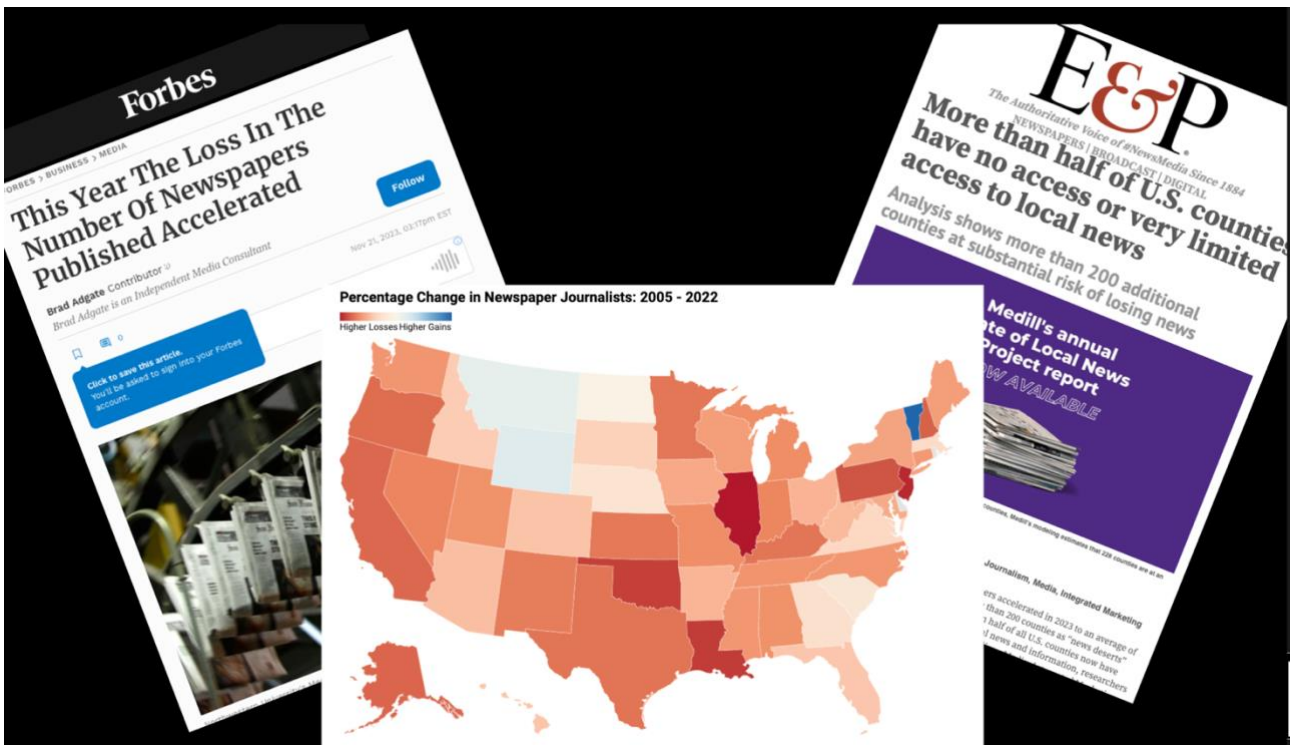


Audio Transcript

Episode 213 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

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[Unpacking the Medill "State of Local News" report](#)

In this episode of "E&P Reports," we un-pack Medill's 2023 "State of Local News" report with co-authors Senior Associate Dean Tim Franklin and Visiting Professor Penelope Muse ("Penny") Abernathy as we investigate their latest findings and methodology, as well as what this data means when it comes to the future of local journalism in the U.S.



00:00:04.2 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor & Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.6 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher E&P Magazine. As always, housekeeping up front. If you are listening to us on a podcast platform, please, please click that follow button. Watching on YouTube, go below, look for that subscribe button, smash the bell to the right. But don't smash the computer, just the bell. You'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of E&P Reports. Old friends, this will be both of these news media executives second appearance on the program. Tim, you don't get a jacket for that. When you get to the fifth or sixth visit like Gordon Burrell, you get jackets. But I have with me, I consider her a friend, Penelope Muse Abernathy. Penny, did you know you have a Wikipedia page? Are you aware of that?

