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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Local Press in Poland: The Internet Instead of Print?

Abstract: This article examines changes in Polish local press at the turn of the second and the third decade of the 21st Century, directly or indirectly related to the coronavirus pandemic. For years, statistics have been showing declining sales of printed press. This is mainly the case of the general-interest newspapers – national, regional, and local alike. Internet media platforms are increasingly important and often take over the role of the leading local media. Due to their limited reach, local publishers felt the losses from reduced advertising revenue and copy sales even more acutely than national publishers. Local press and small publishing teams struggled to cope with the impact of the pandemic and demand for digitization. So, what will the local press look like in the following years? How will the pandemic change the face of the local press? This study addresses these issues based on findings from desk research, case studies, and content analysis of relevant media. The result of the research is the confirmation of changes in the field of local communication, especially in its channels. The printed press arouses less and less interest among recipients and ceases to function as the fourth estate.

Keywords: *local estate, local communication, media power, Polish local press, COVID-19 pandemic, print media, digital media*

Introduction

The start of the '90s saw a revolution in the Polish local press; the entire media system was transforming, and detailed media research began¹. The development of the research on local and regional media changed the perception of these media. Meanwhile, local communication, which consists of local media, is a part of global communication. As Hamelink (2015, p. 2) pointed out: "We are global and local citizens, and our communication could best be termed 'glocal.' This notion connects the global (e.g., a product for global marketing) with

¹ See, inter alia: Chorążki (1999), Gierula (2005), Jachimowski (2006), Kowalczyk (2002, 2008), Michalczyk (2000), Mikułowski Pomorski (1990), Piasecki (2000).

the local (e.g., local tastes and experiences)”. This author uses the term *local* as *national*. In Poland, the term local concerns areas smaller than a voivodship, but this approach does not prevent local media from being treated as a part of global communication. Especially when talking about electronic media.

The efforts of the local, regional, and national press to digitize – and thus transcend the limitations of print publishing – have shown increasing positive results (Kępa-Mętrak, 2017). However, the decrease in the readership of print media negatively affects publishers’ revenue (exacerbated by the outflow of advertisers). This pattern was observed throughout Europe during the start of the 21st century. Lichtenberg (2008) pointed out that advertisers were less interested in print publishing. Consequently, not only publishers but also governments and the European Community should embark upon a new communication policy. Graham and Smart (2010), based on a detailed analysis of three selected UK newspapers, confirmed that the Internet has led to falling advertising revenues and dwindling circulations in Great Britain. As a reaction, the press companies focused on developing their online news services, which hold several assets. They allow us to co-create the content with consumers and customize it for advertising. Most notably, they enable the companies to avoid distribution costs of physical copies. However, moving online has not fully compensated for the observed revenue losses. The readership was reluctant to pay for online content. The income from the sales of web-based advertising space happened to be relevantly lower than from the printed form.

According to the calculations of Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek (2019), in Poland, over the decade, publishers’ revenue decreased on average by one-third. However, medium-sized publishers, whose revenue in 2010 amounted to 1-3 million PLN, lost the most (almost 40% of revenue). Their local publishing and advertising market position was not secure enough to maintain the status quo. Their financial resources were too small to fight to stay online effectively.

Digitization and the Pandemic

Technological advances have been accompanied by recent changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only in Poland, publishers were forced to digitize quickly while simultaneously searching for areas to save and alternative sources of income (Kępa-Mętrak, 2021). Within weeks of the nationwide COVID-19 shutdown, more than 200 regional and community newspapers across Australia announced they could no longer keep their presses running due to the unprecedented crisis (Hess & Waller, 2021). It is not only losses related to the online migration of advertisers and the printing costs that are forcing publishers to look for new communication solutions. Their audience also exerts increased pressure, expecting engaging content to be available fast, regardless of place and time. Digital media is gaining ground and will probably gain more – on the condition that it is free.

