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Free press, a local communication model

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Abstract

The relationship between the non-institutional free press and local communication is quite particular since this type of press shapes a unique model of local communication which proves that advertising is enough to finance a news product targeted at a fairly well-defined readership as long as this product has a good advertising sales department and effective distribution within its operating area. This paper discusses the current situation of the free press in Catalonia, where this phenomenon has been quite prominent. It points out the main features of this type of press and surveys its history, which spans from the euphoria of its early years and its expansion and consolidation to the current crisis.

Key words: free press, local press, local communication, globalisation, glocalisation

1. Introduction: Local communication in the age of globalism

In the new scene that has emerged from the gradual spread of the information and communication technologies, we have to shade the global/local dichotomy, especially if there is a temptation to introduce terms of exclusion. Local scenarios are needed for global actions. The Internet is a medium that allows for communication among many people on a global scale for the first time, yet it also has major repercussions in the local sphere. Public opinion – perhaps more unequivocally known as the receiver – is keenly interested in the local news. Information consumers want to have exhaustive knowledge of their most immediate environment.

However, there is no doubt that today the term *local* should be exclusively used in the sphere of contents, since with the advent of the Internet the second element that has traditionally defined the concept of *local*, the *receiver* – or coverage – now transcends physical space. Local information primarily refers to contents defined in geographic, social and cultural terms and

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to how the events that take place within this frame are treated, along with other events which affect the citizens of this area. It is a service-oriented, direct, local kind of communication which offers the most everyday contents and gets feedback from its own receivers. Local communication does not have the panoramic breadth and the diversity of general communication. It does not need to because its sphere of reception requires detail and specificity, unlike the media that have to serve more universal audiences.

It is clear that the concept of *local* should not be the antithesis of the concept of *global*.¹ Thinking locally and acting globally: this is the formula that gives meaning to communication processes; it is what is known as *glocalisation*, a buzzword that defines this reality. In fact, today's technologies multiply not only global but also local spaces, and the revitalisation of the interest in the idea of *local* can be found in this apparent paradox. It is true that the digital society has become an extremely powerful instrument in the development of local communication, because it has permitted it to have, under equal conditions, the elements that until now have been the exclusive realm of general communication, namely access to data, processing this data and the technological process of developing the product and finally disseminating it. A good communicator is one who knows how to find the relationship between local information and broader geographic contexts, be they national, state-wide or international; one who investigates and interrelates; and one who is not satisfied with a simple official communique or the information provided at a press conference and instead tries to interpret and contextualise this information.

Manuel Castells has reflected on the need to include local scenarios in global actions, and he has described the Internet as an instrument which for the first time has allowed for communication from the many to the many in a given time on a global scale, yet with major repercussions on local scenes. In fact, citizen participation is indispensable to developing quality information disseminated via the web. The intention of preserving one's own culture and the need for receivers to feel like participants in the contents of the media around them are the only weapons that the local media have in order to operate on par with their larger counterparts in the process of globalisation. And let us note the fact that globalisation does not necessarily lead to cultural and social homogenisation. In the era of the new technologies, local communication inserted within the global context represents the confirmation of a reality: the articulation and survival of local and national identities.²

Global and local are the flip sides of the same coin. While in recent years, networks that make intercommunication possible in real time across the entire planet have spread like wildfire, the social value of local information has experienced unimagined headway. We are unquestionably in the midst of a paradigm shift (Ramonet, 2011).

¹ See López García (2008), which surveys the local concept in relation to globality and the buzzword globalisation. Chapter 1, "Una revisión interdisciplinar del concepto de local", is particularly germane.

² See Castells (2009), especially the chapter "La comunicació en l'era digital", pp. 93-208.

2. Methodology and sources of information

This article is the outcome of a study performed in two phases. The first phase consisted of exhaustive documentary research on the free press in Catalonia. We primarily used two sources of information: different journals specialising in the media, and the archives of the *Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta i Mitjans Digitals* (Catalan Association of Free Press and Digital Media, ACPG). In the second phase, we studied the different free publications currently being issued in Catalonia and their typology and contents so that we could reach conclusions on the current status of the free press here. The article is based on two main hypotheses that we attempt to prove. The first is that the crisis has affected the free press just as it has the other media, but that it has not diminished the importance of projects in this sector, instead the polar opposite: new forms are being sought to reach their audience, such as their leap to the web. The second hypothesis which we try to corroborate is that the free press plays a complementary yet extremely important role within the local information system.

