

Measuring the Journalism Crisis: Developing New Approaches That Help the Public Connect to the Issue

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Despite academics and media critics warning that cutbacks from the journalism crisis may be harming democratic values, a majority of the public is unaware of the financial struggles plaguing the industry. In this article, I argue that more communication scholars should publish research that is accessible to the broader public to help raise public awareness of this pivotal issue. Political economy, I argue, is well suited to this task, given its emphasis on merging research with action. I detail three key ways scholars can help the public connect to the journalism crisis: (1) by “localizing” the data to allow people to see how the crisis is impacting their community, (2) by “humanizing” the research to make the findings more relatable, and (3) by testing and refuting common refrains related to the crisis.

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As countless academics and media critics have noted, the journalism industry is in crisis. After adjusting for inflation, between 2000 and 2012, newspapers lost more than \$40 billion in annual advertising revenue according to data from the Newspaper Association of America (Williams & Pickard, 2016). Given that newspapers have traditionally relied on advertising revenue to provide 80% of their revenue (Picard, 2004), this has led to drastic staff reductions. Between 2007 and 2015, the number of newsroom employees at daily newspapers declined from 55,000 to 32,900, a 40% decline (American Society of News Editors, 2015). With the advertising model that supports journalism collapsing, scholars have suggested that the public has less coverage of public hearings (Besley & Roberts, 2010) and foreign news (Starr, 2009). More broadly, the crisis is viewed as lowering the watchdog ability of journalism (McChesney & Nichols, 2010; Pickard, 2011; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012; Starkman, 2014). Yet, most people seem unaware of this crisis: In 2013, a majority of people had heard little or nothing at all about financial problems in the news industry (Enda & Mitchell, 2013).

Indeed, for many people, consuming the news has never been easier. Members of the public can read the news on their phones while waiting in line, see what news stories their friends are reading on Facebook, and listen to a news podcast while running errands. The number of media outlets, blogs, and social media posts seems to be continually expanding. In short, despite the journalism crisis, for many, information has never been as accessible or plentiful. A recent survey of the public in Canada, whose news industry has faced similar financial strains (Gasher et al., 2016; Siles & Boczkowski, 2012), echoes this

point. A full 93% of respondents reported that “We get more news today, more quickly and frequently than we ever have in the past” (Public Policy Forum, 2017, p. 46). At the same time, less than half of the public had “heard, read or seen anything about news organizations facing business and financial difficulties” (Wechsler, 2017, para. 13).

The financial crisis in the news industry arguably came to a head during the American presidential race of 2016 as news organizations chased profits and the proliferation of unprofessional news sources was exploited for nefarious purposes. CBS head Les Moonves bluntly admitted that Trump’s divisive campaign “may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS” (Pickard, 2016, para. 1). Simultaneously, misinformation and sensational news articles spread via hyperpartisan news sites and social media, including a story that Hillary Clinton was connected to a child sex ring run from a pizzeria in Washington, D.C., which ultimately led to a gunman opening fire at the pizza shop (Kessler, 2016). Although it is tempting to believe that this story is unbelievable, 64% of adults believe that completely made-up news has caused a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016).

If citizens are aware of the financial strain impacting news organizations, they are likely unaware of how this strain shapes news coverage—and arguably relates to the election of Donald Trump (Pickard, 2017). Consequently, it is vital for researchers to explain how news organizations are adapting to the journalism crisis and how that crisis impacts local citizens. Within this context, as a COMPASS fellow, I interned with the journalism team at the Pew Research Center in both 2014 and 2016. Although I worked on a variety of projects, I was particularly interested in developing new measurements that would help people connect to the journalism crisis in the print media industry, which I detail in this article. I first outline the need for more scholars to engage in praxis, or using research to influence society, in regards to this critical issue. I then discuss raising awareness of the journalism crisis by localizing data, making the underlying structures of journalism more relatable, and refuting common refrains dismissing the crisis. I conclude by discussing the need for scholars to engage in more public debates related to the crisis by developing new measurements that help the public understand how the journalism crisis impacts their communities.

