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## On any topic? Topics of publications of investigative journalism and journalistic intervention in the local press (on the examples of Poland and the USA)

**Abstract:** The author raises an interesting subject, hitherto unexplored comprehensively in American and Polish media studies, namely, the problem of topics of investigative journalism and journalistic intervention at the level of local newspaper publishers. In local media, just as in national media, disclosure of corruption and misconduct of local government happens quite rarely. Additionally, the checking activity – as the watchdog function of the press – is present in the Polish reality only in some local commercial media which are independent from local government. The author discusses the impact of the media's checking function for the selection of topics by local investigative journalists and the nature of the activities of local political and business decision-makers limiting the subjects addressed by investigative reporters. A comparative analysis relates the problems of the functioning of local government and local communities which are aired in articles published by investigative journalists and journalistic intervention. For the comparison, articles recognised by the jury of the Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism 1926–2015 and texts submitted and recognised in the “Local Press” competition 2012–2013 organised by the Association of Local Newspapers were used.

**Key words:** local press, investigative journalism, journalistic intervention, the subject matter of publication

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“Investigative journalists are people who should lift rocks, look behind screens, never accept the official point of view, or (as Claud Cockburn said) never believe anything until it is officially denied.”

Hugo de Burgh<sup>1</sup>

“The central job of local journalists, acting on behalf of the people, is to ensure that local authorities in all their forms – councils, health trusts, educational institutions, policing boards – are acting fairly and honestly.”

Roy Greenslade<sup>2</sup>

**P**roblems dealt with in articles written by investigative reporters and within the framework of journalistic intervention at the level of local media have not so

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<sup>1</sup> J. Pilger (2000), *Interview with Hugo de Burgh*, 29.06.1999, in: *Investigative journalism. Context and practice*, ed. H. de Burgh, London–New York, p. 314.

<sup>2</sup> R. Greenslade (2009), *Council papers are bad for local journalism – and democracy*, 22 April 2009, <http://www.standard.co.uk/business/council-papers-are-bad-for-local-journalism--and-democracy-6716630.html>.

far been analytically described in comprehensive academic studies, neither in Poland nor the USA.<sup>3</sup> For years, researchers have focused attention mainly on the big national newsrooms, which have undoubted achievements in the field of checking the authorities and business at various levels. National media are often supported by global corporations which help them in their investigations. But local investigative journalists also have reasons to be proud. Their work, though for many reasons much more difficult and less visible, affects the quality of democracy in local areas and the standard of living in these communities. What is more, the effects of such publications in the local media are often quickly noticed by readers and produce concrete results in the activities of local authorities. As Julianne Schultz noticed, the media are most influential when they are local (Schultz, 1998, p. 7). However, it should also be noted that in the local press, as in the national media, articles about the disclosure of corruption and misconduct of power appear quite rarely. Moreover, the checking activity within the watchdog function of the press is present in the Polish reality only in a small number of local commercial media which are independent from municipal bodies (Adamczyk, 1999, p. 168; Adamczyk, 2011, p. 182). This is primarily because the bulletins issued by the municipal authorities and checked by them are often treated as a propaganda mouthpiece, not a two-way platform of social communication for public debate.

“Council-run papers are, in some respects, no more than ‘Pravda publications’. Even if they do not specifically push council policy – and most do – they certainly do not criticise that policy. They may act as a (heavily censored) forum for critics, but they do not campaign against decisions. Nor, of course, do they investigate councillors or council officers” (Greenslade, 2009).

For this reason, hard-hitting publications do not appear to the pages of these newspapers, giving way to other topics, secondary from the point of view of their validity. In this way, local dignitaries use this communication channel to limit access to information and all forms of criticism of their actions and focus the audience’s attention on issues used by community politicians for self-advertisement. The complicated situation of local investigative reporters does not mean that they leave important issues of local communities beyond social control. Both in Poland and in the US the issues of abuse of power and other manifestations of social pathology at the level of municipalities and small towns are raised in the press. Such publications also lead to concrete changes in local legislation, and the resignation of public officials stigmatised by the media. This means that the independent media take on the role of an important actor on the local political scene. Grażyna Piechota noted that:

“Local media serve not only to present positions, achievements or opinions by local political or social actors; local media have become, in fact, one of those actors, with the

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<sup>3</sup> In Polish, there is still modest literature in this field, and this subject has not been taken up in collective publications (Palczewski, 2006; Palczewski, 2009; Palczewski, 2010). American researchers in their studies have also paid special attention primarily to hard-hitting press articles which were prepared by reporters working in well known, large newsrooms (Shapiro, 2003). In his interesting book about local media in the US, Tomasz Goban-Klas only casually described the topic of investigative journalism (Goban-Klas, 1989, pp. 108–109).

ability to create information, even assigning the level of significance to these events” (Piechota, 2012, p. 11).

