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# **Local Media, Local Disaster in a Post-covid Era**

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**Abstract.** Community journalism and neighbourhood journalism involves searching for and identifying the distinguishing features of this type of press. It creates an 'intimate' space for shared knowledge with its audience, which is particularly evident when the community is overwhelmed by an emergency. In emergencies, the role of new information technologies, when used strategically and in a participatory manner, falls to journalists, whether from the community or institutions, who favour forms of communication, cooperation and immediate intervention. The article reports on a local case study of journalistic practices and how local journalists operate in communities affected by natural disasters. One of the most interesting results concerns the sense of belonging to a community, which is typical of citizen journalists and leads them to explore the hardships and difficulties of their territory in depth. This sometimes goes beyond the specific logic of modern media ecology and involves experimenting with languages and giving voice to colleagues, as well as to 'old and new' audiences, including those located outside the community. In the specific case reported, this also involves giving voice to the victims of the disaster themselves.

**Keywords:** natural disaster; community media; journalism; floods; Italy

## **1. Introduction**

According to Radcliffe and Wallace (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic, the largest public health emergency in recent years, threatened to 'wipe out' many newsrooms around the world. The main effort to produce emergency information is focused on local journalism, a publishing sector that is even more in crisis after the pandemic event. Local media have a smaller pool of audiences to draw from and are the ones most affected by the crisis.

In global emergencies, without long-term economic support, the losses suffered by community media could have a profoundly negative impact on the information of (and for) the community (Comunello, Mulargia 2018 ). Without a vibrant information industry, there is a risk that public institutions will be less responsible and transparent in the exercise of their functions than in a stable social situation (Lombardi 2006; De Vincentiis 2018).

Moreover, during an emergency, whether geographically limited or extensive, there is hardly ever a general narrative of events. Instead, there is a myriad of narratives that must be contextualised and explained to different communities (Radcliffe, Wallace 2021).

And it is precisely in these situations of social and informational disorder that the centrality of local journalism reveals itself, as news agencies alone cannot do all the work of ‘shaping’ the news and intervening to verify its veracity, as they cannot put an article online and at the same time work with the print media in the newsroom.

The effort must be joined at local and national level, integrating editorial and online work, with observation in the field, in contact with the various communities of reference that can explain what is happening, thus integrating the journalist's point of view. The aim is not only to investigate the consequences of a disaster or to record its damage, but to collect and report on people's states of mind, to loosen a certain critical gaze on reality that journalism should account for daily (Da Lago, De Biasi 2006).

The contribution presented here attempts to build on Radcliffe and Wallace's considerations, going beyond, however, the reflection on the relationship between local media and the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing instead on a new recent emergency, much more ‘local’ than the previous ones: the flood that hit Romagna starting on 15 May 2023.

An emergency that soon became a national story, born, however, within the local editorial offices of Romagna, some of which were almost submerged by water within hours of the start of the violent rains, which saw editors and chief editors quickly move from their desks to the office, work in the field, use every possible means, traditional or digital, just to record the live emergency of the flood and respond to the desperate requests of citizens on the phone from the editorial offices or to their comments via social media.

Reporting from the territory means constructing a reasoned point of view and not mere exposition of facts. The local newspaper does not only collect news, but becomes a place of active, aggregating intermediation (Russ-Mohl 2011).

Information that speaks of and in the community, in fact, must seek to understand the plurality of components of which the social environment is made up, to allow the definition of interpretative outlooks through which to understand the world. And local information is that cultural expedient that provides the opportunity to recognise itself, becoming a meeting place (Kapferer 2012).

The activity of a local newspaper is very much influenced by where it is located, it is important to understand whether there are more factories or more fields to cultivate, what work the inhabitants of the area do, what interests they have. The lay of the land itself can make a huge difference.

The current challenge of community journalism is to be able to fulfil an important civic, political and service function even while remaining faithful to its own mission, trying not to be completely overwhelmed by the processes of digitisation and platforming of media content, especially emotional content.

