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Commentary

Co-Creating News Oases in Media Deserts

Michelle Barrett Ferrier

Independent Researcher, USA

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Abstract
The Media Deserts Project is a research effort to map and model the changing media landscape in the United States. Media deserts are defined as geographies lacking fresh, daily news and information. Using circulation data of US print newspapers, emerging hyperlocal online news sites in digital networks, and broadband access data from the Federal Communication Commission, the Media Deserts Project maps these changes using geographic information systems down to the zip code level, making visible local communication systems and gaps. To develop community-centered news and information solutions, this research team used community-based research practices, where students engaged with residents, local business leaders, health, education, and other administrators to examine the communication needs of three specific communities in Southeast Ohio. We centered our efforts on building relationships with community members and designing localized media tools. We learned key insights that we believe may travel well into other projects using community-based engagement, participatory design, and co-creation practices.

Keywords
civic communication; community-centered journalism; Media Deserts Project; media deserts; media ecologies; news desert; news oases; online news

Issue
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1. Introduction

I have been some kind of way since *The New York Times* profiled a nearby neighbor in Athens County, Ohio. They called him "The Man Who Knew Too Little" because since November 8, 2016, he has managed to engage regulars at a local coffee shop we both frequent to continue the "news blockade." No news chit-chat with baristas. No news from TV. No news from a newspaper or social media (Dolnick, 2018).

Our lives could not be more different here in one small college town. Call me the "woman who knew too much." I teach journalism, social media, and online news at the local university. I am the founder of TrollBusters (www.troll-busters.com), an organization that fights online abuse of journalists. And I am the creator of the Media Seeds Project and the Media Deserts Project (www.mediadeserts.com).

As the demographics for the region show, Southeast Ohio residents represent some of the poorest residents in Ohio and in the country. These regions also lack broadband infrastructure and other challenges like access to health care. Hard hit by the opioid epidemic, lack of jobs, and rising health and housing costs, regional leaders struggle with multiple issues to keep their communities alive.

You could say I am jacked into news and information on a cellular level. I read daily reports on the opioid epidemic in Southeast Ohio and West Virginia. I monitor hashtags like #OnlineAbuse, #MAGA, and #BlackLivesMatter. And I am on a mission to hunt down people like my neighbor—unplugged and unengaged—and burst his bubble, because I think that his cultivated ignorance and its counterparts—willful sowing of confusion and mistrust—are destroying our communities.

2. Making Media Deserts Visible

As newspapers cut and slashed personnel or closed completely through the economic downturn in 2008, they

contracted their coverage on their perimeters and in their urban cores (Ferrier, 2014). Ownership of local radio stations consolidated in rural areas around right-leaning media organizations. Broadband access and last-mile challenges in rural geographies compounded the issue of connectivity. Shifts across the media industry left geographies lacking robust local media ecosystems across the US.

The Media Deserts Project is a research effort to map and model this changing media landscape. In 2008, I defined media deserts as geographies lacking fresh, daily news and information (Ferrier, 2014). Using circulation data of US print newspapers, emerging hyperlocal, online news sites in digital networks, and broadband access data from the Federal Communication Commission, the Media Deserts Project maps these changes using geographic information systems down to the zip code level, making visible local communication systems and gaps. In 2011, North Carolina became my prototype, Media Deserts' beta test (LeGreco et al., 2012, 2015). My definition: A *media desert* is a community that is lacking fresh, daily, local news, and information (Ferrier, 2014).

In the Media Deserts methodology, we bring together data journalism, digital ethnography, and geographic information systems together into geospatial media analytics that examines the code, content, and conduit levels of the internet. Our methodology builds on framing first posited by Lessig (2002), who implores us to attend to the three levels of the Internet for analysis of its functions and affordances in building civic communications ecosystems.

Bringing geography into our analytics with digital spaces is critical to understanding and designing for the variables of politics and physical geographies that govern the lives of individuals in communities regardless of the geography in the US or around the globe. Said another way, our interventions cannot be absent of geographies and the lived experiences of the residents.

Creating civic communication spaces, where residents can exercise true democracy, requires robust analysis of the code, content, and conduit levels of digital spaces as well as the same application to the "physical world." Code, as Lessig (2002) describes it, is the law and other inscribed instruments that govern behavior. Content can be journalism, but also all of our other knowledge producers, such as scholars and researchers, students and artists and other cultural producers, narrative creations, and artistic creations. Conduits can be newspapers, billboards, radio, or other strategies.

