

1 What We Did on Our Summer Vacation

Sudden extensions in communication are reflected in cultural disturbances.
– Harold Innis, 1951

On June 8, 2019, Google alerted us that our research was mentioned in a California newspaper. We are always pleasantly surprised when our work is noticed, but this was more than a passing reference. In her column, Julie Makinen, Executive Editor of *The Desert Sun*, the English-language daily newspaper based in Palm Springs, announced a plan to drop national politics from her newspaper’s opinion page for the month of July. Her plan was inspired by our findings that local newspapers can hold back the forces of polarization (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018). She was motivated by a similar question: “In an era where there seem to be countless forums for people to scream about national politics, are we devoting the right amount of space to local and state issues?” (Makinen 2019a).

In the dwindling yet durable local newspaper industry, editors, reporters, and owners are grappling with changing economics, technological upheaval, and where to focus their attention. Local journalism monitors local institutions for corruption (Rubado and Jennings 2019), provides a community public forum (Hindman 2014; Mondak 1995), and highlights positive stories about the community (Rosen 1993), but increasingly lacks the resources to meet critical community information needs (Friedland et al. 2012). Modern media technologies liberate media and consumers from geographic constraints (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988), allowing audience migration to the detriment of local news. In many communities, national news fills the void. Americans want news about the president and Congress and have nearly unlimited options to find it online, in print, and on television (Hopkins 2018).

The Desert Sun took a stand against the creeping nationalization of American political news by refocusing its opinion page on local authors and issues. Makinen decided the newspaper would take a “month long summer holiday in July from national politics on *The Desert Sun*’s Opinion pages . . . no columns, no cartoons and no letters about the [P]resident, Congress, the Supreme Court, etc.” (Makinen 2019a).

Like most months of Donald Trump’s presidency, July 2019 experienced a fever pitch of heavily reported partisan conflict. Former FBI Director, Robert Mueller, testified before Congress on July 24 about his report on potential collusion between Trump’s presidential campaign and Russia. The month was bookended by Democratic presidential primary debates, on June 26 and 27 and July 30 and 31. On July 17, a crowd at a Trump rally in Greenville, North Carolina, chanted “Send her back!” at Trump’s mention

of Representative Ilhan Omar, the Democrat representing Minnesota's fifth congressional district (McCarthy 2019). There was no shortage of national politics news in July 2019, but it was missing from the opinion page of *The Desert Sun*.

We immediately recognized the opportunity to learn from this experiment. We fielded surveys in June and July to assess political attitudes before and after the localization experiment, targeting respondents in the circulation ZIP codes of *The Desert Sun* and a comparison newspaper that did not change its opinion page, the *Ventura County Star*. We were particularly interested in the impact of localizing the opinion page on affective and social polarization. Defined as dislike and distrust of the opposing party and measured using opinions of politicians, opposing partisans, and increased social distance between partisans, affective polarization is to blame for many problems in American politics today, from legislative gridlock to partisan differences in mask-wearing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Igielnik 2020; Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). When the news substitutes “an intense focus on the partisan war in Washington” (Makinen 2019a) for stories that emphasize membership in one's geographic community, priming these cross-cutting identities may cool tensions and dampen anger (Mason 2016).

We conducted a complete content analysis of *The Desert Sun*'s opinion page in June, July, and August 2019 and found that the newspaper followed through on their commitment: mentions of President Donald Trump fell to nearly zero, total syndicated content dropped by half, and local issues such as downtown development, traffic congestion, architectural restoration, and environmental concerns received more attention. Localization did not make the opinion page resemble the community, however: July amplified the voices of prototypical political elites rather than women and racial and ethnic minorities. Reflecting newspapers' longstanding tendency to cater to elites, diversity on the opinion page often means representing ideas from both the right and left, not diversity among the authors (Abramson et al. 1988).

The local-only opinion page slowed polarization for readers of *The Desert Sun* relative to readers of the *Ventura County Star* on both affective and social dimensions, consistent with recent studies showing that op-eds can durably change attitudes (Coppock et al. 2018). These effects are moderated by political interest, knowledge, and preference for local news: political sophisticates are less polarized by local than national opinion content. Sadly, local newspapers are shrinking, disappearing, or becoming “ghosts” of their former selves that merely host syndicated content (Abernathy 2018). Philanthropists, newspaper owners, and editors can reduce affective polarization by supporting dedicated opinion editors focused on the community and what it needs to know.

Using a design with high external validity and causal leverage, we show that local newspapers can slow the rise of affective and social polarization through a refocusing of their opinion pages on local issues. When national politics was eliminated, local voices and state-level concerns filled the gap. Our findings demonstrate the continued importance of local opinion pages, which are receiving less support from newspaper chain owners and professional associations (Enda 2013). We hope that the news industry and philanthropists take these findings as a reason to reinvest in local opinion journalism.

