

Article

Deserted Local News: Exploring News Deserts From a Journalistic Recruitment Perspective

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Abstract

An emerging body of research addresses how news deserts cause democratic deficits. This literature is mostly concerned with the closure of local news outlets. The present study was carried out in Norway, a country characterised by rich local media infrastructure. However, recruiting skilled and trained journalists to staff this infrastructure is challenging. Based on qualitative interviews with editors and journalism students ($N = 21$), this article explores the lack of skilled local journalists at small local newspapers, through a job attractiveness lens, and exposes how economic, geographic, and professional prestige factors contribute to labour deficits, identified as a brain drain threat in local journalism. The study expands the news desert research beyond the closure of local newspapers to encompass journalist labour deficits in an otherwise stable and diverse local media environment and discusses professional, societal, and political implications of the recruitment problem.

Keywords

brain drain; job attractiveness; journalistic recruitment; local journalism; news desert

Issue

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1. Introduction

Access to trustworthy and comprehensive news reporting sourced by professional journalists is generally held as a prerequisite for healthy local communities. However, the institution and practice of local journalism have come under severe pressure in recent years as local newspapers, historically the main providers of local news and information, face a large-scale economic crisis due to declining audiences and revenues (e.g., Nielsen, 2015). The shrinking economy has resulted in an increasing trend of cuts, consolidation, and closures of local newspaper titles in many communities (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019) and has caused concerns about the weakening of local news infrastructure and its consequences (Napoli et al., 2017). This has been addressed in a growing body of studies on emerging news deserts, described as loc-

ales without access to updated, locally sourced news and information (Ferrier et al., 2016). Findings from news desert research demonstrate how reduced local news reporting creates opportunities for political and corporate corruption to flourish and undermine effective democratic participation (Napoli et al., 2017).

While this research has predominantly focused on newspaper closures and losses of journalist jobs, other factors that could lead to severe deficits in local news reporting, such as lack of qualified labour and recruitment problems among local newspapers, have received less attention in this line of research. As noted by Hess and McAdam (in press), small local news operations are struggling to attract journalists willing to pursue a career in local news and this resource deficit represents a considerable threat to the sustainability of the news ecology. In Norway, a country characterised by a diverse and

stable local newspaper structure, the recruitment of professional journalists has become an urgent matter among the country's many small local newspapers. The lack of qualified applicants for journalist jobs is described as acute (Silvola, 2022), suggesting that local newsrooms must hire people with no formal journalistic training "off the street." This could have severe implications for the quality and quantity of local news reporting even though the number of newspaper titles remains intact.

The present study investigates the recruitment situation among local newspapers in Norway. In response to Gulyas' (2021) call for news desert research that provides a more comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing spatial inequalities in local journalism, we explore local newspapers' attractiveness as employers and how this attractiveness—or lack thereof—influences their ability to provide a comprehensive local news service. In doing so, we take heed of Usher's (2023) observations that news deserts are not necessarily without news media or news. There is just not sufficient supply of "the news that is taken to power democracy" (Usher, 2023, p. 239). We aim to shed light on the role of job attractiveness and the recruitment of skilled local journalists for the provision of democracy empowering local news in the Norwegian context. As such, we expand the news desert research beyond the closure of local newspapers to encompass journalist labour deficits in an otherwise stable and diverse local media environment.

We explore recruitment and job attractiveness through in-depth interviews with Norwegian local newspaper editors and journalism students ($N = 21$). The study makes an empirical contribution by presenting new data on recruitment deficits in local journalism, which has hitherto received little attention in the research literature. Furthermore, the study makes a theoretical contribution by identifying job attractiveness as a salient factor influencing spatial inequalities in local journalism. Based on our findings, we posit that small local newspapers in Norway may be on the verge of a journalistic brain drain. In the next sections, we review relevant research literature and elaborate on our research method before presenting and discussing the findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous News Desert Research

The use of the term "desert" to describe local journalism supply, or lack thereof, originates from the US where there has been a sharp increase in local newspaper closures from the early 2000s and onwards. From 2004 to 2020, the US lost 2,100 newspapers, leaving at least 1,800 communities without a local news outlet (Abernathy, 2020). A growing number of news desert studies have demonstrated how reductions in news provision have a negative impact on community members' sense of community and belonging (Mathews, 2022), as well as people's engagement in local politics (e.g.,

