

# The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism



Edited by Agnes Gulyas and David Baines

# THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO LOCAL MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

This comprehensive edited collection provides key contributions in the field, mapping out fundamental topics and analysing current trends through an international lens.

Offering a collection of invited contributions from scholars across the world, the volume is structured in seven parts, each exploring an aspect of local media and journalism. It brings together and consolidates the latest research and theorisations from the field, and provides fresh understandings of local media from a comparative perspective and within a global context. This volume reaches across national, cultural, technological and socio-economic boundaries to bring new understandings to the dominant foci of research in the field and highlights interconnection and thematic links. Addressing the significant changes local media and journalism have undergone in the last decade, the collection explores the history, politics, ethics and contents of local media, as well as delving deeper into the business and practices that affect not only the journalists and media-makers involved, but consumers and communities as well.

For students and researchers in the fields of journalism studies, journalism education, cultural studies, and media and communications programmes, this is the comprehensive guide to local media and journalism.

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*To Sue, Josephine, Jack, Rachel, Rosie and Henry  
and  
To Réka, Tibor, Zoltán and Jason*



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The seeds of *The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism* were sown at a vibrant pre-conference to the European Communication Research and Education Association's (ECREA) 2016 gathering at Prague – Dealing with the Local: Media, Proximity and Community. It was organised by Masaryk University, Brno, and it brought together, in the splendid surroundings of the Auto Club of the Czech Republic, a host of scholars from different nations, regions and disciplines, all of whom were developing new understandings and new insights in the field of local media and journalism. Looking across the packed galleries between the numerous parallel sessions brought home the richness of the field, and the range and depth of interest there was in this largely overlooked subject area. That conference gave rise to a range of partnerships, collaborations, alliances and academic networks that are now drawing to this area of study the attention it deserves. This volume is both a product of those networks, and part of the process of developing and consolidating the field and taking it forward. So, we would like to begin by thanking the organisers of that conference for bringing together scholars researching the subject area.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Demarcating the field of local media and journalism

*Agnes Gulyas and David Baines*

This *Companion* provides the most comprehensive survey of local media and journalism to date, bringing together perspectives drawn from different regions, continents and cultures from around the globe. It aims to provide analysis of key issues and trends, explore dominant conceptual debates and consolidate the field of study. Local media and journalism are widely seen as key pillars in the lives of communities across the world, and they play significant political and social roles. With this volume, we sought to demonstrate the importance and the richness of the field, which, as Nielsen (2015, xi) states, “is intellectually interesting, [but] often overlooked and deserves more attention”. A demonstration of this observation is provided by a search we carried out on the Web of Science Core Collection database of the terms ‘local media’, ‘local journalism’ and ‘local news’, which, while not covering everything written about the topic, gives a useful insight of scholarly interests. The search returned 1,263 publications for the period between 1977 and 2019, which shows that it is a relatively under-researched area (in comparison, a search for the term ‘journalism’ returned 14,694 publications). Just over 70 per cent of the publications appeared in the last ten years and about half of them in the last five, highlighting an increased interest in the topic recently. There are, however, significant geographical variations between the countries covered: 40 per cent of publications were about the US, 8.4 per cent about the UK, 7.4 per cent about Australia and 5 per cent about Canada. So the bulk of academic attention in this field, almost 62 per cent of publications, is focused on developments in four nations. A further 60 countries share the remaining 38 per cent of academic interest. The search also revealed that the field does not seem to have a ‘home’ in terms of publications. While 85 per cent of the entries listed on the Web of Science database are articles, these are dispersed in a wide variety of journals across the world. Of all the journals, *Journalism Studies* has the highest number of articles: 35, just 2.8 per cent of the publications. Overall, the search results reflect the discrepancies and disjointed nature of this subject area.

The field, however, is not only fragmented in terms of publications and country of focus, but also in relation to the media forms studied and the approach taken. For example, the literature on local newspapers has separate discourse and research traditions from that of local broadcasting or community media. Thus, different forms of local media have been studied with somewhat different sets of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, as well as different methodological approaches. The literature is arguably also limited in relation to comparative research,

as most studies tend to concentrate on a particular country, and often on a specific region or localities within it. This volume, for the first time, brings together those hitherto disparate and fragmented parts of the field on local media and journalism, and aims to address some of the limitations mentioned. The chapters illustrate the depth of scholarship in this subject area, the importance of which extends far beyond exploring media and journalism in specific localities. The *Companion* reaches across national, cultural, technological and socio-economic boundaries to provide a holistic overview. In so doing, it brings new understandings to the dominant foci of research in the field and highlights interconnection and thematic links between areas of the literature. It also brings a spotlight to bear on themes and issues that have been largely overlooked, but are here revealed to be of significant concern. These include the diverse processes that can lead to the formation of local ‘news deserts’; the effectiveness of different subsidy systems; and a reappraisal of issues surrounding professionalism in local journalism. In this opening chapter, we first discuss definitional debates of key concepts, followed by an examination of the defining features of local media. We then explore emerging themes from the insights of the contributions and identify future directions for the field. The chapter ends with an outline of the structure of the *Companion*.

### Conceptualising the field

An important implication of the historical fragmentation of the subject area is a lack of consensus on the meaning of key terms, which are often taken for granted or defined only implicitly. An additional difficulty is that these concepts are used in everyday speech too, and they are frequently emotionally, rhetorically and ideologically charged. Arguably, the three key terms that have particular significance to the field, and that feature centrally in this volume, are ‘local’, ‘local media’ and ‘community’.

The concept of ‘local’ at its most simple refers to a place where people live their everyday lives. Importantly, in these sorts of place-based definitions, which tend to be the most common, the local has geographical boundaries. For our field of study, however, local is also a mediated social space, which is characterised by Lefebvre (1991) as a triadic structure depending on interrelationships between perceived space (people’s activities in a landscape), conceived space (or spatial representations) and lived space (imagined through its myths, symbols and ideologies). Ali (2017, 5) sees “Localism as a symbolic category [that] means different, often contradictory, things to different people at different times. ... The local is not a single, static site”. Elsewhere, he argues that there is a danger in reducing the debate of different types of localism to artificial and “ultimately reductive dichotomies of ‘social localism’ – defining localism in terms of common interests and tastes – and ‘spatial localism’ – defining localism in terms of where we live” (Ali, 2015, 107). To avoid this reductive debate, he proposes critical regionalism as a theoretical underpinning to study the local, an approach that “forces an interrogation of localism that goes beyond place to include elements of culture, identity, and language” (Ali, 2015, 107).

In media-production-focused definitions, local also refers to a geographical space, but one that has been created as part of an organisational or corporate strategy to reach a particular audience group, a distribution area that fits a business model. But here too there are different meanings, because “the local refer[s] both to the merchandising strategy that sustains a newspaper and the editorial philosophy that defines its mission” (Pauly and Eckert, 2002, cited in Angela M. Lee, Chapter 40, this volume). On the other hand, some audience- and community-focused definitions have conceptualised local as a ‘sense of place’. Under these readings, local media offer ‘geo-social’ identification, placing readers and their locality in the context of the world, where the audience’s connection to the area is influenced by personal experiences (Hess and Waller,

2014 and 2016b). Irene Costera Meijer (Chapter 34, this volume) similarly argues, “What counts as local, community or regional journalism may be clear from a production perspective; from a consumer angle it depends on people’s feelings of connection to a particular space, for some a neighborhood, for others a province”. What these different conceptualisations have in common, though, is seeing local not just as a geographical setting but, equally importantly, as a social one too, where geographical and social context together create the meaning of locality. Thus, for the field, ‘local’ is not just a spatial concept, it is a place formed by its social setting.

The second key concept is ‘local media’. Meanings of local media vary, but it is often interpreted narrowly, including mainly, or in some cases only, legacy local media forms (e.g., local newspapers or radio). To add to the complexity, the meanings of local media and of community media overlap, and different research traditions have developed varied interpretations. Notably, US researchers have used the term ‘community newspaper’ since the 1960s to describe newspapers of towns and cities. Whereas in the UK a distinction is drawn between local and community media, where local media are indicative of professionalised or institutional organisations and community media of a grassroots or alternative media model, often produced by volunteers. Digital transformation and the emerging dominance of the online environment in local media during the recent decade have compounded the definitional debates of key terminology. For example, new forms of local media led to new terms such as ‘hyperlocal media’ and more recently ‘bottom-up hyperlocal media’ (Jonas De Meulenaere, Cédric Courtois and Koen Ponnet, Chapter 38, this volume). Indeed, one of the difficulties with defining local media is that the sector is characterised by great diversity of size, purpose, scope and form. To reflect this diversity, we argue for a broad conceptualisation of local media. Although varied, what the different forms of local media do have in common, and in a sense what defines them, is that their production and distribution relate to a specific locality.

There is a debate in the literature about the extent to which the content of local media is really local, and the extent to which it should be. A number of researchers warn about the declining local content in local media in recent times and the implications of this trend (e.g., Franklin, 2006; and in this volume Rachel Matthews, Chapter 1; Helen Sissons, Chapter 32; Josephine F. Coleman, Chapter 33). As Franklin observes, “In the new millennium, local newspapers are local in name only; the town or city emblazoned on the newspaper’s masthead may be one of the few remaining local features of the paper” (cited in Rachel Matthews, Chapter 1, this volume). He was referring to distant ownership by national and even multinational corporations, the concentration of often transient journalists to central newsrooms and editorial consolidations disconnecting many newspapers from the towns and cities featured on their mastheads. Angela M. Lee (Chapter 40, this volume) also argues that the nature of content in local media has changed in recent times due to the rise of suburbanisation, decentralisation of the metropolises, emergence of transnational media conglomerations, market-driven journalism, the growth of the global economy and the popularity of social media platforms. As a result, local content “became whatever interested the readers, or what was useful to the readers” (Chapter 40, this volume). However, this trend can have negative implications for communities, as content of local media matters greatly in relation to their backbone political function. Nielsen (2015) sees local media in this regard as keystone media, that are “primary providers of a specific and important kind of information” (Nielsen, 2015, loc. 1138), highlighting their role in political communication and in underpinning democratic systems and processes in local communities and beyond.

The third key term for the field is ‘community’, which arguably is an ill-defined word much used by politicians, journalists and academics. In different contexts and across different disciplines it is used in varied ways; as such, it carries different connotations and layers of meaning. In the local media field, ‘community’ and ‘local’ are sometimes used



synonymously, reflecting the importance of social context in understanding the ‘local’. The manner in which ‘community’ has been conceptualised has determined the practice of local journalists and local media legislation, regulation and policy formation, as well as the business models on which local journalism draws. A critical element of local journalists’ construction of their professional identity is as the ‘community champion’. But Rachel Matthews (Chapter 1, this volume) argues that advertising-led business models “constructed the readership as a ‘community’ to be harnessed for commercial ends” in a transactional relationship with the advertiser. Similarly, Aldridge (2003) has argued, with reference to Anderson (1991), that “creating an ‘imagined community’ is seen as a market imperative” by Britain’s local press (2003, 492).

A review of “concepts and meanings of community in the social sciences” notes that “one of the most important distinctions made is between community as an object and community as action, activity, purpose” (Walkerdine and Studdert, 2012). The examples given above demonstrate that local media organisations and local journalists have tended to conceptualise community as object, as identifiable groups that can be both addressed and commodified. However, findings emerging from this collection suggest that a transformation is taking place in the manner in which communities are perceived in the field – less as object, more as process and practice, as action, activity, purpose. Walkerdine and Studdert (2012) describe the latter as “face-to-face being-ness” made up at the micro level by instances of sociality, of communal interaction. ‘Community’ in this sense resists commodification and objectification. A sense in which local journalists and local media see their practice very much as part of those processes of community interaction, rather than primarily observers and reporters of such processes, emerges in Japan’s *Town Magazines* and the local media’s role in times of crisis (Anthony S. Rausch, Chapter 2; Florian Meissner and Jun Tsukada, Chapter 41, both this volume); India’s networks of staff and freelance journalists, activists and grassroots organisations (Ursula Rao, Chapter 14, this volume); hyper-local developments in the Nordic region and Russia (Jaana Hujanen et al., Chapter 26, this volume); in the neighbourhood Facebook groups emerging in Belgium (Jonas De Meulenaere, Cédric Courtois and Koen Ponnet, Chapter 38, this volume); and the turn towards *talanoa* processes of discussion and debate in the Pacific (Shailendra Singh, Chapter 45, this volume). Irene Costera Meijer (Chapter 34, this volume) cites a case study of Norwegian local journalists’ construction of professional identity as “community members first and journalists second”. From the audience’s perspective, she found:

[P]eople love so-called talker news items such as crime or relatively bizarre or human-interest news topics. Not because they are important, but because they facilitate (brief) conversations between relative strangers, thus strengthening people’s feeling of belonging and connection.

### **Defining features of local media**

We argue that there are three key defining features of local media that are universal, regardless of which country or part of the world they are located in:

- geo socio-political context
- relationship with the community
- position in macro media ecosystems

The three features provide a framework to analyse all forms of local media and journalism. As the insights from the chapters in this volume illustrate, these features determine all main aspects of local media, including how they operate, their content, business models, how they adopt new technologies, practices of local journalists and so forth.

### ***Geo socio-political context***

While local media and journalism do share universal values and formats, the manner in which these are locally inflected by geographical, historical, social, cultural, political, economic and technological factors generates as much diversity as similarity – within nations and regions and between them – in terms of structure, form, content and audience consumption. This *Companion*, as well as a scan of the literature, illustrates that there is a far greater degree of diversity among local than national media, and they are less reliant on and bound to particular forms. Among the different influences, much attention has focused on the ways in which local media are shaped and reshaped by technological and commercial factors. This is understandable – these are critical issues that the local media industries are dealing with every day, as demonstrated by the contributions in this volume from James Morrison (Chapter 30), Lily Canter (Chapter 31), Lenka Waschková Čísařová (Chapter 21) and Helen Sissons (Chapter 32), among others. However, local media, while clearly influenced by technological advances and economic fluctuations, reflect very closely the particular historical, geographical, social and political contexts out of which they have arisen (Hess and Waller, 2016b). It is not possible in this introductory section to give an account of all these factors and their influences, but it is possible to explore some examples on which this volume casts a spotlight.

Taking a historical perspective, Eli Skogerbø (Chapter 4, this volume) shows that “Localism and decentralisation make up a considerable part of Norwegian *political and media* history” (our emphasis). With a population of some 5 million in diverse and widely dispersed communities, “local, regional, indigenous and community media make up the backbone of the media structure and the public spheres”. She identifies three culturally specific factors that shaped the local media: local media that voiced diverse political, economic and cultural interests; a welfare state that shaped communication structures and to some extent vice versa; local media and journalism that have developed and accommodated both standardisation and assimilation, and diversity and localism. This decentralised media model, she finds, led to a particular way in which the country’s local media have transitioned to a multi-media digital environment, one that avoided the economic crisis prevalent in many countries. In a different historical background, Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva and Angela Pimenta (Chapter 3, this volume) and Juliette Marie Storr (Chapter 5, this volume) demonstrate how colonialism has had a profound impact on local media development in Brazil and the Caribbean respectively. Storr also shows how “Colonization has remained a significant legacy in contemporary Caribbean media environments influencing power relations and journalistic practices”. Da Silva and Pimenta discuss Brazil’s enduring deep geographic and socio-economic asymmetries, which involve unequal local media access and provisions leaving many Brazilian communities without local journalism. An important implication of the determining influence of the specific geo socio-political factors is that there might not be a sustainable role for local media and journalism in all contexts, leaving communities in a local media or news ‘desert’, a theme that is explored in the next section and in a number of chapters in the volume.

Political and power structures have been particularly significant contextual factors that have influenced the development of local media. Focusing on the US, C.W. Anderson (Chapter 13, this

volume) argues that the country's political and economic system renders local media and journalism particularly important but also problematic. "To the degree that modern US journalism is concerned with observing and checking the powers of political institutions, then, the role played by local journalism is of vital importance insofar as a great deal of political power is concentrated at the local level". The argument is amplified by Erika Franklin Fowler (Chapter 18, this volume), who finds that "local television news is poised to play an important informational role in democracy, both because of the size and the political interest of its core audience, which differs from the typical older, educated male audiences of many other news sources" – yet the medium "fails to live up to its potential". The consequences may be profound, she states, because not fulfilling this informational role "erodes the place-based linkages and other dimensions for finding common-ground through which national polarization might be overcome". Beyond the West, Jingrong Tong (Chapter 17, this volume) explains how, following a period of relative freedom to challenge injustice and the abuse of power after the reforms introduced in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping, local journalists in China are now compelled to play the role of propagandists for the governing party led by Xi Jinping. In the Pacific region (Shailendra Singh, Chapter 45, this volume), local political and commercial elites are intolerant of criticism, and local media organisations with fragile finances are vulnerable to threats of closure and the withdrawal of advertising. Ilya Kiriya (Chapter 16, this volume) tells of the appropriation of the local media in Russia by local political and economic elites. Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova (Chapter 28, this volume) points to the ways in which politicians across Central and Eastern Europe influence and control local media, resulting in declining professional standards. In Bulgaria, the particular focus of her study, she finds that a large proportion of the funding for local media comes from local authorities and reports disillusioned local journalists depicting the field as "lamentable, sad, desperate, critical, dismal, unenviable, a complete catastrophe". Sylwia Męćfal (Chapter 11, this volume) reports that since 2015 local journalists in Poland have faced increasingly authoritarian restrictions on the freedom to report under the populist Law and Justice Party government.

Contributions in Part II of this volume chart the many ways in which policy and regulatory regimes, other important contextual factors, have shaped local media and journalism in its form and content, the structure of the organisations and institutions that deliver them, and their degrees of diversity and plurality. Christopher Ali (Chapter 7, this volume) provides an in-depth analysis of the rise and decline of the localism principle in US broadcasting policy. Rose N. Kimani's account of local broadcasting in Kenya (Chapter 10, this volume) explains how legislators have defined 'community' and determined how local media organisations must engage with their communities. Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (Chapter 9, this volume) examine current policy debates on local journalism in Australia, arguing that the key issues are regulation of the digital environment, the future of public interest journalism at the local level and changes to media ownership rules. Aida Martori Muntsant (Chapter 12, this volume) tells how new communication laws introduced in Spain on the advent of digital terrestrial television virtually wiped out a stroke community channels that had emerged in the analogue era. What the different chapters show, however, is that policy development is dialogic, as emphasised by Rose N. Kimani (Chapter 10, this volume), that while at certain historical junctures the policy determines the operations in the field, at other times it is the existent context that determines which policies arise.

### ***Relationship with the community***

Another key feature of local media lies in their relationship with their communities. As we have seen in the section above on defining community, the nature of that relationship is

complex, nuanced – and often conflicted. As Bill Reader and John Hatcher say in the opening sentence of their contribution to this volume (Chapter 20): “Local news media have always been conflicted by their allegiances to two masters: the communities they inform, and the revenue streams that sustain them”. Rachel Matthews (Chapter 1, this volume) focuses on the revenue stream as the more dominant of the two masters in much of Britain’s mainstream local commercial media. However, in this *Companion*, the relationship with the community is explored in different contexts and from different perspectives, and what is clear is that, across the world, community focus is *a*, if not *the*, key function of many local media provisions. Both Anthony S. Rausch (Chapter 2, this volume) and Florian Meissner and Jun Tsukada (Chapter 41, this volume) find in Japan a stable and demonstrably sustainable local media sector rooted in a strong bond between local journalists and the communities in which they live and for which they report. Rausch relates this resilience to a particular set of communitarian values in Japanese local journalism, as much as the operational model that distinguishes local newspapers from the major national titles. Both chapters explore the particular journalistic approach that defined their role in local reconstruction efforts following earthquakes, giving a valued voice to local communities, immediately after the event and in longer-term policy debates. Meissner and Tsukada explore this community focus through concepts such as revitalisation journalism, care journalism and *tsunagaru* journalism, a Japanese term capturing understandings of connectivity. Tony Harcup (Chapter 46, this volume) locates a care for community in alternative media in “an attitude and approach towards the people who may be a story’s subject, source, narrator or audience, sometimes all at the same time”. He finds that whereas mainstream local journalists are often contractually obliged to abide by regulatory requirements or sets of standards imposed from without, the alternative media afford dignity to ordinary people “because they are the very reason for such media to exist”. Shailendra Singh (Chapter 45, this volume) explores the manner in which the traditional Pacific Island practices of *talanoa* (consultation and dialogue), based on indigenous communal values, can inform journalism practice in that vast and fragmented region. Adam Tanko Zakariah (Chapter 44, this volume) offers another example that falls outside traditional concepts of news reporting: the manner in which local radio broadcasts to rural farming communities are drawing on concepts of developmental journalism to educate marginal communities and help them to fight poverty.

Such examples demonstrate that there are contexts in which local media’s commitment to the communities they inform is the dominant master, using Reader and Hatcher’s analogy, and that commitment is expressed in the roles they play in strengthening and supporting those communities and building a sense of belonging. Local media and journalism are not only about providing news and information, but also binding the community together and encouraging engagement. Eli Skogerbø (Chapter 4) and Annika Bergström (Chapter 39) in this volume remind us that a number of studies in different parts of the world in different eras found clear links between local media use and citizens’ sense of belonging to a locality (e.g., Merton, 1949; Park, 1929; Elvestad, 2009; Gulyas et al., 2019). Irene Costera Meijer (Chapter 34, this volume) cites Heider et al.’s (2005) study that found audience expectations in relation to local journalism are closer to ‘good neighbour’ reporting than to ‘watchdog’ reporting, including “caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups, understanding local community, and offering solutions” (Heider et al., 2005, 961). Costera Meijer herself found that audiences’ top list for local news included history, nature and natural environment in their community, which are unlike traditional professional news criteria.

### ***Position in macro media ecosystems***

We argue that the third defining feature of local media is their relationship with national and international media ecosystems, specifically the extent to and the way in which they are embedded in national and international structures, and the part they play in those. Although local media and journalism are often studied in isolation, it is clear that they are part of macro media ecosystems. Particular important dimensions in this relationship are regulatory systems and policies, ownership, technological infrastructures, content and format flow, industry finance systems and structures, as well as audience practices. For example, in relation to content flow, it is regarded as a truism in journalism that ‘all news starts locally’, which implies that the metaphorical national and global news ecosystems depend in a fundamental sense on local news ecosystems and on ‘keystone media’ that play a critical role in “defining the state and structure of the wider environment” (Nielsen, 2015, 54). Another example is the TV newscast format that originated in US local television. Madeleine Liseblad (Chapter 6, this volume) shows how the remodelling of local news in one local TV station in the US became a dominant model for television news around the globe. This local innovation gave rise to a global transformation in the manner in which TV news engages its audiences, but equally those dynamics are reworked differently in every local context to give rise to diversity and variety.

The relationship between the local, national and international ecosystems is reciprocal. For example, national and international politics and power structures have direct influence on local media policies. In the case of Catalonia, Mariola Tarrega and Josep Àngel Guimerà (Chapter 8, this volume) find that local media policies are often drawn up “in accordance with regional and state interests that mediate them”, rather than responding to the needs and demands of local media and the local communities in which they operate. Thus, “Local media policies in Catalonia have been a political and institutional battlefield between the Spanish state and the Catalan Government, and between different party-political projects within Catalonia”. With regards to the ownership dimension, Rachel Matthews (Chapter 1, this volume) explains the implications of national media corporations’ ownership of large parts of UK local media in the later part of the twentieth century, resulting in the dominance of a commercial agenda that concentrated on profits and circulation, sidelining newspapers’ traditions and community focus.

Kellner, in his theorisation of globalisation, argues that “every local context involves its own appropriation and reworking of global products and signifiers, thus encouraging difference, otherness, diversity and variety” (2002, 293). Ritzer (2003, 193) highlights the reciprocity of such processes, and the capacity of the local to inflect the global through “the interpenetration of the global and the local ... resulting in unique outcomes in geographic areas”. This volume brings to light many of the processes by which these inflections of the global or national by the local, and the local by the global or national, generate both similarities and differences in local media around the world. Thus, in exploring local media, it is important to bear in mind that their processes and practices, institutions and organisations, form and content are informed both globally, nationally and locally.

### **Key themes in contemporary research on local media and journalism**

By bringing together analyses from different geographical and social contexts with varied historical legacies, the *Companion* allows us to highlight key themes that dominate current research on local media and journalism, and transcend national boundaries and single-perspective approaches. There are four themes that emerge as particularly significant:

- sustainability
- subsidies and state interventions
- local news deserts
- professionalism.

### ***Sustainability***

Sustainability has been one of the critical concerns of research on local media and journalism in recent years (e.g., Hess and Waller, 2016b; Briggs, 2012), and it is also a prominent issue explored in the contributions to this volume. The topic is often examined in relation to economic concerns, changing business models and their impacts. Christopher Ali, Damian Radcliffe and Rosalind Donald (Chapter 27, this volume), for example, state that local media and journalism is confronted by a “financial climate that no longer supports advertising-driven news production, a fragmented audience, and multi-media, multi-content environments demanded by both consumers and investors”. Rachel Matthews (Chapter 1, this volume) notes that in the case of the local press in Britain, “The majority of commentators argue that the once-great industry, dominated by a few huge corporations, is in a state of managed decline”. Although, she also points out that, as a management approach, cutting costs and staff to maximise revenue long predates the current downturn in fortune in the sector. Margaret Simons, Andrea Carson, Denis Muller and Jennifer Martin (Chapter 36, this volume) highlight a report by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that found that pressures on local media were resulting in a declining number of news stories and “declining ambition” in local media, with fewer full-time reporters with less time to conduct interviews and in-depth investigations. In relation to Australia, they found:

Legacy media outlets in all four [research] locations have reduced their newsrooms. This, in turn, has limited their practice of ‘shoe leather’ and ‘journal of record’ reporting, such as reporting courts and local councils. Fewer stories are covered, and a deficit in quantity and quality of reporting follows. Untrained reporters are less confident when dealing with controversial issues, and more easily used by campaigners and institutions. Public relations content and propaganda is often published without independent verification.

Marco van Kerkhoven (Chapter 24, this volume) reports a similar situation in the Netherlands, where over the past 30 years paid regional daily newspaper circulations have fallen by more than 50 per cent and the number of published titles is down from 35 in 1980 to 18 at present (Bakker and Kik, 2018). Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva and Angela Pimenta (Chapter 3, this volume) find that in Brazil, the digital revolution and a persistent economic downturn have hit small local outlets the hardest.

Thus, the contributions in the *Companion* show that fragmented audiences, multi-media, multi-content environments and declining revenues have had, in varying degrees, a global impact on local media and journalism. They also show that the sector faces significant challenges, and that financial sustainability of local media organisations is an issue in many parts of the world. But the findings also contest, in part, the dominant discourse of decline and demonstrate that, globally, the pattern is more varied, more complex, more nuanced, than it sometime appears. While there is much in the field of local media that gives rise to concern, Bill Reader and John Hatcher (Chapter 20, this volume) caution that “local media

using time-honored models may still be the most sustainable. Subscriptions and advertising remain viable where residents (including advertisers) happily support local media". This observation is borne out in the volume by contributions from diverse contexts. Ursula Rao (Chapter 14) finds national regional and local newspapers, and in particular the vernacular press, in India "all share a fundamental commitment to local news making" and are both enjoying financial success and acting "as catalyst of transformation by mediating new socialities, setting trends, and creating novel versions of the local". Here, the advertising-based business model remains successful where it is combined with a firm investment in maintaining those processes of sociality and belonging, and by giving a voice to hitherto marginalised and underprivileged groups such as rural villagers and the (formerly 'untouchable') Dalit cast.

Anthony S. Rausch (Chapter 2, this volume) reports on a commercial local newspaper sector in Japan that remains "alive and well". Although it is subject to tensions and shifts in trajectory, the sector has maintained its relevance to the communities it serves as a result of its "efforts toward editorial independence, local economic vitalization and resident place consciousness". This account is reinforced by Florian Meissner and Jun Tsukada (Chapter 41, this volume) on the conception of 'care journalism' embodied in Japanese local journalists with close-knit local networks acting in disaster situations as a mouthpiece for those affected. They prioritise the needs of victims and demonstrate a strong commitment to a duty to contribute to the welfare of local communities. In Britain, Sarah O'Hara's investigation (Chapter 22, this volume) of independent, family-owned newspapers found that that sector was not only surviving, but in some cases flourishing and expanding, having "in the main retained their local publishing footprint". She concludes that such news organisations can be sustainable if they remain "truly embedded within their local communities" and capitalise on the value of their heritage 'brand' as they develop new business models. These diverse accounts support Bill Reader and John Hatcher's argument (Chapter 20, this volume) that legacy local news organisations "which prioritize community service may be the most sustainable, perhaps because citizens reject media for whom 'community service' is empty rhetoric and support media for which 'community service' is an observable practice".

Concerns relating to sustainability reach beyond the legacy local media, of course, and further understandings from this collection relate to the extent to which new forms of local media and journalism are emerging, and the resilience they display. Of these, attention has perhaps focused most on hyperlocal media projects (Bruns et al., 2008; Metzgar et al., 2011; Van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014; Harte et al., 2017; Carlson and Lewis, 2019). In this volume, Jaana Hujanen et al. (Chapter 26) compare the complex manners in which hyperlocal media have developed in Finland, Sweden and Russia. They find the roles of journalists, hobbyists, community activists, civic leaders and media entrepreneurs intertwined, and that the differences in roles are partially embedded in the specificities of each country's media ecosystem. While the motive of delivering a community benefit is a critical factor in all three nations, the quest to marry this with commercial sustainability is most evident in Sweden. The importance of the local media ecosystem in facilitating such sustainability is also underlined by Marco van Kerkhoven (Chapter 24, this volume) in his investigation of hyperlocal journalism in the Netherlands. He finds that such ventures demonstrate greatest resilience when they are part of a rich ecosystem, and when they are not, they struggle to endure. Scott Downman and Richard Murray (Chapter 25, this volume) discover, however, that even in cities in Australia and New Zealand with a variety of local media, there are communities whose needs are not met within that apparently vibrant local ecosystem. They make a telling point, echoed elsewhere in this volume by Philip M. Napoli and Matthew S. Weber



(Chapter 35, this volume), that where strong local journalism is most needed such ventures can be the most difficult to sustain.

There are, however, grassroots models that demonstrate sustainability and longevity in very different contexts. Anthony S. Rausch reports (Chapter 2, this volume) on the *Town Shi* or Town Magazines. They started to emerge in the 1950s and many can boast of 300 and in some cases 500 issues. Community members and local business people contribute articles, production is often a tax write-off for a local printing company and they are usually distributed for free. Unlike typical digital hyperlocal projects, produced by one or two people, they are communal projects with submissions from many people, all of whom have a commitment to, and an interest in, maintaining processes of community within a locality. Similarly, Jonas De Meulenaere, Cédric Courtois and Koen Ponnet (Chapter 38, this volume) found local Facebook groups in the Belgian city of Ghent – contributors of which did not conceive of themselves as journalists – creating something:

that functions to some extent in similar ways as journalistic [hyperlocal media] initiatives ... contain[ing] a variety of neighborhood-related and community-oriented stories ... Through these, a social news stream emerges, which functions as a neighborhood awareness system that subsequently becomes a prominent gateway to neighborhood information and news.

Much content consisted of personal accounts of interests and first-hand experiences, but the groups also shared articles about the neighbourhood from regional and national newspapers or other legacy news media and information from local government, local industry or emergency services. As in the Japanese *Town Shi*, sustainability of these groups is reinforced by their cooperative nature, so the responsibility of providing content over time is a shared enterprise. And because people are depending on each other to produce such content, it is also a shared obligation, further enhancing the Facebook groups' sustainability. Importantly, however, they also draw on the wider media ecology – the 'keystone media' of local papers (Nielsen, 2015), national papers and other information providers.

Josephine F. Coleman's investigation of the production practices of licensed but amateur community radio in Britain (Chapter 33, this volume) also reveals important factors relating to the sustainability of this model. There are approximately 280 stations, some of which are members of the Community Media Association, which lobbies and liaises with government and funding bodies on their behalf and hosts networking events and workshop. Although participants are volunteers, they are licensed and regulated and have to adhere to a set of professional standards. But, as in the *Town Shi* and Ghent Facebook groups, community radio is dependent on the continuing enthusiasm, engagement and goodwill of volunteers and their commitment to providing a community service. While wages are not a cost, equipment and premises require financing, and this can come from fundraising activities within the local community and some advertising by local businesses. There also remains a dependence on the local media ecosystem – especially the commercial or public service radio sector that recruits applicants from community radio, and provides expertise in the form of retired radio practitioners prepared to share their skills.

Sustainability, then, appears to be critically dependent on the willingness, and ability, of a community to support local media and the strength of the wider local media ecosystem. Bill Reader and John Hatcher (Chapter 20, this volume) point to examples of both commercial and grassroots media and journalism where the audience, rather than, or as well as, advertisers, fund them through membership or sponsorship, and raise funds for specific projects. However, they caution that the public may be reluctant to contribute to profit-seeking organisations, especially



those that cut staff and coverage to maximise profits. Contributions to this volume suggest that local media in some regions are at a point of inflection. Rachel Matthews, drawing on a historical perspective, suggests (Chapter 1) that local media and journalism in the UK are approaching the end of an epoch defined predominantly by a corporate, profit-seeking approach and are entering another in which the sustainable delivery of a public benefit will play a more central purpose. However, we must be cautious in suggesting that this is a universal development. It might turn out to be the case in the US, UK and Australia, for example (see Rachel Matthews, Chapter 1; Bill Reader and John Hatcher, Chapter 20; Patrick Ferrucci, Chapter 42; Jan Lauren Boyles, Chapter 37; Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller, Chapter 9, this volume). However, Eli Skogerbø (Chapter 4, this volume) demonstrates that local media in Norway, shaped in part by a different social, political ethos, are successfully navigating technological disruption and avoiding the extreme economic stresses other regions have faced. In contrast, in Russia and parts of Eastern Europe, Ilya Kiriya (Chapter 16) and Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova (Chapter 28) in this volume find that political and economic elites have co-opted local media to sustain their own interests and that has resulted in a different kind of economic transformation and model of sustainability that is not dependent on progressing the interests of a particular community.

### ***Subsidies and state interventions***

Several nations, such as France, the Nordic countries, Britain and Australia, maintain a publicly funded, public service local media system, predominantly broadcast media, which operates alongside private, commercially funded institutions. In the interests of preserving diversity and plurality in the public sphere as a recognised public benefit, some countries have also chosen to directly or indirectly subsidise commercially funded local journalism (Murschetz, 2014). At a time when wide-ranging disruption of local media and journalism is giving rise to concerns about its survival as a facilitator of civic engagement and the democratic process (Gans, 2003; Fenton, 2011; Nielsen, 2015; Carson et al., 2016), some existing systems of local media subsidy are being extended and new forms of subsidy are being proposed and introduced. The accounts and analyses in this volume of systems of subsidy in local media in different countries bring to light a range of complexities inherent in this approach. While public, political and even philanthropic funding has enhanced and sustained local media and journalism in some contexts, outcomes have been shown to be uncertain and, in some cases, have reduced diversity and plurality and restricted local journalism's efficacy in civic life and the democratic process.

In Scandinavian countries, where historically subsidies have been an important part of the local media ecosystem, their overall impact has been positive. However, they seem to have played a contributing, rather than a determining, role in the sustainability of the local media ecosystem. Eli Skogerbø (Chapter 4, this volume) suggests that local newspapers in Norway, which increased in number until 2014 before showing a slight decline, might have been sustained in part by the subsidy system, which kicks in when a publication reaches a certain local penetration. She argues subsidies created incentives for local newspaper start-ups, although they do not fully explain the sustainability the sector has demonstrated. In Sweden, Gunnar Nygren (Chapter 15, this volume) explains that press subsidies were introduced in 1971 to maintain a diversity of political views by supporting secondary newspapers with a weaker share of a local market. The government's policy was that because newspapers delivered a public benefit through the performance of a democratic function, the political system had a responsibility to support that benefit. In return, the newspapers were expected to demonstrate a social responsibility. This state support was marginal, corresponding at the time to some 5–6 per cent of turnover. By 2017 their role had further diminished, decreasing to 12 dailies and 37 weeklies (out of

138 titles) and accounting for some 3 per cent of total industry revenue. Nygren finds that the system did give some newspapers a longer life and stimulated the creation of new local weekly newspapers, but the diversity of voices in Sweden's local sphere is mostly delivered today by an abundance of new online platforms and channels.

In Britain, there have been no direct subsidies to local newspapers and overall support of local media has been less effective and more fragmented than in Scandinavia. Historically, support for the UK's local newspaper industry has come in the form of reduced local taxes on their premises, exemption from tax on newspaper sales and an obligation for municipal authorities to pay for the regular publication of 'statutory notices' such as planning applications and road closures (Baines, 2014). Phil Ramsey and Philip McDermott (Chapter 43, this volume) note that in response to the decline in the sector, the government introduced a form of subsidy system in 2017 allowing local newspapers to employ 'local democracy reporters' paid by the BBC, the publicly funded broadcaster. To its critics, however, the system does not address the wider issues of failing sustainability in the commercial local newspaper sector and is also accused of subsidising corporate profits rather than sustaining public interest news (Greenslade, 2018). In 2019, Ramsey and McDermott report (Chapter 43, this volume), a UK government review into a sustainable future for journalism recommended that an Institute for Public Interest News could be set up, which would adopt the function of "channelling a combination of public and private finance into those parts of the industry it deemed most worthy of support" (Cairncross Review, 2019, 11). But at the time of writing, the British government has not committed to putting the recommendations into effect. Ramsey and McDermott's critical focus, though, is on the role national public service media play at the local level in supporting cultural minorities through broadcasting in the Irish language and for the Ulster-Scots communities in Northern Ireland – services that would not otherwise be commercially sustainable. They frame this not as a 'public good' but a 'merit good', drawing on Christopher Ali's argument, "based on a normative assumption that the good should be provided regardless of consumption habits" (Ali, 2016, 107).

Mariola Tarrega and Josep Àngel Guimerà (Chapter 8, this volume) write that successive governments in Catalonia have used public subsidies to private news media as well as a separate Catalan Public Broadcaster, news agency and media regulator to support the Catalan language and culture and promote an identity distinct from that of Spain as a whole. They note that "there are almost no impartial actors playing a role in the distribution of public subsidies to news media in Catalonia". While subsidies might be deployed to support minority languages and cultures as a 'merit good' in one context, in another, they are dictated by what Tarrega and Guimerà conclude to be "short-term partisan and corporate interests" rather than a wider public benefit. In France, in a system instituted after World War II and intended to protect the press from political interference and commercial pressure, direct and indirect subsidies make up a significant proportion of local newspaper, radio and TV revenues (Mattieu Lardeau, Chapter 23, this volume). However, instead of the intended outcome, the system has fostered close ties between the press and politicians; the growth of increasingly dominant press conglomerates; monopolistic rather than diverse local media markets; organisations that are dependent on subsidy and slow to innovate or respond to market changes; and a system in which up to 50 per cent more copies of local newspapers are printed than sold. Many local broadcasters have low viewing figures and would not survive without public funds. The result, says Lardeau, is that trust is declining in mainstream local media and increasing numbers of citizens are forsaking them for alternative online media that offer distinctive editorial content and orientation.

In Russia, during the 1990s and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ilya Kiriya explains (Chapter 16, this volume), the state guaranteed financial support for local media

to enhance pluralism. However, in the twenty-first century this was replaced by a system of selective support, aimed not at maintaining local media as institutions of public value but at maintaining the power of local political authorities. Local media in Russia are now almost completely dependent on subsidy, says Kiriya. He describes the development of “state contracts for information coverage” – a secondary, informal market in political favours financed by regional authorities. The stark result, he points out, has been an alienation of local media from local communities. Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova (Chapter 28, this volume) argues that political ownership of the local press is a characteristic of much of Eastern Europe and, as a result, in the words of Judith Bayer, “key information about political processes and corruption are concealed” (Bayer, 2017, 25). However, this is not a concern confined to the East. C.W. Anderson (Chapter 13, this volume) points to the danger of powerful local political figures in the United States taking over local media, not for economic profit, but to advance political goals and the consolidation of elite power. This has long been a criticism of media owners on the national stage (see, for example, Cudlipp’s account (1980) of press barons in the US and Britain) and the global stage (McChesney, 2000). The argument here is that ownership motivated by a desire to use local media as vehicles to exert power and influence, irrespective of the economic sustainability of the enterprises, can be regarded as a form of subsidy. However, it is a subsidy applied with a view to protecting private or sectional interests, rather than public benefits. It is a danger to which Shailendra Singh (Chapter 45, this volume) is alert. He argues that local journalism in the Pacific region, as a public benefit, should receive direct public funding where it is in jeopardy, but acknowledges the danger of journalism becoming dependent on and a mouthpiece for local politicians. He suggests that a tradition of journalism informed by traditional communal values such as dialogue, discussion, compromise and conflict avoidance would mitigate that risk.

Overall, research within this volume demonstrates that subsidies and state interventions are both extensive and are features of widely diverse local media markets. Where commercial local media is under stress, public support is increasingly being looked to as a means to maintain the public benefit – or merit – of a diverse and pluralistic local media ecology and as a facilitator of civic and democratic engagement. While contributors to this volume demonstrate that subsidies can be beneficial – as in Norway and Sweden, for example – in other contexts, such as France, the effects have been counter-productive in the long run, diminishing plurality and diversity. Yet in new democracies and non-democratic systems, such strategies carry a risk that public support is deployed to benefit political and commercial interests rather than a wider public benefit.

### ***Local news deserts***

Contributions in this volume, as well as recent literature, demonstrate that the ‘crisis in local media and journalism’, while not universal, is affecting some areas more than others. Recently, those most severely affected have been conceptualised as ‘news deserts’ (e.g., Abernathy, 2016; Stites, 2011). At their worst, these relate to communities that have no local media serving their needs. In this volume, Philip M. Napoli and Matthew S. Weber (Chapter 35), Simons et al. (Chapter 36), Scott Downman and Richard Murray (Chapter 25), Marco van Kerkhoven (Chapter 24) and Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva and Angela Pimenta (Chapter 3) all explore contexts where local media gaps emerge. Da Silva and Pimenta (Chapter 3) discuss the historical and contemporary reasons and conditions that have led to news deserts in Brazil, where they find 51 per cent of municipalities, home to 30 million Brazilians, around a sixth of the population, have no news organisations registered within them. Philip M. Napoli and Matthew S. Weber (Chapter 35) present findings of a large-scale empirical study on news deserts and

at-risk communities in the United States, which found 20 per cent of their sample communities completely lacked local journalism. Consequences, they warn, include less efficient, more costly, unscrutinised local government; deficiencies in citizens' knowledge and participation in civic life; and individuals and organisations with more partisan agendas filling the vacuums. Other authors in this volume demonstrate that similar processes are taking place in Australia (Margaret Simons and Jason Bosland, Chapter 19; Simons et al., Chapter 36), where journalism of record is being eroded; New Zealand (Scott Downman and Richard Murray, Chapter 25; Helen Sissons, Chapter 32); and the Netherlands (Marco van Kerkhoven, Chapter 24), where major cities such as Almere with 200,000-plus citizens have no local media.

The concept of the news desert has been informed primarily by research into the economic stresses on local news media: the closing of newspapers and radio stations, the paring back of newsrooms and editorial staff, the concentration of local news workers in central locations, distant from communities they purport to serve. However, contributions to this volume invite a re-evaluation of the concept of the news desert to embrace the *content* provided by local news media. Ilya Kiriya (Chapter 16) speaks of local newspapers' descending into irrelevance in which people see them "not so much as 'our paper' or even 'their paper' but 'what paper?'". Jingrong Tong (Chapter 17) reports how central political direction has obliged local news media to adopt the role of party propagandist in China rather than providing news and content that serves a community's particular information needs. However, the lack of local media – or local media that is present but considered irrelevant and thus ignored by their communities – raises concerns that go beyond the provision of news and the emergence of so-called democratic deficits. We have seen above that local media fulfil a purpose in supporting and sustaining the processes and practices that make up communities by strengthening people's feelings of belonging and connection. So rather than conceptualising the lack of local media simply in terms of 'news deserts', approaching this aspect from the perspective of 'local media gaps' allows us to consider the loss represented by the depletion of local media ecosystems in a more holistic sense, as a diminution of the opportunities for sociality, of face-to-face encounters, of affective interactions – of 'community' itself.

### ***Professionalism***

There is a rich tradition of research into the professionalisation of journalism and journalism work. Deuze (2005) critiques the manner in which journalists have developed an occupational ideology to make sense of their role and societal value – "how the profession makes sense of itself" – seeing themselves as providing a public service; being objective, fair and trustworthy; working autonomously with a social responsibility and ethical sensibility. However, much of this attention has focused on the institutional setting of the newsroom, often neglecting the "places, spaces, practices and people at the margins of this spatially delimited news production universe" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009, 23). Deuze and Witschge (2018) argue that these people, practices, places on the margins are better understood through conceptual lenses of 'networked journalism' (Van der Haak et al., 2012) and 'liquid journalism' (Deuze, 2008), which both explore the post-industrial context and character of journalism work. This takes place in a fragmented, interconnected, collaborative manner,

in the offices and on the work floors of specific institutions – including newsrooms – but also at home, the atelier-style offices of editorial collectives and journalism startups, and in free Wi-Fi café environments.

*(Deuze and Witschge, 2018, 173)*

A consequence of these transformations has been the repeated engagement of journalists within the ‘mainstream’ sector in ‘boundary work’, “intensely debating what journalism is and who can be considered to be a ‘real’ journalist” (*ibid.*, 168). Deuze and Witschge (2018) argue that such a debate is sterile. But this volume demonstrates the manner in which such arguments are contingent on context. C.W. Anderson (Chapter 13), citing revelations relating to the 2016 US presidential election, raises concerns about state actors disguised on social media as ordinary citizens “hijacking the public discourse for nefarious purposes”, and argues that such factors as fake news and the rise of populism have rekindled debates about trust and normative functions of journalism and journalists. Other contributors to this volume testify to the messy, chaotic nature of local and community media and journalism today. They reflect the erosion of mainstream local media in many regions, the tensions between occupational ideologies and commercial and political imperatives, and the challenges of making a living in local journalism. However, they also reflect a pressing concern about the roles local media and journalism play in communities and wider society. Gunnar Nygren (Chapter 15, this volume) finds that local journalists in Sweden feel their professional standing is under threat as municipalities, police and other organisations communicate directly with their audiences. Jaana Hujanen et al. (Chapter 26, this volume) have discovered that while community members are setting up hyperlocal non-profit news hubs in Russia, they purposefully do not identify themselves as journalists, and the authors conjecture that this is because of the perception of professional local journalists as allies of local political authorities.

Resonating with transformations recounted above of local media and journalism from observer to participant in processes and practices of community, several contributors point to emerging understandings of local media and journalism in terms of ‘collaborative practice’. Ursula Rao (Chapter 14, this volume) recounts the collaborations between staff reporters, freelancers and local activists in producing local newspapers that are remediating the ‘local’ in India. Jan Lauren Boyles (Chapter 37, this volume) explores the way local newspapers in the US are partnering with news non-profits, philanthropic foundations and civic technologists to address shared, societal problems by “collectively engag[ing] in the local community”. Lily Canter (Chapter 31, this volume) finds that senior editorial staff tend to use Twitter as a promotional tool on local newspapers in Britain, while individual journalists use it to interact and engage with their audience, blurring the boundaries between the professional and the personal. Tony Harcup (Chapter 46, this volume) finds in the ‘alternative’ local media in Britain media production as ‘active citizenship’, a ‘social function’ media.

This volume also places a spotlight on the manner in which dominant Western understandings of and approaches to journalism are being challenged in other regions. Shailendra Singh (Chapter 45, this volume) finds promise in indigenous dialogical *talanoa* traditions in developing a values-based practice more relevant to the particular concerns of Pacific Island communities. Florian Meissner and Jun Tsukada (Chapter 41, this volume) find professional identities of Japanese journalists expressed through *tsunagaru* journalism, capturing understandings of connectivity. In South America, Yennué Zárate Valderrama (Chapter 29, this volume) explores the successful application of local knowledge and understanding to the development of an education programme for local journalists covering the conflict that had beset Colombia for more than 50 years. The Western model of journalism education, says Zárate, was more suited to training correspondents who visited a conflict zone, reported and departed, rather than local journalists working full-time within such a zone. Zárate adds that the research that went into the programme’s development arguably offers “an important contribution to de-Westernise[ing] journalism studies”.

## Signposts to further research

As local media ecologies are in a state of flux there are many areas for future research to explore, but we propose more focus on the following.

- The field would benefit from more robust theorisation and greater precision of concepts. As C.W. Anderson (Chapter 13, this volume) notes, the literature can be “a rather presentist account of local journalism developments, one lacking a robust intellectual structure that allows it to be more easily integrated with other research in media sociology”.
- We call for more comparative approach to study local media and journalism, in order to render the invisible visible (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). A comparative approach helps to identify general trends, universal features and to develop common frameworks. Empirical studies have often been small-scale, focusing on specific localities and regions, making it difficult to generalise and draw conclusions for the field as a whole. In relation to empirical work, the field could also benefit from sharing research data more, which would in turn encourage more comparative studies.
- We also call for greater awareness of historical connections. Local media have a long history, and yet our understanding of historical development of the sector, its continuities and discontinuities, and how histories and their legacies shape contemporary structures and realities is arguably limited.
- Sustainability is an important theme for the field; however, we propose that research around it considers sustainability of local media ecosystems *in toto*, and not just those of individual outlets or organisations, and examines the roles audiences and communities play in sustaining local media.
- We need more insights into the factors that lead to ‘local media gaps’ and the reasons for differences between communities in relation to the size and quality of their local media and journalism provisions. As Philip M. Napoli and Matthew S. Weber (Chapter 35, this volume) point out, there is a need for more “robust efforts to try to bring greater nuance and specificity to understanding the state of local journalism in individual communities”.
- The field would also benefit from more investigations into questions of power and politics in the digital age in relation to local media and journalism, which is also a call made by C.W. Anderson (Chapter 13, this volume). For example, what are the implications of fake news at the local level? What is the relationship between local journalism and political populism?
- Journalism, in the West at least, has long been considered a competitive field. However, this *Companion* illuminates the manner in which collaboration is either emerging, or can be identified, as a factor in building resilience and sustainability in the sector. Collaboration can take place between journalist and community (Anthony S. Rausch, Chapter 2; Ursula Rao, Chapter 14; Jaana Hujanen et al., Chapter 26; Patrick Ferrucci, Chapter 42), or between institutional actors (Eli Skogerbø, Chapter 4; Yennué Zárate Valderrama, Chapter 29; Jan Lauren Boyles, Chapter 37; Adam Tanko Zakariah, Chapter 44, all this volume). Further interrogation of the collaborative turn in producing and sustaining local media ecologies promises to offer new understandings of the roles that local media and journalism might endure as participants in the processes and practices of community.
- Finally, we need greater and more nuanced understanding of the outcomes and effectiveness of subsidy systems and regulatory interventions in local media. As our discussion above shows, calls for support for local media could be well justified, but the success of such support cannot be taken for granted.



## **Structure of the book**

The *Companion* offers a collection of invited contributions from scholars across the world. The volume is structured in six parts, each exploring a particular aspect of local media and journalism. These parts provide the framework to bring together and consolidate the latest research and theorisations from the field, and fresh understandings of local media from a comparative perspective and within a global context.

Part I explores histories and legacies of local media and journalism in different parts of the world covering the UK, Japan, Brazil, Norway, English-speaking Caribbean countries and the US. The key questions that contributors address are balance of power, usefulness of a historical approach and whether or not current local media are in decline, from a historical perspective. The chapters illustrate how local media have been shaped by history, geography and the social and political context of a country or region. The importance of legacies and viewing current developments through a historical lens are emphasised in the contributions. The chapters also show that local media has been a dynamic sector across the world, evolving in response to societal and technological changes.

Part II considers local media policies in different countries including the US, Spain (Catalonia), Australia, Kenya, Poland and Scotland. In particular, the contributions explore the factors that have shaped local media policies, what the key current debates are, and how local, national and international power structures influence the formation of local media policies. The analyses show that, historically, local media policies have been fairly interventionist in many parts of the world with the aim to promote particular public, political or national interest. However, the contributions highlight the impact of neoliberalism and deregulations on local media policy formation in recent decades. These policy trends are now being questioned especially in the light of changes in the digital environment and emergence of digital superpowers, such as Google and Facebook. A number of contributors call for more interventionist policies to ensure that local media can retain quality journalism, fulfil their unique social and political roles and serve their communities effectively. Elsewhere, the chapters emphasise that local media policymaking is complex and intertwined with regional and national interests.

Part III interrogates complexities of the political contexts in which local media function in the US, India, Sweden, Russia and Australia, the tensions to which the dynamics of power give rise and how these are – or are not – resolved with regard to the media's roles in the local public sphere. The contributions identify the manner in which political and economic interests at the national and local level are restricting local media and restraining them from reporting on matters of public concern that might be inconvenient to administrative authorities. Some contributors raise concerns about the fragmentation of communication through social media that at once democratise the media landscape, but also allow powerful local political interests to address their publics directly, avoiding analysis and criticism, offer a platform for populism and prejudice, and permit powerful state actors to disguise themselves as ordinary people in seeking to hijack the public discourse for nefarious purposes. The loss of local media's role as journal of record is laid bare. However, there are also examples of rich interactions between local politicians, journalists, activists and grassroots organisations that are giving rise to powerful social change.

Part IV opens with a global perspective on the forms and structures of ownership ranging from mega corporations to non-profit hyperlocals, but it is argued that the focus on ownership is misdirected and sustainability is critically dependent on a management style that is focused on its community, and adaptive to changing idiosyncrasies and diversities within each community.

That thesis is tested by investigations of very different ownership and management models in the Czech Republic (national), Britain (a comparison between family-owned and corporate-owned local media and the manner in which they engage their respective communities) and France, where a system of state subsidy has largely failed to produce the plurality and diversity it was originally designed to deliver. However, contributions about the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand on hyperlocal start-ups demonstrate that a close focus on the community, while a necessary, is not always a sufficient factor in building resilience in local media ecosystems.

Part V offers a collection of essays on local journalists and journalistic practices in different types of local media organisations in Finland, Sweden, Russia, the US, Bulgaria, Colombia, the UK and New Zealand. This part explores how the profession and its practices are changing in different local media settings, and in particular how new digital technologies and the digital environment are impacting how journalists work. The chapters illustrate how local and national contexts influence local journalists' practices, their educational needs and perceptions of their roles. Contributions show how the digital environment is changing local journalists' practices and the challenges that this entails, and warn that these changes involve a more commercially orientated, less community-focused approach to local news making. The section closes with a methodological contribution presenting a reflexive and practice-focused approach to researching local radio journalism.

Part VI explores some of the key debates and trends regarding communities and audiences of local news. The section overall addresses three key questions: how communities and audiences engage and interact with local media and their perceptions about them; how local news consumptions are changing in a digital environment; and how a local media deficit is impacting communities. Some of the contributions provide insights into which communities are more at risk of having a local news deficit and how the decline of legacy local media is impacting communities. Other analyses show that practices and understandings of local news and local news consumption in the digital environment are complex, that consumption patterns do not change overnight and that audiences have different news values to professional journalists. Online platforms, especially social media, offer new hybrid forms of local communication that function as a neighbourhood awareness system, but which raise questions around what local media and news are, and who local journalists are in the digital environment.

Part VII invites us to consider what – and who – local media are for, exploring understandings of local media as a public good from contexts as diverse as Japan, the Pacific and Northern Ireland. It examines the manner in which local media and journalism might be considered a 'merit good' in helping to build a sense of belonging and considers how concepts of care and revitalisation are also found in a collaborative turn in non-profit start-ups in the US. Collaboration is also shown to be a critical characteristic of local media in many parts of the world – reflected in a respect for place and people, and a set of professional values that grow out of reflections on what, and who, journalism is for. These are also the considerations that we find expressed in very pragmatic terms, such as informing local radio output in Africa that is intended to help rural farmers lift themselves out of poverty.

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## PART I

# Histories and legacies of local media and journalism



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# 1

## HISTORICISING THE AFTERLIFE

### Local newspapers in the United Kingdom and the ‘art of prognosis’

*Rachel Matthews*

#### **Introduction**

The dominant understanding of the local newspaper in the United Kingdom is that its days are numbered. Such is the precarity of income streams that it is facing nothing short of an ‘apocalypse’, with peak sales a distant memory (Thompson, 2017). In the UK the twin drivers of digital technology and the 2008 recession means traditional news brands have seen a 50 per cent fall in both advertising and circulation revenue (Mediatique, 2018, 4).<sup>1</sup> The majority of commentators argue that the once-great industry, dominated by a few huge corporations, is in a state of managed decline and that the situation amounts to nothing short of an ‘existential threat’. This analysis is predicated on the reliance of the newspaper on advertising revenue for profit – a revenue stream that has been fundamentally impacted by the advent of online competitors. Similarly, it is this reliance that underwrites the dominant response to the contemporary landscape of cost-cutting and closure. The effects of this ‘mini-max’ strategy, epitomised in the corporate-owned newspaper, have been well documented (see, among others, Franklin, 2006; Ramsay and Moore, 2016) and characterised as resulting in fewer staff being asked to do more work in more ways while titles shrink, merge and close in an attempt to maintain revenues.

However, local newspapers are complicated products; they are, at heart, commercial in nature but they are simultaneously charged with a key role in the local democratic process. Local newspapers in the UK have their roots in entrepreneurial products launched in early eighteenth century to capitalise on the emerging market for ‘news’. Since then, a wide range of products have lay claim to the moniker ‘local newspaper’, from highly local, even amateur free sheets covering a village or small town, to sophisticated daily titles aligned with cities and regions, selling hundreds of thousands of copies per day. For the past 100 years, the local newspaper market has been dominated by highly commercialised products, owned by a decreasing number of national and international corporations. Now reduced in number,<sup>2</sup> but more significantly in revenues, their decline has produced anxiety for those who see these titles as stitched into the fabric of communities, acting as watchdogs to scrutinise those in power. The centralisation or

closure of titles is interpreted as leaving behind impoverished “news deserts” (Abernathy, 2018). In turn, this brings a sense of urgency to the question of the future of these titles and in the UK has prompted government intervention, most recently via the Cairncross Review into the sustainability of quality journalism. This reveals the duality that underwrites the understanding of the local newspaper. On the one hand is the social value ascribed to it via the service it provides to communities;<sup>3</sup> on the other, it is a free-market product, which commodifies the audience to draw profit from advertising. It is this tension that underwrites much of the response to the perceived threat to the local newspaper. Significantly for this discussion of the contribution of history to our understanding of the current predicament, it is this tension that can be usefully illuminated by locating the local newspaper as an historical entity. As Koselleck (2002, 135) suggests,

there are structures that endure and there are processes that persist; both necessitate and outlast the respective individual events in which history itself takes place.

History enables us to disentangle the local newspaper from the current crisis to work out what has endured or changed, and so what the future might hold. This chapter suggests history can do this in three key ways: first, by revealing the nature of the relationship between newspaper, people and profit over time; second, by critically engaging with the social expectations placed on local newspapers by demonstrating that profit has shaped their form and content; and third, by analysing what the contemporary anxiety about those social expectations suggests for the future.

### **The utility of history to understanding the local newspaper**

Though often absent from scholarly approaches to the media, history is particularly useful to understanding the newspaper, in order to move beyond its inherent focus on change. Jeremy Black contends the dominance of change is both internal, because of the focus of news and speed of delivery, and external, because of the “contextual transformations” that are significant to its development. To understand the newspaper at points in time is to recognise, for example, the impact of the rise of literacy in the late nineteenth century, or the invention of the telegraph, or of rival mediums like radio and television, or shifts in law and regulation, all of which shape newspapers and newspaper practice. This means that the considerable task of newspaper history is to chart “shifts in content, production, distribution, and the nature of competition and the social context” (Black, 2001, 1). However, the dominance of change also disengages the newspaper from a sense of history so that our vision of it can be reduced to something that is relatively ephemeral, punctuated by events in the recent past. *Press Gazette* does not look far for the factors that sent Johnston Press into administration in November 2018.

This is a story of how decisions made in the JP boardroom up to 2005, by executives who made their money and then headed for the golf course, have dogged the group and its 200 newspaper titles.

*(Ponsford, 2018)*

This short view of history is amplified in a digital landscape where the rapid introduction of technologies and platforms means transience can be mistaken for innovation and where mastery of the latest digital tool replaces contemplation of fundamental shifts. It truncates institutional

memory and reinforces the obsession with the immediate that condemns our consideration of events to a “collective amnesia” (Pickering, 2015, 12).

Historicising the newspaper is further dogged by the nostalgic perspective of the autobiographical and celebratory accounts that dominate descriptions of the past of the provincial news industry and that reproduce and reinforce the mythology of its people and their work. Like its national counterpart, whose story has often been told either through the lens of the great men – and it is overwhelmingly men – or via the Liberal interpretation as the battle for press freedom (O’Malley, 2012), the story of the provincial newspaper has largely been told by people who document the origins of their own careers, or by titles that are celebrating landmark dates. So, Richard Stott, editor of the *Daily Mirror* in the 1980s and 1990s, recalls with fondness the weekly *Bucks Herald* where he started his career aged 19 (Stott, 2002). And writing of regional dailies in Scotland, Harry Reid, editor of *The Herald*, describes his book as a “last hurrah for those who took part in what was undoubtedly a golden age of the Scottish Press” (2006, ix). Reid admits that

journalists, even the most cynical and hard-bitten, do nostalgia like few others do. They take a sumptuous relish in retelling the gorgeous tales of the past, and in perhaps just embroidering a little bit here and there.

(2006, ix)

Here nostalgia simplifies the meaning of the local newspaper by presenting it as enduring and unproblematic. Underpinning Stott’s remembrance, for instance, is the view of the function of local newspaper implied by work routines dominated by the coverage of courts and councils. He describes senior reporter, Phil Fountain.

Local councils and courts were meat and drink to him. Immaculate shorthand note, all the councillors and the coppers at his beck and call, the holder of 1,000 borough secrets.

(2002, 90)

Such laudatory accounts go some way to explaining populist conceptions, such as community friend or unerring watchdog, which are reproduced both inside and outside of the industry. This process has become magnified in relation to the local paper by the comparative lack of critical engagement by academics with its history so that they are similarly seduced by the idea of a golden age. Such an approach creates a flawed mirror to hold up to the contemporary title by the implication that something has been lost because the pursuit of profit has driven out some higher goal, despite the lack of evidence that titles have ever put purpose before profit. This nostalgic view becomes entrenched as the gap between the apparently gilded past and the problems of the doomed present seemingly widens “in order to dramatise the headlong fall from grace to the present” (Tosh, 2008, 34), without recognising that the image of the past off which it feeds is itself distorted.

### **Provincial newspaper: community servant or shareholder powerhouse?**

The lay understanding of the local newspaper is that the reader is the audience; in contrast, a political economic analysis of titles demonstrates that it is primarily the advertiser who is the main funder, and therefore the first audience in a process that is amplified by the dominant corporate-owned newspaper. In this tri-partite relationship, the reader is a commodity to be



sold to the advertiser in a process that finds its apotheosis in the free printed newspaper where all pretence of sale is abandoned for the ease of mass distribution that guarantees a circulation. This free-distribution model transfers online courtesy of digital technology but falters in terms of generating revenue because of competition from alternative platforms and because advertisers will not pay the same for an online presence as they will for print adverts (Douglas, 2016). However, critiques such as those outlined in the opening of this chapter mostly compare the contemporary industry with an imagined past where newspapers were focused on delivering service to readers. In contrast, my historicisation of the provincial newspaper (Matthews, 2017a) demonstrates that it has always been a commercial venture and that the pursuit of profit is the central premise that underwrites all other elements, including its name, content, relationship with the audience and social standing. I suggest a typology of the provincial press with six stages, characterised by a shift in emphasis between the key elements of state control, political economy and, significantly, ownership, social influence and production techniques – typically driven by new technology.

In brief these six stages are: first, the local newspaper as an entrepreneurial and opportunistic product from the early eighteenth century, produced by printers capitalising on the emerging market for news and allied with other business interests such as quack medicines. Second, these titles are used – and subsidised – for political campaigning and so an association with the idea of the fourth estate emerges in the nineteenth century; third, this political partisanship gives way as these titles become aligned with local markets as they become increasingly commercially sophisticated with the advent of New Journalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Next, this commercialism results in an increasingly consolidated form of ownership in chains, which has implications for structure and purpose; fifth, editorial is increasingly subjugated to the market as titles are increasingly corporatised; and sixth, the contemporary picture of a crisis of this model, disrupted by digital technology.

This typology calls on us to rethink how we understand the local newspaper and its relationship with profit and community service. These ‘epochs’ of the provincial newspaper industry can also be understood in terms of variances in the balance of power between content, audience and advertiser in the production process. This enables the historian to trace the emergence of what we might consider to be fundamental principles of the local newspaper alongside its development as a profitable business proposition. For instance, the editorial focus on the ‘local’ is increasingly evident as newspapers seek to capitalise on profitable advertising markets by developing circumscribed circulation areas, which differentiates them from competitors at the turn of the twentieth century. It is from this commercially driven position that the notion of the local newspaper as a community champion emerges; therefore, our understanding of the local press as a watchdog, or localised fourth estate, is as a by-product of this commercial position rather than a *raison d’être* of these titles, as nostalgia would have us believe.

This understanding therefore sheds a new light on how we think about the ‘now’ of the local newspaper and how we approach the anxiety about the ability of the local newspaper to serve this supposed democratic function. As Laslett suggests in his critique of the nostalgia for the extended family, “... all historical knowledge is knowledge with a view to ourselves as we are here and now” (1965, 229); his survey of family structure reveals that the nuclear family, far from being a modern anomaly, is an historically dominant norm. Therefore, harking back to the extended family is inappropriate because it has not been ‘lost’. Similarly, my analysis, which positions profit as the consistent motive for newspaper production, suggests the nostalgia we have for the local newspaper as first and foremost community champion is similarly inappropriate. However, this is where the utility of history as a tool for prognosis comes in by leading us to re-examine this nostalgic attitude and to ask, what does the anxiety about this loss itself tell

us? The question becomes not ‘do local newspapers act as watchdogs’, but ‘should they’? And if they should, ‘what do they need to be like in order to do so?’ In this way we can begin to look past the ‘now’ of the current crisis, to the future.

### **‘Potholes’: what trips us up, what changes, what stays the same?**

The nostalgic assumptions we hold about the provincial newspaper are further challenged by what appear as “potholes” (Tosh, 2008, 49) in the historical road – anomalies that demand that we revisit assumptions. One such challenge comes in the idea that newspaper owners fought government taxation to create a ‘free’ local press in the nineteenth century. Stamp Duty taxed each sheet of paper used in newspaper production, the impact of which was to limit sales because it increased the cost; it was vilified as a tax on knowledge by a widespread campaign for its repeal. However, the Provincial Newspaper Society, representing the publishers of local newspapers, perhaps counter-intuitively, did not support the campaign (Whorlow, 1886). This was because Stamp Duty had the additional effect of limiting entry to the market because of the capital required to stock up on the stamped paper. The proprietors feared that abolition would “open the door to a host of nobodies who would lower the tone of the press, and elbow the old established concerns out of the field” (1886, 53). Instead, taxation kept the newspaper in the hands of the ‘respectable’ “men of substance”, who made up the membership of the Provincial Newspaper Society. It was not until the ‘illegal’ unstamped press had developed a mass market and challenged the sale of ‘official’ stamped titles that the duty on paper, and a similar tax on advertising, was dropped. Even then the Society attempted to persuade owners to fix the price of newspapers as a way of maintaining the ‘value’ of the information within them.

The Provincial Newspaper Society advocated for the ‘quality’ of local newspapers in terms of those who owned them and worked to profess the value of the local titles, claiming that they were

leaders of public opinion ... the non-metropolitan journals of today are admitted to wield an influence as great, if not greater, in the aggregate than that of the entire London press.

(1886, 104)

As the twentieth century progressed, this notion of influence was refined around a local audience so that titles increasingly claimed a role in local democracy. As titles increasingly aligned themselves with a defined geographical advertising market, so the journalism became overtly ‘local’; at the same time journalistic innovations designed to appeal to wider audiences, including women and children, were matched by a growth in advertising and an editorial form of ‘parish pump patriotism’, which constructed the readership as a ‘community’ to be harnessed for commercial ends.<sup>4</sup> Even during the Second World War, the local paper narrated its role as serving communities, unflinching in the face of disaster (Fletcher, 1946), while at the same time enjoying a period of guaranteed profitability.<sup>5</sup> In 1937, of the 207 newspapers surveyed by the postwar Royal Commission on the Press, 18 per cent were making a loss. By 1946, out of 225 only 3 per cent were not making a profit (Royal Commission, 1947–1949, 81). Yet a detailed analysis of local newspaper coverage suggests that rather than supporting populations, the dominant editorial stance of the Blitz Spirit – ‘we can take it’ – may have been counter-productive because it did not offer a realistic portrayal of local life.<sup>6</sup> However, publishers were keen to stay in business rather than risk censure and possible closure by honestly describing the post-Blitz conditions – as happened to the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party.

This chapter therefore suggests that from the mid-nineteenth century the pursuit of profit by the local newspaper blended with a residual discourse of political purpose, which was increasingly refined around a local market. As local newspapers developed into increasingly sophisticated commercial products, concern about their ability to serve a democratic function emerged, and as the twentieth century progressed this concern was amplified and accelerated as the industry became increasingly concentrated. In the 1920s this concern manifested as resistance by some titles and some populations to acquisition by press barons, including Northcliffe. A decade later the theme was embedded in an increasingly politicised debate between those who saw newspapers as benefiting communities, and those who saw them as benefiting capital. The left-leaning think-tank Political Economic Planning wrote of newspapers in 1938,

The Press is a highly competitive industry run largely for profit and attracting to its service those who are able and willing to be useful in the pursuit of profit. The commercial function of the Press thus conflicts with its social function as an agency of enlightenment.

*(Political and Economic Planning, 1938, 30)*

These arguments found their clearest expression in the Royal Commission on the Press 1947–1949, which resonates with the contemporary concerns outlined in the introduction. Opening the debate in the House of Commons, MP and NUJ member Haydn Davies (St Pancras, South West), said

We have watched the destruction of great papers. We have watched the combines come in, buying up and killing independent journals, and we have seen the honourable profession of journalism degraded by high finance and big business.

*(Hansard 1946, vol. 428, cc452456)*

By the 1960s, Canadian newspaper owner Roy Thomson, whose corporation owned a considerable number of provincial titles, was able to proclaim that his sole interest in owning newspapers was to make money. Two decades later Lord Goodman, a former chairman of the *Observer* Trust and the Newspaper Publishers' Association, decried this trend, which was separating profit and quality, in his foreword to a volume on the centenary of the Institute of Journalists.

[T]he ownership of newspapers is passing rapidly from the hands of those of who feel a deep concern and regard of the maintenance of newspaper traditions and the real purpose they are designed to serve, and into the hands of commercial interests who primary and natural objective is to increase circulation, often to the disregard of quality and standards.

*(Bainbridge, 1984, xv)*

As a theme, this tension between profit and public good flows through even supposed moments of revolution in the local newspaper industry, including changes in taxation, the introduction of computers to replace hot metal or the crisis of the digital. However, while previously its expression may have prompted government enquiries, it has not challenged the corporate dominance of the local newspaper. It is only now that this structure is threatened by the precipitous fall in revenues. But history also evidences that the cost-cutting strategy, positioned as a response to that fall in profit, pre-dates it by decades. This then calls for a re-assessment of the causality of

the crisis; does the fall in revenues justify the reduction of resources in the product, or is that reduction itself partly responsible for that crisis but undermining the product itself?

The few remaining balance sheets for the provincial newspaper in the last century suggest that the balance between profit and quality was under pressure even when titles were yielding substantial revenues for large businesses. For these corporations newspapers were just one way of making money among others, like “zinc-mining in Newfoundland and the manufacture of glue” (PEP, 1938, 10). Archives relating to the *South Wales Echo* demonstrate staff cuts and smaller newspapers were among the ways the Thomson-owned evening newspaper generated increased profit in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> By 1971 the management reports stated the Cardiff evening newspaper was achieving 15 per cent more revenue than expected, but was still on a drive to save costs. This approach to cost-cutting was a management strategy to maximise revenue, rather than a response to an economic or technological climate. Indeed, Simpson contends that the shift from hot metal to computerised technology in the local newspaper industry was itself driven by this strategy because of the cost benefits it offered. This era of technological change therefore marked a shift in the understanding of the role of editorial in the newspaper as it becomes a cost to be controlled and reporting events become a “means to an end” rather than an end in itself (Simpson, 1981, 114). This facilitates an ideological shift that takes resources away from editorial and that sets the scene for the decline of the local newspaper, so ably documented by Franklin and Murphy, who conclude that the “localism of the local press is increasingly illusory” (1991, 195), and which can also be linked causally to the contemporary crisis.

### **Conclusion: the ‘art of prognosis’, looking back to look forward**

While much of the discussion about the contemporary industry positions the impact of digital technology as an unprecedented disruption, this chapter demonstrates that there are also continuities in the discourse surrounding it that challenge the focus on day-to-day changes, such as technological innovation. Our task is to move beyond this “relentless presentism”, which “promotes superficial analysis” (Tosh, 2008, 7), to separate the crisis of the local paper into its constituent parts: corporate managerialism, which has seen the local newspaper homogenised and centralised; the crisis in revenue outlined in the opening section of this chapter; and the anxiety about the supposed impact of this on the social function of these titles.

First, history demonstrates that the dominant pattern of corporate ownership that is particularly imperiled by the fall in advertising revenues is a stage in the existence of the local newspaper. Outside of this particular moment local newspapers have had a successful and, significantly, profitable existence drawing on a variety of values and associated interests. The present crisis of advertising revenue need not then be the end because we can position the current crisis-hit corporate model as an epoch, rather than an end. This is not to deny the facticity of the fall in revenues and the impact that has had on the advertising-led profit model for the local newspaper industry. However, in tracing the trend of cutting inputs to maximise outputs – which severs editorial quality from newspaper sales – as predating the current crisis, this strategy can be understood beyond a contemporary phenomenon, justified by the digital threat. Instead, it is a commercial strategy underwritten by corporate managerialism that has been in place some 50 years. It can therefore be seen as an explanation for the crisis as much as a response to it because of the impact it has had on the organisation and content of titles and critically because it has severed the relationship between quality and profit so that these newspapers have a reduced ability to call on the value within their pages as a sustainable source of income.

Second, we can see that the anxiety about the impending end of the corporate newspaper is more than a response to recent chain of events, and is in fact the latest iteration of the battle

between those who would have newspapers make money and those who would have them serve communities. For a section of journalism entrepreneurs it is this latter principle that has offered them a way forward in the form of not-for-profit enterprises, which seek revenue support from within the community. It seemed significant as I wrote this chapter that recognition that these principles could apply to the legacy newspaper is beginning to reach industry commentators. *Guardian* columnist Roy Greenslade (2018) suggests it is

time now for a different approach, for the emergence of a journalism based on public service and run by not-for profit enterprises funded through a mixed economy.

Equally, my analysis has demonstrated the continuity of the emphasis on the social role of the local newspaper from both within and outside the newspaper industry. It is this ‘thinking with history’, as Carl Shorske would say (Tosh, 2008, 7), which enables us to work out what is truly distinctive about the present, and which therefore links it not only to the past but also to the possibilities of the future. And it is this that enables us to think outside of the normative restrictions that seem to have limited creative, alternative responses to the contemporary landscape. Making reference to the past enables us to re-appraise the present of the newspaper and to open up possibilities for the future. This is what Koselleck (2002) terms “the art of prognosis” because “we look about us from the standpoint of the present in order to determine something, or to be prepared for something” (2002, 133). These prognoses are discoverable in the long-term analyses that elude the pressure of change, in the principles that are repeatedly applicable. In our case of the local newspaper, history demonstrates a longitudinal presence for the construction of the local newspaper as a social good; once we have freed this view of the newspaper from nostalgia, we can begin to ask, what significance for this position? It is this, I would suggest, that offers the local newspaper a continued existence beyond the current climate of decline; we can re-appraise its present beyond the dominant corporate-owned titles that commodify the audience, and look towards one where it does indeed offer service to communities.<sup>8</sup> In this way, an historical approach enables us to dare to imagine a future for those legacy titles.

## Notes

- 1 In 2007, advertising revenue for the local/regional sector was put at £4.6 billion and net circulation revenue at £2.2 billion. As of February 2018, these figures were £1.9 billion (print and digital advertising) and £1.7 billion respectively.
- 2 In 1921, there were 137 morning, evening and Sunday titles and 1,485 weekly newspapers published in the UK; in 2005, these figures were 102 and 1,184 respectively.
- 3 I have critiqued this position elsewhere. See, for instance, Matthews (2017a) and Matthews (2017b).
- 4 See Matthews (2017a, chapter four, ‘The Impact of New Journalism’).
- 5 The hardest hit were the regional morning titles with their traditionally smaller circulations and competition from the metropolitan papers. They were mostly cross-subsidised by their stablemate evening newspapers.
- 6 See Matthews (2017a, chapter six, ‘The Provincial Press in War Time’).
- 7 The balance sheets form part of Western Mail and Echo Ltd holdings at the National Library of Wales.
- 8 I have theorised this possible future as a the ‘socio-local newspaper’; see Matthews (2017a).

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## 2

# A HISTORY OF THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER IN JAPAN

*Anthony S. Rausch*

### Introduction

Japan can claim several of the most-read newspapers in the world today. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* (読売新聞) claims approximately 13 million readers per day, which with four more papers—the *Asahi* (朝日), the *Mainichi* (毎日), the *Sankei* (産経), and the *Nihon Keizai* (日本経済)—each with circulations and readership in the millions, constitute Japan’s big five national/business newspapers. These are followed in decreasing geographic scope and scale by four to six ‘block’ newspapers, covering large regional districts. At the local level are approximately 45-plus ‘prefectural’ newspapers—with about half using the name of their host prefecture (e.g., *Kanagawa Shimbun*, *Yamaguchi Shimbun*, etc.)—and even more sub-prefectural ‘local’ papers, representing regions within prefectures or cities, towns and even villages throughout Japan.

That the Japanese newspaper, even the local newspaper, is alive and well is clear in the numbers above. The aim of this chapter is, thus, to outline the history of this still-relevant medium, focusing on the local newspaper and revealing both broad and subtle trends, tensions and shifts in the trajectory of the local paper in Japan. The historical trend of newspapers in Japan overall is outlined by the Japan Newspaper Foundation for Education and Culture (*Nihon Shinbun Kyōiku Bunka Zaidan*; summarized in English in Rausch, 2012a) in stages, each revealing how newspapers reflected, adjusted to and even created the changes in Japanese society that were taking place at the time. The trajectory of local newspapers can be interwoven and contextualized in this overall trend by their characteristics and efforts toward editorial independence, local economic vitalization and resident place consciousness.

### The birth of Japanese newspapers (1850–1900)

The pre-history of the newspaper in Japan is in what were called *yomiuri* (読売; literally ‘read-sell’) or *kawara-ban* (瓦版; literally ‘tile-block printing’), which originated and were used in the Edo period (1600–1868). Read aloud to a largely illiterate population, the content was then disseminated person-to-person and region-to-region. As Japan opened from its policy of self-isolation, the central government began publishing official news in the 1860s to inform people of events abroad. The first independent newspaper was the *Nagasaki Shipping List and Advertiser*, published beginning in 1861 with content almost exclusively related to shipping



Table 2.1 Historical stages of the Japanese newspaper

Birth, 1850–1900	Origin in ‘gossip sheets,’ transition to ‘political press’ and then ‘news-centered journalism’
Establishment, 1900–1930	Initial return to ‘political-patronage press’ followed by a shift to focus on the emerging middle class—the start of Japan’s mass media
Suppression, 1930–1945	Focus on military issues, followed by military control in the Newspaper Guidance Policy—media as purveyor of government policy
Democratization and economic growth, 1945–1980	American GHQ orders press censorship; press self-reflection brings focus on functions related to free speech, political oversight, and social needs
Diversification, 1980–2010	Solidification of <i>keiretsu</i> control along with changing dynamics in producer–consumer relationship and emerging journalism genres yield dawn of a new national–local newspaper relationship

Source: Based on *Nihon Shinbun Kyōiku Bunka Zaidan*, 2000.

and trade. The birth of an independent and Japan-centered Japanese newspaper came with the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (Meiji Period: 1868–1912), in the *Yokohama Mainichi Shimbun*, first published in 1871. The fledging Meiji government encouraged newspaper publication in order to stem rumors that undermined its authority, and thus numerous others followed: the *Tōkyō Nichinichi Shimbun*, the predecessor of the present-day *Mainichi Shimbun*, in 1872; the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 1874; and the *Asahi Shimbun* in 1879. The emergence of local newspapers was more diverse, but with the examination of the 40-plus prefectural newspapers that comprise the *47NEWS Japan Press Network* ([www.47news.jp](http://www.47news.jp)) consortium at present, a general picture can be drawn. The decade from 1870 to 1880 saw the establishment of 12 local newspapers, 1880 to 1890 saw ten more, and the decade from 1890 to 1900 an additional nine local newspapers, meaning that the 30 years preceding the start of the twentieth century witnessed the birth of two-thirds of present-day prefectural newspapers, with the remaining emerging in the post-Second World War period up to 1950.

Newspapers quickly became a staple of everyday life, a function of their then-small size and easy-to-read content, which, over time, contributed to the literacy rates that would become a hallmark of Japanese society. The large metropolitan newspapers were available for free at government-operated reading centers, meaning that residents had access to a variety of newspapers, even as sales agents were pushing individual consumption in the larger cities and expanding markets throughout the country. Although initially supportive of this vibrant newspaper industry, upon seeing an increase in newspapers emerging out of political parties expressing critical views of government affairs, together with controversial and often contestable coverage and content, the Meiji government enacted Japan’s first libel and anti-defamation law in 1875 and imposed suspensions and bans on some publications.

Tensions between a perverse interest in private affairs combined with a personal-attack style of journalism versus news-centered journalism and journalistic neutrality were apparent in the highly contrasting newspaper profiles of the period. The 1880s saw the emergence of newspapers claiming neutrality, an early example being Fukuzawa Yukichi’s *Jiji Shimpō* in 1882. But the industry was still highly polarized, with papers such as the *Nihon* and the *Kokumin Shimbun* exemplifying highly newsworthy but nationalistic newspapers countered by more sensationalistic papers such as the *Yorozu Chōhō* and *Niroku Shimpō*. Meanwhile, in 1883 the



government initiated (again) its own *Official Gazette*, in an attempt to provide information directly to citizens.

Countering such chaos, the origins of many local newspapers, as depicted in the histories presented on their respective homepages, were neither political, sensationalistic nor nationalistic. Kawanishi (2016) refers to 44 publications that emerged in the Meiji period within the Tohoku area, the vast expanse of Honshu that lay to the north of Tokyo, of which about half were truly ‘news newspapers’, the others being magazines and speciality-themed publications. One of the first newspapers originating in this expansive periphery was the *Kaji Shinbun*, published in Akita City (Akita prefecture) in 1874, the contents of which focused on prefectural government appointments, condensed articles taken from other governmental and prefectural newspapers, and commodity prices from Tokyo. Amidst local power struggles, the *Kaji Shinbun* gave way to the *Akita Nippō* at the beginning of the 1880s, after which, in 1884, the paper combined with two other northern Japan newspapers to become the *Akita Aomori Hakodate Shimpō*, a journalistic partnership of the three northernmost prefectures (*Akita Sakigake Shimpō*, undated). The *Akita Aomori Hakodate Shimpō* was representative of the local aims of most local newspapers at the time, as it heralded its goals in

expanding the economies of the three prefectures through the advancement of political ideas, the reform of agriculture, industry, commerce and local businesses, and the opening up new sources of wealth in Tohoku by exporting local products and gaining a share of overseas markets.

Such name changes were common in the early histories of local newspapers and often a reflection of historical geography. The present-day *Shinano Mainichi Shinbun* of Nagano prefecture started out in 1873 as the *Nagano Shimpō* (*Shinano Mainichi Shinbun*, undated). After a change to the *Kankyo Nagano Maishū Shinbun* (where the *kankyo* refers to its government license), the *Nagano Shinbun*, the *Nagano Nichi-Nichi Shinbun*, and the *Shinano Shinbun*, the present name—the *Shinano Mainichi Shinbun*—was adopted, in which the *Shinano* refers to the ancient place name for the Nagano area. Of course, many of the local newspapers that were established in this period no longer exist, some disappearing altogether and others yielding to a new name under a new publisher as history, both local and global, moved forward.

The aims of such local newspapers were not just local economic vitalization; there was also a sense of independence and self-consciousness, if not validation of self-value, in their agenda as well. While the *Tōōnippō*, established in Aomori prefecture in 1888, promoted liberal democracy and espoused views that sometimes countered those of the central government, an early editorial also opined that Tohoku people “have the spirit and customs befitting a great independent Japan” and that the people of the north must face the challenge of creating a new Japan along with the people of the south. The *Hokkoku Shimbun*, a newspaper of Ishikawa prefecture, located on the western Sea of Japan coast, an area generally viewed as the backside of a modernizing Japan, describes its founding in 1893 as based on a stance of impartiality and independence from any political party, this in order to develop its own destiny within Japan (*Hokkoku Shimbun*, undated). The magazine *Tohoku Kenji* (*Strong Youths of Tohoku*), established in 1897, saw as its mission to “deepen friendships, foster morality, improve academic study and unify members to improve Tohoku’s image.” As Kawanishi points out, the message of these local newspapers and publications was that such local areas must neither parrot a narrow-minded party line nor fall into a self-centered regionalism, but secure an independent place within, while also contributing meaningfully to, Japan’s future as a nation.

### **The establishment of modern Japanese newspapers (1900–1930)**

At the turn of the century, the Japanese newspaper industry was pushed and pulled in a series of simultaneously contrasting positions. Deterioration in Japanese–Russian relations and the Russo–Japanese War forced a highly divisive political environment on newspaper publication, with several papers calling for peace and an equal number clamoring for war, all while the government continued strengthening its restrictive policies on the industry as a whole. Government itself became a target of the newspaper industry in the beginning of the Taisho period (1912–1926), with newspapers decrying the closed nature of government bureaucracy. Tensions erupted as successive cabinets were forced out of power due to public pressure generated largely by newspapers in the years from 1910 to 1920. The government responded, with the *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* eventually being convicted of infringement of the Newspaper Ordinance by carrying an article allegedly inspired to cause social unrest.

As newspapers saw gains to be made in increasing both the readability and the pleasure of reading the newspaper, reader-friendly kanji characters and fonts were increasingly used and women's columns and comic strips came to be included as daily content. While the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 devastated many of the Tokyo-based newspapers, with several never recovering, two Osaka-based newspapers, the *Tokyo Asahi* and the *Tokyo Nichi-Nichi* (Osaka-based despite the Tokyo-centric names), reached circulations of 1 million shortly thereafter. By the beginning of the Showa period (1926–1989), Japanese newspapers had become a fact of modern life for the increasing middle class of Japan, ushering in the first glimpse of what would come to be labeled as mass media. The importance of local newspapers was also becoming increasingly apparent. Just ten years after its establishment in 1897, the *Kahoku Shimpō* of Miyagi prefecture was instrumental in bringing about the founding of Tohoku Imperial University in 1907 through its editorializing on the importance of a university in the development of the Tohoku area, and so today we have Tohoku University, a major Japanese university, and one of a select few as a major university that is not located in the population and power corridors around and to the west of Tokyo.

Freeman (2000), however, summarizes this period as establishing the press–state relations that provide the foundation of her argument on the contemporary Japanese media as information cartels. While it was at this time that tensions between the ‘patronage papers’ and the ‘political press’ yielded an ‘independent press,’ this independent press came to increasingly rely solely on government bureaucrats for the information in their news stories, establishing and strengthening the now-problematic ties to the state. That said, with the emergence of new and local publications came new voices and views. As an example, Japan's first female journalist can be found in this period. Born Matsuoka Motoko but known as a journalist by the married name Hani, Motoko joined the *Hōchi Shimbun* in 1897, working first as a copy-editor and later as a reporter. She went on to found with her husband the magazine *Fujin no Tomo* (*Women's Friend*) in 1908.

### **Newspaper suppression during the War Years (1930–1945)**

Amidst a backdrop of economic crisis and social unrest, the Japanese military took control of the country in the beginning of the Showa period, with newspapers coming to face pressure by the military government to promote positive sentiment toward Japan's efforts in the Sino–Japanese War. In order to ensure the uniformity of information provided to the public, the military government established the Domei News Agency and in February of 1940 issued a

Newspaper Guidance Policy, which included four elements: moral principles, legal procedures, censorship oversight, and management restraint. In essence, the military had thus come to exercise control over the press (Ikawa, 2003). These moves culminated in a July 1942 directive dictating the number of newspapers regionally as follows.

1. Tokyo: three national newspapers, one Tokyo-centered newspaper and one industry newspaper for a total of five newspapers.
2. Osaka: two national newspapers, one Osaka-centered newspaper and one industry newspaper for a total of four newspapers.
3. Nagoya: two Nagoya-centered newspapers.
4. Fukuoka: one Kyushu-centered newspaper.
5. Other prefectures: one newspaper per prefecture (Ikawa, 2003).

What this yielded in reality was implementation of a newspaper integration policy that reduced the roughly 1,120 daily newspapers that were in circulation nationally as of 1938 to about 630 by fall of 1940 and 55 by 1942. Due to short supplies, the 16-page morning and evening formats that had been common were reduced to two-page, morning-edition-only publications near the end of the Pacific War. In any case, the contents had come to be limited to prevailing military ideology, with an emphasis on State Shinto, Emperor worship, and the divine origins of the Japanese race. The case for Aomori prefecture offers a closer look at how this was carried out. Under the national policy of ‘one prefecture, one newspaper’, the then-five smaller and more local newspapers of Aomori prefecture merged under the existing ‘*Tōōnippō*’ masthead. As such, the *Tōōnippō* is now one of the few newspapers in Japan that has carried the same name since its establishment (Matsuda, 2015). It would be remiss not to note that the ‘other’ newspapers of Aomori that operate today originated shortly after the end of the 1942 newspaper policy: the *Tōhoku Daily*, headquartered in Hachinohe City on the Pacific side of the prefecture, in 1945, and the *Mutsu Shimpō*, headquartered in Hirosaki City in the western part of the prefecture, in 1946.

### **Democratization of society and high economic growth (1945–1980)**

The democratization reforms of the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers of 1945 included, somewhat counter-intuitively, a system of press censorship, thereby continuing government constraint on Japanese newspapers. However, as newspapers in general came to denounce the nature of their own wartime reporting, the GHQ loosened restrictions while at the same time targeting regional newspapers as recipients of aid, with priority allocations of materials to help the newly created newspapers that were emerging. These emerging local newspapers were of three types. First, there were those that restarted after being dormant during the wartime integration period; second were those that emerged by working with newspapers that had maintained reduced operations during the war years; and third were those that, in many cases reflecting a critical stance toward a previous newspaper of the area, were established at this time. The monikers of this latter group often included ‘*Minpō*’, as in *Tōkyō Minpō*, reflecting their progressive viewpoint. This period also saw the birth of the Japan National Press Club, which was formally founded by the *Nihon Shimbun Kyōkai*, the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, officially in 1949.

As the domestic economy was gaining strength in the post-war period, newspaper publication and production also returned to pre-war levels, complete with evening editions. Newspapers began to focus on the public well-being as a new professional mission, while

restoration of Japan's independence allowed for the creation of foreign bureaus, albeit limited in scale. This new role for the nation's newspapers included advocacy of free speech, political oversight, and championing social needs. In addition, this period saw the establishment of the now-ubiquitous sports newspaper, for example, the *Nikkei Sports* in 1946, along with the return of the '*Hōchi*' newspapers, those focusing on and featuring political debate and discussion. The economic growth of the 1960s saw more thorough coverage of international affairs by the major newspapers together with improvements in the extent and quality of reporting on local affairs by regional and local papers. As the unintended effects of industrialization started to appear, newspapers, both national and especially local, found their focus on the public well-being being put to the test, as they took up the front lines of reporting on increasing pollution and tension in labor affairs.

### **Newspapers in the age of diversified media (1980–2010)**

From 'one local paper per (47) prefecture' in the war years, the local Japanese newspaper industry has exploded. Tamura (2003) tracked the modern numbers, finding that when one accounts for newspapers at the city, town and village level, there were 1,083 published in 1967, increasing to 1,100 in 1973 and to a peak of 1,564 in 1989 before falling to 1,285 in 1996. This number, of course, includes many of the very small newspapers that represent major city wards within metropolitan areas such as Tokyo and Osaka as well as towns and villages of outlying Japan. Many of these smaller newspapers 'disappeared' with the Heisei Mergers of the early 2000s, either as the municipality they represented disappeared (literally) or as they lost significance amidst the political remaking of the outlying areas of Japan (Rausch, 2012b).

The trends that occurred in the newspaper industry over this period were varied and highly impacting. There was solidification of an industry-wide newspaper-led control function through establishment of the newspaper *keiretsu*. At the same time there was chaos in the industry response to the increasing ubiquity of information technology on the one hand and the preference on the part of consumers for information consumption through such computer-mediated means on the other. Along with this was an increasing estrangement in the relationship between regional residents throughout Japan and the national newspapers. This latter point, combined with increasing civic engagement by local newspapers in the form of civic journalism, contributed to a 'flipping' of the national structure of newspapers and the roles of the national versus the local press, where at present readership of a local paper accounts for half of all newspaper readership in Japan and subscription rates to local newspapers often exceed those of one of the big five national papers in most outlying areas of Japan (Hamada, Tajima, and Katsura, 2009).

Returning to Freeman's (2000) argument, the pervasive dysfunctionality that some see in the Japanese national press is as such a function of re-organizations in the media industry. The central government and big business, through the oppressive and inflexible Press Club operational format and the resulting cartelization of information at the hands of the mainstream media, are bound by financial, personnel and news reporting ties between not only the five major newspapers of Japan and their Tokyo broadcast stations, but also between these metropolitan affiliates and the commercial stations operating throughout the country. What this amounted to is a newspaper-based *keiretsu* that utilizes the 'hot' medium of broadcasting to convey news events in an immediate and emotionally powerful manner, the content of which is then substantiated in the presumably more stable and 'cool' newspaper press, while also limiting the number and variation of participants in Japan's marketplace of ideas, all of which yields not only a homogeneity of news across the mediums, but also a homogeneity of views across the

country. Questions have been raised regarding Freeman's analysis, specifically that the research ignores the perspective of readers, where, given the magnitude of alternatives to the mainstream press and the literacy and media consumption levels, one could conclude that citizens are not ill-served by their press, nor do they see themselves as such (Laurence, 2002).

Regardless of how one views the quality of contemporary Japanese journalism as debated above, local journalism is seen by some as countering the trend toward such news creation on the one hand and the increasing trend toward news homogeneity that corporate concentration of media has generated on the other. As reported on in a 2004 article on the now-discontinued *The Japan Media Review*, local Japanese newspapers were beginning in the early 2000s to experiment with a style of journalism in which the media contributed both to knowledge construction, by providing background information along with news coverage while also encouraging civic engagement, this in the hopes that it would bolster readership (Perry, 2004). An example cited from this period was a Tokai Earthquake Campaign undertaken by the *Shizuoka Shimbun*, started in an effort to reduce the number of deaths that would occur as a result of the inevitable earthquake that would strike the region sometime in the near future. In this content, the newspaper was practicing 'pre-quake reporting,' by illuminating the science of earthquake risk and society's response to it, so as to force community preparation, both infrastructural and with regard to resident consciousness. An example from northern Japan took up the selling of unregistered agricultural chemicals. With the arrest of an agricultural supplies dealer, the *Kahoku Shimpō* of Iwate prefecture covered the case as a crime, but then also initiated projects that helped readers realize the long-term impact such actions could have on the viability of farming in the area. Finally, a *Shinano Mainichi Shimbun* project that aimed to initiate a community-wide discussion on raising children introduced articles on such themes as fathers' roles in child rearing, good practices, and how to overcome self-doubts about parenting skills. As the project continued, the newspaper sponsored community forums and an online discussion group.

This notion of civic engagement led to the emergence of so-called 'citizen journalists' publishing on online sites. According to an April 2008 *Christian Science Monitor* article titled 'Online papers challenge Japan's mainstream media' (Kambayashi, 2008), there were in the early 2000s an increasing number of citizen journalists—high school and university students, retirees and housewives, lawyers and even non-Japanese residents—who were participating in the creation of news and thereby providing an alternative to Freeman's information cartels. The article highlighted the online newspaper *JANJAN* (*Japan Alternative News for Justice and New Cultures*) as an example of this phenomenon. Launched in early 2003, *JANJAN* allowed anyone who had registered to post 'news' on the website. The range of topics covered included labor rights, domestic violence, and homelessness, along with other topics not usually covered in the mainstream press. Due to a lack of revenue, most of which had been based on advertisements from corporate sponsors, *JANJAN* ceased publication in spring 2010.

Related to local newspapers is a recent print media phenomenon known as the *Town Shi* (Town Magazines). A source of shopping information, local history, upcoming events, and familiar faces, the 'Town Magazine' offers something for virtually everyone. A Nihon Telephone and Telegraph survey in the late 1990s put the number of 'town magazines' in Japan at the time at approximately 900, with the history of 'first issues' starting in the 1950s in the tens, increasing to over 150 for the periods 1985–1989, 1990–1994 and 1995–1998, respectively (Tamura, 2003). The typical 'Town Magazine' is long-lived, with many going to 300 or in some cases 500 issues. As the content and production of the typical 'Town Magazine' can be largely out-sourced—city supporters and local shop owners contribute articles and essays and production is often a tax

write-off for a local printing company—these publications are inexpensive to produce and are often offered for free.

### **Contemporary issues and tensions (2010–present)**

Such local publications have come to garner increasing attention within Japan. Hamada, Shimizu, and Takada (2010, 2012) offered two volumes titled *Nihon no Genba: Chihōshi de Yomu* (*Places in Japan: Through Reading the Local Newspaper*), which place the local newspaper at the core of understanding specific places throughout rural Japan. The sense—and practice—of civic engagement by local newspapers was also noted in what Rausch (2012a) termed ‘revitalization journalism,’ defined as a form of local journalism that incorporates both reporting on issues that are viewed as problematic together with creating solutions for those issues by activating local consciousness and cultivating local activism—whether economic, social, educational, or health- and welfare-related. The newspaper format that was identified as most relevant to this local revitalization journalism was the *rensai*, or long-running column, which is commonly found in local newspapers. Umemoto (2015) parallels these two notions—understanding a place and revitalizing a place, both through the local newspaper—in *Chihōshi ha Chiiki wo Tsukuru: Jumin no tamenō jyanarizum* (*Local Newspapers and Region-Making: Journalism for Residents*; reviewed in English by Rausch, 2016). Umemoto offers that local newspapers both create a sense of ‘localism’, reporting on issues originating in specific regions, while also providing a means for such issues to be validated and recognized at the national level by virtue of being reported on *en masse* in local papers throughout Japan. Finally, Matsuda (2015) offered a comprehensive look at the Japanese newspaper, and the Japanese local newspaper, starting from their origins up through the war years (1945).

Another significant function of the local newspaper was identified in the aftermath of the Great East Japan Disaster of March 11, 2011, when local newspapers were found vital in providing specific post-disaster functions such as factual recording of events, promoting community solidarity, and generating event memory creation. Sherif (2014) pointed specifically to the role of local newspapers in the period after the disaster in constructing knowledge about the event and shaping and supporting public opinion about the event. Takekawa (2014), in his examination of Iwate prefectural newspapers (the *Iwate Nippō* and the *Tōkai Shimpō*), focused on the roles that these local newspapers played in local reconstruction efforts, both immediately after the event and in the longer-term policy debates that took place. Rausch (2014) examined another local Tohoku newspaper (the *Tōōnippō*), focusing on the transition of coverage from news to memory creation, noting again how the *rensai* long-running themed columns provided for a specific form of disaster journalism that provided the basis for the public memories of the event on a national level.

There has, unfortunately, emerged (again) a darker side to the Japanese press, outlined in detail in Kingston’s (2017) edited work *Press Freedom in Contemporary Japan*. Self-censorship has emerged again as a theme following a drawn-out episode when a major national newspaper was called out for critical coverage of the governmental response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster brought about by the 3.11 Great East Japan Earthquake. However, in addition, there has come press intimidation, specifically in the warning issued by governing politicians on the eve of 2014 elections for the media to be ‘fair and balanced’ and then in the specially designated state secrets law, which was passed in 2014 and established penalties for journalists who use leaked information along with questions about the use of media in public relations strategies and manipulating public opinion by government officials.



## Conclusion

One can hope that, going forward, local newspapers will be viewed as more than just a local alternative to the major newspapers, and be seen as offering, if not an operational model, then a code of practice, to counter some troubling trends described above. In his work on local media, Tamura (2003) quoted local journalists regarding their sentiments on the importance of local journalism: “we can’t escape from this place—our fate is tied up with this place. Indeed, we—as journalists—have responsibility to this place.” Perhaps this sentiment, expressed by local newspaper journalists, will provide a new consciousness across the media landscape. In an ideal world, such a sense of responsibility, whether to place, reader, or the practice of journalism and media at large, could be the ongoing contribution of local journalism and the local newspaper.

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# 3

## LOCAL NEWS DESERTS IN BRAZIL

### Historical and contemporary perspectives

*Carlos Eduardo Lins da Silva and Angela Pimenta*

#### **Introduction**

Differently from the US, where the press came along with the first European settlements and soon spread to almost all small communities, newspapers in Brazil only started during the colonial period. A further difference is that newspapers have never really established themselves as a viable enterprise in most areas, except in large or middle-sized towns. These variations between the development of press in the two countries were due mostly to economic factors, although cultural features have also had their influence. The fact that economic development in Brazil has been so much more concentrated in certain regions than in the US explains why local journalism has been historically less important there. Brazilian local press surged at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century along with the prosperity brought by 16 years of growth and stability in the country during that period. But from 2014 on the country has plunged into serious economic and political crises, the effects of which have been devastating to the local press. The negative impacts of the crises have been aggravated by business model disruption in journalism brought about by the adaptation of digital technologies in the sector. This chapter provides an overview of the historical development of local press in Brazil followed by an analysis of its contemporary context. It then presents the findings of the *Atlas da Notícia (News Atlas)* project and discusses its implications.

#### **Historical development of local press in Brazil**

Lichter, Rothman and Lichter (1986) and Michael Schudson (1978), in his seminal *Discovering the News*, describe how journalism evolved in the US. Although in the beginning American newspapers mostly imitated those produced in England, the important social, economic and cultural differences in America from the English model resulted in a specific kind of journalism. In Brazil, colonisation was not led by families who came to the New World to establish themselves, as it was in North America. Rather, the Portuguese settlers came to their new territory mostly to spend short periods of time to enrich themselves and go back to Lisbon. As José Marques de Melo argues in his excellent book *Sociologia da Imprensa Brasileira* (1973), Brazil was populated by the Portuguese, from 1532 on, in a slow process, mostly alongside

the coast, with a single objective: exporting natural goods to Europe. The Brazilian hinterland was practically non-populated for centuries. Furthermore, there was almost no economic activity in the colony, except for the extraction of mineral and vegetal resources. Importantly, these activities were carried out without the need for invoices, bills of sale or credit memos. Establishing newspapers was not in the interests of the settlers, who also did not see the need for them for cultural purposes. The colonial social environment was not propitious to the existence of libraries, schools or newspapers. Additionally, it is highly likely that the Portuguese royalty would not have been sympathetic to the notion of people in the colonies printing their ideas and debating public policies that could become dangerous to its rule.

All this changed in 1808, when the Portuguese king moved to Rio de Janeiro, fleeing from Bonaparte's forces, which were attacking Portugal. As the new headquarters for the empire, Brazil was supposed to have what had not been necessary until then: schools, colleges, libraries, museums and printing houses to attend the Court's needs. It was at this time when the first newspaper in the country, the *Gazeta do Rio de Janeiro* (*Rio de Janeiro Gazette*), was published by the government. The Brazilian case is in contrast to the first American newspaper, the *Public Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestic* issued in Boston in 1690, a private initiative of a businessman, the English publisher Benjamin Harrison, proprietor of a coffee house. Harrison was not very successful, though. Having published his paper without a licence and having printed some material critical of the British Government, he was jailed. It took 15 years for another newspaper to be issued in America, but the press flourished there throughout the eighteenth and particularly in the nineteenth centuries. In Brazil, besides the *Official Gazette*, another newspaper that was regularly published in 1808 was the *Correio Braziliense* (*Braziliense Post*). The paper was printed in London and smuggled into Rio de Janeiro to be distributed mostly among opponents of Portuguese rule and campaigned for more autonomy and independence of Brazil from Lisbon. Brazil became independent in 1822. During the nineteenth century, several newspapers and magazines were published, most of which, however, were sponsored by political parties or by people who campaigned for particular political causes, such as the abolition of slavery and the establishment of a republican regime in the country.

Meanwhile, in the United States, starting in the 1830s, according to the aforementioned Schudson (1978), the press notably changed its purpose. Instead of being mostly a means for conveying ideological messages, it became a business to sell news to an audience of consumers and to sell its audience to advertisers who wanted to increase the sales of their own products (from soap to clothes, from furniture to toothpaste etc.). This transformation occurred because of a conjunction of several concomitant economic and social factors in a relatively short period of time: the invention of web- and sheet-fed presses that ensured a large-scale production of print copies, the quasi-universalisation of literacy in the country, the spread of railroads throughout its territory, economic prosperity that resulted in better income for more people who would now have enough money to buy both news and advertised goods, the enhancement of working conditions such as a decrease in working hours and days – which made it possible for more people to have more time for leisure activities such as reading newspapers and magazines. Such processes facilitated a significant increase in the number of daily newspapers in the US from 65 in 1830 (with a total circulation of 78,000 copies) to 138 (with a circulation of 300,000 copies) in 1840, according to Schudson (1978). Most importantly, during the nineteenth century, the United States experienced a period of intense economic development that spread through the country to its expanded territory in the West. The country became an egalitarian market democracy across the whole land. The newspapers performed a formidable role in this process by selling ads that caused the market of consumption goods to grow exponentially, by creating a powerful media businesses, and by spreading the ideology of the free market

and growing consumption to the whole country. Alberto Dines, one of the most accomplished Brazilian journalists of the twentieth century, used to say that in nineteenth-century America every small town had at least three institutions: the sheriff, the bar and the local newspaper.

In Brazil, the development of the press was quite different during the nineteenth century and the first four decades of the twentieth century. Newspapers were few, concentrated in a small number of cities, and were mostly political, aimed at a small group of elites and literate individuals. Brazilian newspapers were vehicles of government platforms or of those who wanted to be in government, of political parties, of proselytism or dilettantism of those who were wealthy enough to be able to sponsor these media. The Brazilian Westernisation was not similar to that of America. Brazilian capitalism was formed in a very different fashion to that of the United States, and it was and still is in many ways uneven and complementary. This means that some regions in the country have not developed themselves in the same way as the Southeast and South regions, especially states such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. In those Brazilian states (and particularly in their capital cities) the audience was wealthy, educated and with enough free time to consume news. It was there that in the twentieth century newspapers developed in relatively similar fashion to those of the US in the 1800s. Another key difference between the two countries is that Brazilian society has a tradition of orality that the United States does not have. Until the mid-1950s, when television was introduced in the country, most citizens were illiterate. Radio and television consumption became the norm before mass audiences were formed for the print media. In addition, in states and cities where the market for the print media was not enough to support independent outlets, newspapers had always been sponsored by governments or political clans interested only in achieving power or their particular political purposes.

### **Local press in contemporary Brazil**

It was only in the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century that opportunities for local newspapers to thrive emerged. But by then, journalism in almost the entire world was already struggling with a structural crisis brought by the internet and social media. These new hurdles meant significant obstacles to the development of local media in Brazil, and much of the progress that had been made around the turn of the century was stalled or reversed. Importantly, since 2014 the economy that had been growing in the previous 16 years has stalled, and Brazil has again been marred by recession or slow growth that particularly affects small cities and states, undermining in turn their local journalism. The challenges for contemporary local media in Brazil are considerable. However, there are still people engaged in the attempts to make them better, moved by the belief that they are essential to the preservation and improvement of democracy. Among them are scholars at universities who dedicate their research to better understand the local press, associations that try to promote it and NGOs that pursue the improvement of its quality.

Brazil has finally been consolidating its democratic institutions over the last 25 years. Its economy grew significantly in the period until crisis hit in 2014. The Brazilian people have benefited from a long cycle of socio-economic advances brought about since re-democratisation in the late 1980s. The main improvements were carried out by the Real Plan under former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration (1994–2002) and by progressive social policies implemented under former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's administration (2003–2010) and during President Dilma Rousseff's first term (2010–2014) (Fausto, 2015). Since the military left power in 1985, Brazil has also moved towards higher standards of governance. The press has been an important driver in these institutional improvements. A good example

is the continuous publication of corporate malfeasance stories involving public officials and politicians, facilitating the approval of key legal advancements such as the 2011 Freedom of Information Law and the 2014 Anti-Corruption Law (Instituto Ethos, 2015).

However, since the political crisis that led to the impeachment of Rousseff in August 2016, the country has been heavily hit by the combination of a severe political institutional crisis and an economic downturn. Its media and communication industries have been impacted by these events, and digital technologies have affected the sectors deeply. These changes pose an immense challenge to the Brazilian news industry. Newspapers and magazines have suffered sharp declines in readership, advertising and circulation revenues. According to latest data provided by Brazil's print and digital media industry auditing body Instituto Verificador de Circulação (Circulation Verifier Institute; 2017), between 2014 and 2017, the circulation of the main 11 national and regional print newspapers dropped 41 per cent from 1.26 million copies to 736,000 copies.

There are no reliable data about the impacts of the digital revolution and its political and economic effects on the local press. However, it is very likely that the effects are similar to the cases of news outlets in larger cities. Apart from the so-called 'big press' based in cities such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and the national capital Brasília, which are known for editorial independence and covering civic issues, Brazil does not have a strong local press. This fact has negative implications for democracy. Local newspapers do not exercise the role of control and oversight of local power and therefore have failed to fulfill the mission of informing citizens. They follow the agenda and focus of news outlets based in metropolitan markets such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the contents of which they reuse, as Nunomura (2018) points out.

The results [of the research] show the excessive use of second-hand news, that is, not produced by [local papers'] own teams. The analysis of the discourse here showed that, in the case of [former president] Dilma Rousseff's impeachment, the six newspapers [researched] reproduced, with almost identical angles and without local or regional contextualization, the discourse of *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo*. Lately under the government of [President] Michel Temer, these newspapers sought to distance themselves from the narrative of the three major publications, denoting serving the political interests of their regions.

The vulnerabilities of local press must be understood within the Brazilian reality. Having a dynamic and diversified economy, Brazil is also a country marked by deep geographic and socio-economic asymmetries, inequality of income and of access to education. According to a 2004 World Bank Country study:

Brazil is a continent-sized nation, marked by profound contrasts and diversity. Some of these are geographic or climactic in nature, others are racial or ethnic. Brazil's population draws on Native American, African, and European roots, and successive waves of immigrants, principally from Asia and Europe, have added to the mix ... Yet other contrasts are social in nature and generally less welcome. Living conditions for Brazil's 170 million people vary dramatically, and income disparities in Brazil are significant – not only across regions but also between metropolitan centers, nonmetropolitan urban centers, and rural areas.

*(Velez et al., 2004)*

As of 2018, Brazil is a country of 208 million people where these enduring asymmetries and inequalities also permeate the journalistic craft and civic news supply throughout the 5,570

municipalities (Governo do Brasil, 2018). In the more developed regions, such as in the Southeast and the South, there are more news outlets and among them more newsrooms that are competent and committed to covering public issues and have greater respect for the freedom of the press. However, in remote regions of the Northeast and the North, the presence of news outlets is more sparse. In these places – and even in parts of the Southeast and the South – the risk of corporate and political interference in journalistic outlets is more prevalent. As stated in the *Media Ownership Monitor Brasil*, a joint report by two NGOs – Intervozes, focused on social communications, and Reporters Without Borders, focused on the defense of freedom of expression –

our [Brazilian] media system shows high concentration of audience and property, high geographical concentration, lack of transparency, as well as economic, political and religious interference.

(*Intervozes and Reporters Without Borders, 2017*)

The report indicates that among the largest 50 media companies, 73 per cent are based in the metropolitan region of São Paulo. In total, 80 per cent are located in the South and Southeast regions. In remote areas of the Amazon, political interference in local media was allowed by the Federal Senate Social Communications Committee. An example for this is the way in which community television stations licences were granted, a story that was revealed by Elvira Lobato (2017), a reporter, in *Antenas da Floresta (Antennas of the Forest)*. As of 2014, politicians and their relatives owned 373 (21 per cent) of a total of 1,737 local Amazonian television stations. Senator Mozarildo Cavalcanti explained the politicians' appetite for broadcast.

The role of TV is to be a showcase for the politician to remain in permanent evidence. To show your speeches and your participation in public hearings, in a way that [you] seem more intelligent and well-prepared than the others.

(*Lobato, 2017*)

Large corporations are also interfering in local media matters, as pointed out by *Observatório da Imprensa (Press Observer)*, a news media watchdog website maintained by PROJOR – The Institute for Development of Journalism, a Brazilian NGO dedicated to the advancement of journalism in Brazil. In 2015, the largest environmental disaster in the country's history was caused by a deadly dam spill owned by mining company Samarco and its controllers BHP Billinton and Vale SA in the historical city of Mariana, in the state of Minas Gerais. Following the disaster, the local newspaper *O Liberal (The Liberal)* featured pro-Samarco coverage, including an article with the headline 'Somos todos Samarco' ('We are all Samarco!') (Ferreira et al., 2016). At the time of the disaster, Samarco was the highest local taxpayer, responsible for 80 per cent of local receipts, and also a significant advertiser of *O Liberal*. Notably, three months prior to the spill, the newspaper featured another friendly piece about Samarco, reporting on a public hearing held at the city council to discuss the expansion of two dams and examine blueprints presented by the mining company executives. *Observatório da Imprensa* found one-sided reporting of the story and quoted *O Liberal's* friendly coverage of Samarco.

The president of the city council of Mariana, Lieutenant Freitas (PHS) [member of the Party of Human Solidarity] made a compliment [to Samarco]: Lt. Freitas highlights the transparency of the company. "It shows that Samarco has the concern to show what they already have done regarding every action they are going to take,"

he congratulates. “In view of the crisis we are experiencing, the project can help our community with the creation of some jobs,” notes the councilman.

(Castilho, 2016)

### **The *Atlas da Notícia* (News Atlas) project**

Aware of the weaknesses of the local press and also the lack of data about the presence and geographic distribution of local news outlets throughout the 5,570 Brazilian municipalities, in late 2017 PROJOR launched the *Atlas da Notícia* (*News Atlas*) initiative (PROJOR and Volt Data Lab, 2017). The project is inspired by the *Columbia Journalism Review’s* (CJR) America’s Growing Deserts of News project (Bucay et al., 2017). *Atlas da Notícia’s* first edition focused on identifying print and/or local media outlets covering civic local issues, such as policy making, public spending, law making, health, education, security, mobility and the environment. The data gathering, analysis and visualisation have been commissioned to Volt Data Lab (2018), a data-driven news agency. The research was based on four types of sources: data provided by the Special Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of the Republic (Secom), through the Law of Access to Information, by the Associação Nacional de Jornais (ANJ), the National Association of Newspapers, by state trade news associations, such as Sindicato dos Jornais e Revistas de São Paulo (Sindijore/SP), and by a crowdsourcing campaign carried out by *Observatório da Imprensa*.

The project defines a local news outlet as a news content provider that publishes at least two local journalistic pieces per month. This criterion was adopted to take into account the aforementioned Brazilian socio-economic asymmetries and thus allow the inclusion of monthly periodicals that are common in remote areas. Published in November 2017, *Atlas da Notícia’s* first edition identified 5,354 news outlets in 1,125 municipalities from a total of 5,570. Thus, it revealed the existence of so-called ‘news deserts’ in print and/or digital news media in 4,500 municipalities, home to 70 million people, some 35 per cent of the Brazilian population.

Other key findings of *Atlas da Notícia*, which revealed links between Brazil’s socio-economic asymmetries and supply of local civic news, included the following.

- There are 416 municipalities, home to more than 15 million people, with only one outlet, either a local newspaper or news website.
- Brazil’s three main cities (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and the federal capital Brasília) account for 1,112 newspapers and/or websites, representing 20.7 per cent of the total. Together, they are home to some 10 per cent of the national population.
- State capitals were at the top of rankings in terms of number of newspapers and/or news websites.
- Florianópolis, capital of the Southern state of Santa Catarina, ranked first nationally in terms of its number of newspapers and/or news websites per citizen among municipalities with a population of above 100,000 habitants.
- Fortaleza, the capital of the Northeastern state of Ceará, had the lowest rate of news media outlets per 100,000 habitants (0.87).

*Atlas da Notícia* is an open-source project. Its first print and digital map has contributed to other studies examining the relationship between local news provisions and socio-economic asymmetries in Brazil. For example, a May 2018 report by the Brazilian section of Article 19 (Artigo 19), an NGO focused on the promotion of freedom of expression, found that almost

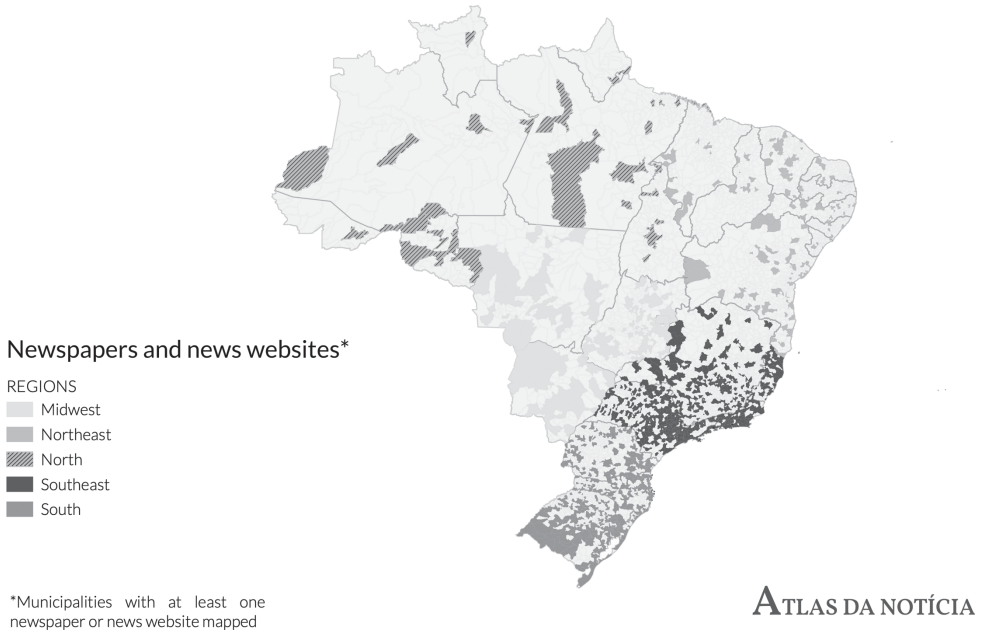


Figure 3.1 *Atlas da Notícia* – mapping local press and ‘news deserts’ in Brazil

half of the violations committed in 2017 against bloggers, radio broadcasters and community communicators took place in so-called ‘news deserts’ (Artigo 19, 2018).

Considering the nature of the outlet where the victims worked when they suffered violence, 56 percent worked for commercial outlets, 3.33 percent worked for activist news outlets and 11 percent worked for community outlets. It is noteworthy, however, the high number of bloggers and of violations against broadcasters compared to 2016. These two groups constitute 19 occurrences, two-thirds of the cases that we covered in 2017 and are distributed along 14 cities ... According to the *Atlas da Notícia* survey, 10 of these cities are in the so-called news deserts, not having any print or online newspapers. Two others have only one print outlet each and none online. In many cities where there are no newspapers, bloggers and radio broadcasters end up occupying this informational vacuum. The serious violations they suffer therefore pose both threats to the freedom of expression and life of these individuals, as well as the possibility of the complete silencing of local media.

Greater São Paulo is Brazil’s richest and largest metropolitan area. Nevertheless, it is also the home of news deserts, as revealed by *Agência Mural de Jornalismo das Periferias* (Mural News Agency of Journalism of the Outskirts), a digital news vehicle focused on São Paulo’s impoverished neighbouring suburbs (*Agência Mural de Jornalismo das Periferias*, 2018). Using *Atlas da Notícia* data, *Agência Mural*’s blog published by *Folha de S. Paulo* has indicated the absence of print and digital provisions in five neighbouring municipalities of São Paulo: Embu das Artes, Juquitiba, Pirapora do Bom Jesus, São Lourenço da Serra and Vargem Grande Paulista. These municipalities are home to a total of 382,000 people (*Agência Mural*, 2017). Another six neighbouring municipalities are nearly-news deserts, having one print newspaper and one digital vehicle each.



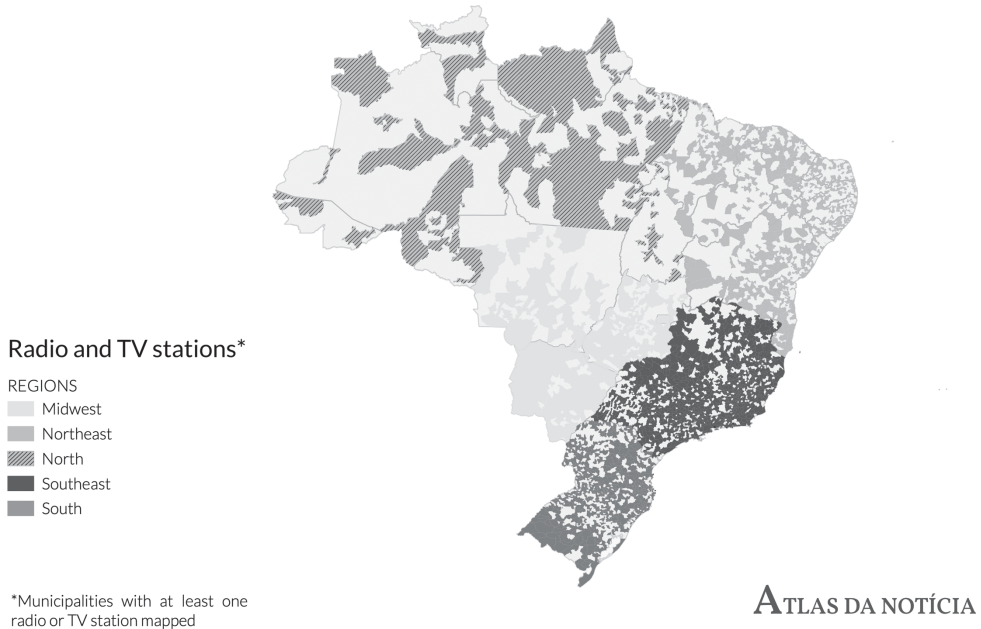


Figure 3.2 *Atlas da Notícia* – mapping broadcasting media in Brazil

*Agência Mural* interviewed a street vendor, Denilson Nascimento Vale, a São Lourenço da Serra resident. According to Vale, “Here in São Lourenço it is like this: when events happen within the city, we get to learn about them through comments of the people in the street” (*Agência Mural*, 2017).

Residents of Brazilian news deserts often rely on broadcast media and social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, to access local news. In order to map the distribution of radio and television stations in Brazil, *Atlas da Notícia* published its first broadcast map in July 2018. It revealed that some 50 million Brazilians (25 per cent of the total population) live in 3,050 municipalities without registered local radio and television stations. When combined with the previous print and digital news provisions mapping, the results indicate that 2,879 municipalities (52 per cent) do not have any kind of registered local media outlet; 40 million Brazilians (16 per cent of the total population) live in these absolute local news deserts (PROJOR and Volt Data Lab, 2018). The research used data provided by Brazil’s Ministry of Sciences, Technology, Innovations and Communications (MCTIC, 2018), responsible for registering broadcast outlets, whose licences are granted by the Senate. It must be stressed that these 40 million Brazilians probably do receive some kind of local news from larger neighbouring municipalities that have some kind of local news media provisions. The second mapping has also revealed that radio stations are most prevalent in Brazil, totaling 3,749 compared with 3,367 print newspapers, 2,728 television stations and 1,985 digital outlets.

Despite the lingering economic crisis, internet access continues to increase, as indicated by CGI.br, the Brazilian Steering Internet Committee (*Comitê Gestor da Internet Brasil*, 2018). The organisation publishes *TIC Domicílios (ICT Households)*, a yearly survey on internet indicators. Published in August 2018, the latest survey indicates that as of 2017, the proportion of internet users in Brazil increased by 6 percentage points in a year, from 61 per cent to 67 per cent,



totaling 42.1 million households. In urban areas this proportion reached 65 per cent in 2017, which corresponds to 38.8 million connected households (CGI.br, 2018). The study also stresses the persistence of inequalities by socio-economic class and by urban and rural areas; internet access is 30 per cent in D/E classed households (the rate was 23 per cent in 2016) and 34 per cent in households in rural areas (26 per cent in 2016). In socio-economic classes A and B, the proportions reach, respectively, 99 per cent and 93 per cent. In addition, 19 per cent of connected households do not have a computer, which represents 13.4 million households whose residents connect to the internet through mobile phones. That proportion was only 4 per cent in 2014.

Published in November 2018, *Atlas da Notícia 2.0* marks the first yearly update, showing that 54 print outlets closed down since 2011, mostly local newspapers located in the Southeast region (Atlas da Notícia 2.0, 2018). Since the second edition is based on the 2017 Brazilian Census updates, the results cannot be directly compared with the first edition, which used the 2000 Census. However, the second edition corroborates a key finding, the presence of news deserts in at least 51 per cent of municipalities, home to 30 million Brazilians. Also, another 30 per cent of municipalities run the risk of becoming news deserts, since they have up to two news outlets publishing at least biweekly issues. The second edition of *Atlas da Notícia* is funded by the Facebook Journalism Project and was independently carried out by PROJOR.

Following President Dilma Rousseff's 2016 impeachment, the federal government has discontinued its research on local news. Thus, in order to carry out the second edition of *Atlas da Notícia*, PROJOR has created a network of five paid data journalists, one for each of the Brazilian geographic regions, to track and validate the new data under Volt Data Lab oversight (Atlas da Notícia 2.0, 2018). The second edition also relied on a crowdsourcing campaign launched by *Observatório da Imprensa* in August 2018 (Observatório da Imprensa, 2018). Its findings will enable a new line of qualitative research that will investigate the causes that led to the closing of local print outlets in different regions of Brazil. *Atlas da Notícia* is a fledging initiative aimed not only at mapping local news provisions. Its long-term goal is to enable future policy building, fieldwork and education projects designed to strengthen local news outlets both editorially and economically.

