

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

The Impact of Citizen Journalism on News Deserts

JADE CAMPOS  
SPRING 2022

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Digital and Print Journalism  
with honors in Journalism

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Russell Eshelman  
Associate Teaching Professor of Journalism  
Head, Department of Journalism  
Thesis Supervisor

Dr. Ford Risley  
Professor of Communications  
Honors Adviser

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

Many people growing up in the 2000s likely don't remember a community newspaper being delivered to their homes or neighborhoods every morning. If they do, they can be considered somewhat of a rarity in a modern society that has seen a dwindling of physical newspapers in favor of digital websites. For many people, the internet simply holds more opportunities to find news not just locally but also nationally and internationally, making it much more of a treasured source of news than the limitations of the traditional paper. However, it's not just the physical papers that are disappearing across the country with the onslaught of the internet, but it's also the local news outlets themselves — the digital age has made it very difficult for community newspapers to exist. This has created “news deserts” throughout the country where many communities are without a local source of news to keep them in the know about happenings in their areas and their local governments. With this trend growing, many residents have taken it upon themselves to fill the void that has been created with the loss of their local news outlet — whether they have experience in the journalism industry at all. To close, I'll discuss my own experience working in a media startup created by a person with no background in journalism. Citizen journalism has taken the form of startup websites, newsletters and Facebook groups that are meant to simply share local information — and it could shape up to be the future of local journalism.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I've always approached big endeavors with heavy milestones with a wary eye. I look at the end of the road, and I stand in disbelief that I would ever achieve such accomplishments. I did it in high school, and I've done the same in college. Yet, somehow, here I am completing a thesis on a topic I'm tremendously passionate about.

Thank you to Russ Eshelman and Ford Risley for guiding me throughout the process — as well as my career at Penn State in general — and making this thesis possible.

Thank you to the residents of Caroline County, Virginia, for cultivating my love and passion for local journalism.

And, especially, thank you Curt Chandler for everything you've done for me as a student, journalist and scholar. This project seemed extremely daunting until you helped mold my ideas into something realistic. Your love for storytelling and local journalism never went unnoticed, and it sparked something endless in myself. I wish you were here to see this come to fruition — it's all thanks to you.

## Chapter 1

### AN INTRODUCTION TO NEWS DESERTS

The *Caroline Progress* in Caroline County, Virginia, has become a textbook example of a modern local newspaper.

It began in 1919 and thrived in the community as its sole newspaper for nearly 100 years. It molded and changed to fit the times — becoming a weekly newspaper when dailies were no longer sustainable and joining the online universe when its audience began migrating there.

Eventually, in March 2018, it adapted to the times in perhaps the most fitting way possible: it died.

It's not that people stopped caring — the community reacted with anger and frustration, because its only dedicated media outlet had been taken away from them. Instead, it came down to a lack of economic feasibility, according to Nick Mathews.

Mathews is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Missouri studying news deserts after spending a 15-year long career in the journalism industry where he worked in sports and local news. When he started his research, Mathews learned about the news desert festering in Caroline, which led him to living there for a few years to learn from the community about how it impacted them.

“If you're thinking of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* or *The Washington Post*, for instance, for comparison to the late *Caroline Progress*, the content is different,” he said. “The connection with the readers is different.”

Caroline is also covered by a regional newspaper in Fredericksburg, Virginia, called *The Free-Lance Star*, though its coverage usually doesn't touch many of the people. The county is just a small part of its bigger coverage area where neighboring counties are more heavily populated and, therefore, receive more coverage. Ultimately, most of the stories *The Free-Lance Star* generates likely aren't relevant to a family in Caroline.

Mathews said news deserts have been growing in the U.S. for years, though it wasn't until 2016 that the concept of them was first given a name by Penelope Abernathy of the University of North Carolina.

That year, Abernathy published "The Rise of a New Media Baron and the Emerging Threat of News Deserts," which outlined the history of media decline. It shook the media industry in its understanding of local journalism and the future of it.

According to the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media (CISLM) — an umbrella organization Abernathy's research was published under — a news desert can be defined 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" (UNC, "What exactly is a 'news desert?'").

This definition notes that it's not just the presence — or lack thereof — of a local media outlet that creates a news desert. Rather, a community could be in a news desert if its content stops serving the local community by informative means.

"Many newspapers have become ghosts of their former selves, both in terms of the quality and quantity of their editorial content and the reach of their readership," the Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media said.

Local journalism had been in rapid decline for years before the study was released. The internet swept into the place of the traditional newspaper, because it was faster and portable. As national publications quickly adapted to technological trends, community newspapers and reporters fell by the wayside, and with it, the connection to the people faded away.

As Mathews found, it's not that people stopped caring about local journalism. Rather, he said the trend of news deserts relates more to a "larger economic ecosystem."

According to CISLM, typical news audiences began to migrate to the internet because of its convenience and speed. The Pew Research Center noted that, since 2011, more people have begun consuming their news online rather than by reading a traditional newspaper, and, ultimately, news circulation dropped 20% in a 10-year period from 2004-2014 (Abernathy, *Rise of a New Media Baron*).

As traditional newspapers began to lose readers to the digital landscape, daily and weekly newspapers also began to shut down or join forces. Mathews said local news outlets weren't able to replace the print revenue they once generated with online revenue. They have the choice to cut down on their expenses — like the print paper itself or employees — and, potentially, close the publication permanently.

"They're really stripping the organization down as much as it can to maintain profitability," Mathews said. "And if they can't do that, then they just make the decision to shatter."

According to CILSM, more than a third of newspapers in the U.S. have changed ownership, some more than two times, since 2004 (Abernathy, "Rise of a New Media Baron"). The cut to newsroom resources, like staffing, makes it more difficult for media outlets to properly cover their communities.