As Sparks and others (2016, p. 197) wrote, “subscription revenue has been difficult to acquire online” because people reluctantly pay for news freely available elsewhere. He says around half of existing US newspapers charge for their online content. Some of them permit the user to read a fixed number of articles online free of charge or create “premium” content available only to paying users. Another tactic to increase revenues was to bundle access to the online content with print subscriptions, thus increasing both online and subscription revenues. However, there appear to be limits to the success of the last strategy for most newspapers. In theory, just an online version of the newspaper may suffice because if the content is appealing enough to attract readers, it will, in turn, draw in advertisers. It should improve the economic situation of publishing houses, allowing them to earn revenue even without copy sales. Nonetheless, another danger occurs, as Napoli (2010) describes: new media technologies give media consumers control of the media reception process. In his opinion, individuals experience mounting levels of control over when, how, and where they consume, selected by the media. Furthermore, the popularity of user-generated content threatens competition with traditional media for audience attention.

In September 2021 (the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic), the Polish ‘Local Press Association’ (Stowarzyszenie Prasy Lokalnej SPL) was renamed to the ‘Local Media Association (Stowarzyszenie Mediów Lokalnych SML). The change directly inspired this research on local print media. The main research problem addressed in the article is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the local press in Poland and its digitalization. It is interesting to examine:

- RQ1: Is local communication moving online?
- RQ2: Will the departure from print form be permanent or just a temporary measure?
- RQ3: How effective will attempts to compensate for losses from traditional publications with electronic editions prove?
- RQ4: Will local publishers be able to compete with more prominent players on the market?

In general, digital media is gaining in importance. Before the end of 2020, the “New York Times” reported that it generated more revenue from selling digital editions than print (Tameez, 2020). The Swedish daily “Dagens Nyheter” (2022) also reported successful sales in digital subscriptions, as well as an increase in advertising revenue in 2021. Their published sales information reveals that the paper achieved its best financial results since the ‘90s. At the end of 2021, it had 369,000 subscribers, 233,000 of whom subscribed only to the digital version. In Poland, according to the data from Polish Readership Research (Polskie Badania Czytelnictwa PBC) (2022), the highest sales of e-editions in the second half of 2021 were reported by “Dziennik Gazeta Prawna.” Another newspaper, “Gazeta Wyborcza,” has had the most significant number of digital subscribers for years (JSX, 2022). However, to what extent can small local publishers also develop a profitable online presence?

Methods

This article examines changes in the Polish local press over recent years using the concept proposed by Hess and Waller (2021). In their study of the Australian media, they have introduced a useful analogy between strategies used in fighting COVID-19 and the strategies for preserving local press. Their novel approach explores “the lessons” from the pandemic and utilizes them in media sciences. The authors took five coronavirus-related themes associated with the pandemic to address the future of newspapers:

1. support for essential services,
2. warnings of complacency against an evolving biological threat,
3. appreciating the power of the social,
4. the need for coordinated government/policy responses,
5. “We are all in this together”.

This perspective seems useful for analyzing Polish local media, as done in this article. Answers to the above questions form separate sections for each theme. To conduct an in-depth analysis, I am using various methods. These are mainly desk research, case studies, and analyses of carefully selected examples of Polish local media. Using a comparative method regarding all elements will allow this study to determine the current state of the local press in Poland and draw conclusions about its future.

The starting point regarding data availability is information provided by media portals wirtualnemedi.pl and press.pl, and those directly related to the local press – gazetylokalne.pl and localpress.pl. Official sales records and readership statements are also important for the research, although they are less inclined to include local titles. The main source of these figures is Polish Readership Research. This source is supplemented by the portals mentioned above, which have a more comprehensive range of current material and archival studies. This data makes it possible to track changes in selected periods according to various criteria. A detailed understanding of the issue also requires an in-depth analysis of the content of selected periodicals’ websites. The selection of press titles and publications used in this research is deliberate; the included papers have undergone significant changes in the last three years, as industry media and publishing organizations noted. Chosen to the detailed analysis were:

- three periodicals which ceased to be published in printed form;
- four weeklies controlled by Polish Readership Research;
- one weekly introduced a paywall as the first in this branch.

