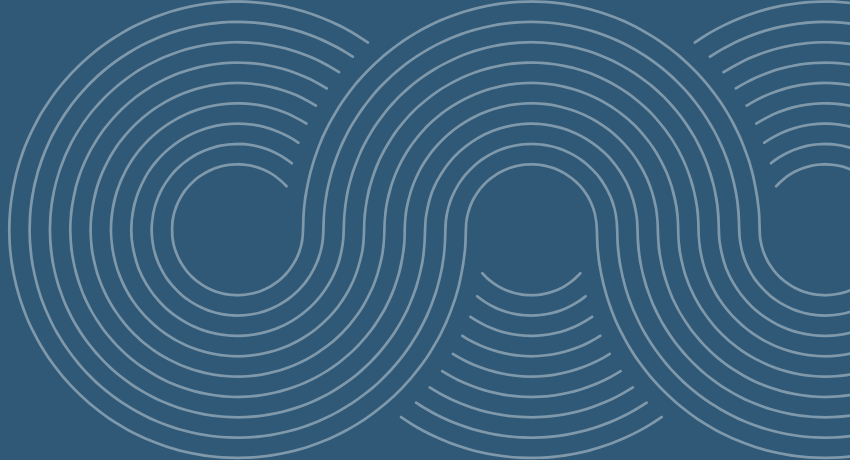


Sustainable journalism, from local to global:

Good practices in Europe





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Introduction & Background

Democratic societies need independent media and strong journalism, which implies pluralism and a variety of information, from international level to local level. Media conglomerates and social media, combined with a non-stop technological connectivity, provide live news about what is happening at the other end of the world, and the public appreciates this global outreach. But the public also needs to be informed about what happens locally. For this reason, local media play a crucial role in democracy. They provide information to citizens, and they hold decision-makers, authorities and major economic actors accountable to the community. Local journalism is not only about reporting, but it is also about connecting, literally part of the society, where the “global village” meets with the actual local village.

Independent local journalism has a positive impact on democracy because information and accountability create a direct link with the interest of voters at elections and the many decisions affecting daily life. Research in Europe showed that “local news media coverage has a positive effect on voter turnout, but only if the news media provide politically relevant information to the voters and only at local elections”. This fact is combined with the reality whereby local reports are necessary to be quoted or echoed by national media. On the other hand, their absence means that certain information of public interest may simply not be brought to the attention that they deserve. Local journalism plays a vital role in enabling democratic participation and in debunking disinformation at local level. By informing citizens about local government decisions, elections, and public policy, local journalism allows individuals to engage in the democratic process, make informed decisions, and participate in local governance. In other words: the existence of quality local journalism is an essential part of a democratic society and the absence of it can be devastating.

This report examines sustainable business models, by highlighting a few examples and good practices of local and cross-border investigative journalism. It builds on a previous report on “Sustainable innovative journalism and new business models” issued in 2021. It is based on desk research, on the discussions and conclusions of the EFJ seminar on “Sustainable journalism for local communities” that took place in Zagreb on 4-5 December 2023, as well as on interviews carried out online or by e-mail in December 2023 and January 2024 with journalist grantees who receive funding from the European Local Cross-border Investigative Journalism project. A final section includes recommendations for local and European policymakers, media managers and professional representative organisations of journalists.

1. Why local journalism matters

Local investigative media are an important way for citizens to be informed about their daily lives. In times of disinformation and propaganda, especially on social media, strong and independent local media can also counter these phenomena.

The public has been used to the fact that their local authorities set up their own information portal, website, social media accounts, newsletters, and sometimes even their own newspapers or television channels. This has been increasingly the case since the Covid-19 pandemic, when updates on health and safety concerns were directly communicated through official channels. In addition to social media, local media thus have to compete increasingly with communication strategies of local public authorities, which communicate directly with citizens thanks to digital technologies and social media.

It is of course easy for authorities to disseminate information as they wish, but they are in no way to be considered as media themselves, since they follow a logic of public relations and political communication. This is why some countries in Europe adopted codes of conduct for publicity of local authorities which require them -among other things - to be “objective”.

As opposed to social media, professional local media are essential to uphold ethical standards. Local media adhere to ethical standards and guidelines, ensuring the accuracy, fairness, and integrity of their reporting. This commitment to journalistic ethics contributes to public trust in the media and promotes responsible journalism practices.

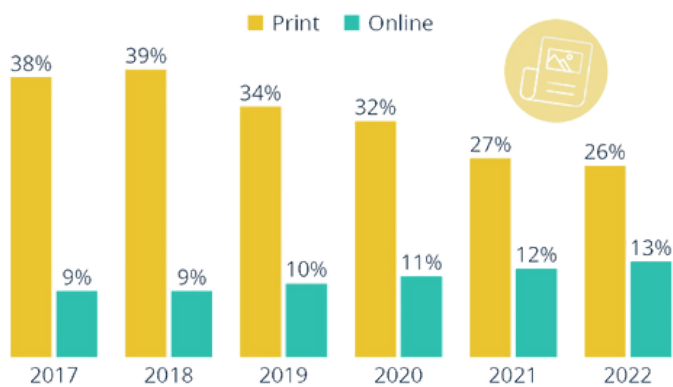
News and reports by local media can also be echoed at a broader level, either national or international, for stories of public interest that would otherwise remain under the radar. Local media are a unique tool of political counter-power, making officials and politicians accountable for their decisions and for the policies they implement.

