

'Survival practices'. Local journalistic communication and new 'methodologies' to avoid the news desert and media illiteracy in Italy
'Prácticas de supervivencia'. Comunicación periodística local y nuevas 'metodologías' para evitar el desierto informativo y el analfabetismo mediático en Italia

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Palabras clave

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, since digitalisation began to play a dominant role in information, many local newsrooms have closed in both the United States and Europe. An in-depth study published by the Wall Street Journal in 2019 showed that between 2004 and 2018, around 1,800 local newspapers closed in the United States, leaving 200 counties without a newspaper and half of the counties in the entire country with at most a single newspaper. Even in Italy, many local newspapers have closed permanently, some have closed only the geographically remote offices serving small towns, and others have stopped printing the paper newspaper and have remained online only. Through desk research and semi-structured interviews with 13 local journalists from some of Italy's most important regions and cities, we tried to understand the «survival strategies and methodologies» that the media have adopted, or that newspapers still active could adopt, to avoid so-called news deserts and the growth of media illiteracy and misinformation. Today, the role of the new information technologies, used in a strategic and participatory way in emergencies, both by journalists and by communities and institutions themselves, favours forms of communication, cooperation and immediate intervention: the consideration of the 'local' in the press and the relevance of the press in the local are intertwined and mutually supportive conditions.

Resumen

En los últimos veinte años, desde que la digitalización comenzó a desempeñar un papel dominante en las noticias, muchas redacciones locales han cerrado tanto en Estados Unidos como en Europa. Un estudio en profundidad publicado por el Wall Street Journal en 2019 mostró que entre 2004 y 2018, alrededor de 1.800 periódicos locales cerraron en Estados Unidos, dejando a 200 condados sin periódico y a la mitad de los condados de todo el país con, a lo sumo, un solo periódico.

Incluso en Italia, muchos periódicos locales han cerrado permanentemente, algunos han cerrado solo oficinas geográficamente remotas que sirven a pequeñas ciudades y otros han dejado de imprimir el periódico y se han quedado solo en línea. Mediante una investigación documental y entrevistas semiestructuradas a 13 periodistas locales de algunas de las regiones y ciudades más importantes de Italia, intentamos comprender las «estrategias y metodologías de supervivencia» que han adoptado los medios de comunicación, o que podrían adoptar los periódicos aún activos, para evitar los desiertos informativos y el crecimiento del analfabetismo mediático y la desinformación. Hoy en día, el papel de las nuevas tecnologías de la información, utilizadas de forma estratégica y participativa en las emergencias, tanto por los periodistas como por las propias comunidades e instituciones, favorece formas de comunicación, cooperación e intervención in-

mediata: la consideración de lo «local» en la prensa y la relevancia de la prensa en lo local son condiciones entrelazadas y que se apoyan mutuamente.

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Introduction

The field of journalism is taking on multiple facets, thanks to the digitalisation of its content and its dissemination on digital platforms, which have profoundly changed not only the way information is provided, but also the journalistic profession itself, the production routines, the methods of handling and thematising news, as well as the relationship with sources and their audiences (Hellmuller, Mellado, 2015; Sorrentino, Splendore, 2022). Processes that have affected both national and local media, for example in terms of their agendas and news values.

Local journalism is also evolving in response to the numerous challenges posed by the technological changes that have taken place in the media sector (Downie, Schudson, 2009; Picard, 2014), even if, as Mario Tedeschini Lalli (2023) argues, the distinction between «journalism» and «digital journalism» has long seemed to be a cultural operation with little meaning, since digital is «historically old» and there is no longer any transition to discuss.

The new information ecology already characterises our private and professional lives and is increasingly hyperlocal. This has given rise to a way of «doing journalism» that is increasingly «hybrid» in its architecture (Chadwick, 2013; Splendore, 2017), including local information and at the same time characterising the journalistic culture of communities that are by nature closer than those produced by national or international media, but which now have to compete with an unstructured flood of information circulating mainly on the various platforms. Groups and profiles of citizens who, without intentionally providing information, end up updating and reporting events or news, condemned to an endless scroll of fake news, conspiracy theories, memes and virtual fights, uncivilised debates within digital infrastructures that have now increasingly become «places» to be deplatformed (Lovin, 2023).

