

Covering tragedy in a small community: A practice-oriented study of local journalism, embeddedness, and ethical decision-making

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Abstract

Accidents in small communities raise some ethical questions for local journalists. How to provide news and simultaneously be sensitive to community and victims? Inspired by research which indicates a shift towards an overall local journalism perspective that does not separate the watchdog role from the caring role, the article discusses journalism practice, tragedy, and ethical decision-making. Despite local journalism's documented "closeness to community", few studies examine relationships between individual, -institutional, and society level including individual decisions, workplace- and institutional practices, and society. Using the covering of a tragic helicopter accident in a small community in Norway as a case, including interviews with journalists, presentations and news texts, findings show that for local journalists, the society level is important. Findings also indicate a change in attitude among journalists when covering tragedy. The normative idea of objectivity, including viewing proximity to community and closeness to sources as unethical, did not come forward in the interviews or in the texts. Instead, embeddedness is perceived as part of *all* their work, something they need to consider daily. In a hybrid media environment where rumors spread on social media, tragedies call for *both* an ethic of care, and to exercise the watchdog role. Local journalists keep the community accountable for their digital behavior. By urging its inhabitants to care and reminding them of the importance and responsibilities of being part of the community when a tragedy happens, local journalists contribute to a collective "we", emphasizing local media's important role in the local society.

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Introduction

In 2019, six young people died in a helicopter accident in Alta, Northern Norway. It had a major impact on the residents of the city, which has 20 000 inhabitants. At some point, any journalist will have to cover a tragedy where someone has lost their lives and accidents in small communities raise some ethical questions for the local journalists. There is a risk of hurting people who mourn, and media coverage may impact the residents' ability to heal and recover (Kay et al., 2010). Local journalists cannot leave when they have done their job, they live in the community and may meet their sources on the local store.

As Skogerbø and Karlsen (2021: 99) point out, local media structures including public broadcasting of both national and regional content, have remained remarkably stable within the Norwegian media system where most of production and consumption now happens on digital platforms. By the end of 2020, there were 248 newspapers in Norway (print/online), and 191 were local (Høst, 2020: 35). Local newspapers have a strong position in Norway, often described as the glue in a society (Mathisen, 2010). Simultaneously, local journalists should have a critical eye towards their community. These roles represent a dilemma: How can journalists be responsible to the news consumer and simultaneously be sensitive to the community who experiences the trauma? Although there are press ethical guidelines and journalism education, no accidents are the same and you can never know beforehand what will happen. Despite local journalism's widely documented "closeness to community", there is a lack of scholarship on how local journalists provide testimony about traumatic events "to the community, about the community, on behalf of the community at the local level" (Hess et al., 2021: 24). Few studies explore how news production "contexts" and news "texts" can be approached as mutually interpenetrating, and not as analytically separate elements (Cottle, 2003: 16). For instance, how does closeness affect journalistic content? Furthermore, Cottle (2003: 4) argues that there is an unexplored and under-theorized "middle ground" of organizational structures and workplace practices, and we cannot rely on textual analysis alone if we wish to understand media representations. Studying local journalism in context is needed, to understand distinctions between ideals and practices (Larsen and Naper, 2022: 1484).

The article addresses these gaps, exploring ethical decision-making and relationships between individual, -institutional, and society level including local journalists' individual decisions, workplace- and institutional practices, and society. It is an attempt to bring theory and practice into closer union, aiming at creating spaces for reflective practice that can assist journalists and journalism educators. Some researchers claim that journalism "has not had a tradition of critical self-reflection, one of the hallmarks of a profession" (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014: 107) and that the problem of ethics in journalism is journalists' "inability to talk articulately and reflectively about it" (Glasser and Ettema,

2008: 512). Several researchers (Kay et al., 2010; Niblock, 2007) have argued that journalists can use reflective practice as a tool to evaluate, understand and improve their work. “By creating reflective spaces to explore the impact of media coverage on individuals and communities,” journalists can engage in systematic examination of their work (Kay et al., 2011: 442).

