Oklahoma's News Media Ecosystem

Phase II Research

Status and Suggestions for Local News

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Executive Summary

Access to reliable local news is an essential component of civic life. Particularly in rural communities, local news provides information and promotes community engagement. Despite the importance of local news, data on the status of access and quality of Oklahoma news media is sparse and contradictory. In partnership with the Kirkpatrick Foundation and the Oklahoma Media Center, social scientists Rosemary Avance (Media & Strategic Communications, Oklahoma State University) and Allyson Shortle (Political Science, University of Oklahoma) designed, implemented, and analyzed a qualitative exploratory study to understand Oklahomans' perceptions of, access to, and consumption of reliable local news and information. Focusing on seven Oklahoma counties chosen for their varying access to local news, we conducted 352 community conversations through interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys to understand factors influencing Oklahomans' media use and perceptions. We found that Oklahomans statewide primarily rely on social media and local word of mouth for local news. Additionally, rural Oklahoma areas face specific challenges that problematize traditional news industry models. Using our unique dataset and ethnographic engagement with our study communities, we offer several recommendations to improve Oklahomans' trust in and engagement with local news. This study has practical and theoretical implications for local news media organizations in Oklahoma and other states with similar social and economic dynamics and broader implications regarding the role of journalism in democracy today.

Keywords:
news ecosystem, news desert, news desert, rural media, Oklahoma, media (dis)trust

Introduction

Access to reliable local news is an essential component of civic life, promoting engagement in local decision-making and allowing citizens to access information and opportunities. Particularly in rural communities, local news provides vital information that may not be available elsewhere. Rural populations may have less access to various news sources and may be more likely to rely on local news outlets, particularly television, for relevant information (Dalton, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of reliable local news access, as citizens relied on local sources to assess health risks (Shearer, 2020).

However, traditional news media have declined for well over two decades. As hometown newspapers shutter, Americans turn to national and sometimes partisan sources for their news (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018). Additionally, many people get their news directly from social media, where misleading and false news stories spread as much as accurate, fact-checked stories (Grinberg et al., 2019)—if not more (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Research suggests that urban dwellers are more likely to use online news sites and social media than their rural counterparts (Ksiazek, 2019).

The proliferation of fake news and growing political animosity is reflected in Americans' growing distrust of news media (Knight, 2018) and increasing partisan divisions (Knight, 2020). Research shows that lack of trust in news media correlates with several negative metrics, such as lower levels of media literacy and lower educational attainment (c.f., Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011); strong political partisanship, especially among conservatives; and both confirmation bias and social influence bias, wherein people tend to trust news that confirms their preexisting beliefs about the world and that is trusted by people they know and trust (Ksiazek, 2019).

In several ways, Oklahoma may provide a valuable case study to understand national trends in news media consumption habits and preferences and an important test case for local news media interventions. Oklahoma's demographics, political landscape, economics, and cultural factors reflect broader trends in the U.S.

As of the 2020 U.S. Census, Oklahoma's population of 3,959,353[1] includes a mix of urban, suburban, and rural communities representing a broad range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds. Compared to national statistics that show 88.9% of Americans have a high school degree or higher, the percentage of Oklahomans with a high school degree is 88.7%. Oklahoma's poverty rate of 15.5% just exceeds the U.S. average of 11.6%. White Oklahomans make up the majority at 73% of the population (compared to 75.5% of the broader U.S. population), with strong minority populations of American Indians (9.5% vs. 1.3% nationally), Black or African Americans (7.9% vs. 13.6% nationally) and Hispanic/Latinos (12.1% vs. 19.1%). While about 70% of Americans identify as Christian, that number is 79% in Oklahoma, of which 47% identify as Evangelical Protestants compared to just 25.4% of Christians at the national level (Pew Research Center, 2014).

Studying media consumption in such a diverse setting can provide insights into how various factors influence news preferences. Oklahoma's mix of urban and rural areas might lead to variations in traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers) versus digital media (online news, social media) use. Similarly, Oklahoma's education landscape varies widely, from highly educated urban populations to areas with lower educational attainment, which provides an opportunity to explore how education levels relate to the choice of news sources and the depth of engagement with news content. Economic conditions like income and employment opportunities may also correlate with media preferences. Understanding news media access and explanatory factors behind use and preferences can contribute to a broader understanding of media consumption trends.

Oklahoma is known for its conservative political and religious orientation, making it an interesting context to explore how political and religious ideologies shape media consumption. This context could shed light on what circumstances lead individuals to seek news sources that align with their beliefs or actively engage with diverse viewpoints. Cultural factors, including local news preferences, community involvement, and the influence of religious organizations, can significantly shape news consumption habits. Oklahoma's distinct culture and values could illuminate how such factors impact media choices. Understanding the local news ecosystem in

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[1] All descriptive demographic data regarding Oklahoma and its various counties is taken from the 2020 Census, available at https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/OK/PST045222

Oklahoma can help us determine the factors contributing to engagement or disengagement with news media in rural and urban centers and across the cultural spectrum.

Despite the importance of local news, data on the status of access and quality of Oklahoma news media is sparse and contradictory. While Abernathy's *Expanding News Desert* project at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (2022) provides useful information on the geographical distribution of news sources, its data on available papers does not necessarily equate to coverage. A paper in one town may cover news in an adjacent town, though the second town may have no paper of its own; in this case, the second town may be considered a news desert according to UNC's map, although its citizens may in actuality have access to local news. Moreover, this map only selectively accounts for tribal and other ethnic or minority news sources. It also does not assess the papers it lists to determine if they meet even minimal journalistic standards to provide consistent, reliable, relevant news.

Indeed, there is no reliable definition of "news desert" in the literature and no clear way to apply the useful theoretical assumptions around the phrase to practical interventions to increase media literacy, trust, and access. Instead, the best way to determine where and how Oklahomans get their news is to adopt a journalistic mindset and go find out.

In collaboration with the nonprofit Oklahoma Media Center, community researchers at the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University initiated Phase II of a bi-part study of Oklahoma's media ecosystem. Building on Phase I's statewide polling conducted in December 2022, our community-engaged research attempts to understand access patterns and related social behaviors among Oklahoma residents.

This report describes the design, implementation model, and findings of our innovative Oklahoma news media ecosystem study. First, we present an overview of the motivation for this study and our specific research questions. Then, we review relevant academic literature to understand the context of this study. Next, we describe our qualitative methodologies and implementation process, including details about the various communities we examined. Next, we describe our study's findings broadly in reference to each research question, then more specifically related to each community we engaged. Finally, we discuss the significance of our findings and offer recommendations for increasing Oklahomans' access to and trust in local

news. This study has practical and theoretical implications for local news media organizations in Oklahoma and other states with similar social and economic dynamics. It also has broader implications for the role of journalism in U.S. civic life.

Coal County, Oklahoma. Photo courtesy of the authors.

Research Questions

This baseline study takes as its overarching inquiry, *"What is the status of Oklahoma's local news ecosystem?"* For the purpose of this study, local news refers to non-weather-related news such as politics, crime, and community events. The study aims to understand Oklahomans' behaviors and preferences in accessing local news options such as television, print publications, newsletters, and social media and the specific channels and news producers Oklahomans trust and utilize.

We established research priorities in collaboration with our funding partner, Oklahoma Media Center. Then, we identified the following primary research questions:

> **RQ1:** Where do Oklahomans get local news and why?
>
> **RQ2:** Are Oklahomans satisfied with their media options?
>
> **RQ3:** What factors influence Oklahomans' trust or distrust of news, especially local?
>
> **RQ4:** What strategies may encourage persuadable Oklahomans to support and utilize local news media?

Literature Review

In this section, we review existing research on news media consumption trends in the United States, factors that affect individuals' trust in news media, and distinctions between urban and rural news access and identity.

News consumption trends in the United States

Journalism is foundational to democracy and community. Freedom of the press is built into the foundational principles of the United States to ensure government accountability and citizen participation in governance and civic life. Indeed, local news provides information and actual and perceived connections for local citizens and can facilitate greater community engagement, which may promote investment, community resiliency, and economic growth (Ali & Radcliffe, 2017; Hayes & Lawless, 2018; Peterson, 2019). The presence of local media serves to unite communities across space, providing a basis for shared values and common feeling (Anderson, 1983).

