

News Desert U2

Finding Solutions

The time for PowerPoints and keynotes is over. On Oct. 29, 2023, we pulled together the best minds in local news from around the world to brainstorm practical solutions for what academia can do to help the news desert crisis. The event was hosted by the University of Kansas, Northeastern University, Duquesne University and the University of Georgia, and here are the key takeaways.

Research – Meg Heckman

The participants who assembled for the research session of News Desert U2: Solutions are deeply invested in solving the local news crisis, but they face challenges on many fronts.

Research-focused faculty reported difficulty in convincing their institutions and some of their colleagues that local news sustainability is legitimate and valuable scholarship. News desert research often involves engaging with community partners and industry professionals — something participants agreed can “taint the waters” in the eyes of too many academics. This challenge, one participant noted, is driven by “the inward-focused incentives of academic career paths and higher education’s need to protect its turf.”

At the same time, local news researchers worry they may not be engaging authentically and thoroughly with all segments of the communities they aim to serve. Most academic research lives behind paywalls, which makes it unlikely it will be seen by the industry leaders who may need the information the most. Traditional scholarship can also be hard to digest, especially for already overburdened local news leaders. As one participant asked, “Are we having the right conversations with the right people?”

A lack of broad savviness about the local news crisis also stymies efforts to find funding for research. “When you put a grant application in,” one participant noted, “there are no reviewers with expertise in local news.” The same is often true of peer reviewers for conference and journal papers, although participants agreed that seems to have improved a bit in recent years.

Several professors who work with campus-based news organizations worried about intensifying efforts by image-conscious institutions to restrict student press freedoms. This, they said, may have impacts well beyond campus given how some student news organizations have become a major source of local information in communities without

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traditional newspapers. These tensions may also contribute to the erroneous perception that local news research isn't legitimate.

The research session drew participants from at least four countries, which led to conversations about the challenges and opportunities of international research. News desert focused research is fairly well established in North America, but it's a newer concept in Europe and some other regions. Collaborating across international borders can be tricky due to differences in terminology, cultural and political dynamics and media systems, but participants agreed it would be worth the effort.

Participants also discussed a handful of technical and methodological challenges. Although it's [fairly common](#) for student journalists in the U.S. to produce local news, there is no standard in terms of audience metrics. This makes it difficult to measure the impact of student work and to identify (and perhaps replicate) successful projects. Similarly, participants expressed frustration with the logistics of mapping news deserts and convincing community members to respond to surveys.

Solving the local news crisis requires playing the long game, but participants agreed to pursue several shorter-term solutions. These include creating a LinkedIn group where local news researchers, industry leaders and relevant policymakers can mingle. Participants also began contributing to a public bibliography that will round up research, white papers, industry reports and ongoing projects. (This is still very much a work in progress, but stay tuned for more information on how to view and contribute.) The bibliography will also include a shared list of keywords and terminology to improve the likelihood of finding relevant research from different countries.

Creating a blog or email newsletter that summarizes academic research for industry leaders was also a popular idea, as was partnering with trade publications and open-access journal publishers to curate a special issue targeted at local news practitioners.

Although every community has somewhat unique needs, participants identified a handful of solutions that could be replicated in different areas. Faculty at U.S.-based land grant schools, for instance, could use existing [Cooperative Extension](#) infrastructure to advance their work. (Cooperative Extension is rooted in agriculture, but knowledge dissemination is also one its goals.)

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Journalism professors at institutions of all kinds, meanwhile, could do more to collaborate with colleagues in advertising and public relations to raise community awareness of the importance of high-quality local news. Recruiting student research assistants who hail from the local community could also help build trust.

Improving public policy related to local news is another area where faculty could leverage institutional resources. Lori Henson, the government advertising policy manager for [Rebuild Local News](#), shared some of her organization's extensive resources for this type of work such as [this policy menu](#).

