

Local Newspapers, Facebook and Local Civic Engagement

A Study of Media Use in Two Norwegian Communities

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Abstract

The European decline in newspaper circulation has fuelled debates on the consequences for civic engagement and democratic participation. Based on a qualitative interview study with 29 inhabitants of two Norwegian communities, this article examines the importance of the local press and of Facebook in the civic actions of ordinary citizens. Overall, the study suggests that both media are important and enable citizens' involvement in collective problem-solving. However, their importance lies on different levels, as the two media play complementary roles: Whilst Facebook's networking possibilities enable new forms of online volunteering and mobilisation, the local press constitutes a shared public sphere in which interviewees can gather information and create awareness of local happenings, politics and volunteering.

Keywords: democratic participation, community engagement, local press, social media, qualitative interviews

Introduction

Following a decline in local press circulation throughout Europe, debates within media studies largely revolve around “doomsday scenarios” (Broersma & Peters 2017) and “crisis talk” (Zelizer 2015) concerning the wider consequences for civic engagement and democratic participation. Civic participation is often held as an indication of a well-functioning democracy (de Tocqueville 1835/2001; Bellah et al. 1985), and research demonstrates that newspaper readership might positively affect the degree of civic engagement amongst a population (McLeod et al. 1999; Kang & Kwak 2003; Moy et al. 2004). The press has been shown to play an important role in community building (Janowitz 1952; Finnegan & Viswanath 1985; Friedland & McLeod 1999; Chen et al. 2012), and in both creating and maintaining democratic debate within neighbourhoods (Kim & Ball-Rokeach 2006). Thus, researchers characterise the press as the “lifblood” of democracy (Broersma & Peters 2017:1).

Earlier, scholars such as Putnam (2000) observed a decline in volunteering, social trust and social contact in the United States, and were concerned that the extensive use of

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new media (in this case television) may weaken civic engagement. The increasing use of the Internet and social media in the Western world seems to have enhanced the number of dystopian scenarios amongst researchers. Contemporary researchers fear that the closing of local newspapers may lead to a local democratic deficit (Howells 2015), and that there could be a parallel between a decline in newspaper circulation and a weakening of engagement in just those areas that newspapers previously covered (Shaker 2014). While some scholars fear that Internet may lead to an increase of so-called “slacktivism” – i.e. likes instead of engaging actively (see Morozov 2011), others argue that social media may complement or even strengthen traditional civic engagement (Skoric et al. 2015). For instance, the Internet might more easily connect people interested in volunteering with relevant organisations, and therefore actually encourage civic engagement (Shirky 2008; Eimhjellen 2014). The present article binds these two strands of research together in a discussion of the roles of Facebook (as the largest social medium in Norway) and local newspapers (as the most widely read traditional local news medium) (see Karlsen 2017) in civic engagement amongst local inhabitants.

Many predominately quantitative studies focus on the importance of social media and local newspapers in civic engagement; most of these analyse either social or local media, respectively.¹ Qualitative analysis of the interplay between local and social media is less common, however (Moro 2010). Furthermore, most studies of media use and civic engagement seem to focus primarily on the impact of media on traditional political engagement in terms of the mobilisation of voters, participation in electoral politics (Skogerbø & Krumsvik 2014; Engan 2015), and the mobilisation tactics of formal organisations (Obar et al. 2012). However, there is a need for studies of other forms of civic engagement amongst ordinary citizens, such as signing online petitions, attending town meetings and participating in crowdsourcing (Ebert & Okamoto 2013). Both the *intent* and actual *impact* of new forms of online activities, such as crowdsourcing, remain relatively unclear (Koc-Michaelska et al. 2016).

Based on this demand for contemporary research, the present article aims to answer the following research question: In what ways do local inhabitants make use of the local press and Facebook in civic engagement, and what importance does the media have in mobilising a wider local public? The study uses findings from an in-depth qualitative study based on interviews with 29 inhabitants of two Norwegian communities. Thus, the article offers insight into how and why individuals mediate their engagement in certain ways. There is a long tradition of research into the motives of the individual choices of media channels and contents within media studies (Katz et al. 1973; Diddi & LaRose 2006). For instance, the varied use of different media might be explained by reference to people’s abilities to gratify their needs for information, entertainment, social interaction and escapism (Vincent & Basil 1997).

