



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Digital Journalism*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Almgren, S. (2017)

Undoing Churnalism?: Users sharing local news on Facebook

*Digital Journalism*, 5(8): 1060-1079

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1343089>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hj:diva-36685>

## **UNDOING CHURNALISM? Users Sharing Local News on Facebook**

Susanne Almgren, Jönköping University

*This study investigates the types of information that users of a local news site share on Facebook. This issue relates to the idea of “churnalism”, which concerns a form of weakened journalism that diminishes the ability to perform expected tasks in a democratic society. As a major social media platform, Facebook has acquired substantial influence over news dissemination, and therefore, scholarly focus needs to be directed to users as news disseminators. The manners by which users share news on Facebook indicate whether churnalism is promoted or abated through users’ interaction with online news. In this study, a quantitative content analysis illustrates how 348 news articles published on a local news site were shared 7,266 times. The results show that concerns related to churnalism should be directed primarily to the fact that the news outlet only rarely provides users with opportunities to interact with serious or hard news, while lightweight news is frequently offered. Despite this, users abate churnalism in the sense that the news they prefer to share is news from in-house sources rather than from external sources. The news extensively shared covers changes in the vicinity, and health care, and has emerged from local and regional events.*

### **KEYWORDS**

churnalism; content analysis; dissemination; Facebook; journalism; local; news; social media

## **Introduction**

In this study, the idea of churnalism is investigated by looking into how news users disseminate local news through Facebook. Misgivings have been expressed about contemporary changes that are turning journalism into “churnalism” (Davies 2009), whereby disconnected journalists spend stressful working days tied to their desks, lacking the means to investigate news stories, and functioning primarily as conduits, through which trivial texts flood through unstrained, on their path to the public (Davies 2009, 57-59). Although the concept of churnalism is in a state of flux—as journalism continues to change—it has been suggested that journalism has lost its ability to promote democracy or to present important issues in a range of diverse ways. Ideally, journalism should hold the powerful accountable in prominent spheres such as politics and the economy. Various concerns regarding the changes in journalism have been given emphasis in extant research. One of these focuses on how corporate culture transfers resources from practices that exhort values of journalism to practices that exhort public relations (PR). This implies a journalism that is increasingly influenced by actors outside the journalism profession such as PR practitioners and audiences, which in turn fuels uncritical publishing and dissemination of material that is not aligned with the values of journalism.

This article has a twofold purpose. It aims to elaborate the idea of churnalism by studying how certain aspects of churnalism are performed and to study it in an area that is not extensively studied by investigating what type of news the users of a local news site share on Facebook. An attempt to understand extant research in this field illustrates that concerns related to the disintegration of journalism emerge from multiple related factors. One of these concerns is the financial crisis in the news industry (Davies 2009; McChesney and Nichols 2010; Krumsvik 2012; Ottesen and Krumsvik 2012) and the lack of means to produce news that measures up to a quality that is considered worthwhile. Another aspect of these concerns involves the increasing means allocated to PR, amplifying the impact of content that aims to persuade and is created from commercial imperatives. Another factor concerns journalists’ changing practices in the newsroom and is related to how professionals shape their understanding of users’ preferences. Lastly, there are concerns that involve the actual influence of users through the contemporary news dissemination practices that users can exert when sharing local news, e.g. on Facebook.

Thus, the research questions in this article examine how users disseminate various types of news from a local news site on Facebook. Different news categories can coincide with the aspirations of journalism to varying degrees. If scrutinizing of power holders is considered important, then it makes a difference whether users prefer to disseminate news on politics or entertainment, news produced by journalists at specific news organizations, or copied-and-pasted news agency material. It is also important if the news shared depicts a variety of events and places or if it is restricted to news from a limited area. A quantitative content analysis was performed that illustrated how many times news articles ( $N=348$ ) were shared ( $N=7266$ ) through Facebook. These news articles are allocated social buttons (Gerlitz and Helmond 2011, 2013) for sharing news on Facebook and have visible counters that illustrate the number of articles shared. The material was collected from a news site affiliated with the Swedish local newspaper *Arbetarbladet*, which has previously displayed a high level of user engagement in terms of the extent to which users share news on Facebook (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2016, 74, 77). Extant research is first presented, structured to outline the theoretical framework of this study, followed by the purpose, research questions and the methods, results and discussion sections.

## **Journalism versus Churnalism**

To describe how churnalism constitutes a threat to journalism and how this can be related to how users share news on Facebook, it is necessary to describe the traditional expectations of journalism. This ascribes journalism the task of enabling an informed citizenry by selecting events with specific relevance from an infinite reality and presenting

these events in balanced proportion (Allan 1997; Hvitfelt 1989; Westerståhl 1972). From this perspective, professional values such as objectivity are crucial in the sense that they suggest that journalists can evaluate if events are sufficiently relevant to be depicted in the news. According to Fenton, the purpose of journalism is;

The relationship between news and democracy works best when journalists are given the freedom (and resources) to do the job most journalists want to do—to scrutinize, to monitor, hold to account, interrogate power, to facilitate and maintain deliberation. But freedom in this context does not simply mean freedom from censorship and interference from government so frequently associated with the term ‘freedom of the press’; it also means freedom from the constraints and limitations of a thoroughly corporate culture.

(Fenton 2012, 4)

The resources for journalists to produce unique high-quality material, control facts, and perform the tasks they are expected to are decreasing (cf. Fenton 2012; Harcup 2015; Jackson and Moloney 2015). Former sources of revenue are drying up and journalists work under increased pressure to perform increasingly complex tasks (Ottosen and Krumsvik 2012). Influence by actors other than journalists in decisions that concern news is perceived as a threat to the quality of the work (Jackson and Moloney 2015). In particular, this concerns the influence of PR and journalists’ uncritical use of material from PR practitioners. There are concerns that the lack of time and risks involved are making journalists more prone to using material that can be incorporated with a small effort (i.e., press releases and news agency material) and this will serve journalism poorly (Mann 2008; Jackson and Moloney 2015). The strong link between PR and news agency material has been clearly illustrated (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008). It has been suggested that recycling material has become a habit and that accuracy has become outdated (Davies 2009). The need for high-quality journalism that offers diverse and insightful perspectives has never been more urgent but the opportunities for it are as insufficient as ever. Journalists have been dismissed and local editorial offices closed down (Nygren and Althén 2014); speed is increasingly essential in newsgathering (Davies 2009). However, checking facts takes time and spending time can put journalists under pressure if their efforts are perceived as conflicting with the organizational incentive of cutting costs. Copying material from other newspapers is preferred to additional time-consuming phone calls. Hence, few would disagree that journalism has been weakened and, as advertisers turn to digital giants such as Facebook and Google (SOU 2016; SOU 2015), users have become accustomed to not paying for journalism. News exists in a highly competitive environment among a steadily increasing abundance of online content that competes for users’ attention and journalists are tied to their desks with computers and phones (Thurman and Myllylahti 2009) with limited opportunities to meet their audience. Input from social media is growing in news practice, which shapes elite echo chambers in which journalists risk distancing themselves from those they are supposed to reach (cf. Berglez 2016; Olausson 2016).

