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To cite this article: Roel Puijk, Eli Beate Hestnes, Simon Holm, Andrea Jakobsen & Marianne Myrdal (2021): Local Newspapers' Transition to Online Publishing and Video Use: Experiences from Norway, *Journalism Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/1461670X.2021.1922303](https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1922303)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1922303>



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Published online: 07 May 2021.



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Local Newspapers' Transition to Online Publishing and Video Use: Experiences from Norway

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces convergence and innovation processes in five local newspapers in the Inland Norway region. It is an explorative bottom-up study of how local legacy newspapers' use of digital technology relates to organisational factors and business models, as well as their journalism. Based on interviews with chief editors and video journalists, the paper shows that these local newspapers adapted in specific ways, sometimes differ from their national counterparts. Each newspaper established a web-edition and later implemented a paywall. This change of business model relates to a change of focus from clicks to subscribers. The change is also reflected in their journalism, focussing on certain topics and more in-depth reporting. While attempts at video reporting turned out to be expensive, streaming local sports became an important element in attracting new subscribers. However, it was easier for those newspapers integrated in larger conglomerates to use these innovations as the parent company provided competence in analysing viewer figures, and because innovations could spread from one local newspaper in the company to the others.

KEYWORDS

Local media; video streaming; journalism; innovation; Norway; paywall; conglomeration

Introduction

While local newspapers in many countries seem to be in decline (Nielsen 2015), they still occupy a strong position in Norway (Mathisen and Morlandstø 2019). They play an important triple role in their communities as providers of information and as critical actors as well as builders of the local community.¹ In addition, in local economies, they act as channels for local advertising. There are relatively large numbers of local newspapers in Norway, partly because of a press support system financed by the government (Slaatta 2015). Local newspapers, in general, have survived the transition from legacy to online, even though this has resulted in a decline in the numbers of subscribers to the printed editions (Høst 2012). Currently, almost half of the Norwegian newspapers are owned by one of three larger media enterprises. Schibsted dominates the national press as well as some regional newspapers. However, 85% of the circulation of the local and regional press is controlled by Amedia and Polaris Media (Medietilsynet 2020).

Digitisation of production and the introduction of the internet have opened the way for many changes in legacy media. A range of production studies have analysed those

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changes, but the focus of these studies has been well-resourced national media (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2009). Local media are seldom the first innovators (primary movers). As such they are members of what Rogers (2003) calls the early and late majority in the diffusion of innovations. Most research on media convergence has concentrated on the “innovators” and “early adapters”, while the “majority” and “laggards” have received less attention. As they are not early adopters, local newspapers have a large range of alternatives that innovators (ICT companies as well as more highly resourced legacy media) have tried out before them. However, not all these possibilities are relevant for local media because they may serve no local purpose. This implies that we should account for their adaptation processes and innovations on their own merits.

The adaptation process of legacy media to the new possibilities of digital publishing has involved a series of changes—technological, organisational, economic and journalistic innovations have changed the way these media function. The Reuters Institute interviewed managers, editors, reporters and business staff members of local and regional newspapers in France, Finland, Germany and the UK to find out how they dealt with the challenges and opportunities of the digital transition by looking at business, distribution and editorial strategies (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018). They conclude that “the local newspapers covered face many of the same challenges and opportunities but have responded to them in different ways” (42). Local media in France have or are imposing paywalls, in the UK they focus on breaking news content and video, the German examples have focussed on theme coverage, while the Finnish only have just started the transition. The main difference they found was between independent newspapers and those that were integrated in larger companies (2018, 42).

This article traces similar convergence and innovation processes in five local newspapers in Norway. It is an explorative study of how legacy newspapers’ use of digital technology relates to organisational factors and business models, as well as their journalism. Our principal research question is: How did these local newspapers transfer from print to online? We will specifically examine changes in the journalistic product and the role of conglomeration in this process. As the use of video has been one of the latest important elements in the process, we will also highlight the role of video in their present adaptation. This is an area that is rarely dealt with in the academic literature, but our research revealed its importance in ways which were unexpected.

Online Journalism

For the last 25 years, digitisation and convergence have been the focus of much journalism production research (c.f. Boczowski and Mitchelstein 2017; Witschge et al. 2016). Digitisation generates a long list of possibilities for news organisations (see Mathurine 2013, 4–6). Immediacy (disappearance of the deadline), multi-media publication (the possibility of mixing different media publication), and interactivity (the possibility for consumers to contribute through the same medium, for example, citizen journalism), are some of the new opportunities offered by digital technology. However, they have been used differently by different actors. In the earliest production studies of online news there was considerable interest in analysing how journalistic work was organised—for instance, whether double editorial boards were established that worked differently (cf. Paterson and Domingo 2008; Domingo and Patterson 2011; Menke et al. 2018). Organisational

forms have varied not only between media organisations, but also within the same company as the degree of integration between traditional media production and online production has developed over time (Garcia Avilés et al. 2009; Konow-Lund 2013).

Online journalism is often accused of being less serious, attracting readers through click bait and sensational content. To a certain degree, such differences in content are also substantiated by content research (Sjøvaag 2016; Kvalheim 2013). The question of whether to integrate or differentiate print and online activity is related to journalists' roles and journalistic content. Several studies have noted internal discussions amongst journalists about whether online journalism really is "journalism" (Quandt 2008; Colson and Heinderyckx 2008). Differences in production modes and prestige have resulted in conflicts and a hierarchical division between legacy and online journalist activity and departments (Erdal 2008).

