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Article

Local News Deserts in China: The Role of Social Media and Personal Communication Networks

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Abstract

The field of local news is often associated with news deserts, commonly defined as geo-based communities without newspapers or other legacy media as providers of locally oriented news and civic information. This phenomenon is expanding in global society due to the diminishing presence of newspapers at moments of accelerated digitization. This study examines the multiplex nature of news deserts in rural and suburban areas in China. Data were collected through a multi-methods approach combining two focus groups and 44 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Patterns of engagement among interviewees reveal that smartphone-based social media applications and digital platforms function as viable sources of news, and incidental exposure to news has become the norm of digital news use. Government-orchestrated convergent media services and WeChat channels are preferred choices by most research participants for local news. We argue that a media ecology perspective may be a productive approach to understanding community news and local newspapers.

Keywords

China; community news; Convergent Media; media ecology; news desert; social media; WeChat

Issue

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1. Introduction

Local news plays a vital role in community building, and a vibrant local news ecology fosters social cohesion and collective identity. In this regard, the diminishing presence of newspapers in an ever-expanding list of communities is a global cause of concern (Gulyas & Baines, 2020). In China, the boom of the newspaper industry from the 1990s to the early 2000s has been followed by a new era of accelerated decline over the past 15 years, and this downward trend does not seem to be reversible. The expanding news deserts in the wake of these developments have significant implications for civic, communal, and social engagement in these affected communities.

This article examines the multiplex nature of the expanding news deserts in suburban and rural China in

the absence of local newspapers and interrogates the emerging role of smartphone-based social media in fulfilling communicational needs and reshaping the information ecology of residents in these communities. Our multi-methods approach combines focus groups with semi-structured in-depth interviewees in multiple suburban (places relatively close to cities) and rural areas (remotely located from cities). The research questions pertained to two broad areas: First, how residents in these areas obtained news in general and news about their local communities specifically in regard to any informational channel or venue; second, how users engaged various platforms of social media in the consumption of local and non-local news. The research findings were contextualized in the specific information ecology of China as well as prevalent academic deliberations of news deserts across societies overall.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Local News Deserts in the Era of Social Media

Historically, local journalism both as a practice and a product has played a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and integration that bonds people together with the community they reside in (Aldridge, 2007; Jakubowicz, 2007). Besides providing timely and accurate information to citizens tied to a specific socio-geographic area, local news also serves as a viable forum for the expression of local views on issues of community concern, including representing communal values and interpreting global and national news events from a local angle (Franklin, 2006). The structural transformation of the media ecosystem since the late 1990s driven in large part by the internet and digital media, however, has put local journalism on a steady decline. In particular, the ubiquity of social media and personal communication networks has drastically changed how people get news and other information, how they stay in touch, and how they entertain themselves. At a time when “readership is eroding, advertising declining, and overall revenues plummeting,” the “practical feasibility” and “commercial sustainability” of print newspapers have reached a level of existential crisis (Nielsen, 2015, p. 3).

Academic understanding of the field of local news and journalism has underscored both the societal and geospatial aspects of the news-making process (Gulyas, 2021). One particular term that has gained traction lately is news desert, which has been popularized by Abernathy, through a series of reports on The Expanding News Deserts Project at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. Initially defining a news desert as “a community without a newspaper,” Abernathy (2018, p. 96) subsequently expanded it to “include communities where residents are facing significantly diminished access to the sort of important local news and information that feeds grassroots democracy.” News deserts are found to be associated with higher poverty rates, food deserts, low income, low education, and low voter turnout. Highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of the ecosystem, Ferrier et al. (2016, p. 221) describe the phenomenon as *media deserts*—“a geographic locale that lacks access to fresh, local news and information.” Ferrier et al.’s definition pays attention to not just the content layer (fresh daily news) but also the conduit (e.g., access through broadband and mobile devices) and code (e.g., algorithms and curation biases) layers. As Usher (2023) notes, prevalent discussion of news deserts hinges on a built-in preference for professional, legacy media as suppliers of local civic news at the downplay of alternative media formats such as social media and digital-first outlets, which certain communities may be more likely to turn to for local information. Worthy of note is that news/media deserts are not just found in the US or Western industrialized countries but are consolidating into a global trend (e.g., Astuti & Irwansyah, 2022; da Silva & Pimenta, 2020).

