away from local journalism. In line

with concerns over “pathologies of pluralism” described by Karppinen (2012), I find that unparalleled media choice stimulates more selective exposure among people. With an infinite range of media platforms and content providers available, my findings show how some are questioning the significance of local journalism and that the sustained attention to local newspapers cannot be taken for granted.

This supports Picard’s (2010) and Nielsen’s (2015c) argument that due to factors such as digitization, globalization and centralization, it is increasingly difficult to identify the relevance of the journalistic product for the audience. The misalignment between local newspapers’ value proposition and the value perception among certain audiences underscores Picard’s (2010) point on the problem of meeting audiences’ needs and wants and extends this argument to the local context. Arguably, this challenges the local newspapers’ capacity to shape common experiences and promote shared discourse in local communities envisioned by social responsibility ideals. As such, the value flow gaps identified between audiences, local newspapers and society in my empirical material demonstrate that local newspapers’ role as community glue is under pressure. Similarly, it shows how the normative ideals of diversity in media supply and commonality in media consumption are to some extent conflicting. Given the positive connection between local newspapers and civic and political engagement demonstrated in previous studies (e.g. Howells, 2015; Shaker, 2009; Yamamoto, 2011), this gives some cause for concern – at least when we interpret these tendencies through a normative social responsibility lens.

There are nuances and complexities in this picture. Against concerns over audiences’ exodus from common public sphere sites and emerging media enclaves voiced in influential scholarly contributions (Gitlin, 2002; Sunstein, 2009), my research finds that, even though the media landscape is fragmented, there is still substantial convergence in the media people use to keep informed about their local community. Local newspapers maintain a key role as information sources in the locality and they are the medium that is most strongly associated with social responsibility ideals among the audiences. This value flow from the audience to society supports previous findings by Gulyas et al. (2018), Nygren (2019) and Pew Research Center (2019) regarding the lasting centrality of local legacy media.

Nevertheless, Facebook challenges local newspapers’ position as the “go-to-place” for local news and information in particular. The fact that this social media platform is identified as the source that most people use to keep informed about their local community is a striking example of new hierarchies and power concentration in the digital sphere. Arguably,

Facebook has the capacity to support a more pluralistic communicative landscape, creating substantial value for local democracy. Moreover, the social media platform serves as a distribution channel enabling local newspapers to reach and interact with audiences in new ways. As such, the social media platform could arguably add value to local newspapers' value creation for audiences. However, the way Facebook is draining local newspapers of economic resources and positions itself at the heart of the local news ecology with the power to influence, manipulate and distort local public discourse without any editorial control is also deeply unsettling.

7.2 The challenge of payment

In the current media landscape, the supply of journalism that fills certain normatively defined roles in society and serves the interests of local communities depends on local newspapers to stay in business. As demonstrated by the empirical findings in this dissertation, local newspapers perform better than other local news and information sources in terms of providing information, integration and arena experiences to their users. This supports Nielsen's point (2015b) regarding local newspapers' role as keystone media in local communities. The research I have conducted shows how local newspapers still have a unique position in terms of connecting people to a public world where matters of public concern are addressed as described by Couldry et al. (2016) and Schrøder and Steeg Larsen (2010). As such, it can be argued that fixing local newspaper organizations' failing business model is not merely a question of securing an industry's economic interests but of saving the media that most clearly serve the interests of the public.

For local newspapers to remain profitable, they must find ways to capture exchange value in the digital sphere. The findings presented in this dissertation show how they pursued the strategy that used to serve them well in the print era – a combined advertising and subscription online revenue model. Based on the idea that local newspapers are important for democracy, it is arguably in society's interest that the newspapers succeed with this strategy. Moreover, I found that the content that local newspapers paywalled was local journalism, which most clearly aligns with social responsibility ideals, typically news stories with higher information value. Consequently, it is in the interests of newspaper businesses as well as society that people are willing to pay and engage with this journalism. However, expanding on previous findings on user payment by Goyanes (2015), Chyi (2012) and Kammer et al. (2015), the research presented in this dissertation shows how paywalls resulted in value flow

gaps between local audiences and local newspaper businesses as well as between local audiences and society.

The way certain demographics were detached from the benefits that local newspapers are supposed to provide in their social responsibility capacity lends further gravitas to concerns over paywalls and increasing information gaps in the population expressed by Myllylahti (2015) and Pickard and Williams (2014). Against previous research demonstrating the value of local newspapers as providers of information, as a shared arena for public debate and as an integrative force in local communities (Hess & Waller, 2016; Kösters & Jandura, 2017; Nielsen, 2015c; Nygren, 2019; Skogerbø & Winsvold, 2011), the unwillingness to pay for access to the local journalism product and the changes in news consumption following the introduction of paywalls, challenge local newspapers' capacity to fill these roles for certain audiences.

Based on these findings, I posit that for the younger, non-subscribing population and for people with lower income, education and interest in local news, the mere provision of social responsibility oriented local journalism in the marketplace of local news and information is far from sufficient to stimulate consumption. When local newspapers implement paywalls to capture exchange value from users online, it encourages disengagement with local news in these audience segments in particular. These insights demonstrate how the special characteristics of the local journalism product make it particularly challenging to monetize in the digital realm (Baker, 2001) and more so with some audience groups than others.

The dissertation's findings suggest that the "youth problem" among local newspapers identified by Jenkins and Nielsen (2018) is exacerbated with the introduction of user payment online. Moreover, they show that the public and merit good characteristics of local journalism might be more challenging with younger, less affluent, non-subscribing audiences with lower interest in local news. This represents a value creation dilemma for local newspaper businesses as well as for society. Implementing paywalls may be an important move to save the newspaper businesses – at least temporarily, but seen through a public interest lens, it comes at a considerable cost. When paywalls lead to a thinner consumption of local journalism among certain audiences, local newspapers' value creation for society as a whole may suffer because the value sharing that results from people's consumption of local journalism is reduced.

7.3 The challenge of personal interests

Scholars sponsoring the view that journalism has public and merit good characteristics (Ali, 2016; Baker, 2001; Van der Wurff, 2012) argue that audiences do not recognize the larger values engendered within local journalism because of erroneous information and imperfect knowledge. The findings in this dissertation provide some nuance to this view by identifying a certain ambiguity regarding local newspapers' value among individuals. On one hand, I find that the perceived value of their local journalism product was regarded as low among people with low willingness to pay. This was partly motivated by disapproval of the prioritization of news and thus, the production of locality (Buchanan, 2009; Hess & Waller, 2016). This challenges the view that local news is more valuable to people (Goyanes, 2015; Hollander, 2010; Lee & Chyi, 2014; Mersey, 2009). Instead, the findings lend support to the idea that, at least for parts of the audience, interest in news close to home is decreasing, as argued by Armstrong et al. (2015). On the other hand, I find that the local newspaper product was regarded as irreplaceable and valuable from a societal perspective even among people unwilling to pay for it.

This reveals how the perceived worthwhileness of local newspapers and the local journalism product they provide exceeds the personal interests and, as noted by Holbrook (1999), how the individual's experience of value is not only self-oriented but also other-oriented. By introducing the distinction between individual and societal worthwhileness of news media and demonstrating a misalignment between the two, this dissertation exposes the complexity and ambiguity of people's relationship to local news and news sources. Extending the worthwhileness conceptualization in previous contributions by Schröder and colleagues (e.g. Schröder, 2015; Schröder & Kobbernagel, 2010; Schröder & Steeg Larsen, 2010), I find that the value of local news media products is not restricted to the weighing of benefits and costs for the individual. Instead, people's appreciation of media diversity and the important role of local newspapers for local democracy show that collective interests are also part of individuals' value perception in the local context. However, even if perceived worthwhileness of local newspapers exceeds personal interests and preferences, willingness to pay may not.

