

UK towns have become 'news deserts' as people get their news from Facebook rather than local papers

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Whitby, North Yorkshire, U.K. Credit: David Hawkes/Unsplash

A new Charitable Journalism Project report—Local News Deserts in the UK—examines the effects of the collapse of local news through the eyes of people in seven places across Britain.

Lead researcher Dr. Steven Barclay, from City, University of London's Department of Journalism, shows that years of economic instability, corporate acquisitions and hollowing out of newsrooms have weakened [social cohesion](#) and local accountability.

Democratic participation and access to justice have suffered.

The report's six main findings are:

1. Social media are now the dominant channels of [local news](#) and information
2. Social media can cause local division and be a source of misinformation
3. Local newspapers are no longer perceived as "community glue"
4. There is a lack of knowledge of local affairs that is linked to a dearth of local reporting
5. There is evidence of democratic disenchantment and apathy
6. People want a trusted source of local [news](#)

Seven communities were studied:

1. Lewisham, London
2. Trowbridge and West Wiltshire
3. Whitby and North Yorkshire Coast
4. Tiverton and Cullompton, Devon
5. Haverfordwest and Pembrokeshire
6. Corby and North Northamptonshire
7. Barrow-in-Furness

The report, co-authored with Professor Steven Barnett, Dr. Martin Moore and Dr. Judith Townend, gives concrete examples of several shocking issues affecting democracy:

- Local newspapers no longer act as "community glue." That has meant a drop in social cohesion and the lack of reliable information has driven an uptick in distrust among communities [Sections 2, 3 and 5]
- National institutions and local public services—including the NHS, police, education and the environment—were thought to be both under-reported and misrepresented [Section 4]
- There was widespread lack of awareness among respondents about how the NHS is organized locally, and it was reported that key services such as the NHS was "reluctant" to be scrutinized [pp. 16–17]
- Digital poverty and poor new-media literacy drives vulnerability to misinformation for those in poverty, disabled people and the elderly [Section 2]
- The average size of a police force communications team regionally is 20, often rivaling or outweighing the number of active journalists in a region [p. 17]
- The BBC-funded Local Democracy Reporter scheme helps but positions are poorly paid and, even in the highly competitive journalism job market, one LDR position (in Northamptonshire) had been open for more than a year [p. 16]
- Overwhelmingly, respondents wanted a rejuvenation of trustworthy, democracy-supporting local news [Section 6].

The report launch took place at the House of Commons on 15 June 2022 (chaired by Baroness Bonham Carter, with an invited audience of journalists and interested parties), with a news report subsequently appearing in The Guardian.

Dr. Barclay told the newspaper that a frequent complaint in "news deserts" was that local journalists on mainstream outlets no longer based themselves in the beat they covered.

He gave the example of the Whitby Gazette, which used to have a strong presence in the Yorkshire seaside town [pictured] but has now closed its office there.

He said: "Whitby was a really classic example of a newspaper that was very widely read within the town and was part of its identity. People identified with the Gazette—they said they knew the editor of the Gazette and drank with him in the pub."

Dr. Barclay noted that numerous people interviewed for the study were acutely aware of—and saddened by—the demise or decline of local news outlets.

"What I found in my research is people wanted a trusted source of local news and information that's both professional and authentically local," he said.

"People don't necessarily want their local news to be big stories—they want scrutiny of local government but they also want stories about the local fete and the primary school reopened and make them feel happy about the place where they live."

More information: The report is available online: [publicbenefitnews.files.wordpress.com/2022/06/news-deserts-in-the-uk.pdf](#)

Provided by City University London

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