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Connecting to Local Publics Through Media: An in-Depth Study of Local Media Use and Public Connection

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ABSTRACT

The places where citizens live their everyday lives constitute an important yet under-researched context for public connection. This paper presents an in-depth analysis of how citizens' everyday media use entails connecting to local publics, and how an orientation towards local publics constitutes a component of public connection more broadly. Methodologically, the paper draws on recurring interviews and logging of the weekly media use and information practices of 24 citizens, thus combining insights on people's everyday media use with their experiences of media, platforms, and content. The findings highlight the importance of media for citizens' local public connection and the value of accounting for the local level in researching public connection, suggesting that the local level is more important to public connection than what is generally accounted for in the literature, which to some extent have devalued important aspects of ordinary citizens' public connection.


KEYWORDS

Audience research; local news; public connection; media use; local journalism; media users

Introduction

The cities, communities and municipalities where citizens live their everyday lives constitute an important context for public connection. Within this context, local newspapers have typically been highlighted as essential, expected to provide information on local issues and public affairs, connecting citizens with each other and with local authorities, and enabling citizens to participate in society (e.g., Costera Meijer 2010; Hess 2015; Jenkins and Nielsen 2020; Nielsen 2015a). However, in today's information rich media environment, citizens are offered a variety of platforms and sites to reach and local issues, and studies show that while local newspapers are experiencing decline, social media increasingly has become important sites to attain information on and participate in local issues (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Nygren 2019; Olsen 2020b). These shifts in local media ecologies and repertoires, raise questions about the role of media in terms of citizens' orientation towards,

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connection to and participation in local societal life (cf. Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). Many have raised concerns over the decline in local newspaper readership and its potentially negative consequences on citizens' sense of community (Mathews 2022), knowledge about local politics (Nielsen 2015a; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019), voter turnout (Rubado and Jennings 2020), and participation (Shaker 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019). Yet, some have also suggested that the democratic role of local newspapers may be exaggerated and other media and communication forms potentially serving equally important roles (Usher 2023).

Granted that the local level forms the everyday context for citizens' lives and is an arena for local government and politics, the local level continues to receive relatively little attention within media and journalism research compared to, e.g., national news use and public connection, hence, in part contributing to devaluing the public orientation of "ordinary citizens" and reproducing notions that an orientation towards local communities and politics is normatively less important (cf. Hovden 2023; Sivertsen and Hartley 2023). The present study addresses this by emphasising not only local public connection, but also how an orientation towards local publics constitutes a component of public connection more broadly.

In terms of previous studies on local media use, many studies have focused exclusively on local newspaper users (e.g., Costera Meijer 2010; Costera Meijer and Bijleveld 2016; Mathews 2022; Nielsen 2016; Olsen 2020a; Skogerbø and Winsvold 2011). There is however a growing field of research focusing on a broader array of media and platforms used by citizens to be updated on and spur engagement in local issues (e.g., Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Lie 2018; Nielsen 2015a; Olsen 2020b; Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe 2022; Schulz 2021). This literature demonstrates that citizens access local information through a variety of channels, including local news media, social media and municipality websites (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Olsen 2020b; Schulz 2021), suggesting that local newspapers remain an important source to be updated on the local area where one live (Olsen 2020b), although social media is increasingly important (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Nygren 2019; Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe 2022).

Few studies have explored the relationship between everyday media use and local public connection in-depth, including attention to people's experience with local media options. To more fully understand how and why people use media to connect to local publics and the role played by the local level for public connection, the present article combines in-depth insights on the everyday media and information practices of audiences with their reflections and assessments of different media. More specifically, adding to and extending the literature on local media use and public connection, and responding to the calls for studying media use and public connection from the vantagepoint of citizens' everyday lives (Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017; Swart et al. 2022), the article poses the following research questions: *How do everyday media use entail connecting to local issues? (RQ1)*, and assuming that peoples' perceptions of local media options play a role to local public connection, *How do citizens assess local media options? (RQ2)*

Empirically, the article draws on an in-depth study with citizens in two Norwegian municipalities, including recurring interviews and citizens' weekly logging of their media use and information practices over a period of 4 weeks. Through this approach,

the article contributes (i) in-depth insights on the significance of media for citizens' connection to and participation in local public life, including attention to how the perceived relevance of media, platforms and content play a role in citizens connection to and engagement with local issues and (ii) by zooming in on the local level, the study adds to and nuance existing research on public connection, which have tended to neglect the local level (cf., e.g., Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022; Nærland 2019).

