Local Journalism in Europe
Reuniting with its audiences

Josep Àngel Guimerà
Profesor agregado
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Espanya
josepangel.guimera@uab.cat

David Domingo
Chaire de journalisme
ReSIC-LaPIJ
Université libre de Bruxelles
Belgique
david.domingo@ulb.ac.be

Andy Williams
Senior Lecturer
Cardiff University
United Kingdom
WilliamsA28@cardiff.ac.uk

The disappearance of long-established traditional media, staff reductions, takeovers of smaller local companies by large (trans)national companies and the appearance of new kinds of digital journalism have resulted in profound changes in local ecosystems. This has generated a need for knowledge that is as evident to academics as it is, and possibly even more so, to media professionals themselves. Scientific interest in local information has been nurtured by a normative perspective on the importance of journalism for political life and public debate in places where there may be fewer publications than in national and international markets. Over the last decade, this interest has translated into the birth of specialised projects and research centres, as well as a number of books and articles exploring different facets of the challenges and evolution of local journalism.

This special issue *About Journalism – Sur le journalisme – Sobre jornalismo* aims to contribute to the debate on some of the tensions experienced by local journalism, which mirror the general situation of the profession, and the same time show the wide range of solutions adapted to particular contexts. Local media ecosystems are microcosms where the global trends of journalism take on specific characteristics. These are information markets of varying size, but what they have in common is the proximity between the producers and the consumers of information: journalists, sources and the public. The exploration

of how that proximity is (re)articulated is central to the contributions of this special issue. They analyse the general panorama as well as specific cases of six European countries: Belgium, France, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. In this introduction we set out the main initiatives structuring research into local journalism in Europe and the USA and their mutual academic and cultural influence in this area. We then offer a review of the main lines of work in the most recent scientific literature to put the contributions in this issue into perspective. Finally, we propose possible future research agenda opened up by these contributions and which defend the importance of the study of public communication processes in the local ambit.

GROWING ACADEMIC INTEREST

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the growing interest in local journalism among researchers is often accompanied by a sense of urgency, the feeling of approaching an object of study in danger of extinction, and the desire to contribute to its survival. In the USA, several research centres and authors have addressed the challenge in the form of reports and monographs. In 2014, the Geraldine L. Dodge Foundation led the launch of the Local News Lab (now upheld by the Democracy Foundation) with the aim of exploring new forms of local journalism and its funding in New Jersey. As part of this project, Napoli et al. (2015) carried out research which highlighted the differences in "*infrastructure, output and performance*" in three communities in New Jersey. A year later they published *Lessons Learned from the Local News Lab* (De Aguiar & Stearn, 2016), where they summarised the findings of the first experiments. The Pew Research Center (2015) analysed the state of local journalism in three metropolitan areas of the United States. In 2016, the University of North Carolina set up the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media (CISLM), sponsored by the Knight Foundation. Since then three reports have been published by Penelope Mucse Abernathy (2016, 2017 and 2018) on the changes in local markets, with special attention to the proliferation of "*news deserts*." Radcliffe & Ali (2017), in their extended research for the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, approached the questions of how "*small-market newspapers*" are responding to the disruption of digital technology. The concern of the University of Columbia about these media is significant and has led the Columbia Journalism Review to create a map[1] of the so-called "*news deserts*" produced as the result of the disappearance of local newspapers over the whole country. Finally, in 2018, the News Measures Research Project of Duke University carried out research, again led by Napoli, which highlights the scarcity of local news that has

a social value in small and medium sized communities in the country (Napoli et al, 2018). This is a worrying fact according to the normative view mentioned above.

Several other books stand out in the period under consideration. In 2013, two case studies showed the changes in the local media ecosystem of Philadelphia (Anderson, 2013) and Connecticut (Kennedy, 2013), demonstrating how vague were the digital news strategies of local newspapers and broadcasters on the wake of blogs, information activists and not-for-profit projects. One year later, Abernathy published her first contribution to the field (2014) with a proposal to try to guarantee the long-term economic profitability of local newspapers. Lloyd & Freedman (2016), in their eloquent *The communication crisis in America, and how to fix it,* also pay special attention to the crisis of local information and how this (negatively) affects the news requirements of the communities. Along a similar line, but centred on local television, Ali (2017) considers the problems in defining – and therefore regulating – local television in the twenty-first century in the US, UK and Canada. These limitations put at risk the long-term viability of local information, both in terms of the concentration of businesses and colonisation of local markets.

