2

The Great Gutting of US Newspapers

To be a resident of Denver, Colorado, in the latter decades of the twentieth century was to enjoy a feast of local news reporting. Home to two prizewinning newspapers, the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Denver Post*, the city saw fierce competition to break stories about state and local government. The papers battled for scoops about malfeasance in the local police department, zoning fights in City Hall, and the aftermath of the Columbine school shooting. "We were two worthy adversaries," one former reporter said, "and the public benefited."[1]

But mounting financial pressure in the late 1990s forced the *News* and the *Post* into a joint operating agreement as a way to cut costs. The maneuver proved only a Band-Aid. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the *News* shuttered its newsroom for good. Denver suddenly found itself with a single daily paper covering a metro area of 2.5 million people. And things were about to get worse. In 2010, the *Post* filed for bankruptcy and was purchased by a New York hedge fund. Major layoffs and cutbacks followed, damaging the paper's ability to cover the city. In 2018, the *Post*'s journalists revolted, publishing a scathing editorial and accusing the new owners of having "murdered" the paper. "We know

[1] Kevin Simpson, "Across the Battle Lines: How Rocky Mountain News Reporters Regarded the Angst – and Comedy – of Competition with the Denver Post," *Denver Post*, October 15, 2017. www.denverpost.com/2017/10/15/rocky-mountain-news-denver-post-rivalry/ (September 23, 2020).

meaningful work will not get done because talented journalists have left the organization," said the paper's editor.[2]

The story of Denver in many ways illustrates the local news crisis that we document in this chapter. Once the nation's preeminent news sources, daily newspapers have in recent years seen a massive reduction in their reporting capacity. As a result, residents of cities and counties across the United States now have access to less coverage of their local governments than at any time in modern American history. As the potential for new sources of local news, such as internet start-ups, remains uncertain, the prospect of an unprecedented information crisis looms on the local horizon.

THE RISE AND FALL OF US NEWSPAPERS

For the US newspaper industry, the middle of the twentieth century was a period of extraordinary popularity and profit. In the early 1940s, newspaper subscriptions stood at 41 million, a remarkably large share for a country of 133 million residents (see Figure 2.1).[3] And as the population and the economy continued to grow in the postwar years, so did the industry's fortunes. By 1950, one estimate put the newspaper household penetration rate – a measure of market saturation – at 124%. With more newspaper subscriptions than US households, newspaper owners regularly enjoyed double-digit profit margins.[4]

But the boom times wouldn't last much longer. With the invention and rapid diffusion of television, newspapers lost their monopoly and found themselves facing a fierce new competitor for consumers' attention. Indeed, although raw circulation continued to climb through the mid-1980s (peaking in 1984 at 63 million), that growth resulted primarily from an expanding population, not an increase in newspapers' popularity. By the time cable and satellite television gave Americans even more news and entertainment choices in the early 1990s, just 68% of US

[2] Sydney Ember, "Denver Post Rebels against Its Hedge-Fund Ownership," *New York Times*, April 7, 2018. www.nytimes.com/2018/04/07/business/media/denver-post-opinion-owner.html (September 23, 2020).

[3] Pew 2019a.

[4] Alan Mutter, "Are Newspapers Losing 'Mass Media' Mojo?" *Newsosaur*, November 4, 2013. http://newsosaur.blogspot.com/2013/11/are-newspapers-losing-mass-media-mojo.html (February 24, 2020).

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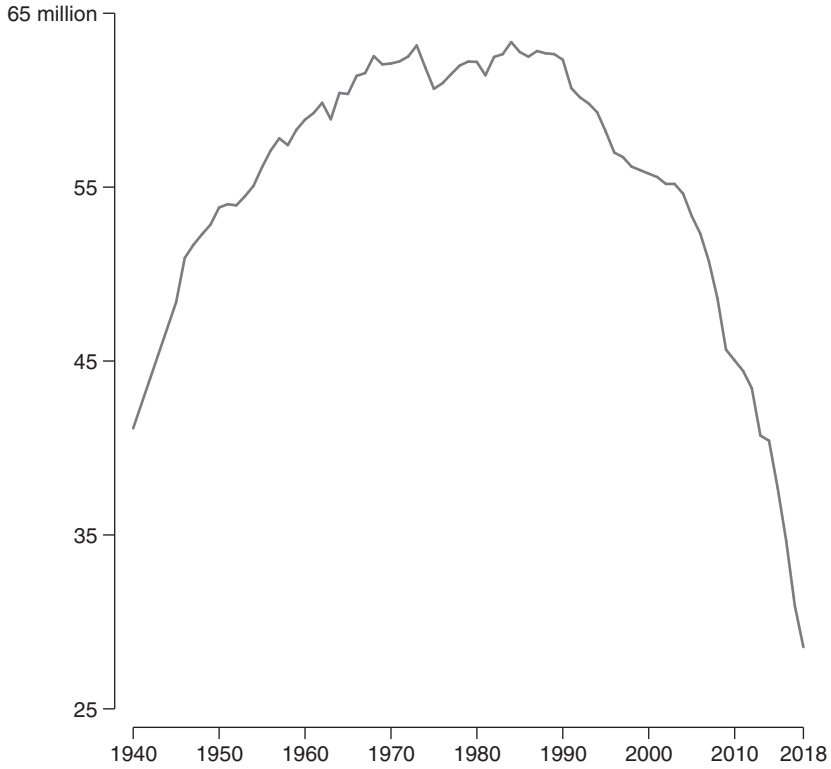

FIGURE 2.1. US newspaper circulation, 1940–2018.
Source: Pew Research Center 2019a. The data represent weekday circulation, including digital subscribers.

households subscribed to a newspaper.[5] As daily circulation fell throughout the decade, the alarm bells were ringing. But industry leaders were unprepared for what was next. "You couldn't get the attention of the major publishers," Kelly Fry, editor and publisher of the *Oklahoman*, told us in one of the dozens of interviews we conducted with journalists at newspapers across the country. "They couldn't see what was coming."[6]

What was coming was a revolution in the way people get information. When the Internet became widely available to Americans in the late

[5] Alan Mutter, "Are Newspapers Losing 'Mass Media' Mojo?" *Newsosaur*, November 4, 2013. http://newsosaur.blogspot.com/2013/11/are-newspapers-losing-mass-media-mojo.html (February 24, 2020).

[6] See Appendix A for a description of our sampling procedures, protocols, and interview questions.

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1990s, consumers' choices for news and entertainment exploded. By 2000, more than half of Americans said they regularly went online. For the heaviest print news consumers – college graduates – it was more than three-quarters.[7] Although it would take years for the online news ecosystem to develop fully, internet-savvy consumers who wanted to keep up with current events could do so without paying for a newspaper subscription.

What happened next is well known: The newspaper industry fell off a cliff. Circulation plummeted so precipitously – with a not-so-gentle nudge from the financial crisis of 2008 – that by 2018, it had fallen to 28.6 million (down 55% from its 1984 peak). It's easy to read the line in Figure 2.1 as a giant frown from newspaper executives.

