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# **The Rhetoric of Trust in Local News Media: Proximity as a Quintessential News Quality**

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**Abstract:** In this paper we argue that in local news media – different than in national news media – proximity is an important concept that can function as a rhetorical device to establish reliability and trust. In times of extreme pressure on local journalism, local reporters can and should benefit from the knowledge they have of the local situation. For this qualitative research we analyzed 52 interviews with local journalists from Dutch local news media to explore how they value and establish this concept of proximity as a rhetorical device in their daily practice to argue the reliability and trust in their medium.

**Keywords:** ethos, local journalism, proximity, trust, social cohesion, news qualities, rhetoric.

## **1 Introduction**

The presence and quality of local news media is considered to be an important factor in political and social engagement for citizens in both rural and urban areas (Hess & Waller, 2017 [1]; Nielsen, 2015 [2]; Stanton, 2007 [3]; Heese, J., Pérez-Cavazos, G., & Peter, C. D., 2022 [4]; Darr, J. P., Hitt, M. P., & Dunaway, J. L., 2021 [5]; Kwon, K. H., Shao, C., & Nah, S., 2021 [6]). And as such, it is also seen as a factor that establishes and preserves social awareness and social cohesion (Olsen, 2021 [7]; Hayes, D., & Lawless, J. L., 2021[8]; Dreger, 2022 [9]).

In contrast to this observation in several parts of the world local governments are concerned about the quantity and quality of local news. Due to a declining advertising market and the upcoming role of social media, traditional local news media are struggling for their existence and are seen in terms of market failure and not as potential profitable companies. Some scholars argue that local

news should be seen as *merit good*: economical goods that function as a commodity or service, such as education or a library, regarded by society or a government as deserving of public finance (Ali, 2016 [10]; Ramsey & McDermott, 2020 [11]; Harrison, 2019 [12]; De Jong & Koetsenruijter, 2017 [13]).

Due to all these changes and developments local news media need a re-orienting on their qualities and their distinctive functions from *national* news media. In this paper we consider reliability and trust as important rhetorical goals for these local news media, realized by capitalizing on proximity.

First, we explain the importance of local journalism (1.1) and second, we zoom in on the problems in this area (1.2). Then we explain the goal of this study (1.4), we present our theoretical concepts (2), the method (3), the results (4) and conclusions, consequences for journalism practice, and suggestions for further research (5).

### **1.1 The importance of local journalism**

We define local journalism as journalism connected to a defined area, smaller than a nation. In smaller countries these areas are smaller; in bigger countries these areas are bigger. In the United States, a local radio station serves a bigger area than, for example, in the Netherlands.

First, we explore in this paragraph why local journalism matters. A vast amount of research supports the idea that the presumed social, democratic and economic benefits from local journalism are not only a common ground for journalists, or part of the profession's beliefs, but a fact with empirical support. On many occasions that support is generally based on the idea that a well-informed public does better in participating in a democracy and is more willing to participate in democracy. We give an overview of literature on this topic.

Gentzkow et al. found that “newspapers have a robust positive effect on political participation (Gentzkow, Shapiro & Sinkinson, 2011). [14] Several other studies have shown that decreased awareness in local and state politics leads to lower voter turnout and less civic engagement. Adsera cs. found that “the presence of a well-informed electorate in a democratic setting, explains between one half and two thirds of the variance in the levels of governmental performance and corruption.” They measured the presence of democratic mechanisms of control and an informed electorate through the frequency of newspaper readership (Adsera, Boix, & Payne, 2003). [15] Gao et al. show that “the loss of monitoring that results from newspaper closures is associated with increased government inefficiencies, including higher likelihoods of costly advance refundings and negotiated issues, and higher government wages, employees, and tax revenues.” (Gao, Lee & Murphy, 2020). [16] Mondak found that “exposure to a major local newspaper (...) contributes to self-perceived knowledge regarding local political campaigns (Mondak, 1995). [17]

Also, civic engagement is associated with the presence of local journalism (Shaker 2014). [18] Darr and colleagues show that newspaper closures polarize voting behavior, encourage split-ticket, and thus less uniformly partisan voting (Darr, Hitt & Dunaway, 2018). [19] Others conclude that local newspapers do their work well as watchdogs. For example, Snyder et al. found that federal spending is lower in areas with exogenously lower press coverage of congressmen (Snyder & Strömberg, 2010). [20] Putnam (2000) [21] found that interest in local news is an indicator of political engagement of citizens and Hess & Waller (2017) [22] see good quality local news media as an important factor for as well cohesion in smaller communities as for the agenda setting of important local issues.

Moy et al. (2004) [23] found – based on survey data – a relationship between attention to local news and evaluations of journalists and news media. “Attention to news on television and in newspapers enhanced perceptions of knowledge, but it was only attention to newspaper local news that promoted political participation.” Remarkable is the fact that positive as well as negative evaluations seem to promote participation, suggesting that “unfavorable views of the press can invigorate democracy”.

Baekgaard et al. (2014) [24] concluded that the quality of local news media is an important factor for voter turnout. Nielsen showed that local news media favor community building and social networks (Nielsen, 2015: 98). [25] Filla and Johnson (2010) [26] found that in communities with “absent local news, voters are less likely to turnout.” Older research shows that the use of news media is associated with civic engagement and the cultivation of social capital. So are newspaper readers supposed to be more politically active than people who do not read a newspaper (Paek, Yoon, and Shah, 2005) [27] and it is associated with an increase in political deliberation, meeting attendance, and participation in community activities (McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy, 1999). [28] The use of news media is also associated with civic engagement and the cultivation of social capital. Citizens who use news media are more likely to trust their community, participate in community groups, engage in political discourse with neighbors, and have higher levels of social capital than those who do not consume local media (McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy 1999 [29]; Stamm, 1985 [30]; Viswanath et al., 1990 [31]).

