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'Do digital technologies matter? How hyperlocal media is re-configuring the media landscape of a Russian province'

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Abstract

The increase of internet penetration across Russia has reduced entry barriers for individuals and companies who want to report locally. New digital technologies have given rise to many semi-professional local media projects, so-called 'hyperlocal media' (Metzgar et al., 2011; Tenor, 2018), created on various online platforms and social networking sites. Websites, blogs, and social media groups (the so-called 'pabliki' in Russian) on the popular social networking site VKontakte have opened up new access routes to local news, both for ordinary citizens and the authorities, but have also become a challenge for traditional local media. This article investigates how the media landscape changes in response to digital technologies in a provincial town of nearly 40,000 in the European part of Russia. More specifically, the article investigates how professional journalists from traditional media and practitioners from hyperlocal media sites understand the influence of digital technologies on the aims and work practices of media in a Russian province. The study is based on in-depth interviews with the editors of traditional local media (e.g. print newspapers) and owners of new hyperlocal media initiatives. The research explores different approaches to the ways in which two groups of media actors understand and make use of the internet and digital technologies. However, within peculiar Russian media model, these differences have led to collaborative rather than competitive relations between the two groups.

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Hyperlocal media, local media, Russian media model, Russian province, social network sites, VKontakte

Introduction

Digitalisation has been the most transformative agent in the 21st century media industry. The entire news ecosystem has changed (Picard, 2014), and this process is far from complete. In local media the development of digital technologies and the internet have affected the processes of gathering, selecting, editing, producing and communicating local news (Graham and Smart, 2010). More generally, the internet has collapsed the former geographical boundaries of local media, so nowadays local media outlets 'are literally moving out of their local patch' (Franklin, 2006: xxi): local news sources can now be accessed from anywhere with an internet connection.

The standard concept of the «local» media is greatly challenged by the emergence of the hyperlocal media. This is a term with many meanings, but can generally be described as 'emergent forms of 'very local' digital media that are typically amateur and positioned as an alternative to the mainstream' (Rodgers, 2018: 857). Hyperlocal media differs across countries in terms of location, driving forces, quality ambitions, funding, and sustainability (Tenor, 2018). Nevertheless, according to previous research the «average» size of one hyperlocal media network is usually one city,[1] or a collection of several adjacent settlements (towns or villages).

In comparison to citizen journalists in official local media, who contribute journalism pieces as just one element of the professional news process (Paulussen and D'heer, 2013), hyperlocal media practitioners represent small-scale original-news-reporting organisations, intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or particular location and to promote civic engagement (Metzgar et al., 2011: 774). The aims, functions and work practices of hyperlocal start-ups and citizen- or community-initiated information sharing vary (Ahva, 2017; Konieczna and Robinson, 2014) and differ from professional media outlets (Tenor, 2018). Hyperlocal practitioners' perceptions of their roles and professional identities also differ (Chadha, 2016). In this research I use the term hyperlocal media to define amateur-based media initiatives that became visible and important actors in a community's media ecosystem, but differ from traditional (or legacy)[2] local media such as newspapers.

Despite a growing body of research on hyperlocal media, it is often overlooked in the study of digitalisation in relation to traditional local media. However, both hyperlocal and traditional local media co-exist within closely overlapping geographical and spatial boundaries, explicitly or implicitly interacting and shaping both one another and the local media ecosystem. Therefore, analyses of how digital technologies transform the media landscape of a given locality should include observations of both types of actors.

This article aims to explore how professional journalists from legacy media and practitioners from hyperlocal media sites understand the influence of digital technologies on the aims and work practices of media in a Russian province. The analysis and comparison of these two types of local media practitioners will allow us to make more general

conclusions on how the media landscape of one Russian town was changed due to digital technologies.

The research is based on qualitative data (interviews and observations) and addresses the request for more 'voices' of local media practitioners to be heard in academic research, in order to understand how industry actors perceive and are experiencing the current transformations (Carlsson and Nilsson, 2016; Siles and Boczkowski, 2012).

