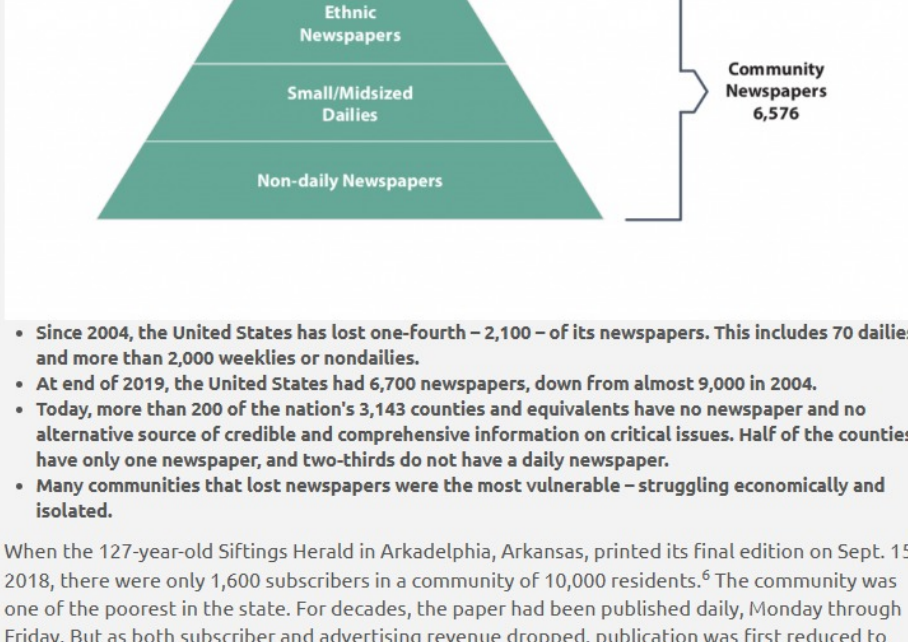


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VANISHING NEWSPAPERS

THE LOCAL NEWS ECOSYSTEM



- Since 2004, the United States has lost one-fourth – 2,100 – of its newspapers. This includes 70 dailies and more than 2,000 weeklies or nondailies.
- At end of 2019, the United States had 6,700 newspapers, down from almost 9,000 in 2004.
- Today, more than 200 of the nation's 3,143 counties and equivalents have no newspaper and no alternative source of credible and comprehensive information on critical issues. Half of the counties have only one newspaper, and two-thirds do not have a daily newspaper.
- Many communities that lost newspapers were the most vulnerable – struggling economically and isolated.

When the 127-year-old Siftings Herald in Arkadelphia, Arkansas, printed its final edition on Sept. 15, 2018, there were only 1,600 subscribers in a community of 10,000 residents.⁶ The community was one of the poorest in the state. For decades, the paper had been published daily, Monday through Friday. But as both subscriber and advertising revenue dropped, publication was first reduced to two days a week in 2016, and then in early September 2018, the owner, the Gatehouse chain, announced the simultaneous closure of the Siftings Herald and two other papers in nearby counties. A former editor, now a columnist at the Democrat-Gazette in Little Rock, took note of the closures, writing, “The watchdogs of school boards, city councils and quorum courts are gone. The chroniclers of high school sports teams are missing. To say that this is a sad thing for these counties is to understate the case.”⁷

For more than two centuries, newspaper editors and reporters, more often than not, served as arbiters of our news, determining what made front-page headlines read by millions of people in this country. They were the prime, if not sole, source of credible and comprehensive news and information, especially for residents in small and mid-sized communities.⁸

Researchers in disciplines such as political science, sociology and economics have identified three ways strong local newspapers historically built a sense of community and trust in our democracy. Through their journalism, they set the agenda for debate of important public policy issues, and, as a result, influenced the course of history with the stories they published and their editorials that recommended specific actions. Their advertising encouraged regional economic growth and development by helping local businesses connect with local consumers. Newspapers also nurtured social cohesion and political participation by putting into local context issues that may have seemed to be national ones, such as health care or gun control.⁹

According to several estimates, as much as 85 percent of the news that feeds our democracy originates with newspapers.¹⁰ Since local newspapers have historically been equal parts business enterprises and civic institutions, the collapse of the for-profit business model that sustained newspapers until recently has also played in jeopardy the journalistic mission.