The free press deals with the news differently, and its hierarchy of information is distinct from that of the paid press. What is more, the way it designs and organises topics makes it particularly appealing to audiences such as young people and immigrants. We try to prove this through a content analysis of different publications, both free and paid, classified into three different groups: daily general news publications, daily local and county-wide news publications, and non-daily publications, in this case weeklies, that are local and county-wide in scope. The free publications that we studied are: *20 Minutos*, *Qué!*, *Bondia Lleida*, *Més Tarragona - Reus - Costa Daurada*, *La Fura*, *L'Enllaç dels Anoiencs*, *Contrapunt*, *El Tot Mataró*, *Capgròs*, *Tot Sant Cugat*, *L'Independent de Gràcia*, *El Tot Badalona* and *Mollet a mà*. These free publications are compared with the following paid publications: *Ara*, *El Periódico*, *El Punt Avui*, *La Vanguardia*, *Diari Ebre*, *Diari de Girona*, *Diari de Tarragona*, *Regió 7*, *Segre*, *Diari de Sant Cugat*, *Setmanari de l'Alt Empordà*, *L'Eco de Sitges*, *Revista del Vallès*, *Nova Tàrrrega*, *La Comarca d'Olot*, *El 3 de Vuit*, *Àncora* and *Diari de Vilanova*. Basically, we analysed the front pages of these publications so we could see the hierarchy of information. For the daily publications, we examined the front pages during the week of the 25th to 29th of June 2012, while for the weekly publications we studied the front pages from the entire month of June of the same year. This selection was performed randomly.

However, before presenting the results of this study, we want to briefly survey the history of the free press and the most prominent authors who have studied it. We will take a historical tour of its origins and the euphoria of its early years, then examine its expansion and consolidation, and finally discuss the current crisis. We will also seek to provide a detailed description of the free press, which has been so scarcely researched, especially local and county-wide publications which are distributed for free, as it has long been considered the poor stepsister of the paid press in this same sphere.

3. The free press in local communication

The rebirth of local communication in Catalonia started after 1975 in the wake of the death of General Franco. Part of the ancient, glorious tradition of county-wide press developed in the early decades of the 20th century was revived, a tradition that had shaped the first major historical period in the Catalan press before the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) marked its sudden erasure (Guillamet, 1983: 41).

The relationship between the free non-institutional press and local communication is highly particular because this model is very characteristic of local communication and serves as proof that advertising is enough to finance news products targeted at quite heterogeneous audiences, as long as they have a good sales department and effective distribution within their area of influence. In France, the free press emerged in 1960, and in a little over three decades its dissemination reached the astronomical figure of 24 million copies. This journalistic model is also quite powerful in Great Britain and the United States of America. In Spain, the phenomenon was introduced a bit more slowly, but in the last few decades of the 20th century its prominence in the written press market has also become unquestionable. In fact, the free press became so prominent that it attracted the attention of large media groups such as Grup Zeta, which at one point published more than 70 free local press titles, either biweekly or monthly, at different points around Spain. Concha Edo believes that the predecessor of the free press was the *Feuille du Bureau d'Adresses*, published in France after 1630 by Théophraste Renaudot (1586-1653). He was also the founder of the *Gazette* in 1631 and a pioneer in the press in France. Nevertheless, the free press as we know it today did not achieve its prominence and was not defined until 1960.

Concurring with Alfonso Nieto, Concha Edo also considers other forerunners in the 18th and 19th centuries, which she groups into three categories: advertising publications, subsidised newspapers and indirect forms of free press. Despite these precedents, she believes that the current concept of free press was born in the USA in 1960s as an alternative press and gained ground in around 1970. At that time, this kind of press began to spread in Europe as well. In the excerpt below, Nieto mentions the different features of the free press:

“Since 1970 we have witnessed the consolidation of publications issued as an alternative to the existing press. Along with the special attention they attach to news stories on local politics, entertainment and culture, the alternative publications also have a specific focus: attracting local advertisers, namely small retailers or professionals. We could say that there are three prominent features of alternative publications: a) they are disseminated locally, b) they are particularly persistent in their quest for advertisers, and c) the copy that reaches readers is totally or partially free.” (Nieto, 1984: 85).

We can regard this juncture, around 1970s, as the rebirth of the free press in Spain. Catalonia is the region with the longest-standing tradition of local and county-wide press, both free and paid. In fact, the first free publication in Spain

was founded in Catalonia back in 1969, namely the weekly *Clàxon Tarragona*. In that historical context, there were different instances of experimentation with new journalistic formulas, as Jaume Guillamet recalls:

“In the decade starting in the first years after the Franco regime, 1976, until the final liberalisation of the press, which culminated with the privatisation of the old provincial newspapers of the Movement in 1983, there was all sorts of testing of new models to bring newspapers up to date” (Guillamet, 1996: 169).

In the early days, the contents of the free press in Catalonia – which was initially not very news-oriented – signalled the first contact with written Catalan for many immigrant families (especially those from Andalusia), who picked up the magazine to check the time a given TV programme was going to be broadcast or to check real estate agency listings. Therefore, one of the target audiences of this kind of press was immigrants. This trend remains in place today, and immigrants are a major target of the free press. In fact, it is a gateway to integration for the new immigrants and a tool of territorial cohesion.