The article is organised according to the following format. It first presents a literature review, covering gaps in previous research on digital transformations of local media that will be addressed in this article. Next, a methodological section outlines the research design and data collection process. This is followed by an empirical analysis of interviews with both media professionals (editors and journalists) and hyperlocal practitioners. Finally, the paper closes with a discussion suggesting a different approach to reshaping the local media landscape via digital transformations within the particular Russian media model.

Literature review: Two gaps in the research on digitalisation of the local media

In this section I will address two gaps in the research of digital transformation of local media that will explain the importance and academic relevance of the aforementioned research questions: how professional journalists and hyperlocal practitioners make sense on the influence of digital technologies on the aims and work practices of media in a Russian province and how the media landscape of one Russian town was changed due to digital technologies. I consider these gaps to be the basis for my article, and I aim to contribute to the scholarly discussion on them.

The main body of research on digital transformations of local media is structured according to 'boundary logic', which differentiates professional and non-professional media and media practitioners (Anderson, 2010). In this logic, one stream analyses changes of professional journalists and newsrooms, while a second stream examines 'journalistic hybrids', including variety of non-professional media practitioners and their initiatives. Hyperlocal media usually belong to the second group.

Hyperlocal media is still a relatively new research subject, and scholarly discussion on it is actively forming. Therefore, the main body of literature on hyperlocal media is focused on compositional issues in order to categorise hyperlocal media in the continuously-evolving quest to find a better definition (Metzgar et al., 2011). Research assess entrepreneurial opportunities and sustainability of hyperlocal initiatives (Cook et al., 2016; Harte et al., 2016; Naldi and Picard, 2012), contributions to local democracy (Barnett and Townend, 2015, Firmstone and Coleman, 2015), values for community, and community engagement (van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2015; Wiard and Simonson, 2018).

A common idea is that hyperlocal media is studied through the lens of 'normative' professional journalism: examining the extent to which hyperlocal news is «to be part of future local journalism. (Tenor, 2018: 1065). Scholars assess hyperlocal journalists' ability to produce original news reporting, understanding of professional norms, and media accountability (Chadha, 2016; Tenor 2018). Hyperlocal media practitioners are often

treated as 'interlopers' (Eldridge, 2018) or 'in-betweeners' (Ahva, 2017), referring to a separate layer between legacy media and personal bloggers.

A significant part of the existing research on hyperlocal media studies hyperlocal actors while disregarding other media actors present in the same space. It is notable that the different medias develop simultaneously, but not in parallel – they interact, influence on each other and adapt (Scolari, 2013). The emergence and development of hyperlocal media are tightly interrelated with digital transformations of local legacy media and with transformation of the local media landscape in general. For instance, a journalist who has lost her job in a local newsroom may start her own hyperlocal project. Hyperlocal media can also flourish in places with weakly performing local newspapers or little to no news coverage (Nygren et al., 2018).

Therefore, rather than focusing on single forms of local media, scholars should consider old and new local media actors simultaneously and interrelatedly. In this research I will follow the framework of local media ecology, which allows one to investigate how a local media landscape changes when new actors are established.

The ecology metaphor to media[3] can be interpreted in two complementary ways: 'the media as *environments* or the media as *species* that interact with each other' (Scolari, 2013: 1419. Emphasis is original). Ecological perspectives on local media have become more visible in research on media transformations under recent digital technologies (Anderson, 2010; Coleman et al., 2016; Nygren et al., 2018). Scholars primarily operationalize the second 'intermedia' dimension of the theory and analyze the media and its inter-relationships as those of species living in the same ecosystem. According to this logic, digital transformations of local media landscapes should be studied as occurring in a complex system, examining how both new and traditional media are influenced by the change (Anderson, 2016; Coleman et al., 2016).

When it comes to a small settlement such as a provincial town, where interrelations between media practitioners might be very strong, the theoretical perspective of local media ecology allows one to analyse how these interrelations shape the town's media landscape in general. In this article, in order to explore how media landscape in one Russian town changed due to digital technologies, I study two groups of media: traditional local media, represented by editors and journalists, and hyperlocal media, represented by founders and practitioners. Media interrelations and their influences on one another, and on the local media landscape in general,[4] will be studied through reflections by media practitioners on the main catalysts of current change: the internet and the digitalisation of media. In this research I understand professional journalists and semi-professional hyperlocal media practitioners as interpretive communities – groups, united by 'shared interpretations of reality' (Zelizer, 1993). In this article, this refers to the reality of new technologies.

