

Management Summary

News Deserts, and Then What?**A Typology of Pseudo-Journalistic Media Products in the Local Sphere (Pink Slime), an Analysis of Their Potential Threats to Resilient Democracies, and an Identification of Further Research Gaps**

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This study is the first to systematically examine the phenomenon of so-called pink slime content in German-speaking countries, with a particular focus on Switzerland. The goal of the project was to identify pseudo-journalistic media content in the local information sphere, to assess its potential threat to democratic societies, and to derive recommendations for policymakers, the media, and society. The study is based on a comprehensive literature review, eleven expert interviews in Switzerland and Germany, and a content analyses of selected print, online, and social media outlets.

Background and Relevance of the Project: A Blind Spot in Media Research

While the consequences of news deserts and the decline in local journalism have been the subject of intensive international research, the question of which actors are occupying the emerging information (blank) spaces has so far been largely unnoticed. This is where pink slime content can emerge. The term refers to media outlets that imitate journalistic forms, language, and design without being bound by journalistic quality standards, transparency requirements, or editorial independence. They seem to be local newspapers, news portals, or local social media channels. However, they often pursue economic, political, or propagandistic interests.

The study shows that, to date, this phenomenon has not received sufficient attention in German-speaking countries – either academically or in society. The term pink slime itself is largely unknown even among media experts. The underlying phenomena, however – pseudo-journalistic communication, interest-driven local media, non-transparent news outlets, and hybrid forms blending journalism, public relations, and political communication – are already evident and are growing in significance.

In this report, the phenomenon is analyzed in detail and made tangible for the first time in the German-speaking world, with a primary focus on Switzerland. First, a typology of pink slime findings in Switzerland and Germany is established. Furthermore, risks to society and policymakers are identified, which are then synthesized into preventive measures and recommendations for action.

Key Insight: Pink Slime is More Than Just a Problem in News Deserts

A key finding of the study is that pink slime does not occur exclusively in areas where professional local journalism has disappeared. While news deserts do facilitate the spread of pseudo-journalistic content, the research shows that pink slime is also present in urban, economically attractive regions with comparatively good media coverage.

In this context, the situation in Europe differs in some ways from previous research conducted in the United States. Here, pink slime serves not only as a substitute for lacking journalism, but increasingly as a business model in its own right, as a political tool, or as a strategic communication vehicle. It is disseminated through print publications as well as websites, social media, and, increasingly, AI-generated content.

Pink Slime as a Hybrid Form of Communication

Based on a literature review, expert interviews, and a content analysis, this study develops a comprehensive definition of pink slime. According to this definition, pink slime refers to pseudo-journalistic media products that:

- imitate the formal characteristics and aesthetic codes of local news media to suggest credibility without adhering to journalistic standards or transparency requirements.
- usually operate under names that sound local or regional, and their naming is deliberately designed to evoke associations with established current or former quality media outlets.
- consist of content typically has little or only a simulated local connection; it is often produced centrally with minimal effort, generated automatically by AI, and/or recycled across multiple regional editions. Similarly, the editorial staff and authors (to the extent they are identifiable at all) usually have no regional connection.
- lack transparency concerning authorship, funding, and publication.
- lack key journalistic quality standards – such as verifying sources, independence, transparency, and the separation of journalistic content from advertising. Those are met only inadequately or not at all.
- pursue economic, political, or propagandistic objectives, which are presented under the guise of editorial independence and objectivity.
- operate in a space where seemingly professional journalism, public relations/corporate communications, algorithmically optimized content marketing, and strategic/political disinformation intersect. As such, they constitute a hybrid form of communication within a highly competitive media ecosystem.
- profit from influence that stems in particular from the systematic simulation of journalistic credibility while simultaneously eroding journalistic and democratic norms.

The study also shows that pink slime should not be understood as a binary phenomenon. Rather, there is a continuum of different manifestations. Some outlets have individual characteristics, while others meet nearly all criteria. It is precisely this hybrid nature that makes it difficult to identify and regulate such offerings. Hence, the following analysis also refers to the individual components of the definition. However, the local aspect (or at least the implied local aspect) is central to all manifestations of pink slime.

