

# We're lucky to have them: Exploring the audience perspective on volunteer journalism

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## Abstract

Volunteer Journalism (VJ) refers to journalism produced by organized community groups of non-professionals. It is distinct from traditional and citizen journalism, and its audience perspectives remain underexplored. This study examines how audiences of six VJ outlets engage with and perceive VJ based on 21 in-depth interviews conducted across Denmark, India, and the United States. Based on a thematic qualitative data analysis, the results reveal that participants perceive VJ as a unique type of journalism characterized by shared ownership, personal connections, and freedom from commercial pressures, providing functional, emotional, symbolic, and economic value. This research contributes to the broader understanding of journalism by highlighting how VJ meets hyper-local informational needs and provides an authentic, collaborative alternative to conventional journalism. The study's implications underscore the potential of VJ to supplement local

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journalism amidst the ongoing challenges faced by traditional media. However, challenges such as sustainability and reliance on volunteerism warrant further exploration. These findings enrich theoretical and practical discussions on the evolving roles of journalism in serving diverse audience needs.

### Keywords

local journalism, volunteer journalism, online video research interviews (OVRI), qualitative, audience studies

## Introduction

Covering events and topics on a tiny geographic scale is often referred to as hyperlocal journalism (Harte et al., 2019; Hess and Waller, 2019). When citizens are in charge of collecting, reporting, and disseminating news rather than professional journalists, it is known as citizen journalism (Thorsen, 2020). The intersection of these approaches yields hyperlocal citizen journalism. In a recent article, Mathews et al. (2024) describe a specific type of hyperlocal citizen journalism called volunteer journalism. The concept of volunteer journalism (VJ) is described as the long-term “consistent, uncompensated contribution of time and collaborative efforts by groups of individuals” within a well-structured organization “dedicated to creating, curating, and circulating news, with the primary aim of enriching the community” (Mathews et al., 2024: p. 1). The introduction of VJ as a unique term is justified by its distinct attributes and potential to enhance community life, especially as local news ecosystems face decline (Abernathy, 2020). VJ outlets provide community service announcements, events, and local developments. They can also cover community business, political, and infrastructural developments. VJ outlets carry advertisements for local businesses and associations, and they also include interviews with local citizens or newcomers to the area, reports about recent local developments, stories about local history, or the sale of a home down the street. Examples of VJ include Denmark’s HornePosten (see Figure 1), a Danish community magazine in print since 1973, India’s Palus News Express (See Figure 2), and the Pittsfield Post (See Figure 3) in the rural U.S. Midwest. The volunteers behind the outlets do not produce all the content themselves; they also collect reports of local interest from various other sources, like the local church, school, and local associations and initiatives. The outlets vary in publication frequency and form. Some are published almost daily, others bi-weekly, and some are published six times yearly. Some are printed leaflets; others are digital or a combination.

Mathews et al. (2024) argue that VJ is a unique sub-category of journalism and has been understudied. As a logical consequence, the audience’s experience of VJ is also poorly described. Thus, this study aims to fill this research gap by asking the following research question: *How do audiences use and perceive volunteer journalism?*

This study examines examples from different countries and regions to provide the first step in understanding the audience’s use of and perspective on VJ. The results exhibit that



**Figure 1.** HornePosten.

VJ offers audiences a distinct and valued alternative to traditional journalism, driven by shared ownership, personal connections, and the absence of commercial pressures. An important implication of this study concerns the challenge of news deserts—communities with limited access to professional local journalism (Abernathy, 2020). The findings



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Top News

## भिलवडी शिक्षण संस्थेच्या अध्यक्षपदी विश्वास चितळे; उपाध्यक्षपदी डॉ.बाळासाहेब चोपडे

**भिलवडी प्रतिनिधी :**



भिलवडी शिक्षण संस्थेचे सर्व संचालक मंडळ

संचालक जयंत केळकर यांनी सर्व संचालकांनी संस्थेच्या सर्वांगीण विकासात वेळेसह विविध उपक्रमात योगदान देण्याचे आवाहन केले. सर्व संचालकांनी प्रतिवर्षी पंचवीस हजाराची देणगी संस्थेला देण्याचे सर्वानुमते ठरले.सहसचिव के. डी.पाटील यांनी सूत्रसंचालन केले.माजी पदाधिकाऱ्यांच्या हस्ते नूतन संचालकांचा अभिनंदन पर सत्कार करण्यात आला.

भिलवडी शिक्षण संस्थेमधील सर्व शाखांमधील सेवकांच्या वतीने नूतन पदाधिकाऱ्यांचा अभिनंदनपर सत्कार करण्यात आला.दरजेदार शिक्षणातून उत्तम विद्यार्थी घडविणे हेच भिलवडी शिक्षण संस्थेचे ध्येय असून आम्ही सर्व पदाधिकारी सामाजिक बांधिलकी म्हणून सेवाभावी वृत्तीने कार्यरत राहू असे प्रतिपादन अध्यक्ष विश्वास चितळे यांनी आपल्या मनोगतातून व्यक्त केले.सेकंडरी स्कूल अँड ज्युनिअर कॉलेज भिलवडीचे मुख्याध्यापक संजय मोरे यांनी सर्व नूतन पदाधिकाऱ्यांचे अभिनंदन करीत भावी वाटचालीस शुभेच्छा दिल्या.

प्रास्ताविक व स्वागत प्राचार्य डॉ.दीपक देशपांडे यांनी केले.सूत्रसंचालन शरद जाधव यांनी केले.आभार सुकुमार किणीकर यांनी मानले.

यावेळी भिलवडी शिक्षण संस्थेचे सचिव मानसिंग हाके,सहसचिव के. डी.पाटील,प्रा.मनिषा पाटील,प्रा.महेश पाटील,विजय तेली,विद्या टोणपे,स्मिता माने,सुचेता कुलकर्णी, तुषार पवार आदींसह सर्व शिक्षक,शिक्षकेत्तर सेवक उपस्थित होते.