Magasic & Hess, 2021; Miller, 2018). There are also indications that a lack of journalistic scrutiny of local public life has wider societal implications such as increased corruption (Matherly & Greenwood, 2021) and cost of municipal borrowing and spending. Moreover, the decline in local journalism is seen to disrupt the news ecosystem by bringing fewer local stories to the attention of larger national news media and audiences and increasing the risk of misinformation spreading via social media (Miller, 2018). Although social media services, such as community news groups on Facebook, local Twitter feeds, etc., could fill some of the functions of legacy news media, people tend to view these alternatives as inferior information sources as compared with local newspapers (Mathews, 2022; Olsen, 2020; Smethers et al., 2021). Consequently, when the quantity and quality of legacy news reporting are reduced, there is a considerable risk that a community becomes under-informed, under-represented, and unable to access timely local information or get adequate access to scrutiny (Howells, 2015).

News deserts have been studied in several national contexts, such as Brazil (da Silva & Pimenta, 2020), the UK (Gulyas, 2021), and Australia (Magasic & Hess, 2021). In a similar vein, deficits in local journalism have been explored through conceptual lenses such as news black holes (Howells, 2015), local media gaps (Gulyas & Baines, 2020), and news blind spots (Sjøvaag & Kvalheim, 2019). There is considerable commonality between these strands of research and their interest in structural transformations of the local news landscape that result in the declining quantity and quality of local journalism. In Norway, where this study was carried out, the concepts of blind spots and media shadows or half shadows have been applied to describe how geographies, topics, and sources are underrepresented in local news (Høst, 2016; Mathisen, 2021; Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2022; Sjøvaag & Kvalheim, 2019). Although the country has not experienced the same trend of local newspaper closures as, for example, the US (Abernathy, 2020) or England (Gulyas, 2021), and the overall journalistic coverage of Norwegian municipalities is reasonably good (Høst, 2016), local news blind spots and local newspapers' vulnerable resource situation amid the ongoing structural transformation of the news landscape is a key concern in media policy formulation (Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2017, 2018) and public discourse.

As noted by Gulyas (2021), the common denominator of news desert research is its preoccupation with spatial inequalities in the availability, access, or use of local news or media. She identifies four types of approaches to news desert research: (a) outlet-focused studies which examine variations in the availability of local media outlets between different localities, (b) content-focused studies exploring variations in local news content and the robustness of local journalism between communities, (c) media-ecology-focused research mapping both local news provision and socio-economic factors to identify well-served and

underserved local communities, and (d) case-study-focused research based on in-depth analysis of news supply development and consequences in a selected geographical area. Amid this rich and varied research, some aspects of the news desert problem remain underdeveloped. According to Usher (2023, p. 239), news desert studies have a tendency to eclipse the shortcomings of local news reporting and promote a “false nostalgia for the role of local newspapers in communities.” There is thus a risk of overlooking how newspapers alone are not sufficient to power local democracy. Gulyas and Baines (2020) observe that there is a need for more research on the sustainability and resilience of local media ecosystems, as well as insight into factors that lead to local media gaps. Such factors include the attractiveness of local newspaper jobs and local newspapers’ ability to recruit and retain skilled journalists. A talent shortage has been observed among local media in several countries (Borchardt et al., 2019). According to Hess and McAdam (in press), there has been a long-term denigration of journalistic careers in local news. They posit that a key challenge for the long-term sustainability of existing small news providers is the ability to attract staff to the regions.

2.2. *The Attractiveness of Local Journalism Jobs in the Norwegian Context*

Hess and McAdam’s (in press) observations encourage several routes of inquiry into local journalism and job attractiveness such as the economy of the local news industry and the promise it holds for journalists looking for a secure job. Another key factor for job attractiveness is the prestige of local news work within the professional hierarchy of journalism, as well as tendencies of centralisation and depopulation of regions, which create challenging labour conditions for local employers in general. In the following sections, we will present relevant research literature on these job attractiveness conditions in the Norwegian local journalism context.

