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To cite this article: Jelena Kleut, Sanja Kljajić & Stefani Šovanec (22 May 2025): As if They are not Covering This City: Audiences' Perception of Politicized Local News, Journalism Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2025.2509607](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2509607)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2509607>



Published online: 22 May 2025.



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As if They are not Covering This City: Audiences' Perception of Politicized Local News

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ABSTRACT

The decline of local media due to the intermingled effects of technological and economic forces has left many local communities in news deserts or reliant on hyperlocal news producers. Research about local news provision has put the concept of place high on the agenda of journalism studies, with growing calls for the de-romanticization of local media and de-Westernization of media scholarship. Heeding these calls and taking an audience-centred perspective, this paper provides insights into how local audiences fulfil their information needs in a politicized media landscape that has gone through post-communist media transformation. Based on eight focus groups in three Serbian municipalities, this paper examines three collective narratives articulated by citizens: (1) politicization of local media and (dis)trust; (2) the need for positive but objective news; and (3) a lack of citizens' voices in the news. Overall, these narratives show that the mere existence of local outlets does not guarantee that audience needs will be fulfilled, and that the politicized local media landscape leaves citizens creating different tactics for finding information about their communities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 May 2024
Accepted 18 May 2025

KEYWORDS

Local news; audiences; politicization; journalism; Serbian media; local media

Introduction

Various aspects, causes and consequences of the decline of local news in Western democracies have been examined in the last two decades. Declining advertising revenue – first due to global economic crises and later the proliferation of Web 2.0 – has brought about a transformation of local information landscapes. Some local outlets have ceased to exist, leaving behind “news deserts” (Stites 2011), while others have downsized their newsrooms, allowing journalists to prioritize their reporting to the detriment of coverage of local politics (Hayes and Lawless 2021). In the merger processes, some newsrooms have been left with just a few reporters covering vast communities (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018). The rise of hyperlocal news sites has in part filled this void and, in some countries, holds the promise of fulfilling the democratic and civic roles of local media (Barnett and Townend 2015; Firmstone 2016). Citizen journalism and networks of community news consumers-turned-producers that utilize social networking sites also play a role in making voices of local communities heard (Firmstone and Coleman 2014). More than 20 years into these changes, questions surrounding the transformation of local news

remain relevant, with two recent journal special issues inviting further debate (Örnebring, Kingsepp, and Möller 2020; Usher et al. 2023)

Audiences are thought to hold the key for the survival of local news. Local media are searching for innovations to cater to audience preferences as they transition to digital channels (Jenkins and Jerónimo 2021). Bottom-up approaches based on citizen journalism, crowdsourcing and crowdfunding have been explored as new business models (Hess and Waller 2017). Consequently, there is a growing interest in factors that influence the willingness of citizens to pay for local news (Goyanes 2015; Heiselberg and Hopmann 2024; Park, Fisher, and Lee 2022).

Most studies on local audiences are conducted within a wider context of the United States (Ali et al. 2020; Mathews 2022), Australia (Hess, Waller, and Lai 2023; Park, Fisher, and Lee 2022), UK (Fenton et al. 2010; Gulyas, O'Hara, and Eilenberg 2019; Harte and Matthews 2021) or the EU (Costera Meijer 2010; Heiselberg and Hopmann 2024). Relatively scarce research on post-communist countries shows that local media are "often owned by municipalities or concentrated and captured media conglomerates, so in practice, there is a lack of offering adequate plurality of contents and viewpoints" (European University Institute 2024, 200). From this perspective, the romanticized view of the audiences' close relationship with local media is criticized as a myth that does not account for specificities beyond the Western world (Waschková Císařová, Macek, and Macková 2018).

This paper builds upon the growing understanding of local news audiences by expanding the existing body of knowledge to the Eastern European, non-EU member, country of Serbia. With fast declining democracy scores (Freedom House 2024), the Serbian media landscape is characterized by the firm grip that the ruling party holds over the media. Local media are no exception and many of them are intertwined in clientelistic networks – owned by party affiliates and receiving state funds (Srećković et al. 2022). Conducted during a 2022 debate about legislative changes related to, often misused, state subsidies to local media, the research presented in this paper was funded by OSCE Mission in Serbia. It is based on focus groups that account for different local circumstances by including one municipality that does not award funds to local media and two known for their excessive spending. Full report was produced in Serbian, and distributed to stakeholders in the debate.