The public space defined by the journalistic media is an arena increasingly crowded with themes and subjects, protagonists of the same moods and comments produced by these protagonists or by all those who intervene to clarify, comment, specify. A space that expands as the flow of information increases and as more subjects are able to intervene in it.

This is why we speak of ‘densification’ in the media sphere, where information is overloaded in an increasingly complex plurality of directions (Sorrentino, 2006; Agostini, 2012).

In this process of changing media ecology, local newspapers still play a crucial role in helping people feel connected to their communities, providing relevant news and a space for public debate, and integrating the national news agenda of the major national newspapers (Gunn, Syvertsen, 2016).

Despite the importance of their presence and function, local media have declined significantly in Western media systems. Local newsrooms, operating on thin margins, have been forced to grapple with changing news consumption habits and the shift from print to online news, reducing the functionality of current business models and the desirability of existing news products and services (Ryfe, 2013; Nielsen, 2015).

As in many European countries, where cultural, linguistic, demographic and economic differences have a major impact on the (democratic) survival of local journalists, and for this very reason it is difficult to study the impact on democracy and media literacy following the disappearance of local media, even in Italy many local newspapers have recently closed down permanently, some only the geographically remote offices that covered small towns, others have stopped printing the paper newspaper and remain only online (EUI, 2024).

1. Methodology and objectives

The research aims to investigate the Italian situation regarding the presence/absence of local newspapers, trying to understand the causes and the impact on the level of knowledge and journalistic skills. Specifically, through desk research and semi-structured interviews (Corbetta, 2014) with 13 local journalists from some of the main Italian regions and cities, we tried to understand the «survival strategies and methodologies» that the media have adopted, or that newspapers still active could adopt, to avoid so-called news deserts and the growth of media illiteracy and misinformation.

The interviews were conducted remotely, via a GoogleMeet platform between February and April 2024. Local journalists, publicists and professionals, who have worked or still work in Italian newsrooms, particularly in northern regions, were involved. Some investigated newspapers currently no longer exist or are trying to lift themselves out of the crisis and emerge from the information desert. Also for this reason, it is preferred as requested by the interviewees to remain anonymous, but for this reason the geographical area of the newspapers analysed will be indicated as a reference for readers (Tab.1).

The background analysis of the research and the framing of the interviews were based on six indicators (all of which were generally applied in the case studies of local newspapers reported below):

1. Granularity of local media infrastructure: This indicator assesses the presence and provision of local and community media services in a country, for rural, suburban and urban areas;

2. **Market and reach:** This indicator assesses the economic conditions, feasibility and sustainability of local and community media in the country. Examine revenues, subsidies, government advertising and market share;
3. **Safety of local journalists:** This indicator assesses the situation of local journalists in terms of work and physical safety of local journalists;
4. **Editorial independence:** This indicator assesses the independence of local and regional media from political and commercial pressures. It examines the risk of conflicts of interest;
5. **Social inclusion:** This indicator assesses the extent and quality of news provided to and about marginalised minorities and communities, both at local and community level, as well as the ability to meet the information needs of the community;
6. **Good practice and the open public sphere:** assessing the actual existence of innovative practices to promote an open and innovative practices to promote an open and thriving public sphere in specific communities, not only through professional media services but also, for example, through citizens' initiatives and social media.

Table 1. Methodological table

<i>Italian geography of local media considered</i>	<i>General interview schedule</i>
Trentino	What is and how do local media survive today?
Veneto	What is the value of community and proximity for local journalists?
Friuli Venezia-Giulia	How does local information meet/disconcert itself in the global media scenario?
Lombardia	What strategies are useful to resurrect local media and how can they be sustainable in the digital age?

Source: compiled by author.

