

The autonomy-popularity binary

Is datafication impacting how Gjesdalbuens Journalists
work?



Universitetet
i Stavanger

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Institutt for media, kultur- og samfunnsfag

Henrik Breimyr

Candidate number: 259278

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1 Introduction

“I remember when I started, as we were so paper-heavy, it was difficult to know whether people had even read your article. You almost had to ask them at the shops. Now you can look at the numbers and find out. Which can be good, and it can fool you.”

Pay particular attention to the final sentence of the above quote. The statement was collected in an interview with Kirsten Håland, frontpage-chief at Gjesdalbuen. Kirsten has worked at the newspaper for the last decade, and the winds of technology have brought about sweeping changes to the media environment, the newspaper, and how Håland approaches her job. When Håland started she would sit and physically scribble on a piece paper how she wanted her articles to look in the printed newspaper. Once published, the response of the readers could only be ascertained through chance conversations struck up at the local café or supermarket. Those days are gone, datafication and metrics have seen to that. Why Håland believes that the constant feedback that datafication and metrics now provide can both be good, but at the same time deceiving, illuminates the very core purpose of this study.

Metrics, big data, and technology can be said to be becoming ever more woven and engrained into the very fabric of society and human civilization. Media is no exception. The fourth state, the watchdog of the people, and a key component of any well-functioning democracy has also adapted with the times. From the very humble beginnings of the printing press with Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century, for centuries metrics were simply singular in nature; how many copies sold? Fast forward to the media landscape of the year 2023, and the metrics, insights, and analysis available to journalists, editors and media outlets are almost endless by nature. Reader demographics, reading time, engagement and subscription conversion, the technological revolution over to the digital age of media has opened the floodgates of feedback. But has a pandoras box been opened? Is datafication journalists’ ability to deliver their democratic role? Can feedback funnel them into a set path for both what and how they report the news?

Due to the modern and constantly evolving nature of the use of data in the media, there can be said to be knowledge gaps in the studies that have been undertaken, specifically when it

comes to the effects of datafication on Norwegian media outlets. This study intends to serve as a bridge to help close those gaps, and inspire further, more extensive research into a fascinating facet of journalism. A facet that holds the potential to be further examined from both a psychological and sociological perspective. To what extent does datafication and the use of metrics impact how a journalist works?

1.1 Research object

This is a study of to what extent the Amedia groups prioritization and use of data and analysis tools, so called datafication, affects how Gjesdalbuens journalists work. Gjesdalbuen is a local newspaper, covering Gjesdal county, that is part of the Amedia group. It employs four full time journalists, and one editor, who also produces articles. At Gjesdalbuen, live reader numbers are shown continuously throughout the day on a TV screen at the office and display how many readers have clicked into an article within the last ten minutes, how many of the readers are under 40 years of age, and how long they read the article for on average. As is common practice at Amedia. Amedia has utilized these analysis tools actively over the previous years, has it impacted the work of their journalists at Gjesdalbuen?

1.2 Focus question

How does Amedias datafication prioritization impact the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do?

1.3 Sub questions

Sub question one: Which criteria are considered when journalists choose cases?

Sub question two: What role does data play in the planning phase of a case?

Sub question three: In what way does datafication impact the journalist's democratic function as specified in V.V.P point 1?

Sub question four: To what extent has datafication changed the classic news criteria?

1.4 Study design

This study begins with an examination of relevant theory, and existing research into the subject of datafication and the use of metrics, and its effects on how journalists work. This theory will be used to analyze the empirical evidence collated from the method chapter of this study in the analysis and discussion chapters. Secondly, the chosen methodology shall be presented. Why the research design type was selected for the study, and how the research and results were executed. From there the results of the research will be presented and analysed. In the discussion section following the results will be analysed according to the theory presented in chapter 2. Finally, the study presents a conclusion.

1.5 Purpose of study

The purpose of this study is to use Gjesdalbuen as a case, and as an indication of any potential overarching ramifications of the impact of datafication and metrics on the media sector, specifically how journalists work on a day to day to basis. Due to the small scale of the study, it will not be possible to draw sweeping conclusions that cover the entire media or journalistic landscape. However, the ramifications and eventual consequences of datafication at Gjesdalbuen can conceivably inspire further broader study by researchers with greater resources available and see if the results can be generalised for media in Norway, or internationally as a whole.

1.6 Definitions

Datafication is defined by Professor in media science at the University of Bergen Hallvard Moe as a term used about the tendency where an increasing number of things that humans do are turned into data with the aim of measuring, archiving and even turning a profit (European Journal of communications 2020). For this study, datafication shall be said to include the tracking of audience reader numbers, hereby referred to as “data” and “metrics.”

Classic news criteria: These are used to decide whether a case is worth following and can be used to decide if something has news value. (Kjendsli,2012, s.52). They are importance, identification, sensation, actuality, and conflict (Kjendsli,2012, s.52-55).

V.V.P 1: This refers to “Vær Varsom plakaten” point 1 which covers the press’s societal role, also known as its democratic mission. This includes important functions such as information, debate, democratic criticism, informing citizens of what is going on in society and revealing critic-worthy actions (Pressens Faglige Utvalg,2020).

2 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter previous research and theory is utilized as the pillar for the research of the theme of the study, and of the research question; “how does Amedias datafication prioritization impact the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do?”

