Book Section:

Trust and ethics in local journalism: a distinctive orientation towards responsible journalism and ethical practices

Julie Firmstone (corresponding author), John Steel, Martin Conboy, Charlotte Elliott-Harvey, Carl Fox, Jane Mulderrig, Joe Saunders, Paul Wragg.

j.a.firmstone@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

This chapter compares the perceptions and experiences of local journalists with those of other types of journalists in six European countries to advance our understanding of ethics in local journalism in different journalism cultures and contexts. As cross-national insights are rare, the interviews with 31 journalists shed light on journalists' ethical practices in these contexts. We find that local journalists are united by a shared identification with a distinctive set of values regarding their responsibilities to the public. A commitment to creating and defending the community differentiates them from other types of journalists, indicating that journalistic specialism is a more prominent definer of role perceptions than country context. Local journalists describe having a particularly close relationship with their audience due to geographical proximity, a co-dependence on the community and notions of a shared sense of place. Coupled with the heightened accountability that comes with the greater visibility of local journalists within communities, it is incumbent upon them to strive for high ethical standards. Our findings add to existing evidence that the culture of the newsroom and the news organisation is at least as important (and possibly more) as formal codes of ethics in influencing ethical practices (Lo, Chan, & Pan, 2005).

Introduction

This chapter explores how local journalists identify with the shared values of the profession, particularly journalism ethics and the responsibilities of journalists to the public, and asks how these values serve as a guide for their ethical practices. In the wider context of the book, we argue that it is important to develop an empirical understanding of responsible journalism and ethical communication in the context of local journalism[1] due to a lack of research in the area. Whilst there are good reasons to be concerned about the continued decline of local journalism in many countries, we find a more positive story when it comes to ethical practices and the role of local journalism in building trust between the public and the news media. Our research indicates a link between ethical practices and trust in the news media at the local level, with journalists perceiving that they gain the trust of audiences by maintaining close connections with communities and striving for high ethical standards. Establishing this relationship is vital from a democratic perspective, with the news media unable to fulfil the function of informing citizens if it is not trusted (Engelke, Hase, & Wintterlin, 2019). Furthermore, and of particular relevance to local communities, "unless we can trust the news

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[1] Many distinctions are made between varieties of local journalism – hyperlocal, regional, urban, rural, digital born, print/digital/broadcast, legacy – here we concentrate on the practices of legacy newspapers serving a city or municipality.

media to deliver common knowledge, the idea of the public – a collective entity possessing shared concerns – starts to fall apart" (Coleman, 2012: 36).

Our study is part of a broader project that investigates the ethical practices and cultures of the press in thirteen European countries ranked top in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index (2016). The project brings an empirically based understanding of journalism ethics in these contexts to the debate about press ethics in the UK where trust in journalism is unusually low[2]. This chapter compares the perceptions and experiences of local journalists with those of other types of journalists in six of these countries to advance our understanding of local journalism in different journalism cultures and contexts. As cross-national insights are rare, our interviews with journalists shed light on journalists' ethical practices in these contexts. We find that local journalists are united by a shared identification with a distinctive set of values regarding their responsibilities to the public. A commitment to creating and defending the community differentiates them from other types of journalists across the countries in our study, indicating that journalistic specialism is a more prominent definer of role perceptions than country context. Local journalists describe having a particularly close relationship with their audience due to geographical proximity, a co-dependence on the community and notions of a shared sense of place. Coupled with the heightened accountability that comes with the greater visibility of local journalists within communities, it is incumbent upon them to strive for high ethical standards.

What is so important about local journalism?

