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Local Press in a Small Community—A Case Study of Relationships Between a Local Weekly and Different Local Actors

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Abstract What are the issues and problems to consider when discussing local (community) media? What are the challenges that local media are facing nowadays? Are phenomena such as: civic journalism, niche journalism, alternative journalism, or the combination of professional and civic journalism, opportunities for further development of local media or are they a threat to the professionalization of local media?

In my paper, I discuss these issues within the context of culture—exploring local media situations in a variety of countries (e.g., Poland, UK, USA, Germany). However, the primary focus is on local media in Poland, and I examine what the biggest challenges are and whether current processes in journalism and media influence local media, and if so, to what extent. On the basis of my own qualitative research (case studies), I show how complex the local relations are and the level of involvement of local journalists and local media owners in these networks of relations. This complexity of relations (media-politics, media-business, media-church, media-media, etc.) might often be a cause of conflicts of interest (individual or institutional) or media bias.

Keywords Local Journalism; Local Relations; Conflict of Interest; Challenges for the Local Media; Individual Conflict of Interest; Institutional Conflict of Interest

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business at the local level and their consequences for local communities.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Relations Between Local Media and Different Social Actors as a Challenge

Local press is still the most developed segment of media in Poland—it is estimated that there are between 2500 and 3000 local newspaper titles (Kowalczyk 2008). These newspapers are very often one of the most important sources of information for a community, it is therefore important to investigate their content, the kinds of problems they face, and the directions they should take in order to survive, without sacrificing their significant role in the community.

One of the issues under investigation is how local media function in a particular social context—that is, the relations between the media and other social local actors (e.g., local government, politicians, local businessmen, church, etc.), who try to influence media content, and how this is manifested (informal relations, indirect political influences, advertisement withdrawal, etc.).

In research focused on Polish journalists, conducted as part of the international project *The Global Journalist in 21st Century*,¹ respondents (86%) claimed that one of the most important aspects of journalistic work is the level of autonomy they have. At the same time, 83% thought they did

have “almost complete” or “a great deal of” freedom to choose the topics they cover (Stępińska et al. 2012). These results would suggest that journalists feel “professionally free” to a great extent and furthermore, that this freedom is a significant issue for them, so it might be assumed that they will defend it.

However, the literature on the subject shows quite a few instances where the media are influenced, particularly by political forces. Tomasz Goban-Klas (2000) argues that completely free media have never existed and never will. Media are dependent on the recipients, owners, economic conditions, and legal norms. One particular kind of media control is exerted in the form of censorship. Goban-Klas classifies censorship as a form of governmental control, although he points out that this kind of control plays only a small part in restraining the media and journalists. Other forms of censorship may be exercised by organized pressure groups (political, religious, cultural), the influence of wealthy institutions (banks, trade centers), other important companies, local government institutions, and legal regulations.

In real social contexts, local media (i.e., journalists, editors, media owners, publishers) interact with many different social actors and institutions (not only local authorities). Such a network of relations might be complex and unclear (or even covert) for ordinary citizens. In the literature, there are various classifications of the relations between the local media and local institutions or individual actors. Michalczyk (2000:110) suggests four types of

¹ The research was conducted in 2009 using CATI; 329 respondents took part in the surveys—journalists working for dailies, weeklies, monthlies, news agencies, radio journalists and television journalists, journalists working for electronic media.

relations²: 1. symbiosis (living together), 2. co-existence, 3. mutual ignorance, 4. hostility. J. P. Benziger outlines two types of relations: 1. the local editorial office favors one of the institutional directions and all the interest groups involved, reducing contact with others; 2. the editorial office safeguards its autonomy, treats interest groups neutrally, and is not influenced from any direction (Benziger 1980:2 as cited in Michalczyk 2000:108-109).

Apart from relations with groups or institutions, local media also interact with individuals. Generally, there are two types of these relations: 1. with ordinary citizens; 2. with elites (local leaders in politics, business, social organizations, administration, associations, and churches). There are formal and informal channels of communication, and being a leader gives the possibility of greater influence on media content (this is often supported by informal acquaintances with the media representatives). Elites often have resources at their dis-

² Symbiosis (living together)—both sides have profits from this type of relation. There is cooperation between them, which is possible thanks to formal and informal bonds. The institutions provide information, however, there is a tendency to use only “positive” ones. The institutions are usually a source of income for the media (advertising); co-existence—both sides tolerate each other. Contact is rare (when there is an important event or issue). The institution does not try to represent itself in the media, however, it does not refuse to provide information. There are no close personal relations between the representatives of both entities. The institutions sometimes use the media as a channel of promotion (public relations purposes); mutual ignorance—there is no contact between the entities. The institutions appear in the media rarely or not at all. The institutions are not the sources of information. They exist next to each other, but there are no joint interests. The entities are either not active enough to develop contact or a lack of contact is caused by subjective factors; hostility—there is an information blockade, which can be the result of previous experiences (e.g., criticism). There might also be political causes—the local newspaper might be perceived as a representative of a different, opposing political option. The institution does not advertise in the particular newspaper (it uses other local or non-local channels).

posal (material or otherwise), which can be offered to journalists or editors-in-chief for their influence (i.e., concealing information, stopping/blocking information, withdrawing advertisements, choosing the competition, annulling the institutional subscription, attacking journalists [editors] directly during public speeches). M. Kurp (1994:48-52) terms the elites “key figures,” whose influence causes a lack of criticism and objectivity in media content.

