

THE EROSION OF PROXIMITY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL JOURNALISM IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The decline of local journalism, which has lost resources and influence, is reflected in phenomena such as “news deserts” that are increasingly prevalent worldwide. A recent study suggests that over half of the municipalities lack local news coverage in Portugal. This article proposes an analysis and reflection on the issues and challenges currently affecting local journalism, drawing on a review of recent literature. It is presented as the weakest link in the global media crisis, grappling with traditional business bankruptcies and platform competition. However, it is also uniquely adaptable to endure in an adverse context. The closure of local media, the struggle for survival among the remaining outlets, and the reluctance of journalists to involve audiences in defining news contribute to the erosion of proximity, albeit with some positive signs. Among these signs is a widespread acknowledgement of the significance of local journalism and a growing academic interest in this domain.

KEYWORDS

proximity, audience, local journalism, news deserts, platforms

A EROÇÃO DA PROXIMIDADE: QUESTÕES E DESAFIOS DO JORNALISMO LOCAL NA SOCIEDADE CONTEMPORÂNEA

RESUMO

O enfraquecimento do jornalismo local, que tem perdido meios e influência, é traduzido por fenómenos como os “desertos de notícias”, em mapeamento num número crescente de países. Em Portugal, um estudo recente aponta para que mais de metade dos municípios se encontrem carentes de cobertura noticiosa sediada no território. Este artigo propõe um balanço e uma reflexão em torno das questões e desafios que enfrenta atualmente o jornalismo local, a partir da revisão da literatura recente. É apresentado como o elo mais fraco na crise global dos média, sendo o mais afetado pela falência do negócio tradicional e pela concorrência das plataformas. Contudo, é-lhe também reconhecida uma flexibilidade singular para singrar num contexto de adversidade. O encerramento de meios locais, a difícil sobrevivência dos que ficam e a resistência dos jornalistas em deixar os públicos serem parceiros na definição do que é notícia são alguns dos fatores a contribuir para um momento de erosão da proximidade, com alguns sinais positivos. Entre esses sinais, está o consenso em torno da importância do jornalismo local e um crescente interesse da academia por este campo de estudos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

proximidade, audiência, jornalismo local, desertos de notícias, plataformas

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by the emergence of “news deserts”, several circumstances contribute to the crisis in local journalism. Firstly, the traditional journalism business’s bankruptcy, unable to keep pace with the new demands of the digital environment and overshadowed by unbeatable platform competition — akin to an unmatched Goliath in this power dynamic. Additionally, the audience’s emancipation plays a pivotal role; they have changed their position on the board of this power game, transitioning from passive recipients to active content creators and distributors — and a key element in the “attention business”.

In this context, local journalism grapples with several challenges, notably in establishing a fitting business model while upholding its essence of proximity. There is also the pressing need to navigate the evolving relationship with an audience increasingly involved in shaping and influencing the news. The current issues and challenges — marked by the decline of local media in the territories and the consequent eroding impact of local journalism — have been noted in the literature, particularly in the past 15 years. Academia’s growing interest in local journalism in recent years indicates its emergence as an exciting field of study — with its own issues and challenges to unravel.

This article highlights the main conclusions of the latest academic literature on the universe of local journalism, encouraging reflection on less explored factors. It delves into the role of journalists in this erosion of proximity, as certain studies suggest that merely being present in the territory does not ensure genuine closeness to the audience. Professional culture and journalists’ perceptions regarding their social legitimacy and responsibilities also influence this dynamic. As Jerónimo et al. (2020) emphasise, there is a crucial need to question whether we are “close enough”.

2. THE ISSUES

2.1. BUSINESSES IN TATTERS AMID PLATFORM COMPETITION

“Crisis”, “disruption”, “pressure”, and “decline” are words often used to describe the current state of journalism and, in particular, local journalism. It is widely agreed that the shift to digital has disrupted the traditional media business, compounded by the 2008 economic crisis and the dominance of digital platforms as formidable competitors in the advertising sphere. The profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic since late 2019 has further intensified these challenges (Harris, 2021; Newman, 2022; Schulz, 2021).