Using a helicopter accident in a small community as a case, I examine NRK Troms and Finnmark (hereafter NRK TF), one of Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s regional offices, and the local newspaper *Altaposten*’s news coverage from the day of the accident, August 31, 2019, and the rest of that year, in total 98 online articles. Furthermore, I discuss local journalists’ reflective practice on their own reporting praxis, including challenges of covering community traumas. I have interviewed one journalist/news editor from the local newspaper *Altaposten*, and one editor in chief from NRK TF. Presentations that these two journalists held at a journalism course for media students at UiT the Arctic University of Norway, and NRK’s own evaluation, are also empirical sources. I explore ethical decision-making inspired by research which points at closeness, care, embeddedness, and proximity to community as part of a local journalism overall perspective. As Vos and Hanusch (2024: 3) note in their article about embeddedness and journalistic cultures, journalism literature seems to diverge between one understanding of embeddedness that focuses on “journalists’ proximity to their sources and one that is more abstract and focuses on journalism as an institution and as a set of socially derived practices tied to the society in which it is situated. The literature hints, however, at something in between, where journalists and news organizations operate in a relationship with the communities they serve.” This article addresses this area “in between”, arguing that, in a hybrid media environment where news travel fast on social media, being accountable as local journalists means practicing the watchdog role and holding the locals responsible for their digital behavior. By urging its inhabitants to care and reminding them of the importance and responsibilities of being part of the community when a tragedy happens, local journalists contribute to a collective “we”, emphasizing local media’s important role in the local society.

Journalistic practice, tragedy and ethics – towards a new paradigm?

The way journalists cover a traumatic event, such as accidents, disasters, and violence, can have a major impact on the community and the victims. When people experience trauma, media can contribute to further pulling the community apart, resulting in a secondary trauma by exposing the audience to traumatic materials (Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000). However, media may also help the community in their healing process (Sykes et al., 2003). It is the way the journalists do it, their approach, methods, and practices, that determine the outcome and eventually the (lack of) trust and relationship between journalists and community. Furthermore, traumatic events may also affect the journalists. News journalists who work with crisis-related assignments, and are exposed to ethical dilemmas, risk the development of long-term psychological impairment (Backholm and Idås, 2015).

Research has shown that ethical decision-making is *individualized*. There is no consensus on what ethical or unethical behavior is when covering trauma - “the navigation of ethical dilemmas in journalism are generally based on the moral standards set by individual reporters” (Amend et al., 2012: 235). Several reasons for this missing consensus are suggested: lack of education and/or level of training and preparedness, lack of practice (novice journalists), and level of closeness to community. According to Anderson and Bourke, journalism education usually teaches students “what it means to be ethical in their general reporting”, arguing that ethical training needs to be more specific, and that trauma journalism should be taught (2020: 236).

On a second, *institutional level*, ethical decision-making and conflicts between carrying out journalistic duties on the one hand and being thoughtful on the other also touch upon journalistic practice within the journalistic field, including journalistic ethical guidelines, but also unwritten rules at the news organization where the journalists work. These tensions have been discussed in studies of journalism education, the journalistic gut feeling and how press ethical guidelines affect journalistic practice (Anderson and Bourke, 2020; Eira, 2015; Schultz, 2007). Journalism has often been “mystified” and viewed as silent, practice-oriented knowledge connected to the individual journalist and news organization (Bjerke, 2009). Backholm and Idås (2020: 250) argue that pro-active work by media organizations can prevent long-term psychological impairment in their employees but also diminish the risk of journalists causing additional harm to crisis victims. Based on their findings when writing about the covering of the hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, Takashi, Zhang and Chavez (2020: 112) argue that news organizations need to implement a mentoring system that allows young reporters to learn from their more experienced colleagues.

Takashi et al. also argue that cultural norms and context play an important role when journalists and organizations face challenging circumstances (Takahashi et al., 2020: 1121). They found that solidarity, collaboration and “a culture of familism” exist in Hispanic and Latin American cultures. Vos and Hanusch (2024) suggest that journalists’ degree of embeddedness can explain the kinds of news content that journalists create, relating it to how some cultures value individual autonomy while embedded cultures emphasize the collective. They argue that significant embeddedness in an institutional culture, and lack of embeddedness in community, lead to blind spots and thus an inaccurate picture of events and issues (2024: 4). How cultural context affects journalism represent a third level when discussing ethical decision-making and traumatic events, namely the *society* in which the journalist is part of. Words such as proximity, community, closeness, and embeddedness are used to describe how and to what extent journalists are connected to a society. For journalists, it can be difficult to separate the personal role from the professional, a struggle that comes forward as strong in studies of local journalism. Císařová (2017: 23) uses three dimensions of local – spatial, temporal, and emotional, to describe a local communication framework. “Local” is a concept that connects geography and place with a sense of belonging, while the temporal characteristics include the extent of time living in a locality, as well as nostalgia or memories for people who no longer live there (Císařová, 2017: 21). Researchers have argued that local journalists can have a particular ethical responsibility as they work through the trauma in situ with the audience,

