

Spontaneous, Substantive, and Relational

Three Moments in the Study of Local Journalism

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Journalists, policymakers, and academics recognize that local journalism is both an important and endangered realm of the profession (Abernathy, 2018; Gulyas & Baines, 2020; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). Such journalism promises to monitor local powerholders while fostering community; its economic future, however, is uncertain. This recognition has spurred calls for work to document the nature and extent of the problem; publicize the issue to policymakers and the public; and propose remedies (Napoli et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2020). An outpouring of work has advanced knowledge and raised awareness, while also generating recurrent questions about the definition of local journalism itself (Ali, 2017; Guimerà, Domingo & Williams, 2018; Hess, 2013). Does the term refer to news produced within an administrative boundary? Or does it denote markets under a certain population size? Does the meaning of local vary cross-nationally, according to distinctive histories of state formation? Or is there some form of recognizable local journalism across contexts? What, in short, are we talking about when we talk about local journalism?

Posing such definitional questions risks scholasticism — i.e., a mode of analysis detached from the urgencies that confront those whose livelihoods and identities are imbricated with local journalism. Cer-

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tainly, a fixation on definitions for their own sake is neither necessary nor useful. But if we recall that definitions are never neutral—that they render some things visible while obscuring others—then reflection provides an opportunity to appreciate the benefits and limitations of different approaches. Rather than generate a single definition, such consideration instead charts a division of labor among those studying local journalism, with different definitions being useful for different aims and scopes (e.g., raising awareness, advising policymakers, explaining successes and failures). It can also help generate questions that advance work in this area more generally. That is the spirit in which this paper is written.

Reviewing a non-systematic sample of professional and scholarly debates, I identify three “moments” in the study of local journalism that emerge from the analysis, each reflecting distinct aims, scopes, and shortcomings. A *spontaneous* moment arises from common-sense understandings of local journalism as news produced without the expectation of being consumed nationally or internationally. This perspective valorizes local journalism’s civic importance, sounds alarms about the perils it faces, and proposes solutions, even as it attracts criticism for overlooking tendencies toward boosterism, sparse coverage of social inequalities, and an excessive orientation to profit-making. A *substantive* moment surfaces from efforts to bound the analysis of local journalism to specific people and places. It highlights the nature and extent of the challenges confronting news organizations, documents variations across time and place, and assesses the strengths and limits of proposed solutions. However, it often stops short of embedding its findings within a broader explanatory context. Finally, a *relational* moment emerges from examining local journalism as the product of interdependencies that shape the production, circulation, and reception of news within a given social space. This moment emphasizes the (often national) system of relations—laws, markets, policies, and more—that enables particular configurations of local journalism and explains why this journalism takes the forms it does. Nonetheless, it frequently struggles to translate its insights into actionable policy recommendations.

Taken together, these moments can be seen as iterative steps in a larger process of knowledge construction. Those interested in local journalism benefit not only from criticisms of the aims and scopes associated with different moments (e.g., Usher, 2023) but also by making each moment productive. This productivity is important, I argue, given the increasingly hybrid space of knowledge production. In discussions of local journalism, individuals with distinct interests (journalists, policymakers, researchers) gather around a shared phenomenon. Given this diversity, definitional confusion is likely. Moments, I propose, can be used to

benefit from this diversity, rather than be drowned in endless definitional debates. In this regard, the study of local journalism also illustrates a broader tendency seen within and beyond universities towards the hybridization of knowledge production.

LOCAL JOURNALISM: TOO AMBIGUOUS, TOO NOSTALGIC?

Discussions of local journalism regularly note haziness regarding the object of analysis and call for greater precision and conceptualization in its formulation. Lawrence and Tabor (2023), for example, ask scholars to “clarify what is meant by ‘local,’” a term they characterize as “presently ambiguous” and “in need of boundaries” (para. 1). Guimerà, Domingo and Williams (2018) strike a similar chord, noting that theorization of local journalism—what it is and how it differs from other forms of journalism—“has been scant” (p. 8) and constitutes a “crucial pending challenge” for scholars (p. 7). Others demonstrate that the problem is not strictly confined to scholarly inquiries. Ali (2017) shows that policymakers and regulators grapple with “how to define...what counts as local news” (p. 5). Hess (2013) likewise notes that industry leaders have not arrived at “a universal definition” (p. 49) of what counts as local journalism.

