

Agents of sustainable transition or place branding promoters? *Local journalism and climate change in Sweden*

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Abstract

The climate crisis concerns the whole fabric of society. Local journalism can play a key role when cities are handling the problems. In this article, I analyse local media discourses on climate change in four Swedish cities that aim to be role models in the transition towards carbon neutrality. A discourse analysis of news articles and op-eds about the climate, combined with semi-structured interviews with journalists working at four different local newspapers, shows that the climate crisis is covered in all newspapers – even if the amount and ambition varies – including the ability to fill key roles as watchdog and educator. The newsrooms’ climate focus also had to give way when the Covid-19 pandemic struck. Local decisions about transportation, food, and urban development are common topics and often debated in the local press. However, the prize-winning cities’ ambitious green plans to become climate neutral already by 2030 remain vague for the journalists and probably also their readers.

Keywords: climate change communication, discourse analysis, local journalism, local media, place branding

Introduction

The scientific community in conjunction with world leaders have concluded numerous times – and with increasing urgency since the Paris Agreement in 2015 – that the seriousness of the climate crisis requires societies to collaborate and to change at an extraordinary speed. Climate change has shifted from distant risk to a crisis that is already here, which demands systemic adaptation at all levels of society and many walks of life. Moving climate change closer to people’s everyday life has also become an increasingly important topic for local journalism, which citizens engage with on a daily basis (Hoppe et al., 2018; Howarth & Anderson,

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2019). The potential of local media to narrate about “the commons”, the shared problems and resources in a society, and to address us – as individuals situated both in local, place-bound communities and global networks – also means that they can play a pivotal role in a transition to a “greener” society. Thus, in this article, I analyse local media discourses on climate change in Swedish cities.

I focus particularly on cities that aspire to be frontrunners in Sweden’s efforts to be the world’s very first fossil-free welfare state (Swedish Government, 2018). On 23 April 2020, eight high-level elected leaders of Swedish municipalities jointly signed a declaration stating their commitment to become climate neutral cities by 2030 (Viable Cities, 2020).¹ Doing so, they also committed to work for this goal through active citizen involvement. These cities consider themselves as pioneers and hope to be among the first 100 European cities that sign a so-called Climate City Contract with the European Union (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b). Opportunities associated with the European Green Deal are of particular interest for these communities, since the European Union has planned to invest at least EUR 1 trillion to support the change (EU, 2019; Tozer & Klenk, 2018). The pledge was part of a Swedish strategic innovation and research programme called Viable Cities, also linked to future EU innovation and research efforts (Horizon Europe).

Cities are globally recognised as key actors in tackling climate change (Satterthwaite, 2008). They are responsible for over 70 per cent of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions, and globally, many cities are already highly exposed to different climate-related problems, such as heat waves, flooding, and water shortage. At the same time, many solutions are developed in cities, for instance, more effective energy use, transportation, or better planning and building. Cities are also knowledge “hubs” that can help innovate more sustainable ways of living (Algehed et al., 2019). Any green transformation in the end depends on citizens willingness to take part (Díaz-Pont et al., 2020; Egan Sjölander & Jönsson, 2012).

In this article, I shed light on the way local journalism in these frontrunner cities cover the climate crisis. By applying a critical discourse analytical perspective informed by Fairclough (1995) and Foucault (1971/1993), I ask how climate change was represented in the media texts, and how these representations were embedded in newsroom practices and a wider sociocultural context. I situate this analysis within the broader context of climate change communication, research on local journalism, and critical studies of place branding.

Climate change communication

Climate change communication has emerged as a distinct research field since the end of the 1990s (Moser, 2016; Nerlich et al., 2010; Schäfer & Painter, 2021; Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014), examining “factors that affect and are affected by how we communicate about climate change” (Chadwick, 2017:1). Media cover-

age and public understanding of the issue have been common objects of study, as Carvalho (2010: 172) pointed out already a decade ago:

Research has shown that the media are the main source of information and the main factor shaping people's awareness and concern in relation to climate change and therefore have an important role in setting the public agenda. As a key forum for the production, reproduction, and transformation of the meaning of public issues, the media influence understandings of risks, responsibilities, as well as the functioning of democratic politics.

Most studies on climate change and the media have focused on an elite media agenda, for instance, focusing on events associated with the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (Carvalho & Peterson, 2012; Eide & Kunelius, 2012; Olausson & Berglez, 2016; Roosvall & Tegelberg, 2018), or the UN's scientific Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) work and its media coverage (Hulme, 2009; Kunelius et al., 2017; O'Neill et al., 2015; Painter, 2013). These high-stake events are certainly important to understand, since they can shape a joint global agenda about climate change. However, I would argue, in line with Schäfer (2015) and Shehata & Hopmann (2012), that it is crucial to diversify the research focus in various ways. Shifting the focus from national, elite outlets to local journalism is a step in that direction.

