



NEWS

THE WHERE OF JOURNALISM

Module 5

WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

A journalist's work is not limited to the confines of a traditional newsroom. Journalism can take place anywhere a newsworthy event occurs.

Knowing the different roles of local and national media outlets can help consumers take important steps toward news literacy.

The decline of local journalism leading to news deserts is an urgent issue that demands more public attention.

NOT JUST IN NEWSROOMS

Oftentimes when we imagine where journalism happens, we picture bustling newsrooms or crowded office buildings. While those assumptions might hold true in some cases, the reality is that journalism frequently occurs in places more familiar to us. City council meetings, school board meetings, and community events are all places where a journalist may be hard at work preparing a story for publication.

The objective of this module is to help you understand

the literal and metaphorical environments where journalism happens, as well as the consequences suffered in areas where it doesn't happen at all. Once we learn to look beyond the stereotypical newsroom, it becomes clear that journalism is all around us, from our Twitter feed to a monthly newsletter.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF JOURNALISM

Journalism can literally happen in your own backyard. And when it does, it is called "local journalism." This is any reporting that happens in the context of a community, which would not be of interest to other localities. For example, coverage of a mayoral election or city-wide Fourth of July celebration.

This type of coverage plays a major role in building community identity. The stories written connect people and ultimately shape their lives. When done correctly, it can also [hold community leaders accountable](#) and create positive change. Close-to-home journalism keeps members of a community [engaged in local democratic life](#). Where necessary, it can also [provide news in the local languages](#) making it more accessible to the masses.

Local media takes an interest in stories that might not initially garner much attention from [national media](#). One relevant example is the Flint Water Crisis in Flint, Michigan. Once the devastation of the lead-poisoned

water came to light in 2015, national media was quick to cover the controversy. However, they were barraged with criticism from people who were shocked that they had not covered it sooner. On the other hand, [local media outlets](#) near Flint had been covering the crisis from the beginning, providing a platform for community voices from day one.

The type of news we are more accustomed to hearing about is broadcast on a national level. National media cover [news that are of interest to a broader public](#), but are also territorially defined and bound. Just as is the case for local journalism, national media can take the form of a television program, radio show, or online content. Some of the most common names in national news media include, [Fox](#), [CNN](#), the [New York Times](#), and [NPR](#). Despite the advantages of name recognition and larger audiences, a [2019 Knight-Gallup study](#) concluded that local news is generally more trusted than national news.

A HEALTHY POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Political and social climates have a significant impact on where journalism can happen. Some forms of government foster political environments that are toxic toward journalists, or simply don't allow them to fulfill their responsibilities. One term worth mentioning is [“media capture,”](#) which is “a situation in which the news media are controlled either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics.” Authoritarian regimes in particular are known for excessive control of media that deters accessibility to information, particularly information that casts the government in an unfavorable light.



Fig 5.1 Youtube and Covid outbreak information

One example of a poor political environment for journalism can be seen in China during the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. A 37-year-old journalist named Zhang Zhan was sentenced to four years in jail after she posted [“more than 120 YouTube videos chronicling conditions in the city and detailed what she saw as missteps in the government’s initial pandemic](#)

[response.”](#) This illustrates one of the many negative effects of media capture, which is that people who speak out against the government are often punished for their expression.



Fig 5.2 Politician

Another way that governments can create a negative political environment for journalists is by employing rhetoric that discredits the press. Though media control is not being explicitly exercised, harsh words and baseless criticism can cause just as much damage. By referring to the media as the “enemy of the people” and “absolute scum,” politicians whither the public trust in journalism. With an understanding of the role of journalism in a healthy government, political leaders and teachers should reiterate the extent to which we all benefit from professional journalists who hold those in power to account. The support of political leaders is essential to creating a workable political environment for journalists.

Even governments which claim to have a healthy deference to press freedoms can create antagonistic relationships with specific journalists and media agencies for political gains which can erode those freedoms. This has been particularly evident in recent years. The United States, an early and devoted champion of press freedoms, was rated as low as #45 in the [World Press Freedom Index](#) of countries in 2020, showing that verbal commitments to press freedoms alone may not be enough to support a healthy journalistic environment.

NEWS DESERTS: WHERE JOURNALISM ISN'T

According to usnewsdesert.com, a news desert is “a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level.” According to research done by the University of North Carolina, the United States has lost 20% of its newspapers since 2004, and 900 communities are without local news sources. Although access to the internet through personal computers and even the smart phones in our pockets has become ubiquitous even in these communities, the type of information conveyed through these devices, often national in scope, cannot entirely replace the need for local information. The fading presence of local news outlets can be largely attributed to the rise of powerful social media platforms adopting a new dissemination role, encroaching the territory of both local and national journalists.

The UNC study concluded that the decline of local news is correlated with [drops in civic engagement](#). Further research has established that the loss of local news has significant political, social and economic implications for our democracy and our society. Yet, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), almost three-quarters of the general public remains unaware of the dire economic situation confronting local news organizations.

In response to the decline of local news, and in an attempt to avoid being numbered among the death toll of local papers, many local outlets have converted to online platforms. Since the fall of 2018, [“more than 80 community-scale digital news sites, some for-profit and some nonprofit, have been started — but an equal number have pulled the plug.”](#)

HOW TO HELP LOCAL MEDIA

To aid in the survival of local media outlets, researchers from the [University of North Carolina](#) made four suggestions:

- 1) A stronger role for ethnic media,
- 2) Algorithms to add efficiencies to the editing and publishing processes,
- 3) A bigger role for public broadcasting, and
- 4) Support from government money and policies.

CONCLUSION

Looking beyond the typical newsroom depicted in Hollywood films can open our eyes to the journalism happening all around us, from the local to the national level. With the increase of outsourced journalism, we must step up and speak up to protect local journalism in an attempt to avoid the growing danger of news deserts.



**JOURNALISM
RESEARCH AND
INNOVATION
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