



## **Local journalists and the digital challenge**

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### **Abstract**

The newsmaking process is increasingly occurring through online platforms. That is a challenge for both the media and journalists, who try to make this transition by seeking new ways of interacting with people who they used to look as quiet and far-to-reach audiences. Such is the specific case of local media journalists who work and live-in territories with populations linked by strong ties of closeness and neighborhood. That becomes particularly relevant in Portugal because the country has most of the population concentrated around the major cities along the coast at the expense of peripheral towns from the hinterland. A democratic sense of community of small and medium-sized cities in the Portugal hinterland implies symbolic production mechanisms that strength in e sense of belonging to those communities. The present study aims to identify the tools and content used and produced by the local media of the central region of Portugal, to understand the role played by digital technologies in this transition to the needs of the new digital ecosystem. To understand the phenomena, a survey was carried away next to a sample of journalists (n=107) from 41 newsrooms belonging to local media outlets from the Centre of Portugal the region with the more significant presence of local and regional media in the country. Even though social media and mobile phones are becoming part of the daily life of local journalists, empirical research often shows that real interactivity with the community seems to be exercised by only a few. This contradicts the defended idea that the long-term viability of a regional press implies using practices and routines for gathering information and reporting that reflect citizen engagement and public participation.

**Keywords:** Local journalists. Digital transition. Local media.

### **Jornalistas da mídia local e o desafio digital**

#### **Resumo**

O processo de produção de notícias ocorre cada vez mais por meio de plataformas online. Esse é um desafio tanto para a mídia quanto para os jornalistas, que tentam

fazer essa transição buscando novas maneiras de interagir com pessoas que antes pareciam ser audiências silenciosas e de longínquo alcance. É o caso específico de jornalistas da mídia local que trabalham e vivem em territórios com populações ligadas por fortes laços de proximidade e vizinhança. Isso adquire relevância em Portugal porque o país concentra a maior parte da população em torno das grandes cidades do litoral em detrimento das cidades periféricas do interior. Um sentido democrático de comunidade das pequenas e médias cidades do interior de Portugal implica mecanismos de produção simbólica que reforcem o sentimento de pertença a essas comunidades. O presente estudo identifica as ferramentas e os conteúdos utilizados e produzidos pelos meios de comunicação locais da região centro de Portugal, para compreender o papel por elas desempenha nesta transição para as necessidades do novo ecossistema digital. Para esse efeito, foi realizado um inquérito junto a uma amostra de jornalistas (n = 107) de 41 redações de meios de comunicação locais do Centro de Portugal, ou seja, a região com maior presença local e mídia regional do país. Apesar de que a mídia social e o telemóvel estão se tornando parte da vida diária dos jornalistas locais, a pesquisa empírica mostra muitas vezes que a real interatividade com a comunidade parece ser exercida apenas por alguns. Isso contraria a ideia defendida de que a viabilidade a longo prazo de uma imprensa regional implica usar práticas e rotinas de coleta de informações e reportagens que refletem o engajamento dos cidadãos e a participação pública.

**Palavras-chave:** Jornalistas locais. Transição digital. Mídia local.

### Periodistas de medios locales y el desafío digital

#### Resumen

El proceso de producción de noticias se realiza cada vez más a través de plataformas online. Este es un desafío tanto para los medios como para los periodistas, que intentan hacer esta transición buscando nuevas formas de interactuar con personas que antes parecían ser audiencias silenciosas y de gran alcance. Este es el caso específico de los periodistas de los medios locales que trabajan y viven en territorios con poblaciones unidas por fuertes lazos de proximidad y vecindad. Esto adquiere relevancia en Portugal porque el país concentra la mayor parte de la población alrededor de las grandes ciudades costeras en detrimento de las ciudades periféricas del interior. Un sentido democrático de comunidad en las pequeñas y medianas ciudades del interior de Portugal implica mecanismos de producción simbólica que refuerzan el sentimiento de pertenencia a estas comunidades. Este estudio identifica las herramientas y los contenidos utilizados y producidos por los medios locales en la región central de Portugal, para comprender el papel que juegan en esta transición a las necesidades del nuevo ecosistema digital. Para ello, se realizó una encuesta con una muestra de periodistas (n = 107) de 41 redacciones de medios locales en el Centro de Portugal, es decir, la región con mayor presencia local y medios regionales del país. A pesar de que las redes sociales y los teléfonos móviles se están convirtiendo en parte de la vida diaria de los periodistas locales, la investigación empírica a menudo muestra que la interactividad real con la comunidad parece ser ejercida solo por unos pocos. Esto contradice la idea defendida de que la viabilidad a largo plazo de una prensa regional implica el uso de prácticas y rutinas de recopilación de información y reportajes que reflejen el compromiso ciudadano y la participación pública.