Local journalism

Most Swedish media research on climate communication has focused on the national press, with local media enjoying occasional attention (cf. Olausson, 2009; for international research on local journalism, see Gulyás & Baines, 2020; Hanusch & Vos, 2020; Hess & Waller, 2017; Nielsen, 2015). This general trend has been criticised by Nygren (2018, 2020) in his work on local media in Sweden. He points out that the “local and regional press has been the backbone of Swedish media”, with high readership in all social groups (Nygren, 2020: 4). For well over a century, the local press has provided both a public sphere for democratic discussions in communities and served the marketing interests of regional businesses. However, the media landscape has changed significantly in the last 10–15 years, and this has led to a sharp decline in local newspapers, in parallel with an increased use of digital and social media in society (Nygren, 2018; Niels et al., 2015).

In the middle of such rapid structural transformations, it is easy to forget the fact that “local journalism actually accounts for the majority of the journalistic profession” (Nielsen, 2015: 2). The latest Swedish Media Barometer showed that two out of three citizens in Sweden read a daily newspaper on an average day, and digital reading of a subscribed daily newspaper dominated (Ohlsson, 2020). Hess and Waller (2017) also remind us of the heterogeneity of local journalism and the importance of concrete studies of local contexts. When it comes to their democratic impact, Hayes and Lawless (2018) have shown that a decline in citi-

zens' public engagement is connected to a reduction in local news. In the context of climate change communication, Brüggemann and Rödder (2020: 24) also emphasise that “knowledge about the locally salient discourses around nature and climate change is a precondition” to make sense in a community.

I look at local journalism “as both a practice and a product that relates to a specific geographic area and the events and people connected to it” (Hess & Waller, 2017: 5). The connection to local places is both a strength and a weakness of local news media – what Mathisen (2010) describes as the tension between a “watchdog” and a “blind patriot”. Internationally, Nordic journalists have a strong identity of serving as autonomous watchdogs (Ahva et al., 2017). This role perception is connected to political cultures and the way the media system work, with, for example, “press laws limiting the power of the state and owners over journalists, the strong role of public service broadcasting and extensive state subsidies also for private media” (Ahva et al., 2017: 609).

Place branding

Place branding research has lately highlighted the strategic importance of the public image of a city (Kavaratzis et al., 2018; McGaurr et al., 2015). City branding is used regularly by policy-makers as an asset to transform and market places both to outsiders and local inhabitants (Acharya & Rahman, 2016). The contested idea of place branding focuses on the competition for attention and resources between places. Branding a city as “green”, “sustainable”, or “climate neutral” has also become an increasingly common strategy in a world facing multiple environmental challenges (Andersson & James, 2018; Hamman et al., 2017; Tahvilzadeh et al., 2017; Tozer & Klenk, 2018). The development has attracted considerable criticism. Hansen and Machin’s (2008) visually focused analysis, for instance, has shown how climate change was turned into a marketing opportunity by the globally operating firm Getty Images. McGaurr and colleagues, (2015: 269), in turn, reveal how Tasmanian “wilderness” has been articulated in the local press and international travel journalism over time, with the local, national, and global media playing a pivotal part in the shift in the focus of mediated conflict from “wilderness” to “tourism”.

Discourse analytical approach

Discourses, broadly understood as language use in practice, form and are formed by the social fabric (Krzyzanowski & Forchtner, 2016). They contribute to both our understanding of ourselves as individuals and how we relate to others, the “commons” and what we conceptualise as “society”. A discourse analytical approach calls for a critical re-articulation of these basic relationships, not only between the individual and the collective, but also between humans and nature – or here, the climate. Questions of power and conflict are also paramount within this

tradition, rooted in critical research. Sense-making processes entail continuous struggles over dominant meanings that are never fully fixed – even if they are often stable and hard to change. Another strength with discourse analysis is its ability to integrate theoretical and methodological perspectives (Jørgensen & Philips, 1999).

Following Norman Fairclough's (1995) seminal three-dimensional model for discourse analysis, the first focus in this article is on media texts. The second part concerns the production of these texts and looks at newsroom practices and local reporters' experiences of covering climate change. Production practices have been covered much less than text-based analyses of media content (Hanusch & Vos, 2020), but they are crucial if one wants to make sense of media discourses. The third analytical level links texts and production practices to sociocultural contexts. In the case at hand, this means the unfolding climate crisis, structural conditions for local journalism, and an encompassing culture of place branding of geographical areas including cities (Karavatzis et al., 2018).

This article looks at local media discourses on climate change in four small or mid-sized Swedish cities that all aim to become climate neutral by 2030 (Viable Cities, 2020). Umeå is a university town in the north with 130,224 inhabitants. Uppsala is also a university town but bigger, with 233,839 inhabitants. Enköping is a smaller city with 46,240 inhabitants by Lake Mälaren. Växjö, with a population of 94,859, is situated in the inland forest-dense south region of Sweden (SCB, 2020). This group is chosen because they all have well-established local newspapers (or media houses) based in their towns. This offers an opportunity to link general concerns about local journalism to the challenges that covering of the climate crisis entail. Following Fairclough's model, the research questions are as follows:

- RQ1. How is climate change represented (and made relevant for the readers) in the news and opinion texts in the local press? (text)
- RQ2. How are local newsrooms working with climate change and what are the local journalists' experiences and views on the matter? (production)
- RQ3. How are local climate coverage and the newsrooms related to broader sociocultural contexts? (sociocultural context)

Through answering these three questions, I try – keeping in mind what Foucault (1971/1993) said – to not only describe and reveal dominant patterns of local climate journalism, but also discuss what appears “given” (or, unsaid) and capture some of the fundamental conditions that enable such a discourse. Finally, I also try to tease out the social consequences of these discursive patterns.