Although tied to the specifics of the national context, this paper contributes to the understanding of complexities of local information landscapes. First, by offering the audience view of the politicized local media, it responds to Usher's (2023) call not to look at traditional local media as "the golden standard". Second, the paper provides insights into the relatively limited study of political dimensions in local information landscapes (Wenzel 2020). As this paper shows, both perspectives are well placed for understanding audiences of politicized and captured local media.

The article begins with an overview of previous studies on local news audiences focusing on perceptions and expectations of local news, trust and politicization. In the next section, we paint a picture of the Serbian media context; the section on method explains the focus groups; finally, the section on results presents three collective narratives identified in the analysis: (1) politicization of local media and (dis)trust; (2) the need for positive but objective news; and (3) the lack of citizen voice in the news.

Local News Audiences

The role of news in local communities has been well-documented (Costera Meijer 2010; Fenton 2010; Poindexter, Heider, and McCombs 2006) and local journalism is seen as fulfilling important democratic and community functions (Barnett 2009). It is a resource for forging connections and coordinating actions among communities, as well as for public accountability on a local level (Waldman 2011). Local media has a role in bonding citizens, fostering the idea of community, and linking “everyday people to those in power” (Hess and Waller 2017, 114–115).

Following the “audience turn” in journalism studies, scholars have supplemented the views from newsrooms with the examination of audience needs, expectations and understanding of local news. In one of the early studies, Heider, McCombs, and Poindexter (2005) showed that the expectations of public journalism on the local level are different from traditional news: audiences mainly want journalists to perform the role of a good neighbour, rather than a watchdog. Subsequent studies, especially those conducted after the economic crises, confirm these early findings. With newsrooms shrinking and reporters leaving towns, communities are increasingly wary of the news produced by “outsiders” – journalists who do not have sufficient understanding of the area (Costera Meijer 2010; Fenton et al. 2010). The situation is further aggravated by “remote localness” or the local media production of news that is not local (Fenton et al. 2010; Pew Research Center 2019). This makes audiences appreciative of stories that demonstrate local presence and local knowledge (Hess, Waller, and Lai 2023; Wenzel, Ford, and Nechushtai 2020).

This “passion for ‘localness’” (Hess, Waller, and Lai 2023) is not only related to the quality of reporting but also to how the community creates its own identity. Or in other words, local media not only present the locality but produce it (Hess and Waller 2017; Usher 2019). For example, in a study that investigated audiences of a local TV broadcaster in Amsterdam, Costera Meijer (2010) identified seven functions that audiences expect local journalism to perform: supplying background information; fostering social integration; providing inspiration; ensuring representation; increasing local understanding; creating civic memory; and contributing to social cohesion. In other words, by consuming local news and its representations of diverse members, the community creates a sense of belonging (Costera Meijer 2022).

Research into audiences of local news further highlights that citizens value the voice they are given through local reporting. This includes voicing the citizens’ concerns to the local authorities, and the representation of a community in a society at large. As the voice of citizens, local media are often expected to offer solutions (Heider, McCombs, and Poindexter 2005) and perform the role of local advocate (Ali et al. 2020; Hess, Waller, and Lai 2023). Representation of community in wider societal communication networks is explored through the notion of “geo-social journalism”, showing, for example, how small newspapers are placing readers and locality in a global context (Hess and Waller 2014). Similarly, research focusing on how citizens experience life in a news desert demonstrates that, together with the lack of information and decreased awareness of events, community members fear diminishing pride in the county (Mathews 2022, 1262).

Online space is gaining relevance for citizens, either because legacy media are shifting to online editions (Jenkins and Nielsen 2018), or because hyperlocal providers and community groups are taking advantage of the possibilities offered by digital technology (Mathews 2022). Providing a portrait of local online news audiences, McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli (2017) noted a strong sense of individual responsibility that gives rise to a “self-reliant news consumers” who uses digital tools and interpersonal networks to obtain and filter information.

Trust, Place and Local Media

With declining general trust in news identified in many countries, local news is considered an exception. Research shows that across markets, local media are trusted by more than half of the surveyed populations: in the USA and France they are the most trusted news brands; while in Finland, Norway, and Germany local newspapers are second to public broadcasters (Schultz 2020, 50).