Before considering the findings, some attention must be given to the Norwegian media context, the scope and definition of the term civic engagement, and previous research on the relationship between media use and civic engagement.

The Norwegian media context

Norway offers an interesting context for an inquiry into the roles of traditional news and social media in civic engagement for several reasons. Firstly, in spite of the decline

in printed newspaper readership, the Nordic countries stand out in the wider European context as having a higher readership of local newspapers (Aalberg et al. 2013; Høst 2017). Researchers consider Norway – and the Nordic countries in general – to be a distinct region within the European media context (Hallin & Manchini 2004; Weibull 2005; Syvertsen et al. 2014). The local press is often considered to be a foundational element of the Norwegian media system (Mathisen 2013), similar to the role of the regional UK press (Aldridge 2007). The press structure is decentralised and characterised by a high number of newspapers published throughout the country (Syvertsen et al. 2014). In 2016, there were 227 newspapers published in 186 different regions in Norway; both a high and stable level (Høst 2017). Although the decline in readership of printed newspapers remains a continuing trend, readership of online editions is increasing, compensating for this to some extent (Høst 2017). The readership of smaller local newspapers has been stable since the 1990s, with 13 per cent of the population being readers of both print and digital editions in recent years (Vaage 2017).

Secondly, Norway was one of the first countries in the world to enable high-speed Internet to a majority of the population (Syvertsen et al. 2014). In 2016, 97 per cent of the population had access to the Internet, and 72 per cent of the population were users of Facebook on an average day (Vaage 2017). Moreover, two thirds of the population engage as volunteers, most of whom are involved locally (TNS Gallup 2016), and the Internet and social media constitute a new arena for democratic participation, for instance through “crowdsourcing” or Internet-based volunteering (see Estellés-Arola & González-Landrón-de-Guevara 2012; Eimhjellen & Ljunggren 2017).

Defining civic engagement

In the light of new communication possibilities posed by the Internet and social media, one can no longer define civic engagement solely in terms of traditional engagement forms – such as voting and influencing representatives (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska 2017). A common definition of current civic engagement is engagement with the purpose of “influencing the selection of actions of decision-makers” (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016:1809). However, political participation covers a wider range of engagement forms – including voting, petitioning online and offline, demonstrating, expressing political views, contributing news articles to social media, et cetera (Gibson & Cantijoch 2013; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska 2017). Contemporary debates within political research revolve around the question of whether these new activities might also be classified as civic engagement (Koc-Michalska et al. 2016).

This article follows a broad definition of civic engagement as any collective political or civic efforts towards community improvement (see for instance Moro 2010; Ebert & Okamoto 2013). This broader understanding of civic engagement encompasses political, civic or voluntary initiatives online and offline – such as petitioning, attending public meetings, crowdsourcing, or any other activities to improve the civic life of the community (Ebert & Okamoto 2013). Thus, the deployed definition encompasses many of the different engagement forms that are taking place in Norway today.

There is reason to believe that politicians and organisations use a wide range of media to influence a broader section of the local public. For instance, local politicians use Facebook in their campaigning to reach potential voters (Engan 2015) and preference

votes (Elvestad & Johannessen 2017) in the local community. Formal organisations also include social media as part of their mobilisation strategies (Eimhjellen & Ljunggren 2017). However, we have less information concerning whether and in what ways individuals who *independently* engage politically and civically mediate their civic actions and spread content through their various networks.

Media use and civic engagement

For a long time, researchers have argued that local newspapers may stimulate civic engagement by, for instance, establishing a common agenda (Bryce 1995) and a shared awareness of local problems, opportunities and interests in the community (McLeod et al. 1999; Shaker 2014). Others affirm that local newspapers are crucial for maintaining both a well-functioning local democracy and a shared local public sphere (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2018). Thus, there are reasons to assume that the degree of civic engagement in society is generally higher when people read local newspapers (Shaker 2014).

