NC CONNECTION—
CLOSING THE NEWS GAP PROJECT
Findings Report

CAROLINA Public Press
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Carolina Public Press is an independent nonprofit news organization dedicated to nonpartisan, in-depth and investigative news built upon the facts and context North Carolinians need to know. Our award-winning, breakthrough journalism dismantles barriers and shines a light on the critical overlooked and under-reported issues facing our state’s 10.4 million residents.

Founded in 2011 and originally established to focus on the issues, topics and challenges faced by Western North Carolina, the organization announced, in February 2018, its expansion to cover all of North Carolina. Since its launch, Carolina Public Press has steadily grown to attract a statewide and national audience; financial support from hundreds of individuals and foundations across the region, state and nation; and has had a proven impact in the community through its nonpartisan, unique reporting.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2021, the third Google News Initiative North America Innovation Challenge awarded Carolina Public Press a data-driven research grant to help address the need for local news research in North Carolina. As a result, the statewide nonprofit newsroom built the NC Connection: Closing the News Gap project to focus on the news needs of rural North Carolinians, especially those who can’t access or afford high-speed internet.

Through this project, Carolina Public Press worked within rural communities to discover news needs and distribution preferences of those living beyond “the end of the digital line.” Our goal is to use the results of this outreach to determine the feasibility of developing products, strategy and messaging designed to provide residents with essential news.

Carolina Public Press will share the project’s results with the public, our project partners and industry peers through this report, outreach to the media and industry peers, and a dedicated landing page, among other activities.

PURPOSE

Original thesis:

The rural population of North Carolina is increasingly underserved by traditional news organizations, both in print and digital media. Additionally, only 40% of the population has access to reliable, high-speed internet. A growing portion of rural North Carolinians, including Spanish speakers and bilingual North Carolinians, struggle to find meaningful and factual local news such as that provided by Carolina Public Press.

The purpose of this research was to better understand the news and internet needs of rural North Carolinians, particularly those who have limited or no reliable internet access. Carolina Public Press conducted this research in order to assist in the origination and development of news products to better serve people in these communities.

The results of this research have larger implications because North Carolina has the second-largest rural population in the United States. Understanding the news needs and consumption habits of rural communities is the first step in being able to reach them with information that is timely, relevant, geographically significant, true and has impact. The results of this study may have national significance to news organizations, funders and community organizations.
North Carolina has a significant digital divide; at least 1.1 million North Carolina households lack access to a broadband connection, cannot afford an internet subscription or do not have an adequate device. More than 40 North Carolina newspapers closed from 2004 to 2018. Six counties have no newspaper. And more than half of North Carolina’s 100 counties are at risk of becoming news deserts. “A news desert is an area in which there are no journalistic organizations that have the means to survive,” states News Media Alliance. “News deserts are found particularly in rural and economically distressed areas of the country, where for so long local newspapers were the main source of news for small communities, and which now are disappearing at an alarming rate.”

Some of these deserts are literal: The community truly has no local newspaper, states Penny Abernathy, visiting professor at Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism. Others are “endangered regions,” or communities in which newspapers are just barely hanging on.

The ability of digital news to fill gaps in declining print-based media is hampered by this increasing digital divide. This disproportionately impacts rural communities where broadband access simply does not exist, leaving residents without essential news and information.

**Research**

**Strategies**

**Survey**

*Using a survey, focus groups and other data-driven methods assisted us in establishing a baseline understanding of the community’s informational needs and expectations.*

Carolina Public Press developed a survey that was delivered via callouts in our daily and weekly newsletters, via our social media accounts, amplification by partner organizations, digital advertising on local and regional public radio stations and via opt-in text messaging and survey messaging.

The survey, launched on May 9, 2022, included multiple choice, ranking and narrative responses, which offered participants a variety of options in responding and offering feedback, requests and recommendations. CPP’s goal was to make the survey statistically significant, with a minimal margin of error. It was unfeasible to survey every adult living in the targeted rural areas in North Carolina (over 4.5 million in 2019). Therefore, a sample of the population was employed. Our contracted market research firm, Voccii, recommended that for the group (or geographic region) we wished to analyze, in our case, specific rural areas in North Carolina, we should strive for a sample size between 250 and 400, if it is possible to achieve.

The survey was delivered in both Spanish and English.

**Final survey results:**

- **1,594 total respondents**
  - 778 Completed (48.8% completion rate)
  - 324 Incomplete
  - 492 Disqualified
  - 54 Spanish language

Survey data shows where people abandoned the survey, and some are marked as “incomplete” because respondents did not fill in the optional text questions. Responses were “disqualified” if they did not meet certain demographic criteria. Changes to the survey included a note at the beginning about the gift card drawing for completed responses and a note halfway through the survey encouraging respondents to keep going.
COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- In-person conferences, farmers markets and flyers posted in Western North Carolina businesses.