## Conclusion

Besides historical challenges, such as a late start and a lack of editorial independence and effectiveness in covering civic issues, the Brazilian local press currently faces financial hurdles brought by a severe economic downturn. Brazil is also marked by socio-economic and geographic inequalities that have greatly impacted the development of local press. The resulting inability of small outlets to hold municipal governments and corporations accountable – as seen in the coverage of the newspaper *O Liberal*, prior to a deadly 2015 dam spill in the historical city of Mariana – has negative implications for democracy in a country already hit by a deep institutional crisis. As the *Atlas da Notícia* findings indicate, the challenges facing the local press are exacerbated by geographic and socio-economic asymmetries. Both 'news deserts' and 'nearly-news deserts' are mostly located in poorer municipalities, be they in remote portions of the North and Northeast or in the outskirts of large metropolises, such as the Greater São Paulo area. The findings also suggest that the fate of democracy at the local level in Brazil – with repercussions for democracy in the entire country – is intertwined with its currently endangered local press.

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# 4

## A HISTORY OF LOCAL MEDIA IN NORWAY

*Eli Skogerbø*

### **Introduction**

Norway is one of Europe's small states in population, if not in territory. Being part of the Nordic region, it has a population of approximately 5 million, about the same as Denmark and Finland, and half of that of Sweden. The country, as any other, has, in addition to its majority population, a number of cultural and ethnic minorities, of which the largest groups are recent immigrants from other countries in Europe, Asia and Africa. Among the minorities, the Sami are constitutionally recognised as an indigenous population entailing specific cultural and political rights that also extend to legislation and policy-making concerning the media. The Sami population is split between four states, with the largest group in Norway, and smaller groups in Sweden, Finland and Russia. Media-wise, Norway has three main traits. The first is a long and strong tradition of *media diversity*, in the number of outlets, variety of voices and in the aims and in policy objectives. The second is a lasting reliance on *public and universal services*, manifested in the strong position of the public broadcaster NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation), and its lasting support among audiences and governments. The third trait is the consequences of *the long-term digitisation processes* that have fundamentally reshaped production, distribution and consumption and thereby the relationships between consumers, users and producers of media content.

Localism and decentralisation make up a considerable part of Norwegian political and media history. Media policy and measures for securing information infrastructures have been important elements for setting up and securing support for the welfare state, although they are rarely highlighted in historical and political studies (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs and Moe, 2014). The history of local media in Norway, accordingly, is inherent to the history of media development in general, and can, in line with Birgit Røe Mathisen's (2010, 13) argument, be conceptualised as a story in which local, regional, indigenous and community media make up the backbone of the media structure and the public spheres. Understanding the history of local media, thus, means understanding the rise and growth of three central elements in the formation of Norwegian society: how the media, which initially only encompassed local newspapers, have voiced diverse political, economic and cultural interests; how the welfare state has shaped the communication structures and to some extent vice versa; and how local media and local

journalism have been instrumental to two seemingly conflicting lines of development, namely standardisation and assimilation and diversity and localism. Following a brief discussion on the definition of local media, this chapter provides an overview of the historical development of local media in Norway focusing on three main phases: the period 1880–1940, with local media voicing different political, economic and cultural interests; the period 1945–1995, characterised by decentralisation, dealignment and de-monopolisation; and the period since 1995 featuring digitalisation and the emergence of new local media structures.

### **What are local media?**

Local media have been studied both within and outside the Scandinavian setting for decades, yet they are often defined only implicitly, as in a recent volume by Mørlandstø and Krumsvik (2014), or by giving examples of local journalism (Leckner and Nygren, 2016) or just being “taken for granted”, as Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2015, loc. 155) argues. It is possible to explain this lack of visibility both with references to the seemingly low status of local journalism (Lamark, 2018) and the ubiquity of local media. Local media have nevertheless attracted considerable academic attention. Nielsen introduces, in line with Mathisen and Mørlandstø (2018), a term that implicitly recognises the backbone function of local media: “keystone media” – which are “primary providers of a specific and important kind of information” (Nielsen, 2015, loc. 1138), pointing to their often undervalued importance for political communication. In contrast to Nielsen’s definition of local media as complying with a (undefined) norm for what is important for the audiences, I will argue that it is more precise to define local media, in all their forms, practices and technologies, by reference to the fact that their content and coverage relates to a specific location. This line of reasoning resonates with Hess and Waller, who understand local journalism “as both a practice and a product that relates to a specific geographic area and the events and people connected to it” (2017, 5). There is also solid, lasting empirical evidence of the importance of local media for political communication, either as information sources for citizens or as arenas for candidates seeking contact with voters, in Norway and elsewhere (Elvestad, 2009; Karlsen and Skogerbø, 2015; Engan, 2016; Hess and Waller, 2017; Larsson and Skogerbø, 2018), but they are not only that; they have many more functions in the localities they operate in, culturally, economically, socially and even emotionally (Císařová, 2017; Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). That is also why they are taken for granted; local media are everywhere, and there is evidence that they remain central despite the fact that the media are increasingly produced, distributed and consumed on digital platforms (Høst, 2018; Olsen and Solvoll, 2018).

### **Voicing political, economic and cultural interests, 1880–1940**

Norwegian media history has to be placed in the context of state- and nation-building processes. “This is the history of how a social institution came about” are the opening words of a four-volume work on Norwegian press history, stating instantly that the press has been and still is among the most influential powers in society (Eide, 2010, 9, author’s translation). Norwegian newspapers have a long history, dating back to the seventeenth century, long before freedom of expression and press freedom were introduced as civil and political rights. Printed news leaflets, forerunners of what later came to be known as newspapers, were circulated under strict censorship and concessions from the (Danish) king, and laid the foundation for the development of the newspaper markets and businesses. The first Norwegian newspaper, in the modern meaning of the term, was started in 1777. The Danish colonial authorities had temporarily eased their strict censorship regime (only to be reintroduced in 1810), opening

for the development of newspapers and magazines and gradually increasing civil, political and economic rights. Norway remained a colony under Denmark until 1814 and in a union with Sweden from 1814 to 1905, when a sovereign Norwegian state was declared by the Norwegian Parliament. The increasing number of newspapers played important parts in these processes, as they voiced different cultural, linguistic and political opinions and also were the voices of regional and local interests.

When the political parties were formed, which in Norway took place with the introduction of parliamentarism from 1884 onwards, most newspapers either supported or were outlets for political interests. Many local newspapers were started by local branches of trade unions, parties and organisations. As the party system expanded, the number of newspapers affiliated with political parties increased, too, meaning that a system of political parallelism between parties and press was in place quite soon. By 1940, most places where newspapers were published had competing party papers. Typically, newspapers supported a party at either side of the political spectrum, for instance, the Conservative Party or the Labour Party, but dependent on the locality and which parties were strong in the areas, there could also be Communist newspapers, newspapers supporting the Farmers' Party (later the Centre Party) and the Christian People's Party (Ottosen, 2010). By the start of the Second World War, local media were mainly party newspapers, and they were more often than not competing with newspapers of different convictions. Simultaneously, they constructed new markets for advertising and readership. As Eide (2010) and Ottosen (2010) point out, the rise of the newspapers must be understood not only as political institution-building but also as the rise of a media industry that had local as well as national implications.

This period also saw newspapers started by Sami political actors. Parallel to the rise of the Norwegian independence movement and to what happened in other colonial settings, racism and assimilation of the minorities increased. Establishing a Norwegian state was not only about creating statehood, it was also about forging a national identity and a common language, literature and culture that was particular to Norway – efforts that the Norwegian Parliament, the parties and the press put much energy into. However, the indigenous population and other minorities did not fit into this picture. The Sami (and more recent minorities such as Roma and Jews) spoke different and not mutually understandable languages, had different cultures and lived by economies and trades that in essence transgressed the new national borders. Nevertheless, in large parts of the Nordic countries, Sami and non-Sami citizens lived and worked in close contact, and Sami people sought similar outlets for voicing political interests as the majority populations, through newspapers, organisations and political representation. From the 1880s until the 1950s, several Sami newspapers were set up in Sami localities in different parts of the country, but none of them were long-lived (Ijäs, 2011; Ottosen, 2010, 227–241). These media outlets can be regarded both as early local newspapers as they were based in Sami communities, and as political outlets, just as the local party newspapers. However, their market was much smaller, and, accordingly, the Sami newspapers were less economically sustainable.

The same period, that is, 1880–1940, also saw the rise of a host of other communication technologies, such as the telephone, film and radio. These provided better infrastructure, news and stories for the newspapers. As in many other countries, there were early experiments with the telephone for public and local transmissions of concerts and other cultural events. The telephone over a couple of decades had become an indispensable means of communication for businesses and, to some extent, private households, not only in the cities but also along the coast. Local cinemas were in operation from 1905. Bastiansen and Dahl (2008, 203) argue that the local cinemas immediately became important political public spaces as they were the locales in which the immensely popular films about the new royal family were shown. The new king

and queen, who were closely related to the Danish and British royal families, were invited to take over the Norwegian throne after a referendum in 1905, and their arrival and inauguration journeys in their new kingdom were documented by films. The cinema in this respect became local distributors of visible, living images of the new political order that had taken seat in the capital, far away from most people at the time. In this respect, they were part of the local media structure and perhaps instrumental to creating early ‘national media events’ in the new-born state (Dayan and Katz, 1994).

Broadcasting started as local and private radio stations in the cities in the early 1920s, but the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) was given a public service monopoly financed by license fees as early as 1933, and the institution centralised (almost) all services (nearly) immediately. The NRK should, in contrast to the newspapers, provide the entire population with news, information and entertainment that were independent of political parties and the government. This system remained until the Nazi occupation of 1940–1945. During the occupation, all media were subject to strict censorship, many newspapers were closed down and journalists and editors were imprisoned, interned in concentration camps and even executed. The NRK was taken over by the Nazis; radio equipment was confiscated and became illegal to own, as it could receive transmissions from the exiled government. In the northernmost parts of the country, where the occupants used the ‘scorched earth’ tactic, most towns and villages and all infrastructure were demolished, including telephone lines, switching boards, newspaper houses and radio masts. When the occupation ended in 1945, the communication infrastructure, including newspapers and broadcasting, had to be re-established and reintroduced to the audiences locally and nationally.

### **Decentralisation, dealignment and de-monopolisation, 1945–1995**

Syvertsen and colleagues (2014) argue that the media have been neglected and underestimated as an important part of the construction of the welfare state in the Nordic countries in the post-war period. Their argument has resonance in how the local media evolved and the roles they played in post-war Norway. Bastiansen and Dahl (2008) describe the first period after 1945 as one in which the high demand for news and newspapers mitigated the damage caused by the occupation. Quite soon, the system of local press competition was back in place. After liberation, the NRK was left with a full-fledged broadcasting monopoly and a centralised organisation. In the first post-war decades the pre-war media structure, where locally competing party newspapers paralleled a centralised broadcasting system, could be recognised. This structure was soon to be complemented with a growing third force, two capital-based popular newspapers that grew fast and increasingly competed not only with each other but also for access to local audiences. By the 1960s, it became clear that the local party newspaper competition system was not sustainable. There are many explanations for the ‘newspaper death’ of the 1960s, but increased competition with the nationwide popular newspapers, radio and television, which had entered the media landscape in 1960 (Bastiansen, 2009), combined with many local newspapers’ lack of market strengths, are among them. Another is the increasing volatility of the voters that made local readers less likely to choose a newspaper for its political views.

The consequences hit the party newspapers unevenly, and in order to slow down and mitigate what would now be called ‘market failure’, the parliament decided in 1967 on setting up a press subsidy system, consisting of different measures (Skogerbø, 1997a). The press subsidies complemented the public service broadcasting policy by introducing a public responsibility for securing citizens access to a diversity of media, and these ‘welfare state’ media policy measures, although contested, have been present in Norwegian media policy ever since. The introduction



of press subsidies did not, however, stop the reduction of local newspapers. In the very first Norwegian study of newspapers as information sources in an election campaign, Stein Rokkan and Per Torsvik (1960) found that voters with access to multiple local newspapers did not necessarily choose the title that reflected their party preferences, and that the newspapers' take on local news was also an important factor. In other words, local party newspapers had already by the 1950s established ties with their local audiences that went far beyond the political. This early Norwegian study supported the findings of Merton (1949) and Park (1929), who had found clear links between media use and citizens' sense of belonging to a locality, a finding that has been repeated by later studies (Elvestad, 2008, 2009). From the beginning of the 1970s onwards most newspapers discarded their formal affiliations to political parties – if not necessarily the ideological platform of the paper – and most of those that survived did so as local or regional papers. Regional newspapers developed out of their position as historical 'winners' of the local competition, that is, they were often local newspapers that gained a favourable market position and kept it over time. Less than ten Norwegian newspapers are regarded as regional in the sense that they typically cover a larger geographical region including many municipalities (Høst, 2018).

Broadcasting remained publicly financed, governed and centralised in terms of channels and organisation. Despite major changes in technologies and the market, the NRK operated only one radio channel (1933–1984) and one television channel (1960–1989) for several decades. Until the 1960s, the NRK also had a programme policy that did not encourage local and regional programmes because a central objective for the broadcaster was to unite the nation across the geographical and cultural cleavages. An early exemption was nevertheless Sami-language news bulletins, aired from 1946 and justified by reference to the need for securing that the Sami population would get news and information from Norwegian sources and not have to rely on potentially 'insecure sources', such as the neighbouring Soviet Union. However, over the decades the centralised broadcasting system was breaking up. In the 1960s and 1970s, the political and cultural climate was changing in favour of decentralisation, as were the technological possibilities for producing (lighter, portable equipment), distributing (FM and expansion of the broadcasting network, both terrestrial and by satellite) and receiving news (transistor radio, portable receivers). All of these factors facilitated production and distribution of local programmes on radio and television. The NRK expanded its Sami programming, and started separate regional radio and, eventually, television programmes. In other words, the decentralised structure of the Norwegian government and culture eventually entered even the most centralised media institution, the national public broadcaster, at the same time as independent local broadcasting was legalised.

The most important change, the removal of the broadcasting monopoly, took place in 1981 as one of the first actions of a newly instated Conservative government. Overnight, the ban on private broadcasting that had been in place for nearly 50 years was lifted and independent local radio stations started programmes almost immediately. Soon after, local television stations saw daylight all over the country. Several hundred new radio and television stations were started, some of which became very popular and some survived over time. The stations were, and still are, very diverse: non-profit, commercial, student-led, popular, music, religious, political, feminist, idealist and indigenous stations, most of them radio stations but experimental television channels too. During the 1980s, there was a continuous battle for survival involving lengthy political processes on the financing of the new media, as well as on competition between types of stations and between local stations and the NRK (Skogerbo, 1997b). From 1988, independent broadcasters had to be local in programming and governance, and the changes were justified with reference to the need for local voices, representation, democracy and local information.

The public broadcaster met the increased competition (which from 1992 also included nationwide commercial broadcasters) by repositioning itself, opening new radio and television

channels, and constantly extending its programming towards targeted audience groups (Syvertsen and Skogerbø, 1998). These processes were by no means purely Norwegian phenomena and in hindsight the 1980s stand out as a period in which experimentation more than consolidation was the key word (Jankowski, Prehn and Stappers, 1992; Lundby and Futsæter, 1993). By the 1990s, the media industry had become a concentrated business sector with a (limited) number of media corporations increasingly controlling large shares of the media markets, including local newspapers, local radio and local television stations. Cross-ownership and integration of media companies increased, a process that speeded up with the opening of the Internet for commercial interests in 1993. By 1995, the first local newspapers opened digital, online editions.

### **Digitisation and the contemporary local media structure, 1995–2020**

In 2019, there were two main observations to be made about Norwegian local media. The first was that *local media remained remarkably stable* in spite of the technological and economic shifts that have seriously altered media production, distribution and consumption. Two structural aspects were striking: the number of newspaper titles and the number of licensed local radio stations. Over the 25 years that had passed since the Internet was commercialised, local journalism practices and local media met with disruptive innovations that they had to adapt to and incorporate. Although varying somewhat between years, local newspaper titles increased from 193 in 2002 to 223 in 2018, with a maximum of 230 in 2014 (Høst, 2018, 49, 2019, 9) whereas the number of licensed (but not always active) local radio stations decreased from 274 in 2002 to a still high number, 208, in 2016 (MedieNorge, 2018). We also have to note that newspapers, radio stations and separate radio programmes operate on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and other online platforms, drawing attention to the fact that the Norwegian media landscape is indeed hybrid (Chadwick, 2017). Local newspapers, online and printed – usually a combination of the two – are published in localities all over the country. Both private broadcasters and the NRK produced more local and regional journalism than ever before, although this in itself has not been a guarantee for high quality, as many commentators have pointed out (e.g., Hess and Waller, 2017; Mathisen and Morlandstø, 2018). There were few, if any, places left out of journalistic coverage, although it has been noted that the capital, Oslo, lacks media that cover its local issues (Høst, 2018).

Arguably, the press subsidy system has been a factor that has contributed to the relatively healthy numbers of local media outlets. Although the press subsidies did not prevent the local party press from dying, they created incentives for local start-ups as small local newspapers were eligible for support after having reached a certain minimum audience figure in the course of one year. Local newspaper competition has all but disappeared, but there are more local titles published in more places in 2019 than there were in 1969. Whereas the press subsidies may be one of the factors responsible for the growth of local titles, they do not fully explain their sustainability in a market where consumption patterns are radically changed. What needs explanation, then, is not the changes but the apparent stability of the structure.

The second observation to be noted about contemporary Norwegian local media is that *consumption of printed newspapers, including local newspapers, has changed dramatically*. Readership of printed, as opposed to online, newspapers has declined to about half of what it was a decade ago. Audiences have moved to mobile and online readership, or to a combination of print and digital, as Figure 4.1 shows. Yet, the reduction in combined audience figures is much less dramatic than the decline in print readership suggests. Høst (2018, 25–27) suggests what may be one important explanation for the stability of local media, that there has been an increase in digital subscriptions over the past few years, as paywalls have been introduced by local media (Olsen



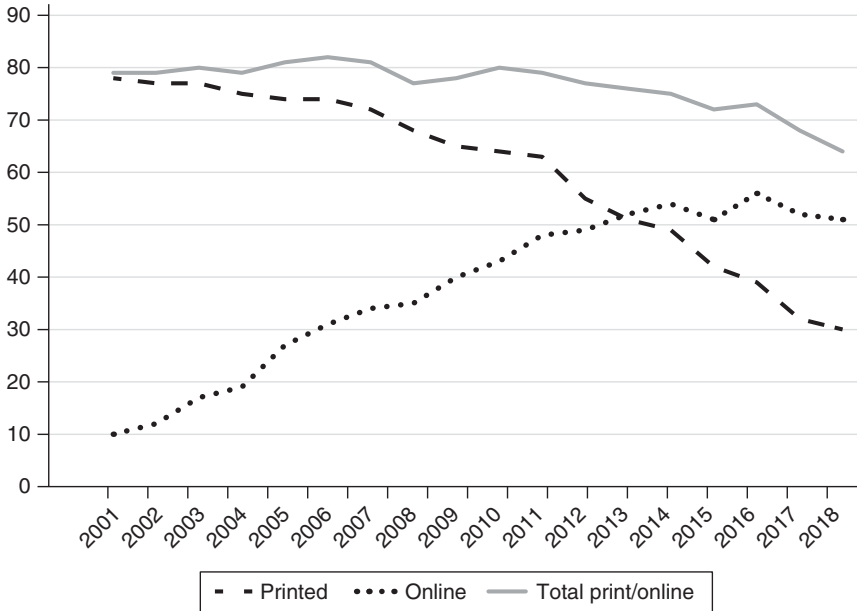


Figure 4.1 Daily readers of printed and online newspapers in Norway, 2001–2018 (percentage of population between 9 and 79 years)

Sources: Medienorge.uib.no; Statistics Norway; Norsk mediebarometer.

and Solvoll, 2018). Despite marked changes in consumption patterns and many predictions that printed newspapers will cease to exist, there is no evidence that local newspapers are being closed down in significant numbers in Norway. Studies of local innovations show that local newspapers adapt to market forces and that these processes are reinforced by the centralised ownership structures (Holand, 2014; Krumsvik, Skogerbø and Storsul, 2013).

Concerning local radio, stability is also remarkable, both in terms of structure and listening (Lenngren, 2013). Although the closing down of the nationwide, analogue FM radio network in 2017 caused an abrupt fall in radio listening, it had less effect on local radio listening. Independent local radio stations were licensed to operate on the FM network until 2021 and have, according to recent figures, gained from the closing of the analogue national network. The NRK regional programmes, which have been switched to the digital network DAB, lost listeners, but it is too early to state whether this is a temporary or permanent shift (Medier24.no, 2018). There have also been new forms of local media that emerged, including local and hyperlocal news websites, Facebook pages and other forms of local digital media that provide some kinds of local news services (Lie, 2018). One such form are municipal websites, that is, the websites of local governments, but there is a dearth of research on their journalistic activities and whether any operate according to principles of local journalism (Winsvold, 2007; Høst, 2019).

## Conclusion

This chapter provided a historical overview of Norwegian local media, pointing to the key forces of localism and decentralisation that have run through both the country's general history, media history and media policy. The account shows that decentralisation has remained

an important feature, evidenced in the increased number of local newspaper titles, support for regionalised NRK programmes and the stability of independent local broadcasting. These trends have evolved at the same time as market models were disrupted, consumption habits changed and media businesses altered delivery and production formats, indicating that localism, one of the deep structures of Norwegian society, may indeed be a key characteristic of the country's media structure in the foreseeable future.

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# 5

## STATE OF PLAY

### Local media, power and society in the Caribbean

*Juliette Marie Storr*

#### **Introduction**

In the Caribbean new patterns of production and consumption are disrupting traditional hierarchical flows of information from center to periphery. Information technologies like the internet and smartphones have introduced a new form of liberalism – one centered on the power of ordinary citizens to influence the daily flow of news and information. Treanor (2005) refers to this as hyper-liberalism, a form of liberalism that favors consensual agreement in the advancement of individual freedoms. This shift in power is creating new information cultures, which are disrupting existing institutional power structures. In a region known for centralized governments, small markets and external dependency, the emerging media ecosystems challenge traditional definitions of local media and journalism in the midst of the rise of post-truth liberalism. A core element of these new information cultures is a decentering of powerful media institutions as citizens increase their use of social media networks to circumvent the corporate news agenda and fourth-estate journalism.

Scholars have long agreed that media, and by extension journalism, play an integral part in shaping cultural ideals and narratives, everyday practices and routines. Media, including print, broadcasting and digital forms, have shaped cultures, establishing new habits and rituals with each new technology. Newman, Dutton and Blank (2012) believe that digital technologies, such as the internet and smartphones, are producing a fifth estate, building new synergistic relationships with the fourth estate and creating a new news ecology (2012, 6). This chapter provides an overview of the history of local media and journalism in the English-speaking Caribbean, specifically Antigua, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago, as well as reflecting on the new media cultures that are currently emerging. The chapter examines power relationships and the different stages of national and local media development in the region.

#### **A history of power imbalances: the influence of colonialism**

The Caribbean is a physical place and social reality. It is delineated by geographic location, cultural similarities that emerged under colonization and smallness. The region is a multicultural space

with six major language groups—English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Creole and Papiamentu—and consists of a variety of traditions and rituals that are both similar and different. Colonization set the tone for all major aspects of life in the modern-day Caribbean. The colonial era is defined as stretching from the 1600s to the 1900s. As such, the evolution of media begins with colonizing influence. Transplanted Europeans started the two earliest forms of mass media, newspapers and radio stations, in public and private ventures throughout the Caribbean. These were mostly local ventures that catered for colonial interests.

Early communication efforts were centered on the expansion of economic empires as colonizers, especially the British, set up communication systems to disseminate information that supported the transfer of resources from the colonies to their European home countries. This mercantile economic activity was promulgated through the African slave trade, the free labor of enslaved people. Earlier contact between indigenous people in the Caribbean and Europeans resulted in the near extinction of the former throughout the region, and much of that history is lost. Indigenous people played very little part in the development of these countries during the colonial period. The first two issues of power were encountered when Europeans made contact with the indigenous people in the region and when Africans were brought to these countries under a system of slavery. This history of power imbalance remains central to current-day hegemonic relationships—politically, economically and socially. Mass media played a significant role in maintaining this balance of power throughout the colonial period and for most of the twentieth century. The advent of digital technologies in the latter part of the twentieth century has shifted some of the power to produce and disseminate information but the majority of power still lies with media owners and political decision makers.

The early history of colonialism undergirds much of the philosophical and theoretical understanding of media and journalism and the kinds of cultures they produced throughout the region. However, the period of colonial dominance was supplanted by American hegemony, which significantly influenced Caribbean media history and cultures throughout the twentieth century, and became particularly influential after the 1980s. North America, including the United States of America and Canada, influenced the development of Caribbean media ecology through a variety of exchanges, including foreign investments, media technologies and content, in forms of piracies, spillover signals, imported content and terrestrial satellites. These influences have created cross-fertilizations and produced hybrid media systems that retained British ideals of media's role in society but emphasized free markets and consumption.

Caribbean media cultures reflect Western capitalist societies that developed, first under colonization and later under nation states. It has long been thought (see Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972) that media cultures represent and reproduce dominant ideologies. This is reflected in the dominant ideologies that media in the Caribbean represent and produce—patriarchy, religion, racism, sexism, mercantilism and capitalism. One of the most dominant ideologies to emerge in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is consumerism. Media culture is often equated with the culture of mass consumption (see Manovich, 2009). Western consumer culture was imposed on Caribbean cultures under colonization and re-imposed post-colonization in hegemonic relations with Western capitalist countries that control the global flow of goods, services and ideas, particularly the United States, Canada and former colonial empires, especially Britain. The region is known for its dependency on external actors and ideas (see literature on Caribbean dependency). Although there has been some increase in the production of local media content, the majority is still either imported or imitated, especially following American media formats and genres.

## **Historical development of media in the Caribbean**

The development of local media in the region has strongly intertwined with that of national media. The first mass medium to appear was print. Print media have been mostly privately owned, but in some countries (Grenada, Guyana and Belize) political parties also owned newspapers that were local. The earliest newspaper, the *Weekly Jamaica Courant*, was published in Kingston, Jamaica in 1718. Since then more than 650 newspapers were launched in the Caribbean. According to Howard Pactor (1990), the majority of these papers, many of which were local community papers, are now extinct. Some countries (Belize, Grenada, Dominica) no longer have a daily print newspaper. Despite this lost history, newspapers continue to influence Caribbean cultures. Advances in digital technology, market competition and changing patterns of readership have led some newspapers to have an online version only. However, in some countries (for example, the Bahamas, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago) print newspapers are still operating, successfully competing in oversaturated markets with radio, television and the internet. Early newspapers were empire-centric; it was not until the 1940s that news became more local as domestic issues replaced the external metropolis focus. Some of these early local newspapers morphed into privately owned national newspapers like the *Nassau Guardian*, which began in 1844 in Nassau, the Bahamas. During the 1960s and 1970s developmental journalism flourished. This change was aided by a variety of local, regional and international movements—unionization, regionalism, the civil rights movement, the independence movement and the migration of people. However, according to some scholars (Cholmondeley, 2001; Stuart, 2001) regional media still contained a lot of foreign content at the start of the twenty-first century.

The second mass medium introduced to the region was radio. Radio began under colonial rule. The first radio started in the Bahamas in 1930. Although radio began with a mix of private and public entities, the main focus of radio was empire building. Colonial governments started public radio in most of the countries, but companies like the British firm Rediffusion also started private radio with the same focus as public radio. British ideology was integrated throughout the practice and development of radio. This external influence set the foundation for the development of public service broadcasting throughout the region. However, unlike the British Broadcasting Corporation, on which these systems were modeled, Caribbean broadcasting systems morphed into hybrid commercial entities in the 1940s and 1950s due to lack of public funding. Television, a more expensive medium than radio, was introduced in many of these countries in the 1960s. These were national stations that covered most of the major cities in each country. National television also inherited the broadcasting systems that were implemented by the British, and was characterized by centralized control and partisan politics. The first local television station in the Caribbean began in Jamaica in 1962, which was state-owned.

On the back of the independence movement, many of the national radio and television stations, broadcasting widely across each country, became little more than propaganda vehicles for centralized governments that emerged in these microstates. After independence, state-run broadcasting systems wielded much power and control over the airwaves, particularly evident during national elections. State governments controlled broadcast licensing. It was not until the period of deregulation, liberalization and privatization that emerged in the 1980s that these systems began to change to more privately owned commercial entities. By the start of the twenty-first century most Caribbean states had divested their sole ownership of radio and television broadcasting, and private local enterprises emerged in the sector. In most countries the state retained some ownership of radio and television entities, as sole, majority or

minority owners, also referred to as leviathan majority and leviathan minority relationships (see Musacchio and Lazzarini, 2012).

Contemporary Caribbean media markets are highly concentrated and competitive. Some scholars (Storr, 2016; Dunn, 2014) characterize these markets as oversaturated media markets. There is a growing trend of conglomeration as media companies merge or are acquired by non-media companies. According to James (2012) this has led to market concentration, a decrease in media diversity and threats to democracy. Two of the largest media conglomerates in the region are One Caribbean Media in Trinidad and Tobago and RJR in Jamaica. However, digital technologies—notably, the internet and social media platforms—are disrupting the flow of information, which to some extent undermines the argument about a lack of media diversity.

Local media in the Caribbean emerged within different geographic spaces and were either private, state-owned or community-owned. Historically, the most popular forms of local media were local newspapers and local radio that typically covered cities, counties, parishes or small towns. Most community media, however, have faced financial and legal constraints for much of their history. The latest forms of community media and local media emerged in the 1970s, which included community theaters in Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. These were small-scale entities created in various local communities to fulfill information, education and entertainment needs. However, they have been overshadowed by state centralized systems, incorporated into larger commercial systems or have languished in various stages of development. More recently, digital technologies have allowed new forms of local media to emerge throughout the region. In the contemporary Caribbean there is a variety of online local newspapers, magazines, blogs and vlogs meeting local community needs.

The state still regulates broadcasting licenses, but in some countries (for example, the Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago) the role and significance of local and community media have been recognized and measures have been introduced to allow the sector to grow. These measures include granting broadcast licenses for specific geographical areas and permitting local and community media entities to work in collaborative partnerships with larger media organizations. Most of these partnership arrangements have been made with cable television, public and state-run radio and television companies. Radio is the most popular form. A variety of state and private local media entities have emerged, including Island FM in the Bahamas, Radio GED in Barbados, Kairi FM in Dominica, Radio Toco in Trinidad and Tobago, Roots FM in Jamaica and Radio Tambrin in Tobago. There have also been some early successes with community video production, such as Bayan Productions in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia's grassroots television programs in Creole and Dominica's Small Projects Assistance Teams (SPAT) that produced community television commercials and programs.

### **Journalism and media freedom in the Caribbean**

Colonization has remained a significant legacy in contemporary Caribbean media environments, influencing power relations and journalistic practices. Under colonization, subjugation existed with clear lines of demarcation along race, class and gender, and print and broadcast journalism were controlled by a white oligarchy. These relationships of power continue in Caribbean societies, manifesting themselves in patriarchal class systems with a variety of oppressions along gender, race and class lines. For example, black ownership of newspapers, which mainly consisted of community titles, first appeared during the nineteenth century, but its influence was not felt until the movement for independence in the 1950s and 1960s. Hiring practices under colonization favored white or mulatto persons. Media ownership was male-dominated. Although there has been an increase in the number of women who own media



in the region, male ownership of media remains a dominant feature. A few of the leading newspapers have female owners, some of whom inherited their family's media business, while others created their own companies. For example, Eileen Dupuch Caron, daughter of Etienne Dupuch, the longest-serving newspaper editor in the region, owns the *Nassau Tribune* in the Bahamas, which is part of the Tribune News Network media conglomerate.

In 2015, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) reported that while media in the English-speaking Caribbean have made some advances toward gender equality and communication rights, some issues have remained. Notably, progress has been made in relation to participation but not representation. That is, the number of female journalists has grown but the number of female decision makers has not. Newsrooms have almost equal representation; according to GMMP (2015), across the region 46 percent of those delivering the news were women, while 54 percent were men. However, men still outnumber women in the region's news content; males appeared two-and-a-half times more often than females. Although women make up more than half of the population in the Caribbean, only 15 per cent of the stories include women as sources, mainly in news on crime and violence. In addition, across the region there are far fewer women in media leadership positions, with Grenada and Trinidad as notable exceptions. In the former there are women in leadership and ownership roles and in the latter women dominate as CEOs in major news organizations.

Many of the media laws and policies inherited from the British were cumbersome and allowed suppression and censorship. Criminal defamation, the most restrictive of these laws, was finally removed fully or partially from the majority of statutes in the second decade of the twenty-first century. With the help of external organizations such as the International Press Institute (IPI), journalists throughout the region lobbied Caribbean governments to change media laws, especially laws for libel and slander, so that they could fulfill their responsibilities to citizens more effectively. Although some of these countries have changed their laws, there are legacy cultural elements, such as secrecy and partisanship, that still restrict the practice of media freedom (Storr, 2016). However, government restrictions are being challenged in a converged media environment. More freedoms are being experienced through the growing use of social media, mobile technology and satellite television. And the culture of secrecy and silence is beginning to dissipate in some segments of society. Local media and journalism—both professional and citizen—are demanding more political transparency, accountability and responsibility as citizens increase their demands for more social transformations.

Generally, journalism throughout the region has evolved over the last 30 years from developmental journalism, popular during the independence and post-independence movement, to commercialized and community journalism, which began to reemerge in the 1990s. A new liberal environment is evolving, influenced by the integration of digital media and citizen journalism. This converged environment has created a more adversarial culture. The global movement to improve systems of governance has also influenced Caribbean media cultures and political systems. Key components of this movement are transparency and accountability (see United Nations 2015 and 2030 agendas). These issues are reflected in the role journalism plays in the protection and advancement of democratic governance. Throughout the region, issues of credibility and relevance challenge current journalistic practices (see Storr 2016).

### **Local and community media in the Caribbean**

Although local and community media exist in most countries, especially the larger ones like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, the majority of journalists in the region work for national



media organizations. Journalists who work for media in small towns, parishes and rural counties or islands share a lot of the same daily challenges, such as pressures to gather information and create content, as those who work for national media, but there are differences. The main difference is found in content and finances. These are smaller operations and the content often focuses on the immediate community. For example, the editors of the *Abaconian* and the *Eleutheran*, two small island community newspapers in the Bahamas, identified the need to keep content local and non-controversial to maximize advertising revenues, which are limited. Community journalism specifically targets the needs of the immediate town or county, and the majority of content is local. Some of these community media entities were established as private commercial entities and others as non-profit organizations with the backing of state governments or international donors, especially the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Journalists who work in local and community journalism spend most of their time reporting on issues related to their community, such as in the case of the *Twin City Sun* and *Western Mirror* in Jamaica. Most of these entities have a small number of full-time or part-time staff, while in some cases, like the *Eleutheran* or Coast Radio in Matthew Town, Inagua, the Bahamas, the owner/editor writes or produces the majority of the content. Some community media are popular with the local audience, such as *The Mandeville Weekly* and the *Eleutheran* newspapers or Roots FM in Jamaica, but many struggle to exist financially. Community media coverage can be as large as 72,000 people, like in the case of *The Mandeville Weekly* in Jamaica, or as little as 900 people for Coast Radio in Matthew Town, Inagua. Some community radio stations limit their operation from 3 to 12 hours; others operate 24 hours. Colin Cholmondeley traces the start of community radio in the Caribbean to the 1970s. Most of these stations started with the aid of UNESCO to help communities throughout the region to focus on local community issues (Cholmondeley, 2001). Educational institutions and religious and ethnic groups have started other independent community stations throughout the region, especially Indian radio channels in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. The majority of contemporary community radio stations are commercial entities, and music and talk shows are the most popular formats.

Professional journalism is adjusting to the challenges of citizen journalism. While most citizens in the region still rely on professional journalists for credible information, this position has been widely undermined by new online information sources like *On the Ground News* in Jamaica, *Bahamas Press* in the Bahamas, *Loop* in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, *Caribbean360* in Barbados, *News Room* in Antigua and other online news services and blogs. These new media entities, including hyperlocal outlets, operate on converged news and information platforms that compete with legacy media houses. In addition, the high use of social platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter by citizens to disseminate information and images also complicates source credibility and increases the amount of distorted, insensitive, unfiltered information in these societies. Journalists operate with no or limited access to public information. Despite the movement, initiated by Caribbean journalists and IPI, to institute or change freedom of information/access to information laws, many governments in the region have retained their control on public information.

In the contemporary Caribbean, the use of smartphones to access and disseminate information has brought new challenges and opportunities to all sectors of society. The challenges have been most visible in journalism, where breaking news is often published first on social media. Professional journalists are expected to lead society with professionalism, truthfulness and credibility and practice fairness and responsibility with the highest standards and best practices. Citizen journalists do not have the same expectations. Citizen journalism also muddies the definition of local media. Local media are no longer confined to local newspapers or radio

stations. On social media new products and new media start-ups have emerged throughout the region, including hyperlocal media. “Hyperlocal media is defined as offering an online news or content service pertaining to a small community such as a town, village or single postcode” (Radcliffe, 2013, 6). There has been significant growth in hyperlocal media throughout the region, examples include *Girl with a Purpose*, *Negrilonestop*, *OAccessJamaica*, *The West Indian*, *Caribbean Climate*, *EatAhFood*, *blahblohblog*, *Caribbean Girls Who Blog* and *Sawyer Boy*. The proliferation of these outlets bodes well for the increase in local news and information as well as for press freedom, but raises concerns regarding trust and truthful content as citizen-led community online news operations exist with very little oversight.

### **Caribbean media cultures**

The Caribbean media landscape is fragmented, segmented, highly competitive, saturated and dynamic. Some countries in the region have highly developed media and telecommunications infrastructures, while others do not. Levels of social media use are high in some countries but moderate in others. Many of the Caribbean’s traditional media systems exemplified the British media system and values to inform, educate and entertain for more than 50 years. Despite the influence from the United States, this philosophy remains a core part of the media culture in the Caribbean. However, modernization and globalization have challenged this position particularly since the liberal agenda was implemented in the 1980s. Although public and state broadcasting still exist, much of contemporary media are private and commercial. Some scholars (Storr, 2014; James, 2012) believe private commercial entities have supplanted the public service motif for a commercial ethos that emphasizes consumption of goods and services, mostly imported into the region. The region swapped one hegemonic existence for another, exchanging the taken-for-granted nature of colonial rule for the rule of global consumption.

Contemporary Caribbean media cultures are consumption-based. There are some differences based on cultural emphases, but the similarities outweigh the differences. Endogenous elements like reggae, calypso, soca, carnival, junkanoo, crop over etc. provide different cultural lenses but the images reflecting back are basically the same, a consumer culture driven by the ideas of Western capitalism, mainly from the United States. China’s recent intervention in the region is creating new asymmetrical relations of power. The media throughout the region has cultivated dependent societies that are controlled by ideas from the West. There is an illusion of indigenous power and control but the economies are mostly dependent on external actors. These countries are locked into asymmetrical power relations with economically powerful Western states, China and multinational corporations. The media reflect this imbalance of power, particularly when it comes to content, exposing corruption or demanding transparency of governments and corporations throughout the region.

Media dependency theory integrates a number of theoretical strands—psychological, sociological, systems, uses and gratifications, media content and effects (see Ball-Rokeach and Defleur, 1976, 1989). Each country’s media system was created in dependent relationships at the macro and micro levels. At the macro level are the country’s economy and government; they determine what kind of media products and information are disseminated to the public. Today, technology has placed some of the control in the hands of citizens. The dependent relations between society’s economic system and media create and reinforce certain values, beliefs and ideas, especially about the free marketplace. A dependent relationship also grew between media and the political system. Political systems rely on media to inculcate political values, norms and ideas. At the micro level, media established interdependences with social systems like the family, education and religion. Caribbean countries do not create media technologies, they import

them. Therefore, according to dependency theories, these cultures have been impacted on the macro and micro levels through the external dependency of importing foreign media hardware and software that bring with them the values, beliefs, ideas and norms of their creators (see the Caribbean media dependency and cultural imperialism literature by Brown, 2006, 1995, 1990; Cuthbert, 1981, 1977, 1976; and Dunn, 2014, 1995).

The recent movement to improve indigenous media production is promising but the majority of media content in the Caribbean is still imported. Further, these countries are still hampered by the lack of economies of scale—small markets mean difficulties with monetization of content and having limited talent. In 1984 Jamaica created Creative Production and Training Center (CPTC), a public sector multimedia and video production center, in 2006 Trinidad and Tobago launched Film Company Limited and in 2012 Barbados started the Caribbean Film and Media Academy. These initiatives are producing a new crop of young innovative talents who are creating cultural products—sitcoms, soap operas and feature-length films. Other countries are creating similar programs both as public and private ventures. This contemporary movement is adding more local media content and producing televisual products not only for the local market but also the global entertainment industry as well. In addition, citizens throughout the region are producing their own media content, uploading and sharing it online through various foreign-owned portals like Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo, Twitter and WhatsApp.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the history and contemporary developments of local and national media in the English-speaking Caribbean countries. These societies today are heavily mediated. Close proximity to the United States, former colonizers, relationships of dependency, new relations with China and smallness characterize the countries' media ecologies and cultures. However, media ecosystems in the Caribbean are in a state of flux. National media institutions still play a central role in shaping these societies but the internet, social media and social networks are disrupting national media's control on the dissemination of news and information as local information cultures emerge. However, local and community media are economically constrained. Opportunities exist for community media, especially radio, to be an excellent force for development, but many of these countries still lack national policies for community media.

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## 6

# ‘PEOPLEIZATION’ OF NEWS

## The development of the American local television news format

*Madeleine Liseblad*

### Introduction

The newscast begins with flashy graphics, teasing upcoming content. Upbeat anchors smile and chit-chat. They toss to reporters in the field or the newsroom. Conversations ensue. Since the 1960s, American television news, and in particular local news, has followed recurring, predictable elements (McManus, 1990; Phillips, 1976). There is uniformity in the format (Matusow, 1983). Today this format is not only visible in the United States. Turn on the news anywhere in the world and a similar scene unfolds. This originally local American television news format can be seen virtually everywhere, with some cultural variations. Furthermore, the commercial television model “has become the dominant model across the world” (Kishan Thussu, 2007, 2). Even public broadcasters have adopted routines making them practically indistinguishable from commercial competitors (McQuail, 1994; Syvetsen, 1997). The way television news is structured came about largely because of audience research and media consultants. Consultants “were conduits connecting local TV stations to the majority of average television viewers” (Allen, 1996, 321). They shaped news in the US – locally and nationally – and spread the formula abroad (Allen, 2001).

Since television is important for information purposes, “what is happening to television news, globally, becomes one of the key areas of concern, not only for those who study, consume or produce television news but for society as a whole” (Kishan Thussu, 2007, 2). Because the American news format has achieved global success, knowing its origins provides context for today’s structure. Understanding American local television news development “is essential to understanding the modern news process because it was the first component of the news media to absorb the systems approach” (Allen, 2001, xii). Comprehending history also furthers current knowledge of the function and role of media in society as “history is the heritage upon which the future is constructed” (Godfrey, 2006, 5). Historian Robert W. McChesney stated, “we are living on the edge of history, and if you want to know where you are going, you have to know where you are coming from” (as cited in Godfrey, 2006, 6). Traditionally, American media historians focused on large events and famous people (Allen, 2006). Local television news was till recently largely neglected. Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross (1990) offered the first large-scale television history written from a diminishing network influence perspective. It is now clear local stations drove much of the progress.

In the US, a local station's commercial success is a matter of survival. Television stations are divided into markets, generally by population and overlapping with one or more metropolitan regions, and focus their broadcasts and reporting on their specific markets. These local television markets are highly competitive with at least three stations in a direct head-to-head battle for the audience (Atkinson, 1994). It is in this type of competitive environment the American local television news format developed and thrived. The aim of this chapter is to explain the origin and advancement of the American format. Because of its global influence, it is imperative to understand its starting point and subsequent development.

### **History of television news in the United States**

From its inception, "television in America has been a fighting word, a battleground, a stormy topic filled with many conflicts" (Warner, 1962, 5). It was primarily an entertainment medium and a way to move goods (Powers, 1978). Everything centered around money and creating profits (Cushion, 2012; Tuchman, 1974). Commercial broadcasting revolves around "the battle for ratings, which reflect national audience allegiances and the status of affiliated stations" (Smith, 1977, 148). The American public saw television for the first time at the 1939 New York World's Fair (Fang, 1997). In 1941, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approved commercial television, and by the mid-1940s, television sets could be purchased from several manufacturers (Barnouw, 1990). However, in the 1940s and 1950s, many "ignored television as just a fad" (Fang, 1997, 134). The birth of the networks can be traced to May 1948, "when AT&T inaugurated regular, commercial intercity transmission of television pictures" (Frank, 1991, 7). The American Broadcasting Company (ABC), National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and television receiver company DuMont used the American Telephone and Telegraph Company's (AT&T) transmission cable to reach nine connected cities. At the time, there were only television stations in 18 cities (Frank, 1991).

With television's emphasis on entertainment, news was originally done to satisfy FCC requirements. The newscast was not seen as profitable or as a serious medium for providing news (Kiska, 2009). Television news "grew from two roots, newsreels and radio newscasts" (Fang, 1997, 164). Early newscasts were "televized radio" (Quaal and Brown, 1976, 208), meaning radio "transposed to the new medium with little change" (Quaal and Brown, 1976, 208). It was news delivered orally, as in radio, but illustrated with photographs (Hutchinson, 1946). Broadcast historian Mike Conway (2009) traced the US newscast starting point to two 15-minute daily television programs that began at WCBW in New York in July 1941, seven years prior to regular network news. In the 1940s and 1950s, both networks and local stations began efforts to advance the evening news. At the local level, stations hired employees to read copy and even teams of reporters and photographers. In 1947, DuMont began "the Walter Compton News," the first network news series originating from Washington, DC (Bliss, 1991). A year later, the face of *CBS Evening News* was Douglas Edwards. At rival NBC, John Cameron Swayze became the personality of the *Camel News Caravan* before Chet Huntley and David Brinkley took over in 1956. The 1950s marked the start of television's golden age as the FCC lifted its station licensing freeze. The 1950s also meant a slightly elevated role for the television journalist. The teleprompter was invented, allowing anchors to look straight at viewers while reading scripts. The late 1950s saw the first use of helicopters in newsgathering, including Los Angeles station KTLA's "Telecopter," equipped specifically for news coverage (Vitello, 2012).

At the beginning of the 1960s, news appeared as 5-, 10-, and 15-minute bulletins. Many local stations carried network news to help meet FCC requirements. However, the 1960s became the medium's most important growth period (Kiska, 2009). Much of the growth stemmed



from “heavy investment in research” (Potter, 1989, 217). The FCC began requiring broadcasters to explain measures undertaken to determine the “tastes, needs and desires” (Krasnow and Goodman, 1998, 616) of their audience. Its community ascertainment policy required stations to research what programming their audience wanted, and come up with a plan to meet that desire, essentially promoting “the public from casual advisor to required consultant” (DeLuca, 1976, 61). At both local and national levels, television news “would become more than a headline service during the 1960s” (Kiska, 2009, 46). It moved away from the rip-and-read format where anchors merely read wire service reports (Brinkley, 2012). Many scholars have argued modern television news started in September 1963 when the first half-hour network newscasts began. That same year the Roper Poll – a nationwide public opinion survey done by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research – first showed television as the majority’s preferred news source (Quaal and Brown, 1976), CBS’s Walter Cronkite became “one of the most trusted men in America” (Sterling and Kittross, 2002, 444) and NBC’s *Huntley-Brinkley Report* rose in ratings (Murray, 1995), becoming a huge revenue source (Bliss, 1991).

The assassination of then-President John F. Kennedy also occurred in 1963. The networks provided live coverage for four days (Barnouw, 1990), and “television critics in every city wrote in superlatives about how the medium heroically rose to the tragic occasion and how it provided public service of the highest order” (Watson, 1990, 226). The coverage “brought the American people together” (Sterling and Kittross, 2002, 407). Scholars called it TV’s finest hour (Bliss, 1991; Sterling and Kittross, 2002). In the 1960s, television’s visual aspect was affirmed as extended network newscasts allowed Americans to see Vietnam War coverage, social unrest and transformation, and accomplishments in space (Dary, 1974; Hunter and Gross, 1980). However, the networks did not drive news growth. Two years prior to the network expansion, in 1961, Sacramento station KCRA-TV aired the first known extended local newscast, featuring 45 minutes of local content coupled with 15 minutes of network news (Liseblad, 2017). At least nine local stations introduced 45-minute newscasts before the expanded network newscasts (Murray and Godfrey, 1997). The 1960s brought change to television in many different areas as a number of trends began transferring power from the networks to local stations (Murray and Godfrey, 1997). It also marked the beginning of the American television news format. While the West Coast drove the lengthening of the newscast, the East Coast marked the origins of the local television news format.

With news, preferences were historically divided along class lines (Coleman, 1983). In the early 1960s, television news had a “medium of record” structure fitting the upper-middle class, but not the middle majority (Glick and Levy, 1962). That middle majority, identified by sociologist Lloyd Warner in his social class model (Warner and Lunt, 1941), accounted for almost 70 per cent of the population. They were lower-middle and upper-lower-class Americans with a high school education, similar incomes, occupations and lifestyles. Sociologists were “baffled that broadcasters felt they were providing public service with newscasts that appealed only to the 25 per cent of viewers with college degrees” (Allen, 2005, 364). While the highly educated treated television as beneath them, the working class “purchased TV sets by the million” (Warner, 1962, 5). The working class loved entertainment programs, but did not understand newscasts as they catered to the ‘elite’ upper-middle class (Allen, 2005). It did not help that journalists, especially network journalists, were highly educated and could not always relate to the middle majority (Allen, 2005). The middle majority found newscasts boring and wanted easily digestible news. It was easier to sit down and listen than to read (Allen, 2001), but news was using a “form borrowed from newspapers” (Allen, 2005, 371).

Television as a medium was capable of reaching a mass audience, but the message needed to fit larger groups; it needed to fit the middle majority. As Warner pointed out, “just to send

symbols (such as programs) is insufficient; it is also necessary for the meaning of such media to be received, in order to complete the conveyance” (Warner, 1962, 9). Good storytelling “focuses on what ordinary people care about” (Atkinson, 1994, 9). In a 1964 report on the Kennedy assassination, respondents described feeling they had shared the tragedy with the anchors (Allen, 2001). Walter Cronkite became emotional, choked up, and a warm, caring newscaster emerged. Television made viewers feel as though they were in a conversation (Zelitzer, 1990); it provided an illusion of a conversation “between anchors on television and viewers at home, unmediated” (Melzer, 2010, 21). The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the beginning of a huge transformation. The development of the Eyewitness News and Action News formats, and the subsequent merger, drew mass audiences, attracted advertisers and television news became profitable.

### **“Peopleization” of news begins with Eyewitness News and Action News**

The “peopleization” of news – focusing on the middle majority – grew out of Lloyd Warner’s social class model. It manifested itself first in local news with the Eyewitness News concept, championed by reporter, news director and later consultant Al Primo and the news consultancy company McHugh & Hoffman, led by Peter McHugh and Phillip Hoffman. Marshall McLuhan called Eyewitness News the first format designed for television; it made viewers part of the action (Dominick, Wurzel, and Lometti, 1975). It was better than newspaper and radio because it made the public a participant rather than a spectator (McLuhan, 1971). Eyewitness News centered around the viewer’s preference

to invite friendly, outgoing people into his home, people who obviously like each other, and can take some of the sting out of the usual catalogue of daily troubles which form so much of our news.

*(Fang, 1972, 85)*

This friendly format that McHugh & Hoffman and Primo advocated for centered around pleasant anchors and a conversational, easy-to-understand news. Eyewitness News, together with Action News, is the basis for today’s newscasts.

McHugh & Hoffman formed in 1962, marking the year news consultancy began (Powers, 1978). They teamed up with Storer Broadcasting, one of the then-largest broadcasters, and brought audience research steeped in social class analysis into the newsroom (Allen, 2005). McHugh & Hoffman worked with sociologist Lloyd Warner, whose company Social Research Inc. conducted their research. Focus groups and field surveys were used to examine what people felt ‘good journalism’ was, a first step in catering to a mass audience. They found audiences liked visuals and therefore recommended that content without visual should not be shown. A successful newscast needed to be both informative and bearable. Viewers did not want a laundry list of items (Allen, 2005). They disliked politics, but loved news they could use, like weather reports. Weather is “an environment that includes everybody” (McLuhan, 1971, 35). The concept for Eyewitness News was born in 1955, when then-reporter Al Primo, because of technical issues, stepped in front of the camera. Primo explained, “it showed our viewers one of our people was actually there. They knew it was our story” (Primo, 2008, 55); it added credibility. Primo “wondered what would happen if every story had an eyewitness” (2008, 55). However, the Eyewitness News format was not developed until years later, debuting at KYW in Cleveland in 1962 (Allen, 2001) but maturing in Philadelphia (Casella, 2013) in 1965 when KYW relocated.



Traditionally, reporters did not appear on air in the 1950s and 1960s. Union rules required extra pay “if any part of the anatomy appeared on television and a larger fee if the voice was heard” (Primo, 2008, 52). At KYW in Philadelphia, Primo found a loophole in the union contract, meaning he could use staff on air without paying extra. Thus, the bulk of the newsroom staff became on-air talent. This was significant, giving KYW “the biggest reporting staff in town” (Primo, 2008, 55). Primo “made it a rule that with the exception of funerals, reporters had to appear in every piece that hit the air” (2008, 55). He explained to staff by being on air, “you become someone just like the person you’re interviewing and more importantly, you become just like the television viewer” (Primo, 2008, 58). Eyewitness News was not just a name, but a newscast style. Primo used a four-person anchor team that included two anchors, one weathercaster and one sportscaster. Reporters were given newspaper-type beats. This gave KYW “a small battalion of specialists” (Primo, 2008, 59).

A set was placed in the newsroom to showcase the busy staff, theme music and snazzy graphics were added, and moving cameras created energy. The Eyewitness News title was prominently displayed during sign-on and sign-off. The station also used ‘data banks’ – static news scrolls teasing stories (Primo, 2008). It was a team effort; all newsroom staff were involved. It paid off as “Eyewitness News became Philadelphia’s dominant number one-news program in just eighteen months” (Primo, 2008, 73). In 1968, Primo moved to New York’s WABC and the Eyewitness News format spread. There anchors introduced reporters, who introduced their stories, and follow-up questions were asked. The most unusual feature was the visibility of women and minorities (Allen, 2001). WABC’s Eyewitness News also used mic flags to

create the impression that Eyewitness News was special and exclusively an ABC product with distinctive new microphones and flags.

*(Primo, 2008, 98)*

The on-air talent was given a uniform look. Men wore dark-blue, tailored jackets and Circle 7 logo pins were introduced (Allen, 2001). There were frequent break-ins into regular programming for news and weather bulletins, “giving the viewers the impression that we were always on top of things” (Primo, 2008, 130). At WABC, McHugh & Hoffman joined Eyewitness News (Ponce De Leon, 2015; Powers, 1978). They were hired to conduct research and the work they did with Primo to tailor the newscast to its audience was incredibly successful. The old WABC newscast had received a 1 rating. Six months after its start, Eyewitness News got a 19 rating (Primo, 2008). The newscast expanded from 30 minutes to one hour. The Eyewitness News format was so successful that by 1971 over 100 local news stations were using it (Allen, 2001).

In 1970, Action News debuted, a format derived by Frank N. Magid. He was trained under a protégé of sociologist Lloyd Warner, had a background in applied research, and quickly became “one of the most influential people in the development of local television news” (Ryan, 1999, 139). Magid’s entry into television was a Cedar Rapids, Iowa station. With the general manager’s help, Magid signed several TV clients. However, up until the late 1960s, Magid only conducted research, not consulting services (Allen, 2001). Action News made its debut in Philadelphia, just like Eyewitness News, but on rival WFIL (Fox, 2010). Magid felt Eyewitness News was too slow; the defining Action News characteristics were shorter stories and a rapid-fire pace. Stories featured quick-cut video clips, soundbites no longer than ten seconds, and there were as many as three stories for every minute (Ponce De Leon, 2015). The format favored “co-anchors who chatted between stories, fast-paced graphics, sports tickers and live shots” (Sullivan, 2010, para. 1). Magid used first-generation television reporters, and an overall young news team. The newscast had a musical theme and used promotions. Magid was at the forefront of new

technology, like mobile vans and hand-held cameras, allowing for quick newsgathering (Ponce De Leon, 2015).

Magid's Philadelphia venture was the greatest ratings expansion in television news history, both at the network and local level (Allen, 2001). In merely a year, the station had "more than quadrupled its news audience" (Allen, 2001, 125). WFIL ended up being the highest-rated major market newscast for close to 30 years. Station managers from all over the US contacted Magid, wanting to increase their ratings. Magid started a local personality news bank to help with anchor changeover. He also launched the first television talent school and hired a Broadway talent coach (Allen, 2001). By 1976, Magid was called "the pre-eminent broadcast news consultant in the United States. He was Number One because his stations moved up in the ratings" (Powers, 1978, 78). He was the "supremo" (Karpf, 1985, para. 2) who "perfected the business of news consultancy" (Powers, 1978, 122).

### **Vocal critics**

While the formats and work of consultants connected "local TV stations to the majority of average television viewers" (Allen, 1996, 321), there were vocal critics. Former *CBS News* president Richard Salant said news needs to tell people what they ought to know, not what they want to know (Ponce de Leon, 2015; Powers, 1978). The then-*ABC News* executive Av Westin felt local news was too preoccupied with easily presentable, visual stories, having an operative based around "what sells is good" (Westin, 1982, 208). While analyzing Channel 7's *Eyewitness News* in Chicago in 1976, television critic Ron Powers found it followed a model blueprint as "a glib, delicious, but empty newscast – a Twinkie of the airwaves" (Powers, 1977, 21). He argued

the hoax is made more insidious by the fact that very few TV news watchers are aware of what information is left out of a newscast to make room for the audience-building gimmicks and pleasant repartee.

*(Powers, 1977, 23)*

Critics argued that local newscasts included a "variety of eccentric anti-journalistic developments" (Barrett and Sklar, 1980, 58). These included "matching blazers and haircuts, fancy sets, and shorter and softer news items" (Barrett and Sklar, 1980, 58). Local news is the

perfect news show for people who can't stand news ... if no news is good news, "Eyewitness News" is the best news show on the air.

*(Morgenstern, 1971, 9)*

Local news was described as the "process by which incompetence is converted into cuteness" (Leonard, 1971, 12). Critics said "the tabloid virus" (Briller, 1993, 60) showed up in network news too.

Despite critics, the formats attracted mass audiences and news became seriously profitable. With news profitable, "news directors discover they no longer are considered heads of parasite departments" (Loch, Christopher, and Morris, 1970, 18). Suddenly news mattered to station owners. Many found it to be their most profitable operation (Loch, Christopher, and Morris, 1970). Because ratings and profit ruled, stations used successful concepts. While *Eyewitness News* and *Action News* had originally been fairly far apart, by the late 1970s, it was evident they had merged (Allen, 2001). This new formula provided "a distinctive style of local television news" (Allen, 2001, 142). While Nielsen national ratings in 1969 showed network

newscast as stronger than local news, that changed a couple of years later as newscasts in most major and large markets overtook network news in popularity (Allen, 2001). In the 1980s, the hybrid news formula was enormously profitable. Many stations expanded their news offerings, invested in new technology, and local stations sent reporters to cover national and even international stories. It showed local stations could be providers of all news, a viable alternative to network news (Ponce De Leon, 2015). The television industry is a copycat business; if something works, it gets duplicated (Primo, 2008). “Imitation may be the most sincere form of flattery, but in broadcasting, it is a matter of survival” (Primo, 2008, 210). By the end of the 1970s, “there was no major local TV news operation that didn’t bear the marks of the news consultant invasion” (Barrett and Sklar, 1980, 60). The consultancy market reached saturation in the US and Canada by the late 1980s, whereupon consultants expanded abroad, shaping global broadcasting.

## Conclusion

The American newscast format provided a successful formula that was both easy to implement and easy to adapt to fit market needs abroad. In the latter part of the twentieth century, television became the premiere news source globally. Today, even with the internet, television remains number one (Kiska, 2009; Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, and Shearer, 2016). A 2016 study found 57 per cent of American adults get their news from television, while only 38 per cent get it via social media and websites (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, and Shearer, 2016). A large 2013 study examining news consumption in 11 nations on four continents found television dominant, and “the more citizens watch TV news, the better informed they seem to be” (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013, 697). However, traditional television news and so-called appointment viewing – people sitting down at a specific time to watch a newscast – is not stable. Threats include a younger digital audience not as likely to turn to television news (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016; Tobias, 2018). Stations are adapting with websites, recorded newscasts, online videos and social media outreach. The journalistic profession is also under scrutiny with allegations of ‘fake news’. However, most do not associate ‘fake news’ with local news (Roschke, 2018). That’s great news – both in the US and abroad – for local television stations battling for audiences in this digital era.

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## PART II

# Local media policies



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# 7

## THE DEATH OF BROADCAST LOCALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

*Christopher Ali*

### **Introduction**

Localism is dead. By this, I do not mean the political ideation of local governance, nor the practices of local media and local news (although, these are certainly changing and hurting) (Ali, 2017a; Hess and Waller, 2016). Rather, I mean the policy principle of ‘broadcast localism’ as it exists in the United States. For decades, ‘localism’ – the principle that broadcasters should be responsible to, and reflective of, their communities of license – has been a foundation of communication policy (Napoli, 2001). This is no longer the case. The past 30 years have witnessed the slow and steady erosion of almost all regulations that we could categorize under the heading of localism. From ascertainment, to ownership, to the UHF discount, and, most recently, the Main Studio Rule, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) – the body responsible for broadcast regulation in the US – has left it to broadcasters, and not the regulatory mechanisms at the disposal of public policy, to ensure local communities are served. This has troubling implications for local news – a vital democratic enterprise, but one certainly under threat (Lloyd and Friedland, 2016). Indicative of the death of localism are the machinations of the Sinclair Broadcasting Group. The largest single owner of television stations in the country, Sinclair has thwarted the foundational beliefs of localism – local control, local reflection, and local voices – first in its (now-failed) bid to acquire Tribune Media and second in its infamous ‘must-run’ segments of conservative political commentary. To be sure, Sinclair did not cause the death of localism, but its actions demonstrate the powerlessness of the localism principle in its current iteration.

This chapter describes the life and death of the localism principle in the United States. I first define broadcast localism and take us through its philosophical foundations. I then describe the various attempts over the last 80 years or so to regulate broadcasting in the name of localism. In the United States, this is a challenge because the First Amendment and the *1996 Telecommunications Act* all but forbid direct content requirements. This means the FCC cannot require broadcasters to air local programming such as local news.<sup>1</sup> Such hindrance forces the FCC to be creative in drafting regulations to encourage localism. Following a description of these attempts (and their inevitable deregulation) I offer a brief case study of the Sinclair Broadcasting Group and its relationship to the localism principle. This chapter concludes on a



more optimistic note with recommendations for how we can breathe new life into the localism principle – a principle that is more crucial today than ever before.

### **The definition of localism**

Broadcast localism, the localism principle, or simply ‘localism’, is the belief that local over-the-air broadcasters – radio and television – should serve their communities of license. It also extends to other areas of peripheral FCC jurisdiction such as cable television and direct broadcast satellite. ‘Service’ here means programming that reflects the community (especially local news). It also means communicating with the community, being present in the community, using and promoting local talent, and being located in the community (FCC, 2008). Former FCC Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein captured the spirit of the localism principle when he spoke at the opening of a hearing on the subject in 2003.

Every community has its local needs, its local talents, local elections, local news, and local culture. And localism reflects the commitment to local news and public affairs programming, but it also means a lot more. It means providing opportunities for local self-expression, it means reaching out, developing and promoting local performing artists and other local talent. It means making programming decisions that serve local needs. It means making sure that the coverage reflects the makeup of the community ... Localism also means the station being responsive to the community in other ways, such as dedicating the resources to discover and address the needs of the community.

*(Quoted in FCC, 2003a, 19–20)*

Localism has been called both the ‘bedrock’ and the ‘cornerstone’ of broadcasting policy in the United States (FCC, 2008; Napoli, 2001), and has held this position for decades. The principle (though not the term) can be found in both the 1927 Radio Act and the 1934 Communications Act, which “instructs the Commission to regulate broadcast as the public interest, convenience, and necessity dictate”, with a particular focus on the geographic distribution of licenses to the states and communities therein (FCC, 2008; Napoli, 2001; United States, 1934). Indeed, the Commission has long believed that every community should have a broadcaster to reflect their unique norms and values (Napoli, 2001). The terms ‘local’ and ‘localism’ do not appear in either the 1934 Communications Act or its predecessor, the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Additionally, despite efforts in 2007 and 2008 (FCC, 2008), there is no official set of regulations regarding broadcasting localism. Instead, the Commission has relied on a number of instruments to encourage local stations to serve their communities. Such regulations have been slowly chipped away in successive waves of deregulation. The result of these actions – both past and present – is that we are asked to trust that broadcasters will serve their communities however they see fit and hope that localism makes the cut.

### **The origins of localism**

Localism rests on two foundational beliefs: local governance and place-based communities (Ali, 2017a). In the first regard, “localism as a value is deeply embedded in the American legal and political culture” (Briffault, 1990). It is based on the notions of local autonomy, self-governance, and community identity, finding its ultimate manifestation in Alexis de Tocqueville’s New England town hall (Braman, 2007). As Napoli summarizes,

greater localism in the distribution of political power is seen as promoting personal empowerment and increased political knowledge at the individual level and, at the societal level, a greater sense of community and more participatory – and ultimately better – decision making that is more closely aligned with the true values and interests of the citizenry.

*(2001, 206)*

Vital, as Napoli reminds us, is that we still vote locally, and so long as our political system is aligned with local elections and local candidates, then localism remains a relevant and resonant concept (Napoli, 2001).

Localism also depends on the fundamental belief in the uniqueness of geographic places and their role in our civic mindset, daily lives, and identities (Cowling, 2005). In other words, political localism depends on a ‘sense of place’ (Hess and Waller, 2016). This is the second pillar of broadcast localism (Ali, 2017a). Its most obvious manifestation in policy is that the FCC licenses broadcasters to geographically distinct communities (cities, towns, etc.) rather than states or regions. This allows broadcasters to reflect the interests and values of those living in these places, rather than, for instance, the CBC in Canada, which has a national mandate (Ali, 2017a). The connection to places reflects the belief that ‘place still matters’ (Tinic, 2005). This contrasts with those who argue that the place-based idea of localism is outdated and unnecessary (Cowling, 2005). In an early piece, I called this the divide between ‘spatial’ and ‘social’ localism, which has been exacerbated with digital platforms that allow for the proliferation of communities of interest (Ali, 2017a).

To an extent, these critics are not wrong, because certain fundamental, possibly fatal, misconceptions exist within the localism principle. Beliefs in both local governance and geographic localism, are challenged when attempting to ascribe them to broadcasting.

The policy of localism constitutes a lovely set of paradoxes that goes to the heart of the contradiction of mass communication in a capitalist democracy. A vague, progressive, almost Jeffersonian vision of a democratically communicating local community, localism naively assumed that local broadcast entrepreneurs would operate television stations that would ‘serve’ the local community.

*(Horwitz, 1991 p. 186)*

There are two problems identified by Horwitz: networking and geography. In the first regard, stations have struggled to balance the requirements of localism with the popularity of networked programming, which comes with flashier stars and even flashier budgets. Outside of local news (which is unique to the area), local programming has all but dried up (Anderson and Curtin, 1999; Horwitz, 1991). The second factor combines the geographical, philosophical, and technological. It demands that our primary allegiance is to the place that we live (as noted above). But, we do not (if we ever did) live in one place. We may go to school in one locality, live in another, shop in a third, and vote somewhere else (Braman, 2007). This is what Braman (2007) calls the difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ localism. In addition to human mobility, electronic media have never respected political boundaries. To the contrary,

the media have helped to reorganize the dimensions of time and space in modern society, reconfiguring personal time and creating new forms of space and new social relations that make it virtually impossible to theorize – or to regulate – ‘the local’ in a way that is consistent or coherent.

*(Anderson and Curtin, 1999, 295)*

Factors like this have led some to argue that localism has had a ‘disappointing career’ (Kirkpatrick, 2006) and others to call it the ‘myth of the localism mandate’ (Cole and Murck, 2006).

Interestingly, many of the arguments about the disconnection of place from identity have waned in recent years as places have been reinserted in to our digital lives, particularly through mobile phones (Farman, 2013). In addition, a renewed interest in the importance of local news and ‘saving’ local journalism has re-inscribed media localism into scholarly and market considerations (Lloyd and Friedland, 2016). These interests, however, have not trickled down to policy, where, instead of promoting localism and local news, the FCC has systematically disassembled the majority of localism-inflected regulations.

## Localism regulation

### *Early attempts*

The 1940s saw two major attempts to bring localism in to the regulatory fore. The first was the 1941 *Report on Chain Broadcasting*, which later became the Chain Broadcasting Regulations (United States, 1941; Cole and Murck, 2006). This report grew out of the FCC’s increasing discomfort with the dominance of network programing in radio broadcasting (Cole and Murck, 2006). This was an exemplary opportunity to recommend and even require local programming. It fell short of this possibility (Cole and Murck, 2006). While Section 3.104 limited the power of networks’ use of ‘optional time’ in the broadcast schedule, the report ultimately failed to articulate any strong requirements for local programming (Cole and Murck, 2006).

The second major inquiry touching on localism was the 1945 *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees Report*, also known as the Blue Book. The Blue Book, writes Victor Pickard,

arguably represents one of the most progressive initiatives by one of the most progressive [FCC’s] in US history. It took the unprecedented – and unrepeated – step of making the privilege of holding broadcast licenses contingent upon meeting substantive public interest requirements.

(2011, 172)

Among its many recommendations, the report urged broadcasters to “sustain experimental programs deemed unsponsorable, promote local live programs, devote programs to the discussion of local public issues, and eliminate ‘excessive advertising’” (Pickard, 2011, 173). The report also argued that, “positive responsibility rests upon local stations to make articulate the voice of the community” (FCC 1945, quoted in Cole and Murck, 2006, 351). These recommendations were subject to intense network contestation and were never implemented (Cole and Murck, 2006).

A third (and successful!) attempt at localism regulation was the Main Studio Rule. In its various iterations, which Silverman and Tobenkin (2000) note go back to 1939, the Main Studio Rule necessitated the location of the station be within the community of license so as to encourage local participation, local talent, community responsiveness, and locally reflective programming (Cole and Murck, 2006; Martens, 2004). The rule was significantly relaxed in 1987, with the acknowledgement that most residents do not in fact *visit* the station themselves, but rely on letter and phone (Silverman and Tobenkin, 2001). As a result, the FCC allowed stations to be located “at any point within the station’s principal community contour” (FCC, 1987, quoted in Silverman and Tobenkin, 2001, 485). The 1998 Main Studio Order further distanced the station from its community of license, as the FCC permitted “the studio to be located within either the principal community contour of any station, of any service, licensed to

its community of license or 25 miles from the reference coordinates of the center of its community of license” (FCC, 2008). In 2017, the FCC would propose eliminating this rule altogether.

### ***Ascertainment requirements***

After the introduction of television, and the entrenchment of the network-affiliate system, the FCC attempted several other initiatives to encourage the production of local programming, and to foster the relationship between the station and community of license. The 1960 En Banc Programming Regulations, for instance, emphasized

major elements usually necessary to meet the public interest, needs and desires of the community in which the station is located, as developed by the industry, and recognized by the Commission.

*(Quoted in FCC, 2008, fn.32)*

After exclaiming the importance of local programming and local reflection, however, “the Commission performed an about-face and disclaimed any regulatory obligation to provide any particular programming” (Cole and Murck, 2006, 356).

Out of any of the regulations promulgating localism, the ascertainment requirements got the broadcaster closest to the community. The requirement – released in 1971 – was for stations to “undertake extensive, formalized efforts to apprise themselves of the needs and interests of the community” (Cole and Murck, 2006, 359). Stations were also required to keep programming logs for public inspection. Joining the Ascertainment Requirements in the 1970s were two other rules, which attempted to protect local stations: the Prime Time Access Rule and the Financial Interest and Syndication Rule (Fin-Syn). The Prime Time Access Rule designated a specific portion of prime time for programming scheduled by the stations rather than the networks, while the Fin-Syn Rule limited “the degree to which the networks could have a financial interest in the programming they aired” (Napoli, 2001, 128). According to the FCC (1993),

The ultimate goal was to “limit network control over television programming and thereby encourage the development of a diversity of programs through diverse and antagonist sources of program services”.

*(Quoted in Napoli, 2001, 128)*

License renewal was also a means by which the Commission could wield its regulatory power in support of localism. Most agree, however, that these policies were seldom enforced (Anderson and Curtin, 1999; Cole and Murck, 2006; Napoli, 2001). The Commission, nonetheless, did attempt to encourage local production, particularly *local news production*, through licensing requirements during the 1970s. This licensing provision allowed stations that broadcast a minimum amount of non-entertainment programming (8 percent for AM stations; 6 percent for FM stations; 10 percent for TV stations) to undergo expedited license renewal by Commission staff, rather than the full FCC (FCC, 1973). These were loosened in 1976 (FCC, 2008). A deregulatory sweep in the 1980s eliminated most if not all of these rules, such as the ascertainment requirement and expedited review. It was also during the 1980s that the Main Studio Rule was also relaxed, no longer requiring the station to be located in the heart of the community. The rationale behind all of these decisions was that “competitive market forces were believed to be the more efficient and effective means of assuring the existence of programming sensitive to local issues and concerns” (Napoli, 2001, 214).

Continuing this trend, in 1993, the DC Court of Appeals struck down a long-held licensing preference (dating back to 1965) for local ownership. In 1966, the Commission believed,

there is likelihood of greater sensitivity to an area's changing needs, and of programming designed to serve these needs, to the extent that the station's proprietors actively participate in the day-to-day operation of the station.

(FCC, 1966, 395)

As such, the Commission preferred local owners to distant ones. The DC Court of Appeals struck down this provision, ruling that the regulation was 'arbitrary and capricious' in *Bechtel v. FCC* in 1993. At the passing of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, the only regulations that directly impacted localism (and not policy priorities like the public interest, which has little regulatory backing) were ownership limitations and the vestiges of the Main Studio Rule.

### ***Ownership***

Ownership regulations – how many stations a company may own – have been the longest-lasting bastions of localism, most likely because they are enshrined in the Telecommunications Act, rather than created through administrative law. Even still, these have seen tremendous changes. In 1984 the FCC ruled that a single company could own no more than 12 stations throughout the country. In total, the reach of these stations could not surpass 25 percent of the American audience (Barrett, 2005). This ruling also introduced the 'UHF discount'. To encourage broadcasters to use the UHF band rather than the rapidly saturating VHF band, the FCC introduced an incentive whereby audiences of UHF channels were only counted at 50 percent of the audience of VHF stations. As such, a potential owner could operate more UHF television stations than VHF stations, because their 'reach' was reduced by 50 percent. This was deemed necessary because at the time UHF frequencies were inferior – both in their distance traveled and in their strength. It should be noted that these were all introduced to, as the Commission wrote, "protect localism, diversity, and competition", based on the belief that greater ownership diffusion would mean a greater diversity of voices (FCC, 2017a).

The 1996 Telecommunications Act eliminated the numerical cap for owners and raised the percentage of American households to 35 percent. In 2003 amidst considerable public protestation this limit was raised to 39 percent, not by the FCC but by Congress. The 1996 Act also retained the UHF discount and established four bright-line ownership rules for local broadcasting.

1. *Newspaper/broadcast cross-ownership rule.* Prohibits owners of a television station from owning a newspaper in the same market.
2. *Local TV ownership rule.* Limits a single company to owning a maximum of two stations in a market, given that the stations' Grade B contours do not overlap, that both are not ranked in the top four in the market, and at least eight independently owned full-power stations remain after the merger.
3. *Radio-TV cross-ownership rule.* Operates on a scaling system, wherein the largest markets would "generally allow common ownership of one or two TV stations and up to six radio stations in any market where at least twenty independent 'voices' would remain post-combination".
4. *Local radio ownership rule.* Allows one company to own up to eight radio stations in the largest markets (Ali, 2017a, 56; FCC, 2003b).

As with so much of broadcast regulation, there are loopholes to these rules. Two of these loopholes are known as Joint Sales Agreements (JSA) and Shared Services Agreements (SSA). These contractual arrangements allow the newsgathering and/or sales services of one station to be controlled by another station, while keeping ownership separate (FCC, 2014). Citing specifically the effect on local voices, the FCC decided to curtail the practice of JSAs throughout the country, arguing that JSAs represented nothing more than *de facto* ownership, often times in violation of the local TV ownership rule (FCC, 2014). Two years after eliminating the JSA loophole, the same FCC – chaired by Democrat Tom Wheeler – eliminated the UHF discount, citing the shift to digital over-the-air broadcasting, and the reorganization of the electromagnetic spectrum (FCC, 2016). In the shift to digital, the UHF spectrum became desirable beachfront property for broadcasters because of the ability to push through high-definition signals and multicasting. As such, the FCC eliminated the UHF discount in 2016, to be grandfathered in over several years and with certain station groups exempted. This promised to have tremendous effects on the broadcast industry. Indeed, without the UHF discount, many networks, such as ION television, Univision, Tribune, and Trinity, would find themselves in violation, with the most drastic result being to divest themselves of stations.

### ***Trump's FCC and Sinclair***

Deregulation has been the *cause célèbre* at the FCC since the early 1980s. While it found legislative support with the 1996 Telecommunications Act, 2017–2018 saw a high watermark for the champions of deregulation. After taking office in January 2017, President Trump appointed a new chair of the FCC, Republican Ajit Pai, who crusaded to rid the broadcasting industry of what he called 'stale' regulation (Fung, 2017). This included allowing newspapers and television stations to combine in the same market, loosening the evaluation criteria for broadcast mergers, and eliminating the requirement that stations maintain hard copies of their programming logs for public inspection (FCC, 2017c). In the first of three major blows to localism, Pai's FCC eliminated the Main Studio Rule, arguing that with social media and other means of electronic communication, there was no longer a justification for forcing a broadcaster to be located within the community of license (FCC, 2017b). As I wrote elsewhere on the matter, this could mean that "small communities that used to have local [television] newsrooms may become afterthoughts for reporters and editors in centralized regional hubs" (Ali, 2017b). At the same time, congress reversed the FCC's JSA order, thus permitting the practice in full once again (United States, 2015).

The third regulatory decision was arguably the most detrimental to localism. Arguing the actions of previous the FCC (under Tom Wheeler) were piecemeal, Pai reinstated the UHF discount. The timing of this action, according to many critics, was highly suspect, as it paralleled the announcement of the Sinclair/Tribune merger (Kang, 2018). In fact, the merger *depended* upon the reinstatement of the UHF discount. Both companies were already skirting the 39 percent threshold, and if they merged without the discount, the combined company would reach over 70 percent of American television households (Ember and de la Merced, 2017). In comparison, with the discount, the merged entity would reach 42 percent, necessitating a less drastic divestiture of stations (Sherman, 2017). Because of this timing, Chairman Pai was investigated by the Inspector General of the FCC. The accusation was that these actions were done specifically to ease the Sinclair/Tribune merger through the regulatory process. He was eventually exonerated (Kang, 2018).

Had it gone through, Sinclair's merger with Tribune would have been a major blow to local voices and a victory for what Victor Pickard (2013) calls 'corporate libertarianism' in the media industries.<sup>2</sup> The merged entity would see Sinclair own and operate over 200 local

stations throughout the country. To make matters worse, Sinclair was found to be forcing its local stations to air conservative commentary, produced directly from Sinclair, but disguised as local content (Ember, 2017). Called ‘must-runs’, these segments included a ‘Terrorism Alert Desk’ and pro-Trump commentary. Americans continue to turn to television for their local news. Indeed, a recent poll found Americans *trust* local television news more than any other news source (Dyakon et al., 2018). While not illegal, Sinclair’s editorial actions belie the history of local autonomy and local voices – two hallmarks of localism.

These actions of the FCC favor commercial broadcasters and embody a neoliberal *ethos*, loosening the already tenuous connection to the public interest, and falling victim to the logic that broadcasters must get bigger to compete with the digital behemoths of Google and Facebook (Reardon, 2018; Pickard, 2013). All of this is deadly to local programming, and local news in particular, for it allows broadcasters to centralize newscasts both physically through the lack of a main studio and virtually through JSAs. Without bright-line regulations protecting the localism principle, we are forced to trust broadcasters that they will operate in the public interest and reflect the needs and interest of their communities of license.

## Conclusion

The regulations that once protected localism – strong ownership limitations, meant to encourage a diversity of voices, the Main Studio Rule, meant to encourage local presence, the UHF discount, meant to encourage more stations, the ascertainment requirement, meant to require community dialogue, and the local public inspection files, meant to encourage accountability – have all fallen by the wayside. Broadcast localism, from a policy perspective, is dead. However, local news is not dead, nor is local media. That the FCC (eventually) challenged the Sinclair/Tribune merger is a victory for localism. That many local television stations continue to produce quality local news is a victory for localism. That Commissioners like Jessica Rosenworcel (2018) continue to champion the public interest is a victory for localism. We also still have ownership regulations, despite their rollback. The FCC also has the power to insert localism provisions as merger conditions, something it did during the Comcast/NBCU merger (Maltas et al., 2016).

In 2008, the FCC engaged in the largest review of broadcast localism ever undertaken. In its report, it suggested, among other things, reinstating the ascertainment requirement, stronger license renewal processes, and strengthening the Main Studio Rule. While it is true that digital media are changing our relationship with local media and with ‘the local’ more broadly, the fact that local broadcasting remains a seminal part of our media diet, and a key component of our local media ecosystems, means that we need to reconsider these old proposals (Ali, 2017a). Broadcast localism is a market failure – the market cannot or will not produce this public good because of a lack of return on investment (Ali, 2017a). Like all market failures, it requires regulatory intervention for correction. At the very least, we are due for another systematic evaluation of broadcasting localism – akin to the studies in 2008 and the 2011 *Information Needs of Communities* study (Waldman, 2011). At the very most, a dedicated and distinct localism policy for the digital age, spearheaded by a committed FCC, would help protect local news, enhance local voices, and ensure the survival of the localism principle.

## Notes

1 This applies only to full-power stations.

2 The deal was called off in August 2018 after the FCC reversed its tone and voiced numerous concerns with the merger (Reardon, 2018).



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# 8

## DEVELOPING LOCAL MEDIA POLICIES IN SUB-STATE NATIONS

### The case of Catalonia

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#### **Introduction**

Local media policies are not always coherent, and they do not always emerge from a political or social consensus. In fact, there has hardly ever been full agreement on key issues such as what a local media system should look like, or even on whether it should exist at all. The picture becomes more complex when the different public administration bodies and the political parties in charge of them keep changing their positions on local media, often very ostensibly. Catalonia is such a case, where different levels of government and different national projects are intertwined with the development of local media policies. The development of local media policies in Catalonia is strongly influenced by the wider debate about what role local media should play in the process of gaining back self-governance after Franco's dictatorship. Different tiers of local and regional governments have attempted to control and define local media policies. This has in turn affected the stability and sustainability of the local media sector in Catalonia.

This chapter explores, from a historical perspective, how local media policies respond to and are influenced by complex political scenarios such as in Catalonia, focusing on nation-building projects. From a historical perspective, local media can be seen as a centrepiece of the communication policies that have been developed in Catalonia since self-government was restored in 1979. Ever since the Catalan Government has tried to create, maintain and enhance a broad, potentially competitive network of local media spanning the whole of the Catalan territory, which has a population of 7.9 million. The result of these efforts is a system that comprises over 800 paper publications, 290 radio stations, 50 TV stations and a large number of online media outlets, albeit with a high degree of instability in the structure.

#### **A framework to explore local media policies**

Media policies do not happen in a vacuum, but they are strongly influenced by partisan and corporate interests, as well as by ideological preferences (Freeman, 2015) and political context. Understanding media policies and more particularly local media policies in a sub-state nation is an exercise that requires attention to both the policy process and the media-political context.

The following section reviews key factors of Catalonia's political system and policy-making process that could help explain the particular characteristics of Catalonia's local media policies. More precisely, we explore Catalonia's multi-level political system, the existence of competing nation-building projects, the size of Catalonia's media system and the influence of partisan and financial interests.

### ***Understanding the political system***

One of the key elements to understand media policies, as many other policies, is to explore the characteristics of each political system. In Catalonia's case, there are two elements of the political system that need to be taken into consideration: the existence of a multi-level system, and different ideas of the nation competing in the same political system. Policy-making cannot be understood without analysing the distribution of policy powers within and outside state and sub-state levels (Beila, Hennl and Kaiser, 2013). Catalonia is part of a multi-level political system (Keating, 2001). Powers and policy competences – i.e., health, education, taxation – are distributed between the state, or sometimes called the centre, and the regions, in this case called autonomous communities. Multi-level politics matter when exploring media policies because the state and the regions are constantly competing over different policies (Cairney, 2011).

Catalonia has been described as a 'quasi-state' (Guibernau, 2004), as the majority of policy powers are devolved to its regional parliament. Nowadays the Catalan Parliament can legislate on agriculture, language policy, media, radio and television services, healthcare, urban planning, culture, local government, territorial organisation, education and civil law (Flores, 2013). The arrival of democracy in Spain brought with it a process of decentralisation of the Spanish state, as prescribed in the 1978 Constitution. This meant a shift from a highly centralised state to one based on power-sharing between the country's central administration and its regions and stateless nations (officially termed 'autonomous communities'). In Catalonia, the institution of self-government re-adopted its medieval name of *Generalitat*. Below the autonomous-community tier is the local one, divided into two further tiers, the municipalities and the provinces, with the latter being made up of groups of municipalities and governed by provincial councils whose function is to assist the municipalities in providing the services they are entrusted with.

Regarding media matters, the distribution of powers was set out in Article 149, Section 1.27 of the Constitution, which states that the state holds exclusive competence over the

basic rules relating to the organisation of the press, radio and television and, in general, all the means of social communication, without prejudice to the powers vested in the autonomous communities related to their development and implementation.

This means that the main structural elements of the media system are set by the central administration, while the autonomous communities can develop certain aspects and implement them in their own territories. Local authorities, on the other hand, have no legislative powers and the scope of their activity is limited to creating public media outlets and supporting private ones. This distribution of powers is at the root of many of the conflicts over local communication, arising from disagreements between the three politico-administrative tiers involved. Successive Spanish central governments have tended to resist moves towards decentralisation that they consider excessive. The degree of resistance has varied over time (there was greater reticence in the early stages of the new democratic regime) and between parties (with more flexibility under centre-left governments and more rigidity under the right). For their part, certain autonomous

communities have tended to demand greater decentralisation and try to stretch the room for manoeuvre granted to them by the laws of the state. Catalonia in particular has stood out in this regard (Gifreu, 1991; Moragas, Garitaonandía and López, 1999; Fernández and Santana, 2000; Guimerà, 2014).

Beyond distribution of policy powers, another key element to understand policies and policy-making is the existence of competing nation-building projects. In Catalonia, similarly to Scotland and Flanders, sub-states challenge the idea of nation defended by the state and this is visible through the existence of pro-independence or sovereigntist parties (Beland and Lecours, 2008). The tension between the two nation projects, in this case the Catalan versus the Spanish, has a strong influence on policy-making processes and debates. Policies aim to solve the needs of the people or the nation, and in this case different political actors disagree on who is the nation. The political spectrum is divided between those that consider Catalonia to be a nation, and, therefore, policies are oriented towards serving the needs of the people of Catalonia, and those who consider Spain as the only nation and Catalonia a region within it.

In 1979, Catalonia's autonomy was officially recognised, and its first government took office in 1980. Ever since then the *Generalitat* has been governed by Catalan nationalist forces. These have governed with absolute majorities, with minority governments, and in coalition with non-nationalist Catalan parties. These governments have all shared the common aim of recovering Catalans' identity, especially in terms of the language and culture, which had been strongly persecuted under the Franco dictatorship. They have also shared a determination to strengthen the institutions of self-government and gain greater autonomy. In fact, all political parties that have formed governments in Catalonia have *catalanisme* as part of their ideology to a greater or lesser extent. This affinity and shared gradualist strategy towards more self-government have only been broken by the recent commitment to a drive for independence on the part of some of these parties (Guibernau, 2004; Lo Cascio, 2008; Cramerí, 2008; Dowling, 2013).

Successive Catalan governments used devolved powers on culture, education and media as the keystone of the Catalan nation-building project (Keating, 1996; Guimerà and Fernández, 2014; Cetrà, 2016). As part of their nation-building project, Catalonia created: a Catalan-based education system (Clots-Figueras and Masella, 2013); cultural policies aimed at promoting Catalan-language and Catalan-based cultural productions (Villarroya, 2012); and a Catalan communicative or media sphere with a Catalan public broadcaster and Catalan-based news media (Guimerà and Fernández, 2014). Strategies of Catalan nation-building have been identified in other areas such as sports (Xifra, 2009) and art (Johnson and Cester, 2015). These policy-making efforts have historically created tensions and political conflicts with the Spanish state (Keating, 1996; Cramerí, 2008; Dowling, 2013).

The clash between these two ideas of nation is particularly visible in media policies. Spanish nationalist political and policy actors have traditionally considered Catalonia's media policies 'too interventionist' and too biased towards the idea of Catalonia as a nation (Alonso, 2013). Catalonia has its own separated Catalan Public Broadcaster (CCMA); its own system of public subsidies to private news media; its own news agency (Agència Catalana de Notícies); and its own regulatory body in charge of monitoring service quality of Catalan broadcasters, the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC). Successive Catalan governments, from a wide political spectrum, have used these policies to enhance what they called the Catalan Communicative Space. This policy project aimed to promote national identity, increase home cultural production and promote the Catalan language in media products (Gifreu, 1991 and 1996; de Prado, 2014). Spanish nationalist actors consider these media policies to limit the penetration of Spanish-wide news media in Catalonia (Garcia, 2010).

### **Media policy-making**

The development of media policies is a very particular process. There are two elements that need to be taken into consideration when analysing media policies: the size of the media system and the influence of partisan and financial interests. In Catalonia's case, our analysis of local media policies indicates how Catalonia's local media strategies resemble those of small states identified by Puppis (2009). Our analysis also demonstrates the strong influence of partisan and financial interests that Freeman (2015) describes as core characteristics of media policies. Puppis (2009) identified that small states tend to have more interventionist media policies for two main reasons: they are under constant pressure from neighbouring media systems that sometimes share the same language or cultural framework; and their media system usually has fewer resources, i.e., smaller audiences and smaller corporations. Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe interventionist media policies as a characteristic of media systems in Southern Europe, those that according to their classification belong to the pluralist polarised model. These two scholars explain that interventionist media policies, such as Catalonia's system of subsidies to local news media, respond to a political tradition in which the state has a prominent role in regulating different economic sectors. Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that in Southern European countries advertising markets are weaker, and hence news media corporations need state intervention to supplement the lack of revenue. This has certainly been the case in Catalonia, where the Catalan Government has developed strong interventionist local media policies to supply the very weak advertising market in post-francoist Spain. Nonetheless, the economic dimension is not the only factor that explains the existence of interventionist local media policies in Catalonia.

Freeman (2015) describes media policies as a policy-making area strongly influenced by short-term partisan and corporate interests. He describes media policy-making as an alienating process where only those with access to power and resources can influence the outcome of the decision. For instance, recent research has found that there are almost no impartial actors playing a role in the distribution of public subsidies to news media in Catalonia (Fernandez Alonso and Blasco Gil, 2014). As Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue, in Southern European countries the relationship between political actors and news media elites is a very close one. The press in these countries is presented as elite-oriented and strongly focused on political life. Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that it is quite common for news owners and news directors to have direct ties to political parties. At the same time, politicians regard news media as means of political mobilisation and campaigning.

### **Local media policies in Catalonia**

The development of local media policies in Catalonia is not a linear process. Different political and socio-economic factors generated periods of high-intensity regulatory activity followed or preceded by periods with limited interest in local media. In the early 1980s, the *Generalitat* – Catalonia's self-government – paid considerable attention to the local press. At a time when self-government was just being reinstated, there were hardly any national media covering the whole of Catalonia and whose language and outlook were Catalan. However, there were a large number of local publications that, even under the Franco regime, had been publishing more and more in Catalan and devoting space to Catalan traditions. This made them highly attractive to the government of *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), the nationalist centre-right party that governed Catalonia from 1980 to 2003 (Guillamet, 1996; Guimerà, 2007 and 2014).

On the other hand, this same government reacted to the birth of local radio and TV stations with indifference or even hostility. As with the local press outlets, these stations were mainly

set up on the initiative of private citizens or the first democratic town councils. They sought to put an end to the deficit in news reporting inherited from the dictatorship, to democratise communication and to foster the use of the Catalan language in the public arena – a universal demand at the time (Corominas and Llinés, 1992; Moragas and Corominas, 1988). However, the Catalan government was concentrating on creating a regional radio and television (Catalunya Ràdio and TV3, respectively) as cornerstones of the nation-building process. This meant that local radio and TV stations were a nuisance because they were using the airwaves illegally just when negotiations were in progress with a Spanish central government that was reluctant to allocate frequencies to Catalunya Ràdio and TV3 (Guimerà, 2014; Corbella, 1991, 1995). In later years the *Generalitat* changed its stance and offered its support to all local media, and similarly to local authorities, which had backed them all along. In the case of the town councils this meant creating public sector radio, TV stations and publications (Moragas and Corominas, 1988; OCL, 2000).

### ***Local press***

The *Generalitat's* policy on the local press has always hinged on subsidies. The first of these were allocated within a year of the first government taking office in 1980. In 1983 the government set up a public scheme to subsidise Catalan-language press publications. The justification for these subsidies was market-based; in a society where the majority were educated in Spanish, publications written in Catalan were clearly at a competitive disadvantage. Subsidies were awarded in accordance with circulation and catchment-area size (Mateo, 1990). From 1992 onwards there were further subsidies, termed 'project subsidies', to support the development of innovative journalistic products. The funding scheme contained very loose definitions of what innovation meant and what type of journalistic products it wanted to promote. This scheme remained almost intact up to 2011, having become an institution in Catalonia. In fact, it was extended in 2005 to make subsidies available to radio stations, TV stations and online media outlets. In 2012, however, the offer of subsidies for projects was withdrawn as part of the policy on financial austerity. Although the data are incomplete, it is clear from official documents that local newspapers were the main beneficiaries of subsidies in the early years, while later policies tended to prioritise new region-wide publications (Fernández et al., 2006; Guimerà, 2014).

### ***Local radio***

The development of local radio policies in Catalonia generated confrontations between the Spanish and the Catalan Government, and afterwards between local councils and the Catalan Government. The legalisation of radio stations stirred up a political conflict between the Spanish state and the *Generalitat*. Although Spain's first ever local radio station sprang up in Catalonia in 1979, the Spanish central government did not pass the state-wide law regulating radio stations until 1991. Up until then stations, mostly owned by public authorities such as town councils, were illegal in the eyes of the state, which led to confrontations in which the *Generalitat* took the side of the town and provincial councils (Corominas et al., 1999; CAC, 2012). In addition, local radio stations became a source of conflict between the *Generalitat* and local councils. The most prominent of these conflicts took place in the first half of the 1990s between the *Generalitat* and the Barcelona Provincial Council (*Diputació de Barcelona*). The latter was governed by the progressive *catalanista* *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (PSC). This party held the view that the media sector was overly dominated by outlets with close ties to the conservative, Catalan-nationalist, CIU government, so it decided to set up a region-wide radio network with a

progressive slant by grouping municipal stations together. The Catalan Government tried to stop the network through legal and political means, but it was unsuccessful in its efforts.

### **Local television**

There are clear parallels between policies on radio and those on local television. The first local television in Spain was community-led and appeared in Catalonia in 1981. Two years later the first municipal station was born. The fact is that these television stations were not regulated by law until 1995, and this law was not executed until ten years later, as part of the implementation of Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) (Guimerà, 2007; Martori, 2017). This generated a legal uncertainty that affected the development and consolidation of local television. It also gave rise to several confrontations between the state and the *Generalitat*, as the central government made several attempts to close down different TV stations. The *Generalitat* tended to defend local TV stations, accusing the central administration of neglecting its duty to properly regulate the sector. In fact, the 1995 law came about thanks to pressure from CiU on the Spanish Government – then in the hands of the progressive *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), which was governing in a minority and needed CiU's support for other laws that it was keen to pass (Guimerà, 2007).

In 2005, when the law was implemented, the central government set out the areas of coverage that local TV stations were to have. These received heavy criticism from the *Generalitat* and local authorities because the coverage areas ignored existing practice. They had a drastic effect on the television system that had been developed, and which was deeply rooted in the territory. Though some minor changes were achieved, demands for amendments are still being made by Catalonia over ten years later (Martori, 2017; CAC, 2018). This determination to maintain the existing local television structures can be seen in the call for tenders for the selection process that TV stations had to go through in 2005. It was intended to favour existing stations, which were in the hands of Catalan companies and institutions and which broadcasted in Catalan, as well as to block state-wide Spanish-speaking networks. The objective was clear: to protect the Catalan language and maintain a large, competitive Catalan media system (Guimerà, 2007, 2014). This was the period when local TV stations were given the greatest ever number of subsidies by the *Generalitat*.

Just like the radio stations, local television was another battleground between various political projects (Guimerà, 2007, 2014; Guimerà and Fernández, 2014). In the early 1990s, CiU launched a project to support a group of private broadcasters in setting up a network with region-wide coverage. To understand the project it is important to bear the context in mind. At that time negotiations were under way in Madrid on a law to regulate nation-wide private television channels that broadcasted in Spanish. The *Generalitat* concluded that this would affect the status of Catalan broadcasters and tried to set up initiatives to counteract it. The original CiU project failed, but in 1998 three of the four provincial councils in Catalonia (Lleida, Girona and Tarragona) set up support for Catalan local TV stations, offering them high-quality content at very low prices. This project was criticised for being partisan, since the three provincial councils were governed by CiU and it had been given subsidies by the *Generalitat* – in the hands of the same party – under very obscure conditions. One year later, in 1999, it was the turn of the Barcelona Provincial Council – in the hands of the progressive PSC – to launch a similar project of its own. This one, however, was based on contributions from the local TV stations, which were to produce local content and distribute it among the members. The network was backed by the most powerful municipal TV stations at the time, all from town councils in the



hands of the PSC, which again led to criticism of partisanship (Guimerà and Fernández, 2014; Besalú and Guerrero-Soler, 2010).

### ***Local media outlets online***

Policy on local media outlets online has been less significant. There had been no policy actions in this area until 2005, when these outlets were also included in the subsidies scheme (Fernández Alonso and Blasco Gil, 2014). In the midst of the debate on Catalan sovereignty, the subsidies sparked a crisis situation with the central government. Towards the end of 2017, the central executive questioned the appropriateness of these subsidies. It argued that they were given only to independence-supporting media, to which Barcelona replied that the criterion was strictly linguistic. This type of subsidies were put on hold for a few months but reactivated eventually. However, the controversy did not die down. In fact, publicly owned media and subsidies have been at the centre of the debate, especially those of nationwide scope.

### **Conclusion**

Catalonia's case exemplifies the complexities and intertwined nature of local media policies. The case shows that local media policies do not always address local interests and needs. On the contrary, very often they are policies drawn up in accordance with regional and state interests that mediate them. Local media policies in Catalonia have been a political and institutional battlefield between the Spanish state and the Catalan Government, and between different party-political projects within Catalonia. With so many political interests at stake the result has been powerful policy interventions in the local media sector, but with a lack of clear policy aims and/or comprehensive strategies. The existence of a complex multi-level political system combined with the clash of two different nation-building projects – Spanish and Catalan – explains constant mismatches between state regulations or absence of regulations. For instance, this can be observed in the clash between the little interest of the Spanish state to regulate local radio and television, and the policy development efforts made by the Catalan *Generalitat* and the lower-tier government, *Diputacions*. The dispute between the Spanish state and Catalonia's self-government over control of different powers strongly influenced how media policies were designed. These disputes are a common feature of multi-level systems where there is a tension between devolving decisions and maintaining central control of policies (Keating, 2005). Catalonia's case also illustrates Puppis' (2009) main argument that smaller political systems or states such as Catalonia need to develop more interventionist media policies to compensate the effects of the powerful Spanish system in which they are embedded. The desire to build a Catalan communication space (Gifreu, 1991) is clearly drawn here. This interventionism is also in line with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model of pluralist polarised media systems where Southern European states are characterised by more interventionist policies to overcome market failure.

Our analysis of Catalonia's case reinforces Freedman's (2015) assertion that overall media policies are dictated by short-term partisan and corporate interests. The conflict between the central government and the Catalan Government regarding subsidies to online local media outlets confirms the importance of party interests. Tensions and contradictory policy developments can also be seen between different levels of the Catalan regional government when governed by the opposite political forces. For example, during the late 1990s centre-left parties in local councils were eager to develop more local media policies to counteract the influence of wider Catalan regional media policies developed by the Catalan centre-right government. These tensions also



indicate that there are many conceptions about the role that local media policies should have. From more nationalistic positions, local news media are means of national construction. These nationalist-oriented views cohabit or sometimes clash with alternative political views that see local media policies as a tool to promote local political pluralism. Catalonia's case is an example of local media policies being drawn up in accordance with regional and state interests that mediate them. This has not eliminated the agency and capacity-building of local actors, but forces them to work harder to influence the agents that design and deploy policies. Often local agents are not able to influence decisions, especially when, as in the Catalan case, broader political projects see local media as tools to achieve their goals.

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# 9

## LOCAL JOURNALISM IN AUSTRALIA

### Policy debates

*Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller*

#### **Introduction**

Australia may be home to the world's longest continental volcano chain, but it is the seismic policy shifts shaping the nation's media landscape that have triggered a fiery spectacle with aftershocks. In 2017, the federal government announced a dramatic overhaul of media ownership laws – the biggest change in more than 30 years – designed to provide a more steady footing for legacy media companies battling the flow of social media and global digital services. At its core, the new regulations provide existing media proprietors with greater freedom to control more news platforms across an array of mediums and broadcast licensing areas (we will discuss this in more detail later in the chapter). Since these changes, there have been boardroom manouvres, mergers and sell-offs among key media players in a country already home to one of the highest concentrations of commercial media ownership in the Western world (Finkelstein, 2012, 59).

At the height of the media ownership policy debate, local media was dangled like a sacrificial lamb by a handful of proprietors who control the lion's share of local news outlets across the nation.<sup>1</sup> As part of intense lobbying efforts, companies from big commercial television stations through to the nation's public broadcaster – the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) – raised fears that local media resourcing would be the first to experience further cuts if media regulation was not changed. Local newspapers and regional commercial television stations owned by big companies had already felt the impact of a centralisation and dispersion model (Hess and Waller, 2017) that drained resources towards larger metropolitan news hubs. It also led to call centres for classified advertising and local news production being shifted offshore to countries including New Zealand, the Philippines and India, which offer lower wage costs than Australia. Hundreds of jobs were lost across the local news sector between 2008 and 2017. While lobbying efforts around media regulation have paid off for proprietors, the reforms have not yet been a panacea for local media. A merger between the broadcaster Nine Network and press king Fairfax Media in 2018 has already led to the sell-off of more than 160 local news mastheads, but its impact on the sector remains to be seen (Ryan, 2019). In the same period, there was some intense policy and public debate on the role and funding of the ABC, especially in preserving its role as a central and reliable information node in times of disaster for regional and remote communities.

It should be highlighted, nonetheless, that amid the doom and gloom the story of local news appears to be one of mixed fortunes depending on the context. Unlike the United Kingdom, which has witnessed the demise of hundreds of longstanding newspapers in the digital era, Australia's local press has not collapsed like a house of cards. While print circulation is dropping, it is also stabilising in some local areas (Audited Media Association of Australia, 2018) and anecdotally news sites serving local communities are gaining traction in digital spaces. A 2015 report on news consumption, for example, found that 20.8 per cent of consumers surveyed had accessed a regional or local newspaper in the past week. In comparison, 15.2 per cent accessed the major metropolitan titles *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12.1 per cent *The Age* and 8.4 per cent *The Australian* (Watkins et al., 2015). Local news continues to be one of the most trusted sources of information for Australians, especially newspapers (Newspaper Works, 2016). In this chapter we will provide an overview of the local news landscape and the media policies that both influence and pose challenges and opportunities for the sector. We will pay particular attention to the impact of changes to media ownership laws for local journalism. We will then focus on the specific role of the nation's public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and the concern among some academics (such as ourselves) around its failure to include a commitment to local news audiences as part of its charter. We will conclude by discussing recent parliamentary inquiries instigated to preserve public interest journalism and an investigation by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission into the impact of social media platforms on traditional news revenue.

### **Local news context**

Australia is a large island continent with a population of 25 million who mostly dwell in large cities on the east coast and in the south of the country. The often vast geographic distances between towns and cities generate challenges and opportunities for local media, even in the digital age. Issues range from internet connectivity (Freeman and Park, 2017) to the rise of news gaps in remote areas, or on the periphery of established news circulation or broadcast licensing areas. Such topographic challenges are akin to those experienced in a range of other countries with high numbers of isolated or disparate rural populations, including the United States, Canada, Norway and China. The overarching policy challenge for Australia's federal government, then, is how best to serve the news and information needs of all Australians, especially when it is well established that the availability of local news and information is considered vital for enhancing civic life and social capital (Bowd, 2012; Hess, 2016; Richards, 2014).

Australia is home to 37 regional daily newspapers, more than 230 non-daily newspapers and about 150 regional community or partly paid newspapers; at least 190 radio stations (commercial, ABC and community) and more than 50 television stations serving regional areas. The public broadcaster, the ABC, plays a key role at the local level through the delivery of radio, television and online news but has displayed a topsy-turvy approach to rural audiences (Freeman et al., 2017). It has been hit by serious funding cuts in recent years and local newsrooms have been centralised. In November 2014, for example, the ABC announced it would axe its popular national rural radio programme *Bush Telegraph*. It has also cut the number of radio journalists in the large provincial city of Newcastle and shut down five of its other regional sites. In 2017, however, the broadcaster announced a major restructure to invigorate digital and video output in regional areas, which involved shedding 200 staff in management positions and the creation of 80 new positions in regional areas (McNair, 2017).

Major players in Australia's regional news network include former Fairfax executive Anthony Catalano and the Thorney Investment group, which purchased more than 160

regional, community and suburban titles from the Nine Entertainment group in 2019 at a cost of more than \$115 million. Other players include News Corp Australia, which owns 23 community newspapers and a handful of larger regional mastheads. Smaller independent publishers include the Star News Group and McPherson Media. Seven West Media publishes 37 regional and community newspapers and has commercial television networks in regional Queensland and affiliates broadcasting the Seven network's content in the states of Victoria, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia. It also has nine radio licences across regional WA. Other major players with regional broadcast licences include Southern Cross Media, Broadcast Operations P/L, The WIN Corporation, NBN Television (an independent affiliate of the Nine Network) and Prime Media Group.

There is also a vibrant not-for-profit community media sector that plays a crucial role in servicing minority and marginalised populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities, ethnic groups and others, including prison communities (Hess and Waller, 2017). Community radio and community television play an important role in meeting the objectives of the Broadcasting Services Act (1992), which include promoting the identities of local communities, contributing to social inclusion and generating a high level of local content. Community broadcasting is Australia's largest independent media sector and recognised internationally as one of the most successful examples of grassroots media. The sector has 500 community broadcasting services operating in communities across the country, with more than 60 per cent of these in regional and rural areas. According to the most recent McNair Yellow Squares survey of community radio listeners, more than 5 million people tune in to 450-plus not-for-profit, community-owned and -operated radio services each week (CBAA, 2018).

A continual challenge for policymakers has been how to define 'local' news, especially in terms of regulating broadcast licensing and audience reach. While it may appear as though the nation is well resourced by a variety of local news options, these are not well dispersed as newsrooms tend to be clustered on the nation's eastern seaboard. The ABC, for example, bases its radio services in regional cities, each of which serves a larger geographic region (some cover the same area as entire countries in Europe). This means that for some listeners, the news provided is not especially 'local'.

### **A shake-up of media ownership regulation and key policy debates**

Australia is served by a three-tiered political system at local, state and national level, but policies influencing media ownership and regulation are debated at a federal level as part of the Telecommunications Act (1997), the Broadcasting Services Act (1992), the Radio Communications Act (1992) and more recently the Competition and Consumer Act (2010). National discussion and political debate about the provision and operation of local news has been clustered around a string of independent and parliamentary inquiries into different aspects of the media ecosystem. There have been four since 2015 that have directly related to local news: the future of broadcasting for rural and regional Australia; the ABC charter; the future of public interest journalism; and an Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) investigation into issues of unfair competition generated by social media juggernauts Facebook and Google. These have followed other significant inquiries into the sector such as the *Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation* (Finkelstein, 2012), which called for more resources for the public broadcaster and incentives for philanthropic investment in the news among its recommendations. While we will unpack the more recent inquiries in more detail below, it is important to note that these have all played out against a backdrop of significant reform of media ownership that warrants attention here.

As highlighted earlier, in 2017 the Australian Government introduced the most significant reforms to Australian media regulation in a generation (Australian Government, 2017). It repealed two media control and ownership rules in the Broadcasting Services Act (1992) that prevented a person or organisation from controlling commercial television licences that collectively reached more than 75 per cent of the population (the ‘75 per cent audience reach rule’); and more than two of the three regulated forms of media (commercial radio, TV and associated newspapers) in the one commercial radio licence area (the ‘two out of three rule’). The reforms maintain requirements for at least five independent media ‘voices’ in metropolitan commercial radio licence areas (mainland state capital cities), and at least four in regional commercial radio licence areas. In addition, an individual is still not able to control more than one commercial television licence in a licence area, or more than two commercial radio licences in the same licence area. Laws were also introduced to protect and enhance the amount of local television content in regional Australia, including an incentive for local content to be filmed in the local area.

Advocates for these changes argue that the old ownership laws prevented traditional media outlets from structuring their businesses efficiently, or achieving the scale necessary to adapt and compete more effectively with the newer unregulated services of the internet era (Barbour, 2016). Critics, meanwhile, say the changes will result in a less diverse, more consolidated media market with less choice for consumers, especially at the local level, and will mean more cost-cutting and less journalism jobs in the long run (Dwyer, 2017). In order to secure support in parliament, the government agreed to set up a three-year, \$48 million ‘innovation fund’ designed to improve media diversity. Most of this funding is directed to small publishers, especially in regional and rural areas, as the government has recognised they face the greatest challenges. They can apply for funding to update equipment and software, develop mobile apps and train their staff. The remainder has been allocated to journalism cadetships. The government says one of the core objectives of the fund is to support

the continuation, development, growth and innovation of Australian journalism that investigates and explains public policy and issues of public significance, engages citizens in public debate, and informs democratic decision-making.

*(Australian Government, 2017b)*

As the package only has a three-year lifespan, there are big questions related to how effective it can be in helping to ensure the future of civic journalism at the local level, and to what extent it will assist in securing the long-term commercial sustainability of regional and small publishers (Dwyer, 2017). There is also concern that this short-term injection of funding does not support emerging start-ups in areas where there are news deficits, or small independent newspapers with turnovers of less than \$150,000 that are considered to be a particularly endangered species in rural areas where population and employment opportunities are declining (Ricketson et al., 2018).

### **The role of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation at the local level**

Much like its British counterpart the BBC, the ABC is seen to play an important role in constructing a sense of local identity and community cohesion as well as fulfilling a vital democratic role in helping to ensure local political accountability (Freeman et al., 2017a). Given the ABC was created to address the undersupply of media services in non-metropolitan areas (Miragliotta and Errington, 2012), it is curious that a specific commitment to rural and regional

audiences is not explicit in the Corporation's core responsibilities. In response to major funding cuts in recent years, its overall efficiency seeking has seen it reduce newsrooms, staff and services, and prioritise digital platforms and content. In 2016, following significant reductions in rural and regional Australian services, a parliamentary probe (titled the 2015–16 Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Inquiry) was announced into the public broadcaster's charter. Public submissions to the inquiry brought powerful voices together to define key issues and provide evidence about the declining quality of ABC local news. Elsewhere we have analysed these submissions and argued that the ABC's Charter relies on outdated conceptions of a single public sphere that fail to account for the specificities of rural and regional areas to adequately serve news gaps (see Freeman et al., 2017a).

In 2017, the government introduced the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Amendment (Rural and Regional Measures) bill 2017 into the Senate. The bill seeks to amend the ABC Act to encourage a greater focus on its commitment to rural and regional audiences by: including the words 'regional' and 'geographic' in its charter; the establishment of a Regional Advisory Council; and an obligation on the ABC Board to consult the Council on broadcasting matters affecting regional Australia. It stipulates that at least two members of the ABC Board have a substantial connection to, or substantial experience in, a regional community through business, industry or community involvement. Further, the bill will introduce additional annual reporting requirements that oblige the ABC to provide a breakdown on the number of employees in regional and metropolitan areas. These statistics will identify journalists and support staff. There will also be a requirement to report on the total number of hours of local or regional news bulletins broadcast during the reporting period. The bill is scheduled for a third reading in 2019 (Australian Government, 2018).

The ABC (especially its local radio services) is a key information source during emergencies and its capacity to fulfil this role came under intense scrutiny during the 2015–16 Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee inquiry (Freeman et al., 2017b). In particular, the ABC's Charter and Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) with emergency services throughout Australia appear insufficient in meeting the emergency information needs of many communities (Freeman et al., 2017b). When regional and rural areas in Australia experience natural disasters such as flooding and bushfire, affected communities turn to the ABC not only to keep them informed, but also safe (Freeman et al., 2017b). Ryan's (2013) research into information seeking practices during flooding in the northern state of Queensland in 2011 highlighted that information received from national sources required reinterpretation with the assistance of local knowledge, which can delay providing critical information to communities. North and Dearman (2010) emphasised the role of the ABC as the most reliable source of news and updates and as an avenue for local people to share stories and connect with one another during and after the catastrophic Black Saturday bushfires<sup>2</sup> in the southern state of Victoria in 2009.

However, the 2016 inquiry highlighted burgeoning discontent about the Corporation's ability to fulfil its role as a designated emergency broadcaster and to provide communication lifelines to rural and regional communities. Analysis of public submissions to the inquiry revealed two key concerns: uneven radio coverage and problems with the ABC's increasingly 'digital first' approach to emergency information; and the critical value of reporters' local knowledge when working to inform communities on where to go and what to do during natural disasters (Freeman et al., 2017b). Submitters argued communication methods that depend on digital connectivity were 'useless' for people in the bush as connectivity often fails to extend to those who need it most. Many noted the inadequacies and unreliability of mobile and satellite internet technologies including limited coverage, inferior speeds and prohibitive end-user



costs (Freeman et al., 2017b). Fast and reliable connectivity is a perennial problem in rural and regional Australia despite large-scale investments and infrastructure developments under various iterations of the National Broadband Network (NBN) and several specific-purpose rural access programmes (Park et al., 2015). Two of the most recent Regional Telecommunications Reviews (2012, 2015) concluded that mobile coverage and its capacity to connect to the internet was the most pressing issue for rural and regional Australia.

### **Preserving public interest journalism at the local level**

In 2017, the Australian Government held a Senate inquiry into the future of public interest journalism that attracted 75 submissions from industry, community groups and academics (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). In announcing the inquiry, Senator Scott Ludlam said a key aim was to identify business models that allow “any entity – public, private, third sector, whatever – to keep well-resourced journalists in the field ... and serving up news and information that we need to maintain a healthy democracy” (in Donnelly, 2017). The inquiry made a series of recommendations to support journalism at a national level, such as a review of defamation, whistleblower and shield laws – especially those that are ‘unjustifiably harsh or draconian’. It also highlighted the need to enhance children’s competency in digital literacy and improve tax incentives and exclusions for not-for-profit and philanthropic supporters of news providers. The report made two specific references to local media – calling for adequate funding to support the ABC in rural and regional news delivery and support for community broadcasting to cover training and education costs, as well as the rollout of digital services (Australian Government, 2018b).

### **Competition policy**

The role of digital and social media giants in disrupting the business model sustaining journalism has emerged as a chief concern in several recent inquiries. As in other parts of the world, Australian news providers have had a love/hate relationship with players like Google and Facebook in the intensifying battle for digital news territory of the past decade. In 2018, competition regulator and national consumer law advocate the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) announced an 18-month inquiry into the impact on the state of competition in media and advertising. The head of the inquiry Rod Sims told the International Institute of Communications’ telecommunications and media forum:

Journalism is a highly valued profession and crucial to our lives. Just like we are well advised not to rely on amateur doctors, perhaps we should not rely on amateur journalists.

*(McCauley, 2018)*

The national journalists’ union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, made a submission to the inquiry that proposed seven measures for protecting professional journalism, including that an access-per-user fee, or percentage of revenue charge, be levied on digital platforms of scale to support a public interest journalism fund that would assist news outlets, including those operating at the local level, to carry out their watchdog role on behalf of the communities they serve. Preliminary findings from the ACCC investigation highlight concern for the continuing reduction in journalistic numbers, especially at the local level, to perform vital functions such as court reporting and investigative reports. The ACCC has called for measures to address Google



and Facebook's power, from monitoring breaches of copyright and anti-competitive conduct to eliminating the practice of smartphone and computer users being directed to the Google platform by default as part of factory settings. They have also called for improvements to news literacy and greater transparency of where news is sourced online (ACCC, 2018).

### **A note on subsidies**

There have been calls for subsidies (such as philanthropic support or extra funding for the ABC) to support local media since the Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation (Finkelstein, 2012). Scholars such as Hess (2019), meanwhile, argue that Australian government advertising remains a largely unexplored 'silent subsidy' to established media providers and this needs reassessment in the digital era. Local municipalities and state governments are allocated budgets to direct their advertising spend to local media – in fact, local governments continue to be mandated under current legislation to publish public notices in local newspapers. Local authorities are also free to establish their own publications to reach and inform audiences of local municipal matters. This has caused some angst among traditional news outlets that claim government agencies are directing such spending to social media rather than local news sites – a problem highlighted in other parts of the world such as Poland (Hess, 2019; see also Freedom House, 2016). The Australian Country Press Association, which serves the interests of non-daily newspapers across the country, argued in its submission to the 2018 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) inquiry that a significant decline in national government advertising spending was having a major impact on the viability of small newspapers (Thomas, 2017). Its submission highlighted the important link between government advertising revenue and the health of local news, arguing that as publishers find quality journalism "difficult to monetise" it is essential that the federal government continues to invest its messages to regional Australia via traditional mastheads, whether online or in print (Thomas, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Australian policymakers, news industry bodies and community and audience groups, such as ABC Friends,<sup>3</sup> are deeply concerned about the state of local journalism and committed to its future. The hundreds of submissions to the inquiries discussed in this chapter are ample evidence of this, and of the wealth of ideas about how it can or should be sustained and nurtured. There has also been ongoing public and scholarly discussion about the virtues and importance of local news, the problems and politics the sector must negotiate and debates about the possible solutions. At the time of writing, the impact of the \$A4.2 billion Fairfax Media/Nine Network mega-merger had raised fresh and serious concerns about the future of rural, suburban and regional journalism and fears that some of the nation's major regional daily newspapers would be forced to close. Within two weeks of that announcement, reports of new, free local newspapers being established to meet the needs of local audiences and advertisers provided shards of evidence that demand for local journalism remains strong in some regional areas and can be sustained with an appropriate business model (Willis, 2018). We have ascertained elsewhere that local news can be quite organic in nature – when a news node collapses another one often emerges – but support is needed to foster and encourage new, quality offshoots and ensure future growth (Hess and Waller, 2016).

The major reforms of 2017 that changed the rules for commercial news operators have had a ripple effect that includes throwing the performance of the ABC at the local level into even

sharper focus. Some academics have argued that it is the role of the public broadcaster to lead the way in addressing the increasing news gaps in regional and remote areas created by mergers and acquisitions. Industry and political critics have even accused the ABC of competing with established media outlets in the national digital space rather than addressing the news needs of rural Australia. The raft of recent media inquiries have generated a patchwork of information, issues and new directions related to local journalism. Despite this, there has been no all-encompassing study to assess news quality and news gaps across the nation that can inform future directions in media policy and local journalism practice. Such research is urgently needed because as news production and distribution practices change to accommodate the growing popularity of mobile platforms, rural and regional consumers in Australia face not only the loss of traditional sources of local news and information, but also growing inequities in access to local online content due to poor digital connectivity.

### Notes

- 1 For example, regional broadcasters such as Prime Media, Southern Cross Austereo Win and Imparja launched a large-scale advertising campaign describing themselves as the voice for local communities and that without change, regional news was threatened (Hill, 2015).
- 2 The Black Saturday bushfires was a series of almost 400 bushfires that burnt through parts of the state of Victoria in February 2009. It resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire – 180 people died and more than 400 were injured.
- 3 ABC Friends is an independent organisation that represents the community's interest in the Australian Broadcasting Corporation at national, state and local levels ([www.abcfriends.org.au](http://www.abcfriends.org.au)).

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# 10

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY BROADCASTING LEGISLATION IN KENYA

*Rose N. Kimani*

### **Introduction**

The Kenyan media sector has experienced significant growth since its inception in colonial times. The growth of broadcasting, and alongside it broadcast legislation, can be linked to political and social factors in the growth of the nation. To quote Teer-Tomaselli,

Broadcasting is a particularly good barometer by which to measure political change in any country. National broadcasting, either in the classic form of public service broadcasting or in the more openly regulated form of commercially based broadcasting, is a daily record of the concerns, obsessions, ethos, and values of the society that produces it.

*(Teer-Tomaselli, 2014, 414)*

The thought above offers a vital insight into understanding the evolution of the Kenyan broadcast sector legislation in general and community broadcasting legislation specifically. This chapter traces national, international and local developments that have impacted on the growth of Kenya's broadcasting industry, and with it the evolution of community broadcasting legislation. It is based on a review of existent literature and legislation, and fieldwork conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Kenya's community radio sector.

### **The beginnings: broadcast for modernization**

Radio broadcasting was first introduced in Kenya in 1927, when the country was still under the rule of the British. Broadcasts were targeted at the British and Asian populations, until a radio broadcasting service targeting Africans was introduced over ten years later, in 1939, to quell the Mau Mau uprising and provide updates on the ongoing world war. The latter, African Languages Broadcasting Services, served under the auspices of the Department of Information and Broadcast in only eight languages (Mbeke, 2008). Given that Kenya is home to over 42 ethnic groups, this was hardly adequate. Nevertheless, it offered broadcasting in local languages for the first time.

Television broadcasting was introduced in the late 1950s, toward the end of colonial occupation. The colonial government intended it to be a commercial venture, which was implemented by a consortium of eight East African, British, Canadian and American entrepreneurs (King'ara, 2014). However, following internal self-rule in 1962 and subsequent political independence in 1963, the broadcaster, which also offered radio services, was nationalized and renamed Voice of Kenya (VOK) in 1964. It was converted to a department under the then-Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Tourism (King'ara, 2014; Ugangu, 2012). As captured by Mbeke (2008), the policy on the media was driven by a need for national unity and development, political rivalry, and ideological issues around media ownership – the wish to have media that were owned and controlled by the nation rather than by foreigners. For their newly formed nations, African leaders viewed the mass media as a way to “keep ... people fully informed, to integrate them, to encourage and to inspire them to new efforts” (Coltart, 1963, 202). Broadcast media were thus incorporated into the civil service structure and harnessed toward nation-building (King'ara, 2014; Ugangu, 2012; Mak'Ochieng, 1996). Their key role was delineated as aiding the government in development of the citizenry.

This conceptualization of the media's role did not welcome any dissent from or through the media. Rather, any criticism of the government was taken as undermining the government's nation-building efforts (Mak'Ochieng, 1996). Accordingly, the legislation put in place to regulate the media was designed to ensure that they would toe the government's line. An example is the Official Secrets Act enacted in 1968, following information leaks that put pressure on the government (Mbeke, 2008). This Act limited the media's access to information from government sources, and made it possible to be penalized for publishing or airing government matters that could at any time be categorized as official secrets. In that era, the main impulse behind broadcasting for many postcolonial nations including Kenya drew from the modernization theory by Lerner, Schramm, and Rogers that was in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s (Mutere, 1988). It was envisioned that 'development' would happen through transferring technology – then equated with modernization – from industrialized nations to the elite of less industrialized nations. This elite would in turn trickle down this modernization to the rest of the citizenry. Mass media and especially broadcasting was envisioned as the main way to facilitate this transfer of technology.

### **Rethinking broadcasting and community broadcasting**

Despite both national and international rhetoric about the place of the media as a trigger for modernization through provision of information,<sup>1</sup> by the 1970s, it was clear that the media were not a magic bullet that would automatically result in development. Furthermore, the top-down information transmission model was found to be ineffective in creating lasting changes in any population. There was also the issue of foreign content in local media channels. All these contributed to rethinking the role of media not only nationally, but also internationally. Berrigan's (1979) report on the place of community media in development, produced under the auspices of UNESCO, was one of the indicators of the change in thinking about whether it is the elite or ordinary people who should be involved in broadcasting and determining broadcast content. At around the same time, there was vigorous debate about global information flows following the McBride Commission's 1980 report, also published by UNESCO. This encouraged the initiation of broadcasting stations that were closer to the grassroots and that served the information needs of those at the grassroots. One such station was to be initiated in Kenya a few years later.

In Kenya, a new president, Daniel Arap Moi, had taken over in 1978. To consolidate political power, he oversaw the passing of a law in 1982 that declared Kenya to be a one-party state (Ogola, 2011). Despite this, the government policy remained cooperation with international bodies. Thus, following an agreement made with UNESCO in 1981, in 1982 Kenya became the first country to have a community radio station on the African continent. The Homabay Rural Radio Project was spearheaded by UNESCO in cooperation with the state broadcaster, VOK. The station operated on an idle VOK FM frequency and the station's technical personnel were seconded from VOK (Quarmyne, 2006). Broadcasts were held in the local language, Luo, and consisted of local news, as well as information on topical issues such as family planning (Ilboudo, 2003). However, the station lasted for just over a year. In mid-1983, the station's equipment was dismantled and taken to Nairobi without a formal explanation from the government (Bourgault, 1995), effectively ending the life of the station.

This action to curtail broadcasting at the grassroots may be understood by a look at the political situation in Kenya at the time. In August 1982, there had been an attempted coup d'état by officers from the Kenya Air Force. The soldiers captured the VOK radio station in central Nairobi, where they broadcasted in English and Kiswahili that the military had overthrown the government. The use of broadcasting services to announce the (though short-lived) change of government demonstrated the importance once more of the role of broadcasting as a means of governing the citizenry. Following the attempted coup, the government redoubled its efforts to maintain control over the media. Apart from dismantling the Homabay Rural Radio Project, there was a crackdown on dissenting voices in other media in the 1980s. Editors of independent publications that were critical of the government were arrested, and many such publications were banned (Heath, 1992; Mbeke, 2008). As regards broadcasting, VOK remained the only broadcaster in the country, with its editorial content managed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Community broadcasting would not get back onto the agenda until some 20 years later. Thus, despite international rhetoric on the importance of grassroots broadcasting, the national political situation at the time was the determining factor in the decisions made about the kinds of broadcasting to have in Kenya. The national constitution of the time guaranteed freedom of expression, but there was no clause addressing media freedom. This, however, did not stop agitation for more media freedoms and free speech.

