

Forms of local media relations in local communities — case studies



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ABSTRACT: The local media market in Poland developed in very particular social conditions, conditions which Nowak (1979, 1981) described as a “social void”. As a result, it might be presumed that it was more likely that the new forms of society (including local media) were formed on the basis of the “bonding” type of social capital rather than the “bridging” type. This might be one of the reasons why tight and complex relationships between the local media and other social actors still exist. On the basis of my own qualitative research (case studies conducted in four small towns in Poland), this article shows how complex the local relations are and describes the involvement of local journalists and local media owners in these networks of relations which might often be a cause of conflicts of interest (individual or institutional) or media bias.

KEYWORDS: local media, local relations, conflict of interest, symmetrical relations, non-symmetrical relations.



INTRODUCTION — LINKS BETWEEN LOCAL MEDIA AND DIFFERENT SOCIAL ACTORS IN THE LITERATURE

In real social contexts, local media (i.e. journalists, editors, media owners, publishers) interact with many different social actors and institutions (not only local authorities). Such a network of relations might be complex and unclear (or even covert) for ordinary citizens. In the literature, there are various classifications of the relations between the local media and local institutions or individual actors. Michalczyk (2000, p. 110) suggests four types of relations as: symbiosis (living together), co-existence, mutual ignorance, and hostility. Benziger outlines two types of relations. Firstly, the local editorial office favors one of the institutional directions and all the interest groups involved, reducing contact with others. Secondly, the editorial office safeguards its autonomy, treats interest groups neutrally, and is not influenced from any direction (Michalczyk, 2000, pp. 108–109). In addition, McQuail (2013) distinguishes three levels of analysis of the practice of journalism: the societal level, the news organization level and the individual journalist level

which allows a researcher to analyze media actors from macro-, mezzo- and micro-perspectives.

Apart from relations with groups or institutions, local media also interact with individuals. There are generally two types of these relations: with ordinary citizens and with elites (local leaders in politics, business, social organizations, administration, associations, and churches). There are formal and informal channels of communication, and being a leader provides more opportunities to influence media content (often facilitated by informal acquaintances with media representatives). Kurp (1994, pp. 48–52) terms the elites “key figures”, whose influence causes a lack of criticism and objectivity in media content.

When analyzing the local media in Poland the researcher has to remember that local media developed only after the transition of the political system in 1989. Before that time local media were very poorly developed. There were bulletins published by the factories but local news media were almost nonexistent. The data presented by Chorązki (1999, pp. 60–67) show that the number of journals published rose from 370–390 in January 1989, to 2500 by 1999. The local media market also developed in very particular social conditions, which Nowak (1979, 1981) described as a “social void”. In his studies Nowak measured the strength of social bonds and found that Poles identified primarily with the concrete family and the abstract nation, and there was a large void between these two. Associations and organizations (civil society) were absent from their concept of the social world. As a result, it might be presumed that it was more likely that the new forms of society (including local media) were formed on the basis of the “bonding” type of social capital rather than the “bridging” type. This might be one of the reasons why tight and complex relationships between local media and other social actors still exist.

These relationships influenced the choice of my own research area. I conducted field studies (mostly qualitative) in four towns in the Łódź voivodeship. The assumptions and the results of three of the case studies are presented in this article, and I concentrate here on the links between the local media and political and business actors.

LOCAL MEDIA IN A COMMUNITY — BASIC DEFINITIONS, METHOD OF RESEARCH AND RESEARCH CRITERIA

My interest in the relationship between local media (as defined e.g. in Gierula, 2005; Kowalczyk, 2003) and social actors resulted in a “multiple case study” (Stake, 2010), so a set of several instrumental case studies (where a researcher is not interested in a case *per se*, but uses a case to explain different processes that are included in the research questions), with the main goal of exploring the complexity of these relationships, and identifying the level of involvement of local journalists and local media owners in these networks. This study describes such networks from after the

local elections in 2010 to the local elections in 2014, although some historical background facts are also used.

The case studies consisted of 137 in-depth interviews with local leaders and local journalists in towns A and B (July–September 2013) and C and D (July–September 2014); content analysis of the newspapers (Weekly A, Weekly B, Weekly C and Weeklies D.1 and D.2) in three periods of time: during the period of the local elections of 2010, during the time period of my visits to the towns concerned in 2013/2014, and during the local elections of 2014. During my fieldwork I also made informal observational notes. Before my visits to every town I gathered information about the town itself, the weekly and the key actors in the community. I used various internet sources, newspaper websites, media competition websites, the Polish Electoral Committee (PKW) websites, statistics, and the Polish Association of the Control and Distribution of the Press website in order to be as well informed as possible before I entered the communities — the procedure in social sciences is called “white interviewing” (Gurtowski & Waszewski, 2009, pp. 170–172).