I have used a mixed-method approach, collecting different types of empirical material (Murphy, 2017; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). A content analysis provided me an overview of the type, amount, frequency, and main content of local climate journalism (Hansen & Machin, 2013), helping me focus on a smaller number of texts and look at how stories depict citizen engagement, how they cover the Viable Cities programme, and what kind of conflicts occur in the coverage.

The studied period starts in the same month when Viable Cities projects were granted and covers 13 months (1 July 2019–31 July 2020). I targeted the most important media in each of the chosen cities. For Umeå, it is the biggest regional newspaper, liberal *Västerbottens-Kuriren* (VK) with a circulation of 28,200 copies, founded in 1900 and owned by the VK Media foundation. About 44 people work in VK's main newsroom and a few reporters have their base in surrounding municipalities. An additional journalist has recently been employed and works in the inland municipalities of Storuman and Sorsele. For Uppsala, it is the liberal *Uppsala Nya Tidning* (UNT), founded in 1890 and with a circulation of 38,500, with about 46 people working in the main newsroom. UNT also employs journalists in a few local offices in neighbouring towns, like Östhammar and Tierp. UNT's owner, the NTM-group, also owns Enköpings's biggest paper *Enköpings-Posten* (EP). This liberal newspaper was conservative from the start in 1880 and up until recently, when they were bought by the NTM-group. EP has a circulation of 7,000 copies and their newsroom is the smallest in this sample, with four reporters employed plus an editor-in-chief. The oldest paper in this group, conservative *Smålandsposten* (SMP), was founded in 1866 and is the biggest newspaper in Växjö. SMP is owned by Gota Media and has a circulation of 30,900 copies. Today, 43 people work at SMP's newsroom. There are local SMP offices in five places outside the main town. Recent changes in Swedish media policies, formulated in response to the mentioned rapid shifts in the media landscape in the last decades, and in particular the sharp decline of newspaper outlets, have meant that at least three of the four studied local newspapers (VK, UNT, and SMP) have applied for and received financial support for local journalism from the state (see Ahva et al., 2017). This has meant that they have been able to employ more journalists.

The stories analysed were retrieved from the database Mediarkivet Retriever, and the sample contains all published texts (news articles and op-eds) during the study period. I used several single or combined keywords such as “climate”; “climate neutral”; “carbon neutral”; “climate change adaptation”; “Viable cit*”; “2030”; and the four different city names.² A first reading of all texts (about 1,000 hits, see Figure 1) in chronological order was conducted, and a smaller sample from each newspaper was selected and analysed in more detail. These news articles and op-eds dealt more specifically with the city's or municipality's transition towards carbon neutrality, the Viable City programme, or citizen engagement in the climate crisis.

Interviews with journalists, complemented with contextual information about the four newspapers (ownership, historical accounts, and statistics about circulation and readership, etc.) form the base for the production-oriented part of the analysis.³ The semi-structured interviews (Longhurst, 2003) were recorded and lasted between 35–90 minutes. In the process of finding interviewees, it became very obvious that local journalists' time is very constrained.⁴ All interviewed local reporters and one editor-in-chief (three female and two male) were experienced journalists and had a long history in the field. None of them specialised on cli-

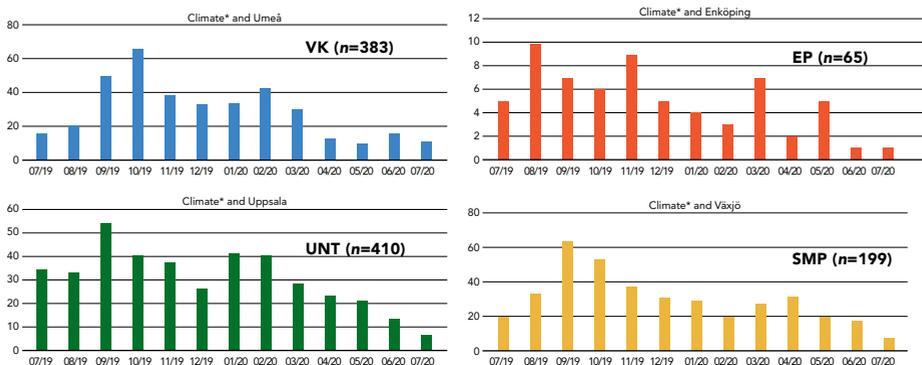
mate or the environment and all except one had studied journalism. Apart from one editor-in-chief, they all worked as general reporters. Some of them also had assigned tasks or areas they are responsible for, like the university or investigative reporting.