This ambiguity has informed efforts to define and delimit local journalism. Gulyas and Baines (2020) propose a “universal definition” (p. 3) based on criteria that can be applied broadly. Others generate definitions rooted in the distinctive national histories in which ideas about local journalism develop (Anderson, 2020; Bousquet & Amiel, 2021). Still others distinguish between types of local journalism, highlighting variation based on market size (Radcliffe & Ali, 2017; Örnebring, Kingsepp & Möller, 2020) and product offerings (Franklin, 2006; Metzger et al., 2011). Finally, some foreground audience perspectives as crucial features of what does and does not count as local journalism (Hess & Waller, 2017; Schulz, 2020).

While these efforts highlight important aspects of the phenomenon, none can claim a monopoly on the legitimate definition of local journalism. This stems partly from the different *scopes* at which discussions operate, making systematic comparisons difficult. These range from amateur news-gathering efforts about neighborhood activities to professional productions for geographically sizable regions, sometimes done by large firms with media holdings in multiple places (Nygren, 2019; Harte, Howells & Williams, 2019). It also derives from the diverse *aims* that guide research. Some seek to map the number of news outlets across administrative regions to grasp the extent of the problem (Abernathy, 2022; Mahone et al., 2019);

others advocate solutions to the observed problems (Stonbely, Weber & Satullo, 2020); still others prioritize the social conditions that make different forms of local journalism possible (Baisnée et al., 2021).

Considering this diversity, local journalism suffers not so much from an absence of definitions as a surfeit of them. What brings researchers, policymakers and journalists together is not any one definition. Rather, they concur in recognizing economic uncertainty across the varied scopes explored and share broadly similar concerns that follow from this recognition. Faltering business models raise basic questions about the sustainability of many local news providers (Nielsen, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022). These challenges in turn fuel concerns about a loss of journalism jobs, the instability of careers, and questions regarding the implications for civic life (Hayes & Lawless, 2021; Powers & Vera-Zambrano, 2023).

Some scholars, concerned about definitional fuzziness, have critiqued what they see as the nostalgic vision that accompanies discussions (Carey, 2017; Robinson, 2017). The news organizations identified as producing local journalism, they argue, often fail to perform their role as watchdogs, prioritizing profits over social obligations. What's more, many of these organizations have long-excluded socially marginalized groups from the very communities they task themselves with helping to form. This makes it "impossible," they argue, to "separate the wheat from the chaff" among those local news providers about whose existence researchers should and should not be concerned (Usher, 2023, p. 12). Better to avoid broad, ill-defined terms like local journalism and acknowledge that the existence of journalists and news organizations is not as necessary for community formation as some might claim.

Instructive as critique and useful in advocating precision, these discussions surface a recurrent issue for scholars. Should they aim to reimagine the terms that get used or grasp the different ways those terms are understood? The former critiques problems in current definitions; the latter, by contrast, seeks to make different definitions productive. For this latter view, definitions necessarily provide a perspective on local journalism. Rather than ask whether they are correct, it begins instead by but asking what they make visible. Synthesizing multiple perspectives will not generate a universal conceptualization of local journalism; it can, however, show the contributions of each perspective, while also keeping in view their limits.

MOMENTS IN THE STUDY OF LOCAL JOURNALISM

To that end, I conceptualize distinctive perspectives as "moments" in the study of local journalism.

This term highlights the definitions of local journalism that appear at specific moments in time, each shaped by different aims and scopes. Analysts seeking to raise awareness of the economic problems that confront local journalists and news organizations occupy one moment; their concern for valorizing local journalism and finding solutions leads them to (sometimes nostalgically) highlight its social importance and to leave the phenomenon only implicitly defined, partly because such labor seems superfluous. By contrast, those working to specify the nature and extent of the problem or explain the system of relations that make configurations of local journalism possible, occupy other moments and mobilize other definitions. Rather than criticize definitions, moments seek to render them productive by asking what they contribute to a broader understanding of local journalism.

My concept of moments is an example of what Weber (1949) theorized as "ideal types." This approach stylizes a more complex empirical reality by reducing it to a relatively small number of features (in this case, definitions, aims, and scopes). It is ideal not in the sense that it achieves excellence but that it selects and accentuates specific features and in doing so provides a "model" that allows scholars to question the strengths and benefits of distinct approaches. Undoubtedly, this approach ignores many other differences in the study of local journalism. However, its utility stems from the insights it generates regarding the strengths and limitations of different ways of studying local journalism. It is precisely an understanding of—and appreciation for—the strengths and limitations of each moment that this paper aims to provide.