After the fieldwork I coded the interviews and conducted content analysis of the newspapers (both quantitative and qualitative), coding the issues of the weeklies (around 30 issues of every weekly) into 25 variables concerning the key actors’ presence in the media. After these analyses were completed, a case study report was prepared for every weekly, which involved combining all the materials together according to the research questions. Apart from descriptions of relationships for every weekly I decided to conduct a cross case analysis.

My choice of local newspapers and communities was guided by Michalczyk’s criteria of formal and material characteristics of local media (2000, pp. 84–85). The most important criteria in my study were: that the newsroom was based in a particular town, the distribution range (local or micro-regional), private ownership (formally independent from political actors) and the provision of a wide range of news concerning a particular community. I also applied a few additional criteria: i.e., diversity of field according to competition versus lack of competition in the media market; stability versus dynamics of the local media market; and membership of the Local Newspapers’ Association. Based on these features four weeklies/towns were chosen for the study (referred to by letters of the alphabet for ethical reasons).

I also decided to apply different frameworks in order to analyze and interpret the data. One of them is the concept of conflict of interest (Lewicka-Strzałecka, 2005, p. 7). A person (or an organization) is in a conflict of interest when the actions they take are profitable to themselves or another actor (an organization they are tied to), and at the same time these actions are against another organization’s interests towards which they should also be loyal. Borden and Pritchard (2001, p. 74) note that conflicts of interest in journalism arise in circumstances in which there is a reason to be concerned that the judgment and performance of journalists might

be unduly influenced by interests they have that lie outside their responsibilities as journalists. Journalists might be faced with different kinds of conflicts of interest: individual or institutional. It is important to remember then, that their primary interest is the public.

A hierarchy-of-influences approach (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Reese, 2001) was employed in order to analyze different levels of relationships between the local weeklies and their societal context. The framework consists of five levels of analysis: 1) individual level; 2) routines level, 3) organizational level, 4) extra-media level, and 5) ideological level. However, the individual level was omitted in the analysis, as it is more useful in studies which attempt to describe the individual characteristics of journalists as an occupational group. I employed the remaining levels of analysis to create a full case study description. However, this article concentrates on one aspect of Shoemaker and Reese's framework, the extra-media level, and discusses this level with reference to towns: A, B and C only, due to limited space.

Also a framework of symmetrical and non-symmetrical links (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2004) was used to interpret the data in terms of political links. Dobek-Ostrowska distinguishes three types of symmetrical links and two kinds of non-symmetrical links taking into consideration the strength/weakness of political and media actors (2004, pp. 220–222). The symmetrical relations appear when: 1) There are strong authorities and strong media — this can lead to conflict or cooperation between such actors; 2) There are weak authorities and weak media — also leading to conflict or cooperation; or 3) There is a balance between the authorities and the media — this is the most desired model in a democratic system if there is a low level of media politicization and a high level of citizen participation. However, this

Table 1. Symmetrical and non-symmetrical relations between the media and political actors

Media \ Political actors	Dependent/weak	Affiliative	Strong
Dependent/weak	SYMMETRICAL RELATIONS Adversary model or exchange model		NON-SYMMETRICAL RELATIONS Media actors are dominant
Affiliative		SYMMETRICAL RELATIONS Exchange model/ adversary model	
Strong	NON-SYMMETRICAL RELATIONS Political actors are dominant		SYMMETRICAL RELATIONS Adversary model or exchange model

Source: Dobek-Ostrowska (2004, p. 221).

model can also lead to collusion between political and media actors in order to fulfill their own interests, regardless of the public interest. Non-symmetrical relations emerge when: 1. There are strong authorities and weak media — this leads to a situation where political actors are dominant and try to influence and control the media (e.g. by blocking information, blocking entry into the media market etc.); 2. There are weak authorities and strong media — which can lead to a situation where media actors can become political subjects, able to influence political life, political decisions and freely realize their own interests (see Table 1).

CASE STUDIES — ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The case study of Weekly A links in Town A

Profile of Town A and Weekly A

Town A is a very small town of 14,500 inhabitants in the Łódź voivodeship. There used to be a well-developed machinery industry, but at present Town A is based on the textile industry. There are also many small businesses, e.g. bakeries, shops and pharmacies. Politically, the town is divided into at least two distinct factions: one which supports the present mayor (elected from liberal Civic Platform's lists in 2010 for his first term and in 2014 for his second term); and an opposition which has a majority in the town council and is centered around a social activist and an editor-in-chief of a local monthly (also a candidate in the mayoral race in 2014). The previous mayor was from this faction and his loss in 2010 was unexpected.

