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# DEMOCRATIZING JOURNALISM?

## Realizing the citizen's agenda for local news media

Irene Costera Meijer

*Media scholars and journalists expect local media to function as vital institutions for the creation and maintenance of a democratic political and public arena and a general sense of social cohesion and public connection (Aldridge, 2007; Couldry et al., 2007; Franklin, 2006; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). Taking a different angle, this paper tries to understand what kind of social role the audience wants their local media to perform. The material presented here relies on audience research and ethnographic investigation of the largest local TV broadcaster in Amsterdam (AT5), as well as on a basic production study of 17 local broadcasters in Rotterdam. It turns out that city residents of Amsterdam expect their local TV station to perform seven social functions: (1) supplying background information (unbiased, reliable, good-humoured, fast and multi-perspectival); (2) fostering social integration, or giving citizens insight into how the city "works"; (3) providing inspiration; (4) ensuring representation ("voice", recognition and "mirroring"); (5) increasing local understanding; (6) creating civic memory; and (7) contributing to social cohesion, or a sense of belonging. We argue that local media do not only constitute a precondition for democracy by representing the city to its residents; to meet this standard, local TV broadcasters will also have to become more democratic themselves, in the sense of better representing local residents to the city and each other by supplying more nuanced stories about them.*

KEYWORDS audience study; democracy; ethnography; local media; urban communication

### Introduction

For some time now, critical journalists have been concerned about the loss of quality in their profession. Generally, they interpret this decline as an effect of the increased importance of ratings. Aiming for a larger audience or even maintaining a large audience would cause journalism to adapt the level of its media offerings to the general public's taste. As a result, the social role of journalism—encouraging participation in the political process, stimulating debates on public issues, serving as watchdog against abuse of power—is undermined and more easily overshadowed by the priorities of the market (Kustow, 2007; Langer, 1998; Oosterbaan and Wansink, 2008; Paxman, 2007). This paper shows how citizens (also) appreciate a different journalistic performance. They still demand relevant and reliable information, but in addition to certain journalistic *content* (conceived by news makers and news users alike as conditional for a democratic society), the local audience articulates the need for a particular *impact* for journalism. Specifically this applies to issues associated with enculturation, civic understanding, inspiration, representation, collective memory and sense of belonging. These desired social performances will be discussed in turn followed by a consideration of some of their implications for current concerns about the quality of journalism and democratic society.

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The study centres on AT5, by far the largest local TV station in Amsterdam. Founded in 1992, this public broadcaster is considered the main source of local information for the residents of Amsterdam and its surrounding area. Significantly, 72 per cent of this city's residents claim to watch it regularly, at least several times a week (Amsterdamse Burgermonitor, 2007). AT5 ranks fourth among TV viewers in Amsterdam, trailing the three nationwide public stations, but outperforming the nation's main commercial station, RTL4. In 2008, local government contributed a third of its annual budget of 8.6 million euros.

The research results reported below are based on a triangulation of desk research of relevant policy reports on local (public service) journalism, a news content study (qualitative content analysis of all the AT5 news programmes aired between October 2007 and April 2008), audience research (100 street interviews, two Internet surveys on the AT5, 25 in-depth interviews with local TV viewers, a representative survey among 3000 Amsterdam citizens by the Burgermonitor 2007 and 2008 of the Research and Statistics Department of the City of Amsterdam) and a production study (interviews with 24 local television journalists and participant observation by joining programme makers at work, newsroom observations, attending meetings and informal interviews by four interns at the local TV station conducted between October 2007 and April 2008). The qualitative approach adopted implies a focus on understanding and analysing citizens' and journalists' expectations and experiences, including the implications of having news media framing our everyday lives, rather than on creating an inventory and quantifying the views of the parties involved (Bird, 2003; Iorio, 2004). In the context of a second production and policy study on Rotterdam-based media, an expert meeting with migrant broadcasters and city government was organized;<sup>1</sup> a public debate was held about local media and urban citizenship, as well as a plenary meeting with local and regional media parties to deal with the draft-policy paper on local media and urban citizenship.