D. McQuail (2013) distinguishes three levels of analysis of the practice of journalism: the societal level, the news organization level, and the individual journalist level.

“At the level of the society, journalism becomes enmeshed in all large public events, by way of contacts with social, cultural, and political elites and drawn by the interests of its own audiences” (McQuail 2013:5).

“At the level of the news organization (e.g., newspaper or media firm), patterns of systematic reporting and publishing that characterize the output of journalists are related to larger structures of the market and of the social system” (McQuail 2013:6).

“At the individual level, the journalist is a person dealing directly with other individuals, especially those who are considered as sources or as objects of reporting” (McQuail 2013:7).

Bearing in mind the different levels of possible analysis and different types of social actors present in the particular communities, the researcher has

to deal with a quite complex field of study. These complex relations between local media and other social actors influenced the choice of my own research area. I decided to conduct qualitative field studies to gain a better and deeper understanding of the observed interactions and relationships. The assumptions and partial results of the study are presented later in the article.

1.2 Technological Challenges for Local Media

It seems that in comparison to Western local media Polish local media are still based in print and what is more, most of the copies are sold in a traditional way³ (even though it is possible to buy electronic versions). In 2005, Sargeson and Astill noted “[i]f newspapers stick to ink, they will sink” (Pilling 2006:105), because of the technological changes in the media, the growing significance of the Internet, and falling number of readers, they simply will not be able to compete. Is this the future for the local press? Rod Pilling’s (2006:105-106) study in the UK in the late 1990s identified a number of significant changes that were already taking place:

1. newsrooms were getting smaller,
2. fewer journalists were covering fewer stories,
3. most of the journalists were trainees and were poorly paid,

³ Ten largest (based on distribution) Polish local weeklies sold together in February 2014 139004 printed copies and 166 e-editions (data ZKDP accessed on: <http://www.teleskop.org.pl>). It means a decline in comparison to last year’s sales: 149128 printed copies and 399 e-editions.

4. journalists feared a “sweatshop culture” was emerging,
5. journalists were relying more on press releases from organizations with an interest in and the capacity for promoting themselves,
6. many journalists worked on free newspapers with a high proportion of advertising,
7. in spite of difficulties, journalists still had faith in traditional local journalism,
8. their coverage was less deferential than in the past and a wider range of voices were finding their way into local papers,
9. journalists sought more to interest the readers than to tell them what they ought to be interested in,
10. the impact of new technology, for example, computer-automated page layout, possibility of recycling digital text at virtually no cost, and remarkable database.

After Pilling’s study, the role of the Internet became even more powerful and widespread and the technological change became even more advanced (especially in the West, but also in the national media in Poland).

With Sargeson and Astill’s prediction in mind, local press proprietors in Poland should utilize new technology in a more thoughtful way. This does not mean they should resign from printed versions

completely, but rather that they should search for synergy—“to make profitable connections between printed newspapers and other forms of media” (Auletta 2005 as cited in Pilling 2006:107). A similar viewpoint is presented by P. M. Abernathy (2014) in her recent work *Saving Community Journalism*. The author points out:

[t]he recent experience of other industries that have faced creative destruction...leads to this conclusion: newspapers, both large and small, need to re-create themselves for the twenty-first century. If they do not develop a plan for confronting and accommodating today's very intrusive and disruptive technological innovations, they risk being lost in the “re-shuffling of the deck” and going the way of black-and-white motion pictures and other outdated media forms, consigned to the periphery with severely diminished prestige, influence, and profitability. (Abernathy 2014:54)

The “creative destruction” process in print publishing is also noted by Gillian Doyle (2013). The researcher underlines that although digital convergence and the development of the Internet have been innovative factors on the one hand, on the other, “as evidenced by recent closures among newspapers, these developments have engendered difficulty and even demise for some market incumbents” (Doyle 2013:27).

The phenomenon of “changing audience” is also significant in terms of the future of local press. Young people do want to access news, but they want to access it in a different way—they want the news faster, continuously updated, more dynamic. They want space for conversation, their own

input, and they expect the local news to be more in-depth, and above all, they want online access. Consequently, with their traditional approach, Polish local newspapers attract mostly middle-aged readers (Józko 2006).

2. Local Media—Directions for Development?

One of the ways to discover future directions for development is to investigate the successful examples of transitions from a print-only format to a more advanced version that is more accessible to readers. One positive example of this is the *State Port Pilot* in the United States. The newspaper's first issue appeared in 1935, and from the beginning it was a family business. The weekly started with only four people in the newsroom, but as a result of a well-established relationship with the community, visionary leadership, dedicated staff, and quality journalism, it managed to grow into a very successful newspaper (Lauterer 2006). However, the technological boom of the 90's made the owners of the weekly realize that changes were needed. In 1996, *State Port Pilot* started a website and, though the editor-in-chief and co-owner, Ed Harper, was initially reluctant about this move, the decision turned out to be a great success. Today the weekly has a printed edition (70 pages, 10000 circulation), an e-edition (“e-Pilot,” which is identical to the printed version), and an online edition, which is updated once a week and provides content that is often related to articles in the other versions. The introduction of the online edition did not cause any printed, paper subscription cancellations and circulation did not decline. “Because the ‘Pilot’ is so

