



After the Fact | The Loss of Local News: In a News Desert

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TRANSCRIPT

[Cold open]

Joshua Sharpe, reporter, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: One hundred years from now, if a kid is assigned to write a history report about your town and small-town Georgia somewhere, what source are they going to have to go look up the history? There will be no chronicle of history. So, it's going to be really difficult, and I think we're going to lose a lot of information.

[Transition music plays]

Dan LeDuc, host: For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact." And that was Joshua Sharpe, a reporter with *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. He's speaking to the loss of local newspapers in this country over the last decade and a half. And that brings us to the data point for this episode: 2,000. There are 3,143 counties in the United States and more than 2,000 of them don't have a local daily newspaper. Many of these communities have become what Penny Abernathy calls a "news desert."

Penny Abernathy, professor, University of North Carolina Hussman School of Journalism: One of the things that has concerned me the most about the rise of news deserts—that it typically occurs in the communities that can least afford to lose vital information links. They are typically much poorer, tend to be older, and less educated. The communities really need the kind of information that is going to help residents there make wise decisions, not only about the choices they make today, but how those choices might affect future lives.

Dan LeDuc: Penny Abernathy is a professor and the Knight Chair in Journalism and Digital Media Economics at the Hussman School of Journalism at the University of North Carolina. She wrote a comprehensive [report](#) on "The Expanding News Desert," which chronicles the increasing number of communities without local news.

Penny Abernathy: If you look at the last 15 years, we've lost 2,100 newspapers in this country. That is one-fourth of the newspapers we had just 15 years ago. The second thing we've lost is we've lost journalists. We have gone over the last decade from having more



than 50,000 newspaper journalists to having only around 24,000 today. So if you think that we've lost more than half of the journalists, you can think, what are all the stories that would have been written as late as 2008 that don't get written today?

I started looking around to try to see what is the scope of the problem and realized there was no up-to-date accurate information. So, beginning in 2014, we went through a multiple-layered process of trying to identify exactly where we were losing newspapers and what sort of impact that might have on the future of communities.

Dan LeDuc: Now there's something like 200 counties in the United States that have no sort of formal news gathering newspaper organization?

Penny Abernathy: That's right. That's only at the county level. We tend to think of the digital divide as being a rural versus urban. This is very much one of income inequality, I think. If you look at it, you can say that the economically struggling communities are the very communities that need those kind of critical information tidbits that help them craft a new future.

Dan LeDuc: Well, you use a very provocative term—a news desert. Why did you decide on that word? How do you define it? And how did you determine where they are?

Penny Abernathy: Well, the term news desert is of relatively recent vintage, and it's gone through several iterations. We're very lucky that the FCC, back in early 2011, identified eight critical information needs that you and I need, regardless of what community we live in, to make good quality-of-life decisions. It's information about education, about the environment, about who's running for public office, about public safety and the like, about infrastructure. If you think about limited access to news and information that feeds our democracies, it's those critical information needs that we just don't get anymore, because there are fewer stories covering environmental disasters or potential environmental disasters. There are fewer stories about things as routine as warnings that come in for hurricanes and disasters coming our way.

Dan LeDuc: Let me take you back to a news desert for a minute and say I would appreciate journalists lamenting what's being lost because they recognize the value of their work, but did you hear from other people in those communities? Public officials, residents, business people?

Penny Abernathy: There was a wonderful book done by a professor out at Stanford two years ago called "Democracy's Detectives," and he tracked the dramatic drop-off in the number of investigative articles done by newspapers, especially in small and mid-sized



markets, and he attributed that very directly to the decrease in staffing, especially at metro papers.

There's also a study out of the University of Notre Dame that looked at what happened to interest rates and the cost of borrowing for local governments when there was no reporter there covering routine government meetings, where issues such as financing bonds were discussed. And what they found is that interest rates went up, which, of course, meant that taxpayers paid more when there was no one there covering routine government business.

