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From investigative to critical local journalism

A quantitative content analysis of critical reporting in local Swedish newspapers with a new analytical focus

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Abstract

Journalism is considered to fulfil a societal watchdog role. However, research indicates that local news rarely lives up to established state-of-the-art definitions of investigative journalism. Therefore, this article argues that the assessment of local accountability journalism must include research on the extent to which it assumes a societal watchdog role in a more basic sense, namely by being critical of events and conditions in the local society in some way.

A content analysis of approximately 1600 articles in three local Swedish newspapers shows that criticism, even in its mildest form, constitutes less than a fifth of the overall output, and that journalists themselves are the agents of criticism in less than 15 % of the critical articles, disregarding editorials, and that they more often criticize national than local power. In news articles, journalists are less often agents of criticism than both politicians, the public, and representatives of organizations. Actors in the public sphere are targets of criticism in 75 % of the critical articles, whereas those articles rarely target the private sector or civil society.

KEYWORDS

Local journalism, investigative journalism, critical journalism, watchdog journalism, news

Introduction

Journalism is reckoned to be an important social accountability institution at all levels in a democratic society (Christians, et al., 2009; Schlosberg, 2013). This designated role has, to a great extent, been assumed by so called investigative or watchdog journalism; a type of high-profile, resource-demanding reporting that through thorough investigations expose wrong-doing in places of power and hold responsible officials to account (Waisbord, 2016; de Burgh, 2008). However, research indicates that even though that type of journalism occasionally appears in the local news, it is far from being a prominent feature (Knobel, 2018; Karadimitriou, et al., 2022). This article argues that a more realistic measurement of how local journalism is shouldering a societal accountability role may be to study the extent to which its content is critical in a basic sense.

Local journalism in the Nordic countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark) has traditionally been held in high esteem and is still viewed as a very important factor for identity shaping, social cohesion, and the formation of an informed and democratically active citizenry at a local level (Nygren, 2020; Morlandstø & Røe Mathisen, 2022). In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) classification of media systems, Sweden is classified as belonging to the Democratic Corporatist Model, which is characterized by high circulation rates, substantial journalistic autonomy, a developed professionalism, and a strong local media (p, 144). News consumption is still high, and local populations trust local news organizations and find their output to be of high journalistic quality (Wessels, et al., 2017). A recent Swedish survey shows that the demand for local journalism in the country supersedes production (Truedson & Karlsson, 2019).

Despite its traditionally strong position, Swedish local journalism is far from untouched by the challenges local journalism faces in most countries. Circulation has declined 40 percent since the 1980's, and since 2001 the reduction of staff has been between 55 and 65 percent among local news organizations. Sparsely populated regions are gradually losing journalistic presence and coverage (Nygren, 2020). The number of political and municipal communicators at a local level has increased dramatically in the last ten years and they are bypassing and supplanting local journalists as sources of information about local politics and administration to a certain degree. Facebook has become a complicated, but determinant, factor in terms of how citizens consume news and information about local society (Nygren, 2020). This development has altered the way local news is selected and produced and has had detrimental effects on the preconditions for local journalists to

produce high-quality, resource demanding investigative journalism (Karadimitriou, et al., 2022). A recent survey shows that investigative journalism in Sweden is suffering from cutbacks and diminishing resources, that less and less time is devoted to this type of journalism, and that local journalism is virtually devoid of substantial high-profile and resource consuming investigations (Stiftelsen Grävfonden [The Foundation for Swedish Investigative Journalism], 2021). The 2022 Swedish government investigation of media subsidies proposes, due to declining economic circumstances, that an increased part of governmental media subsidies should be allocated to support local news organizations, especially in so called “white spots” (Sveriges Regering [The Swedish Government], 2022). Sweden is therefore a critical case if we want to examine how local journalism – in a country where it traditionally holds a very strong position – is upholding a societal accountability function in the face of present challenges. And since there are substantial similarities between the Nordic countries in this context (Morlandstø & Røe Mathisen, 2022), the results from such an examination could, to a certain extent, be generalized across these countries.

