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# Local News Deserts and Their Impact on Young News Consumers

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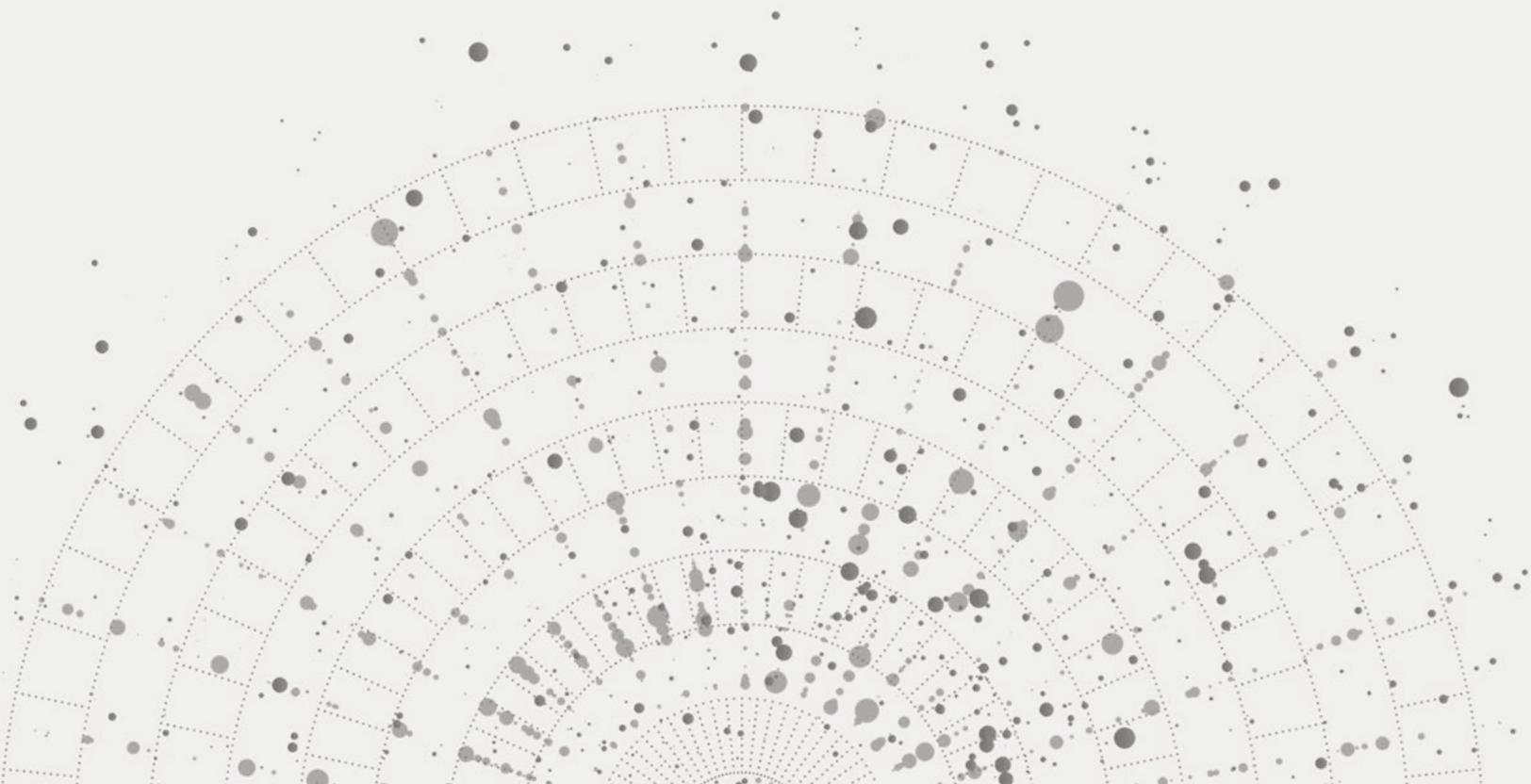
**Presented by:**

NORC at the University of  
Chicago

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**Authors:**

Betsy Broaddus  
David Sterrett  
Mariana Meza Hernandez



## Author Information\*

### **Betsy Broaddus**

Research Associate, Public Affairs and Media Research  
NORC at the University of Chicago  
Email: [broadus-betsy@norc.org](mailto:broadus-betsy@norc.org)

### **David Sterrett**

Principal Research Scientist, Public Affairs and Media Research  
NORC at the University of Chicago  
Email: [sterrett-david@norc.org](mailto:sterrett-david@norc.org)

### **Mariana Meza Hernandez**

Contractor, Public Affairs and Media Research  
NORC at the University of Chicago  
Email: [hernandez-mariana@norc.org](mailto:hernandez-mariana@norc.org)

Data from the Media Insight Project utilized in this study is available here:

<https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Media-Insight-Project-2022-PUF.zip>

Data from the Expanding News Desert database is available upon request here:

<https://usnewsdeserts.cislm.org/>

# Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Keywords .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Literature Review & Hypotheses .....	3
Impacts of local news decline.....	3
Young people & the news media.....	3
What factors influence media consumption? .....	4
What factors influence media attitudes?.....	5
Data.....	6
Media Insight Project Survey.....	6
UNC Expanding News Desert Database.....	7
Measures .....	8
Dependent variables .....	8
Consumption of news:.....	9
Attitudes toward news media:.....	9
Attitudes toward news coverage of political events:.....	9
Independent variable.....	10
Control variables <sup>6</sup> .....	10
Analysis .....	10
Results .....	11
Discussion .....	20
References.....	23
Footnotes .....	28

# List of Figures

**Figure 1.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from local news outlets daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper ..... 13

**Figure 2.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from national news outlets daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper ..... 14

**Figure 3.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from local TV news stations daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper ..... 14

**Figure 4.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from national TV news stations daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper ..... 15

**Figure 5.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of viewing media coverage of January 6 as only slightly or not at all accurate, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper ..... 19

**Figure 6.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of viewing media coverage of 2020 presidential election results as only slightly or not at all accurate, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper..... 19

**Figure 7.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of viewing media coverage of immigrants as only slightly or not at all accurate, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper ... 20

# List of Tables

<b>Table 1.</b>	Distribution of 16 to 40-year-old adults by type of news desert county.....	8
<b>Table 2.</b>	U.S. Census Bureau population counts and distribution of 15 to 39-year-olds by type of news desert county.....	8
<b>Table 3.</b>	Multivariate regression results .....	11
<b>Table 4.</b>	Multivariate regression results .....	12
<b>Table 5.</b>	Multivariate regression results .....	15
<b>Table 6.</b>	Multivariate regression results .....	17
<b>Table 7.</b>	Multivariate regression results .....	18

# Abstract

With more local newspapers shuttering in the last two decades, local news deserts – regions lacking a localized newspaper – have become more common. Does living in a local news desert impact young news consumers’ media habits and attitudes? Utilizing survey data from the 2022 Media Insight Project and the University of North Carolina Expanding News Desert database, this study classifies 16 to 40-year-olds in the U.S. by the number of local newspapers in circulation in their residential county to examine if their level of access to local news influences the news sources they consume, as well as their confidence in and favorability of the press. The findings indicate living in a local news desert correlates with lower news consumption from traditional media sources, but access to local newspapers does not strongly impact overall confidence in the people running the news media. Living in a local news desert does correlate with young news consumers’ perceptions of media accuracy when covering national political events, like the 2020 presidential election and the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. Together, these results highlight the impact of local news deserts on younger generations, providing implications for the future of the local news industry.