The role of local investigative reporters and their activity in journalistic intervention were already noticed and appreciated many decades ago in the United States by the creation of a special category for the most prestigious award for journalism – the Pulitzer Prize. Over the years, the name of this category has been amended twice. Later on, the word “local” was removed from the name of this award, which led to the dominance of national editors in collecting the trophy. In spite of this, local journalists receive this honour nowadays.<sup>4</sup> In Poland, a special prize for investigative journalism and journalistic intervention is awarded by the Association of Local Newspapers in the “Local Press” competition, organised since 2008. A similar initiative was appointed by the Association of Polish Journalists and was named “Pogotowie Dziennikarskie” (“Emergency Journalism”). It is the first such website for local media and civil journalism (Czym, 2014). Under this programme is run a contest for journalists in these media. In its first edition, in 2014, Patryk Salomon received the prize for investigative journalism. He was the author of a publication entitled *Prowokacja Lovekrakow.pl: Komitet konkursowy ZIO to siedlisko patologii*. In this text he revealed the way the authorities buy the favour of the press. However, the politicians did not corrupt the journalists – the reporters decided to give nationwide publicity to this issue (Stowarzyszenie, 2014). This paper aims to show that investigative journalism and journalistic intervention at the local level, in spite of all the aforementioned limitations, covers almost the same issues as the national media do. The differences in the topics discussed are, of course, in the institutions described – the media functioning in small communities focus their attention primarily on local and regional authorities, subordinate offices and the business representatives which co-operate with them. To demonstrate that thesis, we should find answers to several research problems. Firstly, how does the watchdog function affect the selection of topics by local investigative journalists? Secondly, which of the actions of local political and business decision makers limit the subjects addressed by investigative reporters? Thirdly, what kind of dependence, being result of the commercial nature of the operation of the local media, determines the selection of topics by journalists when describing the inappropriate actions of the authorities or their failure to act? Fourthly, what problems of local authorities and local communities are aired in investigative journalism operations and journalistic intervention publications? For comparative analysis publications awarded prizes by the jury of the Pulitzer Prize in the categories: Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting, No Edition Time (years 1953–1963), Pulitzer Prize for Local Investigative Specialized Reporting (years 1964–1984), Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting (from 1985 year) and articles awarded prizes and nominated in the Polish “Local Press” competition, organised by the Association of Local Newspapers from 2012–2013 were chosen.

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<sup>4</sup> The largest American newspapers are leaders in the number of Pulitzer Prizes won. According to calculations by Donna Shaw and ARJ, from 1917 to 2006 “The New York Times” received 93 awards (some sources say even 94), “The Washington Post” – 44, “The Los Angeles Times” – 39, and “The Wall Street Journal” – 31. The share of these four newspapers in the number of Pulitzer Prizes received increases with each decade. In 1960, “the ‘big four’ won 15 percent of all honors, in 1970 their share was 22 percent, in 1980 24 percent, in 1990 already 32 percent” (Shaw, 2006).

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The activity of local communities and the institutions of local power created by them, and also the media remaining in a permanent symbiosis with them, operating in the areas of these units, has been the subject of research by media experts for many years. The relations between local government and the media are not always in harmony with the desires of the representatives selected by local communities. Their work is subjected to permanent and thorough evaluation by journalists, especially those working in independent media. Local reporters, fulfilling the duties imposed by their publishers are primarily trying to put into practice an informative function, designed to build among inhabitants a picture of the real situation in a given unit of local government. In this way, a well-informed public can be created which could adequately respond to the actions of local governments and their subordinate units. Helping citizens make informed decisions is an important job of local investigative journalists, who often expose to readers otherwise unknown stories of the illegal and/or amoral actions of those in power. Articles prepared by investigative reporters do not appear too often in practice, yet their influence and the effects they cause can hardly be overestimated. This form of journalism can be observed only in independent local media. In this segment of the press, only these outlets are strong enough economically, and, despite various attempts to exert pressure on them, they speak about the inappropriate behaviour of local governments. The aim of these actions is primarily a concern for transparency in local authorities' activities and the removal of legal and procedural problems which help miscreants in evading the law (Schulz, 1995, p. 66). Therefore, investigative reporters must demonstrate extensive knowledge of the various issues involved in the work of local government. Only then can they serve as a beacon, throwing a spotlight on these areas of activity of local decision-makers that remain in the shadows.

"News media need to be creative watchdogs and agenda setters scanning the horizon for the gaps in current public life. Part of this larger watchdog role is functioning as social radar, not just a chronicler of what government and other institutions are doing right now, whether good or bad. This means discovering the concerns of citizens and defining what the public needs to know in very expansive terms" (Merritt, 2004, p. 53).

An important reason is also striving to eliminate from public life those who use their position within local government structures to commit acts considered outside the generally accepted norms of coexistence.

The concept of the so-called 'watchdog', formulated by John Milton in his work "Areopagitica" dating back to the Enlightenment, is to the greatest extent fulfilled by investigative journalists today (Kosmaty, 2014, p. 41). Their investigations and the far-reaching consequences caused by their revelatory articles have turned them into the most recognisable synonym of the "fourth estate" and the elite in the world of the modern media (Adamczyk, 2008). However, in some circumstances, the power of the press can prove illusory, and ultimately turn against journalists, and also against readers enjoying their work. As Walery Pisarek noticed:

"The function of media people as the fourth estate is not exercising power, but providing people with the information they need about current events, commenting on these events, and thus contributing to the shaping of public opinion. Going beyond this area

and usurping the position of the fourth estate, the media become tools of other authorities. To the detriment of democracy” (Pisarek, 1995, p. 155).

The watchdog function of the media, to the greatest extent associated with the term “the fourth estate”, in the practice of local newspapers action is sometimes understood differently. In various typologies it is not always expressed explicitly and sometimes treated only as a supplement to the catalogue of the basic duties of the mass media. For American media experts the three basic functions of the press are: informing, educating and providing entertainment. Other functions, including the checking function, are complementary. That problem was similarly recognised by Irena Tetelowska, but instead of the educational function she proposed the function of shaping opinion. We will not find this type of duty, so named, in the classifications by Leslie G. Moeller, Bèla Buda, Harold D. Lasswell, Charles R. Wright, Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, Denis McQuail, the UNESCO experts from the MacBride Commission and the authors of the report *Many Voices, One World* (Pisarek, 2008, pp. 168–171; McQuail, 1987, pp. 70–71; Jakubowicz, 1981, p. 71; Oniszczyk, 1988). In the previous political system in Poland, many media experts did not include the checking function in their classifications of media duties (Michał Szulczewski, Kazimierz Młynarz, Adam Podgórecki). In modern typologies, some researchers list the checking function as a stand alone function (Chorążki, 1994, p. 17), others – such as Ryszard Kowalczyk – merge it into a single information-control function of the press (Kowalczyk, 2003, p. 519). The latter treatment, seems correct in the light of media theory, because the effect of information on reprehensible phenomena can be checking political power. However, it does not exist in the practice of the functioning of the press in small environments. It should be presumed that the function of each press title operating at the local level is both to inform and to check local government. While the first of these features is generally performed better or worse, the second sometimes appears in the content of the activities of reporters from the independent commercial media, but is certainly not present in the editorial bulletins issued by local authorities.

