

Does place still matter? Reconfiguring local journalism in the age of platforms: a narrative literature review

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Local journalism is attracting significant international scholarly attention, particularly considering the digital transformations reshaping the media landscape. This narrative literature review paper aims to synthesise and examine contributions to the discourse on local journalism, focusing on the challenges and opportunities presented by the blurring and intersecting boundaries between geographic, digital, and news production places, which struggle to engage each other. Local journalism, characterised by its inherent proximity, is pivotal to exploring the contemporary complex sense of place. Starting from the concepts of proximity and locality, it will explore the multifaced nature of local journalism, not without definitional ambiguities, especially considering the development of digital media which has inevitably affected conceptions and experiences of “local”. In this context, exploring the relationship between journalism and geography is essential. However, the concept of placeification – valuing how digital news environments are become significant places – highlights how digital sites do not replace physical spaces but rather extend the ways in which local journalism creates a sense of place and community. News production sites can also be places of local journalism, becoming meaningful places not only for journalists, but for the community itself. What is noted is that these debates on local journalism struggle to dialogue with each other. Thus, the paper advocates the idea of “situating local journalism” as a theoretical framework for future research, emphasising the importance of examining how local journalism emerges through the intersection of geographic, digital and news production places, to deepen the tensions between adaptation and resistance of local journalism in the context of digital transformation.

Keywords: local journalism, place, proximity, locality, digitalisation, geography of journalism, placeification, newsroom, situating local journalism

1. Introduction

In an era when digital transformations are profoundly reshaping the media landscape, local journalism has garnered significant international scholarly attention. The advent of digital technologies has not only transformed the ways in which news is produced and consumed but has also redefined the relationship between media outlets and their audiences. Despite this global interest, local journalism remains a niche within the academic debate, even if its inherent proximity and its marginal position within the broader journalistic field (Splendore 2017) could offer a crucial lens through which to investigate the sense of place in the digital age. This paper thus seeks to conduct a narrative literature review that synthesises and critically examines existing contributions to the discourse on local journalism, focusing on the challenges and opportunities presented by the blurring and intersecting boundaries between geographic, digital, and news production places, which struggle to engage each other. This literature review so explores the unique challenges that local journalism faces amidst the rapid pace of digital disruption.

Agnes Gulyás and David Baines (2020) are among several scholars who recently explored the ongoing debate about the core elements of local media and journalism. The authors observe that conceptualising the field of local journalism is a complex undertaking, particularly given the lack of consensus on the definitions of salient terms such as local or community. Despite the complexity and liminality of these terms, the authors attempt to outline commonly shared features of local media: a) the geo-socio-political context, which stresses the unique “geographical, historical, social, cultural, political, economic, and technological factors” (ivi, p. 5), which interact with in universal values and formats of journalism. This local adaptation gives rise to considerable diversity in terms of media structure, content and audience consumption, resulting in a multitude of differences and similarities across and within nations and regions. b) The relationship with the community, which includes not only meeting the community’s informational needs but also fostering unity and promoting civic engagement; and c) the position within macro media ecosystem, particularly the interplay between local, national and international media. If this relationship – defined by the authors from the truism “all news starts locally” (ivi, p. 8) – is important, it is even more so, I argue, if it is considered it in the view of digital changes. If, indeed, with the digital disruption local boundaries become more blurred and news sources are more accessible also for national and international media outlets, digital news competition becomes an important issue to consider for the survival and the economic independence of local media.

2. The senses of closeness in local journalism

So, defining local journalism presents a number of challenges due to its inherently fluid and context-dependent nature (Ali 2017). The difficulty to define local journalism has become increasingly apparent as the digital landscape has transformed the ways in which news is produced, distributed, and consumed. While traditional notions of local journalism often centred on the coverage of geographically bounded communities, the rise of digital technologies and global platforms has blurred the boundaries between local, regional, and national news. As a result, scholars have grappled with the need to reconfigure the concept of local journalism, taking into account the complex interplay between physical and virtual spaces, and the evolving role of place.

Proximity and locality can be important elements in journalism and are certainly key elements in understanding local journalism as it was, as it is today and in imagining its future. This section will analyse these features by comparing them – based on the conceptualisations of Ahva & Pantti¹ (2014) and Weber & Mathews (2022) – to gain insight into how digital transformations have impacted the way spaces and places are conceptually understood in local journalism.

