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# A Servant of the Authorities or an Ally of Civil Society? The Role Perceptions and Role Performance of Local Interloper Media

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## ABSTRACT

The study explores the journalistic role perceptions and role performance of local interloper media practitioners in Finland. The examined media include non-commercial outlets funded by a city administration or other local authorities as well as commercial online-only outlets. The outlets are conceptualised as interlopers because they apply journalistic forms, styles and methods in their content but do not necessarily consider themselves as journalists or adhere to the ethical guidelines of journalism. The outlets' role performance is analysed in their published content, while the practitioners' role perceptions are analysed via semi-structured interviews. The analysis reveals that the non-commercial practitioners primarily perceive and perform the loyal facilitator role, whereas the commercial practitioners serve the disseminator role. The watchdog role is virtually absent among all the examined outlets. The lack of critical perspectives indicates a selective and strategic adoption of journalistic roles aimed at enhancing public relations efforts and appearing more trustworthy and interesting to audiences or advertisers. The investigated outlets and practitioners therefore challenge the monopoly of local legacy news media over local news. Their adoption of certain journalistic roles while abstaining from critical scrutiny of local authorities shows a tendency to disguise political or private ambitions as public interest news.

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## Introduction

The boundaries between journalism, commercial communication and public relations (PR) have been in flux over the last decade. While journalistic institutions have adopted native advertising in their business strategies, there have been simultaneous efforts to adapt journalistic forms and methods for PR and commercial communication (Carlson 2014; Hagelstein and Zerfass 2020). Commercial communication includes various forms

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of advertising, while PR refers to organisations' purposeful use of communication to fulfil their mission (Hallahan et al. 2007; Li 2019). Institutions not considered traditionally journalistic, such as municipalities or cities, are reflecting these trends and are increasingly running their own digital media outlets that purposely mimic journalistic conventions (Hujanen et al. 2023). Moreover, many digital-only media outlets rely on native advertising or otherwise produce content in close cooperation with advertisers (Hujanen et al. 2023). These emerging initiatives highlight potential conflicts between the outlets' financial backgrounds and the ethics of their content production: the media outlets are financially dependent on their funders but can create the impression that they are conducting autonomous, independent journalism. Here, there is an ethical conflict especially concerning the ideals of journalistic autonomy and public service, according to which journalists and journalistic institutions should be free from economic and political pressure and should be accountable to their audiences, not their sponsors (Deuze 2005).

The new quasi-journalistic actors are typical of digital media, which have drastically lowered the barriers to publishing and distributing content (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). As new players have entered the trenches of the journalistic field, they have contested "traditional" journalists as the primary producers of relevant and authoritative information. Such actors have been conceptualised as journalistic *interlopers* operating at the periphery of the journalistic field, seeking to expand its boundaries and advocating for new ideas and practices that could transform the field (Eldridge 2019). These normative and practical reconsiderations are essential because the journalistic profession is not protected by official licences or education but by professional norms, practices and ethics (Abbott 1988). By mimicking journalism and introducing new norms and content practices, interlopers can thus contribute to how media professionals and audiences conceive journalism.

To better understand how interlopers seek to redraw the boundaries of journalism, this article explores the role performance and role perceptions of six local Finnish interloper media outlets and their practitioners. These outlets are considered interlopers because they claim journalistic authority by producing news or news-like content but challenge established journalistic norms, ethics and practices. Most of these outlets are directly affiliated with municipalities or cities or collaborate closely with local businesses, thereby questioning the norm of journalistic autonomy. None of the examined publications adhere to the ethical guidelines for journalists defined by the Council for Mass Media in Finland (2013), rendering their ethical codes of practice ambiguous. In the article, the journalistic nature of the interloper practitioners and media outlets is assessed through their role perceptions and role performance. Journalistic roles refer to the normative expectations within the society about the different functions and purposes of journalism, which influence journalists' professional behaviour (Donsbach 2008). Although the framework of journalistic roles is typically used to analyse traditional professional journalism, there has been interest in its application to non-traditional journalistic actors and forms, such as digital-only news interlopers and native advertising (Li 2019; Schapals, Maeres, and Hanusch 2019).

## Theoretical Framework

### *Interlopers in a Media Landscape with Blurring Boundaries*

With the digitalisation of news, questions regarding the boundaries of journalism have become essential to the field's futures. The reduced costs of digital media production

and distribution have allowed new players to produce journalistic or quasi-journalistic content and access the journalistic field (Eldridge 2014). Consequently, journalism has been characterised as a field of “blurring boundaries”, where it is increasingly difficult to determine what journalism is and who is a journalist (Loosen 2015). Journalistic boundaries are mostly discursive as the journalistic domain is defined by professional norms and practices rather than by official qualifications or jurisdiction (Singer 2015). However, these discursive and normative boundary markers work both ways: actors who have not been traditionally perceived as journalists can assert the journalistic nature of their work by adopting journalistic norms and practices (Riedl 2023).

As journalism scholars strive to understand the increasingly dynamic and contested journalistic field, they are shifting the focus from the journalistic core of legacy newsrooms to various peripheral, non-traditional journalistic actors, such as entrepreneurial journalists or web analytics experts (Deuze and Witschge 2020). The shift in scholarly focus has been accompanied by new conceptualisations that take into account the increasingly complex journalistic field. Loosen et al. (2022, 39), for instance, propose “X Journalism” as an observational tool for mapping out the “combinations of the word ‘journalism’ with a particular modifying term that represents and signals a certain specificity and novelty”, such as robot journalism or foundation-funded journalism.

Among these conceptualisations, the term *interloper media* has emerged as a prominent contender to encompass the wide variety of actors from the journalistic periphery who challenge established journalistic conventions (Eldridge 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann 2023). Interloper media encompass actors, such as WikiLeaks or political bloggers, who are not typically recognised as journalists but whose output can perform journalistic tasks, functions and roles (Eldridge 2014). Since interlopers trespass on the journalistic field through their contributions and claims to epistemic authority, professional journalists typically engage in boundary work by dismissing their journalistic credentials and belongingness in the journalistic field (Eldridge 2014). However, journalists can also broaden the professional boundary by embracing newcomers, such as technologists, who can enhance the journalists’ work and help them reach new audiences (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). Through such boundary extensions, interlopers can exert a lasting impact on journalists’ professional practice.