**Palabras clave:** Periodistas locales. Transición digital. Los medios de comunicación locales.

## 1 Introduction

More than 20 years after the Internet entered newsrooms, the news environment is increasingly growing digital, encompassing, and embracing production, consumption, and business models. Faced with the erosion of the mass communication model, newspaper and news companies were compelled to change their routines and the quality of their content. That also implies a mutation of business models and the adoption of differentiated interaction strategies with users, enhancing the possibility of their participation in the production of news information. In the case of cyber journalism, it is possible to verify a gradual degree of commitment to the participation of audiences:

- a) a phase in which interactivity was a promise that replaces the reader's letters by e-mails;
- b) an increase in the possibility of interacting resulting from the inclusion of forms and hypertext that allowed sending and receiving e-mails to the intended journalist;
- c) forums that generated the possibility of interaction between the public, and newsroom staffs, with the intervention of a mediator;
- d) the possibility of integrating users' comments on the issues included in the agenda, with the chance for the author of a news piece to quote parts of messages that he considers relevant;
- e) the developments brought about in the scope of Web 3.0, in which user-generated content appears, including of multimedia nature (sound and image) and
- f) finally, the inversion of roles between the sender and receiver to construct a discourse interactively.

Despite that apparent stage of consolidation, several researchers showed that the adaptation and incorporation of new routines and, particularly the interaction with new audiences come to be diffculted by some inertia or even resistance from journalists (SINGER, 1997; DOMINGOS, 2006; MAGALHÃES, 2009; JERÓNIMO, 2011; LASORSA, LEWIS & HOLTON 2012). The first research showed that the routines in the analyzed online newsrooms continued to favor professional criteria as the fundamental reference to produce a news judgment, instead of the preferences of users. Although journalists at the regional online newspaper are in the habit of looking at statistics a couple of times a day to see which news is viewed the most, the editors argued that traditional news criteria should prevail. (DOMINGO, 2006)

Despite being a valuable instrument for the valorization and development of low-density regions, Portuguese local Press exhibits several weaknesses such as:

- a) an anachronistic element that exaggerates an ideal vision, ignoring excessive dependence on the nearest sources of information;
- b) the lack of critical distance;
- c) the commitment to on a historical and traditionalist portrait of the region;
- d) some indifference to the demands of new emerging publics and some level of indifference to cultural, economic, and technological changes.

Remaining committed to traditional values and community needs (HANITZSCH ET AL, 2011; JENKINS & NIELSEN, 2019), local news is essential to

promote the participation of citizens in the life of the institutions and democracies that are closest to them. The relationships they establish with journalists and vice versa assume an essential role.

Despite this consolidated consensus around its' importance, in recent years and other geographies, the local media landscape has changed in a negative sense. In the USA and Brazil, for example, "news deserts" are already identified (NAPOLI ET AL, 2018; PIMENTA, 2017), with natural consequences for the democratic health of their communities. Portugal - the context of our study - is no exception. Associations and movements are worried about the impact of COVID 19 in small newspapers and local radio stations. In this context, an economic concentration, and the following occupation of frequencies by national radio stations will leave little or no space for local information. The existence of newspapers, radios, televisions, and digital media in little towns and a small country remains a social, economic, and cultural need for the hinterland vitality. Despite the constraints experienced, we can speak of a certain vitality of the local media In what measure are local media journalists of these media, who claim for themselves the exercise of proximity journalism, using all the resources of the potential of the digital environment, to relate to their audience, increasing interaction and strengthening viable media entrepreneurship?