2.1 Journalisms problem

In 2020, Sjøvaag wrote that “journalisms fundamental problem consists of the relationship between revenue and its democratic mission” (Sjøvaag, 2020, p.9). Journalisms democratic mission can be surmised as its self-appointed role as a critical watchdog over power, and its role of providing citizens with the information they require to be knowledgeable and fully functioning members of a democratic society (Sjøvaag, 2020, p.9). Sjøvaag explains how journalism should not have economic or political ties and concludes that the stronger a media outlet is economically, the stronger it can resist outside influences on its journalistic content. Grimsmo and Heen use Næss to explain the democratic mission (Grimsmo, Heen, 2014, p.2). Media researchers divide up the democratic mission into three elements, the watchdog function, the information function and additionally the arena function which involves the secular and encouragement of a public debate forum about important societal questions (Næss, 2012).

However, Sjøvåg states that as media's revenue drops, it increases the chance of media outlets moving towards more populist content. From 2005 to 2019, 62% of advert revenue disappeared from the Norwegian newspaper market (Medienorge, 2019a), and Sjøvåg positions that digital revenue cannot make up for this loss (Sjøvåg, 2020, p.10-12). All the while, media and journalism find themselves in an online based economy today, where the economy of online or digital journalism is driven by clicks. Journalists know exactly what readers spend time on, how many hits they get, what gets ignored and what makes people buy subscriptions. Sjøvåg describes how both Amedia and Schibsted utilize huge amounts of data, and how this insight influences what gets published as journalists wish to reach their audience. Therefore, insight into what the reader likes that metrics of datafication provides, will naturally also influence what journalists prioritize (Sjøvåg, 2020, p.84).

In relation to this study's research question, Sjøvåg's theory presents a partial answer that datafication does influence how journalists work. It can be deemed reasonable to argue that this is common sense, as why would media-outlets bother spending money on datafication if it didn't provide tangible data that they could use to produce results.? Therefore, what is interesting with this theory in terms of this study, is not whether the study eventually corroborates that, yes, Gjesdalbuens journalists are also influenced by datafication. But rather to what extent? and how are they influenced by it? This is the motivation and thought behind the sub questions specified earlier, particularly sub questions three and four. Explicitly, in what way does datafication impact the journalist's democratic function as specified in V.V.P point 1, and to what extent has datafication changed the classic news criteria?

2.2 Story placement, topic selection and performance evaluation

The volume, abundance and availability of data and metrics on the audience that is available to media outlets have transformed journalistic practices and fashioned novel ones (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.438). In their 2017 study Lee and Tandoc Jr. write that three components of news production have been revealed by studies to be impacted by online audience feedback: story placement, topic selection and performance evaluation (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.438). The researchers define audience feedback as news users' reactions to news and cite Walther & Jang (2012) to explain that it can present as both verbal, such as user comments, or nonverbal like data and metrics (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p. 437).

Story placement refers to decisions made regarding a media outlets online layout (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.439). Audience clicks have been suggested to affect how and where articles are placed on a news website, yet not the inverse relationship one might expect, placement does not affect clicks (Lee, Lewis, and Powers, 2014, p.519-522).

Topic selection is defined by Lee and Tandoc Jr. as the method of deciding whether something will be reported (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.438). The researchers refer to Gans (1979) to explain that journalists have traditionally protected the topic selection process from external influence to uphold and safeguard their autonomy but have since turned to audience feedback to aid selection. They write that according to Welbers et al. (2016) topics that have attracted a lot of clicks in the past tend to be covered more often (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.438).

Performance evaluation can be said to be how journalists gage their day-to-day work (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.439). Lee and Tandoc Jr. write that audience feedback has increased the influence the audience can have, which in turn challenges theories such as gatekeeping (Lee & Tandoc Jr., 2017, p.439).

These three defined components of news production, along with the existing theory presented on them, will be considered when analyzing how datafication has impacted the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do.

2.3 Editorial office processes

As this study assesses how datafication impacts the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do, it can be deemed a necessity to look at theories related to news selection, to use them a theoretical base and comparative tool, when analyzing the results from the interviews with the papers journalists. This as news selection is one of the tasks that journalists perform, and as shall be seen later in the results of the interviews, a task that the journalists at Gjesdalbuen play an active role in. One can make a reasonable argument that news selection falls under the topic selection component presented in 2.2.

Kvalheim cites various perspectives that have been utilized to explain news selection (Kvalheim, 2016, p. 22-24). Firstly, she refers to David Maning White's 1950 study on Mr. Gate, which emphasizes the individuals influence and autonomy on news selection, and how editors largely determine what gets published, thus the term "gatekeeping." Gatekeeping theory will be presented in the following sub chapter. Kvalheim then cites Schultz (2006, p.75), who proposes that one must understand individuals' professional norms, interaction patterns and corresponding factors to fathom why news selection is as it is. Kvalheim then explains the 1955 study by Warren Breed, "Social Control in the Newsroom" (1955), which showed such factors. Breed resolved that journalists strive for a conflict-free work environment and suggests that editorial policies and an organizations strategy will impact a journalists work. Breed therefore concludes that one can make the argument that editorial strategies are a factor in the content produced. Kvalheim then brings in the results of studies on editorial processes from the 1970's and 80's, where the predominant thematic result is one of the structural environments effects on a journalist's autonomy. The structure forms the basis and rules for journalists' day to day actions (Kvalheim, 2016, p.22-24).

