

# CZECH LOCAL PRESS CONTENT: WHEN MORE IS ACTUALLY LESS

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## ABSTRACT:

The development of Czech media during the last 25 years has been influenced by commercialisation, which has characterised its transformation from that of a communist regime to its current globalised context. The commercialisation of local media has manifested itself through the notable erosion of its particular local characteristics (delocalization). The main aim of the article is to find the answer to the question of how has the content of the particular local press changed in terms of localization or delocalization due to the commercialisation development trends. This text uses a case study approach (content analysis and in-depth interviews) to analyse the Vltava-Labe-Press (VLP) publishing house that largely dominates the Czech local press market. In the first phase I conducted a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with editors-in-chief in the VLP's newsrooms and managers in the VLP publishing house. This was followed by a quantitative content analysis of two newspapers between 1989 and 2009 focused on changes in editorial content and changes in the formal presentation of content. The main question of the case study is, how did the local press content published by Vltava-Labe-Press change between 1989 and 2009 in terms of localization and delocalization. The premise was that commercialisation leads to delocalization, diminishing local character and production of the content, and hence between 1989 and 2009 the share of converged and centrally produced contents increased in selected Czech local dailies. The analysis demonstrates an inverse relationship between management localization efforts and the manifestation of local content in the press. Consequently, the delocalized character of the Czech local press is likely to have an adverse effect on the democratic and political empowerment of local communities.

## KEY WORDS:

local press, Czech press, commercialisation, delocalization, content analysis, Vltava-Labe-Press publishing house

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## Introduction

Is the Czech local press actually local? The question may seem banal but its significance becomes obvious once we take into account some of the key roles that local press plays in democratic societies – most impor-



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tantly providing avenues for citizen participation and integration within the local community. In the 1920s, the American sociologist Robert Park was already arguing that “individuals’ community ties were associated with newspaper use which served to maintain and support those ties”.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in his now classic study, Morris Janowitz formulated his community integration hypothesis – namely that “the greater individuals’ integration into their communities, the greater their use of newspapers” and he operationalised community integration as “participation in, and identification with local community facilities and institutions”.<sup>2</sup>

It can also be argued that the local press plays an important role in the democratic empowerment of local communities and hence is crucial for the functioning of democratic societies. As Fenton et al. argue, readers emphasised closeness in the local media content, they wanted “to have a voice, to hear stories from their local community and see their local lives reflected”, they clearly understood that “local news service [...] gives a voice to the voiceless”.<sup>3</sup>

There are similar conclusions regarding closeness from a study of the American Society of Newspaper Editors,<sup>4</sup> which “found that a key aspect of diminished newspaper credibility was the distance people felt between themselves and their newspapers”. The specific characteristics of local contents are described by Phyllis Kaniss.

According to the author, although long overshadowed by the national media, local news has always played an important role in the way a city and region understands its problems, its opportunities, and its sense of local identity. The primary concerns of local news are often quite different from those, which dominate national news and tend to reflect issues that are closer to people’s lives. The factors, which influence the coverage of local issues, are also quite distinct, resulting from the unique ties that bind the local media to their communities.

Metropolitan newspapers, local television and radio stations, and the other local media are all intertwined with the economic, social, political and even geographical conditions of their local areas in ways that have important implications for the news they cover.<sup>5</sup>

However, the topic of local media – often understood as a marginal entity (in contrast to the national and international media) – has largely been overlooked in international scholarship.<sup>6</sup> Research on the local media is almost missing from the Czech academic circles. Local authors<sup>7</sup> argue that it is mainly local content that readers prefer in the media. But, there are only sporadic efforts to conduct researches on issues related to the local media, e.g. on local readers;<sup>8</sup> the selected socio-professional characteristics of local journalists;<sup>9</sup> or local press ownership.<sup>10</sup>

As such, a closer examination of the changing character of the Czech local press content (in this case, the Vltava-Labe-Press) over the last 25 years can provide a wider picture of the public manifestation of local content transformations and the associated anomalies.

1 FINNEGAN, J. R. Jr., VISWANATH, K.: Community Ties and Use of Cable TV and Newspapers in a Midwest Suburb. In *Journalism Quarterly*, 1988, Vol. 65, No. 2, p. 456.

2 FINNEGAN, J. R. Jr., VISWANATH, K.: Community Ties and Use of Cable TV and Newspapers in a Midwest Suburb. In *Journalism Quarterly*, 1988, Vol. 65, No. 2, p. 456.

3 FENTON, N. et al.: *Meeting the News Needs of Local Communities*. London: Media Trust, 2010. [online]. [2015-10-21]. Available at: <<http://www.mediatrust.org/uploads/128255497549240/original.pdf>>.

4 GAZIANO, C., McGRATH, K.: Newspaper Credibility and Relationships of Newspaper Journalists to Communities. In *Journalism Quarterly*, 1987, Vol. 64, No. 2-3, p. 317.

5 KANISS, P.: *Making Local News*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 2.

6 For more information, see: ALDRIDGE, M.: *Understanding the Local Media*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007; TAN, Y., WEAVER, D. H.: Local Media, Public Opinion, and State Legislative Policies: Agenda Setting at the State Level. In *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2009, Vol. 14, No. 4, p. 454-476; ROTHENBUHLER, E. W. et al.: Communication, Community Attachment, and Involvement. In *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 1996, Vol. 73, No. 2, p. 445-466.

