

Shaping a “localised” journalism in European digital media. A multiple-case study

La construcción del periodismo “localizado” en medios digitales europeos. Estudio de casos

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Local journalism is emerging as a central political element in the shaping of local communities on the Internet. In a hyperconnected context, this research aims to conceptualise a form of public service: “localised” journalism. Methods: The study uses the multiple-case study as research strategy to assess the degree of “localisation” of news stories about the European Union in three local digital media from different countries: *Berliner Zeitung*, *This is Local London* and *Sevilla Actualidad*. This multiple-case study empirical design works as a framework for the critical review of the literature on local journalism. Results and discussion: Superficiality and lack of digital languages have been detected in the selected sample. This can be counteracted with simple and practical information, as showed in the text published by *This is Local London* to address the European seasonal clock change. “Localised” information requires a utilitarian view and new formulas that connect more with the audience, like transmedia narratives.

KEYWORDS: local journalism; digital media; *Berliner Zeitung*; *This is Local London*; *Sevilla Actualidad*.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La información de proximidad se perfila como un elemento político central en la construcción de comunidades locales en la Red. En un contexto hiperconectado, queremos conceptualizar una modalidad de servicio público: el periodismo “localizado”. **Metodología:** En este artículo se emplea la estrategia de investigación del estudio de casos para valorar la “localización” informativa de la Unión Europea en tres cibermedios locales de diferentes países: *Berliner Zeitung*, *This is Local London* y *Sevilla Actualidad*. Esta aproximación empírica mediante el análisis de casos sirve para enmarcar una revisión crítica de la literatura sobre información local. **Resultados y discusión:** Se aprecia superficialidad y falta de lenguajes digitales en los ejemplos. Esto puede ser contrarrestado con una información sencilla y práctica, como refleja el texto de *This is Local London* sobre el cambio de hora europeo. La información “localizada” requiere vocación utilitarista y nuevas fórmulas que conecten más con la audiencia, como las narrativas transmedia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: periodismo local; cibermedios; *Berliner Zeitung*; *This is Local London*; *Sevilla Actualidad*.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction. 1.1. History of the local press. 1.2. New local digital newspapers. 1.3. Language, functions, treatment and contents. 1.3.1. Language. 1.3.2. Functions 1.3.3. Treatment and contents. 2. Methods. 3. Case studies. 3.1. *Berliner Zeitung*. 3.2. *This is Local London*. 3.3. *Sevilla Actualidad*. 3.4. Comparative study of the coverage of the European seasonal clock change. 4. Analysis of results. 4.1. Features of the selected local digital media. 4.2. Conceptualisation of “localised” journalism at the European level. 5. Discussion and conclusions. 6. Notes. 7. Sources. 8. References.

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1. Introduction

The concept of local has been linked to journalism since its origins. Public authorities have always needed to communicate with citizens, while the latter require information about the former to be able to act accordingly. Several classical studies (Park, Burgess and McKenzie, 1974; McQuail, 1994) point to the influence of the media on people’s knowledge about their surroundings. For this social monitoring of power, the shaping of reality and the mediation of close public affairs, the area of journalistic specialisation par excellence is political information (Gainous and Wagner, 2013), adapted in this case to a local approach.

In a Western world marked by globalisation, which has demolished geographical and temporal barriers, the local press has not only maintained its importance, but has advanced positions in recent years (López García, 2008). Despite the economic problems that have affected the media, studies like those carried out by Möhring show that, in countries such as Germany, “the local press continues to be the most important and reliable source of information for more than 50% of the population” (2015, p. 15).

The new modalities of news consumption (López García, 2015; Yunquera Nieto, 2016), have not caused a loss of interest in the local press; but rather the opposite. In the face of the whirlpool of information channels and content, ordinary citizens need to know what happens in their surroundings, which is intertwined with the so-called service journalism (Diezhandino, 1994). Proximity information, thus, plays a key social role in local communities “as perceptions of belonging, identity or community are heavily mediated: local media provide the informational backbone of what people know about social life in their city” (Leupold, Klinger and Jarren, 2018, p. 960).

In recent years, local journalism has faced several challenges in this coverage, characterised by declining readership, loss of income and media concentration. This situation coincides with a devaluation of the quality of social cohesion in cities, in the words of Emile Durkheim (Novy, Swiatek and Moulaert, 2012, p. 1875). This deterioration is exemplified by gentrification and the loss of common spaces, ranging from class unions to neighbourhood organisations. However, local media, and especially born-digital media, have become essential nodes for the circulation of news on proximity issues (Leupold, Klinger and Jarren, 2018).

There is a certain debate on whether to continue talking about the local press when, thanks to the Internet, any content produced in a local environment can go viral and make a global impact. The University of Cardiff's Centre for Community Journalism points out that the only local thing that the local press preserves is the name; it is "local in name only" (Franklin, 2006). In contrast, scholars such as Nielsen stress that "there is still a local press, since the differential factor is the processing of information" (2015, p. 6). Thus, the digital revolution has allowed local news media to expand their dissemination, which used to be strictly local. However, local news media still offers news coverage from local approaches, differentiating themselves from other companies in the journalistic landscape.

The need for local information is clear and in this context of change journalistic companies must innovate at different levels to add value for groups of readers who have a common interest in information from a specific geographical and political territory. Local media should strive to identify and satisfy the information expectations of these readers in a cost-effective way through innovation. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)¹ defines innovation as "the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations" (2018, p. 45).

Innovative changes must be "significant". This means substantially modifying what was being done so far. Small improvements cannot be considered innovations. Spreading news through Twitter, by itself, is not an innovation. The purpose of innovation is to positively influence the results of the local journalistic company, either by reducing costs or increasing the quality of the information service, which is to meet the expectations of its audiences. To innovate, in short, is to create relevant and unique value. It must be relevant to be able to have an impact on the target social group, and unique to be able to differentiate itself from the competition.