Amidst a growing recognition of society's need for reliable trustworthy news, three recent events illustrate the specific importance of trusted sources of local news. During the 2019 UK general election the Editor of *The Yorkshire Post* made an unprecedented decision to publish an open letter defending and explaining the journalistic processes used to verify a story about a four-year-old boy having to sleep on a hospital floor due to bed shortages. A false counter-narrative about the story being 'fake news' had spread on social media and gained traction in the national mainstream media. Having defended the accuracy of the story, James Mitchinson urged readers to trust the *Post* "as an historic champion for the county", saying of the fake Facebook account, "Do not believe a stranger who disappears in the night"(Mitchinson, 2019). Just over a year later when Trump supporters protesting the result of the US election stormed Congress, political scientist Timothy Snyder pointed to the erosion of local journalism in the USA as responsible for the pervasive lack of public trust in the mainstream media. According to Snyder, low levels of trust combined with the public's reliance on Facebook for information led to the polarization that ultimately fuelled the escalation of violence. He advised "you shouldn't let local news die. If people don't have local news, then they don't believe in the media in general"(Snyder, 2020). Finally, amidst this climate of disinformation and the continued disappearance of trusted sources of news, the impact of the Covid pandemic emphasised the importance of local news. Responses to the virus were devolved to local authorities, restrictions were applied locally, and the public were ordered to 'stay local'.

These examples support the argument that local news is vital to the functioning of communities and the engagement of citizens in local democracies (Coleman et al., 2016; Firmstone & Coleman, 2015; Nielsen, 2015). In addition to normative expectations that local journalism should inform citizens about local issues, be representative of the opinions and voice of citizens, hold power to account, and proactively campaign on matters of public interest (Steel, 2020), local newspapers also fulfil a social integration function (Janowitz, 1952). The local newspaper has historically played an important role in defining and galvanising a community and contributing to local and regional identities (Franklin, 2006; Matthews, 2017; Steel, 2020). In the UK and elsewhere, local news makes a distinctive contribution by promoting social cohesion (Firmstone & Whittington, 2021), promoting

"public interest" campaigns (Firmstone, 2016), supporting the development of social capital (Richards, 2012). Yet, local news cannot fulfil these roles without gaining the trust of the audience. One way of defining trust in the media is as "the willingness of citizens to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner" (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl, 2017: 5). Particularly in the context of local communities, we should recognise that trust is also a relationship and "involves shared expectations and values that constitute an ethically coherent and culturally convincing foundation for evaluating news performance" (Coleman, 2012: 36). Trust depends on more than the provision of accurate information, audiences expect to recognise the way that "their social environments, experiences and values" are represented (Coleman, Morrison, & Anthony, 2012: 46). Whilst we know that audiences consistently report higher levels of trust in local news than in national news providers across Europe (Newman, Fletcher, Simge, Schulz, & Nielsen, 2020), the question of what determines and generates trust is far more complex.

Despite the significant roles attributed to local journalism, when it comes to big questions about the practice of journalism, particularly questions about concepts of ethics and journalists' identification with normative values, local journalism is rarely singled out. Although our understanding of different types of journalism is growing, much of what we claim to know reflects only "a small portion of that which constitutes journalism" (Zelizer, 2004: 6), and local journalism has long been under researched (Nielsen, 2015). Even when local journalism is the focus, it is often researched in isolation without comparison to other forms of journalism (Hanusch, 2015) which could clarify and expose the distinctions, and it is rarely studied cross nationally (see for an exception Jenkins & Kleis Nielsen, 2018).

Relatively little research has investigated perceptions and practices of journalism ethics at a local level. Much of what we know about journalists' ethical orientations and perceptions of their responsibilities to the public is based on surveys comparing perceptions across countries rather than looking for within country differences or differences between journalistic functions (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Plaisance, Skewes, & Hanitzsch, 2012). Other studies point to the importance of considering how other factors such as experience and the aims of news organisations result in commonalities and variations in shared ethical values (Plaisance et al., 2012), but none have considered local journalism. Given that journalistic standards and ethics are collective practices that operate in the context of institutions which have their own ground rules (Lo et al., 2005), understanding the distinctive organisational setting of local newspapers is important. Our research responds to calls to investigate how organisational culture shapes journalists' ethical decision making (Plaisance, 2016) and for questions to be asked about the ethical issues that arise from the distinctive characteristics of local journalism (Richards, 2012). In comparing local journalism to other types of journalism and in taking a cross-nationally comparative view, we add to a growing understanding of the distinctiveness of local journalism in relation to its practices and the value these represent for society (Firmstone & Whittington, 2021; Hanusch, 2015; Richards, 2012). By interviewing journalists from a broad range of organisational backgrounds we add a rich and in depth, if not quantitatively robust, set of qualitative insights to this area.

