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Article

A Discursive Evolution: Trade Publications Explain News Deserts to United States Journalists

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Abstract
Although diminishing newsrooms—and gaping holes in community news coverage—have been acknowledged in the US for over a decade, the term "news desert" did not widely emerge in discourse among industry professionals to refer to places that lacked news outlets until the fall of 2018. While much work in various disciplines, including journalism studies, aims to uncover the causes behind news deserts and the effects of their proliferation, scant research attempts to understand how journalists themselves see these issues. Utilizing metajournalistic discourse analysis of journalism trade magazines, this study examined seven publications and found 97 articles published between January 1, 2017, and September 30, 2022, that used the term "news desert." The aim is to understand how industry insiders constructed the concept and explained the repercussions of the phenomenon to other journalists. This has broader implications for understanding how journalism as an interpretive community constructs the field and the issues confronting it, particularly in times of crisis. This study found that industry leaders cannot agree on a clear definition of news deserts, have only recently begun to acknowledge the ethnic and socioeconomic communities most affected by a lack of news coverage, and rarely articulate, beyond generalities, the effects news deserts have on citizens. These results are then considered through the lens of journalistic reflexivity, national audience response, and potential solutions.

Keywords
community journalism; local news; metajournalistic discourse; news deserts; trade publications; US media

Issue
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1. A Discursive Evolution: Trade Publications Explain News Deserts to United States Journalists

Journalism in the US faces an existential problem: It is shrinking to the point that its very existence in numerous parts of the country remains tenuous at best, and completely lacking at worst. While local newspapers once thrived from coast to coast, there are now predictions that "one-third of American newspapers that existed roughly two decades ago will be out of business by 2025" (Sullivan, 2022, para. 4). In fact, while the entire journalism industry increasingly becomes economically unstable, "the most hard-hit segment of news organizations is unequivocally local news" (Ferrucci & Rossi, 2022, p. 4096). In August 2022, *Editor & Publisher* ran a "State of Local News" report on news deserts emphasizing the urgency of the problem, noting that "this is the most crucial issue facing the news industry and one of the most crucial issues facing our democracy, right now, is the availability of local news and information" (Holmes, 2022). The editorial choice to put this comment in a pullout quote raises questions about "how journalists as

an interpretive community construct their field and the issues confronting it" (Finneman & Thomas, 2021, p. 4), particularly in times of crisis.

While much work in various disciplines, including journalism studies, aims to uncover the causes behind news deserts and the effects of their proliferation, scant research attempts to understand how journalism itself sees these issues. Regardless of the causes and effects of news deserts, journalism needs to be part of the solution (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2022). However, prior work shows that the industry—and therefore the professional journalists that make up the industry—tend to lack reflexivity when it comes to the problems facing the profession (e.g., Ferrucci & Rossi, 2022; Klocke & McDevitt, 2013). What we mean by reflexivity, in this case, aligns with that of Klocke and McDevitt (2013) in that, historically, when publicly discussing their profession and its norms, journalists often avoid even approaching the idea that something they practice—for example, objectivity—could be partially responsible for a problem. This study aims to identify and comprehend how the journalism industry in America has evolved in its understanding and explanation of news deserts since the declaration of this "emerging threat" in late 2016 (Abernathy, 2016). To accomplish this goal, this research utilizes and analyzes metajournalistic discourse concerning news deserts in journalism trade magazines, publications which "have significant influence over how the industry as a whole socially constructs, both currently and historically…meanings" (Ferrucci et al., 2020, p. 1600). Much scholarship utilizing metajournalistic discourse analyzes trade magazines as a proxy for understanding the journalism industry as a whole since the general notion of a socially constructed industry is undergirded with the belief that the powerful—for example, elite trade magazines—represent the overall viewpoint of the industry as they have the agency to impact an entire field's belief systems (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci et al., 2020). Metajournalistic discourses are public expressions that evaluate news, the practices that produce news, and the factors affecting the reception of news (Carlson, 2016). As with most industries, the field of journalism is discursively constructed, and public discourses in elite publications such as the ones analyzed here play a significant role in legitimizing and delegitimizing practices, defining normative behaviors, and reifying overall beliefs concerning the field (Zelizer, 1993). It is therefore essential to analyze how an industry discursively defines issues such as the increase in news deserts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The News Business