Since Eldridge (2014) introduced the concept of interloper media, efforts have been made to differentiate various kinds of interloper actors. Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) divide interlopers into three groups: explicit interlopers, implicit interlopers and intralopers. *Explicit interlopers* are not typically considered professional journalists, yet they claim journalistic authority by “directly contributing [...] to the creation and distribution of news” and “challeng[ing] journalistic norms, calling for improved practices” (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018, 73). Bloggers and citizen journalists are typical examples of explicit interlopers as they can comment on, redistribute and produce news. They can also criticise traditional journalistic actors, for instance, for their unwillingness to interact with news users or lack of professional transparency. *Implicit interlopers* are not directly involved in journalistic production and do not overtly challenge journalistic authority but nevertheless promise to improve journalism through new technological practices (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). Implicit interlopers include, for instance, web analysts who sell analyses of news users’ online behaviour to newsrooms. Finally, *intralopers* work within newsrooms without journalism-related titles (Holton and Belair-Gagnon

2018). They often come from a technologist background and help journalists, for instance, programme their online stories or visualise data.

Eldridge (2019) further differentiates agonist and antagonist (explicit) interlopers. *Agonist* interlopers, such as entrepreneurial journalists, operate within journalistic norms and express constructive criticism of the legacy news media for their shortcomings in upholding journalistic ideals (Eldridge 2019). *Antagonist* interlopers, such as the alt-right media outlet Breitbart, on the contrary, can occasionally perform traditional journalistic tasks but malappropriate the journalistic identity “to disguise more antagonistic ambitions, serving political agendas rather than public ones” (Eldridge 2019, 15). Antagonist interlopers are destructive to journalistic ideology since they hide their political agenda, abuse public trust and undermine journalistic authority by disguising private interests as public interest news (Eldridge 2019).

The present article expands the study of interloper media to local media landscapes. The analysis adopts an analytical framework of journalistic roles (Mellado 2015) with the aim of providing a better understanding of how local interlopers’ claims to journalistic *identities*, their deployment and modification of journalistic *practices*, and their *structures*, such as ownership models, influence their conceptions and content production (Hanusch and Löhmann 2023). An analysis of journalistic roles helps reveal *what* types of interlopers local peripheral media outlets can represent and *how* they seek to challenge, support, or transform the established forms of local news. In other words, by examining local interlopers’ journalistic roles, the analysis explores the specific ways in which interlopers can claim belongingness in local news or challenge established journalistic institutions, norms and routines.

### ***Journalistic Roles as Boundary Markers***

Simultaneously with notions of the blurring boundaries and interlopers in the journalistic periphery, the study of journalistic roles has become a thriving field (Hanusch and Banjac 2018; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). Drawing on role theory (Biddle 1979), professional journalistic roles are defined by normative perceptions of the purposes that journalism serves in society and that influence journalists’ professional behaviour (Donsbach 2008). Since journalistic roles embody the professional journalistic ideology, they are essential to the maintenance and redrawing of journalistic boundaries (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Riedl 2023). Therefore, a more nuanced view of how interlopers blur journalism’s professional boundaries can be obtained by examining the specific journalistic roles that interloper actors perform or perceive as important (Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019).

While studies typically explore and compare the professional roles of different media systems and their cultural and political contexts (Willnat, Weaver, and Choi 2013), there has been a growing emphasis on studying journalistic roles in the digital media environment (Singer et al. 2011). As part of this strand of research, interlopers have sparked researchers’ initial interest. Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch (2019) find that news-oriented interlopers often adhere to core journalistic roles, such as providing verified information of public interest. They challenge the prevailing forms of journalism mainly through new practices, such as news provision to underserved niche audiences, but leave the ideological core of professional journalism mostly intact (Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch 2019). Along these lines, Belair-Gagnon and Holton (2018) uncover that web analytics companies

working for newsrooms do not generally challenge the professional journalistic ideology but rather perceive their role as *efficiency drivers* who promise to make content distribution and monetisation more efficient. In their analysis of native advertisers' journalistic role performance, Li (2019) identifies that their content performs mostly the service and infotainment roles but occasionally also a civic role.

Journalists' conceptions of their roles – what they think they do or want to do – have typically been conceptualised as *role orientations* (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). The present study approaches the role orientations of interloper media practitioners as *role perceptions*. Rather than journalists' own conceptions, role perceptions acknowledge the social expectations of the journalistic profession (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). A journalist might internalise, for instance, an infotainment role that is influenced by larger social and economic undercurrents, even though the individual journalist would not personally consider the role to be important. As interlopers participate in the journalistic process, either challenging or collaborating with professional journalists, they also perceive and evaluate journalistic roles (Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018). Analysing interlopers' role perceptions therefore allows for assessing how they rearticulate these roles, create new expectations of them and contribute to the broader discourses of what constitutes news and journalism.

The second dimension studied in this article is the interloper outlets' *role performance*, which emphasises the roles that journalists actually perform in their content. Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach (2017, 5) define role performance as “the collective outcome of concrete newsroom decisions and the style of journalistic reporting”. Studying interlopers' role performance helps in unveiling the journalistic roles that they potentially perform but also in assessing *how* they perform those roles. An interloper might perform a civic role, for instance, by collecting proposals from citizens but publishing only those that align with the interests of those in power, in effect performing the loyal facilitator role.

Despite the increasing diversity of journalistic and quasi-journalistic actors, studies on journalistic roles outside professional news media remain scarce. Within existing research, only Li (2019) has conducted a systematic operationalisation of journalistic role performance in studying native advertisers, while Belair-Gagnon and Holton (2018) and Schapals, Maares, and Hanusch (2019) more generally address interlopers' journalistic and other role perceptions. Prior studies thus highlight the need for investigations that systematically distinguish both interlopers' perceived and performed roles into predefined categories of journalistic roles. The roles of local interlopers who more overtly challenge journalists' epistemic authority and the boundaries of journalism especially warrant further exploration. This article contributes to bridging these research gaps by answering the following research questions:

RQ1: What roles do practitioners at Finnish local interloper media outlets *perceive* themselves as performing?

RQ2: What roles do the interloper media practitioners *perform* in their content?

