

Transcript — Ways & Means Podcast — S5E2: Local News Deserts

Emily Hanford: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. We share bright ideas for how to improve society. I'm Emily Hanford.

NAPOLI: Local news outlets are operating in deplorable conditions in some cases.

This is Phil Napoli. He's an expert on media regulation and policy at Duke.

NAPOLI: We went to visit a newspaper that used to be a flagship paper in Akron, Ohio. And the bottom floor of the building was had filled with standing water and had been that way for a year. And they didn't have the money do anything about it. The air conditioning system was broken. We interviewed people, in some cases, that worked there, they broke down in tears in describing their working conditions. This is the reality of how economically damaged local journalism has become.

Local journalism has indeed taken a beating. More than 1,800 metro and community newspapers have shut down or merged in the last 15 years. Many others have downsized drastically.

Reporter 1: Certainly, you've heard of the Charlotte Observer, the Fort Worth Star Telegram, the Miami Herald; McClatchy owns those corporations and has just filed for bankruptcy.

Reporter 2: The past couple of weeks have shown once again how tough the business of news is right now, with layoffs...

Phil Napoli says that's bad for democracy. He says citizens have a hard time getting the information they need to make good decisions about local issues when there are no reporters going to school board meetings, attending city council, or keeping watch on the county sheriff.

(MUSIC)

Coming up on Ways & Means, a look at why local news is struggling -- and what can be done about it.

This season of *Ways & Means* is supported by Polis, the Center for Politics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. I'm Deondra Rose, Director of Research for Polis. We prepare future political leaders, and foster innovative scholarship related to the most pressing political issues of our time. Find out more at polis.duke.edu.

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There is still plenty of good journalism in America. Several big, national newspapers are going strong. The problem is not so much with national news, but with news that happens closer to home.

NAPOLI: What we're starting to see is this sort of have and have nots model between national news outlets and local.

That's Phil Napoli again. He teaches in the Dewitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke.

NAPOLI: If you're following in this space there's incredible innovations that The Washington Post and The New York Times have developed over the past few years in terms of how they analyze their audience data, how they use algorithms in their reporting and in their information gathering, they're innovating and using technology and data in incredible ways. Go visit a local newspaper. You will see none of that.

The internet completely disrupted the economic models of the news industry. Suddenly, there was all kinds of information online, for free. Newspapers responded by putting their content online for free too. You didn't have to buy a paper anymore to get your news. Newspapers tried to make up for the hit in subscription revenue by relying more and more on advertising.

NAPOLI: They became completely ad dependent.

Advertisers had long been the biggest and most reliable source of revenue for newspapers. But now the internet was taking that market away too.

NAPOLI: The exact type of advertising that's traditionally been the bread and butter for newspapers, classified ads, et cetera, migrated away to, you know, your eBay's, your Craigslist, your Monsters. These are all the platforms that in the early 2000s started to suck the advertising dollars away from local newspapers.

The next move to stay alive? Newspapers started charging for their online content. They set up paywalls – open your wallet or you can't get the content. But people had gotten used to getting their news for free.

NAPOLI: And to this day, it's a relatively few local newspapers that are able to establish effective paywalls for their online content.

Phil says back when people were more willing to pay for their local paper, it was often for reasons that had nothing to do with news.

Archival paperboy: Read all about it, latest football scores, morning paper, morning star.

Archival announcer: Sometimes it's the comics we want, can't miss the doings of our friends in the cartoons; then again, it's the sports page where we all keep track of our favorite teams. Yes, it's all here in the paper, we read it every day.

NAPOLI: The big Sunday paper would show up and I would take the entertainment section and throw the rest away, you know, when I was a kid. And my dad would take the sports, and between all of us we were paying for a bundle of products and services. And if you think about the good old days, when we paid for news more, the reality is, news was a very small part of what we probably saw ourselves as paying for. We were paying for coupons. We were paying for movie listings. We were paying for classified ads. We're paying for the comics. We're paying for the crossword puzzle. There might not have ever been much of an audience demand for actual, you know, serious news, but that was disguised with the pricing model.

In other words, people weren't buying just the meat and potatoes, they were buying the whole meal – including the chocolate cake. When parts of the meal were suddenly available elsewhere online, local media found out their main fare – news stories – couldn't bring in enough paying customers. And thousands of local papers shrank considerably or shut down entirely. All over

America there are towns that used to have two or three local papers – and no longer have even a single one.

Cities or towns with few or no local news outlets are often referred to as “news deserts.”