# Keywords

Local news deserts, younger generations, local news, media consumption, media attitudes, trust in media

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# Introduction

Local newspapers have struggled to stay afloat in the last two decades. Newspaper circulation and revenue have declined since the late 1990s (Pew Research Center 2021). To make up for this loss, newspapers cut 45% of newsroom staff between 2008 and 2017. However, many shuttered altogether, with more than 2,000 U.S. newspapers closing since 2004 (Sullivan 2020). This phenomenon results in what some scholars call a local news desert – or what the University of North Carolina School of Media & Journalism’s Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media defines 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.” More than 200 counties in the United States are a local news desert and half (1,540) have just one newspaper (Abernathy 2020).

The shrinking local newsroom impacts the quality of regional news and the capacity to meet critical information needs for vulnerable populations (Napoli et al. 2018). Within local news desert counties, the average poverty rate is higher than the overall rate of the United States, the median income is lower, and the percent of residents with a bachelor’s degree or higher is lower (Abernathy 2020). The societal implications of the local news desert traverse beyond the loss of regional news. Large bodies of research document local news decline and its impact on political polarization (Moskowitz 2021, Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway 2018), civic engagement (Rubado & Jennings 2020, Kübler & Goodman 2019, Hayes & Lawless 2018, Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster 2010, Shaker 2014), and government and business accountability (Gao, Lee, & Murphy 2020, Yazaki 2017, Kim, Stice, Stice, & White 2021, Heese, Pérez-Cavazos, & Peter 2022). This study builds upon past research by analyzing whether local news environment alters media diet and attitudes among younger news consumers.

Why does it matter to study young news consumers’ relationship to regional journalism? While readers of local news tend to be older (Barthiel, Grieco, & Shearer 2019), young people still care about localized issues. Several of the most popular news and information topics followed by these younger generations include traffic, transportation, weather, crime and public safety, and schools and education – all unique to an individual’s locality (Media Insight Project 2022). As newspapers continue to shut their doors in an age where media choice has never been higher or confidence in the press lower, understanding the role local journalism plays among younger news consumers opens discussion as the industry continues to be relevant and responsive to its audience.

In order to explore the relationship between young people, news environments, and news habits and attitudes, this study features a nationally representative survey of 16 to 40-year-olds living in the United States combined with a database of active local newspapers by U.S. county. The study explores how local news environment impacts three key areas of media engagement: 1) news consumption from traditional and newer sources, 2) confidence in and favorability toward the news media, and 3) views on the media’s coverage of national political events. The findings from this study provide important takeaways for the journalism industry as it adapts in a changing media landscape.

# Literature Review & Hypotheses

## Impacts of local news decline

While our study seeks to identify how local news impacts media consumption and attitudes, several areas of scholarship explore how the presence and consumption of local news impacts other areas of society. First, local news impacts civic engagement. Previous research documents increasing political polarization through decreases in split-ticket voting in communities that experienced newspaper closures (Moskowitz 2021, Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway 2018). Another area of research explores how the presence of local news in communities increases voter turnout (Rubado & Jennings 2020, Kübler & Goodman 2019, Hayes & Lawless 2018, Min et al. 2020). Other research demonstrates how local news increases political knowledge of a citizenry (Hayes & Lawless 2018, Snyder & Strömberg, 2010, Meeks 2020). Additionally, those who consume more local news or communities with a localized news source exhibit higher levels of community involvement in civic organizations (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster 2010, Shaker 2014).

Second, local newspaper closures result in less government and corporate oversight. Gao, Lee, & Murphy 2020 demonstrate that in communities following a newspaper closure, municipal borrowing costs – and ultimately local taxes – increase, a phenomenon not explained by underlying economic conditions. Similarly, Yazaki 2017 illustrates the relationship between local newspaper presence and government spending, as local public works spending decreases in areas with a larger market share of local newspapers. When it comes to businesses, local newspaper closures and layoffs correspond with nearby firms increasing dividend payouts to investors and increased misconduct in firms, such as penalties and violations at the facility level (Kim, Stice, Stice, & White 2021, Heese, Pérez-Cavazos, & Peter 2022).<sup>1</sup>

## Young people & the news media

Our research builds on a large body of scholarship demonstrating the varying news habits and attitudes among younger populations. Previous findings indicate young people are more likely to avoid the news and find it depressing and not as relevant as it might be to older people (Edgerly 2022, Craft, Ashley, & Maksl 2016). As our study also explores young people and their relationship to traditional media like newspapers, there are significant findings regarding younger populations and the transition from traditional media to newer media.<sup>2</sup> Though research indicates a trend of these younger generations consuming more news from newer media than traditional media (Boulianne & Shehata 2022, Strömbäck, Falasca, & Kruikemeier 2018, Geers 2020), young people are not entirely avoiding the news and some still use, prefer, and have greater trust in traditional media platforms (Schwaiger, Vogler, & Eisenegger 2022, Van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens, & Beentjes 2013). Media industry professionals are particularly concerned about maintaining this traditional news readership among

young people, as misinformation is not only easier to create on these newer social media platforms, but much more likely to proliferate (Allen 2022).

Several studies demonstrate that young peoples' news habits are influenced by their own parents' news consumption (Lindell & Sartoretto, 2018), with one demonstrating parents' news consumption is the most consistent predictor of an adolescents' news habits (Shehata, 2016). Another study demonstrates young people believe the news will incidentally find them, relying on news exposure through social media and their parents (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl 2016). Whether or not the divide regarding news consumption based on socioeconomic status pertains to these younger generations is debatable. Some find that indicators of social status still impact news consumption among young people (Hartley 2018), while others conclude that because younger generations are socialized in a new media environment, factors like educational attainment are no longer pertinent (Geers 2020).

While many researchers study younger populations as a key group to the health of the news industry, most existing scholarship focuses on aforementioned individual-level factors. Our study contributes to this body of work by exploring whether the place-based news environment of young people is also a factor in the news consumption and attitudes.

## What factors influence media consumption?

This paper explores access to localized news as a potential factor influencing media consumption among young people and builds off prior studies demonstrating drivers of news media habits. A large body of work demonstrates political partisanship and ideology continue to be strong predictors of news avoidance, with Republicans being more likely than Democrats to avoid the news (Edgerly 2015). Tyler, Grimmer, & Iyengar 2022 identify a significant segregation between the online news sources used by Democrats and Republicans. Further, Mitchell et al. 2014 identifies little overlap in media diets between liberals and conservatives, with conservatives highly loyal to Fox News for political information and liberals less unified in their media loyalty, citing several news outlets (such as NPR, CNN, MSNBC, and The New York Times) as their main source of political news.

Higher income and socioeconomic status (Edgerly 2022, Bergström, Strömbäck, & Arkhede 2019), as well as educational attainment (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen 2020, Edgerly 2015) are also correlated with higher levels of news consumption. Other scholarship explores measures of social status (distinct from class or socioeconomic measures) and finds a positive relationship with newspaper readership (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007).

Literature also explores age and gender as predictors of news readership. Younger people tend to avoid news more than older people (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen 2020) and preferred sources of news vary by age. Edgerly 2015 identifies those who consume news mostly online tend to be younger, whereas those who consume traditional media like print and television tend to be older. Studies also explore the gender gap in news media consumption, in which women are more likely to avoid the news compared to men (Toff & Palmer 2019, Mak 2023).

