When a Small Market Newspaper Closes: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Newspapers once were required reading for individuals who wished to gain new information about the world around them. Information behaviour scholars linked newspaper reading to passive acts of acquiring and acclimating new information that later helped individuals expand their perspective, solve problems, and feel a sense of connection with their community. However, shifting information consumption habits, digital communication technology, and the steady growth of capitalistic news conglomerates have led to thousands of newspapers closing since the dawn of the 21st century. Many small and rural communities have lost their only news outlet. Research on the closures of newspapers has raised concerns about the political and social implications. At the same time, newspapers have been accused of legitimizing power structures and social hierarchy, and some see their demise as an opportunity to create new information structures that better reflect their communities. Libraries may be able to play a role in filling the information void that is created when a newspaper closes in a small community. Still, there is a need for broader research to understand the wider implications of newspaper closures and the role libraries can play in the wake of their closures.

Keywords: newspapers; newspaper closure; local media; civic engagement; local politics

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Introduction

In the last 20 years, more than 2,000 newspapers have closed in Canada and the United States. The bulk of those newspapers are in small and rural communities, often where no other news media exists. In those communities, reporting that once reflected communities back unto themselves, that covered local politics, crime, sports, and community events, no longer exists. Journalism, which has frequently labelled itself the watchdog of democracy, holding the powerful to account, becomes non-existent. Study after study about the impact of newspaper closures reveals the adverse political and social implications. When there is no longer a newspaper in a community, residents are less likely to vote (Shaker, 2014), municipal spending is higher (Ali et al., 2017), political polarization increases (Darr et al., 2018), and awareness about local political matters dwindles (Hess, 2015). Similarly, newspaper readership has also been tied to increased volunteerism, participation in community organizations, and trust among neighbours (Putnam, 2000). In sum, the loss of a newspaper to connect individuals to one another may also erode a community's social fabric.

Newspaper closures are of particular significance in small and rural communities where they are often the only source of regularly updated information. A newspaper closure can create an information void that media researchers have called a news desert—a geographic area without a local news source (Abernathy, 2018; Napoli et al., 2017). Already, some 3.2 million people in the United States live in counties without a local newspaper (Abernathy, 2018), while comparable data has not yet been recorded in Canada. There is concern that the resulting community information gaps may have broad repercussions for the social and political well-being of individuals, communities,

and nations. Information behaviour scholars highlight that newspapers supply individuals with information that aids in everyday decision making (Savolainen, 1995). This literature review highlights concerns that emerge after information gaps appear in communities, with a close eye on newspaper closures. Further, this review looks at alternative models that could fill informational voids and highlights roles the public library could play when a newspaper closes. While there is more investigation required related to the closure of newspapers, the rise of alternate news production models, and the role of libraries, this article will demonstrate why the closure of newspapers is a development of which information professionals and librarians must take note. First, though, we must understand why the newspaper continues to have significance in the lives of individuals and communities.

The Newspaper's Role in the Social Life of a Community

At the turn of the 21st century, the newspaper played a central role in delivering up-to-date information to individuals and strengthening social bonds in North American communities. The newspaper, Anderson (2016) states, helped individuals make sense of their place in the world and understand changes to the world beyond their own horizon. Local newspapers also created common points of reference within their communities and enabled individuals to craft a shared identity linked to a specific place (Anderson, 2016). By publishing news that informed community identity, certain values and norms were reinforced, and beliefs about a community were established and re-emphasized (Ali et al., 2017; Anderson, 2016; Smethers et al., 2007). Despite the availability of online information sources in the digital age, a 2012 Pew Research Center survey found that the primary way individuals over age 40 acquired information about

their community was through the local newspaper and television news station. The report further found that the smaller the community size, the more reliant individuals were on newspapers to provide information about local matters (Pew Research Center, 2012). Other research studies in the past 20 years have illustrated the continued role newspapers have in creating and maintaining social connections (Ali et al., 2017; Richards, 2013) and cultivating civic pride (Smethers et al., 2007). As such, it is clear the newspaper remains a vital institution that enriches the social fabric of a community.