Against the somewhat paternalistic view that people do not recognize the "real value" of local newspapers for the collective, the findings in this dissertation reveal how the individual may be well aware of the value local newspapers represent for the common good of a healthy and sustainable democracy. However, in terms of meeting his or her own personal interests, the value may be experienced as low, or too low to merit monetary investment. The misalignment

between the perceived societal worthwhileness of small-town news and readers' willingness to pay for it alludes to a certain "taken for grantedness" with regard to local journalism and local newspapers. Even if people do not pay for the local newspaper, they want it around, and expect it to fulfil democratic functions in the locality.

8 Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the wider implications of my research. I will focus on implications for research, for the local newspaper industry field and for media policy.

Following this, I will present the main contributions of my dissertation to the field of local journalism studies and point to areas of future research.

8.1 The interdependent nature of local newspapers' value creation

The objective of this dissertation has been to unpack supply and demand dynamics between local newspapers and audiences and the implications of this interplay for local newspapers' value creation for society. Taking up the call from scholars like Pickard (2017) and Nielsen (2016) regarding the need for knowledge about the business of news, and Mathisen and Morlandstø (2019a) regarding the under-researched area of local news audiences, I have examined how local newspapers aim to create value from a business perspective and how the value they propose is perceived from audiences' gratification perspective. By holding this interplay between different interests up against the normative ideals of social responsibility, I have demonstrated how local newspapers' societal value is in many ways dependent on a popular engagement that is unevenly distributed among individuals. Moreover, the challenges of plenty, of payment and of personal interests among audiences expose how a combination of structure and agency factors shape the interplay between people, local newspapers and the local journalism product.

The social responsibility model of local newspapers assumes that value can be delivered to people and that value for society will ensue from such delivery. What emerges from my material are patterns of interdependent value flows between audiences, news operations and society in which the individual's willingness to invest time and money in co-creation of value with the local newspaper plays a decisive role. This co-creation of value is more or less overlooked in the functionalist social responsibility view on local newspapers' societal role, particularly the factors that motivate or discourage audiences to engage in co-creation with their newspaper. Contrasting this, my research has shown how local newspapers' contribution to an informed and educated public, to local debate and to a sense of belonging among local people, depends not only on the provision of local journalism that meets certain normative ideals, but on the value that audiences perceive this journalism to have in their everyday life relative to other news and information offerings. This in turn, influences if and how they get involved with the local newspaper product and to what extent this news and information

service matters to them or not. These insights have important implications for local journalism research, for the industry and for local media policy formulation.

8.2 Implications for research

The value perception lens through which audiences' experience and use of local newspaper products have been analyzed in this dissertation has proven fruitful in unpacking different audiences' relationship to local news and information. I align with scholars who argue that a reorientation of research is needed to encompass not only what journalism should do *to* people, but "what it does *for* them instead" (Broersma & Peters, 2016, p. 9). For the field of local journalism research, I posit that the audience value perspective represents a "missing link" which can help us understand not only what role local newspapers should play, but also what role they *could* play in a high-choice, digitally advanced media environment. In line with Picard (2010), I argue that audiences' value perception is important for the understanding of news organizations' value creation. Echoing and supplementing his argument, I argue that understanding individual media users' needs and wants is not only important for the survival of the local newspaper business. More profoundly, it is a question of local newspapers' value for society. As such, research on local newspapers' and other news media's societal role needs to pay more attention to audiences' value perceptions.

This does not entail a departure with the normative ideals that play such an important role in the local journalism research tradition. As demonstrated in this dissertation, holding these ideals up against the audiences' media practices and value perception provides a productive approach to uncover overlap as well as conflict between individual and collective interests in relation to local news. Moreover, I posit that a social responsibility tradition without the added "other social responsibility" described in the local journalism literature (Engan, 2015, 2016; Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2019b) represents a too narrow account of the societal value of local newspapers. Future local journalism research will benefit from a broad social responsibility understanding that includes both the watchdog and the glue role of news media in local communities. That said local journalism research is also encouraged to critically examine and discuss the desirability and realism of social responsibility ideals against the practices and possibilities of communication in the digital sphere. As argued in one of my empirical articles, scholars are challenged to reflect upon the relevance of social responsibility ideals for the understanding of the relationship between people, media and communities in an increasingly fluid, digital and interactive world, and to discuss what good communication for local communities entails in a high choice, digitally advanced local media context.

The integrated value creation model that I propose in this dissertation demonstrates how value creation in a local newspaper context entails a complex balancing of societal, business and audience interests, which may be overlapping as well as conflicting. Following this, I argue that a one-dimensional focus on the conflict and incommensurability of normative and business value perspectives that undergirds much journalism research fails to capture the interplay between local media businesses and societal interests. I do not disagree with the rich research tradition describing this conflict (e.g. Baker, 2001; McManus, 1994; Picard, 2010; Sjøvaag, 2019) but based on the insights from this dissertation, I maintain that this is not the only narrative that fits the complex relationship between media's economic interests and the democratic interests of the broader society. Moving forward, local journalism research will benefit from a more nuanced approach where media business interests as well as audiences' gratification interests are integrated - not only as threats to journalism's role in local democracies, but as its preconditions. To this end, the integrated value creation model could serve as a productive analytical framework.

8.3 Implications for local newspaper businesses

For the local newspaper industry, my findings point to challenges concerning how local newspapers aim to create and capture value. I posit that the gaps between the value proposed and the value perceived among certain audience segments are a call to action for local newspapers. When younger audiences with low willingness to pay for local news describe how local newspapers fail to meet their needs and wants and how they experience local news as too small and unengaging, they mainly criticize the "other social responsibility" of local newspapers described above. Their dissatisfaction appears to concern the community glue function of local newspapers. In many ways, this "smallness" of local news represents some of the uniqueness of these media. Moving away from this profile seems misguided, particularly as local newspapers' way of covering local life still attracts large numbers of subscribers. However, the lack of interest and engagement in the local newspaper that the younger audiences exhibit reminds us that the production of locality that Buchanan (2009) describes is now assessed against the richness of news, information and entertainment available online. This increase demands on presentation formats as well as content and encourages local newspapers to improve the relevance of their journalistic product particularly for younger audiences.

The youth problem that I point to in my research may not be an immediate problem for local newspaper organization's value capture in the present situation, where the implementation of

paywalls is seen to retain subscribers. However, to build a sustainable business for the years to come, local newspapers need to recruit substantial numbers of new, young subscribers, particularly people in their early adulthood. I posit, based on the findings in this dissertation, that such revitalization of the subscriber base requires a better understanding of the needs and wants of these people. Without increased relevance to younger people, local newspapers will not be able to recruit them as readers, let alone as subscribers. The research that I have presented shows how local newspapers have exacerbated their youth problem by requiring young people to pay to access their content. Moving forward, I posit that the youth problem is the main threat to the sustainability of local newspapers and thus to the provision of local journalism in society.

8.4 Implications for local media policy formulation

The special economic characteristics of the local journalism product remains a considerable challenge for local newspapers' user payment strategies. Even in a Norwegian context, where user payment for news online is more common than in other countries (Newman et al., 2019), it is highly questionable if people will be willing, let alone able to bear the cost of journalistic production to sustain the local newspaper business. In the 2019 White Paper on Media policy, small local newspapers' key role as local democracy infrastructure is accentuated and given additional prominence with increased support schemes (Solberg-Government, 2019). Facilitating a structure of local media in the entire country and avoiding geographical "white spots" where journalistic surveillance is weak or absent have been included in the overall policy objectives for the governmental media subsidies. As noted previously, the underlying premise for these arrangements is that supporting diversity in media supply will stimulate use.

One of the central arguments made in this dissertation is that local newspapers' value for individuals and societies as seen through a social responsibility lens is primarily instrumental and related to use. In terms of local newspapers' contribution to an informed and educated public, to social interaction, engagement and participation in public life, these functions all involve the audience. Simply put, local newspapers must be used in order to fill these functions. Moreover, as discussed above, value is not delivered, but co-created. This too points to the active involvement of the audience in news consumption for local newspapers to fill social responsibility functions. Since the use of local journalism is perceived to benefit citizens as well as society, the number of people who use local journalism should arguably also be maximized. This dissertation has revealed tendencies towards the opposite. It has demonstrated how audiences' gratification perspective on local newspapers' value, combined

with the value capture strategies among local newspapers, create gaps in the value flow between audiences, newspapers and society.