These press titles belong to private owners and may be called independent. In the article, different approaches and actions of publishers are described, and a comparison of to-date effects is made. The analysis explores how the Polish local press has been transforming itself. In addition, it is compared to the situation of local press in significant foreign markets (Europe, Australia, USA, China), based on the available literature.

Essential services in Poland

During the pandemic, local newsrooms shut down throughout the world. They were eligible for the JobKeeper scheme in Australia, but it did not stop many newspapers from suspending their printed publications and shifting to digital. This triggered a broad discussion to recognize information-providing journalism as an “essential service.” In the opinion of Hess and Waller (2021, p. 26), the “recognition of news media as an essential service has provided a strong rationale for policy interventions to support journalism.” However, it needs to be noted that financial support for the media, particularly the printed press, to cushion the economic consequences of the pandemic creates a new relationship that can reduce free reporting in the long term (Holtz-Bacha, 2022).

The effects of the pandemic on local press in Poland were felt as early as March 2020, when – according to Press.pl – the paper editions of three local titles were suspended: “Gazeta Wągrowiecka,” “Gazeta Powiatowa,” and the free regional bimonthly publication “Magazyn 67”. Marcin Maziarz, the publisher of “Magazyn 67”, explained that the March-April 2020 issue was about to be sent to print when the government began implementing COVID restrictions. Consequently, that print run was halted, and only a few copies were printed. Print copies of this edition could also be ordered (print-on-demand), and several copies were sold this way. It was also available to view online or download as a PDF (Magazyn 67, 2020). Maziarz said this was “an emergency solution, agreed upon with the advertisers” (E. Maziarz, personal communication, November 28, 2021). Reading the complete edition online did not catch on. Single articles from this issue recorded more views published online than the full version of the magazine. From then on, the magazine’s content has appeared only as individual articles on www.magazyn67.pl.

The second of the suspended periodicals, “Gazeta Wągrowiecka,” is currently only available on Facebook and WWW as “Wągrowiecki Region News.” “Gazeta Wągrowiecka” was one of the newest local periodicals in Poland. Previously, for nearly 30 years, from autumn 1990 to autumn 2019, a different newspaper named “Głos Wągrowiecki” was published in Wągrowiec. The last issue was released on 4th December; the last entry on the publication’s Facebook profile was posted on 6th December (Głos Wągrowiecki, 2019); and on 11th December, the publisher announced the cessation of activities. At the same time, it was announced that the current team of “Głos Wągrowiecki” still wants to publish a weekly magazine, which will appear under a different name. In that manner “Gazeta Wągrowiecka” emerged².

The third of the suspended periodicals – “Gazeta Powiatowa: Social and Cultural Weekly: Jabłonna, Legionowo, Nieporęt, Serock, Wieliszew” – was registered in 2004. The decision

² It is available at gazeta-wagrowiecka.pl/. The previous version of „Gazeta Wągrowiecka” (still available at the beginning of 2022 at gazetawagrowiecka.pl/) disappeared from the Internet. That version had replaced the printed “Głos Wągrowiecki.”

to suspend printing in March 2020 was spontaneous and quickly withdrawn. Only four editions were not published: on the 17th, 24th, and 31st of March and 7th of April 2020. These editions were made available free of charge in pdf form on the website of “Gazeta Powiatowa” (<https://gazetapowiatowa.pl/>). The weekly magazine is still in print. The pandemic did not cause any significant drop in sales. According to the publisher, local government periodicals have had more significant adverse effects on local private media than the pandemic.