Although there is no *direct* relationship between newspaper readership and civic engagement (Chen et al. 2012), one could argue that in a world of free news sources, paying for the news might itself be considered an act of civic engagement (Swart et al. 2016). Newspapers also provide information that, in turn, enables discussions important to civic engagement (Shah et al. 2005). Although local newspapers do not comprise the mainstream media – read by all and connecting the totality of a population – they might be characterised as “keystone media”, being the main providers of professionally produced local news (Nielsen 2015a). Thus, as a news medium, the local press is one of the central pillars of a shared local public sphere, enabling discussion, debate and democratic participation (Engan 2015; Mathisen & Morlandstø 2018).

Some researchers discuss whether the Internet and social media limit democratic possibilities through principally rallying those members of the population who are already engaged (see for instance Bonfadelli 2002; Enjolras et al. 2013), and failing to mobilise offline or face-to-face engagement beyond mere “clicks” and “likes” on Facebook (Morozov 2011). Others note that even following a Twitter feed or joining a Facebook group might enable insight to be shed into civic issues, and could increase interest in specific causes (Kanter & Paine 2012). Through interacting via such digital networks on Facebook, awareness of the issue under discussion may increase and inspire civic engagement (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012).

Thus, social media might complement traditional channels of information, such as newspapers, through possibilities for sharing, commenting and discussing (Penney & Dadas 2013; Liang et al. 2014). Bennett and Segerberg (2012), for example, suggest that traditional collective action – through membership of formal organisations – might be supplemented by more connective action using social media, in which people come together through their use of technology and the relevant networks. As additional channels of communication, social media may also supplement offline methods of engagement, such as physical events, protests and face-to-face community-building (Thackeray & Hunter 2010; Scott & Maryman 2016).

Data and methods

The article is based upon an analysis of 29 in-depth interviews with residents of a small rural local community (approximately 1,700 inhabitants) and of a medium-sized city (approximately 30,000 inhabitants) in Norway. A weekly newspaper is distributed in the rural area, while a daily as well as a free weekly newspaper is distributed in the city (which may be considered a rather more urban area in the Norwegian context).

Although the interviewees were selected from within two communities of different population density and somewhat varying media situations, the comparison between the communities is not the centre of analysis. Instead, the analytical focus is on the present importance of media in civic engagement amongst a wide selection of Norwegian inhabitants.

Interviewee recruitment was accomplished by the snowball sampling technique, where key informants are asked to provide the researcher with suggestions on other potential candidates (Bernard 2013). However, interviewees were also recruited by contacting NGOs, pensioners associations and local Facebook forums. All interviews were conducted between March 2015 and February 2016. Table 1 illustrates some of the variation in the sample.

Table 1. Interviewees listed by main characteristics

| Gender and age | Community | Occupation | Form of community engagement |
|----------------|-----------|------------|------------------------------|
| Woman, 17 | Urban | Student | NGO |
| Woman, 19 | Urban | Student | NGO |
| Man, 27 | Urban | Employed | None |
| Man, 28 | Urban | Employed | Politics |
| Woman, 28 | Rural | Employed | Volunteering |
| Woman, 29 | Rural | Employed | Volunteering |
| Woman, 30 | Rural | Student | Volunteering |
| Man, 32 | Rural | Employed | NGO |
| Woman, 33 | Urban | Employed | NGO |
| Woman, 35 | Rural | Employed | Volunteering |
| Woman, 35 | Rural | Student | None |
| Woman, 42 | Urban | Employed | None |
| Man, 46 | Urban | Employed | Volunteering |
| Woman, 46 | Rural | Employed | Volunteering |
| Man, 47 | Urban | Employed | None |
| Man, 48 | Urban | Employed | None |
| Man, 48 | Rural | Employed | Politics |
| Man, 52 | Urban | Employed | Volunteering |
| Woman, 54 | Urban | Employed | None |
| Man, 62 | Urban | Employed | CSA |
| Man, 63 | Rural | Employed | Politics |
| Man, 64 | Urban | Retired | CSA |
| Man, 69 | Rural | Retired | Politics |
| Woman, 70 | Urban | Retired | Volunteering |
| Man, 72 | Rural | Retired | CSA |
| Man, 78 | Urban | Retired | CSA |
| Woman, 79 | Urban | Retired | CSA |
| Woman, 80 | Rural | Retired | CSA |
| Man, 84 | Urban | Retired | CSA |