In the late 19th century, the US newspaper industry navigated a transition from an industry funded and represented by political parties to one relying on advertising for production costs, a transition that not coincidentally occurred in tandem with the professionalization of the industry (Waisbord, 2013; Winfield, 2008). In effect, journalism began operating as what Baker (1994) called a "dual-model product," a commodity that needed to sell itself as a public good to audiences, but then sold audience attention through advertising. This binary role as both a public service and a business put journalism in a sometimes-conflicting situation of having to please diametrically opposed missions (Bagdikian, 2004). From the turn of the century until roughly the 1980s, newspapers traditionally charged less for its product than it cost to manufacture simply because revenues came from advertising dollars that subsidized the journalistic practice (McChesney & Nichols, 2011). At the same time, newspapers proved to be one of the most lucrative industries in the US, consistently boasting profit margins higher than the vast majority of profitable businesses in the country (Bagdikian, 2004). This profit-making potential attracted the attention of corporations across the US and beyond and catalyzed a shift from local family-owned news organizations to chain ownership by the 1980s (Barnouw, 1997). Effectively, the newspaper industry in the US became appealing to large corporations and, ultimately, conglomerates looking to bolster bottom lines (Bagdikian, 2004).

As the 21st century began, most US news organizations became part of corporate chains, and while this development initially had minimal effects on staff size and professional practices (Lacy, 1989), once advertising revenue decreased substantially—and profits margins shrank—these large corporate chains began enacting plans aimed at stabilizing profits (Abernathy, 2018). These stabilizing efforts, begun in the 1990s and expanded during the financial crisis of 2007 and 2008, were in direct conflict with the altruistic public service that once-family-owned newspapers provided as news coverage shrank and spurred a wave of newspaper closings that continue occurring even today (Abernathy, 2018; Ferrier et al., 2016; Stites, 2018). These closings left many areas of the US, especially rural communities, without dedicated journalism coverage (Abernathy, 2018). While this seismic disruption to newspapers' historical business model ushered in a surge of digitally native news organizations (Ferrucci, 2019; Konieczna, 2018), these mostly nonprofit entities have not provided coverage to existing news deserts (Matherly & Greenwood, 2021; Miller, 2018). Therefore, while there is no doubt that a multitude of new market models of journalism have emerged in the US in recent years, the majority of these outlets exist in principally resource-rich geographic metropolitan areas also boasting legacy media (Matherly & Greenwood, 2021). Thus, few of these new organizations help solve problems triggered by news deserts. And while the term news desert might be "without a universally agreed-upon definition" (Benton, 2018, para. 4), the deleterious effects of their existence are clear. For residents in rural areas, civic life has become harder as citizens now hunt for

information and "act as reporters" with "often frustrating results" (Mathews, 2022, p. 1260). The same study found citizens concerned about a growing lack of civic engagement. Meanwhile, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns grow across the globe as communities without media outlets struggle to find helpful, credible news in an era of misinformation (Barnes et al., 2022; Murray, 2022). Concerns and implications surrounding the lack of information and coverage prompted by a news desert are often compounded in low-income and diverse communities.

2.2. News and Diversity

Although the term "news deserts" has grown in prominence in recent years, the concept has long existed in relation to diverse communities. Throughout its history, the US has struggled to accurately present minority groups accurately and fairly in the press (Wickham, 2004). Historians have documented that residents in minority communities across the US are rarely covered by local media unless a community member commits a crime, excels in sports, or achieves great success in entertainment—all tropes that fueled the creation of Black newspapers in the first place (Washburn, 2006). Valenzuela (1999, pp. 40–67) observed that the Kerner Commission reported as early as 1968 that the news was "almost totally white, both in appearance and attitude." Despite efforts in the 1990s and 2000s to increase newsroom diversity, the steep decline in the number of working US journalists over recent years has resulted in the neglect of stories "that reflect the growing communities of color" (Ferrier et al., 2016, p. 216). For example, despite being among the fastest-growing ethnic group in the US, Asian Americans remain underrepresented and misrepresented when they appear in news stories (Zhang, 2010). A similar fate has befallen Latinos, who are "largely absent from primetime broadcast news and mainstream online and print outlets" (Sui & Paul, 2017, p. 274), despite being a powerful voting bloc that is prominently featured in media coverage of election cycles. Race is not the only determining factor, though. More recently, scholars have observed that it remains critical to note the connection between the US news deserts and the "complex historical context" that certain populations have been "underserved" by journalists for generations, populations defined by both ethnicity and socioeconomics (Finneman et al., 2022, p. 340). The absence of information, whether due to race, economics, or geography, creates serious concerns about the impact of less-informed citizenship in a democratic government.