Local news media may have additional benefits for underserved or disadvantaged people (Abernathy, 2020). For example, Oberholzer-Gee & Waldfogel (2009) found that access to Spanish-language local television news increased Hispanic voter turnout by 5 to 10%. Moreover, evidence suggests that local news does not only benefit those who engage with it directly: The presence of local news media can create a diffusion effect that influences the behavior of those close to a person with access. In one study, voting increased significantly among friends of those who received a reminder to cast their ballots. In fact, the total effect on the friends was greater than the direct effect. Their findings confirm prior research and add to the evidence that online social networks can play a significant role in the diffusion of offline behaviors (Jones et al., 2017).

Utilization of local news media might also provide a buffer for growing concerns about U.S. political partisanship. Moskowitz (2020) found that voters in in-state television media markets were likelier to split their ticket when voting for president, state senator, or governor than those living in out-of-state markets. In other words, a lack of local news correlates with nationalized, straight-party voting, further enhancing the U.S. partisan divide.

Despite the important role of the news media in democracy, traditional news has been on the decline for well over a decade, as local media organizations struggle to maintain a workable revenue amid corporate consolidations of media outlets and the rising competition posed by digital media (Peterson, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2020), a situation that has been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Barthel, Matsa, & Worden, 2020; Tow Center, 2020). As local hometown newspapers shutter, Americans turn to national and sometimes partisan sources for their news (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018).

Today, many people get their news directly from social media., where false news stories spread as much (Grinberg et al., 2019) as true, fact-checked stories—if not more (Vosoughi et al., 2018). While the increase of corporate consolidation of newspaper ownership has had an observable impact on access to local news, research shows that social media algorithms may also inhibit access to local news. One study of 2.4 million Facebook posts from local news media organizations in Arizona, Minnesota and Virginia found that Facebook's algorithms promote national news more than local news posted by these organizations, because these algorithms are designed to increase exposure to items that show high levels of user engagement (Toff & Mathews, 2021). This bias toward reach necessarily limits access to local news with limited population impact.

The proliferation of fake news and growing political animosity is reflected in Americans' growing distrust in news media. A 2018 report from the Knight Foundation found that while Americans believe news media play a vital role in society, most do not believe it is fulfilling its purpose: The majority of Americans say that they cannot name an objective news source (Knight, 2018). Further, a 2020 survey from Gallup and Knight found a continued lack of optimism and an increase in partisan division over news media's ability to provide accurate and trustworthy information (Knight, 2020).

Trust in news media

Research links a lack of trust in news media to several negative outcomes, such as strong political partisanship, especially among conservatives, and logical biases such as confirmation bias and social influence, wherein people tend to trust news that confirms their preexisting beliefs about the world and that is trusted by people they know and trust (Ksiazek, 2019).

Researchers have identified several factors that may predict trust or distrust in news media, including geographic location, media literacy, ideology, and social influences.

Geographic location: Previous research has shown that those residing in rural U.S. communities are more likely to have lower levels of trust in news media than residents of urban areas (Hmielowski et al., 2021). Furthermore, those who identify as conservative and live in rural communities show the greatest decrease in trust in news media over time.

Media literacy: Individuals who have higher levels of media literacy are more likely to be able to critically evaluate the news that they consume, and are therefore more likely to trust news sources that provide accurate and reliable information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011).

Ideology: Due to confirmation bias, individuals are more likely to trust news sources that confirm their existing beliefs and values, and are more likely to distrust news sources that challenge their beliefs and values (Ksiazek, 2019). In particular, individuals with strong political beliefs are more likely to trust news sources that align with these beliefs, and are more likely to distrust news sources that do not align (Wright, 2019). Growing mistrust in the news media is correlated with political affiliation, trust in government, and economic outlook (Lee, 2010). Still, some research indicates that individuals report greater trust in the news media when they are asked about specific sources than when they are asked whether they trust the media in general (Daniller et al., 2017).

Social influence: Relationships and parasocial relationships can also influence media trust. Individuals are likelier to trust news sources recommended by people they know and trust, and are less likely to trust news sources not recommended by people they know and trust (Ksiazek, 2019). Proximity to journalists can impact trust in particular media outlets (Splendore & Curini, 2020). Parasocial interaction in the context of news media has been predicted by factors like higher levels of news realism and feeling happy while watching the news (Perse, 1990).

Rural vs. urban news and rural identity

There are several reported differences in how rural and urban populations consume news media in the United States. Rural populations may have less access to various news sources and

may be more likely to rely on local news outlets for their information. In particular, rural residents are more likely to rely on local television news than their urban counterparts and tend to be more interested in local news. Urban populations, on the other hand, may have access to a wider variety of news sources and may be more likely to indicate interest in national and international news and to consume news from a variety of sources (Dalton, 2018); they are also reportedly more likely to utilize online news sites and social media than rural Americans (Ksiazek, 2019). While online word of mouth is a powerful way of gathering local news, previous research (Gilbert, Karahalios & Sandvig, 2010) suggest those who live in rural communities have fewer online friends than those who live in urban areas; these friends are also more likely to live closer to home than online friends of those in urban areas.

Rural journalists face additional challenges. Distanced from power infrastructure, they may be at risk of hostility from their local readership, who are often also their family, friends, and acquaintances. Because of these power dynamics, rural journalists may often find themselves in the position of having to choose between publishing soft news that functions as public relations content in support of community organizations and publishing journalistic articles that may create tension and hostility in their daily lives (Perreault et al., 2023).

With a decrease in local news availability, scholars have turned to the concept of news deserts to describe areas that do not have access to local news. The most extensive effort to map news deserts is the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's News Desert project, spearheaded by Penny Abernathy. The UNC project defines a news desert 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" (Abernathy, 2022).

Local news deserts affect rural Americans more than urban Americans, partly because rural citizens tend to rely more on local news to stay informed (Dalton, 2018), exacerbating any local news access issues for the nation's rural population. Meanwhile, the nation's urban populations are simply less vulnerable to this particular type of news desert since urban citizens are less likely to rely on local news to stay up-to-date on city happenings (Dalton, 2018). Taken together, these stylized facts suggest that rural news deserts may be crucial ecosystems to examine across the state of Oklahoma. However, such an examination does not come without challenges.

Rurality itself is easier to observe than it is to define. In its most basic form, a measure of rurality simply explains the geographic areas in the U.S. located on rural tracts of land, an indicator which can then be transposed to individuals living there (e.g., rural Americans). Meanwhile, a metric for urban Americans is defined as anyone who lives in an urban area. While various governmental agencies provide approximations of the concept of rurality (Ratcliffe et al., 2016), the difficulty of categorizing towns as distinctly "rural" represents a thorny measurement issue.

For example, while the Census Bureau and the Office of the Management of the Budget (OMB) employ different definitions of rurality, they do not follow standard city or county boundaries when designating areas as rural. These rural metrics can be difficult to employ for analytical purposes since designated media areas are defined dissimilarly at the county level (HRSA, 2022). How would one compare the impact of a county-wide news desert on a population that cuts across counties? This inconsistency is difficult to reconcile.

For this reason, the most commonly relied-upon metrics are the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which do in fact categorize counties as either rural or urban (USDA, 2020). RUCA codes solve one empirical issue but come with their own theoretical limitations. After all, few rural American towns occupy an entire county; nor do cities encompass the full boundaries of the county where they are seated. RUCA scores have limited validity, despite their application to county-level outcomes in any given analysis.

Political scientists, writers, and commentators have all voiced their perspectives on the topic of white working-class politics. The most prominent narrative during the last few election cycles has been that Democrats "lost" the white working class because they prioritized cultural issues (such as "God, guns, and homosexuality") over their economic self-interest (Jacobs, 2012). But Nemerever and Rogers (2021) correctly note that the political behavior scholarship has not yet developed a valid definition and subsequent measurement of who exactly qualifies as "rural Americans." At best, most measures of rurality are proxies for *non-urban*. They note that different metrics of rurality tend to yield divergent results, which makes it difficult to arrive at any reliable conclusions—at least when relying on national-level survey data.