Ethics and local journalism

Ethical standards at local newspapers appear to be compromised less often than at national papers. Analysing complaints made to the UK Press Complaints Commission between 1991 and 2004, Frost found that although equal numbers of complaints were received about local and national newspapers, local papers accounted for fewer of the complaints that were upheld (40%) than national papers (60%) (Frost, 2006: 271). According to Frost, the proximity of local journalists to the community explains the apparent discrepancy in ethical standards because "there is often a more thoughtful approach with a lesser attempt to sensationalise and more attempts to provide balance

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and allow all sides to put their case"(Frost, 2006: 279). The unique context of local journalism requires us to recognise ethical practices in local journalism as distinct from other forms of journalism because "local journalists approach their work in ways which differ from their metropolitan counterparts, and these differences raise a number of professional and ethical issues" (Richards, 2012: 641). But what are these different ways in the context of European countries, how does this 'more thoughtful approach' and difference from other forms of journalism work in practice, and are there other consequences of journalists' proximity to communities?

Studies exploring questions of ethics in local journalism have highlighted the potential tensions that geographical proximity can create between local journalists, their sources and the community (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Ekstrom, Johansson, & Larsson, 2010; Franklin, 2006; Richards, 2012). Four structural conditions support a mutual dependency between local journalists and local politics and have the potential to challenge "the role of journalism as an independent agency" - social anchorage, closeness to sources, closeness to readers and the identity of the newspaper as a guard for the local community (Ekstrom et al., 2010: 260). Concerns stem from the need for journalists to negotiate a range of ethical issues arising when striking a balance between presenting news in a way that does not undermine local pride and cohesion and/or jeopardise relationships with sources yet avoids 'cheer leading boosterism' (Kaniss, 1991) and 'celebratory (somewhat folksy)' accounts of 'our area'(Coleman et al., 2016: 207). We should not forget that trust is of economic importance to the news media as businesses where to ensure the long term legitimacy and economic interests of newspapers, local journalists must gain public trust and maintain a positive relationship with the community and news sources (Hermans, Schaap, & Bardoel, 2014). This can mean that local news avoids departing from the "preferred meanings of a geographical community's dominant groups" (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999: 132), or prioritises community values over journalistic values (Reader, 2006).

Our analysis focuses on three themes to ask how the professional values of local journalists serve as a guide for their ethical practices, and to consider the link between these values and the everyday ethical practices at play in local journalism. First, we consider perceptions of the current relationship between journalists and the public, including how social media has changed the relationship and we discover that journalists instinctively describe the relationship in terms of trust. Second, we evaluate whether a core set of journalistic beliefs and normative values can be attributed to local journalists across all countries by exploring journalists' perceptions about their responsibilities to the public. Finally, we consider how journalists' experiences and responses to common ethical challenges can inform our understanding of how journalism ethics are configured within local news environments.

Method

Building on the first stage of the 'Defining Freedom of the Press' project which analysed the codes of ethics of the press councils in thirteen countries (Fox et al., 2023), we conducted semi-structured interviews with over 40 journalists, press regulators and NGOs representing civil society in Spring 2019. The interviewees were drawn from the five highest ranked European countries in the press freedom index 2018 (Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland) and the UK which was ranked significantly lower at 34th (RSF, 2018). Here we present data from a subset of these interviews, analysing the responses of 31 journalists. One journalist from each of five different press specialisms was interviewed in each of the six countries – two national beat journalists from quality newspapers (one left, one right-leaning), one investigative journalist, one local journalist (two in the Netherlands)[3], and one journalist working for a digital born publication. This sample enables us to harness the advantages of a comparative approach in a way that recognises the importance of

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[3] Interviews were conducted with two journalists from a local newspaper because we were offered access to the Editor after interviewing the 'beat' journalist.

national contexts (Humprecht & Esser, 2018) and the possibilities for within country differences between different types of journalism practised in differing organisational contexts (Hanusch, 2015; Reader, 2006). Although this design allows a deeper understanding of the impact of context on practices, we recognise that the limitations of the relatively small sample size, and the focus of this chapter on local journalism, means that we cannot provide an exhaustive exploration of the relationship between journalists and the structures around them.

