

## Article

# Local Media in Serbia as Symbolic Capital of the Community: A Theoretical Reflection on Its Social Role in the Contemporary Era

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## Abstract

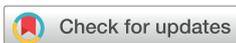
This study is grounded in the premise that local media should be understood beyond a market-oriented framework, with their social role theoretically redefined through the concept of symbolic capital. The central thesis is that the survival of local media must be regarded primarily as a matter of public interest and as a prerequisite for strengthening the democratic capacity of communities in contemporary socio-communicative contexts. Representative examples of both active and defunct local media in Serbia were analyzed to assess how, across different historical periods, they contributed to the formation and transformation of symbolic capital in local communities. The theoretical framework draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital and Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. The analysis indicates that local media functioned as institutional carriers of legitimacy during the socialist period, as spaces of resistance during the transitional period, and as sources of moral and professional capital in the contemporary era. Nevertheless, current project-based funding models and precarious working conditions undermine their autonomy and long-term sustainability. It is therefore concluded that the disappearance of local media represents not merely an economic problem but also a profound symbolic and democratic loss, as communities lose spaces of trust, dialogue, and public representation.

**Keywords:** local media; symbolic capital; local community; public sphere; contemporary society

## 1. Introduction

The role of local media in contemporary society extends beyond the provision of information to local communities. Local news organizations contribute to the preservation of community identity, facilitate dialogue among citizens, sustain social cohesion and roots us in a “sense of place” (Usher, 2021, p. 18)—functions that are frequently overlooked in both media practice and scholarly debate. Yet, aligned with dominant global trends, local media are often assessed primarily through the lens of economic sustainability and market performance, an approach that obscures their broader social and democratic significance.

In many countries, particularly in Serbia, local media operate under persistent structural pressures, including economic precarity, declining audiences, technological disadvantage, political interference, and unstable regulatory frameworks (Gulyas & Baines, 2020). The cumulative effects of these pressures have led to the closure of numerous local newsrooms, the erosion of professional journalistic capacity, and the weakening of the media's social role at the community level. Empirical evidence from recent analyses of Serbian



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local media (ANEM, 2024<sup>1</sup>, 2025a; UNS, 2025<sup>2</sup>) consistently points to negative trends that undermine both the survival of local outlets and their ability to fulfill democratic functions.

This study departs from approaches that reduce the crisis of local media to questions of financial viability. Instead, it foregrounds the social role of local media as generators of symbolic capital within communities: as mediators of public communication, custodians of local memory, and facilitators of civic participation. Audiences are not merely quantifiable consumers but perform their “deep citizenship” in the social networks of their everyday life (Heikkilä & Ahva, 2015). From this perspective, the survival of local media represents not merely a technical or economic challenge, but a question of democratic capacity and community resilience. It is about the media tools that can facilitate the richness of people’s social practices, the “public connection” within the “common frame of collective action about common resources” and unresolved issues (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 7).

Drawing on theoretical insights associated with Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital and Jürgen Habermas’s understanding of the public sphere, the paper conceptualizes local media as socially embedded institutions whose value depends on the functions they perform within specific historical and political contexts. However, rather than applying these theories abstractly, the analysis is grounded in empirical examples of local media in Serbia, serving as analytical illustrations of the social role of local media’s symbolic capital.

We also follow the argument that local media do not generate symbolic capital in a uniform or automatic manner. Their democratic and symbolic value depends on the type of local media, the roles they perform, and the conditions under which they operate. Previous scholarship has identified multiple normative and practical roles of local news—such as acting as a watchdog over local elites, fostering civic engagement, but also strong community life and being a good neighbor (Poindexter et al., 2006). Building on these insights, this study demonstrates how different functional modalities of local media shape their capacity to contribute to democratic life.

This approach aligns with recent critiques of the “news deserts” paradigm, most notably Usher’s (2023), who argues that local news cannot be assumed to function uniformly as a democratic resource, as its effects depend on how it is produced, used, and embedded in local power relations. By developing a typology of local media based on their functional roles and historical conditions, this paper addresses this critique and demonstrates how different forms of local news generate qualitatively different democratic and symbolic outcomes. In this study, “local” is not defined solely by geographic reach or ownership structure, but by the proximity of news production to everyday community life, local power relations, and shared symbolic reference points. Local media are understood as news organizations embedded in specific communities, oriented toward issues of direct relevance to local publics, and capable of mediating public debate, accountability, and collective identity. The disappearance of such media, therefore, constitutes not only an economic loss but a profound symbolic and democratic decline.

Based on a comparative historical analysis of representative local media across four periods in Serbia, the paper identifies several ideal-typical functional roles that are central to understanding the democratic and symbolic significance of local media:

- Local media as institutional legitimizers;
- Local media as sites of resistance and alternative publics;
- Local media as professional—moral watchdogs;
- Local media as simulated or instrumentalized localism;
- Local media as good neighbor.

It should be noted that the delineation of these functions does not imply that specific media perform only one of them or can be categorized solely in this way. Rather, they serve

to indicate the media's evident role in one of these segments in terms of the materialization of their symbolic potential within local communities (and beyond).

These functional differences are crucial for assessing whether local media contribute to democratic capacity or merely reproduce the appearance of pluralism. While local media in Serbia have been exposed to varying forms of political instrumentalization across all historical periods, the intensity and modalities of this influence have not been uniform, nor have their social effects. This variation helps explain why local media were able, in certain epochs, to function as important sources of symbolic capital, while in others this capacity was weakened or eroded.

The contribution of this study, therefore, lies not in reiterating that local media matter for democracy, but in demonstrating how different types of local media, operating under distinct historical and political conditions, produce qualitatively different forms of symbolic capital. The analysis shows that during the socialist period, local media primarily functioned as institutional carriers of legitimacy; in the 1990s, as spaces of resistance and micro-public spheres; and in the contemporary period as fragile sources of moral and professional capital undermined by project-based funding and political instrumentalization.

Our thesis is that, while there are many aspects in which local media appear instrumentalized, it is the simulated localism type that solely loses the ability to reproduce the symbolic capital of the community in its entirety, while others maintain at least some degree of community-responsive journalism (Ali, 2017, p. 7). First, the paper outlines the theoretical and methodological framework. Then, it describes the key characteristics of selected historical periods in the Serbian media landscape and presents representative cases. The discussion section elaborates the findings within the proposed analytical framework, while the concluding section synthesizes the main arguments and implications of the study.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Local Media and Symbolic Capital

Theoretical concepts are employed in this study not as an abstract framework, but as analytical tools for understanding the concrete functions and roles of local media within communities. Rather than treating theory as an abstract backdrop, this paper mobilizes theoretical concepts to explain specific functions of local media within communities: maintaining a local public sphere, producing legitimacy, enabling civic participation, and shaping collective identity.