The increased competition from television, cable, satellite, and the Internet struck at the heart of newspapers' economic model – advertising – in two ways. First, smaller newspaper audiences reduced the value of advertising; fewer eyeballs meant fewer possible customers. Second, the Internet fundamentally changed the advertising landscape. Facebook, Google, and other online behemoths could use cookies, browsing histories, and other personal data to match advertisers with consumers in a way that newspapers never could. The Internet also created new forums for advertising. Sites such as Craigslist would allow people, at no cost, to sell their old furniture or rent their apartments. No longer would they have to pay newspapers to reach potential buyers.

The financial consequences of these changes began to become clear in the mid-2000s. Although newspaper advertising revenue grew steadily through 2005 (see Figure 2.2), it began to decline sharply in 2006. By 2018, advertising revenue was down 71% from just 12 years earlier, even accounting for newspaper websites' digital advertising. This "revenue issue," in the words of one reporter at a mid-sized paper in the Midwest, came to pose an existential threat. "People aren't picking up the print product, which has historically been the money maker. As we've moved online, the advertising dollars don't transfer equally, and so we need to be more efficient and more innovative and at the same time continue to cover the news," he told us. "That might be impossible to do." Jeff Parrott, who covers city politics and government for the much smaller *South Bend Tribune* identified the same problem. "People want to read online for free …. And that means there's no business model

[7] Pew 2019b.

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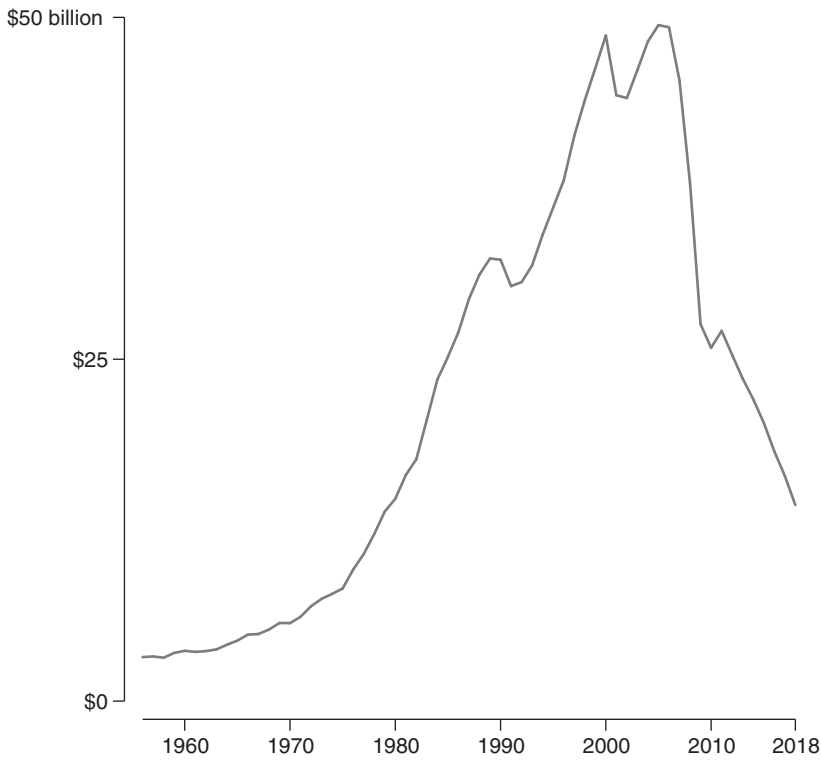

FIGURE 2.2. US newspaper advertising revenue, 1956–2018
Source: Pew Research Center 2019c.

anymore because advertising doesn't pay the same for online ads," he explained. Newspapers found themselves faced with a dilemma that was the opposite of a rap lyric: less money, more problems.

Faced with declining advertising revenue, newspapers across the country responded predictably: They shut down or shrunk. Since 2004, more than 2,000 US newspapers have closed.[8] The vast majority were small weeklies, but several prominent dailies, including the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and the *Youngstown Vindicator*, shuttered as well. The more common effect of the financial upheaval, however, has been staff reductions at the nation's 7,000 remaining newspapers.[9] In the last 12 years,

[8] Abernathy 2018a.

[9] As an indicator of the connection between newspapers' finances and their reporting capacity, the correlation between annual advertising revenue and the number of newsroom employees is 0.96.

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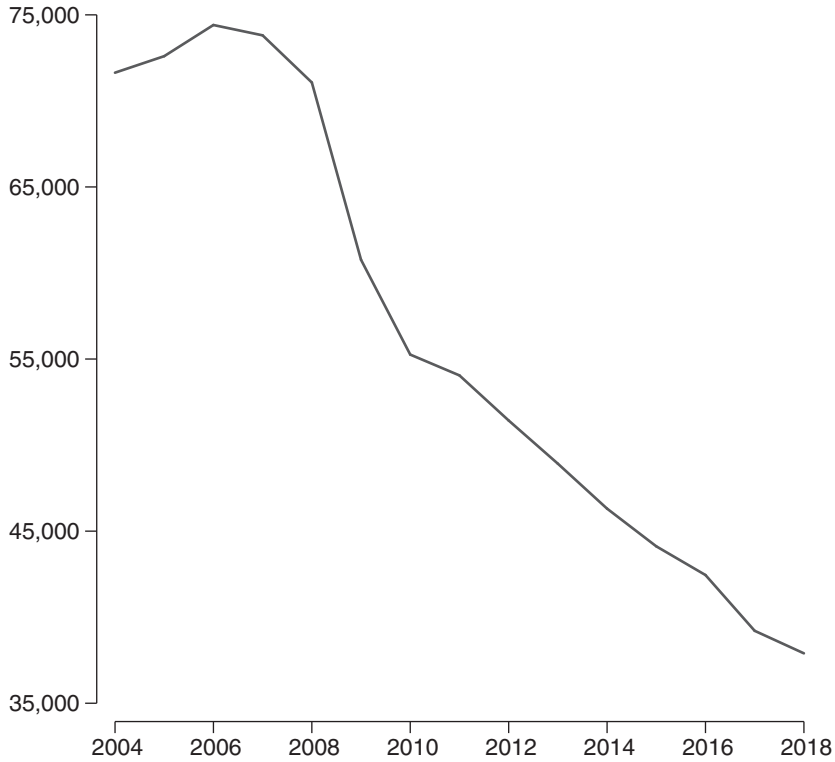

FIGURE 2.3. Newsroom employees at US newspapers, 2004–2018
Source: Pew Research Center 2019c.

the number of newspaper newsroom employees – reporters, editors, and photo and video staff – has fallen by 49% (see Figure 2.3).[10]

Some of that, of course, is due to newspaper closures. But the newspapers still in business now employ fewer journalists. In 2004, there were on average 8.1 newsroom staff for every newspaper operating in the United States. Today, that number is down to just 5.5.[11] The result has been a fundamental change to reporters' work lives. When Alex Rose started at the *Delaware County Daily Times* in 2004, for example, he recalls 12 to 15 full-time reporters, about 40 correspondents, and a group

[10] Peterson's (2021) analysis of staffing data from an annual newsroom census and newspaper directories reports similar trends.