7 PÁČL, P.: *Hromadné sdělovací prostředky v regionu*. Ostrava: FF Ostravské univerzity, 1997; IVANTYŠYN, R.: Regionálne, lokálne a sublokálne periodiká na Slovensku v deväťdesiatych rokoch. In *Otázky žurnalistiky*, 1995, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 25-32.

8 PÁČL, P.: *Hromadné sdělovací prostředky v regionu*. Ostrava: FF Ostravské univerzity, 1997.

9 VOLEK, J.: Regionální žurnalisté v posttransformační etapě: Vybrané socioprofesionální charakteristiky. In WASCHKOVÁ ČÍSAŘOVÁ, L. (ed.): *Regionální média v evropském kontextu*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2007.

10 BENDA, J.: *Vlastnické periodického tisku v České republice v letech 1989-2006*. Praha: Karolinum, 2007; ŠMÍD, M.: Czech Republic. In *Media Ownership and Its Impact on Media Independence and Pluralism*. Ljubljana: SEENPM, Peace Institute, 2004. [online]. [2007-04-05]. Available at: <[http://www.mirovni-institut.si/media\\_ownership/index.htm](http://www.mirovni-institut.si/media_ownership/index.htm)>.

## Content Delocalization as a Consequence of Developments in Local Press

The delocalization of the local press can be seen as a general consequence of recent global trends leading towards greater media *commercialisation*.<sup>11</sup> Some authors<sup>12</sup> argue that the existing business models for the local press are being purposefully transformed, what is evident in the increasing number of conglomerate media chains and the concurrent concentration of ownership which is quantitatively observable on the global media market.<sup>13</sup>

Simultaneously, these media outlets are experiencing a decrease in circulation numbers and readership,<sup>14</sup> with the work conditions of local journalists changing accordingly (e.g. doing more work for less money, a preference for quantity at the expense of quality, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, local media production is increasingly more centralised,<sup>16</sup> producing a subsequent weakening of ties to the locality,<sup>17</sup> and ultimately hindering the relationship between local press/local journalists and their readers.<sup>18</sup>

These concerns are echoed in the study by Croteau and Hoynes who argue that localism has two important elements, local control and local content. The concentration of media ownership has obviously shifted the ultimate control over local television stations, newspapers, and radio stations to the corporate headquarters of media conglomerates. To varying degrees, budget and other key strategic decisions – if not outright editorial direction – are made by executives with little or no connection to the local community. In short, control of much local media has migrated to the national corporate offices of a few media giants.<sup>19</sup>

The disappearance of local characteristics – delocalization – can manifest itself as the *convergence of media content* across a spectrum of media outlets of differing types with usually the same owner. In turn,<sup>20</sup> the content (in this case, local news) is produced without any particular relationship to the specific locality or rather community which the newspaper ostensibly serves.

Croteau and Hoynes point out that convergence can be the unintentional outcome of companies minimising risk and maximising profits, as media giants pursue their synergistic strategies and try to reduce risk, they face limited competition from other media giants. The frequent result is very little innovation and a great deal of imitation”.<sup>21</sup>

11 Denis McQuail identifies commercialisation with profit making goals and large-scale, low-cost and low-taste production and distribution. Other authors define commercialisation as a market-driven trend characterised by an effort to maximise profits. (For more information, see: McQUAIL, D., SIUNE, K.: *Media Policy: Convergence, Concentration and Commerce*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1998; KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: *The Global Village Stays Local*. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992, p. 143-153; PALETZ, D. L., JAKUBOWICZ, K.: *Business as Usual. Continuity and Change in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003).

12 FRANKLIN, B.: *Local Journalism and Local Media. Making the Local News*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006; FRANKLIN, B., MURPHY, D.: *Making the Local News. Local Journalism in Context*. London, New York: Routledge, 1998; VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J., BALÁŽ, M.: Nastofovanie tém a vplyv lokálnych médií na formovanie verejnej agendy. Prípadová štúdia. In *Communication Today*, 2012, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 104-120.

13 BARNETT, S.: Minding the Regional News Gap. In *British Journalism Review*, 2010, Vol. 21, No. 13, p. 13-18; McQUAIL, D., SIUNE, K.: *Media Policy: Convergence, Concentration and Commerce*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 1998.

14 ENGEL, M.: Local Papers: An Obituary. In *British Journalism Review*, 2009, Vol. 20, No. 55, p. 55-62.

15 FENTON, N. et al.: *Meeting the News Needs of Local Communities*. London: Media Trust, 2010. [online]. [2015-10-21]. Available at: <<http://www.mediatrust.org/uploads/128255497549240/original.pdf>>; JAKUBOWICZ, K.: *Rude Awakening. Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006.

16 ENGEL, M.: Local Papers: An Obituary. In *British Journalism Review*, 2009, Vol. 20, No. 55, p. 55-62; JAKUBOWICZ, K.: *Rude Awakening. Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006.

17 FRANKLIN, B.: *Local Journalism and Local Media. Making the Local News*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006.