The challenge of this paper is to address the social role of journalism from the public's point of view and juxtapose it with the professional angle. As such this paper raises the issue of the extent to which news could have *more* (democratic) quality if journalists were to better anticipate *and* represent citizens' diverse stories and lives, wishes and sensibilities, and learn to make *use* of their specific experiences, knowledge and expertise. Although this study's limitation lies in its focus on one case study, it touches on a much larger debate about news and democratic culture (Allan, 1999; Couldry et al., 2007; Gans, 2003; Schudson, 1995).

## Background Information

Michael Schudson (1998, p. 21) has described the changing interest in news in terms of the transformation from informed citizenship (ideally, citizens should know all the issues all of the time) to monitorial citizenship, implying that they should be informed enough and alert enough to identify danger to their personal good and danger to the public good. Local viewers have specific demands when it comes to selection, format, presentation and content of the information provided. To consume local news, younger people in particular more often need to have a specific reason (Dejaeghere and Hooghe, 2006). This news must have something extra to offer on an issue, such as local colour, more depth or other insights. Because the local station is closer to the source of the news, one editor explains, *AT5Nieuws* can give you more inside information regarding particular major local events:

For example, one night we were present in the mosque during the Friday prayers dedicated to the memory of the boy that got killed. This was in fact our little extra, which is nice. You'll only see it at AT5 because we know the city and the people so well. That we can actually be there is the little extra NOS [Dutch national public newscaster] is unlikely to offer.

One student commented that whenever he read a minor news item about Amsterdam on the Internet he rather switched briefly to AT5 where his need for local information paralleled his need to boost his sense of local identity.

because you won't see anything about it on NOS . . . AT5 also gives you a sense of pride, of it being my station. It deals with my city and it is my station. I think that's neat! (Joris, age 24, student)

Poindexter et al. (2006) advocate a local journalistic approach as a matter of "caring about the community, reporting on interesting people and groups, understanding the local community, and offering solutions" (cf. Drok, 2002). Their research shows a significant difference between the public and journalists about two roles that are an integral part of traditional journalism: watchdog and rapid reporting. While 70 per cent of journalists state that traditional journalism's role of watchdog is extremely important, this was true for only 47 per cent of the public. Journalists (59 per cent) were also significantly more likely than the public (35 per cent) to say that rapid reporting was extremely important (2006, p. 77). Similarly, our Amsterdam and Rotterdam case studies show that citizens expect local journalism first to adopt the role of good neighbour and, second, that of watchdog. According to Voakes (2004, p. 32), trust in the accuracy, relevance and competence of local media goes up when journalists practice civic journalism. This is confirmed by our research. A frequent female viewer of AT5 news commented:

I feel that AT5 looks at the world from below, so to speak; they really go into neighbourhoods . . . They ask people more questions on whether, for instance, they are bothered by something. While at NOS Journaal they work, eh, rather from above . . . In my view AT5 much more often goes to places, asking people how they experience things. (Ieke, age 25)

According to one 24-year-old student it is not a question of choosing between news from above or news from the citizen up, but of relevance. Local citizens are more interested in the experience of news by other local citizens.

Stijn: Take for example the murder of Theo van Gogh. In such a case the national newscaster wants to talk to the police spokesperson and to the mayor and other officials involved. AT5 news wants to interview them as well, but also the people directly concerned.

Interviewer: Do you think NOS news presents the news more objectively?

Stijn: Uh, no.

Interviewer: But do you like the personal touch to the story?

Stijn: Well, not always, It adds something to local events, but I would not appreciate it if NOS news gives the floor to some random resident of a small village . . . I mean, it does not engage me in the same way as people in this city do.

Similarly, local residents value the “neighbourly” tone of voice; the good-humoured way in which AT5 regularly reports on local events.

Not critical in the sense of journalistic, as in exposing something. Or, actually, it is critical, but then in a funny sort of way . . . I remember an item about particularly incomprehensible road signs. Various people were asked what the signs meant and they all answered, well, I don't know . . . These are funny things. It is recognizable because you notice the signs in the city as well. (Chaja, age 28)

This light-hearted tone of voice is crucial, so it seems, because it facilitates urban communication. “Critical, but in a funny sort of way” allows viewers to get familiar with how particular (serious) problems are approached and solved in their city, namely with a touch of “Amsterdam wit”, a way of dealing with issues that is reflective of a general local style. This does not mean that people no longer distinguish news from entertainment as a distinctive *genre*. It does, however, hint at the broadcaster's particular *performance*, which, as a 25-year-old viewer put it, “is very informing in an entertaining way”. The suggestion that viewers do not necessarily interpret these two features as at odds with each other was confirmed in the online survey where we asked people to comment on whether the *impact* of the programming was either entertaining or informative: 135 felt it to be informing versus 115 entertaining. In contrast to Winch's analysis (1997) the Amsterdam audience seems capable of conferring cultural authority to local journalism as an important mainstream genre and at the same time enjoying its entertaining potential.

