

The Demographics of Local News Deserts within the Regions of the United States

By Nicholas Grant

Introduction

Why do some parts of the United States have more local news deserts than others? Local news deserts are areas in which citizens no longer have access to a local newspaper. They are vital to American democracy because citizens are more likely to be civically engaged when they follow the public affairs in their area. Serving an important watchdog function, journalism prevents political corruption from flourishing, increases the voting rates of citizens, and leads to a greater attachment to one's community. Local news deserts, however, are increasing at an alarming rate. By analyzing where local news deserts are more likely to form, I determined the regions of the United States that are the most vulnerable. My research is the first to employ a breakdown of the local news deserts in the six regions of the United States in terms of several demographic factors, such as age, income, population density, education, and broadband Internet access.

My research found that certain demographic factors are stronger predictors for the formation of local news deserts than others. For example, the level of education of residents is more insightful than median age and income for analyzing consumer demand. Although the number of consumers in a market and the rate of households with an Internet bandwidth is significant in identifying the supply of local newspapers, I found that overall consumer demand is more important. The South consisted of both a high population and number of local news deserts, which suggests that they form because certain types of residents are less likely to read their paper. These residents tend to be less educated. Additionally, my research identified a divide between urban and rural areas. Urban regions, which consist of the Mid-Atlantic and New England, contain greater media markets in which residents readily consume more local news physically and online. In contrast, rural regions such as the South, Mountain, and the Pacific

have more local news deserts. The Midwest is a rural exception as the region attains a successful newspaper industry that may be attributed to the higher level of education of the residents.

Consumer Demand Explanation for Local News Deserts

A great deal of research has highlighted how consumer demand plays a role in shaping media content. For example, in *How the Market Transforms Information into News* by James T. Hamilton, the author links demographic factors to consumer demand for local news. He performed content analyses for sixty-eight daily papers in the top fifty cities in the United States.¹ The researchers found that editors add hard news stories depending on audience interest in the topic.² Therefore local news outlets shape their business operations according to the characteristics of the market. This tactic is effective because consumer demand is of utmost importance in the success of the local newspaper industry. Newspapers may target readers who are most likely to consume newspapers based on their individual characteristics in order to save their papers in struggling counties.

Edward Malthouse and Bobby Calder analyze the effects of income, age, and education in *The Demographics of Newspaper Readership*. The study drew simple random samples for each stratum for 101 newspapers.³ The list of participating newspapers included a nearly equal distribution from small to big city geographics.³ The researchers found that income and level of education explain some variation in readership, but age and the number of years of residence are

¹ James T. Hamilton, "What is News on Local Television Station and in Local Newspapers," *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 149.

² *Ibid*, 151.

³ Edward Malthouse and Bobby Calder, "The Demographics of Newspaper Readership," *Journal of Media Business Studies* (2006): 5.

the greatest factors.⁴ The study did not calculate the average number of each demographic, but rather analyzed which factors are the strongest predictors.

Media Markets: Rural versus Urban Regions

Consumer demand for local newspapers is stronger in areas that are in or near media markets, which differs between rural and urban regions. In *Media Deserts: Monitoring the Changing Media Environment* by Michelle Ferrer, Guaray Sinha, and Michael Outrich, the researchers mapped local news deserts through the use of geographic information systems. The project utilized data collected from the Alliance for Audited media that maps daily newspaper circulation.⁵ Between 2007 and 2014, 24.5 percent of communities experienced the loss of a newspaper.⁶ Robust media ecosystems still exist around major metropolitan areas, such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC.⁷ A divide is apparent in which rural states without close proximity to a media market experience the greatest loss of local newspapers. Penelope Muse Abernathy concurs with this sentiment in *The Expanding News Desert*. She argued that the residents of emerging local news deserts are often vulnerable citizens who reside in rural areas. They are older, less educated, and poorer.⁸

In *Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News* by Philip M. Napoli et al., the study focused on communities

⁴ Edward Malthouse and Bobby Calder, "The Demographics of Newspaper Readership," *Journal of Media Business Studies* (2006): 10.

⁵ Michelle Ferrer, Guaray Sinha, and Michael Outrich, "Media Deserts: Monitoring the Changing Media Systems," *The Communication Crisis in America and How to Fix It* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 151.

⁶ Ibid, 222.

⁷ Ibid, 226.

