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Meijer, Irene Costera

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# WHAT DOES THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE AS VALUABLE LOCAL JOURNALISM?

Approaching local news quality from  
a user's perspective

*Irene Costera Meijer*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In Western Europe, regional and local broadcasters and newspapers are losing a larger share of viewers and readers and at a faster rate than national newspapers and broadcasters (Barnett, 2011; Franklin and Murphy, 2005; Kik and Landman, 2013). The need for more insight into the audiences' user habits, needs and desires regarding news is felt in every news organisation, but most urgently among scholars and producers of regional and local news. In the last ten years, local and regional legacy news platforms (newspapers, radio and television) have become less popular, in particular among the generations under 45. For instance, in 2017, 15 per cent of Dutch viewers were under 50; ten years ago that was 36 per cent. Since 2000, regional newspapers in the Netherlands and Sweden have lost 50 per cent of their readers (Bakker, 2018; Wadbring and Bergström, 2017). Online platforms for regional news are doing better. In the Netherlands online visits of regional news stations increased from 200 million visits per year in 2011 to 1.2 billion in 2017 (Bakker, 2018).

If audiences become more and more important for news organisations to survive, and if measuring news use – through metrics, surveys or self-reports – (cf. Prior, 2009) may not automatically lead to a deeper understanding of peoples' news interests and preferences as suggested elsewhere (Costera Meijer, 2020; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2018), and if news organisations and journalists want to remain essential to the vitality of local democracy, different kinds of audience research may be necessary to answer the question of how local news can provide a service the public really appreciates and is willing to pay for in money and/or attention. By not departing from an *a priori* concept of informed citizenship, nor from citizens' *opinions* about local quality journalism, this chapter aims to open up space to discuss what people actually experience as informative and useful local journalism. I coined that experience 'valuable journalism'. The research findings seem to be important from a democratic as well as a commercial perspective.

## **What counts as valuable local journalism from a user perspective?**

Although local news selection may not differ from national news selection in its focus on important news (Bakker, 1997), Dickens et al. (2015) suggest that “it is often audiences’ feelings of not being recognised in national news agendas that drives them to generate and consume news stories more locally”. ‘Issues make publics’, as John Dewey argued almost 100 years ago, and that makes it important to check whether local and regional news organisations’ news selection and news approach correspond with their audiences’ preferences, desires and needs. Clicks, shares and time spent are commonly used to measure audience engagement, which makes sense from a production perspective. Yet these metrics are limited tools to understand the user experience itself (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2018; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2020). Valuable journalism pertains to what, when and how people *experience* journalism as valuable. These experiences were captured by asking more than 750 people in various ways and over the course of ten years (via surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, street-intercept interviews) to supply concrete examples of when they felt local journalism was valuable to them.<sup>2</sup>

## **Which topics deserve more attention?**

Our findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that audiences appreciate a wider selection of news topics, a more engaging presentation and a constructive approach and tone of voice, in particular in relation to local and regional news (Aldridge, 2007; Heider et al., 2005; Poindexter et al., 2006; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). What counts as local, community or regional journalism may be clear from a production perspective; from a consumer angle it depends on people’s feelings of connection to a particular space – for some a neighbourhood, for others a province (Costera Meijer and Bijleveld, 2016; Lowrey et al., 2008). In this chapter the term ‘local journalism’ will be used to refer to the kind of journalism people experience as covering important topics and events in the region they feel close to because they live or work there.

Paying attention to the desires of citizens pays off (Costera Meijer et al., 2013; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). This pertains to both preferences in form and in selection of news. In a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, Friedland et al. (2012) provided eight categories of community information needs.

To meet these needs, communities need access to the following eight categories of essential information, in a timely manner, in an interpretable language, and via media that are reasonably accessible, including information about:

1. emergencies and risks, both immediate and long term;
2. health and welfare, including specifically local health information as well as group specific health information where it exists;
3. education, including the quality of local schools and choices available to parents;
4. transportation, including available alternatives, costs, and schedules;
5. economic opportunities, including job information, job training, and small business assistance;
6. the environment, including air and water quality and access to recreation;

7. civic information, including the availability of civic institutions and opportunities to associate with others;
8. political information, including information about candidates at all relevant levels of local governance, and about relevant public policy initiatives affecting communities and neighborhoods.

