

FAQs

1. What is a news desert?

A “[news desert](#)” is a community where residents have significantly diminished access to important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy. Today, more than 200 of the nation's 3,143 counties have no local newspaper. Half – 1,540 counties – have only one newspaper. Two-thirds – 2,000 – no longer have a daily newspaper. Digital news sites have failed to fill the void, leaving residents to turn to social media or regional television stations in distant cities for news.

2. What is a news desert?

In the 15 years leading up to 2020, more than one-fourth of the country’s newspapers [disappeared](#). Simultaneously, half of all local journalists disappeared. Compounding the problem, a lack of capital and funding to support for-profit, nonprofit and publicly funded news organizations has thwarted attempts to prevent more news deserts.

3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the news industry?

The virus and ensuing economic downturn have turbo-charged a decline in industry, with dozens of newspapers closing or switching to online-only, and thousands of journalists being furloughed or laid off. Analysts predict that a deep and prolonged recession resulting from the coronavirus could lead to closure of hundreds of newspapers and, potentially, bankruptcy of the large chains with significant debt.

4. Why are news deserts an issue?

Historically, strong local newspapers have created a [sense of community](#) and nurtured grassroots democracies. Through their journalism, newspapers helped set the agenda for debate of important local issues. Their advertising encouraged regional economic growth by helping businesses reach consumers, and they nurtured social cohesion and political participation by putting national issues, such as health care or gun control, into local context.

5. Are news deserts worse in some areas than others?

Yes. Residents in communities that have lost a newspaper tend to be [poorer, older and less educated](#) than the average American. Eighteen percent live in poverty compared with a national average of 12 percent. Locally owned and operated news outlets in affluent communities are more able to put together [funding](#). Hundreds of papers in less affluent communities have been shuttered when no one came forward to buy the paper or support an alternative news source. Some communities don't have access to the internet, or residents can't afford the service exacerbating the chasm between rich and poor communities. The South has the [most counties without newspapers](#). Every Southern state had at least one county without a newspaper.

5. Why is this report important?

Loss of local news has significant implications for our society. Almost three-quarters of the public remains unaware of the dire economic situation confronting local news organizations. By reporting the state of the local news landscape over the past 15 years we hope to raise awareness of the role all of us – policymakers, industry executives, journalists, educators and citizens – can play in [supporting local news](#).

6. What do you hope people will learn from your report?

The idea is not to be a harbinger of doom but to bring [awareness of the situation](#) and explore ways to address it. Many people are discussing government funding of newspapers or digital sites through entities like the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Many are also examining the not-for-profit model for newspapers.

7. Can I get more information about local news organizations in my state?

Yes. At [usnewsdeserts.com](#) we have more than 350 interactive maps, where you can click on your state, and even your county, to learn about the state of local news (i.e. the newspapers, digital sites, ethnic media and public broadcasting outlets) in your community. You can get a wealth of other information, such as election results, population and median income. The site is continually updated.

8. What do we need to do?

We need to [reimagine](#) the journalistic mission and business model for local news, use technology to develop new capabilities and craft new policies that address disparities that have given rise to news deserts. Reversing the trend will require deploying a variety of business

models. To reinvigorate the local news ecosystem, there will need to be a dramatic increase in funding for local news from corporations and businesses, news consumers, financiers, philanthropists and taxpayers.

9. Why are newspapers failing?

Simply stated, the business model that supported print journalism for two centuries has collapsed. Newspapers in the 20th century [relied on advertisers](#) for 80 to 90 percent of revenue. Today, more people get news online than from a newspaper. Advertisers followed readers, causing the collapse of the print business model. Between 2005 and 2018, newspaper ad revenue fell from almost \$50 billion a year to less than \$15 billion. Newspapers have had difficulty shifting to a digital model because Facebook and Google receive the most digital advertising revenue.

9. How has newspaper ownership changed in the last dozen years?

Today, chains are larger than ever before. The largest chain, Gannett, has more than 600 newspapers. After the 2008 recession, hedge funds, private equity firms and other investment entities began aggressively purchasing hundreds of distressed newspapers and chains, financing their purchases with debt. As print advertising revenue declined sharply, other chains adopted their business practices, laying off staff, freezing wages, reducing benefits and consolidating sales and editorial functions in regional hubs far removed from the community where the paper was located.

11. What is a ghost newspaper?

A “[ghost newspaper](#)” has a far smaller reporting staff and fewer readers than it previously did. Between 2008 and 2018, the number of reporters and editors employed by newspapers dropped from 71,000 to 35,000. Between 2004 and 2019, total weekday circulation – including dailies and weeklies – declined 45 percent, from more than 122 million to 68 million. Daily papers lost 22 million print readers.

12. What is the significance of reduced newspaper staffing?

Reduced [staffing](#) means fewer stories. Transparency and accountability suffer. Some two-thirds of the newspaper journalists who have vanished used to work for large dailies, and the rest were employed by weeklies or small dailies that closed or merged. When a small newspaper closes, there is no reporter to cover government meetings or breaking news. When a regional daily newspaper lays off journalists, investigative pieces that expose corruption and wrongdoing aren't written.

12. What's new about the 2020 report?

This report, the fourth in a series since 2016, is our most expansive. We've added sections on ethnic media and public broadcasting, in addition to tracking newspapers and digital news sites. We also provide a [quick exercise](#) for you to assess the quality of local news in your community. We hope you will share this information with others and use it to support news organizations, whether they are digital sites, newspapers or broadcast outlets.

14. What does the future look like as local newspapers continue to disappear? Who's filling the void?

A variety of legacy and start-up news outlets are attempting to fill the [local news void](#) with myriad business models, including for-profit, nonprofit, and public funding, as well as cooperatives in which the community owns the publication. They are also diversifying revenue sources by sponsoring events, creating e-newsletters and podcasts, and establishing in-house digital agencies to assist local businesses with advertising and marketing needs.