### **New pressures, new players**

While on one hand there was pressure to consolidate political power through a carefully controlled media, on the other hand there were both financial and international pressures to move in another direction. Financially, VOK was running at a loss and needed to adopt a model that would be more commercially viable. The broadcaster's equipment was in desperate need of an overhaul to deal with technical transmission issues. Internationally, the aggressive stance of the Kenyan government toward any dissenting voices was attracting negative attention. There was thus increasing international pressure to liberalize the media and abide by the principles of free speech. Seemingly in response to these pressures, VOK was converted to a parastatal – a semi-autonomous commercial entity – through the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) Act of 1988 (Parliament of Kenya, 1988). VOK was renamed the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and removed from the oversight of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (Heath, 1992; Odhiambo, 2002). It was to generate income rather than being funded solely by the government. These changes were in line with the Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which recommended reduction in government expenditures.



The KBC Act specifically addressed KBC, but since the entity was the only legal broadcaster, the legislation in effect addressed the broadcasting sector as a whole. In addition to vesting program production and broadcasting duties in KBC, the Act sought to

provide for the control of broadcast receiving sets, and for the licensing of dealers, repairers and importers of broadcast receiving sets; and for connected purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Through this Act, KBC was mandated to issue permits for the ownership of a broadcast receiving set (television or radio), and to levy an annual fee for ownership of the same. Thus, KBC was not only a broadcasting corporation but also a kind of licensing body. While levying a fee for ownership of a broadcast receiving set was going to generate funds for the corporation, it at the same time acted as a prohibiting factor for those who may have wanted to purchase a radio or television, but were unable to pay an annual fee for owning it. The Act also clearly laid out that no one could establish a broadcasting station unless authorized to do so via written law, and unauthorized broadcasting would result in a fine and/or up to a year in prison. Thus, this legislation functioned to control both the production and the reception of information. Much as the KBC was no longer under a government ministry, according to the Act, its directors were to be government officials or people appointed by government officials. Thus, the corporation was still not in a position to exercise editorial independence.

The 1990s saw increased internal and external pressure to liberalize the media sector. Significantly, Section 2A of the Constitution, which had turned Kenya into a one-party state, was repealed in 1991, following pressure from donors, civil society, and politicians not aligned to the ruling party. This ushered in pluralistic politics and the liberalization of the media and communication sector (Mbeke, 2008; Ogola, 2011). At this point, the media liberalization was unstructured, with unclear laws for the sector. Once more, independent newspapers and magazines boomed. In terms of broadcast, at least one private radio station and one television station were licensed, although the latter had strong links to the government (Heath, 1992). Nevertheless, it was a move away from a broadcast media sector monopolized by the government.

Following a long consultation process in response to economic demands and pressure from donors and civil society, the government reviewed the laws governing information and telecommunication in 1998. The Kenya Communications Act was passed the same year. In this Act, the Communications Commission of Kenya (CCK) was created to “licence and regulate telecommunication, radio-communication and postal services” (Parliament of Kenya, 1998).<sup>3</sup> Concurrently, the Act established the National Communications Secretariat (NCS), which was tasked with advising the government on information and communications policy. The creation of a communications policy and the licensing of players in the sector were thus assigned to two separate bodies. This is still the case today. The legislation at the time did not delineate license categories, so there was no special provision for community broadcasting. Rather, all non-governmental players were subject to the same regulations to set up broadcasting stations.

### **Accreditation and community broadcasters**

The 2000s saw a new regime take power, with peaceful elections held in 2002. The private media sector expanded while community media made a re-entry into the broadcast scene from 2004, mainly in the context of media for development projects. There was a notable increase in free speech via the media, but with it concern about journalists’ adherence to media ethics. In 2007, the government created the Media Council of Kenya (MCK), tasked with regulating the conduct of journalism practitioners as well as accrediting them. However, although the MCK



was supposed to be a self-regulation mechanism, government control of the body via financing and appointments was built in into the legislation (Mbeke, 2008). Thus, the MCK is not an independent regulator free of pressure from government circles.

Legislation about the MCK was updated in 2013, and functions of the body include dealing with complaints against the media and accrediting journalists. Accreditation, even though sometimes interpreted as a way of limiting media freedom (Berger, 2007), was emphasized after complaints that inflammatory broadcasts were as a result of untrained and therefore unethical journalists. To be accredited as a journalist, one needs to have undergone journalism training. This requirement applies to all media categories, including community broadcasting. Accreditation has however been a point of concern among community broadcasters, given that some of the volunteers who work at these stations are not formally trained journalists. The MCK has dealt with this in two ways: it considers for accreditation volunteers who have been in practice for some time and can provide a letter of recommendation from their media house, and carries out training in media ethics for all accredited journalists.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the interpretation of the legislation has been broadened in response to the context at the local media level.

In 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution, which makes the country legally bound to international conventions and treaties that it is a signatory to. In this now-current constitution, freedom of expression, freedom of the media and access to information are enshrined in Sections 33, 34, and 35 respectively. These rights, however, exclude hate speech, propaganda for war, incitement to violence, and advocacy of hatred. These caveats were important to specify especially following the post-election violence of 2007–2008, some of which was attributed to inflammatory statements via the media. Thus, even while seeking to adhere to international standards, national circumstances impact on the final choices made about which legislation to enact.

### **Analyzing community broadcasting legislation**

By 2008, there were nine operational community broadcasters, and there was increasing lobbying by practitioners and civil society to recognize this as a distinct sector. In 2008, the Kenya Communications Act was amended and renamed the Kenya Information and Communications Act (KICA). It was passed into law in 2009. In this Act, broadcasting in general and community broadcasting in particular were introduced as distinct sectors, unlike the previous laws, which regulated communication and telecommunications in general.

The KICA 2009 explicitly outlines the legal parameters of what it considers as community, community media, and the conditions under which community media are allowed to operate. These are outlined in the section below, starting with the definitions provided in the Act:

“community” includes a geographically founded community or any group of persons or sector of the public having a specific, ascertainable common interest;

“community broadcasting service” means a broadcasting service which meets all the following requirements—

- (a) is fully controlled by a non-profit entity and carried on for non-profitable purposes;
- (b) serves a particular community;
- (c) encourages members of the community served by it or persons associated with or promoting the interests of such community to participate in the selection and provision of programmes to be broadcast in the course of such broadcasting service; and

- (d) may be funded by donations, grants, sponsorships or membership fees, or by any combination of the aforementioned.

*(KICA, 2009, Section 6 of Part I)*

From these definitions, a community may be either composed of people who have a clear common interest, or people who live in the same geographic area. From this definition, community media may not necessarily be local media, for instance, if the people of common interest do not live in the same locale. However, in Kenya, the trend so far has been to license geographically bound training institutions, as well as applicants in a specific locale, such as the slum areas of the capital city, Nairobi. According to Section 46(F) of Part 2 of the Act, in order to grant a community media license, the commission will make consideration:

- (a) to the community of interests of the persons applying for or on whose behalf the application is made;
- (b) as to whether the persons, or a significant proportion thereof constituting the community have consented to the application;
- (c) to the source of funding for the broadcasting service;
- (d) as to whether the broadcasting service to be established is not-for-profit; and
- (e) to the manner in which members of the community will participate in the selection and provision of programmes to be broadcast.

From part (a) above, an application for a community broadcasting license may either be made directly by a specific community, or on their behalf. Part (b), which requires a community broadcasting applicant to demonstrate community consent to the establishment of the station, lowers the possibility of individuals purportedly speaking for a community (while not actually doing so) applying for and getting a license. However, that this community consent is to be demonstrated through the provision of the minutes of a meeting<sup>5</sup> can be a loophole. From merely receiving such a document, it is not clear how the commission would ascertain that such a meeting indeed took place, and, if it did, that the people in the meeting were truly representative of community views. In addition, there is an assumption that community decisions are made in formalized meetings, while in reality sometimes the significant decisions are agreed upon in informal settings. However, logistically speaking, it would not be realistic for the commission to attend every formal or informal community meeting across the country. Therefore, the trustworthiness of the people applying for the license is relied on to ensure that the community is indeed represented through the minutes.

Section 46(F) requires all community broadcasters to ensure that the community is involved in content production and management of the station. The section states that the broadcaster should:

- (a) ensure that a cross section of the community is represented in the management of the broadcasting service;
- (b) ensure that each member of the community has a reasonable chance to serve in the management of the broadcasting service;
- (c) ensure that members of the community have a way of making their preferences known in the selection and provision of programmes;
- (d) conform to any conditions or guidelines as the Commission may require or issue with regard to such broadcasting service.

This requirement for the community to participate in the management of the community station is often met through the creation of a management board that has representatives drawn from different sectors of the community.

The Kenya Information and Communications (Broadcasting) Regulations of 2009, a subsection of the KICA 2009, describes the envisioned role of community broadcasters in Section 13 as:

13. (1) A Community broadcaster shall—
  - (a) reflect the needs of the people in the community including cultural, religious, language and demographic needs;
  - (b) deal specifically with community issues which are not normally dealt with by other broadcasting services covering the same area; and
  - (c) be informational, educational and entertaining in nature; Provide a distinct broadcasting service that highlights community issues.
- (2) The Commission shall, through the frequency plan, ensure that an equitable number of frequencies or channels are reserved for community broadcasting.
- (3) A community broadcaster shall ensure all the funds generated from the operations of a community broadcasting station are reinvested in activities benefiting the Community.
- (4) The Commission shall monitor community broadcasters to ensure that the funds generated from operations of a community broadcasting station are re-invested in activities benefiting the community.
- (5) The Commission shall allow community broadcasting licensees to advertise, on their stations, adverts that are relevant and specific to that community within the broadcast area.

Clauses (a), (b), and (c) delineate the niche for community broadcasters as filling in what is not already covered by other stations. In referring to community-specific issues not covered by other broadcasters in the same area, these clauses imply local broadcasting. Thus, although community broadcasters are not defined as strictly local broadcasters, the legislation seems to envisage them as such. The subsequent clauses deal with the expectations for fund procurement and management, the Commission's responsibility to provide frequencies, and its oversight role when it comes to funds management. Here, the bargaining aspect of policy comes into play: while community broadcasters are assured of being provided with frequencies and allowed some leeway in terms of advertising, there is in the same breath the intention to supervise how they manage any revenue they gain. In this clause the monitorial role of the regulator is explicitly stated. It is under these laws that the community media sector operated from 2009 to 2013.

In 2013, further amendments were made to the legislation, which updated the Kenya Information and Communications (Broadcasting) Regulations of 2009. These amendments were published in 2016 as the Kenya Information and Communications (Broadcasting) Regulations, 2016. In addition to renaming the CCK the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA), significant among the amendments for community broadcasters was deletion of the section that allowed them to carry advertisements. In this latest version of the legislation, the only specification about funding for community media is a clause stating that community broadcasters "shall receive sponsorship"; the section about community broadcasters airing 'relevant' advertisements has been deleted. With the deletion of this section it is not clear if community broadcasters may air advertisements or not. If the silence of the law on this aspect is interpreted as prohibiting the stations from airing advertisements, this has implications for their survival, which has been

a challenging aspect since the first community radio started broadcasts in 2004. Although non-profit actors, community broadcasters view this limited advertising as a lifeline, and therefore the deletion of the advertising clause was a cause of concern. It is this concern that led some community radio stations to seek clarification and negotiate their interest with the regulator.

### **Negotiating community media legislation**

Community radio stations, through the Kenya Community Media Network (KCOMNET), moved to lobby the CA for a revision of the legislation in 2016. The network also asked to be involved in further consultations regarding community broadcasting regulations, in their position as stakeholders in the sector.<sup>6</sup> In April 2016, KCOMNET launched a petition requesting that the deleted clause be reinstated.<sup>7</sup> According to its spokesperson, KCOMNET works ‘closely’ with the government in policy advocacy (Githethwa, KCOMNET Coordinator, 2014). Interestingly however, the National Communication Secretariat (NCS), charged with drafting the legislation, claimed to have no knowledge of the network, and stated that it had never seen KCOMNET representatives at any of the public stakeholders’ meetings held in the course of revising the broadcast regulations. Also, the deletion of the clause was interpreted as a positive development by NCS, based on the argument that “if it is not prohibited then it can be done”.<sup>8</sup> Given these opposing interpretations of the same clause, there is a lack of communication between policymakers and the actors on the ground. While KCOMNET views itself as the legitimate representative of community media and as speaking for them, it seems to be unrecognized as legitimate in government circles.<sup>9</sup> The organization is therefore not accorded a serious hearing, much as it may be genuinely speaking in the interest of community broadcasters. On the other hand, KCOMNET enjoys legitimacy with at least 23 of the existent community radio stations, whom it officially represents, and with international organizations including UNESCO, HIVOS, and GIZ Civil Peace Service.<sup>10</sup> These organizations have funded or facilitated community radio-related projects through KCOMNET. Thus, KCOMNET has legitimacy with non-governmental players, which increases the flow of resources to community stations, but an apparent lack of legitimacy with the government, which limits the organization’s ability to effectively advocate for community broadcasters regarding the legal framework. The organization’s scope of action is thus limited by its lack of alignment with national players.

### **Conclusion**

Community broadcasting continues to evolve. As of the last quarter of 2017, barely ten years after community broadcasting legislation was enacted, there were 36 community broadcasters on air (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2017). In the existent legislation about community broadcasting, one sees the convergence of local, national, and international ideas about the role of broadcasting in general and community broadcasting in particular. In the Kenyan case, legislation around broadcasting has historically been driven by the country’s national political context. Yet, legislation is also responsive to the local context, even while operating within specific national circumstances. Furthermore, the national does not work in isolation and does not hold absolute power when it comes to enacting legislation. At certain points in time, the international and the local exert enough pressure to lead to amendments in legislation, even when unwillingly or incompletely carried out. Thus, there is a constant negotiation by actors at all levels to influence broadcasting policy and legislation. It remains to be seen the ways in which the sector will develop and, with it, the legislation.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, UNESCO report by Natesh (1964).
- 2 (Anon 1988) Preamble, Chapter 221, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1988, p. 274.
- 3 (Anon 1998) Kenya Communications Act, 1998, Cap 5(1).
- 4 Personal communication with KCOMNET Coordinator in June 2019 and with MCK in August 2019.
- 5 Section 5 of the Kenya Information and Communications (Broadcasting) Regulations, 2009.
- 6 From Memorandum to the CA dated 20 January 2016, provided in personal communication with KCOMNET.
- 7 KCOMNET's social media feed featured photos and tweets of a consultative meeting with the CA, and a petition dated 20 April 2016 asking for reinsertion of the deleted section. See [www.kcomnet.org/news/](http://www.kcomnet.org/news/).
- 8 Interview with NCS representative, 24 October 2016.
- 9 The issue of KCOMNET's credibility partly arises from internal disagreements experienced by the organization in 2009/2010, which resulted in the formation of an alternative body, the Community Radio Association of Kenya (CRAK). The discussion that led to this reorganization is captured in a community radio mapping report (Fairbairn and Rukaria, 2010).
- 10 See KCOMNET Projects page on [www.kcomnet.org/projects/](http://www.kcomnet.org/projects/).

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# 11

## LOCAL MEDIA POLICIES IN POLAND

### Key issues and debates

*Sylvia Męćfal*

#### **Introduction**

Local media in Poland only had a chance to expand after the transition of the political system in 1989. Before then, they were underdeveloped (Filas, 1999), and most of the legally existing print publications were state-owned. In 1975 there were only 27 local print publications. After the administrative reforms in 1975 when 49 voivodeships (provinces)<sup>1</sup> were established, the authorities decided (in 1979) to create a local weekly in every voivodeship. By 1982 local weeklies were set up in all of the new administrative regions, in most cases by the new authorities of voivodeships (top-down approach) (Gierula and Jachimowski, 1990). The data presented by Chorążki (1999, 60–67) show that in January 1989, 370–390 print publications were published. Ten years later, this number rose to 2,500.<sup>2</sup> The structure of the media market changed as well, with only 10–15 per cent of the titles operating in 1989–1990 managing to survive. The structural changes included a decline in factory bulletins and titles published by political parties, but an increase in parish press, local government and private (commercial) publications (Kowalczyk, 2007). The number of local publications in 2018 is estimated at around 2,500–3000 (Kowalczyk, 2008; Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, 2013, 2015).

The legal Acts that were particularly important in these changes include the bill liquidating the monopolist publisher from the communist era (RSW ‘Prasa-Książka-Ruch’) and the bill abolishing censorship and introducing changes to the Press Act (both in 1990). These and other legal solutions established in 1989 and the early 1990s allowed a rapid growth in the number of local publications (Filas, 1992). Many did not last, but the local media market continued to develop into the most diverse sector of Polish media. The two most important types of local press in Poland<sup>3</sup> are local government titles and private publications (commercial and formally independent from political influence). In the chapter, I first discuss the issue of local government titles, which is still one of the key policy debates, as the legality of these titles is questioned by private local media owners who see them as ‘unfair competition’. Second, I give an overview of the legal conditions of the functioning of local media and how they influence local journalists’ work (e.g., issues of authorisation, correction, criminalisation of libel/slander offences). Finally, I discuss the potential impacts of local relations on journalistic ethical standards, in particular the role of ‘proximity of place’ and informal community relations, which may lead to conflicts of interest and situations where ethical standards are difficult to adhere to.

## **Local government press**

Independent local government was established in Poland on 8 March 1990 by the Act on commune self-government.<sup>4</sup> The Act allowed local governments to issue their own bulletins/magazines in order to inform citizens about local government decisions and actions. Their function was supposed to be only informative. However, the local government press turned out to be inextricably linked to local authorities who wanted to have a tangible influence on the content of such journals, the range of criticism allowed or even whose names could be mentioned in the newspaper (Michalczyk, 1997). Additionally, these publications are often seen as unfair competition by the publishers of the private press,<sup>5</sup> as they are financed from local government funds, are often free of charge and sometimes accept external advertisements (from local entrepreneurs), all of which disadvantage independent publishers (Kępa-Mętrak, 2015, 211–215; see also Męćfal, 2014, 2016; Miarczyński 2017).<sup>6</sup> The structure and issues associated with local government titles have been a key feature of local media in Poland ever since 1989.

The current legal situation gives the local government (at the level of *gmina*<sup>7</sup> and province) the right to inform a town or region about local matters (for promotional or educational purposes) in their publication, on their website or in the Bulletin of Public Information (a specialist website for public information). However, none of the parliamentary Acts (e.g., the Act on commune economy, the Act on economic activity, the Acts on different types of local governments and the Press Act<sup>8</sup>) give the local government the right to publish a newspaper as such (Płoszka and Głowacka, 2014). There are also paid-for local government publications, which are problematic because they violate the constitutional right to public information (Art. 61 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland). For example, the regional body overseeing local governments (Regionalna Izba Obrachunkowa) in Wrocław declared that the paid-for local paper *Tygodnik Milicki* published by the Milicz local government was wrongful practice because citizens had to pay for access to information about local government (Płoszka and Głowacka, 2014).

The Ombudsman (RPO), Dr Adam Bodnar, issued several letters (in May 2016, February and September 2017 and May 2018) to the minister of internal affairs and administration and to the minister of culture underlining the necessity of establishing a ban on local governments publishing their own titles, declaring that their publications should strictly be informative (RPO, 2018). Bodnar (RPO, 2016; Krawczyk, 2017) insisted that nowhere in the Press Act is it stated that the local government is allowed to publish its own publications. The ‘self-governing organisation’, mentioned in the Act as one of the possible publishers, cannot refer to local government because the Press Act was passed in 1984 when ‘local government’ as an entity did not exist. In 2017, the undersecretary of state at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, Paweł Lewandowski, replied that these issues would be discussed together with the changes in the Press Act.

We need to think about the changes in the Act which will strengthen the position of local press independent from the local government, and which will also comply with article 14 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland – the principle of the freedom of the press and other means of mass communication.

*(RPO, 2018)*

The debate about local government press is still ongoing. One of the likely reasons for inaction on the part of the authorities is the fact that some of these local government publications have important political roles to play during local elections. It is worth mentioning that there have



been some examples where local governments decided not to publish their newspapers. In October 2012, the Town Council of *Thuszcz* (a small town near Warsaw) banned the publication of its title, because “the journal published by the local government cannot be fully objective and independent” (Płoszka and Głowacka, 2014, 83).

### **Local media policies**

As illustrated above, policies concerning local media are located in many different acts in Polish law, and most of them have national rather than local status. The foundation of the freedom of speech and free media in Poland is the Constitution of the Republic of Poland introduced in 1997. Articles 14 and 54 guarantee freedom of the press and other means of mass communication, freedom of worldview and freedom of acquisition and dissemination of information, and ban preventive censorship, but these regulations also introduced the law allowing the state to licence radio and television. One of the major legal documents affecting policies concerning all media institutions in Poland is the Press Act (*Ustawa z dnia 26.01.1984 r., Dz.U. z 2017 r. poz.2173*). It was adopted in 1984, before the political system change in 1989. Several amendments have been made to this document over the years (the most recent in 2017), but no government has had sufficient political power and will to pass a new Press Act to address the different conditions that now exist. In this section, I discuss three specific legal and policy issues that are important in the operation of local media.

#### ***‘Authorisation’***

The right of ‘authorisation’ (Art. 14a of the Press Act) is a controversial regulation that directly influences journalistic work at the local and national level. It means that a journalist cannot refuse a person who is a source and whose words are quoted directly the right to check their statement/interview. The most recent amendment to this article, in 2017, obliges journalists to inform an interviewee that they have such a right. It was also made clear that the person has up to six hours in the case of daily newspapers, and up to 24 hours in the case of journals/magazines, to check and accept the statement they are quoted to have made. The right of ‘authorisation’ is arguably particularly problematic in the local media context, where there are fewer sources available and where as a result important matters might not be revealed at all.

Prior to the article amendment there was no obligation for journalists to inform an interviewee in advance about their right to ‘authorise’ – they had to act only if the interviewee demanded their right to authorise their statement (Art. 14 of the Press Act before the changes). In addition, there was no deadline concerning the time by which authorisation was to be completed, which often meant that the source delayed their authorisation intentionally in order to make publication impossible. As a result, journalists (based on the research projects I conducted in 2006 and 2013–2014) developed different strategies concerning authorisation – some did not mention it and tried to avoid it (one of my interviewees did not answer her phone all day to avoid having authorisation of a statement made by a local politician withdrawn); others asked the interviewees if they wished to authorise their statements after the interview (Męcfal, 2019); others used sources they knew would give them authorisation (Męcfal, 2019). After the regulatory changes, the procedure became more formal – with the obligation to inform interviewees about the right of authorisation before the interview. This made it impossible for the source to block a publication (by introducing a concrete time frame the authorisation needs to be completed by), but different deadlines might have introduced ‘unfair competition’ because a daily newspaper may be able to provide the same news quicker.

It is important to add that journalists may be taken to court and fined for lack of authorisation (Art. 49b of the Press Act, which is an improvement on the previous version where journalists could have also been given a prison sentence – Art. 49 of the Press Act before the changes). There were cases in the past in Poland where local journalists were sentenced because they had failed to obtain ‘authorisation’. One case, of an editor-in-chief of one of the local weeklies, was adjudicated in the European Court of Human Rights in 2011, with the court stating that the obligation of ‘authorisation’ and the penalty for the lack of it are contrary to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, that is, ‘freedom of expression’ (HFPC, 2011). A second case involved a local journalist who was fined by a regional court, but then appealed against the verdict at the district court, which overruled the original ruling and dismissed the case due to insignificant social harm caused by the journalist’s actions (HFPC, 2015). Journalists have been critical of the Act and its changes, while they have been advised to use reported speech or paraphrasing to avoid breaching the law (Twaróg, 2017; Domagalski, 2017). The best solution would be to remove ‘the authorisation right’ from the Press Act as it was introduced for political considerations; as a legal Act it exists only in Poland and remains in conflict with the European Convention on Human Rights (HFPC, 2011).

### ***Correction notice***

Article 31a of the Polish Press Act obligates the editor-in-chief of any newspaper to publish on request of the interested person a free-of charge, factual correction of inaccurate or untrue press material. Depending on the type of media and its frequency, the editor-in-chief has three days (electronic version) or seven days (daily newspaper) to publish the correction, and in the case of periodicals (most local newspapers are included here, as most are weeklies) it has to appear in the next issue. The correction cannot be longer than double the size of the original material and it cannot be commented on in the same issue of the publication. Until the judgment of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal from 1 December 2010, refusal to publish a correction could have been penalised with a fine or prison sentence (Art. 46 of the Press Act before the changes). The Tribunal decided that such refusal cannot be punished as a crime because the legal regulations are unclear about what constitutes a crime in this case. The judgment came into force 18 months after it was announced, and in 2012 Article 46 expired. Currently, if the editor-in-chief refuses to publish the correction or if the correction is published in violation of the regulations (Art. 32, section 4–5: the correction should be published in the same section, with the same font and visible title ‘correction’, without changes), the interested person or entity may bring court action to publish the correction (Art. 39 of the Press Act).

The practice of local newsrooms shows that editors-in-chief prefer not to publish corrections. My own analysis of five local weeklies showed that in four weeklies there were only between one and nine corrections (33 issues of each weekly were analysed), and they concerned mostly formal mistakes (spelling mistakes, misprints etc.). The editor-in-chief of Weekly C explained that when such errors were found, corrections were published even without the request from the interested person or entity. The editor-in-chief also phoned the person and apologised for the error. However, sometimes journalists and editors have to deal with misinterpretation of the regulations in the Press Act because some readers expect correction when their views of events are different from the ones presented in the publication (Męćfal, 2019). In my study, only one case had a larger number of corrections (19), but in interviews with community members there were many complaints about how the corrections were being processed. The main criticism concerned delays in the publication of corrections (three to four weeks after the publication, and not in the next issue), the fact that the notices were too small, that they were published on

one of the last pages of the weekly (instead of one of the front pages) and sometimes that they were critically commented on by the editor-in-chief (Męcał, 2019).

### **Article 212 of the Polish Criminal Code**

In September 2011, the Local Newspapers Association, the Chamber of Press Publishers and the Helsinki Foundation on Human Rights (HFPC) initiated a campaign called ‘Cross out the 212 of KK (Polish Criminal Code 1997)’. One of the main goals of the campaign was to remove Article 212 in its present form. The article concerns slander/libel for which a journalist (or any person accused) may be penalised with a fine or one year imprisonment.<sup>9</sup> After the launch of the campaign, the HFPC was approached by journalists asking for legal help, and as a response a practical guide was published with self-help and information regarding legal procedures (Głowacka, 2012). The rise of these intervention requests, declared by HFPC, might be a symptom of the scale of the problem. Article 212 might be particularly dangerous for local journalists who have to face the courts of law in their own communities where the people involved in the justice system institutions might be part of local cliques and have informal ties in the community.

The case of *Kurier Słupski*, from the town of Słupca, is just one example of how a libel accusation might proceed. Two journalists of this weekly were accused of libel for writing an article where they described how the vice-marshal of the parliament from the Polish People’s Party, who was elected locally, supported his son’s company using public and party funds. The journalists were found guilty by the regional court, fined 2,000 zloty each (ca. 500 euro) and given a suspended sentence, as well as being sentenced to pay 1,000 zloty (ca. 250 euro) to charity. They appealed against the ruling to the district court and, with the support of the HFHR, were acquitted (Płoszka and Głowacka, 2013). It is important to add that the same story was covered by *Gazeta Wyborcza* (one of the biggest dailies in Poland) and the vice-marshal did not take any action against them. When analysed closely, one can easily observe the role of the local context here; almost all public institutions in Słupca were dominated by politicians of the Polish People’s Party or their family members, and the local weekly that opposed the local authorities did not have significant editorial and financial resources (unlike *Gazeta Wyborcza*) and had limited professional legal assistance. It was therefore much easier to sue a weaker (local) newspaper (Płoszka and Głowacka, 2013).

When defending the journalists from Słupca, the HFHR used arguments from the ruling made by the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Lingens against Austria*, where it was stated that the acceptable criticism towards politicians was broader than towards private persons, so therefore politicians must have a higher level of tolerance towards it (Płoszka and Głowacka, 2013, 89). It is important to underline here that institutions such as the European Court of Human Rights and the Polish Constitutional Tribunal (the highest justice institutions) have often been utilised when local journalists have faced legal problems (Głowacka, 2012). Another alarming fact can be observed in Polish police statistics (Statystyki Polskiej Policji, n.d.), which show that the number of cases launched on the basis of Article 212 and ascertained as crimes increased from 93 in 1999 to 540 in 2016. This proves that the problem with this regulation is real and needs to be dealt with. Meanwhile, the Polish Government seems to be taking a different path (see Conclusion).

### **Local relations and ethical journalistic standards**

In this section I discuss examples from one of my own research projects to illustrate how local context and ‘proximity of place’ may make ethical journalistic standards very difficult to follow

for local journalists. There are three journalistic codes of ethics in Poland,<sup>10</sup> but none specifically for local media. Local journalists usually follow the national codes or, as they state, they rather take into consideration general human moral standards. Local editorial offices do not tend to have their own written journalistic and/or ethical standards. However, there are informal rules that journalists and editors seem to follow, even if they are sometimes in conflict with journalistic ethics. Such standards could be observed when analysing the relations between local media and political actors. Informal family relations with the mayor did not stop the editor-in-chief of Weekly B from interviewing all of the candidates for the mayoral seat and organising the debate for the candidates in local elections. The vice-editor of Weekly C took part in European elections and ran for the position of mayor, but these circumstances did not warrant the editor-in-chief dismissing her or even putting her on leave.<sup>11</sup>

The analysis of the relations between journalists and local governmental actors led to at least one discernible type of conflict of interest in all five analysed newsrooms: individual conflict of interest (when journalists have other interests outside their journalistic obligations, so-called secondary interests, which become more important than their primary interest – the audience (Borden and Pritchard, 2001)). In newsrooms with strong leaders (usually the editor-in-chief), institutional conflicts of interest were also recognised – that is, journalists' entanglement with the editor-in-chief/owner's interests (journalists were dependent on and perceived through the relations and interests of the weekly's owner/editor-in-chief). The fact that individual conflicts of interest were more common may be an indicator of local media specifics: the proximity of the social environment, more frequent informal relations,<sup>12</sup> and the difficulty in distancing oneself from such relations (caused by limited professional possibilities, proximity of living, etc.). Even if journalists avoid the individual conflict of interest sufficiently (e.g., they do not cover stories about their family and friends), the fact that such relations exist can cause a potential conflict of interest. All these brief examples show that conflicts of interest seem to be an inevitable part of local media worlds and they appear to be very difficult to control or regulate (Męcfal, 2014, 2016, 2017). The often informal relations between local journalists and other key social actors seem to escape any formal regulations.

## **Conclusion**

At present the most important issues for private local media are unfair competition from local government publications, and national regulations concerning 'authorisation' or Article 212. However, the future might bring further problems. The political switch that happened in Poland in 2015 makes this likely, particularly because the Law and Justice government keeps mentioning the necessity of a new Press Act. The government has recently proposed amendments to Article 212 of the Criminal Code that would enable prosecutors and the police to initiate libel proceedings without the need for private individuals to make a complaint of libel. The new measures, which were passed by the first chamber of the Polish Parliament, would enable the state prosecutor to pursue a libel action even when the 'offended' party disagrees with such action (according to Jerzy Jurecki, the editor-in-chief of local weekly *Tygodnik Podhalański*, Stawiany, 2019). After a great deal of criticism in the local (e.g., Local Newspapers Association and local editors) and national media towards the amendments, they were withdrawn with yet another promise of a debate on the issue of Article 212. Currently, the policies' issues and their effects discussed in the chapter suggest that the European institutions, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal and non-governmental institutions play an important role in defending (local) journalists in many fields. The legal changes by the government have already rendered the usefulness of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal questionable and the freedom of

the media might be under threat. To quote one index: the Reporters Without Borders (2018) Press Freedom Index ranked Poland in 19th place in 2015, and in 58th place in 2018 (classified as a ‘noticeable problem’).

## Notes

- 1 ‘Voivodeship’ is the highest-level administrative subdivision in Poland; it is commonly translated to English as ‘province’.
- 2 Just before the political system transition in Poland the largest number of local newspapers was published unofficially and illegally by local branches of the ‘Solidarity’ movement (Chorążki, 1999, 59).
- 3 In the next parts of the chapter, I am mostly referring to the local press, as it is still the most developed segment of the local media.
- 4 Ustawa o samorządzie terytorialnym z dnia 8 marca 1990 r.
- 5 In February 2017 the Local Newspapers Association (Stowarzyszenie Gazet Lokalnych), the Chamber of Press Publishers (Izba Wydawców Prasy), the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and journalists and editors of local press issued a letter to the Parliamentary Commission on Culture and Mass Media appealing to ban the local government press (HFPC, 2017); in May 2016 the same group of entities directed their petition to the Ombudsman (HFPC, 2016).
- 6 In my research project I observed doubtful practices of the local government media. One of the investigated local weeklies (Weekly B) was engaged in a battle with a local government weekly (which was sold at a lower price, included advertisements and was biased towards the local mayor). The local mayor did not give any public advertisements to Weekly B and tried to convince some of the local investors to do the same. Weekly B in revenge published very critical articles about the mayor. The battle was finished with the mayor’s resignation. In a different case study – in Town D – the regional radio was owned by the Association of Regional Communes. The communes had 100 per cent of ownership and one of the mayors was a director of the radio (Męćfal, 2014, 2016, 2019)
- 7 ‘Gmina’ (commune) is the principal and smallest unit of the administrative division in Poland, similar to municipality.
- 8 Ustawa z 20.12.1996 o gospodarce komunalnej o gospodarce komunalnej; Ustawa z 5.06.1998 r. o samorządzie powiatowym; Ustawa z 5.06.1998 r. o samorządzie województwa; Ustawa z 2.07.2004 r. o swobodzie działalności gospodarczej; Ustawa z 26.01.1984 r. Prawo prasowe.
- 9 Slander can also be pursued in front of a civil court, where the claims are much limited, e.g., apologies, compensation, costs of the trial (Głowacka, 2012).
- 10 Their English versions are available at <http://ethicnet.uta.fi/country/poland> (accessed 2 September 2018).
- 11 She lost her job only after having decided to take part in the parliamentary elections in 2015.
- 12 For example, common history of journalists and local government officials – student versus teacher, colleague from previous work, family member, neighbour etc.

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# 12

## THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION POLICIES IN LOCAL TELEVISION MODELS

### The cases of Catalonia and Scotland

*Aida Martori Muntsant*

#### **Introduction**

Local media are key elements in public communicative spaces when providing coverage to small areas. Local television has been of vital importance when representing towns or cities, promoting culture and social cohesion. The structure and ownership of these media define the characteristics of the model: in many cases as a result of social and cultural processes, but with a strong impact on political decisions that are taken in relation to this field. The objectives of this research were (1) to demonstrate that communication policies have an important role in the design of the local television model, and (2) to show the characteristics of two different models of local television as a result of these policy decisions: in relation to both the typology and ownership of these media and their operation. For this, we focus on two cases in which the local television models are quite distinct, a result of diverse historical traditions as well as communication policies of regional and state governments: Catalonia and Scotland. A combination of qualitative methods were used, including the analysis of official documentation from the Catalan government, the Catalan Audiovisual Council and Ofcom Scotland (the national broadcasting regulator) regarding the awarding of local television licences in both territories; and interviews with six key actors. In Scotland, these were: Bobby Hain, channel director at STV; Dave Rushton, director of the Institute of Local Television; Alan Stewart, director of business affairs, Ofcom (Office of Communications, the broadcasting regulator). In Catalonia, these were: Xavier Abelló, president of the coordinator of local public television; Gabi Barragan, director of local action at 'La Xarxa'; Salvador Alsius, vice president of the Catalan Audiovisual Council.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The communicative space of local television**

A communicative space is understood as the existence of a territory with a particular historicity, a cultural and linguistic community and the presence of concrete political power and communicative institutions that supply the territory (Gifreu, 2014). The configuration of a communicative



space in Catalonia, as in Scotland, is linked to aspects of identity construction, and in both cases has had a place in stateless nations, which, according to McCrone et al, (1998), is owed to a stronger identification with the nation rather than the state to which it pertains. Guibernau (2002) understands the concept as territorial communities with their own identity and desire for self-governance included within the borders of one or several states with which, generally, the local population does not identify. When Gifreu and Corminas (1991) define communicative space they refer to identity, and argue that the basic mechanisms that constitute it are a native language, territory, media rituals, cultural touchstones and differentiation – which is to say that communicative space is created by opposition to other communicative spaces. In the case of Catalonia and Scotland, identity construction is tied tightly to communicative space and the media that are part of it. However, the two territories have a fundamental difference. In the Catalan case the communicative space is tightly tied to the linguistic element, as the media – both regional and local – have been principal actors in the promotion and normalisation of the Catalan language. In Scotland, the linguistic element has not been pivotal. There, the majority language used on television has been English, with some exceptions in certain programmes or, since BBC Alba began broadcasting in Gaelic in 2008, being created specifically to promote the use of this language.

Within these communicative spaces, apart from the existence of generalist television channels, there is a local television presence, on which this chapter focuses. Local channels foment social integration and bring knowledge to the citizenry about the functioning of the city/region. They guarantee representation of the society, they augment local familiarity, they create a civic memory, they contribute to social cohesion and they enhance a sense of belonging (Costera, 2010). Local service providers are closely tied to their territories and establish production infrastructure in their areas. Their mission is to broadcast programming fundamentally related to what occurs in the immediate vicinity, and to promote to the citizenry mechanisms for participation and access (Martori, 2017). These channels emit programming (a) comprised of, and aimed at disseminating, information to the immediate vicinity, (b) developing a public service function based on the representation of local communities and (c) bringing about the decentralisation of the audiovisual model.

We distinguish three typologies of local television by their ownership: public service providers, private providers and community providers. The first of these depend directly on public administration, generally a city hall or group of city halls, which receive financing from municipal coffers. The second group is formed by channels run by private, for-profit businesses. The third group is the media of the third-sector – i.e., non-profits, generally in the form of associations (Guimerà, 2006), in which the members of the community – sometimes with the support of professionals – produce and broadcast content that conforms to a coordinated and coherent programming, both representing and involving the collectivity to whom they broadcast (Jankowski and Prehn, 2002). Communication policies can promote or marginalise the presence of a typology of local television above others.

### **Local television in Catalonia: a community-created model**

The local television model in Catalonia has been unusual since its beginnings due to the rapid proliferation of municipal broadcasters operating independently in a relatively limited territory, with a determined role in the normalisation of the Catalan language and social cohesion. The 1980s and 1990s saw an explosion of local broadcasters, many of which were amateur, civic initiatives. In 1994, 74 broadcasters were established (Prado and Moragas, 2002) and in 2001, 104 local television broadcasters were recorded in the inventory carried out by Observatori de la Comunicació Local, InCom-UAB. The first local television channels in Catalonia were

low-budget, amateur projects brought to life by volunteers. Generally, they were started by enthusiastic people with the ability to fix technical issues, and which broadcasted when municipal activities took place (Guimerà, 2006). The boom in local audiovisual communication was not met with sufficient support by the Catalan government, which concentrated its efforts on developing and strengthening the generalist channel TV3. The local service providers found themselves in a limbo of non-regulation (while awaiting regulation) by the administration, in such a way that they existed in a legal grey area (Corominas, 2009).

These channels were public, private and third-sector and community media were especially representative during the first chapters of local television in Catalonia. The Law of Audiovisual Communication of Catalonia (Art. 70) (2005) defines ‘community media’ as those media that broadcast “content aimed at responding to social and cultural needs, as well as those of specific communication of the communities and social groups that they give coverage to, based on open criteria, clear and transparent access, by the broadcaster as well the production and management, and assuring maximum participation and pluralism”. Businesses and city governments also created projects and broadcasted in mostly local coverage areas. The situation of local television changed with the leap to digital terrestrial television (DTT), which allowed for greater usage of the radio spectrum and improved signal quality (Catalan Audiovisual Council and Market Telecommunications Commission, 2002). Signal digitalisation came at the behest of a European guideline to move towards DTT across the continent, as an essential step towards the Europe-wide spectrum (Marzal and Murciano, 2007). The change, however, was not only technical. It allowed the regulation of channels that, until that point, had had no legal protection in Spain. The communication policies substantially changed the model, such that digitalisation introduced full regulation of local television and introduced a new system, a significantly different model from the pre-existing era of analogue television (Guimerà and Alborch, 2011).

The National Technical Digital Local Television Plan, approved by the Spanish government in 2004 – and later modified on several occasions – divided Spain into 265 demarcations, understood as territorial units in which local digital television is based, or as a coverage area of a multiplex channel (Corominas, 2009). The design of the demarcation map was conditioned by the territorial distribution of the countries and also by the radio space, that is, by the geographic area in which it is possible to distribute the signal without seriously affecting the neighbouring territories. In Catalonia there were 21 demarcations of very disparate dimensions: as few as 3 and as many as 30 municipalities. In each demarcation a multiplex was reserved – a combined channel in which four simple channels were contained – to be given to local television. One of the channels would be publicly owned and the others privately, although the rule allowed for some exceptions. This new structuring of local television reduced the number of local channels from 128 to 96 (37 publicly owned and 59 private) and left community television marginalised. No spectrum space was reserved for community TV, despite the important role it had achieved in the analogue era. In fact, there were at least ten television stations in the analogue era, largely amateur, which opted not to even petition for a licence, because they understood that the new structure would not allow the furthering of their model and because of the elevated costs of the new transmitting technology (Guimerà, 2006).

The terms of the public tender created by the Catalan government made it clear that the content of the channels had to be local and that they were not to prioritise those projects intended to simultaneously broadcast the same content through different licences. They also favoured channels that previously broadcast in the analogue era. This way channels, both public and private, were to be rooted in original, local content rather than determined by the economic model of the projects. The regulation of DTT also notably affected public service providers because it forced city governments to reach agreements to manage them jointly

through an administrative formula called a 'consortium'. The administrative model after digitalisation was completely new for local public television and not at all simple (Corominas, 2009). The processes for constituting consortiums in many city governments was bureaucratically complex and many consortiums encountered difficulties in raising the investment necessary to start and maintain a channel. They were also run by diverse political forces, some of which were resistant to the project. The situation was aggravated by the economic crisis that began in 2007/2008 and many projects were put on hold. When the analogue switch-down took place there were only 12 public local channels broadcasting by DTT. This was just 12.5 per cent of the total number there had been before the change to DTT and only a third of what could exist. The official unpublished documents consulted at the headquarters of the Catalan government show that the reasons for the demise of many consortiums were financial. The documents also explain that the consortiums that did continue lost members because of the increased expense. Between 2010 and 2015, 18 city halls abandoned local television projects (Guimerà, Monedero and Martori, 2017).

At the time of writing, according to data from the Catalan Audiovisual Council (2018), there are 11 public and 39 private channels broadcasting. To these channels we must add those service providers that broadcast irregularly, with their own distribution, side-stepping the costs of broadcasting via DTT, of which a dozen have been identified. Emphasis must also be given to the numerous online TV channels that broadcast public content. In these two groups there are many community projects that were unable to obtain a licence to broadcast by DTT. The Spanish and Catalan governments' communication policies have outlined the current local television model's design for DTT. Their policy favours the creation of projects with an analogue trajectory, prioritises tradition instead of economic viability, penalises, in the licensing process, private projects that desire to broadcast as a network beyond their local area and marginalises third-sector channels. These must now create private companies in order to participate in the public tender, or at least seek the help of a municipal authority to apply for a licence as a public service provider. There are examples of broadcasters that followed one of these paths (Canal10Empordà was a community project that became a public media platform with the help of the local government of L'Escala) but others decided to continue broadcasting without an official licence (such as ACA Sant Vicenç Televisió) or created online projects (Televisió de Cardedeu).

The local television model in Catalonia is formed mainly by projects that work independently from each other, centred on local content, above all informative content. The channels are dispersed throughout nearly the entirety of Catalonia, meeting the information needs of dense population zones, and also more sparsely populated areas and small towns. There is a private group that uses many local licences to broadcast simultaneously in different localities: El Punt Avui, owned by Hermes Comunicacions. However, this was sanctioned by the Catalan Audiovisual Council for not disseminating local content (Catalan Audiovisual Council, 2016) and broadcasting ended in 2019. La Xarxa is a structure publicly financed by the Diputació de Barcelona. This is a supra-local public body, which aims to support local channels with technical and legal resources, personnel training, promoting joint local productions and facilitating cohesion between channels. However, unlike other TV models it does not own the channels, nor does it operate them as a chain; rather, it respects the independence of each project.

### **Local television in Scotland: a network and commercial model**

There has historically been a lack of local service providers in Scotland, where projects were scarce and short-lived. By the end of the 1990s, six frequencies were made available in Edinburgh, Lanarkshire, Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth and Dundee, but because of difficulties in transmitting

a signal only three channels began broadcasting. Lanarkshire's local television was launched by a local company, and the Institute of Local Television – which had fought for years to launch local channels tied to the community – ran the Edinburgh and Dundee channels, and made a test run in Perth. In 2003 these channels had to shut down because of high maintenance costs (Rushton, personal interview). Although there were calls for the adjudication of local frequencies (Institute of Local Television, 2008), from the day the local analogue channels closed until the awarding of new DTT licences in 2014 there was no local television in Scotland. As such, we must speak about a decade-long drought of local audiovisual communication projects.

The Communications Act (2003) established that local television services had to be aimed at a certain area or locality, to be responsive to the localities' needs and to expand the range and number of television programmes for people living and working in the locality. The Wireless Telegraphy Act of 2006 further established a legal framework for awarding licences and reserved spectrum space for local digital television. The adjudication process for allocating DTT licences to local television came from the government of the United Kingdom and Ofcom was put in charge of the decision process – in contrast to Catalonia, where the licences were awarded directly by the Catalan government. According to Ofcom (2014), bidders had to demonstrate that they could be economically sustainable and provide proof of their foreseeable financing resources. When planning area licences, consideration was taken of the size of the available audience and its ability to support a commercially sustainable model. Although the regulator assumed that in a competitive media market it was unlikely that all local channels would succeed, Ofcom wanted to ensure that service providers had feasible plans to run the channels for 12 years. This focus was far from encouraging to non-profits, which, although less commercially viable, could be run as communal ventures.

STV Group won the two licences presented in the public tender in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 2014. The other applicants were business of different sizes, one of which was created ad-hoc to run several local stations in a network. In the case of Glasgow, there was also a non-profit organisation that wanted to create a community project. Ofcom's criteria for awarding licences, set out in the documents of the public tender consulted for this research, referenced the relationship with the locality, the possibility of offering local content and economic viability. The regulator considered STV Group the company that best met these criteria. The business promised to broadcast a large quantity of local content and to collaborate with Glasgow Caledonian University. STV already had experience and ties to the two cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, having offered specific local content through the regional channel. With the local licences, the company consolidated its presence in the territory and the strategy to further local content, which had begun years earlier with the opening of territorial centres. However, this did not introduce any new actor into the system of local communications.

It was foreseen that new local television services would need financial support to get off the ground (Shott, 2010). Because of this, the government put in place assistance for creating local television projects, which could be renewed during the first three years of broadcast. The contribution of £25 million for constructing the infrastructure of local channels was planned to be taken from the BBC, with access to further fees of up to £5 million during the first three years to be paid by the BBC to acquire content from local television (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2011, 30). However, STV refused public financing for creating local DTT, leaving the economic viability entirely in the hands of the commercial model. This was because STV had no interest in providing content to the BBC, a condition for receiving the subsidy. STV wanted its local channels to retain their independence (Hain, personal interview), and to share local information in the network of which it was a part (Channel 3) – goals that were incompatible with providing content to the BBC. The network wished to prioritise its own content

by taking advantage of the production resources it already had in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and exchange content with partners inside the company's channels to offer their audiences a wider range of options.

The second phase in the awarding of licences ended with four new licences for Aberdeen, Ayr, Dundee and Inverness, in March 2015 (Ofcom, 2015). STV Group was the only company to present proposals for licences in Aberdeen, Ayr and Dundee, and it got all three. The company wanted to use the resources it already had in Aberdeen and Dundee. However, the first establishment was in Ayr, in collaboration with the University of the West of Scotland. STV Group did not request a licence for Inverness, and this contest was abandoned. It did not consider the channel commercially viable, having in mind that the city had a small population and there was an insufficient advertising market. Although the public tender occurred in 2015, it was not until 2017 that the channels were up and running.

In the spring of 2017, STV2 was founded, a channel that fused local digital services from various cities with the regional Scottish-run STV channel, consolidating the company's network ambitions. However, the channel was only on air for a short time because STV announced in the spring of 2018 that it would shut down that summer. The goal was to reorganise and reduce costs, by approximately £1 million, and empower digital and use of the online catch-up service STV player (STV, 2018). The inability of STV2 to gain a foothold in new markets was also a factor. It feared the presence of the newly introduced BBC Scotland would offer competition for its audience. The company also announced that it would drastically reduce staff, and sell five local television licences held by STV2 (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Ayr and Aberdeen) to That's Media, a company managing 14 channels in the wider United Kingdom. Ofcom decided not to object to the sale because no change in licensee would take place, only a change in control of the licences. This situation differs from a transfer of licences, in which previous consent would be required (Preston, 2018). Beside this, some association-linked groups are beginning online channels geared to certain geographic communities and niche groups. The Institute of Local Television has launched various internet TV channels<sup>2</sup> centred on art and culture, financed by art galleries, donations, advertising, organisations and the national agency for artistic development, Creative Scotland. Despite these isolated initiatives, in Scotland an analysis of the licensing process demonstrates that communication policies have favoured economically sustainable projects. The local television model has been set up conforming to commercial logic, based in large cities and acting as a network.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis of the two case studies for local television shows that communication policies have a vital role when configuring a model for the sector. The priorities of the governments are clearly reflected in the license planning and the criteria for awarding them, which determines the number of available channels and which type of television station is set up. In Catalonia, a spontaneous surge in local channels – many amateur – took place in the analogue era, fruit of the existence of an active society collaborating on community projects. The communication policies have tried to achieve and maintain an elevated amount of local service providers, which currently stands close to 50, prioritising historically public and private channels that produce local content while marginalising network-style projects. No radio-spectrum space has been reserved for community service providers, but they continue broadcasting either online or via other non-official ways. They are non-profit projects, in which volunteerism and community ties have a great importance. In Scotland, coming from a society less inclined to engage with local channels, the communication policies have been geared towards favouring economically

sustainable projects, based on commercial logic. The few available licences, in the most populous cities, were given to a private business that had expertise in the audiovisual field in the region where the network operated. The sale of the channels showed that the company did not live up to its own expectations, largely for economic reasons.

The communication policies of the territories concerned have not prioritised community projects. In both cases there are third-sector channels running at the edges of DTT broadcasting: non-profit and somewhat amateur, but fighting to maintain local representation on television. This demonstrates that one element that may help the maintenance and strength of such channels is their bond with their community. While channels must be economically sustainable to continue in operation, the justification for local stations should also rest on their provision of a public service and their role as vehicles for local life and representation. Advertising is often insufficient to sustain them, so besides the receipt of public assistance, consideration needs to be given to the diversification of revenue sources such as the commercialisation of content. The construction of networks within which different local stations produce and share quality content also offers a pillar of sustainability. However, the viability of local television cannot be separated from its goal of representing local communities and inspiring local societies.

## Notes

- 1 The interviews were carried out as part of the author's doctoral thesis, titled *Public Proximity Television in Catalonia: The Relationship with TV3 and the Informative Content Exchange*.
- 2 [www.craftscotland.tv](http://www.craftscotland.tv), [www.artinscotland.tv](http://www.artinscotland.tv), [www.summerhall.tv](http://www.summerhall.tv).

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## PART III

# Local media, publics and politics





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# 13

## LOCAL JOURNALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

### Its publics, its problems, and its potentials

*C.W. Anderson*

#### **Introduction**

Local journalism in the United States has occupied a somewhat paradoxical position in the larger global media ecosystem (Anderson, 2016a). It is often seen as the most fragile and endangered form of news in the United States; nevertheless, it occupies a significantly smaller amount of scholarly attention than the trials, tribulations, and successes of major national and global media outlets such as the *New York Times* (Usher, 2014), the BBC (Belair-Gagnon, 2015), or the *Washington Post*. All too often, concern with local journalism amounts to little more than a hand-waving gesture in which the seriousness of the crisis is acknowledged and then quickly dispensed with in pursuit of more shiny and interesting topics.

This chapter proceeds in four parts. It begins by defining ‘local journalism’ in the US context, and by situating that journalistic form within the universe of global journalistic production. I argue that there are aspects of the US political and economic system that render local news particularly important and particularly problematic. I then review the research on local news in the digital era, making an effort to show the evolution of that research over the past two decades. I argue here, in part, that research on local news has been primarily focused on ‘business models’ of news, and lags behind the larger shift in journalism research toward more normative questions. In the third section, I tie the discussion into larger debates in political science and political theory, including those over the nature of the current US public sphere and arguments about the nature of populism and polarization, and the media’s role in fostering the tendencies. Finally, I outline some paths forward for future research.

#### **Local journalism: what it is and why it matters**

Media scholar Christopher Ali is both the leading theorist of local news in the United States and also, paradoxically, the scholar who has done the most to problematize what it means to call something ‘local journalism’. What, after all, is local news? Is it the news of a particular city or metropolitan environment (Anderson, 2013; Coleman et al., 2016)? Is it the journalism produced in a smaller community – a town or village rather than a city? Is there a meaningful difference between ‘metropolitan’ journalism and ‘local journalism’? What about journalism

that appeals to particular communities that are not confined to a single geographical place? The definitional questions that surround the very subject of this chapter are legion. Ali has tackled these definitional difficulties in a clear and straightforward manner. “The local is not a single, static site,” he argues.

Conceptualizations that reduce the local to a single, static site on a discursive map are inadequate because the local is at once places, communities, markets, relationships, resistances, and fetishes. It is also none of these things, as it is an empty signifier as a result of monopoly capitalism. Building from there, I have argued that before considering the role of the local in media policy, we need a more holistic way to theorize these problematic dynamics.

(Ali, 2017)

In his effort to craft a local regulatory framework appropriate for a digital age of multiple localisms and contested meanings, Ali advances the notion of ‘critical regionalism’ as an appropriate way to understand the practices of local media production. Critical regionalism is not only an open and flexible concept, capable of absorbing the wide variety of meanings of ‘localism’, but it aligns with existing (though latent) definitional tendencies within the media regulation regime itself.

The difficulty with such an open definition of localism, however, is political rather than regulatory. It is a difficulty that returns us to the very importance of localism in the US context – the problem that local journalism is both important and under-theorized. This difficulty relates to the federated nature of American democracy. More than many democratic Western systems, the American political structure is highly localized and regionalized, with a number of democratic and public powers existing outside the sole control of the national government. Federalism in this sense is one of the key characteristics of the US political structure. As explained in the *Federalist 39*:

If we try the Constitution by its last relation to the authority by which amendments are to be made, we find it neither wholly NATIONAL nor wholly FEDERAL. Were it wholly national, the supreme and ultimate authority would reside in the MAJORITY of the people of the Union; and this authority would be competent at all times, like that of a majority of every national society, to alter or abolish its established government. Were it wholly federal, on the other hand, the concurrence of each State in the Union would be essential to every alteration that would be binding on all. The mode provided by the plan of the convention is not founded on either of these principles . . . The proposed Constitution, therefore, is, in strictness, neither a national nor a federal Constitution, but a composition of both. In its foundation it is federal, not national; in the sources from which the ordinary powers of the government are drawn, it is partly federal and partly national; in the operation of these powers, it is national, not federal; in the extent of them, again, it is federal, not national; and, finally, in the authoritative mode of introducing amendments, it is neither wholly federal nor wholly national.

(Madison, 1788)

To the degree that modern US journalism is concerned with observing and checking the powers of political institutions, then, the role played by *local journalism* is of vital importance insofar as a great deal of political power is concentrated at the local level. Note that here I specifically mean ‘local’ insofar as it is defined in geographic terms, insofar as this is the case of the

formal US political structure as well. In effect, no matter how open our definition of what local means, place still matters – and we might even venture to say that it matters *more* than other competing definitions. This also means that the specific vulnerability of local journalism to shifts in the economics and business models of news matters a great deal. It is to the academic conversation about these business models that I now turn.

### **Research on local journalism in the United States**

Elsewhere I have argued (Anderson, 2019) that academic research on digital journalism has progressed through several areas of focus over the past two decades. To summarize, we might say that research has moved from an emphasis on participation and politics, toward a greater emphasis on economic and business model issues, and back toward a new political and normative focus, this time with a greater concern about normative and theoretical issues of democratic governance. There have been four major inflection points: a focus on news ecosystems and the explosion of new actors across the media landscape; a turn toward examining the collapse of the business models by which news organizations funded their reporting; an analysis of the role played by platforms in transformation of journalistic audiences; and a closer look at the relationship between digital media and political populism more broadly speaking. I discuss the first three inflection points in this section, and then turn to the final research area – the relationship between populism and local news – in the next.

The early years of the internet were marked by an excitement that the relatively low costs of digital content production, combined with the ease through which such content could be distributed, would mark a flourishing of creative practices more generally. Scholars like Henry Jenkins (2008) and Yochai Benkler (2006), along with more popular writers like Clay Shirky (2009), combined legal, economic, and socio-cultural strands of scholarship to sketch a twenty-first-century information utopia in which a relatively bottom-up stream of digital content circulated relatively friction-free, could be combined with other cultural products, and would be enabled by a relatively permissive copyright regime. This strand of broader digital scholarship led some early news researchers to focus on ‘news ecosystems’, or networks of journalistic and quasi-journalistic actors, who produced content that ricocheted around digital space and was often produced by new media entrants like bloggers and citizen journalists. While much of this research looked at national or global media ecosystems (e.g., Adamic and Glance, 2005), others turned their attention to the way that local news was itself becoming ecosystemic (Anderson, 2010, 2013; Nielsen, 2015; Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2018; Radcliffe and Ali, 2017). In general, this scholarship converged on the central finding that local media ecosystems remained dominated, in terms of reportorial capacity and audience attention, by large legacy media outlets, usually newspapers, and that blogs and citizen media outlets were simultaneously additive in terms of overall information production, and also economically and organizationally fragile.

The discovery that newspapers (Pew, 2010) remained the central agents of original journalism production in most cities and in local news ecologies helped to focus the next phase of research into local news – what we might call a deep concern with how newspapers, in particular, could sustain themselves financially during the digital transition. Between 2003 and 2015, newsprint advertising revenue in the United States plummeted by more than 50 percent. Newsroom employment, likewise, was down by 30 percent during the same time, dropping to a level not seen since 1978 (Jurkowitz, 2014). While a discussion of the ‘crisis of journalism’ was widespread between 2008 and 2010 (Downie and Schudson, 2009), there was a particular focus on the crisis in *local* journalism. The closure of the *Rocky Mountain News* in 2009, combined

with the breakup of the Knight–Ridder newspaper chain in 2006, helped focus public attention on the fact that local news outlets were uniquely vulnerable to the shift in advertising models wrought by digital technology. Franklin (2006) has analyzed the economics of local journalism, though primarily in the British context. Fico et al. (2013) have looked at the economics of community newspapers in the United States, and Phil Napoli and his various co-authors have done the most to advance our understanding of the ways that local news is at a particular disadvantage in the twenty-first-century local media ecosystem, and how certain communities can become virtual news deserts, bereft of much local news content at all (Napoli et al., 2018). In response to this economic crisis of local news, many philanthropic foundations have pledged money in order to attempt to grow new newsroom business models that can operate outside the capitalist marketplace. While the Knight Foundation has been the leader in this field, other funders, such as the Open Society Institute and the Democracy Fund, are increasingly entering the journalism space. Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist, is only the most recent philanthropist to try to spend down some of his large fortune by supporting news.

Beyond this focus on sustainability and support, the larger scholarly discussion about the business models of digital news has begun to more specifically focus on the relationship between *platforms* and *publishers* (Nielsen and Ganter, 2018). A concern with the relationship between journalism and platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has come to dominate a great deal of the recent academic research on digital news. In 2018, both the Reuters Institute for Journalism at Oxford University and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University released major reports on the platform/publisher relationship. And while both had their differences, they were united in their description of an unequal economic and technological relationship in which Facebook could more or less impose its economic and professional news values, despite its claims that it really had no interest in being a journalistic outlet. As Nielsen and Ganter summarize:

Relationships between publishers and platforms are characterized by a tension between (1) short-term, operational opportunities and (2) long-term strategic worries about becoming too dependent on intermediaries. We argue that these relationships are shaped by news media's fear of missing out, the difficulties of evaluating the risk/reward ratios, and a sense of asymmetry. The implication is that news media that developed into an increasingly independent institution in the 20th century – in part enabled by news media organizations' control over channels of communication – are becoming dependent upon new digital intermediaries that structure the media environment in ways that not only individual citizens but also large, resource-rich, powerful organizations have to adapt to.

*(Nielsen and Ganter, 2018, 1600)*

Despite this shift in attention from media ecosystems (seen as a benevolent and almost ecological space in which a variety of media creatures grow and thrive) to a more capitalist and platform-dominated digital space, there has been little scholarship looking directly at the relationship between digital platforms and local news.

### **Populism, politics, and local journalism**

While economic concerns continue to dominate the discussion of digital news in 2019, additional, more normative concerns have also emerged. How are populist political actors using the affordances of social media and platforms to shift the meanings of, and the participants in,

electoral politics (Anderson and Bødker, 2019)? Are state actors, disguised as ordinary citizen journalists or professional news reporters, hijacking the public discourse for nefarious purposes? These concerns also tie into the renewed focus on digital platforms like Facebook, and demonstrate just how much the debate over the future of journalism has changed over the past ten years. From a somewhat abstract debate about who counts as a journalist online and offline, the surge of so-called “fake news” has injected concerns about national security, cyberspying, enemy propaganda, and the toxic power of trolls into arguments about the boundaries of the journalism profession. One of the ironies about the web of revelations in 2018 about the degree to which foreign actors used Facebook to insert political propaganda into coverage of the US presidential elections is the fact that it re-raises older issues long thought buried. Who is a journalist? Who gets to decide? What happens when the trust in a major political institution is weakened, in part, due to the blurred boundaries between amateurs and professionals, particularly when those amateurs are acting in distinctly anti-democratic ways? There are no easy answers to these questions, but the degree to which older debates in digital journalism studies are being re-litigated is rather remarkable. Remarkable, too, are the ways that formerly utopian journalism scenarios are being stood on their head under the pressure of the populist and right-wing wave sweeping the nations of the liberal West.

To date, most of the research about the relationship between anti-liberal populism, social media, and fake news has taken place at the level of the nation-state – which is not surprising given the degree to which it was a national US election that pushed concerns about digital disinformation into the public consciousness. There has been little scholarship on the way that changing political currents and different forms of news production are affecting *local* journalism. There are, however, some suggestive early articles that have primarily focused on the risk that the growing *local* ownership of the press may lead to what Rasmus Kleis Nielsen has called the “instrumentalization of American news media” (Kleis Nielsen, 2012). By this, Nielsen refers to the possibility that journalism outlets may be increasingly used by powerful political figures, not for economic profit, but rather to advance political goals. Referring to the purchase of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2012 by a group of politically connected owners, Nielsen speculated that:

The situation in Philadelphia suggests that [a] scenario is possible ... where news organizations are kept alive, sustained by new forms of cross-subsidy that gradually pull journalism back towards its origins as, at least in part, an instrument for outside political and business interests ... This is what media and communications scholars call ‘instrumentalization’, where news organizations are owned and operated by groups less concerned with the day-to-day profitability of an independent outlet than with the influence media afford – the ability to advance various political or business interests.

*(Kleis Nielsen, 2012)*

A second relationship between local journalism and politics might arise, not from local politicians attempting to use local media for local political goals, but from what Dan Kennedy and others have called the ‘mogulization’ of media ownership. In his 2018 book *The Return of the Moguls: How Jeff Bezos and John Henry Are Remaking Newspapers for the Twenty-First Century*, Kennedy (2018) contends that the trend of powerful and wealthy individuals buying newspapers is not inherently a bad thing, as politically inclined individuals may be more willing to experiment with technological innovations than publicly held media companies would be. On the other side of the argument, Des Freedman (2015) has pointed to the dangers of this mogulization. In the media industry,

there has been a significant shift in corporate structure as power is increasingly being vested in individual proprietors as opposed to CEOs or board members as in most public companies. This is particularly noticeable in the newspaper industry where there has been, in the last few years, a spate of takeovers by wealthy individuals ... An emphasis on the ‘interlocking’ nature of elites – especially the multiple points of contact between state and market – reminds us that, whatever divisions may exist, there is an overriding common purpose and shared vision amongst those that populate the ‘higher circles’: to celebrate wealth creation and to treat all forms of regulation as barriers towards innovation and dynamism.

(Freedman, 2015, 2)

Rather than focus on the potential for long-term investment and technological innovation (as Kennedy does), Freedman points to the possibility that individual media ownership simply represents a further consolidation of elite power. We can see here the emergence of two distinct theoretical and political positions, each of which might serve as a useful framework for analyzing local media ownership in general. On the one hand, developments in local journalism might be analyzed through a frame of innovation, business models, and the important role of the so-called “fourth estate” for checking political power. On the other hand, a perspective more indebted to a political economy analysis would argue that discussions of innovation and so on are simply a mask for the continued consolidation of the ruling class, a class that uses the media to advance its class interests. In general, research into local journalism has not usually adopted such an explicit political and theoretical framing, but it might possibly be well served by doing so. At the very least, it might help clarify the stakes in what can sometimes be a rather presentist account of local journalism developments, one lacking a robust intellectual structure that allows it to be more easily integrated with other research in media sociology (Boczkowski and Anderson, 2017a).

Be that as it may, it seems clear that there has been little if any scholarship on the relationship between local journalism and political populism, even though the populist temperament has become an increasing focus of research attention since 2016. Given the importance of local journalism in the American federalist system of government, this is a possible ripe area for future research. I want to discuss this, and other possible intellectual paths forward, in the next and final section.

### **Conclusion: paths forward**

In their essay contained the collection *Remaking the News: Essays on the Future of Journalism Scholarship in the Digital Age*, Boczkowski and Anderson (2017b) write that journalism scholarship has primarily been an adopter of larger ideas and theoretical frameworks from other disciplines, and has tended not to “give much back” to other fields. It has been a theoretical importer, in other words, rather than an exporter. In this conclusion, I lay out three final questions about the future of local news and areas for scholarly exploration, all the while thinking about how journalism studies might give back to the larger intellectual community of which it is a part.

Much work remains to do be done when it comes to gaining a deeper understanding of the world of local journalism. This includes the work of scholarship, but also the work of journalists, editors, activists, and politicians themselves. In the end, the fate of local news will not be decided by academics. It will be shaped by the people who make it, and those who interact with these makers. Given this, I want to discuss, very briefly, some final normative questions that we might want to consider when we research local news. The first is the question of the role the state

ought to play in stabilizing and even funding the local institutional press. The economic crisis in news is far from over, and support for a governmental provision of press subsidy may actually be rising in the US, but the conversation continues.

A second normative question relates to the issue of what kind of participation in local digital journalism is good participation, if any. It has been remarkable to what degree the larger intellectual discourse about citizen-media or participatory journalism has shifted from deep utopianism to profound dystopianism (Anderson and Revers, 2018). The digital ecosystem *does* appear to have shifted in a permanently participatory, open direction, even if the larger networked structures of the internet also enable digital centralization. It is likely that an intellectual middle ground will be found between pessimism and optimism, but a lot of hard thinking must be done about what behaviors are valuable with regard to participatory media – and why.

Finally, there is much work to be done on understanding the relationship between digital news, emotion and reason in politics, the aesthetics of information, and the way that publics are assembled in the twenty-first century. In the end, journalism only matters insofar as it facilitates a group of strangers coming together in some fashion in order to make collective decisions about their common life. What kind of public does today's journalism assemble? How do the varieties of digital information, their various shapes and forms, make politics possible?

Local journalism in the US has always existed in a state of paradox – it is simultaneously important and undervalued, incredibly political but politically opaque and often obscure. Most of the questions that concern media scholars are questions of national and (increasingly) global importance. But if “all politics is local”, as the saying goes, then perhaps the critique and analysis of local journalism deserves more attention. It is a form of news production that deserves increasing scholarly consideration.

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# 14

## REMEDIATING THE LOCAL THROUGH LOCALISED NEWS MAKING

India's booming multilingual press as agent in  
political and social change

*Ursula Rao*

### **Introduction**

The year 1991 is a watershed moment in the history of Indian news making, especially local news making. Wholeheartedly embracing a liberal market model, India introduced several economic reforms, thereby stimulating swift growth and rapid globalisation. The subsequent media revolution is marked by the growth and multiplication of media outlets (Chadha, 2017). Unlike developments in Europe and the US, the radical diversification and speedy expansion of digital media have not undermined the newspaper business. On the contrary, the commercialisation of the media has benefitted the press. Today India has 94,067 different newspapers (Chadha, 2017) and sales are up. From 2000 to 2008 the total number of newspaper copies sold has almost doubled from 126.96 to 207.1 million (Neyazi, 2011, 75). Several factors have contributed to this internationally atypical consolidation of the print market, foremost among them the growth in literacy and buying power, new marketing strategies and the decentralization of production leading to prompt delivery of newspapers also in semi-urban and rural areas (Jeffrey, 2000; Neyazi, 2010). Today, India's localities are served by both local newspapers and national newspapers with pages editionised for local areas. In this chapter, I discuss both types of newspapers together, because they both consolidate the market for local news. In a competitive media market, newspapers owe their success to sustained investment in local news – still unquestionably the best, most comprehensive source of information about proximate social worlds.

The vernacular press sets the trends towards localisation.<sup>1</sup> By 'vernacular press' I refer to publications in a range of Indian languages, such as Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Mahrathi, Malayalam and others. These newspapers reach millions of readers not familiar with English. They are the shooting stars of the commercialised news market. Their raging success has prompted Robin Jeffrey (2000) to speak about a *Newspaper Revolution* that dates back to 1979,<sup>2</sup> when the circulation of vernacular newspapers overtook that of the English-language press. Thirty years later, the National Readership Survey (NRS) attests that no

English-language newspaper made it into the top ten in terms of readership (the *Times of India* came in at number 11) (Neyazi, 2010). Some publications in Hindi, the most widely read vernacular, have spread right across northern India and are also purchased in some southern states and thus can hardly be called 'local media'. Yet, regardless whether papers reach a few thousand or few million readers, they all share a fundamental commitment to local news making, whereby newspapers with high circulation figures produce several additions and sub-additions of their product for different states and districts (Chadha, 2017). Under a unified label, readers receive customised news for their locality. Vernacular newspapers increasingly also influence the approach taken by the English-language press. Thus, all newspapers, whether they are technically local newspapers or not, contribute towards creating and nurturing a market for local news.

This chapter explores the role commercialisation plays in the localisation of news. Customised news making is an important reason for the financial success of newspapers, while expansive reporting about specific local and regional events contributes to the transformation of India's political realm and public sphere. Thus, the press has contributed to the success of new political currents – such as Hindu nationalism and Dalit empowerment – and assisted the repackaging of urban culture, the spread of consumerism and the development of new values and role models. As a medium operating close to the people, it acts as catalyst of transformation by mediating new socialities, setting trends and creating novel versions of the local. This chapter traces the recursive process of re-creating the local through a process of remediation.

### **Mediated grassroots politics and the transformation of India's party landscape**

Two observations to begin: first, newspapers, in conjunction with other media, have had a great impact on the political sphere in India; and second, regardless of their language, position or reach, all newspapers in India allocate substantial space to local reporting, with the vernacular press driving the process of localisation. Taken together these two observations provoke questions about the relationship between news making and politics that are addressed in a recent series of fine-grained ethnographies (Neyazi, 2010, 2011; Ninan, 2007; Rajagopal, 2001; Rao, 2010a; Stahlberg, 2002; Udupa, 2015). Newspapers and local print organs powerfully contribute to social transformation by popularising regional parties and social movements, influencing political and administrative decisions, providing a platform for upcoming leaders and disseminating ideas and shaping ideologies. Scholars have drawn attention to a circular development according to which rising political awareness assists media growth, which in turn opens up a space for fostering new political movements (Jeffrey, 2000; Neyazi, 2011; Peterson, 2014).

Newspapers in India are political actors in their own right. They are an indispensable part of a democratic culture that requires the broadcasting of ideas, ambitions and developments as a precondition for political debate. Recognising politicians' perennial need for publicity, journalists nurture relations in the political field and spend long, dull days in routine meetings with politicians that generate little information, which they must then turn into exciting articles to fill news pages. On the upside, journalists gain a sense of intimate sharing, access hidden knowledge, are elevated to membership in an elite class and, importantly, influence the terms of political debate. Politics is negotiated in a shared arena between politicians and reporters (Rao, 2010a). What happens at the upper end of the political hierarchy reappears in a different guise at the bottom of society; local news provides the medium for public communication about a wide range of issues, and it influences not only day-to-day decision making but the very texture of society. Citizens take on the role of reporters as much as journalists contribute to

politics. Newspapers are at the centre of multiple acts of social communication, blurring the line between the producers and receivers of information.

The leaking of news into the capillaries of everyday society gains momentum today, when customised content has proved to provide a competitive advantage. To increase circulation, English-language newspapers cultivate urban readers and young people, while vernacular newspapers offer local readers in rural and suburban India information tailor made to their specific needs and interests – information that is not readily availed from any other sources. Thus, counterintuitively, the digital revolution boosted the printing press. Computer networks are the backbone of a new localised production and distribution strategy. During the day, editorial teams in centrally located newsrooms collect news from all corners of the state, sorting them according to region, and producing different newspaper templates for a set of defined localities. In the evening, the various templates are sent out digitally to decentralised printing units, which produce and distribute newspapers locally so that readers everywhere receive customised news promptly. In order to generate enough content for the prolific local pages, vernacular newspapers have pioneered what I have called the ‘open-door policy’ (Rao, 2010a, 2010b).

Media houses cultivate a multiplicity of information channels, which include a large team of local reporters, a wide net of freelancers and an open invitation to citizens to write press releases. An extraordinarily elaborate beat system keeps journalists in touch with representatives of the local state and administration, important leaders, businesspeople, heads of religious organisations and innumerable institutions of civil society. Stringers and citizen reporters inform about things like a fire in a neighbourhood, the blockage of a water pipeline, protests over the felling of a tree, the theft of a temple image, a fight between known goons or the impact of bad weather on local harvest prospects. In a business with gruelling timelines, editorial teams have little time to discriminate and often use local pages to accommodate all the incoming information, as long as it is clear, uncontroversial and does not contradict the editorial line. The open-door policy turns the press into a channel for politics, including micro-politics. Citizens amplify their demands by writing press releases or organising protests specifically to draw the attention of reporters. People with leadership ambitions regularly invite journalists to print their comments on public events, and give information about their supporters and the concerns of their constituencies. Newspapers add weight to their voices. The press has an authorising effect; associated with education and modernity, newspapers are considered to print socially relevant information. Thus, they not only make known what is happening but also boost political demands, galvanise decision makers, and track leaders’ careers.

Using the case of the rise of the Hindu Right, Arjun Rajagopal (2001) showed how the expanding news media contributed to changing the political landscape from the 1990s onwards. He develops the notion of a ‘split public’. While English-language newspapers support a public in a Habermasian (1992) sense as an arena for a rational discourse of citizens, Hindi journalists engage with and take seriously a much wider range of voices and opinions, beyond an idealised ‘rational’, thus providing space for public alternatives or alternative publics to emerge. The campaign for the Hinduisation of society is a case in point. Hindu nationalists slowly gained prominence in the public sphere in the 1990s. Their ascent to power has been supported by propaganda in an emerging multi-media environment,<sup>3</sup> and extensive local reporting about their numerous supporters, who lecture against the Westernisation of society, spread anti-Muslim propaganda, burn edifices of hated politics, attack leftist artists or threaten self-immolation. For some these are narrow-minded radicals who seek to destroy the fundamentals of a multi-religious and open society; for others they represent an emancipation of Hindus and the victory of a specific Indian way of thinking and living. Familiar with the symbols of the movement and often sympathetic towards it, Hindi journalists’ reporting made intelligible and brought close to the

people the demands for change. Studies about regional parties and caste politics have reached similar conclusions. When the National Congress began losing its prime position 30 years after independence, India experienced the rise not just of Hindu nationalism but also of multiple regional parties that sought to empower underprivileged groups, such as poor villagers, Muslims and Dalits (low, formerly untouchable castes; see, for example, Jaffrelot, 2003; Neyazi, 2011, 78).

Contradictory judgements prevail about the political role of India's press. While some celebrate its importance for empowering local actors and subaltern classes, other bemoan the fragmentation of the public and media's role in promoting xenophobia and narrow chauvinistic politics (see, for example, Ninan, 2007; Chadha, 2017). This bifurcation can be explained with regard to the position taken by liberal academics vis-à-vis two significant political movements of post-emergency India: the rise of Hindu nationalism and the Dalit Movement. Many scholars testify to how media innovation underscores the Hindutva Movement, and promotes a narrow mainstream Hinduism, violent nationalism and Islamophobia. By contrast, the rise of Dalit politics is often seen as advancing justice by giving voice to the disempowered. Serving as conduits for demands of the marginalised, the oppressed and the poor, local newspapers are here seen as deepening democracy.

In summary, the recursive process of shaping politics through reporting makes newspapers particularly vulnerable to accusations of bias, lack of professionalism or even inciting violence. Moreover, the interests driving their reporting are not always transparent. As insiders to politics that operate close to the grassroots, newspapers are an invaluable source of knowledge. Citizens read them carefully to know who has influence, what is current, how to get things done and which roadblocks exist. By highlighting scandals, newspapers may fuel popular outrage while also educating readers about how things are done informally (see, for example, Gupta, 1995). Detailed reports about power negotiations make politics at all levels of society transparent and, importantly, make newspapers political actors. In a market society, commercial interests shape the outlook of newspapers. Localising political news and reporting in favour of particular political trends helps to increase circulation. Readers are sold to advertisers, who have their own interests, and their growing influence is changing news genres, diverting attention away from political questions by addressing the consumer citizen.

### **The new local of the newspaper supplement**

Thussu (2007a, 2007b) succinctly sums up the consequences of commercialisation for news making in India. In the new millennium, large corporations as main financiers of news organs push editorial teams to reflect market perspectives and bolster their commercial interests. Whether on television, on the internet or in print, reporting now celebrates the free market, promotes consumer goods, reports from the metropolis and accords high news value to popular topics such as celebrity and sport news (Thussu, 2007a; Rajan, 2007). In addition, with aggressive marketing and feel-good journalism, newspapers target what appears like an "almost infinite audience" of young people (Stahlberg, 2014). The new approach to news manifested most clearly in newspaper supplements such as metro additions.

In English national dailies, newspaper supplements focus on feel-good stories, advertorials and, importantly, city news. These supplants are the English press' response to the trend of localisation set by the vernacular press. They sell the local to affluent readers by reporting on entertainment opportunities and report on local restaurants, movies and consumer goods. They also discuss security questions and urban mobility, and feature the opinion of consumers. According to the senior reporter of the Chennai metro section of *The Hindu*, Shonali Muthalaly, this creates a close relation between city supplement and locality.

[A] newspaper's Metro section ... monitors the pulse of the city, telling you where to go, what to do, whom to see and how to get there. Established newspapers ... are always the best way to get to know a city, whether you live in it or are visiting for a couple of days. For not only do the papers have teams of seasoned reporters, who understand the cities and know all its key people, but the citizens also identify with the papers, so every newsmaker and anybody organizing anything of importance – whether it is a huge AIDS benefit concert or a brownie-baking competition, will make their way to the paper's office for publicity.

*(Muthalaly, 2007, 240)*

The supplements target a subsection of urban citizens; in a fractured society no newspaper addresses the whole population, and the English-language press shows a strong bias towards affluent denizens with disposable income – the main addressee of well-paying advertisers.

Seeing the success of the city supplement format, the vernacular press quickly sought to adapt it to its own readership. For example, in Lucknow, the market leader *Dainik Jagaran* adapted infotainment and celebrity news to make it palpable for a more conservative readership. Introduced in the mid-2000s, the pullout *City My City (Sahar Apna Sahar)* carefully avoids the image of Westernisation associated with publications like the *Lucknow Times*, instead promoting local heritage and tourist destinations, and traditional cultural events such as sitar concerts or folkloristic dance festivals. Bollywood, too, is a topic. With *Jagaran City*, a new pullout started in 2005, experiments have become bolder.

*Jagaran City* tries to cover the elite people who speak Hindi with a lot of English. The approach is different from *Sahar Apna Sahar*. Here the emphasis is on lifestyle and fashion presented in a mixed language as you can make out by the use of the word 'city' [in the title]. *Jagaran City* is a sort of 'page three' type coverage of culture, to counter the *Times of India* pullout *Lucknow Times*.

*(Interview with journalist from Dainik Jagaran, Lucknow, 15 January 2005)*

In these supplements, invitations to religious festivals compete with advertisements for sales events organised by shopping malls or car vendors. Local shops promote consumer goods as necessary assets of global Indians, and global pop culture is repackaged for local tastes. These are carefully measured experiments in taboo-breaking. Neyazi reports about an image of Celina Jaitley as finalist of Miss Universe in *Dainik Bhaskar* in 2001. It caused outrage, and when a flood of readers condemned the image as indecent and offensive, the editor apologised. However, rather than abandoning spicy content, the newspaper placed sexy images in the inside pages, where they are less visible (Neyazi, 2010). What worked for the metropolis and state capitals was eventually also adopted for the countryside. In a pullout called *Upcountry City Bhaskar*, *Dainik Bhaskar* provides entertainment and consumer news for rural areas, thus expanding the market for advertisement by repositioning rural people as consumers.

Neyazi (2010) calls the adaptation of the universal genres of infotainment and infomercial to specific Indian tastes an instance of vernacular modernity. In a competitive media market, the effort to please corporations and consumer citizens produces a dazzling new variety of news, which impact the way the local is filtered, seen and thus constructed. The supplements create a new local that is very distinct from that of the main pages of newspapers: it is not a hotbed of political contestation, a site of crime and infrastructural breakdown or the setting for taken-for-granted traditional events and celebrations. In the metro supplement, tradition is reflexively appropriated, staged from a distance, and can then be turned into a marker of

identity (Giddens, 1990). The new local is presented as having a unique culture that is open for leisure and pleasurable consumption. *Dhabhas* (food stalls) become rusty places of authentic cuisine and crowded markets exotic locations oozing urban buzz. Popular restaurants, picnic spots, tourist sites, parks or heritage walks signify a specific local identity. There is a new brand of heroes, such as start-ups, local youths successful in talent shows and beauty pageants or women who have succeeded in a male-dominated society. Readers have grown up with tips on how to keep fit, apply make-up and dress smartly. They know which gym to use and where to get the best education. Here emerges clearly what Udupa (2012) poignantly calls the “mediated urban”.

Rather than constituting the opposite of the global – often imagined as an authentic place and the home of an organic community – the local comes into being through mediated communication. When national English-language newspapers pioneered supplements they began constructing a local that would fit their economic interests. The “global local” is distinct from the “cultural local” (Udupa, 2012). It is the local seen through the prism of consumer modernity and emancipation, with the stated purpose of capturing the imagination of that section of the population that can be sold at a high price to advertisers. The targeted readers live in posh neighbourhoods and have disposable incomes and a taste for global consumer goods. They are presented a local that is on par with any city in the West. It is emancipated and efficient, has first-class institutions and strives towards constant improvement of infrastructure and cityscape. It is inhabited by educated, successful professionals that have left behind the constraining shackles of old-fashioned thinking (Udupa, 2012). The supplements of the vernacular provide a softer version of a similar range of content and thus create a startling contrast between two renderings of the local in the supplement and the main news pages.

These different experiences of living in India regularly clash when local happenings escalate into major media events. The Pink Chaddi Campaign is a case in point. On 27 January 2009 a story broke about a local activist of the right-wing Hindu organisation Rama Sene (Sri Ram’s Army) who attacked women who had been out clubbing, brutally dragged them to the ground and beat them up. He had insisted on being recorded and the media coverage went viral, splitting the community into supporters, who defended traditional values and justified the act as a form of necessary social policing, and stern opponents of this assault on women’s rights and freedom. The event came to Udupa’s attention (2012) because the *Times of India* comes out clearly in defence of women’s rights by extensively covering the Pink Chaddi Campaign – in which women’s rights activists called upon women to send pink underpants (*chaddi*) to the attacker on Valentine’s Day to embarrass him and express their disgust and dissent. Journalists from the vernacular press found this frustrating. They had no sympathy for the attackers but they also opposed Westernisation and drinking culture, and they found the approach of the *Times of India* biased towards a small segment of rich Indians who have lost their link to traditional culture. At this point it became clear that for Kanada journalists the local was not about pubs, urban nightlife and outdoor culture, which they saw as destroying the fabric of a community rooted in a territory and invested in tradition (Udupa, 2012, 2015).

When depicting the rift in understandings of the local between English-language and vernacular journalists, Udupa echoes Rajagopal’s (2009) notion of the split public. The language barrier marks a split; however, it is one which cannot be accounted for in the terms suggested by Rajagopal between objective and engaged journalism. To the contrary, in the Pink Chaddi Campaign the *Times of India* took sides and for this reason was castigated by Kanada journalists as propagating drinking, gambling and loose morals. The split is brought about by a more complex set of values and orientations as part of the distinct habitus of globalised English-speaking affluent citizens and a locally rooted middle-class caring for a traditional India. English-language



and vernacular newspapers tailor make their news content to these different audiences and, importantly, source their reporters from these distinct social groups. Where newspapers compete for a local market, they thus create distinct rendering of the local that is indicative for a conflict between values negotiated in the public sphere of globalising India.

## **Conclusion**

Newspapers have proved to be particularly resilient in India and the market for printed products continues to grow, benefiting in particular the vernacular press. Two processes underlie this success: the making of close alliances with powerful financiers from the corporate world and the discovery of local reporting as a unique selling point of newspapers. If localisation has been driven by the vernacular press, commercialisation has taken off first in the English press. Yet both processes are relevant for the sustained success of a broad spectrum of national, regional and local newspapers. Associated with the up-market segment of society, the English-language press has profited most from the growing advertisement revenue. Hence, they form the spear-head of a new aggressive movement to promote consumerist messages and the development of 'feel-good' journalism. As a result, they create a particular local that is urban, cool and global. In the glossy supplements the local appears as a world full of opportunities awaiting consumer citizens and inhabited by role models, unique characters and exemplary professionals. The perspective is copied and adapted by the vernacular press to suit the tastes of their local audiences. The supplements of regional-language newspapers bridge the divide of a split public and create economic opportunities by developing new potential target audiences for advertisements. Their readers can now be reached more effectively by local businesses and big corporations that seek to move beyond the metropolis.

Commercialisation has changed but not diminished the political role of news media in India. Their recognised influence in the political sphere makes them vulnerable to deals. Journalists maintain close ties to the political field and exchange favourable articles about leaders for access to decision makers (Rao, 2010c), a practice taken to new levels in the election campaign of Narendra Modi. Politicians and editorial teams are involved in scandals around paid news (Press Council of India, 2010), and corporate players strengthen their hold on the line of news making through strategic partnerships that include the "transfer of shares in return for advertisement" (Chadha, 2017, 142). Here the focus rested on the relevance of an expansive realm of local news making for Indian democracy. The vernacular press occupies a position close to the people and thus opens up the newspaper to a multitude of players. Local pages are conduits for ideological debates. Leaders seek recognition; citizens' struggles for infrastructural improvement and marginalised populations demand respect and recognition. Customised local editions and proliferating numbers of local editions cater to readers who sometimes subscribe to several newspapers to stay on top of current developments in politics and the economy, and who use newspapers as manuals for navigating relations in governmental offices, civil society and the market (Gupta, 1995; Peterson, 2010). Interwoven into society, newspapers could foster social transformation and significantly contribute to shaping the post-emergency political landscape in India, by boosting Hindu nationalist forces, regional parties and the Dalit Movement. Today newspapers are an integral part of a multi-media landscape that tends towards convergence. The Narendra Modi election campaign in 2014 has shown that politics is negotiated across a range of platforms in a networked multi-media environment (Chakravarty and Roy, 2015; Dwivedi and Kapoor, 2015). Accordingly, cross-media ownership is becoming the norm in India, with big media houses owning television and radio channels along with newspapers and online outlets. News outlets are also increasingly owned by non-media corporations and political



actors (Chadha, 2017). These changes will impact not only the channels and content of local news, but also the meaning of the local in a media-saturated world.

## Notes

- 1 The term vernacular has been criticised by some as potentially signifying lower status. Yet, it remains the most popular term for indicating non-English newspapers. Sahana Udupa (2012, 826) uses the alternative Hindi term *Bhasha* to connote the local or regional because it has a more complex set of associations that include a sense of rootedness, cultural richness and authenticity.
- 2 The publication business was implicated heavily between 1975 and 1977 when Indira Gandhi imposed censorship that lasted for 15 months.
- 3 Religious fundamentalism gained ground when the Hindu Right mobilised against Muslims in the Ramjanambhumi Movement that sought to replace the old-age Babri mosque a temple in honour of the Hindu god Ram at his mystical birthplace. Media are central to this process because video roadshows and the broadcasting of religious soap operas popularised the vision for a Hindu Raj (Brosius, 2005; Mitra, 1994; Rao, 2011). Vernacular newspapers radicalised communities and contributed to tensions and riots between Hindus and Muslims through sensational reporting and spreading of rumours (Hasan, 1998; Nandy et al., 1995).

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# DE-PROFESSIONALIZATION AND FRAGMENTATION

## Challenges for local journalism in Sweden

*Gunnar Nygren*

### **Introduction**

*Norrköpings Tidningar* is the oldest daily newspaper in Sweden still in print. The first issue was published in 1758 in the growing trading town of Norrköping on the coast south of Stockholm. This was a few years before one of the oldest Press Freedom Acts in Europe was passed by the Swedish parliament, abolishing censorship and establishing a constitutional guarantee for access to public documents. In this time of liberal progress, the new local newspapers developed into a tool in trade and served as a forum for information and debate among the local middle class. More than 250 years later, *Norrköpings Tidningar* is part of the second-largest newspaper chain in Sweden, NTM (Norrköpings Tidningar Media AB) (Ohlson, 2018). This chain has the monopoly in daily newspapers in the county of Östergötland where Norrköping is situated (five papers), and it owns all newspapers in three other counties (nine papers). NTM has also expanded into all publishing channels, primarily the online platform (Nygren and Zuiderveld, 2011). It has centralized editing, IT development, TV production, and 24/7 coverage, has closed most local offices, and recently introduced robots into the production of local sports, real estate, and other routinized areas. Newspapers are still printed, but content in all channels is becoming less local every year.

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the structural conditions for local journalism in Sweden and how they influence journalistic practices in local communities. The structural conditions concern the digital transformation of local media systems with the development of new forms of hyperlocal media and the role of journalism in the age of social media. They also concern relationships between the political system and journalism, expressed in the local setting by press subsidies and regional public service broadcasting. The key question is: what is the role of local professional journalism in the fragmented local media landscape? This chapter discusses how changes in structural conditions influence journalistic practices on different levels:

- digital transformation of the local media landscape
- relationships between local journalism and local politics
- local audiences and the local network society.

## **A newspaper country**

Sweden was for many years one of the top five countries in the world for the number of people reading newspapers: in 1999 total daily circulation was 536 copies per 1,000 inhabitants, just behind Norway and Japan (Weibull 2000). This was mainly due to the local press, a wide net of local newspapers. The role of national newspapers was marginal, and only two tabloids were considered to have truly national coverage. The power in the press was local, as was ownership and control (Gustafsson, 1996). This strong position for the printed newspaper is now history, but regional and local media houses still produce most of the local news for all platforms (Nygren and Schærff Engelbrecht, 2018).

This local media landscape developed with the large popular movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the Free Church, temperance societies and the labor movement. Newspapers became a part of the growing democracy; they were connected to political parties through ownership or other loyalties, and in the mid-twentieth century the most common profession among the members of parliament was newspaper editor. Sweden had a party press system where readers chose their local newspaper according to their political beliefs, and journalists were supposed to share the political views of the newspaper (Hadenius, 1990). This system worked until the 1950s and 1960s, during which time there was a sharp decline in the number of newspapers able to attract enough advertisers. This mostly affected social democratic newspapers, often the second-largest in town. This raised concerns about decreasing diversity in the local media landscape if there would only be one newspaper left. To maintain diversity of political views, a system of state press subsidies was introduced in 1971 to sustain newspapers with weak ad revenue. However, for the industry as a whole state support was marginal, corresponding to at most 5–6 percent of turnover.

The role of subsidies has since diminished. In 2017, only 12 daily newspapers and 37 weeklies (of 138 titles) received subsidies, and these amounted to only 3 percent of total industry turnover (Ohlsson, 2018). Today, all the second-largest newspapers (except one) are owned by large chains. Diversity has reduced in other ways, for example, centralized production and a large share of the content being reprinted in different titles. The purpose of state subsidies is to preserve diversity in the media landscape (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The media are viewed as a part of the democratic system, so the political system takes responsibility for this. In turn, the media is supposed to take social responsibility. In state press inquiries since the 1970s, the role of the media has been defined as providing citizens with information about society, scrutinizing political power, and offering space for public debate (Weibull et al., 2018). Press subsidies to weak newspapers have been one tool to achieve diversity while maintaining a free press. The other tool has been public service broadcasting financed by a special tax since 2019. In 1977, public service radio launched 25 regional channels, and since the 1970s public service TV (SVT) has built a network of about 30 regional and local newsrooms with local news broadcast and online. Public service has become important for diversity as the concentration among newspapers created monopolies, but public service only produces a minor share of local and regional news. A study of 17 local communities in 2018 shows that local paid newspapers produce about 70 percent of all local news, and public service and free newspapers/online news sites 15 percent each (Nygren and Schjærff Engelbrecht, 2018).

## **Digital transformation and local media landscape**

As in the West in general, newspapers in Sweden have been in decline for 20 years. About 40 percent of circulation has been lost since the peak in 1989. Advertising revenue has decreased

by almost 50 percent, and a large share of this has moved to Google and Facebook, which have increased advertising revenues five-fold since 2011 (Ohlsson, 2017). Newspapers in the three metropolitan areas have experienced the largest decrease, with local and regional newspapers managing better. The market is still in a general decline, even if the development is uneven and some regional newspapers still make good profits (SOU, 2016, 80).

Despite this, only three local newspapers have closed in Sweden in the past few years (all of which were the second-largest in their markets). Instead, ownership has become concentrated. More than one in every two newspapers have changed owners since 2000, and the eight largest groups have increased their circulation share from 71 to 89 percent (Ohlsson, 2016). These groups now control 76 of Sweden's 93 daily newspapers. The state committee on media policy in 2016 concluded that the most important structural change in the newspaper market was the transfer of power from local media companies to large media conglomerates. Conflict has emerged between the central pressure for more rational and coordinated production and the demand for the newspapers to be locally anchored (Kulturdepartementet, 2016). Centralized production makes it possible to keep many titles, even if a large part of their content is identical (Nygren and Nord, 2017). Even though newspapers did not close, nearly every second local newspaper office has shut since 2004. Content production has been centralized, and local newspapers are increasingly produced and printed in only a few places. Large regional newspapers have reduced staff by between 35 and 40 percent since 2001, and in local markets the reduction has been between 55 and 65 percent. Remaining journalists now have to produce more content to cover both the paper and online editions (Nygren et al., 2017).

In regional radio and TV, the situation is more complex. The only commercial channel broadcasting news (TV4) closed all its 21 regional newsrooms in 2014, cutting 140 TV journalists' jobs, arguing that regional news was not profitable. The situation in public service is more stable – the number of journalists has increased slightly, and SVT has opened new local newsrooms in expanding metropolitan areas (Nygren and Nord, 2017). Even if public service is almost the same size as it was before, the relationship between public service and commercial newspapers has changed due to the heavy downsizing in print. Newspapers have become more regional, and as local coverage in newspapers has shrunk public service has become relatively stronger. However, public service is still more regional than local.

Journalistic practices in legacy media have changed in many ways. Local journalists now spend more time in the newsroom and less in the field. They have to be multiskilled to handle all steps of production, and they must be able to produce for different platforms (Witschge and Nygren, 2009). Local reporters have become more dependent on easily accessible sources like the police and municipal officials. One example is the local newspaper *Länstidningen* in the industry town of Södertälje. The staff in 2017 was half that of 20 years earlier, but produced the same amount of news for the online edition as was produced for the printed paper 20 years ago. The content had changed, though. Now, there was twice as much reporting of crime and accidents (42 percent) and much less related to local culture, business and politics. Much of the time in the newsroom was spent producing streamed TV programming, for example, special editions in different languages for multicultural audiences (Heppling and Said, 2017). Other research shows that local coverage performed from a distance changes the content; there is less local material and more official sources. Pages are filled with syndicated content produced elsewhere (Hellekant and Karlsson, 2017).

There is another development occurring simultaneously outside legacy media; a new kind of hyperlocal media is emerging close to the audience. A recent survey found 300 local free newspapers and about 100 independent local online news sites in addition to about 50 paid local weeklies and community radio (Nygren et al., 2017). These hyperlocals are often started

because of discontent with the old local media – too little coverage and too negative coverage are common explanations. Hyperlocals often strongly identify with the local community, and often state their purpose to be to promote the local community. Production is by a mix of professional journalists and enthusiastic amateurs, and sustainability is low (Leckner et al., 2017). Are these hyperlocals filling the gap left from closing local newsrooms and downsizing legacy media? To some extent, in areas with expanding populations like the suburbs of large cities and towns, the answer is yes. In general, though, the pattern is the opposite; there are many hyperlocals in areas where legacy media is still present. Sparsely populated parts of the country tend to have neither traditional newspapers nor new hyperlocals (Nygren et al., 2017).

The political system reacted to this by enhancing support for local journalism. A state media inquiry in 2016 (SOU, 2016, 80) resulted in a new form of state support for innovation in the media industry and for increased coverage in the parts of Sweden where local media is weak. Another state inquiry on public service suggested a stronger role for public service radio and TV in local journalism, stating that more resources need to be put into local coverage by public service broadcasters when commercial media is in decline (SOU, 2018, 50). This is controversial for commercial media, which faces competition that is increasingly state-funded.

### **Local journalism and local politics**

During the party press system, there were close ties between local newspapers and local politics. In 1963 a report (Furhoff, 1963), “*Treason of the Press*” showed local journalists often had political assignments; local politics decided what should be published and newspapers were silent about conflicts. Decisions in town councils were reported after they were made, not before, to prevent public debate. This close relationship changed as journalism underwent professionalization. Under the influence of public service and professional journalism education, journalism became more independent of local politics (Djerf Pierre and Weibull, 2001). During the 1980s, political parties surrendered their ownership, and local newspapers became less political tool and more commercial enterprise. Newspaper editorials were still politically connected, but the news itself was supposed to be free from bias.

The close ties between local reporters and politicians remained into the 1990s. Research shows that a relationship of exchange and negotiation emerged; reporters received information and offered the political sphere access to the public (Larsson, 1998). However, between 1961 and 2001 a process was also underway to increase independence in the selection and presentation of local news (Ekström et al., 2006). An important part of this change was the increased importance of the ideal of media being a watchdog of power. During the 1990s and 2000s, reporters in many local newspapers engaged in investigative reporting, scrutinizing local corruption and the misuse of public funding. Research shows this function consisted not only of deep investigative stories, but spanned different levels (Nygren, 2003).

- *The potential watchdog.* Local politicians and decision-makers are aware of the presence of local media, and have to assume they can be scrutinized.
- *Daily reporting.* Local media select what stories to cover and determine how these will be presented. This selection also fulfils a watchdog function since the media can choose news that does not always put decision-makers in a positive light.
- *Publicizing conflicts.* When local media direct public attention to conflicts and ask critical questions, they create an arena for local actors. Local media draw attention to sensitive issues, demanding responsibility from decision-makers.

- *Investigative reporting.* These stories are quite rare, but deeply scrutinize corruption and political scandals. On the local level, they often focus on leading politicians using public funds for private needs, for example, municipal credit cards for private shopping and travel.

Yet, while there are fewer local journalists, the number of communicators in local municipalities has doubled in ten years, now outnumbering those working in local newsrooms. For local municipalities, providing information to citizens as well as PR and image-building have become more important since local media lack the resources to cover local issues and local politics to the extent they did before (Tenor and Nygren, 2017). Many municipalities have hired former journalists to produce community information and develop the municipalities' own online channels. One large region in western Sweden has started its own online TV channel to promote the work of the region in health care, culture, and transport, and every second local municipality now reports that local newspapers often publish their press releases verbatim. At the same time, though, these communicators admit they cannot serve as watchdogs of local politics and municipalities – a role reserved for professional journalism (Tenor, 2016). Sources within local politics have taken back part of the initiative and control they lost during the professionalization of journalism in the 1970s. Local journalists still cover local politics, but the political sphere has now built its own channels to citizens.

At the same time, though, local journalists face a basic dilemma – the conflict between the need to be close to local society and the need for professional detachment (Røe Mathisen, 2015). Journalists need to be close to all sources at the local level to get the news and sentiment of the local community, including the local political sphere. However, this closeness also makes it difficult to maintain a distance to a source who may be a neighbor or member in the same club. This challenges the professional role of journalists, but can also be a reason to redefine that role. When it comes to the notion of public journalism, local journalism should be more oriented toward social issues that are important for citizens and seek solutions in discussions rather than conflicts (Meritt, 1995). A group of free weeklies has been applying this model in some Stockholm suburbs, challenging the traditional role of the journalist as detached observer (Beckman, 2011). This group has developed a participatory journalism, where the local issues important for citizens have become the most important issues in the weeklies' coverage. This approach is also found among new hyperlocals that are trying to serve the local community and development of the area – and shows that professional values can be challenged in local journalism.

### **Local audiences and the local network society**

Research shows that local media has long played an important role in local communities, identities and social cohesion (Hess and Waller, 2017). According to the large annual SOM survey in Sweden,<sup>1</sup> local news is still important for people. Despite globalization, nine out of ten participants say they are very, or quite, interested in reading news about where they live. This figure is the same for national news and higher than that for international news (Nygren and Leckner, 2016). However, the channels for local news are changing rapidly, and this is altering the basic conditions for local journalism.

The share of the population regularly reading the local printed newspaper at least three days a week is shrinking. Between 2015 and 2017, this share decreased from 57 to 41 percent (Table 15.1). This would have been a minor problem if the audience had moved to the outlet's digital platforms, but the SOM survey found this was not the case. Only 26 percent of the



Table 15.1 Regular use of different kinds of local media in 2015 and 2017 (at least three days/week)

	2015	2017	Difference	N =
Local subscription-based newspaper (paper)	57	41	-16	10,812
Local subscription-based newspaper (online)	25	22	-3	10,812
Other local online news	8	8	0	10,812
Local free newspaper (weekly)	33	33	0	1,828
Public service radio (SR P4)	50	43	-7	10,812
Public service TV (SVT regional news)	61	50	-11	10,812
Facebook (e.g., local groups)	41	46	+5	1,827
Twitter	5	6	+1	1,827
Other kind of social media (e.g., local blogs)	14	15	+1	1,827
Website of the local municipality	6	6	0	1,827

Source: National SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017.

audience aged 30–49 years regularly use the online news site of the local newspaper, the same share reading the printed paper. Older age groups still read the local newspapers in print (two out of three over the age of 65).

Public service regional broadcasters also show declining audiences, but less drastic than the newspapers, and consumption of public service regional radio and TV remains at higher levels. Other local media outlets are also keeping their audiences (free newspapers and online news sites), with the big winner being Facebook. Nearly every second respondent in the survey says they use Facebook at least three days a week to stay up to date on local news and events. This applies not only to younger generations (where, interestingly, this figure is decreasing), but among the middle-aged and senior citizens. Respondents also said they used Facebook for information about local events and links to news in local media as well as for their own active use (selling and buying things, looking for help or expressing opinions).

Even if the use of traditional local media is decreasing, people still regard legacy media as important sources about community issues. Legacy media have a legitimacy created from their long history, and the newspaper (in print and online) is still regarded as more important than social media. Public service radio and TV score the highest in terms of importance, but websites of municipalities score higher in importance than in their actual use (Table 15.2). This means legacy media still has “trust capital” in local communities. Even if people frequently turn to Facebook, they regard the local newspaper as more important, although this importance has fallen from 58 to 47 percent in two years.

These fundamental changes in usage of local media influence practices in local journalism. In day-to-day work, Facebook pages provide inspiration for ideas and sources as well as channels for research and communication. Local media outlets use Facebook frequently for interaction with their audiences and social media in general (including Twitter) for distributing local news. Local media companies reported that 15–20 percent of their readers came from Facebook before the algorithms were changed in 2017 (Martin and Skeppstedt, 2017). Facebook has become the strongest change-factor in the local media ecosystems since the introduction of TV (Nygren, 2019). It is changing not only the economic conditions, but the whole concept of local media. Facebook is the viral place where every actor in local society has to be present and visible because that is where the audience is. In the Facebook feed, local journalism is mixed with all other kinds of local interaction: local campaigning, local marketing, and local rumors.

Table 15.2 How important are different kinds of local media for staying informed about local society? (Percentage that responded very and quite important on a scale of 1–4)

	2015	2017	Difference
Local subscription-based newspaper (paper)	58	47	–11
Local subscription-based newspaper (online)	44	44	0
Other local online news	27	28	+1
Local free newspaper (weekly)	39	36	–3
Public service radio (SR P4)	55	55	0
Public service TV (SVT regional news)	75	69	–6
Facebook (e.g., local groups)	32	35	+3
Twitter	5	6	+1
Other kind of social media (e.g., local blogs)	13	12	–1
Website of the local municipality	30	30	0
Number of answers	1597	1827	

Source: National SOM surveys in 2015 and 2017.

Facebook can be viewed as parasitic in the local media ecology, eating up economic resources such as advertising revenue. On the other hand, this new public sphere can give social actors a better chance to be heard and influence public debate, bypassing traditional local media. On Facebook, local media users adapt their feed to their interests, mixing local, national, and global news with personal relationships. Behind these individual feeds, though, Facebook is the operator controlling the network through hidden algorithms.

## Conclusions

The trends described above can be defined as fragmentation (diversity) and de-professionalization. The question for this chapter was how these structural changes influence practices in local journalism. When press subsidies were introduced in 1971, their purpose was to preserve diversity. This has succeeded to some extent, giving a longer life to many newspapers and also stimulating the creation of new local newspapers (but only weeklies). However, today's local media diversity has mostly been created by media development and the abundance of new online platforms and channels. There are more voices in the local media landscape than ever before. Political parties and municipalities have created their own channels; local activists and entrepreneurs have created hyperlocal outlets on all platforms (including paper); and residents have created content for their Facebook feed that ranges from cute cats to hot local debates. Legacy media, such as daily newspapers and public service broadcasts, still produce local stories. Diversity is a word with positive connotations, but it can also be described more negatively as fragmentation. The public sphere is now divided into many sub-spheres, sometimes called filter-bubbles. Common ground where people and opinions meet can be hard to find.

For local journalism, this brings challenges. Local journalists have lost their monopoly of creating the stories that kept communities together. They have to relate to all other actors in the local public sphere and be in constant dialogue with the audience as well as other actors chasing their own agenda. The daily dialogue has become much more important for local journalists – on news and on Facebook pages as well as face-to-face in daily life. At the same time, this dialogue presents an opportunity for local newspapers and radio/TV. The broad local media is the only

common arena still connecting the public sphere. To connect a fragmented local public sphere becomes even more important for local media, as they become the nodes connecting all the sub-spheres in local society. This mission is a key component in public journalism and transforms the local journalist from detached observer to more of a participant in local development.

The other development in local media is the de-professionalization of the landscape. In the analog world, professional journalism had a monopoly in public storytelling, informed by professional values, ethics, integrity, and the ideals of a liberal press. However, this monopoly may have existed only during a short transition from the old system of party press to today's digital diversity. In the 2020s, professional journalism occupies a shrinking share of the local public sphere. Strong actors, like the local municipality, police, and other organizations, are building their own channels. They often look like journalism and are produced by former journalists, but they lack professional autonomy. Outside these "official" channels, new hyperlocals are created both online and on paper. They are produced by a mix of professionals and amateurs, and the ideals are often connected to the development of local society. All these new channels are embedded in the social media world, mostly Facebook, where information as well as rumors and hate are delivered by secret algorithms without professional filters to users' daily feeds.

This de-professionalization of content production influences the public sphere, and the result can be a declining level of public debate and knowledge, but it can also be described as a democratization, since it is no longer professional journalists alone who have access to public storytelling and a voice in the local debate. For local journalism, the challenge is to emphasize professional standards, to explain why the version given by local professional journalists is more trustworthy than other information found online. Succeeding in this is necessary for persuading the local audience to continue to pay for journalism. No paywalls will work if the audience finds the same content for free outside of legacy media.

## Note

- 1 The SOM survey has been done annually since 1986 by Gothenburg University. The survey covers areas within society-opinion-media, and is answered by a representative sample of citizens between 16 and 85. Some questions have more than 10,000 respondents; other questions have a more limited but still representative sample of 1,500–2,000 respondents. The response rate was 55 percent in 2017.

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# 16

## CENTRAL AND LOCAL MEDIA IN RUSSIA

### Between central control and local initiatives

*Ilya Kiriya*

#### **Introduction**

Post-Soviet Russian federalism represents a conflictual field. On the one hand, since Perestroika and the Soviet period, Russia remained the federal state purporting to give high levels of autonomy to regional levels of power. However, on the other hand, Russian economy and political life remained centred on Moscow both politically and economically during the entire period. The political economy of Russian media in such a situation became a rather conflictual field too. On the one hand, regional media was expected to correspond to the federalist character of the Russian state and to contribute to and both support regional identity and represent the regional in the general public sphere. Yet all the regional media's resources, including advertising revenue and state subsidies, were derived centrally from Moscow. Thus, the extremely centralized character of the Russian media during the Soviet era was perpetuated in the post-Soviet period.

In this chapter we show how, during the post-Soviet period, such a centralized model of the Russian media progressively excluded the local media from the system of public goods and placed them inside the system of 'vertical of power' mainly oriented towards the domination of Moscow in the political field and governance. 'Fostering the vertical of power' first appeared as a task in the first programme of President Putin at the beginning of 2000 and aimed to increase the level of control of the federal centre over the regional authorities and regions in general. The chapter begins by analyzing the heterogeneous character of the Russian regions and different models of media that formed in such regions during the 1990s, when such regions aspired to a greater degree of autonomy. We then trace the evolution of such a system of regional media during the centralization of power that followed in the 2000s and explore the transformation of the media model. Finally, the chapter discusses this transformation in terms of the functions and evolution of local media in Russia.

#### **Russian regional media: a variety of historic models**

The first and probably the main characteristic by which we can define the role of local media in the Russian regional level is the extreme diversity of regions and the high level inequality between them. Researchers have distinguished a wide range of criteria for this

heterogeneity. Social geographer Natalia Zubarevitch, drawing on Paul Krugman's approach dividing 'first-nature' and 'second-nature' factors (Krugman, 1993), distinguishes two further types of factors: climatic factors that determine the structure of settlements, and urban factors that determine the character of industries in the region (Zubarevitch and Safronov, 2005). The first set of factors, those that are climate-related, show us an extremely uneven population distribution within Russian territories. The second set of factors is related to 'economic conditions of households', which depend largely on the quality of urban space. The uneven distribution of cities and their artificial creation around industrial objects during Soviet times has resulted in a structure where, in the European section of Russia, the average distance between cities is significantly lower than that in Siberia. This allows Zubarevitch to call Russia an 'underurbanized' country (Zubarevitch, 2009). The other problem relates to a significant gap between the level of cultural and domestic development and the pace of urbanization. Cities used to be considered simply as 'containers' in which to place people working at the industrial facilities (Pivovarov, 2001) on which the cities were centred.

Zubarevitch constructs a taxonomy of eight types of regions, adapted here to offer regional classifications based on four sets of descriptors.

- *Rich and developed regions.* These are able to provide a very diversified economy. They can deploy big budgets and, consequently, the governance of such regions is an object of struggle between different clans of financial and industrial capital.
- *Poor but cultivated regions with a high density of population.* In these regions, characteristically those of central Russia, the industry is state-supported and, consequently, state authorities are the main 'owners' and distributors of resources. However, at the same time, these regions have a capacity to reorient their industries.
- *Poor and non-cultivated regions.* These are most characteristic of the Caucasian Republics and some regions of Siberia. Such regions are recipients of state support and local administrations have become main distributors of this social support. They do not represent major concerns for the federal power.
- *Rich but little-developed regions without diversified economies.* These include the gas and oil regions of Siberia. Here the local authority is subordinate to the power of the locally based monopolies or oligopolies such as Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosneft. These are the big gas and oil companies owned and managed at a federal level.

The different regional models influenced greatly the nature of regional conflicts and the balance of forces between the federal centre and the regions immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s some regions (represented mainly by the first level) enjoyed rights of quasi-autonomy; their governors played the role of regional leaders and often participated in federal politics. However, this led to conflict between the federal centre and these regional figures when the centralization process was initiated in the early 2000s (Turovski, 2003). The success of such leaders in defending their autonomy depended on their relations with big capital, but big capital has often been used by federal power to exert pressure on those regional leaders. The second and third types of region, even if their political leaders have been in strong opposition to federal authorities,<sup>1</sup> have in reality been much more loyal to the federal centre as a result of their dependence on the federal social support distributed to them. Finally, regions in the fourth category had little conflict with the center. However, the weaknesses of the federal authorities during the 1990s constrained their ability to adequately redistribute resources, which led to the impoverishment of the already poor and disadvantaged regions and the enrichment of the already rich and advantaged ones (Lapina, 2006). Russia's regional power

model has also in part been based on a personality strongly linked with monarchic traditions in particular regions (Turovski, 2006, 78). All these factors greatly influenced the model of the regional press. However, much depended on the personality of the regional leader, and the power of such people was at its greatest during the 1990s when, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and its centralizing power, the regions gained a quite high degree of autonomy from the federal centre.

We now adopt the aforementioned classification model to explore and explain the system of media in Russia. In the first type of region, where resources are wide and diverse, the media were used during the 1990s by different industrial and financial groups to protect their interests and to support their struggle for regional power. This regional model of media ownership repeated the federal struggle for power between big media and industrial capitals (so-called “oligarchs”) and their emblematic figures, such as Vladimir Goussinski and Boris Berezovski (Mieckewicz, 1999). In some regions representatives of this financial and industrial capital came to power, such as Alexander Khloponin in Krasnoyarsk, where the former director of JSC Norilski Nikel (the world’s largest producer of palladium and one of the largest producers of nickel, platinum and copper) became governor in 2002. But the diversified economy in such regions led to the establishment of substantial regional advertising markets and consequently contributed to the development of a more commercially based and independent business model for the local media. In these regions the governor’s influence on the media played a secondary role in the media market. A greater degree of pluralism flourished because different industrial groups involved in politics were competing for the attention of relatively independent and commercially self-sufficient media outlets.

In the second category of regions, both the large redistribution role of regional authorities and the real weaknesses of advertising markets led to the submission of regional media to regional power. In such regions, only governors, mayors and other state executives have been able to organize and finance regional media. Thus, regional authorities hold a monopoly over the media and public opinion. In such situations any change of political landscape could only come from outside the region. In the fourth category of regions (oil- and gas-rich regions) the advertising market has not been sufficiently developed because all economic activity was oriented to the extraction and export of hydrocarbons, and diversification of the economy to any significant degree was absent. In these regions, media have been owned either by the local authority or regional extractive company (such as oil or gas companies), but they could not be truly independent from such power and are very seldom privately owned. Table 16.1 illustrates the different regional models.

The regional media landscape of the 1990s in terms of media property and power relations has rarely been analyzed. This is most likely a result of the lack of transparency of the Russian media market as a whole. The unique publication on the subject is a pamphlet presenting the results of research undertaken by the Media Law Policy Institute in 1999 (Richter, 1999). In this study, the authors made a strong survey of media concentration in ten regions of Russia. Their analysis was based on a concept in the political economy of media that focuses on the importance of ownership in determining levels of pluralism within regional markets. Private forms of media dominated in the regions surveyed, but the study found there to be wide disparities between the regions in the number of privately owned or state-owned media. We can see that generally during the 1990s a new model of regional media became established, compared with the Soviet era’s vertical power model, and that transformation was driven by the increasing importance of the role of media in local politics. Local political forces (either subordinated to industrial capital or local political elites, and sometimes disconnected from the centre) used media in their political struggles. After the 2000s and Putin’s recentralization and regional policy



Table 16.1 The four types of pressure on local media in the regions of Russia during the 1990s

		<i>Territorial development and cultivation level</i>	
		<i>High degree of cultivation – high level of economic diversity</i>	<i>Low degree of cultivation – narrow economic diversity</i>
Economic conditions of households	High level – rich region	1. Media as resource of struggle for power of different elite economic groups, relatively developed advertising market, privately owned media	4. Media are used by regional authority or regional monopolies to ensure social stability; advertising market is underdeveloped; local media are owned and controlled either by local authority or regional monopolies
	Low level – poor region	2. Media as political resource of local authority, quasi-absent advertising market, media belongs to local authority, but local power could finance and support some privately owned media close to it	3. Very weak local media financed and owned by local authority. There are no adequate instrumental needs (political) in media but they exist by ‘tradition’. Only state-owned media

change (the so-called “Putin’s model” (Turovski, 2006, 577)) we should expect another kind of relationship based not only on influence through ownership control.

### **Transforming the state pressure concept in a new regional model after 2000**

After the centralization and cancellation of governor elections in regions, the state started to recentralize power and, consequently, to eliminate elements of political struggle in the regions. In the media field, this policy operated through the centralization of Russian state television infrastructure. In February 2004, a central government decree restructured the state-owned VGTRK group (Rossia-1 is the major channel of VGTRK) by means of affiliating its subsidiaries, including regional state TV and radio companies. All types of regional broadcast except news were cut, transforming the network to a centralized channel. All regional subsidiaries lost their affiliation to local authorities and became subordinated to central VGTRK headquarters in Moscow. This decision also gave rise to a fall in regional broadcast volume from between 900 and 1,200 to 590 hours (Kachkaeva, Kiriya and Libergal, 2006, 49).

This reform coincided with the cancellation of governorship elections in the regions and, we argue, was also intended to centralize power and eliminate media platforms that contributed to political struggle in regions. Such reconfiguration should provoke a considerable change in the pattern of state pressure in regional media. To verify this hypothesis a series of studies have been conducted by our research group.<sup>2</sup> These included more than 60 in-depth interviews with media editors and media owners in the regions. Subsequently, a database of 15,000 state contracts between state regional authorities and media was statistically analyzed and social network analysis performed. The first observation that we made was the transformation of media ownership models in the regions. This transformation occurred during the 2000s and influenced all levels of media, both privately and state-owned. First, the involvement in the

media sector of both the industrial and financial sectors has grown much weaker than it was in the 1990s. Financial and industrial groups that were subjects of the struggle for regional power as a result of the cancellation of the governors' elections have lost their interest in using media as an instrument of influence at the regional level. As a result, they either sold off such media (often to their managers) or restructured them along more commercialized models.

At the same time the restructuring of state television and its centralization prompted regional power responses, which included establishing new governor-led television stations, partially owned by large regional industrial groups affiliated with local power figures. Such was the case of Krasnodar television station NTK, the Altai governor's channel Katun 24 and the establishment of the Tatarstan regional state-run holding Tatmedia. This also coincided with the new policy of centre-periphery financial redistribution, which transferred money from richer to poorer regions – those of the second and third categories in the taxonomy above. Thus, even in relatively poor regions, some local authorities were able to afford to open their own media organizations.

This return of the state to media ownership was accompanied by the restructuring of the system of state support to media. Russian legislation during the 1990s ensured the legal and relatively transparent mechanism of state support for media (in particular the regional press) along principles of supporting and encouraging pluralism. However, since 2005 all forms of automatic state support for media have been eliminated (Richter, 2002). Instead of these automatic forms of state support, new forms based on selectivity have appeared. Thus, we can see that with the centralization of state power during the second half of the 2000s, in parallel with significant changes in the policy of redistribution of resources between regions, local authorities started to use state money in order to maintain the political status quo and manipulate public opinion via the most popular and often privately owned local media. Since local authorities have been integrated into the above-mentioned 'vertical of power' via the nomination of governors, local media have become little more than local clones of the federal media.

After the beginning of the 2010s, considerable changes in the situation of local governance in Russia took place. After the post-election protests in 2011–2012, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev reinstated gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions. This libertarian initiative has been severely restricted by the so-called 'municipal filter', which requires that potential gubernatorial candidates collect signatures in three-fourths of the sub-regional municipalities (such as townships) in the region. Regina Smyth and Rotislav Turovski note: "As United Russia (the ruling party) majorities control nearly all of these bodies, the municipal filter affords the party control over ballot construction" (2018, 187).

Following the reinstatement of the elections at the local level, the system of local media was confronted with some new challenges. We argue that media ownership in the regions transformed from a model of direct control (ensured by direct possession of capital) to one of indirect control based on another mechanism of obligations of loyalty (Kachkaeva, Kiriya, Naumova and Rogers, 2012). This led to our next hypothesis: that in Russian regional media today, the influence of the state is not articulated through direct administrative pressure on media managers (ownership-based model), but through other channels, the first of which is direct financial support.

We discovered that advertising does not represent an important source of financing for Russian regional media. Even in privately owned media, the prime source of revenue is from the local authorities. In parallel to the advertising market, Russian regional media is involved in a secondary, informal market in political favours that is totally financed by different levels of regional authorities. Instead of the automatic support systems for local media that were established in law in the 1990s, we see a very extensive system of so-called 'state contracts

for informational coverage', which are usually concluded between a state regional administrative body and a media organization. Such contracts can specify the volume, number, character and themes of information coverage the media organization will deliver. Specific examples include 'coverage of the governor's policy' and the publication of information items about local authority initiatives. In addition, the expectation of future agreements for information coverage could lead to self-censorship in any reporting on the authority. Such agreements are usually negotiated annually and take the form of open biddings. However, authorities do not disclose the real criteria for selection. In this manner, they are able to transform the entire procedure into one of privilege distributed by the power's agents.

Our initial hypothesis was that such a system of information contracts would work to recompense the disparities and disadvantages caused by regional disproportions in media development. In other words, in regions of the first category, such a system will be less present because of the commercial self-sufficiency of the media in such regions. In regions of the second, third and fourth categories in our classification, the state will be more likely to support media by the way of state contracts for information coverage. In order to verify such a hypothesis, we analyzed more than 15,000 state contracts in ten regions between 2011 and 2014. The final results contradicted our expectation that in poorer regions with weaker advertising markets the proportion of state financing would be higher (Ademukova, Dovbysh, Kiriya and Chumakova, 2017). We discovered that in the Tatarstan Republic, a well-developed region, the total amount of contracts was close to the total amount of the advertising market in Kazan (one of the leaders in this field). The largest number of contracts was distributed among commercial organizations, which indicates that 'the parallel media market' serves as a tool to ensure the economic dependence of mainly privately owned media on regional authorities.

The total amount of state spending for regional media in each region is highly concentrated. We found that the largest number of contracts were aggregated by between three and five main media players in the regions. For example, in the Rostov region the privately owned media group 'Southern Region' and another four companies (including its affiliates) obtained more than 85 per cent of the total value of contracts. From this point of view state financing under the contract system does not represent the mechanism of supporting pluralism and thus supporting local media as a democratic institution. On the contrary, it represents the institutional mechanism of maintaining the status quo within the regional power elite.

### **Functions of local media and the dynamics of change**

We traced the evolution of the political-economic conditions of the existence of media in diverse Russian regions. As is evident, it is possible to divide the whole post-Soviet period into three different stages. Each of these corresponds to a particular degree of independence of the region from Moscow, the federal centre, and, consequently, to the particular economic structure of media organizations, as well as the inclusion of the local media into the local political process. When regions enjoyed a high degree of autonomy from the federal centre and regional resources were not widely redistributed, some private media organizations were able to exist and remained independent from local authorities' control – especially in regions of the first category. In terms of folk theories of local journalism, we can label these titles 'our newspaper': newspapers for which there is a strong connection between the life of the community, the region and the news the paper provides (Nielsen, 2016).

After the suppression of the governors' elections and the elimination of media as important actors from local politics, we can see the move towards the vision of the second concept of the local paper as 'their paper', considered by readers as not geographically proximate enough, or

politically biased. News was mainly produced by state-owned regional media that were directly supported by the regional authorities after new policies of redistribution of resources from the more advantaged to the less advantaged regions, giving those less advantaged regions the capacity to develop media organizations.

After the return to direct governors' elections, but in the context of a quasi-monopolization of the political spectrum by the ruling party and the usage of both formal and informal mechanisms to make such elections risk-free for the ruling party (Smyth and Turovsky, 2018), the function of local media could be described as purely decorative. In reality they are completely excluded from decisions on local politics, which are taken centrally by the Kremlin and are strongly biased in favour of the local administration, because they fall within its control. Thus, we can see as the outcome the de-politicization of local media discourse. During some of our studies of the regional media consumption in rural areas between 2012 and 2015, a very large number of our respondents were unable to remember the name of their governor. Such a situation would have been unimaginable in the 1990s, where governors were commonly constructed in the media as charismatic leaders (Kiriya and Novikova, 2013). Such a situation could be described in terms of aforementioned folk theories of local media not so much as 'our paper' or even 'their paper', but 'what paper?'. The population demonstrates the loss of interest in local media because of the media's distance from and irrelevance to real local problems and events.

Such dynamics (illustrated in Table 16.2) indicate a further problem – a total lack of interest from the federal centre in supporting regional media as institutions connecting people with their

Table 16.2 Dynamics of change of the main parameters of regional media systems in post-Soviet Russia

	<i>First period (low control of the federal center) – until 2005</i>	<i>Second period (centralization of power and building 'vertical of power') – until 2012</i>	<i>Third period (controlled electoral model) – since 2012</i>
Degree of regional independence	High	Low	Low
Level of media pluralism	High	Low	Low
Media owners	Industrial and financial corporations	Local administrations	Local administrations and private owners
Amount of state money for media development	Low	High	High
Role of media in local politics	High	Low	Low
Diversity of regional models of media	High	High	Lower
Model of local paper in folk local media theory	Our paper	Their paper	What paper?
Model of state support for media	Via loyal oligarchs or federal support under the law	Direct financing of media from the regional budget	State contracts as form of state support

local identity. During the digital broadcasting reform the local television companies lobbied for protective measures to guarantee the presence of at least one local company inside the multiplex of digital broadcasting. The reaction of the federal centre can be found in comments from the deputy minister of digital development and mass communication (previously Minkomsvyaz), who argued that regional media should be attractive for their audiences and consequently self-sufficient in terms of finance. If they are not able to find alternative and commercially sustainable ways of distribution, they are not effective (Orlov, 2015). Here we can see that the effectiveness is measured only by the commercial effectiveness and not by the recognized necessity of protection of local identity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we argue that the core problem of Russian regional media is that there are no institutions in need of them. During the 1990s the state guaranteed their financial support through federal law and this was regarded as support for pluralism in local media. However, during the 2000s, such a system was replaced by selective support. The aims of this policy are far from supporting local media as institutions valuable as public goods, but are oriented, as we have seen, towards maintaining the power of the local political authorities. During the evolution of the local media system we can see that the new redistribution policy of the state, which was intended to smooth disparities between regions, injected more money into less developed regions. This encouraged them to increase the direct financing of media by local administrations in order to influence public opinion through the so-called ‘state contracts for information coverage’. Paradoxically, all such measures increased the level of dependence of media on local authorities, which detached them from the publics and communities they are supposed to serve.