In contemporary literature on local media, presentism and parochialism often dominate, with local media being primarily examined through the lens of their current state or the development of specific media forms within a single country, while broader societal and theoretical perspectives are frequently neglected (Anderson, 2020). Consequently, different forms of local media—from print and electronic media to community media—are analyzed through fragmented theoretical frameworks. Attempts at synthesis do exist (Aldridge, 2007), and the application of Jürgen Habermas's and Pierre Bourdieu's theories, for example, can prove useful in developing a unified perspective that also encompasses the analysis of local media.

In this context, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by "local", as local is not merely a geographically bounded space. It is the "where", the material setting of news, but also a lived space of cultural and economic power (Usher, 2021, p. 38). Local is an empty signifier in which communities and markets collide, social relationships and struggles occur, and people experience these problematic dynamics (Ali, 2017, p. 49). Castells (2010) describes the local as a "space of places", often contrasted with the "space of flows" in the global economy and culture. These media reflect both the social and cultural values of the community, providing resistance to networked interests beyond the local level. The

strength of political decentralization correlates directly with media localism, whereby local media may serve both as an echo of corporate or political strategies and as genuine instruments for informing citizens (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 48).

The primary function of local media is to maintain the local public sphere, inform citizens, and support the social capital of the community (Möhring, 2019; Heiselberg & Hopmann, 2024). However, financial sustainability often constrains this. Local media often reinforce the dominance of existing power structures (Usher, 2021). As a result, local media are susceptible to pressures from advertisers, political elites, and global corporations, which may lead to their instrumentalization and subsequent simulation of community (Williams, 2003, p. 155), while “news deserts” in poorer communities symbolize a deficit of information and democracy (Nielsen, 2015).

In the United States, for instance, the deficit of local reporting, driven by hyper-commercialization, contributes to national polarization, as strong local media can mitigate ideological conflicts within communities (Gulyas & Baines, 2020). Similarly, Putnam et al. (1992) demonstrate that social capital, formed through everyday interactions and communal activities, enables effective and stable democracy, while its absence leads to fragmentation and inefficient institutions.

Local media also need to balance “hard news” coverage with content that builds community identity. Although topics may appear trivial, they create networks of social capital and allow citizens to make key life decisions within the community. The absence of critical reporting or servility to local elites transforms media into a “lapdog” of privileged groups rather than a guardian of public interests.

A key theoretical framework is likely provided by Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, as it enables citizens to exercise critical oversight over authorities and to form public opinion through discussion of societal issues, rather than through mediation by the state or corporations (Habermas, 1969). Local media facilitate deliberative democracy through citizen participation in local public spheres (Ali, 2017, p. 7). Later, Habermas (1986) emphasized the necessity of recognizing the relationship between the system and the “lifeworld”, in which local media reflect the concrete experiences and needs of the community rather than abstract national or global interests.

Bourdieu therefore serves as an excellent complement to this approach through his analysis of symbolic capital and habitus, which shape valuation and perception within social fields. Domination manifests not only in economic and political structures but also in cultural practices, where the state and powerful actors determine values and the distribution of capital (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 21; Burdije, 1999, p. 162). Symbolic capital generated by local media is therefore contingent upon editorial autonomy, modes of financing, and the relationship between journalists and the community they serve. Local media, as both Habermas and Bourdieu indirectly suggest, operate within a network of media’s meta-capital (Couldry, 2003), where dominant interests shape what is considered “local” and worthy of attention—both in terms of media and the communities they inform.

This would be the case of “conversion of economic into symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 291), related to instrumentalized media, but what we seek is “the patterns of conduct” that are perceived by people as honourable and worthy of their attention and identity, providing them with values and a “set of beliefs”, which makes their association and local belonging a collectively recognized reputable property (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 47). We will call this the symbolic capital of the community, its public sphere. For truly local media—meaning those that are independent of political and economic forces—the ability to support the collective identity of the community, inform citizens, and facilitate public debate is therefore crucial (Heiselberg & Hopmann, 2024). Consequently, analyzing the socio-political and economic context, as well as the level of civic activism, remains essential

for understanding the effectiveness of local media and their role in democratization and social cohesion (Nielsen, 2015).

Focusing primarily on the U.S. media system, Usher (2021, p. 23) argues that “the presence or absence of local journalism does not guarantee that journalists are holding up truth to power” as well as that “the American democratic project was well underway without the kind of local news we imagine to be necessary to support a thriving democracy”. We do not seek the idealized view, even fetishized impressions of local media (Ali, 2017, p. 21). Our study primarily focuses on the case of Serbia (as well as the state formations that encompassed this territory), that is, on the highly specific historical, political, and structural conditions under which media in this region—including local media—have operated and continue to operate. For this reason, we find another assessment, by Usher (2021, p. 29), more analytically relevant, which emphasizes that “journalism is more than information and politics, as journalism plays an important role as a builder and transmitter of shared cultural values and experiences” as well as “the role journalism plays in place-making, history-shaping, and community-building”.

Within this framework, we examine selected media outlets, which are discussed in greater detail below, with particular attention to their role and significance within local communities (but also beyond). These cases simultaneously confirm that only such a framework of local media operation enables the fulfillment of the functions highlighted by Usher. Accordingly, the quality of their work—particularly in the domain of quality (political) reporting (the watchdog role, their contribution to the construction of the public sphere, and the provision of high-quality information to citizens, without which no functional society can exist)—is closely linked to their influence within the community, that is, to what may be described as the community dilemma (the existence of symbolic capital, the preservation of local identity, and the maintenance of collective memory within specific communities). Therefore, “the two roles—good neighbor and watchdog—can coexist to mutually benefit the public and the press while reconnecting the public with civic life” (Poindexter et al., 2006, p. 86).

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that a decline in the quality of information (the first variable) is neither a direct nor a primary cause of democratic backsliding. More specifically, the principal causes lie not with the media and journalists themselves, but with political actors and the structural characteristics of the political system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), which shape the media system as a whole (and local media in particular), rendering them collateral damage and, indirectly—given their limited capacity to exert influence in the current media environment—also complicit in the production of these outcomes. This dynamic is particularly well illustrated by the contemporary Serbian context and the modalities of media operation embodied in so-called project-based financing, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

All of the cases examined in this paper demonstrate the nature of these relationships, as well as the paradoxes outlined here, which must be adequately understood in order to create conditions for the proper functioning of local media and the fulfillment of their important roles within the described context.

## 2.2. Serbian Local Media Landscape

We can identify four main periods through which the domestic media system, and consequently local media and their community engagement, can be examined.

These are: *the Socialist Period* (1945–1990), when the media system was predominantly a state-controlled media system; *the Transitional Decade* (1990–2000), characterized by political influence and media reorientation; *the Period of Democratization and Early Digital Transforma-*

tion (2000–2015); and finally, the still ongoing *Contemporary Period* (2015–), which is most closely associated with project-based funding and the struggle for survival of local media.

