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MEDICAL NEWS, DIGIDEMIC AND HEALTH CRISIS. WHEN JOURNALISM CREATES PREVENTION AND COMMUNITY SAFETY

Abstract: *Recent national and international health emergencies have repeatedly highlighted the role that local information must play in synthesizing the various social and cultural policies proposed by public authorities in order to manage panic and correctly represent the living conditions of local citizens, overcoming national media logics that are often based on the speed and spectacularisation of (health) disasters.*

By analyzing and comparing the most recent national and international literature on the subject, the article attempts to reconstruct the path taken by community journalism from a socio-media point of view, referring to three perspectives that seem to hinder and at the same time promote community information in the digital society: technological change and the information market; the transformation of the audience; the impact of recent global crises on news traffic. Rethinking these dimensions can transform news reporting into a cultural field capable of creating awareness and an emergency culture among citizens and security for communities in times of crisis.

Keywords: *local community; journalism; crisis; digidemic; health communication*

Introduction

Starting from March 2020 the spread of COVID-19 imposed isolation for many weeks, with opening and closing phases, which involved numerous countries, including Italy. And this is until mid-2021. Being together has increasingly become an online relationship.

Our daily life has become increasingly "platformized": the home, school and work environment have become exclusively digital. In this regard, to describe this unprecedented situation Anthony Giddens used the expression "digidemic", the first digital pandemic in history made up of connections, data and above all an excess of information¹⁰. It is no coincidence that another word that characterized the pandemic period was "infodemic", a term first coined by the political scientist David Rothkopf (2003) and then reused by the World Health Organization during the emergency¹¹. "Infodemic" refers to the presence of an overload of news concerning a specific event that confuses public opinion, overwhelms the media and undermines the institutions, as it heavily conditions our mind and the ability to correctly process multiple news items. Some facts, writes Rothkopf (2003) mixed with fear, rumors, and speculations, amplified and transmitted throughout the world by modern information technologies, can influence the economies, policies and security status of many nations.

In the face of a pandemic, we are unprepared and the exceptional nature of the situation, including in Italy, has generated chaos and mistrust at all levels: in the institutions, among citizens, and also in the world of journalism. According to Radcliffe and Wallace (2021) the biggest health emergency in recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, risked causing the "extinction" of many of the newsrooms around the world. The main efforts in the production of emergency information have focused on local journalism, an editorial sector that is even more in crisis after the pandemic event. In fact, local media have a smaller advertising pool to draw on and are the ones that have been most affected by the crisis.

¹⁰ <https://www.sum.uio.no/english/research/networks/arne-naess-programme/arne-naess-symposia/events/anthony-giddens-covid-19-and-the-future-world-of-order.html>

¹¹ https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1

In global emergencies, without long-medium-term economic aid, the losses that community media suffer could have a profoundly negative impact on information of (and for) the community (Comunello, Mulargia, 2018). Without a lively local news industry, there is a risk that public institutions will act less responsibly and transparently in the exercise of their duties than they would in a situation of social stability (Lombardi, 2006; De Vincentiis, 2018).

Furthermore, during a geographically small or more extensive emergency, there is rarely a general narrative of events. Instead, there are a myriad of narratives that need to be contextualized and explained to different communities (Radcliffe & Wallace, 2021). And it is in these situations of social and informational disorder that the centrality of community journalism is revealed, as the press agencies alone cannot carry out all the work of "shaping" the news and intervene by verifying their truthfulness, just as they cannot post an article online and, at the same time, work with the times of the printed paper in the editorial office.

The effort must be common at local and national levels, integrating editorial and online work, with observation in the field, in contact with the various reference communities who can explain what is happening, thus integrating the point of view of the journalist. The goal is not only to investigate the consequences of a disaster, or record the damage but to collect and tell people's moods, to extend a certain critical gaze on reality, which journalism should report daily.

Methodological notes

Starting from this scenario, the following contribution attempts to reconstruct, from a sociological point of view, the path taken by community journalism by referring to three perspectives that at the same time seem to hinder and enhance local information in the digital society: technological change and the health information market; audience transformation; the impact of recent global crises on news traffic with a focus on Covid-19. Community journalism is a branch of journalism that focuses on covering local news and events that are relevant to the residents of a specific community. It is a vital part of the media industry as it provides a platform for people to voice their concerns and bring attention to issues that are often overlooked by larger news organizations.

