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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Císařová, L. W. (2023). Backed Into a Corner: Structural Changes That Lead to Local News Deserts. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 381-389. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6731>

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Article

Backed Into a Corner: Structural Changes That Lead to Local News Deserts

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Submitted: 28 January 2023 | Accepted: 12 July 2023 | Published: 28 September 2023

Abstract

On the surface, it may look like there are no news deserts in the Czech Republic, but that does not mean that all audiences are able to get relevant local news. Apart from independent local news outlets, which are diminishing, Czech districts are served by information provided either by a delocalised publishing chain or a municipality press that promotes the local government. I will focus on the emergence of news deserts from the perspective of independent local newspapers, especially on the structural changes that lead to the declining number of media outlets that offer local news in Czechia. Moreover, I take the bottom-up approach to reflect on the local journalists' point of view. The mixed-method research, which was conducted in 2019 and 2020, consisted of a survey of local newspaper owners and in-depth interviews with local journalists. I identified several structural changes to both the local newspapers and to the general publishing industry that have led to growing organisational and economic problems for the local newspapers, and often to their demise. Local news is still carried by newspapers, which depend on the traditional business model and are slow with their digital transition. Their survival is based on (non)cooperation with either ancillary organisations (printing office, distribution firm, and sales outlet) or other local newspapers. Newspapers are cornered by the demands of external actors; their economic stability depends on the self-sufficiency of their production.

Keywords

entrepreneurial initiative; local journalists; local media; media cooperation; media infrastructure; news desert; newspapers' self-sufficiency; structural changes

Issue

This article is part of the issue "News Deserts: Places and Spaces Without News" edited by Agnes Gulyas (Canterbury Christ Church University), Joy Jenkins (University of Missouri), and Annika Bergström (University of Gothenburg).

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1. Introduction

While it might look like there are no news deserts in the Czech Republic (Abernathy, 2018; Gulyas, 2021; Napoli et al., 2018), that does not mean that audiences in every locality get relevant local news. Apart from the independent local print outlets, which are gradually disappearing from the media landscape, the Czech districts are served with the news either from a publishing chain or a municipality press. The centralisation and delocalisation of function and content, and the latter promotion of local governments, mean that people who live in some localities fail to receive relevant local information (Waschková Císařová, 2017).

Authors often cite general economic and technological developments in the media as reasons for the emer-

gence of news deserts. The question is: What are the reasons that make it difficult or impossible for local media to survive? The important aspect is to recognize that local media depends on local infrastructure and actors, including audience, employees, and a publishing infrastructure that includes a printer, distribution, and newsstands. In short, the analysis of a newspaper should encompass all the important elements of production dynamics (Deuze & Witschge, 2018).

Therefore, I will focus on the emergence of news deserts from the perspective of independent local newspapers, aiming specifically at the structural changes that lead to the declining number of media outlets that offer local news in the Czech Republic and addressing the problems that, from the local journalists' point of view, paved the way for the emergence of news deserts. More

particularly, the structural changes are viewed primarily through the lens of the changes in the production, distribution, and business strategies of local newspapers.

2. The Structural Changes That Lead to News Deserts

News deserts, which are areas that are not covered by any media with news content, have gradually become a topic within the development of local media (Abernathy, 2018; Barclay et al., 2022; Gulyas, 2021; Mathews, 2022; Napoli et al., 2018). The concern is grounded in the shared and data-supported view that local newspapers “are significant contributors to vibrant, well-functioning local democracies” (Lindgren et al., 2019, p. 7) by serving information to the local audience (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018).

In describing the news desert, authors primarily address the consequences, like what it means for a particular community to lose a source of news information (Abernathy, 2018; Mathews, 2022). However, it is important to change these optics. The focus should be on what causes the news deserts. This can contribute to systemic change, or at least to the public discussion.

