

## REGIONAL INFLUENCE JOURNALISM: A PROPOSAL FOR MEDIUM-SIZED BRAZILIAN CITIES

**Thays Assunção Reis**

Universidade Federal do Maranhão, Imperatriz, Brazil

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents the conceptual proposal of “regional influence journalism”, centred on the journalistic practices developed in medium-sized, non-metropolitan Brazilian cities located in the interior of the states of the states. The proposal is grounded in empirical research conducted in the medium-sized city of Imperatriz, in southwestern Maranhão, as well as in 18 small municipalities within its region of influence (*Regiões de Influência das Cidades*: 2018; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020). The methodological strategy comprised the following procedures: (a) mapping of media outlets operating in the cities studied; (b) semi-structured interviews with journalists in Imperatriz; (c) administration of questionnaires to residents of Imperatriz and of cities in its surrounding region; and (d) content analysis of journalistic outputs. The results point to the existence of a form of journalism characterised by (a) simultaneous production of local and regional news — termed here “polarising news”; (b) news coverage that encompasses the broader region of influence; (c) mediation of the demands and concerns of nearby small communities; (d) production of local information aimed at regional consumption; and (e) intermediation of information flows originating from other urban centres.

### KEYWORDS

regional influence journalism, medium-sized cities, Imperatriz, Maranhão

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## JORNALISMO DE INFLUÊNCIA REGIONAL: UMA PROPOSTA PARA AS CIDADES MÉDIAS BRASILEIRAS

### RESUMO

O artigo tem como objetivo apresentar a proposta conceitual de “jornalismo de influência regional”, voltada à atividade desenvolvida nas cidades médias brasileiras não metropolitanas, situadas no interior dos estados. A proposição parte de uma pesquisa empírica empreendida na cidade média de Imperatriz, localizada no sudoeste do Maranhão, e em 18 cidades pequenas da sua região de influência (*Regiões de Influência das Cidades*: 2018; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020). Como estratégia metodológica foram adotados os seguintes procedimentos: (a) mapeamento dos veículos de comunicação em funcionamento nas cidades investigadas; (b) entrevistas semiestruturadas com jornalistas de Imperatriz; (c) aplicação de questionários com moradores de Imperatriz e das cidades na sua região de influência; e (d) análise de conteúdo dos produtos jornalísticos. Os resultados obtidos indicam a existência de um jornalismo especializado na: (a) produção simultânea de notícia local e regional, a qual denominamos “notícia polarizadora”; (b) realização da cobertura noticiosa da região de influência; (c) mediação das

demandas e reivindicações das pequenas comunidades do entorno; (d) informação de proximidade para o consumo da região; e (e) intermediação de fluxos informativos produzidos em outros centros urbanos.

#### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

jornalismo de influência regional, cidades médias, Imperatriz, Maranhão

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, there has been a rediscovery and growing appreciation of local and regional journalism in Brazil. Whereas, in the past, journalistic activity beyond the metropolitan areas of the country's centre-south received limited attention, today, there is increasing interest in understanding, mapping, and exploring these practices in greater depth. After all, such journalism is responsible for covering specific cities or regions.

This interest, however, is not entirely new. Studies by Dornelles (1999) and, more recently, by Pinto (2015), Deolindo (2016), and Aguiar (2016) demonstrate a sustained academic engagement with local and regional journalism in Brazil. What is more recent, however, is the contribution of geography to the field of communication studies in Brazil, particularly through the work of the research group GP Geografias da Comunicação<sup>1</sup>. In its first 10 years, this Brazilian research group systematically invested in studies on cities, borders, territories, local and regional journalism, regionalisation, rural media, local media content, hyperlocal media, information flows, cartography, and digital space, among other themes (Moreira, 2019).

Within this context, we were struck by the observation that “the perimeters of metropolises, after regional or state capitals ( ... ) are the most visible areas in the production connecting geography to communication” (Fadul & Moreira, 2019, p. 7). This finding was confirmed in our survey of theses and dissertations on local and regional journalism produced in Brazil between 2010 and 2020, where most of the research focused on news outlets located in state capitals or the major national metropolis of São Paulo (Reis, 2022b).

Given this observation, we began to question the media landscape of medium-sized<sup>2</sup>, non-metropolitan cities located in the interior of Brazilian states. What media outlets with journalistic production operate in medium-sized cities? What type of journalism do they produce on a daily basis — local and/or regional? Moreover, in small towns, is there any journalistic output, or do they rely on news content from nearby medium-sized cities?