2.1 Proximity

The need for the two authors to try to unravel the complexity of this theoretical construct is twofold: on the one hand, as they observe, proximity is traditionally defined as a value for journalism without, however, delving into definitional ambiguities; on the other hand, the development of digital media has inevitably affected conceptions and experiences of proximity. According to Ahva and Pantti, proximity can be understood as *socio-ideological proximity* to the sources of discourse². Digitisation has had a considerable impact on this, with the result that the role of the eyewitness has been less significant and the number of subjects capable of contributing to journalistic discourse has increased – i.e. parajournalist (Shudson 2003; Jerónimo *et al.* 2022). Proximity can also be understood as a *means of presenting events*. The place, according to the two authors, has strongly oriented journalistic narrative practices, to create in texts' news a sense of proximity and familiarity between the audience and the event. In digital local and hyperlocal journalism, the choice of the territory is still an important issue, even they are “potentially available from potentially anywhere” (Negreira-Rey *et al.* 2022, p. 158). As a news value, proximity can be linked to geographical and temporal scope but also to cultural and emotional aspects (Koetsenruijter & de Jong 2023). The *proximity-as-interpretation perspective* shifts away from production processes to bind itself more to the emotional and moral dimension, thus moving the focus to those who consume the news. Finally, proximity can be understood as a *strategy*, an organising principle of newsrooms' work in relation to audiences. The community orientation [of digital local media] is also reflected in their participatory relationship with the audience, through which users can take active roles in the information production process. (Negreira-Rey *et al.* 2022, p. 156).

¹ Although the proximity of Ahva and Pantti (2014) was not originally conceived to explain local journalism, I argue that, due to the conceptual complexity expressed, it can be very suitable to understand its nature, as Koetsenruijter and de Jong (2023, p. 16) state.

² This means that there are sources who, by social background, are more akin to journalists, so an informative relationship is easier to establish.

2.2 Locality

Locality, as defined by Weber and Mathews (2022), encompasses spatial and temporal *distance*, influencing news organisation and audience relationships. Local news traditionally reports geographically closer events, but the relevance of distance becomes less distinct in digital contexts. Locality also involves *boundaries* – real or artificial – where journalistic organisations define coverage areas. While these boundaries are more fluid online, locality as *proximity* is subjective, often tied to the relational connections between publications and their audiences (Byerly 1961). Hess (2013) introduces a geo-social dimension, highlighting the intersection of geographical space and social behaviour in generating locality. Additionally, locality can reflect a *sense of community*, rooted in cultural ties and shared belonging (Hess & Waller 2016). Local journalism supports this sense of community by addressing information needs, fostering collective identity through the production and consumption of local news (Batsell 2015).

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of the ways in which digitisation has become embedded in information contexts, I focus exclusively on the sections of papers by Ahva and Pantti (2014) and Weber and Mathews (2022) that are devoted to illustrating the nuances of meanings and uses of proximity and locality. The coding of the parts of the text that explicitly deal with digitisation, digital/online media or digital technologies is carried out using Nvivo 14 software, and the results are displayed in the table.

Table 1. Coded parts on the impact of digitisation on proximity and locality. Own processing.

Proximity by Ahva & Pantti (2014)	Locality by Weber & Mathews (2022)
<p>p. 323: “Hence, questions of location and access—and the practice of eyewitnessing—remain important in journalism, even if the journalist’s traditional role as an eyewitness has been affected by the development of digital recording technologies (Zelizer 2007).”</p> <p>p. 324: “Digital media have increased the number and kinds of sources available to journalism, thus making the question of balance between socially “close” and “distant” sources relevant (Franklin and Carlson 2011; Kristensen and Mortensen 2013).”</p> <p>Ibidem: “New technologies have provided additional tools for the construction of proximity in news coverage. It is claimed, for example, that the spatial and temporal proximity of live reporting have been replaced by virtual proximity, that is, creating an illusion of on-the-site presence by digital means (Huxford 2007, 661).”</p> <p>p. 326: “In the current digital landscape, the proximity strategy has included collaboration with the public, and user-generated content has emerged as a crucial resource for it (Pantti and Bakker 2009; Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, and Wardle 2010).”</p>	<p>p. 4: “Distance is traditionally thought of as a baseline measure of locality (see, for example, McKenzie 1927), but digital technology has eliminated many distance-related obstacles (measured as either time or distance of travel). While the global communication network may alter the lived experience of distance, it does not mean that distance does not matter at all (Mosco 2000).”</p> <p>Ibidem: “In digital environments, the importance of distance becomes more ambiguous for publishers (Harlow and Chadha 2021), but it is unclear how that fluid relationship with distance as time or physical distance translates to audience perceptions of local and distance [...]”</p> <p>p. 5: “Newspaper organizations draw a wide variety of local borders, and the meaning of local, hyper-local and regional can vary significantly. These physical boundaries have become far more fluid online (Hess 2015). News organizations draw lines around coverage areas, delivery areas and viewing areas, but online those boundaries are harder to delineate”.</p>