18 FENTON, N. et al.: *Meeting the News Needs of Local Communities*. London: Media Trust, 2010. [online]. [2015-10-21]. Available at: <<http://www.mediatrust.org/uploads/128255497549240/original.pdf>>; FRANKLIN, B.: *Local Journalism and Local Media. Making the Local News*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006.

19 CROTEAU, D., HOYNES, W.: *The Business of Media. Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001, p. 155.

20 ALDRIDGE, M.: *Understanding the Local Media*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2007.

21 CROTEAU, D., HOYNES, W.: *The Business of Media. Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001, p. 153.

These authors go on to illustrate the implications of local level content convergence: “a reporter’s single story can be used in a number of papers, resulting in significant savings in the cost of gathering and reporting the news [...] the more your morning newspaper is made up of such standardised chain content, the less likely it is to cover local news substantively”.<sup>22</sup>

*The centralisation of media content* is another manifestation of delocalization. The share of centrally-prepared editorial content with no relationship to a particular locality has been on the rise, as Kleinstueber explains, “local news and other kinds of local information are much more expensive to produce than prefabricated material ‘imported’ from far-away places. Once again this is the well-known structure of centres and peripheries”.<sup>23</sup>

Such centralisation is formally structured (layout, nameplate, etc.), with Franklin suggesting that local newspapers are “local in name only, the city listed in the nameplate being one of the few surviving local features of newspapers”.<sup>24</sup>

The content of the local press is edited by a central staff lacking knowledge of the specific locality such that “the organisation of newspaper groups into regionally based monopolies, for example, promises economies of scale through the centralised subbing and printing of local newspapers, but each impacts negatively on editorial. The employment of centralised teams of subeditors to work on a number of remote local titles means subeditors have little, if any, local knowledge of the patch in which the paper circulates. The economic efficiency is high but the tie with the local community is ruptured.”<sup>25</sup>

According to Hans Kleinstueber, this results in most local media not being local at all, rather “pseudo-local”.<sup>26</sup> Part of the content is sourced, written and edited centrally and then distributed as local content and sold while pretending to possess closeness and local value. When researching delocalization in the Czech local press, it is important to bear in mind the historically determined evolution of media systems, making them *path dependent*.<sup>27</sup>

As a ‘post-communist’ media system, the Czech media cannot be studied as those in other long-standing European democracies, for its trajectory towards greater commercialisation is linked to the political and economic dimensions of its transformation from a totalitarian to a democratic regime and thus to the normative frameworks established during the political transformation which led to privatization and changes in ownership.<sup>28</sup>

But even in the transitive civic democracy in the Czech Republic there is an important tie between local media and local democracy.<sup>29</sup> So there is the question whether the integral part of the local democracy – localness of the local media – is still present.<sup>30</sup>

In the following case study I focused on the main question, how has the content of the particular local press changed in terms of localization or delocalization due to the development trend associated with ongoing commercialisation.

22 CROTEAU, D., HOYNES, W.: *The Business of Media. Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001, p. 156.

23 KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: The Global Village Stays Local. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992, p. 151-152.

24 FRANKLIN, B.: *Local Journalism and Local Media. Making the Local News*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006.

25 FRANKLIN, B.: *Local Journalism and Local Media. Making the Local News*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 10.

26 KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: The Global Village Stays Local. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992, p. 151-152.

27 HALLIN, D. C., MANCINI, P.: Comparing Media Systems. In CURRAN, J., GUREVITCH, M. (eds.): *Mass Media and Society*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2005.

28 KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: The Global Village Stays Local. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992.

29 JAKUBOWICZ, K.: *Rude Awakening. Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe*. Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2006.

30 KILLIBY, C.: Relationships between Country Newspapers and Community Ties. In *Australian Studies in Journalism*, 1994, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 275-289; JEFFRES, L. W., DOBOS, J., LEE, J.: Media Use and Community Ties. In *Journalism Quarterly*, 1988, Vol. 65, No. 3, p. 575-581.

## Case study: Developments in the Content of Vltava-Labe-Press Newspapers

The localization or rather delocalization of the Czech local press<sup>31</sup> content has been previously discussed but, unfortunately, without reference to any actual research. What follows is an instrumental case study which seeks to provide a deeper specification of the issue, aiming to find out what – if any – changes have occurred with regard to the local press content as observed in the Vltava-Labe-Press (VLP), the most prominent local newspaper publisher in the Czech Republic. In 2009, Vltava-Labe-Press published 73 district dailies in the Czech Republic and it owned the largest chain of local newspapers. There were also further 59 local and regional papers published by 49 different publishing houses in the same year. When analysing concentration levels, we used two indices (HHI index and concentration ratio) to show that in 2009 the Czech local and regional press market was absolutely (highly, respectively) concentrated and VLP thus held a monopoly.<sup>32</sup>