A narrow way of understanding the checking function was introduced by Marcin Król:

“It is not primarily about tracking various pathologies in society on a low or high level [...], but to oversee whether the elected representatives of the authorities are fulfilling their election promises, in which cases they did not comply, and what the consequences for us are” (Król, 2004).

Observations of the daily activities of local reporters dedicated to checking the actions of the governing bodies do not confirm this opinion. Limiting the scope of the exercise of the checking function only to verifying the implementation of election manifestoes seems too strong, narrowing the range of possible and practical actions. It should rather formulate the view that a frequent subject of the publication of investigative reporting and journalistic intervention is the various manifestations of social pathologies, including poorly organised local government institutions. This means that journalists expose situations where both the local authorities and the individual civil servants working in them do not adequately fulfil the tasks for which they have been appointed or, in the case of officials, employed.

“The media are not fighting the institutions, but all forms of distorting the principles of local government, including erroneous decisions, bureaucracy, corruption, waste of



public resources and so on. They do not fight the local government and its particular decisions, not the institution, but specific officials – their attitude and unfair decisions” (Kotlarz, 2006, p. 213).

Therefore, special attention should be paid to the decisions taken by investigative reporters about the themes of their articles, allowing them to properly carry out their tasks. As Ryszard Kowalczyk observed, the thematic structure in local media is derived from the needs and interests of the audience, and a decisive influence over it is held by the editor (who identifies the profile of writing), the social environment, the editorial policy (preference for certain topics or their marginalisation) and the needs, expectations and interests of consumers (Kowalczyk, 2003, pp. 186–187). Paweł Kuca indicates several key areas of life which are the subject of interest of journalists performing the media checking function (Figure 1).

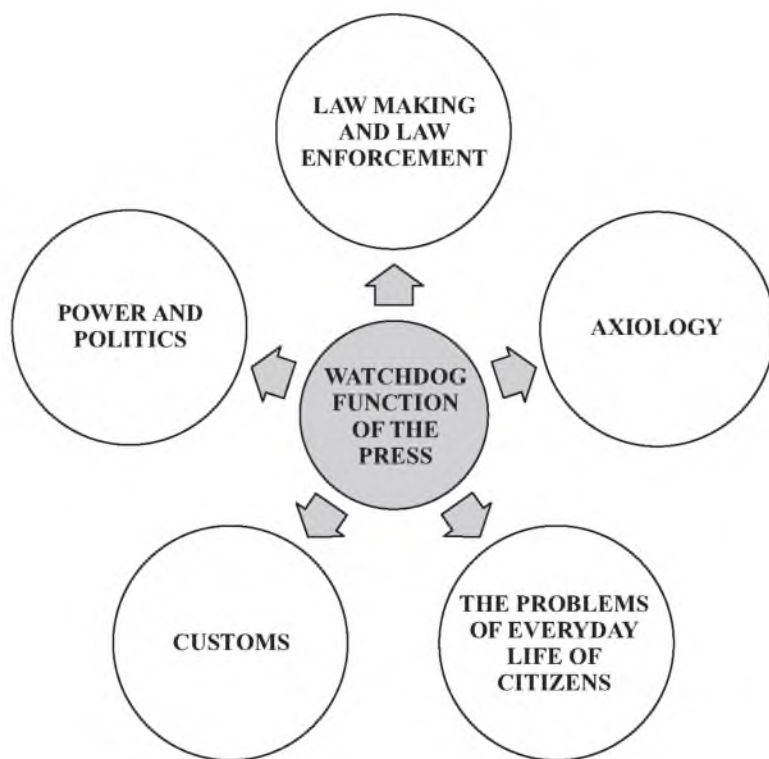


Figure 1. The areas of life described by the media as part of the checking function

Source: Own elaboration based on P. Kuca (2006), *Dziennikarstwo interwencyjne jako przejaw kontrolnej funkcji prasy na przykładzie dzienników woj. podkarpackiego*, in: *Między odpowiedzialnością a sensacją. Dziennikarstwo i edukacja na przełomie wieków*, eds. K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, M. Wrońska, W. Furman, Rzeszów, p. 188.

The problem areas identified, which are the subject of investigations by reporters, often underlie conflicts between the media and a local authority. This is partly because, in seeking the truth, journalists ask difficult, or sometimes even uncomfortable, questions of people at different levels of politics. Doing so on behalf of the citizens, they implement

the idea of watchdog journalism, becoming an instrument of democracy (Mauret, 2012; Marder 1999/2000, p. 78). Characteristic of investigative journalism and journalistic intervention, criticism of the behaviour of the representatives of local elites, due to the difficult economic situation of print media in recent years, is, for newspapers, a matter of life or death on the market, and is a measure of journalistic credibility (Wójcikowski, 2006, p. 217). At the same time, permanent confrontation in this type of journalism seems to be not only a natural attitude, but even necessary. From the point of view of the reader and the citizen, a medium which is too conciliatory towards the actions of the authorities does not serve the local community on matters of interest, especially when it comes to conflicts of interest and breaches of the rights of residents. Supporting the position of the authorities, or business entities supported by them, raises suspicions about the existence of informal arrangements and dependences between local governments and the owners of a newspaper. Therefore, some independent titles in the local press decide to check the actions of municipal bodies on behalf of the citizens. This is so, even at the expense of falling into open conflict with a local authority, which, as practice shows, seems inevitable (Kotlarz, 2006, p. 214; Barć-Krupińska, 2006, p. 180; Wójcikowski, 2006, p. 218). An expression of this confrontational character is primarily the quantitative relationship of press materials with a positive tone to materials containing critical remarks. In a medium carrying out the checking function the dominance of the latter can be observed.