**भिलवडी:**  
 अमृतमोहोत्सवी भिलवडी शिक्षण संस्थेच्या नूतन पदाधिकाऱ्यांची नुकतीच बिनविरोध निवड झाली.अध्यक्षपदी विश्वास परशुराम चितळे यांची तर उपाध्यक्षपदी डॉ.बाळासाहेब शामराव चोपडे यांची निवड करण्यात आली.

निवडणूक निर्णय अधिकारी म्हणून संस्था सचिव मानसिंग हाके यांनी कामकाज पहिलेले.

संस्थेचे विश्वस्त जे.बी.चौगुले यांच्या अध्यक्षतेखाली सर्व पदाधिकाऱ्यांची बैठक संपन्न झाली.यावेळी नूतन पदाधिकाऱ्यांना पद व गोपनियतेची शपथ देण्यात आली. माजी पदाधिकाऱ्यांनी नूतन पदाधिकाऱ्यांकडे कार्यभार सुफुर्द केला.

नूतन संचालक पुढीलप्रमाणे,यशवंत आनंदराव पाटील,धनंजय सुभाष पाटील,सौ.लीना गिरीश चितळे,डॉ. रविंद्र श्यामराव वाळवेकर,अजय श्रीपाल चौगुले,सदाशिव नामदेव तावदर,मुकुंद चिंतामणी जोग,महावीर आप्पा वठारे,संभाजी श्रीपती सूर्यवंशी,चंद्रकांत बाबुराव पाटील.विश्वस्त पदी गिरीश दत्तात्रय चितळे,अशोक धोंडी चौगुले, डॉ.सुहास यशवंत जोशी यांची निवड करण्यात आली.माजी




Figure 2. Palus News Express.

# PITTSFIELD POST

A FREE NEWSLETTER BY COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS

"Our nation owes a debt to our fallen heroes that we can never fully repay." - Barack Obama May 22, 2024

## Victory Workers 4-H Club and the Dowboro Farmstead



Our club started in 1942 with leader Ruth Kimball teaching farm-to-table experiences – gardening and food preservation. Then along came other projects like crafts, woodworking, basketmaking, sewing, demonstrations, public speaking and photography, to name a few. Through the years hundreds of members ages 8 to 18 enjoyed "Making the Best Better." Community service projects hours were in the hundreds, as were the screened volunteer hours spent teaching the members. Members would complete projects and exhibit them at the Hopkinton State Fair in what is now known as the Ruth Kimball Exhibit Hall.

About 30 years ago the Victory Workers implemented the state's Cloverbud program, allowing ages 5 -7 to receive an introduction to 4-H, teaching the young members the importance of community service, citizenship, safety, and to be creative. Each of these members were allowed to exhibit 3 projects a year into the exhibit hall. Since then 476 children have participated in the program.


In 2005 Tom Locke of Barnstead introduced the Farm to Table experience all over again, as many families had stopped raising their own animals and plants. Our club once again took notice and added additional garden classes and animal science projects at club level. We added outings at Barnstead's "Gathering on the Green", Tractor Supply, Duane's Family Farm, Barnstead Farm Day, and Belknap County Day to our already busy outings at Pittsfield Old Home Day, Epsom Memorial Day observance, Pittsfield's Balloon Rally and the Hopkinton Fair.

In 2015 members started a Farm to Table plan which would include a farmstand to sell their produce. This would allow members to grow their own veggies, donate to the local food pantries FRESH vegetables and then can, pickle, and dry for future use. Members learned to write grants to expand their learning by adding hydroponics. Members would continue to keep records of their projects and submit for County judging. Records then could be turned into Resumes as members approached senior year of school and college.

-Erica Hutson, Victory Workers 4-H **Story will continue with the June 5 edition**

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Do you have a message for the graduates? Then start writing and send it in! We will collect messages through May 30. Messages may be emailed to: [pittsfieldnews@pnhcc.org](mailto:pittsfieldnews@pnhcc.org) or mailed to Pittsfield Post, Post Office Box 253, Pittsfield, NH 03263.



**Memorial Day  
Ceremony**

**Dustin Park  
1pm Sunday  
May 26**

Figure 3. Pittsfield Post.

suggest that, under conditions of strong community cohesion and sustained volunteer commitment, VJ can partially mitigate the effects of news desertification. While not a replacement for professional journalism, VJ offers a trust-driven, community-based supplement where traditional outlets have withdrawn.

## Literature review

### *Differentiating volunteer journalism from related concepts*

Loosen et al. (2020) identify and categorize 166 X journalisms to capture the field's diversity and complexity, contextualize its constant evolution, and identify patterns of interrelation. The article does not mention VJ, likely because it focuses on mapping terms that are already gaining significant academic traction. Mathews et al. (2024) establish VJ as a distinct concept characterized by the uncompensated, sustained contributions of individuals within organizations dedicated to news and information dissemination, aiming to enrich community life. Unlike other forms of unpaid journalism, volunteer journalism focuses on organizational commitment, informational rather than persuasive content, and service to the broader community.

VJ is related to hyper-local citizen journalism (Hess and Waller, 2019; Kim and Lowrey, 2015; Loosen et al., 2020; Thorsen, 2020), sometimes called community citizen journalism (Tse, 2024). Hyper-local citizen journalism gained popularity with the emergence of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, and, therefore, it is typically distributed online. According to Thorsen (2020), "...what they have in common is a focus on citizens reporting on issues in their immediate locality or community" (p. 47-48). Thorsen (2020) describes (hyper-local) citizen journalism in two primary forms. The first is eyewitness and spontaneous journalism, where individuals document events, often as bystanders or victims, sharing their immediate observations, thus acting as "accidental journalists" (Zeng et al., 2019). The second form is alternative and activist journalism, where citizen journalists adopt a more purposeful approach, often aligning with social or political causes to challenge dominant narratives and bring attention to underreported issues; thus, it is used as a means of advocacy and social change (Robinson and DeShano, 2011). In connection with these advocacy motivations, there are cases of continuous contributions from citizen journalists (Mapudzi and Osunkunle, 2017). However, by and large, hyperlocal citizen journalism differs from VJ in the absence of long-term commitments of volunteers, and many VJ outlets have a history that predates the Internet and Web technologies (Nah et al., 2024). Another point of difference is that VJ can be characterized as a well-structured group effort, as (sometimes large) groups of volunteers divide the tasks between them and put some in charge of collecting content, editing, printing, contacting commercial partners, and others in charge of distribution. The last thing that differentiates VJ from hyperlocal community journalism is that volunteer journalists' altruistic motivation sets VJ apart. Volunteer journalists prioritize community enrichment over personal gain, and thus, volunteer journalists are driven by selfless motives, including a commitment to serve their communities and derive personal satisfaction from contributing to the public good without seeking compensation (Mathews et al., 2024).