We argue that the most realistic way to research the topic may not be to focus on high-profile and resource consuming investigative journalism in local newspapers, but to examine to what extent the accountability function is assumed by a broad criticism of power in all societal sectors. Knobel (2018) points out that even the study of simple criticism in local news gives a valuable understanding of local journalism’s watchdog function and its contribution to the public sphere. Benson (2010) even claims that simple negative assessments “offer a more comprehensive measure of criticism on a day-to-day basis than the occasional in-depth investigative report” (p. 3). Nygren & Tenor (2020) state: “It is more beneficial to view the media’s watchdog role in a broader perspective than to establish an ideal model for what is investigative journalism, and what is not” (p. 199), and Dimova (2012) points out that the simply critical media coverage “sets the range of disputable issues” (p. 65) and is thus giving consumers of local news a bird’s-eye view of areas subject to criticism in the local community, whereas the occasional in-depth investigative story zooms in on one particular problem area.

In this article, we first review previous research on local media’s prerequisites to assume the role as a societal accountability institution. Secondly, we explain the rationale for our study and state our research questions. Thirdly, we present our method, and the results of our study of the extent to which three local Swedish newspapers are critically assessing power in all societal sectors. Fourthly, we present out main findings, and fifthly, based on our

results and previous research, we discuss in what sense, and to what extent, local journalism could be considered a societal watchdog, and we also consider some of the societal implications of the strengths and weaknesses of how that role is assumed.

Literature review: How and to what extent does local journalism hold power to account?

Being critical of societal power has not always been a commonly adopted professional ideal in Swedish media. After World War II, the main role of Swedish journalists was to mirror societal events. The press informed citizens about facts, situations and events in society, and journalists were generally more of a reverent mouthpiece for the authorities than their critic (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2013). But during the 60s, following the professionalization of Swedish journalism and the dismantling of the party-press, journalists came to consider themselves as a regulatory body with a mission to be critical of power and to investigate the exercising of authority (Danielson, 2016); a societal function of the media that has since been supported by governmental reports (SOU, 1975:78; SOU, 2000:1; SOU, 2016:80) and established as a journalistic ideal in Western democracies (Christians, et al., 2009, p. 56).

This development of professional ideals has shaped the image of journalism as one of a democratic society's most important accountability institutions (Schlosberg, 2013). Today, investigating power, asking authorities critical questions, and giving voice to critical opinions are some of the ways in which journalism is assuming a broadly accepted societal responsibility to hold power to account. This responsibility has to a great extent come to be associated with the concept of investigative, or watchdog, journalism (Waisbord, 2016). In Sweden, the shouldering of this purported role is one of the major reasons that journalism is reckoned to be a part of the democratic system, and as such also why it receives public subsidies (Nygren, 2020, p. 183).

Efforts have been made to find a suitable way of defining and typologizing investigative journalism and distinguishing it from other types of journalism. However, there is still no conceptual consensus of what is meant by investigative journalism (de Burgh, 2008; Strömbäck, 2003; Ekström, et al., 2006; Carson, 2020). Some journalists and media researchers even consider the term irrelevant and misplaced (Kunert, et al., 2022; Aucoin, 2005). The prevailing notion, both among practitioners and researchers is, however, that investigative journalism is a "distinct form of reporting, requiring special efforts beyond reporting the daily news" (Carson, 2020, p.

52), or a societal function of “critical scrutiny over the powerful, be they in government, business or other influential spheres of society” (McNair, 2003, p. 239). It has even been suggested that investigative journalists are “a breed apart” (Lanosga, et al., 2017). In their book *Normative Theories of the Media*, Christians et. al. (2009) state that “the purpose is not simply to report events that are public and have public importance but to systematically discover social problems or abuses of power and to use rhetorical resources to move the public to act on these problems” (p. 57).