dense with local news, the online edition does not detract from the ink-on-paper product. ... Harper suspects that the online edition heightens interest in the print version" (Lauterer 2006:251-252). In fact, as the editor-in-chief of the *Pilot* admits, the online edition made the paper more accessible for non-residents who still want to keep in touch with the community. The website itself has a rich variety of options for the potential user. Apart from the possibility of accessing the news, the reader can buy the e-edition of the paper, manage his/her subscription, or place an advertisement. However, apart from these common options there are also more advanced alternatives: a recipient can use a live web cam, send a letter to the editor, submit news, announce his/her wedding (wedding form), engagement (engagement form), anniversary (anniversary form), or his/her close person's death (obituary). The website also includes social media plug-ins, a community calendar, and a very easy way of enlarging the font of a text the reader is interested in.⁴ All these options make *State Port Pilot* a reader-friendly newspaper which also has a long tradition and is appreciated not only by its readers but also professional institutions (in the annual News, Editorial and Photojournalism Contest the *Pilot* was the most honored newspaper in its division—community newspapers between 3,500 and 10,000 circulation—with the 22 editorial awards and 24 advertising awards⁵).

Another positive aspect of new technology is the potential of the audience to be authors of "con-

⁴ See: <http://stateportpilot.com/>.

⁵ See: http://stateportpilot.com/news/article_05292742-a47f-11e3-8a49-001a4bcf887a.html. Retrieved April 25, 2014.

tent" as citizen journalists. Citizen journalism has a long tradition, but it seems to be of marginal use in traditional Polish local weeklies. Perhaps they are afraid of the responsibility and lack of control over such journalists who are not completely dependent on the publisher. Such journalists are sometimes considered second category journalists,⁶ "semi-journalists," or "village correspondents" (Bew 2006:203). They happen to not have enough knowledge or skills (or understanding of the laws of defamation) and the pages submitted by them can be a legal minefield for a newspaper, so qualified journalists as subeditors have to constantly check what is sent in (Bew 2006:204-205).

McQuail (2013) presents a different understanding of "civic" or "public" journalism in which the journalists themselves are responsible for doing more to engage with their audience and being involved in their communities in relevant ways. This approach does not expect common citizens to be journalists, but views journalists themselves as "professionals who hold citizenship in trust for us" (McQuail 2013:49). Therefore, the role of journalism is to facilitate a debate in society rather than simply providing information.

A particular combination of professional and citizen journalism worked well in the Korean *OhmyNews*⁷ and German *Giessener Zeitung*.⁸

⁶ The interviewees in my study often expressed such opinions about citizen online journalists in their towns (citizen journalists involved with local news websites in two towns of the Lodzkie Voivodeship where I conducted my study).

⁷ See: <http://international.ohmynews.com>.

⁸ See: www.giessener-zeitung.de.

In the first case, a Korean journalist, Oh Yeon Ho, set up an online newspaper, *OhmyNews*, that actually based its content on “citizen reporters,” whose contributions were edited by a handful of professional staff: around 60 professional reporters are responsible for 20% of the content and 42000 “citizen contributors” provide 80% of the content (Pilling 2006; Aldridge 2007). *OhmyNews* introduced a tipjar system which enables readers to pay a “tip” when they approve of an article, simply by clicking on their computer screen (Pilling 2006:108).

The idea is very similar to *Giessener Zeitung*. The principles of the functioning of the newspaper are simple: it is based on a continuously updated news website *Gissener-zeitung.de*, where every reporter (so-called *Bürgerreporter*) can submit an article, a photo, or a comment. The most interesting texts are published in the printed version of this regional paper and their authors are paid for their articles. The materials published are checked by two professional journalists employed on a full-time contract. It is worth mentioning that this newspaper is free of charge, it is published with four local supplements and financed fully by advertising (Domagała-Pereira 2011).

What if publishers concentrated on one particular group in a community or one initiative instead of giving the recipients the news concerning a community as a whole? In the U.S.A., even in the big cities, various communities (groups) have a niche community newspaper to package news of specific interest to a particular community. A prime example of this is African-American newspapers, which are based not only on a community of

place but also on a community of ethnicity. Another example worth mentioning is the *New Pittsburgh Courier*⁹—presently a weekly, which was transformed from a national newspaper targeted at 400000 readers to a well-respected community newspaper with an audience of up to 30000 (Lauterer 2006:38-39). *New Pittsburgh Courier* is today a part of the largest and most influential Black newspaper chain in the country (Real Times, LLC),¹⁰ but in 1966, following a change of ownership, the newspaper changed its identity and its mission. Its primary function is “to be a voice and to allow voices from within of the community to be heard” (Lauterer 2006:38). The newspaper wants to portray the “Black community” accurately, “to dignify a race of people,” and its editor underlines that “the other media tend to talk *about* our community...We talk *to* our community...We say ‘we,’ and we say ‘us’ in our stories, and the reader knows who we mean” (Lauterer 2006:39).