⁸ Penelope Muse Abernathy, "The Expanding News Desert," *Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (2018): 16.

with populations ranging from 20,000 to 300,000.⁹ The researchers believed that the smaller communities are the most vulnerable. From the 493 communities, the researchers selected a random sample of 100 communities and then studied the effects of population, income, and demographic composition.¹⁰ The researchers at Duke University found that the distance from a large media market resulted in a loss of journalism output in a community.¹⁰ Furthermore, the researchers asserted that the distance from a media market is more significant in determining the vulnerability of a community than population density or median income.¹¹

Supply Side of Local News Deserts

While the previous literature discussed has focused on consumer demand for local news, local news deserts may develop due to the high cost to produce original stories. Certain regions may have less resources, such as the number of reporters. In *Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage* by Erik Peterson, the study found that the decline in staffing in newsrooms reduced the amount of political coverage in newspapers. Peterson analyzed the measures of staffing based on an annual newspaper census conducted by the American Society of Newsroom Editors and he digitized the newspaper staff lists from *Bacon's News Directory*.¹² The researcher links these measures of staffing to a newspaper's attention to politics from data that was collected in two different sources, which include the Newsbank

⁹ Philip M. Napoli et al., "Assessing Local Journalism: News Deserts, Journalism Divides, and the Determinants of the Robustness of Local News," *Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy* (2018): 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

¹² Erik Peterson, *Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage* (2019): 10.

database and the ProQuest database.¹³ Peterson found that a higher level of staffing is related to a greater volume of political news coverage.¹⁴

The paper demonstrates the methods in which local news outlets create their staffing changes. For example, cutbacks involve reporters specializing in political news coverage.¹⁵ In regions in which newsrooms struggle financially, the high cost of the beats system is cut in favor of general reporters. Additionally, the regions in which journalists are more likely to be located is important to consider. According to the Pew Research Center in another report, newsroom employment decreased in the United States by 23 percent between 2008 and 2017.¹⁶ In particular, newsroom employment dropped by 45 percent over this period of time.¹⁶ Job growth only occurred in the digital-native news sector, which reveals that journalists are more inclined to work in urban areas. In these locations, readers consume online news and generate a sustainable level of advertisement revenue for the industry.

In *How people get local news and information in different communities* by Carolyn Miller, the Pew Research Center conducted a nationally representative telephone survey of adults in the United States in order to explore their local news consumption habits that are influenced by their type of community. The researchers noticed that from rural to urban areas, citizens report similarly high levels of interest in local news, but the methods in which they seek information reflects community differences.¹⁷ Suburban residents depend on local radio during

¹³ Erik Peterson, *Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage* (2019): 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Grieco, "Newsroom employment dropped nearly a quarter in less than 10 years, with greatest decline at newspapers," *Pew Research Center* (2018): 2.

¹⁷ Carolyn Miller, "How people get local news and information in different communities," *Pew Research Center* (2012): 2.

their commutes, while rural residents rely on word of mouth for local information.¹⁸ Residents of larger cities are more likely to stay informed about local topics from a combination of online and traditional sources.¹⁹ Although interest is similar, urban areas with higher rates of households with a broadband Internet subscription represent a greater supply of residents who read the news physically and online. As Napoli et al. asserted, media markets are powerful in determining the vulnerability of a community.

Changing Ownerships in Newsrooms

In *The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts* by Penelope Muse Abernathy, she determined the manner in which investment groups purchase struggling newspapers and squeeze them for short-term profit. Abernathy utilized the information from the University of North Carolina but excluded large national newspapers in the database.²⁰ The study is solely focused on traditional local newspapers in which she identifies a new type of investment company known as the “media baron,” which consists of private equity funds, hedge funds, and investment partnerships.²¹ The author discovered that the largest companies own about 900 papers, which have a combined circulation of 12.7 million.²² My study does not analyze the ownership of newspapers, but it is worth noting that the largest 25

¹⁸ Carolyn Miller, “How people get local news and information in different communities,” *Pew Research Center* (2012): 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

²⁰ Penelope Muse Abernathy, “The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts,” *Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (2016): 6.

²¹ *Ibid*, 7.

²² *Ibid*, 8.

companies collectively own newspapers in all 50 states.²³ They tend to purchase newspapers in rural areas with high poverty rates.²⁴ Not only do the firms focus more on advertisement revenue to the detriment of the quality of the news, the largest chains seek to purchase and merge newspapers from multiple adjacent counties. As suburban newspapers merge into larger metropolitan papers in rural areas, they result in the spread of local news deserts.

