

Just weather and cheese? Analysis of the content of Swiss local media online with different business models

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Abstract

Changes in the media industry brought about by digital transformation are putting local media under severe economic pressure. In order to avoid the closure of editorial offices and continue to provide the population with local news, media companies adapt their business models, which, among others, comprise decisions regarding the journalistic content offered. This paper examines the online offerings of 12 Swiss local media outlets using different revenue approaches. The analysis shows that there is great heterogeneity in terms of issue diversity, locality, and originality across outlets. Media outlets with alternative funding models dedicate their reporting almost exclusively to local issues. Article quantity is lower, but the proportion of in-house editorial work is high. Local media that are primarily financed by advertisement or through the implementation of a paywall offer websites where original local media coverage is supplemented by a wide range of national and international news, the latter usually consisting of agency reports. Overall, article quantity is higher for outlets financed by advertisement and paywalls, but the proportion of the editorial offices' own work is smaller, which does, however, not necessarily mean that the quality of local reporting is lower.

Keywords

local media, Switzerland, content analysis, revenue, quality, value, structural changes, media business models

1 Introduction

Digital transformation has changed media landscapes around the world tremendously and confronted media companies with major challenges. Traditional media outlets have witnessed a decline in importance, particularly among younger consumers, and media consumption in general has shifted from traditional to digital channels, accompanied by a low willingness to pay for online news (Picard, 2014, 2017; Udris et al., 2023). The resulting revenue loss due to decreased advertising income and customers' reluctance to pay for content leads to economic pressure and demand for solutions to overcome this threatening situation. Especially for local me-

dia that can only partially exploit economies of scope, the consequences are severe. Local editorial offices get diminished or even closed (Fürst & Vogler, 2023), which leads to so-called 'news gaps' or 'news deserts,' depriving communities of adequate coverage with consequences for informed decision-making and citizen engagement (e.g., Abernathy, 2018, 2020; Hayes & Lawless, 2018; Karlsson & Rowe, 2019; Mathews, 2022; Napoli et al., 2017, p. 373; Nielsen, 2019, p. 7). Thus, in many cases, the fundamental needs of communities cannot be met, which would be especially important in a democracy such as Switzerland. To avert this and to continue to exist in times of challenge and change, (local) media must take new and innovative paths and adjust



their business models. Even though there has been some research published recently on news deserts and the negative effects of the lack of local media coverage (Abernathy, 2018, 2020, 2023; Gulyas et al., 2023; Magasic et al., 2023; Mathews, 2022; Negreira-Rey et al., 2023; Vogler et al., 2023; Waschková Císařová, 2023) and the content of language-regional Swiss media (fög – Forschungszentrum Öffentlichkeit und Gesellschaft, 2023), little is known about the content of local media in Switzerland. The present results close this research gap by not only examining the content (and its local value) of selected Swiss local media but also by analyzing how such content, which can be regarded as the service offered to the recipients, is related to different forms of revenue models.

The paper (i) presents the main challenges local media is facing in general and specifically in Switzerland due to structural changes, (ii) sheds light on media companies' responses to those changes, and further (iii) examines how media companies' adaption to change corresponds with certain forms of media content. The empirical part of the paper analyzes the content of 12 selected local media outlets in Switzerland, explores the value of the content for the local, and discusses how discovered performance may vary across outlets. The paper follows a geographically, politically, and socio-geographically oriented understanding of "local" (Burger et al., 2023, pp. 9–10).

2 Challenges for local media due to structural changes

There is nothing new in the fact that digitization faces multiple challenges for media companies. Even though technological advancement brought about new distribution channels for journalistic products and thus new opportunities, many difficulties persist. Among the most pressing problems are revenue losses, which are a consequence of reduced advertising revenues as well as customers' limited willingness to pay for news products (Picard, 2014, 2017). The latest figures for Switzerland show that, overall, online advertising generates the highest revenues in comparison to other channels such as print,

TV, or radio (Stiftung Werbestatistik Schweiz, 2023). However, based on expert estimates, most of these profits generated online (approx. 74%) go to foreign tech companies and do not remain in the Swiss market (Rivière, 2023; Schweizer Medien, 2023; Stiftung Werbestatistik Schweiz, 2023). Thus, media companies, even though they are highly active in online news markets, participate little in growing online revenues and are still dependent to a high degree on sales and advertising revenues generated in traditional sectors (mostly print) to subsidize their online news products (Jenkins, 2020, p.8). This is problematic as customers' orientation away from traditional media to online offerings reduces the income from sales of journalistic products. At the same time, the attractiveness of those products for advertisers who shift their budgets online diminishes (Sridhar & Sri-ram, 2015). It can, therefore, be assumed that cross-subsidization will become increasingly difficult in the future.

To compensate for both decreasing sales and advertising revenues offline as well as the limited access to online advertising revenues, paid online content gains in importance. However, people's willingness to pay for online news is often low and not thoroughly understood (Chyi, 2005, 2012; Goyanes, 2014, 2015; Goyanes et al., 2022; Himma-Kadakas & Köuts, 2015; Kammer et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2020; van der Wurff, 2012). In the case of Switzerland, 18% of consumers show a willingness to pay for online content at present, which comes up to the average of other countries in Europe and the American continent in 2023 (Newman et al., 2023, p.19), yet indicates that a vast majority is unwilling to pay. In Switzerland, as in many other countries, one reaction to such financial challenges is the consolidation of editorial offices, which results in a decline in the diversity of media content (Fürst & Vogler, 2023, p.161). Many media outlets still use traditional labels but offer identical content, which is neither original nor special and thus substitutable. Besides this content-related concentration, structural media concentration leads to a market in which media outlets with high reach belong to only a few media companies, which aggravates the situation (Fürst & Vogler, 2023, p.159). Overall, the media industry is con-

fronted with a paradox situation: due to the need to economize, editorial offices get diminished, consolidated, or even closed. At once, this has negative effects on the diversity and originality of the local media content. Thus, by saving spending, media companies curtail value – the one factor that is likely to increase people’s willingness to pay.

