

## LOCAL NEWSPAPERS AT THE DAWN OF THE DIGITAL AGE: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE STATE OF THE TURKISH LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

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### ABSTRACT

*Local newspapers are one of the leading businesses affected by the digital age. Especially having a fragile structure than the mainstream national newspapers, their local competitors face with serious difficulties to survive in the digital era. The obstacles that local newspapers face include economic problems, inadequate qualified personnel and technological infrastructure deficiencies. Especially the currency crisis in 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic brought the existing problems of the local newspapers to a more serious level in Turkey. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the functions and problems of the local newspapers in Turkey and to present suggestions for strengthening their future.*

**Keywords:** *Local Newspapers, Turkey, Media, Digital Age.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Local media refers to the journalism that is not geographically distributed across the country. Hence, two main characteristics of local newspapers are decentralization and geographical limitation. It also represents a regional content and agenda. In this respect, local newspapers have the role of conveying news and issues that cannot be found in the national newspapers to the readership.

Local newspapers have the functions of informing and creating local alternative agendas in order to supervise local governments and decentralization units. They also ensure that regional problems and local demands are discussed publicly. While the contents of the national newspapers are determined according to the news agencies and the order of national importance, local problems usually are ignored in their daily contents. The elimination of this deficiency is the transmission of local or regional problems, demands and agendas to the readership through local newspapers.

In this respect, the local newspapers cannot be seen as an alternative but a complement to the mainstream or national media. One of the basic criteria that separates local and national newspapers from each other is the audience, interested in the news content. While the topics that make up the national agenda may be of interest to many citizens, regional news only attracts the attention of the local community and a limited number of interest groups. Likewise, local newspapers also have the function of bringing local problems to national interest groups.

Unlike developed countries, the functions and the issues of the local newspapers in Turkey carries unique differences. The local newspapers, which assumed important duties in the last periods of the Ottoman Empire and the period of establishing the new Republic, began to lose its importance in last decades, due to both legal restrictions and the severe problems it faced, and gradually lost power against the Istanbul-based mainstream media (Gezgin, 2007).

Nowadays, local newspapers face many obstacles such as economic problems, inadequate qualified personnel and technological infrastructure deficiencies. Especially the currency crisis in 2018 and the pandemic that spread all over the world brought the problems of the local newspapers to a more serious level. As a result, it is reported that many local newspapers all over the world, including the USA, are closing down. The purpose of this study is to discuss the functions and problems of the local newspapers in Turkey and to present suggestions for strengthening their future.

### 2. FUNCTIONS OF THE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS

Local newspapers are regarded as the voices of the people living in regional communities. Local media outlets are extremely important for citizens to be informed about the problems, events, economic and social developments and the decisions taken by local governments in their regions. Therefore, an important function of the local newspapers is to publicize public services in a healthy and correct

manner within the framework of the state and local citizens' relationship. The local media, which ensures the announcement of the public services in the neighborhood, acts as an intermediary in the establishment of the government-citizen relationship at regional level (Şeker, 2007).

Local newspapers are seen as dynamics that enable the decentralization of authority and the creation of a structure that respects people. In this context, local newspapers are extremely important, especially for developing countries. This role shows that another function of the local newspapers should be establishing a control mechanism. In other words, it is another responsibility of the local newspapers to inspect the local governors on behalf of the public. The central government can react more quickly to the problems and malfunctions experienced at the local level through the news made by the local media. Hence, local newspapers play a key role in generating solutions by bringing regional problems and developments to the national agenda (Girgin, 2009).

Another important public responsibility of the local newspapers is its education function. Especially, developing citizenship consciousness is a great task of the local newspapers in developing countries. One of the most important functions of the local media is to establish the culture of democracy, necessary for the correct and purposeful reflection of the national will. The local media, which conveys social, economic, cultural and social developments to the people in the neighborhood, acts as a mirror that reflects the economic, cultural, social and political characteristics of the local community (Gezgin, 2007).

Publication of news regarding the inhabited contributes to the development of that region. Therefore, local media play an important role in terms of the sustainability of local development. An individual who has information about the events and developments in the region where he/she lives becomes more sensitive to local problems. Thus, local newspapers play an important role on creating unity, and solidarity in solving problems (Gezgin, 2007).

### **3. MAIN PROBLEMS OF THE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS**

While the local newspapers have important missions on democracy, the fulfillment of these duties depends on economic freedom and independency. The financial independence

necessary for the freedom and independence of the local newspapers is however limited to advertising and subscription revenues.