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<sup>1</sup> The research group GP Geografias da Comunicação was created in 2009 within the scope of the Society for Interdisciplinary Communication Studies. The group comprises 25 researchers from various regions of Brazil. It includes two e-books and 189 articles published at the Society for Interdisciplinary Communication Studies conferences between 2009 and 2018, according to a survey by Moreira (2019).

<sup>2</sup> These cities are classified as regional centres, with total populations ranging from 100,000 to 500,000 inhabitants, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2011). Among other characteristics, they are defined by their capacity to provide goods and services to a cluster of smaller surrounding towns, including the immediate and proximal supply of information (Santos & Silveira, 2006).

To answer these questions, we conducted research during our doctoral studies (Reis, 2022a) on the role of journalism in the medium-sized city of Imperatriz, located in southwestern Maranhão, within the context of the surrounding region, which is represented by 18 small neighbouring cities (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020)<sup>3</sup>. These are: Amarante do Maranhão, Buritirana, Campestre do Maranhão, Cidelândia, Davinópolis, Estreito, Governador Edison Lobão, João Lisboa, Lajeado Novo, Montes Altos, Porto Franco, Ribamar Fiquene, São Francisco do Brejão, São João do Paraíso, São Pedro da Água Branca, Senador La Rocque, Sítio Novo and Vila Nova dos Martírios.

The choice of Imperatriz was motivated by the fact that it is: (a) an inland city, which aligns with our research interests; and (b) recognised and classified as a medium-sized city in geographical terms, according to studies by Branco (2007), Trindade and Pereira (2007), Araújo (2016), Antero (2019), and the Amazon Development Authority (Superintendência do Desenvolvimento da Amazônia, 2019, 2020). The definition of small cities follows the criteria established by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics — *Regiões de Influência das Cidades: 2018* (Regions of Influence of Cities: 2018; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020).

Two hypotheses guided the research. The first posits that Imperatriz has a strong media presence that fosters the development of specialised journalism, both in terms of news coverage and in responding to local and regional demands from smaller towns within its area of influence. As a result, journalism in this context assumes the status of “regional influence”. The second hypothesis is that these smaller towns constitute “news deserts” — areas with limited access to reliable and comprehensive news and information that can address community needs and support the foundations of local democracy (Abernathy, 2016). Due to this condition, residents of these municipalities often turn to Imperatriz’s media outlets when they wish to report issues or demand solutions to local problems.

This article systematises the main findings and discussions from the broader research project and introduces the concept of “regional influence journalism”, developed from this investigation. The article begins with an introduction, followed by a presentation of the theoretical framework on local and regional journalism, a detailed description of the methodological procedures, and a discussion of the research findings. It concludes with a summary of the key insights.

## 2. READINGS ON LOCAL AND REGIONAL JOURNALISM

Defining “local journalism” and “regional journalism” remains one of the primary challenges for scholars exploring this field, as both terms share the following characteristics: “a greater geographical proximity between the events reported, the audiences they prioritise, and the sources they give voice to; alongside a strong socio-cultural and political-economic identity tied to the territories they cover” (Aguiar, 2016, p. 17). Faced

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<sup>3</sup> The study *Regiões de Influência das Cidades* (Regions of Influence of Cities), conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, establishes the hierarchy of Brazilian urban centres and defines their respective areas of influence based on the range of goods and services they provide and their spatial reach.

with this lack of definition, we present below some reflections from various researchers to gain a deeper understanding and clarify the distinctions between these concepts.

According to Gulyas and Baines (2020), local media and journalism “are widely seen as key pillars in the lives of communities across the world, and they play significant political and social role” (p. 1). According to the authors, they are characterised by three universal traits common to journalistic outlets worldwide, irrespective of their country or region: (a) the geo social-political context, (b) the relationship with the community, and (c) the position in macro media ecosystems. Furthermore, local journalism holds local governments and public services accountable (The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2023), informing and guiding the public on issues ranging from health and politics to economics and education (Deolindo & Curvello, 2023). In essence, it is central to the production of proximity-based information (Peruzzo, 2005). Traditionally, local journalism has been closely tied to legacy media formats, including print newspapers, radio, and television. However, with the rise of the internet and new digital media, local journalism has increasingly shifted to online platforms. While this transition presents numerous challenges, it also offers promising opportunities for the practice and sustainability of local journalism.

One of the primary challenges facing local media, particularly print newspapers, is financial sustainability in the digital environment, as the business model has undergone significant changes. While traditional newspapers relied on two well-established revenue sources — advertising and product sales; in the digital realm, media outlets continue to experiment with various funding strategies to ensure their survival. These include paywalls, crowdfunding, donations, and value-added services, among others (Casero-Ripollés, 2010; Costa, 2014).