These theories and studies revoke the idea of journalists as autonomous actors and suggest that they are only partially free to work within the parameters of their structure. This will be interesting to compare to how the journalists at Gjesdalbuen view themselves. As a part of the Amedia group, the journalists work under guidelines and targets from the group, in this case specifically, datafication targets. The journalists' answers will be analyzed to discover whether the structure that it can be reasonable to assume that Amedias datafication focus has created, has impacted how they work on a day-to-day basis. These theories can be argued to be an extension of Sjøvaags journalism problem, as one would assume that the structures created by editorial processes are likely there as a direct result of the economic media market, democratic mission and technology mentioned by Sjøvaag. Thus, they are not competing theories but rather varying scales of theory, with Sjøvaags more macro than the microenvironments of each media outlet's structure, albeit oft the result of the larger parent groups strategical decisions. One could argue that an interesting and relevant question that can be used to analyze the results of this study would be as follows; has Amedias datafication focus created a new or changed structure? Following on from this question sprouts a succession of logical sub questions; if existent, does this structure impact the three components from 2.2, or form a "rulebook" for Gjesdalbuens journalists' day to day actions?

How does said hypothetical structure impact how they work? How does it impact what they produce for the readers?

2.4 Online audience as gatekeeper?

Reviewing the theory and research produced on online audience can be argued to be highly relevant for this study as Amedias datafication focus and the metrics it provides, are specifically about their online audience. In Vu's 2014 study on the effects of audience web metrics on editors he found that audience metrics influence editors in gatekeeping (Vu, 2014, p.1094). Vu uses Schoemaker et al.'s definition of gatekeeping where it has been presented as including "writing, editing, positioning, scheduling, repeating, and otherwise massaging information to become news" (Schoemaker et al., 2008, p. 73). Respective research studies have indicated that audience has an impact on the gatekeeping process. Specifically, researchers have found that gatekeepers or online journalists are increasingly analyzing readers' behavior and observing web metrics to gather increased insights into their audience (MacGregor, 2007; McKenzie et al., 2011). MacGregor's 2007 study, where he interviewed online journalists, discovered that gatekeepers do in fact monitor audience data to reevaluate their editorial priorities. These revaluations could be, according to the results of MacGregor's study, expanding coverage of a story, providing more analysis, or producing more of the similar type of story to an article that receives good metrics (Macgregor, 2007, p.294-296).

One of the findings Macgregor gained from his study can be directly linked to the Kvalheims later research on news selection and editorial office processes. "In the old days we'd say: "That's a good story"...and i would say that's the primary means still of picking a story [online]. So, we usually follow our instincts to a great extent. But I think we'll see in the near future more reliance on knowledge based on what metrics are throwing up" (Macgregor,2007, p.293). The above quote is from a senior journalist at the English newspaper The Guardian, obtained by Macgregor. Bearing in mind that this qualitative data was collected in 2007, it can be interesting to see if the hypothesis stands the test of time and is vindicated and corroborated by the results of this study. How are the stories picked at Gjesdalbuen? This contributes to the first two sub questions of this study's research question.

MacGregor determined in his conclusion that editors and journalists he had sampled agreed on the need for numbers and volume, but synchronously they emphasized the journalism cannot simply be an uncritical hunt for numbers, and that news values must be maintained. He ends his study by suggesting the notion that it is this link between numbers and values that is the true grail of, at the time, modern journalism (MacGregor, 2007, p-295-296). 16 years have passed since MacGregor deduced this viewpoint from his study, and it forms a fascinating basis of analysis for the results of this study.

Schoemaker and Reese's hierarchy of influences model from 1996 was created in a vastly different media environment to what one finds at Gjesdalbuen and media outlets today. They hypothesized that gatekeeping happens at multiple gates, or levels, from the first level of individual factors of the communicator to the fifth and final level of media ideology. The second, third and fourth levels are media routines, organizational influences and extra media or extrinsic forces respectively (Schoemaker & Reese, 1996). Naturally, the media environment of today, means that the influences on the various levels of the hierarchy are likely to be changed from the original model. One can make a reasonable claim that datafication, and audience metrics would be expected to exert more influence on the gatekeeping process. Therefore, one can hypothesize that this in turn affects how the journalists at Gjesdalbuen go about performing their work. This study aims to answer not just whether it does so, but how it does so.

Comparatively, Lowrey and Woo's findings from their 2010 study into the ways news organizations responded to the uncertainty of those times, discovered that journalists' attention towards audience information had increased because of newsroom worries created by the financial struggles within the industry (Lowrey and Woo, 2010, p.41). Despite this, the study ascertained that although it was taking place, monitoring of audience information was in fact not powerfully impacting decisions about content. The result of this study can be paralleled with the already mentioned results of MacGregor's 2007 study, the hierarchy of influences model, and Sjøvaag's view that audience metrics will impact what journalists prioritize, when evaluating and analyzing the findings from the interviews with Gjesdalbuens journalists.