1.1 Home Style Opinion

Cultivating a local audience is a well-established political and media strategy. In his 1978 book, *Home Style: Representatives in Their Districts*, political scientist Richard Fenno described how members of Congress historically adopted a “home style” to gain the trust of their constituencies to win reelection. Congressional home styles imbued everything a representative did, from the clothes they wore to the votes they cast, showing voters that their representative was “one of them.” For decades, this strategy paid electoral dividends. Voters consistently reported liking their representative but disliking Congress overall (Fenno 1978). But for today’s elected officials, crafting a home style may be less useful as national parties and politics increasingly dictate representatives’ behavior in Congress (Quinn 2020; Kujala 2019; Hetherington 2001). The reelection prospects of today’s representatives may not be as dependent on strong and consistent local identities (Trussler 2020).

The weaker ties and lower responsiveness between House representatives and their local constituents resembles a similar pattern in local media. As audiences turn away from local news in favor of national news, members of the House have less incentive to attend the geographic constituency as district service goes largely unnoticed and fails to generate electoral rewards without attention from the local press (Trussler 2020). In spite of the fact that local media are still more trusted than national media (Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2018), evolutions in communication technologies chipped away at the geographic boundaries constraining market audiences and eroded these safeguards of electoral accountability. At the same time, for the remaining local media, a local focus is still a safe bet. Local news outlets need a home style, since audiences trust and follow local media because of the local coverage they provide (Knight Foundation 2019).

For those politicians and newspapers trying to appeal to locals, home style comprises both art and substance, adopting and perpetuating regional preferences and norms while contributing to the health and well-being of the region. If a newspaper publishes only wire reports without serving community

information needs, readers will turn elsewhere. Newspapers often narrow their appeals in response to economic pressures and audience characteristics (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Branton and Dunaway 2009; Hamilton 2004). The top priority of local newspapers, including on the opinion page, is to provide readers with a local angle (Rosenfeld 2000).

The Desert Sun, 93 years old in 2020, is the area's only English-language daily newspaper, along with just two television news stations. Its home style is both economic and linguistic, distinguishing *The Desert Sun* from an all-Spanish newspaper (*El Informador del Valle*) and a bilingual newspaper (*La Prensa Hispana*) that serve the region's substantial Hispanic and Latinx population. Economic factors also skew coverage toward the wealthy: "[T]he paper has long catered to a more affluent audience and probably left out more economically disadvantaged communities" (Makinen, personal communication, June 18, 2020).

This pattern of market responsiveness is reflected in a lack of diversity on the opinion page, although the paper is far from unique in this regard. Gender and racial inequality characterize most opinion pages: only 15 percent of op-eds in 1992 (Wolf 1995) and 20 percent in 2011 (Yaeger 2012) were written by women, while white writers continue to dominate opinion journalism and Sunday morning talk shows (Powell 2014). Localization may take up resources that might otherwise be used to overcome these biases. Even a well-meaning newspaper like *The Desert Sun* needs resources to represent the racial and economic diversity of their full geographic constituency, and targeted market responsiveness reflects that resources are often scarce, much like for representatives, who rarely focused their efforts on appealing to their entire district (Fenno 1978).

Appealing across demographic groups within the market audience may be difficult, but local newspapers can adopt a home style that reflects the one shared characteristic across groups in the local market audience – by prioritizing state and local issues. By banning national politics, *The Desert Sun* turned the opinion page over to issues facing California and Palm Springs, prioritizing community voices over journalists' perspectives. Readers filled the pages with appeals to save old buildings, descriptions of the area's natural beauty, and exhortations to drive safely, but the writers did not look more like their community: rather, authors on balance remained largely white, male, and relatively privileged. Localization alone could not overcome newspapers' historical legacy as both a product and a platform for elites (Hindman 2009; Prior 2007; Abramson et al 1998; Innis 1951).

While it may not cure all of the imbalances and inequities of the local opinion page, a turn to "home style opinion" could provide a roadmap for other local newspapers to push back against polarization. In a nationalized and partisan era

(Hopkins 2018), newspapers want to strengthen the community connections that make them unique. As more newspapers are bought by nonlocal owners and cut their newsroom staff and opinion page editors, their home style, cultivated over decades, may nevertheless diminish.

1.2 Less Local News, More Polarization

In the research that inspired Makinen’s experiment, we studied the effects of local newspaper closures on Americans’ voting decisions (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018). The United States had lost 2,100 newspapers over the past fifteen years, readership and staffing fell by half, and many of the country’s 6,700 remaining newspapers are pale reflections of their former selves (Abernathy 2020). Newspapers are the most important source for local stories that are “original, local, and address a critical information need” (Mahone et al. 2019), and we expected a closure to have polarizing effects.

We collected an original national sample of newspaper closures from 2009 to 2012 to examine if areas where a newspaper closed had more split-ticket voting, in which people vote for different parties at different levels of government – for example, Democrat for president and Republican for senator – than areas without a newspaper closure. We matched counties according to race, voting-age population, gender, income, and education, and compared president-Senate split-ticket voting before (2008) and after (2012) a newspaper left a community. We found a 1.9 percent decrease in split-ticket voting in counties that lost a newspaper (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2018). Robustness tests showed that our findings were best explained by increased reliance on partisan cues, not reduced information. In other words: if local news fails, national news replaces it and polarizes voting behavior.