Trust in local journalism is connected to knowledge of the locality as a prerequisite for reporting on local matters. Usher (2019) provides a useful framework for understanding the complex relations between place, trust, knowledge, and authority. In journalistic work in general, knowledge of place creates cultural authority that is based on the power of journalists “to know places better than the rest of us” (104), for whom many places are beyond their reach. This creates “place trust”, that is “emplaced material, cognitive distance between journalists as professional place-knowers and news consumers” (Usher 2019, 104). First-hand accounts and other journalistic techniques enable bridging of this distance and create a place-based authority of journalism (Usher 2019). In the case of local media, this distance is lesser when compared to national news providers, so symbolic as well as physical proximity of journalists and the news they produce brings increased trust. And vice versa, when journalists are physically displaced from the communities, citizens tend to be more critical and less trusting of such reporting (Fenton et al. 2010).

Wenzel, Ford, and Nechushtai (2020) explored how audiences perceived trustworthiness of news during implementation of one of the initiatives in the USA that supported local media. Conceptualizing trust as connected to power, privilege, and place, the study showed that in the underprivileged communities under observation citizens were concerned about place-trust failing: “These concerns are connected with [...] accuracy and credibility, representation, and perceptions of the motives of news outlets” (Wenzel, Ford, and Nechushtai 2020, 301). In situation when journalists are parachuted to cover the communities, community members recognize inaccurate depictions, sourcing patterns that privilege certain groups and intentions to stereotypically present the community for external audiences.

In a similar study, that also followed the development of a grassroots initiative, Canella and Pramas (2023) demonstrated how local journalism cultivates place by covering location-specific issues. Everyday interactions with journalists, as the study showed, “foster trust and mutual understanding, and narrow the space between journalists, communities and public institutions” (21). Relating their findings to Ziff’s (1986) distinction between “cosmopolitan and provincial news”, the authors discuss the value of journalists as community members as opposed to the cosmopolitan press in which journalists need to address competing interests and memberships.

Local Media, Politics and Trust

Findings related to trust in local media are usually attributed to their position within a wider ecology of news. In USA and UK, the decline of local news has been mostly attributed to a mixture of economic and technological changes that led to hollowing out of the local newsrooms (Fenton et al. 2010; Hayes and Lawless 2021). Political dimensions of local media work have been given relatively little attention despite the fact that trust in news is related to citizens assessment of media partisanship and undue influence of external actors (Newman et al. 2022).

In the context of USA, research conducted by Wenzel (2020) showed that consumption and perceptions of national news follow the lines of political polarization, while consumption of local news and connectedness with local storytelling networks is based on prioritization of local issues, not on party preference. Although “local media often do not have the luxury of reporting on behalf of one political side while ignoring the other” (Schultz 2020, 50), the results of the Pew Research Center showed that trust in local media among the Democrat leaning voters remained consistent through time, while among the Republican leaning voters there is a drop in trust from 79% in 2016 to 66% in 2024 (Eddy 2024).

In Europe, the market position of local media is slightly better because of targeted subsidies that exist in most of the EU countries (Blagojev et al. 2023). However, these economic incentives pose risks to editorial independence, especially in the countries of Eastern Europe (Blagojev et al. 2023; European University Institute 2024). These risks are twofold – first, economic incentives make local media a lucrative business that easily falls into the hands of party affiliates, and second, subsidies are used as a tool in clientelistic relations between local media, and local and national politicians (Gulyas and Baines 2020).

In Russia, for example, the historical trajectory of local media is closely connected to centralization of the state and decrease in state funding to local media (Kiriya 2020). As a consequence, selective mechanisms of subsidies are put in place, and their aims are oriented “towards maintaining the power of the local political authorities” (174). In Poland and in Czechia, municipal press is funded by state budgets and for the most part serves as a mouthpiece of local governments (Męćfal 2016; Waschková Císařová 2023).

Focusing on audiences, Waschková Císařová, Macek, and Macková (2018) showed there is a lower interest in local news in Czechia when compared to USA and UK, calling for reconsidering of the romanticized image of local media. Responding to this call, our study aimed to explore audiences’ perception of local news with a specific evolutionary path and in a specific political context, similar to the other Eastern European countries in which news partisanship does not stem from ideological polarization but rather from politicization - political instrumentalization and capture of the local media.

Local News in the Politicized Media Landscape of Serbia

Local media have been one of the pillars of communism in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a country that dissolved after the civil wars during the 1990s. Founded by municipalities and funded from state budgets, local media performed various functions for local communities, among them a social-political function, i.e., acting as ideological proponents of the communist party. However, local media during Yugoslavia’s communist period cannot be viewed solely through their propaganda functions, because they

served its communities with information of local relevance and had important educational and integrative roles (Mihelj and Huxtable 2018).