The depoliticization of the population and lack of trust in electoral processes are obvious. At the beginning of September 2018, a high number of Russian regions elected their heads of administrations – governors or presidents – and in a high number of regions the turnout decreased. Our findings do not offer a conclusive link between these factors, but we are convinced that the increasing alienation of the local media from their communities increases the distance between power – and media allied with that power – from local problems.

## Notes

- 1 These regions historically voted for the Communist Party.
- 2 The Laboratory of Media Research at the Higher School of Economics and School of Media, National Research University, Moscow made such research projects possible in 2009, 2010 and 2013–2015, supported by different grants of the university.

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# THE RETURN OF PARTY JOURNALISM IN CHINA AND 'JANUSIAN' CONTENT

## The case of Newspaper X

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### Introduction

More than 20 years ago, the birth of commercial newspapers at different administrative levels greatly transformed the media landscape in China (Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998). Commercial newspapers – especially those at local levels,<sup>1</sup> then, were the main bread earners in their press groups, financially supporting their parent newspapers, i.e., party organs (*dangbao*). They were often proud of their considerable circulation and advertisement incomes. Their success in media markets was accredited to moving away from party journalism to tabloid journalism. It was not hard to distinguish local commercial newspapers from their party counterparts by their tabloidised content and their focus on ordinary people. Some local commercial newspapers even gained a reputation for practising critical and investigative journalism. Although having been the ‘mouth and throat’ (*houshe*) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), party journalism was unpopular in media markets. Twenty years later, however, party journalism has come back in full force (Wang and Sparks, 2019). It has gradually been picked up by local commercial newspapers and even dominates their coverage. One would wonder, what does the coverage of local commercial newspapers look like and what has shaped their content in this particular way?

This chapter examines how Newspaper X has changed under the joint influence of political, commercial and technological forces. Southern China-based Newspaper X is a commercial newspaper at the provincial level. It was well-known for its investigative reports in the late 1990s and early years of the 2000s. The qualitative analysis of the content published in its sampled front pages between 2016 and 2017, however, reveals that it no longer gives priority to critical and investigative reports. Instead, two features are obvious in its front-page content: strong partisanship and tabloidisation. On the one hand, it shows a predominantly pro-government partisanship feature, in terms of selection of agendas, lexical choices and narratives. On the other hand, however, its front pages are characterised by tabloidised and sensational content. I term this content ‘Janusian’ in reference to the Roman god Janus, the god of intermediate spaces and duality, who is often portrayed with two faces – one looking to the future, the other to the past. ‘Janusian’ content is the result of the influence of the changes in the context – especially in the political



climate, media markets and digital technology. Interviews with journalists of Newspaper X between 2015 and 2016 have helped interpret the patterns found in such content.

### **Chinese local newspapers and journalism: the 40-year orbit of development**

Following economic reforms starting from 1978, China has developed a market economy with 'Chinese characteristics'; however, its authoritarian political system has remained intact. The particular political economy environment of China has profound impacts on the development of Chinese local newspapers and journalism. The chapter defines a 'local newspaper' as a newspaper that is based in a place with an administrative level below the central level. It aims to mainly engage local (for example, provincial or municipal) readership. That means that a newspaper is mainly circulated in a geographical locality. However, the topics covered by the newspaper may be about events occurring in other places.

Since the 1980s, Chinese local commercial newspapers and journalism have been on a rollercoaster. Local commercial newspapers were at the frontline of the 1980s media reform. Most of them had their prime in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century. During those years, while commercial newspapers achieved unprecedented market success, journalism obtained relative journalistic independence. There appeared media diversity, which was limited but promising. Benefiting from media marketisation, local commercial newspapers rapidly ascended in media markets through practising 'non-party journalism'. One genre of non-party journalism was tabloid journalism that swung away from reporting party news, i.e., news about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), governments and officials, to giving coverage to ordinary people. Typical tabloid-style news stories included everyday life stories of ordinary people, crime stories or reports providing trivial but useful information that readers might be interested to know. Like elsewhere, tabloidised stories published by local commercial newspapers can be sensational, yet give voice to and engage with ordinary people, as exemplified by South African tabloids (Wasserman, 2008).

However, another important genre of non-party journalism was critical and investigative journalism. The practice of critical and investigative journalism was win-win for local commercial newspapers; Chinese journalism achieved a certain level of journalistic independence through the practice, which also helped local commercial newspapers to build readership, and thus income. The popularity of critical and investigative journalism thus generated both social and financial value. Possible factors leading to its popularity include the support of the central government, the market strategies of local commercial newspapers and the need of local readers (de Burgh, 2003; Tong, 2011; Svensson, 2017). Local commercial newspapers such as the *Metro Express* (*Dushi Kuibao*) in Hangzhou and the *Shenjiang Diyi Daobao* in Shanghai were famous for practising tabloid journalism. Other local commercial newspapers such as the *Southern Metropolitan Daily* (*Nanfang Dushibao*), the *Xinkuai Daily* (both in Guangzhou), the *Dahe Daily* (*Dahe Bao*) in Zhengzhou, the *Beijing News* in Beijing, the *Huashang Daily* in Xi'an and the *Xiaoxiang Morning* (*Xiaoxiang Chenbao*) in Changsha earned names for their support for critical and investigative journalism. Those that were known for critical and investigative journalism were often also good at delivering tabloidised content, although the other way around might not be true. In any case, overall local commercial newspapers were socially influential and important in the media markets at the turn of the new century (see Lee, 2000; Zhao, 1998; Tong, 2011; Stockmann, 2012 for more detailed discussions).

The success of local commercial newspapers and journalism, however, started to decline around 2010 and especially after 2012 when Xi Jinping came to power. This decline was demonstrated in three ways. First, local newspapers started suffering financial loss in the media markets – both in circulation and advertising. A sharp decline occurred in around 2014 and

has led to the closure of newspapers and the loss of jobs (Tong, 2017; Li and Sparks, 2016). Second, the space for journalism practice has been greatly reduced. The range of the topics that journalists can report without resulting in punishment from the authorities has become extremely limited. Critical and investigative journalism has gradually faded from China's media landscape (Tong, 2017; Tong and Lo, 2017). The problem is not solely that local newspapers have stopped supporting the practice of critical and investigative journalism, but also that a great number of investigative journalists have left journalism. The process of "the taming of critical and investigative journalism" started from around 2012 and was completed around 2017 (Tong, 2017). Third, several local commercial newspapers that were once famous for critical and investigative reporting have experienced a crisis in journalistic ethics. They have been accused of failing to hold ethical grounds (Tong, 2017). This crisis is damaging their reputation and endangering their journalism.

Accompanying the decline of local commercial newspapers has been the return of party journalism, which is increasingly practised by them. With the virtual disappearance of critical and investigative reports, a large amount of coverage has been given to topics that are pro-government and solely concerned with the activities of governments and its officials. When local commercial newspapers started to practise party journalism, the distinctions between party organs and commercial newspapers began to collapse. This indicates that Chinese journalism has taken a significant backwards step in terms of gaining journalistic independence and developing media diversity. The remainder of the chapter will discuss the case of Newspaper X, from which one can see its rise and decline as a local commercial newspaper as well as the way that the contextual factors have shaped its development.

## **The case of Newspaper X**

### ***Background***

I have anonymised the name of the newspaper in order to protect my interview participants. However, a brief description of its background will help explain the path of its development as well as the underlying influencing factors. Newspaper X<sup>2</sup> was launched in the 1990s as a commercial tabloid by a provincial party organ in southern China. It was financially successful and socio-politically influential. The social and political influence of Newspaper X was first evident locally in the city where it was based and later demonstrated in the wider region of southern China, such as the Zhujiang River Delta. It even gained nationwide fame at the turn of the new century. It started as a commercial tabloid that supported sensational reporting and soon turned to investigative journalism. It pledged to hold power to account. In its coverage, it combined sensationalism with a focus on revealing wrongdoings. Its commercial success was attributed not merely to stories about scandals, affairs, crimes or celebrity, but also revelations of commercial misconduct, wrongdoings of local governments or officials, abuse of power and official cover-ups. By 2003, Newspaper X had established its fame as a liberal and critical newspaper. In its prime between the late 1990s and the early twenty-first century, it drew journalists from other parts of the country who were keen to fulfil their ambition of practising "genuine" (independent) journalism.

### ***Brief notes about methods***

My observation of Newspaper X started more than a decade ago. My first round of interviews was completed between 2006 and 2007, while my latest interviews were conducted between

2015 and 2016. For this research, I also undertook a qualitative analysis of its publications in 2016 and 2017. The e-version of its daily publications was accessed and downloaded from its website. To conduct the qualitative analysis, I used a constructed week sampling strategy – I chose Monday in the first week in 2016, Tuesday in the second week, Wednesday in the third, Thursday in the fourth, Friday in the fifth, Saturday in the sixth, Sunday in the seventh. Then I repeated this selection process for the rest of the sampling period. The first day included in the sample was Monday, 4 January 2016 and the last day of sampled data was Sunday, 31 December 2017. I sampled 13 constructed weeks for these two years, including 91 front pages. I focused on the headlines (and their articles) included on the front pages of the newspaper. Most of the front pages only included the headlines of articles, which were covered in the remainder of the newspaper. I analysed both the headlines that appeared in the sampled front pages and the corresponding articles. An analysis of front-page headlines and articles can tell us what the newspaper regarded as the most important news reports of the day. I used NVivo to download and store the front pages. The qualitative analysis was also conducted on NVivo with an aim of understanding the nature of the sampled content. I carefully explored the collected data, examined the agendas, lexical choices and narratives of the content and coded the themes of each front-page article. After having finished the coding, I then classified these nodes. The analysis was focused on text rather than images.

### ***The findings of content analysis***

The findings show two clear features of the content published on the front pages of Newspaper X over the two years from 2016 to 2017. First, party coverage was extremely evident in every aspect of the content, ranging from the intensive inclusion of hard government news to the extensive use of the CCP's political discourse. The majority of the topics and the dry and unattractive writing style were indistinguishable from what would be found in any party organ. Most front-page reports were of government conferences, policies and achievements at both national/central and provincial levels. Of the 91 front pages studied, 84 covered governments and officials: dry accounts of government meetings and attendees, and the activities of high-ranking officials.

The front pages also devoted extensive coverage to the achievements of (both national and local) government or the state, whereas previously government departments such as the police had been one of the main targets of criticism by the newspaper and its investigative journalists for abuse of power. In 2016 and 2017 such departments were receiving regular praise. For example, 12 front pages mentioned the police 22 times and most of these reports were compliments for government achievements. The choice of topics and writing style clearly indicated that the stance of Newspaper X was on the side of government, both local and national.

National pride was also a key theme. One report, for example, quoted Xi's speech about China leading globalisation to a new stage, which conveyed a strong sense of patriotism and pride in China's achievements and power in the world. One would expect to see such a piece on the front page of a party organ, such as the *People's Daily*. Carrying significant amounts of party news on the front pages of the commercial newspaper had previously been unusual.

A clear focus on Xi was noticeable in the sampled front pages. The activities and speeches of Xi Jinping were a prominent feature and Newspaper X gave far less coverage to other officials – central, provincial or municipal. Of the 91 front pages, 24 carried 31 pieces of news about Xi Jinping's speeches or activities. Only three front pages carried three pieces of news about Zhang Dejiang, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress. Four front pages carried four items about Li Keqiang, the premier of the State Council. Two pages

mentioned Wang Qishan, the vice president, three times and three pages carried a total of four mentions of Hu Chunhua, a member of the Politburo.

Second, the front pages also contained tabloid and sensational content. Some front page content aimed to provide information about (local) hospitals, disease, schools, universities, traffic, house prices. Taxation was also covered from time to time. This was typical of a commercial newspaper. In the media marketisation process, some news outlets, such as the *Shengjiang Service Guide* (*Shengjiang Fuwu Daobao*) in Shanghai, were launched with a particular aim of providing all sorts of information for subscribers. For Newspaper X, it was part of its tabloid journalism tradition.

Ordinary people received some, though limited, attention on Newspaper X's front pages during 2016 and 2017. Most of these reports featured sensational stories about their miserable experiences, wrongdoings or even crimes. Examples included the drowning of some young people in a reservoir, a teenager involved in an illegal pyramid selling scheme (*feifa chuanxiao*) and porn-streaming programmes on Tencent QQ. Some of these critical news reports were based on information provided by the police, others on investigation by the journalists of Newspaper X. The former were politically safe as they were endorsed by the police and showed the achievements and determination of the police. For the latter, the journalists' investigations revealed problems in Chinese society, commercial misconduct or some unfortunate situations or mistreatment that ordinary individuals had suffered. However, given that the reports were all about ordinary people, they were unlikely to attract the anger of the authorities to Newspaper X. For example, the stories about illegal behaviour of individuals and online pornography would not be allowed even by the governments and would be something that newspaper readers would like to read. One of these critical reports used the (often local) government policies as their justification and basis for their criticisms of a business that had committed commercial misconduct. Although only few in number and not targeting the powerful, this aspect of the content on front pages shows the desire of the newspaper to keep its critical reporting tradition, although what it could do was very much limited.

The commercialisation of the newspaper, however, was obvious, as demonstrated in the increasing amount of advertising on the front pages. Five of the 91 sampled front pages covered whole-page advertisements. Self-promotion of the newspaper and the press group it belongs to could also be seen on the front pages from time to time. The 'Janusian' content of the sampled front pages thus suggests Newspaper X was practising both party journalism and tabloid journalism, even though party journalism dominated. Even more pieces of government news were published on the front pages in 2017 than 2016, while fewer reports about ordinary people were seen on the front pages in 2017. The number of self-investigation-based reports in 2017 was only about half of that in 2016. These indicate that media control in 2017 was even tighter than in 2016, and party journalism played a more prominent role in 2017 than in 2016.

### ***What has happened?***

As a commercial newspaper that was once famous for its investigative reporting, Newspaper X has greatly changed in terms of reporting focus and style. The content on its sampled front pages between 2016 and 2017 reveals that it has reverted back to party journalism, which signals it has succumbed to the authorities' tighter grip on news media. The decade-long observation and interviews with the news practitioners since 2005 have offered insights into the situation it has been facing and the factors that have shaped its changes.

The way in which Newspaper X has developed has resulted from the changes in social dynamics and its own organisational cultures. First and foremost among these is the political climate in China. Media control has been greatly tightened under Xi Jinping, whose policies have been unfriendly

towards news media and critical journalism. When Jiang Zemin was in office, the central government supported critical reporting and investigative journalism, which significantly facilitated the rise across the country of this approach to journalism. Xi imposed much harsher media control as soon as he came to power than his predecessor Hu Jintao. Disobedient journalists and those in editorial or management positions were removed, in some cases arrested. Noncompliant news outlets were punished or closed. In the 2015–2016 interviews, the journalists of Newspaper X complained that a multitude of topics that were reportable 15 years earlier had become too sensitive to be touched. The provincial propaganda department even assigned so-called 'internal censors' (*shenduyuan*) to the newsroom to make sure the newspaper was listening to them.

There have also been changes in central–local government relations in China. Since the 1980s economic reform, decentralisation has taken place in terms of taxation and media control (Tong, 2010). However, under Xi, scholars have recognised a “recentralisation” tendency that brings “the centre back” (Kostka and Nahm, 2017). In addition, Xi has maintained a high profile, which is why the sampled front pages of Newspaper X have given so much coverage to him as well as the activities of the central government.

While reporting space has shrunk significantly, Newspaper X has encountered profound financial losses in media markets. The pervasiveness of the internet, in particular the embedment of ICT into all aspects of the everyday life of ordinary people in China, has resulted in not only the migration of advertising from traditional news media to online platforms but also changes in the interests and tastes of audiences and readers. Central government support for business start-ups has led to a wave of new media enterprises, and the capitalisation of digital communication and further commercialisation of Chinese society have in turn reduced the interests of people in, and the passion of journalists for, serious journalism (Tong, 2017). The difficulty Newspaper X has met in media markets started from around 2013 and became worse in the following years. As advertising and subscription incomes fell dramatically, the newspaper's investment failed to perform as expected and thus led to the loss of huge sums of money. A very pressing consequence of this for journalists is that their incomes have been greatly reduced over the past few years. Narrowed reporting space and declining salaries have jointly undermined the job satisfaction of journalists; working for Newspaper X can bring neither spiritual nor material rewards, which has to a great extent eroded the cachet of working for the paper.<sup>3</sup>

The newspaper's critical reporting tradition had significantly boosted its market shares and thus its financial returns in the 1990s, and it could be argued that market failure could have been a reason for it to maintain this critical tradition. However, when this market strategy stood in opposition to the interests of the state, the newspaper chose the latter. Had it tried to maintain its critical reporting tradition, it would likely have been forced to close. However, with market success eroded, it has become even harder for it to stand up to the authorities. Furthermore, the press group that owns Newspaper X has started to receive financial subsidies from local governments, and a range of collaborations have developed between the group and local governments or their departments. Such circumstances present further challenges to independent critical reporting.

The transformation of the management and journalistic cultures within Newspaper X has also been uncondusive to the maintenance of a critical approach. There have been several rounds of management reorganisation, mainly due to political pressures. Some senior managers and editors were removed, and in recent years, amid the wave of business start-ups, some left to launch their own businesses. The result was that those who once adhered to their journalistic principles and supported critical reporting were no longer in place, and the newspaper was run by those who were closer to the party and government. In 2016, Newspaper X explicitly swore its loyalty to the party by directing public opinion in support of the party.

The ‘new’ management culture shaped the editorial policies of Newspaper X. In the 1990s and early twenty-first century, even if an investigative report was spiked, the journalists were still paid for the stories they produced. However, this policy was later abolished, and in 2015 Newspaper X’s well-known in-depth reporting team was dismantled.<sup>4</sup> Most of the investigative journalists left to join internet-based companies such as Netease or Tencent. Some started their own business projects. For daily reporting, the lately reformed editorial system of Newspaper X requires editors to take shifts of days and nights so that news can be produced and published 24/7 by their website and APPs such as those on Tencent’s WeChat – the Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp. Only a small part of the news published online will be selected and published in their print publications. Journalists have been under immense pressure to catch up with the ever-changing online trends in order to match and maintain the interests of their readers. In the meantime, the restrictions imposed on their reporting topics have lowered their professional prestige and generated uncertainty in regards to work requirements and the role of journalists (Tong and Lo, 2017). No high morale among journalists would be found in journalistic cultures of this sort. As a result, many journalists who still work for Newspaper X just do the job in a way that they are told to do.<sup>5</sup>

However, editors and journalists of Newspaper X do know the importance of their critical reporting tradition, and they also want to engage their readers. The limited inclusion of tabloid content is the only thing they can do to engage their readers, as no one would pay for boring party news about officials’ activities and government conferences. If no one wanted to buy the newspaper, no advertisers would invest their money. For this reason, they also need to cover exclusive reports. Self-investigation of individual or commercial wrongdoings serves this need.

Newspaper X’s desire for advertising income can be seen in its practice of repeatedly publishing advertisements – even full-page ones – on its front pages, which no quality newspaper would do. That means it really needs the money regardless of ethical standards, which bodes ill for its journalism. Even in its prime as a critical newspaper, the interference of the advertising department in its editorial practices is evident. Now that the critical and investigative journalism tradition has been discontinued, commercial interference might only become worse, echoing Wang and Sparks’ observation that journalists gradually fall victim to Chinese commercial newspapers’ organisational needs to enhance incomes, and these take precedence over news reporting (Wang and Sparks, 2018).

## Conclusion

This chapter presents a case where a local (provincial) commercial newspaper has been shaped from a critical newspaper into something that delivers ‘Janusian’ content as a result of practising both party and tabloid journalism. Underpinning its transformation is the combined force of the political climate, the market and digital technology. During the early years of media marketisation, the changes in the Chinese media landscape triggered heated discussions about the power of the market and scholars were optimistic about the power of the market (such as Huang, 2001; Lee, 2000; Pan and Chan, 2003; Zhao, 1998; Chu, 1994). At that time, what was happening in China showed the market as a counter-force against the power of the state. It was the same with the Internet; at the turn of the new century, observers also hailed the liberalising power of the Internet, which first showed in the case of Sun Zhigang and later the case of SARS. However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholars started to express their concern about the collaboration of capital and politics, which may generate a different but even more powerful type of influence on newspapers and journalism (see Lee et al., 2006, 2007; Tong,



2013). The latest development of commercial newspapers and journalism over the last ten years further demonstrates that the state has had the upper hand.

The power of either digital technology or the market is double-bladed; what power they can show is subject to what goals the state wants to achieve as well as the lessons the state has learnt from the past. The birth of local commercial newspapers was a result of the grand design of the central government. In the first place, the administrative decree of the central government required local party organs to launch press groups and local commercial newspapers, as part of China's economic and media reforms. This helped to take the financial burdens off the governments, which thus no longer needed to financially subsidise party organs. The popularity of local commercial newspapers also helped to promote consumption lifestyles, foster consumption markets and generate huge space for advertisements. Launching local commercial newspapers is also thought of as contributing to maintaining the legitimacy of the CCP by steering attention away from politicians and governments to ordinary people. In the Jiang era, the need of the state to curb local power facilitated the rise of critical and investigative journalism. However, state-initiated investigative reporting was gradually running away under the influence of the market and digital technology. Likewise, the Internet showed its liberalising power in the SARS epidemic and the Sun Zhigang cases in the early twenty-first century. Such out-of-control journalism and the Internet soon taught the Chinese authorities lessons. Media control started to tighten up after the landmark coverage of these two cases. That is why during his rule Hu Jintao imposed a tighter media control than Jiang. At that time, however, local commercial newspapers were still enjoying their success in media markets, which enabled them to resist the interference of the state. In addition, it is hard for Chinese authorities to entirely control journalism without curbing the development of Internet-facilitated/mediated civil movements. When Xi came to power in 2012, he made great efforts to control the Internet, journalism and society at the same time, although he was greatly encouraging the development of digital economy and platform capitalism. In the wake of severe market failures, the disappearing of civil movements and the spread of societal worship for capitalism, the failure of local commercial newspapers and journalism to stand up to authorities has followed. The 'winter' has come; delivering 'Janusian' content is a precarious expedient of surviving the winter.

## Notes

- 1 By 'local', I mean administrative levels below the central level, including provincial, municipal, town or village levels.
- 2 I have discussed the case from a different angle in my other writing (see Tong and Lo, 2017).
- 3 From interviews with journalists and editors of Newspaper X conducted in 2015–2016.
- 4 In 2015, Newspaper X dedicated special pages for in-depth reporting (*shenduban*), which nevertheless rarely covered critical and investigative reports (according to the interviews in 2015–2016).
- 5 From the interviews in 2015–2016.

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# STRATEGY OVER SUBSTANCE AND NATIONAL IN FOCUS?

## Local television coverage of politics and policy in the United States

*Erika Franklin Fowler*

### **Introduction**

Although the media landscape in American politics has shifted dramatically over the past several decades, the privileged position of local television as a primary provider of news for the majority of the American public has remained a relative constant despite declines of its own in recent years (Gottfried and Shearer, 2017a). Importantly, local television news audiences are not only large but they also reach sizable numbers of Democratic and Republican identifiers (something of a rarity in a polarized era) and viewers who otherwise do not closely follow politics (Fowler, 2018). In other words, local TV is poised to play a democratically important role in informing the electorate about politics and policy, especially among citizens for whom politics is not a central focus.

The dominance of local television newscasts among American audiences has not, however, been matched by scholarly attention, which tends to focus on news in elite, online and social media sources where data are more readily available (Hale, Fowler, and Goldstein, 2005). Yet the evidence that does exist suggests that local television news can boost citizen knowledge about elected officials (Hopkins, 2018), candidates for office (Fowler, 2013), and feelings about being informed (Fowler, Baum, Barry, Niederdeppe, and Gollust, 2017), all of which further support the connection between local news and civic engagement (Barthel, Holcomb, Mahone, and Mitchell, 2016). In short, local television not only reaches an important part of the citizenry – serving those who might not otherwise seek political information – but evidence also suggests that its content can be democratically beneficial.

The picture is not all rosy, however, and in fact in many ways, local television news does not come close to meeting its potential. For a variety of reasons outlined in this chapter, including assumptions about audience preferences, declining resources that lead to further media consolidation, and structural barriers inherent in the distribution of broadcast news, local television news content is suboptimal. This finding will come as no surprise to political junkies who would never seek out political information on local TV in light of the myriad of other news options available. And yet, the strategic and nationalized focus of local television news coverage may have profound consequences for democracy. First, however, a look at why local television matters.

## Why local TV is poised to be important

It may be the age of the internet, but on average television remains a dominant source of news for most Americans. More specifically, a 2017 Pew survey showed that although the gap between TV and online is narrowing due to younger adults demonstrating a preference for online, half of Americans report often getting news from television, a higher percentage than any other source including online sources (43 percent), radio stations (25 percent), and print newspapers (18 percent) (Gottfried and Shearer, 2017b). Among television audiences, local TV news consistently draws the largest number of viewers, more than national network news (e.g., ABC World News Tonight) or cable news programming (e.g., CNN or Fox News Channel), and supporting evidence attesting to local TV's dominance comes both from self-reported survey data (Matsa, 2018) and from commercial metering data (The Nielsen Company, 2017). Not only are local television news audiences larger than other news sources; among TV news programs, they also draw more racially diverse and younger audiences than national network or cable news shows (The Nielsen Company, 2017).

Perhaps the most important features of local television news audiences, however, have to do with the partisan distribution and political interest level of the viewers who tune in. In the era of media choice (Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013; Prior, 2007), there are plenty of places that the politically interested can go for news. Evidence suggests that partisans tend to selectively opt-in to sources that match their own views (Stroud, 2011), and although a debate exists in the literature (see Arceneaux and Johnson, 2013), there is growing evidence that even if viewers seek out like-minded content, they may be further polarized by it (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007; Martin and Yurukoglu, 2017; Schroeder and Stone, 2015). Local television news audiences – in stark contrast to cable news viewers (and even national network news audiences) – tend to be more diverse in ideological persuasion. A 2017 Pew Research Center report (Matsa, 2018) noted that 36 percent of self-identified Republicans (including those who lean Republican) report tuning in compared to 38 percent of self-identified Democrats (including those who lean Democrat). In other words, local television is not only the dominant source for most Americans; it also reaches large percentages of both parties, a unique position in the polarized era of news consumption.

Unlike audiences of most other news outlets, local television viewers also tend to mirror the average American in important demographics. More specifically, heavy news consumers tend to be on average older, more wealthy, more educated, and more male than the average citizen; the demographic breakdown of local television audiences by contrast looks much more similar to the national average (Matsa, 2018; Kohut et al., 2012). This difference is notable because of the implications for media effects. In particular, classic models of media influence argue that political novices are unlikely to encounter new information but much more likely to be influenced should they encounter it (Zaller, 1992). To the extent that local television news delivers even small doses of public affairs content to those closer to the novice end of the political sophistication spectrum, this information can be very influential precisely because these citizens do not necessarily seek out political content elsewhere and have fewer predispositions. This is well understood by political practitioners who buy up advertising time on local television broadcasts in competitive elections and presidents who routinely reach out to local media (Fowler, 2018). In short, the political messaging on a local broadcast (and the political advertising that airs during its commercial breaks) may be central for conveying information and bolstering the knowledge of an important portion of the electorate.

Of course the question becomes: how much information is available on local TV news? Systematic analyses examining the varying topical foci of local television news broadcasts over the past two decades confirm that political and public affairs content make up a small minority of the

information available on air (Fowler, 2018; Fowler, Goldstein, Hale, and Kaplan, 2007; Hale et al., 2005; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). Whereas crime, disasters, and accidents ('mayhem' topics) tend to be placed upfront (Rosenstiel et al., 2007), civic and public affairs – even during the heat of election season – tend to only be allotted roughly three to five minutes of coverage, less than sports, weather, and commercial breaks (Fowler, 2018).<sup>1</sup> For the reasons outlined above, although the quantity of public affairs content is small, the cumulative political information regular viewers of local TV might gain is still nontrivial and could be influential for political novices. Therefore, the next question is what type of public affairs information do citizens encounter on local newscasts?

### **Why strategic coverage dominates substance in news and why it matters**

One way to measure the type of information provided is to assess its focus – does a story substantively discuss the issue at hand or does it focus on the strategic and tactical considerations of the key players and/or who is ahead? This latter tendency is frequently referred to as strategic, game-framing, and the tendency of news media to frame political and public policy coverage through game-framing has been widely documented (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Dunaway, 2008; Dunaway and Lawrence, 2015; Fallows, 1997; Iyengar, Norpoth, and Hahn, 2004; Patterson, 1993), with additional work suggesting that such coverage has increased over time (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2011; Patterson, 1993).<sup>2</sup> Scholars argue that the game-frame tends to dominate news in part because it aligns with journalistic norms privileging conflict, drama, and familiarity (Gans, 1979; Graber and Dunaway, 2017), and of course strategic competition with winners and losers fits all three. Local television coverage is no exception to the pattern of strategic frame dominance, and in fact may be even less focused on substance (Just et al., 1996; Just, Crigler, and Buhr, 1999).

Election news lends itself easily to coverage of the horserace – who is ahead and who is behind – and the rise and availability of polls in competitive races may actually serve to decrease coverage of substantive issues at the expense of strategic framing (e.g., Dunaway and Lawrence, 2015; Hayes, 2010). Looking at local TV in particular, a study of the 2014 midterm election coverage on Iowa local news found that just 22.9 percent of the election coverage contained some sort of issue coverage, whereas more than half (52.9 percent) featured strategic coverage of the game (Dimitrova and Hu, 2016). These findings echo earlier studies of the 2002 and 2004 elections that also featured strategy and horserace coverage in roughly half of the stories as well (Fowler et al., 2007) and in nearly 75 percent of the coverage in the 2006 elections (Fowler, 2013). Evidence suggests that the game-frame is not limited to election coverage, but rather spills into coverage of public policy as well (Lawrence, 2000). A comprehensive study of local television news coverage of the first open enrollment period for the Affordable Care Act in 2013 and 2014 found that strategic coverage of the politics and conflict surrounding the law was more common than coverage devoted solely to the new insurance products available and details about how citizens might enroll (Gollust, Baum, Niederdeppe, Barry, and Fowler, 2017).

As shown in Figure 18.1, strategic coverage was especially prevalent during the first few months of the open enrollment period, which no doubt was influenced by the government shutdown highlighting disagreement over the ACA during the first two weeks of October. However, strategic coverage of the politics persisted into November well after the government resumed operations. The prominence of politics vastly outweighed the mere 36.3 percent of coverage over the full period that contained any factual policy detail about how to enroll or what the options and penalties might be (Gollust et al., 2017).

The prominence of strategy and horserace coverage has consequences. Evidence suggests that increases in low-quality, strategic coverage of advertising can make campaigns feel more

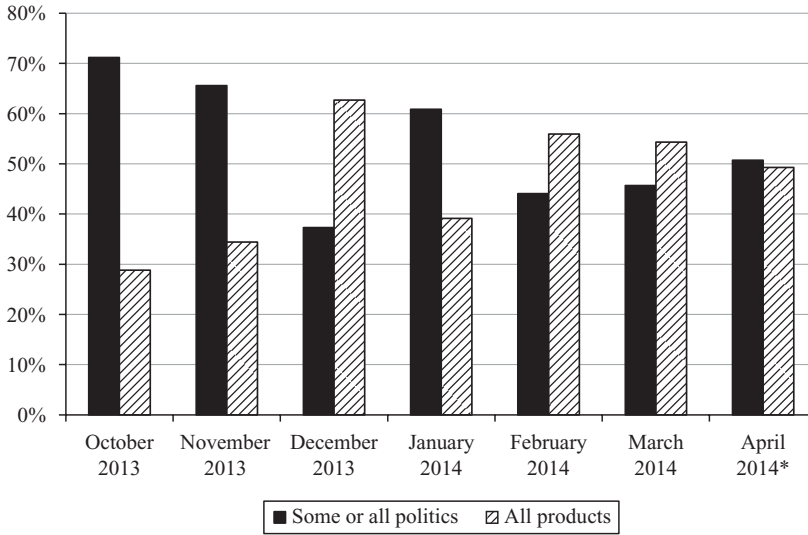


Figure 18.1 Coverage of the Affordable Care Act on local television by focus (October 2013–April 2014)

Source: Graph by author using Wesleyan Media Project data from Gollust et al. (2017). \*April was a partial month due to the end date of the open enrollment period.

negative (Ridout and Fowler, 2012). Scholars have also argued that a focus on strategy and the horserace can lead to higher cynicism among the public (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997), which can heighten polarization and motivated reasoning (Han and Federico, 2018) whereby citizens selectively process information to confirm or maintain their prior beliefs (Taber and Lodge, 2006). It may also lead to missed opportunities for education in both policy and election contexts (Gollust et al., 2017; Hayes, 2010) and has the potential for backlash, which could have profound consequences for public health with people rejecting evidence-based recommendations (Gollust, Fowler, and Niederdeppe, 2019). For example, evidence suggests not only that Republicans are less likely than Democrats to sign up for health insurance even when they need it, but also that emphasizing politics over other considerations exacerbates this tendency (Lerman, Sadin, and Trachtman, 2017).

### The nationalized focus of public affairs on local television coverage

The substantive focus of coverage is not the only reason why local television fails to live up to its democratic potential, however. In theory, local television could also be a crucial information source for local politics given that information on local politicians and local policy impact is less readily available and less likely to appear in national sources. And yet, there are key reasons why local television news does not and likely cannot live up to its democratic potential as a local information purveyor. The reasons for this are multifaceted but include structural factors in news distribution and are likely to be exacerbated by the declining resources and corporate consolidation facing the broader media environment, which will be discussed in turn below in both electoral and public policy contexts.

One key factor prohibiting local media from providing more localized content has to do with the structural factors inherent in the geographical region through which citizens receive their

news (e.g., Schaffner and Sellers, 2003). By definition, local television broadcasts news to residents in their geographic area – a region called a media market, which defines the geographical boundaries within which local news from the market can be received. Crucially, media market areas do not correspond geographically with important political boundaries (e.g., congressional districts or state lines). For example, the Minneapolis media market reaches portions of western Wisconsin; or, at the extreme end, the Philadelphia media market reaches residents of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and northern Maryland. This mismatch in geography between audiences for local news and relevant political boundaries has important substantive consequences for the content of local media because coverage of a congressional race in Delaware would be pertinent to only a fraction of the viewers tuning into Philadelphia’s local TV news.

This discrepancy creates large incentives for broadcasters to focus on more nationalized content, which applies to broader segments of their core audience. As shown clearly in Figure 18.2, this is especially the case in presidential elections where stories focused on the race for the White House overwhelm all other election coverage. And although longitudinal data tracking the same stations over time would be needed to know for certain, the more than three-quarters of stories focused on the presidency in 2012 and 2016 appears to represent an increase from the 60.7 percent of stories from a 2004 study of 44 stations in 11 markets (Fowler et al., 2007).

Studies of news production suggest that the structural size of the media market within which a particular outlet resides can also influence the substantive content and focus of its coverage. Although lots of scholarship argues that outlets in larger markets face more competition and frequently respond by increasing their strategic game-frame coverage (Althaus and Trautman, 2008; Fowler, 2013; Fowler and Ridout, 2009; Just et al., 1996; Sabato, 2000; Zaller, 1999), more recent work further suggests that increasing the national focus of content is also a rational response to competition because citizens are increasingly more engaged with and interested in national compared to state and local politics (Hopkins, 2018). Of course, the less coverage

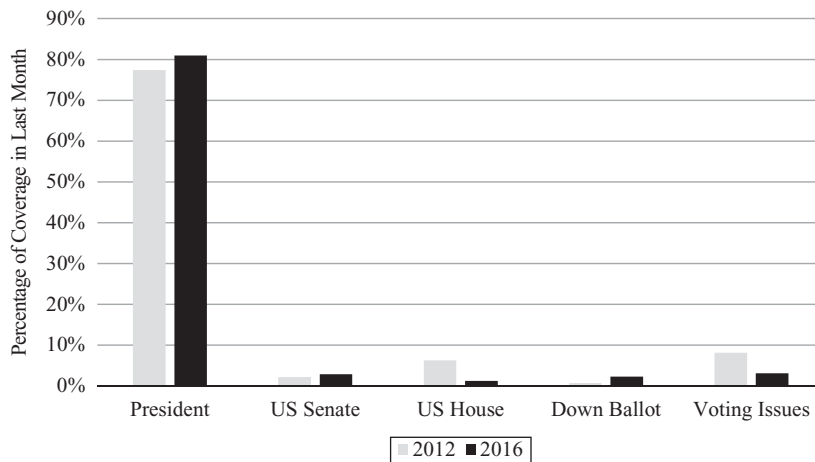


Figure 18.2 Percentages of election stories by office of focus in presidential elections  
 Source: Author’s collection of election news; 2012 data are from a constructed week sample designed to provide representation of all 210 media markets through stratified sampling of one station in each of five media market quintiles defined by population served; 2016 data are from closed captioning key word searches for election content from all four major network stations in nine media markets. In both years, the time frame is the last 30 days of the election cycle and only evening broadcasts for the selected markets/stations are included.

ordinary citizens receive of state and local politics, the less likely they are to develop and sustain an interest in it, meaning that the effects of nationalization may reinforce themselves. Additional evidence suggests that nationalization of news coverage may interact with the substance of the content, leading to even greater focus on strategy over substantive issues given that coverage of in-depth issues tends to correspond more with state and local policy-making than national policy-making (Lawrence, 2000).

An additional structural component affecting the content and focus of news has to do with media ownership (Dunaway, 2008; Gilens and Hertzman, 2000; Milyo, 2007; Yanich, 2014). Consolidation of television outlets among top ownership groups has been occurring for a while (Matsa, 2014). Some work suggests that cross-ownership – arrangements where local newspapers and local television stations in different markets are owned by the same entity – may increase local broadcast political content (Milyo, 2007; but see also Napoli, 2004), and earlier evidence suggested that stations held by larger owners had more local programming (Napoli and Yan, 2007). However, more recent research examining the effects of consolidation of local television stations under one owner in particular finds a large increase in the amount of national politics at the expense of local political coverage (Martin and McCrain, 2018). To the extent that coverage of national politics requires fewer resources to produce and distribute, given the product can be shared across the country, whereas resources spent on local stories will largely only be of interest to the local market, it makes intuitive sense that corporate owners looking to maximize profits would privilege national content. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that consolidation may only amplify corporate tendencies to frame coverage strategically (Dunaway, 2008) and focus on nationalized information (Martin and McCrain, 2018), which may serve only to further polarize American democracy (Hopkins, 2018).

### **Conclusion: implications for democracy**

Local television news is poised to play an important informational role in democracy, both because of the size and the political interest of its core audience, which differs from the typical older, educated male audiences of many other news sources. Yet for a variety of reasons demonstrated above, which include structural barriers inherent in its distribution, it fails to live up to its potential. Specifically, it has a limited capacity to carry coverage of politics and public affairs, and the content it does provide tends to be more nationally than locally focused and more attentive to political conflict at the expense of substantive discussions of policy issues. Although these limitations have always existed, recent work highlights the shrinking audience for state and local politics, which may have profound consequences because it erodes the place-based linkages and other dimensions for finding common ground through which national polarization might be overcome (Hopkins, 2018). Further, the evidence suggests both that audience demand (Hopkins, 2018) and supply-side considerations due to ownership consolidation (Martin and McCrain, 2018) may both be exacerbating these trends. Yet there is little question that important political issues happen at the state and local level, and with local newspapers also in rapid decline, the question becomes: what, if anything, will fill the information void in local politics?

### **Notes**

- 1 Data for the 2016 calculations come from an analysis by the University of Delaware's Danilo Yanich and Allison Becker.
- 2 There is literature distinguishing the dimensions of the game-frame and the strategic frame (Aalberg, Strömbäck, and de Vreese, 2012). For the purposes of this chapter they are lumped together.



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# 19

## FROM JOURNAL OF RECORD TO THE 24/7 NEWS CYCLE

### Perspectives on the changing nature of court reporting in Australia

*Margaret Simons and Jason Bosland*

#### Introduction

Historically, one of the core missions of some print media was to provide the public with a ‘journal of record’ – a comprehensive and impartial account of the operations of civic society. In the late 1800s this function of the press featured in the foundation documents of influential mastheads such as *The Manchester Guardian*, *The Times of London* and the *New York Times* (Scott, 1921; Okrent, 2006). The commitment to the journal of record function was to provide, as put by the early proprietor of the *New York Times*, Adolph Ochs: “all the news ... impartially, without fear or favour, regardless of sect, party or interest, in a clean, dignified and trustworthy manner”.

In Australia, the newspapers claiming journal of record ideals were traditionally *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*. From the outset, the print media made reporting the workings of the courts a key aspect of providing a journal of record. For example, *The Age* published an account of its aspirations in the first issue:

*The Age*: a journal of politics, commerce and philanthropy, dedicated to: The record of Great Movements, the Advocacy of Free Institutions, the Diffusion of Truth, and the Advancement of Man ... In its Reports of public proceedings – the sittings of Council and of the Courts of Law, the meetings of commercial companies and of religious and philanthropic institutions – *The Age* will aim at being comprehensive accurate and impartial.

*(The Age, 1854, 1)*

*The Sydney Morning Herald* echoed these sentiments in 1944:

The *Herald* carries certain traditions and performs certain specialised services for the public which have made it in the past and will still make it in the future inevitably different from other popular papers. Firstly, it is a journal of record, and must carry Law and Parliamentary reports and other serious matter at a length and in a manner not always justified by their news value.

*(Sydney Morning Herald, 1944, 5)*

As can be seen, impartiality and comprehensiveness were key criteria – even more important than news values. The noble aims were not, of course, free from commercial motives. The claim to special journal of record purpose was one of the things that allowed them to carve out a niche, separate from the “yellow press” of their time (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2009; Stephens, 2007).

The journal of record function is also a pivot between law and journalism. The idea that without comprehensive media coverage of civic forums, citizens are deprived of the kind of information that allows them to participate meaningfully in representative democracy is, at least in part, the rationale behind defences in defamation and other laws that protect the ability of the media to report public forums, including parliaments, local government meetings and the courts. Usually, the defences in law rely on the reporting being fair, accurate and contemporaneous (Pearson and Polden, 2014). The right to report the courts free from liability in defamation can also be partially explained by reference to the common law principle of open justice, an extension of the public’s right to attend and observe judicial proceedings (Pearson and Polden, 2014; Stephens, 2007; Barnhurst and Nerone, 2009).

The commitment of the press to comprehensively and impartially report the courts was one of the things that, at least from the early 1800s, allowed the symbiotic relationship between the media and the courts to develop, with newspapers and subsequently broadcasters employing large numbers of court reporters. However, in recent years the civic role played by the media in reporting courts has been challenged. First, the business model that has supported most journalism has come under profound challenge from the move of advertising online. In this context, it is recognised in Western nations that there has been a significant decline in the quantity of court reporting by mainstream media (Waldman, 2011; Warren, 2014; Senate Select Committee, 2018). A retiring chief justice of the Victorian Supreme Court, the Honourable Marilyn Warren, lamented that there were fewer experienced court reporters, and as a result “courts can no longer rely solely on the traditional media to ... guarantee open justice for the public”. She worried that this had the potential to undermine the right to a fair trial (Warren, 2014, 50).

Second, there is evidence that editors, journalists and media proprietors are less committed to ‘journalism of record’. In a number of inquiries into the functioning of the news media in Australia over the last five years, senior editors and proprietors, when asked to define the role of the media in a democracy, disavowed ‘journal of record’ functions as old-fashioned. Being comprehensive and serving the community at large was no longer the aim; editorial judgement based on the demands and interests of the perceived audience was the determining feature (Simons and Buller, 2014; Senate Select Committee, 2018). While it is commonly acknowledged that challenges to the business model have had an impact on court reporting globally, there is little empirical evidence on the nature of these changes; how they interact with changes in media technology; and how all this is impacting on the public functions traditionally fulfilled by court reporting, and the principle of open justice. In this chapter, we go some way to addressing this gap by examining the current state of court reporting through the analysis of interviews conducted with courts reporters, judicial officers and others involved in the court system in Victoria, Australia.

## **Interviews and methodology**

The data was collected as part of a larger Civic Impact of Journalism Project – which examines how the impact of journalism is changing as a result of the collapse of advertising-based business models (Simons et al., 2017). Our examination of court reporting in Victoria is mostly concerned with the way in which it has changed in response to new commercial pressures and the impact of any such changes on the institutions of the courts and open justice. This chapter

examines the first of these issues by revealing the current state of court reporting in Victoria as perceived by the interviewees.

Between 2014 and 2016, we undertook 24 semi-structured one-hour interviews with eight journalists, five lawyers (barristers and solicitors), four judges, five court staff (including four court information officers) and one media information officer from the Victorian police. One interviewee was both a former lawyer and journalist. (In the following, M = media/journalist; J = judicial officer; L = lawyer; C = court staff; D = employee of state department.) Issues and themes from the interviews were then identified separately by each of the co-authors, and those that were identified by both of us as substantial issues are presented for analysis in this chapter.

### **Role, importance and impact of court reporting**

We first set out to obtain interviewees' views on the role, importance and impact of court reporting. There is a considerable literature suggesting that the interests of the court system in open justice, and the priorities of the commercial news media are dissonant and diverging (Schultz, 2000; Rodrick, 2013). Given this, and the commercial pressures described above, it is perhaps surprising and reassuring that the interviewees unanimously acknowledged that court reporting continues to have an important civic impact, and there was substantial agreement between media representatives, judges and court officials about its role. All interviewees except two (J20 and L22) expressed the view that publicity of court proceedings was essential to holding the courts accountable to the public. This was often explicitly framed in terms of democratic accountability (M1, C3, LM13, M14, M16, L21). Some, mostly those with legal training, further acknowledged the central role accountability plays in engendering public confidence in the courts and hence the rule of law (L4, C5, L6, J7, LM13). One judge (J7) placed particular emphasis on the media's role in ensuring confidence in the administration of justice:

It's more likely that the message that the public receives in relation to the results of any particular case will be the message that's mediated through the media, rather than the message that's communicated through the judgment, or the reasons to the judgment ... So although providing reasons for decision is our way of maintaining public confidence ... it's often a journalist's understanding of our reasons.

Some also acknowledged that publicity can have an important "disciplining effect" on judicial conduct and decision-making (M2, C3, L4, C5, J8, M14, M16, M17, M18, L21, M23, C24), and on other participants, including lawyers and witnesses (L9, M23). Journalists, in particular, felt their presence changed the behaviour of participants (M2, M14, M16, M17, M18). Perhaps not surprisingly, the perceived benefits of court reporting reflect justifications conventionally given for the principle of open justice; indeed, many interviewees spoke directly to the media's involvement in open justice as a legal principle (M2, L4, L9, LM13, J19, L21, L22, M23). One (C3) went so far as to say the media were the court's "conduit to the world" and form "part of the court structure". One very experienced reporter said the media "can be seen as almost being part of the system" (M23). Interviewees highlighted the role reports can play in deterring future offending (M1, M2, M18, J20). One reporter told of a case where a magistrate had specifically referred to the presence of the media as a sentencing consideration. Because the case would be reported, he said, it was more important to consider the deterrent effect of sentencing (M18).

Many interviewees emphasised that the benefits of court reporting depended on the extent to which reports were accurate, balanced, comprehensive and clear (L4, L6, J7, M10, C11, D12). Thus, according to one judge (J7), if a journalist's understanding of a case "is wrong or

not sufficiently well communicated, then public confidence in the judiciary is likely to be damaged". However, an overwhelming number believed that, in one way or another, the media often fell short of meeting these criteria. One recurring criticism was that in reporting criminal matters they tended to emphasise, or focus on, the prosecution, creating an incomplete, unbalanced or distorted account of proceedings (L6, L9, L22). As one lawyer (L6) said:

And the way in which media will cover the opening by the prosecution's side of the case, but you'll never hear what the defence was, or if you do, it's well after the damage has been done. And if the person's acquitted, because the public's only heard what the prosecution case was, they then become disillusioned with the courts, which then feeds back into parliament doing things which are draconian.

Another frequent criticism related to the perceived lack of accuracy, balance and comprehensiveness in the reporting of sentencing (L6, J7, J8, C11). A lengthy campaign by one outlet in particular calling for stronger sentencing and criticising judges' decisions was perceived by participants in the court system as having a strong and unfair impact on public opinion (L4, L6, J7, C11). Such coverage was thought to have influenced government policy to limit judicial discretion in sentencing (C15, J7). One judge said:

It is impossible, and I accept, to convey in a short newspaper article or radio or television report all the intricacies of sentencing. But inevitably the media reporting is on the basis that the sentence passed is inadequate. Really, is there any analysis of the trial judge's reasons for imposing sentences? And I think that's the greatest problem that we as judges have with media reporting.

*(J8)*

A lawyer said:

[W]hilst there might be a legitimate attempt to represent the evidence that they've listened to fairly, there's a lot of paraphrasing that goes on, and I think the consequence is the article isn't necessarily then accurate ...

*(L9)*

But a reporter from the outlet known for campaigning on sentencing justified decisions regarding coverage as a reflection of what the average person would think. This was considered both justified and part of the media's role.

And the good test for that is usually just going back to the office, and there's three of us in this office, and saying, this bloke just got this sentence. And see what the reaction amongst the, you know, even just the two there. And that's usually a good test for what your mates would think in the pub, or...

*(M17)*

For one lawyer, accuracy could be a "real problem", but said the media do a good job given their limited resources (L4). For one journalist, accuracy was a big issue due to pressures placed on journalists by media organisations and of having to report several cases at once (M14).

The educational impact of court reporting was also identified by some interviewees (M1, M17, C24); however, this was differently perceived. One judge found "different priorities"

between the courts and the media (J19) to be a source of tension. One information officer and one judge complained about too little straight reporting, and too much opinion writing on the courts (J7, C11). But journalists asserted court reporting was about more than the operations of the courts. It provided the public with a window on society, including issues such as the prevalence and impact of drug abuse (M1), domestic violence (M1, M2, M13) and disadvantage (M2). Reporting the courts enabled the media to paint a full picture of society. Human drama had its own justification for being reported (M1).

LM13, a former journalist turned lawyer, said part of the purpose of court reporting was to educate participants in the process about the views of wider society, to avoid the courts becoming

frenetically sealed ... Too self-regarding or self-referential and I think one of the things that can happen if the law opens itself up to proper journalism, real, serious journalism, lawyers get to see their work reflected back with commentary from educated outsiders, not just insiders.

(LM13)

Some interviewees pointed to cases where reporting had led to social change – a former coroner’s court reporter recalled the reporting of children drowning in swimming pools as leading to stricter regulations (M1). While the civic impact of court reporting was, in one way or another, acknowledged by each interviewee, only one journalist (M23), one of the most experienced court reporters, spoke directly to the issue of the journal of record function. In his experience, there was a palpable rejection of the mission at *The Age*, the broadsheet newspaper where he worked for much of his career:

Look, I think there was talk at *The Age* while I was still there, we’re not a paper of record any more ... You know, that’s not something someone came up to me and said, you know, look ... we’re not a paper of record, you mustn’t do this. But it’s just you’d hear these types of discussions.

The implication is that, rather than providing a “disinterested” account of daily court events, *The Age* has begun presenting and selecting court reports in a manner that would have the greatest appeal to its target audience, as suggested in earlier research referenced above.

### **Changes to court reporting**

Moving away from ‘journal of record’ functions is not, of course, happening in isolation from economic and political forces, and fundamental changes in the media itself, including the advent of social media and commercial pressures from the move of advertising online. With that has gone much of the revenue that paid for journalists in courts. These trends match developments overseas (see Greenslade, 2016; Robins, 2016; Thornton, 2016; Tryhorn, 2009). Here, we draw on our interviews to describe the impact of these changes on the way court reporting is performed, and how this is perceived by judges, court officers and reporters.

### **Resources**

Without exception, informants agreed there had been a long decline in the numbers of journalists reporting courts in Victoria, and as a result significant numbers of cases and



jurisdictions were rarely, if ever, reported. Getting precise numbers was difficult. Courts have only recently established systems of accrediting reporters (C11, C3), so hold no long-term records. Media organisations were unwilling to make records available, and it was in any case not clear that they had reliable headcounts. Sometimes reporters with other specialities would attend particular hearings. A routine part of training for cadet reporters has been attendance at local magistrates' courts, without a necessary expectation of publication. This has now largely disappeared as part of journalists' education (C15, M18, C24). Finally, the large cohorts of suburban and rural and regional journalists who would once routinely attend as part of a varied round of reporting no longer do so due to staff reductions (Carson et al., 2016). One court reporter who had been in the job for two-and-a-half years was able to quantify a loss of five dedicated court reporters in Melbourne during that time, across radio, television and newspapers (M1).

Reporters were increasingly likely to be covering a case without being in court for its duration. In some cases, they would not attend at all, but rely on court information officers. As a result, the media are increasingly reliant on information officers and the provision of judgments, transcripts and other material to do their job (M1, M2, M10, C11, M17, M18, C24). There was concern expressed by some that using such resources in lieu of reporters attending hearings could compromise balance and accuracy (L22). However, it was clear that the information officers could not, and did not seek to, replace the reporter role. Largely, they were reactive, responding to requests from journalists about cases (C11, C15). New media allowed quick responses to journalists' requests. Court information officer C5 said:

When I started, if a journalist wanted a judgment and then very early on they had to go and pay for it, which was not an insubstantial amount of money. And they had to get a hard copy and then that'd have to get run off and whether they'd get it same day. And of course now with the advent of the net, we can flick things around pretty quickly, like judgments are sent in on that same day ... timeliness for a journalist is absolutely critical.

### ***Education and experience***

The emerging deficit in court reporting capacity lay also in experience. Older, experienced reporters had left, retiring or falling to newsroom cutbacks, to be replaced by more junior journalists. This had a hard to quantify but real impact – perceived by judges, information officers and journalists. On the morning of our interview with M1, a murder trial in the Supreme Court had been aborted because a reporter broadcast information that wasn't presented to the jury. A retrial had been ordered.

She's been covering courts a while but yes doesn't have the experience that a predecessor would ... it'd be, like a horrible position to be in for her but also yes, you're talking about someone's justice being pushed back months, you know hundreds of thousands of dollars in time just gone and yes, you go through it all again.

(M1)

Informal information sharing networks on which journalists once relied have declined – partly because of an increase in police media management. The once routine practice of contacting police prosecutors for tip-offs on interesting cases is now mostly a thing of the past (D12, J19, M10, M17).

Lawyers and information officers reported that they were more often asked very basic questions about operations of cases and what could and couldn't be reported (C5, C3, L9). Lawyers, information officers and judges spoke fondly of the days when experienced court reporters of long standing – they named individuals – were part of the informal community around the courts and informal information exchanges, including gossip (C5, L6, C15, J7). Four such had left the industry in the months before our interviews. Judicial officers and court staff were aware that these experienced reporters played an important role in educating and training younger reporters, both formally and informally. Sometimes, we were told, lawyers and information officers would use their relationships with the experienced court reporters to ask younger reporters to be informed of errors in protocol or in stories (C5, C3, J7).

### ***Story selection***

A combination of the resourcing issues and the advent of new media resulted in changes to the way choices were made about what cases to cover. Journalistic informants described a speedy yet complicated and nuanced method. As specialists, part of their function was to inform editors and producers about what was going on in the courts, and suggest which cases should be covered. On any day there were up to a dozen that were of potential interest. The selection was made in an interchange between news desk and reporter (M1, M2, M10, M14, M16, M17, M18).

New media has had an impact on news values. Whereas once the availability of pictures and video had little impact on decisions, now a case was far more likely to be covered by all media if there was CCTV, which was popular with online audiences and would often “go viral”. Stories now had two different audiences who accessed and used the material in different ways. One reporter nominated a “quirky” crime story about how a man dressed up as a woman had robbed a McDonald's as an example. This was written up in two paragraphs in the newspaper and ran on a back page, but did well online because there was CCTV. The story, he acknowledged, was not exceptional or important. The sentence was not even reported. Online CCTV footage from the courts was equivalent to entertainment, he said, whereas a text report was more likely to allow him to explain, educate and inform. He believed web publication and the increasing prevalence of CCTV footage in evidence had led to a greater reporting of crime than would otherwise be the case (M1).

Civil cases received significantly less coverage than criminal cases (L21, M23), although it was suggested that commercial and technology cases tend to be covered by specialists rather than general court reporters (M23). Suburban magistrates' courts were almost completely unreported and local police believe this has an impact on deterrence – one of the purposes of open justice (D12; Carson et al., 2016). As well as actual court reports, there is also an accompanying lack of legal commentary. There is no dedicated law reporter (as opposed to court reporters) in Victoria at present, whereas previously the ABC had two and the *Herald Sun* one. Law reform measures, institutional changes in the courts and the legal system and controversies in the legal community are all less likely to be reported (LM13, L4). Reporters also said they rarely had the time to write the “wrap-up” or feature articles at the conclusion of important cases (M2, M18). The loss of this mattered, it was suggested, because these offered an opportunity for the public to be educated about issues in a case and how the system operated (L4, M2, C15, M16, M10).

### ***Impact of technology on media environment***

Technology had had other significant impacts. Whereas once media worked to a single deadline – evening news bulletins and daily newspaper deadlines – there was now a continuous

demand for content, despite reduced resources (M1, M18, C24). As one journalist (M18) graphically described:

... it is just like a black hole, it is like a beast just rolling across the fucking, the territory. It sucks up everything, they just need news and they need information, they need all sorts of shit.

This reporter believed web and social media publication plus the capacity for organisations to closely measure audiences' consumption had led to a greater hunger for 'clickbait' and trivia:

I mean, look at the stories that rate high on particular websites? You know, it is sex, it is trivia, it is fucking TV you know ... stories of input and substance most of the time they rate shit. Trivia just goes through the fucking roof.

Others acknowledged the pressures, but said news values of prominence and significance were still followed.

They are the big, high-profile, we are always going to cover the big, high-profile cases. So it's actually not really a conversation we have, we just know which ones have to be covered.

*(M16)*

A related issue is the understanding that with open courts, the potential is there for untrained members of the public to publish reports. After considerable internal discussion (C11; Warren, 2014), most courts now allow court reporters to use electronic devices in court, including for live updates to social media, and this is reflected in guidelines for media (County Court, 2016, Supreme Court, 2006). This, in turn, has led to courts accrediting reporters in order to police the system. Implicit in these arrangements are assumptions that reporters are more likely to understand legal limitations. Not only does the need for accreditation to use electronic devices exert a level of control over mainstream media journalists; presumably, it acts as a disincentive to citizen journalists.

## **Conclusion**

The data we have gathered is, we argue, powerful evidence that mainstream media court reporting matters. Social media and web publication mean that the public now hear about what is happening in some courts much faster than was once the case, but at the same time local courts are barely reported, and many areas of the legal system go unreported. So to what extent can the news media be relied upon to continue to serve open justice? It is not a simple question. The news media industry is one of the fastest changing on the planet. Technological innovation will continue to alter both the business model and the ways in which the public receives its news.

The survival of journal of record functions should be of great public concern. Indeed, the reduction in court reporting and other 'journal of record' functions was a key concern highlighted in the recent inquiry by the Senate Select Committee on the Future of Public Interest Journalism (Senate Select Committee, 2018). Notably, this inquiry broadly accepted that declines in news reporting were a significant social issue that justified a response by government, in the interests of a healthy democracy. The inquiry considered a range of measures

by which governments might address emerging deficits in reporting, including direct subsidies and grants to news organisations. This was rejected, but the inquiry recommended better funding for public broadcasters and consideration of modifications to the tax system to aid public-interest journalism (Senate Select Committee, 2018). Meanwhile, in European countries and in Canada, similar concerns about the decline in news media have resulted in a number of responses, including direct government subsidies to media, tax reform and increased rewards for innovation and industry initiatives (MEAA, 2017). We suggest that these options, and others, be further examined as a means of supporting the important civic function of reporting the workings of the courts to the public, whether it be via traditional media or new and emerging players.

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## PART IV

# Ownership and sustainability of local media



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# BUSINESS AND OWNERSHIP OF LOCAL MEDIA

## An international perspective

*Bill Reader and John Hatcher*

### **Introduction: economic considerations of the ‘local news crisis’**

Local news media have always been conflicted by their allegiances to two masters: the communities they inform, and the revenue streams that sustain them. But in an age of profound disruption, that conflict is changing. Globally, the appetite for quality local journalism appears healthy; however, reliable revenue is increasingly elusive. While legacy media try to adapt, start-ups are stepping in to provide local news without the institutional baggage of legacy media. Yet local media using time-honored models may still be the most sustainable. Subscriptions and advertising remain viable where residents (including advertisers) happily support local media. Special sections remain important advertising vehicles that sustain revenue-negative coverage of public affairs. Less sustainable are ancillary revenue streams supplanted by an ever-growing array of dedicated channels for obituaries, personal announcements, classified ads, event announcements, and the like. Although not ‘new’, alternative revenue streams are gaining appeal, such as sponsored community events, voluntary memberships, ‘premium’ content, and monetized archives. For every financial challenge facing local news media there are numerous opportunities for adaptation, but that is often hampered by entrenched business philosophies and protectionist management styles. The future of reliable, good-quality local news is clearly up to innovators.

### **Local news: one size does not fit all**

‘Local news’ is a broad category that includes multiple platforms. Most obvious are traditional local media: newspapers, broadcasters, and websites. Other platforms include social media, public loudspeakers (Semujju, 2017), volunteer-operated ‘hyperlocals’ (Barnet and Townend, 2015) – even word of mouth (Coleman et al., 2016). Local news, therefore, is defined more by the nature of the content than by geography – for example, *Die Zeit* has a ‘Hamburg’ section, but overall it is a national newspaper. Truly *local* news involves a range of content that all has ‘proximity’ as the principal news value.

Unfortunately, assessments about the quality of local news media too often focus on whether they do investigative journalism (Hallock, 2010). However, truly local news media usually focus more on the mundanities of community life: “It involves reporting on all manner of personal

tragedies: fires, auto accidents, crimes, children fighting ghastly diseases ... [and] documentation of the events, activities, meals, meetings and gatherings where the glue of the community gets applied” (Lauterer, 2006, 26). Although concerns about a ‘local news crisis’ largely focus on the decline of metro-region newspapers (Sullivan, 2018; Martin, 2018), short shrift is given to the role of genuinely local, rather than regional, news media.

In 2019, when this was written, local print newspapers were still preferred to digital in North America and Western Europe (Chyi and Tenenboim, 2017; Thurman, 2018). Digital platforms may be partly responsible for decreased overall circulation: “the industry hastened its own decline ... via the establishment of free online versions of their printed product” (Mierzejewska et al., 2017). For both metro and local newspapers, digital subscriptions have generally lagged behind print subscriptions – consider Japan, where more than 90 percent of the population uses the Internet (ITU, 2018) but high readership and profitability of print makes that format the emphasis of newspaper executives (Villi and Hayashi, 2017). Rising print readership in India correlates with increased literacy rates and the growth of the vernacular newspaper sector (Bamezai et al., 2011; Udupa, 2012). In post-apartheid South Africa, the 2000s saw dramatic increases in literacy rates, political engagement, and newspaper readership (Bauer, 2009). In more mature media markets, however, the early 2000s saw the closing of hundreds of local newspapers in the US (Reader, 2018) and the UK (Ponsford, 2012), declines of regional newspaper readership in France (Rouger, 2008) and declining audience for free ‘city papers’ in Spain (Garcia et al., 2014).

In the West, the decline of traditional local media also correlates with declines in young-adult interest in local news (Drok et al., 2018; Wadring et al., 2015). The Millennial and Gen Z generations prefer local news “geared towards them” rather than general-interest community news (Zerba, 2013). They want that news delivered to their smartphones for free, enabled with social-media feeds and location services (Weiss, 2013). That trend was predicted by Nicholas Negroponte in the early 1990s: ‘The Daily Me’ (Negroponte, 1995, 153). Trying to gain young-adult customers, local media may focus more on ‘soft’ news while retreating from ‘serious’ coverage of public affairs that communities need (Meyer, 2004).

### **Legacy media’s retraction from local journalism**

Many legacy news organizations have de-emphasized locally produced news in lieu of national/global news from centralized newsrooms, as happened with state-funded broadcasting networks in Australia (Freeman et al., 2017) and Norway (Sjøvaag, 2012). Meanwhile, consolidated ownership of commercial local radio led to reductions in local news in the UK (McDonald and Starkey, 2016), the US (Saffran, 2011), and Mexico (Leree, 2005). A common presumption is that corporate ‘chain’ ownership erodes the quantity and quality of coverage (Baker, 2006; Fenton, 2011; Gans, 2003; McChesney, 2004). Since the 1990s, chain buyouts have resulted in layoffs as well as reduced coverage of local government and public affairs (Meyer, 2004). Media economist Stephen Lacy and others contend that since the 1980s, decisions to cut staff and newsroom investment, to centralize production, and to buy out competition has resulted in a diminished local-news product that no longer appeals to readers (Lacy et al., 2014). Many corporations misuse their channels to lobby for chain-friendly regulations, such as relaxation of South Korea’s media ownership limitations (Sup Park, 2014), promotion of companies’ other media products in Belgium (Panis et al., 2015), and deregulation of broadcasting in the US (Saffran, 2011; Scott et al., 2008). Some chains engage in advertising price-fixing that disadvantages independent local media, as happened in South Africa (Kubheka, 2018).

As chains downsize or eliminate local newsrooms, local officials and civic groups may circumvent local news outlets entirely and communicate their news directly to the public via

social media (Carson et al., 2016). In communities where there are no local news media, local governments and organizations may have no other option than to self-report via social networks (Coleman et al., 2016). There is considerable evidence that the local news crisis is a result of, not a cause of, an industry-wide cut in local news coverage. As such, much attention is turning to business models that prioritize serious local news over ‘fluff’ and long-term sustainability over short-term profits.

### **‘Hyperlocal’ media and the digital divide**

Some of the diminishing local coverage may be augmented by community radio and digital ‘hyperlocal’ sites (Naidi and Picard, 2012), but many are “shoestring operations run by volunteers” (Barnett and Townend, 2015) or universities’ student-training projects (Huesca, 2014; Wagg, 2004) with small, insular audiences (Nelson, 2018). Even large, well-funded hyperlocals have struggled. Several ‘big hyperlocals’ (with more than 20 employees) identified in 2013 (Chadha, 2016) dramatically cut staffs or have gone out of business within a few years (Bilton, 2017). Nonprofit ‘big hyperlocals’ are not immune. In 2011, the award-winning *Voice of San Diego* laid off four from its already small staff (Plautz, 2011). Many ‘big hyperlocals’ are not really hyperlocal. Half of the 144 sites in a 2013 survey covered entire cities, while fewer than a quarter focused on distinct neighborhoods or small towns (Chadha, 2016). Still, those hyperlocals tended to cover mostly public-service news, whereas for-profit sites covered more soft content about the arts or lifestyle.

Hyperlocal news sites often suffer from small, inexperienced staffs, unsustainable revenue streams (many launch with one-time start-up grants), and small, niche audiences unrepresentative of the larger communities. Even professional, for-profit hyperlocals can have difficulty. In late 2017, revenue shortfalls at Spirited Media’s millennial-targeted hyperlocal sites in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Denver forced layoffs; in March 2019, the company put its sites up for sale (Schmidt, 2019). Similar ‘young professional’ hyperlocals in the six-city DNAInfo/Gothamist stable shut entirely after employees voted to unionize amid flagging revenue (Bilton, 2017). Patch Media, launched in 2007 in thousands of relatively affluent suburbs and urban neighborhoods, started with a promise of one editor for each community; after years of shortfalls and cuts, Patch was sold in 2014 and, in late 2017, was down to 1,200 local sites covered by a staff of 148 – eight sites per ‘local’ editor (Sluis, 2017). Research suggests hyperlocals are unlikely to replace legacy local media; *Columbia Journalism Review* publisher Kyle Pope said:

The notion that there is this sort of healthy infrastructure of hyper-local digital sites, that’s not happening. There are a lot of sort of one-and-two-person blogs ... that actually do quite well, but those places are incredibly resource constrained.

*(Martin, 2018)*

Although nonprofit hyperlocals may prioritize serious news over advertising-friendly ‘fluff,’ their sustainability is problematic at best.

Another shortfall of the hyperlocal business model is that it is essentially sustainable only in relatively affluent, (sub)urban, technologically advanced communities because of reliance on accessible digital networks. Yet more than half the world’s population do not have broadband access (Broadband Commission, 2017), with the greatest deficit in low-income and rural communities globally, including underserved urban neighborhoods (Napoli, Weber, McCollough, and Wang, 2018). For half of the people in the world, ‘digital hyperlocal news’ is simply not an option.

### Ownership: style over substance?

Correlations between ownership and local-news quality are complicated. The type of ownership does not predict the management style adopted. Local news media can be sustainable under any ownership model so long as the management style prioritizes local coverage of serious news. Within the industry, there are managers who view local journalism as just another business opportunity and those who view it as a public service. In his typology of community news media, Lauterer (2006) notes that the best are those where ‘the owner has an investment in the community as well as the newspaper,’ while the worst ‘can be plagued by uninvolved management, low-grade talent, a bottom-line focus, and draconian edicts handed down by a distant, remote owner’ (40–41). Any ownership model can prioritize (and profit from) an emphasis on good-quality, reasonably sustainable local news.

[S]table, financially strong, and well-managed companies are more likely to perform well in public-interest terms because [media] need financial strength to invest in serious coverage and to challenge entrenched interests.

*(Picard and Weezel, 2008, 29)*

That applies to rural communities as well as metropolitan media, although the latter can more readily tap the benefits of population density (and economies of scale) while the former benefit from little, if any, direct competition.

Corporate ownership gets the most attention, and many scholars suggest that the model inherently diminishes the quantity and quality of local news (Baker, 2006; Fenton, 2011; Gans, 2003; Lacy et al., 2014). Yet, unlike independent local media, chain ownership may spare newsrooms from being beholden to local establishments or avoiding critical coverage (Fitzgerald and Saba, 2006) and may prioritize journalistic quality, professional development, and workplace diversity (Demers, 1999). A study of more than 200 European media outlets across 32 markets found transnational ‘chain’ ownership often correlated with more editorial independence for local newsrooms compared to family-owned independents and media-mogul empires (Hanretty, 2014). Some chains may invest more in local news than others and remain competitive, as was found in a study of local-news companies in New Zealand (Gibbons, 2014).

Family-owned independent papers, meanwhile, may be more susceptible to conflicts of interest due to the owners’ social ties and “complex tax issues” that can discourage multi-generational ownership (Picard and Weezel, 2008, 26). Some independent owners may be committed to public service, but others may use local media as platforms to promote their pecuniary or political interests (Stetka, 2012). In Romania, for example, there is widespread belief that local media are controlled or “owned indirectly” by politicians and business leaders “who use them to further personal, political or business goals” (Stănuș, 2011, 114). A study in New Brunswick, Canada, showed concentrated ownership by one family company resulted in allegations of anti-competitive behaviors and a decline in editorial independence (Couture, 2013). Unlike chain owners, however, independents may be more concerned with sustainability or increasing socio-political influence than maximizing profits. Privately owned local media also may be seen as more ‘in touch’ or trustworthy than chain or state-funded media, as Kalyango and Vultee (2012) found to be the case in Ethiopia and Rwanda.

Of all the ownership models, the nonprofit model may have the highest potential to prioritize public service above financial gains, but that correlates with financial instability (Picard and Weezel, 2008). Since the 1990s, the number of nonprofit media has grown in some parts of the world and lagged in others. By the 2010s, Benin, Mali, Mozambique, and South Africa have

seen significant growth of community radio, but local community radio was largely undeveloped in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Uganda (Mendel, 2013, 31–33). Community radio blossomed in Western Europe, but was lacking in Central-Eastern and Eastern nations (Mendel, 2013, 36). Community radio flourished in Latin America by the late twentieth century, but its advancement in the early twenty-first century was added by government censorship and regulation (Mendel, 2013, 39). Another challenge for nonprofits, obviously, is commercial competition. In Kenya, where radio listenership is estimated at more than 70 percent, just 25 of the 139 FM stations on air in 2016 were community stations; most vernacular radio stations are not really ‘community’ stations, but rather corporate-owned with centrally produced content (Kimani, 2017). The quality of nonprofit journalism also varies widely. Many community media outlets rely on untrained volunteers, which provides a sustainable business model (Order, 2017, 246) but an unreliable quality of news.

Government-funded media may provide quality regional and national news, but are unlikely to provide consistent local coverage. State-funded media from Australia (Freeman et al., 2017) to Zimbabwe (Mpfu, 2016) often have top-down, centralized management. National media may also undercut local news; Mensing (2017) notes that US public radio network NPR has shifted focus more to national programming and expanded online offerings that can undermine local stations whose audiences “will bypass local programming and access NPR directly through the national online site” (Mensing, 2017, 241). From a management standpoint, it is unreasonable to expect state-funded news organizations to have robust local news outlets – staffing, production, and management costs would be much too high.

An alternative to state-owned media are grants, subsidies, tax breaks, “and other government aid packages” (Pillay, 2003, 407). Such programs usually support a relatively small number of outlets, and often provide only seed money for projects that collapse when start-up funds run out. For example, South Africa’s Media Development and Diversity Agency, created to serve disadvantaged communities (Republic of South Africa, 2002), in 2016–2017 spent R73 million (about €4.3 million) to fund just 40 community stations (less than half of all community stations) and 18 print/digital publications, most in rural communities (MDDA, 2017). The project is funded by the general treasury, specific taxes on broadcasting licenses, and voluntary contributions from corporate media, but has “not received funding from the print sector for the past two years” (MDDA, 2017, 8) such that,

the mainstream print media poses a considerable threat to the sustainability of community media in terms of, amongst others, competition for advertising.

*(MDDA, 2017, 11)*

Meanwhile, many independent newspapers feared MDDA-funded publications undercut their profitability as they faced increased (and unfair) competition from large chains (Arenstein, 2005). That example illustrates how state-funded local news initiatives may unwittingly harm the sustainability of established local media.

### **‘Community connector’ as a business model, not just a slogan**

The ‘community journalism’ philosophy (Reader and Hatcher, 2012) is integral to many of the new business models sustaining local news (Hansen et al., 2018). To adapt, organizations must be willing to build more engaged relationships with audiences (Marchionni, 2012). The question is whether legacy media are capable of the institutional change required to overcome the top-down, elite-driven tendencies of media companies (Entman, 1990; Tuchman,

1980). The advertiser-driven approach is no longer sustainable in many communities; instead, local media organizations are experimenting with approaches that view the audience as funder via memberships, sponsorships, and fundraising for specific projects (Hansen et al., 2018). An impediment for legacy media is that the public may be reluctant to contribute to for-profit organizations (Sill, 2011; Hansen et al., 2018), especially if the for-profit outlet cuts staff and coverage to maximize profits. It's unclear whether legacy local media will eventually change from profit-oriented management to community-oriented models. Such a change would require them

to reimagine journalism in context ... that fosters trustworthy relationships, encourages learning, develops the capacity for holistic thinking, and inspires organizational responsibility and accountability.

(Holman et al., 2017, 8)

As global society becomes more interconnected, the desire to (re)connect with a sense of place is enjoying revitalization: consider growth of the 'locavore' food movement, place-based entrepreneurship, and neighborhood organizations tackling local problems. That 'shift to local' includes demand for quality local news.

Interestingly, most of those 'new' visions of journalism embrace ideals of traditional 'community journalism' – the belief that community journalists must be engaged, enthusiastic members of communities they cover (Lauterer, 2006; Reader and Hatcher, 2012; Hatcher, 2017a). Most research assumes a homogeneous situation for news, but local news organizations' experiences are unique to their communities (Ali et al., 2018). For some, the status quo is most sustainable – in many communities, advertising-driven, print-oriented local newspapers continue to be viable (Hatcher, 2017b; Radcliff and Ali, 2017). However, in poor communities, local news (if any) is often substandard. Communities that need good local journalism are most often those least likely to be able to sustain it (Napoli et al., 2018). Nor can alternative business models work alone in underserved communities. Perhaps the most sustainable business model for local news is a diversified approach – some mixture of government funding, citizen memberships, sponsored content, philanthropic investment, NGO grants, and/or 'Robin Hood' profit-shifting schemes. Legacy news outlets that prioritize community service may be the most sustainable, perhaps because citizens reject media for whom 'community service' is empty rhetoric and support media for which 'community service' is an observable practice.

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# LOCAL MEDIA OWNERS AS SAVIOURS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

## They save money, not journalism

*Lenka Waschková Čísařová*

### Introduction

As Ryan Chittum pointed out in 2013, we have entered the oft-predicted *billionaire saviour* phase of the newspaper industry's collapse: where businessmen from different sectors invest in the outlets. Michael Wagner and Timothy Collins (2014) added that these saviours come with consequences and Dean Starkman (2013) argued that in the new model, "journalism ... is enveloped by, and dependent upon, interests far larger and quite different from its own" (Starkman, 2013). This study explores the consequences of billionaire saviour ownership through data collected in qualitative interviews with Czech journalists, and focuses on the shifts in their perceptions after ownership changes from a traditional owner to a 'saviour'. Particular attention is paid to the owners' impact on how the interviewees understand that owner's role in the media house and how such changes impact journalistic autonomy.

### Media ownership (change) matters

The importance of the possible influence of ownership is based on the tradition that democratic journalism stands as a wall (or iron curtain; see Örnebring, 2013) between the owner/business and journalist/editorial sides of the news organisation (Skovsgaard, 2014; Witschge and Nygren, 2009). But, as Wagner and Collins (2014, 761) point out, "both journalistic lore and the literature contain examples of this norm being violated", and Witschge and Nygren (2009) depict the disintegration of the wall as the result of economic changes.

Journalism is more connected than ever to finance and the old wall between the newsroom and the advertising and finance departments is no longer the great wall of China, but more the Berlin wall, crumbling and seen as a museum piece.

*(Witschge and Nygren, 2009, 48)*

Hanitzsch and Berganza (2012, 797) point out, "ownership has long been established as a major, if not the most important factor that shapes news production at the organizational level". Media

ownership, as an analytical topic, is more relevant when not only the ownership, but even the type and concentration of ownership, changes: when fewer owners control more media; when most of the media outlets have been absorbed in concentrated ownership; when independently owned media are disappearing (cf. Wagner and Collins, 2014; Meier, 2002; Coulson and Hansen, 1995; Beam, 1993).

Research into the changing ownership of local media brings a broad spectrum of findings, challenging, for example, simplistic assumptions that either large companies or locally controlled media are better (e.g., Coulson, 1994; Rosenstiel et al., 2003). However, others argue that independent ownership supports better local content. When editors and reporters were asked about the quality of their newspapers' local news and opinion sections,

group editors expressed greater dissatisfaction with their newsroom budgets and other resources. They also were seen as receiving less pressure from advertisers and special interest groups. By comparison, independently owned newspapers were considered to have a better understanding of their local markets and to be more involved in their communities.

*(Coulson, 1994, 403)*

### **Owners as saviours**

Many media acquisitions are made by billionaires without previous experience in the business (e.g., Smith, 2018; Chittum, 2013; Wagner and Collins, 2014; Starkman, 2013). Although we lack relevant data about the consequences of this type of ownership, we at least have an answer to the question: why do billionaires buy media?

[It is a] combination of civic-mindedness, profit motive, and raw self-interest in using the power of the news organization for their own purposes.

*(Smith, 2018)*

However, we cannot generalize whether this change is harmful or helpful (Rosenstiel et al., 2003, 5).

The establishment of a new owner is often the focal point for verification of the assumed owners' influence. Research suggests that content changes (Wagner and Collins, 2014; Coulson and Hansen, 1995) or organizational changes (Beam, 1993) are linked with ownership changes. These factors are expected to be the most visible manifestation of owners' influence and they have a common denominator: commercialization (Compaine and Gomery, 2000). Meier argues that the main threat to the freedom of expression is that private entrepreneurs tend to monopolize the marketplace of ideas in the name of economic efficiency and private profit.

The global interlocking of the media industry and traditional corporate power creates a powerful cartel, which in turn encourages the spread of certain values (for example, consumerism, shareholder value, individualism, egoism, etc.).

*(2000, 300)*

Ownership structure affects both goals and behaviours of media organizations (Wagner and Collins, 2014) and there are various, mainly economic, implications for this influence (Compaine and Gomery, 2000). Every owner has to decide "whether the primary motivation of a successful

newspaper group is allegiance to its readers or its stockholders” (Coulson and Hansen, 1995, 205). However, the economic prism is in direct contradiction with the values and characteristics of local media (Fenton et al., 2010; Coulson, 1994) and the owners’ emphasis on profit causes *delocalization* (Franklin, 2006; Waschková Císařová, 2013, 2017b). Owners’ profit orientation ends in reducing the media budget (Cushion, 2007), which results in content delocalization, reduced staffing, and disruption in relationships with audiences (Wagner and Collins, 2014; Coulson, 1994; for more about *closeness*, see Waschková Císařová, 2017a). As Coulson (1994, 404) adds, “as the number of newspapers in a group increased, the number of lines of news content decreased” (cf. Waschková Císařová, 2016). With this in mind, when an owner cuts costs and reduces quality (Coulson, 1994), such media fail to satisfy the local audiences and shift their business model to audience equity. Smith (2018) considers the *audience equity business model* to be sustainable for local media because it emphasizes listening to the audience before making key decisions.

The solution that seems most obvious in 2018 is a local news organization with a real economy of scale, audience equity, and the financial support of its readers. Such an organization would be free from the grinding pursuit of pageviews and ad-impressions, able to devote the entire weight of its enterprise to satisfying its readers.

(Smith, 2018)

### Journalists’ perception of media owners

One aim of this chapter is to explore the journalists’ perception of both the owner’s role and the consequences of ownership changes. Importantly, journalists may understand the problem differently from researchers.

Trends on the institutional level (described using general words like ‘commercialisation’ or ‘tabloidisation’) may be perceived differently on the individual level or not perceived at all (something that at least in part may explain the divergent results of the perceived influences research).

(Örnebring et al., 2016, 310)

The journalists’ perspective is significant because, normatively, journalists tend to protect their professional goals instead of those of the organization, owner, or executives (Matić, 2016; Price, 2003). As Godole (2015, 369) argues, “journalists as well as media owners should be treated as actors with their own pragmatic interests”. The tension (or conflict, e.g., Skovsgaard, 2014) between journalist and organizational goals is encompassed in the concept of *professional autonomy*:

the degree of self-governance within the profession, and the extent to which the profession is independent of other societal institutions, primarily the state and the market.

(Örnebring, 2013, 39)

This relates to the degree of control journalists have over their own work (Skovsgaard, 2014; Witschge and Nygren, 2009; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013), and the potential limits of that autonomy. This is important because these limits are considered to be a challenge both for democracy and for journalists’ sense of value:

Autonomy is what makes citizens trust that journalists provide them with the unbiased information they need to participate in democratic processes. Furthermore, professional autonomy has been shown to be a significant predictor of job satisfaction among journalists.

*(Skovsgaard, 2014, 345)*

Constraints on autonomy come from various sources. Some point to hierarchically structured models of influence: external, internal, individual, organizational, societal – others to political and economic factors (see Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Örnebring et al., 2016; Örnebring, 2013; Skovsgaard, 2014; Coulson and Hansen, 1995; Price, 2003). Here I focus on internal models, concerning the degree of control journalists have over their own work within organizations, which Örnebring et al. (2016, 307–308) note “have been less intensely and publicly debated”.

Individual autonomy is directly influenced by organizational structure and its hierarchy. Journalists are instructed by various superiors – editors, editors-in-chief, and, in some cases, owners (Skovsgaard, 2014; Örnebring et al., 2016; Matić, 2016; Meier, 2002; Cushion, 2007; Price, 2003). This text focuses on the internal dynamics of a particular news organization: on the owner role; the journalist perspective of ownership change; and on the relations within the workplace. Such a focus has to acknowledge that internal stakeholders are also intermediaries of external factors such as the organization’s economic goals at management and owner levels (Skovsgaard, 2014; Matić, 2016).

Research has shown journalists can experience a range of potential owner influence that devalues the journalist role (Cushion, 2007) or erodes job satisfaction (Price, 2003). These pressures can have political or economic (advertising) dimensions (Örnebring et al., 2016; Godole, 2015; Meier, 2002), but the most visible is direct pressure to either publish or withdraw certain content. Nevertheless, journalists usually deny that they have ever experienced such pressure, or admit it indirectly: “my colleague was in such a situation” (Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Cushion, 2007; Meier, 2002):

There is a kind of third-person effect at work regarding how autonomy is perceived: yes, journalism is becoming more commercialised, but only other journalists are affected by it, not me.

*(Örnebring et al., 2016, 308)*

The important questions are whether journalists actually reflect these potential influences and consider them important in their work and to what extent journalists believe their work is influenced by them. Some journalists simply do not recognize such pressures because newsroom socialization processes generate conformity (Godole, 2015), and some forms of owner influence and control do not always come directly. For example, cost-cutting and its consequences are, in the journalists’ perception, often unrelated to owner decisions (Meier, 2002; Cushion, 2007; Price, 2003; Skovsgaard, 2014). Matić (2016, 3) is more critical and concludes that journalists,

like a frog slowly being boiled alive, became used to the increasing commercialisation and tabloidization ... the drastic departures from professional rules and ethics required from them in order to receive their salaries.

Quantitative data from the Worlds of Journalism Study reveals Czech journalists’ perception of ownership change, particularly before and after a big ownership shift in 2013 (Němcová

Tejkalová et al., 2015; Hájek et al., 2015). It demonstrated that the Czech media landscape had changed: journalists worked for multiple news outlets; experienced less job security; and there was more owner pressure on journalists to work harder for higher profits. Journalists felt their managers had a big influence on the staff and the content; they perceived owner influence as having doubled in comparison with the previous era. There was a rise in the number of journalists who felt that the pressure for profit had increased – and, paradoxically, that the influence of media owners seemed to be less important for local journalists (Němcová Tejkalová et al., 2015; Hájek et al., 2015).

### Czech local media owners

Besides anecdotal evidence about owner and manager interference, only a limited number of studies of media ownership in the Czech Republic are available (cf. Waschková Císařová and Metyková, 2015; Němcová Tejkalová et al., 2015; Hájek et al., 2015; Metyková and Waschková Císařová, 2009). But understanding changes in media ownership – and specifically in the ownership of Czech local media – is relevant for more substantial reasons.

1. In the Czech Republic in 2015, changes in print media ownership resulted in a total replacement of previously dominant foreign owners by local businessmen, billionaire saviours (see Chittum, 2013).
2. This development is relevant within the globalized international media framework.
3. The important, but fragile, local print media were a crucial part of the ownership changes and can serve as typical examples for research about ownership change.

Local press ownership in the Czech Republic is strongly concentrated with Vltava Labe Press group (VLP, later Vltava Labe Media, VLM), which has a monopoly in this segment of the market (HHI index; concentration ratio; see Waschková Císařová, 2013, 2017b). In 2015, the group was sold by German owner Verlagsgruppe Passau to Czech and Slovak financial group Penta. This sale profoundly changed local print media ownership and concluded seven years of gradual change in media ownership in the Czech market. The period following the 2008 financial crisis (Stetka, 2012) saw widespread replacement of foreign owners by domestic companies that usually lacked publishing experience (Waschková Císařová and Metyková, 2015), and the entry of those labelled billionaire saviours led to some protests and the collective departures of journalists (Hájek et al., 2015).

The sale of VLP group was expected – it had suffered losses for years (Waschková Císařová and Metyková, 2015). Representatives of the investment group Penta, the new owner, considered controversial because of its involvement in a bribery scandal in Slovakia, openly declared it needed the media acquisitions as a ‘shield’ against ‘irrational attacks’ (Mikulka, 2015). With the new owner and after years of developing online outlets, VLM group settled on a ‘four legs’ model: (1) local daily papers published in almost every district; (2) a free monthly advertising vehicle distributed to mailboxes; (3) local weekly papers published in almost every district to challenge local competitors; (4) web-based and social-media news platforms (Aust, 2017). The author of this model, the group editor-in-chief, considered it more sustainable than finding savings by cutting costs and staff (Aust, 2017). However, while the daily chain has the third-highest sales, second-highest readership and the highest advertising revenue among Czech dailies (Publishers Union Yearbook, 2017), the publisher has recently experienced continuing (but decreasing) losses (178 million CZK in 2016; almost 18 million CZK in 2017; *Vltava Labe*



*Media Annual Report 2015, 2016, 2017*). Staff numbers are falling (46 managers and 1,134 other employees in 2015; 15 managers and 933 employees in 2017; *ibid.*).

## **Methodology**

The Vltava Labe Media group offered an ideal case study concerning journalists' perceptions of media ownership change in the Czech local media market from the traditional to the 'saviour owner' and how such changes impact journalistic autonomy. The study addressed the following research questions.

RQ1: What were journalists' perception of the previous owner's role?

RQ2: How does the change of ownership impact journalists' understanding of the owner's role?

RQ3: How do the changes in ownership impact journalistic autonomy?

Data collection consisted of a series of qualitative interviews over four years (2015–2018) with a sample of nine journalists who work(ed) for Vltava Labe Media. Interviewees were recruited using personal contacts and snowball sampling according to a quota scheme. The six men and three women, mainly at local editor-in-chief or editor level and all with at least 17 years' journalistic experience, were able to reflect upon the changing environment. They were from nine different organizational units (divisions) of VLM group, which enabled us to identify the degree of homogenization and centralization across the publisher. A total of 34 30-minute to two-hour interviews were conducted in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

## **Results**

### ***RQ1: Perception of the previous owner's role***

The German publisher Verlagsgruppe Passau, owned by the Diekmann family, was invisible for the Czech journalists. Respondents had minimal experience of the owners but labelled them symptomatically as if they were to be blamed for the bad condition of the publishing house.

Such distant 'creatures', I know nothing about.

*(Interviewee 3, 2015)*

I feel the owner is a 'grey eminence' whom I have never met.

*(Interviewee 2, 2015)*

The Germans are beyond the borders and, as they say: after us it may flood. But they want to see the results.

*(Interviewee 2, 2015)*

Normatively, there is nothing wrong when journalists do not feel any relation to the owner (cf. the concept of a brick wall; Örnebring, 2013), but in this case the journalists said they were missing information important for their work. They spoke of limited communication channels; the owner's minimal attempts to communicate with journalists; and about the lack of information regarding plans and decisions concerning newsrooms such as forthcoming office sales and

newsroom relocations. This concern was greatest during the sale of the publishing house and caused rumours and uncertainty.

One has heard about the intention to sell it for maybe five or six years.

(Interviewee 2, 2015)

We know about the sale of the company from the other media.

(Interviewee 3, 2015)

The idea to sell it is probably long-term because since then we have just felt a squeeze in money. We have lived for too long on the edge.

(Interviewee 4, 2015)

However, the owner's invisibility meant the journalists were not able to define or reflect critically on the owner's responsibility regarding the development of the publishing house, other than as a quest for profit.

They don't come to educate but to make money.

(Interviewee 6, 2015)

We have to achieve black instead of red numbers.

(Interviewee 2, 2015)

It was only business for the Germans, in the pure meaning; they don't come to promote any side interests.

(Interviewee 6, 2017)

While, in the beginning, the German owner was criticized for significant cuts before the sale and for the consequences of these cuts, journalists later re-evaluated their opinions. They valued the former owner better for his emphasis on localized – instead of centralized – news content; the freedom of local newsrooms; and, eventually, even for his invisibility. After years of uncertainty journalists harboured great, but not always positive, expectations of new owner the Penta group and hoped the local billionaire would bring a period of financial stability.

### ***RQ2: Impact of the change of ownership on journalists' understanding of the owner's role***

In the period shortly before the change and one year afterwards the new owner was perceived as a saviour: less invisible, no longer silent, potentially more active, and more responsible than the former owner.

We don't know any of the owners [in person] but Penta, they are Czechs and Slovaks ... information [about them] is more accessible.

(Interviewee 3, 2015)

Penta is a strong player in everything it does.

(Interviewee 2, 2015)

It is a new beginning ... Penta will invest and, finally, something will start to happen ... And we will be motivated to work again.

*(Interviewee 4, 2015)*

I actually believe that Penta bought it because they want to make the world better. There are even such people today.

*(Interviewee 3, 2015)*

Moreover, they received the conglomerate's internal communications (intranet, e-mails from executives, the company magazine), and felt better informed. However, in 2016, more critical perceptions started to emerge. After a year with the new owner, journalists expected to see at least some relaxation in the money-saving trend of the previous period. They saw changes in the publisher's Prague HQ but little in the localities.

In terms of new visions and their realisations, nothing happened in localities, only in Prague.

*(Interviewee 2, 2016)*

It's disappointing.

*(Interviewee 9, 2016)*

The owners are suddenly selling the building in which our newsroom is located.

*(Interviewees 8, 9, 2016)*

In 2017 and 2018, in the eyes of the journalists, Penta started to change from local media saviour to money-saver and they blamed the owner for the lack of progress.

I don't know what Penta wants ... Nobody tells us anything ... Where are we going? To hell.

*(Interviewee 4, 2017)*

Where are we heading? I don't want to say we are totally doomed. But I'm afraid that it will not improve dramatically.

*(Interviewee 1, 2018)*

The owner's vision? I would also like to know.

*(Interviewee 7, 2018)*

Penta is a predator, they are interested in money. They try to crunch as much as possible.

*(Interviewee 8, 2017)*

There are 50 people to check that I don't make a mistake or commit fraud ... The German owners didn't suspect me of being a thief. I have the feeling now that someone is behind me aiming to catch me out.

*(Interviewee 4, 2017)*

Three years after the change, the initial optimism had dissipated.

### ***RQ3: Impact of the changing ownership on journalistic autonomy***

All of the respondents denied that the owner exerted direct influence. But this is only the first layer (Meier, 2002). They admitted later to political and economic pressures on colleagues, and in other publishing houses (Interviewee 9, 2015; cf. Örnebring et al., 2016). And they identified a range of indirect influences on journalistic autonomy. They reported economic pressures connected in general to commercialization and specifically to cost savings. In the beginning, they experienced pressure for savings arising out of the sale of the group but later reflected that the pressure was more intense each year.

The year before the sale, it was like decorating the bride.

*(Interviewees 1, 2, 9, 2015)*

The Germans saved a lot. The cost cuttings before the sale were bloody and false. It was not fair to Penta, which had to find it out after the purchase.

*(Interviewee 4, 2016)*

I still feel increasing pressure for savings, despite the fact that I thought it was no longer possible.

*(Interviewee 1, 2016)*

I don't feel any owner pressure. If there's any, it's only economic. They set up their own financial manager from Penta group and he monitors the money flow.

*(Interviewee 3, 2017)*

One journalist, in almost every yearly interview, reflected on the growing centralization of 'local' content, and raised concerns that it could lead to greater ownership influence on content.

When they reduce the number of local pages and increase the number of centrally produced pages, they can more easily serve as the owner's opinion carrier.

*(Interviewee 2, 2015, 2017, 2018)*

The journalists were also increasingly aware of their regional and central managers, whom they either considered to be the owner's 'hatchet men' to make unpopular moves, or understood to have their own ways to fulfil the owner's expectations. But they regarded the most serious disruption to their autonomy as pressure from regional managers for close cooperation between journalists and advertisers, despite the existing code of ethics at the publisher. This was mentioned by all respondents.

A local journalist sometimes has to become an advertising dealer. We convince businessmen to pay for advertisements. Why? Because of money.

*(Interviewees 4, 9, 2016)*

If I had garters, I would be a complete prostitute.

*(Interviewee 8, 2016)*

Respondents gradually admitted to themselves that regional managers sometimes had a personal stake in savings targets.

The managers got rewards from the owners for saving and cost cutting.

*(Interviewee 2, 2016)*

My salary was not raised for 10 years ... One would say that the regional manager saves the money for hard times.

*(Interviewee 4, 2017)*

While journalists did not report owner influence on content, one did encounter two cases of such pressure from a regional manager.

He tried to convince me not to publish my opinion piece which made fun out of one politician ... Before I left, he tried to convince me that I must work on a topic which was from my point of view absolutely locally irrelevant.

*(Interviewee 9, 2015, 2017)*

And there were other examples of management/owner pressure that damaged journalists' self-esteem: (a) eroding the autonomy of local managers; (b) downgrading journalists' professional roles; (c) eroding community trust in the journalists. Central managers refused to confirm to editors that they were cutting jobs, but days later they found that some of their staff had not had their contracts renewed. Then responsibilities for local staff, budgets, and even content were taken over by central management from local editors-in-chief. Local newsrooms were reduced to two reporters – one assigned to write news while the second became a 'community editor' copy-and-pasting event invitations and service information.

I'm not a local editor-in-chief anymore, I'm the second-category journalist ... They brought such a strange hostility among us.

*(Interviewee 4, 2018)*

In the end, the interviewees felt helpless, demotivated, and trapped (Interviewees 3, 4, 8, 2017). Most were middle-aged and with alternative media jobs scarce, and money short, some took on second jobs. But local communities blamed the local editors for the declining quality of their papers.

We can bang on the table and leave. But I, in my years, can't do anything else. So, I shut up.

*(Interviewee 4, 2018)*

The local editor-in-chief is the face of the daily in the district. Criticism falls on my head.

*(Interviewee 2, 2016, 2018)*

## **Conclusions**

This study explored the consequences of 'billionaire saviours' media ownership in the Czech Republic, paying particular attention to the journalists' perceptions of the owner's role and their own autonomy. The previous German owner was seen as remote and journalists welcomed the

new conglomerate owner as a saviour, but became more critical. They saw the new owner as an entrepreneur who did not understand or accept media logic and applied a purely economic prism to centralize control and production and de-localize the newspapers. These hierarchical factors eroded the professional autonomy of local journalists, damaging both readers' trust in them and their satisfaction in the job. Interviewees spoke about anxiety over the ethical and professional dilemmas with which they were confronted. Centralization of editorial responsibility and content production is diminishing the local media's role in local communities and the VLM papers are losing their local faces.

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# WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM INDEPENDENT FAMILY- OWNED LOCAL MEDIA GROUPS?

Case studies from the United Kingdom

*Sarah O'Hara*

## **Introduction**

The last 20 years have been a period of enormous change for local news organisations. The industry has seen mass consolidation of publications and changes to the publishing footprint. The impact of digitalisation on the traditional local media business model has seen a national strategy of closure and regionalisation to drive down costs through economies of scale, resulting in an “amalgamation into fewer, larger groups that has radically altered the pattern of ownership” (Aldridge, 2007, 38). The local media landscape has changed as regional publishing groups have merged and the industry has also seen the acquisition of some of the larger regional newspaper groups by national media groups. Companies such as Newsquest and Reach Plc now own regional news brands across the United Kingdom. This threatens the localism of news and the mutual trust within the community and the news provider.

The regional press industry in the United Kingdom is now dominated by national publishing groups. In 2016 national groups Trinity Mirror, Johnston Press, Newsquest and Tindle accounted for 73 per cent of these local newspaper titles across the four nations of the UK (Ramsay and Moore, 2016). This ownership pattern has resulted in centralised newsrooms (often off-patch), outsourcing of print and production, template page layout and the coverage of national news stories. For these national newspaper organisations commercial online platforms for property, jobs and motors are branded and managed at a national rather than local level.

There are, however, still some smaller family-owned independent groups across the United Kingdom that appear to be bucking the trend of the ‘nationalising’ of local media, who continue to publish on-patch and deliver local weekly newspapers. Independent publishing groups such as Iliffe Media still survive and in many cases flourish. Some of these have in recent years expanded publishing patches through both acquisition and the launch of new titles, but have in the main retained their local publishing footprint. So what is the main difference in the management of independent-owned organisations that are not beholden to corporate shareholders?

Family-run organisations tend to take decisions at a more grassroots level, the papers' owners are often well-known families within their local communities embedded in the daily life of their audience. There are of course advantages and disadvantages of companies under family ownership or management. Family-run organisations tend to take a longer-term view, often following strategies that have more than just a financial goal. Aris and Bughin (2009) argue that independent ownership allows organisations to be more risk-taking, whereas Oakley (2013) believes that although family-owned organisations can be reactive in times of change, they do not always embrace new opportunities and can lack the financial back-up and security of larger organisations. Corporate businesses are more able to flex and grow with the demands brought about by digitalisation, and are able to develop new technologies and skillsets.

An investigation into the organisational differences between family- and corporate-run business and the subsequent strategic decisions was undertaken through a pilot study in Kent in the southeast of England between 2015 and 2017. The research was based on a comparative study of two publishing groups, the independent family-owned KM Group and the Trinity Mirror (now Reach Plc)-owned KRN (Kent Regional Newspapers). Subsequent to the research project both groups were bought out: KM Group by Iiffe Media and KRN by Reach Plc, a sign perhaps of how quickly the local media landscape in the United Kingdom is changing. The findings from the study clearly showed that the corporate strategy and evolution of new business models differed dramatically, with the major influencer being the difference in the ownership model of the two organisations. This chapter will discuss the impact that the type of ownership model has on the local newspaper industry.

### **What do we mean by independent family-owned media organisations?**

By definition, independent family-owned and -managed companies are those that have the initial founding family or a family foundation as the majority owner or controller of the organisation. They tend to be entrepreneurial or patriarchal and are often run without a culture of professional management (Aris and Bughin, 2009). The pilot project seems to confirm this theory.

The stakeholders [family] don't understand it and they are unwilling to have someone who is not financially involved to make a decision on their behalf. They prefer to just balance the books than grasp the opportunities there.

*(Interviewee)*

For independent media organisations the heritage of the company is of key importance. These media groups were built from a history of family-edited papers and many have been around for more than a century. These organisations are proud of their founders and their role within their local community. Many of these organisations describe their heritage and history on their corporate websites using their family background as a unique selling point for their organisations. Examples of this ethos can be found in the 'about us' section of websites of independent-owned organisations such as Archant, Iiffe and the KM Group.

The Archant story began over 165 years ago when four free-thinking Norfolk businessmen launched its first ever newspaper.

*([www.archant.co.uk/articles/about-us-our-history/](http://www.archant.co.uk/articles/about-us-our-history/))*

For over 150 years KM Media Group has built strong relationships with the communities and people it serves via local newspapers.

([www.kentonline.co.uk/km-group/history/](http://www.kentonline.co.uk/km-group/history/))

The Iliffe family have extensive experience and heritage in local media, publishing and printing dating back to 1891.

([www.iliffenews.co.uk](http://www.iliffenews.co.uk))

For these companies, family ownership gives them experience and expertise and this heritage is important – more important, one might argue, than their commercial success. Unlike other family-owned consumer companies such as family-owned retailers, independent media organisations appear to see their role as being central to their local community. Their corporate objectives extend beyond the purely fiscal bottom line of their corporate counterparts and these companies have an “idealistic mission in society and the owner families tend to uphold this grail” (Aris and Bughin, 2009, 263). They hold a unique position supporting their community’s interests and their mission and vision statements show a belief in the value of continuing to publish within the local community.

Even those family-run organisations that have acquired other newspaper groups and are now publishing beyond their initial community footprint place greater importance on their heritage than their corporately owned counterparts. Compare for example the online statement from independently owned Archant to the corporately owned Reach Plc, both of which own and publish local newspapers across the United Kingdom. Archant’s mission talks about its position and reputation within its publishing areas as being trustworthy and empathic.

Throughout its many years of development, and several transformations, Archant ... has been at the very heart of the communities which they serve – informing, educating, entertaining and inspiring them. Archant has remained a family owned business, focusing on providing different forms of community media ... Archant remains a thriving and innovative community media business, which is one of the leading privately-owned regional newspaper group ... in the UK.

([www.archant.co.uk/articles/about-us-our-history/](http://www.archant.co.uk/articles/about-us-our-history/))

On the other hand, Reach Plc, which owns regional newspapers such as the Kent-based *Isle of Thanet Gazette*, the *Dover Express* and the *Folkestone Herald*, focuses more on the size and reach of the audience.

Our brands have a long heritage of being trusted sources of news ... Last year we sold 540 million newspapers, and we have a bigger online monthly audience than all our competitors ... Our network of over 70 websites provide 24/7 coverage of news, sport and showbiz stories, viewed by 110m unique browsers every month.

([www.reachplc.com/our-newsbrands](http://www.reachplc.com/our-newsbrands))

In the pilot area, Kent, the KM Media Group was recently acquired by another family-owned independent: Iliffe Media. When announcing the sale, the KM Group appeared to justify it on the basis of the group continuing to be independently owned. A statement at the time of the sale from KM Group chair Geraldine Allinson stated:

Although there is some personal sadness for me and my family that our pension liabilities have led us to this position, in Iliffe we have found a publisher which shares our belief in the importance of local media. The Iliffe family have extensive experience and heritage in local media, publishing and printing dating back to 1891, and have very similar values and ethos to us at KM.

Her comment was backed by Edward Iliffe, chief executive of Iliffe Media, who said:

At a time when trust in local media is soaring, Iliffe Media, with its long heritage as an independent, family-run media business, is committed to a long-term investment in local newspaper publishing, across all platforms.

In contrast, the purchase of KRN (Kent Regional News) by Reach Plc was announced simply as part of a bigger corporate buy-out without any focus on the local impact of the purchase.

### **What were the traditional business models for local media?**

Traditional business models for the local press were based on revenues being generated from both the reader, through copy sales, and the advertiser, through selling of print space. Independent newspaper groups were initially founded on a model of paid-for circulation from a traditionally loyal local audience. The distribution method of local newspapers was through both paid-for subscription and over-the-counter paid-for copies via a network of newsagents and other retail outlets. This audience was closely measured and audited by the ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation) with additional readership insight being measured through local research conducted via the News Media Association through the JICREG tool. This allowed local newspaper owners to report both copies sold as well as readers per copy. The readers-per-copy measure was used as an audience metric to set advertising rates and revenues. Throughout the year the newspaper sales and promotions department would work to increase copy sales through a number of techniques using both face-to-face and in-paper promotions. Face-to-face promotions included activities such as the newspaper sales team attending local events, for example, taking a promotional stand at county shows, car shows or carnivals. Copies of the paper would be sold alongside promotional giveaways to drive a peak in sales. In-paper promotions included competitions to win holidays, coupon collection offers and campaigns such as photo montages of class photos from schools, nativity pictures and 'cute baby' photo competitions. These activities not only drove additional copy revenue but increased readership figures, which in turn raised the advertising rate card based on a readers-per-copy figure.

Local newspapers differ from national newspapers in that a larger proportion of revenue was gained from the classified (or private) advertising sections rather than from corporate brand advertising. This was largely based on the knowledge that both advertisers and readers were locally based. Local newspapers built strong revenues through their reliance on classified sales with the advertising rates and the resulting page yield being much higher for these sections than display advertising. The property, motors and jobs sections of the local papers traditionally drew the readers and therefore generated responses for the advertiser and the rates were set accordingly. In many local newspapers, these sections became so big they were published as separate editions distributed alongside the news section. Newspaper advertising sales teams were traditionally split by section with representatives being solely responsible for either motors, property

or retail sales. Telesales teams traditionally managed the recruitment, private classifieds sales advertisements and birth marriages and deaths notices. Classified revenues were also guaranteed from the local councils because public notices such as road closures and planning consents had to be advertised within local newspapers.

Relationships were built at a local level with sales representatives visiting advertisers weekly and managing the advertising copy on their behalf. Local newspaper groups had in-house advertisement production teams who would design and set the advertisement copy free of charge as part of the service. The traditional local newspaper business model initially relied on a local sales team working within the publishing patch to manage the advertising revenue built on strong local relationships.

The impact of digitalisation has eroded all elements of this business model. Free-to-view online news has damaged the newspaper sales revenues, with the younger audience in particular accessing news online free of charge. This in turn has impacted upon the readers per copy and the resultant advertising rates. Advertisers themselves have moved to online commerce platforms such as [www.rightmove.co.uk](http://www.rightmove.co.uk) and [www.ebay.co.uk](http://www.ebay.co.uk) and increasingly social media platforms have taken away the readers and the advertisers have migrated online. The impact of this has been a sharp decline in revenue from both copy sales and advertising for local newspaper groups, which in turn has changed the business models.

New business models for local newspaper companies differ between organisations. Some are following a strategy of building a large online audience, often through 'clickbait'-type activities with the hope of monetising the advertising opportunities on these free news services. Other organisations appear to be using brand loyalty to develop new local products and services. Family-owned organisations want to maintain loyalty within their community whereas the corporate owners are more focused on building the audience. The ownership model would appear to be a major influencer in the adaptation of these models and development of these different business models.

### **How do we investigate the impact of independent ownership in local media companies?**

From 2015 to 2017 a pilot project was undertaken in the county of Kent in the southeast of the United Kingdom. Our project sought to understand the organisational culture within local media companies and how this differed between independent and corporately owned organisations. The organisations chosen were the Kent Messenger Group and Kent Regional News and Media. They were selected because they were the largest regional media companies in the area and had a similar publishing footprint because both published newspapers in the same areas of Kent. It should be stated again that since this research was undertaken both organisations have changed ownership, but they maintained the same ownership model: KM Group is now owned by family-owned Iiffe Media and Kent Regional News by Reach Plc. To fully understand the influence of the ownership model three types of data were collected to build the organisations' case study:

1. company data such as publicly available information about the organisation sourced from websites, industry publications and company publications
2. observational data collected as part of the fieldwork, including location of the offices and use of branding
3. semi-structured interviews with employees.

### ***Company data***

Publicly available data were collected from several sources: information released by the organisations themselves through corporate statements and websites and from industry bodies such as the News Media Association (formerly known as the Newspaper Society) and the National Union of Journalists. In addition, industry research conducted by publications such as *Hold the Front Page* and *The Press Gazette* was reviewed. Information sources included websites, industry reports, archival material and the newspapers themselves and materials displayed in offices.

### ***Observational data***

The second area of data collected was observational data. Observational data allow the researcher to develop the study and analysis of espoused values and to gather key elements of the organisation. Observational analysis included data gathered during the visits to the organisations over the research period. In addition to observations during the interviewee visits, general observations about the organisations within their local publishing areas were also considered for the period under analysis. Branding within towns, on company cars and on other printed partnership collateral was also gathered. Observational data gathered included the presence of company branding, its location, branding of newsagents' windows, the use of billboards and newsheets.

### ***Interviews***

In order that interviewee insight was as varied as possible, respondents were recruited to take into account occupational area of employment, longevity of employment, seniority of role and geographical location of the role. Occupational areas of employment were considered and respondents were recruited from editorial, advertising sales, newspaper sales and promotional roles. These departments were chosen because they have the largest number of employees within local newspaper organisations and are key areas of organisational structure within the companies. Longevity of employment could show whether there was an established embedded culture within an organisation and how this related to the ownership and management style. One interviewee had nearly 20 years of service in comparison with a new employee with only four months' service. Respondents included heads of department, editors and directors through to junior staff members within both organisations.

The geographical region in which the role was located was also considered, such as whether respondents were physically located within the publishing area of their newspaper or in a central or regional office. Respondents were selected to include those with a hyperlocal role (one or two towns or communities), a regional role (an editorial region such as the administrative area of a municipal authority) or a county-wide role. By selecting interviewees with different locational responsibilities, the aim was to establish how local the community was and whether the ownership model varied depending on how geographically focused the job role was.

The combination of these three research perspectives allowed us to build up a picture of the degree of influence of the ownership model and how this impacted upon the financial sustainability and future business models of the organisation.

## **What impact does independent ownership have on the management of local media?**

One recurrent topic that was raised throughout the project by the employees of the independently owned group was the importance of the family owners. All interviewees stressed that the

family and the influence of their management style remained at the core of the organisation. All respondents named the family or the chairman as the main stakeholder for the company. In contrast, those working within the corporate-owned organisation named either the advertisers or the readers as the core stakeholders. This suggested that the two organisations appeared to have different cultural approaches: one seeking to deliver for an internal stakeholder, while the other looked to external stakeholders. The presence of family members on the governing board might be expected to bring stability and a continuity of management, but at the expense of a tendency to accommodate change or dynamism.

Newspapers in Kent have been around for 100 or 150 years and publishers knew how to make money and that model continued on and on over the years and the Chairman sat in clover as the money rolled in.

*(Interviewee)*

The interviewee insight supports research (Aris and Bughin, 2009; Oakley, 2011) that the longevity of family ownership impacts upon how proactive some independent organisations have been at engaging with digitisation. There appeared to be a naivety relating to the influence of the internet and a belief that the local audience would remain loyal to the local legacy brand. A key characteristic of the KM Group that emerged from the research was the manner in which the digital challenge had undermined the traditional business model and revenue streams. Classified advertising, a cornerstone of local media revenue, has seen fundamental changes as a result of digital convergence (Oakley, 2011). Traditional newspaper advertising revenues from the property, jobs and motors sections migrated to new online competitors. For example, a new regional start-up, [jobsinkent.co.uk](http://jobsinkent.co.uk), offered a local online advertising platform for companies and recruitment agencies that had traditionally advertised in the local paper, and took from it a large share of the local recruitment advertising. Interviews revealed that this new competitor was not taken seriously at first. Monitoring of the group's market share did not initially include online competitors and focused solely on its performance in relation to other established legacy press brands.

The KM Group had launched an early online news presence, [K=kentonline.co.uk](http://K=kentonline.co.uk), in 1998 but had not succeeded in building a successful revenue stream from digital advertising. The group had also established content-specific sites such as [kentjobs.co.uk](http://kentjobs.co.uk), [kenthomes.co.uk](http://kenthomes.co.uk) and [kentmotors.co.uk](http://kentmotors.co.uk), to host recruitment, property and auto content and advertising, but it lacked the financial resources and knowledge to develop the online platforms effectively and was also supporting the systems and costs associated with an established legacy brand. This was attributed to the ownership and management model.

The SMT (senior management team) have no external experience, they don't know how other organisations do this, change and adapt. They are not fleet afoot.

*(Interviewee)*

Digital convergence, the recession and social change have also combined in a 'perfect storm' resulting in a large financial downturn for the group in 2008, with Geraldine Allison (KM Group chair) stating at the time:

We had to pay off debts, cut costs, cope with the economic downturn and embrace the digital revolution. And we were losing £500,000 a month.



Local media organisations have addressed the challenge of erosion of audience and advertising due to digitalisation in quite different ways. National or corporately owned groups have capitalised on the economies of scale from being part of a bigger organisation and have moved to introduce national online portals such as [www.fish4jobs.com](http://www.fish4jobs.com), owned by Reach Plc. National portals can deliver the response local advertisers need but can share the costs of development nationally. There has also been a clearer focus in these organisations on monetarising the audience.

The journalists are driven by the audience and monetarising this audience is crucial. We [the commercial team] were selling more than the website could deliver. If we can get the money on the table and we can't deliver the audience, then we need to change the website so we have more inventory to sell.

*(Interviewee)*

In addition to developing the audience across different platforms, the corporate groups removed costs by migrating all private classifieds online and pushing private advertisers to a self-service advertising portal such as [www.kentthisisads.co.uk](http://www.kentthisisads.co.uk). This removed the cost of running a telesales team. With less loyalty to the local community, the corporate group was also quicker to close newspapers, local offices and reception desks.

They closed the papers overnight; there was no consultation with us.

*(Interviewee)*

In contrast, independent groups have maintained a local presence by continuing to publish on the patch and by maintaining a local brand presence. They are seeking to capitalise on brand value and trust and to develop new sources of income through brand extension within their communities. Independent companies such as the KM Group are using their brand to deliver different products to the same local audience. They are launching design companies, selling website-building services and contracting to run social media campaigns. Some have also launched and manage local business award schemes such as KEIBA (Kent Excellence in Business Awards) and work with partners on charity initiatives to develop sponsorship opportunities. Their strategy is to further embed their brand in their local communities and to increase their visibility at county and local events.

During the research period the company sold its newspaper from a marquee on local high streets and a promotions team attended at least two events every week. The events selected were local to the towns concerned, and in particular the coastal towns. And the promotions focused on the town's newspaper, rather than the media organisation itself. KM Group continues to brand newsagents and sponsor local sports grounds, to ensure that its brands maintain a high level of engagement with the local community.

I have more promotional money now than I have ever had; we've even gone out and bought a mascot.

*(Interviewee)*

Newspaper sales remain an important revenue stream and in some areas newspaper sales revenue is larger than that from digital advertising. Local offices are empowered to manage their newspaper title without central group involvement. The intention is that they engage with their local

communities and deliver the kind of paper their community wants. The data suggest that local teams understood the differences between their audiences for print, online and social media and that the local journalists strove to sustain the paid-for newspaper readership for as long as possible. Even in the corporate-owned organisation there were indications that at the local level they did not always follow corporate suggestions for national or celebrity-based content and would maintain their focus on the local community.

### Can the independent newspaper group remain sustainable?

In conclusion, there is evidence that local news organisations can be sustainable if they remain at the core of the community they serve. Independent family-owned organisations that are truly embedded within their local communities are developing new business models capitalising on the value of their heritage 'brand'. For these organisations circulation revenue appears to have stabilised and newspapers that maintain a focus on local news and support community values remain viable. With smaller, efficient, multi-media news teams and the development of new commercial opportunities these organisations have the potential to be financially sustainable. In other sectors such as retail and hospitality we are seeing the resurgence of independent shops and boutique hotels. These industries have seen a cyclical change from large chains to smaller organisations and there could be a similar pattern for local news organisations returning to smaller, independent organisational models. Independent media organisations were founded on a culture of entrepreneurialism and community values – core factors that should support them as the industry continues to change.

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# LOCAL MEDIA IN FRANCE

Subsidized, heavily regulated and under pressure

*Matthieu Lardeau*

## Introduction

Four types of news media cover the regional and local media landscape: press, radio, television and online. The local print press market in France is split in three segments: regional dailies (*Presse quotidienne régionale*, PQR), local dailies (*Presse quotidienne départementale*, PQD) and local weeklies (*Presse hebdomadaire régionale*, PHR). From many decades all these markets have suffered a dramatic decline in readership, and therefore a drop of advertising revenues. The radio broadcasting market is divided between the FM music stations and a few stations offering news programs in each department (municipal area). Regions and departments are also partly covered by some TV channels. Finally, besides the websites run by the print press, TV and radio firms, independent pure-player websites have been launched to compete with the traditional media in covering local news. Consequently, the critical problems that face the French local news media concern their business models. Media markets in France are strongly interwoven with the central state and public bodies and have been since the immediate post-Second World War era. This interventionist legislative and regulatory approach is rooted in the substantive role historically played by the central state in the different media markets in France. This chapter is structured as follows: the first part describes the business models of the different media outlets and demonstrates the degree to which these models, mainly put in place in the 1940s, are intertwined with the politics and state regulation rather than open market conditions. The second part explores the ownership of the different local media and highlights how the concentration of ownership has taken place, particularly in the print press.

## The business model of French regional and local media

French political elites and various state bodies maintain enduring and strong ties with news media organizations and individuals, especially regional and local outlets, and this is particularly true of the print press.

### **Regional and local press**

Regional and local newspapers benefit significantly from the direct or indirect support of political and administrative bodies. The most critical interventionist decisions made by parliament and the central state that affect the business model of the print press relate to the setting of monopolistic markets and a system of financial aid or subsidy. The first substantive political decisions specifically concerning the print press were enacted in the years immediately following the Second World War. Government and parliament were then dominated by individuals who had come from the French *Resistance* movements and implemented policies defined by the *Resistance* spirit: promoting values of fraternity, generosity and idealism (Jacquemart, 1948) – and that normative concern with the public-interest role of the local media persists today. By the end of the war, *Resistance* movements – or movements that claimed to be part of the *Resistance* spirit – seized the property and the presses of newspapers whose owners were accused of having collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. This seizure was given legitimacy by the ordinances of May 6, 1944 and September 30, 1944. The newspapers concerned were selected by government and top civil servants (Hisard, 1955). In addition, the Société Nationale des Entreprises de Presse (SNEP) was established. This was a corporation jointly managed by the state and the union CGT du Livre, affiliated to the French Communist Party. It operated between 1945 and 1955 and managed the reallocation of the forfeited presses as well as overseeing all the wider properties: the printing plants, newspapers and buildings. The subsidy scheme was also characterized by the pooling of newsprint purchase, the transfer to the printing trade unions of the power to run the printing plants of the national dailies, and the pooling of the nationwide distribution system for daily newspapers and magazines.

Press laws enacted between 1944 and 1947 established an environment intended to protect the press from both political intervention and financial pressures and commercial dependency. The aim of the state and parliament was to resurrect and regulate the regional and local print press and this project rested on two tenets. The system formalized the existing gentlemen's agreement concluded by newspapers owners in 1944 to establish and adhere to local monopoly markets. Accordingly, each newspaper restricted circulation to its native region and was expressly prohibited from competing with another newspaper. Each region was therefore covered by only one major regional newspaper. In this way, except for a couple of exceptions (in Brittany and Alsace), daily regional newspapers never faced competition and were left to shape their monopolistic market. Furthermore, laws were introduced to protect the financial stability of the print press. As an illustration, the right for large retail companies to advertise on TV was restricted in order to direct advertising budgets for discount and special offers to regional and local newspapers. It was made compulsory for most judicial and legal notices (*annonces légales et judiciaires*) to be advertised in the weeklies or dailies circulating in the departments where the cases took place. Each year the legal list of accredited outlets is drawn up by the Department Prefect.

A further manifestation of state interventionism has survived in an array of financial subsidies to the press that are funded by the state. The first such system, preferential tariffs for post and delivering papers, was created in 1948. Since then numerous public subsidies have been implemented and continue to accumulate. The Direction générale des médias et des industries culturelles (DGMIC), an arm of the Ministry of Culture and Communication, is partly dedicated to monitoring the allocation of the numerous and substantial public subsidies to newspapers and magazines. The scheme's main objective has remained to provide access to information for all citizens, to stimulate their participation in public life and to safeguard and promote the plurality of outlets, and thus the diversity of ideas. Subsidies have strengthened

Table 23.1 The 15 most subsidized daily regional and local newspapers in France in 2016

<i>Newspaper (national rank for subsidized newspaper)</i>	<i>Newspaper group</i>	<i>Direct subsidies amount</i>	<i>Subsidies/ circulated copy</i>
<i>Ouest France</i> (3rd)	SIPA-Ouest France	€5,787,718	€0.025
<i>Le Dauphiné libéré</i> (8th)	EBRA	€1,469,161	€0.018
<i>La Dépêche du Midi</i> (12th)	La Dépêche	€1,290,114	€0.024
<i>Presse Océan</i> (10th)	SIPA-Ouest France	€1,344,436	€0.131
<i>Le Parisien</i> (14th)	Les Echos-Le Parisien	€1,200,389	€0.017
<i>Le Télégramme</i> (15th)	Le Télégramme	€1,189,901	€0.017
<i>Le Journal de la Haute-Marne</i> (16th)	EBRA (50%)	€1,177,318	€0.150
<i>Le Progrès</i> (17th)	EBRA	€1,147,608	€0.016
<i>La République des Pyrénées</i> (18th)	Sud Ouest	€1,017,849	€0.115
<i>La Presse de la Manche</i> (21st)	SIPA-Ouest France	€853,755	€0.011
<i>L'Est Républicain</i> (22nd)	EBRA	€844,902	€0.019
<i>Midi Libre</i> (23rd)	La Dépêche	€797,292	€0.019
<i>La Voix du Nord</i> (24th)	La Voix	€756,382	€0.010
<i>L'écho de la Haute-Vienne</i> (25th)	L'Echo	€707,218	n.c.
<i>Sud Ouest</i> (27th)	Sud Ouest	€634,792	€0.007

Source: Ministry of Culture and Communication, March 2018.

Note: Numbers refer to the overall direct state subsidies paid by the end of 2016; n.c.: undisclosed.

the economics of newspapers over the decades, so much so that such subsidies are now salient guarantors of survival for the regional and local press (Charon, 1991; Mathien, 2003; Le Floch, 2006; Schwartzberg, 2007). According to La Cour des Comptes (the national Court of the Auditor), the overall public subsidy, both direct and indirect, for the print press amounts to €1.8 billion, which came to around 15 percent of the sector's turnover in 2017. The table below lists the 15 regional and local newspapers that received the most subsidy in 2016.

However, the sums listed in this table only refer to direct aid such as distribution aid, aid for safeguarding editorial pluralism, modernization aid and other additional sums. Newspapers also receive indirect benefits such as preferential tariffs for post and distribution and a reduced VAT rate on sales revenues. As an illustration, the overall direct subsidies received by *Le Journal de la Haute-Marne* in 2016 is comprised of the following elements: €146,572 (pluralism) + €938,635 (distribution) + €92,111 (modernization and strategic development funds). These financial aids are granted each year and most supported newspapers or press groups receive similar levels of support. In regard to the specific subsidy for safeguarding editorial pluralism, *La Manche libre*, the paper that received the most support in the local dailies' segment, received €28,196 in 2012, €29,396 in 2013, €31,250 in 2014, €36,738 in 2015 and €36,738 in 2016. One consequence of this system is that the newspaper companies print many more copies than are taken up by their readerships. The mean rate of unsold copies for the whole sector is 50 percent – and 96 percent of direct subsidies go to general and political newspapers.

Yet, despite the high level of subsidy and support, this enduring system has been failing to sustain and renew the sector. Critics of the scheme argue that state aid has been ineffective and has been intended principally to preserve the appearance rather than the reality of a diverse and pluralistic press (Freiberg, 1981; Toussaint-Desmoulin, 1987, 2008; Le Floch and Sonnac, 2005;

Table 23.2 The seven most subsidized local press groups in France in 2016

<i>Press group</i>	<i>Direct subsidies amount</i>	<i>Aid for social modernization</i>	<i>Overall subsidies</i>
SIPA-Ouest France	€9,208,330	€30.284	€9,238,614
Banque Cr�dit Mutuel	€4,006,398	€704.953	€4,711,351
La D�p�che du Midi	€2,893,822	€671.768	€3,565,590
Sud Ouest	€2,192,637	€18.182	€2,210,818
La Montagne	€1,785,383	€100.181	€1,885,564
Le T�l�gramme	€1,195,637	N/A	€1,195,637
Le Journal de la Haute-Marne	€1,177,318	N/A	€1,177,318

Source: Ministry of Culture and Communication, March 2018.

Note: Numbers refer to the overall direct state subsidies paid by the end of 2016.

Lardeau and Le Floch, 2013). Politicians argue about its desirability (Cardoso, 2010) and frequent evaluations of and reports on the subsidy system point to its failings – such as the case of the national daily *L'Humanit *, one of the most subsidized newspapers with €0.63 per copy, one third of its cover price, made up by public funds. However, they never call for the system to be phased out, but rather that it requires modification to safeguard its endurance (Fran aix, 2012). In addition, the state regularly wipes out the debts some newspapers have built up to state or public bodies. The strong interconnections between press and politics are also evident through the active political roles undertaken by some of the newspapers' chief executives and top managers. An illustrative case is that of Jean-Michel Baylet, CEO of the group La D p che, who is a local elected representative, a senator, and has been a serving member of several governments.

