

HISTORICAL SCIENCES

THE CONCEPT, FUNCTIONS, AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL PRESS THE PRESS AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

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Abstract

This study explores the concept, functions, and historical significance of the provincial and local press in Hungary during the early twentieth century. It distinguishes the often-conflated categories of “provincial” and “local” press and demonstrates their differing social, spatial, and political roles. Despite structural weaknesses—economic vulnerability, limited editorial capacity, and political influence—provincial and local newspapers played a crucial role in shaping local public life, forming community identity, and mediating public opinion. The chapter argues that the local press functioned not only as an information medium but as an integral component of local society. It also outlines the methodological framework for using local newspapers as historical sources.

Keywords: local press; provincial press; public sphere; public opinion; Hungarian press history; Debrecen; interwar period; media and society

I. Introduction

The history of the local and provincial press represents a field of Hungarian press history that has so far been only partially explored. While the press of the capital—owing to its political, cultural, and economic importance—became an early focus of historical scholarship, provincial and local newspapers remained marginalized for a long time.² This neglect is particularly striking given that, in the decades following World War I, a substantial proportion of Hungary’s periodical publications were produced in provincial regions, where they played a decisive role in the everyday flow of information, the formation of local identity, and the political socialization of local communities.

The aim of this chapter is to establish the theoretical, historiographical, and methodological foundations for the central inquiry of the dissertation, which undertakes a detailed historical analysis of the local daily newspaper Debreczen. Its core question concerns how the concept of the local press can be interpreted in the context of Hungary in the first half of the twentieth century, what social, political, and cultural functions it fulfilled, and how—and to what extent—it can be employed as a historical source. Accordingly, the chapter is not merely descriptive; it adopts a problem-oriented perspective, examining how the local press mediated social relations, the degree to which it shaped public opinion, and the ways in which it was embedded within the structure of the public sphere.

One of the conceptual problems is the distinction between the provincial and local press. In the literature, these two categories are often – incorrectly – presented as synonyms, despite the fact that there are significant differences between them in terms of their function, scope, and social embeddedness. The study starts from the basic thesis that all local press products can be considered provincial press, but not all newspapers published in provincial areas can be classified as local press. This distinction is not merely a question of terminology, but also fundamentally determines how the social functions and historical significance of a given press outlet can be interpreted.

The aim is also to show the structural and social conditions under which provincial newspapers gained ground in Hungary, with particular reference to the first decades of the 20th century. The study examines the division of roles between the capital and the provincial press, focusing on the fact that while Budapest, the capital, functioned primarily as a center of cultural, scientific, and official public spheres, the provinces became the primary arena for political and local public discourse.³ A key aspect of the analysis is the examination of the structural weaknesses of the provincial press, highlighting the economic, organizational, and personnel factors that determined the operation of local newspapers: limited financial resources, a “one-man” editorial structure, and political and economic dependencies.

² This situation was further reinforced by the fact that at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the press experienced not only a formal and qualitative transformation, but also a quantitative explosion. As a result, research into the history of the press—both provincial and national—was interrupted at a certain point. The sheer volume of material would have required not only extensive time and labour, but also considerable financial resources. The second (and to date final) volume of the academic series was published in 1985, covering the history of the Hungarian press between 1867 and 1892. The editor-in-chief of the work was Miklós

Szabolcsi, and the editorial team included such distinguished scholars as Domokos Kosáry, Géza Buzinkay, Tibor Erényi, and András Gergely. See: Ágnes Széchenyi, *The Missing History of the Hungarian Press in the Twentieth Century – Debt List and Proposal*, Magyar Tudomány, 2004/10, p. 1150.

³ Understanding this duality is essential in order to understand the operation of the Debreczen newspaper not merely as a local phenomenon, but as part of the national press structure.

Another important issue is the relationship between local society and the press. The local press cannot be understood merely as a means of conveying information: its operation is closely intertwined with the social environment, which is why the concept of local society is introduced as a category of analysis, examining how the press conveyed local identity, traditions, values, and conflicts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the power of the press, with particular emphasis on the concepts of public opinion, the audience, and the public sphere. How did the local public sphere develop, how was public opinion formed, and what role did the press play in this as a mediating and interpreting institution? At the same time, it also addresses criticism of the press, particularly the issue of business and political influence, as well as the problems of restrictions on press freedom.

II. The rise of provincial newspapers⁴

In Hungary, a significant proportion of the periodical press, more than half, was published in provincial areas, despite the fact that provincial newspapers often operated under less favorable financial conditions. Nevertheless, the provincial press remained a significant competitor to the capital's newspapers, and some provincial newspapers even had significant social and political influence. **From the moment Budapest became the capital**, the provincial press can be discussed in a modern sense. The first period, which lasted until the 1880s, can be considered the initial stage of provincial journalism, which we refer to as *the formative period of provincial journalism*.⁵ The second phase, which began in the 80's, was *the Middle Ages* of the provincial press, which was also the consolidation of the provincial press. During this period, an increasing number of printing houses were established, and a num-

ber of influential provincial newspapers emerged, especially in Arad, Oradea, Cluj-Napoca, Bratislava, Szeged, and Debrecen.⁵ In 1894, 18 daily newspapers were published in provincial areas, while in Budapest, the number of daily newspapers was only 15. The presence of the provincial political press was further strengthened by 54 political weeklies, which were usually published once a week, and in some cases three times a week. The number of non-political social weekly newspapers in the countryside during the same period was approximately 162, which clearly indicates the demand for press products with social themes, while trade journals did not have national significance in the countryside. The most significant group of provincial periodicals was religious and church magazines: 82 of these were published, many of which were distributed nationwide. The third phase, the *"modern era,"* can be placed in the post-World War I period. The First World War caused significant losses in the Hungarian periodical press: in 1914, nearly a thousand press outlets ceased operations. However, this decline primarily affected the press in the capital, while provincial newspapers outnumbered those in Budapest, leading to a restructuring of the domestic press. The war brought a clear upswing for the provincial press.⁶ Provincial newspapers, which had previously focused primarily on local events and curiosities, began to place greater emphasis on news from the capital, which significantly increased reader interest.⁷

As a result, the composition of the newspaper-reading public also changed: social groups that had previously shown no interest in the press became regular readers. After overcoming problems related to paper supply, technological advances not only increased circulation, but also made it possible to reduce prices, so

⁴ The term "provincial" can be used in several ways. On the one hand, it may denote a simple geographical distinction—namely, everything that is not Budapest. On the other hand, however, it also carries a much broader and more complex meaning: it can refer to patterns of thought, behavior, and lifestyle that reflect the cultural character of a given community. "Provincial" therefore denotes a particular quality of life and mindset which, in modern approaches, may even be interpreted as a specific behavioral model. See: Pál Bánlaky, *The Symptoms of Provinciality*, Békéscsaba, 1989, p. 5. According to the Minister of Culture, Count Kuno Klebelsberg, the term "provincial" had undeservedly acquired a pejorative meaning. In his view, those who spend considerable time in the countryside can encounter cultural values that are not always accessible within certain circles in Budapest. *Délmagyarország*, January 20, 1931, p. 2.