In calling these moments, I foreground the iterative dimension of studying local journalism. Unlike schools of thought, which define and fix researchers' identities, an individual researcher can move across different moments over time. They might begin from a moment of concern (e.g., journalists in a town or at a news outlet are losing their jobs, people should be made aware); move to one in which they document the nature and extent of the problem (e.g., how many journalists lost their jobs); and proceed to examining how laws, policies, etc. make journalists more or less likely to retain their jobs. Researchers learn by moving amongst different moments over time, sometimes through confrontation among them, and other times via their integration. My approach thus aims to understand the content of the approaches associated with different moments and to clarify their respective strengths and limitations. This task, I argue, is especially useful given the hybrid nature of knowledge production surrounding local journalism, which leads individuals with distinct interests to gather around a shared phenomenon.

Identifying distinct moments not only provides a way to order existing definitional debates; it also offers a division of labor among those studying local journalism. Because discussions of local journalism are so wide-ranging, the identification of moments helps to separate tasks so that participants can contribute what they are best equipped to provide. Some journalists, policymakers and academics seeking to sound the alarm start from the empirical problem they observe; their skills in narrating public issues to a wide audience helps valorize the challenges that local journalism confronts and points to potential solutions. Others begin instead from theoretical problems or methodological concerns and use local journalism as an important case (e.g., the consequences of media ownership, mapping news ecologies). Without ignoring the need for critique, this division of labor defends the contributions of each moment and does not ask moments to do work they are not set up to undertake.

DATA AND METHODS

To explore these different moments in the study of local journalism, I entered the search query “local journalism” into Google Scholar, LitMaps and Google Search. This ensures the sample included both academic and popular discussions of the topic. Prior scholarship suggests that personalization in web searches is shaped in part by an individual user’s past search history and the geographic location from which the search is conducted (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022, p. 33). To reduce the potential effect of prior searches on the construction of this corpus, all queries were conducted while being signed out of all Google accounts. To vary location, I conducted the search using Virtual Private Networks located in countries (United States, France, Germany) that represent distinct “media systems” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Taking the first 50 results from each query, I created a spreadsheet that listed for each entry the title, author(s), and publication year. After removing duplicates from across the searches, the total number of items came to 240. While hardly exhaustive, these titles capture the diversity of aims and scopes involved in discussions of local journalism, and thus provide a useful basis for identifying the distinctive “moments” involved in its study.

Reading through each entry, I sought to identify its definition and scope of local journalism. In cases where these were made explicit by the authors, I recorded these definitions verbatim in the spreadsheet, while noting how they sought to delimit the phenomenon (e.g., by administrative region, media market). In cases where definitions were implicit, I considered what the authors referred to in their discussions (e.g., places, news organizations, journalists) and used this to develop a definition. For example, Margaret Sullivan’s

(2020) *Ghosting the News* never defines local journalism; however, her discussion references non-national news organizations (e.g., *Buffalo News*) doing work outside of media capitals like New York or Paris that “won’t win a journalism award” or “change the world” but “lets local taxpayers know how their money is being spent” (p. 1). In this case, local journalism is understood, on my reading, as news produced without the expectation of being consumed nationally.

Writing these definitions and scopes in a spreadsheet, I then sought to identify the author’s aims and objectives. What motivates their discussion of local journalism, and what do they see as the “value added” of their contribution? Typically, these aims were stated explicitly in the introduction or conclusion of an article, policy report or academic study. Examples of this include efforts to warn citizens about the actual and potential impacts of declining local news provision of political and social life; the development of measures or indices to represent the nature and extent of so-called “news deserts;” and efforts to explore the effects of media ownership on local news provision. I briefly summarized the aims for each article in the spreadsheet, assuming these aims provide evidence of what each author views as the contribution of their work to discussions of local journalism.