Exposure to media sources and subsequent attitudes toward the news media also influence consumption. Individuals who believe that the news is not relevant to their lives or feature topics they are not interested in consume less news (Edgerly 2022). Trust in the news correlates with exposure to traditional and alternative news media sources online (Elvestad, Phillips, & Feuerstein 2017). Other research demonstrates how in a high choice media environment, those predisposed to like news will consume more news, and those who prefer other forms of entertainment will receive less public affairs information (Prior 2007).

Notably, studies analyzing individual media diets – particularly among younger audiences – based on the regional presence of local news are limited, which motivates our study. One study demonstrates that the media sources consumers turn to differs between residents of larger and smaller news markets (Althaus, Cizmar, & Gimpel 2009). Given this previous place-based media consumption analysis and findings that demonstrate the impact of the local news desert phenomenon on individual-level civic engagement behaviors (Moskowitz 2021, Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway 2018, Rubado & Jennings 2020, Kübler & Goodman 2019, Hayes & Lawless 2018, Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster 2010, Shaker 2014), we suspect that individual-level media consumption choices might also correlate with living in a local news desert. These findings provide the basis for *Hypothesis 1 (H1)*.

*(H1): Young audiences (ages 16 to 40) who live in a local news desert, and thus have less access to local newspapers, will consume less news from traditional news media like local and national news outlets and local and national television news.*

## What factors influence media attitudes?

Our study also builds on findings that identify the influences of media attitudes among the public. Partisan and ideological predictors remain a driver of media attitudes (Gronke & Cook 2007, Culver & Lee 2019), as well as income and educational attainment (Gronke & Cook 2007, Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), religiosity (Gronke & Cook 2007), and age (Bucy 2003, Edgerly 2022). Another body of research explores how trust in other institutions – such as government – and interpersonal trust impact an individual's trust in the press (Gronke & Cook 2007, Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, & Steindl 2017, Tsfati & Ariely, 2014).

Literature exploring the impact of media environment on media attitudes is limited. Tsfati & Ariely, 2014 find a positive correlation between exposure to television news and newspapers and trust in the media, while exposure to news on the Internet exhibits a negative correlation with trust in media. This research in particular provides the basis for *Hypothesis 2 (H2)*.

*(H2): Young audiences (ages 16 to 40) who live in a local news desert, and thus have less access to local newspapers, will have less favorable views of and lack confidence in the news media.*

While few studies examine how proximity to local newspapers impacts attitudes toward the media's coverage of political events, survey research demonstrates the public perceives much bias and

inaccuracy in news reporting from both traditional media sources and social media (Gallup & Knight Foundation 2018). However, previous polling also illustrates the public is more likely to trust “the news media they use most often” compared to “the news media” generally when it comes to reporting accurate information (Media Insight Project 2017). Additionally, these younger news consumers feel more positively toward local news media compared to other news sources (Media Insight Project 2022). Given these findings, we suspect younger news consumers’ views of media coverage of national political events might vary according to their local news environment, which we explore through *Hypothesis 3 (H3)*.

*(H3): Young audiences (ages 16 to 40) who live in a local news desert, and thus have less access to local newspapers, will have less trust in the media’s coverage of political events like January 6, the 2020 presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and immigrants in the United States.*

## Data

### Media Insight Project Survey

Data from this study come from an online survey conducted by the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The survey, funded by the American Press Institute, was conducted from May 18 through June 8, 2022, and features completed interviews with 5,975 people ages 16 to 40 representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Data were collected using both probability and non-probability sample sources. The 20-minute survey asked respondents about their views, opinions, and habits about news media and news consumption.

The probability sample source is the AmeriSpeak® Panel, NORC’s probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, nonzero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). Adult panel members ages 18 to 40 were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,947 completed the survey – 1,941 via the web and 6 via telephone. Teen panel members age 16 to 17 were drawn from AmeriSpeak Teen, and 202 completed the survey – 200 via the web and 2 via telephone. Interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish, depending on respondent preference. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive (\$3) for completing the survey. The final stage completion rate is 24 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 24 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 77.4 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 3.5 percent.

Lucid provided 3,826 non-probability interviews with people age 16-40. The non-probability sample was derived based on quotas related to age, race and ethnicity, gender, and education. Interviews were conducted in English and via the web only. For panel recruitment, Lucid uses invitations of all types including email invitations, phone alerts, banners, and messaging on panel community sites to include people with a diversity of motivations to take part in research.

To incorporate the nonprobability sample, NORC used TrueNorth calibration, an innovative hybrid calibration approach developed at NORC based on small area estimation methods in order to explicitly account for potential bias associated with the nonprobability sample. The purpose of TrueNorth calibration is to adjust the weights for the nonprobability sample to bring weighted distributions of the nonprobability sample in line with the population distribution for characteristics correlated with the survey variables. Such calibration adjustments help to reduce potential bias, yielding more accurate population estimates.

The weighted AmeriSpeak sample and the calibrated nonprobability sample were used to develop a small area model to support domain-level estimates, where the domains were defined by race/ethnicity, age, and gender. The overall margin of sampling error for the combined sample is +/- 1.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect.

## UNC Expanding News Desert Database

This study classifies the number of local newspapers in U.S. counties utilizing The Expanding News Desert database maintained by the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The database details all U.S. local newspapers in circulation as of 2020, as well as their location by county and state. The database compiles newspaper data from the Editor & Publisher DataBook (published 2004-2017) and E&P data accessed online for the years 2016-2019, as well as proprietary information collected and provided by the consulting firm BIA/Kelsey for the years 2004 and 2014. Researchers then verified these data by obtaining information from 55 state, regional and national press associations, conducting independent online research, ascertaining the content of newspapers by checking websites and print versions, and interviewing editors and publishers when appropriate. The 2020 database includes 6,736 U.S. newspapers (1,260 dailies and 5,476 weeklies). The database identifies about 200 U.S. counties that do not have a local newspaper (and thus are a local news desert). About half of all U.S. counties (1,540) only have one local newspaper, while 1,403 counties have more than one.

Utilizing respondent zip codes, we combine the UNC database with the Media Insight Project survey data. While the original Media Insight Project study sample included 5,975 cases, the combined dataset excludes 75 respondents with missing county data. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the sample of 16 to 40-year-old respondents across our county classifications.

**Table 1.** Distribution of 16 to 40-year-old adults by type of news desert county

	N	Percent
<b>Young Americans (16-40)</b>	5,900	
<b>Live in a news desert (no local newspaper in county)</b>	113	2%
<b>One local newspaper in county</b>	1,170	19%
<b>More than one local newspaper in county</b>	4,617	79%

To assess the representativeness of the Media Insight Project study sample, we collected county population counts from the 2022 U.S. Census Bureau for 15 to 39-year-olds living in each of our county classifications.<sup>3</sup> Table 2 demonstrates the population distribution of counties represented in our sample compared to all U.S. counties.

**Table 2.** U.S. Census Bureau population counts and distribution of 15 to 39-year-olds by type of news desert county

	Counties represented in study sample		All U.S. counties	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
<b>Young Americans (15-39)</b>	99,174,506		110,807,907	
<b>Live in a news desert (no local newspaper in county)</b>	1,672,553	2%	1,994,414	2%
<b>One local newspaper in county</b>	13,546,640	14%	19,191,682	17%
<b>More than one local newspaper in county</b>	83,955,313	85%	89,621,811	81%

## Measures

Complete question wordings and descriptive statistics for the measures can be found online at [https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/MIP\\_The-Young-News-Consumer\\_Topline-1.pdf](https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/MIP_The-Young-News-Consumer_Topline-1.pdf)

## Dependent variables

We group dependent variables into three broad categories: 1) consumption of news, 2) attitudes toward news media, and 3) attitudes toward news coverage of political events.