[11] To arrive at this number, we divided newsroom employment data from the Pew Research Center by the number of newspapers in business, as identified by the News Deserts Project.

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of summer interns. Fast forward 15 years and the newsroom is unrecognizable. "We don't really have beats anymore because we don't have the manpower," he explained. "We're down to two staff reporters and three others who pitch in for us when we borrow them from other local papers in our network." The *Toledo Blade* has three times the circulation as the *Delaware County Daily Times*, but has found itself in a nearly identical situation. "It's not the newsroom it was when I walked in the door [in 2000]," *Blade* Executive Editor Kurt Franck lamented. "We had 170 people then, and now we're at a little more than half of that. We used to have a Washington bureau, and we don't have that anymore." Darrell Ehrlick, a political reporter at the *Billings Gazette* couldn't say exactly how many colleagues he's lost over the years because he "quit counting after 30 rounds of cuts from layoffs." Said one reporter laid off from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2007, "The guillotine has finally fallen."[12]

A closer look at a selection of 40 large regional papers provides another window into how the changing economic fortunes of newspapers has hollowed out newsrooms across the country. Most of these outlets are the "paper of record" for their city, and often for their state, constituting the primary source of information about the activities of local and state governments. Between 2000 and 2009, three-quarters reported cuts to their news executives and editorial management, according to figures compiled by the trade publication *Editor & Publisher* (see Figure 2.4). This includes positions like editorial page editor, city editor, arts editor, as well as some lower-level positions.

Among the 30 papers in this group reporting cuts, the average decline from the beginning to the end of the decade was substantial: 45%. In terms of raw numbers, this amounts to an average reduction of 12.8 newsroom managers – the equivalent of firing more than one person per year. Some publications – such as the *Detroit Free Press*, which cut 76% – slashed more severely than others. The *Newark Star-Ledger* in 2000 reported 40 news managers, but only 17 by 2009. Cuts by the *Providence Journal* – which was down from 29 newsroom managers in 2000 to 16 by 2009 – were typical. Just five papers saw increases during this period, and another five reported no change.[13]

[12] Katharine Q. Seelye, "Layoffs Imminent at Philadelphia Inquirer," *New York Times*, January 3, 2007. www.nytimes.com/2007/01/03/business/media/03paper.html (March 14, 2020).

[13] See Appendix B for a description of our source and method for collecting staffing data.

FIGURE 2.4. Changes in news staff at selected regional papers, 2000–2009
Note: See Appendix B for a description of our source and method for collecting staffing data.
Source: Data compiled from volumes of *Editor & Publisher's International Yearbook*.

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These staff cuts didn't immediately bring newspapers to their knees. Publishers and editors restructured newsrooms, reassigned reporters, and publicly championed the idea of "doing more with less." Forced to prioritize, maybe newspapers could serve the interest of the public with a leaner and more nimble corps of journalists. Maybe these changes wouldn't diminish consumers' access to critical information about their local governments. Maybe it would all work out. But as we demonstrate in the next section, the reality, predicted in 2009 by former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller, was that "what you can do with less, is less."[14]

TRACKING LOCAL NEWS COVERAGE OVER TIME

Even as they suffer financially, newspapers remain the primary providers of local public affairs reporting across the United States. As recently as 2019, media scholars Philip Napoli and Jessica Mahone in a study of local media ecosystems characterized newspapers as "by far, the most significant providers of journalism in their communities."[15] Local television remains popular, and internet start-ups have tried to break into the business of local news. But when it comes to substantive reporting about local politics, those outlets provide just a fraction of the coverage that newspapers do – a point we return to later in this chapter. Accordingly, tracking changes in the local political coverage daily newspapers provide is essential for understanding the extent to which local communities are losing a key source of civic engagement.

Sample of Daily Newspapers

In order to measure local political coverage in newspapers across the country and over time, we first identified the largest circulating daily newspaper in each of the 435 US House districts.[16] These local outlets have the largest reach and thus the broadest consequences for citizens'

[14] Zachary M. Seward, "NYT's Keller: 'What You Can with Less, Is Less'," *Neiman Lab*, November 9, 2009. www.niemanlab.org/2009/11/nyts-keller-what-you-can-do-with-less-is-less/ (April 2, 2020).

[15] Philip Napoli and Jessica Mahone, "Local Newspapers Are Suffering, but They're Still (By Far) the Most Significant Journalism Producers in Their Communities," *Nieman Lab*, September 9, 2019. www.niemanlab.org/2019/09/local-newspapers-are-suffering-but-theyre-still-by-far-the-most-significant-journalism-producers-in-their-communities/ (March 14, 2020). See also Hindman 2018.

[16] This is based on 2014 circulation data.

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political engagement. We then narrowed the sample to papers we could access through NewsBank, whose archives go back further in time than other databases. Because our research question demands a longitudinal analysis, we further restricted our list of papers to the 202 with consecutive coverage dating back at least to 2003. For 60%, or 121, of these papers, the full-text archives dated back to 1996. In addition to giving us at least one paper from every state, the diverse sample also captures the largest paper in each state. In 13 cases, the largest state paper was not available in NewsBank, so we accessed the archives through ProQuest. In the handful of cases in which a state's largest paper was unavailable from either database, we included instead the paper in the state with the second-largest circulation.[17] It is important to note that because of the way these electronic databases archive content, our data include content published on newspapers' websites as well as in their print editions.

The data set reflects coverage in different kinds of communities across the country and variation in the size of the paper as well as the size and characteristics of the markets. In our full data set, the smallest paper, the *Suffolk News-Herald* in Virginia, had a daily circulation in 2014 of only 5,012. At the other end of the continuum, the *New York Times*' daily circulation exceeded two million. Although our data set does not include many especially small newspapers (or any weeklies), the overall story we tell likely plays out in those as well.

Content Analysis of News Coverage

Once we assembled the sample of papers, we conducted a content analysis to collect three essential measures for detailing the decline of local news during the late 1990s and the first two decades of the 2000s. First, we tracked the amount of local political coverage in each newspaper. For each year, we identified in each paper the number of news stories that contained references to several major topics pertaining to local public affairs. Specifically, we collected data on coverage of mayors, city and town councils, local school boards, and county governments. US localities have a diverse set of political institutions, but these four constitute the key governmental bodies in the vast majority of communities. Thus, the way that newspapers across the country have covered these topics over time

[17] See Appendix C for a description of the sample and Appendix D for a list of the newspapers.

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should reflect their attention to local politics more generally. Moreover, our four areas of focus have been identified as the primary topics of local political news coverage in research using methodologies different than ours.[18]

Second, we collected data to contextualize changes in local political coverage. By tracking news stories published about national politics (the president and Congress), the governor, and the four major professional team sports (basketball, baseball, football, and hockey), we can characterize not only how newspaper coverage of local government has changed in absolute terms, but also how that coverage has changed compared to other types of content.