One of the biggest answers to the financial difficulties newspapers have faced is perhaps one of the most largely criticized facets in the changing force of the media landscape. Community newspapers have been taken out of the hands of local journalists and put into the control of corporate business owners.

According to the CISLM, more than half of all daily newspapers were owned by the largest 25 companies in the country in 2014 (Abernathy, “Rise of New Media Baron”). McClatchy, a newspaper publishing company, owns nearly 30 daily newspapers nationwide, including *the Centre Daily Times* of State College, Pennsylvania (McClatchy). In 2020, McClatchy itself transitioned into a new phase of newspaper publishing when Chatham Asset Management, which created two layers of ownership for local newspapers that typically have their own diminishing number of staff. In fact, Chatham Asset Management is a registered investment adviser that specializes in financial planning — with no specialization in the journalism field. This is a trend that’s happening nationwide.

It’s not just large corporations that take ownership over once solely owned local newspapers. Wealthy business people are also making a stake in the journalism industry as well. In Pittsburgh, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* is owned by Block Communications Inc. whose publisher is John Robinson Block. Block comes from a family of newspaper owners and advertisement salespeople, and his wealthy ancestry is well documented (Addison). On a more national level, Jeff Bezos — the former CEO of Amazon — bought ownership of *The Washington Post* in 2013 (Fahri).

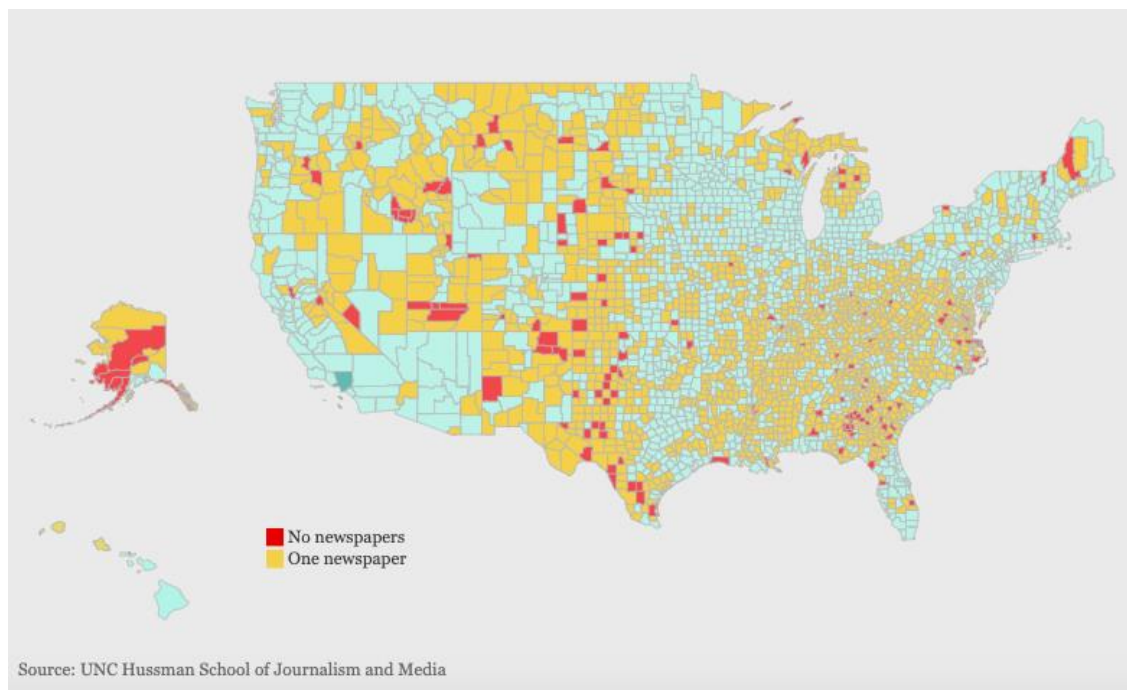
Much criticism of current media ownership is that the owners — like McClatchy or Bezos — are out of touch with the communities their newspapers are covering, coming back to the idea that news deserts can be created by a lack of adequate coverage for a community.

At the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, many reporters and community members have criticized editorial content from its board of editors, which receives final approval from Block, for its inability to offer a full representation of the entire newsroom's beliefs. In 2018, an editorial "defending" Donald Trump's comments calling several foreign nations "shithole countries" was heavily criticized by the Pittsburgh community and the newsroom itself (Addison).

News deserts aren't confined to a single place and exist throughout the entire country, though they thrive in certain areas. Mathews said they're most common in rural communities.

"If you don't have broadband access, it just exacerbates the situation of lack of information."

An interactive map created by CILSM illustrates the number of news deserts across the country. Its purpose is to inform audiences about whether they live in an area considered a news desert. The map, last updated in June 2020, shows a relatively even spread of news deserts across the country, though the south is a particularly consolidated region of news deserts.



**Figure 1. A map showcasing news deserts across the U.S. by highlighting areas with no newspapers or just one (UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media).**

According to CILSM, rural communities are more likely to turn into news deserts for economic reasons (Abernathy, Rise of a New Media Baron). Small towns typically don't just face the issue of a rocky news market but have a struggling economy overall as well. The communities themselves, along with their newspapers, are struggling to “adapt technologically and financially to macro-economic change and the digital era.”

“If the local newspaper fails, no other medium, such as television or radio, is capable of providing these communities with the sort of public service journalism that lays out the issues and holds public servants accountable.”