Local media discourses on climate change

Media attention

Climate change was the most reported subject in all Swedish news media in 2019, as “climate emergency” and “climate crisis” became the dominant ways to frame the issue (Vi-skogen, 2020). This overall dominance of the topic was also reflected in the local media. All the newspapers in the sample were actively covering climate change issues, even if the volume of the reporting differed between them. The Umeå-based newspaper *VK* ($n = 383$) and Uppsala’s *UNT* ($n = 410$) covered the issue twice as often as *SMP* ($n = 199$) and significantly more than *EP* ($n = 65$) did (see Figure 1). The attention to climate change in the local press here follows quite well the global newspaper attention monitored in Boykoff and colleagues (2020). There was a peak in the studied coverage in August–October 2019, as a new alarming IPCC report was released, the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg received the Right Livelihood 2019 award, and the social movement Fridays for Future arranged global climate strikes in relation to the UN’s Climate Action Summit in New York the very same year. Similarly, there was a general decrease in climate coverage in the local press from early spring 2020 and onwards, much due to the outbreak of the global pandemic caused by Covid-19.

Figure 1 Climate change coverage in the local press, 1 July 2019–31 July 2020 (number of published texts)



Comments: Climate change coverage in *VK*, *EP*, *UNT*, and *SMP*, in association with the respective city/municipality.

Local political decisions and debates

The text analysis showed that local political decisions relating to the climate were often covered in the news, and even more so if they also sparked local debate.

These types of events are very much part of what local journalists regularly report (Nygren & Tenor, 2020; Hess & Waller, 2017). Two examples taken from VK were when the County Administrative Board's Strategy for climate and energy was taken (VK, 27 September 2019) and Umeå municipality decided about new Local Environmental Goals (VK, 25 February 2020). Environmental groups such as Fridays For Future Umeå (VK, 30 October 2019), Extinction Rebellion Umeå (VK, 3 October 2019), and Climate Students Umeå (VK, 24 January 2020) also tried to mobilise decision-makers to do more for the climate. Local politicians and the municipality were criticised for moving too slow. Climate Students directed their critique primarily at Umeå University's leaders and employees.

A similar local tension that generated coverage in *SMP* (25 September 2019) concerned the 2019 Sustainability Programme of Växjö. The relatively small size of the *EP* newsroom reflected the total amount of climate coverage they produced. Information from the local government in Enköping, together with other local stakeholders, were main sources for climate news in this newsroom. One such story about urban green growth looked at a new attractive climate-neutral residential and business area called Myran, chosen as a case in a prestigious international architecture competition called European 15, which was introduced for the *EP*-readers (10 July 2019; 4 September 2019). A market developer from the municipality was interviewed by an *EP* reporter and said they were proud to be part of this competition and the Viable Cities group. The civil servant further concluded that "The development of the Myran area in Enköping can become an international role-model for how to work with climate mitigation" (*EP*, 10 July 2019).

Local politicians and engaged citizens in Växjö debated climate-related issues in *SMP* about food production and consumption (14 August 2019; 9 September 2019; 21 November 2019), transportation (10 October 2019; 4 November 2019; 6 November 2019; 1 April 2020), and urban development (30 September 2019; 19 November 2019). Similar topics and conflict areas could be observed in debates in *UNT* (2 September 2019; 5 January 2020) as well; for example, Uppsala's transportation systems, urban development, and rapid growth. Representatives from local parties debated and were criticised in the local press (*UNT*, 16 October 2019; 2 February 2020). Traffic was a major theme in the local climate context in Enköping too (Personal communication with *EP* reporter). A decision by the local politicians in Enköping to increase the amount of ecological food that the municipality purchased was reported about and debated in *EP*, partly since the municipality stood out nationally for its low amount of use compared with others (31 January 2020; 4 March 2020; 5 March 2020).

Transportation, food, and urban development

Covering climate through conflicted themes around transportation, food, and urban development has been recognised in other Swedish studies too (Benulic,

2016; Egan Sjölander & Jönsson, 2012). The geographical location of Umeå in the north of Sweden, with a relatively long distance to the capital, means that air travel generates much of the local carbon footprint (SEI, 2018). The future of flying was consequently an issue and discussed in *VK* (12 December 2019; 24 January 2020). An Umeå preschool's decision to try to serve vegetarian food to the children four days a week also got media attention, since it was heavily criticised by conservative politicians. The head of the preschool explained in a *VK* article (31 October 2019), "It is only meat that is taken away. We are not going to make a major change. After two months we will evaluate this test together with the parents". *VK*'s reporters also published a series of longer news articles entitled "Food & the Climate" that shed light on local food production, distribution, and consumption (Interview with *VK* reporter). Scientists were interviewed in several of these articles, as in much of *UNT*'s reporting, and often supplemented with a consumer perspective looking into what the individual could do themselves to eat "smart" (*VK*, 5 December 2019; 10 December 2019; 11 December 2019).