The corporate ownership of newspapers affects the production of content that may not align with the audience interests of the market. According to Gregory J. Martin and John McCrain in *Local News and International Politics*, the study found that the nationalization of news occurs due to the lower cost for the supply. Even though the study focuses on local television news that operates under different market conditions than newspapers, the effects may be applied to the local news desert phenomena. By comparing the Sinclair-acquired stations to others operating in the same market, the researchers found that the acquisition led to a roughly three percentage point increase in the share of programming devoted to coverage of national politics.²⁵ The content also developed a rightward shift, but the researchers determined that viewership declined due to this change.²⁶ The consumer demand of citizens does not align with the supply of content from the Sinclair-acquired stations.

Research Methods

²³ Penelope Muse Abernathy, “The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts,” *Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (2016): 39.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

²⁵ Gregory J. Martin and John McCrain, “Local News and National Politics,” *American Political Science Review* (2018): 3.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 22.

My study explored previous data conducted by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina. I analyzed several demographic factors utilizing Census data, such as median age, median income in dollars, residents per square mile, median percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher for persons age 25 years+, and the percentage of households with a broadband Internet subscription. Median income in dollars, median percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher for persons age 25 years+, and median age represent consumer demand. Residents per square mile and the percentage of households with a broadband Internet subscription are supply variables.

The center released a report *The Expanding News Desert*, which visualized the total number of local news deserts in each region of the United States. To identify them, the center supplemented the information in industry databases with data obtained from press associations in every state.²⁷ The regions were separated into the South, Mountain, Midwest, Pacific, Mid-Atlantic, and New England, which I followed. According to the center, the South had the most local news deserts at 91, while New England and the Mid-Atlantic had the least amount at 3 each.²⁸ The Mountain, Midwest, and the Pacific had 28, 27, and 19 respectively.²⁸ Furthermore, the results from the center indicated that local news deserts have a higher poverty rate by 5 percent, a lower median income by \$14,000, a slightly higher median age by four years, and a lower average percent of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher by 14 percent compared to the national average.²⁸ While this research shows which regions have the most local news deserts and compares the data to the national average, my analysis offers a greater breakdown of the thresholds in which they form.

²⁷ Penelope Muse Abernathy, "The Expanding News Desert," *Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (2018): 13.

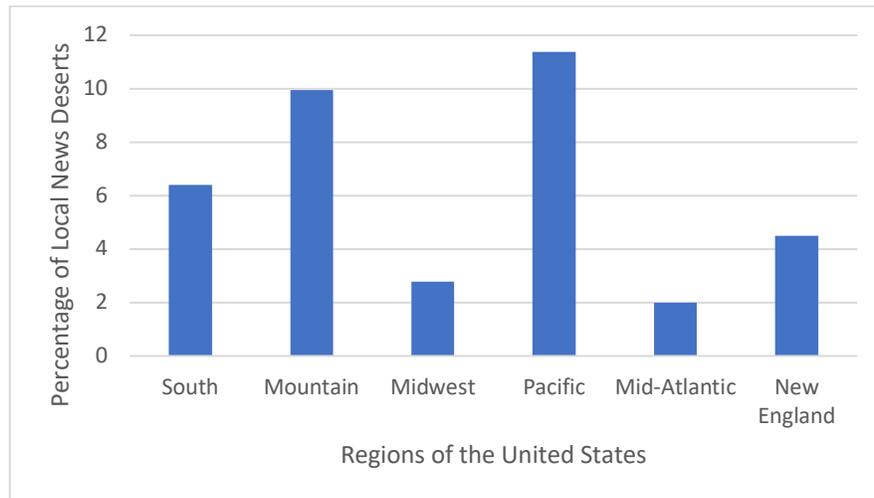
²⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

The data by the center is located on an interactive map on usnewsdeserts.com. The website separates the United States into counties with red indicating local news deserts. Users are able to view the map of the counties within each individual state. For the first part of my research, I separated the regions by state. I listed the number and names of the counties in each state that are completely devoid of newspapers. I followed the same classification for the regions as the center.²⁹ The South contained 13 states with local news deserts. New England contained 3, the Midwest contained 9, the Pacific contained 5, and the Mountain contained 6. In each region, I divided the number of counties that lack access to a local newspaper with the total number of counties using information from the 2010 Census Geographic Entity Tallies by State and Type.