According to CILSM, the vulnerability of rural areas makes the newspapers more susceptible to being bought out by larger companies. In 2016, investment firms gained control of twice as many newspapers in rural communities than anywhere else in the U.S. (Abernathy, Rise of a New Media Baron).

After *the Caroline Progress* faded away completely, many community members were forced to use social media as their news outlet. Facebook in particular became a popular medium for dispensing news where people can join groups for their specific towns, counties and neighborhoods.

People migrate there to find the information they were used to finding in their local newspaper like birth announcements, obituaries and wedding announcements.

Mathews said he's seen this take hold in many other communities that are experiencing the impacts of a news desert.

Around 100 miles away, in Surry County, Virginia, the community struggled to find itself in the news. Surry, which is in the Norfolk area, technically has several media outlets in close proximity to them — including Virginia's biggest newspaper, the *Virginian-Pilot*. However, Mathews said most of the news outlets around them simply didn't report on the community.

He said at one point in time, *The Daily Press* in Newport News, Virginia, had bureau reporters that covered Surry. However, staffing cuts forced coverage of the area to disappear.

This was especially harmful when the COVID-19 pandemic began, Mathews said. Since Surry residents weren't seeing themselves in the news, they had to be their own reporters to learn about COVID-19 testing sites and information on cases. Mathews said they used Facebook and also became well-versed in their local government's website.

"They were starving for local information about it," Mathews said. "There was a dearth of it — they couldn't find it."

On a smaller scale than the pandemic, Mathews noted that a lack of coverage can impact a person's daily life. Community members don't know what restaurants are open or what's

taking place at their local school board meetings. When people have to seek out and disperse information on their own, there's a chance for misinformation to spread.

Mathews doesn't blame the local media outlets for the lack of coverage — he said they're in an “impossible situation” with dwindling reporters and the same size coverage area. With only a few pairs of hands to report on a large area, Mathews said it's not possible to cover everything well.

But without a dedicated news outlet, many communities — like Surry and Caroline — may only see their names when bad news is being reported by larger media outlets, Mathews said. This can lead to a loss of community pride.

In his initial research on Caroline, some community members said they didn't feel like there was a voice to speak for them anymore without the Caroline Progress. The paper shared good spirited stories about positive things happening in the community (in addition to the critical news), which gave people a sense of community (Mathews).

One resident said they only see “bad stuff” coming from other nearby outlets that don't focus on Caroline. They said the “good stuff” confirmed that they made the right decision to move to Caroline.

As more newspapers disappear throughout the country, more people are looking to rediscover their community pride and put an end to misinformation. Local news startups are popping up in the place of traditional media outlets — one being *The Virginia Connection*, which began several months in Caroline after *The Caroline Progress* closed.

*The Virginia Connection* began through a citizen reporting venture by community member Tony Ares, who works in business and is also a pastor in the area.

Citizen reporting happens when normal people partake in reporting and newsgathering without any professional experience in the industry — like Ares. The practice can take shape in many different forms — like sharing news tips, photos or videos with professionals to include in their own reporting or starting their own reporting ventures. Ares dove into the media startup, because he cared about spreading truthful information to the community.

*The Virginia Connection* had its own website, Facebook page and weekly print publication shared for free in local businesses — each place shared stories reported by Ares or high school and college interns from the community.

Many local news startups may take all the same forms of *The Virginia Connection*, while others may work solely through Facebook, a newsletter or a website.

The purpose is all the same, though: to offer a solution to the decline in local journalism.

According to Sue Cross, the executive director and CEO of the Institute for Nonprofit News, many communities are only recently recognizing the need to create solutions for news that aren't tied to the traditional outlets (Edmonds).

“That’s a big cultural shift and we’re very early into it,” Cross said to Poynter. “In most communities, the shrinkage is just down to a point where people are saying OK, we have to do something.”

The future of news startups isn't certain, as it may be too soon to tell. However, Abernathy's 2020 report on news deserts “News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will local news survive?” noted that over 80 local news startups had been created over the span of two years and nearly the same amount closed during that time — including

*The Virginia Connection*, which eventually closed in the summer of 2019 (Abernathy, “News deserts and ghost newspapers: Will local news survive?”).

However, many local news startups continue to thrive and offer meaningful benefits to their communities that can fill the gap that the loss of traditional media outlets created.

## Chapter 2

### CITIZEN JOURNALISM

By 2006, *The Hansford County Reporter-Statesman* of Hansford, Texas, had been in service for nearly 100 years. It advertises itself as the county's "longest, continuously operated business" — but by that time, it just wasn't satisfying everyone.

Gina Gillispie was one of those people. After the *Reporter-Statesman* was bought by a person living over 300 miles away in Nashville, she said it "lost its local flavor." The new owners didn't have the same feel for the people, so community stories began to slip out of focus and national stories took hold in their place.

She didn't have any experience in journalism, but Gillispie said she knew something would have to change for the town. So, she took it upon herself to learn a little bit about reporting before creating the [\*High Plains Observer\*](#).

"I really just jumped into it," Gillispie said. "It really came so easy, because, to me, it is so easy. And the news is just the news and it belongs to everybody."

Since then, the *High Plains Observer* has operated alongside the *Reporter-Statesman*, and it's even expanded beyond the county limits of Hansford, where Gillispie lives.

It's an amateur website that features the latest stories directly on the homepage with ads running alongside each side. Along with advertisements, the Observer's website has links to other community services like religious ceremonies and weddings.



In the beginning, Gillispie was working on her own. She'd venture out in the community just to learn about what was going on — like meetings and activities — along with lighthearted stories of her neighbors to share.

Eventually, the *Observer* started getting noticed by community members who were also craving news that was locally based. People began sending her stories — some that were already fully written — and others volunteered their time to do field reporting. Gillispie said the *Observer* partnered with a local radio station in Parrington, Texas, that's almost 30 minutes away from Spearman.