### **Local radio and TV**

This close dependency on the political establishment is also characteristic of the local radio and TV channels that air news. As an illustration, BIP TV (Berry Issoudun Premi re TV), one of the 42 local TV channels (in September 2018) that operate in the department of Indre as well as the Cher (central France), established in 2006, and then taken over by three major local political institutions in 2010: the agglomeration of Ch teauvoux (the prefecture of the department), the Local Area Council and the City of Issoudun. BIP TV is run by the mayor of the city of Issoudun, who is president of the company. This local TV is thus a media outlet owned by the political administrations on which it is reporting. It has a budget split in three parts: salaries of the team of about 15 employees (50 percent), running costs (25 percent) and industrial depreciation (25 percent). In 2013, its income of €1.2 million was split in the following manner: €450,000 from the Department Council, €200,000 from the agglomeration of Ch teauvoux and most of the rest from the city of Issoudun. At that time the TV channel was forced to close because of a cut in the public subsidies from the Department and the City of Ch teauvoux, whose president and mayor were political opponents to the mayor of Issoudun.

However, local markets for radio are mainly covered by channels that are not news-oriented. The leading national radio network, NRJ, includes 120 local studios all over France that broadcast mainly music programs, night talks and a few basic news bulletins. Most other local radio stations operate as community associations run mainly by volunteers and air music programs.



The two national radio networks operate through local or regional branches: the state-owned Radio France and Radio Chrétienne de France, owned by the Catholic Church. Both of these devote many hours a day to local news.

### **Highly regulated and concentrated markets**

The market structure of press, radio and TV is historically characterized by the major role played by the central state and its linked organizations as well as politician bodies (de Tarlé, 1980; Freiberg, 1981; Charon, 1991). The state plays a substantive role as regulator, supervisor and actor. Political organizations and individuals have historically strong relationships with their news media counterparts and play a major role in the regulation of media ownership and thus in the processes of concentration.

### ***Regional and local press***

The regulatory approach in the post-war 1944–1945 period was intended to ensure pluralism of opinions and free competition in the political press market as well as to prohibit the concentration of newspaper ownership. Rules of ordinance of August 22 and 26, 1944 set economic, financial and ethical standards for the new post-war press that intend to protect the sector from financial and economic pressures and to promote the diversity of opinion; these ordinances strictly forbade monopolies and the integration and merger of press companies (i.e., a single person is not allowed to own more than one newspaper). However, public authorities did not challenge the nascent newspaper monopolies in each region that contradicted pluralism of opinions and free competition in the dailies market. The regional daily press could never be prevented from a *de facto* monopoly in almost every region of France. The first regional newspapers established in the Liberation period benefited from the first-mover advantage and strong barriers of entry into this market (Le Floch, 1997; Eveno, 2003). Forty years later, another set of laws was enacted to reinforce limitation on ownership concentration. The law of October 23, 1984 (modified by that of November 28, 1986) put in place two main limitations: one press group was prohibited from controlling more than 30 percent of a paper's circulation, and it could not be the major shareholder of media firms in more than two of the four media markets (press, radio broadcasting, terrestrial TV, cable TV).

Yet this law has neither limited nor blocked the processes of concentration in the regional newspapers' market or cross-ownership across the different media markets (Charon, 1991; Eveno, 2003; Le Floch and Sonnac, 2005; Albert and Sonnac, 2015). The process of concentration has increased in the regional dailies market. Historically, each of the 22 French metropolitan regions have been dominated by one regional independent newspaper (with one edition dedicated to each county). For two decades this market has been driven by a huge ownership reconfiguration through mergers and acquisitions in favor of the most profitable regional press groups. EBRA (owned by the bank Crédit Mutuel) covers the northeast of France, La Dépêche and Sud Ouest share the southwest market, Ouest-France rules the west region, La Voix (owned by the Belgian media holding Rossel) dominates the north and Centre-France controls the center of France. As an illustration, the group Midi Libre (or Les Journaux du Midi) has been owned by four different bigger groups in only 15 years. Its current owner, the group La Dépêche du Midi, based in Toulouse, runs the dailies that cover ten departments in the south of France and received 96 percent of the public subsidies provided in the Occitanie region in 2015.

Governments and parliament have failed to limit concentration and maintain the conditions for competitive markets as well as pluralism of political ideas. Political parties and representatives

prefer to ensure their personal and professional interests, and relationships with media directors and journalists (Kuhn, 1995). They claim that a degree of ownership concentration and cross-media ownership in a market can save media organizations from demise and is thus, *de facto*, reinforcing the purpose of the regulation.

### **Local radio and TV**

TV and radio broadcasting are markets subject to prior approval to enter. This license is given by the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA), one of whose missions given by the central state is to allocate frequencies to TV and radio operators. Indeed, the number of TV and radio channels is limited. Consequently, the CSA managing and regulating the radio and TV spectrum can limit the cross-ownership in both markets. The radio broadcasting market has boomed since 1981 when the new president of the Republic, François Mitterrand, and his socialist government freed up the market; as a consequence, around 2,000 FM radio stations were created or legalized. Compared to TV and the press, the ownership concentration of France's radio broadcasting landscape is limited at the local level but quite concentrated at the national one. The market for local TV stations is less dynamic. Most of them need to be run and financed by local public and political bodies because low audience levels, and consequently low advertising revenue, are barriers to profitability.

### **Troubled business models**

Newspaper owners have maintained the business model inherited from the Liberation era. Most media leaders and journalism leaders find supporting the status quo to be more comfortable than change and innovation (Schwartzberg, 2007). Yet this strong institutionalization means the models no longer fit current media consumption and market conditions. Newspaper firms target two kinds of clients: the advertiser and the reader. However, the continuing decline of readership from the 1970s combined with the decrease of advertising revenues from the 1990s (partly due to their migration to the Internet) have dramatically affected both sources of revenue for French daily newspapers (Charon, 1991). The current turnover of regional and local dailies (excluding subsidies) is split as follows: 39 percent of revenues come from subscription, 27 percent from copy sales in newsstands, 23 percent from display advertising and 10 percent from classified ads. For regional weeklies the picture is as follows: 13 percent subscription, 22 percent newsstands, 26 percent display ads and 39 percent classified ads. As mentioned above, the regional and local dailies benefit from the compulsory publication of judicial and legal announcements (*Annonces légales et judiciaires*) and in 2014 these announcements amounted to €193 million divided between some 600 newspapers.

The economic downturn appears to be less critical for the regional dailies as a result of their specific business model and market conditions; the outlets never face local competitors and thus the loss of readership and advertising revenues has been gradual. Furthermore, a substantive part of news sourcing and writing is undertaken by nonprofessional freelance local reporters – *correspondants de presse* – whose income, in the form of fees, is very low, so they cost the newspaper company relatively little. However, despite these factors and monopoly markets, the local and regional dailies and weeklies have very low readership penetration. Continental France had a population in 1945 of 42 million and a local and regional daily newspaper circulation of 7.532 million copies. In 2012, 2.237 million copies circulated in a country of 65 million inhabitants. In 2017, weekly newspaper circulation was 58.8 million per week, compared to the regional dailies' 3.6 million a day.

The overall turnover of the French Press was €7.330 billion in 2015 and its public subsidies – both direct and indirect – amounted to €1.1 billion. On an annual average, subsidies make up 15 percent of a daily newspaper’s turnover. La Dépêche du Midi – the group that purchased the smaller group Les Journaux du Midi – received 96 percent of the state subsidies (€3,593,977) paid out in the Occitanie region in 2015. To an extent, subsidies stand for an annuity or a taken-for-granted income for newspapers’ owners. Monopolistic, noncompetitive markets aligned with enduring annual subsidies have stifled innovation in newspapers’ managers and shareholders. They have neglected business development and put emphasis on nurturing their relationships with the national and local politics. Public authorities and political leaders do not challenge the conditions that drive concentration of ownership, nor act to favor fair competition. They maintain the public subsidies system that sustains this situation and fosters the growth of increasingly dominant press conglomerates in regional markets.

### Ownership of French regional and local media

The evidence shows an enduring trend toward concentration in the different local media markets in France and this tendency is expected to further increase in the short and middle term.

#### *Print press: regional and local dailies and weeklies*

##### *Local dailies*

These regional press groups have purchased most of those local newspapers that were originally independent. The Alliance pour les chiffres de la presse et des medias (ACPM), the joint body that formally certifies circulation and audience of print outlets, encompasses 64 regional newspapers.

##### *Local weeklies*

Another segment of the press delivers local news through weeklies, bi-weeklies or monthlies. This segment encompasses the oldest French newspapers, which were launched during the nineteenth century. The ACPM oversees 168 newspapers with a limited circulation and audience for their printed issues. The mean circulation is 6,225 copies a week with a mean

Table 23.3 The five daily regional newspapers with highest circulation figures in France

<i>Publication title</i>	<i>Paid circulation</i>	<i>No. of covered departments / region</i>
<i>Ouest France</i>	659,681	12 / Northwest
<i>Sud Ouest</i>	234,752	8 / Southwest
<i>La Voix du Nord</i>	204,041	2 / North
<i>Le Parisien</i>	198,328	8 / Greater Paris (and Oise)
<i>Le Dauphiné Libéré</i>	193,856	9 / Southeast

Source: ACPM, paid-for circulation in France, 2018.

Note: Numbers are a mean of paid-for daily circulation in France, taken between July 2017 and June 2018.

Table 23.4 The major daily regional newspapers' groups in France

Owner	Newspaper	No. of areas / main regions covered	Circulation in 2017–2018 (rank)
SIPA – Ouest-France	<i>Ouest France</i>	13 / Brittany	659,681 (1st)
	<i>Le Courrier de l'Ouest</i>	2 / West (Angers area)	84,677 (16th)
	<i>Le Maine Libre</i>	1	38,194 (25th)
	<i>La Presse de la Manche</i>	1	20,044 (40th)
EBRA (Credit Mutuel)	<i>Le Dauphiné Libéré</i>	9 / Southeast (Grenoble area)	193,856 (5th)
	<i>Le Progrès</i>	6 / East (Lyon area)	169,524 (7th)
	<i>Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace</i>	2 / East (Strasbourg area)	138,686 (10th)
	<i>L'Est Républicain</i>	6 / Northeast (Nancy area)	115,846 (12th)
	<i>Le Républicain lorrain</i>	1	96,412 (14th)
	<i>L'Alsace</i>	1	68,147 (19th)
	<i>Le Journal de Saône-et-Loire</i>	1	47,461 (23rd)
	<i>Le Bien public</i>	1	36,891 (26th)
	<i>Vosges Matin</i>	1	33,005 (27th)
	<i>Le Journal de la Haute-Marne</i>	1	20,254 (39th)
La Voix (Rossel)	<i>La Voix du Nord</i>	2 / North (Lille area)	204,041 (3rd)
	<i>Le Courrier picard</i>	3 / North (Amiens area)	84,677 (16th)
	<i>L'Union - L'Ardennais</i>	1	76,738 (17th)
	<i>L'Est Éclair</i>	1	22,525 (38th)
	<i>Nord Éclair</i>	1	15,405 (43rd)
	<i>Nord Littoral</i>	1	7,311 (48th)
Centre France	<i>Libération Champagne</i>	1	3,514 (52nd)
	<i>La Montagne</i>	6 / Center (Clermont-Ferrand area)	154,168 (8th)
	<i>Le Populaire du Centre</i>	2	32,198 (28th)
	<i>La République du Centre</i>	1	29,537 (30th)
	<i>Le Berry Républicain</i>	1	28,272 (32nd)
	<i>L'Yonne républicaine</i>	1	25,098 (35th)
	<i>L'Echo républicain de Chartres</i>	2	25,052 (36th)
	<i>Le Journal du Centre</i>	1	22,636 (37th)
	<i>L'Eveil de la Haute-Loire</i>	1	10,287 (46th)
	La Dépêche	<i>La Dépêche du Midi</i>	10 / Southwest (Toulouse area)
<i>Midi Libre</i>		6 / Southwest (Montpellier area)	98,960 (13th)
<i>L'Indépendant</i>		2	43,888 (24th)
<i>Centre Presse (Aveyron)</i>		1	16,017 (42nd)
<i>La Nouvelle République des Pyrénées</i>		2	9,551 (47th)
<i>Le Petit Bleu d'Agen</i>		1	6,642 (49th)
Sud Ouest	<i>La Gazette du Comminges</i>	2	n.c.
	<i>Sud Ouest</i>	7 / Southwest (Bordeaux area)	234,752 (2nd)
	<i>La Charente Libre</i>	1	29,127 (31st)
	<i>La République des Pyrénées</i>	1	27,278 (34th)
	<i>L'éclair des Pyrénées</i>	1	6,095 (50th)
	<i>La Dordogne libre</i>	1	4,980 (51st)

Table 23.4 (Cont.)

Owner	Newspaper	No. of areas / main regions covered	Circulation in 2017–2018 (rank)
NRCO	<i>La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest</i>	5 / Center (Tours area)	151,705 (9th)
	<i>Centre Presse (Poitiers)</i>	1	10,369 (45th)
Les Echos/Le Parisien (LVMH)	<i>Le Parisien</i>	9 / Paris area	198,328 (4th)
Télégramme	<i>Le Télégramme</i>	3 / Brittany	190,475 (6th)
La Provence	<i>La Provence</i>	3 / South (Marseilles area)	96,338 (15th)
	<i>Corse Matin</i>	1	32,110 (29th)
Nice Matin	<i>Nice Matin</i>	2 / South (Nice area)	70,989 (18th)
	<i>Var Matin</i>	1	50,260 (20th)
Société normande d'Information et de communication (SNIC)	<i>Paris Normandie</i> (including <i>Le Havre Libre</i> and <i>Le Havre Presse</i> )	1	48,212 (21st)
Hersant Media	<i>Le Journal de l'île de la Réunion</i>	1	n.c.
	<i>Les Nouvelles calédoniennes</i>	1	n.c.
	<i>France Antilles</i>	2 / Martinique and Guadeloupe	n.c.
	<i>France-Guyane</i>	1	n.c.
L'Echo du Centre	<i>L'Écho</i>	5 / Center (Limoges area)	36,000

Source: ACPM, paid-for circulation in France, 2018.

Note: Numbers are a mean of paid-for daily circulation in France between July 2017 and June 2018; n.c.: undisclosed.

annual turnover of €1 million. This turnover is split in the following way: circulation (42 percent), advertising (30 percent), judicial and legal notices (27 percent) and classifieds (1 percent). The first listed is the weekly *La Manche libre*, which has a circulation of 58,676 in the department La Manch, at the top of Brittany. Originally independent and focused on rural life, these regional papers now belong to major press groups such as Publihebdos (Groupe SIPA-Ouest-France), Centre France and La Voix, or major press groups specializing in local and regional press, such as Sogemedia, which publishes about 25 local newspapers focused on micro local news with a limited circulation (a mean of 6,000 copies). Publihebdos is the largest publisher of weekly newspapers: 88 papers (77 paid, 9 free and 2 monthlies) covering 17 departments and 10 regions. Its turnover for 2017 reached €68,049,740. As an example, *L'Aurore paysanne* was launched in 1945 in the department of Indre and distributed up to 3,500 copies each Friday in 2018. This journal doesn't run a website but has a Facebook account instead.

### Local TV markets

In September 2018 there were 42 listed local TV stations operating in France. Some operate under an associative status. Their audience is limited and these local stations rely on public subsidies – from local public bodies and authorities – to be sustainable. Others are part of media

groups such as Groupe Médias du Sud, which runs viaOccitanie – a local news network that mainly covers the southwest of France through four TV stations – as well as other media outlets in continental France and overseas. These stations face persistent low audience numbers and weak advertising revenues. Between September 2016 and July 2017, the 35 local TV stations scrutinized by *Médiamétrie* had a combined audience of 1.3 million viewers per day. As a consequence, in July 2018, 22 local stations partnered through the Réseau Vià with the aim at pooling investments to grow audience and revenue. Continental France is also covered by the 24 regional stations that belong to the major state-owned nationwide TV network France 3. These regional stations produce and air two daily regional and local news programs; the rest of the output is national network content.

### ***Local radio stations***

Local radio stations are more numerous than TV operators and each French department typically hosts more than a dozen. Two kinds of stations operate: the state-owned network France Bleu – part of the national public service broadcaster Radio France – operates on 45 frequencies in all departments. It provides daily local news and programs produced by local teams. Radio France's turnover is €656 million but only 12 percent comes from advertising and business revenues; 88 percent comes from public taxation. France Bleu receives 33 percent of the budget to finance its programs. Another nationwide network, Radio Chrétienne Francophone (RCF), run by the French Catholic Church, has 64 stations delivering 4 hours of local programs attracting around 600,000 listeners a day. RCF's revenue is made up of charitable donations (70 percent), advertising (20 percent), Ministry of Culture and Communication subsidy (3 percent) and funds from the Lyons diocese (7 percent). Besides these nationwide networks with regional and local units, many private stations operate in each continental and overseas department. They are run through association or community and commercial models that mainly broadcast music. The largest, NRJ, was launched in 1981 by NRJ Group and is the leading music station for teenagers and young adults and the most popular radio network in France.

### ***Digital local media***

Print, TV and radio markets have always been interwoven with political and public administrations. Elite journalists and most media outlets maintain political ties; politicians maintain media ties. News media markets are affected by a growing concentration of ownership in mainstream media as well as a process of standardization that not only affects the editorial news content but also the practices and identity of journalists. In response, more and more citizens forsake mainstream news media for alternative online media that offer distinctive editorial content and orientation. Some of these are strongly opposed by mainstream journalists because they are run by individuals outside the mainstream occupation and their alternative perspectives challenge mainstream orthodoxy. Mainstream journalists and intellectuals seek to delegitimize alternative media by claiming they create false news and undermine democratic systems (Lardeau, 2017).

Trust in both national and local news media is declining among French citizens as the quality of content is depleted and their interconnections with local politics and business elites undermine their ability to engage critically with established powers. Some journalists have resigned from mainstream organizations to launch online news media, citing a lack of independence from politics and business. Consequently, most of these entrepreneurial new starts have adopted investigative, critical approaches to journalism, disclosing local political scandals and financial wrongdoing. These local independent newspapers are mainly run as not-for-profit

organizations or small enterprises and the frequency of their printed issues varies. The longest-lasting case is *La Galipote*, launched in 1979 as not-for-profit association run by five employees assisted by many volunteers – which also manages a publishing house tied to the newspaper. It issues 6,000 copies three or four times a year and covers the Auvergne area with a selling price of €6. Like most local investigative newspapers its founders follow the example of *Le Canard enchaîné* and *Charlie Hebdo*, satirical and investigative papers that reject advertising.

More recently, local media have launched as pure online players. The first of these appeared during the 2000s but most have closed or changed their business model having failed to create a sustainable source of revenue reliant on display advertising and free content, and they were also subject to political pressures. One such was *Montpellier Journal*, launched by independent journalists in 2008 and offering free content on local politics and business issues in and around Montpellier. Another, *Marsactu*, launched in 2010, covers Marseille. Its editorial charter clearly separated shareholders and newsroom. It provided free content but failed to attract sufficient advertising and collapsed in 2015. However, its journalists successfully relaunched it later that year through a crowdfunding campaign and it adopted a paywall model with subscriptions ranging from €5 to €7 per month. It claimed 1,800 subscribers by mid-2018. *Marsactu* regularly collaborates with *Mediapart* on specific issues. One of the most prominent examples is *mediacites.fr*. Launched in 2016 by journalists who left their mainstream posts, it conducts uncompromising journalistic investigation in four cities (Lyon, Lille, Toulouse, Nantes). Like *Mediapart*, its business model is subscription (€5 to €7 per month) rather than advertising. Its launch capital comprised: crowdfunding (€25,000), founders' investments (€35,000) and state subsidies (€50,000). The site is run by a staff of seven veteran reporters with many freelance contributors.

## Conclusion

The French local press, radio and TV landscape is not shaped by liberalism and free competition. On the contrary, the central state strongly regulates these markets. Radio and TV markets are subject to licensing by the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel, an administrative body that regulates entry to and development of TV and radio markets. Successive governments have continually reinforced regional press monopolies and the enduring massive subsidies granted by the Ministry of Culture and Communication to the print press. As of now, independent news websites that compete with the mainstream regional and local newspapers are still small and need to harden their business models, based on either subscriptions or advertising. These new online outlets are often launched and run by veteran journalists who have left mainstream media to strengthen investigative and independent journalism. In this sense they offer an alternative way to produce local news and journalism that breaks the ties with politics and administrative bodies.

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# ‘I’VE STARTED A HYPERLOCAL, SO NOW WHAT?’

*Marco van Kerkhoven*

## **Introduction**

In the renowned study by Bowman and Willis (2003), it was predicted that by 2021 non-professional journalists would account for at least 50 per cent of all the news stories. And online would be their preferred platform. Also, the public would be actively participating in the political process through online communication. The diversification of communication channels would also offer the public, or more specifically the voter, as Jenkins (2006) emphasises, an expanded range of voices that can be heard. We are now on the brink of 2021 and whether or not these somewhat ominous words prove to be true is still at the centre of debate. In any case, the digitisation and democratisation of the media was painfully balanced by a decline of good old legacy media. At least for sure in the Netherlands this proved to be the situation. Over a period of 30 years, paid regional daily newspapers in the Netherlands have seen their circulation declining by more than 50 per cent: from 2.7 million in 1980 to 1.3 million papers in 2017. Household penetration also dropped severely: in 1990, 47 copies were distributed in every 100 households; in 2017 this number fell to 23. Today, five independent regional publishers are left, while the number of titles decreased from 35 in 1980 to 18 at present (Bakker and Kik, 2018).

In some Dutch regions publishers decided to withdraw their daily print publication from the market altogether. For that reason, new news initiatives and local news ecosystem have been well monitored in the past decade. Bakker and Bosch (2011) studied appearance and functioning of the media in two municipalities in the Netherlands. They tracked all other available media channels and their content during one week for news on politics and policy, including online and offline complaints and comments. They conclude that digital media do not play a significant role in these areas of concern. They mainly publish second-hand stories by aggregating from websites of local freesheets and the public institutions’ press websites. Original reporting, debate or comments are practically non-existent.

Kik and Landman (2013) conducted a follow-up research project that entailed an in-depth focus on selected municipalities and found that in those with under 50,000 inhabitants local original political news – which they regarded as critical content for regional news media – is effectively non-existent. In regions where the keystone media player, as Nielsen et al. (2014) term the local paper, is underperforming, online news producers also tend to underperform

as well. Taking a broader perspective on the development of media density in a representative number of Dutch regions, van Kerkhoven and Bakker (2014) investigated how hyperlocal media organised their business, how they were geographically distributed, what sources of revenues they relied on and what their editorial strategy was. In a follow-up (van Kerkhoven, 2016) studied motivations, editorial and organisational strategy, and the way hyperlocals engage with the community. Results indicated that hyperlocal sites underperformed in terms of efficient use of resources, attracting readers and advertisers and the way they connect with sources and audiences. The sustainability of local news websites, therefore, seemed far from secured. Bakker and Kik (2018) showed that the overall tendency of declining media availability in the Netherlands is still very well visible. But they also revealed that the number of successful regional and local digital news initiatives was growing steadily.

This chapter aims to show what we have learned from the Dutch cases the past decade about how – often in the absence of a regional daily newspaper – local news ecosystems have developed, and how hyperlocal media have coped with sustainability, impact of ownership and business models.

### **Local news**

The digitisation of media has given room to thousands of new news companies around the world, competing for the attention of the news consumer and the increasingly selective advertiser. The latter has benefited tremendously from the monopoly-breaking effect of digital start-ups. This process is especially visible in the local news ecosystem, where new news businesses erupt in a rapid fashion (Picard, 2014; Wall, 2015; Nguyen and Scifo, 2018). In essence, the transition from analogue to digital made it possible to represent every single piece of information by a series of ones and zeroes, the fundamentals of digital data transfer. All media products could be synchronised, offering almost unlimited ways of producing and channelling news. Broadband Internet and the mobile revolution have in particular altered fundamentally the value chain of news production and distribution. Digital start-ups and online-only news providers have a competitive advantage over the traditional print publications, because they do not carry the burden of the high-cost legacy model (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2009; Picard, 2018).

In the meantime, economic rationalisation shifted ownership in media from individuals and families to detached shareholders. The latter had neither the urge nor the devotion to invest in a social role for the media, and furthermore introduced a well-known business approach to the media: that of harvesting the fruits of their market position (Meyer, 2009; Adams, 2016). This take-the-money-and-run strategy involves lowering costs to a level where it is difficult to maintain a quality product, and sustaining this situation for as long as possible before consumers recognise that they are being deceived. By then, the company and the product may already be ruined, and the owners either sell or close down the company, completing the 'harvest' (Franklin, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2016). Regional publishers divesting themselves of local and regional news publications is a development that has also been visible in other European countries, in the UK and in the US (O'Sullivan, 2017). Yet, there is a long-established consensus that regional newspapers play a critical role in informing and supporting a democratic society (Stephenson, 2018). The Pew Research Centre (2009) published a longitudinal study on how people value local and regional news coverage in the United States. Results showed that 56 per cent of the 1,001 adults interviewed agreed that the disappearance of local or regional independent news media in general would do "a lot" of damage to "citizenship". Nine years later, the Pew Research Centre reported that the number of newspaper newsroom employees had dropped by 45 per cent since 2008 (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Local news media are considered to be crucial elements in the political debate (Kaufhold, Valenzuela, and De Zúñiga, 2010; McChesney, 2015). And a critical consequence of these findings is that people value news in relation to their public life. There is evidence that local news in a newspaper promotes political participation and enhances political knowledge, and thus reading local newspapers increases the willingness to participate in the community (Moy, McCluskey, McCoy and Spratt, 2004; Paek, Yoon and Shah, 2005). People also see a close connection between political accountability and the presence of an active news community. Snyder and Stromberg (2010) saw that members of the American Congress work harder for their constituents – in terms of brining more economic activity home and testifying for more committee hearings – when they are receiving more coverage in their local newspapers.

Currah (2009) feared that a declining availability of regional news dailies leads to a situation in which a public is deprived of a sufficient amount of daily news on which it is supposed to be able to judge political issues. A large-scale study investigating a local news ecosystem, and examining the role a regional daily newspaper plays in the news cycle, has been undertaken by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. It found in its investigation of the Baltimore news ecosystem, 'How news happens' (2010), that about 50 per cent of the news leads it followed across all the online and offline channels available in the Baltimore area during a certain period – depending on the duration of the story developing – had the local newspaper as their main source.

## Hyperlocals

Online news models are expected to play an increasingly leading role in local news markets because their presence has the potential to add value to the political news ecosystems. They are more flexible and cheaper to operate, especially in terms of production and distribution (Howley, 2009; Nielsen, 2015). Because the threshold for participation seems low, these media are also able to use citizens as contributors (Wall, 2015). The hyperlocal is a special brand of alternative local news businesses: local online initiatives that aim to produce news gathered in and focused on a designated local area. However, Howley (2009, 2) argues that hyperlocals go beyond the traditional description of 'community media'. He defines them as "a range of community-based activities intended to supplement, challenge, or change the operating principles, structures, financing, and cultural forms and practices associated with dominant media".

New local online initiatives seemed to be a logical reaction to an (assumed) news gap: the failure of incumbent media to cover the community any longer (Metzgar, Kurpius and Rowley, 2011). In *We Media* (Bowman and Willis, 2003) and *We the Media* (Gillmor, 2004) the promise was made that new online models could offer citizens the possibility to start their own media by adopting easily accessible technology. Chen et al. (2012) suggest that grassroots web-based initiatives were capable of filling the local news gap that is emerging due to disinvestments of legacy media. And, according to Beckett (2010, 11), "independent hyper-local journalism ... is a potential amelioration of the drastic problem of declining professional regional and local news media". Radcliffe (2012, 10) suggests that there are "many reasons why hyperlocal media is gaining popularity". His focus is on technological possibilities, expected audience behaviour and possible commercial opportunities. It is assumed that engaged and committed citizens will use technology to start blogging or contribute to digital platforms in other ways. Local online community news sites launched by entrepreneurial journalists are also expected to play a role in the local democracy (Downie and Schudson, 2009). Optimists such as Gillmor (2004) and Radcliffe (2012) expect that such changes will enable local news environments to change

for the better, even though the presence of legacy media organisations such as local papers is decreasing. Gillmor wrote: "The emergence of 'mymedia' has accelerated at a remarkable rate" (2004, 14).

### **Business models**

However, it is clear that the absence of a regional daily must have some impact on a local news ecosystem. A study of a media ecosystem in a growing (200,000+) municipality (Almere) in the Amsterdam metropolitan area (van Kerkhoven, 2016) demonstrated this. It might be expected that the absence of a regional daily newspaper would give room to new online initiatives, yet the opposite was reported. This counter-intuitive situation arose because in the absence of a strong news medium, it proved difficult or impossible for a newcomer to enter the news market. Where to begin, what business model to follow? These findings supported a study in Denmark (Nielsen, Andersen and Almlund, 2014) that showed that after national news organisations pulled out of the local news ecosystem, the remaining news producers did not manage to keep a blooming news economy alive, and a news desert was emerging. In Denmark survey data were combined with a content analysis and semi-structured interviews to explore the news ecosystem of a regional town. The data showed that a result of the absence of keystone media and producers of independent and professionally produced news, the media environment or ecosystem of local journalism was diminishing. Keystone media play a critical role in the production and circulation of information in a local information environment; online news initiatives seem hardly capable of taking over that position.

Yet, in the Netherlands, hyperlocal start-up news websites are gaining importance, in spite of the increasing erosion of these so-called keystone media organisations. In the past ten years, more than 100 independent news websites have managed to survive locally. In the process, many have become more professional, and some of these sites are even profitable. The number of online news channels has grown steadily, mainly due to their use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. But both offline and online news channels that report on political issues – for example – consist in large part of aggregators and other websites with no, or only very few, members of staff. So, in general, the hyperlocal business model is still a low-budget concept heavily reliant on volunteers. The use of social media is not yet optimal, and advertising revenues are hardly sufficient to sustain them. There is, however, a growing entrepreneurial spirit, visible in a strong performance in terms of local news – dominant for all models – and a substantial portion of original content.

### **Sustainability**

One motivation to start a local online news website is for the better part grounded in the perception of a local news gap: owners of these sites are not satisfied with the local news offered by traditional news providers. Many site owners are also motivated by commercial objectives. Overall, owners show a passion for serving their community. However, a majority are somewhat uncomfortable with what they regard as a true journalistic approach. In terms of strategy and claimed engagement, however, there are only a few differences between ideologically non-profit hyper-locals and the ones that are more commercially orientated. Commercial goals prevail. This is why, in attempts to find new avenues of income, hyperlocals permit third parties to publish unedited and paid press releases in a news environment.

Online local news sites in the Netherlands still underperform in terms of an efficient use of resources, the acquisition of readers and advertisers and in their attempts to connect with

audiences. This makes the sustainability of the hyperlocal model vulnerable. Nevertheless, the lack of resources has triggered ingenuity and has forced owners, employees and volunteers to commit to their project and to adapt to new situations. Although there is more freedom to experiment with technologies, compared to traditional news media, taking advantage of new tools and ideas is often not considered a priority, mostly due to lack of time and money and skills.

Re-investing in local news could be an answer to growing competition. The hyperlocals that were studied show that start-up costs are low, as is the digital technology that allows higher levels of social interaction with news consumers – a critical factor in gaining customer loyalty. Re-entering local or hyperlocal markets and being more in touch with the audience would also be a logical step to take for incumbent media as well. Moreover, presenting the news alone cannot beat the competition of low-cost aggregators and online start-ups. Added value – that is, quality – has to be created in original stories (self-produced), scoops and follow-ups, skilled political interviews and multi-media dossiers. Journalists have to extend their skills to be present on different platforms and to lead public debates and voice opinions on online and offline platforms. Being visible in the public space as an ambassador for democracy and social integration seems a natural role for a journalist. The local news ecosystem provides a potential – albeit challenging – job market. As this overview shows, local news has reclaimed attention and importance, both as a foundation for democracy and as a commercially attractive product.

### **Conclusion: impact of ownership**

The hyperlocal markets in the Netherlands reveal a number of problems concerning sustainability and business models. There is insufficient investment in the production of a steady stream of original news and in securing advertising revenues. Moreover, hyperlocals could do more in terms of their visibility and presence. This is why they need to expand their social media strategy and to produce more original news. Elaborating on the impact of ownership, one can say that, overall, owners of hyperlocal news businesses could benefit from training programmes: on developing their site; in terms of navigation; focus; business model and staffing; on adapting to new market circumstances (competitors, advertising); and on the behaviour of the audience. There is actually no lack of initiative, enthusiasm and motivation. But noble motives on the one hand and the business approach on the other present a severe dilemma. Sometimes ideology is getting in the way of sound economic, organisational and editorial decisions, and vice versa. Both situations cause damage to basic principles of professional journalism.

The explorative case study in Almere gave new insights into the way a local news ecosystem without a daily newspaper develops over half a decade. The lack of a regional daily – or another keystone medium – means that there is a serious risk that many local political events and issues are not covered at all. This has consequences for the availability of independent news, harming the political discourse. At the same time, however, local start-up news producers do try to fill the news gap, and do show potential. For the democratic process in local communities, this means that all is not lost. A substantial growth in the number of online news channels with a working business model might create a promising and rewarding local news market. However, which business model is sustainable in a particular local context needs further research, as does the question of how hyperlocals persist in performing journalistically, ethically and businesswise at the same time.

In any case, governments at all levels need to recognise that a lively local news ecosystem is vital to a local community. News media inform people as voters, foster integration and are key to political checks and balances. A structural public support for media, profit-making and

non-profit-making, and local journalism in particular, should therefore be taken into serious consideration. It seems unsustainable for a government to persist in drawing the line at radio and television when it comes to supporting mass media with a legal task for culture, sports and political news – as is the case in the Netherlands. When local news production is platform-independent, and when local news needs special attention, it is evident that the funding of local journalism should be platform-independent as well.

Whether independent news start-ups are appropriate substitutes for, or an addition to, legacy news media depends on answers to the question of what political news should look like when serving public debates on issues. Exploring the strategies for adding value to news production beyond just implementing convergence is worthwhile. The same goes for questions concerning how owners of hyperlocals value and implement journalistic codes of conduct, how they combine advertorial-based business models with independent news production and how they deal with conflicting interests, especially in cases where local economic and political powers seem to interfere. There are enough encouraging signs in the Netherlands that could signal a change in media work for the better. That by 2021 non-professional journalists will account for at least 50 per cent of all the news stories and online would be their preferred platform, is not very likely to be the change we can expect. And although a wide range of different 'voters' actively participating in the political process through online communication, as Jenkins (2006) stated, has yet to take off, there is still little reason to doubt that regional and local news media are able to survive the digital crisis due to their place in the community and their fundamental role as a source for *need-to-know* information.

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# THE HYPERLOCAL 'RENAISSANCE' IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

*Scott Downman and Richard Murray*

## Introduction

Local journalism, in some parts of the world, not only serves an important function in keeping communities informed but becomes a binding agent that encourages civic participation and awareness. In an Australian context, local journalism is a cultural, nationalistic construct that explains news transference from one person to another. The so-called Bush Telegraph was a term first used in Australia after European settlement to describe the way news moved from local community to local community about the exploits of feared and notorious bushrangers. These shared eyewitness stories and embellished accounts not only became an important method of informing communities of the dangers of criminals in their local area but built a culture of localised reporting in a vast nation of isolated communities. They also contributed to a national identity. This bedrock of local reporting swiftly developed and became formalised during the 1800s and 1900s into a sophisticated journalism industry that provided a crucial community function for more than 150 years. However, a digitised media industry has now wreaked havoc in this foundational local institution. In 2012, former Australian prime minister and journalist Malcolm Turnbull forewarned: “The consequence of this decline in journalism is that too many important matters of public interest are either not covered at all or covered superficially” (2012, 59). The story of local journalism is similar in New Zealand. Local journalism there became the glue around which rural and urban communities bonded. New Zealand is small in size but rugged in geography, meaning in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century many of the country’s citizens were isolated from their peers, heightening the need and desire for good local journalism.

However, in recent years, newspaper closures, the large-scale sacking of journalists and the disintegration of the news business models has left the Australian and New Zealand media industry in tatters and communities starved of local news. The gravity of this collapse has not been lost on the Australian Government. In 2017 the federal government launched a Senate inquiry into the future of public-interest journalism in Australia. The outcomes of this inquiry, released in 2018, do not make for easy reading. More than 3,200 journalists have left the industry since 2012, news deserts are emerging in local communities at an alarming rate and the quality of journalism has been eroded to a point that has never been seen in Australia. The reports says:

It is also clear that the scale and speed of these changes has had profoundly negative effects on the traditional news media sector, including a depletion of the capacity of many organisations to provide quality public interest journalism. This is particularly concerning as many of these traditional media organisations have over many years provided the bedrock of investigative and public interest journalism, informing the public and holding all levels of Australian government to account.

*(2018, 24)*

Even Australia's much-lauded public broadcaster, the ABC, was outed for struggling to deliver its local news commitment and offerings. It was argued that the collapse of commercial journalism in regional areas had created an added burden for the ABC.

A number of submissions noted that the ABC was particularly stretched in delivering current affairs and local news for some areas. As commercial broadcasters increasingly shut down their operations in places that are not commercially viable, the ABC is often left as the last provider of local current affairs, particularly for many regional and rural communities.

*(2018, 32)*

Broadly, the inquiry revealed Australia's media industry at a point of crisis, but for many local communities the relationship between communities and media providers is already terminal. Amid this grim setting of disruption and collapse, pockets of journalists with a desire to reinstate the role and influence of local journalism have emerged. These journalists are using the platform of hyperlocal journalism as a renaissance to resuscitate journalism in Australia and New Zealand. Although many of these enterprises are underpinned by a spirit of altruism and passion connected to the important democratic and social functions of journalism, they are not always sustainable. This chapter contextualises the emergence of hyperlocal journalism in Australia and New Zealand in a post-digital-disruption world by examining three hyperlocal journalism enterprises that have been launched since 2014. The influence, effect and innovation of these enterprises will be tracked and analysed to shine a light on a field of journalism many are hopeful will breathe life into a beleaguered industry that tip-toes on the cusp of irrelevance in both countries.

### **Contextualising hyperlocal journalism in Australia and New Zealand**

Hyperlocal journalism in Australia and New Zealand has emerged out of position of desperation and necessity. That is not to downplay the various forms of hyperlocal journalism that have emerged in both countries. In fact, out of this place of vulnerability, experimental and powerful forms of journalism have been developed in recent years that are not only challenging long-held notions of local journalism but are embracing a spirit of inclusiveness that has previously been missing from mainstream news media. The past 15 years have seen the variety and quantity of local news dwindle as the number of local news providers has scaled back. The optimism that citizen journalism would somehow fill the emerging news vacuums has largely evaporated as few citizen journalism projects have managed to gain traction, let alone credibility, with audiences. In this moonscape of media mayhem important realisations have solidified. First, in both Australia and New Zealand, the importance of professional, public-interest journalism has been emphasised. The naivety that local citizen journalism could ever replace professional news services has not eventuated. Even large media

companies, such as Fairfax, that have tried to facilitate partnerships with citizen journalists and provide a platform for hyperlocal journalism have failed (Downman and Murray, 2018). Second, institutional and structural changes to the news industry have meant journalists now have new freedoms to tell stories in imaginative and cutting-edge ways, outside the restrictions of corporate structures.

In the hyperlocal market, this has led to experimentalism in the journalistic genre that has seen enterprises emerge that blend art and poetry with journalism. Although such ventures are not to everyone's liking, they are typically created for niche audiences that are demanding this kind of storytelling innovation. These news enterprises are not only filling a news void but challenging long-held definitions of journalism. Third, recapturing local media markets has forced journalists to rethink audience and community engagement. This has seen the re-emergence of grassroots, face-to-face interactions as a valuable ingredient in storygathering and building credibility. Rather than journalists making decisions 'chained' to their desks and relying solely on news algorithms and data sets, hyperlocalism has seen journalists break free from the shackles of modern newsroom culture.

... News organisations and journalists must connect and bond with the communities they serve. In a hyperlocal sense this is done by adopting a grassroots approach. An algorithm is not always a sure-fire way of discovering a person's wants or needs. But talking with them quickly removes the ambiguity an algorithm can't.

*(Downman and Murray, 2018, 16)*

Hyperlocal journalism is a chance for journalism to reclaim authenticity and credibility at a time when the media industry is facing unprecedented challenges to its integrity and to restore trust to a critical profession (Downman and Murray, 2018, 12). In spite of this optimism, it is important to emphasise that hyperlocal journalism is not a panacea. In fact, the first case study, which unpacks the development, growth and eventual demise of an award-winning hyperlocal magazine on Australia's Sunshine Coast, is testament to that. The publication *Backstory* had a life of little more than 18 months; however, it will be argued in this chapter that if authentic and sustainable hyperlocal journalism models are to be realised, important lessons can be learnt from courageous hyperlocal entrepreneurialism such as this. Central to the success of any hyperlocal journalism venture is a commitment to core foundations. Although the news products will inevitably vary dramatically from community to community, the principles of audience, investment and respect must drive the product (Downman and Murray, 2018). Although a commitment to these principles does not guarantee success, establishing a hyperlocal news service without them will almost certainly signal disaster. The second case study explores the development of a hyperlocal website in Sydney's multicultural western suburbs. The project *Mapping Frictions* seeks to break stereotypes and meet the news needs of one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the world. It will be argued that this purposeful use of hyperlocal journalism has the capacity to unify and empower diverse communities. The final case study will explore how a news app – Neighbourly – that connects communities using social media methodology is being used to address the issue of emerging news deserts in regional New Zealand.

### **Case study 1: *Backstory***

The Sunshine Coast is one of Australia's fastest-growing areas. Spanning a large area that includes 211 kilometres of spectacular coastline and a mountainous hinterland, the region's moderate,

sub-tropical climate has seen people from across Australia migrate to the area in large numbers during the past 20 years. From a journalism perspective, it is a city of diversity that is filled with stories. Serviced by a daily newspaper, *The Sunshine Coast Daily*, two television stations, each with a 30-minute nightly local news bulletin, and three locally operated commercial radio stations, along with a local ABC radio station, the region is better equipped than most regional areas in Australia to tell local stories. However, the region's vast area means many stories go untold. In 2016, experienced journalists Kat Donaghy and Megan Slade recognised the dearth of local reporting in their region. They noted that the stories about the Sunshine Coast published by mainstream media were either sensational or stereotypical and fulfilled a prescribed news agenda. Donaghy says the tipping point to establishing their own hyperlocal enterprise came after spending an extended period covering a human-interest story on an Indigenous rodeo programme that was giving hope to troubled youth in the region's hinterland. She said the feature, which included stunning images, was eventually published as a three-paragraph story.

That was the day we both said, 'that's it'. We saw how we would have told that story and not just the story but the story behind the story and they [mainstream newspaper] turned it into three or four paragraphs with a bit of fluff. So that was the start of it.

*(Personal communication with Kat Donaghy, 6 April 2018)*

With no knowledge of business, advertising, marketing or web design, the two experienced journalists set about finding out as much as possible about running a journalistic publication.

We came up with idea of setting up our own publication spontaneously a year before quitting our jobs. When we quit our jobs we spent about 2–3 months working out how we would do this. We rang people who we knew were in advertising or that had a bit of business nous and we picked their brains ... We were naively of the belief that if you produce good stories people will just lap it up and embrace the publication. We didn't have any fear and we were passionate.

*(Personal communication with Kat Donaghy, 6 April 2018)*

To fund their venture, both women invested \$8,000 to launch the project. They also embarked on a regional road trip, travelling to every newsagent on the Sunshine Coast with a product pitch and an information kit on why they should stock the news publication. Donaghy says:

Because we were so enthusiastic people got swept up in our passion. We never ever doubted that we could do this. Everyone was enthusiastic because it was local and we sold it to them by saying it's going to be like *Time Magazine* or *National Geographic* but with all local content. It was a spiel we used over and over again. We gave them examples of the images and most of them agreed to support us.

*(Personal communication with Kat Donaghy, 6 April 2018)*

However, despite their enthusiasm, there were dynamics in the community that were resistant to a new publication. Donaghy says she was surprised at the number of people who were completely fed-up with mainstream media and reluctant to pay \$4 for great stories about their community:

What we faced was a switched-off, jaded audience and they saw a magazine and thought it was going to be junk with nothing in it for them. The trouble was cutting

through to people. We would hand them out to people but convincing them to open the magazine and read it was difficult. Once they did they loved it. We learnt that people in Australia don't care about media any more.

*(Personal communication with Kat Donaghy, 6 April 2018)*

She said people's initial responses surprised them, but they remained convinced that good and meaningful journalism had the capacity to overcome people's disinterest in another publication.

We truly believed that we were on to something and that local journalism is the way of the future. Online is about national or international and there was nowhere people could turn to, to get quality local journalism and I still really believe that.

*(Personal communication with Kat Donaghy, 6 April 2018)*

However, the 18 months in getting the publication afloat took a toll on both of the journalists. During the life of *Backstory*, Donaghy and Slade worked three jobs to keep the publication alive. For example, Donaghy worked as a part-time media adviser for a local politician, taught journalism to first-year students at a local university and had a business as a part-time fitness instructor. She says:

We were working all the time. I have two teenage children so it wasn't as bad for me but Megan had two children under four. She was working until past midnight almost every night and in the end it started taking a toll on all of us.

*(Personal communication with Kat Donaghy, 6 April 2018)*

Donaghy (2018) says although she still believes *Backstory* was a fantastic publication, the impact on her well-being was immense: "... You reach a level of anxiety you've never had before". She said the irony was when they wound up the publication it was making money and they had built a subscriber base of a few hundred. She said the magazine had been accepted by the community, but they had unfortunately hit the point of burnout. Donaghy and Slade's experience is increasingly common in today's digitally driven media market. A 2016 study into burnout in journalists paints a picture of fragility and crisis regarding the wellbeing of digitally disrupted journalists. The study found:

Journalists of varying experience levels are at risk of burnout when they have personal and professional motives for maintaining high practice standards in an environment where they have reduced levels of control, staffing support, budget, and a diminished sense of purpose.

*(MacDonald et al., 2016, 35)*

Donaghy and Slade's experience in establishing *Backstory* supports this. It also highlights the difficulty in filling the local news needs of communities that have a fractured relationship with news media. The *Backstory* case study is both positive and negative. Positively, it demonstrates the power of engaged storytelling through the drive of committed journalists. Negatively, it demonstrates that audiences have lost faith in the news media in Australia and that the hurdles in overcoming the news voids in local communities will require a sustained commitment to journalism excellence and integrity, in a market lacking sustainable funding models.

## Case study 2: *Mapping Frictions*

In 2013 the sights of mainstream media in Australia were on western Sydney. The deeply multicultural area, with a large concentration of Muslim communities, became the focus of journalists seeking to investigate whether the diverse people in Australia's largest city were incubating terrorists. With the rise of ISIS and following the Boston bombings in 2013, media in Australia were questioning if something similar could happen here. For the most part, the reporting in these communities was speculative, stereotypical and superficial. Amid this reporting of racial tension, a hyperlocal journalism project emerged in Sydney's west to give greater voice to the diverse people who make up the region, with a population of more than 1 million people. *Mapping Frictions* was launched with a view to promoting a more complex understanding of the region and its people. The project's mission says:

Friction is what occurs when things rub against each other. It can cause eruptions as people in a place push up against one another, jostling for space. Bankstown has commonly been portrayed as a site of friction; as ethnic communities sparking on the fault line, a site of violence and crime. A multicultural community presented by the media as a 'clash of civilisations'. But friction also creates energy – and with it comes new possibilities.

*(Australia Council for the Arts, 2014)*

*Mapping Frictions'* goal is not only about telling untold stories but also innovating in the journalistic genre about the way, and how, stories are told. The website that was developed not only used an interactive map to track the locations of frictions, but also engaged alternate forms of storytelling, including documentary photography essays and slam poetry. Using a grant-based funding model, initially from the Australia Council for the Arts, the collaborative project partnered with the Bankstown Youth Development Service, which was also engaged in projects aimed at addressing the negative frames mainstream media were attaching to the area. The start-up's website says:

With concerns of Islamophobia growing in Australia following the recent terror raids and the worsening conflict with ISIS, the south-western Sydney suburbs have become a renewed focal point of negative stories in the media. Whilst some of these tensions are very real, it is also important for local voices to have a platform to show stories of their own, and which are rarely told.

*(Australia Council for the Arts, 2014)*

This approach is important for three reasons. First, it demonstrates that even though the people of western Sydney live in a city with scores of media outlets, news deserts can still occur whereby people are not represented proportionately or accurately in the mainstream media. Second, it shows that because of biased or fabricated reporting, communities lose faith and trust in media, leaving affected communities with a further sense of alienation. Third, it challenges the method of newsgathering and production and highlights the importance of community engagement in local storytelling. The project's creative producer Kavita Bedford says:

It's not some sort of naïve project where we're trying to say everything is glossy and great but there is a very one-sided portrayal of this area that is happening ... but what we feel is needed at the moment is some place or platform where people can actually



speak for themselves and not be typecast or pushed into this context of conflicts or racial riots.

*(Devudu, 2014)*

Bedford said one thing that the project was committed to was ‘myth-busting’ media reports about the area. In August 2014, Australia’s largest circulating daily newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, published an article referring to Lakemba in western Sydney as ‘Sydney’s Muslim Land’. The article says:

On this main shopping strip, the ethnic mix seems similar to what you’d find in any Arabic city. Australia may be multicultural, but Haldon St is a monoculture.

*(Blair, 2014)*

Bedford said that after the story was published, *Mapping Frictions* sought to investigate whether Lakemba was in fact a ‘monoculture’. She said the *Mapping Frictions* team retraced the steps of the *The Daily Telegraph* journalist, interviewing locals to add balance to the story. She said those who were willing to be interviewed said the story was typical of the narrow lens mainstream media used to report western Sydney: “We talk to people to get their side of the story. We’re not trying to catch people out but just give them the platform if that’s what they want” (Bedford, 2014). Their counter-narrative presented Lakemba as a vibrant multicultural hub that included people from a variety of different ethnic groups. She said it was through this approach, of setting the record straight, that would not only provide a counter-voice to mainstream media, but gradually erode the stereotypes that have been constructed about western Sydney. The *Mapping Frictions* experimentalism, which Bedford (2014) describes as “an artistic venture that blends journalism and art”, also involves allowing the community to tell their stories as citizen journalists, using video, audio, art and poetry, under the guidance of the *Mapping Frictions* creative team. The project itself demonstrates that emerging local journalism in Australia has a very different flavour to traditional models expressed by the mainstream for more than a century. Under the *Mapping Frictions* model, the journalism is intrinsically grassroots, where the journalists work as both facilitators and storytellers. Although the model relies largely on grants and goodwill, it demonstrates a high degree of altruism and clearly reflects the values of honesty, fairness, independence and respect for the rights of others outlined in the preamble of the Australian journalism code of ethics.

### **Case study 3: Neighbourly**

In New Zealand the impacts of digital disruption have been keenly felt. It is the familiar story of staff losses, the consolidation and closing of news outlets, big and small, and emerging news deserts. These dramatic changes have occurred following the migration of advertising and classified revenue to the digital giants. Like Australia, New Zealand’s commercial print and digital news landscape is dominated by Fairfax and News Corp. Where News Corp has been successful in claiming the emerging digital news space in Australia with news.com.au, Fairfax has triumphed in New Zealand with the online publication Stuff. Uncertainty over the longevity of the news industry in New Zealand has driven Fairfax New Zealand to experiment with its digital delivery of news. This cross-platform transition under the Fairfax New Zealand banner has seen the rise of Stuff, New Zealand’s award-winning national and international news aggregate website. This Stuff brand has been so successful in New Zealand that in 2018 Fairfax New Zealand renamed itself ‘Stuff’. With the website a success and the centrepiece of Fairfax’s

digital-first, or “News Rewired” (Downman and Murray, 2018) strategy, Stuff has looked to other ways to digitise its news offering and sustain existing revenue streams. A key pillar in this strategy is hyperlocalism, in the form of a social networking platform – Neighbourly.

According to Jeremy Rees, Fairfax National Communities editor (personal communication, 6 June 2017), Neighbourly has been instrumental in Stuff maintaining dominance in New Zealand’s hyperlocal journalism market. Today, Neighbourly has replaced newspapers as Stuff’s primary platform for the distribution of local news, with many free community publications continuing to disappear, only to reappear on Neighbourly. Neighbourly has also become a key tool in distributing local journalism, while doing more with less. Journalists are able to work across a number of communities at any given time, allowing journalists to engage with more people and stories, without the need to do traditional ‘shoe leather’ journalism. Neighbourly was not conceived as a platform for journalism. Rather, the platform was born out of the entrepreneurial spirit of co-founders Casey Eden and Shane Bradley to bring people together. Eden (personal communication, 7 June 2017) said he and Bradley were looking to create a platform where neighbours could come together and share information about what was happening in their communities. They wanted to take on Facebook’s dominance in New Zealand’s social media sphere. At the time of writing, Neighbourly boasted 550,000 users in New Zealand and was expecting to surpass 600,000 by the end of 2018 (Neighbourly, 2018). Where a Facebook user’s sometimes disparate social network is determined by ‘friends’, a Neighbourly user’s social network conforms to a postcode. On its website (2017), Neighbourly is described as:

... A tool that makes it easier to kickstart relationship building in our communities  
... Neighbourly makes meeting the neighbours easy. It helps get that ‘difficult’ first introduction out of the way – and hopefully even starts a few face-to-face interactions.  
*(Neighbourly, 2017)*

Since 2014, Neighbourly has been incrementally acquired by Stuff as a strategy to transition community and local news from print to digital. Stuff assumed full ownership and control in 2018. According to Rees, it was also a way to maintain some very lucrative revenue streams within New Zealand’s hyperlocal advertising market. In New Zealand the mainstay of newspaper advertising is real estate. Rees said areas where the real estate markets and associated revenue streams were strong were the areas where Neighbourly was thriving. These areas are in metropolitan areas of New Zealand where the populations are predominantly middle-class, university-educated and white. These populations are also aspirational, with access to credit to invest in property (Downman and Murray, 2018). In lower socio-economic areas like South Auckland, Neighbourly barely factors, and these are the areas where local news is drying up. Rees said:

We don’t pretend to have all the answers. Different solutions in hyperlocal news will appeal to different communities. Neighbourly is not going to work for every community.  
*(Personal communication, 6 June 2017)*

Driven by falling or insufficient advertising revenue, especially in real estate, many in the Stuff stable of 28 community publications are set to become extinct. In February 2018, Stuff Chief Executive Sinead Boucher announced that *The Wairarapa News*, *The Tribune*, *Waiheke Marketplace*, *Rotorua Review* and *Ruapehu Press* would be closed after buyers could not be found for them

(Edmunds, 2018). With the exception of *Waiheke Marketplace*, which served the community news needs and interests of the exclusive Auckland enclave of Waiheke Island, the failed publications were in rural and regional New Zealand, where population densities are very low and the publications' distribution costs are high. None of these titles will migrate to Neighbourly, meaning more job losses and the potential for greater news desertification across New Zealand's newscape. The impact this will have on the communities affected by the closures is a story that continues to unfold.

## Conclusion

This chapter outlines that hyperlocal journalism in Australia and New Zealand is an emerging necessity that is shrouded in a veil of uncertainty and experimentalism. That makes it exciting. It also makes it vulnerable. Universally, the hyperlocal journalism movement in Australia and New Zealand is being driven by journalists fed-up with what mainstream journalism offers in both countries. The challenge is convincing fed-up audiences to consume it. It is also being driven by some legacy media organisations seeking a digitised renaissance within their traditional models. Within this dynamic space the results are mixed. Powerful journalism is being produced, innovation is being embraced and experimental storytelling methods are being trialled. However, ensuring this hyperlocal renaissance remains economically sustainable continues to provide challenges. Hyperlocal journalism in Australia and New Zealand is not a panacea to many of the woes plaguing contemporary journalism but recognises local news is important and that journalism in targeted communities has a vital role in informing audiences. The case studies in this chapter are not answers to the crisis journalism is facing in Australia and New Zealand. Rather, they are poignant reminders of the importance of genuine journalism to inform, educate and entertain communities and a celebration of the journalistic profession and the people who are prepared to practise it, to make local communities stronger and better places.

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## PART V

# Local journalists and journalistic practices



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# AT THE CROSSROADS OF HOBBY, COMMUNITY WORK AND MEDIA BUSINESS

Nordic and Russian hyperlocal practitioners

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## Introduction

Research indicates that the aims, functions and work practices of hyperlocal start-ups and citizen- or community-initiated information sharing vary (Konieczna and Robinson, 2014; Ahva, 2017). We know little so far about how hyperlocal practitioners' perceptions of their roles are constructed as a part of media ecosystems and how views differ across media cultures as well as societal and political cultures. To be able to examine hyperlocals as contextually defined media, more research is needed on how practitioners from different countries make sense of their media. In this chapter, we examine how Nordic and Russian hyperlocal practitioners define their roles and aims, focusing on the possibilities, needs and limits given by the media ecosystems and models (Dobek-Ostrowska, Glowacki, Jakubowicz, and Süközd, 2010; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Of special interest are the notions of *authorship*, *local information*, *community engagement* and *political participation*. With authorship, we are referring to those who are involved in the making of the hyperlocals and how practitioners perceive of their roles. The dimension of content refers to what kind of information hyperlocal media aim at producing. With community engagement, we are referring to practitioners' views on audience and participation, i.e., how they wish to invite people to participate in the making of hyperlocals as well as to interact among themselves and with the practitioners. Political participation refers to how initiatives aim to create opportunities for local political communication and reconfiguring citizens' roles within local governance.

The datasets from Finland, Sweden and Russia allow for comparison between media in democratic and non-democratic countries and include a non-Western country in a comparative study of journalism (Hanusch and Vos, 2019). Sweden and Finland represent rather similar contexts of a liberalised version of the corporatist model, with strong public service media and state press subsidies (Ohlsson, 2015). Russia emerges within a context of unfree journalism and strong state interference in the media market (Vartanova, 2019). Comparative media research is often structured top-down, with a focus on national media companies. At the local level of a



media system, we might observe differences that are central to national media but irrelevant to local media, and vice versa.

### **Three contexts from the global North: Finland, Sweden and Russia**

The Nordic countries follow a similar model for press freedom, combined with self-regulation monitored by press councils and an ethical code that serious publishers follow. Finland and Sweden are characterised by universal media and communications services, strong and institutionalised media freedom, and consensual media and communications policy solutions – a model called the Nordic media welfare state (Syvertsen, Enli, Mjøs, and Moe, 2014). Equal access to different media and communication services as a communication policy principle has been enshrined in Finland in the Constitutional Law (731/1999), where it is reflected in the fundamental rights of citizens (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018). In Sweden, constitutional laws date back to 1766, and the self-disciplinary system of the press was founded in 1916. The Finnish media market is moderately regulated, while self-regulation has a major role. Radio and television broadcasting licences are regulated both in Finland and in Sweden. The Russian media system is characterised as “statist commercialized” (Vartanova, 2012), with the strong involvement of the state (Vartanova, 2019). The media system includes diverse journalistic practices inherited from the Soviet journalist culture and accepted from Western journalism in the post-Soviet period, regional differences and inequality, and converging media sub-systems (Lehtisaari and Miazhevich, 2019).

Digital technologies have changed the operational environment of the media. While digital distribution channels have gained in popularity, printed newspapers have faced a prominent decline in circulation and advertising revenues. In Finland, during the last decade the share of printed newspaper advertising has declined by half, from 40 to 20 per cent. Although people’s willingness to pay for journalistic content has diminished (Grönlund and Björkroth, 2011), some regional and local newspapers continue to make good profits. Seventy-five per cent of 200 Finnish newspaper titles are small local non-dailies. Concentration and consolidation of the markets have increased, leading to a situation where most local newspapers belong to larger media companies (Grönlund and Björkroth, 2011). This transformation has ensured that regional dailies face limited competition, enjoy monopolies and clear market-area demarcation between neighbouring newspaper companies (Lehtisaari et al., 2012). Local media markets are still quite pronounced and varied; markets are served by freesheets, city newspapers and many local publications, such as leaflets, seasonal publications and village bulletins (Hujanen et al., 2019).

Legacy media still enjoy a relatively strong position in Sweden. This is due to the heritage of the Nordic model, with locally anchored newspapers and strong public service and an editorial presence in two-thirds of municipalities (Nygren et al., 2017). At the same time, major changes have emerged in the Swedish media ecosystem. Circulation and advertising revenues of the newspapers have decreased dramatically, even though some regional dailies still make good profits (Kulturdepartementet, 2016). The development has led to a concentration in ownership, with centralised production, fewer journalists and closed local newsrooms. The number of journalists working for daily newspapers decreased by 25 per cent between 2004 and 2014. Half of all local newspaper offices were shut down between 2004 and 2017 (Nygren et al., 2017). The situation has been more stable for public service media (Nygren and Appelgren, 2015). Most Swedish people trust the news media and consider it important for society (Mitchell et al., 2018). Despite a high internet penetration (93 per cent), only a minority of people (25 per cent) paid for digital access to news in 2017 (Westlund and Ekström, 2018).

Regional and local media have a subordinate position within the Russian media system, experiencing economic, technological and professional lags compared to national media located in Moscow. Nevertheless, people rely on local media (VTsIOM, 2016). There are no reliable statistics on the number of outlets in Russia, though 77,519 outlets were registered as ‘mass media’ in 2018, with 42 per cent of them covering a local agenda (Mediator.media, 2018). After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, local media needed to find sustainable business models to survive the shift to a market paradigm. Nevertheless, the idea of state support continued to be anticipated by local officials and journalists. Local officials desired to preserve their control over the news agenda, while advertising revenues were deficient due to insufficient advertising markets (Dovbysh, 2019). Currently, local media rely on financial support from local authorities (Dovbysh and Gudova, 2016). Economic challenges have been accompanied by a crisis of journalistic values. Clientelistic relations with local authorities, based on economic dependency and self-censorship, have resulted in re-visioning among journalists of whom they serve and what value they create (Roudakova, 2017). Local journalists have withdrawn from conducting investigative journalism on local politics. In search of professional self-legitimation, they aim more to help people solve everyday problems and serve as a conduit between citizens and officials (Lowrey and Erzikova, 2018, 100).

### **The data and analysis**

The primary data consist of surveys and interviews with practitioners. The Finnish data include survey data, email interviews and ten in-depth interviews (Hujanen et al., 2019). The data collection process began in 2017 with a semi-structured national phone survey to municipalities to map hyperlocal publications. We asked about sources of local news and the existence of hyperlocal publications. The phone calls resulted in 241 answers, with the response rate being 78 per cent. The dataset was complemented in 2017 with an online survey directed at 72 titles found in the first stage. We received 33 responses (the response rate being 45 per cent), 25 of which were categorised as hyperlocal. The criteria used were as follows: publication is published/updated at least once a month; content is local and on a variety of topics; publication is targeted at locals or people with ties to the location. The survey data were analysed using statistical methods, resulting in tables and figures of authorship, ownership, type and goals of publishing. Ten semi-structured interviews were carried out in the years 2017–2018 among practitioners representing nine initiatives. The aim was to deepen our understanding of publication processes, practices, content and goals. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed qualitatively, marking important statements and relevant quotations under chosen themes.

The data from Sweden include an online survey and 13 semi-structured interviews with practitioners. The data gathering process started with a mapping of the local and hyperlocal news media market in the years 2015–2016. This resulted in a database of titles, location, ownership, frequency and publishing platforms of 587 regional, local and hyperlocal news outlets (Nygren, Leckner and Tenor, 2017). The database covers 178 small, independent, local news media outlets operating outside the established media groups. An online survey was performed in 2016, with 96 representatives from 140 titles completing the questionnaire (response rate 54 per cent). The sample included free and subscription newspapers, community radio and television stations (Leckner, Tenor and Nygren, 2019). The questions covered the beginning, organisation and funding of operations. In the next step, the digital hyperlocals were identified. The selection process yielded a total of 85 hyperlocals, operated by 76 actors; 46 of the actors, operating 56 sites, completed the questionnaire. In the last step, 13 independently owned, online hyperlocal entrepreneurship were chosen for qualitative interviews, representing professional journalists,

amateurs, commercial and non-profit initiatives as well as different geographic locations. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted in 2017. The questions covered background, journalism, organisation, finances and entrepreneurial skill sets. The interviews, taking two hours each, were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically.

Data from Russia include 82 semi-structured interviews with local media practitioners. The interviews were conducted in six cities in the years 2017–2018, covering the capitals of regions and district centres. Respondents came from legacy media (TV, newspapers,  $N = 13$ ), digital media (websites registered as mass media,  $N = 24$ ), hyperlocal media ( $N = 34$ ) and others (e.g., local officials,  $N = 5$ ). The diversity of the respondents allowed us to explore Russian hyperlocal media not only as separate objects, but also their interrelations with other media and their place within the local media landscape. The interviews lasted from 40 to 120 minutes. The respondents were asked about their professional roles, norms and routines, financing models and transformations in the local media. Particular attention was paid to the perceptions of hyperlocal media by other actors. Hyperlocal practitioners of media were also asked about their motivations and intentions as well as their understanding of the journalistic profession. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were coded using predefined categories derived from the extant literature as well as categories that emerged from the data (Neuman, 2000). Important statements and relevant quotations were marked.

### **Hyperlocal media in Finland, Sweden and Russia**

The hyperlocal media field in Finland is inherently diverse and has emerged at a leisurely pace. Approximately 30 hyperlocal publications were active in 2017. The hyperlocal media from Finland can be characterised as ‘in-between media’: media situated between personal and professional modes of communication. Initiatives operate mostly online, pertain to geographically defined communities and aim at filling gaps in local news and information sharing. From Sweden, 178 independently owned and run hyperlocal outlets were identified for the years 2015–2016. Some 90 of them were online hyperlocals, but sometimes they combined print and online media. High turnover rates and constant changes characterise hyperlocal operations in Finland and Sweden.

In an average Russian town of less than 100,000 citizens, there are up to ten hyperlocal media sites, while in larger cities there are dozens. In contrast to Finland and Sweden, few hyperlocal media sites exist as websites; most hyperlocals operate on social media platforms. The growth of hyperlocal media in Russia began in the 2010s, when SNS (social networking sites) had become the main communication platforms. Moreover, easier and cheaper access to the mobile internet compared to broadband has enhanced the popularity of social media and messaging services as the main sources of media consumption.

### ***Authorship***

Central questions regarding the authorship are (a) who the hyperlocal practitioners are and (b) how the roles are embedded in the media model. Hyperlocal publishing in Finland is pursued mainly on a voluntary basis or is community-driven. In the online survey, two out of three hyperlocal publishers defined their media primarily as publications produced by hobbyists (36 per cent) or as a community media (28 per cent). A small group (20 per cent) defined themselves as professional journalists, while labelling the publication as a non-profit-seeking enterprise. These results support the observation that most new hyperlocals in Finland are published by an association, a society, a community association or a local

entrepreneurial association. One of four hyperlocals (25 per cent) is published by a company and one of five (20 per cent) by private individuals. The companies are small-scale media or communication companies with an aim to produce local news in a new way or to test content marketing.

Most hyperlocal news sites in Sweden are operated by a company, including one-person operations. A minority (20 per cent) of the online practitioners are explicit hobbyists or non-profit associations; 24 per cent of initiatives make a profit, while 37 per cent break even and 28 per cent run a deficit, with the rest being non-monetary operations. Maintaining operations often means that practitioners need to engage in self-exploitation, work part-time in other industries or be provided for financially by family. Most hyperlocal practitioners have experience with the media business and legacy media. However, only 20 per cent are trained and/or previously full-time journalists. There is no set pattern by which online hyperlocal publications have emerged in Sweden; they exist in city districts, municipalities within commuting distance and small villages. The initiative is often tied to a practitioner's individual life circumstances or practical motivations, being able to work from home or managing one's own time. Practitioners are typically locally anchored persons who perceive local media as important. They also have an appropriate skill set or resources to explore hyperlocal options, such as a rich local network, experience with entrepreneurship, digital knowledge or skills in journalism.

Most Russian hyperlocals are operated by one person (owner) and one or two administrators who edit user content and moderate discussions. The largest team identified in this study consisted of 12 employees. Most practitioners are amateurs who began their projects for fun or because of personal interest. The other explanation given is that there was no media to read and talk about in the city. There are two main groups of practitioners. The first one consists of 30-to-40-year-old practitioners having their own businesses or full-time jobs elsewhere. They perceive hyperlocal media as a social responsibility that they can provide to the community rather than as a business entity. The second group consists of younger people who began their activities for fun but also aim to earn money from their projects. Several had worked previously with marketing and social media. Russian hyperlocal practitioners see themselves as detached from legacy media and local journalists, whom they regard as non-professional, corrupt, unfree and not attractive. An important feature of the hyperlocal practitioners in Russia is their aspiration to remain anonymous. In comparison to local journalists and editors, they are difficult persons to reach.

### ***Original local content***

The main question addressed here is what kind of local information practitioners want to focus on and why. The search for original content is central for Finnish hyperlocal publications, as is the aim to fill perceived gaps in local news reporting. Most respondents saw local reporting as inferior in quality or believed there was too low a volume of reporting. Typically, the practitioners examined noted that they rely on producing or sharing original content and local information. Most publications produce their content on their own, while a few initiatives function as aggregators for content produced by others. The hyperlocals varied concerning the content published. Only a few publications are orientated towards providing 'news' and 'journalism' and can be referred to as professional hyperlocal news operations. Such initiatives try to fill in a perceived local information gap, updating stories several times a day and promoting them further on a Facebook page. The others are more varied, publishing stories on local people and content on micro-local issues and events.

Due to a lack of coverage by established media, a central objective for practitioners in Sweden is to develop local journalism. Online practitioners prioritise local politics and public

affairs, but they also see reporting on local life and activities as important. Just over half (52 per cent) of online practitioners say that most of their content is produced by professional journalists. Despite this fact, there are hyperlocal sites with an orientation towards positive reporting rather than critical journalism. There are also sites focusing on providing news alerts, keeping the audience up to date on accidents, fires and crime. Overall, non-local and lifestyle content are negligible, and the focus varies from local politics and business to events, culture and sports. There is a connection between the choice of topics and practitioners' professional backgrounds as well as their initial motivations. The sites with the largest share of news items on local politics and public affairs are run by former journalists who have felt a lack of critical reporting by the local newspaper. Others, perceiving the newspaper as reporting too little and overly negative news, stress the need for positivity and recognition and the need to prioritise a more constructive approach.

Since Russian hyperlocal media sites are not registered as mass media, they are not required to follow the ethical rules central to legacy media elsewhere. Hyperlocal media invent their own rules and 'editorial' policies. Projects with commercial goals are usually demand-driven and publish news suggested by users. Popular topics include local accidents and social problems, like housing and communal services, roads and healthcare. Users often complement texts with photos or videos. Typical news tends to be emotional, but it does not call for action. Hyperlocal initiatives with higher social responsibility instead aim at filling in gaps in local news coverage or promoting civic engagement (Metzgar et al., 2011, 774). Enjoying higher levels of freedom than traditional media, hyperlocals tend to cover socio-political topics excluded from professional media's agenda. However, because amateur reporters have limited access to experts and officials and cannot get accreditation for official events, their possibilities for investigative journalism are limited.

### ***Community engagement and political participation***

The Metzgar model claims that hyperlocal media sites strive to build a sense of belonging and connectedness within the target group and enhance civic engagement through interaction and participation. In light of this study, Finnish practitioners are characterised by an orientation towards local communities and civic engagement. It is noteworthy, however, that many practitioners lack an understanding of the participatory potential of social and hyperlocal media. Half of the survey respondents perceived social media as a way to interact with and especially obtain feedback from readers, while a third did not see social media as a way to obtain feedback or to interact at all. Half of the practitioners claimed they do not use social media to acquire material from the audience, while only one third reported doing so. The aim of supporting political participation was not perceived as central among Finnish hyperlocal practitioners. However, there are private persons and associations whose hyperlocal services are motivated by a desire to fill in a local information gap in order to inform people about local decision-making processes so that they could have a say.

The most important rationale in Sweden is to support local community and identity. Ninety per cent of the practitioners stated that this objective is important (Leckner et al., 2019). Acting in the community's best interest means aiming to counterbalance submissive or negative reporting, acting as local patriots or mirroring local assets. The aim of achieving unbiased hyperlocal journalism is central and counts even for the news sites that originated to protest local politics, such as corruption or insensitive city planning. Practitioners welcome citizens and politicians to share their views. For a majority (70 per cent), it is important to provide an arena for local debate. According to the interview data, some amateur journalists see providing

a debate forum as their most important contribution to the community. While some hyperlocal sites engage community members, spontaneous contributions from the community are rare. The most successful hyperlocals connect with people in a structured way, offering study or online discussion groups through local associations. Another way of engaging local communities is to offer work experience for students or unemployed persons or the opportunity to collaborate in citizen journalism projects.

In Russia, practitioners offer people the possibility to participate in news creation. Both commercial and non-commercial hyperlocal sites rely on user-generated content and user participation, which helps citizens to make topics that are important to them visible in public discourse. However, practitioners perform strong gatekeeping functions, which limit the opportunities for community engagement. In light of the data gathered, hyperlocal media sites enhance community engagement with social issues and urban development, while political and 'sensitive' topics or comments are often removed. In towns, hyperlocal media sites play an important role in political communication. The interviews with local officials indicated that officials actively use these media sites to inform citizens and to receive feedback. According to hyperlocal practitioners, officials form friendly work relations with them. Many practitioners are open to collaborating with local authorities and do not mind distributing official information. For instance, they may publish press releases by the local police department or administration. In this way, user participation supports local community and is utilised as a resource for hyperlocal practitioners, legacy media and local officials.

## **Conclusion**

Our aim was to examine how Nordic and Russian hyperlocal practitioners define their roles and aims within the possibilities and limits given by the media ecosystems and models (Dobek-Ostrowska, Glowacki, Jakubowicz, and Süközd, 2010; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Of special interest have been the notions of authorship, local information, community engagement and political participation. The analysis shows that the perceived roles of hyperlocal practitioners vary and yet are intertwined, including those of journalists, hobbyists, community activists, civic leaders and media entrepreneurs. The analysis suggests that the differences in the roles imagined by them are partially embedded in the specificities of a country's media model and media ecosystem.

Regarding authorship, Finnish and Russian practitioners aim at contributing to local community and identity as a hobby or on a voluntary basis. While few Finnish and Russian practitioners identify themselves as entrepreneurs, Swedish practitioners do. A clear difference seems to exist between Sweden and Russia. While most Swedish practitioners identify themselves as professional journalists, Russian practitioners wish to detach themselves from and work in opposition to professional journalists. This may refer to how hyperlocal practitioners position themselves within the wider local media landscape. Regarding Russia, one explanation might be the low societal status and professional level of local journalists, who are often perceived as unfree and dependent on local authorities, producing boring and unimportant local content. According to this logic, hyperlocal practitioners aim to cover actual and important information as well as provide space for local communication.

Commercial opportunities are limited in each country. While Swedish practitioners expect revenue, Finnish and Russian ones seldom maintain a subsistence living from hyperlocals. They are also less concerned with the financial potential. One explanation for the difference with the Swedish case may be the strong tradition of local media. In this respect, Finland has a similar tradition, but a different outcome. The press subsidy system, which is in effect in Sweden but



not in Finland, might play a role here. Many Swedish journalists have lost their jobs in recent decades, which may also explain the aim of earning a living via hyperlocal initiatives. In post-Soviet Russia, local media have never acted as purely commercial enterprises. While the idea of financial profitability or the independence of local media is still debated, the professional legitimacy of local journalists is constructed through the ideas of independence, freedom of speech or public service. Hyperlocal practitioners are thus more concerned with autonomy and the possibility of helping locals rather than obtaining financial revenue.

The search for original content is central for the hyperlocal practitioners, as is the aim of filling in perceived gaps in local news reporting. Practitioners across the different media systems expressed the desire to contribute to local reporting, which they reportedly thought was of an inferior quality or low in volume. As regards Finland and Sweden, hyperlocal reporting takes various forms, ranging from critical reporting to a more constructive approach. In Russia, hyperlocal practitioners want users to highlight topics important to them and construct an agenda from the ‘bottom up’ since legacy media and local officials read their news. At the same time, the facilities used by hyperlocal media sites in Russia are not good enough for them to provide high-quality local reporting. In all the countries studied, practitioners see the support for local community and community engagement as among their central functions. Practitioners in Sweden see their task as providing an arena for local debates, while in Russia they want to involve users in news creation. However, there is no clear or structured understanding of how they can collaborate with citizens to date.

Since the project was not designed as comparative from the very beginning and since the data were gathered by different means, the results are not fully compatible. However, the study allowed for comparisons between media in democratic and non-democratic countries and included a non-Western country in a comparative study on journalism, as requested (Hanusch and Vos, 2019). With this approach, we have been able to pay attention to factors that seem to shape the perceptions of hyperlocal actors. Those factors include the position of the local media within the country’s wider media system, the current roles and societal positions of professional journalists, entrepreneurial opportunities for local media and requests for critical reporting. Discussing these factors within the contexts of different media systems made it possible to reveal how the current roles and strategies of hyperlocal practitioners are rooted in the previous and broader context and development of a country’s local media.

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# NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM

## The story of American small-market newspapers

*Christopher Ali, Damian Radcliffe and Rosalind Donald*

### Introduction

Readers of *The Denver Post* on April 6, 2018 may have noticed something missing from a group photograph of the paper's newsroom. The picture – a formal shot capturing the *Post's* staff after they won a Pulitzer in 2013 – had blacked out more than half of those present, dramatically highlighting just how many people had left the paper (voluntarily or as a result of cuts) in the past five years. Despite remaining profitable, a further 30 jobs needed to go by July. The new millennium has not been kind to the American newspaper industry. The experience of *The Denver Post* has played out across newsrooms large and small, although the revolt by the *Post's* staff to the proposed cuts is unusual (Ember, 2018). Recently, the *New York Daily News* laid off 50 percent of its newsroom, and the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* declared bankruptcy (Pelser, 2018). In 2018, the Pew Research Center noted:

According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Employment Statistics, 39,210 people worked as reporters, editors, photographers, or film and video editors in the newspaper industry in 2017. That is down 15 per cent from 2014 and 45 per cent from 2004.

*(Pew Research Center, 2018a)*

A year before, Pew noted an 11 percent reduction in circulation and a 10 percent decrease in advertising revenue since 2016, continuing a decade-long trend (Pew Research Center, 2017).

The decline of newspapers, and local newspapers in particular, has significant implications for media ecosystems, voter turnout, and civic engagement, as well as the larger information needs of communities (Capps, 2018). Upwards of 600 newspapers have closed or merged in the past decade, leading to a rise in 'news deserts' (Abernathy, 2016) or 'media deserts' (Ferrier, 2017), those communities without access to current local news and information. Many of the newspapers that have survived are 'ghost papers' – outlets with little original local content – or part of larger companies like Gannett, or hedge-funds like BH Media or Alden (which owns *The Denver Post*), a by-product of which often means a decline in local autonomy and a risk of local neglect (Abernathy, 2016). This is the common 'doom and gloom' newspaper narrative of the past decade, but it is not the entire story.

Focusing on the newspaper industry as a whole means overlooking the story of small-market newspapers, titles with a daily print circulation of less than 50,000 (Ali et al., 2018; Lauterer, 2006). One of these, the *Storm Lake Times*, a weekly newspaper with a circulation of 3,000, won a Pulitzer in 2017 (Guardian Staff, 2017). There have been lay-offs and challenges in this part of the news industry too, but it is the largest metros – those with a daily circulation surpassing 250,000 – that have experienced the most (Pew Research Center, 2018b). It is also these larger outlets that have tended to be the focus of academic study and the lens of the trade press (Ali et al., 2018a). Using data from *Editor and Publisher*, and based on a print circulation threshold of 50,000 or fewer, we found that 6,851 – out of 7,071 US daily and weekly newspapers – can be classified as ‘small market’. Far from being a fringe component of the American newspaper industry, these outlets constitute the vast majority. We set out to remedy the lack of data about these publications through in-depth interviews and a nationwide survey, to investigate the state of small-market newspapers in the US. In the midst of very real challenges facing the industry, we found the outlook for this sector is not all ‘doom and gloom’. Despite the pronouncements of pundits and industry watchers, we found a community of editors and journalists optimistic – or at least not as pessimistic as you might think – about the future of their industry. Three themes account for this optimism: diversified revenue streams, digital experimentation, and the enduring mission of local newspapers. We begin, however, with a review of the state of the industry and the literature on the values of local newspapers. We find a lack of granular data on small-market newspapers in the former, and a lack of contemporary studies in the latter.

### **State of the industry**

The Pew Research Center has done an excellent job chronicling changes in terms of general revenue, circulation, and employment of the newspaper industries. They illustrate an industry severely deflated in the past decade. Overall advertising revenue and circulation numbers typically continue to fall; advertising revenues saw the biggest drop in 2015 since 2009 (–7.8 percent in 2015 and –26.6 percent in 2009), the height of the Great Recession (Pew Research Center, 2016). They continue to show an anemic sector; online unique visitors – and visit durations – have leveled off, the largest alt-weeklies are witnessing rapidly declining circulations (one of the best known titles, the *Village Voice* in New York, folded in 2018) and minimal digital revenue growth. Just 31 percent of newspaper companies’ advertising revenue comes from digital advertising, up from 17 percent in 2011 (Pew Research Center, 2018a). Alongside this, employment data find there were 20,000 lay-offs between 2007 and 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2016).

We also witnessed a reduction in the number of newspapers. Figures vary, but the trend is clear. Pew has reported a decrease of more than 100 daily newspapers (Pew Research Center, 2016), a major FCC report (Waldman, 2011) listed 245 daily and weekly newspapers closed between 2007 and 2010, and Abernathy (2016) noted 664 closures between 2004 and 2014. These aggregated figures do not tell us how smaller, weekly, and community newspapers are faring. Some even suggest they may have fared better than their national and metropolitan counterparts (Abernathy, 2014; Lewis et al., 2009). Lewis et al. observe that community newspapers “have largely been insulated from the competitive assault facing larger dailies” and today,

in America’s rural communities, the local newspaper is often the best – and sometimes the only – source for local news. This, in turn, makes them a go-to source for local readers and advertisers.

(2009, 8)

Given the lack of granular data, we need contemporary studies to examine this assertion. Our data begin to fill this gap, building on insights from scholars, practitioners, and industry watchers alike, which attests to the continued importance of local news and local newspapers.

## Literature review

### *The value to democracy*

News media often act as a ‘watchdog’ for democracy (Gans, 2004; McChesney and Nichols, 2011; Carey, 2000). Here, in-depth investigative journalism is one of three pillars that Nielsen (2015) identifies as a hallmark of local journalism (along with civic and political engagement, and community integration). Readers also want local news outlets to be a ‘good neighbor’ (Poindexter et al., 2006; Heider et al., 2005),

caring about [the] community, highlighting interesting people and groups in the community, understanding the local community, and offering solutions to community problems.

(Heider et al., 2005, 961)

Offering solutions is a key component of this community relationship, departing from a traditional ‘objective’ ethos, and bringing it closer to the tenets of public and civic journalism (Kurpius, 2000).

Local media also support civic engagement and voter turnout. Studies led by McLeod (1996, 1999) found “links between local media use, community integration and local political interest, knowledge and participation” (1996, 179), as well as a relationship between local media consumption and “institutionalized participation” (e.g., voting and contacting local officials). Among Spanish news consumers, Oberholzer-Gee and Waldfogel (2009) found consumption of local media “substantially boost[s] Hispanic turnout in nonpresidential election years” (2127). Shaker explored newspapers’ influence on civic engagement, finding both “Seattle and Denver suffered significant negative declines in civic engagement when they lost one of their daily newspapers” (2014, 144). Similarly, a study of the *Cincinnati Post*’s closure found elections post-closure became less competitive, had lower voter turnout, and results favored incumbents (Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido, 2011). In addition to voting and civic engagement, democratic roles that community newspapers fulfill include being the primary source for local original reporting, defining the public agenda through reporting and commentary, encouraging economic growth and commerce, and fostering a sense of community (Abernathy, 2014).

### *Value to community*

Consuming local news also creates community and reinforces community bonds (McCleod et al., 1996, 1999; Jeffres, Dobos, and Sweeny, 1988). To do this, local news media tell the community about itself, perform a ritualistic function as part of readers’ everyday lives, provide a sense of comfort to readers and viewers (Hess and Waller, 2012), set the standards and norms of the community (Costera Meijer, 2010), and position themselves as the conduit between global events and local conversations (Hess, 2013). Local news outlets further fashion, maintain and celebrate community solidarity and identity through boosterism (Hess and Waller, 2012). Local news media act as the ‘social glue for a community’, not only by providing for the information needs of communities, but also by serving as the symbolic center and public square for

everyday life (Kaniss, 1991). A strand of scholarship even examines the hypothesis that local media actively create the community – both geographically and relationally (Buchanan, 2009; Kaniss, 1991). Said differently, they turn a space into a *place* – something that human beings can relate to and in (Hess and Waller, 2016).

### ***Value to media ecosystems***

Local newspapers also support larger media ecosystems. Nielsen (2015b) argued that even though newspapers may no longer be “mainstream media” (because of declining readership), they serve as “keystone media” by being “the primary providers of a specific and important kind of information and enable other media’s coverage” (51). Thus, their decline has severe “ecological consequences that reach well beyond their own audience” (51). In sum, while newspapers have been of major interest to scholars for over a century, a focus on small-market newspapers has been lacking. In many ways, we are answering the challenge Lewis et al. set back in 2009:

Seemingly lost in this discussion are community newspapers. Perhaps because their content is harder to gather, or because their size makes them less attractive to researchers, relatively little is known about how smaller newspapers are transitioning in the digital age...

(2009, 3)

While our study extends beyond the confines of traditionally defined ‘community newspapers’, our decision to study small-market newspapers reflects our concern about the lack of knowledge about this industry. Because of this, we produced a wide-ranging holistic study designed to offer an exploratory analysis of the transition from print to digital, and provide researchers and industry with insights into areas that merit more examination.

## **Methods**

We employed two data-gathering methods. First, we conducted 56 in-depth interviews with practitioners (journalists and editors) at small and large newspapers and digital-first publications, experts and researchers, industry watchers, policymakers, and philanthropists. Using snowballing methods, our aim was to understand the ‘state’ of the industry using interviews to provide a cross-section of small-market journalists’ subjective experience as a social group. They tell us not just what reporters and editors are doing, but what they want to do, and what they believe they are doing (Portelli, 1981). Next, we conducted a nationwide survey of journalists and editors at small-market newspapers, asking about the digital life of small-market newspapers. The survey garnered 430 responses, of which 420 were eligible. Between the interviews and the survey, three key themes emerged that point to a sense of optimism among small-market newspapers: new revenue streams, digital adaptation, and mission and mandate.

### **Theme 1: new revenue models**

Small-market newspapers are experimenting with new revenue streams, recognizing subscriptions and advertising alone will no longer suffice (Stearns, 2015). Efforts include commercial website design services and new revenue streams such as newsletters, paywalls, and events. In this section, we focus on paywalls as just one example of these efforts. Paywalls are not

exclusive to large newspapers. Joel McNeece, publisher of *The Calhoun County Journal* in Bruce, Mississippi, said, “we’ve always utilized a paywall.” Published on Wednesdays, his paper enjoys a circulation of just over 5,000 a week.

From early on, we had a paywall. And it doesn’t generate enough to sustain you on its own, but it does provide some extra revenue for the news operation ... When I go to the board of supervisors meeting and I cover that meeting, when I go back to the office, I’ll write that story up and put it on the website. And that may be a Friday morning. Our publication day is not till Wednesday. So, the subscribers to the website can read that story on Friday right after the meeting. By the time the paper comes out the next Wednesday, I try and do a little follow-up, and maybe have a little more to it to go into the paper product. But we use the website for breaking news, and really to get stories out immediately for people that want it that fast. And it’s been good to us.

However, some journalists can be ambivalent about this approach. As John Costa, publisher of *The Bulletin*, a daily newspaper in Bend, Oregon, acknowledged:

If you went to any newsroom there is a tension between loading it up for free and getting lots of page views, or charging something, being a little bit more restrictive and making people pay for it.

At the same time, as Costa acknowledges, news is “a very expensive proposition.” So, “who’s going to pay for it?” The solution at *The Bulletin* is a metered paywall, allowing audiences to view eight articles for free, every 30 days. Beyond this, online only access is \$13/month, although certain categories such as classified ads, their events calendar, guides (restaurants and golf), obituaries, and information about *The Bulletin*, including job openings, are exempt from monthly limits. The paper offers electronic access, alongside home delivery of the daily paper, for \$18 a month, just \$5 more than an online-only subscription. It’s a model, Costa told us, that “we like,” although he also mentioned that in getting to this point, “we’ve had several models.”

Experimentation is vital, since paywall types and limits are not static. Calhoun’s McNeece also puts his finger on a wider conundrum – how much to invest in print – and the higher advertising rates this returns – versus betting on increasing revenue from digital output. It is a balancing act all publishers are contending with, irrespective of their size or revenue models. Similarly, all publishers need to educate their audience about the need to pay for content. Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues, told us:

Americans have been spoiled, and the newspaper industry made a horrible mistake when it decided it was going to provide its content for free. It spoiled people and accustomed them to getting what they wanted for free. Now, the metered paywall is the platform of choice. People are becoming more accustomed to that. But you’ve got to have compelling content that makes them want to pay, and it’s a real challenge.

Cross is nonetheless optimistic about the possibilities for increasing subscription rates.

The thing about local newspapers is there is always going to be a market for local news and information. There’s always going to be a demand for that. The kinds of things people get from a local newspaper are the kinds of things that people will continue to want 100 years from now. What’s going on within my locality? What’s happening with

my school system, what’s happening with my taxes? What’s happening with planning and zoning? What kind of businesses or jobs might we get? And it’s only the local newspapers that are likely to be the consistently reliable sources of that information.

### Theme 2: digital and revenue experimentation

In our survey, 70 percent of respondents noted that their digital work has increased in the last two years. Among journalists at small-market newspapers, Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used social media platforms (Figure 27.1). Looking beyond social media reveals that small-market newspapers are also harnessing opportunities presented by video, live video, and podcasting. We found less enthusiasm for tools like augmented and virtual reality (Figure 27.2). Our survey also uncovered an eagerness to learn about new digital tools, suggesting that small-market newspapers are not letting the digital age pass them by. The majority of respondents are keen to learn about video reporting, live video, and podcasts, although this can be challenging for journalists at small-market newspapers (especially the independently owned papers), as newsroom resources and access to training opportunities are more limited (Stencel et al., 2014) (Figure 27.3). Nevertheless, our research demonstrates a willingness to experiment and do more with digital. Most practitioners at these papers learn how to use these tools through articles and self-teaching (Ali et al., 2018b), which suggests that there are opportunities for industry and trade bodies to do more in supporting this cohort. Events – ranging from community conversations about politics, to award nights – are a further means by which some small-market newspapers have sought to diversify their income. They also offer opportunities for live tweeting and streaming, video recording, and preview and follow-up content. Although they

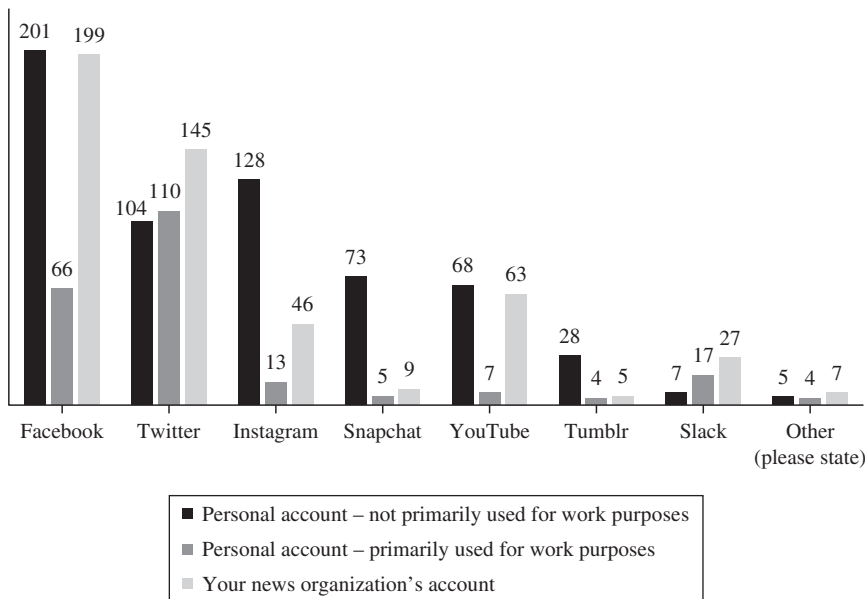


Figure 27.1 Social media use at small-market newspapers in the US

Note:

Q: “What social media platforms do you use (use means actively post to the account, not simply have administrative access to)? Please select all that apply.”

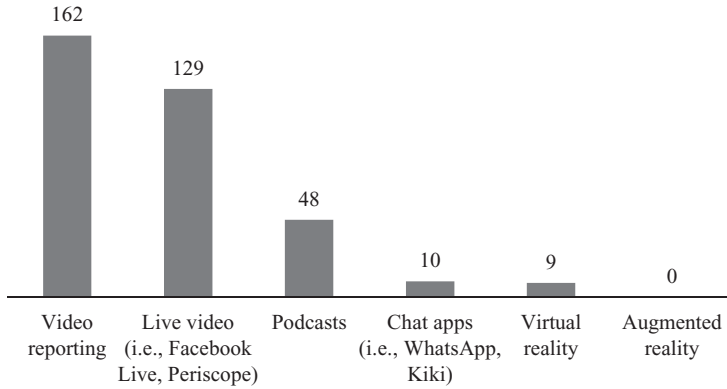


Figure 27.2 Digital technology usage at small-market newspapers in the US

Note:

Q: “Do you use any of the following at your publication? Please select all that apply. (Total: 192).”

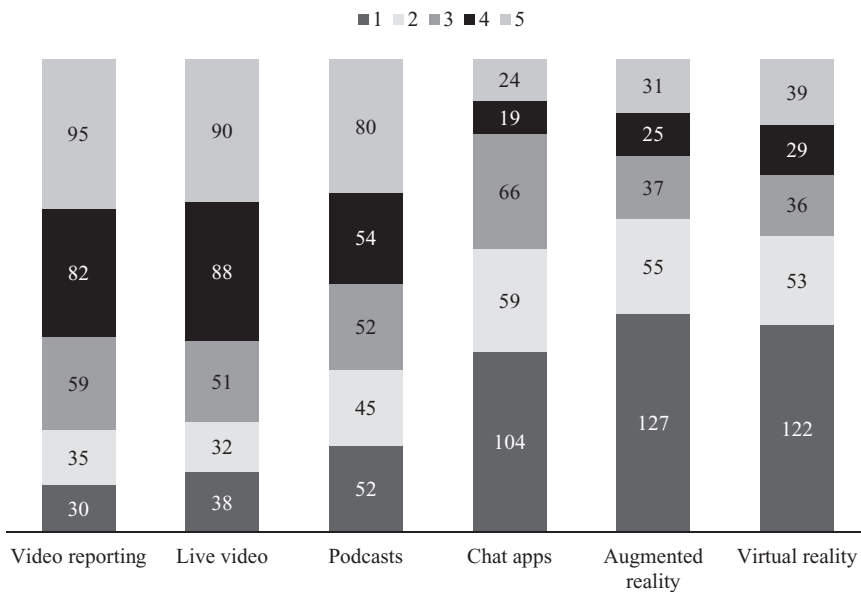


Figure 27.3 Digital technology interest at small-market newspapers in the US

Note:

Q: “How interested are you in learning about these emerging formats? Please assign a value to each format: 1 = not interested; 5 = very interested.”



*American small-market newspapers*

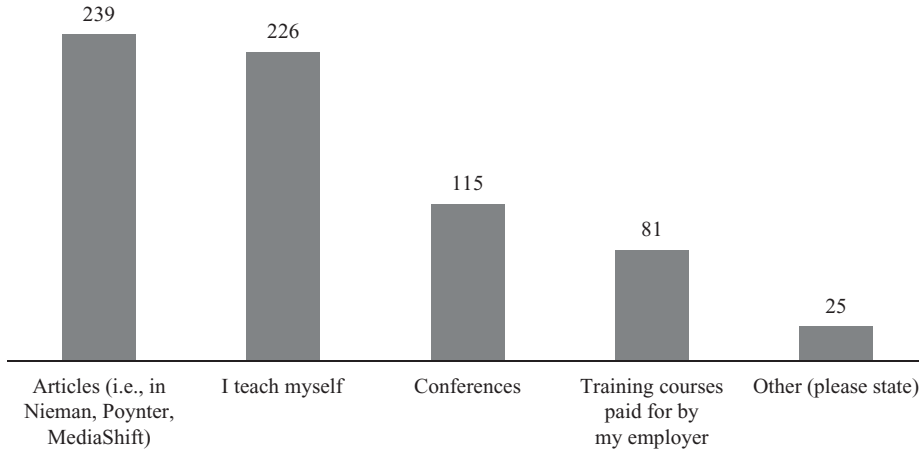


Figure 27.4 Digital technology education at small-market newspapers in the US

Note:

Q: “How do you learn about new technologies and tools related to your industry? Please select all that apply. (Total: 301).”

offer opportunities to sell tickets and unlock sponsorship, interviewees repeatedly reminded us events are labor-intensive. One editor at a smaller chain told us that their group had hired an events specialist.

This person will travel around and help out with the different events that the newspaper wants to put on, either for raising money, probably the main goal is to raise more revenue, but also to help with its name in the community. So that does help a little bit, but it’s not enough as far as how much we really want to do for the town.

Given these challenges, it is essential to maximize the wider impact of events, dovetailing outreach with journalistic content, and not producing events solely for their revenue potential.

Lauren Gustus, executive editor at the Fort Collins *Coloradoan* at the time of our interview, explained how her newsroom (30–40 people) had been reconfigured to include a dedicated ten-person engagement team. Part of its charge was not just “talking with readers across any of the platforms that we operate on and that our readers operate on,” but also:

Thinking on how we connect with people in the real spaces, if you will, ‘real spaces.’ So that means in the event space, in the community connecting around what are we doing to further our relationship with our readers in a meaningful way? How can we demonstrate to them the value of a local news organization and that it goes beyond the printed product?

In doing this, events were part of a wider outreach and engagement strategy. Tom Slaughter, executive director of the Inland Press Association, felt events were likely to be part of the “basket of businesses” required to “support the infrastructure of what we call a daily newspaper,” noting

that “newspapers will not be able to sustain themselves solely on digital advertising.” Slaughter commented:

There are ways to diversify the revenue stream of almost any newspaper ... You can hold events in your community, which newspapers are uniquely able to do because they have a brand that’s been established over decades in their community and they’re one of the most recognizable brands in their communities and so they have a natural advantage there.

For the daily *Coloradoan*, these initiatives seem to have paid off.

Our paid circulation is up year over year and is up over the last two years. And I love to point that out because so often we do hear, “Oh,” you know, “local news is on its way out and,” you know, you know, “it’s a dying industry,” and so on and so forth. And yet, here in Fort Collins, we’ve got more people paying for our product, our news, than we did a year ago. And we have more people paying for that news today than we did two years ago. We have among the highest digital-only subscriber base in our company ... And I’m really proud of that because that means people see enough value in what we’re doing in the digital space to want to pay for that content.

Events can be seen as potential channels for direct – and indirect – revenue, by acting as reputation builders (or reinforcers), highlighting the importance of the local newspaper to a community, as well as being an excellent source for journalistic content.

### **Theme 3: the mission of local journalism**

Despite recent changes in the economic and technological landscape, the democratic and community-building mission of small-market newspapers remains much as it always has. Our survey and interview respondents reminded us how they have long supported the idea that newspapers act as a “good neighbor” as much as a watchdog (Poindexter et al., 2006). Kevin Anderson, for instance, told us:

You need your tenacious reporters who are going to be able to discern when they need to hold power to account, but you also need the soft fluffy people who go to schools and they’re not counting every penny, they’re actually just praising kids that are doing something awesome. ... ‘Cuz that’s what the community wants, too. And you can’t have one or the other. ... You can’t have all poodles and no pitbulls but conversely you can’t have that kind of hyper-aggressive super skeptical coverage that sees malfeasance behind every blade of grass.

Anderson also advocates that newspapers play a greater role in reflecting the breadth of conversations in a community. This means “amplify voices of concern” and show “people who are working toward solutions in our community.”

For some outlets, this requires a change in approach. We found newsrooms are having discussions around concepts academics have described as civic journalism, public journalism, and “solutions journalism” (Wenzel, 2016). Newsrooms may not use these labels, but they are considering whether they need to do some things differently. One of these things is seriously

contemplating the limits of ‘objectivity,’ which may conflict with community-building sensibilities. As Gannett’s Joel Christopher explained:

... I think the concept of objectivity got distorted over time. That became something that removed journalists so much from the communities that they covered that it actually ... drove a wedge in that relationship. ... And to pretend that you can’t, or pretend that you don’t live in the community that you cover and that you’re not affected by the events that you’re reporting on, and that you have a stake in them ... it’s ludicrous. And readers, even if they don’t articulate that, sense it and are turned off by it. ... So I think a much more robust and honest conversation about what our role is, both as individual journalists and as a news organization, in connecting with our community, is a critical part of engagement and it’s got to be a very honest and open conversation.

Doing this need not challenge journalistic standards, as Lauren Gustus argues:

The lens through which we view our work is ‘how do we contribute to making Fort Collins the place we all wanna live?’ ... And that doesn’t mean we don’t get critical. We certainly do ... But the lens is, ‘Hey we want to, like you, live the best lives we can in Fort Collins, so how do we help you do that?’ And sometimes it’s advocacy and sometimes that’s, ‘We have twenty breweries in town. You should try these five this week.’

Doing things differently should also mean re-evaluating what you cover, not just how you cover it. As Jim Brady of *Billy Penn* told us “you can do anything but you can’t do everything.” In a climate of reduced resources, yet greater demands for the speed and distribution of content, newspapers should double down on the “master narratives” of their communities and let partnerships and other outlets fill in the rest.

## **Challenges and conclusion**

Our findings do not ignore the economic and authoritative challenges newspapers face. Rather, they reinforce that small-market newspapers face many similar challenges to their larger counterparts. We need to tell, and understand, this sector better, given its continued importance to the democratic process, and the wider journalistic ecosystem. Moving forward, we believe that there are also a number of key areas that would merit further research. The first is how ownership models impact on newsroom experiences. What are the strengths and weaknesses, for instance, to being independent or being part of larger chain (Ali et al., 2018b)? The second relates to diversity. Retention and recruitment is a concern for small-market newspapers, especially in non-metropolitan areas. As one survey respondent said:

A small market is not always a great sell to potential employees, especially when trying to recruit reporters of color; LGBTQ reporters, etc., who might not feel welcomed in a small, white, conservative community. It is also difficult to retain reporters for more than a few years ... It is difficult to create and maintain institutional knowledge and community rapport with a continuous shift in reporters.

As newspapers and researchers grapple with these important questions, they also need to push back on the oft-repeated narrative that this industry is a “grandma with one foot in the grave”

(R.York, personal communication, 2016). There are stories of resilience and innovation amongst small-market newspapers, and we need to hear them. By having a more nuanced conversation, we will be better able to reflect the reality of the news ecosystem, and ways in which the information needs of American communities are – or are not – being met.

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# LOCAL JOURNALISM IN BULGARIA

## Trends from the Worlds of Journalism study

*Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova*

### **Introduction**

Bulgaria is the poorest EU member state with the lowest press freedom ranking according to the Paris-based non-governmental organisation Reporters Without Borders (2019). It is ranked 111th out of 180 countries. The scarcely available literature on the state of Bulgarian journalism points to a range of negative developments in recent years. A large section of the media fell into the hands of local owners with strong political interests, the most notorious one being MP Delyan Peevski – labelled as the “Murdoch of the East” (Stetka, 2012). A number of newspapers had to close down in the past few years and a few rounds of redundancies took place in the surviving media. A 2016–2017 survey with Bulgarian journalists conducted as part of the second wave of the Worlds of Journalism study showed that journalists had a very negative view of the state of journalism in their country, and that they faced a range of challenges: corruption practices, smear campaigns, advertising pressures, and less time to work on their stories (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017). How have these negative developments affected local and regional journalists in Bulgaria? Is the situation better or worse for them than it is for national and transnational journalists working in Bulgaria? This chapter aims to answer these questions by comparing the results from the Bulgarian survey of the Worlds of Journalism study for local journalists with those reported by national and transnational journalists. The Worlds of Journalism study (2019) is a ground-breaking research project, which in its second wave involved a representative survey with more than 27,500 journalists from 67 countries.

### **Journalism in Bulgaria: key developments**

Bulgaria’s press freedom rankings have experienced a strong downward trend in recent years. As already indicated, according to Reporters Without Borders (2019), the country has the lowest press freedom ranking out of all EU countries. While Freedom House’s ranking of Bulgaria is not as low, the US-based NGO classifies the country as free but its media as partly free. The Nations in Transit reports annually track the state of democracy in 29 former Communist countries by providing scores across seven categories – national democratic governance; electoral process; civil society; independent media; local democratic governance; judicial framework and independence; and corruption. While there has been a recent backslide in a few of the

categories, the most notable one in which Bulgaria has shown a linear trend of decline since 2009 is the independent media category (Zankina and Gurov, 2018).

Similarly to other former Communist countries Bulgaria experienced an initial upward trend towards democratisation and media freedom in the first years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but unlike most other countries it has faced a much stronger deterioration in its media freedom in the last decade or so. The country was not only affected by the recession, as most other countries were, but it was also not spared the trends towards Berlusconiisation/Mediterrannisation, Italianisation/Iberianisation manifested in the problematic interlinking of business, political, and criminal interests. The media are highly politicised and after the recession most media outlets fell into the hands of domestic owners with very strong political interests. The most notorious one is Delyan Peevski – labelled as the “Murdoch of the East” (Štětka, 2012). He is an MP who also became a deputy government minister in his early twenties and owns (overtly and covertly) one of the largest media corporations in the country, as well as exerting his influence on many other media outlets in the country. As Bayer (2017, 25) explained,

under the surface, public resources are channelled through corrupt mechanisms into private pockets, and key information about political processes and corruption are concealed in the mainstream media. As a result, economic, political and communicative powers are accumulated in a few hands in certain countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic.

Bulgaria’s press freedom rankings have been adversely affected by these developments and journalists themselves have been negatively impacted. The Worlds of Journalism study survey, conducted in Bulgaria in 2016–2017, showed that “the majority of Bulgarian journalists reported largely negative trends over the past five years” such as “a substantive deterioration of working conditions in the profession and a declining credibility of journalism” as well as “an increase in their average working hours and a decrease in the time available for researching stories” (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017, 5). The majority of journalists also felt that the relevance of journalism for society has decreased, and they generally described the state of journalism in very negative terms by using words such as “critical”, “tragic”, “at rock bottom”. A majority of Bulgarian journalists said that there was an increased influence of profit-making pressures, public relations, pressure towards sensational news, audience research, advertising considerations, and competition. “Ethical standards and journalism education were the only sources of influence that had substantively weakened over the years” (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017, 5).

Moreover, the majority of journalists reported a very low level of trust in the authorities. The level of trust in the judiciary/the courts was the lowest of all 53 countries in which this question was asked and the level of trust in the government was the second-lowest among all 53 countries. The levels of trust in most other institutions were also among the lowest. Bulgarian journalists trusted the military and the police more than they did the government, parliament, politicians, and political parties, which were the least trusted. Do these trends apply to local and regional journalists, though, or are there any substantial differences between them and their national and transnational colleagues? This chapter aims to answer this question.

Prior to doing that, it is worth briefly providing an overview of the local media in the country. There is very scarce evidence and data on the state of local media in Bulgaria. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism’s Digital News Report 2019 (Antonov, 2019), only 7 per cent of Bulgarians get their news from a regional or local newspaper; 3 per cent use *Maritza* – a regional newspaper – as a news source. No local radio or TV stations feature in the report. When it comes to online news sources, only 4 per cent say that they get their news from



a regional/local newspaper website. A white paper on the freedom of the media in Bulgaria published in 2018 claimed that

the pressure over the media in Bulgaria is most clearly evident on a local level, where they function with severely restricted funding and in a hostile environment. The only publications that lead a comfortable existence are the ones which work with the local authorities or with oligarchs.

*(Union of Publishers in Bulgaria, 2018, 25)*

The report provides only anecdotal evidence of the impact of these negative trends on journalists and their work so it is definitely worth considering the views of local and regional journalists themselves.

### **Methodology**

The Worlds of Journalism study (2019) is a ground-breaking collaborative project, including researchers from 67 countries and representative surveys with over 27,500 journalists; 263 journalists completed the Bulgarian online survey in 2016–2017; 928 out of a total population of 5,800 journalists were invited to take part, so the response rate was 28.3 per cent (confidence level 95 per cent; confidence interval 5.9 per cent). The sampling method was purposive quota sampling of organisations and simple random sampling of journalists. The aim was to achieve a national sample of news media that reflected the structure of the media system – in line with the Worlds of Journalism study’s methodology. The indicators used to achieve this aim were: media type, content orientation, reach, and ownership. Of the 263 journalists, 64.6 per cent were women, 75 per cent held a degree from a graduate programme, and 20.5 per cent a bachelor’s degree. On average, journalists were 41.74 years old ( $s = 10.40$ ). Of the 263 journalists, 208 declared that they worked for national media (79.1 per cent), 39 for local and regional media (14.8 per cent), and 16 for transnational/international media (6.1 per cent). The project received ethical clearance from the University of Chester and all journalists provided written consent.

In addition to the standardised questions asked in all countries, the Bulgarian questionnaire included a few questions about the state of journalism, corruption practices, changes since Bulgaria’s accession to the EU, and ownership/transparency issues. This chapter is going to present the results of two main sets of questions, the first one measuring journalists’ normative perceptions of their roles, ethical orientations, perceived influences, changes in journalism, and trust in institutions. The second set of questions explores journalists’ understanding of the state of journalism in their country in their own words as well as their experience of corruption practices. Most of the questions used in this chapter are standardised questions from the Worlds of Journalism study (Tables 28.1–28.7), with the exception of the last few questions, which were exclusively asked in Bulgaria. The additional questions were as follows.

1. What is the state of Bulgarian journalism at the moment?
2. Have you witnessed any corruption practices in Bulgarian media?
3. Reports by international organisations claim that there is no transparency in media ownership in Bulgaria. Do you agree with this statement?
4. As a whole, are Bulgarian media free?

The quantitative questions were analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics 24. The qualitative questions were thematically analysed by using the constant comparison method. Thematic

analysis is one of the most flexible methods of qualitative textual analysis, which “can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 78). The procedure included a few stages of coding – initial and then focused coding – with the aim of identifying and refining themes emerging from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **Local journalism in Bulgaria: trends**

The survey asked respondents what roles Bulgarian journalists – local/regional, national, and transnational/international – should play. While the most important role for the majority of journalists across the three categories was to report things as they are (Table 28.1), there were some interesting differences. Thus, the second-most important role for local and regional journalists was to let people express their views while for national and transnational journalists it was to educate the audience. To support national development was also more important for local and regional journalists than it was for national journalists. Similarly, to promote tolerance and cultural diversity came up only in local and regional journalists’ list of top five roles. Local journalists also appeared to play a stronger accommodative role, namely they were more likely to be aiming to provide the kind of news that attracted the largest audience as well as entertainment and relaxation. As Hanitzsch et al. (2019, 170) explain, the accommodative role is

most strongly oriented toward audience members as consumers, notably – though not exclusively – through providing orientation for the management of self and everyday life. Journalists who embrace an accommodative role strive to provide their audiences with the sort of information that appeals the most to the public.

In addition to that, local journalists in Bulgaria were not as interested in influencing public opinion as their colleagues working for national and international media organisations.

With regards to journalists’ ethical orientations, there were also some notable differences (Table 28.2). Thus, it was far less acceptable for local and regional journalists to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances required it than it was for national and international journalists. Similarly, fewer local and regional journalists than national and international journalists thought that what was ethical in journalism was a matter of personal judgement or depended on the specific situation. Therefore, as a whole local and regional journalists professed a stronger commitment to ethical values than their colleagues from national and international media. However, when considering the actual ethically questionable practices that journalists found acceptable (Table 28.3), the differences between local and national journalists were not that significant. More local and regional journalists said that it was justified to exert pressure on unwilling participants to get a story, but only a few national journalists found it acceptable to publish stories with unverified content, to accept money from sources and to alter or fabricate quotes from sources.

Local and regional journalists appeared to experience more constraints in their work than their colleagues from national and international media. Thus, when asked about the different sources of influence on their work (Table 28.4), the percentages they reported were higher for the following perceived influences: information access, media laws and regulation, availability of news-gathering resources, time limits, audience research and data, relationships with news sources, competing news organisations, public relations, politicians, government officials, businesspeople, military, police and state security, and pressure groups. There were some notable differences in the changes they believed they had experienced in the past few years (Table 28.5). Considerably more local than national and international journalists reported the importance

Table 28.1 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: journalistic roles (percentage of respondents by category)

<i>Journalistic roles</i>	<i>Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work.</i>		
	<i>Percentage saying “extremely important” and “very important”</i>		
	<i>Local and regional</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>International</i>
Be a detached observer	94.9	87.2	96.1
Report things as they are	100	98.4	100
Provide analysis of current affairs	87.2	86.2	69.2
Monitor and scrutinize political leaders	53.9	56.9	57.7
Monitor and scrutinize business	43.6	45.2	61.5
Set the political agenda	30.8	20.8	38.4
<b>Influence public opinion</b>	<b>48.7</b>	<b>61.7</b>	<b>77</b>
Advocate for social change	77	67.5	84.6
Be an adversary of the government	38.5	34.1	34.6
<b>Support national development</b>	<b>92.3</b>	<b>78.7</b>	<b>88.5</b>
Convey a positive image of political leadership	5.1	1.6	7.6
Support government policy	2.6	3.2	7.6
<b>Provide entertainment and relaxation</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>33.6</b>	<b>42.3</b>
<b>Provide the kind of news that attracts the largest audience</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>57.7</b>
Provide advice, orientation and direction for daily life	49	45.2	57.7
Provide information people need to make political decisions	74.4	69.7	47.1
Motivate people to participate in political activity	28.2	35.7	38.5
Let people express their views	97.4	87.3	88.4
Educate the audience	87.2	89.4	100
Tell stories about the world	77	77.1	76.9
<b>Promote tolerance and cultural diversity</b>	<b>89.8</b>	<b>80.4</b>	<b>84.6</b>

*Notes:*

Q: “Please tell me how important each of these things is in your work; 5 means you find them extremely important, 4 means very important, 3 means somewhat important, 2 means little importance, and 1 means unimportant.”

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

of their interactions with their audiences, and the number of journalists having a degree in journalism or a related field has increased. More local journalists thought that the credibility of journalism had increased, and fewer local than national and international journalists thought that it had decreased. Audience research, competition, and Western standards of practising journalism also played a slightly stronger influence for local and regional journalists than for their colleagues from national and international media (Table 28.6).

The levels of trust in the authorities among Bulgarian journalists were one of the lowest among the countries surveyed. There were no significant differences between local and regional journalists and their colleagues in national and international media in that respect. There were

Table 28.2 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: ethical orientations of journalists

Ethical orientations of journalists	Percentage saying “strongly” and “somewhat agree”		
	Local and national	National	International
Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context	100	97.3	66.7
<b>It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>30.8</b>
What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment	23.1	37.8	26.9
What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation	28.2	36.1	30.8

Notes:

Q: “The following statements describe different approaches to journalism. For each of them, please tell me how strongly you agree or disagree; 5 means you strongly agree, 4 means somewhat agree, 3 means undecided, 2 means somewhat disagree, and 1 means strongly disagree.”

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

some minor differences regarding levels of trust in institutions. For example, local and regional journalists showed a higher level of trust in the military and in the police, and a lower level of trust in the government and in the judiciary.

When asked “What is the state of Bulgarian journalism at the moment?”, in line with the national trend, local and regional journalists described the state of journalism in their country in very negative terms. Three main themes emerged from their answers: discussions of crisis and decline (46.2 per cent of local and regional journalists – less than the national average of 57.1 per cent); dependency and servitude (18 per cent of local and regional journalists versus 16.7 per cent for the Bulgarian sample as a whole), and low professional and ethical standards (28.2 per cent of local and regional journalists versus 15.2 per cent of all journalists in Bulgaria). Some of the words used to describe the state of journalism in Bulgaria are very telling: lamentable, sad, desperate, critical, dismal, unenviable, bad, a complete catastrophe, a landslide, in decline. One in five journalists also described the state of journalism in relation to a range of political, state, and corporate dependencies. A regional journalist wrote that there was an “ostentatious political influence or pure servitude borne out of one’s own will (either as a result of or in anticipation of certain benefits)”. She said there was “no critical thinking”, and negativism and the lack of perspective were widely promoted by a focus on “bad and catastrophic news” and the idolising of “fake” heroes. The editor-in-chief of a website wrote that Bulgarian journalism was “strongly dependent on advertisers, owners, politicians and personal relationships”. Another journalist spoke of an intertwining between politicians and journalists. An editor-in-chief described Bulgarian journalism as “more manipulated and more manipulative”. The managing editor of a magazine summed up the situation as: “The media are dependent on everyone. No one trusts the media. Quality journalists are suppressed”.

When making claims about deteriorating or low professional and ethical standards, a radio journalist outlined the situation in the following way.

Table 28.3 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists

Justification of controversial reporting methods by journalists	Percentage saying "always justified"			Percentage saying "justified on occasion"		
	Local and regional	National	Inter-national	Local and regional	National	Inter-national
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	2.6	2.7	0	43.6	52.1	46.2
Using hidden microphones or cameras	8	10.1	15.4	79.5	76.1	65.4
Getting employed in a firm or organization to gain inside information	10.3	7.4	11.5	48.7	57.4	46.2
Using re-creations or dramatizations of news by actors	2.6	3.7	15.4	20.5	37.2	23.1
Paying people for confidential information	2.6	2.9	43.8	46	49	56.3
Claiming to be somebody else	0	1.9	0	43.6	58.2	37.5
<b>Making use of personal documents such as letters and pictures without permission</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>27.4</b>	<b>12.5</b>
<b>Exerting pressure on unwilling informants to get a story</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>14.9</b>	<b>12.5</b>
Publishing stories with unverified content	0	0	0	0	4.8	0
Accepting money from sources	0	0	0	0	2.4	0
Altering or fabricating quotes from sources	0	0	0	0	2.9	0
Altering photographs	0	0	0	18	13.9	0

## Notes:

Q: "Given an important story, which of the following, if any, do you think may be justified on occasion and which would you not approve of under any circumstances?"

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

The state [of journalism] is not good. There is a lack of transparency of media ownership. There is a lack of objectivity. The Ethical Code of the Bulgarian Media is not abided by. Copyright is not observed. Journalists do not receive appropriate remuneration. A lot of the media are in the grey economy.

A magazine journalist drew a very similar picture but he linked the declining ethical standards with the battle for advertisers: "The battle for advertisers has relegated journalistic ethics to a minimum. Outright lies, manipulations and even entirely made-up stories are being published." A colleague of his also talked about:

Table 28.4 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: perceived influences

Perceived influences	Percentage saying “extremely” and “very influential”		
	Local and regional	National	International
Your personal values and beliefs	95	91.3	100
Journalism ethics	89.7	89.4	87.6
<b>Information access</b>	<b>87.2</b>	<b>70.7</b>	<b>64.3</b>
Editorial policy	66.7	68.2	68.8
<b>Media laws and regulation</b>	<b>74.4</b>	<b>58.2</b>	<b>56.3</b>
<b>Availability of news-gathering resources</b>	<b>66.7</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>43.8</b>
<b>Time limits</b>	<b>64.1</b>	<b>61.1</b>	<b>43.8</b>
Feedback from the audience	64.1	60.1	50.1
<b>Audience research and data</b>	<b>43.6</b>	<b>51.9</b>	<b>50</b>
Editorial supervisors and higher editors	43.6	43.7	43.8
Managers of your news organization	51.3	39	56.3
<b>Relationships with news sources</b>	<b>53.9</b>	<b>35.1</b>	<b>25</b>
Owners of your news organization	38.5	32.7	50.1
Advertising considerations	36	29.4	37.5
Profit expectations	28.2	24.5	37.5
<b>Your peers on the staff</b>	<b>30.8</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Competing news organizations</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>22.6</b>	<b>12.5</b>
<b>Friends, acquaintances and family</b>	<b>12.8</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>25</b>
Censorship	18	17.4	12.5
Religious considerations	12.8	14.4	6.3
<b>Public relations</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6.3</b>
<b>Politicians</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9.7</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Government officials</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Business people</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Military, police and state security</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Pressure groups</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>0</b>
Colleagues in other media	5.1	6.9	6.3

Notes:

Q: “Here is a list of potential sources of influence. Please tell me how much influence each of the following has on your work; 5 means it is extremely influential, 4 means very influential, 3 means somewhat influential, 2 means little influential, and 1 means not influential.”

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

incredibly low ethics, chasing after sensationalism and a totally replaced agenda – accidents and scandals are more important for the state and society than internal and international processes.

A TV journalist offered a more nuanced answer in an attempt to explain the reasons for the decline in professional standards. She argued that a large part of the changes linked to the dynamics of public life and the changing value system have come about as a result of the transition from socialism to capitalism. She wrote:

Table 28.5 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: changes in journalism

Changes in journalism	Percentage saying has “increased”			Percentage saying has “decreased”		
	Local and regional	National	Inter-national	Local and regional	National	Inter-national
<b>Technical skills</b>	<b>61.5</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>87.6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>12.6</b>
The use of search engines	89.7	84.1	93.8	0	0	0
Average working hours of journalists	69.2	71.7	62.6	0	1.5	6.3
<b>Interactions of journalists with their audiences</b>	<b>84.6</b>	<b>66.3</b>	<b>37.6</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>9.6</b>	<b>37.6</b>
<b>Having a university degree</b>	<b>53.9</b>	<b>33.6</b>	<b>56.3</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>16.3</b>	<b>0</b>
Journalists’ freedom to make editorial decisions	38.5	33.2	6.3	28.2	26.9	43.8
The relevance of journalism for society	23.1	24.5	12.5	59	51.9	75.1
<b>The credibility of journalism</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>48.7</b>	<b>62.9</b>	<b>87.5</b>
<b>Having a degree in journalism or a related field</b>	<b>25.6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>31.2</b>	<b>18.8</b>
<b>Time available for researching stories</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>59.2</b>	<b>75.1</b>

*Notes:*

Q: “Please tell me whether you think there has been an increase or a decrease in the importance of following aspects of work in [country]; 5 means they have increased a lot, 4 means they have somewhat increased, 3 means there has been no change, 2 means they have somewhat decreased, and 1 means they have decreased a lot.”

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

Problematic [the state of journalism] – similarly to other sectors connected to public life dynamics, the changing values as a result of the transition period and the transformation from socialism to capitalism. Problematic in terms of funding, ownership, a lack of understanding of traditional media’s competition with social media and the virtual social fabric as a whole. A lack of appropriate training and a broken link between higher education and the media. A lack of adequate control by society over the managers of the big public media. Serious problems connected with the decentralisation of economics, culture and the media. Globalisation that did not take place, a lack of partnerships with foreign media. A lack of commitment towards the enculturation of the public, turning a back on the educational function at the expense of an undue focus on the entertaining function.

All in all, as evident from journalists’ answers, they painted a very negative picture of the state of journalism in their country. The majority (92.3 per cent) said they agreed with reports by international organisations that claimed that there is no transparency in the ownership of



*Local journalism in Bulgaria*

Table 28.6 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: changes in influences on journalism

Changes in influences on journalism	Percentage saying has “strengthened”			Percentage saying has “weakened”		
	Local and regional	National	Inter-national	Local and regional	National	Inter-national
Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.	94.9	94.9	100	2.6	0.5	0
<b>Audience involvement in news production</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>80.3</b>	<b>87.6</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6.3</b>
User-generated content, such as blogs	79.5	79.8	75.1	2.6	3.9	0
Audience feedback	79.5	72.6	81.3	2.6	3.4	0
Profit making pressures	59	69.7	75	12.8	6.7	0
Public relations	74.4	63.5	56.3	5.1	5.1	0
Pressure toward sensational news	77	63	75.1	5.1	7.2	0
<b>Audience research</b>	<b>71.8</b>	<b>61.6</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>12.5</b>
Advertising considerations	59	63.9	56.3	20.5	12.5	18.8
<b>Competition</b>	<b>69.2</b>	<b>60.6</b>	<b>56.3</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>12.5</b>
<b>Western ways of practicing journalism</b>	<b>48.7</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>43.8</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>18.8</b>
Ethical standards	23.1	23.6	0	59	56.7	62.6
<b>Journalism education</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>51.3</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>56.3</b>

Notes:

Q: “Please tell me to what extent these influences have become stronger or weaker during the past five years in [country]; 5 means they have strengthened a lot, 4 means they have somewhat strengthened, 3 means they did not change, 2 means they have somewhat weakened, and 1 means they have weakened a lot.”

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

Bulgarian media. When asked whether they had witnessed any corruption practices, 25.6 per cent of local and regional journalists said “yes, in other media” and 7.7 per cent said “yes, in my media organisation but without my participation”. Eleven journalists (28 per cent) provided specific examples of corruption practices. A radio journalist wrote how mayors bought media organisations and turned them into PR agencies. A TV journalist also pointed her finger at a mayor. She wrote:

‘Winning’ of public tenders in appreciation of the fact that the edition is still afloat (despite being clinically dead) and as a result the mayor features on the front page every day. A refusal of the right to reply to the wrong side. Blackmailing for advertisements by publishing unfounded negative commentaries. Smear campaigns during the election period.

Other journalists described similar practices, involving local mayors, councillors and on one occasion a government minister with local connections who had apparently secured advertisements for a local information agency because of his friendship with the agency owner.

Table 28.7 Worlds of Journalism study Bulgaria: journalistic trust in institutions

<i>Journalistic trust in institutions</i>	<i>Percentage saying “complete” and “a great deal of trust”</i>		
	<i>Local and national</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>International</i>
The news media	8	12	6.3
<b>The military</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>The police</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>6.3</b>
<b>The government (“Министерски съвет”/ правителството)</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>6.3</b>
<b>The judiciary/the courts</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.9</b>	<b>6.3</b>
The parliament (“Народното събрание”)	2.6	4.3	0
Religious leaders	2.6	4.3	0
Trade unions	2.6	3.4	0
Politicians in general	0	1.9	0
Political parties	0	1.4	0

*Notes:*

Q: “Please tell me on a scale of 5 to 1 how much you personally trust each of the following institutions; 5 means you have complete trust, 4 means you have a great deal of trust, 3 means you have some trust, 2 means you have little trust, and 1 means you have no trust at all.”

Rows in bold highlight key findings.

A magazine journalist described a case in which a media owner had apparently become a local councillor and had then supplied his media organisation with paid public notices by the municipal council. A few journalists mentioned cases of bribery in exchange for favourable coverage. A TV journalist claimed that the owner of a football club had paid through a newspaper for the loss of another football club while a politician had paid for an article containing defamatory statements and insults against an opponent.