Journalism, in general, and local journalism, specifically, is affected by these cost-cutting strategies and their consequences. A vast majority of research analyzes the challenges and potential opportunities of national newspapers, radio, or television stations with high reach and less local media (Nielsen, 2019, p.2), even though the consequences on the local level are severe. The decrease or even disappearance of local editorial offices and journalistic infrastructures leads to local ‘news gaps’ and ‘news deserts’, creating a situation in which communities receive insufficient, or even worse, no coverage at all (e.g., Abernathy, 2018; Karlsson & Rowe, 2019; Napoli et al., 2017, p.373; Nielsen, 2019, p.7). This development may not only challenge informed decision-making but also seems to reduce citizen engagement, especially when it comes to local political news coverage (Hayes & Lawless, 2018; Kübler & Goodman, 2019). Against this backdrop, it is of key interest how local media can create content that is valued by their audience and might stimulate their “willingness to invest time and money” (Olsen, 2021, p.812).

3 Local media’s reaction to structural changes

According to Olsen’s (2021) “integrated value creation model,” value is a matter of perspective, namely, from the perspective of the business, society, and consumer. Economically speaking, a product is of high value if it has the capacity to generate attention and revenues. Media companies not only have to create distinctive content but also adequate publication channels and user-centric surfaces, as well as a payment system that makes it attractive for consumers to purchase content. Throughout the past years, “organizations have implemented new newsroom roles, content-management strategies, and social

media tactics to produce premium content more efficiently (and identify the readers willing to pay for it)” (Jenkins, 2020, p.8). Thus, an adaptation of the business model comprises many factors that need to be considered. For one, media companies need to be aware of the *market* in which they operate, which includes the prevailing demand as well as the competitive environment (Rimscha, 2016, pp.211–212). As has been shown in the prior paragraph, the Swiss market situation for local media is quite challenging due to low willingness to pay and increasing competition not only by other legacy media but also by tech companies introducing new production and distribution models.

Furthermore, decisions regarding *financing and revenues* are a key factor (Rimscha, 2016, pp.216–219). In contrast to physical products such as newspapers, where each customer pays the same price for an identical product, the distribution of online content is based on variable pricing depending on the type of content as well as the platforms through which consumers want to receive it (Picard, 2014, p.491). Besides income from advertising, there are three different pay models to generate income: paywalls, micropayments, and special funding (e.g., subsidies or crowdfunding). With regard to the prior, media organizations can either implement hard paywalls or soft paywalls, which are important to generate continuous traffic to attract advertisers and convince readers that the offered content is worth paying for (Carson, 2015, p.1025). Meanwhile, metered paywalls allow customers to obtain a certain number of articles for free, while so-called noble or freemium models offer news for free but charge for premium content (Carson, 2015, p.1025). Micropayment, on the other hand, raises a small fee for each article a customer reads. In comparison to paywalls, which predominantly aim at frequent users, micropayments target unique visitors (Geidner & D’Arcy, 2015, p.613). However, not all companies employ revenue models that incorporate mandatory payment. Instead, they rely on funding from foundations or governments as well as donations as a means of continuous refinancing. Journalistic start-ups often profit from such fundings due to their perceived importance for society in general and communities in

specific (Picard, 2014, p.490), filling existing voids, especially on a local level (Nisbet et al., 2018, p.3). However, generating revenues after the initial funding has been used up is likely to pose a challenge to many of those companies.

Financial questions are strongly related to decisions regarding the *service offer*. Media companies operate in a two-sided market in which both recipients and advertisers are their customers (Rimscha, 2016, pp.213–214). Depending on whether outlets are more dependent on advertising money or whether their main source of income is subscriptions of some sort, the quantity and focus of content are likely to vary. Regarding local journalism, it can be assumed that paywalls are more attractive than micropayments since the content they offer is especially interesting for a specific, steady readership, namely, people connected to a region. According to a recent study (Jenkins, 2020, p.8), rather than producing high quantities of news, local media seem to focus more strongly on “in-depth, localized approaches” in order to “rely less on fly-by readers attracted through platforms, such as search and social, and more on loyal readers seeking distinctive local content.” A Norwegian study (Sjøvaag, 2016) shows that due to its less substitutable character, local news stories are worth hiding behind a paywall. Focusing on “the local” thus seems to come with great economic value since the content is potentially unique, has an identity-creating character, and directly concerns people bearing reference (Goyanes, 2015, p.1506). In fact, local journalism is even described as a relevant innovation in the Swiss media landscape (Meier et al., 2022, p.707), highlighting the importance and potential of local news in a challenged landscape. However, due to the limited scope of local news, a strong or even exclusive focus on the latter is likely to decrease an outlet’s attractiveness to advertisers. If the main source of income is money from advertisement, an outlet might be forced to publish content that transcends the local and thus possibly attracts a broader audience. This leads lastly to the question, as to how far a media company should *produce* or *procure ready-made content* (Rimscha, 2016, pp.212–213). A decision that is strongly interwoven with the service offer and financial considerations. On the one hand, externally produced

content (for example, by a news agency) can be easily obtained and published in a higher quantity without requiring a lot of resources. Due to its often national or international character, it is likely to appeal to a larger audience and might thus be interesting for outlets that are predominantly financed by advertising. A focus on unique local coverage, on the other hand, may require higher degrees of in-house production or is dependent on citizen journalists who may provide such content externally.