These mechanisms encourage critical assessment of the assumption that supply alone stimulates actual use of local journalism in a high-choice media environment. Or more precisely, if it is sufficient to achieve policy objectives. Specifically, I posit that we are challenged to reflect on the implications of local newspaper paywalls for media policy and the meaning of facilitating content with the goal of stimulating diversity in use in a media abundant media landscape. My research has not explicitly operationalized and measured diversity in use, and so I will be careful not to draw any conclusions about the diversity of people's media diets based on my material. However, the shift in news consumption upon the introduction of paywalls revealed in the findings presented here, strongly suggests that the role of local newspapers as contributors to a diverse media diet is weakened by paywalls.

If the media policy goal is not to secure *any* diversity in use, but a *certain* diversity in use that local newspapers contribute to, then the findings encourage a discussion of how such diversity can be achieved in a digitally advanced high-choice media landscape where paywalls have become the norm in local newspapers. To this end, I posit that the integrated value creation model proposed in this dissertation can serve as a useful framework for analysis. It encourages an open-minded approach to timely and targeted support measures that will support the value flows and reduce the value flow gaps between society, local newspapers and audiences.

8.5 Research contributions

My main objective in this dissertation has been to provide an understanding of the supply and demand dynamics that affect local newspapers' value for society. This has encouraged empirical studies that offer several new insights. One such contribution is the mapping of break and acceleration strategies among local newspapers aiming to secure their subscription base while simultaneously innovating their advertising business by means of paywalls (Article1). This offers a nuanced understanding of what these newspapers aim to achieve and the implications this has for their value proposition in their two-sided market.

Another empirical contribution is the audience data that I have collected and analyzed which in sum provide a detailed picture of how people perceive the value that local newspapers propose. To the best of my knowledge, the double analytical lens of combining value

proposition data and value perception data has not been applied in previous research on local journalism (Article 4).

Thirdly, by applying a broad understanding of local news and information media, this dissertation has provided new insights on the audiences' use of and experience with the local newspaper product compared to other sources of news and information. This has revealed that social media platforms such as Facebook have gained a central position as news and information sources in the locality. However, in terms of serving as resources for people's local public life by providing certain democratic experiences, local newspapers, particularly the fast-declining printed newspaper, have a much stronger performance (Article 3).

Theoretically, I have extended the understanding of local newspapers' value creation by proposing an analytical model that captures how local newspapers' value for society is influenced by the value creation and value perception dynamics between local newspaper organizations and audiences. By developing the integrated value creation model, this dissertation offers a framework, which connects theory on local newspapers' social responsibility with business model and uses and gratification perspectives. I posit that the model encourages a more nuanced analysis of the complex dynamics that affect local newspapers' value for society by capturing value flows and value flow gaps that occur in the intersection between social responsibility, business and gratification perspectives on value. Moreover, it captures mechanisms that influence local newspapers' value capture potential and thus their sustainability.

Moreover, the dissertation makes theoretical contributions on the article level. One is the development of the societal worthwhileness concept presented in Article 2, which encompasses media users' incorporation of collective interests in their value assessment of news media. This broadens our understanding of the public goods and merit goods concepts in relation to media. Another theoretical contribution on the article level is the development of the practice and perception dimensions of mediated public connection in Article 3, which bridges the research on mediated public connection with the audience fragmentation literature.

Finally, with regard to methodology this dissertation offers new methods for exploring value creation dynamics. In Article 4, my co-author Mona Solvoll and I propose a mixed method approach whereby qualitative data from in-depth interviews with media managers is integrated with quantitative audience data. This way of examining supply and demand

dynamics is new to the field of local journalism studies. The analytical model that describes how common key elements of paywall value propositions extracted from the thick descriptions in the qualitative material were merged with variables capturing audiences' value perception in the quantitative material provides a structuring framework for similar studies in the future.

Another contribution is the methodology for examining individual and societal worthwhileness proposed in Article 2. Inspired by Q sorting and media landscape mapping methods, I developed a media card sorting exercise that captures informants' valuation of different media types – for them personally and for society. This method effectively visualizes individual and societal worthwhileness of local news and information sources.

A third methodology contribution is made in Article 3 where I propose a method for analysis of mediated public connection based on network analysis. Supplementing previous studies using a media repertoire approach, I offer a way of combining a network analysis method used in audience fragmentation studies with survey data on media use and democratic experiences with media among local audiences. This approach enables us to gauge the macro level patterns of local news and information consumption, while simultaneously capturing the democratic role that different media play in the lives of local people.

Finally, in Article 5, my co-authors, Aske Kammer and Mona Solvoll, and I offer a framework for comparative studies of online traffic development to local newspapers. By gauging how the number of unique visitors and pageviews as well as the pageview/unique visitor ratio develop upon the introduction of paywalls, our approach allows a combined breadth and depth analysis of consumption combined with a temporal dimension. This method based on official audience tracking data can be expanded to other media systems and user payment models.

8.6 Suggestions for future research

This dissertation has applied a multidisciplinary approach to value creation in relation to local newspapers. In the process of moving between and trying to bridge different research territories, local journalism research has remained my “home turf” throughout the dissertation. It has been my sincere aspiration to contribute to the advancement of this particular sub-field of journalism research and this is where I will focus my recommendations for future research.

As described in the theory section, value creation in relation to local newspapers occurs in a complex network of actors with different interests. My focus has been on the local newspaper

and audience interplay. I encourage future research to extend the examination of local newspapers' value creation to a broader set of stakeholders, particularly in relation to the changing value capture strategies in local newspapers. One such group is local politicians. Findings in this dissertation on audiences' detachment from the local newspapers upon the introduction of paywalls, combined with previous research demonstrating the key role of local newspapers in connecting local politicians with their constituency, encourage us to ask if paywalls have had any consequences for this relationship. Another group of interest is journalists in local newspapers. The dissertation's findings on how local newspapers differentiated between high value and low value journalism and aimed to harness user payment as well as reach, call for an examination of how this balancing act affects the work in the newsroom. This is particularly relevant considering previous research demonstrating the impact of user data on newsroom priorities.

A third group is advertisers. The way this dissertation has revealed a declining capacity among local newspapers to attract younger audiences begs the question: how do advertisers perceive the value of local newspapers? Against research demonstrating the increasing dominance of Facebook and Google as advertising platforms, future research is encouraged to examine how local advertisers assess the benefits of local newspapers' value proposition. This group is rarely included as informants in journalism research. However, as demonstrated in this dissertation, advertising remains an area of strategic importance for local newspapers and thus for the funding of local journalism.

By asking advertisers about their value perception in relation to local newspapers and by examining their investment in local newspaper advertising, future research can enrich the integrated value creation model and populate the value flow from advertisers to local newspapers with more empirical data, thus "adding value" to the value creation model. Other areas where the model encourages further examination is the value flow from society to local newspapers. The nature of this flow is described in policy documents outlining media policy objectives and support measures. However, the impact of such favorable value creation conditions on local news production is largely unknown. A comparative study exploring how different media systems and support measures condition local newspapers' production of local journalism could add valuable insight to our understanding of this value flow and expand the research perspective on local newspapers' value creation from the national to the international level.

Moreover, the findings on the value flow gap between local newspaper organizations and audiences resulting from misalignments of value proposition and value perceptions invite further research into the journalistic content that audiences actually consume. What reading patterns can be identified for local journalism online? Which stories stimulate different audiences to get involved with local journalism? And which ones do not? Future research is also needed to determine if the migration of audiences away from local newspapers following the change in their value capture persists in a longer-term perspective. Will audiences return to local newspapers, as they get more accustomed to paying for online news? Will they substitute local newspapers with free of charge public service media? Will they increasingly shift their attention to other types of content and platforms? I call upon future research to apply quantitative as well as qualitative methods to address such questions regarding the relationship between audiences and local news.