The Socialist Period did not establish a logic of media organization, but it did reinforce paradoxically contradictory processes: “a multitude of local media entirely subordinated to socially established goals. The journalist was essentially a socio-political worker” (Oreč, 1977, p. 207). They acted as agitators and organizers, providing publicity to the country’s economic and political elites, transmitting their responses from closed forums, while citizens remained largely at the bottom of the hierarchy (Gredelj, 1986). Nonetheless, many institutions and enterprises maintained their own media outlets, and local media did exist, even if they did not fully meet the previously outlined Habermasian criteria.

The 1990s, in turn, brought a transition of power over the media itself, which in domestic literature is interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the opening of the media market led to a substantial increase in the number of media outlets, numbering in the hundreds, repeating the pattern of deregulation seen in other Mediterranean countries with polarized pluralist systems, such as Italy, which had to correct its market principles due to the chaos in the broadcast spectrum and reintroduce certain forms of regulation (Radojković & Stojković, 2004). The reasons for media proliferation were somewhat more complex in Serbia, where licenses were still granted under tacit political control to the parties in power, and less to those in opposition (Miletić, 2014). From an idealistic perspective, this was often viewed as “a classic conflict between a liberal public and an undemocratic regime” (Veljanovski, 2024, p. 38), without considering the underlying constellation of interests.

The changes that occurred with the turn of the century and broader socio-political shifts were later characterized as “disappointing” (Matić, 2012). Although the transition toward a democratic system began, and some professionalization of media workers followed, the “political will of authorities regarding reforms remained limited” (Veljanovski, 2024, p. 47). The media system found itself in a paradox: authorities emphasized their desire to meet European standards and outsourced analysis to British consulting firms, which proposed Scandinavian models without comparing them to countries in the region or adopting transitional experiences, leaving decisions ultimately in the hands of dominant political and economic actors (Milivojević, 2009). At the local level, this meant “predominantly party-controlled newspapers, while at the national level, media oligarchization emerged” (Miletić, 2014, p. 81).

At its close, the decade only perpetuated most of these negative trends. Instead of the anticipated democratization of the media space, polarization between pro-government and anti-government outlets intensified (Mladenović & Petrović, 2020). Media instrumentalization occurred under the guise of politically controlled hyper-commercialization. Several authors have noted a certain colonization of the media, reflecting the loss of autonomy relative to dominant actors (Matić & Milivojević, 2020), while the thesis of a competitive regime with a one-party domination has unfortunately persisted for decades (Pavlović, 2005; Milutinović, 2022).

### 3. Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative, theoretical-analytical approach, aiming to examine the role of local media in Serbia within a broader context as an undeniable forms of community symbolic capital. It was explored across different socio-historical periods (framed by the four previously mentioned and described periods), presenting various characteristic examples of local media and the role they have played (and continue to play) in local communities.

The comparative-historical approach provides insights into continuities and discontinuities in the development of local media from the socialist period to the present day,

enabling the identification of changes in institutional frameworks, financial models, and social functions of media in relation to dominant social and political conditions. Complementing this approach, we conducted a qualitative analysis of representative examples of some of the local media. Selection criteria were based on geographical diversity, historical continuity (and birthdate), and symbolic significance within local communities. The analyzed media include a comparative overview of *Radio Subotica* (Subotica), *Magazine Sloboda* (Pirot), *B92 Radio*, *Boom 93* (Požarevac), *Južne vesti* (Niš), *Ozon Press* (Čačak), *Magločistač* (Subotica), and *Glas Šumadije* (Kragujevac)—as an important and characteristic examples illustrating each of the periods in which they emerged and operated. The selected cases illustrate different functional types of local media rather than representing an exhaustive overview of the local media landscape.

The analysis considered media histories, editorial policies, funding models, and community relations. Additionally, a limited discourse analysis was conducted to examine how local media articulate their mission and role within the community, drawing on editorial columns, interviews, and journalists' statements.

The data were collected from secondary sources, including scholarly literature, professional organization reports, archival material, and the media outlets' own websites. While the study does not have a strictly empirical character, the qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of the symbolic dimensions of local journalism and its overall societal significance.

This methodological design allows the linking of theoretical concepts of symbolic capital with the practices of local media, contributing to a broader understanding of their social function and contemporary position in Serbia and beyond.

Based on these analytical dimensions, the study seeks to answer the following research question: How have local media in Serbia contributed to the formation, preservation, and transformation of symbolic capital in local communities across different historical periods? In this way, it also addresses the question of what their potential is today in this regard, and consequently, the possibilities for its actualization. In doing so, it also examines their broader social significance, the conditions in which they operate, and the challenges they face.

## 4. Historical Overview: From Self-Managed Socialism to Project-Based Funding

### 4.1. The Socialist Period: State-Controlled Media System (1945–1990)

Within the socialist framework, the local media largely adhered to dominant narratives and modes of reporting, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping collective identity as well as regulating ideological discourse. At the same time, even within this context, they exercised their symbolic capital and fulfilled a significant social function.

The normative model is clear: “all communication institutions were founded on social ownership, providing a concrete basis for the democratic realization of a free press” (Radojković, 1984, p. 177). The system of delegate assemblies created numerous decision-making instances, from the local to the federal level, that were functionally interconnected “without vertical hierarchization or subordination” (Radojković, 1984, p. 177). This has brought the overall governance of the country closer to the socialist masses, and local media played an important role: “ownership, power, and political organization, in accordance with self-managed socialism, already contain the seeds of dispersion and socialization of power” (Radojković, 1984, p. 178). Dilemmas of the socialist media system even extended to seeking connections with non-aligned countries against Western hegemony, which involved the idea of “decolonizing information flows” (Radojković, 1987, p. 232).

The market reform of 1965 weakened the power of the League of Communists but also produced new challenges. “Media localization led to politicization” (Oreč, 1977, p. 255). Localization fostered ethnic or federal divisions, whereby the country was fragmented along political lines, to the extent that a local media outlet would not report on neighboring republics, treating them as foreign territory. Sveta Tadić, vice president of the Association of Journalists of Yugoslavia, warned that one-sided information ultimately leads to “misunderstandings or unnecessary escalation” (According to Oreč, 1977, pp. 256–257). While some viewed this as a threat to the unity of the media system itself, even describing it as “the activity of hostile political émigrés and renegade groups” (Radojković, 1984, p. 182), others considered it a desirable form of polycentrism: “Despite difficulties, it transitioned from forms of state information and autocratic communication toward socialized and democratic communication” (Vreg, 1991, p. 290).

Today, it is difficult to determine whether this was genuine decentralization or merely its surrogate (Miletić, 2014), but local media clearly acquired significant functions under these conditions, even while confirming their subordination to social goals set by the elites. The relaxation of party control contributed to the creation of media that established some professional standards, such as Studio B, which Veljanovski (2024) identifies as a precursor of commercial radio that challenged the clichés of state radio, serving as a prototype of modern urban radio and an early model for such media in the region.

Regarding concrete examples of local media operating during this period and serving as adequate cases for analyzing the symbolic potential within local communities, in this study, we selected two such cases.