The proximity-based approach functions as a characteristic element of what has traditionally been considered the local press. Based on this premise, this article has two objectives: 1) to carry out a critical review of the scientific literature on local digital media, especially with regards to innovation in political information; 2) to define the concept of "localised" journalism in the context of digital media, understood as the treatment of global issues from a proximity perspective; 3) to identify the innovative localised strategies of digital media with a long history at the European level; and 4) to conduct a comparative analysis of the informative innovations of localist initiatives in different parts of the continent.

For the case study, we selected journalistic pieces about European affairs (European Union), published over a three-month period, by three consolidated local digital media outlets: *Berliner Zeitung* (Berlin), *This is Local London* (London) and *Sevilla Actualidad* (Seville). These are journalistic initiatives of social and professional relevance that represent cities of different size and

¹ The OECD brings together 37 member countries and its mission is to promote policies that improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.

operating in different European countries. The case study also analyses the localised coverage that these three media outlets give to a common issue linked to the European Union.

1.1. History of the local press

The local press is not a new phenomenon. It is actually the origin of all journalism (Nielsen, 2015; Napoli *et al.*, 2017). The local vocation and commitment to their cities is embedded in some of the newspapers with the longest trajectory worldwide, such as *The Times* (London), *The Washington Post* (Washington) and *The New York Times* (New York). This is also the case of the defunct *Diario de Barcelona*, founded in 1792 and considered the first newspaper in continental Europe. Proximity is therefore revealed as one of the essential features of journalism, occupying central positions in mediated communication since its very beginning.

Regional and local press is a phenomenon of importance throughout Europe, but López García and Maciá Mercadé indicate that “it is significantly greater in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Spain -most Spanish newspapers are local or regional and have more than twice as many readers-” (2007, p. 37). In Germany (Bonn’s Basic Law of 1949) and Spain (Spanish Constitution of 1978), the creation of democratic and decentralising constitutions in the second half of the 20th century favoured the development of a well-established base of regional and local print media.

There are considerable variations in how local and regional media have developed in the Western world after the Second World War. While, a media market plagued with proximity media is developing in Germany and Spain, a more country-wide media system prevails in the United Kingdom. Nielsen points out that much of this difference is explained by the structural divergence that exists between the German federal political system and the more centralised system of the United Kingdom; although the concentration of local press is occurring virtually all across Western Europe (2015, p. 57).

Although local media has been present since the birth of the European press, the history of the media shows very different stages when it comes to paying attention to the area of proximity. Interest in nearby issues has increased in recent years in a correlative way to the emergence of new technologies, to such an extent that the local is present in all kinds of news (Lauterer, 2006). An example of this is the great importance that local authorities attach to what is published in proximity media (Firmstone and Coleman, 2014).

In a context of fragmented audiences, local media, and particularly digital local media, are the only ones that manage to retain a high level of commitment from their audiences (Leupold, Klinger and Jarren, 2018). At the end of the 20th century it was argued that in Europe the regional (local) media enjoyed better health than their national counterparts (De Fontcuberta, 1997). The success of regional media was due to their cultivation of the proximity factor, considered one of the most powerful claims when choosing a news story, while reflecting a strong awareness of regional identity.

In the case of Spain, in 2018, local media accounted for 73.7% of digital media, while media with national and hyperlocal scope -district publications- represented only 23.8% and 2.4% respectively (Salaverría, Martínez-Costa and Breiner, 2018). Therefore, local media have a predominant presence in Spanish digital journalism, much greater than the number of local newspapers in traditional newsstands.

Local information has gained strength in response to global media standardisation. It is an alternative that satisfies the social need for an indigenous identity in the face of the cultural homogenisation

caused by globalisation and guarantees the non-dependence of the communicative message on large and powerful media groups. One of the ways to resist the power of the great media powers, which resulted from business concentration, is the search for more alternative forms of small-scale communication (López García, 2008).

Local media have a number of intrinsic characteristics that makes them stronger against their competitors, such as their ties to the territory, a close proximity to the public who feels identified with their contents, and a high degree of business flexibility (González Esteban, 2009; Carson *et al.*, 2016). However, in today's society, all these potentialities can only be harnessed if local media is committed to innovation in online formats, which had been already mentioned in the literature a decade ago (González Esteban, 2009, p. 161).

Since 2010, the EU's communication policies have promoted the area of proximity, as shown in the Annual European Public Communication Conference organised since that year by the European Committee of the Regions (EuroPCOM). On a global scale, the phenomenon of bringing reality closer through close public-service journalism has been experienced since the 1990s, in response to the excessive distance perceived historically between news media and their audiences (McCollough, Crowell and Napoli, 2016, pp. 2-3).

1.2. New local digital newspapers

Local information has been defined as “the journalistic area that collects the events produced in a certain area and affects its politics, urbanism, ecology, customs and sociocultural reality” (Esteve Ramírez, 2002: 484). Informing the people with whom the citizen space is shared is a double requirement for journalists. On the one hand, it requires a greater knowledge of what is relevant to its fellow citizens. On the other hand, accountability is clearer and more direct than in other journalistic modalities (Izquierdo Labella, 2010, p. 16).

According to the classical theories of American sociologist Robert E. Park (Berganza Conde, 2000), the newspaper attempts to reproduce in the city the conditions of the first primitive village that humans established. Based on this premise, the space of journalistic specialisation that best fits this function is local information, since “the local area allows the generation of a type of knowledge of a specific reality similar to that of the village where everybody knows each other” (Esteve Ramírez and Fernández del Moral, 2009, p. 75).

In an ideal situation, political information should be the focus of digital media, as journalism is the backbone of democracy, in this case of the local public sphere (McNair, 1999). Municipal and regional politics is one of the main themes, although the local press has historically tended to attach great importance to other areas, such as culture, sport and police reports (Esteve Ramírez and Fernández del Moral, 2009).

The digital society has brought with it a recovery of the central spaces for local political journalism (Nielsen, 2015). The Internet is characterised by community principles that are intertwined with the sentiment of a local society whose members are relatively active participants in what happens in their nearest environment. The local press is no longer only determined by territorial dissemination, but by the proximity scope of its media coverage, which is also concerned with the problems of people who are native to that place but currently live outside such a geographical space.