The affordances and reach of social media have been seen by many as presenting great potential to counter the onslaught of digital disruption in revitalizing journalism. One such model is Bruns’ (2018) social news media network, which is triumphantly proclaimed to bridge “multiple publics” and brew “divergent perspectives” because users’:

News sharing activities not only involve the horizontal passing on of information from one social media public to another but also the vertical sharing of information gleaned from social media spaces to face-to-face communication and other forms of interpersonal engagement. (Bruns, 2018, p. 363)

In a similar vein, Marchi and Clark (2021, p. 300) contend that social media-based connective journalism promotes political awareness, youth citizenship, and civic action among young people through “sharing personal feelings, experiences and meaningful news with their personal networks.”

Despite their omnipresence, social media-led digital networks, many have argued, create new formations of inequalities. For example, Helsper (2021) dissects various forms of socio-digital inequalities along dimensions of traditional socio-economic, socio-cultural, and individual gaps. These inequalities are tantamount to “social media news deserts” that, driven mostly by access, literacy, and engagement styles, disadvantage certain groups in society to deprived exposure to important political, public affairs, and social information (Barnidge & Xenos, 2021). As incidental exposure becomes the primary way of directing more and more people to news content (Thorson, 2020), the inequalities may be widening through a Matthew effect in social media news use due to the relative enrichment of some and the impoverishment of others as a result of the combined effects of user preferences and dispositions, social networks, algorithmic values, and platform design and features (Kümpel, 2020). One critical dimension of digital inequalities is digital footprints, defined by Micheli et al. (2018, p. 243) as “the aggregate of data derived from the digitally traceable behavior and online presence associated with an individual.” The footprints include, among other things, active content creation and sharing, associated user activities, and digital behaviors by related others. As the commercialization of social media platforms deepens, it is easy to imagine the ranking value of one’s purchase and consumption power in driving digital inequalities with regard to content curation and redirection.

2.2. Newspapers, Television, and New Media in China

Newspapers have figured prominently in the various conceptualizations of news deserts. A brief overview of the historical development of China’s newspaper industry is therefore necessary for the assessment of news deserts in China. The restructuring and reform of (print and

broadcast) media has been an important part of the overall economic reform initiative since 1978. Starting in the 1980s, a major measure in media reform has been the marketization of media operations from the previous state-supported model to one that hinges on subscription and advertising, thus spurring cutthroat competition for readership and ratings. In their sustained efforts to respond to audience demand and maintain a delicate degree of independence from the state's most preferred ideological stance, the Chinese media have been able to offer diversified news and entertainment content to a large audience base and enjoy a relatively high level of credibility among the general public; meanwhile, market-oriented media provide a viable mechanism for the authoritarian state to monitor public opinion and help the party-state maintain stability and legitimacy (Stockmann, 2013). The media market witnessed a sustained period of rapid growth and steady expansion into the early 2000s. In 1978, China had 180 newspapers and fewer than 400 radio and television stations in the country; by 2012, there were 1,918 newspapers and 2,579 radio and television stations (Shao et al., 2016).

After its circulation peaked in 2012, the Chinese newspaper industry has been on a sharp downward trend in both its readership and advertising revenues. The total number of newspaper titles shrank from 1,918 in 2012 to 1,810 in 2020, while advertising revenues experienced a precipitous drop with its 2021 income at 1/15 of what it was in 2011 (Cui & Chen, 2022). In responding to the changing media ecosystem, Chinese newspapers embarked on a new round of innovative reform initiatives in boosting revenue sources and restructuring organizations, including reconsolidating newspaper groups, partnering with the state and commercial entities for direct and indirect subsidies, strengthening side-line businesses, redefining their daily operations from journalism-focused to (information) service-focused missions, and, more importantly, repurposing content for mobile delivery (Fang & Repnikova, 2022; Wang & Sparks, 2019).