Online journalists are expected to produce multi-media, writing articles, taking pictures as well as recording and editing video to be published on various platforms. Digitisation combined with cheaper video equipment means that online newspapers can easily produce video as part of their content. In this way, they can expand their activities beyond written texts illustrated with photographs as was the norm in printed news. This is a form of convergence attractive not least to younger users who are accustomed to extensive use of moving images on social media (YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, etc.).

Conglomeration

Not only internal organisational processes are involved, but also external organisational processes, such as conglomeration, have taken place. Acquisition and mergers have been usual since the 1980s and are not uniquely connected to digitisation and convergence. However, as Jenkins & Nielsen in the above-mentioned study of local news suggest, independent local newspapers' content strategy differs from that of their conglomerate counterparts:

The difference between newspapers operating independently or in smaller ownership companies versus those that are part of larger parent companies (...) was particularly clear. Independent titles and small groups focus on local depth, whereas larger groups pursue regional breadth or national scale (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018, 42)

The local Amedia newspapers in this study can be considered chain newspapers as they are owned by the same owner but cover different local communities (Sjøvaag 2014). In her study of four Schibsted-owned regional newspapers in Norway Sjøvaag argues that chain ownership "creates economies of scale that facilitate the sharing of technological infrastructure, consolidation of content and work practices, which enables cost cutting across the organisation" (514). In her content analysis, she found that "chain ownership in the Norwegian regional newspaper market cannot be said to represent concentration in content, at least not among Schibsted's titles" (518). We can expect that newspapers that are outside a chain to follow a different route in their convergence process.

Business Models

Traditionally printed newspapers had a double source of income: the reader paid for the newspaper (either print copy or as subscription) and the advertisers paid for

advertisements. Even though some doubted the business model for free online news, most companies seem to have felt forced to publish online news for “free”, or at least to finance their online endeavours through advertisements. Over the last decade, because of increased competition in combination with social media taking over much of newspapers’ advertising income, the issue has become even more precarious. A number of studies discuss the change from gratis to paywalls (Arrese 2016; Myllylahti 2014; Carson 2015; Picard and Williams 2013). Yet, even in 2018 few readers were interested in paying for online news. A large international study from The Reuters Institute concluded that only 14% of users paid for it, even though the Benelux and the Nordic regions are doing better and Norway was leading with 30% (Newman et al. 2018, 22–23). By 2020 the Norwegian figure grew to 42% (Newman et al. 2020, 11).

Audio-visual Content

To what degree newspapers use the different possibilities of the internet varies. Large organisations with many resources have built up an array of platforms they use such as online video (Bock 2011), graphics and podcasts, while they also publish on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat (Jensen, Mortensen, and Ørmen 2016). In addition, they may have established commercial online spin-offs and collaborate with third parties on their websites. Jenkins and Nielsen (2018) discuss how local and regional legacy newspapers also used video, web-graphics, and other web-based platforms to enhance their product, to reach out to more readers and to diversify their income. A report from the USA (Radcliffe 2017) notes that newsrooms will be increasingly visually oriented and cites a local CEO: “Video’s an opportunity for newspapers to come back and tackle, in a low-fi way, the content that it’s too expensive for the TV stations to go after”. (Høst 2019, 7).

The largest national newspaper in Norway, VG established its own video-platform (VGTV) as early as 2000 (Konow-Lund 2013). According to Høst (2011) only a few Norwegian local newspapers produced video for their websites during the first ten years of their online presence. In 2006 the national press agencies NTB and ANB started producing news videos for the web and several local newspapers used these and supplemented them with clips they had produced themselves or user-generated material. Yet even in 2011 local newspapers published few clips:

Among the regular local newspapers there are a few that upload new videos daily or almost daily, but most come under the category 1–3 times per week or sporadically. The local 2–3 issues per week newspapers are for the time being even more restrained. (Høst 2011, 32)

Even though he has not made a comprehensive study of the videos offered online, Høst notes that the videos vary considerably in quality, often made with a minimum of effort and cover foremost “concerts, cosiness and curiosity”.²

The number of local newspapers with video on their website has increased: in January 2012 half the daily local newspapers had at least one new video clip each week, but only 6% of the newspapers with two to three issues per week (Høst 2012). Again, Høst comments on the large variation in quality of these videos, from professional reports to amateurish recordings of public performances (2012, 30–31).

This short overview of existing studies demonstrates that there are certain tendencies but at the same time considerable variation in legacy media’s adaptations, depending on

their situation and strategies. Our analysis of the case studies of five local Norwegian newspapers which follows below will be considered within this context.

Methods

Our approach is explorative and bottom up. In order to investigate the transition from paper to online and the use of internet for distribution at the local level, we chose five newspapers localised in the Inland county in Norway: *Gudbrandsdølen Dagingen* (GD), *Oppland Arbeiderblad* (OA), *Hamar Arbeiderblad* (HA), *Østlendingen* and *Hadeland*. This is thus a multi-case study and not representative of all local newspapers in Norway. However, as we will discuss later, the processes described here can be found to apply generally to other local newspapers.