By way of comparison, we can also observe different initiatives in Poland which are similar to “niche journalism”—newspapers are set up with the sole aim of supporting a particular issue/problem or to present matters of a certain organization (Jachimowski 2009). They will not last long, but they indicate the growth of citizens’ activity and a need for “truly” local papers, which might show the way forward for traditional newspapers.

The role of “alternative media” is also worth mentioning. Their news coverage focuses more

⁹ See: <http://newpittsburghcourieronline.com/>.

¹⁰ See also: <http://newpittsburghcourieronline.com/history/>. Retrieved April 25, 2014.

on a community and targets younger audiences, which is quite important as these younger audiences are more dissatisfied with mainstream media (Harcup 2006). In the UK, alternative press (including local press) began to emerge again in the 1960s as a challenge to the hegemony of the traditional press which tend to use official sources and give voice to those in positions of social or political power (Harcup 2003). One such newspaper was *Leeds Other Paper* (published in West Yorkshire from 1974-1994), which made its mission to give a voice to common citizens. For Atton (2002:11 as cited in Harcup 2003:361), “the alternative press is inseparable from an alternative public sphere” in which “experiences, critiques, and alternatives could be freely developed on a self-managed, democratic basis—itself a major alternative to the media hierarchies of the official public realm” (Downing 1988:168-169 as cited in Harcup 2003:361-362). Newspapers like *LOP* have a limited audience, but Manning notes that audiences without access to alternative media are less able to engage critically with news texts (2001:226 as cited in Harcup 2003:367). They also have more open editorial policies with more horizontal communication between writers and readers, or even between writers and sources. Harcup (2003; 2006) underlines the point that although the 1960s alternative press may have largely disappeared from the UK media market in the early 1990s, other forms of alternative journalism have appeared, especially on the Internet.¹¹ An important characteristic of alterna-

¹¹ Harcup (2003) gives the example of KDIS website which started in 1981, and in 1998 it began to feature investigative articles and a news section. However, it went offline in 2001. (See: <http://www.1in12.com/publications/>. Retrieved April 25, 2014).

tive media is their short life cycle and uncertain existence. However, these types of media are able to change their style and direction within weeks and the Internet makes financial survival a little easier. Nevertheless, they do demand a lot of time and engagement from both journalists and readers—so again, relations with the local community are very significant.

Some of the examples of transitions in the ways newspapers function presented earlier were based on the newspapers’ well-established relations with a community and on providing quality journalism. The question is whether Polish local media are professional enough to forge such positive relations with local communities or whether they are too preoccupied with maintaining good relations with local elites?

3. Local Media in a Community— —Complicated Relations

My interest in the relationship between local media¹² and different social actors resulted in a multiple case study¹³ (Stake 2010), with the main goal of exploring the complexity of these relationships and identifying the level of involvement of local journalists and local media owners in these

¹² In my study, I concentrate on the local press as it is still the most developed segment of local media. There has been much debate regarding the definition of local media. I adopt the definition suggested by Józef Mądry and his research team: “[l]ocal media/local press are for one, more or less cohesive community, living in a relatively small area, which is connected by social bonds based on joint traditions, activities, sources of living, and even press-reading habits” (Kowalczyk 2003:50; see also: Gierula 2005).

¹³ The multiple case study consists of several instrumental case studies (Stake 2010:628).

relationship networks. My choice of local newspapers and communities under investigation was guided primarily by S. Michalczyk's criteria of formal and material characteristics of local media (2000:84-85). R. Kowalczyk (2012; 2013) suggests two types of criteria: the territorial range of the newspaper (one of the formal characteristics in Michalczyk's terms) and the main topics of interest for the newspaper (influencing content; material characteristic in Michalczyk's terms).

The most important criteria in my study were: the fact that the newsroom was based in a particular town, the distribution range (local or micro-regional), private ownership (formally independent from political actors), and the provision of a wide range of news concerning a particular community.¹⁴ I also applied a few additional criteria: that is, diversity of field according to competition versus lack of competition in the media market; stability versus dynamics of the local media market; being a member of the Local Newspapers' Association. Based on these features, four weeklies/towns¹⁵ were chosen for the study (and are referred to by letters of the alphabet for ethical reasons).¹⁶

¹⁴ Therefore, I am not interested in "habitat press"/"milieu press," parish press, or local governmental press.

¹⁵ Weekly A and B—the same private owner, members of the Local Press Association, stability of the media market, no or weak competition; weekly C—there is competition in the media market, dynamics of the local media market; weekly D—there is competition in the media market, stability of the media market.

¹⁶ As a researcher, I follow the rule "do no harm," and therefore decided to keep the names of the weeklies and towns confidential. In a small community, a person might be identified just by his/her function, so it was done only in order to protect my informants. The phenomena discussed in the study also involve ones which might be considered unethical, ethically dubious, or covert, so it was important to make my informants feel secure.

In this paper, I discuss the results of the case study conducted in town B¹⁷ and the initial conclusions drawn from the study.¹⁸

In a local community, informal relations are often very significant. The citizens, particularly those who are in crucial social or political positions, often know each other from school or a previous employment. This complexity of relations (media-politics, media-business, media-church, media-media, etc.) might often be a cause of conflicts of interest (individual or institutional) or media bias.