### Social Integration/Enculturation

People demand more than just factual information. They indicate they would like to understand how their region or city “works” (Aldridge, 2007; Franklin, 2006; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). As one of our interviewees (Jasper, age 24) claimed: “AT5 shows how the average local resident is thinking, how the city basically operates and that sort of thing”.

Media have largely been neglected in the Dutch debate on civic norms. In policy studies from the government and its advisory bodies, the socializing, integrative and inspirational functions of local and regional media have so far remained underexposed. Frequently, studies concerned with policy development regarding urban issues, citizenship, democracy and social cohesion—such as WRR (2005) and RMO (2006)—will devote a paragraph or section to “the” media. Most of these studies, however, seem to neglect the intrinsic democratic role of media in establishing and sustaining democratic values and norms. If media are a topic, they are usually, but incorrectly, dealt with (or criticized) as mere reporters of events. Yet, local media in fact serve as major cultural players and offer points of reference for understanding the city and its manners and customs. Media may show the meaning and value of particular cultural practices and forms of interaction such as fair sharing, careful listening to others and solidarity with the poor (Dahlgren, 1995; Gripsrud, 2002). Like family life, work or the educational system, media provide cultural, social and moral anchors (Costera Meijer and Krijnen, 2007; Dahlgren, 1995; Gripsrud, 1999, 2002; Hartley, 1999; Hijmans, 2000; Krijnen, 2007; Signorielli and Bacue, 1999). This proves of vital significance in particular to newcomers. A Kurdish taxi driver underscored the integrative role of local public TV:

My wife has been in the Netherlands for a year only and she likes watching TV West. This station is not as high-paced as the commercial stations and does not use as difficult words as the [national] public ones. Thus she learns how the country works.

In this respect Schudson (1995, p. 31) has argued that journalists do not so much produce information, but “public knowledge”; they contribute to “what is recognized or accepted . . . given certain political structures and traditions”. Knowledge is shared in the form of stories and they constitute the basis of meaning production and sense through which people may get some grip on the chaotic, haphazard nature of daily life (Nussbaum, 1995). If such stories do not exist, or if they are unknown among the general public due to the absence of mediated representations of them, people have more trouble developing an “identity” of their own or acquire a place of their own in their city or region (Irvine, 2000, p. 10). The editor of a local children’s programme *Basta* confirms that providing knowledge about Amsterdam (“local (folk)lore” she calls it) is a major goal of the programme:

We really concentrate on Amsterdam and its children and our goal is to offer them local lore. So the idea behind *Basta* is: start with yourself and your own city, after which you can go out into the wide world. In other words, the idea is to learn more about your own city and its various parts first. Once you know about it you can move ahead a little further again.

People who just moved to Amsterdam indicate that the local station has helped their “integration” into the city. In cities with many newcomers this integrative function is very important, as these words from Jasper (24) testify:

After my move I started watching AT5 a lot, so as to learn more about the city indeed. If you are from a completely different area, it is only natural—at least in my case—that you start being interested more in the city you live in and thereby AT5 and Kort Amsterdams [a popular AT5 current affairs programme] certainly play a role. You are given a sense of the city’s local mentality.

Our interviews show how local television may educate viewers about local mores by creating a casual symbolic space where local residents can virtually meet and get to know each other.

Like no other tool, local television presents “model citizens”, that are crucial in making people feel included or not. In this respect, mayor Job Cohen and former alderman Ahmed Aboutaleb (meanwhile mayor of Rotterdam) have a solid reputation for setting a normative standard for urban communication. Other local model citizens include, for instance, the two young mothers (one native Dutch and one Moroccan) who in response to the death of a schizophrenic Moroccan young man in police custody in the Slotervaart district (27 October 2007) organized a positive demonstration to show that Slotervaart is a normal neighbourhood with “quite ordinary” people. The reporting shows how various ethnic groups participated in the demonstration. Viewers suggested that AT5 may further exploit these mothers’ “exemplariness” by offering them a bigger (media) podium in programmes other than news.