In this digital context, in which social networks have the capacity to mobilise the vote (Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés, 2017), proximity information has become more important for citizens,

since it is the way to be able to participate in the affairs of the local community. This is a paradigm shift in global communication, which privileges more inclusive postulates that digital media must address.

The figure par excellence of this sector is the local digital medium. Digital media have been listed as media that use “an interactive online platform, either in the form of a website or in the form of a mobile web application” (Codina *et al.*, 2014, p. 4). Therefore, the distinctive element of this new actor is its online version, so that the digital edition of a traditional newspaper is considered a digital medium.

On the other hand, Salaverría, Martínez-Costa and Breiner define local digital media as “all those media ranging from municipal media to the media oriented to an entire autonomous community, including regional and provincial media” (2018, p. 1043). This means that the approach is again erected as the identity trait of local media, although ICT involve a revolution in language and formats that will be assessed in the next section.

In the Western world, new technologies have provided most of the population with access to a wide range of information sources, including local digital media. This free access has diminished the gap between the prestigious press and the once humble local press. The Internet promotes interaction through user-receiver feedback, which makes the latter a member of a community of readers. Some researchers even talk about the democratisation of the societies that the Internet may entail (Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa, 2010; Ihlebak and Krumsvik, 2015). However, the informational variety is turning to be limited: the digital explosion in the number of newspapers has not meant a greater variety in the topics covered in the news (Boczkowski and De Santos, 2007; Welbers *et al.*, 2018).

As a result, digital media do not grant spaces to the plurality of voices that we expected from them. In addition, the presence of agencies as news sources is much greater in digital journals published online than in traditional newspapers (Welbers *et al.*, 2018, p. 317). The reason is that much of the digital press lacks the resources to have their own sources.

1.3. Language, functions, treatment and content

1.3.1. Language

Local media focus on proximity issues that may be of interest to the inhabitants of a given local geographic area. This is a way of “gaining space/time for these matters while other current events are excluded from the agenda or are given little attention” (López García and Maciá Mercadé, 2007, pp. 35-36).

These proximity issues are dealt with by a singular, more direct and informal language than that of the national press. Local media are pioneers in introducing innovations in formats to emphasise content in the media landscape, although the use of some or other modalities does not directly contribute to greater social cohesion (Leupold, Klinger and Jarren, 2018, p. 970). The variety used is synthesised in four fundamental genres: “the news report, the feature article, the chronicle and the opinion or column” (De Fontcuberta, 1997, p. 104). There are authors who incorporate the interview, for its high degree of presence in proximity journalism (López García and Maciá Mercadé, 2007, p. 100).

The academia argues that local information is characterised by a multiplicity of expressive modalities (Möhring, 2015; Leupold, Klinger and Jarren, 2018), including articles and interviews, which have a

greater preponderance than other areas of journalistic specialisation. The reason is probably that these genres demonstrate a closeness to the reader that should be basic in the press that defines itself as “local”. Both the article and the interview involve direct questioning with persons identified by first and last names, who have an opinion on what happens in the field of proximity.

As for the language used in these genres, digital local media, and especially born-digital ones, exhibit the characteristics of digital journalism: hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity (García de Torres and Pou Américo, 2003). In addition, the basic formulas of journalistic genres are applied on the Internet, which include the use of link title, full post time data, hypertextual fragmentation, teaser and hyperlinks (Salaverría, 2005).

There is no doubt that the introduction of new digital technologies has led to innovations in the news making process. The Internet demands the setting of full-day schedules in order to feed information to the website. It also involves the translation of historically associated aspects of the local press, such as interactivity or close language derived from proximity, to all digital publications. Distance has been blown up by the Network, as it is now possible to interact in real time with journalists located thousands of kilometres away. The digital world demands hypertextuality, images and more concise language, characteristics that may have influenced the whole of journalism, including the one published on paper (Welbers *et al.*, 2018).

1.3.2. Functions

The local press has specific functions within the social work of journalism. According to Schudson, journalism itself involves a number of adherent functions: providing information, investigating, analysing, creating social empathy, serving as a public forum, and making representative democracy work (2008, p. 24). Schudson’s categories are important because they provide a conceptual framework for understanding how journalism strengthens a democratic society. These attributions are not necessarily limited to traditional media but are also applied to social media and hyperlocal news platforms (Carson *et al.*, 2016, p. 134).

In the field of proximity journalism, there is a number of ad hoc functions. López García and Maciá Mercadé describe with detail four typical tasks of this journalistic specialisation: exposing recipients to what happens in their nearest environment, delving into issues of the local area, establishing close contact with the user and promoting democratic participation (2007, pp. 22-23). From the point of view of the value of journalism in democracy (McNair, 1999), the latter function is the most important and stems from the ability of these media to arouse interest in local affairs.

A classic informational objective of the local press is to provide public service information. This involves providing data that is useful to citizens of that environment, such as cultural agenda, public transport schedules and weather forecasting. This service information continues despite technological changes and is one of the factors that makes local media fundamental to understanding what is happening in a city (Hess and Waller, 2016, p. 264). The mass newspaper has had a service purpose since its birth in the 19th century, which should not be confused with the so-called “service” journalism, understood as its own categorisation by Diezhandino (1994).

1.3.3. Treatment and contents

Local journalists should apply certain criteria for determining what news stories should be turned into journalistic information. This content must be in line with the pretence of functioning as a reflector of the local society of which it is part, for which Armentia Vizúete and Caminos Marcet

establish fifteen principles that are intertwined with the affective variable of the reader (2003, pp. 126-127). It is always information that generates present and future expectations for members of that community.

The contents of the local press seek to find identification with the interests of citizens. This is the *raison d'être* of proximity journalism. Professor Bel Mallén introduces the concept of subsidiarity in this area, insofar as the development of local media has enabled it to “reflect the concerns and interests most directly felt by the inhabitants of these population centres, often forgotten by the information content of the national media” (2002, p. 28). Therefore, proximity newspapers play a role in the deepening of the local reality that will hardly be satisfied by the national press. The principle of subsidiarity would invite each medium to devote itself exclusively to what it covers best, not to invade the competencies of higher or lower journalistic spaces in a geographical dimension.