4 Value and quality of local content

Business decisions, especially those regarding service offer, production, and procurement, deserve further consideration since content is not only an economic enabler to legitimize an organization’s operation and to get financial resources but also fulfills important functions in democracies, namely, to ensure that people are provided with vital information about social, political or economic events, processes, and decisions in their direct environment on a regular basis. By doing so, media creates social value and fulfills its role as a fourth estate in a democracy (Barnett, 2009, p.6; Christians et al., 2009, p.116; Schudson, 2014, p.3). Providing these purposes is not only important in routine times but also in times of crisis, during which citizens have an increased need for information and orientation (Olsen & Furseth, 2023). While some authors highlight the necessity of coverage of political issues due to their importance for democratic processes and participation (Arnold & Wagner, 2018; Wagner, 2022), other authors define so-called critical information needs (CIN), which basically concern fundamental issues such as health, politics, economy, or education (Damanhoury et al., 2022; Friedland et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2017; Napoli et al., 2018). Studies from the US show that the coverage of CINs strongly depends on geographic and demographic characteristics (coverage is weaker in poorer regions with higher ethnical and racial diversity) as well as the proximity to large media markets (the closer to a large media market the weaker the coverage on CINs) (Damanhoury et al., 2022; Napoli et al., 2018). The results further show

that coverage of issues that serve critical information needs occurs more frequently in print than radio coverage (Damanhoury et al., 2022). In an analysis of 103 German local newspapers Wagner (2022) comes to the conclusion that regarding issue diversity in general and emphasizing politics in particular, the media outlets under analysis perform quite well, especially in comparison to earlier studies (Arnold & Wagner, 2018; Wagner, 2022). A large longitudinal study on Austrian and German regional media partially supports those findings (Vonbun-Feldbauer et al., 2020). Based on the few partially mixed results regarding issue coverage and diversity on the local level, the following questions (RQs) are:

RQ1.1: Which (local) issues do Swiss local media cover, and how diverse is this coverage?

RQ1.2: How are certain forms of coverage related to media type (print, video, audio) and revenue model?

Besides informing and educating citizens, local journalism is said to be most competent in reducing societal complexity, contextualizing local issues, addressing national and international issues in relation to the local, offering orientation, and enabling participation (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020; Möhring, 2013; Möhring & Keldenich, 2018, p.188). By putting the local at the center of their reporting, local media establish communicative local spaces and thus create a sense of belonging and feelings of togetherness (Karlsson & Rowe, 2019, p.18; Nielsen, 2019, p.15; Olsen, 2021, p.813; Picard, 2006, pp.82–83; Wagner, 2022, pp.53–54), which may contribute to social cohesion (Costera Meijer, 2010; Leupold et al., 2018; Nielsen, 2019, p.11). In order to fulfil these various purposes, local media “blend characteristics of public-service and popular content” and thus not only cover political topics but also “must emphasize articles that are useful, engaging, and emotionally resonant” (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020, p.250). However, according to Wagner (2022, p.445), coverage lacks the perspectives of ordinary people, especially in political reporting. The mode of presentation is rather unidimensional and consists mainly of news and reports. Further, instead of reporting critically, local journalists

draw a rather “harmonious perspective” of local issues. Other studies criticize the content in a similar way, saying that it is quite often neither local nor original (Damanhoury et al., 2022; Napoli et al., 2018). Variations might correlate with certain business decisions: Harlow & Chadha (2021) found that a focus on local content was stronger among news sites with alternative funding models and rather limited income. In many cases, though, news sites publish content that transcends the boundaries of the local. Especially in times of crisis, publishing news of national or even international relevance is tempting and easy to implement online (Steblyna, 2018). On the one hand, offering content on national and international topics in addition to local news may increase the number of readers (and potentially advertisers), but there may be a risk that local issues will lose visibility and attention or even get suppressed. This has negative consequences for the inhabitants of a region and for decision-makers and political elites who learn from the media about opinions and attitudes in the community, the issues that keep people busy, worry, or even displease them (Barnett, 2009, p.6; Fawzi et al., 2018). Thus, the following questions arise:

RQ2.1: Which (local) actors and perspectives receive how much recognition in the coverage of Swiss local media?

RQ2.2: How are locality and originality related to different revenue models?

5 Method

5.1 Sample and data collection

For the quantitative content analysis, 12 Swiss local media outlets were selected according to the criteria of business model, language region, and type of medium (print, radio, and TV). Even though most outlets offer multiple types of media content (text, audio & video), the analysis specifically focuses on the online offer from the core business (e.g., videos that are on a local TV station’s website) since media consumption increasingly shifts towards digital channels. The case selection tries to include the diversity of language regions in Switzerland, its origins (legacy media and new online-only offerings), and forms of me-

dia revenue models. These revenue models range from foundation-based financing (Bajour) to mixed models (Le Nouvelliste) and public media funding (RTR). None of the selected outlets have content-sharing arrangements with each other or belong to the same central editorial unit. The sample includes six German-language media (Bajour, Jungfrau Zeitung, Züriost, Zentralplus, Kreuzlingen24, Telebasel), three French-language media (Le Nouvelliste, Nyon Région Télévision NRTV, Radio Fréquence Jura RFJ), two Italian-language media (Il Bernina, Radio Ticino) and one Romansh-language media (RTR Mustér/Glion). In terms of media type, print, TV, radio, and online-only outlets are covered. With regard to the business models, three different types of content accessibility and financing were incorporated: whereas Il Bernina, Le Nouvelliste, and Züriost hide all or some of their content behind a paywall, the content of Zentralplus, Jungfrau Zeitung, Kreuzlingen24, Telebasel, Radio Fréquence Jura and Radio Ticino is freely accessible and financing stems mainly from advertising but for some of the outlets also partly from either subsidies, funding or voluntary subscription. Bajour, RTR Mustér/Glion, and NRTV have their content freely accessible, with no advertisement and alternative funding models. While RTR is fully financed by fees (since it is a public service broadcaster), Bajour relies on initial funding and donations. NRTV primarily receives money from a community association.