Recent Dutch research by the Journalism Stimulation Fund (Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek) concluded that people using local and regional news media, are the most dedicated voters in local elections. In the group of news avoiders, the percentage of voters is three times lower. Consumers of local news are more interested in local politics (SVDJ, 2018). The conclusion of the Journalism Stimulation Fund study also showed that: “Citizens who consume news have more trust in politics; citizens who consume local news in the process are also more interested in local politics” (SVDJ, 2018).

In general, it can be said that Local Journalism is seen as an important factor to establish social cohesion (see for example Leupold, Klinger & Jarren, 2018 [32], Yamamoto, 2011 [33], Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022) [34]. Although not all of these correlations can be regarded as cause-and-effect relationships (Hoffman & Eveland, 2010) [35], they provide evidence that local journalism serves important societal values, such as social cohesion, civic engagement, political participation in democracy, and even governmental financial benefits.

### **1.2 The problems in local journalism**

In contrast to the importance, in several parts of the world local governments as well as scholars are concerned about the quantity and quality of local news. In this regard, the titles of recent books on local media speak for themselves. Many of the problems are attributed to the rise of social media (Nielsen, 2015 [36]; Harte et al., 2018). [37]

Due to a declining advertising market and the upcoming role of social media, traditional local news media are struggling for their existence and are seen in terms of market failure and not as potentially profitable companies (Pickard, 2020 [38]; Napoli, 2020). [39] Some scholars argue that local news should be seen as *merit good*: economical goods that function as a commodity or service, such as education or a library, regarded by society or a government as deserving of public finance (Ali, 2016 [40]; Ramsey & McDermott, 2020 [41]; Harrison, 2019 [42], De Jong & Koetsenruijter, 2017 [43]).

### **1.3 Purpose of the study**

Taking the importance and the emerging problems of local journalism into account, it is vital to focus on ways to overcome observed defeatism. In earlier research into the problematic state of local journalism, we concluded that proximity could be a key value in the discourse about the special quality of local news media (De Jong & Koetsenruijter, 2017). [44] Further literature research confirmed the relevance of the concept in local journalism in general. That brought us to the main question of this article: *how do local journalists value and establish this concept of proximity as a rhetorical device in their daily practice to argue the reliability and trust in their medium?*

The main source for our research are interviews we conducted with 52 local journalists and media workers in the Netherlands. Our interviews cover the broad perspective on all news media: from local digital media to newspaper and local radio or television.

## **2 Theoretical framework: three concepts**

Our analytical framework is based on three theoretical perspectives or notions: 1. rhetorical ethos and trust, connected with 2. “boundary work” and 3. social theory about the concept proximity. In this paragraph, we will elaborate

on these perspectives. In paragraph 2.3 we elaborate on proximity in the context of local journalism and news values. But proximity is more than a news value. We argue in this article that proximity can be used as a rhetorical means to establish reliability and trust, *the quintessence* of good journalism.

## 2.1 Rhetorical ethos and trust

Journalistic work can be considered essentially rhetorical in nature, in the sense that journalists try to convince their audience of the plausibility of their version of the news events, and, therefore, that they are a reliable and trustworthy source (Broersma, 2010). [45] The question is: what makes a local journalist reliable and trustworthy?

Within the rhetorical means of persuasion ethos, pathos, and logos, especially ethos and logos seem to be at stake in local news. Where logos is concerned with the actual content of the news and the arguments by which the facts are presented and underpinned, and pathos may be seen as all the journalistic work that attracts the attention of the audience and connects them emotionally with the content of the news, ethos is the factor that makes news, the news producer and the medium *trustworthy*. Aristotle determined three aspects of ethos: expertise, common sense and knowledge of the world (*phronêsis*), goodwill towards the audience (*eunoia*), and moral character (*aretê*) (Aristotle *Retorica*, 2.1, 1378a6-17). [46] In twenty-five centuries of rhetorical theorizing, these classical concepts have taken on many interpretations and forms. It still may be fruitful in our study to apply this Aristotelian perspective to the work of journalists – and in this case local journalists – because this helps to identify the rhetorical work that journalists are aware of and in fact perform to gain the needed trust of their local public.

## 2.2 Boundary work

Some elements in our data (the interviews) can be seen as *boundary work*: as rhetorical strategies to establish one's own quality or the quality of the news outlet he or she works for (Holmquest, 1990). [47] Boundary work provides one element of the theoretical framework we apply to the interviews.

Boundary work is a concept that originates in philosophy of knowledge and later has been introduced in organizational sciences (Gieryn, 1983). [48] Originally, it was used in the context of discourse to separate science from non-science. It focuses on the *boundaries* between two spheres and the means people use in – formal and informal – discourse to characterize their work to separate one sphere from another. In later research, it has been transferred to other professions (see Langley et al., 2019). [49] Carlson (2016) [50] placed the concept in the context of meta-journalistic discourse to explain how meanings around journalism develop. He states: “Through meta-journalistic discourse, various actors inside and outside of journalism compete to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the

boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices and the limits of what can or cannot be done.” (p 349) [51] In this way he connects actors, sites/audiences, and topics.