Another gap, that I am going to address in this article is the influence of the country's media model on digital transformations of local media. So far, scholarship on digitalisation processes in local media has focused its attention mainly on Western media models. However, research on hyperlocal media in democratic countries (e.g. the Netherlands – van Kerkhoven and Bakker, 2014; Europe – Cook et al. 2016; the UK – Harte et al., 2016; Sweden – Nygren et al., 2018; Finland – Hujanen et al., 2019) might have limited

relevance to media operating within other, non-western and non-democratic and/or authoritarian regimes.

Russia is a country with a hybrid media system, which does not conform strictly to a theoretical set of features commonly associated with a 'Western' media model (Strovsky, 2015; Vartanova, 2015). Even though some elements (such as commercial advertising, news journalism, and private media outlets) have been borrowed or imported from Western models, others (like the substantial role of the state in the media sphere, or low participation of people in the public sphere) are indigenous to Russia (Kiriya, 2018).

In order to present a clearer picture of local media models in today's Russia, I distinguish three core characteristics that shape local media professionals' views on digitalisation. First, despite changes in federal policy regarding the commercialisation of regional mass media (Dovbysh, 2019), regional (and especially local) media outlets[5] are highly dependent on state financing (Dovbysh and Gudova, 2016). These relations form latent yet strong control by the state through financial leverage, which results in the self-censorship and self-control of local journalists and editors and thus a very homogeneous local news agenda. In fact, only a limited number of local media outlets have a purely commercial financing model.

Second, rooted practices of self-censorship and a lack of investigative reporting co-exist with local journalists' claims to professional legitimacy and a desire to serve the local society (Dovbysh, 2019; Erzikova and Lowrey, 2017). Clientelistic relations with local authorities lead to the exclusion of any critical reporting or investigative journalism. In fact, local newspapers often consist of emasculated articles, merely containing re-printed press releases provided by the local administration. In such conditions, journalists try to find other ways to establish professional legitimacy – being helpers and problem-solvers of everyday issues for ordinary people (Dovbysh, 2019; Erzikova and Lowrey, 2017). Similar to journalists in the Soviet period, mass media can affect social issues, such as housing and communal services, but it cannot influence political processes (Roudakova, 2017).

Third, many local newsrooms have difficulties with technical and human resources. A lack of financing leaves them unable to update their technical base, while the socio-economic situation in local towns leads to the migration of professionals to larger and more economically prosperous cities, such as the regional capitals or Moscow.

At the same time, the rapid increase of internet penetration across Russia has reduced entry barriers for individuals and companies who want to report locally. Websites, blogs and social media groups (the so-called '*pabliki'* in Russian) on the popular social networking sites (SNS) VKontakte and Odnoklassniki[6] have opened up new access routes to local news for both ordinary citizens and the authorities. Therefore, cases of local media in Russia can be extremely relevant to extending scholarly understanding of how digital technologies might influence local media within different socio-political and economic contexts and within the professional culture of journalists.

Methodology

Empirical data was collected in June 2018 during 7 days of fieldwork in one Russian town. The provincial town is located in the European part of Russia, 150 km from

Moscow and 120 km from the region's capital. The town is one of the region's three largest cities, but it is one-sixteenth the size of the region's capital. In 2018, the population was 38,000 people, a number which has been declining since 2000.

The region (in Russian, *oblast*) where the town in located belongs to Central Federal District (*okrug*) and is characterised as a relatively developed industrial region. Large mechanical engineering facilities, inherited from the Soviet past, affect the region's development path and slow down its modernisation process (Zubarevich et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the region receives the minimum amount of financial support from the federal budget.[7] The town was founded in the 12th century and has many religious and cultural attractions. Proximity to Moscow, historical significance, and a pastoral provincial image make the town popular with tourists. At the same time, it hosts several engineering and chemistry plants along with a research institute (a branch of the Russian Academy of Science).