0:01:06.9 Penelope Muse Abernathy: Yes, I am. Actually, the librarian at UNC started it.

0:01:12.6 MB: Well, guess what? I don't have one. And I am honored. Did you know... Let me just read it now. Penelope, Penny as we call her, an American journalist and author who specializes in the study of news deserts. I don't think that word or that... Not words, but words or euphemism would've ever existed without you. Do you agree, Penny?

0:01:35.1 PA: No, I actually don't. And I think we discussed this last time. I think it was first used by a Chicago Tribune journalist back in 2011. I will take credit for having used it several times since, but so have a lot of other scholars and a lot of other journalists. So I think it's just the consensus built around a certain term.

0:01:56.2 MB: I sit corrected. You have ink in your veins. You worked at the Charlotte Observer, Dallas Times Herald, Wichita Eagle, and you were, of course, a publisher for Harvard Business Review. I could go on and on. And you're our guest today along with Tim Franklin, senior associate dean, professor, and John M. Mutz. I'm saying... Or Mutz Chair in local news.

0:02:18.4 Tim Franklin: Mutz. Mutz.

0:02:19.0 MB: Mutz. Tim, you don't have a Wikipedia page.

0:02:22.6 TF: I know. I'm gonna have to work on that.

0:02:24.3 MB: There's a good chance you have seen the headlines about the latest, greatest data that are coming out of Medill. And Penny and Tim, we're gonna get to all of that on the backside of this message.

0:02:34.6 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly TownNews. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management, and more. Join the over 2000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with



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0:03:39.2 MB: All right. Let me start with you, Tim, before we get to Penny. How is the report done at Medill? How do you assess this knowledge of communities across the United States? And if they have... I like to call it a voice. If they have a local journalistic platform of any kind, whether it's print or digital or not, Tim, what is the methodology?

0:04:01.9 TF: Well, it's incredibly labor-intensive, Mike, and it takes months and months to assemble all of this data. We have a team of researchers who work on this. We have two full-time researchers. We now have a director for the project, who works with Penny and me. And we have six part-time student researchers who do this. Collecting data from press associations and journalism organizations and other sources across the country. And so, as you can imagine, pulling together databases that includes thousands of newspapers as well as digital only local news sites, ethnic media, which we added this year, public radio, which we also added this year, takes a lot of time. And then also what's new about this year's report are a couple of things. One is we developed a predictive model working with the data science team here at Medill to look at counties in the US that are at high risk of becoming news deserts. So we looked at the current characteristics of news deserts today. And then based on those characteristics we looked at one news organization counties, so that we could identify counties at high risk.

0:05:11.0 TF: And why is that important? Well, it's important because it means that community leaders in those areas, public policy makers, philanthropists, community foundations, can hopefully act before it's too late in those counties. And then we also created new this year what we call a 'Bright Spots' map. So that includes every local news startup in America in the last five years. And then we spotlighted 17 local news organizations that, in our collective discussions, we believe have promise for sustainable business model in the future. And we hope that that'll be an inspirational tool that people will use and read.

0:05:50.8 MB: Okay, Penny, you're on the spot now. You called this your barometer. How did you anoint those 17? Where's the secret sauce, Penny? Everybody's asking. Sustainability is the word now. It's not just, "Let me grab a couple of hundred thousand of philanthropic dollars and launch things." If it ain't sustainable it ain't gonna last. What is your secret recipe for a bright spot as Tim just said?

0:06:23.4 PA: Well, I hope people look at the bright spots and do two or three things. The first is one of the things I like to say is that every strategy is unique to the market. So if you look at those 17 bright spots, they have things that could be shared with others, but they also are very unique to their market. And so if you're going to be unique to the market too, I think what's also interesting about all of those bright spots is they take a long-term view. So they understand that you are going to have to invest and that maybe the return won't be immediate, but that the key is a long-term investment that yields sustainability. So and I think the final thing I would say is you're so right, Mike. You can have startup money, but you're going to have to, regardless if you're for-profit or non-profit, find a sustainable business model.