14. What strategies are working?

Knight Chair Penelope Muse Abernathy has written two books in addition to the news desert reports, [Saving Community Journalism: The Path to Profitability](#) (UNC Press: 2014) and [The Strategic Digital Media Entrepreneur](#) (Wiley Blackwell: 2018). Both books have interactive, accessible websites that provide tools, tactics and case studies to help publishers and founders of news sites develop sustainable business models.

16. Is technology an answer?

Technology in many ways has made news more accessible – on tablets and phones – in addition to computers and print. But that accessibility requires [connection to the internet](#), which is unavailable in many parts of the country, and many people can't afford the connection fees. Facebook has tried selecting stories through an [algorithm](#), which saves on staffing, but with limited success. But who knows what technological breakthrough may appear.

17. What role do Facebook and Google play in purveying news?

More Americans get news on social media sites than from print newspapers, and Facebook is the [dominant social media news site](#), with about 43 percent of Americans getting their news there. Facebook and Google don't generate articles, but pick them up from other organizations, which has been a sore point among publishers. And Facebook and Google's dominance in the digital ad space has stripped news organizations of revenue needed for their journalism. The

two tech giants have pledged \$300 million to support local news, but that doesn't begin to replace the journalism they've destroyed.

18. Can digital subscriptions replace revenue lost from print subscriptions?

Newspapers are struggling to get [online subscribers](#) to pay the approximate amount for access that they do for print subscriptions. Many metro newspapers that once had hundreds of thousands of print subscribers have been able to entice only a few thousand subscribers to pay for their online editions, at only 23 percent of the price charged for print subscribers.

19. Can public broadcasters fill the news void?

Public television stations aren't well positioned to produce local and state news programs. National Public Radio is trying to use journalists more efficiently by creating regional hubs to pool coverage. However, staffing is constrained by funding. Between 2011 and 2018, more than 400 NPR and affiliated stations added about 1,000 full-time and part-time jobs, bringing the total to about 3,000 journalists. This hardly compensates for the 36,000 newspaper journalists lost between 2008 and 2018.

20. Is public funding the answer?

Some newspapers received money in 2020 under the Paycheck Protection Program engendered by the COVID-19 pandemic. But that was a temporary program, and it called attention to a long-standing debate about the desirability of [government aid](#). While some, such as Nicholas Lemann, former dean of the Columbia University Journalism School, argue that the local news crisis is so severe that only direct government support can save it, other journalists worry that government funding would compromise editorial independence.

21. What about newspapers becoming not-for-profit operations?

Some people want Congress to make it easier for commercial news outlets to shift into [tax-exempt](#) organizations, as The Salt Lake Tribune did in 2019. The Tribune successfully argued to the Internal Revenue Service that it qualified for non-profit status because it is owned and operated exclusively for educational and charitable activities. But a 1977 IRS ruling still on the books could be invoked to impede such conversions. Also, nonprofit newsrooms, like all other tax-exempt entities, can't endorse political candidates.

22. Is Congress doing anything about the situation?

There are [several proposals](#), including: direct government support, government purchase of public service ads, business loans, tax credits, pension debt relief, allowing publishers to combine efforts without violating antitrust laws, and curtailing the ability of private equity firms to force debt onto their target companies while laying off workers.

23. Why include a focus on ethnic media in this fourth report?

By 2045, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that non-Hispanic whites will be outnumbered by the current minority population, composed primarily of African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos. This suggests a [broader journalistic mission](#) for ethnic media in the coming decades.

26. Are problems for ethnic media different than those for mainstream outlets?

Like mainstream commercial television stations and community newspapers, many ethnic news organizations remain overwhelmingly reliant on advertising to support their journalism. With traditional advertising declining and digital advertising failing to materialize, [financial sustainability](#) is a concern. The transition to digital platforms has been challenging, as ad money isn't migrating to the online sites.

26. Where are ethnic media concentrated?

The [biggest growth](#) in ethnic news outlets has been in the states with the largest minority populations. Analysis of 951 ethnic news outlets identified by UNC shows that California has the most ethnic media outlets (142), followed by Texas (96), New York (91) and Florida (76). Most ethnic media outlets are in urban areas.

26. What are some problems particular to ethnic media?

They frequently have [smaller audiences](#) than their mainstream counterparts and can't charge as much for ads. Many have not been audited by independent organizations examining their circulation and ratings, which makes advertisers reluctant to buy space and time. Some national advertisers have been slow to recognize the buying power of ethnic communities and have thus overlooked ethnic outlets.

27. Who is the author of the report?

Penelope Muse Abernathy, author of this report and three previous ones on the state of local media, is formerly an executive with the Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review and The

New York Times. She now holds the position of Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at Chapel Hill. You can access her faculty profile by clicking [here](#). For a list of other writers and researcher, click [here](#).

28. Are other people doing research on news deserts and related issues?

Yes. Scholars at universities and research institutes around the world are examining the problem. We highlight their research in our [Spotlight on Research](#) features.

29. What was your methodology?

Our findings come from a [comprehensive proprietary database](#) created and maintained by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Faculty and researchers collected data on more than 9,000 local newspapers, 1,400 public broadcasting outlets, 950 ethnic media and 525 digital sites from a variety of industry and government sources supplemented with reporting, fact checking and layers of verification.

30. How do I get in touch with you?

Go to usnewsdeserts.com/about/contact-us. You can leave a message there.

31. Where can I get your previous reports?

Previous reports are available online at usnewsdeserts.com/reports/.

31. Who funded this report?

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