This way of journalism often presupposes a deep knowledge of the issues affecting their communities, which allows them to provide in-depth coverage and analysis relevant to their readers. Community journalism also plays an essential role in promoting civic engagement and participation. By reporting on local issues and events, community journalists can help educate residents about the political process and encourage them to get involved in their communities. This can include attending local government meetings and participating in grassroots campaigns to promote change (Moro, 2023).

3A (community and security) journalism without borders?

Digital transformation and disintermediation processes have therefore reconfigured the entire information market, redefining relations with sources – both institutional and informal – by virtue of their pluralization and growing direct accessibility, and with the public, in its role as producer and distributor of information content (Murru, Pasquali 2020; Sorrentino, Splendore, 2022). A way of "doing journalism" that appears increasingly "hybrid" in its architecture (Chadwick, 2013) which also involves local information and at the same time characterizes the journalistic culture of the community which is in itself closer to that produced by national or international media, but which now finds itself competing with an unstructured information overload that circulates above all within the various platforms. Groups and profiles of citizens who, while not intentionally providing information, end up updating and reporting news events or facts, condemned to an infinite scroll of fake news, conspiracy theories, memes and virtual brawls, uncivilized debates within digital infrastructures, which have now become increasingly "places" to be de-platformed (Lovink, 2023).

The public space defined by the journalistic media is an increasingly crowded arena of themes and protagonists of the same moods and comments produced by these protagonists, or by all those who intervene to clarify, comment, and specify. A space that widens as the information flows grow and the subjects manage to intervene within it.

For this reason, we speak of "densification" in the media sphere, where information is overloaded in an increasingly articulated plurality of directions (Sorrentino 2006; Agostini 2012). Within this process of changing media ecology, local newspapers still play a crucial role in helping people feel connected to their communities, providing relevant news and a space for

public debate, and integrating the agenda of national news from major national newspapers (Gunn, Syvertsen 2016). Despite the importance of their presence and function, local media has declined significantly in Western media systems. Local newsrooms, operating on slim margins, have been forced to contend with changing news consumption habits and the shift from print to online news, which undermines the functioning of current business models and the desirability of information products and services existing (Nielsen 2015).

The presence and, in part, the success of the local press today, in fact, cannot be traced so much in the more general economy of information, but rather in that of knowledge and analysis. "Narrating from within" has allowed the emergence and representation of previously unknown social realities, the news area has expanded, drawing on a larger number of sources. This condition has made it possible, on the one hand, to better intercept the varied interests present in the reading public; on the other hand, quickly and exhaustively satisfying the information needs of individual communities, particularly in crisis and emergency contexts (Comunello, Mulargia 2018). The disruption of ordinary social activities produced by their impact often triggers specific patterns of behavior and leads to the production of new frames of reference (Pelanda, 1982).

The "informative dialogue" between local media and collaborative audiences could improve journalism in an emergency through bottom-up content, especially in those cases where traditional media are struggling to reach. Difficulties are mainly attributable to two factors: the structural crisis that the world of professional journalism has been experiencing for some years now (which translates into reduced revenues, budget cuts, job losses and pluralism of the information offer) and numerous problems related to reaching places often made inaccessible by the calamitous event (Cooper, 2019). The recent COVID-19 health crisis has drawn very similar information and behavioral geography of the public and newspapers. The causes seem to be many: overload, information overload, news avoidance, fatigue from consuming the same topics over and over again, powerlessness in the face of the information society, and difficulty in interpreting health data.

Local newspapers and medical information

As mentioned in part in the introduction to this analysis, news coverage during the

COVID-19 pandemic was an important factor in how people responded to health and safety protocols designed to curb the spread of the virus. This role of news during the recent pandemic highlights the broader trend that news has the potential to influence vital health behavior. Crucially, at a time when news plays such a crucial role in private decision-making, access to news globally continues to contract. In particular, local newspapers are disappearing at an alarming rate. According to Maimuna Majumder (2023), a researcher in computational epidemiology at Harvard Medical School, when cities lose their local newspapers, disease researchers work blindly, losing important sources and key elements for interpreting the health status of communities. Through work on the HealthMap website, it was possible to confirm how the information collected is being used not only by public health authorities but also by researchers around the world who are studying things like the changing geographical distribution of diseases - think Zika - and the impact of climate change on disease patterns. The site set up by the Boston team continues to work exclusively with non-traditional data sources, including local media reports and social media platforms, to monitor global infectious disease activity in real-time. Local media are therefore the bedrock of health research, allowing early signs of what is happening in a community to be captured and studied: the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic is an example of how local reporting helped bring an emerging disease threat to global attention. Without local reporting, it would have been even more difficult to track an epidemic and assess its progress.