Vu's 2014 study on the effects of audience web metrics on editors found that almost a third of the study respondents stated that the metrics helped them plan future content, and/or where they place content on the webpage. However most explained that they monitor web metrics

purely to examine audience behavior, without elaborating as to why that was. Vu theorized that this was the case due to the journalistic pride of remaining autonomous, and that admitting that metrics affected their decision-making was difficult for the editors (Vu, 2014, p.1106-1107). In their study on professional norms versus online audience metrics Welbers et al. cite Lee et al. (2014), who observed an incongruity between how journalists claim that they use metrics and how they are in fact influenced by them, and also Anderson (2011), who found that this discrepancy can be attributed to the journalistic struggle to balance the use of metrics with professional norms (Welbers et al., 2016, p. 1039). Contrary to the findings from Lowrey and Woo's study, Vu found most editors reported a comparatively strong chance of making editorial alterations predicated on web metrics. This discovery was also replicated in Lee and Tandoc Jr.'s 2017 study on audience feedbacks (which included data and metrics) effect on news production and consumption, where they found that it guides news organizations' editorial decisions concerning what to report and how to report it. Welbers et al. (2016) found that the most-viewed articles were more likely to receive follow-up articles, suggesting that audience clicks, or data and metrics, affect news selection (Welbers et al., 2016, p.1038). In his conclusion Vu highlights a quote from one editor in his study, about their motivation to track audience content preferences; "To judge what readers want, which is then balanced against what readers need" (Vu, 2014,p.1106). It will be interesting to see if, and if so how, this balance is managed at Gjesdalbuen, and discover what motivates their journalists to track data and metrics, in comparison to the editors in Vu's study. Vu suggests that the hierarchy of influences model need be updated, proposing a separate level for the audience factor due to more importance being consigned to the audience role during journalistic gatekeeping. Since Vu's study only produced quantitative data, he proposed that future studies were needed to capture the nuances of the complex issue of datafication, data and web metrics (Vu, 2014, p.1107). This study aims to do just so, by examining not just whether data and web metrics influence what journalists do, but rather how. By collecting qualitative data, the nuances of this, as the theory shows, challenging new tool, may be revealed on a micro-scale, and provide indications and a guide to future more extensive research, that can close the knowledge gaps from previous studies such as Vu's.

2.5 Autonomy-popularity binary

In their study on digital news user practices, Kormelink and Meijer (2018), cite research from Schlesinger 1978, Darnton 1975, Gans 1979, Schlesinger1978, Gans 1979 & Costera Meijer 2003 to show how traditionally, journalists actively resisted audience feedback for fear of compromising autonomy and reducing journalistic standards. They call this the autonomy-popularity binary (Kormelink & Meijer, 2018, p.669). This binary is present in the findings of several of the other studies already mentioned in chapter 2 (Vu, Welber et al., MacGregor). This theory is relevant to the answering of the research question of this paper. Is the autonomy-popularity binary present in the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do? To what extent has an audience-centric ethos and attitude taken over?

3 Methodology

To gain relevant information about the use of datafication at Gjesdalbuen I have interviewed three of the five full time employees at the newspaper. Extensive information on the informants can found under 3.2 informants. The research question was the very basis of the research design and acted as a guide to produce a final research design capable of answering the aforesaid research question. Qualitative interviews in a semi-structured design were undertaken as a case study of Gjesdalbuen. The following chapters will present and explain why both the informants and methods chosen and utilized were done so.

3.1 Method

Themes for a study should provide information about important aspects about the media, their message or audience, or ideally a combination or two or three these areas (Østbye et al., 2007, p.17-18). The overarching theme of the use of datafication in journalism and its effect om journalists and audience can be claimed to cover all three. Datafication is a component of how journalism works in 2023, how does it then impact the message (content), and in turn how

does this message impact the audience? A theme should be produced in such a way as that the results of a study project can be used alongside the results of knowledge from other research, and as such expand confirmed knowledge (Østbye et. al, 2007, p.18). As shown in the theory section, there have been several studies undertaken on the theme of datafication, and its impact on both journalism, journalists, and audience. Several common themes and correlating results have emerged from these studies, yet there are also grey areas and conflicting theories and findings, such as the true status of the autonomy-popularity binary in modern journalism. It can be wise to select a theme found in scientific literature, or one where differing theory give different explanations (Østbye et al.,2007, p.18). This study can be said to fulfill both these criteria; there has been minimal research on the impact of datafication on Norwegian newspapers and journalists, and there are, as shown in section 2, differing theories on its impact internationally.

Once a theme is selected, it must be worked into a precise research question. The research question must be designed to enable the research to be undertaken in the most sensible and effective manner possible (Østbye et al., 2007, p.18). The research question from this study is designed to be precise, in that it surmises the theme of the study, whilst coincidentally being possible to answer. From said research question a research design must be found or developed. This involves choice of definitions that get to the root of the research question, choice of method for data collection, choice of data that can illuminate the research question, choice of technique to analyze data, and choice of presentation form for the results (Østbye, et al.,2007, p18-19).

