

TERRA. Revista de Desarrollo Local

e-ISSN: 2386-9968

Número 13 (2023), 22-45

DOI 10.7203/terra.13.27338

IIDL – Instituto Interuniversitario de Desarrollo Local

## **Senses of place, rurality and local journalism**

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## Senses of place, rurality and local journalism

*Abstract:* This article presents a reflection between communication research and the essay on the role of journalism in the construction of senses of place in rurality. The collective sense of place is generated and circulates in processes of social interaction in which public communication becomes a space for negotiation. These territories see how rurality suffers a decline as a result of depopulation, the abandonment of productive activities, the impact of forest fires and environmental problems. The media becomes a forum where these communities must have a space for expression. The author argues the need for local journalism (in the sense of proximity) that is governed by deontological criteria for understanding the people living in small towns and cities that have suffered processes of peripheralization. The author implements a research case by studying the journalistic coverage of a solar plant project and the opposition of part of the inhabitants of a municipality under the umbrella of the “Renovables sí, pero no así” (“Renewable yes, but not this way”) movements. The author holds that local journalism enhances the voice of communities, granting agency to its residents, which he connects with the concept of “agent rural.” At the end, the author highlights the importance of decentralized, local and regional journalism (*periodismo de proximidad*), in which the nodes of small and medium-sized cities are crucial for the understanding of the senses of place.

*Keywords:* proximity journalism, sense of place, ruralities, energy transition, environmental conflict

Recibido: 26 de septiembre de 2023

Devuelto para revisión: 10 de octubre de 2023

Aceptado: 13 de diciembre de 2023

### *Referencia / Citation:*

Castelló, Enric (2023). Sentidos de lugar, ruralidad y periodismo de proximidad. TERRA. Revista de Desarrollo Local, (13),22-45]. DOI 10.7203/terra.13.27338

## IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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|---|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. El periodismo contribuye a la construcción de los sentidos de lugar.</li><li>2. En la ruralidad, el periodismo de proximidad debe acercarse más al territorio y sus habitantes.</li><li>3. El periodismo de proximidad en la ruralidad construye comunidades con agencia narrativa.</li><li>4. Los retos de la ruralidad reclaman la existencia de un periodismo local y comarcal que explica los sentidos de lugar.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Journalism contributes to the construction of senses of place.</li><li>2. In rural areas, local journalism must get much closer to the territory and its inhabitants.</li><li>3. Local journalism in rural areas builds communities with narrative agency.</li><li>4. The challenges of rurality demand the existence of local and regional journalism that explain the senses of place.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. El periodisme contribueix a construir als sentits de lloc.</li><li>2. A la ruralitat, el periodisme de proximitat ha d'apropar-se més al territori i als seus habitants.</li><li>3. El periodisme de proximitat a la ruralitat construeix comunitats amb agència narrativa.</li><li>4. Els reptes de la ruralitat reclamen l'existència d'un periodisme local i comarcal que explica els sentits de lloc.</li></ol> |
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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to explore the concept of collective sense of place and the role that local journalism (*periodismo de proximidad*)<sup>2</sup> plays in its construction and circulation. To do this, the text begins with a digression in which the author highlights the need for journalism not to confuse objectivism with impartiality, activism with deontological commitment to the communities it reports on. The author advocates here for journalism that physically approaches rural places, speaks with the dwellers of towns and agricultural and livestock areas. These areas, according to the author, have been peripheralized not only from an economic and social point of view, but above all from a symbolic and cultural perspective. Local journalism should be a tool for communicative balance of these peripheralization processes. These territories and their people are represented in a system of “symbolic colonization” since mainstream journalism tends to report on these areas taking interests and vectors exogenous to the interests of their inhabitants, therefore, consuming an exogenous sense of place.

In the conceptual section, the author delimits the concepts of local journalism (*periodismo de proximidad*), sense of place, rurality and newsworthiness. He puts these four concepts into dialogue, through interdisciplinary discussion of communication studies and human geography. Based on previous studies, it is argued that proximity does not necessarily imply that journalism takes an attitude committed to the environment or to understanding the locals’ sense of place. It is necessary a conscient exercise of this role. The author relates some discredit of the concept of sense of place because of the strong scientific and technocratic visions and planning towards the territory, while romantic notions would lead to an idealization of rurality and its problematic identification with essences of tradition.

In the second part of the theoretical section, the newsworthiness criteria and their relationship with rural issues are discussed. The author argues that there is a critique towards journalism from academia which should be nuanced. It is usually noted that journalists take a biased viewpoint focusing on rural conflicts, indeed conflicting the rural. The author comments that it is not that the media conflicts rurality, but that the media tend to offer frameworks of the conflict wherever it operates. Journalists explain the conflicts where they happen. The problem, for the author, is that this is not always done offering enough elements of background, history, socio-cultural context, etc. to properly understand these rural places. On the contrary, there is a tendency towards a simplification or spectacularization of these stories that do not help to understand the challenges of rural areas. Local journalism, the text says, should put special attention to this context and to intangible values of the territories.

The case study works on local journalistic coverage of a conflict generated around the project to install a solar plant in the municipality of Carcaixent (Valencia, Spain). After contextualizing the scenario and placing himself in it, the author analyzes a sample of 69

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<sup>1</sup> Traducción exclusiva de los autores/ Authors’ exclusive translation.

<sup>2</sup> In Spanish media studies the notion of *periodismo de proximidad* is a common concept to refer to local journalism (see for example Macià and López, 2007), although there is also the notion of *periodismo local*. *Periodismo de proximidad* would include not only local journalism but also regional, community journalism, and even small scale modes of production (eg. a website collecting news about a neighbourhood). In Spanish, local has a meaning more attached to municipality, meanwhile proximity would be broader here. In this extended abstract, we used local journalism to refer to *periodismo de proximidad*.

journalistic pieces (between January 2017 and August 2023) to identify the uses in which proximity journalism defines the sense of place. He highlights the ability of some journalistic pieces to take distance from corporate sources and making possible to local people and agents to disseminate messages that articulate a collective sense of place. The author relates the quality of this journalism to its capacity to present in a qualitative and reasoned manner “arguments from all parties, and crucially from the affected communities”. He also highlights the fact that some of these newspapers’ pieces devote efforts to explaining the history of the place and the relationship of the dwellers with it, as was the case of some of the published articles.

In the conclusions, the author remarks that it is an essential function of journalism to give voice to these rural communities. In the case study, it has been observed that this conflict had hardly any impact outside of the local media, which is why they are necessary to display an “agentic rural” that gives voice to the inhabitants and defines the sense of place, which is the basis of their collective identity. In that sense, the author calls to better value journalism expressions and initiatives that operates from small and medium-sized cities, communicative nodes of proximity becoming the media and forum of local communities.