“Over the years, that has really gotten so much easier — people send me stuff that they want on there.”

Ultimately, the *Observer* has become a news platform dictated by the community itself.

Gillispie said it's important that the stories and news released on the website remain “simple.” With the fast paced nature of people's lives, Gillispie said most people don't have time to dive into long form articles.

On the website, the articles are short and to the point with pictures to aid the storytelling process. Official documents and press releases are oftentimes embedded directly into the website where people can quickly digest the news relating to crimes in the area, local events and election results.

For a community that's hungry just to learn about what's going on, the website serves all its needs.

Today, the *Observer's* website has had 12 million visitors since its creation, who Gillispie said come from all over the country, and the outlet's Facebook page has over 8,000 followers. Its services have spread to Dumas, Perryton, Stratford and Hutchinson County.

What continues to be the best part about it to Gillispie is that the website is completely free for all community members. There's even a newsletter people can sign up for that goes directly into their emails that's free of charge.

They stay alive just by pure love of local journalism.

"Money is not my goal," Gillispie said. "I don't really make that much money, and I don't really care that much about money."

Advertisers from local businesses keep it afloat financially, though, Gillispie said. She said many of the advertisers have consistently supported the *Observer* since it began — primarily local banks, dentists and restaurants. Some have dropped off along the way, mostly because the business itself shut down, not from a lack of support for the startup.

Most of the funds go back into the website, though a small portion ends up in the pockets of the freelancers — however, Gillispie said it's a small percentage.

No matter the economic situation, Gillispie is confident she'd keep doing the work.

It's not really a job for Gillispie — more like a hobby where she can give back to the community. She said she has family members that keep her from worrying whether the *Observer* will give her enough financial support to keep her alive.

She doesn't really worry about the future of the *Observer* — it's mostly stayed the same in its 16 years — though Gillispie said she recognizes that the industry changes rapidly.

"I think we were way ahead of our time, especially in 2006, and I really do wonder what is next that I'm not aware of," she said. "One of these days I'm going to wake up and be that person going 'Man, I didn't see that coming.'"

The goal is to continue delivering the news in a simple way that is the most beneficial for the community, though Gillispie said she's prepared to pass the torch to someone in the future who can take the Observer in a new direction.

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Growing up, Don Davis could learn everything about his local community in the Texas panhandle just by reading the newspaper.

Weddings, graduations, birthdays and deaths — it was all right there. Davis said that's what everyone really wanted to know.

But he said the same isn't true for modern journalism. It's hard to learn about your neighbors, because the local news doesn't feature the same people-oriented stories it once did. Davis said he's stopped watching the local TV news channel, because there isn't the same charm to local stories and they tend to take national stories and “regurgitate them.”

“It's shooting on the south side, carjacking on the north side, burglary, apartment fire every day,” Davis said.

He stumbled upon the *High Plains Observer* by accident. Davis said he tried to stay away from Facebook for as long as possible but eventually fell into it as a way of connecting with the community and old friends. It was there where he learned about the startup media outlet.

Since then, Davis has begun to fall back in love with local journalism, because it's taken him back to his childhood. He learns about the people he's living alongside — not just taking in the national politics that's playing on every other news channel.

“It brings me emotions that I might not otherwise experience in my life,” he said. “You can get news anywhere that’s very sterile. When you’re reading about your old friends, there’s a little bit of emotion in that that doesn’t have to be manufactured.”

As a community member, Gillispie has a better grasp on what’s actually important to people, Davis said. To him, true local reporters, who live and work in the neighborhoods they’re reporting on, enhance the news and are, ultimately, “absolutely necessary” to quality local journalism. Davis said other reporters can only make assumptions about what’s meaningful.

“It’s the same thing, they come in, and they don’t... understand that everybody in that small community has either helped someone or needed someone else,” he said.

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In 2018, BJ Murphy started making a list of all of the things he didn’t like about the local media.

One of the first things on the list was a reliance on national news as opposed to local stories. Murphy said community members in his hometown in Kinston, North Carolina, were “lucky” if the local front page had one local headline on any given day.

Also, Murphy said he didn’t like running into a paywall or popup ads when he tried to read the news.

So, after taking a look at his list, he decided he was going to get into the media business himself — with just one rule for himself.

“I’m just gonna do the exact opposite.”

In fact, the website of [Neuse News](#), the news startup Murphy ultimately created, clearly states the values Murphy had for the site: “Hyper-local news with no pop-up ads, no AP news and no online subscription fees. No kidding!”

Murphy said he wasn’t the only person yearning for more local news. The community was distressed with the coverage that was funneled into the local newspaper that had little to do with the community itself. Murphy added that journalism has started to move toward “shocking” headlines to catch people’s attention.

He said the traditional news people once knew just didn’t exist anymore.

“The kind of news that your grandparents, my grandparents grew up [with],” Murphy said. “If you imagine...the dog goes and fetches the paper, that kind of backyard news that they used to do, or receive, we just weren't getting it.”

To Murphy, the financial competition of the journalism industry is the primary factor contributing to the downfall of local news. He said news companies are forced away from covering community stories, because people are more attracted to news with a more national hook.

“I’m not calling it corporate greed. I think it’s just the survival of the industry competing against other blogs and podcasts, and other print products and magazines and billboards and social media,” Murphy said. “All of those things compete for your attention and the local news suffers in the process.”

So, without any journalism experience, Murphy sought out to recreate that news environment for the town. Unlike Gillispie, he found people around him who were more specialized in website creation and reporting to lift *Neuse News* off of the ground. Murphy said it's a leadership style based on “empowering people.” Some of the people he selected for the

team had experience working at the local paper who were “invested” in seeing local journalism thrive.