2. The risk of news deserts and the «proximity factor»

The concept of a news desert was initially developed by US academics and politicians to explain the crisis of traditional news media and the disappearance of local news media as a result of digital transformation and the global economic crisis of 2008.

In an attempt to define the concept, some authors have focused on digital accessibility by measuring the availability of broadband and wireless technology in local communities. A second group focused on the language and cultural barriers that leave ethnic communities marginalised and disenfranchised, while a third group focused on the quality and quantity of news available.

One of the most widely used definitions, however, is that proposed by Abernathy (2020), of a community, rural or urban, where residents have very limited access to the kind of credible and comprehensive news and information that underpins democracy. In other words, news deserts can occur not only in rural areas, but also in urban centres, neighbourhoods and suburbs.

A common characteristic of the new desert areas is that they are economically distressed communities with populations that tend to have lower levels of income and education than the average population, with important implications for media literacy (Abernathy, 2020).

Local reporting means knowing the problems of your community; the same community that blindly relies on community media, especially during emergencies (Buoncompagni, 2024). It means developing a reasoned point of view and not just reporting the facts. The local newspaper does not just collect news, but becomes a site of active mediation and aggregation (Russ- Mohl, 2011).

In this respect, Hess (2013) prefers to speak of 'geo-social' news, content that is selected and hierarchised around notions of relevance and place.

The information that speaks of and in the community should, in fact, try to understand the plurality of components from which the social environment is formed, allowing us to define interpretive perspectives through which to understand the world. And local news is that cultural tool that offers the possibility of mutual recognition, it becomes a meeting place (Kapferer, 2012).

The activity of a local newspaper is strongly influenced by the place in which it is located, it is important to understand if there are more factories or more fields to cultivate, what work the inhabitants of the area do, what interests they have.

The lay of the land itself can make a huge difference.

However, even the local press is competing in a very crowded field, where the claim to professional culture often clashes with the survival needs of the newspapers themselves, which suffer from a legitimacy problem with regard to the

national and international media and the various forms of editorial mediation exercised by and in the platforms, especially in the case of online newspapers, which still have to deal with the idea that the printed paper is the place of journalistic information par excellence (Deuze 2005; Murru, Pasquali 2020).

Despite this, the interest of communities in local information remains significant, as recently highlighted by the survey conducted by Agcom (2018, 28-29), which shows that 86% of Italian citizens habitually inform themselves about local events through television channels, radio stations, newspapers or online services.

A journalism, therefore, a local journalism, which should necessarily continue to be able to satisfy the needs and expectations of its audience, still relying on that local rooting on which its original specificity is based and which clearly distinguishes it in the sea of magnum opus of information.

The relationship between «local narratives» and «place» is an increasingly problematic element, and at the same time an issue that is still very much present in public debate in the face of major social or environmental crises and emergencies. The value of proximity circumscribes a communicative space of services in which the public finds useful tools to operate practically in everyday life and to nourish the bond with the community to which they belong (Usher, 2020).

Ahva and Pantti (2014) propose some interesting typologies of approach to the study of «proximity», identifying some of its dimensions that are closely linked to the journalistic field and, above all, easily identifiable in the practices that characterize journalists and local journalism (even in the digital age):

1. Proximity as newsworthiness. A fundamental question of newsworthiness that has to do with «what is included», «what is excluded» and «why»;
2. proximity as working practice. The second approach to the study of proximity refers to daily journalistic work, focusing on the relationship between journalists and events or sources.
3. proximity as presentation and interpretation is a further concept of proximity and refers to the narrative means used to «create a sense of closeness and familiarity between the audience and the event»;
4. proximity as a strategy. It also refers to a broad organisational strategy to connect with the public.

These multiple dimensions illustrate how the local press can still be a potential driving force for local identity, in that it offers opportunities for the recognition and re-elaboration of the social, cultural and political richness that inhabits its microcosm.