#### 4.1.1. From Institutional Legitimizers to a Good Neighbor: Radio Subotica

This case illustrates how local media in the socialist period functioned as institutional carriers of legitimacy and multicultural symbolic capital, which, nowadays, transfers its specific media potential in a local media ecosystem.

Founded in 1968, Radio Subotica continues to broadcast programs in multiple languages, reflecting the demographic and cultural composition of Subotica (RTV, 2016).

It represents an important local media phenomenon within the context of multi-ethnic Vojvodina, serving to preserve ethnic and linguistic pluralism within local communities and policies.

From the perspective of media and social functions, it was established as a community service rather than merely a commercial station. Throughout its history, it received financial support from the local government, which made the provision of specific programming, particularly in the multicultural environment of Subotica, sustainable. This has enabled it to function as a key channel of information for all national communities in the city, which remains the case today.

Radio Subotica has also faced challenges. Following an attempted privatization and the mass closure of programs, it survived under new ownership (RTV, 2016). The new management has renewed its transmitters and reinstated minority-language programs (Croatian, Hungarian, Bunjevac).

Radio Subotica has also sought to keep pace with technological advancement, as exemplified by the launch of a DAB+ transmitter in Subotica at the Crveno Selo location, which ensures better coverage with digital radio signals as part of the broader strategy for modernizing the radio space in Serbia and promoting digital inclusion of the population (Bojčić, 2023; Subotica.com, n.d.).

The significance of Radio Subotica is evident in several key dimensions. As a locally oriented media outlet, it plays a crucial role in informing citizens about issues of community relevance, thereby strengthening the democratic capacity of the local society. Broadcasting

in multiple languages provides space for cultural pluralism and gives voice to groups that are often marginalized in national media. Thanks to its multi-decade tradition, it constitutes an important part of the historical and cultural identity of Subotica.

#### 4.1.2. A Good Neighbor and a Keeper of Collective Memory: Magazine Sloboda (Pirot)

This case exemplifies local print media as a long-term repository of collective memory and everyday symbolic capital.

Namely, it is the oldest local print media in Serbia, founded in 1944, as the bulletin of the District People's Liberation Front in Pirot ([Pirotске vesti, 2024](#)).

Over eight decades of continuous publication, this newspaper (weekly magazine nowadays) has evolved from a partisan information bulletin into a stable regional weekly, firmly embedded in the cultural and social life of Pirot. This longevity positions Sloboda as an important primary source for the study of local history, public life, and media practices in southeastern Serbia. In the post-World War II period, Sloboda operated within the local information system, which later developed into an integrated public enterprise alongside Radio Pirot and TV Pirot ([Pirotске vesti, 2024](#)).

The newspaper was privatized in 2007 ([Danas, 2007](#)). This change in ownership raised questions regarding financial sustainability, editorial autonomy, and the media's relationship with local authorities ([NUNS, 2007](#)).

Content-wise, Sloboda combines reporting on local politics, economics, and social issues with sections that affirm community identity, including texts in the Pirot dialect, family columns, and children's content. In this way, it performs not only an informational function but also cultural reproduction, preserving the specificities of local language and customs. Over the decades, the editorial team has emphasized close contact with the everyday lives of citizens, presenting "ordinary people" and their stories as an essential component of local memory and public information ([Pirotске vesti, 2015](#)).

As a local public forum, Sloboda contributes to articulating the problems, needs, and developmental perspectives of Pirot and its surroundings. As a guardian of collective memory, it consistently records socially significant events, from political changes to cultural manifestations and microhistorical phenomena. Its extensive and up-to-date archive also represents a valuable resource for social science researchers, historians, and local institutions.

Sloboda exemplifies a typical local media with elements of local patriotism. However, like most local media in Serbia, it currently faces structural challenges: a shrinking print market, limited revenue sources, dependence on budgetary funding for local government projects, and occasional legal pressures.

Despite these challenges, Sloboda remains a recognizable and influential local media outlet, continuing to play a significant role in informing citizens, preserving local identity, and ensuring continuity of public communication in Pirot.

#### 4.2. *The Transitional Decade of Political Influence and Media Reorientation (1990–2000)*

This period was characterized by the widespread political instrumentalization of many media outlets and a general lack of regulation within the media system. However, a positive side of this uncontrolled openness and confusion was the simultaneous emergence of new, independent local voices. Contemporary expert assessments suggest that this was possible because the state paid relatively little attention to the informational context, focusing primarily on mainstream sources that reached broader audiences.

Newly established local media, which appeared across the country, increasingly became an informational alternative to the dominant narratives shaped by state-controlled outlets. In doing so, they also acted as a form of social resistance to the prevailing regime, forming networks that strengthened their potential to create local, micro-public spheres.

From a sociological perspective, these two parallel trends and their effects can be seen as embodying the conflict between the collective-ownership class—i.e., “the party elite seeking to retain control over social property—and the new capital entrepreneurs who began accumulating wealth in the final decades of socialism, and, until 1995, also through looting and war profiteering” (Miletić, 2014, p. 45). Social property was transformed into state ownership, initiating a process of statization of the media, which was also reflected at the local level. The political majority in a municipality—perceived as the will of the majority of municipal voters—channeled its particularistic interests “into the interpretation that it was therefore entitled to control local media” (Miletić, 2014, p. 53). This led to the creation of media outlets “with particular political options, whether the ruling or opposition party” (Miletić, 2014, p. 54). In short, despite all specificities, the process was paradoxical: “the new democracy strengthens its power with fully authoritarian interventions”, such as the dismissal of editors and disobedient journalists, creating a “journalistic poverty” (Vreg, 1991, p. 322). On the other hand, the process of wild privatization and commercialization led to the emergence of numerous media at both national and local levels, “including 40 local enterprises such as TV K9 in Kragujevac, TV Spektrum in Čačak, Radio Belami in Niš, Yu Eko Radio in Subotica, and Radio Pančevac” (Miletić, 2014, p. 56).

While Veljanovski (2024, p. 37) identifies “media representing a liberal public sphere”, Miletić (2014, p. 59) argues that “there were no public service models or civil society media models during the 1990s; rather, dominant political and economic interests shaped the media system from the national to the local level”. Newly established media, in order to survive, either refrained from criticizing authorities or sought alternative funding sources. Veljanovski (2024, p. 37) also noted a transnational dimension: “most of these new, small-scale media, with limited reach, survived on foreign donations, which promoted the development of democracy and media freedom in Serbia”.

It remains necessary to determine what this implies for local media. We have selected the following two examples that could serve as a suitable sample for our analysis of the period described above.

#### 4.2.1. From Resistance to Simulated National Media Giant: Radio B92

This case demonstrates how a media outlet operated as a space of resistance and a networked micro-public sphere during an authoritarian transition.

It was founded in 1989 as an independent youth radio station in Belgrade (B92, n.d.; Observatorio Balcani Caucaso, 2015).