## Consumption of news:

Respondents were asked how many hours they spent online in a typical day, with response options: “I do not spend any time online” (coded 1), “Less than 2 hours” (coded 2), “2 hours to 4 hours” (coded 3), “5 to 8 hours” (coded 4), “9 to 12 hours” (coded 5), “13 to 19 hours” (coded 6), and “20 or more hours” (coded 7). Second, respondents were asked how often they get news and information from social media platforms. For this study, we focus on the responses specific to how often they received news and information from Facebook (as it was the most popular social media platform for daily news consumption among this population),<sup>4</sup> with response options: “Never” (coded 1), “Less than once a week” (coded 2), “Once a week” (coded 3), “Several times a week” (coded 4), “Once a day” (coded 5), “Several times a day” (coded 6), and “Nearly constantly throughout the day” (coded 7). Third, a sum variable is created from responses to all the items measuring how frequently a respondent receives news from social media and traditional news sources to assess how many news sources they consume on a weekly basis. Response options were: “Never” (coded 1), “Less than once a week” (coded 2), “Once a week” (coded 3), “Several times a week” (coded 4), “Once a day” (coded 5), “Several times a day” (coded 6), and “Nearly constantly throughout the day” (coded 7).<sup>5</sup> Fourth, we asked respondents how often they get news and information from four different traditional media sources: 1) Local news outlets, including a newspaper or its website or app 2) National news outlets, including a newspaper or its website or app 3) Local TV news stations or their websites or apps and 4) National TV news stations or their websites or apps. Response options were: “Never” (coded 1), “Less than once a week” (coded 2), “Once a week” (coded 3), “Several times a week” (coded 4), “Once a day” (coded 5), “Several times a day” (coded 6), and “Nearly constantly throughout the day” (coded 7).

## Attitudes toward news media:

Respondents were asked if they had a positive or negative view of different types of media sources: 1) National news outlets 2) Local news outlets 3) News media as a whole and 4) Individual journalists you may follow online or through newsletters. Response options were: “Very negative” (coded 1), “Somewhat negative” (coded 2), “Neither positive nor negative” (coded 3), “Somewhat positive” (coded 4), and “Very positive” (coded 5). Respondents were also asked how much confidence they had in the people running: 1) National news media 2) Local news media 3) Social media. Response options were: “Hardly any confidence at all” (coded 1), “Only some confidence” (coded 2), and “A great deal of confidence” (coded 3).

## Attitudes toward news coverage of political events:

Respondents were asked how accurately they thought news organizations portray each of the following topics: 1) What happened during the January 6 attack of the U.S. Capitol 2) The results of the 2020 presidential election 3) The number of COVID-related deaths in the U.S. and 4) Immigrants. Response options were: “Not at all accurately” (coded 1), “Slightly accurately” (coded 2), “Moderately accurately” (coded 3), “Very accurately” (coded 4), and “Completely accurately” (coded 5).

## Independent variable

News desert county – Based on the amount of newspapers in a respondent’s residential county, cases are classified as “News desert, or 0 local newspapers in county” (coded 1), “Only one local newspaper in county” (coded 2), and “More than one local newspaper in county” (coded 3). This measure only includes local newspapers, not online-only local news, local television news, or local radio stations.

## Control variables<sup>6</sup>

**Age** – Respondents were categorized into three categories, Gen Z for respondents ages 16 to 24, Younger Millennials for respondents ages 25 to 31, and Older Millennials for respondents ages 32 to 40. Dummy variables were used for Gen Z, Younger Millennials, and Older Millennials, with Older Millennials as the reference group.

**Race** – Respondents were categorized as non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, or other. Dummy variables were used for non-Hispanic black, Hispanic, and other with non-Hispanic white as the reference group.

**Educational attainment** – Coded 1 for having no high school degree, coded 2 for having a high school degree or equivalent, coded 3 for having some college education, coded 4 for having a bachelor’s degree, and coded 5 for having a postgraduate or professional degree.

**Gender** – Coded 1 for male and 0 for female.

**Political partisanship** – Dummy variables were used for Democrat (including those who lean Democrat), Republican (including those who lean Republican), and independent, with independent as the reference group.

## Analysis

The analysis explores the impact of living in a local news desert, living in a county with just one local newspaper, or living in a county with more than one newspaper on media consumption habits and attitudes toward the news. We run logistic regression models with our dependent variables, independent news desert county variable, and control variables to examine the relationship between our survey items and our news desert measure, while controlling for age, race and ethnicity, education, gender, and political partisanship. Respondents who answer “Don’t know,” skip, or refuse to answer the question are dropped from the regression. Among key significant variables, predicted probability analysis is conducted to examine the extent and direction of any significant differences. All analysis is conducted in STATA 16.

## Results

When controlling for age, race or ethnicity, education, gender, and political ideology, the findings illustrate the number of local newspapers in an individual's county correlates with the amount of media they consume from traditional sources like local and national newspapers or television, while not affecting how much news they consume on Facebook or how many hours they spend online (*H1*). Findings indicate more minimal effects of local newspaper access on favorability toward and confidence in the news media (*H2*). The results also indicate a significant relationship between local newspaper access and attitudes toward media coverage of certain events, but not others (*H3*).<sup>7</sup>

Regarding our measures of news consumption, we do not observe a relationship between our news desert measure and the number of hours a respondent spends online ( $b=0.07$ ,  $p=0.181$ ) or how frequently the respondent receives news and information from Facebook ( $b=-0.06$ ,  $p=0.200$ ). However, we do observe a significant positive relationship between our news desert measure and the number of news sources a respondent consumes on a weekly basis ( $b=0.11$ ,  $p=0.021$ ). On average, those living in news desert counties or counties with only one newspaper consume news from 5.9 sources on a weekly basis and those living in counties with more than one newspaper utilize 6.6 news sources each week. Furthermore, we observe a significant positive relationship between the number of local newspapers in a respondent's county and how often they consume news from local news outlets ( $b=0.17$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), national news outlets ( $b=0.16$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), local TV news stations ( $b=0.13$ ,  $p=0.009$ ), and national TV news stations ( $b=0.15$ ,  $p=0.002$ ).

Previous scholarship indicates demographics such as political ideology (Edgerly 2015, Edgerly 2022, Tyler, Grimmer, & Iyengar 2022, Mitchell et al. 2014) age (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen 2020, Edgerly 2015), gender (Toff & Palmer 2019, Mak 2023), and educational attainment (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen 2020, Edgerly 2015) are significant predictors of media consumption habits, which is also reflected in our model results. While controlling for these other demographic characteristics, we also find our news desert measure is significant, demonstrating support for *H1*.