Citizens are also interested in local media simply because they want to know and they have the right to know. This is only made possible with professional journalists understanding the community where they work and making events, policies or trends relevant for the public. This is also why the phenomenon of “media desert” (see below), is one of the main issues for democracy and for the fundamental right of access to information. Without local media, a city or a region lacks a platform for sharing local events, celebrations and common memory, which are all needed, in addition to information, to strengthen the common values among citizens.

Local media are also particularly important during emergency situations: local journalists play a critical role in disseminating emergency information and updates during natural disasters, public health crises, and other emergencies. Their reporting can help keep the public safe and informed during challenging times. Local media are at the source of public service journalism, their reporting can raise awareness about pressing local issues and drive positive change for their local citizens.

Wie relevant ist Lokaljournalismus in Deutschland?

Anteil der Befragten, die regionale/lokale Nachrichtenangebote mindestens wöchentlich nutzen



Basis: 2.000+ Befragte (ab 18 Jahren) in Deutschland; Jan/Febr des jwlg. Jahres
Quelle: YouGov | Reuters Institute Digital News Report

How relevant is local journalism in Germany ?

Source : statista.com

Surveys in Europe show that local journalism, (for example in Germany shown in the graph on the left), is still relevant for over a quarter of the population in print. This is also slightly increasing over the years for online media. However, according to [a recent report by the European University Institute \(EUI\)](#), local journalists often face tougher conditions than national ones, in terms of “job insecurity, precarious contracts, work pressures, labour laws, declining wages, and issues with pension schemes”. For example, local journalists’ jobs are more likely not to be replaced, or to be replaced with precarious contracts.

Local journalists also “*have closer ties with local politicians, where professional and personal lives are often entangled*” and are struggling to be sustainable in the digital era. Paradoxically, local media have an economic impact themselves: local journalism contributes to the economic vitality of the region where they operate by covering local businesses, developments, and economic trends. This information is valuable for citizens, businesses, and policymakers in making informed decisions that can impact the local economy.

Local journalism is also an important part of “solution journalism” or constructive journalism: instead of reporting on “what’s gone wrong”, it is an approach to reporting that also focuses on showing potential solutions and responses to problems, by highlighting initiatives and innovations referring to the social, environmental, and political environment. The aim is not only to inform, but also to inspire the public by showing that improvement is possible and that actions can be taken to address important issues. Local media are particularly well placed to achieve this, because they are in contact with realities, and they have the knowledge of the impact of general policies on precise communities or places.

On climate change, for example, rather than solely reporting on the negative impact, a solution journalism would explore innovative or community-led projects that are contributing to sustainable resource management. The same could apply to migration and the existence of grassroots initiatives aimed at proposing housing and support to migrants. Overall, it aims to inform the public in a nuanced way about complex problems and to seek local engagement and action.

To sum up the role of local media, and based on research and findings by scholars, local journalism:

- ✦ Hold local power accountable
- ✦ Uncover new issues, report on underreported stories and serve as inspiration
- ✦ Uphold ethical standards and confront disinformation
- ✦ Have an economic impact through their activity
- ✦ Are the first level of journalism as a public good
- ✦ Contribute to civic engagement
- ✦ Connect citizens of the territory and contribute to social integration
- ✦ Allow democratic participation
- ✦ Provide diverse perspectives
- ✦ Engage audiences at local level with local concerns and themes
- ✦ Are needed for emergency situations

Overall, local journalism serves as a cornerstone of informed, democratic societies, providing essential information, help individuals to actively participate in shaping the future of the city or the region where they live.

2. Sustainable local journalism: It's the economy! (as always)

When looking at the financial situation of local media in Europe, the reality is quite sobering. Local media are more vulnerable to economic cycles and downturns than big media conglomerates: in many countries in Europe, local and regional media were among the most affected by Covid-19 pandemic. When looking at financing, local media struggle between different strategies, such as membership fees, donations, grants, public support, subscriptions, paywalls, copyright revenues and even the involvement of members of the local community in the life of the media.

Local media often suffer from their lack of “critical mass” to be able to develop monetisation strategies because of limited audiences who are not always willing or able to pay for content. The most recent challenge is the development of “programmatically advertising” and the use of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI): only big, sustainable, and economically efficient media have the “luxury” to use their traffic and to adapt to this AI ecosystem. Without the ability to rely on these larger “operational units” to manage targeted or native advertising, which also include audience analytics, many local media face financial difficulties, which in turn reinforce the concentration of media ownership, or create information deserts in regions where no media are operating anymore.

Over the past decade, local media have declined to a point where these “news deserts” are now widespread. It is the case in the US, where more than half the counties have no access or very limited access to local news, but Europe is also increasingly affected.