A case study is a detailed and intensive study of a single case, either on its own, or because one believes that the case can exemplify a general problem or phenomenon (Korsnes et al., 1997, p.45). In this study, the case is Gjesdalbuen, one of Amedias local newspapers, where the purpose is to study the use of datafication at Gjesdalbuen to attain results that can potentially be extrapolated to account for a larger specter, such as the entire Amedia group, journalism in Norway or internationally. Case-studies are performed in the present, in real-life situations and are utilized when the borders between phenomenon and context are unclear (Yin 1994, p.13). The theory and knowledge from previous studies suggest several phenomena on the effect of datafication, such as well-read stories, receiving a greater number of follow up stories, but how do these phenomena relate to the context of this study? Specifically, the work of journalists at Gjesdalbuen. Case studies can be useful to produce

first insights, oft referred to as exploratory research, where one can discover phenomena that appear essential, or classifications and definitions that can be used to describe them. These results can serve as the foundations for future, more systematic descriptions produced from research, and the production of theory on the studied field or theme (Østbye et al., 2007, p.239). The study is designed as a first look at the effects on increased datafication focus at Amedia, and its effects on their journalists at the local newspaper Gjesdalbuen. It produces insights, knowledge and suggested hypothesis that can be studied further in more extensive study designs.

The selected method for the study is qualitative interviews. Qualitative data is typically richer and more varied than quantitative, and characteristically comes from a small number of sources or informants but covers a wide array of aspects (Østbye et al., 2007, p.20). As the theory presented in section 2 suggests, the effects of datafication on journalistic processes such as news selection are typically varied and nuanced, therefore this study uses qualitative interviews in a semi-structured design to shed light on the research question and sub questions. Qualitative interviews are a central method for collecting and analyzing data related to individuals work, decisions and opinions (Østbye et al., 2007, p.96). Qualitative interviews can have advantages over methods such as quantitative, as researchers can gain information otherwise hard to access, hypotheses can be tested during the interviews, processes can be mapped out and researchers get access to informants' ways of speaking and the classifications that they use (Østbye et al., 2007, p.98).

A quantitative study, such as a larger survey could well have yielded valid data, but it was deemed that the theme and research question of this study was of such a nuanced nature, that more in depth qualitative data would allow the research question to be answered in a more satisfactory way. Additionally, structuring and designing a survey in such a way that it could answer the research question acceptably and suitably, would have been particularly challenging, and even if done perfectly, may not have gained as valid, reliable, and in-depth findings. When studying the decisions made in a newsroom, before content is delivered to the audience, known as a production analysis, it is natural to perform qualitative interviews (Østbye et al., 2007, p.96). The research question and theme of this study can be said to fall into this category. Access to the informants was granted quickly, which allowed more time to be spent on analysis of the qualitative data findings collected. Throughout the interviews, I asked clear thematic questions utilizing a pre-designed interview guide. This allowed

conversation to flow, follow up questions to be asked, and the interviews to evolve in a natural way. It can be deemed reasonable to state that this gave the interviews a semi-structured nature. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by the fact that the themes for the questions are defined pre-interview (Østbye et al., 2007, p.100).

It is important to document what is said in a qualitative interview, and it is therefore common to record them (Østbye et al., 2007, p.103). The interviews in this study undertaken in person at Gjesdalbuens office, were recorded and then later transcribed. The recording of an interview, as opposed to notetaking, will always strengthen the methodic reliability of a research study, and in many cases strengthen the projects validity (Østbye et al., 2007, p.118). All informants were informed of the purpose of the study, and signed forms of consent to both participate and for their full names to be used. One should consider ecological validity, how informants' actions and answers relate to the context they are done or said in, when using qualitative interview and recording (Østbye et al., 2007, p119). To maximize ecological validity, the interviews started off with colloquial everyday "chit-chat," to put the informants at ease.

3.2 Informants

The term "informants" is common to use about the person being interviewed in qualitative interview. In this term lies an understanding that the research shall be informed of the interviewee's reflections, insights and considerations (Østbye et al., 2007, p.99). Three journalists at Gjesdalbuen have been interviewed for this study. The study aims to ascertain how the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do at the newspaper has been affected by Amedias datafication focus, therefore a sample of three of the five full time journalists employed at the newspaper was deemed a suitable sample size. The editor (who is one of the five full time journalists at the newspaper) was not chosen, on account of him having other responsibilities on top of also producing articles. The following informants were selected:

- Kirsten Håland, Frontpage-chief and journalist, bachelor in journalism, worked at Gjesdalbuen since 2012.
- Sindre Slethei, journalist, bachelor in journalism, worked at Gjesdalbuen since 2020.

- Dag Atle Svendsen, journalist, no formal journalism higher education, worked at Gjesdalbuen since 2022.

The journalists have different degrees of journalistic experience, years spent at the paper and formal higher education in journalism, yet they share many of the same work tasks, such as news selection and article production. Therefore, the three are likely interesting and useful informants.

4 Findings and Analysis

In this section the findings from the qualitative interviews are presented and analyzed. To do so the four sub questions of the research question will be used. In chapter 5, the findings will be discussed up against relevant theory presented in chapter two.

4.1 Which criteria are considered when journalists choose cases?

During the early stages of the interviews, it became clear that the journalists considered themselves to have a high degree of autonomy in terms of case selection. Svendsen felt that it was *“very free, within certain guidelines,”* whilst Håland mentioned that the journalistic *“instinct that this is a good story”* played a large role. It is interesting to note that Håland, who has worked at Gjesdalbuen for over ten years, and as such has seen the development of datafication and the use of metrics, did not mention data or metrics when initially asked how she chose cases. Instead, more conventional, and traditional techniques such as *“little or big things I see on the way to work, or what people in the community, at the nursery, in my friend group are talking about”* were mentioned. One could hypothesize this as displaying an audience-centric or external focus, where a large focus is placed on what the reader needs, perhaps even wants. Svendsen corroborates this by answering that he looks for *“typical things that I think other people in the same life situation as me will be interested in.”*

Slethei described the use of social media, tips from readers, old articles where a new piece of information has arisen, and input from the editor as criteria for news selection. Interestingly, as with Håland, neither Svendsen or Slethei mentioned datafication or metrics as criteria for

choosing cases when initially asked. In 4.2 how they answer once the subject of datafication in planning is broached will be revealed.