Unlike newspapers, Chinese television has maintained a conspicuous presence in public life. For example, ratings of television watching in 35 major Chinese cities in 2021 show that 14.5% of the audience watched news on television during the 7-pm-to-midnight period; this was a drop from 16.8% in 2020 (which was a historical record high due to nationwide lockdowns) but was higher than the 10–11% range in the previous decade (Wang, 2022). However, there is considerable variation from channel to channel in terms of audience share. China Central Television, the only national network, draws 43% of the news audience, followed by provincial satellite channels (27.2%) and provincial terrestrial channels (18.5%). By contrast, news on metropolitan channels is only watched by 8.1% of the news viewers, while the rest of the channels, which include operations by local broadcasters, pick up only 3.2% of the news audience (Wang, 2022). Because national and provincial tele-

vision networks possess more financial and technological resources in news production, it is no surprise that they are leaders in attracting news audiences. On the other hand, metropolitan and regional television stations are heavy carriers of local news, and their diminished presence in news consumption does not bode well for patching up the local news deserts.

In response to technological innovations in the television market, one strategy spearheaded by national and provincial networks is the “One Cloud Multiple Screens” service model, which integrates television, radio, online media, social media, and apps into an AI-operated, cloud-based content delivery system (Central Television Research, 2023). This shift from big screen (i.e., television) to multiscreen delivery is necessitated by the changing media ecosystem in which more and more audience members are consuming video content on smartphones and other hand-held devices. Indeed, as the Central Television Research (2023) report acknowledges, the leading areas of growth in advertising revenue in 2009–2021 have been related to mobile and online video use (including both news and entertainment programming). The National Radio and Television Administration takes the lead in overseeing the implementation of one such nationwide initiative called the Convergent Media project. The idea is to provide technological and financial support to county-level and township-level authorities in mobilizing television, print, and digital media into an integrated online site plus a dedicated smartphone app for local news and civic information.

The digital strategies of delivering news online have been facilitated immensely by the rapid emergence of China as a global tech power in the new millennium. Since the 1990s, the Chinese state has implemented a series of aggressive strategies to foster technonationalist ambitions and overt cyber sovereignty goals through ICT innovation and development (Keane & Chen, 2017). Increasing rivalry between the US and China in recent years has catalyzed the rise of state platform capitalism, Rolf and Schindler (2023) argue, in which the distinctive affordances of digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WeChat empower the US and China “with new potentialities for carving out nationally centred digital empires and leveraging extra-territorial power” (Rolf & Schindler, 2023, p. 6) in geopolitical contestation. Along these lines, WeChat, the most popular application of interpersonal networking in China, has transformed from “platformization” to “infrastructuralization” as “a meeting ground for both the business ambitions of internet companies and the infrastructural ambitions of the Chinese authorities” (Plantin & de Seta, 2019, p. 259). Besides state policymaking and grand strategization, the huge Chinese market size provides indispensable leverage in the domestic ecosystem that most countries do not possess in aligning state interests with multifarious infrastructural engagements to economic gains. As of June 2022, China's internet population (i.e., people with access to the internet) reached 1.05 billion

(out of an estimated total population of 1.4 billion), with 99.6% of them surfing the web on smartphones (China Internet Network Information Center, 2022).

The proliferation of social media has drastically reshaped the contours of the Chinese media ecological system. First, the explosive penetration of social media platforms creates plentiful opportunities for conventional news media and journalists to disseminate news and amplify reach (Jian & Liu, 2018; Xu, 2022). Second, social media allows a viable space for news start-ups to practice a brand-new genre of news service by venturing into areas of coverage otherwise unfulfilled by the official media while maintaining autonomy from the state and achieving “negotiated professionalism” (Deng & Yan, 2022). Additionally, user-centered production in social media has incubated an “innovative repertoire of contention” (Yu et al., 2023) and heterogeneous discourses (Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021) on issues of public interest. Citizen journalism and online opinions in Chinese social media may influence the agenda of traditional media as well as government policymaking (Luo & Harrison, 2019).