Although based in Belgrade, it maintained a network of correspondents across Serbia, giving it significant symbolic value as a site of local resistance and a source of information, particularly in the last decade of the 20th century.

Concretely, under Slobodan Milošević’s regime, B92 became one of the few sources of independent news. It combined a music program (especially rock and alternative scenes) with critical political reporting. Its editorial profile was strongly anti-war and pro-democracy, which contributed to its recognition as a media outlet of resistance (Human Rights Watch, 1997; Serbia Media Ownership Monitor, n.d.). The station was repeatedly subjected to repression and censorship. During the NATO bombing of 1999, authorities took control of the studio, but the editorial team continued to operate from alternative locations and via the Internet (Observatorio Balcani Caucaso, 2015). During this period, B92 also received international recognition, including the MTV Free Your Mind award for its engagement in human rights advocacy (IWM London, n.d.).

During the 2000s, B92 underwent commercialization and reorganization, becoming part of the broader RTV B92 corporation, which included television and a web portal. In 2015, the original radio station was closed, and its programming continued under the new

“Play Radio” station (Serbia Media Ownership Monitor, n.d.; Observatorio Balcani Caucaso, 2015). The acquisition by the Kopernikus company distanced the B92 radio from its former status and functions.

B92’s significance for local communities and beyond was thus multifaceted: it was a key transmitter of democratic values during an authoritarian period, a catalyst for cultural and political mobilization, and a lasting reference point for independent journalism in Serbia. Later on, its influence extended well beyond the radio medium, through television, the web portal, and publishing projects, representing a symbol of media resistance and pluralism as well as a voice for democracy.

#### 4.2.2. A Struggling Public Forum: Radio Boom 93 (Požarevac)

As one of the first independent local radio stations, Boom 93 has accumulated symbolic capital by fostering civic participation, promoting European values, and serving as a trusted forum for public debate in the Braničevo District.

Founded in 1992 and based in Požarevac (REM, n.d.)<sup>3</sup>, Boom 93 is also one of the first local independent radio stations with an investigative profile.

From its inception, it has been positioned as a local radio station with a strong informational and rich musical program. Its content includes news, interviews, debates, documentary programs, and music, combining domestic and international hits. The station also broadcasts content from international sources such as the BBC and Radio Free Europe, contributing to an expanded local perspective for its audience (B. Stepanović, 2020).

“Boom 93 was also one of the founders of ANEM” (Marko, 2013, p. 23). During the 1990s, it “was a target of regime repression, being banned in 1996” (Marko, 2013, p. 22). This highlights its role as an independent voice during a turbulent period and its engagement in the fight for media freedom and the democratization of society.

Through a multimedia approach, Boom 93 promotes European values, tolerance, human rights, and multiculturalism. The station has also undertaken innovative business initiatives, including mobile applications for Android and iOS, a listener club, and an online store for branded merchandise. This demonstrates that it not only informs but also builds a community and leverages technology to strengthen audience engagement (Journalift, 2022).

Boom 93 is characterized by civic engagement, reflected in its response during extraordinary events, when it uses its programs to mobilize the public and provide relevant information. “Its musical programming is carefully curated to balance entertainment and social function, serving as a mechanism for connecting and educating citizens” (A. Stepanović, 2023).

Despite challenges, particularly during the political instability of the 1990s, Boom 93 has persisted as one of the key local media outlets in the Braničevo District, maintaining its independent character and relevance to the local public. It serves as a public forum, regularly organizing debates, interviews, and informational programs, ensuring that important issues are publicly discussed.

#### 4.3. The Period of Democratization and Early Digital Transformation (2000–2015)

Following the socio-political changes at the end of the 2000s, a so-called market liberalization occurred, accompanied by the privatization of many local media and the restructuring of institutional support, as the state gradually withdrew from such activities in line with Serbia’s EU accession process.

At the same time, new mechanisms were created to support those media that government actors deemed in need of assistance to survive, a process that reached its peak in the last decade.

While most authors note some progress, but not a genuine willingness on the part of authorities to fully democratize the media system, Miletić (2014, p. 82) sees it “in another way—yet the same”, regarding the level of political pluralism and the absence of public and civil communication models. In other words, the statist-market media system continues to persist. Non-transparency in media ownership remains, the state retains influence over the advertising market, and a multitude of media outlets function as services for the political elite.

Concurrently, the civil sector was strengthened, and project-based funding began to emerge. Local media received financial support from international organizations, such as USAID, or participated in projects coordinated by journalistic associations, such as NUNS<sup>4</sup> and ANEM. This support provided many significant and professional local newsrooms with the minimum resources needed to survive, maintain credibility, and preserve their broader relevance within the communities in which they operated.

#### 4.3.1. A Professional Watchdog: Južne vesti (Niš)

Južne vesti serves as a significant source of symbolic capital in southern Serbia, shaping public knowledge, civic engagement, and local identity through independent and digitally oriented journalism.

It is a local online media outlet from Niš, founded in 2008. According to its staff, it conducts “the majority of its activities thanks to the enthusiasm of journalists and collaborators”, while part of its funding comes from website advertising and project-based activities primarily aimed at better informing citizens (Južne vesti, n.d.).

The outlet combines daily news coverage with investigative journalism, including interviews, analyses, and reports that shed light on various local issues. In its own editorial reports, it is “the most-read and most-cited media outlet south of Belgrade”, having achieved “12.5 million views, averaging one million per month in 2025” (L. Jocić & Zirojević, 2025).

Overall, Južne vesti represents an exemplary model of independent, digitally oriented, locally focused journalism, primarily covering political, social, and cultural issues in Niš and southeastern Serbia. It positions itself as a key actor in shaping an informed and engaged local community, in which journalism functions both as a mechanism of governmental oversight and as a platform for civic engagement.

#### 4.3.2. A Pillar of Civic Resistance and a Trusted Watchdog: Ozon Press (Čačak)

As an independent local media outlet, Ozon Press generates symbolic capital by providing essential information, fostering citizen participation, and maintaining editorial autonomy under political and financial pressures.

It is a local media outlet from Čačak, founded in 1996 with the launch of Radio Ozon, while the online portal Ozonpress.net was established in 2012.

Today, it “operates as a privately owned enterprise with eleven employees” (Kljajić, 2022, p. 6) and serves as an important source of information for western Serbia. Its primary sources of funding include competitive grants and donations, while “20% of its budget comes from advertising” (Kljajić, 2022, p. 6). The outlet also fosters investigative journalism, which enhances its social role but exposes the editorial team to political and financial pressures. Ozon Press has repeatedly faced external pressures, yet it has maintained editorial independence (NUNS, 2024a, 2024b).

Ozon Press provides local and regional news, analyses, and commentary, particularly covering topics insufficiently addressed by national media. Its editorial team focuses on local politics, the economy, social issues, and human rights, embodying the watchdog role and promoting citizen participation. The outlet functions as a public forum where local actors and citizens can express opinions, making community issues visible to the broader

public. The organization actively utilizes digital platforms and social media to disseminate information and engage audiences in discussion.