It is important to point out that my investigation deals with the case of this particular Russian town. Even though it is quite average in socio-economic development, and in this sense is comparable to other towns of its size, there are some peculiarities that differentiate it from other places. Towns of this size are quite different from larger cities and centres of regions; therefore, the results of this case might be less relevant for bigger cities in Russia, or for towns in other countries.

Interviewees were recruited after mapping the town's media landscape via the internet during preliminary research. Preliminary desk research included classification and analysis of public information about town's mass media, like the history of foundation and development, ownership structure, general characteristics of publishing content (selection of topics, way of reporting), and online presence. Moreover, I spent around 20 hours observing groups in SNS to get a preliminary understanding of how and what hyperlocal media publish and how people consume their content. This mapping allowed me to identify the core actors of the local media landscape – both editors and journalists of traditional media and practitioners of hyperlocal media. The 'snow-ball' method, whereby interviewees were asked to name other people or media outlets that are influential and popular in town, slightly adjusted initial picture by providing a more nuanced understanding of the 'weight' of various actors of local media.

In total, 10 interviews were collected. Three interviewees were representatives of traditional local media (newspapers and one TV channel), and seven interviewees were from online media sites (websites and groups on SNS). One of these seven interviewees was a local official, responsible for media relations, who runs hyperlocal media on SNS. Taking into account the size of the town, these ten respondents represented the most important media sources of the area. Questions for the interview were grouped to cover two main topics: a respondent's perception of their own media and of the town's media landscape in general, and their perception of its transformations due to internet.[8] Each interview lasted for an average of 80 minutes.

The first step of data analysis was to code the transcribed interviews. To develop the coding scheme, I drew up predefined coding categories and subcategories based on the prior literature on various aspects of transformations in local media due to digitalisation and internetisation, while allowing for new categories to emerge as I coded the interviews. This method of data analysis frees the researcher from entanglement in the details

of the raw data, and encourages higher-level thinking while at the same time helping with generalisations and with identifying the theory (Neuman, 2000). The predefined coding matrix consisted of three categories and nine subcategories from the literature, while two new subcategories ('cooperation between media' and 'relations with local authorities') emerged from the data during the coding process. I then conducted cross-case thematising, whereby quotations coded for the categories and subcategories were collected from all the interviews to determine what ideas the interviewees conveyed for each coded category.

Findings

The town's media landscape

The town's legacy media landscape is represented by three weekly newspapers and one cable TV channel. The current landscape is quite typical for a Russian town of such size. One state-owned newspaper, the 'mouthpiece of power' (*Weekly*), is complemented by two newspapers founded during the political struggles of local elites in the late 1990s and mid-2000s (*Independent* and *Kind*).[9] As a rule, regional businesses and political groups stop supporting such entities after they have lost the elections. Media outlets devoted to their cause either shut down or find alternate sources of funding (as in case of *Kind* and *Independent*).

Newspapers' circulation varies between 2000 and 4500 copies per week. Editorial boards have 5–10 workers, some of them employed part-time to save costs. Financing sources include advertising (including political advertising), sales of copies, subscriptions, and funding from the local government (for state-owned *Weekly*). Legacy media outlets are poorly represented on the internet. Only *Independent* created a website where content from their print edition is duplicated. The website was an amateur initiative by a retired lady, who created it from scratch and continues to support it out of her interest. *Kind* had a website for a while, but shut it down some time ago 'because it was idle'. *Weekly* has neither a website nor accounts on social networking sites.

In addition to legacy media, several new digital media initiatives appeared in the town's media ecology in the 2010s. These semi-professional or amateur hyperlocal media outlets became important actors in the town's media ecology, not only for ordinary citizens, but also for local officials and the town's legacy media outlets. They publish news faster, cover a broader spectrum of local affairs in a freer manner when compared to traditional media, update content regularly, and provide a space for discussions and local communication (including communication with local authorities).