2.3. The Implications of News Deserts

When a community becomes a news desert, the deficiency of news "poses a far-reaching danger to civic engagement, the accountability of government and, many analysts argue, democracy itself" (Miller, 2018, p. 59). The theorized danger aligns with an empirical study from Matherly and Greenwood (2021) that found corruption flourishes when communities become news deserts. The study also illustrated how a lack of accountability reporting in an area led to emboldened political actors embarking on illegal activity. In a sense, the existence of news deserts compounds already information-precarious areas of the US and beyond. In large metropolitan areas mostly unaffected by news deserts (Griffin, 2018), citizens typically have access to information from other sources beyond news (Plowden, 1994). However, when a small town or rural area loses its existing news source, that source typically represents almost 100% of the original reporting about that community (Miller, 2018). In the US and abroad, this leaves many non-metropolitan areas of the world without any news coverage whatsoever (Örnebring, 2018). This "erosion of community journalism leads to diminished democracy" (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020, p. 502). Often, diminished resources prompt newsrooms to make difficult decisions about what stories to even allocate funds toward, particularly when it involves investigative reporting (Binns & Arnold, 2021). Beyond simply information, accountability, and, more broadly, democratic ideals, the existence of a news desert also destabilizes community ties as local news organizations often play a vital community-building role within rural areas (Friedland, 2016; Fulwood, 2018). While it is undeniable that journalists themselves can only do so much to prevent news deserts and, overall, alleviate the overriding precarity within the industry (Friedland, 2016), it is also true that despite severe and arguably overwhelming economic disruption throughout the industry, "journalists continue behaving as if the normative patterns and notions acted on in newsrooms are beyond reproach" (Ferrucci & Rossi, 2022, p. 4107). This study seeks to understand how the journalism industry perceives the causes behind news deserts, and the effects news deserts have on communities.

2.4. Metajournalistic Discourse

Journalism, in terms of its norms, boundaries, ethics, and definitions, is a socially constructed field, something Zelizer (1993) labeled "an interpretive community." Essentially, as a discursively formed field, journalism is, at any specific moment, constructed "through both the exercise of institutionalized news practices and through explicit interpretative processes justifying or challenging these practices and their practitioners" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). What this means is that while professional organizations, such as the Society for Professional Journalists, exist and a multitude of codes of ethics are utilized throughout the industry, there is no overriding governing body in US journalism. Therefore, the norms of the field, its boundaries, and its prevailing definitions that undergird the industry are reified and legitimatized or delegitimized through a discursive process,

a large piece of which involves what Carlson (2016) called metajournalistic discourse. Simplistically thought about as "what journalists say about their capacity to do what they ought to do" or "journalism about journalism" (Craft & Thomas, 2016, p. 1), metajournalistic discourse are public utterances emanating from publications. A foundational example from within journalism studies concerned the death of Princess Diana in 1997; after her death, many in the public blamed journalism. Journalists, though, believed paparazzi caused the death, not journalism, and therefore news organizations across the globe published public-facing articles explaining the boundaries of practice within the industry, effectively reifying the norms of the field and attempting the process of paradigm repair (Berkowitz, 2000).

As a way to bring an assemblage of related research under one umbrella concept, Carlson (2016) introduced and conceptualized a theory of metajournalistic discourse. The theory argues that there are three components that must be acknowledged and incorporated into any study of this type of discourse. The first is the site/audiences, which basically relates to where the discourse is published. For example, studying metajournalistic discourse from trade journalism magazines translates to an audience of insiders from the journalism field. The second component is the topic, which can be either reactive or generative. Reactive discourse focuses on one critical incident, such as the death of Princess Diana (Berkowitz, 2000), while generative discourse focuses on a situation concerning the entire field of journalism, such as labor precarity within the industry (Ferrucci & Rossi, 2022) or the role of gatekeeping in the field (Vos & Finneman, 2017; Vos & Thomas, 2018). Finally, the third component identifies the actors composing the discourse, which can be, most often, journalists, but also non-journalists such as bloggers (Vos et al., 2012), legal practitioners (Johnson et al., 2021), or even pop-culture creators (Ferrucci, 2018). For this study, which examines trade magazines, the audience is insiders within the journalism field, primarily journalists, the topic is generative in that it affects the entire industry, and the actors are journalists.