The overall picture shows that there has been a redistribution of the resources allocated to perform journalism to churnalism, through the increasing use of professional PR practices (cf. Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers 2014; Krumsvik 2012). As the field of PR is strengthening its position (cf. Jackson and Moloney 2015; Mann 2008), there are concerns that unidirectional copy-and-paste journalism influenced by promotional elements has strayed from the democratizing ideal that journalism is prescribed to be. The number of PR practitioners is increasing (McChesney and Nichols 2010, 49). While, in 1980, the number of journalists and PR specialists was almost the same, by 2008, there were more than 3.5 PR specialists to each journalist. It is assumed that this gap has widened even further since then. PR practitioners are also becoming more professional about inserting material and tailored messages into newspapers through press releases and news agencies (cf. Jackson and Moloney 2015; Mann 2008). In addition, the link between news

agency copy and PR copy can be illustrated in the Swedish context by how news agencies provide support to PR practitioners on how they can increase the chances of turning their press releases into news. One example is how the news agency TT Nyhetsbyrå offers the service Via TT under the headline “Make news of your press releases” (TT Nyhetsbyrå 2017) announcing that “80 per cent of the press releases sent by Via TT result in publication”. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that news agencies are an efficient means for PR to impact the news flow in Sweden, which is also the case in the British context (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008).

From the citizens’ perspective of what news should provide, the PR objective of influencing the public’s perceptions of a product, brand, or organization is problematic when it concerns scrutinizing power holders. However, it would be incorrect to describe the discord between journalism and churnalism as an entirely new phenomenon. The impact of PR on journalism has been acknowledged since the 1970s (Mann 2008). However, it has also been suggested that these concerns tend to miss contextual differences and the differences between the actors concerned (cf. Van Leuven, Deprez, and Raeymaeckers 2014; Jackson and Moloney 2015).

In addition to the competitive conditions for revenue and attention, there has been a concern that journalists could change their practices of selecting and presenting news based on their understanding of the audiences’ preferences. Today, these practices are shaped by their professional offline experience with the audience and promoted by new technology that details certain aspects of user behavior. User metrics are more accessible, offering instant feedback, “Your story is flying! In 12 minutes, you have got 500 readers” (Thurman and Myllylahti 2009, 698; cf. also Ottosen and Krumsvik 2012). However, it could be argued that journalists’ understanding of users is at least partially inaccurate. The incentives for gaining attention and revenue are a temptation to direct news towards topics of sensation, sex, and celebrities (cf. Fenton 2012; Ottosen and Krumsvik 2012, 50). Although active users can be seen as loyal customers, their interaction with news is associated with legal and financial implications, exemplified in cases in which users’ comments have pushed news outlets into legal processes (cf. Ottosen and Krumsvik 2012; Thurman 2008). Journalists’ perceptions of users and the benefits of their influence may be diverse but news professionals have a widespread and long tradition of expressing doubt towards users’ involvement and influence on various steps of the news production process (cf. Lundell 2002; Lewis 2012). This appears to be the case with certain types of news, for instance issues related to crime and migration (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2015; Diakopolous and Naaman 2011). Although journalists’ current understanding of their users can be based on user metrics, this understanding usually emerges in demarcated settings in which ad hoc examples direct the learning process and the underpinnings of why certain content triggers user interactions are not sufficiently studied. Moreover, industry competitiveness makes it difficult for news organizations to benefit from each other’s experiences, forcing each news outlet to re-invent the wheel on their own. When members within news organizations talk about changing news practices, users’ preferences for certain types of news can be used as an argument as to why the selection of news is going in a certain direction. When news producers tend not to value their users’ contributions to journalism (cf. Lewis, Kaufhold, and Lasorsa 2010; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2010) it can be interesting in its own right. However, it becomes even more crucial if journalists alter news practices in a direction that no one actually wants, from journalism to churnalism, based on sketchy beliefs about their users, risking turning churnalism into a self-fulfilling prophecy, for instance, by offering users lightweight news, that users in fact tend to ignore (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2015).

One aspect of the discord between journalism and churnalism touches on the wider issues of whether the rise of social media platforms has led to an increased influence of capital, curtailing the role of the media in the workings of democracy (cf. Dahlgren 2005; Brants 2005; Olsson 2013). News distribution is of interest when discussing churnalism because it relates to the impact of various types of news. Another issue that has gained increasing importance since the US election of 2016 has been how social media algorithms

make various types of news visible to users. However, the discussion tends to be focused on how the dissemination of content is directed by social media platforms rather than on how the users disseminate various types of news. Several scholars have described that an overall transition is occurring, from hard to soft or lightweight news (Deuze, Bruns, and Neuburger 2007; Harrison 2009; Thurman and Myllylahti 2009). Results such as these make it interesting to see what type of news users interact with and whether users align with the content that producers provide or if they choose to emphasize other types of news content.

Users' interactions take place through comment sections or social plugins on news sites that enable users to share news and comments through social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Such technological features are now present on news sites and allow users—to some extent—to participate in the news production process (cf. Domingo et al. 2008), particularly the distribution of news through social media (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2016). Although extant research has illuminated important aspects of the financial crisis in journalism and the rise of PR, the impact of the users in the distribution of news has not been sufficiently noted. In this study, I examine how users share news articles through Facebook and how their way of sharing various types of news differs from or coincides with the news chosen by the local professional news producer. Users can distribute news from the news site interfaces to social media platforms, permitting user influence over news dissemination, but the question of how users actually influence these practices has not been given sufficient consideration.

The extant research in this field can be understood as illuminating a discord between journalism and churnalism with certain elements that can be related to the main focus of this study: the dissemination of news by users. The manner in which users choose to interact with news does not necessarily coincide with the producers' selection of news (Almgren and Olsson 2015; Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013). Users tend to interact with news slightly differently depending on the type of news site and the features for user interaction (i.e. commenting, emailing, and sharing news through Facebook and Twitter) (Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2012; Almgren and Olsson 2016). Facebook plays a specifically salient role because of its widespread general use. Facebook has been shown to host 20 times more shared news than Twitter (Almgren and Olsson 2016).