Despite these and other economic alternatives, in recent years the business model of local media “has been undermined by the digital transition, the rise of news platforms and aggregators, and successive economic crises” (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022, p. 5). This has led to the gradual closure of numerous local media outlets worldwide and the emergence of “news deserts” (Abernathy, 2016; Projo, n.d.), communities without access to local news sources or information about their local areas.

Alongside these challenges, disinformation has become a significant issue for local journalism today. Jerónimo and Esparza (2022) argue that the scarcity of resources and trustworthy local information sources allows disinformation to spread more easily in areas distant from major urban centres. In this context, local media play a crucial role in countering disinformation through fact-checking, investigative reporting, and the involvement of engaged community members in verifying information (Jerónimo & Esparza, 2022; Torre & Jerónimo, 2023).

On the other hand, many scholars (for example, Meulenaere et al., 2020) identify hyperlocalism as the future of local media and journalism. These authors view traditional local media as increasingly outdated due to financial difficulties and closures. The gap left by local reporting, according to the authors, is now being addressed by various new initiatives known as “hyperlocal media”. These digitally native platforms — such as

websites, blogs, or social media — deliver highly focused “local” news and information pertaining to a municipality, neighbourhood, or even a single street (Hess & Waller, 2019).

Apart from that, it is worth noting that local journalism has different denominations depending on the country. In Portugal, for instance, some authors (Camponez, 2002; Jerónimo, 2015) use the term “proximity journalism” to emphasise its strong connection to a territory and its communities. In Brazil, it is often referred to as “local journalism”, focusing on the realities of medium-sized and small cities situated in the interior of the states, along the coast, and at state (or provincial) borders, as well as at national frontiers. As observed by Assis (2013), journalism produced in these areas reflects particular organisational characteristics, structures, and practices that derive from their territorial context and the surrounding reality. Thus,

journalism in the interior does not consist merely of reproducing patterns common to large centres, but is an exercise dedicated to finding the best ways—strategies—to act in each reality. Its structures, routines, schedules, reception and even the effects caused by current information exhibit, in this context, dynamics that are considerably different from those identified in national or international scenarios. Obviously, the place influences the practice of journalism. (Assis, 2013, p. 3)

This view is supported by Dornelles (2013), who writes that geography plays a decisive role in defining local information. To demonstrate this, the author notes that the strategically located circulation of a rural newspaper in a given region naturally restricts its place of production, coverage, local content, availability of information, the interest of the local public, and especially the economy of the region in which it circulates.

Regarding the term “regional”, we note that it is used in at least four different ways in journalism studies. The first, which also applies to the expressions “local”, “rural” and “proximity”, refers to the area outside large urban or metropolitan centres. According to Hanusch (2015),

“regional” or “rural” journalism are also terms used in discussions of journalism outside metropolitan centres, and are often meant to denote a “smaller” version of the journalism practised in major cities, with few, if any, distinguishing characteristics beyond the size and scope of its audience. (p. 817)

The second use of the term “regional” in journalism research is linked to the geographical notion of “regional scale”, that is, “a spatial entity larger than a city or municipality and smaller than a country, or, in any case, as a category that refers to an ‘intermediate’ space between the local and the national or global” (Souza, 2013, p. 145). In this sense, regional journalism is understood as a practice that occurs in a microregion, mesoregion, state, or macroregion (Aguar, 2016).

On the other hand, some studies and publications on media and journalism use the term “regional” in the geographical sense of a “functional or polarised region”, where a city organises and influences smaller urban centres through its commercial role and

provision of services (Haesbaert, 2019). In this context, the publication *News in Australia: Diversity and Localism*, developed by the Centre for Media Transition (2020), defines regional media as “media servicing multiple smaller communities, often based out of a larger regional town” (p. 57).

Ultimately, “regional” comes up in research related to regionalisation processes, that is, spatial divisions or delimitations created by media companies “to produce, manage and/or represent their space in an articulated manner, according to their interests” (Haesbaert, 2014, p. 190). From this perspective, Aguiar (2016) explains that media interventions in geographical space result in two distinct types of regions: “journalistic” and “media”.

The areas serving as the basis for mediations between events and audiences, carried out by journalists, constitute “journalistic regions”. At the same time, the spatial divisions used as references for the market activities of newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and news portals operated by media companies or groups are referred to as “media regions”. (Aguiar, 2016, p. 120)

In line with this perspective, Moura Filho (2014) observes that media regionalisation occurs in two ways: physical and content-based. Physical regionalisation refers to “the expansion of media into the most remote areas and/or the interior of a given region, through strategic investments aimed at extending media reach within that geographical area” (p. 20). Content-based regionalisation, by contrast, “concerns the integration of regional issues into the daily routine of media production, valuing cultural aspects, customs, habits, and problems linked to the population through the lens of proximity” (p. 20).