through “proximal witnessing” (Hess et al., 2021: 24). Some scholars have called for changes approaching stories on trauma with goals of public interest, responsibility, reconciliation, and social justice, and assuming an ethic of care (Fullerton and Patterson, 2006; Amend et al., 2012: 237).

Existing research reveals a tendency towards challenging the objectivity ideal and arguing in favor of rethinking journalism ethics, including discussions about responsible reporting (Camponez, 2014; Hess et al., 2021). Far from refusing the objectivity paradigm, including the duty of truth and information accuracy, Camponez (2014: 124) argues that the ethics of care “emphasizes the role of journalism in its engagement with the public sphere and democracy, stressing the social responsibility dimension based on respect for the different stakeholders in the complex process of information: the subject who informs, the public and the information sources; journalism as a professional culture.” Camponez (2014: 132) argues in favor of a paradigm shift that translates into an ethics of objectivity which is committed to listening and respect and not only on independence and detachment, “which does not mean agreeing with what is said.” Following this, practices of the dominant objectivity norm, including maintaining distance from communities, are now criticized for bearing “responsibility for the harm that journalism has done to Black, Indigenous, and people of color” (Wenzel and Crittenden, 2021: 2024). Scholarship on media witnessing typically concerns “professional”, distant suffering (Chouliaraki 2010), but McCallum et al. (2023: 1180) argue that local reporters and editors’ have “a more intimate relationship with their sources and audiences, which enables them to bear witness “firsthand”.

Instead of seeing objectivity and closeness as mutually exclusive, newer research points in a direction of a paradigm shift where it is accepted that both is possible. Perceptions and criticism of local journalism as being too positive and close to its community, are challenged. Larsen and Nape (2022: 1473) conceptualize the community role of local journalism as an overarching role, where, for example, the watchdog and advocacy roles in principle may serve a community function in local communities. Accordingly, it is not possible to erase the local journalism perspective, since it is included in all aspects of local journalism’s roles, also the watchdog role. Research shows that journalists can reconcile these roles (Hanusch, 2015; Larsen and Naper, 2022). For local journalists, “advocating for communities and their development also means that to fulfil these goals they need to act as watchdogs of those in power” (Hanusch, 2015: 828).

Studying journalism practice and ethical decision-making

The research process can be described as inductive, beginning when the editor in chief (N) at NRK TF visited UiT the Arctic University of Norway in 2021, one and a half year after the accident. NRK TF is a regional office in the northernmost county in Norway, and one of NRK’s ten regional offices. NRK TF covers local and regional news from the county, and “everything that gets published shall have the potential to reach a national audience” (Lillelien, 2019: 7). The editor talked to the media students about NRK’s own evaluation of the covering. One year after, the news editor (A) at Altaposten had a guest lecture for the students, and he also talked about their coverage of the accident. A also works as a

journalist for *Altaposten*, a local newspaper which covers the Alta-area. In contrast to NRK TF, their only focus is the local public. *Altaposten* is a well-established newspaper, the first printed newspaper came in 1969.

In class, the journalists mentioned cases and situations where they explained and questioned their own covering and choices. As the course instructor, I was present, and the students and I could ask questions. The presentations lasted for 3 hours, and it raised several ethical questions, which fueled my research interest. My starting point for the research was therefore the two journalist's presentations.

The next step was to conduct a qualitative analysis of the media coverage by reading all articles published on the platforms of NRK Troms and Finnmark (NRK TF) and the local newspaper *Altaposten* during the period from August 31, 2019 (the day of the accident) to December 31, 2019. The focus was specifically on their web articles. Both NRK TF and *Altaposten* have curated an overview of their coverage, allowing readers to access all related articles, including the latest updates. For NRK TF, the content analyzed included 86 bulletins—short updates consisting of the date, time, headline, and two or three sentences—alongside 15 articles of varied length, none of which included audience comments. *Altaposten*'s coverage comprised 83 articles of varied length, including editorials. 14 articles have reader comments, primarily heart emojis and condolences. Although *Altaposten*'s articles on Facebook typically received more comments, these were not included in the analysis due to difficulties in retrieving them at the start of the research.