In 1990, the German publisher Verlagsgruppe Passau entered the Czech local press market and built the Vltava-Labe-Press publishing house which acquired the regional and district titles that had previously been published by the state and the Communist Party (prior to 1989). From 1991, the apparent aim of the then Verlagsgruppe Passau director, Franz Xaver Hirtreiter, was to publish a daily in every district in the Czech Republic. By 2000, VLP has covered the western regions of the Czech Republic with its *Deníky Bohemia* [in English *Bohemia Dailies*]. In 2000–2001, the company started to assume dominance also in the eastern regions of the country (Moravia) by establishing (by 2006) a chain of district dailies there as well (*Deníky Moravia* [in English *Moravia Dailies*]). On 18<sup>th</sup> September 2006, VLP took significant steps towards standardising the layout of its titles throughout the Czech Republic under the nameplate *Deník* [In English *Daily*]. From 2006 to 2008, Roman Gallo, the manager responsible for VLP’s newsrooms, advocated for the localization of the organisational structure and content of VLP’s dailies. The content convergence of the Bohemian and Moravian titles was completed on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2008 when all the dailies began appearing in the same format, with the same structure.<sup>33</sup>

## Methodology

The main question of the case study was how the local press content published by Vltava-Labe-Press had changed between 1989 and 2009 in terms of localization and delocalization. The premise was that commercialisation leads to delocalization, diminishing local character and production of the content, and hence between 1989 and 2009 the share of converged and centrally produced contents increased in selected Czech local dailies.

In the first phase of the case study I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with editors-in-chief in the VLP’s newsrooms and managers in the VLP publishing house. I conducted the in-depth interviews in 2009 with 10 interviewees. Their selection was based on a number of criteria – VLP’s development; length of employment at VLP; career development and position; different geographical location of the newsroom.<sup>34</sup>

31 Within the Czech media system, the local press denotes newspapers published and distributed only at the municipality and district level while the regional press is published and distributed at the regional level (remark added by L. W. C.).

32 For more information, see e.g. NAPOLI, P. M.: *Media Diversity and Localism. Meaning and Metrics*. Mahwah, NJ, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2006; GULYÁS, Á.: Structural Changes and Organisations in the Print Media Markets of Post-Communist East Central Europe. In *Javnost-The Public*, 1999, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 61-74; CROTEAU, D., HOYNES, W.: *The Business of Media. Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001; DOYLE, G.: *Understanding Media Economics*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 2002; HERRICK, D. F.: *Media Management in the Age of Giants. Business Dynamics of Journalism*. Iowa: Iowa State Press, 2003; WASCHKOVÁ ČISAŘOVÁ, L.: *Český lokální a regionální tisk mezi lety 1989 a 2009*. Brno: MuniPress, 2013.

33 WASCHKOVÁ ČISAŘOVÁ, L.: *Český lokální a regionální tisk mezi lety 1989 a 2009*. Brno: MuniPress, 2013.

34 The interviewees were anonymised. The number of participating men and women was almost identical; however, I use the masculine for all interviewees as the female gender itself would be enough to identify the particular participating women (remark added by L. W. C.).

This was followed by a quantitative content analysis of two newspapers between 1989 and 2009. The quantitative content analysis<sup>35</sup> focused on changes in editorial content on the pages selected for analysis (geographical topics; centrally produced materials; positioning of topics on the page) and changes in the formal presentation of content (structure of pages, sections, changes of nameplate and layout).

## Changeable Editorial Policy

When I asked the interviewees to assess whether the content of the VLP's dailies had become localized or delocalized between 1989 and 2009, their views differed. Editors-in-chief more readily admitted that although local topics were given a formally more prominent place (the front pages), the scope of local coverage had most likely decreased. Hence they believed that delocalization of content had occurred:

- I think we used to be more local in the past than we are now. (Editor-in-chief 01)
- Gradually the local moved more and more to the front till it got on the front page. [...] As to the volume of local news, I think that it has unfortunately decreased. (Editor-in-chief 02)
- I would say that there was more community stuff in the 1990s. (Editor-in-chief 03)
- I hope that it is moving towards increased localization or indeed to the local running across all the twenty-five pages, I hope so. I feel that it is increasingly more local but it seems to me that I am the only one who feels this way. [...] The reader won't find that section because we can't present it well to him. (Editor-in-chief 05)

In contrast, managers tended to align themselves with localization. The extent of their belief in the increase of local topics in the newspaper content related closely to whether they were responsible for content in the period before the interviews – if responsible, their conviction grew stronger.<sup>36</sup>

- At the beginning the traditional focus was regional news, there was one page of local news. [...] The fact is that today there must be at least four local pages. (Manager 02)
- I think that the share of foreign news has decreased significantly, it has been remarkable in the past five or seven years, I'm not even comparing it to before 2000. [...] National probably decreased as well but not so significantly, say by ten to fifteen percent. [...] I think that the share of regional news disappeared. Probably the greatest share, definitely the way the paper focuses, is local, followed by region, nation and a minimum of foreign news. (Manager 03)
- It is a myth that the newspaper centralised and became a national one, as the share of local news is significantly greater than before. [...] I tried to convince dozens of editors-in-chief that a local and not a national story should appear on the front page. [...] Those were people trained by VLP. [...] We constantly worked with the newsroom on including more local content but I think that the big name *Deník* [*Daily*] creates a certain expectation and in spite of it includes e.g. *Kroměřížský* [name of a town and district] the Daily was more visible. Although in fact the reader gets more local content, he felt that it was more national [because of the change of the nameplate]. (Manager 04)