Media ownership concentration, digitalisation and changes in the public’s access to information through social media are the main reason for this situation. Concretely, many media outlets closed down, were downsized or saw their newsrooms merged with one another. The spread of “desk journalism” disconnected journalists from their local sources of information and sometimes from their local knowledge at all.

Research shows that the level of public subsidies varies in terms of nature and amount in Europe. For example, in terms of state subsidies, 20 out of 32 countries included in the above-mentioned report by the EUI recorded having state subsidies for local media in 2021, the others did not.

Some local media even face the paradox of big national media trying to develop their local activities as competitors, such as the BBC’s plans to expand its online local news coverage in 2022. Local media also must compete with non-journalistic forms of information sources, such as social media (Meta) groups, whereby individuals consider themselves as local news sources able to report and comment on public interest. Although this is a positive development for providing diverse perspectives and firsthand experiences, these sources of information lack professional standards, ethics and critical media literacy skills to discern between facts and opinion, and between reliable news and mis/dis-information.

AI is used in local journalism, such as at Studio 47, the last private local television station in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). According to its Editor-in-chief, “AI could be a kind of last resort and last straw” for small local broadcasters which are currently “desperately looking for staff and cannot find it”. Many believe that AI tools can help local media to survive by publishing important and useful journalism.

When listing the various sources of financing of local media, the following breakdown can be established:

SOURCE OF REVENUES	CATEGORIES OF TOOLS
Commercial (market)	Targeted digital advertising
	Native advertising
	Sponsored content
	Events, lectures, trainings, exhibitions, etc
User-generated (paid access or service)	Paywalls
	Subscriptions
	Pay-per-view
Grants (and other non-public support)	Donations, philanthropic support
	Membership (especially for non-profit media established as NGOs)
	Crowdfunding (general support, not linked to access to specific content)
Public support	Direct (for example state/public media funds)
	Indirect (for example tax exemptions, support to print or distribution, etc)
Intellectual property revenues (copyright)	Redistribution (for example after agreement with platforms)
Other types of aid	International development funds (foreign state support, international organisations' projects or support)
	International philanthropic support

3. Cross-border journalism: On the rise, but still limited

Examples of successful local journalism show that complementary initiatives of local and/or investigative journalism are taking place all across Europe, in very different contexts and situations. Cross-border journalism is a way of increasing the visibility of the investigations and to share information with similar -or bigger- media elsewhere. It is still relatively limited to few media and journalists, but it has increased drastically in the past years, mostly thanks to the use of digital technologies, social media, data journalism and the access to government information of public interest. The public is now well aware of spectacular and iconic investigations, from the “Panama papers” in 2016 to the recent “Cyprus confidential” in 2023.

At global level, cross-border journalism is carried out by networks of journalists and media such as the [International Consortium of Investigative Journalists](#), the [Organised Crime and Corruption Project](#) or the [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network](#). In a global economy and in the context of increasingly complex topics such as climate change, migration crises, organised crime and global pandemics, cooperation between journalists between several countries is the only way to bring these issues to the public. Global cooperation between journalists has also made [more efficient tools of access to information](#).

Cross-border journalism is a way to revive local journalism. There are many interesting and successful examples that local journalists and media can learn from. Among recent collaborations, journalists have been investigating on various topics such as:

[Island depopulation in the UK and Ireland](#), with common issues like transport links, housing, employment, and higher education shortages.

[The transformation of old industrial sites into new neighbourhoods across Central and Eastern Europe](#), which also leads to inflation of prices, speculation and increase of rental prices, making it a real challenge for many locals, especially the younger generations, to find anywhere to live in Budapest, Prague or Sofia.

[The social impact of migration: with the arrivals of young migrants and refugees in European cities](#), special interventions are needed, such as language courses and psychological and learning support, but with few resources in various countries such as France, Germany, Italy, Poland and UK.

A professional involved in European cross-border journalism initiatives is Ronald Tipan; the Project coordinator of the local cross-border journalism programme at [Journalismfund Europe](#).

For him, the added value of cross-border journalism is quite clear:

“it allows local journalists to reach a wider audience, and some investigations published can have a real public impact. It develops the profile of the journalist, who can then find easier work elsewhere. The struggle of journalists is that when they work on an article, they don’t know if it would be relevant to work also with other media outlets in other countries. But on many occasions, it makes sense! Sometimes it’s a challenge to convince them to work with others, and then it’s also a challenge to convince others to work with them”. Tipan also insists on the financial dimension: *“Grants are helpful, even as a ‘one shot’, but what is important is to develop the capacities of journalists and media to monetise their activity, by knowing their audience, developing ‘data harvest’ and looking for fundings. That’s why journalists need workshops, training and to be part of a network”.* But the most important is this: *“there is no single profile of a cross-border journalist: it can be a freelancer or not; an established media or a startup, it doesn’t matter; what matters is the topic”.*