4.2 What role does data play in the planning phase of a case?

Once conversation brought up data in the planning phase of a case, it appeared as though the journalists reflected over how data did in fact play an if not leading, but participatory role, in the planning phase of a case or article. One can argue that the fact that this did not come up initially supports Vu's theory on the journalistic pride of remaining autonomous from 2.4.

"It's one of the benefits of the tools we have available, that you learn to understand what people will read," said Håland, a view also found with the other journalists. Svendsen stated that data *"plays a role, both a large and little role. Of course, there are some stories where you think this is perhaps so niche that it will be poorly read,"* whilst Slethei could explain how case selection is impacted. *"We know for example that sport is poorly read, then it's natural that we don't write as much of that and deprioritize it in favor of spending time on what people want. Because that is easy to find by looking at the data."* These views align with Sjøvaags theory from 2.1 that insight into what the reader likes will influence what journalists prioritize, and MacGregors 2007 study results presented in 2.4.

Convergently, the journalists displayed an opposition to the over-reliance on metrics in this phase of journalism, and a self-awareness of its potential impact on their autonomy and ability to perform their democratic function. Their thoughts on datafication's ability to perform their democratic function will be looked at in 4.3. *"I mainly think about whether it's a good article, and if I believe it is, I just get going, I don't think that much about it (data/potential number of readers),"* explained Håland. When asked to explain what she meant by a "good article," Håland referred, without prompt, to the news criteria of actuality, *"that its news, something new that people don't know about...actuality, that it's something that's happening here and now."* This substantiates the findings of Lowrey and Woo's findings from their 2010 study presented in 2.4, that although journalists monitor data and reader numbers, it does not powerfully impact content decisions. Svendsen went as far as stating that he would actively disregard the knowledge that a certain type of article would be poorly read and go ahead regardless. *"When I first reflect over it, I write articles I know will go badly as I feel that they*

are important to people to know. For me it's (the number of readers) not that important." Slethei described how *"we follow up all important cases, we have a democratic responsibility to do so,"* yet finished his sentence by explaining *"but if we see that something (article type) barely gets read, we will instead spend our time on more important things that can lead to sales (subscriptions), so that more people read the news."* This is an unsurprising viewpoint when considered alongside the findings of Lee and Tandoc Jr.'s study mentioned in 2.2, that story placement, topic selection and performance evaluation have been revealed to be impacted by online audience feedback.

Håland displayed the opinion that instead of simply prioritizing genres that the journalist know will be "well read," the knowledge and insight that certain genres are less popular can improve journalism and inspire creative new ways of thinking. *"If you look at sports journalism in the media now, you can see that it isn't just reports like it was before, now journalists are thinking differently and searching for the stories. It asks a bit more of you, but you get more back for your effort."*

4.3 In what way does datafication impact the journalist's democratic function as specified in V.V.P point 1?

All three journalists showed zero hesitation when the theme of the autonomy-popularity binary was discussed, especially in relation to their ability to perform their democratic mission as specified in Vær Varsom Plakaten, specifically point 1. Hålands view that *"my main focus is the job we have to do, and the democratic mission we have,"* was one that was echoed by both Svendsen and Slethei. However, Slethei did admit to there being a debate, and alluded to the autonomy-popularity binary being present due to the metrics provided by datafication. *"That is the conflict, and something that is discussed not only here, but probably the entire group (Amedia) right now. But the most important thing for me is still my democratic responsibility."*

Like Slethei, Svendsen also indicated the insights provided by datafication as making the question of the autonomy-popularity binary more challenging and focus-worthy, and as such potentially able to impact a journalist's democratic mission. *"I put most emphasis on the value a story has for our readers and not the potential reader numbers, however I know I could*

probably be better at balancing it, and thinking what I can say to reach more (readers).” The fact that he reflects on being “better” in terms of reader numbers suggests a substantiation of the Editorial office processes theory presented in 2.3, that the structure that Amedias datafication focus has created, has impacted how the journalists think and subsequently work.

Despite this, the overarching theme of the three interviews was distinct and clear on this subject, they considered their democratic mission to trump all other influences to their work, including datafication and metrics. Therefore, although they concede ways that it does affect how they work, such as news selection and production shown in 4.1 and 4.2, they have an awareness of not allowing that effect to impact their ability to perform their democratic function. *“We mustn’t forget our democratic function, it’s a balancing act. We know that readers often want the simple stuff, but I believe we must be careful that the data doesn’t take over completely,”* said Svendsen towards the end of our discussion. One could argue that this view is to be expected when considered alongside the theory from 2.4 on the incongruity between how journalists claim that they use metrics and how they are in fact influenced theorized to be attributed to the journalistic struggle to balance the use of metrics with professional norms. This will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

4.4 To what extent has datafication changed the classic news criteria?

Håland could explain that she believed that *“it should still be the classic news criteria that form the foundation of what we do,”* whilst synchronously expressing her fears that datafication had the potential to in fact alter said news criteria, *“I am afraid that if we only went off what was best read, what would we turn into?”* These fears reverberate MacGregors conclusion presented in 2.4, that journalism cannot be an uncritical hunt for numbers, news values must be maintained.