It is also generally agreed that local and regional media have been the weakest link in this global crisis, as audiences and advertising revenue have shifted to the big platforms, with many titles (some historic) shutting down and others cutting back on resources (Schulz, 2021). According to Schulz (2021), “local newspapers in particular have been hit hard by disruption to both consumer behaviour and business models, and the pandemic has only increased pressures” (p. 42). The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*

2022 signalled the strengthening influence of digital platforms in an "incredibly competitive marketplace for attention" (Nielsen, 2022, p. 5). In the Foreword to this report, Nielsen (2022) states that

most news media continue to struggle in an unforgiving winner-takes-most online environment, where the bulk of audience attention and advertising spending goes to digital platforms, and where many new voices – ranging from creators and influencers to activists and politicians – are carving out their own place, competing head-on with journalists for attention. (p. 5)

Current trends include “a weakening of the connection between journalism and much of the public, and younger people using media in ways that challenge inherited approaches to the business and practice of journalism” (Nielsen, 2022, p. 5) — which translates to a preference for platforms as the primary source for accessing news and information overall. Higher levels of distrust and voluntary disengagement from news were among the main trends identified. Within the 46 countries studied, only seven did not see a drop in trust towards traditional media, and in most of them, citizens are still unwilling to pay to read news. When they subscribe to news, a large proportion of digital subscriptions go to just a few big national brands (Newman, 2022, pp. 10–11).

For Sjøvaag and Owren (2021), local journalism has suffered particularly acutely from the failure of its “umbrella” market model — which guaranteed it a share of the advertising market from advertisers looking for local targets. The introduction of algorithmic and programmatic processes in advertising was a major blow to the sector. According to the authors, local newspapers have proved to be “more vulnerable” than national newspapers since the latter have the corporate capacity to conquer new markets. A report by the International Press Institute (Park, 2021) emphasises this unequal competition:

the disruption has been particularly acute in local media as the advertising opportunities presented by the big platforms’ algorithmic micro-targeting most directly replicate the traditional offering of local media (think Google’s powerful “near me” offering). Large, often national, advertisers also prefer to place at scale, bypassing the much smaller (particularly *start-up*) local players. (p. 35)

Recently, the Australian government kicked off what could be “a global turn towards platform regulation” (Bossio et al., 2022, p. 136) by implementing a law that obliges large digital platforms to negotiate with local media for the right to share their news. The enactment of the “Australian News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code” made Facebook retaliate by blocking several Australian news companies’ ability to share for a few days. The regulation of platforms is an ongoing heated debate.

2.2. THE NEWS DESERTS

The significant and accentuated closure of local newspapers over the last 15 years has been coined with a striking name in the United States: “news deserts”. Since then, this

closure of local newspapers to the point of leaving communities, and even entire regions, devoid of any traditional media representation has been mapped in other countries. The project led by Penelope Abernathy — *The Expanding News Deserts*¹ — initiated data collection in 2005. It highlights the closure of local newspapers, journalist unemployment, ownership concentration, and the rise of new media primarily aligned with (political or social) causes as contributors to these news deserts. Among the surviving newspapers — even prestigious ones such as Pulitzer Prize winners and historically significant titles — many have become “mere ‘ghosts,’ or shells of their former selves” (Abernathy, 2020, p. 5).

The vanishing of local newspapers and journalists, leaving behind a landscape of survivors and ghosts, paints the picture of news deserts: “a community, either rural or urban, where residents have very limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feed democracy at the grassroots level” (Abernathy, 2020, p. 18). The current era has starkly highlighted this phenomenon. The pandemic

has exposed the deep fissures that have stealthily undermined the health of local journalism in recent years, while also reminding us of how important timely and credible local news and information are to our health and that of our community. (Abernathy, 2020, p. 5)

Ferrier et al. (2016) highlighted a concern in the United States: acknowledging newspapers’ role in “[meeting] critical news and information needs” might pose a risk to democracy. Engaged in another monitoring endeavour — the *Media Deserts Project*² — these authors favour the definition of “media deserts”, considering it multidimensional and more likely to incorporate various layers of analysis, such as access and algorithms.

The phenomenon has also been mapped in Brazil since 2017 through the *Atlas da Notícia* project (<https://www.atlas.jor.br>; Silva & Pimenta, 2020). Their latest report indicates that 52% of Brazilian municipalities, encompassing approximately 29,000,000 people, are classified as news deserts. Most of these “deserts” are located in the northern region of the country, where there has also been an emergence of numerous new online news outlets (Belda & Pimenta, 2022).