The most popular and influential hyperlocal outlets are *InTown & Events, InTown, Curious Town* and *News*. All of them were established in 2010s and have 4500–9600 subscribers now. *InTown & Events* and *Curious Town* were launched by entrepreneurs who moved to the town. *InTown* was founded by a local IT specialists. *News* was founded by the mayor's advisor (formerly a professional journalist and editor of a TV channel) soon after the new mayor got his position at the end of 2016. *Curious Town, InTown* and *News* use VKontakte as their only platform, while *InTown & Events* also includes website and accounts on other SNS.

InTown serves mainly as an aggregator: the project's owner gave moderator rights to several people (a worker at a local museum, a town's popular blogger, etc.) and let them 'write what they want about the town'. The group re-posts content from other sources, such as local and regional mass media, bloggers, and other cultural, historical, and religious SNS groups. *InTown & Events* employs two reporters full time. The project covers a wide range of local affairs, though the majority of posts are written in a peaceful, non-critical manner. *Curious Town* is running by its owner, who collects information, archival data, photos and other materials on the town's history and then publishes them on SNS. A digitalised 'unknown history' of the town is complemented by coverage of current news and local affairs, as well as advertising. *News* is organised by professional media specialists with high-quality photos (a photographer attends events), infographics, and formal reports. The project is aimed to be a counterweight to other hyperlocal media on SNS, and to provide factual and 'more positive' information.

Two other visible hyperlocal media sites need to be mentioned. *Overhead in the town* is the largest local group on SNS (over 24,000 followers), and posts local gossip (often anonymously), practical announcements (for instance, lost and found notices), and advertising. This is the only group in town that is profitable; it makes a profit by placing commercial advertising on its site. The group is run by two young men in their twenties, one of whom lives in Moscow now. The other initiative, *TownR*, is the most politically oppositional online media site, started by a local activist as 'a civic project of people who love their town'. The project has a website, but group on SNS is the main place where people read and discuss project's news (1200 followers on VKontakte).

Understanding of digital technologies and motives for going digital

Below, I discuss how media practitioners from legacy and hyperlocal media understand digital technologies and the influence of the internet on the town's media landscape. One of the most important subjects to discuss in regards to these things are the motives of two groups of media practitioners for going digital.

The first difference concerns how the two groups of practitioners perceive themselves and their activities. Since the representatives of legacy media outlets perceive themselves as professional journalists, their understanding of the internet and digital technologies is framed in a very rational manner – as a tool to simplify the newsroom's internal processes or as a financial source. They assess whether the resources (human, financial) they spend on the internet will pay off in the long run.

This logic reveals at least two (de)motivations for the further development of legacy media on the internet. First, there is the financial issue. Local advertisers are still quite reluctant to advertise on the internet; hence, editors do not see any commercial advantage to going online. The interviewees could not remember any case when an advertiser switched from print media to online media. Economic crises have had a more painful influence on the local print media than the internet and digital technologies: 'crisis, crisis . . . someone goes into the shadows [starts to work unofficially, in the grey economy – OD], saves every kopeck, even though everyone understands that advertising is the engine of the trade. Well, everything is shrinking down now and it influences the financial position of the newspaper', stated the chief editor of *Independent*.

Financial support from local government also contributes to the vision of 'stability' for print newspapers. Given the harsh economic conditions, legacy media's practitioners prefer to minimise their risks and retain the small but stable state support rather than rush into the unknown and unpredictable space of digital media.

Second, there is the lack of human resource and a further lack of quality within the existing pool. Journalists working for legacy media outlets usually do not have enough knowledge (or enthusiasm) to explore technologies that are new to them. 'These people [the editorial board] are 50+, so mastering these things [online technologies] for them is a big, big challenge', noted the chief editor of *Weekly* and head of the town's TV channel. Taking into account the lack of financial opportunities, editors do not find a rationale in spending limited resources on hiring new personnel or educating the older employees.