The Newspaper's Role in Facilitating Democracy

Along with a newspaper's social benefits, journalism and news are often framed as the watchdogs of democracy. The concept of the public sphere, where citizens come together to discuss matters of public interest and form a public opinion, is closely connected to media. Habermas et al.'s (1974) public sphere theory states that "today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere" (p. 49). A democratic system must provide the public with access to information about matters that affect the public so that individuals can make informed decisions and ensure democratically elected leaders respond to the will of the people (Habermas et al., 1974). A functioning news system in a democracy is one in which ethical ideals guide the journalism profession. Journalists should, guided by various codes of ethics, pursue truth, report accurately and objectively, verify facts, and seek multiple sources of information on an event or issue (Merrill, 1997). Barnett (2009) identifies three ways that journalism holds democratic leaders to account: by representing, campaigning, and interrogating. In the first case, journalists can act as representatives of the public and bridge the gap between the public and the powerful to ensure popular opinion is heard

by political decision makers. Journalists can also guide public interest campaigns both at the local and national levels by identifying issues relevant to the public and demanding public action. Lastly, journalists can hold authorities in public and private institutions to account for their involvement in potential wrongdoing. The media have often stood in for the public sphere as they have access to the powerful, can hold them to account, represent public interests, express popular opinion, and share alternative viewpoints (Ali et al., 2017; Hallin, 2008). Given this, a vibrant media is required to ensure that the public sphere functions effectively and that democracy is disseminated.

When it comes to reporting about political matters, newspapers have tended to do the majority of the reporting, in comparison to other news mediums. Lindgren et al. (2019) highlight studies that show newspapers “are often the only source of day-to-day public affairs coverage, they cover political stories ignored by other media, and in many cases their journalism still sets the agenda and informs the reporting of other news organizations” (p. 7). Small market, non-daily newspapers often are the only news agency in small and rural communities to cover local political matters (Darr et al., 2018). Coverage of politics by newspapers in such communities has been useful in creating awareness and debate about local political matters and increasing the visibility of politicians who serve a community (Darr et al., 2018). With this in mind, it can be argued that newspapers have been essential to democracies, to holding the powerful to account, to facilitating citizen participation, and to contributing to the public sphere.

The Role of Newspapers in Expanding an Individual’s Perspective

Within the field of information studies, information behaviour theories look at the totality of an individual’s experience with information through both active and passive means of

accumulating information. Reading the newspaper has been identified as both an intentional and unintentional way to meet an individual's information needs (Bates, 2002). In his theory of everyday life information seeking, Savolainen (1995) highlights the different ways that people use newspapers to meet their everyday information needs to respond to the social and cultural context of their environment. He highlights how newspaper reading is often a leisure activity that can assist individuals "to orient themselves in daily life or to solve problems not directly connected with the performance of occupational tasks" (p. 267). Savolainen highlights newspaper reading as a form of passive information monitoring as individuals may read the newspaper as a habit, and expose themselves to information that they may adapt to their life and problem-solving abilities. Other information scholars have also highlighted the role of information exposure through passive media consumption in informing an individual's information environment. For example, in her theory of information practice, which considers social constructions of information, McKenzie (2003) demonstrates the role of unanticipated information encounters in shaping an individual's information landscape. McKenzie highlights how encountering information in unexpected ways can shape an individual's perspective, as long as the information comes from a known source or is aligned with a personal interest. McKenzie notes that reading the newspaper is an activity that helps individuals form perspective. With the closure of newspapers, one wonders how individuals will be exposed to unanticipated information about their community that may expand their perspective, maintain their sense of belonging, and/or assist them in problem solving.

Why are Newspapers Closing?