Political Economy: Bridging Theory and Praxis

My research is informed by the critical political economy approach, which emphasizes the central role of power dynamics in defining the structure of society. Mosco (2009) summarizes political economy as “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (p. 2). In the United States, studies using this perspective have illustrated how political and economic interests influence the allocation of resources at media institutions and how the media system is regulated. For example, studies focusing on economics have analyzed how media markets are dominated by oligopolies, which reduces competition and diversity while inflating consumer prices (Baker, 2007), and studies focusing on politics have shown how the sinking of the *Titanic* led to regulations that shifted the use of public airwaves in the radio industry from a public right to a corporate privilege (Douglas, 1989). Of course, these two strands of research often intersect,

with much research demonstrating how the deregulation of the media industry has diminished the potential benefits of the Internet (Mansell, 2011) or a healthy local news ecosystem (McChesney, 2003).

Scrutinizing the media system in the United States, McChesney (2014) notes, "All democratic theory, as well as the specific history of the American republic, is premised on the idea that democracy requires an informed, participating citizenry, and such a citizenry can only exist with strong and vibrant journalism" (p. 97). Yet, to many political economists, the commercialization of the media system contradicts the goals of a healthy democratic media system (McChesney, 2000; Pickard, 2015; Schiller, 1989). This is because most news organizations are for-profit, which creates two organizational goals that are not always aligned: to fulfill the norms of journalism by acting as the fourth estate while at the same time increasing profits. Unfortunately, this tension has become increasingly lopsided, with news organizations adapting to diminishing advertising revenue by laying off staff and cutting costs, which limit their ability to act as a watchdog (Starkman, 2014). Although this trend has been documented by research centers such as the Pew Research Center and numerous academic scholars, perhaps the Federal Communications Commission best summarized how the financial strains plaguing the news industry impact news coverage and local communities. In a major report titled the *Information Needs of Communities*, the commission concluded that financially strapped news organizations have

less time to investigate, to question, to take a story to the next level. Fewer newsrooms . . . deploy reporters to work on labor-intensive stories. That means . . . fewer investigative stories . . . less daily beat reporting about municipal government, schools, the environment, local businesses, and other topics that impact Americans' future, their safety, their livelihood, and their everyday life. . . . The dramatic newspaper-industry cutbacks appear to have caused genuine harm to American citizens and local communities. (Waldman, 2011, p. 57)

Although some scholars have pushed back on this narrative (e.g., Edge, 2014), it is important to note that the steep revenue losses that news organizations are facing are seldom challenged.

Despite this expansive body of literature and the importance of the topic, a majority of the public is unaware of the financial peril that news organizations face (Enda & Mitchell, 2013). To be sure, this imbalance has many possible causes, from trade organizations such as the Newspaper Association of America refusing to release advertising revenue data (Edmonds, 2015) to the challenge of quantifying how healthy the news ecosystem is today and how it compares with previous time periods. These challenges are particularly salient in the academic field, in which arguments are advanced incrementally to avoid overextending an argument. Consequently, many academic studies offer only tepid conclusions to critical questions regarding the future of journalism. Although this is understandably done in pursuit of academic rigor, when paired with most academic manuscripts being published behind a paywall, it often results in conclusions never reaching the public.

Political economy is well suited to challenging this paradigm, given its emphasis on the importance of engaging in interventions that benefit democratic goals. Indeed, a central focus of political economy is *praxis*, or the unity of research and action, which is sometimes labeled *media activism* (Mosco,

2008). As Wasko (2012), summarized, "political economists attempt to transcend the distinction between research and policy, orienting their work towards actual social change and practice or as Marx pointed out: 'Philosophers have sought to understand the system, the point is to change it'" (p. 27). During my time as a COMPASS scholar, I embraced political economy's commitment to praxis by carrying out research that the public could easily access and understand. To do so, at the Pew Research Center, I focused on highlighting new ways to measure whether the changing media environment was weakening the journalism field's ability to act as the fourth estate. This approach led me to focus on two goals: (1) measuring whether the quality of journalism is deteriorating; and (2) if so, raising awareness of this deterioration by publishing articles that would reach a broad audience.

How Many Statehouse Reporters Are in Your State?

When learning that thousands of newspaper reporters have lost their jobs, a citizen may wonder, "Why should I care if my local newspaper employs fewer journalists?" A political economy approach is well suited to answering this question by offering both a holistic and historical perspective of the U.S. media system. Because many Americans rely on television programs, radio hosts, and digital outlets for information, they are often unaware of the importance of newspapers to the news ecosystem. Historically, newspapers have been adept at monitoring institutions through routine coverage that may not yield immediate returns. Rather than only covering a topic when it has breaking news, newspapers use "beats" to cover municipal government, statehouse politics, and other important civic bureaucracies. Although these beats may not result in popular coverage on a daily basis, through persistent coverage, they often lead to investigative reports that would otherwise go undetected.