In Sweden, the public notion of investigative journalism is largely formed by spectacular revelations, nationally acclaimed investigative tv-shows, and high-profile investigations undertaken by journalists associated with national news outlets (Danielson, 2016). Theorists and practitioners propose ideological and normative definitions of investigative journalism, suggesting high degrees of journalistic involvement and high impact results as requirements to qualify as such (Christians, et al., 2009; Stiftelsen Grävfonden [The Foundation for Swedish Investigative Journalism], 2021; Karadimitriou, et al., 2022; Strömbäck, 2003; Waisbord, 2016). In a recent Swedish report, the criteria for what could be qualified as investigative journalism are: high levels of engagement, elaborate research, profound analysis, exclusivity, great importance, and extensive processing (Stiftelsen Grävfonden [The Foundation for Swedish Investigative Journalism], 2021). The report, entitled ‘Less and Less Time for Investigative Journalism’, defines investigative journalism as: “projects that lead up to one or a series of journalistic publications that reveal or depict important events or facts previously unknown to the public. Investigative projects have further been defined as an investigation that approximately has taken a total of (the whole team) at least 40 hours to accomplish” (p. 5, own translation). Strömbäck (2003) claims that journalism that only reproduce criticism based on opinion or hearsay does not qualify as investigative. He labels journalism that just reports, and not actively generates or analyses criticism, “pseudo-investigative” (p. 30).

There is evidently some high-quality investigative journalism produced by local news organizations. The Swedish Association of Investigative Journalism (Föreningen grävande journalister) yearly receives several ambitious locally produced entries competing for their prestigious prize The Golden Shovel; entries that correspond well to the most ambitious definitions of what is meant by investigative journalism (FGJ, 2022). And some local newsrooms do allocate considerable resources to this type of journalism. However, research indicates that in-depth, resource consuming, and high impact investigative journalism is not a prominent feature of local journalism, neither in Sweden (Nygren & Tenor, 2020) nor in other

Western democracies (Karadimitriou, et al., 2022; Knobel, 2018; Barclay, et al., 2022). A Danish report states that critical investigative journalism is virtually absent in local Danish news (Svith, et al., 2017). Nygren (2020) writes that revelatory news stories based on elaborate journalistic investigation are quite rare at a local level (p. 186). In line with these findings, the above-mentioned governmental media investigation explicitly states that producing investigative journalism according to prevalent definitions is not a prerequisite to receive subsidies (Sveriges Regering [The Swedish Government], 2022, p. 149). More than 45 percent of the responding journalists in the report 'Less and Less Time for Investigative Journalism' answered that they did not engage in investigative journalism at all during 2019 (the year of the survey). Of those who indicated that they engage in investigative projects on a daily basis, not a single one worked either in a small town or municipality, nor in any sparsely populated area (Stiftelsen Grävfonden [The Foundation for Swedish Investigative Journalism], 2021, p. 6). In their recent study of the performance of investigative journalism in 18 countries, Karadimitriou et. al., (2022) conclude that recent economic development in the media industry has been a "severe deterrent to costly investigative journalism", that investigative reporting is considered "a luxury process" by some journalists, and that the volume, quality, and complexity of investigative journalism is proportional to the financial strength of the media organization (p. 101). This is a development that does not necessarily favour local news media's possibilities to engage in that kind of journalism.

Local journalists' close connections to the local community also poses a challenge to their purported role as investigators. Local journalists juggle their role as watchdogs with a sense of local patriotism and loyalty. The intimacy of local communities makes critical distance a difficult journalistic ideal. In an interview study in Norway, regional columnists acknowledged the importance of their role as critics within the local community, but they also strongly identified with a patriotic role linked to their geographical position and perceived their work as a mission to advocate the interests of the region (Røe Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2017, p. 245).