2.2.1. The State of the Local News Industry

Norway belongs to the democratic corporatist model in Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) media system typology. This model is characterised by a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organised social and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state. In Norway, local newspapers play a key role in this media system. This structure is embedded in the construction of the Norwegian welfare state and reinforced by the country’s press subsidy system (Syvertsen et al., 2014). The network of local media has remained remarkably stable over time despite dramatic economic shifts in the industry, such as the loss of advertising revenue. From 2015 to 2019, the Norwegian newspaper industry lost 30.5% of its advertising revenue and user payment became newspapers’

main source of income (Medietilsynet, 2020). An important reason for the decline in advertising revenue is competition from Facebook and Google (Medietilsynet, 2022). The economic downturn in the news business has resulted in several rounds of downsizing and cut-backs among commercial news media in Norway and an estimated 1,500 journalists have left the field (Bjerke et al., 2019). With increasing production costs, particularly for print and distribution, the print product is becoming less profitable, posing a considerable challenge for small local newspapers which are still heavily reliant on print revenue (Medietilsynet, 2022). In a rapidly changing media landscape, where audiences and advertising are steadily migrating from print to digital platforms, this print dependency suggests that local newspapers are falling behind in the digital restructuring of their operations. Consequently, these news operations are becoming more vulnerable financially and less interesting employers for young talents who, as noted by Borchardt et al. (2019), are looking for “cool” jobs in digital media rather than old-style print-driven organisations at the local level.

2.2.2. The Prestige of Local Journalism

Regarding the prestige of local journalism and its potential impact on job attractiveness, research based on the sociology of professions framework describes how journalism constitutes a professional hierarchy, with internal cleavages and inequality (Mathisen, 2021). Inspired by Bourdieu, Hovden (2008) analyses the profession of journalism as a socially stratified field, where local journalists are placed in the sector with the lowest journalistic prestige, while those in large, national newsrooms have the highest prestige and status. Previous research in the Nordic countries has shown how these status hierarchies of the profession are well-established among journalism students in the sense that students’ motivations and aspirations are directed toward the most prestigious journalistic positions (Hovden et al., 2009). Studies also show that local journalists express a feeling of inferiority and lack of professional capital compared to colleagues in larger newsrooms (Mathisen, 2021). Adding complexity to the status hierarchy of journalism, there is an ongoing discussion about de-professionalisation in (local) journalism whereby professional values and identity fade, and the profession weakens as a result of the deepening media crisis (Nygren, 2014). In both academic research and public debate, local journalism is often criticised for deferential and patriotic reporting, acting more as a guard dog for those in power than society’s watchdog, the latter being one of journalism’s most salient professional ideals and mythologies (Nielsen, 2015). A Danish study found that local journalism was hardly hard-hitting and investigative (Nielsen, 2015). A more recent study on local journalism in Norway found only 5% critical or investigative journalism and extensive use of “one source” news stories, indicative of superficial

journalistic investigation (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2022). The professional hierarchy and shortcomings of local journalism identified in this research literature suggest that pursuing a career in local news is less attractive for trained journalists who are likely pulled towards larger news organisations. Local journalism is at best portrayed as a “stepping stone” or a “starting place” for a journalistic career (Hess & McAdam, in press). Consequently, small news operations may struggle not only to attract but also to retain qualified staff in a situation where, as observed by Borchardt et al. (2019), there is a talent shortage in journalism in general.

2.2.3. The Rural–Urban Transformation

When investigating the recruitment of journalists to small local newsrooms, demographic and geographic factors cannot be overlooked as an overarching structural framework that conditions job attractiveness. Norwegian society is characterised by decentralised population patterns. Maintaining sustainable rural areas is a key political goal and multiple economic incentives are in place to stimulate vibrant communities throughout the country. Nevertheless, Norwegian society has undergone significant urbanisation and centralisation over the last decades, in line with worldwide demographic trends in the “century of urbanisation (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2020). The most prominent population growth has been concentrated in compact, densely populated urban areas, while many rural municipalities have experienced a negative population growth (Andersson et al., 2019). These developments have resulted in demographic challenges such as a decreasing and ageing population and more scattered settlements in the regions as younger people are drawn to larger cities (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2020). Among Norway’s 356 municipalities, 209 are defined as rural, accounting for 72% of the total national area and only 14% of the country’s inhabitants (Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2020). In sum, the country’s population patterns mean that the supply of competent and skilled labour is limited in many Norwegian municipalities. Labour deficits are exacerbated by low unemployment rates in general (Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Fisheries, 2020). Recruitment is thus a huge challenge for rural industry and businesses as well as for the public sector and local newspapers are “competing for brains” in a tight labour market.