2.3. Research Goal and Questions

The purpose of this research is to investigate the evolving landscape of news deserts in China in an era of media ecology dominated by smartphone-based social media communication, which is paralleled by a continuous diminishing and decline of the newspaper—both as a vehicle of community news and as an anchor of collective identity. We define news deserts as geographically bound communities where there is a lack of presence by legacy media such as the newspaper and television as regular providers of locally based news and perspectives. Our examination of news deserts is driven by these overall questions:

RQ1: How do residents in these areas obtain news about the outside world in general and their local communities in particular?

RQ2: How do they engage various platforms of social media in the consumption (as recipients) and production (as originators) of both local and non-local news?

RQ3: What major outlets (from both legacy and digital media platforms) serve as local news sources for the residents in such areas?

Our focus is on not just the quantity but also the quality and the nature of news that is involved in these processes.

3. Methodological Approaches and Data

We adopted a multi-methods approach combining focus groups and individual in-depth interviews in gathering

data to address the above questions. Although focus groups have become a well-established qualitative technique in social research (Krueger & Casey, 2015), some caution that focus groups may suppress or silence voices concerning “private and isolating experiences” from marginalized or stigmatized individuals (Michell, 1999, p. 46). In-depth interviews, which are considered the gold standard of qualitative inquiry, work best in reaching out to targeted individuals one-on-one to explore personal experiences. On the other hand, user interaction in focus groups can add depth to the inquiry and tap into aspects of the phenomenon otherwise unavailable from interviews. Thus, combining both approaches has been proven to be effective in triangulating data and perspectives for purposes of data completeness and confirmation (Lambert & Loiseau, 2008).

Our research was conducted during a period when the Covid-19 pandemic continued to be a public health hazard, and varying measures of lockdowns and travel restrictions were still in place in most regions in China. Moreover, the wide span of geographic range with the pool of our interview participants posed extra challenges for conventional face-to-face interviews. We therefore resorted to an online modality for completing the interviews. As Żadkowska et al. (2022, p. 2) observed, online interviews may be “more equipped” than traditional approaches and may “make it the first not the second-best choice” in gathering certain types of data, which we believe aptly describes this study’s context and goal setting. Because they were intended to complement and add interaction dynamics to the interview data, the focus groups were conducted in person and on-site.

3.1. Research Design and Procedure

As the socio-geographic location was pertinent to our interest in local news deserts, we limited the scope of our inquiry to residents in suburban and rural communities across China without the presence of local newspapers. A local newspaper is defined as a conventional publication that is printed at least weekly and specializes in covering news in the geo-location where it is based. As an illustration, one locality fitting the profile of and included in our research (i.e., communities without local newspapers) is Xishui, a county-level city in China’s Southwest Guizhou Province. With a population of 717.5 thousand (Wikipedia, n.d.), Xishui does not have a newspaper in its territory. However, Xishui is an administrative unit of Zunyi, a prefecture-level city that publishes its newspaper *Zunyi Daily*. In turn, Zunyi is under the jurisdiction of Guizhou Province, which runs its provincial paper *Guizhou Daily*. In the Chinese press system, *Zunyi Daily* is considered a local newspaper to Zunyi but not Xishui, even though the paper may occasionally cover major news events in the latter. *Guizhou Daily*, on the other hand, is accountable to the provincial authorities and reports major news across the whole province. In order to streamline the interview process and optimize

interviewer–interviewee communication, we adopted a stratified, snowball sampling approach in identifying candidates for in-depth interviews. The primary consideration was to cater to the language needs of the specific sociodemographic characteristics of our targeted population. There are hundreds of local dialects across China and it can be difficult for people to communicate in different dialects. This is a potential barrier for the vast majority of residents in rural and urban areas in many places because most of them are not well-educated to speak fluent Putonghua (the standard spoken Mandarin).

Our stratification strategy started with selecting potential interviewers representing different regions in China. We took advantage of a metropolitan university in southeastern China, which enrolls students from across the country. We obtained the roster of junior and senior students from the media and communication program and selected 40 students who met the following criteria: passed a required interviewing-and-reporting-for-the-media course with a B or above grade and came from a rural or suburban region that fits our preset geographic profile and had the proficiency in speaking the dialect used in that region. We then reached out to the selected pool of students as potential interviewers for the research. After being briefed on the scope and the expected responsibility of their participation, those who expressed interest were admitted into a few paid training sessions on interview skills and logistics. Student trainees were evaluated through mock-up interviews and a total of 12 student researchers were chosen as finalists. The researchers developed a unified set of interview questions and then worked individually with each student researcher in making appropriate adaptations toward the dialectical particularities of the respectively targeted regions.