(Friedland et al., 2012, v–vi)

To establish which news topics the public feels local media should address more often and what would prompt them to watch, read or listen more frequently, we asked respondents to assign a total of 100 points to 13 different news topics in reply to the proposition: “I would watch or listen to local Broadcaster X more often if it pays more attention to...” (Costera Meijer, 2015). We derived these 13 news topics (see Figure 34.1) from interviews with local news users: 132 street-intercept interviews, ten focus groups and 22 in-depth interviews with professionals holding top positions in the investigated urban areas. ‘Politics’ as a separate topic was not included in the survey because in the previous interviews people emphasised they would only be interested in more political information in connection with other themes. However, respondents could add politics or any other topic to the list.

Local news consumers confirmed that news media should devote more attention to 13 *long-term local themes* if news organisations wanted them to watch, listen or read the news more frequently. These topics do not coincide with the common professional news beats (cf. Boesman et al., 2018). Some topics were also considered more important by more respondents. More attention for nature and local environmental issues, history, safety and quality of healthcare (in that order) would encourage people to seek out local news more often. Fifteen per cent of the respondents took the opportunity to add their own topic to the list (category ‘Other, namely’

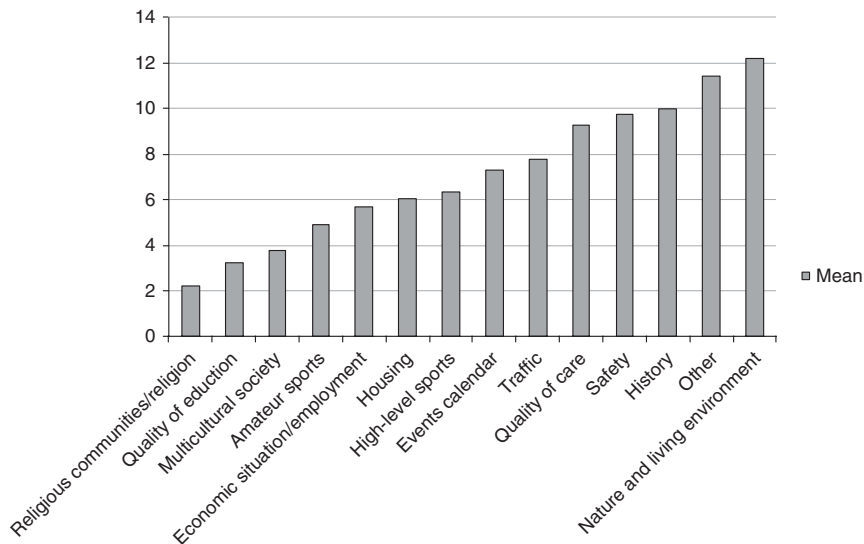


Figure 34.1 Mean score (out of 170 respondents) with respect to topics that deserve *more* attention: which local news should be supplied *more often* to increase user frequency?

in Figure 34.1). Eight of them believed that news on ‘art and culture from the region’ should be more salient in the local news. Only four respondents would appreciate extra news about local politics, affirming what Rosenstiel et al. (2007) conclude about political news: successful stories cover issues instead of the horse race and explain their relevance.

Comparing this list with Friedman et al.’s (2012) suggests that local news users do not wish more attention to ‘emergencies and risks’, this news beat – not even mentioned by news users – is often the one given the most prominent place in local journalism. A second remarkable finding is that news users put the topic ‘nature and environmental issues’ and ‘history’ at the top of the list. History is not even on Friedland et al.’s (2012) list and ‘nature’ is not a separate issue in their overview. ‘Nature’ was discussed in our focus groups in terms of more information about natural history and geography, rare birds and plants living in the region, and hiking and cycling trails (recreation). Comparing both lists suggests that what journalism scholars and journalists themselves select as relevant local news beats may differ from what news users expect from good local journalism.

### **Which values and approaches are appreciated by local news users?**

In addition to general benchmarks that apply to all good journalism – trustworthiness, credibility and good storytelling – news users pointed at five functions that should be met in particular by local journalism if it aims to provide news that they deem valuable and important. These functions were confirmed by and put into context using findings from other countries. The following functions for valuable journalism from an audience perspective proved especially relevant in a local context and remained stable over the research period of ten years (2007–2017).

#### ***1. Reciprocity and audience responsivity as core practices***

Scholars suggest that in order to be of value to the community, online and offline community news platforms have to engage with community values more than with professional values (St. John III et al., 2014). In addition, as Karlsson and Holt (2014) pointed out, this controversy raises a need to discuss alternative normative ideas about what good local journalism should be. In contrast to many other countries, Norwegian print circulation figures of community journalism are still growing. In this context Hatcher and Haavik (2014) raise the relevance of the issue of ownership structure and business models for the quality of community journalism. The success of these local newspapers is among others attributed to a strong local ownership, often by community shareholders, and to journalists’ own community membership.