The content of the local press is the one that best meets the classic thesis of journalism: to build community in its dissemination area (Novy, Swiatek and Moulaert, 2012). In the 1990s and the 21st century, research carried out in the United States and Europe has shown that more than 60% of citizens prefer the local press as source of information (Möhring, 2015).

With regards to the origin of the information, Napoli et al. argue that there is a relationship between the size of the population and the number of sources used by a local journalist (2017: 380). The larger the population, the greater the number of sources that the author of the information has at his or her disposal. In recent decades there has been a professionalisation of institutional sources, with a proliferation of communication cabinets that filter information and advice local and regional entities (Rodríguez Rey *et al.*, 2015). The ultimate purpose of these cabinets is to place the message of their institutions in the proximity media, which does not always mean that citizens receive better information.

Despite the professionalisation of sources, the direct relationship and the ability of the journalist to weave interpersonal contact networks continue to have a great significance in proximity scenarios. The number and quality of sources of proximity journalism is decisive to obtain information that is beneficial. In this sense, the journalist's own sources are key. This is also confirmed by research carried out by McCollough, Crowell and Napoli:

Our results also indicate the importance of interpersonal networks at the local level. Despite the proliferation of technologies, platforms and content options that community members can turn to in search of local news and information, interpersonal networks appear to be a vital means by which community members stay informed. (2016, p. 23)

The consumption of news about local areas on the Network is quite “self-directed”, since it is citizens who weave an individual strategy to inform themselves (Hume, 2012). The centrality of interpersonal links in discussions about local news is probably motivated by the very close and smaller-scale nature of this information, which is defined by Byerly (1961) as “nearness to people”, which is a concept widely accepted in literature (Robinson, 2014, p. 113).

One of the aspects that local journalists should be most clear about in the information treatment is that the subject of their information is very close to their professional work (Barnett and Townend, 2015). Contrary to what is happening in the field of national and, of course, international journalism,

the direct relationship between the information subject and object is so obvious and strong that it can condition the information itself. Therefore, local journalists must develop an even greater capacity to resist political, social and economic pressures than journalists in other information fields. The fact that the person who has been the subject of journalists' activity is a close person with whom they must maintain a close relationship cannot negatively mark the journalistic work.

2. Methods

This article follows the multi-case study method to achieve the research objectives. Communication researchers (García Avilés and Carvajal, 2008; Gómez-Diago, 2010) argue that this kind of methods allows a better understanding of today's porous media realities because it breaks the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy. The multiple case study makes it possible to combine multi-method strategies, which in this research include content analysis and the systematic study of the selected media, based on the review of the information they published about the EU over a three-month period, July to September 2018. This issue has been chosen because it is a distant issue that has important consequences in the day-to-day life of citizens and can therefore be the subject of localisation.

In addition to carrying out a critical review of the scientific literature on local digital media, which was presented in the introductory section and will be discussed with the results, the main objective of this article is to define the concept of "localised" journalism in digital media.

Two secondary objectives derived from this general objective:

1. Identify the innovations made in "localised" formulas used by consolidated digital media at the European level.
2. Compare the informative practices regarding the same issue carried out by local media initiatives in different parts of Europe.

The digital media chosen are *Berliner Zeitung* (Berlin), *This is Local London* (London) and *Sevilla Actualidad* (Seville). The following criteria have been considered for their selection:

- Media companies operating in countries that joined the European Union at different historical times. This explains the relevance of comparing Germany -one of the founding states of the European Communities in 1957- with countries that were subsequently added, like the United Kingdom in the first adhesion (1973), and Spain in 1986, following the democratic wave of the countries of southern Europe. In addition, the UK is on track to leave the EU, which further singles out its relationship with the European project.
- Digital media whose title and editorial line are attached to capital or large cities. These digital newspapers must carry out a local coverage of events. Hyperlocal formulas are not valid because we assume the neighbourhood press will not deal with distant issues and, therefore, does not need to "localise". Because of this, we selected media from Berlin and London, as well as Seville instead of Madrid, since the Spanish capital does not have any journalistic proposals for the whole city, only for its districts.
- Consolidated media, which already enjoy a prestigious position in the media scene of their cities. "Consolidated media" means those companies that have been created more than 5 years ago, a period that allows us to discern between established local news initiatives and digital news start-ups.
- Born-digital media, which present higher levels of usability and interactivity than those media that have subsequently joined the digital world (Costa Sánchez, 2012). This is possible in London and Seville, but not in Berlin, where born-digital initiatives are confined to the hyperlocal plane. For this reason, for the German capital, we selected a digital medium

derived from a traditional newspaper, the *Berliner Zeitung*, based on an online audience criterion. It is Berlin's local news outlet with the highest number of web visits.

On the other hand, content analysis enables us to make a comparison of how these three journals address an international theme that has local applications. The selected topic is the European Commission's proposal for seasonal clock change, which has aroused great interest in the public opinion of the continent. The objective is to discern the extent to what these media "localise" or not, that is, whether they provide tools for readers to make an interpretation of general events from proximity parameters.

The analysis is performed on a sample of information pieces on European issues, collected over a three-month period: July, August and September 2018. This period was selected because this is the time when a hugely impactful decision such as the time change proposal was made. The sample consists of a total of 250 journalistic texts: 135 published by *Berliner Zeitung*, 99 by *This is Local London*, and 16 by *Sevilla Actualidad*.

This study focuses on six variables: authorship, genre, sources, approach (international, national or local), degree of contextualisation and use of digital journalistic tools, whether traditional (link title, full post-time data, hypertextual fragmentation, teaser and hyperlinks) or novel (transmedia).

We do not aim to analyse the journalistic treatment that the selected digital media give to a topic, which would require a systematic content analysis over a wider period of time. The objective is to use examples taken from these influential media to conceptualise an area of specialisation that goes beyond local information: "localised" journalism.

3. Case studies

3.1. Berliner Zeitung

Germany is one of the European countries where the media has traditionally been of greater importance to society (Seidendorf, 2007). This did not prevent the sale of newspapers between from falling between 1991 and 2015, from 27.3 million to 16.1 million (Statista GmbH). Most of the current German press, arising from the catharsis of 1945, is no stranger to the introduction of ICT in the journalistic business, which has experienced a transfer of readers to digital media editions.