The next part of my research investigates whether a correlation is apparent between demographic factors and the number of local news deserts in each region. An analysis of the demographic factors in each region indicates which types of audience are most likely to consume local newspapers, shaping sustainable economic environments. I created a data set that includes information on state, county, median income in dollars, residents per square mile, median age, percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher for persons age 25 years+, and the percentage of households with a broadband Internet subscription. For each demographic factor, I inputted information from the United States Census Bureau with estimates as of July 1, 2017.

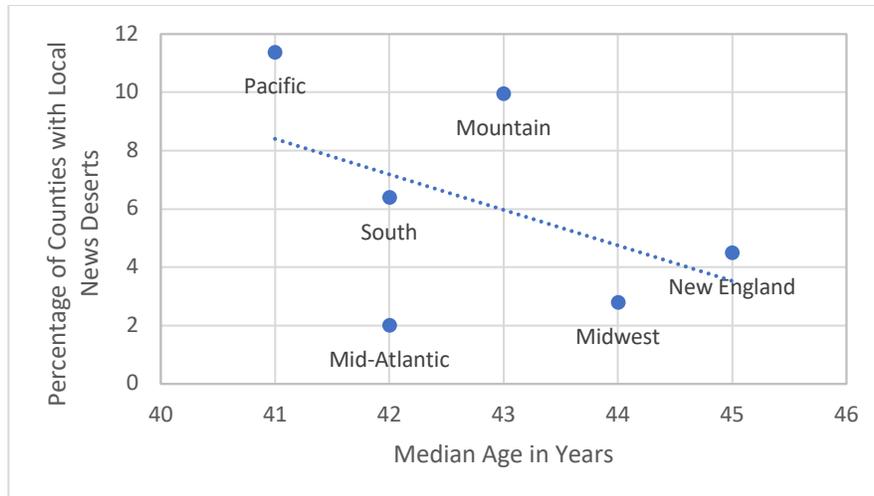
Findings

²⁹ The South consisted of DE, DC, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV, AL, KY, MS, TN, AR, LA, OK, and TX. The Mountains consisted of AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, and WY. The Midwest consisted of IL, IN, MI, OH, WI, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, and SD. The Pacific consisted of AK, CA, HI, OR, and WA. The Mid-Atlantic consisted of NJ, NY, and PA. New England consisted of CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, and VT.

Figure 1: Percentage of Local News Deserts Relative to the Total Number of Counties

When I calculated the percentage of local news deserts relative to the total number of counties in each region, the result differs greatly than the bar chart in *The Expanding News Desert*. I found that the Mid-Atlantic and New England still have a low amount of local news deserts at 2 percent and 4.5 percent, which indicates that these urban regions offer greater markets for the consumption of local news. According to the Pacific, 19 out of 167 counties have local news deserts. Unlike the center's findings, this region contained the highest percentage at 11.38 percent. With only 27 local news deserts counties out of 968, the Midwest exhibited a significant decrease in local news deserts at 2.79 percent. The South, which previously had the most local news deserts, held a medium number at 6.4 percent. The significant changes in the Midwest and Pacific suggests that certain regions contain more local news deserts because of their size, which results in false representation of the epidemic.

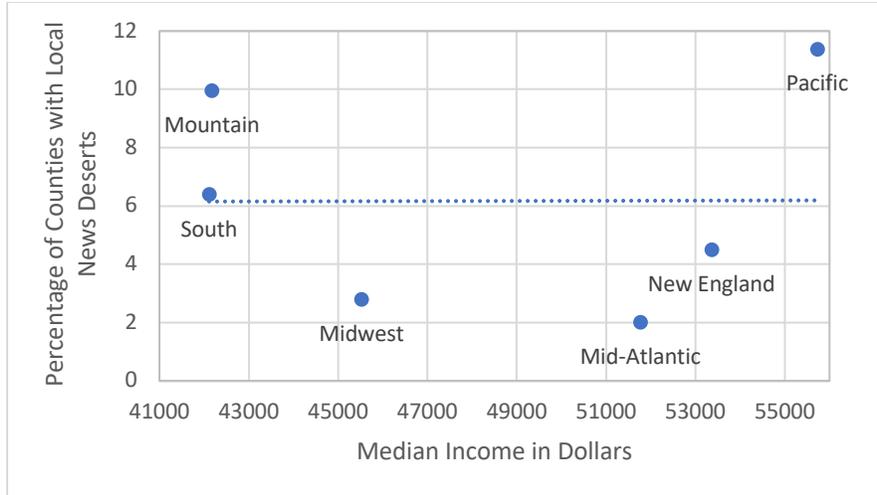
Figure 2: Median Age in Local News Deserts



For each demographic factor, I created a scatterplot with the independent variable that I am studying on the x-axis and the percentage of counties with local news deserts on the y-axis. By implementing a linear trendline in each chart, I am able to determine whether a correlation exists, and which demographic factors represent the strongest predictors for local news deserts.