Comments: NGO stands for non-governmental organisation. CSA stands for clubs, societies and associations.

At first glance, Table 1 illustrates a variation in age within the two communities, with interviewees between 17 and 84 years old in the sample. In the rural community, six men and seven women aged 28 to 84 were interviewed. In the urban community nine men and seven women aged 17 to 79 were interviewed. Four of the interviewees are high school students or students of universities, whilst 17 are employed and eight are retired. Whilst six of the 29 interviewees are not particularly involved in any civic or political initiatives, four are active in various NGOs and eight in other types of volunteering (such as crowdsourcing, volunteering at the local sports club, or other individual initiatives to improve the civic life of the community). Seven interviewees are involved in various types of clubs, societies and associations (such as the historical society and the pensioners association) and four are politically engaged. The involvement ranges from sparingly attending meetings to facilitating voluntary initiatives and holding leading positions. Thus, the sample provides a good basis for investigating how a wide selection of local inhabitants make use of the local press and Facebook in civic engagement.

Acknowledging that media use is “habitual” and difficult to articulate (Carey 1985), the interviewees were encouraged to log their media use throughout an ordinary day, from morning to night, in advance of the interview. The media log of the respondents’ everyday media habits and communications formed the basis of the interview.

Although not *statistically* generalisable, the insights from this study do offer information that elaborates on what we already know through national statistics (Høst 2017; Vaage 2017). Furthermore, the study presents several qualitative examples important to an understanding of the everyday democratic significance of various media in current civic engagement. The findings are therefore of *analytical* importance and may be transferrable to similar local communities and media situations.

Findings

This article investigates the ways in which a selection of the inhabitants of two Norwegian communities make use of the local press and Facebook in civic engagement, and how they experience the roles of the media in mobilising a wider local public. The analysis shows that both Facebook and the local press play important roles in civic engagement.

A majority of the interviewees in this sample are users of Facebook (21 out of 29 interviewees) and readers of the local press (23 out of 29 interviewees). Although most state that they read the local press and use social media, one can differentiate between the older and younger interviewees’ use of media. When asked to describe their everyday media use, six interviewees – most of which were amongst the youngest in the sample (between 17 and 28 years old) – described themselves as nearly non-readers of their local newspaper, preferring national or international news and newspapers, and social media over the local press. By contrast, older interviewees generally stated that they preferred and prioritised the local newspaper. This corresponds to national statistics showing that the younger generation generally read the local press less often than the older age groups (Vaage 2017), and that they seem to be more internationally oriented than older people, who tend to share a more “local” orientation (Norris 2000).

The theoretical section of the article illustrates some possible roles for local newspapers and social media in civic engagement. The following sections present findings based on an analysis of the roles of both media for civic engagement amongst engaged

individuals in the sample, starting with the role of newspapers, continuing with that of Facebook and ending with how the two might complement each other.

Local newspapers and information sharing

Research indicates that the local press might be relevant to civic engagement by making inhabitants aware of shared challenges (Shaker 2014), and through providing information on the political life of the community (Nielsen 2015b, 2017; Karlsen 2017). Nielsen (2015a) describes the role of the local press as “keystone media” – a main provider of political news in a wider information environment. The role of the local newspaper seems to be to present local news and information that in turn might create engagement within the community by enabling discussion and democratic participation (Shah et al. 2005; Mathisen & Morlandstø 2018).