What are the benefits of cross-border journalism for local journalists?	Cross-border journalism also implies some difficulties, such as:
<p>Growing beyond the daily work: journalists work with other professionals from outside their usual circle, sometimes even outside their culture. Local reports can have cross-border and even global implications.</p>	<p>Time consumption: journalists, in particular freelance journalists, do not have much time to dedicate to “extra activities” in addition to the work, especially for potential grant reports that do not generate immediate revenues.</p>
<p>Developing new professional skills, for example working in another language, learning how to use different tools and technologies, and also developing financial or project-related skills, since cross-border journalists often takes place in an organised context.</p>	<p>Lack of resources and knowledge: cross-border journalism involves knowledge about cross-border methods, as well as investment in money and in skills, particularly “project-oriented” capabilities in terms of fund raising, project management, accounting, etc.</p>
<p>Reinforcing the impact of local reports, by reaching a broader audience, at national or international level.</p>	<p>Uncertainty: in addition to the two previous difficulties, the results of cross-border journalism are less easy to plan and to predict. To some extent, there is even a risk of lack of final outcome.</p>
<p>Working “on the long run”: cross-border journalism requires a long preparation and is often taking place over a long period of time.</p>	

4. Local journalism and cross-border collaboration:

What journalists say

After having presented examples of local journalism initiatives and cross-border projects, the following section contains testimonies of journalists and media professionals who have been involved in local or cross-border journalism, in various political and economic contexts (some are grantees of the European local cross-border journalism grant).

► **Local journalism in times of media capture: The example of G7.hu in Hungary**

Since over a decade, Hungary has been a laboratory for “media capture”, this phenomenon whereby the persons or the people in power take direct or indirect control over media by instrumentalising regulatory bodies, distorting the media market or creating a circle of “loyal” businesspeople to control private media in the government’s interest. Local and independent journalists are even more vulnerable than in other countries. G7.hu is a Hungarian online magazine founded in 2017 that aims to tell business stories in an understandable, jargon-free way. The editorial team is composed of 11 journalists, and additional external contributors are regularly collaborating with G7.hu. The media is read by about 1.3 million people per month, making it one of the main “local” media in Hungary, with a bigger outreach than Budapest, given the importance of the capital-city and the topics of national interest reported by G7.hu.

G7.hu operates as a non-profit media, with few articles, but most of them are based on verifiable information produced by in-house research, data collection and analysis. Most articles deal with business, politics, the social environment and “forward-looking public initiatives”, trying to look into what “life will be like in Hungary in ten years and beyond”. Access is free so far, thanks to previous “historical patrons”, but the media currently faces increasing difficulties and is looking for public support and donations, which can be made online through a monthly support or with a lumpsum. It currently considers to set-up a paywall in order to face the increasing costs. G7.hu also offers a newsletter. In order to minimise costs, G7.hu collaborates with other media, for example to pool the studio facilities for the production of podcasts. Collaborations outside Hungary are occasional, mostly because of lack of time.

Working for G7.hu, Anna Debreczeni is a Budapest-based journalist experienced in business issues related to economy, sustainable consumption, urban development and social questions. She chose to work for G7.hu because “traditional media in Hungary are too polarized and politicised, whereas G7 is always putting the emphasis on checked data and facts”.

According to her, “everyone is ‘local’, in the sense that we are all affected and emotional about issues of public interest”. This is why she applied and won a grant at Journalismfund’s local cross-border journalism programme and wrote about an urbanisation-related problem in Budapest. During the cooperation with foreign journalists, she gained a deeper insight to the European media landscape, had the chance to research the subject much deeper than usual and also exchanged best practices with colleagues.



Thanks to the quality journalism produced by G7, the portal is “*considered as a success story according to the feedback of the public and of other journalists. The team is used to pressure and it just goes forward. We do what we can*”. When thinking about the financial outlook of G7, Anna reckons that they “*need to look for more international funding*”, but this also requires time and expertise. She wishes that the advertising landscape in Hungary “*would be more equal, away from political considerations whereby some advertisers are currently too linked to the government and are reluctant to work – or simply don’t work - with certain media*”. This shows how ‘media capture’ in Hungary is affecting the whole media ecosystem, in particular economically vulnerable and independent online media. Anna Debreczeni is very clear about it: “*We are in competition with the propaganda of the daily news, so we have the smallest part of the cake to share. This is our reality*”. Still, she remains positive: “*I advise everyone to try local cross border journalism. For me it’s a very positive experience and I want to continue*”.

► **Local journalism in the Balkans: The example of eTrafika.net in Bosnia and Herzegovina**



With nearly 20 million people living in the six countries of the Western Balkans, there are around 1,500 local media outlets in the region: almost half in Serbia, the most populated country, followed by 19% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 12% in Albania, 10% in North Macedonia, 7% in Kosovo, and 5% in Montenegro. But the economy, and therefore the media and advertising markets are “*fragmented, saturated, and opaque in regard to the number of outlets and their operations, with ownership also often obscure*”. With most national media outlets being controlled by powerful groups or subject to political interference, the most vibrant journalism often takes place online and locally. One of these local media is eTrafika.net, based in Banja Luka (Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The potential of eTrafika.net was first recognised by the participants of the “Innovation Lab 2012”, where the eTrafika.net team won the second place in a competition of 46 teams. Soon after that, the media started a cooperation with the NGO sector and implemented projects with foreign donors. eTrafika.net is registered as a citizens' association and is mostly financed through donations and projects with a large number of non-governmental organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the USAID agency, the American Embassy, the SHL Foundation, the Internews organisation, the Center for Media Development and Analysis, the International Organization for Migration (IOM). eTrafika.net is mostly read by an educated public and among the 45,000 monthly visitors of the website, a majority are women (60%) between 25 and 45 years. eTrafika.net currently employs 3 staff journalists and 1 finance officer, but they also work with a dozen of freelance journalists.