As mentioned above, in 1969 the first free weekly was published in Catalonia, the *Clàxon Tarragona*, and others sprang up quite regularly in dozens of medium-sized cities in Catalonia with titles like *Sac Comercial* in Osona (1977), *El Tot Mataró* (1981), *El Tot Badalona* (1981), *La Fura* in Vilafranca (1982), *Capgròs de Mataró* (1984), *El Pregó del Vallès* (1984), *El Pregó de Sabadell* (1984), *Aquí* (1985), *Zona Alta* in Barcelona (1985), *Tot Sant Cugat* (1986), *L’Ham* in Banyoles (1986), *Tot Cerdanyola* (1987), *Reclam d’Osona* (1988), *Revenda* (1990), *Reclam La Cerdanya i Alt Urgell* (1992), *3 Viles* (1993), *Nou Palafrugell* (1993) and *Punt de Venda Alt i Baix Empordà, la Garrotxa i El Gironès* (1993) – this is a free newspaper issued by a publication with larger territorial coverage, namely *El Punt – El Tot Granollers i Vallès Oriental* (1993), *Secundèria* (1994), *Pànxing Tot Cerdanya* (1995), *El Pregó de Terrassa* (1995), *Cop d’Ull* (1995), the monthly *Mataró Report* (1996) and *El Mercat de Girona* (1997), just to name a few.³

Alfonso Nieto, one of the first Spanish authors to study the free press sector, defines it as: *“All newspapers that are distributed free of charge and thus are solely financed by advertising and published by businesspeople who run an economic risk by doing so”*. This same author stresses that free publications are free regardless of their frequency, and that the fact that they are free does not imply that their contents are lower quality or less reliable, because their credibility depends on the editor and his or her professionalism. In fact, citing Drancourt, Nieto says: *“The success of free publications is closely tied to the quality of the reporting in the newspapers”* (Nieto, 1984: 86).

This kind of local press is an alternative to the traditional press and covers certain news needs that had been unmet until it emerged. These needs basically included more local information closer to the readers. For this reason,

³ Some of these free publications are still issued today. Many are part of the Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta i Mitjans Digitals (ACPG). These titles may be viewed on the association’s website: www.acpg.cat. However, some publications have folded for a variety of reasons.

they are targeted at a very specific group of people living within a given region. On the other hand, there are also publications specialising in a specific topic (medicine, university affairs, etc.); that is, they are not only identified as local and county-wide publications but are also targeted at a specialised or professional audience. Therefore, the first major consequence of the emergence of free local publications is the increase in the heterogeneity of the local journalism sector, since these kinds of publications are very diverse in both their areas of dissemination and their frequency and contents (López, Fernández & Durán, 2002: 275).

As mentioned above, free publications in Catalonia have been extremely dynamic from the very start. In fact, different authors have acknowledged that the phenomenon of the free press is unique in Catalonia and by extension Spain.⁴ This uniqueness of the free press in Catalonia led to the founding of the *Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta* (Catalan Association of the Free Press, ACPG)⁵ in 1997 with the mission of bringing together most of the free local and county-wide publications as well as some of the larger free newspapers. Along with this association, the *Asociación Española de Prensa Gratuïta* (Spanish Association of the Free Press, AEPG)⁶ also emerged in 2001, when the phenomenon of free newspapers was beginning to gain momentum and become a specific information outlet:

“Few countries in Europe – or even in the world – have experienced a revolution in its daily printed press comparable to what happened in Spain in the first decade of the 21st century: circulation doubled (more than 30 new titles launched onto the market) and millions of new readers began to consume the press regularly” (Bakker & Berganza, 2011: 19).

Thanks to the *Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta*, this new press gradually gained journalistic awareness and definitively became the benchmark news medium in many Catalan counties. We could claim that the most

⁴ This was acknowledged by the researcher specialising in the free press, Piet Bakker, at the *Segones Jornades Internacionals de Premsa Gratuïta* organised by ACPG. A report on this conference can be found in the news story published on the Capgròs.com portal: Capgròs.com (2006), “La premsa gratuïta organitza unes jornades internacionals” [online], <http://www.capgros.com/noticies/detail.asp?id_noticia_portal=10493&sec=71> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

⁵ Today this association has changed its name slightly. When it was founded in 1997 it was the *Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta* (Catalan Association of the Free Press, ACPG). Today its complete name is the *Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta i Mitjans Digitals* (Catalan Association of Free Press and Digital Media, ACPG). The name was changed in 2010 in order to include the digital media in the association, in addition to continuing to serve as an umbrella for free publications, despite the creation of the ACPG’s Digital Area in 2008. Even though the association’s name changed, its abbreviation has not and it remains the ACPG. Information on the name change can be found in the following report: ACPG (2010), “Els 140 editors assistents a l’Assemblea de l’ACPG aproven el canvi de nom per adaptar-se a la nova realitat de l’entitat” [online], <<http://www.acpg.cat/noticies/detail.php?id=588&nwl=31>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

⁶ More information on the *Asociación Española de Prensa Gratuïta* (AEPG) can be found on its website: <http://www.aepg.es>.

characteristic model of the free press in Catalonia is a medium that has been professionalised, sometimes replacing but primarily complementing the role of the traditional local press; furthermore, it is mass-distributed, especially through mail box stuffing or offering it at strategic spots with heavy passenger traffic, such as Barcelona's underground. In 2006, all the publications of the *Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta* printed over 2,800,000 copies and had a potential audience of 4.5 million readers. The ACPG is a highly active association in the field of the free press. Today 110 free publications and 97 digital media belong to it.