The scholarship's antidote to objective place-based metrics of rural and urban has been to turn toward rural consciousness, otherwise known as "rural identity." Instead of measuring where someone lives, researchers simply ask people whether they consider themselves more of a rural or urban person, which is synonymous with an individual's rural self-identity. Researchers have linked rural self-identification to a slate of political attitudes and behaviors, most contributing to political polarization and citizen disillusionment across the U.S. (Cramer, 2016; Lyons & Utych 2021; Trujillo, 2022). In rural Oklahoma, collective sense of community disenfranchisement creates social solidarity and strengthens informal networks. In times of crisis, these networks are invaluable as they combine resources and cultivate resilience (Straub et al., 2000).

While this approach has certainly yielded positive results in uncovering related attitudes and behaviors among rural identifiers, researchers note the nontrivial tendency of some urbanites to self-identify as rural and vice-versa. To the extent that rural identity matters, it is likely to be symbolic and therefore potentially limited in its ability to tell us how one's objective residence in a geographic space—not their presumed emotional attachment to or identification with that space—affects trust levels or news consumption habits.

Given the infancy of rural measurement as well as rural self-identification, we employ a broad array of metrics to determine rural Oklahomans' attitudes and behaviors toward their local news environment. We employed the RUCA framework to develop our sampling logic. When we could, we measured rural self-identification in addition to one's geographic location in rural or urban areas. As the results will demonstrate, our research did not suffer from much inconsistency in those who lived for most of their lives in rural Oklahoma counties. However, whenever possible, we collected information about our participants' rural location and identification to alleviate any errors introduced by employing a single measure of rurality.

Study Context & Methodologies

In December 2022, as Phase I of the 2023 Oklahoma News Ecosystem Study, Oklahoma Media Center partnered with the Oklahoma City-based firm Cole Hargrave Snodgrass & Associates to conduct a survey of 500 registered Oklahoma voters. The survey, which relied on live telephone interviews via landline and mobile phones and text-to-web data collection, found that 66% of respondents consider bias in news reporting a major problem among Oklahoma media outlets. Fully 75% of those polled indicated they would trust a news organization more if journalists were transparent and prominently acknowledged mistakes. Additionally, 56 % said an outlet recommended by friends would earn more trust.

To contextualize these findings, we employed on-the-ground community research for Phase II of the 2023 Oklahoma News Ecosystem study. This section describes our study context and methodological approaches.

Study design

The present study aims to gather more information to contextualize the Phase I survey findings and to unpack patterns regarding news access, perception, and utilization across Oklahoma. Broadly, we wanted to understand barriers to local news utilization and potential avenues for promoting local news. To address our research questions, we utilized a grounded theory approach and engaged in community research using triangulated methodologies including interviews, qualitative surveys, focus groups, textual analysis and participant observation.

Sampling logic

The research team began by analyzing available data, including the survey results from Phase I of the 2023 Oklahoma News Ecosystem study as well as existing data on media coverage in the state, in order to focal communities for qualitative data collection. The UNC News Desert project identifies five counties in Oklahoma as news deserts (Abernathy, 2022), but there are discrepancies with its data. For example, the project initially reported that Mayes County was a news desert, but at the time, the Pryor Daily Times was located in Mayes County (see Graham, 2018; this paper has since closed). Similarly, the site does not account for tribal newspapers (some, but not all, are mentioned in the 'ethnic media' section), a factor that is especially relevant in Oklahoma, where 43% of the state is tribal land.

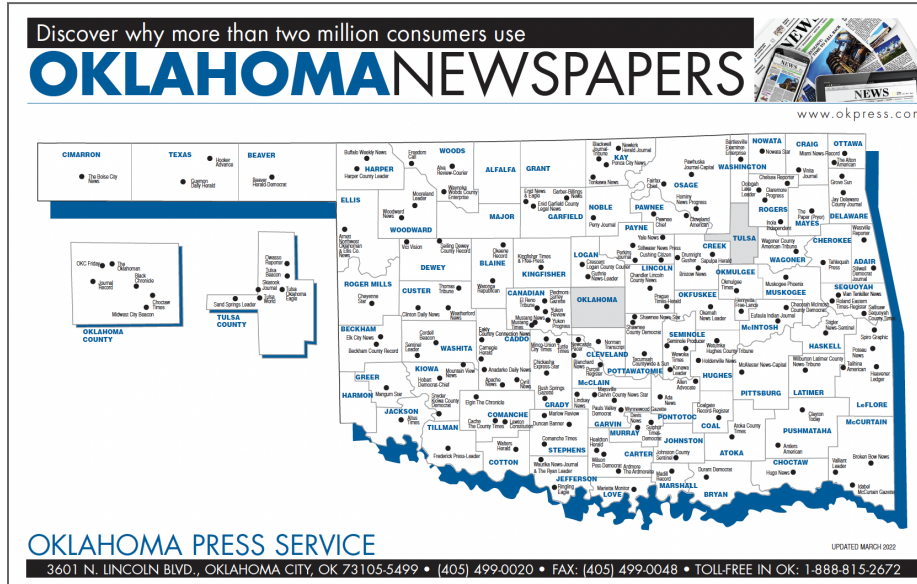**Figure 1. Oklahoma newspaper distribution**

Photo credit Oklahoma Press Association, 2022

While the project data has been updated multiple times to rectify these errors, it is still an approximation; it is challenging to determine what counts as a news desert in Oklahoma. Many towns may be part of a single media market and may share a paper. Some Oklahoma towns are a part of media markets headquartered in neighboring states. Overall, there are no counties in Oklahoma that can be considered both a newspaper and television news desert.

We approached sampling as an exploratory exercise, using the sampling logic in Table 1 to identify regions of the state with varying access to local television news and local newspapers:

Table 1. Sampling logic

	"Fewer OK newspapers" (0-1 newspapers)	"More OK newspapers" (2+ newspapers)
"Limited TV news access" / Outside OK DMA (TV)	Limited TV & newspaper access	Limited TV access only
"Has TV news access" / Inside OK DMA (TV)	Limited newspaper access only	TV & newspaper access

Location descriptions

Although no county in Oklahoma is both a newspaper and television news desert according to accepted definitions, we identified multiple counties that experience specific limitations on their news media access, then narrowed down our focal communities to provide geographic variation. While this study does not attempt to be quantitatively representative, we isolated the following counties to focus on for qualitative investigation:

- Limited TV & newspaper access: Beaver, Coal & Jefferson Counties
- Limited newspaper access: Greer County
- Limited TV news access: McCurtain County
- Ample news access: Oklahoma and Tulsa Counties

Figure 2. Counties selected for qualitative investigation
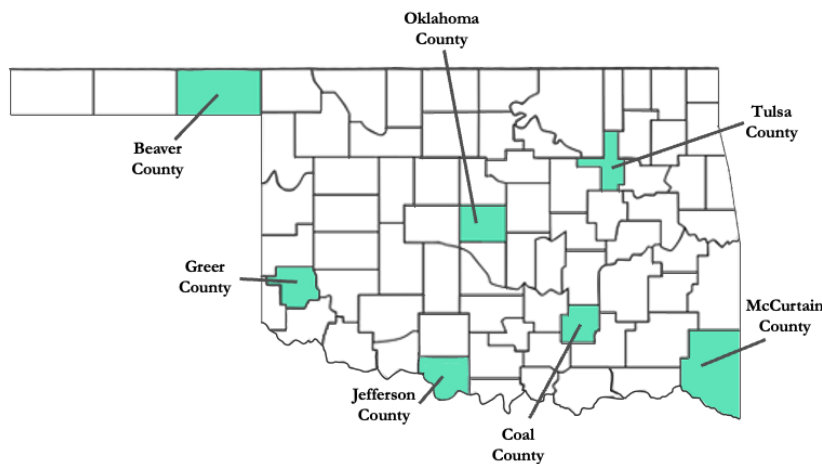
The following table offers general information about each county under study:

Table 2. County demographic descriptions

County	News Access	Population	People/mi²	Median income	Persons in poverty	Bachelor's or higher
Beaver	**Limited TV & paper**	5,016	2.8	$60,152	11.6%	21.5%
Coal	**Limited TV & paper**	5,313	10.2	$43,697	18.7%	17.5%
Greer	TV	5,547	8.6	$49,203	23%	10.6%
Jefferson	**Limited TV & paper**	5,389	7.0	$43,438	24.2%	15.2%
McCurtain	Papers	30,931	16.6	$43,435	21.5%	14.6%
Tulsa	Papers, TV	667,358	1,173.7	$60,382	14.7%	32.7%
Oklahoma	Papers, TV	802,559	1,123.3	$58,239	16.3%	33.7%
STATE	—	4,019,800	57.7	$56,956	15.6%	26.8%

Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 estimates generated from 2020 census data and population trends. See https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/oklahoma

Beaver & Coal Counties: Limited TV & newspaper access

Beaver County, located in northwestern Oklahoma where the panhandle connects to the rest of the state, has the distinction of being in a non-Oklahoma television news market (Amarillo, TX) and also touches a newspaper desert (Harper County). It also borders Kansas to the north and Texas to the south. Beaver County has one weekly newspaper, The Herald-Democrat, based out of Beaver and owned by resident Joe Lansden.