Digitalisation is understood by editors to be an unimportant and voluntary process, and is strongly interdependent with their conservative understanding of the print version as the main asset. This has to do both with content policy (editors retain the 'hottest' and most exclusive content for the print version, even if it is published several days after the event occurred) and with commercial policy (the print version is still the main cash generator). Even though the editors expressed some concerns about the effect of the internet on local media consumption, they remained quite confident about the future of the print version of news in small towns like their own. According to the chief editor of *Weekly*, 'If one was not in a hurry 20 years ago, he is not in a hurry now. He can afford to buy a print newspaper. If he did it before, he will continue to do it'.

The town's hyperlocal media representatives framed the internet and their activities on it in a completely different manner. All of the hyperlocal media sites mentioned above were started as a 'hobby' or as 'social' or 'enthusiastic' amateur projects without any commercial ambitions. Almost none of their founders has a journalistic background. They perceived internet as place of freedom and an opportunity to create something new. The first common motivation was the desire to create 'independent' local media in comparison to newspapers, which 'always serve someone's interests.'

Hyperlocal practitioners see local journalists as non-professional, corrupt, unfree, and unattractive: 'you know, newspapers are business, it is their life: they attend *planyorki* [official meetings at the town's administration], officials smile at them, while we don't see them. However, we have comics [with political satire] that they cannot afford', stated the founder of *InTown*. The owner of the *TownR* project argued that they do not consider professional journalists as contributors to his project because of their 'close-minded views'. He was sure they will produce 'professional texts, but nobody will read them'.

The second common motivation, related to understanding the internet as a possibility to create something new, was the desire to contribute to community building and community engagement. Hyperlocal practitioners were dissatisfied with how legacy media performed the function of community support, mentioning that 'there was no place [on the internet] to read about town [news]'. All of the owners of hyperlocal outlets had a certain 'idea' that they wanted to pursue in their projects. The owner of *Curious Town* was fascinated by history and archival materials about the town, while the owner of *InTown & Events* wanted to show the town where 'one can live, work and raise kids,' and the owner of *InTown* was nostalgic for passionate and interesting discussions on local forums in the pre-social media era and wanted to revive these discussions on a

new platform. Therefore, they understand their hyperlocal media as an opportunity to implement these ideas, in contrast to the wasting of resources by professional media practitioners.

In comparison to legacy media, hyperlocal practitioners did not care about financial issues. None of the projects[10] earn any money, and their owners are sure that there will not be opportunities to do so in the future. Moreover, none of the owners really want to receive an income. For instance, the *InTown* team voted to remain a non-commercial project and thus do not accept any advertising materials. The owner of *InTown & Events* views his project and its costs as part of the 'social responsibility' of his business: 'many people can afford to make their own small media. Many can do this and it would be great. To invest a small amount of money and spend some more monthly, understanding that you are doing, probably, a good thing for society. And it is not that expensive'. In comparison to the professional orientation of legacy media, hyperlocal media reflects the ability of local society in Russia to 'generate and sustain grassroots engagement' (Greene, 2011: 460).

How local traditional media and hyperlocal media work through/with the internet

This article seeks also to explore how differences in understanding of digital technologies influence the aims and work practices of media practitioners.

It would be myopic to say that editors and journalists totally deny the role of the internet and digital technologies in local journalism. Nevertheless, in accordance with their understanding of digitalisation, they treat it in a very utilitarian way, as something that helps them simplify their processes related to the collection and production of the news. For instance, to simplify the editorial job via digital communication in messengers and SNS or to simplify the way data can be gathered for a journalist's piece: 'I remember how, 17 years ago, we called the kolkhozes and asked about the numbers of milk feed. (. . .) Now, everything is on websites. My productivity has increased. I can find the information that I use for my materials much faster', stated the chief editor of *Weekly*.

The internet is used for data sourcing, including the search for ideas/inspiration and the collection of information/facts for articles. Journalists use the town's hyperlocal media as sources to understand what is important for locals: 'if a dump (*vbros*) [of certain information] goes, we read, monitor constantly, what people post. Well, people for instance ask, 'is it true that. . .?' Naturally, this is a reason for investigation and for future publication.' At the same time, they aim to cover these issues in a professional way – to check facts, to get information from local officials. In their publications they try to follow this 'top-down' view. For instance, they use such expressions as 'recently, the internet has been 'bombarded' with news about. . .' or 'social network sites were full of angry responses. . ..' to stress out that they monitor grassroots discussions, check them, and produce correct information.

