

THE DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS OF NEWS DESERTS

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In today's political climate the perception of journalists gets diminished with, what seems like, every passing day. Trust in the news is lower than ever before and the circulation of fake news has spiked. This has led to an uprising in news deserts. A news desert is a geographic area, typically a county, that has no newspapers, and if a county does it's a single paper that covers a large geographic space and is run by a miniscule staff. This is a cyclical process because fake news is circulated which causes distrust in a local newspaper because people believe its fake news which causes the paper to close. Once the paper closes there is no longer a credible source to look to and the spread of fake news ravages a community like wildfire. This problem is of great importance but goes unrecognized by the general population and if this ignorance continues finding the truth will become impossible. With everything going on in the world right now local journalism is more important than ever. "Our founders were afraid of a monarchy happening so they established the three states of government with all equal power and they over see each other and when the founders put together the Constitution and The Bill of Rights I know it wasn't an accident that the freedom of the press was the first one, it was very clear. [Thomas] Jefferson hated newspapers, but he always would say that he would rather have newspapers without government then government without newspapers. He knew that," said Rob Curley, editor-in-chief of the Spokesman-Review.¹ Luckily, there are some programs in place to help subdue the issue and begin to fix it however, it is going to take a country wide ideology shift to fix the issue of news deserts.

To legitimize this issue the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill did a study to find all the news deserts and assess their impact on the democratic process in the United States. They began by defining news deserts as: "A community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots

¹ Curley, R. (2020, March 12). The impact of news deserts on democracy. (R. Utley, Interviewer)

level.”² The research went onto say that there are 225 counties that do not have a local newspaper and half of the counties in the country have typically one weekly newspaper. *Poynter* summarized the research done at UNC into three major top findings:

- “About 20 percent of all metro and community newspapers in the United States — about 1,800 — have gone out of business or merged since 2004, when about 9,000 were being published.”
- “Hundreds more have scaled back coverage so much that they’ve become what the researchers call “ghost newspapers.” Almost all other newspapers still publishing have also scaled back, just less drastically.”
- “Online news sites, as well as some TV newsrooms and cable access channels, are working hard to keep local reporting alive, but these are taking root far more slowly than newspapers are dying. Hence the 1,300 communities that have lost all local coverage.”³

At first glance this research shows that at least 900 communities have lost news coverage since 2004. “About 70 percent of the newspapers that have died since 2004 were in suburban areas of metropolitan areas that historically offered many news choices, the researchers say, but counties with no coverage at all tend to be rural.”⁴ The counties that have experienced the loss of a newspaper really don’t have a lot in common when it comes to demographics or geography. However, the consequences of not having a newspaper on their local government has been the

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Abernathy, P. M. (2018). *The Expanding News Desert*. Retrieved from UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media: <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/>

³ Stites, T. (2018, October 15). *About 1,300 U.S. communities have totally lost news coverage, UNC news desert study finds*. Retrieved from Poynter: <https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2018/about-1300-u-s-communities-have-totally-lost-news-coverage-unc-news-desert-study-finds/>

⁴ (Stites, 2018)

same. Curley said that in all 200 counties voter turnout fell, fewer people ran for office to the point where in many counties they had to change the laws and move over to a nomination process, the incumbent of any given office, statistically, always wins and the post truth narrative, in other words fake news, is very likely to take hold and be perceived as fact.⁵ Over all when the research was completed it showed “that of the 3,143 counties in the United States, more than 2,000 now have no daily newspaper, 1,449 have but one newspaper of any kind, and 171 counties, with 3.2 million residents in aggregate, have no newspaper at all.”⁶

This research alone illuminates the repercussions of news deserts on the country. But it’s only further proven how much news deserts impact democracy by looking at the political outcomes of the past four years. “A recent Politico study, which found that Donald Trump outperformed Mitt Romney in areas without a robust local media, put numbers to something I’ve felt intuitively since the 2016 election: that the nationalization of the media (a movement that includes websites like *Vox*) has been good for news junkies but not as good for those who want and need news about their local communities,” said Emily Todd VanDerwerff, a reporter at *Vox*.⁷ The nationalization of news has created an issue of making ever issue general and not connected to one specific community. The problem with this is that not everyone can identify with the national narrative and no aligning with the hegemonic ideals of what is reported can often cause mistrust because what is being reported has absolutely nothing to do with a person’s life. “At its worst, the divide between the national news and local realities creates an environment in which baldly false rumors flourish and true information is disregarded because it doesn’t square with what rural media consumers can

⁵ (Curley, 2020)

⁶ (Stites, 2018)

⁷ VanDerWerff, E. T. (2018, May 9). *The rise of the American news desert*. Retrieved from *Vox*: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/5/9/13771462/news-deserts-explained>

see in front of their eyes. I wouldn't argue that the divide makes racist rumormongering *possible*, but it does destroy a necessary counterbalance to those rumors.”⁸ No local coverage causes the people of a community to not be in tune with the politics that affect them the most: their local government. Nicholas Kristof, who has worked at *The New York Times* covering issues that range from national to local impact said “You can't have a national ecosystem for news without a local ecosystem. It's so important to have reliable news in parts of the country that don't.”⁹ What Kristof said is true and the mission is being fulfilled by organizations to provide reporters and funding to local newspapers to cover topics that would otherwise go unnoticed.