Having read through the entire corpus, I returned to the spreadsheet notes regarding each author’s definitions, aims and objectives concerning local journalism. On each of these variables, variation existed: i.e., different authors offered distinctive definitions of what the term local journalism means. What’s more, these different definitions typically corresponded to different aims and objectives regarding why the study of local journalism matters. Those who did not problematize the meaning of local journalism (as in the Sullivan example above) generally sought to valorize this form of journalism and suggest ways that it could be supported (e.g., donations, subsidies, business models), while those who sought to delimit local journalism endeavored to either substantiate popular concerns by developing measures for exploring the nature of the problems confronting local journalism or to explain why local journalism assumes the form it does. This led me to develop the idea of “moments” as a way to characterize the different approaches to studying local journalism.

To characterize these different moments, I began by closely rereading the articles that differed most strongly from each other in terms of their definitions, aims, and scopes. For each, I created a label that could pithily characterize these approaches. “Spontaneous” refers to articles in the corpus whose understanding of local journalism springs from common-sense (i.e., unproblematized) understandings of what local jour-

nalism entails and urges quick action to remedy the problems confronting local news providers. “Substantial” denotes articles that seek to validate the concerns expressed in the spontaneous moment, usually by developing measures for understanding the nature and extent of the problem confront local news providers in a delimited area. Finally, “relational” pertains to articles that explore local journalism as the product of interconnections among different entities (state policies, markets, laws, etc.).

With these three moments defined, I sought to apply one to each text in the remainder of the sample. Because I conceive of moments as distinct periods in time, I applied only one label to each entry. Certainly, variation among the texts within each group existing; not every spontaneous article argues for the same remedy; substantive approaches study many different geographic locations and at varying scales (neighborhood, city, region); relational studies often foreground different types of relations (some emphasize ownership, others explore laws and policies). What’s more, the line dividing different moments can be more or less bright, with authors sometimes invoking aims that might cut across different moments. However, no text in my corpus included all elements of different moments simultaneously. I therefore assigned a label for each based on my reading of the entire text (rather than searching for phrases or terms within them). This approach, moreover, helps to fulfill my theoretical aim of highlighting the definitions, aims, and scopes that characterize each moment.

Below, I describe the main features associated with each moment in the study of journalism, based on their definitions, aims, and scopes. Examples of texts in the corpus are utilized to illustrate what these moments look like in practice. Across each of these moments, my aim is to highlight how each understands what local journalism is and why it matters. Doing so, I suggest, can usefully highlight the strengths and limitations associated with each, which I also seek to illustrate in my discussion of each moment.

THE SPONTANEOUS MOMENT

A first definition conceives of local journalism as news that is produced without the expectation of being consumed nationally or internationally. The definition is spontaneous because it springs directly from common-sense understandings of the term. This common-sense can be that of “ordinary” people, as seen in surveys that ask respondents for their perceptions of news “from the city or town, municipality or region” in which they live (Schulz, 2020, p. 46). Or it can be that of “experts”—journalists, policymakers, academics (Sullivan, 2020)—whose close involvement in dis-

cussions about local journalism renders the labor of further defining the term unnecessary, as everyone already knows what the term means. Whether conveying common-sense in its ordinary or expert forms, spontaneous definitions find it either redundant or counterproductive to problematize understandings of local journalism. Indeed, the very act of engaging in such definitional labor risks, from these perspectives, appearing “academic” in the pejorative sense of the term – i.e., superfluous, pedantic (Abramson, 2019).

Spontaneous approaches contribute to discussions of local journalism in several ways. Highlighting news that is, by definition, not intended to be consumed nationally or internationally, they foreground a form of journalism oriented to the concerns of “ordinary” people. A European Commission report distills this tendency nicely, arguing that local journalism gives “local people the necessary knowledge, and opportunity, to take a position on [government and public affairs]” (Trei, 2021, p. 9). By emphasizing what American policymakers term “the information needs” (Waldman, 2011) of local communities, this approach endeavors to secure for ordinary citizens the social functions associated with the most prestigious forms of national and international journalism: to hold officials accountable, to explain complex issues in straightforward terms, perhaps even sustain democracy. What’s more, local journalism is also held to be useful to rectify the distorting effects of news produced about “local” settings by national news producers, and who tend to see “local” events in negative or exoticizing terms. This recognition is at the core, for example, of the Canadian government’s Special Measures for Journalism Fund (Canadian Heritage, 2022). Even those who stress that local journalism often fails to live up to its social functions nonetheless argue that some form of non-national journalism can and should provide an important alternative to more prestigious news providers (Sullivan, 2020).