Theoretical Perspectives: (Local) Public Connection and Everyday Media Use

(Mediated) public connection concerns how media use, through providing information and shared frames of reference, may enable citizens to orient towards societal issues, connect to others and participate in society (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Couldry and Markham 2008; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). Simply put, public connection may be understood as an orientation towards what lies beyond individual's private worlds. In their authoritative work, Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007, 3) define public connection as an orientation to a public world where matters of shared concern are addressed, sustained by an overlap in the media citizens consume. The shared orientations and frameworks that individuals may form part of through their overlapping media use, be it political, civic, social or cultural, again has the potential to foster engagement and participation (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). A key idea underpinning the notion of public connection then is that for democracy to work, citizens need, to a certain extent, to be oriented towards societal issues of shared concern and common resolution, and in today's societies such an orientation is often mediated (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022).

Scholars have drawn attention to how certain forms of orientations towards public life tend to be regarded as more worthy than others, with researchers' risking reproducing such distinctions (Hovden 2023; Sivertsen and Hartley 2023). For example, in drawing attention to how citizens' orientation towards politics and public debate align with social structures, Hovden (2023, 224–225), identify a division between (i) those that feel political debates and events are interesting and speak to them, and which have an orientation towards the world of social elites – particularly national politics and (ii) those that experience that politics lack relevance to their lives, have less trust in the political system, and which have an orientation towards ordinary and subaltern worlds, such as local communities, places of work, and common people. Hence, as noted by Hovden (2023, 227), essentialization of citizens roles and interests are not only unrealistic as fundamentals for normative democratic theory but also devalue "ordinary people's ordinary engagement in their ordinary worlds" (see also Sivertsen and Hartley 2023). In short, society tends to regard the local level as less important and this is in part reflected in media research, which have tended to focus on mediated public connection to national and international publics.

To draw attention to the relationship between public connection and people's assessments of and experiences with media, this study draws on Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2017) conceptualisation of public connection aimed to capture how mediated content becomes meaningful to audiences, and their analytical distinction

between four dimensions of public connection (“inclusiveness”, “relevance”, “constructiveness” and “engagement”). The dimensions are described in the following, focusing on questions of specific relevance to the study of mediated local public connection.

The dimension *inclusiveness* concerns “what issues people connect over and who they are connecting with”. Here news media has traditionally played a key role, enabling citizens to orient towards what is going on in society and providing shared frames of reference, while today the integrative function of media use may be more dispersed (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). In terms of local public connection, key questions are which media citizens use to be informed about and orient towards local issues and the extent to which users’ interests intersect with, e.g., the reporting of local newspapers. The dimension *engagement* concerns how shared frames of reference enable people to participate in society (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). In relation to the local context a key question is whether local content is perceived as engaging, and how media use may enable participation, such as, for example, participation in debate on local issues, in voluntary work to improve conditions in the local community, through voting or as members of political parties (cf. Ekman and Amnå 2012; Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). The dimension *relevance* concerns when and why mediated content become relevant for media users (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017), and in relation to the local context key questions are then to what extent and how local media content are experienced as relevant to citizens in their everyday lives. Finally, the dimension *constructiveness* concerns the extent to which media content is experienced as helpful in terms of users experiencing that they are given solutions, feel that they have say, and may do something about issues that they experience as relevant (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017). In relation to the local context key questions concern to what extent and how various media and platforms are experienced as constructive and helpful in terms of enabling connections to local public issues. In sum, the dimensions draw attention to whether people experience that (local) media, platforms and content speak to them, overlap with their interests, are experienced as constructive and engaging, and thus enable local participation.

Previous research on local newspaper use have drawn attention to differences in how people perceive local newspapers in relation to these dimensions (e.g., Costera Meijer 2010; Nielsen 2016; Olsen 2020a; Poindexter, Heider, and McCombs 2006). Nielsen (2016) for example shows that while some perceive the local newspaper as key in terms of playing an informational role and tying the community together, others perceive it as politically or geographically biased and not speaking to them. Olsen (2020a) draws on the concept of perceived worthwhileness of news media to distinguish between those willing and unwilling to pay for the local newspaper, finding that those willing to pay found the reporting relevant as it concerned their everyday lives while those unwilling to pay saw much of the reporting as insignificant and irrelevant. Costera Meijer (2010) shows how local audiences want local news that is informative, give them insights into how the city works, is representative, and fosters a sense of belonging. Relatedly, in a survey of audiences’ expectations towards local news, Poindexter, Heider, and McCombs (2006) found that while watchdog ideals were prevalent among some groups, other groups highlighted “a good neighbour ideal”, including constructively offering solutions. Recent studies on local news have also included other media and platforms in addition to local newspapers. These studies

show that local Facebook groups play an increasingly important role as sources to local and hyperlocal news (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Nygren 2019; Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe 2022), and may be particularly important for local civic participation (Lie 2018; Nah et al. 2021), although people also tend to regard social media platforms as less constructive and less suited to get an overview of what is going on locally (Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Olsen 2020b).