In a 2022 interview study of audience perception of local news in seven local communities in the United Kingdom, respondents conveyed that local government was "poorly scrutinized" and that national institutions and local public services were "under-reported, and mis-represented" (Barclay, et al., 2022, p. 6). A survey from the United States shows that even though local news is more trusted than national news, the confidence in the watchdog role of local journalists is low (Knight Foundation, 2019, p. 2), and, in her study of investigative journalism in a cross-section of American

newspapers, Knobel (2018) shows that nationwide and metropolitan newspapers do considerable investigative reporting, but that local and regional investigative journalism is scarce and “do not produce enough accountability reporting to fully engage and empower citizens” (p. 81). She concludes that even though small local papers take their watchdog role seriously, “their size and strength do affect what they are able to achieve” (p. 82).

Furthermore, concerns for the lack of investigative journalism in the local news are not a completely new feature of journalism studies. Earlier research indicates that high-profile investigative journalism has not been a prominent feature of local journalism during the 2000s. One study published in 2002 found that less than 10% of the material in Swedish local newspapers could be qualified as investigative, even if using the moderate definition “journalism based on some kind of investigation, a critical approach and focusing on influential groups in society” (Nord, 2007, p. 520). Commenting on a 2003 Swedish study of 1 184 local news articles, Nygren & Tenor (2020) mention that some of the articles were investigative in some sense, but that “none of the articles were even close to the ideals of investigative journalism” (p. 198, our translation). Ekström et. al (2006) conducted a longitudinal study on how three Swedish local newspapers from 1961 to 2006 “scrutinize” local politicians in the daily reporting. They identified seven types of scrutiny categorized according to methods, structure, involvement and invested time, and analysed the prevalence of those types. Less than one third of the articles could be qualified as scrutinizing in any sense (p. 299), even though one of the categories, labelled “reporting criticism”, was defined as low-key as:

Conveying scrutiny without the editorial staff themselves having to do any active investigation. We are here referring to articles where the newspaper in various ways stages others’ criticism. One example is when the newspaper gives ample space for the political opposition’s criticism of current politics. Another example is articles where dissatisfied citizens or users are interviewed

(p. 297)

In his interview study of Swedish local journalists, Nord (2007) found that some local journalists identified “traditional news routines, which were perceived as more or less adapted to short-term news work” (p. 519), as a factor hampering high-quality investigations. The interviewees stated that most editors favoured fast and swift news reporting over more time-consuming investigative projects. In their study on local journalism in the U.K., O’Neill and O’Connor conclude that local journalists use a

minimum range of sources – often favouring one authoritative source – and that local journalists are increasingly passive, limiting their reporting to a narrow range of perspectives and favouring simplicity over complexity (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008).

The apparently weak position of investigative reporting in local journalism has been the cause of alarm since it compromises local media's capacity to shoulder its threefold democratic mission: to inform the community about significant events and conditions of public interest, to serve as a platform for debate and discussion, as well as to criticize irregularities and wrongdoings and investigate and hold institutions, organizations and individuals wielding societal power accountable (Christians, et al., 2009). Failure to perform adequately in these areas is believed by media scholars to mean a less informed and less engaged citizenry, a poorer debate climate, and a lack of restraint with regards to corruption and power abuse (Moore & Ramsey, 2016, p. 14; Allern & Pollack, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019b, p. 164).

Much of the scholarly measuring of the extent to which local news fulfils the watchdog role has however been concentrated on the lack of high-impact, resource-demanding investigative reporting (Karadimitriou, et al., 2022; Stiftelsen Grävfonden [The Foundation for Swedish Investigative Journalism], 2021; Knobel, 2018). But what happens if we settle for a more pragmatic and low-key definition, including the basic elements of accountability in daily reporting? Nygren (2020) offers a typology consisting of four ways in which local journalism could be reckoned to fulfil the watchdog role. In this typology, he incorporates both investigative reporting that “deeply scrutinize corruption and political scandals” (p. 187) as well as the abstract assumption that the media have a preventive role in deterring mismanagement and corruption. But he also argues that local media serves as a watchdog by regularly publishing articles that, in one way or another, criticize people in power and identify sensitive questions, conflicts and issues at a local level to which politicians and other stakeholders must respond (p. 186). Our research is about the magnitude and range of local accountability journalism at that level.