Snowballing was used in sampling interviewees following this process. Each student researcher worked with the faculty supervisors in identifying three to four acquaintances in the home regions they represented, who were each asked to name two to four candidates along predefined sociodemographic lines as potential interviewees (who must be regular residents, not transients, of the locality). Nominated candidates from all 12 student interviewers were aggregated into one master list (totaling 105), and 60 were chosen as final interviewees driven by consideration of maximal socioeconomic and regional representation. We followed the well-tested “invitation–dealing with technology–transparency–designing the virtual interview space” process as developed by Żadkowska et al. (2022) to carry out the interviews. The difference is that instead of Zoom, we used WeChat, the most popular real-time audio and video messaging platform in China. Of the 60 finalists solicited for WeChat video chat calls, 44 responded positively and completed the interviews. Student researchers conducted the interviews in local dialects, with one faculty researcher present in the background but not visible to the interviewees so as to not distract or disrupt the flow

of the conversations. The audio part of each interview was recorded and subsequently transcribed for further analysis. Each student researcher was compensated for their time and effort at the conclusion of the interviews. Sample characteristics were summarized in Table 1.

For the focus groups, we utilized a “nomination” sampling approach, which Krueger and Casey (2015, p. 202) call “the most effective strategy in community studies.” We identified a few well-connected individuals and mentioned specifications to them for nominees in the local community as potential participants. We chose one county in Southwestern China, which is suburban in setting, for the site of one focus group and selected a rural community in the same province for the other focus group. One faculty researcher moderated the focus group discussions, assisted by a student researcher with expertise in local dialects and customs. The focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Six of 10 invitees showed up and completed the group-based discussions for each focus group.

3.2. Data Analysis

We followed the logic of grounded theory coding as specified by Charmaz (2014) in data analysis. The multi-methods approach offers us one great vantage point. We started by analyzing the two focus groups and gained a solid understanding of the dominant opinions and typical practices. Next, we performed “open-ended coding” (initial coding) of each interview by naming, labeling, and segmenting individual experiences, which were then compared with themes in the focus group discussions to crystalize into categories and patterns that meaningfully describe the residents’ overall experiences. The phase of “focused coding” allowed us to “sift, sort, synthesize, and analyze” the total corpus of data into emergent conceptual themes and user tendencies Charmaz (2014). In the latter phase, we also paid attention to deviating and idiosyncratic experiences of the interviewees.

4. Findings

4.1. Newspaper Encounter

Even though the geographic sites we included in our research are all without local newspapers, it does not necessarily mean that they are totally devoid of *all* newspapers. There is an obvious spillover effect with national and regional newspapers being distributed to most locations. Three types of papers have been mentioned in the interviews (as order ranked): *People’s Daily*, which is the propaganda arm and reports the views and policies of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party; the respective provincial newspapers in which the interviewees reside (e.g., *Yunnan Daily* for residents in a local town we interviewed in that province), which is the official publication for the provincial committee of the Chinese Communist Party; and one or

Table 1. Interviewee characteristics.

| Variable | Variable trait | Value |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Age | 18–19 | 3 |
| | 20–29 | 11 |
| | 30–39 | 11 |
| | 40–49 | 9 |
| | 50–59 | 5 |
| | 60 and above | 5 |
| Gender | Female | 21 |
| | Male | 23 |
| Locality | Suburban | 20 |
| | Rural | 24 |
| Geographic representation | Provincial regions | 9 |
| Occupation | Technical/mechanical worker | 6 |
| | Educator/banker | 5 |
| | Farmer | 5 |
| | Salesperson/business employee | 5 |
| | Freelance worker | 4 |
| | Government clerk/village leader | 4 |
| | Housewife | 4 |
| | Retiree | 4 |
| | Unemployed | 4 |
| | Medical worker | 3 |
| | Education | Elementary school |
| Middle school | | 11 |
| High (secondary) school | | 12 |
| Two-year college (associate degree) | | 9 |
| Four-year college (bachelor’s degree) | | 7 |

more metropolitan papers from the nearby metropolis, which tend to be more entertainment-oriented. These papers are available, even in most remote urban villages, because the Chinese Communist Party organizations from the villages are required to subscribe to the *People’s Daily* and the provincial party paper.