The project was carried out as a part of a Masters' course in Production Studies. In April/May 2019, a group of four students from the course concentrated on one newspaper each and interviewed the chief editor as well as the person responsible for video production.³ The ten interviews were all semi-structured and carried out on the newspaper's premises. A common interview guide of what items to cover was developed, but each interviewer was allowed to use his/her own wording and ordering of the questions so as to produce an informed conversation with the interviewees.

The interviews started by asking for information about the newspaper, interviewees' attitudes towards local media's role in society and what they considered good content. Then followed questions about the convergence process, the challenges they had experienced and how digital production had affected their journalism and working routines. These questions were informed by course seminars on convergence processes, but they were open ended to allow the informants to come up with their own themes and wording. If necessary, we would ask our informants to elaborate. As the course is part of a Master's degree in Film and Television Studies we were especially keen to know how they dealt with audio-visual media. Therefore we asked specifically about their use of and experiences with video and streaming.

The interviews were transcribed and we used NVivo for a thematic analysis of the interviews, coding the interviews with nodes such as "ownership", "income", "print journalism", "digital journalism", "social media", "Amedia", "internal organisation", "video competence" and "video production", condensing our material eventually under the main topics "organisation", "business model", "journalism" and "audio-visual production". In the interviews, the role of the parent company (conglomeration) dominated the organisation topic. The editor of the independent newspaper talked a great deal about not being part of a conglomerate.

During the analysis, it became increasingly obvious that the various editors in chiefs' accounts have many points in common, probably partly because they go to the same meetings regarding strategy and convergence, partly because they have told this story to outsiders often. Of course, this is a drawback of interview-based research where the researcher has to rely on the utterances of the interviewee. The people interviewed in charge of video production had a more varied background and function. As they probably have not formulated their responses to outsiders very often, their accounts varied more and dealt less often with the more strategic themes we use in our analysis.

The following sections analyse conglomeration, business models, journalism and the use of audio-visual material by the local newspapers. Each begins with a short overview of the Norwegian situation, before looking in detail at the five case studies.

Conglomeration

Amedia dominates the local newspaper market with one national online newspaper and 72 local and regional outlets across the country in 2019 (Medienorge 2020). Even though Amedia has a majority interest in many local newspapers, each newspaper is editorially independent with its own separate history, editorial chief and staff.

As Table 1 shows, the five newspapers have only a limited circulation—three of them (*GD*, *HA* and *OA*) have an equally large circulation of circa 20,000 copies. They are located in small cities of equal size. *Østlendingen* is smaller while *Hadeland* is by far the smallest with only three editions per week and fewer people in the area it covers. There is some geographical overlap between some of the newspapers (for example between *Østlendingen* and *Hamar Arbeiderblad*), but on the whole, the newspapers have a quasi-monopoly in their regions.

The newspapers we have selected thus have several features in common, but also vary to a certain degree. Three (*OA*, *Østlendingen*, and *Hadeland*) are owned by Amedia. *GD* and *HA* have majority local ownership. *GD* is in a special situation as 60% is owned locally, while 40% is owned by Amedia (5% directly, 35% through *Østlendingen*). Even though Amedia does not have a majority share, *GD* has an agreement to be part of Amedia's content development programme. Only *Hamar Arbeiderblad* is without Amedia's support, which consists of common analytic tools for the supervision of user behaviour on the web, a common login interface, sharing of stories, sports rights and so on.⁴ This support from the mother company in innovation is essential for the wellbeing of the newspapers.

Not only does the main office support the individual newspapers, but also new ideas spread through this network. As the chief editor of *OA* explained, 46 Amedia newspapers copied the template *OA* used for a series of MeToo articles. The editor in chief of the smallest newspaper in our sample told us how they had increased editorial cooperation within Amedia since 2014:

We cooperate in editorial matters. From 2014, I think it was then [...] Amedia went through tough downsizing. Many newspapers had to fire people. And we saw that if we are going to

Table 1. Some features of the local newspapers in this study.

	Principal city	Number of inhabitants in main municipality, 1 October 2019	Inhabitants in areas of coverage	Nett total circulation (2019) ^a	Editions pr. Week
Hamar Arbeiderblad (HA)	Hamar	31,144	95,000	19,019	6
Oppland Arbeiderblad (OA)	Gjøvik	30,676	80,000	20,600	6
Gudbrandsdølen Dagingen (GD)	Lillehammer	28,023	70,000	22,454	6
Østlendingen	Elverum	21,191	50,000	16,415	6
Hadeland	Gran	13,642	30,000	7,413	3

^aSource: Medienorge.uib.no, ssb.no.

make it we have to unite forces to a larger degree than we had done previously. And for our part, 2014 became a turning point because then we started to cooperate seriously with the newspapers near us, also exchanging content. So we don't do double work anymore. We don't meet at municipal council meetings, for example. We travel and serve others. The same for sports or cultural events. Now you won't see two Amedia journalists on the same spot—just one who delivers to both. (Chief editor *Hadeland*)

Being part of a media conglomerate thus helped the small newspapers to tackle some of the problems caused by digitisation and increased competition—it increased their competencies in technological and organisational matters and functioned as a network to exchange ideas and routines, as well as the content. As we shall see below the mother company also played an important role in the standardisation of the way audio-visual material is used by the local newspapers and enabling them to establish a sports video portal across the Amedia newspapers.