## Data and Method

As in many countries, the number of Finnish newspaper titles has fallen over the last 20 years, while the ownership of local media has simultaneously become more concentrated

(Ala-Fossi et al. 2022). These trends have created diversity risks, such as citizens' lack of opportunity to access news about local events and decision-making from multiple sources (Ala-Fossi et al. 2022). New local media actors, such as hyperlocal initiatives and city-funded media outlets, have emerged to fill the gaps left in locally produced information in Finland (Hujanen et al. 2023).

To investigate these emerging initiatives, we sampled six local interloper media outlets across Finland, from rural areas to mid-sized cities. Role perceptions are analysed in nine semi-structured interviews with interloper practitioners, and role performance is examined in 169 news articles published by their outlets. The media under investigation have varying organisational backgrounds: (i) three media outlets financed and produced by a city, municipality and/or parish; (ii) one media outlet funded by a municipality, local associations and businesses but produced by a non-profit organisation; and (iii) two independent commercial online media outlets financed through native or banner advertising. These outlets were selected because they represent two types of interloper media outlets that are likely to emerge or strengthen their position in the local media landscape with the decline of local legacy news media: non-commercial outlets funded by local authorities or other interest groups and nimble commercial outlets run by individual practitioners or small teams. The relatively low number of outlets sampled is attributed to the nascence of the field. In the Finnish media, legacy media organisations still prevail and non-traditional media initiatives, especially within the local media landscape, are relatively scarce (Ala-Fossi et al. 2022).

The media outlets were selected as examples of interloper media because their content resembles a journalistic format even though the outlets do not adhere to the ethics of professional journalism, their business models are antithetical to journalistic autonomy or they operate as online-only media initiatives outside the legacy news media. The analysis investigates their applications and modifications of journalistic roles and differentiates types of local interlopers according to their prevailing roles. The examined outlets are pseudonymised as follows: *City Media*, *My Town*, *Local Resident*, *Local Route*, *Locally Now* and *Town News*. The key characteristics of the outlets and the interviewees' background information are summarised in Table 1.

### **Practitioner Interviews**

The qualitative, semi-structured thematic interviews were conducted through video calls with nine practitioners from the sampled outlets between March and May 2021. The key personnel from each outlet were interviewed, resulting in one to three interviews per outlet. The interviews lasted between 40 and 98 minutes. Five interviewees had previously worked as journalists; four of them also had previous work experience in communications. Only one interviewee perceived their current position as that of a professional journalist; others with a journalistic background emphasised that they applied their journalistic expertise, such as writing skills, in their current work. Four interviewees had professional backgrounds in entrepreneurship, ICT or management. One interviewee worked as a municipal manager alongside contributing content on local politics to an examined outlet.

The semi-structured interview framework encompassed a series of open-ended questions designed to allow the interloper practitioners to describe their outlet and articulate their approaches in their own words (see Appendix 1 for the interview framework). These

**Table 1.** The examined interloper outlets and their key characteristics.

Outlet (pseudonymised)	Interviewee	Business model and organisation	Product	Size	Audience reach per month (approx.)	Articles published during the sampling period
City Media (est. 2021)	Int-1: Female, 46 Position: Editor-in-chief, Communications director (city administration) Occupational background: Communications, journalism	Funded and owned by the city administration	Local stories, PR, podcasts, live streams Webpage and free print publication	Four-person communications team	1,500	17
Local Resident (est. 1970)	Int-2: Female, 30 Position: Editor-in-chief Occupational background: Communications, freelance journalist	Funded and owned by the municipality administration and local parish	Bulletins, local stories Webpage and free print publication	One-person operation, editorial board of municipal councillors	2,000	12
Local Route (est. 2013)	Int-5: Male, 60 Position: Editor-in-chief, journalist Occupational background: Journalism	Advertisement-funded Owned by a private enterprise	Local news Online-only	One-person operation	12,000	30
Locally Now (est. 2020)	Int-8: Male, 62 Position: Founder, CEO Occupational background: Engineering, information and communications technology (ICT) entrepreneurship and funding	Advertisement-funded, incl. native advertising Owned by a private enterprise	Local news, native advertising stories Online-only	Four-person operation: CEO, journalist, ad salesperson and ICT specialist	11,000	24
My Town (est. 2020)	Int-6: Male, 45 Position: Editor-in-chief, Communications director (city administration) Occupational background: Journalism, communications Int-7: Female, 54 Position: Journalist Occupational background: Communications, journalism	Funded and owned by the city administration	Local stories, PR Webpage and free print publication	Four-person editorial team: editor-in-chief, managing editor, reporter and digital communications expert	50,000	50
Town News (est. 2005)	Int-3: Male, 62 Position: Secretary Occupational background: Municipality administrative staff Int-4: Male, 62 Position: Producer Occupational background: Media production, NGO work Int-9: Female, 43 Position: Municipal manager, contributor Occupational background: ICT, management	Funded by local businesses, associations and municipality Owned by a non-profit organisation	Bulletins and articles produced by local associations, businesses and municipal administration Livestreaming of municipal council meetings and local sports events	Two-person operation: Secretary and producer	5000	36

included questions such as “Why does your publication exist; what are its primary purposes?” or “What norms, principles or ideals guide your work?” There were no direct questions about journalistic roles to avoid a predetermined journalistic perspective. Instead, the interviews included a question about the roles the interviewees perceive the outlet and its content fulfilling in the locality and for the audience. The practitioners were also asked whether their publication employs journalistic practices or formats, and if, how and why so. Moreover, the practitioners were requested to position their outlet in relation to journalism, communication, PR and marketing. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Content Analysis**

The data for the content analysis were collected during the last week of February 2021, which was randomly selected. This involved gathering all the articles published on the homepages of the sampled media outlets. The number of articles published during this period varied among the outlets, with the smallest number being 12 articles and the largest being 50 articles. The total sample comprised 169 articles. Most of the articles were labelled as news by the outlets, but the data also included opinion pieces, blogs or other such genres not considered strictly as news. The outlets nevertheless published such content on their homepage news feeds without distinguishing it from the news content. In general, the sampled articles followed journalistic formats, providing timely local information of assumed public relevance in a concise manner. The articles also utilised interviews or other sources to gather and present this information.

### **Coding Process**

The transcribed interviews and sampled content were coded according to the operational definitions of journalistic roles described in more detail below (Mellado 2015; see Appendix 2 for the codebook). The initial coding for both data sets was conducted by one of the authors, after which another author reviewed the coded data and proposed adjustments when necessary. The coding unit was one sentence of an article or interview transcription.