The term "conflict of interest" has many different meanings, which include a variety of types of conflicts of interest. In my study, I use the definition suggested by Anna Lewicka-Strzałecka (2005:7): "[a] person (or an organization) is in a conflict of interest when the actions they take are profitable to themselves or another actor (an organization they are tied

¹⁷ Town B is a small town situated in the Lodzkie Voivodeship—almost 30000 inhabitants. The community has a quite evident catholic identity and the Catholic Church is an important social actor. The mayor of the town was elected in 2010 for his second term and he is supported by the majority members of the town council. The towns' economy is based on the food industry, food processing, agriculture, horticulture, and the textile industry. The companies with a long tradition focused around local entrepreneurs are still in business, but there are also new investments (in 2012/2013 a large Polish contractor and a foreign company dealing with natural resources extraction invested in Town B). The local weekly B, which is the focus of the study, is a newspaper with a long tradition, with Solidarity roots, was established in 1990. The weekly is published fully by the Polish private owner. The newspaper consists of around 44 pages on average. The same owner also publishes another weekly in the region—the local weekly A, though the content of both newspapers is broadly similar. Weekly A differs from weekly B by approximately 10 pages.

¹⁸ My case studies have so far consisted of 66 in-depth interviews with "local leaders" and local journalists in towns A and B (from July to September 2013 I spent over two months in these towns); the first phase of content analysis was also completed; the presented material is based mainly on the in-depth interviews from town B; research in towns C and D is ongoing.

to), and at the same time these actions are against another organization's interests towards which they should also be loyal."

Sandra L. Borden and Michael Pritchard (2001:74) note that "conflicts of interest in journalism arise in circumstances in which there is a reason to be concerned that the judgment and performance of journalists might be unduly influenced by interests they have that lie outside their responsibilities as journalists." Journalists might be faced with different kinds of conflicts of interest: individual or institutional. It is important to remember then what their primary interest is—the public. According to Andrew Stark (2001:342), "[t]he public is in fact the only principal." All other interests: personal interest, institutional interest (so the employer's interest), individual interest (political or business) should be treated as secondary ones in this profession.

A hierarchy-of-influences approach (Reese 2001) was employed in order to analyze different levels of relationships between the local weekly B and its societal context. However, the individual level was omitted in the analysis, as it is more characteristic for studies which attempt to describe the individual characteristics of journalists in terms of occupational group. Therefore, this particular local situation is investigated on four levels: 1. routines level, 2. organizational level, 3. extra-media level, and 4. ideological level.¹⁹

¹⁹ Reese (2001:174) represents a sociology-of-media view, which "considers how media power functions within a larger context." According to the author, "in the media sociology view, we are more interested in those forces which set the media's agenda" (Reese 2001:174).

3.1 Routines Level

"The routines level of analysis considers the constraining influences of work practices" (Reese 2001:180).

Materials gathered through in-depth interviews²⁰ and informal conversations with journalists previously employed at the local weekly B (interviews 10b, 30a) and local leaders who know someone working for the weekly (interview 28b) show that the journalists working for the newspaper are strictly subordinated to the editor-in-chief and the directorship of the newsroom (editor-in-chief's wife; both of them are the owners of the newspaper).

There is a detailed schedule of daily routines that journalists have to follow (e.g., there is time set for lunch and it also has a time limit). Staff are under constant observation: there is a venetian mirror in the editor-in-chief's door, their professional e-mails are checked, and the websites they visit are also traced. They also have additional, non-journalistic, duties, like cleaning the newsroom.²¹

The journalists are also aware of their editor-in-chief's information preferences. The representatives of the political opposition in town B mentioned that the journalists explained to them many times that they have little influence on what will

²⁰ All the statements are based on the case study I conducted myself in town B (techniques used: in-depth interviews [39], content analysis, white interview method, informal conversations, observation). A list of the interviewees is enclosed at the end of the article (see: Appendix).

²¹ Some of the restraints might be considered as mobbing.

be published in the newspaper (e.g., interviews 3b and 7b). It is also necessary to note that the bonuses that the staff receive (1/3 of journalistic salary at this newspaper) are dependent on them writing a “remembrance” every month, dedicated to a person who recently died in the community (interviews 10b, 30a, and 1a).

Weekly B journalists also object to the way the quality of their articles is evaluated by the owners (subjective marks from A to F are given by the editor-in-chief). They admit the articles are sometimes changed during editorial proofreading or that subjective editorial comment is added, which is at odds with the author’s intentions (interview 2a and 10b²²).

3.2 Organizational Level

“At the organizational level we may consider the goals and policies of a larger social structure and how power is exercised within it” (Reese 2001:181). This level is closely connected to the previous one.

The local weekly B was established just after the political transformation in Poland and local Solidarity members were its founders (interviews 18b and 19b). It was handed over to a private owner in 1990, who is still the editor-in-chief, and has not changed ownership since. The interviewees under-

line the role of the co-owner (the editor’s wife) and note that the editor married into this community and comes from a different town.

The position of the directorship seems strong and stable, and the weekly is a reflection of this. The shape of the newspaper is a result of the editor and his wife’s conservative world-view and their background (graduates of a theological academy, the editor—former member of Solidarity). The local left-wing opposition representatives recognize that their initiatives are mentioned in the weekly very briefly or not at all (interviews 3b, 7b, and 12b).