## 2. Methodological notes

According to the Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale in Italy (2023), the territory of Romagna, the subject of our study, was affected by two events in sequence in just a few days in May 2023 alone, with cumulative monthly rainfall exceeding 450 millimetres in various locations. The current event from midnight on 15 May to 17 May caused the overflowing of 21 rivers and widespread flooding in 37 municipalities. In the following hours, peaks of 300 mm were recorded on the ridge and hill basins of the Forlì area (Romagna).

Socio-natural disasters of this type are by definition extra-ordinary events, concentrated in time and space, which cause an interruption of daily routine (Quarantelli 2000) and destabilise the social structure, producing disorder, human losses and destruction (Gilbert 1998). Increasingly, these are sudden and often unpredictable events that interfere with company equilibriums, leading to situations of collective stress that transform the biological system, the political system and the cultural system, and change the motivations of the actors within these systems.

In the light of these considerations, this contribution analyses the behaviour of local media in emergency contexts.

Specifically, taking the recent flooding that hit Romagna in May 2023 as a reference, an attempt was made to understand how journalists operated within the affected community and organised their work in the formation of information, inside and outside the editorial offices, how and if their routines changed and which channels they used most.

Four main research questions: how would one define local journalism today and how does it function in the analysed social context? What kind of content is generally on the media agenda and how does this change in the emergency? How is local editorial work organised and how has it changed in the aftermath of the flood? How are newspapers in Romagna Yes linked to the community and local institutions?

In order to answer these questions and best represent the theme analysed, a qualitative methodology was used, that of the semi-structured interview. Sixteen interviews were conducted, between the end of June and September 2023, including in the sample journalists (professional and non-professional), with different roles within the local editorial offices, present in the four main cities of Romagna affected by the flood: Rimini, Cesena, Forlì, Faenza (with reference also to the Municipality of Ravenna).

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the qualitative approach chosen allowed to focus more on the depth of the information collected and to gather in I detail the reasons of the interviewees, through their own words.

The semi-structured interview therefore seemed to be the more appropriate technique in terms of openness and flexibility, allowing the freedom - where necessary - to broaden the questions and ask for further clarification. The interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes and were

conducted by appointment with the journalists, both in person and online (via the Teams platform, in the case of newsrooms located in the flood-affected areas and only partially accessible then).

The content of the interview was videotaped and then transcribed in full (Bloor et al. 2001). The textual corpus resulting from the interviews was treated following a procedure of type inductive face to identify, on the basis of the interview track, categories themes more relevant and significant (Ryan, Bernard, 2003) to describe the perceptions, opinions and behaviours of journalists during the emergency flood.

The interview extracts were then reorganised according to these categories. Specifically, two main dimensions of analysis were identified, relating to the local journalistic field and to the profession of journalism in emergencies:

-socio-biographical. This first dimension concerned, on the one hand, the professional life of the journalists involved in the research, inside and outside the newsroom, inside the community affected by the flood, as well as their own idea/perception of local journalism (in an emergency); on the other hand, the political editorials of the individual dailies and the use of certain channels and technologies;

- organisational-cooperative. In this case, it was wanted to explore the role of the local journalist and the internal production routines of individual newsrooms in terms of their collation territorial and the availability of resources human and technological. We have concentrated on those that McQuail (2001) defines "organizational" and "ideological" influences, where the former concern especially the bureaucratic routines, while the latter are the values and conditioning that I am not only individual and personal, but that are also born from the context social (and technological) and influence the activity information.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Live and tell journalistically the Romagna*

The local news, which once marked a clear dichotomy between the story of the deviance, of the subversion of the order, carried out through the news black and the story of the institutional life that regulated the civil coexistence of the social partners, was probably also the first place of information journalism to open more so to the variety of the system social, to represent previously unknown realities.