The interviews took between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours, were recorded, professionally transcribed and have been anonymised. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of the transcripts comparing responses to the following themes by specialism and country: the current state of the relationship between journalists and the public, the health of this relationship, how the relationship has been changed by the arrival of social media, and how they perceive their main responsibility to the public. In addition, journalists were asked to describe the most common ethical challenges encountered, to explain how they resolve ethical dilemmas, and to give examples of difficult ethical decisions.

Findings

The relationship between journalists and the public

Several common themes emerged in interviewees' characterisations of the current state of the relationship between journalists and the public. First, interviewees in all countries perceived that the relationship between all journalists, local or otherwise, is suffering due to the salience of global narratives about fake news, disinformation, Trump and other populist leaders' criticisms of the mainstream news media, and the explosion of other sources of information, particularly social media. Although not explicitly asked about trust, journalists in all countries brought it up, perceiving falling levels of trust to be a threat to the health of the relationship with the public. Whilst several journalists reminded us that public opinion surveys have long ranked journalism as one of the least trusted occupations, there was a sense that the situation is deteriorating. Even though problems of fake news and misinformation are perceived as originating in other countries, narratives questioning the credibility of journalism are having an impact everywhere, resonating well beyond their geographical origins.

> *"It's getting worse, I think. The political situation is stable, but you can see that, also in Holland, as in all of Europe and America, people are not trusting their governments anymore. And for some bizarre reason, journalists are being seen as part of the elite and the government which is very strange because of course we're not."* (Local Journalist 1, Netherlands)

Narratives of distrust were universally perceived to be having a negative impact, but journalists also reflected on the implications of specific national circumstances. These examples illustrate the relevance of country contexts in shaping the relationship between journalists and the public for better or worse. For example, a recent domestic scandal in Norway, as well as changes in the media ecology, were perceived to be putting the previously relatively high level of public trust in journalism at risk:

> *"And I think that right now that* [the scandal] *has big effects on people's trust in journalism, but I think political journalism specifically. […] I think that the trust in the media in Norway is much higher than in many other countries, but I think that these kinds of situations are something to be extra concerned about now because we also in Norway see the growth of alternative media, who just write whatever they want, they don't really have any common rules that they follow for what's printable or not."* (National Quality right, Norway)

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In Switzerland, the context of more devolved democracy and plurality in the media system across the cantons was important in fermenting trust compared to other countries and was described as "*quite healthy.*" (Investigative Journalist, Switzerland).

When it comes to their own news organisation, all journalists tended to perceive that they have a good relationship with their audience, but responses from local journalists suggest that there is something special about local journalism regardless of national context. Unprompted, most local journalists caveated their responses with the assertion that the public's distrust and criticisms of journalism tend to be levelled at national mainstream media and do not apply to local journalism because local journalists have (and always have had) a distinctive relationship with the public. As these quotes demonstrate, journalists perceive a higher than usual level of trust that is dependent on three common characteristics of local newspaper journalism. Local journalists described having a closer relationship because of their geographical proximity to the audience and explained that they must maintain a good relationship with the public because they rely on each other. They have a reciprocal relationship based on co-dependence. They also benefit from long-term, established relationships with audiences, particularly with older generations who make up a large part of their audience.

> *"I think that when one is at a local newspaper that one is closer to one's audience than one is at a national media. We interview a lot of regular people who have a story to tell."* (Local Journalist, Denmark).

