

Editorial

Places and Spaces Without News: The Contested Phenomenon of News Deserts

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Abstract

News deserts have gained prominence both in academic literature and policy discussions about local news in recent years. Although there is no agreed definition of the term, it usually refers to the lack of or diminishing availability, access, or use of local news or media in a community. It is seen as a significant phenomenon that highlights inequalities in local news provisions, challenges of local media operations in the digital environment, and issues around the quality of local journalism and the critical information needs of communities. This thematic issue aims to contribute to the field by bringing together different approaches to the topic, considering varied empirical studies and methodological designs, and providing perspectives from countries around the world with different media systems and cultures. The articles in the thematic issue address three broad issues: approaches to studying news deserts, local news production and news deserts, and the impact of news deserts on communities. Overall, the contributions reveal that the presence of a news desert is not a simple question of a locality having or not having a local media outlet. The concept is better understood as processes affecting access and quality of local news involving places, news media outlets and production, communities, and audiences. We end the editorial highlighting areas for further research, including the need for more holistic, conceptual, and comparative work on the topic.

Keywords

local communities; local journalism; local media; local news; media gaps; news deserts; news inequalities; subnational media.

Issue

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1. Introduction

Scholarly as well as policy interest in news deserts has increased in recent years, as evidenced by the number of publications and inquiries in a variety of political forums. The topic is not completely new to media and journalism research, as places and spaces without news have been investigated in earlier scholarly endeavours. A particular feature of the current discourse, however, is its focus on local media.

Recent research on news deserts has been significant for several reasons. Firstly, it has highlighted the criti-

cal role local media play in providing news and information to communities. Secondly, it has exposed the challenges local media sectors face in the digital age, such as declining revenues, competition from online platforms, recruitment challenges, and issues with sustainability. Thirdly, it has brought attention to the inequalities in news provisions, where certain communities may have limited access to reliable and diverse sources of information compared to others, and others may have long faced lacking or stereotypical news coverage. Fourthly, it has revealed the consequences for communities of living in a news desert.

However, this growing body of scholarly work also has several limitations, including the absence of agreed-upon definitions. Interpretations of “local media” or “news desert” vary significantly. Research also tends to emphasize particular forms of local media, while overlooking other types of subnational media. In Western literature, particularly in the US, news deserts are primarily addressed as a problem related to newspapers, specifically legacy local newspapers (Usher, 2023). Further, the research is time-bound, focusing on the last few decades and the impact of digital technologies, without considering the historical context of the issue. Additionally, issues related to news deserts are often treated uniformly, disregarding potential variations based on community type, media system, funding model, and editorial philosophies. There also remains a need for consistent methods and models for identifying and mapping news deserts. Lastly, there is a lack of comparative studies, which limits our understanding of general patterns and trends.

This thematic issue brings together different approaches and perspectives on the topic of news deserts, aiming to address some of the limitations of the current body of scholarly work. It creates a space for scholars from countries around the world to consider the distinctive contexts and conditions in which news deserts have emerged and the different ways the phenomenon could be studied. We included different types of contributions, covering methodological work and empirical studies. We also invited three notable scholars, Penelope Abernathy (2023), Michelle Ferrier (2023), and Gunnar Nygren (2023), who have pioneered studies on local news deserts and media ecosystems, to share perspectives on where this research began and where it should go.

The articles that follow explore established problems facing local media, as well as emerging shifts. We organize this work into three broad categories: approaches to studying news deserts, local news production and news deserts, and the impact of news deserts on communities. These categories are not mutually exclusive but help to frame the ways news deserts have been understood and researched.

2. Approaches to Studying News Deserts

There are no agreed definitions of the term “news desert.” A further conceptual complication is that other terms have emerged in the literature that refer to similar phenomena, including news gaps, news deficits, media shadows, and information voids. Overall, we can identify three main approaches to news deserts: outlet, media ecology, and content-focused understandings (Gulyas, 2021). Importantly, these different approaches not only reflect different interpretations but also different methodologies and scales in research design. Outlet-focused investigations typically assess the availability and supply of media outlets in different geographical localities. This approach tends to concentrate on

local newspapers, in particular on the decline of legacy local news outlets. Studies with this approach tend to consider larger geographical areas, often working at a national scale. Mapping is frequently used as part of the research design to analyze variations in local news provisions, such as contributions in this thematic issue from Negreira-Rey, Vázquez-Herrero, and López-García (2023) on Spanish news deserts and from Wang (2023) regarding the US case.

In media-ecology approaches, researchers explore the availability of local news and information in one or a limited number of specific ecosystems, typically combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Work here includes Ferrier et al.’s (2016, p. 218) investigation on “media deserts,” by which they mean an area that “lacks access to fresh, local news and information.” They explore the content, conduit, and code layers that affect whether people have access to daily, local news. In the European context, some studies have focused on the decline in pluralism in local media ecologies via the centralization of offices, “copy papers,” “black holes” (Harte et al., 2018), and zombie newspapers as Assmann (2023) discusses in this thematic issue.