The key predictor of participation of citizens in local journalism was whether participants felt a virtual sense of community with the news organization (Borger et al., 2016). Ekdale (2014) offers lack of connectivity as the main explanation why the residents of a Nairobi slum did not see the value of the work of community journalists. Lewis et al. (2014) offer the concept of reciprocal journalism as a way of imagining how journalists might develop more mutually beneficial relationships with audiences. An extra reason for increasing engagement with users is that the authors consider it the key to the economic sustainability of news models. As the (negative) example of Patch.com shows, engagement of users demands more than inviting them to like, (re)tweet or otherwise discuss and share news content. These scholars all suggest that journalists might encourage more valuable or constructive input from their readers by being more of service to the community.

## **2. Learning about the area**

Freedman et al. (2010) underlined how local journalism, according to its audiences, should differ from other forms of journalism, by offering “long-term coverage of news items as well as everyday investigative journalism on local issues”. In Klein’s (2003) survey about audience reactions to local TV news the most frequently selected motive for news use is ‘learning about the world’. At least 85 per cent of the investigated populations (young people, college students and senior citizens) agreed on ‘learning’ as primary criterion. The second-most frequently motive was ‘to see good things that have happened’. These results correspond with our own findings. News users emphasize that local news media should do more than inform people. To improve their understanding of the region, they should devote sustained attention to *long-term local themes*, preferably in a *constructive* manner (cf. Rosenstiel et al., 2007). Especially appreciated are stories that show new perspectives or solutions on local issues (cf. Wenzel et al., 2018). Heider et al. (2005) and McCollough et al. (2015) found that audience expectations are closer to ‘good neighbour’ reporting than to ‘watchdog’ reporting, including ‘caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups, understanding local community, and offering solutions’ (Poindexter et al., 2006).

## **3. Stories from within: holding the community together and recognizing difference**

Robinson (2014) pointed to the importance of adhering to community values and the necessity for journalists of being personally involved in community life. The high and even rising readership figures of local newspapers in Norway suggest that news decisions being made by Norwegian journalists are congruent with the expectations of their community (Hatcher and Haavik, 2014). Unlike less successful community platforms such as the Swedish local news site Patch.com and the community newspapers involved in the WiscNet Case Study, the Norwegian journalists described themselves as community members first and journalists second: “We write with our hearts”. Consequently, the local journalist in Norway has been described as local patriot, defending the community against outside threats, yet finding it difficult to write about local controversies. This tension between striving for cohesion and recognizing pluralism is inherent to community journalism (Lowrey et al., 2008). Some Norwegian newspapers found an alternative for the classic watchdog function by giving a voice to everyone involved (platform function): local authorities, politicians, organized interest groups and concerned individuals. In so doing journalists used the tone of the good neighbour and kept their fellow community members apprised of what had been transpired, without appearing too critical of the community or its individual members.

What citizens very much appreciate are news *stories ‘from within’*: stories told from the angle of the ‘locals’ and their concerns (Costera Meijer, 2010). Freedman et al. (2010) describe a ‘twin’ local news need: “a platform that enables communities to represent themselves to each other and one that enables them to represent themselves to society at large”. Similarly, Dickens et al. (2015) use the notion ‘practice of care’ enacted through a practice of active listening to particular people and places in the community (cf. Dreher, 2009; O’Donnell, 2009). Telling news stories from within deals according to our informants with the increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds of geographical neighbourhoods and cities by taking an explanatory angle. In this context Zhang (2017) calls for ‘an ethic of inclusion’ to underline the importance of ethnic diversity in local communities. Explaining the different or surprisingly similar customs, values, habits and ways of thinking of the various cultural groups – in terms of age, gender and

ethnicity – to each other facilitates communication across difference (Costera Meijer, 2013b; Dreher, 2009). Stories from within can explain, for instance, different cultural understandings of the private/public division. In our studies we found that putting shoes in the entrance halls was a source of conflict in some blocks of flats. While Turkish and Moroccan residents resort to this practice because in their view it is unclean to put shoes indoors, white Dutch residents considered this practice an infringement on the public space they share. Turkish and Moroccan residents, on the other hand, did not understand the Dutch custom of appropriating the parking space in front of one's house. By contributing to the ability of interpreting each other's everyday habits, stories from within can add to residents' intercultural communicative competences. Providing insight into the local customs, traditions or manners was especially appreciated by newcomers to the area because it enabled them to increase their understanding of 'how things work here'. For established residents, this information is valued not because it is 'new' but because it confirms what Schudson (1995, 31) calls 'public knowledge'. It contributes to "what is recognised or accepted ... given certain political structures and traditions".