The phenomenon of the free press reached its peak of popularity in 2000 with the arrival of free newspapers in Europe. The first large-scale free general news newspaper in Spain was *20 Minutos*,⁷ and one year later, in 2001, the newspaper *Metro* began publication. The success of the free newspapers was reinforced when publishers in the paid press began to release free publications. Thus, Recoletos launched *Qué!* in 2005 (sold to Vocento in 2007), and the Planeta group launched *ADN* in 2006. Despite the launch of these generalist titles in Spain, we should note that the first free local newspaper in Europe was *Mini Diario*, which was founded in Valencia in 1992 and folded in 1998. During this time, there have been many other free local newspapers all over Spain.

The advent and especially the consolidation of the free press led to profound concern among owners of the paid press, who were worried that it might become a direct competitor which would end up replacing the paid press. This fear was most likely unfounded, since according to the sector itself, consumers often had a newspaper-reading habit that went beyond what the free press could offer and therefore they bought the conventional press. Spanish television and radio consumption was higher, but with the advent of the free press, the habit of newspaper-reading rose, and in consequence so did purchases of the paid press. What is more, many printers of paid newspapers also printed free publications. Despite this, initially there was a public clash because the publishers of the paid press believed that the free press was low-quality and posed unfair competition in terms of securing advertisers.

Some publishers in the paid press opened free editions to combat this competition. Others first exerted pressure for stronger regulations on the distribution of the free press,⁸ and then tried to ensure that it was excluded from the *Estudi General de Mitjans* (General Media Study, EGM). In the former strategy, we can see that the distribution points of the free press were regulated in some cities, such as Santa Cruz de Tenerife and Madrid. In the latter, the paid press was unable to prevent the free press from being included in the media

⁷ Initially, in 2000 the free newspaper *20 Minutos* began to circulate in the capital of Spain under the name of *Madrid y M@s*. It opened a branch in Barcelona that same year. In 2001, the Norwegian advertising group Schibsted bought the majority of its shares and changed its name. It also introduced the design of the other titles that the group owned in Germany and Switzerland.

⁸ *El Mundo* (2008), "Madrid limita el número de repartidores de periódicos gratuitos en la calle" [online], <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/06/05/comunicacion/1212688481.html>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012); *El País* (2002), "Prohibido el reparto de periódicos gratuitos en los transportes públicos" [online], <http://elpais.com/diario/2002/05/16/madrid/1021548260_850215.html> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

studies. What is more, there were also clashes when the free press was able to access the tracking of the number of copies printed offered by the Oficina de Justificació de la Difusió (Office of Justification of Dissemination, OJD).⁹ However, in the end, the OJD agreed to track the number of copies printed by free newspapers by creating a new tracking area for free publications.¹⁰

Over time, this confrontation was settled, as the figures showed that readers of the free press were not replacing readers of the paid press; rather they were complementary. For example, a 2007 study by Orange Media reached the conclusion that three out of every four readers of the free press had also read the general news press in the past month. Therefore, reading the free press did not exclude or replace reading the paid press. Despite this, in one of the questions in the study participants were asked about the effect of the advent of the free press in their reading of the paid press, and the results were as follows: 63% read the same amount of paid press as before, 18% read less paid press than before, 14% continued not to read the paid press and 5% read more paid press than before. In short, the fact is that there are 13% fewer readers of the paid press than before the advent of the free press.

After some difficulties, hurdles and debates, the free press gained traction. At the start of the 21st century, it became a strong business sector that kept launching new media in Catalan in television, radio, the written press and especially the Internet. Therefore, it is a key sector in the development of the field of communication and the media in Catalonia which began to become quite prominent. According to the *Informe de la comunicació a Catalunya 2005-2006*, the 35 publications belonging to the Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta in 2003 had risen to more than 80 two years later. Regarding their frequency, 47 were weekly, 19 monthly, one bimonthly, four biweekly and four daily. The typology of free publications combined products that were purely advertising or commercial with ones that included more news, on either services or local events.

The economic crisis began to rear its head in 2008, and the free press became the scapegoat, given the notable retreat of the advertising industry. The income in the press dropped, and titles disappeared. The dissemination or distribution of publications dropped, and so did resources for advertising, although paradoxically the number of readers rose, according to figures from the *Baròmetre de la Comunicació i la Cultura* (Moragas i Spà et al., 2011). Many publications also cut their staff, as seen in a study conducted by the

⁹ *El País* (2003), “Competencia expedienta a la OJD por poner trabas al diario 20 minutos” [online], <http://elpais.com/diario/2003/11/18/sociedad/1069110008_850215.html> (retrieved: 4 July 2012); *El Mundo* (2002), “El diario Metro anuncia acciones legales contra OJD por las sanciones a la prensa gratuita” [online], <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2002/10/10/sociedad/1034243344.html>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012); *El País* (2003), “El diario gratuito 20 minutos retira su demanda contra la OJD” [online], <http://elpais.com/diario/2003/11/09/sociedad/1068332405_850215.html> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

¹⁰ *El Mundo* (2004), “OJD cambia de nombre” [online], <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2004/07/01/comunicacion/1088684143.html>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012); *El Mundo* (2004), “La OJD se reestructura con una nueva división que controlará la distribución de la prensa gratuita” [online], <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2004/10/19/comunicacion/1098197228.html>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