While this study examines VJ journalism as a distinct subcategory, it recognizes foundational work on alternative journalism (Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Forde, 2011). Like alternative journalism, VJ shares a community orientation and departure from mainstream norms, but is differentiated by its sustained, organized, and non-adversarial nature, emphasizing service over critique.

To further clarify how VJ operates in practice, it is helpful to illustrate the roles undertaken by volunteer journalists. Unlike citizen journalists who contribute spontaneously or individually, volunteer journalists typically work in teams, often dividing responsibilities across editorial, production, and distribution functions. For example, in outlets such as *HornePosten*, some volunteers write or edit stories, while others manage layout, liaise with advertisers, or oversee distribution. The organizational structure and sustained workflow distinguish VJ from ad hoc or activist forms of citizen journalism, and illustrate its semi-institutional character rooted in long-term community service.

### *The audience's perspective*

It has been established within journalism studies that media effects and perceptions of these effects are not the same (McLeod et al., 2017). Therefore, it is essential to comprehend media formats in terms of both their effect and how the audience perceives them (Lecheler, 2020). This has been called the audience turn in journalism studies (Meijer, 2020). While there, to our knowledge, is no research on how audiences perceive VJ specifically, there is some research on how audiences perceive related types of journalism, that is, hyperlocal, community, and citizen journalism, and this literature will be reviewed below.

Audience research on hyperlocal citizen journalism indicates that these users are both consumers and active participants, contributing stories, comments, and insights that strengthen the local news ecosystem (Metzgar et al., 2011). This interactive role fosters a sense of community ownership over news content, distinguishing hyperlocal news audiences from those of mainstream media (Hess and Waller, 2019). Users of hyperlocal journalism are motivated by a desire for information directly impacting their lives, valuing content that addresses local concerns often neglected by larger media outlets (Radcliffe, 2015). This relevance to their immediate environment nurtures greater trust, as users perceive hyperlocal journalism to be more authentic and responsive to community needs (Fenton, 2010). Tse, 2024 further notes that users of hyperlocal platforms prefer positive or constructive reporting, which aligns with the community-oriented values of citizen journalism. Additionally, studies show that engagement with hyperlocal citizen journalism extends beyond information consumption; users often translate news engagement into civic actions, from participating in local events to engaging in policy discussions (Kaufhold et al., 2010). This pattern highlights the reciprocal relationship between hyperlocal journalism and its users, wherein the journalism creates a stronger civic identity and enhances local social ties, ultimately reinforcing community cohesion and collective action.

### *Four categories of audience's wants and needs: Functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic*

In a recent article on local journalism, the authors divide the audience's wants and needs into four categories: functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic (Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024). In the following analysis, we draw inspiration from these categories, which we will briefly describe. The functional value of traditional

local journalism includes practical information, like weather forecasts, advertisements, and community-related updates. Symbolic value refers to the value of experiencing local media's ability to establish and disseminate norms, myths, and traditions. The media shapes social reality by producing and distributing symbolic content to broad audiences. Local journalism can act as the symbolic hub of the community by informing the community about itself and establishing its standards and norms (e.g. [Abernathy, 2020](#)). Audiences can also experience emotional benefits from local journalism, including participation and interactive self-expression, which may make audiences feel less alone and prouder ([Mathews, 2020](#)). Because traditional local journalists have social capital in the form of local expertise and a shared identity with the audience, local journalism is distinguished by a deeply entrenched closeness between the local media outlet and the audience. Because of their close relationship, traditional local journalists serve as community advocates rather than watchdogs ([Moon and Lawrence, 2023](#)). Economic value can be described as the fact that when local media promotes local events, attractions, traditions, and culture, it can have a favorable economic impact on audiences. Additionally, it can boost the local economy by enticing residents to participate and maintain open businesses.

While the present study focuses on audience perceptions of VJ, it is essential to acknowledge ongoing debates about the structural vulnerabilities of this type of journalism. Existing concerns include long-term sustainability, the risk of misinformation, the absence of standardized editorial oversight, and varying levels of professional rigor ([Forde, 2011](#); [Hanitzsch et al., 2018](#)). These challenges not only shape the viability of VJ as a model but also influence how audiences engage with and interpret its content. Although these aspects are not the primary focus here, they are conceptually relevant and are revisited in the results section and conclusion.

The audience's perception of VJ's worth is based on its functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic values taken together. Thus, the analysis will deal with how these values materialize regarding VJ.

The audience's wants and needs from VJ can be further contextualized through the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory, which posits that media users actively select media types to satisfy specific needs ([Blumler and Katz, 1974](#)). Applying U&G to VJ lets us understand how its functional, symbolic, emotional, and economic values align with the audience's motivations. VJ audiences are likely seeking highly localized, relevant news that creates a sense of belonging and addresses community-specific concerns—needs increasingly unmet by traditional media ([Radcliffe, 2015](#); [Swart et al., 2022](#)). Through the lens of U&G, VJ provides unique gratifications by delivering accessible and trustworthy news that supports communal identity and engagement. This theoretical foundation helps to interpret VJ's appeal, emphasizing how audiences use it to stay informed, reinforce local bonds, and participate in a shared community narrative.

In addition to usage motivations, perceptions of credibility and trust are essential for understanding audience relationships with VJ. Research on journalism credibility emphasizes the importance of transparency, responsiveness, and perceived independence in shaping audience trust ([Fenton, 2010](#); [Hanitzsch et al., 2018](#)). These

dimensions are especially relevant for volunteer journalism, where professional norms and institutional authority are limited. The perceived sincerity, accessibility, and local embeddedness of VJ outlets may serve as alternative markers of credibility that warrant closer attention.

