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Commentary

News Deserts: A Research Agenda for Addressing Disparities in the United States

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Abstract
News deserts are spread unevenly across the US, with as much as a fifth of the country's population handicapped by a lack of access to critical news and information. There is a prodigious amount of recent research outlining the consequences for democracy. However, as policymakers, philanthropists, and entrepreneurs devise solutions, they are encountering gaps in information that hinder their ability to address the news disparities among communities. We need a focused research agenda that assists stakeholders in identifying the communities most at risk, understanding the current flow of critical news and information in communities without a local news provider, and establishing sustainable business models for existing and start-up organizations in both current news deserts and at-risk communities.

Keywords
at risk communities; business models; journalism disparities; local news; news deserts; United States

Issue
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Today, the US is increasingly divided, not only politically, but also journalistically. Despite the promise of internet and mobile technology, which was supposed to connect all 330 million residents living in this county, the US has experienced a dramatic increase over the past two decades in the number and types of news deserts—defined here as communities where residents have very limited access to the sort of critical and credible local news and information that nurtures grassroots democracy and binds together our society. Seventy million residents—or a fifth of the US population—now live in either the 200-plus counties without a local news outlet or in the 1,630 at-risk counties with only one surviving news provider, often hanging on by a slim financial thread (Abernathy & Franklin, 2022).

The US is a vast country, encompassing more than 3.2 miles. Newspapers have historically been the primary—if not sole—source of local news and information for residents in the thousands and thousands of small and mid-sized urban and rural communities scattered across the landscape. As the lone newspaper in any one of those communities disappears, there is often no alternative local news outlet.

Unlike many industrialized democracies, the US allocates only a fraction of taxpayer funds to public media. A 2020 study (Pickard, 2020) calculated that the US spends only $1.40 annually per resident on public media programs, such as PBS and NPR, and most of that money goes to funding entertainment programs. This compares to $50 to more than $100 annually per resident allotted to public media outlets in Japan, France, Germany, and individual British Commonwealth countries (including Australia and Canada.) In many of those countries, public media outlets not only cover national news but also regional and local news. Therefore, in the US, when the lone newspaper in any small and mid-sized community disappears, there is a critical need to consider a mix of funds—commercial and philanthropic, in addition to public—to support alternative sources of local news.

Scholars from multiple disciplines have produced a prodigious amount of research in recent years on the consequences for the US democracy of losing

the news, beginning with the Federal Communications Commission (2011) report on the information needs of communities. Recent research and investigative reporting have documented a link between the decline in local news coverage and political engagement (Hayes & Lawless, 2021), an increase in government inefficiency and spending (Gao et al., 2020), and an increase in corruption and misconduct in local businesses, agencies, and institutions ("Uncovered: Shining a light on South Carolina corruption and misconduct," 2021).

This multi-disciplinary research documenting the impact on democratic political, economic, governmental, and cultural institutions has informed and motivated a variety of stakeholders to seek innovative solutions for reviving news. This includes policymakers at both the state and federal levels proposing new regulations and an increase in public funding and subsidies for news organizations, philanthropists investing in nonprofit journalism, industry executives experimenting with new journalistic and business strategies, and faculty directing more than 100 university programs that engage students in filling local reporting gaps in news deserts and at-risk communities.

While these developments are encouraging, significantly reversing the loss of local news will require all stakeholders to work in a concerted fashion to directly address disparities among communities. To do this they will need to be able to (a) identify the communities most at risk, (b) understand the current flow of critical news and information in communities without a local news provider (or in danger of losing one), and (c) develop sustainable business models for existing and start-up organizations in both current news deserts and at-risk communities.

Here's a quick overview of what we know about each of these areas and what additional research would be most useful for stakeholders designing policies and funding processes to target at-risk communities.