Asociación Española de Prensa Gratuita.¹¹ This study was performed based on a survey of 240 editors in the free press, and it revealed that half of them had had to trim their staff. The main cause of these staff cutbacks was the drop in advertising income, which affected 79% of the editors surveyed, and they claimed that in 2009 this drop was between 31% and 50% compared to the previous year. The following quotation from Piet Bakker and Maria Rosa Berganza Conde explains the relationship between readership and the crisis in the press:

“In turn, Spain offers an unequivocal example of how the crisis of the press and readership are unrelated: according to data from the Estudi General de Mitjans (AIMC, 2008), newspapers’ penetration has risen five points in the past ten years, and the number of free copies distributed is slightly higher than the number of copies of the paid press, although the replacement effect has been minimal according to the findings of the World Press Report (World Association of Newspapers, 1996-2006)” (Miguel, 2011: 49).

An article by Bakker explains that free newspapers face three main problems when dealing with the current economic crisis. The first, as mentioned above, is the drop in advertising income; this is closely related to consumer confidence, which is lower in crisis situations. The second problem is related to their position in the market compared to other competitors. *“Paid newspapers tend to be differentiated from each other in terms of their choice of audience, political viewpoints, pricing strategies, marketing and distribution areas”*, comments Bakker. In contrast, free newspapers do not have these options for differentiation, since they all are distributed similarly in public transport and busy places, and therefore they cannot compete by targeting a specific audience that might interest a given advertiser. The third problem which free newspapers often face is that most of them are not backed by a large media group. Having a business conglomerate behind them would balance the risk and make them less vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy. All of these problems had affected the market for the free press:

“In terms of market development, free newspapers have disappeared from some European markets, but overall they have fallen to a less competitive position and adopted another commercial model in which cooperation is more important than competition. The third trend seems to be that the larger and therefore stronger newspapers tend to have higher chances of survival” (Bakker, 2010: 136).

In the two-year period from 2009-2010, some free newspapers have left paper behind to become digital, such as the weekly *Punt de Venda*, the editions

¹¹ *El Mundo* (2009), “La mitad de los editores de prensa gratuita han reducido su plantilla” [online], <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/09/15/comunicacion/1253022272.html>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

of the publication Flash and the titles put out by Anuntis Segundamano SL (*Clàxon*, *Revenda*, etc.). Others have ceased publication, such as the newspaper *Aquí* and the editions of *El Pregó*, or their frequency has changed, such as *Cafè amb Llet* (from weekly to monthly). According to Piet Bakker, the share of free newspapers had risen to 54% in 2006, while by 2009 this figure had dropped to 35%, since more than half of the 35 titles had shuttered. In contrast, the Comunicació 21 Group had expanded considerably, with 13 local editions. According to the *Informe de la Comunicació a Catalunya 2009-2010*, the most important daily, weekly and monthly free local and county-wide publications between 2008 and 2010 were: *Pànxing*, *El Tot Mataró i Maresme*, *Capgròs*, *Tribuna Maresme*, *Notícies TGN*, *Cafè amb Llet*, *Freqüència*, *Més Tarragona - Reus - Costa Daurada*, *La Fura*, *El Tot Badalona-Montgat-Tiana*, *Tot Sant Cugat*, *Reclam Osona - Ripollès - La Selva*, *Més! Osona* and *Bondia Lleida*.

In 2012, the news on the media is not very positive. In terms of the free press, we should note that currently there is only one generalist newspaper that is still being published, namely *20 Minutos*, since the others have had to close. *Metro* was the first to announce its closure, and it stopped publication in 2009 after recording a drop in sales and having to dismiss many of its workers and close branches. *Metro* closed its branch in Spain, the first free newspaper to do so. The next free newspaper to close was *ADN*, put out by the Planeta business group, in 2011. This closure left 60 people from the Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia bureaus jobless. The last to close was the free newspaper *Qué!*, put out by the Vocento business group. The group's intention was only to close the paper edition and to leave the digital edition in order to keep the brand. However, the closure of publications and editions is not the only thing that has affected the circulation of the free press; so has the fact that the newspapers that are still being published have cut back their circulation. In Spain, circulation has dropped by more than 50% since 2006, from 4.9 million to 2.2 million. With 2010 figures, we can see that only 15 of the original 35 newspapers are still being published, and regarding the number of editions, only 56 of the original 113 still remain.

4. Characteristics of the free press

The researchers Piet Bakker and María Rosa Berganza Conde remark on a variety of reasons why the phenomenon of the free press was so prominent in Spain. The free press is a major phenomenon in the country in that it existed long before the newspaper *Metro* was launched in Stockholm in 1995. Therefore, the first characteristic that Bakker and Berganza Conde cite is the large number of titles and their diversity (national and local, morning or evening, specialised, etc.). The second factor worth mentioning is their high circulation and large market share: in 2006, the peak of free publications,¹² circulation was 5 million and their market share was 50%. Finally, the last factor is that free newspapers in Spain have transformed a country that was characterised by high television consumption into a country of free press readers. In 2007, a milestone was reached when the newspaper *20 Minutos* was

¹² *El País* (2006), "Las publicaciones gratuitas en Europa crecieron un 60% en 2006" [online], <http://elpais.com/diario/2006/10/27/sociedad/1161900013_850215.html> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

the most read in Spain, with 2.5 million people reading it per day. The other free newspapers *Qué!*, *Metro* and *ADN* came in fourth, fifth and sixth in the rankings, respectively.