## Method

### Case

This is a case study with several rural VJ outlets (four from Denmark, one from North America, and one from India). The three countries are very different, they differ in size as the US and India have large populations, and Denmark has only approximately six million inhabitants. Furthermore, they belong to different media systems, such as the Democratic Corporatist Model (Denmark) and the Liberal Model (USA) (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), and India shares characteristics with the Polarized Pluralist model. However, India has characteristics beyond the scope of Hallin and Mancini's original models.

We interviewed 21 audience members from six different VJ outlets: India's Palus News Express, Denmark's HornePosten, Udby Times, Hagedsted Nyt, and Mårslet Avis, and The United States' Pittsfield Post, see [Table 1](#) (further details on each outlet can be found in the [Supplemental Material](#)). The selected VJ outlets—four from Denmark, one from India, and one from the United States—were chosen to reflect geographic, cultural, and systemic diversity, while all meeting the core definitional criteria of volunteer journalism: sustained, uncompensated, and organized community-based news production. These outlets represent established examples of VJ with varying formats (print, digital, mixed), publication frequencies, and audience reach, allowing for the examination of audience perceptions across different media systems and socio-political contexts. The outlets all fit the definition of VJ because they are maintained by a dedicated team of volunteers who ensure regular publication. They emphasize informative content relevant to the community rather than persuasive or advocacy-based journalism, and they prioritize broad community coverage, highlighting the commitment to enriching the community, consistent with VJ's purpose of community service.

### Sampling and recruitment

The volunteer journalists at these organizations provided us with contact information for VJ audiences, that is, potential participants, or made contact on behalf of the researcher. Thus, a snowball sampling strategy (Smulowitz, 2017) was employed. The advantages of this sampling approach were that it allowed us entry into otherwise inaccessible participants, provided cost-efficiency as participants were not offered incentives, and aided trust and rapport building between the researcher and participants, as a familiar and trusted person made referrals. On the other hand, snowball sampling also has disadvantages, the first being the potential sampling bias. In our case, the sample may not represent the broader population because it relies on the social networks of initial participants, that is, producers and editors of VJ outlets, which can lead to homogeneous groups and skewed

**Table 1.** Overview of participants.

|               |                     |  |
|---------------|---------------------|--|
| India         | Palus News Express  | Participant 1, female, early adulthood (20-39)<br>Participant 2, male, middle adulthood (40-59)<br>Participant 3, male, older age (60+)<br>Participant 4, male, older age<br>Participant 5, female, early adulthood<br>Participant 6, male, middle adulthood<br>Participant 7, male, early adulthood |
| Denmark       | Horneposten         | Participant 1, female, older age<br>Participant 2, male, older age   |
|               | Udby times          | Participant 1, female, early adulthood<br>Participant 2, male, older   |
|               | Hagedstedt Nyt      | Participant 1, female, older   |
|               | Mårslet Avis        | Participant 1, male, older<br>Participant 2, female, middle adulthood  |
| North America | The pittsfield post | Participant 1, female, middle adulthood<br>Participant 2, female, middle adulthood<br>Participant 3, female, older age<br>Participant 4, male, older age<br>Participant 5, female, middle adulthood<br>Participant 6, female, middle adulthood<br>Participant 7, male, middle adulthood              |

data. For instance, there might be a positivity bias, as the producers and editors might have suggested readers with a positive attitude to their outlet. Furthermore, social desirability bias can be in play, as individuals might give responses that align with the views of the person who recommended they participate in the interview.

In addition to potential positivity and social desirability bias, the sampling strategy may have resulted in participants already familiar with or favorably disposed toward VJ outlets. As such, the sample may underrepresent more critical or disengaged perspectives. This limitation is inherent in recruiting through VJ platforms and should be considered when interpreting the findings, particularly regarding the audience's limited emphasis on concerns such as editorial oversight or misinformation risks.

To achieve a cross-country perspective on VJ, we interviewed participants from all three countries, aiming at maximum variation sampling to underline that VJ is a universal phenomenon being identified in very different contexts. As such, including three countries was chosen to provide a broader scope rather than perform a comparative study. This approach allows for examining similarities even though VJ operates within different environments. For an overview of the interviews, see [Table 1](#). The number of interviews per outlet varies due to the practical circumstances of recruitment, for example, difficulties in re-contacting the participants of study 1 (producers and editors of VJ).

Additionally, we acknowledge that some participants are both consumers and contributors to VJ outlets. This overlap reflects the participatory nature of VJ itself, where

audience boundaries are fluid and engagement often involves active collaboration. While this study is framed from the audience perspective, we interpret “audience” broadly to include those who consume and occasionally contribute to the outlet, consistent with research on participatory journalism (e.g., Metzgar et al., 2011; Swart et al., 2022). Of the 21 participants, six reported occasional contributions to the VJ outlet (e.g., writing short pieces or assisting with distribution), though they primarily identified as readers or audience members. No participants were part of the groups of volunteer journalists producing or editing.

### *Data collection*

Between December 2023 and February 2024, individual, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were performed via Zoom and Teams, two video conferencing tools (see [Supplemental Material](#) for interview guide). The interviews were conducted using the Online Video Research Interview (OVRI) approach (Heiselberg and Stepińska, 2022). All interviews were audio-visually recorded with consent from the participants and lasted 45-60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed using AI tools, Amberscript and Otter.ai. Transcripts were verified and corrected by the researcher who had conducted the interview. All procedures used to acquire data comply with data protection requirements (GDPR) at The University of Southern Denmark.