Contrarily, Slethei believed datafication has already changed the classic news criteria. *“It has been changed, datafication is a tool that helps journalists see what actually works.”* When asked to expand on this he explained that the data allowed journalists to move from theory to what he called fact, and that he felt it was comforting to be able to *“actually know 100 percent whether the theory works on not by looking at data.”* Svendsen displayed an

analogous attitude, *“We get the data concrete every single day, which means we can adjust how we work every day. Therefore, I think it (datafication) impacts on a subconscious level no matter what.”* It can be reasonable to argue that these views suggest that the autonomy-popularity binary mentioned in 2.5, is present at Gjesdalbuen. To what extent, and in what way will be discussed in the following section.

5 Discussion

This chapter begins by restating the research question of study, namely, “how does Amedias datafication prioritization impact the work Gjesdalbuens journalists do?” From there the main findings of the study are presented and practical implications explained, by comparing them to the theories and previous research presented in chapter two. Subsequently, alternative explanations for the findings are presented by discussing different perspectives and theories of the theme of datafication before limitations of the study are discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research are offered before a conclusion is presented in chapter 6.

One of the major findings of the study is the contrast between the journalist’s personal view of their autonomy on news selection, compared to the answers they provided on how datafication and metrics in fact impact how they go about their work. All three journalists considered themselves to have a high degree of autonomy, yet synchronously admitted to datafication impacting time spent on cases, what cases receive follow up stories, and what angle to take for different genres of cases.

When considered in relation to Lee and Tendoc Jr’s findings that data and metrics affect story placement, topic selection and performance evaluation this is unsurprising. Additionally, this also appears to justify Vu’s theory from his 2014 study where editors struggled to admit that metrics affected their decision-making due to the journalistic pride of remaining autonomous. It can be argued that the results of this study build on Vu’s and displays that journalists also struggle with dilemma.

It can be deemed reasonable from the journalists answers that self-perception of their journalistic integrity was of high importance to them. This was particularly evident when

discussing themes of upholding their democratic mission. Sjøvaag findings from chapter 2 that as medias revenue drops, so increases the chance of media outlets moving towards more populist content can be used as reasoning for why the journalist's self-perception of autonomy and actual actions, can be said to display a mismatch.

Slethei discussed how more time is spent on “*things that can lead to sales (subscriptions)*,” which as explained in chapter 2.1 is essential as 62% of advert revenue disappeared from the Norwegian newspaper market between 2005 and 2019, and digital adverts cannot cover this loss. Although the journalists consider themselves autonomous actors, the theory presented in 2.3 suggests that structural environment affects a journalist's autonomy. The theory also displays that individual' professional norms, interaction patterns and corresponding factors must be understood to comprehend why new selection is as it is. Therefore, one can theorize that the datafication focus implanted by the Amedia group will have created a structure at Gjesdalbuen, which will likely have shaped and formed professional norms and journalistic practices at the paper. This, combined with the fact that the journalists understand that they are reliant on subscription sales to maintain solvency and be able to continue to perform the democratic function they place such high value on, suggests that they will gravitate towards more populist content.

This gravitation can even be said to be happening at the subconscious level alluded to by Svendsen in 4.4. This gravitation will manifest towards Gjesdalbuens journalists' choice of story placement, topic selection and evaluation of performance, Lee and Tendoc's three facets found to be impacted by datafication and metrics, becoming impacted by the newspapers structure, which can be said to be impacted by datafication, particularly audience feedback. This can be extrapolated further to suggest that Vu's proposal that a separate level for the audience is needed for Schoemakers hierarchy of influences model is a valid one, as despite Gjesdalbuens journalists believing that they have high degrees of autonomy, they also admit to how and what they produce being affected by information about their audience, specifically the number of readers.

It is however prudent to remember that Lowrey and Woo's findings from their 2010 study into the ways news organizations responded to the fiscal uncertainty (as also mentioned by Sjøvaag) found that journalists' attention towards audience information did increase but that it was not powerfully impacting decisions about content. This suggests a lesser influence of the

audience on the hierarchy of influences model and goes against Sjøvvags view that decreased revenue leads to increased populist content. If one places emphasis on the results of Lowery and Woo's study whilst analyzing the data from Gjesdalbuens journalists it is entirely possible and reasonable to deduce that although they use datafication and track audience metrics actively, it is still classic news criteria, and a focus on what the reader needs, not wants, that impacts the content produced for their readers.

The second major finding of this study is that it can be argued that although datafication can be said to affect several facets of Gjesdalbuens journalists how they work, such as news selection and production, there is not sufficient evidence to say that it changes the very essence of their work, specifically their ability to perform their democratic mission as defined by Sjøvaag in 2.1. As stated in 2.1, it is not the fact that this study shows the work that Gjesdalbuens journalists is impacted by datafication that is interesting, but to what extent. To deem to that extent one can discuss the findings of the study as related to sub questions three and four.