This is the case of the *Berliner Zeitung* newspaper, which was founded in Berlin, precisely, in 1945 and became the most common medium in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Its historical importance is explained by the fact that it was the first newspaper created in Germany after World War II. After the demise of the GDR in 1990, the *Berliner Zeitung* passed through various private hands until it became the property of the German publishing house M. DuMont Schauberg, which had no major connections with the large media conglomerates.

In the digital environment, the *Berliner Zeitung* showed an early concern to present its information on the web. The online edition dates back to autumn 1994, a similar date to the emergence of the first newspaper on the Internet in Spain: *El Periódico de Catalunya* (Salaverría, Martínez-Costa and Breiner, 2018). However, their information still uses traditional genres. The systematic review of its website for three months makes it possible to verify that, out of the basic formulas of the journalistic genres on the Internet (Salaverría, 2005), this digital medium does not use the teaser and hypertextual fragmentation. It only uses, in a very basic way, the essential elements of the Internet: link title, full post-time data and hyperlinks.

This is accompanied by the absence of social media content or videos in the body of the news. Audiovisual material is only present in a specific web gallery. In addition, formulas such as lack of authorship and information from agencies, which are practices associated with a low journalistic quality, are easily observable (Handstein, 2010).

With regards to content, during the observation period -July to September 2018- the *Berliner Zeitung* published 135 pieces of information on matters relating to the European Union, denoting concern about the issue and, at least, a certain formal will to “localise” global issues. This will be further explored in a specific case. The high number of EU publications reflects the fact that it is not a digital medium dedicated exclusively to the most local issues.

Although the systematic observation of its publications shows certain gaps, the variety of its themes and approaches make the *Berliner Zeitung* one of the most prestigious newspapers in Germany, as well as the strongest medium out of those media that emerged in the former GDR (Seidendorf, 2007; Handstein, 2010). The city of Berlin has an important media pluralism: currently 12 newspapers are published, 8 of which have local approaches. Of all of them, the ones with the highest subscribe rates are *Tagesspiegel* (national) and *Berliner Zeitung* (local). According to Seidendorf, the high number of subscribers remains to be the main proof of great journalistic prestige in Germany (2007, p. 15).

3.2. This is Local London

Britain is the cradle of democratic liberalism and, therefore, the first country in the world in which public opinion developed, with a free press, adjusted to the demands of the democratic system. Its liberal tradition explains why the English are great newspapers readers and have a large number of outlets at their disposal. In addition, the British newspapers have their own characteristics that shape them as a unique media system that has hardly changed in the last fifty years. There is a coexistence between the quality press and the infamous tabloids, which sell copies in the millions. These are characterised by a small format, similar to that of a magazine, and sensationalist content.

This is Local London adopts the features of a digital tabloid, with a website filled with shocking headlines and short content. It is a born-digital medium launched in 2001 by Newsquest Media Group, one of the largest publishers in the United Kingdom dedicated to the production of local and regional journalistic content. This group holds international connections, as its parent company is the USA-based Gannett Company, which owns *USA Today*.

In the digital ecosystem, it is a born-digital medium that does not employ especially novel genres and makes use of the basic formulas of digital journalism. The analysis shows a systematic use of the title link and the teaser, as well as a high frequency of textual fragmentation and hyperlinks. In contrast, *This is Local London* does not use full post-time data, one of the defining features of Internet journalism.

The presence of social media content and videos in the body of the news occurs in 63 of the cases. It is important to note that 77 of the 99 registered texts are based on statements from protagonists. These interventions are often illustrated with screenshots of tweets or audiovisual formats.

In terms of content, this digital medium published 99 pieces during the three period of analysis. Of these, only 2 did not allude to Brexit, the European issue par excellence in the United Kingdom since the 2016 referendum, which intertwines national and local issues because it has a direct impact on citizenship. The predominant approach is quite “localised”, in line with the medium’s name, *This is*

Local London. However, this perspective is not linked to authorship, since all the texts studied do not have the signature of the journalist, which only appears in opinion genres.

3.3. Sevilla Actualidad

In Spain, the press has dragged a historic backwardness, motivated by the delayed implementation of liberalism in the 19th century and the existence of a dictatorship for much of the 20th century. This situation causes Spanish newspapers to have low readership and to lack the popularity experienced in other European countries. The exception is local newspapers, which exist in all provincial capital (López García, 2008).

Spanish newspapers still carry out ideological strategies typical of the 19th century press. However, in the online environment there is a certain plurality of media and formats since the beginning of the Internet (Almiron Roig, 2006). This is the context surrounding *Sevilla Actualidad*, a born-digital newspaper focused on the City of Seville. It was created in 2009 by journalists Christopher Rivas and Francisco Salvador. This digital medium belongs to the Maravedismo group, a project led by media professionals that has different journalistic initiatives in the province of Seville.

Sevilla Actualidad has a policy of constant presence in social networks (Facebook and Twitter) but this is not accompanied by novel formats on its website. Of the formulas defined as typical of online journalism, this medium uses only the link title, full post-time data and hyperlinks. Moreover, in the period of study, a large number of information pieces did not disclose their author -none of the news on the EU did so- nor were accompanied by videos or social media posts.

On the other hand, this digital medium does have an original system to present data of interest to the reader. The left side of the news article has a space containing the author's twitter username and profile (in cases where the news is signed), the full post-time data, the possibility to write comments, the estimated reading time and a tool to share on social networks. This set functions as a fixed element that remains on sight despite scrolling the page.

With regards to the content of the information pieces, *Sevilla Actualidad* only published 16 pieces about the EU in the period of analysis. The system of ownership of this digital medium already demonstrated its high local ties. Below we reflect on the degree of "localisation" of information based on a case study.

3.4. Comparative study of the coverage of the European seasonal clock change

On 4 July 2018 the European Commission launched a referendum for European citizens, stakeholders and Member States to reflect on the need to amend the EU summertime arrangements directive, following the request of the European Parliament in a resolution of February 2018. The current legislative text, which came into force in 2000, involves changing the clock time twice a year for better use of daylight.