- In September, Carolina Public Press partnered with the Border Belt Independent, Carolina Demography and the NC Local News Workshop at Elon University for a listening session about community news needs. There were approximately 40 people in attendance at this World Café-style event. During the program, we asked the attendees (broken into small discussion groups) about three topics:
  - What issues are important to you?
  - How do you get your news?
  - What stories do you want to see covered?

During the event, Carolina Public Press distributed a tri-fold brochure that described our NC Connection project and the organization, plus two articles from the CPP East bureau by reporter Ben Sessoms.

- Virtual activities included contacting more than 250 organizations, libraries and government agencies.

- SMS texting activities included nine text message campaigns regarding ARPA spending.

- We undertook a test send of a “Letter to the Editor,” coming from Executive Director Angie Newsome and encouraging community participation in the survey. Only one newspaper chose to print the letter.

- Advertising: We experimented with a variety of advertising delivery methods for this project, including radio taglines on public radio stations that serve the project’s target areas, digital ads on select regional radio websites, Facebook and Nextdoor (a hyperlocal social networking service for neighborhoods). We experienced the greatest success with a combination of on-air and digital ads placed with local public and for-profit radio stations in target areas.
Milestone One

Our activities included a variety of in-person, digital and one-on-one outreach. To date, we have contacted approximately 120 community organizations by email and phone, including county extensions, libraries, nonprofit organizations, museums, and businesses in target counties: 30 target counties identified in high-needs areas of the state in the western, eastern and southern regions.

Milestone One focused on collecting data through our online survey, as well as conducting outreach to garner interest in the survey. The survey launched on May 9 and had 577 responses by the end of the first phase.

Outreach for the survey and project was conducted by email, text message and social media to individuals and organizations serving rural North Carolina. The team worked with a graphic designer to create collateral in the form of ads, social media graphics and flyers to distribute in person. We also had all outreach material translated into Spanish.

PIVOTS

We initially coded the survey to include responses from rural-identifying participants only, but upon hearing feedback from multiple survey takers, we decided to open up the responses to those living in small towns as well. This increased the number of people who took the survey and gave us a more complete picture of the news and internet needs of people in sparsely populated areas.

CONCLUSIONS

• Only a small percentage of respondents do not have internet at home. Additional outreach will target libraries and other places where people use the internet while away from home. Most respondents use their phones to access the internet, so we can trial additional outreach through text message campaigns.

• Respondents use a variety of methods to access news information, but in almost all categories, the internet was the most common method. This may indicate that those who have internet access are more likely to use it to get their news and information. The next most used method of news access was on phones. Our interviews and focus groups are asking follow-up questions about how people get their news on phones, including social media, apps, newsfeeds and news organization websites.

• Additionally, many respondents still access local news through traditional newspapers, whether online or in print. Where they are still available, these news sources prove very valuable in informing people about local politics, social and entertainment news, and public interest stories.
Milestone Two

During the second half of this project, we continued to conduct outreach for the survey and also turned our attention to a series of listening sessions and focus groups to dive more deeply into understanding the news and internet needs of rural North Carolinians.

Our first live community listening session was held on Sept. 1 at the University of North Carolina’s Pembroke campus, in the Eastern part of the state. We partnered with the NC Local News Workshop of Elon University and the Border Belt Independent newspapers on outreach and program development. During the event, we spoke with a diverse group of community members about the unique needs of people in the Southeastern section of the state. People expressed their interest in solution-oriented journalism (a form of journalism focused on responses to problems) and direct-to-consumer news products.

On Nov. 17, we conducted another large listening session with media partners on the campus of Western Carolina University in Cullowhee. This session also included a presentation by Shelby Harris, a Carolina Public Press government reporter, based in Asheville, whose main focus has been informing communities in the region how American Rescue Plan (ARPA) expenditures have been decided upon and disbursed by local governments. This reporting has been especially important to rural communities, many of whom hoped that ARPA spending would include some funding to expand broadband and connectivity to digitally starved areas.

During this time, we also led two virtual focus groups, one on Oct. 27, in partnership with AMEXCAN (a Greenville, N.C.-based nonprofit that has as its mission to “support, empower and take progressive action for the Latino population” in North Carolina) for 50 bilingual English and Spanish speakers to talk about news needs for both linguistic communities. On Nov. 15, we held an additional focus group to hear from people in Eastern North Carolina about their news needs. While sparsely attended, we did glean some actionable information.

PIVOTS

During Milestone Two, we pivoted away from conducting one-on-one interviews in favor of having more group discussions in community settings. Interviews with individuals elicited valuable information but were time-consuming and not always representative of issues for many of the target areas.

THE LATINO AUDIENCE

According to the 2020 census, Latinos make up 10.2% of the total population of North Carolina, or 1.1 million people. Our survey was completed by 54 Latino people, making up 6% of the total respondents. Our data is limited to a small sample size; however, our findings suggest that Latino respondents have unique needs when it comes to news and internet connectivity.