Since journalistic roles were probed indirectly in the interviews, journalistic role perceptions were identified in responses where the practitioners described their local roles and functions in general terms and addressed their applications of journalistic norms, practices and formats. As the responses also covered many topics besides the practitioners’ role perceptions, the coding of the transcribed interviews was less dense compared to the content analysis. Therefore, only the core, most pronounced role perceptions are described and analysed in the Results section.

The analysis of role performance in the outlets’ content resulted in densely coded data, where each paragraph of an article was coded with one or more journalistic roles. The total number of coded content units was 1626. The qualitative content analysis aimed to identify the prevailing journalistic roles performed by the outlets and uncover common themes and characteristics as well as differences between them. Rather than quantifying the different roles and comparing their frequencies across the outlets, the qualitative approach was employed to analyse how they implemented and modified journalistic roles in their content.

The coding for both data sets followed a conceptual framework to classify journalistic roles into three categories reflecting the different dimensions of the journalistic occupation (Mellado 2015; Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). The first category focuses on the *presence of a journalistic voice* in news content by assessing the *disseminator* and *interventionist* roles. Within the disseminator role, the practitioner distances themselves from and merely reports on a phenomenon (Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach 2017). In contrast, the interventionist role involves actively interpreting the phenomenon and lending one's voice (Mellado 2015). In analysing the interviews and content, instances where the practitioners focused on factual, descriptive, stylistically neutral and timely reporting were coded under the disseminator role. Conversely, excerpts where the interlopers underlined or offered opinions, interpretations and proposals or used adjectives were coded under the interventionist role.

The second role category assesses *journalists' relationship to those in power* through the *watchdog* and *loyal facilitator* roles (Mellado 2015). A practitioner in the watchdog role aims to operate as a fourth estate and strives to hold accountable those in power. Meanwhile, a practitioner serving the loyal facilitator role defends those in power, for instance, by supporting governmental policies or fostering social and political unity. In the analysis, passages where the interlopers highlighted or expressed criticism, raised questions or engaged in investigative reporting were coded within the watchdog role. Conversely, passages supporting institutional activities or local elites or portraying a positive image of the locality were coded under the loyal facilitator role.

The third category evaluates *journalists' relationship to their audience*, encompassing the *civic*, *service* and *infotainment* roles (Mellado 2015). In the civic role, a practitioner stresses the importance of the citizen's perspective and supports their participation in public life. In the service role, a practitioner serves their audience by offering information about services, products and everyday issues, including health and personal topics, such as budget balancing. In the infotainment role, a practitioner offers the audience information in an entertaining format. During the data analysis, instances where the practitioners emphasised or provided background information to help local citizens understand local issues, underlined citizen perspectives or educated them on their duties and rights, or described the local impact of decisions were coded under the civic role. Excerpts where the interlopers addressed the audience's everyday life or offered consumer advice were coded under the service role. Finally, passages concerning private life, emotions or personalisation were coded under the infotainment role.

## Results

The interloper media practitioners' role perceptions exhibit a distinct pattern. The city-, municipality- or parish-funded outlets (*City Media*, *Local Resident*, *My Town*), alongside the non-profit *Town News*, funded by the local municipality, associations and businesses, align predominantly with the *loyal facilitator* and *civic* roles. Conversely, the commercial outlets funded by native and conventional advertising (*Local Route*, *Locally Now*) perceive *disseminator* as their main role. Since the non-commercial outlets perceive the loyal facilitator and civic roles as intertwined, these roles are addressed together in the presentation of the results. This is followed by an analysis of the disseminator role perceived by the two commercial media outlets.

## Role Perceptions

### *Non-Commercial Interloper Media as Loyal Facilitators Exploiting the Civic Role*

The interviewees from the non-commercial outlets described their output as aimed at informing local residents while abstaining from scrutinising local authorities. They underlined their journalistic influences, claiming that they report on local issues of public interest by adopting journalistic forms and styles. The criteria they expressed for determining what and how to report often centred on local identity and communality. Given the practitioners' mission to inform about local public life and their affirmative stance towards the locality and its authorities, their role perceptions align with the *civic* and *loyal facilitator* roles of journalism. Since the practitioners explicitly refrain from acting as critical watchdogs or independent observers, their approach can be characterised as a selective application of journalistic norms and practices aimed at enhancing the PR and communications of their funders.

The practitioners stressed that they borrow from journalism to make their content appear more serious, trustworthy and interesting to audiences. All interviewees at these outlets indicated that audiences typically prefer journalistic stories over PR content. Stories that imitate journalism therefore serve the strategic interests of their parent organisations by making the content more appealing to the local audience and disguising PR as legitimate news. An interviewee at the municipality- and parish-funded *Local Resident* described the blending of PR and news-like content as follows:

We try to boost the town's image and brand, and do not expose any dirty secrets. [...] We publish bulletins and PR, but I have also pursued a more journalistic direction by producing proper newspaper stories, which our audience often finds more interesting [...] We produce reliable information. [...] So, these are the journalistic elements in our content. (Int-2)

Reflecting findings from previous studies on the journalistic roles of interloper media (Schapals, Maeres, and Hanusch 2019), the practitioners emphasised their writing skills and the journalistic style of their content. In other words, they use journalistic language as a boundary marker to position themselves within the journalistic field and distinguish themselves from other communications professionals. An interviewee at the city-funded *My Town*, for instance, described their content as stylistically neutral, professionally edited, journalistic and not overtly positive: "We need to preserve our credibility by not producing content that is upbeat in a wrong way. Our style is not what you would find in marketing or advertisements. The content is well-edited and reflects our journalistic expertise" (Int-7). Besides their allegedly journalistic language, the practitioners legitimised their affirmative coverage by referring to a "division of labour" whereby the traditional news media are seen as responsible for critical reporting, while sponsored media outlets focus on more positive coverage. As one interviewee explicated, "We do not question or investigate [local authorities] – commercial news media covers that role" (Int-6).