Teaching — Amanda Bright

From dedicated courses to experiential learning opportunities, the teaching room at News Desert U2: Solutions discussed what was already being attempted in curriculum, in light of what was and wasn't working, and what instructors and teaching academics should do to support and innovate in community journalism's news deserts.

The faculty and professionals in the teaching session identified four larger struggles in pedagogy's connection to news deserts. The first is familiar — money. Emerging from the pandemic with budget reductions and faculty lines not restored, taking on the expansive effort of supporting or filling a news desert through curriculum means finding external financial resources (in the form of grants, etc.) to not only build the program but also compensate and equip both students and faculty for the work.

A second concern about student enrollment and faculty expertise was linked. Several academics noted fewer students were majoring in journalism (or journalism-adjacent fields), and faculty didn't always have the time or practical expertise to lead news-production programs. These two issues led to students preferring to stay inside the safe, campus zone for reporting. The larger consequence was the inability to develop a pipeline between universities and the newsrooms that need young journalists the most.

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The final two struggles highlighted the ponderous nature of curriculum change — particularly when nimbleness is required. Several faculty and professionals were worried about the news deserts near them that were just on the horizon. Others mentioned students' lack of ability to serve remote areas or their struggle to serve communities that were demographically disparate from themselves. These fears were worsened by the confined nature of student and course schedules. Several faculty mentioned how quickly students must — concurrently — understand issues, engage with a community, and continue to learn how to do good journalism. Then, complex coverage, like statehouse reporting, or innovative digital approaches felt like even more of a reach, although many mentioned how intense the need was for both.

Such honest conversation around the current methods and their complications was warranted, but the key moments were when professionals and faculty thought beyond the current circumstances to what could be possible for academics and news deserts.

Proposed solutions centered around four areas — building a local/news desert culture, creating curricular flexibility, engaging with communities in inventive ways, and intentionally fostering collaborations.

Professional and academic voices were unified in a call for a transformed industry culture. Kim Fox, a professor of practice at The American University in Cairo Egypt, said it was crucial to meet students where they were, to “get into their heads and understand them” in order to engage them authentically in community news and serving news deserts. Amethyst Davis, founder of the Harvey World Herald, said that mission could be accomplished by “extending grace” to young journalists in the form of allowing Gen Z to “reimagine how we do it.” Davis noted that young journalists want to do this work, but they want to do it in a different way than legacy organizations — from digital products to working conditions. Part of the next step in engaging student journalists in universities with news deserts is to rethink everything from pay to culture to innovation.

Other transformative cultural concepts included intentionally connecting with other majors (from PR to data science to medical schools to natural science) to tell community stories through nontraditional expertise, enhancing diversity by reaching out to campus or community groups outside of journalism, and building strong connections with local high school programs to foster an authentic community connection and early training.

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To address the conundrum of curriculum's glacial pace compared to the speed at which news deserts occur, participants shared concepts like short-term externships (versus a structured, semester course), along with developing a curricular model that would "stack" and allow students to work their way through a partnership with a news desert over the course of more than one semester — whether that was Reporting III and IV with different levels of difficulty, or an asynchronous, online module to prepare students for the beat or community expertise they need before joining the news desert course.

Solutions to help engage students with the communities they served were plentiful in the discussion. One of the most inventive was a position within the department or college that would act as an assignment editor for reporting courses, allowing that person to be familiar and connected with the communities served to create institutional memory where it's challenging to obtain with constant student turnover. Community listening, tours, meet and greets, and surveying were talked about in-depth, but not as a perfunctory act but to find specific topics students should report on to serve *that community*. Perhaps students serving a news desert as a class would only focus on health and medical concerns, or agriculture and the environment, instead of spreading them and their still-blossoming expertise too thin.

In a moment of keen self-reflection, industry professionals and those now residing in academia agreed on one truth — we are bad at collaboration. Yet, the intersection of higher education and news deserts cannot be achieved without a tremendous level of partnership. Whether it's funding sources, working with newsrooms, engaging with communities, developing relationships with other departments, joining nonprofits and associations, or even reaching out to employ experimental nationwide models, journalism educators and professionals clearly understood the problem of news deserts cannot be solved with good, but siloed, ideas — but instead with a depth of sharing and connectedness that has not been done before.