Reporter 1: News about newspapers has been relentlessly bad.

Reporter 2: Across the country there are deserts of news.

Reporter 3: Many rural areas are called...

Many voices: ...news deserts

Reporter 4: Places where there is limited access to news outlets.

Phil Napoli wanted to better understand what kind of information citizens of these news deserts are actually getting from the local media that is left. His team of researchers came up with a way to measure that. They started by identifying all the local news outlets in medium-sized communities across the country -- places like Toledo, Ohio, and Huntsville, Alabama.

Announcer: Taking action, getting results. You’re watching WHNT News 19.

Then, they took a random sample of 100 of those communities. And for a week, they analyzed all the stories produced by every type of local media in those communities – newspapers, TV and radio stations, online publications.

Reporter 1: The Huntsville city council approved a contract for a new amphitheater in mid-city in November ...

Reporter 2: Well, you may need to stop driving your vehicles for helicopters at a new signalized intersection in Huntsville...

NAPOLI: We look at three characteristics of news stories. We look at whether the story’s original or not, whether the story is local or not, and whether the story addresses what we call a critical information, need or not, the kinds of subject areas that communities need to be informed about in order to be able to make good decisions when it comes to get informed voting. So, you know, economic news, education, news, health and safety, environment, et cetera...

Phil and his team of researchers took out all the soft news stories – stuff like entertainment, sports, celebrity updates.

NAPOLI: Tweets and YouTube videos that news outlets post that are entertaining.

Here's a kid falling off his skateboard, you know, sliding down the stairs.

Reporter: Now take a look at this, this golden doodle from Madison is getting a lot of attention online for one of her special tricks, check it out: Lucy folds her hands, bows her head to pray.

NAPOLI: Is that a critical information need? Probably not.

They found 16,000 stories that qualified as news. Then the researchers measured how many were actually “local news.” To qualify as local news, a story had to address a critical information need, it had to be about a local topic, and it had to be produced by the local news outlet. The researchers found very few stories that fit the definition.

NAPOLI: Only about 12 percent of the stories we analyzed were local.

Phil says local news outlets now rely more than ever on national news from wire services. Or they get content from social media. Or – if there’s a larger media market nearby – they use stories from those news providers. Phil’s personal experience matches what he found in his research. He recently moved to North Carolina from New Jersey, just outside New York City.

NAPOLI: So when we lived in North Jersey, yes, lo and behold, we watched a lot of New York City television stations and listened to a lot of New York City radio stations and probably read the New York Times and not, ah, you know, our local paper. When we quantified that, we ultimately found that the further away these communities were from a large media market, the more robust was their own local journalism ecosystem.

When Phil began this study, he thought he would find more robust local news coverage in towns and cities that are “county seats” – the centers of government. To his surprise, that wasn’t true.

NAPOLI: The fact that we didn't find any relationship confirmed what we've been fearing, which is that one of the key areas that has been declining as the economics of

news outlets has been declining is this kind of local government reporting. You're not as likely these days to see reporters covering county governments, city government school board meetings, town council meetings, all that sort of thing. These are important gaps that need to be filled

(MUSIC)

ANGIE: So, the quietest spot I have is in my car right now. There is snow on the ground. There is snow on my car. It's about 34 degrees outside. I've got my big coat with me; I'm totally fine.

This is Angie Newsome. She stepped out of her office and sat in her car to find a quiet place to talk to us. Angie's a journalist.

ANGIE: I became a journalist to be an investigative reporter, to look for and to explore issues of malfeasance and justice on behalf of North Carolinians. There's a need for watchdog journalism. There's a need for nonpartisan information about what our government is and is not doing, what government officials, elected officials, are and are not doing.

Angie studied journalism in college and began her career at a local newspaper that had been around since the late 19th century. It was now the early 2000s and the daily paper was struggling to transition to the online world. Angie loved being a journalist. But sometimes she found the job really frustrating.

ANGIE: I was an investigative reporter and then, at one point, I had three other beats – immigration, health care and transportation. And that, for me, just meant that I wasn't doing anything well.

Angie was convinced there had to be a better way. She quit her job. And in 2011, with a small group of supporters, she started Carolina Public Press. It's an online, nonprofit investigative news organization. She says getting started was hard.

ANGIE: The learning curve was extreme and it became like an extreme Olympic sport for me at times, when I was really trying to understand organizational development, board development, board recruitment, brand building, Web site design, all of those things that had nothing to do with reporting, which I knew how to do. It was a real challenge, but I loved it.