In content-focused approaches to news deserts, scholars focus on the quality and relevance of news and the robustness of local journalism that is available to a community. News reporting per se means emphasizing certain perspectives while ignoring others. News value criteria and news media logic are at play. Although a news infrastructure might be available and content published, deserts could exist regarding areas, issues, and groups covered. This approach is covered in the thematic issue by: Khanom, Kiesow, Zdun, and Shyu (2023), who suggest a machine learning approach to analyze digital local news content; Vogler, Weston, and Udris (2023), who applied automated geoparser to explore local and regional news content in Switzerland; and Madrid-Morales, Rodríguez-Amat, and Lindner (2023), who mapped the African continent with regard to news deserts on both continental and regional levels.

3. Local News Production and News Deserts

Local news production is an important part of the discourse on news deserts, as it is seen as a key driving force in the emergence and shaping of news deserts. For example, changes in the capacity and quality of local journalism are a primary factor. Local journalists have long experienced staffing reductions, challenges recruiting new staff members, long working hours, and layoffs and closures (Ali et al., 2020). Meanwhile, managers, editors, and reporters at local and regional newspapers are challenged to prevent further losses by adapting to shifts in news consumption in the digital environment while exploiting the commercial and editorial affordances of their print products (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020). Local newsrooms are also creating distinctive local products to reinforce their brand and value in communities

while reorientating their newsroom structures, cultures, roles, and audience relations to maximize the potential of digital media (Jenkins & Jerónimo, 2021). Events like the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges while forcing adaptation, such as locally owned newspapers that changed their business models to embrace donations, grants, and other strategies to help them survive (Finneman et al., 2023).

In this thematic issue, scholars address multiple production-oriented questions about the prevalence and effects of news deserts, including: Assmann's (2023) exploration of how ownership consolidation in Germany has led to the rise of "zombie papers"; Ferrucci, Finneman, Heckman, and Walck (2023) on the ways US trade publications have explained news deserts; Císařová (2023) on how local newspaper owners and journalists discuss structural changes leading to the declining number of local media outlets in the Czech Republic; and Olsen and Mathisen (2023) on the challenges of recruiting journalists in the local news environment in Norway.

4. Impacts of News Deserts on Communities

Explorations on the impacts of news deserts on communities feature prominently in the literature on the topic. Research has highlighted that living in a news desert could have various negative implications, including a less vibrant local community (Ferrier, 2014), less efficient and unscrutinised local government (Napoli & Weber, 2020), a decline in citizens' civic engagement (Shaker, 2014), less informed citizens (Rubado & Jennings, 2019), and community members feeling isolated (Mathews, 2022).

The impact of news deserts on audiences can be significant because individuals' experiences of the world are, to a large extent, mediated. Societal knowledge is unevenly distributed because of education, social conditions, and different views of the status of knowledge. News consumption can reduce the knowledge gap (McQuail, 2019), but a prerequisite is that there is available and relevant news content. In the case of news deserts, access to relevant news content is reduced or diminished.

Scholars have explored the effects of these declines on access to local news that serves critical information needs, including health, education, transportation, economic development, civic information, and other topics (Napoli et al., 2017), as well as the ways audiences seek out their own means of remaining informed about issues affecting their communities (McCollough et al., 2017). Costera Meijer (2019) challenges a one-dimensional view of content and local information, arguing that sources other than local newspapers can contribute to knowledge and reasoned choices. Therefore, to fully grasp the audience's perspective of declining local news, a media repertoire perspective could be useful.

The effects of news deserts on news users and communities are core questions related to news deserts. In this thematic issue, they are covered by: Magasic, Hess, and Freeman (2023), who studied a rural Australian

community and the nuances of local media's role in shaping everyday life; Tai, He, and Liu (2023), who explored the role of social media in news desert areas in China; and Steensen (2023), who studied Covid-19 misinformation in two case municipalities in Denmark and the UK.

5. Conclusion

The articles in this thematic issue clearly reinforce that the concept of news deserts means different things in different settings and contexts, and is interpreted differently depending on what perspective the researcher takes. Overall, the contributions reveal that the presence of a news desert is not a simple question of a locality having or not having a local media outlet. The concept is better understood as processes affecting access and quality of local news involving places, news media outlets and production, communities, and audiences. In addition, news deserts need to be critically questioned in relation to the concepts of news, journalism, and media, especially in the digital environment, where definitions of these key terms are often ambiguous and susceptible to changes.

News desert is a powerful concept that can speak to academic and non-academic audiences, but we need further research that provides a more comprehensive underpinning to the subject area and brings together different perspectives. First, there is a need for a holistic approach examining audience demand (and needs), production conditions, and content, together in relation to news deserts. Second, scholars should also explore how these findings contribute to journalism practice, including investigations of solutions for the decline of local news. Third, widening the scope of "news" is essential, looking at the variety of local media, editorial aims, and information available, to fully understand the nature and extent of news deserts, as well as their impacts on democratic societies. Fourth, the field would also benefit from systematic, comparative studies on news deserts that would reveal general patterns and illuminate the key factors contributing to news scarcity in underserved areas. Finally, we need more conceptual work in the field that advances shared understandings of key terms and the theories that underpin them.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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