3. Voices from local Italian journalists

After this introductory and descriptive part, we asked ourselves How are local Italian newspapers responding? What are the strategies for strengthening and maintaining community communication? This led to three dimensions of analysis, presented below, which focus on the health of local journalistic communication and its actors: 1. global issues (of information); 2. generational issues (among journalists); 3. sustainability issues (of local journalism).

3.1. Global problems?

Recently, Trentino, a daily newspaper from Trento with 19 journalists, launched its online edition. Eliminating printing costs does not, however, solve all the problems: online advertising already pays very little in itself - much less than on paper - and even less in a newspaper that reaches a limited and geographically limited share of readers, less interesting for the big advertisers: «Attention to the local is fundamental [...] in order not to let information die and leave people without news, we have gone online. But this has not solved our economic problems for the moment» (I, 2).

During the first months of the lockdown, demand for information - especially on pandemic issues - was high, and online readership increased somewhat for all, while advertising investment (with some exceptions) declined significantly. According to Radcliffe and Wallace (2021), the biggest public health emergency in recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, threatened to «wipe out» many of the world's newsrooms. The main efforts to produce emergency information have focused on local journalism, a publishing sector that is even more in crisis after the pandemic event. Indeed, local media have a smaller advertising pool to draw on and are the ones most affected by the crisis.

We often look at what is happening to the big American newspapers, such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, to understand what will happen -or at least what should happen- in Italy in a few years' time, and it is now known that the revenue model that is currently more likely to replace or integrate advertising is the one based on getting readers to pay online as they used to pay for paper (Congiu, 2021).

A model that can be applied in different ways.

With many nuances in between, we could say that the two extremes are, on the one hand, the «paywalls», those systems adopted by almost all the major newspapers that prevent the reading of an article (or of articles above a certain monthly threshold) until you stop subscribing, that is, until you pay, and, on the other hand, subscriptions to support an editorial project, a way of doing journalism in which much or all of the content remains free to everyone, with content possibly

accessible only to those who subscribe (this is the case, for example, with the Italian model of the Post; or the Guardian among international newspapers). In both cases, it seems important that the reader, because he is paying, recognises the quality of the product he is buying (we have talked about this in more detail here). In the second case, in particular, it is important to create a complicity with the reader, an almost direct relationship that constantly shows the reasons for supporting this project.

As some of the local journalists interviewed point out: «There are still few contributions, voluntary or otherwise, from our readers. Even online. We do all we can to cover local events, but the national media crush us» (I, 7). «1/3 of our readers continue to support us both online and with the paper version of the newspaper. We know our community, mainly older readers, we build our agenda, which is their information agenda» (I, 9).

A national newspaper has more financial resources, more journalists and a wider range of topics to offer its readers. It is much harder for a local newspaper, which has fewer potential subscribers, fewer investment opportunities and fewer journalists. According to an analysis by the *Wall Street Journal*, local online newspapers generally have a much harder time converting readers into paying subscribers than large-circulation newspapers. Yet the intimacy of subscription, the direct and trusting relationship, seems to lend itself well to a newspaper that is deeply rooted in the community.

The activity of a local newspaper is strongly influenced by the place where it is located (Buoncompagni, 2024; Splendore, 2017). It is important to understand if there are more factories or more fields to cultivate, what work the inhabitants of the area do, what interests they have. The layout of the land itself can make a huge difference.

O.M. of the newspaper *Messaggero Veneto* -a local newspaper in Friuli Venezia Giulia and one of the largest in Italy in terms of circulation, owned by the GEDI publishing group- explained during the interview that.

The newspaper's territory consists of a few city centres and many outlying areas, where the few remaining newsagents have to cover ever larger areas. Newspapers are also sold in shops that have other main businesses, such as grocery stores or tobacconists, which were closed during the lockdown... Converting readers to digital subscribers was above all a necessity.

In anticipation of the change that would come sooner or later, the journalistic working methods had already changed, and this allowed *Messaggero Veneto* not to suffer from the transition to digital like others:

When an article is finished, it is immediately published on the website and the next day it is also published in the paper edition. We found that with this system we did not lose any copies. The paper readers did not interfere with the digital ones, and for our editorial staff this was a small turning point (I, 10).