For journalism as a profession, the concept of boundary work is in particular relevant: after all, anyone can call themselves a journalist. Journalism about journalism (so called meta-journalism) therefore can often be seen from the concept of boundary work. Journalists’ discourse about their profession is not seldom a discourse about the boundaries of the trade. In our interviews, we found several implicit or explicit references to what a journalist ought to do or not, or what are known to be the characteristics of “real” journalists and what is done or not done. And these characteristics are different for local journalists than for journalists working for a national news outlet.

### **2.3 The concept of proximity**

Local news outlets who disregard the connection to “place”, have no chance of longstanding success or are at least subject of discussion. We give a few examples of cases where proximity, the close relation between news and place, was problematic. There is for example the case with the local news outlet Passadenanow.com. *The Huffington Post* reported that Passadenanow.com, a local American news site, hired reporters not only *from* but also *in* India. Located in New Delhi they were much cheaper than American reporters and a solid internet connection did the rest. So was the idea. And, wrote the Huffington Post, “if they ever feel the need to see the potholes of Passadena, there’s always Google Earth” The same news fact was brought by *The Los Angeles Time* with the header: “When is local journalism not really local? When it’s about Passadena and written by someone in India.” After all, it was not a successful enterprise. The publisher of Passadenanow.com received death threats and after a while, the business was stopped. (Archive cjr.org).

Another example of the discourse about the strong connection between place and journalistic work is discussed in the movie *Special Correspondents* (2016 – with Eric Bana, Ricky Gervais and Vera Farmiga). A radio journalist and his technician pretend they are kidnapped during a rebel uprising in South America, while they do their reporting work from an apartment around the corner of their radio studio in New York instead. Of course, this story has a bad ending: you don’t mess with proximity.

In the Netherlands, the online news site *The Correspondent* announced in 2018 that they would bring more international news, especially from the elections in the United States and they had suggested that they would open an office in New York. For this expansion they started a fundraising campaign. But in 2019 *The Correspondent* appeared to be punching above its weight with the planned office in New York and they decided to take care of the American news from their

Amsterdam-based office. It was a scandal and it cost them a lot of subscribers. This foreign adventure was not long lived (Takken, 2019).

### **News values**

The concept “proximity” can be related to a well-known theory of news values. This theory provides in fact an answer to the question: why are some events newsworthy and do other events never reach the front page? This newsworthiness can be defined in terms of news values. Although the concept of news values figures earlier in publications of for example Halsey (1919) [52] and Brown (1937) [53], the concept took wings by the publication of two Norwegian scholars in 1965, Galtung and Ruge in their publication *The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers* (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). [54] By consulting events in a wide variety of sources and comparing these with news articles, they described twelve factors that make some events more likely to appear in the news than others. These twelve factors – news values – define the concept of newsworthiness. The more an event fits in these factors, the higher the probability that it becomes news. For example: an event that happens to a socially higher placed person has a bigger chance to appear in the headlines than the same event happening to a socially lower placed person. Things that happen far away are less likely to become news, than things happening nearby.

In later articles they – and others – elaborate on these ideas and present several new versions of the set (Harcup & O’Neill, 2001 [55], Joye, Heinrich & Wöhlert, 2016 [56] and Harcup & O’Neill, 2017 [57]). These revisions show that news values are not a static set that remains constantly the same over the years, but changes in time, due to for example the emergence of new media. Due to new print techniques and the rise of online news, the availability of visuals became an important new news factor during the last 10 years, as well as shareability and drama (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017). [58] One of the news values is *meaningfulness*, which is further described as “relevance and cultural proximity”. So in some way, our interpretation of proximity is related to this news values, but we consider it more broadly, namely as a rhetorical strategy to establish reliability and trust.

### **Cultural Proximity**

The concept of proximity is more than a news value. Shoemaker et al. (2007) [59] see proximity as a “multidimensional construct, not tied to distance alone.” They make an important distinction between *geographic distance and scope*. Geographic distance is the literal distance between the event and the news outlet. Scope refers to the meaning of the event for a certain community. “Scope is a cognitive variable that represents journalists’ judgment of the event’s psychological closeness to the audience and the subsequent spin that they give news items about the event.” (p 244) [60] “Once an event is selected to become

news, editors, and producers may issue instructions for the journalist to create a story that emphasizes the event’s local implications, regardless of how physically close the event is to the audience” (p 236). [61]

According to Lu et al. (2019) [62] proximity must most importantly be seen as *cultural* proximity defined by ‘similarities in history, ethnicity, religion, language, and geography’. “Among them, similar language was often highlighted as an important determinant of audience preferences [...] Besides language, there are other cultural elements at play, such as dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, humor, music, religion, gender image, lifestyle, personal experiences, education, family, and organizational affiliation”. Straubhaar (2021, 26) [63] specifies his description as: “Cultural proximity is created by a feeling of cultural closeness or similarity, perceived in specific things like humor, gender images, dress, style, lifestyle, knowledge about other lifestyles, ethnic types, religion, and values that seem familiar or comfortable.” And as Joye et al. stress the importance of *involvement* in this concept “Next to cultural proximity, the term refers to a number of (inter)related factors such as historical links, geographical distance, trade or economic relations, and psychological or emotional distance. In other words, it describes different expressions of a certain relationship of *involvement*. (Joye, Heinrich & Wöhlert, 2016, p 13). [64]

Ahva & Panti (2014, p 331) [65] conclude: “The concept of proximity has evolved from being a criterion of news selection into a central imperative of news production aiming to engage audiences [...] proximity appears as a spatio-temporal, emotional and strategic keyword.”