While these studies map how audiences regard and evaluate local media, they have paid less attention to the *consequences* of such evaluations for connecting to and engaging with local issues. The present study addresses this gap by examining the media and information practices of audiences together with their reflections and assessments of different media. In doing so, the study provides in-depth insights into the role played by media for local public connection, as well as the role played by the local level for public connection more broadly.

Context and Methods

Cases and Context

The study focuses on Norway, a high-choice, digitally advanced local media context (Olsen 2020b) with a local media system that can be characterised as hybrid (Lindén, Morlandstø and Nygren 2021). Established outlets such as local newspapers coexist with newer platforms like local Facebook groups, where Facebook groups may perform some of the functions traditionally associated with local newspapers. Local newspapers still hold a strong position in Norway, enjoying some of the highest readership figures in the world (e.g., Schulz 2021), although, like other countries, the migration to digital platforms and decreased circulation figures has caused economic decline and led to cutbacks of staff and resources. In general, the Norwegian population show a comparatively high willingness to pay for online news (Newman, et al. 2023).

The study takes as its starting point two municipalities in Eastern Norway: Fredrikstad with app. 85,000 inhabitants and Drammen with app. 104,000 inhabitants (Statistics Norway 2023), making them among the top 10 largest municipalities in Norway in terms of inhabitants (Statistics Norway 2021). Both places have a main subscription-based online and print local newspaper covering the city and municipality – *Drammens Tidende* and *Fredrikstad blad* – in addition to a small subscription-based newspaper (Fredrikstad) and a small free online newspaper (Drammen). In 2023 *Drammens Tidende's* readership figures were app. 72,000 while *Fredrikstad blad's* readership figures were app 55,000 (Mediebedriftene 2023).

In Norway, local identity and belonging tend to be strongly emphasised. The local government sector in Norway is well-established, with the municipalities being responsible for services such as primary healthcare, elderly care, primary and lower secondary schools, kindergartens, urban development, sanitation, and culture and business development (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Administration, n.d.). Local elections are held every 4 years. Voter turnout in local elections have been in decline since the end of the 1980s, and voter turnout is generally lower for local elections than parliament elections. Voter turnout in 2015, 2019 and 2023 local elections were 60%, 64.8% and 62.2%, respectively (Statistics Norway 2021).

Recurring Interviews and Logging of Media Use

The study is based on recurring interviews with citizens and their logging of information practices and media use over a period of 4 weeks. The study included 24 participants aged 30–50 (mean 41.5), which each participated in two individual interviews and were asked to fill in four questionnaires with open-ended questions concerning their daily and weekly media use and information practices. The combination of recurring interviews and subsequent open-ended questionnaires or “media diaries” (see e.g., Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Couldry and Markham 2008; Hasebrink and Hepp 2017; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022) have several advantages in terms of capturing citizens’ media use and public connection. First, the methods capture citizens’ cross-media practices, investigating the variety of media that citizens regularly use rather than focusing specifically on one media outlet (Hasebrink and Hepp 2017). This allows for an open and broad investigation of the ways in which citizens use, experience and engage with media, and hence, how they orient towards public life. Second, the questionnaires provide more detailed insights into citizens’ actual media and information practices than interviews alone, identifying the specific media they use and the topics they engage with in their everyday lives. Since media use is often routinised, the questionnaires complement the interviews in important ways. This was underlined in the second interview round, where several participants remarked that completing the questionnaires had made them more aware of their everyday media habits (cf. Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007). Third, the second interview enabled the researcher to clarify and expand on information from the first interview and the questionnaires, yielding more nuanced insights into how citizens use and assess mediated information.

The purpose of the first interview was to get insights into the media and information practices of the participants. Participants were asked questions regarding their interest in local issues, how they typically got information on local issues, their media habits in general, whether parts of their daily media use concerned local matters, their use and assessments of sources to local information, and whether they discussed or otherwise participated in local matters of interest. After the first interview, participants weekly for 4 weeks received questionnaires with open-ended questions, asking participants about their media and information use “yesterday” and “the past week” (two questionnaires concerned media use yesterday and two concerned information the past week). In the questionnaire regarding media use “yesterday”, participants were asked which media they had used, what they saw, read, heard when using these media, whether any of the things they used media for related to their local community or municipality, and if so, what it concerned. In the questionnaire regarding information the past week, participants were asked whether they had been interested in any specific events or topics the past week, and if so, what it concerned and whether they had talked about or discussed it with anyone or otherwise acted upon it. Moreover, they were asked if they had come across or noticed any issues in the local media where they live, and if so, if the topic(s) were of interest. Approximately 4 weeks after the first interview, a second interview was carried out. Here, aspects from the first interview and the questionnaires were followed up, and the participants were asked to comment on, confirm and nuance the researcher’s initial understanding

of their media use and interests (“inclusiveness”), their perception of local media content, including experienced relevance and whether it enables participation (“engagement”, “relevance” and “constructiveness”).