Past research suggests that users and producers disagree on the question of how users should interact with news (Almgren and Olsson 2015; Bergström and Wadbring 2015). When comparing news producers' somewhat despondent views on the preferences of their users with their users' actual practices, it has been found that users often decline to comment on lightweight news, such as sports and entertainment, and prefer to comment on political news (Almgren and Olsson 2015). This contradiction can be related to the notion of churnalism because the users have a concrete influence on what impact various types of news stories have when shared through social media platforms. If users favor news content that exemplifies churnalism rather than journalism in their news sharing practices, then it follows that users can multiply the presence of churnalism, decreasing the presence of journalism. If users favor news content that exemplifies journalism rather than churnalism in their news sharing practices, then it follows that users can decrease the presence of churnalism, multiplying the presence of journalism. It is therefore relevant to explore the direction that news sharing by users pushes the dissemination of news, between journalism and churnalism.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

This study's purpose is to expand the understanding of churnalism by exploring the discord between journalism and churnalism in a setting that has not been extensively studied to fill the empirical gap in extant research on how users share news from a local news site through Facebook. Users can emphasize and give visibility to news of their choosing by sharing news articles through social media, so users have a concrete influence

over the impact of various news content and are relevant in the discussion of the discord between journalism and churnalism. The following research questions are asked:

- (a) Which categories of news are extensively shared on Facebook?
- (b) From which news sources did these news articles emerge?
- (c) Where did the news events that are featured in these news articles take place (locally to globally)?

## Methods

A quantitative content analysis was applied, focusing on the number of times news items were shared ( $N=7266$ ) on Facebook, for various types of news articles ( $N=348$ ) from a Swedish news site affiliated with the local-regional rural newspaper *Arbetarbladet*. The news site is affiliated with a newspaper with a modest circulation of 22,600 daily copies (Sundin 2011). This study draws on data from a larger project with comparative ambitions (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2015; Almgren and Olsson 2016), studying the various ways in which users interact with a variety of types of news on different news sites. When comparing and controlling for differences in circulation size of the newspaper, *Arbetarbladet's* users constitute the most engaged news site audience when it concerns sharing news on Facebook (Almgren and Olsson 2016), seemingly able to capture the interest of both news users and Facebook users to a substantial extent. Users sharing news on Facebook tend to be younger and more often female than the news user in general (Levy and Newman 2014; Glynn, Huge, and Hoffman 2012; Wadbring and Bergström 2010). It has also been shown that Swedish local news users tend to avoid lightweight news and prefer to comment on news covering their changes in the vicinity, politics and health care (Almgren and Olsson 2015).

The manner in which users disseminate news is generally underexplored, particularly when considering the type of news that the users are allowed to interact with. Because scholarly interest commonly focuses on leading national newspapers, smaller rural newspapers are not equally examined although they are the most common in this media landscape and they may display a substantial level of user engagement when the differences in circulation are controlled for (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2016). This is the case for the local news site chosen in this study regarding how users share news on Facebook; thus, the news site is an important factor for understanding the impact of users' selection and dissemination of news on social media, which can help to illuminate the users' roles in the impact of churnalism.

Users' practices on Facebook are less studied than those on Twitter. However, in Sweden, most news articles are equipped with buttons for sharing news and, during the time the material for this study was collected, most articles also displayed counters showing the number of times that each article had been shared (Almgren and Olsson 2016). This specific newspaper has a leftwing political slant and is the second-largest in its publication area (the city of Gävle). Although commenting on news has been described as a modest phenomenon in Sweden, sharing news through Facebook is substantially more common. For perspective on the practice of sharing news on Facebook, the news items in this study were shared 7266 times across 348 news articles in three weeks. Only articles more recent than three days after publication were included in the sample since news sites differ concerning how news producers keep a substantial amount of the news on the news site for long periods, or whether they replace it within a few days (Almgren forthcoming). Without controlling for this variable, the measuring of user interactions would have been biased by how news producers work with the salience of news, thus, the study would have ended up measuring news producers' preferences in news rather than the users'.

A quantitative content analysis was performed on the news articles. The first variable was the number of times the article was shared on Facebook. The counter feature was shown next to the social plug-in for sharing news on the news article. This counter feature was usually made visible for each social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) on Swedish news sites (Almgren and Olsson 2016). However, an increasingly common

practice among Swedish sites has been to show the button for sharing and cloak the counter feature or display a composited measure for several social media platforms.

The second variable was the news category (politics, economy, accidents, crime, sports and club activities, entertainment and art, working life, science/technology, health care, education and child care, the environment/climate and outdoor life, family and home, infrastructure, changes in the neighbourhood public space, migration/ethnic minorities and integration, and others). The news category variable was constructed using news value theory with traditional news categories, such as political and economic news, combined with test-coding procedures.

The third variable was whether and how the news articles are labeled in terms of news source (with an in-house byline, with the corporate news group, as news agency material, without byline with name and affiliation, as material from an external news organization, or from another external organization). The news source variable is based on how each news article is labelled by the news site. However, it is important to consider that it is difficult to be certain how transparent journalists are in disclosing the impact of PR on the news, not least if journalists tend to downplay the impact of PR (cf. Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008). However, even if it seems reasonable to assume that PR overall has had a larger impact on the news than journalists disclose, the focal point here is to enquire whether the users tend to share certain types of news more than others, or whether sharing is done across various types of news approximately to the same proportions that various types of news are published. For instance, this variable shows the proportion of material presented as news labelled as news agency material, in-house-produced material, unlabelled material, and news labelled with external sources and whether the number of times users share the included news articles coincide with these proportions or not. When considering the allocation of resources between journalism and churnalism, it is of interest to examine the proportion of the material the news organization has labelled as in-house news compared to news agency material. Swedish newspapers attribute news agencies as sources by placing an abbreviation next to the article, for instance (TT) signalling *TT Nyhetsbyrån*, as opposed to articles attributed to in-house journalists, which are labelled with name, phone number, and email address.

The fourth variable was the distance between the place where the news event took place and the newspaper's place of publication (global, Western world, European, Scandinavian, national, regional, local). Google Maps was used to discern the driving time by car from the newspaper's place of publication to the location of the news event reported: local (<30 minutes), regional (30-90 minutes), and national, within the Swedish border (>90 minutes). Scandinavian and European news follow standard conventions, news from the Western world includes the United States and global news includes events from places not included in any of the other categories. A reliability test (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007) was performed using 30 per cent of the material. All measures exceeded critical values (for the variable "Number of times news article was shared on Facebook", Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.98$ , for the variable "News category"  $\alpha = 0.81$ , for the variable "News sources"  $\alpha = 0.90$ , and for the variable "Place of the event from local to global"  $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