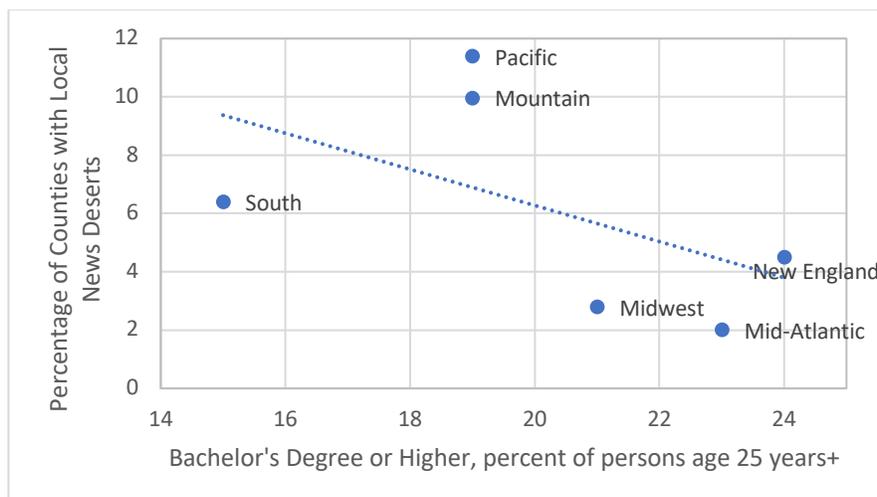
The results for median age are not highly substantive. The large correlation coefficient is -0.47 , but the ages ranged from only 41 to 45 years in the regions. My scatterplot found that the higher the median age, the less likely local news deserts are to form, but this is a peculiar finding because the center found that older residents are less likely to read local news. New England contains the least amount of local news deserts and the highest median age. The median ages in the South and the Mid-Atlantic were both 42 years, even though these regions differ greatly in their number of counties without a local newspaper.

Figure 3: Median Income in Local News Deserts



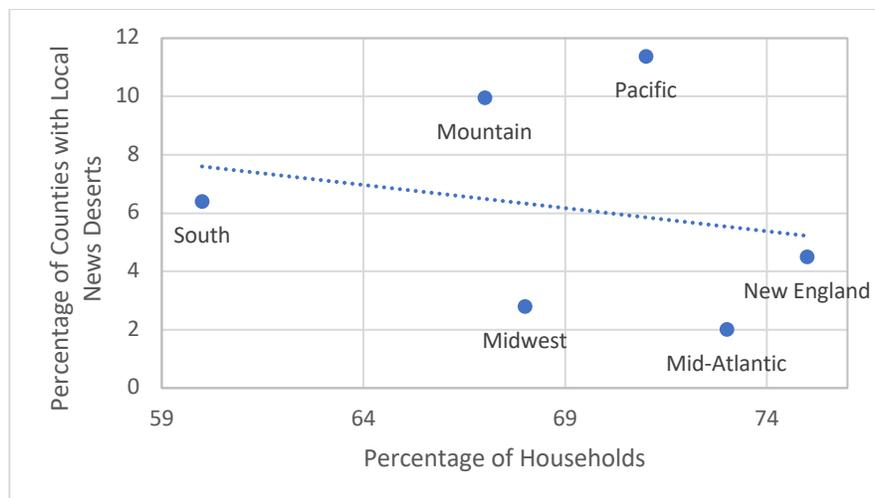
The South, Mountain, and Midwest contained a lower median income than the Pacific, Mid-Atlantic, and New England. The median income ranged from \$42112 to \$55723. Although the center found that poorer consumers are less likely to purchase local newspapers, my scatterplot found a virtually nonexistent correlation. The correlation coefficient is only .0045. Median income is not a strong predictor in the formation of local news deserts as a consumer demand variable.