All articles and broadcasts published online on their websites in the time between April 4th and May 31st, 2022, were collected via automated web scraping. For those media that published more than 500 articles in the given period, a random sample of 500 articles was drawn afterward. For the remaining outlets, the full sample was content analyzed, leading to a sample size of overall 4677 articles and broadcasts (Bajour: 130, Jungfrau Zeitung: 478, Züriost: 475, Zentralplus: 490, Kreuzlingen24: 500, Il Bernina: 405, Le Nouvelliste: 500, NRTV: 115, Telebasel: 432, Radio Fréquence Jura: 500, Radio Ticino: 458, RTR Mustér/Glion: 194). The average length for articles is 418 words ($SD=337.6$), for audio 1 minute and 4 seconds ($SD=53$ seconds), and for video 6 minutes and 37 seconds ($SD=5$ min-

utes and 46 seconds). April 4th was chosen as the start date for the data collection, as this was when the last COVID-19 measures were repealed in Switzerland. This was done to collect an average sample, which was not overly skewed by exceptional COVID-19 reporting. In addition, the period is before the so-called summer slump. An exception to this was Züriost since, in this case, retrospective scraping was not an option. Therefore, Züriost content was scraped live from the 1st of December 2022 to the 9th of February 2023.

Subsequently, seven student assistants were trained in a 3-day coding school. Afterward, they had to fulfill intercoder reliability tests and receive qualitative feedback for improvement. Besides those initial reliability tests, continuous tests throughout the whole coding process (October 15th, 2022, to March 1st, 2023) were undertaken. A total of 94 articles were used for these tests. The coders achieved an overall intercoder reliability score of 0.800 (Krippendorff's alpha), with reliability scores on individual variables ranging from 0.608 to 0.9801. These values are acceptable (when relying on Landis & Koch's (1977) benchmarks for Kappa statistics), though it can be assumed that the factual reliability is higher since the reliability test was in German, yet some coders were non-native speakers (Früh, 2015, pp. 184–187). Further, due to being rather conservative, Krippendorff's Alpha may lead to unreasonably low values under some circumstances (Zhao et al., 2013). Finally, some of the variables were quite complex to code. Especially regarding the geographical scope and geographic location, coders had problems differentiating between community and district as well as multinational and international. Therefore, those options were merged. While the content-related categories were hand-coded, a number of formal variables, such as format, date, or comments, were captured automatically.

5.2 Measures

To answer the research questions and to analyze what constitutes value on a local level,

- 1 Geographical scope: 0.608, authorship: 0.721, topic: 0.648, gender of actor: 0.980, societal sphere of actors: 0.766, age of actors: 0.906, type of actor: 0.970.

three main dimensions were derived, namely *reporting on a local matter*, *originality*, and *consideration of local actors and perspectives*. All dimensions were captured by a variety of variables with nominal measures. The dimension *reporting on a local matter* was captured by two variables: issue and geographical scope. Overall, 14 different issue categories (welfare, economy, finance, Europe and globalization, education, immigration, military, law and order, ecology, institutional reforms, infrastructure, culture, society, election, and events) existed. Each issue category consisted of numerous sub-categories (in sum 123) through which the coders could further specify thematic focus. The geographical scope was developed following fög (2021). Coders had to capture if the content referred to a context that was community, district, canton, national, bi- or multinational, or international (either one or many other countries).

Originality was assessed with one variable, namely authorship. The operationalization of the variable was based on fög (2021), and coders had to identify who originally authored the article or broadcast it. If it originated from the editorial office, coders could further specify if it was authored solely by members of the editorial office, a correspondent, an expert, or a guest author, or in cooperation with another media outlet. If the article or broadcast originated from an agency, coders had to further capture whether the editorial office had edited the content or not. Further, coders could classify an article as a press release (by either a community, party, or association), an online platform (such as Twitter/X or Facebook) or an external article by either a member of an association or a citizen journalist. The dimension *reporting on a local matter* was captured by two variables: issue and geographical scope.

The third dimension, *consideration of local actors and perspectives*, comprised of the type of actor, geographical localization of the actor, societal sphere, gender, and age. The type of actor indicated whether the actor was an individual or a collective actor, such as an institution, organization, or party. Regarding the societal sphere, actors could belong to the following: political, economic, science and education, culture, sports and leisure, re-

ligion, public service, or private. Coders further captured if an actor was male, female, or diverse and, if apparent, which age group they belonged to.

5.3 Results

Research question 1.1 asked which issues Swiss local media cover and if the issue coverage is diverse. Table 1 shows the issues covered by each media outlet. Overall, the coverage is rather broad, with a strong focus on culture and society (33%) as well as events (17%). In the prior category, sports (43%) and music and arts (15%) received the most attention. While Bajour (49%), Züriost (48%), Radio Fréquence Jura (48%), and Telebasel (42%) dedicate almost half of their coverage to cultural and societal issues, especially Radio Ticino (7%) but also Zentralplus (20%) incorporate this focus less. As for the events, the media most often offered information on current festivals and events taking place in specific regions (58%). Here, it must be mentioned that the latter only concerns formal information, such as the time and place of an event. If further contextualization of the event was offered (e.g., reporting on the happening, critical reflection, audience impressions, interpretations) it was coded as belonging to culture and society. Further, 20% of the coverage in the category events was on accidents. Especially, Il Bernina (40%) and Radio Ticino (38%) inform about events strongly. Following *events* are the following topics: economy (9%, mainly private economy: 41% and agriculture: 11%), infrastructure (8%, mainly private traffic/transportation: 23%, spatial planning: 22% and public transportation: 17%) and law and order (7%, mainly crime in general: 48%). The topic-category *elections* were especially important in RTR because, during the analyzed period, the elections of the Grand Council of the Grisons (May 15th, 2022) took place.