Its significance lies in strengthening local democracy and public information: audiences receive relevant information while the media simultaneously promotes ethical journalism and civic activism.

#### 4.4. *The Contemporary Period: Project-Based Funding and the Struggle for Survival (2015–)*

Following the privatization and closure of many local media outlets, a new survival model emerged based on projects, grants, and so-called crowdfunding. Through short-term financing and the functional sustainability of such media models, there has been, consciously or unconsciously, an increased dependence on local politics, as the operational continuity of most outlets now relies on current project-based support.

Namely, project-based co-financing of the production of media content involves applying for funding allocated by the state through the local self-governments within whose geographical jurisdictions they operate; it was introduced in Serbia for the first time by the Public Information and Media Act. For a large number of local media outlets, financial resources provided by local self-government units within such a procedural framework constitute their main source of funding.

Without access to these funds, the possibilities for exercising the previously attained rights of the media are increasingly limited.

According to the authors of the UNS database report, the problems in the co-financing process are multiple. First, the UNS database<sup>5</sup> showed that, in 2025, “the same group of people decided in many commissions, which practically made rotation and independent decision-making impossible” (UNS, 2025). Even the introduction of the new legal framework (the new Public Information and Media Act and the UIS system), and the shift to evaluation through UIS, “led in 2024–2025 to a decline in trust among local self-governments: this is allegedly the main reason for the sharp drop in budgets allocated to media projects” (UNS, 2025).

Instead of pluralism, the scene is dominated by media outlets close to the authorities, while many local media no longer exist as professional newsrooms but rather as platforms for obtaining funds. Based on the data from this report, the total amount of funding is substantially lower, which means that local media today are poorer than they were before privatization, while, at the same time, the lack of transparency, conflicts of interest, and favoritism toward media close to local or state authorities provide grounds to conclude that decisions on the allocation of funds are less professional and more politically driven.

This period, therefore, brought about the “complete instrumentalization of the media by an oligarchic nexus of political actors and capital interest groups” (Miletić, 2016, p. 240). The state exerted significant influence over media liberalization and privatization, yet this represented only formal deregulation, not genuine financial divestment of the state. Miletić (2016, p. 242) provides the example of municipal project funding, where, at the level of Belgrade, competition “committees included no representatives of journalistic associations, while in Jagodina, only media with technical and staffing capacity within the city could compete”. “Out of 11 applications, there was only one winner—a previously municipal public enterprise that had already used budgetary funds”. Through existential financial dependence on budgetary resources—that is, public funds—nearly all private and privatized media organizations in Serbia are effectively controlled by the state regarding their (non)allocation of funding (Jevtović & Bajić, 2019).

This model of sustaining local media has produced numerous propagandistic media models at the local level, weakening overall information quality. At the same time, a significant number of important and high-quality pillars of local information (and beyond)

disappeared over the past decade, deprived of funding and further constrained. This phenomenon has contributed to a trend of “media emptiness” in peripheral areas, as smaller towns lose local newsrooms, journalists move to other professions, and social media and non-professional sources take over the role of information provision.

Examples of such defunct or inactive media include Kikindske, a particularly important independent weekly that ceased operations in 2022 after years of financial difficulties, having served as a key example of professional journalism and critical engagement with authorities; Vranjske, a symbol of courageous local journalism, shut down in 2017 due to political and economic pressures; Pančevac, the oldest local newspaper in Serbia, founded in 1869, closed in 2020 following privatization, whose disappearance carries symbolic weight for local identity; Radio Zaječar, also closed after privatization in 2015, resulting in the loss of regional radio programming and information; and Podrinske novine from Šabac, an important independent local news source, shut down in 2022 due to financial difficulties and significant political pressure, continuing a series of closures of key local media in that city, after Radio Šabac and TV Šabac had already disappeared from the media map.

#### 4.4.1. A Professional Watchdog at the Heart of Alternative Publics: Magločistač (Subotica)

As an independent community-oriented media portal, Magločistač generates symbolic capital by enabling citizen participation, supporting investigative journalism, and strengthening pluralism in the local media landscape.

It is an online news portal based in Subotica, founded in 2015. According to its own data, the portal has experienced growing readership, reaching over 200,000 users per month and several million page views annually in early 2025 (Subotičke.rs, 2025).

The portal combines local news coverage with analyses, commentaries, and reports on political, social, and urban issues in Subotica. It also addresses investigative journalism topics that extend beyond the local context (Magločistač, 2018).

As a community-focused independent media outlet, Magločistač exemplifies civic journalism and citizen participation. It is widely recognized for its commitment to editorial independence, professional ethics, and urban engagement, making it one of the key alternative voices in the local media landscape.

Acting as a forum for public discourse, the portal enables citizens of Subotica to critically follow local authorities, initiate debates, and influence local decision-making processes. Its dedication to investigative journalism and transparency serves multiple societal functions: educating the public, enhancing trust in media, and contributing to the pluralism of the local media environment.

#### 4.4.2. Community-Oriented Local News Outlet as a Trusted Neighbor: Glas Šumadije (Kragujevac)

As a civil society-oriented local portal, Glas Šumadije generates symbolic capital by bridging citizens and authorities, promoting participatory reporting, and sustaining editorial independence under challenging conditions.

It is an online media from Kragujevac, launched in 2018 by a group of experienced journalists with the aim of serving the local public as a civil society media outlet (Jelenkov, 2018).

This media portal seeks to connect citizens and local authorities through responsible reporting. According to some assessments, it is “one of the most influential web portals in Kragujevac and the Šumadija region” (Nikić, 2023).

It was founded in the context of weak media competition in Kragujevac, where the city lacked strong and autonomous local media, with Glas Šumadije emerging to address this gap (G. Jocić, 2024). Its funding is partially secured through donations and grants,

which help maintain editorial independence, although public funds from local government tenders remain limited (Res Publica, 2024).

The portal covers a broad range of topics, including local politics, social issues, urban planning, demographics, and cultural events. It actively promotes community engagement through open-topic discussions and a participatory approach, serving as a bridge between citizens and local institutions. Numerous examples indicate its strong commitment to reporting on sensitive issues, positioning it as a significant factor in the development of democratic discourse in Kragujevac (Mišić, 2022). This strengthens civic activism and local accountability. Journalists at Glas Šumadije often emphasize that their work combines professional responsibility with community membership, providing deep insight into local issues.

It is also frequently exposed to various forms of pressure, ranging from financial constraints to, unfortunately, physical threats, such as a recent attack on a journalist during coverage of protests (Glas Šumadije, 2025; 021.RS, 2025). These risks highlight the challenges faced by local media, as well as the importance of their role in holding authorities accountable. Glas Šumadije has been recognized as a bridge for building trust in local media, and its growth and stability reflect a readership that values independent local journalism.