Our studies found that most people love so-called talker news items such as crime or relatively bizarre or human-interest news topics, not because they are important, but because they facilitate (brief) conversations between relative strangers, thus strengthening people's feeling of belonging and connection. Telling bad news with a solution-oriented frame was also very much appreciated, in particular when it took a humouristic approach, as was illustrated by a popular and funny news item that filmed how easy it was to pick people's pockets (Costera Meijer et al., 2010). The strong link we found between appreciation of serious news, presenting light and cheerful news, approaching people respectfully and supplying topics for conversation,<sup>3</sup> may affirm the relevance of Schröder's (2015, 63) extensive concept of *public connection*. He broadened the concept to include 'democratic worthwhileness' (catering to the identity of people as citizens) and 'everyday worthwhileness' ("content that links you to personal networks"). The link also confirms our findings that stories about serious topics (e.g., racism, violence, crime) that have a light or humorous touch are valued because they lighten the atmosphere around them, easing the way for neighbourly conversations with a public-interest dimension.

#### **4. Facilitating local orientation: important, findable and connected news**

According to Rantanen (2009), journalism studies tends to ignore questions of 'where' and 'when', prioritizing the analysis of news content. In her analysis of localization and places in journalism, news plays a significant role in constructing our experience of place: "belonging has no meaning unless news offers readers a point of identification" (Rantanen, 2009, 80). News plays a central role in people's understanding and interpretation of spaces and places. Yet residents and journalists, in particular when the latter use official sources, do not always have corresponding visions about spaces and places, all the more when these neighbourhoods are inhabited by a majority of ethnic minorities. In this context, Gutsche (2014) suggests adopting a

notion of news place-making as an understanding of the ideological (and practical) work journalists (and their sources) do in shaping dominant understandings of geography.

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To counter the ideological, often stereotypical impact of news place-making, residents themselves should be used more often as news source. It will increase the chance of both positive and layered stories (Costera Meijer, 2013b). What residents value are items that facilitate regional

orientation either by visualizing everyday geographical landmarks such as central squares, prominent bridges, highways, public gardens and nature reserves or by providing social and personal landmarks: stories and images of local well-known persons (ranging from shopkeepers to librarians, teachers and street paper vendors (Costera Meijer, 2010, 2013b)). Dickens et al. (2015, 5) underline how it is local points of reference that create such opportunities for identification. If community journalism is about connectedness and embeddedness, Lewis et al. (2014) suggest, it should articulate the 'local' in both geographic and virtual forms of belonging.

Dickens et al. (2015) emphasize how consumers very much appreciate reporters' sense of being positioned within a local community; it broadened the types and depth of the stories that can be told. Citizens want to know how individual stories are related to other or previous stories. Providing links and context is very much appreciated because it enables them to experience coherence, not only in the news, but in (the reported) reality as well (Costera Meijer, 2013b). Not surprisingly users want local media to inform them about the most *important news* right after it happens, but they also like to be able to easily *find* news once something of importance occurs. Importance, to users, does not only apply to high-impact news, but also to major public events in the region. The annual flower parade or international concours hippique might not be new in the sense of unexpected, but they are important as common reference points. Moreover, as to be expected, users want local news organizations to indicate clearly *where*, exactly, events take place. A shed on fire is experienced as more urgent if the shed is located in one's neighbourhood. Adding a visual landmark that points to the exact location of the event is appreciated because it enables news users to determine the potential impact of the matter. Reporting about big events (expected or unexpected) and remembering them after some time contributes to a sense of *collective memory*, a 'time line', allowing residents to position their life and that of others within the region (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). Unfortunately, as McCollough et al. (2015, 14) describe, due to budget cuts, and in cases even the closing down of local papers, local news users increasingly have to stay updated on local issues and events through a 'seek-and-you-shall-find' mode. To obtain local news requires citizens to actively seek information themselves from various 'disjointed' and 'sporadic sources'. Citizens less inclined to actively pursue information risk being left out of the information loop.

### ***5. Honouring complexity: providing a layered and 'realist' representation of the region***

Both Klein (2003) and Rosenstiel et al. (2007) as well as Lipschultz and Hilt (2014) suggest that local news stations devoting so much time to covering crime are not responding to viewers' interests. The authors suggest that reporters should explore the causes and consequences of crime as vigorously as they do the actual crimes committed. A side effect of biased, sensationalized local news for the people who actually work or live in the region is sometimes experienced as losing one's grip on everyday reality. This is why residents want to be given a *layered* and *'realist'* representation of their region, leaving room for the complexities, ambivalences and contradictions of everyday lived reality. It is important to note that even residents from multi-ethnic urban areas are univocal in emphasizing that supplying only positive news may just as well lead to a sense of losing contact with reality (Costera Meijer, 2013b).