Because local journalism matters to ordinary people, writings inspired by spontaneous definitions aim to ring alarm bells to alert citizens about the crises it faces. In her *cri de cœur*, for example, Margaret Sullivan (2020) writes that “American citizens don’t know about what’s happening to local news” (p. 2). As evidence, she cites a Pew Research poll in which almost three of every four American respondents believed that their local news organizations were in good financial shape. Her effort, therefore, is to warn that “the growing crisis in local news...has already done serious harm to our democracy: further polarizing our society, providing less incentive to vote, and failing to keep public officials accountable” (p. 2). In the United Kingdom, Roy Greenslade (2020) sketches a similar narrative in which the profitability of local news media has been “wrecked by the digital revolution,” (p. 5) and that has led to staff reductions that make it “impossible [for

those organizations] to cover their patches adequately” (p. 9).

Alarms sounded, spontaneous approaches also contribute by describing potential solutions to the problems confronting local journalism. Diverse but not infinitely varied, these include calls for increased philanthropic support and targeted government funding (Trei, 2021); experimentation with new models of reporting that promise to attract audiences by making news more relevant to their daily lives (Wenzel, Gerson & Moreno, 2016); examination of new online-only ventures that point to new business models for local journalism; and documentation of collaborations that might allow hollowed out news organizations to “do more with less” (Jenkins & Graves, 2022). Whatever their differences, these proposed solutions stem from the recognition that local journalism is both important and existentially threatened.

These contributions are important yet also invite questions and encourage reflection on local journalism’s definition. If local journalism has important and somewhat distinctive social roles, then to what extent do existing news organizations fulfill these roles? How can discussions include less lauded, but real, aspects of journalism: e.g., its tendency towards boosterism (see, e.g., Gutsche, 2015; Kim and Lowrey, 2018) and its sparse coverage of social inequalities? Moreover, if local journalism is in crisis, is it in crisis in the same way and to the same extent everywhere? Finally, how effective are the solutions proposed to remedy problems in local journalism? Do some proposed interventions, like philanthropic support, in fact amplify the unequal resources available to local and national news outlets?

Rather than abstractly academic, these questions underscore a need to specify the nature of the crisis in local journalism, the ways this crisis manifests in different places, and the extent to which proposed solutions might effectively address the problems local journalism faces. Spontaneous approaches can and do show *that* these issues matter; they can and do offer intriguing anecdotal evidence to support intuitions regarding what might be done. But because they reflect rather than interrogate the common sense about local journalism, they cannot on their own answer these questions. A different approach is necessary.

THE SUBSTANTIVE MOMENT

A second definition delimits local journalism by bounding it to places or people. These places and people constitute the substance of local journalism that empirical researchers set out to examine. Most commonly, these are defined through an administrative logic – i.e., state-defined boundaries of cities,

towns, regions, etc. The news producers included in the analysis are focused on those “that reside within, and oriented around serving selected communities” (Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough, & Renninger, 2016, p. 378). Less commonly, an economic logic is incorporated into this definition (e.g., media markets). Whatever logic is deployed, the substantialist approach is an effort to build upon spontaneous approaches by substantiating concerns about local journalism.

The contributions of this research are considerable. They provide specificity regarding some of the core questions in debates about local journalism. Population studies provide snapshots of the news providers in a place and offer over-time analysis of their offerings (Abernathy, 2020; Harte, Howells & Williams, 2018). Content analyses document the amount and types of news produced by news outlets, shedding light on which outlets do and do not provide so-called “civically useful” news and information (Hayes & Lawless, 2021; Jenkins & Jerónimo, 2021).

The contributions of substantive approaches do not end there. Such research also highlights patterns of variation in terms of the production and consumption of local journalism across locales and peoples. In both Western Europe and North America, the forms that media ownership takes (Abernathy, 2016); the business models that news organizations employ; and the demographics of audiences (Napoli et al., 2018) all correspond with different amounts and types of local journalism available to citizens. Communities composed of citizens with higher education and income levels tend to have more news providers that meet the so-called “critical information needs” of these communities, as well as more audiences interested in such news (Usher, 2020). By contrast, less well-resourced communities tend to be “underserved” in the provision of such news (Neff, Popiel & Pickard, 2022), and less interested in consuming such news – even when it entails no direct economic cost. Given that those less well-resourced places also tend to correspond to broader inequalities rooted in race, class, and ethnicity, these patterns highlight ways in which transformations in local journalism might effectively intensify broader social inequalities.