Aims and research questions

Our research interest is to find out to what extent local newspapers are critical in a basic sense, how agents and targets of that criticism are socially distributed, and what people in power are criticised for, in order to discuss to what extent such criticism

qualifies local journalism for the societal watchdog role it has been assigned.

Previous studies have focused on criticism of local politicians (Ekström, et al., 2006; Nygren, 2020), but our study includes criticism of civil society and private enterprise since we reckon that journalism's responsibility to act as a societal institution of accountability should encompass all types of societal power – political as well as economic and cultural. Therefore, we are interested in the overall social distribution of critical assessments. That is also why our research concerns the entire journalistic output of local newspapers (sports, culture, national news, etc.) and not only local news. We also want to know who is given voice of criticism in the articles, since part of our research interest is to study the extent to which journalists are the origin of the critical assessments, and to what degree they outsource the criticism to experts, officials, and others. This would be an indication of the balance between criticism based on journalistic research and analysis, and reports on criticism and opinions that circulate in the local community. To get indications of the extent to which local journalism is a local watchdog, we are also interested in comparing proportions between criticism directed towards national and local targets.

By quantitatively analysing a broad spectrum of negative assessments concerning all societal sectors, we aim for an overview of the scope of journalistic criticism of societal power in the local community, its agency, and its social distribution. The study also fills a knowledge gap by examining differences in types of misdemeanours for which the representatives of the different sectors are criticized. Our research questions are:

RQ1: To what extent are articles in Swedish local newspapers critical?

RQ2: What sectors are criticized? And for which type of misdemeanour?

RQ3: Who are the critics?

Method

Approximately 1600 articles from three local Swedish newspapers were subject to a quantitative content analysis. The newspapers constitute a non-probability sample representative of Swedish local newspapers in general (Bryman, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004). The newspapers were chosen to represent different regions in Sweden with different numbers of subscribers, owners, political backgrounds, and editorial policies; Barometern in Kalmar, Norran

in Skellefteå and Värmlands Folkblad in Karlstad (see Table 1). Their accumulated circulation in 2019 was around 70 000 copies. However, we intend no comparison between the newspapers. Thus, the articles are considered as an aggregated body of texts, constituting a sample of Swedish local journalism.

| Name of newspaper | Barometern | Norran | Värmlands Folkblad |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Circulation | 36 000 | 19 000 | 13 000 |
| City/Region | Kalmar/ South Sweden | Skellefteå/North Sweden | Karlstad/Central Sweden |
| Type of ownership | Foundation | National media group | Local media group |
| Political background | Conservative | Liberal Party | Social Democratic Party |
| Editorial policies | Liberal/ Conservative | Liberal | Labour |

Table 1: Description of the three local newspapers featured in the study.

The dataset consists of a randomized probability sample of articles collected during a 10-day synthesized period between March and June 2019, and a similar period between September and December 2019. The main reason for the choice of sampling period was to avoid possible impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, which spread in Sweden in early 2020. As we are interested in the overall critical output of the local papers, the sample includes all journalistically produced articles, categorized according to the indicative headings employed by the newspapers. All articles including a headline, a preamble, and at least 500 characters are included in the study.

In our study, we establish a minimum requirement, or lowest common denominator, of what could be considered critical journalism by drawing on elements of Strömbäck's (2003) concept of pseudo-journalism (p. 30); Nygren's (2021) category "news that does not always put decision-makers in a positive light" (p. 186); and Ekström et. al's (2006) category "reporting criticism" (p. 297). We consider criticism as any discrete critical statement directed at some sort of societal power, and we measure criticism by the number of articles in which "critical statements" appear (Benson, 2010, p. 9).