3. Research Questions

The foregoing literature review has described several conditions related to job attractiveness among small local newspapers. In sum, these factors could result in a labour shortage that threatens the provision of the kind of local journalism that powers democracy and contributes to healthy local communities. Importantly, there

appears to be a mismatch between the local newspapers’ need for qualified journalists, on the one hand, and journalism students’ career ambitions on the other. The interplay between job attractiveness factors and their implications for the provision of news and information in local communities is essentially an empirical question that has not been sufficiently answered in previous research. The present study addresses this research gap by asking how local newspaper editors in Norway experience the labour situation in terms of recruiting and retaining qualified local journalists. Furthermore, we ask what local newspaper editors and journalism students think about the attractiveness of working as a local journalist and the implications of job attractiveness for the provision of local journalism in Norway.

4. Method

To get an initial sense of the labour situation among local newspapers we conducted an expert interview with the secretary general of the Association of Norwegian Local Newspapers (Landslaget for lokalaviser [LLA]) and looked at survey data from a study on recruitment conducted by the LLA among their members. Close to 80% of all respondents ($N = 61$) confirmed that recruiting qualified staff had become more challenging during the last three years. Less than 20% of those who had actually recruited news workers ($n = 56$) were satisfied with the applications they had received in the hiring process. Based on these insights we designed an exploratory study aiming to “develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2005, p. 203), which is best achieved by a purposeful sampling strategy, where the focus is on “studying information-rich cases in depth and detail” and on “understanding and illuminating important cases rather than on generalising from a sample to a population” (Patton, 1999, p. 1197). The sample for this study consists of local newspaper editors and journalism students in Norway ($N = 21$). These groups represent the two main parties in local journalism recruitment: employers and potential employees with experiences, knowledge, and opinions that make them suitable information-rich sources for our study of recruitment and job attractiveness. We conducted in-depth interviews with both groups to generate qualitative data to address our exploratory research questions. The editors were recruited based on newspaper geography and size considerations. We wanted interviewees who, based on their experience and knowledge, could reflect on the recruitment situation in their own organisations as well as in the broader field of local journalism. We primarily used the LLA’s member database (<https://lla.no>) to select these respondents. Our editor sample consists of nine editors representing newspapers scattered from the north to the south of Norway. Five of the nine newspapers under study had a total paid circulation (print and digital) of between 2,000 and 5,000. The circulation of the remaining four ranged between 5,000 and 14,500. The students were recruited from two

leading journalism education institutions in Norway (Oslo Metropolitan University and Nord University), where the two researchers behind this study are teachers. The students came from both small rural communities and larger cities. They were invited by e-mail or through their student Facebook group. All students were in their third and final year of bachelor's education.

The students were interviewed face to face in small groups of two to three students, whereas the editors were interviewed individually on Teams. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. We used standardised, open-ended questions which facilitated faster interviews and made it easier to analyse and compare the data afterwards. The editor interviews focused on the labour situation (experiences with journalist recruitment, access to journalist competency, and possible reasons for labour shortages in local newsrooms), whereas the student interviews focused on job motivation and professional ambitions. Both groups were asked about the attractiveness of local journalism from an employee perspective as well as the consequences of labour shortages among local newspapers.

The interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and analysed in tandem by the two researchers. We analysed the data using the constant comparative approach beginning with primary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013), which involves examining the interview transcripts line by line to identify initial patterns or themes. From this process, we were able to broadly identify what was "going on" and "why" while simultaneously keeping an eye out for "promising in vivo codes" (Tracy, 2013, p. 200) that could help us interpret our material. The analysis alternated between emergent readings of the data and the use of existing perspectives, explanations, and theories described in the literature review. This process was done individually by the two researchers. As a next step, we met to compare and discuss our interpretation of the data. In this process, the codes were refined and we identified themes through mutual agreement. The respondents were anonymised in the presentation of the findings. To keep the 21 participants apart, without compromising their anonymity, we gave each participant a code. E1–E9 refers to editor participants while S1–S12 refers to student participants. The size and composition of the sample is a limitation of the study that should not be ignored in the interpretation of findings. Despite being limited in number and thus not generalisable, the participants' in-depth qualitative accounts and their experiences offer constructive insights that are useful for developing a deeper understanding of the recruitment situation in local journalism and what role job attractiveness plays in the provision of comprehensive local news and information to local communities.