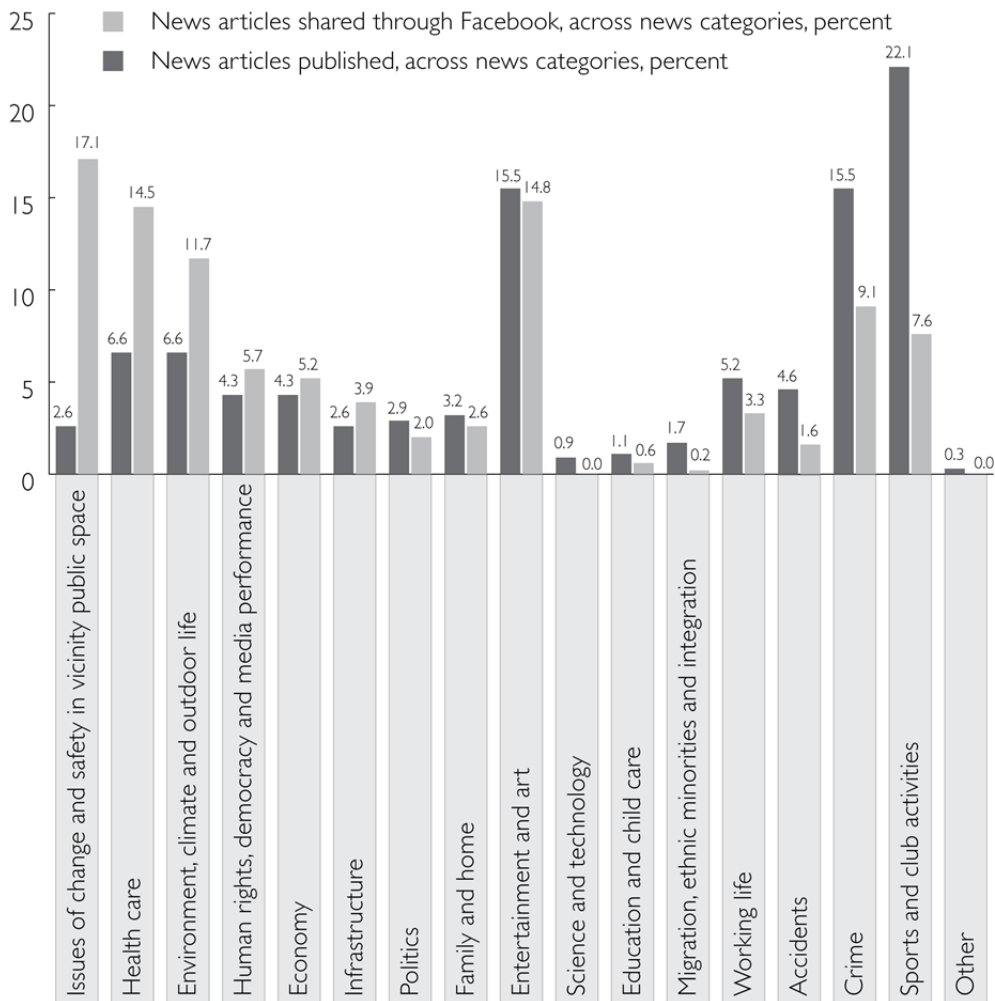
## Results and Analysis

This section is organized so that each research question is answered in order. The results are discussed in conjunction with the aspects of the discord between journalism and churnalism. For RQ1, which investigates the news categories shared on Facebook, the results show that news stories about changes in the local area, health care, and the environment are the ones most frequently shared, given how often such articles are published. Of the news articles shared through Facebook, 17.1 per cent cover changes in the vicinity while only 2.6 per cent of the news articles published cover this news category, 14.5 per cent of the shared news covers health care although this topic is only covered by 6.6 per cent of the news articles published. The results also show that the news that users most frequently decline to share through Facebook covers sports, crime, and accidents



when controlling for how frequently this type of news is published, 22.1 per cent of the published news articles cover sports, but only 7.6 per cent of the news shared through Facebook. News covering crime represents 15.5 per cent of the published articles although only 9.1 per cent of the shared news articles involve this topic. The users avoid sharing sports news and potentially conflict-ridden news in which there are victims or perpetrators (i.e., crime and accidents) with their social media network.

Figure 1. News articles published ( $N=348$ ) and how many times news articles are shared ( $N=7266$ ) through Facebook in various news categories (%)



*Note.* The bar graph displays news articles published (the dark grey bars) and shared through Facebook (the light grey bars) as per cent in various news categories. In the news categories in which the height of the light grey bars substantially exceeds the height of the dark grey bars (primarily news covering changes in the vicinity, health care, and the environment), users are engaged in sharing news on Facebook from this news site. The users are comparatively disengaged with the news categories in which the height of the dark grey bars exceeds the height of the light grey bars (sports, crime, and, to some extent, accidents and working life) because this news is shared less frequently.

When looking into how news from various sources coincides with various news categories, it becomes clear that news agency material primarily influences lightweight news such as entertainment and art and sports and club activities. Not only is this news common, but it also often originates from news agency material. News agency material is

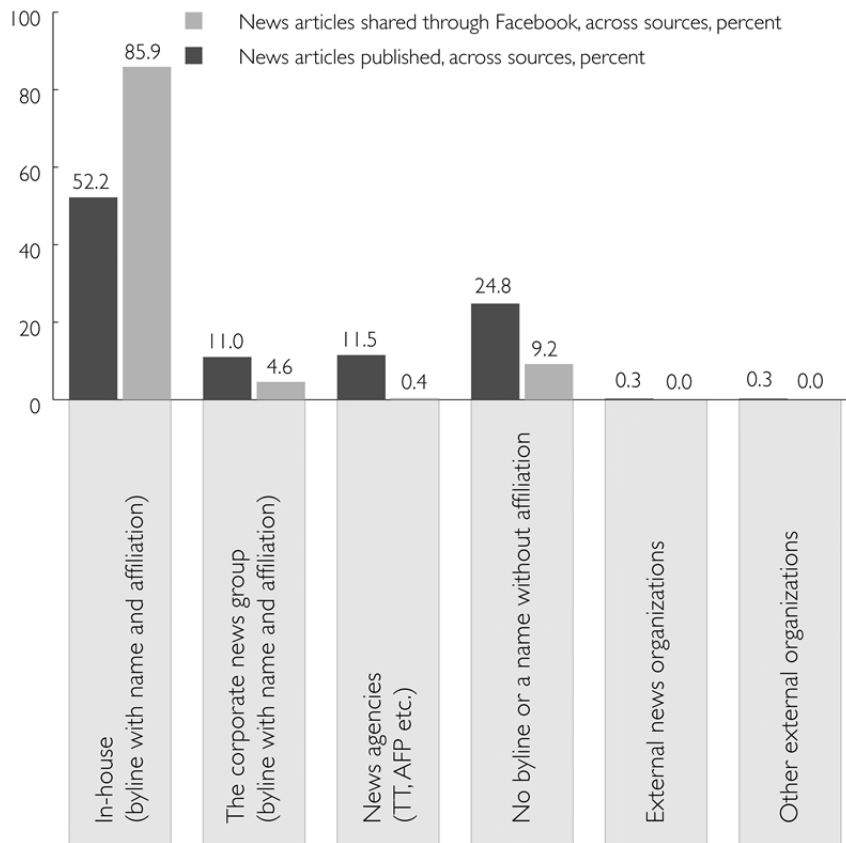
also often the source of news covering human rights, family and home, and science and technology, however, since this news is comparatively scarce within the material its impact among news published becomes more limited.