The media landscape started to change after the fall of communism when private media were formed. During the 1990s, media businesses started to flourish, which eventually led to “chaos in the ether” (Veljanovski and Štavljanin 2017, 56) with almost no regulation of the private sector. State media of that time was controlled by the government at all levels, including the local. Following the democratic change in 2000, media transformation began, led by imitative logic in which privatization of all media was seen as a key measure to dismantle state and political influence. A bumpy road to media privatization proved controversial and lasted more than two decades.

Unwillingness of the government to divest from the media can be seen in the several prolongations of the privatization deadline, and the introduction of laws, in collision with media legislation, that made it possible for municipalities to own the media again (Tomić 2007). When a Strategy for Media Development was adopted in 2010, the key debate was around local media. On the one hand, the stalled privatization allowed for political influence over the media, contrary to the general direction of media transformation. On the other hand, in a small advertising market, private owners could not create sustainable business models (Krstić 2012).

The solution was found in a new policy instrument called “Project based co-financing of the content in public interest”. It was introduced in 2014 as a subsidy to support content diversity, through a public call, issued on local and national levels. The idea that the subsidy was intended for specific types of content was often misunderstood and the money was used to sustain daily operations of local media. Lacking the desired transparency and fairness, the instrument soon became a channel for awarding funds to selected media (Srećković et al. 2022).

The situation in general worsened with the growing strength of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP). Forming the government in 2012, SPP at first continued reform of the media sector, but, already in its second mandate, it started to limit media freedoms following the toolkit of similar illiberal regimes (Csaky 2020). In the context of local media, this meant that party affiliates took an active part in the privatization process – one such example is the network of 14 local media owned by a businessman close to SPP (Srećković et al. 2022). Similarly, subsidies were further instrumentalized to support the clientelistic networks of both local and national media. Most of the privatized local media lost their internal pluralism and became the megaphones of the ruling party (Veljanovski 2017; Krstić 2022).

Relatively scarce data on Serbian audiences shows that local media are an important part of news consumption, with the majority of surveyed citizens using some source of local news, prevalently from local media (Milivojević, Ninković Slavnić, and Bajčeta 2020). Trust is generally low, with only 21% of Serbian citizens trusting most of the media most of the time, a finding that is connected to the perception that the media is under political and economic pressure (Kleut et al. 2022). Within these broader contextual insights, our study aims to supplement knowledge about audiences by responding to the following research questions:

RQ1: How do citizens perceive the existing local media and local news in Serbia?

RQ2: What are citizens’ expectations of local news in Serbia?

Method and Cases

This study relies on focus group interviews as a method to elicit the collective understanding of news in general and local in news specifically (Fenton et al. 2010; McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli 2017). Focus groups are especially well-suited for eliciting data on perceptions and self-reported practices related to local news due to the community role of local news. Allowing for “simulation of everyday conversation” and “everyday process of generating social representations” (Lunt and Livingstone 1996, 85), focus groups provide rich data on how audiences frame and perceive the topic of common interest. In comparison to other methods oriented towards quantification, including surveys and audience metrics based on data tracking, focus group research empowers respondents by giving them the floor to articulate arguments in their own words, and brings more of the community context necessary for understanding the data. The value of focus groups lies in the relatively open structure that allows for the exchange of views among participants (Kitzinger 1995). In such an exchange, negotiation of meanings occurs, with agreements and disagreements forming an inherent part of the conversations.

The selection of three municipalities was guided by reports on local media landscapes and the distribution of state subsidies through project-based co-financing, also considering geographical distribution. Focus groups were conducted in Novi Pazar in the southwest of Serbia, Lučani in central Serbia, and Pančevo in the northern province of Vojvodina. The municipality of Lučani has never opened a call for subsidies, while Novi Pazar and Pančevo are known for ample funding provisions (Srećković et al. 2022).

Novi Pazar, a city of 108,000 residents, has a majority Bosniak population and is marked by ethnic, religious and political divisions. These divisions are reflected in the media landscape: according to the media registry, there are 20 local and regional media outlets that provide daily information. One of them is once-state-owned RTV Novi Pazar, which in 2020 received the highest amount of state subsidies compared to all local media in the country (Srećković et al. 2022). Beyond the registry, the number of media outlets in Novi Pazar is higher due to numerous online portals with unknown ownership and editorial structures. Located a few dozen kilometres from the Serbian capital of Belgrade, Pančevo is home to 115,910 people. After the process of media privatization, the media landscape of Pančevo changed to the detriment of local media outlets. One of the oldest newspapers in the Balkans, *Pančevac*, was privatized and experienced a significant decline in circulation. Once owned by the municipality, RTV Pančevo has also undergone privatization and is now owned by a businessman close to the ruling party. Radio Pančevo, which used to offer programmes in several languages, is now privatized and mainly broadcasts entertainment content. Local information dissemination has shifted to the online sphere. Lučani is a small industrial municipality with 17,000 inhabitants, built around the military factory during the socialist era. Now privatized Radio D is the only local media outlet.