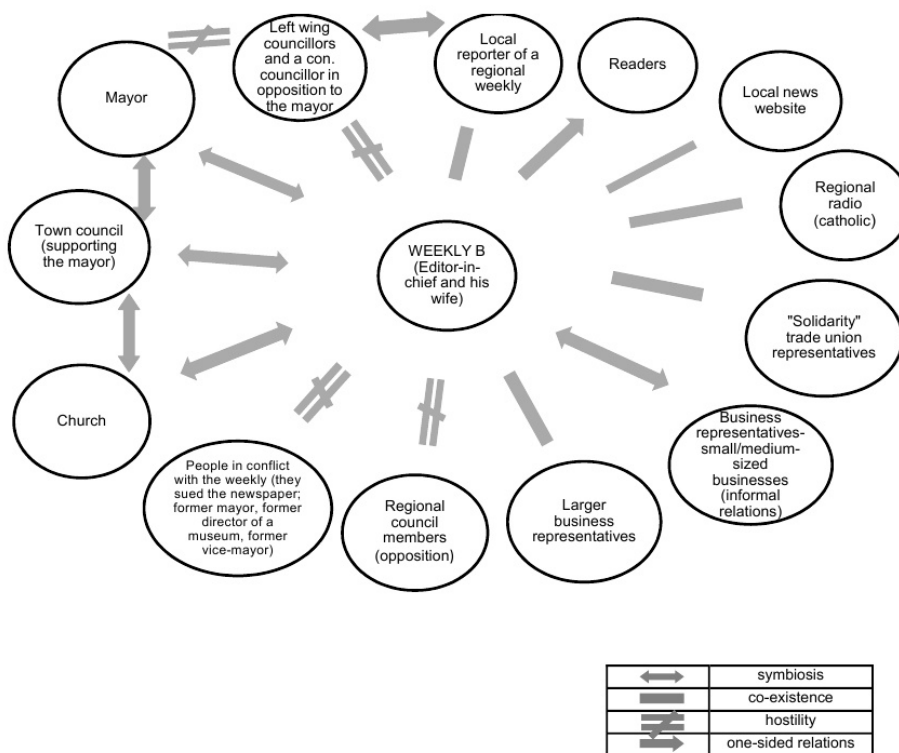
The business approach of the owners is also apparent. There are many advertisements printed in the paper,²³ and some of the interviewees mentioned that a lot of recipients buy the weekly for that reason. There is little of reader input in the paper, but in spite of this, the weekly sells well.²⁴ One of the reasons for its successful distribution is the paper’s orientation to topics like crime, accidents, and “neighbor’s wealth” (financial declarations of local councilors, tax amortization, or subsidy for business activity). The journalists are obliged to cover accidents (interview 1a and 2a), and in every issue of the weekly a crime chronicle is published. The readers call the local weekly B a “rag” or a “gossiper.”

²² R2a: “they [journalists from weekly B] have made a lot of remarks about their articles after proofreading, so after the chief saw them, he changed them or added something to them. The chief’s comments are a tradition. And then they are signed with our names whether we agree with them or not”; R10b: “Our editor-in-chief was used to writing comments, which were not signed with his name, and which were pasted into the text. This wasn’t always right.”

²³ Only an average of 10 pages per issue (36-44 paged) contain no advertisements (sport pages, obituaries, photo reports, institutions’ contact information); 7-8 pages are dedicated to small ads, and on the rest of the pages we can find several or dozens of advertisements.

²⁴ Nearly 8900 copies sold in February 2014 (10000 circulation; February 2013 sales were almost at the same level: 9000 copies). See: <http://www.teleskop.org.pl/zkdp/>. Retrieved April 26, 2014.

Figure 1. The network of relations between the local weekly B and different social actors in Town B



Source: Self-elaboration

Sometimes the newspaper publishes unpaid articles, which are in fact advertisements for local businessmen (in one of the interviews one businesswoman confirms this happened in her business—interview 24b). There were also occurrences of advertorials, which are generally banned unless the editor decides otherwise (interview 1a, 2a).²⁵

²⁵R2a: “We are not allowed to publish advertorials. But our chief can. We don’t approve of this. There has been a situation recently where [the owners] needed the irrigation system for their garden, so they suddenly published an article about some irrigation systems offered by a particular shop.”

3.3 Extra-Media Level

“At the extra-media level we consider those influences originating primarily from outside the media organization” (Reese 2001:182).

Figure 1²⁶ presents local institutions and actors identified as “key figures” or “local leaders” which are represented in the study.

²⁶In Figure 1, the relations between the actors are marked by different arrows: 1. an arrow that points both ways indicates a relation which is close to a “symbiotic” one described earlier in footnote no. 2; 2. a line between the clouds means a relation of co-existence; 3. an inequality sign (≠) indicates a relation of hostility; 4. an arrow that points one way means a one-sided relation.

Weekly B's dominance in town B is also confirmed by other local or regional media representatives. A journalist (interview 8b) who works for a local news website (started by the owner of an outdoor advertising company), which is mentioned as an alternative source of information by some of the interviewees, claims that the weekly has more impact. However, he notices a shift in the weekly's policy towards the website. In the beginning, the weekly did not pay much attention to the website, but it has recently begun to fight the competition, particularly in the advertising market (e.g., exclusivity of media patronage).