The exploration of the media coverage involved a systematic content analysis of the articles, focusing on thematic elements. This analysis was conducted through an inductive process, allowing themes to emerge from the data without preconceived categories. This process was informed and complemented by interviews with the two editors/journalists from NRK TF and *Altaposten*. These interviews were semi-structured and informed by the initial readings of the web articles and the presentations given by the journalists in class. The interviewees, who held significant roles as editor-in-chief and news editor, were actively involved in directing the coverage of the accident and were present at work when the incident occurred. The research project received approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), and a letter of consent was obtained from both interviewees.

I finally categorized the texts—comprising interviews, journalistic articles, editorials, and presentations—into inductively derived, “rich” themes: (1) the accident area, (2) photos as trauma triggers, (3) identification, speculations, and social media, and (4) the relationship between local journalists and the community. A “rich” theme is defined as one that captures significant aspects related to the research focus. The analysis was an explorative process, where themes emerged initially from the presentations and were refined through the integration of insights from interviews and readings of the web articles.

The accident and the covering

On August 31, 2019, a helicopter crashed into a mountain area in Alta municipality in Northern Norway. Five young people from Alta, aged between 19 and 22 years and the

Swedish pilot, aged 27, were all killed. The five youngsters were friends, two of them were cousins. They were visiting the Høstsprell-festival, a yearly music festival. The helicopter tour was a free offer for festival participants.

Editor in chief (N) at NRK TF recalls that it was a lovely Saturday afternoon, and he was at home, drinking coffee. Suddenly the phone rings about the accident, lots of calls and stress, and when rushing out to the office, he is so distracted that he reverses into a parked car. At Altaposten, the editor gets a tip and takes off, but it turns out that the location is wrong, and no one is at the office to write about what happens. The location gets confirmed, and editor and news editor/journalist (A) talk. A drives to the festival area, only bringing his mobile.

“What am I doing here?” The accident area

At first, A received a tip about the helicopter accident but was not aware of the extent of the accident. As the SMS kept coming, A drove to the festival area.

It was chaotic, young people in shock who were just wandering around. I thought that I should not be here (A, interview).

The statement shows a dilemma; on a personal, individual level, he thinks his presence is inappropriate. Still, he believes he needs to be there, as a journalist. In addition to young people, some people were drunk, and in shock. He therefore left the festival area and went to the golf course, which is right by the festival area. He interviewed a witness, a golfer, who was not in shock. To get the info out quickly, he called the editor, who wrote the article. The two had continuous contact about what to do and how to behave and agreed that it was important to keep distance from the festival participants.

NRK TF sent a video journalist (VJ) to the festival area. Before the VJ went, she talked with the editor about what would meet her and how to behave. When she returned, N looked through the recordings and stills with her. They chose pictures that were taken from a distance, overview pictures.

The first afternoon after it happened, we didn't have time to go in depth about the ethics, but I talked to people continuously (N, interview).

The Code of Ethics of the Norwegian Press (VVP) says, “Always consider how reports on accidents and crime may affect the victims and next-of-kin. Do not identify victims or missing persons unless next-of-kin have been informed. Show consideration towards people in grief or at times of shock” (Norsk Presseforbund, 2022). An accident area is an ethical minefield where it is easy to make mistakes, such as inappropriate use of witnesses, and the risk of using audiovisual content that may reveal too much information. Both Altaposten and NRK did the same ethical considerations. The two editors first response during the chaotic first hours reveal the importance of the institutional level; a journalistic gut feeling about what to do based on long experience and practice, since communication between journalists and editors happened fast and there was no time for deep ethical

discussions. However, this contact still reduced the risk of individuals making wrong decisions. In class, both A and N emphasized that when looking back on decisions made right after the accident happened, they followed the press ethical guidelines about being considerate in the journalistic working process, especially concerning people in shock and grief, not approaching witnesses who were close to the deceased, people who were affected by alcohol, young people, or people in shock. Norwegian press has been criticized for being pushy and insensitive when covering accidents or catastrophes, but self-criticism has taken place and the last 20 years, reactions on their coverage have been more positive (Brurås, 2020).