“They love journalism. They love this community, but the corporate takeovers and regionalization of their own company cut them out, which left a bad taste in their mouths,” he said. “So, they’re willing to help somebody like me who was just trying to get this idea of free, local news off the ground.”

Today, Murphy said *Neuse News* has a dedicated full-time reporter along with three other freelancers.

Every day, the reporters aim to put out three pieces of original content, though Murphy said they also share press releases and government documents directly to their website as well. It’s to disperse the information as much as possible when a writer can’t work on a story, because just having that knowledge is important for the community, Murphy said.

Since the beginning, he’s tried to perfect the reporting process — particularly down to audience engagement.

Over the past four years, *Neuse News* garnered thousands of subscribers. Its Facebook page has reached 14,000 followers in a county of 20,000 people. Murphy said the digital engagement gives him hope that the outlet will “win that long game” of success in the journalism industry. However, he said he’s never really thought about success metrics.

Like Gillispie, Murphy said *Neuse News* rarely loses an advertiser — mostly because the businesses see the benefit in putting money into the startup. It helps grow another local business that each owner has their own stake in as a community member, and the bigger that *Neuse News* gets, the more people can learn about the advertisers.

With the success *Neuse News* has seen so far in its community, Murphy said he's tried to expand the resource to nearby counties, though without much success.

Originally, he looked into the issues facing other communities outside of their area of coverage, though he noted that their audience just wasn't interested in the content. Additionally, without a larger staff to tackle a wider coverage area, Murphy said the reporting wasn't up to the level he wanted to see.

When the initial idea fell through, Murphy tried to look at the issue from a business perspective. He received advice from engineering professionals who recommended *Neuse News* utilize a system that generated various websites to use public data to create stories.

Ultimately — do local reporting without being local.

“They would create this ‘air’ that it’s a local thing, but the people who wrote those stories were...1000 miles away — and they were actually using computer programs that they wrote into.”

While quick to admit he's not a journalist by trade, Murphy holds strong to his own beliefs of what journalism should be. The more local the reporting is, the better, and the opportunity to hold public officials accountable is important to him. He doesn't want to take on a reporting endeavor if he can't add value to a community — the primary reason for *Neuse News*.

And Murphy said the community is grateful to see the product every day. They seek information about the town, local government and schools, and *Neuse News* is one of the only places that offers it to them.

Expansion and further growth of the company may be possible in the future, though Murphy is intent on continuing the solid foundation of meaningful, local reporting as a means of solving the community's problems first.

“Sometimes it may not just [be] a news desert, but a community that is underserved from local jobs for local journalism.”



## Chapter 3

### FILLING THE VOID OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Chris Baxter spent years in journalism, covering local government or breaking news in a handful of different states, but he always had the feeling there was a bigger purpose to the job.

The day-to-day reporting he spent time doing didn't make the kind of impact on people that he really wanted, and it made him think carefully about his future. But accountability journalism is what confirmed his love for the industry — Baxter could feel the value of his work.

“I always got the feeling... It's like if I disappeared tomorrow, there's plenty of really talented people that keep up this work,” Baxter said. “I just wanted to do something where I felt like if I was gone tomorrow, that would be meaningful. I'm not just duplicating what others are doing.”

His first job was at *The Morning Call* in Allentown, Pennsylvania where he began dipping his toes into investigative reporting. It didn't have to be anything that broke ground on a national level — the town's landfill dispute hardly meant anything for people living in the county over, but it was important for the local community members. That's what Baxter cared about.

Baxter said his desire to make an impact through journalism stretched beyond the boundaries of his own reporting. He wanted to “multiply” his impact by being the person who molded reporters into investigative reporters.

“Part of what drew me to it is what drew me to [reporting] in the beginning,” Baxter said.

“It just makes my purpose feel much more defined.”

This desire led him to taking on the editor-in-chief position at *Spotlight PA* in March 2019, which he said was just “a couple pieces of paper” and “good funding” at the time.

Two years later, after he practically helped the outlet come off the ground, Baxter continues to work for *Spotlight* in the hopes of bringing hearty, accountable journalism to people all over the state.

*Spotlight PA* is an investigative, nonprofit news outlet that’s based in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania though it covers the entire state with an emphasis on state government coverage. Its original funding came primarily from the Lenfest Institute, which is the nonprofit owner of the Philadelphia Inquirer, a resource that not many local media startups would have granted to them.

Today, it doesn't have advertisers, because the mission isn't to generate money for the company.

“This is not a profit making enterprise. It’s not a corporate arrangement,” Baxter said. “This is a public service-based endeavor, and so it sort of lives or dies out of public support. Every day we try to produce something great and make the case for why it’s really important and why we should all support it.”

Baxter said he didn't want people to see *Spotlight* as a “threat.” With the already deteriorating numbers of local newsrooms throughout the country, he worried people would become intimidated by their presence.

“We are a friend, not a competitor.”

Baxter's hope for a mutual relationship went hand in hand with his mission for a news outlet dedicated solely to investigative reporting.

While *Spotlight* does have its own website where people can consume its coverage, it's more common that people find *Spotlight* stories through their own local media outlet. That was the goal — to “fill the gap” in local journalism that didn't have the resources or time for bigger accountability based reporting. So, the *Spotlight* team created a partner network with newsrooms across the states that ensured content was funneled into local communities.