Most authors name the reason for the loss of local newspapers as either the decline of circulation and advertisement (Abernathy, 2018; Lindgren et al., 2019) or a slow-paced digital transition (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018; Waschková Císařová, 2023). Nevertheless, research shows that local newspapers “still derived the majority of revenues from their print newspapers, whether through subscriptions, advertising, or newsstand sales” and insist on maintaining the traditional business model (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018, Chapter 4.1, para. 1).

The emergence of a news desert is closely linked to key transformations in the media-production infrastructure: printing, distribution, and sales (Napoli et al., 2017). While the traditional media infrastructure is breaking down and therefore complicating or making it impossible to survive, the online media infrastructure is emerging hesitantly and more slowly, preventing the organic formation of new media types (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). Bowd (2009, p. 50) mentions the concentration of printing facilities: “Whereas once most local newspapers had printing presses on site and supplemented their income by taking on outside printing work, now most papers are printed in another town or city,” which has “the potential to loosen the ties between newspaper and community of circulation” (cf. Anderson, 2013).

To understand a local infrastructure, Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006, p. 175) propose a communication infrastructure theory that “provides a theory-driven guide to assess the capacities of community communication infrastructures for building and maintaining civic communities in the contemporary urban environment.” Communication infrastructure theory “focuses on various communication opportunity structures, or communication infrastructures, that make it either easy or difficult for residents of a local community to build community”

(Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006, p. 175); therefore looks at the topic, which is at the other side of the “same coin.”

Local media organisations have two different production strategies that are connected to their survival (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020). First, there is the active approach in terms of economic self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial initiative (Ekdale et al., 2015; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). These active publishers try to find a way out of their economic problems. One way is through business-model diversification: “Incorporating events, in-house marketing and B2B content firms, interest-based magazines and free newspapers, and online commerce (real estate, auto sales, job-search sites)” (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018, Chapter 4, para. 2). As part of this strategy, “publishers are therefore trying to branch out into other business ventures, such as stationery sales, printing services, specialty publications” (Lindgren et al., 2019, p. 43). Second, cooperation/collaboration is often used: “Collaborations in various forms are becoming increasingly common as a way to pool limited resources and produce quality journalism” (Lindgren et al., 2019, p. 52; cf. Abernathy, 2018). Deuze and Witschge (2018, p. 173) think that “media professionals as well as their audiences are increasingly (expected to be) working together, to converse and co-create.” Nevertheless, Hatcher and Thayer (2017, p. 1286) are aware of the problems that may arise from cooperation, mentioning that “hesitations with partnerships on behalf of the journalists themselves have also been described as a trust issue,” and they reflect that “one of the biggest roadblocks to success for organizations considering a partnership could be that the ideas of competition are so ingrained in many journalists that they find it difficult to agree to or enjoy, working with other journalists” and that there is “a tension when one organization is perceived to be doing more work or giving more than they get out of the partnership.”

This article seeks to explore how local-media journalists perceive the reasons for the creation of news deserts, and how they define the structural causes of the problematic developments within local media. The main angle is focused on individuals’ responses to the infrastructural changes of local-media publishing, and how it reflects the structural changes and problems that paved the way to the emergence of news deserts. Similar to Jenkins and Nielsen (2018), the analysis focuses on the production, distribution, and business strategies of local newspapers, specifically their entrepreneurial initiative, production self-sufficiency, and cooperation.

3. Methods

This mixed-method study consisted of a survey of all the owners of local Czech newspapers and in-depth interviews with local journalists in Czechia during 2019 and 2020. The research is part of a wider project that, since 2009, has focused on the specificities of local media in the Czech context (Local media, n.d.).

Research in 2019 and 2020 consisted of two steps. The first was to update the existing database of the local press in Czechia by means of questionnaires with local newspaper representatives. The resultant data covers the basic characteristics of the newspapers (e.g., periodicity and scope) and newsrooms (e.g., number of members and hierarchy). The data, which was obtained from all 30 active newsrooms in 2019, were then used to argue for the emergence of news deserts when compared to the same data from 2009 and 2014. The second step was in-depth interviews with 33 local newspaper workers conducted from November 2019 to February 2020, representing all existing and some no longer existing local newspapers' newsrooms (Brennen, 2013). As follows from the survey, in 2019 there were 88 local newspaper workers in the Czech Republic (Local media, n.d.).