35 Two dailies published by VLP – *Českobudějovický deník* and *Brněnský deník* – were selected for analysis. *Českobudějovický deník* was owned by VLP from its inception on the Czech local press market, and was published in Bohemia and *Brněnský deník* was acquired by the publishing house in 2001, being published in Moravia. The sampling technique partly followed that of Coulson and Hansen. I analysed nine years of *Českobudějovický deník*, 1990, 1993, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008. Five years were analysed for *Brněnský deník*, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008. Each year, two weeks of coverage in two different parts of the year – the first weeks of February and December – were analysed. The sample included the full front page and general pages (e.g. the section politics but not the topic of the day, economy, culture, sport, etc.) with national, foreign, regional and local news (sections like Czech Republic, abroad, south Bohemia, České Budějovice and surroundings). The analysis of formal characteristics included all editorial content. The unit of analysis was a single article (the size of the article included related visuals and was coded as such) or a single visual (e.g. an image). There was a total of 11,996 units of editorial content (articles/visuals), 8,138 in *Českobudějovický deník* and 3,858 in *Brněnský deník*. The analysis of formal features included complete issues of *Českobudějovický deník* (108) and *Brněnský deník* (60), a total of 168, with the issue as the unit of analysis. (For more information, see: COULSON, D. C., HANSEN, A.: *The Louisville Courier – Journal's News Content after Purchase by Gannet*. In *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 1995, Vol. 72, No. 1, p. 205-215; WASCHKOVÁ ČÍSAŘOVÁ, L.: *Český lokální a regionální tisk mezi lety 1989 a 2009*. Brno: MuniPress, 2013).

36 See: KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: *The Global Village Stays Local*. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992, p. 151-152.

The manager least convinced about the increased localization of content was the one who returned to the publishing house shortly before being interviewed as a change in assignment.

- I would say that the reader is losing out rather than gaining paradoxically because everything happens quicker. [...] I'm afraid you read less about the district than you used to in the first half of the 1990s. [...] Foreign news almost unchanged; national was almost subject to the vision of the person in charge. (Manager 01)

It is thus apparent that VLP did not present a unified position on developments related to content and localization/delocalization. This correlates with another point that emerged from the interviews – namely that the editorial direction of the publishing house was operationalised according to the intuition of individual editors-in-chief. Moreover, particular editors-in-chief were critical of the frequent changes related to content and company policy.

Consequently, it seems that developments related to the localization/delocalization of content were not outlined for editors-in-chief and managers in light of the absence of any uniform and over-arching company vision. Moreover, individual editors-in-chief were able and inclined to create their own policies further thwarting the establishment of a company-wide mandate.

## Local Content: When More is Actually Less

The content analysis focused on the premise that commercialisation leads to delocalization, diminishing local character and production of the content, and hence between 1989 and 2009 the share of converged and centrally produced contents increased in the selected Czech local dailies.

Content convergence was analysed using the frequency and size of identical content identified in *Českobudějovický deník* [in English *České Budějovice Daily*, further ČBD] and *Brněnský deník* [in English *Brno Daily*, further BD], such content was supplied centrally within VLP from the regional and later the national (central) newsroom. In the late 1990s the regional, national and foreign contents were produced in the regional newsrooms for their local issues in districts. In 2001, after VLP purchased two national dailies and fused their newsrooms with existing local dailies, they built a strong central newsroom by merging their Prague newsrooms. In 2006 the central newsroom was further strengthened.

- All the years up to 2001 were set, that the supra-regional content was made by the regional editors and mainly from the agency [...]. But we considered that inefficient [...], because we did on ten places the very same product from the same sources [...]. The central newsroom could provide better national and foreign content for all local newsrooms [...]. Only when the publishing house bought two national dailies [...], then came mass of journalists, the whole daily newsroom [...]. It was unique opportunity to create central newsroom. (Editor-in-chief 02)

From the total sample of 6,222 items (articles/visuals) in the two dailies in the analysed period, 37 1,639 (26 %) were identical and 4,061 (65 %) were not, the remaining 9 % had an identical topic but its treatment differed (9 %). Thus overall in the two dailies more than a third (35 %) of analysed content was identical (although in some cases the treatment differs).

The identical content involved national and foreign news that were supplied by the central or regional newsrooms, being identical most often due to the fact that they were sourced from news agencies. Concurrently, editorial content converges over time (in both frequency and amount), with the share of identical content similarly increasing (see Figures 1 and 2).

37 This variable involves only the years 2002, 2005, 2006 and 2008 when the contents of both dailies were analysed (remark added by L. W. C.).