Studies such as this one allow researchers the ability to examine how reflexive journalism is about situations currently facing the industry. When it is possible to ascertain how reflexive journalism—and by proxy journalists—is about the profession, it provides an important glimpse into understanding the ability to change (Klocke & McDevitt, 2013). Various critical incidents in journalism, such as the spread of news deserts, often catalyze reflexivity (Ahva, 2013). Explicitly, this type of work assists in illuminating how and why journalism does what it does and how it understands those decisions.

3. Method

A study of metajournalistic discourse proceeds with the implicit understanding that the field of journalism is an interpretative community (Zelizer, 1993). The goal is to enhance knowledge as to how "journalistic practices, norms, and institutions come to be legitimated or contested" (Carlson, 2016, p. 354). Due to these notions undergirding any study of metajournalistic discourse, Craft and Thomas (2016) contended the optimal methodology is textual analysis. This allows researchers to interpret and extrapolate all possible meanings of the data, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the belief systems providing a foundation within an industry at the moment of publication (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Fairclough, 2003).

For this study, the researchers gathered data by searching the term "news desert" from industry trade publications using a model created by Vos and Singer (2016) that initially identified 17 trade publications, including trade journals, content from journalism institutes, and traditional trade publications. This study only includes data from the US so, as argued by Ferrucci et al. (2020, p. 1592), the findings would "eliminate any potential differences due to national variances." The decision to only analyze content from trade publications aligns closely with numerous like-minded studies because while trade publications may not reach a majority of professional journalists, they maintain an immense influence in mirroring the norms of the field (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci & Taylor, 2018).

In late 2016, news deserts were declared an "emerging threat" to the journalism industry (Abernathy, 2016). Consequently, the researchers examined all the major US journalism trade publications and ultimately collected data from the following seven outlets that featured content related to "news deserts" between January 1, 2017, and September 30, 2022: *Poynter*, *Nieman Lab*, *Nieman Reports*, *Nieman Storyboard*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Media Report to Women*, and *Editor & Publisher*. This sample is somewhat smaller than that used in other recent analyses of metajournalistic discourse due to selecting publications that included data on this topic and that operated continuously throughout the five-year period in order to track evolutions across time. This search provided 97 articles for analysis. Content that was not original to the trade publication was excluded and, if several versions of the same article appeared in the search, the final version was used.

The total *N* for articles unearthed and utilized as data is very similar to the total *N* from other studies with the same theoretical framework and methodology (e.g., Berkowitz, 2000; Ferrucci & Canella, 2023; Vos & Singer, 2016; Vos & Thomas, 2018). The unit of analysis for this current work is each complete article. Considering the theoretical framework of this, the findings section below follows the direction implemented by Vos and Singer (2016), individual publications and speakers quoted in articles are not identified in order to focus on themes presented by the industry as a whole (for all articles referenced, see the Supplementary Material).

This is intentional and suitable for this type of study in that identifiers would "take away from the themes presented by the industry as a whole" (Ferrucci & Rossi, 2022, p. 4101).

To analyze the data within this sample, the researchers utilized the process outlined by Emerson et al. (1995). First, the researchers entered the memo stage, which included a close reading of the data while making notes of noteworthy comments and phrases. Next, the researchers entered the open-coding stage, looking for and identifying emergent themes and patterns. Finally, the researcher completed the focused-coding stage with a third close reading, this time with the identified patterns and themes in mind and categorizing the data accordingly. In this particular case, all authors read all of the data and took part in the first two steps of the process. Once, together, the authors decided upon emergent themes, individual authors conducted the third stage of the analysis individually. In effect, a different author worked on each section of the findings, writing up each theme.