Standing outside the Amedia cooperation, the chief editor of *HA* expressed his frustration at not having access to this kind of expertise. Even though he emphasised that they also track reader behaviour he was afraid they were falling behind because of lack of advanced monitoring competence and software.

Business Models

Most legacy newspapers commenced their online existence from the 1990s onwards by putting content on the internet for free. The result has been that most local newspapers turned from being print-producing enterprises into media houses producing for different platforms. There was a considerable increase in the number of newspapers with news online from 1999 to 2001 and by 2008, 65% of the smallest newspapers had their own website (Høst 2019, 21). Even so, there was a reduction of online activity amongst the smallest titles between 2009 and 2014 because of the financial crisis. From 2010, the online subscription was initiated and the number of newspapers that have replaced free online news with different forms of subscription arrangements has increased sharply: in 2015 more than 50% of Norwegian newspapers had subscription and in 2018 that had risen to 80% (Høst 2019, 21). The methods of payment have varied between subscription for premium content and a hard paywall, but today almost all subscription newspapers offer two options for their subscribers: either subscription to the printed newspaper with online subscription included or online subscription only. On the website some content is free, but access to substantial parts is only through subscription.

The transition from written newspaper to online news has been a long process for these titles. All the four Amedia newspapers in our study report that they previously had an online version of their paper freely available, hoping that online advertising would cover the costs. But it did not and resulted in diminishing numbers of subscriptions for the printed paper. Furthermore, not all local newspapers embraced the free online policy to start with. *Hamar Arbeiderblad* went against the current:

When the internet arrived most newspapers thought this was interesting and threw themselves into it and gave away the news for free—everything was free. We did the opposite (...), we closed everything. So you can say that we were really early in fencing our content. At that time, we were where others are today, but it resulted in a negative opinion about

Hamar Arbeiderblad online—it was inaccessible while everything else was accessible. And it also created an idea internally that the internet was not important enough to count on. (Chief editor HA)

He went on to explain that their renewed internet commitment started seven or eight years ago and that the editorial staff is now much more internet-minded.

As [Figure 1](#) shows, the number of paper subscriptions to the newspapers in this study has decreased significantly. This has been a process that started around 2000 (Høst 2011). Since the initial assumption that digital advertising would become the main source of income, until 2015 most online material was free, but after that more and more local newspapers have shielded their content behind paywalls and large parts are only accessible to subscribers.⁵ The Amedia group has been particularly successful. Their local newspapers have increased the number of digital subscriptions from under 20,000 in 2015 to 186,000 in 2018 (Kalsnes 2019, see also Lichterman 2017).

The shift from free access to subscription has been relatively easy as most newspapers made the move at the same time. As most local newspapers in fact have a local monopoly, they were in a position to introduce a paywall. In the beginning, they received negative comments, particularly when an article freely available on Facebook turned out to be behind the paywall, but gradually there was acceptance of asking money for access to their content:

What we see is that to start with we were criticized: “Why cannot I read this link on Facebook?” But we found more and more that our subscribers defend us. They comment: “Why should you read this for free—I pay for it!”. Acceptance that journalism costs has increased a lot. (Chief Editor HA)

[Figure 2](#) demonstrates the increase in the number of digital subscriptions over the last few years. However, in absolute numbers *Hadeland* and especially *HA* are lagging behind. As *Hadeland* has a smaller circulation than the others, we could expect them to grow

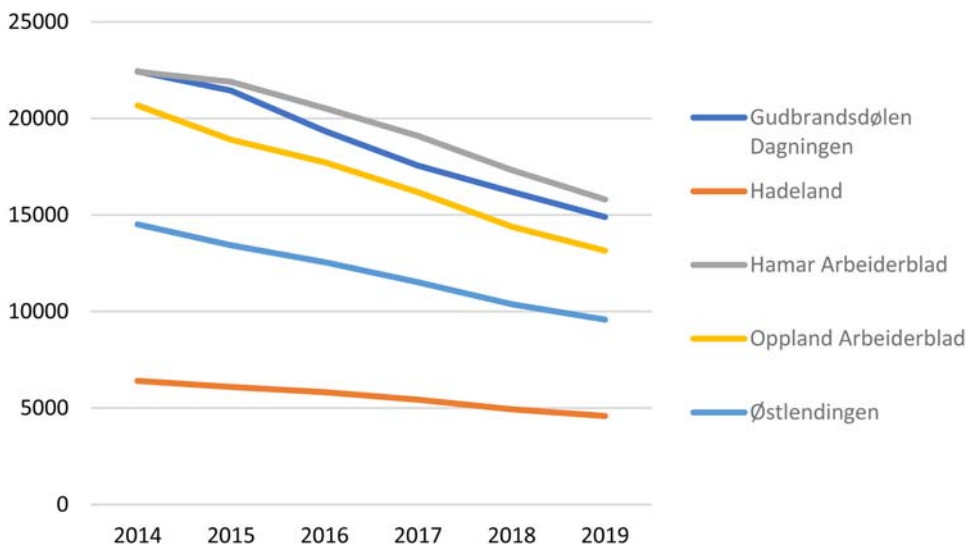


Figure 1. The number of print subscriptions 2014–2019.