In March 2020 – i.e., after the introduction of the first Covid-19 restrictions – the essential societies twinning local press publishers: Local Press Association (SPL)³, Local Newspapers Association (SGL), and Press Publishers Chamber (Izba Wydawców Prasy IWP) sent a letter to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki with an appeal for help. These organizations’ presidents pointed out that successive bans and restrictions translated directly into a decrease in press sales and publishers’ revenues. Local publishers complained that they were recording declines in advertising revenue of up to 80%. Some reported that there were no funds to pay wages. Publishers expected help from the government (Czapul, 2020a).

Warnings of Complacency against an Evolving Biological Threat

The reaction of the states worldwide to COVID-19 may be compared to society’s complacency about the failing health of small newspapers. Firstly, there was a panic and an urge to rescue them amid the pandemic (Hess & Waller, 2021). Similarly, bacteria are a useful analogy for social media because they can be understood to be both dangerous and beneficial. Social media and the entire Internet are named the *fifth estate* (Dutton & Dubois, 2015; Jericho, 2012). Polish publishers are aware of the power of social media. At the pandemic’s beginning, they applied for aid programs from Google, the European Journalism Centre, and Facebook. Almost all local newspapers have Facebook pages to promote content.

Meanwhile, the sales of the printed press have been decreasing month by month. The data from August 2021 shows that the title with the most significant decrease in sales among local weeklies was “Życie Bytomskie”. Only 2,468 copies were sold, 11.92% fewer than in August 2020. At the same time, the average total sales of the highest-ranked “Tygodnik Zamojski” amounted to 13,909 copies, a 7.61% decrease from the previous year. “TEMI Galicyjski Tygodnik Informacyjny” was in second place, selling 6,142 copies and recording a sales decrease of 9.41%. “Kramik – Plus” sold the least 1,561 copies, a decrease of 5.57% (Rycko, 2021). The average quarterly sales of all examined weekly magazines in the 2nd quarter of 2022 were lower than in August 2021: “Tygodnik Zamojski” by 12.30% (12,198 copies), “TEMI Galicyjski Tygodnik Informacyjny” by 16.09% (5,154 copies), “Życie Bytomskie” by 12.68% (2,155 copies), “Kramik – Plus” by 4.48% (1,491 copies) (PBC, 2022).

Examining the differences in total print copy sales and e-copy sales may seem interesting. All four audited local weeklies are available in both media; however, the sum of e-copies sold

³ Currently Local Media Association.

concerning the total is negligible – starting from 0.12% in the case of the overall best-selling (sic!) “Tygodnik Zamojski,” followed by 0.39% “TEMI”; 0.40% “Kramik,” to 0.74% “Życie Bytomskie” In Table 1 local weeklies are compared to the most popular nationwide weeklies. Unsurprisingly, national weeklies outperform local ones due to the limited distribution range of print copies and the limited scope of the impact of their content.

Table 1. Average sales of total copies and e-copies (April-September 2021 and April-June 2022) of local weeklies concerning the most popular Polish weeklies covered by PBC research.

No.	Title	Average sales 2021	Average sales 2022	E-copy sales 2021	E-copy sales 2022
1.	Tele Tydzień	532 175	492 319	–	–
2.	Życie na Gorąco	373 731	328 949	–	–
3.	Twoje Imperium	275 625	249 688	–	–
4.	Chwila dla Ciebie	201 414	173 875	–	–
5.	To & Owo	199 491	183 350	–	17
...
24.	Tygodnik Zamojski	13 956	12 198	6	14
25.	TEMI Galicyjski Tygodnik Informacyjny	6 236	5 154	34	20
26.	Życie Bytomskie	2 563	2 155	12	16
27.	Kramik – Plus	1 526	1 491	9	6

Source: Own findings based on data from the PBC (2022). ‘Average sales’ includes the copy and copy sales of e-editions.