“It’s someone’s kids.” Photos as trauma triggers

The theme “photos as trauma triggers” represents many layers. It derived from A’s presentation in class, which revealed information about ethical considerations that was not present in the journalistic article, including changing the use of a specific photo from the accident area. This picture has been widely circulated by the photo agency NTB Scanpix and used by several media. A wanted to take a photo from the accident area, and together with the editor in chief, he decided that the photo was important information, and that it was press ethical unproblematic to publish it. He went up to the wreck the morning after the accident, aiming to find out more about what had happened. He was aware that the deceased were not yet removed and therefore called the police, asking how to proceed.

I wanted to do it in a proper way and cooperate with the police. Not just show up there (A, interview).

At the wreck, he talked to the policeman who controlled the area and looked out for trespassers. The policeman walked together with A when he took photos, and A also showed him all the pictures he took. A thought it was adequate to have two pair of eyes in a situation like that. Still, one of *Altaposten*’s published pictures from the wreck immediately received reactions. The picture shows parts of the canvas cover, and at that time, the deceased were not removed from the accident area. People in Alta, and the relatives, knew this when they saw the picture, and people wrote emails saying, “these are someone’s kids”.

One could imagine that there was someone underneath the cover. Press ethically, the picture is not problematic. But it turns out wrong when you receive reactions from relatives and audience. So, we chose to remove it (A, interview).

He explains why he did not consider the picture press ethically problematic: it was taken from a distance; it was an overview picture of the accident area and the helicopter’s tale. Only a small part of the canvas cover was shown in the corner of the picture, and it was not the focus in the picture. Based on the feedback, *Altaposten* edited the picture before re-publishing. When asked why, he says:

It's ingrained in our workplace culture. In cases like this, we cannot be cynical. It was the right thing to do.

However, VG, Norway's largest online news site, used the same picture, but did not get any reactions.¹ A called them and specifically asked about this, and they assured him that none had commented on the picture.

It shows the difference between a local and a national newspaper. We received massive response, a hailstorm of comments. The editor and I agreed to remove it (A, interview).

The example with the photo shows how all three levels, individual, institutional, and society, come into play and how ethical decision-making can be a dynamic process. The decision to take the picture and publish it was first made on an individual- and institutional level but was changed because of reactions from society. Based on what A describes as Altaposten's "workplace culture", they chose to remove the picture because the local readers reacted. It is a good example of how geography and closeness matters, and the different connection the two newspapers Altaposten and VG have to the Alta-community. The local community reacted because Altaposten is "their" local newspaper, while VG is a national newspaper, located in the capital. The fact that people commented so strongly shows that Altaposten matters, and that the local community has certain expectations on how Altaposten should behave. The reactions confirm the relationship that exists between community and local media. It is also an example of how "local" press ethics sometimes trump general, press ethical guidelines.

NRK also used the first version of the picture, but their timing was different. They decided not to use the picture until after the deceased were brought down from the accident area, and the police had confirmed it. In hindsight, A thinks that Altaposten also should have waited.

However, for NRK, pictures were difficult to get hold of, says N:

It was a rush for pictures from NRK in Oslo, smoke, flames. We wanted to wait until *we* thought it was ok to use a picture. Oslo would just have to wait. It is difficult when you are so close. Distance does something with your judgement.

According to N, journalists at NRK TF complained that the quest for "juicy" pictures was inappropriate, and this feedback is also mentioned in the evaluation that he presented for the media students. His comments specifically address how distance and closeness matters. As Altaposten, NRK TF also puts the interest of the local society first. VG also asked Altaposten for pictures showing smoke from the accident area, says A:

I told them they will have to take what they get. I'm happy that VG didn't push us, I think it has been an attitude change there, and that they understand that we cannot leave, we need to be able to see the family members in the eyes.

According to Kay et al. (2011: 449), awareness of trauma and its impact on a community have increased among journalists. This development has happened simultaneously as the objectivity norm has been challenged and problematized (Deuze, 2005: 456). This norm, which involves maintaining distance and being objective, has been cultivated to explicitly avoid media manipulation and getting too close to sources. Existing research shows that many scholars question an objective, distant relationship between journalists and community when a tragedy happens. Instead, they call for an ethical framework that incorporates empathy and positionality (Kay et al., 2010: 429), an “ethic of care” (Kay et al., 2011), including treating victims of trauma the same way as they would behave if it was their own family and friends (Sykes et al., 2003).

