Book Review

Local Journalism, Global Challenges: News Deserts, Infodemic and the Vastness in Between

Matthias Künzler

Author information:
Matthias Künzler is a Professor of Communication Policy/Media Economics at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. His research interests include media systems in a comparative perspective, local communication and news desert research, private and public service broadcasting, as well as media systems including regulation and economics. He earned his PhD from the University of Zurich, Switzerland.
For more information: www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/kommwiss/arbeitsstellen/kommunikationspolitik/team/professor_in/mkuenzler/index.html
Email: m.kuenzler@fu-berlin.de

Research on local media was neglected for a long time. This has changed due to the continuous shift of advertising revenue away from print and journalistic media in general toward U.S. tech companies, most notably *Alphabet* and *Meta*. The advertising funding crisis has led to the downsizing of local newsrooms, mergers, and, in many places, the closure of local media outlets. As the U.S. has been hit hard by this development, much research has been conducted on the impact of emerging 'news deserts' on local politics, economies, and communities. However, the phenomenon of the decline or even disappearance of local media is not limited to the United States. It can now be witnessed in many countries, prompting corresponding research in Europe and Latin America in particular.

In this context, Pedro Jerónimo's anthology addresses a highly relevant topic. It offers insights into the state of local media in countries where little research has been published to date. Of the eight contributions in the volume, four focus on Europe and Latin America (Romania, Portugal, Europe, and Brazil), while the other four examine China. Thematically, the contributions cover a broad spectrum of topics within the field of local media: the impact of economic and social challenges on local journalism, automation in local journalism, transnational cooperation in investigative research, and the potential of information apps for local communities. The four articles on China focus on the role of local media during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the title of the anthology may not lead readers to expect such a wide range of topics, some might have expected more research specifically on news deserts, i.e. studies examining the societal effects of local media decline.

The two contributions by Carmen Neamţu and the group of authors led by Walter Teixeira Lima Junior align most closely with these expectations. Based on a case study of local media in the Romanian city of Arad, Neamţu succeeds in demonstrating the significant economic pressures on local media and their effects on media professionals and content. In their article, Teixeira Lima Junior et al. explore an innovation project designed to counter news deserts in small rural regions. This project involved the development of an app that enables residents to report infrastructure problems. This article provides valuable insight into the perspectives of the software engineers from three universities who collaborated on the project and serves as inspiration for similar projects. The article by Adriana Gonçalves et al. examines the potential of technological innovations in media production. Through case studies on the use of robot journalism and AI in various local media outlets in Norway and Portugal, the article provides an insightful overview of current research and practical applications. Similarly, Parra Valcarce et al. offer a good overview of various projects of transnational cooperation of different media in investigative journalism across Europe.

The four articles examining local media responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in China provide European and (Latin) American readers with some interesting insights into the normative objectives and operations on Chinese media. On an epistemological level, they also illustrate how Chinese communication scholars apply

international research to their own media system, which is shaped by the Chinese Communist Party. The two contributions by Carl Zhou et al. and Hongxu Zhu et al. are empirical studies. One uses quantitative data to analyse the differences of covering topics between local and national media, while the other examines how local media handled a specific set of pandemic-related rumours.

Lin Shike et al. and Chuchu Zhao investigate strategies local media used to guide public opinion during the pandemic in alignment with state health campaigns. The cross-media strategies employed and the deliberate shaping of public opinion as a positive objective are effectively demonstrated. The second article discusses the portrayal of those party members who played an active role in combating the pandemic. While the positive image might not be surprising, its specific nature is: these individuals are depicted as "civilian heroes" sacrificing themselves for the community.

And this leads to an overall assessment of the anthology. As previously mentioned, I appreciate the diversity of topics ranging from technology and collaboration to the structure of the Chinese (local) media system. From a methodological point of view, however, some reservations must be noted. Several contributions lack a deeper theoretical-conceptual engagement, and a more rigorous application of research methods.

For example, Parra Valcarce's article, titled "Restoring trust in local media through journalistic collaboration," barely addresses why trust is an issue, why collaborations might help restore it, or whether the projects analysed successfully achieved this goal. Similarly, while the article on app development is framed within the context of news deserts and journalism, the app does not appear to be a journalistic initiative. Can an app designed to report infrastructure issues truly fulfil some of the normative functions of journalism?

Similar methodological concerns can be identified in the case studies on China. The content analysis of topic coverage is based on a few broad categories which makes it difficult to derive meaningful societal interpretations. Additionally, I would also like to have some more methodological information for the study dealing with rumours about the COVID-19 pandemic. The article provides an exact figure of 77 rumours, raising questions about the methodological basis for determining this precise number.

The article on guiding public opinion during the pandemic encourages further critical reflection. From a European perspective rooted in democratic theory, the notion of 'guiding public opinion' might be viewed critically. However, there may be similarities in how European and Western media have managed the pandemic, potentially justified by the health crisis. A deeper reflection of these similarities by the authors and editors would have been of great interest. While this may have exceeded the scope of the anthology, it opens the door for future research and publications.

The anthology's strength lies both in its detailed insights into specific aspects of local media communication in various countries and its potential to inspire further research. Readers seeking such inspiration will find the book valuable, whereas those expecting conceptually and methodologically rigorous case studies may be disappointed.