Weekly A was started in Town A in 1997 by the editor of Weekly B. The editorial office is situated in the town center. There is no real division between the newsroom and the advertising department. There are only three journalists and sometimes they also have to cover stories from Town B. There used to be a branch director, but the journalist who fulfilled this function resigned from this post, because there were more duties, without extra remuneration. A former journalist and branch director is now employed at the town council as a communication and PR expert.

The newspaper itself consists of the same number of pages as Weekly B, but with only 9 to 12 pages that concern micro-region A (14 pages during the election). The rest of the newspaper consists of the same stories as the ones published in Weekly B. There is little reader input in the paper and the circulation is on average 2500 copies (per micro-region: Town A and nearby villages).

Extra-media level of analysis

We consider the extra-media level as influences originating primarily from outside the media organization (Reese, 2001, p. 182).

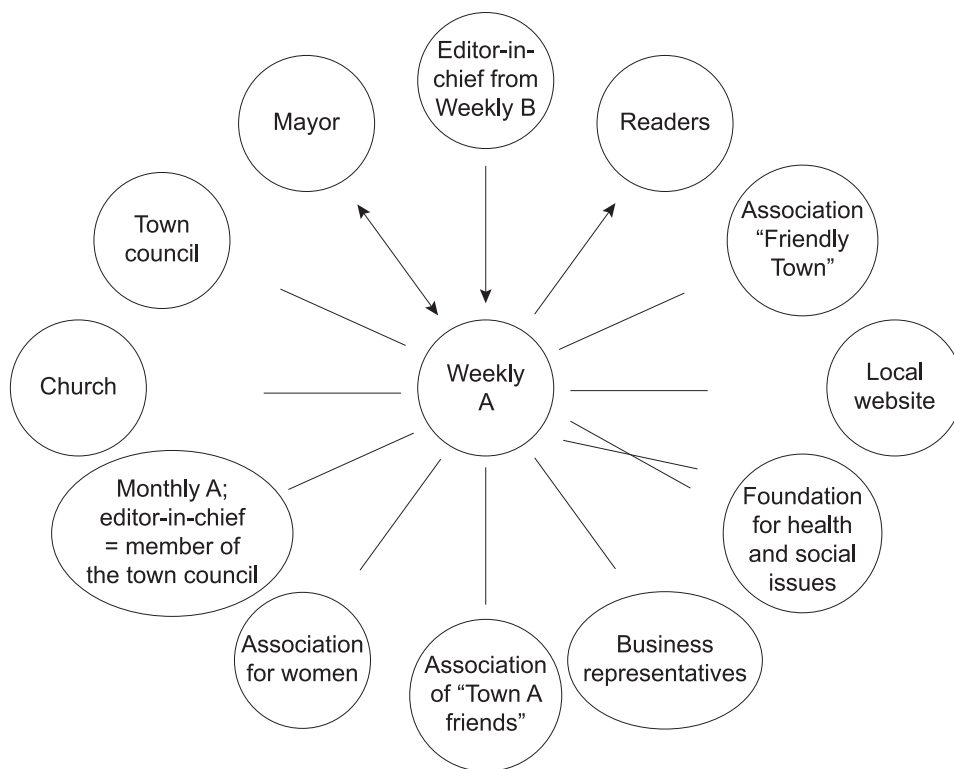


Figure 1. The network of relations between Weekly A and different social actors in Town A
 ↔ symbiosis, → one-sided relations, — co-existence, - hostility, X mutual ignorance

Source: author.

Political actors

In 2010 there was a change in the mayoral seat in Town A, which was not expected by journalists working at Weekly A. When I interviewed them during the pilot study in 2010, they were convinced that the mayor at that time would hold his seat:

At the moment, the mayor is the only candidate, but there are some rumors about two other candidates. However, I don't think they will be strong enough to be a threat for the present mayor. (R1, journalist, Weekly A)

However, the mayoral race was won by a candidate with Civic Platform support and a strong division between the two political factions began in Town A. Shortly after the 2010 local elections, one of the main local journalists in Town A resigned from the newspaper and became a communication and PR specialist at the Town Hall. The opposition leaders were convinced that the journalist had made a deal with the mayor before the election and the new post was her reward for favorable reporting (R7, R23, R24). They claim to get less coverage than the mayor and point

to the links between journalists and the Town Hall (e.g. a journalist's husband was granted for writing a historical book about one of the town districts; adverts from the Town Hall in Weekly A, but not in Monthly A, which is in the opposition's hands). The journalist herself (R30) denies that her resignation was connected with any links to the mayor (the mayor confirms her version of the story — R27 — and recalls that Weekly A published a very unfavorable article about him and his campaign a week before the election day) and admits that she had a disagreement with the editor-in-chief and that was the reason she resigned. However, the situation might be perceived as a conflict of interest by the general public who do not know the details of this case. Additionally, a clear example of “revolving door” is observed here, caused by the fact that local journalists have no alternative work possibilities, because Weekly A is the only editorial office in town.