The way it works is simple. Any Pennsylvania newsroom — whether it's something bigger like the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* or Baxter's alma mater *The Morning Call* — can sign a memorandum of understanding with *Spotlight* that will give them free access to any stories. This means outlets can pick and choose which stories they think will be important to their readers. Baxter said *Spotlight* is similar to the *Associated Press*, but the niche-ness of their area of coverage makes it more meaningful for local communities.

“We're going to cut through the noise and give you the most important stuff with the most context,” he said.

Baxter said the partner network also helped *Spotlight* take hold in communities more immediately, since their work gets shared with outlets that have a dedicated audience.

According to Baxter, *Spotlight* has 81 partners as of February 2022.

Since the beginning, Baxter has sought to use *Spotlight* as a tool that people across Pennsylvania can use to educate and inform themselves on issues that will impact them every day. He described it as a combination of investigative work that highlights problems and offers solutions and on service work.

Baxter said resources like voting guides and explainers to help people understand what a bill means have received “fantastic responses.” It’s confirmation for him that *Spotlight* is moving in the right direction as something that can actually make a difference.

One of the main difficulties for many local newsrooms across the country is a lack of hands to get all the work done — not a lack of skill. To stay afloat financially, many community newspapers have made big staffing cuts over the past decade. This leaves little room to cover stories that may not be considered time worthy.

And, luckily, these newsrooms don’t see *Spotlight* as the threat Baxter worried about. Instead, they utilize the outlet as a partner that they share story ideas with, because they recognize the importance of coverage for their audiences but not be equipped to take them on themselves. At times, it’s issues that reach to the “legislative or governor level” that a smaller newsroom doesn’t have easy access to. This bridges the information gap that many local newsrooms have been missing out on as news deserts expand.

One of the most recent successes Baxter said *Spotlight* — and Pennsylvania newsrooms as a whole — has had with its partnership model came with the COVID-19 pandemic.

When COVID-19 began to run rampant throughout the U.S., *Spotlight* reached out to a handful of its partner newsrooms to assemble a “COVID-19 strike team” that would tackle the pandemic across Pennsylvania efficiently. Each newsroom chose a reporter that would share their COVID-19 coverage with *Spotlight* to expand its coverage statewide.

“Within 24 hours, we had three reporters attached to us and that went on for months,” Baxter said. “We got so much more coverage overall than we would have gotten had we not been coordinating.”

With so much success in such a short period of time, Baxter said the impact on the state is difficult not to feel. As they look to the future, he said it's clear there's a "hunger for more" from the people and reporters alike.

So, the next step to benefiting local journalism is bringing *Spotlight's* coverage to more of a local level. In June 2022, *Spotlight* will launch its first local reporting bureau in State College, which Baxter said will be a foundation for replicating its coverage in five or six other regions in the state.

It's an effort to "sustainably" find a solution for the problem of news deserts. Baxter said there isn't a single person who does have the key to fix everything, but he feels like *Spotlight* "has an obligation to try to find the answer."

"It's dictated by the public — that's the thing about *Spotlight* and anything we do," he said. "People value it and they support it, or they don't and they don't support."

"At the end of the day, the future of journalism and local journalism is in the hands of the public. Either it's going to be something valuable and that we need to support and sustain or we don't and it's going to continue to go away."

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Tom Stites has spent a lot of time working in journalism.

After graduating from Williams College in the early 1960s, he started working as a reporter and editor for newspapers across the U.S. — including the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Kansas City Times* and *The New York Times*.

With nearly 50 years of experience, Stites has noticed things have changed in the journalism industry, which created a drastic shift in the way reporters and their audiences interacted. In 2007, he sought to find a solution: *The Banyan Project*, which is an attempt to rebuild local media outlets in their current forms.

“If you get discarded, you’re living in a news desert,” he said. “People want the damn news.”

The idea for *The Banyan Project* was created after Stites began learning more about the idea of news deserts. He looked at “underserved” communities that were becoming neglected by the changing news industry and saw the need for a new approach to journalism.

With that idea, Stites started developing *The Banyan Project* as a “robust response” to the need for new models for local journalism as digital news continues to become more popular. He said the project is a cooperative that allows the community to make decisions about its news coverage.

According to its website, *The Banyan Project* is a “grassroots” institution meant to engage the readers through the election of a news co-op board that can vary in size depending on the community’s population.

Stites said a pilot launch of the program saw immediate success.

“Boy, did it resonate.”

However, news co-ops are only recently getting off the ground, and there’s little current data to prove the strength of its future.

In 2020, the first community news co-op in the U.S. was created in Akron, Ohio, called *The Devil Strip*, which surpassed its one-year goal of nearly 1,000 member-owners in 2021 (Stites, “A new business model emerges”).

Currently, *The Banyan Project* has been approached by 40 media outlets across the country, with a future project to create a trusted media outlet for Boston's Black community (Stites, "A new business model emerges").

According to Stites, *The Banyan Project* isn't meant to replace traditional reporting that is still prevalent in many communities across the U.S. Instead, the goal is to find a new way of looking at that reporting since, he said, newspapers don't fulfill their communities' needs anymore.

Stites said the changing model of journalism has ultimately "reshaped" American politics. When people stop engaging with their local news outlets, they stop engaging in the local community all together. This can create a democratic problem, according to Stites, that allows many different levels of government to go unnoticed by the people.

"It's a disaster," he said.

Stites said the Banyan model is designed to create content that is relevant to its communities, respectful of its readers and capable of earning trust.