The *Local News Research Project* (<https://localnewsresearchproject.ca>) in Canada has been active since 2008, combining content analysis and digital mapping to explore issues related to local news. Meanwhile, in another latitude, the *Australian Newsroom Mapping Project* (<https://anmp.piji.com.au>) is associated with the Public Interest Journalism Initiative, an independent, non-profit observatory. It presents the data on an interactive map delineating Australia’s news deserts, highlighting a 15% decline in local newspapers between 2008 and 2018. This decline has left dozens of territories without a single local news outlet (Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2019).

¹ This initiative is part of the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, housed within the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the United States. Its website is <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com>.

² The *Media Deserts Project* is a joint research project of the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, the Department of Geography and the Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs at Ohio University in the United States. You can explore further details at <https://www.mediadeserts.wordpress.com>.

In Portugal, efforts are underway to map news deserts, with an initial contribution from the study by Jerónimo et al. (2020). This study updated the last comprehensive sector overview published by the Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC) in 2010 (Martins & Gonçalves, 2010). Jerónimo et al. (2020) highlighted a “significant decrease in local media landscape, especially since 2004” (p. 814).

This trend placed Portugal in the widespread crisis of local journalism, even though Portugal continues to show “a certain vitality of the local media” and is portrayed as “a paradigmatic case in the European context”, as highlighted by the authors (Jerónimo et al., 2020, p. 814). Many of them, however, were characterised by small, financially precarious newsrooms with low remuneration, upholding their commitment to “journalism that is faithful to traditional values and seeks to meet the needs of the community” (p. 814).

In the initial attempt to chart Portugal’s news deserts, Ramos (2021) identified 18.5% of municipalities facing this predicament — the vast majority located in territories with low population density and *per capita* income, primarily within the country’s interior. The study was further developed the following year through a database built by the authors, built upon the most up-to-date ERC records and after the list had been cleared, and a thorough verification of media activity in each region was conducted (Jerónimo et al., 2022). Their findings indicate that over half of Portugal’s municipalities are currently news deserts or are at risk of becoming one (Figure 1).

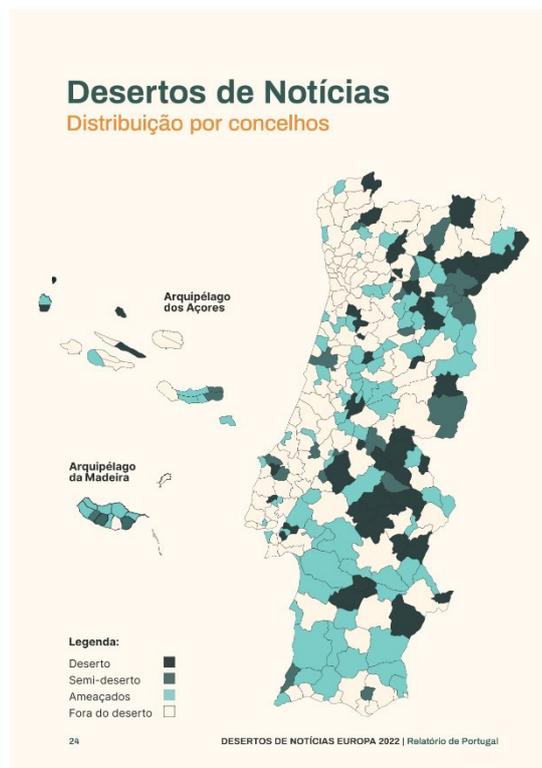


Figure 1. Map of news deserts in Portugal

Source. From “Mapas dos Desertos de Notícias: Portugal”, by P. Jerónimo, G. Ramos, & L. Torre, 2022, from *Desertos de Notícias Europa 2022: Relatório de Portugal*, p. 24. Copyright 2022 by Pedro Jerónimo, Giovanni Ramos, Luísa Torre and Daniel Baldaia.

The authors highlight that out of the country's 308 municipalities, 166 (53.9%) are currently identified as desert, semi-desert, or facing imminent threats of news scarcity. Moreover, a quarter of the municipalities (25.3%) "lack satisfactory or regular news coverage altogether" (Jerónimo et al., 2022, p. 20). Notably, 59% of Portuguese municipalities do not have printed newspapers. Furthermore, consistent with Ramos's initial study (2021), the phenomenon is predominantly internalised within the country — 80% of these news deserts and semi-deserts are concentrated in inland municipalities across the North, Centre, and Alentejo regions.

The correlation between news deserts and low population density is further underscored (58% of the least inhabited municipalities face this situation), with some demographic data advanced in the *MediaTrust* project report.