According to Andreu Casero, we should make a distinction between daily publications (free newspapers) and non-daily free publications (that is, publications that come out weekly, biweekly or monthly, among others). They are two slightly different concepts, since free newspapers tend to offer general news, while free non-daily publications are more local in content. Despite this, free newspapers tend to have the mission of providing local news, even though their distribution area might be larger than local and reach several different municipalities within the Barcelona metropolitan area. What is more, they appear every day from Monday to Friday, on workdays, that is. In contrast, free non-daily publications are published at different intervals and are much more closely tied to local affairs, since the majority are local in scope.

A unique feature of the free press, both daily and non-daily, is the absence of political clashes, since it is a kind of journalism that focuses on social topics and other topics of interest to readers. It focuses on local issues, and free newspapers do so through their local editions (Sabés, 2006). The study performed of the contents of the local press noted the lack of political clashes in these publications, which contrasts with the paid press. If we primarily examine generalist newspapers, we can see that the front pages of the free publications analysed have political contents less often than paid newspapers. During one week (from the 25th to 29th of June 2012), we analysed the front pages of different publications and noted that the front pages of the free publication *Qué!* contained no political news, while the front page of *20 Minutos* had one political story as the main news item and three more as secondary news. In contrast, when we observed the generalist paid newspapers, political news was more frequent. In the newspapers *Ara* and *El Punt Avui*, political stories were the main news items in three of the five front pages studied, and they also contained other secondary political stories (one more in *Ara* and for more in *El Punt Avui*). If we examine the paid newspapers *El Periódico* and *La Vanguardia*, the main topics on the front pages were more varied: only one political news story was on the front of the former, and none appeared on the latter; *El Periódico* had no secondary political stories while *La Vanguardia* had two throughout the entire week studied.

Secondly, we analysed the contents of the front pages of the daily local and county-wide news publications. In this case, we also compared free and paid publications and examined one week, from the 25th to 29th of June 2012. The dynamic of these publications is clearly distinct from the general news publications, since the contents of the former cover the region while the contents of the latter are broader. We did not detect such significant differences between the paid and free publications because the subject matter is quite clearly delimited. Thus, for example, the main content of the five front pages of the daily free publications *Bondia Lleida* and *Més Tarragona - Reus - Costa Daurada* was local news stories, while the other two were society topics. Regarding the paid publications, we found the following contents: two front pages of *Diari Ebre* contained local news, two had society news stories and one opened with sports; four front pages of *Diari Girona* contained local reports and one opened with a society story; four front pages of *Regió 7* contained local news and another reported on sports; and Segre opened with two local stories,

two society stories and one sports report. Therefore, we can see that the most commonly recurring topics on the front pages of both free and paid publications are local stories and society news. This conclusion is also valid for non-daily publications; in our case, the non-daily publications studied were local and county-wide weeklies. The front pages of different editions from the month of June 2012 were studied to ascertain the hierarchy of the contents (Table 1).

Table 1. Weekly local and county-wide publications

Free	Subject	Paid	Subject
<i>Capgròs</i>	Local	<i>Àncora</i>	Local
<i>Contrapunt</i>	Local + Society	<i>Diari de Sant Cugat</i>	Local + Society
<i>El Tot Badalona</i>	Local	<i>Diari de Vilanova</i>	Local + Society
<i>El Tot Mataró</i>	Local	<i>El 3 de Vuit</i>	Local + Society
<i>El Tot Sant Cugat</i>	Local + Services	<i>L'Eco de Sitges</i>	Local + Services
<i>L'Enllaç dels Anoiencs</i>	Local	<i>La Comarca d'Olot</i>	Local
<i>L'Independent de Gràcia</i>	Local	<i>Nova Tàrrrega</i>	Local
<i>La Fura</i>	Local + Services	<i>Revista del Vallès</i>	Local + Society + Sports + Other
<i>Mollet a mà</i>	Local + Society	<i>Setmanari de l'Alt Empordà</i>	Local + Sports + Other

Source: Authors, based on a study on contents of the front pages of weekly local and county-wide publications, both free and paid. The subjects of the news on the front pages in the month of June 2012 are listed.

Once we have analysed the contents and main topics reported on by free publications, we should note that the news model of this kind of press is based on conciseness, because they are designed to be read quickly (between 20 and 25 minutes) and their length is limited. What is more, the characteristic that best defines this phenomenon is the fact that it is free of charge, which has led to a certain prejudice in that anything that is free to consumers must not be high-quality or credible: *“This prejudice cannot be seen in other media which are free, such as the television, radio or Internet, but centuries of a paid newspaper tradition cannot be overcome easily”* (Fernández, 2002: 44). Other characteristics of this communicative model is that it helps modest local businesses to enter the world of advertising, businesses that would be hard-pressed to promote their products in the traditional media given the high fees. Yet this does not prevent consolidated brands and companies from also using the free press to reach an audience that does not read the paid press – these are ads called *media agencies*, which distribute their packages of advertisements and their campaigns state-wide. This is even further magnified if we bear in mind that in Spain a little over 10% of the population purchases newspapers. However, in reality the reader profile of the free press is a young person aged 30-35, middle and upper middle class with secondary or vocational studies. That is, from the standpoint of advertising penetration, the reader profile could not be better. The attention of the promoters of local media is focused on advertising by modest clients.