The Norwegian case offers insight into the dynamics of supply and demand in a diverse media landscape with an abundance of news and information sources. Findings from this critical case challenge the assumption that by securing the provision of local newspapers, the journalism they offer will be consumed, thus fulfilling social responsibility functions for all people equally. However, more comparative research is required to grasp the impact of media abundance on the consumption of local journalism. Even though diversity in supply might not be enough to stimulate consumption of the local newspaper product, we cannot conclude that such diversity does not have a positive effect on consumption. I strongly encourage future studies to examine this connection by comparing how local newspapers' value creation plays out in different media systems.

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PART II: EMPIRICAL ARTICLES



Reinventing the business model for local newspapers by building walls

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Understanding the relationship people in their early adulthood have to small-town news and paywalls

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Abstract

Within the context of a high-choice, digital media environment, this study explores how people in their early adulthood perceive the value of news from the small town where they reside and their attitude towards paying for it. Based on qualitative data from in-depth interviews and a media landscape sorting exercise, the study demonstrates how those willing and unwilling to pay differ in terms of lived and anticipated value experiences with small-town newspapers. The study posits that there is a misalignment, for them personally and for the local community, with regard to their perception of small-town news media's value. What might not be important for them as individuals is nonetheless experienced as important for the society they live in. The study expands on studies of perceived worthwhileness of news media in a small-town context and introduces the concept of societal worthwhileness to encompass media users' incorporation of collective interests in their value assessment of news media.

Keywords

Audiences, local journalism, paywalls, small-town news, willingness to pay, worthwhileness of news media

Introduction

The digital transformation of local newspaper businesses and their relationship to their small-town audiences have so far been mainly off the radar in journalism research. However, as demonstrated by Nielsen (2015a), small-town newspapers are keystone

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media, which play important roles in local democracies. They are part of the press structure's local media foundation that shape and support the local public sphere and serve as mediators of local identity while providing a sense of belonging (e.g. Hess and Waller, 2017; Nielsen, 2015b; Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). As such they represent an essential component of local democracy. This democratic infrastructure is under threat as the business model upholding it is crumbling due to declining print readership, advertising and subscriptions. As a result, the future of local journalism can no longer be taken for granted (Nielsen, 2015b). In an attempt to secure print revenue and generate new online revenue, small-town newspapers have implemented paywalls (Olsen and Solvoll, 2018b) and the funding of small-town journalism is increasingly dependent on a paying readership.

The implementation of paywalls takes place in a context of unparalleled news and information abundance where free content providers ranging from *Facebook* and municipal webpages to government-funded public service players are competing for the audience's attention (Nygren, 2019). The assumption underpinning local newspaper's paywalls is that local journalism is so valuable that people are willing to pay for it (Olsen and Solvoll, 2018a). Such belief in the value of 'the local' belongs to one of professional journalism's 'deepest mythologies' (Pauly and Eckert, 2002: 310). Several studies have supported this myth by demonstrating high interest in local news among audiences in the United States and the United Kingdom (Cisarova et al., 2018). However, interest in local news is unevenly distributed among countries (Newman et al., 2015) and the experiences from the American and British markets should be supplemented by insights from other media systems (Cisarova et al., 2018). Furthermore, audiences' relationships to sources of local news and information are dependent on demographic factors, particularly age (Rosenstiel et al., 2011), and the use of local newspapers varies considerably between generations with lower levels of use among younger people (Wadbring and Bergström, 2017). Although such insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of audiences' relationships to local journalism, we know little about the value of small-town journalism for individuals. The question of whether small-town news really matters to people living locally has not been addressed in the literature, which leaves an important aspect of local newspapers' sustainability unexplored. With the increasing reliance on user payment to fund local journalism, this question ultimately concerns the future of small-town newspapers and their role as civic institutions in local democracies. The purpose of the present study is to fill this gap by exploring how people in small towns relate to news and news providers in their locality. Extending uses and gratification literature on the perceived worthwhileness of news media concept (e.g. Schröder and Kobbernagel, 2010), this study makes a dual conceptual and methodological contribution. On one hand, it introduces a distinction between individual and societal worthwhileness of news media in a small-town context and explores how this relates to local news consumption and people's willingness to pay for small-town journalism. On the other hand, it proposes a methodology for examining individual and societal worthwhileness inspired by Q sorting and media landscape mapping methods. Furthermore, by zooming in on people in their late 20s to early 40s who are in early adulthood (Levinson, 1986) and living in a media-rich (Chaffee and Wilson, 1977) small-town environment, the study provides new knowledge about an age group which journalism studies have mainly overlooked. According to Levinson (1986), early adulthood is the era for pursuing professional

aspirations, establishing a niche in society and raising a family. As the strong connection between starting a family and starting a newspaper subscription has weakened with the increased consumption of news online (Høst and Vaage, 2010), the early adulthood segment represents a particular challenge for small-town newspapers aiming to build a digital subscription base for the future.

The article proceeds with a literature review of relevant research on small-town newspapers and the value of proximity, and on the worthwhileness of news media concept in uses and gratification research and its relationship with willingness to pay for local news. Following this, the methodology and the case market are described and results are subsequently presented before the discussion and conclusion of the article.

Small-town newspapers and the value of proximity

Despite its centrality in the media structure in countries worldwide, the locally based newspaper enterprise rooted in a small town is not clearly conceptualized in the literature. According to Lauterer's (2006) definition, such operations fall into the category of 'community newspapers' described as largely commercial ventures with circulations below 50,000, published daily to biweekly and serving people who live together in a distinct geographical space with a clear local-first emphasis on news (p. 1). However, as noted by Hess and Waller (2014), the term 'community' in relation to newspapers and journalism has become increasingly complex with the incorporation of highly diverse phenomena, such as alternative, independent underground and radical media challenging mainstream media, as well as journalists who share a strong connectedness to their audiences and processes of increased citizen empowerment and social development. Furthermore, the use of the term 'community' in relation to media serving a fixed geographic territory and people living there, is contested in the literature, as described by Hess (2013): 'while individuals may engage in similar communication channels or reside in a similar geographic area, it does not necessarily make them part of the same community' (p. 50). As an alternative to the notion of community, Hess offers the concept of 'geo-social' to define news outlets 'that have a solid connection to geographic territory while acknowledging the wider social space in which they play a role' (p. 49). Embedded in 'sense of place', the geo-social concept links audiences to people and places without assuming shared values or common interest between them or even assuming that they reside in the same area. Instead, it acknowledges that one's connection or identification with the geographical area that a newspaper serves is individual and unique. Drawing on this, the present study defines small-town newspapers as geo-social news outlets with a geographic connection to a town or small city.

Small-town newspapers' connection to this geographic territory is manifest in their selection and presentation of content. Buchanan (2009) describes this as a process of producing locality, such as subjects and spatial location: Newspapers' notices and stories of rites of passage – births, deaths, marriages – play an important part in producing local subjects, whereas news and debates about roads, buildings, housing, commercial development, cultural amenities and so on, aid the spatial production of locality. Whether small-town newspapers matter to their audiences or not depends on the audiences' interest in this production of locality and to what extent the production of locality is

inimitable and non-substitutable as described by Goyanes (2015). The newspapers' value is based on the daily interpretation of local realities and on the knowledge and understanding of a shared message and language that feel close and are irreplaceable. As such, these newspapers propose value of proximity as their core offering to their audiences (Ibid). Whereas some research maintains that proximity remains fundamental in defining news value and news interest among people (Mersey, 2009; Schaudt and Carpenter, 2009) and stimulates a growing number of hyperlocal media initiatives, other contributions suggest that proximity in local news is not as important to audiences as they are to journalists. Moreover, that the availability of information from all over the world has devaluated the relevance of proximity with decreasing interest in 'news close to home' among audiences (Armstrong et al., 2015: 94).