The interviewees at the non-commercial outlets also associated their content production with strengthening a sense of local community and belonging. This embodies the *patriotism/localism* function within the *loyal facilitator* role. An interviewee from *My Town* categorised the outlet's role as "identity media" seeking to "strengthen local pride and identity" (Int-6). Along similar lines, a practitioner at the non-profit *Town News* claimed that content produced by local businesses "manifests the local spirit and

vitality” (Int-3). Invocations of localism can support the outlets’ funders by bolstering their brands and fostering their belongingness in the local communities. An interviewee at *City Media* explicitly referred to serving the city’s interests by enhancing its appeal through community- and identity-related brand work:

There is also this idea of an identity brand, the idea of communality – that we strengthen the local community and identity in a city with a constant influx of new residents so that they would feel themselves as part of the city. And this, of course, enhances our [the city’s] brand, which can increase the city’s appeal. (Int-1)

As a companion to the loyal facilitator role, the practitioners underlined their outlets’ *civic* role in emphasising serving the informational needs of local citizens, encouraging their participation in content production and local public life, and claiming to make local decision-making more transparent by providing background information about local decisions. An interviewee at *Town News* even called the outlet “citizen media” that produces “knowledge from the grassroots” since local associations, businesses and communities can publish content on the outlet’s website. Another practitioner described their civic role as follows: “I consider what the local residents need to know – not only what the civil servants want them to know. [...] I encourage local residents to participate by producing content and suggesting potential topics” (Int-2). However, the loyal facilitator function of the civic role is exposed by the absence of critical perspectives in the practitioners’ role perceptions. The interviewee from *City Media* expressed this explicitly by drawing a distinction from the *watchdog* role played by professional journalists: “a journalist would be like ‘A-ha, are there some negative implications for the local citizens in this?’ and highlight the potential threats, whereas we emphasise the opportunities” (Int-1).

The perceived civic role can be seen to support the loyal facilitator role by fostering a closer and more trustworthy relationship with local residents. As the editor-in-chief at *My Town* stated, “By using journalistic means, the public sector [media] can become close with the locals” (Int-6). This implies a communication strategy that supports public officials and local businesses by embedding their content more firmly within the local communities. Within this strategy, the appeal of content can be enhanced by delivering information that both informs on relevant local issues and valorises the local identity.

### **Commercial Interloper Media as Perceived Disseminators**

Deviating from the non-commercial interloper media outlets, the practitioners at the two commercial outlets funded by native or banner advertising conceived their role foremost as that of a *disseminator*. The practitioners expressed a desire to provide accurate and verified information about local events and decision-making. The journalist and founder of *Local Route* affirmed a bare-bones journalism that efficiently delivers trustworthy information, describing the outlet’s disseminator role as follows:

[We] produce as clear news prose as possible. Our news is produced according to a strict format, and the news format is followed obediently from story to story. This is part of our brand. [...] We follow the traditional journalistic norms: fairness, impartiality and publishing only confirmed information. (Int-5)

The practitioners underlined that their outlets emerged due to the absence of local legacy news media and the false or misleading content on social media. The interviewee from

*Local Route* explained that establishing an online-only, one-person news operation was largely motivated by “a huge need for local journalism in the area” (Int-5). The interviewee underlined the pressing need for new journalistic disseminators to “make sense of the world [where] the flood of information is so immense” (Int-5). Along similar lines, the representative of *Locally Now* described their role as providing a factual counterbalance to the inaccurate or false information on social media amid a looming local news desert:

When the local newspaper closed down, the locals did not have a reliable source of information anymore. We have several Facebook groups, but the discussion in them is often inappropriate and hostile. [...] With social media, we risk going back to a mouth-to-mouth type of communication, full of rumours and inaccuracies, if we are not able to recover local professional journalism. [...] So, our news is produced by a journalist and we follow the journalistic norms. We do not publish rumours, and claims are fact-checked. (Int-8)

The two commercial media outlets can be regarded as interloper media seeking to claim their place within the journalistic field by affirming their commitment to the very essence of journalistic ideology – that is, news provision (see Nielsen 2017). Their emphasis on news dissemination responds to the scarcity of professional news within the local context, presenting an opportunity for interloper media actors to fill the gap. However, the participants’ strong emphasis on autonomous news production and core journalistic norms is somewhat surprising since neither of them discussed the *watchdog* role as important. The absence of a critical role challenges their claims of being “strictly journalistic”, given the centrality of acting as a fourth estate in the journalistic ideology (Deuze 2005). Neither of the two outlets officially adheres to the ethical guidelines for Finnish journalists, although such adherence is often regarded as a marker of a professional journalist. Moreover, for *Locally Now*, the boundary between journalistic and paid content is blurry. Since its native advertisement stories are fact-checked and produced by professional journalists, the representative of *Locally Now* likened them to news: “all our content is journalism, [even] our native advertising” (Int-8).

For the commercial outlets, news dissemination without a perceived watchdog role seems to be determined either by their business model or their size. By claiming journalistic credibility and quality through its production of local news, *Locally Now* can increase its appeal among native advertisers seeking journalistic prestige. Regarding *Local Route*, its focus on news dissemination may reveal the limitations of news operations run by a single individual or a small team: acting as a watchdog typically demands resources beyond the capacity of small newsrooms. Although the two commercial interloper outlets differ from the non-commercial interlopers in terms of *what* journalistic roles they perceive as important, they all perceive journalistic roles *selectively* to highlight those that are strategically, commercially or practically important to them.

### **Role Performance**

In their content, the interloper outlets perform a relatively wide range of journalistic roles. Both the commercial and non-commercial outlets perform the *civic*, *service* and *disseminator* roles regularly, whereas the non-commercial outlets recurrently perform the *loyal facilitator* and *interventionist* roles, which the commercial outlets perform only occasionally. The *watchdog* role is virtually absent in all of the examined outlets’ content.

In the following, the outlets' primary performed roles are analysed more thoroughly to understand the specific ways in which these journalistic roles can be performed by local interloper media. After describing the main ways each role is performed in the content, its connections to other performed roles are addressed by assessing the code co-occurrences between the different roles. Code co-occurrence means that a content excerpt is coded with two or more roles.