After the 2010 election, Weekly A established a good relationship with the mayor, but there are no clear examples that the opposition leaders were misrepresented. Their associations are represented in the weekly (Association for women, Association of “Town A friends”) and their words are quoted from the town council meetings. However, the mayor or his close collaborators are present in 26 issues of the weekly out of the 33 analyzed (sometimes in multiple materials). Using Dobek-Ostrowska's classification, the relations between Weekly A and the mayor are most similar to symmetrical affiliative relations. In terms of Michalczyk's classification (2000), I would call the relations between Weekly A and political actors symbiotic in reference to the mayor and co-existence in reference to the town council members and the opposition leader — editor-in-chief at Monthly A.

Business actors

There is a clear strategy towards business actors implemented by the owner of Weekly A and B. The journalists from Weekly A declare that

In our newspaper different companies appear only as paid advertisements. So they can present their services, but they know they will have to pay for this. We do not write advertorials. If we write about a company, it is more in the context of a particular phenomenon. For example, there was a boom of cake shops and corset producers at some stage, so then we wrote that something like this was happening, but without pointing to a leader or promoting any particular business. (R2, Journalist, Weekly A)

Another journalist (R6) recalls that he wanted to write about a new coffee shop and restaurant in Town A as there were not many of them, but the editor-in-chief decided not to publish the story. However, all of the journalists admit that the editor-in-chief is allowed to do more and they give an example of a situation:

We are not allowed to publish advertorials. But our chief can. We don't approve of this. There has been a situation recently where they [the owners] needed the irrigation system for their garden, so they suddenly published an article about some irrigation systems offered by a particular shop. So this is already an advertorial and a lack of consistency. (R1, Journalist, Weekly A)

During the study I was also confronted with negative attitudes towards the weekly from business actors. The president of a foundation which owns a private clinic and a care home expressed negative opinions about journalists' professionalism and education with reference to the stories that journalists covered about the foundation.

I avoid commenting for the weekly as they are not professional. I either refuse to comment or send them a written statement. (R26, businessman, founder of Foundation for health and social issues, Town A)

This attitude is close to “mutual ignorance” between actors.

The case study of Weekly B links in Town B

The town's profile and the Weekly's profile

Town B is a small town of 30,000 inhabitants situated in the Łódź Voivodeship. The community has a quite evident catholic identity and the Catholic Church is an important social actor. The mayor of the town was elected in 2010 for his second term and is supported by the majority of the town council (in November 2014, after the research was finished, the same mayor was elected for a third term). The town's economy is based on the food industry, food processing, agriculture, horticulture, and the textile industry. Companies with a long tradition focused around local entrepreneurs still exist, but there are also new investments (in 2012/2013 a large Polish contractor and a foreign company dealing with natural resource extraction invested in Town B). The local Weekly B, which is the focus of the study, was established in 1990 and is a newspaper with a long tradition, with its roots in “Solidarity”. The weekly is published entirely by a Polish private owner. The newspaper consists of around 44 pages on average. However, the number of pages rises to as many as 56 pages in the week before the elections. The same owner also publishes another weekly in the region: weekly A, though the content of both newspapers is broadly similar, apart from 10 pages. The owner of Weekly B is also the editor-in-chief and author of some of the articles and comments in the Weekly (e.g. the interviews with mayoral candidates were conducted and then written by him).

The fact that the editor does not originate from Town B, that he married into this community, and that his wife is also a co-owner of the newspaper, was underlined by several interviewees. The owners, apart from issuing Weekly B, are also involved in other businesses: they have a publishing house and their own café.

The business approach of the owners is also apparent. There are many advertisements printed in the paper (7–8 pages are dedicated to small ads, and on the rest of the pages we can find on average 110 advertisements per issue; only an average of 10 pages per issue contain no advertisements), and some of the interviewees mentioned that a lot of readers buy the weekly for that reason. There is little reader input in the paper, but the weekly still sells well. One of the reasons for its successful distribution is its orientation to topics like crime, accidents and neighbor's wealth

(financial declarations of local councilors, tax amortization or subsidies for business activity). The journalists are obligated to cover accidents, and in every issue of the weekly a crime chronicle is published. The readers call the local Weekly B a “rag” or a “gossiper”.