## 2 Literature review

According to insights drawn from participative theories, life-world appears a key concept to understanding regional and communitarian press, because of the fundamental role developed in the formation and transformation of individual and collective identities, linked by closes cultural ties and shared values.

Habermas claims the lifeworld is "represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretive patterns" (HABERMAS, 1996, p. 124). The lifeworld includes the domain of cultural experiences and communicative interactions that are essentially knowable and inherently familiar. Couldry (2007), for instance, claims that ordinary persons are called into organizing themselves as publics when problems are recognized at the level of everyday life. Transparent and accountable decision-making and good local governance need a strong involvement of the civil society, but it is on this everyday lifeworld that appears a fundamental instance through which the sense of membership and the construction of a pre-political notion of local and regional identity starts.

The introduction of digital was sawed as an opportunity to allow access to the production and public distribution of messages by many people, which was a strong comparative advantage to citizen groups who want to organize the public but suffer the disadvantages of a peripheral location,

It also allowed a more substantial discussion of current events in a way that traditional media could never allow (JOYCE, 2007, p. 3).

According to Nip (2006, p. 12), one expected that news users could participate in the newsmaking process in multiple ways: (i) audience participation at mainstream news media including staff weblogs, which incorporate reader comments, either through e-mails or direct postings; (ii) newsroom-sanctioned weblogs written by outsiders; (iii) discussion forums; (iv) articles written by readers; (v) photos, video,

and reports sent in by readers; vi) news and information websites that accept works from independent writers and broadcasters, providing original interviews, research, and reporting previously checked and filtered by a professional staff. (CORREIA, 2012).

Denying some of the most enthusiastic dreams from the early day of online journalism when one looks at the incorporation of the Internet by newsrooms one finds a landscape with multiple and differentiated speeds. Slower transition is mainly due to some resistance on the part of journalists. When describing the way journalists view technology, Rosental Alves, from the University of Texas claims that “there are still many in denial” (JERÓNIMO, 2015, p. 107).

Often unable to adopt the desirable new technological and cultural changes, local regional media were, during many years, private companies with a scarce average number of workers, scarce average wages, low level of professionalism, in the sense of their precariousness. Some of the titles in the regional press come from reality before Portugal's capitalist development, that occurred after the arrival of European Union funds. Some succeeded in transforming and updating themselves, others did not follow the same path.

Some are still small and medium-sized companies, some based on family traditions, others in a cooperative format, but without sufficiently professionalized business management. Many follow an editorial line based on memory, before the appearance of new audiences and new services (CORREIA ET AL, 2011)

The starting point was problematic, and the efforts carried away by a new generation of journalists and editors seem to exhibit differentiated outcomes, resulting also from different degrees of commitment with change.

Local newspapers, for example, have fewer resources to invest in new digital strategies than their national and international counterparts" (ALI ET AL, 2018, HESS & WALLER, 2017, LECKNER, TENOR & NYGREN, 2017). At this level and with some exceptions, the most frequent attitude it is a reactive one, especially at the editorial level.

In the very end journalists do not take advantage of technology or make little use of it (RIVIERA & YAGUACHE, 2010; ZAMITH, 2008).

Following the above, several studies conducted in different countries point to out the news with only one source, a public without access to various perspectives of events, little original production and little or no involvement with local communities. Productivity and multi-platform policies, as well as working conditions, are pointed out as determining factors for this reality. " Their working conditions are also worse, something that reduces their willingness to innovate and engage themselves in the project" (SMYRNAIOS & BOUSQUET, 2011, p. 9). Moreover, In the case of local newspapers, there is also a strongly rooted culture of decades of news production for paper. This element is determinant of what are the local online news and availability of journalists to engage with the community (Jerónimo, 2015)

### 3 Methodology and case study

The Re/media.Lab is a research project that aims to contribute to the diagnosis of the current situation of regional media, promoting experimental tools and strategies to strengthen its business model, increasing its innovation degree and



improving its connection with the public. Simultaneously, it aims the incubation of new regional media with an innovative profile, using information and communication technologies. Re/media.Lab will have three dimensions: As an observatory, diagnosing the current situation of the regional media industry in dimensions such as the labor conditions and the socio-professional characterization of their professionals. As a laboratory, promoting experimental strategies in cooperation with industry and associations, to improve new practices and strategies. As an incubator, it will give support to entrepreneurship projects and startups developed and planned particularly by the students of the higher education's institutions cooperating with the project.