The Media Deserts methodology brings together a mixed methodology of qualitative, ethnographic, and network analyses together to examine these three layers in digital and physical geographies. As I describe in *The Communication Crisis in America and How to Fix It* (Ferrier et al., 2016, p. 221):

> We use the term "media deserts" since it describes not just the content layer as Lawrence Lessig describes in his framework, but also the conduit and code layers (Lessig, 2002, p. 23). For example, if at the content layer we are describing "news deserts," the conduit layer would address issues through broadband or mobile devices and the code layer would address issues with Google algorithms for determining "news" to the effects on search engine results. The term "media deserts" is, therefore, multidimensional and allows us to begin to see the larger complexity of the ecosystems in which we operate.

The Media Deserts Research Atlas, launched in March 2018 (Figure 1), allows users to search by state, county, and zip code to find what media are operating on these multiple levels or what regulatory conditions might be affecting local access. Our goal is to help jumpstart local conversations about building media capacity and helping residents create local solutions (Ferrier et al., 2016, p. 221).

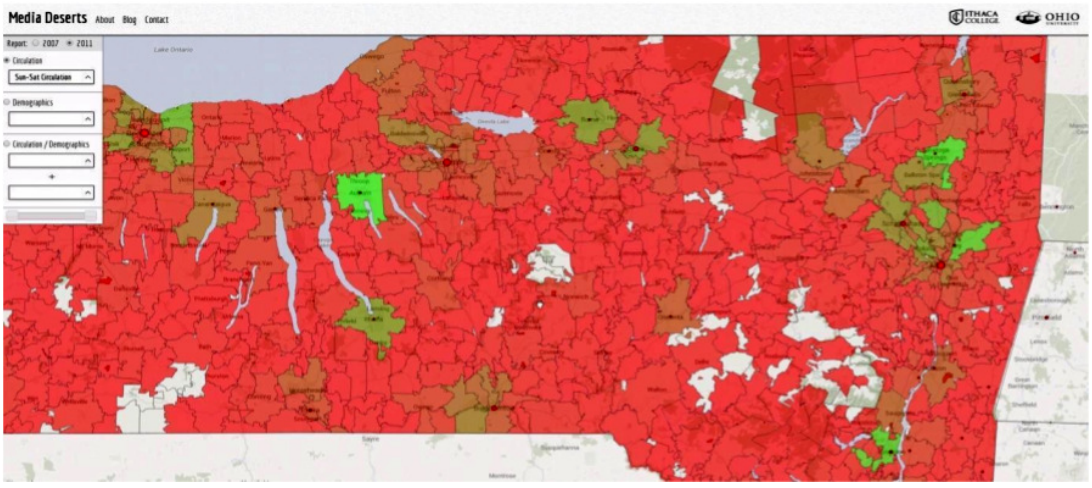

Figure 1. The Media Deserts Research Atlas. Notes: After users see the pinpoint data, they can click on a state and see the circulation change rendered by zip code; users can also compare the circulation on demographic factors.

The Media Deserts model looks at the code, content, and conduit layers of our communications ecosystem. Using Lessig's (2002) characterization of the layers of digital spaces, I examined the communication flows on these levels:

- Code: Using network analysis and social media monitoring tools, we examined access to and use of social tools.
- Content: Using content analyses and digital ethnographic methods, we analyze content distribution, sourcing, and representation.
- Conduit: Using circulation data from the Alliance for Audited Media to map daily newspapers across the US and broadband data, we examined access to Internet services and cellular access.

Since 2012, my approach has been to focus on bringing the whole system into view—governmental information, civic communication, and emerging media innovations on social media platforms—and helping to grow sustainable media ecosystems. Other journalists have tried to co-opt our systems model by mapping "news deserts." Abernathy in her work at the University of North Carolina in 2018, began mapping the presence of a local newspaper in geographies. Abernathy defines a news desert as the absence of a local newspaper (Abernathy, 2018).

In our Media Deserts models, the target of our work is building civic communications ecosystems. The Media Deserts Project makes visible information flows and gaps, helping to facilitate the processes of coordinating actions and resources across geographies. Through our civic communications systems analyses, from the visualizations to deeper ethnographic work, we are helping to make visible the complexities of information flows across geography and co-design interventions with community residents and stakeholders.

3. Sowing the Seeds of Civic Communications

In partnership with Journalism That Matters, I led the Media Seeds Project in Southeast Ohio in August 2017 to learn what it takes to turn deserts into fertile civic information oases. The project is informed by the civic communications framework developed in 2015 while I was board president of Journalism That Matters (Figure 2; Holman et al., 2017).