Therefore, it is noteworthy when newspapers remove these beats as other media are unlikely to replace them. Indeed, the Pew Research Center conducted a census of journalists that cover state capitols, and found that 1,592 journalists are assigned to statehouse reporting (Enda, Matsa, & Boyles, 2014). Among the key findings were that roughly half of the statehouse reporters are part time; about one in seven reporters is a college student; and despite cutbacks, newspapers still employ more statehouse reporters than any other sector. Of newspapers for which a longitudinal comparison was possible between 2003 and 2014, the number of reporters dropped by 164, a decline of 35%, likely due to the journalism crisis. Given the importance of informing the public of legislative developments in state laws, these figures are alarming.

While assisting with this project, I collected state demographic data and figures related to state legislatures. Rather than describing state variation in writing, I created an interactive map that charts the number of full-time reporters per 500,000 residents. The graphics department at Pew informed me that its reports make the largest impact when "readers are able to find themselves in the data." By mapping information about the number of statehouse reporters, it allowed readers to understand how the journalism crisis was impacting reporting in their state. For example, Vermont has the most reporters per 500,000 residents, and California has the fewest (Williams & Jurkowitz, 2014).

In addition to being published on Pew's website, this map was also covered in national outlets such as *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe*. More research that allows citizens to see themselves

and the news that they consume in relation to the journalism crisis is needed. For example, *ProPublica* has helped popularize database reporting, which permits the “localization” of data by allowing the public to identify how their local community is impacted. This approach is also needed by scholars studying the journalism crisis, as most research focuses on the national level, when it may be more instructive to collect local data sets that allow people to understand how their local community is being impacted (Gasher et al., 2016).

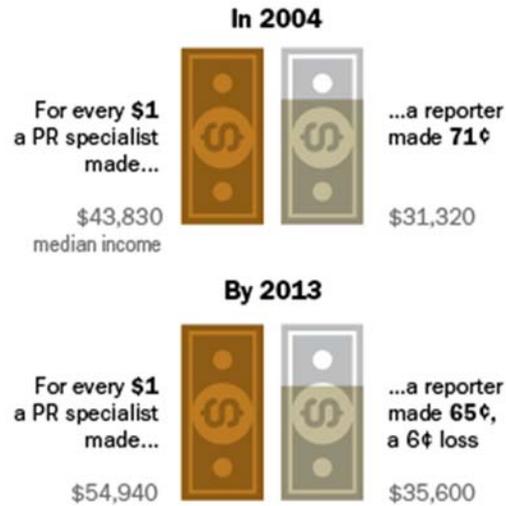
The Widening Pay Gap Between Public Relations Specialists and Journalists

Scholars have analyzed how many newspaper reporters have been laid off during the crisis, but it is important to help humanize the data for the public. The number of working journalists is more than an abstract figure: It represents actual people, whose livelihood depends on job security and salaries. To help the public understand the enduring challenge of low salaries in the reporting profession, I researched how the journalism crisis may impact the career paths of potential and current journalists. My research revealed that potential journalists have significantly higher starting and median salaries if they go into public relations (Williams, 2014). Moreover, the salary of journalists has not kept pace with inflation in the past 10 years. Between 2004 and 2013, journalists went from making 71 cents for every dollar that a PR specialist makes to 65 cents for every dollar. Figure 1 details these changes.

Coupled with staff reductions, this has meant that the ratio of journalists to public relations specialists has widened from 1 to 3.2 in 2004 to 1 to 4.6 in 2013 (see Figure 2). This comparison was inspired by *The Death and Life of American Journalism*, which compared the two fields in terms of employment per capita. In this book, McChesney and Nichols (2010) argue that “as editorial staffs shrink, there is less ability for news media to interrogate and counter the claims in press releases” (p. 48). A Pew Research Center report analyzing the 2012 presidential election supported this claim by noting a “sharp rise in the influence of partisan voices, spin doctors and surrogates in shaping what the public is told about the biography and the character of the candidates,” which was connected to the “diminishing reportorial resources in newsrooms” (“Sources,” 2012, para. 4). By publishing this report, I hoped to help people understand that the journalism crisis may become a vicious cycle—with potential journalists understandably choosing more lucrative career paths—that may not be as beneficial for democracy as journalism.