## 5. Discussion: Local Media as the Symbolic Capital of the Local Community

Local media are indisputably important pillars of information in local communities, as they follow events occurring within their area and draw attention to issues of primary significance to these communities. This role is considered their most important potential for survival in increasingly complex socio-market conditions, both locally and globally. Such potential also enables them to serve as key guardians of collective memory and identity, which further enhances the significance of their function in any society. On the other hand, community trust constitutes a crucial form of symbolic capital, reflecting the value and position of local media within these communities—provided that such trust substantively exists.

What we observed in the comparative and historical analysis is the interplay between the socio-political context, which includes power relations and the macro-media ecosystem, on one hand, and the relationship of local media to the communities to which they belong, on the other. All power asymmetries have affected media access, the quality of reporting, and the business models of local media. A path of dependence emerges in which political actors do not abandon media instrumentalization but instead find increasingly creative ways to control content production—ways through which instrumentalization now contributes less and less to the formation of the community's symbolic capital. Although the ties between political and economic elites and local media, maintained through subsidy schemes, undermine media pluralism and diversity even in democratically developed nations (Gulyas & Baines, 2020), the dependence of local media and the degree of their instrumentalization in Serbia fluctuated across the observed periods (Table 1).

In socialism, instrumentalization and the significant level of symbolic capital of local media appear to have gone hand in hand; that is, self-management functioned at least as an attempt at a surrogate for the idea of public service in the less politicized areas of information, which enabled at least a partial construction of the community's symbolic capital. The 1990s largely forced local media to take on unusual roles—as mobilizers and as instruments of political oversight at the national level, all under conditions of political parallelism and an unregulated economic transition. The changes in this millennium initiated a democratization of the political system and a liberalization of the media system, albeit

with a declining enthusiasm among state officials, they retained many of the shortcomings of previous periods.

**Table 1.** Comparative Overview of Epochs and Their Characteristics Through the Lens of the Functioning of Local Media in Serbia.

Time Period	Instrumentalization	Symbolic Capital	Case Study Findings
1945–1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Socialist self-management</li> <li>· Social ownership of media</li> <li>· One-party domination, but a crisis of political integration at the federal level</li> <li>· Polycentric, but non-democratic communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Politicization and ethnic divisions follow the localization of information</li> <li>· Politically fragmented media, one-sided filtered information</li> <li>· Surrogate of decentralized carriers of public interest and symbolic capital</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Censored hard news, but strong identity building in the period</li> <li>· Later, multicultural community service and cultural memory reproduction</li> <li>· Local public forum</li> </ul>
1990–2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· From one-party domination to democratic transition</li> <li>· Instrumentalization of mainstream media and emergence of an unregulated media market</li> <li>· High political parallelism—both leading and oppositional parties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Local media forced to become alternative information sources to the dominant narrative</li> <li>· Micro-public spheres of resistance</li> <li>· Partial watchdog role, selective critique of authorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· B92 as an example of social resistance and a citizen mobilization network</li> <li>· Hybrid of national and local media organization</li> <li>· Blending local perspectives and international news sources</li> </ul>
2000–2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Lack of political will to fully deconstruct the statist-market media system</li> <li>· Democratization of the political system, but high parallelism and political instrumentalization were preserved</li> <li>· Attempts at EU standard market liberalization and media regulation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Failed attempts at building community symbolic capital</li> <li>· Still absence of public and civil communication models on local level</li> <li>· Emergence of a partial watchdog role and investigative journalism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Južne vesti—example of monitoring function and critical public opinion formation</li> <li>· Platforms for civic engagement</li> <li>· Finances based on competitive grants, donations, and advertising</li> </ul>
2015–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Project funding instrumentalization</li> <li>· Non-transparent co-financing of the media production as a political parallelism method</li> <li>· One-party domination in state institutions</li> <li>· Impoverishment of the local media landscape</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Conversion of economic capital into simulated symbolic capital</li> <li>· Media fragmented along political lines</li> <li>· Dominance of propaganda models</li> <li>· Disappearance of important local media organizations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Magločistač and Glas Šumadije as examples of online investigative and analytical journalism</li> <li>· Engaging the citizens on online portals</li> <li>· Financial struggles—donations and grants</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' processing.

As indicated by the data and conclusions presented in this study, local media face increasingly significant challenges that substantially reduce their potential and, consequently, their chances of survival. This represents a feedback mechanism often misunderstood, as local media are primarily assessed through the lens of economic and financial performance. Namely, the profits they generate determine their survival prospects rather than their social and symbolic roles.

The epochs illustrated earlier, primarily from the perspective of media functioning, can also be examined through three modalities of local media, which recur in different proportions. These are analyzed in more detail in the tabular presentation below (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Models of Local Media—Description of Existential Circumstances and Epilogue.

Model of Local Media	Description	Historical Context & Development	Key Consequences/Local Media Significance
1. <i>Functional (positive) examples</i>	Media that contribute to the local community, uphold professional standards, and generate symbolic capital.	Most prominent during socialism (social stability), later in the transition period (resistance, professionalization). Today rare due to difficult conditions for survival.	Maintain public informedness, strengthen community cohesion, preserve professional norms, and local symbolic capital.
2. <i>Instrumentalized (mostly propaganda-oriented) examples</i>	Media that appear stable but whose editorial orientation is dependent on the state, political parties, the market, or project-based mechanisms.	Continuously present, but their form has changed: state-centered control in socialism, party propaganda in the 1990s, and today a combined model (market-driven, project-based, and political) with a centralized source of power.	Create the appearance of pluralism, undermine media autonomy, and serve political or economic interests.
3. <i>Extinguished Media</i>	Media that have ceased operating due to loss of autonomy, resources, or function.	Most pronounced in the contemporary era, the highest number of closures among local media.	Erosion of local informational capacity and the community's symbolic capital; their disappearance indirectly confirms that they had an important social function.

Source: Authors' processing.

Although it is not possible to quantify the exact proportions of each of the above-described scenarios across epochs, a clear trend is observable: *in socialism*, functional and instrumentalized institutional legitimizers dominate, while closures are minimal; *in the period of the so-called transition* (which, in a certain sense, is still ongoing), the number of functional and resilient local sites of resistance increases, yet media instrumentalization remains strong; *in the contemporary period*, however, both instrumentalized and closed outlets clearly grow in number, simulated localism is on the rise while truly functional and professionally relevant examples are few.

According to publicly available data published on the website of the Serbian Business Registers Agency, there are currently 2238 media outlets officially registered in the Media Register in Serbia (ANEM, 2025a), while the number of local outlets is estimated at around *one-third of this figure*. The framework of their existence is particularly complex, as is the scope of problems arising from it, which is confirmed by the numerous data presented and interpreted in this study.

The question of preserving and practicing journalistic professionalism and achieving societal credibility is directly linked to the possibility of connecting symbolic capital with media legitimacy and autonomy. Whether their potential manifests effectively within communities depends on the broader social environment and formal processes dictated by legal regulations and the behavior of decision-makers in this domain. In the specific case of Serbia and the current frameworks for local media, this highlights the necessity of examining the sustainability of local media and the quality of information, as well as the long-term effectiveness of project-based funding models.