4. Results

The following section sets out to understand, as implicit in the review of the literature, how the metajournalistic discourse analyzed defines the term "news desert," recognizes its inclusiveness or lack thereof, and, finally, outlines the effects of news deserts.

4.1. Defining News Deserts

The conceptualization of "news deserts" was largely a tentative endeavor in journalism trade publications for the first three years after the alarm sounded that this was an emerging threat to the industry. Few articles defined the matter and, when they did, there were scattered interpretations. An early piece in 2017 went so far as to vaguely label all of New Jersey as a news desert while another briefly defined the concept as "no *daily* local news at all" (emphasis added), thereby giving an early metropolitan framework to the term. This remained the case in early 2018 when New York City and the US college town of Berkeley, California, were called news deserts due to a decline in the number of journalists and "less and less original coverage." This lack of coherence was called out in spring 2018 with the declaration that "'news desert' is a term without a universally agreed-upon definition" that included (a) no daily local news, (b) losing a newspaper, (c) communities ignored by media, (d) difficulty accessing news, (e) how many people subscribed to news, and (f) fewer journalists in newsrooms.

More clarity began to emerge after the release of Abernathy's (2018) US news desert study, which noted how many communities around the country had lost local news coverage. The following year, 2019, definitions of "news desert" in trade publications included "no general news publication [that] exists," communities "left behind" as media focused more on metropolitan areas, and towns that "completely lost news coverage." Yet by early 2020, the conversation had returned to New York City as a "topical" news desert and confusion if the concept referred to the quantity of reporting, quality of reporting, ease of reader access, the availability of a newspaper, or the ability to meet information needs of a community. A reference to Abernathy's news desert study briefly tried to provide more coherence to the definition by suggesting "a community without a newspaper" and "communities where residents are facing significantly diminished access" to local news. However, by early 2020, trade publications overall had provided little direction to the industry on the explication of news deserts in terms of both quantity and quality of metajournalistic discourse.

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, however, was a critical incident that resulted in an immediate increase in discourse about news deserts. Newspapers forced to close due to pandemic financial losses heightened interest in this discussion. Furthermore, the conversation began to place an increased emphasis on weekly newspapers as one article pointed to Abernathy's latest statistics that 1,700 of the 1,800 US newspapers lost since 2004 were weeklies. Throughout the year, the conceptualization of news deserts evolved into "entire communities without any local press presence" and "a place where there is limited access to the type of critical news and information that I need in order to make informed decisions about the quality of my life." Yet frustration emerged later in the year about the continued lack of agreement on how to define and measure news deserts "when dealing with a crisis as urgent as the one currently facing local news."

This sense of seriousness prompted even more metajournalistic discourse in 2021 across various trade publications. Rural communities again emerged as a critical topic, with news deserts defined as towns outside of urban areas that had "zero or one local news provider" and where a newspaper had closed. However, a suggestion emerged that the concept should focus on "coverage area" rather than cities as the unit of analysis and, as noted further below, discourse increasingly incorporated diverse populations into the explication discussion. Metajournalistic discourse in 2021 and 2022 increasingly emphasized a connection between "news deserts" and "quality" or "professional journalism," returning to earlier discourse that the conceptualization goes beyond the absence of a news outlet to include the performance of an outlet. Trade publications in 2022 further discussed news deserts in wide-ranging terms of (a) "rural and urban communities," (b) communities with "some traditional local news sources" deemed "inadequate," (c) the closure of a rural newspaper, and (d) "very limited access" to the news. Five years into the warning about news deserts, one trade publication bemoaned there still was not a sufficient definition of the concept, declaring it necessary to generate solutions. Even while

expressing an urgency to address this industry problem, however, only 31 articles total appeared among *all* journalism trade publications over the course of 2021. This reinforces prior scholarship (i.e., Ferrucci & Rossi, 2022; Klocke & McDevitt, 2013) that journalists tend to lack reflexivity when it comes to the problems of their profession.

