

NEWS DESERTS

VISUALIZING HOW THE LOCAL NEWS LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED SINCE THE EARLY 2000s

BY Shraddha Dinesh

Local news has experienced exceptional market change over the past two decades because of the expansion of Internet access, digital content, and social media; and the resulting decline of print advertising revenue which previously sustained the local news business model. Consequently, local news organizations have either folded or been incorporated by private and investment companies since 2000.

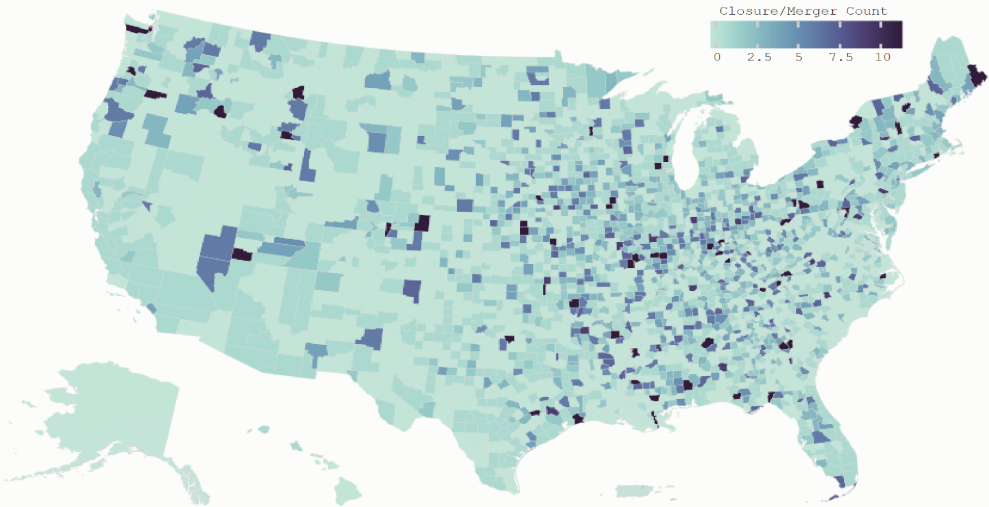
UNC's Hussman School of Journalism defines "news desert" as a "community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level."

According to Northwestern Medill School of Journalism and Media's 2022 report, the U.S. is "on track" to lose one-third of its newspapers by 2025, and 70 million U.S. citizens live in news deserts or high-risk communities.

The problems with this drastic loss are clear. Scholars tout local news as a tool to combat political polarization. Further, local newspapers cover stories that fall under the radar and beyond the resources of national papers. Therefore, local newspapers, when adequately resourced, serve as checks on local politics; their absence affects social and political processes at the smallest levels of government.

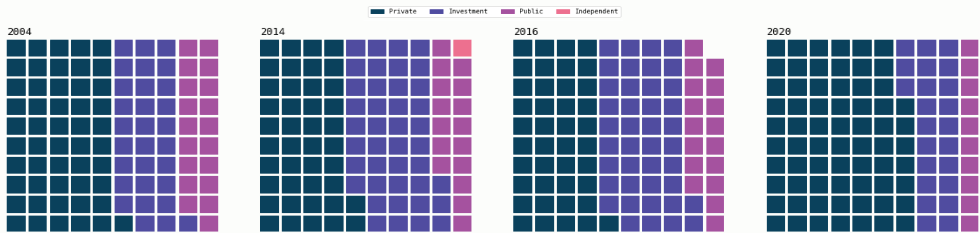
WHERE HAVE NEWSPAPERS DISAPPEARED?

The total number of mergers and closures per county from 2004–2019



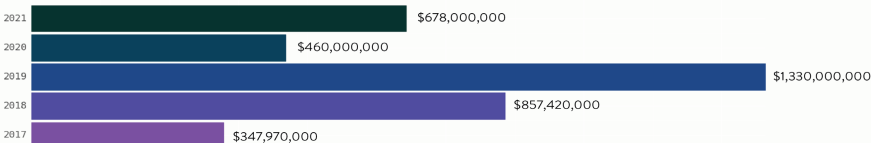
Source: UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, U.S. News Deserts Project

LOCAL NEWSPAPER OWNER TYPES AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL MARKET



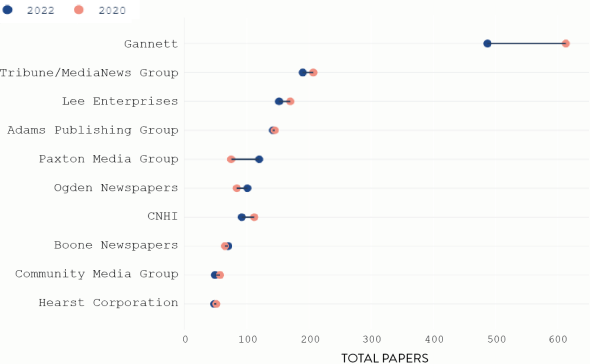
Source: UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, U.S. News Deserts Project

TOTAL DEAL VALUE OF MERGERS & ACQUISITIONS, IN DOLLARS



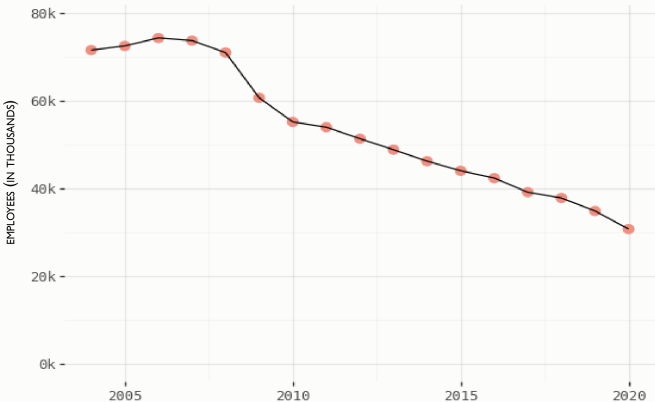
Source: Northwestern Medill School of Journalism, Local News Initiative

BIGGEST MEDIA OWNERS BY NUMBER OF NEWSPAPERS OWNED IN 2020 AND 2022



Source: Northwestern Medill School of Journalism, Local News Initiative

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN THE NEWSPAPER SECTOR FROM 2004 TO 2010



Source: Northwestern Medill School of Journalism, Local News Initiative

NOTES:

- Several of the darker regions represent closures around large metro and urban areas, which tend to have more news outlets. However, by visual comparison alone, small to medium cities are the most affected.
- Waffle plots were calculated by rounded percentages. 2016 is missing a box due to rounding and independent markets representing <1% share of the total. **Private companies** own media portfolios containing an array of media formats (e.g. print, digital, etc.). **Investment companies** hold non-media assets and defer to shareholder interests; many are previously owned by private equity/hedge funds. **Public companies** are publicly traded. **Independent media** encompass non-profit organizations.
- The 2019 merger & acquisition total includes the high-value Gannett/Gatehouse Media merger
- Largest owner plot excludes companies that did not report data for 2020 and 2022
- Employment data was originally aggregated by Pew Research Center