A comparison of the two coded papers reveals that the impact of digitisation on the senses of closeness in (local) journalism is undeniable. According to them, transformative contribution has been most significant in two contexts: production and distribution of news (e.g. spatial demarcation and eyewitness role) and consumption of news (e.g. reader prosuming, geographical distance of news consumption). However, it is also crucial to highlight the aspects that have not been codified, as they weren’t not explicitly connected to the digitisation discourse. Indeed, both papers – as seen – addressed the concepts of proximity and locality also from a relational and emotional perspective. The sense of belonging and community, which is transversal from both local media outlets and news readers, shifts towards more cultural – or to be more precise, geo-social, to use Hess’s concept (2013) – approaches in which the transformative process of the digital appears to be clearly not a significant intervening variable. This is an extremely important element to take into account because the social connective element of place is shown to be a stable one.

The digital environment has significantly impacted local media, particularly due to their marginal position within the journalistic field (Splendore 2017), making them more susceptible to both destabilising and innovative changes (Murru & Pasquali 2020). This vulnerability is further compounded by the multifaceted nature of local journalism, which is

shaped by the dynamic interplay of key features such as proximity, locality, and community. These concepts, already complex and ambiguous, are being increasingly redefined in the context of digital transformations. Digital technologies have fundamentally altered how news is produced, distributed, and consumed, compelling scholars to recognise the evolving complexity of these essential features in local journalism. Digitisation, as seen, however, does not seem to be so revolutionary for place, but that its effects act more in an embedding way by providing new ways of experiencing place itself.

3. *Place and spaces in digital local journalism*

As seen in the previous section, the elements that define the identity of local journalism become in part more nuanced when considering the transformative effects of digitisation, without losing their cognitive value. As such, it is necessary to consider further how space and place are perceived and experienced in digital local journalism.

By proposing a *geography of journalism*, Robert Gutsche and Kristy Hess (2019) consider the interrelationship between journalism and geography, particularly the influence of the media on the perception of place³ and the multifaceted ways in which people engage with the tangible and virtual environments in which journalism is practiced. One interesting aspect they address concerns *spatial demarcation*. Place-naming (Gutsche 2014; Wiard & Pereira 2019; Stoltenberg 2021) plays a crucial role in demarcation of an information zone within which journalists focus their news research on elements within a defined setting—be it an identified physical or social space. Local media construct a local territory by delineating areas for media coverage⁴, and local journalists further shape this territory through their agenda setting and framing in the news (Svith 2020). Often, these delimited spaces are socio-spatial; for instance, most mainstream newspapers tend to identify with specific geographical areas. This process helps create a sense of local place and shared attitudes among journalists and the audience (Cresswell 2009). However, this does not mean that news cannot be found or produced outside the defined area. Rather, any news from outside must meet the interests and expectations of those who share a sense of place or connection within these physical or

³ Gutsche and Hess define place “the physical, social, and digital spaces and sites to which individuals attribute meaning and which become more significant when this meaning (both imaginative and physical) is shared or contested by others” (2019, p. 2).

⁴ Often in fact, as Nikki Usher (2019, p.85) notes, newspaper names have the names of places in them, “as if to signal allegiance and special knowledge of a location”.

social spaces, regardless of their degree of mobility and where they are located when they access the news (Gutsche & Hess 2019).

If, therefore, local journalism contributes much to defining the spaces within which it works and produces news (*place-making*), it is equally accurate to assert that journalistic products have long constituted concrete and significant “places” for audiences (Gutsche & Hess 2020). Digitisation has certainly rewritten the grammars of news production and fruition (Splendore 2017), expanding both our cognitive boundaries and the possibility to access news at any time. Moving beyond the idea of place-making, Gutsche and Hess (2020) introduce the concept of *placeification*⁵. Placeification refers to the process by which digital spaces of interaction with news are transformed into places of meaning and significance for their audiences. As seen, place-making is closely tied to physical geography, with journalists covering stories that reflect and shape the identity of a local area or community. Placeification acknowledges this role but incorporates digital spaces, where boundaries are less rigid, and communities are often defined by shared interests rather than physical proximity. In the context of digital journalism, this means that news environments are no longer just platforms for information exchange but also spaces where audiences connect, interact, and develop a sense of identity and belonging. Considering, therefore, that virtual spaces also become places of interaction, it becomes important for the authors to go beyond the exploration of journalistic practice, focusing also on users’ interactions with digital news regarding their connection to media platforms, the development of relationships, and the connection of users and producers in generating a sense of place in online news spaces.