It is necessary to explain why only four weeklies are included in the analysis. These are the only local weekly titles controlled by the Association for Controlling Press Distribution (Związek Kontroli Dystrybucji Prasy ZKDP) and thus included in PBC research. There used to be more local newspapers belonging to ZKDP, but fewer of them each year. A decade ago, the website ‘Wirtualnemedial.pl’ (the first to systematically document changes in the press) explained that their analysis and ranking of local weeklies included the 15 titles with the highest average sales as listed in the ZKDP. The list for 2015/2016 included 22 local weeklies, with the reservation that only those reported to the ZKDP were included. Two years later, only nine titles appeared in the 2017/2018 ranking. In 2019/2020, the following publishers withdrew their five titles from the ZKDP⁴. Those resigning from membership in

⁴ At the beginning of 2020, three publishers withdrew their titles from the ZKDP: Agencja Wydawnicza Agard (Agard Publishing Agency), which releases “Obserwator Lokalny” in Dębica; Oficyna Wydawnicza Nowy Łowiczanin (Nowy Łowiczanin Publishing House) with its weekly titles “Nowy Łowiczanin” and “Wieści z Główna i Strykowa”; and Zakopiańskie Towarzystwo Gospodarcze (Zakopane Economics Society) with “Tygodnik Podhalański.” A few months prior, in October 2019, the weekly magazine “Życie Podkarpackie” publishers, Ziemia Przemyska (Land of Przemysł), had also withdrawn. Thus, only four local weeklies remained in the ZKDP: “Tygodnik Zamojski,” “TEMI Galicyjski Tygodnik Informacyjny” in Tarnów, “Życie Bytomskie” and the Białystok advertising weekly “Kramik – Plus.”

the Association explained that advertisers were less interested in sales results than online reach and that the required monthly reporting back to the ZKDP added to the publisher's workload (Pązik, 2020). On 15 December 2020, the ZKDP itself formally ceased to exist. A subsidiary of the ZKDP – the PBC – took over the research and provision of information on the circulation and distribution of newspapers and magazines. It is supervised by the IWP (JK, 2020)⁵.

In an immediate reaction to the pandemic, publishers began to reduce the volume and circulation of their magazines, opened negotiations with office-space landlords on reducing rent, requested social insurance reductions, and applied for aid mentioned above programs from Google, the European Journalism Centre, and Facebook⁶. These steps were intended to enable the functioning of the publishing houses at a lower cost. Additional savings were made by not paying out mileage expenses, as journalists made no business trips. The temporary reduction of salaries and working hours was also possible – as was announced by “Kurier Szczeciński”, which lowered them by 20%, and the dismissal of employees at retirement age (Stawiany & Czapul, 2020).

“Appreciating the Power of the Social”

During the pandemic, the IWP, the SGL, and the SML intensified campaigns promoting press readership. IWP created a video clip with the slogan “Read the press, let us be together!” – an appeal on behalf of the editors-in-chief of dailies and weeklies to encourage readers to buy magazines. Local press promotion was also undertaken by local publishers, who launched the campaign “Bread rolls and a local newspaper, please!” Special posters were designed and made available on local publishers' social media profiles and websites (Czapul, 2020b).

At the end of April 2020, the owner of Biedronka (the largest chain of discount supermarkets in Poland) announced that he wanted to help small entrepreneurs. Several dozen publishers of local weeklies responded to this pledge. They explained that local papers are regional products worth supporting, so they applied to be sold in Biedronka stores. This resulted in a pilot program implemented in June 2020, under which almost 160 Biedronka stores in 75 towns across eastern and southern Poland sold one of four weekly titles: “Tygodnik Podhalański”, “Tygodnik Siedlecki”, “Tygodnik Zamojski”, “Nowiny Raciborskie”. This program was supposed to last until the end of August 2020 but was extended (Stawiany, 2020ab). From April 2021, 38 more newspapers were sold in Biedronka in 419 shops across

⁵ In December 2021, it was reported that the PBC had developed a new press distribution policy with publishers to enter into force in 2022. The publication of press reports will also change from monthly to quarterly. They are to combine data on advertising, readership, and press dissemination (JSX, 2021).