⁵ The emergence of proposals for church policy reforms also contributed to the development of the provincial press. In response to these reforms, Catholic newspapers were founded—initially in episcopal seats and later in several larger cities—with the aim of opposing the government's church policy initiatives. In 1890, a total of 687 newspapers were published in the Hungarian Empire, and six years later this number had nearly doubled to 1,203. These newspapers appeared not only in Hungarian but also in the languages of all nationalities living within the empire. See: Cs. L., *The Provincial Press*, in: *Press. Scientific Journal of Journalism*, 1927, no. 7, p. 1.

⁶ With the outbreak of the war, the situation of provincial daily newspapers changed significantly. Editors sought to obtain as much up-to-date information as possible from Budapest, a process facilitated by the government's official press agencies. As a result, provincial newspapers regularly received official reports from the battlefield, along with other important announcements, which greatly contributed to the boom in the provincial press. Through local newspapers, provincial readers were able to learn about war events 12–24 hours earlier, as national newspapers often reached provincial areas with considerable delay due to transportation difficulties. Thus, the local press became the primary source of information through which the population of the provinces could access news most rapidly. Cs. L., 1927, issue 7, p. 2.

⁷ According to the 1900 census, Debrecen had a population of 75,006, a figure that increased substantially over the following decade. By 1910, the city's population had risen to 92,729, indicating a clear trend of dynamic growth. The linguistic homogeneity of the settlement remained unchanged: the number of native Hungarian speakers reached 91,305, representing 98.5% of the total population. Knowledge of the Hungarian language was almost universal, with 92,236 people (99.5%) able to speak Hungarian. Data from the last census before the Great War show that 72.3% of the population (67,358 people) were literate—well above the national average of 58.2%. Rovács Barna, *Ady Endre's Academic Career in Statistics – With the Help of Contemporary Thematic Maps*, in: *Book and Education*, 2019/3–4.

that cheap newspapers were no longer available only to the elite, but also to the masses.⁸

This growth in readership primarily benefited provincial newspapers, strengthening their role in the Hungarian press market.⁹ According to the 1920 census, a total of 79,765 people in Debrecen were literate. The distribution of literacy rates varied according to age. Among the 6–11 age group, 9,571 people were literate, among the 12–14 age group, 6,343 people were literate, while among the 15–19 age group, 10,350 people were literate. The number of literate people was 18,431 among those aged 20–29, 13,554 among those aged 30–39, and 9,232 among those aged 40–49. Among those aged 50–59, 6,828 people were literate, among those aged 60–69, 3,922 people were literate, while among those aged 70–79, 1,304 people were literate. Among those aged 80 and above, the number of literate people was 1,534.¹⁰ According to data from the 1930 census, the population of Debrecen over the age of six was 104,268, of whom 96,069 could already read and write, meaning that 92% of those over the age of six were literate.¹¹

The educational reform process that began in the early 1920s also contributed greatly to the growth of the reading base. Kuno Klebelsberg's work was of decisive importance in this regard: he made advances in the development of education that had a direct impact on the level of literacy and the increase in the proportion of people who could read and write. While in 1910 the illiteracy rate among the population over the age of six was 33% nationwide, by 1920 this figure had fallen to 15% and by the 1930s it had fallen even further.¹² A major wave of educational reforms began in 1926 with the launch of a comprehensive development program. As part of the program, 3,500 new classrooms and 1,750 teachers' apartments were completed, and 1,096 new elementary schools were established between 1926 and 1931. In provincial areas, educational progress

among the lower social strata unfolded at a somewhat different pace, with folk high schools (adult education institutions) assuming a key role in facilitating the educational catch-up of rural and peripheral communities.¹³ These measures contributed greatly to the expansion of the press readership.¹⁴

Parallel to the expansion of the readership, readers' demands also gradually increased, their tastes developed, and they increasingly expected high-quality press products. As a result, the editorial and content quality of provincial newspapers also improved.¹⁵ The most significant editorial offices of the era operated in Miskolc, while most newspapers were published in Debrecen, where 19 different newspapers were published, collectively distributed across 115 cities and towns.¹⁶

III. The division of roles between the capital and the provincial press

Provincial newspapers often drew on material from evening newspapers arriving from Budapest, sometimes copying articles verbatim, which often represented a higher standard of editing and content.¹⁷ The provincial press grew steadily in numbers, although at a moderate pace: by the beginning of 1926, there were already 316 provincial newspapers in operation, and this number increased during the year, indicating the expansion and stabilization of the provincial press.

We have accurate data from early 1928 on how the periodicals developed, which clearly shows the structural differences between the capital and the provinces. While Budapest functioned as the primary center of cultural, scientific, and official public discourse, the provinces primarily provided a forum for political and public life. Budapest's dominance is striking in the category of daily newspapers: news-reporting dailies were published exclusively in the capital, and the number of political dailies was also significant (22). At the same time, the countryside was strongly represented in this category, with 46 political daily newspapers, which

⁸ Bajomi-Péter Lázár, *Media and Society*, Budapest, 2008, p. 26.

⁹ This expanding readership primarily benefited provincial newspapers, as clearly demonstrated by contemporary statistical data. While in 1913 the 38 daily newspapers published in Budapest distributed a total of 204.8 million copies via post and rail, by 1920 this number had dropped dramatically to 95.8 million. This decline weakened the position of the capital's press, whereas the circulation and readership of provincial newspapers grew significantly. Cs. L., 1927, no. 7, p. 3.

¹⁰ Hungarian Royal Central Statistical Office. *The 1920 Census. Literacy by Native Language and Age*. Budapest, 1928, pp. 234–235.

¹¹ Hungarian Royal Central Statistical Office. *The 1930 census. The literacy of the population*. Budapest, 1932. 29.

¹² One of the decisive stages in this development was the confirmation in 1921 of compulsory school attendance for children between the ages of 6 and 15 (Act XXX). Ignác Romsics, *History of Hungary in the 20th Century*, Budapest, 2002, p. 175.