The coding frame included 14 variables of which the first four identify the units of analysis: article ID, newspaper ID, newspaper name, and date of publication. The 10 analytical variables are: 1)

criticism present (yes, or no), 2) target sector of the criticism (public sector, private sector, or civil society), 3) type of conflict (unilateral, bilateral), 4) agent of criticism (authoring journalist, expert, politician, official, representative, member of the public, other), 5) origin of article (inhouse, news agency, other), 6) geographic focus (local, national, international), 7) Type of article (editorial, op-ed, sports, news, financial news, culture, other) 8) criticism of public sector (deviousness, callousness, incompetence, none), 9) criticism of private sector (deviousness, callousness, incompetence, none), 10) c criticism of civil society (deviousness, callousness, incompetence, none). The two authors coded half of the articles each. Inter-reliability testing resulted in an overall Krippendorff's Alpha reliability score of = 0.826 (Krippendorff, 2004). The variable "callousness" showed the lowest score (0,78) but was within the reliability range.

Results

The entire sample consisted of n=1601 articles (see Table 2). News stories in a narrow sense accounted for more than half of the sample. The second most frequent category of articles, sports, represented around a third of the sample. Economy news were scarce, representing only 1,1 % of the total number of articles. Inhouse produced articles dominated the analysed material, representing 80% of the output, leaving 20 % to news agencies.

| Category | % | N = 1601 |
|-----------|----|----------|
| Editorial | 3 | 55 |
| Chronicle | 5 | 84 |
| News | 52 | 827 |
| Economy | 1 | 18 |
| Culture | 7 | 105 |
| Sports | 31 | 492 |
| Other | 1 | 20 |

Table 2: Overview of article categories

How critical are local news?

Our study shows that criticism could not be seen as a predominant feature of local journalism even when applying a minimum requirement for what is considered critical. According to our criteria, we found that less than a fifth of the articles (18%, n=290) included some sort of criticism. Of all news articles (n=827), 23 % included at least one critical statement, but only 7,5 % of all

articles on culture and 4 % of all sports articles were critical in any sense. Of all the critical news articles (n=190), 83 % were locally produced and only 17 % were material from news agencies. Half of all the critical articles (n=290) had a local focus, 35 % had a national focus, and in 15 % of the critical articles the target of criticism was international.

Who is criticized, and for what?

The most frequent target of criticism is the public sector. Of all the critical articles (n=290), more than 73 % dealt with some sort of public office, political or administrative. The private sector, notably private businesses and enterprises, were objects of 13% of all critical articles, and 10 % of the critical articles concerned civil society.

The main critical focus was incompetence (42 %). Officials were criticized for not handling public affairs with the required skill and dexterity. In a third of the articles in which public servants were criticized, the focus was callousness, in the sense of not taking people's feelings into account, disregarding the vulnerable in society, not caring about nature, or in some other way displaying insensitivity. Close to 11 % of the critical articles concerning holders of public office accused them of being devious, corrupt, or dishonest (Table 3).

| | Incompetence | | Callousness | | Deviousness | |
|----------------|--------------|-----|-------------|----|-------------|----|
| | % | n | % | n | % | n |
| Public Sector | 48 | 119 | 38 | 94 | 12 | 23 |
| Private Sector | 32 | 7 | 32 | 7 | 23 | 5 |
| Civil Society | 32 | 12 | 53 | 20 | 8 | 3 |

Table 3: Types of criticism by criticized societal sector (n= 290)

Slightly more than half of the critical articles had a local focus. Close to a third of the critical articles focused on issues of a national character, and 14 % of the critical articles had an international focus. However, the editorials had a national rather than local critical focus. In most critical articles, criticism was expressed unilaterally. Only 16 % of the critical articles were part of a bilateral conflict, in which two parties are criticizing each other.