The radical technological changes experienced in the 2000s have shown that the media is one of the industries that must keep up with the digital age. The digital transformation, which has affected the whole world, has also caused a radical change in 'news following' habits of the Internet users (Arvas, 2019). Especially, as a result of the development of individuals' habits of reading news on the Internet, there has been a serious decrease in the circulation of both national and local newspapers all over the world. As this situation also negatively affected their advertising revenues, many local newspapers that suffered serious revenue losses had to bankrupt (Özcan, 2016)

The existing local newspapers try to survive in a very harsh environment. Technical inadequacies for digital transformation led to a wide variety of negativities, from the layout of the newspapers to the print and the distribution networks. Since the existing public advertisement revenues are not sufficiently enough to cover expenses, most of the local newspapers provide additional printing services such as flyers, brochures, etc. Additional income from these jobs is mostly used to finance their core activities (Nalcioğlu, 2007).

The local newspapers that need to digitalize their activities to a great extent, do not have constant sources of income other than public advertisements. As a result, they face difficulties in hiring employees such as reporter, graphic designer to fulfill tasks such as typesetting and design, and columnists to interpret the news. Instead, they employ insufficient number of employees that are mostly underqualified or semiskilled (Karaduman, 2017).

Lack of qualified staff reduce the quality of the content and layout of the local newspapers. The problems arising from the employment of limited number of personnel led the owners and employees to simultaneously perform several tasks from designing to typesetting (Kayacan, 1996). Lack of reporters also leads the local newspapers to gather news from the bulletins of the national news

agencies. Finally, many newspaper employees that do not earn sufficient income need to have a second job. This situation is in principle incompatible with the independence and impartiality of journalism (Altun, 2005).

#### **4. SUGGESTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS**

In Turkey, there is a serious gap between local and mainstream national newspaper in terms of financial opportunities. Therefore, in order to strengthen the local newspapers, important duties fall on the governmental bodies, professional organizations, NGOs, local businesses, scientists in different disciplines, and local media owners and employees.

Above all, local newspapers need to access urgent financial resources to compete with the national newspapers. Financial support primarily provided by governmental bodies will help local newspapers to establish technological infrastructure. Additionally, employees with technological qualifications needs to be employed by the local newspapers. Solving those significant problems will help local newspapers to attract more readers in short run (Mısırlı, 2020).

Public loans and financial supports can provide significant benefits to solve aforementioned problems of the local newspapers. However, the financial sustainability of local media activities depends on the business community's support through transparent and legitimate means (e.g., ads and subscriptions). If the relationship between the local media and the local business world develops, the desire of local economies to use local media as an advertising alternative will increase. Successful economic reporting, when combined with the stimulating role of the local news, can make a significant contribution to the local economy (Demirkent, 1998, 33).

Similarly, public attention to subscription to local newspapers not only provides financial support to the local newspapers but is also important in terms of ensuring the effectiveness of the news presented. It is also important to provide an interactive

environment of interaction with the readers, especially on social media, as the stronger the local newspapers will make their readers' voices heard.

Finally, increasing number of academic studies on the future of the local newspapers, encouraging postgraduate research as well as international projects on this subject are of great importance for the future of the industry. Therefore, it is essential to support interdisciplinary studies in the field of social sciences, especially in communication faculties in higher education (Çavuş, 2017).

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

Newspapers are one of the leading establishments that give the most serious test in keeping up with the digital age. Especially having a fragile structure than the national newspapers, their local competitors faced with serious difficulties in Turkey as well as all over the world. While approximately 2100 local newspapers bankrupted in the United States between 2004 and 2019, nearly a thousand newspapers shut down in Turkey during 2016 - 2019 period (Erandaç, 2019).

Widespread shift to the Internet journalism decreased circulation and advertising revenues of the newspapers, which are the most important sources of income for the local newspapers. Besides, the significant increase in cost factors, especially paper prices and labor expenses, also made it difficult for the industry to fulfill its functions.

Rising costs and insufficient sources of income cause local media outlets to turn to a limited and unqualified workforce, further distracting them from readers. Therefore, it is clear that unless financial problems are not solved, other problems cannot be settled.

In this paper, the main functions of the local newspapers in Turkey and in particular the problems faced today have been discussed. Suggestions for the future of the industry have been also given. The study is important in terms of emphasizing the importance of determining the position of the local newspapers in the digital age. It is important both in practical and theoretical terms

to conduct future academic studies at the level of detailed empirical analyses.

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