¹³ These institutions contributed to the improvement of the general education of the population through courses lasting several weeks or months, and played an important role in the cultural advancement of society. Romsics (2002), p. 178.

¹⁴ Between the two world wars, interest in literature also increased significantly. A large portion of the petty bourgeoisie,

as well as an ever-growing number of organized workers, developed a strong interest in reading. As a result, the number of books published did not decline; on the contrary, it rose steadily. While 2,378 volumes were published in 1913, by 1934 the number of different books published in Hungary had reached 3,920. This boom was interrupted by the paper shortage of 1938–1939 and by the introduction of the First Jewish Law, both of which significantly hindered the development of book publishing and intellectual life. Romsics (2002), p. 211.

¹⁵ The improvement in the quality of the press was also facilitated by the fact that editorial offices increasingly employed highly competent staff. Journalists collected information quickly and thoroughly, both locally and from Budapest. They processed news arriving by telegraph, telephone, and radio with professional skill. Most provincial editorial offices already possessed radios, which enabled editors to learn about events across the country—and even around the world—almost immediately. Information obtained in this way passed rapidly through local editorial offices and could appear in the columns of newspapers shortly thereafter. Cs. L., 1927, issue 7, pp. 1–6.

¹⁶ Cs. L. 1927, issue 7, pp. 1–6.

¹⁷ In addition, some provincial daily newspapers received fresh reports from the capital by telephone or telegram, thus ensuring that readers had quick access to national events.

shows that local political life and the provision of information to regional communities played a decisive role in the countryside. In terms of weekly newspapers and magazines, the countryside clearly dominated: more than two-thirds of political weekly newspapers and magazines were published in provincial areas (122 out of 168), and a similar trend can be observed in the case of newspapers published three times a week: 144 provincial newspapers were published, while Budapest published only 46 such publications.¹⁸

Overall, 699 newspapers were published regularly in Budapest, while 361 were published in the countryside, which is almost twice as many as in the capital. At the same time, the number of publications alone does not reflect the difference in the functional role of the press, which thus had a dual character: the capital's press served as a forum for the discourse of the national elite, while the provincial press continued to function as a venue for identity formation and political communication in local societies.

IV. Structural weaknesses of provincial newspapers

Provincial newspapers had to contend with a number of difficulties. One of the most significant was chronic financial constraint: the owner, founder, publisher, or financial backer of a paper often carried out the editorial work as well, meaning that professional, trained journalists were seldom employed.¹⁹ The second difficulty likewise stemmed from this situation: the editors of such "one-man" weekly newspapers could not adopt a fully independent position, either financially or intellectually. They were obliged to consider a wide range of constraints and expectations, which often came at the expense of their editorial work. They had

to take into account the interests of the publisher or printer, the wishes of local officials, and the demands of their readership.

For provincial weekly newspapers to employ professional journalists and editors, it was essential first to overcome their financial difficulties.²⁰ The objective was to employ only those staff members for whom the newspaper could provide a secure and respectable livelihood. Achieving this required the accumulation of sufficient capital, a process in which the establishment of an in-house printing press constituted a crucial step.²¹ The core objective at the time can thus be summarized as follows: "*it should not be the printing house that owns a newspaper, but the newspaper that possesses its own printing house.*" In addition to lowering printing costs, expanding the subscriber base and attracting new advertisers generated further revenue. Taken together, these income sources created the financial foundation that enabled the provincial press to professionalize and to operate sustainably in the long term.²² Once these objectives had been met, it became evident that the provincial press was also capable of providing a stable and secure livelihood for professional journalists.²³

Another significant problem was the absence of organizational cohesion within the provincial press. Provincial newspapers lacked a unified, structured body that could effectively represent the economic and social interests of their members or maintain systematic communication between individual publishers and editorial offices. This organizational vacuum generated persistent difficulties, and it became increasingly evident that the only viable way to improve the situation

¹⁸ The capital's dominance in the field of cultural and professional journalism was unequivocal. The vast majority of literary, critical, fashion, and other cultural periodicals were published in Budapest (113 out of 151), and the capital also maintained an almost complete monopoly in the category of scientific journals: 88 of the 94 scientific periodicals were produced there. Official newspapers were likewise concentrated in the capital, owing to its central administrative role. By contrast, the distribution of religious newspapers was considerably more balanced: 40 were published in the capital and 42 in the provinces, indicating that religious life was structurally and institutionally deeply rooted in provincial society. Statistics on the press in truncated Hungary. In: A Sajtó, Scientific Journal on the Press, 1929, no. 2, p. 77.

¹⁹ Not only was the lack of trained journalists a problem, but it was also uncertain whether a professional journalist, once hired by a provincial newspaper, could earn a decent living. Owing to the limited financial resources of provincial editorial offices, a journalistic career in the provinces often meant economic insecurity and frequently led to livelihood difficulties. Géza Buzinkay, "The Career of a Journalist." In: Tibor Malkovics, Press and Media History. Budapest, 2003, p. 151.

²⁰ The profession of journalism developed through several stages. First, journalism became distinct from other occupations and emerged as an independent field of work. This was followed by the growing demand for specialized knowledge, which initiated the process of professionalization. The third stage was characterized by a decline in external political, economic, and institutional interference, which enabled the strengthening of journalistic autonomy. Finally, a form of collective professional identity emerged among journalists,

accompanied by the development of an individual social identity that already displayed the features of a professional community. Svernik Høyer – Epp Lauk, "Professional Journalism and Civil Society. A Historical Overview." Jel-Kép, 1995/1, p. 77.

²¹ Not only was the establishment of printing presses significant, but the substantial technological development in printing at the beginning of the century—both in the provinces and in the capital—also played a crucial role. This period marked the beginning of the so-called vertical integration of publishing houses and printing companies. Dezsényi Béla – Nemes György, 250 Years of the Hungarian Press, Vol. I. Budapest, 1954, p. 222;

²² László Tarr, On Provincial Weekly Newspapers. In: The Press, Scientific Journal of Journalism, 1933, No. 10, p. 257.