The consultation, which ended on 16 August 2018, involved 4.6 million Europeans, three times as many as usual in these initiatives. On 30 August the German newspaper *Westfalenpost* leaked the results and, the next day, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced them publicly, which was also unusual.

80% of participants supported the proposal to stop the obligatory one-hour clock change in summer EU-wide, which quickly had a massive echo in the European media. *Berliner Zeitung*, *This is Local*

London and *Sevilla Actualidad* published pieces about it, but with different local journalistic approaches that will be analysed.

Under the illustrative title “The clock time change comes to an end” (*Die Zeit für die Zeitumstellung läuft ab*), this digital medium offers an 11-paragraph news report signed by German press agency DPA. It is a text more typical of the print press, both for its size and its lack of digital tools. Only the link title and the full post-time data are used, ignoring the hyperlinks that had been regularly used in this medium during the period of analysis.

The information treatment does not contain any element that allows us to characterise it as local journalism. The event is not contextualised, and there is no information on the importance of the news for the population of the city or the region. The extensive text is constructed with statements by German national politicians and forgets to mention public areas of proximity. The news also addresses the participation rate in different European countries, but not how it is spread in the German states, which would have been of interest to know the expectation that this consultation generated in the State of Berlin.

The news of *Berliner Zeitung* is made by an agency, which can also be inferred from the information published about it by *Sevilla Actualidad*, titled “Brussels debates whether to suppress the time change, as requested by a majority of Europeans”. The news story is not signed and its content is based on statements made in a press conference by the European Commission spokesman Margaritis Schinas, which are data the digital medium has obtained directly via teletypewriter. In addition, that same title was used by the *ABC* newspaper in information published on that date, further evidence of its common origin of agency.

Sevilla Actualidad produces a text on the time change that is also typical of the printed press, with a title link and full post-time data as the only digital journalistic practices. Its information neither includes references of the local or political ramifications. *Sevilla Actualidad* and *Berliner Zeitung* coincide in this regard. The only difference is that the approach of the Sevillian medium is European, focusing the news on the statements of a EU spokesman, while the approach of the German newspaper is national, since it is built around the interventions of high-ranking German politicians, as well as valuations of the different degree of participation by country.

This is Local London develops a more unique practice that is closer to the concept of “localisation”. This digital medium published a piece titled “*When do the clocks change?*”, which is signed by a woman journalist and addresses the time of the next seasonal clock change and its health-related implications. It also offers recommendations to fight the negative effects of the change, which is a clear example of service journalism.

Although, with Brexit, the United Kingdom would no longer be subject to the European Commission’s summertime arrangements, the approach of the British media localises the clock change, understanding and presenting it from proximity parameters. However, its use of digital formulas is very scarce, as it only employs the link title and the teaser. As in the other newspapers analysed, there is an outstanding absence of hyperlinks, so characteristic of online journalism.

The comparative analysis of the treatment of the possible abolition of summertime arrangements yields different data regarding the approach, but similar data about the digital plane. The information pieces published in response to this proposal by three digital media has been taken as a case study. *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad* developed a national and international approach, respectively, completely lacking perspectives about the importance of the event at the local level.

Both media outlets published texts in the form of news as a genre. For its part, *This is Local London* produced a brief feature article, but focused on the impact that time changes have on the lives of London citizens.

This comparative study also reveals the poverty of their digital strategies. Two of the three media analysed -*This is Local London* and *Sevilla Actualidad*- are born-digital, while the other -*Berliner Zeitung*- is a pioneer in this field, given that it was launched online in 1994. However, the three digital media present information composed exclusively of text and photography, which are very similar to those of traditional newspapers.

The clock change involves a day-to-day question that can modify the customs and traditions of the population of the cities studied. Therefore, the fact that the coverage of an issue with such features does not merit quality digital formulas is a concern, as well as the fact that two of the digital media analysed simply offer a carbon copy of agency news in their central information on the subject.

4. Analysis of results

4.1. Features of the selected local digital media

As part of our multiple case study, we have observed a common denominator of superficiality in the treatment of a priori distant aspects, such as EU decisions, which, in the case of the time change, have a direct impact on the lives of citizens. This lack of quality is more severe in *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad*, where the information comes from news agencies that are not properly identified.

The lack of depth is reflected in national and international approaches that do not “localise” the information. Only *This is Local London* developed a feature article that describes in detail how to fight the adverse effects of the clock time change. Since all selected digital media are by definition linked to a city, and are not hyperlocal nor regional, this majority lack of local journalistic traits is contradictory.

On the other hand, as it has been shown, the selected media have a close relationship with the Internet. However, they are digital only on their continent, but not in their content. The democratising capacity attributed to proximity digital media (López García, 2008), motivated by their ability to serve as an independent flow of information in multiple formats, is in this case undermined by the non-exploitation of all their communicative potentials.

Local communication brings together four differentiating characteristics: proximity, greater interactivity, public service function and direct language (Esteve Ramírez, 2002). Only *This is Local London* combines proximity, public service and direct language; the other two digital media lack any of these traits in the common information analysed. Particularly significant is the situation of interactivity, which is completely cancelled in the three online journals due to the absence of quality digital formulas. For its part, proximity is compromised by the lack of professionalism that entails the unique use of news agencies in the newspapers of Berlin and Seville.

Technological development has led to the emergence of new digital languages and information needs that revitalise interest in proximity issues (López García *et al.*, 2015). However, these needs are not met in relation to such a topical topic in *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad*, local digital media based in important European cities. *Berliner Zeitung* belongs to a traditional media conglomerate, while *Sevilla Actualidad* is linked with new digital companies run by journalists.

The crisis of the traditional local press has involved the emergence of a journalism of hyperlocal proximity, structured around cooperatives that follow the postulates of the Social Economy. This system allows new media to better meet the needs of citizens (Melián Navarro and Campos Climent, 2010). Although *Sevilla Actualidad* is not a cooperative, its parent company is made up exclusively of journalists who seek to provide an informative treatment according to the demands of the population. In addition, it has a coverage by districts that brings it closer to hyper-localism, an area that has been conceptualised as more “democratising” (López-García, Negreira-Rey and Rodríguez-Vázquez, 2016, p. 229).