Not every local reality can be shared just as easily though. Its range of topics (residents as subjects, not objects), news frame (constructive and solution-oriented) and tone of voice (optimistic and cheerful) seems to be limited. Residents themselves did not always feel free to discuss the seamy side of their neighbourhood, at least not on paper or television, fearing that others would recognize them and turn against them. Local journalists like other residents felt



vulnerable about telling critical stories, in particular about sensitive issues and ethnic groups that are over-reported by national news. Some felt ill at ease to uncover stories of crime or violence, knowing they frequented the same supermarket and the same schoolyards as the ‘villains’. In addition, they found it difficult to present the downside of the neighbourhoods’ reality, without losing people’s trust. For this reason Freedman et al. (2010, 29) emphasized the importance of a professional news infrastructure that ensures journalists “are both respected and legally protected to scrutinise power effectively”. If such a professional infrastructure is lacking, the media-image can be experienced as too rosy. One informant discussed an item about school children cleaning up front gardens: “But why they are in such a mess is not explained. Not one of them dares to say that Moroccans don’t care a thing about their gardens. That’s politically incorrect.” It remained challenging to address such issues about differences in a non-racist discourse.

## Conclusion

Valuable journalism is meant to conceptually fill the gap between marketing criteria (popularity) and journalistic dimensions (adding to informed citizenship). Valuable local news topics (nature, environmental issues, history, safety and quality of care) and news approaches (reciprocity and audience responsiveness, learning about the area, telling stories from within, facilitating regional orientation and honouring complexity) illustrate how users’ news selection practices are more inclusive than journalists often assume and less trivial than web metrics suggest. How do these dimensions interconnect? First, *public connection* stands out as the linking concept between respectfulness, a constructive approach and supplying serious as well as light conversation topics. This might illustrate the importance of local journalism for keeping up personal networks as well as people’s identity as citizens. The need for local conversation topics (talker news) may explain why news users click frequently on crime and obituaries (cf. Wenzel, 2018). Second, *honouring complexity* is very much appreciated in particular by telling stories from within and taking a realistic but constructive, optimistic and sometimes even humorous approach. If you are close to or even part of the problem you won’t need its exaggeration, nor its simplification or downplaying.

Third, the centrality of *understanding the region* as a dimension of valuable journalism mirrors people’s awareness of news as second-order reality; they know about others and others know about them in as far as and how they appear through news stories. Even informants with direct personal experience of an issue explicitly refer to a need for learning and for confirmation about ‘how the region works’, often not because they lack information, but because it enables them to compare their own experience of events or the region with that of others. This comparison accommodates a need for a common frame of reference, a prerequisite for a sense of place and a feeling of belonging. Fourth, the professional value *audience responsiveness* (Brants and de Haan, 2010) is likely to mirror the growing assertiveness of the public. Citizens expect journalists to take into account and to listen carefully to their questions and experiences. Consequently, core to a successful business model appears to be the maintenance of a sense of community with local news users. Audience responsivity and community involvement are suggested as a *conditio sine qua non* for residents to spend money or attention to local news. Finally, our respondents indicate they would increase their local news use when journalism covers more thoroughly and extensively topics evolving around nature, environmental issues and history. Remarkably, these three subject areas are usually absent as conventional newsbeats, even in research on local journalism (cf. Boesman et al., 2018; Rosenstiel et al., 2007, 2014).

## Notes

- 1 Fully revised, supplemented and updated version. Originally published in *Journalism Studies* as Costera Meijer, I., & Bijleveld, H.P. (2016) Valuable journalism: measuring news quality from a user's perspective. *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), pp. 827–839.
- 2 References to studies involved include:
  - Costera Meijer, I. (2007) *De wereld van west side. Reality Stadsoap AT5. Eindrapportage publieksonderzoek*. Universiteit van Amsterdam, April 2007. Commissioned by: B&W Amsterdam.
  - Costera Meijer, I. (2008) *Medianota Rotterdam: Lokale media en Stadsburgerschap. Een verkenning van het Rotterdamse mediabeleid in de context van modern burgerschap*. Commissioned by: Wethouder Cultuur and Participatie Rotterdam (Orhan Kaya).
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- 3 Cf. Costera Meijer and Bijleveld (2016) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.812).

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