Extra-media level of analysis

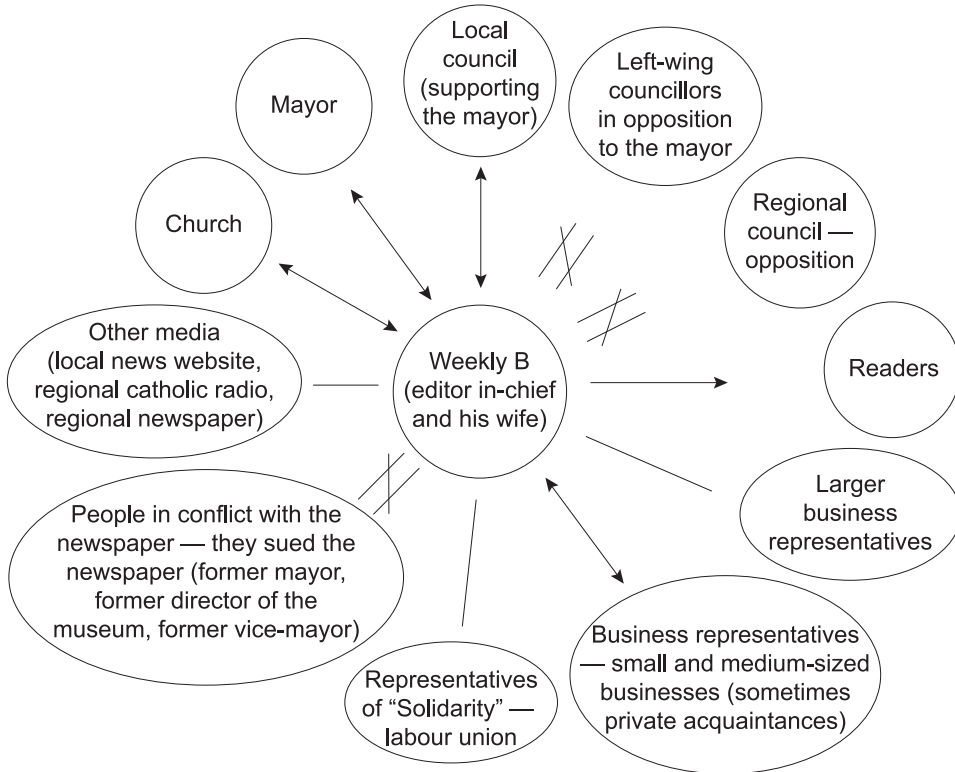


Figure 2. The network of relations between Weekly B and different social actors in Town B
 ↔ symbiosis, → one-sided relations, — co-existence, ≠ hostility, X mutual ignorance)

Source: author.

Political actors

Relations with local authorities have been complicated in the history of the weekly. According to interviewees (R33, R51, R58) the newspaper was persuaded to support one of the local candidates in the first free local elections. This politician won the election, but later started a local governmental newspaper. Consequently, cooperation between weekly B and the mayor halted and hostile relations developed. The newspaper was also in conflict with the previous mayor. The local leaders agree (R33, R37, R39, R43, R58, etc.) that weekly B clearly supported one candidate in the local elections in 2006 and 2010 — the current mayor (who was elected in 2014 for

his third term). The informal relations (family) between the editor-in-chief (and his wife — the co-owner) and the mayor were mentioned by all the informants.

The editor-in-chief is godfather to the mayor's child, so the relations are much closer between them than they used to be with the former mayor, whom he simply didn't like. After so many years here I notice a lack of objectivity from our boss. (R1, Journalist, Weekly A, but started in Weekly B; opinion confirmed by R2, R6, R40)

Our local press is, I would not even hesitate to use these words, very biased. They sympathize with the current authorities. There are family links between them. (R33, left-wing town B council member, a social activist)

There is an evident conflict of interest which was not officially revealed in their paper. The mayor himself (R44) declared that this private relationship does not influence coverage, but it can cause a potential conflict of interest, and it clearly creates an institutional conflict of interest for the journalists.

The mayor also gets a lot of coverage in Weekly B. He sometimes appears several times in one edition. In 31 editions that were analyzed, events with the mayor's participation and/or statements appeared 109 times (on average 3.5 times per issue). The majority of the town council members support the mayor, therefore opposition councilors' (two left-wing and one right-wing independent) ideas and initiatives are covered rarely (in 31 editions their statements appear 34 times; an average of 1 article per issue). These respondents sometimes cooperate with a local reporter from a regional weekly, although this regional weekly is not widely read in Town B (R33, R37, R42).