The interviewed local journalists were: managers, editors, and reporters; 11 women and 22 men; mostly older (median age 55) and experienced (median 26 years of work as a journalist); 14 were university-educated, but none had received an education in the field of journalism (see Supplementary Material). According to a representative survey of Czech journalists (Volek & Urbániková, 2017, p. 66), in 2003 only 47.3% had a university degree, while in 2015 it was 68.1%. The share of graduates with a specialised journalism/communication degree has increased from 39.6% of all university graduates in 2003 to 53.5% in 2015. However, the authors of the study note that this "professionalisation change has been particularly pronounced in the educational structure of journalists, at the level of the youngest journalistic generation" (Volek & Urbániková, 2017, p. 66), while among local journalists and in our sample the older journalistic generation predominates. The survey authors do have regional journalists in their sample, but not local journalists from small-market outlets (Volek & Urbániková, 2017, p. 313).

The research was conducted according to the rules of the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee. All communication partners signed an informed consent form. Their data were strictly anonymized, and they appear in the text under pseudonyms. The face-to-face interviews were in the Czech language and ranged from 40 minutes to 3.5 hours. They were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated. The data analysis took two cycles of coding: the primary focused on structural, descriptive, and thematic matters; the second focused on coding (Saldaña, 2009). The topics of news deserts and infrastructural changes in newspaper production were not conceptually pre-determined. It emerged during the primary coding cycle as part of the topic of the local journalists' reflections on the changing local newspapers' environment and their working conditions.

The research is part of the longitudinal research on local media in the Czech Republic, which was covered by surveys in every newsroom in 2009, 2014, and 2019, interviews in 2019 and 2020, and participant observation in 2019 and 2020 (Local media, n.d.).

4. Local News Deserts in the Czech Context

Local information in the Czech context is mostly mediated by privately owned newspapers. There are only a handful of online pure players. The rest of the local media sub-system consists of either the publishing chain, Vltava Labe Media, which covers almost every district with dailies but has a centralised structure and delocalised content (Waschková Císařová, 2017), or outlets owned by the local municipalities that mostly serve as political public relations for the ruling parties (Waschková Císařová, 2015). Considering the existence of local news deserts in Czechia there is always some type of mediated communication in the localities, but this does not mean that the audience in localities receives relevant local news. This was commented upon by the European Federation of Journalists (2019, p. 2): "Local media are in a very difficult position, leaving a big part of the citizens without real independent impartial information on local interests, which has a negative impact on participation in local debates and democracy."

There is a steady decline in the number of private local newspapers in Czechia: there were 60 local newspapers in 2009, 45 in 2014, and 30 in 2019; from 2019 at least three others have ceased publication (Local media, n.d.). These outlets meet the definition of "small-market newspapers" (Ali et al., 2018). They mostly: cover a small district; are located in a district town or the second largest town in the district (approximate population from 10 to 25 thousand); publish once a week; and have a circulation of 1,500 to 6,000 per issue. They are not part of the official organisations that audit the numbers, there is therefore no verified and publicly available data about their performance. Despite this, local newspapers still have strength in the media market: the total number of sold copies of these titles in 2019 is estimated at 190,000 per week. However, the decline in the availability of local information is not due only to the closure of local newspapers, but also to a change in their features, which became flat (see Table 1): reducing the number of pages, decreasing the variability of content, and extending the periodicity of their publication (Local media, n.d.).