### *Data analysis*

This study adopts a qualitative data analysis approach using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with coding conducted manually and iteratively to allow both theoretical and emergent insights to develop. The first author conducted data analysis. The analysis combined both a priori categories—derived from the functional, emotional, symbolic, and economic value framework—and inductive, emergent themes identified during the coding process. The analysis integrates constant comparison methods. To assist the process of writing up the qualitative data analysis, a ChatGPT4 pre-developed customized GPT was used (See [Appendix](#) for the prompt used). All data was anonymized to ensure compliance with ethical and data protection standards (Heiselberg & Hartley, in review). Hereafter, the first author uploaded the coding, one code at a time, to the customized GPT. The GPT was prompted to analyze the data descriptively and provide suggestions on exemplary quotes to illustrate the analytical point. The first author critically assessed, modified, and added to the suggested descriptive analysis texts and quotations. Hereafter, the first author conducted a manual contextualization, interpretation, and links to prior research and theory to ensure the integrity and depth of the analysis. This process involved cross-referencing the emerging themes with established literature to validate the interpretations and provide a robust analytical framework. In sum, interpretation, contextualization, and theoretical framing were conducted exclusively by the first author. The ethical implications of using generative AI in qualitative research—particularly regarding data privacy, authorship, and analytical integrity—were considered, and the process adhered to the GDPR requirements and institutional ethical guidelines.

## Results

The thematic analysis revealed three key themes related to using VJ: shared ownership of news, personal connections, and the absence of commercial pressure. The following analysis examines these themes.

### Shared ownership of news

#### *Inclusiveness*

Participants across the three countries emphasized their role not just as passive consumers but as active contributors to the news ecosystem. The sense of shared ownership is reinforced by the outlets' openness to community submissions, which range from updates on local church activities, government officials, and school board minutes to reports from playground development initiatives and sports associations. Some participants also described having occasionally submitted content themselves. In such cases, their reflections on VJ included both their experiences as readers and their participatory engagement as contributors—an overlap that is characteristic of VJ's integrated audience-contributor dynamic. VJ outlets can integrate contributions from many different community members. When the ownership is shared, there is room for many sources, for instance, representing the activities of local groups like the "4H group" (Pittsfield Post 5), and even young contributors like a 12-year-old girl are encouraged and valued (Pittsfield Post 5). Volunteer journalists seem to provide an outlet where each person's contribution, each story, is given consideration.

Furthermore, VJ outlets create a sense of belonging and inclusivity, an emotional value, as illustrated by a newcomer's experience of being featured in the Udby Times. As a participant says, the acknowledgment of her and her partner and their child in Udby Times is more than just news; it is a validation of their place within the community, providing a sense of acceptance:

I live with a woman in a lesbian relationship, and we have a child. And it was nice for us with this presentation... It was also a way for people to see that we had moved to the village, and then I knew, like, if anyone had a problem with it. At least they already knew...it was tremendously nice. (Udby 1).

Feelings of belonging have also been described in the literature on local news [Mathews \(2020\)](#). Participants underline this point by stating that the VJ outlets make them feel less alone (Udby Times 2). This sense of belonging can occur due to a personal touch in the news pieces and information from fellow inhabitants in the community, which allows residents to see the volunteer journalist as neighbors ([Moon and Lawrence, 2023](#)) and, in some instances, even friends.

## *Encouragement of participatory culture*

As the outlets often carry a calendar of events, this also means that for many audiences, the VJ outlets have a long lifespan compared to traditional local journalism, as it is not thrown out after being read because it is used as a calendar of events:

JyskeVestkysten [a regional newspaper] you read once, and then it ends up as paper waste. But HornePosten has a longer lifespan, even a much longer ... (HornePosten 2)

This functional value of VJ is crucial to participants because it allows them to be part of events happening in their community. The longer lifespan is also linked to VJ not being published daily or several times daily, as in traditional journalism. Participants acknowledge this difference: “So it’s a paper that helps connect you with anything that’s going on in town within those 2 weeks.... So have people know what’s going on” (The Pittsfield Post 2). Even though VJ is not published daily or, for some, even monthly, they still have functional value and high relevance to audiences as they carry information and overviews of events most cannot access elsewhere. A Danish participant encapsulated that VJ informs community members about activities but encourages them to participate in local initiatives, such as playground improvement (Udby Times 1). As an American participant described: “... rallies the community around community events, it informs people about what’s happening in their community” (Pittsfield Post 1). VJ outlet’s coverage of activities and the encouragement to participate in local initiatives encourage a participatory culture, and as such, the outlet positions itself as a central platform for community engagement. The feeling of shared ownership occurs as participants see their contributions and actions reflected in the content.

The functional value of VJ is also evident in its role as a vital source of hyper-local information, such as historical accounts and safety information. However, where commercial local media often reuse existing information via press releases from state, county, and city offices, VJ outlets primarily get their information from local contributors, making it unique and highly relevant to the audience. Participants described how VJ outlets provide a platform for niche content, often overlooked by traditional journalism. For instance, participants mention a “local basketball game”, “event at school”, or “information about a downtown market”.

The outlets also function as a repository of local knowledge: “It could just be a description of some area out in the forest or a family that has moved to the U.S back in the days. My interest is often historical” (HornePosten 2). In these cases, VJ seems to have functional value as an outlet for distributing local knowledge. As such, they become an educational resource, and the audience seems to value the authenticity, passion, and unique perspectives that volunteer journalists offer, even if they lack formal journalistic training. Even though this is also present in traditional local journalism, it seems more pronounced in VJ, where detached objectivity is not sought. Furthermore, this ability to document hyper-local stories reflects the outlets’ symbolic value as custodians of community memory and culture. Beyond documenting events, the participatory element of VJ allows readers to shape the narrative of their community, underpinning shared ownership.

### *The collective good*

Another example of such relevance for the community is safety and public awareness content, which participants describe as a core functional value. Palus News Express, for instance, reported on the lack of taillights on farm tractors, which underscores the outlets' commitment to actionable and potentially life-saving information:

In the farms, there is total darkness and tractors don't have taillights, so what does Palus News Express do? It will do a story on why putting reflectors on tractors is important. They do it because this story will help save someone's life. (Palus Express 2)

This suggests that VJ outlets prioritize community well-being, reinforcing emotional bonds between outlet and audience. When VJ outlets prioritize the well-being of their audience, they demonstrate a commitment to the collective good. This makes the audience perceive the outlet as a partner rather than a detached information provider. This mutuality makes participants view themselves as stakeholders in the VJ outlet's mission, thus creating a shared sense of responsibility and ownership.