First, we need to identify the communities most at-risk. The US has lost more than a fourth of the country's newspapers (2,400) since 2005 and is on track to lose a third by the end of 2025. During the same period, the number of journalists employed by newspapers declined by almost 60%. Local digital start-ups have replaced only a small fraction of the newspapers and journalists lost in recent years. There is a net deficit of more than 30,000 local journalists, who once covered routine, but important, government meetings and produced award-winning investigative pieces that saved lives and averted disaster. In general, economically struggling communities are most likely to lose a paper and not have a print, digital, or broadcast local news alternative.

The disparity among communities and regions in a state can vary dramatically. In order to craft policies and funding processes to address these disparities, we need in-depth media audits in all 50 states that drill down to the community level, tallying the current number of active local news organizations (newspapers, digital-only outlets, broadcast, and ethnic media) and the number of reporters covering communities in every county. How many communities are without a local news provider or in danger of losing one? How many reporters are assigned to cover each county in the state? Are there any nontraditional alternative sources? Both the University of Oregon's Agora Center (Lawrence et al., 2022) and the League of Women Voters of Washington (2022) have recently conducted extensive audits in their states, and Montclair State University has an ambitious news ecosystem mapping project that also tracks the number of alternative local news sources, such as blogs and newsletters (The News Ecosystem Mapping Project, 2020). There is an urgent need to fill in the blanks on the other 47 states.

Secondly, an understanding of the flow of critical news and information in news deserts is essential. The dramatic decline in the number of journalists at local newspapers has affected the flow of information across all mediums. Numerous research studies have quantified a decline in the number of local news stories appearing, not only in local newspapers but also in other mainstream regional outlets, including print and digital publications, as well as broadcasting stations (Napoli et al., 2019). Content analysis of the material that is published and produced reveals what topics and events are most likely to make headlines, and, by inference, which topics are under covered and overlooked.

In addition to quantifying and analyzing the news that is produced by various mediums, we need to track the actual flow of critical news and information in news deserts, as well as in at-risk communities. Throughout US history, there have been news deserts—rural communities too small and isolated to support a local news outlet, as well as urban communities, often with large ethnic populations, that have been ignored or redlined by mainstream news outlets. Yet, residents in those communities developed workarounds to get the news that would affect them personally. How are people in news deserts currently getting information about local issues? Is it from a neighbor or from a source outside the community, such as social media? How credible and comprehensive is the news and information that travels via workarounds? By researching the types of information that reach people in news deserts and at-risk communities and how people in those communities prefer to receive news, we can build on what already exists, designing processes and tools that not only increase the flow of news but also get critical information to the largest number of people.

We need to rigorously analyze new business models that are working in affluent communities for their adaptability in economically struggling ones. Anecdotal case studies of start-ups often present findings that contrast with the gloom-and-doom headlines about the decline of local news. In fact, both commercial and nonprofit news organizations are thriving in some communities—especially those with affluent and rapidly

growing populations. In general, the economically struggling communities that lose a newspaper are the very places where it is most difficult to sustain either a for-profit or nonprofit news organization. Even with a recent increase in both corporate and philanthropic funding, the footprint of the nation's 550 local and state digital-only news outlets is small and predominantly a big-city phenomenon, with more than 90% of sites located in metro areas.

Third, we need a methodical and rigorous analysis of the business models being utilized by both for-profit and nonprofit news organizations. Can the commercial models developed in urban, affluent markets be transplanted successfully to more rural, less affluent ones? Can nonprofit models be successfully established and, most importantly, supported, in high-poverty areas and longstanding news deserts? What are the incentives that will encourage successful news organizations in adjacent communities to expand their reach into and coverage of at-risk communities?

Whether seeking to revive local news in longstanding news deserts in the US or newer ones, stakeholders are confronted with multiple political, economic, geographic, and infrastructure challenges. Getting news to those communities that have lost local news involves rethinking for-profit, nonprofit, and public strategies and funding at the national, state, and local levels. No one solution will fit all markets. Continued investment in research will be critical in guiding how we respond.

As previous studies have concluded, the loss of local news is a looming crisis for democracy. That is why there is a pressing need to focus on filling the gaps in our knowledge—identifying the communities most at risk, mapping the flow of information in those communities, and evaluating the sustainability of local journalistic business models in a variety of markets.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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