Figure 4: Level of Education in Local News Deserts



The level of education shows that the regions with the highest number of local news deserts contains audiences with a lower rate of a bachelor's degree or higher. The correlation coefficient is very large at -0.53. The three regions with the least amount of local news deserts are the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and New England. These all contained the highest percentages of having a bachelor's degree or higher for persons age 25 years+, which demonstrates that educated consumers are more likely to read local news. Level of education maintained a large negative correlation in my scatterplot with a range from 15 to 24 percent. The South contained the lowest rate of education. Unlike the previous demographic factors analyzed, level of education in local news deserts is effective in demonstrating how consumer demand affects the newspaper industry.

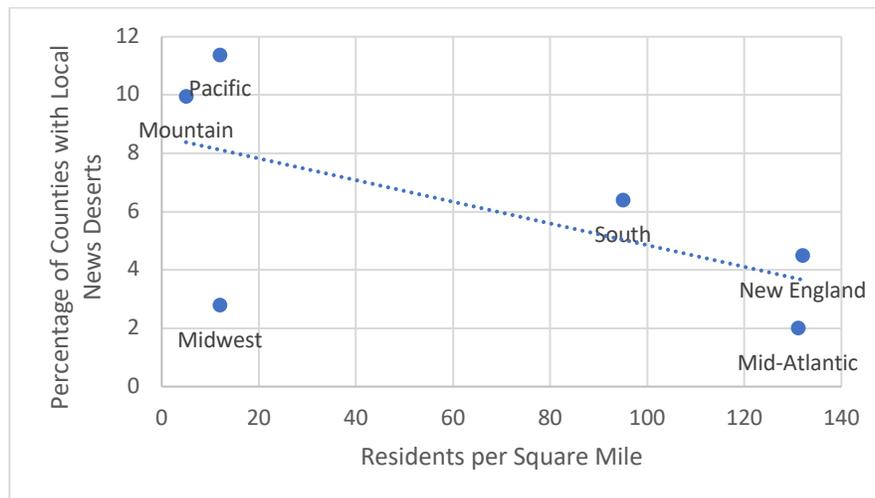
Figure 5: Households with a Broadband Internet Subscription in Local News Deserts



Households with a broadband Internet subscription is a supply variable. The small correlation coefficient is -0.22, but the percentages ranged largely from 60 to 75 percent. According to my results, the less local news deserts a region exhibits, the greater the rate of households with an Internet subscription. The trendline in my scatterplot is only slightly negative

but is consistent with my prediction that local newspapers are better adapted to survive in areas in which consumers read online news.

Figure 6: Population Density in Local News Deserts



The population density demographic factor is one of the most striking results. The Mid-Atlantic and New England regions contained high rates of residents per square mile, which allows for a sustainable local news environment. The Mountain, Midwest, and Pacific were all incredibly low. The population density ranged from 5 to 132. Even though the South has a population density of 95, the region also consists of the greatest number of local news deserts. Therefore, even though the supply for the consumption of local news is present, the demand is not. My scatterplot showed a steep negative slope, with the percentage of counties with local news deserts increasing as residents per square mile decreases. The correlation coefficient is the largest at -0.60. This finding suggests that the number of consumers in a market is significant for the functioning of local newspapers, but the South also illustrates that the demand for local newspapers is more important than the supply.

Conclusion

The report *The Expanding News Desert* by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina highlights the spread of local news deserts in the United States. The report, however, did not view the percentage of local news deserts relative to the total number of counties as shown in Figure 1. Furthermore, the study did not analyze the media market in each region. My findings are evidence that certain demographic factors shape the formation of local news deserts. Regions with the least amount of local news deserts, such as the Mid-Atlantic and New England, maintain positive demographic factors for the consumption of local news. The residents in these regions are more educated and have a greater number of households with a broadband Internet subscription.

According to Figure 2, residents in local news deserts are younger. One possible explanation is that younger residents are more likely to read local and national news online, which produces less revenue for local news outlets than paper subscriptions. According to Figure 5, however, the higher rates of broadband Internet subscription in households led to a decrease in the number of local news deserts in the regions. Although the correlation coefficient in Figure 5 is small, the large range of 15 percent is significant. While Figure 2 contains a bigger correlation coefficient than Figure 5, the ages only ranged by 4 years. Therefore, the results for median age are not very informative. The median income ranged by about \$14,000, but Figure 3 is not a strong predictor because the trendline for the demographic factor did not express a correlation. While residents in local news deserts tend to be poorer when compared to the national average, the consumer demand variable is not insightful when analyzing each region.