Table 1. The distribution of news articles ( $N=348$ ) labeled as having emerged from different news sources across various news categories (%)

News categories	News sources					Percent per news category
	In-house	News agencies	The corporate group	Other external sources	Not stated or signature without affiliation	
Issues of change and safety in vicinity public space	2.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	<b>2.6</b>
Health care	5.2	0.0	0.6	0.3	0.6	<b>6.6</b>
Environment, climate and outdoor life	4.3	0.3	0.0	0.0	2.0	<b>6.6</b>
Human rights, democracy, media performance	2.6	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.9	<b>4.3</b>
Economy	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	<b>4.3</b>
Infrastructure	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.9	<b>2.6</b>
Politics	1.7	0.3	0.0	0.3	0.6	<b>2.9</b>
Family and home	1.4	1.4	0.3	0.0	0.0	<b>3.2</b>
Entertainment and art	6.9	5.2	0.9	0.0	2.6	<b>15.5</b>
Science/technology	0.3	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	<b>0.9</b>
Education and child care	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	<b>1.1</b>
Migration, ethnic minorities and integration	1.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	<b>1.7</b>
Working life	4.3	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.3	<b>5.2</b>
Accidents	2.0	0.3	0.6	0.0	1.7	<b>4.6</b>
Crime	7.5	0.0	0.6	0.0	7.5	<b>15.5</b>
Sports and club activities	4.9	2.3	7.8	0.3	6.9	<b>22.1</b>
Other	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	<b>0.6</b>

For the second research question that investigates the news sources of the news articles that are shared on Facebook, the results show that users share news produced by journalists in-house more than news from news agencies or other sources. More than half (52.2 per cent) of the news published has a byline with an in-house journalist, but this applies to 85.9 per cent of the news articles that are shared on Facebook. Although 11.5 per cent of the news articles published are labeled with the name of the news agency, they only account for 0.4 per cent of the news articles shared from the local news site.

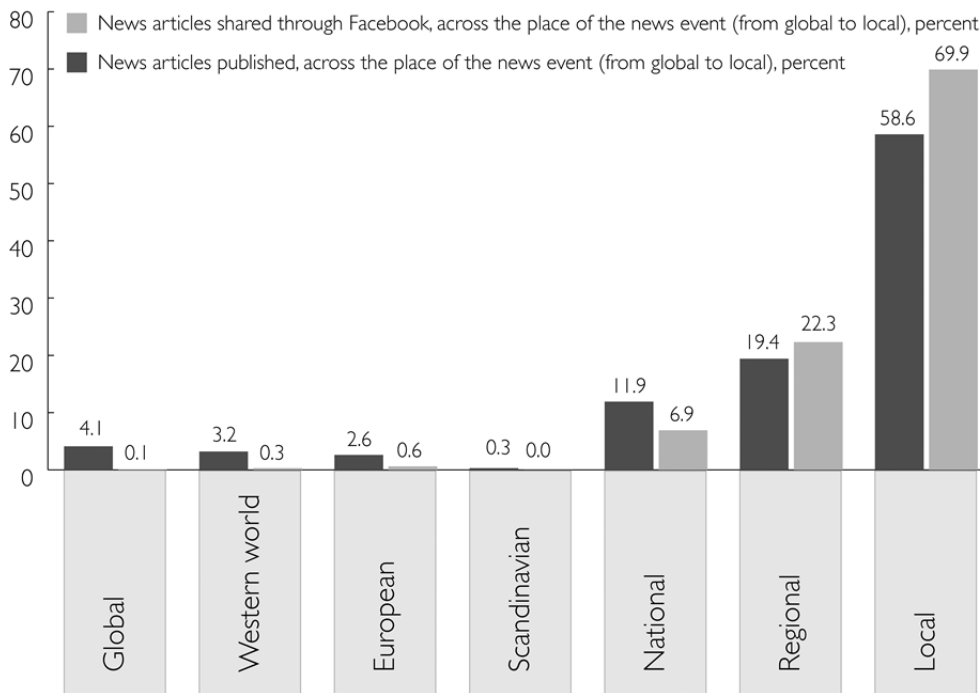
Figure 2. News articles published ( $N=348$ ) and how many times news articles are shared ( $N=7266$ ) through Facebook for various news sources (%)



*Note.* The bar graph displays news articles published (the dark grey bars) and shared through Facebook (the light grey bars) for various news sources as per cent. For the news sources in which the height of the light grey bars substantially exceeds the height of the dark grey bars (in-house news labeled with a byline with one of the newspaper’s journalists), the users are engaged in sharing news on Facebook from this news site. The users are comparatively disengaged with the news items in which the height of the dark grey bars exceeds the height of the light grey bars (news without name or affiliation and news from news agencies) because this news is shared less frequently.

The third research question investigates the location of the news events (on a local-to-global scale) in articles shared on Facebook. The results show that 69.9 per cent of shared news articles relate to local events, although local news constitutes only 58.6 per cent of all news published. A similar tendency, although weaker, applies to regional news. Users decline to share news of more distant events but the news organizations also publish very little news of distant events, so the users have fewer opportunities to share this news through Facebook.

Figure 3. News articles published ( $N=348$ ) and how many times the news articles are shared ( $N=7266$ ) through Facebook for news covering global and local events (%)



*Note.* The bar graph displays news articles published (the dark grey bars) and shared through Facebook (the light grey bars) for various distances where the news events took place globally to locally (per cent). In the news in which the height of the light grey bars substantially exceeds the height of the dark grey bars (local and regional news), the users are engaged in sharing news on Facebook from this news site. The users are comparatively disengaged with the news items in which the height of the dark grey bars exceed the height of the light grey bars (national news and news that is more distant) because this news is shared less frequently.

This section presents contextual information about the results. The practice of sharing local news on Facebook has a distribution that shows that most news articles (55.7 per cent) were not shared; news articles that were shared six times or less constitute 75.0 per cent of the corpus and comparatively few news articles were shared frequently. The five news articles that were shared most extensively represent 37.4 per cent of the times that news articles were shared. To contextualize the material, some of the most shared news articles are displayed below. The most frequently shared news article (shared 855 times) on Facebook describes how a 42-year-old father who uses a wheelchair after an operation is forced to live in a nursing home for the elderly because the municipality denied him homecare (*Arbetarbladet*, March 6, 2014). The second-most shared news article (shared 820 times) describes how a bingeing game (“Neknomination”) spread among youngsters on social media and how young people challenge each other to drink as much alcohol as they can, urged by likes, roots, and other forms of encouragement (*Arbetarbladet*, February 13, 2014). In the article, the coordinator working with drug prevention at the social services department in the city describes the dangers of the game. The third-most shared news article (shared 399 times) describes how a woman (a local chorus show producer and blogger) was appointed the funniest person in the city of Gävle in 2014 (*Arbetarbladet*, March 4, 2014) by an organization. The fourth-most shared news article (shared 345 times) describes how the municipality planned to build playgrounds but the work has been delayed for several years. A local building construction company offered to build the playground at no charge to speed up the process but the municipality declined the offer by referring to the rules of procurement (*Arbetarbladet*, March 4, 2014). The fifth-most shared news article

(shared 301 times) describes how the city's association for "fine beers" was organizing a beer festival in the city (*Arbetarbladet*, February 17, 2014).