What happens more often in local newsrooms - many of which have working methods that are still based on habits from another era - is that the articles are always written for the next day's paper, and it is only at a later stage that the articles already published in the paper are selected to be published on the website. This has significant implications, of course, as these articles are often old by the time they arrive online. On the other hand, the content created exclusively for the website is often of lower quality and is the one that «gets the most clicks», in the belief that those who read the newspaper online are less interested in in-depth analysis and are looking for light content:

For all newspapers, the revolution in this sense has come especially in the last ten years. ... With the arrival of Google and the social networks, which cannibalised all advertising, it was understood that we couldn't go on as we had always done. If we talk about paper, it is easier for the parish paper to survive than the local paper (I, 13).

It is true that the sale of paper copies continues to decline inexorably, sometimes more, sometimes less, but online visits are constantly increasing, especially in 2020, even for the more traditional newspapers: the problem is to understand how to make money.

Some journalists from the *Pavese Province* explain that in their newspaper the awareness that the relationship between paper and web has changed has been there for some time:

Inside, it always seems as if we're moving on two tracks. 21 journalists work for the Province of Pavia (excluding external collaborators), of which 2 are permanently online and another 2 or 3 help out in shifts: compared to the average, this is not too few, given the size of the newspaper.... We know what works, but we don't know how to monetise it (I, 5).

3.2 Generational issues?

One reason why many local newspapers can't afford to earn less is that they don't know how to spend less. The newsrooms that are most rooted in the area have to bear the same costs as in a time when journalism guaranteed a much better income: the rent of workspaces, subscriptions to agencies, the printing of paper documents (for those who have them) and, above all, the contracts of journalists. A journalist in training today knows that he must also learn how to use a camera, how to film, how to edit video and audio and how to appear in front of a camera, often a mobile phone camera. In the past, newsrooms could afford to have journalists who were perhaps single-tasked, writing no more than one story a day, or to send a photographer to even the smallest events. The difficulties are greater where these habits have not, or only partially, been broken.

On the other hand, generational change -and with it new ideas and journalists who know how to cover more than one role to reduce costs- is not easy, because those

who have contracts from better times are not necessarily close to retirement: «In the case of my newspaper, we had quite a few retirements. First the editor decided that we would hire one for every three people who retired, then it was one for every two. There were 50 journalists and now there are 36 (always excluding staff)».

Another large Italian publishing group is Citynews. It has about fifty local newspapers across Italy, all online only, all called *ParmaToday*, *LecceToday*, *FirenzeToday*, *BolognaToday* and so on. The group was born about ten years ago, with a more modern approach to the journalistic profession and less romantic or nostalgic for better times, as some information operators say: «We made a study of 5 cities and built a model. We understood that we would need at least 30/35 cities to make it sustainable. Having so many newspapers allows us to reduce many costs, for example with advertising concessionaires» (I,1). «We pool our investments,» says Lani. «Meanwhile, being in 50 cities means that the total number of visits is similar to, and sometimes higher than, that of the big Italian national newspapers such as *Corriere* and *Repubblica*, and that advertising can be very targeted in individual areas compared to a national one» (I,2).

There are also considerable savings in terms of journalistic staff: there are 12 directors for 50 newspapers, and several permanent employees have a USPI contract: a type of contract obtained by some newspapers a few years ago that is less burdensome for smaller companies but allows journalists to be employed regularly, paying them a little less but without keeping them in precarious or illegal conditions. It has been tried for two years and rejected by many who want to maintain the economic advantages of the past, and for the moment there seems to be no intention of continuing this experiment.