Coal County, in southeastern Oklahoma, is a partial-non-Oklahoma market (Sherman, TX/Ada, OK). The majority of Coal County is within the Choctaw Nation reservation. We visited Coalgate, the county seat of Coal County, to interview residents and understand the local environment. Coal County has one weekly newspaper: the Coalgate Record-Register, based out of Coalgate and owned by Robinson Publishing Company out of Holdenville, Hughes County, OK.

Greer County: Limited newspaper access

Greer County is located in a remote southwestern corner of the state. During the course of our study, we employed a research assistant who lived in Mangum, the county seat of Greer County. We also visited Mangum to conduct focus groups and interviews and to understand the local environment. Greer County has one weekly newspaper, Mangum Star News, based out of Mangum. It is owned by Scott Wesner and Scott Wood, who purchased the paper from the Texas-based Hicks Media Group in 2022. Wesner and Wood also own the Oklahoma papers Altus Times (Jackson County) and Frederick Press-Leader (Tillman County).

Jefferson County: Limited TV & newspaper access

Jefferson County is located on the central southern border of Oklahoma. Waurika is the county seat of Jefferson County. At the time of our study, Jefferson County had one weekly newspaper, Ringling Eagle, which was privately owned and published out of Ringling, Oklahoma. Subscriptions to the Ringling Eagle were $25 per year. At the time of this writing, the paper has announced it will either sell or close. The Waurika News Journal is based out of Jefferson's county seat and is owned by a local resident, who started the paper to fill a void after the 113-year-old Waurika News-Democrat shut down operations in 2015.

McCurtain County: Limited TV access

McCurtain County offers the unique combination of having several local newspapers available while simultaneously being geographically located in a non-Oklahoma television news market (Shreveport, LA). All of McCurtain County is located within the Choctaw Nation reservation. We visited two areas of McCurtain County, the county seat of Idabel and the popular tourist destination Broken Bow, in order to gather varied data and understand the news environment in McCurtain County. McCurtain County has one daily newspaper, McCurtain News-Gazette based out of Idabel and owned by resident Bruce Willingham, and two weekly papers, Broken Bow News out of Broken Bow (also owned by Willingham) and Valliant Leader out of Valliant (owned locally by the Wilson-Monroe Publishing Company).

Implementation

Data were collected using in-person and online platforms from April 27 to August 20, 2023. A dual in-person and online recruitment protocol was used to encourage participation from underserved urban and rural target populations statewide.

Although our process varied based on access and response within each community, our approach generally included visiting each county, locating decision-makers and influential stakeholders, interviewing citizens, and informally touring the area to gather relevant ethnographic data. We also conducted focus groups and open-ended community polls.

For both in-person and online recruitment, an availability sampling strategy was employed. For in-person recruitment in rural areas and small towns, participants were encouraged to attend an in-person focus group about local news in their area. Fliers publicizing focus group events were placed at local businesses in and around town in the week preceding the focus group; major employers were also identified and asked to place fliers in prominent locations in their physical spaces.

For in-person recruitment in larger metropolitan areas, fliers were placed in different regions within each city based on neighborhood family income averages and the proportion of rental versus owned homes. Both rural and urban in-person recruitment targets were encouraged to voluntarily RSVP prior to the focus groups. Participants who RSVPed to participate received

confirmation as well as a follow-up reminder of the focus group one day prior to the focus group. When possible, focus groups were held at publicly available spaces that offered greater levels of accessibility to the target population of underserved news consumers in each town or city. We also conducted Zoom and telephone-based interviews.

Table 3. Sampling description by county

County	Community Conversations
Beaver	36
Coal	116
Greer	43
Jefferson	14
McCurtain	—
Tulsa	33
Oklahoma	16
All other	94
TOTAL	352

In total, 352 participants[2] took part in interviews, open-ended surveys, and focus groups across the state, with a more intensive recruitment strategy across seven counties.

Recall that our research questions are:

RQ1: Where do Oklahomans get local news and why?

RQ2: Are Oklahomans satisfied with their media options?

RQ3: What factors influence Oklahomans' trust or distrust of news, especially local?

RQ4: What strategies may encourage persuadable Oklahomans to support and utilize local news media?

To gather data related to these research questions, we generated interview and focus group questions related to categories including general information sources, local news and subscription behavior, and trust in news media.

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[2] We informally collected ethnographic and observational data from many other participants, but did not count them as official sources unless they underwent a consent process and engaged with on official focus group, survey, or interview protocol.

Table 4 below lists the general questions we included in our focus groups, interviews, and open-ended surveys. Each question is categorized according to our schema in order to target each research question. Please note, as these interviews were loosely structured, we encouraged participants to elaborate on topics that resonated with them and asked additional, probing questions where relevant. These additional questions are not listed here although the additional information we gathered is included in our qualitative analysis.

Table 4. Summary of interview and focus group questions

Interview & Focus Group Questions
General Information Sources

1. Can you tell me how you found out about this event today?
2. Do you feel like you are able to stay informed about what's happening in your community? How?
3. In general, how do you find out about events in your community? Why do you choose to find out about events this way?
4. If your town had an upcoming election and you wanted to find out more about the candidates, what would you do? Why?
5. What sources do you use to get news and information on a regular basis? Why do you prefer these particular sources?
6. Have you ever shared news or information from local news organizations with others in your community? Would you give an example?
7. What role do you think local news media organizations play in your community?
8. Apart from local news media, how do you find out about news and events in your community?
9. Would you tell me about any social media platforms or online communities you use to keep up with local news and events?
10. Have you ever used word of mouth or personal networks to find out about local news or events? Would you give an example?
11. Have you ever attended local events or meetings to find out about news in your community? Would you give an example?
12. Are there any community bulletin boards or physical locations where you can find out about local news or events? Tell me more about that.

13. Are there any gaps in the information you receive about local news and events? Tell me more about that.
14. Have you ever participated in any citizen journalism or community reporting initiatives?
15. Do community organizations provide information about local news and events? Tell me more about that.
16. What could be done to improve access to information about local news and events in your community?

Local News & Subscription Behavior

1. Do you subscribe to any newspapers, whether on paper or online? What is the paper called?
2. (If applicable) Why do you subscribe to that one? What kinds of things do you like to learn from reading it? How long have you subscribed?
3. Are you aware if [NAME OF TOWN] has a local news organization?
4. (If applicable) What is it called? What do you think of it? Do you use it?
5. Do you pay for news? For example, by subscribing or donating to a news organization?
6. (If applicable) Which news source(s) do you pay for?
7. (If applicable) Why do you subscribe to that one? What kinds of things do you like to learn from reading it? How long have you subscribed?
8. (If applicable) Why not?
9. Have you noticed any changes in your media use in the past year or so? Tell me more about that.
10. Do you use any local news sources? Which ones?
11. Tell me about your experience with local news media organizations in the area.

Trust in News Media

1. Do you feel local news media organizations are trustworthy sources of information?
2. (If applicable) What do you think makes them trustworthy?
3. (If applicable) What do you think makes them untrustworthy?
4. Have you noticed any changes in the quality of local news coverage over the years? Tell me more about that.
5. Are there any topics you feel are not covered adequately by local news media?

Findings

In this section, we detail our findings associated with each research question. Then, we outline the qualitative findings from each county.

Research question-level results & analysis

In this section, we outline our findings associated with each research question. Then, we detail the qualitative findings from each county.

RQ1: Where do Oklahomans get their local news and why? Does this vary by demographics and region?