The Czech local news deserts have some significant differences compared to other researched news deserts. Unlike local news deserts in the UK, where "social media are now dominant in local news and information systems," and "local newspapers are no longer perceived as 'community glue'" (Barclay et al., 2022, p. 9, 15), the emergence of the Czech local news deserts is related to the lack of local newspapers' digital transition (Waschková Císařová, 2023), centralisation of publishing chains (cf. Abernathy, 2018), and strong position of municipality press in the local communication (Waschková Císařová, 2015).

Table 1. Features of local newspapers in Czechia.

	2009	2019
Distribution area		
Municipality with extended powers	11	6
District	35	24
More districts	11	0
County	3	0
Frequency of publication		
Fortnightly	6	3
Weekly	51	25
Biweekly	3	2
Copies sold per issue*		
Up to 2,000	6	10
Up to 6,000	28	12
Up to 10,000	5	4
Up to 15,000	6	4
Up to 25,000	1	0
Type of ownership		
Self-employed owner	16	3
Corporate	44	27
Longevity of publication		
Up to 5 years	18	2
Up to 10 years	6	1
Up to 20 years	36	7
Up to 30 years	0	20

Note: * = In 2009, only 45 newspapers provided information on circulation.

5. Findings

The difference among the newspapers is not based on a different size or business model (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). On the contrary, all the researched local media are still based on the traditional business model (most income is from advertising, less income is from subscriptions and newspaper sales) and a traditional publishing structure (primary printed edition, secondary online presence; cf. Waschková Císařová, 2023).

I divide the local media organisations into three types according to the interviewees' reflections on their active/passive approach towards the infrastructural changes of local media publishing and their production strategies: entrepreneurial initiative, production self-sufficiency, and cooperation (Ekdale et al., 2015; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998). There were 30 local newspapers' titles, according to my communication partners' description, eight of them belong to the active group, 17 to the neutral group, and five to the passive group.

The first type of local media can be called active. These media organisations successfully built upon the traditional business model (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018). The communication partners' description of the specific functioning of their medium had one common denominator, an active approach. The second type of local media is neutral. Their representatives consider the tra-

ditional business model to be problematic but have no solid strategy to develop the medium. Some of the communication partners take negative infrastructural and production changes that need to be adapted to rather than actively addressed. External developments force them to constantly "deviate" from their set strategy. The third type of local media can be considered passive. They see the infrastructural and production changes as "fate," which is hard, or even impossible, to "break," and eventually leads to the end of the newspaper.

5.1. Activity/Passivity of Entrepreneurial Initiatives

The activity of local media is visible in entrepreneurial initiatives, like long-term development strategies, rather than in "fire-fighting" (Ali et al., 2018). As editor Ota from an active local medium puts it, "Rather than cut the budget, we always did something extra." The interviewees name various strategies: organising cultural and sporting events (editor Marie; manager Josef); producing and publishing thematic advertising supplements (reporter Marta); publishing locally oriented non-fiction and fiction books (editor Ota); and organising the rental and sale of local real estate (editor Artur).

For the neutral local media representatives, this initiative is more of a tactic, like responding to current developments, than a strategy. For example, as the

financial revenue from the traditional business model drops, they are forced to come up with new ideas, but they do not stabilize their income, or they are mostly considered demanding one-off events:

I completely changed the philosophy of distribution because we still had copies left. I said, We must get the newspaper among the people. An issue cost only eight Czech crowns. We have nothing from the sale. We have made a network of collection points and we deliver the newspaper there for free. (editor Lucie)

We do a road show for our readers every year. We look for different villages. We try not to go to the same ones every year and cooperate with local companies that support us. We tour these villages, organise a competition there, for beer and lemonade, and our partners contribute prizes, and we present the newspaper....It has a tradition going back 10 years, so it gets a response. It increases the sales, because people get to know us. (manager Anna)