All the interviewees completed the study and participated in two interviews. Most participants responded to and returned all four questionnaires (two participants responded to three questionnaires, one participant responded to two questionnaires). All interviews were carried out by the author. The first interviews lasted between 20 and 45 min. The debrief interviews lasted between 10 and 25 min. The interviews were taped and transcribed before being analysed by the author.

The participants had varied socio-economic backgrounds, although the educational level was higher than the national average (cf. Statistics Norway 2023, see [Supplementary Appendix](#) for an overview of the interviewees). The percentage of participants having access to a local newspaper subscription was somewhat higher than for the population. Seventeen of the participants had access to an online subscription to a local newspaper, either by paying for it themselves or by having access through work or other family members. All the participant except for two, visited the online edition of their local newspaper regularly or occasionally, regardless of whether they had a subscription (cf. [Mediebedriftene 2023](#); Newman, et al. 2023, p, 88).

Participants were recruited through the panel provider Norstat. All participants gave their informed consent before participation. The study has been approved by the data protection service for research, Sikt. In presenting the analysis, the participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Analysis of Interviews and Questionnaires

The analysis started during data collection. Before the second interview, the author reviewed each participant’s completed questionnaires and first interview transcript, and summarised key points related to each participant, allowing the participants to confirm and nuance these points during the second interview. After completion of the data collection, all the interview transcripts were read, identifying initial themes, such as “sources to local information”, “participation”, “local newspaper” and “Facebook”, and collected participants’ responses into shared documents which provided an initial overview of media use and local public connection. Moreover, questionnaire responses were organised in a spreadsheet, providing an overview of each participant’s answers and enabling comparison. During the analysis process key points were summarised in a table, including information on each participant’s background, interests, media use, and participation in local issues. This document was used to get an overview of the data and analyse differences and similarities between participants in terms of their media use and local public connection. At several points throughout the analysis, the author re-read the interview transcripts and questionnaire responses of participants, to ensure that initial findings indeed were reflected in and gave justice to the data. Hence, the findings came about in an iterative process, reading and re-reading interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, the table providing an overview of each participant, the thematically categorised interview excerpts, and the initial analysis and findings. Throughout this process, the four categories “inclusiveness”, “engagement”,

“relevance”, and “constructiveness”, as presented in the theory section, were used to guide the analysis and capture aspects relating to participants’ public connection.

Analysis

Everyday Media Use and Local Public Connection

For most of the participants, the local context where they live formed part of their everyday media consumption, with local newspapers and groups and pages on Facebook being the most important sites for local information and for engagement with local issues (cf. Gulyas, O’Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Olsen 2020b). Most considered the local newspaper as their most important source of local information and a routine part of their everyday media use, but Facebook, in particular groups/pages on Facebook, also played an important role in terms of getting information on, engaging with and participating in local issues.

In general, the analysis shows that participants routinely monitored the local newspaper to stay updated on what was going on locally, and for some, the reporting of the local newspaper functioned as a common local reference point that regularly spurred face-to-face conversations with family, friends, neighbours, and colleagues. There were varying opinions on the quality of the local newspaper, but participants nevertheless tended to experience the local newspaper as the best place to get an overview of what was going on locally. For many of the participants, regularly visiting the local newspaper was a routine activity and being oriented towards and having a certain overview of what was going on locally was largely presented as a matter of course.

Participants tended to be sceptical of Facebook as a *general* platform for (local) information and participation, and a majority did not consider Facebook as a well-functioning arena for *open* (local) public debate. However, local groups and pages were used to receive information and stay updated on local cultural events and for (hyper)local information and participation in issues related the areas and communities where they lived. This included general Facebook groups/pages regarding the city and the municipality’s page on Facebook, but particularly smaller and more closed interest-based and hyperlocal groups concerning specific issues, communities and neighbourhoods. These groups included resident’s associations and various local community initiatives which, for some, served as hubs for information, discussion, community events and organisation of offline action (cf. Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe 2022).