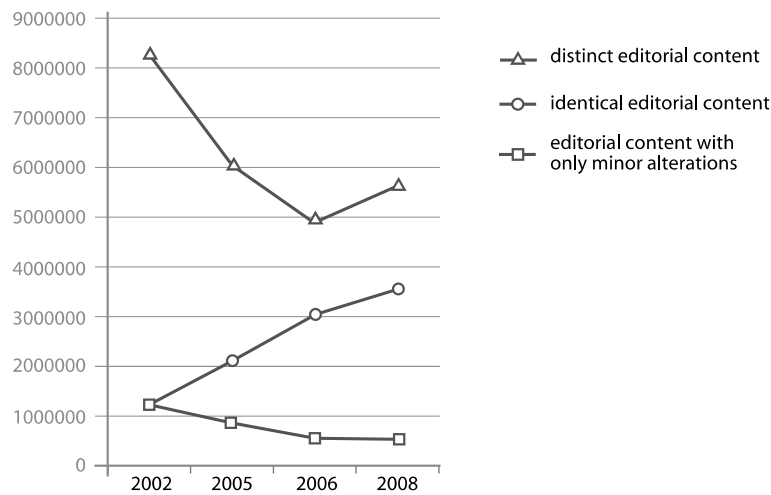


Figure 1: Českobudějovický Deník – editorial content (mm²) and content convergence  
Source: own processing

In both dailies the formal features have become increasingly identical signifying that content could be even more easily replicated without any minor alterations. Changes in pages' structure brought in 2006 greater convergence of the formal features of the content. But there were still different layouts of Bohemian and Moravian titles published by the VLP publishing house until the final convergence in 2008, when all the local titles acquired the same layout and pages' structure, as one of the respondents points out (Editor-in-chief 06).

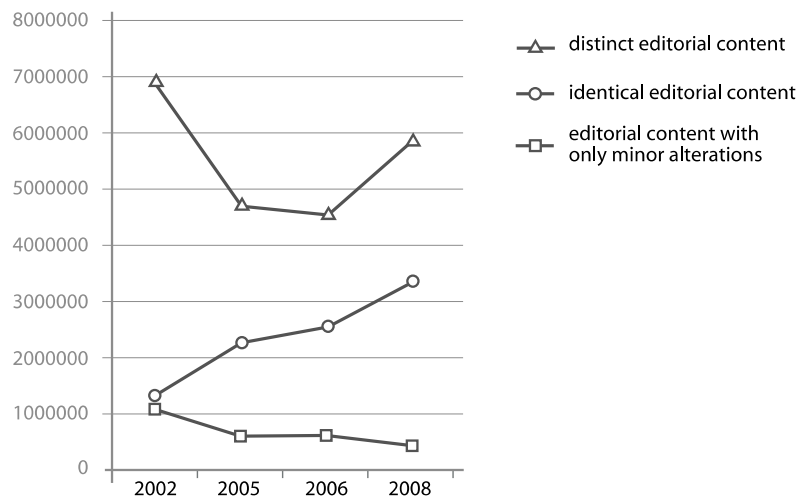


Figure 2: Brněnský Deník – editorial content (mm²) and content convergence  
Source: own processing

Between 2002 and 2008, when both dailies were owned by VLP, demonstrable tendencies towards content convergence are observable. Furthermore, the analysis of the changes to the formal features and content structure illustrates that this gradual convergence was initiated from the first year of dual ownership (2002), with the number of identical sections initially increasing in the two dailies, followed by their increasingly uniform structure.

Between 2002 and 2006, BD appears more stable in its focus and order of sections, giving the impression that the publisher (or the newsroom) tested new layouts in ČBD, which were not implemented in the other daily. The virtual convergence of formal features is observable only at the end of the analysed period (final layout changes occurring on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2008) in light of the closure of obsolete publishing facilities. Collectively, the results fall clearly in line with what one would expect to observe in light of delocalization.<sup>38</sup>

The analysis of the development of centrally produced content was focused on testing the hypothesis that the increasing centralisation of content production leads to the weakening of observable local characteristics in the news. The frequency and size of coverage on local topics was the focus of this analysis, as opposed to the regional,<sup>39</sup> national and foreign news that were supplied by the central newsroom or by other central sources such as news agencies.

In order to assign a variable of importance attached to local topics, I considered their structural position in the daily, positing that the highest importance would be attached to articles that appear at the top of the page.

In the sample, it is observable that the most frequent editorial content is centred on national topics and increased in both dailies during the analysed period. Similarly in both dailies, the second most frequent content focused on regional topics, with local topics following in third place and foreign topics in fourth (the exceptions being related to years 2006 and 2008, when in BD foreign topics were more frequent than local). Furthermore, there was a notable increase in all topics in 1997 (ČBD) and 2002 (BD) as a consequence of increased pagination.

The size of coverage regarding the individual topics (see Figures 3 and 4), however, suggests that the importance of national and foreign topics decreased in the analysed period, as their particular word count was increasingly shortened.

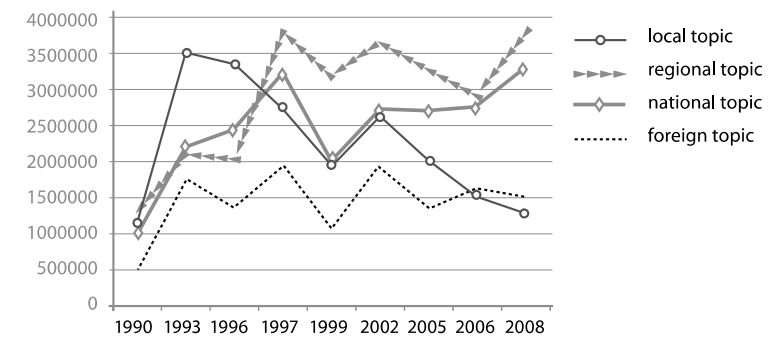


Figure 3: Českobudějovický Deník – size (mm²) by geographical origin of topic  
Source: own processing