**Table 3.** Multivariate regression results

Variable	Hours spent online each day	Frequency of consuming news from Facebook	Amount of news sources consumed on a weekly basis
News desert	0.07 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	0.11 (0.05)*
Gen Z	0.23 (0.06)***	-0.56 (0.06)***	0.13 (0.05)*
Young Millennial	0.25 (0.06)***	-0.05 (0.06)	0.09 (0.06)
Hispanic	0.02 (0.06)	-0.16 (0.06)*	0.32 (0.06)***

Variable	Hours spent online each day	Frequency of consuming news from Facebook	Amount of news sources consumed on a weekly basis
Black	0.22 (0.07)**	0.25 (0.07)***	0.67 (0.07)***
Other race	0.24 (0.08)**	-0.27 (0.08)**	0.18 (0.08)*
Education	0.06 (0.02)**	-0.03 (0.02)	0.1 (0.02)***
Male	0.11 (0.05)*	-0.38 (0.05)***	0.27 (0.05)***
Democrat	0.23 (0.06)***	0.05 (0.06)	0.56 (0.06)***
Republican	-0.02 (0.07)	0.23 (0.06)***	0.5 (0.06)***
<i>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.005	0.01	0.01
<i>N</i>	5,896	5,861	5,900

\*\*\*=p<0.001; \*\*=p<0.01, \*=p<0.05; +=p<0.1

**Table 4.** Multivariate regression results

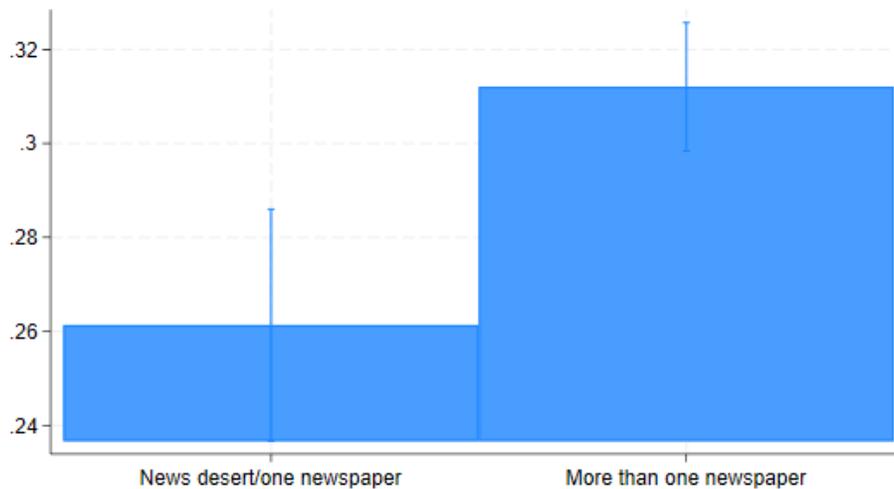
Variable	Frequency of consuming news from local news outlets	Frequency of consuming news from national news outlets	Frequency of consuming news from local TV news stations	Frequency of consuming news from national TV news stations
News desert	0.17 (0.05)**	0.16 (0.05)**	0.13 (0.05)**	0.15 (0.05)**
Gen Z	-0.53 (0.06)***	-0.45 (0.06)***	-0.49 (0.06)***	-0.51 (0.06)***
Young Millennial	-0.27 (0.06)***	-0.16 (0.06)**	-0.24 (0.06)***	-0.25 (0.06)***
Hispanic	0.25 (0.06)***	0.07 (0.06)	0.26 (0.06)***	0.15 (0.06)*
Black	0.47 (0.07)***	0.3 (0.07)***	0.45 (0.07)***	0.32 (0.07)***
Other race	0.24 (0.08)**	0.16 (0.08)*	0.15 (0.08)+	0.1 (0.08)
Education	0.1 (0.02)***	0.14 (0.02)***	0.06 (0.02)*	0.1 (0.02)***
Male	0.15 (0.05)**	0.33 (0.05)***	0.11 (0.05)*	0.29 (0.05)***
Democrat	0.52 (0.06)***	0.69 (0.06)***	0.51 (0.06)***	0.63 (0.06)***

Variable	Frequency of consuming news from local news outlets	Frequency of consuming news from national news outlets	Frequency of consuming news from local TV news stations	Frequency of consuming news from national TV news stations
Republican	0.44 (0.06)***	0.49 (0.07)***	0.5 (0.06)***	0.5 (0.06)***
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02
N	5,871	5,876	5,871	5,875

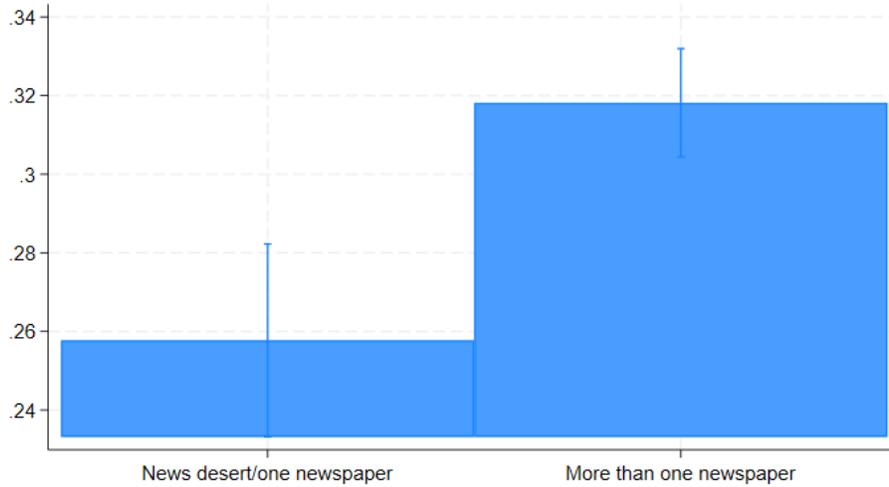
\*\*\*=p<0.001; \*\*=p<0.01, \*=p<0.05; +=p<0.1

To contextualize these results further, predicted probability analysis finds that those living in local news desert counties or counties with only one local newspaper have a lower overall probability of consuming news each day from local news outlets, national news outlets, local TV news stations, and national TV news stations compared to those living in counties with more than one local newspaper. Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4 display the results of the predicted probability analysis with these dependent variables, as well as 95% confidence intervals for each margin.

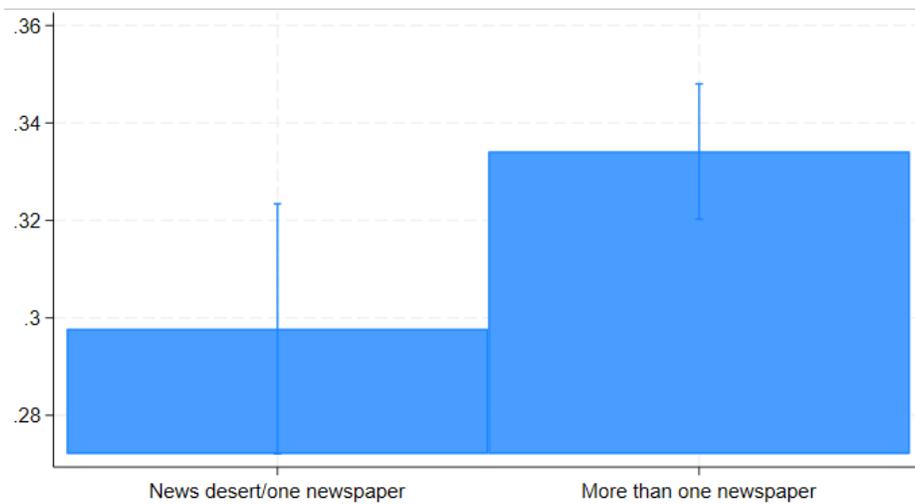
**Figure 1.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from local news outlets daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