0:07:21.2 PA: And there are two or three things we found that lead to sustainable business models, regardless of the market. The first is the demographics of the market. So if you are located in a market with average to above average income and a large growing market, your chances are better of doing that. But you don't have to be in that market. We have examples of people who are in struggling markets, and what that depends on in many instances is local accountability and the entrepreneurship. So you need to be both locally-minded and be entrepreneurial. And then the third thing you need to understand is you have to invest for the long term. So that way you need capital not only to start something, not only to transform something if it's a legacy organization, but you need enough capital to invest for at least five years. And that's kind of the key for what we looked at with bright spots.

0:08:24.4 MB: Penny, look, let me ask you. Was anywhere in there just great journalism and good content?

0:08:30.4 PA: Well, actually, I was gonna say... Before Tim answers on the business side, I get asked this all the time. And I think that one of the ways to look at it... And I have to give credit. This came from a publisher who told me that he conceives of the editorial, the journalism, that if you're a good newspaper you hold a mirror up to your community. If you're an excellent newspaper you're not afraid to love your community. And I think that gets back to the whole notion that strong news organizations both nurture our democracy and they nurture our community, our sense of community. And what do we need right now if it's not a sense of belonging in a community and a sense of identity with the people who are in our community.

0:09:19.9 MB: Tim, what do you want to add to that on the business side then?

0:09:22.2 TF: Yeah I think right now, especially as we move toward a reader revenue business model, and are less reliant on advertising, that it's about relevance and it's about producing a product, at the end of the day, that people are willing to pay for, that they're willing to fork over their credit card for every month. And the thing about that reader revenue business model is that quality sells. That if you're producing original, unique, local content for your community, people are more likely to turn over their credit card to you and to pay for that news and information. And if you look at our 'Bright Spots' map, for example, you've got some really terrific, journalistically excellent news organizations like The Boston Globe, like The Minneapolis Star Tribune, like AL.com, like The Texas Tribune. I could go on and on. But it all starts with producing original, local, quality news and information.

0:10:31.8 MB: Penny, I wanna run through the headlines with you since you... This is what everybody's already reported on. There are 204 counties with no local news outlet. The loss of local newspaper ticked higher, now, with an average of 2.5 per week. If I'm saying something wrong, please let me know. We have lost, since 2005, 2900 newspapers. The country has lost two thirds of its journalists. But you blame that, correct me if I'm wrong, we'll pause here, on some of the corporate seizures and downsizing. Am I correct?

0:11:05.0 PA: At least the majority of that has been there. Yes.



0:11:10.7 MB: And you and I both know there are some newspapers with editors a hundred miles away. Right? It's...

0:11:16.4 PA: Right.

0:11:18.1 MB: Now do you have... You did make up this term, right? Ghost paper? It was someone...

0:11:21.2 PA: Actually, I think that is one term that I may have used with an interview and the journalist was smart enough to get somebody to put it in a headline. So I do think I did refer in just a casual one to that.

0:11:34.2 MB: Note to self. News deserts, not Abernathy, ghost paper, Abernathy. We got it here. There are 550 digital only local news sites. Now, this is a challenge. The word newspaper doesn't mean it's paper. You and I both know... Well, Tim, you come out of Pointe. And Tampa Bay Times is mostly digital now, with what we call a replica version, a flip book type of paper. What's the challenge here, either one of you, with what we refer to as a local journalistic sourced voice for a community? Do we stop using the word paper? What's the difference? Help me out here.

0:12:14.9 PA: Well, let me give you a technical term and say that I think the historic role of newspapers has been to provide and stop... Versus digital sites. Has been to stop every day or every week and give us a historical context of what happened that past week. That's something that scholars look at, that's something we depend on, is the context, the first draft of history as we call it. And so when we're putting the Tampa Bay Times into a category as newspaper, we're not talking about whether it's printed on newspaper or not, but we say it is a daily as long as it is stopping once a day to produce an e-edition. It could only print maybe one or two days a week, because we've noticed that the frequency has dropped on most dailies. There at maximum six days a week except for a few national ones. But some are down to around four times a week.