In our research proximity forms a sensitizing concept to analyze our data, including all elements in discourse about the value of local issues, local norms, ideas, and knowledge about specific places, history and origin. This is a rather broad interpretation, including spatial, cultural, and value-proximity, but for this exploratory research it appeared to be a fruitful starting point. In this way, proximity seems to be a favorable virtue of local news. We can suppose that it adds to the audiences’ involvement with the news and greater consumption of local news.

But on the other hand, this rhetorical interpretation of proximity also concerns ideas about inclusion and exclusion of certain citizens or journalists. And a rhetoric of regionalism about who is “from here” and who is not. The proximity discourse can also include a rhetoric of journalistic boundary work about who is a real journalist and who is not.

### 3 Method

*The main question of this research is how local journalists value and establish this concept of proximity as a rhetorical device in their daily practice to argue the reliability and trust in their medium.*



Commissioned by a regional Dutch governmental organization (the Provincie Zuid-Holland) we interviewed 52 journalists, media workers, and communication professionals about the state of the news in the province. The original goal of this research was to lay out the problems and qualities of local news in the region. After analyzing our data for this specific goal and presenting the research (De Jong & Koetsenruijter, 2019) [66], the topic of proximity became salient and we decided to re-analyze the data with this concept in mind.

The interviews are semi-structured in-depth interviews following an interview protocol drawn up for this purpose; semi-structured meaning that although there is a list of topics that can be addressed, the dynamics of the conversation also explicitly leave room for depth and unexpected insights from the interviewees.

The first 42 interviews were conducted in 15 of the 60 South Holland municipalities (5 large, 5 medium, and 5 small) with a municipal communications professional (head of communications or spokesperson) and a local media representative. In addition, some of these interviews involved interviews with relevant individuals from businesses, knowledge institutions, and civil society organizations. Afterward, we conducted another 10 interviews with a specific scope on proximity. The interviews generally lasted one to two hours; audio recordings were made of the interviews and the recorded interviews were transcribed in writing (a total of about 75 hours of interview material developed into 440 pages of text). Persons involved were all quoted with permission (The topic list and a complete list of interviewees can be obtained from the authors.).

The data are analyzed in a qualitative way, following common procedures for open, axial, and selective coding (see for example Mayring 2004 [67]; Schreier, 2012 [68] or Saldanã 2021 [69]). The insights from the three theoretical concepts as explained in chapter 3, form the sensitizing concepts in the axial and selective coding.

With 52 interviews, spread across journalists and media workers, spread across different local media, and centered in one of the biggest provinces of the Netherlands, the data are rich but of course not representative of European or global-local journalism. The relevance of this research is however not its (statistical) representativeness but more in its potential to generate new insights.

#### **4 Results**

The interviews demonstrated insights about local news, local journalism, and local journalists, which we will present in the following ten paragraphs. The nine categories show the ways they value and establish the concept of proximity as a rhetorical means in their daily practices.

#### 4.1 Proximity of the news

In the nine categories in this section we make a distinction between proximity *in the news* and proximity *of the journalist*. The first category has to do with the content of the news: the subjects and people. It concerns local events, changes in local infrastructure, politics, economy, culture, sports, and the way reporters emphasize their importance. With localism in the news, we are dealing with the geographical proximity of the news. References can be found in many interviews. Dealing with local subjects is part of the way proximity is *established*.

*“We work here in Dordrecht. If something happens here, then we are on top of it, because we literally sit here. When you go to Zwijndrecht just across the bridge, then it becomes a bit tougher.” (Jos Verlegh, AD De Dordtenaar)*

This localism also takes shape in references to the origin-argument: you have to be from here. And the argument that a certain knowledge is necessary, otherwise you “run against a wall”:

*“Then you really have to be like the boys in The Hague [centre of National politics] [...], they are completely rooted there. But yes, if they have to report something in Gouda, they would also run against a wall.” (Marianka Peters, Goudse Post)*

Another fine example of the importance of “being where the news” is, is from journalist Reanne from Sleutelstad:

*“Look, they [the rival news outlet in the city] only write a small article: ‘there’s a water polo match and this is who won’. Whereas we know those people. I just go there on Saturday nights. And I go everywhere and talk to people. If they [the rival news outlet] are somewhere, they just pick up and leave. We get there, pick up and hang out for a while. We are a lot more engaged and we know the people better. As a result [...] people are more likely to tell us things. They give me a call in the morning: have you heard the news? The ZVL chairman has resigned!” (Reanne van Kleef, reporter Sleutelstad)*

Local journalists who work where they live, get the news by just moving through the city; they get tips and ideas on the road and during shopping. They find their news topics more often than national journalists from their private lives. From what they hear during parties, while shopping, or from what happened to their children:

*“Yes, my children go out and buy forty nitrous oxide balloons in a café. In a cafe, on a Saturday night. Apparently, cafes in this city sell nitrous oxide balloons [as a drug], you can get them for free. So we're making that story right now [...] Well, that's just a subject from my kids.” (Henk Ruijl, RTV West)*

And of course, local news is also about local sport:

*“... sport is very local. It also has a connecting role, I suppose... If there is something written in the newspaper, then that is the talk of the town, which is nice.” (Jojanneke Weijermars, municipality of Bodegraven)*