In total, 539 sources for local news were mentioned, which we categorized by type. Traditional news included all mentions of newspapers (whether digital or in print), radio, television (including TV stations' websites), and apps run by news stations and newspapers. The category of word of mouth included friends, family, and talking; we also include here mentions of participation in community events, church, the workplace, businesses, and other places where verbal information exchanges take place. The final category, digital media, includes all mentions of social media and websites unaffiliated with traditional news outlets, for example, community websites, group chats, and social media pages.

Figure 3. Local news sources by type

Word of mouth
19.1%

Traditional news s…
25.0%

Digital media
55.9%
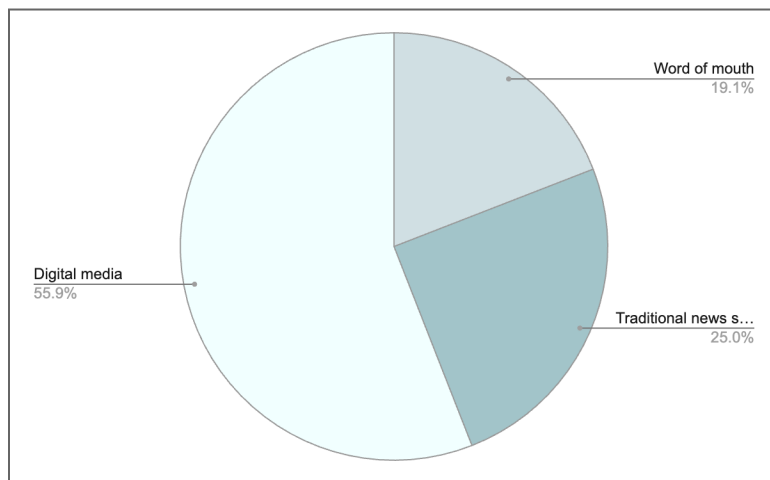
The vast majority of participants in this study use **social media, especially Facebook community pages, to stay informed about local news and connect with others to solve problems.** These pages are generally run by a community member who took the initiative to start it, not necessarily because they care about local journalism but rather news and happenings in the community. Nearly all participants who live in rural counties mentioned that they belong to their county or town's community page. Fewer participants mentioned other specific social media platforms, including Reddit, Twitter[3], and Instagram.

Figure 4. Specific social media platforms mentioned as sources of local news and information
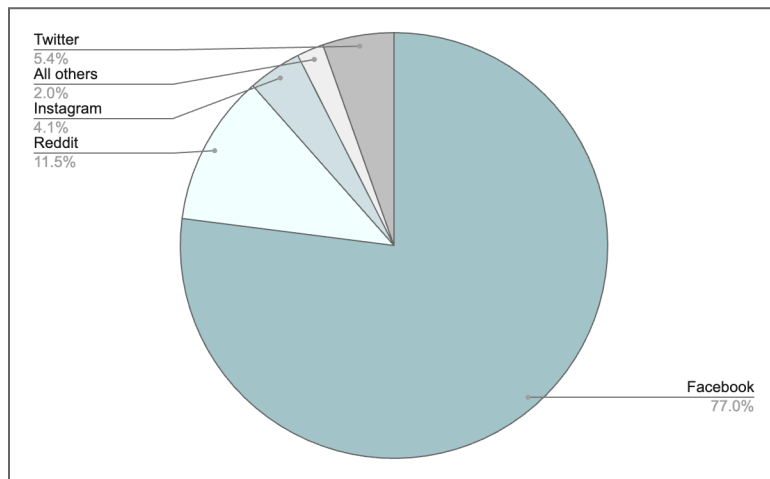
Most participants also use **word of mouth** to find out about local events, stay involved in community happenings, and engage with community processes. This includes information exchanged through social media, text message, email, telephone, and in-person, face-to-face communication with people the participant actually knows.

Findings varied by gender. **Men** reported open access to getting information straight from a source or authority; for example, if they needed information on a city council initiative, they would simply call a councilor on the phone and ask. **Women** tended to report more communal information sources, like visiting the local dollar store or drive-up fast food restaurant to talk with the workers and get the latest news.

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[3] While the platform has recently rebranded as X, no participants mentioned X by name, instead using its former name Twitter.

Other methods of gathering news include police scanners; notices on restaurant windows, bulletin boards and billboards; church announcements; and informal discussions.

Most participants did not report reading the local **newspaper**; however, of those who did, most seemed to consider it reliable but not very relevant or informative. The newspaper is considered a source of niche types of news, including legal notices and obituaries, so readers seeking this particular type of information for personal or practical reasons are more likely to read it.

RQ2: Are Oklahomans satisfied with their media options?

Most Oklahomans in this study said they **are able to stay informed** about their local community, with 58.6% saying "Yes," 32.6% reporting "Somewhat," and just 8.8% saying "No." However, Oklahomans from primarily rural counties have a reduced ability to stay informed, with 40% reporting "Yes," 46% saying "Somewhat," and 15% saying "No."

Figure 5. Oklahomans' reported ability to stay informed about their local community.
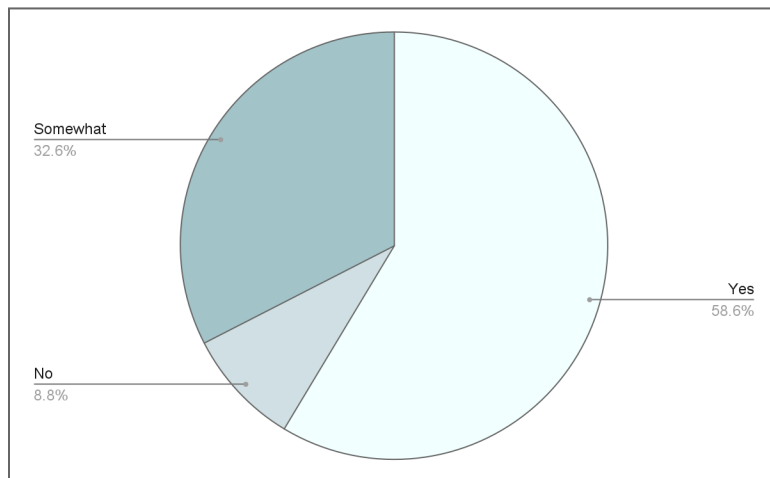
Perceived quality and depth of local coverage differs. Some see a decline in quality, investigation, and focus on "fluff" over substantive issues. But others see improvements in quality and note that online availability increases ease of access.

We noticed that among those who are not satisfied with their media choices, several mentioned **access to local election information and opinion/editorial content is needed.** Other specific gaps in local coverage mentioned include **crime, politics, education, and environmental issues,** as well as a general lack of state and regional focus compared to hyperlocal or national stories.

Many participants said although they do not have access to a lot of local information, they would be **unlikely to read a newspaper** if they had the option. Social media is free and can be accessed anywhere at any time, and participants in general appreciated that they can find relevant information much quicker online.

RQ3: What factors influence Oklahomans' trust or distrust of news, especially local?

Despite the fact that most respondents reported not using local news, the majority said they trust local news. Those who do not utilize local news stated that they do not trust news that is obviously biased or one-sided. Importantly, we also noted that some people in areas with what we assessed to be biased newspaper options considered it trustworthy. While this merits further study, we see a correlation that suggests, for many Oklahomans, "trustworthy" means that a news source agrees with one's own ideological views.

In small towns, Oklahomans in this study expressed that local news is more trustworthy when someone who is from the county is in charge of it. For instance, residents in Greer County described a newspaper they used to enjoy that featured all the relevant local news and was run by a townie with detailed knowledge of local happenings. When she retired and the newspaper shut down, someone from out of town opened another iteration of the paper. Most participants were uninterested in the new paper, which they consider generally irrelevant and uninsightful. Interestingly, few participants knew the name of the former or current papers.

RQ4: What strategies may encourage persuadable Oklahomans to consume and support local news media?

Respondents value **free, accessible news** and want to access it via **social media**. For the most part, they will not pay for access, especially in the form of a subscription.

In general, participants indicated they would like more local news that focuses on their town.

- Some indicated they would like to know **more detailed and nuanced background stories, editorials, and other long-form content** on local issues.
- Participants in small towns indicated a willingness to purchase **special editions of the paper,** such as the annual issue featuring high school graduates' photos or holiday issues with value added (such as access to coupons or local deals).

County-level results & analysis

In the following pages, we describe our experience and findings in each county under study.