As part of this larger research project, this survey was based on sample journalists from a sample from local media from the central region of Portugal. For this study, the questionnaire focuses on new tools and new content.

The choice of the territory was justified by the fact that it is the one with the most significant presence of local media, i.e. about half of the local media landscape in Portugal (ERC, 2010). Were considered only newspapers and radios whose newsrooms had a minimum of three journalists. Following these criteria, one built a sample of 41 regional media to whose journalists the survey was submitted. The questionnaire was applied between December 2018 and February 2019, whenever possible in presence but also by telephone. In the end, 107 (n) were considered valid.

This methodological option was related to the fact that the surveys allow the collection of the opinion of many people. Thus, it appears as an alternative to the interview, as it allows the collection of certain information in a rapid, synthetic, and systematic manner. Carrying out interviews in these cases would imply a high volume of information, which would be difficult and time-consuming to treat.

#### 4 New tools, renewed routines

The Internet is fully integrated into the newsrooms. This reality is particularly evident when most journalists report resorting to it "several times a day" (96.3%), as part of their routines, as opposed to "several times a week" (3.7%). Although such access primarily occurs through the "computer" (93.5%), mobile devices are also already in regular use, namely the "mobile phone" (83.2%), but also the "tablet" (35.5%). Respondents reveal that they resort to several devices and only a minority (15%) to a single.

In terms of the type of use, "information search" (97.2%) and access to "electronic mail" (94.4%) stand out. This was followed by "social media management" (70.1%), "contacting sources" (64.5%) and "publishing information" (62.6%). Here too, use is multiple, i.e., almost all journalists use the Internet for more than one task (98.1%).

Searching for information is one of the most frequent routines in journalists' daily lives, and for this purpose, the "search engines" (100%) are the most used. This is followed by "national media websites" (72.9%), "local/regional media website" (64.5%), "social media" (58.9%) and "news agencies" (53.3%). Less frequent is the use of "international media websites" (29.9%), "blogs" (8.4%) and "others" (0.9%).

In what concerns with how to contact sources, most prefer to use the "mobile phone" (45.8%), followed by "email" (30.8%) and "in-person" (22.4%). It also should be noted that "social media" is not used by the respondents to contact sources.

When asked about the main difficulties encountered in collecting information online, journalists mentioned: "finding credible sources" (57.0%), followed by "defining what is important due to a large amount of information" (52.3%) and "time to research outside the agenda" (51.4%). Less problematic seems to be "locating specialists in a given subject" (23.4%), "finding contacts" (18.7%), "choosing where to look for information" (15.9%), and "other" (0.9%) - a reference to "availability of the parties involved to speak". These data show that the most significant difficulties are more in the process of identification and collection of information than in the process of research.

#### 4.1 UGC

The incorporation of content produced by citizens (UGC) is paradoxically viewed by journalists. About the participation of the public in news production, most of the respondents considered it "not very useful" (44.9%); only a few answered that it is "not useful at all" (0.9%). However, some think the opposite, i.e., see public participation as "very useful" (27.1%) and "useful" (26.2%).

About the main advantages of bringing the public into news production, respondents pointed out above all that the fact that users' comments allow greater proximity between the media and journalists of the public (62.6%). Respondents also considered that the public may provide new and relevant information (53.3%) and that the suggestions of the public make the journalists aware of what they should improve (48.6%). As for the disadvantages, the problems of reliability of information (84.1%), the fact that public participation creates too much dispersion of subjects (49.5%) and difficulties in contact and validation of sources (44.9%) are pointed out.

#### 4.2 Innovation needs

Innovation is a challenge that also came to journalism, and this was a question asked. In which journalistic genres it was most needed, "Reportage" (39.3%) and "News" (38.3%) stand out. About what kind of innovations journalists considered important for the mentioned genres, respondents pointed to the use of data visualization tools and in an interactive way (48.6%), multimedia content (47.7%), and the use of tools that enable the construction of interactive narratives (43.0%). Finally, regarding the themes to be rethought in the way they are approached, the results point out Politics (60.7%), Science and Technology (43.0%), and Economics (41.1%).