Over half of the interviewees said they never or seldom read any print newspaper at all. Two commented to the effect that “I don’t know that newspapers still exist.” Five interviewees mentioned that they used to read newspapers but quit a few years ago; four of them stopped newspaper use due to lack of interest, and one 77-year-old retiree indicated that he remained interested in reading, but his declining vision no longer allowed him to read. Eight residents said they only occasionally read newspapers, and they would do this during fragments of leisure time when there was ready access to a newspaper. So this chance encounter with newspapers might trigger snippets of reading. Only two admitted to being avid newspaper readers, and their regular use of multiple newspapers was motivated by different reasons: A 42-year-old mechanical engineer attributed this to his personal interest (in being a “news junkie”) and a 51-year-old village head relied on the newspapers to be informed about latest state and provincial policies and developments.

4.2. Television and Radio News

The pervasiveness of television broadcast was easy to notice as only one (a 48-year-old housewife) reported not having a TV set at home. Easy access to television, nevertheless, is not tantamount to use, as 16 participants said they rarely watched TV, if ever. These include people in certain professions, such as truck driver, medical doctor, government clerk, farmer, or salesperson, with lack of interest being the most cited reason, followed by not fitting one’s routine schedule (i.e., air time in conflict with professional or menial tasks). Slightly over half of the non-TV users indicated that, from time to time, they resorted to accessing similar programming on their smartphones at a pace and time of their convenience.

As might be expected, television use was heavily entertainment-oriented: 15 interviewees reported watching mostly teledramas, movies, and entertainment series over other programs, while 10 indicated television news was a draw to them more than anything else. TV use by three men was almost exclusively sports-focused. As for news, the national TV network China Central Television channels were the preferred choice by most, followed by provincial cable channels. Any news that was watched then was mostly either national news, world news, or news at the provincial level; local news

rarely would be featured on television, as confirmed throughout the interviews. Any exposure to local news was accidental, typically at moments when the local channel was on during news hours. Radio was only mentioned by five as an occasional source of news when it was turned on in the car or as a background companion. There was no indication that there was any intentional effort to dial the radio for the news, thus news listening was clearly incidental.

4.3. Social Media and Digital News

It is easy to notice that smartphone-based applications and platforms have become mainstream in news consumption. All of the interviewees said they receive news on their smartphones, although the degree of news engagement varies substantially. We noted two distinct types of news use patterns. On the one hand, there were those (close to half of the participants) who rather passively received news from either reposts by friends or other sources on their social media, and their exposure to news on social media was mostly indiscriminate, meaning that there was not really any particular category of news they avowed an interest in. They said they only occasionally took the effort to search for news online. On the opposite end, a slight majority of the interviewees reported actively seeking news from multiple sources, and they typically subscribed to multiple news feeds both on WeChat and via third-party apps. They were also inclined to repost news from time to time on their social media.

Three types of apps and services that specialize in news delivery were cited frequently. First, many used smartphone apps developed and operated by newspapers that send out real-time updates and news reports. The apps by *People's Daily*, provincial newspapers, and metropolitan papers were the most commonly mentioned among the interviewees. Second, two-thirds of the interviewees used WeChat subscription channels (called WeChat public channels) that offer news and information feeds by newspapers, government entities, and various institutions and organizations. These channels, which are embedded within WeChat and free to subscribers, are a common venue for mass circulating information and are very popular among Chinese users.