Beaver County

Beaver County, located in northwestern Oklahoma where the panhandle connects to the rest of the state, has the distinction of being in a non-Oklahoma television news market (Amarillo, TX) and also borders a newspaper desert (Harper County) as well as the states of Kansas to the north and Texas to the south. Due to its sparse population per square mile, as well as its location in Oklahoma's panhandle, most Oklahomans consider both the county as well as the county seat (Beaver) to be rural. It is the second least populated county per square mile in the state (Stacker, 2022).

Beaver Co. news sources: The vast majority of Beaver County residents claimed to be able to stay informed about what's happening in their community, with a minority 17% of participants claiming they could not stay informed with local happenings. Few claimed to read or subscribe to the local newspaper—less than 15% of residents, and typically not as their primary source of news. Almost all participants of the study claimed to receive news through Facebook community pages and word of mouth. A handful of participants also mentioned radio, but this was still a minority of Beaver residents with whom we spoke. The overwhelming result of our analysis of Beaver County news gathering habits was summed up by one respondent, "Living in a town of 1200 people, Facebook works pretty well." When pressed for their preferred news sources, participants mentioned national news sources, phone apps, or online sources. When asked to explain their source preference, most noted their preference was the result of convenience above all else.

Beaver Co. news and subscription behaviors: The Herald-Democrat is the only paper in Beaver County. Most participants claimed they did not subscribe to the local newspaper; nor were they willing to consider subscribing to it in the future. Respondents claimed that the reason why they would not pay for the local newspaper was either that it was illogical, "because [news] is free elsewhere," or, "cause [they're] cheap." One participant went as far as to detail the sensitive economic situation underlying most participants' views of paying for news: "Because most people can't afford health care, much less news." Like most of the participants of our study, Beaver County respondents made it very clear that they are unwilling to pay for news that is not open-access or free. Few participants claimed to rely on local news stations for their local news, which stands to reason since Beaver County is located outside of one of the major Oklahoma television designated market areas.

Beaver Co. trust in news: For the most part, residents of Beaver County expressed neither overwhelmingly trusting nor untrusting views of local news. They typically could not offer an opinion, and if they could, they could offer few reasons why they offered such a preference.

Coal County

Downtown Coalgate, Oklahoma. Photo courtesy of the authors.

Coal Co. news sources: Coal County is demarcated as a "no access" county, although the Coalgate Record-Register is located in Coalgate. This paper is owned and operated by Bill and Dayna Robinson, who also own Holdenville News. Most participants we talked to said they

don't utilize this source because they view it essentially as just a place for people to publish legally required notices.

The Coalgate Record-Register. Photo courtesy of the authors.

About half of Coal County participants said they are not able to stay informed about what's happening in their community. Most cited social media, especially Facebook community pages, as their primary source of local news. Newspapers were mentioned rarely. Most participants either claimed that they turned to Facebook for "ease," or that Facebook is "more reliable and if you wait for the newspaper the event has usually passed by the time you read about it." Those who expressed reservations about the local newspaper tended to note that Coalgate is also home to one of only two major Amish communities in Oklahoma. While visiting Coalgate, we learned that the Amish community in the nearby town of Clarita is considered a reliable news source because they frequently travel throughout the county on business. One participant noted that the "televised news has gaps."

Coal Co. news and subscription behaviors: The Coalgate Record-Register is the only local newspaper in Coal County. Participants had mixed feelings about this paper. Some said it was reliable but not relevant, as it mostly contains public notices, obituaries, and some editorials.

Coal Co. trust in news: Most of our Coal participants expressed a degree of trust in the local news, with some caveats—either qualifying that they do not use it for political information, or insisting that Facebook is still their main source of information.

Greer County

Photo of the Mangum Star, currently housed at the Greer County Museum in Mangum. Photo courtesy the authors.

During the course of our study, we employed a research assistant in Mangum, the county seat of Greer County. We also visited Mangum to conduct focus groups, interviews, and to understand the local environment.

Greer Co. news sources: Residents of Greer County overwhelmingly reported using a private Facebook community group, Mangum Folks, to gather information about local events and other relevant news. They also reported word of mouth and identified several locations around town that serve as notable hotspots for local gossip and news. For example, a fast food location was reportedly a great place to find out about upcoming events. Local civic leaders are also accessible to residents; direct phone calls or in-person visits to the courthouse were a prominent source of local information. It is important to note that residents of Greer County expressed

hesitation and even reluctance regarding the feasibility of a journalistic local news source. Small-town politics and rivalries make it inadvisable for journalists to publish investigative or political news. One focus group participant explained that residents' livelihoods could suffer if they were to get on the bad side of influential town leaders.

Greer Co. news and subscription behaviors: Only a few respondents reported subscribing to the local newspaper, Mangum Star News. Several respondents explained that it is more of a newsletter and does not have any advantages over other sources of news, most notably their community Facebook page. Most expressed that they don't find it relevant or feel they don't need to pay for news when they can get it for free on Facebook. Several others reported not having enough discretionary income to pay for access to news. As one Mangum resident noted as a reason they don't subscribe to the Mangum Star News, "Mangum Folks is free."

Greer Co. trust in news: Most respondents in Greer County had no strong feelings about the reliability of news media. Several noted that national news outlets tend to have strong political biases, but most felt local news is reliable and trustworthy. Some seemed to conflate discussions of news media and social media. One Mangum resident stated, "I don't trust anyone in the media," then went on to clarify that people always exaggerate when they post on social media.

Jefferson County

We employed a research assistant in Jefferson County, who conducted interviews and gathered data about the local community.

Jefferson Co. news sources: Most Jefferson County participants claimed to be able to stay informed about what's happening in their community. Facebook community groups are the primary sites through which people receive their news. As with most of our county-level analyses, participants cited the ease with which Facebook provided them access to local news—i.e., "Easiest way here," "Where everyone goes," "Easy," "Easy access," "the fastest and easiest," "easiest," and "Accessible," were all cited as reasons that Facebook users chose to prioritize it as a local news hub. Facebook was mentioned by 80% of Jefferson County participants as the main source of their local news source. Word of mouth is also a popular secondary option, with one respondent expressing a common reason as "just the way it's always been," and others reflecting a common theme of the social interaction being "more personable

and [instilling] a sense of community." Roughly half the Jefferson County participants said they relied on local news, but mainly as a secondary source. As one respondent put it, they relied on, "Facebook, word of mouth, local channels, but always Facebook first." This illustrates the general trend in Jefferson, where residents are largely reliant on Facebook community groups, but happen to use local news as a complementary way to hear about what is going on in their community. Participants referenced television news, although mainly on phone apps, and mainly for weather alerts.

Jefferson Co. news and subscription behaviors: Roughly one-third of Jefferson County participants claimed to subscribe to their local newspaper. However, most participants seem at odds with the particular name of their local newspaper. For those who claim a subscription, it is almost always the Waurika Democrat, which is likely the name they give to the Waurika News Journal. Overall, it appears that most participants did not subscribe to a local newspaper; however, many citizens felt the need to show their local readership tendencies. Reasons cited for subscribing related to personal affiliations with the topics referenced. Some participants noted that the local paper, "covers more of our local area," while others claimed more specific reasons, such as, "It used to be to see who's in jail; now they stopped giving names," and "Because my kids go to school there." Others gave more general reasons, such as, "It's just always been around." Overall, however, most participants from Jefferson County were not subscribers, nor did they intend to subscribe in the near future.

Jefferson Co. trust in news: Jefferson County residents were split on whether or not local news media is trustworthy. One said that "newspapers are basically just opinions." Others expressed a lack of trust due to the local news' limited scope, with one explaining "they don't have enough resources to do enough" and another simply saying the news is "very brief" and "very vague on what they tell you." Still others prefer local news sources because of familiarity; as one respondent said when asked whether they trust these sources, "Yes, because I know them."

McCurtain County

McCurtain County offers the unique combination of having several local newspapers available while simultaneously being geographically located in a non-Oklahoma television news market (Shreveport, LA). We visited Broken Bow and Idabel, leaving flyers and attempting to recruit

local participants over the course of two days. McCurtain County, despite having multiple newspapers available, was the most difficult county in which to recruit. We were surprised to see zero participation from residents of this county. The political environment in this county, following a recent scandal involving the local newspaper and law enforcement, may have chilled participation. Further research is needed to understand local news access and trust in this county.