Vanja Stokić, a human rights journalist, has been a journalist since 2009 and is one of the founders of the portal eTrafika.net and the first Balkan photo stock portal, Fotobaza.ba. In addition to reporting, she is a trainer and mentor of young journalists. *“I want to fight injustice, and this is why I report on human rights. Local journalism has this power to raise topics that are important to people in their daily life. People or NGOs know me, they trust me, they are open to talk to me or even to suggest topics to investigate, because they feel this proximity with me. The difficulty in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the Republika Srpska in particular, is the political environment and the limited economic market. Even regionally, the money is in Sarajevo, not in Banja Luka. Our funding is coming from ‘abroad’, with around 95% of our income based on international grants. With the new laws in Republika Srpska, we are now accused of being ‘foreign agents’ by the government, since we are officially registered as an NGO. We are not sustainable yet, but our ‘Fotobaza’ pictures stock helps us to gain extra money and we launched a crowdfunding campaign in September 2023, which should help us diversify our incomes. We have financial problems, but some of our stories had a real influence. We collaborate with other media at the level of the Federation [of Bosnia and Herzegovina] on anti-corruption, with exchange of content among an ‘umbrella’ organisation of 13 different media”.*

Local, investigative journalists have developed their network among various media such as inforadar.ba and spin-portal.info in Sarajevo, direkt-portal.com in Trebinje, hercegovina.info in Mostar and impulsportal.net in Banja Luka. Umbrella is the formal network of 13 independent portals which produce joint content, but also advocacy on media freedom in the country.

One of the main challenges for Vanja is to be able to combine journalism and the management of a “start-up” media. *“I’m a journalist and I want to work as a journalist. I also wish there would be more training for journalists in my country. Instead, I must be both a journalist and a manager even if I didn’t plan to be one and I still don’t want to be one. My wish is to really separate my editorial activities and that eTrafika.net can hire a manager in the future”.*

When asked about what could be improved for local media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she said that the country should create a fund for journalism, like some Western countries did, “but this implies an independent board to supervise the spending, which is quite unlikely to happen in the country” [1]. She also thinks about special taxation measures for media outlets and/or on salaries of media employees.

► ***In Italy, an unequal local media landscape***

Marzia Minore is a freelance journalist based in Italy. Passionate about investigative journalism, she combines data research and human stories. She wrote for La Stampa, il Fatto Quotidiano, Il Giornale dell’Arte, Altreconomia, Voxeurop and Internazionale. In 2023, she was a grantee of the “Local cross-border investigative journalism grant” of the EFJ, supported by the European Commission. Her current interests include social and environmental issues, human rights, inequalities, migration, education and she is well aware of the realities of national and local journalism in Italy.

In the Italian context, Marzia thinks that *“it’s important to report on local problems such as transports, waste management and corruption”*. But the level -both quantitative and qualitative- of local journalism is very uneven in the country. In many areas, even in rich cities of Tuscany, local journalism is very weak. *“Existing media just copy and paste press releases”*, and one of the reasons is that the level of payment is very low: *“an article as a freelance journalist is paid around 20€, which is a shame for professional journalists who can produce good work, but is even less paid than staff journalists. We need more initiatives for local journalism, such as funds and grants, but above all, journalists should be better paid. This implies that the public is ready to pay for quality journalism reporting on topics that you won’t find for free on the internet. It’s also important to collaborate with NGOs, because they have the information and the expertise”*.

Among the interesting initiatives of local journalism in Italy, Sveja is a daily podcast on Rome, broadcast every morning at 9am (sveja meaning “wake up” in Roman-Italian) on various platforms and social media, commenting the news according to the various media reports, *“a different voice to tell what is happening in the city”*, the voice being literally *“different”* according to the journalist working that day.

► ***In Germany, a project to revive local journalism against “cluster capitalism”***

To address the issue of local journalism, the Journalists’ Association of Germany (DJV) has launched a project to highlight the important role of reporting exactly where people don’t expect (but journalists truly find) the biggest headlines: in the province. Far from big media metropolises, in small towns, communities or villages, the so-called “Hinterland”.