²³ In summary, at the beginning of the 20th century, the "typical" professional journalist almost invariably worked for a nationally distributed daily newspaper: they produced news, wrote reports, and participated in the editing of individual columns. Their activities were documented by official certificates, and their income generally enabled them to maintain a middle-class standard of living. Another important characteristic was their membership in the Journalists' Pension Fund, which represented a fundamental form of professional security and existential stability. Since the modern press was concentrated mainly in the capital, the majority of professional journalists were also members of the Budapest Journalists' Association. Balázs Sipos, Personal Sources and the Narrative of Historical Experience. Individuals and Communities in Hungary 1848–1948, p. 107–108.

of the provincial press was the creation of a unified institutional framework.²⁴ This problem was ultimately addressed by Gyula Szigethy, the owner of Debreczen. He established the Provincial Press Syndicate, which soon evolved into a large-scale organization and eventually gave rise to the Economic Association of Provincial Daily Newspapers. This institution played a decisive role in alleviating the structural problems of the provincial press.²⁵

V. All local press can be regarded as part of the provincial press, yet not all provincial newspapers qualify as local.

Definition and operational characteristics of the local press

The concepts of provincial press and local press are frequently conflated, yet they can be clearly differentiated both in terms of content and geographic scope. The provincial press denotes publications issued outside the capital that cover a broader territorial area, including newspapers published in major provincial towns which reported on public, political, and cultural developments across an entire region, a county, or even multiple counties. County daily newspapers are typical examples, as they disseminated news not only about a single settlement, but about a wider surrounding area as well. By contrast, the local press concentrated on a single municipality or a smaller spatial unit. These newspapers focused primarily on local public life, economic matters, and cultural and social events, and their readership was therefore generally confined to one specific city, town, or community.²⁶

The local press must be examined both as a historical phenomenon and as a historical source. Only through a coordinated and systematic analysis can a comprehensive understanding be gained of its development, its values, and its role in social life. In Hungarian press historiography, this field has remained largely underexplored, and several problem areas -many of them specific to local press research -continue to be insufficiently studied.²⁷ Since the concept of the local press has not yet been sufficiently clarified in the scholarly literature, it is necessary to define both "*local*" and

"*press*" more precisely and unambiguously in order to render the term professionally coherent and analytically usable.²⁸

The press is a distinct medium of social communication, characterized by a variety of forms and modes of content.²⁹ These characteristics have changed repeatedly throughout history, and therefore the concept cannot be defined in a single, fixed manner. To examine the press with sufficient rigor, the term itself must first be clarified: what do we mean by "*press*"? The very word newspaper implies the communication of new events and information of interest to wider segments of society, making its printed dissemination both necessary and justified. The earliest forms of the press appeared as leaflets reporting primarily on battles and other major events. In its modern form, however, the press functions as a means of providing the public with continuous and regular information - a need generated by civil society with the intention of informing and serving the broader public as comprehensively as possible.³⁰

As a social phenomenon, journalism has continually adapted to historical processes, which in turn have shaped its development.³¹ It consistently reflects the social transformations within which it has evolved, enabling its historical and social origins to be identified with considerable precision. Its development and functioning have been shaped by a wide range of external influences, including bureaucratic intervention, the technological and market conditions of press production, journalistic practices, and prevailing ethical and professional standards. Northcliffe, the English newspaper publisher, was the first to recognise a new form of modern journalism: the mass-circulation, information-centred newspaper. He argued that the general public was not interested in abstract or overly general issues, but rather sought topics that were personally relevant, romantic in tone, or connected to sport and everyday life. Even major political events captured the

²⁴ "It is a remarkable and incomprehensible phenomenon in Hungary that neither law nor customary law provides protection or safeguards the livelihood of journalists." Rezső Péchy-Horváth, cited in László Tarr, "On Provincial Weekly Newspapers," *A Sajtó*, Scientific Journal of Journalism, October 1933, p. 257.

²⁵ József Pálffy, *The Directors of the Newspaper Company*. DEENK Kassai út Campus Manuscript Archive, compiled by József Pálffy, Ms 11/1:4 2.

²⁶ For example, a small-town or district weekly or daily newspaper can be regarded as part of the local press.

²⁷ Gáborné Korompai, *History and Literature of Press Research in Debrecen*. Debrecen, 1979, p. 69.

²⁸ Miklós Bényei, *The Printed Messengers of the Civic Spirit*. Debrecen, 2007, p. 243; Mihály Szívós, "Regional Innovation and the Revaluation of Local Publicity," in *Space and Society*, Vol. XXIV, 2010, p. 51.

²⁹ At the beginning of the 20th century, the press and radio were among the most important means through which people could learn about a world they had not experienced firsthand. Although other media also contributed to shaping the public's worldview, the press played an especially decisive role in expanding people's horizons. It enabled readers

to become acquainted with events, places, and social phenomena beyond their personal experience, thus serving as a fundamental instrument for representing reality and disseminating information. Balázs Sipos, *Press and Power in the Horthy Era*. Budapest, 2011, p. 74.

³⁰ József Halasy-Nagy – Can newspapers educate the public? In: *A Sajtó*, Scientific Journal of Journalism, 1934. Issue 5-6. p. 2.

³¹ According to university professor József Halasy-Nagy, journalism is fundamentally driven by two core motives: the service of political and economic interests. In his view, journalistic activity was organized around these two objectives; therefore, when analyzing a press product, one must primarily examine which pieces of information were made public and which were left unsaid. It is well known that a given piece of news can be written in several different ways: while two articles may be identical in terms of factual content and both may accurately reflect reality, the mode of presentation can significantly influence the reader's interpretation. Thus, journalism was not merely a vehicle for transmitting information but also a tool for shaping interpretive frameworks. Halasy-Nagy (1934), pp. 1–4.

public's attention only when they bore some direct personal relevance.³²

The term press is used today by professionals in both a narrow and a broad sense, yet it is essential to emphasise that any press publication must meet four fundamental criteria: it must be produced in a reproducible form, appear at regular intervals, contain current information, and be intended for a public audience. When considering the conceptual scope of the press, newspapers and magazines constitute its most narrowly defined category, whereas calendars, yearbooks, school newsletters, almanacs, and annually or biennially issued pocket books occupy a borderline position.³³

The other component of the concept- the adjective local -indicates that the content of the press product is primarily connected to a specific place, such as a county, district, town, municipality, or, in some cases, a particular institution. Its principal function is to inform those who live or work within that area, and its articles typically contain information of explicit local relevance.³⁴

The most appropriate point of comparison for the local press is the national press; however, the local press cannot be equated with the provincial press. There are local newspapers published in the capital that target narrowly defined audiences- such as workplace communities, schools, or residents of particular districts - and therefore address only the population of Budapest. Conversely, a considerable number of newspapers published in provincial areas can be regarded as national in character, both in terms of their content and their distribution.³⁵ The boundaries between the national and local press are often indistinct, particularly in the case of so-called regional newspapers, whose circulation and influence may extend across sizeable parts of a country or specific regions.³⁶