This article was cited by a variety of national news outlets, including *Politico*, *The Huffington Post*, *Quartz*, *Vox*, *The Guardian*, and *The Washington Post*. With this coverage, my research became accessible to people who were unlikely to see my analysis if it has been published in an academic article only. After publishing this report, I realized the importance of writing for both academic audiences and the general public. Research-based op-eds help the public understand the journalism crisis by reducing jargon and making information more accessible by bypassing the paywalls used by academic journals. As political economy suggests, scholars have a responsibility to merge research with action, which often requires speaking to broader audiences. Consequently, I have continued publishing my research in nonacademic outlets, such as *Poynter*, *The Washington Post’s Monkey Cage*, and the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

The Growing Income Gap Between PR Specialists and Reporters



Note: Median annual income in current dollars, not adjusted for inflation. Dollar icon by Antonieta Gomez from The Noun Project.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics

PEW RESEARCH CENTER / GRAPHIC BY JESSICA SCHILLINGER

Figure 1. Widening pay gap between public relations specialists and reporters.

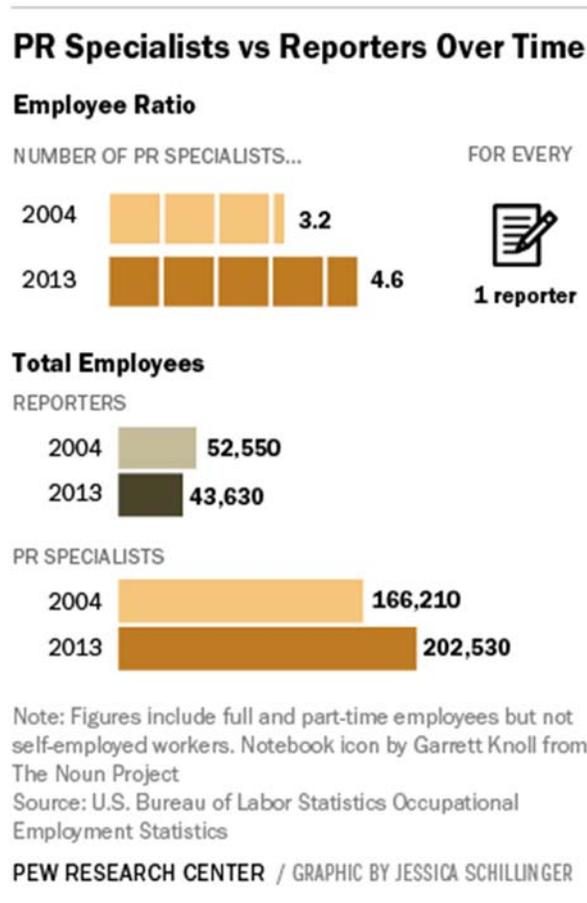


Figure 2. Ratio of public relations specialists to reporters.

For Every Digital Journalist Gained, 3.5 Newspaper Journalists Were Lost

Individuals are increasingly getting news information from “digital-native websites” such as *The Huffington Post*, *Vox*, and *BuzzFeed*, which only publish online. Given this growth, on learning of newspaper layoffs, members of the public may assume that journalists are simply migrating from newspapers to digital outlets, which will eventually replace newspaper coverage. To demonstrate that this scenario is unlikely, I developed a new measurement to show that the number of journalists working in the digital-only sector is unlikely to offset losses in the newspaper industry. This research was conducted during my time at the Pew Research Center and used in Pew’s 2017 “Newspapers Fact Sheet” (Barthel, 2017). In addition, based on these figures, I published an op-ed in the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Williams, 2016).

Whereas the American Society of News Editors estimates the size of the newspaper workforce and the Radio Television Digital News Association does the same for television news and radio news, no such group currently exists for digital news sites. Therefore, to compare the number of journalists at digital-only publishers and newspapers over time, I used data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics program. This federal program collects data from approximately 200,000 employers, which represent 340 types of industries, to annually catalog the structure of the American workforce.