Is the selection of topics made by investigative journalists objective? Are local decision-makers (such as, say, publicly stigmatised politicians) portrayed negatively only when something bad happens? Do today's investigative reporters imitate the old American muckrakers, about whom President Theodore Roosevelt said: "the man who could look no way but downward, with the muck rake in his hand; [...] the man who in this life consistently refuses to see aught that is lofty, and fixes his eyes with solemn intentness only on that which is vile and debasing" (Weinberg, 2001, p. 58)? How true is the opinion of Frank Denton, the editor of a regional US newspaper? He once said that he and his colleagues are still "using as a measure of success how many heads [they] can hang on the wall, either for being thrown out of office or into jail" (Russ-Mohl, 2005). Such an approach would be a confirmation of the truth included in the old joke: what's the difference between a politician and a fly? None. Politicians and flies can both be killed by a newspaper.

What kinds of problems are investigative journalists interested in? An overview of award-winning publications in the category of investigative journalism awarded prizes in the United States and Poland is proof that the range of such subjects is very extensive. The most prestigious American Journalist Award – the Pulitzer Prize – was awarded in the category of "Local Reporting" relatively late, twenty years after the introduction of similar awards in the field of "International Reporting" and seven years after the field of "National Reporting" (Fischer, 1989, p. XV). However, from the beginning, the interests of journalists have tended towards describing the unlawful and/or immoral behaviour of public people, who at all cost tried to hide it from the public. Importantly, local reporters were frequently prize winners. In 1926, William Burke Miller of the "Louisville Courier-Journal" won in the category "Reporting" for an article about trapping in Sand Cave, Kentucky. A year later, John T. Rogers won for publications which led to the impeachment of George W. English, a judge of the US Court for the Eastern District of Illinois (Fischer, 1989, p. XVIII). In 1931, A. B. MacDonald of the "Kansas City Star" won for

his texts dedicated to a murder in Amarillo, Texas. In 1938, a lot of publicity went to Raymond Springle, who won the award for a series of articles published in "The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette". He revealed the membership of judge Hugo L. Black in the Ku-Klux-Klan. A year later, Thomas Lunsford Stokes of "The Scrippes-Howard Newspapers Alliance" was awarded a prize for publishing a series of articles on alleged intimidation of workers for the Works Progress Administration in Pennsylvania and Kentucky during an election in 1939. In 1940, Burton S. Health of "The New York World-Telegram" was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for exposing the fraud of federal judge Martin T. Manton. Thanks to these publications, Manton was forced to resign and was later convicted and imprisoned. In 1941, the prize was awarded to Westbrook Pegler from the same newspaper for articles "on scandals in the ranks of organized labor, which led to the exposure and conviction of George Scalise, a labor racketeer" (Fischer, 1989, p. XIX–XXI). A new chapter in the history of this award involves the introduction of a new category – "Local Reporting", for news stories published in a daily newspaper prepared under the pressure of edition time. And although the formal name of this category did not indicate investigative journalism articles, practice has shown that the results of journalistic investigations conducted by reporters from smaller newspapers are appreciated by the jury. For example, in 1948 George E. Goodwin of the "Atlanta Journal" was awarded a prize for a publication on electoral fraud in Telfair County, Georgia, which took place a year earlier. The subject of investigative journalism at the local level was also reflected after the next change of the name of this category of award in 1953. Then, an award was set up under the name "Local Reporting, No Edition Time", which was awarded for publications produced over a long time, without time pressure.

"Within this award category, it was intended that carefully and lavishly investigated journalism should be recognized separately from the other category where deadlines precluded such considered and in-depth writing" (Fischer, 1989, p. XXVIII).

Table 1 contains examples of reporters from the newspapers of the local range awarded this distinction for publications that were the result of investigations conducted by them.

Table 1

**Journalists from local newspapers awarded with Pulitzer Prize for "Local Reporting, No Edition Time" in 1953–1963 (selected examples)**

| Year | Author of publication | Name of newsroom            | Justification of award  |
|------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1    | 2                     | 3                           | 4   |
| 1954 | Alvin Scott McCoy     | <i>The Kansas City Star</i> | For a series of exclusive stories which led to the resignation under fire of C. Wesley Roberts as Republican National Chairman  |
| 1955 | Roland Kenneth Towery | <i>Cuero Record</i> (Texas) | For his series of articles exclusively exposing a scandal in the administration of the Veterans' Land Program in Texas. This 32-year-old World War II veteran, a former prisoner of the Japanese, made these irregularities a state-wide and subsequently a national issue, and stimulated state action to rectify conditions in the land program |



| 1    | 2                                  | 3                                       | 4   |
|------|------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1957 | Wallace Turner and William Lambert | <i>Portland Oregonian</i>               | For their expose of vice and corruption in Portland involving some municipal officials and officers of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America, Western Conference. They fulfilled their assignments despite great handicaps and the risk of reprisal from lawless elements |
| 1958 | George Beveridge                   | <i>Evening Star</i> (Washington, D.C.)  | For his excellent and thought-provoking series, "Metro, City of Tomorrow", describing in depth the urban problems of Washington, D.C., which stimulated widespread public consideration of these problems and encouraged further studies by both public and private agencies  |
| 1959 | John Harold Brislin                | <i>Scranton Tribune and Scrantonian</i> | For displaying courage, initiative and resourcefulness in his effective four-year campaign to halt labor violence in his home city, as a result of which ten corrupt union officials were sent to jail and a local union was embolden to clean out racketeering elements  |
| 1960 | Miriam Ottenberg                   | <i>Evening Star</i> (Washington, D.C.)  | For a series of seven articles exposing a used-car racket in Washington, D.C., that victimized many unwary buyers. The series led to new regulations to protect the public and served to alert other communities to such sharp practices  |
| 1961 | Edgar May                          | <i>Buffalo Evening News</i>             | For his series of articles on New York State's public welfare services entitled, <i>Our Costly Dilemma</i> , based in part on his three-month employment as a state case worker. The series brought about reforms that attracted nationwide attention   |
| 1963 | Oscar Griffin, Jr.                 | <i>Pecos Independent and Enterprise</i> | Who as editor initiated the exposure of the Billie Sol Estes scandal and thereby brought a major fraud on the United States government to national attention with resultant investigation, prosecution and conviction of Estes  |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on: The Pulitzer Prizes, <http://www.pulitzer.org>; Fischer, 2003, pp. 115–128; Brennan, 1999, pp. 356–365, pp. 374–397.