Like traditional commercial local journalism, the VJ outlets play an important role in nurturing traditions and a shared identity (Hess and Waller, 2019). This also leads participants across countries to note that the outlets contribute to inclusivity, that they have a "unifying effect" (Udby Times 1), and are seen as a beacon of local pride, as a Danish participant observes:

Well, it also advertises Hagedst. ...And you know the positions of the area. And you have something to unite about or something to be against. I think that makes a difference (Hagedst Nyt 1).

The symbolic value is also tied to the volunteer aspect of VJ. The call for volunteer work is not only about contributing to the content in the outlets but also about promoting an often decade-long collective responsibility in all types of volunteer work, which many small communities rely heavily on. As one participant suggests, these efforts ensure that "someone signs up for voluntary work. I think that is a common thread between us for the benefit of the community" (HornePosten 2). In that sense, the outlets nudge audiences to participate in the community in a way that other types of journalism do not.

### *Local distinctiveness*

VJ serves as a custodian of local identity, a role also noted in traditional local journalism (Mathews, 2020). VJ becomes a conveyor of local voice and identity. As an American participant remarks, "I think it keeps the tradition going in that I think that Pittsfield kind of likes to have its own identity, ...even though we live really close to Concord." (Pittsfield Post 1).

The experience of emotional value reinforces the sense of shared ownership, that is, when participants refer to feelings like (Pittsfield Post 4). Prior research has found that

emotional value is a fundamental aspect of local news (e.g. Heiselberg and Hopmann, 2024). This is also the case for VJ. When participants feel pride or view the outlet as a platform that amplifies local identity and promotes the community, there is a strong bond between the audience and VJs, contributing to the experience of shared ownership.

Participants valued VJ's constructive tone, which they saw as countering the negative portrayals typical of traditional media: "It's kind of the lens is always like the deficit and not like, what the town does have" (Pittsfield Post 1). This sentiment highlights how VJ focuses on the strengths and achievements of the community, actively working to construct a positive image.

### *Economic interdependence*

Regarding economic value, the participants underline that an economic relationship exists between local businesses as advertisers in the VJ outlet and the audience. The economic value is tied to the experience of shared ownership as participants describe a collaboration where local businesses, audiences, and VJ outlets mutually benefit. A participant noted, "I look to see if that company supports HornePosten. If they do, I support them too" (HornePosten 1). This reciprocal relationship highlights how VJ outlets bridge businesses and communities, creating local economic vitality. Participants also shared that VJ outlets introduce them to local businesses:

And then you might think, yes, they support the HornePosten, then we can use them. I found the painter we are using right now in Horne Posten. (HornePosten 1).

Such stories not only connect audiences to businesses but also encourage support for local entrepreneurs, contributing to the broader economic ecosystem. Thus, the dynamic illustrates how VJ creates a platform for news and a shared economic and social network, where all stakeholders—audiences, businesses, and the outlet—feel a sense of ownership in the community's shared success.

The analysis highlights six subthemes: shared ownership, inclusiveness, participatory culture, collective good, local distinctiveness, and economic interdependence. Shared ownership encourages community involvement, inclusiveness builds acceptance and solidarity, and participatory culture encourages local engagement. Commitment to the collective good ensures community welfare, while local distinctiveness preserves pride and identity, reinforcing the unique value of volunteer journalism.

## **Personal connections**

### *Accessibility*

Personal connections were consistently identified as vital to the audience's appreciation for VJ, offering significant emotional and symbolic value. Participants valued their direct access to volunteer journalists, often describing them as neighbors and friends rather than distant professionals: "If you have something on your mind, you can always get in touch

with them” (HornePosten 2). The approachability of volunteer journalists is also apparent in how participants feel empowered to share their stories. The sentiment “I have his personal cellphone number” (Palus Express 3) exemplifies that these journalists are more than just anonymous figures; they are part of the social fabric, accessible and responsive: “Like, I typically just email, ... and I’ll hear back almost immediately from a volunteer. So, I think it’s highly accessible like you definitely get quick access.” (Pittsfield Post 6).

### *Equality*

Personal connections with volunteer journalists extended to experiences of a sense of equality and mutual respect. This is evident as participants highlight feeling “I feel more equal” (Hagestednyt 1) and in this quote: “I can just call her directly...we know each other. It is entirely different if I had to call the weekly newspaper in Varde. Then they don’t know me, they won’t take me seriously” (HornePosten 1). This theme in the interview data reveals a connection between audiences and volunteer journalists that is distinct and extends beyond the existing relationships between traditional local journalism outlets. Moreover, the volunteers’ familiarity with the people and stories within their area enables a level of coverage that resonates with participants. This also contrasts with commercial local news organizations, where submissions may be rejected if they do not align with the editorial line and where audiences may feel their voice is lost.

### *Accountability*

Accountability is another dimension that adds to the perceived emotional value of VJ and the experienced value of personal connections in VJ. In the literature review, we stated that concerns regarding local journalism include accountability (see e.g. [Hanitzsch et al., 2018](#)). According to the participants in this study, the accountability and credibility of VJ hinges on personal connections, genuine and honest reporting, and a sense of communal accountability. The trust placed in the volunteer journalists stems from their proximity to the stories and familiarity with their audience. VJ is perceived as unbiased and authentic: “So we’re very lucky that we have a small group of pretty dedicated folks. And they’re unbiased, and that’s kinda neat.” (Pittsfield Post 4). The community trusts that VJ accurately conveys the town’s stories, though this trust may also stem from their personal relationships with the volunteer journalists. Participants express trust in the credibility of VJ, contrasting their perception of larger news organizations with the more intimate, community-focused reporting of volunteer journalists: “I almost never doubt that it is credible” (HornePosten 2). The personal relationships between the volunteer journalists and the audience underpin this trust. As one participant says:

”Because I know the journalists that are there, and the group, I suppose that I would feel comfortable going to them if there was something not true.” (Pittsfield Post 5).