So, one way to look at it is that we have two functions that reporters have provided. One is the investigative function that leads to better policies. The second is just a whole issue of having someone show up and shine a light, provide transparency to government proceedings. That vanishes when there's not a newspaper or a reporter covering town council meetings.

[Transition music plays]

Joshua Sharpe: I can tell you way back. Waycross, Georgia, grew out of a railroad line that was built in 1880.

Dan LeDuc: Joshua Sharpe writes for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* now, but he grew up in Waycross.

Joshua Sharpe: The town sprung up around it, to accommodate all the railroad workers and all the travelers that came through the area. And it became a real hub for commerce, and society around southeast Georgia.

I grew up reading the local paper. I grew up watching my dad sit there in his recliner every night, reading the local paper. I could still picture him there, and that's a good memory for me. It was just part of the air. It was always there. Everyone was always reading it. Everyone was always talking about what was in it. People were happy when the kid made the honor roll, and that was in the paper. I grew up knowing that the local paper contributed something really indispensable to the community.

[Transition music plays]

Dan LeDuc: Oh, man, that's like, one step removed from Ben Franklin right here.

[laughter] It says a lot about what a newspaper means to a community, that if you create a museum in town, that there's a room devoted to the newspaper.



Larry Purdom: Very much so.

Dan LeDuc: Two former classmates from Ware High School know all about the *Waycross Journal-Herald*—Larry Purdom was a reporter there and Gary Griffin was the managing editor.

Larry Purdom: Gary and I go back a long way. I sat behind Gary in journalism class and it was a real pleasure to be back in his presence, sitting right behind him.

Gary Griffin: I was shorter than Larry, so he could easily copy my papers.

Dan LeDuc: Larry and Gary met up with us at Okefenokee Heritage Center in Waycross, which includes an exhibit on the history of the *Journal-Herald*.

Gary, tell us about you. You spent over 40 years being a journalist in this town.

Gary Griffin: That's right.

Dan LeDuc: Why'd you choose to stay here?

Gary Griffin: Well, *Sports Illustrated* never did call me. They never called me. *[laughter]*

Dan LeDuc: Is there something about Waycross that made you want to stay?

Gary Griffin: Yeah, it's home. Just like Sheriff Andy Taylor on "The Andy Griffith Show," he thought about moving to Raleigh to work with a detective agency there. But in the end, he said, I like Mayberry. Aunt Bee likes it here. Opie does, too. And I kind of like it. So, he stayed in Mayberry. That was me, in Waycross.

Dan LeDuc: Talk to me about the role of this paper and how the newspaper tried to serve people so they knew what was going on in their community.

Gary Griffin: We would have tour groups come through. And I would tell them, your hometown newspaper mirrors your life. We're here to tell your life story. By that I mean, you know, what's the first big thing that happened? You were born. Your parents likely, back then, trotted down to the *Journal-Herald* to place a birth announcement. And that was the first chapter in your life story as told by your hometown newspaper. Then you get a little older and you hit a home run in a Little League baseball game, your name gets in the paper, and on and on and so forth. The engagement announcement, the wedding



write-up. Then you have your own little bundle of joy. And you're putting a birth announcement in.

Then what's the last big thing? And depending on the group, it's usually children that would say, "You die?" "Yeah," I says, "you die." And the obituary, that's the main drawing card of a small-town hometown newspaper.

Dan LeDuc: Let me ask you about what the newspaper meant to this community's civic life?

Gary Griffin: At election time, we would write about the local ballot items coming up, often on a daily basis. Just before the daily *Journal-Herald* went belly up, looming on the horizon was a November vote on a special purpose local option sales tax.

And the as the days drew nearer to the election, the daily *Journal-Herald* would have focused in on that in a big way, with news articles, news features, editorials, to inform the people. We probably wouldn't have come out and endorsed a "yes" or "no" vote. You don't do that in local politics.

Larry Purdom: It would have informed them. It would have explained where the money was going to go. And without that, nobody knew.