The position of Weekly B is strong in the community, as is the position of the current mayor supported by the majority of the town council. Relations between these two actors are therefore symmetrical and an exchange model of relations can be observed.

Business actors

There are two types of relations between the weekly and local entrepreneurs: 1. Co-existence or even mutual ignorance between "B" and larger entities and 2. Symbiotic relations with smaller local businesses. The larger entities are not interested in maintaining a good rapport with the weekly, because they need a wider range of advertising and they prefer to choose other means of achieving this (e.g. outdoor advertising) (R39). Smaller entities are more dependent on local advertising and as previously mentioned, Weekly B sometimes publishes advertising articles for free (there might be private relations between the owners and the businessmen) which might result in paid advertisements in the future. Sometimes the newspaper publishes unpaid articles which are in fact advertisements for local businessmen.

I have experienced myself that a good article in Weekly B is really something. [...] You have to have good contacts with the press. Our press is concentrated on advertising, I would not like them to hear that, because they are my friends, but they are oriented towards advertising. I did thank them, because their article about my company worked very well. (R54, local business owner, Town B)

There were also occurrences of advertorials, which are generally banned unless the editor decides otherwise (R1, R2). It must be noted though that business articles are not published so often — in 31 issues there were 49 texts about different businesses (1.5 article per issue).

The case study of Weekly C links in Town C

The town's profile and Weekly's C profile

Town C is a bigger town than Town B also situated in the Łódź voivodeship, with nearly 66,000 inhabitants. The town has an industrial history and before 1989 it was said to be one of the towns with the biggest support for the communist regime. However, in the 2014 European elections a conservative party, Law and Justice (PiS) received the greatest support — over 40%. The mayor of the town was elected in 2010 (in November 2014 a new conservative mayor was elected) for his second term, despite a lack of support from the local media (especially the major newspaper in town C: Weekly C had their own opposing candidate). It is important to note that Weekly C expressed their open support for the mayor when he was a candidate for the first term (in 2006). The biggest factories (in the textile industry) went bankrupt after the transformation of the political system. Presently the most important companies in Town C are connected with construction and ceramics. The local Weekly C, which is the focus of the third case study, was established just after the political transformation in Poland, and members of the local community were its founders in 1990 (the editor-in-chief and his colleague from work in the factory). The roots of the weekly are in the factory bulletin which was published for the workers from one of the textile factories in Town C (the editor-in-chief underlines that he learnt how to run a newspaper and how to be a journalist there). Since 1990 the owners of the weekly have not changed. One of the owners has also remained the editor-in-chief since the beginning, apart from a brief period when the assistant editor took over. After this short break the owner resumed the function of editor-in-chief.

The newspaper consists of 44 pages on average. However, during election time the number of pages rises to as many as 72 in pre-election week. The same owner also publishes another weekly in the region, however this weekly was not the subject of my study (it has a separate editorial office and its own content). The newspaper is considered to support left-wing views. The shape of the newspaper is a result of the editor and the assistant editor's "liberal" world-view and their background (the political engagement in feminist and LGTB groups in the case of the assistant and the working class background in the case of the editor). There is little reader input in the newspaper, but it also sells well (declared circulation: 11,000 copies per week in May–October 2014), being open to reader input on historical or social topics from readers who are experts in the subjects (R73, R94).