In this way, the digital news place becomes a “home” with a “sense of belonging” often because it projects life from some physical reality (where people live, work and have strong physiological, emotional and social connections) to the digital (ivi, p. 587).

According to the authors, there are several elements that characterise the placeification process. I will examine some of these through the lens of local media to ascertain whether the digital spaces occupied by local journalism can also become places. The two authors argue about *spatial and emotional immersion*. They posit that the digital environment has

⁵ For Gutsche and Hess (2020, p. 587) placeification refers to the set of processes and practices by which digital information spaces are transformed into places of meaning and significance. The suffix of -ification determines a process in the making and which attributes the structure-agency of the place-making process.

not fully erased the sense of place, but rather, the possibility of accessing news online can intensify the individual's physical and emotional ties to the coverage and communities identified in the news. This is particularly evident in the context of both the existence of local news websites and the opportunity for journalists to present immersive experiences, which can influence the audience's sense of place in the virtual environment. Of course, the cost of technology for immersive journalism projects is quite high, making them almost unaffordable for local journalism without appropriate financial support. However, as Palak Barmaiya (2023) points out, more affordable immersive technologies, such as 360-degree cameras, can be used to create compelling and immersive stories even with limited resources. The two scholars also highlight the *personalisation and community building*, because the platformisation of online experiences allows the personalisation of news to increase loyalty and to cement "a strong sense of connection and community between the user, the content, and the product" (Gutsche & Hess 2020, p. 593). A study conducted on Spanish local digital media (Negreira-Rey *et al.* 2022) revealed that local audiences engage with these outlets primarily through social network sites and profiles. This makes them an important source of news dissemination and a valuable channel for interaction with the public. Indeed, as noted by Jerónimo *et al.* (2022), Facebook and other social media platforms are crucial spaces for discussions on topics that gather communities connected geographically, culturally, or emotionally. Local interest groups on Facebook can be conceptualised as town or neighbourhood squares where citizenship/audience interacts directly with local journalists, either through public comments or private messages. Similarly, through Instagram or other social media platforms, journalists can reply to or republish users' content.

In the previous section, it was observed that the element of closeness, as a sense of belonging, was not clearly thematised in the discourse on the impact of digitisation in the works of Ahva and Pantti (2014) and Weber and Mathews (2022). As a result, this seems not to be a decisive factor in the fostering of a sense of community. Gutsche and Hess's (2020) concept of placeification effectively addresses this limitation by conceptualising digital information spaces (including local ones) as places. This transformation from mere interaction spaces to emotionally and socially significant places imbues digital spaces with a heightened sense of place.

4. The place of local news production sites

In the previous sections I explored local journalism on the ground, analysing some of its characteristics and noting how, despite digitalisation, the sense of place has not been lost, also because how digital local journalism spaces can become culturally and emotionally meaningful places. However, place in local journalism is not only “concentric proximity” (Di Chio 2023, p. 154) or its deconstruction, or the product of placeification in the digital world. What I argue here is that local journalism can itself be a place, in the form of news production sites.

The long tradition of organisational and ethnographic studies on newsrooms has highlighted, as Nikki Usher (2015) clearly points out, the importance of newsroom spaces in the study of the relationship between places and news production. Historically, newsrooms were well-defined physical spaces, with a clear hierarchical organisation and established workflows. In recent decades, attention has also been paid to how the physical and digital configuration of environments affects journalistic work, the dynamics among team members, and the production of news (Robinson 2011). With the advent of digital technologies and more flexible work models, such as remote working, the concept of place has evolved, shifting from a purely physical space to a hybrid one, where interactions between journalists can also take place in virtual environments.

Newsroom spaces can be studied, according to Maares *et al.* (2024), through three aspects. First, newsrooms are real and material locations, consisting of furnishings and work tools. Second, they are socio-material spaces, where the furnishings, equipment, and people occupy space and interact with one another. Finally, newsrooms are symbolic places of meaning and power, spaces of expression and negotiation of newsroom culture, routines, and professional identities, which help foster a sense of belonging also among journalists to the news outlet.