Finally, substantive approaches have the virtue of evaluating the strengths and limitations of proposed solutions to the crisis in local journalism. Tracking the effects of suggested interventions, this scholarship provides evidence of the extent to which online-only news providers, philanthropic funders, government subsidies and new models of journalism practice can address some of the “gaps” in local news provision (Konieczna, 2020). Sometimes linking these evaluations to normative conceptions of local journalism, this research also foregrounds questions about who

does and does not benefit (Neff, Popiel & Pickard, 2022). Research of this variety therefore provides a sort of “feedback loop” that interested parties (policymakers, media managers, consultants) can utilize to make potentially more informed decisions regarding the allocation of often scarce resources.

By delimiting the analysis of local journalism to specific groups and places, substantive approaches are therefore able to specify, document variation, and evaluate potential solutions to the crisis in local news. The principles used to delimit the object of analysis, however, are not necessarily the principles needed to explain those findings. Administrative principles are a useful way of studying local journalism in a given locale. But so much of what shapes the circulation and reception of local news is not confined by the limits of a city or town. In an era characterized by chain ownership and conglomeration, the profit-making (and cost-saving) strategies of many news organizations—which clearly impact the amount and types of news available—cannot be understood within one city or town. Even basic questions like whether to implement a paywall depends on socio-demographic factors that are shaped by factors external to the locale observed.

Thus, the substantive moment also raises questions about how best to explain the results it achieves. Why do some towns, cities or regions witness greater or lesser degrees of innovation in the provision of local news? Why should some forms of ownership, business models or socio-demographics correspond with particular types of information provision? And why do some interventions to bolster local journalism fail, even when their failures are not rooted primarily in a lack of economic resources? These questions, which the research produced from the substantialist moments enables, are not easily resolved from within it.

THE RELATIONAL MOMENT

A third definition conceives of local journalism as the product of interdependencies that construct the production, circulation and reception of news within a given space. Like substantialism, it sees delimitation as a necessary first step to grounding the study of local journalism in specific contexts, thus reducing the risk of offering vague generalities about the nature and extent of a “crisis.” However, it understands the actions taken by agents (journalists, managers, audiences, etc.) as being made possible by a system of relations (laws, policies, regulations, markets) that often exceed the groups and places studied because they are built on relations found in larger social spaces (e.g., nation-states). These relations form a system because of their interconnection: it is the interaction among these different relations, rather than

any one element on its own, that provides the energy that makes action possible.

This relational moment helps shed light on the system of relations that make specific configurations of local journalism possible. The formation of local news startups, to take one example, are often seen as sources of innovation (e.g., Carlson and Usher, 2015). Without denying the novelty of some of these developments, the relational moment—drawing on prior theory (e.g., media systems, field theory) as a guide regarding the elements to identify—highlights the configuration of elements that make such agents possible (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Looking at the highly uneven formation of online startups in two cities in France and the United States, for example, Powers and Vera-Zambra (2016) show that the overall size of the pool of startup creators is shaped first and foremost by the degree to which labor protections insulate journalists from layoffs. These protections, which are national policies that cover these and other cities, protect specific journalists. In France, established journalists enjoy relatively strong job protections but make finding stable work difficult for less established ones, while in the US very few journalists ever find stability, even as the market is relatively open to newcomers. The relatively higher presence of startups in one American city, therefore, stems partly from the fact that journalists with the social networks necessary to form startups are on the job market due to weak labor protections, as well as the higher degree of market exposure in American media. By contrast, the relatively small number of startups in one French city stem from the insulation of its most established journalists from even considering this option, and the weak social connections of the less established journalists who do. In these cases, therefore, the explanation for startup formation revolves around market exposure and job protections (which are national), and which create different conditions of possibility for startup formation.