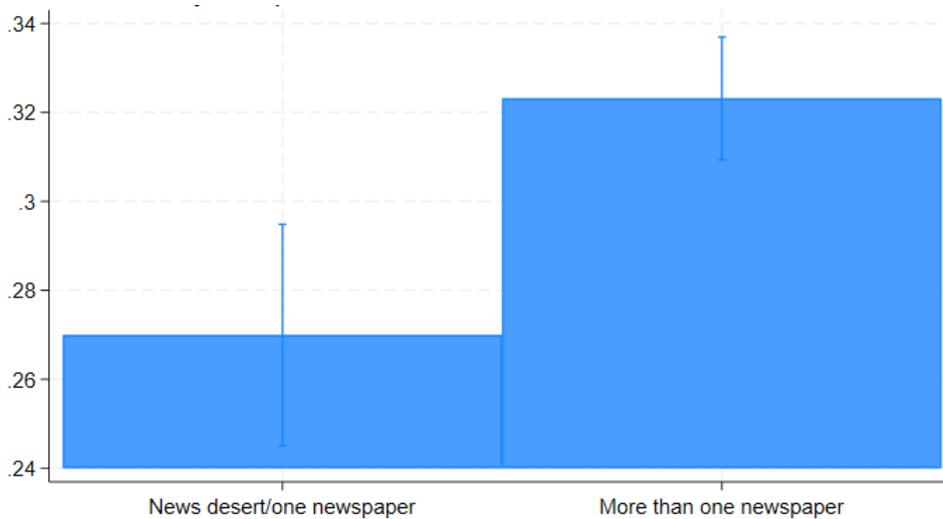
**Figure 2.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from national news outlets daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



**Figure 3.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from local TV news stations daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



**Figure 4.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of consuming news from national TV news stations daily, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



For our results on media attitudes, we observe a positive relationship between our news desert measure and favorability toward national news outlets ( $b=0.12$ ,  $p=0.021$ ). Access to local newspapers also has a moderate positive relationship with favorability toward local news outlets ( $b=0.09$ ,  $p=0.093$ ). However, the number of local newspapers in a respondent’s county does not impact favorability toward the news media as a whole ( $b=0.03$ ,  $p=0.557$ ) or favorability toward individual journalists the respondent might follow ( $b=0.03$ ,  $p=0.526$ ).

**Table 5.** Multivariate regression results

Variable	Favorability toward national news outlets	Favorability toward local news outlets	Favorability toward news media as a whole	Favorability toward individual journalists
News desert	0.12 (0.05)*	0.09 (0.05)+	0.03 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)
Gen Z	0.01 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.06)*	0.00 (0.06)
Young Millennial	-0.19 (0.06)**	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.06)	0.03 (0.06)
Hispanic	0.21 (0.06)**	-0.12 (0.06)+	0.18 (0.06)**	0.06 (0.06)
Black	0.37 (0.07)***	-0.13 (0.08)+	0.28 (0.07)***	-0.13 (0.08)
Other race	0.08 (0.08)	-0.18 (0.08)*	0.01 (0.08)	-0.11 (0.08)

Variable	Favorability toward national news outlets	Favorability toward local news outlets	Favorability toward news media as a whole	Favorability toward individual journalists
Education	0.03 (0.02)	0.1 (0.02)***	0.00 (0.02)	0.12 (0.02)***
Male	-0.01 (0.05)	0.19 (0.05)***	0.01 (0.05)	0.09 (0.05)+
Democrat	0.55 (0.06)***	0.56 (0.06)***	0.39 (0.06)***	0.48 (0.06)***
Republican	-0.06 (0.07)	0.14 (0.07)*	-0.22 (0.07)**	0.01 (0.07)
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
N	5,814	5,805	5,802	5,783

\*\*\*=p<0.001; \*\*=p<0.01, \*=p<0.05; +=p<0.1

Results from the models containing the confidence in media variables do not indicate a relationship between the local news desert measure and confidence in the people running national news media (b=0.08, p=0.116) or local news media (b=0.03, p=0.583). The amount of local newspapers in one's county has a moderate positive relationship with the amount of confidence placed in the people running social media (b=0.1, p=0.055).

Previous literature finds political ideology as a strong predictor of media attitudes (Gronke & Cook 2007, Culver & Lee 2019), which we find consistently reflected in our models measuring favorability and confidence toward media institutions. Other research identifies educational attainment as a significant predictor of media attitudes (Gronke & Cook 2007, Tsfati & Ariely, 2014), which our models also support, particularly when it comes to confidence in all the media institutions asked of respondents on the survey and favorability toward local news outlets and individual journalists. Past studies also find age as a significant predictor of attitudes toward the news media (Bucy 2003, Edgerly 2022), which our models containing the Gen Z and Young Millennial age groups do support, although less consistently.

Taken together, the findings illustrate living in a local news desert produces weak results when it comes to favorability toward the news media and there is little evidence living in a local news desert impacts the amount of confidence respondents place in media institutions (H2).

**Table 6.** Multivariate regression results

Variable	Confidence in people running national news media	Confidence in people running local news media	Confidence in people running social media
News desert	0.08 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.1 (0.05)+
Gen Z	0.11 (0.06)+	0.03 (0.06)	0.22 (0.06)***
Young Millennial	-0.18 (0.06)**	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)
Hispanic	0.06 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	0.28 (0.07)***
Black	0.12 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.08)	0.46 (0.08)***
Other race	0.15 (0.08)+	-0.03 (0.08)	0.00 (0.08)
Education	0.07 (0.02)**	0.05 (0.02)*	0.04 (0.02)+
Male	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.05)	-0.11 (0.05)*
Democrat	0.59 (0.06)***	0.53 (0.06)***	0.21 (0.06)**
Republican	-0.16 (0.07)*	0.08 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)
<i>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.02	0.001	0.01
<i>N</i>	5,814	5,814	5,822

\*\*\*=p<0.001; \*\*=p<0.01, \*=p<0.05; +=p<0.1

For the variables measuring how accurately respondents find media coverage of various events, we observe a positive relationship between the news desert measure and how accurately the media covers each of the topics we chose to explore: the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol ( $b=0.13$ ,  $p=0.011$ ), the 2020 presidential election results ( $b=0.16$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), and the number of COVID-19-related deaths in the United States ( $b=0.09$ ,  $p=0.095$ ). The results indicate a negative significant relationship between the news desert measure and how accurately the media portrays immigrants ( $b=-0.11$ ,  $p=0.033$ ). These results demonstrate support for *H3*. Given views toward these items are highly partisan, it is important to note that the news desert measure is significant even when controlling for political ideology.