#### **4.2 Proximity of the journalist**

The idea that local journalists have to originate in the area they are writing about is very often mentioned. This idea of origin is connected with issues about local knowledge and feeling comfortable working in your own environment. When asked if it is even possible that local journalists live in another town than they work, Chris de Waard, a local journalist from the city of Leiden sees problems:

*“I know people who do. One of our employees did freelance work for Broadcast West for a while. He had to go to villages like Hillegom and Pijnacker, places he didn't like. [...] He quit the job because he lives in another area. I too like the combination: to do your work in your own living environment.”*

In Leiden there has always been animosity between two news outlets Unity and Sleutelstad. Unity-journalists live – according to Reanne – mostly in another place (Alphen) and in this quote we not only see the origin argument (“real Leiden people”) but we also see an example of boundary work. It seems as if people (read: journalists) who are not “from here” are not real journalists. With the argument that they see the journalistic way of life as just ‘work’. In the meantime, she refers to the immediacy-argument: you don’t see them when something is happening.

*“That's the difference between us: involvement. People working here are real Leiden people. People there see it as work. And that becomes clear in how they work: you never see people from Unity [when there is something going on in Leiden].” (Reanne van Kleef, Sleutelstad)*

The issue of “who is from here and who is an outsider”, is important in local life and in local news. It is not only a question of knowledge but also of understanding local society and – as Van Kleef calls it – “deeper structures”:

*“... because I grew up here myself, I do know a little more of the deeper structures as well. Who knows who, who has an interest in what. I think that if you are a journalist from Amsterdam, it's a lot more difficult. And you also don't know, you don't feel what people think is important.” (Iris Olsthoorn, Indebuurt Delft)*

Marianka Peter gives another example to stress the importance of this sensibility of what is really happening in the community: she noticed that politicians had missed a fine antenna in society:

“... the cemetery here, it's called IJsselhof. And it's now operated by Yarden. Then Yarden wanted to change the name to the Yardenhuis Gouwestreek. We also have Rabobank Gouwestreek here, so it was like entering an insurance company. [...] I wrote a few columns about it, and my complaint was dismissed as nonsense by a few politicians. I received seven thousand responses: on Twitter, Facebook, phone, you name it. [...] In the end, Yarden also went crazy with calls from angry people, and returned to the old name.” (Marianka Pete..., Gouda Post)

The localism of the journalist also has to do with references to local history and customs, habits, and traditions. And it is vital for a local journalist to be around in the area:

“We are in the capillaries of our society, and we hear from the butcher and the baker things, which they [national journalists] don't hear. I think that's very important to us. You hear it on the street ...” (Marjo de Waard, Klokradio)

### 4.3 Scope

National sports events are not specific events for local news media, except when a local sporter achieves something on a national stage. This is an example of what Shoemaker et al. (2007) call scope: not the content of the news is local, but a scope is chosen to make it local.

“If Sarina Wiegman wins on Sunday, we will be a proud regional broadcaster, because Sarina Wiegman comes from our region. As coach of the Dutch women's soccer team. Then you dance the polonaise... The easy thing about pride is that it very easily appeals to the feelings of listeners, readers, and followers. [...]” (Henk Ruijl, RTV West)

Sometimes it is the other way around: local news gets a national scope:

“Regional news is important because you can trace its DNA. For example, frauds in the municipality are initially of: yes, well, the municipality of Zaltbommel, a civil servant stole ten grand, be happy. But if there is a problem within the municipality and it happens for the umpteenth time, suddenly it becomes a national story.” (Marcel van Lingen, media-directeur, ANP)

In other cases, actual, national issues are translated or related to local examples, as in the quote from Willemijn Sneep, editor, a clear example of what Shoemaker means:

“For example, last week it was Keti Koti, the abolition of slavery was celebrated in Rotterdam. We had an article which linked to that, also the slavery past [...] Yesterday we had a story about the shortage of doctor's offices in the center due to increased housing prices.” (Willemijn Sneep, editor Vers Beton)

#### 4.4 Language and local culture

Consideration for local language and dialect is a way to show that a news medium or a journalist is familiar with local culture. A region with a strong identity in the Netherlands is for example Limburg, a province in the south. Van Peij (2019) [70] sees dialect as a vehicle and a mirror of culture and identity. She cites journalist Urlings:

*“... the culture, the way of thinking, the outlook on life of those who speak the language. You can see that in Limburg in traditions like the carnival, in humor, in the music. Even when we call each other names. Much of that can only be spoken in the local dialect. In translation, it loses its essence, its soul.” (Urlings, 2018)*

The cabaret-performer Sjaak Bral, famous for his local dialect is a well-known guest on local Radio. His dialect is associated with local pride:

*“We have Sjaak Bral on the radio here as a cabaret performer from The Hague. Well, that program is of course especially interesting for the The Hague listener, because he appeals to the The Hague audience, because he articulates The Hague pride. [...]” (Henk Ruijl, RTV West)*

Sometimes a reference to language has to do with the difference between the language of the (local) government and the language of the reader:

*“And I do think that a big part (of the journalistic work, J&K) of it is to give a better or more easily understood view of a city than for example the municipality does. Because they obviously use policy language, people don't understand that. (...) We try to communicate to people in an appropriate and clear way.” (Iris Olsthoorn, Community Manager Indebuurt Delft)*

The theme “language” does not only concern literal language, but also what is “not done” in a certain area. In fact, it relates in a broad sense to local culture, norms, and values. In this example Sliedrecht is a more conservative Christian community than Gorinchem:

*“We had a cartoon in the newspaper [...] We thought it was funny. It was about a robot and about adultery, well. But in Sliedrecht I received serious letters, because people thought it was unacceptable that the cartoon suggested that adultery was being committed. If you had posted it in Gorinchem, no one would have reacted. [...] But I seriously got four emails: “tasteless cartoon”, “please do not post this kind of things anymore.” (Marjanne Dijkstra, Het Kompas Sliedrecht)*

#### 4.5 Home grown

Interviewees state that it is essential that their work is home grown: that their articles are original work, no press releases or direct overtakes from other news media.