Over 13.4% of the country's citizens reside in news deserts or communities at risk of becoming news deserts. That is 1,390,493 people living in the 78 counties with insufficient regular news coverage or in the 88 counties relying on just one media outlet for more frequent local news coverage. (Jerónimo et al., 2022, p. 21)

In a study that advocates for integrating additional dimensions and approaches in the inherently intricate research surrounding news deserts, Agnes Gulyas (2022) found that 10% of the most deprived areas in the UK are also those less served with local news media. In this pioneering study of British news deserts, the author argues that "researching spatial inequalities should go beyond just recognising variations between different localities and aim to identify how and why spatial context contributes to inequality and links to existing socio-economic inequalities" (Gulyas, 2022, p. 25).

2.3. ACTUAL AND PERCEIVED PROXIMITY

Exploring one of the United States' "news deserts", Mathews (2020) analysed the impact of the closure of a local newspaper that had been in operation for 99 years. As the article's author suggests, the findings indicate "a negative impact on community members' sense of community, with participants missing celebrated gatherings and noting increased isolation and diminished pride in their community" (p. 1250). Binns and Arnold (2020) refer to another consequence in their study examining the closure of local newspapers in the UK and the dwindling number of journalists in those still operational: the lack of coverage of criminal cases, which leads to reduced scrutiny of police action and investigation.

Still in Europe, specifically in Sweden, a study by M. Karlsson and H. Rowe (2019) underscores the risk of exclusion certain territories face. The authors found that news about communities without local newspapers was dominated by institutional actors and mainly reported on crime — a sign that news organisations wanted to do the same job from a distance and with fewer resources.

The absence of an editorial office seems to result in a dilution effect, producing news stories that are feasible in several news outlets (and possibly municipalities). Or, put differently, the absence of an editorial office in a municipality seems to result in less news aimed specifically at that municipality. (Karlsson & Rowe, 2019, p. 22)

It should also be noted that the author's (Karlsson & Rowe, 2019) findings suggest a nuanced understanding of “presence” in proximity journalism. They emphasise that “presence” should denote permanence: “presence is not understood as simply being on the scene occasionally or when something dramatic happens, but a presence that has longevity in order for journalists to become familiar with the people, the community and their issues” (p. 16).

However, mere presence might not necessarily translate to increased engagement with the community, according to Jacob L. Nelson (2021). In a study examining how two Chicago newspapers in the United States sought to get closer to their audiences, the author outlined how the different strategies were primarily rooted in audience perception. One team endeavoured to present their stories appealingly, leveraging audience metrics; the other prioritised integrating everyday life issues, particularly from under-represented communities, into their news coverage.

The author points out that the former journalism's “problem is one of distribution” while for the latter, “it's representation” (Nelson, 2021, p. 13). Nelson (2021) suggests taking into account, when considering proximity, what he believes to be “one of the most important – yet least studied – aspects of journalism: the connection between how journalists perceive and pursue their audiences” (p. 18).

The rise of an engaged public actively involved in content creation and dissemination, marking the digital era's revolution, appears to clash with journalism's reluctance to embrace challenges to its traditional model. This resistance to change has been apparent since as far back as 2006 when journalism professor Jay Rosen (2006) penned the renowned essay “The People Formerly Known as the Audience” on his blog *PressThink – Ghost of Democracy in the Media Machine* (<https://pressthink.org>). In May 2021, Rosen, whose advocacy of citizen journalism is famous, declared on the social network Twitter that the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for journalism “would be smart to create a special category where the people formerly known as the audience can be recognised for committing journalism”. Less than a month later, he rejoiced when American teenager Daniela Frazier received a special citation in these awards (Fu, 2021) for filming and posting on social media the death of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer (who was later convicted of murder) in May 2020. The video triggered protests against police violence and racism — sparking a broader debate about whether citizens engaging in such actions could be considered “acts of journalism” (Fidalgo, 2021).

Social media has propelled the evolution of news delivery into a new paradigm — the “unbundling of news” (Jurno & D'Andréa, 2020; Newman et al., 2021). “The

journalistic product of a newspaper, provided in the form of an organised bundle to the audience, is transformed into many isolated pieces of content offered in a personalised way to spread users” point out Jurno and D’Andréa (2020, p. 508).