## Conclusion

This chapter presented data about the state of local journalism in Bulgaria by drawing upon the second wave of the Worlds of Journalism study, conducted in 2016–2017 in the country. The survey showed that there were a few major differences between local and national journalists in Bulgaria. Local journalists professed a much stronger normative commitment to ethical values, codes, and practices as well as media law and regulation. It is difficult to tell the reason for this difference because the trend is not fully confirmed when looking at the endorsement of specific ethically questionable practices. It is also interesting to note that more local and regional journalists than national journalists provided specific examples of corruption practices. These examples most frequently involved the local mayors and/or municipal authorities. In terms of role conceptions, local and regional journalists appeared to play a stronger accommodative role, namely they were more likely to be aiming to provide the kind of news that attracted the largest audience as well as entertainment and relaxation. This might be explained by the nature of their news outlets and the expectations of their audiences. Local journalists have been among the ones most hardly hit by the recent financial pressures so it is understandable

that attracting the largest possible audience is a priority for them. This also explains why they were more influenced by advertising considerations than their national colleagues. Given that a large proportion of their funding comes from the local authorities it is also understandable why the influence of news sources such as government officials, politicians, and businesspeople had increased for them over the past few years.

Similarly to their colleagues from national and international media, local and regional journalists depicted a very dire picture of the state of journalism in Bulgaria by describing it as lamentable, sad, desperate, critical, dismal, unenviable, bad, a complete catastrophe, a landslide, in decline. When asked whether Bulgarian media were free, 51.3 per cent said “yes, partially” and 48.7 per cent said “no”. The third option was “yes, fully”. All in all, the findings in this study confirmed the generally negative trends that we have observed in Central and Eastern Europe in the past few years in terms of Berlusconiisation of media and declining professional standards. Local media in Bulgaria have always been considerably weaker than national media, and this chapter provides a rare glimpse into the views of local journalists themselves and their perceptions of their own profession and roles.

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# SPECIALISED TRAINING OF LOCAL JOURNALISTS IN ARMED CONFLICT

## The Colombian experience

*Yennué Zárate Valderrama*

### **Introduction**

Journalism education is still regarded as the professional framework for pursuing a career in the news media, yet it is an issue of longstanding concern to the academic community and to journalists (Gaunt, 1992). It is debated whether journalism is a profession, a technique or an occupation (Tumber and Pentroulis, 2003). Arguably, journalists' professionalism (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996) can be attained either through formal education in the subject, or via 'doing the job' in a relevant professional role. The evidence gathered in this study indicates that notions of professionalism in an armed conflict entail more specialised knowledge and require expertise of the situation from both the journalists and editors. This chapter examines the pertinence of a specialised education on war coverage and violence, as an essential training framework for local war journalists, particularly in violent environments. The study presented in the chapter is part of a larger research, *Revamping Journalism in the Midst of a Conflict: Mapping the World of Local Journalists* (see Zárate Valderrama, 2016), which analysed different dimensions in the world of local conflict journalists' praxis in relation to journalism in conflict and peace.

A key debate about journalism education has been whether to focus on merely training reporters instead of educating journalists (Becker, 1996), whether to teach techniques or to develop journalists' critical thinking and situational analysis. However, it is important to consider how education can contribute to professionalism and professional values. Although journalism education may lead to critical thinking (Reese, 1999; Cohen and Reese, 2000) and the ability to connect theory and praxis, early-career reporters often begin their media careers without enough preparation (De Burg, 2003; Skinner et al., 2001). Despite the lack of consensus, the Western model of journalism has been exported and taught in other parts of the world, particularly in Latin America. Splichal and Sparks (1994) sustain that journalism education is seen as an agent of change, and therefore is still considered necessary for new generations of journalists worldwide.

In relation to journalistic professionalism in South America, Josephi (2009) emphasises that the region has probably the most diverse combination of normative perceptions and professional values. On the one hand, having absorbed North American influences, and on the other, being

former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, the countries of South America have inherited the partisan clientelist structures of journalism. However, Waisbord (2000) states that journalists are developing from lapdogs to watchdogs and muckrakers, due to the consolidation of investigative journalism in the region. There are different perspectives regarding education for professional journalism (Beattie, Tumber and Webster, 2006; Josephi, 2009), but there is little analysis of how to prepare local professionals to cover war adequately. What exists mainly focuses on training foreign, not local, international correspondents to report war (Tumber and Webster, 2006; Becker and Lowrey, 2000). Local and regional journalists have a certain anonymous nature; they report from their communities. The main difference between metropolitan and regional/local journalism covering conflict is detachment and security. The city gives metropolitan journalists some security, due to the geographical distance from the conflict zone. Meanwhile, for local journalists living in the war zone, on their way to the shop or to church they might encounter a guerrilla or paramilitary leader who might enquire about their latest article. Therefore, there are hierarchies in the profession. A metropolitan journalist covering conflict is protected; they stay a few days in the conflict zone and leave. However, the challenge for local journalists is to work and live in the midst of conflict (Zárate Valderrama, 2016).

The methodological approach taken in this study is qualitative research, based on media ethnography of local journalists. The research tools used were in-depth face-to-face interviews with journalists who were covering peace/conflict from diverse parts of Colombia: Bogotá, Cundinamarca, the Caribbean region (Barranquilla, Cartagena, Bolívar, Sincelejo), the Pacific region (Antioquia) and Santander. The rationale for choosing these regions is that the selected zones have been directly affected by a conflict, either paramilitary and/or guerrilla, and there are active journalists there. There were time and resource constraints on including a wider selection of countries; that said, the chosen areas arguably represent a fair sample of the phenomena analysed. The journalists included in the study are part of a small group of professionals that report conflict, and are an interpretative/knowledge production community following Bourdieu's Field Theory (Benson and Neveu, 2005). The study included mainly local conflict journalists from the regions (64), as well as conflict journalists from Bogotá (26); newspaper editors (9); professionals from national and international NGOs connected to journalists and conflict (8); and academics (2). The length of the fieldwork was a six-month period in 2008 and follow-up interviews in 2013. The research question guiding the study was to determine what local practices and rationales conflict journalists apply in the midst of an armed conflict.

### **Colombian training to professionalise local conflict journalists**

To fulfil the need for specific training to cover war, the Colombian NGO Medios para la Paz ('Media for Peace'), together with Universidad Javeriana and the Programme for Peace (CINEP), created a diploma course (Medios para la Paz, 2006)<sup>1</sup> titled 'Responsible Journalism in Armed Conflict'. The programme was taught from 2001 to 2010 in several cities such as Medellín (2001), Cali (2003), Barrancabermeja (2004 and 2009), Bogotá (2005), Pasto, Barranquilla (2008) and Valledupar (2009–2010). The programme covered all main regions of the country, particularly those with armed actors. Each class normally had 30 journalists who worked in urban zones and provinces. The last diploma course programme ran in 2009–2010, and was estimated to have reached 20 organisations and 290 journalists including 190 men and 100 women (Castañeda, NGO coordinator). The programme was active for ten years until the key partner, Media for Peace, closed down due to lack of funding.

The course covered the history of the Colombian armed conflict, political negotiations and the role of information in war and peace. The programme included international perspectives

and regional contexts of armed conflict; war and information; Colombia and the international context; journalism and the public sphere in war and peace; the responsibility of journalists and professional ethics; international and national experiences of war and peace journalism; peacebuilding; and human rights and international humanitarian law (diploma course pamphlet, 2008). However, the programme was adapted to the needs of each region, and included more specialised themes, such as coverage of displacement, children, recruitment and victims. There were also seminars on reporting transitional justice and post-conflict situations, coverage of paramilitary disarmament laws and the Peace and Justice Law (*Ley de Justicia y Paz*). The training lasted six months with weekend sessions every fortnight and lasted a total of 120 hours. These were spread over eight modules divided into theory lectures and workshops. In total around 1,800 journalists from more than 840 media organisations have completed the training.

After the first few years of the course, which took place in Medellín (October 2001–April 2002), Cali (July–December 2003), Barrancabermeja (October 2004–April 2005) and Bogotá (July–December 2005), the programme was evaluated in order to assess the pedagogy employed and students' output. The result was the book *Press, Armed Conflict, and Region* (Bonilla et al., 2006), which details the diploma course's methods, achievements and limitations. The course came to constitute an important space for reflection and learning for professional journalists, in order to produce high-quality news reports on themes related to armed conflict and the search for peace alongside the news agenda.

I believe that we are contributing to change journalists' routines and their understanding of the profession. However, it is a long process; we have been training for ten years, and in the last two, we have noticed [professional] changes in the practices of many journalists. On our diploma, five years ago, some journalists were not sure if there was an armed conflict or not ... or else they were ignoring the procedures of internal forced displacement.

(Manrique, NGO director)

Journalism education is seen as the key in developing journalists' attitudes and knowledge (Joseph, 2009). Yet training journalists for war coverage is still not included in the basic curricula of professional education in Colombia.

The majority of conflict journalists that we worked with had 30 years of practising journalism in their own style. So it was more complicated for them to change, and we realised that it was necessary to start this training with students before they finished their career.

(Castañeda, NGO coordinator)

The diploma course offered scholarships to journalists with financial aid from some embassies (e.g., the British and Norwegian Embassies), international organisations (such as USAID, UNESCO),<sup>2</sup> and some Colombian private enterprises (e.g., Bancolombia Foundation).

The challenge for the programme was to educate journalists to cover an unconventional war that does not have the traditional features of armed conflict (e.g., battles, offensives and clearly defined battlefields). The crucial contribution to the knowledge of Colombian war journalists was the specific training for local reporting. In the Colombian context journalists need to be trained to cover a conflict that takes place in their home and neighbourhood, where they permanently live and work. There was a concentrated effort to constantly review

the course content and maintain an up-to-date training programme that provided practical tools relevant to the country's socio-political context. The diploma course developed specialised workshops addressing specific local issues (e.g., disarmament, paramilitary-judicial hearings<sup>3</sup> in the Caribbean region). One of the course's teachers asserts:

There is a difference in conflict coverage between 2000 and now and it is remarkable. Given the magnitude of the conflict, there are still many issues unsolved, but there is a generation of journalists that have grown up and been taught to cover the armed conflict. This has been the norm for many youngsters, of 30–35 years old. That's a long time, and that generates a mindset which is complicated to change, quite apart from military and government pressures.

*(Sierra, city editor)*

The programme coordinator concurs.

Journalists have told us that the course helps them to better understand the country. It gives them tools to improve their work, and most importantly not to compromise with the truth. We are looking to educate journalists who will work in a responsible manner ... without the official version of the facts.

*(Castañeda, NGO coordinator)*

The diploma course was a benchmark for high-quality journalism setting out the standards for professional behaviour. Given that the conflict in Colombia lasted 50 years while the course only ran in the last decade, the impact of the training programme on local conflict reporters is still relatively small, although there are a number of success stories with individual graduates of the course. However, reviews of the sector have found that there is still a need to continue re-educating local war journalists, together with editors and, indeed, "entire news desks" (Manrique, NGO director). A linked project of the diploma course was the Reporteros de Colombia media observatory, which was a crucial strategic tool in continuing education of the profession (Reporteros de Colombia, 2009). The media observatory monitors journalists' outputs to evaluate the impact of training on journalists' professional practice and content. There are four key features of the observatory as an educational tool. First, it is a place to publish high-quality content – published or broadcasted by national or local media, written by graduates. Second, the content is produced from the perspective of 'responsible journalism'. Third, the media observatory continuously offered refresher courses for graduates providing further educational opportunities. Fourth, the observatory has improved communication in the network linked to the programme and between journalists from different regions, strengthening professional alliances and solidarity among peers.

The case study of the journalism programme in Colombia shows that the specialist training of local war journalists should not be an option but a requirement. Conflict regions are among the places where specialised training is most crucial. A journalist commented on the coverage of the paramilitary demobilisation process:

I believe that the specialisation of journalists is a serious issue. We don't understand the processes: there's criminal law, sociology, and historical significance. In most cases, we don't have that background, and sometimes there is no coherence.

*(A6, regional journalist)*

While another journalist noted:

Journalists need more comprehensive training in order to know exactly how to cover the conflict. I believe that journalists don't cover news badly just because they are good or bad [reporters], but because we are not educated for it. That's why we don't see another way to do it, since we don't know how.

(Mercado, city journalist)

### Comparing two key training programmes

Specialised local journalists have been uncommon in Colombia, and addressing this issue is the significance of the diploma course for regional journalists covering the conflict. It is an opportunity that challenges reporters' limitations and encourages them to pursue further training. It should be noted that the Gabriel García Márquez Foundation of New Ibero-American Journalism (Fundación de Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano, FNPI) still provides training to journalists in conflict reporting with the aim to improve journalistic practices (García Márquez, 1996). In addition, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) offers International Humanitarian Law training in countries in conflict (2011a, 2011b), such as Colombia, some of which are taught online (see ICRC, 2019). In the following, the two most important training courses for journalists in armed conflict in Colombia during the period between 2001 and 2010 are compared, the 'Responsible Journalism in Armed Conflict' and the 'International Humanitarian Law' training courses (see Table 29.1) to reveal differences and similarities in educational approaches.

By comparing the two courses, the strengths and weaknesses of local training can be explored, as well the possibility of adopting the Colombian MPP course model in other conflict situations. The comparison shows the following.

- (a) The courses take different approaches. The ICRC course is mainly focused on international humanitarian law, while the MPP's 'Responsible Journalism in Armed Conflict' programme is mainly concerned with Colombian journalistic coverage of the conflict. The focus reflects the goals of the organisations running the programmes. ICRC's mission is to train journalists on international humanitarian law in conflict zones, whereas the MPP's course aimed to enhance the professional practice of journalists in Colombia. It is also evident that the specialisation taught in the latter is centred on the key themes of the armed conflict, examining in-depth as it does the conflict's historical origins and the subsequent peace processes. Participants gain analytical tools to understand the economics, politics and legal aspects of the conflict. In addition, the course trains them on journalistic narratives, but in this goes beyond the ICRC's course, as it involves reflection and debates on journalists, journalistic ethos and ethical dilemmas. Self-examination of journalists' role and their personal and emotional dimension also takes place. This gives some evidence that the course does not only contain training in theory, but also attempts to go further to dialogue with participants of the emotional and personal effects of their job. Arguably, this comprehensive approach is the result of the different backgrounds of the three partnering institutions: namely in media studies, conflict journalism and human rights education and research. The result is thus a *sui generis* formative project that not only instructs journalists, but also supervises them after the workshop through their professional praxis.



Table 29.1 Comparison of ‘Journalism, Armed Conflict, and International Humanitarian Law’ and ‘Responsible Journalism in Armed Conflict’ journalism training programmes

	<i>International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), Colombia. ICRC’s regional sub-office and local office. Course ran in partnership with local universities.</i>	<i>Media for Peace (Medios para la Paz; MPP), Centre for Investigation and Popular Education (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP) and Universidad Javeriana.</i>
<b>Course title</b>	‘Journalism, Armed Conflict, and International Humanitarian Law’	‘Responsible Journalism in Armed Conflict’
<b>Course length</b>	Five to eight sessions (Saturdays); one to two months	Eight sessions; every 20 days (Saturday and Sunday) over six months
<b>Hours/Session</b>	Five hours per session; 8:00–13:00 hours. Total: 40 hours.	Fifteen hours; Saturday: 9:00–18:00; Sunday: 9:00–15:00. Total: 120 hours.
<b>Pedagogy</b>	Lectures and workshops	Lectures and workshops
<b>Session themes (S)</b>	<p>(S1) Principles of the Red Cross and of humanitarian action. Protection and assistance in conflict.</p> <p>(S2) International humanitarian law (IHL) I and II. The Colombian armed conflict.</p> <p>(S3) IHL principles and rules. IHL and human rights as protection mechanisms.</p> <p>(S4) Main humanitarian issues and the ICRC’s answer (women and armed conflict).</p> <p>(S5) Main humanitarian issues: disappeared, displaced.</p> <p>(S6) Journalists and war. Journalistic language and armed conflict. Production of journalistic content in armed conflict.</p> <p>(S7) Journalists and IHL. Journalists and ICRC’s information (journalists’ protection in IHL).</p> <p>(S8) Challenges of humanitarian action in urban armed violence (medical missions).</p>	<p>(S1) Module 1: Past and present of the Colombian armed conflict.</p> <p>(S2) Workshop I: Electoral process and journalistic narratives I.</p> <p>(S3) Module 2: Old wars, new wars. Colombia in the international context.</p> <p>(S4) Workshop II: Journalistic narratives II.</p> <p>(S5) Module 3: Peace, human rights, and international humanitarian law.</p> <p>(S6) Workshop III: Personal and emotional dimension of journalists.</p> <p>(S7) Module 4: Journalistic ethics and journalism in the midst of an armed conflict.</p> <p>(S8) Workshop IV: Professional tools.</p>
<b>Follow-up of students and graduates</b>	N/A	Media observatory. Evaluations (content analysis) of content quality and professional output as the student is completing the programme.

Table 29.1 (Cont.)

	<i>International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), Colombia. ICRC's regional sub-office and local office. Course ran in partnership with local universities.</i>	<i>Media for Peace (Medios para la Paz; MPP), Centre for Investigation and Popular Education (Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular, CINEP) and Universidad Javeriana.</i>
<b>Places</b>	Medellín, Cali, Barrancabermeja, Bogotá, Pasto, Barranquilla, Valledupar, Tunja, Ibagué, Buenaventura, Montería, Cúcuta, Villavicencio, Puerto Asís, Cartagena, Santa Marta, Cauca, Ocaña, San José Guaviare, Quibdó, Bucaramanga	Medellín, Cali, Barrancabermeja, Bogotá, Pasto, Barranquilla, Valledupar
<b>Students</b>	40 per class	30 per class
<b>Admission</b>	Professionals working in media, press and communication officers, NGOs, state and private organisations, communication consultants. Application: editor signs the application form.	Journalists (reporters, editors, newsroom chiefs, directors) working in media, particularly covering armed conflict and peace. Application: no need for editor's signature. Hand in two journalistic pieces before the training and two during the course.
<b>Instructors</b>	ICRC experts.	Media editors, senior journalists, academics and experts.
<b>Tuition fees</b>	Free	C\$250,000 (€80). Full and partial scholarships offered (subject to financial support).
<b>Graduates</b>	1,500 journalists	325–400 journalists
<b>Since</b>	2002	2001
<b>Degree</b>	Certificate of ICRC/university in partnership	Diploma course from the Universidad Javeriana

Sources: International Committee of the Red Cross (2011a, 2011b, 2010), Medios para la Paz (2008), Reporteros de Colombia (2009) and ethnography data.

- (b) The time-frame of MPP's course is seen as appropriate, and allows the course to function as a 'laboratory', in the words of one of the trainers: "Over six months you can see everything that happens with a journalist. It's a laboratory" (NGO director).
- (c) Both courses provide both theoretical and practical tools and content. Since the MPP course is longer, it can delve into each topic with extended lectures and workshops with professionals who are senior journalists and specialists. Senior journalist Javier Darío Restrepo, who has spent more than 50 years in the profession, is an example of the high quality of the tutors. He is an expert on journalistic ethics and a key journalistic figure in Colombia.
- (d) It is unclear what individual support and follow-up the ICRC course provides. However, graduates on the MPP programme have the Media Observatory, in which a member of staff closely supervises their learning development during the course. Students hand in two of

their journalistic pieces at the beginning of the course and another two at the end. This is a strong point of the course, and indicates that, first, a more personalised education is provided where the focus is on training individuals taking into consideration the media institution they work for. Second, monitoring students and graduates demonstrates that their pedagogical objective goes beyond the course itself.

- (e) The schedule of both courses is structured by considering journalists' working patterns, as weekend training is suitable for most participating professionals.
- (f) It is evident that the duration of the courses differs, with the ICRC course being shorter (it covers 40 hours in total in weekly seminars over approximately one month). This can be handy for journalists who do not have much time, and the course's length may be sufficient to learn the topic. In comparison, the duration of the MPP course (120 hours distributed over six months) indicates a different approach, one that focuses on the specialised training of journalists to a higher level.
- (g) The programmes are taught in regional centres, which appeals to local conflict journalists and the proximity of the teaching facilitates journalists' attendance. The decentralisation of journalists' education is fundamental to reach local journalists, particularly when it is difficult to commute to Bogotá to attend a course. Holding courses in regional capitals encourages reporters from surrounding areas to attend. For example, the MPP course held in Barranquilla (the regional capital of the Atlantic Department) in 2008 gathered journalists not only from this city but also from a considerable number of smaller neighbouring towns and villages, such as Cartagena (Bolívar Department) and Sincelejo (Sucre Department), around two to three hours' drive away.
- (h) Tuition fees are not obstacles to attend either of the courses for most journalists. The ICRC course is free and the MPP course costs COP\$250,000, which is approximately £80. Journalists' average monthly wages range between COP\$500,000 and COP\$1,000,000 (approximately £150–£336) (Gutiérrez, 2010), so over a six-month period it could be affordable even for the lower-waged reporters. However, in certain cases, full and partial scholarships are provided for conflict journalists.
- (i) The ICRC has taught a considerable number of journalists (1,500) from 2002 to 2011. Since 2012 the course has added peace and conflict resolution to strengthen its syllabus. As an international NGO it has the resources to run the programme in the longer term. On the other hand, between 2001 and 2010, MPP's course has taught around 325–400 journalists. The smaller class size (30 students per course) makes it more personalised, but at the same time it means fewer graduates.
- (j) On completion the MPP course is a university qualification and a higher level of specialisation. The ICRC's certificate is also well regarded given the prestige of the organisation and the specific focus on international humanitarian law.

Training initiatives of a number of international non-governmental organisations, such as the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), have similar programmes to those offered in Colombia. IWPR trained Afghan journalists on conflict reporting and investigative journalism before the fall of the Taliban (IWPR, 2011). Yet there are differences in comparison with the Colombian endeavour, since the IWPR's training is organised by an international NGO, whereas in Colombia it is a programme of a national NGO. In addition, the IWPR's trainers are international, whereas in Colombia they are national journalists and experts. Another difference is the target group; in Afghanistan, the course focused on the basics of journalism, while in Colombia it is a specialised course for journalists already working in the profession.

## INSTRUCTIONS ON BECOMING A THREATENED JOURNALIST

**Do not prepare yourself** to understand the conflict. Do not study the history of the country

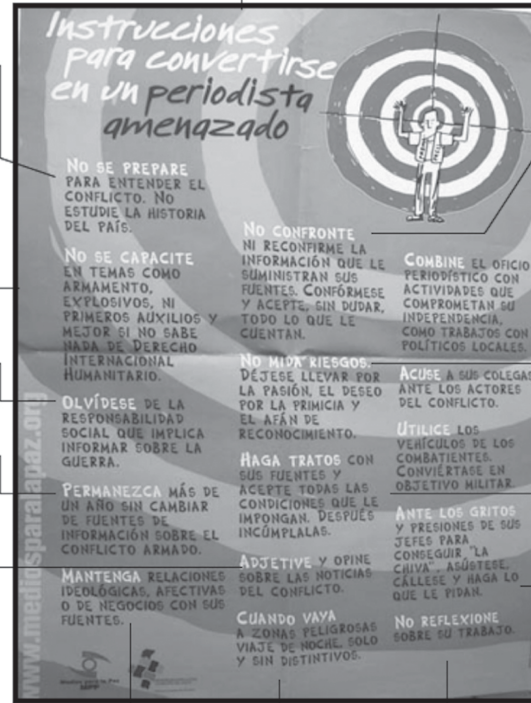
**Do not train yourself** on topics such as weaponry, explosives, or first aid, and it's better if you do not know anything about international humanitarian law

**Forget** about the social responsibility entailed by reporting on the war

**Remain** for more than a year without changing your information sources on the armed conflict

**Use adjectives** and give your opinion on news of the conflict

**Maintain** ideological, affectionate or business relationships with your sources



**Do not challenge** or confirm information given by sources. Be satisfied and accept it all

**Combine** journalistic work with activities that compromise your independence, such as work with local politicians

**Do not analyse** possible risks. Let yourself be led on by the desire for the scoop and the lure of recognition

**Accuse** your colleagues of working with the armed actors

**Use** combatants' vehicles. Become a military objective

**Make deals** with your sources and accept all the conditions imposed. Afterwards, fall short of your promises

**When your bosses** pressure you and shout at you to get the scoop, be scared, be quiet and do what you are told

**When travelling** to dangerous zones, travel by night, alone and without press documents

**Do not reflect** on your own work

Figure 29.1 Satirical poster on Colombian journalists' culture and routines. Translation: 'Instructions on becoming a threatened journalist' ('Instrucciones para convertirse en un periodista amenazado')

Source: Corporación Medios para la Paz. Illustrations by Vladdo (2008). Translated by the author.

## **Raising awareness about professionalism**

An investigation undertaken by the NGO Media for Peace on ‘War: threats to the press’ examined news coverage of the conflict in Colombia and the threats and risks to journalists in the country (Gómez, 2008). It revealed aspects of local journalistic cultures and routines that could pose risks to reporters covering the conflict; it also analysed newsmaking and the political economy of media. Using the findings of the study the NGO published a series of satirical posters with the aim to be displayed in newsrooms (Figure 29.1), where they might act as a reminder of professional standards in order to encourage self-reflection among journalists and editors.

Every statement on a poster is supported by research; the lack of professionalism, unethical behaviour, and particularly the lack of specialised training of war journalists are highlighted as potential risk factors. Participants of our research also agreed that there was not adequate knowledge and understanding of the history of Colombia and the armed conflict among conflict journalists. The multifaceted violence, the length of the war and the complexity of the conflict are factors that make it difficult to understand the situation. A reporter explains:

I promote training with professionals, since I owe my career to the specialisation courses. The standards that we have in Bogotá are different from the regions, because [local] reporters there sometimes don’t have a professional degree, so their education is poorer, but they have learned the craft in the newsroom.

*(González, city journalist)*

The MPP course focuses on journalists’ ethics and their understanding of their role in society and the conflict. According to our research data, journalists that cover illegal armed groups were put under pressures by these groups. They demanded certain types of information and reporting tones in the news, in order to get a pass to travel in the region to cover the news. Hence, the ‘free’ access of journalists to conflict zones is most of the time regulated. As an editor explains:

I’ve never promised anything to my sources about whether I can publish it or not – that’s not up to me but to the editor-in-chief and other media issues. Sources such as armed actors always want to pressure you to publish exactly what they’ve said in the interview, even if it will be eight pages long. But you have to explain the dynamics of media and never guarantee that it will be printed.

*(Olimpo, regional editor)*

## **Conclusion**

There is a North–South divide in the specialised training of journalists in wars and reporting from hostile environments. Some media organisations in the Global North require completion of prior training from journalists covering armed conflicts, yet it is not a requirement in this case study. Our research findings show that journalism education has enhanced the quality of journalism in Colombia and is, as Curran states, “one way in which society can intervene to influence the development of journalism” (2005, xiv). In this regard, Colombian society (i.e., media NGOs) has made a remarkable contribution to its professionalisation of local journalists in the midst of conflict. Our case study also illustrates how the Colombian educational approach to conflict coverage can improve the quality of war reporting. In this regard, this method might shed light on educational perspectives for reporting in violent societies. Arguably it is

an important contribution to de-Westernise journalism studies. This experience reveals the journalist's constant need for journalistic specialisation and training throughout their professional life. This method might shed light on journalists' professional education in violent environments. In places with unstable democracies or with violent environments, such as our case study, the professionalism of local war journalists is a crucial necessity.

The MPP diploma course on Responsible Journalism in Armed Conflict responded to the need for reporters' professionalism in the midst of an armed conflict. It sheds light on the evolution of journalism professionalisation and its constant reshaping according to local cultures and socio-political contexts. This style of journalistic training is a laboratory that could be replicated in other violent environments and the educational process may help journalists to improve their work. It is also important to highlight the role that journalistic networks could play to collaborate and jointly break news that is not possible for local journalists to report on. For that reason it is important to reinforce regional and local journalist networks (e.g., *Red Caribe*, Antioquia) and maintain collaboration with the stronger metropolitan networks. These connections have been developed by the 'Medios para la Paz' Diploma and the 'Fundación para el Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano' programmes, which have provided opportunities for city and local journalists to link up, allowing exchanges of news that their media outlets do not publish.

## Notes

- 1 Spanish word 'Diplomado' refers to a 'certificate course' of specialised education in Latin America. It can be undertaken after a bachelor's degree. The course is not equivalent to a Diploma of Higher Education or Postgraduate Diploma of the UK system.
- 2 Other organisations that donated funds to Media for Peace were the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives, Fondo de Paz (Colombia), the Broederlijk Delen Foundation (Belgium), International Media Support, Reporters Without Borders (Sweden), and the UN Peace University.
- 3 The Justice and Peace Law ensured the individual's right to truth. The demobilised paramilitaries had public hearings to confess their crimes (cf. Gómez, 2008).

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# FROM COMMUNITY TO COMMERCE?

Analytics, audience ‘engagement’ and how  
local newspapers are renegotiating news  
values in the age of pageview-driven  
journalism in the United Kingdom

*James Morrison*

## Introduction

Industrialized newspaper journalism has long been propelled by more ‘market-driven’ motives (McManus, 1994) than any high-minded Burkean commitment to the ideals of a pluralist, truth-seeking “Fourth Estate” (Grande, 2014). From the sensational ‘yellow journalism’ patented by Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the 1890s to the launch of picture-heavy tabloids like Rupert Murdoch’s (reinvented) *Sun* and Gannett’s *USA Today* three-quarters of a century later, to today’s ongoing absorption of swaths of local papers into regional conglomerates, the pursuit of profit as an engine of news production has consistently manifested itself as both a symptom and enabler of the “gradual shift away from financial dependence on political parties to dependence on circulation and advertising revenues” (Hampton, 2010, 6).

Indeed, commercialization of the press arguably predates all these developments and is, in some respects, native to journalism itself – with the noble exception of the earnest outpourings of early DIY pamphleteers. The “supposedly trivial or emotion-laden stories of celebrities” and “everyday heroes” have, as Bird observes, “always been a part of news”, even performing “an important cultural role” that only becomes a “problem” when it “swamps the other important dimensions of what journalism can and should be” (2009, 49). Moreover, as Serazio argues (2009, 15), the pointed re-framing of such ingredients as ‘popularization’, by no less than Herbert Gans, reimagines them as offering “the possibility of strengthening news and bolstering democracy rather than despoiling it” – precisely the aim of lofty Fourth Estate idealists.

It is, then, this part-pragmatic, part-ideological debate – one preoccupied with the perennial tension between revenue-driven commercialism and the pursuit of conscientious public-interest journalism – that underpins this chapter, as it considers the ways in which new drivers and measures of market success are being adopted by local papers in the digital age. In doing so, it considers two sub-questions. The first concerns the issue of how such new forms of commercialization, principally the use of audience analytics to drive news agendas, might be transforming



the underlying cultures/identities of local newspapers (and journalists). The second concerns the implications of any such changes for the preservation of the distinctive (if oft-romanticized) role of the provincial paper as “faithful chronicler of the parish pump” (Pilling, 1998, 187) and/or reflector of the interests of the “community structure” of which it is notionally part (McCombs and Funk, 2011, 906). After a brief review of the existing literature, we explore these concerns empirically, by analyzing a series of interviews with five senior local news personnel whose jobs involve incorporating analytics into their day-to-day online editorial decisions.

### Clicks, pageviews and the rise of analytics in the online press

Today’s digital news environment is, in one sense, a world away from that inhabited by “newsmakers” (Tuchman, 1978) of the mass-circulation analogue era. In others, however, it is all-too-relatable to the musings of post-war wire editor ‘Mr Gates’, who once justified his news selections by regaling an academic with the commercially astute observation that his readers were “entitled to news that pleases them” – principally “stories involving their thinking and activity” – as well as coverage that “informs them of what is going on in the world” (Manning White, 1950, 390). Latter-day debates about the perceived subservience of public-interest news to that which is *of interest to the public* are, then, echoes of that stolid wire editor’s formula for selecting a “variety” of stories – and favouring “human interest” items, “in a big way”, over “economic news” and other stories that went “over the heads” of readers (*ibid.*, 389–390). While editors of Mr Gates’s and later eras based their judgements about stories’ likely appeal on clipboard-based consumer surveys, occasional focus groups and the snail-mail feedback published on letter pages (some of which they ignored – see Gans, 1980), today’s have access to popularity measures that are instant, 24/7 and much more precise: live data analytics. Widely defined as the “systematic analysis of quantitative data on various aspects of audience behaviour”, with the aim of “growing audiences, increasing engagement, and improving newsroom workflows”, editorial analytics are increasingly integral to the routinized journalistic practices (and wider business models) of “organisations all over the world”, with major news operations increasingly developing “tailored” packages designed to mine the maximum amount of granular information about the demographics (and associated likes and dislikes) of their audiences (Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016, 7).

The benefits of real-time profiling are obvious. Not only does it help editors focus increasingly strained editorial budgets on prioritizing content likely to attract audiences, but both the profile data itself and the evidence of bigger, more engaged, user-communities they generate can be used to sell advertising (Zeng, Dennstedt and Koller, 2016, 549). In the words of one of few substantive studies to date to examine the impact of editorial analytics internationally, including on (national) UK providers:

Journalists today not only *need analytics*, to navigate an ever-more competitive battle for attention. Many journalists also *want analytics*, as an earlier period of scepticism seems to have given way to interest in how data and metrics can help newsrooms reach their target audiences and do better journalism.

(Cherubini and Nielsen, 2016, 7)

Rolling analytics-monitoring has not only revolutionized the speed with which audience data can be generated; it has prompted a shift in the *types* of metric that are of most interest to news organizations. An earlier preoccupation with the simplest measures of market penetration – ‘clicks’, ‘visits’ and the one-time holy grail, ‘unique visitors’ – has been supplanted by a focus on

*how long* individuals stay on websites and *what they do* while there. In other words, the emphasis has switched from quantity to quality. By calculating pageviews, likes, shares and other measures of engagement with their content (*ibid.*) – including comments posted beneath stories and on their social media pages – organizations can build up clearer and fuller pictures of how many times visitors click onto more than one page or item; how long they linger on their site(s); how much they participate while there; and how best to encourage them to spread the word about their brands to others – and keep returning themselves for more.

Yet, for all their commercial virtues – principally, user-friendliness, speed and granular precision – analytics present problems for journalists. Chief among these is the prescriptive, formulaic and instrumentalist newsgathering practices they have the potential to promote over normative professional ideas about newsworthiness, let alone any higher ideals about the public’s “right to know” (Meyers, 1993). As Canter demonstrated in a (so far) rare study examining the impact of analytics on editorial practices of local (rather than national) papers, an “increase in the use of web metrics or analytics to measure most-read stories, most-commented stories and most-shared stories is beginning to shape journalistic decisions” (2014, 110). Defying earlier predictions that online audiences’ primary contribution to post-Web 2.0 news would take the form of original stories, videos and other content they uploaded themselves to news sites, today’s “secondary gatekeepers” (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009, 7), Canter argues, are “impacting on the gatekeeping process” not through “user-generated content” but indirectly: by shaping *editors’* decisions about *their* news selection, via web metrics (Canter, 2014, 110). This, she says (citing Örnebring, 2010), can change news values “to soft over hard news, quirky over substantial, visual over non-visual”, promoting “an overall preference for sensationalism” (Canter, 2014, 110).

Pursued to its logical commercial extreme, such analytics-driven journalism could arguably damage trust in news providers by distorting the images of reality they present in far more misleading ways than was ever the case in the oft-maligned mass media age of ‘constructed’ (e.g., Tuchman, 1978) or ‘manufactured’ news (Fishman, 1980). Indeed, such unscrupulous approaches would rocket-boost the “audience as product perspective” that, to quote Lee et al., has long been central to the critique of political economy scholars that “above all, capitalist media ‘manufacture’ audiences to be sold as commodities to advertisers” (2014, 509). In the process, as Nguyen (2013) argues, journalists risk facing ever more tortuous ethical dilemmas, as their employers’ relentless pursuit of the bottom line undermines core news values, dictates new ones and militates against investing in content that (based on past analytics) is unlikely to “sell”. Why spend valuable time investigating a complex policy story that (however important) will have little popular appeal, when reproducing a funny video clip lifted from YouTube, at no cost, is more likely to draw punters – and earn you Brownie points?

As we enter into the third decade of the twenty-first century, then, how far have pageview-driven editorial norms come to influence the day-to-day newsgathering and publishing practices of Britain’s local press? Six years after Canter’s informative interviews with practitioners at various levels in the newsroom hierarchies of two English locals – the *Leicester Mercury* and *Bournemouth Echo* – how representative are her snapshots of the incipient ‘metricization’ of UK newsrooms today? Has the tail-wags-dog process of Web 2.0-style secondary gatekeeping identified by Canter, Örnebring and others accelerated or stalled – and, if the former, how deeply is it embedded? The following sections aim to make a start on answering these questions based on the findings of empirical fieldwork carried out between June and September 2018. The research involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with editors responsible for taking daily decisions about what stories (and content) to publish, how prominently and in what form on five local news sites based in different UK regions. These were the digital editors of a daily newspaper covering a major north-east English city, a city-based evening paper in eastern

Scotland and an evening title serving a large catchment area in south-west England; the executive editor of a website encompassing the catchments of two south Wales-based daily papers; and the content editor of a county-wide website serving the joint catchment areas of five weekly newspapers in south-east England.

The findings suggest the *degree* to which web analytics are dictating news agendas across the provincial press is subject to some variation from one area and/or provider to another, with local factors (e.g., population characteristics and socio-economic profiles) combining with slight deviations in newsroom structures to affect the extent to which metrics are pre-eminent. However, the overarching picture suggests that pageview-driven journalism is certainly on the rise – and predictions about the likely audience appeal of this story or that, based on the tracking of today’s clicks, likes and shares, are as likely to determine tomorrow’s content and headlines as any normative and/or ideological judgements about an event’s or incident’s intrinsic newsworthiness. Indeed, some findings even signalled the emergence of a potentially more problematic crossover between the roles of journalists and advertising/salespeople – sets of practitioners customarily separated by such clearly defined professional boundaries that studies consistently conceive of them as “walls” between mutually antipathetic camps (Gans, 1980; DeLorme and Fedler, 2005; Artemas, Vos and Duffy, 2018).

### **Reading the runes and promoting the popular: analytics-driven news lists**

The primacy of analytics-based audience profiling and data measuring the popularity of past content in shaping today’s editorial decisions was emphasized by all five interviewees. “With analytics you know exactly what people are interested in”, remarked the Scottish-based editor, adding that real-time metrics “totally” drove his paper’s online news decisions. The south-east editor said data were “the key driver” of her site’s coverage, with her daily news lists “shaped by” analytics, while the north-east editor described such measures as “absolutely crucial” to “informing” his online coverage, as they helped it “remain relevant, produce better digital content and reach a larger audience”. Though there was remarkable agreement about the most popular genres of content – breaking news, crime, traffic, human-interest stories and (depending on time of day) more leisure-orientated articles, like restaurant reviews – some examples cited demonstrated a more nakedly commercial approach to capitalizing on “trends” with little respect for old-style, community-focused news values. An extreme illustration came from the Scottish editor, who described how a tweeted video of a teenager tripping his friend over at a party “went massive” by gaining 50,000 views – forcing him to explain to fellow editors in a news conference why the day’s “best story” had been “someone kicking someone at a party”. Analytics-driven routines adopted by all five news organizations included the following:

- segmentation – targeting certain types of content at sub-audiences and/or peak times
- follow-ups and added value – milking popular items by publishing extra related content
- using social media as a shop window – posting links and headlines to their content on Facebook and other external sites to drive traffic towards their own websites.

### ***Sub-audience targeting and segmentation***

The most normalized use of analytics was to construct round-the-clock schedules to determine when specific items/types of content should be published, in order to maximize audiences. “We

have a constant schedule – 7am, 8am etc. – so we know what we are going to publish ... right up to 11am the next day”, explained the south-west editor. Aside from breaking news stories – which could occur at any time and “almost exist in a parallel space” – his reporters had to pitch three self-generated stories each morning. Depending on their subject matter, these would be ration-released to target specific sub-audiences who were active online at different times. Like others, the south-west site generally held back “hard stuff” for its lunchtime peak, whereas evenings were “a bit different”, as audiences “switch to Facebook and Twitter” – encouraging editors to post shareable, feature-style content, to drive users towards their site. Each interviewee described rush-hour peaks, with the south-east editor relaying a diet of “stuff we save and schedule” on weekday mornings and evenings as “things aimed at commuters”, such as traffic news and information. Items held back for daytime release tended to be light-hearted or “aimed at mums”.

“Commuters” and “mums” were key segments identified by all interviewees, though other sub-audiences were highly specific to the characteristics of individual catchments. The Scottish editor likened the process of targeting different sub-audiences at different times to “a press office, communications” scheduling grid, adding that, once his paper had content ready to publish, decisions about when to release it were driven by the question, “when’s it going to have the most effect?” A peak-point for one sub-audience specific to his catchment was tied to the shift patterns of its biggest local employer. “Health stories are more popular around 5pm”, he said, because hospital shifts “begin and end at 5, so you’ve got people going into work and people who’ve just finished”.

### ***Follow-ups and added value***

Another way of drip-feeding content to maximize audience engagement is to deliberately string out the release of details relating to *unfolding* news events. “So a fire takes place and you get the initial ... breaking news”, which gains a “massive readership”, explained the Scottish editor, and you then “do an update”. Updates might be published “four or five times” for one story, starting with “first story: something’s happened”, then “second story: maybe reports of shouting”, followed by a third story from a police statement – and “each time you’re linking it to the original”, to encourage newcomers to the story to click back to earlier versions and spend longer on the site. “If we have a video we link that to the story, and then all our stories [about this incident] have a video”, he added, allowing the site to “monetize” it directly by posting a paid-for advert at the start, in the style of YouTube’s “video comes after ad” banners.

In other newsrooms, follow-ups and ‘added value’ content were routinely generated to capitalize on the appeal of popular items. “If it’s doing well, we will search for any follow-up or new line we can get”, said the south-east editor, adding that her team would “embellish the story” with every possible hyperlink and “read more” tab; “look at variations of that story we could sell differently” to “different areas” of their catchment; and use all “other means possible to keep them [readers] on our site”. Should an item’s popularity exceed expectations, the Wales-based editor would “examine any trends” around the subject (using Google Trends) and, if persuaded there was a genuine market among his core audience, try to amplify his coverage. A simple way of producing ready-made follow-ups to stories that generate lots of social media activity favoured by both Welsh and north-east England-based sites was to run a “reaction piece” quoting a mix of representative and/or provocative posts. Conversely, “if a particular theme, issue or topic is being heavily debated [on social media]”, said the north-east editor, “we will look at whether further journalistic investigation is needed”. When stories were “spiking”,

his journalists would be told to write not only “regular updates” but additional related content, including “explainers, reactions, image galleries” and, “if appropriate”, live blogs.

These depictions of newsroom cultures primed for all-hands-on-deck investments in high-performing stories reflected the primacy placed on audience-driven news values by all five publications. As the south-east editor put it, the pursuit of rapid follow-ups to popular items had “an incredibly big impact on our editorial decisions”, to the extent that it almost “dictates it”.

### ***Social media as shop window***

The ways in which social media analytics were used by editors differed to those used to exploit *their own* metrics in two important respects. First, rather than focusing on profiling their existing audiences and using the popularity of their past/present content to inform future editorial decisions, their main reason for tracking social media metrics was to identify where audience-members *came from*, that is, from which external sites/platforms they were being redirected, via links and likes shared by “opinion leaders” in their social networks (Turcotte et al., 2015). Second, their use of social media was, in many ways, more sophisticated than the quantitative data-mining used to harness their own websites’ internal analytics. With up to six out of ten of their online audience-members initially stumbling on their content via Facebook (according to metrics), and further traffic coming via Twitter, all the interviewees had routinized the process of posting their main stories on these platforms daily. However, rather than run the risk of losing track of potential return visitors, they had also developed their own social media channels (north-east editor), including branded Facebook pages – giving them access to vital sources of secondary analytics they could harness to profile/target *potential* audiences and build brand loyalty by constructing external communities of interest linked to their sites.

“Without social media, our online audience would be significantly smaller”, explained the north-east editor, adding that Facebook was “by far the biggest referrer” of readers. Moreover, his south-east counterpart described this platform as the source of “successful innovations” for her company, including a dedicated “traffic and travel” website, which “has 30,000 members who share information” and is both “a key place for us to share our traffic-based stories [and] get tips on stories” and “the authority on traffic and travel” throughout the county. So integral had social media become to her news operation that her morning editorial meetings were now used to agree not just the site’s own schedule but also a “Facebook schedule for the day” (author’s italics), determining “what time we will post certain stories ... for the best benefit of traffic”. The south-west editor was more cautious about automatically using big Facebook hits as a guide to shaping future news decisions, unless he could establish an audience was “core”, rather than passing trade, that is, “internal” to his site or based on “our own Facebook page”. However, he conceded its importance in boosting audiences – adding that, “if they [new visitors] choose to read another article, we know they like the brand”.

Another virtue of Facebook was that it could be used to engage *directly* with newcomers who showed an interest in a site’s content. People who lingered, clicked on more than one item and/or expressed “some kind of emotion on Facebook” faced being directly contacted by the Scottish editor, who would invite “anyone [who] likes or comments on” an article to “like the [news or Facebook] page”. The act of ‘liking’ a page would flag up future content that might interest them – increasing the likelihood of their returning to the site. “Say you were on a story with 100-odd likes, I’d get a list of all those people with likes”, and “with all of those we can go in and ‘invite’, ‘invite’, ‘invite’”. When “you’ve got the likes”, he added, “the next time you’ve got a big story, you’re hitting them”, because “it appears on their news feed”.

## **The journalist-adperson hybrid: tagging, video and other monetizing newsroom practices**

Beyond routinizing the use of analytics themselves to maximize audiences, interviewees described various other ways in which commercial thinking (and practice) was becoming hardwired into newsroom cultures. The south-east editor said comments and shares on her site's Facebook page enabled it to offer sponsored posts and content to advertisers, while both her Scottish and south-west counterparts said almost every story was now accompanied by a video, as they could easily be monetized. The former described video views as an especially attractive "currency" to advertisers, as they required users to sit through commercials before they could watch. "The sellers say to the market, 'we get 500,000 video views a week'", he said, adding, "the higher the number, the more they can charge".

Perhaps the starkest illustration of how the increasingly commercialized nature of online news production was pushing some journalists towards crossing the line into the business side of their organizations was the same editor's description of "tagging": the use of thematic labels to signpost and/or link items of related content. He outlined two different reasons for why you tag: the first being for "easy reference", as it "helps the readers, it helps us", and the second to attract advertising, as there might be someone who wants to advertise "just for people who read" content relating to a specific area. Expressing enthusiasm for doing "the sales schtick" himself, he said there were "great opportunities" to exploit – adding that,

as an advertising team we can say, 'we'll give you ... 50,000 page-impressions', so they [advertisers] know that everyone who reads a story has some interest in that area.

## **Reinforcing the 'wall'? Resisting role mergers and putting pageviews in their place**

The above testimony suggests that market-driven priorities are increasingly breaching the symbolic 'wall' that has traditionally been held to separate journalists from salespeople – replacing it with a more permeable barrier, like a "curtain" (Coddington, 2015). Nonetheless, in considering questions about their websites' news values, most interviewees betrayed signs of enduring tensions between what might normatively be regarded as "important stories" (Welsh and south-east editors) and content most likely to attract audiences – and advertisers.

A strident assertion of the need to uphold traditional news judgement came from the south-east editor, albeit couched in pragmatic terms. Casting public-interest values less as a hard-to-sell luxury (or economically costly burden) than a unique selling-point that could be exploited for commercial gain, she said her website's push to improve its "engagement times" had "brought back the need for core journalistic values, quality reports, exclusive material" and "trusted content" that distinguished the press from other outlets. "A loyal readership", she added, is "what will keep local digital journalism alive and we will earn that through respect". She also emphasized her team's efforts to balance more obviously commercial "trending topics", in which audiences were already showing interest, with "important" stories that they "didn't know they wanted to read" – adding that, if "an important story hasn't done very well", they would "discuss ways to make it more relevant" to audiences and "sell it in a way that will make them click on it". An example might include dressing up "a story about cuts the council is making" to "link with our trending topics". Others described similar efforts to boost stories they considered newsworthy/important – from adopting "a slight change to how it's delivered and at what time/day" or



targeting “specific interest groups” (Welsh editor) to “re-nosing the headline or social media posts” (north-east editor) or putting “a human face on it” (south-west editor).

Significantly, though, there was general agreement that commercial considerations were ultimately prioritized over ‘instinctive’ news values when it came to finalizing decisions about what to run with and/or how hard to push important stories that analytics suggested were unpopular. The Scottish editor described how he sometimes took advantage of the “three peaks” in his site’s daily audience to “put on a new headline, and maybe write it slightly differently for the evening peak” if it “doesn’t do anything” initially, but added that this often “doesn’t work” – leaving him feeling that, “for the effort I’ve gone [to], I’ve thought, ‘well, that’s not really done it’”. Similarly, despite being strongly resistant to getting “involved with” his website’s business side, the south-west editor lamented that, “ultimately, if you are writing about an issue and no one’s reading it, you are kind of writing into a vacuum”.

## Conclusion

Tensions between newspapers’ *commercial* interests and their duty to serve the *public* interest are as old as the press itself. However, while even local paper editors have always tailored much of their output to the tastes and demands of their publics, this chapter shows that, as the sector formerly known as the press becomes progressively more digitally native, new competitive pressures combined with technological advances have encouraged it to adopt ever-more market-driven mindsets – embracing everything from granular profiling of segmented sub-audiences to direct-messaging of people who stumble on its content accidentally via Facebook.

While more empirical research is needed to determine precisely how far today’s local news agendas can be described as pageview-driven – including analysis of their published content – our interviews suggest journalists are increasingly resigned to prioritizing profit over public service. Nonetheless, while some editors are enthusiastic about the prospect of working more collaboratively with advertising staff, others seem determined to avoid breaching this ‘wall’ – by preserving some semblance of the historical distinctions between what Gans once described as the “church” of editorial and the “state” of business (1980, 24).

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## TWO-TIER TWEETING

### How promotional and personalised use of Twitter is shaping local journalistic practices in the United Kingdom

*Lily Canter*

#### **Introduction**

Local newspaper hacks often recall the golden era when reporters spent hours sipping tea and swapping stories with beat bobbies, parish councillors and village correspondents. Flash forward 20 years and the picture is more sterile, with staff chained to their desk in an out-of-town office, churning out copy to meet the insatiable desire for up-to-the-minute online news. This chapter seeks to examine how journalistic practices have changed in local journalism in response to rapid technological shifts and the ways in which local journalists practise on popular social media platform Twitter. Social media are often criticised for perpetuating this slavery to technology but local journalists in the UK have seized Twitter as a means to network, engage and communicate with their local communities in an alternative virtual forum. Since its launch in 2006 journalists have been grappling with how to integrate Twitter into their daily practices and over the past decade a set of norms and practices have started to emerge and gradually solidify.

This chapter explores the different ways in which local newspaper companies and journalists in the UK have adopted Twitter and adapted it for multiple purposes. It investigates how those in managerial positions tend to use the platform as a promotional tool in line with company policy and how local news organisations' official Twitter handles continue to pump out automated headlines with hyperlinks back to the legacy news website. It also observes how individual reporters have developed a more nuanced and engaging approach, which includes user interactions and opens a window into their personal life as they become brands themselves. As the chapter argues, reporters utilise Twitter not as a promotional tool but as a versatile instrument to gather, distribute and share news, information and comment. It is also an invaluable platform for building a network of contacts and communicating with readers on a more personalised level outside the confines of a structured, objective news story, which further enables journalists to build a personal brand. This chapter largely draws upon the research of the author, conducted at three local newspapers: Bournemouth's *Daily Echo*, the *Leicester Mercury* and *The Star* in Sheffield. These daily newspapers were selected due to their size, geography and demographic variability. As a sample they represent the north, midlands and south of England together with rural and urban areas, affluent and working-class regions and areas that are white-centric as well as those with a higher Black/Asian/minority/ethnic (BAME) population.

## Reach replaces circulation and suspicion

It is now conceived ‘old news’ to talk about the decline of local newspaper circulation and the subsequent growth of online news as this consumer shift is as commonplace as the smartphone. Indeed in 2018 the smartphone became the most used device for news in the UK, overtaking the computer/laptop for the first time (Newman, 2018). Publishers have therefore been investing heavily in online technologies in order to further their readership and reach through their websites, apps and social media profiles that are being accessed on numerous devices. A prime example of this is the UK’s largest regional newspaper publisher, formerly known as Trinity Mirror, which rebranded itself as Reach in 2018 (Tobitt, 2018) in an attempt to reflect how the company is reaching millions of consumers through multiple platforms. Along with selling 540 million newspapers in 2017 (Reach, 2018), it also attracted 110 million unique browsers every month to its network of over 70 websites, which provided “24/7 coverage of news, sport and showbiz stories”. This rebranding has been viewed by some commentators as a way to distract investors’ attention from the company’s imminent challenges (Vincent, 2018) of plummeting circulation and only modest growth online. In this arduous online economy where the news and information market continues to fragment online publishers are desperately seeking new strategies to attract, engage and retain readers/users/audiences/consumers, and drive traffic to their websites. Twitter is particularly attractive due to its wide-reaching capacity, simplicity and speed and as such has been adopted by news organisations as one of the key platforms for journalists to communicate on due to its easy engagement with users and huge commercial potential. The platform is free to use but can raise brand profile significantly and, more importantly, link thousands of users to revenue-generating news websites. The Twitter explosion (Farhi, 2009) of recent years has created an environment whereby the site is now considered a news platform as much as a social network (Hermida, 2013) and 14 per cent of the UK population consume their news directly from Twitter (Newman, 2018).

It is hard to believe that Twitter was once viewed with suspicion by journalists, with critics’ arguing that it was nothing more than a “torrent of useless information” (Arceneaux and Schmitz Weiss, 2010, 1271) made up of totally pointless babble (Pear Analytics, 2009). Initially many local media companies restricted reporters’ access to Twitter and preferred centralised web teams to coordinate outgoing tweets and responses to the public. This top-down control was supported by numerous editors, with some declaring that Twitter was a space where reporters could only speak as private individuals not as staff members since journalists “aren’t really supposed to have opinions” (Canter, 2013, 10). Research by this author at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* newspaper conducted in 2011 showed that there was no culture of encouraging journalists to use Twitter and at that time only one journalist had a consistently active Twitter account. However, by the end of 2013 there had been a fundamental shift in attitude, following the arrival of a new editor and the release of updated company guidelines, which stated that it was

strongly recommended that editors and reporters have work Twitter accounts ...  
Journalists should be proficient with Twitter. Twitter is integral to the job.

(Canter, 2014, 11)

Even live tweeting from breaking news stories was not a normalised practice in 2011 due to an overwhelming fear amongst staff that doing so would tip off rivals and damage newspaper sales. However, in less than two years live reporting via Twitter had become standard practice for the majority of reporters and photographers (Canter, 2014) as the shift moved from newspaper sales to online hits. Despite the initial reticence to embrace Twitter it was not long before journalists had a change of heart and less than a decade after it was first launched in 2006 reporters were embracing

the platform. It swiftly became an essential part of local and national journalists' everyday reporting toolkit (Oriella PR Network, 2012; Cision, 2013; Hermida, 2013), which impacted on the way in which they operated within traditional journalistic practices and norms (Dickinson, 2011; Canter, 2013, 2014). By the mid-2010s local news publishers had entered the Twitter arena alongside their national and international counterparts in terms of competing on an instantaneous global platform.

### **Two-tier practices**

The BBC's director of global news said as early as 2006 that "news organisations do not own the news any more" (Allen, 2006, 169) and instead journalists gather information on social media platforms from breaking news situations and use it as a marketing tool to disseminate news and link back to their legacy platforms (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Raimondo Anselmino and Bertone, 2013). The dilemma for journalists has always been how to sift through, and verify, the "rapid and easily accessible flow of information" (Bruno, 2011, 6), in effect acting as a "human algorithm" (Aviles and Carvajal, 2008). The ability for anyone to publish news instantaneously on Twitter and potentially reach a global audience has clearly impacted upon the role of the journalist, which, in the pre-internet era, was heavily entrenched in the notion of the gatekeeping fourth estate, an industry that could be relied upon to accurately report the news on behalf of the public. Post-Web 2.0 scholars refer to the journalists as curators (Charman, 2007), gatewatchers (Bruns, 2005), conversationalists (Gillmor, 2006) and verifiers (Bruno, 2011) rather than traditional gatekeepers.

The fear of harming newspaper sales or tipping off rivals has become a redundant argument as local reporters have realised, in some cases too late, that in order to beat the competition on Twitter they have to join them there. It has become standard practice for the majority of reporters and photographers to live tweet from breaking news events. The practice is particularly prevalent amongst local sports reporters who tweet live updates on team news, from inside press conferences and on the stands at matches incorporating relevant hashtags. Many league football matches are not televised so local journalists are able to keep supporters up to date by live-tweeting match reports. However, the normalisation of live tweeting has had a direct impact on what and how local journalists report, altering their practice in the process. Journalists have always prided themselves on being purveyors of truth and accuracy and yet as Twitter has evolved so have the boundaries of verification. Since Twitter is an almost instantaneous publishing platform, the view from journalists has modified into one where it is acceptable to tweet unverified information online, but it remains the view that content for the main legacy brands – the newspaper and website – should still be verified in a traditional manner. A work-in-progress or "incremental reporting" (Hermida, 2013, 303) approach has taken hold whereby every "spit and cough" is reported on Twitter in a rolling news process. The editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* explained:

If you are giving people information first and quickly, people realise that sometimes that information is subject to change ... For breaking news you just have to go out there and get what you can and then fill in the gaps and change it and edit it as you go along ... it adds to the whole spirit of drama ... The bonus of the internet is you can say things like 'we are hearing reports of a fire with 60ft flames and we are going out to investigate it' and you might put that out as a tweet. And actually it is a tea towel fire and you can go back online and say 'despite reports earlier of 60ft flames it was just a small fire that was put out when we got there'.

*(Canter, 2014, 14)*

Yet local journalists still have a significant role to play in adding value and context to the streams of information online rather than simply acting as filters. They must have active knowledge of the local area, an ability to understand the material being assessed and be able to clearly communicate why particular items are important (Charman, 2007). Furthermore, they can use social media platforms – particularly Twitter due to its speed, reach and ease of use (Canter, 2014) – to gather a wider range of voices and ideas and gain a new dimension in breaking-news stories previously unavailable (Eltringham, 2012). These civic functions of engaging with, and providing, a platform for a plurality and diversity of voices are set within a commercial framework where news organisations are competing for increasingly fragmented audiences online. Twitter, along with other forms of social media, has therefore emerged as a method of building brand loyalty (Dickinson, 2011) around legacy platforms such as newspapers.

I argue (Canter, 2013, 2014) that local media in the United Kingdom take two distinct approaches when it comes to branding and promotion on Twitter, which are split into “a traditional function for news organisations and a social function for journalists” (2013, 492). This is further supported by evidence that news organisation policy directs journalists to link to their legacy website. Yet this approach is only taken by news organisation accounts and editors, whilst individual journalists promote the brand at a much more nuanced level by indirectly building a personal brand that is engaging for users to follow (Canter, 2014; Molyneux, 2014; Olausson, 2017), rather than by actively driving traffic to their news website. These personal brands vary in scope from those who build a reputation for regular live tweeting, others who become celebrated for tweeting happy messages or those engaging in sporting banter, to a limited few who tweet family snapshots (Canter, 2014). There is some evidence that journalists are breaking down traditional boundaries of objectivity and professionalisation by posting personal and sometimes subjective tweets commenting on the news or revealing their hobbies and interests (Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton, 2012; Hermida, 2013; Brems, Temmerman, Graham and Broersma, 2017; Molyneux, Holton and Lewis, 2017), using personality to create a following (Palser, 2009; Marwick and Boyd, 2011; Olausson, 2017).

However, there is still a swath of journalists who set clear boundaries between their professional and personal identities when using Twitter as a reporting tool (Reed, 2013; Gulyas, 2013) or struggle with negotiating the boundaries between professional and personal (Brems, Temmerman, Graham and Broersma, 2017). In short, practice varies immensely amongst individuals but the dominating factor is that Twitter has become normalised into the working practices and routines of journalists, albeit as a flexible tool that can be adapted to suit a journalist’s specific job role and individual preferences in relation to interaction (Canter, 2013). This was acknowledged in Twitter’s own 2013 guidelines to journalists, which stated:

Some reporters turn to Twitter as a virtual notebook using it to collect and provide real-time updates on breaking news events. Others use it as a way to point readers to their work or to share their perspective on a particular topic.

### **Promotional traditionalists**

Studies of news organisations’ Twitter usernames overwhelming indicate that they primarily use the social media network as a dissemination platform to distribute information, thus reinforcing the traditional gatekeeping model (Canter, 2013; Broersma and Graham, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Holcomb, Gross and Mitchell, 2011; Phillips, 2011). News organisations are far more likely to use social media networks as marketing tools to promote their legacy brand (Raimondo Anselmino and Bertone, 2013) and direct people to their website via automatic RSS feeds and links (Canter, 2013; Broersma and Graham, 2011; Dickinson, 2011; Phillips, 2011) than to

engage in collaboration and two-way participation. The marketing power of social media means that “even at the level of the smallest news website the impact of social media on the circulation of information is considerable” (Phillips, 2011, 8). As local media companies have integrated Twitter into their marketing strategy they have shifted from heavily controlling journalists’ use of the platform to expecting their staff to regularly tweet. The emphasis from the top tier of these organisations – the senior management – remains a traditionalist approach with a strong focus on promoting and protecting the brand and linking back to the core website. Interactivity and engagement are a secondary focus, viewed as important only in the context of brand loyalty and extension. Where Twitter guidelines exist, companies stress the commercial value of tweeting, as reflected in policy vocabulary that refer to ‘brand’, ‘business’, ‘rivals’, ‘competitors’, ‘reputation’ and ‘peak traffic’ (Canter, 2014). This reinforces the argument that social media are largely viewed by publishers as a tool for economic gain. Newsquest, the second-largest local newspaper publisher in the UK, circulated guidance to staff that clearly outlined that they should be “linking back to your site”, stating:

Drive people to your site by linking your content from tweets. Linking to relevant reports, pictures and further information elsewhere on the web is acceptable but never do this to the detriment of your own site.

*(Canter, 2014, 11)*

However, research tells us that although the guidance makes it clear that staff should be linking to their legacy website, in practice there is little evidence of this happening on a regular basis. A content analysis of journalist tweets at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* in 2013 revealed that 67 per cent of journalists on Twitter used no or limited links in all of their tweets and it was not a routine practice. For those that did include links, sports reporters were the most frequent at doing so, followed by the editor; the top three linkers only included links in a quarter to a third of their tweets. Similar findings were observed at *The Star* in Sheffield in 2014 (Canter and Brookes, 2016), where it was noted that those in more senior positions, such as the digital editor, editor and readers’ champion, were more likely to tweet a higher percentage of traditional tweets (headline or summary of a story) with links back to the website. This is likely to be due to their increased awareness of company commercial imperatives and social media policy, which focuses on promoting the brand and driving traffic to the website. By contrast, individual journalists were more focused on journalistic practices such as breaking news and news gathering, and concentrated on building their own personal brand and following rather than promoting the company. Individual journalists rarely linked back to *The Star* website or their own individual stories, confirming that UK regional journalists use relatively few links in their tweets, and it is not routine practice to link to the legacy website despite company guidance stating staff should do so.

Interviews with local journalists also gave a clear indication that Twitter referral figures (the number of users who land on a news website via a link from a tweet) are a key universal measurement to record the impact of individual tweets (Canter, 2014). Referrals were viewed as an important way to keep track of the success of Twitter use and its impact on the website, reinstating the view that quantitative measurements with a potential economic impact were more helpful than qualitative, civic measurements of building community engagement. Figures obtained from the web team at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* revealed that Twitter referrals had grown exponentially from 2012 to 2013. In October 2012 the referral figures were 35,259 for the month, compared to 72,767 in October 2013 – an increase of 106 per cent. This further reinforced the view that it was important to use Twitter to drive traffic to the brand website to increase unique user rates, thus making the website more attractive to advertisers.

## Brand, personalisation and the personal

Below the top tier of senior journalists – such as editors, news editors and digital editors – are the everyday reporters who utilise Twitter for very different purposes. Although they are aware of the need to protect and promote their employer's brand, their tweets do not tend to communicate headlines, link back to the website or be concerned about referral rates. By contrast local news and sports reporters tend to tweet more personalised and interactive posts than any other type, as Table 31.1 from my 2013 research demonstrates.

These could be comments on the news or responding to followers. In doing so, they are developing a personal brand that is engaging for users to follow rather than overtly self-promoting their stories to indirectly promote their news organisation. These practices have seen journalists cross the historic line between the professional and the personal, the objective and the subjective. In the social surroundings of Twitter, journalists are more likely to post information about their family, hobbies and leisure activities and express opinions on stories than they would ever consider doing in their legacy platforms. However, there are others who make a clear distinction between their professional and personal identities, setting clear boundaries, and there are often marked differences between individual journalists. The personal brand of a local journalist can take on different forms. For some it is about building personal relationships with readers and sources that enable them to strengthen their news gathering skills by creating a loyal network of followers. This might take the form of having 'banter' with followers, particularly for sports reporters. For other journalists it is about giving a sense of personality to their tweets such as tweeting happy messages or commenting on current affairs. The editor at *The Star* in Sheffield took a mixed-method approach combining traditional and personalised content (Canter and Brookes, 2016). He used a mixture of traditional tweets with links to promote his journalists' stories and drive traffic back to the company website with more personalised interactive tweets often giving opinion on stories. In some cases, a comment was integrated into the traditional link; for example, in this tweet the editor mixes a headline and link to the legacy website with a subjective comment:

TV Corrie's Bill Roache cleared of all charges: [link] So an innocent man has had his name dragged through the mud! #crazy

This approach blends the traditional function of reporting the news and promoting the legacy brand with a more personable approach that moves away from journalistic norms of objectivity. This enables the editor to demonstrate that his news organisation is quick and accurate with breaking the news whilst also setting the tone of the news organisation by coupling his informative tweets with personality and comment. Similarly, the editor of the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* made it clear that he did not talk about his family on Twitter but he had spent time finding the right tone of his tweets so he could reflect "the seriousness of the role" whilst also being able to "make fun out of myself". He felt it was important to portray personality to take away "the perception of us all being ogres that are trying to steal their grandmas for a story" (Canter, 2014, 14). Once again, he demonstrated the ability to show personality without imparting personal information.

However, there is evidence that a smaller minority of local reporters embrace the ability to share information about their family and life outside the newsroom. An example of this is the rugby correspondent at the *Leicester Mercury*, who made a conscious decision to transfer from work-related tweets to purely personal tweets in order to distinguish himself from online competition and build his own fan base (Canter, 2013). Similarly, the political correspondent at the

Table 31.1 Examples of local journalists' Twitter use

<i>Username</i>	<i>Dominant coding categories</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Martin_Crowson, sports reporter, <i>Leicester Mercury</i>	Equal balance between informal and interactive, followed by personal	Live blogging during rugby matches and press conferences, chatting to rugby fans, talking about family life and catching up with friends	Live blogging: "New Bath signing Dave Attwood being helped from the pitch by physios with what looks like ankle injury" Fan interaction: "@SportingbetMark It was pretty tough – as was their scrum" Family life: "Father's day began at 2am with excited 4-yr-old trotting in and whispering: 'How long until I can give your present Daddy?'"
David_MacLean, politics reporter, <i>Leicester Mercury</i>	Equal balance between informal and sharing, with lesser amount of personal and interactive	Commenting on and linking to national current affairs stories, commenting on own newspaper/blog coverage, retweeting posts by journalists, news sources and political commentators, responding to reader comments, witty observations unrelated to work or current affairs	Commenting national: "Daily Mail – 'More and more families are having to withdraw their children from private education' <a href="http://t.co/L6ekgG7">http://t.co/L6ekgG7</a> – Heartbreaking" Commenting on own coverage: "I'll deal with the inept spinning behind the @leicester_news Twitter account on my blog tomorrow" Retweeting: "RT@GuidoFawkes I called them to ask for Hari to be stripped of his award" Responding: "@mikemcsarry I'm trying to upload some PDFs to share with you all" Observations: "Ordered a Gin Bramble in Cafe Bruxelles and I've been served something quite disgusting by mistake. It could strip paint"
StephenBailey, <i>Echo</i>	Mostly informal, followed by interactive	Commenting on local current affairs, updates/colour on own reporting activity, news/media-related recommendations, responding to reader questions/comments	Updates: "Just interviewed the friendliest block of pensioners ever, after a very serious flat fire on the east cliff" Recommendations: "The Guardian magazine had a brilliant and horrible selection of photographers best works from conflict zones today <a href="http://t.co/uiJ6gbP">http://t.co/uiJ6gbP</a> " Responding: "@GarrisonGirls Previous articles on our website, this one 95 per cent done, and should be up soon"



same newspaper felt revealing personal information was a way to maximise the journalistic potential of Twitter.

I think the personal stuff is quite important because contacts that are coming to you, people that you would only deal with in a work environment, cabinet members at the council, they only deal with you as a journalist and I think it kind of makes you more human. What are you doing for your holidays, are you playing with your cat. It's helped me build up a bit more of a closer relationship with people I would just usually deal with for stories.

(Canter, 2013, 16)

This view was echoed by a journalist at the Bournemouth *Daily Echo*, who said it was important for reporters to build up a picture of themselves and what they do in their spare time so the local community could identify with them. He would tweet about his grandchildren, dog, the area he lived in and watching his football team. For this reporter it was about “building up the personality rather than relentlessly banging on about what you're writing about” (Canter, 2014, 15). However, these journalists were in the minority as only a small percentage revealed personal information about themselves on Twitter. The emerging pattern was one of a personalised, rather than a personal, tone. Personality was viewed as an important marketing and branding tactic but in most cases did not equate to tweeting personal details or opinion. Furthermore, any tweets that bordered on personal, such as how a journalist was spending their leisure time, centred around hotspots in the local community, maintaining a local relevance.

## Conclusion

The lack of enforced protocol or formality around Twitter is changing the way in which local journalists in the UK practise journalism. Technology enables journalists to create their own tweeting style, which crosses boundaries between personality and professionalism, objectivity and comment – sometimes all within the same tweet. For some, particularly those in more senior positions, it is a valuable tool for legacy brand promotion and driving website traffic, whilst for individual reporters it is a means to break news first and build personal and loyal relationships with readers in their local community, developing their personal brand in the process. Policy may direct journalists to link to their legacy website but in practice the majority of their tweets contain no such links. The promotion of their brand and content occurs at a much more nuanced level by indirectly building a personal brand that is engaging for users to follow. This personal brand is most commonly based upon personalisation of tweets rather than the revelation of personal information, and professional boundaries are largely being maintained. Those who deviate from professional conventions are in the minority, although their very existence reveals the marked differences in how individual journalists use Twitter. Diversity of use remains an important factor on Twitter, enabling local journalists to move away from traditional conventions of style and form to work within a more flexible set of practices. There are clearer practices emerging in particular in news gathering, live reporting and incremental journalism, but types and styles of Twitter use remain a broad spectrum, tailored to each individual journalist rather than fitting within a set of clearly defined practices.

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# CENTRALISED AND DIGITALLY DISRUPTED

## An ethnographic view of local journalism in New Zealand

*Helen Sissons*

### **Introduction**

Depending on who you talk to, local journalism in New Zealand is either in its death throes or is leaping off its hospital bed, yanking out its IV and striding determinedly into an independent future. There is evidence to back up both scenarios. Those who believe local news is a non-responsive patient displaying a ‘do not resuscitate’ notice are watching the actions of New Zealand’s two largest media companies and seeing papers shrinking in size, or publishing fewer times per week or being closed or sold off. Those that subscribe to the revitalised model are noticing the rise of independent publishers, both national and local, and seeing it as a sign New Zealanders want more locally owned companies, especially in their communities, providing news.

However you look at it, the country’s local journalism is mostly a tale of two publishers: Stuff and NZME (New Zealand Media and Entertainment). Both companies are headquartered in the country’s largest city, Auckland, and both are dealing with declining newspaper circulations. Both too have moved towards digital-first publishing and centralised editorial control, which has obviously affected the autonomy of regional and local offices. However, the two companies have displayed very different approaches to local news. Stuff, owned by Australian Nine Entertainment, has been shedding its community papers. It closed down or sold off 28, or 35 per cent of its total, and laid off staff at 13 remaining papers in Auckland and further north in 2018 (Peacock, 2018). NZME, on the other hand, has retained most and in some cases invested in its titles, reporting an increase in readership in three of its five regional centres in 2018 (*New Zealand Herald*, 2018).

This chapter goes inside a newsroom in Auckland to observe how local journalism is carried out. Specifically, it examines the day-to-day practices of journalists focussed on community news through the close analysis of interactions between a journalist at head office and a community reporter hundreds of miles away as they collaborate to cover a story. The researcher was given extraordinary access to video record journalists at the Auckland office. Such ethnographic studies go beyond the products of journalism or ownership models to look at the usually invisible processes of production (Cottle, 2007). Increasing our understanding of ‘how’ journalism is done is crucial in light of the continuing ‘creative destruction’ of news (Schlesinger and Doyle,

2015) and allows a reassessment of the theories generated by the earlier newsroom ethnographies of the 1970s and 1980s. Before turning to the case study, we briefly consider the organisation of local news in New Zealand.

### **Local news in New Zealand**

Despite's Stuff's closures and sales of 2018, Stuff and NZME between them control more than three-quarters of the newspaper market in New Zealand. They also control half the commercial radio market, and most online traffic to and from online news sites, as well as having business interests outside news (Myllylahti, 2018). Besides NZME and Stuff, Dunedin-based Allied Press controls about 8 per cent of the market through its newspapers across the South Island (Myllylahti, 2016). Sprouting alongside, or in the gaps between, these behemoths, are independent publishers who have listed around 80 titles with the New Zealand Community Newspaper Association, a rise of 10 per cent over five years (Stone, 2016). A further innovation is the appearance of local news apps. In May 2018, the Independent App Network of New Zealand saw the launch of the seventh app in the network (Rose, 2018).

### **Method**

The data were collected over two weeks in 2017 using video ethnographic methods involving observation and video recording in a newsroom in Auckland. Data gathering involved shadowing and recording the interactions of the head of the regional desk with reporters and news editors. The study captured rare footage of journalists interacting in the newsroom, by phone and online, and through the analysis of verbal and non-verbal actions (Sissons, 2015; Theunissen and Sissons, 2018) demonstrated how the regional editor met the demands of digital-first deadlines to cover a story hundreds of miles away while accounting for the limited technological capability of the local reporter. In the interests of triangulation, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with a dozen journalists in the newsroom as well as a journalist working on a regional publication affiliated with the organisation and with a senior executive at a rival organisation. Finally, the researcher fed back the findings to the main participant to corroborate the interpretations. The names of all participants have been changed.

### **Case study: the regional desk**

Richard heads the regional desk at a large news organisation in Auckland, overseeing the websites associated with the regional offices. Working with him are two reporters and an online producer. Since taking over the desk 18 months ago, his aim has been to improve relations between head office and the regions through the sharing of resources and content. It has been a challenge as many local offices viewed the national publication as competition.

It's unnatural for them to tell us what they're doing and there's still a long way to go to get that to happen. For the first six or eight months of my job I spent two out of each week's morning meetings in absolute blood-letting sessions of things being hidden and not being shared.

Another disruption for the regions was the move to a digital-first strategy earlier in the year. Before this, the regional newsrooms each produced a newspaper as their core activity and stories did not go online until they had been printed in the paper. Now, their focus must be online.

Most days, Richard arrives at work at 6:30 am. In the hour before the morning meeting, he checks everything relevant to the regions. He looks at the news wire and forwards anything of use to the relevant editor. Then he scans the five regional websites, publishing stories of interest to a wider audience across the network where they may attract national attention. Each day, he publishes 30 to 40 locally developed stories on the national network. Next, he turns to the morning papers' digital editions, reading every page. He also reviews the online record to see that stories have the correct headings (for search engine optimisation), synopses and images, fixing problems as he goes. He makes a list of items to present at the morning meeting and consults his work diary for scheduled events. Richard then checks the two online communication methods used with the regional offices: email and Slack, an online collaboration software. He scans his emails for handover notes from the regional editors and Slack for messages posted by editors or reporters. He finds the newsrooms with the strongest competition are the best at communicating and at adopting new technologies such as Slack. The offices with limited direct competition see little need to change.

His final check is each regional newspaper's production queue where he can see what's planned for their pages. Getting access to these was a struggle, but over time he has built enough trust that the regional teams allow him in.

They believed the mother ship was trying to steal everything, [that it] would just grab the stories and give them no credit, and so it's been a real job in trying to break down that level of distrust.

At 7:30 am, Richard attends the morning meeting of department heads to discuss the day's stories. Afterwards he takes a break, and while having coffee he receives an email cc'd to him about an accident near Palmerston North, a town 500 km south of Auckland. The email was sent by the national newsdesk to the editor of the local affiliate, a small weekly newspaper, alerting her to the accident. Richard decides to phone the editor, the only full-time reporter at the paper.

When things break like that, Auckland can typically handle it, but we can do a much better job if we can get someone out to the scene. And, because I deal with our regional sites day in, day out, it's quicker for me. I've got more of an idea of what that regional site is like.

The actions and interactions presented in this chapter centre on the coverage of this story, which Richard later explains are typical of what happens when news breaks in remote areas. The first interaction was captured on an audio recorder at the café where Richard was taking his break, the second on video at the regional desk.

### ***Interaction 1: getting a reporter to the scene***

On receiving the email, Richard first rings the editor, Amelia. When she does not answer, he tries the part-time reporter, Aroha, who answers. We can only hear Richard's side of the conversation, but from this we can see his approach is one of persuasion and collaboration (Table 32.1, see Appendix 32.1 for transcription symbols).

At the start of the interaction, Richard's introduction, "it's Richard in Auckland", indicates he speaks with this reporter often enough that she needs no more information. However, as Aroha is part-time, he checks she is working before continuing. When she says she is, his use of the conversational particle "o::h" (Table 32.1, line 4) shows he had not known (Clark and

Table 32.1 Who's on duty?

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1. 00:00.8	hi Aroha it's Richard in Auckland
2. 00:04.3	how're you <u>do:in</u> ?
3. 00:06.1	are you working at the Guardian today?
4. 00:09.4	o::h u:hm
5. 00:10.8	uh uh just tried to get ahold of <u>Amelia</u>
6. 00:12.8	there's a there's <u>two</u> things
7. 00:14.4	there's the school <ball boy>
8. 00:16.5 (0.7")	u:hm from Palmerston North Boys who can't <u>go</u> cos >he doesn't have< a <u>date</u>
9. 00:21.6 (1.1")	so >I was <u>checking</u> < whether you guys had any kinda line on that
10. 00:24.3	cos we haven't yet run anything on our our our network?
11. 00:27.6 (0.4")	but but
12. 00:32.4	that's cool.
13. 00:32.9	the more pressing one is a: a (.) person trapped in a motor vehicle accident?
14. 00:39.0	I think <u>so</u> .
15. 00:40.6	°yeah°
16. 00:41:5	u:hm so do you guys <u>have</u> something on that as yet?
17. 00:46.6	°oh: okay°
18. 00:47.7	yep
19. 00:52.1	that's co:ol
20. 00:53.0	uhm is Amelia around?
21. 00:56.1	oh: >is she<?
22. 00:57.2	okay
23. 00:58.3	that's cool
24. 00:59.7	ya hhha hhha
25. 01:00.5	you'll be < <u>splen</u> >did
26. 01:02.4	the uhm
27. 01:03.4	so what sort of time
28. 01:04.5	wh- when are you going to be in the <u>office</u> ?
29. 01:08.3	oh: okay
30. 01:09.0	is there a chance you could <g:o to where the site is?>
31. 01:11.8	of this crash?
32. 01:12.8 (0.4")	on the way?
33. 01:16.2	I-
34. 01:17.0	I- I'll flick you a note of the address by <u>email</u> ?
35. 01:19.1	a- u- will you be able to p- grab that?
36. 01:22.2	<u>lovely</u> I'll flick that now.
37. 01:24.4	talk soon
38. 01:24.9	cheers mate
39. 01:25.4	bye

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Foxtree, 2002). This is not surprising, as he explained after the phone call: “none of these people log in and out with me”. He tells her he has tried to contact Amelia, the inference being he has failed and so he's ringing her. He immediately adds, “there's a there's two things” (Table 32.1, line 6) as the reason he's calling. His repair from “a” to “two” suggests he was going to mention only one “thing”, probably the most important, but changes his mind. Aroha expresses no “recognition trouble” (Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984, 303) indicating she knows the “things” are potential stories.



Richard continues, “there’s the school <ball boy>” (Table 32.1, line 7). This is classic news language and sounds like the slug/story name that an article would be filed under in a content management system. Richard’s use of the definite article “the” rather than the indefinite article “a”, and his slowing down on the words “ball boy” infers that he expects Aroha to recognise the story. However, after a pause of more than half a second, in which Aroha does not comment, he adds more detail, “u:hm from Palmerston North Boys who can’t go cos >he does not have< a date”. A further pause without Aroha responding prompts Richard to spell out that he’s “checking” if the local office had “any kinda line on that” (Table 32.1, line 9). Aroha’s pauses are longer than is considered normal and indicate trouble of some kind (Liddicoat, 2011) – either she does not know the story or they have not covered it.

Richard is interested because the social media editor mentioned the story at the morning meeting, saying it was “trending hugely” for two rival news sites and suggesting they “should probably match it”. A match is when an organisation spots a story it has not covered on another network and creates its own version, sometimes with new information, sometimes without. It is not a priority, as Richard knows the social media desk will have produced a match and his contrastive “but but” (Schiffrin, 1987) (Table 32.1, line 11) reassures her that it’s okay if they have not covered it. When Aroha confirms they have not, he replies “that’s cool” (Table 32.1, line 12) and immediately brings up “the more pressing one ...”. He goes straight to the news point, which is that a person is trapped. Accidents involving injuries are newsworthy, and in New Zealand the rising road toll has kept the issue in the news (Johnston, 2018). The “I think so” “yeah” (Table 32.1, lines 14–15) confirm the details, then Richard returns to the question of coverage, “u:hm so do you guys have something on that as yet?” This construction is different from earlier. While “anything” question forms, such as “any kinda line”, have been found to have an expectation of a “no” response, “something” question forms, such as Table 32.1, line 16, expect a positive answer (Heritage, Robinson, Elliott, Beckett and Wilkes, 2007).

That Richard affixes “as yet” downgrades the request, suggesting he is treading carefully, but does not negate it. Effectively, he is saying, if you have not covered it yet, it can still be done. Having ascertained that they do not “have” anything on the accident, Richard asks if Amelia is “around” (Table 32.1, line 20) and discovers she is on annual leave. This means that the email sent by the newsdesk would remain unanswered and, as Richard said afterwards, “Auckland would have been left wondering in an hour or two’s time ‘what’s happened with that?’” Aroha now appears to indicate she knows she is second choice. Richard’s laugh (Table 32.1, line 24) is likely to be an alignment strategy that also reduces awkwardness (Kangasharju and Nikko, 2009), and he reassures her, “you’ll be <splen>did” (Table 32.1, line 25). He then asks when she will be at work, at first using the imprecise expression “what sort of time?”, but making a repair to “wh- when are you going to be in the office?” (Table 32.1, line 28). Vague language is common with requests and inquiries, especially in phone conversations, as it is more polite (Urbanová, 2003). Richard’s repair shows he decided precision was necessary.

Once he has established when Aroha will head to work, he asks “is there a chance you could <g:o to where the site is> of this crash (0.4”) on the way?” (Table 32.1, line 30–32). The design of the request is relatively elaborate, being split into three interrogatives with rising intonation, with a pause of nearly half-a-second before the third part, “on the way?”, possibly added to encourage the reporter to get going. The more usual form of such a request would be “could you”. By designing the request as he did, Richard reveals his understanding that his entitlement to make the request is limited, as is Aroha’s obligation to comply (Curl and Drew, 2008). He explains that his interactions with local reporters require “a lot of working relationships” especially as sometimes he has to ask them to cover stories more of interest to head office than to their own publication.

I can't tell them what to do. I can only ask them. I mean, every time I get into a situation where I start telling them what to do, they push back and go, 'you don't understand what it's like. We don't have the resources for that.' So I try to work culturally and just go 'What's your thinking around this?'

Aroha agrees to go and Richard says he'll "flick" her an email and then confirms she'll be able to "grab" it. While all national reporters in the news organisation are given a smartphone for work use, some of the local and community reporters still did not have them. Richard's use of the words "grab" and "flick that now" and "talk soon", while being conversational, suggest he is emphasising speed.

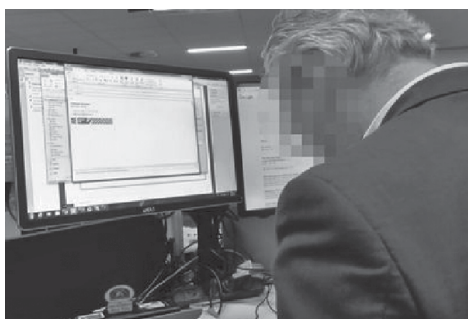
### ***Interaction 2: the reporter's notes***

A little after 10 am, Richard receives a phone call from Aroha, who is at the police cordon near the scene of the accident. She explains she cannot send an email and so will recite what she knows over the phone. Richard puts Aroha on speakerphone to free his hands to type. During the conversation Richard does not gesture much, not just because he is typing, but because he is listening. McNeill (1992, 89) noted the "passive comprehender" does not evoke as many gestures as does the talker or "active producer". We enter the conversation as Aroha explains what she knows (Figure 32.1, see Appendix 32.1 for transcription symbols).

Aroha immediately reports the current situation, updating the news angle of the story and stressing the words: "removing", "victims" and "now" (Figure 32.1, image 1). Her "uhm" and "so" then tell us she is bringing her narrative back to important details (Schiffrin, 1987), such as its location and that traffic is being diverted. At this point, Richard asks her to slow down (Figure 32.1, image 1). He is typing and cannot keep up. He uses the high modality form "have to" (Machin and Mayr, 2012), although he minimises the request with "a wee bit". He then repeats the location information – Awahuri – as he types, affixing a "yup" to indicate he would like confirmation that he is correct (Seuren and Huiskes, 2017). He looks up from the keyboard and reads over what he has typed adding to "Awahuri::↑i" a lengthened and sharply rising "i", which gives him time to type a correction (Figure 32.1, image 2). He affixes another "yes", to which Aroha immediately replies "yes it is" and names the roads. Richard both repeats and spells out Stewart Road, presumably checking it is not "Stuart" (Figure 32.1, image 2). Misspelling names is one of the most common errors in journalism and damaging to credibility. He receives a confirming and slightly lengthened "y::es::", as if Aroha were checking her notes.

Aroha then sums up what she knows. Her pause of more than a second along with the two lengthened uh:ms as she says "and all I know at this point is that" (Figure 32.1, image 3), with a stress on "all", indicates she is aware it is not the ideal response (Schegloff, 2010). She repeats that the victims are being removed by ambulance, slowing down and stressing the word "ambulance", as it implies injuries. Richard interrupts, as she makes the second repair, to ask about the injuries. He makes a repair, from "do y-" to "any indication" possibly as a politeness strategy, to make the question less direct. As he does so, he is looking directly at his mobile phone on the desk (Figure 32.1, image 3). Her initial "uhm" and two further "uhms" again indicate she knows she is not telling Richard what he wants to hear, "they're not telling me anything at this point", although she adds that she will be allowed to go beyond the cordon to the scene. As he listens, Richard pauses in his typing and his left hand rubs once across his top lip (Figure 32.1, image 4), a minor act of self-comfort, as he considers this information (Meadors and Murray, 2014).

He then asks a declarative question, "so you can't see anything from where you're at?" (Figure 32.1, image 5). Having sent her to the scene, Richard is likely to expect that in addition



A: they are just removing the victims by ambulance from the scene <now>

R: yes

A: (0.8) uhm so the crash is on State Highway 3 at Awahuri, the uhm traffic is being diverted through Awahuri Road,

R: you'll have to slow down a wee bit for me (0.6) uh:: Awahuri yup

A: yep



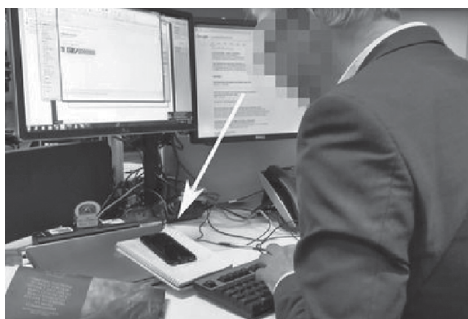
R: crash on State Highway 3 at uh Awahuri::↑: yes=

A: =yes it is just just between uh:m Awahuri Road and Stewart Road,

R: Stewart S T E W

A: (0.9) y::es::

R: cool yup



A: (1.4) uh:m and all I know at this point is that uh:m the victims are being removed by <ambulance>,

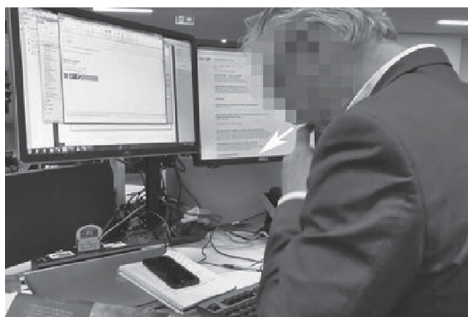
which it looks like they have been,

R: (0.6) are they [uhm]

A: [are ] being,

R: do y- [any indication of what] sort of injuries they have;

A: [just for (indistinct) ]



A: (1.0) uhm no they're not telling me anything at this point

they're just uhm

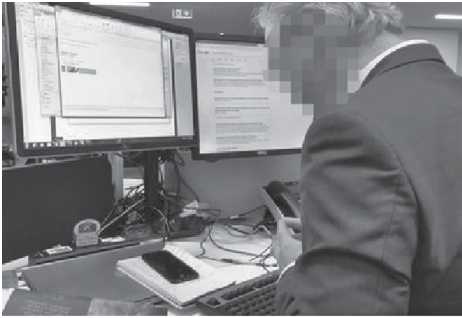
going to uhm

get the victims out of the scene

and then they'll let me on up there so

R: oh okay

Figure 32.1 What can you see?



R: so you can't see anything from where you're at?

A: (0.6) I can I can only see in the distance uhm some some flashing lights

hh[hh.hs] ((laughs))

R: [ohh ] okay

A: uhm but uhm where the traffic's being diverted at Awahuri Road

R: all right uh:m is



A: sorry uhm I've just seen an ambulance leave so I'd say I'm not far off being allowed up

R: cool that's great so far any id[ea of o-of ] number of people up there?

A: [okay I'm allowed to go] uhm (indistinct) how many victims are involved or anything (indistinct) he knows

M: (indistinct) two cars



A: (0.4) just all we know is that there's two cars involved

R: right cool

A: but uhm I've just been given permission to go on up so I'll s- I'll see what I can find out from there

R: wonderful are you cap- uh can you do video?

A: I can do video yeah=



R: =yeah so since the vics have been removed we'd love to get some video

A: ye[ah okay]

R: [uhm ] yeah good one Aroha good work

A: cool th[ank you]

R: [talk soon] cheers mate bye

A: bye

Figure 32.1 (Cont.)

to what she is told by emergency services, she will be able to observe and report back. He has stopped typing, is looking at his phone and steepling his fingers, suggesting he is thinking about what has been said (Figure 32.1, image 5). Aroha starts to answer positively, “I can I can”, before admitting she can “only see ... some flashing lights”. She then laughs, maybe from embarrassment, but perhaps also inviting Richard to join in (Kangasharju and Nikko, 2009). He responds by chuckling as he acknowledges the clarification. She spots the ambulance leave and interrupts Richard, who is about to ask a question, to say she should be able to go to the scene soon (Figure 32.1, image 6). Richard is still chasing facts and asks “any idea of o- of number of people up there” (Figure 32.1, image 6). As he does so, he glances at the phone and rubs his left forefinger across his chin once in a second minor act of self-comfort (Meadors and Murray, 2014).

Aroha interrupts to say she is going to the scene, but has heard his question and appears to be conferring with a person, perhaps a police officer (M: on Figure 32.1, image 6). We lose the clarity on the line, but we can hear a male voice say “two cars”. Aroha repeats this, prefixing the modifier “just” to limit what she knows to two cars being involved, while adding “but uhm I’ve just been given permission to go on up” (Figure 32.1, image 7). Richard expresses his approval using the assessment “wonderful”, and asks if she can shoot some video of the scene (Figure 32.1, image 7). He makes a repair from “are you capable” to “can you do”. The change may be because “are you capable” carries doubt about a person’s ability and Richard wishes to encourage the reporter. They finish the call with Richard complimenting Aroha, hands folded in his lap (Figure 32.1, image 8). While his compliments appear genuine, they are useful as a tactic for securing compliance. He has earlier expressed the need to use persuasive rather than coercive methods and research shows complimenting someone results in an increased willingness to comply with requests (Grant, Fabrigar and Lim, 2010).

### ***Filing the story***

Immediately he gets off the phone, Richard alerts the newsdesk to the story by typing a one-line notification in Slack, in the ‘Breaking’ news channel at 10.06 am.

“Emergency services are at the scene of a two-car crash on SH3 in the Manawatu.”

Once that’s posted, he writes a second line.

“The accident occurred this morning between Awahuri Road and Stewart Road just north of Awahuri.”

As he types a third line, a message appears in the same Slack channel from a news editor asking for the story to be put into the newsroom’s content management system. Richard responds that he will do it. He logs in and creates an article with the headline “two-car crash in Manawatu”. He then cut-and-pastes the sentences he has written in Slack and adds “more to come” to the bottom. Next, he fills in the “synopsis” section, “victims of the crash being taken from the roadside near Manawatu town of Awahuri”, and the key words “Manawatu”, “National”.

He brings up a map of the area in Google Street View on his second monitor and takes a screen shot of State Highway 3 at the place the accident happened. He adds this to the story with a “Google” photo credit and the caption “Traffic is being diverted from the scene of the crash on State Highway 3”. He then publishes the story to the local paper’s web page and copies the link to the news editor on the Slack channel “Homepage pitches” with a note that there are “pics, and hopefully video, to come”. Just then the phone rings and it is Aroha. She has been to the scene and has further details that two people were involved in the accident, only one person was in each car and both sustained mild to moderate injuries. She says she will send a photo from the scene when she gets back to the office. Edward updates the story, changing the



headline to “two injured in Manawatu crash”. The completed story with photo but no video is posted online at 10.10 am with a reporter by-line and credit for the local newspaper.

### Summary and conclusion

The research looked at current local journalism practice in New Zealand through the analysis of interactions between a community reporter and a senior journalist at head office as they collaborated to report an event, a car accident, in a remote area. From the analysis, we see the senior journalist, Richard, is involved in a complex and ongoing exercise in relationship building. The interactions support Richard’s assertion that he found working collaboratively to be more successful at gaining compliance than “telling them what to do”. He employed two compliance strategies, *indirect appeal* and *maintenance of face* (Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor, 2007). An example of *indirect appeal* is when Richard asked Aroha whether there was “a chance you could <g:o to where the site is; >” (Table 32.1, lines 30–32). The modal verb “could” and hedging language “is there a chance” (Machin and Mayr, 2012) soften the impact of the request, making it less of a demand. Richard used *maintenance of face*, which relies on making a person feel positive about themselves, once when he told Aroha “you’ll be <splen>did” (Table 32.1, line 25) and when he said “that’s great so far” (Figure 32.1, image 6). Richard also employed laughter as an alignment strategy twice (Table 32.1, line 24; Figure 32.1, image 5).

Importantly, Richard did not use a direct request strategy in either interaction. This probably relates to his not wanting to appear confrontational. He preferred “to work culturally” with the regions, showing he understands the pressures they face. These strategies tell us that Richard is consciously employing linguistic devices associated with politeness (Theunissen and Sissons, 2018), indicating that his relationship with the regional newsrooms is one of professional civility. The approach is a sensible one as Richard constantly has to make requests of local reporters, and so the less imposing he can make them, the better. However, the success of his role requires him to secure compliance one way or another. Hence, we see an increase in modality in the second interaction. In the first interaction, Richard employs low modality language to persuade the reporter to go to the accident. In the second interaction, Richard is more direct as he takes notes. There is some indication that he is discomforted when being direct by his use of the modifier “a wee bit” when he requests Aroha to slow down and two self-adaptors, a rub of his top lip and his chin, when asking crucial questions relating to the number of people involved and their injuries.

What the findings say about local journalistic practice in New Zealand needs to be considered against a backdrop of newspaper closures and centralisation of control. In the organisation we observed, the regional desk appears to be managing change through building trust. While a digital-first strategy has been implemented, meaning all stories must be put online immediately, there is a recognition that the pace of change is different in each newsroom. Richard tries to accommodate the differences and in the interactions here, we see him supporting Aroha to fulfil her responsibilities of a live news reporter despite the technological limitations. At the same time, the news organisation is encouraging upskilling. The day after these events, the regions’ chief reporters attended a professional development day in Auckland, which included live news management and ways of increasing audience engagement. Going forward, the building trust approach, such as that used by Richard, could prove significant as the industry faces increased problems recruiting journalists and retention of existing staff becomes key. In New Zealand, the number of students applying for journalism courses has halved in five years and, at the time of the research, Richard’s organisation had vacancies

unfilled. This has an unwelcome knock-on effect for local journalism as those that do enter the industry are now often bypassing the traditional training ground of the regions and going straight into national newsrooms.

## Appendix 32.1

Transcription symbols used:

- (0.4") The number in the brackets indicates intervals between talk (in seconds).
- (.) A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates a pause too short to measure.
- = There is no discernible interval between one speaker finishing and another starting.
- . A closing intonation or stopping fall in tone.
- : The speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the more extension there is to the sound.
- , Indicates slight upward continuing intonation such as when someone recites a list.
- [] Square brackets show where talk overlaps.
- >talk< Right and left carats ('more than' and 'less than' symbols) indicate that the talk between the symbols was speeded up or slowed down relative to surrounding talk.
- ? Rising intonation.
- ˘ Rising intonation is weaker than above.
- °Word° Words spoken between the degree symbols are softer than those before or after.
- hh A speaker's out-breath.
- .hh A dot before the 'h' shows a speaker's in-breath.
- A hyphen indicates an abrupt cut-off of sound.
- Word Underlining indicates the speaker's emphasis.
- WORD Shows words spoken are louder than surrounding talk.
- () The words within a single bracket are the translator's best guess.
- (( )) The words within double brackets indicate a description or comment from the Translator.
- ↑↓ A mid-turn sharp rise or fall in intonation.

For more information about transcription see the transcription module on Emanuel Schegloff's website, [www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/schegloff/).

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# SITUATING JOURNALISTIC COVERAGE

## A practice theory approach to researching local community radio production in the United Kingdom

*Josephine F. Coleman*

### **Introduction**

The contribution to knowledge that this chapter offers is to establish the value of practice theory, with an added practice-*as*-research component, for studying journalistic production practices in local contexts. This value is manifested in three areas: theoretical framework; methodological orientation; researcher mindset. How a focus on situated practices informs the research process is demonstrated using the case study of a practice-based doctoral research inquiry, *Talk of the Town*. Between 2015 and 2018, desk research and ethnographic-style inquiry, including 60 hours of interviews and observations, were conducted on and in selected local community radio stations in the UK. This was supplemented by 230 hours of practice-based research carried out during 2017, which generated a collection of locality-specific audio features as well as self-reflexive analysis of the production experience. Journalistic practice is not just the object of academic inquiry here, but a method of gathering cultural ‘data’ (Bacon, 2006; Lindgren, 2014; Makagon and Neumann, 2009). It is a means of seeking knowledge in order to learn to understand a culture “from the inside” (Ingold, 2013, 5). In addition, by drawing on Theodore Schatzki’s ‘social site’ ontology (Schatzki, 2002), journalistic practice is also understood as the research site.

First, there will be an overview of Schatzki’s version of practice theory along with references to Pierre Bourdieu’s contributions on field theory and positionality (Bourdieu, 2004; Couldry, 2003a; Couldry, 2003b; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). Then, a definition will be outlined of journalistic practice in local community radio, and how this practice theory framing shapes a methodological orientation for researching it. I will summarize how the *Talk of the Town* inquiry was designed and present some findings. These will indicate how a strategic decision to take into account reflexive insights and researcher positionality enhances qualitative research and enriches the data generated. To conclude, I will argue that this approach to researching journalistic activities positions the study of local media production alongside studies of larger-scale entities and offers a multidimensional theoretical solution for media studies generally.

## A practice theory perspective

Far from being a grand theory, the practice theory approach is more “a body of work about the work of the body” that has emerged over the last five decades from the work of academics such as Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens and, more recently, Schatzki (Postill in Bräuchler and Postill, 2010, 11). It is a way of understanding the complex relationship between human agency and the social structures of the world by centring investigations on the routinized activities of humans, situated within, influenced by and impacting upon the contexts of their everyday lives. The ‘turn’ to practice that has occurred this century calls for media to be studied as arrays of practices rather than as texts for close analysis or as production structures (Cottle, 2003; Couldry, 2003b). Studying radio programmes has historically posed challenges in any case, due to the ephemerality of content: the object of study being only fleetingly present (Scannell in Scannell and Cardiff, 1991, xiii). A focus on the *practices* associated with radio programmes means that social – personal and institutional – relationships, technologies and market-driven aspects of radio production, distribution and consumption are also phenomena to be considered. The framework for analysis becomes non-media-centric (Moores, 2012), because interactions with and between material entities, infrastructures and contexts become significant too (Morley, 2009; Schatzki, 2010).

Schatzki’s account of practice portrays such structural and structuring conditions as not only where activities take place, but a multidimensional, dynamic, spatially complex nexus of situated arrays of practice-arrangements. He explicitly contemplates “material configurations” (Schatzki in Schatzki, Cetina and von Savigny, 2001, 3), paying attention to “orders of entities that are always already there”, and thus also the implication of time in terms of experience and past action (Schatzki, 2002, 106). Schatzki abstracts this context where life unfolds as the “social site” (*ibid.*, xi), and also follows a flat ontology in his theorizing of practice. He treats micro and macro level phenomena as components of a single whole ‘plenum’ in which “larger practice-arrangement constellations ... encompass smaller ones” (Schatzki, 2011, 16). Thus, he overcomes hierarchical scaling and prioritizing of activities and dynamic processes by considering all practice as unfolding in situated instances, in localized settings. He considers ‘social sites’ in specialist areas of practice to be porous, open-ended and entangled with other sites, and therefore evolving and indeterminate. He sees them as characterized by four interlinking aspects: the people involved share a general understanding as to what the practice is and what it entails; they have the skills, capacity and know-how to carry out the requisite actions and activities; they are affected by and respond to the teleoaffective structure of the practice, appreciating it as the normatively accepted ‘means to an end’; and they respond to established rules, conventions and guidelines specific to that site of practice-arrangements (Schatzki, 2002, 77–86).

Schatzki distinguishes between two types of practice – dispersed and integrative. The former, being common general activities such as reading, speaking, writing, walking, weave through the everyday activities and routines of people, across the various ‘social sites’ through which they pass. Certain dispersed practices become bound together in the performance of more complex, integrative practices. These are ordered, interwoven, intelligible – materializing as “informed citizenship ... or friendship” (Rodgers et al., 2014, 1064), and, I suggest, producing radio bulletins and organizing campaigns. Bourdieu’s ideas on fields of cultural production, ‘habitus’ and the accrual of social capital are also pertinent to this study in hand (Couldry, 2007; Couldry, 2003a; Hesmondhalgh, 2006). I investigate how practitioners, accustomed to ways of being and modes of performing to the extent that they internalize a way of life, take on a certain disposition, build and capitalize on their relative positions in the ‘social site’ of a practice to carry out their roles there. Another Bourdieusian influence is the act of objectifying the researcher as

well as the research subject and taking into account perspective and positionality. This informs my understanding of the importance of reflexively acknowledging one's status and presence in research (Bourdieu, 2004, 94–95), which has relevance to both the ethnographic and practice-as-research methodologies used in *Talk of the Town*.

### **Defining journalistic practice in local radio**

Using Schatzki's 'social site' practice theory lens, we can understand journalistic practice as the situated, yet spatially complex, unfolding of arrays of tasks, activities, interrelations and organizational structures involved in the making of a range of newsworthy media content and other locally relevant material. Such journalistic activity within radio broadcasting is a specialist sub-field of cultural production with an influence that, in this media-saturated age, is as wide-ranging as it is itself subject to external forces (Benson, 1999). Therefore, it follows that we cannot study this 'journalistic field' without paying attention to both innate and surrounding social and cultural phenomena. We appreciate how practices are affected by socio-cultural shifts due to the industrial and institutional convergences brought about by digital technologies (Jenkins, 2006). As one of many former radio professionals pursuing an academic interest in the field, I experienced first-hand the well-documented contraction and retreat of mainstream local media outlets to regional hubs (Franklin, 2006; Starkey, 2011). Enabled in part by innovative networking and digital technologies, operators sought to maximize profits through cost-efficiency savings. During this time, the regulatory authority lightened restrictions over commercial and BBC radio's provision of locally distinctive programming content in the UK, and the community sector's position has shifted. Community radio is arguably now the most local licensed broadcast communications media provider, hence my decision to investigate how it is faring.

Recent scholarly work on journalistic practices shows how convergences of broadcast and oral traditions of storytelling have changed "ecologies of journalism" (Papacharissi, 2015, 28). We have become accustomed to what emerged as user- or audience-generated content and has graduated to co-created news content, with 'produsage' becoming a "contemporary news storytelling practice that is more subjective and affecting" (*ibid.*). Where once for an event to be 'newsworthy' it had to be dramatic, spectacular and therefore nothing to do with the everyday lives of ordinary people (Morley, 2007, 94), now the more memorable news stories are dramatic for being personal and relevant (Bird, 2003, 23). For the purposes of the case study discussed here, a wider definition of radio journalism has been applied (Starkey and Crisell, 2009) – encompassing research and related production tasks entailed in conducting interviews, presenting magazine-style and topical talk shows, features, documentaries and other forms of local coverage for sharing on air and online.

### **Methodological orientation**

To learn how practitioners carry out a particular practice, we examine closely their activities, routines and relations as enabled or constrained by their material contexts and the technologies to hand. Some evidence can be sought through desk research, but situated ethnographic fieldwork yields essential information. Focusing on 'natural' human behaviour requires first-hand observation and engagement to generate situated, meaningful understandings (Bird, 2003, 8). 'Ethnographic particularity' is invaluable for understanding place-specific and culturally (or field-) specific perspectives (Miller and Slater, 2000; Spitulnik, 1996). How these insights were gathered through the participant observation part of *Talk of the Town* will be described later.

In addition, where the researcher has been practising in a 'social site' being investigated, it also makes sense to capitalize on their own professional or voluntary experiences and expertise (Murray and Lawrence, 2000). Not only is this an efficient use of resources, but it is a necessary, formal acknowledgement of their positionality, a clarification of perspective and an indicator, to themselves as much as to the reader, of any potential bias. This is important if we are to achieve impartiality in designing qualitative, practice-focussed research methodologies to systematically source and analyze data.

### ***Conducting practice as a research method***

Incorporating a practice-based exercise into fieldwork entails documenting one's own performance of relevant activities to add a subjective, phenomenological dimension. Experimenting with practice whilst entangled in the material contexts but also the teleoaffective structure of that 'social site' reveals what it feels like and what it makes sense to do. This additional strand of fieldwork presents an opportunity to intellectualize not only how one is applying a skillset, but to reflect upon the professional cultures that have been absorbed and build a critical understanding of that social order and any potential implications (Murray and Lawrence, 2000, 28). This approach to building academic knowledge based on personal reflection is akin to the auto-ethnographic approach, dating back to a subjective turn in sociology in the 1970s and 1980s. Many researchers draw upon Donald Schön's notion of 'reflective practice' (Schön, 1991), including its application to journalism (Lindgren, 2014; Niblock, 2007). Schön's case studies relating to the performance of tasks and decision-making activities involved in selected professions demonstrate that reflecting on one's practice *in the moment*, as well as afterwards, offers opportunities for learning and continued personal advancement and so potentially creates new knowledge. This feedback loop of reflexivity is a central tenet in practice-as-research since the practitioner-researcher must pay attention to the experience of thinking through creating, and then adjust their practice as their new ideas take shape.

### ***Ethnographic fieldwork***

Creative contingencies can be accommodated in qualitative research, particularly ethnographic investigations. The process of exploratory and observational fieldwork is iterative, repetitive and indeterminate. Some theorists call it 'messy' research (Postill and Pink, 2012; Star, 1999), for we are studying everyday life, which is unpredictable, not necessarily linear and may yield unanticipated findings. Case studies have value in that they can illustrate localized instances or phenomena that help build understandings and can be representative of wider, more generalized patterns. A major proponent of this methodological approach for researching practices is anthropologist Sherry Ortner. She emphasizes the value of the researcher being located *in* the context being studied in order to achieve an "on-the-ground" cultural perspective through studying people as "active agents and subjects" in their own societies (Ortner, 1984, 143). Yet we encounter the paradox of observing and participating at the same time (*ibid.*, 134). It is interactional work and we are always implicated in it. We must manage the ongoing negotiation, implicit and explicit, with people in the field in order to experience for oneself what it is like to perform a role and make things happen (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, 4). Indeed, remaining reflexive of one's positionality throughout means being hyper-aware of how research participants' performances might be affected by the physical presence of, and by their preconceived ideas regarding, the embedded researcher (Bourdieu, 2004; Pink, 2008).

### **Researching *Talk of the Town***

The aim of *Talk of the Town* was to explore what is entailed when producers and presenters in selected local community radio stations in the UK set out to source and feature local content on their programmes, and how this is entangled with locality-based socialities. This fast-growing but under-resourced sector is highly dependent on the continuing enthusiasm, committed engagement and good will of its volunteers. There are approximately 290 licensed operators across the UK,<sup>1</sup> some subscribing to the Community Media Association (CMA), which lobbies and liaises with the government and funding bodies on their behalf. There are frequent networking events and workshops, some of which I attended, making useful contacts, raising my profile and facilitating access to research sites.

### ***Desk research on local community radio***

Desk research commenced at inception. As well as newspapers and magazines, I studied the websites and social media accounts of the selected stations, seeking evidence of the coverage of local affairs and events. Tuning in regularly, either listening live or listening again, enabled me to familiarize myself with the presenters, the content and their general programming approach.<sup>2</sup> This was a good way to home in on the practitioners that I would eventually request to observe and interview, but it also helped me devise themes for the features I would be making as my own practice research. It is noteworthy that many presenters ‘only’ play music and cover entertainment news so do not describe their shows as featuring local happenings. However, reading out local traffic and travel updates, weather forecasts, playing local advertisements and promotional trailers loaded up in ‘the system’, and mentioning people or businesses they have been in contact with, can be considered local coverage, as all that information is specific to that locale. Indeed, Ofcom is satisfied if most of the requisite ‘original’ programming made for and with a community is evidently *produced* ‘locally’.<sup>3</sup>

### ***The practice-based element: Remarkable Harpenden on Nickey Radio***

I have volunteered periodically in local community radio since the late 1990s. This led, in 2001, to freelance work for several years as a broadcast news journalist and presenter on BBC local radio. So, I have up-to-date equipment suitable for making broadcast-quality audio content: a digital recording device with integral stereo mics; decent headphones; and a high-spec computer with reliable editing software. I possess the requisite skillset and know how to apply those resources to journalistic practice. I also ‘know’ Nickey Radio, an as-yet-unlicensed internet radio station for Harpenden, operated from members’ homes.<sup>4</sup> I have produced occasional topical reports for them, but for my doctoral research, I undertook an unpaid three-month assignment on a project we agreed to call *Remarkable Harpenden*. After several conversations, I drew up a terms-of-engagement contract, outlining my intended contribution to their output and to protect my ownership and usage rights of the audio and related content. Using my network of community contacts, I then approached local institutions to find people to interview about the town’s history, culture and environment.

Throughout the assignment, always equipped with my recording kit, smartphone, camera and notebook for the field forays and interviews, I gathered a host of experiential and subjective insights along with the material I would need to make the features. Every item was organized and archived for analysis. I collated paperwork and correspondence including web searches, blogposts and reactions, press cuttings, email conversations, consent forms, interview questions,

fieldnotes, photographs, transcriptions, storyboards and scripts, as well as production log sheets and a reflective journal. I have an archive of over 120 hours of recorded audio interviews, from 13 local people and the resultant ten audio features, which are now available online.<sup>5</sup> All this material contributes to an auto-ethnographic account of how I experienced the process of producing local features for community radio. Reflections on this – my practice – then informed the drawing-up of the observation charts and research questions that I used to systematize the next stage of my fieldwork.

### ***Participant observation in Radio Verulam and four snapshot studies***

I approached Radio Verulam in St Albans through a former colleague, who recommended me to his fellow volunteers. Through other contacts at the CMA, four additional stations welcomed me to conduct snapshot studies and interviews with selected volunteers: Vibe 107.6 FM in Watford; the University of Bedfordshire's Radio LaB in Luton; 103 The Eye in Melton Mowbray; Somer Valley FM in Midsomer Norton. Over several months, as with the practice-based research, and using the same equipment, I observed volunteer practitioners, conducted interviews and collected background materials and my own reflective records. I used a checklist to note down interactions between them and with the technology to hand, with their contributors, guests and audiences. I inventoried studio and office equipment, other devices, handbooks, posters and so forth, as well as the routines and actions that are carried out in the putting together of radio programmes featuring local content. Where my conversations with practitioners were recorded, I used a set of standard questions to stimulate semi-structured interviews. I was interested in what roles they hold in other local organizations, how many hours they volunteer for their station each week, for what purpose, how much training they receive, what knowledge and know-how they contribute, and whether they consider their radio production work to be journalistic. Informal conversations were also a useful way of establishing common ground and further discussing what goes on in the stations, and I made digitized notes of those afterwards.

### **Findings**

My engagement with the stations was grounded on experience so I already had a good grasp of the “doings and sayings” involved (Schatzki, 2002, 72). But I learned new terms and techniques like ‘voice-tracking’ – a technique of pre-recording vocal drop-ins, links, traffic and weather updates that can be done off-air during live programmes or remotely and asynchronously. Such versatility is due to digital devices and computerized play-out systems. Objects and technological devices influence the organization of a ‘social site’ through their presence, absence or mode of functioning, because actions are constitutively and contingently ‘locked’ to objects in a variety of ways (Schatzki, 2002, 107). I encountered throughout the fieldwork the frustrations of a series of technical disruptions and the role of human intervention. For instance, my own audio features were ‘dumped’ by ‘the system’ because someone ‘dragged and dropped’ them into the running order without removing excess music tracks to make space for them in the hour. I looked on concerned but helpless in dead air as another station’s studio computers froze mid-show and the presenter phoned colleagues for advice. I was stranded in the rain watching an embarrassed sports presenter cancel an important pre-record interview, because his door key to the station would not work.

I was not only investigating experiences of technology usage, but the interrelations and procedural routines involved in performing what the practitioners understand to be their



role – one that *makes sense* to them (Schatzki in Schatzki et al., 2001, 54). It was clear that they share an understanding about why producing locally relevant content for and with local audiences is important. Data gathered on licensing documentation, target-area demographics and key commitments would illustrate the rationale behind featuring local voices and contributing positively to local life. Programme schedules and broadcast output, social media profiles and webpages could reveal how they go about it. But observations and interviews revealed more fine-grained insights. I found that my target stations' volunteers follow similar paths to achieve the sector's mission. I witnessed presenters, with responsibilities tending to cross over into programme production, sourcing news and other material primarily by interacting with their regular contributors and listeners. At Radio Verulam, I was told:

Some of it's word of mouth, some of it because I'm involved in so many local events myself ... the rest of it is Facebook, social media.

*(Denise, The Parsons Knows Local Music)*

and

There's a lot of conversations [in Facebook groups]. A lot of them are really silly, a lot of them are very serious and so we sometimes get ideas through that. We use Facebook extensively to kind of continue the conversation – amplify our voice, give it another dimension and we've recently started using Facebook live.

*(Lydia, The Parents' Show)*

Radio shows are often produced and presented in tandem with social media, as Somer Valley FM's director/manager acknowledged:

It's an age-long problem how people, how radio stations interact or engage with their audience ... Social media's made this a lot easier ... it's the fun and the frivolous that really engages people, I mean if you put up a posting saying "Look we're making a programme about child abuse" ... I don't think we'd get a lot of response ... but if you put up a post saying "This week's theme of Saturday afternoon is gonna be driving, so I want all your song titles with driving in the title" suddenly you've got 50, 60 people on the thread or contributions to it and I suppose it's about hitting a resonance isn't it? That's what we're doing in radio anyway. We're social media, we're trying to engage our audience to participate cos community radio's really the voice that empowers a community.

*(Dom)*

This is not to say that sensitive topics are avoided once the listeners are engaged; I regularly heard expert guests on air discussing health matters and listeners sharing personal testimony.

Beyond compiling news reviews, none of the community stations I studied can fund and sustain their own newsroom, since this requires someone skilled with the appropriate training, prepared to do it for little or no financial reward. Instead, the stations subscribe to the national Independent Radio News service, supplied by Sky.<sup>6</sup> For sourcing local news, volunteers rely on social media networks, websites and good communicative relations with local government, business organizations, charities, entertainment venues, publicity agencies, schools and clubs. They arrange with local newspapers to re-use published content, share news feeds on the station website and invite press reporters to contribute on air. Presenters more confident in their

journalistic ability appreciate that it is not enough to simply read out headlines and comment on newspaper articles or press releases. A journalism student and co-manager of Radio LaB explained:

I do a weekly, local sort of news show, *Luton Buzz*, and that's sort of just some local news stuff, some feelgood interviews. Basically, soft news, nothing too hard-hitting, like good charitable deeds, seagulls being rescued, stuff like that.

(Jack)

They realize the value of getting other people and other views onto the radio and the importance of building interpersonal relationships to do so. Founder and managing director of The Eye described how her professional background helps her find content for their flagship *Community Focus* programme:

I did work in the area as a journalist for many years, and I already had a lot of contacts in the community. I used to help run a community workers' lunch club at the local college at one time and I used to be the speaker finder ... now ... I find four speakers each week.

(Christine)

Without necessarily intellectualizing this networking power, the volunteers acknowledge the bearing that their own social status and the reputation of the station can have on their access to these local voices, places and information. The reflexive angle of my practice-focussed mindset highlights how volunteering can in turn enhance one's social standing and employability. As I can attest, volunteering in local community radio can be a stepping-stone into mainstream careers. It provides valuable training opportunities in production, journalism, presentation and transferable skills. Conversely, for those already established or retired, it is a way of utilizing skills and experience to give something back to society. The station manager at Vibe said:

... it falls into two camps. One is those that are investing in their career and their CV ... you're gonna have to invest some time and effort in where you want to go ... At the other end of the scale, you'll meet ... those guys [who] wanna do broadcasting. Probably this is as good – this is what it is for them ... it's a passion and a hobby ... or it's the fact that they just want to be engaged with the local area.

(Howard)

Some practitioners dedicate full-time hours each week to their shows and there are volunteers who have been involved for over 20 years. Not surprisingly, emotions can run high. I witnessed great teamwork and passion but also tension and resentment. One instance concerned conflicting views over some workshops laid on for a station's presenters, many of whom resented the expectation that they sacrifice yet more time and spend extra money on childcare and transportation to attend. Those volunteers who had spent time planning the training sessions were sorely disappointed by the poor turnout. They wanted to help colleagues improve how they source, shape and share the sort of content their audiences appreciate, and to reiterate why it matters to perform in accordance with Ofcom licensing, the Broadcasting Code and to adhere to station standards.

As well as broadcasting performance, regulations also apply to financial affairs. It takes money to run a radio station. Ofcom allows community stations, some say controversially, to earn up to

50 per cent of their income from the sale of airtime (Lloyd, 2018). So, developing good relations with local commerce is important. As the founding director of Radio Verulam put it:

Local businesses ... know who we are, and they give us a bit of this and things like that ... we do help them cos we promote them, directly often and obviously we like them to pay for advertising, which some of them do, but a lot of them get free publicity from us which is fine, because you know that's what we're doing – we're helping the local community.

*(Clive)*

His long-time colleague, the studio manager, clarified the importance of finding a balance:

... pandering, if you like, to the community radio ethos, we would have lots of interviews – all local ones – but then you'd probably find that you'd lose a lot of your audience. So, you gotta get a balance – you do a little bit of that, but you've got to have a lot of music in there. If you don't have balance, and you only have all the local bits you probably won't have a very big audience – and then you've got a problem because you can't sell the advertising and then you've got a problem cos you can't run the station.

*(Phil)*

These are just some of the everyday realities I discerned that affect practitioners in the community radio sector and impact upon their journalistic activities. Taking stock of enabling or constraining conditions and circumstances promotes a deeper understanding of how the practice is performed, informing my study on stations' roles in reflecting, building and sustaining social affairs and socializing opportunities in their target localities.

## **Conclusion**

I have demonstrated how conceptualizing the practice of local journalistic coverage using the 'social site' framing inspired a mindset and methodological approach that positioned me as an agent in the situation. Nuanced insights were achieved because I engaged intellectually, physically and reflexively in the practice being studied. Further analysis of the richly textured empirical evidence enables connections to be made between localized instances and the broader media landscape. Thus 'situating' the practice achieves a site-specific yet multidimensional focus whilst not losing sight of the wider context. This strategy is equally suited to investigating the localized activities of mainstream broadcasters; therefore, I contend that performances of journalistic practice by locally dedicated, volunteer media practitioners could be considered alongside those of professionals in the field. This approach would create more accurate impressions of the practice and impact of local radio journalism in the United Kingdom and beyond.

## **Notes**

- 1 292 at time of writing based on list published online. <http://static.ofcom.org.uk/static/radiolicensing/html/radio-stations/community/community-main.htm> (accessed 15 February 2020).
- 2 All local community stations in the UK are available to listen to online. Most use social media to document activity, post video and photographs, 'webcast' and 'podcast' content and interact with audiences.

- 3 [www.ofcom.org.uk/manage-your-licence/radio-broadcast-licensing/community-radio](http://www.ofcom.org.uk/manage-your-licence/radio-broadcast-licensing/community-radio) (accessed 17 July 2018).
- 4 It is common in the UK for radio stations to launch online before applying to Ofcom for a licence.
- 5 See, for instance, [www.mixcloud.com/josephine-coleman/remarkable-harpندن-green-fingers/](http://www.mixcloud.com/josephine-coleman/remarkable-harpندن-green-fingers/) (accessed 11 January 2020).
- 6 A matter of concern in terms of concentrations of media power (Crisell and Starkey, 2009).

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**PART VI**

**Communities and audiences  
of local news**





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# WHAT DOES THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE AS VALUABLE LOCAL JOURNALISM?

## Approaching local news quality from a user's perspective

*Irene Costera Meijer*

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In Western Europe, regional and local broadcasters and newspapers are losing a larger share of viewers and readers and at a faster rate than national newspapers and broadcasters (Barnett, 2011; Franklin and Murphy, 2005; Kik and Landman, 2013). The need for more insight into the audiences' user habits, needs and desires regarding news is felt in every news organisation, but most urgently among scholars and producers of regional and local news. In the last ten years, local and regional legacy news platforms (newspapers, radio and television) have become less popular, in particular among the generations under 45. For instance, in 2017, 15 per cent of Dutch viewers were under 50; ten years ago that was 36 per cent. Since 2000, regional newspapers in the Netherlands and Sweden have lost 50 per cent of their readers (Bakker, 2018; Wadbring and Bergström, 2017). Online platforms for regional news are doing better. In the Netherlands online visits of regional news stations increased from 200 million visits per year in 2011 to 1.2 billion in 2017 (Bakker, 2018).

If audiences become more and more important for news organisations to survive, and if measuring news use – through metrics, surveys or self-reports – (cf. Prior, 2009) may not automatically lead to a deeper understanding of peoples' news interests and preferences as suggested elsewhere (Costera Meijer, 2020; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2018), and if news organisations and journalists want to remain essential to the vitality of local democracy, different kinds of audience research may be necessary to answer the question of how local news can provide a service the public really appreciates and is willing to pay for in money and/or attention. By not departing from an *a priori* concept of informed citizenship, nor from citizens' *opinions* about local quality journalism, this chapter aims to open up space to discuss what people actually experience as informative and useful local journalism. I coined that experience 'valuable journalism'. The research findings seem to be important from a democratic as well as a commercial perspective.

## **What counts as valuable local journalism from a user perspective?**

Although local news selection may not differ from national news selection in its focus on important news (Bakker, 1997), Dickens et al. (2015) suggest that “it is often audiences’ feelings of not being recognised in national news agendas that drives them to generate and consume news stories more locally”. ‘Issues make publics’, as John Dewey argued almost 100 years ago, and that makes it important to check whether local and regional news organisations’ news selection and news approach correspond with their audiences’ preferences, desires and needs. Clicks, shares and time spent are commonly used to measure audience engagement, which makes sense from a production perspective. Yet these metrics are limited tools to understand the user experience itself (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2018; Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2020). Valuable journalism pertains to what, when and how people *experience* journalism as valuable. These experiences were captured by asking more than 750 people in various ways and over the course of ten years (via surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, street-intercept interviews) to supply concrete examples of when they felt local journalism was valuable to them.<sup>2</sup>

## **Which topics deserve more attention?**

Our findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that audiences appreciate a wider selection of news topics, a more engaging presentation and a constructive approach and tone of voice, in particular in relation to local and regional news (Aldridge, 2007; Heider et al., 2005; Poindexter et al., 2006; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). What counts as local, community or regional journalism may be clear from a production perspective; from a consumer angle it depends on people’s feelings of connection to a particular space – for some a neighbourhood, for others a province (Costera Meijer and Bijleveld, 2016; Lowrey et al., 2008). In this chapter the term ‘local journalism’ will be used to refer to the kind of journalism people experience as covering important topics and events in the region they feel close to because they live or work there.

Paying attention to the desires of citizens pays off (Costera Meijer et al., 2013; Rosenstiel et al., 2007). This pertains to both preferences in form and in selection of news. In a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, Friedland et al. (2012) provided eight categories of community information needs.

To meet these needs, communities need access to the following eight categories of essential information, in a timely manner, in an interpretable language, and via media that are reasonably accessible, including information about:

1. emergencies and risks, both immediate and long term;
2. health and welfare, including specifically local health information as well as group specific health information where it exists;
3. education, including the quality of local schools and choices available to parents;
4. transportation, including available alternatives, costs, and schedules;
5. economic opportunities, including job information, job training, and small business assistance;
6. the environment, including air and water quality and access to recreation;

7. civic information, including the availability of civic institutions and opportunities to associate with others;
8. political information, including information about candidates at all relevant levels of local governance, and about relevant public policy initiatives affecting communities and neighborhoods.

(Friedland et al., 2012, v-vi)

To establish which news topics the public feels local media should address more often and what would prompt them to watch, read or listen more frequently, we asked respondents to assign a total of 100 points to 13 different news topics in reply to the proposition: “I would watch or listen to local Broadcaster X more often if it pays more attention to...” (Costera Meijer, 2015). We derived these 13 news topics (see Figure 34.1) from interviews with local news users: 132 street-intercept interviews, ten focus groups and 22 in-depth interviews with professionals holding top positions in the investigated urban areas. ‘Politics’ as a separate topic was not included in the survey because in the previous interviews people emphasised they would only be interested in more political information in connection with other themes. However, respondents could add politics or any other topic to the list.