## Inspiration

More and more media users are living in large-scale, globalized multicultural cities, marked in particular by fragmentation, immigration and mobility. In Amsterdam 16–30

per cent of the population suffers from feelings of social isolation, especially residents with a Moroccan or Surinamese background (Amsterdamse Burgermonitor, 2007, 2008). For the Moroccan community this may be linked to their bad reputation in terms of crime and violence, which makes it more difficult for their individual members to develop a positive self-identity. Clarke and Gaile (1998) have established that storytelling is one of the strategies adopted by urban residents for countering the potentially disintegrative effects of globalization. Media may actively foster this process of storytelling. If there is no positive source that people can draw on for telling and sharing stories, it is impossible to build a cohesive community. Likewise, philosopher Karl Popper (1999) has argued that optimism is "a moral duty" and that instead of concentrating on dire predictions we are obliged "to support the things that may lead to a better future". By paying attention to major issues in an inspiring and optimistic way, local media may fulfil their "moral duty", in part as a complement to the inevitably more troublesome news featured by the national and international news media. Through a particular way of storytelling, with a clearer focus on the relevance of emotions, follow-up and context, people may develop a keener sense of the positive and moving sides of life in Amsterdam. This might help people to feel at ease in their city and with their fellow residents. As one of our interviewees (Lisanne, age 21) appreciatively commented:

Suppose a war erupts between Turkey and Iraq, as in fact seems to be a genuine risk right now. NOS Journaal [National public newscaster] will have extensive coverage, but *AT5Nieuws* will not cover it at all; unless they carry an item about for instance a Turkish man and a Kurdish man who have been living as good neighbours in Amsterdam for years.

A substantial share of local and regional news consists of stories about crime, fires, traffic accidents and so on (Rosenstiel et al., 2007). Even these stories, as viewers pointed out, can be told in ways that could inspire people. Several interviewees referred in this respect to an item featured in the current affairs programme *Kort Amsterdams* (Amsterdam in Short, 27 March 2007) about a man named Arno who planned to do voluntary work in India. But right before he left, the camper he needed for his trip burned down.<sup>2</sup> After seeing the programme an anonymous local benefactor decided to buy a new camper for him, which was addressed in a follow-up story on 9 May 2007.

Many citizens, businesses and services are interested in ideas about how they can make a difference in and for the city. As one editor of *AT5Nieuws* put it:

People always know how to reach us . . . And we know that a problem will be solved if we pay attention to it. We have learnt that whenever we call or challenge an alderman on some issue, he will instantly start to tackle it.

When media want to encourage residents to develop such active involvement with local affairs, their approaches need to consider not only the city's social problems, but also their solutions (Dagger, 1997; Drok, 2007). The popular AT5 current affairs programmes, *Kort Amsterdams*, presents itself explicitly as a podium for both raising and solving major and minor local nuisances. The programme's developer argued:

Driving through the city you notice that a lamppost has come down or you realize the performance of the mayor or an alderman is below standard, and so on. You report on it and you do so in a good-humoured way after which you wait to see what happens, and you report on it again when things work properly again. You hold on to the issue.

Basically, in my view, this is the role of AT5 in Amsterdam: being a kind of constable, a cheerful constable.

While journalists working for national television appear to underestimate the inspiring force of significant *good* news (Costera Meijer, 2003), AT5 journalists seem a lot keener on broadcasting it and they have regularly paid attention to successful measures, to neighbourhoods which have become safer, or to specific areas in which residents have developed effective initiatives for raising the quality of their living environment.

## Representation

Nick Couldry et al. (2007) have described the growing gap between citizens, media and politics in terms of “voice”. As in the United Kingdom, large groups of Dutch media users do not feel “represented” in and through mainstream media. Regular news users in particular appear to have increasing doubts about whether their news use is “meaningful” or how their “voice” is reflected in the media, if at all. People expect media to represent the world to them, and vice versa: they expect their situation, lifestyles and issues to be represented to the world as well. Commenting on a black stand-up comedian hosting a popular talk show, Meriam (32) states:

Image is very important. When the camera turns to the audience and you see shots of, eh, our multicultural Netherlands, it is immensely important, because you never see such images on television. All those talk shows, all those programmes show all white faces. But in this show you see black women, women with head scarves, white men, etc. sitting next to each other. This is something I can identify with because my world looks like that, my friends look like that. When I go out, this is what my world looks like. But this reality is rarely seen on television.