Within the perspective of the attraction and loyalty of new audiences, journalists were asked about the approaches they identified as being necessary to achieve these goals. In both cases, investigative journalism stands out (82.2% to attract; 79.4% to retain), followed by multimedia journalism (36.4% to attract; 35.4% to retain).

#### 4.3 The place of social media

Among journalists of the local media, the majority use social media (71.0%) and regularly - "several times a day" (39.5%), and "I am permanently connected" (38.2%) are the most frequent responses. The social networking platforms that stand

out are Facebook (70.1%), followed by YouTube (34.6%) and Instagram (19.0%). Regarding Twitter, there is a trend that is registered all Portuguese media and which is of lower use (15%); even though the expression of this social media platform as in countries such as the USA or Brazil. As to use social media, like other types of online routines, the search for information (50.5%), followed by the publication of content on social media themselves (42.1%) and contacting sources (29.0%), is noteworthy.

The sharing of content on social media is a practice that local media journalists implement in an antagonistic way when the origin of the content is their own or that of the public. In the first case, the answer "several times a day" (35.5%), followed by "several times a week" (21.1%) and "once a day" (17.1%), while in the second case, the answer "never" (46.1%) stands out, followed by "monthly" (22.4%) and "several times a week" (13.2%). These results led to the conclusion that it is easier for journalists to share their content than for the public.

One of the possible explanations for the lower tendency to share content other than theirs on social networks may be one of the essences of journalistic activity, which is the verification of information. In this sense, journalists were questioned about whether this practice is exercised before sharing any content of which they have not been authors or co-authors. The overwhelming majority answered affirmatively (80.3%). However, one cannot neglect that some have answered negatively (6.6%), and the rest do so a few times or rarely.

The space for comments allowed on some social media, such as Facebook, allows not only the generation of debate but also the journalists themselves to get involved in it. Concerning this possibility of interaction, it was assessed how often journalists respond to public comments when related to their activity. The prevailing attitude is availability, with responses concentrated on "several times a day" (23.7%), "once a week" (17.1%) and "once a day" and "several times a week" (both with 14.5%). There are still those who "never" (13.2%) do it. When the question is about the monitoring of debates generated in the content shared by journalists, they also show availability, i.e. they do so "several times a day" and "several times a week" (both with 28.9%) and "once a day" and "once a week" (both with 14.5%). As in the previous question, some reveal "never" (6.6%) to do so.

#### 4.4 Digital tools: importance and skills

Skills that most of the respondents consider important are a). Working with HTML and other programming languages; b). Managing content and SEO; c). Recording and editing photos, audio, and videos 360°; d). Work with digital tools that help in fact-checking; e). The knowledge to join different journalistic formats and innovative ways of telling stories. The same goes for producing infographics and working with data visualization, as well as analyzing and collecting web-scraping data, but in this case, with a higher response tendency.

The only competence in which journalists are divided is concerning knowledge about augmented reality and virtual reality. Here the response trend is also concentrated on "important" and "unimportant" (35.5%). It should also be noted that some consider these skills to be of little or no importance - in the latter case, extreme, the figures range from 9.3% to 15.9%.

Given the importance that journalists attach to certain technologies for the exercise of the profession, let us look at them, but now as acquired skills. Journalists



reveal knowledge of HTML and other programming languages, content management, and SEO, 360 ° photo and audio recording and editing, infographics design, and data presentation. Respondents also have the skills to work with digital tools that aid fact-checking, as well as different journalistic formats and innovative ways of telling stories. The same goes for video recording and editing skills and web-scraping.

The only exception is also augmented reality and virtual reality, where journalists tend to reveal little knowledge. In the remaining competencies, we also found answers that point to little or no knowledge on the part of journalists - in the latter extreme case the figures range from 8.4% to 20, 6%.

## 5 Discussion

The Internet is fully integrated into the newsrooms of the local media and their journalists to integrate into their routine's various digital platforms and tools. The mobile phone, for example, is used by a considerable number of journalists. If we think that its original function was to make and receive calls, looking at the type of use, we find that stands out information search, email access, and management of social networks, i.e., journalistic routines that lack access to the Internet. Whether by Wi-Fi or mobile access.