Local news consumers confirmed that news media should devote more attention to 13 *long-term local themes* if news organisations wanted them to watch, listen or read the news more frequently. These topics do not coincide with the common professional news beats (cf. Boesman et al., 2018). Some topics were also considered more important by more respondents. More attention for nature and local environmental issues, history, safety and quality of healthcare (in that order) would encourage people to seek out local news more often. Fifteen per cent of the respondents took the opportunity to add their own topic to the list (category ‘Other, namely’

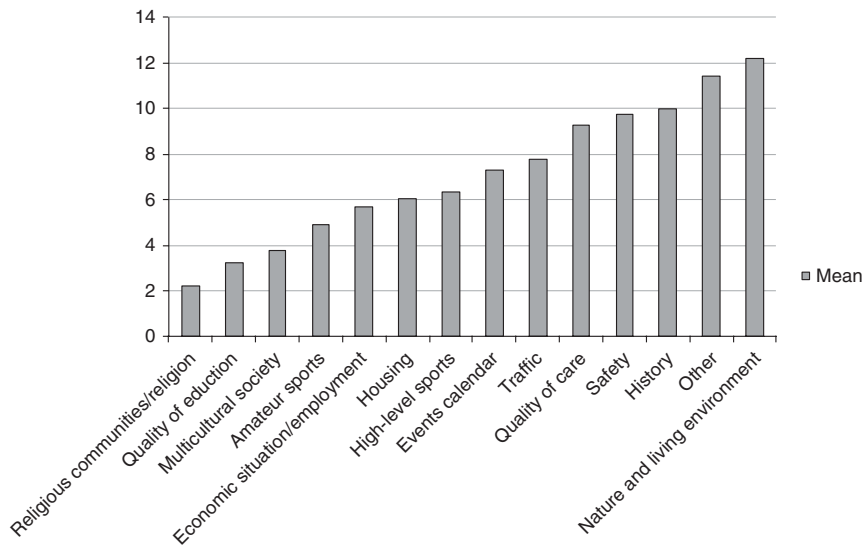


Figure 34.1 Mean score (out of 170 respondents) with respect to topics that deserve *more* attention: which local news should be supplied *more often* to increase user frequency?

in Figure 34.1). Eight of them believed that news on ‘art and culture from the region’ should be more salient in the local news. Only four respondents would appreciate extra news about local politics, affirming what Rosenstiel et al. (2007) conclude about political news: successful stories cover issues instead of the horse race and explain their relevance.

Comparing this list with Friedman et al.’s (2012) suggests that local news users do not wish more attention to ‘emergencies and risks’, this news beat – not even mentioned by news users – is often the one given the most prominent place in local journalism. A second remarkable finding is that news users put the topic ‘nature and environmental issues’ and ‘history’ at the top of the list. History is not even on Friedland et al.’s (2012) list and ‘nature’ is not a separate issue in their overview. ‘Nature’ was discussed in our focus groups in terms of more information about natural history and geography, rare birds and plants living in the region, and hiking and cycling trails (recreation). Comparing both lists suggests that what journalism scholars and journalists themselves select as relevant local news beats may differ from what news users expect from good local journalism.

### **Which values and approaches are appreciated by local news users?**

In addition to general benchmarks that apply to all good journalism – trustworthiness, credibility and good storytelling – news users pointed at five functions that should be met in particular by local journalism if it aims to provide news that they deem valuable and important. These functions were confirmed by and put into context using findings from other countries. The following functions for valuable journalism from an audience perspective proved especially relevant in a local context and remained stable over the research period of ten years (2007–2017).

#### ***1. Reciprocity and audience responsivity as core practices***

Scholars suggest that in order to be of value to the community, online and offline community news platforms have to engage with community values more than with professional values (St. John III et al., 2014). In addition, as Karlsson and Holt (2014) pointed out, this controversy raises a need to discuss alternative normative ideas about what good local journalism should be. In contrast to many other countries, Norwegian print circulation figures of community journalism are still growing. In this context Hatcher and Haavik (2014) raise the relevance of the issue of ownership structure and business models for the quality of community journalism. The success of these local newspapers is among others attributed to a strong local ownership, often by community shareholders, and to journalists’ own community membership.

The key predictor of participation of citizens in local journalism was whether participants felt a virtual sense of community with the news organization (Borger et al., 2016). Ekdale (2014) offers lack of connectivity as the main explanation why the residents of a Nairobi slum did not see the value of the work of community journalists. Lewis et al. (2014) offer the concept of reciprocal journalism as a way of imagining how journalists might develop more mutually beneficial relationships with audiences. An extra reason for increasing engagement with users is that the authors consider it the key to the economic sustainability of news models. As the (negative) example of Patch.com shows, engagement of users demands more than inviting them to like, (re)tweet or otherwise discuss and share news content. These scholars all suggest that journalists might encourage more valuable or constructive input from their readers by being more of service to the community.

## **2. Learning about the area**

Freedman et al. (2010) underlined how local journalism, according to its audiences, should differ from other forms of journalism, by offering “long-term coverage of news items as well as everyday investigative journalism on local issues”. In Klein’s (2003) survey about audience reactions to local TV news the most frequently selected motive for news use is ‘learning about the world’. At least 85 per cent of the investigated populations (young people, college students and senior citizens) agreed on ‘learning’ as primary criterion. The second-most frequently motive was ‘to see good things that have happened’. These results correspond with our own findings. News users emphasize that local news media should do more than inform people. To improve their understanding of the region, they should devote sustained attention to *long-term local themes*, preferably in a *constructive* manner (cf. Rosenstiel et al., 2007). Especially appreciated are stories that show new perspectives or solutions on local issues (cf. Wenzel et al., 2018). Heider et al. (2005) and McCollough et al. (2015) found that audience expectations are closer to ‘good neighbour’ reporting than to ‘watchdog’ reporting, including ‘caring about your community, highlighting interesting people and groups, understanding local community, and offering solutions’ (Poindexter et al., 2006).

## **3. Stories from within: holding the community together and recognizing difference**

Robinson (2014) pointed to the importance of adhering to community values and the necessity for journalists of being personally involved in community life. The high and even rising readership figures of local newspapers in Norway suggest that news decisions being made by Norwegian journalists are congruent with the expectations of their community (Hatcher and Haavik, 2014). Unlike less successful community platforms such as the Swedish local news site Patch.com and the community newspapers involved in the WiscNet Case Study, the Norwegian journalists described themselves as community members first and journalists second: “We write with our hearts”. Consequently, the local journalist in Norway has been described as local patriot, defending the community against outside threats, yet finding it difficult to write about local controversies. This tension between striving for cohesion and recognizing pluralism is inherent to community journalism (Lowrey et al., 2008). Some Norwegian newspapers found an alternative for the classic watchdog function by giving a voice to everyone involved (platform function): local authorities, politicians, organized interest groups and concerned individuals. In so doing journalists used the tone of the good neighbour and kept their fellow community members apprised of what had been transpired, without appearing too critical of the community or its individual members.

What citizens very much appreciate are news *stories ‘from within’*: stories told from the angle of the ‘locals’ and their concerns (Costera Meijer, 2010). Freedman et al. (2010) describe a ‘twin’ local news need: “a platform that enables communities to represent themselves to each other and one that enables them to represent themselves to society at large”. Similarly, Dickens et al. (2015) use the notion ‘practice of care’ enacted through a practice of active listening to particular people and places in the community (cf. Dreher, 2009; O’Donnell, 2009). Telling news stories from within deals according to our informants with the increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds of geographical neighbourhoods and cities by taking an explanatory angle. In this context Zhang (2017) calls for ‘an ethic of inclusion’ to underline the importance of ethnic diversity in local communities. Explaining the different or surprisingly similar customs, values, habits and ways of thinking of the various cultural groups – in terms of age, gender and

ethnicity – to each other facilitates communication across difference (Costera Meijer, 2013b; Dreher, 2009). Stories from within can explain, for instance, different cultural understandings of the private/public division. In our studies we found that putting shoes in the entrance halls was a source of conflict in some blocks of flats. While Turkish and Moroccan residents resort to this practice because in their view it is unclean to put shoes indoors, white Dutch residents considered this practice an infringement on the public space they share. Turkish and Moroccan residents, on the other hand, did not understand the Dutch custom of appropriating the parking space in front of one's house. By contributing to the ability of interpreting each other's everyday habits, stories from within can add to residents' intercultural communicative competences. Providing insight into the local customs, traditions or manners was especially appreciated by newcomers to the area because it enabled them to increase their understanding of 'how things work here'. For established residents, this information is valued not because it is 'new' but because it confirms what Schudson (1995, 31) calls 'public knowledge'. It contributes to "what is recognised or accepted ... given certain political structures and traditions".

Our studies found that most people love so-called talker news items such as crime or relatively bizarre or human-interest news topics, not because they are important, but because they facilitate (brief) conversations between relative strangers, thus strengthening people's feeling of belonging and connection. Telling bad news with a solution-oriented frame was also very much appreciated, in particular when it took a humouristic approach, as was illustrated by a popular and funny news item that filmed how easy it was to pick people's pockets (Costera Meijer et al., 2010). The strong link we found between appreciation of serious news, presenting light and cheerful news, approaching people respectfully and supplying topics for conversation,<sup>3</sup> may affirm the relevance of Schröder's (2015, 63) extensive concept of *public connection*. He broadened the concept to include 'democratic worthwhileness' (catering to the identity of people as citizens) and 'everyday worthwhileness' ("content that links you to personal networks"). The link also confirms our findings that stories about serious topics (e.g., racism, violence, crime) that have a light or humorous touch are valued because they lighten the atmosphere around them, easing the way for neighbourly conversations with a public-interest dimension.

#### **4. Facilitating local orientation: important, findable and connected news**

According to Rantanen (2009), journalism studies tends to ignore questions of 'where' and 'when', prioritizing the analysis of news content. In her analysis of localization and places in journalism, news plays a significant role in constructing our experience of place: "belonging has no meaning unless news offers readers a point of identification" (Rantanen, 2009, 80). News plays a central role in people's understanding and interpretation of spaces and places. Yet residents and journalists, in particular when the latter use official sources, do not always have corresponding visions about spaces and places, all the more when these neighbourhoods are inhabited by a majority of ethnic minorities. In this context, Gutsche (2014) suggests adopting a

notion of news place-making as an understanding of the ideological (and practical) work journalists (and their sources) do in shaping dominant understandings of geography.

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To counter the ideological, often stereotypical impact of news place-making, residents themselves should be used more often as news source. It will increase the chance of both positive and layered stories (Costera Meijer, 2013b). What residents value are items that facilitate regional



orientation either by visualizing everyday geographical landmarks such as central squares, prominent bridges, highways, public gardens and nature reserves or by providing social and personal landmarks: stories and images of local well-known persons (ranging from shopkeepers to librarians, teachers and street paper vendors (Costera Meijer, 2010, 2013b)). Dickens et al. (2015, 5) underline how it is local points of reference that create such opportunities for identification. If community journalism is about connectedness and embeddedness, Lewis et al. (2014) suggest, it should articulate the 'local' in both geographic and virtual forms of belonging.

Dickens et al. (2015) emphasize how consumers very much appreciate reporters' sense of being positioned within a local community; it broadened the types and depth of the stories that can be told. Citizens want to know how individual stories are related to other or previous stories. Providing links and context is very much appreciated because it enables them to experience coherence, not only in the news, but in (the reported) reality as well (Costera Meijer, 2013b). Not surprisingly users want local media to inform them about the most *important news* right after it happens, but they also like to be able to easily *find* news once something of importance occurs. Importance, to users, does not only apply to high-impact news, but also to major public events in the region. The annual flower parade or international concours hippique might not be new in the sense of unexpected, but they are important as common reference points. Moreover, as to be expected, users want local news organizations to indicate clearly *where*, exactly, events take place. A shed on fire is experienced as more urgent if the shed is located in one's neighbourhood. Adding a visual landmark that points to the exact location of the event is appreciated because it enables news users to determine the potential impact of the matter. Reporting about big events (expected or unexpected) and remembering them after some time contributes to a sense of *collective memory*, a 'time line', allowing residents to position their life and that of others within the region (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). Unfortunately, as McCollough et al. (2015, 14) describe, due to budget cuts, and in cases even the closing down of local papers, local news users increasingly have to stay updated on local issues and events through a 'seek-and-you-shall-find' mode. To obtain local news requires citizens to actively seek information themselves from various 'disjointed' and 'sporadic sources'. Citizens less inclined to actively pursue information risk being left out of the information loop.

### **5. Honouring complexity: providing a layered and 'realist' representation of the region**

Both Klein (2003) and Rosenstiel et al. (2007) as well as Lipschultz and Hilt (2014) suggest that local news stations devoting so much time to covering crime are not responding to viewers' interests. The authors suggest that reporters should explore the causes and consequences of crime as vigorously as they do the actual crimes committed. A side effect of biased, sensationalized local news for the people who actually work or live in the region is sometimes experienced as losing one's grip on everyday reality. This is why residents want to be given a *layered* and *'realist'* representation of their region, leaving room for the complexities, ambivalences and contradictions of everyday lived reality. It is important to note that even residents from multi-ethnic urban areas are univocal in emphasizing that supplying only positive news may just as well lead to a sense of losing contact with reality (Costera Meijer, 2013b).

Not every local reality can be shared just as easily though. Its range of topics (residents as subjects, not objects), news frame (constructive and solution-oriented) and tone of voice (optimistic and cheerful) seems to be limited. Residents themselves did not always feel free to discuss the seamy side of their neighbourhood, at least not on paper or television, fearing that others would recognize them and turn against them. Local journalists like other residents felt

vulnerable about telling critical stories, in particular about sensitive issues and ethnic groups that are over-reported by national news. Some felt ill at ease to uncover stories of crime or violence, knowing they frequented the same supermarket and the same schoolyards as the 'villains'. In addition, they found it difficult to present the downside of the neighbourhoods' reality, without losing people's trust. For this reason Freedman et al. (2010, 29) emphasized the importance of a professional news infrastructure that ensures journalists "are both respected and legally protected to scrutinise power effectively". If such a professional infrastructure is lacking, the media-image can be experienced as too rosy. One informant discussed an item about school children cleaning up front gardens: "But why they are in such a mess is not explained. Not one of them dares to say that Moroccans don't care a thing about their gardens. That's politically incorrect." It remained challenging to address such issues about differences in a non-racist discourse.

## Conclusion

Valuable journalism is meant to conceptually fill the gap between marketing criteria (popularity) and journalistic dimensions (adding to informed citizenship). Valuable local news topics (nature, environmental issues, history, safety and quality of care) and news approaches (reciprocity and audience responsiveness, learning about the area, telling stories from within, facilitating regional orientation and honouring complexity) illustrate how users' news selection practices are more inclusive than journalists often assume and less trivial than web metrics suggest. How do these dimensions interconnect? First, *public connection* stands out as the linking concept between respectfulness, a constructive approach and supplying serious as well as light conversation topics. This might illustrate the importance of local journalism for keeping up personal networks as well as people's identity as citizens. The need for local conversation topics (talker news) may explain why news users click frequently on crime and obituaries (cf. Wenzel, 2018). Second, *honouring complexity* is very much appreciated in particular by telling stories from within and taking a realistic but constructive, optimistic and sometimes even humorous approach. If you are close to or even part of the problem you won't need its exaggeration, nor its simplification or downplaying.

Third, the centrality of *understanding the region* as a dimension of valuable journalism mirrors people's awareness of news as second-order reality; they know about others and others know about them in as far as and how they appear through news stories. Even informants with direct personal experience of an issue explicitly refer to a need for learning and for confirmation about 'how the region works', often not because they lack information, but because it enables them to compare their own experience of events or the region with that of others. This comparison accommodates a need for a common frame of reference, a prerequisite for a sense of place and a feeling of belonging. Fourth, the professional value *audience responsiveness* (Brants and de Haan, 2010) is likely to mirror the growing assertiveness of the public. Citizens expect journalists to take into account and to listen carefully to their questions and experiences. Consequently, core to a successful business model appears to be the maintenance of a sense of community with local news users. Audience responsivity and community involvement are suggested as a *conditio sine qua non* for residents to spend money or attention to local news. Finally, our respondents indicate they would increase their local news use when journalism covers more thoroughly and extensively topics evolving around nature, environmental issues and history. Remarkably, these three subject areas are usually absent as conventional newsbeats, even in research on local journalism (cf. Boesman et al., 2018; Rosenstiel et al., 2007, 2014).

## Notes

- 1 Fully revised, supplemented and updated version. Originally published in *Journalism Studies* as Costera Meijer, I., & Bijleveld, H.P. (2016) Valuable journalism: measuring news quality from a user's perspective. *Journalism Studies*, 17(7), pp. 827–839.
- 2 References to studies involved include:
  - Costera Meijer, I. (2007) *De wereld van west side. Reality Stadsoap AT5. Eindrapportage publieksonderzoek*. Universiteit van Amsterdam, April 2007. Commissioned by: B&W Amsterdam.
  - Costera Meijer, I. (2008) *Medianota Rotterdam: Lokale media en Stadsburgerschap. Een verkenning van het Rotterdamse mediabeleid in de context van modern burgerschap*. Commissioned by: Wethouder Cultuur and Participatie Rotterdam (Orhan Kaya).
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- 3 Cf. Costera Meijer and Bijleveld (2016) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.812).

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# LOCAL JOURNALISM AND AT-RISK COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

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## Introduction

The economic challenges confronting local journalism have been well documented (see, e.g., Abernathy, 2016; Nielsen, 2015). Concerns about ‘news deserts’ have been particularly pronounced (see, e.g., Abernathy, 2016; Ferrier et al., 2016; Stites, 2011). Here, the concern is that individual communities may find themselves lacking in news serving their specific information needs. These communities, then, are more at risk in terms of the range of negative consequences that a growing body of research is showing to be related to declines in local journalism. Research has shown, for instance, that the demise of local newspapers leads to increases in government costs, as the absence of the governmental watchdog allows local governments to operate under less scrutiny and thus, apparently, less efficiently (Capps, 2018). Other studies have found that declines in the production and consumption of local journalism are related to declines in citizen knowledge, community engagement, and participation in elections (George and Waldfogel, 2003; Hayes and Lawless, 2014, 2018). Purveyors of hyperpartisan news and commentary have begun to treat the decline in local news outlets as an opportunity to create local news sites that have the appearance of traditional, mainstream local news outlets, with the ownership and sponsorship of the sites intentionally left opaque (Schwartz, 2018). Thus, the gap left by the demise of legitimate local news outlets is being filled by outlets with less journalistic, and more partisan, agendas. Given this range of consequences, it is perhaps not surprising that a recent editorial in the *Washington Post* described the crisis in local journalism as nothing less than “a crisis in democracy” (Waldman and Sennott, 2018; see also Gondreau, 2017).

Some types of communities may be affected more profoundly than others, with the declines affecting local journalism potentially varying according to particular demographic or geographic characteristics (see, e.g., Ferrier et al., 2016). One report noted, for instance, that large US cities such as New York, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles are employing an increasing proportion of the country’s professional journalists, with smaller cities experiencing dramatic declines (Tankersly, 2015). Another recent study (Napoli et al., 2017) raised the possibility of ‘journalism divides’ – patterns in the relative availability in local journalism that reflect the patterns and characteristics associated with the well-known digital divide, in which lower-income, minority, and rural communities tended to suffer from lower levels of Internet access than the rest of the

population (Pick et al., 2015). It may be the case that lower-income and more ethnically diverse communities generally have access to less robust local news media – just as, historically, lower-income and more ethnically diverse communities have had lower levels of access to the Internet.

In this chapter, we seek to delve deeper into this question. Specifically, our goal is to explore whether there are any relationships between the characteristics of individual communities and the robustness of the local journalism that is available to those communities. We begin by presenting the methodological approach we have taken for addressing this question. Next, we present recent data from an analysis of 100 randomly sampled communities across the US, in which we seek to determine whether certain types of communities are particularly vulnerable to the declines affecting local journalism, and thus more at risk for the negative political and economic consequences that have been found to be related to declines in local journalism.

## **Method**

Research on local journalism has tended to focus on large metropolitan areas. Our goal was to look outside of this context; thus, our focus was on communities with populations ranging from 20,000 to 300,000 residents. Using US Census data, these parameters resulted in a list of 493 communities. From this list, we selected a random sample of 100 communities.

### ***Identifying local media outlets***

Our next step was to generate a complete inventory of all of the local media outlets in each of these communities. Thus, our search criteria included local newspapers, as well as local radio stations, local television stations and local online-only news sources. Our inventory of local news sources was limited to those sources geographically located within each sampled community; thus, we excluded news sources that might produce news of relevance to the community but that were geographically located outside of the community. This inventory was created through a systematic process of consulting multiple media databases and directories – 11 in total – and supplementing these database and directory scans with a multi-stage online keyword search protocol. This multi-pronged approach reflects the fact that a comprehensive portrait of the media outlets serving local communities today can only be achieved via combining information from a broad array of sources.

Although our search criteria included print, radio, television, and online media, the content gathering and archiving was conducted exclusively online. Thus, the corresponding URL for each media outlet's home page was located and recorded for use in the archiving process described below. In this way, the journalistic outputs of daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, local cable channels, and, of course, online-only media outlets all were assessed via their online content offerings.

### ***Content archiving***

Our content data gathering relied on a partnership with the Internet Archive. We used the Archive-IT community archiving platform to create our own web archive, as the locally oriented websites central to this study are generally not part of the Internet Archive's regular archiving work. The Archive-IT platform allows users to specify the websites for collection and to set parameters including the frequency and depth of crawling. In this case, we had 733 distinct URLs that we identified for content archiving.<sup>1</sup> In cases in which a media outlet's content was behind a paywall, subscriptions to those sites were obtained. In terms of the depth of



the content crawl, we focused on the home page coverage of each media outlet and crawled to a depth of one. This means that in addition to archiving the home page, we archived each web page that was one click from the home page. This approach draws from the premise in the journalism studies literature that news source front pages/home pages represent a meaningful indicator of the most important news events and issues affecting a community and thus represent a useful means of assessing media outlet performance (for a more detailed discussion see Napoli et al., 2017). The last methodological question to address was the sampling used to create the web archive. For this project, we created a constructed week sample, selecting a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at random over a two-month period during the summer of 2016. Using this method, we created a robust record of the home page presentation of local news in 100 communities. The web crawl across the sample week generated a collection containing 1.6 million documents (html files, pdfs, images, audio files, etc.), 2.2 terabytes of total data, and an archive of over 16,000 news stories.

### ***Content analysis***

The primary goal of our content analysis was to determine the extent to which journalistic output was serving the information needs of local communities. To do this in a way that could be reliably and efficiently accomplished at the scale at which we were operating, we focused on three criteria: (1) whether the story was original; (2) whether the story was about the local community; and (3) whether the story addressed a critical information need. Thus, we went beyond simply analyzing the quantity of news stories available in each community and analyzed aspects of the quality of these stories as well (see Lacy and Rosenstiel, 2015). The criteria that we employed provide a relatively simple, economical, straightforward, and replicable set of indicators of journalistic performance that address the fundamental concern about whether journalistic sources are addressing communities' information needs.

The notion of critical information needs has been central to the ongoing discourse about the performance of local journalism (Knight Commission, 2009a; Waldman, 2011). This approach draws upon this discourse, and the research it has inspired (e.g., Becker and Yanich, 2015; Friedland et al., 2012). Specifically, each story was content analyzed to determine whether it fit into one or more of the critical information needs categories identified in the literature review by Friedland et al. (2012) that was prepared for the Federal Communications Commission. Friedland et al. (2012) provide eight categories of community critical information needs. These categories are (see Friedland et al. (2012) for the more detailed descriptions that served as the basis for the coding criteria for each of these categories):

1. emergencies and risks
2. health
3. education
4. transportation systems
5. environment and planning
6. economic development
7. civic information
8. political life

Stories that did not address one of these categories were coded as a 9. This category is intended to capture less-substantive story types (celebrity news, sports reports, etc.). For the purpose of

the analyses presented here, categories 1–8 are collapsed in order to create a dichotomous variable (i.e., story does/does not address a critical information need) that reflects the frequently employed distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news. Each story also was coded for whether it was original (i.e., produced by the media outlet rather than reprinted, linked, retweeted, or shared from elsewhere) and whether it was about the local community. The emphasis here on original stories is intended to separate aggregation, linking, sharing, retweeting, and re-publication activities. Furthermore, it was an effort to determine the amount of original journalism output being produced (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2010). This originality measure seeks to discern the robustness of local journalism sources by determining how active they are in *producing* news stories. A story was considered ‘original’ if it had a byline by an outlet’s reporter, or if it had no indicators that it was a reposting of, or hyperlink to, content produced elsewhere.

The emphasis on locality is employed to analyze the extent to which the output of local journalism sources focuses on the local community. This measure is intended to address the extent to which local journalism is truly local, providing community members with news and information about, and directly relevant to, their communities. This measure reflects the long-standing localism principle, which has featured prominently in democratic theory perspectives on media, and in media policymaking. From this perspective, the extent to which citizens are engaging in informed democratic participation in their communities is a function of the availability of local news and information about their communities (see, e.g., George and Waldfogel, 2003). For this variable, we opted for a strict geographic definition of community, where we identified a story as about the community only if the subject was an issue/event oriented around the specific municipality. Together, these three variables reflect some of the primary concerns about the state of local journalism today: (1) that the economic pressures on local journalism create overwhelming incentives to aggregate and repurpose existing content rather than engage in original reporting (see, e.g., Anderson, Bell, and Shirky, 2012; Doctor, 2010); (2) that the changing technological and economic dynamics for news distribution and consumption are exacerbating the extent to which large-market or out-of-market news can infiltrate local communities, thereby undermining local journalism (George and Waldfogel, 2003); and (3) that the increasing challenges associated with attracting and retaining an audience for news are compelling local news outlets to neglect substantive topics in favor of an emphasis on ‘soft’ news, celebrity, and sensationalism (see, e.g., Patterson, 2013). For these reasons, we think these particular variables of focus represent a useful set of top-level indicators of how well local journalism is fulfilling its central purpose of facilitating informed participation and engagement in local community affairs.

Content analysis of the online news stories was conducted by a team of trained coders during the spring and summer of 2017. In identifying and coding individual news stories, coders were instructed and trained to exclude social media feeds, widgets, photo galleries, event calendars, outlet promotional announcements, and advertisements from their coding activity. Coders also coded only those stories with publication dates that matched the dates in the constructed week sample. Google Translate was used to facilitate coding of foreign-language content. According to Krippendorff’s alpha, intercoder reliability was 0.81 for the Original variable, 0.84 for the Local variable, and 0.73 for the Critical Information Needs variable. From these data, four dependent variables were constructed: (1) STORIES (the total number of news stories produced for the community); (2) ORIGINAL (the total number of original news stories produced for the community); (3) LOCAL (the total number of local news stories produced for the community); (4) CIN (the total number of news stories addressing a critical information need produced for the community).

**Community characteristic variables**

For the multivariate analysis, we gathered data on a wide range of community characteristics that previous research has suggested may be related to the robustness of local journalism. A number of municipality characteristics were gathered from 2010 census data. From the census reports, we gathered data on the size of the population (POPULATION) in each community to control for the effects that community size is likely to have on journalistic output (see Napoli et al., 2017). We also gathered data on the population density (DENSITY) of each community, as this also may be related to the robustness of journalistic output, with denser communities perhaps facilitating greater efficiencies in journalistic production. Municipality demographic data gathered for this analysis included median household income (INCOME), the percentage of the population that is African-American (AA%), and the percentage of the population that is Hispanic/Latino (HL%). These data were gathered to explore whether the robustness of local journalism follows patterns in line with the digital divide, which has often been found to be a function of income disparities and ethnic diversity. Data were gathered on the number of four-year colleges/universities in a community (#UNIVERSITIES), since universities tend to be sources of activity and local news production. Data also were gathered on whether the municipality was a county seat (COUNTYSEAT), on the assumption that the greater governmental activity within such a community may generate higher levels of journalistic output. Finally, data were gathered on each community’s distance from a large (Nielsen top 50) media market (DISTANCELMM), to explore the possibility that proximity to large media markets (and the one-way flows from large to small media markets that are characteristic of news flows) undermines the viability (and thus output) of local news outlets (see Napoli et al., 2017). Descriptive statistics for these community characteristics are presented in Table 35.1.

**Results**

Before exploring the results of the multivariate analysis, it is worth briefly examining the descriptive data regarding journalistic output and performance, as these data provide a sense of the scope of the news deserts problem. First, it is important to note that of the 100 communities

Table 35.1 Descriptive statistics for community variables (N = 100)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
POPULATION	20256	291707	59408.05	50797.90
DENSITY	628.5	17346.30	3258.92	2830.43
INCOME	21301	156439	68775.30	25586.94
DISTANCELMM	4	342	57.78	61.86
AA%	0	86	10.78	15.28
HL%	1.0	96.0	15.73	19.05
#UNIVERSITIES	0	2	0.21	0.48

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency (Y)</b>
COUNTYSEAT (Y/N)	19

Table 35.2 Proportion of community news output meeting robustness criteria ( $N = 100$ )

<i>Story category</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Original	0.00	100.00	43.78	31.83
Local	0.00	83.87	17.43	18.27
Critical Information Need	0.00	100.00	56.25	25.83
Original + Local	0.00	83.87	16.60	18.38
Original + Critical Information Need	0.00	100.00	25.94	22.27
Local + Critical Information Need	0.00	80.65	12.16	14.43
Original + Local + Critical Information Need	0.00	80.65	11.49	14.42

sampled for this analysis, eight generated *no news stories* (while only four of these communities generated no media outlets for content archiving). Similarly, eight communities contained no stories addressing critical information needs. Twelve communities contained no original news stories. *Twenty communities in the sample contained no local news stories.* Thus, a full 20 percent of the sample of communities were completely lacking in journalism about their communities. These communities represent the essence of the local news deserts that have become a growing concern in recent years. Table 35.2 presents the aggregated results of the content analysis, showing the mean percentage across all communities in terms of each story robustness category and category combination (along with minimums, maximums, and standard deviations). Perhaps the most striking finding in this table is that, on average, only about 17 percent of the news stories provided to a community are truly *local* – that is, actually about or having taken place within the municipality. Clearly, very little of what we might consider local news is – at least in the strict geographic sense – actually local.

In terms of originality, the results are substantially better. Nonetheless, less than half (43 percent) of the news stories provided by these local media outlets are original. Thus, the majority of the news stories provided by local media outlets originate elsewhere; local outlets exhibited a strong tendency to hyperlink to stories produced by other outlets, or (as we often saw in our data) outlets run stories produced by other outlets, but with attribution to that other outlet either very clear or discernible through our content analysis protocol. Considering the extent to which news stories addressed critical information needs, we see that, on average, just over half (56 percent) of the news stories provided to the communities met this criterion. It is worth re-emphasizing that our Critical Information Needs category was not locally oriented; thus, a nationally focused political story was categorized as addressing a critical information need just as a locally focused story would be categorized as addressing a critical information need. As the bottom portion of Table 35.2 indicates, when individual stories are evaluated in term of the extent to which they meet two or more of the robustness criteria, the mean percentages drop further.

### ***Multivariate analyses***

Next, we turn to our primary research question – whether the robustness of local journalism is a function of the demographic and geographic characteristics of individual communities. Because the dependent variables are count variables, the use of traditional OLS regression is not appropriate. Instead, negative binomial regression was employed for each of the four dependent variables (STORIES, ORIGINAL, LOCAL, CIN).<sup>2</sup> Collinearity diagnostics indicated no problematic

Table 35.3 Negative binomial regressions for journalism robustness (N = 100)

	<i>Stories</i>	<i>Original</i>	<i>Local</i>	<i>CIN</i>
<b>Parameter</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>B</b>
(Intercept)	3.99	3.6	2.9	3.06
[COUNTYSEAT = 0]	-0.30	-0.38	-0.65	-0.22
[COUNTYSEAT = 1]	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>	0 <sup>a</sup>
Population	<b>9.74E-6**</b>	<b>1.06E-5**</b>	<b>1.20E-5**</b>	<b>9.31E-6**</b>
Density	-9.02E-5	-2.07E-5	-2.66E-5	-7.82E-5
INCOME	6.55E-6	1.2E-6	-2.66E-7	9.10E-6
DISTANCELMM	<b>0.006*</b>	0.004	0.005	<b>0.007*</b>
AA%	0.003	0.004	0.002	0.008
H/L%	-0.006	<b>-0.02*</b>	<b>-0.03**</b>	-0.003
#UNIVERSITIES	<b>0.59*</b>	<b>0.62*</b>	0.58	<b>0.63*</b>
(Negative binomial)	1.30	1.60	1.73	1.38
Likelihood X <sup>2</sup>	33.22**	27.61**	28.45**	33.88**

Notes:

a Set to 0 because this parameter is redundant.

\* p < 0.05, 95% Wald Confidence Interval.

\*\* p < 0.01, 95% Wald Confidence Interval.

levels of multicollinearity amongst the independent variables (tolerance statistics ranging from 0.49 to 0.81). To facilitate comparisons across each of the four regressions, they are presented in a single table (Table 35.3), with the statistically significant independent variables highlighted in boldface. Each of the four regression models was statistically significant, with Likelihood  $\chi^2$ s ranging from 27.61 to 33.88 (p < 0.01).<sup>3</sup>

The first regression (STORIES) focuses on the overall story output (i.e., total number of stories) produced in each community. This variable provides a sense of the overall level of journalistic output, absent any assessment of each story’s underlying characteristics. As this regression indicates – and as is the case across all four regressions – the POPULATION control variable is statistically significant; this variable indicates that overall journalistic output is, as we would expect, a function of the size of the population within a community. In previous research, focusing on the number of media outlets serving each state (Napoli et al., 2018), we found a curvilinear relationship with population (suggesting that the extent to which the number of media outlets increases as a state’s population increases tapers off as population size increases). Here, however, in focusing on journalistic output, it is worth noting that scatterplots revealed no such relationship.

Continuing to look at regression #1, we see that DISTANCELMM and #UNIVERSITIES are both statistically significant in the expected direction. Thus, the closer a community is to a top-50 media market, the less the overall journalism output in that community. Also, the greater the number of four-year colleges/universities in a community, the greater the overall journalistic output in that community.

Looking next at the regression for ORIGINAL story output, POPULATION and #UNIVERSITIES again emerge as statistically significant in the expected directions. In addition,

the percentage of the community population that is Hispanic/Latino (HL%) also is statistically significant in the negative direction, indicating that the greater the proportion of a community's population that is Hispanic/Latino, the lower the proportion of journalistic output in that community that is original. The third regression in Table 35.3 focuses on the level of LOCAL story production in a community. As is indicated in Table 35.3, POPULATION is once again statistically significant in the expected direction, and HL% is once again negatively statistically significant. Turning finally to regression #4, which focuses on the production of stories that address critical information needs (CIN), we see that POPULATION and #UNIVERSITIES once again emerge as statistically significant in the expected directions. DISTANCELMM once again emerges as positively statistically significant, indicating that as distance from a large media market increases, the number of stories produced by local media outlets that address critical information needs increases as well. It is worth noting that the COUNTYSEAT variable was not significant in any of the four regressions. This result is striking in that it suggests that the presence of county-level governmental activity within a municipality fails to generate any overall increases in journalistic output. It is also important to note that potential journalism divide-related factors such as income, population density, and African-American population composition were not significantly related to any of the dependent variables. Thus, the robustness of journalistic output does not appear to be a reflection of the wealth of a community, the extent to which a community is rural versus urban, or the size of the African-American population.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis has provided a sense of the extent to which the news provided to communities by their local media outlets is original, local, and addresses critical information needs – utilizing a community sample size and news story corpus that far exceed previous research on local journalism. As the descriptive data indicated, 'news deserts' are fairly prominent across the sample, with eight of the communities containing no news stories, eight containing no stories addressing critical information needs, 12 containing no original stories, and 20 containing no local stories. One could argue that these communities completely devoid of news stories, and/or completely devoid of stories that are local, or original, or that address critical information needs, are emblematic of the news deserts that have become an increasing concern as the economics of local journalism have become more challenging.

Turning next to the results of the multivariate analyses, the extent to which the robustness of local journalism is a function of the demographic and geographic characteristics of a community appears to be limited to the proportion of the community that is Hispanic/Latino and the community's distance from a top-50 media market. The negative significance of H/L% across two of the four regressions may be indicative of greater economic challenges affecting foreign-language journalism in the US (particularly alongside the non-significance of AA%) that are, in turn, affecting the ability of (in this case) Spanish-language outlets to produce original, local journalism. However, it is likely also the case that the interest level of the Hispanic/Latino population in non-local news (i.e., news about events and issues in their home countries) is greater than the general population. These non-local interests may also contribute to negative relationships with the originality and local orientation of journalistic output, given that local outlets are not likely to provide original coverage of international news stories. In any case, communities with larger Hispanic/Latino populations emerge as more at risk in terms of the robustness of their local journalism.

The findings presented here provide some support for previous assertions that large media markets, and their associated substantial journalistic output, tend to have a negative effect on the journalistic output in nearby local communities. This is one of the key ramifications of the one-way-flow phenomenon that has been shown to characterize journalism; furthermore, these negative effects are likely being exacerbated as journalism is increasingly disseminated and consumed via digital platforms (see, e.g., Hindman, 2009). The process at work, then, is one in which the flow of large-market journalism into neighboring communities undermines the economics of local journalism production. In the case of this analysis, this phenomenon appears to have undermined overall story output as well as the production of stories addressing critical information needs; this latter pattern suggests that local media outlets may, to some extent, be ceding the more substantive elements of journalism to their large-market neighbors. Thus, other things being equal, communities closer to large media markets are more at risk in terms of the robustness of their local journalism. The fact that a community's status as a county seat failed to exhibit any significant relationship with journalistic output serves to highlight growing concerns that local governmental reporting may be particularly vulnerable in today's increasingly challenging journalistic environment. The fact that the presence of county government activity fails to generate any increases in journalistic production suggests that such activity may no longer lead to commitment of greater journalistic resources.

While this study has attempted to address the issue of the determinants of the robustness of local journalism at a scale that has not been attempted before, operating at such a scale has required some sacrifices in terms of depth of analysis. One could certainly imagine more extensive approaches to analyzing local journalism than the three basic criteria applied here. It is our hope that future research will explore the characteristics of local journalism in greater depth. This is why the content archive that has formed the basis of this analysis has been made publicly available to researchers.<sup>4</sup> This is also why the Internet Archive has continued to archive one day per month for all of the media outlets studied here, as the basis for an ongoing national sample of local media output. This archive could be utilized to perform a wide range of analyses of local journalism that analyze the content we have gathered in much different, or much more granular, ways. We hope that researchers find novel and valuable ways to make use of this substantial and current local journalism archive.

## Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that, in some instances, more than one outlet shared the same URL. This typically occurred in relation to radio stations. Because radio stations often are part of large ownership groups, it was sometimes the case that an individual radio station's home page would be (or would redirect to) the home page for the entire station group. In such instances, the home page was analyzed each time it arose in connection with an individual community.
- 2 Given the substantial number of zero counts across the dependent variables (ranging from 8 in the case of STORIES and CIN to 20 for LOCAL) we recognize that a zero inflated negative binomial regression may represent a further improvement over the negative binomial regression approach employed here. However, exploration of a zero inflated negative binomial regression indicated no significant differences from the negative binomial regression.
- 3 Note that negative binomial regression does not produce an  $R^2$  similar to that produced in OLS regression.
- 4 The complete archive is available online at <https://archive-it.org/collections/7520>.



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# THE EMERGING DEFICIT

## Changing local journalism and its impact on communities in Australia

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### **Introduction: local journalism – a focus of concern**

It is a truism of newsrooms that all stories are local. Local issues, aggregated, make up the concerns of the nation. It is therefore concerning that research in Australia and the US suggests that it is the democratic health of local communities that suffers first from declines in journalistic capacity (Waldman, 2011; Carson et al., 2016). The state of local journalism is often singled out in contemporary debates about the democratic functions of news media (Carson et al., 2016; Kurpius et al., 2010; Nielsen, 2015; Simons, 2013). The FCC report in the US found that while digital technology had empowered citizens in many ways, a concurrent decline in local reporting had shifted power away from citizens to government and powerful institutions. As a result, the news agenda was more likely to be set by these institutions than by the news media. The report found a declining number of news stories and “declining ambition” in local media, with fewer full-time reporters with less time to conduct interviews and in-depth investigations. It predicted that the result would be a reduction in democratic accountability (Waldman, 2011, 5).

There has been no similar government review of the health of news media in Australia, but over the past 15 years local journalism has been a focus of government and parliamentary inquiries into aspects of media regulation and the future of public-interest journalism. Australia’s media ownership is one of the most concentrated in the Western world (Tiffen, 2010). This concentration has been exacerbated by media companies saving costs through cutting local newsrooms and centralising operations. It has become commonplace for local radio and television stations to close newsrooms and ‘hub’ content from corporate headquarters (Simons, 2013). At the same time, an estimated 3,000 Australian journalists’ jobs have been cut since 2012. Regional and local media have been particularly affected (MEAA, 2018; Carson et al., 2016). While media regulation has to some extent mandated the provision of local news through broadcast outlets, this has not addressed all the problems, and most of Australia’s recent inquiries have identified a particularly acute emerging deficit in local news (Finkelstein and Ricketson, 2012, 60; Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2013).

## Our case studies

We chose diverse communities to investigate the impact of changes in local media on local communities in a variety of settings: a disadvantaged outer metropolitan suburb (Broadmeadows, Melbourne), a wealthy beachside regional area (Byron Bay, New South Wales), and a remote township (Moree, New South Wales). We also examined the impact of a particular instance of investigative journalism by the local newspaper in the regional city of Newcastle, where local news deficits have since occurred. In total, we conducted 36 semi-structured interviews with local journalists, broadcasters, editors, media proprietors and civic and community leaders. These included local councillors, police officers, community activists, chambers of commerce representatives, real estate agents, property developers, school teachers, community workers and service and sporting club leaders.<sup>1</sup>

### Broadmeadows: disadvantaged urban fringe

Broadmeadows is a socially and economically disadvantaged suburb of 12,000 people 16 kilometres from the centre of Melbourne. Broadmeadows has high unemployment – 16 per cent compared to the state’s average of 7 per cent. Family weekly incomes average \$900, compared to the state average of \$1,419. Educational attainment is half the state average. The most common occupation is labourer. Broadmeadows residents come from 170 countries, and include a large number of refugees. Six out of ten do not speak English at home; a similar proportion had both parents born overseas (ABS, 2016a). Local media are limited to two weekly free newspapers. While metropolitan and national media are available, typically they do not cover local stories. When they do, the coverage tends to be negative. This resonates with Meijer’s (2013) study of urban neighbourhoods, which found that mainstream professional media can ‘hurt’ local communities through continuous negative portrayals. Gina Dougall, the CEO of Banksia Gardens Community Services, which runs 30 community programmes in Broadmeadows, described reporting by a city-based commercial television network as destructive of her organisation’s attempts to create social cohesion: “All the commercial media stuff that we’ve had has been really sensational and horrible”.

There are two local papers, the *Northern Leader* and the *Star Weekly*. Several foreign-language newspapers (Turkish, Greek and Italian), including e-newspapers, target specific readerships, but typically do not cover local news. Both local papers belong to large syndicates: the *Northern Leader* to the Leader Community News group owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp Australia, and *Star Weekly* to the Star Group. Over the past decade, there has been a trend by the Leader group to close or consolidate local offices. The *Northern Leader* office is in the suburb of Preston – half-an-hour’s drive from Broadmeadows. In 2016 and 2017, three waves of redundancies at the community titles saw seven local mastheads close and editorial jobs cut. This has led to greater copy-sharing across the remaining titles (MEAA, 2017). Former *Leader* editor Liam McAleer, speaking before he left journalism, acknowledged that the location limited the paper’s ability to cover the community.

A lot of the stories are done from the office over the phone. But we try to make an effort to get our guys out to at least two or three stories a week ... but obviously there’s time constraints and there’s resource constraints, so it’s not always possible.

(Carson et al., 2016, 138)

With only two full-time journalists, some reporting was no longer possible. This included court reporting.

Community leaders noticed the difference. Dougall, for example, remarked that the supposedly local newspapers now all looked the same “because now everything is centrally organised”. Consequently, her organisation spent less on local newspaper advertising, because “people are not reading the local paper like they used to”. The deficit in local reporting had led community leaders to use social media to target and interact directly with the community. The Hume council used Twitter and Facebook for better understanding residents’ concerns. Some locals set up rival Facebook pages to complain about the council. As well, community organisations used websites and social media to reframe news stories to counter the predominantly negative reports in the national media.

The local police had also taken matters into their own hands. Broadmeadows police sergeant Ivan Petrunic was concerned in 2015 that the deterrent effect created by court reporting in the local paper had been lost and that the public were also less able to find out about, and assist, police inquiries. Partly because of this, he began a Facebook page, *Eyewatch*, in which he reported on crime, people sought by police and charges laid. He would post CCTV footage when it was available and sometimes short stories. The page had 23,000 followers in 2018, up from 2,000 shortly after its 2015 launch. Police found this an effective means of public communication.

Often we go back and look at what the comments are and see what community perceptions are surrounding the posts. We also use it for crime-solving, so if we’ve had an offence occur somewhere, we’ll put that out.

However, the effort was constrained by the need to moderate comments, and to ensure that the police did not comment on matters before the court. This meant that some sensitive matters were left for the local paper, which did a weekly wrap of police news. However, some such matters went unreported due to lack of newspaper resources.

Meanwhile the local newspaper acknowledged that Facebook had become an increasingly important means of finding out what was happening in the local community. Community Facebooks sites were part of a news ecosystem. To sum up, this disadvantaged urban fringe community regards itself as poorly served by its media, and the deterioration in recent times is acknowledged both by community members and journalists. More optimistically, this case also shows how a shrinking in traditional local media has triggered community leaders to take control of their own stories by speaking directly to citizens through hyperlocal uses of social media. This goes part-way to addressing the media deficit, but is not a complete solution. Leaving aside the issue of independent scrutiny of civic institutions (which we discuss below) there are some stories that local institutions cannot cover, either because their position makes it inappropriate to do so, or it is too costly, or they do not have the capacity to exercise the gatekeeper or moderation capabilities that are generally expected of responsible online media.

### **Byron Bay: sophisticated and active**

Byron Bay is a wealthy coastal tourism town in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. Located at Australia’s most easterly point – 800 kilometres north of Sydney and 175 kilometres south of Brisbane – it is known for its beaches and hinterland. The town has a permanent population of around 9,000, and about 1.5 million visitors each year. The local people are known for political activism and concern for environmental issues. Members of the left-wing and environmentally focused Green Party often dominate the local council (Turnbull, 2016). The most common occupations are professionals and managers, and 8.5 per cent of

residents are employed in providing accommodation, compared to the national average of just over 1 per cent (ABS, 2016b). Strategies to cope with the holiday tourism influx are a top priority for the council and a major concern for residents. Increased traffic, high commercial and private rentals, a need for more police officers, parking problems and the threat that increased numbers pose to the area's ecosystem are issues regularly canvassed in the local media (MacKenzie and White, 2018; Bibby, 2018). Byron Bay's median family income is \$1,469, which is below the state average of \$1,780 (ABS, 2016b). This is probably because part-time work is more common than the state average. Education attainment, however, is better than the national average, with 23.6 per cent of residents tertiary-qualified. The most common language spoken at home is English (72.8 per cent), equal to the national average (ABS, 2016).

Multiple media outlets serve the area. There are two free weekly papers, the family-owned *Byron Shire Echo* and the *Byron Shire News*. There is also a daily paid newspaper, the *Northern Star*. The *Byron Shire News* and the *Northern Star* are owned by News Corp. Byron Bay has a not-for-profit, volunteer-run radio station, Bay FM Community Radio, and is serviced from the nearby town of Lismore by the public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) NSW North Coast radio station, and the commercial station ZZZFM, which is owned by the Broadcast Operations Group (BOG). In 2010 the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) found BOG's syndication of Sydney-based content to three regional radio stations in New South Wales had breached rules mandating minimum levels of local content (Burrowes, 2010). Otherwise, the region is serviced by ABC TV, based in Sydney, whose news bulletins include stories filed from the ABC North Coast station, and three commercial television stations. The Seven Network's Prime7 News and Nine Network both have bureaus in nearby Lismore. Nine includes a pre-recorded local bulletin in its nightly news, while the WIN Network on Seven broadcasts a half-hour bulletin from its Wollongong headquarters, nearly 900 kilometres away.

Judged solely by the number of outlets, Byron Bay seems comparatively well served by local, state and national media. However, not all this news is truly local, and our interviewees revealed the existence of a developing local news deficit. First, there are fewer local journalists than a few years ago, with less support. The sole reporter at *Byron Shire News* said cost-cutting had meant that he had to work harder and do more tasks. He had to report, take photographs and write advertising features. Since 2015, the paper had not employed a receptionist and two sales positions had been left unfilled. The reporter said he no longer covered local council meetings because of a lack of time. He proofread his own copy. He relied on user-generated content such as regular columns by business, civic and sporting leaders to fill the paper. ZZZFM had also suffered cutbacks. A broadcaster said two daily local news bulletins had been cut, and her hours and those of her fellow reporter had been halved. She worried that more people "were turning online for news that isn't verified, and that isn't good".

Community leaders saw this deficit as both a problem and an opportunity. They had a sophisticated understanding of the importance of local media, and some felt confident in using it to garner support for their causes. The fact that local media were open to user-generated content made it easy to manipulate. Dalian Pugh from the Byron Bay Residents' Association used local media to "bring the community along" and build local opposition to a planned "mega suburb" development (Lovejoy, 2018). Similarly, Cate Coorey, a local councillor, also of the Byron Bay Residents' Association, said she favoured the *Byron Shire Echo* for public communication and engagement because it showed "sympathy for our cause", which was to protect the region from over-development. Other community leaders saw this use of media for activism as a negative. Independent councillor Diane Woods said the *Byron Shire Echo* was "biased" and

“inaccurate”; “It is a Greens-dominated paper and it does not report accurately or fairly.” She partly attributed misreporting to insufficient journalistic training including in the disciplines of objectivity, noting that the journalist who reported on council meetings was a musician and not a trained news reporter. Businessman Ed Ahern saw the local media as a part of the town’s life but that the *Echo* was biased towards “greenies” and “lefties”. He did not think it was worth spending money on advertising. Mayor Simon Richardson said he tried to “make it easier” for the local media and often his press releases were reported verbatim. “It’s great for me”, he said, but added it “wasn’t so great for the community”.

The volunteer community radio station saw itself as “truthful media”, in the words of volunteer Ashley Thompson, because “we’ll talk about issues like coal seam gas and we’ll talk about things that we think are important and people need to be aware of”. Thompson often sacrificed paid work so she could prepare for her four-hour show. She said she had put to air accusations by people in the community about police misconduct. However, it became clear that her lack of formal journalism training presented risks that she and the station would be exposed to actions for defamation that they could not defend. In summary, although Byron Bay has a comparatively high number of local media outlets, deficits are emerging: the media are more easily manipulated, local institutions are less subject to scrutiny and some local media outlets are becoming more partisan.

### **Moree: remote and disparate**

Moree is a town of about 10,500 people located on the black-soil plains of far northern New South Wales. It is remote: more than 600 kilometres from Sydney, more than 400 from Brisbane and nearly 300 from the nearest regional city, Tamworth. It lies within the Kamilaroi Aboriginal nation, and about a quarter of its population is Aboriginal. Historically, relations between the Aboriginal people and white townspeople were poor. It was a destination of the ‘Freedom Rides’, a bus trip undertaken in 1965 by a group of about 30 students from the University of Sydney, to draw attention to systemic racism. Moree’s local media consists of a bi-weekly newspaper, *The Moree Champion*, and a commercial radio station, 2VM. Both were owned by media companies from outside the district: *The Moree Champion* by Fairfax Media, Australia’s second-largest newspaper publisher, and 2VM by Broadcast Operations Group, also mentioned in our case study of Byron Bay, which has been in breach of local-content regulations in other areas of North South Wales.

2VM’s broadcasts from its Moree studios are generally confined to business hours. At other times it broadcasts programmes, mostly music, relayed from an affiliated station in Newcastle. It has a staff of seven, one of whom is designated as the news director. He joined the station from the spare-parts industry, has no formal training in journalism and is the only person on the staff who deals with news. He produces two local news bulletins a day, each of about five items. Only rarely is he able to leave the studio to report first-hand. He told us he depends almost entirely on media releases sent to the station by the Moree Plains Shire Council, the local state and federal members of parliament and sporting and service clubs. *The Moree Champion* appears on Tuesdays and Thursdays each week. It has a cover price of \$1.50 and a combined weekly circulation of about 3,000. This gives *The Champion* a household penetration rate approaching 75 per cent across its bi-weekly issues. As a business, *The Moree Champion*’s circulation has been in gradual decline, but its household penetration remains high. However, editorial resources have been cut in recent years. Previously there were four editorial staff. Now there are three – an editor and two reporters. At the shire council, it has been noticed that whereas a reporter once attended full council meetings, they now came only when there was something of particular interest.



Coverage of the local magistrate's court is confined to a weekly wrap of verdicts and sentences drawn from court files rather than attendance of reporters in court.

Local community leaders and citizens interviewed did not consider social media as a platform for news about their town or community. They relied on a combination of the local paper, and regional and metropolitan radio and television. Nor, unlike Broadmeadows and Byron Bay, did community leaders use social media as a means of disseminating news and information themselves. Social media appeared to have next to no relevance in Moree as a news source. Instead, despite their limitations, the local radio station and newspaper remained central to the civic life of Moree. The radio station is indispensable in time of disaster, such as floods, when it is the only means by which everyone in the community can be reached with vital information. The newspaper, civic leaders agree, is indispensable in telling people what is going on in their community and what their local political representatives and governing bodies are doing. It is also a forum for the exchange of ideas.

This potentially unifying effect of local media was, during our fieldwork, powerfully illustrated. Our presence coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Rides. *The Moree Champion* published a comprehensive collection of photographs and stories of the commemoration, complete with street procession and carnival-like activities. It also published a long article by an Aboriginal elder giving an Indigenous perspective on the occasion. The Freedom Rides, once a potentially divisive issue, were now a source of civic pride. In this transition, local media had clearly played a role in 'framing' how this piece of local and national history was regarded. Equally telling was the fact that while 2VM's news director had attended the commemoration, he had done so as a member of a music band and had not considered it necessary to file a news report. It was clear that his lack of journalistic training lay at the heart of this. He was aware of the sensitivity of the issue, and did not feel confident or competent in reporting it. Of all the communities studied, Moree in some ways is the most unaffected by the disruption to media business models. Its paper and radio station still have enviable reach, commercial viability and remain the main ways in which the community shares news and views. Yet, deficits exist. Fewer people are employed, there is a lack of journalistic training and the traditional 'journal of record' function of the media in the community has suffered. The community lacks any means to fill the emerging deficits.

### **Newcastle: local reporting, national effect**

In this final case study, we move from examining the impact of changes in local media on local communities to exploring the impact of locally focused journalism on national affairs. On 11 November 2012, the Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard, announced the appointment of a Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse. Seven months later, on her last day in office, she wrote to a reporter on the *Newcastle Morning Herald*, Joanne McCarthy, acknowledging the critical role she and her newspaper, a regional daily, had played in forcing the Royal Commission (Gillard, 2014). The events briefly described here have been fully reported elsewhere (Muller, 2017). They demonstrate how local media can work with others to push important matters on to local and national agendas, despite institutional resistance.

Newcastle is a harbour city in the Hunter Valley region of the state of New South Wales, 160 kilometres north of Sydney, with 440,000 residents in the larger metropolitan area. It is a largely working-class town with an industrial past, driven by its role as the largest coal-exporting harbour in the world. The daily paper's reporting that resulted in the Royal Commission began for

McCarthy with a routine assignment in 2007, when she was asked by the newspaper's features editor to look into why enrolments at Catholic primary schools were dropping. Her inquiries led her to a local lawyer who invited her to inspect the files of child-abuse compensation cases involving the local Catholic church. The files included letters proving that the hierarchy in the diocese of Maitland-Newcastle had known of abuse cases going back decades (Muller, 2017). The story she wrote about this was a watershed. "I got a call from somebody I didn't know and this person said to me, 'You want to look at a priest by the name of McAlinden. You won't need a first name'". This led her to reveal the predations of a Fr Denis McAlinden. Following McCarthy's repeated revelations, the New South Wales police established Strike Force Georgiana to pursue paedophile priests. The *Herald's* coverage and the work of the strike force were combining to have a snowball effect. The strike force was starting to charge priests, the newspaper covered the ensuing court proceedings and these reports emboldened more victims to come forward. In September 2012 the newspaper convened a public forum to pose the question: do we need a Royal Commission into the Catholic Church? Hundreds of people turned up, including a senior Hunter Valley police officer, Detective Chief Inspector Peter Fox, who had been pursuing paedophile priests for years. Fox, having addressed the forum, then went on national television and repeated his allegations. The national media had been slow to pick up the story, but when they did, the combination of McCarthy's reporting, the newspaper's campaign, Fox's public statements and questions in the New South Wales Parliament proved irresistible.

In August 2015 the owner of the *Newcastle Herald*, Fairfax Media, announced that 69 full-time jobs would disappear from its mastheads across the Hunter region. Of these, 46 would be from the newsrooms, and more than half of those from the *Newcastle Herald* (Media Watch, 2015). In 2018, Fairfax Media announced a deal under which it would be taken over by a commercial television network, Nine. The CEO of the new company, Mr Hugh Marks, made it clear that Fairfax's non-metropolitan newspapers would probably have no future within the company because they were not "high-growth" (Simons, 2018). In 2019 the papers were sold to a former Fairfax executive and the outlook for them remained uncertain. The significance of this case study is clear. The reporting of the *Newcastle Herald* is a telling example of the way in which local issues are both microcosms and exemplars of broader, national concerns. The reporting of Joanne McCarthy is a classic example of 'shoe leather' reporting, requiring time, editorial support and local contacts. This kind of journalism is difficult or impossible to replace with other kinds of civic activity.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the differences between the communities and the types of journalism we examined, we found traditional newsrooms in four disparate communities faced similar issues. Legacy media outlets in all four locations have reduced their newsrooms. This, in turn, has limited their practice of 'shoe leather' and 'journal of record' reporting, such as reporting courts and local councils. Fewer stories are covered, and a deficit in quantity and quality of reporting follows. Untrained reporters are less confident when dealing with controversial issues, and more easily used by campaigners and institutions. Public relations content and propaganda is often published without independent verification. Effectively, journalists become news takers, rather than news makers. We found local communities and institutions were using social media to produce their own content, partly in response to the decline in journalism. By using this material the local media became arguably more responsive to community concerns, but also

more partisan and more vulnerable to being manipulated. With the means of publication in many more hands, some suggest, citizens might replace professional journalism (Rosen, 2011) or that, alternatively “we are all journalists now” (Rosenbloom, 2015). Others have suggested that journalism’s boundaries are becoming porous – that many individuals may “commit acts of journalism” (Simons, 2012, 99) without necessarily identifying as professional journalists, and that this might have a democratising effect. Our analysis supports parts of these views and also serves as a corrective. Our cases show that emerging journalistic deficits can be partly filled by other institutions of society using social media and their websites to publish. These acts of publication became part of what some have described as the news ecosystem (Shane, 2013; Viner, 2013).

However, our research also draws attention to the things that mainstream institutional media do that are difficult, if not impossible, for other institutions and individuals to accomplish. Western countries’ institutionalisation of journalism under a professional model in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was accompanied by notions of media responsibility and standards that included a separation and autonomy from other seats of power and party political and market influences (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2009). Associated with this were the development of training and codes of ethics that, at least in the Western system, emphasised impartiality. This was accompanied by the granting of both legal and subtle social privileges to journalists. As such, the media perform some functions that are not easily replaced or performed by others. Journalistic deficits result in a reduction in accountability for interest groups and institutions. Media are likely to become more partisan and increasingly manipulated by those who have the skills and interest to do so. This, in turn, is likely to lead to less social cohesion, with serious implications for the health of democracy.

## Note

1 Interview subjects were identified through desk research. Ethics approval from our host university was obtained prior to interviewing. Interviews in each community took many days. Additional interviews were scheduled through the snowballing method if thought necessary during the data gathering process to capture issues specific to that community. We used two interview schedules. The first was devised for media professionals to detect changes in their journalistic practice and newsroom activity over time. The second schedule for civic leaders was used to understand how they perceive the health and function of local journalism in their communities over time. More details available on request to the authors.

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# STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

## Building collaborative partnerships for data-driven community news

*Jan Lauren Boyles*

### Introduction

To cultivate and sustain digital news audiences, institutional media are experimenting with alternate storytelling formats that extend beyond traditional news narratives. Today, the ‘classic’ inverted-pyramid story format can be complemented by the use of dynamic infographics, interactive data visualizations and/or public datasets. In its ideal construct, these data storytelling approaches can better contextualize salient, local issues for readers. At their most aspirational, data proponents purport that the reporting products may help citizens connect more deeply to their communities through civic engagement. This act of knowledge production aligns with the long-standing public service ethic embedded within journalistic practice. Chiefly, citizens – empowered with information produced and circulated by journalists – can thereby better navigate civic life within their local communities. Despite its promise, data journalism is far from providing a panacea for the industry’s ills, however. Engaging in data-driven newswork can be challenging for institutional media. Namely, the resource-intensive production process necessitates not only new internal competencies around computation; it also requires new external approaches toward translating complex knowledge to the public. For traditional news outlets that are stretched thin financially, it can be tough to produce data stories without additional staffing, expertise or infrastructure.

In order to collectively share this burden, news providers in the late 2010s established partnerships for creating sustainable data journalism. Such community-based storytelling that brings together local actors in news production has existed for decades. The technical know-how required to obtain, harness and package data for local audiences has ushered new actors into the sphere of data-driven newswork, however. The core challenge that unites today’s communities in data storytelling surrounds knowledge translation – the act of demystifying data for key stakeholders. In short, unlocking data’s power as a storytelling device requires additional skills on behalf of both news producers and consumers. Specialized expertise is imperative to understand the data and to present the findings accurately for audiences. To surmount this central obstacle of data translation, local stakeholders are adopting innovative approaches to share computational expertise with one another. This chapter, which profiles how varied stakeholders invested in translation efforts during the late 2010s, establishes how data-driven communities can collaboratively function around local storytelling.

## Data journalism as collaborative craft

Throughout journalism's history, newswriters have blended quantitative evidence into their work of local knowledge production (Anderson, 2018). Yet while institutional publishers have long championed forms of precision journalism for community-based reporting, editorial leaders have struggled in the last decade with tactically integrating data-driven routines into daily practice (Lowrey and Hou, 2018). Even though journalists may enter the newsroom with basic abilities around digital numeracy and data literacy, newswriters are less likely to possess more complex skill sets in coding or statistical methods (Hewett, 2016; Nguyen and Lugo-Ocando, 2016). Because of this current knowledge gap, editors and publishers have expended significant energies toward either retraining existing staff and/or hiring 'hacker journalists' who possess complementary, computational expertise (Usher, 2016, 75). Even once all newswriters acquire baseline data competencies, newsroom leaders still grapple with resource allocations around data journalism (Fink and Anderson, 2015). Costly data projects can be time- and labor-intensive to construct.

As data journalism routines have integrated into newsrooms slowly, the practice has (over time) become highly collaborative. This shift toward team-based production may be attributable to the perilous financial climate for news in the 2010s. In this sense, newsroom alliances may help address an underlying financial imperative for news organizations losing both readership and revenue (Pew Research Center, 2014). Within institutional media outlets today, such products emerge from both intra-organizational and inter-organizational teamwork among journalists (Esser and Neuberger, 2018). This tendency toward data journalism as a collaborative craft represents a marked departure from newsroom standards. Historically, journalists have adhered to more competitive behaviors, internally protecting their work product from other outlets. Legacy media actors, generally speaking, have been less inclined toward collaborative workflows (Hatcher and Thayer, 2017). These deeply socialized beliefs about the once-competitive boundaries of journalistic autonomy appear to be evolving, however (Graves and Konieczna, 2015). In the mid-2010s, isolated experimentation with collaborative newswriting began. After migrating through eras of 'competitive chaos' and 'territorial exclusivity,' news organizations started partnering more closely with one another in investigative journalism and accountability reporting (Boyles, 2016, 479). In the same time period, data production that employs computational approaches to newswriting was folded into newsrooms. Attempts to marry collaborative workflows to data journalism naturally followed. As a community of practice, data journalists have especially exhibited high levels of collaboration *between* media organizations, expressing "an affinity to data journalism as a field, above and beyond an allegiance to a specific news organization" (Hermida and Young, 2017, 167).

At the local level, data newswriting requires expanded cooperation for success, however. While journalists are gifted storytellers, the entry of data requires expanded expertise from skilled technologists. For real-world civic engagement to materialize from the news product, greater collaboration is also needed from a wider range of community actors. Examining locally based news production more fully can help understand how communities can assemble and activate around data.

## Community-based data storytelling

Within local communities, journalistic and quasi-journalistic actors have long assembled to circulate news that helps residents feel more attached to the neighborhoods they call home. To instill and perpetuate this mutual sense of place, several parties have traditionally converged in



community-based newsmaking. In the pre-digital era, these spaces were largely populated by institutional media with the resources to circulate stories widely, community organizations with geographic ties to local concerns and citizens who discussed proximate issues face-to-face (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006a). Integration between actors (for instance, local media partnering with community groups and citizens to tell stories that directly matter to their everyday lives) helped reinforce a sense of belonging across the community (Kim and Ball-Rokeach, 2006b). Today, this ‘geo-social’ dimension of local news remains strong for residents, even in the digital age (Hess and Waller, 2014, 121). Digital engagement in locally based media making can, under optimal conditions, foster enhanced social cohesiveness for residents (Lowrey, Brozana, and Mackay, 2008). These efforts may ultimately translate to place-based, civic participation.

As highlighted, exchanging information within local communities certainly predates the digital era. Residents have always shared stories that matter to their fellow citizens. When examining community-based storytelling practices in the era of big data, additional similarities persist. Analogous to place-based, pre-digital outreach, news organizations today are dedicating particular energy around audience engagement to reach readers in digital spaces (Wenzel, 2017). Here, residents congregate in social spaces online to talk about their shared geographic community and the problems that they collectively face. Like practitioners engaged in pre-digital storytelling, data journalists see their primary role as serving the public interest by engaging in collective efforts “that hold powerful people and institutions accountable and empower citizens” (Baack, 2018, 688). To accomplish this task, data journalists tend to focus upon explaining complex knowledge to the public, while – at the same time – adhering to a watchdog vision of practice adapted from investigative newswork practices (Felle, 2016). This shared notion of social responsibility, it should be noted, unites the labors of traditional and hacker journalists within the newsroom. Much like pre-digital news, data-driven reporting may ultimately act as a conversational convener for shared, societal problems in the community.

Data storytelling possesses some hallmark differences from the local circulation of pre-digital news, however. In the last decade, the role of institutional media as the community’s central producer of journalism has greatly diminished. In the United States, numerous metropolitan newspapers have witnessed diminished circulation volumes (Pew Research Center, 2018). At the same time, more competition for news audiences exists today. Operating in the always-on environment where users are in constant collision with news products, residents are more likely to encounter news incidentally (most visibly, through social media feeds) rather than intentionally (Hermida, 2010). Within these social spaces, civic organizations – as well as citizens themselves – can also bypass traditional channels entirely, instead releasing content on their own accord. News organizations, consequently, are having to work more aggressively to engage with digital audiences. When it comes to data-driven storytelling, journalists say they are more deeply involved with explanatory functions – showing the audience step-by-step what the findings mean and why they are important to their lives (Nelson, 2018). At its most extreme, data journalists can cling to ‘paternalism,’ or the creation of visualizations and interactive products that restrict rather than foster interactivity (Appelgren, 2018, 308). Instead, such products manifest as top-down visions of how the journalist interprets the dataset. As a result of these collective shifts in digital news production and consumption, a new set of actors is now participating in the circulation of data-driven community news.

Beyond institutional news providers, two emergent types of locally based publications engage heavily in data newswork today: news nonprofits and news start-ups. News nonprofits are community-based journalism outlets seeking to fill content holes in the local news ecosystem (Graves and Konieczna, 2015). This financial arrangement is most visible in the United States, where tax laws permit news nonprofits to be recognized as charitable organizations (Benson,

2017). These news organizations have adopted a public service orientation that strongly values issue-based data journalism, especially in the domains of healthcare and the environment (Nisbet, Wihbey, and Kristiansen, 2018). In fact, they often vow that their depth of community engagement through data storytelling stands apart from that of commercial media (Konieczna and Robinson, 2014). In the local news ecology, news nonprofits are complemented by news start-ups – a class of for-profit news organizations that are often backed by venture capital and/or crowdfunding (Usher, 2017). Much like the civic-minded news nonprofits, news start-ups actively promote data-driven analysis (Carlson and Usher, 2016). While many news start-ups focus on the production of national news, entrepreneurial energy at the local level is spreading. In both cases, news nonprofits and start-ups are not only set apart by their innovative revenue streams and small staff sizes. For these news outlets, their commitment to data-driven narratives stands strong. In many cases, data reporting is explicitly mentioned in the mission statements of these publications as a distinguishing factor between their outlet and local media competitors (Carlson and Usher, 2016). While their prominence varies from city to city, news nonprofits and start-ups are emerging as formidable forces in circulating local, data-driven news.

At the same time, community organizations are seeking external support to make their operations in data-driven outreach more sustainable. Responding to the market's failure to support the news industry, philanthropic foundations have acted as a financial accelerant – providing much-needed funding for data experiments with locally based reporting (Benson, 2017). In many cases, these foundations are headquartered in locations far removed from the community itself. Despite the geographic disconnect, foundation support is being leveraged for the emergent class of data-driven news nonprofits and news start-ups, as well as the broader communities that they serve (Konieczna, 2018). Data are also used by the funders to track the community storytelling project's impact as measured through a variety of dimensions, including web traffic/analytics, project promotion, audience engagement and/or civic participation (Powers, 2018). For funders, further measures of impact can be seen through the resultant data-driven deliverables – typically stories, datasets or visualizations – that provide “a visible sign of their influence in helping to improve journalism as a whole” (Graves and Konieczna, 2015, 1973). Foundations can point to these data-driven outputs as evidence that the project's goals of community engagement were achieved. In this regard, foundation support can provide financial backing for community-based partnerships around data.

Expanding upon citizen engagement in news production, civic technologists are the newest actor to populate data communities. Encompassing coders and programmers working for local governments as well as hobbyists who like to recreationally manipulate code, civic technologists work with publicly available data. These community knowledge producers, in many respects, create content that reflects how journalists have traditionally manufactured quantitative information for the public (Baack, 2018). In this respect, two concurrent movements – the rise of civic hacking and DIY maker culture – have brought these actors into closer contact (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016). Both movements are founded upon the principle that citizen-led computational approaches can be used to stimulate social change within communities (Hunsinger and Schrock, 2016). Civic technologists most commonly work with open data produced by government agencies for public dissemination (Baack, 2015). These actors delve deeply into datasets to surface insights that may not have reached the general public or policymakers. They also often leverage existing datasets to create new public-facing products, such as websites and apps. The ethos of civic technologists aligns with the public service mission traditionally inscribed into journalistic practice – centrally, that practitioners carry a responsibility to act as a check on governmental power (Baack, 2018).

In community-based storytelling efforts, a central tension exists, however: acquiring the pre-requisite expertise to work with data. Simply stated, computational skill barriers can be significant for all practitioners inhabiting this mutual production and consumption space. Journalists must interpret data for a public audience. Grassroots organizations must present data to funders to keep their operations sustainable. Citizen activists must employ a mutual language to talk about data with others. If left unaddressed by any or all of these actors, this barrier can ultimately stifle the integration of data across the community. Data, at this point, would remain the province of experts, rather than serving as a collaborative tool for community-driven engagement around the news by all. As data flows produced by local government agencies continue to accelerate, the ability to package this information for the public surfaces as a paramount concern. Against this context, this work will now examine selected partnership experiments (meant to reflect a snapshot of recent activity in the late 2010s, rather than serve as an exhaustive catalog of current efforts) that have sought to tackle this expertise boundary by forging broader integration in data storytelling efforts at the community level.

### **Translating data across the community**

Data translation – or the explanatory process of deciphering data for use by journalists, community organizations and the general public – requires close collaboration through an exchange of computational skills. To this end, community-based partnerships are being formed among local actors who share talents across the space of data production and consumption.

Practitioners within institutional news organizations (particularly small to mid-sized metropolitan newspapers with diminished-capacity circulations) need expertise in analyzing data. A fraction of the efforts in the late 2010s centered upon media partnerships between institutions (and, in some instances, between news nonprofits and/or start-ups), in which larger news providers share best practices and personnel in data production, as well as data-driven content, with smaller regional and local media outlets. The larger outlet has the scale – often with deeper pockets – to fuel necessary resources. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the BBC's Shared Data Unit exemplifies this relationship to unite local journalists in creating content that can be redistributed nationally (BBC News, 2017). The BBC's redistribution of the stories expands the content's reach. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, The Bureau Local – an outreach effort from The Bureau of Investigative Journalism – has sought to unify local reporting efforts through its Local Data Lab (Lucero, 2017). This exchange enables story sharing as well as partnered reporting projects between journalists. Taken together, these partnerships give media providers the expertise to process data as well as the amplification to reach more readers.

Philanthropic foundations provide financial support to community organizations to develop platforms that make working with data easier for all community actors (Lowrey, Sherrill, and Broussard, 2019). In 2018, the Knight Foundation seeded \$500,000 to The Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) to create institutional/non-institutional media partnerships in data journalism within four American cities (Knight Foundation, 2018). The grant stipulates that CIR will publicly develop and circulate best practices in data newswork acquired from the collaboration. As a result, the lessons learned can be replicated in other cities, the funders posit. Beyond supporting such newsroom-to-newsroom teamwork, funders have prioritized projects that create public-facing tools for processing data among community organizations. These fragments of code, pieces of software and/or public platforms streamline the painstaking process of routine tasks such as cleaning datasets, interpreting data outputs and visualizing data. Tracking funding recipients from the Knight Foundation's News Challenge, 80 percent of winning

entries incorporated a data-driven storytelling tool to better connect with local communities (Lewis, 2011). For instance, a recent Challenge winner's entry supported data journalists from the Associated Press (AP) toward creating dataset processing tools that could be distributed across the AP's member network (Associated Press, 2015). In other cases, foundation support has helped generate platforms for the exchange of data within local communities – digital spaces where datasets can be manipulated and analyzed in collaboration with the public. As part of its Open Cities initiative in the United States, the Sunlight Foundation has authored coding tools that enable third parties to manipulate large-scale datasets (Sunlight Foundation, 2018). Professional organizations for newsroom practitioners have also engaged in grant making. To date, the Online News Association (with backing from six philanthropic partners) has funded 33 projects to create locally based, data-driven storytelling projects (Online News Association, 2018a). Broadly, however, philanthropic foundations in the late 2010s tended to fund projects in America's urban centers, leading to inequalities for rural data production efforts (Nisbet, Wihbey, and Kristiansen, 2018). Nevertheless, publicly available tools developed through these grants can, in the best-case scenario, streamline future practitioner labor by avoiding duplicated computational effort across communities. Rather than spending time to develop and test tools, practitioners have tested off-the-shelf solutions at their disposal.

Attempts to activate the public in the act of data storytelling also take collaborative energy. Generally speaking, this requires that actors enter physical and digital spaces for knowledge exchange within the community. Face-to-face outreach conducted by groups (such as Online News Association Local chapters) culminates in hosted events to trade skills (Online News Association, 2018b). The gatherings, which regularly take place in cities stretched across 15 countries, call upon the expertise of civic technologists. Often these events act as a networking catalyst to identify how best the lay labors of civic technologists can augment the existing in-house talents of local newsrooms. University skill present in global journalism schools and research institutes is also being leveraged to bridge the data-driven labors of professional journalists, community organizations and citizen collaborators. An analysis of major American philanthropic foundation activity around news production (over six years) evidenced that 21 percent of the \$1.8 billion in funding was allocated directly to academic institutions seeking to conduct community-based outreach (Nisbet, Wihbey, and Kristiansen, 2018). In this light, the 'Mind to Mind' project (supported by funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) has convened stakeholders in a series of public events to better understand how data translation resources can be shared (Reveal News, 2017). Other experiments have sought to convene community actors in digital space. CALmatters – a news nonprofit based in Sacramento, California – has pioneered the use of 'open reporting', in which the public is actively engaged throughout the process of data production. In partnership with reporters at *The Los Angeles Times* and Capital Public Radio, the journalists share insights and ask questions of the public (typically through blog posts on the CALmatters website and the news nonprofit's social media channels) as the data project progresses, rather than waiting for the story's ultimate release (Calefati, 2017). Here, participants can contribute to a crowdsourced site, in which the data product develops incrementally from the grassroots.

To unify the community, partnerships have also formed to train actors how to work with data. Such professional development outreach has been a major thrust of foundation funding, with nearly \$122 million dedicated to training journalists and communities how to effectively tell community-based stories (Nisbet, Wihbey, and Kristiansen, 2018). News nonprofits, such as The Seattle Globalist, have provided face-to-face professional development sessions directly to citizens on how to more effectively tell stories from their communities (Institute for Nonprofit News, 2017). Other outlets have created step-by-step digital guides on how to work with data.

The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, for example, has created a ‘Be Your Own Watchdog’ tab on its homepage, where average citizens can learn from the news nonprofit how best to work with campaign finance datasets (Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, 2018). Given their commitment to local communities, universities are also a key contributor in this realm. For instance, the New England Center for Investigative Reporting – a news nonprofit embedded into Boston University’s College of Communication – offers training sessions to journalists, educators and students (Konieczna, 2018). Mirroring the face-to-face efforts of pre-digital community involvement, such audience engagement efforts around collaborative data present another vehicle for the community to assemble around data as they relate to key issues.

### **Conclusion: prospects for collaborative data partnerships**

The production and consumption of data journalism requires that computational competencies be shared among stakeholders. This manufacture and sharing of data occurs throughout the community. The assemblage of actors that engage in data storytelling (including news organizations, news start-ups/nonprofits, universities, community organizations, philanthropic foundations, citizens and civic technologists) are transparently creating communal works, as well as new products and tools to publicly process data.

Despite possible rewards that may arise from partnered data production, several risks may deter engagement in these initiatives altogether. A high opportunity cost exists for collaborative data newswork. Editors and publishers may, upon reflection, decide that their newsroom employees should place their priorities into reporting projects with higher and more visible returns on investment. Untested, experimental data projects may simply carry too much risk for news leaders. Day-to-day operations, particularly for newsrooms plagued by industry downsizing and redundancies, may not afford time to strategically evaluate partnership prospects. Finally, there stands the challenge of activating the community at large. To date, participants in these initiatives are generally deeply committed activists dedicated to civic change. But what about engaging the average citizen? Activating data-driven community participation at the grassroots for all citizens requires significant effort. Merely publishing a story online or hosting a one-off event stands as insignificant to meaningful community outreach. Again, actors in the partnership must consider the inherent opportunity costs to reach and engage general audiences that are demographically and culturally diverse.

Despite these limitations, the operation of community-based, data storytelling partnerships is still guided by the historic precepts of journalistic practice. The circulation of information (or, in this case, the circulation of data) provides context for citizens to better approach daily life in their home communities. All actors concur that data storytelling should serve the public through accountability reporting. In this regard, data partnership advocates have suggested that building closer relationships with the community can help combat declining levels of trust in news institutions. Data projects, in the best-case scenario, may help news providers lure fragmented audiences back into news consumption routines. At the sheer minimum, data storytelling enables divergent actors to more deeply investigate shared, societal problems that matter to the community. By partnering together, actors can extend their message across the community – engaging local stakeholders in data storytelling that may, with time, yield civic action.

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# BOTTOM-UP HYPERLOCAL MEDIA IN BELGIUM

## Facebook groups as collaborative neighborhood awareness systems

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### Introduction

There is largely a consensus in literature on what hyperlocal media (HLM) are and are supposed to do to the local communities they operate in (Barnett and Townend, 2015; Metzgar, Kurpius, and Rowley, 2011; Paulussen and D’heer, 2013; Williams, Harte, and Turner, 2015). First, HLM are often opposed to ‘local media’. Local media are considered something from the past, to have suffered greatly from dwindling advertisement revenues and related financial cuts on the production side, which were especially hard for local offices. This void left in local reporting is nowadays being filled by various new initiatives, called hyperlocal media. Second, these recent initiatives find in contemporary network technologies both the means to disseminate their local news stories to a specific local news audience and the opportunity to engage that audience in various types of participation. Summarized, HLM are:

geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting operations, indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived news gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement.

*(Metzgar et al., 2011, 774)*

Interestingly, there are two underlying themes in the literature on HLM. First, there is a normative discourse, prescribing HLM to provide accurate and reliable information, be a watchdog, represent the local community, and be an advocate of the public (McNair, 2009, in Williams et al., 2015, 681). Second, HLM are regarded as organized entities, intentionally set up to produce local news, typically in the form of a project of professional journalists, individuals or a collective of individuals assuming the role of (citizen) journalists, finding in those initiatives the means to practice authentic journalism. Sticking to such normative standards of what news and journalism ought to be may bias the appreciation of new audience practices in the context of news production and circulation (Hermida, 2010; Hess and Waller, 2016). In that sense, we have recently seen the emergence of bottom-up, unstructured, loosely organized, and little monitored Facebook groups that bring together residents and information concerning a specific locality such as an urban neighborhood (Bouko and Calabrese, 2017; Gregory, 2015; Silver

and Matthews, 2017; Turner, 2015). In these groups, people share information and news related to the neighborhood, announce and promote events, and often report neighborhood-related problems. Moreover, notwithstanding the organizational differences between such groups and HLM, outcomes typically attributed to HLM news consumption (e.g., increased civic participation, community engagement, and sense of neighborhood belonging) have also been positively associated with the use of digital media and SNS, on the precondition that this use is locally situated (Kim et al., 2015; Ognyanova et al., 2013; Nah and Yamamoto, 2017).

These observations raise the question to what extent these bottom-up online environments can adopt the role of HLM. That is, to what extent are these local online groups geographically based and community-oriented? To what extent do they engage in original news reporting and are they perceived as a local news source? And to what extent do they produce beneficial neighborhood related outcomes such as the promotion of civic engagement? To study this, we applied a mixed-method design consisting of a content analysis and in-depth interviews with local online group users. The study was theoretically informed by Communication Infrastructure Theory (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei, 2001), complemented by the conceptual framework of ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010) and affective news (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). We elaborate on these concepts below.

## **Method**

In order to study to what extent local online Facebook groups show characteristics and have consequences that are similar to hyperlocal media, we considered their contents as well as their audience perceptions and uses. A mixed-method design was used, comprising a descriptive quantitative content analysis and a series of in-depth interviews. The content analysis allowed us to get a grasp of the nature of the content circulating in the online groups, while the in-depth interviews complemented these insights by providing an understanding of how the local online groups' users perceive and use these groups. Before discussing the procedures of the content analysis and the in-depth interviews respectively, we first elaborate on the population, sample, and sampling strategy.

This study took place in Ghent, Belgium. The content analysis was performed on six hyperlocal Facebook groups that were oriented to and anchored in six different neighborhoods in the city of Ghent (Table 38.1). First, in order to attain variety in the sample we relied on information derived from the municipal registry (<https://gent.buurtmonitor.be/>). The neighborhoods differed in terms of socio-economic status (SES), ethnic diversity, and level of urbanism. Second, to be included in the sample, the groups had to have a clear reference in their name to the selected neighborhood and have at least 100 posts by the time of the data collection (June 2016). As a result, the sample includes two suburbs, two neighborhoods with lower SES and multi-ethnic populations, one central residential neighborhood with a higher SES, and one mixed neighborhood with a suburban periphery but a center that has a lower SES and multi-ethnic population. The local Facebook groups also differ along a number of structural characteristics: number of members, number of total posts and comments, year the group was created, and number of posts per day.

The data for the content analysis were collected using NCapture, a browser plug-in of NVivo for capturing social media data, and processed using NVivo 11 and Excel. Of these six groups, the last 100 posts (in June 2016) were analyzed. The posts were coded in terms of type of post (Table 38.3), news topic (Table 38.4), and post authorship (Table 38.5). The operationalization was informed by Williams et al. (2015). Next, a series of 14 in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of local online group users, distributed over the six selected neighborhoods. In

Table 38.1 Selected hyperlocal Facebook groups

	<i>Type of neighborhood</i>	<i>Year started</i>	<i>Total number of members (autumn 2018)</i>	<i>Total number of posts/comments</i>	<i>Number of posts per day during data collection</i>
1	Suburb	2009	6,347	4,716/36,398	11.11
2	Suburb	2014	1,615	982/4,702	0.63
3	Lower SES/ multi-ethnic	2007	4,546	4,140/32,214	4.00
4	Lower SES/ multi-ethnic	2008	993	1,120/1,886	1.03
5	Mixed	2014	4,511	2,924/19,010	2.38
6	Central residential	2009	1,248	1,328/3,890	1.82

Table 38.2 Overview of respondents

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Type of neighborhood</i>	<i>Role in Facebook group</i>
P1	M	39	Lower SES	Admin
P2	M	48	Lower SES	Member
P3	F	51	Lower SES	Member
P4	F	55	Suburb	Admin
P5	M	47	Suburb	Member
P6	M	51	Central	Admin
P7	M	37	Central	Admin
P8	F	33	Lower SES	Admin
P9	F	40	Lower SES	Admin
P10	M	40	Lower SES	Admin
P11	M	71	Mixed	Member
P12	F	66	Mixed	Member
P13	M	67	Mixed	Member
P14	F	46	Suburb	Member

order to attain a diverse sample, we selected users that varied in terms of their role regarding the particular Facebook group (Table 38.2). All respondents actively contributed to the local online group.

Both Facebook group administrators and ordinary members were contacted directly via Facebook Messenger. Ordinary members were identified either through referrals by previous interviewees or via a preliminary network analysis of the local online groups. Pertaining to the latter, by considering *interaction networks* in the online groups we contacted users with high betweenness centrality (Rieder, 2013). Interviews were guided by semi-structured questions. First, we inquired about the interviewee's experiences of living in their neighborhood, and their activities and personal network(s) therein. Next, we asked them how they met and communicated with other neighborhood residents and how they acquired information about their neighborhood. This primed the residents to talk about their perceptions and use of the local Facebook group, both in terms of content, relationship with other Facebook group

members as well as the group’s perceived role in the neighborhood. The interviews were fully transcribed and processed using NVivo 11.

## Results

### *The local online group as a local social news stream*

We considered the content circulating in the local online groups in terms of *type of post*, *type of news*, and the *post authorship*. The content circulating on these online groups varied considerably (Table 38.3) as local online groups are predominantly used to (1) ask questions to and favors from other users (*mobilization requests*) (cf. Ellison et al., 2014; López and Farzan, 2015) and (2) share news and information about the neighborhood at large (*news stories*) (cf. Williams et al., 2015). Together, these two types make up more than 80 percent of the posts on the online groups. The remaining 20 percent contain advertising from local shopkeepers (*sales and advertising*), discussions on particular neighborhood issues or activities (*opinions and critiques*), jokes or entertaining content (*humor, entertainment, and diversion*), and finally posts in which the rules of the group are explained, discussed, or contested (*about page or group*). This content diversity is also noticed by our interviewees, who describe these groups as ‘informative’, consisting of ‘local news items’, ‘human interests’, but also as ‘helpful’ and ‘a means for local social interaction’.

Informed by the operationalization of news topics used by Williams et al. (2015), we were able to discern the various topics covered in the posts categorized as *news stories* (Table 38.4). We found that the news stories mainly related to local community events and groups, including updates on the local annual fair, or announcements of events organized by resident associations. Another popular topic included posts containing information on road works or local construction works of public buildings. These are supplemented by posts in which the neighborhood’s past is reminisced upon by sharing old pictures, local traffic issues are discussed, and local instances of criminality and vandalism are reported. Table 38.4 shows the rest of the identified topics.

In contrast to the observations by Williams et al. (2015) on HLM content, hard news (Reinemann et al., 2012) such as information on local councils and policy decisions was absent in our study. Studying user-generated contributions to a newspaper, Paulussen and D’heer (2013) found that citizen journalists (1) predominantly covered soft news such as community events and everyday community life, (2) selected issues and events informed by their personal interests and experiences, and (3) tended to be the sole source for the stories they delivered. Similarly, we noticed that content shared to the online groups often included first-hand

Table 38.3 Types of posts (N = 600)

<i>Type of post</i>	<i>Relative frequency</i>
Mobilization request	46.67%
News story	33.67%
Sales and advertising	12.33%
Opinion and critique	4.00%
Humor, entertainment, and diversion	1.33%
About page or group	1.33%
Other	0.67%

Table 38.4 Types of news (N = 202)

Type of news	Relative frequency
Community events – groups	32.67%
Urban planning – building – infrastructure	14.85%
History – nostalgia	10.89%
Traffic – transportation	9.41%
Criminality – vandalism (specific)	8.91%
Local people or families	6.93%
Nature – environment	4.95%
Nice places in the neighborhood	4.95%
Local business – industry	2.48%
Consumer	0.99%
Artists	0.99%
Sports	0.50%
Criminality – vandalism (general)	0.50%
Politics (government)	0.50%
Other	0.50%

experiences, appeared to be motivated by a personal interest, and tended to relate to everyday life issues. Nevertheless, an observation made by our interviewees is that the local online group allowed them to get a sense of what is happening in their neighborhood.

You are much more aware of the other, what they are doing, where the problems are ... I believe we know this better now.

(P6)

This high prevalence of soft news topics provides evidence of the strong community orientation of these local online groups. This is also reflected in the online groups' content authorship. We found that most posts are authored by either individual residents or by local community associations (Table 38.5).

HLM are also expected to provide original news content (Metzgar et al., 2011). With social media platforms making it easy to share content and posts from other online locations, it can be expected that original content in these local online groups is sparse. Still, we found that about half (50.72 percent) of the posts identified as news were first made public via the specific local online group. This finding, together with the high number of individual residents authoring posts, might suggest an active community engaging in practices of citizen journalism. However, in contrast to typical instances of citizen journalism, our respondents did not identify themselves as journalists, nor what they did to be journalistic in nature.

No, I am not a journalist, because I don't make news. I disseminate information. A journalist searches for stories and then writes an article on that. But that's not me. Nor is it my goal to be one.

(P1)

In addition, although the local online groups are identified as informative, our interviewees find it difficult to define the content as *news*. Rather, they regarded it as 'little facts' or 'human

Table 38.5 Types of authors (N = 600)

<i>Post authorship</i>	<i>Relative frequency</i>
Resident	56.50%
Resident association	10.50%
Legacy news media	6.83%
Local commercial entity	6.67%
Civil society organization	5.50%
Government	4.33%
Sport or cultural association	3.33%
Other hyperlocal media	1.83%
Educational organization	1.00%
Other/unclear	3.50%

interest', lacking the proper journalistic rigor of fact finding and checking as well as the capacity to transcend the private interest of the author. Admittedly, a post about a stolen bicycle, local construction works, or traffic infringements are in themselves hardly news, but rather accounts of banal, idiosyncratic events. However, news stories are hardly ever connected to a single particular event, but tend to encompass a series of mini-events within a larger story, on particular issues, trends, or speculations (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). In that sense, the posts in the local online groups are snippets of larger news stories, distributed over multiple posts and comments, with the story unfolding gradually. For example, the introduction of regulations limiting the use of cars in certain streets triggered many to express their opinions about it, motivating others with similar or different opinions to react, often providing facts and figures. Discussions like these are not limited to a particular day, but stretch over multiple weeks, gaining prominence one day, while being less prominent on other days. This applies to the particular issue of new governmental policies, but may equally apply to issues of illegal dumping or recent burglaries.

Our findings mimic the notions of ambient journalism (Hermida, 2010) and affective news (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012), suggesting that social media allow citizens to participate in the production of news, albeit according to social-media-specific logics and related news values. News audiences create a storytelling environment when using the technological affordances of social media to create, disclose, share, comment, and annotate news content. These networked environments function as awareness systems, allowing audiences to "collect, communicate, share and display" content (Hermida, 2010, 301). This can be organized in the personal news feed on a social platform like Twitter or Facebook, or around a particular hashtag (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012). Either way, all posts together form an ambient (Hermida, 2010) and affective (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012) social news stream – ambient because it requires little attention or effort from the user, affective because the shared content involves the blending of "emotion with opinion, and drama with fact" (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012, 277). Accordingly, it makes more sense to understand the local online groups as social news streams, built on a series of small and insignificant events by themselves, and infused by the authors' subjective experiences, opinions, and emotions. As a whole, these social news streams bring about an awareness about the neighborhood, neighborhood events, neighborhood residents, and how residents think about their own neighborhood.

### ***Functioning of the local online group in the neighborhood's communication infrastructure***

In order to know how content circulating on local online groups might lead to particular neighborhood outcomes, we have to understand how these local online groups relate to the neighborhoods they are situated in. Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) is a framework that considers the wider communicative environment of urban neighborhoods and argues that neighborhood storytelling, understood as everyday talk and communication about the neighborhood, is instrumental in the creation of a sense of belonging (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001), and contributes to civic (Nah and Yamamoto, 2017; Ognyanova et al., 2013) and community (Kim et al., 2015) participation. Central to CIT is that every neighborhood has a storytelling system. This system involves storytelling agents, located on three storytelling levels: macro, mezzo, and micro. These agents include ordinary citizens talking to each other (micro), legacy news media that have regional or national readership (macro), or can be situated in-between (mezzo), such as civil society organizations. HLM are also considered mezzo-level agents, connecting micro-level agents such as residents to other residents, to local events, to local community associations, as well as to macro-level agents, being local governments or legacy news media (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). In this section, we argue that local online groups fulfill a similar role.

Our interviews indicate that local online groups were considered to be one of the main sources of neighborhood information. Through Facebook notifications or posts appearing in the individual user's newsfeed, local online group members are being kept up to date about local events, issues, and other neighborhood information. Interestingly, our respondents also indicated a tendency to actively consult the local group when confronted with an unusual observation in the neighborhood.

The other day ... we heard firetruck sirens close by ... and then we saw on the local Facebook group that there was a fire at a local printing house, with a picture of personnel standing in the parking lot ...

(P14)

This indicates how the local online group connects micro-level agents, even if they are just part of the audience. This wide availability of local information shared online may engender discussion online, but also enables offline conversations.

The first conversation I had with my neighbor started by him asking me if I also had seen something on the local Facebook group. So yeah, it forms the base for having conversations. Now we say hello and ... he also helped us fix our car when it broke down.

(P8)

The local online group does not just connect residents with each other, but also to other types of storytelling agents (Table 38.5). Articles about the neighborhood appearing in regional and national newspapers or other legacy news media are often actively shared in the local groups. The same applies to information disseminated from local governments or other local stakeholders such as local industry or emergency services. Interestingly, an administrator of a local group in a neighborhood bordering the local port indicates that he shares as much information as possible to inform the neighborhood.



Recently there was a fire in the port. Windows and doors had to be closed immediately. We make sure to share this kind of information immediately on the Facebook group. And mostly we are faster than the press.

(P1)

This illustrates how local online group users take on an active role in circulating local information. Interestingly, the local online group also operates as an intermediary for stories from micro to macro level and back. For instance, a violent incident in one of the neighborhoods, reported on in a national newspaper, appeared to be largely based on rumors and speculations posted in the local online groups, as one interviewee found out when she was making a plea for a rectification.

I explicitly asked that journalist whether his source was that Facebook group. He admitted it was and that he had read it on that group. I then asked him whether he had checked his sources. Apparently, he had indeed called to the police, but they had only confirmed that this indeed happened in that particular location, not what the cause was. That he had fabricated himself.

(P9)

This account indicates how local online groups are used by legacy news media as a means to ‘crowdsource the news’ (Hermida, 2010, 300). This, along with the arguments above, shows how local online groups can function as a central hub in the local storytelling network.

Moreover, by doing so, they can function as a broker for local social relationships, while also providing the means for residents to engage in civic and community participation. First, the circulation of local information through various storytelling levels enables conversations among residents. This occurs among residents that already have an established relation, yet also among those for whom the online group is hitherto the sole connection. The following quote illustrates that local online groups allow for the development of a shared history, which has been found to be instrumental in community development and creating a sense of belonging (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

... if someone posts something, you can see it, you can read other people’s reactions ... even if you don’t know them. After a while ... those names become familiar and ... if you’re having an [offline] event and you get to know those others, then there’s already a history ... It’s not like ‘who’s that?’ but more like ‘that’s that guy who posted this and that ...’

(P7)

Second, posts can generate discussions that touch upon political issues. Graham (2010) has shown how political discussions can occur everywhere, including spaces that do not intend to incubate political talk. Similarly, our interviewees mentioned that local online groups facilitate local discussions and allow them to learn about different perspectives on particular issues in their neighborhood. However, this does not mean that discussions are necessarily perceived as productive, intellectually fair, or showing the qualities of rational discussion.

The question is whether these are truly ‘discussions’. In my opinion they aren’t ... there are no intellectual considerations such as ‘on the one hand... on the other hand’, nuanced, ‘before, now, in the future’ ... No, I don’t recall seeing that kind of discussion in that group.

(P13)

Still, local residents can find an outlet to express their opinions on particular subject matters in these online groups. Their opinions might or might not resonate with other members, but by expressing them, they effectively participate in local political discussions. Although their productivity might be questioned by our interviewees, there are examples of how online discussions motivate some users to translate these issues into concrete action. For instance, motivated by reports about burglaries and thefts on the local online group, a local neighborhood surveillance group via WhatsApp was developed in one neighborhood. Similarly, a local clean-up group emerged in another neighborhood after many reports on littering and illegal dumping. These examples stand alongside a myriad of individual mobilization requests for informational and tangible support, showing how the online group enables residents to access local social support.

## Conclusion

Our study shows how active audiences, largely unintentionally, can create something that functions to some extent in similar ways as journalistic HLM initiatives. Specifically, we found that these local Facebook groups contain a variety of neighborhood-related and community-oriented stories, which are dispersed throughout the numerous posts and comments. Through these, a social news stream emerges, which functions as a neighborhood awareness system that subsequently becomes a prominent gateway to neighborhood information and news. In the appearance of a collaboratively created neighborhood social news stream, hyperlocal Facebook groups can function as a central hub in the communication infrastructure of a neighborhood, thus playing a crucial role in the circulation of local information, providing opportunities for citizens to be heard as well as reflexively engage in news consumption and production. As such, these groups seem to parallel HLM in terms of circulating local information, engendering local attachment and civic engagement, and providing the preconditions for local community building, yet without complying to journalistic norms or their members even considering themselves to be local journalists. Accordingly, local online groups should ideally not be regarded as a replacement of proper journalistic initiatives, but rather as supplemental. Still, as audience practices are changing and social media are used, to produce, circulate, and consume *news* of all kinds, social media platforms should behave accordingly and take up their responsibility as media companies with proper editorial policies that guide these developments.

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# LOCAL NEWS REPERTOIRES IN A TRANSFORMING SWEDISH MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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## Introduction

News media consumption, not least local news, is essential in practicing democracy (Ksiazek et al., 2010; Lauf, 2001; McLeod, Scheufele, and Moy, 1999; Ostertag, 2010). Shaker (2014, 134) concludes that

civic engagement and other indicators of an active citizenry should be higher when local news media institutions are numerous and vibrant and members of the public are consuming the content that they produce.

Local news media are strongly related to the feeling of connectedness to one's community (Elvestad, 2009) and create a sense of belonging and identification with the local society (Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). The opportunity to use news has altered greatly the last few decades as the media environment has undergone substantial changes, and the news media structure has turned into a complex environment with numerous choices of platforms, sources, and level of engagement. This transformation of the media structure opens up choices for the users, and can result in diverse media repertoires (see Yuan, 2011) for different groups in the general public. Repertoire differences among groups in society might affect, for instance, information levels and the sense of belonging (Aalberg, Blekesaune, and Elvestad, 2013; Taneja et al., 2012).

The digital transformation has slowly altered the local news playing field since the mid-1990s. However, although aggregators and social media have become important gateways to news, traditional journalism's content dominates the mobile information repertoire (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016), and despite high levels of Internet use among publishers and the audience, few initiatives have managed to realize the potential of digital forms of local journalism (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015). Many previous studies have captured certain specific aspects of news consumption, but the picture is rather fragmented. Little is known about the repertoires users create in today's high-choice environment (Taneja et al., 2012). Further, there has been little emphasis on how local news media are consumed (McCullough, Crowell, and Napoli, 2017). This chapter aims to provide a coherent picture of how news repertoires are created by different people in a changing media structure with a special focus on local news in

Sweden. Based on a large-n, representative survey, the use of major news sources – traditional and online – will be analyzed in a repertoire perspective and for different groups. Local news consumption is put in a context of national and other news media to capture its position in a wider news context.

### **Theoretical perspectives on news consumption**

There are diverging theoretical approaches that explain the complexities of news media consumption (Cooper and Tang, 2009; Taneja et al., 2012). The Uses and Gratifications approach is frequently used to explain news media choice, functions, and habits (e.g., McQuail, 2010; Rubin, 2002; Ruggiero, 2000; Sullivan, 2013). Through the lenses of Uses and Gratification theory, media consumption practices are established as a combination of societal, media structural, and individual factors (cf. McQuail, 2010; Rosengren, 1974; Weibull, 1985). Society sets the outer framework that in the long-term influences the preconditions for media structures and individual habits. The media structure sets more concrete limits, such as accessible platforms, channels, and content (Becker and Schönbach, 1989; Prior, 2007). Regular media use is often embedded in the structure of everyday life and timed to patterns of work and leisure. Individual characteristics such as age, family formation, and working situation are of great importance for such habits (Elvestad and Blekesaune, 2008; Lauf, 2001; McQuail, 2010).

Further, media technology and dominant media forms are important factors in creating a collective memory of a generation (Aroldi and Colombo, 2006; Vittadini et al., 2013). People who, during their formative period, saw the birth of a medium that then became widespread tend to consider this medium as an integral part of their cultural landscape. One should, however, take into account that young people have not yet established news habits, which means they might well take up any platform or content later in life (Elvestad and Phillips, 2018).

Socio-economic factors like education provide citizens with skills favorable for consuming news and political information (Dalton, 2017). Further, social engagement and a general political interest are usually good predictors of news consumption practices, and their explanatory power has increased with increasing media choices (Prior, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2015; Strömbäck et al., 2013). There are also differences due to residential area; people in smaller towns tend to prioritize local news to a larger extent, whereas people in larger cities show more interest in national and international news (Kleis Nielsen, 2015). Since today's news environment includes several digital outlets and platforms, diffusion of media technology also influences news consumption practices. Technological adoption is predicted by perceived attributes of innovations, social norms, and individual characteristics (Rogers, 2003). The technology acceptance model (TAM, Davis, 1989) in addition emphasizes contextual factors as important determinants of the uptake of technical innovations.

In sum, the diffusion of media technology has been strongly related to socio-demographic factors (Bergström, 2015). Age is particularly important for the adoption of digital technology (Rogers, 2003), and there is also evidence that different technology generations behave differently due to differences in technology experience during their formative years (cf. Docampo Rama et al., 2001). Socio-economic indicators, particularly formal education, have also proven to affect the willingness to take up news media technologies like the Internet (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Rogers, 2003). The online news context refers not only to access to devices and applications, but also to the willingness to engage with news through, for instance, commenting or sharing. Thus far, however, audiences seem reluctant to interact with online news (Bergström, 2008; Karlsson et al., 2015), and rather prefer the well-known position of a spectator (McCollough et al., 2017).

When the media structure changes, there is often a fear of what will happen to old media. Scholars do not entirely agree on whether new media forms should be seen as having a complementary or a displacement effect (cf. Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Kang and Atkin, 1999). It has been found, however, that when a new medium is regarded as more functionally desirable than an old medium, the audience may abandon the old one and replace it with the new (De Waal and Schoenbach, 2010; Dimmick et al., 2004; Lin, 2001). Previous research on the relation between use of legacy and online news is partly diverse. Thus far, the contribution of online to traditional platforms in terms of use has been modest (Wadbring and Bergström, 2017). Online and print audiences seem to prefer somewhat different genres, and online newspapers, for instance, did not obtain the same status as the printed editions (Skogerbø and Winsvold, 2011). Chyi and colleagues (2010) showed that online news were perceived as less credible, less likable, and less useful compared with traditional media. According to Mitchell et al. (2016), news readers have been more attracted in going online whereas news *watchers* seem to prefer traditional TV to the TV channels' news sites, and national newspapers seem to have a stronger position online than do broadcast news (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016). With regard to user groups, Edgerly (2015) found that a mainly online repertoire was made up of younger and male respondents, whereas television- and print-oriented repertoires were constituted by wider groups of citizens and related also to older and female respondents.

### The Swedish context

In Sweden, there is a strong newspaper tradition and a long history of public service broadcasting without commercial competitors up until the late 1980s. The newspapers are mainly local, subscription-based, and home-delivered. News via public service television is regional rather than local, whereas public service radio news is more local in character. Most news sites online are editions of the print newspaper brands or broadcast companies. Within this structure there are, however, changes – not least because the media are under severe financial stress (see Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor, 2018 for an overview). On the local newspaper market, since 2004 editions have been cut, almost half of the high-street offices have closed, and in 2013 the free daily *Metro* closed down all its local offices. There has been a decline in circulation, although digital subscriptions are slowly increasing, but more for the nationally distributed newspapers and less for the local. Further, revenues from advertisements have decreased and ownership has concentrated. However, the market in general is characterized by stability; a few less-frequent newspapers have started, a few have closed down. The main commercial TV channel closed its regional newsrooms in 2004, whereas public service TV and radio on the local and regional levels are more stable. These are, however, concentrated in larger regional towns, whereas parts in sparsely populated areas have low presence of local or regional broadcast media. Alternative sources – free newspapers, local news sites, community radio and television, local Facebook groups – are available but not systematically or to any large extent.

### Method

To shed light on people's orientation to local news in the contemporary media landscape, a national, representative survey was used. The annual SOM surveys, done by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, pose questions on news media use. From 1986, every year a random sample of the Swedish population aged 16 to 85 years has received the survey. During the period 1986–2017, the net response rate varied between 51 (2016) and 71 (1992) percent.

In the 2017 survey presented here, 20,400 persons were included in the sample, and 55 percent participated. Analyses of respondents show that they are largely representative for the Swedish population in terms of gender, social class, and educational level, although with some overrepresentation of older and some underrepresentation of younger people (Tipple, 2018).<sup>1</sup> The dependent variables in the analyses are measures of news media use: local and national public service broadcast news and their digital outlets, national and local morning newspapers in print and online, and other digital sources (social network sites, local sites, and international sites). A six-grade scale was used: *Never (1), More seldom (2), 1–2 days a week (3), 3–4 days a week (4), 5–6 days a week (5), and Daily (6)*. The independent variables used are sex, age, level of education, residential area, and political interest. Sex and age (year of birth) were integrated with the dataset from public registers. Education was measured in eight categories, then divided into low, medium, and high educational levels. Residential area was measured in four categories: *Rural area, Village, Town, and Larger city*. Political interest was measured on a four-point scale: *Very interested, Fairly interested, Not very interested, and Not at all interested*.

## Findings

When entering the field of local news consumption, it is important to emphasize that there is no single ‘local news’ that is consistent all over the world, or even within a country, but that there are large differences in local news supplies in different areas, cities, etc. This in turn leads to differences in quantity of journalistic sources and output, and also qualitative differences in output when comparing different geographical areas. A first overview of news consumption reveals large differences in regular practices when comparing different news outlets (Table 39.1). The significantly largest outlet is national television news (54 percent at least five days a week). Other national news reaches smaller shares of the population: radio 24 percent and morning papers 6 percent. Local news media also differ somewhat in reach. The regional television news has a share of frequent users of 40 percent, local radio news 35 percent, and printed local newspapers 25 percent.

It is evident that digital outlets lag behind their traditional precursors from a consumption perspective. The shares of frequent users are – with the exception of national newspapers – significantly lower than for traditional distribution forms. For local newspapers, the regular online audience constitutes 15 percent compared to 27 for print. Local radio and television news are not fully comparable with their digital outlets in the survey; the measure for online use does not separate national and local broadcast news. But still, the total share of online users is significantly lower than for traditional distribution on both national and local/regional level.

Table 39.1 also reveals that alternative online sources, such as local sites (other than legacy media) and international news sites do not attract any large audience. Only social network sites (SNS) have large regular audience shares, but then one has to keep in mind that all the outlets included in the survey can be distributed via SNS, as was the majority of the news in people’s SNS feeds (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016). The next step in the analysis focuses on how use of different news outlets correlates bivariately (Table 39.2). The strongest correlations are found between three different web outlets: television news, radio news, and news in SNS. There is also strong significant correlation between national and regional broadcast news. What we see thus far is a strong media orientation toward web and toward traditional broadcast respectively. Turning to local and regional news, the patterns are more diverse. Local newspapers in print is correlated to regional and national television news. The use of local newspapers online correlates significantly but weaker with broadcast news online and news in SNS. It is also evident that use of local and regional radio and television news is significantly



Table 39.1 News use, different sources, 2017 (percentage of users at least five days a week)

Local morning paper, print	27
Local morning paper, web	15
National morning paper, print	6
National morning paper, web	10
Regional TV news	40
National TV news	54
TV news, web	15
Local radio news	35
National radio news	24
Radio news, web	9
Web, social media	33
Web, international news	8
Web, other local sites than above	5
<i>N</i> =	10,812

correlated. Users of local radio news also tend to turn to news in national television. What we see here is a local dimension mixing with a media dimension.

To study people's overall news repertoire in the contemporary news media landscape, a factor analysis was conducted (Table 39.9). Three factors were found for the news media included in the survey. The first one is digital with strong factor loadings for radio, television, and SNS. The factor also includes local newspapers online, but with a weaker loading. The second factor contains legacy broadcast news and also printed local newspapers. The third factor includes national newspapers, both in print and online.

It is interesting to note that the factors cut across geographical levels and very clearly are media-based. Roughly speaking, if you are into broadcast media you tend to consume both national and regional news and if you are an online news user the same appears with the exception of national newspapers. Local newspapers – both print and online – do not constitute a factor of their own, and also only partly fit into the other factors. In the contemporary news media landscape, local newspapers seem somewhat homeless. The last analysis focuses on the contribution of web to legacy news outlets on the local level, and local newspapers were chosen as a case (Table 39.4). Print-only is the most common way of consuming local newspapers. Only a very small share of the population combines local newspapers in print and web, and the share of web-only consumers is about 10 percent. Among sporadic readers of local newspapers, the contribution of web is only a few percentage shares, and among non-readers of local newspapers just under 10 percent.

Turning to different groups, there are no significant differences between the sexes. Age, on the other hand, is important in that the local newspaper online has larger audience shares among people between 30 and 50 years than among the youngest and the oldest in the survey. Further, it is evident that online-only has found its way to the higher-educated rather than the lower. No significant differences were found for residential area with regard to the contribution of online publishing to the reading of local newspapers in print. The overall use of local newspapers is less frequent among the politically uninterested, no matter the platform. Interestingly, though, is that the contribution of web among non-readers of print does not seem to follow this pattern to the same extent. Although small in numbers, it seems that online local news could be a substitute to local newspaper reading to people less interested in politics.

Table 39.2 Correlations between different news sources, 2017 (Pearson's r)

	<i>Local morning paper, print</i>	<i>Local morning paper, web</i>	<i>Regional TV news</i>	<i>Local radio news</i>	<i>National morning paper, print</i>	<i>National morning paper, web</i>	<i>National TV news</i>	<i>National radio news</i>	<i>TV news, web</i>	<i>Radio news, web</i>
Local morning paper, print	1									
Local morning paper, web	0.084**	1								
Regional TV news	0.313**	0.091**	1							
Local radio news	0.277**	0.117**	0.401**	1						
National morning paper, print	-0.221**	-0.120**	0.086**	0.059**	1					
National morning paper, web	-0.186**	0.154**	-0.021*	-0.019*	0.228**	1				
National TV news	0.330**	0.070**	0.781**	0.404**	0.112**	-0.013	1			
National radio news	0.174**	0.119**	0.315**	0.549**	0.167**	0.150**	0.337**	1		
TV news, web	-0.150**	0.285**	-0.082**	-0.059**	0.020*	0.257**	-0.107**	0.041**	1	
Radio news, web	-0.150**	0.284**	-0.088**	-0.054**	0.021*	0.257**	-0.114**	0.045**	0.999**	1
News in social media	-0.163**	0.282**	-0.104**	-0.075**	0.014	0.254**	-0.132**	0.025*	0.997**	0.997**

Notes: \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed). \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).  $N = 10,812$ .

Table 39.3 Factor analysis of news consumption practices in different news outlets, 2017 (factor loadings)

	<i>Factor 1</i>	<i>Factor 2</i>	<i>Factor 3</i>
TV news, web	0.971	-0.076	0.136
Radio news, web	0.971	-0.077	0.138
News in social media	0.969	-0.102	0.135
Local morning paper, web	0.468	0.201	-0.195
National TV news	-0.071	0.823	-0.040
Regional TV news	-0.039	0.812	-0.063
Regional radio news	0.002	0.734	-0.005
National radio news	0.084	0.675	0.239
Local morning paper, print	-0.049	0.474	-0.582
National morning paper, print	-0.111	0.160	0.798
National morning paper, web	0.266	0.059	0.600
Total variance	29%	24%	14%

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  $N = 10,812$ .

## Conclusion

Local and regional news media reach large audience shares in the Swedish public. Local newspapers have much larger audience shares than their national equivalents. For television, the national news are, however, larger than local, whereas the opposite applies for radio news. Local media, as any other media, are obviously affected by the digitalization and overall development in society. This is shown in decreasing audience shares especially for newspaper reading, but also by decreasing local news coverage both in newspapers and in local broadcast media. The causality, however, is not evident: do people tend to turn their back on local media because of the cut-backs, or are organizational changes a consequence of people abandoning local media? In Sweden, the preconditions for digital news consumption are good; almost everyone in the Swedish population is online, with an exception for large groups among the 80+. The digitalization of news has, however, not affected the local news audience. The share of users is comparatively low, and the contribution of web to the total news audience is small. Not many people have replaced printed local newspapers with their online equivalent. There is, however, a small contribution of local web in the group of politically less interested respondents. Other studies found that with news in SNS feeds, people claim to get more news than before (Hermida et al., 2012). Whether or not this also includes local news is not clear, but there is surely a potential with digital distribution.

One explanation for why local news media online have difficulties reaching out could be that digital platforms are primarily used for other purposes than news. The competition for attention in digital contexts is large, not only between different news outlets, but with all kinds of areas, applications, conversation channels, and other facilities. When putting local news – print and broadcast – in a larger consumption context, they do not correlate strongly to each other or to other news media. Nor do they fit in a multivariate factor model. Local news seems somewhat isolated both media-wise and platform-wise. Local news is, to some extent, homeless in people's news repertoires. Geographical anchoring has been one of the

*Table 39.4* Contribution of web to local newspapers in print among frequent, sporadic, and non-readers (percentage of readers at least five days a week)

	<i>Frequent reading of local newspapers in print and online (at least five days a week)</i>			<i>Sporadic readers of local newspapers in print (fewer than five days a week)</i>	<i>Non-readers of local newspapers in print</i>
	<i>Print only</i>	<i>Print and web</i>	<i>Web only</i>	<i>Web only at least five days a week</i>	<i>Web only at least five days a week</i>
All	22	5	10	2	8
Women	22	4	10	3	7
Men	22	6	10	2	8
16–29 years	3	1	7	2	5
30–49 years	8	4	14	4	10
50–64 years	23	7	12	3	9
65–85 years	43	7	6	1	5
Low formal education	39	6	6	1	5
Middle-low education	20	5	10	2	8
Middle-high education	18	4	11	3	8
High formal education	18	5	12	3	9
Village	27	7	9	2	7
Town	23	5	11	3	8
Larger city	9	2	10	2	8
Not at all interested in politics	11	2	7	1	6
Not particularly interested in politics	21	4	10	2	7
Fairly interested in politics	24	6	11	3	8
Very interested in politics	21	6	11	2	9

*Notes:* N: all = 10,812, women = 5,669, men = 5,120, 16–29 = 2,275, 30–49 = 3,108, 50–64 = 2,754, 65–85 = 3,319, low education = 1,635, middle-low education = 3,121, middle-high education = 2,436, high formal education = 3,311, rural area = 1,552, village = 2,042, town = 5,179, city = 1,791, not at all interested in politics = 780, not particularly interested in politics = 3,387, fairly interested in politics = 4,885, very interested in politics = 1,647.

major principles of the success of local news media. In the digital age, they moved into wider social spaces and changed the nature of audiences and advertisers (Engan, 2015; Hess, 2013). It is relevant to reflect upon the role of local news in relation to local identity. Maybe this is why local news media do not attract large audiences: they are not local anymore and might have lost their identity with the globalization of both news and people. Several topics arise in relation to diminishing local news: will the local identity weaken or will it be communicated through other local sources like local Facebook groups or local community websites? To be perceived as relevant by people, local news distributors need to address relevant perspectives no matter the platform.

## Note

1 For more information about methodology, see [http://som.gu.se/som\\_institute/methodology](http://som.gu.se/som_institute/methodology).

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# THE WHAT, WHERE, AND WHY OF LOCAL NEWS IN THE UNITED STATES

*Angela M. Lee*

## **Introduction**

Regardless of the crisis facing the news industry as a whole, local news media remain one of the main sources from which Americans get their news and information (Nielsen, 2015a). The 'local' in local journalism is a big word with various meanings. In Pauly and Eckert's words (2002, 311),

Like the term independence and public, the local inscribes the contradictions of a commercial press in a democratic society. Just as independence can refer to both economic wherewithal and editorial autonomy, and public to both consumers and citizens, so does the local refer both to the merchandising strategy that sustains a newspaper and the editorial philosophy that defines its mission.

A short historical overview is provided in this section to contextualize the changing nature of 'local' in the United States over time.

The proliferation of local journalism in the United States coincided with urbanization in the nineteenth century, when more people started moving into cities such as New York and Philadelphia. This rise in city life established the 'local' as a popular news genre, and it further enjoyed more circulation expansion and profit with urban growth in the twentieth century. During those times, local newspapers symbolized and sustained Americans' sense of identity and local community (Nielsen, 2015a; Pauly and Eckert, 2002). However, toward the end of the twentieth century, the rise of suburbanization and decentralization of the metropolises significantly challenged local newspapers' established definition of 'local' as in terms of geography. Moreover, on the managerial side of things, the rise of transnational media conglomerations and market-driven journalism (McManus, 1994) and the emergence of a global economy further complicate the nature of 'local' content (Pauly and Eckert, 2002). Furthermore, with the rise of digital and social media in the twenty-first century, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have made it possible for those physically living far away to establish and maintain close relationships (Engan, 2015). In his examination of emerging local media, Nielsen (2015b) posits that new forms of local media include local newspapers, public service broadcasters, community

media, mostly volunteer-driven alternative media, hyperlocal digital operations with a more specific geographical focus, digital-only for-profit, non-profit, and citizen journalism initiatives, to name just a few. The emergence of new definitions and forms of local news media begets the following question: if geographic proximity is what has traditionally connected local news outlets with their target audience, in what ways do all the above-mentioned factors complicate what it means to produce ‘local’ content, and how can local newsrooms meet the needs of an emerging local news audience in the new era?

With the need to appeal to advertisers and help from marketing research (Pauly and Eckert, 2002), local newspapers began conceptualizing ‘local’ not as a coherent geographic or social place, but as “a common state of mind, a common set of interests or a common position in the lifecycle” (Bogart, 1989, 21), or “citizenship, social status, religious beliefs, or economic situations” (Pauly and Eckert, 2002, 314). The goal in ‘local’, then, became whatever interested the readers, or what was useful to the readers. Nonetheless, the theoretical challenge remains: if physical proximity no longer exemplifies the concept of locality in local journalism, then what *is* local news? In Nielsen’s words (2015a, 5),

We still live local lives, but our lives are less locally bounded, as people move more often, as more and more people commute to work elsewhere, as more and more of the goods and services we consume are produced far away, and as some of the most important decisions impacting our lives and communities are taken elsewhere.

While its definition remains contested, from a media economics perspective, ‘local’ increasingly refers to “the audience that the news organization hopes to sell to advertisers” (Pauly and Eckert, 2002, 320).

In the attempt to reconceptualize the ‘local’ in today’s media environment where digital technology disrupts the traditional definition of distance and physical proximity, Pauly and Eckert (2002) offered three proposals on how to think about the term *local*: (1) we should stop thinking about *local* as a spatial concept; (2) we should examine what is covered in local news and use such empirical findings to redefine *local*; and (3) we should recognize that a growing emphasis in *local journalism* lies in a newsroom’s commitment to initiate and sustain conversation with its target audience on issues and topics that matter to the imagined community (e.g., shared interests among those who choose to consume local content from a particularly local news outlet). In terms of what local news audiences actually want, Heider, McCombs, and Poindexter (2005) found that Americans, especially those who are ethnic minorities, of lower economic class, less educated, and women, “expect local journalists to care about the community, to understand and appreciate its value, and crucially, to prioritize solutions as much as problems in their coverage” (12). From this perspective, it becomes apparent that in order to understand *what* is local journalism, one must not only consider what has been covered, but also *who* is consuming local news content, *why*, and *how* well local news content meets the needs of its consumers. After all, as media economics suggests, news consumers—rather than producers—shape, if not define, the nature of commercial journalism, which applies to most local journalism endeavors in the US (Lee and Chyi, 2014).

### **What is in local news?**

With emphasis on local journalism from US communities with populations between 20,000 and 30,000 residents, which some argue is different from local journalism in major metropolitan areas or sparsely populated countryside (Nielsen, 2015a), Napoli, Weber, McCollough, and

Wang (2018) randomly sampled 100 out of the 493 communities listed in the US Census data as the basis of a large-scale content analysis project that aims to analyze *what* is covered by local news outlets. By local news outlets, the project included local newspapers, local television and radio stations, and local online-only news sources. In this particular project, ‘local news outlets’ are defined as news sources that primarily produce news of relevance to those living in a specific municipality. This definition of news outlets highlights only one facet of what the ‘local’ means today; as previously discussed, the readers are encouraged to keep this strict and limited definition in mind when interpreting the report’s findings. On *what* is in US local news, the study found the following (based on 100 sampled communities with 20,000–30,000 residents):

- twenty percent of the communities had no local news stories
- twelve percent of the communities had no original news stories
- eight percent of the communities had no stories addressing critical information needs
- analysis using negative binomial regression found that communities closer to a large media market or with more universities have more robust local journalism
- based on the same negative binomial regression analysis, a community’s status as a county seat, which suggests more frequent county government activities, does not influence local journalistic output.

Based on over 16,000 news stories analyzed across the 100 sampled communities, the study found the following:

- only 17 percent of the news stories are local
- less than half (43 percent) of the news stories are original
- a little over half (56 percent) of the news stories address a critical information need.

(For more details on this report, see Napoli and Weber, Chapter 35, this volume.)

### **Where is local news consumed?**

As of 2018, about nine in ten (89 percent) Americans use the Internet, 65 percent have high-speed broadband Internet at home, and 20 percent have replaced broadband at home with smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2018). In comparison, the fact that only about one in ten (12 percent) local newspapers in the United States have a digital presence (Holcomb, 2018) is notable. Local news media’s social media presence is slightly higher, at 34 percent, as even some of those outlets without an online page also have an active Facebook page (e.g., ‘active’ was operationalized as having posted content in the previous month by the report). It should be noted that by ‘local news media’, the report included community newspapers, college newspapers, daily newspapers, digital-native publishers, magazines, radio stations, and TV stations (Holcomb, 2018, appendix A). In terms of multi-media offerings on the digital counterparts of the aforementioned local news outlets, 57 percent have a subscribe or donate section, 56 percent have a comment section, 47 percent offer video, 39 percent promote newsletters, 27 percent have an iOS mobile app, 16 percent offer live video or audio, and 11 percent promote podcasts (Holcomb, 2018, appendix A).

In examining the presence of online local news, Hindman’s (2011) large-scale report ( $N = 1,074$ ) on the state of online local news for the Federal Communications Commission is noteworthy. Using panel data that tracked a quarter-of-a-million Internet users across over 1 million web domains provided by comScore, a large American media measurement and

analytics firm, Hindman's report examines online local news content within the top 100 US television markets. For definitional transparency, here is how Hindman defines and operationalizes online local news:

Local news, by definition, draws a larger audience within its home market than it does nationally. A local news website covering Seattle will have a larger audience share in the greater Seattle area than it will in Tulsa or Toledo ... Local websites are operationalized as sites that have higher levels of usage within a given media market than they do in the rest of the nationwide sample ... Sites where the observed local vs. national gap in usage is at least three times larger than the estimated standard error are examined as possible local sites.

(Hindman, 2011, 3–4)

Moreover, in his content analysis, Hindman operationalized a website as a local news outlet “if [it] provided regularly-updated information about local news, community affairs, local officials, or issues of regional concern” (5). In other words, should a local newspaper have an inactive online new site, its digital counterpart would not have been counted as a local news site following this definition.

Overall, Hindman (2011) found that online news sites account for a very small portion of overall web usage, or “less than half of a percent of all page views in a typical market” (0.43 percent) (10). Of all the online local news sites that the comScore panelists frequented, local online newspaper sites have the strongest presence (about 55 percent), followed by local TV news sites (about 37 percent), predominately alt-weekly newspaper sites (about 4 percent), and web-native local news sites (e.g., those unconnected to a traditional print, television, or radio news outlets) (about 2 percent). In other words, Hindman's finding suggest that a majority of online local news traffic comes from a significantly smaller set of news sites not only owned by, but also produced by, legacy local news media. In examining overall local news web traffic, Hindman found that “online local news sites received on average 11.4 monthly page views per person in the median market” (10). In looking at the range of page views across all local news sites, Hindman also found that most received between the equivalent of 8.3 to 17 page views per person each month. In terms of time spent, average time spent in the median market on local news sites is 9.1 minutes a month, which is equivalent to 0.45 percent of total time spent. Overall, the data indicate that online local news sites have limited attention from average online users. Such findings suggest that the lack of online local news consumers and their typical shallow consumption contribute significantly to their revenue problems. In Hindman's words (2011, 28),

The central problem facing local online news sites is that their audiences are small—and proportionally much smaller than even many publishers and journalists seem to realize. Metrics such as monthly audience reach are often falsely inflated, and deceptive even when measured accurately. If a particular news startup gets a few tens of thousands of page views a month, the site is hailed as a success—even though many citizens view *thousands* of pages a month each, and even though page views last less than 30 seconds each on average. Online local news has a revenue problem largely *because* it has a readership problem [emphasis in original].