*“Het Witte Weekblad is better at that, because it is from here. Het Leidsch Dagblad is a regional newspaper. [...] The other news media are zero-critical, to be honest. They copy-paste.” (Pien van Buul, Municipality Kaag & Braassem)*

Henk Ruijl, about a documentary he made for Broadcast West:

*“Yes, I do think those are great examples of how you dig up a local issue from within your own circle, about which no press release is sent, no Tweet either, which you really dig up yourself.” (Henk Ruijl, Hoofdredacteur Broadcast West)*

The urge to make your own news also speaks from the quote below:

*“It is vital to go there and talk to the people personally. [...] you can experience the atmosphere.” (Marjanne Dijkstra, Hoofdredacteur het Kompas Sliedrecht)*

#### 4.6 Small scale

Because local journalists often live in the place they write about, they always have their “news antennae” on when they walk down the street. The news happens literally and figuratively at their feet: traffic accidents, strange construction sites, blue-green algae in their swimming water. These topics are visible in the daily lives of the readers. What is not news for national media, is often news for local media. These newsworthy subjects are often very small things:

*“But also in terms of magnitude, [local news is] a completely different kind of news. Because a particular newspaper seller on the corner can already be news to us, while nine times out of ten that is not news so quickly for national media. Something very small can quickly become news [...] it's just a kind of micro level you practice here.” (Marjanne Dijkstra, Het Kompas Sliedrecht)*

Another example of the small-scale news is:

*“We also sometimes do very small things, you just put them on Instagram or something. This week I had a picture of stray cows in the city, of Gooimeerlaan. We will not make an article of that, but publish it on Instagram. And then you immediately see that people like to see it.” (Chris de Waard, Sleutelstad)*

#### 4.7 Pride

Pride is often mentioned as a theme in the interviews. That contrasts with (Dutch) national news media, where national pride is seldom an issue, pre-

sumably because of the critical attitude of journalists. However, this pride is part of local culture and history and quite often explicitly mentioned:

*“But I am also proud that on August 4 we will be portraying the Sailing Flower Parade together with the WOS [public broadcasting for the municipalities] Because we feel that this is a pride of the region and that you can make a wonderful program with that pride. Or that last weekend at Parkpop [famous Pop Festival], for the first time this year, we mainly use online and social media and less radio and TV. And that our Instagram account almost exploded from what we did there, and that we have a lot more followers. That was the result of that pride, and that rootedness.” (Henk Ruijl, RTV West)*

That same pride is mentioned in the next quote:

*“You may distinguish yourself from a national medium because, in my opinion, a local regional medium may be more chauvinistic and proud of the region, you may emphasize what the cohesion is in the region, because you are part of that society. Journalists live there, readers live there. If you then only show what is wrong, you are putting the cart before the horse. You may show what is wrong, but also that it is great to have your children grow up here.” (Paul van den Bosch, AD regio)*

Often, journalists refer to a historical component of pride connected with identity; although it is not explicitly mentioned as such:

*“I thought that was a really nice production, an atmospheric report about the last day that the local hospital in Sliedrecht was open. [...] For many people that had a certain sentimental value, because their children were born there, or grandpa died there, and now the hospital is being demolished. [...] That concerns their identity: hospital closed, we have to go to the big city, as a village we do not longer have one.” (Marjanne Dijkstra, Het Kompas)*

#### **4.8 Social cohesion**

Communication professionals as well as many journalists see “connecting” and social cohesion as an important function of local journalism. For some of them, social cohesion is an important goal and for others, it is only seen as a side effect. Barry Raymakers as well as Ib Haarsma see social cohesion as a goal of local journalism:

*“You want to bind and inspire people, so you want to inform them about what is happening in their municipality and in their living and working neighborhood in Delft. [...] And what is also very nice, and I see that reflected in all local media, is attention to people who make a good contribution to the city. Delft op Zondag [a weekly paper] has an interview with them every week: the Delft resident of the Week. Those are examples of connection.” (Barry Raymakers, municipality of Delft)*

*“Local journalists provide a picture of what is happening in a village or neighborhood, they interpret it and are therefore a connecting factor. Because of their stories, people understand each other better and understand better where things are going wrong. In this way, journalism creates a kind of togetherness. When you know each other better, the fear decreases. You give people a safe environment to tell their story.” (Ib Haarsma, Broadcast Rijnmond)*

Jojanneke Weijermans sees it as an effect of what local journalism can achieve:

*“[Local journalism] has such a comforting content[...] I find that very typical of local journalism. And sports, I think, are very local. It also has a connecting role. If something is in the newspaper, it's the talk of the town, that's fun.” (Jojanneke Weijermans, Bodegraven)*

Marijn Kramp, former editor-in-chief Leidsch Dagblad, sometimes sees connecting as the main news function, which can lead to articles that have no direct news origin:

*“When it comes to the content of the newspaper – because that is of course another way you can connect – the ‘interview of the week’ is a good example: two pages about someone who does something for the city, giving him or her a platform, without a direct news cause. Sometimes that leads to extra connection because then people think: oh, interesting I'm going to call them.” (Marijn Kramp, former editor-in-chief Leidsch Dagblad)*

#### **4.9 Social pressure and independency**

Quite some of the interviewees mentioned the dark side of proximity in local journalism.