Beyond conceptual frameworks, the literature offers additional terms to geographically distinguish journalistic practices, such as metropolitan journalism (Kramp, 2016) and small-town journalism (Örnebring et al., 2020). Following this set of studies, which updates geographical classifications of journalistic practice based on location, this research focuses on journalism in medium-sized cities and proposes a definition for its development.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research employed a hybrid methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative procedures across four stages: (a) mapping communication outlets, (b) conducting interviews with journalists, (c) administering news consumption questionnaires, and (d) performing content analysis.

The mapping of communication outlets was conducted through exploratory research (Gil, 2002) on two fronts: the city of Imperatriz (Maranhão) and 18 small municipalities within its region of influence. For Imperatriz, this stage was further divided into two phases: an initial survey of communication outlets and a subsequent collection of data regarding the reach of the journalistic output from the mapped outlets. The first phase, which

took place between December 2018 and January 2019, involved identifying existing print newspapers, AM and FM radio stations, low-power community radio stations, television stations, and local news websites.

The second phase began in February 2019 and involved contacting the commercial departments of media outlets in Imperatriz, both by telephone and in person, to gather information about their coverage and distribution areas, as well as programming schedules for radio and television stations. This data enabled us to map the journalistic activities and identify the direction of information flows.

The media mapping in the Imperatriz region was conducted during the pre-pandemic period, from 2018 to 2020, through in-person visits to the municipalities, due to the limited availability of online information about the media outlets operating in the area.

Interviews with journalists were carried out face-to-face between February and March 2019 in the city of Imperatriz. The sample comprised 17 journalists working in the newsrooms of the two print newspapers existing at the time (*Correio* and *O Progresso*) and three television stations in the city: TV Mirante (affiliated with Globo), Nativa (affiliated with Rede Record), and TV Difusora Sul (affiliated with SBT). The selection of interviewees was based on the following criteria: employment at organisations with a basic newsroom and daily content production. The aim was to include journalists with diverse professional profiles, including (a) those with and without formal journalism training; (b) varying lengths of service in the profession; and (c) different roles in news production, such as reporters, anchors, editors, producers, and managerial positions.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Martino, 2018), using a script comprising 14 questions addressing the opinion system on local and regional news, motivations and experiences in the selection process, thematisation, and journalistic coverage of municipalities in the Imperatriz region. The interview results were organised into two analytical categories: (a) news classification and (b) work routines in regional coverage.

News consumption questionnaires were administered to residents of Imperatriz and two nearby small towns — Lajeado Novo (6,923 eligible residents) and Ribamar Fiquene (7,318 residents; Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010). Only two municipalities in the vicinity of Imperatriz were selected due to the data collection method used (interviews), which requires considerable time and personnel (Novelli, 2005). The criterion for city selection was population size, specifically, the two smallest municipalities in the region of influence. The sample size consisted of 100 residents (aged 16 years or older) from each of the three towns involved in this stage of the research. This represents a non-probabilistic sample based on judgment or purposive sampling (Babbie, 1997/2003). Accordingly, 100 questionnaires were conducted in each municipality, resulting in a total of 300 responses by the end of the study. The questionnaire, comprising 22 open and closed questions, was administered in person between 2018 and 2019 and completed directly by the researcher.

For the content analysis — grounded in Herscovitz's (2008) perspective, focused on journalistic products — news items published by two television news programmes and the city's print media were analysed: *JMTV 1ª Edição* (TV Mirante), *Na Hora D* (TV

Difusora Sul) and the newspaper *O Progresso*, between February 10 and 14 2020. The *corpus* of the study comprised a total of 196 news items: 56 from *JMTV 1ª Edição*, 44 from *Na Hora D*, and 96 from the print newspaper *O Progresso*. We selected two television programmes for analysis based on the following criteria: (a) “television is still, in Brazil, the medium that allows the widest access to information” (Pontes & Silva, 2012, p. 55); (b) television broadcasters in the Legal Amazon are subject to specific legislation that permits the airing of locally produced content; and (c) television stations in Imperatriz possess the most robust editorial structures among the media outlets mapped in the city. Accordingly, we included the two longest-standing television stations operating in Maranhão and Imperatriz. Regarding programming, we prioritised the midday news broadcasts on both channels — *JMTV 1ª Edição* (TV Mirante) and *Na Hora D* (TV Difusora Sul). The print newspaper *O Progresso* was included in the analysis as it is the only newspaper currently circulating in the municipality.