As analyzed in 4.3, although the journalists divulge ways that datafication does affect how they work (examples given in 4.1 and 4.2), they have a strong focus on not allowing this to impact their ability to perform their democratic function. This suggests that Gjesdalbuens journalists, despite the increased use of metrics still have the traditional journalistic resistance towards audience feedback, for fear of compromising their own autonomy and reducing their journalistic standards mentioned in 2.5. Svendsen mentions that he will write articles he knows will be poorly read, whilst Slethei and Håland mention news selection based on what they deem "*important*" for their readers, or a "*good new story*." Despite this, the journalists discuss several benefits of the datafication and the metrics, such as Håland saying that they "*learn to understand what people will read*." The fact that they learn this, suggests that Gjesdalbuens journalists must therefore be at the very least monitoring the metrics and data that datafication produces, as several studies shown in chapter two also indicated that journalists do. With that notion in mind, it indicates that autonomy-popularity from 2.5 does exist at Gjesdalbuen and is something that the journalists consider. As their answers indicate, they place a higher focus on the democratic function, which it is reasonable to state falls into the autonomy side of the binary. This suggests that although they have knowledge of what articles are popular, it is not the factor influences their news selection the most.

One can argue that this is an idealistic interpretation of the qualitative data from this study, and that a more logical and realistic interpretation could be deemed from considering the validity of their answers in accordance with the theory from previous studies on the theme. Vu's theory of the journalistic pride of remaining autonomous along with Welbers et al. 2016, Lee and Tendoc's 2017 and Macgregors 2007 study from 2.4 indicate that more extensive research is required to be able to draw more concrete conclusions and hypothesis.

When combined with Slethei's opinion that datafication has already changed the classic news criteria, and Svendsen's view on its impact on the subconscious of Gjesdalbuens journalist, the limitations of this study come to light. Given more time and extensive resources, the combining of the qualitative interviews along with field observation and even quantitative surveys of a greater sample size of Amedia journalists would potentially yield more reliable and valid results, and results which could be more confidently generalized.

The challenge for future researchers is to take a step beyond the self-reports of journalistic perception and behavior shown in the data of this study and attempt to produce quantitative data that can illuminate a more precise representation of the relationship between datafication and its impact on journalists.

6 Conclusion

The journalists in the study articulated a high degree of autonomy in case selection, primarily relying on conventional techniques and journalistic instincts in lieu of data or metrics. However, when datafication was brought up, the journalists acknowledged the participatory role that data played the planning phase of a case, providing insights into readers' partialities and affecting their own decision-making to some degree. The analysis highlights the contrast between the journalists' perception of autonomy and the actual impact of datafication on their work. They exhibited a vigilant attitude to the over-reliance on metrics, stressing their obligation to their democratic function as journalists.

The journalists recognized the hypothetical influence of datafication on their autonomy and capability to execute their democratic mission but contended that their primary focus

remained on the democratic responsibility of their profession. They expressed opposition to permitting data to overshadow judgment in the selection and production of news content. While datafication influenced their work in several areas, their dedication to their democratic function, which can be said to be the very crux and core of their work, was evident.

The journalists held different views on the extent to which datafication changed the classic news criteria. Some believed that datafication altered the criteria by providing insights into what works, while others emphasized the importance of maintaining traditional news values and avoiding an uncritical pursuit of numbers.

The study also explores the structure that datafication may produce, which as shown by the theory and findings from previous research, along with data from this study has the potential influence the journalists' decision-making and their response to the financial challenges faced by the media industry.

Overall, while datafication plays a role in shaping both how the journalists' work, specifically news selection, and prioritization of time and resources, and to some extent what they produce, there is evidence to suggest that their commitment to their democratic function remains the significant influence. Therefore, it can be said that the very purpose and overall mission of their work has not been changed by datafication. The study's findings provide insights into the complex interplay between datafication, journalistic autonomy, and the preservation of traditional news values, an interplay that is of such a nuanced character, that it requires more extensive future research.

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Attachments

Attachment 1 - Interview guide

1. Introduction
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Could you briefly introduce yourself and your role at Gjesdalbuens newspaper?• How long have you worked at the paper?
2. Case selection
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do you choose cases?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In what way does data play a role in case selection?
3. Datafication at Gjesdalbuen?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How is data used in a typical day's work?• How has datafication prioritization impacted the way you approach your reporting?
4. Motivation and Focus
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To what extent the use of data impact your day-to-day motivation?• How does it impact how you approach different case types?• What weighs heaviest, journalist's democratic responsibility as outlined in V.V.P punkt 1, or potential number of readers?
5. Future of Datafication Prioritization
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is datafication changing classic news criteria? How?• How do you see the role of datafication in journalism evolving in the coming years?• How do you think datafication will have an impact on Gjesdalbuens readers moving forward?
6. Conclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there anything else you would like to add about the impact of datafication prioritization on the work of journalists and readers at Gjesdalbuen?• Are there any recommendations you would like to make for improving the use of datafication at Gjesdalbuen? What are they?• Thank you for your time and insights.

Attachment 2 – Informants

Kirsten Håland: frontpage-chief & journalist Gjesdalbuen. Interviewed in person at Gjesdalbuen 12. April 2023. 004745867790

Dag Atle Svendsen: journalist Gjesdalbuen. Interviewed in person at Gjesdalbuen 30. march 2023. 004791394207

Sindre Slethei: journalist Gjesdalbuen. Interviewed in person at Gjesdalbuen 27. march 2023. 004748260114.