Third, we created a measure of the "news hole" – an industry term that refers to the amount of space for editorial content once advertising has been placed. This includes news stories, but also entertainment, obituaries, and the many other items that appear in the paper. For each paper, we collected the total number of items it published each year, regardless of the topic. This measure is critical for an assessment of how publishers responded to their sinking financial fortunes. With increasingly limited space for news, what did they prioritize? The existing work on the decline of local news focuses on either changes to the overall volume of local politics coverage or the ratio of local to national coverage. Our measure of the news hole provides the first opportunity to determine whether coverage of local government suffered larger cuts than other newspaper content.[19]

THE CATASTROPHIC LOSS OF LOCAL NEWS REPORTING

We begin by describing the disappearance of the news hole over the last 25 years. Drawing on the 121 papers for which we have data stretching back to 1996, the drop in circulation and loss of advertising clearly shrunk the space newspapers had for editorial content (see Figure 2.5). In 1996, the papers in our sample published on average about 35,000 items per year – roughly 100 per day. Of course, there is a lot of variation. The *Los Angeles Times*' news hole 20 years ago was around 100,000. *The*

[18] Martin and McCrain 2019; Peterson 2021.

[19] Despite our fairly blunt method of analysis – keyword searches – we are confident that our approach effectively picks up stories specific to the individuals and institutions that comprise each category of news coverage. Appendix E includes details about our search procedures, as well as a discussion of the reliability and accuracy of our measures of local news content.

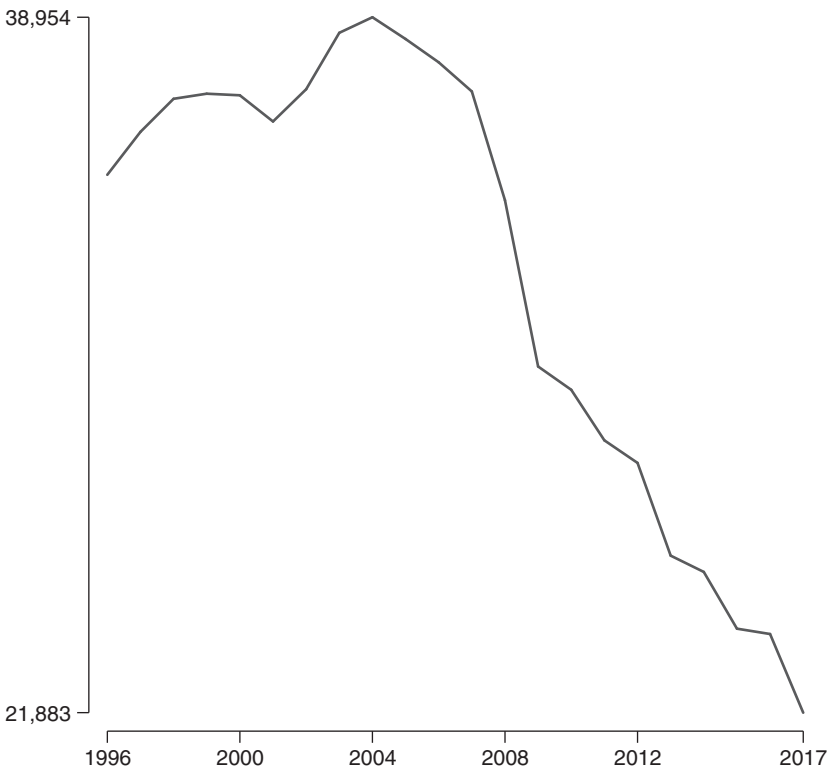

FIGURE 2.5. The decline of the news hole
Note: Results are based on the 121 newspapers for which we have content dating back to 1996 (see Appendix D). The measure of the "news hole" represents the total number of items a paper published each year, once advertising had been placed.

Spokesman-Review, in the considerably smaller Spokane, Washington, was publishing only about one-fifth of that. Other papers published even less. But on average, the news hole increased throughout the late 1990s and the early years of the 2000s, hitting a peak of about 39,000 in 2004.

And then the bottom fell out. By 2008, the news hole had in just four years decreased by 12%. This change was merely the start of what would amount to a catastrophic decline in the volume of news produced by local papers. By 2017, the news hole had contracted by 43% (compared to 2004). With advertising moving online and to other sources, local newspapers were shrinking to a degree that shocked almost anyone who had worked in the newspaper business in the halcyon days of the early 1990s.

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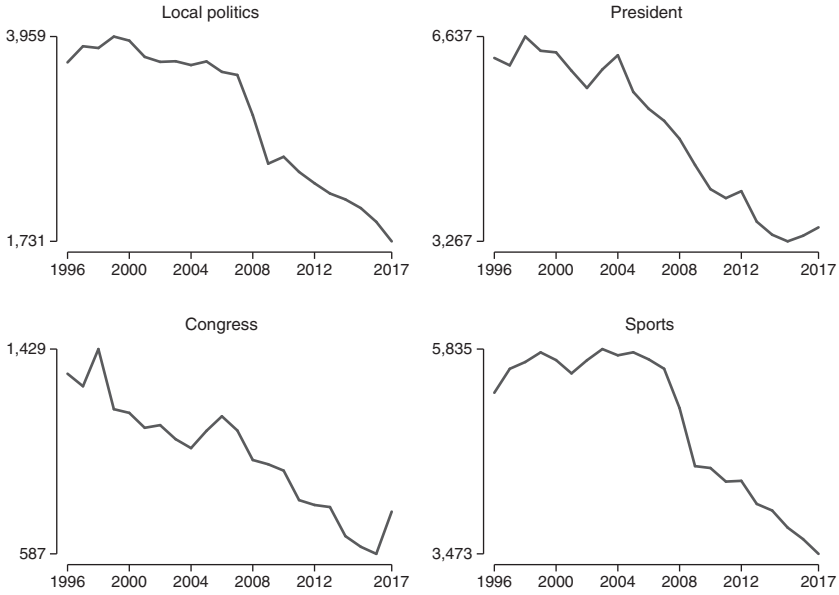

FIGURE 2.6. The decline of news coverage
Note: Results are based on the 121 newspapers for which we have content dating back to 1996 (see Appendix D). For specific search terms used to identify local politics, president, Congress, and sports stories, see Appendix E.

As size of the newspaper shrunk, the volume of news coverage withered. Consider first coverage of local politics. In the upper left-hand panel of Figure 2.6, we plot the average number of stories about local politics published each year in the papers in our sample. In the late 1990s, newspapers published on average about 4,000 stories about city hall, county governments, and other topics every year – roughly 11 articles every day. But beginning in the early 2000s, local government coverage began to fall, a decline that accelerated dramatically following the financial crisis of 2008. Between 1999 and 2017, the volume of local politics news dropped by more than half (56%). At the close of 2017, newspapers were publishing fewer than five local politics stories per day.

Reductions in coverage can't be divorced from the fact that reporters were disappearing from the newsroom. The experience of newspapers in some of Alabama's major cities is illustrative. Between 1996 and 2011, local politics coverage at the *Press-Register* in Mobile fell by about 10%. That meant fewer stories every day about the city council or Mobile County public schools. At the *Birmingham News*, local government

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coverage fell by 24% over that same period. But when the two papers' owner, Advance Publications, announced in the fall of 2012 the decision to suspend print publication for all but three days each week and dismiss hundreds of staff, things got even worse. By 2017, coverage of local government in both papers was less than half of what it had been before the layoffs. John Sharp, who covers the Mobile area for AL.com, the umbrella site for the *Birmingham News* and *Press-Register*, told us that the newsroom can still cover major local stories, but much less thoroughly than the old days. "The difference between now and the early 2000s is that we would have had more reporters to go around and cover different angles [of the same story]," he said. "Now, it's pretty much me."