Aiming on the specifications peculiarities, local newspapers I am you succeeded to expand the news field, following also from the speed up informative, managing to satisfy better that wide range of actions, subjects social, opportunities that are composed everything is fine local reality. As they say some of the respondents involved in the study:

I have been working here for a long time. Before I was in Rimini, now in the Cesena newsroom. I have known and told about two different types of communities (..) over time I have used Everything is fine type of technology applied to journalism. The journalistic practices are very

similar at local and national level. Today with digital, actions and functions, are more or less the same, but local journalism still exists, it has not yet been totally absorbed by the logics of the network and the platforms (I, 4)

First of all, I don't think. is possible to talk about a real model of local journalism in Italy. I don't think there is one, not even from Romagna, I've learnt by watching and doing (...) Each local newspaper has its own peculiarities, its own history, its own objectives, its own "sensitivity". What It is known that in the last years, following from the recent crisis, local information has strengthened the bond with the community, on this there is no doubt (...) What distinguishes us from Repubblica, Sky and "all that world there" are the themes and the possibility / ability to go in depth on that is That it happens close to us, that that we same we live. It's an ability and a privilege that the colleagues that they work at the national level they don't have" (I, 10)

Our work has certainly changed over the years. But the perception that we we have is to be another reference for the community (...) Unlike the daily newspapers national, we have a lot of autonomy in the choice of the news (...) We are first of all "the territory", a "connector informative" between editorial and single city. Also from the point of view of history... how shall I put it... a "grammar" has developed over time that is typical of local information in Romagna" (I, 11).

Information therefore has the exclusive on much information from the territory, especially in cases of serious emergency, where it takes on great importance relevance news value from the territoriality. The more limited the context of dissemination of the newspaper, the more relevant it is how much it happens in this context (Tierney et al., 2006).

In the case of natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods, the "proximity" factor is fundamental. The interest is due to the opportunity to get to know the people first hand, the actors and the places protagonists of the facts; this allows at the community of knowing live information utility and to have a " competence communicative ", that is to ascertain the plausibility of what is told, then the reliability of the medium As mentioned in part, the evolution technology has also allowed to local information to shorten incredibly the times of realisation of all the products. With digital, even if with some difficulties of adaptation and an initial attitude of contempt in the comparisons of online news, the Italian journalism had to take act of the fact that to make survive that consolidated way of providing information on printed paper, it was necessary necessarily to hybridize it with the new ones needs in the new environments informative (Splendore 2017).

As highlighted by Ryfe (2012) and some of the journalists involved in the research, who work both in the daily newspaper and online, many newsrooms are still struggling to adapt to the changes. The fundamental challenge that digital has imposed on traditional journalism is not only about the income and job stability of the information operator, but rather concerns the profession, policy, editorial and technological medium (Singer 2003; Chalaby 2016;).

The paper still preserves its " institutional " value (...) there are no doubts about the costs, yes, we can discuss of the sales in constant descent, but the newspaper that it comes out the next day and is the root of an old way of working that still really inform (...). Writing and consuming online news is today a reality also specific to local journalism, but someone still preserves, in part, the

old way of doing journalism, going out daily with the classic newspaper paper, and to the same time that yes, we update our users through our online pages (I, 15)

Some colleagues they still work on this double track " paper " and " online ". It's also a question of politics, editorial, media, history and culture, local staff and journalism (I, 17)

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In this way we maintain the trust of our readers. Then we also work online (...) Maybe we resume the story already published, we insert some detail, but yes, it is always and in any case about flash news (...) But sometimes it is no use not to recognise it, working on the online allows you to publish something new and special that is not already state press release elsewhere, and therefore, even if fragmented, you can to intrigue the users, to attract attention (I, 6).

### *3.2 Telling the crisis from the inside*

The environmental disaster that hit Romagna concerned a series of events alluvial and geological products of a front meteorological event of Atlantic origin, in turn fuelled by a cyclone Mediterranean, which has generated persistent rains, floods, overflows and landslides on a large part of the region (ISPRA 2023).

As early as 14 May 2023, the service of the Regional Agency for Environmental Protection of Emilia-Romagna issued the alert orange and yellow for criticality hydrogeological in the provinces of Ravenna, Forlì-Cesena and Rimini and the areas of Bologna and Ravenna:

As they recall the interviewees :

Already from that date, even working exclusively online, we decided to concentrate the last hours of the day of the press release that they were about the meteorological situation of our region (...) The previous ones rains of 3 and 4 May they had provoked numerous damages in the province of Ravenna and had forced many people to evacuate (...) This time there was greater tension and anxiety among the citizens that they continuously commented online and asked important details (I, 5).