⁶ Such measures were taken, amongst others, by Kropka J.W. Śliwczyński Publishing (then-owners of “Wiadomości Wrzesińskie”); Zakopiańskie Towarzystwo Gospodarcze (“Tygodnik Podhalański”) and Mepress Andrzej Andrysiak (“Gazeta Radomszczańska”).

228 towns. The locations were selected after consultations with newspaper publishers (Stawiany, 2021).

The Need for Coordinated Policy Responses

With the pandemic's beginning, the printed press found itself in a paradoxical situation. Although the request for information intensified significantly during the crisis, the economic pressure on newspapers escalated because advertising revenues plummeted. Some European countries have supported their newspapers with state aid. Meanwhile, commenting on Hungary and Poland, Holtz-Bacha (2022, p. 40) named them "the EU's black sheep" regarding media policy and freedom of the press. It is difficult to disagree with the statement just shortly after the PKN Orlen acquisition of several regional newspapers⁷ and a common practice of the Polish government to subsidize only chosen media during the COVID-19 crisis. Caused by the latter, the deterioration of the economic base hit the media worldwide. Simultaneously, there was a growing need for reliable information among citizens, especially directed at those who had decision-making power and were responsible for managing the crisis. The pandemic developed into a crisis different from any other experienced by humankind in the last years. Therefore, it can only be compared to other types of emergencies to a limited extent.

A very different crisis was foretold by Sparks and others (2016) comparing American, Chinese, and European media markets, which was caused by the growth of the Internet. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened this crisis around the world. Looking for similarities, the Polish local media market resembles this in China rather than in Western Europe. The contemporary Chinese situation is marked by intense competition between different titles at the provincial and city level, which is determined by political, not economic, factors. In Poland, commercial titles compete with those published by local governments and those belonging to Polska Press (PKN Orlen). The Chinese crisis of local press struck later than that in the developed world, but its onset appears fiercer compared with the relatively mild decline of local press in the United States. The press crisis commenced later in Poland, too, but was severe from the beginning. One primary strategy adopted by the newspapers to tackle it was to reduce the costs of producing and circulating the press.

Another activity focused on local media publishers was conducted by associations of publishers. In December 2021, the SML debuted a new journalism competition: The Local e-Journalism Awards 2021⁸. This was the first competition in Poland aimed exclusively

⁷ On 1 March 2021, PKN Orlen – a Polish oil corporation controlled by the government – formally owned Polska Press, which publishes 20 regional dailies and 16 local weeklies (Polska Press Grupa, 2021).

⁸ The publishers of the following websites joined the SML in 2020-2021: limanowa.in (Publisher: Ilmanowa Partnership, Limanowa), ino.online (Administrator: Ino-online Media, Inowrocław), nswiecie.pl (Publisher: PQM Krzysztof Grzechowiak, Bydgoszcz), halogorlice.info (Administrator: Halostrona.pl

at journalists and publishers of local internet portals. Explaining the new initiative, the president of the SML, Piotr Piotrowicz, spoke about a historic moment in which the world of media is changing dynamically – the Internet has an increasingly significant impact on people’s lives. That is why it is worth promoting good online journalism. The issue of replacing the print press with electronic media was not addressed but was apparent from the subtext (SML, 2021b). The leading partner of the competition was Google Poland, which has been working with the SML since 2019 on projects such as the technological transformation program and e-Journalism University training programs.

The SGL also brings together publishers of online portals and undertakes activities for them. At the end of December 2020, the SGL had 52 members who published 67 local newspapers and websites. The 2020 SGL activity report confirms a decline in advertising budgets in the print segment, which was greatly reinforced by the pandemic. As part of the attempt to counteract its effects, the SGL – in cooperation with the IWP – coordinated campaigns resulting in paid government advertisements appearing in local newspapers. According to the SGL, by the end of 2020, the situation of the local press had slightly improved.

Under the banner “Bringing media closer – how to increase the trust and commitment of readers”, a joint project of the Polish-American Fulbright Commission and the SGL was implemented. It aimed to support the media in reaching online audiences and educating them about Internet safety and how to use the latest technology. It was inaugurated in 2019 and continued until 30 March 2021 (Rada Wydawców SGL, 2021).