The lament is similar at papers all over the country. Twenty-five years ago, the *New Hampshire Union Leader* published on average more than seven local government stories each day. Now, with a dwindling team of reporters handling multiple beats and scrambling to cover huge swaths of the region, it's down to about four – a reduction of close to 40%. "This afternoon, I'm going to a New England Patriots event about opioid addition. I'm covering the Durham holiday parade and the need for a menorah. I'm doing a feature on a woman who is going on a moose hunt," Kim Haas, one of the paper's correspondents, told us in the fall of 2019. "And then of course, I need to see if there are any interesting arrests or happenings in local government. And that's just this afternoon." Reporters at other papers said that investigative reporting "is done," that their stories are "undercooked," and that they can't talk to folks on the street because "ground level reporting is too time consuming." At the *South Bend Tribune*, Parrott was candid: "We're doing less coverage overall, for sure. No one I know is willing to work without getting paid. And we're not paid to work more than 40 hours."[20]

To be sure, newspapers didn't slash only their coverage of local politics. The remaining three panels of Figure 2.6 display the average number of stories about the president, Congress, and sports. Although the trends are slightly different for each topic, local newspapers carry significantly less news about everything than they did two decades ago.[21]

These changes are closely related to the reduction of the news hole, as illustrated in Figure 2.7. Start again with the upper left-hand panel, which

[20] See Peterson (2021) for more evidence of the way that newspaper staffing affects local political reporting.

[21] We also measured attention to state politics (specifically, the governor), and the trend is similar to the graphs displayed in Figure 2.6.

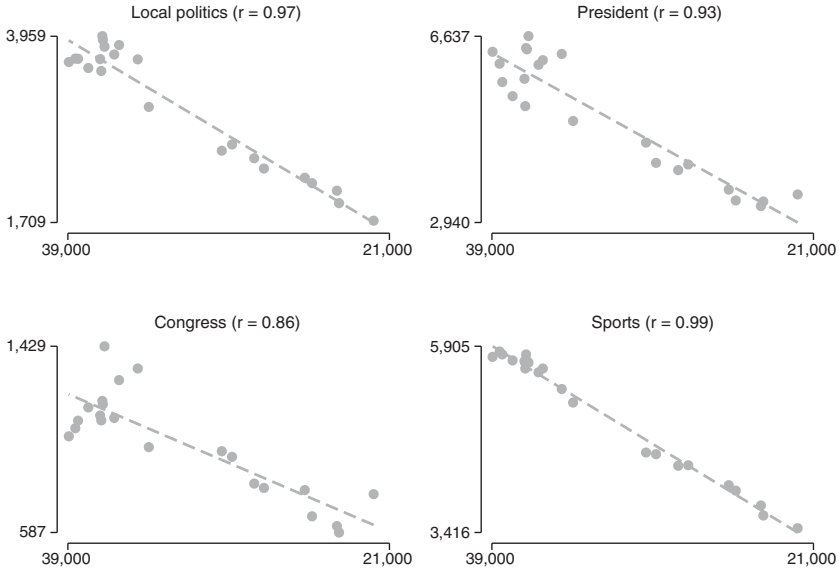

FIGURE 2.7. The shrinking news hole and the decline of news coverage
Note: Results are based on the 121 newspapers for which we have content dating back to 1996 (see Appendix D). Each dot represents a year, and the placement of the dot indicates the size of the news hole (on the horizontal axis) and the number of each type of news story (on the vertical axis) published that particular year.

plots coverage of local politics. Each dot in the panel represents a year, and the placement of the dot indicates the size of the news hole (the horizontal axis) and the number of local politics stories (the vertical axis) published that particular year. The diagonal line represents a summary of the average relationship. The downward slope indicates a strong correlation (0.97) between the two quantities: In the years when the news hole was small, papers published fewer stories about local politics. The same is true, with some variation, for the other topics as well. As advertising dollars disappeared, the news hole shrunk. And as the news hole goes, so goes news coverage.

What these correlations do not tell us, however, is whether the cuts to local politics were more or less severe than reductions of other topics. In other words, what content did publishers prioritize? Facing a steep drop in space for news – and perhaps more importantly, diminished reporting resources – publishers presumably had three options. First, they could cut everything equally across the board, reducing coverage of all topics by roughly the same amount. Second, they could cut national politics and

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sports more aggressively. Since that content was now available on cable news and the Internet, focusing on local politics coverage, which consumers couldn't get elsewhere, might be one way to capitalize on a product that local papers could still claim as a monopoly. Third, they could opt to preserve national coverage and sports reporting at the expense of local politics. Local public affairs reporting is relatively expensive, requiring a considerable amount of reporting staff and time. But coverage of national politics and (much) sports coverage could be drawn from wire service reporting. Once a newspaper subscribes to a wire service, there is no additional reporting cost, since a steady stream of content is available.

We consider these possibilities by examining the percentage of the news hole devoted to local politics, compared to other topics. By looking at the data this way, we can "hold constant" the available space for editorial content. If the share of the newspaper allocated to local politics declines more steeply than the share devoted to Congress or sports, for instance, it would suggest that publishers were less willing to commit resources to local government coverage in the face of a shrinking news hole. For this analysis, we focus on the sample of 202 newspapers for which we have data going back to 2003, the moment when the contraction of the news hole began in earnest.

Put simply, local government coverage was cut significantly more than other topics. The upper left-hand panel of Figure 2.8 plots the share of the news hole devoted to local politics from 2003 through 2017. At its peak, local government accounted for slightly less than 10% of the editorial content in the nation's daily newspapers. By 2017, that was down to less than 8%, representing a 20% cut. Even accounting for the shrinking news hole, publishers allocated one-fifth less of the paper to local government in 2017 than they had just 15 years earlier. These cuts were widespread: Seven out of 10 papers in our sample reduced the amount of the news hole devoted to local politics over this period.