An important date in terms of investigative journalism was 1964. Then, the jury decided the next redefinition of this category of awards for the next two decades. The "Pulitzer Prize for Local Investigative Specialized Reporting" was awarded for publications in the field of investigative journalism published in local media (Table 2). This decision can be regarded as a natural consequence of the practice observed in the previous period, when a large group of local reporters was awarded prizes for publications that were the result of journalistic investigations.

In 1985, the title of the category of "Local Investigative Specialized Reporting" was changed to "Investigative Reporting". Removal of the local nature of the publication in this category did not immediately contribute to the rising dominance of national newspapers, belonging to big media corporations (Table 3).

Table 2

**Journalists from local newspapers awarded the Pulitzer Prize for “Local Investigative Specialized Reporting” in 1964–1984 (selected examples)**

| Year | Author of publication                               | Name of newsroom                                 | Justification of award  |
|------|---|--|---|
| 1964 | James V. Magee, Albert V. Gaudiosi, Frederick Meyer | <i>Philadelphia Bulletin</i>                     | For their expose of numbers racket operations with police collusion in South Philadelphia, which resulted in arrests and a cleanup of the police department                       |
| 1965 | Gene Goltz  | <i>Houston Post</i>                              | For his expose of government corruption Pasadena, Texas, which resulted in widespread reforms   |
| 1966 | John Anthony Frasca                                 | <i>Tampa Tribune</i>                             | For his investigation and reporting of two robberies that resulted in the freeing of an innocent man  |
| 1967 | Gene Miller   | <i>Miami Herald</i>                              | For initiative and investigative reporting that helped to free two persons wrongfully convicted of murder   |
| 1969 | Al Delugach, Denny Walsh                            | <i>St. Louis Globe-Democrat</i>                  | For their campaign against fraud and abuse of power within the St. Louis Steamfitters Union, Local 562  |
| 1970 | Harold Eugene Martin                                | <i>Montgomery Advertiser and Alabama Journal</i> | For his expose of a commercial scheme for using Alabama prisoners for drug experimentation and obtaining blood plasma from them   |
| 1973 | <i>The Sun Newspapers Of Omaha</i>                  | <i>The Sun Newspapers Of Omaha</i>               | For uncovering the large financial resources of Boys Town, Nebraska, leading to reforms in this charitable organization's solicitation and use of funds contributed by the public |
| 1975 | <i>Indianapolis Star</i>                            | <i>Indianapolis Star</i>                         | For its disclosures of local police corruption and dilatory law enforcement, resulting in a cleanup of both the Police Department and the office of the County Prosecutor         |
| 1978 | Anthony R. Dolan                                    | <i>Stamford Advocate</i>                         | For a series on municipal corruption  |
| 1979 | Gilbert M. Gaul, Elliot G. Jaspin                   | <i>Pottsville Republican (Pennsylvania)</i>      | For stories on the destruction of the Blue Coal Company by men with ties to organized crime   |
| 1981 | Clark Hallas, Robert B. Lowe                        | <i>Arizona Daily Star</i>                        | For their investigation of the University of Arizona Athletic Department  |
| 1982 | Paul Henderson                                      | <i>Seattle Times</i>                             | For reporting which proved the innocence of a man convicted of rape   |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on: The Pulitzer Prizes, <http://www.pulitzer.org>; Fischer, 2003, pp. 115–128; Brennan, 1999, pp. 356–365, pp. 374–397.

In the above-described statements from 1926–2015 the main areas of interest of US investigative reporters of local newspapers were lawmaking and law enforcement, power and politics, and the problems of the everyday lives of citizens. Frequently, they described the phenomenon of corruption, electoral and financial swindles, and of abuse of position by senior politicians and officials. Much less often, among winning publications were problems of axiology and customs. It is worth noting that the American muckrakers of local newspapers also described subjects relating to institutions, politicians and civil servants at the higher levels of administration.

Table 3

**Journalists from local newspapers awarded with Pulitzer Prize for “Investigative Reporting” in 1985–2015 (selected examples)**

