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## *Local News Deserts*

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### Definition briefing

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# News deserts

Definitions are a continual problem. There is a lack of shared understanding of what we mean by both local media and local journalism. The terms are interpreted differently by different stakeholders. Some perceive them narrowly (only including local newspapers and the associated products produced by those legacy brands), others more broadly (for instance, including online hyperlocal providers and community radio stations that provide local news). Local news should include local news outlets that maintain independence from those they cover and are devoted primarily to produce news in a defined geographic area. Hyperlocal is typically much narrower, relating to a small town, village or suburb, or sometimes even a particular group of streets. For example, hyperlocals are defined as online news or content services pertaining to a town, village or single postcode or other geographically defined community. A community (or a small number of linked communities) can be both geographic or thematically based.

## Hyperlocal journalism

From its roots in community journalism (Berrigan, 1979), studies of hyperlocal news across a range of countries showed small digital start-ups and community or citizen-initiated journalism rising as legacy forms of local media had started to retract. There was much interest in their capacity to offer public service journalism with emphasis on civic value (Beckett, 2010; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Flouch, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Radcliffe, 2015).

## Local news

Though there are varied interpretations, geographic location is a key element and for some this special aspect is the defining feature. Anderson (2013) refers to local news produced for metropolitan cities while others limit local to part of a town (Coleman 2021) or provision for smaller communities (Harte et al 2019). Critical regionalism approaches force an interrogation of localism and adds levels of culture identity and language (Ali 2017). The geo-social model adopted by Hess and Waller (2016) broaden the comprehension further adding five dimensions of local news: geo-social, local, local habitus, community and sense of place. Adding these, there is consensus that both spatial and social features are important in understanding local news and journalism.

## Local news deserts

A study by Abernathy (2018: 97) has popularised the term news deserts through the project Expanding News Deserts. Definitions include communities where residents are facing significantly diminished access to the sort of important information that feeds “grassroots democracy”. Usher defines news deserts as a geographic area that is not covered by media provision therefore with few or no news outlets. Media or news gaps make up a large part of the understanding of news deserts. Ferrier (2014) refers to media deserts as geographies without access to fresh local news and information that can inform the public. Gulyas (2022:17) therefore synthesis that “news deserts generally refer to the lack of or diminished availability access or use of local news or media to a community in a geographical area”.

## Spacial inequalities

International Media Support is committed to putting a lens on those who are marginalised. Rooted in feminist ideology that anchors to all social injustice issues, we are committed to exploring structural and social discriminations in all forms. Therefore, our focus on news deserts is also testimony to spatial inequality. In economics, special inequality is defined as a disparity in resources and services due to discrepancies in social and economic factors across geography (Kanbur and Venables, 2005). As a dimension of inequality overall, spatial inequality arises from access inequalities. It also aligns with root causes of social and political instability especially those rooted in political and racial tensions. In social geography, a key theme in special inequality is how they affect social cohesion and the capacity of a community to come together on a common future (Cassiers and Kesteloot, 2012). A UK study found the most deprived communities tend to have the most restricted access to local news. Analysis of English indices of deprivation with local news provisions data shows that 10 per cent of the most deprived areas in England were significantly less served with local news than the averages. Of the lowest decile areas of indices of deprivation included in the sample, 56.5 per cent had no or one [local] paper, while the average for all areas was 35.3 per cent. Of the areas identified in the study as having no local papers, 28 per cent were located in lowest decile of indices of deprivation, indicating that communities in these areas are almost three times more likely to have no local news titles (Gulyas, 2022).

## Methodologies for the study of news deserts

According to desk-based research by Gulyas (2022) there are four main approaches to the study of news deserts: Outlet focussed (to identify patterns which are then visualised by maps), Content focussed (between communities in relation to how well served they are with local news, Media ecology (often combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies examining not just media but social and spatial economic factors), Case study (including longitudinal and mixed methods approaches). Adding action research methodologies fits with International Media Support's core business viability methodology and will allow "linking practice and questioning on significant real world issues to instigate change improvements" (Cook, 2021). Such approaches have been adapted by the Future News Fund in the UK in response to the government's Cairncross Review seeking innovation in the local news landscape to put public interest news back as part of the immune system that keeps democracy healthy (Nesta, 2020).

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