Tulsa & Oklahoma Counties

Tulsa & Oklahoma Cos. news sources: Most residents of Tulsa and Oklahoma Counties reported being able to stay informed about what's happening in their local communities. Taken together, 58% of respondents from these communities reported that they are able to stay informed, while 35% said "Somewhat" and 7% said "No."

Tulsa & Oklahoma Cos. news and subscription behaviors: Although there are many more options for local news in these counties, most participants still reported not subscribing to papers or otherwise paying to access news. When asked why they don't subscribe, answers generally reflected the theme that subscriptions are too expensive and news is free elsewhere. As one participant explained, "I don't want to pay for something I can get for free from the internet." Some others expressed that newspaper information, in particular, is dated by the time it is in print. Those who did report paying for local news mentioned the Tulsa World and Oklahoman.

Tulsa & Oklahoma Cos. trust in news: Some respondents expressed distrust of local news, particularly television news. As one Tulsan expressed, "I'm losing trust in local television as many are owned by corporations pushing a political agenda." Another respondent explained, "They don't edit out bias or opinion like they once did." Yet another said, "I think so much of it is driven by advertisers and PR that they don't really exist for the purpose of news anymore." On the other hand, one participant stated, "Local news is less partisan," and specified trust for local radio news. On the whole, Oklahoma County residents seemed more trusting of local media; as one explained, "They've never given me a reason to not trust them." On the other hand, one respondent stated, "They lie too much, in part to get ratings and in part to get the public to believe what the news station wants us to believe."

Discussion

The scope and definition of what counts as "local news" is debated in the literature and complicated by news media's broad shift to digital dissemination models, which extend their reach beyond the community of origin. Still, the definition has implications for measuring access as well as designing interventions that respond to community members' priorities. Weber and Mathews (2022) note, "Ask 50 reporters, 50 consumers of news and 50 academics to define local journalism and you will end up with a plurality of definitions stretching across the range" (pg. 2). Their work emphasizes the need to understand objective (e.g., geospatial) and subjective factors (such as social dynamics and shared concerns) that influence citizen perceptions of the local news media.

Findings from across the state point to what news practitioners already know: Oklahomans' reliance on traditional news coverage is shifting. Not only do Oklahomans across counties rarely subscribe to local newspapers, but they also report accessing a variety of types of news from various sources for free on social media. Few are interested in subscriptions to any news source, let alone local sources. The types of local news they tend to see are bound by social media algorithms as well as the echo chambers of their own online social ties.

Reinvigorating local news starts with a well-defined definition of what counts as local to those living in areas of interest. It also involves ongoing knowledge sharing with citizens to reinforce the importance of local government and civic participation and the role of news consumption in these processes (Hayes & Lawless, 2021). Given the state of local news media access and trust in Oklahoma, we offer the following recommendations to news practitioners who desire to increase engagement with local news.

Recommendations
1. **Commit to ongoing investments in local communities.**
Distrust of outsiders and news organizations' failure to understand a community's priorities and contextual dynamics can cause even well-funded news media ventures to fail, especially in tight-knit rural communities. News media organizations cannot

simply report on a community from afar nor can they rely on past knowledge of community dynamics. They must continually engage with communities to understand decision-makers, influencers, and political dynamics influencing the culture and context in which any other interventions will occur. Trust is hard-earned and easily lost in both rural and urban areas; investment and engagement in the local community is time-intensive but worth the effort.

2. **Identify ways to continually communicate the importance of civic engagement, local politics, and journalistic reporting to populations at risk of disengagement from local news.**

In many areas with low access to reliable news, participants reported that they did not need or want it. However, after engaging in conversation about the types of news and information that the community may not be able to access, most ultimately came to the idea that more news would benefit their communities.

3. **Shift news communication models to prioritize social media.**

While it is apparent that general interest in print publications has declined, we also found that people are less enthusiastic about visiting websites to access information. Instead of clicking through a post on social media, they prefer to gather information from their social media feed itself. Media organizations that do not include vital information in posts on social media and instead "bury the lede" in a website (whether or not it is behind a paywall) will see less engagement and more frustration from viewers.

4. **Partner with area individuals and organizations.**

Each area we visited had one or more individuals or organizations who were considered reliable sources of information. These influencers already have social capital and can serve as vital entry points for community engagement.

5. **Experiment with community-engaged journalism solutions.**

Many respondents talked about former town newspapers run by a trusted local citizen who cared enough and was embedded enough in the community to offer a

reliable source of information. While this model is not feasible today due to economic constraints, the concept of a community paper is still relevant. Partner with local high schools, colleges, and universities to develop and deploy customized community journalism models.

Areas for future study

This preliminary research explored several counties in Oklahoma to understand factors contributing to local news media demand, access, and trust. To strengthen recommendations and provide more avenues for journalism practitioners to address these ongoing problems, we suggest the following:

- Further research into a broader selection of Oklahoma counties, since this study is not empirically representative.
- Experimental studies to test and improve interventions in various community contexts (see Mullin & Hansen, 2022), to assess whether demographics and geography influence effectiveness.
- Further research into the role of Native publications and tribal communication patterns, in collaboration with local tribes, to understand how these factors may impact tribal and nontribal citizens across the state.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Oklahoma Media Ecosystem Study
Open-Ended Interview Protocol—Summer 2023

This is a tentative template incorporating the primary topics under study. The interviewer should attempt to gather these details and any other relevant information that might come up in conversation, with particular attention on the participants' motivations, feelings, and reasoning behind news media consumption behaviors and attitudes.

[Consent]

[C1] Hi, my name is [NAME] and I'm a researcher from [INSTITUTION] conducting research on how Oklahomans get information. Can I ask you a few questions?

> → IF NO: Thank you anyway! Have a great day.

> → IF YES, proceed to next question.

[C2] Great, first let me get your consent to continue. Here is a little more information about our study [HAND CONSENT SHEET TO PARTICIPANT], with a phone number you can call if you have any questions. We won't be collecting any personally identifiable information, and no one will be able to connect you with your answers in any way. You can stop the interview at any time. Are you happy to continue?

> → IF NO: Thank you anyway! Have a great day.

> → IF YES, proceed with interview.

[Interview questions]

[Q1] (If applicable) Great! First, can you tell me how you found out about this event today?

[Q2a] Do you feel like you are able to stay informed about what's happening in your community?

> [Q2b] How?

[Q3a] In general, how do you find out about events in your community?

> [Q3b] Why do you choose to find out about events this way?

[Q4a] If your town had an upcoming election and you wanted to find out more about the candidates, what would you do?

> [Q4b] Why?

 [Q5a] What sources do you use to get news and information on a regular basis?

> [Q5b] Why do you prefer these particular sources?

[Q6a] Do you subscribe to any newspapers, whether on paper or online?
> → IF YES [Q6b] What is the paper called? Why do you subscribe to that one? What kinds of things do you like to learn from reading it? How long have you subscribed?

> → IF NO [Q6c] Why not?

[Q7a] Are you aware if [NAME OF TOWN] has a local news organization?

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→ IF YES [Q7b] What is it called? What do you think of it? Do you use it?

[Q8a] Do you pay for news? For example, by subscribing or donating to a news organization?

→ IF YES [Q8b] Which news source(s) do you pay for? Why do you subscribe to that one? What kinds of things do you like to learn from reading it? How long have you subscribed?

→ IF NO [Q8c] Why not?

[Q9a] Have you noticed any changes in your media use in the past year or so?

→ IF YES [Q9b] Tell me more about that.

[Q10a] Do you use any local news sources?

→ IF YES [Q10b] Which ones?

[Q11] Tell me about your experience with local news media organizations in the area.

[Q12a] Have you noticed any changes in the quality of local news coverage over the years?

→ IF YES [Q12b] Tell me more about that.

[Q13a] Are there any topics you feel are not covered adequately by local news media?

→ IF YES [Q13b] Tell me more about that.

[Q14a] Do you feel local news media organizations are trustworthy sources of information?

→ IF YES [Q14b] What do you think makes them trustworthy?

→ IF NO [Q14c] What do you think makes them untrustworthy?

[Q15a] Have you ever shared news or information from local news organizations with others in your community?

→ IF YES [Q15b] Would you give an example?

[Q16] What role do you think local news media organizations play in your community?

[Q17] Apart from local news media, how do you find out about news and events in your community?