The worthwhileness of local news media and audiences' willingness to pay

The value of proximity for the audiences of small-town newspapers links to what Schröder and colleagues (e.g. Schröder, 2015; Schröder and Kobbernagel, 2010; Schröder and Larsen, 2010) have conceptualized as the perceived worthwhileness of news media for the individual. In their definition, such worthwhileness denotes individuals' subjective assessment of whether a medium is worth their while or not. Without ignoring the habitual aspect of media use, the authors describe a process of relatively rational calculation of worthwhileness among individual media users: from becoming aware of a medium through trial consumption and intermittent use, to ending up on their list of routines (Schröder and Kobbernagel, 2010). The factors that constitute a news medium's perceived worthwhileness include the subjective experienced material as well as situational and functional circumstances that characterize the medium's practice of use (Schröder and Larsen, 2010). The individual's assessment of worthwhileness weighs the resources required to use a particular medium, such as time and money, against the benefits of using it. One such key benefit is what Couldry et al. (2007) have defined as mediated public connection, referring to a medium's ability to deliver content which satisfies users' needs as citizen-members of the democratic order as well as participants in cultural and social networks (Schröder and Larsen, 2010). The factors in the 'worthwhileness equation' determine 'why some news media and not others are chosen to become parts of an individual's news media repertoire' (Schröder, 2015: 63). This cost versus benefits perspective connects perceived worthwhileness of news media with the field of customer perceived value research. In this tradition, customer value is a subjective assessment of the utility of a product or service based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988: 14). For customers to perceive an offering to be of positive value, benefits have to outweigh undesired consequences, such as monetary and non-monetary costs. Customers determine an offering to be of superior value by comparing it to competing offerings, expectations or past experiences (Kumar and Reinartz, 2016).

The concept of perceived worthwhileness is related to people's willingness to pay for news due to the fact that price constitutes an important factor in the judgement of worthwhileness (Kammer et al., 2015). Findings from the paywall literature demonstrate how newspapers tend to paywall their most valuable content to stimulate user payment

(Myllylahti, 2017; Sjøvaag, 2016). Highly specialized content such as local news may stand a better chance as a payable online product than uniform, general, national and international news (Goyanes, 2015). As people feel a personal connection to local topics from their hometown, willingness to pay may increase (Himma-Kadakas and Kouts, 2015). However, previous paywall research has found limited paying intent for local newspapers online (Chyi, 2012) particularly among younger people (Goyanes, 2015) who are more likely to reduce their consumption of local news due to paywalls (Chiou and Tucker, 2013; Olsen and Solvoll, 2018a). In an international study of small and large newspapers, Myllylahti (2014) concludes that paywalls do not offer a viable business model in the short term.

Local journalism is often categorized as a public good: It is a non-rivalrous, non-excludable product, which is expensive to produce, provides little financial return, and is under-appreciated by consumers. However, it engenders numerous benefits for local democracy (Ali, 2016) such as keeping the public informed, providing an arena for local debate and contributing to a sense of belonging (e.g. Kösters and Jandura, 2017; Nielsen, 2015b; Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). According to Ali (2016), audiences' undervaluation of local news is one of the main reasons for the present crisis that local journalism is experiencing. He posits that due to its societal value local journalism should be provided regardless of market demand. As such it is a 'merit good' (p.107). Whether audiences consider the societal value of journalism or not when making decisions on paying for news is unclear. Chen and Thorson (2019) found that the perceived journalistic and societal value of journalism did not lead people to pay for news. On the other hand, Cook and Attari (2012) found that the prospect of a news provider going bankrupt had a positive effect on audiences' willingness to pay, and Swart et al. (2017) demonstrate how paying for news was considered a 'civic obligation' among people – a support their informants felt compelled to provide because the place they lived in 'deserves its own newspaper' (p. 1355). Such motivation suggests that customer perceived value, in this case worthwhileness of news media, is not only self-oriented but also other-oriented as described by Holbrook (1994).

The present study addresses the ambiguity identified in the research literature regarding the perceived value of news from the geographically near. It investigates how people in their early adulthood assess the worthwhileness of local newspapers: the value of its 'production of locality', its inimitable and non-substitutable character and its relative importance for them as individuals and for the small-town society that they reside in. Ultimately, the study asks whether small-town news matters to people in early adulthood and whether they are willing to pay for it.

Method

The study was conducted in Fredrikstad in Norway, a digitally advanced country with more than 220 newspapers spread all over the country (Østbye, 2019). Fredrikstad has a population of 81,000 and covers 110.4 square miles in the southeastern part of Norway. In terms of demography, geography, economy and local governance, Fredrikstad has some city characteristics but remains a small town 'at heart' with a distinct geographically rooted identity. The case market has a wide variety of digitally advanced and

traditionally oriented media outlets making it a media-rich (Chaffee and Wilson, 1977) environment. Its largest newspaper, *Fredriksstad Blad*, has a circulation of 22,127 (Norwegian Media Business' Association/Medianorway, 2019) and a forward-leaning digital strategy. The second largest newspaper, *Demokraten*, has a circulation of 3,849. It receives direct governmental support as part of the country's system for press subsidies (The Norwegian Media Authority, 2018). Both newspapers have online paywalls. *NRK Østfold*, the regional public service broadcaster (PSB), has its headquarters in Fredrikstad. The case market also has a wide variety of digital- born media, ranging from municipal webpages to local businesses and civil society representatives with their own communication channels. The media richness of the case market is not generalizable to other small-town contexts but provides an alternative to studies of emerging local news deserts (e.g. Abernathy, 2018) which have caused scholarly and industry concern. The chosen case market offers a unique insight into the attitude and behaviour of those living in a media-rich environment with regard to small-town news.

The study combined in-depth interviews and a media landscape sorting exercise with 20 informants aged 26 to 44 living in or just outside Fredrikstad. They were recruited through interpersonal contacts, referrals and invitations in local Facebook groups. A quota-sampling strategy was applied to secure a balanced mix of subscribers and non-subscribers of the small town's newspapers. The resulting non-random sample consisted of 8 men and 12 women with high levels of education and a homogeneous geographical background.¹ The size and composition of the sample is a limitation of the study that should not be ignored in the interpretation of findings. Despite being limited in number and thus not generalizable, the informants' in-depth qualitative accounts offer constructive insights that are useful for developing theory. Data were collected in February and March of 2018. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour and took place at the premises of an educational institution in Fredrikstad. An initial day-in-the-life-interview was conducted where informants were asked to describe their media consumption during an average day. This prepared them to talk about the value of keeping informed about the area where they lived and their relationship to various sources of local news and information. After the interviews, the informants were asked to arrange a stack of cards with the names of local media sources along a continuum from 'important to me' to 'not important to me'. This media landscape interview technique described by Tammi (2016) is inspired by the Q sorting applied in research by Schröder and colleagues (e.g. Schröder and Kobbarnagel, 2010) but deviates from this method by allowing the participants to freely define (a) the number of cards in the sorting based on the media they are familiar with and (b) how to position the cards along the continuum. As the purpose of the sorting was not to generate data for statistical factor analysis, these adjustments were deemed suitable to overcome the limitations of Q sorting described by Schröder and Kobbarnagel (2016) such as forcing informants to evaluate media they do not know or use. After the cards had been arranged based on their relative importance for the individual, the counterpoints of the continuum were changed to 'important to local democracy' and 'not important to local democracy' and the informants were asked to arrange the media cards again with the interests of their small-town society in mind. The aim of this exercise was to visually reflect the informants' valorization of different media sources and facilitate a comparison of self-oriented versus other-oriented worthwhileness of the media sources based on the assessment of importance.