Both born-digital media -*This is Local London* and *Sevilla Actualidad*- and those derived from printed editions face the difficulty of monetising their investments, which has not been solved during the boom of digital journalism. Currently, the model of a digital newspaper whose only source of revenue is advertising is not feasible, since it would require “800 to 1 billion page-views per month to get 56 million euros a year of advertising” (Martínez Molina, 2010, p. 142). The great development of smartphones in recent years shows that the forms of consumption in the digital world are very volatile, making the challenge of monetising content even more difficult.

We must not lose sight of the importance of the Information Structure to contextualise poor journalistic practices. Within the framework of the political economy of the media, the current globalisation and increasing work insecurity in the media sector have had special repercussions on local media, due to their smaller size (González Esteban, 2009). This implies the economic impossibility to keep correspondents in Brussels, but also difficulties in terms of human resources to provide quality information from the newsroom. The low revenue generated from the digital field is not yet enough to alleviate these problems.

In the current digital context, the once exclusive power of the mass-media as the sole intermediary has been diluted, giving way to the increasingly important brand of the journalist (López-Meri and Casero-Ripollés, 2017). The authors of the information are increasingly recognisable thanks to their presence on social networks, so they must gain a prestige in their relationship with the public in order for their texts to achieve greater reach. In the local press, the proximity associated with this area of journalistic specialisation makes the role of the journalist’s brand to be even greater, which does not happen in the texts published by *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad*, since the information pieces are not signed.

Much has been reflected on the supposed ability of digital media to make the reader feel like a deliberative member of the community. From a theoretical point of view, new digital technologies have great advantages for both parties -media and users- because they have the ability to serve as catalysts for the demands of those readers who had been ignored until now (Karlsson, Clerwall and Nord, 2018, p. 578). However, the literature highlights that this dynamic is not caused by the Internet by itself, but by a variation in the conception of journalism, which is seen today from a much more participatory perspective (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012; Borger, Van Hoof and Sanders, 2016).

The argument that the degree of participation in digital journalism is as democratising and positive as the one shown in the discursive representation of the media is also under discussion (García-Orosa, 2018). The case analysed here is proof that digital media do not necessarily involve more participatory formulas and therefore do not ensure greater compliance with the “social contract”, a theory that in journalism starts with the premise that the press fulfils the social function of disseminating the demands of citizens (Merrill, 2011; Karlsson, Clerwal and Nord, 2018), while serving as a platform for informing on the performance of public authorities.

The three media outlets under study have Facebook and Twitter accounts. *Berliner Zeitung* and *This is Local London* also incorporate their WhatsApp number. The use of this mobile application for daily use reflects a willingness to maintain a personal contact with the reader, taking advantage of the smartphone technology. The value of interpersonal ties is key in shaping the information we receive over the Internet (McCollough, Crowell and Napoli, 2016). This human side is greater in the local press, because it belongs to the field of proximity, a consciousness that, at least formally, the media analysed shows through their presence on social networks.

4.2. Conceptualisation of “localised” journalism at the European level

As we have seen, local journalism has several peculiarities that make it a journalistic specialisation. These traits come from their more direct contact with the audience, which ends up generating a greater commitment to it. In a classic definition, Gomis noted that “local news is the fabric of democracy” (1974, p. 127), since it is this type of news that strengthen the bonds of citizens with their nearest political neighbours and representatives, building a sense of community.

Traditionally, local information has been considered to be the one that collects the events that are produced in a certain area and that affect its politics, urbanism, ecology, customs and socio-cultural reality (Esteve Ramírez and Fernández del Moral, 2009, p. 79). Based on this notion, the authors refer to geographical proximity as the first objective element of journalistic interest. In contrast to this definition, in this article we have opted to conceptualise a “localised” journalism that is not defined by the coverage of local issues, but by a description of reality from “local viewpoints”, which involves observing global issues using the territory’s own parameters.

Our approach is that the local constitutes a journalistic criterion that is more thematic than a geographical, contrary to what has been usually valued. We are critical of the position that argues that one can no longer talk about local news, since any text is likely to have a massive impact (Franklin, 2006). The speed of the dissemination of new technologies has turned the local press into one more element of globalised information. However, several authors, such as Izquierdo Labella (2010), Möhring (2015) and Leupold, Klinger and Jarren (2018), agree that local newspapers continue to play a key role in building community sentiment.

“Localised” news would be the information that treats journalistically international, national, regional and local events from a proximity perspective. The close focus is the differential element when addressing a news story, applying public service criteria. This type of information is competitive in the sector because of its low price, since it is not necessary to have a journalist stationed in Brussels, as it would be the case with the European Union, to produce quality information. The selected text from *This is Local London* exemplifies how a transnational event can be covered from the perspective of what matters to the local citizen.

The new hyper-connected public has certain needs that local digital media can meet. Faced with the obligation to make complex and post-materialistic political phenomena understandable, the key is to fit a double vision that humans have always shared: universality and closeness (De Fontcuberta, 1997, p. 48). In a context of ever shorter informational readings, “localisation” can be a response that combines both visions, exposing the reader succinctly to information of maximum interest.

As we have seen, proximity is a central element that has been present since the very origins of journalism. The Internet is also providing space for a hyperlocal approach, with a proliferation of publications that seek to meet the information demands of municipalities and even districts.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center², hyperlocal media accounted for more than half of the digital journalistic initiatives in 2015.

The proliferation of hyperlocal newspapers on the Internet, with their consequent social media accounts, does not always fit journalistic criteria (Williams, Harte and Turner, 2015). In front of them are local digital media with broader coverage claims, heirs of a wide history on paper-based platforms in countries such as Germany and Spain. However, such media, like *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad*, use in the selected case news agencies as unique sources, which suggests a little specialised journalistic practice (Pérez Curiel *et al.*, 2015).