5. Findings

We organised our material according to two overarching themes related to the labour situation among the local

newspapers (undersupply and exit of professional journalists) and three themes related to the attractiveness of the local journalism profession (economy, geography, and prestige). These main themes were not mutually exclusive but interrelated and sometimes overlapped in the data material. The same goes for the two themes identified regarding the consequences of the labour situation, namely newsroom capacity deficits and democracy deficits.

5.1. Undersupply and Exit of Professional Journalists

A recurring topic in the conversations with the local newspaper editors was the challenge of filling vacant journalist positions with qualified labour. The editors described recruitment processes with no trained journalists on the lists of candidates and very few applicants overall. In the words of one of the participants: "In the cases where there has been a slightly longer list of applicants, it's because we've had local applicants who cannot be hired because they have absolutely zero experience" (E3). This undersupply of trained journalists was seen to force local newspapers to hire unqualified staff, "almost recruiting people right from the street" as described by one editor (E4), because "having somebody is better than having nobody" as noted by another (E9). Even editors who did not have first-hand experience with recruitment challenges recognised this undersupply of trained journalists in local journalism. The lack of access to qualified staff was seen to result in resource-demanding internal training processes, whereby the editors were forced to build up journalistic competency from scratch among their new hires. In the words of one of the editors: "We invest an extreme amount of time and energy in training" (E2).

Due to the recruitment challenges, employee turnover was another labour problem identified in our material. The editors described how retaining qualified staff was particularly difficult because larger and more resourceful news organisations were also looking to hire journalists and local newspapers served as a popular recruitment base. One of the editors voiced the frustration expressed by several of our interviewees, noting that once the staff they recruited had reached a certain level of expertise "they move on to larger news operations that can harvest our investments" (E3). This outflow of competence was not described as a new phenomenon but more of a labour food chain logic, whereby larger news organisations feed on the smaller ones. However, due to a recruitment boost among regional and national news media, these larger players were seen to "vacuum the labour market" (E3). Another editor noted how the undersupply of journalists had distorted the labour food chain. Local journalists that used to move on to greener pastures in a regional newspaper were seen to skip the regional level and move straight to a national outlet: "They get jobs that used to be unattainable for a younger journalist in the past—like working at the night desk in

one of the national newspapers,” he said (E5). There were also some concerns regarding the failing recruitment of students to journalism education, particularly in the northern part of the country, and observations of how trained journalists chose other professions like public relations and marketing. This exodus from the profession, sometimes before the journalist career had even started, was seen to exacerbate the growing recruitment crisis among local news media.

When comparing the editors’ experiences with the students’ professional desires and aspirations, we find that all students planned to work in journalism in the future. However, their professional desires and aspirations were not primarily directed toward working in small local newsrooms. Asked about their professional dreams, the students mainly talked about working in large, national newsrooms, as foreign correspondents (S1, S8), as TV anchors or in other broadcast jobs (S5, S7, S8, and S12), or as feature or magazine journalists (S2). Others dreamt of being individual entrepreneurs with their own startups (S4, S10). While local journalism was not on top of most students’ list of desirable future jobs, they did appreciate that small local newsrooms could offer valuable experience. As noted by one of the students: “It’s a good place to start, to learn the occupation and get more experience, which is important when applying for other jobs” (S12).

5.2. Economic and Geographic Challenges for Local Journalism Recruitment

In our interview material, the local newspapers’ failing capacity to recruit and retain trained journalists was often linked to economic factors, which again was seen to influence professional status. For example, local media managers discussed how the salary level among local journalists had a negative impact on recruitment. Local journalist salaries were seen to fall behind those of other professions such as teachers and nurses, making jobs in local newspapers less attractive. In the words of one of the participants: “The wage level for [local] journalists and editors is too low” (E6). The students confirmed that low wages, combined with time pressure and unsatisfying working conditions had a negative impact on the attractiveness of working in local journalism. As one participant said: “In local newsrooms, you work 24/7 and the wages are often low. You can’t ignore that” (S2).