4.2. Race and Ethnicity

It was rare for trade publications to link news deserts with broader racial disparities between 2017 and 2020. Stories that did mention race or ethnicity did so mainly in passing or as a matter of newsroom demographics. There are, however, a handful of notable exceptions, such as a column published in early 2020 that pondered how a lack of local news in south Georgia delayed coverage of the death of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black jogger who was shot to death in February 2020 by two White men who thought he was a burglar:

> A big reason it took so long for this story to become a major one: where it happened. Brunswick, Georgia, isn't quite in a news desert, but it's close….Maybe if it had happened in downtown Atlanta, it would have gotten more attention. But in Brunswick? With no media spotlight? With no charges filed? It almost slipped through the cracks.

Another article published around the same time explored how communities of color are often the first to feel abandoned by shrinking local news resources: "African American residents struggled to remember when members of the Black community were featured in the local newspaper…except for criminal activity." The article, based on research conducted in central Pennsylvania, also described how the Latinx community was frustrated by both a lack of comprehensive coverage and the absence of Spanish-language media in the area. It argued that finding ways to serve Latinx audiences took on new urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic as "it is a matter of public health that more news and information be made available in Spanish and other languages."

The highest concentration of stories about the role of race in news deserts followed the May 2020 murder of George Floyd, a Black man killed by a White police officer, and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests. During that time, trade publications paid more attention to structural racism in journalism and its impacts: "We hear a lot about the disinvestment in news, about news deserts—but…we can't address the problems of revenue for news in low-income areas without addressing income inequality itself." An article from early 2021 attempted to quantify the problem, pointing to data showing that municipalities in New Jersey with large Hispanic populations are more likely to be news deserts and that the crisis of local journalism impacted less affluent, rural, and Black/Latinx communities.

Some coverage explored potential solutions to racial inequities, including efforts by Report for America to place more journalists at ethnic media organizations, and profiles of new publications, like *The Harvey World Herald*, which was founded by Amethyst J. Davis to serve minority audiences in a suburb of Chicago. Davis was profiled in the spring of 2022 in an article that framed her efforts as an example of media entrepreneurs working to meet the information needs of underserved audiences "against the odds of today's media landscape." Another story published a few months later described philanthropic efforts to support journalists of color in Georgia leading the type of "news outlets that funders have traditionally ignored." In short, while more recent discourse suggested a clear connection between news deserts and various racial and socioeconomic findings, overall, the discourse in trade publications failed to clearly and cohesively articulate this obvious connection.

4.3. Understanding (or not) the Effects of News Deserts

The discourse analyzed in trade publications to understand how the industry conceives the effects of news deserts presents four ramifications. The effect identified most often concerned how news deserts result in fewer journalists covering local government. One article noted, for example, how citizens in news deserts "had no idea what was happening at City Council." Another discussed how there are not enough journalists to cover school boards, planning boards, or county commissioner meetings, effectively the organizations making decisions about communities. As one piece noted:

> Local newspapers particularly have a history of showing up at every board meeting, maybe even the committee meetings, working these sources over time, and being able to get at, through this detailed beat and local coverage, how people's tax dollars are being spent.

While many of the articles discussing this effect did not explicitly note how this actually mattered, occasionally an article attempted to articulate this. One noted that, in a particular news desert, locals were complaining that there was not enough information to help them make decisions when electing local officials and passing budgets. Another, discussing a survey of residents in news deserts, concluded that "respondents were clear that a wide range of local issues and institutions were not getting sufficient coverage."

The second main effect recognized within the discourse concerned a diminished sense of democracy evident in news deserts, something one story described as "general chaos for democracy." Many pieces noted a lack of trust in civic institutions and blamed news deserts but did not discuss why this particular lack of trust existed far beyond news deserts. This distrust or diminished democracy, according to the trade publications, is

because, in news deserts, there is no journalism to shine a spotlight on concerns that are "more inclusive, equitable, and accountable to more communities," and not enough "information that matters to people who don't have access to it today." More specifically, this diminished democracy spreads without "more reporters on the ground (that) will help repair the rupture between local media and the residents they serve."

The third effect noted by industry publications surrounded the idea that while non-local journalists will helicopter in for a big story, these news organizations often focus on the micro aspects of a story without thinking about the macro elements important to local communities. For example, numerous stories talked about news deserts receiving coverage when, say, a murder happens, but those pieces focus on the grisly and salacious details rather than the issues impacting the community and these journalists are not "working to provide reliable information in a context that makes it as useful as possible." This type of coverage also focuses on the negative, which results in readers asking themselves: "Why would I pay for a monthly subscription for regional coverage, and the occasional salacious, usually negative, story about my own town, when day-to-day news that affects me as a citizen, taxpayer and parent goes uncovered?" In short, news desert residents do not receive news about their communities, and when they do, it often does not focus on the elements that matter to them.