According to Occupational Employment Statistics data, the number of journalists in the newspaper industry has declined sharply in the past decade. In 2005, there were 66,490 newspaper reporters or editors (see Figure 3). In 2015, there were 41,400, a decline of 25,090 journalists, or 38% (Williams, 2016). During the same time period, the number of journalists at digital-only publishers more than tripled, growing from 3,410 to 10,580. Although this growth is a noteworthy development, since 2005, for every digital journalist that has been hired, 3.5 newspaper journalists have been laid off. Thus, the growth of digital journalists has clearly not offset job losses in the newspaper industry.

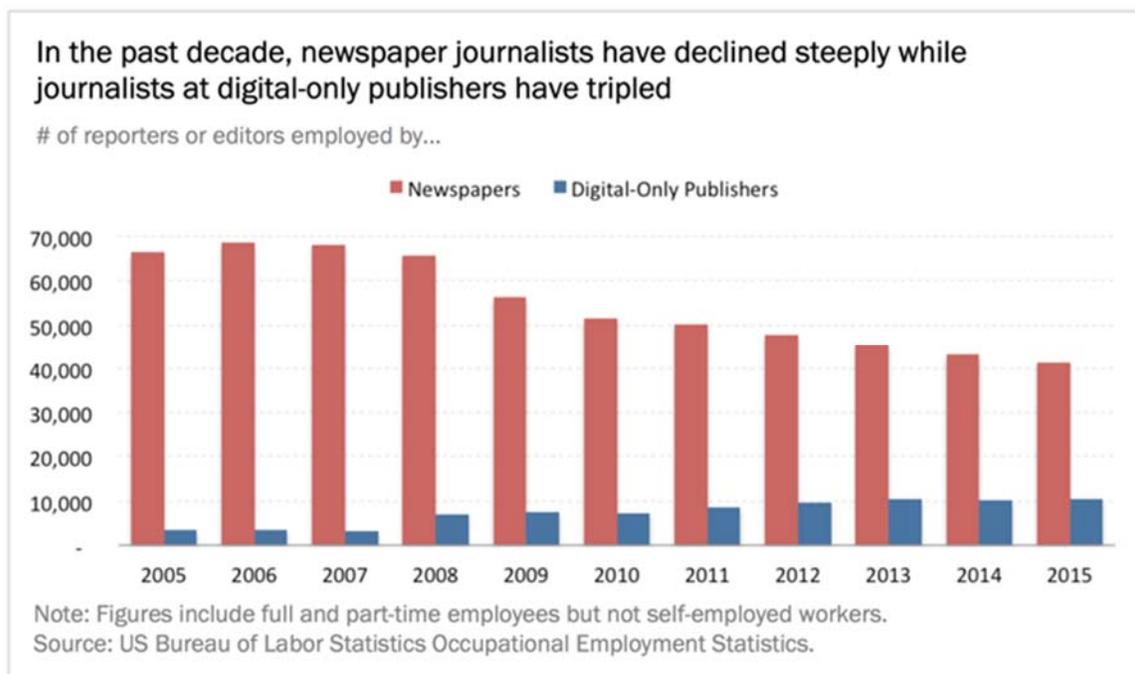


Figure 3. Number of newspaper and digital-only journalists.

Indeed, staff at digital-only outlets may not even be growing. Since 2013, the estimated number of journalists has plateaued at a little more than 10,000 (see Figure 4). These figures complement recent indicators suggesting that the economic model for digital-native publishers may be in flux. In 2015, *BuzzFeed* projected \$250 million in revenue but generated less than \$170 million (Thielman & Sweney,

2016). In 2016, layoffs have been reported at *Mashable* (Sterne & Gold, 2016), *VICE News* (Mullin, 2016a), and the *International Business Times* (Mullin, 2016b).