Prior to setting up focus groups the authors organized on site conversations with local media experts, journalists, and non-profit representatives, in their offices and local cafes. Further, a month prior to focus groups we followed the reporting of local media. Observations and notes from both types of sources served to provide orientation in the local news landscape, to identify topics that are relevant to citizens, and to familiarize ourselves

with the local vocabulary. During the focus groups this allowed us to take the role of an interested stranger, someone who comes from outside of the community but has a demonstrable interest in local circumstances.

In total, we conducted eight focus groups with 46 participants during October and November 2022. Four focus groups were conducted in Novi Pazar and two in both Pančevo and Lučani. The participants were selected using a snowball technique, starting with the community residents we met while preparing for the group interviews who recruited first participants. Only in Novi Pazar did we control for one demographic factor, age, because this is the youngest municipality in Serbia with an average age of 35.5. We held two focus groups with participants 18–35 and two with participants over 35. Across all eight group interviews, there were 18 men and 28 women participants. The majority of participants had a secondary education (28); less than a third had higher education (15); and three had only finished elementary education. The interviews conducted in Lučani had four participants per group, and in Pančevo and Novi Pazar they consisted of six or seven participants. Interviewees signed written agreements for participation, guaranteeing their confidentiality, and each received a gift coupon for 10 euro.¹

The focus group interviews were conducted in Serbian by the authors; in each one of us played the role of moderator and the other made notes. Conversations were led based on a semi-structured and open-ended interview guide that included questions pertaining to sources of local news and perceptions of local media. Since the interviews had a goal to inform the debate about new policy on state subsidies, participants were also asked how they would spend money on media if it was up to them to decide. It was this hypothetical exercise that revealed much of the expectations that citizens had of local news.

The transcripts of focus groups were analysed by the authors through an iterative process of thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). We used this as an essentialist method “which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 81). After in-depth familiarization with the transcripts, we developed an initial code set. After the first round of hand coding, we refined parts of the code and applied it back to our material. Coded excerpts were re-read and analysed using theory and the literature review as a wider framework. From these we deduced conceptual themes and compared them across the focus group transcripts.

Results

We organize our findings around three collective narratives that recurred in the focus groups: (1) politicization of local media and (dis)trust; (2) the need for positive but objective news; and (3) the lack of citizen voice in the news. Relevant for understanding perceptions of news in all three communities, the narratives sometimes have different articulations. In general, the smallest of the three communities – also the one least funded by municipal money – holds the most positive perception of its news environment. The two larger towns are much more concerned about the news they receive.

Politicization of Local Media and (dis)Trust

The first recurring theme in the focus group conversations relates to the influence of politics on local media. Politicization permeates conversations about news sources that

participants use, or avoid; it surfaces in discussions about the local media landscape, topics and approaches that are missing; and more than anything it ushers in the issue of trust. When participants explain local news sources, they do so through the issues of media ownership and media content – repetition of certain topics and persons, and avoidance of some others. This recognition of political bias for many respondents serves as a criterion for selecting news sources. Across the focus groups participants agreed on being able to recognize the capture of local media. For example, in one conversation in Novi Pazar, where ample subsidies are awarded, participants finished each other sentences when explaining the affiliations of local media:

i3 (NP4): Yes, they have colour, political colour. If it is the Regional TV that is definitely SDP [ruling party in Novi Pazar], their politics.

i4 (NP4): I can recognize which channel is on from the other room ...

i3 (NP4): If it is Mufti²'s Sandžak TV, it is all about him [Mufti], no ...

i1 (NP4): Same thing with the portal, all the portals are ...

i2 (NP4): Coloured.

i1 (NP4): Also, their names, all are some wordplays, the *Voice of Novi Pazar*, or the *Voice of Pazar*. I tried not to bother with that, but I know who is behind it when I see the text and its content.