In Europe, the UK concentrates many of the contributions in this field, with the early leadership of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism of the University of Oxford. In 2009, it published the Currah Report with possible solutions to the "*serious funding crisis*" for local and regional news, which could lead to the emergence of "news gaps" in the UK. In 2014, the centre organised the conference "Local Journalism around the world: professional practices, economic foundations, and political implications". An international selection of contributions was included in the book *Local News* (Nielsen, 2014), which became an obligatory reference in research into contemporary local journalism. It analyses the importance of local media in different aspects of community life, how economic crisis and digitization affect them and what strategies are applied in different countries to tackle these problems. Avoiding new news gaps and maintaining the centrality of local media in public life seems to be a common concern for all authors. In 2018, one study collected evidence from Finland, France, Germany and the UK and gave a new account of the challenges and opportunities that local and regional newspapers have in the face of digitization (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018).

Charity organisations in the UK have financed research into the subject, with a special concern about

the impact on democracy and the life in local communities. In 2010, Media Trust published a pioneering study on the news requirements of local communities (Fenton et al, 2010). Nesta launched the Destination Local programme, "*aimed to support the next generation of hyperlocal media services in the UK*". It published a map of the sector in the UK (Radcliffe, 2012), and in 2016 a report on the funding models of hyperlocal projects. From an analysis of five countries in Europe, it showed the different strategies for strengthening business models for this type of initiative (Cook et al, 2016).

In turn, *Understanding the Local Media* by Meryl Aldridge (2007) represented an important starting point for systematising knowledge about press, radio and televisions during the initial period of change. Ramsay & Moore (2016) focussed on the decline of local newspapers, a possible democratic deficit and its political implications. Also, in the UK, a diverse group of researchers has provided the driving force for research into the so-called hyperlocals. The most recent result of this initiative is the publication of *Hyperlocal journalism: The decline of local newspapers and the rise of online community news* (Harte, Howells and Williams, 2018), which explores whether, and in what ways, amateur and community news outlets compensate for the loss in professional news coverage, often from a position of great economic fragility. Finally, Baines & Gulyas are currently editing the *Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism* with a worldwide distribution and due to be published in the first half of 2019.

CRISIS, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY

if all the above references demonstrate the interest in local journalism, it is in the scientific articles that we can appreciate the breadth and diversity of this vibrant line of research. Concentrating on Europe, as the geographical area which this issue has ended up focussing on, in the last decade there have been dozens of contributions in the main scientific journals specialised in journalism. If the publication of special issues and books on the subject has been a phenomenon especially significant in the last three years, the articles indicate that there was already significant research interest at the beginning of the decade. Geographically, the contributions by the UK and Scandinavian countries continue to be considerable compared with those from countries in central Europe and the Mediterranean. A thematic analysis of this set of texts allows four main groups of contributions to be identified: the economic crisis of local printed media and the emergence of the hyperlo-

cal phenomenon; the question of the participation and content produced by the public (User Generated Content, UGC); the impact of all these changes on the lives of the communities (hyper)local media serve; and the changes in local journalistic culture, with the professional identity of journalists as the focus of attention. The articles that you can read in this special issue are concerned with one or several of these topics.