The data analysis was conducted in two phases: First, using in vivo coding, transcripts of the standardized, open-ended interviews were analysed to capture the essence of the informants' relationship to different news and information sources in the locality. The analysis was structured around four topics: the value of the proximity of small-town news, the role of small-town newspapers for the individual, the inimitable and non-substitutable character of small-town news and willingness to pay for small-town newspapers. Second, photographs of each informant's media landscapes were analysed pairwise to capture differences and similarities between the two sortings. Using Excel spreadsheets, the media cards from the photographs were presented as colour coded cells and positioned section-wise: important media to the right, unimportant to the left and neither important nor unimportant in the middle. Transcripts of the informants' reflections during and after the sorting aided the interpretation of the visualizations.

Findings from interviews

The interviews demonstrated the centrality of market-leading *Fredriksstad Blad* and the peripheral role of the number two newspaper, *Demokraten*, for the informants. Small-town newspaper thus refers to *Fredriksstad Blad* in the following section. With regard to media platforms, informants were digitally oriented. With few exceptions, they rarely consulted the printed local newspaper. The interviews further revealed that a divide between subscribers and non-subscribers did not fully capture the nuances in subscription relationships among the informants. Some of those who considered themselves to be subscribers to the small-town newspaper did not pay for a subscription. Instead, they used a subscription paid for by somebody else, mostly their parents, to access paywalled content. Based on this, two groups emerged from the material: those *willing to pay*, who paid for a subscription themselves or indicated that they would do so if their free access was terminated, and those *unwilling to pay*, who did not subscribe or indicated that they were unlikely to do so without a free access option. In both groups, there was support for the general principle of paying for online news and the price rarely surfaced as an obstacle to subscription. However, their views diverged on the value of proximity of small-town news and on the role of the small-town newspaper in the informants' daily lives, even though both groups recognized the inimitable and non-substitutable character of the small-town newspaper.

The value of proximity

The willing to pay informants described small-town news as important because it made them feel updated on what was going on in town and enabled them to participate in local civic life: 'You have to keep updated on what is happening around you in the local community. If you're not informed and don't care, you are unable to influence others' (Female, 36). Following the news and local debate was described as important for the informants' sense of belonging; reading about local people and positive development in the locality was fuel for local patriotism: 'It's important because I'm involved in this town. It's important to be included, to know what people talk about, to take part in the conversation' (Female, 41). Small-town news was described as relevant because it

concerned the everyday lives of the informants – their children’s school and activities, their work, their interest in culture, sports, politics and so on. The link between family life and small-town news played a key role: ‘With little children your focus is on family life and you’re more concerned about the town because this is where we live our lives’ (Female, 39).

Contrasting this, the unwilling to pay informants described small-town news as less important. A recurring topic in their account of small-town news was its ‘smallness’ and its tendency to overemphasize insignificant matters. Even though the value of news from the locality was not ignored by this group, the newspaper’s chronicle of small-town life was described as unengaging and the news values guiding the journalists’ selection of news stories criticized and ridiculed: ‘Some time ago, the front page of the local newspaper read, “The apple tree in Mrs. Hansen’s garden fell over during the storm last night” and I thought: “Is this their main story? With everything that is going on in the world, this is what *Fredriksstad Blad* chose to write about?” That was it for me’ (Male, 35).

The data material revealed a sense of detachment from small-town news in this group, sometimes due to a stronger personal interest in topics and areas beyond the scope of the small-town newspaper, such as national and international matters: ‘I don’t think *Fredriksstad Blad* writes much about the topics that I’m interested in, like feminism, and education and professional life – unless it’s about local jobs and businesses. I’m more interested in the general trends’ (Female, 33). Such preferences motivated use of national and international media, rather than local. Others did not feel connected to the local community and expressed little interest in local news. This was sometimes associated with a sense of guilt: ‘As a citizen you’re supposed to read newspapers and be well informed, and I’m not. I don’t reveal that to others’ (Female, 44).

The inimitable and non-substitutable character of the small-town newspaper

When discussing sources of local information that could potentially replace the small-town newspaper, both those willing and unwilling to pay described the uniqueness and superiority of the small-town newspaper. Three alternatives were discussed as potential substitutes: *Facebook*, *NRK Østfold* (PSB) and the municipal webpages. Compared to the small-town newspaper, *Facebook* was mainly described as chaotic and unreliable. Relying on *Facebook* for news from the locality would mean missing out on things: ‘It’s far too messy for that kind of use. News updates – OK. Posting of articles – fine. But it’s not a replacement for a news site where you can find everything in one place’ (Female, 36). This emphasis on the overview and order in the small-town newspaper was a recurring example of its superiority and uniqueness in the informants’ accounts, along with breadth of coverage and balanced presentation of different views. Other reasons why the informants regarded the small-town newspaper as superior included *Facebook*’s lack of quality control, the risk of one-sided, opinionated information and the impact of commercial interest in the algorithmic display of news on the social media platform.

With regard to the news service from *NRK Østfold*, the local PSB provider, this was also described as inferior compared to the small-town newspaper. *NRK Østfold* was portrayed as more distant, superficial and lacking the special local feel of the small-town

newspaper due to its focus on regional rather than hyperlocal news: ‘I don’t think they cover local matters that much. There are more small stories in the newspaper because NRK is the whole region and *Fredriksstad Blad* is only this town’ (Female, 41).

Adding to this picture, the informants made a clear distinction between the news provided by the small-town newspaper and the information on municipal webpages. Both in terms of user-friendliness (‘it’s terrible to navigate’) and news value (‘they’re not very updated’), the informants described municipal webpages as inferior to the newspaper: ‘It’s more information. Not news, really. It’s updates about practicalities, like the closing of roads, opening hours in the local swimming pool. I don’t think of that as news’ (Female, 41). The municipality’s information was also described as inferior in terms of depth and critical distance: ‘They don’t write more than they feel necessary and they avoid critical questions. So you’ll have to consult the newspaper to get the full picture’ (Male, 28).

The role of the small-town newspaper in the daily life

Despite the uniqueness and superiority of small-town newspapers described by informants in both groups, their view on its indispensability for them personally differed, particularly with regard to the paywalled content. Among the willing to pay informants, reading the small-town newspaper was well integrated in their daily routines as a ‘first thing in the morning’ habit or a checking pattern throughout the day – or both: ‘The first thing I do in the morning is to check *Fredriksstad Blad* online. And *VG*. During the course of the day I check social media and news media, mainly *Fredriksstad Blad*, *VG* and *Dagbladet*’ (Male, 27).² For this group, not having full access to the small-town newspaper was not an option. They described how that would have made them feel deprived, alienated and frustrated: ‘I would have been pretty frustrated because I couldn’t access a lot of content. Not being able to read local news will make you feel excluded from the community, I think’ (Female, 39). Some of these informants described how the indispensability of small-town newspapers exceeded the personal realm. Local news was regarded as vital for the town and ‘something one ought to support’ (Female, 26).

Among the informants who were unwilling to pay, consumption was less routinized and thorough. Scanning headlines and reading stories that did not require a subscription were described as sufficient: ‘You get an impression of what the story is about based on the headline and photo. If there is something that catches your interest, you’re always able to dig around on the Internet to find out more’ (Male, 34). The news sharing on social media and the general abundance of information made paywalled local content dispensable, according to this group: ‘Think about it – how much do you really need to know about this town? What you need, you’ll find out, at least if you’re using social media’ (Female, 44). Even though the value of small-town newspapers was not altogether disregarded, it was described as something ‘nice to have’, rather than ‘need to have’:

‘I think you can operate perfectly well as an inhabitant of Fredrikstad without the local newspaper. It definitely gives us something, but it’s not something we *must* have. We don’t need it in order to navigate, as we get what we need on other platforms – or I ask my mum’ (Female, 33).

Findings from media card sorting

The informants' sorting of media sources according to importance for them individually compared to importance for local democracy revealed that the local democracy concept was challenging and ambiguous. Some informants approached it as the 'political system' in their town, others treated it as a synonym for 'people living locally'. In both cases, local democracy referred to collective interests rather than individual. This commonality guided the analysis of the card sorting, which identified two main patterns of shifting perceptions of worthwhileness when the perspective was altered from the individual to the collective: *the increased worthwhileness of newspapers and other legacy media* and *the ambiguous worthwhileness of social media*. These patterns were manifest both among those willing and unwilling to pay for small-town news. Underpinning the patterns were a set of motivations expressed in the informants' reflections and explanations of their card sorting. These motivations were identified as societal worthwhileness factors as they describe other-oriented benefits of the media sources rather than self-oriented benefits.