[Transition music plays]

Joshua Sharpe: [The *Waycross Journal-Herald*] just chronicled everything for us. You could go knock on any door in Waycross, Ware County, and maybe even a couple of adjacent counties, and ask to see their scrapbook. And if you went through there, I'd bet you'd find some kind of clipping from the *Waycross Journal-Herald* because they covered the local news well in that they chronicled the achievements of local people.

Dan LeDuc: That sort of local news is what helps stitch the fabric of a community. Joshua Sharpe got his start in the news business pulling together those kinds of items as an intern at the *Waycross Journal-Herald*. I asked him about the impact of local newspapers shutting down.

Joshua Sharpe: It's sad because what the communities are losing is something that is, I think, extremely valuable. They're losing papers, like the one that I grew up with that chronicled our daily lives. It's distressing because they're losing papers that could look out for their best interest, if they were still there. Residents typically don't go to city council meetings. You have to pay someone to do that. And that is normally a reporter.



I think a lot about what stories aren't getting covered when a newspaper closes. What are people not hearing about? Now, one thing that we do have is social media, but the standards there are not the same.

[Transition music plays]

Dave Callaway: It was definitely a shock. Like you say, you sort of take it for granted like we want to have coffee every morning. What happened if all the coffee dried up? What are you going to drink?

Dan LeDuc: That's Dave Callaway remembering September 30, the last day of the daily *Journal-Herald*. He is a local businessman, active in civic affairs, raised his family in Waycross, and still goes every week to see his grandkids games at the local high school. The newspaper was part of his daily life and the daily life of his family.

Dave Callaway: Well, it's been my go-to for information, coming out every day, six days a week. And I've told people—I said, you know, we're a small community—not too many communities our size has a daily newspaper. They published six days a week. They did a good job of reporting the news as it happened. And everybody that I'm aware of enjoyed getting the paper.

The last seven or eight years, they started putting up the paper online. So, I'd start looking for it about 11 o'clock in the morning. I'd read it online before it ever came to find out what was happening locally, not necessarily what was happening in the state or nationally or internationally, but what was happening—coverage of the county commission meeting, the city commission meeting, the board of education meetings, this type of thing.

Dan LeDuc: And that's the stuff that makes the community run. The city council, you've got to have one of those. Schools, got to have a school board. That's how a community governs itself and someone is going to tell you about it.

Dave Callaway: Right.

[Transition music plays]

Gary Griffin: *[Pulling out an old edition of the Waycross Journal-Herald.]* What date is this? Ruby killed Oswald, the day before, on a Sunday. I remember that was on a Sunday. What a monumental weekend that was, huh?



Dan LeDuc: Back at the Okefenokee Heritage Center, Larry and Gary page through large bound books of old editions of the *Waycross Journal-Herald* dating back to 1914.

Larry Purdom: The *Journal-Herald* used to be like family. When I first started down there in 1990, it was like family. It was a wonderful, wonderful feeling throughout the building. But, there was more and more competition like television and social media.

Advertisers can get their word out in a lot more different and varied ways, in alternative ways. And so they kind of forget about the daily paper and they go for the flash and the bright lights and the shiny objects. There were some rumors that the *Journal-Herald* was going to cease publication and nobody could believe it.

Gary Griffin: A lot of us had figured the end was near but I really thought we would go through Christmas, go through the end of 2019. We were called together, all the employees. The powers that be said, look y'all, we're going to put out two more papers and then y'all are going to be drawing unemployment. It was just jolting to everybody.

Larry Purdom: It was very gratifying to Gary and I, as newspaper people of a certain ilk, that the population in the whole area, not just in the city limits of Waycross, but the whole South Georgia area, said, whoa, what are we going to do? We don't have access to our local information. It wasn't quite panic in the streets but it was, "What are we gonna do?" Did Jimmy's Auto Parts store get broken into last week? Or was that a rumor? Did so-and-so get married? Did they get divorced? Did they have a child? Anybody having children anymore?