At the same time, the trends for national politics and sports were very different. Between 2003 and 2015, presidential coverage, as a share of the news hole, declined by about 17%. But with the arrival of the 2016 election and the can't-look-away presidency of Donald Trump, stories about the president shot back up to 2004 levels. By 2017, they once again constituted more than 15% of the news hole. Perhaps more striking, the portion of congressional coverage actually grew over this period. Between 2003 and 2016, the percentage of stories mentioning Congress held steady, fluctuating no more than half a percentage point. But in 2017,

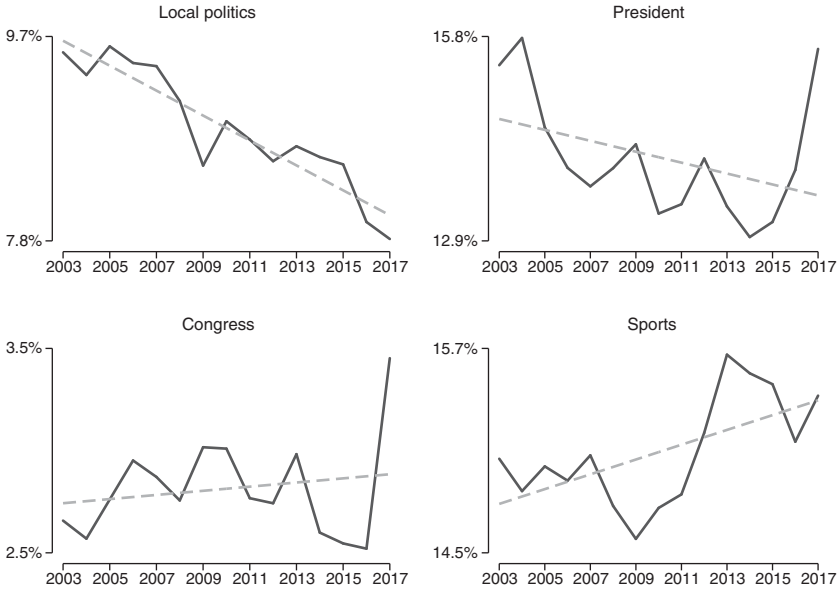

FIGURE 2.8. The decline of local politics and other topics as a share of the news hole

Note: Results are based on the 202 newspapers for which we have content dating back to 2003 (see Appendix D). Dotted lines are fitted linear estimates. For specific search terms used to identify local politics, president, Congress, and sports stories, see Appendix E.

that grew to 3.5%, higher than any year since 1998. It is impossible to say how much of this was the product of cost cutting by publishers or a reaction to the newsworthiness of the Trump presidency and Republican control of Congress. It is likely both. But it is clear that as the number of pages in the newspaper shrunk, news consumers found a larger percentage of them taken up with stories about politics in Washington, DC. Finally, the bottom right panel of the figure shows that as local public affairs reporting was de-emphasized, sports coverage became a growing share of the newspaper. In stark contrast to the widespread cuts to local politics, 53% of papers in our sample devoted *more* of their newsprint to sports in 2017 than in 2003.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, publishers had to make hard choices about what to save. In the aggregate, our data show that they chose to jettison the kind of public affairs reporting that sits at the heart of the democratic enterprise. With engagement in local politics

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declining at the same time, it is hard to imagine that the demise of newspapers wasn't at least partly responsible.

CAN LOCAL TV AND INTERNET START-UPS FILL THE VOID?

The counterpoint to our thus far gloomy assessment – Americans were losing access to essential local news from their most reliable source – is that the shrinking of newspapers coincided with an information revolution. As newspapers were imploding, electronic media were exploding, with new news and entertainment websites emerging seemingly every day in the early 2000s. Social media wasn't far behind. Moreover, local TV news remained, by some measures, the nation's most popular news source.[22] In that environment, the demise of newspapers might simply mean that consumers could stay informed by turning to the expanding array of other media sources.

In one respect, that's exactly what happened. Consumers interested in national politics, sports, and entertainment turned to cable stations and internet sites that could provide them more thorough and specialized coverage than even many of the best newspapers could. Even if consumers could no longer rely on their local papers for as much information about the New York Mets or President Obama's battles with Republicans in Congress, there were an increasing number of convenient other ways to get it. But for local politics, the options remained few. "It's not like the Huffington Post is going to show up at a Conway City planning commission meeting," said Tyler Fleming, a reporter at the *Sun News* in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. As we will demonstrate, neither television nor the Internet have come to the rescue and stepped in to fill the hole left by legacy newspapers.

Local TV

One reason that local TV news might be viewed as a possible savior of local political engagement is that the industry has fared better financially in the last two decades than newspapers. In 2004, for instance, local TV advertising revenues were reported at $22.4 billion. In 2018, the number was $20.4.[23] Far be it for us to pooh-pooh a loss of $2 billion, but in the contemporary local news environment – and especially compared to

[22] Pew 2019c.
[23] Pew 2019c.

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newspapers – this is not a dramatic drop. One reason for its relatively steady finances is that local TV remains popular, with a plurality of consumers telling pollsters that they get local news from TV broadcasts.[24] As a consequence, many outlets have avoided significant newsroom cuts; some have even grown.[25] And theoretically, the decline of local newspapers may have created an opening for local TV stations. By devoting more attention to local politics, they might be able to attract consumers who have grown dissatisfied with the diminished coverage their local newspapers provide when it comes to local government.

To investigate whether TV stepped up its public affairs coverage, we collected data from transcripts of local TV station archives in NewsBank. Electronically available broadcast transcript data are scarce, but we identified 31 stations with coverage going back to at least 2007 and over at least three consecutive years. The stations cover nine different markets in six states. For each of the 31 stations – local ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC affiliates – we used the same search protocol we did for the newspaper content analysis to identify coverage that included discussion of local government (mayors, city government, and school boards).[26] We generated a measure of the news hole by calculating the percentage of transcripts for a given station in a given year that included discussion of local politics.[27]

The story from these data is clear: There is no evidence of a consistent uptick in coverage of local government. In Figure 2.9, each line represents the percentage of transcripts in which a story mentioned the mayor, city government, or the school board.[28] Let's say we consider it a change in local government coverage if stations in a market increased or decreased coverage by at least 1 percentage point from the beginning to the end of the time series. By that measure – a pretty minimal shift – our data show an increase in local politics coverage in three markets, a decline in four

[24] Wenger and Papper 2017.

[25] "Research 2019: Local TV and Radio News Strengths," Hofstra University Newsroom Survey. https://rtdna.org/article/2019_research_local_tv_and_radio_news_strengths (March 15, 2020).

[26] We could not include coverage of county government because there is exceedingly little of it on TV news.

[27] See Appendix F for a description of the content analysis of local TV news coverage.

[28] The overall percentages of local politics coverage are higher than in our newspaper data because these analyses are at the transcript (or broadcast) level, rather than the individual story level. If we calculated the percentage of newspaper editions (not stories) that included at least one mention of local politics, the number would almost certainly be several times higher than the percentages for local TV news.