From revolutionary days to the early 20th century, newspapers flourished in our country. As pioneers moved West in the 19th century, one of the first orders of business – right after hiring a lawman to keep order – was establishing a local newspaper. A newspaper gave a sense of time and place to the first settlers, and helped residents connect with one another as dusty crossroads grew into real communities. The number of newspapers peaked in the early 1900s, when there were an estimated 24,000 weekly and daily publications, with two in five newspapers located in communities west of the Mississippi.¹¹ Even small and mid-sized communities had two newspapers. But as the popularity of television surged in the years after World War II, afternoon papers fell by the wayside, leaving most communities with only one surviving newspaper – either a daily or a weekly.

By 2004, there were only 9,000 papers still publishing. Since then, the United States has lost one-fourth – or 2,100 – of its newspapers. In the country today, there are 6,730 surviving papers, including 1,260 dailies (published four or more times a week) and 5,470 nondailies or weeklies. The three-fourths of newspapers in this country have circulations under 15,000. About 1,800 of the communities that have lost a paper since 2004 do not have easy access to any local news source – such as a local online news site or a local radio station.¹²

It is useful to think of the country's newspaper ecosystem as a pyramid, with a very large base of small papers serving communities ranging in size from a few hundred to a million or more residents.¹³ The 6,570 papers that form the base include small dailies, as well as weeklies and ethnic newspapers. They help residents in small and mid-sized communities understand what is going on in their community and also put into local context national issues such as the opioid crisis or the coronavirus pandemic. In other words, these small local newspapers help residents in a community understand what interests they share with their next-door neighbors, and the best of them mobilize grassroots efforts to address local issues. They also connect local businesses with consumers through their advertising.

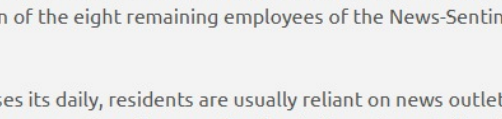
The 150 or so surviving regional papers in the country bind a metro area or a state together. They have historically provided the majority of investigative and analytical reporting that prompts both local, state – and even national – government officials to enact major policies that address the problems. The journalists at these papers spot trends among the various smaller community papers, and their reporters on beats, such as education, health and politics, provide journalistic oversight and editorial commentary on areas that affect the future of all residents in a city, region or state. In other words, the journalism in these metro and regional dailies connects residents of communities in one area of a state with those in a distant part of the state, helping them come together to solve statewide problems.

At the very top of the pyramid are the three national newspapers – The New York Times, Wall Street Journal and USA Today – with circulation and online readership in excess of several million. The national papers are excluded from this analysis of the local news landscape since they have a journalistic mandate and a business model, which rely on scale and reach, that are very different from that of either the state and metro papers or smaller community papers.¹⁴

National and state papers have historically relied heavily on journalism done at small local papers to initially report on events and decisions that later become state and national headlines. Hometown papers not only record the history of their communities – the ebb and flow of daily life – they can also change the course of history by reporting on a shooting or a local protest. The larger papers then amplify the initial work done by the small newspaper. But as hometown papers disappear – and the state and regional papers lay off veteran journalists and pull back on coverage and circulation in outlying communities – the news ecosystem is imperiled.