It is essential to bear in mind that the free press has a different audience than the paid press, since it is targeted at occasional readers who are not in the habit of reading. *“Thus, free newspapers contribute to spreading the habit of*

reading and help the weaker socioeconomic strata gain access to printed information”, says Roberto de Miguel Pascual (Miguel, 2011: 45). It also attracts two crucial audiences: young adults and immigrants. Young adults find the free press to be a more audiovisual, multimedia format, which they prefer. The fact that it is free is also important, since young adults tend to get information through other free media like the radio, television and Internet. The free press has created a different reader profile than the paid press, since it has attracted population segments like young adults *“of both sexes, educated and working, who are not used to reading”* (Arroyo, 2006a: 1). What is more, it offers contents that are accessible, general and entertaining. Regarding immigrants, the free press is one way of learning the local language and integrating into society. Likewise, there are free publications targeted specifically at this audience.¹³

The economic crisis has seriously affected free publications, since they are more sensitive to fluctuations in the economy because they depend solely on advertising revenues, one of the first areas within companies to be trimmed. What is more, not only does the free press compete with the paid press for advertising, but today there are also other media that capture much of this income. Today, the media whose advertising income has risen the most are the Internet and the new technologies, which has repercussions on the other media. This poses a problem for the free press, although it might be an opportunity in the long term. Here we can see a glimmer of hope for the survival of the free press: *“The reason why the position of these newspapers is still relatively strong is that they attract a different kind of reader than paid newspapers. The readers of free newspapers are, in fact, considerably younger overall”* (Bakker, 2010: 137).

So is the Internet an opportunity for the free press? According to the *Informe de la Comunicació a Catalunya 2009-2010*, after the crisis in the digital economy shuttered many local products in the first half of the decade, 2009 was the culmination of a recovery of the enthusiasm for the Internet in local communication. Therefore, it seems that the future of the free press may lie in the digital world, or at least this is the impression gleaned from observations of the local communication sector. The number of local digital media has doubled in recent years, and specifically we can see that the majority of free publications have taken the leap to the web. If we look at the website of the Associació Catalana de la Premsa Gratuïta i Mitjans Digitals (www.acpg.cat), we can see the match between their paper publications and digital media. In fact, the association has encouraged this trend among its members, and in 2008 it opened the Digital Area to help include the digital media. At first 30 digital media registered as members, but by late 2010 this number had risen to 90. Today it includes almost 100 digital publications.

Advertising revenues are increasingly spent on the Internet as well. This is proven by the figures: in 2010 advertising revenues on the Internet rose 13.5%, while in 2011 they rose 12.6%, according to data from InfoAdex.¹⁴ The

¹³ PRNoticias (2008), “El 14% de los lectores de diarios gratuitos son inmigrantes” [online], <http://www.prnoticias.com/index.php/home/59/10021672-el-14-de-los-lectores-de-diarios-gratuitos-son-inmigrantes-> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

¹⁴ An analysis of figures on advertising investment in 2010 can be seen in the following news story: *Marketing Directo* (2010), “InfoAdex: la inversión publicitaria en España ha crecido un

rise in the number of digital media audited by the OJD Interactive is remarkable, as is the rise in the number of readers of the press, in this case, the number of unique monthly users. Despite this increase in the consumption of local media, revenues have stagnated. For this reason, the editors of both the free and paid press have cut back human resources in order to cope with this stagnation or drop in advertising income. However, local and county-wide information on the Internet is more highly valued, and the trend of new digital titles appearing which started in 2007 has consolidated.

Therefore, today the free press is working on improving its presence on the Internet and having its own digital channels. Once again we should mention the ACPG, because it is taking steps to have a prominent presence in the digital media. In 2012, the organisation's 15th Assembly was held¹⁵ with the main objective of acting as the umbrella of its members, including both free publications and digital media.¹⁶ One of the avenues that it has embarked upon this year is a ranking of the digital media in Catalan, spearheaded jointly by the OJD Interactive and Nielsen Online, in order to encourage measurements of Internet audiences.¹⁷

The results of the first monthly ranking of digital media in Catalan (January 2012) shows that the local digital media have a higher penetration in the target audience.¹⁸ According to the figures from the ranking, we can see that the top ten digital media in Catalan (in descending order of unique monthly users) are: *Televisió de Catalunya* (1,726,406), *Ara* (1,045,845), *El Punt Avui* (543,407), *Vilaweb* (467,843), *324* (455,582), *Nació Digital* (368,925), *Catalunya Ràdio* (333,501), *Racó Català* (265,982), *Diari de Girona* (231,702) and *Esport 3* (226,708). We can highlight two newspapers whose information revolves around the local and county sphere, namely *El Punt Avui* and *Diari de Girona*, as well as two digital-native media, namely *Vilaweb* and *Nació Digital*, whose goal is to cover the local market, especially *Nació Digital*, which has several local editions. In this ranking of digital media in Catalan, we can also highlight other locally-oriented projects such as *Regió 7* in twelfth place (137,993), *BTV* in thirteenth (127,092), *LaMalla.cat* in fifteenth (81,279),