Third, a few content-creating and sharing apps have become regular sources of information in China, as testified in our interviews. The apps frequently mentioned by the interviewees include Douyin (the Chinese domestic counterpart of TikTok), Toutiao (a news aggregating application), Xiaohongshu (an Instagram-like platform in China), and KuaiShou (a short-video sharing mobile app). Moreover, a number of individuals reported using Baidu (China's search engine, with its own news page, similarly modeled like Yahoo News), Tencent's subsidiaries Sohu (<https://www.sohu.com>) and QQ (<https://www.qq.com>), and SINA (<http://www.sina.com.cn>) as well as newspaper websites. Noticeably, Sina Weibo, China's Twitter

counterpart, was only mentioned by about a quarter of the interviewees as a regular source of news, showing the declining presence of Weibo in the Chinese news-making process. This pattern conforms to the national trend identified in other studies pointing to the diminished role of Sina Weibo in news distribution and its shifting focus on entertainment-oriented permutations (Jia & Han, 2020).

It is worth mentioning the specific role of one particular type of social media influencer—called 流量明星 in Chinese (“viral stars,” as these people rely on cranking up the volume of traffic in social media to make a living)—in spreading information in the virtual space. One common strategy for these viral stars to grab audience attention is to spice up trending topics. Because these social media operatives do not have much original news, they have developed cunning ways to stir the pot with hot-interest news events by adding often unsubstantiated tidbits, sensational commentaries, and speculative assumptions. In the process of spreading such information, they magnify public awareness of these events. Over half of our interviewees reported receiving news-related information from such micro-influencers on a regular basis. One such story that came up in our interviews was the chained woman in a rural village in Feng County of Jiangsu Province (Cao & Feng, 2022). The original video by the vlogger generated close to two billion clicks and led to tens of thousands of follow-up posts by other social media writers. Besides this event, other events that were followed closely by many of our interviewees include the US–China trade war, the Russian war in Ukraine, US sanctions of Huawei (as well as the detention and later release of Huawei's CIO Meng Wanzhou), among others. This user-created space is fertile ground for conspiracy theories, fake news, and nationalist narratives. Four interviewees specifically mentioned the “news” they read in WeChat on how the US military personnel allegedly exported the Covid-19 virus to Wuhan, and quite a few shared with us the fake news of purported recipes using traditional Chinese medicine and certain over-the-counter drugs to cure Covid-19.

Finally, six interviewees expressed their appreciation for the ability to carve out a path for news and information that aids their professional and hobby pursuits such as cooking, automobiles, mechanical automation, sports, sales promotion, and construction. As an example, a construction worker said that by compiling various sources of local and adjacent construction markets and needs, he was able to help himself and his co-workers constantly move to good-paying jobs in the area.

4.4. Local News

Local news is still important in the lives of most participants: 36 interviewees said they often or regularly followed local news, while eight reported not being interested. Sources of local news include the following venues. First, the most often mentioned channel

was WeChat public accounts operated by local governments, which frequently publish news and community-related information. Another popular source for local news is the Convergent Media platform mentioned in the literature review. While the initiative started at the country-level cities about a decade ago, most township government administrations have also joined this effort in recent years, and most towns are now running their own convergent media operations. As an example, all four interviewees from Zhenxiong mentioned using Zhenxiong Microlife, a convergent media app by Zhenxiong Township in Yunan Province. Similar platforms in different localities were mentioned as viable local news sources by most of the interviewees. In terms of distribution, the majority of the interviewees mentioned gaining exposure to local news on the Convergent Media outlets via reposting by WeChat circles, a popular way of sharing information with WeChat social networks.

Traditional interpersonal networks maintain their relevance in the circulation of local news, especially in rural communities. Places like tea houses, town squares, convenience stores, and even street corners were all mentioned in the focus groups as popular sites for communal news sharing. As one participant remarked: “Any news of the day spreads in no time from this side to that side of the street in town.” In particular relevance to local news, our interview data revealed a pattern of the two-step flow process of information dissemination among the local audience as identified by Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) 80 years ago: Some news was mentioned by many interviewees as spreading from people who learned it first typically in social media networks to others through formal and informal encounters that took place in the workplace, community gathering places, and over dinner tables. However, social networks’ local news communication is more of a reincarnation than a revival of the old two-step flow; dynamics in social media have created multi-layered intermediaries connecting sources to an amplified base of online and offline followers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Declining readership and loss of advertising revenue have brought unprecedented challenges to Chinese newspapers. The increasing number of communities without newspapers or other legacy media as a reliable source of local news has important implications for the evolving media ecology. At the same time, the rapid diffusion of smartphone technologies and personal communication networks has drastically changed the modality of news and information delivery. In the communities we studied without local newspapers, there are really no discernible “news deserts,” as various forms of news are prevalent and plentiful, ranging from news feeds by national and provincial newspapers to locally based news reporting applications. Findings from our research demonstrate that chance encounters were still a common way for many users to casually pick up a print news-

paper from time to time, but there is no doubt that mobile access to newspaper content has taken precedence, especially among younger demographics.