For local journalism, this has meant losing importance as the main source of information in its region of influence. According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (Newman et al., 2021), when it comes to local media, social media and direct search take the biggest shares for information about shops and restaurants (49%), local services (47%), or things to do in the area (46%). Although these searches direct the public to local media content, “in many cases, the information being sought is contained within the platform, making them a destination in their own right” (Schulz, 2021, p. 45).

In an analysis of Facebook’s actions since 2017, as part of the *Facebook Journalism Project* with local journalism (focusing on partnerships, funding projects and training journalists), Jurno and D’Andréa (2020) consider that we can now speak of a “platformisation of journalism”. The gradual penetration of platform logic into the journalistic process has “strongly normative and prescriptive dimensions” that “appropriates and tightens the values and practices” (p. 519).

3. THE CHALLENGES

3.1. THE NEW PLAYERS IN THE NEWS FIELD

Given the growing attention and diverse perspectives on the relationship between journalism and its audiences, Jay Rosen’s expression seems to remain relevant. Vos et al. (2018) discuss a permanent negotiation of journalism’s social legitimacy. As the audience is the judge of journalism’s social legitimacy but also as the basis of the “attention market”, “journalists have found themselves in a complex relationship with news audiences” (Vos et al., 2018, p. 1009) — which becomes even more complex the more empowered the audience becomes to interfere in the digital environment. Journalists, who were once the “sole guardians of journalistic capital” (Vos et al., 2018, p. 1009), face citizens as new players.

Critical functions like the *watchdog* and *gatekeeper* roles are at stake. Journalists are faced with the ongoing task of negotiating their legitimacy (Vos et al., 2018), realising that the local public tends to hold a more critical perception of journalism than those within the profession. This public did not strongly endorse traditional journalism norms such as *watchdog* and rapid reporting. Instead, it perceived such roles as providing a community forum as more important. Vos et al. (2018) conclude that if journalists paid more attention to the public in news production, “a more active and interventionist journalism could result” (p. 1024), leaving a call for more research into “the misalignment between journalists and the public’s views of journalistic role” and into the mechanisms by which the public influences journalism (p. 1024).

Harcup and O'Neill (2017) revisited their taxonomy of news values, initially presented in 2001 — a reference in journalism studies — drawing on the review of John Galtung and Mari Ruge's seminal study³. The advent of social media has significantly impacted the revised array of news values, introducing a notable addition: shareability.

There may be little doubt that digital media can help challenge mainstream news agendas, but the most popular stories do not reflect this democratic ideal. Rather, the most common news value is entertainment; such stories seem to be shared by online readers because they are fun, and sharing them can brighten the day. (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017, p. 1480)

However, these authors suggest that this revisitation should be seen as a tool for analysis and further research since other factors are involved in journalists' choice of subjects that become news. This is because, they point out, “who is selecting news, for whom, in what medium and by what means (and available resources), may well be as important as whatever news values may or may not be inherent in any potential story” (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017, p. 1483) — and that's why when you ask a journalist why something is news and he answers “it just is!”, “there will always remain an element of truth to the reply” (p. 1483), they emphasise.

For Jacob L. Nelson (2021), these “gut instincts” today, combined with audience metrics, lead journalists to decide what they think the public wants. However, for this author, journalists have always been chasing an “imagined audience”, and the stories they tell “are moulded and constrained by the assumptions they form about the people they hope to reach. Have grown even more important in recent years” (p. 2). “As the news industry attempts to overcome its ongoing crisis of diminishing revenue and public trust, its focus has increasingly shifted toward embracing a public it was once all too happy to largely ignore” (Nelson, 2021, p. 2).

The panorama has changed with the need to captivate audience loyalty in an “emerging consensus” that brings together journalists, media managers, investors and researchers, and whose implementation (and theorising) has been given various names, such as “engaged”, “participatory”, “reciprocal” or “public-powered” journalism — with the terminology effort signalling that “all of which trace the profession's [journalism] problems to the notion that audiences are no longer willing to tolerate a one-sided relationship with the power dynamic is skewed and their input or rarely solicited or valued” (Nelson, 2021, p. 3).

Nelson (2021) argues, taking on a “counter-narrative” (p. 5), that journalists should accept, with “journalistic humility” (p. 6), that they will never be able to fully understand or control their audiences, at the end of the day, these attempts to engage with them may function more as “a means to improve journalism than a means to increase readership” (p. 6). Despite this shift towards the audience, the author notes that “there is no

³ Galtung and Ruge's study, entitled “The Structure of Foreign News”, was published in the *Journal of International Peace Research* in 1965 (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001, p. 261).

consistent conceptualisation of the news audience” (Nelson, 2021, p. 144), even with the increasingly sophisticated data collection methods. He highlights that journalists have always relied on “intuition and gut instincts” (Nelson, 2021, p. 145) to determine who they are and what they want from the news.