The editors described how the salary level was a result of the downturn in the local newspaper economy. “In 10 years we have lost half of our printed newspaper revenues. Of course, these things influence wage negotiations. We’re unable to make the adjustments that could have brought us to a competitive wage level,” said one (E3). The editors described how the recession in the newspaper industry during the second decade of the 21st century resulted in cutbacks, severance packages, and layoffs. This was seen to give the industry a doom and gloom image which reduced the sectors’ attractive-

ness from an employment perspective. As noted by one of the editors, from around 2012 onwards the economic outlook of the local media business was very bleak: “We did not have a functional business model. So those who are 20-something today haven’t really considered local journalism as a future career path at all” (E2).

Another structural factor that came up in the interviews concerned geography and the increasing tendencies of centralisation and urbanisation. The editors discussed how these trends had a negative impact on local journalism recruitment while also noting that such challenges cut across local sectors, as described in the following quote: “There’s a lack of nurses and people in finance. They can’t get people to work in local shops and there aren’t enough waiters. There’s enormous pressure in the workforce” (E2). Attracting younger people from the millennial generation was seen as particularly challenging due to work and life expectations that local newspapers could not meet. Life in a small place, far away from everything the larger cities have to offer, could easily be perceived as uneventful and restricting. In the words of one of the editors: “When you’re 20-something, you want to live life to the fullest. Very few want to move back home (to where they once grew up)” (E5).

The students mostly confirmed this view. Even those who were born and grew up in small communities described how, for young adults, living in a big city with all its possibilities was more attractive than village life. When it came to nurturing friendships, finding partners, and starting a professional career, urban life was simply seen to have more to offer. One student noted: “It’s more fun to live in a big city” (S11). Another described how she loved life in the capital—“I love Oslo” (S12)—and a third student described how young people “are attracted to larger cities because they want to work with something bigger. That makes it hard (for local newspapers) to compete” (S1). However, the students also discussed how, in the future, having settled down with their own families, working in a smaller place could be more appealing.

5.3. Professional Prestige Challenges for Local Journalism Recruitment

According to the interviews, the professional prestige factor played a key role in the recruitment problems among local newspapers. Both editors and students described how local journalism had a major image problem. As one of the editors put it: “There is this image of local newspapers as something dull, covering local fairs and simple stuff. It’s perceived as second-rate journalism” (E7). The editors complained that local newspapers were not doing enough to change this image. Instead of promoting important, high-quality journalism, local news outlets were continuously subject to ridicule, particularly on a popular satirical Instagram account dedicated to exposing the comic shortcomings of local journalism to a national audience. In the words of one of the editors: “It looks like we’re only fooling around doing soft

local news, whereas the reality is very different” (E3). Supplementing this, another editor described working at a local newspaper as “very interesting, demanding, and rewarding” (E9). However, in the editors’ opinion, these characteristics were not sufficiently communicated to the public. Consequently, local journalism was seen to maintain its low ranking in the journalistic status hierarchy.

Mirroring these observations, several of the students described how local journalism suffered from lower professional prestige and status. Among their accounts we find descriptions of local journalism as “less serious news and more bad journalism” (S12), “more rural and a lower threshold for what is newsworthy” (S1), and “more unimportant stories being told, such as ‘look what Karl is doing in his garden’” (S7). These perceptions of local journalism were seen to influence the students’ professional ambitions. As one student noted: “I prefer to work in a newsroom with a serious reputation, one which covers stories that matter in society” (S1). Reflecting on the potential to practise watchdog journalism in a local journalism context, the same student stated: “You can’t really have a fourth estate function in a place like Steinkjer” (a small town in rural Norway). The students also described how having a university degree in journalism made them feel overqualified for a local newsroom job. As succinctly expressed in the following quote: “You don’t really need a journalism education to work as a local journalist” (S3). While these accounts suggest that local journalism had a low standing among the students, there was also considerable appreciation of local journalism in the student group. Several participants emphasised the importance of local journalism, both for the well-being of local communities and for the supply of local news to the national public (S5, S6, S9, and S11). In the words of one student: “I don’t want to describe local journalism as a poorer kind of journalism. It’s important....It’s closer to the citizens and communities” (S10).