Marianka Peters (editor *Goudse Post*) has sometimes experienced the large degree of proximity as a problem for the watchdog function of local journalism: it is hard to be critical of your town's mayor if he is your neighbor:

*[About a former mayor that was a neighbor of the journalist] “I tried to avoid bad publicity for him. [...] But I was being watched. I lived on the Singel, and he lived across the street, and a town councilor lived on the other side. And he saw exactly when I visited the mayor. Really awful, of course he tweeted that...” (Marianka Peters, Goudse Post)*

Local journalists must be able to deal with being approached in the street about their articles. This feedback is not always positive, which is why a local journalist must have resilience. IJsbrand Terpstra, a journalist at Sleutelstad:



*“I write that the alderman has made a big mistake and then I may be standing behind him in line at the supermarket the next day. You have to be sufficiently strong in your shoes, because you will be confronted like this much faster than journalists at a national level.”*

Many local media work with volunteers with little formal journalism education. These volunteers sometimes experience problems with independency:

*“You can't get too critical either. [...] you are independent but you are also dependent. [...] our political reporter, for example, comes from a certain political party. He is subconsciously not independent after all. Because of course, he can say on the radio: 'Well, that party is making such a mess'. But then he is called the same evening by his own party chairman: 'What are you saying now?' [...] He is no longer politically active, but you keep your political color. To be independent is very difficult for a volunteer.” (Tim Hoek, RTV Slogo)*

Local journalists must have a well-developed ethical sense. This also applies to national journalists, of course, but local journalists told us that they often find themselves in complicated situations. This is because they live amidst their sources, which can easily intertwine work and private life. Willemijn Sneep has experienced this kind of problem:

*“... we had an editor who became a council member. And he then quit, because he couldn't write independently anymore. So that occurs sometimes, indeed. You might have that sooner with local media, that conflicts of interest can arise, or that you have to resign from positions as a result.” (Willemijn Sneep (eindredacteur Vers Beton in Rotterdam))*

Also Coen Polack, editor-in-chief of Leidsch Dagblad warned for this risk to the independence of journalists:

*“I prefer journalists who are prepared to dig deep into society, but who also understand what it is like to remain independent. I've had reporters who wrote for the newspaper but also did all kinds of societal work, or interns who were a member of a student association. When they were writing on those subjects that immediately led to conflicts of interest.”*

Especially local journalism is vulnerable to this sort of risks, because many of the volunteers working for local media did not have a proper journalism education.

*“National journalists, of course, have been really trained as journalists, with ethical norms of professional journalism, acknowledgment of sources. I have learned by doing, but I didn't get a formal study in it. And many local journalists are not getting paid. I think that's a very big difference. Here it is a*

*labor of love and a passion, a passion for your village, and personal curiosity.”*  
(Marjo de Waard, editor-in-chief Klokradio, Alblasserdam en Molenlanden)

## **5 Conclusions and discussion**

The main research question was “*how do local journalists value and establish the concept of proximity as a rhetorical device in their daily practice to argue the reliability and trust in their medium?*” We present the conclusions in connection with our three theoretical concepts: rhetorical ethos and trust; boundary work; and social theory about proximity. Finally, we added some consequences for journalism practice and suggestions for further research.

### **5.1 Rhetorical ethos**

Many of the presented findings and ideas about local journalism practice can be directly connected to Aristotelean Ethos, the factor that makes the rhetor – here the journalist and its news medium – trustworthy. Aristotle determined three aspects of ethos: *phronêsis*, *eunoia*, and *aretê*. The classical notion of *phronêsis* is shaped in the data as expertise, common sense, and knowledge about the local situation. These qualities are valued as vital: being journalists ‘from here’, feeling what local people think is important, being in the capillaries of the local society, and hearing from the baker and butcher what is hot and happening. knowing the deeper structures of the local culture. These qualities are not *learned* but gained in experience and origin, which implies: being where the news is, knowing what is going on in the region, and being involved on a daily basis. It is suggested to show these qualities in news productions. In this context *eunoia* or goodwill towards the audience is shaped in terms of emphasizing a shared common cultural background and celebrating the collective local history. In that context also fits the expression of shared local pride. Journalists win the sympathy of the public by speaking their language and being one of them. They are involved citizens reporting about the subjects the public cares about, however small they may be. Moral character (*aretê*) is defined as the virtue of an honest character being consistent, that can be trusted. This aspect of ethos seems to be less salient in our data: it is a personal, universal journalistic value, not specifically connected to locality. The aspect of homegrown news can be interpreted in this respect: the news is from here, dug up by the local journalist, and not copy pasted from a press agency or other media. Furthermore, *aretê* is part of the aspect of the “proximity of the journalist”. A journalist with local origins is seen as more trustworthy than an outsider. These three aspects can be seen as rhetorical strategies, purposefully deployed to enhance ethos, gain trust and connect to the audience.

### **5.2 Boundary work**

Our data (the interviews) can also be seen from the perspective of *boundary work*: as rhetorical strategies to establish one's own quality or the quality of the

news outlet and to distinguish journalism from non-journalism (Gieryn 1983 [71]; Carlson 2016 [72] and Carlson & Lewis, 2019 [73]). Especially the contrast between local and national news media was emphasized in the interviews.