Paying the bills was especially tough.

ANGIE: We poured every dime that we received into the journalism, into making sure that we could pay our freelancers and our reporters fairly, and to get the website up going, and everything we earned, we put into that. And so that was the way it happened for years. And in fact, it still happens on occasion.

Carolina Public Press relies on gifts and grants. About 70 percent of their budget comes from local, state, and national foundations.

ANGIE: And about 30 percent comes from people like you or me who are giving charitable gifts to the organization, much like people give to their local NPR station. So, it's a very similar model.

Carolina Public Press began by covering just the western part of the state. Now -- nine years later -- they have expanded statewide. Angie calls the reporting staff "small but mighty." They have one investigative reporter, a managing editor and about 14 freelancers to cover all 100 North Carolina counties. And their work is getting national attention.

CNN reporter: Less than 1 in 4 rape suspects in North Carolina are convicted. And that's in part because of state laws that appear to protect the rapist, not the victim. Joining me now, Kate Martin; she's an investigative reporter for the Carolina Public Press and also part of a collaboration of 10 other news organizations that analyzed more than four years of sexual assault cases across North Carolina.

That's CNN reporting on an investigation led by Carolina Public Press that prompted North Carolina lawmakers to make changes in the state's sexual consent laws.

ANGIE: And they not only took action, but they approved those changes unanimously. It was really incredible to see. So we know that that reporting played a key role in making that happen.

Angie started the Carolina Free Press because the local newspaper was stretched so thin by budget pressures that she didn't have time to do enough investigative work. It's not that there

are no budget pressures at Carolina Free Press, but she says the nonprofit funding model allows her and her staff to focus on a central mission.

ANGIE: I hope that nonprofit journalism is not just preserving the status quo, but it really is providing a key voice and additional information for people. It's not just a stopgap. I truly view it as the vision for news delivery and news production.

The nonprofit media sector is growing. The Institute for Nonprofit News says there are more than 230 nonprofit media organizations in North America. Ten years ago, there were about 30. Philanthropists have invested millions of dollars in nonprofit news.

NAPOLI: Philanthropy has stepped into this space in a very aggressive way.

This is Phil Napoli again.

NAPOLI: You have a number of foundations, whether it's the Democracy Fund or the Knight Foundation, and the list actually goes on and on, some of them at the local level, that are trying to invest in local journalism.

Phil's research found another source of investment in filling the gaps in local journalism: universities.

NAPOLI: We found that the presence of a university in a community has a significant positive relationship with the robustness of the local journalism in that community. They seem to bolster the local news ecosystem.

He sees this in action in Durham, N.C., where he works. Durham is a midsize city, similar to the cities in the research that Phil did about local news. The local paper is a shell of its former self, and the national chain that bought it a few years ago is in bankruptcy. Durham residents get news from local affiliates of national TV networks, National Public Radio affiliates, and an alternative weekly, but there's a lot less coverage of *local* issues than there used to be.

Enter the Ninth Street Journal. It's a student publication at Duke, digital only. It's giving student journalists real-world experience, and also filling gaps in local news. A Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist who now teaches at Duke launched Ninth Street Journal about a year ago. Another veteran journalist manages the staff of student reporters and edits their stories. Cameron Beach is a student reporter there.

CAMERON: I am a student at Duke and I work in the Ninth Street Journal's Reporters Lab. I am the staff photographer and I am a reporter with the courthouse team. The vision of Ninth Street is to kind of fill in the gaps of news coverage in Durham, which tends to focus on crime, some of the more sensational things that happen in our city.

Before a recent city council election, each student journalist was assigned to write a profile of a different candidate.

CAMERON: I don't think there is anyone in Durham that was covering it as comprehensively and fairly as we were. I think the rest of the coverage was really horserace coverage. I really think that that we covered it better than anyone else.

The Journal was able to reach more readers by sharing its election stories with the local alternative weekly. On election night, Cameron was assigned to be the Ninth Street Journal's photographer. She bounced around -- from the elections office to polling places and watch parties. As results were coming in, she and her classmates went to the watch party for three incumbents.

CAMERON: I was standing on a chair in the middle of this bar trying to crane my camera around to get photos of the incumbents as they stood on top of the bar and made their speeches. It was super fun. It was a great, great time. It was like local journalism at work.

It was there, at the incumbents' party, that she finally saw journalists from another local news outlet -- the first she had seen all night.