At the turn of the 21st century, newspapers were a booming business. Funded by advertising and subscriptions, the industry was worth billions of dollars in both Canada and the United States. However, the rise of the internet and digital communication has created dramatic ripple effects for the newspaper industry. During a ten-year period from 2008 to 2018, Canada's newspaper industry recorded a two-billion-dollar loss in revenue as an increasing amount of advertising money was directed online (Lindgren et al., 2019). Subscriptions have also tumbled. Newspapers are no longer viewed as required reading for younger demographics. As an Australian study of young people's information experiences found, young people were more likely to search online for information that enables them to make everyday decisions than look in a newspaper (Qayyum & Williamson, 2014). Rather than relying on the interpretations of journalists in a local newspaper, young people determine the credibility of information by considering search result rankings and the way information appears on a website (Qayyum & Williamson, 2014). Taken together, the shifts in technology and reading habits have led to newspaper closures, along with a more rabid market-driven approach to journalism.

Newspaper owners have increasingly focused on a corporate approach to news. While in the past many publications were owned by families within a community, since the 1990s newspapers have frequently been bought, sold, and traded among corporations. As a result, local ownership of newspapers has increasingly moved further away from the communities that the newspapers exist within, resulting in less owner accountability to community news and the information needs of individuals within that community (Abernathy, 2018; Lindgren et al., 2019). In Canada, as in the United States,

corporate-owned newspapers have also established geographic monopolies, leaving one corporate owner in control of all print news publications over hundreds of kilometres (Winseck, 2018). Many publications that remain operational have seen dramatic cuts to staff and a shrinking amount of locally produced news (Lindgren et al, 2019). As such, the information and news that is still produced locally may not be in alignment with the journalism profession's tenets of accuracy, verifiability, and presenting multiple perspectives on issues.

Most of the newspapers that have closed were chain owned and located in rural or small communities (Lindgren et al, 2019; Abernathy, 2018). Due to the consolidations of newspapers, these closures often leave wide geographic areas without a local news source. Abernathy (2018) calls these areas news deserts, places void of locally-produced, verifiable information. Even from this brief summary, it is clear that the implications of newspaper closures are broad, and now we will turn to some of the individual, social, and political repercussions.

Implications of Newspaper Closures on Individuals

Information behaviour scholars consider a scarcity of information to be socially problematic. In the 1990s, Elfreda Chatman (1996) identified the phenomenon of information poverty, and this has had a significant impact on the field. Chatman's theory of information poverty postulates that a scarcity of reliable and credible information sources causes marginalized social groups to face difficulty in solving "a critical worry or concern" (p. 197). That information scarcity, Chatman argues, is caused by systems controlled by outsiders who withhold access to information, leading individuals to act in self-protective ways. Those self-protective behaviours, Chatman states, include

increased secrecy, deception, and a mistrust of others, which ultimately leads to an unwillingness to disclose personal information about problems an individual might be facing. Chatman's theory was further expanded by Britz (2004), who argues that the concept of information poverty can be applied to entire populations in geographic regions where "a lack of essential information and a poorly developed information infrastructure" prevents people from accessing, adequately interpreting, or applying information to their lives (p. 192). In a more practical application of information poverty, Lloyd et al. (2016) highlight how information scarcity can negatively affect an individual's ability "to extend social networks, to gain employment, maintain health, and improve educationally, thus creating a cycle of alienation from mainstream society and continued marginalisation and disenfranchisement" (p. 308). The information scarcity wrought by the closures of local newspapers, which are often decided by corporations based far beyond the communities the publications are intended to serve, has led to significant concerns about the corresponding social conditions.

Social Implications of Newspaper Closures

When a newspaper closes, the social fabric of a community is disrupted. Places with newspapers have been identified as having higher levels of community participation and cohesion. Robert Putnam (2000) utilizes social capital theory to identify how relationships use reciprocity and trust to achieve both community and individual goals. Putnam states that newspapers facilitate relationships within a community. When comparing newspaper readers to non-readers, Putnam correlates newspaper readership with a higher likelihood of belonging to community organizations, attending

community meetings, volunteering on a community project, joining a community organization, visiting friends, and trusting neighbours.