5.4. Consequences of the Labour Situation

Turning next to the perceived consequences of the job attractiveness problems described in the previous sections, a recurring topic in our data material was newsroom capacity deficits. The editors described this as a many-faceted problem with implications for the day-to-day running of the newsroom as well as more strategic matters related to digital development and audience demands in an increasingly competitive and fast-changing media landscape. As noted by one editor: “It’s extremely important for local newspapers to keep up with digital development. That’s more difficult if you’re not able to recruit new and young people in the newsroom,” adding that, consequently, “the digital mindset which is so important for small newsrooms” could be lost, “increasing local newspapers’ digital lag” (E6). Supplementing these observations, the students described how the problem with recruiting and

retaining qualified journalists could create a negative circle whereby the lack of younger reporters resulted in content with less appeal to younger audiences, which in turn would make recruitment of younger reporters even more difficult.

Ultimately, the capacity deficits were also seen to threaten local newspapers’ ability to provide the kind of journalism required to maintain a healthy local democracy. The following quote expresses this concern among the editors: “If we cannot get hold of skilled reporters, the newspaper will deteriorate, and we won’t be able to cover our local community the way we should” (E7). The interview data suggests that critical and investigative local journalism was particularly vulnerable. Specifically, the lack of qualified staff was seen to exacerbate local newspapers’ failing capacity to provide watchdog journalism. As one editor expressed it:

When you have to employ people who have worked at the till in the local grocery shop or as a gym teacher, of course, there will be a long way to go before they can dip their noses into things and uncover stuff. (E3)

The editors discussed how, with fewer resources and less journalistic competency at hand, local newsrooms were more prone to fail in their social responsibility. Summing up this concern, one editor said:

You’re not able to be the watchdog you’re supposed to be, you’re not able to cover the breadth of your local community—to reveal shortcomings but also to display all the good things going on locally. There is a potential negative effect on democracy in that. (E1)

This was described as a threat rather than a reality in the sense that the editors emphasised how they were still doing important local news reporting. However, they feared that this would become increasingly difficult if they were not able to recruit more trained journalists. The students went even further than the editors in their assessment of the labour situation, suggesting that job attractiveness problems and the lack of qualified staff could result in newspaper closures. This, they noted, would result in “nonfunctioning local democracies” (S5) and “totally destroyed local communities” (S4).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The state of local journalism has become an urgent matter in many Western, liberal democracies. The Norwegian case with its diverse and stable local newspaper structure may seem like an anomaly in this context. However, as demonstrated in the present study, even a country characterised by a comparatively robust backbone of local news outlets runs the risk of deterioration and deficits in the provision of local news. This problem stems not primarily from the lack of a local news infrastructure but from the lack of manpower to staff

the infrastructure with the required journalistic skills and competencies.

The way editors and journalism students describe the lack of attractiveness of local journalist jobs in this study confirms the hierarchical nature of the profession identified in previous research (Hovden, 2008; Nielsen, 2015). Extending observation by Borchardt et al. (2019) and Hess and McAdam (in press), our findings show that local journalism in Norway suffers from a severe image problem and struggles to compete with the prestigious media organisations in the big cities. For young, ambitious people who want to pursue a career at the forefront of journalism, local news appears to have too little to offer. Supplementing Borchardt et al. (2019), we also find that young journalists strive for a work–life balance which makes the 24-hour news cycle in understaffed local newsrooms less desirable. Combined with economic factors like low wages, and geographic factors such as centralisation and urbanisation (Andersson et al., 2019; Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2020; Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Fisheries, 2020), the relatively low status of local journalism makes it difficult to recruit and retain skilled journalists in local newsrooms. Admittedly, this complex problem is exacerbated by the current pressure in the Norwegian labour market, where a range of sectors are competing for competency. A cooling down of the labour market could make recruitment problems less acute for local news media. However, the perceived low status of local journalism jobs is a persistent problem that makes local journalism particularly vulnerable to competency deficits in the short as well as longer time perspective.