3.2. QUESTIONING THE APPLICATION OF PROXIMITY

At this point, there is a question about whether the same applies to local journalism, traditionally driven by proximity. A study by Jerónimo et al. (2020) delves into what Érik Neveu (2001/2005) identifies as a peril of professional mythology, emphasising how journalists often formulate theories about their own practices.

The practice of an imagined proximity journalism is sometimes far from reality. Local journalists are not always as available or as close to the community as they claim. When this happens, it is more to feed the journalistic needs (make news) than to seek a permanent dialogue. (Jerónimo et al., 2020, pp. 818–819)

The literature underscores the widespread stance among local journalists in various countries, asserting their authority status within their communities. Jerónimo et al. (2020) cross-referenced local journalists’ perceptions of proximity with how they leverage the digital environment to exercise it. While the study noted some under-utilisation of the digital environment in production routines, it highlighted the extensive integration of Facebook and Twitter in the day-to-day practices of local journalists. The study conducted primarily in the Centre region (where most regional and local media in Portugal are concentrated) concludes that digital tools are predominantly employed for gathering information rather than fostering citizen engagement. Additionally, it identifies a division in journalists’ stances on this matter. The authors claim that “not everyone seems willing to establish a permanent dialogue with citizens, mediated technologically” (Jerónimo et al., 2020, p. 823).

Boesman et al. (2021) sought to test the “participatory journalism” ideal, which they believe dominates contemporary journalism practice and study. They observed discrepancies and conflicting outcomes in the literature while assessing whether journalists and the public express different conceptions of what constitutes news. Building on the methods adopted in previous studies like Harcup and O’Neill (2017) and drawing from their own research that indicated limited audience participation in the initial stages of the news process, the authors set out to examine whether the audience’s perception of news values clashed with those of journalists.

The decision to focus on the initial phase of news production (selection and framing) is attributed to this phase being when journalists tend to put up the most barriers to safeguard their professional authority and control over determining what qualifies as news. The previous findings “do not necessarily mean that journalists do not see value in

audiences as idea generators and/or as sources, but they are unsure about how to organise and monitor user contributions exactly” (Boesman et al., 2021, p. 144). These conclusions, drawn from research conducted in the Netherlands, align with the outcomes of the Portuguese study.

Boesman et al. (2021) chose to analyse the practices of local journalists in their interaction with their audience because these journalists position themselves as “community members first and journalists second” (p. 146). They aimed to understand whether these journalists are in any way challenged by news values suggested by the audience. Across three newsrooms analysed in their study, the audience posed challenges to the journalists, urging them to reconsider what constitutes recent news (excluding urgent matters), “forget the power elite” (prominence), advocating for a move from conflict-centric reporting to a more constructivist approach (making the news more solutions-orientated), and emphasising a focus on narratives intertwined with the community’s history and essence.

In short, journalists were challenged on traditionally non-negotiable news values: recency, novelty and relevance, and their independence since incorporating the participatory ideal into news production entails the potential of dealing with disgruntled citizens pursuing personal agendas or seeking free publicity. Boesman et al. (2021) underscore the significance of comprehending the public’s perspective on newsworthiness more deeply. “Instead of considering audience suggestions as a binary matter of newsworthiness (or not), journalists would do more justice to participating audiences by looking at how they can make audience input newsworthy” (Boesman et al., 2021, p. 159).

Making the audience’s contribution newsworthy was one of the common trends among 30 local media projects described in a report by the International Press Institute (Park, 2021), highlighting the resurgence of local news projects across various countries worldwide. “Successful local media have a clear sense of their mission, editorial vision and audience (or potential audience). This confidence is guiding a reimagining of journalism to meet the needs of their community” (Park, 2021, p. 4). These diverse local media strategies, spanning different continents, share a commitment to reflecting and shaping the community. They demonstrate an awareness of cultural complexity and diversity while “looking like the community” (Park, 2021, p. 4).