Passive local newspapers were reflected by my communication partners after they stopped publishing, or were close to the end (Abernathy, 2018). The basic reason was that the equation, as formulated by manager Josef, does not exist: "I can only spend as much as I have in my pocket." These organisations have long been in debt or, for various reasons, on the verge of economic collapse. Their owners' entrepreneurial initiative can be considered active in one sustainable sense: they cover their debts from the other businesses that they own (reporter Robert; editor Jan; editor Barbora; editor Max). The interviewees reflect on the pride of the owners, who kept their problems under wraps until they could not be solved (reporter Milan; reporter Robert). Otherwise, these local media followed the gradual infrastructural changes rather than reacted to them, let alone established a tactic or strategy:

The turning point in sales occurred five years ago, today we are almost down to a third of our highest numbers. The decline started with the internet. It destroyed it. We had a lot of competition—newspapers started up, but they never lasted, but the internet cannot be overcome. We haven't been able to balance our books for a long time....I must make money in other businesses to handle it. (editor Barbora)

5.2. Production Self-Sufficiency

The production self-sufficiency of a local newspaper can be understood as the active minimization of the risks that arise from external influences and support for the stability of the production process. In the case of traditional media, this means as little dependence on ancillary

organisations (printing, distribution, and sales) as possible. As editor Marie said:

We have our own means of distribution, and it simply wouldn't be possible without it. If I had to pay 39% of an issue to an external distributor and still wait sixty days for them to send us our money, it would destroy us.

One active group newspaper represents a special case of self-sufficiency: owning the newsroom house, having their own printing press, and doing their own distribution:

When we had to pay for services it was a lot of money, and we were always a customer...matters were outside our control....But here the newspaper comes first....We found out that many of the other printing offices belonged to a chain, and many of the local newspapers were fooled. The chain promised them something, so they broke all the ties they had with the local printing office. The peripheral printing offices were brought to ruin and over time the chain changed its conditions and destroyed the newspapers. (editor Ota)

Neutral local newspapers are not similarly self-sufficient; nevertheless, these journalists consider self-distribution as crucial for production stability (editor Filip; reporter David; editor Dan; editor Dana). According to editor Karel: "We have about fifty points of sale to which we carry the papers ourselves, sometimes using buses." But these newspapers are only able to manage this process if the area of distribution (typically a district) is not too large and the number of distributed pieces is not too small, which is more often the case in the group of passive newspapers. Under these conditions, interviewees no longer consider self-distribution to be manageable (manager Anna; editor Cyril; manager Mirek; editor Ivo).

Passive organisations are only sporadically self-sufficient, which brings more problems than solutions. For example, they decided to keep their own distribution to save money, but they could not reasonably maintain it. Reporter Milan depicts a situation where he had a company car but was only allowed to drive a certain number of kilometres per month, which the owners calculated. He said: "However, they forgot to include my weekend trips to events. So, during distribution, on which I spent about twelve hours a week, I had to stop fifty meters from the shops to save on kilometres." Or they tried to find "non-orthodox" ways, shortcuts rather than solutions, to conduct their distribution, like getting bakers or butchers to deliver the paper with their goods (editor Barbora; manager Petr):

We delivered the newspapers in a hearse. We didn't have a big enough car, so we went to borrow one and a colleague appeared in front of the newsroom with a

funeral car and pulled out two coffins into the street. I was in a cold sweat...We always pulled out the coffin and took the packages round to the sellers. Everyone was horrified, but we sold all the copies [laughs]. (editor Max)

5.3. Actors' Cooperation

The strategy of self-sufficiency supports the individualization of an organisation and disrupts the cooperation of the actors (Deuze & Witschge, 2018). Nevertheless, there were certain opportunities where individual local newspapers were willing to cooperate. On the level of inter-media cooperation, the active local media built a network of local newspapers, which jointly solicit advertising (editor Ota; manager Josef). Eventually, this cooperation failed, which caused the local journalists to distrust this kind of cooperation.