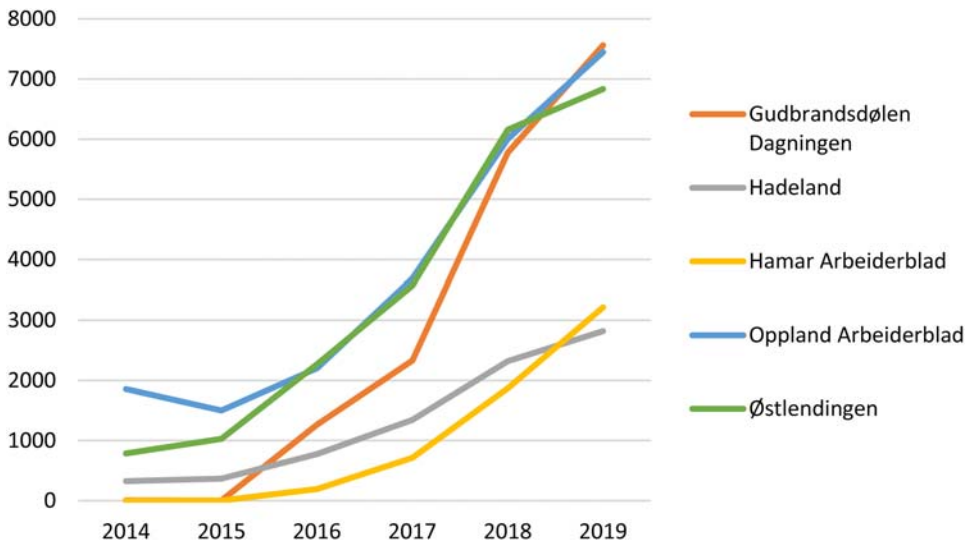


Figure 2. The number of digital subscriptions 2014–2019.

more slowly. The editors of *HA* explain the rather feeble increase in digital subscriptions for their newspaper as a result of not being part of Amedia and the support provided by a parent company.

Online Journalism

Even though all these newspapers produced content for the internet for many years, it is only since 2016/2017 that they decided to prioritise online publishing. Until then the print edition had priority. Now news articles are published online first while the printed paper is produced by reusing the same material.

When asked for the biggest difference between writing items for the printed paper and online, most editors and journalists told us that there were few differences. Even though the content of individual articles is not very different, the use of digital features such as linking, updating, using video as well as tracking reader behaviour mean the journalistic product differs in a number of ways. As several of our informants pointed out, a major factor was the disappearance of a fixed deadline:

It is not clear that the print and online articles are much different as to content. It is first of all about when they get published. We try to have journalists write on location. If there is a political meeting and you have an interview, you sit down and write straightaway. That was a mindset that was difficult for journalists and it took time for us to make them understand that. They were used to being on location, to come back and write for the article to be published the next day. (Chief editor *HA*)

One of the journalists in our sample discussed how online news is more dynamic as items can always be changed and updated online when significant changes happen. Updating is mostly done by adding and linking to a new article rather than by changing the existing text. Unlike Domingo's case where several online sites competed for news in

the same area (Domingo 2008), because our newspapers have local quasi-monopolies the feature of immediate publication was not the cause of intense competition to be the first to publish an item.

Not only immediacy influences the kind of journalism that is produced, but also the business model influences what kind of content is put out. The introduction of paywalls had a strong influence on what kind of journalism is presented to readers. As the editor in chief of *GD* explained:

There was a period in the digital development process where it looked like advertisements would be the mainstay for digital journalism and digital content. There was a long period where it looked like that. At that time people talked a lot about clicks [...] and then words like click-prostitutions, click items, and things like that appeared. This has changed, because formerly one had to get as many clicks as possible to get paid for advertising content [...]. Today it is user payment that is most important. (Chief editor *GD*)

The editors in chief all agree that they now have more insight into what their readers are interested in and use this knowledge to prioritise certain areas:

I know that transport and business, I know that housing, property have many readers. I know that dramatic events and criminality and those kinds of things have it. I know that commentary and opinion articles, politics and public administration have fewer readers. The most important thing I can do is try to have each article within these categories to be the best. (Chief editor *OA*)

Other changes in what kind of areas they cover are related to this: the fact that subscribers now have to log into the newspaper's site means that the editorial staff can have a more comprehensive overview of their reading behaviour:

And we work a lot with content analysis. Every day we carry out close analysis of what occupies our readers, what they read and what isn't read. And not only in relation to clicks, but as much in relation to how long people read an item [...] An item with many clicks that people read only for a short time or if it has a big drop out is a bad item. So, for us the ideal item is one that many people read and continue reading. And preferably also young people read. (Chief editor *GD*)

According to the chief editors, being part of the Amedia conglomerate was the prerequisite to making use of the technological tools available to produce such an analysis, as well as developing other innovative ideas:

We are a company of journalists and marketing people—i.e., advertising salespersons. We simply don't have development competencies inhouse and we are at the mercy of the concern. So now Amedia has gradually built a strong development department and it is a shorter path from when an idea is born in the editorial board to the development department delivering a solution. (Chief editor *Hadeland*)

Kalsnes (2019), who has studied the use of metrics in Amedia, describes how the mother company has used tagging, content analysis and focus group interviews as the basis for a content handbook. Here certain content categories are prioritised. The handbook includes new ways of framing stories as well as having a certain mix of topics and genres and what content to have on each side of the paywall (44–45). However, she also points out that national metrics have to be translated to the local newsroom.

