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## Challenges facing local media and its practitioners across the globe

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A free press is one where media outlets, whatever their size, have the liberty to publish without hindrance by the chilling mechanisms of censorship – whether those mechanisms are explicit, or whether they are covert and more subtle. Freedom of speech campaigners will, therefore, have let out a cheer when this year's Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to Maria Ressa and Dmitry Muratov, journalists who have defied threats and intimidation to defend freedom of expression in the Philippines and Russia respectively.

The Nobel committee praised Ressa, the co-founder of the news website *Rappler*, for fearlessly championing freedom of expression in order to 'expose abuse of power, use of violence and growing authoritarianism in her native country'. Muratov was commended for pursuing a similar free-speech agenda in Russia as editor of the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, despite an increasingly hostile environment for independent journalism. Muratov dedicated the prize to his newspaper colleagues who had been killed for their audacity to try to get to, and publish, the truth. Conferring the awards, the committee said: 'Free, independent and fact-based journalism serves to protect against abuse of power, lies and war propaganda.'

Those at the frontline of standing up for free, independent and fact-based journalism are the local media, who are – or at least should be – at the heart of their communities and the issues that matter to them. This special double issue of *Ethical Space* focuses on the many contemporary challenges facing local media and its practitioners across the globe.

In their agenda-setting paper for this issue that offers a wide-ranging survey of the literature on local journalism, David Baines and Agnes Gulyas tease out many of the ethical issues inherent in discussions about local media. Underlying their exploration is a recurring tension between types of local journalism which deliver benefit for the public, and those which deliver benefits to what they term the elite – those having powerful commercial and political interests. The sustainability of community rather than the maximising of profitability should, they argue, be a guiding principle in strategies and policies around the future of local journalism: 'A journalism which serves public benefits, facilitates and is immersed in the practices and processes of community.'

If giving a voice to the once silenced and being a part of community are key facets of ethical journalism, then Kristy Hess, Kerry McCallum, Lisa Waller and Alanna Myers provide a powerful blueprint of how local journalists can play a central role in the community they serve following collective trauma. 'Local journalism and the ethics of inquiry' considers the local media's coverage of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Australia. Informed by interviews with editors and reporters from local media who covered the clergy sexual abuse scandal, they advocate an approach to journalism reminiscent of Martin Bell's 'journalism of attachment' (1998), in which the journalist acts as a sensitive yet professional witness to the survivors of injustice. They explore this in the context of journalists building trust within the communities they report on, and highlight the ways in which local journalists can take an active role in the recovery process following trauma and work with the community 'in the process of healing'.

Hess, McCallum, Waller and Myers point to a new understanding of the skills and attitudes that local journalists may need, both to report ethically and to gain their audience's trust. Ruth Stoker, in her paper 'Trust us, we are local journalists – how the desire to be trusted shapes early career practitioners' understanding of ethical journalism in the UK legacy press' makes an important contribution to this debate, too. Stoker highlights a tension in UK local journalists' training. On the one hand, there is the formally facilitated work-based training schemes which frame ethics through the lens of a code of practice. On the other, there is the informal learning that occurs through social interactions with colleagues and members of their local community. Through interviews with journalists from the British legacy press, Stoker concludes that the 'desire to be perceived as trusted by their community' – and to be accepted into that community – is a powerful influence in shaping trainee journalists' understanding of media ethics.

Community of another sort emerges in David Randles' exploration of football fan-based media and how it creates 'glocal' identities. Based on interviews with the people behind some of England's most prominent fan-based platforms, 'New "glocal" players: Exploring the emergence and position of fan-produced football digital media' investigates how legacy media companies and their traditional reporting practices are being challenged, and in some ways subverted, by the material that is being produced online by fans. The ways in which this is disrupting the sports media eco-system are explored, alongside the emergence of transnational glocal fan identities, in which 'behaviour previously only associated with local supporters is now being replicated globally'. The paper stimulates questions about the evolving professional identity of sports journalists and associated issues around how this growing supply of fan-produced content – disseminated by social media – may or may not be regulated.

A thread that runs through many of the contributions to this special issue is the extent to which local journalism is wilting and dying due to the size and number of news deserts – geographical areas whose

communities are no longer served by a news organisation. Desertification arguably represents an existential crisis for local journalism, and its consequences arguably spread far wider than the local media industry itself, potentially undermining the broader fabric of community. Marcelo Fontoura and Sérgio Lüdtke explore the overlapping issues of media ethics and desertification in 'Ethics and journalism in Brazil: A study of local journalism through the Brazilian News Atlas', and suggest that the business model of many local media outlets will need to change if the drought is to be contained.

Paul Wiltshire, a former local newspaper executive, now an academic who has helped guest-edit this issue, challenges the twin concepts of endemic news desertification and stagnation. He explores the evolving local media ecology in the United Kingdom, and through interviews with editors suggests that a process of revivification is occurring. Traditional news publishers are expanding into fresh areas by establishing new outlets and enlarging their editorial footprints. This is occurring alongside hyperlocal enterprises and the emergence of new players, with many of those involved welcoming the competition.

But what of the composition of the staff working on such titles? To what extent are they reflecting the communities they serve? Marcus Ryder, a media diversity campaigner with a range of media awards to his name, says they are currently failing abysmally. Ryder makes an impassioned plea for far-reaching changes to the UK media industry – both at local and national levels – in order to improve representation. The start of his piece is striking, and the call for action does not relent: 'For many journalists of colour the media profession can be a hostile environment to navigate. We have to give them the tools not only to survive but to thrive. Not doing so would not only be counterproductive in achieving greater media diversity but ethically irresponsible.'

The responsibilities of the freelance local sports reporter in France are of concern to Matthieu Lardeau, himself both a freelance and an academic. Lardeau draws attention to the ethical and professional challenges confronting sports freelancers and, in so doing, he highlights the complicated gradations of professional identity that shape practices on the sports desks of local news operations in France.

Elsewhere in this edition, there are plenty of other points to be made. Margaret Hughes finds Tony Harcup's *What's the point of news? A study in ethical journalism* to be particularly timely, while Sarah Drummond hails *What's the point of Ofcom?*, edited by John Mair, as a sage, accessible and engaging collection on the future of the UK's broadcast regulator. Also in our book reviews, Ian Case Punnett's monograph *Towards a theory of true crime narratives: A textual analysis* is appreciated by Barbara Henderson as a 'clear, entertaining and useful starting point in a little-theorised area of study'.

Rachel Matthews, meanwhile, praises *The Routledge companion to local media and journalism*, edited by Agnes Gulyas and David Baines, as a way of navigating the storm surrounding local journalism 'so that the mess and chaos is seen as an opportunity, rather than a threat'. And it is to Gulyas and Baines to whom we can return for the final reflections on this double issue. Local journalism, they state in this issue's opening paper, is at a key moment in its evolution, its future uncertain. 'Local media,' they write, 'are at a point of inflection: approaching the end of an epoch defined by corporate, profit-seeking approaches and entering another in which the sustainable delivery of a public benefit will be more central. But as we have seen, powerful commercial and political interests still seek to shape local media landscapes to their own advantage. On that point of inflection, the future of local media is finely balanced.' It is hoped this special double issue provides rich reflections from across the globe to further inform views at this key moment in the evolution of local media.