The internet and SNS are utilised by professional media for information distribution. Since professional media practitioners assess digital content as secondary after the print version, they do not have their own websites or groups on SNS, but actively use

hyperlocal media to distribute some of their content. I call it the 'friendly collaboration,' when newspapers, based on informal relations with the owners of groups on SNS, use these groups to distribute their content.

This collaboration takes on two different forms. The first one is 'outlet-to-outlet' collaboration. This is the case with *Weekly* and *InTown & Events*, where newspapers, instead of making their own websites, place their content (PDF versions of newspapers) on the website of the hyperlocal partner. The second form of collaboration is 'person-to-person' collaboration. This is the case with *Kind* and *InTown*, where the chief editor of the newspaper is also one of the moderators for a group on SNS, so she can re-print articles from the newspaper on the site. *Independent* does not have an 'exclusive partner', but since the newspaper has its own website with a 'share' function, its publications pop-up in different hyperlocal media accounts.

Such collaboration is beneficial to both parties. Traditional media outlets have their content distributed on the internet, while hyperlocal media sites receive professional content for free. The collaboration is possible because of the contrasting identities of legacy and hyperlocal media practitioners. While the former see themselves as professional journalists, the latter view themselves as amateurs and hobbyists. The idea is that if the two play in different fields, there can be only positive results to collaboration.

This collaboration is rooted in a different understanding of and rationale for the internet by the two media species. The different motivations for digital activities, together with different ways of using the internet, cause them to operate in different and not strongly-intersecting parts of the local media landscape. Therefore, both media species see themselves as friends rather than competitors within media ecology.

When it comes to work practices of hyperlocal practitioners, they prefer to see themselves detached from professional legacy media (*sredstva massovoi informacii, SMI*) and never refer to themselves as being part of the '*mass media*'. Nevertheless, they (explicitly or implicitly) borrow work practices from professional media, in what can be treated as simulation during emergence. Scolari (2013) argues that simulation process 'can occur when a new medium tries to construct its own niche in the media ecology, or when an old medium attempts to survive adverse conditions by mimicking the new media species surrounding it' (Scolari, 2013: 1429). For instance, all hyperlocal media sites have content moderation – all news, as suggested by the users, is assessed by the moderator or owner (if they are different persons). In fact, the owners and moderators of hyperlocal sites act as editors with the function of gatekeepers – they decide on their own what citizen content to publish, what comments to delete, and which users to ban.

Conclusions: Reconfiguration of the town's media landscape in the digital age

New technologies have significantly influenced local media all over the world, and Russia is no exception. Having been primarily studied within the context of Western countries, these changes have been poorly observed in non-Western localities. The case of one Russian province has examined how the specifics of the Russian media model shape local media actors' relations and behaviour in today's local media ecology.

Internet and digital technologies gave rise to new species of the town's local media ecology – hyperlocal media. This research explored what place they obtain within the whole ecosystem, depending on their interrelations with other species like traditional local media.

The town's professional media practitioners see the internet as a utilitarian tool to simplify some processes of print newspapers' production and distribution, rather than a significant threat or an opportunity for local media landscape. They pretend to frame the internet as an irrelevant, parallel world to their own, one in which neither intersect. 'If there would be no internet, we would not sell more newspapers. I think, they are two completely parallel, independent [of each other's worlds]', argued the chief editor of *Independent*. They argue that they do not compete with any of the town's hyperlocal media: 'our subscription [rate] is stable, revenue is stable too. As soon as I see that [those] figures are changing, I'll [be able to] tell that the audience is leaving [and going to the internet],' stated the chief editor of *Kind*.

Being indigenous to the internet, hyperlocal practitioners perceive it as a space to develop own initiatives, freer and closer to local people, than traditional media. In their turn, hyperlocal practitioners also argue they do not compete with traditional media, since they are independent from local authorities and do not pursue commercial goals.