### **Civic Role**

The studied outlets perform the *civic* role mainly by providing *background information* that contextualises or explains local decisions and issues. A typical contextualisation is a temporal extension of the daily news cycle: the outlets addressed the recent history of local issues and decisions or described their anticipated future outcomes. However, thorough news analyses explaining the different interests in issues or assessing the pros and cons of a decision – crucial dimensions of the background information role (Li 2019) – were absent from the content. The following quotation from a commercial outlet regarding regional transportation policies exemplifies the typical background information: “The surrounding municipalities of the capital region are still side by side resisting congestion charges and road tolls, which resurface in plans time and again.” The quotation extends day-to-day coverage to provide insight into longer-term tendencies of regional transport planning and decision-making. The quoted passage, however, does little to explain the conflicting interests or views involved in the issue. As such, the passage provides *loyal facilitation* to regional policies by reporting on the issue from the municipal authorities' perspective.

The non-commercial outlets, in particular, perform the *civic background information* role in conjunction with the *loyal facilitator* role. Within this segment, the outlets portrayed the backgrounds of local decisions or actions taken by civil servants in a positive light. Performing the *civic* and *loyal facilitator* roles simultaneously, the city-affiliated *My Town*, for instance, writes that “The city administration is strongly motivated to develop the city as a ‘city by the sea’. Now the city wants to hear citizens' opinions about the drafted plan”. This quotation provides background information about the city's aims and signals openness to citizen involvement but also implies political consensus around the project. By creating the impression of political determination and citizen participation, the outlet tacitly promotes the plan's execution. Similar to the previous quotation about transportation policies, the outlet describes the city's intentions but does not provide information that would help citizens assess the pros and cons of the proposed plan.

### **Service Role**

Within the *service* role, the outlets mostly provide *consumer information or advice*. In performing this role, the outlets offered information about public or private products and services, such as event dates or soon-to-be-available real estate. However, *consumer information/advice* can have a broader purpose than serving individual consumers; the role co-occurred recurrently with the *civic* role, for instance, in providing information on new public transportation arrangements or local COVID-19 vaccination programmes. Conversely, the *service* role can facilitate the interests of the local power holders. In sections coded under both the *service* and *loyal facilitator* roles, the non-commercial outlets

provided an information service aimed at fostering, for instance, participation in local entrepreneurial education programmes. In these cases, performing the service role appears to be a strategy to create externalities to engage residents along the interests of the local political and economic elites.

### ***Loyal Facilitator Role***

The *loyal facilitator* role is performed primarily by the non-commercial outlets, which regularly engage in *defending or supporting institutional activities*. Besides one-sidedly and non-critically citing officials, these outlets promoted local policies and institutional activities explicitly in their own voice: the *loyal facilitator* role co-occurred often with the *interventionist* role in using *adjectives*, expressing *opinions* or offering *interpretations*. For example, a city-affiliated outlet promoted a new local natural gas fuelling station by stating that “the increasing use of environmentally friendly fuels fosters the environmental goals of the city and its entrepreneurs”. The positive appraisal of “environmentally friendly fuels” can be read as greenwashing in favour of the city administration and local businesses since natural gas is a fossil fuel. Another example of overt loyal facilitation appeared in the non-profit *Town News*, funded by the local municipality, associations and businesses. *Town News* appealed to local solidarity in supporting businesses during the COVID-19 restrictions: “During these difficult times, it’s worth doing everything possible to increase the visibility of businesses”.

### ***Interventionist Role***

The practitioners perform the *interventionist* role by presenting their own voices and views in stories. This role is performed mostly by the non-commercial outlets but occasionally also by the commercial ones. The commercial *Local Route* used positive adjectives to express an affirmative opinion about a new school in the area: “The school represents the newest, state-of-the-art school design in Finland.” The quotation represents a broader tendency among the outlets to portray local events and issues using positive adjectives or opinions. The non-commercial outlets, in particular, employed adjectives and opinions in conjunction with the *loyal facilitator* role. These outlets regularly offered appraisals aimed at supporting local institutions or enhancing a sense of local belongingness. Such promotion of localism and a sense of local pride is observable in the following quotation, where a city-funded outlet portrayed a local event centre positively by using the adverb *wonderfully*: “The event centre is known to have served wonderfully already during the Finland 100 years festivities [in 2018].”

### ***Disseminator Role***

The outlets perform the *disseminator* role by adopting a neutral tone to provide factual information about local events and issues. Within the studied content, such information provisions typically addressed COVID-19-related topics, such as local restrictions. The outlets also disseminated information about local politics, such as in the following quotation by the city-affiliated *City Media* informing residents about the construction of a new park: “The city council made a decision on February 15th regarding the selection of a construction partner for a new [park]”. The disseminator role typically co-occurred with the *service* role. As the outlets disseminated information on local matters, they also provided a service to potential consumers or users of public services including, for instance,

information about new schools or recently opened private enterprises. The disseminator role also co-occurred with the *civic* role, which extended the implications of the disseminated information to the locality at large. The following quotation exhibits the non-profit *Local Resident* disseminating information about an upcoming merger of four municipalities: “The local governments decided unanimously to propose a municipal merger”. In such instances, the outlets provided information that can be considered vital for the local public life by informing citizens of the local impacts of decisions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the journalistic roles of local interloper media practitioners in Finland. The sampled media included three non-commercial outlets directly affiliated with the local authorities; one non-profit funded by local associations, businesses and the municipality; and two commercial outlets funded by native or conventional advertising. All the examined interloper actors asserted that their content and practices include at least some journalistic elements. They employ conventional news formats, interviews and “neutral” news language to appear as legitimate news providers. The practitioners also claimed a journalistic identity by referring to their, or their colleagues’, experience as professional journalists. As these interlopers use journalistic methods and claim to provide at least some of the information service traditionally provided by legacy news media, the study was intended to understand what journalistic roles these actors perceive and perform in the local media landscape. By doing so, the study addressed the perceived need to differentiate various types of interloper media and their relationships to professional journalism (Hanusch and Löhmann 2023).

The analysis uncovered that the practitioners working for the commercial outlets perceive their role mostly as that of a *disseminator*. They underline their mission to provide daily news in their localities where traditional news media have ceased operations. On the contrary, the non-commercial practitioners working for outlets affiliated with local authorities perceive the *loyal facilitator* as their core role. They also highlight the production of publicly relevant content, but explicitly state that their content serves the interests of their parent organisations or funders. Regarding role performance, the non-commercial outlets recurrently perform the *loyal facilitator*, *interventionist*, and *civic* roles, while the independent, commercial outlets focus mainly on the *disseminator* and *civic* roles. Within the *civic* role, the outlets focus mainly on providing *background information* rather than directly encouraging citizen participation or assuming a citizen perspective in reporting. Both groups of interloper outlets also regularly perform the *service* role in their content, which underscores their intent to appear as valuable to their audiences by offering practical advice on local events and issues.