In addition to examining local online news traffic, Hindman further examines the composition of different types of online news outlets. Specifically, the data suggest that in the top

100 television markets, a majority of online local news content comes from local newspaper sites (mean = 6.1), followed by local television sites (mean = 3.8), local online radio stations (mean = 0.3), and Internet-native news outlets (mean = 0.2). Notably, the report concluded that the online news landscape is an oligopoly in nature, where “most online local news markets are dominated by just a few news organizations” (Hindman, 2011, 13). Additionally, there is minimal presence of local online news sites that are *not* affiliated with traditional local news media outlets. Specifically, Hindman found only 17 out of 1,074 (1.6 percent) online local news outlets to be “genuinely new media outlets rather than just online outposts of an established print or broadcast media” (Hindman, 2011, 13). Hindman found that larger markets (e.g., larger cities) tend to have more local news outlets. For example, Boston, New York, and Minneapolis (28, 21, and 20, respectively) have significantly more distinct online local news sites than Baton Rouge, Ft. Smith, and El Paso (4, 5, and 5, respectively). The difference is primarily due to varying numbers of newspapers, since most of the markets (88 out of 100) tend to have between three and five local television news sites. Additionally, almost all alternative weekly online publications came from larger metro cities. Yet, overall, there are fewer journalists across the board in recent years regardless of medium (Grieco et al., 2018; Tankersley, 2015; Wadbring and Bergström, 2017).

Consistent with Hindman’s finding that larger markets tend to have more local news outlets than smaller markets, Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough, and Renninger (2017) also found that both the quantity and quality of local news available in different communities across the US is primarily a function of communal prosperity, and they believe this has to do with the fact that

in more prosperous communities there are more individuals/organizations in the position financially to engage with journalism as a non-profit (or even money-losing) community service, and/or that are able to make a long- or short-term investment in a high-risk business venture such as a local journalism initiative.

*(Napoli et al., 2017, 390)*

The imbalance in number of local news media outlets and quality of local news reporting between wealthier and poorer communities across the United States is disconcerting and calls for structural and economic reform. In his FCC report’s concluding remark, Hindman (2011) argues that the overall low levels of traffic to local news sites across the US and evidence of concentration in online local news media ownership, which echoes that of offline concentration, warrant regulatory attention particularly in relation to federal restrictions on media cross-ownership.

### **Why do people consume local news?**

In his exploration of what it may take for local news outlets to earn the trust of their audiences, Engan (2015) concluded that the main task is to produce content that is not only socially responsible but also offers uniqueness and relevance. This perspective is consistent with Lee and Chyi’s (2014) larger-scale online survey ( $N = 767$ ) finding that the extent to which audiences find news content noteworthy (e.g., interesting or relevant) is a positive predictor of enjoyment from news, time spent on reading newspapers, time spent on watching TV news, time spent on getting news online, paying intent for print newspapers, and paying intent for online newspapers. In fact, they found that noteworthiness is more effective at predicting the aforementioned outcome variables than demographic variables, which have traditionally been used to predict news use by the industry. From the perspective of news noteworthiness, Lee and Chyi found that local news, compared to general news produced by mainstream media and five other

news genres (political, international, business/finance, sports, and entertainment) is deemed the most notable. Specifically, the survey respondents perceived about 43 percent of local news organizations as noteworthy (SD = 33), followed by general news (36 percent, SD = 29), political news (30 percent, SD = 30), international news (28 percent, SD = 28), business and finance news (26 percent, SD = 30), sports news (23 percent, SD = 29), and entertainment news (21 percent, SD = 27). Moreover, those who are women, older, with lower income, and white are more likely to perceive local news as noteworthy. In other words, this study suggests that people consume local news because it satisfies their needs for newsworthiness.

In further examining *why* US audiences consume local news, Lee (2013) employed the Uses and Gratifications perspective. In reviewing key research from the Uses and Gratifications paradigm for nearly seven decades, and drawing on relevant research in political communication and journalism, Lee (2013) proposed four overarching gratification types—that is, four distinct types of reasons for *why* people consume a variety of news content. The four types are: (1) information-motivated—consuming news content for informational gains and surveillance, and to fulfill the need to know and understand what is going on in the world, etc.; (2) entertainment-motivated—consuming news content to fulfill the need for excitement, laughter, humor, and relaxation, etc.; (3) opinion-motivated—consuming news content either to validate one’s of view, to seek exposure to different viewpoints, or to avoid opposing viewpoints, etc., (4) social-motivated—consuming news content in order to keep up with what others around us are talking about, to appear knowledgeable to other people, and to be more sociable, etc.,

Based on an online survey of 1,143 US adults, controlling for age, education, race, gender, and income, Lee (2013) found that whereas Americans are by far most likely to watch local TV newscasts for information-motivated reasons ( $b = 0.31, p < 0.001$ ), followed by opinion-motivated ( $b = 0.19, p < 0.001$ ), entertainment-motivated ( $b = 0.17, p < 0.001$ ), and social-motivated ( $b = 0.15, p < 0.001$ ) reasons, when it comes to motivations for consuming content from local newspapers, all four motivations play relatively similar roles, albeit that information-motivated ( $b = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ) and social-motivated ( $b = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ) reasons still have a slight edge over entertainment-motivated ( $b = 0.21, p < 0.001$ ) and opinion-motivated ( $b = 0.19, p < 0.001$ ) reasons. Such findings suggest two possibilities: either (1) the local TV newscast does a notably better job at meeting its audiences’ information needs, as its beta of 0.31 is remarkably high when compared to its fulfillment of other consumption motivates (cf. motivations for consumption across 30 news sources range from 0.15 to 0.35); or (2) local newspapers are more well-rounded in meeting their audiences’ varied news consumption needs, since they have yielded relatively consistent motivational responses across the board.

In profiling why and how local news audiences in the United States consume local news, McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli (2017) conducted six focus groups across three north-eastern US communities that “varied in sizes (277,000; 55,000; and 18,000), per capita income (\$13,000; \$16,000; and \$37,000), and ethnic composition (74 per cent non-white; 55 per cent non-white; and 37 per cent non-white)” (McCollough et al., 2017, 105), and they found three types of local news audiences, which partly explains *where* local news audiences consume the content and *why*.

1. Self-reliant news consumers—those who believe it is their own responsibility to actively stay informed about local news and community affairs, and these news audiences also tend to “paint a picture of a varied local news and information landscape characterized by individual news sources such as neighborhood email lists, nonprofit sites, and communications from members of local government” (McCollough et al., 2017, 108).

2. Disengaged citizen journalists—those who do not actively share or produce news and information for their communities. Typically, these individuals tend to contribute their lack of participation in citizen journalism to “time constraints, lack of financial compensation, concerns about legal liability, and low expectations about audience reach” (McCollough et al., 2017, 109). On the other hand, those who have engaged in citizen journalism note that they tend to do so as the result of feeling neglected by national news media.
3. Socially reliant news consumers—those who actively rely on their interpersonal networks (e.g., friends, community, or neighbors, off or on social media) as sources for local news and information. In particular, these individuals have identified “places and spaces in the community such as schools, faith-based organizations, community or neighborhood organizations, universities, government, and the library ... [a]s information ‘hotspots’ for trading and sharing local news” (McCollough et al., 2017, 111).

## Conclusion

Regardless of its multi-faceted nature, local journalism has been found by a number of studies to be good for the health of democratic societies. Specifically, local journalism is found to have a positive impact on communal cohesion, civic knowledge (e.g., local public affairs) and civic engagement (e.g., involvement in local politics and volunteerism, local election turnout, etc.) (e.g., Scheufele et al., 2002; Shah et al., 2001; Shaker, 2009; Wadbring and Bergström, 2017). Similarly, in their report on the connection between local news use habits and civic engagement, using panel data drawn from January 12–February 8, 2016 ( $N = 4,654$ ), Barthel, Holcomb, Mahone, and Mitchell (2016) found that interest in, use, and positive attitudes (e.g., believing that local news media are in touch with their communities or do a good job keeping the public informed) toward local news are positively associated with local community attachment and local voting habits, controlling for age, income, and education, and the same factors—along with trust in local news media—are positively associated with regular and more diverse local news consumption.

Just as the presence of local journalism has been found to exert positive influence on average citizens, the absence of local journalism has also been found to be associated with some negative effects, such as the rise in costs for local government (Murphy, 2018). Additionally, without robust local journalism, average citizens would no longer “have the information to make decisions for families or hold institutions accountable. [For example], they don’t know if their schools are underperforming or their mayor is corrupt or their courts are fair” (Waldman and Sennott, 2018, para. 8). To a great extent, the evolving nature, strengths, and limitations of local journalism are contingent on emerging socio-political, economic, and technological changes in society. Local journalism in the United States may not be as robust as it used to be; however, the societal need for strong, quality local journalism is persistent, if not greater than before. Future studies are encouraged to uncover and examine more effective ways to promote local news consumption to contribute to a healthier news ecosystem in the US. After all, the health of local governance and democracy at large in the United States depends on healthy journalism, both locally and beyond.

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## PART VII

# Local media and the public good



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# 41

## LOCAL MEDIA AND DISASTER REPORTING IN JAPAN

*Florian Meissner and Jun Tsukada*

### **Introduction**

Japan has a long history of devastating disasters, but it also has a strong tradition of media organizations striving to contribute to resilience. The local media plays a crucial role in this process as it provides important micro-level information related, e.g., to survivors, lifeline services, and reconstruction (Hiroi, 2000; Yamada, 2004). While studies concerning ‘Western’ countries have often emphasized the strict news value-orientation and short attention span of media covering disasters, Japanese literature largely focuses on how reporting provides affected publics with vital information and thereby contributes to mitigation (Oda, 1997; Shigyō, 2011; Yamada, 2013). This seems to be the case especially on the local level where media organizations actively take on the perspective of the victims and continue reporting on a long-term basis (Rausch, 2015; Meissner, 2018).

The professional role Japanese journalists have adopted, studies have found, is shaped by often extremely close relationships between reporters and their sources, a pattern that originates from traditional local reporting in Japan (Hayashi and Kopper, 2014). The consequence of such close relationships is a grassroots perspective of the journalists who often share with their audiences the same social environment, the same problems and experiences. When covering disasters, reporters often draw from these close-knit local networks and try to directly support citizens affected by disaster (Meissner, 2018). Several examples of this kind of reporting could be witnessed during the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster of 2011, which has received extensive attention by media and journalism scholars inside and outside Japan. Subsequently, this chapter will outline in more detail the factors that influence disaster reporting of local media in Japan. As a first step, it is necessary to understand how the respective media markets in Japan are structured and why the newspaper, often considered the epitome of ‘legacy media,’ still plays a crucial role for local reporting in Japan.

### **Local media in Japan: an overview**

There is a widespread perception that in centralist Japan, with its huge national media networks, local media is somehow irrelevant. It is often overlooked, however, that local newspapers do

play a very important role outside of Tokyo, especially in the context of the political decentralization policy that seeks to grant more autonomy to local governments (Isono, 2010). In almost all of Japan's 47 prefectures, there is just one prefectural newspaper (*ken-shi*) available, or a block newspaper (*buokku-shi*) that covers several prefectures. This paper typically has higher circulation figures in its area of distribution than any of the Tokyo-based national papers (*zenkoku-shi*) (Shimbun jōhō, 2016). The origin of this market structure lies in the wartime military dictatorship, when the thriving Japanese newspaper market was forcefully concentrated to facilitate censorship. Between 1938 and 1942, the number of newspapers was downsized from 1,124 to just 54 (Hanada, 2007, 214). The contours of the newspaper market have not changed fundamentally since. However, around 200 local newspapers (*rōkaru-shi*),<sup>1</sup> many of which restarted their businesses in the postwar era, add diversity to the micro level of Japan's media landscape.

Most local reporting in Japan still takes place in the prefectural and local newspapers, including their online services. Consequently, research on local media in Japan has largely focused on the newspaper. An important reference in this regard is Rausch (2004, 2011; see also his contribution in this volume, Chapter 2). Based on content analyses of serialized articles in prefectural newspapers, he developed the concept of "Revitalization Journalism." It refers to an editorial orientation that strives to promote identity-building and support local businesses in view of the rapid demographic change and economic decline in rural areas. Rausch (2012) also found elements of the revitalization narrative to be salient in newspaper coverage following the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in 2011.

Rausch's findings indicate that local media in Japan often tries to actively contribute to the welfare of its community. This draws attention to the origins of local reporting in Japan. Hayashi and Kopper (2014) describe a historically evolved reporting style where the journalist becomes an integral part of the social environment he or she covers, sharing the everyday needs and sorrows of residents. Contrasting Western-shaped ideals such as the 'detached watchdog,' the journalist seeks to assume the perspective of the average reader. This grassroots-style reporting technique is most conspicuous on the social pages (*shakai-men*), which resemble a mixed category of local police reporting, gossip, scandals, self-help, and other themes. According to Hayashi and Kopper (2014, 7), it is "pervasive to all other types of journalistic activities in Japan," including disaster coverage, which routinely focuses on the perspective of those victimized by disaster.

Several other examples highlight local media's distinct form of journalism. For instance, Fukasawa (2013) explains "Care Journalism" (Hayashi, 2011) is a "normative theory that envisions journalists to report the focal matter from the standpoint of the socially weak and vulnerable", and is a key principle for local media. Additionally, "Tsunagaru (connecting) Journalism" (Terashima, 2010) is a theory of local media developed by Hideya Terashima of *Kahoku-Shimpō* that sees its normative role "to provide a platform and facilitate discussion between local citizens, aiming to aid their effort to resolve the given matter" (Fukasawa, 2013, 83).

### Japanese local media and disaster reporting

Media started to play a role in disaster mitigation in Japan after the devastating Kantō Earthquake in 1923, which killed more than 140,000 in Tokyo and beyond. The broadcaster NHK was founded three years later partly because the lack of communication with the affected population caused huge problems with regard to the fires that quickly spread following the earthquake (Tanaka and Satō, 2013). In the postwar era, media organizations, first and foremost NHK, were legally obliged to spread disaster-related information (Yamada, 2004). While the

public broadcaster has adopted the role as main source for early warnings and instant information in case of disaster, the local media proved most valuable with regard to micro-level information concerning shelter, food and water supplies, information about survivors, and more (Shigyō, 2011).

However, while Japanese media are routinely expected to contribute to disaster mitigation, there is a significant qualitative difference between so-called natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunami, heavy rains, and industrial disasters like the decade-long lead poisoning in Minamata, which began in the 1950s, or the Fukushima disaster of 2011. These two types of disasters will therefore be looked at separately, with a special focus on how the information needs of affected communities were (or, in some cases, were not) satisfied by reporting.

### **Natural disasters**

A major earthquake in Niigata prefecture in 1964 left a group of primary school students and their teacher, who had gone on a trip, unharmed but cut off from communication. The teacher convinced a team of NHK to broadcast the message that none of the students was harmed on TV. After the report aired, more and more people requested the public broadcaster to transmit their sign of life as well. In the end, around 8,000 groups or individuals sent a sign of life via TV (Yamada, 2004, 3). After an earthquake in Miyagi prefecture in 1978, NHK radio took up an important role for the first time. The affected communities were provided with important lifeline information such as access to water and food supplies (*ibid.*, 5). This shows that despite being a national broadcaster, NHK provided localized information from early on, facilitated by its dense network of branches and regional bureaus even in Japan's rural areas.

However, in the aftermath of the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake disaster, which killed more than 6,000 people and widely destroyed urban infrastructures in the city of Kobe, national TV stations received sharp criticism. One important issue was that they repeatedly aired iconic pictures of destruction but failed to portray human suffering (Sekito, 2004, 83). Contrastingly, local media was praised because it was committed to sincere and constructive reporting and empathized much more with the people affected (*ibid.*, 124). The role journalists took up was also groundbreaking because they used mobile data transmission for the first time during a disaster (Kopper, 1995). Remarkably, they did not only use it for reporting, but also to establish improvised communication and information hubs available to anyone. Locals could, for instance, send out a message to their relatives or file a missing person's report, a service the often overtaxed authorities were not capable of at that time.

Based on the experiences such as the earthquake in Kobe, Oda (1997) developed a phase model that reflects the changing information needs of affected communities that media are expected to satisfy after a disaster (Table 41.1). This model showcases how disaster reporting in Japan is generally geared toward mitigation and providing vital information to locals. While national media, especially NHK, are crucial for quick warnings and initial information like the scale of disaster and degree of danger, local media have proven much more useful when it comes to mid- and long-term information such as relief efforts, supplies, lifeline restoration, and so forth.

As the literature shows, the focus on restoration, a typical long-term reporting issue after disasters especially for local and regional media, is of special importance in terms of coping strategies. Reminding the victims and survivors of their current plight by disseminating the reality of their condition may not only trigger trauma and sadness but also may be seen as a disservice for the spirit of restoration (Rudyanto and Arif, 2016, 149).

Table 41.1 Thematic focus of disaster coverage changing over time

<i>Period (passage of time)</i>	<i>Information need</i>
Disaster (time of occurrence)	Existing situation, scale of disaster, degree of danger, and extent of damage
Damage spread period (few hours to one day)	Spread of damage, conditions in other areas, state of disaster mitigation activities
Rescue and relief (two to three days)	State of rescue and relief efforts, supply of water and food, lifeline damage, and recovery forecasts
Recovery (one week to one month)	Lifeline restoration, reopening and restoration of homes, workplaces, and health, education, and medical facilities
Restoration	Housing reconstruction plans, regional economy, and society reconstruction policy
Normal	Knowledge of disasters in general, projected damage to housing, disaster prevention, and preparedness

Source: Oda (1997, 268; translation by Sekito, 2004, 57).

## Industrial disasters

Reporting by Japanese media about industrial accidents and disasters has often elicited more critical responses. This is also true for local media. For instance, the industrial lead poisoning scandal in Kumamoto prefecture, which started in the mid-1960s and caused the so-called ‘Minamata disease,’ was long covered up by politicians, authorities, and even local media (Ishikawa, 1990). Valaskivi (2015) sees an important reason for this in Japan’s press club system, which perpetuates media’s cozy relationships with politics and large companies, mostly in Tokyo, but also outside the capital (Freeman, 2000). According to Valaskivi, the Minamata case parallels allegations made against many Japanese media in the context of the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 (see Valaskivi, 2015).

According to Yamaguchi (2009, 77–78), a pivotal moment for industrial disaster reporting was the dioxin pollution coverage starting in the 1980s. Back then, TV Asahi’s flagship journalism program, Hodo-station, was severely criticized for unnecessarily stirring fear among the public about dioxin’s potential health implications. The media drew a lesson from this experience by reverting to a more conservative news format, avoiding deterministic content when reporting on instances with a high degree of uncertainty (*ibid.*, 80–81). However, simultaneously, local media was seen to immediately issue evacuation alerts to local residents, despite the confusion and uncertainty that culminated in the immediate aftermath of the Tokai-mura ‘criticality’ nuclear accident that occurred on the morning of September 30, 1999. The prefectural newspaper *Ibaraki Shimbun* was quick to prioritize the safety and well-being of local residents by issuing ‘Go-gai’ or special evening editions, strongly prompting nearby residents to evacuate given the potential health implications.

## The earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster of 2011

Like maybe no other disaster before, the great east Japan earthquake (also known as 3.11) hybridized ‘natural’ and ‘man-made’ disasters. This unprecedented, multiple disaster also challenged Japanese media organizations in a new way. Reporting the earthquake and tsunami,



which killed around 18,500 people and devastated hundreds of kilometers of coastline, would have been a difficult task alone. The incalculable and escalating nuclear disaster and the risks posed to the inhabitants of Fukushima and beyond was an even more challenging object of reporting.

With regard to the earthquake and tsunami, Japanese national media was given credit for saving “hundreds, maybe thousands of lives” (Harlan, 2011) thanks to instant warnings and instructional information concerning evacuation. NHK in particular was seen to play a pivotal role by directing residents out of danger in the attempt to minimize further casualties (Meguro, 2012). With regard to the nuclear disaster, however, national newspapers and TV stations especially were criticized for simply relaying the official announcements of the Japanese government as well as *Tepco*, the operator behind the crippled power plant. According to Itō (2012), for instance, these media became complicit in downplaying the disaster and withholding more critical voices from the public. However, local and regional media from the disaster area showed a different picture of the events.

A volume edited by Hanada (2012) showed that the two regional newspapers in Fukushima prefecture reported more openly about nuclear risk than national ones (Dezawa, 2012). Moreover, the biggest newspaper in the disaster area, the *Kahoku Shimpō*, based in neighboring Miyagi prefecture, quoted actors of civil society nearly as often as governmental sources and politicians (Rin, 2012). The kind of reporting observed among local and regional media was in stark contrast to the national media, which were often criticized for relying almost exclusively on official sources and pro-nuclear experts (Itō, 2012; Kataoka, 2012). Further evidence for the gap between national and local/regional media was provided by Yamada (2013), who conducted a content analysis of all national and prefectural and block newspapers from the disaster area over a month from March 11, 2011. Based on his findings, he concluded that the national newspapers reported mainly from the perspective of Tokyo and of national politics, while the papers of the affected Tōhoku region gave voice to those victimized by either the natural or the nuclear disaster.

Based on content analyses such as the aforementioned, Meissner (2018) investigated the self-perception of journalists working for local and regional media in the disaster area. In a qualitative interview study, he reconstructed three main ‘orientations’: (1) a supportive approach toward the people affected by the disaster, (2) a strong sense of belonging to the community covered, and (3) a critical distance toward Tokyo politics and media. The latter point is connected to the overwhelming centralism in Japan’s political system, which inspired local media to function as a mouthpiece for the needs and interests of their communities, striving to be heard even beyond the delineations of the disaster area (see also Meissner, 2019).

The supportive approach of disaster reporting and the strong commitment to one’s community are exemplified by the case of the *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun* (*ibid.*). After the tsunami had left the newspaper’s printing press defunct, the journalists started to publish a handwritten newspaper, which was delivered to the emergency shelters of the coastal town. The journalists continued their work despite most difficult circumstances in the inundated town and despite the fact that they themselves or their families were deeply affected by the disaster. The handwritten newspaper carried information about the scale of the disaster, the state of rescue efforts, as well as lifeline-related information. For many evacuees in the shelters, the handwritten newspaper was the only available source of information at that time.

However, regarding the nuclear disaster, local media also faced criticism. A volume edited by Sakata and Mimura (2016) juxtaposed surveys of Tōhoku residents affected by disaster and local TV journalists covering the events. The book outlines a tension field between public information needs and the difficult circumstances of reporting such a complex and large-scale

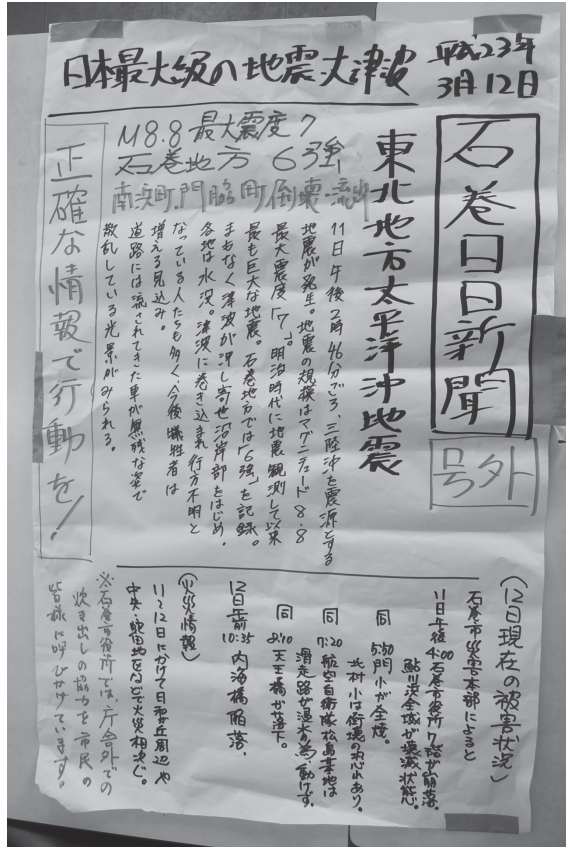


Figure 41.1 First ‘wall paper’ edition of the *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun* on March 12, 2011  
 Permission granted by *Ishinomaki Hibi Shimbun*.

disaster (Sakata and Mimura, 2016). As a result, local TV stations often relayed soothing official announcements concerning the nuclear disaster without further substantiation or independent assessment. This left many residents, who had particularly high expectations of the media during the crisis, in anxiety about risks related to radioactivity (Sakata, 2016; Sasaki, 2016). The project consequently identified a normative gap between the parties and proposed a means of reciprocal understanding through a more participatory form of local journalism. Additionally, Itō (2015) argued that the issue of radioactivity had initially been underestimated, including by local media, but had been reported in a much more extensive and differentiated manner in later stages, especially by the prefectural newspapers *Fukushima Mimpō* and *Fukushima Minyū*.

It deserves mention, however, that traditional local media were not the only significant alternative to the national media. In fact, the great east Japan earthquake was the first disaster in Japan where social network services (SNS) played an important role. SNS users in Japan increased dramatically after the disaster. One important reason was that trust in traditional media quickly eroded because of the way the nuclear disaster was reported (Yamada, 2013).

## Increasing significance of localized information on social networks during disasters

In terms of SNS usage in disaster situations, a large quantity of research has been generated, most of it pertaining to SNS usage in the aftermath of 3.11. Twitter has proven to be a powerful tool to collect and disseminate information, e.g., concerning the search for survivors or lifeline services (Yoshitsugu, 2011; Yamada, 2013). Facebook's platform was seen to contribute to the facilitation of an online community for users to share and collect information regarding a specific topic or area, with a higher degree of trust and reliability owing to its access management features (Ogawa et al., 2012). Numerous studies in the aftermath of 3.11 have made it evident that SNS can be utilized not only for personal communication, but, when harnessed properly, can morph into a powerful tool of social communication during crisis (Yoshitsugu, 2011, 23).

The intervention of such ICT platforms, however, did not negate the legitimacy of local media. As we have seen, local media have been considered to gravitate toward *anshin hōdō* (positive news) over *saigai hōdō* (disaster coverage), prioritizing the revitalization of the affected community rather than repetitively reminding the evacuees and victims of their unanticipated misfortune (Fukai, 2014; Yamanaka, 2018). Particularly crucial at times of disaster is to provide victims and associated parties with reliable information. While ICT platforms were heavily utilized, users found it difficult to organize the massive quantity of fluctuating information, as well as to navigate through inaccurate and/or false information (Ogawa et al., 2012). The spread of harmful rumors (*fūhyō*) has been seen as a huge problem especially in the context of the nuclear disaster (Yamada, 2013). In this context, local media entities were seen as invaluable assets for citizens to seek credible but also relevant information that was in accordance with their situation and needs (Endō, 2011).

## Conclusions and outlook

In this chapter, we have outlined that local media plays an active and crucial role in providing lifeline-related information after a disaster. Above that, journalists of local and regional media outlets also adopt the role of a mouthpiece for those affected. This role concept is based on (1) a long tradition of disaster reporting that prioritizes the needs of victims, (2) a grassroots perspective of reporters who draw from their close-knit local networks to support citizens affected by disaster, and (3) a strong sense of duty to contribute to the welfare of local communities, which is captured by theoretical and/or normative concepts such as Revitalization Journalism, Care Journalism, or *Tsunagaru* Journalism. For these reasons, media organizations, respectively journalists, feel obliged to contribute to lifeline information and create or uphold a spirit of restoration.

When it comes to industrial disasters, however, the role of local media has been much more ambivalent, especially when a high degree of uncertainty is involved, for instance, concerning the spread and potential effect of radioactive or otherwise toxic substances. In that regard, the nuclear disaster of Fukushima parallels earlier cases such as the lead poisoning case in Minamata. On the other hand, studies have shown that in the case of imminent danger, local media communicated more openly about nuclear accidents than national media in Japan. Since the great east Japan earthquake in 2011, social networks services have increasingly complemented local disaster reporting. Scholars have engaged in debate about advantages such as instant warnings, evacuation orders, and lifeline information, and problems like information overflow, or the spread of harmful rumors. In this context, local media entities were seen as invaluable

assets for those affected by disaster to seek credible but also relevant information concerning their vital needs.

While the research surveyed in this chapter is certainly fruitful for the critical analysis and development of local media disaster reporting, it is striking that Japanese media coverage of disasters is hardly, if ever, viewed within the framework of democracy. In other words, what the media does (or doesn't do) is often perceived as an issue in itself rather than a 'symptom' that derives as a result of the democratic 'coloration' (Hallin and Mancini, 2004, 8), or the larger socio-political environment in which the media are situated in. This may also be related to the fact that citizens in Japan mostly consider themselves to be spectators of socio-political matters rather than active and responsible democratic citizens (Tsukada, 2015), a 'coloration' that, according to Strömbäck (2005, 338), justifies a form of journalism that relies on and relays the narrative of the establishment. We therefore recommend further research to investigate the political dimension of local disaster reporting in Japan and beyond.

### Note

- 1 Data taken from the *Nihon Chiiki Shinbun Kyōgikai*, accessed 16 September at [www.loco-net.info/user\\_data/list1.php](http://www.loco-net.info/user_data/list1.php).

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# PUBLIC SERVICE JOURNALISM AND ENGAGEMENT IN US HYPERLOCAL NONPROFITS

*Patrick Ferrucci*

## Introduction

Beginning in the 1980s, journalism in the United States found itself at another crossroads. The profitability of the industry caught the attention of corporations and conglomerates and those organizations began to purchase journalistic enterprises, both print and broadcast (Barnouw, 1997, 89). This change brought with it further upheaval in the form of a more market-driven approach to news production (Beam, 1998). Essentially, prior to this period, journalistic organizations made so much in terms of profit that owners, typically local families, allowed the editorial department – the news division – to operate relatively autonomously (Bagdikian, 2004; Gans, 2004). However, with corporations now calling the shots, owners chis-eled away at this autonomy with seemingly small changes designed to position news content in a more market-driven manner (Underwood, 1993). At the height of this era, scholars began noticing the influx in lifestyle, entertainment, and sports stories, for example (Beam, 2003). Through an ethnographic study of numerous newsrooms, McManus (1994) labeled this period and type of journalism as market-driven journalism and warned that this trend of considering news readers or viewers to be *consumers* instead of *citizens* could potentially become a threat to democracy. For decades prior, the industry engaged with the question of whether journalism should provide people with what they need or what they want (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007); however, now that debate was not hypothetical and it was occurring in newsrooms across the country (Gans, 2004).

Roughly a decade later, in the early and mid-1990s, journalists became weary of the changes happening in their industry, and practitioner Davis Merritt and scholar Jay Rosen came together to explore the concept of what they entitled public or civic journalism (e.g., Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1994). Public journalism, they argued, meant reorganizing journalism to put the public first; it meant cultivating civic life and catalyzing public discourse (Rosen, 1999). To the two, journalism's move toward prioritizing financial gains led to troubles in democracy and led to a journalism industry that treated the public like consumers at the expense of public dialogue and a clear focus on the press' role in deliberative democracy (Glasser and Craft, 1996). To Rosen and Merritt, the press needed to understand that the public must be part of journalism – that “when the performance of the press deteriorates ... then public life suffers as well” (Rosen, 1996, 2).



Yet over time, the public journalism movement failed relatively quickly in newsrooms. In short, journalists felt the movement also chipped away at their autonomy and was not launched with the democracy in mind, but rather as another way to generate more economic capital (Gade and Perry, 2003). In fact, the term became so synonymous with negative implications and carried such a “generally negative reaction” that scholars stopped using the phrase when trying to understand the movement’s effects (Ferrucci, 2015d; Voakes, 1999, 762). But while public journalism did not have the effect its founders Merritt and Rosen predicted and hoped for, it did make the industry take note that it was potentially not serving its role in a democracy well (Rosenberry and St. John, 2010). Due to this, scholars began trying to understand the general tenets of public journalism (e.g., Nip, 2008), and then apply those characteristics to a new form of journalism called *public service journalism* (e.g., Ferrucci, 2015d, 2017a).

While the journalism industry and journalism studies scholars have utilized the term public service journalism for decades, the meaning of the concept remained unclear and quite nebulous, with most defining it in some similar manner as the kind of journalism “required by democracy” (Konieczna, 2018, 6). While this type of definition, on the surface, is correct, it lacks nuance and does not provide a blueprint for how journalistic organizations can accomplish the goal. However, my research (2015, 2017, 2019) looked toward hyperlocal, digitally native news nonprofits (DNNNs) to provide the answers. This chapter examines a conceptualization of the term *public service journalism* and then explains how journalists in these hyperlocal nonprofits are accomplishing this goal of creating journalism that “drops the illusion of (journalists) as bystanders” and acts as a foundational piece of democracy (Rosen, 1996, 6).

## Public journalism

By the time Rosen and Merritt introduced public journalism, the industry was suffering not only from an economic downturn, but also a crisis of credibility (Nip, 2008). The adoption of public journalism, at least in the early years, came in the form of projects; news organizations would often attempt to accomplish the goals of public journalism while reporting on one specific topic over an extended period of time (Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1999). Over time, though, many of the ideals of the movement became commonplace in the industry, even well after the movement ended (Rosenberry and St. John, 2010). Yet similar to the aforementioned *public service journalism*, even as the movement grew in popularity during the 1990s, the definition of public or civic journalism was often a moving target (Corrigan, 1999). Therefore, almost a decade after its demise, Nip (2008) conducted a thorough review of the literature surrounding public journalism to unearth its undisputed tenets. She found that public journalism aimed for four things: to engage the community through open dialogue; to let ordinary people have influence over news organizations’ agendas; to make the news more understandable; and to report on issues in a manner that galvanized the community rather than frustrated it (Nip, 2008).

Ironically, while public journalism all but disappeared from newsrooms around the turn of the century (Nichols et al., 2006), technological advancements in the newsroom made it far easier for journalists to accomplish the main four goals identified by Nip (2008); in fact, one could argue that the ability to communicate with the public through social channels allows for a type of engagement newsrooms have always desired (Ferrucci, 2017a; Rosenberry and St. John, 2010). Yet, without calling it public journalism, many news organizations are embracing relatively new technologies to accomplish the aforementioned movement’s goals. Ferrucci (2015d) argued that these organizations essentially followed public journalism’s goals, with one caveat. While they allowed the audience a say in the news agenda, journalists still held onto their autonomy and ultimately controlled the news agenda, with some influence from the audience.

He called this slightly altered type of public journalism *public service journalism*. And one type of news organization, specifically, is incorporating elements of public service journalism as one of its explicit goals; this type of model is the digitally native news nonprofit (e.g., Ferrucci, 2015a, 2017a; Kennedy, 2013; Konieczna, 2018; Konieczna and Robinson, 2014).

### **Digitally native news nonprofits**

DNNNs are news organizations birthed on the internet without any legacy component that came first (i.e., newspaper). These nonprofit organizations are typically funded through a variety of revenue streams such as grants, reader donations, memberships, advertising, corporate sponsorships, live events, and community workshops, among other money-making activities (Kaye and Quinn, 2010; Konieczna, 2018; Larson, 2015). The vast majority of these organizations were founded by ex-print journalists who believed that their former legacy media employers were failing communities (Ferrucci, 2015a; Konieczna, 2018; Remez, 2012; Kennedy, 2013). In short, DNNN founders believed that their former employers, profit-based news organizations, were prioritizing news that focused on reader wants and not on the kind of stories that helped strengthen democracy (Ferrucci, 2015a).

Over roughly the last decade, scholars have begun examining how these DNNNs operate in a variety of different manners. Some works examine how funding structures impact news practices (Konieczna, 2014; Ferrucci et al., 2017; Nee, 2013); how leadership impacts organizational culture (Ferrucci, 2015a); how the government's potential role in funding news nonprofits could violate the first amendment and journalism's role as a watchdog (Nee, 2014); how these organizations are creating new norms (Konieczna, 2014); how nonprofit content differs from content from legacy media organizations (Ferrucci, 2015b, 2015c; Ferrucci et al., 2019); how these DNNNs tell stories that potentially rebuild public trust in journalism (Konieczna and Robinson, 2014); how journalists perceive working conditions at nonprofits (Ferrucci, 2018); how technology is utilized at this type of newsroom (Ferrucci, 2017b; Ferrucci and Tandoc, Jr., 2015); how the market model strengthens democracy (Konieczna and Powers, 2017); how these organizations can attain sustainability (Kim et al., 2016); and how the market model introduced non-journalistic actors into the field of journalism (Ferrucci, 2019; Konieczna et al., 2018). In short, DNNNs have been studied in many ways and lauded as a market model making a significant contribution to democracy (Konieczna, 2018), and this chapter examines the practices DNNNs implement to engage in public service journalism.

### **Method**

For this chapter, all quotations come from long-form, in-depth interviews with 27 full-time journalists at 20 different DNNNs in the United States. A list of DNNNs from a large journalistic organization was used for recruitment purposes. From that list, the researcher chose the 30 largest DNNNs in the United States, by number of employees, then sent recruitment emails. If a potential participant accepted the request, the researcher confirmed that the potential participant worked full-time for the organization. Finally, if the potential participant met the requirement, a Skype or phone interview was scheduled. The average length of conducted interviews was 51 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions meant to encourage detailed answers (McCracken, 1988). All participants were asked the same protocol of questions, but follow-ups were asked based on each participant's initial answers. The interviewees' experience in journalism ranged from 11 months to 34 years. The interviews featured 17 men and 10 women.

The researcher promised all participants anonymity and confidentiality. The audio interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis using traditional qualitative data analysis methods (Emerson et al., 2011; McCracken, 1988; Spradley, 1979). Specifically, the researcher employed the three-step process outlined by Emerson et al. (2011). This involves a first step of writing memos, which consists of closely reading through transcripts while writing notes. The second stage involves open coding; that means the researcher performs a line-by-line reading of the data, identifying themes. For the third stage, the researcher conducts focus coding, which means returning to the data with the themes and patterns in mind and, thus, beginning a draft of the findings.

## Findings

This section details how journalists at digitally native local nonprofits accomplish the goals of public service journalism. Therefore, this section is split into four sections representing each of the four undisputed tenets of public service journalism, building on the work done by multiple researchers (e.g., Ferrucci, 2015d, 2017a; Nip, 2008). Those four tenets are: engage the community through open dialogue; let ordinary people have influence over news organizations' agendas; make the news more understandable; and report on issues in a manner that galvanizes the community rather than frustrating it.

### Engage the community through open dialogue

Journalists interviewed from hyperlocal digital news nonprofits discussed five distinct practices happening in newsrooms that fulfilled this tenet. First, they talked about email newsletters. Almost every journalist mentioned newsletters as a significant way to engage the community. One said she believed these newsletters kept readers in the loop and truly catalyzed discussion. "I believe we engage in many ways," she said, "but the email newsletters do it optimally, the best really. Our community stays up to date on what we're doing, but the emails always include a button for people to talk back and give their impressions of what we say we're doing. It closes the loop." This was a common refrain amongst those interviewed; email newsletters not only encourage openness with the community, but, if they're done correctly with a clear, easy option for feedback, they let the community have a say in where stories are going. Second, at least one interviewee from each of the organizations represented cited how their organizations put email addresses and/or social media contacts on every story published. By doing this, they argued, the community could have an easy way to talk back to journalists, to have their say about a specific issue or story. This practice also overlapped with posting stories or story links on social media, which then meant comment threads could be started and a dialogue could begin about the story or topic in question. "It's similar to comment sections, really," said one journalist, "but I think the level of discussion is so much better on, say, Facebook. I've posted stories on Facebook and what followed, sometimes, was very good, topical conversations between me and our readers and members."

Third, eight of the journalists interviewed talked about how their organization set up tables at popular stores in the community and solicited direct feedback from the community. One journalist described the practice thusly:

I'd never heard of it before I came [to this organization], but I was asked to do it one week and love it. We set up a table [at the local grocery store] and wear shirts that advertise us. Sometimes you will see a table [for the local newspaper], but we're not selling anything. Instead, we just ask people for feedback. We want to know what's

important to them and how we can help. I really do love it and the times I've done it, we were able to get good story ideas.

Fourth, numerous journalists mentioned a well-publicized phone line dedicated to community engagement. This phone line essentially works as a hotline dedicated to news. According to one journalist interviewed, his organization gives out this number on the website but also at all community events, and leaves fliers including the number in popular spots around the community. One interviewee said the hotline is an important addition to traditional electronic means of communication. "We've found that there are people who don't want to email or go through social media. Sometimes they're old and rely on older technology, but other times they don't want internet evidence. The hotline receives quite a few tips a week." Finally, journalists at nine of the organizations represented highlighted an open-door policy. "Our newsroom is small," explained one journalist:

So, typically, there are not many of us there, but the community can visit us any time during normal bank hours and discuss things. People don't take us up on it often, but I think it creates goodwill and maybe helps us encourage other engagement activities.

### **Influence over news agendas**

The journalists interviewed for this chapter identified four main practices common in most of these hyperlocal nonprofits that effectually provide the audience with some agency over news agendas. Ultimately, with these practices, journalistic organizations still maintain overall autonomy over news agendas, but these practices specifically exist to give the public some sway. The most-mentioned practice aimed at this goal features newsrooms holding what many interviewees called 'community meetings.' These meetings are scheduled events held in prominent public spaces that give the attendees a chance to talk about what's happening and what is important in their lives. As one journalist said:

The thing that must be kept in mind is that we come to these without an agenda. What I mean is that it's common practice for journalists to hold meetings in the community as a way to solicit information about a topic. For these meetings to work, we don't come with a topic in mind. It's an open discussion with the ultimate goal of informing us about issues and concerns we might be unaware of.

All but one journalist interviewed discussed this type of meeting as a way that the audience has some influence over what journalists cover. The second-most mentioned practice involved polling conducted through social media. Most journalists interviewed discussed a practice involving their news organization brainstorming a small handful of topics they feel are under-covered and then publishing a poll on social media that would allow the audience to vote. "We include four topics," said one journalist, "and these are general topics. And whichever garners the largest amount of votes, we cover in some way." Again, this practice involves the journalists essentially deciding on the scope of the discussion – the four-or-so potential topics – but then the audience or community would have power of choosing between those options.

The third practice uncovered through interviews concerns the opening of news meetings to the public. Some news organizations consistently publicize the schedule of their news meetings and allow the public to attend, if they RSVP. One journalist described this practice as not only a way for the community to impact a news agenda, but also as a measure of transparency.

Our website has this space for people to sign up to come to our afternoon news meetings. They come and can understand why we do what we do and they can also interject their opinions on our plans.

Fundamentally, the news organizations that implement this practice attempt to fill all of their chairs in their editors' news meetings daily. Therefore, for example, one journalist said the meeting room at his organization holds 15 people, but only roughly eight journalists attend daily, so about seven people can sign up to attend the meetings. Across all organizations, this practice normally entices two or three community members daily to attend and those people are usually the same. "Truthfully, there is a group of five people that make up probably 99% of the attendance at these meetings," explained one journalist. "That sounds like this might be frivolous, but those people are clearly engaged and bring a lot of community knowledge and insight."

### **More understandable**

Journalists interviewed discussed four main practices implemented by their news organizations as a means to make news more understandable. The first, and most commonly noted, is simply including numerous hyperlinks in all stories. "Let's face it," said one journalist, "you can't make a story include enough context for everyone. Good links let us make stories succinct, while still letting readers get more information if needed." Consistently, the journalists interviewed identified hyperlinks as something used for two primary reasons: to give stories more credibility, but also to give interested or confused readers more context to understand a story. As one journalist said:

I'm a journalist, yes, but I'm also a news reader. I get upset when stories cover complicated subjects and don't give me the required information, the information I have to have to form an opinion about the subject matter. I believe this is the purpose of links. If a story has them, I can follow those links without much effort and learn what I should know.

The second practice identified is making sure comment sections are interactive. Many journalists interviewed both lamented how much vitriol could be included in comment sections, while also saying that if journalists consistently respond to legitimate comments, they could help readers understand stories and journalism in general. Essentially, the interviewees believe that many comments, both positive and negative, include ideas that may not be grounded completely in accuracy and therefore if journalists respond to these, they can help with a learning process, thereby making news more understandable.

The third practice included in this tenet concerns utilizing more data visualization. One journalist described this thusly:

The hardest stories to understand are ones about numbers. Whether they're policy stories, budget stories, whatever, numbers and, even, science-type pieces are the most complicated. Many people are like me. Let's face it, those types of investigations are complicated and words do not exactly help sometimes. [My organization] have a policy that it's important to use [visualizations] to help illustrate the complex things. It just makes it much easier for everyone – including me – to get their heads wrapped around these more dense pieces.

Others echoed the same point: many people learn better through visuals. Also, many of these digital hyperlocals focus extensively on government issues; these issues tend to be policy-based and feature more complicated subjects. It's important to note that these journalists did not only mean visualizations including numbers, but also things as simple as maps or timelines could also catalyze better understanding. Finally, the fourth practice is similar to the previously mentioned one involving responding to comments. Numerous journalists talked about holding online chats with readers. Basically, these question-and-answer sessions not only allow readers to get to know their local journalists better, but also allow for an open forum where readers can ask direct questions of journalists. The interviewees mentioned that sometimes these sessions can include more general questions about journalistic process, but could also include specific questions about stories.

### **Galvanize the community**

The last tenet of public service journalism (e.g., Ferrucci, 2015d) revolves around the practice of publishing stories and reporting on news in a way that galvanizes the community instead of frustrating it. Numerous journalists interviewed discussed this tenet, in some manner, as being integral to the way their organization operates. "It's a fundamental principle here," one said, "to make sure we're not publishing information without any context about how to maybe fix things." Basically, this journalist said that one of the reasons the founder of her organization started the place was due the feeling that legacy media's main goal, in current times, is to "titillate" readers with "scandalous" news without the required context to actually act on this. Many of the journalists talked about solutions journalism. Some mentioned how they were in contact with the team that works with the organization the Solutions Journalism Network (i.e., SJN, 2018), but others just talked about 'solutions journalism' as a mission to provide solutions, when possible, to the community. Said one interviewee:

You're not always going to have the answers. You don't always have those solutions. It could simply be giving someone a call to action or telling people what to do next, if they want to do something next. The key is not reporting on a problem and then giving people nothing to work with, you know?

The second practice associated with this tenet goes back to the aforementioned community meetings. Those meetings allow journalists the opportunity to hear community needs and potentially not write about them, but point citizens in the correct direction to improve on a problem or concern. "In multiple cases, I would say," said one journalist interviewed, "those meetings can turn into self-help sessions where people have problems they don't know the solution to and we help them. It has nothing to do with journalism and everything to do with being good community partners." Finally, the last practice includes story selection. Essentially, numerous journalists said, their organizations avoid 'crime-of-the-day' stories that do nothing but alert the community something bad happened. "We cover crime," said one journalist, "but not the specific crime, if that makes sense. We cover the issue and how to maybe fix the issue."

### **Conclusion**

This chapter examines how hyperlocal nonprofits located all around the United States are accomplishing the goals of the now-defunct public journalism movement (Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1996). Because these organizations focus on engagement generally, and do not turn

over their news agenda completely to the audience, it is not exactly public journalism, but a conceptualization of public service journalism first introduced by my own work (2015d). Essentially, what this chapter illustrates is how hyperlocal nonprofits, freed from the hierarchical structure of corporate ownership, have been able to implement practices aimed primarily at engaging audiences and working toward a more public service model of journalism, a model that prioritizes the public good and not profitability.

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# LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## The merit goods argument

*Phil Ramsey and Philip McDermott*

### Introduction

Public service media (PSM) in Northern Ireland (NI) has been subject to significant scholarly attention. In particular, substantial scrutiny exists on how the BBC reported on ‘the Troubles’ (Schlesinger, 1987) and, more recently, in terms of how the Corporation serves NI’s divided society (Ramsey, 2016). In this chapter we address both local PSM and PSM services from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) that are accessible in NI, and consider the role that these organisations play in enhancing the public sphere in two prominent areas. First, we relay how PSM maintain and support local journalism in the face of a decline in local newspapers; second, we assess the role that PSM play in supporting cultural minorities through broadcasting for Irish-language and Ulster-Scots communities. Throughout, we primarily draw on Ali’s (2016) argument that local journalism should be considered a merit good, rather than a public good, and apply this specifically to PSM’s role in the public sphere in NI. While we note shortcomings in the PSM approach, we argue for the continuation of PSM in maintaining local news provision and in protecting minority languages, in an era when both are under threat.

### Northern Ireland: social, economic and political context

NI is the smallest of the UK’s constituent countries (including England, Scotland and Wales), with a population of 1.8 million. The conflict, colloquially termed ‘the Troubles’ is generally considered to have lasted from 1968 to 1998, and left an indelible mark on society. There were more than 3,500 deaths, and while the most severe violence ended some 20 years ago, a modicum of sectarian violence continues and much of NI society remains divided. This is evidenced in education, housing, in the use of public space and often in public service delivery, which leads to higher public administration costs (e.g., in policing) (Wilson, 2016, 14). Inequality and social deprivation persist in many areas, with economic inactivity at 28 per cent, compared to the UK average of 21 per cent (Campbell, 2018). Politically, the NI Assembly and Executive were set up following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998 and

established power sharing between Irish Nationalist and (UK) Unionist parties. However, the arrangements reached an impasse in January 2017, with the cessation of normal political activities, and NI had no devolved government until 2020. A new power-sharing deal was reached in January 2020, though some seemingly intractable problems remain.

### **Local media: PSM, democracy and the public sphere**

In its report on the *Future for Local and Regional Media* in the UK, the House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee stated:

Local media performs numerous functions in society. It scrutinises and holds to account local authorities and institutions, it informs people of news and events in their communities, and it forms part of the local identity of an area.

*(House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2010, 3)*

As a summarising statement, the MPs on the committee offer an effective starting point in outlining why local media matter: in large part, local media provide “democratic accountability” for political institutions operating at a local level (House of Commons, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2010, para. 87). Moreover, the democratic and social importance of local media are frequently highlighted for their important role in the public sphere, where they are “essential to community solidarity, identity, and everyday life” (Ali, 2016, 109) and where, similarly, local media – such as local newspapers – are seen as being important tools to inform the public about local politics (Nielsen, 2016, 844).

An empirical intervention regarding what local media can provide, vis-à-vis national media, comes from audience research by Costera Meijer (2010) in relation to the public broadcaster AT5, a local television station based in Amsterdam. She found seven characteristics of the station’s programming relating to the importance of local media:

- (1) supplying background information ...;
- (2) fostering social integration, or giving citizens insight into how the city “works”;
- (3) providing inspiration;
- (4) ensuring representation ...;
- (5) increasing local understanding;
- (6) creating civic memory; and
- (7) contributing to social cohesion, or a sense of belonging.

*(Costera Meijer, 2010, 327)*

To greater or lesser degrees, these characteristics contribute to the public sphere, the space in society where the public can access information circulating in the media system, and where public opinion is formed (Habermas, 2006). Local media contribute to a well-functioning public sphere as they can greatly increase the plurality of news providers – argued to be beneficial to democracy (Napoli, 2017, 377) – as citizens are exposed to various viewpoints, rather than a more limited range as would be the case in their absence.

Given the strong theoretical basis for local media’s role, scholars have addressed how its continuation might be argued for in an era of decline. Ali (2016) suggests that local journalism should be described as a *merit good* rather than a *public good*, with news often rather considered the latter. Public goods are seen as those that are ‘non-rivalrous’ – where “one person’s consumption does not detract from another’s” (Picard and Pickard, 2017, 14) – and ‘non-excludable’, where “any purchaser and each nonexcluded beneficiary get roughly the same type of benefit from the good” (Baker as quoted in Ali, 2016, 110). However, for Ali, while:

public goods demand intervention only to the point that they continue to be consumed. ... In contrast, merit goods are based on a normative assumption that the good should be provided regardless of consumption habits.

(2016, 107)

Moreover, merit goods are those:

which society requires (such as healthcare services), but which individuals typically undervalue (are unable or unwilling to pay for), and thus the market underproduces.

(Picard and Pickard, 2017, 15)

For Ali (2016, 107), local journalism is of such “social democratic importance” that the merit good argument makes allowance for its continuation, even when audience consumption of local news is in decline (Ali, 2016, 106).

### Decline of the local press

Local media, especially those provided by the market, have been buffeted by a range of problems in recent years. Local media have faced limitations in staffing levels and resources (Nielsen, 2015, 13), meaning journalists are “stretched thin” (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2016, 802). In the UK, the demise of the local press is exemplified in the massive decline in circulations, and in the fracturing of the business model underpinning many local newspapers. Between 1985 and 2005 the UK lost 401 local newspapers, despite sales peaking in 1989 (when each week there were nearly 48 million sold, an astonishingly high figure for a country the size of the UK) (Franklin, 2006, 5). Between 2005 and 2018, a further 200 or more local newspapers have closed, with 58 per cent of the UK population now estimated to have no local daily or regional newspaper (Hutton, 2018). Despite this, ten local newspapers were launched in the UK in 2017 (Kakar, 2018). The sector has also witnessed massive financial losses, with the publisher Reach Plc (formerly known as Trinity Mirror) writing down the value of its local news assets by £150 million (Sweeney, 2018).

In NI, the local press (including the regional press) has faced major problems, especially in declining readership. McLaughlin (2006, 61) noted that in 2006 NI had 73 weekly newspapers in a society with fewer than 1 million adults. Many local newspapers in NI are targeted at either Nationalist or Unionist readerships, but not both, lessening competition and duplicating provision (McLaughlin, 2006, 61). In the intervening years, figures have declined further with the closure of 11 local newspapers for financial reasons in 2017 alone (BBC News, 2017). This is also the case for the four NI-published newspapers that are available across the region, the *Belfast Telegraph*, the *Irish News*, the *News Letter* and the *Sunday Life* (a Sunday-only publication). The circulations of these publications have dramatically declined each year. However, the decline is most striking when 2018 figures are compared to those from 2005 (see Table 4.3.1).

One issue for the daily and Sunday regionals in NI is that they face competition from sales of both UK and ROI newspapers. This group includes the *Daily Mirror* and the ROI Newspaper *The Sunday World*, which publish versions specifically for readers in NI. Online, there has been differentiation of regional news provision, with digital-only local providers launching websites; these include *The Detail*, a not-for-profit venture that has been funded by the public, private and philanthropic sectors, and *Belfast Live*, which is published by Reach Plc.

Table 43.1 Northern Ireland-published regional newspapers: daily/Sunday-only

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>2005 circulation</i>	<i>July–December 2018 circulation</i>	<i>2017–2018 change in circulation</i>	<i>2005–2018 change in circulation</i>
<i>Belfast Telegraph</i>	94,000	33,951	–6.7 per cent	–63.9 per cent
<i>Irish News</i>	>48,000	32,315	–5.2 per cent	–32.7 per cent
<i>News Letter</i>	29,000	12,499	–8.8 per cent	–56.9 per cent
<i>Sunday Life</i>	84,082	30,435	–7.5 per cent	–63.8 per cent

Source: Based on Audit Bureau of Circulations (2019) and McLaughlin (2006, 61), including percentage-change calculations.

### Broadcast media in Northern Ireland

Compared to the decline of the local press, the audience for PSM has remained relatively stable. Audiences are served by the UK’s commercial public service broadcasters, Channel 3 (UTV in NI), Channel 4 and Channel 5. However, it is the BBC that is the main PSM provider in NI. In television, local ‘opt-outs’ appear on BBC One and BBC Two, with a significant BBC newsroom based in Belfast. In terms of BBC radio, NI is served, in addition to network services, by two stations: BBC Radio Ulster and BBC Radio Foyle, important providers of public service radio in the midst of the region’s social and political division (Ramsey, 2016).

Audiences in NI are also served by ROI PSM services through cross-border media consumption (Ramsey, 2015, 2018). Today, access to the ROI’s PSM services in NI is based on a mixture of formal and informal arrangements, whereby there is formal provision in some cases, while in others ‘signal slippage’ provides a solution. In addition to the largest ROI PSM organisation RTÉ, TG4 (*Teilifís na Gaeilge*) produces programmes mainly in Irish. The aforementioned GFA made provision to achieve “more widespread availability of *Teilifís na Gaeilge* in Northern Ireland” (NIO, 1998). In terms of consumption, broadly similar patterns to those among audiences in Great Britain are observable. However, statistics on NI’s radio audience indicate 9 per cent of its listening is taken up by “other” programming (neither BBC, national commercial, nor local commercial) (Ofcom, 2018, 39). This figure can perhaps be attributed to those listening to stations broadcast from the ROI. With regards to television, a significant proportion of NI’s population also watch ROI television channels either every day (e.g., RTÉ 1: 10 per cent) or at least every week (e.g., RTÉ 1: 17 per cent) (Ofcom, 2018, 19).

### Language policy and public broadcasting, 1998–2018

Another particular aspect of the local media landscape is the provision for minority languages through public service media. In order to provide context we now turn to address debates on language policy, which since the establishment of NI have often been dominated by questions of identity. Irish, and more recently Ulster-Scots, have acted as one of the many symbols of cultural difference between the Nationalist and Unionist communities in the region. While Irish is a Celtic language from the same language family as Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, Ulster-Scots might be attributed a more ‘disputed’ status linguistically. While some linguists consider Ulster-Scots to be a language in its own right, others view it merely as a dialect of English. What is clear is that there is a strong Scottish influence on Ulster’s vernacular speech, especially in North

Antrim, due to longstanding cultural connections between Ulster and Scotland. Consequently, the Ulster-Scots language tradition and wider cultural identity have become more visible in the region in the past 20 years (McDermott, 2019).

While English is the primary vehicle of communication in NI, affinity towards Irish or Ulster-Scots is still considered to be a declaration of political loyalty (McCall, 2002; Nic Craith, 2003). Balancing these sensitive identity questions is central to the development of language policy in a post-conflict society that has ostensibly placed “parity of esteem” at its core (Nic Craith, 2003). While there exist some examples of cross-community language learning, such as small groups of Protestant learners of Irish (see Mitchell and Miller, 2019), the language issue remains contentious overall, particularly among the political hierarchy.

In the 1970s, a range of developments to improve the situation for both languages occurred at the grassroots level, while from the mid-1980s onwards in the context of wider European regionalism, the question of minority-language rights gained prominence. The establishment of the Ulster-Scots Heritage Council in the early 1990s indicated a more formal approach within this language movement, while Irish also gained some ground due to the efforts of earlier community activists. This initial period of activism provided a starting point for the current context of minority-language recognition in the public sphere with Irish undeniably achieving wider visibility – as exemplified by the inclusion of a census question in 1991.

However, more organised approaches to policy came after the 1998 Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement), which determined to promote “respect, understanding and tolerance” for linguistic diversity in NI, in relation “to Irish, Ulster-Scots and the languages of various ethnic communities” (NIO, 1998). While supporters of minority languages might bemoan what they deem a continued poor level of provision, the 1998 Agreement’s ‘language clause’ acted as a point of reference for policymakers in post-conflict NI (McMonagle and McDermott, 2014). These developments have had implications on the ways that minority languages appear in the local media environment, which has seen a moderate growth in minority-language coverage. An influential international dimension in the form of the (Council of Europe’s) European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages, ratified by the UK in 2001, has also raised awareness of minority-language rights and coverage in broadcasting. The Charter provides an international monitoring process for minority-language provision throughout the continent. On several occasions, the Charter’s committee of experts in its reports has provided critical commentary on the levels of broadcasting for Irish and Ulster-Scots and has provided pressure for the alleviation of shortcomings in this and other areas (CoE, 2014, 37). As Brexit will not affect the UK’s ratification of the Charter, this international document will continue to act as an international monitoring agent of the minority-language broadcasting landscape.

Since 1998, however, the political landscape has also shifted significantly, which has had consequences for language policy in broadcasting. For instance, in NI, the Legislative Assembly was suspended from late 2002 until 2007 amidst political instability. In the attempts to reinstate governance, the less moderate parties Sinn Féin and the DUP gained ground and in such a charged environment both Ulster-Scots and Irish became even more politically expedient (McDermott, 2019). The DUP, as a means of further balancing provisions made to Irish-speakers in the 1998 Agreement, achieved certain stipulations for Ulster-Scots in the 2006 St Andrews Agreement – an accord that would eventually lead to the restoration of devolved power in 2007 (UK Government, 2006). Likewise, the Nationalist parties, especially Sinn Féin, have aimed to further consolidate the position of the Irish language. Indeed, the discourse of political elites on all sides, during this period and beyond, has often hidden the efforts of many individual activists who prefer a more politically neutral debate on linguistic diversity.

The 2006 St Andrews Agreement was, therefore, significant and led to what might be described as a second phase in the language policy debate from that initiated in 1998. For instance, there were further statements with regard to the promotion of Irish through the proposed introduction of an Irish Language Act. Commitments were also made to “*enhance and develop the Ulster Scots language, heritage and culture*” (UK Government, 2006; our emphasis), which was a shift from the GFA’s more ambiguous reference to Ulster-Scots. For Ulster-Scots, additional obligations were placed on authorities to further a strategy for wider recognition in areas such as broadcast media. Subsequently, in 2011, a Ministerial Advisory Group for Ulster-Scots was established to advise on policy change.

The key issue of contention, however, has remained the introduction of the proposed legal framework for Irish, which has not been implemented due to objections, mainly from Unionist parties. The unsuccessful attempts to introduce legislation was one cited feature of Sinn Féin’s withdrawal from government in January 2017. Ensuing campaigns at a community level, spearheaded by organisations such as *Conradh na Gaeilge* (The Gaelic League), have indicated that this is an issue that will continue to place language and identity politics at the centre of political debate for years to come.

### **Minority-language provision in broadcasting**

Today, audiences in NI are served by a developing provision in Irish and Ulster-Scots. Language activists, however, often argue that broadcasting for minority languages in other parts of the UK is vastly superior with dedicated television and radio stations for both Scottish Gaelic and Welsh. The availability of TG4 from the ROI provides the most substantial service in Irish, while local BBC services, along with RTE provision, also offer programmes in Irish for speakers in NI. In relation to specific BBC coverage, the first programmes in the Irish language appeared on Radio Ulster in 1981, and were followed ten years later with the first television broadcast (McDermott, 2007). The contemporary picture is that a number of Irish-language programmes are broadcast on television (e.g., *Gaeilge* Collection (BBC, 2018a)), while a wider range and more regular set of programmes are broadcast on BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, with the half-hour slot following 7 p.m. usually reserved in the schedules for Irish-language programming.

Ulster-Scots provision on television is slightly different, as much of what the BBC terms Ulster-Scots output includes programming on culture (such as poetry, music and dance), but is broadcast in English (BBC, 2018b). On BBC Radio Ulster/Foyle, audiences are served by the weekly magazine-style programme *Kintra*. However, to underline that minority-language provision is not simply the preserve of PSM, one Ulster-Scots community radio station, fUSE FM, broadcasts from Ballymoney in County Antrim (akin to Irish-language community provision, such as Raidió Fáilte). Outside of public service media provision, an alternative funding scheme is available to Irish and Ulster-Scots through a dedicated Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF) and an Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund (USBF), both of which are administered by the screen agency Northern Ireland Screen.

### **PSM provision for local news and minority-language provision: the merit goods argument**

When the issue of the decline of the local press is surveyed, NI is in a similar situation to the rest of the UK, with many newspapers in *significant* if not *terminal* decline. By contrast, PSM provision and consumption has remained relatively stable throughout this period, with the BBC in particular providing programming and services that are intrinsic to the functioning of the



public sphere in NI (Ramsey, 2016). PSM services can help ameliorate the effect of the decline of the local press, with Nielsen (2015, 3) suggesting that licence fee-funded PSM providers “face fewer challenges to their resource base (though in some cases well-known political pressures)”, with the proviso that “like their commercial counterparts, they generally provide more regional news than genuinely local news”. Indeed, BBC Northern Ireland conducts its news gathering and broadcasts in a way that is aimed at the whole NI population; while stories are gathered by a number of ‘district journalists’, they cannot replicate what, at least in ideal circumstances, local newspapers might publish. That said, services provided by BBC Northern Ireland have remained relatively stable while the local and regional newspaper sector has been in significant decline.

One way to bridge the gap between the resource bases of PSM organisations and the local press is through schemes like the one launched in 2017 between the BBC and the News Media Association, whereby 150 local democracy reporters “to cover council and public meetings across the UK” were funded by the BBC (at a maximum of £8 million per year), and are employed within local news organisations (BBC, 2017). As a form of information subsidy (Gandy, 1982), the scheme represents a major policy shift following many years of criticism that the BBC operations at a local level had been harming the local press, and instead offers a way in which PSM can support local news provision. Following on from this, the Cairncross Review (2019, 11) – set up to address the sustainability of journalism in the UK – recommended that “Direct funding for local public-interest news” be increased. Citing the BBC scheme, Cairncross suggested that an institute for public-interest news could be set up, which in the case of ongoing financial problems in the sector:

might become a rough equivalent to the Arts Council, channelling a combination of public and private finance into those parts of the industry it deemed most worthy of support.

*(Cairncross Review, 2019, 11)*

We now seek to apply Ali’s (2016) argument on local journalism as a merit good, as a means of arguing that PSM’s role in local media provision in NI should be viewed as a merit good. In his account, Ali (2016) draws examples from media policy; for our context, we apply the framework first to local media and second, in particular, to language provision in order to suggest that PSM offer a way of ensuring continued provision in both of these areas. First, on current trends, it can be postulated that local media in the private sector will continue to decline. While the BBC local democracy reporting scheme will help ameliorate the decline, it is to PSM-provided news that the merit good argument can be most readily applied; in this sense, it is normatively preferential for BBC News Northern Ireland, the PSM news-element of UTV, and TG4’s Irish-language *Nuacht*/news services to have their budgets for news protected and indeed grown. Moreover, with regards to the “normative assumption that the good should be provided regardless of consumption habits” (Ali, 2016, 107), the merit good argument can be used to deflect the threat that the moderate decline in consumption of PSM services might be used by less-than-supportive governments to scale back PSM funding and provision.

Second, PSM’s role in relation to minority-language provision in NI can be viewed through the lens of the merit goods argument. While there are the alternative funding streams of the ILBF and USBF available to broadcasters, it is PSM’s role as the primary deliverer of minority-language provision that makes most sense within this approach. While minority-language provision might be undervalued by the audience, and underproduced if left to the market, the merit goods argument provides the basis for provision to remain in place (cf. Picard and Pickard, 2017,

15). Given that PSM organisations such as the BBC already allow for provision in areas of lower audience demand, it is within PSM that the realistic future for minority-language broadcasting lies. While some provision will fall outside of PSM (such as the Irish-language and Ulster-Scots radio stations we note above), the levels of funding and resources required to provide good levels of minority-language provision can best be supported through PSM.

## Conclusion

While we have employed the merit goods argument here to illustrate that PSM's role in local news and minority-language provision is normatively important, that is not to say that it could not be improved upon. In news provision, BBC Northern Ireland could seek further areas for developing local news provision akin to that which is disappearing as local newspapers close (such as running BBC news webpages at a sub-level below the main BBC News webpage for Northern Ireland). Moreover, given the prominent role that minority languages play in the culture and politics of the region, BBC Northern Ireland provision could arguably be extended. Other options include taking better account of the all-island nature of broadcasting, such as exploring opportunities for greater activity in the area of NI-ROI PSM co-productions (Ramsey, 2015, 1204). We therefore do not argue that PSM is a perfect solution for the decline of local media, but it is the most fulfilling way that the merit goods argument can be grounded in actually existing conditions. In NI, it is those PSM services that are presently delivering good levels of local news and minority-language broadcasting that present the best chance for the continuation of such services.

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# PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL RADIO AGRICULTURAL BROADCASTS AND MESSAGE ADOPTION AMONG RURAL FARMERS IN NORTHERN GHANA

*Adam Tanko Zakariah*

## **Introduction**

The total population affected by hunger and malnutrition globally recently recorded the highest increase in about a decade, from 804 million in 2016 to 821 million in 2017 (FAO et al., 2018). The declining outlook of food crop productivity in many parts of the developing world provides little hope of a reduction in the crisis. In sub-Saharan Africa, the situation is worsening, despite the majority of the population (57.3 per cent) being engaged in agriculture (Dercon and Gollin, 2014; FAO et al., 2018). Indeed, there are fears that the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating hunger by 2030 will not be attained if efforts are not intensified to boost food productivity. As a result, significant efforts have been made in recent years to modernise the agricultural value chain.

In Ghana and elsewhere, science, technology and innovation have stimulated agricultural mechanisation, the development of improved seeds and plant varieties, manufacture of chemicals to control pests and diseases, techniques to reduce post-harvest losses as well as increased market access for farm produce (FARA, 2015). However, advances in agricultural innovations have witnessed limited diffusion to farmers, particularly smallholders, who still rely on rudimentary methods and approaches. Studies have shown that agricultural extension services provided by extension agents (EAs) are critical in agricultural innovations diffusion (FAO, 2010; Bonye, Alfred and Jasaw, 2012). In Ghana, EAs are largely employed by the state as frontline staff responsible for transferring agricultural messages and technologies, including performing demonstrations to farmers. Gebrehiwot has found that the services provided by EAs help to improve crop yields and incomes and thereby reduce household poverty among farmers (Gebrehiwot, 2015). Yet, most smallholder farmers in Ghana lack access to extension services. The farmer-to-extension officer ratio in Ghana is estimated at 1:1,500 (Amezah and Hesse, 2002; McNamara et al., 2014). In northern Ghana, most farmers live in rural areas, which lack

good road networks and efficient means of transportation. These, in addition to poor incentives and logistical constraints, make it extremely difficult for the few available EAs to reach out to farmers (Amezah and Hesse, 2002). In the light of these constraints, digital mass communication channels, such as radio, could provide viable alternatives to reach out to rural farmers (Ango et al., 2013; Omoghene et al., 2017; Gorman et al., 2018). Chapman et al. (2003) hold the view that local radio can be used for public good by disseminating agricultural messages to farmers. Against this background, this chapter explores the potential of local radio in communicating new ideas, innovations and practices in agriculture to rural farmers in northern Ghana.

### **The objectives of the study**

The main objective of the study is to assess the role of local radio in facilitating the dissemination of agricultural innovations and its adoption by rural farmers in northern Ghana.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- to assess the level of participation of farmers in agricultural radio programmes
- to examine farmers' level of understanding of such information
- to investigate farmers' level of adoption of such information
- to elicit suggestions from the farmers on how to improve agricultural radio programming.

### **Local radio and agricultural innovations communication**

Radio is a powerful tool for agricultural communication in most parts of Africa and Asia (Yadava, 1986; Rao, 1986; Myers, 1998; Chapman et al., 2003). This is largely due to its wide coverage, ability to transcend barriers of illiteracy (Head, 1974; Myers, 1998) and inadequate numbers of extension agents, limited logistics and poor transport networks (Chapman et al., 2003; McNamara, 2008). Radio's potential as a tool for agricultural extension has been identified by researchers internationally (Yahaya and Badiru, 2002; Murumba and Mogambi, 2017). Yahaya and Badiru's study among 198 farmers in south-west Nigeria showed they obtained vital information from agricultural programmes. Murumba and Mogambi's (2017) assessment of the impact of agricultural radio programmes in Kimilili sub-County in Kenya found that the farmers were economically empowered through the application of new knowledge and skills gained from the programmes – from the application of inputs to marketing of their produce (Murumba and Mogambi, 2017). In Nigeria's Bennue State, Omoghene et al. suggested after their 2017 study of 100 farmers that when radio messages are broadcast at suitable times to the farmers, and also when farmers listen in groups, these can enhance both reach and impact (Omoghene et al., 2017).

In the past two decades, studies have been conducted to determine the impact of local radio on agricultural communication in Ghana. Abbey-Mensah (2001) assessed the impact of rural broadcasting on improving productivity and argued that radio remains the commonest source of agricultural information. It was cheap to use and dry-cell batteries made it convenient, even in areas without electricity. Abbey Mensah (2001) found that broadcasts using a combination of news, interviews with successful farmers and talk-shows with experts on modern farming practices, and marketing of produce remarkably improved farmers' productivity and income.

In a study of vernacular broadcasts for agricultural communication in northern Ghana, Chapman et al. (2003) argued that local radio can widen the information networks available to farmers by creating a participatory platform for both extension agents and farmers to share

best techniques and practices. They found that using local languages greatly enhanced extension efforts and that combining drama with thematic discussions could stimulate interest. They suggested that targeted audience research was necessary prior to designing radio programme content and formats. After a survey of 365 farmers in Ghana, Zakariah (2008) reported that radio was their most popular and reliable source of agricultural information. Like Chapman et al., Zakariah (2008) concluded that with effective programming, radio had a great impact on agricultural knowledge gain. Taiwo and Asmah (2012) also assessed the role of rural radio in the sharing of indigenous agricultural knowledge in Ghana and revealed that non-cash crop yield had a stronger conditional correlation with the intensity of participation in radio agricultural programmes (Taiwo and Asmah, 2012). In a similar study in the Tamale metropolis of northern Ghana, Iddrisu and Shivram's interviews with chiefs, the clergy, media professionals and other key community opinion leaders revealed that radio is a very popular source for development messages, including agriculture, among both urban and rural dwellers (Iddrisu and Shivram, 2017).

The present research makes an empirical contribution to the body of literature by exploring the potential of local radio in facilitating the communication and adoption of agricultural innovations and practices in a rural Ghanaian context. The study examines farmers' agricultural radio programme listenership and levels of comprehension of the information. It investigates the relationship of farmers' socio-economic characteristics with their participation in agricultural radio programmes, and their adoption of agricultural radio messages.

## **Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were tested.

- There is a significant relationship between respondents' socio-economic characteristics and their participation in agricultural radio programmes.
- There is a significant relationship between respondents' socio-economic characteristics and their adoption of agricultural messages.

## **Methodology**

The study employed a mixed-method approach, involving quantitative and qualitative techniques. For the survey, a multi-stage cluster sampling technique was used to select respondents from ten communities in three regions of northern Ghana: Northern, Upper East and Upper West. Five rural districts were selected from the Northern region, three from Upper East and two from Upper West. In each district, one farming community was purposively selected and 10 per cent of the households randomly selected for the survey. A total of 260 adult farmers were interviewed using a set of questionnaires. The questionnaires sought to elicit responses on the farmers' demographic and socio-economic characteristics, their radio listenership and their level of comprehension and adoption of agricultural radio messages. Interviews were conducted face-to-face by six research assistants over two months.

Qualitative data were gathered through interviews with 20 EAs and local radio agricultural programme presenters. They were identified through a snowball technique, whereby initial respondents provided leads to reach out to subsequent respondents. An interview guide containing 12 open-ended questions was used to elicit interviewees' views on farmers' access to agricultural radio messages, the level of adoption and understanding of the messages and the potential of radio as a tool for agricultural extension and innovation. One interviewer

conducted the interviews over three weeks. The quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using SPSS Version 20. The analysis involved the use of Pearson's product moment correlation (PPMC) to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between dependent and independent variables. According to Pallant (2005), the Pearson's product moment correlation is suited for measuring continuous variables. The qualitative data were recorded electronically, then transcribed. The transcript was analysed to determine key themes and patterns in responses. In this way, the major themes that emerged from the data were used to further understand the effectiveness and reach of local radio as a tool for agricultural communication.

## **Findings and discussions**

### ***Respondents' socio-economic characteristics***

Most respondents (67.7 per cent) were males, and the rest (32.3 per cent) females. In northern Ghana, where the traditional family arrangement is patriarchal, land ownership, allocation and utilisation is determined by men (Kaunza-Nu-Dem et al., 2016). As a result, farming is a predominant occupation for men. The average age of the respondents was 38, with the youngest 23 and the oldest 70. About two-thirds (69.6 per cent) were between 31 and their 50s. The level of education was generally low. The highest qualification was a bachelor's degree, and only 2 (0.8 per cent) held this. More than half (69.2 per cent) had no formal education. Of these, 6.5 per cent indicated that they had gone through some non-formal literacy education. About a quarter (30 per cent) had formal education below the post-secondary level (see Table 44.1). The study found an overwhelming majority (93.4 per cent) earned GHC5,000 or below (approximately US\$1,000 or less in February 2019) from farming in the last crop season. The remaining 6.5 per cent earned above GHC5,000 but no more than GHC15,000 (approximately US\$3,000) (see Table 44.1). The generally low income earned from farming is attributable to the small land holdings. Almost all respondents reported that they were involved in animal rearing, petty trading, basketry, wood carving and value-added agro-processing as sources of additional income.

### ***Radio listenership***

Among the sources of media available to the 260 farmers interviewed, radio was the most popular. Almost all (95 per cent) owned radio sets, and all, including the few who did not own one, had access to radio and listened at least once a week. The few who did not own radios said they listened through family members and friends. Most (85 per cent) indicated they listened to agricultural programmes at least once a week. Studies in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa presented similar findings (Zakariah, 2008; Chapman et al., 2003). In a study in Ghana, Zakariah (2008) found that 87 per cent of farmers owned sets, and all the 365 farmers interviewed listened at least once a week. An earlier study by Chapman et al. (2003) in Ghana found that radio ownership among farmers was 58 per cent and all had access to sets any time they wanted to listen to news. The current findings indicate that radio ownership is increasing among rural farmers in Ghana. The study found that television came second to radio as a source of information for farmers but less than half (39.6 per cent) watched television. The high cost of sets makes it difficult for farmers to own them. Television receivers are fewer than radio sets (Abbey-Mensah, 2001) and the lack of electricity in some rural communities is also a disincentive. Newspaper readership was very low: only 18 respondents (6.9 per cent) read newspapers at least once a week. This is attributable to the high illiteracy rate in northern Ghana.



*Agricultural broadcasts in rural Ghana*

*Table 44.1* Respondents' gender, age, education and income

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	176	67.7
Female	84	32.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age</b>		
21–30	60	23.1
31–40	112	43.1
41–50	69	26.5
51–60	14	5.4
61–70	5	1.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Education</b>		
No education	163	62.7
Non-formal	17	6.5
Primary	27	10.4
Middle	14	5.4
JSS/JHS	20	7.7
SSS/SHS	17	6.5
Post-secondary	2	0.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Income (GHC)</b>		
< 1,000	148	56.9
1,001–2,000	56	21.5
2,001–3,000	18	6.9
3,001–4,000	14	5.4
4,001–5,000	7	2.7
5,001–6,000	5	1.9
6,001–7,000	4	1.5
9,001–10,000	1	0.4
10,001–11,000	4	1.5
14,001–15,000	3	1.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source:* Field data, 2018.

The findings support the argument of Iddrisu and Shivram, who contend that radio is by far the predominant mass communication tool in northern Ghana, with almost every household owning a set (Iddrisu and Shivram, 2017). The findings are also supported by views expressed by some of the agricultural extension agents as well as radio programme producers, who were interviewed as part of this study. For instance, Yaro Ishmael (RP with Might FM, Tamale) suggests that:

The rural farmers listen to radio more than any other medium, because for radio, they can carry it along wherever they go, unlike TV, which they can't carry around, and for newspapers, most of them cannot read because they are not literate!

Sule (EA, Sagnarigu District) said:

Most of the peri-urban communities and the villages have extension periods, and there are some radio stations that they normally pay attention to. So that any innovation that is coming, they listen to it. Even when you go to the communities and you are giving them sensitization on some issues, they themselves will tell you that they have heard it from this or that radio. So, they pay attention to the local radio programmes, especially when they broadcast in the local dialect.

The predominant view of the interviewees is that radio enjoys a wide listenership among rural folk. This notwithstanding, some of them emphasised the need for 'organised listenership' where the farmers are mobilised into 'listener groups' and regularly pre-informed to listen to specific programmes of interest. Yaro Ishmael said 'organised listenership' was employed both as an advocacy strategy and an instrument for monitoring and evaluation during a radio advocacy project on agriculture implemented by his radio station (Might FM) in partnership with Farm Radio International, a non-governmental organisation. Yaro says:

We were able to establish farmer groups, we called them 'listener groups' in various communities and by that ... any time there is a programme, they knew the time, they had to organise themselves and listen and contribute to the discussion. And we had a tracking system by which they normally called or flashed [our phone number] to let us know that they were listening.

A study by Omoghene et al. (2017) in Nigeria's Benue State found 'group listenership' had the potential to enhance both the reach and impact of agricultural programmes. Another EA, Fatawu Yakubu (Kumbungu District), said farmers tend to pay attention to agricultural programmes that discuss their immediate and most compelling problems. He cited a time when farmers encountered problems with the government's Fertilizer Coupon Distribution Programme in the Kumbungu District. He said radio programmes on the topic were heavily patronised by the farmers compared to other routine farmer educational programmes. This underscores the position of Blessed Dadzie (RP and agricultural documentary producer with Countrywise Communication, Tamale), who argued that the production of agricultural programmes should be preceded by a needs assessment to ensure that such programmes addressed the complex, multifaceted and evolving needs and challenges encountered by farmers. This reinforced Chapman et al.'s 2003 study in Ghana which highlighted the need for audience research prior to the design of agricultural programmes.

### ***Farmers' participation in radio agricultural programmes***

Farmers' level of participation in agricultural radio programmes was assessed through respondents' involvement in such programmes either as live panelists, or a replay of their recorded voices on radio, or via phone-in to live discussions. The findings (in Appendix 3) show that more than three-quarters (76.9 per cent) of the respondents did not participate in any agricultural radio programme. Only 23.1 per cent of the 260 respondents participated. Nakabugu (2001) argues that agricultural radio programmes generally provide opportunities for farmers to interact with agricultural experts through 'talk shows, phone-in programmes and on location broadcast (Nakabugu, 2001, cited in Khanal, 2011, 202). However, the findings of this study suggest that most respondents did not participate in agricultural radio programmes. The reasons cited by the respondents for non-participation ranged from lack of interest (17.7 per cent), lack of mobile phones to phone in with (8.85) and not having been invited to be interviewed by the radio stations (21.2 per cent). Other

reasons included lack of phone credit to call, and unsuccessful phone-in attempts due to the radio's line being too busy during phone-in periods (29.2 per cent).

Samuel Mbura (RP with A1 Radio, Bolgatanga) contends that participation in agricultural radio programmes is normally restricted to 'experts' with little involvement of the farmers as panelists. As he puts it: "Most of the time, we only have the experts coming on radio to talk, but we don't normally invite the farmers themselves". Only Yaro Ismael (RP in Tamale) reported that during agricultural radio programmes they had with Farm Radio International, they recorded the farmers' voices and played them on radio. This, Yaro argued, stimulated interest among farmers to listen to their programmes, because they enjoyed hearing their own voices on radio.

### ***Farmers' understanding of agricultural innovations broadcast on radio***

The study also explored participants' level of understanding of the agricultural innovations broadcast on local radio. The results (see Appendix 4) indicated that close to half (46.9 per cent) of the respondents said they *always* understood the agricultural messages, 41.2 per cent indicated that they understood *sometimes* and only 11.9 per cent say they *did not* understand at all. This implies that more than half of the respondents (53.1 per cent) had difficulty understanding some or all of the radio agricultural messages. While some suggest that the messages are not very clear in meaning (25 per cent), others think that the words used by the experts are too technical (18.8 per cent). A few attributed lack of understanding to the short duration of such programmes (2.3 per cent) and 4.6 per cent said the programmes were not interesting.

Asumah Issahaka (EA with Behisung Farms, Tamale) reports that farmers listen to and understand the farming techniques and practices he shares with them through radio. He says: "They really understand it, because I have done those programmes, and after that I go to a place and I see that somebody has put it into practice on the farm. I even went and inspected what he got from the farm." But Yaro Ismael (RP in Tamale) argues that:

... some of the farmers understand, but not all of them, because ... more often than not, you have to translate what is in the book to the local language. And sometimes, if you are not directly with them to really give them the guide, they will not appreciate how to do it. But for the few people who are lettered, I think they understand.

Yahaya Mashud (RP in Tamale) said that it is common to hear farmers refer to and describe the uses of agro-chemicals they have heard about on radio, suggesting that they do understand the information sometimes.

It further emerged from this study that understanding of agricultural radio messages depends on a number of factors. Issah Mohammed (chief technical officer with Heritage Seeds Company, Tamale) warns that if radio stations do not get experts who can communicate well, there is the danger of misleading farmers. Alhassan Abdul-Karim, a veterinary officer at Sagnarigu, says farmers understand best "If you do the programmes in the local language like Dagbani". He emphasises the need for repeat broadcasts: "... you can't just do it once and start to get results. You have to repeat it over, for several times."

### ***Adoption of agricultural innovations***

Respondents were asked whether or not they adopted the knowledge gained from the farmer education programmes broadcast on radio in their farming activities during the last crop season,

and if they did not, what the barriers to adoption were. Only 32.3 per cent of the 260 farmers indicated that they *always* adopted the knowledge in their farming activities. More than half (51.9 per cent) adopted it sometimes and 15.8 per cent never adopted the messages. Eighty (30.8 per cent) of the respondents cited financial constraints as a barrier to adoption; 23.8 per cent attributed non-adoption to unavailability of resources, such as finance, logistics and equipment. Only 8.5 per cent said that they did not apply the messages because they did not understand them well.

### ***Farmers' suggestions to make agricultural programmes more impactful***

More than a third (39.6 per cent) suggested that repeat broadcasts of relevant programmes would improve understanding and subsequent adoption of agricultural innovations shared by experts. About a quarter (24.2 per cent) thought experts should provide adequate details on such programmes to assist farmers and 25.4 per cent proposed other options, such as involving community opinion leaders in programmes, using the 'language' of the rural farmer in the discussions and appealing to government through the programmes to provide the necessary finance, equipment and logistics. Only 10.8 per cent of the respondents thought lengthening the programmes would make them more beneficial.

## **Testing hypotheses**

### ***Hypothesis 1***

*There is a significant relationship between respondents' socio-economic characteristics and the level of farmers' participation in programmes.*

A Pearson's product moment correlation (PPMC) test indicated that education had a weak inverse correlation with radio programme participation ( $r = -0.172$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ). What this may suggest is that the highly educated farmers probably understood the radio messages and therefore did not phone in to seek clarification. Income was also found to have a low and definite negative correlation with participation ( $r = -0.226$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The study found no significant relationship between participation in agricultural radio programmes and age ( $r = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.340$ ).

### ***Hypothesis 2***

*There is a significant relationship between respondents' socio-economic characteristics and their level of message adoption.*

A PPMC test revealed that age ( $r = -0.138$ ,  $p < 0.026$ ) had a weak inverse correlation with message adoption. This means that the young rural farmers had a greater tendency to adopt the radio messages than the older farmers. Income ( $r = -0.059$ ,  $p < 0.343$ ) and education ( $r = 0.061$ ,  $p < 0.329$ ) had no significant correlation with message adoption.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This study assessed rural farmers' level of participation in local agricultural radio broadcasts and message adoption in northern Ghana. It examined farmers' level of listenership and participation in agricultural broadcasts as well as their understanding and adoption of the messages. The study found that radio ownership was very high (95 per cent), that all the

farmers listened to radio and 85 per cent listened to agricultural programmes at least once a week. This suggests that radio has a potential to be used effectively for agricultural communication in northern Ghana.

Participation in local radio agricultural broadcasts was relatively low; about a quarter of the respondents had participated in such broadcasts, either through phone-ins, interviews by programme producers or by serving as panelists in live broadcasts. Only a third (32.3 per cent) indicated that they always adopted the messages, and about half (51.9 per cent) said they applied the messages sometimes. Less than a quarter (15.8 per cent) said they never adopted the messages. The adoption rate as compared to listenership is low. This study concludes that to enhance participation in agricultural broadcasts and the adoption of the messages, more efforts should be made by local radio stations to involve farmers, especially successful local farmers, in programme production. Also, organising farmers into 'radio listenership clubs' would generate more discussions and promote message comprehension and adoption. Delivering the agricultural messages in simple language using the local dialect would be helpful. Finally, more targeted financial and logistical support by government and farmer-based non-governmental organisations to farmers would be a useful complement to the efforts of the radio stations in promoting message adoption.

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# PACIFIC ISLANDERS' *TALANOA* VALUES AND PUBLIC SUPPORT POINT THE WAY FORWARD

*Shailendra Singh*

## **Introduction**

The Pacific region displays enormous diversity in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, political systems and development. These pose significant challenges to the development of local media models, especially those that aim to serve the public good. This chapter explores those challenges and assesses the state and development of local journalism and how it is responding to them. One particular issue journalism in this region faces is the impact of Western values due to the influence from Australia, New Zealand and the US. The chapter argues, in line with David Robie (2013, 87), that the public benefits of high-quality, independent journalism can be enhanced by the adoption of the traditional Pacific practice of *talanoa*, based on communal values such as dialogue, discussion, compromise and conflict avoidance. Other critical issues include cultural, legal and political pressures on the media, a young and inexperienced journalist corps, high staff turnover due to low salaries and a lack of resources, leading to a somewhat precarious financial situation. The chapter argues for increased public support and tax-payer funding for high-quality journalism that delivers a public benefit. The danger in such support is that it can lead to a relationship of dependence, which can compromise journalistic independence. However, '*talanoa* journalism', it is argued, can mitigate that risk.

## **Diversity and fragmentation**

The 22 countries and territories in the Pacific include sovereign states, French overseas territories, US territories, islands under New Zealand sovereignty, a British Overseas Territory, associated states and an Indonesian colony. Population sizes range from 1,538 in Niue to over 7 million in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Driver, 2018). Nauru is made up of one island of 21 square kilometres, while Kiribati consists of 33 low-lying coral atoll islands across 3.5 million square kilometres of ocean. The three major sub-regions include Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Melanesia comprises the arc of islands to the immediate north and east of Australia, starting with the Indonesian-claimed province of West Papua, through to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and New Caledonia (Driver, 2018). The Melanesian Islands are rich in natural resources and accommodate significant ethnic and linguistic diversity. Polynesia

comprises the triangle of states above New Zealand through to Hawaii, including Samoa, Tonga, Niue, the Cook Islands, Tokelau, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia. Polynesian countries are ethnically and linguistically homogeneous and are organised around hierarchical socio-political structures. Micronesia comprises the band of islands to the north of Melanesia, starting with Palau in the west through to Guam, Nauru and the Marshall Islands, with the Federated States of Micronesia and Kiribati in the east. Micronesian islands tend to be very small, with homogeneous, hierarchical populations (Driver, 2018).

### ***A region under pressure***

The complex and extensive challenges facing journalists in the Pacific region were outlined by David Robie at the World Journalism Education Congress in New Zealand in 2016. These included:

military coups, as in Fiji; ethnic conflict, as in the Solomon Islands; and two rival governments and the ruthless crushing of student protests in Papua New Guinea in June 2016, major questions are faced. Along with critical development issues such as climate change and resources degradation.<sup>1</sup>

The region also faces common developmental problems related to its fragility, isolation and susceptibility to natural disasters. One in every four Pacific Islanders lives below their national poverty lines, with increasing inequality and unemployment, particularly among young people and women. Even in a leading country such as Fiji, people in some areas still have limited or no access to electricity, tap water, roads and reliable transport (Bhim, 2010). In Papua New Guinea, up to 5 million people do not have access to a doctor, with nearly half of all districts without medical practitioner support. The natural environment is threatened by plastic pollution, ocean acidification, mining and other unsustainable practices. Increased connectivity to the global economy has brought much-needed development, but put pressure on culture, tradition and the environment. The region's greatest resource, fisheries, are under threat and the forestry sectors in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are plagued by corruption (Global Witness, 2018b). By 2016, PNG had lost 640,000 hectares of forest in the previous five years (Global Witness, 2018a). The Solomon Islands exported more than 3 million cubic metres of logs to China in 2017 alone, which is more than 19 times a conservative estimate of the annual sustainable harvest. A Solomon Islands Ministry of Finance report suggests that at current rates of logging, natural forests will be exhausted by 2036.

Another major problem in countries such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands is internal conflict, largely over land, natural resources and political power. In addition to the civil war in Bougainville, there have been violent clashes between different population groups in the Solomons, and four coups in Fiji since independence in 1970, partly due to tensions between ethnic Indians and indigenous Fijians. Gender issues are compounded by challenges in sexual and reproductive health and women's rights in general (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018). In 2018, the high-level representatives of 18 Pacific countries issued a statement describing climate change as the region's "single greatest threat" (Pacific Islands Forum, 2018). Pacific Islanders are likely to be among the first climate refugees, with some models anticipating the displacement of as many as 1.7 million individuals as rising sea levels cause the loss of land and coastal infrastructure, alongside stronger cyclones, harsher droughts, crop failure and loss of coastal fisheries (Ferris et al., 2011). Yet the Pacific remains of high political and economic

significance, with a resurgent China challenging the dominance of the region's traditional powers – the United States, Australia and New Zealand (Holtz, 2016).

## **The Pacific media landscape and challenges**

### ***Media provision and digital development***

The magnitude of the region's problems underscores the responsibility carried by its journalists, which raises questions about the preparedness of the media sector to rise to the existing and looming challenges. A survey of media and communications in 14 Pacific countries found that practically all organisations produced content across several platforms – print, radio, television, mobile and online – of varying quality. In the larger markets, radio, television, newspapers, magazines, the internet and other sources of information were available. However, in the smaller markets and remote rural and maritime areas, radio was the most important platform and a vital link with the rest of the country (Tacchi et al., 2013).

While most local media are in English, some countries provide multi-lingual content, with foreign content widely available either through free-to-air or pay TV, pirated DVDs and the internet (Tacchi et al., 2013). Foreign content is profuse, and can crowd out local content, particularly sports and entertainment. Mobile phones are ubiquitous, especially in the urban areas, though relatively costly. At the end of 2018 mobile internet penetration in the Pacific Islands was the lowest of any region in the world, at just 18 per cent of the population – less than half the developing world average (GSMA, 2019, 18) – although penetration rates vary in individual countries. Contributory factors include infrastructure challenges, such as the lack of electricity or of available or assigned spectrum, and innovatory ecosystems as a result of the fragmented nature of the region, with small population totals and densities, giving rise to – in some cases – tiny local markets (GSMA, 2019, 11).

### **Journalism education**

Journalism schools at universities in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Samoa have established degree and diploma programmes, while vocational institutes in Tonga, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands offer skills-based polytechnic courses. Journalism education and training had largely relied on donor-funded short courses, but this is changing, with expatriate educators giving way to local counterparts. Recently, more home-grown staff are engaging in teaching and research. The Media Educators Pacific (MEP) president Vicky Lepou, head of journalism at the National University of Samoa, told a panel at the World Journalism Education Congress 2016 in Auckland, New Zealand:

We need to find answers to bridge that gap between the media industry and journalism education, not just between these two but also we need to build that trust between ourselves and the community.

*(Lepou, cited in Smith, 2017, 100)*

During my visit to the World Journalism Education Congress, I cautioned the same panel that there was a critical lack of resources in most of the technical educational institutes and in the face of the major threats outlined above, local communities needed “a really strong and informed journalism corps to understand, analyse and report these issues – so proper training is crucial” (Singh, cited in Smith, 2017, 98).

## Media freedom

Given these pressures, local journalists seeking to investigate matters of public concern such as corruption, abuses of political and corporate power, environmental degradation and social concerns face significant hurdles. Mar-Vic Cagurangan publishes the *Pacific Island Times* in the US territories of Guam and the Republic of Palau (some 340 Micronesian islands sovereign since 1993) and the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), a US commonwealth adjoining Guam. She highlighted the problems Pacific regional journalists faced in a 2018 editorial, saying suppression of free speech was most blatant in Nauru, the world's third-smallest state after the Vatican and Pacific neighbour Tuvalu, with a population of around 12,000. The "government has zero-tolerance for dissent." In July, the Nauruan government banned the Australia Broadcasting Corp. from entering the country "under any circumstances," citing the organization's ... continued biased and false reporting about our country" (Cagurangan, 2018); she said that elsewhere in Micronesia, journalists on small independent publications self-censored their output, citing the Federated States of Micronesia declaring a local journalist *persona non grata* and a threat by Palau to deport a foreign journalist for investigating the administration. Small local publishers were most vulnerable to attacks as they "struggle to survive amid the industry's economic uncertainty".

Guam, though a U.S. territory supposedly protected by First Amendment, is not immune to such reality. Given the small market, where there is a thin line between business and government, operating a media outlet is much more challenging locally ... And now running my own self-funded publication, the painful economic aspect of journalism becomes even more real and personal. Recently, a certain advertiser pulled the rug under my feet. They cancelled their already signed contract following the *Pacific Island Times'* publication of an article they conveniently called 'fake news'.

(Cagurangan, 2018)

It is difficult for newspapers to challenge powerful interests and institutions in communities that are often isolated, and where boundaries between political and business interests are blurred.

On paper, most Pacific countries support media freedom, but reporters have long faced political and commercial hostility in their efforts to expose matters of public concern. David Robie has spoken of "the real obstacle to Pacific media freedom ... organisational attempts to censor or gag" (Robie, 2002, 150). In 2009, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) joined 40 Pacific journalists from 12 nations calling on governments to honour their commitment to free speech. Likewise, in 2011, an IFJ report on Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu found that despite legal protections for media freedom, many media workers faced threats and/or assaults from police and politicians (IFJ, 2011). In 2018, the Pacific Islands News Association condemned an unprovoked assault on Papuan journalist Dorothy Mark, and online abuse directed at *Samoa Planet* editor Lani Wendt Young (Radio New Zealand, 2018). Fiji is regarded as having the toughest media laws in the Pacific, with the punitive 2010 Media Industry Development Decree said to foster self-censorship.

## News reporting style, standards and focus

Despite the pressures outlined above, local journalists have been praised for exposing corruption, holding leaders accountable and supporting free speech – but criticised, mainly by political leaders, for their alleged lack of knowledge about political and social institutions, a questionable

grasp of ethics and poor understanding of complex issues (Robie, 2004). By the same token, some analysts lament what they see as an urban-based media with elite-orientation and superficial reporting. Such critics accuse media of blindly adopting the dominant Anglo-American news reporting style with a crime/corruption-focused approach, and an overly antagonistic stance towards government. Papoutsaki singles out Papua New Guinea's capital-city-based journalists for privileging foreign development agencies in their reporting while bypassing local knowledge in sustainable development (Papoutsaki, 2008a, 27).

### Drawing on local values and cultures

In Fiji, Larson (2008) observed a 'top-down' approach whereby news media depended more on the government than on other sources for information and described this as a threat to media's watchdog role (29–30). Such limitations are behind longstanding calls to decolonise and de-commercialise journalism in favour of formulas and formats more specific to the needs of the Pacific's diverse localities. Robie (2013) argues that in developing countries, daily news should be contextualised as issues, rather than reported as isolated events. He proposes the adoption in education and practice of "*talanoa* journalism", a critical deliberative approach that not only highlights problems, but emphasises solutions (Robie, 2013, 87). *Talanoa* is a time-honoured Pacific story-telling practice based on communal values such as open dialogue, discussion, consensus and conflict avoidance in decision-making. *Talanoa* journalism has elements of social responsibility, whereby a free media prioritises socio-economic development based on community needs while upholding indigenous cultural values – in contrast to Western liberal news frameworks, which tend to focus on elite sources, uphold individual rights and treat conflict as a prime news value.

Calls for a reorientation in Pacific journalism are not new. A University of Hawaii roundtable in 1979 on the "Media's Role in Pacific Islands Politics" discussed the quandary facing the leaders of the developing island states, caught between colonial traditions of libertarianism and the indigenous social leadership system of chiefs and elders. These leaders were calling for more of a government–press partnership in the best interests of the region (Brislin, 1979, 85). This is akin to the concept of 'development journalism' whereby government and media cooperate in the interest of national development, rather than engaging in confrontation (Chalkley, 1980). In positioning journalism as a public good that benefits the community, emphasising development makes sense; for journalism to claim to be a public good, principles informing and guiding professional practice, and the journalistic outputs of such practice, should demonstrably reflect the public interest. However, long-held concerns internationally – that development journalism is susceptible to political manipulation – also persist in the Pacific. In Fiji, critics equate government calls for a 'journalism of hope' with media control.

Unlike some variations of development journalism, Robie's concept of *talanoa* journalism does not shun media's traditional fourth-estate role, but seeks to exist alongside it as a 'fifth estate'. This stance echoes Singh and Prasad (2008), who argue against rejecting "Westernised Journalism" outright because of its core strengths and values in speaking truth to power. Notwithstanding concerns about development journalism, few will question the benefits of journalistic frameworks anchored to, and designed for, addressing regional and local problems. The challenge is the practical application of long-format news reporting styles, which can require more work, greater resources and an experienced journalist corps able to interrogate critical issues. In the fragmented Pacific media communities, adequate resources, along with experienced and qualified journalists, are in short supply, even in larger countries like Fiji and Papua New Guinea. The data indicate that despite some improvements over time, the Pacific

journalist cohort remains largely young, underqualified and inexperienced, with the media industry subject to high staff turnover (Perrottet, 2015). The 2011 IFJ report on Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (IFJ, 2011) identifies local journalists as some of the lowest-paid professionals. Indications are that they are routinely poached by other sectors as soon as they are experienced enough, meaning an ongoing and critical skills loss for journalism.

So far, much of the debate in the Pacific has been on ‘journalism values’, with calls to decolonise journalism education and practice in favour of an approach more sensitive to the local environment. The analysis gives little thought to the high turnover rate of staff that leaves newsrooms in a constant struggle to build capacity. This is the gap that this chapter attempts to address, given that journalist capacity forms a crucial part of the overall news media infrastructure of a country. Media content cannot be improved without improving journalist capacity and strengthening newsrooms by, among other things, retaining staff and allowing them to gain field experience.

Without first addressing the root causes of the problem – inexperienced, underqualified local journalists and high staff turnover caused by uncompetitive salaries – talk about the implementation of long-format journalistic frameworks is premature. Too often, policy-makers conveniently ignore the link between the professional capacity of journalists and news content. They focus only on the end product – the content – and propose stronger controls while ignoring key variables in strengthening professionalism. For instance, staff retention, which has been the local media’s Achilles heel for decades, is overlooked, even as its effects become more acute in the face of a news reporting landscape that is becoming more complicated due to mounting political, economic, social and environmental problems.

### **What is to be done?**

As McChesney notes: “If the market generates lousy journalism that keeps the citizens poorly informed, the entire society suffers – not just the consumers of particular media – because the resulting political governance will be shoddy” (2008, 422). Funding journalism on a commercial basis can be difficult, even in developed countries, and calls for the public funding of journalism based on the public good argument are gaining traction (Allern and Pollack, 2017; Cairncross, 2019). This argument is even more relevant in the Pacific, given the relative smallness of the advertising markets and limited profit margins, which hamper many companies’ ability to pay competitive salaries, let alone invest in staff development. Local companies would rather hire new staff than retain experienced staff on higher salaries.

The public good argument holds that journalism benefits society as a whole, and the challenges facing media organisations are not for them to bear alone. There is a wider public responsibility to strengthen journalism. Conceptualising journalism as a collective public good strengthens the justification for a greater level of support from a variety of sources. This approach recognises that journalism needs a concerted and collaborative effort by all stakeholders – the state, tax payers, donor agencies, the private sector and civil society organisations. These stakeholders already provide a measure of support, both directly and indirectly, but the level of support could be increased to keep up with the contemporary demands of journalism. A major strength of this approach is that it draws upon the resources of multiple sources – the private sector, civil society, regional organisations and international donors. For instance, one way to address the high turnover of journalism staff would be to make local journalism more attractive as a career, if not through the provision of higher salaries, then with increased government and donor-country scholarships and fellowships for career progression. This can address longstanding pleas by Pacific editors to raise educational standards rather than rely on punitive legislation alone. As

Deuze (2006) argues, journalists confronted with complex issues need not only practical skills, but the contextual knowledge and critical thinking gained from higher education.

International aid agencies have been major supporters of media training and development in the Pacific. These include the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), NZAid, UNESCO and the World Association of Christian Communication (WACC). The Australian government, through AusAID and later DFAT, has been the dominant player since the late 1990s and its latest multi-million-dollar Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (PACMAS) aims to improve “practitioners’ capacity to report responsibly on key developmental issues”. International, regional and local civil society organisations also provide support. The Pacific Regional Environment Programme’s (SPREP) Vision Pasifika Media Awards offers prizes and international fellowships for student and professional journalists in environmental reporting. SPREP has also facilitated training on meteorological reporting in this cyclone-prone region (Vakamino, 2018). Grant journalism is also taking off. In 2019, the Internews/Earth Journalism Network (Asia-Pacific) gave the University of the South Pacific journalism programme \$US20,000 for reporting assignments to the Solomon Islands and the Cook Islands.

Radio has been the Pacific’s major channel of communication, with public-service broadcasters (PSBs) uniquely placed to cover programming gaps in a profit-focused broadcasting environment, such as providing a lifeline to isolated regions, especially during natural disasters. By the same token, the state could consider increased assistance to private local media through grants, subsidies, tax breaks and duty concessions on equipment and supplies. The British government has cut business rates for local newspapers (Sharman, 2018) and UK magazines and newspapers are exempt from VAT (purchase tax). Pacific governments should offer similar benefits to the media sector. In the Pacific, state advertising is a major revenue stream for local media companies, and this could be distributed more evenly. Britain’s public-service broadcaster, the BBC, pays the wages of “local democracy reporters” based in local newspapers, offers local newspaper journalists training in data journalism and shares its local video content with local papers (Cairncross, 2019).

The private sector has a major stake in a stable social and political environment as the foundation for sustained economic development, and this goal is better supported by an empowered news media. To this end, businesses could offer scholarships, fellowships and other forms of assistance as their contribution to develop the local media sector. Some corporate support has been there, such as the 2016 Australia New Zealand Banking Group/Fiji Media Association training for journalists in banking and global economy (*Fiji Sun*, 2016). However, such schemes are rare.

## Problems

It should be noted that external funding, including public funding for local journalism, carries risks. State-owned radio stations provide crucial services in remote areas, but most are bound by agreements requiring them to support, not critique, government development programmes, and reporters in Fiji, Kiribati and Tonga have been sacked or reassigned for stepping out of line. There is concern that local media independence would be weakened by accepting state support. This could be addressed through charters guaranteeing non-interference – but governments would need to honour those charters. Local media that are heavily dependent on public advertising could be compromised, as the press in Fiji and Papua New Guinea reportedly is (Solomon, cited by Rooney and Papoutsaki, 2006, 6).



Over the years, commentators have raised concerns about strings-attached media development aid with regards to quality, consistency and efficacy, including the ad-hoc, short-term, uncoordinated programmes driven by funders' strategic interests rather than local needs, with minimal local involvement. There is also the risk that local media organisations receiving financial support would pocket the money, although any support could be made conditional on investing in staff training. Ultimately, it is for the media companies to adopt a longer-term outlook through better working conditions, mindful that journalistic credibility, longevity and profitability depend on the quality of news output – which in turn depends on the quality of journalists. Media organisations need understand that they stand to benefit the most by lifting professional standards and improving conditions.

## Conclusion

This review concludes that punitive legislation alone is not the answer to building Pacific media capacity. The media-as-a-public-good concept, despite certain risks, is still valid, timely and needed in the Pacific context to better equip local journalists to address complex, contemporary issues. Applying this framework – informed by *talanoa* journalism concepts – does not necessarily detract from local media's traditional fourth-estate role. Governments, international aid donors and civil society organisations have a role in lifting support for local journalism through various means, including training and education. Addressing structural weaknesses in the Pacific's local media systems is not without challenges due to possible conflict-of-interest scenarios between the state, media organisations and aid donors. Any risks have to be weighed against the benefits, given the need to address the shortcomings in local journalism to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

## Note

1 Report available at <https://ojs.aut.ac.nz/pacific-journalism-review/article/view/333/375>.

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# ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM, ALTERNATIVE ETHICS?

*Tony Harcup*

## **Introduction: the relationship between producer and audience**

Alternative forms of media that are produced to serve local geographical communities tend to include alternative forms of content. That is usually the point of them, more or less. But there is often something else going on in and around alternative media, as noted by Susan Forde (2011, 80) when she argues that within alternative journalism ‘the notion of localism does not just relate to the content, but the *process*’ (my emphasis). In other words, the ways that local forms of alternative journalism tend to be produced entail a different relationship between producer and audience than that which is commonly found between mainstream commercial media outlets and those who consume their output. Indeed, within alternative media, the very concepts of ‘audience’ and ‘consumer’ are likely to be challenged or at least blurred, implying that something different from the norm may be happening ethically as well as journalistically. This chapter sets out to explore such alternative relationships to see what light this might shed on our understanding not just of alternative journalism specifically but, by implication, of local media and local journalism more generally.

But first, what exactly do we mean by alternative media? Broadly speaking, they are media projects the main purpose of which is not to make money but to fulfil a more social function: media production as a form of ‘active citizenship’ (Harcup, 2013). Traditionally, the phrase ‘alternative media’ has been applied to projects that are either committed to a politically progressive, leftist or at least liberal view of the world, or in less overtly political forms to a community-oriented ethos. However, in recent years some far-right activists and online commentators have adopted the label ‘alternative media’ to describe their own ‘alt-right’ output and to distinguish it from what they see as the outlandishly liberal mainstream media (or ‘MSM’). To date, such output has tended to be national – indeed, nationalist, even racist – in orientation rather than local, and as such is beyond the scope of this volume.

The alternative media projects discussed in this chapter are those with a more open approach to communities and that do not attempt to speak with one voice for one community. They may be created by people with or without formal media or journalistic training, and more often than not without being paid. Such media ‘may be defined as media output produced by its (potential) audience and can be seen as serving and as helping to form what might be described

as an alternative public sphere in which groups and individuals on the margins of mainstream culture and media can form communities of interest' (Harcup, 2014a, 12). To offer a typical example may be unwise if not impossible, because alternative media often seem to be almost as different from each other as they are from the mainstream. But the broad range of such media might encompass the Suffragette newspaper *Votes for Women* (which ran in the UK from 1907 to 1918), the counter-culture magazine *Oz* (which initially published in Australia between 1963 and 1969) and *Democracy Now!* (the peace journalism-inspired broadcast and online news outlet produced in the US from 1996 to date), among countless other projects both within and without the Western world.

Problematic the label 'typical' may be, but despite their differences the above examples all share a certain democratic ethos and demonstrate the existence of 'multiple possibilities for doing journalism', as Chris Atton (2013, xii) puts it. Alternative journalism may not be an easily defined single entity but any form of journalism that is conceived of by its producers 'as a *social responsibility* requires ethics to be at its centre', argues Atton (my emphasis), who points out that this will often be at a local level.

[H]owever unusual many of these practices might appear by comparison with many types of mainstream journalism, their concern for and their location in the lives of ordinary people renders them accessible, even ordinary themselves. The possibilities of alternative journalism ... seem to succeed by their close connection with community. That is not to say that all alternative journalism practices need only deal with local issues, but that to begin with the local is entirely appropriate.

(Atton, 2013, xii–xv)

Locality – or 'place' – matters, even in an increasingly globalised world, argues Kevin Howley (2010, 8–10). That helps explain why multiple possibilities for doing journalism have found expression in very localised and often defiantly non-commercial alternative news outlets ranging from the *Liverpool Free Press* newspaper of the 1970s to the *Bristol Cable* of today's digital age, which distributes a quarterly print edition to 30,000 homes in the city but which is primarily an online multi-media operation. Such local alternatives come in many forms: some are more journalistic and others more activist oriented; some run hard-hitting campaigns and investigations while others tend towards the cuddly and the twee; some survive for decades whereas others seem to be gone in the blink of an eye. But in their different ways they demonstrate, for good or ill, what local journalism can be like when it is de-coupled from the traditional structures, constraints, commodification and norms of mainstream media industries.

### **An alternative approach to ethics**

The existence of alternative local and 'hyperlocal' media can be understood as 'a backlash against commercial local media with traditional news and ethical values', argue Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller (2017, 153). Ethics in the context of alternative media tends to imply an ethos that goes far beyond reductive notions of merely producing work that does not fall foul of regulatory rules and industry codes of practice. There has often been a tendency within much mainstream journalism, especially in the UK, to regard ethics either as a matter primarily concerned with industry regulation or as a series of discrete issues capable of being ticked off some kind of watching-your-back checklist. This can result in ethics being regarded as 'crises that pop up from time to time' rather than as issues that need to be 'dealt with almost on a minute-by-minute basis' (Frost, 2011, 4). In contrast, journalism within alternative media tends to be less

concerned with regulatory mechanisms or with following formal codes of practice, just as it is less concerned with turning a profit.

To what extent does an alternative approach to journalism at a local level imply an alternative approach to ethical issues such as fairness, privacy, intrusion, discriminatory language and the rights of vulnerable individuals or communities? Indeed, given that alternative media are often produced by people with no formal journalism training (of which media law has long been a staple subject, joined in more recent years by media ethics and regulation), might such ethical considerations be ignored due to ignorance? Quite the reverse, the evidence suggests. Alternative media practitioners may not always use the word 'ethics' in relation to their work, but that does not necessarily mean they are being unethical. Ethics are concerned with ideas of right and wrong, and such ideas underpin much alternative media. Taking journalism seriously as a social and ethical responsibility for the public good – rather than treating it primarily as a means to make money – is precisely what the finest examples of local alternative media have done over the years.

Therefore, rather than being seen as a regulatory requirement, or as a set of standards imposed from without, the ethical approach of (much) alternative journalism within alternative media is more about an attitude and approach towards the people who may be a story's subject, source, narrator or audience, sometimes all at the same time. As a result, 'ordinary people' are afforded dignity not because of legalistic or commercial considerations but because they are the very reason for such media to exist. Consider, for example, the story run in 1979 by the Rochdale alternative paper *RAP*. It is a story that continues to resonate today. It concerned a prominent local and UK-wide politician who it was claimed had taken advantage of his power and influence to abuse vulnerable teenage boys who were living in a hostel in the town. In a piece of careful reporting that took more than six months to complete, the paper's untrained and unpaid citizen journalists (as nobody called them at the time) painstakingly revealed how some of the victims had given statements to police years earlier, how the police had gathered sufficient evidence for charges to be laid, but how no charge or prosecution ever resulted. *RAP* contacted many of the survivors of the abuse (who were adults by this time), gained their trust, and interviewed them about their experiences. The paper kept the interviewees' identities secret but told their stories when running the result of the investigation. Yet dominant forms of news media – local as well as national – failed to cover the story until decades later when the perpetrator was safely dead (Harcup, 2015).

That story may simply have been the result of good reporting but ethics were at the heart of it. Specifically, the story was made possible by the paper's willingness to listen. *RAP* had listened to the voices of a marginalised and hitherto silenced group of people at the bottom of the societal pile, but they did more than that. They took those voices seriously enough to put in the effort to find documentary evidence and other sources to verify the survivors' accounts. As Herman Wasserman (2013, 77) argues, the ethics of listening are fundamentally about treating people with dignity primarily by 'taking their stories seriously' rather than dismissing anything that cannot necessarily be turned into a piece of entertainment or monetised. The sensitive, non-sensationalist and measured way the story was reported by *RAP* also demonstrated an ethical commitment towards readers and other citizens not to publish unsubstantiated rumours and claims without evidence. In other words, checking and verifying information before publication can itself be seen as ethical practice; it is also what distinguishes the best local alternative *journalism* from much of what local individuals may today post or circulate via social media. In this sense, then, *RAP*'s commitment to ethics cannot be understood separately from its commitment to journalism, because both were integral to the publication's very purpose, and both were a form of collective endeavour.

Similarly, other local alternative newspapers that existed around the same time as *RAP*, such as *Leeds Other Paper* (or *LOP*), also saw their purpose as serving a public good by – among other things – serious and empathetic listening, often to the barely audible voices of oppressed individuals, groups or communities. Perhaps the classic sustained example of this was *LOP*'s local coverage of the UK's year-long miners' strike of 1984–1985, during which the paper maintained 'a rich record of reporting and of sustained journalistic contact and engagement with a wide range of sources, most notably the so-called ordinary men and women involved in the strike', whose voices largely remained unheard in mainstream media output that was dominated by official sources (Harcup, 2011, 35).

This is sometimes described as *journalism from below*. However, journalism still entails some selection, or at the very least curation, rather than the 'neutral' transmission of a kind of cacophonous free-for-all with voices all speaking at once and shouting over each other. Many of the more politically committed forms of local alternative journalism reject both the possibility and the desirability of neutrality or impartiality, preferring to declare any bias openly so that everyone knows where they are coming from. Whilst some might see any form of bias as unethical, others counter that openly declared subjectivity can be far more ethical than a concealed bias that purports to be objective reporting.

After all, media representations are precisely that – representations – as Meryl Aldridge (2007, 167–168) points out.

Alternative newspapers have an honourable history of allowing the community to speak for itself ... but even independent media, whether trying to represent a locality or a particular social movement, are not relaying reality unmediated. They, too, have to source and edit their content ... News is not a discrete and self-evident category of social reality, it is a process of selection, and this process of editing always embodies a point of view.

But whose point of view? And who is doing the selecting? Such questions will be considered in the following section.

### **Ethics and representation in local alternative media**

Local alternative newspapers such as those that sprang up across the UK from the late 1960s to the 1980s were just one manifestation of alternative journalism serving specific geographic communities, and the examples of investigative reporting undertaken by the likes of *RAP* and *LOP* were just one element of alternative media output. Another less combative form of local alternative media comes in the form of what is often labelled 'community media', which has made a particular impact in the form of broadcasting, especially radio. Community media 'assumes many forms, and takes on different meanings, depending on the "felt need" of the community and the resources and opportunities available to local populations at a particular time and place', according to Howley (2010, 2), and they are particularly popular across Africa and Latin America. Some of this output – but by no means all – has now moved online.

Community broadcasters' value to local people stems from their intimate relationship with the community, argues Susan Forde (2011, 90). They are not just located within a geographical community but they are a *part* of that community, with the non-professionals appearing on air (or online) being seen as 'one of us'. Writing in the context of an Australian study but with a wider resonance, she argues that 'the audience-producer barrier' that professionals are

encouraged to foster as part of their image is not found within the community broadcasting projects that she has studied in Australia. But this does not result in audiences dismissing community media output as ‘amateur’; it actually ‘endears them to their audiences and is one of the key reasons why they tune in’ to local community radio stations, for example. She adds:

[A]udience definitions of news and journalism were not necessarily the same definitions that we as media scholars, educators or practitioners might apply. Community broadcasting audiences consider local talk, community announcements, events, information about travelling bands, cultural shows, and local perspectives on broader political issues to be local news.

*(Forde, 2011, 90–91)*

Essentially, then, local audiences are more likely to recognise themselves and to feel themselves represented in media output that is closer to the community not simply in terms of content but also in terms of accessibility. Such forms of ‘cultural expression’ via community media can ‘provide a distinctive lens to explore how local populations understand and make sense of place in the era of globalisation’ (Howley, 2010, 129).

Sometimes the impetus behind such media comes from within the community, but not always. In her book *Journalism As Activism*, Adrienne Russell (2016) cites the work of the international not-for-profit social enterprise *Ushahidi* as an example of how outsiders with access to technology can facilitate members of local communities in different countries in telling their own stories in a form of self-representation. The project developed out of attempts to ‘crowdsource’ information during the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008 and has since worked at a local level in dozens of other countries including Haiti, Uganda and Spain. Co-founder Juliana Rotich told Russell that *Ushahidi* was a response to mainstream media’s ‘helicopter journalists’ who arrive in a locality when there is a crisis and for whom ‘it’s very easy for them to simplify an issue because they don’t have the local context’. To counter this, Rotich – who is described as a blogger, tech-developer and digital activist – facilitated collaborative ways of ‘engaging local expertise to create narratives that counter those of the mainstream international press’, as Russell (2016, 135) puts it. Countering the simplifications – and the silences – of dominant media coverage of local issues is one of the motivations behind some of the more journalistic of local media projects, for whom alternative journalism can be seen as a form of active citizenship.

### **Alternative journalism as active citizenship**

Independent local journalism for non-commercial alternative media can be characterised as, among other things, a form of ‘oppositional reporting’ (Harcup, 2014b), ‘monitorial citizenship’ (Harcup, 2016a) or ‘active citizenship’ (Harcup, 2013). Those who engage in such practices may be motivated by a variety of personal and societal influences, but a desire to have a lucrative or even a comfortable ‘career’ is unlikely to be one of them. As a former alternative journalist in the UK explains:

I became involved through being sold an alternative weekly newspaper while in a pub. I went along to see if I could be of any use as I wanted to help ... to expose dishonesty, unfairness, hypocrisy, wheeling and dealing and general skulduggery going on in the Establishment and to lend a hand to ‘save the planet’.

*(Quoted in Harcup, 2013, 105–106)*



Another journalist, who began in alternative media and later worked in the mainstream, says she took the same ethical ethos with her on that journey, as far as was possible within the different constraints of the commercial industry. This included the following understanding of ethical journalism.

A commitment to helping give a voice to people who aren't usually otherwise heard. As a reporter that would mean talking to the homeless person before the housing officer, for example. Presenting campaigning, trade unions, squatting, feminism, lesbian and gay rights, etc as a normal part of everyday life. Obviously keeping to the NUJ Code of Conduct as best I can.

*(Quoted in Harcup, 2013, 110)*

What do the readers or listeners make of all this? Studies of the audience for alternative local journalism are relatively few and far between, but what evidence there is tends to support the contention that there is an interrelationship between consuming such media (although 'consuming' might be too passive a concept in this context) and engaging actively in the community. As three different readers of a blog that specialises in monitoring the activity of one local authority in Yorkshire commented:

I think in a sense what *Leeds Citizen* is doing at the moment for me as an individual citizen of Leeds is giving me a much better understanding of my city and helping me to think about actually whether there are things I can do as an individual to make things better ...

... It's just an alternative view, an alternative explanation ...

... It's about civic participation, really. That's what it comes down to. And I think if you're already minded to be interested in that then it will appeal to you ...

*(All quoted in Harcup, 2016b, 692)*

These and other readers added that they particularly appreciated the way that the local alternative blog in question did not shout at them, patronise them or seek to scare them with endless headlines about violent crime, as they felt much of the mainstream media did. Rather, they felt it displayed an ethical commitment to serving the public good of the local area and its citizens, helping them to seek out alternative forms of journalism because it provided them with useful information, 'simultaneously prompting, reinforcing and reflecting readers' active democratic engagement as citizens (Harcup, 2016b, 693).

Such local alternative media, especially those emerging or surviving in today's interactive digital world, can thereby 'help audiences "do" community better', according to Hess and Waller (2017, 153–154). However, this comes with an ethical responsibility, as they warn:

Problems arise when we seek to determine what we mean by 'community', who fits in and who deserves representation. It is necessary that journalists sometimes embark on advocacy and campaign journalism on topics that appeal to a majority ... However, they must at all times consider the under-represented and serve as champions for those without a voice in the very interests of preserving the importance of 'community'.

*(Hess and Waller, 2017, 134)*

That can be easier said than done, of course, and some people within any geographical area are likely to feel themselves unrepresented even in local community media output. In such

circumstances they can either try to influence the more open-minded of such media to be more inclusive; or they can do what has frequently happened throughout the history of alternative media, which is to embrace the do-it-yourself ethos and create a fresh alternative to the alternative.

Notwithstanding the necessary problematising of the concept of ‘community’, alternative forms of local media in many parts of the world have indeed helped local communities find their voices. Accessible and participatory local community radio projects in post-war El Salvador, for example, have been found to ‘help create civil society by creating public spaces and an inclusive public sphere’, which in turn ‘helps to construct and maintain community memory and a sense of shared identity’ (Agosta, 2001, 243). Similarly, participation in a small community radio station in rural India was experienced as a particularly empowering form of active citizenship. ‘We can talk now’, one of the women involved told researchers, adding: ‘We used to sit silent. Government officials will come and we let them talk. Now we question them’ (quoted in Pavarala and Malik, 2010, 107). In these ways, the active citizens who involve themselves in local forms of alternative or ‘citizens’ media’ can be understood as being ‘dynamic agents in the strengthening of public communication’ and therefore as valuable contributors to the democratic process (Vatikiotis, 2010, 39).

### **Conclusion: a vital part of ‘the news ecology’**

This chapter has argued that a concern with ethics (even if not always labelled as such) is central to much alternative local journalism, and that such a concern goes beyond the codes and editorial guidelines issued by regulatory bodies, where they exist. However, that is not to say that ethical codes have no role to play. As one of the practitioners quoted above stated, wherever she is working she does her best to follow the code of conduct of the National Union of Journalists (which covers journalists in the UK and Ireland). Some ‘alternative’ and ‘community’ journalists are members of the NUJ, but even those who are not might similarly find much of value in its commitment to, among other things, ensuring that ‘information disseminated is honestly conveyed, accurate and fair’ and that no material be published that is ‘likely to lead to hatred or discrimination on the grounds of a person’s age, gender, race, colour, creed, legal status, disability, marital status, or sexual orientation’ (NUJ, 2011).

Some independent local media projects in the UK have signed up to the country’s state-recognised regulator Impress (which has been eschewed by the bulk of the commercial press, who have opted for the self-regulatory Independent Press Standards Organisation, Ipso). Impress has a standards code that, like the NUJ code (and Ipso’s Editors’ Code), can be a useful reference point for anyone involved in producing community media and alternative journalism whether they are signed-up members or not. The Impress code covers issues such as privacy, harassment, suicide, transparency and the public interest (Impress, 2017). Impress will consider public complaints that member publications have breached its code and also runs an arbitration service that can award compensation to victims of unethical journalism. In its first two years of operation Impress received complaints about only two of the local publications it regulates: the *Caerphilly Observer* and *Llanelli Online*. Both concerned alleged inaccuracies and both complaints were dismissed (Impress, 2018). To date, the numbers of publishers signing up with Impress is relatively small, and most local alternative media even in the UK remain outside formal regulation. That is partly because such media tend to come and go with alarming frequency and partly because such media value their independence above all else. They often exist in opposition to mainstream media and their output is in effect a critique of journalistic practice, so it is hardly surprising that they do not feel part of any industry ‘club’. But that does not mean they have no significance.

Independent and ‘outsider’ forms of journalism are significant not just because of their content but also because they illustrate some of the ways journalism might be produced when it is disentangled from some of the structures and constraints (and resources) that are found within the dominant media industries. It can be illuminating to see how people who have mostly been neither formally trained on journalism courses nor schooled in mainstream newsrooms approach the task of reporting events, issues and their fellow citizens, to explore the differences and similarities with traditional journalistic practices and concepts of ethics. As Coleman et al. (2016, 162) point out, what they refer to as ‘citizen news practices’ today make ‘an important contribution to the news ecology’ locally and can complement ‘professionalised’ journalism, for example, by providing more background or alternative perspectives. Because they do not rely on catering to market forces alone,

citizen news practices also play a role in translating and making sense of news stories, broadening the range of interpretation and discussion around news and building different types of social relationships.

(2016, 145)

None of which is to say that worthwhile, ethical journalism cannot be found within more mainstream forms of journalism, where they still exist at a local level. Nor that alternative journalism is perfect. Far from it. Alternative journalism can learn much from the skills daily applied within the newsrooms of more dominant media; but the reverse is also true. If a firmer grasp of some journalistic basics such as writing punchy intros (and avoiding exclamation marks!) would benefit some community and citizens’ media, so a firmer grasp of concepts such as community and citizenship would improve the output of much mainstream media. Listening to and giving voice to the voiceless, broadening the range of interpretation and helping local people make sense of the world have all long been central to the motivations of people engaging in alternative and community news practices at a local level, irrespective of whether they call themselves journalists or label their actions as ethical. Their commitment, and the continued existence of such media in new formats and utilising new technologies, is a cause for some mild optimism about local journalism amidst the gloom caused by the way much of the dominant news ‘industry’ has turned its back on local people. Local alternative media projects such as those discussed in this chapter can be seen as embracing – in practice as well as theory – an ethical ethos as integral to their existence. Such an ethos marks them out as worthy of our attention, and of our support.

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