As such, two groups of media species occupy different and not overlapping places within town's media ecology. It creates the possibility for reciprocal cooperation or 'friendship' rather than for competition. Legacy media cooperates with hyperlocal media to get grassroots information from locals and to distribute its own content on the internet without spending additional resources (for instance, for running own group on SNS). Hyperlocal media, in their turn, welcome professional content.

This form of relationship between traditional and hyperlocal media is different from other media models. For instance, previous research revealed that these media species compete with one another in Germany (Harnischmacher, 2015) or in Sweden (Tenor, 2018). Collaborative relations within local media ecology can be explained by peculiarities of Russian media model. Local traditional media outlets in Russia can still be treated much less as market actors than can their western counterparts. Therefore, the resistance toward digital development is rooted in the specific structure of the Russian regional media (quasi-)market and state-media relations. Being dependent on support from local government, editors prefer to maintain this low but stable level of financing. Since the internet is seen as unknown and risky, 'the game is not worth the candle', to use a Russian idiom. On the other hand, if legacy media outlets become too active and profitable, they will lose state financial support. It is a paradox: local media outlets express a desire to be independent of state financing and at the same time do not want to lose it. It similar to what Greene (2011) calls 'aggressive immobility'. He explains that when social institutions are uncertain, any change is perceived primarily as a threat to existing stability.

In comparison to Sweden (Nygren et al., 2018) or Great Britain (Coleman et al., 2016), where local newspapers are still the most important actors, this research demonstrates that in Russian town hyperlocal media occupies a more significant position within town's media landscape, what is also rooted in country's media model. The crisis of values of local journalists and their clientelistic relations with local authorities (Erzikova and Lowrey, 2017) make local traditional media serve the local officials rather than local

community. It makes hyperlocal grassroots media outlets more visible and influential actors of a town's media ecology in Russia, especially in small towns. The town's hyperlocal media sites link their amateur nature with a greater degree of freedom and independence. Hyperlocal media practitioners insist on their non-commercial, non-professional motives and prefer to detach themselves from professional journalists and editors, which have the corrupt and cynical image in contemporary Russia (Roudakova, 2017).

These factors make semi-professional hyperlocal media important long-run actors and news agenda setters of the local media landscape within Russian media model. They have become not only reliable news sources for locals, but also channels for the distribution of official information and key partners for legacy media. This research demonstrates that taking into account crisis position of traditional media in small towns in Russia, hyperlocal semi-professional media have the possibility not only to complement but also to replace traditional counterparts and become central actors of towns' digitised media landscapes.

Notes

1. Usually small or average-sized city.
2. In this article I use terms 'traditional media' and 'legacy media' to describe traditional local media outlets like newspapers as the most common type of local media, but also magazines, TV channels, radio stations etc.
3. The concept of media ecology was initially proposed by Neil Postman who defined it as 'the study of media as environments'. Marshall McLuhan defined media ecology though 'arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another' (McLuhan, 2004: 271)
4. In this research audience and their consumption of local media are excluded from the analysis. Nevertheless, I understand that audience is important element of local media ecosystem. To avoid misunderstanding, I use term 'media landscape' that exclude audience. Using term 'media ecology' in this text, I refer mainly to 'intermedia' dimension of this term.
5. 'Regional media' includes any media outlet with a region-wide coverage, while 'local media' refers to any media outlet with a smaller than region-wide coverage.
6. The most popular SNS in Russia (in descending order) currently are VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Instagram and Facebook: https://br-analytics.ru/blog/socseti-v-rossii-osen-2018/.
7. For more on the grants provided to the different regions of Russia in 2018, see: http://fincan.ru/articles/14_dotacii-regionam-rossii-2018/

8. The first group of questions discussed such issues as goals and functions of own media for local community, positioning in relation to other town's media, daily job practices including web practices. The second group of questions covered respondents' reflections on changes of roles of local media in digital environment, influence of social media platforms and messengers on local media production and consumption. Questions for professional media workers and hyperlocal practitioners slightly differed.
9. Names of all town's traditional and hyperlocal media were changed for the anonymity reasons.
10. *Overhead in the town* is the only exception.

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