Table 2. The table lists the articles that were most frequently shared on Facebook

Swedish title	English title	No. shares on FB
Joakim, 42, tvingas leva på äldreboendet	Joakim, 42, is forced to live in a nursing home for the elderly	855
Farlig dryckeslek sprider sig bland unga	Dangerous bingeing game spreads among the young	820
Lena är Gävles roligaste	Lena is the funniest person in Gävle	399
Han vill bygga lekplats gratis	He wants to build a playground free of charge	345
Premiär för ölfestival i Gävle	Premiere for beer festival in Gävle	301

*Note.* The news articles were published on [www.arbetarbladet.se](http://www.arbetarbladet.se) during February and March 2014.

The results regarding the most-shared news articles suggest that the manner in which users disseminate news has a strong focus on events that take place in the physical space of the local community that relate to change and safety. Two additional dimensions can be traced. There is engagement with people who are perceived to be vulnerable (in this news, patients and young people), and there is a weaker but still discernible engagement with events that relate to local entertainment events. The next section includes a discussion of what this means for the continuing debate on the discord between journalism and churnalism.

Regarding the resources allocated to perform journalism and the research question that focuses on news categories (RQ1), it can be assumed that, if journalism values were prominent among both users and news producers, hard news depicting national politics, party politics, and the economy would be prominent both among the news articles that are published and the number of times these news articles were shared on Facebook. This is not the case (see Figure 1). News articles on politics and economy are not most prominent. Among the news articles published, political news and economic news are scarce, only 2.9 percent and 4.3 per cent of the news articles cover these issues, respectively, a tendency that has been observed on other local news sites (cf. Almgren and Olsson 2015). However, this tendency is even stronger on the *Arbetarbladet* local news site. Producers do not prioritize this news and the users do not often select it to share on Facebook.

Regarding the resources allocated to journalism and the research question that focuses on news sources (RQ2), if journalism values were salient, the news organizations should publish primarily in-house-produced news and less news from external sources and the users would also prioritize this news when sharing news on Facebook. This appears to be the case (see Figure 2), since 52.2 percent of the published news and 85.9 percent of the shared news articles originate from news labeled as in-house production. When considering the resources allocated to journalism and the research question focusing on the location of news locally to globally (RQ3), it could be argued that if the values of diversity in journalism were salient, both users and producers would show an interest in publishing and sharing a variety of news from diverse places. This is not the case (see Figure 3). Both users and producers show a strong preference for local news. Local and regional news constitute 78.0 percent of the published news and 92.2 percent of the shared news.

Regarding the impact of churnalism, it could be considered a problem if both users and producers prioritize lightweight news and news agency material influenced by commercial interests from distant places, compared to hard news and in-house news. Sports and entertainment stories are a significant feature of local news, and have probably been helpful in attracting advertising. However, it could constitute a threat to the expectations of what journalism should provide for a democratic society, if this type of news is given a predominant salience compared to other news, more in line with the expectation to fulfill

the need for information by citizens. This argument is supported when it concerns news that producers publish as news categories, such as entertainment and sports, which occur abundantly (22.1 percent of the news articles published cover sports and 15.5 percent cover entertainment). Churnalism seems to have a more important effect than journalism, as news producers do not emphasize news traditionally viewed as hard news, such as politics and the economy, compared with other categories of news.

However, a similar assumption on the impact of churnalism is not supported when considering how the users on the *Arbetarbladet* local news site share news of various categories on Facebook. The news that is extensively published is not the same news that users tend to disseminate when sharing. Users actually lower the risk of churnalism that news producers pose to themselves in the selection of news for publication. However, neither users nor producers prioritize external news sources or distant news. Regarding the impact of PR practices in the news and users' sharing practices, churnalism does not appear to have a prominent position in how news is labelled on the news site (Figure 2); 52.2 percent of the news articles are labelled as in-house productions through a byline with the name of the journalist and the affiliation to the news site. News from other newspapers in corporate groups and news agencies are comparatively rare (11.0 percent and 11.5 percent, respectively). However, 24.8 percent of news articles display no byline or an incomplete byline. These resemble the majority of articles published in terms of event location (cf. Figure 3), but are slightly more local (68.2 percent local; 14.1 percent regional; 10.6 percent national; 1.2 percent Scandinavian; 3.5 percent western world, and 2.4 percent global). News articles with no (or incomplete) bylines also belong approximately to the same news categories as the majority of published articles (cf. Figure 1), with one salient exception; among articles with no or incomplete bylines, crime stories are almost twice as common (30.2 percent) as they are in the rest of the news (15.5 percent). Although this is an interesting result, it has no apparent connection to the influence of PR mentioned during the discussion on churnalism. Frequently reporting of crime news may, of course, be a fast and easy way to produce content when time is scarce; journalists do not seem encouraged to add bylines to such articles. However, news stories with no (or incomplete) bylines are not the kind of articles that users promote through Facebook in this setting (cf. Figure 2). Judging from how the *Arbetarbladet* news site labels its news, the impact of the news agencies is not the major component of the discord between journalism and churnalism. Interestingly, the same type of introversion that makes users discard news from other places might also work to protect them from the impact of commercial interests.

When examining newsroom practices due to journalists' perceptions of users' preferences, if the news that producers publish coincides with the news journalists perceive that users prefer, then producers must think that users prefer news covering sports, entertainment, and crime news (Figure 1). The producers would also assume that users prefer in-house material and local and regional news (Figure 2 and Figure 3). When comparing the news that producers offer with the news that users share, it is clear that the manner in which producers select news is only partially aligned with what is shared.

When considering how users change news dissemination practices due to their influence from sharing news through Facebook, it is clear that users diverge from producers primarily when it concerns the emphasis on different news categories. The results show that users prefer to disseminate news on Facebook if the news focuses on changes in the neighborhood public space, health care, and the environment (news items that are not emphasized by producers). This dissemination of news on Facebook displays an engagement in what takes place in the community and the situations of and responsibility for various groups of vulnerable people. However, users' and producers' views are substantially better aligned in common preferences for news produced in-house and local and regional news.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The influence of users involved in the news production process has often been associated with decreased quality by news producers (Diakopolous and Naaman 2011; Lewis 2012). The results in this study suggest that such views may infer an overly generalized and shallow understanding of what users do. The manner in which users share news does not fully coincide with journalism's focus on hard news, such as politics or the economy, or on news associated with churnalism, such as entertainment news, news agency material, or PR material promoting commercial interests. The results show that the shared news is primarily produced in-house rather than by external sources.