Audio-Visual Content

All five local newspapers in our sample produce video currently and have dedicated employees and routines for this. But the content of the videos has changed over the years. The key date at which many local newspapers started to produce a video for their own webpages was 2013:

We all, I think that in any case almost all Amedia newspapers, have prioritised video the last few years. We had a video boom around 2013. Then everybody produced video. But at that time, it was the kind of video where journalists would stand up and record—this results in talking heads and was in fact the same thing as what was written. Then around 2015 nothing came out of this kind of video. There was no money to be earned and we did not fix it, so from 2016 and until today it has become more live coverage. It can be in connection with court cases, events and things like that, but of course it has most impact with sports. (Chief editor *Østlendingen*)

The smallest newspaper in our sample *Hadeland* went through a similar process:

First, we produced TV —TV items for local television.⁶ After that quite some years passed until we were back to offer video and video clips we produced for mobile phones. And after we found out that this was as time consuming as making TV, we now stream live the stuff that suits live streaming. We could probably find more content, but overall we have live streaming of football games and handball games. (Chief editor *Hadeland*)

The discovery that live streaming of local sports, in particular, popular sports like football and handball, and also children's sports tournaments attracted much local attention was an important one. Now local papers cooperate with local sports clubs that often record the events for them. These recordings are streamed live and available for delayed viewing through links on the local newspapers' webpages. Amedia has provided a common platform for these sports videos so subscribers to any Amedia newspaper can also watch games from other cities; it has also acquired the rights for league football from the second to the fourth division.

While video reporting used to be the main activity in the audio-visual field, direct streaming has taken over for all the local newspapers. Not to say that video reports have completely disappeared, but their use has been restricted to items where pictures show what is hard to express in words. The web editor responsible for video at *GD* summed it up as:

Some years ago, there was much focus on having lots of videos and everyone should produce it. But this has reversed somewhat because making videos is also a craft. And we can see that video reports don't necessarily increase activity. It has rather a support function. It can be used a little in social media or it can be a part of an item to show something exceptional, and maybe in particular with events: floods, fires and things like that, but we produce little video. What we did before, what we tried formerly we have put away now somewhat. Now we know that it is live broadcasts the readers want, and we know that readers sign up for subscription so they can follow the direct broadcasts. (Web editor responsible for video *GD*)

Streaming of local sports is considered an important factor in recruiting new digital subscribers. As the editor of *Østlendingen* told us, when asked whether streaming of matches also generated subscribers:

Absolutely, we recruit many subscribers through live broadcast football matches, for example. Clearly, we reach new groups here. It is true that [...] people over 60 years are very loyal to *Østlendingen* and they have read *Østlendingen* all their life, and still do so. And there have been a few years where we got hardly any subscribers in their 20s or 30s. But it is clear that when we stream football live it means that you relate to this group. We also try to do that with our journalism otherwise and we focus on what we call under 45-items and items that hit the family segment. (Chief editor *Østlendingen*)

In addition to sports and visual events, some of the newspapers arrange or mediate other content—sometimes municipal council meetings, discussions on current themes or concerts are streamed. However, this seems to be more occasional and none of the editors in chief nor the video journalists mentioned them as routine assignments.

HA, because it is not a member of Amedia, does not have rights to cover local top sports clubs. However, they also stream related sports items, such as discussions with experts before and after the matches, interviews with trainers and video from training sessions. The editor in chief answered our question about whether this kind of streaming results in more subscriptions by saying:

Yes, definitely (...) A training match in January [for the local ice hockey club] generates subscriptions. (...) We are very much locked out for this as Amedia has bought the rights, and it is difficult for us, very demanding. This is the main driver for Amedia when it comes to selling subscriptions. (Chief editor *HA*)

Being independent thus comes with a price, not only in terms of in-house competence but also other collective issues that are taken care of by the mother company.

Discussion

We set out to find the relationships between organisational processes, business models and journalist practices during this convergence process and our findings indicate that these factors are intimately interconnected. Adaptation from print to online publishing is a continuous process—as long as print and web versions of the local newspapers exist side by side, the two will constantly influence each other even though online activities have strengthened their relative position.

We may discern two phases—the first lasting from 1995 until around 2015. During the start of this phase, the printed product had primacy and the newspapers had different solutions as to how much they made available online, whether they were paid for it, how much weight they put on video reports, etc. For some newspapers, electronic publishing consisted initially of putting PDF files of the printed edition online. By the end of the first phase, the offer had become more standardised and all local newspapers had an online offer for free.

Online production had several consequences for journalists' working processes. The disappearance of the deadline played a major role. From the point of view of the editors a main challenge was to have journalists not waiting for a deadline in the afternoon, but to produce content evenly through the day. Even though the introduction of online publishing as well as content management systems demanded the journalists change their working routines, several observers point out that media organisations are rather slow in innovation (Steensen 2009; Wurff and Lauf 2005). Hagen, Tolstad,

and Bygdås (2018) report their action research in one of the Amedia newspapers (Moss Avis) where they observed and facilitated what they call a change “from deadline to flowline”, indicating that the newsroom was essentially directed towards print as recently as 2017.