[1] As reported in November 2023 in a European Commission “staff working document” on Bosnia and Herzegovina, “no steps were taken to adopt legislation on media ownership transparency (including on the prevention of hidden media concentration), legislation on advertising or criteria for the distribution of subsidies”: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2023_en

Michael Hirschler, who is in charge of the Hinterland project for the DJV, shared his experience after the first year. *“Local democracy is at the heart of German democracy. We need different points of views, away from media monopolies and big publishing houses. It’s a matter of public service in front of the ‘cluster capitalism’ affecting media, whereby media and culture are flourishing in big and prosperous cities, but the ‘hinterland’ is left behind, because of the lack of advertising market. Very often, local journalism depends on personal strategies of publishers. It can be either quality journalism, or simply repeating institutional communication”.* Hirschler thinks that the key is the economy and the existence of competition among media: *“Even the national tabloid ‘Bild’ decreases investment in local journalism because there is no competition and no market! In the end, people just go on the internet, and it’s difficult to bring them back to real journalism”.*

This is why the DJV set up the “Hinterland” project, to go to places to meet journalists who develop “alternative projects”. But it is sometimes a difficult exercise without offending established journalists who consider -rightly- that they are good journalists, and not second-rate professionals working in remote places. *“Most of the time, ‘grassroots’ initiatives and media start-ups are made by good people, but they lack the financial background”* says Hirschler. *“Local journalism is not about sitting in a nice office connected to social media, copy-pasting press releases. It’s about going out, attending City council meetings and Court hearings. This is lacking even in big cities such as Hamburg. But for example, in Berlin, the Tagesspiegel managed to significantly increase its number of subscribers by providing more local stories, with special reporting on the districts of Berlin in dedicated segments of the website, by newsletters and also by podcasts. That’s a good example of how a well-established “traditional” media can adapt and improve its local journalism”.*

When it comes to financing and sustainability, Hirschler’s views are quite clear: *“Media are a need, a public service; it’s like a hospital: if public authorities want it, it’s possible because money is here, it’s a matter of will and of priority. But politicians are elected even with bad journalism, so why bother investing and supporting journalism once you are elected? The minimum to do is to create a positive environment for journalism, either with special taxation policies, or with direct funding of media”.*

There was also a debate in Germany about the reform of the ‘Gemeinnützigkeitsrecht’, the laws applicable to non-profit organisations and the notion of ‘gemeinnützige Journalismus’, the non-profit journalism. A solid Reform of the law and the taxation rules is needed to facilitate the support of local, non-profit media by citizens. This idea is supported by a whole group of journalists’ organisations and media outlets. Indeed, tax policies can literally lead to successful and independent media, as it is the case for the Polish media OKO.press, which collected over half a million euros thanks to readers’ donation.

► **In Belgium, the efficient success of “glocal” journalism with MO**

MO* – Mondiaal Nieuws is a “journalistic media project about global trends and local realities”, published by “Wereldmediahuis vzw”, a non-profit organisation founded in 2002 with eight NGO members.

For its Editor-in-Chief, Jago Kosolosky, *“MO doesn't necessarily have a local character, but we do believe that more and more stories are “glocal”, combining local and global elements and having an impact on both levels. For the topics we tackle, this is often relevant for the diaspora communities who are hungry for quality journalism dealing with the challenges of their motherland. We have also enhanced our offer of translated articles to make sure that our reporting isn't limited to a small group of Western people. This has proven to be a great success”.*

The media is financed by a very diverse range of income streams. From larger to smaller: subsidies (federal and Flemish), member organisations (several tiers), reader revenue (several options), advertising (ethical), special editions, events and merchandising. For example, MO* organises lectures, talks and “global cafés”.

Dependency on subsidies is a current issue for MO: *“It is a very common practice in Belgium, even for for-profit media, and although we have greatly reduced our dependence on subsidies, it still forms a large part of our budget. This of course is a vulnerable position, even with 20 years of proven experience”*, according to Jago Kosolosky.

MO*, with its approach of “glocal” journalism, is very active in cross-border collaboration. MO* is part of several international consortia, and collaborate with national and international media for co-publications and co-productions. There are also several business partnerships, for example with Kompreno, a German start-up helping to overcome language barriers with AI and language technology, but respecting journalistic standards.

Still, the staff at MO* needs more expertise, says Jago Kosolosky: *“We expect economic advice on how to diversify and enhance revenue streams in a very, very, very difficult context anno 2024. Also, in a context of information overload it has become incredibly difficult to monetise even quality reporting. Such help would be greatly appreciated”.*



5. Good practices and examples

Despite all the challenges and difficulties faced by local media, some of them managed to survive and even thrive. Examples of local journalism are even among the most relevant journalism innovations in the past decade, according to academics, “*which illustrates the renewed recognition that it is indispensable for democracy when cultivated by independent actors*”. This section will present some examples of local, cross-border and investigative journalism in Europe.

► In Switzerland, local non-profit media join forces and create their own network



In **Switzerland**, three local and urban media, Bajour (Basel), Hauptstadt (Bern) and Tsüri (Zürich), have created the “We.Publish network” in 2020, which was then enlarged to other local or non-profit media. For example, Tsüri is financed through its membership subscription, advertising, events and sponsorship. It was founded in 2015 by a group of young journalists with the aim of creating independent local journalism. In order to bring local issues and debates closer to the city’s residents, they invented “Civic Media” in 2018, a participative process with panel discussions, city walks or workshops which defines thematic reports that are relevant locally.



