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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Importance of Local Media in the Digital Age with Emphasis on Legal Measures of the Council of Europe

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The digital revolution and the advancement of new information and communication technologies have engendered profound structural transformations in societies, enhancing the quality of life and reinforcing the rights and freedoms of individuals. Concurrently, however, unprecedented risks have emerged that seriously threaten certain rights and freedoms. Owing to significant shifts in political, economic, and media landscapes, alongside evolving audience behaviors, local and regional media have encountered considerable difficulties in sustaining their operations. Nevertheless, in recent years, renewed attention has been directed toward the position and role of local and regional media.

The capacity of local and regional media to fulfill their ideal functions is contingent upon their political, economic, and socio-cultural conditions. Serving the vital information needs of communities underscores the critical role of these media outlets. To meet such needs, societies require access to eight categories of information—essential, timely, interpretable, and reasonably accessible—delivered through media channels. International policy-making organizations have consistently pursued various initiatives, and scholarly research has been conducted with the aim of harmonizing legal frameworks to protect citizens' rights. Among the international public and specialized organizations active in the development of legal instruments pertaining to communications are the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Economic and Social Council, UNESCO, the International Telecommunication Union, and the World Intellectual Property Organization. At the regional level, particularly within Europe, the Council of Europe and the European Union constitute two pivotal institutions.

Three principal challenges appear to be currently addressed: precarious working conditions, the safety of local and regional journalists, and limited resources for enhancing journalistic skills and training, particularly in the domain of digital innovations relevant to local and regional journalism. Financial sustainability represents a key challenge for local and regional media globally. Most countries have reported a decline in the number of local news titles and circulation figures. Furthermore, due to financial constraints, numerous local media have closed their regional offices. Physical offices of local news organizations have traditionally served as important landmarks and primary sources of community information. The loss of physical presence not only affects the relationship between journalists and the community but also diminishes the visibility and accessibility of local journalism. The phenomenon of "local news decline" has become a focal point of public discourse and political debate in recent years. Some regions suffer from a shortage or complete absence of news outlets and coverage. Additionally, the political independence of local and regional media is essential for the effective performance of their democratic functions and the provision of content that meets the vital information needs of their communities. Under these circumstances, media development indicators help determine communication development strategies within the broader framework of national development. Governments must undoubtedly recognize the vital role of independent local media organizations in fostering public debate, pluralism, and awareness of diverse opinions.

Method:

The Council of Europe recently addressed the importance and status of local and regional media in its 2023 report. In this article, considering the current situation and developments in the digital age pertaining to the proliferation of various media platforms, international experiences are examined to identify policies and policy-making practices concerning local media as articulated in the recommendations and reports of the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe website was selected for document retrieval using purposive sampling, and relevant documents were obtained through the website's search engine.

Findings:

The findings of this study indicate that achieving a thriving local and regional media environment requires joint and coordinated efforts across different levels of government and among stakeholders. Governments should adopt comprehensive policies to ensure that local and regional media fulfill their important political and social roles while simultaneously strengthening the quality of local journalism. The report also reveals that local and regional media are more vulnerable in terms of financial resources and skills development compared to national media. Comprehensive governmental policies should include a transparent support system featuring appropriate direct and indirect subsidies that address the challenges in the local media ecosystem holistically, promote innovation in the sector, and enhance the quality of local journalism.

Conclusion:

Based on this research, governments should facilitate joint initiatives that address challenges or promote innovation in local and regional media. Such initiatives may include providing financial assistance, tax incentives, stakeholder participation, knowledge exchange and capacity building, and networking and partnership platforms. Engaging a variety of stakeholders—including professional bodies, local authorities, universities, and schools—is crucial in developing local media. Addressing inequalities in access to local news by promoting affordable broadband access and digital literacy programs, as well as media literacy initiatives (including through schools and from an early age), while taking into account the specific needs of local and regional media, particularly in disadvantaged communities, is also a focus of these policies. Subsidies are important for promoting a diverse media landscape that meets the information needs of communities. However, it is imperative that these support mechanisms—whether provided by local, regional, or national governments—are underpinned by strong and transparent criteria to ensure that they benefit legitimate local news media.

Recommendations to governments for supporting local media include: supporting investigative journalism; developing viable business models for transnational journalism and freelance journalists; facilitating the transition of print publications to the digital environment; establishing a digital presence for small players, especially local media; developing journalism skills and training, as well as media literacy programs for newsrooms; strengthening journalistic ethics and principles such as fact-checking and reflecting the diverse perspectives present in society; encouraging and promoting careers in journalism; developing the business skills of media practitioners relevant to the digital economy, including audience measurement and analysis skills; and supporting the development of new technologies for newsrooms.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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