Nevertheless, the communication partners from the neutral media referred to stronger relationships with other local media (Hatcher & Thayer, 2017), but all of them fizzled out over time. At first, they shared their production problems with others, but later the problems outweighed the cooperation. The relationships, which were based mostly on individuals, faded away (Anderson, 2013): "Our former publisher befriended a newspaper publisher in the neighbouring district" (reporter Tom); "we knew each other even before 1989. But everything has changed. Those people are no longer there" (editor Cyril); "we know about each other, of course, but I don't even know how they're doing now. We've been in touch a lot, but completely different people are running it now" (editor Dana); and "I used to be in contact with the nearest foreign newsroom, the editor-in-chief was a friend of mine" (editor Dan).

Another reason was the lack of time to stay in touch: "I met a man from a similar newsroom in another district. We communicated for a while and then it went completely dead. When the crisis came, everyone had different worries and stopped talking to one another" (reporter Radim); and "the cooperation is rather random, because I'm not looking for it. I'm overwhelmed with work" (manager Mirek).

One more reason for failing to cooperate was the feeling in neutral newsrooms that other local newspapers were competitors, if "only a little" (Hatcher & Thayer, 2017): "They are a bit of a competition for us...so there has always been such careful cooperation. We watch each other warily" (manager Anna); "when we had distribution problems, we called each other. But they didn't like us very much because we interfered with their newspapers" (manager Ema); and as editor Dan reinforced:

We were friends and then they surprised me. They came up with a proposal to add my newspaper to their chain. And I said, don't be angry, but I won't get involved. And they said: we'll destroy you...[laughs]. But they couldn't.

It can also be connected to cooperation on common production problems:

We had problems with the Czech post, which was increasing the cost of distribution. I talked to my lawyer, and he said call a meeting with them, ideally after you have spoken to someone who is in the same situation. We asked how a couple of other newspapers would deal with it...and they told us there was no way of solving it. (editor Cyril)

The communication partners from the passive organisations do not consider cooperation with other newspapers to be meaningful as they had a bad experience (editor Barbora; reporter Milan) they were afraid to lose control over their own publication: "Cooperation? No, I wouldn't be able to influence it" (editor Jan), or they never actively tried collaboration (manager Petr).

Other important actors on the local level, with whom the level of (non)cooperation is crucial to the stability of local media, are ancillary organisations involved in media production. This type of cooperation is a co-dependency because for local media the production partners are essential for survival, and local production firms often depend on customers from the local area. Either way, the background of the relationship emphasizes the fragility of the media production system in the locality, which further disturbs the stability of local media.

The breaking point for the cooperation is mostly when a printing office, a distribution firm, or a newsstand stops serving the local market. This forces the newspaper to respond by either taking over the production process, as the active local media did (editor Ota; editor Marie; reporter Marta) or risk dependence on national corporations or chains, which can disrupt their economic stability (Bowd, 2009).

Neutral local media, which do not have the capacity to take over production services from local partners, emphasize that local ancillary organisations are key and maintain close relationships with them, mainly with local printing houses, newsstands, and grocery stores in villages (editor Karel; editor Filip; manager Anna). They suffer like active organisations when these businesses decline (editor Dana; manager Ema). This cooperation is therefore sometimes "at any cost." As manager Mirek said:

We print in one of the last small newspaper printing houses in the country, but qualitatively it's a horror. I get offers from [a printing house which is part of a chain]. They do a beautiful job. But they can't swallow everything. They've already got most of it.

Or these relationships can be based on friendship rather than stable business strategies: "A local company of friends helps us with the distribution," said editor Dan.

The passive local newspapers struggle with the same obstacles regarding cooperation in distribution and sales.

But, in their more economically difficult situation, they have potentially worse consequences: “The newspaper was distributed by a company, but it was a catastrophe. I would not recommend it to anyone” (editor Max); “our problems were very much related to how the points of sale disappeared...there are only three newsagents in the town. The other copies went to petrol stations and grocery stores, which were served only by the [large distribution company]” (reporter Robert); and “it hurt us that the shops started to fall off, mainly in the villages” (editor Barbora).