In line with the journalistic content analysis protocol, five analytical categories were established: (a) type of news item; (b) theme; (c) news values; (d) origin of information; and (e) news sources. The first category refers to the geographical scale of the news content, based on insights gathered from interviews with journalists in Imperatriz. The second pertains to the types of topics that receive the most coverage from local news organisations. The third category — news values — relates to the attributes or typical features that make an event newsworthy. The fourth addresses the origin of the content, distinguishing whether it derives from the newsroom’s investigation, press releases, or other media outlets. Finally, the fifth category identifies the individuals or entities whose voices are represented in the news stories.

Data collection was conducted using an Excel spreadsheet, in accordance with the coding manual. The data was subsequently exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to generate graphs and tables displaying the frequency and cross-tabulation of the variables under analysis.

#### 4. FOR JOURNALISM WITH REGIONAL INFLUENCE

This study seeks to develop an understanding of regional journalism not merely as a counterpart to national news or as an isolated and overemphasised practice (Pinto, 2015), but rather as a form of influential journalism that serves as a reference point for small towns within a region.

To explore this concept in greater depth, we triangulate the findings of empirical research conducted in Imperatriz, Brazil, and in the 18 small towns within its area of influence (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020). The results are organised around three principal axes: (a) media infrastructure; (b) local information production; and (c) news consumption, with the aim of comprehending the media centrality and the significance of Imperatriz journalism within its regional context.

Media infrastructure refers to the technical systems employed to distribute information throughout a territory. In Imperatriz, such infrastructure has existed since the



1930s through print newspapers but only became firmly established in the 1970s, coinciding with the city's economic development and the introduction of audiovisual media, including radio and television stations. In contrast, small towns generally saw the establishment of media infrastructure only from the 1990s onwards, often experiencing intermittent operation over time.

When compared to small towns, Imperatriz's media infrastructure exerts a greater regional influence, as it hosts "highly specialised production companies, in this case free-to-air television stations, daily newspapers and FM radio stations" (Deolindo, 2016, p. 171). Print newspapers and free-to-air television networks are among the factors considered by the *Regiões de Influência das Cidades: 2018* (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020) to determine the centrality of cities regarding the flow of information emitted and received within urban centres.

The municipality hosting the main television station and its affiliates generally ranks among those with the highest centrality in its area, due to the necessity for local technological infrastructure, such as transmission lines enabling signal retransmission, the presence of specialised technical teams for support and maintenance linked to the broadcasters, as well as economic and social potential — the latter primarily related to advertising and regional markets. (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020, p. 123)

In small towns, media outlets tend to be low-end (Deolindo, 2016), characterised by simpler technical structures, low operating costs, and typically found across urban centres at various hierarchical levels. For this study, these are classified into three categories: (a) analogue "artisanal" — fixed loudspeaker systems installed on towers (voice) or electricity poles (wired radios); (b) traditional analogue — commercial radio stations, community radio stations and monthly printed newspapers; and (c) digital — web radio stations, blogs, news portals, YouTube channels, and WhatsApp newspapers.

The infrastructure results confirm Deolindo's (2016) observation that the most sophisticated and complex media are based in cities of higher hierarchical level "with larger populations, economic boldness, a dynamic market, and a solid context of technical, cultural, intellectual and artistic production, as well as a tradition of media production" (p. 275). These characteristics were evident in Imperatriz, but not in the surrounding small towns.

Regarding the information flows produced by the media (fixed flows), it was observed that those originating in Imperatriz — particularly from radio and television broadcasters — confer a central role on the city, as their reach extends beyond its territorial boundaries and even the state, encompassing the central, southwestern, and southern regions of Maranhão, the extreme north of Tocantins, and the southeast of Pará. This coverage aligns with the reach of wholesale and retail trade, healthcare services, and higher education institutions in Imperatriz (Sousa, 2015). It supports the formation of a shared area of influence between Imperatriz and Araguaína, Tocantins. Antero (2019) notes that "Imperatriz enters the area of influence of Araguaína in the extreme north of Tocantins, between Araguaínas, Augustinópolis, Axixá do Tocantins, Buriti do Tocantins, Cachoeirinha, Carrasco Bonito and Esperantina" (p. 9).

It is essential to note that the information flows from Imperatriz media represent a “potential reach”, meaning the technical capability of dissemination as estimated by radio, television, and print media outlets. The actual territorial reach — the effective circulation within the region — is likely to be smaller (Pasti, 2013). Nonetheless, this does not reduce Imperatriz’s significance in the studied area, given that flows generated by small towns — especially via wired radios (or pole-mounted radios) and community radio stations — are strictly local in scope.