Service – Pamela E. Walck

A community without local news is like a person walking through the desert without water. All they need is something. It doesn't have to be perfect. It just needs to be available.

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At least that is how Joey Young, from Kansas Publishing Ventures, feels about the news desert problem across the state of Kansas.

“It may not be perfect, but sometimes just having someone taking notes (at a council meeting and posting on a Substack) is what the community needs,” Young said during the Service workshop session, hosted by News Desert U2, an online gathering of professionals, educators and non-profit journalism officials, held Oct. 27 and sponsored by the University of Kansas. “Just doing something is better than nothing.”

And there are plenty of challenges to doing that “something”—it just depends on whether one is an educator or a practitioner.

For journalism educators, the transient nature of journalism at smaller news outlets means constantly trying to connect and reconnect with what feels like a revolving staff at smaller publications. Add to that challenge a wide range of student talent and commitment levels, and sometimes just doing something seems next to impossible. Factor in the demands on faculty time and heavy course-loads and suddenly, solving the community news desert problem seems unlikely regardless of the vast resources one has access to in terms of students, equipment, writing labs and more at one’s university.

Ashley Kang, a professor at Ithaca College, said that lingering pandemic-era budget cuts at many universities also mean departments still cannot afford course-buyouts to give faculty the time needed to devote to working with local publications and students—work that while rewarding, is incredibly time-consuming.

For journalists in news deserts, the challenges seem even more basic: It’s simply hard to convince new college graduates to live in small, often rural communities where there isn’t even a good bar to hang out in or places to develop social lives. Add to that historically low pay, slow-moving academic processes, and the needs of small publications and suddenly, partnering with a journalism program seems like a lot more trouble than it might be worth.

“I feel like kids and school administrations push this agenda of NOT going to small town papers, so there is this big disconnect between industry expectations and what the industry wants,” Young observed, adding that even with the best of benefits, he has heard of newspapers still unable to “get kids from metro universities to come to small markets.”

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In one example, a group of South Dakota newspapers worked hard to “up” their game in terms of providing competitive internships to journalism students—often paying significantly more than metro newspaper counterparts—but still could not attract interns.

It left smalltown newspaper editors with the sense that journalism students just don’t want to leave the city and would much rather skip the little community newspapers altogether, despite the tangible skills they could gain in smaller environments.

Solutions, meanwhile, do not always need to come with big price tags.

One professor noted that normalizing recent graduates at small-town papers can often help current students envision themselves at small papers as well. An easy way to achieve that is by asking guest speakers—only a year or two out of college—and working at community papers to come into the classroom as guest speakers.

It also means changing the narrative surrounding work at publications like the New York Times and the Washington Post—places many journalism students feel are the pinnacle of career success. Instead, journalism programs and professors need to identify smaller community papers as equally significant and important places to work.

Other solutions included breaking down the ivory tower’s barriers by partnering with business or medical schools, where seed money for community partnerships or the creation of social networks with other university majors struggling to place graduates in small communities might help entice recent alumni to consider careers in non-metro areas.

Additionally, practitioners urged faculty members to get comfortable with their students doing, even if it isn’t perfect.

“Something is better than nothing. Our industry is in crisis, so training kids for a world where there is separate fact-checking (department) and four-lines of editing (on each story)... it just does not exist,” said Young, adding that students and faculty need to be OK with human mistakes.

He added that his experiences in a small town have taught him that communities are better served despite imperfections and community members are forgiving when publications are transparent about errors.

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More costly solutions could include signing bonuses and student loan forgiveness for recent graduates willing to commit to two or three-year contracts at publications in small towns; universities offering Maymester or summer classes where students could spend longer amounts of time reporting from a community they have studied; and paying students to travel for such work.