This time there was greater tension and anxiety between the citizens that they were constantly commenting online and asking for important details (I, 5) With the first flooding the communication emergency, and then even the news, are increased in a frightening way (...) by the citizens, the authorities, the mayors (...) So we started to collect and select that is that it seemed to us more urgent and that could help the citizens to understand how to behave (...) Since that night our work has been about the flood, it did not exist any more nothing (I, 11).

Journalism filters everything that happens, allowing its own public to orient itself between the events and to acquire information to spend daily. And this task it comes exercised through an elaborate process of attribution of relevance, which is used to choose that what it is newsworthy or not (Agostini 2012).

But in the case of emergency, the need to tidy up the information increases in order to enable the inhabitants of the affected areas to better track it. Information and news transmission about the event natural violent is not a "simple reproduction", rather a representation with codes linguistic - narrative precise that meets the expectations of the public, which in turn expresses the need for a key event interpretation extraordinary that he would not be able to give himself reason (De Vincentiis 2018).

According to Lombardi (2006) when yes they verify disasters unexpected contemporary media they have, on the one hand, the function important to update in real time through the channels digital the population; on the other hand, the possibility of extending the narrative communicating the data or the details of the event through the means traditional. This balance has to do with the right choice of means to be used during the " life cycle " of the disaster: the selection and verification of the news becomes increasingly difficult in the early stages of the emergency and the risk is that of oscillating between information overdose collapses and moments of information blackout.

For a local newspaper to manage all this becomes a task complex considering often the numbers rather bass of operators that they make up a local newsroom and the availability of communication tools useful to the desk activity or to be used on the place interested by the emergency. In the case of Romagna, the editorial staff, in addition to knowing these well problems, yes I found myself working in almost completely unattended workstations flooded, with the lines telephone out service and Internet network not working, in some cases for over an hour.

The inconvenience, therefore, I am multiplied in the hours following the flood:

There are six of us in the newsroom (...) usually two reach the place interested, the others they work from here (newsroom) (...) But those days between the blackouts, the water that he entered, the connection that he jumped, he concentrated on What writing and how to give the news was rather tiring, maybe more than the period pandemic (1.3)

That day in the newsroom there were three of us ... we we did everything we could, we felt on me a lot of responsibility. In the first three days we were, on the one hand, the voice of the citizens asking for help and, on the other hand, the only possible bridge of contact between those families who were far away, who had only friends or relatives in the street for days, with their cellars completely flooded (I, 7).

Often, as the interviewees pointed out, the news took on a format that was not very precise, very fast and not very well edited, where the title was simply followed by photos or video news, live, sometimes with almost no text. When it stopped raining, the use of means such as drones has proved to be strategic, as the photograph of the disaster from above "has allowed us to communicate the real situation, to identify the most affected areas hit, to contain someone information partial and imprecise that began to circulate online or in news nationals" (I, 6).

Despite the newsrooms' need to always have their "own news package" (Couldry 2015) and a good connection to work, often standing or on the move, outside or inside the newsroom, the presence of water and mud on the road caused numerous and long power and telephone cuts. This condition,



where possible, pushed the journalists to take advantage of the context in which they found to collect as much information as possible and to select the contents shared to come to readers.

The numerous inconveniences, also in the access to electronic and digital media, by the citizens, led the latter to acquire more copies paper in the following days, which became for some hours the only reference medium able to photograph the emergency in Romagna:

At a certain point, not being able to say we are all here, we concentrated on the neighbourhoods (...) Through the so-called "direct textual", or more simply with videos and photos, every day we concentrated on the history and the situation of the individual places of the city. While some of our colleagues in the Rome or Milan offices only published bulletins or reported on the destruction, the daily confrontation with the farmers, the entrepreneurs working in the most sensitive areas, allowed us to better understand the extent of the disaster and the discomfort of the community. Much of the material we then published it in the edition paper of the next day (...) In the emergency, due to the lack of electricity and connection, people have preferred to acquire the edition traditional, even if partially updated, rather than not know nothing or receive snippets of news here and there (I, 15).