Local information production involves the preparation of reports on events, personalities, and issues of interest to communities. In this regard, data converge to confirm the hegemony of Imperatriz in the region. The city is the only one with structured newsrooms, especially television stations, staffed by professionals trained in journalism or with extensive market experience, and producing journalistic content in various formats — news, interviews, features, and others.

Beyond these aspects, Imperatriz’s production covers both local news relevant solely to its residents and news that interests and affects people in the smaller towns within the region, often referred to as local-regional or “polarising” news. Generally, this information pertains to services and institutions based in Imperatriz that serve the broader population, events that draw people from the surrounding region to Imperatriz, and sporting activities with emotional and ideological significance for residents of other municipalities.

Within this context, events specific to the smaller towns tend to occupy a secondary position in Imperatriz’s media agenda, being reported only in exceptional cases such as deaths, robberies, or accidents. This reveals a process of invisibility for these smaller centres, which, although part of the region, do not attain the same visibility, relevance, or recurrence in Imperatriz’s news production.

Correspondingly, topics such as culture, traffic, education, and the environment receive comparatively less coverage in the Imperatriz press, while issues related to politics and law enforcement dominate public attention. This thematic hierarchy follows a pattern observed in other media outlets in Brazil’s interior, characterised by a positive portrayal of government officials and legislators, as well as an emphasis on crime reporting (Dornelles, 2013).

Given this thematic focus, popular and testimonial sources tend to be marginalised in news reports, with official sources privileged, reinforcing an informational logic centred on institutional and official voices.

Despite challenges related to travelling to smaller towns, regional coverage is a part of Imperatriz’s media’s daily routine, facilitated by WhatsApp, which supports news gathering and reporting from a distance through text messages, audio, videos, and photographs. Journalists noted:

we receive a lot of information today through WhatsApp. ( ... ) The public itself, when there is a complaint, contacts us through the app and requests a team. Just last week, a colleague of mine, not me, went to Montes Altos to report on a dam that had burst at a certain point, which would have cut off

an important road used for transporting agricultural products and for cattle farmers to pass through. ( ... ) We learned about the situation because residents sent videos via WhatsApp. We could have reported solely based on the videos, but we sent a team to the city. (Journalist 14, TV Mirante, personal communication, February 19, 2019)

Through WhatsApp, we receive numerous requests from other cities where we would not imagine TV Difusora Sul's signal reaches. For example, last month, Sítio Novo do Maranhão experienced a water shortage for more than 10 days, and residents shared videos showing people carrying buckets of water. The anchor commented on this in the news, demanded action, and the city's mayor contacted us to provide a response. (Journalist 12, TV Difusora Sul, personal communication, February 19, 2019)

In regional production, both journalist interviews and content analysis revealed the role of mediating the demands of small communities. The news outlets in Imperatriz, especially the television stations, are viewed by residents of neighbouring towns as genuine regional forums, where problems can be reported and solutions demanded from public authorities or responsible entities.

Conversely, local news production in smaller towns is poor and almost non-existent. Community radio stations mainly broadcast music, religious programming, services, and news content sourced from news agencies, regional and national websites, and blogs. When local information is included in programming, it is often sent via WhatsApp and reported in an improvised manner, sometimes lacking a complete lead, context, verification, sources, or other essential news elements.

Wired radio stations function primarily as advertising services, offering announcements such as lost documents, obituaries, event notifications, messages for rural residents, and music. Local information, much like on community radio stations, is transmitted to announcers in a very rudimentary manner, lacking journalistic structure or editorial treatment.

Blogs are among the most prevalent forms of media in small towns, often republishing press releases and news from regional and national websites. Local information on these platforms typically covers only the actions of local authorities and public officials, reflecting the political affiliations that bloggers maintain with city halls and municipal councils.

Due to these conditions, which negatively impact the quality of local information, we classify the small towns within Imperatriz's sphere of influence as "news deserts", following Abernathy's (2016) concept. These are locations that, despite possessing media infrastructure, fail to produce news or informative content that adequately addresses the specific needs of the community, contributes to understanding local realities, or helps reinforce or shape cultural identities (Peruzzo, 2003).

It is important to note that this finding challenges the classification provided by the *Atlas da Notícia* (Projor, n.d.), which designates places such as Amarante do Maranhão, João Lisboa, Governador Edison Lobão, Cidelândia, and São Francisco do Brejão as “near news deserts” due to the presence of one or two news outlets in their territories. However, this presence is quantitative rather than qualitative, as it does not guarantee the production of informative content grounded in journalistic practice.

News consumption refers to the moment when the public accesses the informative content produced by the media. According to Sposito et al. (2007), it is a fundamental aspect to consider when analysing the regional and intermediary roles of medium-sized cities.