Over time, and in response to changing societal demands, a wide variety of local press formats emerged, which continue to display considerable diver-

sity in both content and form. Among the most prominent types were political newspapers, county and municipal daily papers, as well as weekly newspapers published in towns and larger urban centres.³⁷ Although several categories can be distinguished, in practice a single publication may simultaneously fall into more than one of them. Content overlaps are frequent, meaning that a substantial proportion of press products cannot be classified as "*pure*" types. Local newspapers played a particularly prominent role in the dissemination of culture: they contributed to the expansion of general education, the strengthening of moral standards, and the shaping of public taste. Their informative notices, literary texts, critical reviews, and illustrations all served these cultural functions. The local press also offered extensive opportunities for writers, artists, researchers, and for students and intellectuals engaged in literary, artistic, or scientific work. Newspapers provided a platform through which these individuals could articulate and disseminate their ideas.³⁸ The phenomenon of overlap frequently arises from the diverse functions and tasks that these newspapers perform. Local papers regularly reported on national and international political developments, often supplementing these with analysis and commentary. In addition, they provided coverage of economic, legal, cultural, religious, and various other topics, resulting in an exceptionally diverse and wide-ranging content profile.³⁹

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the local press played a decisive role in shaping cultural, political, and economic life. Although the quality of these newspapers was often uneven, this inconsistency was frequently compensated for by the sheer number of titles in circulation. Consequently, despite variations in editorial and stylistic standards, readership levels remained remarkably high. Local newspapers reached social groups that the national press was unable to address, and for many individuals they served as the primary- indeed, at times the only- source of information.

³² The newspapers edited by him - most notably the Daily Mail - followed new editorial principles: the paper's columns were filled with everyday events presented in the most sensational manner possible. It covered topics that had previously been ignored by the press, such as job opportunities and childcare issues. The Daily Mail sold millions of copies, with a substantial share of its revenue coming from advertising. Northcliffe also recognized that mass-market newspapers could only achieve high circulation if their content did not exceed a certain intellectual level and if articles were written in clear, accessible language tailored to the tastes of the masses. He believed that a newspaper publishing overly sophisticated or bourgeois texts could never reach as broad a readership as one written in an easily understandable style and focusing on popular topics. Halasy-Nagy (1934), pp. 1-4.

³³ The classification of occasional publications that appeared in newspaper format remains a debated issue in press history scholarship. Nevertheless, it is clear that press products which appeared periodically but produced only a single issue- due to financial constraints or legal prohibitions, for example- must still be considered press products. Bényei (2007), p. 245.

³⁴ The "local" character of a newspaper means that the publisher intended it to be distributed exclusively within a

clearly defined and delimited area. Consequently, national distribution and recognition were of secondary importance. The local press is never identical with the provincial press, since even in the capital there existed local newspapers intended for a specific, narrowly defined readership. Bényei (2007), p. 244.

³⁵ Examples of this phenomenon include national literary journals. In the second half of the 1920s, versatile and vibrant newspapers reappeared, once again serving the aims of what contemporaries called "qualified destruction." Kókay György - Buzinkay Géza - Murányi Gábor, *A magyar sajtó története* (The History of the Hungarian Press). Budapest, 1994, p. 192.

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 244-245.

³⁷ Further examples include movement newspapers, economic newspapers, professional journals, as well as church, school, and university publications. Moreover, information and advertising papers, sports newspapers, company newspapers, and scientific journals can also be classified here. Bényei (2007), p. 246.

³⁸ The work of many prominent poets, writers, and scholars began in these newspapers, and many other high-quality works were also published there. *ibid.* p. 246.

³⁹ Bényei (2007) p.245.

As a result, they managed to attract a broad and diverse readership even when their content quality fluctuated.⁴⁰

A recurring criticism held that the language employed by the press contributed to the erosion of linguistic norms. However, the reality was considerably more nuanced. The nature of journalistic work -whether in the capital or in provincial editorial offices -required constant alertness, rapid response, and the swiftest possible reporting of daily events.⁴¹ The competitive nature of the press market made it impossible for daily newspapers to report events with a delay of even a few days. Although the public clearly prioritized the rapid delivery of news, the speed of information flow at times came at the expense of linguistic refinement.⁴² Articles increasingly contained ungrammatical constructions and overly simplistic formulations of ideas. These erroneous or linguistically undemanding turns of phrase entered the press through newspaper writers and gradually "filtered into" the pages of the newspapers as well.⁴³

VI. The concept and significance of local society in press history research

The construction of an image of local society is of interest not only to specialists, but also to citizens who seek self-understanding and wish to define their place within the community. Local society can be examined from multiple perspectives: agricultural experts may approach it through the lens of household or backyard farming; historians through local historical research; economists by focusing on economic processes; and ecologists from the standpoint of environmental protection and regional ecological movements. Regardless of the perspective applied, it is clear that local societies are not merely theoretical constructs but diverse forms of social organization that function effectively in everyday life.⁴⁴

*"I define local society as a meso-group formed in a given settlement, which mediates interests, values, and ideologies between the individual and society as a whole through primary groups, preserves traditions, and enables locally rooted (autochthonous) self-organization."*⁴⁵ In Antal Bóhm's interpretation, local society

should be understood as a relative unit, system, or subsystem. Its defining characteristic is that it performs a mediating function that facilitates the integration of individuals into a broader social group. This presupposes that local societies mediate between different levels of the social structure, and that the local press not only records and reports local events but also actively participates in shaping the norms and articulating the conflicts of local society.

According to another interpretation, when viewed from the perspective of a settlement, the concept of local society primarily refers to a spatially defined dimension, forming a distinct community that can be clearly delimited within a specific area. It is therefore crucial to examine the extent to which the qualitative composition of this local community influences the emergence and functioning of the local press. For the various roles within a local community to be effectively fulfilled, a well-integrated social structure is indispensable.⁴⁶ Moreover, the local community must also function as a cultural mediator, which is essential for understanding and navigating the natural processes of everyday life.

If we define local society according to the strictest criteria, several aspects must be taken into account: a local society constitutes a clearly delineated spatial unit with a geographically defined and relatively stable population. This community is held together by a network of interpersonal relationships and possesses a shared history that has shaped its local traditions and customs. Its members share a common identity framework, expressing feelings of belonging and attachment-such as local patriotism and regional identity.⁴⁷

There are several essential components of mediated culture. Among these, the elements of material culture -those transmitted and maintained by the local community -are particularly significant. One illustrative example is the built environment, which clearly reflects the distinctive characteristics of local culture.⁴⁸ Two significant components of behavioral culture are relational forms and work culture. Relational forms refer to the patterns of everyday interaction and social

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 246.