The organization Report for America is the current leader in the fight to minimize news deserts across the country. Their mission is to solve this crisis: “The collapse of local journalism has created a crisis for democracy. Residents no longer get the information they need to understand the critical issues facing their community, to make good decisions for their family, and to hold elected officials accountable. This problem is not going to be solved by a new phone app or an increase of a few pennies in digital ad rates. It's time to try something dramatically different.”¹⁰ The way this works follows a model similar to Teach for America and the Peace Corps. It looks for papers that need specific coverage of a under covered topic in their community. The newspaper applies to get a reporter and reporters apply to work at the paper. Report for America pays for 50% of the reporter's salary, the newspaper pays 25% and local donors pay the final 25%. As of right now there are 60 reporters stationed across the country with the goal of having 250 reporters placed by 2020 and 1,000 by 2024. The beats Report for America reporters take on are incredibly specific

⁸ (VanDerWerff, 2018)

⁹ Utley, R. (2018, November 9). *New York Times writer discusses the current state of journalism*. Retrieved from The Gonzaga Bulletin: https://www.gonzagabulletin.com/news/new-york-times-writer-discusses-the-current-state-of-journalism/article_30243ffc-e450-11e8-b85b-771b6a925ccb.html

¹⁰ Report for America. (n.d.). *A Call to Service*. Retrieved from Report for America: reportforamerica.org/about-us/

to the community they go to. “It asks publications to specify what they’d do if they had more resources, then helps them fill that gap. Its funding model is also designed to pull new money into local journalism, including from local foundations and donors in each area.”¹¹ What this organization is doing is alleviating a need that has needed attention for a very long time. It will take more organizations like this one and a change in ideology around local news to fix news deserts, but Report for America provides the foundation needed to get rid of news deserts and provide a resource that will ultimately create a well-informed public ready and willing to partake in the democratic process.

A case example of how Report for America as well as a unique ideology regarding local news has been helping news deserts is in Spokane, Washington. At *The Spokesman-Review* they just received a reporter named Arielle Dreher who covers rural health care. Curley said she covers an area that was under covered in Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho and is able to provide information on a medical community that impacts the people between Seattle and Minneapolis, considering that Spokane is the only city between those two places that has a robust medical system.¹² Along with the coverage Dreher is doing *The Spokesman* also just got two more Report for America reporters who will cover the Washington State House and a Washington D.C. reporter. The reason they got these is because they provide local perspective to state and national issues. These reporters are funded by the book club *The Spokesman* puts on. Curley emphasized that by over covering topics that are unique to Spokane, citizens are more likely to subscribe bringing in more revenue for the paper which in turn allows the paper to cover more topics. “Our circulation numbers had fallen every year since 1994. In 1994 we were at about 120,000 when I got here, we

¹¹ Fallows, J. (2019, December 3). *Report for America Goes Big*. Retrieved from The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2019/12/report-america-goes-big/602863/>

¹² (Curley, 2020)

were at about 68,000 so, about half. Here's the crazy number, we hadn't lost as much as most. Well, within one year we jumped from 68,000 to 82,000 that's the only newspaper in America to see that kind of jump. We went from 3 million-page views to 9 million. That's a massive jump. It's so massive that on some days of the week we'd have higher numbers than the *Seattle Times*. What that shows is now you have readers that care. You have to understand what people want to read before they're going to be willing to pay for it. So, you have to become very reader and audience focused. We have to create journalism that readers want and need so they're willing to pay for it," Curley said.¹³ What this example shows is that it's possible to get out of a news desert and Spokane has been able to accomplish that over the past few years creating a community of people who are well informed and ready to participate in the democratic process.

The issue of news deserts is one that looms large on the United States. It's a silent problem that goes unseen by the general public. It should not be this way. "I'm worried that the media as a whole may drop the ball on some of these really important issues," Kristof said. "That means it's even more important for all the rest of us, to the extent we can, pick up that ball and keep an eye on these issues, we put a light on these issues the best we can. I'll do my part and I challenge you to do your part as well," Kristof said.¹⁴ The research that has been conducted by UNC has identified the problem and there are organizations out there that want to make a change and heal the news deserts but it's going to take getting the entire country to care about local journalism to care and understand how local journalism deeply impacts the democratic process in their communities and in the country.

¹³ (Curley, 2020)

¹⁴ (Utley, 2018)

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