Defining public connection in the broadest sense, as an orientation towards political, cultural, or civic issues in local society, most participants may be categorised as more or less connected to local publics through media, by visiting their local newspaper and/or by receiving information from local Facebook groups. There were however important differences among the participants, both in terms of the degree to which they perceived the local context as interesting, how they used media to orient towards local publics, and the degree to which media spurred and enabled participation. Drawing on Swart, Peters, and Broersma (2017) analytical distinction presented in the theory section to distinguish the different forms of public connection and how

citizens connect to local publics through media, the participants have been divided into the following four categories based on their local media use, perception of and engagement with local media content and how their media use enables participation in local issues: i) failed mediated local connection (strong orientation towards national publics), ii) partial mediated local connection through local newspapers, iii) partial mediated local connection through social media, and, iv) strong mediated connection. It should be noted that not all participants fit neatly into one category, illustrating the large variation in people's media use, interests, and forms of public connection (cf. Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Ytre-Arne 2023, 14). The five categories are presented in detail below, including examples of individual participants media use, perceptions of relevance, and how media enables participation, aiming to show general tendencies while simultaneously reflecting the variety of practices and assessments among the participants.

Failed Mediated Local Connection – Strong Orientation towards National Publics

For one group of participants, media was relatively unimportant in terms of their local public connection – they never or seldom visited the local newspaper, and they were member of none to few local Facebook groups. They tended to consider the local level as uninteresting and/or they felt that there was a mismatch between their interests and local news reporting. However, they were more or less heavy consumers of national news and saw it as a duty to stay informed on what was going on in society but tended to consider local level issues and/or local news reporting as irrelevant and unengaging (cf. Hovden 2023).

For example, Kirsten, which consumed national news daily, through online news sites, podcasts, and radio, and regularly discussed national news stories with friends and family, experienced local issues as uninteresting – she did not read the local newspaper nor did she consider any local Facebook groups as important. From her point of view, local news reporting tended to be trivial and mainly interesting for those who already were connected to the local area the newspaper covers:

I find that local newspapers tend to be narrow-minded. And I am not from here, does not have that local connection, then it doesn't have that value. The important news is reported in the national newspapers. I don't need anything smaller than that. [...] I feel that there is quite a bit of 'we found this rock that looks like [random male name]'. It is too local in a way.

For her then, local newspaper reporting felt irrelevant, local public issues generally failed to spur her attention or engagement, and when voting in local democratic elections she said she primarily relied on national news reports and her previous knowledge of the political alternatives.

A similar perspective was put forth by Rasmus, which said he used to be interested in selected local topics, such as urban development and nature conservation, but who had "given up on the local newspaper", noting that "the news reported there is too local to be interesting. It is not interesting in the larger context". This suggests an interplay between regarding local issues per se as interesting and perceptions of local

newspaper reporting, which was further elucidated by the media practices and assessments of Martin. He was interested in selected local political issues, such as urban, industrial, and commercial development, but experienced local news reporting as irrelevant. Overall, he labelled himself as a news junkie and regularly discussed political news with friends and acquaintances. Related to the local context, however, media was not important to him in terms of being informed about or becoming engaged with local issues; he did not follow or participate in local Facebook groups, and although he out of habit visited the online local newspaper he generally experienced the selection of stories as irrelevant and the framing as too click-driven, noting that *“there are not many seconds before I think ‘ok, noting of interest today either”*. Elaborating on his views he said that:

To me the local newspaper felt more important before than it does now. [...] Online everything is measured in clicks and that means that they are more focused on conflicts than on issues. And that makes it less relevant if you ask me.

In sum, these individuals were more oriented towards national publics than local publics, and neither the local newspaper nor social media were important in terms of connecting to local publics. Moreover, while local issues might be experienced as uninteresting per se, the findings also illustrate the significance of the local newspaper to local public connection in the sense that irrelevant or unengaging local news reporting may entail detaching from local publics, with otherwise politically interested citizens directing their attention elsewhere.

Partial Connection through Monitoring Local Newspapers (Informed, but Not Engaged)

Another group of participants regularly scrolled through the local newspaper and were members of some local Facebook group, but they only occasionally noticed stories in the local newspaper that spurred any further interest, and they relatively seldom discussed local news or local public issues with others. They generally did not actively participate in local public life, although there were variations among the participants, where some participated in Facebook debates on selected local topics, for example related to their neighbourhood. Overall, they monitored the local newspaper to get information on local topics such as traffic, cultural events, housing prices, crime, and health care, but they mostly did not engage any further with these issues in the form of for example talking about others with them, unless it concerned their lives directly. Most had a certain overview of what was going on locally, although they generally considered national news as more worthwhile. Among these participants several did not have strong opinions, either positive or negative, on the reporting of the local newspaper, although many said that they experienced the local newspaper as providing a good overview of what was going on locally. However, some also noted how they experienced local journalists, politicians, and others to be part of a common network, which resulted in stories that felt irrelevant for people outside of this network (cf. Nielsen 2016), and some found the reporting to be too conflict-driven and click-oriented. Overall, among the participants in this group, several expressed an ambivalence towards local news, as on the one hand relevant in terms

of knowing what was going on locally, and on the other as insignificant. This ambivalence towards local news was illustrated by Erik: he did not use Facebook to get local information, but visited the local newspaper daily and considered the local newspaper as *“very important”* for receiving information about *“local politics and what happens in the city”*. At the same time, he relatively seldom saw local stories that spurred further interest, noting that:

There are not that many exiting things going on locally. It is a store that has opened, a store that has closed, a road that is closed, a road that has opened, construction work. A lot of the things that go on locally are not things that spur any further attention than that you read it and think “ok” and then you move on (ID5).