In a comparative study of rural communities with and without newspapers, Beaudoin and Thorson (2004) conclude that in places with newspapers there was greater social trust among community members and social networks demonstrated more reciprocity. Similarly, in a survey of residents of a rural community in Kansas that lost its newspaper, Smethers et al. (2007) found that readers felt newspapers contributed to feelings of pride in the vitality of their community. Readers also indicated that the newspaper had made them more likely to attend community social functions and to discuss people, issues, or events they read about in the newspaper (Smethers et al., 2007). Newspapers have also been credited with facilitating community connections, which expose individuals to information that they can apply to their own lives and use to find ways to interact with other community members (Richards, 2013). Newspaper readership and community attachment have also been linked (Richards, 2013; Shaker, 2014), as the newspaper frequently acts as a cheerleader for the community (Ali et al., 2017). With this in mind, it stands to reason that newspaper closures would have a negative effect on individuals' involvement with their communities as well as overall social engagement within communities.

Political Implications of Newspaper Closures

The closure of small market newspapers also has a distinct impact on citizens' ability to access information and news about political matters in their community. Without media to cover local politics when a newspaper closes or reduces coverage, citizens may have no local source of information about matters affecting them, such as tax hikes, local

candidates in politics, and planned or disrupted services (Abernathy, 2018). Diminished knowledge about local political matters among citizens has been documented in communities without newspapers (Ali et al., 2017; Darr et al., 2018; Smethers et al., 2007). Additionally, Hess's (2015) study documented the importance of local newspapers in advocating on behalf of citizens in the digital age. Hess found that politicians are more likely to respond to concerns raised in newspapers than those shared by citizens through connective digital media. The issue of political accountability is further highlighted by Ali et al. (2017), who raised concerns that without newspapers, local matters of political corruption could go unchecked. Research has also documented that government spending is lower and borrowing rates are higher in communities without newspapers than in those with a newspaper (Darr et al., 2018; Lindgren et al., 2019). As these studies suggest, without a newspaper to act as a witness and voice for the public in a small or rural community, democratic responsibility among politicians may wane.

On a similar note, the absence of locally available information and news affects citizens' participation in the democratic process. Lindgren et al. (2019) highlight that the majority of election coverage was generated by small market newspapers in the past. However, with newspaper closures and diminished newsrooms, election coverage is becoming increasingly nationalized and less locally focused (Darr et al., 2018). The closure of newspapers also affects voter turnout. Shaker (2014) compares voting rates in two communities before and after a newspaper closes and concludes that voter turnout dropped after the closure. According to Darr et al. (2018), political polarization has been another adverse effect of newspaper closures in the United States. In

communities without a newspaper, split-ticket voting was far less common. Darr et al. note that with an absence of locally available news and information about local candidates, voters are more likely to vote based on information gained from national news coverage and become more aligned with one party, rather than looking at the varying merits of each local candidate. Additionally, after a newspaper closes in a community, research from Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido (2013) highlights that fewer candidates ran in local elections, less money was spent on election campaigning, and the incumbent in office was more likely to be re-elected. While these threats to democracy could lead to calls for the revival and revitalization of newspapers in small and rural communities, the mass commodification of the media and the race to accelerate profit have thus far prevented such mobilization. Instead, many have sought out alternative systems of news production.

Alternative News Production Systems

A number of solutions have been proposed to deal with the social and political implications of newspaper closures. Independent publishing models have been promoted and celebrated as a means of maintaining newspaper quality at the local level. Likewise, non-profit news creation has grown since the start of the 21st century. Hyperlocal, digital journalism has also been touted as a solution, along with digital media more broadly.