Findings for Switzerland and Germany

The empirical analyses indicate that pink slime manifests itself in various forms. In Switzerland and Germany, outlets were identified and examined that exhibited several of the defined manifestations of pink slime. In Switzerland, issues of the magazine *Schweizer Kombi* and the Instagram channel *Wintiblog* were examined. In Germany, the Instagram channel *Unser Heidelberg* and issues of *Neues Gera* were analyzed.

In the area of print and e-paper publications, the Swiss publications examined show clear signs of pink slime characteristics. Notable features include the sharp increase in the number of regional editions, recurring and sometimes identical content across different titles, a lack of genuine local relevance in many articles, opaque author attributions, and the blurring of lines between journalistic-style content and interest-driven communication.

An analysis of German examples reveals different patterns. The focus here is particularly on politically oriented local media outlets that link local issues to clear political narratives.

The dissemination of low-quality, pseudo-local journalistic content (because it is neither journalistic nor local, or both) can be deliberately exploited by interest groups to, for example, plant and spread fake news – or, particularly at the local level, to make it available to AI models as a supposedly trustworthy source. Local identity, relevance to everyday life, and entertainment content are used to build reach and trust. This attention can later on be mobilized for political or economic messages.

Pink Slime as a Business Model

The findings from the expert interviews suggest that pink slime must be understood as a profit-driven communication model. Production costs are low, and coverage/reach can be significantly increased through platforms, free distribution, and digital channels.

Unlike traditional local journalism, pink slime is not based on long-term credibility, local roots, or editorial responsibility. Rather, it consists of flexible and scalable communication structures that combine economic interests, political influence, and strategic communication.

The study identifies a high degree of opacity regarding ownership structures, financing structures, and actual responsibilities. It is precisely this lack of transparency that complicates both its societal classification and regulatory intervention.

Pink Slime as a Political Tool

The potential of pink slime to influence politics deserves special attention. The study provides evidence that pseudo-journalistic content can be used to normalize political narratives, set the agenda (agenda setting), create the impression of broad public support, undermine trust in established media and institutions, and indirectly support election and referendum campaigns.

This influence is often subtle. The focus is not on individual instances of misinformation, but rather on the long-term shift in priorities, perceptions, and structures of trust.

Pink slime exploits the credibility of journalistic formats without assuming the responsibility that comes with them. This results in a particularly effective form of strategic communication that often eludes immediate detection.

Potential Threats to Democracy

The greatest danger posed by pink slime lies not in individual problematic elements, but in its long-term effects on democratic public spheres.

The study shows that pink slime blurs the lines between journalism, advertising, public relations, and political communication; it can undermine trust in journalistic institutions, distort public discourse, fuel social polarization, and it can weaken the ability to reach a mutual understanding of facts.

What makes this particularly problematic is the gradual development of this. The authors compare this process to the boiling frog syndrome: The changes occur gradually and are therefore often not noticed until their consequences are already deeply embedded in the information ecology.

Recommendations for Actions

The study's findings make it clear that pink slime cannot be addressed through isolated measures. Rather, an integrated approach combining regulation, transparency, research, education, and media support is required. The key recommendations are as follows:

- Recognize and strengthen local journalism as a democratic infrastructure.
- View pink slime as more than just a consequence of news deserts.
- Consistently expand transparency requirements and disclosure.
- Regulate misleading imitations of journalistic brands and formats.
- Make quality journalism more visible.
- Align media literacy more closely with local information spaces.
- Establish monitoring and early-warning systems.
- Promote research and international cooperation in the long term.

Conclusions

This study shows that pink slime poses a new challenge to democratic information sphere. The phenomenon is not limited to individual problematic media outlets or structurally disadvantaged regions. Rather, it is a growing hybrid form of communication that intertwines economic, political, and technological developments and deliberately exploits the credibility of traditional forms of journalism.

Switzerland still has the opportunity to take prompt action. Awareness of the problem has been low so far, but the spread of the phenomenon is evident. That is precisely why now is the right time to work together to further advance research, regulation, media support, and the development of media literacy.

This study is intended as a starting point for a broader societal debate on the future of the local public sphere, journalistic credibility, and democratic resilience in the digital age. Pink slime is not a marginal phenomenon in media developments, but rather an indicator of fundamental changes in the relationship between information, the public sphere, and democracy itself.