"To be a thriving, resilient ecosystem, communication needs to go beyond 'reporting' what is happening in the ecosystem to providing robust information and inclusive dialogue, fostering collaborative action that achieves community goals" (Holman et al., p. 1). Our operational principles were drawn from the work of Journalism That Matters and its creation of engagement principles for our Southeast Ohio work: (a) Nothing about us without us, (b) speak truth to empower, and (c) listening is our superpower.

In August 2017, students in my Strategic Social Media and Digital Innovation and Information classes used digital ethnography methods to create county-level media audits of more than 20 counties in Southeast Ohio that had been identified as media deserts:

Figure 2. The Journalism That Matters civic communications framework.

- How might we…foster and celebrate a greater sense of community or sense of place in the county?
- How might we…help communities affected by the health crisis to thrive?
- How might we…encourage dialogue and information sharing in our county? New pathways?

Using community-based research practices, students engaged local business, health, education, and other leaders to examine the communication needs of three specific communities. We centered our efforts on building relationships with community members and designing localized media tools. We learned key insights that we believe may travel well into other projects using community-based engagement, participatory design, and co-creation practices.

3.1. Consider Your Identity

To successfully enter a media desert, it is important to reflect on who you are and what relationship you have with the community. This means seriously considering what knowledge and experience you bring to the project, how others in the community are likely to see you, and how these things may limit the scope or pace of your work in the community.

3.2. Listen Deeply

In addition to engaging in self-reflection, it is essential to learn about the assets and needs of the community. Practicing this kind of listening helped us challenge our pre-existing assumptions about people and places that could have prevented us from developing good working relationships with community members.

3.3. Make the Invisible Visible

Discover the factors that affect the capacity of community members to connect to themselves and others (e.g., geography, history, technology, temporality, politics, demographics, culture, and power). We also developed six insights for engaging local communities:

1. Design for the realities of the region: Assess the constraints and assets of local infrastructure, geography, and culture. Innovations should be designed to fit these realities.
2. Attend to journalists' emotions and inner life: Working alone in a media desert can be isolating and emotionally difficult. Journalists need preparation and tools to manage emotional dynamics.
3. Recognize limits and public perceptions of existing local media: Local media are embedded in cultural and political institutions. Just because some local media exist, does not mean they necessarily serve the public and community needs.
4. Anticipate that innovations may disrupt existing power structures: Change is difficult and can be threatening to local leaders, who may resist or challenge your work.
5. Enlist a local champion, even if the journalist is from the community: Supportive local partners play an important role that is different from what journalists can do alone.
6. Treat every community as unique: Finally, it is important to design tools that are consistent with and build from what you learn during deep listening. Collaborating with local partners helps to keep the designs well-grounded in the assets and needs of that community.

We learned that our work must confront and interrogate local geographies, infrastructure, politics, and local cultures. Although we did not begin this project with the goal of disrupting local power systems, it became clear that media innovations were disruptive and seen as threats by both local politicians and owners of local media. We felt firsthand the importance of understanding and appreciating geography.

The lessons from this work have been carried across the world, to Ethiopia and media development work in underserved communities. We learned of the challenges of internet access, government shutdowns that limit access to key digital and financial services, rolling electrical blackouts that disrupt streaming connections and calls, and other physical challenges of keeping devices powered and ready to connect. Geography must play a role in our calculus of how and what communities need to thrive and how to build a safe space for civic communications.

This Media Deserts Project work is articulating new practices for journalists as "community weavers" and co-designers of new ways of reaching residents with community-based communication solutions. Ultimately, these new practices of listening, hosting, gathering, engagement, and creation will help journalists and other media workers to cultivate a communications ecosystem with their communities to support a thriving, local civic life.

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About the Author

Michelle Barrett Ferrier (PhD) is the principal investigator for The Media Deserts Project and the Media Seeds Project. She is the executive director of the Media Innovation Collaboratory and international board president of the International Association of Women in Radio & Television (2022–2024). She is a co-author of the book chapter "Media Deserts: Monitoring the Changing Media Ecosystem" in *The Communication Crisis in America, and How to Fix It* (1st ed., 2016, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 215–232.) and co-author of the chapter "Further Down the Virtual Vines: Managing Community-Based Work in Virtual Public Spaces" in the book *Further Down the Virtual Vines: Managing Community-Based Work in Virtual Public Spaces* (2015, IGI Global, pp. 147–169; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297056489_Further_down_the_virtual_vines_Managing_community-based_work_in_virtual_public_spaces).