Similarly, in Pančevo our participants nostalgically discussed how their local media – that was once a beacon of Serbian press – has changed, being watched or read only occasionally. They purchase the local newspaper, *Pančevac*, only to make clippings when family members are featured, or they tune to the local TV when their children are part of a news story. Otherwise, they highlight that the controlled information cannot be trusted:

i1 (PA1): Everything is in the past tense. Something that was, doesn't exist anymore, and nothing new is created, that is worth something, that we believe in it. Instead, well, we watch, we browse. And it stays with us for five minutes, it doesn't last. Because I don't believe it, because we don't trust anyone anymore, it's terrible. We don't trust anyone anymore. I'm talking about myself, maybe not everyone thinks that way.

i7 (PA1): But I don't understand, for example, one media has journalists, and makes information and shares it with everyone, and look, five TVs read the same sequence of information like this one, like that one. So, they only take information from each other, and they have 150 journalists.

i3 (PA1): They supposedly have 150 journalists. Those are mostly people who are fictitiously employed just to receive salary, but it all comes down to politics, to controlling information. It's the same at the state and local level.

As the participants note, they do not trust local media even when they publish service information, because they are "bribed," "biased," "unobjective," and the news they find in them is "embellished or fabricated," "filtered," and often delayed because they "wait for approval" from the centres of power. One of the participants comments on mediated representations: "literally, as if they are not covering this city." The situation in Novi Pazar was further aggravated during the Covid-19 pandemic. As explained by the interview participants, during the second wave of the coronavirus in 2020, just after the parliamentary

elections, the community was hit badly and the local hospital struggled to cope with the number of people in need of care. Local media did not report this, but rather gave the floor to the prime minister, who visited Novi Pazar, to explain that the situation in their city was under control. It was the time when, as one of the students in the focus group said, “not only the citizens knew they were being lied to, but the ones who lied knew that the citizens knew that they were lying.”

In such a situation, citizens resort to different tactics. Among the younger generations, equipped with sufficient technological skills, social media are the key source for learning what is happening in the community. They follow the accounts of cultural clubs, sports associations, movie theatres, and they inform each other. Some social news accidentally surfaces in their feeds, but most avoid everything that is political. At the same time, they share the inadequacy of social media as a source of news – they miss interesting events, scholarship opportunities and similar, and, as other research has shown (McCollough, Crowell, and Napoli 2017), they are burdened by self-reliance to find information.

A similar burden is felt among those who use multiple sources of different political leanings to establish the truth. A teacher in one of the focus groups “forces herself” to watch “upside down news,” trying to “fit everything together by reading between the lines.” An elderly housewife claimed that even for traffic accidents she waits for another TV station to publish the news, adding: “When they said that the Mufti had died, half of a day had gone by and I was still not trusting it. I waited for five of them to say it, so that I could trust them.”

Some community members prioritized other people and word of mouth as the most credible and trustworthy sources. Information from “nanny Mara,” as one participant in Lučani metaphorically described the most knowledgeable member of the community, and intel gathered “on the streets” or “by sitting in cafes” prevails when media fail to undertake their watchdog role. When probed about the credibility of information from the streets, focus group participants agreed that it is as credible as the news; one of the respondents further explained: “Media polish that information a little. The street adds a little. But the essence is there.”

One tactic, found in Lučani municipality, where no subsidies are awarded to media, is where journalists and citizens counter politicization together. As we learned from residents, in a deliberate decision to minimize political pressure, the only legacy local outlet, Radio D, has decided to avoid political topics, and to give no room for party representatives in its programmes. But not publishing the news does not mean that the small newsroom of two people does not have information or resources to find it. A majority of respondents in Lučani told us that they would call an editor: “if there is a power cut or water stops or anything, you call him to see what is happening. Not every house has his number, but you can easily find him.” Otherwise, they work nearby from the offices of the radio, so they can learn what they need there. Although not published, this information is then circulated further within the community. The centrality of local radio is not hindered by a new online outlet, which one respondent claimed is “part of the [ruling Serbian] Progressive Party chain of news portals that they have in every city.” The joint tactics developed by journalists and citizens created an atmosphere of trust, much different to the one found in the other two municipalities.

The Need for Positive but Objective News

In the local information landscapes deemed polluted by politics, positive news is in high demand. For some of our participants, “good news” is what they like to follow, for others it is what they lack in the current offer of news. Also, descriptions of what constitutes “good,” “positive” or “nice news” differ – including news stories related to community identity, inspiring local stories or stories that offer solutions. The stories that create a sense of belonging (Costera Meijer 2010; 2022) are usually explained through the desire to see more interviews “from the streets,” especially if the media find “a fellow citizen who will tell it in his own way.” Other respondents referenced stories of struggle and success in overcoming hardship, when people who they had known since they were children made it to the news. These are also relevant when they reach the agenda of national media and bring pride to the community. For some focus group participants, there is a lack of stories that connect past and present of their communities:

i4 (PA1): Either something that was before, something connected to now. How did this street look, how does it look now, so some comparative things, which are both educational and give us a sense of something existing in some time and space ... Something that changes, and it's not necessarily some immediate service information, that's what I miss.