0:13:14.6 PA: But in order to be classified a daily, you have to put out an e-edition that historians will refer to, your grandchildren will refer to, that at least captures the day's history right then for that moment in time. If you're a weekly, you have to do it at least once a week. So for me, almost all of the places we list as newspapers have websites. How we classify them has to do with their print schedule or their publishing schedule, let me say that. So whether they're publishing online a digital edition or whether they're publishing a print edition. We try not to get hung up on it. We call it news organizations. We just wanna differentiate between the way the business models that are there for current legacy newspapers as they try to make the transition successfully and become sustainable versus digital sites, who have a very different kind of challenge, business challenge, that comes up, and also in many ways have a continuous flow of information. And so who knows which way it will end up in the future, but for the moment that's how we're trying to distinguish between them, just as we distinguish between ethnic media and more mainstream legacy media, 'cause they have same but different business challenges going forward.

0:14:36.1 MB: Well, actually, one of the biggest challenges in my opinion, or our opinion at E&P, is defining what local news is. See, we have this stupid document that is brilliant called the Constitution, which means our press is free and unfettered in Canada, which it's defined by the

government, by taxation. But at least they can say you are a news source. And we have had on this program some people that actually represent law enforcement that are begging for us to self-define ourselves so they can say you're inside the rope line, you're out of the rope. You see what I'm saying? We are at a crisis level because if we don't define that how can we get through this legislation when having big tech compensation? How can we have tax credits for the publishers who employ journalists? 'Cause what is a journal... So it's crazy. I could go on and on.

0:15:23.8 TF: I was just gonna say, right now I'm serving on the bipartisan Illinois Local Journalism Task Force, and we're looking at potential public policy recommendations to help local news in the state. And one of the things we're wrestling with is the definition of a journalist. How do you define a journalist in this day and age? And we're I think getting close to that and we're studying how other states have done that as they're looking at public policy. But you're absolutely right. That is a very key question and it's one that we need to get clarity on.

0:15:57.1 MB: Soon. Penny?

0:15:58.6 PA: Yeah. Let me take it from a slightly different angle. And I think that we are very fortunate that back in 2011, 2012, the FCC grew very alarmed by the loss of newspaper journalists and came out with a major report called the Information Needs of Communities. And what they attempted to do was to find eight different categories of news all of us need to make both everyday decisions-wise, everyday decisions as well as long-term decisions. So when we look at what is a newspaper, what is a digital site, we look to see are they covering any of those critical information needs that the FCC identified, such as education, such as health, such as politics, such as local government, such as the environment, such as public safety, such as what's just going on in the community. And that's why I get back to that... What I love about that comment about a great newspaper is not afraid to love its community is because that's what you do. You expose what the issues are, you talk about what the possibilities are, and you attempt to bring people together to both live a better quality of life in that community.

0:17:14.9 MB: I'm gonna add to that as someone who has 20, 30 years now of media sales background, that love you give the community can translate into advertising dollars as well.

0:17:23.8 PA: Yes. Yes.

0:17:24.6 MB: So that brings up another topic. We have done a lot of reporting lately on news deserts or near deserts. And I don't know if you follow what we're doing here, Penny and Tim, But I've had on this program small communities, like just south of where I live here in Nashville, a town called Pulaski lost its paper for three weeks. We interviewed civic leaders there. And I gotta say, guys, this is not... How should I put... This is not a liberal community. The KKK was formed in this town in the 1860s. So in other words, this community realized through, and remember I come from sales, loss aversion. The trick to anything is loss aversion. By the loss of their voice they begged for that free unfettered press to come back. And I had civic leaders thanking a newspaper company in Nashville that came in and started a new paper. So my question to you is, A, you obviously know that, that no matter what stripes you are, politically, we have bipartisan support for press. But do you think that philanthropic dollars may not be heading into some of those areas? What do you think, Penny?



0:18:40.8 PA: Well, I think the real challenge with the second round, and one of the reasons we came out with the watch list this past time of ones that have the same characteristics, actually, some of the demographics are much worse on the watch list communities than they are on current news deserts. So I think that one of the challenges for this round of philanthropic money is understanding where the most at risk areas are, where we have to just kind of get in and we can either support what's there or we can entice entrepreneurs to go into those markets and do it, or entice existing news organizations. If you look at, the 'Bright Spots' map, we have several examples of existing media that have taken it upon themselves to go into news deserts.