| Year | Author of publication                                   | Name of newsroom                                  | Justification of award  |
|------|---|---|---|
| 1    | 2   | 3   | 4   |
| 1985 | William K. Marimow                                      | <i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i>                  | For his revelation that city police dogs had attacked more than 350 people – an exposure that led to investigations of the K-9 unit and the removal of a dozen officers from it   |
| 1985 | Lucy Morgan, Jack Reed                                  | <i>St. Petersburg Times</i> (Florida)             | For their thorough reporting on Pasco County Sheriff John Short, which revealed his department's corruption and led to his removal from office by voters  |
| 1986 | Jeffrey A. Marx, Michael M. York                        | <i>Lexington Herald-Leader</i> (Kentucky)         | For their series ‘Playing Above the Rules,’ which exposed cash payoffs to University of Kentucky basketball players in violation of NCAA regulations  |
| 1987 | Daniel R. Biddle, H.G. Bissinger, Fredric N. Tulsky     | <i>The Philadelphia Inquirer</i>                  | For their series ‘Disorder in the Court,’ which revealed transgressions of justice in the Philadelphia court system and led to federal and state investigations   |
| 1989 | Bill Dedman   | <i>Atlanta Journal and Constitution</i>           | For his investigation of the racial discrimination practiced by lending institutions in Atlanta, reporting which led to significant reforms in those policies   |
| 1990 | Lou Kilzer, Chris Ison                                  | <i>Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune</i>          | For reporting that exposed a network of local citizens who had links to members of the St. Paul fire department and who profited from fires, including some described by the fire department itself as being of suspicious origin |
| 1991 | Joseph T. Hallinan, Susan M. Headden                    | <i>The Indianapolis Star</i>                      | For their shocking series on medical malpractice in the state   |
| 1992 | Lorraine Adams, Dan Malone                              | <i>The Dallas Morning News</i>                    | For reporting that charged Texas police with extensive misconduct and abuses of power   |
| 1993 | Jeff Brazil, Steve Berry                                | <i>Orlando Sentinel</i> (Florida)                 | For exposing the unjust seizure of millions of dollars from motorists – most of them minorities – by a sheriff's drug squad   |
| 1994 | <i>Providence Journal-Bulletin</i> (Rhode Island) staff | <i>Providence Journal-Bulletin</i> (Rhode Island) | For thorough reporting that disclosed pervasive corruption within the Rhode Island court system   |
| 1995 | Stephanie Saul, Brian Donovan                           | <i>Newsday</i>                                    | For their stories that revealed disability pension abuses by local police   |
| 1996 | <i>The Orange County Register</i> staff                 | <i>The Orange County Register</i>                 | For reporting that uncovered fraudulent and unethical fertility practices at a leading research university hospital and prompted key regulatory reforms   |
| 1997 | Eric Nalder, Deborah Nelson, Alex Tizon                 | <i>The Seattle Times</i>                          | For their investigation of widespread corruption and inequities in the federally sponsored housing program for Native Americans, which inspired much-needed reforms   |

| 1    | 2  | 3   | 4   |
|------|--|---|---|
| 1998 | Gary Cohn, Will Englund                  | <i>The Baltimore Sun</i>                  | For their compelling series on the international shipbreaking industry that revealed the dangers posed to workers and the environment when discarded ships are dismantled               |
| 1999 | The <i>Miami Herald</i> staff            | <i>The Miami Herald</i>                   | For its detailed reporting that revealed pervasive voter fraud in a city mayoral election that was subsequently overturned  |
| 2004 | Michael D. Sallah, Joe Mahr, Mitch Weiss | <i>Toledo Blade</i>                       | For a series on atrocities by the Tiger Force during the Vietnam War  |
| 2005 | Nigel Jaquiss                            | <i>Willamette Week</i> , Portland, Oregon | For his investigation exposing former governor Neil Goldschmidt's long concealed sexual misconduct with a 14-year-old girl  |
| 2007 | Brett Blackledge                         | <i>The Birmingham News</i>                | For his exposure of cronyism and corruption in the state's two-year college system, resulting in the dismissal of the chancellor and other corrective action                            |
| 2011 | Paige St. John                           | <i>The Sarasota Herald-Tribune</i>        | For her examination of weaknesses in the murky property-insurance system vital to Florida homeowners, providing handy data to assess insurer reliability and stirring regulatory action |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on: The Pulitzer Prizes, <http://www.pulitzer.org>; Fischer, 2003, pp. 115–128; Brennan, 1999, pp. 356–365, pp. 374–397.

Against the background of the US experience, it is interesting to compare awarding prizes to American muckrakers with the much shorter history of rewarding the efforts of local media reporters in Poland for articles which present the effects of journalistic investigations. The best evidence of the activities of local independent publishers in this difficult area is their interest in the “Local Press” competition, organised by the Association of Local Newspapers since 2008.<sup>5</sup> Since its announcement, each year, reporters from these newspapers send their publications, which are evaluated, among others, in the category of investigative journalism and intervention. Overall, from 2008 to 2014 there were 1,047 publications in this category (details for the respective years are in Table 4), which should be considered a success. During nearly 25 years of the existence of free press in Poland, local press titles published by independent, private operators are faced with many prob-

<sup>5</sup> The Local Newspapers Association (Stowarzyszenie Gazet Lokalnych, SGL) has existed since 1999 and currently comprises 43 publishers, owning 73 titles with a combined weekly circulation of 387,000 copies. The SGL works with local newspaper publishers, who are not members, but who publish independent local newspapers. The number of members and supporters of the SGL has reached 150. They are associated in an advertising agreement called “Local Weekly TL” (“Tygodnik Lokalny TL”), a unique national advertising network. “Local Weekly TL” appears in 100 counties outside big cities and is regularly read by almost every second inhabitant (42.3 percent). In 2005 research was conducted on a sample of 6,095 people over 15 years of age which showed that at least once a month 11.25 percent of Poles, that is 3.4 million people in the age range, read newspapers published with the logo “Local Weekly TL” (Polacy, 2005; *O Stowarzyszeniu*, 2011). In a study of 2015, the number of readers reaching for “Local Weekly TL” amounted to 3.68 million, giving it first place among weeklies and the title of the strongest paid medium in the segment of print media in Poland (AM 2015).

lems that are not conducive to covering difficult and economically risky topics. Despite the lack of a long tradition of investigative journalism, a complicated relationship with local authorities, and unequal competition with bulletins issued by local authorities, the reported number of texts is optimistic.

Table 4

**Number of press materials submitted in category  
“journalism investigation and journalistic intervention”  
to contest conducted by the Association of Local  
Newspapers “Local Press” in 2008–2014**

| <b>Contest “Local Press” conducted by the Association<br/>of Local Newspapers in 2008–2014</b> |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Year</b>  | <b>Number of press materials submitted in<br/>category “journalism investigation and<br/>journalistic intervention”</b> |
| 2008   | 287   |
| 2009   | 203   |
| 2010   | 70  |
| 2011   | 128   |
| 2012   | 87  |
| 2013   | 140   |
| 2014   | 132   |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on data Association of Local Newspapers (Stowarzyszenie Gazet Lokalnych).