Prize-winning cities

The different kinds of prizes Uppsala won for its climate work were regularly mentioned in *UNT* (2 September 2019; 20 October 2019; 2 February 2020). This is to be expected in a local newspaper when the community gets recognition for its achievement from outside (Nygren & Tenor, 2020; Hess & Waller, 2017). One such example is, for the last three years, Uppsala was awarded the prize the Swedish National Cycling Advocacy Organisation [Cykelfrämjandet] gives to the nation's best city for cycling. In 2018, Uppsala not only won the national competition in the World Wide Fund For Nature's (WWF) "One Planet City Challenge", the city also received the global prize. In 2020, Uppsala again won this Swedish WWF right to call itself Best Climate City – which it also does on, for example, the municipality website (Uppsala kommun, 2020). This green framing was also scrutinised by *UNT* reporters (11 September 2019), for example, when reviewing how well (or not) employees followed the municipality's own travel policy. At the same time, other news articles had a more positive tone and associated the climate action place branding with local financial support and investment in the municipality. This was the case when it was announced in the local newspaper that Uppsala was going to be part of the national Viable Cities programme and therefore would receive SEK 5 million (*UNT*, 9 July 2019). The main message was, "The municipality wants to make Uppsala an international role model regarding sustainable urban development" and "the Bergsbrunna district completely carbon positive" (*UNT*, 19 July 2019).

That Växjö was among the finalists in 2020's national WWF-competition made news in *SMP* (20 April 2020). The city had previously, in 2018, won the international competition European Green Leaf for being Europe's greenest city (together with Leuven in Belgium). However, Växjö municipality had been using

this green city slogan ever since 2007, when the well-known British Broadcasting Company (BBC) framed the city as such in one of its broadcasts (Växjö kommun, 2020; Andersson & James, 2018). In mid-2019, *Smålandsposten's* readers also learned about the new Viable Cities project, bringing financial support to the municipality and its local partners, with the ambitious aim of making Växjö climate neutral by 2030 (SMP, 10 July 2019). One civil servant from the municipality was interviewed about the project and said, “We will look into areas such as transport. We want to support electric bikes and we will work with issues such as greenhouse gases. Another major issue is life cycle costs for buildings, like for example what materials to use, how it is produced” (SMP, 10 July 2019). Apart from this news item, clearly based on the press release from the national program Viable Cities, there is very little coverage about the project in *SMP*, which is a bit surprising given the ambitious targets and tight time schedule that the local government subscribed to here. That pattern is also valid for the other studied newspapers.

The local relevance

When it comes to understanding how the climate reporting in the local press is made relevant for the different communities' and cities' respective readership, the coverage in Uppsala, as well as Umeå, highlighted the fact that they are university towns. Researchers were often interviewed, like in one article about a climate smart innovation that was used internationally (UNT, 30 August 2019). Several university groups⁵ engaged in the climate crisis was another sign of this, and also some of the student protests caught *UNT's* attention (28 September 2019; 29 November 2019). In a similar manner, some of the climate actions that local groups arranged in Växjö, such as Omställning Växjö and Fridays For Future, were also reported in *SMP* (30 November 2019). One of the climate activists in Uppsala, engaged in Extinction Rebellion (XR) and studying sustainable development at Uppsala University, was portrayed by a *UNT* journalist (10 November 2019) immediately after returning from an illegal protest in Germany. The reporter described for the readers how this 19-year-old, during one of the previous Fridays for Future strikes in Uppsala, had responded to critical comments from high representatives of the university. The Uppsala University leader had said, “You do not have the whole picture and probably ought to think a bit ahead, before you demand more”. The student firmly responded, “I can hardly think more than I already do. Not a day is passing without me thinking about climate change” (UNT, 10 November 2019). The day after this piece was published in *UNT* the same reporter wrote a column entitled “Men get afraid of young females”. The journalist commented upon the fierce online responses, primarily articulated by male readers, that the article had generated after being published on *UNT's* Facebook account (UNT, 12 November 2019). *UNT's* editor had had to moderate the discussion, and the journalist compared the reactions to the net hatred Greta Thunberg had been exposed to. Another feature of the local media discourse in

UNT, also associated with being a university town, was the presence and regular connections to national and global discourses on climate change.

The EU Arctic Forum's two-day summit held in Umeå in 2019, with 38 invited foreign ministers, also connected the local with the global climate discourse. The event generated several articles in the local press, since it was the biggest high-level meeting ever held in the city (VK, 1 October 2019a, 2019b; 4 October 2019a, 2019b). In the coverage, VK's journalist highlighted the praise the city received from a high official from the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that "Umeå is a good example of a successful and innovative city in the Arctic that has developed quickly in a positive way" (VK, 7 August 2019).⁶ The place branding of Umeå as an Arctic town is relatively new and clearly associated with the growing importance of the Arctic as a geopolitical area of significance globally, not least due to the climate crisis (Christensen et al., 2013).

That forestry is big in the Växjö region was visible in *SMP*'s climate reporting. For example, it included a couple of news stories about new local green businesses associated with forestry (*SMP*, 12 March 2020) and forestry related research and development projects (*SMP*, 10 December 2019). A similar specific local framing was less obvious to the readers of *EP*, probably due to the much lower number of published texts.