Event-based surveillance depends on robust, local journalism, so it is reasonable to assume that the loss of local sources would increase the time it takes to detect an outbreak (Hartley et al. 2013). Newspapers are not the only source of local news, of course, but a town that cannot support a newspaper may not even have radio and television stations. Indeed, radio and television stations may not file reports online, or may not file them in paper format, making their archives harder to search (Majumder, 2023).

Social media cannot bridge the gap created by declining local news coverage. With Twitter, you can pick up a signal, but that signal may not be accurate' or even the social media reports may simply be wrong Local news coverage functions as an 'anchor' of a ship that stops signals picked up on social media and distributes them equally to the community beyond any form of digital inequality. For all these reasons, the scientific community, especially in the US, is quite concerned about the so-called growth of 'news deserts' - communities without local news

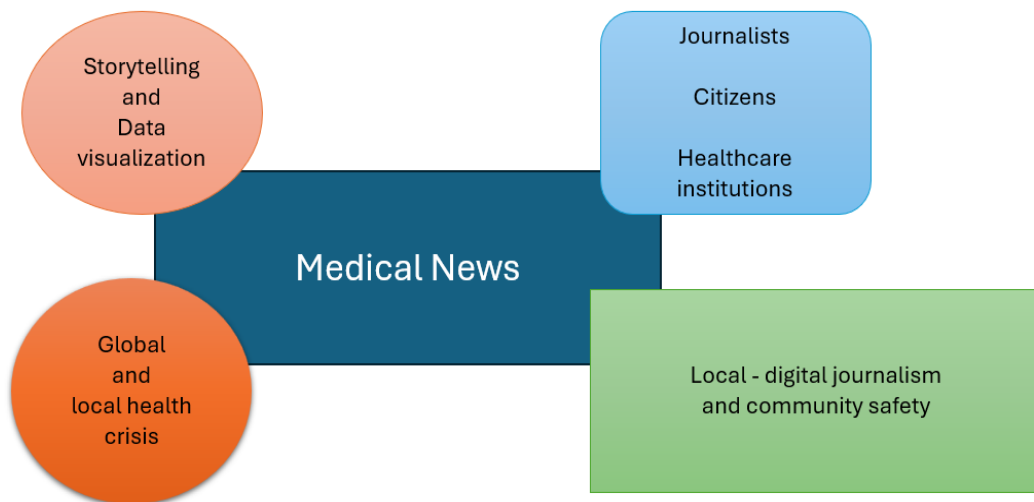
sources. The presence of health news and collaboration with academic health institutions, however, is not enough to understand an epidemic or to adopt preventive behavior. The latter must be communicated.

Thus, the problem of the 'presence of local health news' is joined by that of journalistic language in the medical field (Pitrelli, 2021). And in health crises, such as Covid-19, we are faced with a 'numbers game', local newspapers use statistics and data visualizations to cover the health emergency (Newly & Gwendelyn, 2022).

Data and visualizations are an important part of local health news. Systematic data from credible sources provide context to stories and educate the audience, just as data visualizations help simplify complex statistical information and increase audience interactivity. Journalists associate statistics with objectivity and use them to quantify risk in crisis situations and examine predominant data sources, data-driven medical and scientific narratives and the use of interactive elements. Recent research has shown a strong reliance on local media, during Covid 19, on government sources (Platoff et al. 2020; Ahmad, 2016). The result was a prevalence of hard news, localization of statistics, contextual presentation of data and abundant use of visualizations. The result was disorientation for local communities. The coverage lacked human interest stories (a typical journalistic technique), lacked interactivity in the infographics and did not adequately reflect the diversity of the communities covered by the two newspapers.

The data-driven stories did not always provide access to the underlying databases, nor did they always explain the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. Although the readable format of the articles and updates on infection rates can inform audiences, we argue that coverage that ignores trends in the broader data can leave readers feeling negative and encourage them to avoid the news (Newly & Gwendelyn, 2022).

Overall, data journalism can be crucial in making sense of mass events with clear 'data-driven' characteristics, but in some cases and contexts there may be little support from mainstream news outlets, or it may be difficult for local newspapers to adopt exclusively quantitative/visual language. What emerges is the existence of a 'data divide' in data-driven reporting, caused both by the skills available to journalists and the quality of data available and by the fragmented reading of audiences.