To better understand the news needs of North Carolina’s Latino population, further outreach should be conducted. The outreach conducted to date has provided a better idea of what bilingual Latinos want to hear about and how they would like their community news delivered.

The survey told us that Latino respondents had the lowest rates of internet at home, at 14.8% without internet access, compared to 6% of the total respondents. When asked why they did not have internet at home, respondents said that the internet was not available (39.7%), that it was not reliable (49.2%) and that it was too expensive (36.5%).

Thirty-two percent of the total population surveyed has access to Spanish-language news media, compared to 53.7% of Latino respondents. When asked whether they had heard about federal ARPA spending, 61% of respondents said yes, 28% said no, and 11% said they weren’t sure.
Among our most important findings was the racial disparity in home internet connectivity rates, with Latino respondents reporting the lowest rates of internet at home (84%) as compared to 94% for the total population.

In general, responses varied slightly from topic to topic; most respondents got their news from local papers, TV, the internet and on cell phones. Our survey indicated that older adults (65+) were more likely to get their news from local newspapers than any other source, whereas younger adults were most likely to get their news from the internet or cell phones.

The most important news topics ranked by respondents included health care, local and state government, weather, environment and the economy. Respondents mostly felt that they had enough information about the topics listed, but at least 25% wanted more news about local government, investigative stories and the environment.

Preferred news delivery was online (60.2%), though local papers, radio stations, TV and cellphone also had rates of response.
CONCLUSION

Summary

Our survey found that most respondents did have access to the internet, though there were disparities in the rates of internet connectivity. Additionally, some respondents reported that they had internet at home but that it was through a mobile network on cellphones, which limits the amount and kind of information that can be accessed.

The majority of people surveyed get their news from multiple sources, but it appears that television news is on the decline. More respondents got news from the internet and cellphones than any other sources.

Our research found that many people in rural North Carolina still rely on local newspapers for information pertaining to local and statewide issues. Television and radio are also still fairly popular news delivery means.

In one-on-one interviews with survey respondents, we heard repeatedly a concern with the quality of news media, and some people talked at length about doing their own fact checking on news articles. We learned that there is a significant gap in Spanish news media, and we hope to continue to build relationships with the Latino community to better serve this population.

An in-depth review of all the research will help Carolina Public Press staff examine the possibilities and determine the feasibility of creating news products that could address the needs of specific North Carolina communities.

Next steps

The NC Connection research has important implications for news organizations nationwide, but more research is needed to further identify how to reach rural populations at the end of the digital divide, particularly marginalized people within these communities. Our partnership with AMEXCAN, including the conversation with the NC Latino Resource Network and our Virtual Focus Group for Bilingual North Carolinians helped us identify additional research and development opportunities with North Carolina’s Latino community.

CPP will work to identify and develop novel news products, including newsletters and direct-to-consumer text messaging newsrooms, that will be tailored to specific audiences in need of investigative journalism. We are working to secure funding for additional reporters who could contribute to the organization’s mission to serve all of North Carolina’s residents and we are looking for partners who are interested in funding news products that would serve North Carolinians beyond the digital divide.

CPP wants to hear about your local news needs and develop ways to serve you better. Take our survey today!

Visit https://bit.ly/cppgni22 or text SURVEY to 866-716-1266
The following list is a set of suggestions for CPP, communities, and journalists based on the NC Connections research project. This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor does it reflect the extent of our post-project activities as an organization.

**What can Carolina Public Press do?**

- Develop additional unique novel news products, including newsletters specifically designed for rural communities.
- Expand the text message news delivery system to reach more digitally challenged rural residents, including the use of Whatsapp to send micro-stories/short weekly round-ups.
- Develop additional audio options, including the reading of stories, and a podcast.
- Utilize community-based news distribution methods such as through school systems, community health networks, food banks, community organizations.

**What can communities do?**

- Develop relationships with journalists in your community that go beyond press releases.
- Train community members as citizen journalists to cover local news topics.
- Start a community listserv or text message chain in rural areas to disseminate reliable, accurate and trustworthy news that’s independent of social media.
- Learn more about issues related to high speed internet access in your community, county and state.

**What can journalists do?**

- Use Whatsapp, Signal, and other text message services to connect with sources in hard-to-reach locations.
- Report on broadband issues in your communities, including the barriers to access.
- Take an audience-first approach and review audience data from this survey and others when planning beats, coverage and projects.
- Challenge assumptions and stereotypes about rural communities and look for their inherent diversity, complexity and authenticity.
FUNDING AND PARTNERSHIPS

Project Type:
Collaboration, Community Research, Data Analysis

Date: December 2021-November 2022

Location: North Carolina

Newsroom:
Carolina Public Press, Asheville, N.C. (headquarters)

Collaborators
• The NC Rural Center
• The Border Belt Independent
• NC Local News Workshop
• Carolina Demography
• AMEXCAN

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• Google GNI Innovation Challenge
• Dogwood Health Trust

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