Karen Ross (2006) illustrates the apparent difficulty, even for regional media, to have “ordinary people” voice their concerns.<sup>3</sup> An editor of *AT5Nieuws* is aware of the influence of unbalanced “distribution of voices”, and yet it can be seen regularly:

Yes, we should avoid making white news. We need to add some colour. And not make a broadcast with only men in it. You try to take this into account all the time. But it does not always work out that way. Last week a broadcast I did only included white men of 45. This made me think, hmm... And when I watched the broadcast again at night, I thought: no, this is not right. It didn't come out well. It is important of course to be aware of these things.

It turns out that local residents, especially those from a migrant or a poor white background, highly value media which “represent” them in all their diversity and which tell stories they can identify with or give them a sense of being recognized. Volunteers of local Rotterdam migrant broadcast organizations, who know from experience how media may hurt individuals and groups by not or poorly representing their feelings, lifestyles and views (cf. Couldry, 2001; Dreher, 2006), underlined the value of good stories over “factual” reporting. A compressed and straightforward news format seldom does justice to their experiences, views and concerns. For this reason, Silverstone proposed the concept of *mediapolis* as both a descriptive and a normative category:



We need to know about each other in a way that can only involve a constant critical engagement with our media's representation of the other. Such engagement is as important to our relationships to our neighbours as to the strangers, both amongst us and far away. (2007, p. 187)

To represent urban groups or neighbourhoods better, AT5 employees were assigned their own district to monitor more carefully. As one *AT5Nieuws* desk editor told us:

It is quite hard to put your finger on the identity of the Amsterdam resident. Still, all of us here at the news desk have their own group we take a special interest in. Amongst us we have also divided the city into various districts and we all try to find out what the people in our area are interested in. The Amsterdam South-East district, for example, has very different residents than the Amsterdam North district or the old-South district or so.

Some residents are painfully aware of what they view as systematic misrepresentation of their neighbourhood which damages its reputation. An additional effect is that groups of neighbourhood residents may move away, without there being a good reason for it, "objectively" at least. As two of our interviewees claimed in this context:

They [local media] only come to our neighbourhood when something ugly happens; I would also like them to come when we have a nice event. (Woman, age 44, street survey)

I almost never see my neighbourhood on TV and when I do, in many cases the item contains foul blows against our local government. (Woman, age 45, Internet survey)

However, it is a common misunderstanding amongst journalists that neighbourhood residents will only value good news about their district. The media, our interviewees suggest, should not merely compensate negative images with positive ones, but offer a broad spectrum of current affairs that pertain to the city or neighbourhood. These do not have to be important or very positive events; as long as they present a city in an authentic way. "Through AT5, Bos en Lommer takes on an identity for me", according to a 61-year-old female resident of this Amsterdam neighbourhood in our street survey. Both the street survey and the Internet survey reveal that people value nuanced and truthful reporting. If bad news happens, it should obviously be included:

My neighbourhood is presented respectfully. There is a lot of negativity, but it is fair to say that such things must be reported as well.

AT5 tries hard to present a nuanced picture, but right now there is simply a lot of bad news, unfortunately.

In *Inclusion Through Media* (Downmunt et al., 2007), European scholars show how creative collaborative efforts between media professionals and marginal groups such as youngsters and migrants make it possible to do justice to experiences, perspectives and stories that are seldom addressed in regular public media. Volunteers at migrant media pointed out that it may sometimes be enough to opt for a different angle. If a general news item (e.g. the severe frost of the Winter of 2009) is told from the angle of youngsters (never learnt to skate?), poor people (cost of heating and clothing goes up?), Antilleans (do they experience the cold differently than Swedish residents of Rotterdam?) or people

with a disability (on your scoot-mobile across an icy bridge?), its relevance increases for that group, while the story might be just as interesting for other groups. This approach may even raise the general quality of a news story.