On the other hand, these projects are characterised by “engagement of local communities (...) embedded across the process chain” with a sense of equity and inclusion (and even the creation of literacy and training for citizen journalists), “journalism of service” and an effort to understand and make events relevant to local audiences. “There is no right or wrong model – nor one single best product. Local news media are finding ways to reach their audience where they are” the report reads (Park, 2021, p. 6).

Recent research conducted by Jenkins and Nielsen (2019, 2020) underscores the unique adaptability of local newspapers in meeting this challenge, although constrained by the technological and generational transition. The authors emphasise the quest for

novel strategies ensuring the financial sustainability of these ventures, which encompasses editorial aspects, noting the coexistence of so-called quality and popular journalism approaches. The commitment to upholding traditional values (historical presence, professional values and readers' trust) and emphasising proximity and public service remain steadfast as they endeavour to win over online audiences. This phenomenon leads the authors to label local newspapers as “ambidextrous organisations” (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020, p. 485).

3.3. THE “RETURN TO THE LOCAL” IN RESEARCH

The crisis confronting local media, epitomised by concepts like news deserts, has fuelled heightened scholarly interest in this sector, characterised by Jerónimo and Correia (2020) as a “return to the local” within journalism studies.

Following a period dominated by discussions on globalisation, propelled by technological advancements and chiefly the advent of the Internet, there appears to be a shift in focus toward advocating for a return to the local. At the heart of this return lies an acknowledgement of the significance of (re)visiting territories and communities and (re)discovering their identities. (Jerónimo & Correia, 2020, p. 11)

Recent literature acknowledges the contribution of local media in fostering social cohesion, shaping identity, and facilitating democratic enlightenment of the community and proximity news production... despite all their flaws, which many studies have also identified. “There is compelling evidence that local journalism, despite its shortcomings, is actually often informative and helps people follow local public affairs” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 18). The author highlights research findings that suggest that local journalism “helps generate higher levels of civic and political engagement” and also “contributes to community integration, represents communities, and helps tie people together” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 18). For Brian McNair (2006),

if news is our window on the world, local news is our window on that part of the world we actually inhabit (...), tells us what’s happening in our own streets and backyards. Parochial by definition, local journalism is part of the social cement which binds communities together and is widely and rightly viewed as an essential element in the construction of local identity. (p. 37)

Around the same time, Aldridge (2007) emphasised the pivotal position:

local media may lack glamour, but their importance is beyond doubt. The community of residence is, as Friedland so vividly expresses it in Habermasian terms, the ‘seam’ between the system and the lifeworld (2001:374). Here institutional structures and processes become daily reality. For most people,

most of the time, everyday needs are met and regular routines played out within familiar territory. (p. 161)

Several years and major changes later, this perspective endures. Jenkins and Nielsen (2019) refer to local media as a “cornerstone” within communities. Carlos Camponoz (2011) delves into the symbolic dimension of this journalism as a “communicational pact forged within place-based communities – that is, communities identifying themselves through values and interests cultivated and perpetuated locally, stemming from experiences entrenched in specific territories” (p. 36).

Nielsen (2015) brings forth a nuanced perspective, stating that “journalists and journalism scholars alike are and have been ambivalent about the quality of local journalism” (p. 1). It is a sector with “terrible” shortcomings — and he underscores, for example, the prevalence of deferential attitudes towards local powers and figures, or even advertisers. We would also draw on the contribution of Ross (2006), who delves into how the local media reproduced the same “circuit of meaning” as the national media, privileging an elite white male voice and perspective even though the local press “has much more freedom to promote more diverse views because it is not tied to a national agenda” (p. 232).

We can also refer to local journalism’s tendency to produce “soft news stories” and promote “rural idyll representations” as one of these controversial effects of community proximity (Freeman, 2020, pp. 14–15). This inclination towards preserving the image of the community sometimes overriding adherence to traditional journalistic news values (such as conflict and controversy) should be analysed in the light of the specificity of local journalism — the case involving a local newspaper that took a “moral compass” position in its news coverage of a fractious issue rather than “normative ideas about the role of journalism”, reported by Hess and Waller (2020, p. 586).

Leupold et al. (2018) concluded in a study of local newspapers in Germany that local journalism is characterised by “a docile and uncritical style of reporting that emphasises the positive aspects of local civil society actors and community life” (p. 4), confirming other previous studies that reported “a lack of conflictive, critical, and investigative journalism” (p. 4). The local media preferred to prioritise news linked to social cohesion, such as networking, trust in institutions, identification, and respect for social norms.