In the case of local media, it is especially interesting how the covered issues were contextualized, more precisely, if they were local issues or discussed in relation to the local. Table 2 gives an overview of the amount of local, cantonal, national, and international coverage for each outlet, showing that overall, around 42% of the coverage refers either

Table 1: Issues across media outlets

	Welfare	Economy	Finance	EU and globalization	Education	Immigration	Military	Law and Order	Ecology	Institutional Reforms	Infrastructure	Culture and Society	Elections	Events	n
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>															
Bajour	10.8	11.5	0.8	1.5	2.3	0.8	2.3	2.3	4.6	0.0	2.3	49.2	1.5	10.0	130
RTR Münster/Glion	5.7	10.3	0.0	0.0	1.0	2.1	0.5	4.6	7.2	0.5	13.4	20.1	28.4	6.2	194
NRTV	3.5	7.0	5.2	0.0	0.9	1.7	0.0	0.0	3.5	0.0	14.8	39.1	1.7	22.6	115
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>															
Zentralplus	5.7	13.3	1.4	2.2	1.0	2.2	9.8	12.7	5.9	0.6	9.4	19.8	5.1	10.8	490
Jungfrau Zeitung	6.1	13.4	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.6	0.8	6.3	9.0	1.5	10.5	36.0	1.7	12.8	478
KreuzlingenZ4	3.4	11.4	0.4	2.6	0.4	1.0	10.0	8.2	3.6	0.6	3.6	40.0	4.4	10.4	500
Telebasel	7.2	7.6	0.0	1.6	0.7	2.1	0.5	6.5	4.9	0.9	11.6	41.9	1.6	13.0	432
RFJ	7.0	4.4	1.6	1.8	1.4	3.6	5.8	4.2	6.4	1.8	4.0	48.4	1.2	8.4	500
Radio Ticino	5.0	4.8	2.6	8.7	1.7	2.0	1.1	12.7	2.2	0.7	10.9	6.6	2.6	38.4	458
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>															
Zürjost	5.1	6.9	4.8	0.0	1.3	0.2	0.0	6.7	3.4	1.1	10.9	48.4	1.9	9.3	475
Il Bernina	3.2	4.0	0.7	6.9	1.5	1.2	0.7	3.2	1.2	0.5	8.6	23.2	5.4	39.5	405
Le Nouvelliste	9.0	10.6	1.6	2.6	0.8	2.0	4.0	5.0	7.2	0.8	5.4	33.8	2.8	14.4	500
n	274	408	72	126	50	79	165	319	234	41	397	1556	182	774	4677
%	5.9	8.7	1.5	2.7	1.1	1.7	3.5	6.8	5.0	0.9	8.5	33.3	3.9	16.5	100

Note: In percentage.

Table 2: Geographical scope across media outlets

	Community	District	Canton	National CH	CH Bi-/Multi-national	Foreign country	Multi-national	<i>n</i>
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>								
Bajour	18.1	13.4	29.9	21.3	8.7	5.5	3.1	127
RTR Mustér/Glion	35.8	8.9	44.2	6.3	0.0	2.1	2.6	190
NRTV	46.9	16.8	13.3	20.4	0.9	0.0	1.8	113
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>								
Zentralplus	9.2	6.7	8.8	16.9	5.8	23.6	29.0	479
Jungfrau Zeitung	34.2	24.4	8.1	27.1	2.1	1.1	3.0	468
Kreuzlingen24	11.6	3.0	6.0	19.7	2.8	25.9	30.9	498
Telebasel	25.5	43.3	17.7	9.9	3.3	0.2	0.0	423
RFJ	19.9	7.2	15.3	24.7	12.7	14.5	5.8	498
Radio Ticino	36.8	4.2	21.3	8.6	0.9	13.8	14.5	456
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>								
Zürjost	58.5	16.0	8.4	12.2	0.6	0.0	4.2	475
Il Bernina	21.6	36.1	11.7	6.7	0.7	11.9	11.2	402
Le Nouvelliste	16.3	5.6	19.0	28.0	15.9	6.7	8.5	496
<i>n</i>	1227	701	676	796	230	475	520	4625
%	26.5	15.2	14.6	17.2	5.0	10.3	11.2	100.0

Note: In percentage.

to the community or district. Bajour and RTR both have a strong focus on the canton. This is because Bajour's focus lies on Basel, which is both a canton (consisting of only three municipalities) and a city. For RTR, this can be explained by its' unique regional and lingual roots and public funding. Coverage of international issues, on the other hand, is low within these two outlets. Same holds true for NRTV, Telebasel, Jungfrau Zeitung and Zürjost. The other websites have a strikingly considerable amount of coverage of international issues. Regarding research question 1.2 the data shows a weak (Cramer's $V = .169$, $p = .001$) significant correlation between geographical scope and revenue model $\{[X^2(6), N = 4625] = 262.763$, $p = .001\}$: while predominantly advertisement financed outlets include high amounts of national and international coverage (51%), outlets with a paywall (63%) and alternative funding models (78%) more strongly include regional or cantonal news. Furthermore, geographical scope correlates significantly with

the media type $\{[X^2(6), N = 4625] = 355.597$, $p = .001\}$: for video-based outlets the amount of regional and cantonal coverage is highest (86%) followed by audio-based (52%) and text-based (51%) outlets.

Overall, it becomes apparent that only certain topics get contextualized on a local level. Across all analyzed media outlets, questions concerning infrastructure (68%), events (57%), finance (taxes) (54%), culture and society (44%), as well as law and order (44%) bear high reference to either the community or district. Issues in relation to the EU and globalization are rather discussed on an international level (68%), with no connection to Switzerland. Around one-fourth (26%) of all articles have a multinational view, whereas Switzerland is part of the discourse. Similarly, the topic of the military is either discussed on an international level, excluding Switzerland (77%), or on a national level (18%).

Research question 2.1 asked which and how much recognition local actors receive

Table 3: Type of actor across media outlets

	Individual	Institution	<i>n</i>
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>			
Bajour	91.7	8.3	216
RTR Mustér/Glion	98.9	1.1	353
NRTV	100.0	0.0	207
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>			
Zentralplus	33.0	67.0	1478
Jungfrau Zeitung	41.5	58.5	3259
Kreuzlingen24	41.2	58.8	2747
Telebasel	62.2	37.8	1239
RFJ	94.3	5.7	350
Radio Ticino	62.8	37.2	441
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>			
Zürüst	30.3	69.7	5126
Il Bernina	57.9	42.1	888
Le Nouvelliste	81.3	18.8	656
<i>n</i>	7707	9253	16960
%	45.4	54.6	100

Note: In percentage.

in the coverage of Swiss local media. To gain insight, 16960 actors were assessed, of which 45% were individual actors and 55% were institutional actors (Table 3). The variation across media outlets is large; RTR, Bajour, NRTV, and Radio Fréquence Jura reach especially high values in individual actors. This can be explained by the type of format, which significantly correlates with the type of actor $\{[X^2(2), N=16960]=1055.374, p=.001; \text{Cramer's } V=.249, p=.001\}$. NRTV, for example almost exclusively publishes interviews (78%) and reportages (18%). On the other hand, there is a tendency towards a higher coverage of institutional actors within textual outlets. The latter is also characteristic of paywall outlets (61%), while outlets with alternative funding predominantly cover individual actors (97%) $\{[X^2(2), N=16960]=949.512, p=.001; \text{Cramer's } V=.237, p=.001\}$.