Concern for the paper crisis has led to research into innovation and possible future business models. Cawley (2016) analysed the newspaper crisis in Ireland, while Rouger (2008) did the same in France and Wadbring & Bergstrom (2017) analysed 30 years of evolution in Sweden. Olsen & Solvoy (2018) presented Norwegian newspaper strategies to implement paywalls and Boyles (2017) described the strengths and weaknesses of journalism hackathons as instruments for journalistic innovation in nine countries. In this issue, Birgit Røe Mathisen and Lisbeth Morlandstø look at the attitude of journalists towards innovation – not just in relation to technology, but also journalistic genres and work practices. Their article documents the tensions between economic motivation and democratic ideals in the definition of local journalism, and the innovations adopted by two regional Norwegian newspapers. The overall image is one of a crisis in local print journalism which takes slightly different shapes nationally, but which presents a common decline in circulation and problems when it comes to monetising the digital editions, which also require innovative forms of presenting the journalistic product.

Several of the authors state that (some of) the problems behind the growing weakness of print media are being addressed by hyperlocal digital media and the exploration of different business models and business organisational structures. Different research has attempted to explain the appearance of this new media in European countries such as Spain and Portugal (López et al., 2016; Pardo, 2016), the UK (White et al, 2017) and Sweden (Leckner et al, 2017). Also, more sophisticated studies attempt to look more deeply into the way in which they operate (van Kerkhoven & Bakker, 2014), detect the legitimising resources behind their appearance (Harte et al, 2016), how they are economically sustained (Kurpius et al, 2010) and what value they have in the media system as a whole (Williams et al, 2015). The changes that these media introduce into the system and their relationship with "*legacy media*" (Nygren et al, 2017), as well as their capacity to fill news gaps also appear on the research agenda (Barnett & Townend, 2014). The result of all these articles together is that of a heterogeneous sector dealing with a wide range of local situations but which tends

to seek to satisfy specific news requirements while fighting to find sustainable business models that avoid economic precariousness and the prevalence of amateurish products. In this special issue, María-Cruz Negreira-Rey, Xosé López-García and Ana-Isabel Rodríguez-Vázquez offer a joint overview of local digital media in Spain and Portugal, from its business structure and model to its relationship with its audiences and spaces for participation.

Audience participation is precisely one of the biggest topics in contemporary research into local journalism[2]. Several contributions attempt to report on how the public participates in the creation and diffusion of content, on the limits for doing so and on the implications for journalism, both practical and philosophical (Lewis et al, 2010; Costera, 2010; Paulussen & D'heer, 2013; Karlsson & Holt, 2014; Canter, 2013; Ardizzoni, 2013; Dickens, 2014; Carlsson & Nilson, 2016; Wiard & Simonson, 2018). At the same time, the quality of UGC and how it is perceived by professionals and audiences have also attracted the interest of researchers in some European countries (Singer, 2010; Canter, 2012, Frölich et al, 2012). Laura Ahva and Victor Wiard offer in this issue a systematic analysis of the dynamics of public participation in two very different projects: a not-for-profit media outlet in Brussels and a free newspaper managed by professional journalist in Stockholm. These cases show how every context generates different ways of participation which, in turn, shape the role of members of the public in journalism, and the role of the media in the public sphere. In a piece of meta-research on the results obtained by research on citizen journalism, Wall (2015) indicated the ambivalent sense that this citizen involvement has had, showing signs of both enrichment and problems and limitations.

All the dynamics noted in the preceding research lead to a change in the relationship of (local) audiences with the media and, therefore, their ability to affect community life. Articles such as those by Leupold et al. (2016), Wiard & Pereira (2018) and Firmstone & Coleman (2014) try to show how local media reflect their communities and the implications that this coverage may have on aspects such as political behaviour or quality of life. They also examine how a reciprocal relationship is produced between hyperlocal media and its audiences (Harte et al, 2017). In this issue, Pauline Amiel concentrates on the presence of French local media on Facebook and on their crowdfunding campaigns as a strategy to "rebuild" their local bond with the readers. Franck Bousquet, on the other hand, explores the comments section in news stories as a representation of the local public sphere. The case of a newspaper from southern France enables him to observe how

certain dynamics of participation connect the local with national political trends, de-naturalising the local political debate.