The choice of not using “spectacular” and dramatic images shows that care and closeness were more important than attracting readers when covering this traumatic event. It confirms what research has shown; that national media to a larger extent operates as “fire-fighters”, swooping in and out without having to deal with those left behind the same way as the local journalists (Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000: 471). It also shows that local journalists can play an important role when a tragedy happens, since closeness seems to indicate a more considerate, less harmful approach in the covering. Altaposten’s choice to remove the picture can be seen as an attempt to protect the community and relatives from unnecessary pain.

Identification, speculations and social media

Two of the names of the deceased were published on social media before the police had released any names. One of the publishers were the Norwegian Minister of Finance and leader of the Progress Party, Siv Jensen. One of the fathers who had lost a child was the profiled local politician Ronny Berg from the Progress Party, former wise mayor in Alta. On Sunday, the day after the accident, Jensen wrote on Facebook:

I send my deepest condolences to everyone affected by the tragic helicopter crash in Alta on Saturday. Progress Party central board member and long-time politician in Alta, Ronny Berg, lost his son and a niece in the accident. Progress Party’s election campaign leader in Alta, Svein Berg, was the grandfather of the two. Their family and Alta Progress Party are therefore strongly affected by the accident. I and the Progress Party mourn with them.

Ronny Berg also wrote on Facebook the same day:

Life is so damned unfair. Lots of great young people who had their whole life ahead of them, and now they’re gone. We lost our eldest son Kevin in the helicopter crash. We must search for strength together when life feels ruined and completely empty.

Based on this post, NRK decided to publish, says N:

We knew the closest relatives to Bergs’ son were informed because Berg had tagged his wife. I called the news editor in Oslo, who has the last word, and we agreed to publish. I sent a SMS

to Berg with condolences and told him that we would publish. I asked him about a picture, and he quickly sent a photo of his son on email. Just the photo, no comment (N, interview).

He underlines that they didn't ask Berg for permission but wanted to give him a heads up and an opportunity to choose a picture.

We would have gone an extra round if it was one of the other parents. We know Berg, he knows what he is doing. He is trained, he is used to media (N, interview).

NRK's decision was in line with press ethics – a source who is familiar with media, may be met with a different attitude than a person with little acquaintance with the media. Both A and N underline that they didn't approach the parents or closest relatives after the accident, they contacted the police or contact persons. However, it was important for them that the families and friends understood the journalists' work on behalf of the public.

In contrast to NRK, *Altaposten* asked Bergs' contact person at the Progress Party in Alta for permission to publish the picture of Berg's son and explicitly wrote that in the article. *Altaposten* therefore published the news about Bergs' deceased son later than NRK, and "lost" the news race.

In situations like this, we are walking a tightrope. We are Alta's local newspaper, we belong to them, we should be there for them. Occasionally, not all are fond of us, when they are subject to critical journalism, for instance. But we need to show that we care and that we take peoples' emotions, reactions, and sorrow, seriously. What we risk, is losing peoples trust. If people start thinking they cannot trust us, or that we misuse their feelings, then we risk long term consequences for instance that people don't feel closeness to us, and perhaps feel more anger than necessary. Off course, we should create both anger and engagement, but not in cases like this. In the long run, we benefit from being honest and take ethical and moral decisions (A, interview).

The journalists' discussions reflect what [Chadwick \(2011\)](#) describes as a hybrid media system - changing interactions among older and newer media logics where journalists not always have a gatekeeping role but must deal with active audiences who share information online. This hybrid media environment creates tensions and challenges especially for the local newspaper. *Altaposten* would rather lose the news race than to risk offending the community and their decision reflect a difference between regional and local media. Embeddedness in society and the local journalistic perspective are part of *Altaposten's* working culture, while NRK's decision reflects embeddedness in institutional, journalistic culture. A thinks it gains the newspaper in the long run. "The press ethical gut feeling trumps the press ethical guidelines", he says, meaning that in *Altaposten*, they are sometimes even more considerate than what VVP states.

However, people wanted answers and soon, speculations about the cause of the helicopter accident took off on social media. Little was written in media about the Swedish pilot, who was not a local. Identification of the pilot and rumors regarding cause of the accident, were difficult ethical topics for *Altaposten* and NRK.