As previously mentioned, most interviewees read the local press either occasionally or regularly. When asked to elaborate on the importance of the local press for them personally, most state that it is important in order to get an “overview of the local events”, or the political climate and what is currently being debated in the community. Civic engagement seems to be driven primarily by a wish to unite the inhabitants, in order to *collectively* influence and improve the civic life of the community (see for instance Ebert & Okamoto 2013). As a 30-year-old interviewee states:

We work a lot to improve the social situation for youths in the community, making places for them to meet and that sort of thing. For instance, we re-opened a youth club [...]. I did it for the kids, because it is important for them to have a place to meet. It makes them attached to the community and becomes an important part of their upbringing. (Woman, 30 years old)

The interviewee wishes to improve the civic life of the community by offering leisure activities for the next generation. This is expected to help populate and develop the community in the future. Information on local improvement requirements does not arise from thin air, but seems to be partly found in the local newspaper.

A female interviewee in her twenties, for instance, explains that she became aware of the prospect of the local grocery store closing down, at which point she decided to support it to prevent the closure (Woman, 29 years old). Others describe how mediated attention towards the Syrian refugee crisis – those already in Norway, and those fleeing from the war – led to a wish to contribute at a local level by collecting cash donations and clothes for refugees in Greece. Regarding the wish to contribute locally, a 35-year-old woman states the following:

We cannot change the world, but we can get three kids dressed. So at home, we quickly agreed that one of us had to go down there [to Greece]. Therefore, we started to beg for money and clothes in the community and involved the kids from the local school et cetera. (Woman, 35 years old)

Interviewees also said that they post advertisements in the local press in order to inform the community of town meetings and NGO meetings in an effort to mobilise participation. A common account is that interviewees engaged in NGOs use the local press to inform the “community as a whole” of the activities taking place during the forthcoming week.

Correspondingly, interviewees actively promote positive examples of civic engagement in the press. They say that local journalists are interested in writing stories about “positive things that happen” in the community (Man, 63 years old), and that it is crucial to “let the community know what we are doing” (Woman, 29 years old). This indicates that the local press still maintains a shared local public sphere in which the community as a whole is ensured access to information of democratic importance (Engan 2018; Mathisen & Morlandstø 2018).

The previously mentioned 30-year-old female initiator of a crowdsourcing initiative to re-open a youth club in the community states that “we used the local newspaper when we accomplished something – it was very important to us to do that.” This corresponds to other studies conducted in Norway, which state that the local press has an important role as a mediator of not only hard political news, but also lighter news, binding people together within a local community (see Mathisen 2013).

The findings show that interviewees become informed of local community improvement requirements partly through the local newspaper and its information overview. This is often formulated as “knowing what happens” politically, socially and culturally by readers of the local newspaper in the sample. Thus, the analysis indicates that the local press remains relevant to interviewees by creating an *information awareness* of civic and political life in the community. This corresponds with studies indicating that the local press continues to be a main provider of political information, even at a time of increasing use of digital media (Nielsen 2015a; Karlsen 2017). Furthermore, the political and civic information seems to make the public attentive to shared problems, opportunities and interests in the community, which, in turn, inspires them towards civic engagement (see Shaker 2014).

Facebook and mobilising on social networks

Research indicates that social media enables civic participation through its networking possibilities (van Dijk 2012). This is achieved by accessing several social networks and spreading information efficiently (Ranie & Wellman 2012; Satariano & Wong 2012), which could increase the number of people communicating (Guo & Saxton 2013) and make social media a useful tool for the mobilisation of a wider target group (Eimhjellen & Ljunggren 2017).