THE VANISHING DAILIES

TOTAL NUMBER OF U.S. NEWSPAPERS: 2004 & 2020



SOURCE: UNC Database

In July 2019, the longtime family owners of The Vindicator in Youngstown, Ohio, announced they were shuttering the 150-year-old newspaper at the end of August after failing to find a buyer. When journalists on the paper learned this, they gathered in Managing Editor Mark Sweetwood's office. He called on them to remember the paper's crusading legacy and encouraged them, "To the last minute to the last hour of the last day, we are giving this thing a Viking funeral. We can't change the circumstances, but we are going to walk out of here with our heads held high."¹⁵

At its demise, The Vindicator, which employed more than 30 journalists, had a circulation of only 35,000, serving a metropolitan area of half a million residents, where a third are living in poverty. The Vindicator's closing made national headlines and caused much angst in the industry as Youngstown became the first city of any size in the country to lose its sole surviving daily newspaper. Could this be a harbinger of what was to befall daily newspapers in other large metro areas?

Since 2004, 70 dailies have vanished from the U.S. landscape, and most of those have been papers serving small and mid-sized communities. Only four of the shuttered dailies had circulations above 100,000 when they closed, and all four were located in two-newspaper cities – the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, and the Tampa Tribune. Today, there are only a handful of metro areas – most notably, New York, Washington, Chicago and Los Angeles – that still have two or more daily newspapers.

The vast majority of the dailies that closed in recent years served impoverished communities that never regained their economic footing in the years after the 2008 recession.¹⁶ Many of these dailies lost not only their local advertisers, who went out of business in the wake of the recession, but also their readers, who could no longer afford to pay for a subscription. When they closed their doors, most of the shuttered dailies had less than 15,000 print subscribers, even though they served communities with tens of thousands of residents. After two deals to sell the family-owned Waycross Journal-Herald fell through, the longtime publisher, Roger Williams, told employees that the six-day-a-week daily would publish its final edition on Sept. 30, 2019. At its closing, the small daily paper, with a circulation of only 6,700, was distributed in three Georgia counties, where more than one in five residents lived in poverty. With declining subscription and advertising revenue, "we didn't have any recourse," Williams said.¹⁷ Two weeks after the closure of the Waycross Journal-Herald, the owner of The Brantley Beacon in Nahunta, 23 miles away, announced he planned to resume publishing the Journal-Herald, but as a weekly.¹⁸

As advertisers and readers abandoned the daily paper, the owners – both large chains and independent publishers – often tried to stave off closing of the newspaper by switching from daily to nondaily printing of the paper. About a tenth of the more than 2,000 weeklies shuttered over the past 15 years were listed as dailies in the 2004 UNC database. Most had been published daily for decades. The 127-year-old Siftings Herald in Arkansas switched to twice-weekly in 2016, three years before its demise.¹⁹ The Daily Times of Pryor Creek in Oklahoma, established in 1919, switched to publishing only three times a week in 2013. When The Pryor Creek Times published its last issue as a thrice-weekly on April 29, 2017, it had only 3,000 subscribers among the 40,000 residents of Mayes County.²⁰

Other owners of dailies took more drastic steps and stopped the printing presses entirely. More than 100 papers (including at least a dozen of the daily newspapers) that were printed and distributed in 2004 are now online-only sites. Over time, these slimmed-down websites have either withered in terms of impact and reach, or they have been absorbed into the website of a surviving paper. In 2009, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer switched to digital-only publication. In 2018, its website was placed under the umbrella of the San Francisco Chronicle's free website, SFGate. More recently, in 2017, The News-Sentinel in Fort Wayne, Indiana, ceased daily publication and became a website. In 2018, seven of the eight remaining employees of the News-Sentinel digital site were laid off.²¹

When a community loses its daily, residents are usually reliant on news outlets in adjacent or faraway counties for coverage, since there are few local alternatives. In the aftermath of the closure of the Vindicator, several news organizations attempted to fill the void. The Ogden chain, which owns the newspaper in the adjacent county of Trumbull, purchased the Vindicator's subscription list and its front-page nameplate, and in fall 2019 began publishing a zoned edition with limited news. The Youngstown Business Journal started beefing up its coverage of topics, including entertainment.²² And the McClatchy chain, in partnership with the Google News Initiative, established MahoningMatters, designed to explore "potential sustainable business models for local news" in Mahoning County. However, the site employs only three of the 30 journalists working at The Vindicator when it closed.²³