[Q18] Would you tell me about any social media platforms or online communities you use to keep up with local news and events?

[Q19a] Have you ever used word of mouth or personal networks to find out about local news or events?

→ IF YES [Q19b] Would you give an example?

[Q20a] Have you ever attended local events or meetings to find out about news in your community?

→ IF YES [Q20b] Would you give an example?

[Q21a] Are there any community bulletin boards or physical locations where you can find out about local news or events?

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→ IF YES [Q21b] Tell me more about that.

[Q22a] Are there any gaps in the information you receive about local news and events?

→ IF YES [Q22b] Tell me more about that.

[Q23a] Have you ever participated in any citizen journalism or community reporting initiatives?

→ IF YES [Q23b] Tell me more about that.

[Q24a] Do community organizations provide information about local news and events?

→ IF YES [Q24b] Tell me more about that.

[Q25a] What could be done to improve access to information about local news and events in your community?

→ IF YES [Q25b] Tell me more about that.

[Demographics]

I appreciate your time answering these questions today! Before we finish, would you mind telling me a few things about yourself? These are just for classification purposes.

[D1] Would you tell me your age?

[D2] What is your occupation?

[D3] And how would you describe your political leanings? Would you say you are very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?

[D4a] How would you describe your religious identity?

→ IF CHRISTIAN [D4b] Would you describe yourself as evangelical or born again?

[D5] What is the highest level of education you've completed?

[D6] What is your gender?

[D7a] And what is your race?

→ IF NATIVE AMERICAN [D7b] Are you an enrolled member in a recognized tribe?

[Wrap up]

[Q26] Do you have any final thoughts or comments you would like to share?

[PROVIDE INCENTIVE CARD] Thank you again for your time.

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Appendix B: Online Survey Questionnaire, OU

2023 Media Study
Q1 Department: Political Science
Principal Investigators: Dr. A. Shortle

Study Title: Media Ecosystem Study

You are being asked to volunteer for this research study. This study is being conducted by researchers at The University of Oklahoma. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to take part in this study.

Purpose: to study views toward local news, informational sharing habits, and views about your local community and the State of Oklahoma.

Duration: 5 to 15 minutes

Risks: None to Minimal. This survey involves some sensitive questions. Your responses will be completely voluntary and confidential. You may opt out of any questions at any time.

Compensation: There is no compensation for this survey.

Number of participants: Up to 1500

Procedures: While you are in the study you will have answer questions about your opinions and demographics.

Voluntary: Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be confidential. If you decide to participate, you may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw at any time. After removing all identifiers, we might share your data with other researchers or use it in future research without obtaining additional consent from you.

Privacy and confidentiality: In research reports, there will be no information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

Data Security: Data are collected via an online survey system that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide.

Contact: If you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research, you may contact the research team: drshortle@gmail.com You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu with questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant, or if you don't want to talk to the researcher.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received satisfactory answers. I consent to participate in the study. Please print this document for your records.

1

Appendix C: Online Survey Questionnaire, OSU

Oklahoma News Study

Background Information
You are invited to be in a research study of Oklahoma's news sources. Please read this information and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study. Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you can withdraw your consent and stop at any time.

This study is being conducted by:
Primary investigator: Rosemary Avance, Oklahoma State University
Co-PI: Dru Norton, Oklahoma State University

Procedures
You are eligible to participate if you are 18 years or older and live in the state of Oklahoma. If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to complete an online survey. The survey will take 20 to 30 minutes.

Compensation
You will receive no payment for participating in this survey. However, you have the option to submit your email address at the end of the survey to be entered in a drawing for a $50 gift card.

Risks
There are no anticipated risks of participating in this study.

Confidentiality
The information you provide will be anonymous. This means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data in any way. The researchers cannot remove your data from the dataset once your participation is complete. We will collect your information through an online survey. This information will be stored in the researchers' cloud computing accounts and secured through data encryption. The research team will ensure confidentiality to the degree permitted by technology. It is possible, although unlikely, that unauthorized individuals could gain access to your responses because you are responding online. However, your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to everyday internet use. If you have concerns, you can review the survey provider's privacy policy at https://www.qualtrics.com/privacystatement/.

Contacts and Questions
The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study (IRB-23-201-OFF).

If you have questions about the research study, please contact the Principal Investigator, Rosemary Avance, at rosemary.avance@okstate.edu or (918) 671-7958.

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact OSU's Institutional Review Board at irb@okstate.edu or (405) 744-3377. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

Statement of Consent
By proceeding with this survey, you agree that: you have read the above information, have had the opportunity to ask questions and have those questions answered, and consent to participate in the study.

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Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Protocol—Summer 2023

WELCOME
Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. We appreciate your willingness to participate.

INTRODUCTIONS
Moderator; assistant moderator

PURPOSE & CONSENT
We have been asked by the Oklahoma Media Center to conduct focus groups with Oklahomans. The reason we are having these focus groups is to find out where Oklahomans get local news. We need your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.

First, let me get your consent to continue. Here is a little more information about our study [HAND CONSENT SHEET TO PARTICIPANT], with a phone number you can call if you have any questions. We won't be collecting any personally identifiable information, and no one will be able to connect you with your answers in any way. You can stop the interview at any time. Are you happy to continue?

GROUND RULES
1. WE WANT YOU TO DO THE TALKING.
We would like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.

2. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS
Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. WE WILL PROTECT YOUR PRIVACY
We are gathering this information to understand general behaviors and opinions, but we will never disclose your name or tell anyone what you said in this room.

4. WE WILL TAPE-RECORD THE CONVERSATION
We want to capture everything you have to say. We won't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.

QUESTIONS

[Q1] Great! First, can you each tell me your first name, what you do for a living, and how long you've lived in the area?

[Q2a] Do you feel like you know what's happening in your community?

    [Q2b] How?

[Q3a] In general, how do you find out about events in your community?

    [Q3b] Why do you choose to find out about events this way?

[Q4a] If your town had an upcoming election and you wanted to find out more about the candidates, what would you do?

    [Q4b] Why?

[Q5a] What sources do you use to get news and information on a regular basis?

    [Q5b] Why do you prefer these particular sources?

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[Q6a] Do you subscribe to any newspapers, whether on paper or online?

    → IF YES [Q6b] What is the paper called? Why do you subscribe to that one? What kinds of things do you like to learn from reading it? How long have you subscribed?

    → IF NO [Q6c] Why not?

[Q7a] Are you aware if Mangum has a local news organization?

    → IF YES [Q7b] What is it called? What do you think of it? Do you use it?

[Q8a] Do you pay for news? For example, by subscribing or donating to a news organization?

    → IF YES [Q8b] Which news source(s) do you pay for? Why do you subscribe to that one? What kinds of things do you like to learn from reading it? How long have you subscribed?

    → IF NO [Q8c] Why not?

[Q9a] Have you noticed any changes in your media use in the past year or so?

    → IF YES [Q9b] Tell me more about that.

[Q10a] Do you use any local news sources?

    → IF YES [Q10b] Which ones?

[Q11] Tell me about your experience with local news media organizations in the area.

[Q12a] Have you noticed any changes in the quality of local news coverage over the years?

    → IF YES [Q12b] Tell me more about that.

[Q13a] Are there any topics you feel are not covered adequately by local news media?

    → IF YES [Q13b] Tell me more about that.

[Q14a] Do you feel local news media organizations are trustworthy sources of information?

    → IF YES [Q14b] What do you think makes them trustworthy?

    → IF NO [Q14c] What do you think makes them untrustworthy?

[Q15a] Have you ever shared news or information from local news organizations with others in your community?

    → IF YES [Q15b] Would you give an example?

[Q16] What role do you think local news media organizations play in your community?

[Q17] Apart from local news media, how do you find out about news and events in your community?

[Q18] Would you tell me about any social media platforms or online communities you use to keep up with local news and events?

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[Q19a] Have you ever used word of mouth or personal networks to find out about local news or events?

→ IF YES [Q19b] Would you give an example?

[Q20a] Have you ever attended local events or meetings to find out about news in your community?

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→ IF YES [Q24b] Tell me more about that.

[Q25a] What could be done to improve access to information about local news and events in your community?

→ IF YES [Q25b] Tell me more about that.

[Wrap up]

[Q26] Do you have any final thoughts or comments you would like to share?

[PROVIDE INCENTIVE CARD] Thank you again for your time.

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