At the end of the first phase, the expectation was that journalists would become multi-media journalists, writing, taking photos and producing video (with their mobile phones) from the same event and publishing this online. How much the editors in our case studies pressed their journalists to do this is not clear but certainly, not everyone was happy with this situation. It often resulted in different versions of the same text—one written and one spoken. Readers did not respond positively to this either. Probably these are the kind of videos that Cantarero, Neira, and Pérez (2015) investigated when they found that readers of the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* thought that inserted videos on their tablets did not give added journalistic value, concluding that readers would rather read a text than hear it:

It is interesting to keep in mind that all of the people who say that they are more interested in reading the news than watching videos, and thereby identifying different attitudes in themselves as readers and of spectators of audio-visual content, are over forty years-old. Among the reasons given for this preference is that reading allows for a quicker selection of news, the usual ‘skimming’, whereas video must be seen through to the end to obtain the full meaning. Also mentioned is the idea that reading provokes a more active attitude than that of watching a video, which implies passive conduct, and that there is a certain difficulty in switching from one to the other. (Cantarero, Neira, and Pérez 2015, 124)⁷

This kind of video journalism has also been abandoned by the newspapers in our study. These videos got little response from the readers, while more advanced reports were time consuming to produce.

As advertisements became the main source of income, “click bait” became a phenomenon—different techniques to augment readers’ curiosity to click on a link. In his study of two American local newsrooms, Anderson (2011) showed that journalists increasingly base their judgements on the number of clicks the article is expected to receive and less on traditional journalistic criteria:

Whereas earlier newsroom sociology emphasized the submersion of audience centred news judgments in favour of professional codes, the research discussed has documented that the process of ‘deciding what’s news’ is increasingly influenced by quantitative audience measurement techniques. (Anderson 2011, 563)

However, he also notes that there were differences in so far as how much weight the upper hierarchies of the newsroom staff put on click numbers. In our case studies, editors also talk about click bait, but the local newspapers’ reporting is far from tabloid. They are well integrated in their local communities and have a rather sober style of reporting even though there seems to be a tendency to personalisation also in the local press.

We can say that the second phase started when most newspapers changed their business model from free to paywall around 2015. As circulation figures for print copies went down, at least partly as a consequence of the availability of the same content for free online (Høst 2010), and at the same time the advertisement volume decreased as a consequence of the 2009 crises and competition from Google and Facebook, there was a pressure towards getting a new source of income through subscriptions.

As many local newspapers belonged to one of the two major conglomerates it was relatively easy to coordinate the introduction of a paywall. As we noted, the conglomeration process started before online publishing. Today the conglomerate is important for innovation in local media in this group as head office provides analytical services an individual newspaper could not afford. The head office also serves as a hub for spreading news ideas among the newspapers so successful innovations in one of the local newspapers can be transferred to others, such as the successful shift from print first to online first that Hagen et al (2018) described.

Web metrics have become increasingly important in society at large as well as in local media. Through our case studies, we discerned another step in the use of audience metrics—more in-depth insight into readers' behaviour and background. More sophisticated analysis software made the chief editors move away from counting simple clicks towards more in-depth insights such as how much time readers spend on each article, what different categories of readers read and so on. We also saw that these changes in the use of metrics are directly linked to changes in business models (from advertising toward subscription based). Subscribers have to register and give away some of their background information (age, gender, address) which random surfers do not. This information again can contribute to making a more sophisticated analysis.

Not only does the business model relate to what kind of metrics become important, it also influences the kind of journalism that is produced. While click-based journalism prioritises more suggestive links with tabloid-style headlines and pictures, subscribers are more interested in substance. The business model—built around differentiated distribution—has a pertinent influence on content as it implies another kind of thinking. While the main commercial challenge for an advertising business model is “selling eyeballs to customers”, the main challenge for a subscription model is attracting and retaining readers. The last challenge is solved by offering interesting content. In measuring viewers' responses, the behaviour of subscribers becomes more important than that of more casual readers.

On the question of content, the editors we interviewed talked about changes: less minutes of political meetings, less commentary and opinion, less cultural reviews, more coverage of transport, housing as well as dramatic events and personal stories. These are changes in journalism that have been going on for several years in particular in the tabloids sold by single copy but are probably strengthened by the use of readers' metrics.

The editors in chief explained that they would often publish content with general information (for example about accidents) on the open part of their webpages while they would publish follow up articles behind the paywall. A previous study of regional and local newspapers in Norway confirms this (Morlandstø, Lamark, and & Holand 2019), showing that articles on emergencies (often from press agencies) are more often available for free, while labour-intensive articles on welfare, crime and business are more often behind paywalls (291).

Local newspapers use the possibility to transfer audio-visual material through the internet. A change can be seen in how that material has been used and its content over time. Current video reports have changed style and resemble TV reports less. They are meant explicitly to provide pictures that are difficult to describe. Videos are expected to give an additional value, often unfolding a visual event. They thus resemble a more observational style, different from the traditional journalistic “inverse funnel” presentation

of talking heads. In an analysis of videos produced for newspapers in the US, Bock (2011) points to the mimetic style of the reports in contrast to the diegetic style of the interview videos mentioned above, although it seems that the videos Bock analyses are more elaborate than the videos in the local Norwegian newspapers.