Despite the new additions, Mark Brown, general manager of The Vindicator and son of the longtime publisher and owner, believes something important is lost by not having a paper with ties to the community that endured for 150 years. He hopes people remember how hard his family fought to preserve crusading journalism in Mahoning Valley, going to court to get access to public records, often sending the paper's attorney with its journalists to meetings to make certain the politicians were following open meeting laws. "We fought those battles like crazy," he said. "I'm very concerned that is what's lost."²⁴

THE VANISHING WEEKLIES

WHERE HAVE NEWSPAPERS DISAPPEARED?



SOURCE: UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media

Residents of the Kentucky community of Morehead awoke on the morning of April 29, 2020, to learn they had joined a growing number of university towns – from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to Baldwin City, Kansas – with the dubious distinction of having lost their weekly newspaper. Citing the loss of advertising revenue due to the coronavirus pandemic, Community Newspapers Holding Inc. (CNHI), announced that The Morehead News – and four other weeklies the chain owned in northeastern Kentucky – would be merged with The Daily Independent in Ashland, 55 miles away.²⁵

"Many dailies have swallowed up sister weeklies, but it's unusual if no unprecedented for such a consolidation over such a distance," wrote Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues at the University of Kentucky. "It dismayed people in Morehead, home to Morehead State University, [because of] some recent economic developments, including a huge complex of greenhouses intended to provide vegetables to the Eastern United States." A former spokesman for MSU told Cross that a local economic development official had observed, "I can't say to a prospect, we've got everything you want in a small town, in addition a newspaper. ...If you don't have a newspaper in your community, how backward are you?"²⁶ Next to the five weeklies in Kentucky, CNHI, which is owned by the state-pension fund of Alabama, closed seven other weeklies across the Midwest and South.²⁷

Weekly and nondaily papers often have an outsized impact on their communities, but in contrast to the dailies, their closing rarely makes headlines outside the community where they are located. More than 2,000 weeklies and nondaily papers have been shuttered since 2004. Most had circulation of less than 8,000 when they failed. In addition to the five weeklies in Kentucky, CNHI, which is owned by the state-pension fund of Alabama, closed seven other weeklies across the Midwest and South.²⁸

Two-thirds of nondaily newspapers closed since 2004 are located in metro areas, leaving a vacuum for residents of America's urban neighborhoods and suburbs, who typically relied on the local paper to keep them informed about everything from municipal candidates to property assessments and real-estate transactions. Many of the shuttered city and suburban weeklies were owned by some of the largest newspaper chains, such as Gatehouse and Digital First. The decision to shut them down – or merge them with other weeklies or dailies – is often made by executives who opt to deploy their financial resources and journalistic focus elsewhere. In 2013, the CEO of Gatehouse told the Boston Globe that corporate decisions about when to close or consolidate weeklies depended – not on the journalistic mission – but on the economic viability of the markets where the papers were located. "We're going to shift resources to the highest potential markets that are most desirable to our advertisers," he said.²⁹ The company has periodically pruned its Boston area portfolio, which included more than 100 weeklies in 2010. As it prepared to acquire the Gannett chain in 2019, Gatehouse merged 32 of its remaining 50 weeklies in the Boston area suburbs into only 18 publications.³⁰

In 2015, The Washington Post abruptly closed all 20 of its Maryland weeklies in failed Montgomery County, shortly after Jeff Bezos, who had purchased The Post, failed to find a buyer. Bezos had decided to focus all his resources on positioning The Washington Post as a national paper. The papers, collectively known as The Gazette, had a free circulation of 450,000.³¹