Positive news is also connected to everyday problems, and the participants would like to see news about local entrepreneurs whose businesses are thriving. They think that these stories should not only be a promotion of business success but should inspire, educate and “open the space for networking.” In discussing such news, residents of Pančevo make parallels with the nearby Serbian capital Belgrade where there is ample support for business people, and they believe that showcasing of solutions through media might serve the same purpose.

The conversations about good news did not come without disagreements. While for many positive news is needed to bind a community, for others it represents a divergence from more serious topics. For example, in Lučani, after other participants said they preferred “nice news,” a female pensioner opposed the prevailing view by saying that she would like to know how other poor people like her manage to survive and why they were silent. She concluded: “I like to hear nice news, I would like everything to be nice, but here in Lučani nothing is nice for me.”

Similarly, in Pančevo, where state subsidies are used to fund media affiliated to the government, citizens first concluded that more positive reporting could increase interest in news, but voiced concerns that such news might be embellished. For them, as in some other conversations, good news turns to be the “real news” – news that is objective:

i6 (PA1): Again, not just service information, but actually some news that could be important for someone's life, some interviews, some positive things. It doesn't always have to be a chronicle of events, but something inspiring and beautiful. So, when we look at that, I'm not surprised at all that people are uninterested [in the news], and I agree that we're not informed. (...)

i1 (PA1): Exactly, if there were more of those positive news stories, people would be more inclined to read, they would want to be informed more.

i6 (PA1): About problems that call for solutions, not just “this is bad.”

i7 (PA1): That's it ...

i5 (PA1): But there is good news [irony]. I mean, there are portals that only convey "wonderful news", like here, we [the government] successfully opened this and that. There is this good news, but the problem is that people have lost trust in that, and then they don't read or only read this good news.

i7 (PA1): Not embellished, but real news.

i5 (PA1): So, it's not a matter of whether they are good or bad, but how objective they are, whether they really provide the information I need or tell fairy tales or scare me with nonsense.

Irony found in this excerpt reveals a concern that positive news easily turns into the news that promotes government success, which echoes the debate about the state subsidies being misused to support the media affiliated with the government and the ruling party.

Lack of Citizen Voice in the News

Many of the participants use social media not only to access news, but also to disseminate information, be it on their folk ensemble performances, youth NGO events, humanitarian actions or just what is happening around them. However, there is still a need to hear the voices of regular people in the media. Or as one respondent puts it, there is a lack of "spaces for public debate where different people, with different opinions, have the opportunity to share." There is a prevailing opinion that through commenting on social media "the people are venting their frustrations into the void" and so many of our respondents would like to see themselves and their fellow citizens directly communicating their grievances and concerns through traditional channels:

i1 (NP1): If I had the money, first I would create a network where citizens can communicate directly with the local government. They could submit their suggestions regarding the priorities for solving communal, health, and educational issues. These suggestions would later be considered by both the local government and all citizens. Once decisions are made, the local government would provide feedback, informing citizens about what has been done and what has been requested.

i3 (NP1): What I would do is exactly that. I agree with all of you that people actually need a television where they can be honest, where they can openly say whatever they think. It should literally be like a landline telephone, where people have the chance to call in all day and be involved, just talking about what bothers them. Sometimes, it's easier for people to just say it, regardless of whether they have help or not from another side, just to vent, and let them be limited to five minutes.

For some participants these initiatives serve the purpose of an accountability mechanism. In Pančevo, a younger man envisaged an outlet where citizens could post what needs to be done in a municipality, "fix a bench here, or a traffic sign there, from smallest to the biggest issues." Once the posts are made, he explained, there should be an accounting of what is done and what is pending. In another focus group in Pančevo, a middle-aged female activist suggested what she labelled as a Monty Python style of programme, with an office that accepts citizens' complaints being live streamed on television. In Novi Pazar, the soon to be retired president of a women's group went a step further, envisaging a protection mechanism that would allow her to voice concerns:

i1 (NP3): I would have that TV station, nicely fenced off with some electric currents so that nobody could approach me, and I could report from inside and tell the truth to all my fellow citizens and beyond, so that everyone knows who, what, how, where, and why.