Who is the critic?

In all critical articles (n=290), criticism is most often expressed by authoring journalists (31 %), followed by representatives of public offices or organizations (26 %), politicians (21 %), and the public (13 %). However, the authoring journalists mainly express criticism in

editorials and chronicles. More than 65 % of the criticism expressed by journalists (n=59) are found in the editorials and chronicles, and these account for only 9 % of the total output of critical articles (not in table).

Around 21 % of the criticism in editorials and chronicles deals with local circumstances. The vast majority (61 %) have their focus on national affairs. In the total output, authoring journalists criticize national circumstances more than local, whereas three out of four critical statements by the public concern local circumstances (see Table 4).

| | Local | | National | | International | | No geographic focus | |
|----------------------|-------|----|----------|----|---------------|----|---------------------|---|
| | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n |
| Politician | 48 | 28 | 32 | 18 | 19 | 11 | 1 | 3 |
| Journalist | 42 | 36 | 48 | 41 | 9 | 8 | 1 | 2 |
| Expert | 40 | 6 | 33 | 5 | 26 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Representative | 57 | 40 | 33 | 23 | 10 | 7 | 0 | 1 |
| Member of the Public | 76 | 28 | 8 | 3 | 16 | 6 | 0 | 0 |
| Other | 2 | 3 | 3 | 4 | 13 | 10 | 1 | 1 |

Table 4: Geographic foci of critical voices (n=290)

In the critical news articles (n=290), 14 % of the criticism is expressed by the authoring journalists themselves, compared with the 27 % in which the main critical voice belongs to politicians. This corroborates Dimova's (2012) study on critical news articles in Bulgarian, Russian, and German newspapers, where she found that the foremost criticism of politicians in the media originated from opposing politicians, not journalists (pp. 73, 74).

Experts are not prevalent as critics in our material. Of all critical news articles (n=190) only 5 % featured a critical expert, whereas 20 % included critical voices from the public. In our material, politicians and the public are criticizing the public sector to a higher degree than other critics, and experts are more inclined than other critics to criticize the private sector. Close to 90 % of the criticism expressed by politicians concerned the public sector (see Table 5).

| | Public | | Private | | Civil | | Several | |
|----------------------|--------|----|---------|----|-------|----|---------|---|
| | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n |
| Politician | 88 | 49 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Journalist | 78 | 66 | 15 | 13 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Expert | 40 | 6 | 27 | 4 | 20 | 3 | 13 | 2 |
| Representative | 66 | 46 | 11 | 8 | 18 | 13 | 4 | 3 |
| Member of the Public | 81 | 30 | 14 | 5 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 |

Table 5: Distribution of type of critical voice by criticized sector (n=290)

Summary of findings

Of all articles (n=1601), less than a fifth contain criticism of a basic character. Of those critical articles (n=290), only half concern the local community. Of the criticized sectors, the public sector is criticized almost three times as often as the private sector and civil society put together. Critical statements against representatives of the public sector concern allegations of incompetence and callousness in equal measure, whereas accusations of deviousness are rare.

Authoring journalists are agents of criticism in 31 % of the total critical output (n=290), but in less than 14 % of the critical news articles (n=190), which is less than both politicians (27%), the public (20 %), and representatives of public institutions and civil organizations (32 %). Of the criticism originating from authoring journalists, two thirds were found in editorials and chronicles. However, the critical editorials do not have a predominantly local focus but are mainly criticizing societal affairs at a national level. Experts are not frequently used as critics in local journalism.