> "…*when we go out and do sessions where people can come and meet us, they always come with really nice stories and say how important we are. Particularly old people, they look forward to getting the paper and they feel part of the community even though they're home bound*." (Local Journalist, UK)

The importance of geographical proximity in creating positive relationships with readers was also recognised by other journalists, as exemplified by the Finnish context where geography is particularly important:

> *"I think in Finland the distance between the public and some media outlets is also short if you take into account all the local newspapers. We have local… I mean, even in Åland Island with 20,000 people there are two newspapers, so we still have a short distance between the local newspapers and the public."* (National Quality right, Finland).

Living and working in the community they are reporting on helps to create trust*: "Everybody knows everybody, so I think they don't think that I'm a representative of fake news, because they know that I make my job fine"* (Local Journalist, Switzerland). As illustrated later, in terms of ethical practices and day to day ethical decision making there is a strong sense that this closer relationship with the public demands a higher level of vigilance resulting in the maintenance of a high ethical standard.

Social media and audiences

Social media is perceived to have positive implications for trust and ethics in one sense whilst simultaneously fuelling distrust and instances of unsubstantiated questioning and criticism of journalists' credibility. On one hand, the affordances of social media were described as bringing local journalists even closer to their audiences through increased interaction and levels of feedback. Positively, audience interactions on social media are also perceived to be improving the accuracy and precision of journalism because audiences are holding journalists to account and scrutinising their work to a greater extent.

"You get instant feedback on what you do, very fast. You have to be precise in what you're writing because there's always an expert out there. [...] So it's much more an interactive role [with the public] *than journalists had earlier. The bar for* [audiences] *contacting the newspaper is much lower now than earlier".* (Local Journalist, Norway).

On the other hand, social media enables the audience to criticise and question the legitimacy of reports very publicly without the need for evidence. Whilst local journalists' geographical proximity to readers means that they were held to account by their readers long before social media made it so easy, social media has inevitably increased the opportunities for such encounters.

Several journalists also perceived social media to have detrimental consequences for levels of media literacy, and ultimately for public trust. They described how audiences have difficulty distinguishing between 'content' and 'content produced according to journalistic values' on social media platforms. For example, a Danish local journalist said:

> *"I think it* [social media] *has confused people even more because there are contents everywhere, everyone is a media and there is lots of mistrust for social media and also there's lots of journalism in social media, so it's all a big mess and there are lots of public mistrust to journalism like the President of the United States with the fake news, he criticises media so it creates mistrust generally."*

Although audiences are not thought to view local newspapers with the same level of suspicion as national newspapers, global narratives about distrust are seen as rubbing off on public attitudes towards local journalists.

Responsibility towards the public: comparing role perceptions

How do local journalists' perceptions of their responsibility to the public compare to other types of journalists? We found a shared understanding with all journalists perceiving that they have a responsibility to tell the truth, and with the exception of digital born journalists, to provide information to the public. In addition to these two 'standard' responsibilities, comparing the perceptions of local journalists with others in our sample reveals that each specialism identifies with a distinctive role that is specific to their remit. Our findings suggest there is significant uniformity in the role perceptions of journalists fulfilling the same functions. This further illustrates the distinctive orientation of local journalists, suggesting that there are more differences in the role perceptions of journalists within countries than between them.

Each of the local journalists described a unique dual responsibility where alongside the standard responsibilities to tell the truth and provide information they saw themselves as creating and defending the community. Returning to the unique level of proximity to the audience described earlier, our findings suggest that this closeness goes beyond existing in a shared physical space and is manifest in the distinctive way that local journalists imagine and practice their role in in relation to perceived responsibilities to the public. As this quote demonstrates, a local journalist's role in the community involves more than being physically present and includes a shared mission:

> *"...when one is at a local newspaper one also has part of the responsibility that one is a part of their community. I am in the "Amager-icans" community because people who live there, they have a type of community feeling, and I must not stand outside of it and speak at it, I need to be a part of it myself, so that they think that we are together with something."* (Local Journalist, Denmark).