The “localised” journalism we propose should avoid depersonalised practices, like the exclusive use of news agencies, but also overly limited approaches typical of hyperlocal media. The goal is to provide information that aims to be complete for the compression of the world.

One of the determining factors in devising local media as close in comparison to their competitors is the active role of their audiences (Loosen and Schmidt, 2012). In this process, social networks play a central role, by enabling citizens to act as sources of information. This explains the continued use of social networks by local newspapers since the moment this technology emerged.

Beyond the presence on social networks, “localised” digital media should harness all the expressive potential of digital journalism. We no longer talk only about hypertextual fragmentation and hyperlinks (Salaverría, 2005), which are classic strategies in this area, but also of new formulas that allow journalists to present journalistic content in a more participatory and enjoyable way, such as transmedia narratives (Scolari, 2009).

These innovations would be used to develop local information that, following the definition developed by María Pilar Diezhandino, enhances “everything that, without being strictly news, can have immediate use for the audience” (López García and Maciá Mercadé, 2007, p. 14). This utilitarian approach coincides with social networks such as Twitter, which seek to immediately generate information of interest to the reader. Consequently, the symbiosis between local information and social networks should be exploited by “localised” journalism to help generate relevant content that makes it possible to value reality from a proximity approach.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This article delves into the possibility of innovating local journalistic content to bring value to citizens by building community (Novy, Swiatek and Moulart, 2012; Nielsen, 2015). To this end, our proposal advocates the development of a digital “localised” journalism, whose approach is its differentiation from other areas of journalistic specialisation. This stance rejects the approaches of authors such as Franklin (2006) and Hume (2012), who consider that local information has disappeared because, at present, any news event can have a global impact.

The case study shows an example of how content can be innovated by taking as reference public-service information of interest, based on a news story from the European Union, as we have seen from the coverage provided by *This is Local London*. This medium and *Berliner Zeitung* are characterised by combining proximity information with a global-scale journalism, making way for international issues, which is not observed in the selected Spanish digital medium, which hardly gives space to these issues.

² *Local News in a Digital Age* (2015). Available at <http://www.journalism.org/2015/03/05/local-news-in-a-digital-age/>

The main problem of the news studied in *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad* is that they are written by news agencies, to the point that they are identical to the texts published by other media. Moreover, there is no journalistic element that allows them to be identified with local information. They are based solely on the statements made by an international protagonist. The “local” digital medium has just become the mere transmitter of generic content with zero added value for its geographically segmented audience.

Another worrying aspect, noted in all three media, is that their information presents print press formulas in an online journalism framework. Local digital media often have few economic resources (Lauterer, 2006), but this should not prevent them from meeting the minimum hypertextuality required by information on the Network. Beyond the digital language, the text studied from *This is Local London* shows that it is possible to make cheap and quality local journalistic content, simply by fulfilling the public-service function of reporting on what a political decision entails.

The local European press is no stranger to the media concentration processes that are being experienced at the global level. However, in the traditional local press of several countries, groups of a regional nature still survive without external connections, which was observed in *Berliner Zeitung* and *Sevilla Actualidad*. This means greater independence and, therefore, a high formal capacity to develop a more innovative journalism, free from ties and committed to its readers.

The critical review of the literature and the data collected from the multiple case study, lead us to introduce a decalogue on innovation in “localised” journalism in the digital context. It is a series of non-exhaustive recommendations that aim to serve as a guide for higher quality local information oriented at generating added value to citizens:

1. The local perspective as a prism to observe the world: reality is presented from the parameters of the community that receives the information. This means that the customs and sensitivities of the public, as well as their informational needs, are taken into account. It is ultimately a strategic change in the company’s mission and in the attitude of its directors and staff, the transition from an orientation based on the product to an orientation based to the information needs of local readers. The media should become experts who know the information needs and consumption behaviour of their local audiences, in order to provide the information they need in the format and time they want.
2. In-house news as a motto: News agencies are useful sources but cannot be the basis of the news. Innovate in content is recommended. The differentiation of the information service should be based on providing the local public with what other media cannot provide. Despite the news event takes place thousands of miles away, journalists must adapt it by applying their detailed knowledge of the local community in which they develop their work.
3. Information content: the informative text is prepared in a way that is understandable to the ordinary audience that makes up a local society. This comprehensibility lies in the fact that the recipient is able to understand the causes and consequences of the event from the reading of the news, which would allow local information to fulfil its social function of building democracy on a proximity scale (Gomis 1974, Möhring 2015).
4. Quality digital journalism adapted to the digital field: the news in these digital media must comply with at least the three features of digital journalism: hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity (García de Torres and Pou Américo, 2003). In addition, they must use the basic techniques of online journalistic genres, which are link title, full post-time data, hypertextual fragmentation, teaser and hyperlinks (Salaverría, 2005). The use of all these formulas is the common denominator of quality information on the Internet. Currently, in the interest of producing journalistic products of greater impact and accessibility, transmedia

narratives have emerged (Scolari, 2009), including genres such as gamification (García-Ortega and García-Avilés, 2018).

5. Low-cost production of information: while the use of new formats such as transmedia narratives can increase news production costs -freelancers who are experts in this technology are a good choice (Serrano Tellería, 2016)- creating online content that meets the minimum requirements of digital journalism is economically accessible. There are free-code software platforms and free servers that make online journalism cheaper. In addition, to “localise” the news it is not necessary to have journalists in faraway places, as *This is Local London* has shown, but to hire professionals who have a deep knowledge of both local reality and those regional, national and international aspects that can affect it. Process innovation is key to the survival of local media.

There are issues, such as the abolition of the seasonal clock change proposed by the European Commission, whose significance reflects the relevance of local media to contextualise and report on the impact of the news on ordinary citizens, i.e. the importance of “localising the information”. Beyond some apocalyptic comments on the quality of proximity journalism, many academics and journalists value the significance of the press as a chronicler of the local communities on the Internet (Hastjarjo, 2017, p. 21). Thus, the democratic function of local digital media is recognised because of their role in presenting independent information and in commenting not the nearest issues, but those issues that affect citizens the most in the case of “localised” journalism.

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