Regarding individual actors, it is important to analyze their socio-demographic characteristics further. Most outlets tend to cover significantly more male actors than female

ones, as can be seen in Table 4. Here, only Bajour and NRTV are exceptions. While the former has an almost balanced representation of female and male actors in their coverage, the overall number of female actors in the latter equals 39%.

Especially in many print outlets *age* (Table 5) was not directly encodable (only if mentioned in brackets or context). If visible or mentioned, actors most often belonged to the group of middle-aged adults. What stands out is the higher coverage of children and young adults in NRTV (12%) and old adults and retired people in RTR (16%).

Most of the mentioned actors either belong to the following spheres (Table 6): leisure, sports, and culture (31%), politics (22%), economy (17%) as well as community service (14%). The coverage of the first category is especially high for NRTV (51%) and Radio Fréquence Jura (48%). Actors who belong to the private realm (lay people) are most prominently displayed in Bajour (20%) and RTR (27%). Bajour appears to have the broad-

Table 4: Actors gender across media outlets

	Female	Male	Diverse	Not applicable	<i>n</i>
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>					
Bajour	44.4	55.1	0.5	0.0	196
RTR Mustér/Glion	29.3	70.4	0.0	0.3	348
NRTV	39.1	60.9	0.0	0.0	207
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>					
Zentralplus	25.1	74.3	0.0	0.6	487
Jungfrau Zeitung	30.4	68.8	0.0	0.8	1352
Kreuzlingen24	17.0	82.4	0.1	0.5	1132
Telebasel	30.5	69.1	0.1	0.3	771
RFJ	27.4	72.3	0.0	0.3	329
Radio Ticino	21.7	78.0	0.0	0.4	277
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>					
Zürüst	26.0	73.4	0.0	0.5	1555
Il Bernina	20.1	78.9	0.0	1.0	513
Le Nouvelliste	24.2	74.8	0.0	0.9	532
<i>n</i>	2017	5636	3	43	7699
%	26.2	73.2	0.0	0.6	100

Note: In percentage.

Table 5: Actor age across media outlets

	Children / young adults	Middle-aged adults	Old adults / retired person	Not applicable	<i>n</i>
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>					
Bajour	2.0	8.2	2.0	87.8	196
RTR Mustér/Glion	6.9	77.0	15.8	0.3	348
NRTV	12.1	84.1	3.4	0.5	207
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>					
Zentralplus	2.3	46.8	8.6	42.3	487
Jungfrau Zeitung	9.4	35.5	2.7	52.4	1352
Kreuzlingen24	4.1	77.4	7.4	11.1	1132
Telebasel	3.6	37.1	1.7	57.6	771
RFJ	4.9	15.5	3.6	76.0	329
Radio Ticino	6.9	23.5	7.6	62.1	277
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>					
Zürüst	7.1	80.9	3.5	8.5	1555
Il Bernina	7.0	21.6	4.1	67.3	513
Le Nouvelliste	3.4	9.8	4.1	82.7	532
<i>n</i>	464	3865	372	2998	7699
%	6.0	50.2	4.8	38.9	100

Note: In percentage.

Table 6: Societal spheres actors belong to across media outlets

	Politics	Economy	Science & Education	Leisure, Sports & Culture	Religion	Community Service	Private	Other	Not applicable	<i>n</i>
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>										
Bajour	19.0	26.9	8.8	14.8	0.0	9.7	19.9	0.5	0.5	216
RTR Mustér/Glion	32.6	17.3	1.4	13.6	0.6	7.6	26.6	0.3	0.0	353
NRTV	22.2	6.3	0.0	50.7	0.0	7.2	9.7	3.9	0.0	207
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>										
Zentralplus	42.1	16.8	2.6	8.5	0.7	19.9	7.5	1.8	0.1	1478
Jungfrau Zeitung	14.5	22.6	4.5	35.4	0.8	8.9	12.2	0.8	0.2	3259
Kreuzlingen24	24.4	11.6	3.1	35.4	0.9	16.3	5.7	2.3	0.1	2747
Telebasel	19.9	20.9	2.7	33.3	1.0	9.4	12.4	0.2	0.2	1239
Radio Fréquence Jura	23.1	14.3	2.3	43.1	1.7	9.4	6.0	0.0	0.0	350
Radio Ticino	40.8	7.3	2.0	19.7	0.0	13.4	9.5	3.4	3.9	441
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>										
Zürriost	14.0	15.1	4.1	32.4	1.8	16.8	8.5	7.1	0.2	5126
Il Bernina	34.5	11.7	2.4	30.5	1.6	8.8	7.8	0.8	2.0	888
Le Nouvelliste	29.4	19.1	4.7	27.9	0.8	11.0	4.7	0.6	1.8	656
<i>n</i>	3693	2783	608	5202	191	2312	1577	520	74	16960
%	21.8	16.5	3.6	30.7	1.1	13.6	9.3	3.1	0.4	100.0

Note: In percentage.

est heterogeneity of actors regarding spheres. Overall, actors from the religious sphere are hardly covered.

Finally, regarding *originality* (RQ2.2), the authorship of the respective articles and broadcasts was analyzed. Table 7 gives an overview of all findings, which vary quite strongly across outlets.