⁴¹ "News is not what has happened, but what is happening." Balázs Géza- Szayly József- Szilágyi Árpád- Media Studies. Budapest, 2005. p.24.

⁴² Zsolt Harsányi, The Hungarian Nature of the Press. In: The Press, Scientific Journal of Journalism, 1930, issue 6, p. 289.

⁴³ It is important to emphasize that although the press is often accused of corrupting the Hungarian language, it can also exert a corrective influence. Jenő Rákosi, for example, made a significant contribution to preserving the purity of the Hungarian language through his language-cultivation activities in the press. Ibid., p. 290.

⁴⁴ András Gergely, Urbanized Beehive, or Local Society Budapest, 1993, p. 7.

⁴⁵ Antal Bóhm's interpretation of local society, cited in Pál Bánlaky, Local Society III. Structural Relations in Local Society, p. 15.

⁴⁶ The quality of local society was significantly influenced by the extent to which the individuals constituting it were able to form a genuine community. It was essential that a well-integrated social structure emerge, one capable of ensuring the smooth functioning of everyday life. (Pál

Bánlaky, Local Society as a Medium of Cultural Mediation, in: Still from the Sidelines: New Essays and Studies (1995–2019), Budapest, 2020, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.13.

⁴⁸ Characteristic features included residential buildings, the appearance of streets, and even the flowers and plants cultivated in gardens, all of which were shaped by local fashions. Another important group was the world of interior furnishings: furniture, household items, and decorative objects, which not only carried ethnographic markers but also reflected social status and its associated expectations. This phenomenon extended to everyday objects as well. Such items spread from family to family, became fashionable, and eventually became commonplace: if a few wealthy families hung paintings on the walls when building new houses, the habit quickly spread, and soon a painting appeared in the home of every "respectable" family. Clothing and related customs also constitute significant cultural elements within local societies. These were not expressed solely in folk costumes-although for ethnographers, traditional dress remains the most visible and most frequently analysed manifestation. Bánlaky (2020), pp. 16–17.

conduct between individuals, which are shaped by the strong normative framework of local society. These include, for instance, customary forms of greeting and modes of address. Work culture likewise represents a complex domain in which the practices and expectations associated with labour are regulated according to local societal norms. Each local society develops its own standards that dictate how particular tasks should be performed and what is regarded as appropriate or acceptable.⁴⁹

Between the two World Wars, Debrecen-the so-called *civis* (civic/bourgeois) city-was, alongside Szeged, the largest urban centre in Hungary outside the capital. Its society exhibited a distinctly European, bourgeois character. At the same time, beyond the urban core, the surrounding areas retained the features of a small town or village, and in the more remote outskirts even resembled farmstead-like rural settlements rather than a major city.⁵⁰ We must take into account both the duality inherent in the city's specific functions and the broader relational networks that shaped the urban space available to its inhabitants.⁵¹ Three pillars define a city: *"spatial extent, demographic embodiment, and functional role."*⁵²

Political culture was likewise a significant component of every local society. Its development was closely tied to the degree to which citizens were able to articulate their views and exert influence on their surroundings. Equally decisive were the arenas and forms through which public opinion could be expressed, shaped, and negotiated, as these fundamentally structured political discourse and public life.⁵³ Political discourse unfolded primarily in political newspapers. In 1926, for instance, 203 such papers were in circulation, 108 of which- amounting to 52.7 percent- supported or aligned with the government. By 1930, this figure had shifted to 161 pro-government newspapers out of a total of 250 political papers, representing 64.4 percent. It is important to emphasize, however, that at the national level the pro-government press was considerably stronger in provincial areas, where publishers, operating in smaller markets, were more dependent on state assistance.⁵⁴

VII. The power of the press: public opinion, audience, and the public sphere

⁴⁹ *ibid.* pp. 19-20.

⁵⁰ "The occupational structure of Debrecen differs so greatly from that of the towns and villages in its catchment area that we cannot treat the city and its surrounding countryside as a single region in our socio-historical analysis. Debrecen, with its role as a regional center and its multifaceted urban functions, is a much more complex society than the typical "market towns" of its countryside." Lajos Tímár, *Provincial Townspeople*. Budapest, 1993, p. 52.

⁵¹ It is not sufficient to examine the settlement itself; broader spatial relationships must also be taken into account, including the city's wider catchment area. These factors contributed significantly to the level and structure of central functions. Debrecen's catchment area was among the least developed regions in Hungary. Low incomes, low consumption, and weak capital accumulation collectively hindered the region's industrial development and urbanization. As a result of this unfavourable economic and social structure, a substantial part of the city's industry came under the control of Budapest's banking capital. Tímár (1993), pp. 53-68.

There was a time when the press was described as the *"seventh power."* As time progressed, its influence steadily expanded, and it assumed an increasingly prominent public role. Its significance derived from its ability to articulate and represent public opinion, to disseminate new ideas, and to amplify social aspirations that had previously remained marginal. The press had the capacity to reach millions, to mobilize them, and to inspire collective action.⁵⁵ However, the power of the press cannot be examined in isolation: its operation and influence must be understood within the theoretical frameworks of public opinion, the audience, and the public sphere. An analysis of these concepts reveals that the press exerts power only insofar as a receptive medium exists-namely, an active public opinion and a functioning public sphere in which press content can resonate, provoke debate, and stimulate social action.

The following section therefore examines the specific characteristics, historical foundations, and social functions of these three concepts, in order to demonstrate that the press derives its power from their existence and operation.

VII. 1. Public opinion

The concept of public opinion can be interpreted in several ways.⁵⁶ As a starting point, we may refer to the Révai Nagy Lexikon, which defines public opinion as follows: in every community engaged with public affairs, a certain common judgment tends to develop regarding public matters, ideas, and institutions; this is called public opinion. Within this framework, the press is only one of the institutions that shape public opinion. Its role is to influence shared interests and values, along which the views of communities are formed and transformed.⁵⁷ The positions represented by communities subsequently influence the judgments and actions of fellow citizens. According to Ödön Gerő, the relationship between the press and politics is fundamentally determined by the relationship between the press and public opinion. This relationship is reciprocal: on the one hand, the press shapes public opinion, while on the other, it is compelled to adapt to it and, in a certain sense, to submit to it. Newspapers shape individual opinion, often on the basis of commercial considera-

⁵² György Ránki – City History and Historiography. In: City History Conference, Debrecen, 1977. p.6.

⁵³ Bánlaky (2020) p.23.

⁵⁴ Sipos (2011) pp. 108-110.