Revisiting Nielsen’s (2015) reasoning on ambivalence, the literature suggests that, despite its “terrible shortcomings”, local journalism is also seen as “terribly important” as it is a forum for debate and a hub for the community.

The reality of local journalism probably lies not between these two extremes, but in their combination. Like journalism more broadly, local journalism may well be frequently terrible and yet also terribly important. Local journalism does not always play its roles well, but the roles it plays are important. (Nielsen, 2015, p. 1)

Michael Schudson (2019) proposes a reconciliation, saying there is no divergence between the acceleration of society and the permanence, or slower change, of certain values. He contends that the world consists of juxtaposed layers moving at varying speeds.

Though we live culturally more and more online, we also live as we always did, embodied, and in one place at a time. We carry devices through which we are in touch with a wider world, but we are in touch from our own homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces, worrying about our own families and friends and love lives, and whether there's enough milk in the fridge for tomorrow's breakfast. (Schudson, 2019, p. 79)

For this reason, even though there is “plenty of reason for concern about a rapidly shifting context for journalism”, “we should give this full consideration in relation to journalism's impressive continuities” (Schudson, 2019, p. 79).

Guimerà et al. (2018) had already stated that this was a “vibrant line of research” (p. 6) with four main ramifications: the impact of transformations in the local media sector on the lives of communities, the economic crisis of local media and the emergence of hyperlocal media, participation, and content produced by the public, and changes in local journalistic culture. Among the gaps to be filled in the field, the authors identified the need to theorise and better delimit “an object of study which is by definition heterogeneous and highly dynamic” (p. 7) and to deepen knowledge about the origins of changes in the sector, observing the evolution of news projects over several decades — and not just since the advent of digital journalism. The authors also suggest strengthening the audience's perspective for “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” (Guimerà et al., 2018, p. 8).

Gulyas and Baines (2020) also call for

greater awareness of historical connections. Local media have a long history, and yet our understanding of the historical development of the sector, its continuities and discontinuities, and how histories and their legacies shape contemporary structures and realities is arguably limited. (p. 17)

These authors (Gulyas & Baines, 2020) reinforce Guimerà et al.'s (2018) call for a deeper understanding of the reality in countries other than those where most research in this field is concentrated to expand the landscape and the potential for comparative studies.

Gulyas and Baines (2020) confirmed the growing interest in this line of research by searching the Web of Science Core Collection database, which revealed that around 70% of publications on journalism, media and local news for the period between 1977 and 2019 appeared in the last ten years — and about half of them in the last five. The authors point out the “significant geographical variations between the countries covered” (Gulyas & Baines, 2020, p. 1), with around 40% of publications about the United States,

8.5% about the United Kingdom, 7.5% about Australia and 5% about Canada. A further 60 countries share the remaining 38% of academic interest.

The same authors stress the importance of revisiting and refining, deepening and clarifying new and classic terminologies and concepts such as “local”, “local journalism”, and “community”, given recent studies that “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” (Gulyas & Baines, 2020, p. 4).

In line with this concern, Hess and Waller (2020) note that while it is important to analyse what is said (and by whom) in local news, it is also important to explore what is not said because of the eloquence that what is left unsaid (and possibly also by whom) can have. “Routinely viewed as undemocratic, in binary opposition to voice, and as a barrier for minorities (and also sometimes for journalists themselves), silence remains under-examined and under-theorised in the garrulous excesses of the digital age” (Hess & Waller, 2020, pp. 586–587). This growing interest in the field of local media has a singularity, Guimerà et al. (2018) point out: “[it] 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” (p. 5).

4. CONCLUSION

Within the broader media crisis, local journalism is being reconfigured in terms of its audience engagement practices and strategies, business models, news formats, and a certain reflection on journalistic values. In recent years, research interest in this field of study has flourished, prompting a review of its path. There are calls to refine terminological rigour and study realities under-represented in literature. There are also calls for creating a shared meaning encompassing the common interest of mapping, understanding, and even supporting local journalism in its survival — and, more than that, in its progress and sustainability.

The field’s main issues encompass the collapse of the traditional business model and platform competition, the rise of news deserts and the erosion of proximity in journalistic practices. As for the challenges, we highlight those posed by the emancipation of audiences, which are pushing journalists to review and confront their traditional news values and professional practice rituals, as well as a flourishing academic interest in this field of study.

Translation: Anabela Delgado

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