The local newsrooms and the reporters

The severity of the climate crisis as a challenge also for local journalists was evident in the journalist interviews:

It is such an important issue. One has to try to make things interesting and easy to grasp and attractive since people feel so down from it. [...] One has to try to find what is good and positive to sustain hope. We live in a difficult time. There is so much despair and strong political forces take advantage of this, I think [...]. One cannot give up but has to point out all that is good and progressing also when it comes to the climate. That is crucial! (Interview, *UNT*)

The same *UNT* reporter continued to reason about the role of journalism in society and their responsibility:

We have to show that people can influence their own lives to a certain degree. Just as an example, we can use the car less. But the responsibility cannot lie only on the individual. It has to be shared [...] One must not leave people alone. (Interview, *UNT*)

These quotes are strongly reminiscent of how Nordic journalists in general perceive their role in society: "serving the common good", where the classic watchdog function is coupled with social responsibility and an educational pathos (Ahva et al., 2017).

The interviews with local journalists reveal that at least three out of four newsrooms have some specialised roles for reporters, but none of them have an assigned climate or environmental reporter. In *VK* and *UNT*, climate is however, a prioritised area (Interviews with *VK* reporter, *VK*'s editor-in-chief, and *UNT* reporter). *VK*'s editor-in-chief explained that the climate crisis had become crucial for society. It cuts across all sections of the newsroom which motivates their choice of *not* having one assigned reporter.

Special efforts had also been made at *UNT*. The paper declared a goal in 2019 to publish at least one climate-related story per day, but the target could not be sustained when the pandemic broke out in the spring 2020 (see Figure 1). About a year earlier, *UNT*'s newsroom did try to reach out to their readers on Facebook and posted an appeal called "Klimatkollen" to encourage people to get in touch: "This is a group that *Upsala Nya Tidning* has started to be able to produce relevant local journalism about climate issues. Please share your thoughts and questions about the climate here and we promise you to create journalism about the subject". At this point, all *SMP* staff that have been dedicated to the environment are not working in the paper any longer, which makes a difference in their reporting:

I can think that this is somehow our Achilles heel actually. And this since we have had reporters before that has been very interested in environmental issues and have been covering these issues well over a long period of time. But today we have no one that is really dedicated to these areas even if we have several younger reporters now. We cover the climate in the same way as other subjects and write about it in the same way, but no one knows a lot about this area. I think that is a bit of a shame since the issue is, and will be, so important. (Interview, *SMP*)

There was an emerging discussion among *SMP*'s journalists about the need to allocate time to gain more knowledge on the complex issues related to climate change. This, however, was stranded as well as soon as the Covid-19 situation happened. The same change of priorities also happened at *VK* (Interview with *VK* reporter). *VK*'s editor-in-chief saw the climate issue as very polarised, like other contested areas such as migration. She also emphasised the importance of being concrete when writing about the climate and the task of assessing critically what the local council and big companies do to live up to all the promises they make (Interview with *VK*'s editor-in-chief). This pedagogical role of a journalist was also stressed by the *UNT* reporter:

It is difficult with climate issues to reach out widely and to many. [...] It is important to be pedagogical or to use simple language. One has to be clear and not get lost with lots of numbers and complicate things. (Interview, *UNT*).

Another challenge of local climate reporting according to the *SMP* reporter was the great variation in previous knowledge among the readership. Some are very

knowledgeable about the problem and some know nothing at all, which makes it tricky to write something for everyone.

The interviewed journalists had heard about the Viable Cities programme, but none were very familiar with it, nor with their local government's plans to become climate-neutral cities. The interviewed *VK* reporter described great difficulty to even grasp what it was all about. What did it mean to sign a climate contract for the municipality, and with whom, and at what level should it be done? And would it be legally binding? Another difficulty was to be able to understand what type of citizen involvement that had actually taken place.

Sociocultural contexts

The local context in which the newsrooms work has a clear impact on their reporting of the climate crisis. The fact that *VK* and *UNT* have given priority to the subject is not only visible in the number of stories compared with *EP* and *SMP*, but also shows in the variety of topics, diversity of sources, and the inclusion of citizens perspectives. The relevance of locality is also evident when, for example, *SMP* gives the Västmanland region's forestry-related subjects weight, following the local business interests, or climate news associated with local universities have visibility in *VK* and *UNT*. As *EP* has the least resources, it was more dependent on input from sources outside the newsroom to generate climate news, like the municipality, with the evident risk of journalists being what Mathisen (2010) calls blind patriots instead of watchdogs.

The new Swedish national media policy to support local journalism, in line with a long tradition of strong and independent journalism (Nygren, 2020), has clearly made a positive difference in the studied newsrooms. The potential of local media to engage and mobilise cities' readers to act in relation to the climate crisis – crucial for any “green” transition – decreased dramatically, however, when all focused on the Covid-19 crisis instead. Such a reduction in local news can have a negative democratic impact, according to findings by Hayes and Lawless (2018). More radical voices that question dominant anthropocentric worldviews, or that do justice to indigenous peoples or other marginalised groups' experiences of the climate crisis, were rare even before in Swedish media discourses (Roosvall & Tegelberg, 2018).