Similarly, Vilde, which said she mainly subscribed to the local newspaper to get information on culture, but nevertheless visited the local newspaper daily and regularly read stories that interested her noted that she did not *“find the journalism to be particularly good”*, arguing that *“It is too small and self-centered. You get the feeling that somebody know somebody and therefore they get an interview about something that is completely uninteresting, at least to me”*. Hence for many in this group, scrolling through the local newspaper was relevant in the sense that it was a way of monitoring local issues to be updated on selected topics and have a general overview of what was happening, although local news was not necessarily experienced as particularly engaging, and generally did not enable participation.

Partial Connection through Social Media

While most participants favoured the local newspaper over Facebook in terms of providing an overview of what was going on locally, for a few, Facebook was more important and represented the key platform for connecting to local issues (cf. Gulyas, O’Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Örnebring and Hellekant Rowe 2022). The importance of Facebook for local public connection was illustrated by Johanne which generally avoided news, saying that she experienced it as *“overwhelming”*, but that was an active user of social media, occasionally participated in debates concerning local issues on Facebook, and generally regarded Facebook as her most important platform to be informed about and participate in local issues:

I follow quite many local things on Facebook. We have a local page through the municipality [related to a particular area in the municipality], and there they have events and things to do. And then there is of course the [local music venue], the theatre and various bars with live music and such. And I have also been part of the kayaking club here, and I still follow them on Facebook and get updated on what is going on. I know that they have a new area development plan underway [in specific local area] where people have provided input, and the kayaking club has been quite active in relation to that.

As alluded to in the latter part of quote, groups mainly oriented around a shared interest for specific activities may also entail an orientation towards and contribute to spur active participation in local political issues of common concern, representing forms of (mediated) public connection and active attempts to influence policy processes.

A similar albeit not equal mediated form of local public connection was illustrated by Anne; she routinely scrolled through the local newspaper, but seldom saw stories that spurred any further interest, said she was generally disinterested in politics and seldom voted in democratic elections. However, she was a member of and participated in hyperlocal Facebook groups and initiatives related to the community and neighbourhood where she lived, noting that hyperlocal information about what was going on in her neighbourhood felt more relevant to her than local or national journalistic news. For her these hyperlocal Facebook groups, in combination with face-to-face conversations with friends in the neighbourhood, occasionally spurred more active participation in the local community, such as contributing to the process of providing a new playground for children in the community, and formed the main way in which she participated in issues of common concern in general. Hence, similar to Johanne, her media practices show how social media and the (hyper)local level may be important arenas to orient towards and participate in public issues for those least interested in “mainstream” news and politics (cf. Seegard 2015; Haugsgjerd and Karlsen 2024).

Strong (Mediated) Connection. Well-Informed and Active Participation

This group of individuals tended to visit their local newspaper daily and regularly read local stories that spurred their interest and that became topics of conversation with family, friends and colleagues. They were also typically members of (hyper)local groups on Facebook and they felt a strong sense of attachment to their city and/or neighbourhoods. Many participated in (hyper)local issues offline, some occasionally and some continuously, and they regularly read about or engaged with stories related to municipal public affairs, such as urban development or education. Although all also were interested in and connected to national and international issues through their media use, and some even said that they found national news more interesting, they tended to spend more time on local issues.

The majority found local news reporting to be relevant and engaging in the sense that the reporting was experienced as informative, and spurred reflection and discussion around local issues. Explaining her relationship to the local newspaper Live for example noted that *“it is to know what is going on. And it is also often what you talk about in the lunch break at work. And I like to know what is going on. It is more important to me to read [the local newspaper] than [the largest national newspaper], because it is local”*.