Gary Griffin: It's, like, this is our newspaper. What do you mean? Our newspaper's gone? Who took our newspaper away from us?

Dan LeDuc: The Pew Research Center, where we are associated, came out with a survey that showed 71 percent of Americans think their local news organization is just financially fine. And I'm guessing, here in Waycross, a lot of people thought everything was just fine at the *Journal-Herald*.

[Transition music plays]

Dave Callaway: I first saw it, I thought, well, this is not true. It can't be. I thought they just don't know what they're talking about, because that's not going to happen.

Dan LeDuc: Both Dave Callaway and Joshua Sharpe were surprised and disappointed by the news.



Joshua Sharpe: Well, to me it's both sad and distressing. If your newspaper closes, and there isn't anyone else who steps in to fill that void, then nobody's finding the secrets.

[Transition music plays]

Dan LeDuc: The local newspaper served as town square of sorts for many communities, and the journalists who helped provide that information—which was fact-checked and provided a historical record—now worry about what will fill the void.

Gary Griffin: Ten years ago, I would have never guessed that newspapers would go away in our lifetime. Five years ago, I would have said that couldn't happen. But here we are, and it's a shame. The media of yesterday, they're hurting right now around here, in part by the advent of social media. Social media is fine, but there's a little bit of hearsay in there.

Dan LeDuc: Before you put it on the printed page where it was going to last, you checked it out?

Gary Griffin: Yeah. We had to, I mean—not knocking social media—but they have no such rules and guidelines. The younger generation, they would often ask us, look, the rumor's out all over town, about the triple ax murder and y'all continue to not report it, if not plain-out deny it. And we were like, yeah, but you know, we don't deal in rumors. We have to talk to the police and the mayor and the authorities, and go by what they say. Now, if they're lying, you know, later on the truth will come out. You'll be proven right and we were wrong.

Larry Purdom: I think 90 percent of the time, we discovered that there was no triple ax murderer down the street that night.

Gary Griffin: Oh, yeah.

Larry Purdom: And it was just a rumor. So, a lot of our job was quoting “the rumor” that was just a rumor. That had no truth in it and that was part of our job.

Dan LeDuc: Larry, they say journalism is the first rough draft of history. And you're a historian in this community. So, when there's less newspaper, what is that going to mean for people like you 20, 50, 100 years from now, when they want to write about the history of this community then?



Larry Purdom: Tell it like it is. Because that's where I went. And my partner, Joe Valentine, we went to the old editions of the paper. And there it was, there was a story of going into the Okefenokee swamp, the whole history of making the Okefenokee Swamp into an international heritage site.

A weekly paper, try as they might, they aren't a daily edition, where you can go and see what happened on that day and how it impacts the future and the present. So, it's tough. It's tough and it is kind of a crisis. And you say, what will the future historians do? I don't know. Anybody who has a daily paper today, I urge them to cherish it.

[Transition music plays]

Dan LeDuc: A few weeks after the daily *Journal-Herald* printed its last issue, a weekly version of the paper was launched with a new owner who used to be the sports editor. But once a week is less than six times a week. As Gary told us, it's now possible for a Waycross person to die and be buried between the time one issue of the paper is printed and the next one comes out. While the folks in Waycross are getting used to the loss of their daily paper, there's a different story happening in western Massachusetts at *The Berkshire Eagle*.

Kevin Moran, executive editor and chief content officer, *The Berkshire Eagle*: We added some very fine journalists. And we really have just broken ground in terms of our breadth and depth of coverage. We've expanded sections and we've expanded our features department. Now we run a 12-page feature section on Sundays and it's all local.

Dan LeDuc: We travel to Massachusetts next week, where the printing presses are still running every day thanks to a small group of local investors who banded together to buy back their local paper. We'll see you next week.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."

[closing guitar music plays]

Female voice: "After the Fact" is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.