When local journalists talk about their profession, issues about their origin are salient. These are part of their personal identity and are part of the required professional knowledge. Language and social culture are vital parts of this knowledge. In the discourse about the journalistic *metier*, this origin seems to be even more important than journalistic skills. And this is an important difference between national journalists. In national journalism, classical journalistic skills like education, being critical, following the adversarial process, and being independent, seem to be more salient themes in the discourse about the profession. And local journalists in our data sometimes distance themselves from national journalists with an appeal to origins and local knowledge. While being Dutch is seldom discussed in Dutch national news media.

National journalists presenting news about local issues are being criticized for their lack of local knowledge and feeling about what is locally important. This can be described as *helicopter journalism* (Schechter, 2005) [74]: “distanced ‘outside-in’ reporting that accesses few if any sources in the country itself, does not speak the language, and does not explain much about what is going on. It’s like the foreign correspondent who flies into a conflict zone for an afternoon and gets most of his information from a taxi driver.”

Another aspect of boundary work is the appeal to pride. Many local journalists in our data pride themselves on their origin, and on the area they live and work in, which is in contrast with national journalism, where pride is seldom an issue. (An exception is news about national sports).

Local journalists mention establishing social cohesion explicitly as a value in their work: some see it as a result of their work; others see it as a goal. This is in contrast to national journalism where the idea of social cohesion is not seen as a vital function.

Social pressure and independency are themes that are closely connected to boundary work. Closeness to sources is mentioned as essential to good local journalists. They live amidst their sources and that seems to be a *conditio sine qua non* for the job. As one of our respondents said about an official figure in a critical article: “*I may be standing behind him in line at the supermarket the next day.*” That makes a big difference with national journalists, who have a substantial distance from the people and facts they report on.

While there seems to exist the idea in society that local journalists look up to national journalists and national journalists look down on local journalists, this is an idea that is much less prevalent among the respondents that showed diverse instances of boundary work in the interviews. They not only show pride in the area they live and work in, but they also pride themselves in their work as local journalists.

### 5.3 Proximity

Proximity is the overall concept in our approach, connecting rhetorical ideas and theory on boundary work. We made a distinction between *valuing* proximity and *establishing* proximity. Our interviews mirror a high value of proximity in different kinds of appearances: it figures as a rhetorical theme in discussions about what local journalism ought to be, and it shows up in the ways the news is selected and produced. It relates to both journalism as a profession and to journalism as a product. The way proximity is valued, gets its contours in the nine subjects from chapter four: proximity of the news, proximity of the journalist, scope, language and social culture, the fact that news is homegrown, the small scaleness, pride, and the function in social cohesion. Two more negative points in this context of proximity are the experienced pressure from the environment and a risk of loss of independence. The reason proximity is valued highly, can be explained by ethos: journalists presenting themselves and their news as reliable and trustworthy by the rhetorical strategies presented in the nine aspects of establishing proximity.

From our viewpoint, proximity is more than a news value (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) [75]; it can be seen as a rhetorical virtue in local journalism, a quality that concludes from a set of specific rhetorical techniques to produce trustworthy and convincing local news (Ahva & Pantti 2014) [76].

The concept of proximity seems to offer an insightful and clarifying perspective on the way journalists define and appreciate the quality of local journalism. There are important differences between local and national journalism. The classical notions of reliability and factuality seem in local journalism to be contested by the notion of proximity: a tendency to convince not only with facts but also by playing locus cards: that you are “from here.” Shortly said, an emphasis shift from *logos to ethos or from factuality to a more important role for involvement*. The salience of proximity changes the perspective from classical news values to personal involvement. These results shed light on challenges and directions for local journalism in the future.

The problems of local journalism are sometimes defined in terms of ‘News deserts’. Although these problems are still scarce in the densely populated Netherlands, they certainly exist elsewhere in the world. Nikki Usher (2023) [77]: suggests that “current scholarship and public discourse about ‘news deserts’ and the loss of local news [...] reinforce a false nostalgia for the role of local newspapers in communities and focus on saving local newspapers as they are rather than reimagining what local news could be.” We disagree that this is only a matter of newspapers that can be solved by digital news: not every area has its own digital news outlet. (And besides: paper news still has its role for older people.) We do agree with Usher that local journalism has to focus on “place-based specificity.” This specificity has been elaborated by our nine aspects of proximity (Usher, 2023). [78]

## 5.4 Suggestions for further research and consequences for journalism practice

The present study is exploring research on the way proximity can fulfill a role in local journalism. It is limited to a specific area and a specific theoretical context. That made our questions manageable, but our outcomes confined. Work can still be done for example in research on local journalism in other parts of the world, and in research within other theoretical frameworks. A suggestion for another framework is further research into the ‘professional identity of journalists’ (see for example Hanitzsch et al. 2019 [79]; Melado 2015 [80]; Tandoc et al. 2013 [81]). This concept has grown over the last decades into a rich area of research that we have not been able to address here.

The challenge for a modern locally based journalism is to exploit proximity as their unique selling points to distinguish their work from national news organizations and contribute to a sense of belonging and community spirit, pride and at the same time avoid a rhetoric of exclusion that can be part of regionalism and xenophobia. Local journalists could consciously use the nine aspects of proximity to increase the value of their journalistic products and connect more closely to what is going on in the local community. In doing so, they not only can increase audience engagement, but also social cohesion. These insights could also be taught in journalism educational programs and during internships to new young journalists. In this way, more young talent can be recruited for a career in local journalism, which is having a hard time at this juncture.

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