Today, around ten people work for Tsüri, all income goes to journalism and all team members, with the exception of the interns, are paid a standard salary of 4,300 CHF. Also Hauptstadt is ad-free and mostly reader-financed. It was created as recently as 2022 with a crowdfunding campaign that “exceeded all expectations”: the minimum goal of 1,000 subscriptions was exceeded on the first day, and by the end of the campaign, over 3,000 people had signed up as subscribers. Further contributions come from foundations. All income goes to journalism and Hauptstadt also pays all team members, with the exception of interns, a standard salary.



All of these three Swiss media of the “Wepublish network” are founding members of the Media with a Future Association (Medien mit Zukunft – Médias d’avenir – Media con futuro), whose aim is to “encourage independent journalism and the creation and support of new independent media brands existing or to be created”, and to engage in “*discussions for journalistic content, new forms of distribution and new possible brand formats*”

► In Norway, Bergen's newspaper focuses on online, live local news

In **Norway**, after being at the verge of bankruptcy in 2015, Bergen's local newspaper Bergens Tidende (BT) decided to concentrate on local news and online content only: “fewer stories, stronger focus on unique local reporting, while letting go of most generic national and international stories”. Also live reporting was brought at the centre of the work of journalists. This strategy brought the paper back to be profitable, with a replacement of traditional, paper subscription, with digital subscribers. Moreover, thanks to “newsroom robot” driving significant revenues, BT's home sales website section is entirely “populated” with robot-generated content. Over the past years, it has generated more than one million pageviews, and it is now driving 5% of all BT's article conversions of paying subscribers.

Bergens Tidende

In **Iceland**, media have to operate in a limited “local context” due to the small size of the market and the insular situation and most private media still rely on a mix of subscription and advertising revenues. An interesting and outstanding example is Stundin, a former investigative media outlet, founded and owned by journalists, which was issued as a biweekly printed edition in addition to a subscription-based online version, pay-walled only partly. Its policy stated that the staff shall own a majority of the shares, with no single shareholder over 15%. In 2023, Stundin merged with another paper, forming Heimildin (the source in Icelandic), a news website which also publishes a newspaper twice a month, based on subscriptions. The combined publishing company has around 40 shareholders and none of them owns more than 8% of the shares. According to the statutes of the media, editors disclose their interests in a similar manner as members of parliament, including loans and past political activities, making Heimildin a unique media in the Icelandic context.

Heimildin

In **the Netherlands**, where the media market is rather flourishing compared to other European countries, and with the long-standing journalism fund often considered as an example to follow in other countries, advertisement is still the main source of revenues for local media, but some media are developing systems of subscription for “extra content”. The Enter Media group, which gathers several “free door-to-door newspapers”, introduced an online subscription to read additional articles and “exclusive news” on the associated website. Its competitor BDU media is following the same strategy.

In **Portugal**, Fumaça (*smoke* in Portuguese) is a “digital native” investigative journalism newsroom that mainly publishes narrative works in audio (podcasts). It was founded in 2016 and financed through individual contributions, without any further advertisement revenues. It is a non-profit media owned by the association “Verdes Memórias” (*green memories*), with the aim of being financed entirely by the audience, although so far the project has been also financed through journalism grants from foundations. The podcasts are freely accessible and also free for republication.

► **Innovation in financing schemes**

Finally, as a good practice of financing journalism, it is worth mentioning the work of the Journalism Funders Forum, the community of European funders working together to ensure more effective and impactful funding of journalism in Europe, founded in 2017. In addition to actual funding by its member organisations, it organises online and in-person events, expert briefings and a regular newsletter about emerging trends in journalism funding.

One of the “innovative” funding schemes is the “peer-based journalism funding model”, which aims to promote excellence in journalistic projects through a competitive peer review process. An example of such a peer-based journalism funding model is the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), which developed a concept for a German Journalism Foundation (Deutsche Journalismus-gemeinschaft, DJG) that would follow a “multi-level journalism funding” approach, awarding potential funding to individual journalists, editorial teams, but also to cooperative projects or (media) infrastructure. Such flexible funding schemes would combine the state, foundations and private donors into one mixed financing, thus reducing the dependence on one source.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Local journalism and extensive cross-border collaboration between investigative journalists are crucial for ensuring a well-informed society and healthy democracy. By supporting local journalism, one also supports media freedom, media pluralism, the fight against disinformation, media literacy and access to information of public interest.

Unfortunately, the economic and political situation in Europe does not always guarantee the adequate conditions for local independent journalism to operate and to flourish. There are numerous examples of courageous journalists, innovative initiatives, reaching out to diverse audiences but these also need to be supported structurally by a whole range of stakeholders, from national authorities to individual members of the public. Media organisations can also learn from these good practices.

Before listing a series of targeted recommendations, it is important to recall that the public itself is at the heart of the success of local journalism. They are the ones subscribing to local newspapers, magazines, and online news outlets, which is the easiest and most direct way to support local journalism. The two main elements to take into account for the sustainability of local journalism, as mentioned in the examples of this report, are the existence of a fair and open advertising market, the guarantee of media freedom for all journalists and the presence of a lively civil society dealing with issues of public interest hand in hand with local media. An enabling environment for local journalists does not only include courageous journalists but indeed also citizens, who fight for and defend journalists when attacked. Media concentration and media capture are vital threats for all media, but in particular for the most vulnerable ones.