Independently-owned local newspapers have not shut down at the same rate as chain-owned newspapers (Abernathy, 2018; Ali et al., 2018; Lindgren et al., 2019). The most successful independently-owned newspapers provide readers with ample local content and advocate on behalf of the community, which resonates with readers (Ali et

al., 2017). This stands in sharp contrast to the dominant approach of chain-owned newspapers, which tend to cut news production at the local level, making these newspapers less relevant to their communities. Although local newspapers have been critiqued for being slow to adapt to online environments, this may be a competitive advantage, as purchasing the print copy brings “people together in time and space” (Ali et al., 2017, p. 11). On the other hand, Abernathy (2018) writes that many independently-owned newspapers operate on tighter and tighter margins, as advertising continues to move towards online platforms.

Other funding models are being utilized to keep news in communities. For example, dozens of new publications that operate on a non-profit model have sprung up since the dawn of the 21st century. In some communities, these newspapers have emerged to fill a news gap that emerged after newspapers owned by corporations were closed (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2019). Often started by former print journalists, these non-profit newspapers are described as being focused on covering stories that are of shared community concern (Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2019), and they typically engage citizens to co-produce information (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014). In other communities, volunteers have banded together after a newspaper closed to create a news publication. Research into a volunteer-run newspaper in Kansas showed that there were social benefits both for the volunteers who created the newspaper and for the larger community itself (Smethers et al., 2017).

Another recent approach to news has been hyperlocal journalism, which primarily disseminates news through digital platforms and takes a public service orientation to news production, focusing on a specific geographic area and matters within that

community (Harte et al., 2019). Primarily run by small, independent news organizations, hyperlocal journalism is created by “enterprising, civic-minded, digitally savvy individuals seeking to start news services for personal gain and/or for wider civic benefit” (Harte et al., 2019, p. 3). Other hyperlocal models run on other funding models are also emerging. The growth of these alternative models has provided some hope that news will not disappear in communities; however, concerns still remain.

The number of new media publications has not grown at a sufficient pace to offset the number of newspapers that have closed (Abernathy, 2018). Moreover, news organizations are more likely to emerge in middle- and higher-income communities, while news outlets that close in low-income and more ethnically diverse communities are less often replaced (Napoli et al., 2017). The financial sustainability of non-profit media models has also been raised as a concern (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014), and volunteer-run newspapers often rely on a small group of dedicated individuals, relying on effective leadership to be successful (Smethers et al., 2017). Finally, the quality of information produced by digital news organizations has been described as significantly lower than traditional news outlets (Darr et al, 2018). Given these numerous shortcomings, it is worth considering whether other organizations could step in to assist in providing information to individuals in communities that lack local newspapers.

Libraries to the Rescue?

As information organizations and meeting places where communities can connect, libraries are well-positioned to support access to credible information from multiple perspectives and strengthen community bonds. Indeed, the preamble to the American Library Association (2008) Code of Ethics highlights the role of a library within a

democratic society as one of informing citizens and providing a space where the public are able to access a multiplicity of information and ideas. Similarly, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2019) Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom underlines that accessing expressions of knowledge, creative thought, and intellectual activity that are reflective of society's diversity are fundamental rights for human beings. Libraries are called upon to respond to community information needs not only through their collection of resources, but also through their programming. A 2014 editorial in *Library Quarterly* described libraries as places that are "continually adapting and innovating to meet the basic needs of their communities" (Jaeger et al., 2014, p. 492). As such, when information gaps exist within a community, librarians are called to act.

