

Problem of local news deserts is widespread, study finds

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Research from Duke University provides comprehensive new evidence of the magnitude of the problem of "news deserts"—communities where news and information about critical local issues is nonexistent or severely limited.

The researchers analyzed more than 16,000 news stories, gathered over seven days, across 100 U.S. communities not situated in major media markets. They found 20 communities where [local news](#) outlets contained not a single local news story.

"We wanted to assess the health of local journalism on a scale that hadn't been done before, and in doing so we confirmed that the problem is as bad as we thought, maybe even worse," said Philip Napoli, a professor at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy and lead author of the study.

"Journalistic output is falling very short of serving the important information needs of many communities in America," he added.

Findings include:

- Only about 17 percent of the news stories provided to a community are truly local – about or having taken place within the municipality.
- Less than half (43 percent) of the news stories provided by local media outlets are original (produced by the local media outlet).
- Just over half (56 percent) of the news stories by local media outlets addressed critical information needs—issues pertaining to emergencies and risks, health, education, civic life, political life, transportation, environment and planning or economic development.
- Less than 12 percent of stories met all three criteria—local topic, locally produced, and addressing a critical information need.

Previous case studies focusing on one or a few communities, or on one type of news source, have documented the "news deserts" problem. This is the first study that examines data from a large sample of communities, across different types of media outlets, to measure the extent of the problem, Napoli said.

The study used U.S. Census data to identify 493 communities with 20,000 to 300,000 residents and randomly selected 100 of them to analyze. The analysis included English and non-English speaking [media outlets](#).

"Local news outlets serve an important watchdog function over local governments. They also help people stay informed and engaged in local politics," said Napoli. "We're seeing evidence that when traditional local news outlets go away, they are being replaced by highly partisan outlets focused on promoting specific political agendas rather than on informing the community."

Other studies have shown that declines in the production and consumption of local journalism can lead to a variety of other negative consequences, including increases in government costs, lower civic engagement and lower political participation.

Researchers also sought to identify the types of communities most at risk. They found:

- Communities closer to a large media market have less robust local journalism.
- Larger proportions of Hispanic/Latino populations are associated with less robust local journalism.
- A community's status as the county seat had no effect on the quantity or robustness of local journalism.

"These findings tell us that communities with minority populations may not be as well served by local news outlets. They also tell us that large-market journalism can, to some extent, drown out local journalism in nearby communities, and that local news outlets don't seem to be devoting journalistic resources to covering county government, unlike in the past," Napoli said.

"Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News" was published online by the Duke Sanford School's DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy.

Provided by Duke University

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