⁵⁵ Ede Bresztovszky, *The Press: A Great Power*, Twentieth Century, 1917, p. 351..

⁵⁶ According to Schaeffler, public opinion is "the reaction of the public-of popular intellect, popular spirit, and popular will-to certain leading views, judgments, and tendencies." György Ottlik, *The Role and Significance of the Modern Press*, in: *A Sajtó, Scientific Journal on Press Matters*, 1933, Issue 02, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Dániel Lovas offers a similar definition, describing public opinion as the collective judgment of identifiable segments of the public. Public opinion plays a decisive role in a democracy: it shapes both national and local politics, remains in constant flux, and changes according to its own internal dynamics. Moreover, it responds sensitively to social tensions. Dániel Lovas, *The ABCs of the Local Press*, Lakitelek, 1996, p. 88.

tions. They are also commercial enterprises whose primary goal is to attract readers and avoid anything that might drive them away.

László Tápay-Szabó defined the concept of public opinion in his work *The Ethics of Journalism*. In his understanding, only individuals capable of independent thought can form part of public opinion, and their judgments can be regarded as public opinion only when they are in agreement with one another.⁵⁸ If we examine the term public opinion from an etymological perspective, we can draw the following conclusions. The first element, public, can be understood both in the sense of “central” and as the opposite of “private” or “secret.” The second element, opinion, denotes a value judgment or a statement of viewpoint. It is important to emphasize that the concept refers to a large number of people—namely, the aggregate of many individual opinions. Public opinion is therefore a value judgment that is accessible to all and to which anyone may choose to subscribe.⁵⁹

Dr. István Dékány distinguished between two fundamental types of public opinion. The first is bottom-up public opinion, which originates within the public and develops spontaneously. In contrast, artificial public opinion is generated from above and seeks to secure acceptance among the public as though it had emerged organically from them. The press plays a pivotal role in this process: it enables an assessment of the extent to which a given public opinion may be regarded as natural and authentic, and where top-down, constructed opinion begins.⁶⁰

It is therefore correct to say that the press is *the “mouthpiece”* of opinion.⁶¹ According to another perspective, however, it is the press itself that creates public opinion. The essence of these two opposing interpretations lies in their attribution of agency: one views the press as a genuine and active power, whereas the other regards public opinion as the active force for which the press merely serves as an instrument—a medium through which public sentiment becomes articulated. Public opinion is therefore not simply a factual statement or a judgment; it is far more than that. It reveals the extent to which a community is capable of reflection, how it interprets events, and how it positions itself for or against them. Although public opinion is

influenced by everything that takes place within society, empirical experience shows that not all events attract public attention. Typically, heightened attention is directed toward those phenomena that are closely linked to changes within one’s immediate environment, whereas issues that are too abstract or distant from personal experience rarely become subjects of genuine public concern.

It follows that the press tends to concentrate on topics that appear particularly salient or compelling to society at a given moment. Public opinion—understood as the aggregation of numerous individual viewpoints—is therefore more than a mere judgment: it constitutes a comprehensive reflection of social sensitivities, values, and collective reactions.⁶²

VII. 2. The audience

*“We usually decide what we want to see, and only then do we actually look at it.”*⁶³ W. Lippmann’s observation may seem counterintuitive at first, yet it can be substantiated in several ways. It is well established that individuals tend to seek out information that aligns with their interests and serves their personal needs. Conversely, they are inclined to exclude or disregard information that concerns topics conflicting with their existing opinions or beliefs.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, people were able to access information from regions of the world they could not experience directly, primarily through the press, newsreels, and radio broadcasts. One of the most significant effects of the press was its ability to broaden the horizons of the public: it exposed individuals to social, political, and cultural realities to which they had previously had no access.⁶⁴

Another important area of inquiry concerns the size of the readership of individual issues—that is, the actual audience reached by press publications. Precise data for the period are not available, and therefore the closest approximation can be obtained by examining circulation figures.⁶⁵ However, this does not provide a completely accurate picture, as it is not known how many people read each copy or how the newspaper spread within social networks.⁶⁶ Readership denotes the total number of individuals who read a given issue after its publication. This figure is almost invariably higher than the number of copies sold, as a single newspaper

⁵⁸ The function of public opinion is to exercise a decisive role in democratic states, since in a moral society, governance must ultimately rest on opinion. In other words, public opinion must fulfil a guiding and controlling function in order to sustain democratic operation. Sipos (2011), p. 62.

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.63.

⁶⁰ Dr. István Dékány, *The Role of the Press in Shaping Natural and Artificial Public Opinion*, The Press Library, 1938, Issue 16, p. 2.

⁶¹ According to Cromwell, public opinion is an elusive phenomenon precisely because it seems to tell everyone what they wish to hear. Peel expresses a similarly dismissive view, arguing that public opinion is nothing more than a confused mixture of foolishness, weakness, prejudice, and both genuine and false emotions. Dékány, *The Role of the Press in Shaping Natural and Artificial Public Opinion*, The Press Library, No. 16, 1938, p. 4.

⁶² Dr. Dékány (1938) p.3.

⁶³ W. Lippmann 1922. Quoted by Sipos (2011) p.73.

⁶⁴ According to the German legal scholar Lassalle, “the press is the most dangerous and genuine enemy of the people; all the more dangerous because it operates under a mask.” Iván Miklós, *The Organization of Intellectual Consumption*, Huszadik Század, 1917, p. 550.

⁶⁵ The term circulation refers to the total number of printed copies of a given newspaper produced by the printing press and intended for distribution. However, the number of copies actually distributed is typically lower, as various factors reduce the quantity that reaches the public. Among the main reasons for this decrease are the mandatory deposit copies that must be supplied to libraries and archives in accordance with legal regulations, as well as reference and archival copies retained by the editorial office. Free promotional copies also affect the final number of distributed issues. The number of copies sold includes both subscriptions and retail sales, and therefore provides a more accurate indication of a press product’s actual market reach and readership. Lovas, p. 118.

⁶⁶ Sipos (2011) p.77.

was often shared among several people within a household or workplace. According to statistical data, county newspapers had an average of 2.5 to 3.5 readers per copy. On this basis, a daily newspaper with a print run of 60,000 copies and actual sales of 55,000 could have reached a regular readership of approximately 180,000 to 220,000 people.⁶⁷

If we assume that each copy of a Budapest daily newspaper had at least three readers in the countryside, and that no “cross-reading” occurred- meaning that every individual read only one daily newspaper (a scenario that likely does not reflect reality) -then, on the basis of the number of copies mailed from Budapest and transported by rail, we can estimate that in 1930 at least 20% of the provincial population over the age of twenty regularly consumed press publications. If we calculate with five readers per copy, this proportion could have reached as high as 33%.^{68 69}

VII. 3. Public Sphere

There are numerous definitions of the public sphere in the sociological literature, but the simplest approach is to begin with the etymology of the term: public denotes what is generally accessible. From this, it follows that the public sphere primarily encompasses a social space in which facts, topics, arguments, and positions of public relevance are accessible to all, and may be commented upon, criticized, or supplemented.