Librarians and journalists share similar mandates: to facilitate intellectual freedom, to enable individuals to access credible information, and to support democratic participation. While newspapers present information in written form that can provide individuals with a multiplicity of viewpoints, libraries can leverage programming to capitalize on face-to-face information dissemination in a public space that is freely accessible to all (Bossaller, 2017). Similar to the practice of newspapers covering stories that hold elected leaders to account and draw attention to public interest issues that might be otherwise ignored, public libraries run programming that spurs civic education and encourages deeper citizen participation in the democratic process. Whether through screening films with a political perspective; organizing readings by writers who comment on political matters; facilitating conversation circles that encourage different perspectives to be shared; organizing public debates about local

issues; or arranging workshops about various government matters, libraries already foster democratic participation (Bossaller, 2017). Whereas newspapers aim to verify information through journalistic practice, information literacy in libraries is intended to teach individuals how to identify credible sources and develop a deeper understanding of information creation (Cooke, 2017). In an era of digital misinformation and disinformation, there is a clear need for information literacy programming to equip people with the skills to understand information they encounter online (Cooke, 2017). Yet, while this type of programming can help address information deficiencies within a community, information gaps about local matters may still persist when a newspaper closes.

To address local information gaps, some libraries are stepping in with new programming. When the newspaper closed in the community of Weare, New Hampshire, for example, a librarian filled the information void by creating a community newsletter with the assistance of local students, other library staff members, and volunteers (LeBeau, 2018). The newsletter is regularly published and distributed both online and at local businesses. In other news desert communities, librarians have worked with youth to create newspapers, simultaneously building media production skills among young people and filling an existing information void (Marcotte, 2016). The results from library-facilitated news production have been quite encouraging. In Weare, New Hampshire, the newsletter led to an increase in attendance at community events (LeBeau, 2018). Newspapers produced with help from libraries in other communities have enabled new partnerships to be developed, in addition to attracting new groups of library users (Marcotte, 2016). Still, such examples of news media creation at or with

the support of libraries are relatively few and far between. Pursuing partnerships with other emerging news production models could be another way for more libraries to respond to small market newspaper closures.

Libraries could also address information gaps by building on current programming trends, such as digital media studios. These are increasingly being set up in libraries to allow individuals to try new technology, create information in new ways, and engage the community (Rhinesmith & Stanton, 2018). Research into digital media studios in libraries suggests that, if guided, information created in these spaces could be further shared with communities “to remind local residents of the value of local news to ensure their communities stay informed and connected about the most important and pressing issues of the day” (Rhinesmith & Stanton, 2018, p. 437). Similarly, storytelling and oral history projects organized by libraries have the ability to personalize events of historic significance (Chancellor & Lee, 2016). In evaluating oral history projects organized by a library, Chancellor and Lee (2016) highlight the need “not only for telling stories but for collecting them” for future use (p. 50). As such, when planning new information creation programs, libraries could look beyond just implementing the service itself to also plan for how information created through these programs could be guided, collected, and disseminated in order to address information needs.

Gaps in Existing Research

While the political and social implications of newspaper closures have been established through existing research, gaps remain. Hess (2015) highlights the predominant reliance on utilizing social capital theory and quantitative measures to understand the social impact of newspapers. As Hess suggests, these methods fail to capture the

nuanced ways that newspapers inform and influence individuals, encompassing “the subtleties of conversation at the breakfast table, sustaining friendships and reaching out to others in times of personal crisis” (p. 492). Newspaper closures could also be studied in relation to quality of life indicators and the social systems that determine the quality of life (Williams et al., 2015). Applying various information behaviour theories could also provide insight into the varied ways people access information and better highlight the information needs of individuals. In short, a range of interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives would strengthen our understandings of the phenomenon of newspaper closures.

A long-term investigation into the impact of newspaper closures is needed. Shaker (2014) notes that the effects of newspaper closures have primarily been studied in the immediate aftermath of the closures, and few studies have looked at the longer-term impact of newspaper closures after three, five, or ten years. Additionally, Shaker points out that few studies have looked at the alternative systems of information sharing that have emerged in the wake of newspaper closures. The phenomenon of ghost newspapers or news deserts and their impact on local communities also requires further research.