All these examples, usually given when participants were asked about what type of media content they would subsidize, reveal dissatisfaction with how citizens' problems are dealt with both by the municipality and by the media. At the same time, these proposals point to the lack of trustworthy and "honest" local reporting because the proposals circumvent the local media as advocates of community (Hess, Waller, and Lai 2023) and place the citizens themselves in the advocacy roles.

Discussion

This study started from the research questions commonly found in scholarship on audience of the local media, by asking how citizens perceive existing local media and local news and what their expectations of local news are. As the results show, local media have not escaped the state capture and are as politicized as their national counterparts. Local residents are well aware of this politicization and nostalgically look back on the time when local media were a source of community pride. Overall, the citizens' perception of local media and the content they produce is rather negative – they recognize the influence of state and local politicians on the news, and they are very concerned about its trustworthiness. While some respondents are looking for positive local news stories, some are wary that they are also used for the purposes of promotion of the government. Ordinary citizens and their problems are seen as absent from the local media reporting.

Despite many commonalities, the three communities in a small and centralized country still differ in their perceptions of local news. In the two larger municipalities, with relatively high municipal funding of local media, the focus group participants were more vocal about issues of trust, politicization, and the lack of citizen voice in the news. In a smaller municipality, we found a peculiar case of "depolicitization" of local media that seemed to work due to the more tightly woven interpersonal networks for news sharing. Just one phone call away from local journalists, citizens of Lučani are more content with their news provision than the citizens of Novi Pazar and Pančevo.

Placed in a global perspective, conversations revealed that the local media are far from the "golden standard" (Usher 2023) because the ample offer of private media does not satisfy audience needs, specifically the need for trustworthy news. Compared to other countries, such as USA, in which economic and technological challenges have left communities without media and journalists – in effect diminishing place trust (Canella and Pramas 2023; Usher 2019), in Serbia local media abundance shows that trust cannot be gained if media are oriented more towards politicians and less towards the communities they serve. In the Global West, absence of local journalism is physical, with newsrooms displaced and journalists working from remote locations, mostly online, and symbolic as the communities do not receive local information, nor feel represented in them. In the case of Serbia, there is no physical loss of place, but there is a symbolic absence resulting from politicization of local media. Privileged access is given to state and party sources, while local residents remain unheard and their need for debate unfulfilled.

In such a captured and politicized media landscape, also found in other countries of Eastern Europe (European University Institute 2024; Waschková Čiřařov, Macek, and

Macková 2018), media fail to fulfil their watchdog role and cease to provide a voice to communities. This drives citizens to develop different tactics in news consumption – attempting to navigate social media news, reading between the lines or directly contacting a local journalist.

These findings should also be considered in the context of state support of local media, which is seen as a model for securing local news in some countries. Especially when Western European models are implemented in EU-candidate countries with insufficient media autonomy, state support usually comes with a price and instead of fostering local democracy, it diminishes it. Hess, Waller and Lai's (2023) findings that audiences favour "the establishment of an independent watchdog to ensure papers adequately serve their communities' informational needs" (22) might point to a direction in which policies should be developed. Further, nation-wide policy instruments should account for differences within communities, recognizing demographic, ethnic, religious, and other characteristics. Pure accumulation of media, without sufficient diversity to accommodate these characteristics, does not seem to be a reasonable alternative to news deserts.

Similar calls for recognition of local diversity can be directed at the scholarship and points to the limitations of this study. Chosen with the specific internal logic in mind, the three communities and a modest number of focus groups offer only a partial look into the local media landscape in Serbia. Further, a more representative sample of respondents, that could control for party preferences, would bring more nuances in understanding the perceptions of politicization. Finally, we should recognize that audience perceptions and preferences do not necessarily match audience behaviours (Örnebring and Rowe 2022), so the readiness to be heard in the media, or the need for positive news, might not work as actionable suggestions for local newsrooms.

Notes

1. Prior approval of the institutional ethics committee was not obtained since the individual research conducted for external agencies does not fall within the mandate of the committee. The researchers followed the necessary procedures related to human participants in non-invasive studies. Written consent was obtained from all participants, guaranteeing anonymity and the protection of personal data. All documentation and further explanation can be provided upon request.
2. Mufti refers to Muamer Zukorlic, who served as the president and chief Mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia, but also was a founder of the Justice and Reconciliation Party and MP in the National Assembly of Serbia.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

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