For almost five days, all our efforts have been concentrated on the flood. The case Romagnolo has become national (...) In some of the nights that I am I stayed in the newsroom and received contacts from SkyTg that he asked me details on the construction of this or that dam, looking at all the costs of those responsible or to frame someone (...) Or other colleagues they wanted the number of family members of the victims ( still between the others do not determine ). In a situation like this, outside control, we have preferred sometimes to partially photograph the disaster and give more voice to the citizens ( ...) Shooting random death numbers or create further anxieties and fears, it is not a sign of responsible journalism ( ...) We 've already seen something similar with Covid. And we felt a great responsibility at the time (I, 3).

The literature proves that in the face of uncertainty, people turn to the media and the Internet not only to share information, but also to publicly process the disaster experience, to externalise their own emotions, to trace possible missing persons, to re-establish contact with friends and relatives, to support rescue and management activities from resources (Taylor et al. 2012). As underlined by Fraustino et al. (2017) and Farinosi (2020), the reasons that drive users to use (social) media are diverse and numerous. The latter they can be attributed partly to the needs tied to the ball informative (search for timely and unfiltered news) and partly to the needs tied to the ball relational (communication with friends and family, search for emotional support).

In the emergency, the routinization of journalistic work it is done more complex also because of the intense communication between journalists and the public. In fact, at times it seems to renew itself almost completely.

From the words of the journalists interviewed, we are witnessing a work of selection, hierarchisation and presentation of the news rather accelerated. Internal and external communication within the newsroom, between those who work at the desk and those who work in the field, is intensifying in order to ensure greater and better coordination and the involvement of the inhabitants.

From the 16th to the 17th of May, the story has widened.

To the communications institutional-emergency, that however they could not help but be reported, it was given to begin to pay more attention to the stories of the people, their voices and the great solidarity demonstrated right from the beginning coming on young coming from the community of the Municipalities struck and of the Regions neighbouring.

A choice of field that it seems good yes to approach the thought of Pierre Bayard (2022) to whom he states that it is precisely because of the increase of information false and thesis harmful in the journalism, every writer and communicator should try with his work to alleviate the suffering human, since the individual, even more than its language, is "a being of the story".

Stories, for the philosopher French, would help to make the world less hostile and to satisfy a need common to all human beings, that of creating and listening to personal stories:

In addition to data and recommendations, the presence of news stories emotionally involved the whole community, raising awareness on the issue, avoiding partisan politics (...) We gave voice, for example, to the entrepreneurs of Faenza, to the inhabitants of the city of Conselice, in short, to the cases that were more dramatic, but where at the same time there was more hope to start living again. Pluralism is also informative, the story of the others in our newspaper (I, 12).

We have collected the testimonies of more than ten young volunteers and shared probably a hundred photos in those days (...) stories and gestures of people brave and full of hope, in the midst of the mud (...) give space to everything, I think this was important for them and for us (...) it is a kind of local information that conveys hope and strength (I, 3).

A journalism, that of Romagna, that during the emergency seems to have taken on the appearance of a (local) advocacy journalism, a form of (local) journalism in which there is a fear of the need to side with the weakest or least protected in order to be the bearer of one's own interests. Information that aims to represent the positions and conditions of disadvantaged citizens or those in critical situations.

Towards the end of the week of the 15th of May, the political debate begins.

Once the rains have stopped and the damage has been assessed, numerous visits are made by national and European politicians to the main affected areas. In these circumstances, the institutional presence means that local information, in this case for the whole affected region, follows the institutional event and the words of the passing political actor, such as those of the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, who visited Forlì on 25 May.

Contents in addition to the social and institutional ones already reported:

It's clear that when the Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, arrives, the coverage of this event is total (...) Many have commented on the social pages of the newspaper that we had already forgotten the victims, or that we were servants of the government just for having given space to the President. But that's not the point. This kind of presence and information policy, which was

strictly bound to the event, opened the post-emergency phase (...) and the citizens, above all the residents, have understood it. We have registered important sales and numerous views even in those days (...) beyond the economy, the citizens were interested in reconstructing the history of the flood and discovering the next steps (I, 20).