The *watchdog* role was absent from all the practitioners’ role perceptions and performed roles. This is noteworthy because a critical examination of authorities is a foundational boundary marker distinguishing journalism from other forms of media production (Deuze 2005). The interloper practitioners thus challenge the fundamental journalistic norm that actors who claim journalistic authority should provide an autonomous counterbalance to powerful institutions. For the non-commercial outlets, the lack of a critical approach suggests a deliberate strategy to support the communicative interests of their funders. These outlets regularly perform the *interventionist* role in conjunction

with the *loyal facilitator* role to offer positive appraisals of local issues and authorities. They also serve the *loyal facilitator* role indirectly through the *civic* role by delivering purportedly publicly relevant, factual information in a concise journalistic style that nevertheless depicts local decision-making in a positive light. As part of the *loyal facilitator* role, these outlets also seek to foster a local identity and belongingness, portraying public officials and residents as part of a unified local community.

In contrast, the commercial outlets' emphasis on the *disseminator* role revealed a conception and practice of "stripped-down" journalism, where the practitioners claim journalistic authority by emphasising core journalistic routines and delivering formally legitimate news. Within this model, the commercial practitioners remain passive in assessing the news they disseminate or in engaging in critical or investigative reporting. Despite the practitioners' claims that they follow journalistic norms and practices, their lack of both a perceived and performed *watchdog* role positions them apart from the normative core of professional journalism. The commercial, independent interloper outlets do not have a direct incentive to bolster local power holders. This manifests in their lack of both a perceived and performed *loyal facilitator* role. However, their non-critical content can provide indirect support to the local authorities by preventing the publication of unfavourable information about them. Moreover, the implementation of only some journalistic norms and practices can support these outlets' business strategies by enhancing their content's credibility and appeal among native and other advertisers and engaging audiences through upbeat local news (see Li 2019).

The practitioners' role perceptions and role performance reveal a selective and strategic adoption of journalistic norms and practices. They do not systematically follow journalistic roles and routines but rather select only those that support their goals and interests. By perceiving and performing journalistic roles and claiming to produce serious, quality content, the practitioners claim journalistic authority, draw a distinction from PR and other non-journalistic media content, and pursue a closer and more trustworthy relationship with their audiences. The examined outlets can, thus, be categorised as explicit interlopers, who may not always identify as journalists but who nonetheless consider themselves as contributing to news production, criticising and challenging professional news producers for their claims of monopoly over news (Holton and Belair-Gagnon 2018). Moreover, by projecting the *appearance* of professional journalism, the investigated outlets resemble what Eldridge (2019) calls antagonist interloper media. Antagonist interlopers can carry out traditional journalistic routines while using journalism for antagonistic pursuits, disguising private or political interests as public interest news. In other words, the examined outlets *malappropriate* (Eldridge 2018) journalistic norms and identity to serve the interests of their funders or their own economic goals. By appearing to provide news and serve the public interest while catering to the agendas of their funders or abstaining from critical scrutiny, such malappropriation is strategic and deceptive, and therefore antagonistic to the journalistic field (Eldridge 2019). Such malappropriation is not only antithetical to journalistic ethics but reveals an ethical conflict at the heart of these interloper operations. While the outlets can deliver timely and accurate information, the absence of a *watchdog* role and the prevalence of the *loyal facilitator* role undermine the critical function of journalism in their content. The delivery of locally relevant information may garner audience interest, but the absence of a critical scrutiny betrays their trust. In terms of local public life, the cherry-

picking of journalistic roles can erode the quality of local news dissemination by diminishing its critical function.

The emergence of public and private quasi-journalistic interlopers who selectively borrow from journalism may have serious implications for the futures of journalism. Since online audiences often do not differentiate journalism from non-news sources (Swart et al. 2022), the strategic use of journalistic techniques can be expected to grow and further blur the boundaries between journalism and communications. The trend may be intensified in local information ecosystems. Audiences increasingly expect local journalists to act as nurturers and facilitators of local community and culture (Hess, Waller, and Lai 2022). By acting as local identity media, local interloper media might increasingly strive to perform that role. If such interloper actors strengthen their position, local news landscapes may become less critical, more focused on local identities and be inclined to provide mostly “positive” news.

Like any study, the analysis had its limitations. A more balanced sampling of commercial and non-commercial interloper outlets would have allowed a more thorough and systematic comparison of the different types of interloper media organisations and their journalistic roles. The sampling period of the articles could also have been extended beyond only one week to better take into account the variations in output among the outlets. While the qualitative analysis provided an initial understanding of the journalistic roles that local interloper media perceive and perform, a quantitative content analysis can be applied for a more systematic and detailed examination of the roles. Future studies can, therefore, expand on these findings by incorporating quantitative approaches to comprehensively assess the prevalence and variations of journalistic roles across diverse local interloper media actors.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Semi-structured Interview Framework for Local Interloper Media Practitioners

##### Background Information:

- Name, age, education, place of residence.
- What is your work history like?
- How long have you worked for the publication and in what capacity?
- Which professional group do you consider yourself to belong to?

##### Audience Relations and Role Perceptions:

- Why does your publication exist; what are its primary purposes?
- How would you describe the nature of the publication (is it a journalistic publication/media/communication/marketing/public relations/hybrid/other, and based on what criteria)?
- Does the publication employ journalistic forms or practices? If so, how and for what purposes?
- Why or in what way is the content of the publication journalistic or not?
- How independent or impartial is the publication?
- What tasks or roles do you see your publication fulfilling in the local community and public life?
- Where do the story ideas for the publication come from?
- What criteria are set for the content? (E.g. is the intention to produce overtly positive stories? Is that one criterion?)
- How do you position your own work within the fields of journalism, communication, public relations, marketing, or PR?
- Are there ethical conflicts related to journalism or communication in your work? If so, what kind?
- Who do you consider to be the most important audience or target group from the publication’s perspective?
- To whom do you feel responsible in your work, and how does this manifest in your work? (audience/advertisers/companies/employer/city/municipality/someone else, who?)