Notably, the majority of the news published is not in the hard news categories that the values of journalism primarily prescribe (cf. Table 1 and Figure 1). If the type of news that most saliently expresses journalism's core values is scarce, it is difficult for users to distribute this news even if they wish to. There is an abundance of lightweight news that is published, such as entertainment and sports' news, although Facebook users do not emphasize this news when they share news. Thus, this study suggests that it does not seem reasonable to attribute the impact of churnalism (in terms of the impact of certain news categories) primarily to the users' preferences for news interaction.

Even if journalists have a normative conception of what local news is, it can still be useful to study this news from the lens of what journalism is ascribed in the discussion on churnalism. If local journalists would completely omit for instance national political news, in order to give the local users only the local news that they prefer, this could be viewed as a kind of corporate culture that moves journalism practice further away from the ideals of journalism. The users apply a type of public logic that emphasizes proximity but there is more to how users share news. Additionally, the shared news contains aspects of accountability but these concern events that take place in the municipality and focus on how its public officials and administrators measure up to the expectations of those in the area. The political aspects are present but they are subordinated to a proximal event (the impact of the news category covering changes in the vicinity's public space). The news that users share is chosen so that the political dimension is played down and the depictions of people in various situations of vulnerability are emphasized; this includes news about people who are perceived to be in need of care or interventions (the impact of the health care news category) rather than news that is given an angle in which the political dimension constitutes the main entry point.

This softening angle of news presentation is important to consider when discussing normative aspects of journalism and the discord between journalism and churnalism. Even if the news that is shared does not resemble PR material, the shared news does not coincide with what is usually emphasized in journalism. This contextualization of the political might constitute a catalyst to engage users but such an engagement might be limited in its capacity to enlighten the underpinning aspects of politics that brought on the events in the news in which people are afflicted in various manners, as in public administration and resources allocated to enable beneficial facilities for people in a community. This leads to the question of whether journalists should emphasize background material in their reports so that the specific human conditions depicted can be related to more easily than the wider causes that underpin them.

If journalistic ideals imply expectations of engaging users in news that emphasizes national political news, party political news, and economic news, then the results might be disappointing. This news is not what users tend to share on Facebook. However, it is important to note that the users are not offered many opportunities to do so because this type of news is (comparatively) scarce on this local news site. In addition, the results contradict any assumptions that users are primarily interested in sharing conflict-ridden issues. Users on this site have an abundance of opportunities to share news covering crime (and sports) but the users' interest in sharing this news is comparatively low. This is true of news covering issues of migration. The most-shared news on Facebook from this news site shows no signs of moral scandals, celebrities, or sex. This situation suggests that the stories users share on Facebook have little in common with the frequently expressed concerns about churnalism or the way in which users influence the news. In fact, the most commonly

shared news articles relate to people in the community, and to local problems and experiences. Issues involving distant celebrities and entertainment seem less important to users, especially given the number and diversity of published news available to share (cf. Figure 1). Moreover, even if users share news pertaining to entertaining events related to places in the community, when there are glimpses of commercial interests, they appear to be given prominence if they have a concrete impact in the physical space of the vicinity.

When considering journalistic ideals suggesting that journalism should help widen the perspectives of their users, the results may seem problematic. Users sharing news on Facebook show strong preferences for local and regional news and decline to share news covering events from more distant places. The news site does not promote distant engagement because distant news is scarce. In addition, the users substantially increase the impact of local news through the manner in which they share news through Facebook from the *Arbetarbladet* news site. The users and producers are united in an introspective relationship, implying that the local news site is affected by corporate culture primarily in the sense that the producers are providing what the users want, which leads to a scarcity of traditional hard news. It appears as if the focus on events that have palpable impact in the local community keeps the values of churnalism and journalism at bay. The stakeholders that can benefit from the manner in which users disseminate news from a local news site on Facebook are those who can tie their message to the local context and the issues that affect the people living there. The news articles that primarily engage users to share appear to incite emotions of resentment and fear. Any idea suggesting that distant commercial interests could convey commercial messages unconstrained through a local newspaper, such as this, appear quite unlikely (although this might function differently in a national newspaper). In this setting, neither users nor producers appear to be very interested in outside content.

Another issue of interest concerns news published without a byline. In future research, it might be useful to study if journalism practices are exerted in systematically different manners in this type of news than in news with a byline as well as if this type of news is related to the values of journalism or PR. The results of this study suggest that the concepts of churnalism and journalism require further elaboration and that we should consider perspectives that include users as actors of interest in various contexts in addition to news producers. The specific social media platform intertwined in the users' interactions might also be significant. It is important to gain further understanding regarding the characteristics of the news that users interact with in various settings. This would require more open-ended and qualitative approaches to analyze the news that users interact with to explore the discord between journalism and churnalism.



## REFERENCES

- Allan, Stuart. 1997. "News and the Public Sphere. Towards a History of Objectivity and Impartiality." In *A Journalism Reader*, edited by Michael Bromley and Tom O'Malley, 296-329. London: Routledge.
- Almgren, Susanne. Forthcoming. *Users and Producers: Online News as Mediated Participation*. (Working title). PhD diss., Jönköping University.
- Almgren, Susanne, and Tobias Olsson. 2015. "‘Let’s Get Them Involved’ . . . to Some Extent: Analyzing Online News Participation." *Social Media + Society* 1(2):1-11. doi: 10.1177/2056305115621934.
- Almgren, Susanne, and Tobias Olsson. 2016. "Commenting, sharing and tweeting news: Measuring online news participation." *Nordicom Review* 37(2):67-81. doi: 10.1515/nor-2016-0018.
- Berglez, Peter. 2016. "Few-to-many Communication: Public Figures’ Self-promotion on Twitter through ‘Joint Performances’ in Small Networked Constellations." *ANNALES: Series Historia et Sociologica* 26(1):171-184. doi:10.19233/ASHS.2016.15.
- Bergström, Annika, and Ingela Wadbring. 2015. "Beneficial Yet Crappy: Journalists and Audiences on Obstacles and Opportunities in Reader Comments." *European Journal of Communication* 30(2): 137-151, doi:10.1177/0267323114559378
- Boczkowski, Pablo J. and Eugenia Mitchelstein. 2012. "How Users Take Advantage of Different Forms of Interactivity on Online News Sites:Clicking, E-Mailing, and Commenting." *Human Communication Research* 38(1): 1-22. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2011.01418.x.
- Boczkowski, Pablo J. and Eugenia Mitchelstein. 2013. *The News Gap: When the Information Preferences of the Media and the Public Diverge*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT press.
- Brants, Kees. 2005. "Guest Editor's Introduction: The Internet and the Public Sphere." *Political Communication* 22(2): 143-146. doi:10.1080/10584600590933133.
- Dahlgren, Peter. 2005. "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation." *Political Communication* 22(2): 147-162, doi:10.1080/10584600590933160.
- Davies, Nick. 2009. *Flat Earth News: An Award-winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*. London: Vintage.
- Deuze, Mark, Axel Bruns, and Christoff Neuburger. 2007. "Preparing for an Age of Participatory News." *Journalism Practice* 1(3): 322-338. doi:10.1080/17512780701504864.
- Diakopoulos, Nicholas, and Mor Naaman. 2011. "Towards Quality Discourse in Online News Comments." In *Proceedings of the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work, CSCW* (pp.133-142). New York, NY: ACM.
- Domingo, David., Thorsten Quandt, Ari Heinonen, Steve Paulussen, Jane B. Singer, and Marina Vujnovic. 2008. "Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond." *Journalism Practice* 2(3): 326-342. doi:10.1080/17512780802281065
- Fenton, Natalie. 2012. "Telling Tales: Press, Politics, Power, and the Public Interest." *Television and New Media* 13(1): 3-6. doi:10.1177/1527476411425252.
- Gerlitz, Carolin, and Anne Helmond. 2011. "Hit, Link, Like and Share. Organizing the Social and the Fabric of the Web". In *Digital Methods Winter Conference Proceedings*, 1-29. Amsterdam.