A comparison of the size of the coverage of regional and local topics illuminates some interesting considerations. The region as a site of content emphasis gradually became the most covered geographical area in both dailies; with its share increasing between 2006 and 2008 through layout changes related ostensibly to the newspaper's proclaimed localization of content. However, in contrast, both dailies' coverage of local topics actually decreased overall (with the exception of BD between 2005 and 2008) when local content increased in number of articles despite occupying less actual space than foreign topics. The fluctuations in the size of coverage related to local topics between 1996 and 2008 may be explained by the initiation of formal pagination changes (especially in the size of adverts) and also by VLP's evolving content strategies as indicated in the interviews.

38 ALDRIDGE, M.: *Understanding the Local Media*. Maidenhead : Open University Press, 2007, p. 42-49; CROTEAU, D., HOYNES, W.: *The Business of Media. Corporate Media and the Public Interest*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi : Sage Publications, 2001, p. 153.

39 Local topics were topics oriented specifically on village, town or district issues; regional topics were oriented specifically on issues related to the region, meaning in the broader context (remark added by L. W. C.).

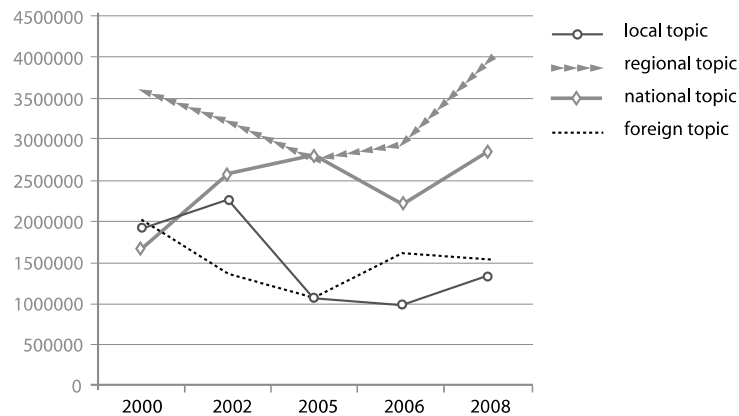


Figure 4: Brněnský Deník – size (mm<sup>2</sup>) by geographical origin of topic

Source: own processing

A more detailed analysis of the space devoted to local topics provides further evidence of delocalization (see Figures 5 and 6). Between 1990 and 1993 the size of the coverage of local topics grew 3.5 times in ČBD, which correlates to its transformation from a regional to a local (district) daily.

Yet, in the following years, local content kept decreasing until 2008 (with the exception of 2002 when pagination increased significantly and the format of both dailies was altered). Also in 2008, the size of local coverage decreased while regional and national coverage increased in both dailies.

This is most likely attributable to the convergence of content and formal features of all local press titles published under VLP. This finding completely contradicts VLP's official localization policy heralded by its management in 2007.<sup>40</sup> The coverage of local topics in BD (see Figure 5) is seemingly different. However, the size of local coverage decreased here as well between 2002 and 2006. The increase in 2008 is most likely a consequence of the convergence of formal features and section hierarchy rather than a result of any actual increased localization of contents.

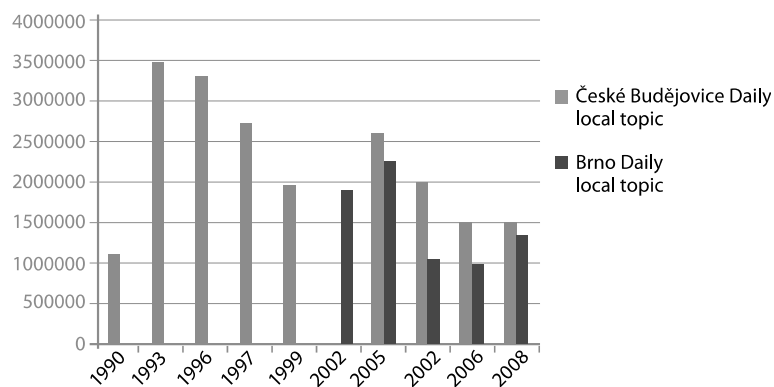


Figure 5: Českobudějovický Deník and Brněnský Deník – size (mm<sup>2</sup>) of local coverage

Source: own processing

40 Respondents (Editors-in-chief 02, 04, 05) understand the VLP managers' decisions in 2007 as localization. "In 2007 it changed significantly when the position of the local newsrooms was greatly strengthened" (Editor-in-chief 05).

During the entire analysed period in ČBD (Figure 6) regional topics were most frequently at the top of the page (330 items) and least frequently placed as 'filler'<sup>41</sup> (642 items). The second most frequent topic at the top of the page was local content (254 cases) followed by national content (249), suggesting that underscoring a particular relationship with the locality as reflected in editorial content was not a key concern for the publisher.<sup>42</sup>

The situation in BD was very similar (Figure 6) despite the fact that the local section had been more prominently placed in the daily since 2005 (compared to 2008 in ČBD). The topic most frequently placed at the top of the page was once again a regional topic (286 cases) which was in sharp contrast with its local content; local content tended to be presented as 'filler' and appeared at the top of the page less frequently than regional, national or even foreign topics.