The responsibility to champion the community and contribute to its wellbeing was variously described as 'creating common ground', 'defending local democracy', 'speaking for the city' and 'building bridges'. Quotes noticeably associated notions of truth telling and acting on behalf of the

community with references to the role of watchdog, illustrating the same orientation for combining advocacy and watchdog roles in local journalism as seen in Australia (Hanusch, 2015). The following quote typifies the perception of this dual role:

> *"People have to trust what you write, so I have to tell the truth. But my responsibility is to try to be the, what do you call it, ambassador for people. […]I have to investigate what will this mean for you in your daily life. I have to find the answers that the people are looking for. I have to be a guard dog towards the government, towards the City Council. […] So my responsibility is basically to take care of this town and the people living here, be their guard dog and to inform and educate people."* (Local Journalist, Norway).

The distinctive responsibility to the community perceived by local journalists is not as prominent in other journalistic identities. Journalists working for left and right leaning national quality papers were limited to a focus on two responsibilities: providing information and giving people information to vote. Investigative journalists had a clear sense that in addition to the key responsibilities of telling the truth and providing information they are 'the eyes and ears of the people' and are duty bound to uncover the truth and abuses of power. The six digital born journalists were unusual in not perceiving the provision of information as one of their responsibilities. Each of the digital born journalists articulated a differing unique role that was clearly connected to the specific motivations and objectives of their organisation such as providing an alternative to mainstream news (right wing alternative media) and providing a public service (disinformation site).

These findings support other research that has shown that representing local people, a duty to try to bring local people together, and championing and campaigning on behalf of the community is part of the culture of local journalism (Coleman et al., 2016; Firmstone, 2016; Hanusch, 2015; Matthews, 2017; Reader, 2006). Having established that local journalists have a shared perception of their responsibility to the public we now explore how these distinctive role perceptions and their special relationship with the audience shape the everyday ethical practices at play in local journalism.

Responsibilities and ethical practices

Local journalists did not differ significantly from other journalists in the *types* of ethical issues commonly encountered in daily newswork – they mainly mentioned issues of protecting privacy, particularly children, giving people the right to reply/getting both sides of a story, protecting their sources and various examples of conflicts of interest e.g. naming a sex offender working in a kindergarten, taking photos at the scene of fatal car crashes, and naming local business people involved in fraud. These were perceived as common issues that are to be expected and seen as easy to deal with by drawing on well-established ethical principles. Ethical challenges most commonly cited as a source of concern by both local and national journalists related to the consequences of the increased pressure for speed in reporting. The demands of digital first publishing for more and faster reporting with fewer editorial resources to fact check is perceived to be compromising ethical practices in all reporting roles, reducing journalists' capacity for accuracy, cutting out time needed to give subjects the right to reply, reducing the opportunity to consult multiple sources, and increasing the risk of making mistakes. Where local journalists did differ was in the ways that they referred to their responsibilities to the community and their role as champions and protectors of the community as values that guide ethical decisions daily. Our analysis suggests that this role perception shapes ethical practices in three distinct ways.

First, local journalists operate with extra ethical vigilance because they perceive that their role demands that they are more reflective and conscious about ethics than other types of journalists. As the examples below show, the responsibility journalists feel to audiences and communities simplifies ethical decisions because they do not think that there is any other choice than to be extra vigilant and operate to the highest ethical standard. Journalists' examples of common ethical decisions frequently described the high stakes involved in getting accuracy or privacy wrong. The position of

the newspaper as part of the community and the fact that journalists live and work among the people they report on and their geographic proximity heightens their sensitivity to the importance of getting things right. As mentioned earlier, the opportunity for audiences to correct or critique reports via social media also intensifies the pressure that local journalists feel to act with a heightened sense of ethical vigilance.

> *"And people have to believe in what we're writing, they have to trust us, and especially for a local paper, because I might be writing about my neighbour tomorrow […]I have to see my neighbour in the eyes tomorrow, so it has to be correct and I have to treat people fairly."*
> (Local Journalist, Norway)

Second, the shared value of championing and protecting the locality shapes newsroom culture and drives news values. The clearest example of this came from the UK. When asked if they have their own code of ethics, the journalist explained that, no, they use the codes of the voluntary press council (IPSO), but that they also have an unwritten ethical approach that guides their work. They try to avoid negative stories or to at least balance negative stories with positive stories so that they present a good image of the city: *"But then we do try and be positive about the place we represent. So that's not a written thing, but I would hope that if you stopped reporters they kind of get that, and, as I say, what we're doing for Xtown, we are trying to fight for Xtown"* (Local Journalist, UK).