News buildings, however, are significant also because “they represent institutions deeply connected to the public” (Usher 2015, p. 1008). Local newsrooms, then, can serve as a critical meeting point between journalism and the community they serve. Beyond being material and socio-material spaces, newsrooms can act as places of connection and collective identity. The geosocial proximity of local newsrooms to the public affords them a particular aptitude for comprehending and representing the needs, concerns, and interests of the community.

5. *Situating local journalism*

The study of the importance of place in local journalism, with particular consideration of the implications of digitalisation, has revealed the inherent challenges in integrating the physical and digital places of local journalism, and local news production spaces, whether physical or virtual they are. The reasons for this may be diverse and likely associated with the fact that each particular element of the discourses under examination is already the subject of considerable debate, without forgetting that the process of digitalisation and hybridisation of local journalism is still present. The debate remains ongoing and open to further discussion.

As has been seen, studies frequently concentrate on a single specific element (for example, place-making) or local journalism is not the principal subject of enquiry (for instance, proximity or placeification). It is evident that local journalism still requires further investigation. Given that it is a global phenomenon yet highly context-dependent, a theoretical lens that can more broadly and comprehensively analyse the intersection between these different dimensions is necessary. The concept of *situating local journalism* could serve as a valuable framework for integrating disparate aspects that have previously struggled to engage in constructive dialogue. While proximities and places in local journalism may be conceptualised in distinct ways, they ultimately share a common underlying principle: the physical and/or socio-emotional sense of belonging.

Figure 1. The intersections in situating local journalism. Own realisation.



The theoretical lens of *situating local journalism* allows for a deeper and dynamic exploration of the spaces of local journalism and their intersections. This is also the reason why I prefer to use the term “situating” rather than “situated”: although, as seen with Gulyás and Baines (2020), there are elements of continuity, the places of local journalism are undergoing a process of reassessment and redefinition. Moreover, the intersection of these three spaces is pivotal for comprehending the tensions between the adaptation and resistance of local journalism in the context of digital transformation. Indeed, crucial to acknowledge the dynamic interplay between the three distinct types of spaces, reflecting the ongoing transformation and adaptation that occurs between these diverse contexts. These spaces mutually influence journalistic practices, modes of interaction with audiences, and news production. This interaction is not static; rather, it evolves continuously in response to technological, social, and cultural changes.

6. Conclusions

The literature on local journalism and its relationship with the concept of place reveals a growing appreciation for the interconnectedness between physical and digital spaces. The advent of digital technologies has reshaped how place is understood and experienced in journalism, transforming both the production and consumption of news. However, this shift does not signal the loss of place as a critical element in local journalism; rather, it highlights the adaptability and complexity of place in the digital age.

Scholars like Ahva and Pantti (2014) and Weber and Mathews (2022) emphasise the importance of proximity and locality, both of which are key to understanding the evolving nature of local journalism. While digital platforms have blurred traditional geographic boundaries, the emotional and cultural ties to place remain significant. Concepts such as place-making and placeification underscore how local journalism can continue to foster a sense of community and belonging, both in physical and virtual environments.

Additionally, the literature points to the continued importance of local news production sites as places of connection between journalists themselves and with their communities. Despite the rise of remote and hybrid work models, local newsrooms—whether physical or digital—serve as hubs of interaction and identity for both journalists and their audiences. This dual role of local journalism, in both shaping and being shaped by place, remains central to its function in promoting community cohesion. The evolving nature of place in local journalism highlights its ability to remain relevant and significant, even as the media landscape continues to transform.

The idea of *situating local journalism* could emerge as a crucial framework for advancing the ongoing debate on local journalism studies, particularly in an era marked by digital transformations. For future debates in local journalism studies, the framework of *situating local journalism* provides a theoretical lens that can integrate the diverse elements of place, proximity, and community in geographical, digital and local news production places. It recognises the fluid, evolving nature of local journalism, which is neither fixed nor static, but actively situated within its broader socio-cultural and technological contexts. By embracing this perspective, scholars can more effectively examine the ongoing tensions between the adaptation and resistance of local journalism to digitalisation.

In conclusion, *situating local journalism* offers a pathway for future research to delve deeper into the intersection of spaces and for understanding how local journalism will continue to evolve in response to digital disruption, while still preserving its fundamental role in fostering a sense of place.

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