The relations with local authorities have been complicated in the history of the weekly. According to interviewees (3b, 21b, 28b), the newspaper was persuaded to support one of the local candidates in the first local elections. This politician won the election, but later started a governmental newspaper. The cooperation between weekly B and the mayor halted and hostile relations developed. The newspaper was also in conflict with the previous mayor. The local leaders agree (3b, 7b, 9b, 13b, 28b, etc.) that weekly B clearly supported one candidate in the local elections in 2006 and 2010—the current mayor (second term). The informal relations (family) between the editor-in-chief (and his wife—the co-owner) and the mayor were mentioned by all the informants. There is an evident conflict of interest which was not officially revealed in their paper. The mayor himself (14b) declared that this private relation does not influence coverage, but it can cause a potential conflict of interest and it clearly creates a situation of an institutional conflict of interest for the journalists.

The majority of the town council members support the mayor, therefore opposition councilors' (two left-wing and one right-wing independent) ideas and initiatives are covered rarely. These respondents sometimes cooperate with a local reporter from a regional weekly, although this regional weekly is not widely read in town B (3b, 7b, 12b).

There are two types of relations between the weekly and local entrepreneurs: 1. co-existence or even mutual ignorance between "B" and larger entities and 2. symbiotic relations with smaller local businesses. The larger entities are not interested in maintaining a good rapport with the weekly because they need a wider range of advertising and they prefer to choose other means of achieving this (e.g., outdoor advertising) (9b). Smaller entities are more dependent on local advertising and, as previously mentioned, local weekly B sometimes publishes advertising articles for free (there might be private relations between the owners and the businessmen, like those in the example mentioned above), which might result in paid advertisements in the future. In comparison to political relations, relations with businessmen are more neutral.

The Catholic Church is an important social actor in town B. The symbiotic relations between the weekly and the church are invoked by the owners world-view and the fact that they are religious themselves. The newspaper is perceived in the community as "pro-church," although the informants do notice that the relations were better with the previous bishop (the bishop himself admits that he had informal relations with the owners of the paper, but he did not want the weekly to be a bish-

op's "tuba," 13b). The present bishop cooperates closely with catholic media. According to the local church spokesman (5b), the relations loosened due to the newspaper's coverage of a "church scandal."

3.4 Ideological Level

"Here we at least are concerned with how media symbolic content is connected with larger social interest, how meaning is constructed in the service of power" (Reese 2001:183).

Weekly B is an example of a newspaper which does not have a well-established relationship with the community as a whole. It represents the interests of its allies, to be precise, the owners' allies, and its columns are not available (or hardly ever available) for opponents (with a different world-view). There are occurrences of such conflicts ending in the law courts, and these cases were lost by the weekly (18b, 21b, 30b).

The business approach is also visible—the newspaper's columns are available to the opposition if they pay for the content. The owners have a lot of experience in running the local weekly and they know exactly what sells in the community. They also expect their journalists to follow their ideas almost blindly. If they want to suggest a change or if they want to disagree with something, they have to find a new newsroom to work in, or a different professional career (10b, 30a).

4. Concluding Remarks

The example of local weekly B might suggest that local pacts and interest groups are much more im-

portant for the local media than their recipients. This particular newspaper is still based on a traditional model of publishing and it is rather closed for its readers (e.g., poorly developed website/online communication with readers and a rather closed newsroom for local people). The local elites (particularly political/local governmental) are the ones who consistently have the most influence on media content. Additionally, the directorship of the weekly, with strong one-sided views, controls the situation and maintains the *status quo*.

Such leadership means the weekly does not have the chance to become anything like *State Port Pilot*. Perhaps the growing role of the local news website lead by the engaged young journalist in town B will help the weekly transform itself.

There are certain features of weekly B worth underlining. Some of these may prove beneficial for the weekly, others may be detrimental in the long term. Table 1 below outlines the most prominent features and their potential benefits and drawbacks. Weekly B indicates that the strong position of the media and the involvement of interest groups and various social actors to the media system do not strengthen the independence of journalists' working for a particular media company (Taczowska 2012). The strong economic position of the media and their powerful influence in the public sphere are not guarantees for the media to fulfill their role as public servants (to treat the public as their primary interest). On the contrary, the case study of weekly B shows it may lead to the abuse of power in the area of external relations, as well as in the area of relations within the organization.

Table 1. Weekly B and its positive and negative aspects of functioning.