Along a similar line, the access of sources to the media has also been a point of interest for researchers in local journalism, who have detected how institutional sources can come to dominate the news agenda (O'Neill & O'Connor, 2008), although those that are not linked to the elites are emerging in some countries (Splendore, 2017) and "radical non-official sources" seek out ways of being recognised as viable (Taylor, 2015). At the same time, the need to re-think the models of newsgathering at a time of change to recover the beat of local journalism seems clear (Dick, 2012). In connection with this, the article by Gilles Labarthe in this issue analyses the evolution of the relationship between local journalists and sources in the context of the digitization of public communication in Switzerland. Beyond the domination of the media agenda by institutional sources, Labarthe shows that the increase in content production by sources on their websites and social media networks ends up making the job of investigative journalism more complicated, with problems of access and attacks on its legitimacy.

Other authors have shown that these changes and tensions are, in turn, modifying local journalistic culture, both in terms of the identity and the values that journalists profess –especially professionalism – and their own perceptions of their tasks. Some tensions have been detected in Germany where, despite everything, professionalism is dominant (Harnischmacher, 2015, see also Chadha, 2016, for the case of the US). There is evidence of change in the professional self-perception in the UK and Norway (Firmstone, 2015; Hatcher & Haavik, 2013). In this special issue, Karianne Sørgård Olsen shows how Norwegian journalists working for local newspapers and public broadcasting stations position themselves in regard to digitization, and how they reconsider their professional identities, their relations with the public and their professional practice.

FUTURE CHALLENGES: THEORISATION, HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

despite the large number of special issues and articles published over the last decade, there are still some gaps in our knowledge and needs for more in-depth research about an object of study which is by definition heterogeneous and highly dynamic. A review of the literature reveals a crucial pending challenge in research into local journalism: all of these developments have placed on the table the

need to conceptually (re)think local information, but the work put into theorisation has been scant. Metzgar et al. (2011) considered a very complex aspect that is seen in much of the research on hyperlocal media: the need to correctly define a new phenomenon, that at the same time feeds from previous traditions and also contemporary experiences. Hess (2013) proposes abandoning concepts that are excessively rooted in notions of territory and recasting the local newspaper as a "*geo-social news*". This is an attempt to overcome the conceptual problems posed by defining media solely by territorial limits. Finally, Nielsen (2016) highlights how in Denmark the same local newspaper can be conceptualised in different (even opposing) ways by members of its audience. This illustrates the importance of public perceptions when it comes to understanding (and defining) local media. A more profound approach to audience needs, interests and perspectives could help with this necessary effort to theorise and, of course, to a greater understanding of the media itself from a perspective that has not always been sufficiently taken into account.

The conceptual and theoretical challenge could also benefit from the comparisons proposed by Ahva & Wiard, or Negreira-Rey and their colleagues in this special issue. Contrasting similar trends in different cultural, economic and political contexts could help to test the explanatory capacity of new analytical models, but it also poses the challenge of negotiating theoretical, epistemological and methodological distances in different scientific traditions (Vera-Zambrano & Powers, 2017)[3]. In making these comparisons, it would be very useful to include other countries from southern and eastern Europe and extend the focus to other continents. There are communication ecosystems in place with a very long tradition in local media, but they are scarcely present in the international research circuit, if at all. On the other hand, one of the research strategies that we miss in some of the most recent studies on digital journalism is the historical perspective. As Metzgar et al. (2011) rightly point out, current changes can be better understood if we look at their origins and references, the evolution of local communication projects through the decades of development and often of fight to defend their existence.

The historical perspective, the intensification of audience-centric approaches and efforts to make comparisons, together with theorisation which is sensitive to new situations and configurations in the local space, will allow a deeper reflection on the redistribution of legitimacies in local news production and the position of media professionals in an ecosystem filled with new voices that do not always get to be heard.

NOTES

1. https://www.cjr.org/local_news/american-news-deserts-donuts-local.php

2. In the same way that it is a principal topic in studies on journalism in general. See the special issue "Le journalisme en ligne et ses publics" in volume 4(2) of Sur le journalisme (2015).

3. See the special issue "Études comparatives sur le journalisme, les médias et la politique" in volume 6(2) of Sur le journalisme (2017).

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