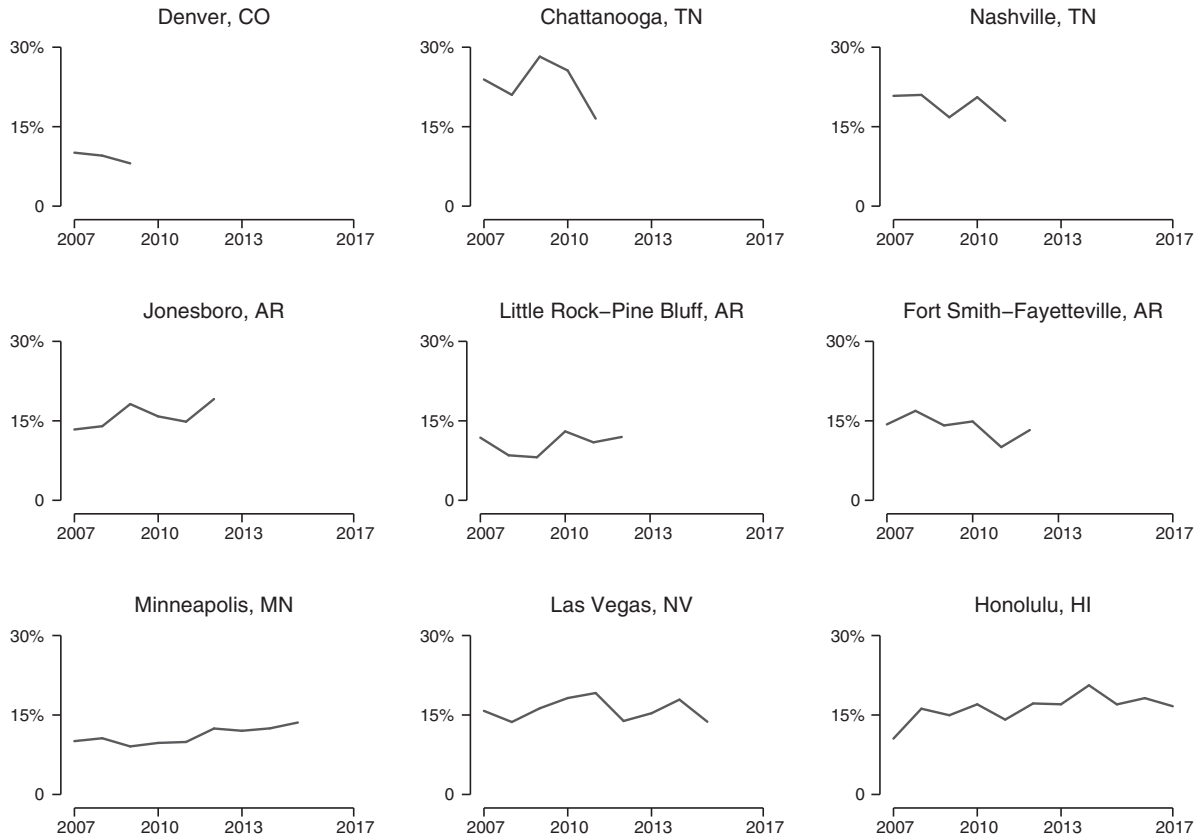

FIGURE 2.9. Coverage of local politics on local TV

Note: Results are based on transcripts of local TV stations' electronic archives in NewsBank. The sample includes 31 stations, which cover 9 markets, going back to at least 2007 and over at least 3 consecutive years (see Appendix F).

others, and no change in one. In the cities that saw increases, the changes are no more than 6 percentage points over 6–10 years. Although not nothing, these modest increases in local TV could hardly make up for declines in newspaper coverage that were sometimes 10 times the magnitude.

It's also worth noting that TV coverage of local politics tends to lack the depth of many newspaper articles. According to political scientists Gregory Martin and Joshua McCrain, "Mentions of local officials by name in news transcripts are rare . . .. That is, the average local news show mentions a state or local official by name about once every 6 months."[29] This may be why several of the newspaper reporters we interviewed said that they don't even consider the local TV stations as competition. In Ohio, for instance, the *Lima News* technically competes with one TV station but is not a true competitor because, according to reporter Josh Ellerbrook, "the network doesn't go very in-depth." *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* Kevin Dayton's assessment of the local television networks is similar. "TV has decided that government news isn't a priority for them," he told us. Columnist Linda Blackford said the same is true for the *Lexington Herald-Leader,* which competes with TV for advertisers, but "not for getting the local news scoop." Others mentioned that local television stations tend to be based in larger cities outside of their circulation area, so they don't even cover the specific community the newspaper reaches.

As newspapers have shed advertising revenue, slashed their newsrooms, and reduced local politics coverage, TV news has remained a profitable and popular source of news for many Americans. But our data offer no evidence that local stations in recent years have shifted their content in ways that could help bolster local political knowledge or participation. Indeed, local TV news is popular not because of its public affairs content, but because consumers like its staples: crime and weather.[30] It is an unlikely savior of citizens' political engagement.

Local News Start-Ups

If local TV isn't filling the void left by the decline of newspapers, what about the great informational hope of the twenty-first century – the Internet? Some observers have expressed optimism that local news

[29] See Martin and McCrain's (2019) appendix.
[30] Pew 2019d.

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start-ups, crowd-sourcing, and the tools of social media would emerge to provide robust coverage of their local communities.[31] Not only could start-ups fill the gap left by the retrenchment of newspapers, but by positioning themselves as "hyperlocal," they might be able to cover their communities even more effectively than legacy news outlets. And with fewer expenses – no printing presses, limited distribution costs, and lean staffs – these outlets could thrive in the economic environment that has decimated mainstream news organizations.

To examine the plausibility of this argument, we draw on a data set of local news start-ups compiled by media scholar Michele McLellan.[32] To our knowledge, the list – known as "Michele's List" – is the most comprehensive current collection of local online-only news outlets.[33] To be included on the list, a start-up must be "devoted primarily to local news," update news reports "regularly," and meet a series of other standards common to news organizations, such as a commitment to accuracy. Although the list does not include every local internet site that occasionally posts news articles, it does account for exactly the type of sites that – if the Internet can step in where newspapers have stepped away – would inherit the mantle of substantive local news providers.

We started by examining the 462 sites based in the United States that, as of March 2020, had a working URL. We classified each site as including news or politics, or not. Our coding was generous; if any content touched on local news, we coded it as a "yes." This includes health care or business sites that provide information about elections, new ordinances or regulations, and the like. Sites we deemed devoid of politics included not even a modicum of anything resembling local news coverage.[34]

Overall, 400 sites (87% of those on the list) provided at least occasional coverage of news or politics. But delving deeper shows that over the course of the 2000s, online news organizations have not reached a point where they can be considered replacements for the journalism provided by thousands of local newspapers across the country. Few can even be considered supplements.

[31] Jimmy Wales and Orit Kopel, "The Internet Broke the News Industry – and Can Fix It, Too," *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/19/internet-broke-journalism-fake-news/ (September 22, 2020).

[32] "Michele's List." www.micheleslist.org/ (March 15, 2020).

[33] Hindman's (2018) analysis of online-only local news outlets is exhaustive, but it is based on data that are now a decade old.

[34] See Appendix G for a description of the content analysis of local news internet start-ups.