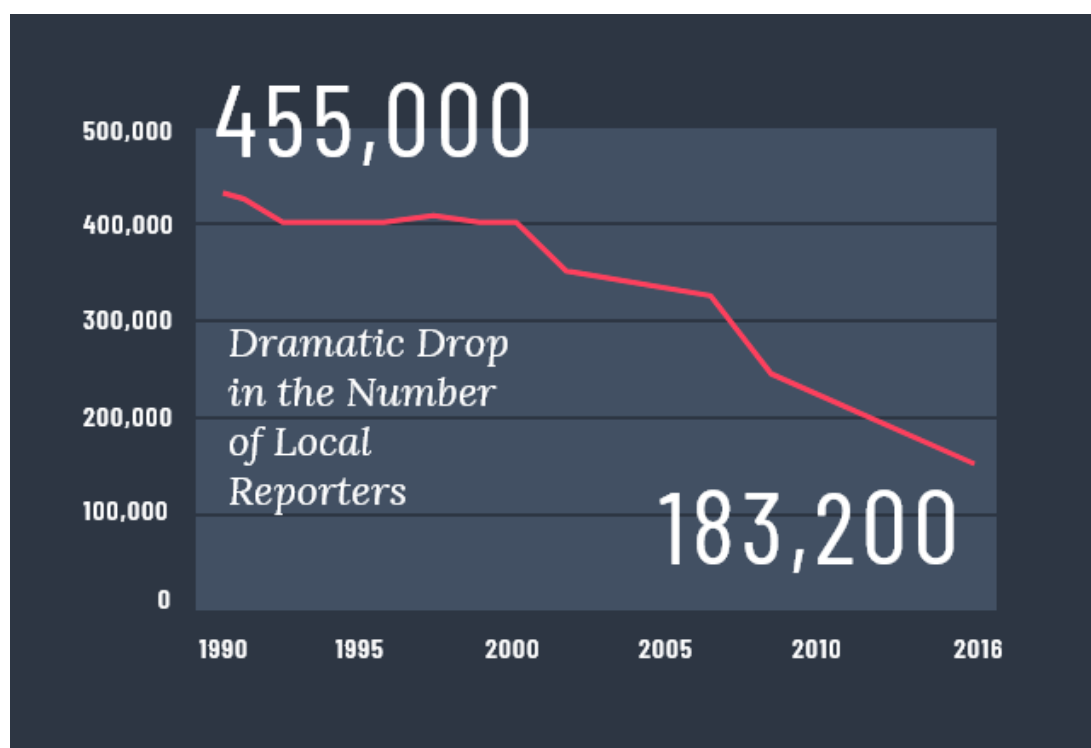
Banyan's publishing platform encourages its audience to engage with it, which, Stites said, should be used with the websites or newspapers that already exist in a media outlet. The platform helps bridge the gap between traditional journalism and the digital age to ensure a lack of digitization doesn't force a community outlet to suffer (Stites, "Banyan Project").

Additionally, the platform lets community members share content ideas and feedback on coverage, which Stites said can make people feel more connected to local journalism. With the hope of establishing a greater relationship, community members may feel more inclined to donate to their local newsrooms.

Stites said his end goal is to spread the model of *The Banyan Project* to local communities throughout the U.S.

Programs are popping up across the country that are similar to *The Banyan Project*, which target news deserts in order to grow local journalism through increased resources.

Report for America is relatively new in the journalism industry, though it's quickly gained traction. Its goal is to solve the issue of shrinking staff sizes by placing reporters in newsrooms throughout the country (Report for America).



**Figure 2. A graph showing the decline in local journalists in newsrooms throughout the U.S. (Report For America).**

Report for America was created in 2017 through The GroundTruth Project — a nonprofit, independent news outlet dedicated to supporting “under-covered communities” — by Steven



Waldman and Charles Sennott who have years of reporting experience of their own (GroundTruth Project).

A journalist can join the corps by applying for a position through Report for America, which filters applicants that meet the needs of the host newsrooms before matching a reporter to a news outlet that ultimately decides whether to hire a candidate. Within their chosen newsrooms, a reporter will cover “under-covered issues and communities” for an average of two years.

As many local news outlets experience staffing cuts as a means of saving money, Report for America ensures newsrooms only need to pay 25% of corp members’ salaries. The other 75% comes through Report for America — 50% coming from the organization itself (up to \$25,000) and 25% through donors. The average salary of a Report for America corps member can be between \$30,000-\$45,000 (Report for America).

In 2021, Report for America reported that it had 300 reporters in its corps and. It hopes to bring 1,000 reporters to local newsrooms by 2024.

From a digital perspective, an emerging news app called NewsBreak — founded in 2015 by Jeff Zhang who has a background in computer science and business — is looking for a solution to the dearth of news in communities (NewsBreak).

NewsBreak aggregates the content of national outlets, such as The New York Times, but it also shares freelance work for specific communities. Users can share their location and find stories specially made about their area by writers on the NewsBreak team.

Contributor positions are open to professional journalists or people interested in joining the industry. This gives an opportunity for community members who recognize a lack of coverage to share their stories on a national and professional scale. [Start here](#)

## Chapter 4

### THE NEED FOR LOCAL JOURNALISM

I've lived in Caroline my entire life — I still live there.

I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about the news when I was growing up — maybe because it wasn't around a lot in my community or maybe it was because I just didn't care that much.

The local ABC news affiliate channel, based almost an hour away from me in Richmond, was playing a lot on my TV while I got ready for school. But otherwise, I rarely consumed the news.

Caroline is one of those places where everyone knows everyone, and most people have had roots in the county for decades. So, news spread quickly through word of mouth and even faster when social media came around.

My family wasn't from the area, so we didn't really learn much from anyone else. I learned more about my own community after joining Facebook as a 13-year-old where everyone updates everyone on the smallest things — school closings, traffic jams and police sirens blaring through town.

Looking back on it, I actually never knew anything about my county until I had to.