The broader scope of that competition (on top of investigative reports, there are journalistic interventions, focusing attention on presenting the struggles of ordinary citizens with local institutions and officials, and on supporting people to solve their daily problems) contributed to the widening of the topics discussed.

Table 5

**Press materials awarded prizes in the category of investigative journalism and  
journalistic intervention in the “Local Press” competition conducted  
by the Association of Local Newspapers in 2008–2014**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Author of publication</b> | <b>Name of newsroom</b>  | <b>Title of article</b>                         |
|-------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| 2008        | Jerzy Jurecki                | “Tygodnik Podhalański”   | <i>Szczawnica w Raju</i>                        |
| 2009        | Milena Celińska              | “Tygodnik Siedlecki”     | <i>Lewa antykoncepcja</i>                       |
| 2010        | Jerzy Jurecki                | “Tygodnik Podhalański”   | <i>Sekret Senatora Skorupy</i>                  |
| 2011        | Andrzej Olszewski            | “Kurek Mazurski”         | <i>Dom Samopomocy za zamkniętymi drzwiami</i>   |
| 2012        | Jerzy Jurecki                | “Tygodnik Podhalański”   | <i>Daliśmy łapówkę na Hołdymasie</i>            |
| 2013        | Jerzy Jurecki                | “Tygodnik Podhalański”   | <i>Dream team</i>                               |
| 2014        | Daniel Długosz               | “Nowa Gazeta Trzebnicka” | <i>Tajemnicze interesy burmistrza Trzebnicy</i> |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on data by the Association of Local Newspapers (Stowarzyszenie Gazet Lokalnych).



In previous editions of the competition, Jerzy Jurecki received the most prizes. He is owner and editor of the weekly "Tygodnik Podhalański". For many years he has been engaged in investigative journalism. His publications relate to the abuse of position by politicians and officials for private benefit (*Sekret Senatora Skorupy*), forcing bribes by corrupt officials (*Daliśmy łapówkę na Hołdymasie*), vague connections between the lawyers and judges affecting the outcome of legal proceedings (*Dream team*) and problems with privatisation in a spa (*Szczawnica w Raju*). Articles by other winners raised varied topics. In the publication *Lewa antykoncepcja* the author revealed procedure by which a midwife administered a contraceptive drug to patients without consulting a doctor and for which she gained material benefits. In a prize-winning series of texts under the common title *Dom Samopomocy za zamkniętymi drzwiami* the author described cases of wasting public money, harassment and ill-treatment of patients in a social care centre. Another prize-winning author in 2104, in an article titled *Tajemnicze interesy burmistrza Trzebnicy*, presented the ambiguous conduct of a local official. This local official took over real estate from residents of the municipality at a reduced price for private purposes.

A better view of the various subjects discussed in the articles published in the local media is given by an analysis of the texts submitted in 2012–2013 to a competition organised by the SGL in the category of investigative journalism and intervention (only in those years does the SGL provide all articles submitted for the competition). Among the problems raised in the publications of investigative journalists in 2012 were:

- 1) mobbing,
- 2) nepotism,
- 3) conflicts of interest in the allocation of funds for social activities,
- 4) driving under the influence of alcohol by local politicians,
- 5) construction lawlessness of municipal officials,
- 6) hiding by officials the fact of convictions against them and submitting of false declarations of good conduct false declarations,
- 7) attempts by officials at buying the favour of the local media,
- 8) bribery,
- 9) corruption,
- 10) eavesdropping of officials and petitioners in municipal offices,
- 11) immoral proposals made by councillors to females (Table 6).

Table 6

#### Topics discussed by local investigative journalists in 2012–2013

| Topics of articles  | Year 2012 | Year 2013 |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| 1   | 2         | 3         |
| Mobbing   | 3         | 0         |
| Nepotism  | 3         | 5         |
| Conflict of interest in the allocation of funds for social activities   | 5         | 4         |
| Driving under the influence of alcohol by local politicians   | 1         | 1         |
| Construction lawlessness of municipal officials   | 3         | 1         |
| Hiding by officials the fact of convictions against them and submitting of false declarations of good conduct | 4         | 1         |

| 1   | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|
| Attempts by officials at buying the favour of the local media   | 1 | 1 |
| Bribery   | 1 | 0 |
| Corruption  | 0 | 1 |
| Eavesdropping of officials and petitioners in municipal offices | 0 | 3 |
| Immoral proposals made by councillors to females                | 0 | 1 |

**Source:** Own elaboration based on data Association of Local Newspapers (Stowarzyszenie Gazet Lokalnych).

The above table clearly shows that, compared with the effects of the work of American reporters, Polish investigative journalists working in local newspapers focus their attention on politicians and officials on the lowest levels of local government. A greater diversity of issues occurs in the materials on journalistic intervention. Also, the number of texts submitted for the competition in both these editions was higher than in investigative journalism. The most common topics of journalistic intervention undertaken by reporters were:

- 1) neighbourhood conflicts,
- 2) crime (theft, accidents, murders),
- 3) evictions by bailiffs,
- 4) problems of dwellers of housing communities,
- 5) family conflicts caused by alcoholism,
- 6) conflicts between residents and officials,
- 7) restricting access to information about the activities of councillors,
- 8) fraud and mismanagement in local institutions,
- 9) fraud committed by so-called quacks,
- 10) creating sinecures in offices and subordinate units,
- 11) officials receiving undue salaries,
- 12) environmental issues,
- 13) improper activities of local institutions (police, municipal guard, health care, fire brigade),
- 14) false bomb alarms,
- 15) social services.

The aforementioned catalogue of issues is not exhaustive, but this list enables us to see how extensive the subjects raised in this type of publication were. In the presented examples of journalistic intervention, the main issues raised were problems of the everyday lives of citizens and, far less often, law enforcement.