In the process of searching for information, one finds that local media journalists make more use of national media websites than of their more direct competitors. Considering that their scope of action is the community where they are inserted, the expectation would be that the priority interest would be the issues of greater proximity and, therefore, the websites of other local media. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that there are issues of national and even international scope that have implications at the local level. It is an issue that could be touched upon in future studies.

Still, about how to contact sources, one found that the most used resources have in common the fact of being non-personal. Since the respondents are participants in a journalism that is assumed to be close, we question the prevalence of these forms of communication. If one considers that time remains critical in the exercise of journalism, as well as the size of local newsrooms, that is, they have few journalists, then perhaps we can have possible answers.

As for the difficulties identified - finding credible sources, defining what is important, and time to find other issues off the agenda - they have as a common denominator the amount of information that is shared online. Here too, the factors of time and scarcity of journalists in local media newsrooms help us to understand.

One of the keys to building local news is its audience. The exercise of proximity journalism presupposes a permanent dialogue between journalists and the public (Franklin, 2006; Mayer, 2011). Even in smaller territories, journalists are not always able to reach everywhere, at the desired time, and they do not master all the issues either. Hence the importance of public participation in the process of news construction and the establishment of community bonds around them (SINGER ET AL, 2011). However, not all journalists take a positive view of this issue. The view on this issue divides them. Although almost half of the respondents see public participation as unhelpful, we cannot ignore the fact that the other half consider it to be useful or even very useful. Specially to strengthen ties of proximity, to provide

new information, and even to help journalists improve their work. On the other hand, the participation of non-journalists in the news construction process leads them to question the reliability of the information.

Looking for our findings, we conclude that journalists see the public more as a source, where the news construction is their own than as co-builders. This reading is reinforced by other data from the project of which this study is part (CORREIA & JERÓNIMO, 2020).

Visual and multimedia content - which allows a quick and interactive reading - are the most desired by journalists. Among the themes that require innovation, politics is the most mentioned. This may be because it is the one that can most often fall into a grey area in terms of news coverage. Therefore, it does not mobilize the public as much as other themes. It also seems clear that most journalists recognize the lack of more investigative journalism. Here too, time and resources can motivate such a desire.

For research, social media are essential spaces of interaction between people. Although respondents recognize that it is possible to do journalism without social media, most local media journalists use them regularly and some even permanently. Above all, to search for information and contact sources, as verified in other studies (Jerónimo, 2015), but also to share content, especially from their own. When it comes to sharing content from the public, journalists show high resistance. This question leads to the verification of information, which takes time, and this is a critical factor. At this point, it is important to highlight that some journalists mentioned that they do not verify the information of the contents they share when they are not their own. In a profession that has this as one of its founding principles, this is a severe mistake.

We have already mentioned that the time and resources available in newsrooms are critical. Perhaps that is why the willingness of journalists to engage with their audiences through social media is not so often. Following debates generated by the content produced by them and responding to the comments of the public are integral practices in the routine of journalists. Although they recognize the importance of social media, the truth is that they are also mainly tools that help the construction of news, namely in research and contact with sources. Not everyone seems willing to establish permanent dialogue relations with the public, mediated technologically.

## 6 Conclusion

Technological evolution has challenged not only the construction of the news but also the relationship of journalists with the public. In the digital age, continuing to defend the exercise of proximity journalism presents itself as an added challenge for the local media and their journalists.

Even dealing daily with critical factors such as time, newsrooms with scarce technical and human resources, low salaries, and not always with training (JERÓNIMO, 2015, CORREIA & JERÓNIMO, 2020), journalists from the local media have resisted. If we think that before being journalists, they are often citizens of that territory and that community, perhaps we can find a possible justification for some signs of hope. "We find ourselves in a wonderful quagmire: journalism remains the same, yet the conditions under which it is practiced have not only changed considerably, but they are also in permanent flux" (DEUZE, 2019, p. 2). It is in the face

of these challenges that the fortitude or weakness of local journalism will be in the coming years. To ignore them is to dig one's own grave.

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