Finally, the last effect of news deserts uncovered in the discourse is that these communities, due to a dearth of local news, turn to disinformation or misinformation to fill the gap. One piece noted that while national news does interest residents of a news desert, the "vacuums in local journalism" are being filled by misinformation and disinformation, while another noted that this effect was especially salient during the pandemic as it "paved the way for misinformation to take hold and hindered journalism on breakdowns in the official response." While discussing a lack of reporting in a news desert, one source in a story said: "We actually have a contested local election in my township, first time in a while, but the only place I can get any information is on Facebook and what I read there I don't trust." As this discourse analysis revealed, the journalism industry believes that the serious ramifications of news deserts run the gamut from fewer journalists covering communities and democracy in chaos to growing distrust and expanding vacuums of misinformation as citizens look elsewhere to fill the journalistic void.

5. Discussion

The obvious and clear takeaway from this study's findings illustrates the dire need for journalism to approach thinking about the issues happening within the profession with more reflexivity. Following the findings of Ferrucci and Rossi (2022) and Klocke and McDevitt (2013), among others, this study unearthed a startling lack of reflexivity among journalists writing for trade magazines concerning news deserts; this can be extended to believe that few journalists probably show reflexivity in this vein as well. The future needs to begin with conceptualizing—coupled with a concept explication—a clear definition for the term itself. Despite a large, data-filled report from Abernathy (2018) and in subsequent years, trade publications still fail to consistently provide a clear definition of the term "news desert" to other journalists. Without a clear definition, it is virtually impossible for the industry to formulate a solution to the problem and consistently articulate to stakeholders why such solutions matter.

The much more salient and permeating issue, according to this study's findings, concerns the lack of understanding of any specific effects emanating from news deserts. Much of the data analyzed here laments journalists not covering local governmental meetings, the spread of misinformation, or journalism's importance in a democracy. The problem, of course, is that none of these effects clearly communicate to the journalists, or more importantly to the public, why news deserts should matter. More succinctly, while it seems obvious and a historical normative notion that journalism is central to a democracy, that is a macro-level understanding that does not clearly link how news deserts affect citizens. For example, democracy is a historically vague concept, one often taken for granted in nations (Haugaard, 2010). Tying the effects of news deserts to a vague notion of diminished democracy, then, would seem rather ineffective.

This also allies with the notion of decreased coverage of standard government functions, such as school boards. While no doubt audiences understand the value of this type of coverage in times of controversy or malfeasance, journalists themselves often fetishize this continued coverage in a way that does not resonate with audiences (Pavlik, 2004). This does not mean we are arguing against the need for consistent coverage of government—far from that—but rather why that line of argument for explaining why news deserts have deleterious effects seems insufficient, especially when combined, as this data illustrated, with a lack of real-world examples of this diminished coverage's very real effects on communities. This once again illustrates a non-interrogated devotion to a norm that is just assumed to be understood by all.

Overall, this study demonstrates that news deserts, arguably the biggest threat to the survival of journalism, are covered in a limited and macro manner by the industry. Ferrucci and Rossi (2022) found the same lack of reflexivity but also noted the news industry provides consistent coverage about its own professional precarity. However, here we show that when the concern revolves around citizens, and not journalists themselves, there is a decidedly limited amount of coverage. Specifically, when the problem involves a direct effect on journalists, such as the loss of jobs, the effects are clearly delineated to the industry, but when the effects are directly related to the public, not so much.

This is problematic and emblematic of a profession that seemingly cannot do itself any favors with the public (Nelson, 2021). Furthermore, this study provides additional evidence of the disconnect between journalism and lower-socioeconomic and diverse communities on an issue that directly impacts these demographics.

Future research should examine a broader sample of metajournalistic discourse, such as how newspapers have constructed the concept of news deserts to readers, as well as interviews with state newspaper associations, national journalism foundations and organizations, and other industry leaders to understand their conceptualizations of news deserts and the impact of the loss of local news coverage on the public.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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