## Understanding

“Good journalism often is the means by which empathy is evoked”, as Michael Schudson once put it (1995, p. 8). According to the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, television, more than other media, has the power to influence people’s sense of compassion (2001, p. 434): “Its choices of images and roles, in news stories, advertising, and drama, will have important consequences for citizens’ moral abilities, for better or worse”. Media ethics form an often implicit, yet integral part of these professional choices: Who “deserves” our understanding? Do we empathize or do we hold people responsible? Are they victim or perpetrator? Who is worthy of our attention; who is “pitiful” and who isn’t? Who is “different” and potentially frightening, who is “recognizable” and thus reassuringly “the same”?

Effers and De Jong (2004) and Gijsberts and Dagevos (2005) have shown that in neighbourhoods marked by a large increase in migrant residents but less contact between natives and migrants, residents will feel less safe: unknown, unloved, as the saying goes. Research on the effects of the introduction of television in Alaska (Lonner et al., 1985) suggests that merely exposing people to (images of) people with another ethnic background, culture or nationality can be enough to bring about a positive change in attitude, if at least this representation is not univocally negative (Messaris, 1997). Conversely, reasoning from the perspective of the “strangers”, Flint (2002, p. 255) claims that they will develop a bond with their city only after the city itself presents them (through the media and such) with a “normal” basic identity, at least in the context of work and education. If this is denied to people, they will be less inclined to position themselves as socially committed citizens.

A particular tone or style of a programme is relevant as well and might strengthen or discourage compassion. As someone on the staff of *Kort Amsterdams* claimed:

We do not want to mock people. There is a risk in irony that in my view we precisely should avoid: we show people very much in an authentic manner in fact, thereby maximally respecting their identity.

Humour, programme makers argue, is a strategy that creates understanding. This strategy is deployed by AT5, for instance to counter the effects of negative stereotyping (aggression, lack of internships etc.) on the Moroccan community in Amsterdam West. In *AT5Nieuws* Moroccan youngsters not only were given space and attention to tell their own story; the TV magazine *Kort Amsterdams* depicted the Slotervaart neighbourhood also in a cheerful, humorist light. An artist had a T-shirt made with the words “I love Holland” in Arabic on it (see Figure 1). Next he asked passers-by to read the text aloud, causing major hilarity, also among the programme’s viewers, who then realized that not all “Arabic-looking people” are actually capable of speaking or reading Arabic. An additional advantage of using humour in items pertains to the increased chance to inspire conversation and dialogue. To the question whether he discusses the AT5 news with other people, Andries, a law student, replies:



**FIGURE 1**

Robert (right) and a fellow-resident from Slotervaart. Together with Robert, *Kort Amsterdams* went to Slotervaart to hear the opinion of the Moroccan community on the “I love Holland” T-shirt. They in fact welcomed it

If AT5 news alerts me to some exposition that I would like to attend, I would not mention AT5 as the source of information. No, I think I only discuss AT5 news when I saw something funny or so.

### Civic Memory

To create a sense of cohesion or unison, according to Dagger (1997), a city needs to have a “memory”—a recollection of events, protagonists and developments that together make up its history. To establish a bond among residents with their city, civic memory needs to be *shared*. An editor of a Rotterdam-based migrant station told us how he would love telling the story about his father taking a stroll with his grandson across the Erasmus Bridge while explaining to him how he as Turkish resident of Rotterdam has contributed to its urban renewal. Telling such a story in some Dutch newspaper or on a local TV station means recognition of the achievements of Turkish residents who also participated in the post-war reconstruction and growth of Rotterdam.

What has a city accomplished, where did it fail and how are such events reflected in the identity of the region and its residents? People who know a city’s local history, even if only to a limited degree, will feel more involved with it and be inclined sooner to consider themselves part of it (Dagger, 1997, p. 164). “What memory is to the self, civic memory is to the city.” A Moroccan resident (26) states that she would very much like to see what the neighbourhood looked like in the past. She adds:

It [the neighbourhood] has changed a lot and will soon change again. A lot of new houses will be built and this here will be demolished. And thus it would be nice to see what it looked like before.

On the other hand, a white resident (82) from the same neighbourhood suggests that historical items would only be useful if they end on a positive note. To her and her 86-year-old husband, it would not make a lot of sense to romanticize the past.