3,5% en el primer semestre de 2010" [online], <<http://www.marketingdirecto.com/actualidad/publicidad/la-inversion-publicitaria-en-espana-ha-crecido-un-35-en-el-primer-semestre-de-2010/>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012). And the figures from 2011: *Marketing Directo* (2012), "Info-Adex: la inversión publicitaria en España cayó un 6,5% en 2011" [online], <<http://www.marketingdirecto.com/actualidad/publicidad/el-mercado-publicitario-espanol-cayo-un-65-en-2011-segun-el-estudio-infoadex/>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

¹⁵ More information on the 15th Assembly of the ACPG can be found in the report on its website: ACPG (2012), "L'ACPG encara el futur en el seu 15è aniversari" [online], <<http://www.acpg.cat/noticies/detail.php?id=914>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

¹⁶ *Comunicació21* (2012), "L'ACPG actuarà com a patronal dels mitjans associats" [online], <<http://comunicacio21.cat/2012/06/1%E2%80%99acpg-actuara-com-a-patronal-dels-mitjans-associats/>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

¹⁷ *Comunicació21* (2012), "Es presenta un rànquing per visualitzar la força dels digitals en català" [online], <<http://comunicacio21.cat/2012/02/es-presenta-un-ranquing-per-visualitzar-la-forca-dels-digitals-en-catala/>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

¹⁸ *Comunicació21* (2012), "Els digitals de proximitat tenen una major penetració en l'audiència objectiu" [online], <<http://comunicacio21.cat/2012/03/els-digitals-de-proximitat-tenen-una-major-penetracio-en-1%E2%80%99audiencia-objectiu/>> (retrieved: 4 July 2012).

Cugat.cat in seventeenth (32,729), *Anoia Diari* in eighteenth (28,404), *Vilanova Digital* in nineteenth (26,744), *Reus Digital* in twenty-first (24,774), *Capgròs* in twenty-second (24,433) and *L'Empordà.info* in twenty-third (23,855).

These figures show that the local and county-wide news is also successful on the Internet. In fact, as noted above, globalisation has led to more local spaces, and the Internet is where we can see this the most. Therefore, the local press has an opportunity on the Internet which it should seize.

5. Conclusions: Internet, an opportunity for the free press?

Today *local* is not the opposite of *global*; rather they are two interrelated terms. They are the flip sides of the same coin. In fact, with the new technologies we have not only more global spaces but also more local spaces. The relationship between both terms is precisely described with the term *glocalisation*. The interest in more local information has been revitalised with *glocalisation*. Therefore, *local communication* has become an important concept in our society, and within it we can find the free press, a model of local communication.

The rebirth of the free press took place in around 1970, when publications of this kind began to emerge. Catalonia is one of the regions where the local and county-wide press is the most common and where local communication is the most developed, including the free publications discussed in this article. It is a model that has gradually professionalised over time, even though it was not very news-oriented at first. What is more, it is a kind of alternative press that arose to cover needs that were previously unmet.

The peak of the free press came in around 2000, when daily publications began to emerge, namely free newspapers. Until then, free publications were not daily (they were weekly, biweekly, monthly, etc.). Therefore, the phenomenon of the free press became more popular after 2000 and free newspapers like *20 Minutos*, *Metro*, *Qué!* and *ADN* were launched, even though this kind of press had emerged years earlier in Catalonia and Spain. It is a characteristic phenomenon in this country because there is a large number of titles and a great deal of diversity, high circulation and market share. This has prompted a change in media consumption by raising readership levels.

Within the free press sector, we can make a distinction between daily and non-daily publications (the latter have other frequencies) because they have several differences yet also some similarities. They are the most prominent locally and seek content closer to readers, although free newspapers often have broader contents or general information because they tend to be distributed in large cities and metropolitan areas. Both kinds avoid political confrontation and instead focus on social issues. What is more, they are press models that stand out for their conciseness and brevity and are primarily characterised by being free of charge. The kind of advertising they tend to contain is local; that is, modest, local companies take out adverts in them. Another shared characteristic is their reader profile: the readers tend to be either young or immigrants.

The two-year period 2005-2006 was very prosperous for the free press; in fact, it marked a peak with a large market share, many titles being published

and a high readership. However, in 2008 it began to feel the economic crisis that still lasts today. The recession in the advertising sector led to a considerable drop in advertising income, and the media that noticed it the most were the ones that depended on advertising, such as the free press, which had to lower print runs and staff and even close publications. One clear symptom of this trend was the closure of three out of the four major free newspapers in Spain (*Metro*, *Qué!* and *ADN*).

By glancing at the figures on advertising revenues per medium, we can see that they are rising the most in the Internet. For this reason, the majority of free press publishers have taken the leap to the web because they see an opportunity there. In fact, during the crisis many local digital projects were halted, but since 2009 the enthusiasm for the Internet seems to be on the rise in local communication. Therefore, the future of the local press may well be digital.

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