In Figure 6, population density resulted in the largest negative slope in my trendline out of all of the demographic factors that I analyzed. The South, however, consists of both a high

population density and number of local news deserts. My findings suggest that local newspaper deserts form largely due to a lack of consumer demand. Even though the supply is important to consider, audience interests mainly influence the success of the local news industry. These characteristics differ by region, which represents a divide between urban and rural areas. Urban regions, such as the Mid-Atlantic and New England, contain greater media markets and have more residents who readily consume local news. Citizens that are more educated may be more likely to live in urban areas, creating a stronger dynamic news industry. The rural regions, such as the South, Mountain, and Pacific contained residents who are less educated and have less access to the Internet. The rate of households with a broadband Internet subscription experienced a slight negative correlation in Figure 5, suggesting that certain regions have a greater supply of readers who are able to consume both print and online news.

Previous research has analyzed whether the decline in the local newspaper industry may be attributed to weak consumer demand or a lack of supply, but my study is the first to consider these factors within the six regions of the United States in the context of the local news desert phenomena. My findings suggest that the consumer demand explanation is more important. As Hamilton argues, local news outlets shape their business operations according to the consumer demand of the market. If the target audience has a higher level of education, the stories will be influenced by this demographic factor in order to increase the rate of newspaper subscriptions in a given county. Malthouse and Calder found that age is a better predictor of readership than income and level of education. While this notion is true for the simple random samples in the counties with functioning newspapers, my study demonstrates that the education of consumers is the most insightful independent variable within local news deserts due to the large correlation

coefficient in Figure 4. As a result, local news deserts operate under a different economic environment than previously expected.

Media markets are important in identifying which regions consist of better conditions for a sustainable news industry. Strong media ecosystems are apparent in or around metropolitan areas. They are more pronounced in the urban Mid-Atlantic and New England regions in which the circulation base for local newspaper readership is larger. Interestingly, the Midwest is rural and consists of the second lowest rate of local news deserts when comparing the amount to the total number of counties. While an urban and rural divide exists, the Midwest is an exception. The Midwest contained the third highest level of education and may express a culture that is positive for the consumption of local newspapers. Additionally, my study reinforces the findings of Napoli et al. who analyzed a random sample of 100 communities and found that the distance from a media market is a greater predictor for the loss of journalism output than population density and median income. In contrast to his research, however, my study demonstrates that local news deserts are not a uniform phenomenon. They vary greatly depending on the characteristics and compositions of the citizens in each unique region.

The supply side argument of my study provides various paths for research. As the Pew Research Center found, journalists are more likely to be located in urban areas. Peterson also found that a higher level of staffing is related to a greater volume of political news coverage. Although my research did not identify the number of reporters in each region, urban areas near or in large media markets may have greater journalism output. A study that compared the number of journalists in newsrooms based on each region would provide a greater context for identifying which areas have a larger production of local news content. As a result of changing ownerships, struggling newspapers are bought by corporate entities that decrease the quality of

the content. This raises the question as to which regions contain the most local newspapers that are not performing their tasks effectively.

Moreover, more demographic factors may be studied within local news deserts, such as the effects of gender, race, and occupation on consumer demand. If local news deserts are primarily a consumer demand issue, the implications are significant for the future of journalism. Local news deserts are extreme examples of negative economic conditions in which the local newspaper is no longer a part of a community. If they are becoming extinct because citizens do not enjoy reading the news, this represents a transformation of American culture in which the personalized Internet has replaced the newspaper industry. Readers may prefer national news, which is deemed as more exciting than the local newspaper. Lastly, future research may break down the regions that I studied into smaller areas in order to determine the precise locations in which local news deserts form. For example, the South is a very large region that may be separated into eastern, central, and western parts.

Once a local newspaper is out of business, the return of the industry in a community may be challenging as citizens become accustomed to consuming predominantly national news online. Citizens, however, are more likely to be civically engaged if they read the local newspaper, such as voting in local elections. Local news deserts are a threat to American democracy as these counties experience a sharp decline in political accountability. While Americans may be taught the importance of journalism in the functioning of the United States through the use of marketing campaigns, the prevalence of local news deserts in certain areas conveys a situation in which some regions experience greater political corruption than others.

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