The national, often monopolistic, infrastructural companies are considered by my interviewees as a threat to local media survival. Local newspapers are not, for them, respected business partners, yet they depend on them for two key components of newspaper production: distribution and sale. At the same time, local ancillary organisations can be understood as community organisations with a strong role in a community communication infrastructure (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

Czech post, the state postal monopoly, is the only available national company that sends the newspaper to subscribers. It is considered by all the interviewees, regardless of the type of medium, as an unpredictable trap: “We have no choice, because no one else does it” (manager Ema). The interviewees complain about various serious problems. Repeated price increases are costly: “They increased the price of distribution by 50%. It’s no joke for us, because that will cost me a quarter of a million more in a year!” (editor Cyril). At the same time, the service is poor (manager Anna; reporter Radim; editor Cyril; reporter Eva; editor Filip; editor Dan; editor Ivo). There were often disruptions caused by changing the issue or delivery day (manager Anna; reporter Emil; editor Ivo) or by postponing deadlines (manager Ema). This was “an obstacle” for active organisations. For neutral organisations, it was “a struggle.” For passive organisations, it was a matter of survival (Anderson, 2013). As manager Petr said: “It was the Czech post alone, no one else finished us. We were in the red just on the production only.” Also, editor Ota declared:

We do everything ourselves except subscriptions, which are unfortunately in the hands of the Czech post, a terrible partner. We have quite a few subscribers, about 1,500, which is a decent figure. And someone is always calling in that they haven’t received the paper. There are always some copies lost. This year, the price of subscriptions rose again, but the post couldn’t tell us how much it would be until the end of the year. Then they sent a contract in which the price wasn’t mentioned at all. Such a strange way to do business! But it’s a monopoly...We tried to find an alternative, but it doesn’t exist.

Similarly, all my communication partners point out that behind their drop in sales, there were also a declining number of selling points and the monopolization of

national sellers. On top of that, these could not be substituted by the local media themselves:

We started years ago with a significantly higher number of sold copies. Since then, 22 village stores have closed and no one in the village will stock it. (reporter Marta)

The largest press distributor is the company owned by the largest newspaper publishers, and they favour their own titles. It is simply becoming increasingly difficult for us to find a seller who will sell our newspapers. In the big stores, no one talks to us. (editor Ivo)

There is also the problem of distribution of a subscription delivery, as editor Marie, a representative of the *active* local medium, sums up: “Distribution through large national companies destroyed one of my newspapers. We couldn’t ensure that they met their contractual conditions, and they were late in giving us the money from our newspaper sales.”

For neutral newspapers, the national distributors are often their only chance to handle a large distribution area or a small number of copies. They become dependent on the conditions that the monopoly company can often dictate (manager Anna; editor Cyril; manager Mirek).

Nevertheless, not every cooperation is positive for local media. The neutral organisations sometimes set up close cooperation with a local political representative (Hájek et al., 2015). This often became problematic because it can be understood as a violation of journalistic norms (editor Karel; editor Filip). The interviewees speak about “better than ordinary relationships,” “financial support from municipalities” (editor Dana), and “contracts with the town hall” (editor Lucie). At the same time, the communication partners from the less economically stable neutral local media consider the municipal press a suitable collaborator (Waschková Císařová, 2015), which is in line with the relationship with local politicians: some earn extra money by publishing municipal press (editor Filip; editor Pavel) and others have created a synergy—“I have now established friendly relations with them, so they promote us and we promote them” (editor Dana).

In contrast, passive organisations, some of whom have a history of close relationships with local politicians, fought the municipal press as their strongest competitor and one of the obstacles to their production stability. For example, manager Petr sees the municipal press as “the last straw” that closed his newspaper: “All those town halls have their own press and publish with taxpayers’ money. We published an independent newspaper using my money.” Editor Barbora adds that the competition “is getting worse”; editor Jan adds: “The municipal press charges for advertising at a quarter of the price that we do, but you can’t do anything about it because if they don’t have the money, they ask the town for more.”