Discussions and conclusions

By producing a steady flow of aggregated and accessible criticism of local society, Swedish local journalism is to a certain degree shouldering a watchdog role in the sense of providing a birds-eye view of problem areas in the local community. Even though criticism is not a dominant feature of the total output, it may still fulfil an important “signalling function” (Benson, 2010) by, on a day-to-day basis, displaying what is considered wrong in local society and putting a certain “range of disputable issues” (Dimova, 2012, p. 65) on the agenda for the public to consider and possibly react upon. Since the critical statements focus mainly on the public sector, this critical output constitutes an important counterbalance to the information distributed by municipal communication

professionals, giving the public a steady, even though not abundant, flow of critical views of how the local community is politically governed in regions covered by local journalists.

However, since previous research shows that the degree of “engagement, elaborate research, profound analysis, exclusivity, great importance, and extensive processing” (Stiftelsen Grävfonden [The Foundation for Swedish Investigative Journalism], 2021) is low in local Swedish journalism, and since our study shows that: (1) articles containing critical assessments constitute not more than 20 percent of the total output, (2) only half of those critical articles concern the local community, (3) the private sector and civil society rarely are targets of criticism, and (4) the majority of the critical editorials were not aimed at the local community; we conclude that local journalism may be fulfilling a local societal watchdog role only in a limited sense.

A factor that is also possibly limiting the quality of the watchdog role is that a journalistic critical voice is not prevalent in the examined texts. In her study on emotions in the media, Wahl-Jørgensen (2019a) notes that journalists outsource emotional expressions to sources and interviewees. Our study indicates that local journalists likewise outsource criticism to citizens, representatives of interest organizations, and politicians. This lack of journalistic criticism raises questions of the importance of a critical stance, that is one of journalism’s declared professional virtues. If sources are the main, and often undisputed critics, what about the critical perspective, the journalistic analysis, and the independence towards those sources?

The results also raise questions as to how much of a deterrent from corruption and other misdemeanours local journalism represents, especially to power outside the political realm. If thorough and well-researched investigative journalism constitutes a deterrent to a certain degree – simply critical statements from sources in news texts may not have the same preventive potency. And since the private sector is the target of only 13 percent of the critical articles, of which authoring journalists rarely are agents of criticism – local businesses may not have to worry too much about journalistic scrutiny. The rare accusations of deviousness may indicate that honesty is increasing among people in power but is more likely an indication of a lack of the time consuming and in-depth investigations needed to expose such deviousness. And if in-depth investigations and analytical critical journalism are to be expected only occasionally, the deterring effect upon mismanagement and corruption at a local level may not be particularly strong.

The fact that local business and civil society are not particularly criticized in the local news may indicate that the journalistic ambition to be a champion of the local community interferes with the professional ideal of the watchdog role (Røe Mathisen & Morlandstø, 2017), a friction that leaves local journalists with an important, and presumably difficult, choice as to what journalistic ideals to adopt, and what journalistic identity to develop. This choice may also be compromised by the apparently increased societal, economic, and political friction between centre and periphery that explicitly and implicitly calls for local patriotism, even from journalists. Morlandstø & Røe Mathisen (2022) note that Norwegian local journalist operating in that friction sometimes have been “criticized for being an uncritical lapdog, described as superficial and deferential and one that skirts controversy” (p. 2). This proclivity for local patriotism may be one explanation for the somewhat surprising result of our study that criticism in the editorials was not primarily focusing on the local community, but on national issues.

Our results also raise some important questions for future research. Does today’s output of critical statements and comments still make local journalism stand out as a more critical and analytical source of societal information than other local media output? Is it conveying more complex and illuminating criticism than what is found on algorithm-driven social media platforms or in hyperlocal media initiatives? If the critical reporting in local newspapers is more of a reflecting surface of criticism circulating in the local community than a result of research and journalistic analysis, how does local journalism distinguish itself from other local media initiatives? And on a final note, what could we reasonably expect from local journalism? What is a realistic balance between critical voices from the community and critical journalistic engagement and analysis, and at what point could local journalists be considered to “produce enough accountability reporting to fully engage and empower citizens” (Knobel, 2018, p. 81).

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