In Hungarian, the term public sphere carries a dual meaning: on the one hand, it refers to the physical or symbolic space in which publicly accessible facts, themes, and opinions appear; on the other, it denotes the audience itself, which plays a decisive role as the recipient and interpreter of these contents. An often overlooked function of the public sphere is its mediating role: it constitutes a communicative arena that emerged between the state and society, as well as among the branches of power and the various organizational units of the state.⁷⁰

Jürgen Habermas discusses the interpretative framework of the concept in his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. He adopts a critical perspective on the public sphere at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguing that it had become increasingly hollowed out and had transformed into a domain of manipulative communication. With the industrialization of newspaper production, the previously intimate relationship between journalists and their readership gradually disappeared. In summary, according to Habermas, the condition of the bourgeois public sphere is fundamentally “*ambivalent*.”⁷¹

In the first decades of the twentieth century, both the press and the public sphere were marked by pronounced governmental intervention and control. The state exercised exceptional authority over the press, whose primary function, from the government’s perspective, was the management and steering of public opinion. As a result, the press operated not only as a vehicle for the transmission of information but also as an instrument through which the government could communicate its political aims and impose its preferred interpretive frameworks on society.⁷² The public sphere underwent continuous transformation not only in social and geographical terms but also temporally, as specific historical turning points substantially reshaped its operation. During periods of crisis -such as major economic depressions or world wars -public attention intensified. In such moments, the majority of the political community directed its focus toward unfolding events, which came to define the contours of the public sphere in that particular period. Put differently, historical events effectively structured the public sphere around themselves, and public discourse became concentrated almost exclusively on these issues.⁷³ One of the most potent social forces of the public sphere lay in its capacity to shape perceived reality: it could legitimize even partial or fragmentary truths as complete truths in the eyes of the public. For this reason, countering attacks against the press was essential to preserving its authority and credibility.

One of the period’s most prominent criticisms concerned the commercialization of the press: many argued that newspapers had become instruments of economic interests, thereby jeopardizing their moral and professional independence. At the same time, the press faced increasing pressure from the state, which sought-already in the early decades of the twentieth century-to exert political influence and administrative control. The state repeatedly attempted to appropriate the journalistic public sphere, either partially or entirely, making press freedom one of the central political and administrative issues of the era.

It was therefore a fundamental interest of the press to preserve its moral ethos and professional integrity. Yet this moral autonomy could only be sustained as long as the state refrained from excessive intervention. Once political or administrative influence exceeded a critical threshold, journalism lost its independence -endangering not only the functioning of editorial offices but the integrity of the public sphere as a whole. The press could only fulfil its social role and exercise its power effectively if it succeeded in maintaining moral

⁶⁷ Lovas 116.

⁶⁸ However, it is safe to state that by the mid-1930s roughly one-third of the provincial population were regular readers of daily newspapers.

⁶⁹ It is noteworthy that readers showed particular interest in events that in some way made them feel threatened, such as wars. As public anxiety increased, so did the consumption of news. Murder cases, sensational or scandalous stories, and natural disasters had a similar effect, all contributing to higher newspaper sales. Sipos (2011), p. 83.

⁷⁰ Szívós (2010) p.53.

⁷¹ This was further exacerbated by the later advent of radio and television. Szekfü András- Communication, publicity, equal opportunities in Hungary. From the telegraph to Web 2.0. Budapest, 2007. p.32., Habermas Jürgen- Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Investigations into a Category of Bourgeois Society. Budapest, 1971. p.56.

⁷² It is important to note that the public cannot be treated as a homogeneous group; we can distinguish several smaller and larger groups. Balázs Sipos – Press, Press Policy and the Public in the Horthy Era Korunk 2012. Issue 11 p.76-79.

⁷³ Ibid. pp. 76-79.

and professional autonomy in the face of both market pressures and state attempts at control.⁷⁴

When studying the characteristics of the public sphere, we must take into account that public communication processes may be either unidirectional or multidirectional, and that they may unfold in a reciprocal manner. Within the social system, both forms can appear, though in varying proportions across different historical periods. In the case of one-way communication, we are essentially dealing with public life in its simplest form. By contrast, the multidirectionality of the public sphere presupposes situations in which the roles of communicator and recipient are not fixed; instead, participants have both the opportunity and the established practice of reversing roles during specific communicative interactions – that is, they are able to respond publicly.⁷⁵

It is evident that the public sphere cannot be regarded as a static concept, but rather as a continually evolving social space whose functioning is shaped simultaneously by political, economic, and communicative conditions. Within this system, the press not only performs a mediating function but also actively contributes to the formation of the public sphere itself. The press can, however, fulfil its genuine social role only if it is able to preserve its autonomy and maintain the reciprocal nature of public communication.

VIII. Summary

The aim of this chapter was to demonstrate how the provincial and local press can be interpreted within the history of the Hungarian press, with particular emphasis on the first decades of the twentieth century and from social, political, and cultural perspectives. The analysis showed that the concepts of “*provincial*” and “*local*” press – often conflated in the scholarly literature – must be distinguished functionally, spatially, and socially. It examined the processes underlying the expansion of newspapers, the division of roles between the capital and the provincial press, and the characteristic vulnerabilities of the provincial press, including financial precariousness, editorial structures, and political and economic dependencies. Despite these challenges, provincial and local newspapers played a decisive role in organizing local public life, shaping public opinion, and contributing to the identity formation of local communities.

The chapter emphasized that the local press cannot be understood merely as a medium for transmitting information but operated as an integral component of local society. The analysis of the concepts of public opinion, audience, and the public sphere revealed that the press was not only a mediator but also an active producer of social reality, even as it remained continuously subject to political, economic, and moral criticism, and underwent ongoing transformation. Taken together, these considerations lay the foundation for the subsequent detailed analysis of the daily newspaper Debrecen and delineate the methodological framework for interpreting the local press as a historical source.

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⁷⁴ The ethics and freedom of the press. In: The Press, Scientific Journal of Journalism, 1936, issue 1-2, pp. 1-3.

⁷⁵ Angelusz Róbert – Communicating Society. Budapest, 1983, p. 22.

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