6. Conclusions

Having analysed the stories of the interviewees, the findings confirm that an organisation's self-sufficiency and activity are better indicators of local media performance than a typology based on an organisation's size or business model. There was a factor that complicated the fulfilment of my aim—the general coverage of interviewees from all these organisations on the periphery provided a vivid overall picture that did not allow for a more nuanced look. However, it was still possible to find common features and to divide the organisations into three types, which correspond to the active/passive approach towards the infrastructural changes of local media publishing and consider the production strategies—entrepreneurial initiative, production self-sufficiency, and cooperation.

The main feature of active organisations is the long-term and difficult-to-build equilibrium, which is based on maintaining relationships with relevant local actors and avoiding the influence of monopolistic actors. However, the equilibrium is not passively received, it is repeatedly recreated. Neutral organisations are trapped in a spiral that has developed from their passive attitude towards challenges and changes and their equilibrium is disturbed. There are two sub-groups: First, there are organisations that, from the outside, could be considered active. They seem to thrive, but they cannot adapt to the changing production process. Then there are the organisations that are changing slowly with the general trends in local newspapers and approaching those we consider passive. What this group of organisations illustrate is that, regardless of their periodicity or area of publication, size does not mean success. The passive organisations either show the way in which the local newspapers' organisations decline, or they represent organisations that were never meant to thrive. They either entered the industry with an inadequate set of operating rules, or they had the necessary prerequisites but fell victim to an inability to cope with an infrastructure change. For them, not only passivity but also a lack of self-reflection played a role.

These findings suggest that local journalists are aware of the structural causes of the news deserts, the changes in the local newspapers themselves, and the publishing industry in general. They understand the growing organisational and economic problems for local newspapers and often their demise. The local news in the Czech Republic is still traditionally carried by newspapers, which depend on the traditional business model. Therefore, their economic stability and survival are based on the (non)cooperation with either ancillary organisations, both locally and nationally, or other local newspapers. Newspapers are often cornered by the demands of these external actors. Their economic stability depends on their production self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, some matters, such as selling points or subscription delivery, cannot be resolved by the newspapers' organisations themselves.

The findings lead us back to the initial question, which did not ask about the usual consequences of the emergence of local news deserts, but rather the reasons for their emergence (Abernathy, 2018; Mathews, 2022). In terms of production strategies (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2018) in the Czech local newspapers, it is clear that the crumbling infrastructure (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006; Napoli et al., 2017) of local ancillary organisations, the status of the state postal monopoly, and the monopolisation of the selling points into national chains, are contributing to the emergence of local news deserts. Local newspapers can only solve such a situation to a certain extent and for a certain period of time, even the active newspapers run up against the limits of existing and surviving infrastructure.

It is, therefore, necessary to admit that there are local news deserts in the Czech Republic (cf. Abernathy, 2018; Gulyas, 2021; Napoli et al., 2018). However, Czech local newspapers still have different ways out of the stalemate of extinction: rather than passively waiting, start an active digital transition, which is still either in its infancy or rejected by local newspapers (Waschková Císařová, 2023); initiate cooperation to solve structural problems, e.g., strong competition of municipality press in the locality (Waschková Císařová, 2015); or contribute to the public discussion and, eventually, to systemic change, by elevating the importance of the survival of a local medium to the level of survival of a local grocery store, post office, or bank branch. Moreover, the difference is that the survival of local media is not just a question of the availability of local services, but above all the flourishing of local democracy (Darr et al., 2018; Hayes & Lawless, 2018).

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Österreichische Agentur für Internationale Mobilität und Kooperation in Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung and the Austrian Agency for International Cooperation in Education and Research (OeAD-GmbH) via the Aktion Österreich-Tschechien, AÖCZ-Habilitationsstipendium.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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