As a result of their lack of attractiveness as employers, reinforced by structural factors like centralisation, we posit that small local newspapers in Norway could be facing a journalistic brain drain with significant repercussions for the provision of essential news and information services to local communities. The term brain drain refers to the movement of human capital where the net flow of expertise is heavily in one direction. “Brain” means any skill, competency, or attribute that is a potential asset for an organisation, whereas “drain” implies that the rate of exit of this asset is at a greater level than “normal” or than what might be desired (Giannoccolo, 2004). With fewer people coming into the profession, as noted by Borchardt et al. (2019), and many leaving, as described by Bjerke et al. (2019), the labour food chain in journalism is disrupted. While small local news media have a long history of serving as the recruitment arena for larger news outlets, our findings demonstrate how this role becomes increasingly challenging when those at the bottom of the food chain find themselves drained of “brains” that are difficult to replace. The findings regarding the brain drain threat support Nygren’s (2014) observations of the ongoing de-professionalisation of journalism. When local newspapers, as described by the editors under study, are forced to hire people with little or no previous knowledge of journalism ethics, interview tech-

nique, journalistic presentation formats, etc., there is a risk of fading professional values, journalistic identity, and legitimacy. Ultimately, such de-professionalisation could harm journalistic quality, particularly the ability of local newspapers to provide a watchdog role in local communities.

As noted by Hess and McAdam (in press), this movement of human capital is the result of a symbolic degradation of local journalism that has been perpetrated by the field itself. Indeed, when the editors in our study complain that local news media do too little to promote important, high-quality journalism, they suggest that local journalism is somehow destroying itself from the inside by failing to live up to journalism’s professional ideals of hard-hitting, watchdog journalism. That said, local journalism has a dual social responsibility to serve not only as society’s watchdog but also as an integrative force that ties people and communities together. This role as local community glue appears to have much less impact on professional reputation and prestige. We argue that unless this integrative, social glue function of local journalism is promoted as a professional value on a par with investigative, watchdog journalism, local journalism will likely continue to struggle in competition with “big journalism.”

By exposing the brain drain threat in local journalism in Norway this study adds another dimension to news desert research. When small local newspapers, as described by the participants in our study, fail to attract the competency needed to sustain a comprehensive local news service, they are unable to provide the kind of news that powers democracy (Usher, 2023). If important stories are left uncovered or not given the depth and breadth of investigation they deserve, due to lack of time and competency, this is likely to have a detrimental impact on the information flow in local communities and ultimately the knowledge provision that undergirds local democracy. Such information deficits lie at the heart of news deserts research (e.g., Howells, 2015; Magasic & Hess, 2021; Mathews, 2022; Miller, 2018). While previously this research has mainly been concerned with information deficits resulting from a collapse in the infrastructure of local newspapers, we find that local newspapers’ role as democratic institutions is also threatened by profound labour problems. As such, this study demonstrates that preventing news deserts from spreading is not simply a question of saving newspapers as succinctly pointed out by Usher (2023). Avoiding news and information deficits in local communities is essentially about securing news providers that have the capacity—the brains—to deliver the kind of journalism that local communities need to be healthy and flourishing places. This, we maintain, calls for more attention to job attractiveness in local news in journalism research as well as in the industry and the media policy field.

From an industry perspective, it is particularly worrying that the students in our study perceive local journalism to provide limited opportunities for career

development. Albeit with some exceptions, the students mostly dismiss local media when talking about future employment, at least in the near future. For local news organisations seeking to attract these young journalists, it is a paradox that the competency that newspapers urgently need, like investigative reporting skills and digital capabilities, are the ones the students feel they will not be able to nurture in a local newsroom. Moving forward, closing at least some of this perception gap is a key challenge for the industry. For the media policy field, the brain drain threat identified in the current study suggests that securing an infrastructure of local news may not be sufficient to solve news desert problems. This is not to say that policy measures aimed at supporting a diverse media structure are not important contributions to tackling the market failure that otherwise threatens local news. However, to solve local journalism's prestige challenges, such infrastructure support is not enough.

While this study paints a rather gloomy picture of the recruitment situation in local journalism, it is important to emphasise that the editors interviewed expressed pride in their local news reporting and eagerness to improve the standing of local journalism. Moreover, journalism students supported "the idea" of local journalism and talked warmly about its importance to local democracy. The findings are based on a limited number of interviews in one country and do not allow generalisation beyond the specific context of this study. We call on future research to explore the journalism brain drain threat in other national contexts and encourage comparative studies in this field. There is also a need for follow-up studies on journalism education and what role such formal training plays in the prestige level of local journalism.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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