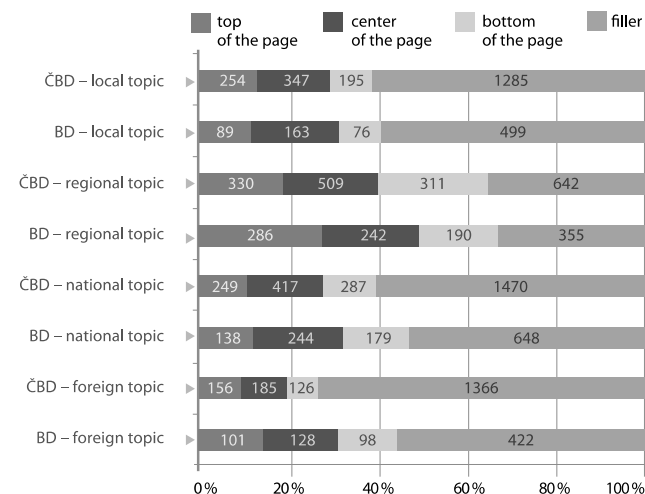


Figure 6: Českobudějovický Deník and Brněnský Deník – frequency of editorial content by geographical origin and position on page

Source: own processing

The centralisation of standards related to the newspapers' formal features are reflected in the changes implemented in the nameplates (the standardisation of titles and their size) and the structure of sections. Centralised formal features suggest that there are no specifics of centrally produced, content-converged local titles.<sup>43</sup> These aforementioned changes were clearly linked to the publishing house's strategy of acquisition and consolidation of news dailies in Bohemia and Moravia. In 2006, VLP introduced a unified nameplate for all its dailies that included *Deník* [Daily] in conjunction with the name of the specific district. The size of the two words is also significant as the word *Deník* [Daily] completely dominates the nameplate, the name of the district being marginalised. VLP thus managed to create a clearly recognisable national chain of dailies.

The hierarchy of sections was localized in the analysed period, with local topics moving towards the front page. These topics thus gradually appeared more frequently on the front page as well as on top of the page. Hence we can argue that while in terms of formal features both dailies demonstrate localizing trends (i.e. local topics were quite literally moving to the forefront), this does not apply to editorial content which – as demonstrated above – was dominated by regional topics, with the space devoted to local topics actually decreasing over time.<sup>44</sup>

41 'Fillers' are understood as short, mainly single-column journalism articles or photographs that are used in order to fill space between more important articles included in the newspaper layout (remark added by L. W. C.).

42 See: KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: The Global Village Stays Local. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992, p. 151-152.

43 See: FRANKLIN, B.: *Local Journalism and Local Media. Making the Local News*. London, New York: Routledge, 2006.

44 See: KLEINSTEUBER, H. J.: The Global Village Stays Local. In SIUNE, K., TRUETZSCHLER, W. (eds.): *Dynamics of Media Politics. Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe*. London, Newbury Park, New Delhi: Sage, 1992, p. 151-152.

# Conclusions

From the data analysed, it is clear that, in case of both dailies, VLP attempted to gradually strengthen the ties of the papers with their respective localities (the district in which they were published), however through a somewhat disingenuous process that localized the formal features without augmenting its coverage of local content. In fact, the actual space devoted to local issues was observed to be decreasing in both dailies. Regional topics are now dominant in both dailies, along with centrally supplied content (national and foreign) and increasingly standardised formal features.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, despite the appearance of moves by VLP to increase its local ties, an actual gradual weakening of ties to the given locality and delocalization is observable.

Although this case study is rather specific, it nonetheless stands as a concrete example of how corporate strategy related to the development of economic efficiencies influences the content and structure of news as detailed in Croteau and Hoynes.<sup>46</sup> Such moves, while producing economic benefits for the company, simultaneously produce negative externalities in the communities served in relation to developing civic tendencies as a function of the news content disseminated, as argued by Fenton et al.<sup>47</sup>

It must be pointed out, however, that despite these overarching converging and centralising tendencies, district newsrooms had a certain degree of autonomy within the publishing house. Such autonomy could and did manifest itself in particular interventions related to content (attested to by interviewees for multiple reasons, many related to VLP's tenuous centralised management structure).

Although more research is needed to identify the particular links between the commercial decisions of the publishing house and key moments in the delocalization process, it remains clear that developments in the Czech local press can be aligned with those identified in other long-established European democracies.

But of greatest concern is how this process of delocalization of local media content can contribute to the weakening of the local characteristics of analysed newspapers, and in turn, the weakening of civic ties within local communities, which, as integral components, similarly weaken the Czech democratic society as a whole.

This study is the first and retrospective analysis of the delocalization trend in the Czech local media and it forms the essential basis for further research on contemporary development of the local media in the Czech Republic – especially due to the fact that the contemporary development have led to significant ownership changes in VLP<sup>48</sup> followed by management and publisher's intention changes.

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48 In August 2015, VGP sold the Vltava-Labe-Press publishing house to the local company Penta (remark added by L. W. C.).

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