Fig.1 Infographic of medical news in the global health crisis

Conclusion

Based on what has been discussed, it clearly emerges how local journalism, in its traditional and digital form, becomes a central element useful for building a territorial bond precisely in moments of insecurity and disorientation. Newsworthiness consists of more intense forms of negotiation with the reading public, often known and "faithful". Accustomed to an increasingly disorganized and spectacularized way of informing, local information comes to take the form of the best expression of the role of hinge between the public sphere and everyday life, a place of "sense" and relationship more open to listening than to entertainment. Considering the high public attention (partly also international) that socio-natural disasters receive from Italian and international media and political institutions, as well as their direct presence as story news on all the front pages of newspapers and in local and national news, one could venture to define the "disasters in and through the media" of media events (Dayan, Katz 1992), narrative forms (or scripts) based on the pre-planned upheaval of content programming to reach large audiences and coverage of events at the "core" of society. Doing local journalism, and being local journalists, means researching and finding an element of characterization that distinguishes that type of press capable of creating an "intimate" place of shared knowledge with its audience (Hjarvard 2000). And this

condition is clearly evident when the community is (s) overwhelmed by the emergency.

The role played by the new information technologies, used in a strategic and participatory way in the emergency, both by journalists, by the communities and also by the institutions themselves, favor forms of communication, cooperation and immediate intervention. At the same time, consideration of the 'local' in print and the relevance of print in the local are conditions that intertwine and support each other. It is in the emergency that, with and in the local press, what Meyrowitz (1993) has defined as a "public and mediated social awareness" is highlighted which is strengthened parallel to the emergence of new communication and information processes, where the topics, previously of importance only at a territorial level, today they become national issues and force the "new public" to take a stand. "Plural and alternative voices" focus directly on the specific interests of a community and constitute the corpus of the news (Baker, 2023). The sense of belonging to a community, typical of the citizen-journalist, leads him to fully explore the hardships and difficulties of his territory, sometimes leaving behind the specific logics of modern media ecology, experimenting with languages, giving voice to colleagues and "old and new" audiences, also positioned outside that community or to the same victims (primary or secondary) of the disaster that has occurred.

The new mediated, transparent and connected public sphere is a "non-localized" space (Thompson, 1998) within which we move continuously, in and out of global information flows, starting from local frames of reference, from the normality of everyday life, from the neighborhood, towards times and spaces that have a wider reference and definition. The loss of the "sense of place" which can also be found in the information process has generated a form of journalism sick with "institutionalism" which is able to offer stimulating but not diversified stories, just as it appears limited in offering points of views on the world and identical sources. The sources of local information often differ from those of the national or international networks and this depends on the availability of a larger budget or staff which allows for in-depth analysis of the international events broadcast by news agencies. The bureaucratic organization of the world by journalists, the continuous oscillation between fiction and reality, and the non-substantive nature of information, have favored the passage from the information age to that of "post-journalism". A transition that does not yet seem to completely overwhelm the local journalistic dimension which tries to

maintain its identity and its open, plural, albeit geographically circumscribed gaze. Crises and events occur globally, but relationships and identities are formed based on common interests, lifestyles and political beliefs, shared beyond geographical limits, «constitute the infrastructure that holds up the world and makes it livable, manageable, explorable and, more importantly, reducible to the contingencies and uncertainties that characterize everyday community life» (Silverstone 2002, p. 16).

Information technology works today as a "bridge over the world" that defines a new cultural *frame where images, narrations, chats, and homepages*, favor the overcoming of the traditional concept of border, help to create creative exchanges between equality and difference, heroes and antiheroes, friends and strangers and to participate in events and circumstances in distant and remote places within media spaces that become part of the social and of our local life experience. The coronavirus pandemic posed an unprecedented set of challenges for community newspapers, as the industry was hit by an existential threat due to the economic impact of the pandemic and the logical challenges of reporting in a health emergency (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2023).

The closure of non-essential activities has led to a decline in local advertising revenue, while isolation has made the distribution of print newspapers more difficult or impossible. Although many newspapers experienced an increase in online ratings, those publishing print editions faced logistical challenges that often disrupted publication or required drastic changes in practices. At the same time, many newspapers changed the focus of their coverage, sharing positive stories about community initiatives and offering community-based solutions to citizens in need. The pandemic represented a profound break in all elements of journalistic practice, from reporting to printing and distribution. However, community journalism organs, due to their small size and agility, were able to adapt to the challenges and, in many cases, emerged stronger.

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