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The challenge of local news provision

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The greatest challenge facing journalism today lies in the collapse of local news provision. This collapse is underpinned by the large-scale economic crisis challenging journalism, which has caused extensive damage to the institution and practice of news-making.

In some ways, the crisis in journalism is a long-standing one: As David Ryfe (2012, p. 1) noted, the decline in advertising revenues can be traced back as far as the 1920s, while newspapers have seen a decline in market penetration and circulation since the 1970s. However, these downward trends have rapidly accelerated in the digital era, which has brought about the rapid erosion of income from sales, subscriptions and advertising.

This part of the story of the crisis in journalism has been widely rehearsed and lamented over the past several decades. But, as research has shown, there are significant differences in the *impact* this crisis has caused in terms of audience access to news. And these differences are underpinned by power relations and, therefore, by already existing economic, cultural and social inequalities. In particular, while centers of power in nation states, as well as large and wealthy metropolitan areas tend to be well served by news organizations, poorer and less densely

populated areas suffer from chronic news drought. While the closure or abandonment of major urban newspapers tends to receive significant attention, the hidden big story is the growing trend of cuts, consolidation and closure of local titles.

This decline can be particularly difficult to spot in the context of structural transformations in the news industry. A recent Tow Center study (Ford & Ali, 2017) showed that journalism job opportunities are increasingly centered in digital native outlets in large metropolitan areas. The increase in such opportunities – even if they involve relatively unstable and fledgling news organizations – conceal job losses in the local news industry. For example, a 2015 study by the *Washington Post* showed that the number of journalistic jobs in major cities like Los Angeles and Washington D.C. *increased* between 2004 and 2015. But outside of a few major metropolitan areas, the number declined by 25% in the same period – with the total number of reporters and correspondents down from 52,550 to 42,280 (Tankersley, 2015). In the UK and US – two countries whose local newspapers I have had the opportunity to study for more than two decades – we have seen hundreds of closures of once thriving local and regional daily newspapers, with some major titles now only retaining an online presence. Other local newspapers – including titles owned by Trinity Mirror in the UK and Digital Media First in the US – keep going with the support of skeleton staff, against the backdrop of constant waves of redundancies. Newspaper chains tend to concentrate their remaining journalistic workforce in urban centers. This makes it very difficult for them to cover routine news events outside of these areas – such as council meetings, development plans, sports events and social issues – the stories that have for so long been the bread and butter of local journalism.

The collapse of local journalism has serious consequences for the health of both local communities and, more broadly, democratic societies. Citizens require information not just about what is going at the national level, but also what happens in their local communities. For example, recent research has shown that local newspapers now publish less political news in terms of both quantity and substance, informing concerns about political engagement in local communities (Hayes and Lawless, 2018). More broadly, knowing what happens in your backyard is central to local engagement, participation and social life, and historically, local newspapers have played the role of sharing that information in the community

Hyperlocal journalism, usually produced by non-professionals operating on a shoestring budget, is sometimes viewed as the potential savior of local journalism and at least a partial solution to the collapse of legacy local news (see Harte, Howells and Williams, 2018, for a more detailed discussion). At the same time, it is also seen as a way of turning inhabitants of local communities into citizens, fostering new forms of participation and holding local governments accountable (Schaffer, 2009). David Kurpius and his colleagues, who have done extensive work on hyperlocals in the US context, define them as “geographically-based news organizations that operate largely in big metropolitan areas and cover a narrow range of location-specific topics. Such sites allow input from citizens through content contribution, blogs, and other feedback loops” (Kurpius et al., 2010, p. 360). As Williams and his colleagues (2015) found in their study of UK hyperlocal journalism, community journalists have been able to develop new strategies to shape and inform public debate on local issues. However, the relatively deprofessionalized practices of hyperlocal journalism has given rise to concerns about the journalistic quality of information. For example,

while Williams and his colleagues (2015) found evidence of a desire for critical and investigative journalism among hyperlocal reporters, this came up against an overall reluctance to balance sources in hyperlocal news reports, with an overwhelming number of single-source stories. These limitations of hyperlocal journalism may, at the same time, be a symptom of the economic precarity of the hyperlocal sector. This precarity is reflected in the scarcity of advertising revenue, as well as the relative invisibility of many hyperlocal outfits (Williams & Harte, 2016).

The crisis in local news provision has several urgent implications for news organizations, policy makers and scholars. While news organizations continue to experiment with new business models, ranging from subscription and crowd-funding to charitable donations, policy makers are considering and, in some cases, implementing, new forms of information subsidy to secure the future of local news.

For those of us studying journalism – an impulse which often comes with some normative investment in the profession itself as a key institution in the public sphere – it is imperative to pursue research on local journalism. This is easier said than done: First, such research frequently falls to the wayside as universities, research funders and peer-reviewed journals continue to privilege the study of the most prestigious, elite and well-resourced newsrooms (see Wahl-Jorgensen, 2009). While such newsrooms may attract the most attention – scholarly and otherwise – they are not representative of the fate of the profession as a whole. Instead, the systematic neglect of poorly resourced organizations – and the ways they fail or succeed – has

led to an important gap in our knowledge of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017). To find the hiding places of hope for the future of local journalism, we must assume that innovation and rebirth are impossible without failure and disruption (Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015). As such, we can take our inspiration from research that grapples with the fate and the lived experience of emerging disruptive practices, including entrepreneurial journalism (e.g. Singer, 2017). More research is urgently needed to better understand not just what is lost – including local information and community-building, but also how it can be regained – whether through the support of entrepreneurial initiatives like hyperlocals, or the allocation of public funding for what we are increasingly coming to see as a public good.

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