CAMERON: It just kind of goes to show that the local news media is stretched fairly thin.

Cameron says the student journalists provided election coverage that citizens wouldn't have had otherwise. But she recognizes that student journalists will never be able to make up for what's lost when local news outlets shut down.

CAMERON: It's a Band-Aid to the issue of local news. But honestly, at this point, I don't know if there's going to be a revolutionary fix that's going to make local news come back with the flourish that it used to have. It might just have to be a few Band-Aids piled on top of each other that help make local news coverage work.

Phil Napoli says student journalism projects like the Ninth Street Journal provide a valuable public service. But it's not enough.

NAPOLI: I don't like the idea, to be honest, that the model going forward is, you know, students replacing trained, seasoned reporters. And that goes for, you know, all the other examples we can point to, you know, bloggers and citizen journalists and things of that sort. It's a poor substitute.

Plus, Phil says local bloggers and student journalists usually lack the institutional support that a newspaper or media company provide.

NAPOLI: What happens if you get sued? You know, where's the legal support?

(MUSIC)

So far in this podcast we've been talking about the challenges facing local news outlets -- there are fewer of them, they have fewer reporters and they are stretched thin. But it surprised Phil Napoli to discover that traditional local newspapers are still providing *more* local news than many of the organizations that have sprung up in the internet era. Phil and his colleagues compared

how much local news was being produced by local newspapers to how much local news was being produced by newer, digital-only publications.

NAPOLI: Local newspapers represented about 25 percent of the outlets in our sample, but represented about 50 percent of the original reporting. They're sort of overproducing. The assumption has been that digital-only news sources will sort of compensate for whatever declines local newspapers are facing. They're not operating yet at a capacity that even compares with the massively crippled state of local newspapers.

In other words, the new online-only outlets are not closing the news gap left by vanishing newspapers. Not even close.

NAPOLI: We're a decade and a half into -- at least that -- into all sorts of experimentation, commercially funded, philanthropy funded experimentation, around how to develop new viable business models for local journalism. And we've yet to crack the code. How long do we keep experimenting?

Phil believes as a nation, we have to look for other solutions to support and strengthen local news coverage. He thinks there's an answer hiding in plain sight: more government support.

NAPOLI: Do we take a page out of the books of what we're seeing in other countries, whether it's in the Scandinavian countries or France or Canada, where government subsidies for journalism are increasing?

News clip: "...the Trudeau government has decided to invest in local news, nearly \$600 million dollars over the next 5 years to support media outlets struggling with dwindling revenue.....

There's no government support on that scale in the United States. Federal taxes have long helped fund public radio and TV, but it's a small percentage of the overall cost to keep the doors open. It equates to about \$1.35 per American, per year. Phil thinks that's peanuts. He says it's time for government at all levels -- federal, state and local -- to view local news as a public good, and to invest a whole lot more in supporting it.

NAPOLI: I think at this point we are out of other options. We rank near the bottom of developed countries in terms the amount of government support to journalism that we provide. And we have to start asking ourselves whether that's viable going forward.

There have been some small-scale public funding experiments in the United States -- New Jersey passed a Civic Information Bill to fund local journalism initiatives. Other ideas for public funding are being explored, too. But so far, it's mostly the private sector that has stepped up to address the problem of local news deserts.

To Phil, it comes down to whether the country values what good, local journalism can do -- uncover corruption, expose problems, keep citizens informed. He says that sort of journalism doesn't just happen. It requires paid professionals.

NAPOLI: "Everyone's a journalist now." Nothing annoys me more than to hear that because it just completely undermines and devalues what it is a trained professional journalist brings to the process of our system of government, the watchdog, the Fourth Estate.

(MUSIC)

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Professor Phil Napoli directs the News Measures Research Project with collaborators at the University of Minnesota. The project is supported by [The Democracy Fund](#) and the [Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation](#). We will have a link to his work at our website, waysandmeansshow.org.

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Karen Kemp and Alison Jones. Our associate producer is Hunter Stark. Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans. Artwork by Rae Hsu. Special thanks to Matt Majsak. We are excited to bring you our 5th season, all focused on policy and politics! Please tell your friends about us. Thanks!

Cameron Beach: People say journalism is dying industry. I don't think that's true. Journalism is just a changing industry. That's true. Journalism is changing like crazy. I don't know if I would be comfortable going into local news just based on how much turnover there is, but I would love, love, love to make journalism my career. I love it. I mean, it's so exciting. No day is ever the same.