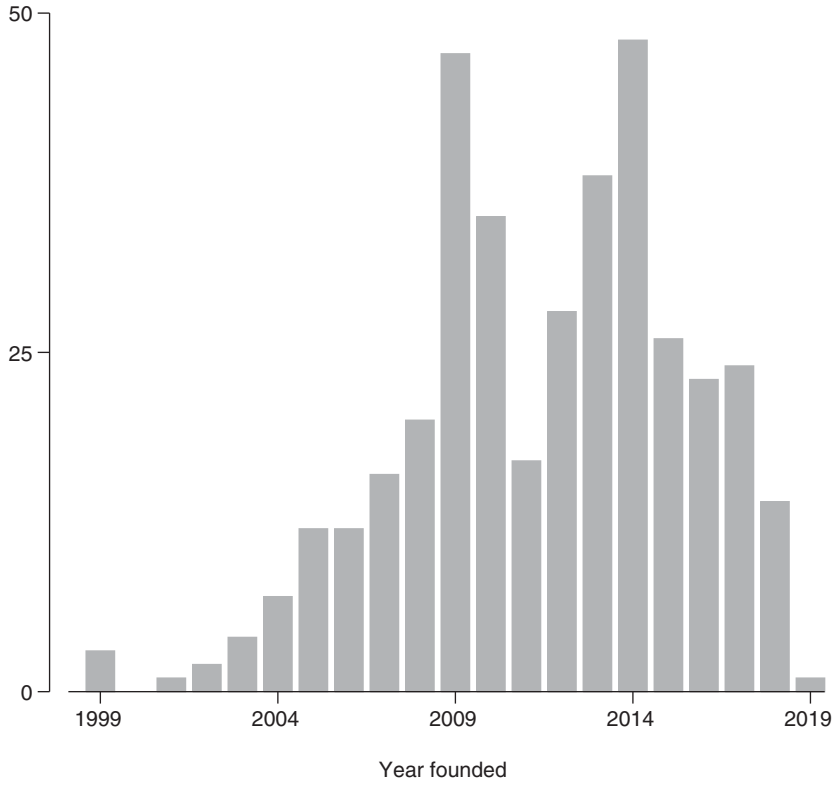

FIGURE 2.10. The founding dates of local news start-ups
Source: Michele's List, as of March 2020.

Consider first the year each site was founded (see Figure 2.10). The majority – 53% – listed a founding date of 2012 or later. Seventy-eight percent didn't exist before 2009. That means that most of these could have done very little to help recoup the loss of information left by the significant decline of newspapers in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Not only does the timing suggest that local news start-ups haven't filled the void, but most of these sites are concentrated in a handful of (mostly urban) areas. In the Michele's List data set, fully 23% (95) are located in one state, New Jersey (see Figure 2.11). This is mostly a product of one large site with numerous affiliates (TAP). But it's not just New Jersey, or the TAP sites. Along with the Garden State, five other states with large urban areas and concentrated populations – California, New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Texas – account for 50% of all the sites. The average number of local news start-ups in a state is nine, and

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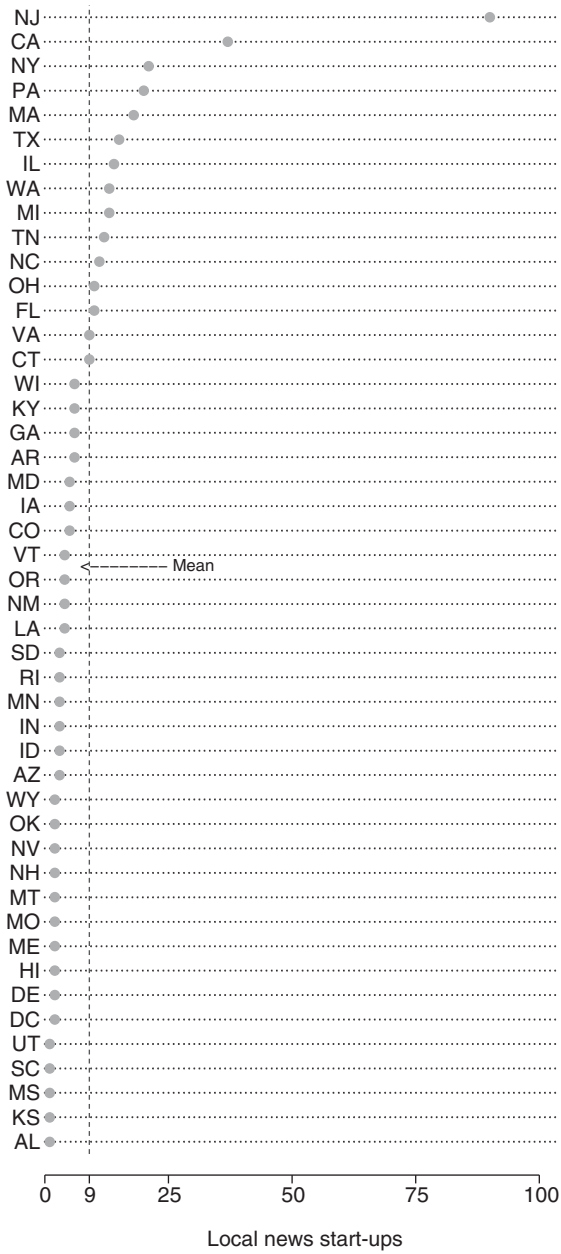

FIGURE 2.11. Local news start-ups, by state
Note: Dots indicate the number of local news start-ups as of March 2020. Data are from Michele's List.

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most states have fewer. With a few exceptions, news start-ups are not serving the thousands of mid-size and small communities across the country that have traditionally been served by daily newspapers.

Even in the places where local news start-ups have established themselves, most have had a hard time gaining traction. In addition to infinitesimally small traffic numbers for all but a few, journalists we spoke with did not regard online news organizations as serious competition. Craig Brown, the editor of the *Columbian*, a small paper in Washington state, mentioned a couple of sites that, according to the paper's analytics, have "a loyal following, but not one that's growing." That's *Tulsa World* reporter Jason Collington's impression of the three or four websites that have sprung up in and around Oklahoma as well. "They try to do the news, although I have no evidence that they've grown an audience," he said. One reporter in Ohio referred us to an online news Facebook group – 419NewsNow – that has become popular. But when we visited the site – which has less than 6,000 members – we found not local news, but rather, links to national news stories about the coronavirus and an article about a Texas zoo that will name a rat after your ex and then feed it to a snake on Valentine's Day.[35] Tempting, for sure, but hardly the kind of thing that could allow news start-ups to meet the public service function that newspapers have fulfilled throughout US history.

CONCLUSION

The data presented in this chapter paint a portrait of a media landscape in which coverage of local politics has eroded substantially. Newspapers, facing tough financial times, had no choice but to scale back their reporting resources. Coverage of local politics took a disproportionate hit. As newspapers came to provide less and less reporting on their local governments, other venues did not step in to replace them. Whereas cable television and the Internet offer a steady stream of information about national politics, sports, and entertainment, the same isn't true for local political affairs. When newspapers stopped telling citizens what was happening in city hall or on their county commissions, there was no other place where citizens could find it. Thus, the retrenchment at local newspapers was most damaging to citizens' access to the kind of reporting that local newspapers were uniquely positioned to provide.

[35] "The New 419 News Now (Uncensored)." www.facebook.com/groups/1338687922887731/ (March 15, 2020).

Although the suffering at daily newspapers has been universal over the last two decades, cuts to local government reporting have not been the same at every outlet. Which kinds of papers, and what types of communities, have endured the biggest reductions in coverage of local politics? To what extent have newspapers deprioritized certain aspects of local government? And how have they made those decisions? Answering these questions is central for understanding the potential consequences that the erosion of local political coverage carries for citizen engagement. So these are the questions to which we turn in the next chapter.

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