Added to similar findings from the USA (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Janowitz, 1952; Reader, 2006), Australia and Canada (Hanusch, 2015; Richards, 2012), and the UK (Firmstone, 2016; Franklin, 2006), these testimonies from across Europe suggest that an intention to balance positive and negative stories is more prominent in local journalism. Such practices have been criticised by those who suggest that a 'cheerleading and boosterism' approach can undermine the ability of local newspapers to fulfil another important role, that of watchdog (Kaniss, 1991). Claims that the co-dependency of local newspapers and the communities they report on has the potential to create conflicts of interest that can restrict journalists' autonomy were supported by some of examples of ethical challenges described by our interviewees (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999; Franklin, 2006; Richards, 2012). Whilst none of the examples described encounters where journalists felt they or their paper had acted unethically, several explained that the dual role of being part of the community at the same time as being a critical friend gives rise to situations where ethics must be extremely carefully considered. Examples included instances where reporting on wrongdoing in the community would expose a local politician, a powerful business leader/local figure, or in one case a member of the newspaper's executive board. Several journalists had experienced pressure to provide favourable coverage to local businesses, exposing the conflict of interest created by the reliance of local newspapers on local businesses for advertising revenue. Whilst not mentioned by interviewees, the market vulnerability of local papers is an important background context that also shapes ethical practices.

Discussion

When it comes to how they understand their responsibility to the public and how they apply these values in their everyday ethical practices, the cross-national comparison showed that distinctions between ethical approaches are more obvious between different types of journalists than between different countries. Local journalists are more similar to other local journalists in other countries than to journalists working in other specialisms in their own country.

Local level ethical practices are strongly driven by a co-dependency between journalists' perceptions of what they need to do to gain and maintain high levels of audience trust and how they perceive their responsibility to the community. These findings add to existing evidence that the culture of the newsroom and the news organisation is at least as important (and possibly more) as formal codes of ethics in influencing ethical practices (Lo et al., 2005).

We should of course be cautious about the accuracy of journalists' self-reported perceptions of their roles and ethical practices, and further research is necessary to establish how the reported practices of local journalism ethics translate into news content and audience perceptions. We need to know whether the benefits of a closer relationship between journalists and communities outweigh the disadvantages, particularly because local journalism is leading the way in creating and maintaining trusted relationships with the public. One study to explore this connection has challenged the view that co-dependency may present an ethical challenge to the independence and autonomy of local journalism. Whilst they caution whether this trend translates into better quality news and note that the Swedish context is characterised by a strong local press, a higher than average proportion of journalists educated to degree level, and higher than average levels of professionalization, Ekstrom et al's longitudinal content analysis of Swedish local news found a "noticeable trend towards independent local journalism" (Ekstrom et al., 2010: 264). Further research is needed to establish how the advocacy and protective ethical roles enacted by local journalists fosters the provision of news that benefits local citizens and to evaluate whether potential conflicts of interest raised by the co-dependency of communities and news organisations constrain the scrutiny extended to local figures and organisations.

Taken at face value, the positive ethical approaches and high level of trust in local journalism described by our interviewees, and evidenced in audience research, suggest that the value of local journalism extends beyond the provision of normatively valuable news. We argue that local journalism should also be valued and further researched to identify how the practices of local journalists function to foster above average levels of trust between the public and the news media. Having discussed how ethical practices in local journalism help to create trust, at least from the perspective of journalists, a valuable next step would be to evaluate how citizens see these features contributing to their trust in local news. Given that local newspapers commonly serve as the training ground for journalists who move on to work in national publications, we might also hope that valuable lessons from the 'higher vigilance' ethical approach of local journalism can be learned and might inform the practices of other types of journalism and news organisations.

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