The relational moment is also an opportunity to grasp why some types of news that might be normatively desirable are often not spontaneously produced at the local level. In both North America and Western Europe, it is common to see calls for reporting that does in local media what occurs more regularly at the national level (e.g., investigations into powerholders). A relational perspective provides the opportunity to question the nature of the connection between these two scales (local, national). Local journalism is not simply a smaller version of a larger national form of journalism. Rather, the local is embedded hierarchically in a broader relationship, in which definitions of professional excellence are set at the national level. While local journalists seek to emulate these definitions, they often do not share the same conditions necessary for producing such work (Splendore, 2020). They have less time and fewer resources to do the work; they

also tend to have less “elite” social profiles than journalists working at national news media (in terms of background, education, etc.; Hanusch, 2015). Those more advantaged backgrounds also provide some of the power to resist encroachments of this time and resources that occur so regularly in some local news companies. Without negating the attractiveness of these nationally derived visions of excellence, the relational moment helps explain why they should be less commonly produced at the local level.

A third contribution of the relational moment is that it highlights the resources necessary to succeed in local journalism (Hess, 2013). Spontaneous discussions about what is required to do well as a local journalist often emphasize industriousness or technical skills. No doubt such skills are important. But common-sense discussions, rooted in experience, do not include explanations derived from abstraction. In the case of online startups, for example, research has found that the resource most needed to succeed is not technical savvy (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2022). Instead, it is social connections and reputation, which help to garner the resources necessary to form a news site, get space for work, get sources to talk, etc.

If the relational moment sheds light on important facets of local journalism, it struggles to convert those insights into practical actions. Partly, this stems from a difference in aims. Research occurring in the relational moment seeks to explain rather than act on the phenomenon it studies. But even granting this division of labor, relational research is not so easily adapted to actionable insights. If the explanation for startup formation, for example, stems from so many factors outside the control of any single government, business or individual, then how can this be used to facilitate startup formation? Often, relational research highlights the contingent nature of its findings – i.e., the fact that the results could be different in other contexts. In a space as diverse as local journalism, this makes actionable insights extremely difficult to infer. Other moments, like the spontaneous one described above, are likely better adapted to offering such insights.

CONCLUSION

Discussions about the state of local journalism have proliferated in recent years, yet definitional questions remain. Rather than resolve these discussions with a single definition, I aim to give order to the different ways in which the phenomenon is understood. Distinct moments in the study of local journalism are rooted in particular aims and scopes. They can be evaluated not so much in terms of whether they are right or wrong in their implicit or explicit definitions of local journalism but in terms of what they can and cannot contribute to the debate. In presenting these different moments, I

therefore aim to make these different approaches productive while also heeding calls to take seriously the need to better define what is meant by the term local journalism.

My approach suggests that the study of local journalism advances through a division of labor among those involved. Journalists, policymakers, and researchers both within and beyond the university participate actively in these discussions. Not only do they not share the same aims and stakes; they also bring unique skills. Stated very generally, some individuals are better equipped to craft engaging narratives that rouse public attention to the issue; others possess methodological sophistication that disposes them to finely tuned analysis of patterns of variation in the local journalism; still others evince a theoretical orientation that offers explanations for the forms that local journalism assumes in different settings. The study of local journalism benefits from this panoply of skills, aims, and scopes.

To be sure, a division of labor does not obviate the need for criticism. The study of local journalism advances in part through the confrontation of different definitions inherent to distinct moments. By asking what other moments lack, researchers seek to overcome the limitations of perspectives and highlight something new about local journalism. Through their critiques of concepts or ideas, they also encourage greater precision. This is especially beneficial when the phenomenon appears existentially threatened, as the temptations towards nostalgia can overshadow questions about the limitations associated with many actually existing forms of local journalism.

Yet criticism is just one component of a broad and iterative process of knowledge formation regarding local journalism. This is because concern about local journalism is rooted not merely in nostalgia but also in empirical realities. Certainly, the details vary within and across national contexts; nonetheless, it remains true that many local news outlets are being shuttered; that many more are being substantially reduced; and that many thousands of local journalists have lost their jobs or had their working conditions degraded. Given those developments, isn't it reasonable to expect the study of local journalism to do more than offer reminders about news organizations' shortcomings? Rather than abandon critique, the approach favored here seeks to integrate it into a larger discussion about the benefits and shortcomings of the existing moments observed in the study of local journalism.