There is a significant difference across media types $\{[X^2(6), N=4634]=1314.642, p=.001; \text{Cramer's } V=.377, p=.001\}$, showing that the amount of content originating from editorial offices is highest among the local radio and TV stations. Here, it needs to be considered that, especially in the case of radio and TV content, the use of news agency publications is not necessarily mentioned. This may also apply to print content; however, in an article, it is easier to integrate cross-references than in audio or video material. In contrast to Bajour (97%) and Zürriost (98%), where most of the content appears to be produced by members of the editorial offices, Jungfrau

Zeitung, Il Bernina, Le Nouvelliste and Zentralplus show lower levels of in-house effort. While Jungfrau Zeitung and Le Nouvelliste publish an equal number of articles originating from news agencies, Il Bernina stands out due to a great variation regarding authorship. From a local perspective, it is especially interesting that, in comparison to the other outlets, there is a high amount of content authored by citizen journalists (15%) and press releases published by clubs, such as sports clubs or cultural associations (21%). Thematically, press releases and articles by citizen journalists can be assigned to the issue dimension of culture and society. Thus, those publications have a strong focus on community matters. Kreuzlingen24 (92%) and Zentralplus (82%) stand out due to their high amount of news agency publications. There is a significant correlation between originality and revenue model $\{[X^2(6), N=4634]=572.471, p=.001; \text{Cramer's } V=.249, p=.001\}$: while outlets with alternative funding show the highest amount

Table 7: Authorship across media outlets

	Editorial Office	Agency	Press Release	Citizen Journalist/association	Not applicable	<i>n</i>
<i>Alternative revenue model</i>						
Bajour	96.9	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.8	130
RTR Mustér/Glion	99.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	194
NRTV	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	115
<i>Advertising-based revenue model</i>						
Zentralplus	17.3	81.8	0.8	0.0	0.0	490
Jungfrau Zeitung	44.8	52.3	1.3	1.7	0.0	478
Kreuzlingen24	6.8	92.4	0.6	0.0	0.2	500
Telebasel	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	432
Radio Fréquence Jura	99.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	500
Radio Ticino	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	458
<i>Paywall-based revenue model</i>						
Zürjost	97.9	1.9	0.2	0.0	0.0	475
Il Bernina	59.8	3.2	20.5	14.8	1.7	405
Le Nouvelliste	50.8	45.9	0.0	0.4	2.9	500
<i>n</i>	3108	1356	97	73	25	4659
%	66.7	29.1	2.1	1.6	0.5	100.0

Note: In percentage.

of originality (99%), outlets with paywalls (71%) and ad-financing (60%) include a lower amount of original articles.

6 Discussion

The paper's main objective was to analyze the degree to which local media realize their potential to offer unique local content that fulfills various political and societal goals and thus creates value. In this regard, the paper looked at the issues (*RQ1.1*) and actors (*RQ2.1*) being covered in a local manner by Swiss local media and how issue diversity and originality are related to media types and revenue model (*RQ1.2* & *2.2*).

Issue & actor diversity. Overall, the results show a great diversity of the contents and, thus, interesting findings. First, there was a great disparity in output quantity. While some outlets publish a lower number of articles (Bajour, NRTV, and RTR), other samples had

to be drawn due to the high amount of publications in the regarded time frame (Kreuzlingen24, Radio Fréquence Jura and Le Nouvelliste). Thus, while some outlets seem to have the strategy to publish less but with a stronger emphasis on unique local content, others further include reporting on national or even international issues on their websites, which is in line with the findings of previous studies (Jenkins, 2020; Steblyna, 2018). In fact, those outlets with a smaller number of articles all show a strong focus on the local. While Bajour and RTR give visibility to numerous actors from different societal spheres at community, district, and canton levels, NRTV focuses on actors from communities and districts. Even though, according to Sjøvaag (2016), such content is worth hiding behind a paywall, this is not the case for any of the three mentioned outlets. While RTR is fully financed by public funding and Bajour is partially financed by start-up funding and donations, NRTV, after receiving initial funding in its beginnings, now

relies on a mixed financing model (community and private funding). Thus, the results confirm the findings of Harlow & Chadha (2021) those who found that especially news sites with alternative funding and rather limited income most strongly focus on local reporting. However, the analyzed outlets Il Bernina and Züriost, which have implemented a paywall, also focus heavily on local matters. The prior includes considerable amounts of articles by citizen journalists and press releases of local clubs and associations. This gives visibility to lay people and their concerns and issues of interest, as well as social institutions such as sports clubs. The results show that visibility can be given to the local in two ways: First through journalists who cover local people and their issues and second by offering local people a platform to send in their own content for publication. Within our sample, the prior aspect is especially fulfilled by those outlets with a strong, almost exclusive focus on local matters (Bajour, RTR, NRTV). Regarding the latter, Il Bernina seems to be the exception since other outlets do not yet include citizen journalism as a means of authorship. In this context, Zentralplus needs to be highlighted: even though the number of articles by citizens is low, subscribers have the opportunity to submit preferred topics and further vote on which of those topics should receive coverage. Overall, the results are partially comparable to the findings by Wagner (2022), who found that too little consideration is given to citizens' perspectives. Due to the fact that local journalism enables communication and visibility in the opposite direction and thus gives decision-makers and political elites the possibility to learn about opinions and attitudes in the community (Barnett, 2009; Fawzi et al., 2018), more consideration of peoples' perspectives would be desirable. In this regard, it would also be important to increase the visibility of female actors, who make up about 50% of the population. In the present study, only Bajour and NRTV live up to this need.

It became apparent that all media outlets cover a rather broad variety of issues and thus fulfill the demand to inform and educate in the broadest sense (Schudson, 2014; Barnett, 2006). However, not all outlets do so in an entirely local manner, which would further be important from a normative perspective

(Wagner, 2022). Contextualization occurs more often in relation to political or economic topics, which can easily be found within a specific area because it is tied to people or institutions. For example, RTR showed a strong focus on political coverage at the cantonal level in the context of the respective elections. For issues that transcend locality and local political entities, this is harder, even though it would be important to offer people proper orientation and view global events and their consequences through a local lens. An example of this is the topic of EU and globalization, which is almost never discussed on a local and only on an international level, sometimes in relation to Switzerland. Even though Switzerland is not part of the EU, political decisions of and relations with this supranational institution may affect even the smallest units. The same is true for the consequences of globalization. Ecology, on the other hand, is rarely discussed on an international level but mostly on a local level (34% community and district).