We were one of the first residents here. You will not be able to tell us a lot of new things about it; I mean, I would not know what attention to the past would add. Well, you could show of course how the neighbourhood went to the dogs in the course of time. But that would not be a lot of fun.

An example of a positive angle was mentioned by residents from the Van der Pek buurt, an Amsterdam neighbourhood on the eve of a major renovation. Episode 14 of *In de Buurt [In the Neighbourhood]*, broadcasted in November 2007) described how two artists decorated a home with all kinds of stuff collected by residents that had to do with the history of the neighbourhood. The goal of the “exhibition” was to make it easier for people to situate their own history and the history of others. In a similar vein, Dowmunt et al. (2007) describe how citizens, facilitated by journalists and programme makers, may have a proactive role in developing urban memory. Professionals support people in telling their life history and letting them illustrate these “digital stories” with photos and video films.

### Sense of Belonging

AT5 plays a crucial role in promoting the feeling among local residents that they belong in Amsterdam. One viewer stated in the Internet survey: “AT5 really takes good care of us feeling at home”. Watching AT5 programmes contributes to their personal bond with the city as in the city’s slogan “*I amsterdam*” and a sense of community, “*We Amsterdammers*”. As Joris, a student aged 24, claimed: “Well, because of AT5 I simply feel more like an Amsterdammer”. Or Ricardo, 23: “They stress that everyone is a resident of Amsterdam, even if you do not feel like being one”.

Viewers of AT5 are explicitly addressed as local residents, even if they may not have strong local ties (yet). One 25-year-old viewer from nearby Amstelveen explains how the local station has contributed to her adopting her new identity as *Amsterdammer*: “because they emphasize that everyone who lives in Amsterdam counts as a local resident, regardless of whether you were born here or not”. AT5 takes pains to include every inhabitant as an Amsterdam citizen. The editor of AT5 news commented:

As a communal factor Amsterdam is very important; the feel of the city, the bond. Many people do not have many strong bonds, but at least they have one bond in common and that is Amsterdam. It is a wonderful bond that we all have collectively. And [with pride] we report on Amsterdam!

Residents of Amsterdam feel *Amsterdammer* rather than Dutch, Turkish or Moroccan (Amsterdamse Burgermonitor, 2007, pp. 25, 47). Recent data indicate that 78 per cent of residents feel at home in the city, 85 per cent feel connected to Amsterdam and 76 per cent feel connected to their neighbourhood (Amsterdamse Burgermonitor, 2007, 2008). In Geuzenveld-Slotermeer, a neighbourhood with many migrants, the sense of belonging amongst local residents is significantly smaller (slightly over 60 per cent).

The street interviews we held in culturally mixed neighbourhoods outside the downtown area show that most residents of Amsterdam enjoy watching AT5. There was

one major difference, however. When people were asked to respond to the statement “AT5 befits me, or AT5 does not befit me”, nearly three-quarters of the “white” residents of Amsterdam felt a sense of being at home when watching AT5, while this was true for only half of the “non-white” residents we interviewed [we determined (non-)white “visually”]. An explanation offered by one of the journalists was that framing mattered a lot. She found out that her stories could be made more exciting, layered and complex (for white *and* non-white viewers, Muslims *and* Christians) when she used the amazement, perspective or experience of the marginalized group as angle.

### Conclusions

The Amsterdam broadcaster AT5 is a source and a platform for urban communication. This case study has wider relevance, because it does not so much identify favourite programmes, anchormen or journalists, or a list of specific topics about which citizens would like to be informed (like health care, employment, education etc.). The innovative character of this research is that it offers insight into the social *performances* that are ideally expected from local media, including informed citizenship or monitorial citizenship, social integration, inspiration, representation, understanding, civic memory and sense of belonging. The communicative potential of local media is connected in particular to specific framing practices, a good-humoured tone of voice and a particular news selection.