This quote highlights the importance of personal connections and suggests that they would also be comfortable reaching out if something needed to be corrected. Another

participant seconds this: “I trust that if I had an issue, I could call you know, the person in charge and say: Hey, why didn’t you print Dan’s letter?” (Pittsfield Post 2). This quote demonstrates that if one disagrees with VJ’s editorial line, it is possible to reach out and express one’s opinion. The shared communal space contributes to this accountability. Participants recognize that VJ is an integral part of the community and cannot afford to misrepresent themselves: “They can’t just lie. And they will know immediately if something is wrong or they have done something wrong.” (HornePosten 1).

### *Acceptable lack of professionalism*

The participants’ perceptions of personal connection also extend to assessing VJ’s professionalism. Forde (2011) found that non-mainstream journalism is often accused of being unprofessional. Unsurprisingly, the participants in this study also debate the professionalism of VJ, and some express a high degree of satisfaction with VJ’s professionalism: “I think it is very professional” (HornePosten (2) and: “I can only describe this newspaper as highly professional” (Mårslet Avis 1). Other participants express differences in levels of professionalism between traditional commercial local journalism and VJ:

“Theyre not reporters. They’re not. It’s a different, completely different writing style.” (Pittsfield Post 3).

I think, when you pay for the news, you tend to get more timely news... professional reporting... And then I think with volunteer journalism, ... it’s not going to be like the same level ... quality, but it’s got the right meaning behind it, the right intent. (Pittsfield Post 4)

These views suggest that divergent opinions about the professionalism of VJ are present. However, as the last quote illustrates, this disadvantage seems to be toned down by the ‘right intent’ behind VJ. Consequently, VJ is not bound by the same professional criteria as commercial news media, and the lack of professionalism some participants experience does not harm the perceived functional value of VJ. Furthermore, in terms of journalistic criteria such as accountability and independence, there is a recognition that VJ may not always adhere to the rigorous standards expected in traditional journalism. However, this is not necessarily seen as a deficit but rather as a different approach to storytelling and news dissemination, with a focus on community relevance: “So, I’ve mostly seen it as someone who has some good ideas... I probably have more understanding and goodwill towards them.” (Udby Times 1). Furthermore, participants appreciate the communal approach, indicating that VJ is perceived as playing a different role from traditional news media: “I think they’re kind of like curating it. Like they’re getting it from different sources and trying to put it together and lay it out for people.” (Pittsfield Post 1). This suggests that personal connections are important, and the functional value of VJ deviates from standard journalistic investigation and reporting practices and points toward audiences feeling shared ownership of the VJ outlet, which compensates for a possible lack of professional rigor.

In sum, the analysis highlights the importance of personal connections and reveals four subthemes: accessibility, equality, accountability, and acceptable lack of professionalism.

Personal connections foster emotional and symbolic value, with volunteer journalists viewed as approachable neighbors.

## **Appreciation of the absence of commercial pressure**

### *Selfless motives*

The absence of commercial motivations emerged as arguably the most significant driver of the audience's appreciation for VJ outlets, delivering emotional and functional value. The participants value the sincerity and intention behind VJ, where there is no pursuit of readership or sensation but rather a focus on "verification and honesty" (Palus News Express 5). Participants appreciate the absence of commercial pressures, which they believe leads to a more genuine form of reporting. This characteristic of VJ contrasts with previous research on news audience perceptions of traditional journalists and news (Nelson et al., 2024). According to this study, news audiences find that journalism is compromised by journalists' perceived pursuit of profit and financial success in a competitive media environment. The authors further explain that traditional journalists are seen as motivated to profit off audience attention, making news audiences skeptical. Thus, the groups of volunteers behind the VJ outlets, from producers to editors and distributors, are driven by selfless motives as they devote their time to the good of the community: "We're very lucky to have a small group of dedicated folks who are unbiased... That's kind of neat" (Pittsfield Post 4).

The absence of commercial pressures allowed VJ outlets to focus on community-relevant stories without sensationalism or external influence, providing functional value by ensuring coverage of hyper-local issues. Participants frequently contrasted this with traditional journalism's emphasis on negative narratives. Thus, comfort is another emotion that is mentioned in the interview data. VJ makes the audience feel comfort, and it is not frightening, as an Indian participant states: "In fact, people are over-saturated with national politics and so they find comfort in local neighborhood stories." (Palus News Express 1), and this point is nuanced by another participant: "about what's going on here, not about Gaza or something else... It's like another level, which is also important" (Udby Times 1).

### *Transparency*

Transparency was another dimension linked to the absence of commercial pressures, offering both functional and emotional value. Participants appreciated the transparent editorial processes and the ability to contribute directly. A Danish participant remarked, "They can't just lie... They know immediately if something is wrong" (HornePosten 1). Another participant highlighted the sense of transparency fostered by the volunteer nature of the work: "Since they're not paid, you know they're doing it for the right reasons" (Palus News Express 6). This transparency reinforced the audience's trust, as did the collaborative nature of VJ, where volunteers work together to ensure accuracy and community service.

In sum, VJ's absence of commercial pressures makes participants perceive it as sincere and honest, distinguishing it from profit-driven traditional journalism. Participants value the selfless motives of volunteer journalists, who focus on hyper-local, unbiased stories that provide emotional comfort and avoid sensationalism. Transparency in editorial processes and VJ's volunteer-driven nature further enhance trust. This approach positions VJ as a meaningful and trustworthy alternative to compensated journalism.

## Conclusion and discussion

In conclusion, audiences perceive VJ as high-quality information that might not be professional local journalism but still provides different types of value to audiences. In contrast to citizen journalism, VJ is distinguished by a sustained and organized commitment to local coverage, provided by groups of volunteers who view their work as a service to the entire community, rather than as sporadic or issue-driven activism. The results demonstrate that VJ offers audiences a distinct and valued alternative to traditional journalism, driven by shared ownership, personal connections, and the absence of commercial pressures. Shared ownership fosters inclusivity, participatory culture, and community pride while encouraging engagement with local initiatives and maintaining economic interdependence. Personal connections create trust and emotional value through accessibility, equality, and accountability, compensating for a potentially perceived lack of professional rigor. The absence of commercial pressures ensures sincerity, transparency, and a focus on hyper-local, community-relevant stories, providing emotional comfort. Collectively, these attributes position VJ as a vital contributor to community cohesion, offering an authentic, collaborative, and trust-driven model of journalism.