When I came back home from my first summer of college in May 2019, I learned about *The Virginia Connection*. As a journalism major looking for a summer internship, I knew it was the perfect opportunity to get experience. So, I scoured the website and sent an email to Tony Ares letting him know I wanted to join the team in any capacity possible.

He got back to me in less than an hour. Ares was more than excited to offer me a position with the startup and was impressed with my journalism experience — even if it was just a few months worth at our college newspaper, *The Daily Collegian*.

I think I had the same attitude as many aspiring journalists: trudge through experiences in local journalism before making it into a national publication like *The New York Times*. I preached the importance of local journalism, but I considered myself above it for so long since it always seemed like the “best” journalists worked at bigger media outlets.

But *The Virginia Connection* changed everything for me.

During my first reporting experiences with *The Daily Collegian*, people had been kind and thankful when their stories were covered, but it was never anything more than a respectful gratitude. When I started reporting in my hometown, I had people thanking me everywhere I went.

I went to local government meetings and I was thanked for being there. I went to the county fair and I was thanked for being there. I went to July 4 celebrations and I was thanked for being there.

The community reaction was completely unexpected. I came into the summer with a lot of reservations about how people would feel about me. It was 2019, in the midst of Donald Trump’s presidency when a lot of hostility around journalists had been created, and I didn’t think my hometown would take very kindly to a reporter cramping their style.

But they were overjoyed — every single one of them.

A year had been enough time for coverage of Caroline to dwindle completely since the *Caroline Progress* died. *The Free-Lance Star* was the only outlet focused on covering the county.

However, I hadn't noticed it before, but *The Free-Lance Star* always seemed to have bigger things to worry about. Caroline was never really in its cycle of coverage. The paper covers 10 counties and one city in total with its own shrinking staff, so it's understandable that more populated communities were given greater focus.

But the impact was always felt nonetheless.

Caroline had a reputation throughout the central Virginia region of being "trashy." The surrounding counties and high schools looked down on the community, and, for a long time, I could never really put my finger on it.

We had more poverty than many other places around us. There weren't really a lot of recreational activities to like in the county — you have to travel just to get to a Walmart. But it never seemed like a reason for all of the bias.

But that summer and the flood of gratitude helped me connect the dots.

After the *Caroline Progress* disappeared, there were no positive stories about Caroline. Anything that people learned about the community for places outside of Caroline were small bites of news about crime or growing poverty rates. It created this idea about the school system, the economy and the residents that many people latched onto without ever stepping foot in Caroline.

So, *The Virginia Connection* was that bridge that so many people were looking for. I helped report on the informational things people needed to know — like what happened at the local town hall (which I, truthfully, never knew existed) — and lighthearted stories about community members making an impact.

The emotions I felt from Caroline that summer changed my outlook on journalism completely.

So, it was heartbreaking when, halfway through the summer, *The Virginia Connection* was forced to close.

I cried after I got a call from Ares that he couldn't afford to keep the publication going, no matter how important it was to the community. He tried to make it work, but the modern news market is unforgiving.

It didn't take very long for me to understand the value of local journalism, and it was devastating to see it fall apart right in front of my face.

No one really forgot the value of *The Virginia Connection*. The Facebook page still exists, and Ares even created a second Facebook page called "One Caroline" where people could share positive news. So, while it may not exist anymore, it renewed the sense of community that the *Caroline Progress* once bounded people together through.

Outlets like *The Virginia Connection* and its current form prove that journalism doesn't need expensive resources to make an impact. Websites run through WordPress or reporting shared solely through email newsletters are still meaningful for communities, even if it doesn't touch a national audience.

A lot of people take local journalism for granted. People value reporters who speak to a bigger audience, and, for a long time, I did too. But just hearing one "thank you" for telling a person's story in my small hometown was enough for me to know how important local journalism is.

I still have newspaper clippings from the local papers on my childhood bedroom wall. The feeling of seeing myself, my school and my marching band getting recognized in the news was exhilarating, and I still look back on it with fondness.

Citizen journalism and startup media outlets may not be the final answer in solving the issue of news deserts, but, for many people, it's a step in rebuilding the news ecosystem. They allow journalism to get back to its roots and serve communities the way they want to be served. When community members take the reins of their coverage, they can show corporations what local news outlets should really look like.

Additionally, citizen journalism has reignited an understanding of how important local news is for many people. A community can grow distant and cold without coverage, so a reliable media outlet can bring people back together to celebrate the good stories while acknowledging difficulties as well.

Once the news is gone, it's clear how much people take it for granted.

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## **ACADEMIC VITA**

Jade Campos  
18jcampos64@gmail.com

### **EDUCATION:**

B.A. in Digital and Print Journalism, May 2022 (Expected)  
Academic minors in French and Media Studies  
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:**

The Daily Collegian Editor-in-Chief (Present)  
WPSU Radio: Radio News Intern (Summer 2021)  
COMMRadio: Arts and Entertainment Director (Spring 2019-Spring 2021)  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Regional News Intern (Summer 2020)  
CommAgency: Social Media team member (August 2019-May 2020)  
The Virginia Connection (Summer 2019)

### **SKILLS:**

Expertise in AP Style  
Expertise in Microsoft Suite  
Adobe Audition, Photoshop, Premiere, InDesign; Photo Mechanic

### **AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS:**

William Randolph Hearst Foundation Journalism Awards Program  
17th Place Enterprise Reporting (December 2020)  
Online News Association Student Newsroom and Innovation Lab Member (Summer 2021)  
Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications Fellow  
Presidential Leadership Academy  
Bunton-Waller Fellow  
Kappa Tau Alpha Honors Society  
President's Freshman Award, President Sparks Award, Pugh Scholar Award