In the present study, many younger interviewees rarely, if ever, read the local press, although they were far from unengaged either civically or politically. A female member of a youth NGO describes the role of Facebook in the following way:

We make advertisements in the local newspaper regarding meetings [...]. However, in relation to our target group, the newspaper is not exactly the thing... We want to reach people aged 13 to 30, and few of those actually read the local newspaper. Therefore, we use Facebook to reach them [...]. Previously, I used Facebook mainly to speak with friends. Now it is a way to convey a message to the people we try to reach as well. That is, through making arrangements, publishing content, and making people share it repeatedly – in order to make the information stick in people’s minds. (Woman, 19 years old)

At the time of the interview, the NGO was trying to combat loneliness in the local community, which involved organising themed meetings, petitions, stands and organising lectures at local schools. The above statement shows how Facebook has become the preferred way to mobilise a wider and younger target group in the community. Such use of Facebook is common amongst younger people volunteering in NGOs and charities in the sample. They describe Facebook as the main place to interact and mobilise. This can be related to the fact that youth organisations and youth NGOs generally seek to influence younger individuals within the population; i.e. age groups that use Facebook more frequently than they use traditional news media (Vaage 2017). Other young individuals claim that they could not stop using Facebook even if they wanted to, due to their civic engagement and their need to interact with other members and the wider public.

However, the analysis shows that individuals in other age groups within the sample use Facebook in a similar way. The sample contains examples of interviewees using Facebook as a way to inform the wider community of town meetings and current happenings “that seem to reach the masses” (Woman, 46 years old). Other individuals use Facebook to gain access to input from the wider public about engagement in the historical society (Man, 72 years old), or receiving feedback on political ideas on local discussion forums (Man, 69 years old). The latter also says that he “sometimes posts ideas or opinions there, and if it is ‘seen’ by 30 people and ‘liked’ by five, it was not a good idea”. However, most of the senior interviewees seem to engage in traditional engagement mediated through the local press – such as writing letters to the editor concerning issues of the elderly, both locally and nationally.

Interviewees make use of Facebook in order to inform members of the community of forthcoming events (such as fundraising events and crowdsourcing). For example, when a 35- year-old female interviewee was arranging a charity event in the local community (selling arts and crafts), many people did not show up because she merely posted advertisements in physical locations within the community, rather than on Facebook. She stated that “people said to me: I am sorry that I missed it, but you did not post it on Facebook!” The same interviewee states that she posted her opening hours and information related to her crafts store and exhibitions on Facebook, and that Facebook was the most effective way of mobilising a wider local target group for her (previously mentioned) fundraising journey for Syrian refugees:

I begged on Facebook. I told people that I was going to travel to Greece and encouraged people to donate. Refugees Welcome to [place name] helped me a lot as well, and shared my Facebook-posts. The kids in the local school, and the whole community, practically worked towards the same goal. (Woman, 35 years old)

This kind of example is common amongst crowdsourcing initiatives in this sample, and shows how content is shared and spreads within digital social networks, enabling access to several social networks (Ranie & Wellman 2012; Satariano & Wong 2012). In this case, both the interviewees’ own network of acquaintances on Facebook, as well as those on local Facebook pages, participated in cooperative efforts towards the same goal. Others said that the NGOs manage to reach a large segment of the community “with two clicks, and when publishing at the right time” (Man, 35 years old), or using Facebook “in marketing, spreading news to the community and generally being in people’s awareness” (Woman, 46 years old).

Thus, Facebook seems to be relevant and effective in reaching the masses for *on-going* actions and charities, or simply to ensure that such topics are present in the back of the minds of people in the local community. These accounts illustrate the ways in which a larger local public could be reached and mobilised through Facebook, which is hardly surprising bearing in mind that 72 per cent of the Norwegian population use Facebook on an average day (Vaage 2017). The findings suggest that Facebook could be a means of achieving a common goal and mobilising the local public into civic action, rather than leading to “slacktivism” (see Morozov 2011; Enjolras et al. 2013). This is especially evident amongst the youngest individuals in the sample, and corresponds to recent research indicating that crowdsourcing enables democratic participation by younger individuals, who would not otherwise engage in traditional political engagement (Enjolras et al. 2013; Eimhjellen & Ljunggren 2017). The analysis shows that Facebook might be considered a *mobilisation tool* amongst individuals in this sample; used in order to reach specific target groups within the wider local public. However, interviewees often make use of both Facebook and the local newspaper for the same civic efforts, signalling the complementary roles of traditional news and social media.