It is a truism that free and independent media are crucial in maintaining a democracy. In order to serve a democratic *culture*, this case study suggests media may become more democratic themselves, in the sense of better representing and connecting the people to the city and their fellow citizens. One way of making media more “representative” involves a fairer distribution of the resources needed for telling stories and being heard, which Couldry (2007, p. 258) refers to as “effective access”. Although most interviewees did not express a clear wish to be structurally involved in media production or media policy, they eagerly longed for media to do more justice to their perspectives, experiences and concerns. Local media can serve these groups with relevant news (angles) precisely because of the physical proximity that follows from their local basis. For the same reason, it is easier for them to give more voice to groups that are currently underexposed or systematically misrepresented, “hard to reach” or less easy to satisfy—such as youngsters, those who are “socially disappointed”, and first- and second-generation migrant groups.

The media public favours a shift in emphasis from watchdog to good neighbour, at least where local media functions are involved. At first sight this may seem to be a call for media de-politicization. On closer consideration, however, the message of media users is more complex. Critical, honest, truthful and independent journalism is still valued highly, but today it should be wrapped, so to speak, in a more open, curious, compassionate and “good-humoured” professional attitude and tone of voice. Although being critical is fine as a professional ethos, it should not determine the tone of a news report or programme. The local news programmes that the public values are informative, relevant *and* entertaining. Generally these programmes are also marked by attention for solution-oriented journalism, the presenting of positive important news, a diversity of sources, multifocality, multiple voices, and an unravelling of complexity instead of reproducing it (cf. Costera Meijer, 2006, 2007; Drok, 2007). An explanation for this preference may be the recognition of local media as source and platforms for resolving or creating urban

communication problems. The popularity of a cheerful or embracing news *atmosphere* might thus be explained by its supportive role in viewers' dealings with an ever-more complex society.

If media are a topic, they are usually dealt with (or criticized) as reporters of events rather than as actors themselves. A likely explanation is that many media barely realize the scope of their effect and therefore are less inclined to reflect on it. Yet, through local media, viewers and readers may adapt more easily to local (democratic) habits and customs. Or vice versa, they may distance themselves from local mores if they do not feel represented. It is of crucial importance for journalists who want to take issue with both forms of "representation" (representing the city to its residents and its residents to the city), that they realize their impact in the double meaning of the word "realize", e.g. become more reflexive of the influence of journalism and making "real" the desired impact of journalism. David Ryfe (2009), in his recent ethnographic study of changing newsroom culture, shows how difficult it is for journalists to organize their work along these lines. The reason is that each new day reporters need usable and fairly easily accessible news information. Because public institutions tend to have skilled spokespersons, well-organized press conferences and a ready-to-use supply of press releases, they are well-equipped to deliver such news. Moreover, the routine attending of press conferences answers to an elementary need of reporters to present themselves as watchdog. The cherishing of this identity symbolizes how journalists determine whether they themselves and their colleagues live up to the standard of "good journalism". As Ryfe argues:

Deviations from their basic routines and practices may threaten journalists' ability to find and transform information into news, and may also trouble deep-seated conceptions of identity and value within the profession. (2009, p. 199)

Independent news media function as democratic society's cornerstone. This autonomy, however, does not automatically ensure that journalists are in touch with citizens' changing needs. There are major institutional and cultural obstacles for change. This study has addressed how news media may better meet their users' wishes by "representing" them more completely. In other words, media will have to find out how they can serve democratic society better by becoming more democratic themselves. Perhaps the access of citizens in the journalistic process is a precondition for media companies to keep in touch with their audience. If this requires time and a service-minded attitude, such attitude is generally at odds with journalism's self-identity as independent watchdog or professional know-it-all.

Representing the public more comprehensively requires, in short, a change of culture. Professional journalists and programme makers will have to learn to address seriously the public's desires and sensibilities and to make effective use of their knowledge, experience and expertise. Allowing and facilitating citizens to join in making media products can be part of it.

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## NOTES

1. Transcity Marketing and Communications Agency, Rotterdam, November 2007.
2. See <http://www.kortamsterdams.nl/web/2007/03/page/2/>.
3. Ross found a prevalence of well-educated white men as sources. "It is of significant concern that in a region like the West Midlands which has an ethnic minority population of around 600,000 (approximately 18 per cent), that less than 4 per cent of all quoted sources were members of identifiable ethnic minority communities and of these, 26 per cent were women. It is of significant concern that only one-third of 'all' sources were women and that only a quarter of sources were asked to speak or be featured as 'ordinary' people" (Ross, 2006, p. 243).

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