In this context, the main commonalities in news consumption across Imperatriz, Lajeado Novo, and Ribamar Fiquene are: (a) television as the primary source of information, followed by the internet, radio, and printed newspapers; (b) the internet as the most frequently and regularly used medium; (c) mobile phones and social media as the preferred devices and platforms for consuming online information; (d) radio remaining the most local medium, as the stations listened to are predominantly local or regional; (e) traditional devices as preferred for radio consumption; and (f) most newspaper readers still favour the printed edition over digital versions.

Regarding the origin of the news programmes, radio shows, websites/blogs, and printed newspapers accessed by respondents, Imperatriz stands out as a key reference for local information. Residents of all three cities cited Imperatriz productions, especially radio programmes and websites/blogs. However, the consumption of Imperatriz television news was minimal in Lajeado and Ribamar due to limited access to television signals. In contrast, access is easier within Imperatriz itself, where the programmes are produced. Printed newspapers published in Imperatriz were the most read titles across all three cities.

When analysing the news topics that interest residents most, a clear correlation emerges between the availability of local news production and audience preferences. In smaller towns, where local news production is limited, national news tends to attract the most interest. Conversely, in Imperatriz, where daily local news production occurs, local news generates the highest engagement and interest among respondents.

The means of accessing local information also differ between small towns and medium-sized cities. In Lajeado Novo and Ribamar Fiquene, informal conversation is the most common way residents learn about local events. In contrast, in Imperatriz, television news programmes serve as the primary source of local information. These findings, along with those related to news preferences, may be associated with the presence of local news production in each city.

The role of Imperatriz as a regional news hub was acknowledged by the majority of respondents across all cities, linked to several factors: (a) demographic size; (b) the quantity and diversity of media outlets; (c) the volume and quality of news; and (d) the reception and distribution of information flows from Imperatriz to the surrounding region. Notably, the presence of Imperatriz-based news flows was strongly reflected in

WhatsApp groups from the small towns, as reported by their residents, an area deserving further investigation.

By triangulating data on media infrastructure, information production, and news consumption, we conclude that Imperatriz's media centrality stems from its regional context, characterised by low demographic and economic density, as well as limited information production in surrounding small towns. This situation fosters a distinct form of journalism in medium-sized cities, marked by prominence and leadership over smaller urban centres in the region. This can be described as regional influence journalism, characterised as:

- A focal point for the production of “polarising news” that involves or affects residents of small towns in the surrounding region;
- A producer of news about cities within its area of influence that are typically overlooked by state or national media;
- A regional forum responsible for mediating the demands and concerns of small communities within its sphere of influence;
- A key reference for the consumption of “proximity information”, reflecting the specificities, daily life, stories, and needs of the region;
- A channel for the intermediation of information produced by agencies, advisory services, and news outlets at the municipal, state, national, and international levels.

## 5. FINAL REMARKS

In examining the role of journalism in the medium-sized city of Imperatriz (Maranhão) within its regional context, we confirmed the initial hypothesis of media centrality, grounded in the concentration and consolidation, over time, of media infrastructure in the city and the emergence of what we term “regional influence journalism”.

The actions of local elites — businesspeople and politicians — combined with the “social need for news”, propelled the establishment and expansion of media activities in Imperatriz. This process has culminated in a contemporary landscape comprising 18 media outlets, distributed among eight radio stations, six television stations, three news websites, and one print newspaper. This extensive media presence has established a network of information flows — via radio, television, print, and the internet — extending to small towns across Maranhão, Pará, and Tocantins.

The study *Regiões de Influência das Cidades* (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2020) recognised part of Imperatriz's media centrality through the presence of daily print newspapers and affiliates of national television networks, implicitly assuming the existence of journalistic activities within these infrastructures. Our investigation goes further by explicitly identifying and characterising the media services in this medium-sized city, confirming that journalism is indeed a tangible and active practice there. Although it may seem obvious, the study does not delve deeply into activities specialised in news production. Prior to this, geographical studies of medium-sized cities had already highlighted their regional roles in the intermediation and distribution of goods and

services to surrounding areas. There is a wealth of accumulated knowledge about the potential of medium-sized cities within the regional context; however, this has not been explored in relation to media services or journalistic production. Given this gap, medium-sized cities serve as media and journalism reference points for their regions through news production and the consumption of proximity information. From this perspective, we observe that in studies of local and regional journalism, the city — regardless of its geographical classification — is not well explored as an urban functional reference, appearing more as a location datum than as an element capable of generating implications for journalistic practice.