Conclusion: Tools in the same tool box?

Norway stands out in the wider European context as a nation with a high degree of readership of local newspapers, whilst at the same time following the western trend of an increase in the use of the Internet and social media (Aalberg et al. 2013; Høst 2017; Vaage 2017). However, there is a lack of studies investigating how and in what ways both might be included in civic engagement.

When asked to elaborate on their community engagement, engaged interviewees most often referred to *both* the local newspaper *and* Facebook as a part of the mobilisation process. Interviewees generally expressed that they “have dealt with” both media in order to reach as many people as possible. The following is a common account regarding this:

We started with a Facebook page and then invited to a meeting at the local school [...]. We made and distributed a survey and a petition that we sent to the local authorities [...]. We did many things and went to the authorities to put pressure on them. Then we used the local newspaper when we accomplished something – it was very important to us to do that. (Woman, 30 years old)

The statement illustrates a common *interplay* between the use of the local newspaper and Facebook in relation to community engagement. Interviewees generally use Facebook to invite people to some form of face-to-face meeting at the beginning of a community engagement – and to facilitate the ongoing engagement of participants. Interviewees describe how Facebook enables them to spread relevant information amongst participants and members of Facebook groups, and Facebook seems to facilitate traditional engagement forms (such as public meetings), as well as online crowdsourcing initiatives. This corresponds with research indicating that Facebook is of relevance to civic engagement through its possibilities for rapid information spreading and network sharing (Ranie & Wellman 2012; Satariano & Wong 2012).

Interviewees generally describe that the local newspaper enables information to be shared with the community, where anyone might potentially access it. Often, this takes

place towards the end of an initiative – sharing “positive things that happen” in the community and what NGOs, volunteers or politicians have accomplished. This corresponds with research indicating that the local press not only have a role in sharing hard political news, but also in presenting “happy news” (Mathisen 2013), which, in turn, contributes to the maintenance of a shared local public sphere and understanding of civic and political life in the community (Mathisen & Morlandstø 2018).

Thus, findings presented in the article show that both local newspapers and Facebook are of importance to civic engagement, and the two media seem to complement each other. However, as they seem to have somewhat different roles, one might think of them as different tools in the same toolbox. The use of Facebook for the spreading and sharing of various voluntary initiatives seems to be an efficient way to cooperate towards the achievement of a common goal – especially amongst the younger age groups within the sample (see Ranie & Wellman 2012; Satariano & Wong 2012). However, in ensuring access to local political and civic information relevant to the community as a whole, the local newspapers do fulfil an important role (see Karlsen 2017; Nielsen 2015a). Social media platforms such as Facebook are more fragmented – they cannot present users with the same kind of information overview of the local community as the local press.

Furthermore, one might expect that information shared via digital networks on Facebook will only reach a network of like-minded people, rather than the community in its entirety (see for instance Enjolras et al. 2013). As the youngest interviewees read the local newspaper less often than the older age groups, one might assume that younger people might lose access to local political information relevant to the community as a whole (Karlsen 2017), and that the future of the local press could be at risk (see Broersma & Peters 2017; Vaage 2017). However, this could also signal a change in the future role of the local press as related to civic engagement. Notably, even the youngest interviewees – those who do not often read the local press – do so in civic actions within NGOs and organised volunteering. This fact seems to signal the continued importance of the local press in a wider information environment as a main provider of local news (Nielsen 2015a; Karlsen 2017), which in turn suggests that it remains a media cornerstone highly relevant to civic engagement practices – in spite of overall media use being in a state of rapid change. In this time, in which the circulation and readership of the local press is in decline, there is an evident need for more research on the uses of various media in civic engagement amongst various individuals.

Note

1. A national evaluation of media research in Norway has also criticised media researchers for focusing too heavily on legacy media, thus ignoring the changes that have taken place in the media environment over the past 20 years (Research Council of Norway 2017).

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