The increased worthwhileness of legacy media

This shift entailed the increased importance of newspapers as well as PSB media. This is displayed in the example in Figure 1. This visualization of the card sorting of a female, 44-year-old informant belonging to the 'unwilling to pay' group exhibits how the number of newspapers and other legacy media sources swelled and their position changed from low and medium to high importance as the perspective was altered from individual to collective interests.

These changes were partly motivated by a *diversity factor*. Both informants willing and unwilling to pay for small-town news expressed the benefits of a diverse local media environment accommodating a wide variety of preferences in terms of platforms and brands. This appreciation of media diversity exceeded personal interests. As described by one informant regarding the PSB radio and TV offering, 'Even though I personally don't relate to it, I think it's important for those who like radio and TV' (Male, 27). Such rationale was related to age and the media preferences of older people in the locality: 'We have an older population to cater to. I know that many elderly people use the printed edition of *Fredriksstad Blad*, so I think it is just as important as the online edition for the local community' (Female, 29). Being able to choose between alternative media sources in a diverse media context and benefitting from competition in the local media market, also played a part in the informant's assessment: 'Competition between the media is good. Without it, the monopolists can do whatever they like, and we don't want that' (Male, 28).

A key motivation for the increased importance of newspapers was a *democratic monitor factor*, related to critical journalism, which holds those in power accountable and illuminates important societal issues. One of the informants described a specific investigative story on municipal mismanagement as an example of legacy media's watchdog role and the importance of newspapers for local democracy: 'Newspapers, regardless of whether they're print or digital, have a unique role in realizing democratic principles and

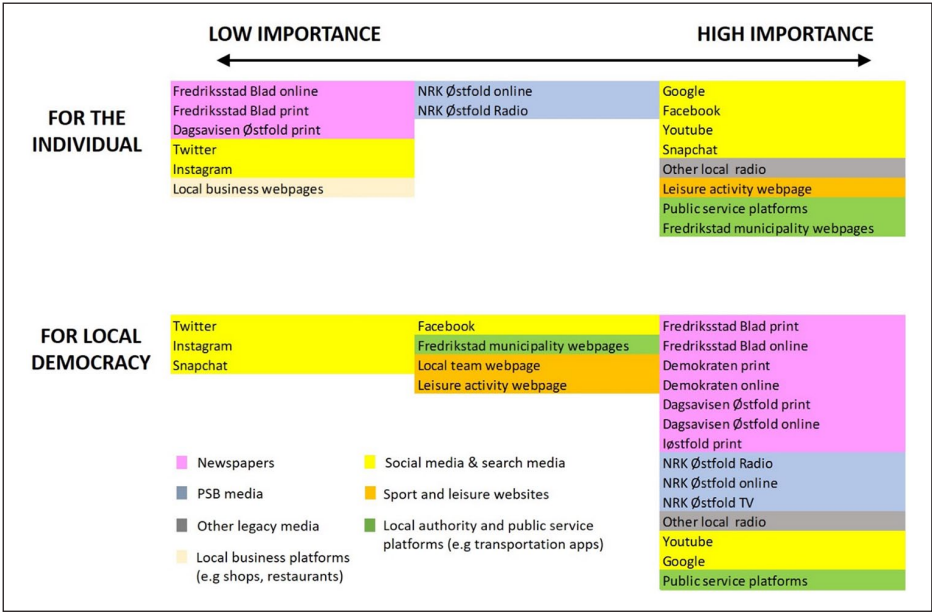


Figure 1. Increased worthwhileness of legacy media, example of media card sorting based on high and low importance for the individual and for local democracy.

making critical voices heard. Without local media, this story would not have been exposed’ (Female, 36). Critical and balanced information concerning local matters also motivated the increased importance of the number two newspaper as it represented an ‘alternative voice’. However, its actual impact was questioned: ‘It depends on the number of readers. There is no point in shouting if nobody is listening’ (Female, 44).

Finally, the increased importance of newspapers was motivated by a *meeting place factor*. Both among those willing and unwilling to pay for local news, the social glue function of the small-town newspaper was appreciated and emphasized when considering the interests of local democracy: ‘A town like ours definitely needs a local newspaper. People living here should have that offering. Everything identity-building, like a local newspaper, is super important’ (Female, 33). This was grounded in a common reference point rationale securing that ‘everybody reads the same news’ (Female, 26) as well as the need for a shared arena ‘where many people express their views and where local debates take place’ (Male, 27). Again, such collective benefits offered by the local newspaper in particular were identified as values beyond the immediate self-interests of the individual.

The ambiguous worthwhileness of social media

Whereas some of the informants clearly prioritized newspapers and PSB media over social media when assessing importance for local democracy, others maintained that

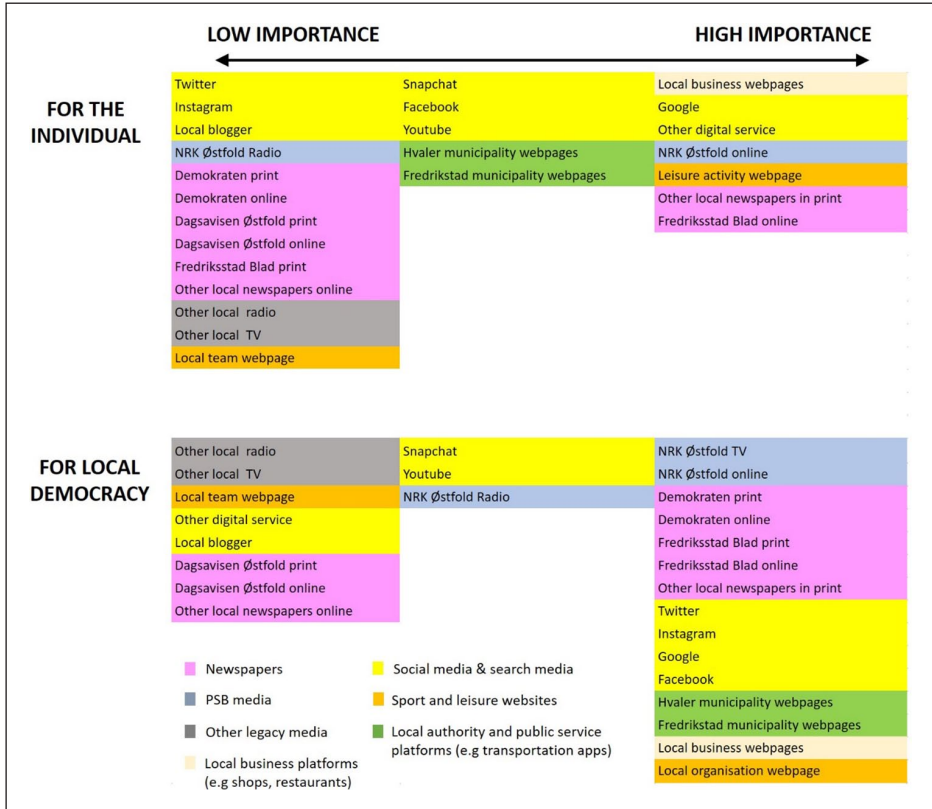


Figure 2. Increased worthwhileness of social media, example of media card sorting based on high and low importance for the individual and for local democracy.

social media platforms gained importance when their perspective shifted from the individual to the collective. This demonstrates the informants’ ambiguity regarding the democratic value of social media in the small-town context. The motivation for disregarding social media’s importance was mainly these platforms’ disability to fulfil legacy media’s information role in society, a concern voiced both among those willing and unwilling to pay for small-town news. As described by one of the informants regarding *Facebook*, ‘For local democracy it’s not important. It’s very subjective. It differs from one person to another, depending on what you follow and click on. It’s very arbitrary. And not very local’ (Male, 28). Other informants perceived social media as playing a significant role for the collective as displayed in the example in Figure 2 based on the sorting of a male, 35-year-old informant belonging to the ‘unwilling to pay’ group.