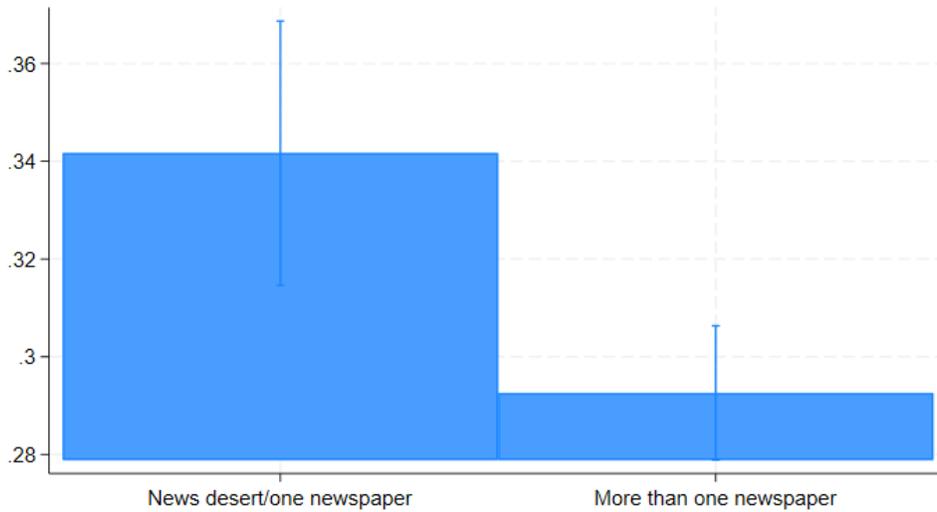
**Table 7.** Multivariate regression results

Variable	News media cover January 6 accurately	News media cover 2020 election results accurately	News media cover COVID-19-related deaths accurately	News media cover immigrants accurately
News desert	0.13 (0.05)*	0.16 (0.05)**	0.09 (0.05)+	-0.11 (0.05)*
Gen Z	0.14 (0.06)*	0.04 (0.06)	0.12 (0.06)*	0.04 (0.06)
Young Millennial	0.14 (0.06)*	0.03 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.00 (0.06)
Hispanic	0.1 (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)
Black	0.29 (0.08)***	0.24 (0.07)**	0.19 (0.07)*	-0.21 (0.08)**
Other race	0.18 (0.08)*	0.17 (0.08)*	0.16 (0.08)*	-0.19 (0.08)*
Education	0.11 (0.02)***	0.17 (0.02)***	0.12 (0.02)***	-0.03 (0.02)
Male	0.3 (0.05)***	0.33 (0.05)***	0.3 (0.05)***	-0.28 (0.05)***
Democrat	0.86 (0.06)***	1.04 (0.06)***	0.84 (0.06)***	-0.25 (0.06)***
Republican	-0.32 (0.07)***	-0.43 (0.07)***	-0.24 (0.07)***	-0.19 (0.07)**
<i>Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.005
<i>N</i>	5,829	5,841	5,838	5,816

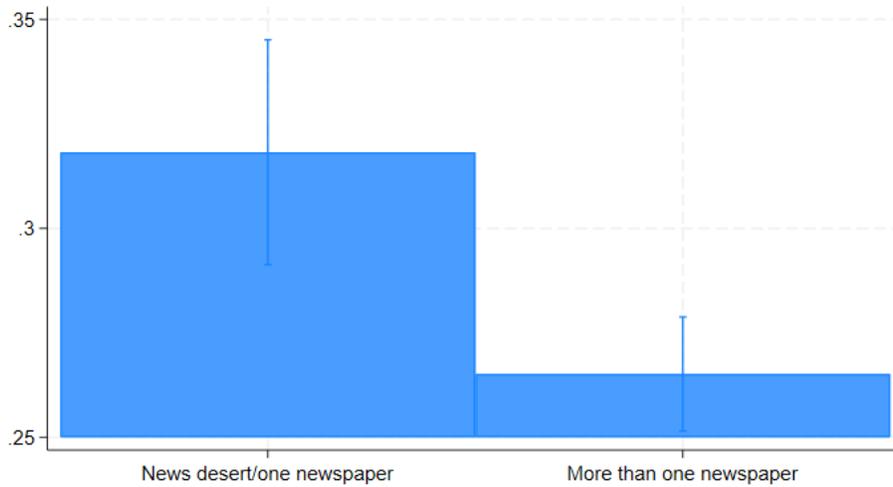
\*\*\*=p<0.001; \*\*=p<0.01, \*=p<0.05; +=p<0.1

Predicted probability analysis among the variables with the strongest significant differences finds that those living in local news desert counties or counties with only one local newspaper have a higher overall probability of finding media coverage of January 6 and the 2020 presidential election results as not at all or only slightly accurate compared to those living in counties with more than one newspaper. Figure 5 and Figure 6 display these results along with 95% confidence intervals for each margin. When it comes to the media's coverage of immigrants, we see the reverse – those living in counties with more than one newspaper have a higher overall probability of finding the media coverage of immigrants as not at all or only slightly accurate compared to those living in counties with fewer local newspapers. Figure 7 displays these predicted probability margins along with 95% confidence intervals.

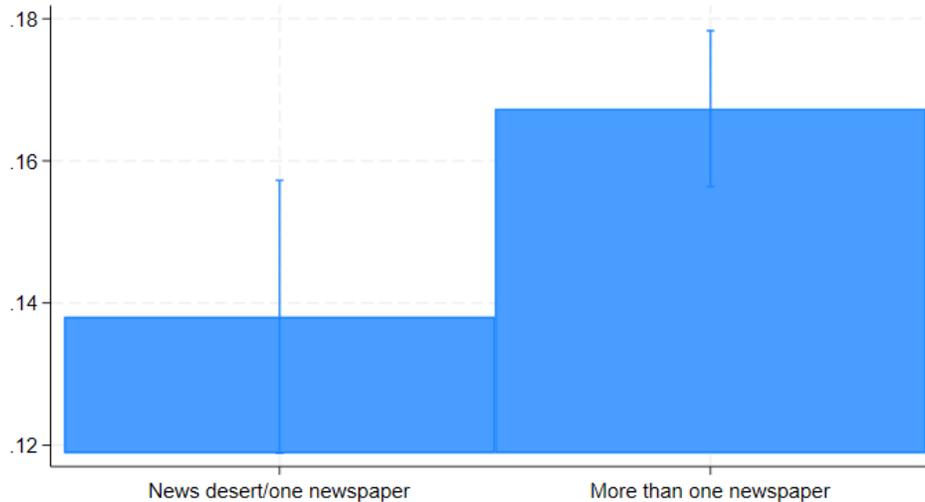
**Figure 5.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of viewing media coverage of January 6 as only slightly or not at all accurate, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



**Figure 6.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of viewing media coverage of 2020 presidential election results as only slightly or not at all accurate, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



**Figure 7.** Predicted probability with 95% confidence intervals of viewing media coverage of immigrants as only slightly or not at all accurate, respondents living in news desert counties/counties with only one newspaper vs. counties with more than one newspaper



## Discussion

Since local newspaper revenue has declined and more newspapers continue to shut their doors, journalists and academics alike have sounded the alarm. How will communities' critical information needs be met? Does this further divide the country on the political spectrum? Will this contribute to the already eroding trust in the press? While previous research indicates impacts of local news decline in the public and private sector, and a breadth of explanations exist for why certain individuals consume media and the attitudes they hold toward it, this study focused on identifying if the shrinking and defunct local newspaper phenomenon is also part of the equation. In particular, this study goes further and asks if local media environment influences these behaviors and attitudes among the youngest generations of news consumers as they develop their media habits.

First, findings indicate that access to local newspapers among 16 to 40-year-olds does not affect the amount of time they spend online or consuming news from social media like Facebook. There is no doubt this age group is universally online and connected – The Media Insight Project survey found 71% of this cohort receive news from social media at least daily and 91% do so weekly. Over half spend at least 5 to 8 hours a day online (Media Insight Project 2022).