Extra-media level of analysis

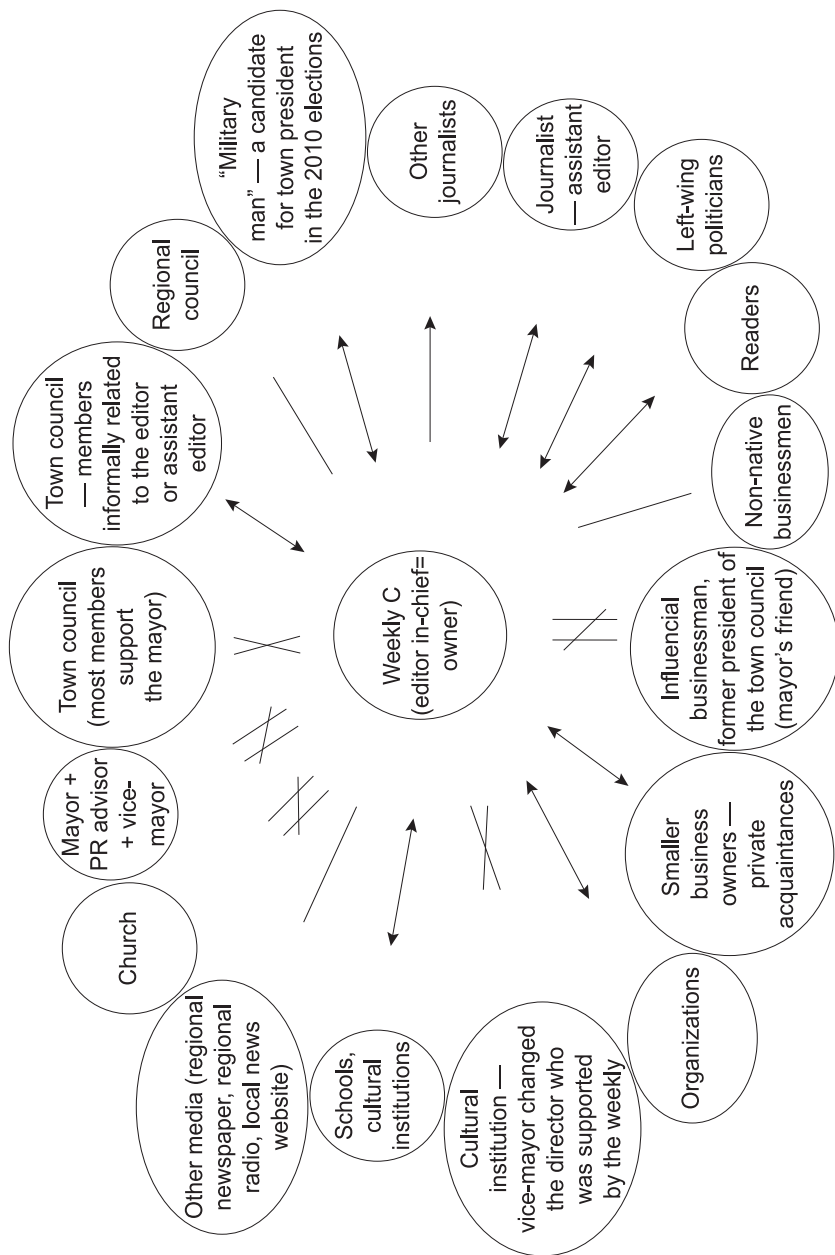


Figure 3. The network of relations between Weekly C and different social actors in Town C
 ↔ symbiosis, → one-sided relations, — co-existence, ≠ hostility, X mutual ignorance

Source: author.

Political actors

There are visible examples of the weekly’s active engagement in local politics. The editor-in-chief admits (R75) that the weekly supported the present mayor when he

was a candidate for the first term (in 2006). This open support was caused by a conflict the newspaper had with the previous conservative mayor. Weekly C decided to endorse a candidate who seemed “a better option” at that time.

When the present mayor was a candidate for the first term in 2006, we made this mistake and supported him openly. I regret this until today and I am ashamed of it. [...] At that time we thought that if the former mayor had won another term of office, it would have been a calamity. (R75, Editor-in-chief of Weekly C)

After one term in power the present mayor lost the newspaper’s support. The relationships between him and Weekly C became hostile, so before the local governmental elections in 2010 Weekly C and a group of local businessmen managed to convince a well-respected army member, without a political past (“Military Man”), to take part, even though he was not from Town C. The candidate himself confirmed that his candidature was the editor’s initiative and he, along with others, were in charge of his campaign. He also admits that the weekly gave preferential treatment to his candidature and he did not have to pay for advertisements in the newspaper.

My circle of friends, whom I had known before, convinced me to take part in the local mayoral race. Among them was the owner of Weekly C. [...] Weekly C supported me in the campaign, I mean, they reminded the readers who I was, because I left Town C 9 years ago. So they wrote about me, who I was, what I achieved and what people could expect from me. (R99, former candidate for the mayor of the town in 2010 elections, supported by Weekly C, a former general)

The newspaper did not want to cooperate with other candidates who were willing to resign from the election race and support the “Military Man”, because they were convinced they could win without their support (R25). As a result of this lack of cooperation and the late start of the campaign the “Military Man” did not have enough votes to get to the second round of the elections, but he came third in the first round which was an achievement as he had no previous involvement on the political stage.