## Appendix 2

*The operational definitions and indicators for a qualitative content analysis of role performance in local interloper media (Li 2019; Mellado 2015). The same operationalisations were applied in the investigation of role perceptions in the semi-structured practitioner interviews.*

### 1. The Audience Approach

#### 1.1. Civic Role

**1.1.1. Background Information.** The article provides citizens with background information for them to make informed decisions, including, for instance, an explanation of the history of an issue, different positions and sides of an issue and the pros and cons of a proposal or decision.

**1.1.2. Citizen Demand.** The article includes demands, requests, proposals or concerns from regular citizens about how certain things should be handled or how certain decisions should be made.

**1.1.3. Citizen Perspective.** The article shows how certain decisions or events affect the lives of regular citizens.

**1.1.4. Citizen Questions.** The article includes direct questions, concerns or inquiries from regular citizens to those in power, whether public or private.

**1.1.5. Credibility of Citizens.** The journalist grants validity to regular citizens' concerns, demands, questions, critiques and proposals.

**1.1.6. Education on Duties and Rights.** The article gives instructions for citizens on their economic, social or political duties, responsibilities and rights.

**1.1.7. Information on Citizen Activities.** The article informs citizens of their democratic right to take (collective) action, such as joining campaigns, protests, marches and commemorations, as well as when and where they can join them.

**1.1.8. Local Impact.** The article expresses how certain information or decisions—international, national or local—affect the local community, city, municipality, etc.

**1.1.9. Support of Citizen Movements.** The article supports the objectives of an organisation or citizen movement and portrays their actions as a positive example to follow.

#### 1.2. Service Role

**1.2.1. Impact on Everyday Life.** The article informs readers of the consequences and meanings of certain decisions, facts or events for people's everyday lives.

**1.2.2. Information/Consumer Advice.** The article informs the reader about the latest trends, products and services on the market. In addition, services and events promoted by a public organisation, such as a city or municipality, are included in this category.

**1.2.3. Tips and Advice (Grievances).** The article gives tips and advice to readers concerning their problems with other people or with their environment.

**1.2.4. Tips and Advice (Individual Risks).** The article offers tips and advice to the audience regarding the personal challenges they may face in their lives.

#### 1.3. Infotainment Role

**1.3.1. Emotions.** The article references feelings or emotions, such as someone being happy, sad, angry or scared, among others.

**1.3.2. Morbidity.** The article describes acts of violence or crime. In general, articles with textual elements that could be considered unpleasant, cruel or prohibited are included in this category.

**1.3.3. Personalisation.** The article includes one or more people and describes their different characteristics and personal backgrounds.

**1.3.4. Private Life.** The article discloses private information of individuals that is not considered of public interest, such as personal history and past, hobbies, family life, or sexual orientation.

**1.3.5. Scandal.** The article discloses an illegitimate or immoral event that does not have anything to do with a person's public role, such as the extra-marital affairs or violent behaviour of a politician or some other prominent local figure.

**1.3.6. Sensationalism.** The journalist uses exaggeration, dramatic superlative adjectives or metaphors to stimulate readers' senses, emotions or arousal. The article then highlights the incredible, unusual or spectacular nature of an event or a person.

## **2. Presence of Journalistic Voice**

**2.1 Disseminator Role.** The article reports on daily news events in a detached voice.

### **2.2. Interventionist Role**

**2.2.1. Use of Qualifying Adjectives.** The use of qualifying adjectives in an article when the use is not necessary.

**2.2.2. Interpretation.** The article contains explanations and evaluations by the journalist regarding decisions or events. Through interpretation, the journalist can offer the audience meanings and possible consequences of the decisions and events.

**2.2.3. Opinion.** The article contains the journalist's views or judgments on decisions or events.

**2.2.4. Proposal/Demands.** The article contains the journalist's proposal or demands in dealing with certain decisions or events at hand.

**2.2.5. Use of First Person.** The article uses the first-person instead of the third-person voice.

## **3. Relation to Power Holders**

### **3.1. Watchdog Role**

**3.1.1. Criticism by Journalist.** The journalist criticises individuals or groups holding power.

**3.1.2. Criticism by Others.** The article expresses criticisms of those in power by people other than the journalist, such as whistle-blowers or activists.

**3.1.3. Denouncement by Others.** The article expresses denouncement towards those in power by people other than the journalist.

**3.1.4. Denouncement by the Journalist.** The journalist denounces something illegal or inconvenient regarding individuals or groups in power.

**3.1.5. Information on Judicial/Administrative Processes.** The article provides information about judicial processes against powerholders, which is how the public stays up to date on, for example, trials concerning those in political or economic power.

**3.1.6. Investigative Reporting.** The journalist informs the public about abuses of power or wrongdoings by those in power through extensive inquiry, research or leaks.

**3.1.7. Questioning by Others.** The article offers questions about the decisions of those in power by people other than the journalist.

**3.1.8. Questioning by the Journalist.** The journalist doubts the validity or veracity of what individuals or groups in power say or do.

**3.1.9. Reporting on Conflict.** The article handles conflict between the journalist and those in power.

**3.1.10. Reporting on External Investigation.** The article informs readers about external research and investigations not carried out by the journalist but covered extensively by the journalist.

### **3.2. Loyal-facilitator Role**

**3.2.1. Comparison to the Rest of the World/Country.** The journalist compares the country, region, city or municipality to others and highlights the advancement and triumphs of the area.

**3.2.2. *Defend/Support Institutional Activities.*** The article supports or defends actions carried out by politicians, public organisations, or people with economic power.

**3.2.3. *Defend/Support National or Regional Policies.*** The article defends or supports national or regional policies.

**3.2.4. *Emphasis on National or Local Triumphs.*** The journalist highlights the achievements of individuals or groups that are nationally or locally remarkable in any field of practice.

**3.2.5. *Emphasis on Progress/Success.*** The journalist highlights the progress of the country, area, city or municipality in any dimension considered relevant in the context.

**3.2.6. *Patriotism/Localism.*** The journalist makes statements that positively value a specific country, city, municipality or area.

**3.2.7. *Positive Image of the Political/Economic Elite.*** The journalist positively highlights the skills and personal characteristics of a member of the political or economic elite.

**3.2.8. *Promotion of the Country or Area's Image.*** The journalist portrays a positive image of their country, city, municipality or area.