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the above, the function of social and sometimes institutional mediation, rather than mere transmission, performed by community media in emergency situations becomes clear. Local journalism, in its traditional and digital forms, becomes a central element in the construction of a territorial bond precisely in moments of uncertainty and disorientation. Newsworthiness is constituted by more intense forms of negotiation with the public of readers, often known and "loyal". Accustomed to increasingly disorganised and spectacularised information, local information ends up configuring itself as the best expression of the role of hinge between the public sphere and everyday life, a place of "meaning" and relationship, of more open listening than entertainment. Given the high level of public attention (some of it international) that the flood disaster received from Italian and European institutions, as well as its presence as a news item on all the front pages of newspapers and in local and national news bulletins, one could venture to define the event in Romagna as a media event (Dayan, Katz 1992), a narrative form (or script) based on the predetermined disruption of content programming in order to reach a large audience and to report on events at the "heart" of society.

In the case study discussed, this expression is used again helps to underline, as already supported by the two sociologists Americans, a thesis that yes he believes is still rather current, that is, as an adequate consideration of the events media and how they work allow us to see how "solidarity mechanics", considered in decline terminal in the great modern society of Durkheim, can renew itself when a medium collects whole communities and nations in an experience shared viewing (Couldry 2015).

To this Yes adds, compared to what emerged from the interviews, how local journalism in Romagna, resisting journalistic "temptations" national to organize live from the real "marathons" of the disasters (Liebes 1998), have certainly opted for a continuous live coverage, but focusing the attention on the stories and the needs of the displaced, rather than on the destruction provoked by the rains, with the risk of trivializing the events and fragmenting the participating audiences. A "methodology" that seems to recall the neo-Durkheimian idea that media events serve to integrate communities and strengthen the values of the democratic consensus.

To do local journalism, and to be journalists premises, means to search for and find a characterising element that distinguishes this type of print capable of creating an "intimate" place of knowledge shared with your audience and this condition is very evident. when the community is overwhelmed by the emergency.

The role of new information technologies, used in a strategic and participatory way in emergencies, falls to journalists as well as to those who come from communities or institutions, privileging forms of communication, cooperation and immediate intervention.

At the same time, the consideration of the "local" in the press and the relevance of the press in the local are conditions that are intertwined and mutually supportive.

In times of emergency, what Meyrowitz (1993) defined as a "public and mediated social conscience" is strengthened, in parallel with the emergence of new communication and information processes, where issues that were previously only territorially relevant now become national issues, forcing the "new public" to take a stand. "Plural and alternative voices" that directly address the specific interests of a community and constitute the corpus of news (Baker 2023). The sense of belonging to a community, typical of the citizen journalist, leads him or her to explore in depth the hardships and difficulties of his or her territory, sometimes going beyond the specific logic of the modern media ecology, experimenting with languages, giving voice to colleagues and audiences "old and new", positioned even outside this community or, as in the specific case reported, to the same victims (primary or secondary) of the natural disaster.

The bureaucratic organisation of the world by journalists, the constant oscillation between fiction and reality, the non-substantial nature of information have favoured the transition from the information age to that of "post-journalism".

A transition that does not yet seem to have completely overwhelmed the dimension of local journalism.

Crises and events happen globally, but the relationships and identities formed on the basis of shared interests, lifestyles and political beliefs, shared across geographical boundaries, "constitute the infrastructure that supports the world and makes it liveable, manageable, explorable and, more importantly, reducible to the contingencies and uncertainties that characterise everyday community life" (Silverstone 2002, p. 16).

Information technology acts as a 'bridge to the world', defining a new cultural framework in which images, narratives, chats, homepages encourage the crossing of traditional boundaries, contribute to the creation of creative exchanges between sameness and difference, heroes and anti-heroes, friends and strangers, and participate in events and circumstances in distant and remote places within media spaces that become part of society and our local life experience. Community media can support the production of local culture and heritage, as well as the social and political participation of individual communities, in their own language and on their own terms, globally. Community media provide access not only to the public sphere but also to local community life, producing and sustaining greater 'local-intercultural sensitivity' (Hamilton, 2002).

For this reason, unlike national media, and precisely because of their technical and organisational limitations, they should be seen as tools that allow communities to tell their own stories and build their own identities by discussing political, economic and cultural issues relevant to their daily lives.

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