Overall, in assessing the local newspaper, the strongly connected tended to be more specific in their praise and criticism, pointing to specific topics or areas where the local newspaper was experienced as good or could improve. Most underlined the importance of the local newspaper and characterised the reporting as good, although some were also quite critical, characterising at least parts of the reporting as too conflict-driven, click-bate oriented, biased, or questioning the priorities in terms of story selection and how stories were reported. For a few this entailed that they spent more time on local Facebook groups and experienced these as more relevant in terms of connecting to and engaging with local issues. Others maintained that the local newspaper nevertheless was important, representing a key means to have an overview of local issues. This latter point is for example illustrated by Marie,

which considered herself a patriot on behalf of her city, visited her local newspaper several times a day and regularly talked about issues in the local news media with her network. Yet, when asked why she read the local newspaper she noted that it was: *“to see what is going on in the area. What have happened, from traffic incidents to bankruptcies, to feel-good stories [...]. It is just to see what is going on. Because it is not that much deep and interesting there”*. Still, the interviews and questionnaires also revealed that she indeed weekly read and engaged with stories in the local newspaper, including topics related to local health care, education, emergency preparedness, and urban development, discussing some of the stories with her family, and participating in popular meetings and publicly voicing her opinions on a story regarding merging of schools. Regarding the latter issue she wrote that *“I experience the local news reporting as good. And it has also been easy to find [information] on the municipality website”*. Simultaneously, she was critical of the reporting of other stories, for example characterising the reporting as too focused on disagreements between political parties and selected individuals’ opinions.

The analysis suggests that the critical characteristics of the local newspaper among some of the “strongly connected” may be interpreted as engagement for their local community, where the criticism is based on a notion that the local newspaper should make sure to inform their citizens about issues of local importance and reporting these issues in a way that contribute to elucidate citizens. In addition to Marie, above, this was also for example elucidated by Jon, which routinely read the local newspaper, was interested in local public affairs, and regularly had conversations regarding local news stories with people in his network, but who was worried that the local newspaper failed to present local political issues in a way that was relevant and accessible to citizens. He noted that *“some of the stories look like an internal memo in the municipality”*, and went on to say that *“they write about directives and laws and rules, things that the common citizens do not understand unless they really go into how a municipality functions and the responsibilities the different municipal agencies have”*. From this perspective the local newspaper is experienced as relevant and important, and criticism does not necessarily entail that they themselves spend less time on the local newspaper or detach from local publics, but there is a worry that the local newspaper fails to present local political issues in a way that are experienced as relevant to citizens in general.

Most of the “strongly connected” actively participated in local issues, and the analysis shows that Facebook was particularly important in this regard (cf. Lie 2018; Nah et al. 2021), particularly smaller interest-based and hyperlocal Facebook groups concerning particular areas and neighbourhoods. For some of the participants, such as Edmund, which continuously initiated and participated in local political action, hyperlocal Facebook groups served as an important supplement to the local newspaper. During the data collection period he for example worked actively to secure public access to an area in his neighbourhood and to change traffic in a dangerous school road, and he typically used Facebook groups to share and get information in relation to such initiatives. Although he regarded the local newspaper as his most important source to local information, hyperlocal Facebook groups were used to initiate and participate in local issues.

Some of the “strongly connected” experienced (hyper)local Facebook groups as *the* most important media platform to receive information on and local issues. For example, Karoline, who was interested in politics in general, member of the local organisation of a political party, and had initiated and participated in several smaller and larger initiatives concerning the part of town where she lived noted that:

I hadn't reflected on it before my participation here [in the research project]. But yes, I read the local newspaper, I have a subscription through work. I to a certain extent follow it because of work, to keep me updated there. But now that I have reflected on it, I see that there is very little information about things. It is very little overlap between my interests and the things that the local newspaper is interested in. So, information about the things that I am preoccupied with in the local community largely comes from Facebook, in places [groups/pages] that I am directly involved in there.

Similarly, Hanne, which also actively participated in hyperlocal issues in her community, noted that although she read the local newspaper regularly: *“my way of seeking out information tends to be through Facebook groups. Because I experience that there is almost always someone who post information or have information that can tell me about it”* (ID24). Hence, while the local newspaper provided her with an overview of what was going on locally, Facebook groups provided more detailed information into local issues she was specifically interested in, which again regularly spurred offline action.

Discussion and Conclusion

The local level forms a democratically important context in terms of being an arena for local government and politics, and in terms of providing the everyday context for citizens' lives. By combining insights on people's everyday media use and their reflections and assessments of different media (cf. Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017), this study provides in-depth insights into how citizens' everyday media use entail being informed about, engaging with, and participating in local publics, as well as the role played by the local level for public connection more broadly.