In previous research, volunteer journalists describe their product as having (1) an emphasis on a continuous commitment to an organization rather than irregular individual journalistic acts, (2) a focus on information transmission rather than persuasion, and (3) a focus on community in general rather than particular issues within a community (Mathews et al., 2024). Audiences largely echo producer perspectives but emphasize accountability, accessibility, and constructiveness, while articulating value in functional, emotional, symbolic, and economic terms.

We view these findings as important because audiences' use of VJ broadens our understanding of journalism and challenges our conceptions of journalistic quality and roles. However, like all studies, our study does not come without limitations. First, the results rely on Danish, Indian, and the United States participants; thus, generalizations should be made carefully. However, the three countries provide a broad selection of countries for studying the phenomenon. Despite potential positivity and social desirability biases, snowball sampling facilitated access to otherwise unreachable participants and built trust through familiar referrals. Some participants occupy hybrid roles as both audience members and occasional contributors. This fluid boundary is characteristic of VJ and reflects the participatory ethos embedded in these outlets. While the study focuses on audience perceptions, future research could more directly examine the motivations and

practices of volunteer contributors themselves, particularly as they relate to engagement, identity, and civic participation. While this study focused on cross-cutting themes across diverse VJ contexts, future research could explore how outlet-specific characteristics—such as frequency, format, or topical scope—shape different forms of audience value. It is possible, for instance, that outlets with infrequent publication may offer more symbolic or emotional resonance, while more regular publications provide stronger functional value. Such a comparative typology would enrich the understanding of VJ's varied roles in different community settings.

The mounting threats local journalism faces, such as declining trust, financial constraints, and the rise of misinformation (Ferrier et al., 2016; Hess et al., 2023; Jenkins and Nielsen, 2020), have led to a search for alternative models. In reflecting on whether VJ is a solution to the local journalism crisis, it is essential to note that while VJ brings numerous benefits to a community, it also faces several challenges. One of the challenges is the willingness of individuals to volunteer their time and effort for hyperlocal journalism. As a volunteer-based initiative, VJ relies on the dedication and commitment of individuals who may have competing priorities. Encouraging and maintaining an often large pool of volunteers, including younger demographics, is crucial for the sustainability of VJ. The economic aspect of producing and sustaining VJ poses a potential challenge. Despite its longevity and supplementary value, VJ has not resolved the broader crisis in local journalism and should not be seen as a standalone solution. Therefore, viewing VJ as a valued supplement to local journalism rather than a comprehensive solution to the crisis is crucial.

These findings hold practical implications for media organizations and policy actors. VJ illustrates how audience trust, participation, and local embeddedness can be established through transparent, non-commercial, and inclusive practices. While VJ cannot fully replace professional journalism due to resource limitations and questions of editorial oversight, it offers a viable supplementary model—especially in communities underserved by legacy media. Future initiatives aiming to revitalize local news might benefit from integrating VJ principles, such as community co-production, local relevance, and visible accountability, to rebuild trust and fill systemic gaps in coverage. Moreover, this study suggests that audiences often ground their trust in VJ not in formal editorial mechanisms, but in perceived authenticity, responsiveness, and alignment with local values—elements that echo broader findings in research on journalism credibility (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2024).

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## **Author contributions**

L.H. was primarily responsible for writing the manuscript, conducting interviews, and coding and analyzing the data. N.M. contributed by conducting interviews and providing comprehensive feedback on the manuscript. P.J., D.O., and M.V.P. were involved in conducting interviews,

overseeing the transcription and translation processes, and preparing written descriptions of the media outlets.

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### **Ethical statement**

#### *Informed consent*

The participants provided informed consent for participation through e-mail. Consent for publication was obtained during the interviews. At the University of Southern Denmark, no ethical approval is required for this type of research.

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### **Data Availability Statement**

Data is available upon reasonable request. Please contact the first author.

### **Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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**Lene Heiselberg** is an Associate Professor at The Centre for Journalism, SDU. She is an audience researcher studying media and journalism reception. Lene Heiselberg has over 10 years of experience as an applied audience researcher focusing on audio and television and was formerly employed at The Danish Broadcasting Corporation. Her tight collaboration with industry partners includes translating study findings into actionable recommendations for professional journalistic practices.

**Nick Matthews** is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. His research interests focus on local news, journalism studies, rural media environments, rural broadband, news audiences, news deserts, social media and its role in journalism and society and the value of news in everyday life. NM has co-authored the book "Reviving Rural News: Transforming the Business Model of Community Journalism in the U.S. and Beyond", and solo-authored the book "Living with the Loss of Local Journalism: Voices from the Rural News Desert".

**Pranaav Jadhav** is a journalist and a PhD student assistant at the Missouri School of Journalism.

**Damilola Oduolowu** is a second-year doctoral student and graduate assistant at the Missouri School of Journalism. He studies media sociology, with a particular emphasis on digital journalism. He is also studying the dynamics of citizen journalism practices and their implications for journalism and society. He also explores research in environmental journalism and journalism ethics.

**Mathilde Vammen Poulsen** is a master student at SDU.

## **Appendix I**

### *Customized GPT: Specialist in thematic analysis and coding*

*Prompt.* The Qualitative Data Analyst specializes in assisting users with thematic analysis in qualitative data, alongside coding. It is adept at interpreting interview and survey data, focusing on identifying themes and patterns. The GPT guides users through the process of thematic analysis, including coding data, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. It also offers coding assistance in various programming languages, providing best practices, debugging tips, and optimization strategies. The GPT communicates clearly and accessibly, avoiding technical jargon, and clarifies ambiguities to ensure accurate responses. It caters to users with varying levels of expertise in data analysis and coding, making it a versatile and valuable tool.