We Are All in This Together

The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to treating the country’s newspapers as ‘essential services’, it has opened the possibility of developing new approaches to cross-industry collaboration both in Australia (Hess & Waller, 2021) and in Poland. The Polish government undertook many actions aimed at the weakest social groups, including local press publishers. For instance, it provided an opportunity to apply for tax exemptions for publishing houses. In the meantime, publishers’ societies promoted print press sales and support for publishers to digitize. The local publishers are increasing their activity on the Internet, and their affiliate organizations are trying to help them as much as possible. At the same time, however, they are reluctant to abandon print form. It seems that the Internet, although ubiquitous, still gives rise to uncertainty. Why? Perhaps the answer, at least, is the specificity of the local press. Some readers still prefer a printed message that appears more specific, real, and credible. They are mainly elderly people, often living in smaller towns.

It is also worth paying attention to publishers who continue to print not just because of traditionalist readers. They are not afraid of new technology, and they see an opportunity to sell content that used to be free until now. Andrzej Andrysiak, the publisher of “Gazeta Radomszczańska”, introduced paid access to online content as early as October 2020. After a year, he claimed it was worth it. Andrysiak predicted that in 2 years, the paper would have more subscriptions than copy sales. He claims combining print and digital press is the future for local and national press, although this optimism seems slightly premature. The quality of journalism available is an essential factor. Online, readers receive information quickly, along with access to closed content (which accounts for about 25-30% of all content). Furthermore, it is this paid content, announced on social media, that Andrysiak believes to have the most potential (JK, 2022). However, other local publishers are cautious about paywalls.

Examining the economic consequences of technological changes in the press industry highlights publishers’ problems. Disruption of the economic model on which the regional and local media market was based also affected communities where local press played an essential role in every sphere of social, economic, and cultural life. The sharp reduction in advertising revenue for newspapers has worsened their economic situation and weakened the print media’s role in carrying out their role. As introduced by many countries, the aid schemes increased dependence on the state and created new liabilities. The consequences of these measures will remain for a long time – they may be referred to as long COVID or post-COVID conditions in the media sector.

Discussions and Conclusions

The changes in the local communication field, especially its channels, which have been signaled by researchers for years, became a fact. Two thousand twenty-two data confirm that the various shocks of the last few years, including the pandemic, have accelerated structural shifts towards a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment worldwide (Newman, 2022). Today’s consumers have a choice regarding the technologies and platforms that access, produce, and distribute media content. Internet draws audiences from the press, radio, and television, posing the greatest threat to local print press.

According to a We Are Social/Hootsuite report, in January 2021, there were 31.97 million internet users in Poland – 84.5% of the total population – and their number increased in 2020-2021 by 1.3 million (4.4%). In January 2022, there were 32.86 million internet users (87% of the total population). For comparison – in Eastern Europe, the reach of the Internet was 82% concerning the entire population in 2021 and 86% in 2022 (Kemp, 2021, 2022). Time spent online daily (6 hours 39 minutes) is much longer than the time spent reading the press, both printed and electronic (1 hour 17 minutes). On average, we spend more time listening to the radio, watching TV, and using social media than reading.

Digital News Report 2022 shows a few trends in the whole world:

- Consumption of traditional media, such as TV and print, declined further in the last year in almost all countries, with online and social consumption not making up the gap. Interest in news has fallen from 63% in 2017 to 51% in 2022.
- The proportion of paying for online news increases only in a few rich countries (Australia, Germany, Sweden); young people do not pay for any online news; the average age of a digital news subscriber is almost 50.
- because of rising household costs, some consumers are considering reducing the number of media subscriptions. Access to the news is becoming more and more widespread. In all markets, less than a quarter (23%) of consumers look for the news on websites or apps, down nine points from 2018. Others prefer social media, search engines, and mobile aggregators.