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Spontaneous, Substantive, and Relational: Three Moments in the Study of Local Journalism

Spontané, substantiel et relationnel : Trois moments dans l'étude du journalisme local

Espontâneo, Substantivo e Relacional: Três Momentos no Estudos de Jornalismo Local

Espontáneo, sustantivo y relacional: tres enfoques en los estudios sobre el periodismo local

En. The expansion of research on local journalism has been accompanied by recurrent calls to better define the phenomenon. Rather than propose a single definition, this paper argues that this area of study can be better understood as having distinct “moments” whose varied understandings of local journalism are shaped by particular scopes and aims. Analyzing a non-systematic sample of popular and academic texts, I conceptualize three such moments: spontaneous, substantive, and relational. Collectively, these moments constitute unique but iterative steps in a larger process of knowledge construction. The study of local journalism, I maintain, advances best through awareness of—and appreciation for—the contributions and limitations associated with each moment. Such awareness and appreciation is important in “hybrid” spaces of knowledge production, where journalists, policymakers and researchers gather around a shared phenomenon that they define differently due to their distinctive interests.

Keywords: local journalism; defining local news; epistemological moments; hybrid research; journalism crisis

Fr. L'essor de la recherche sur le journalisme local s'est accompagné d'appels récurrents à mieux définir ce phénomène. Plutôt que de proposer une définition unique, cet article soutient que ce objet d'étude peut être mieux compris comme ayant des « moments » distincts, au sein desquels la compréhension de ce qu'est le “journalisme local” est façonnée par des cadrages et des objectifs particuliers. En analysant un échantillon non systématique de textes populaires et universitaires, j'ai pu caractériser trois de ces moments comme spontané, substantiel et relationnel. Collectivement, ces moments constituent des étapes uniques mais itératives dans un processus plus large de construction des connaissances. Je soutiens que l'étude du journalisme local progresse grâce à la prise en compte et l'appréciation des contributions et des limites associées à chaque moment. Cette prise de conscience et cette reconnaissance sont importantes dans les espaces « hybrides » de production de connaissances, où les journalistes, les décideurs politiques et les chercheurs se réunissent autour d'un phénomène commun qu'ils définissent différemment en raison de leurs intérêts distincts.

Mots-clés : journalisme local ; définition de l'information locale ; moments épistémologiques ; recherche hybride ; crise du journalisme

Pt. A expansão da pesquisa sobre jornalismo local tem sido acompanhada de apelos recorrentes para uma melhor definição desse fenômeno. Em vez de propor uma única definição, este artigo argumenta que essa área de estudo pode ser melhor compreendida como tendo “momentos” distintos, em que os variados entendimentos sobre jornalismo local são definidos por escopos e objetivos particulares. Por meio da análise de uma amostra não sistemática de textos populares e acadêmicos, conceitualizo três momentos: espontâneo, substantivo e relacional. Coletivamente, esses momentos constituem etapas únicas, mas iterativas, em um processo mais amplo de construção do conhecimento. O estudo do jornalismo local, eu sustento, avança melhor por meio da conscientização das – e apreciação pelas – contribuições e limitações associadas a cada momento. Essa conscientização e apreciação são importantes em espaços “híbridos” de produção de conhecimento, onde jornalistas, tomadores de decisão e pesquisadores se reúnem em torno de um fenômeno compartilhado que definem de forma diferente devido a seus interesses distintos.

Palavras-chave: jornalismo local; definição de notícias locais; momentos epistemológicos; pesquisa híbrida; crise do jornalismo

Es. La creciente expansión de la investigación sobre el periodismo local ha generado frecuentes llamados a una definición más rigurosa de este fenómeno. En lugar de plantear una única definición, este artículo propone entender este campo de estudio como un conjunto de «momentos» diferenciados, caracterizados por marcos conceptuales y objetivos específicos. A partir del análisis de una muestra no sistemática de textos académicos y populares, se conceptualizan tres enfoques principales: el momento espontáneo, el momento sustantivo y el momento relacional. En conjunto, estos enfoques constituyen etapas únicas pero iterativas dentro de un proceso más amplio de construcción del conocimiento. Se argumenta que el avance en la comprensión del periodismo local depende de una valoración crítica de las contribuciones y limitaciones de cada momento. Este ejercicio crítico resulta especialmente relevante en los espacios de producción de conocimiento «híbridos», donde periodistas, responsables de políticas públicas e investigadores convergen en torno a un fenómeno común, aunque definido de manera diferente según sus intereses y perspectivas.

Palabras clave: periodismo local; definición de noticia local; enfoques epistemológicos; investigación híbrida; crisis del periodismo