The findings show that local issues form part of the everyday media consumption of many and underline the important role played by media to citizens' (local) public connection. Local newspapers and local Facebook groups/pages form the key mediated arenas for citizens' connection to local publics (cf. Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019). For many, visiting the local newspaper is a routinised part of their everyday media consumption, and the findings confirm the important role played by local newspapers in terms of being a key means for citizens to keep updated on practical and political issues of relevance to their everyday lives (cf. Nielsen 2015a; Olsen 2020b) and in terms of the reporting being topics of conversation that connect citizens to each other and to local public life (cf. Hess 2015; Mathews 2022; Moe and Ytre-Arne 2022). Simultaneously, the findings also show that local newspaper reporting oftentimes is experienced as irrelevant and fails to engage citizens (cf. Nielsen 2016). For some, irrelevant local news reporting is to some extent equalled with local issues being unengaging, entailing that they detach from local issues. For others, community and interest-based Facebook groups, serve as substitutes for what they perceive as uninteresting local newspaper reporting. Overall, the analysis underlines the significance

of (hyper)local Facebook groups to receive information on hyperlocal issues and for active participation in local public life, with local Facebook groups connecting citizens around shared causes of interest and servings as hubs for information, discussion, community events and organisation of offline action (cf. Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Nah et al. 2021; Örnebring and Rowe 2022). Although, for most, Facebook groups or other interest-based networks do not substitute local newspapers in terms of providing an overview of what is going on in a city or municipality, the analysis underlines such networks' importance to citizens' participation in local public issues that are of interest and relevance to them. For some, these groups work as an alternative to the local newspaper, while for others it works as an extension to get information on, initiate, and participate in community issues.

Existing research on mediated public connection has tended to neglect the local level. Zooming in on the local context, this study contributes new insights on patterns of public connection, showing the significance of the local level and illustrating how connection to local publics may not necessarily reflect patterns of connection as it has been defined in studies with a broader focus (e.g., Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham 2007; Nærland 2019). In relation to the significance of the local level, the analysis shows that local issues indeed are a relatively prominent topic of conversation and point of departure for participation. This indicates that the local level may be more important for public connection than what is generally accounted for in the literature, perhaps reflecting notions that an orientation towards local issues is normatively of lesser value (cf. Hovden 2023; Sivertsen and Hartley 2023).

In relation to patterns of public connection, the findings show that individuals that may be considered weakly publicly connected in terms of their general media use and interests, may indeed be engaged with issues in their communities, with the hyperlocal context being experienced as more relevant and being the main way in which they participate in public issues (cf. Hovden 2023). Here, hyperlocal groups on social media and offline networks were particularly important, while local newspapers were less important. The findings suggest that the local and hyperlocal levels should be given greater emphasis in researching public connection, as they may represent arenas to orient towards and participate in public issues for those generally least interested in news and politics, while also representing key sites where (mediated) engagement turn into political action for groups of citizens which are indeed interested in news and politics.

The findings furthermore show that citizens considered strongly connected locally also tend to be oriented towards issues of national or international concern. Yet, the analysis also illustrates that citizens that may be considered strongly publicly connected in terms of their media use and interests in general, may be relatively detached from local news and local level public affairs. This latter group tends to regard local issues, and specifically the reporting of the local newspaper as largely irrelevant, entailing that they direct their attention elsewhere (cf. Hovden 2023). There are indications that previous attachment to the local area where one live indeed plays a role in terms of the perceived relevance of local newspaper reporting and local public connection in general (cf. Mcleod et al. 1996). However, the findings also suggest that it may be the other way around. For example, some noted an interest in specific local issues, but nevertheless had largely ended up disengaged with local issues due

to what they perceived as irrelevant or unconstructive local news reporting. This indicates that the perceived relevance of local newspapers' story selection and presentation styles may play a role in terms of citizens' orientation towards local publics (cf. Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2017), where otherwise politically interested citizens may experience mediated local public debate as irrelevant and/or unconstructive. In a broader perspective, detaching from local publics, while being more or less publicly connected in general may not necessarily be a problem. Simultaneously, if it is indeed a goal that citizens should connect to and participate in local publics, including local democratic debate and elections, these findings should be explored further.

The study is not without limitations. The findings are based on an in-depth study with 24 participants, aged 30 to 50, in a high-choice, digitally advanced media environment (Olsen 2020b) where local newspapers still hold relatively strong positions, where the local government sector is well-established, and local identity tend to be relatively strongly emphasised. The research design has allowed for a deep dive into everyday media practices and local public connection, adding to previous studies of local media use and studies focused on overall public connection. However, the research design also means a focus on depth over breadth, and the study cannot pretend to provide a representative or necessarily full picture. The findings should be explored further in quantitative and qualitative studies. For example, to further understand media use and local public connection future studies could include other geographic contexts, age groups and time periods (e.g., focusing on local election periods or contexts where specific local political issues are at stake). Moreover, the findings illustrate variations in terms of cross-media practices and forms of local public connection. To further understand how and why citizens connect to local issues – and the role the local level plays in public connection as such – future studies could zoom in on different sub-groups and forms of connection, taking seriously and avoiding devaluing citizens' orientation towards the (hyper)local.

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