The growing culture of place branding (Acharya & Rahman, 2016; Kavartzis et al., 2018) – reflected here as cities posing as green prize winners or international role models – fits well with the tradition of local journalism to support the community and local stakeholders (Hess & Waller, 2017). It is therefore crucially important that the other tradition of journalism – to scrutinise local decision-makers – is kept up. Otherwise, there is an apparent risk of greenwashing, not least because of significant future funding opportunities associated with the European Green Deal (EU, 2019). Tahvilzadeh and colleagues' work on the governance of Gothenburg's Metropolitan Area serves as a critical reminder. They conclude that the hegemonic

sustainability discourse within today's urban politics "did not make any effective climate or environmental protection policies possible, nor did it have clout enough to combat rampant social inequalities" (Tahvilzadeh et al., 2017: 80). A similar development would be devastating given the seriousness of the climate crisis, and local journalism could certainly be a counter-force if functioning well.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, this study of local media discourses on climate change shows that the local press still uphold central democratic functions in cities. They inform about the climate crisis so that citizens can inform themselves about the nature of the problem, and their readership can articulate their own views regarding the matter. The journalists review actions by local decision-makers and try to see the world from their readers' perspective. In addition, local media provide a vital arena for stakeholder meetings and local debates about the climate problem. All this is happening despite continuous cut-downs and difficulties in sustaining subscription levels, especially among the younger population. Having said that, given the seriousness of the climate crisis, there are several dimensions of these local media discourses that could be developed much further. On balance, the local newsrooms still seem to be more reactive than proactive when it comes to this all-encompassing problem.

If the newspapers had assigned climate reporters or put aside special resources for the environmental area on a more regular basis, the possibilities to make better sense of and report about this very complex issue would increase. What the local consequences of climate change might be and what ought to be done now in order to adapt and mitigate the harm in the future are such issues. The meaning of "climate neutrality" would also be important to write about in more detail, including the cities' plans to reach this ambitious goal within the coming decade. Journalists' abilities to critically engage with municipalities and other local actors that make claims about being "green", "climate-friendly", or "smart" would also demand more resources. This would reduce the increased risk of greenwashing in a time when cities place branding is expanding. The findings in this article also indicate the pivotal role of the individual journalist's engagement and dedication in the newsroom. Without it, there is much less climate coverage, which reveals how fragile and arbitrary the supporting structures for this type of journalism often are. The outbreak of Covid-19 meant that the newsrooms' focus on climate got much weaker. And finally, when it comes to citizen engagement and public participation in the climate crisis, if we are going to be able to transform our ways of living so the goals of the Paris Agreement can be achieved, the contribution from local media – both the printed press and the digital platforms they provide – could be of great importance. They could potentially work to fuel cities' sustainable transitions instead of promoting Climate Neutral Cities "green" place branding.

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Notes

1. Umeå, Uppsala, Enköping, Stockholm, Göteborg, Växjö, Malmö, Lund, and Järfälla are the nine cities or municipalities that are taking part in the Viable Cities programme for smart and sustainable cities (for more information, see <https://en.viablecities.se/>).
2. In Swedish: klimat*; klimatneutral*; koldioxid*; koldioxidneutral*; klimatomställn*; Viable Cit*; and Umeå, Enköping, Uppsala, and Växjö.
3. Three interviews were conducted online (VK, SMP, and UNT) and one took place at the newspaper's headquarters (VK). The fifth one (EP) was done in written form via an online questionnaire, plus e-mail correspondence.
4. During the interviews, I took notes to facilitate the transcription phase, identifying most relevant passages. I did the same when listening through all recordings afterwards in order to identify special parts of interest for the study, like when the reporter describes how their newsroom work with the climate issue.
5. Uppsala universitet klimatnätverk; Skogs- och Lantbruksuniversitetets klimatnätverk, Klimatstudenterna Uppsala and Flygfritt 2020 (see, e.g., UNT, 1 June 2020).
6. This quote and all other quotes and headings from newspapers and interviews have been translated by the author (see the Appendix for full references for newspaper articles cited).