- Gerlitz, Carolin, and Anne Helmond. 2013. "The Like Economy: Social Buttons and the Data-intensive Web." *New Media and Society* 15(8): 1348-1365. doi:10.1177/1461444812472322.
- Glynn, Carol, Michael Huges, and Lindsey Hoffman. 2012. "All the News that's Fit to Post: A Profile of News Use on Social Networking Sites." *Computers in Human Behaviour* 28(1):113-119. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2011.08.017
- Harcup, Tony. 2015. *Journalism: Principles and Practice*. London: SAGE.
- Harrison, Jackie. 2009. "User-Generated Content and Gatekeeping at the BBC Hub." *Journalism Studies* 11(2): 243-256. doi:10.1080/14616700903290593.
- Hayes, Andrew F., and Klaus Krippendorff. 2007. "Answering the Call for a Standard Reliability Measure for Coding Data." *Communication Methods and Measures* 1(1): 77-89. doi: 10.1080/19312450709336664.
- Hvitfelt, Håkan. 1989. *Nyheterna och verkligheten. Byggstenar till en teori*. [The News and the Reality. Building Blocks for a Theory] Journalisthögskolan. Källered: Göteborgs Universitet.
- Jackson, Daniel, and Kevin Moloney. 2015. "Inside Churnalism: PR, Journalism and Power Relations in Flux." *Journalism Studies* 17(6): 763-780. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2015.1017597.
- Krumsvik, Arne. 2012. "Why Old Media Will Be Funding Journalism in the Future." *Journalism Studies* 13(5-6): 729-741. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2012.664331.
- Lewis, Justin, Andrew Williams, and Bob Franklin. 2008. "A Compromised Fourth Estate?" *Journalism Studies* 9(1): 1-20. doi: 10.1080/14616700701767974.
- Lewis, Seth C. 2012. "The Tension Between Professional Control and Open Participation. Journalism and Its Boundaries." *Information, Communication and Society* 15(6): 836-866. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.674150.
- Lewis, Seth C., Kelly Kaufhold, and Dominic L. Lasorsa. 2010. "Thinking About Citizen Journalism. The Philosophical and Practical Challenges of User-generated Content for Community Newspapers." *Journalism Practice* 4(2): 163-179. doi:10.1080/14616700903156919.
- Levy, David, and Newman, Nic. 2014. *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2014*. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
- Lundell, Patrik. 2002. *Pressen i provinsen: från medborgerliga samtal till modern opinionsbildning 1750-1850* [The press in the province : from civic conversation to modern shaping of public opinion, 1750-1850]. Lund: Lunds Universitet.
- Mann, Alana. 2008. "Churnalism." In *State of the News Print Media in Australia 2008 Report*, Section 5-2. Sydney: Australian Press Council.
- McChesney, Robert, and John Nichols. 2010. *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again*. New York: Nation Books.
- Nygren, Gunnar, and Kajsa Althén. 2014. *Landsbygd i Medieskugga*. [The Countryside in the Shadows of the Media] Stockholm: Södertörns högskola.
- Olausson, Ulrika. 2017. "The Reinvented Journalist: The Discursive Construction of Professional Identity on Twitter." *Digital Journalism* 5(1): 61-81. doi:10.1080/21670811.2016.1146082.
- Olsson, Tobias. 2013. *Producing the Internet: Critical Perspectives of Social Media*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.
- Ottosen, Rune, and Arne Krumsvik. 2012. "Digital Challenges on the Norwegian Media Scene." *Nordicom Review* 33(2): 43-55.
- SOU (Statens Offentliga Utredningar) 2015. *Medieborgarna & medierna. En digital värld av rättigheter, skyldigheter - möjligheter och ansvar* [The mediated citizens and the media. A digital world of rights and obligations—prospects and responsibility] 2015. Stockholm: Fritzes.
- SOU (Statens Offentliga Utredningar) 2016. *Människorna, medierna och marknaden. Medieutredningens forskningsantologi om en demokrati i förändring* [The People, the Media, and the Market. The Swedish Media Inquiry's Research Anthology on a Democracy in Flux]. 2016. Stockholm: Fritzes.

- Sundin, Staffan. 2011. *Den svenska mediemarknaden* [The Swedish Media Market]. Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Thurman, Neil. 2008. "Forums for citizen journalists? Adoption of user generated content initiatives by online news media." *New Media & Society* 10(1): 139-157.
- Thurman, Neil, and Merja Myllylahti. 2009. "Taking the Paper out of News. A Case Study of Taloussanommat, Europe's First Online-only Newspaper." *Journalism Studies* 10(5): 691-708. doi:10.1080/14616700902812959.
- TT Nyhetsbyrå. 2017. "Gör nyheter av dina pressmeddelanden. Se vår film om hur du förbättrar dina odds." [Make news of your press releases. See our movie on how to improve your odds] <https://tt.se/via-tt/>
- Van Leuven, Sara, Annelore Deprez, and Karin Raeymaeckers. 2014. "Towards More Balanced News Access? A Study on the Impact of Cost-cutting and Web 2.0 on the Mediated Public Sphere." *Journalism* 15(7): 850-867. doi:10.1177/1464884913501837.
- Wadbring, Ingela, and Annika Bergström. 2010. "Mediers värde för olika generationer." [The value of media for different generations] In *Nordiskt ljus*, edited by Sören Holmberg and Lennart Weibull, 407-416. Göteborg: SOM-institutet, Göteborgs universitet.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin, Andy Williams, and Claire Wardle. 2010. "Audience Views on User-generated Content: Exploring the Value of News From the Bottom Up." *Northern Lights* 8(1): 177-194.
- Westerståhl, J. (1972). *Objektiv nyhetsförmedling* [Objective intermediation of news]. Göteborg: Akademiförlaget.