We argue that an ecological perspective of news deserts as well as the future of community media should be a constructive approach to understanding news in the digital environment and contemplating actions and solutions. Media ecology provides a conceptual framework that looks at media as “‘species’ that live in the same ecosystem and establish relationships between each other” (Scolari, 2012, p. 209). Both intermedia coevolution and human-media coevolution are important to dissect the respective role of each mediated communication. Focus groups and in-depth interviews in our research indicate that most participants are shying away from newspapers in general nowadays in suburban and rural areas although certain news and information from newspapers is still desired. In this regard, instead of idealizing the “good old days” of local newspapers (Abernathy, 2018), it may be more proactive to interrogate the adapted role of community newspapers in the digital environment and strive for their new potential. Toward that end, a nuanced and accurate assessment of the changing functions of newspapers within the overall environs of information production and consumption in relative connection to other mediated outlets is the essential first step in contemplating innovative and integrative strategies.

One specific model is the hybrid hyperlocal media in Sweden as discussed by Nygren et al. (2018) that adapts to the evolving local media ecology and develops intermedia niche partnerships with legacy media in building digital platforms and amplifying voices to local communities. Similar initiatives in Spain, France, and Portugal are noted by Negreira-Rey et al. (2022). In direct relevance to China, *Southern Weekend*, which is a weekly in Guangzhou, took the drastic measure in April 2018 to a subscription-based multitier digital service expanding to not just repurposing local and regional news but also packaging service-oriented comprehensive information to diverse user groups. On its fifth anniversary in April 2023, it has garnered over 320,000 fee-paying subscribers, and the digital platform alone has generated a revenue of RMB 44 million (approximately 6.5 million USD; Xu, 2023). This shows local news alone may not be sufficient in attracting a viable subscriber base, but integrating news with diverse user-sought information for deliveries to apps and other digital venues can be a promising hybrid model in sustaining hyperlocal news production. We concur with Nygren et al. (2018, p. 46) that this is a very much “under-researched area of local news ecologies” in media and journalism scholarship.

The Convergent Media initiative by the Chinese state seems to be an effective response to local news production in the digital era. Integrating news, serviceable information, and community announcements into one app has become a primary venue for local residents to stay informed. Other community-based news channels

are WeChat-based public accounts. These are all administered by local governments and serve the duality of information and propaganda needs. It must be understood within the particularity of the Chinese media system, which bans individuals and private capital from the news business. Mediated communication has always been a battlefield of ideological control and contestation between state and civil society interests in China (Meng, 2018), and the state-orchestrated Convergent Media represents a new frontline for the authorities at the local levels to propagate news and information they see fit. This type of community news production is not likely to be feasible for the vast majority of democratic systems in which the media stay outside of the parameters of government interests.

User-generated social media news provides countervailing perspectives and information not endorsed by the legacy media. For most users, the common approach in engaging with the news is incidental exposure through which users are exposed to news information as a byproduct of engaging in other communication behaviors (Thorson, 2020). People are getting used to receiving all sorts of information on their smartphones, and accidental encounters with news take place when people perform other activities. “Snacking on the news” (Molyneux, 2018) is also built into the habits of most users, with frequent low-attention news reading becoming the norm. User-centered information production by social media influencers tends to fan the flame of conspiracy theories and nationalist sentiments, and news is often poached for its entertainment and fun-making value.

5.1. Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. We studied a few suburban and rural communities without local newspapers, and the results may not be generalizable to urban residents and many other regional communities in China. Our focus on digital news is broad in nature, and we did not elaborate on the depth, quantity, and quality of news in the process. Also, examination of specific types of news may be a useful approach in shedding light on the news-making process.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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