Features	Benefits	Drawbacks
Origins of the newspaper	Solidarity movement, opposition to communist regime.	One-sided views, the owner as a declared “anti-communist.”
Importance of the weekly	Long tradition, established in 1990.	Too attached to traditional way of functioning, not paying enough attention to competition or mistreating competition.
Mostly based in print	Printed version brings the sales among middle-aged readers.	Low number of on-line sales, poorly developed website, low number of younger readers.
Loyal readers	Large number of readers confirms the weekly’s strategy.	Rather closed approach towards the readers.
Clear conservative, pro-catholic views of the owner/editor	Conservative community, loyal readers, good relationships with church.	Closed to various view-points, difficulty in getting new readers interested.
Hierarchy and strict directorship within the organization	The owner (editor-in-chief at the same time) has full control of the content of the weekly, journalists are strictly monitored.	Mobbing-like practices might discourage young journalists from joining the weekly. More independent staff will leave (fluctuation of the staff). Auto-censorship and internal censorship may result.
Clear political engagement	Good relationship with the town authorities (informal relationship with the mayor)—possible paid advertising.	Lack of distance and objectivity in the content of the weekly; possible problems if the mayor changes; conflicted relationships with the head of the district. Unethical practices. Putting journalists in a position of institutional conflict of interest. The editor-in-chief is in an individual conflict of interest. Possible external political pressures.
Open to relationships with businessmen; publishing advertorials.	Good relationships with local businessmen—possible paid advertising in the future.	Unethical behavior. Potential conflict of interest. Possible external pressures (by buying or withdrawing advertisements).
Lack of competition in the media market/ Weak competition (on-line)	Strong position of weekly B, which has an opinion-forming role. In control of the local news that is reported to the public.	No motivation for the development and implementation of more advanced technology. With the growing role of the local news website the role of weekly B might decrease.

Source: *Self-elaboration.*

Appendix: 39 in-depth interviews with local leaders and local journalists from town B.

List of the interviewees:

1b: a town council member, a school headmaster, member of Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform party)

2b: a town council president, supportive of the mayor, conservative

3b: a left-wing town council member, a social activist

4b: a regional newspaper journalist (leads a one-man editorial office)

5b: a priest, a church spokesman

6b: a town council member, young politician, conservative

7b: a left-wing town council member, a director of a social welfare institution

8b: a local journalist working for a local news website

9b: a businessman, an owner of a large food processing factory, and a president of a non-governmental organization

10b: a former journalist of weekly B

11b: a president of the regional Solidarity trade union

12b: a town council member, a doctor, conservative, but cooperates with left-wing councilors rather than the mayor

13b: a priest (fulfilling a prominent role in the church hierarchy)

14b: a mayor of town B, conservative

15b: a vice-mayor of town B, conservative

16b: a local business owner, investor (land owner, restaurant owner, property owner)

17b: a local business owner (textile industry)

18b: a former director of a museum (in conflict with weekly B)

19b: a former president of the local Solidarity trade union, an activist, took part in setting up weekly B

20b: a gallery owner, formerly in charge of a cultural journal and a local government bulletin

21b: a former vice-mayor (in conflict with weekly B, which he sued successfully)

22b: a former reporter and a camera operator for a local TV channel (which does not exist anymore), presently cooperating with a local news website

23b: a town council member

24b: a local business owner

25b: a vice-president of the town council, conservative

26b: a former vice-head of the district (wicestarosta), left-wing

27b: a town council member, a member of Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform), works for the Polish Red Cross

28b: a district (powiat) council member, conservative, a member of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice Party)

29b: a retired (a week before the interview) director of the sanitary-epidemiological station, social activist

30b: a former mayor of town B (in conflict with weekly B)

31b: a director of the Archives, cooperates with weekly B, a candidate for the honored citizen award

32b: a president of a district (powiat) council, many years of experience in local government, conservative

33b: a doctor, a loyal reader of weekly B, collects all the issues

34b: a former head of the district (starosta), a former president of a district (powiat) council and head of municipal services office

35b: a regional catholic radio journalist, head of the news department

36b: a district (powiat) council member, the head of the communication and PR department at town B council

1a: a journalist and an assistant editor at weekly A who initially worked at weekly B

2a: a journalist at weekly A who cooperates with weekly B

30a: a former journalist of weekly A who initially worked at weekly B, the head of the communication and PR department at town A council

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Prasa lokalna w małej społeczności – studium przypadku relacji pomiędzy tygodnikiem lokalnym a różnymi aktorami społecznymi

Abstrakt: Jakie wyzwania stoją współcześnie przed mediami lokalnymi? Czy zjawiska takie jak: dziennikarstwo obywatelskie, dziennikarstwo niszowe, dziennikarstwo alternatywne czy też połączenie profesjonalnego i obywatelskiego dziennikarstwa są kierunkami dalszego rozwoju mediów lokalnych czy też są one zagrożeniem dla profesjonalizacji mediów lokalnych?

W artykule rozważam te kwestie także w kontekście kulturowym – podając przykłady prasy lokalnej z różnych krajów (m.in. z Polski, Wielkiej Brytanii, USA czy Niemiec). Jednak podstawowym wątkiem i punktem odniesienia są media lokalne w Polsce. To na ich przykładzie pokazuję, jakie wyzwania stoją przed mediami lokalnymi i w jaki sposób współczesne procesy zachodzące w mediach i dziennikarstwie odbijają się na mediach lokalnych. Bazując na własnych badaniach jakościowych (studia przypadków), prezentuję, jak złożone są relacje na poziomie lokalnym i na ile dziennikarze lokalni i właściciele mediów lokalnych są uwikłani w te sieci relacji. Złożoność tych związków (media-polityka, media-biznes, media-kościół, media-media itd.) może być często przyczyną występowania konfliktów interesów (indywidualnych czy instytucjonalnych) lub stronniczości mediów.

Słowa kluczowe: dziennikarstwo lokalne, relacje lokalne, konflikt interesów, wyzwania mediów lokalnych, indywidualny konflikt interesów, instytucjonalny konflikt interesów