The recommendations below put forward the main findings of the Seminar in Zagreb on 4-5 December 2023, as well as the proposals from journalists contacted for this report.

By taking these steps, individuals, media and governments can play a vital role in sustaining and strengthening local journalism in Europe, ultimately contributing to a well-informed and democratic society.

SUSTAINABILITY & FINANCING

✦ **Diversify your revenues, be flexible**

- Develop flexible and agile business models.
- Find alternative sources to advertising and combine different income sources.
- Secure stable, sustainable and predictable income streams such as subscriptions.
- Don't be afraid of non-profit, "member-owners" and cooperative business models, government funding at arms length and

tax incentives to support local journalism as a public good.

✦ **Give good reasons to pay**

- Advertising can be developed according to different levels of access.
- Non-profit or cooperative media can allow different kinds of membership.
- Focus on local, high-quality public interest issues.

EDITORIAL POLICY, GOVERNANCE & TRANSPARENCY

✦ **Connect with the audience and put the public at the center of your work**

- Go out of the newsroom: innovative media engage with the public. They organise events, lectures and meetings with the public.
- Your audience can engage in advocating for policies that protect journalists and press freedom, as well as promoting media literacy initiatives.
- Be transparent and go public about your work, your team and your finances.

✦ **Know your audience**

- Innovate in AI and data strategies to improve the knowledge of your audience and attract more advertisers -and more people.

✦ **Use AI for local journalism not by replacing journalists but as an valuable tool to develop data rich information**

✦ **Embrace technology while respecting professional and ethical standards to gain trust in local journalism**

✦ **Use audience engagement tools and adapt format to young audiences**

✦ **Develop your network**

- Although local media are often small, networking among themselves is a way to building stronger technical and operational skills.
- Engage in civil society initiatives: NGOs promoting media freedom, journalism ethics, and transparency can contribute to the overall support for local journalism in Europe.
- Collaborate to pool your resources, go beyond your usual public and improve efficiency.

✦ **Be united and develop solidarity among journalists in face of abuses and attacks**

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY, SUPPORT & FINANCING

✦ **Support the media**

- Create, secure and develop public support to media, in particular through organised funds with clear criteria for allocation.
- Guarantee clear and transparent structures for funding media, including with representatives of civil society organisations.

✦ **Think about private support also**

- Private-public funding tools can merge private investment with public funding, with a specific non-profit structure acting as “firewall” between donors and media, in order to guarantee transparency and lower the risk for “investors”.

✦ **Invest in innovation**

- Develop targeted support for digital innovation and technological infrastructure, which benefits mostly local journalism.

✦ **Develop international media development capacities, including in Europe for countries and regions affected by the “news desertification”**

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

✦ **Think of diverse legal statuses and ownership models**

- Create a non-profit media legal status and encourage private media to adopt it.
- Diversified ownership models in local media can help ensure a plurality of voices and perspectives. Community-owned or cooperative media model empower local communities to have a stake in the production and dissemination of news.

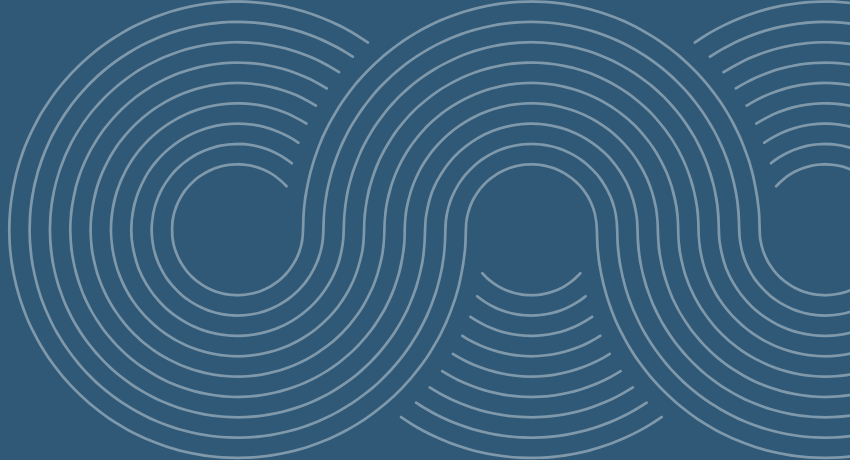
✦ **Regulate efficiently the big platforms and media conglomerates**

- Combat media concentration and guarantee fair access to the media market, in particular for advertising.

- Enforce transparency on data collection and other associated marketing strategies used by platforms.

✦ **Develop alternative taxation measures or tax incentive measures**

- Introduce media-specific taxation rules for media and journalists.
- Create an international taxation tool such as an international global tax rate on media.



EUROPEAN LOCAL CROSS-BORDER INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

EFJ European
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Transitions



Co-funded by
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