Living in a county with fewer local newspapers correlates with less news consumption from traditional media sources like local and national newspapers and local and national TV news. We also see a negative correlation between living in a county with fewer newspapers and the amount of overall news sources consumed on a weekly basis. Previous scholarship demonstrates a relationship between news consumption and several demographic factors like political ideology (Edgerly 2015, Edgerly 2022,

Tyler, Grimmer, & Iyengar 2022, Mitchell et al. 2014) age (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen 2020, Edgerly 2015), gender (Toff & Palmer 2019, Mak 2023), socioeconomic status (Edgerly 2022, Bergström, Strömbäck, & Arkhede 2019), and educational attainment (Karlsen, Beyer, & Steen-Johnsen 2020, Edgerly 2015), among others. Our findings reflect these claims, and also demonstrate that when holding all of these other demographic characteristics constant, regional proximity to a local newspaper is also a factor. Although these young people are not solely consuming news from traditional sources like local newspapers anymore, they will utilize these sources if given access.

Our findings also demonstrate a complicated portrait of local news exposure and its impact on media attitudes. Largely, this age group does not hold positive opinions toward the news media. Younger adults tend to trust the news media less than older adults (Media Insight Project 2018) and only 26% of 16 to 40-year-olds feel positively toward national news outlets, 23% toward news media as a whole, and 31% toward individual journalists they might follow. While more feel positively toward local news outlets (35%), this figure is still low. When it comes to confidence in the news media, less than a quarter of 16 to 40-year-olds have a great deal of confidence in the people running national news, local news, and social media (Media Insight Project 2022). Previous research might lead one to suppose that proximity and exposure to local newspapers would increase favorability of local journalism (Tsfati & Ariely 2014), though our findings demonstrate only a weak relationship between access to local news and positive feelings toward news media, and confidence in local news media remains unaffected. Thus, even though these younger audiences might have access to a local newspaper, they do not hold dramatically different feelings of favorability or confidence in the institution itself. Journalist Amanda Ripley concludes that while local news is among the more trusted news media by the public, “the trust that remains for [local news] is brittle,” particularly among younger viewers (Ripley 2021). The message for the local news industry is clear – merely existing in a community is not enough and more must be done to gain confidence from younger audiences.

Notably, while effects on overall attitudes toward the media appear minimal, we observe a relationship between local news environment and young individuals’ assessments of media coverage of topics like January 6 and the 2020 presidential election results. Living in a local news desert or a county with only one newspaper correlates with grading the media’s coverage of these events as inaccurate. Though political ideology exhibits a strong relationship with these attitudes (with Republicans being more likely to find the media’s coverage of both events inaccurate), we find whether or not an individual has access to a local newspaper in their residential county also correlates with their perception of media coverage. This supports prior findings that identify how loss of local news media increases political polarization (Moskowitz 2021, Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway 2018). Going forward, researchers should continue to explore the perceived reliability of a news story from a local news outlet compared to a similar story from national news or social media, as well as if the phenomenon of local news being more reliable holds across different subgroups (particularly among partisans). Further analysis should also be conducted to explore the sources people living in news deserts turn to when they do not have access to a localized newspaper. Moreover, is the local news desert phenomenon driving these younger populations to consume information from increasingly biased sources?

Lastly, a limitation of this analysis lies in our classification of local news desert counties. While these county classifications are determined by the amount of newspapers in a given U.S. county, it is important to note that the reach of this information is not limited by geographic scope – namely, information from a local newspaper in one county could reach a nearby county that is classified as a local news desert. Local news desert counties could also have access to other sources of localized news other than newspapers, like local television, radio, or online-only sources. Future research should continue to refine the definition of a local news desert, perhaps transitioning to a continuous measure that classifies the distance a respondent lives from its closest active local newspaper, creating a more exact measure of one’s isolation from a localized news source.

Taken together, this study identifies that local newspapers are part of the news diet of young people – when available – within their high-choice media environment. Yet proximity to local news media does not guarantee higher levels of trust or favor in the institution. As philanthropy toward local media organizations continues to rise (Media Impact Funders, Lenfest Institute, NORC at the University of Chicago 2023), it is important for those funders and journalists in the industry to identify the uphill battle they face in courting not only readership but also trust with the newest generation of news consumers. To make these investments worthwhile, business as usual may not be the winning strategy. Furthermore, the loss of local media requires these younger news consumers rely on other sources, such as Facebook, for their information on current affairs. Should this continue, we might expect further division and disengagement within and between communities.

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# Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Heese, Pérez-Cavazos, & Peter 2022 also pair the UNC database of local newspapers with county-level firm data in their analysis.

<sup>2</sup> For our analytical purposes, “traditional media” refers to sources like local and national news outlets, as well as local or national TV news stations, including their websites, apps, or physical copies in the case of news outlets. “Newer media” refers to sources often identified as social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, or Instagram.

<sup>3</sup> We could not obtain the population counts for the exact age range of our study – 16 to 40 – due to the categories the U.S. Census Bureau collapses their age-based data.

<sup>4</sup> Survey results found 40% of adults ages 16 to 40 received news and information from Facebook at least daily. 37% said the same for YouTube, 34% Instagram, 29% TikTok, 24% Snapchat, 23% Twitter, 16% Reddit, 12% LinkedIn, 11% Twitch, 10% Nextdoor.

<sup>5</sup> This includes data from questions measuring how often a respondent receives news from each of the following: Local news outlets including a newspaper or its website or app, National news outlets including a newspaper or its website or app, Local TV news stations or their websites or apps, National TV news stations or their websites or apps, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitch, YouTube, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Nextdoor.

<sup>6</sup> Researchers excluded urbanicity from the control variables due to concerns about both multicollinearity of a respondent’s self-identified urbanicity and our news desert county independent variable as well as small sample sizes for the various types of communities within news desert. There were only 28 interviews with people living in an urban area that is a news desert and only 35 interviews with those living in a news desert in a rural region. As a robustness check, the models were run with dummy variables of urban, suburban, and rural (with rural as the reference group), in addition to our news desert measure and other control variables. There were very few significant changes in the key results when including urbanicity in the model. Researchers also excluded income from the control variables due to concerns about its reliability as a control measure. An assessment by the U.S. Census demonstrates that national weighted survey estimates of income exhibit high levels of inaccuracy compared to independent benchmarks, as well as considerable levels of nonresponse. Another assessment identifies the inconsistencies caused by treating socioeconomic status as a solely causal agent, as it is often a variable that can have "a reciprocal or circular relationship of cause and effect upon one another" Given these limitations for survey measurement of and controlling for income and the strong positive correlation between income and educational attainment we decided to only include education as the socioeconomic measure in our models. There are minimal significant changes in the key results when including income in the model.

<sup>7</sup> When adding urbanicity in the models, the only changes in the effects of the news desert variable is decrease in significance in the frequency of consuming news from local TV news stations ( $p=0.009$  in model without urbanicity,  $p=0.133$  with), favorability toward national news outlets ( $p=0.021$  in model without urbanicity,  $0.125$  in model with), favorability toward local news outlets ( $p=0.093$  in model without urbanicity,  $p=0.203$  in model with), confidence in people running social media ( $p=0.055$  in model without urbanicity,  $p=0.211$  in model with), news media cover January 6 accurately ( $p=0.011$  in model without urbanicity,  $p=0.120$  in model with), news media cover COVID-19-related U.S. deaths accurately ( $p=0.095$  in model without urbanicity,  $0.428$  in model with), and news media cover immigrants accurately ( $p=0.033$  in model without urbanicity,  $p=0.279$  in model with).