## Conclusions

The topics raised in local newspapers are, in most cases, a result of the situation in which newsrooms operate in this segment of the media and the functions of the press assigned to the term “fourth estate”. Expectations regarding the work of journalists and the issues raised by them are not the same – readers and media people vary even in their assessment of the components of the watchdog function. In 2001 a telephone survey was

conducted on a sample of 600 adult respondents in an American city. On a list of the most important functions of the media, "control of power and powerful people" was in 9<sup>th</sup> place, with 49 percent of responses rating it as "very important". The top items in this study were accuracy (94 percent) and unbiased reporting (84 percent) (Heider, 2005, pp. 956–958). Journalists perceive the importance of this form of activity differently, as shown by a study conducted in the United States of America in 2002. In this case, the response rate recognising "[being] a watchdog" as "very important" amounted to 70 percent (Heider, 2005, p. 959; Weaver, 2003). This should be considered as one of the reasons influencing the range of themes offered by the local media, which in turn may lead to them not raising difficult topics. This is evident not only in recent decades in the content of titles belonging to the big media giants, that in pursuit of increasing income focus their activities on topics that are cheap and easy to prepare (McChesney, 1999, p. 54; Logan, 2004, p. 101). Research conducted by Ryszard Kowalczyk on the content analysis of the local press in the Poznań region in 1989–1992 and 1998 showed that a new trend in the problems discussed on the pages of local magazines is appearing. More and more space is devoted to affairs of private life (accidents, crimes, profiles of people, the problems of individuals). This is done at the expense of social issues, including matters which are of interest to reporters who check the authorities and business (Kowalczyk, 2003, p. 191). The trivialisation of content and tabloidisation are, according to Marek Jachimowski, phenomena increasingly present in today's local papers and lead to the loss of the information, discursive and checking functions. Their place is taken by entertainment, promotional and advertising content (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, 2013, p. 136).

Political and economic pressure on reporters from small, local newspapers also has a negative impact on the range of topics undertaken by investigative journalists. Wide range of forms of pressure on unruly newsrooms means that the local elites survive without ongoing criticism of their actions which continue unchecked (Begoyan, 2009; Pitera, 2006, p. 158; Barć-Krupińska, 2006, pp. 180–182; YT, 2002). Worse still, any attempt by the media to censure errors is treated by local decision makers as an attack on their authority and undermining their competence.

"The media are the most disliked when they are trying to enforce its watchdog function. Publicising lapses, nonsense or scams made by representatives of local elites, scrutinising them, observing the actions of individual leaders, groups, councillors or parties is sometimes treated as a declaration of war" (Szymański, 2012, p. 145).

Financial considerations are not without significance for reporters. Investigative journalists carry out a responsible and difficult job, for which they receive relatively low pay. In addition, they live under the pressure of any civil process.<sup>6</sup> Another obstacle in describing difficult social problems may also be the commercial nature of media enterprises, which at the level of small municipalities are often dependent on companies collaborating or being closely related to the local ruling elite. In such situations, cold calculations can

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<sup>6</sup> A famous case was with the Pulitzer Prize-winner in 2015 in the category of local journalism. Rob Kuznia, along with Rebecca Kimitch and Frank Suraci, published a series of articles as the result of an investigation into alleged corruption in one of the small school districts in California. R. Kuznia quit his job at "The Daily Breeze" because of the difficult economic situation and decided to move to the PR industry (PS, 2015).

discourage publishers from taking on risky topics. As a result, the balance of gains and losses may determine editorial and journalistic decisions. Jolanta Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek pointed out this problem:

“Checking of authorities, representing the public interest and not the special interests of publishers are assigned to the private press. Such a view is simplistic, because it does not take into account all the economic restrictions on the freedom of the commercial press. Private ownership is not automatically a warranty of its independence and does not pre-judge about its position as watchdog on the local media market” (Dzierżyńska-Mielczarek, 2012, p. 30).

The consequence of this situation is different for the local investigative reporter and his or her editors. Should they pursue socially important topics and be exposed to pressure from the authorities and an outflow of advertisers, or should they avoid describing sensitive issues about local government and build an economic position for the future?

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## Na każdy temat? Tematyka publikacji dziennikarstwa śledczego i interwencyjnego w prasie lokalnej (na przykładzie Polski i USA)

### Streszczenie

Autor podjął ciekawy, chociaż do tej pory niezbadany kompleksowo na gruncie amerykańskiego i polskiego medioznawstwa problem tematyki poruszanej w publikacjach dziennikarstwa śledczego i interwencyjnego na poziomie lokalnych wydawnictw prasowych. Podobnie jak w mediach ogólnokrajowych ujawnianie afer i nagłaśnianie niewłaściwych zachowań władzy zdarza się dosyć rzadko w mediach lokalnych, a działalność kontrolna w ramach *watchdog function of the press* występuje w polskich realiach tylko w nielicznych lokalnych mediach komercyjnych, niezależnych od organów samorządowych. Autor omawia wpływ funkcji kontrolnej mediów na dobór tematyki przez lokalnych dziennikarzy śledczych oraz charakter działań lokalnych decydentów politycznych i biznesowych ograniczających tematykę podejmowaną przez reporterów dochodzeniowych. Analizie porównawczej poddano problemy funkcjonowania organów samorządowych oraz społeczności lokalnych nagłaśniane w publikacjach demaskatorskich i interwencyjnych. Do porównania wykorzystano artykuły o tematyce lokalnej nagrodzone Pulitzer Prize za dziennikarstwo śledcze w latach 1926–2015 oraz materiały nadesłane i nagrodzone w latach 2012–2013 w konkursie "Local Press", organizowanym przez Stowarzyszenie Gazet Lokalnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** prasa lokalna, dziennikarstwo śledcze, dziennikarstwo interwencyjne, tematyka publikacji