In recent years, many publishers have tried to get audiences to pay for content online to reduce their dependence on advertising revenue. Digital News Report 2022 states that most of the consumers paid for online news in Norway (41%), followed by Sweden (33%), Finland (19%), and the United States (19%). Australia (18%) and Germany (14%) showed the biggest increases this year – at five percentage points. On the other hand, the report depicts a slight decline in Norway and the United States. Around half of the subscriptions in the USA go to “The New York Times”, “Washington Post”, and “The Wall Street Journal”. Half of the subscribers in Finland pay for “Helsingin Sanomat”, the national newspaper with local publications. Over half (53%) pay for a local or regional title in Norway, 35% in Germany, and 27% in the United States. By contrast, 5% of subscribers pay for a local title in the UK and 3% in Portugal. In Poland, 14% of consumers pay for any online news. The vast majority of those paying are the elderly, with an average age of 47 across countries.

These data confirm Sparks’ and other’s (2016, p. 201) conclusion: “Newspapers are losing their unique role of providing detailed news and information, their advertisers are deserting them for online competitors while newspapers have not been able to retain their market share in the Internet environment, those audiences that remain loyal to newspapers and follow their online offering are very reluctant to pay for particular titles when there are free alternatives”. Local press faces an even worse situation. Printed newspapers, even those that are free, are generating less and less interest among the readership. The Internet and smartphones are dominant across society. The local press publishers’ situation would not be that dramatic if more people decided to pay for content delivered online. How do we make it happen? For such a question, no single answer exists.

As outlined above, the *Fifth Estate may successfully replace the Fourth Estate*. However, access to information (particularly in social media) does not always correspond with using them. In addition, many people are becoming increasingly disconnected from any news. In the USA, the proportion of respondents who say they did not access any news source in the last week has grown from 3% in 2013 to 15% in 2022. In Japan, it was 15%; in the United Kingdom, 9%; in France, 8%; and in Australia, 8% (Newman, 2022). Seven years

earlier, Coleman and Ross (2015) wrote that the Internet reconfigured the information and communication environment. It has brought “new ways of producing, acquiring, sharing, and challenging what people need to know”. However, it “has not displaced traditional media and will probably never do so”. Is it true today?

Examples from the world press show that online content subscriptions can earn more than print subscriptions. Nevertheless, only the most prominent newspapers have managed this successfully. The problem of how small publishers can move their local press online is an open question. In 2021, the American consulting firm Mather Economics published optimistic forecasts for digital subscriptions, which by 2027 are expected to overtake the print subscriptions of local newspapers (Williams, 2021). However, this will not automatically mean more online revenue, as publishers charge less for digital products than print. In addition, subscribers to digital editions appear less loyal than their traditional counterparts and more frequently quit reading. Polish local publishers are also faced with the problem of acquiring and maintaining digital subscribers, although their scale is currently much smaller. Indeed, it will be several years before this form of local communication becomes common. However, staying in print will not be easy for them either. Until now, they saw their biggest threat in local government media. Their concerns are heightened by the state-owned corporation present in local markets since 2020, which can rapidly meet the demands of online readers.

Decision-makers cannot perceive local and regional media as worse or less significant than national publications. The essential functions of these media include fostering an emotional connection to specific geographic, social, and cultural spaces, the integration of local and supralocal communities, and promoting local initiatives. Local and regional media provide information on local society, explain it, and encourage people to engage in it, shaping attitudes and behavior. They should perform a controlling function as well. They may only be perceived as a fourth (or fifth) estate.

A successful migration to the virtual world, namely the Internet, would enable the seamless transference of those functions. Printer local press reaches the broadest range of recipients among the oldest residents of small societies (villages and towns). A more attractive and engaging online form is needed to attract younger readers. Although not all local publishers are ready to transition towards online publishing, SML and SGL have taken measures to improve the situation. They have appeared to be not enough. Coordinated actions of the government, municipal councils, and social organizations are in demand.

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