Originality. Not all analyzed outlets present mainly local, original content. Contrary to other outlets, Le Nouvelliste hides substantial amounts of its content behind a paywall, yet the content is much less characterized by a strong local focus and rather of national (28%) and international (32%) nature. This is due to the large quantity of news agency publications included in their portfolio (44%), which are freely accessible. The outlet seems to pursue a dual strategy by supplementing local news with national and international news to make the site attractive to a broader target group. This does not necessarily mean, though, that the local content is of lower quality. The media outlets with free access and mixed financing also offer some interesting insights. Jungfrau Zeitung, for example, has a high affinity for local issues, yet a high amount of the offered content is either completely or partially based on keystone-sda (the only Swiss news agency) publications and thus not entirely original. This seems to be an alternative strategy to reduce costs but, at the same time, stay independent as the editorial unit. Kreuzlingen24 also relies heavily on news agency publications, but their content is much more concerned with national and international matters.

7 Conclusion

Local journalism offers value from multiple perspectives. It not only fulfills essential normative functions but, at the same time, has the ability to generate urgently needed revenues since it can be classified as a niche product that is, to a certain degree, unique and thus not easy to substitute. The goal of the paper was to examine the content of 12 selected Swiss local media outlets and their local value and further analyze how such content is related to different forms of revenue models. The analysis showed that overall, a focus on the local is given but varies strongly across media outlets. Certain content characteristics are

more typical for some revenue models than for others, which highlights how closely both formal and content-related business considerations are linked. Especially outlets with alternative revenue models offer valuable local reporting (see Table 8). They have a strong focus on regional and cantonal issues and individual local actors. They offer lower quantities of articles, but the content is highly original and local. Advertisement-financed outlets have a different profile: the quantity of content units is larger, but locality and originality are lower. This, however, is only in the case of outlets that are originally print outlets. Those outlets publish high amounts of agency news, focusing quite often on national and interna-

Table 8: Business model dimensions across media outlets

Media outlet	Business model dimension			
	Financing & Revenues	Production of goods & services	Procurement	Service offer (content)
Bajour	alternative funding	high; free access	very low	regional, cantonal and national
RTR Mustér/Glion	alternative funding	high; free access	very low	regional & cantonal
NRTV	alternative funding	high; free access	very low	regional, cantonal and national
Zentralplus	advertisement	low; free access	very high; news agencies	national & international
Jungfrau Zeitung	advertisement	medium; free access	medium; news agencies	regional, cantonal & national
Kreuzlingen24	advertisement	low; free access	very high; news agencies	national & international
Telebasel	advertisement	high; free access	very low	regional & cantonal
Radio Fréquence Jura	advertisement	high; free access	very low	regional, cantonal, national & international
Radio Ticino	advertisement	high; free access	very low	regional, cantonal & international
Züriost	paywall	high; freemium access	very low	regional
Il Bernina	paywall	medium; freemium access	medium; citizen journalists/clubs	regional
Le Nouvelliste	paywall	medium; freemium access	medium; news agencies	regional, cantonal & national

tional news. It can be assumed that such content reaches a wider audience through coverage beyond the local, generating more clicks and making their offering more attractive to the advertising industry without much effort in the case of print. Television and radio outlets are much more oriented towards local reporting, which may be explained by the mode of production. While news agency content can simply be published in a print outlet, video or audio content always needs to be compiled, making news agency content less attractive. Finally, outlets with paywalls revealed a mixed profile. They offer original local coverage worth hiding behind a paywall but, at the same time, seem to increase traffic through freely accessible news or audience-generated content, which require little effort in production and can be easily integrated into the websites.

Limitations & future research. There are limitations in terms of both methodology and content. While it could be shown that financial considerations seem to occur with content-related considerations, other factors, such as journalistic self-perception, degree of professionalism, and human resources, need to be examined to achieve a complete picture of the business strategies of local media. Further, while the present paper analyzed the local value of the content offered by local media, future research should focus on the audience's perspective and their perception of valuable local news. According to existing research, the audience appreciates local news coverage if it contains relevant information and educates people in a way that they learn something about important issues, positions, processes, and people on a local level (Costera Meijer, 2010; Firmstone & Coleman, 2019) and if it considers opinions and voices of the citizens and thus creates an image and understanding of the local through representing the local (Costera Meijer, 2010, 2020, 2022; Firmstone & Coleman, 2019). Gaining insight into the Swiss audience would offer valuable insights, not least regarding people's willingness to pay. As to the authors' knowledge, the audience perspective has only been considered when studying general-interest news media (e.g., Bachmann et al., 2022). Regarding WTP, it would be valuable to analyze the social media content of local media providers

further. Social media has become an important channel for media companies to distribute their content but also interact with followers (Cawley, 2019; Cornia et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Goyanes et al., 2023). This trend also holds true for some Swiss media companies, some of whom have defined news distribution via social media as part of their core strategy (Wirz et al., 2023, p.47). So far, research on the effects of social media news use on the willingness to pay for content is scarce, yet those studies that consider this variable provide evidence that social media news use may positively influence paying behavior (Goyanes, 2014; Goyanes et al., 2023).

Regarding the methodology, the coding of the articles turned out to be a great challenge for the coders despite the in-depth coding school and re-briefings after the reliability testing and throughout the coding process. Even though the instructions on how to choose the relevant actors, one coder had great trouble even after retraining, which led to higher numbers of actors for some outlets. Nonetheless, the results were consistent with the coding of the categories. Multilingualism is also a limitation. The articles to be coded were in the respective native languages of the coders, but the coding tool, as well as the coding training and the reliability test, were in German. In the future, attempts could be made to code more categories automatically, such as the issues using topic modeling.

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