After the present mayor was elected for the second term the relationships between him and the newspaper worsened further. The articles about the mayor’s activities no longer included his name and surname, the newspaper preferring collective terms such as “the town” or “the town hall”. Additionally, there is less coverage of the mayor’s actions and it is mostly negative (there were 22 publications including the president within the 11 issues analyzed in 2010, but only 8 in 2013 /10 issues analyzed/ and 8 in 2014 and 5 of them expressed a lot of criticism towards the president /12 issues analyzed/). An advisor was employed at the town council responsible for communicating council information to the media. All questions have to be directed to him in the first instance, and he also checks all the replies written by the clerks (R96). The journalists complain that access to information has worsened since the advisor was employed (R68, R75, R90).

There is another aspect of political engagement of the weekly. It is perceived as a newspaper with left-wing views, because of the content it produces, but also because of the assistant editor's role in the community. She is openly engaged in feminist and LGTB organizations and was also a candidate for the European Parliament in the 2014 elections (on the lists of one of the political parties). This is clear example of individual conflict of interest as being a candidate did not cause her resignation from journalistic duties. It is also an institutional conflict of interest (at least a perceived one), because her activities influenced the perception of the whole newspaper (mentioned by ten interviewees). The journalist herself does not try to hide her views and revealed that she was planning to be a candidate for mayor in the local elections in November 2014 (R68). This places the editor-in-chief and other journalists in the weekly in a position of conflict of interest once again (the journalist took part in the race and made it to the second round, where she lost 46% to 54%) to a candidate from Law and Justice. During and after the campaign she remained employed in Weekly C.

There is an idea that I am supposed to be a candidate in the local presidential elections. Very modestly. [...] But at the moment this is confidential information. (R68, journalist in Weekly C, well-experienced, took part in the European elections in 2014, decided to be a candidate in the local elections in 2014)

The relations between Weekly C and the authorities in the period 2010–2014 were complex. Initially, both actors were strong and symmetrical relations existed (closer to the adversary model, though). The authorities (particularly the mayor) have become much weaker over time and at the end of the term the relations changed to non-symmetrical ones, where the media actors are dominant, which resulted in one of the journalists participating in the local election.

Business actors

There are a few types of relations between the weekly and local entrepreneurs. There are two groups of local businessmen native to Town C.

The first one, businessmen who are informally connected to the owner of the weekly or the assistant editor. The relations between them and the weekly are generally positive (symbiotic relations or co-existence), although they often are very critical about the quality of the newspaper (R69, R73).

Journalists in Weekly C often follow town gossip and they often present their own opinions rather than facts. [...] Weekly C criticizes absolutely everything the local government does. I think that the authorities should be criticized, but when they do something right this should also be shown, at least in order to educate the readers. (R69, businessman, a social activist, a former political activist, a friend of R68)

These businesses are small or medium-sized, have regular advertisements in the weekly and even support some competitions for children organized by the newspaper.

ing election time showed a different picture. I would therefore call this model of functioning “hidden engagement” or “apparent non-engagement” (the second term was inspired by Lutyński’s framework of “apparent actions”, 1990). Weekly C is a clear example of open political engagement. Not only did the assistant editor take an active part in different types of political elections, but the editor-in-chief with his circle also tried to affect the result of the local election at least twice: once by openly supporting a candidate for mayor (2006) and the second time by proposing an independent candidate and helping him with the campaign (2010).

The study also shows that local elites (particularly political/local governmental) are those which consistently have the greatest influence on media content. Additionally, the directorship of the weeklies with strong one-sided views controls the situation and maintains the *status quo*. The links between the media actors and the political actors correspond with different models of relations presented in Table 1 (in Town A affiliative, symmetrical relations; in Town B two strong actors who have symmetrical relations and cooperate according to the exchange model; in Town C the relations between media and political actors became eventually non-symmetrical with the dominating role of Weekly C).

The situation of Weekly B and Weekly C indicate that the strong position of the media and the involvement of interest groups and various social actors to the media system, does not strengthen the independence of journalists’ working for a particular media company (Tackowska, 2012). The strong economic position of the media and their powerful influence in the public sphere do not guarantee that media will fulfill their role as public servant (treating the public as their primary interest). On the contrary, the case studies of Weekly B and Weekly C show that the economic strength and power of the media may lead to the abuse of power in the area of external relations as well as in the area of relations within the organization. This statement is also confirmed by the fact that Weekly A, which does not have such a long tradition in the community and was started by a person who does not come from the community, is more neutral than any of the investigated weeklies.

The next step of the study will be to complete the cross-case analysis, which will also include: Weekly D, other levels of Shoemaker and Reese’s framework, and relations with other types of local actors. These studies help to propose a few more general statements leading to a revised version of typology of relations. In the future, the results of this study might be used to facilitate further investigation of local media in international contexts.

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