The closure of The Gazette meant that a family-owned weekly, the 165-year-old Montgomery Sentinel, was the only local newspaper covering a county of more than 1 million residents. But, in January 2020, the publisher Lynn Kapiloff announced that the Sentinel was closing. Having lost almost all of the local display and classified advertising it carried in the 1990s, the Sentinel was left with only legal advertising, which didn't cover the costs of producing the paper and paying the staff.³² At its peak in the 1990s, the Sentinel had a circulation of more than 100,000. By 2020, the weekly had a circulation in Montgomery County of only 5,000. County Council member Nancy Navarro worried about the lack of news coverage of local government. After the demise of the Gazette, "We barely have any local coverage," she said, "and overall, this is bad for our democracy."³³

The struggles of The Sentinel are typical of those confronting many owners of locally owned weeklies today. Weeklies are not as capital intensive as dailies, and, as a result, it is much easier for someone to find the funds to publish a neighborhood newsletter or paper. However, weeklies are also much more susceptible to downturns in the local market. In contrast to the dailies, weeklies typically employ a very small staff – maybe no more than a couple of people, who handle both the business and journalism. So, there is no room to pare back when times are hard.

While both low-income and affluent neighborhoods in metro areas have lost their hometown papers, most of the shuttered 600 weeklies in rural areas were located in small markets with high poverty rates. Most had an average circulation of less than 4,000, underscoring the small size of their communities. Newspaper publishers found it difficult to attract paying customers, as well as advertising from businesses in the area.

When Gatehouse announced that the 130-year-old Carthage Press in Southwest Missouri would print its final edition August 29, 2018, it had a circulation of only 1,200. Almost a third of the people in Carthage live in poverty. A group of local residents announced they would take over publication the following month, but they, too, were forced to close the paper by the end of 2019.³⁴

LIVING IN A NEWS DESERT

DO YOU LIVE IN A NEWS DESERT?



SOURCE: UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media

The coronavirus has brought into sharp focus the critical role that a local news outlet can play during an epidemic or emergency – disseminating authoritative information from experts and discrediting misinformation. An analysis by the Brookings Institution found that in early April 2020, half of the 2,485 counties that reported cases of coronavirus had either no local newspaper or only one surviving paper. The seven-eighths percent of those counties in the country lacked a daily newspaper. Two-thirds were rural counties. It concluded, "Undoubtedly important stories will go uncovered as the coronavirus spreads across the country" – especially into rural areas, with poorer health care facilities than in metro areas and vulnerable populations that are at high risk of contracting the virus.³⁵

What is a "news desert"? Both scholars and policymakers have tackled the question in recent years. Some have focused on the digital divide and sought to determine whether residents have readily available access to broadband and wireless technology. Others focus on barriers, such as language and cultural issues, that leave ethnic communities marginalized and disenfranchised. Still others focus on the quality and quantity of news available.³⁶

At the heart of the debate is the notion that all residents in a community need access to critical information in order to make wise decisions that will affect the quality of their lives. Therefore, this report defines a news desert as "a community, either rural or urban, where residents have very limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feed democracy at the grassroots level."

Local newspapers have historically employed many more reporters than television and radio, and even in their diminished state, still provide the majority of what the Federal Communications Commission terms "critical information" on topics such as education, health, politics, governance and infrastructure.³⁷ A recent study by Duke University of 100 mid-sized communities, ranging in size from 20,000 to 300,000, found "local newspapers significantly outperformed local TV, radio, and online-only outlets in news production, both in overall story output and in terms of stories that are original, local, or address a critical information need."³⁸ This means that for many communities, the local paper is still the prime, if not the sole, source of news and information about topics such as local education and governance, as well as what is on sale at the grocery store.