We chose not to publish anything about causes and speculations. The pilot had no opportunity to defend himself. He could easily be blamed for the accident. It could easily become a major case, but we decided to wait to see what the investigation concluded (N, interview).

VVP states that one should be careful with identification, especially in the beginning when not all the cards are on the table (Norsk Presseforbund, 2022). The pilot's family did not want his name to be published, and at the time, no one knew whether he was to blame. Both Altaposten and NRK therefore decided *not* to focus on the pilot, or contributing to further speculations. However, when Altaposten 2 days after the accident published the name of the deceased, except the pilot's, a reader commented: "Why is the pilot anonymized? He is not present. He died as well. Aren't we entitled to know who he is?" (Skoglund and Larsen, 2019). Altaposten commented that they respected the relatives' request, to not publish his name. Four days after the accident, Altaposten wrote in an editorial that "no one gains from rumor spreading":

When rumors are formed and spread in a digital world, the level of precision in the information becomes inaccurate. It is important to have a critical approach to the theories being spread. Media also has a special responsibility to filter out information that is not confirmed (Lund, 2019b).

This editorial shows how local media can have a watchdog function towards the community, urging the readers to stop spreading rumors and speculations. For both Altaposten and NRK, press ethical considerations came forward as strong regarding identification and speculations. As A's reflections reveal, being considerate and caring when covering a tragedy is not the opposite of being accountable. Having a watchdog role, including holding local individuals accountable for their role, actions and expectations as members of the community, and caring for "their" society is seen as part of the same thing and not as mutually exclusive. The community role of local journalism can be an overarching role where the watchdog, - advocacy- and information role all serve a community function (Larsen and Naper, 2022: 1473; Hanusch, 2015: 828).

Two and a half year after the accident, the Norwegian Safety Investigation Authority concluded that the accident could perhaps been avoided if it had a so-called crash-resistant fuel system but gives no clear explanations about why the accident happened.

"We cannot care enough." The relationship between local journalists and the community

The closeness between the community and the local newspaper Altaposten is evident, not just in the amount of coverage, but also explicitly addressed in the editorials. Two days after the accident, Altaposten wrote in an editorial: "It is of great value to have a local community that care for those left behind. We must also be there when everyday life comes" (Lund, 2019a). The editorial emphasizes "we" and how the newspaper is part of the community, caring for the surviving family and friends. The editorial underlines the

importance of community, charity, and warmth, and it ends with: “We cannot care enough.”

The perhaps strongest example of Altapostens’ role in the community came 3 days after the accident. The father of one of the deceased contacted Altaposten and asked if they could write about the cortege. He wanted to encourage friends and acquaintances to respectfully follow the cortege on the last stretch towards Alta. The cortege with the five local deceased was driving from Tromsø to Alta, where the funerals would take place.

The initiative was not coordinated with the other parents, but A says the request was “innocent” and they chose to publish. Altaposten updated the article about the cortege continuously, so people would know when to go out. They also followed up with an article about people in Alta who wanted to welcome the deceased. The request from the father, communicated by Altaposten, had a result: lots of people went to the streets. Altaposten wrote, “The people welcomed the cortege with torches and flowers” (Eilertsen, 2019). 34 people commented, all of them with heart emojis.

The way Altaposten dealt with the cortege of the local deceased shows the importance of the society level. The local journalists did not exercise “second-hand” witnessing, but rather “proximal witnessing” (Hess et al., 2021: 24), taking part in the traumatic event by offering a platform for communication about the cortege to the community, and by covering the event on behalf of the community.

Although NRK TF is a regional office, they also produce news on a national level and have a different role than the local newspaper Altaposten. Altaposten covered the accident in more detail than NRK, publishing 83 articles in the period 31.08 – 31.12.19 while NRK had 15 articles. However, both A and N emphasize that they are closer to the community than national media, and in the aftermath, both reflect on whether they were *too* considerate. As A mentions, in the beginning, he didn’t know whether the deceased were someone from his own family:

When I wrote about it... I thought, how would *I* react if I was affected? (A, interview).

N says that perhaps NRK should have been pushier, but:

We must be able to live with our coverage in the future and meet the sources. TV2 and Dagbladet² came and left after a couple of days (N, interview).