The role that community libraries could play in the wake of newspaper closures has not been looked at rigorously. Studies that describe the impact of newspaper closures on library use could not be found within the academic literature, and library programming that was launched in locations where newspapers had closed was discovered through media reports, rather than academic research. As such, more

research on the intersection of libraries, information literacy, and news creation is required.

Discussion

If one agrees with Habermas et al. (1974) that democracy requires a public sphere where an informed citizenry can have vibrant discussions about issues of public interest, one must pay attention to the streams in which information is created and shared. For nearly 200 years in North America, the newspaper has been a consistent means of sharing new information with individuals and prompting public discussion about issues of shared interest. The early newspapers of North America, which were filled with scandals and shared stories for entertainment purposes, evolved by establishing professional ethics (Schudson, 2007). Those ethics urge journalists to commit themselves to the pursuit of truth, to the verification of information, to telling stories from multiple points of view, and to avoiding conflicts of interest. In short, journalists stand behind the stories they produce because they take steps to verify accuracy and maintain their independence while reporting.

The loss of newspapers leaves communities without access to local news created in an environment where information is verified, where information shared from powerful sources is questioned, and where alternative perspectives are sought and shared. Instead of relying on a newspaper to interpret and verify information on behalf of the individual reader, the post-newspaper world places the onus on the individual to verify information, seek alternative perspectives, and band together with others to challenge information from those in power. It is just one more responsibility that has been placed on the individual in the neoliberal era. The removal of the newspaper from

local communities means that issues that are closest to home, that have the most immediate impact on an individual, may not be thoroughly discussed or explored. In short, the public sphere suffers as information becomes more difficult to access, interpret, and verify, which can, in turn, be a threat to democracy.

While many libraries offer information literacy workshops and events, these programs have limitations. The number of people that can be reached through information literacy programming and other activities pales in comparison to the number of people reached through regular news circulation. Furthermore, the onus is placed on the individual to address information limitations they may encounter, rather than a systematic approach to ensure that credible information is provided to individuals about local matters. While this does not dismiss library information literacy and civic engagement programming, media produced about similar issues has the opportunity to reach wider audiences than those who decide to attend library events. Partnerships with local news organizations that are not running on a commercial for-profit model may be a more effective way to ensure that localized, credible information is accessible to the public.

Conclusion

Throughout the 20th century, individuals turned to newspapers to obtain new information about their community, their country, and the world beyond these borders. The act of reading a newspaper enabled individuals to encounter information that expanded their perspective, helped them solve problems, and fostered community ties. However, demographic shifts, advertising losses, and the growth of digital technology have all had an impact on newspaper consumption. In the day and age of instant

searches and peer-generated content on social media, reading newspapers has now become a leisure time activity, rather than serving as a primary means of making sense of the world. The loss of newspapers, often for the sake of increasing profit for conglomerates, signifies the disruption of an established information channel and makes it difficult for the public to hold the powerful to account.

Without another information stream to fill the void that the closure of a newspaper creates, there can be significant political and social ramifications. Research tells us that when a small market newspaper closes, the local community often sees an increase in political polarization, a weakening of government accountability in spending, and lower voter participation. The social consequences of a newspaper closure likewise threaten to upset shared reference points within a community and weaken participation in community social activities. At the same time, however, the loss of newspapers can make way for new media that more fully reflect the lives and needs of community members. For example, digital media that provide hyperlocal news have taken the opportunity to fill information gaps and may also seek to address the broader ramifications of newspaper closures. Libraries, too, can step in to meet the information gaps by offering information literacy programs and events to promote citizen participation, assisting with community news production, or ensuring programs dedicated to digital media production or oral storytelling are guided, collected, and disseminated. Although more research is required to understand the implications of newspaper closures, it seems that now is the time for libraries and other organizations to imagine how information gaps can be addressed to counter information poverty, adverse social affects, diminished civic participation, and threats to democracy.

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