Today, more than 200 of the nation's 3,143 counties have no local newspaper. Half of the nation's counties – 1,540 – have only one newspaper. Additionally, two-thirds – 2,000 – no longer have a daily newspaper, which means residents in those counties typically turn to social media or regional television stations in distant cities for daily news.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF COUNTIES WITHOUT NEWSPAPERS

Demographic Measure	News Deserts	U.S.
Average Poverty Rate	18%	12%
Average Median Income (\$/Year)	\$45,000	\$61,937
Average Median Age (Years)	42	38
Average Percent of Residents With Bachelor's Degree or Higher	19%	33%

SOURCE: UNC Database and US Census Bureau

News deserts are widespread and can occur in inner-city neighborhoods and suburban towns, as well as sparsely populated rural communities. Most communities that have lost a newspaper are struggling economically. They are slowly dying, bypassed by the technological revolution – the very communities where residents most need news and information on topics such as education, health and infrastructure. When a community loses its newspaper, coverage of routine local government meetings almost always declines. Without a professional journalist covering those meetings, transparency and government efficiency also decline. Residents in those communities frequently end up paying higher taxes as the cost of government borrowing rises.³⁹

Residents of counties with no newspaper – or only one newspaper – tend to be much poorer, older and less educated than the average American. Eighteen percent are living in poverty, compared with a national average of 12 percent. Almost half of residents living in a county without a newspaper also live in a food desert, "without access to fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthful whole foods."⁴⁰ They are less likely to be able to afford subscriptions to either cable or newspapers.⁴¹ Many do not have access to high-speed internet in their homes or at work. As a result, residents of low-income areas tend to be overlooked by advertisers and have less access to print or digital media. Because they are less informed about key issues confronting their communities, they are less likely to vote.⁴²

News deserts contribute to cultural, economic and political divides in this country, between media-rich communities typically located in metro areas and those in news-deprived regions, mostly located in the South and Midwest. The South, which has some of the poorest states in the country, has the most counties without newspapers. Every state in the South had at least one county without a newspaper. There were two dozen counties without a stand-alone newspaper in both Texas, with 254 counties, and Georgia, with 159. Several other states in the South, with very fewer counties – including Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee – had at least a half-dozen counties without newspapers.⁴³

COUNTIES WITHOUT NEWSPAPERS BY REGION: 2020

States were grouped by region according to the following classifications: Pacific: AK, CA, HI, OR, WA; Mountain: AZ, CO, UT, MT, WY, NM, ID, WY; Midwest: IL, IN, OH, MI, WI, IA, MO, KS, NE, ND, SD, NE; South: DE, DC, FL, GA, MS, AL, LA, KY, TN, VA, WV, PA, NY, NJ, CT, RI, MA, NH, VT; Northeast: ME, NH, VT, MA, CT, RI, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD, VA, WV, KY, TN, MS, AL, GA, FL, SC, NC, VA, WV, PA, NY, NJ, CT, RI, MA, NH, VT.

SOURCE: UNC Database

No state has been spared the death of a newspaper. California has lost the most dailies, 11. They ranged from 22,000 to 157,000 in circulation. This loss was primarily driven by the merger of eight dailies, owned by the Digital First chain in the San Francisco Bay Area, into two nameplates, the East Bay Times and Mercury News. Illinois, New York and Texas – some of the nation's most populous states – lost the most weeklies, more than 150 each since 2004. Most of the weeklies closed in Illinois and New York were in the suburbs of metro areas. More than half of the weeklies in Texas were in rural areas.

States in the South, Midwest and Rocky Mountain regions were most likely to have counties with only one local newspaper. The sole surviving newspaper in those counties often covered vast geographic areas with populations ranging from a few hundred to several hundred thousand.

Ultimately, the loss of a local newspaper in one state has the potential to affect residents in other states. Government agencies often depend on local newspaper reports to help identify and contain public health crises, such as epidemics and pandemics.⁴⁴ "While online outlets of news and information have sprouted up everywhere ... few have been able to replace the reach and professional level of traditional news outlets," noted a researcher at New York University's School of Law, in a recent article about the threat that the rise of news deserts poses to national security, especially as the coronavirus affects the decisions of people living in even the most remote communities.⁴⁵

NEXT: VANISHING READERS AND JOURNALISTS