3.3 Towards a (local) sustainable future

For the most independent newspapers, without a large group behind them and with few economic resources, it is not easy to invent new sources of revenue. Some virtuous examples concern two newspapers that in 2020 will probably have experienced the most difficult year in their history: *L'Eco di Bergamo* and *il Giornale di Brescia*, which did an unprecedented job of covering the pandemic from one of the most affected areas in the world:

Together with the University's Department of Economics, we are analysing between 500 and 1000 annual accounts of Brescian companies in order to define a kind of ranking of the best. All this culminates in an event that generates good income and helps to increase the credibility of the newspaper, which can then launch other projects (I, 11).

Eco di Bergamo also does something similar, but in a different context, demonstrating the need to understand your audience depending on the area (Brescia and Bergamo are only about fifty kilometres apart).

In fact, in recent years the newspaper has tried to launch several vertical online products, that is to say those that focus on a single theme: one is *Skille*, about companies in the area; another is *Eppen*, about events in the city; but the best has been *Corner*, an in-depth analysis of Atalanta.

The journalists involved in the research report:

Before the pandemic in the newsroom, meetings were held with the whole newsroom staff where we talked about the possibility of looking at how we could evolve in the future from a news production and marketing point of view, and perhaps introduce personalised subscriptions that included only certain sections (I,3).

Of course, it was little more than an idea, but it is interesting to note that some newspapers are on the move and aware that they need to change: «The real challenge is not only technological and related to the migration of audiences, but above all to anticipate the socio-economic change of information before it overwhelms you» (I, 5).

It is true that a newspaper like *L'Eco di Bergamo* has to bear the very high costs we have mentioned, but it also has 140 years of history and a consolidated brand in the area, which allows it to have credibility in projects like *Corner*.

Anyone entering the market today can avoid certain structural costs, but has the great difficulty of having to build up a reputation in a short space of time.

4. Conclusions

From what has been said, it is clear that local journalism, in both its traditional and digital forms, is becoming a key element in the creation of a territorial bond, precisely in moments of uncertainty and disorientation. Newsworthiness consists of more intense forms of negotiation with the reading public, which is often known and «loyal». Accustomed to an increasingly disorganised and spectacularised form of information, local information is seen as the best expression of its role as a hinge between the public sphere and everyday life, a place of «meaning» and relationships more open to listening than to «entertainment».

Doing local journalism and being local journalists means searching for and finding an element of characterisation that distinguishes the type of press that is able to create an «intimate» place of knowledge shared with its audience. This condition is very evident when the community is (un)overwhelmed by the emergency.

The role of new information technologies, used in a strategic and participatory way in emergencies, both by journalists, by communities and by the institutions themselves, favours forms of communication, cooperation and immediate intervention.

At the same time, the consideration of the «local» in print and the relevance of print in the local are conditions that are intertwined and mutually supportive.

It is in the emergency that, with and in the local press, what Meyrowitz (1993) defined as a «public and mediated social conscience» comes to the fore, strengthened in parallel with the emergence of new communication and information processes in which the issues that were previously only important at a territorial level now become national issues, forcing the «new public» to take a stand. «Plural and alternative voices» that directly address the specific interests of a community and constitute the news corpus (Baker, 2023).

The sense of belonging to a community, typical of the citizen journalist, leads him or her to fully explore the hardships and difficulties of his or her territory, sometimes going beyond the specific logic of the modern media ecology, experimenting with languages, giving voice to colleagues and «old and new» audiences, even those positioned outside this community, or to the victims themselves (primary or secondary) of the disaster that has occurred.

The new mediated, transparent and networked public sphere is a «non-localised» space (Thompson, 1998; Marini, 2021) in which we move constantly, inside and outside the global flows of information, starting from local frames of reference, from the normality of everyday life, from the neighbourhood, to times and spaces that have a broader reference and definition.

Small radio stations, newspapers and their online sites produce and maintain a greater «local-intercultural sensitivity» (Hamilton, 2002), which is why local media, unlike national media, should be seen as tools that allow communities to tell their stories, to become literate in their media experience and to shape their identity by discussing political, economic and cultural issues relevant to their daily lives.

Certainly a question of survival in an information- and content-rich society, but one that can be addressed through new adaptation methods and strategies aimed at the local sustainability of newspapers and local communities.

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