Due to the severity of the accident, journalists from several national media also flew in and out to cover the story. In an editorial, Altaposten wrote about how the accident affected the journalists, some of them crying at work. A veteran journalist from the national public service broadcaster TV2 expressed his sympathy, saying “we can leave, but you must stay. We can see that it is a tough job” (Lund, 2019c). Different imperatives drive local and national media reporting of events. Journalists on national newspapers arrive, cover the story, and rush off to the next incident. Local journalists, however, are affected by a tragedy which involves the community. According to Jemphrey and Berrington (2000, p. 471), local journalists understand their local readers’ sensibilities and are loyal both to locality and readers.

Summarizing the news year 2019, Altaposten reveals their thoughts about the accident for the public, explaining, but also problematizing, the ethical decisions that were made (Skoglund, 2019). It addresses that they chose not to speculate about the cause and who was to blame, and the choice of not approaching some of the sources, young people at the festival, relatives, or close friends. The article gives Altaposten an opportunity to reflect on their practices and show the public that they were considerate, what they did and did *not* do, including problematizing the use of the previous mentioned picture. This reflective practice gives the public some insights into journalistic decision-making, including difficult ethical considerations. Finally, it indicates the importance of the society level and the close relationship between Altaposten and its community. The editorial reveals their vulnerability when covering a tragedy and it represents an opportunity for them to being humble and self-critical, to explain themselves and, hopefully, get the acceptance from the local community on how they have behaved.

Conclusion

This article has discussed local journalism, tragedy, and ethical decision-making inspired by previous research which indicates a shift towards an overall local journalism perspective that does not separate the watchdog role from the caring and supporting role (Hanusch, 2015; Larsen and Naper, 2022). I have aimed to explore the space where journalists and news organizations “operate in a relationship with the community they serve” (Vos and Hanusch, 2024: 3), including the importance of closeness and embeddedness. Following this, I have explored ethical decision making on an individual, -institutional, and society level. Using these levels indicate how and under what circumstances decisions are made, including how decisions can change and how the levels are connected. The article challenges the idea of journalism as the “anti-reflective profession” (Shoemaker and Reese, 2014) and it shows that local journalists may exercise reflective practice in public, including sharing in editorials, with students, and in their own, internal evaluations. At some point, most journalists will be sent out to cover a terrible event, and reflections and examinations of their own decisions can contribute to improve ethical decisions and practice in the future. Although it is not possible to generalize the findings based on this case study, they give some indications that can be examined further.

Findings in this article show that the society level comes forward as strong, especially for the local journalists at Altaposten. The interviews, covering, and presentations reveal that care, embeddedness, and closeness, are important values when considering local journalism and the covering of a tragedy. These values are crucial because these media are part of a small community, which makes it difficult to be distant. However, the watchdog role and showing care do not have to be mutually exclusive. For instance, urging the locals to be accountable and not spreading rumors on social media, is also a way of showing care. The interviews and presentations reveal that the accident had a strong impact on the journalists at NRK TF and Altaposten. Being respectful becomes more important when you are a local journalist compared to a journalist who works for national media. When covering a tragedy, the journalists are considerate because they are close to their

community and it affects them, but they also need to be careful because of long term, pragmatic affects. Lack of trust is something local journalists cannot risk; it would make them irrelevant, and the local community may turn their back on them. The findings show that when covering the helicopter accident, being considerate was regarded as necessary and appropriate. As the news editor in *Altaposten* mentions, there seems to be a change in attitude among journalists when covering tragedy, a reflection that the findings in this article also indicate. The normative idea of objectivity, including viewing proximity to a community and closeness to sources as unethical, did not come forward in the interviews or in the texts. Instead, this closeness is perceived as part of what they do, and something they need to consider daily. Care is also a result of pragmatism: local journalists must simultaneously negotiate their position as professionals and as affected individuals of a society. Embeddedness and closeness are therefore closely connected to geography, meaning that local journalism ethics may be stricter than general journalism ethics.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Sikt Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 169787) on January 09, 2024.

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Notes

1. *Altaposten* is owned by Polaris Media, which is partly owned by Schibsted. Schibsted owns VG and has an agreement with *Altaposten* that gives them the right to be the first to buy content.
2. TV2 is a public service broadcaster, *Dagbladet* is one of Norway's biggest newspapers.

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