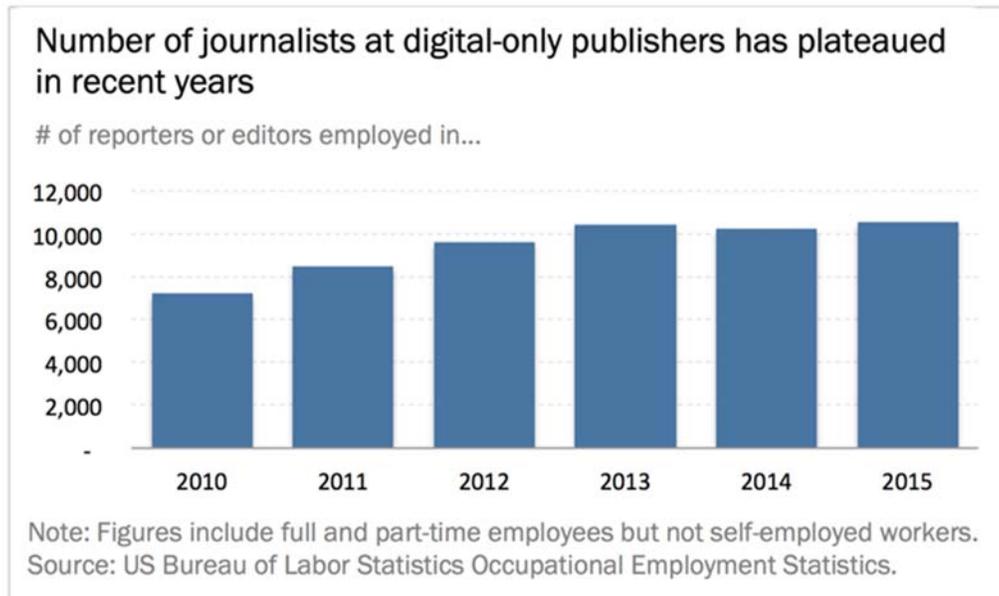


Figure 4. Number of journalists at digital-only outlets.

By focusing on trends in two prominent industries, this article is better able to explain the structural forces shaping the news coverage that people see every day. Given the revenue challenges plaguing both the newspapers and digital news industries, outlets from either medium are unlikely to green light in-depth investigative reports that are costly to produce. Likewise, they are less able to monitor the day-to-day bureaucracy of local institutions because it may be too time-consuming to be profitable. In addition, the vast majority of digital news sites are concentrated in New York and California (Benton, 2016), which limits their ability to cover local affairs in other parts of the country. Despite the popularity of digital news sites, this article helps explain to the public why such sites are unlikely to replenish the number of people working as journalists or replace newspaper reporting.

Discussion

It is no longer controversial or newsworthy to say that the financial structure undermining the journalism industry is in crisis. So how can media scholars convey to the public why this matters? The political economy approach suggests that scholars should engage in public debates while providing a holistic and historical perspective. To be certain, there are many researchers who have tried to do exactly this. Yet, most academic research is published behind an expensive paywall and focuses on the journalism crisis at the national level rather than its impact on everyday citizens. Consequently, much academic research does not reach the broader public, and when it does, it is often difficult to convey why individual

members of the public should be concerned by this trend. With the public increasingly interested in understanding how the proliferation of misinformation and sensational news coverage is impacting the American political system, it is paramount that academic researchers communicate to the public how the financial strains plaguing the journalism industry impact news coverage quality.

As a COMPASS fellow at the Pew Research Center in 2014 and 2016, I focused on publishing research that would reach a broader audience while helping members of the public connect to the journalism crisis and better understand its impact. By mapping the number of statehouse reporters, I hoped readers would recognize how the journalism crisis impacts their community. By comparing the number of public relations specialists with the number of journalists, I helped humanize the data by showing why people may choose to leave reporting for higher salaries and better job security. Lastly, despite the growing popularity of digital-only outlets, I showed that since 2005, for every digital journalist that has been hired, 3.5 newspaper journalists have been laid off. Throughout these projects, I focused on raising public awareness by writing articles that would be accessible to the public and, ideally, reach a broader audience through additional media coverage.

Although these measurements are not advanced—counting journalists by state or calculating ratios between different fields and outlets are not overly complicated—they help raise awareness of this critical issue. Moreover, they allow the public to see newspaper layoffs in a new light. What does it mean for the newspaper industry to lay off 20,000 journalists? Did it impact coverage in a reader's state, have similar losses been seen in other industries that a reader is familiar with, and has the growth of digital outlets that a reader may rely on offset those losses? Helping the public to “see themselves” in the data about the journalism crisis is incredibly important. By doing so, media researchers can help create an informed public, which can then decide whether interventions are needed to preserve quality journalism—from individually subscribing to a local news source to supporting public policies that will reduce commercial pressures on news organizations.

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