Here too the *diversity factor* and catering for the interests of others played an important role for the informants’ assessments: ‘With regard to local democracy, I have to take into account the sources used by others than myself. From that perspective *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *Facebook* become super important’ (Male, 44). Informants described how

social media added richness to local democracy by extending media diversity: 'I think a rich local democracy demands media richness. Of course, quality will vary, but I don't think you can be snobbish on behalf of local democracy, so everything should be included' (Female, 33). Both among those willing and unwilling to pay for local news, meeting the preferences of young people was a specific concern when assessing social media's importance for local democracy: 'Many young people use social media. If you want to reach them, you have to use platforms like *Facebook* and *Twitter*' (Male, 34). This emphasis on reaching different segments of the population represented an *information dissemination factor* whereby the informants associated social media with the benefit of an extended distribution system for news. As such, social media were regarded as 'important sources for local news by many people' (Female, 27) which, often in tandem with mobile phones, made local news 'accessible just by a click' (Male, 44). Another benefit related to accessibility was social media's participatory affordances. This *deliberative factor* also motivated the appreciation of social media's importance for local democracy. Social media were described as contributors to diversity by offering alternative and supplementary arenas for public discourse. 'For some people, being able to voice their opinion on *Facebook* and *Twitter* is important. So having this platform in local democracy is good, although it's not important for me personally' (Female, 41).

In sum, these shifts demonstrate how the informants regarded a diverse media landscape as important for local democracy. When taking the interests of the small town into consideration, they were concerned with meeting the needs of different user groups and providing opportunities for self-expression and participation as well as quality-controlled information from trustworthy sources that hold local authorities accountable while providing common points of reference in the local public sphere. Such collective benefits were appreciated both among those willing and unwilling to pay. The valorization of media diversity demonstrated societal worthwhileness factors that went beyond the personal value experience of each individual media user and the affordances of each individual media type.

Discussion and conclusion

For small-town newspapers, sustainability depends on their ability to deliver a product that their audiences care about. By implementing paywalls, small-town newspapers are putting the relationship with their audiences to the test. If, as suggested by Goyanes (2015) and Himma-Kadakas and Kouts (2015), local news is more easily monetized due to its unique value for local audiences, small-town newspapers are indeed well positioned to develop an online business based on user payment. By asking whether small-town news matters to people in their early adulthood and whether they are willing to pay for it, the present study demonstrates how the perceived value of small-town newspapers, conceptualized as their worthwhileness, was experienced very differently among audience members. In the midst of an unprecedented abundance of news and information, the informants evaluated the importance, relevance and indispensability of the small-town newspaper's content against the costs of consumption. For some, this worthwhileness 'equation' resulted in a favourable evaluation and willingness to pay. The small-town newspaper was well integrated in their daily routines and vital for their sense

of being informed and part of the local community. For others, the value of small-town news was regarded as low and not worth paying for. This was partly motivated by disapproval of the small-town newspaper's prioritization of news and thus its production of locality (Buchanan, 2009). The finding challenges Mersey's (2009) and Schaudt and Carpenter's (2009) argument that proximity remains essential for people's news interest, as well as Goyanes' (2015) and Himma-Kadakas and Kouts' (2015) optimism regarding willingness to pay for local news. Instead, the finding lends support to the idea that, at least for parts of the audience, interest in news close to home is decreasing as argued by Armstrong et al. (2015). In sum, the varying worthwhileness assessments demonstrate how value is individually determined by the media user.

The study shows how the availability and richness of news and information in the digital sphere devaluated the significance of small-town news among those unwilling to pay. It stimulated a sense of dispensability, even nonchalance with regard to paywalled small-town news. Interestingly, this disengagement contrasted with their view on small-town newspapers' inimitable and non-substitutable character. The analysis of both interview and media card sorting data displays how small-town newspapers were regarded as irreplaceable and valuable from a societal perspective both among those willing and unwilling to pay for it. This inconsistency reveals how perceived worthwhileness of news media exceeds the personal realm and, as noted by Holbrook (1994), how the individual's experience of value is not only self-oriented but also other-oriented. By introducing the distinction between individual and societal worthwhileness of news media and demonstrating a misalignment between the two in the small-town context, the present study exposes a complexity in people's relationship to local news and news sources hitherto unaccounted for in the literature. Extending the worthwhileness conceptualization in previous contributions by Schröder and colleagues (e.g. Schröder 2015; Schröder and Kobbarnagel, 2010, Schröder and Larsen, 2010), the study demonstrates how value of local news media cannot be reduced to the weighing of benefits and costs for the individual alone. Instead, the informants' appreciation of media diversity and the democratic role of small-town newspapers for the local community show that collective interests are also part of individuals' value perception. However, even if perceived worthwhileness of local news media exceeds personal interests and preferences, willingness to pay may not. This paradox supplements Ali's (2016) description of local journalism as a public and merit good. The gap between the perceived societal worthwhileness of small-town news and individuals' willingness to pay for it alludes to a certain 'taken for grantedness' with regard to small-town newspapers among some of the informants: Even if they do not pay for the newspaper, they want it around and expect it to fulfil democratic functions in the locality. This supports Chen and Thorsen's (2019) conclusion that societal value does not lead people to pay for news. Moreover, it moderates Swart et al.'s (2017) argument that paying for news is considered a 'civic obligation' among the audiences. The present study finds that such a sense of civic responsibility was unevenly distributed, and even if people felt it, they did not necessarily act upon it.

The study provides a deeper understanding of why paying intent for local news is limited (Chyi, 2012), particularly among younger people (Goyanes, 2015; Kammer et al., 2015; Olsen and Solvoll, 2018a). Findings add insights to previous research questioning the revenue potential of paywalls (Myllylahti, 2014) and suggest that turning

non-paying young adults into paying subscribers for the future is indeed a challenging task. In lieu of newspapers' increasing dependency on reader revenue, these findings give some cause for concern. People may be getting used to the idea of paywalls in their local online newspaper, and even support the idea of user payment, but small-town journalists and editors are challenged to explore what really creates value for their readers in order to stimulate willingness to pay. Furthermore, media academics as well as practitioners and policy makers are encouraged to explore ways of bridging the gap between people's perception of individual and societal worthwhileness of local news media as it has significant implications for the future funding of local journalism.

While this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the experience of small-town news and willingness to pay for it, it does have some limitations. As the discussion is based on qualitative data from one societal context, similar studies in other markets may yield different results and normative implications. Future research is encouraged to expand the present design to encompass other less media-rich markets and broader audience groups. Another challenge is to operationalize individual and societal worthwhileness dimensions for rigorous quantitative measurement and results that are generalizable. As such, the present study represents a starting point for illuminating people's relationship with small-town newspapers and the sustainability of these media in a global, digital context.

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Notes

1. Eight with a bachelor's degree or similar, eight with a master's degree or similar and four with no higher education. All but three were 'born and bred' in the Fredrikstad region. One was an Eastern European immigrant.
2. *Verdens Gang (VG)* and *Dagbladet* are national newspapers published both in print and online.

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Connecting People? Understanding Media's Role as Democratic Resources for People in Digitally Advanced Local Environments

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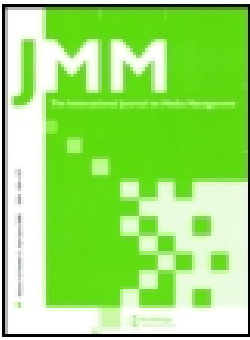
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Ragnhild Kristine Olsen & Mona Kristin Solvoll

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Paywalls' Impact on Local News Websites' Traffic and Their Civic and Business Implications

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