0:19:36.9 PA: The Charleston Post and Courier, for instance, use philanthropic money to actually go in and do investigative reporting in many of the at-risk communities and news deserts. The Recorder in Virginia, a small weekly, moved into an adjacent county when another newspaper died. So we've got to... To me, the issue is how do we support those efforts that are being made by existing news organizations as well as startups to bring the news to those communities? Because it hurts our democracy, it hurts our society, it hurts everything, when we do not have a way to connect on a local level.

0:20:18.4 TF: And Mike, to answer your question, just to add to that, I talk to the foundation folks a lot and I'm in regular touch with them. And I can tell you that I think they are focused on the Pulaskis of the world. And one of the reasons why this watch list is so important is that it's an indicator for them about where they should be thinking about making investments in local news. And I think there's a lot of concern among philanthropists about the news deserts across the country, including in rural areas and including in rural areas in the Midwest and the South in particular. So I think that we're going to see a focus on those communities in this next round of philanthropic funding. But there also are a lot of factors in this. Penny's talked about the demographic factors. There's also the issue of broadband access, which is a real problem in a lot of these communities. And so as a foundation going to pump a lot of money into a rural area that doesn't have broadband, is that throwing good money after bad? And so there are other underlying considerations here of things that need to be addressed to help local news. And I think building this broadband infrastructure is one of those things.

0:21:40.2 MB: I agree completely. If you don't have broadband, you're putting a billboard in your basement. Don't you agree?

0:21:47.1 TF: Exactly. Exactly. No question to be asked. That's absolutely right. That's a good point.

0:21:51.2 MB: I'm actually thrilled that you guys did that, that you actually started... You said loud and proud that some of the biggest communities that need that voice are some of the poorest and some of the most neglected. And it's important because if... Penny, and maybe you and I are on the same page on this. I love the Script's logo, the spotlight. Remember? You're supposed to shine that light into corners that need truth. Some of these communities desperately need it. Don't you agree?

0:22:23.1 PA: Well, I think that you look at what has happened in this country. And with a lack of local news, we used to say all politics is local, all politics becomes national. I search in vain often



for local news in places where I live. And where we have the most ability to affect the people we elect, where we have the most ability to affect the own quality of our life, is local. So if you're going to bring up economically struggling communities or traditionally underserved communities, you really need to give them that ability to connect with their community and connect with grassroots democracy.

0:23:03.4 MB: Tim Franklin, senior associate dean, professor, and John M. Mutz Chair in local news at Medill. Thank you so much for your valuable time. Penny Abernathy, who obviously... Penny, let me get this right. You're a visiting professor at Medill. Is that correct?

0:23:21.9 PA: That's right. That's correct.

0:23:24.8 MB: And you were the Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the Hussman School of Journalism and North Carolina Chapel Hill. Do you actually reside there all the time in North Carolina?

0:23:34.2 PA: No. As Tim knows I'm just about all over, and, fortunately, Medill brings me to Chicago and Evanston every now and then. So it's been a wonderful association the last three years with Medill, where they really took this research and are building a platform to really expand on it and I hope make it relevant for years to come.

0:23:56.9 MB: One of the great things about this study, Tim, is it's free. Am I right?

0:24:00.2 TF: Yes, yes, absolutely.

0:24:02.1 MB: We do have a large podcast audience that never, ever gets to the landing page. Obviously, there'll be a link to the study at editorandpublisher.com/vodcast. But where can someone travel online to get this critical data now, Tim?

0:24:16.4 TF: Localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu. That's the url. And you'll find all the details in this very extensive report, a lot of interactive maps and graphics. And then we also have on that site trend stories about what's happening in local news. And also it highlights the research that's being done on local news on the site. So we'd love it if people could check it out.

0:24:38.8 MB: We at E&P wanna thank both of you for your hard work and especially keeping us in the loop when you release information. And thank you again for joining us on this program. We appreciate it.

[music]