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Appendix

Empirical material cited, by newspaper

- EP. (2019, July 10). Myran – en förebild i klimatarbetet? [Myran – a role model for the climate?]
- EP. (2019, September 4). Tävling om att utveckla Myran [Competition to develop Myran].
- EP. (2020, January 31). Ekomat är inte bättre för miljö eller hälsa [Ecofood not better for the environment or health]. Jonas Paulsson.
- EP. (2020, March 4). Klimatsmartare mat i kommunens kök [Climate-smart food in the municipality's school restaurants]. Tomas Rådkvist.
- EP. (2020, March 5). Mer ekologisk mat i skola och omsorg [More ecological food in school and social care].
- SMP. (2019, July 10). Miljonstöd ska göra Växjö klimatneutralt till 2030 [Million support should make Växjö climate neutral in 2030].
- SMP. (2019, August 14). Den ekologiska omställningen ska minska, inte öka [The ecological transition should decrease, not increase]. Christer Svensson.
- SMP. (2019, September 9). Kött för klimatet [Meat for the climate]. Ester Hedin.
- SMP. (2019, September 25). Vägen mot ett hållbart Växjö utstakad [The road towards a sustainable Växjö is decided]. Bo Ströberg.
- SMP. (2019, September 30). Klimatanpassning för vår tids utmaningar [Climate adaptation one of our time's biggest challenges]. Sofia Stynsberg, Cheryl L. Jones Fur, Claes Bromander, Kaj-Mikael Peterson, & Susanna Röing.
- SMP. (2019, October 10). Sluta flyga runt jorden – tala mer med invånarna [Stop flying around the globe – talk more to inhabitants]. Lars Edqvist.
- SMP. (2019, November 4). Nytt reseavdrag kritiserats – men inte av Växjö kommun [New travel deduction is criticised – but not by Växjö municipality].
- SMP. (2019, November 6). Förslaget är ytterligare ett slag mot landsbygden [The proposal is yet another hit against rural communities]. Magnus Lo.
- SMP. (2019, November 19). Såga inte ner blodlönnssallén med Mörners väg [Do not cut down the blood-red maple at Mörner's road]. Erik Jansson, & Magnus P. Wählin.
- SMP. (2019, November 21). Ut ur ekokammaren [Out of the echo chamber]. Jacob Sidenvall.
- SMP. (2019, November 30). Klimataktion i vinterkyla [Climate action in the cold winter].
- SMP. (2019, December 10). Mångmiljonjulklapp från näringslivet till Linnéuniversitetet [Christmas gift from businesses worth millions to Linné University].
- SMP. (2020, March 12). Här är nya sätt att använda skogsråvara [Here are new ways to use forestry products].
- SMP. (2020, April 1). Vi måste minska biltrafiken [We have to decrease car traffic]. Pål Karlsson, Järda Blix, Uno Pettersson, Lena Lilieblad, & Lars Edqvist.
- SMP. (2020, April 20). Växjö kan bli årets klimatstad [Växjö can become climate city of the year].
- UNT. (2019, July 9). Miljonstöd ska gå till klimatarbete [Investment of millions to support climate action].
- UNT. (2019, August 30). Våg minskade matsvinnet [Wave decreased the food waste].
- UNT. (2019, September 2). Grönskan byggs bort i Klimatstaden [The green is forgotten in the climate city]. Anders Lindvall.
- UNT. (2019, September 11). Klimatstrateg i kommunen tog flyget [The municipality's climate strategist took the flight].
- UNT. (2019, September 28). Uppsalabor i gemensamt uppror med omvärlden [Uppsala citizens join forces with the rest of the world].
- UNT. (2019, October 16). Ett blågrönt förslag för ett tryggare Uppsala [A bluegreen proposal for a safer Uppsala].
- UNT. (2019, October 20). Uppsala bygger ensidigt med betongklossar [Uppsala is building one-handed with concrete blocks]. Eva Hallqvist Larsson.
- UNT. (2019, November 10). Klimataktivist som sovit i en tysk rondell [The climate activist that slept in a German roundabout].
- UNT. (2019, November 12). Männan blir rädda för unga tjejer [The men are afraid of young women].
- UNT. (2019, November 29). Klimatstudenter pressar universitetet [Climate students are putting pressure on the universities].
- UNT. (2020, January 5). Bygg med hänsyn till klimat och miljö [Build in harmony with the climate and the environment]. Inger Sjöberg.

- UNT. (2020, February 2). Klimatstaden borde satsa mer på vätagas [The climate city ought to invest in hydrogen]. Matts Ytterström.
- UNT. (2020, June 1). Universiteten har en viktig roll efter corona [Universities have an important role after corona] Uppsala universitets klimatnätverk, Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitets klimatnätverk och Klimatstudenterna Uppsala.
- VK. (2019, August 7). Stort möte i Umeå för utrikesministrar [Big meeting in Umeå for foreign ministers].
- VK. (2019, September 27). Klimatstrateg tvingas lämna efter kritik [Climate strategist has to leave after criticism].
- VK. (2019a, October 1). Arktis – i centrum [Arctic – in the centre].
- VK. (2019b, October 1). Sveriges ambassadör i Arktis hoppas på mötet i Umeå [Swedish ambassador in Arctic has hopes for the Umeå summit].
- VK. (2019, October 3). Hur blir lokala omställningen? [How will the local transformation happen?]. Helena Forsman, & Moa Gagner.
- VK. (2019, October 4a). Det som händer i Arktis påverkar också Indien [What happens in Arctic also has an impact on India].
- VK. (2019, October 4b). Trine, 17, från Lycksele på ministermötet [Trine, 17 years old, from Lycksele at the minister summit].
- VK. (2019, October 30). Framsynthet och mod krävs [Braveness and courage is needed]. Ulf Holmgren, & Lena Tegnér.
- VK. (2019, October 31). Helt vegetarisk förskola väcker starka reaktioner [Completely vegetarian preschool creates strong reactions].
- VK. (2019, December 5). Därför är matvanorna svåra att ändra [Therefore food habits are hard to change].
- VK. (2019, December 10). Alternativ till soja kan odlas i Umeå [Alternative to soy can grow in Umeå].
- VK. (2020, December 11). Så arbetar kommunen och regionen för klimatsmart mat [This is how the municipality and the region works for climate-smart food].
- VK. (2019, December 12). Sluta flyga är inte hållbart [Not sustainable to stop flying]. Fredrik Kämpfe.
- VK. (2020, January 24). När slutar personalen flyga? [When do the employees stop flying?]. Ulrika Karlsson, & Tobias Pettersson.
- VK. (2020, February 25). Nya miljömål klubbade [New environmental goals decided].