When we devised a methodological strategy in communication to explore these perceptions, we found in medium-sized cities a specialised journalistic activity characterised by: (a) simultaneous production of local and regional news, which we term “polarising news” precisely because of its impact on the surrounding population; (b) coverage of the region of influence; (c) mediation of the demands and claims of small communities; (d) provision of proximity information for regional consumption; and (e) intermediation of information flows produced by other urban centres. Together, these features shape journalism with the potential for a distinctive role outside metropolitan regions, which we refer to as “regional influence journalism”.

The term “regional influence” is intended to qualify a type of journalism that differs both from local journalism — restricted to municipal dynamics — and from traditional regional journalism, typical of cities situated in microregions, mesoregions, states, or macroregions, whose news production exceeds municipal boundaries to cover information relevant to other localities within the region (Aguilar, 2016; Reis, 2018). The term also reflects the strategic role that journalism practised in non-metropolitan medium-sized cities assumes within contexts of news scarcity and precarious access to local information, as observed in towns surrounding Imperatriz. That is, more than merely setting the agenda for other localities in the region, regional influence journalism becomes an informative reference for small communities, filling structural gaps left by the absence of local news production.

From the perspective of small towns, we confirm the hypothesis that the 18 urban centres within Imperatriz’s region of influence can be considered “news deserts”, following Abernathy’s (2016) concept. This means we observed well beyond the mere presence of media infrastructure in these locations: 36 initiatives were mapped, including blogs, community radios, wired radios, and other types of media. Generally, news flows through these media, but they do not represent local journalistic production that meets the specific needs of the communities. Furthermore, a strong political affiliation was observed in the press of the Maranhão interior, which raises doubts about the reliability of the information disseminated. The central concept of “news desert” goes beyond the mere presence or absence of journalistic outlets, as it concerns the independence and quality of the news. For this reason, the political interference found in the ownership of Maranhão media initiatives supports their classification as news deserts, since Communication occurs “for the bosses”, according to one interviewee.

From the perspective of the *Atlas da Notícia* (Projor), some of the cities studied here would be classified as “near news deserts” due to the presence of one or two journalistic outlets. However, several caveats should be noted regarding this Brazilian initiative. The appropriation of the term “news desert” differs from the original concept developed in the United States. In the *Atlas*, the focus is quantitative, without examining political affiliations. Moreover, its methodology is based on public databases from the Federal Government and on volunteer contributions. Therefore, there are divergences between our findings and perceptions, as this investigation involved in-person visits to the cities, verifying the existence and operation of media activities on site. This does not diminish the importance of the *Atlas* project, which serves as a crucial starting point for guiding studies on local news production in Brazil. However, we believe the classification should be used with caution, because — as we have also seen — media outlets are fluid, appearing and disappearing very quickly in small towns. Public government data cannot keep up with these changes. Beyond the proposed definition, the study opens avenues for further research and analysis of professional practice. One suggestion is to study medium-sized cities in other regions of Brazil with the aim of identifying new journalistic functions in these places. It is also possible to investigate the role of medium-sized cities as central hubs for distributing proximity information to neighbouring towns, which are often news deserts. While much attention is rightly given to the need to promote journalistic initiatives in small towns — which we do not contest — we expand the debate to medium-sized cities because, as observed, they can be focal points for regional coverage. For a long time, regional journalism was limited to a spatial scope beyond the outlet’s home city, leading journalists to think that practising regional journalism necessarily means covering events in external towns. We demonstrate that in a medium-sized city, it is possible to align local and regional coverage, considering the implications that services, institutions and events based in its territory have for the wider region.

Small towns also prove to be fertile ground for scientific research in Communication. Here they were studied in relation to a medium-sized city, but they can be analysed in isolation or collectively, seeking to identify communicational trends unique to these places.

Finally, we underscore the need for further research in the field of communication that focuses on small Brazilian towns, recognising their importance in understanding information dynamics beyond major urban centres. While this study examined these localities in connection with a medium-sized city, future research could explore them either independently or comparatively to identify communication patterns specific to these contexts.

### **Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Thays Assunção Reis is a lecturer in the Journalism programme at the Federal University of Maranhão, Imperatriz campus. She holds a PhD in Communication from the Rio de Janeiro State University, a master's degree in Journalism from the State University of Ponta Grossa, and undergraduate degrees in Social Communication – Journalism from the Federal University of Maranhão and in History from the State University of Maranhão.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6826-1096>

Email: [thays.assuncao@ufma.br](mailto:thays.assuncao@ufma.br)

Address: Universidade Federal do Maranhão – UFMA, Centro de Ciências de Imperatriz, Curso de Jornalismo, Rua Urbano Santos, s/n, Centro – Imperatriz/MA, Brasil.  
Cep: 65900-410

**Submitted: 01/04/2025 | Accepted: 16/06/2025**



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