Streamed video from local sporting events is an important element in attracting and keeping readers. There is a big interest in watching local sports clubs play. The highest divisions are traditionally covered by regular television sports programmes. Sports broadcasts are important elements of traditional television and television channels are willing to pay huge amounts for transmission rights (for the example of football, see Scelles, Dermitt-Richard, and Haynes 2019). Sports are also one of the areas where there is most willingness to pay a subscription (Hutchins, Li, and Rowe 2019). As we noted above, local newspapers are now covering the lower divisions in addition to local junior matches or tournaments. In this way, they exploit a lower layer of this interest in sports. As in television, those that do not own the rights have to come up with alternatives to recruit and keep readers in their subscription universe.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the transformation of five legacy local Norwegian newspapers into newspapers where online publishing has become the main activity. In the first phase, most of the local newspapers followed the leading national dailies and provided their content for free, hoping that online advertising revenue would finance their operations. As they still had income from print, they could sustain this for some years, but giving away their content for free affected readers' willingness to subscribe to the printed edition. They thus were lagging behind more innovative national media like VG (Konow-Lund 2013). As US-owned Google and Facebook threatened their advertising the individual newspapers came under even more pressure to find new business models. The transition process has not finished. As the editor in chief and CEO of *GD* remarked, the local newspapers are in a paradoxical situation where production is geared towards digital publication while the printed edition still generates most income:

In total our income from paper is still decisively biggest. Almost 80% of our income comes from paper—both advertising and the complete subscriptions [combined paper and online] make up for 80% of our income, while all development is digital. This is our biggest challenge: you have to safeguard the paper edition while it is dying (Editor in chief *GD*)

This leaves local newspapers in a tricky position and we can expect them to search for more opportunities to survive when paper editions will be phased out. An important route they will use is taking advantage of other possibilities digital publishing offers. The growth of local sports coverage is an example. Instead of imitating television in producing time- and labour-intensive news reports, they found that concentrating on local sports and occasional images from impressive incidents (such as floods and fires) attracted new audiences. In addition, items from outside their geographical reach turn up on their internet editions. Other possibilities are not used, though—the possibility of producing advanced graphic illustrations, to use big data in journalism, or of offering paid for services are examples of areas local media have not been using very much. Here national media are more active (Barland 2012).

We have also seen that it is not the internet alone that determines how the present adaptation processes take place. Integration of the formerly independent local newspapers in media conglomerates (Amedia in our case) has played an important role in the recent shift toward paywalls and subscriptions. It enabled the local newspapers to find and implement a new business model including online subscription. The newspapers that are part of a conglomerate now share competencies, analytic tools and practices amongst each other giving them benefits of scale in competition with more independent local newspapers. The latter are finding it harder to survive.

In the case of sports coverage, we see a certain alignment of all newspapers starting to offer local streaming of sports. Here they have found their own local niche. At the national level, newspapers are prohibited to cover sports through streaming as national and international television actors own the television rights. As these television actors are not interested in lower level sports competitions, they are affordable for the Amedia conglomerate. But they in their turn exclude the independent local media from covering the matches so they have to turn to background reports on local sporting events.

In our interviews, editors made reference to changes in the journalistic product they offered their readers. While the initial free online publishing model emphasises click-rates, intriguing headlines and short items, subscription readers ask for more substance. What can be seen here perhaps challenges expectations as the latest development is towards a less tabloid coverage rather than the opposite. On the other hand, editors claimed that certain areas have been prioritised while others have received less attention.

What does this change mean for the three functions of the local press—information, fourth estate and local identity? First of all, we have established that local newspapers now have a more differentiated offering for the local population. Subscribers get more than surfers, although the latter still have access to the most essential hard news from their community that is published on the open part of the website. We have not carried out a content analysis of what is published, but the interviews indicate that where more in-depth analysis was available about reading behaviour this showed that politics, commentary and local administration was not very popular with readers, while dramatic events and crime were more attractive. This indicates that the fourth estate function is given less priority unless there is much local involvement in the issue. The streaming of sports does contribute to the local identity function of the local press. How far these changes have progressed and their impact on localities is difficult to judge from interviews alone. Independent research on changes in content should be a next step in examining this important question for the functioning of local communities.

Notes

1. For a more nuanced discussion, see Hanusch (2015).
2. Concerts because many videos cover musical performances, cosiness because many videos feature animals or children and curiosity because they often deal with funny or strange subjects. Likewise, in Norwegian these words are partly chosen because of their alliteration (*Konsert, kos, kuriositet*).
3. Each student delivered a report on “their” newspaper. One student experienced “cold calling” (Bruun 2016). As time was running out the student in question made appointments with a second newspapers and—when both turned out to be accommodating—carried out double the number of interviews.

4. Although Amedia also owns 20% of HA, it is not integrated in the Amedia group in terms of services provided.
5. The numbers in the figures represent the paper edition (Figure 1) and the total minus the paper edition (Figure 2), source: <http://www.medienorge.uib.no/statistikk/medium/avis/190>.
6. Some local newspapers contributed video to local TV stations.
7. Four out of their 15 informants are over 40 years old (Cantarero, Neira, and Pérez 2015, 120).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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