Although the amount of money allocated for media projects has increased compared to previous years, concerns persist regarding how it is used and whether it is genuinely

used to serve the public interest, particularly given that the composition of commissions continues to influence the allocation of budget funds (UNS, 2025; ANEM, 2025b)<sup>6</sup>. Even after the 2023 Law revised commission applications and scoring procedures, authorities have found ways to prioritize certain representatives of associations, thereby ensuring that funds are allocated to media outlets close to them (ibid.). This situation demonstrates a paradox: while project-based financing is formally intended to sustain local media and pluralism, it often reinforces dependency on political actors, undermining both symbolic and democratic capital.

## 6. Conclusions

Local media in Serbia have, in every historical period, carried a particular form of the community's symbolic capital: from institutional legitimacy during socialism, through resistance in the transitional period, to moral and professional value in today's project-based system. Their role, therefore, has never been purely informational, although that function remains primary; it simultaneously encompasses identity formation, civic participation, and social cohesion (Usher, 2021). This theoretical understanding underscores the broader social significance of local media beyond conventional market-oriented frameworks.

Ownership transformation and digitalization have already reduced the number of local electronic media (Veljanovski, 2024). With the decline of civic engagement, deficits emerge in the local population's knowledge, which are filled by more biased agendas due to the informational vacuum (Gulyas & Baines, 2020). Local media are expected to monitor local elites and report on public affairs concerning the community, but with limited investments, reduced advertising revenue that shifts to digital platforms, and curtailed resources, the quality of reporting is affected, leading to the erosion of the core function of local media: community-responsive journalism (Ali, 2017, p. 7).

The project-based financing model currently in practice is clearly not part of a solution that sustains these functions. As the UNS report (2025) shows, the project co-financing process may formally exist, but without adequate mechanisms to safeguard media autonomy and transparency, it potentially reinforces media dependence on the authorities. This is particularly significant given the lack of clear criteria, the favoritism toward pro-government media, and reductions in funding—all of which indicate an erosion of editorial autonomy and media pluralism. In this way, the project-based financing model becomes a living manifestation of the paradox whereby institutional and financial mechanisms formally support pluralism (i.e., quality journalism), while in practice diminish media independence and info-pluralism.

Alongside the processes dictated by this model, both the survival and the closure of numerous professionally relevant local media outlets occurred. This represents not only an economic setback but also a profound symbolic loss of trust, identity, and public dialogue within local communities. The symbolic capital that these media have generated also indirectly attests to the social need for reliable local information—a resource that is increasingly scarce.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings confirm that local media function as carriers of symbolic capital, whose erosion diminishes not only informational but also civic and democratic capacities within communities. Information provision entails the oversight of elites (accountability), such that routine reporting does not stem exclusively from a single privileged source, thereby preventing the emergence of knowledge gaps that lead to engagement gaps—dividing society into the informed and active, and those citizens who are hindered in that respect (Nielsen, 2015). This is why, alongside the informational and activist functions, an integrative function is also registered: one of shared experi-

ence, connectedness, historical memory, and the very imagining and conceptualization of the community.

Local media shape patterns of behavior in accordance with particular values—that is, they define what matters locally, what citizens identify with, and whose authority they accept, which constitutes the essence of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 47). This authority need not arise from the community itself; it may also be corporately simulated (Williams, 2003). As Raymond Williams vividly notes, what we perceive as an authentic local feature can easily turn out to be a representation of Toyota. At that point, economic and political structures dominate the construction of symbolic capital, and cultural practices are adapted to the interests of the dominant actors. Bourdieu refers to this as the conversion of economic capital—imbued in our study with political power—into symbolic capital, which represents a simulation of value (Bourdieu, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984). The state’s meta-capital has long been a structural affliction of the Serbian media system, which has experienced periods in which the “local” was less affected by the space of flows (Castells, 2010), whereas today, in the context of global processes, this presents an additional burden for the local media system.

While this study focuses on Serbia, the issues identified: precarious financing, political influence, and diminishing symbolic capital—reflect some of the challenges faced by local media globally in contemporary socio-communicative contexts. Viewed in this way, this also represents a potential for the survival of those media outlets that manage to build functioning models based on a reversed logic, while recognizing their undeniable symbolic potential within local communities.

The previously outlined models, or scenarios that frame the functioning of local media in Serbia across different epochs, clearly confirm that local media carry the symbolic capital of the community, and that they can materialize its integrative function, with society benefiting from it only if these media possess a minimal degree of autonomy and sustainable working conditions. Therefore, when they become instrumentalized to the point of losing their professional function, or when they disappear altogether, the community loses not only an informational resource but also elements of identity, memory, and democratic cohesion. This is precisely why local media, regardless of the epoch, constitute an indispensable form of symbolic capital for every community, and why their survival is tied both to their own ability to preserve a professional ethos and to the broader question of the public interest and democratic cultural infrastructure.

At the same time, we also should be aware of the fact that the democratic and symbolic loss associated with the decline of local media is therefore not uniform: mainly, it is not the instrumentalized, market-oriented and simulated models of the local media that are struggling but the ones that embody watchdog and communal orientation are the type of local news that disappear and cannot fulfill their symbolic function within the community. The “local” may be an empty signifier of monopoly capitalism (Ali, 2017, p. 49), but communities are being increasingly distanced from structures of power that produce the problematic dynamics of Serbian local media, when the “where” of news has changed to the point that “journalists are less able to cover places” (Usher, 2021, p. 30).

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## Notes

- 1 Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM, *Asocijacija nezavisnih elektronskih medija* in Serbian) is a professional media association in Serbia that brings together independent electronic media, primarily radio and television stations, as well as other media platforms.
- 2 Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS, *Udruženje novinara Srbije* in Serbian) is a professional organization in Serbia that represents journalists, promotes journalistic standards, ethics, and professional development among Serbian journalists.
- 3 Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM, *Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije* in Serbian) is a Serbia's official independent regulatory body responsible for overseeing electronic media (radio and television broadcasting), ensuring compliance with media laws, issuing licenses, and protecting the public interest in the electronic media sector.
- 4 Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS, *Nezavisno udruženje novinara Srbije* in Serbian) is another professional association dedicated to protecting journalists' rights, defending press freedom, and supporting independent journalism in Serbia.
- 5 UNS database. More details at: UNS. *Baza medijskog projektnog finansiranja* [Database of media project funding]. Available online: <https://finansiranjemedija.rs/> (accessed on 8 December 2025).
- 6 Between 2015 and 2025, a total of 17,380,729,907 dinars (approximately 148 million euros) was allocated for project-based support to local media. However, this represents only a fraction of the funds invested in media before privatization: in 2012 alone, 32 municipalities allocated 848 million dinars in a single year (UNS, 2025).

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