

Global Media Journal

German Edition

Book Review

The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism

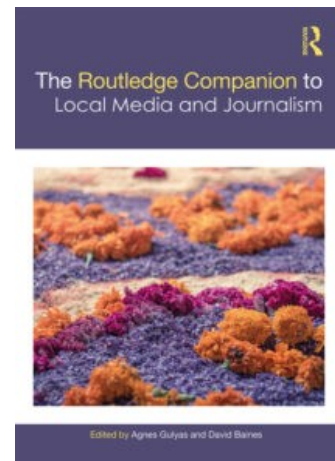
Gulyas, Agnes & Baines, David (eds.) (2020): The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism (1st ed.). London: Routledge. 522 Seiten. ISBN: 978-1-351-23994-3.

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To cite this article: Litvinenko, Anna (2020). Gulyas, Agnes & Baines, David (eds.) (2020): The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism. *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, 10(2).

The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism offers a multifaceted picture of today's local media landscapes across the globe presented by 65 scholars. Local media is one of the fundamental pillars of any media system, and yet its current challenges and transformation in the digital age have remained understudied by communication researchers. Nationwide media outlets traditionally attract more attention of scholars, especially when it comes to comparative studies. The impact and the importance of local news in media ecosystems are often overlooked.

The *Companion* seeks to close this gap by offering a comprehensive overview of history, practices and challenges of local journalism and local media in different parts of the world. Although the majority of the studies included in the book are dedicated to the Western world – which reflects a general disproportion in geography of journalism studies – the volume takes a big step towards diversifying research on local media. Thus, it includes studies on Brazil, China, Ghana, Kenya, and Russia, and some of these studies even put these contexts in comparative perspective with established democracies.



The studies presented in the *Companion* use different methodological approaches, from surveys and interviews to ethnographic field studies. Despite the diversity of approaches and aspects tackled by the authors, the 522-page volume has a well thought-through structure and the collection is made up of seven parts.

The *Introduction: Demarcating the field of local media and journalism* written by Agnes Gulyas and David Baines is an important contribution to mapping and conceptualizing research on local media in today's world. The authors scrutinize the basic terms "local" and "media", putting them into perspective of different contexts, and reflect on their transformation in the digital age. They also highlight similarities that can be traced across the presented studies. For instance, problems of state interventions are often experienced by local media not only in authoritarian contexts, but also in democratic ones. The same applies to the problems with de-professionalization of local journalists, with monetization of digital content, or with "local news deserts" (p. 14), a concept which refers to communities with no or only limited access to qualitative local news coverage.

The first part of the *Companion* is devoted to history and legacy of local media, and presents case studies from the US, Norway, Japan, the UK, Brazil and Caribbean Islands. Several studies here raise an important and understudied question of the role of colonial legacy for local media ecologies.

Part Two is dedicated to local media policies and looks not only at the nationwide media policies, as in the cases of the US, Australia, Kenya and Poland, but also at the so-called sub-states, such as Catalonia and Scotland.

Part Three, *Local media, publics and politics*, focuses on political macro contexts and dynamics of power struggles on local media landscapes. It starts with a comprehensive analysis by C.W. Anderson, who conceptualizes the topic on the example of local journalism in the US. Other studies in this part explore the cases of India, Sweden, Russia and Australia.

Part Four is dedicated to business practices and to local media ownership, which undergoes significant transformations with the rise of hyperlocal news and the increasing importance of global platforms such as Facebook. The main challenge for local journalism in these circumstances is to find a sustainable business model using innovative approaches and at the same time to remain more or less independent. As Bill Reader and John Hatcher mention in their article *Business and ownership of local media: An international perspective*, when it comes to innovations in local media business, "one size does not fit all" (p.205). Studies from the Czech Republic, Britain, France, Netherlands and New Zealand show different approaches to innovations in local media businesses.

Part Five looks at journalistic practices and role perceptions of local news providers in different types of local media in the US, the UK, Bulgaria, Colombia, New

Zealand. An intriguing study by Jaana Hujanen, Olga Dovbysh, Carina Tenor, Mikko Grönlund, Katja Lehtisaari and Carl-Gustav Lindén compares hyperlocal media practitioners in democratic and non-democratic settings (Finland, Sweden and Russia). They find similarities and differences that one would not expect when looking at the national media systems. For instance, Finnish and Russian hyperlocal media practitioners aim at contributing to the local community on a voluntary basis, while their Swedish colleagues see themselves more as entrepreneurs (p.273). Yennué Zárate Valderrama's article on training of local journalists in armed conflict areas in Colombia stands out in this row of studies as it highlights a topic of education of local media practitioners, which otherwise remains out of the scope of the *Companion*.

Part Six discusses communities and audiences of local media. Interestingly, it is the only part of the edited collection, which is completely dedicated to Western countries. This might indicate an important gap in research of media audiences beyond the Western World.

Finally, Part Seven, *Local media and the public good*, presents case studies of local media coverage from Japan, the US, the Pacific Islands, Ghana and Northern Ireland. It poses an important question, which runs like a golden thread through the volume: what exactly is public good in local journalism? The answer is multidimensional, and as the *Companion* shows us, it depends to a large extent on the given context. In this chapter, this idea is illustrated with different examples of local news coverage, such as disaster reporting in Japan, or agricultural broadcasts in Ghana, as well as with the examples of public service journalism in Western countries and the Pacific region.

The *Companion* can serve not only as a guide into the topic, but also as an inspiration for researchers, who would like to explore this area of study. The volume is rich on up-to-date information (many studies contain references to the year 2019) on the current state of local journalism in different regions of the world, and it offers a multitude of perspectives, through which scholars look at local media landscapes.

The *Companion* is a successful example of taking context into account while researching universal trends. The authors have managed to find a hard-to-achieve balance between conceptualizing the complexity of the field and highlighting its diversity. As mentioned above, the attempt of the volume to cover under-researched regions of the world is applaudable. Nonetheless, there is still room for improvement on this aspect. Thus, future edited collections on local media would certainly benefit from including studies from the Middle East and North Africa.

As the *Companion* features a big number of case studies from journalistic practice, it might be useful not only for researchers, but comes in handy also for media pro-

fessionals who would like to deepen their understanding of media trends and to see what innovations work or do not work in certain contexts.

This collection of studies reveals that despite the differences in economic development and political regimes, the digital age poses very similar challenges for local media across the globe as they all seek to re-invent themselves and to find new creative ways to monetize content and to stay useful for their communities. Reading the *Companion* makes one think that these communities would for sure benefit from international networking and an exchange of experiences and ideas among local media professionals.