Our findings clearly tapped into something journalists understood and cared about. Our study was covered by the Associated Press, *Washington Post*, and *Journalist’s Resource*, and we wrote about it for *The Conversation* and *Scientific American*. Local journalists and newspapers noticed as well: *The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* of West Virginia, and others wrote editorials about the state of local news framed around our findings. In our interview with her, Makinen described why our study resonated:

Why do we need to run voices from the *Chicago Tribune* or the *Washington Post*? I’m sure there’s local stuff that we can get people interested in here . . . As I read your article and other articles that talked about the national polarization trickling down into local media, the more I thought I, we, should try something . . . National columnists would write a lot about Trump and the national political divide. And I felt that was adding to people’s unhappiness with the paper, whichever side of it you were on . . . If we could put a focus on

local things, people could find some common ground. Writing another column about Trump is not going to bring anyone in the community together. (Makinen, personal communication, June 18, 2020)

Makinen made clear that national political news is not only a competitor for local newspapers: it is an active force within them, in wire services and syndicated columns and letters to the editor. Particularly on the opinion page, publishing more national politics may contribute to the current wave of polarization and nationalization.

1.3 Palm Springs

Makinen's initiative, not a deliberate research design, determined the location for our experiment. Palm Springs, located in the Coachella Valley east of Los Angeles, is not a representative American community in terms of gender, race, or political leanings, and understanding those differences is necessary for interpreting our conclusions.

In addition to Palm Springs, *The Desert Sun* serves the cities of Desert Hot Springs, Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells, Indio, La Quinta, and Coachella (CVAG 2015). Palm Springs has a permanent population of 48,500, swelling to around 75,000 in winter months (City of Palm Springs 2020; U.S. Census Bureau 2019). The economy depends on cultural and environmental tourism for its desert beauty, music festivals such as Coachella and Stagecoach, and distinctive mid-century modern architecture (Visit Palm Springs 2019). Water and natural preservation are perpetual concerns for tourism and survival (Makinen, personal communication, June 18, 2020).

Gay and lesbian voters make up more than half the electorate in Palm Springs, which elected the nation's first all-LGBTQ+ city council in 2018 (Wilson 2019). Palm Springs' population is only 41.9 percent women, and the city has one of the highest percentages of same-sex households in the nation (Gates and Ost 2004). Palm Springs is an outlier in its circulation region, however: Palm Desert, a similar-sized city next to Palm Springs and also served by *The Desert Sun*, is 51.8 percent female, and Indio (51.3 percent female) and Cathedral City (49 percent female) are more representative (U.S. Census Bureau 2019).

Politically, the area is heavily Democratic: across the Coachella Valley, Hillary Clinton received over 75 percent of the presidential vote in 2016 (Marx 2016), compared to 62 percent statewide. The political composition of the area can determine the slant of a newspaper (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010), but both Makinen and Franco stressed in their interviews that they strive to keep

the opinion page balanced: “I think it’s important to take a hard look at the balance of stuff on our pages and not just dismiss all criticism like that of being completely unworthy of attention” (Makinen, personal communication, June 18, 2020). The newspaper actually broke with its Republican-leaning tradition to endorse Hillary Clinton in 2016, its first ever Democratic endorsement (Desert Sun 2016).

Although the location of our study is not representative, *The Desert Sun* is a fairly typical newspaper, and the outcomes of its opinion page experiment are relevant to local media across America.

1.4 Plan of the Element

In the following Sections, we will illustrate why local news matters; explore how *The Desert Sun*’s opinion page content changed in July 2019; analyze our survey results about polarization; and offer suggestions for using these lessons to strengthen local news.

Section 2 explores the diverging trajectories of local and national news. A community with a declining local newspaper will suffer in several ways: national news exposure lowers familiarity with local elections and exposes consumers to more partisan language. National news cannot supply the civic benefits that local news once did.

Section 3 explores how the content of the opinion page of *The Desert Sun* changed in July 2019. Syndicated columns fell by more than half, Trump coverage dropped to nearly zero, and the opinion page published more letters about local issues while national ones evaporated. State-level syndication and local writers replaced national politics, but racial, ethnic, and gender representation did not improve, and the voices of powerful executives and CEOs were amplified.

In Section 4, we analyze our surveys of Palm Springs and Ventura according to our preregistered hypotheses and analysis plan, focusing on affective and social polarization. Affective and social polarization in Palm Springs slowed down after July, when opinion page mentions of both parties fell by half, relative to Ventura. This effect was moderated by three factors: reading the newspaper, political knowledge, and political participation.

Section 5 lays out our recommendations for local news at this precarious time. Both Makinen and Franco said that other newspapers should localize their opinion pages but acknowledge that it takes resources other newspapers may not have. Philanthropists and newspaper chains should hire or retain opinion editors and support state-level news services. When local newspapers give readers home style opinion instead of national partisan conflict, they can hold back the rising tide of polarization.

2 Why Local Newspapers Matter

Local newspapers foster robust political competition, bolster government performance, and increase citizens' satisfaction with local governance. Communities have critical information needs that help members live safely, access opportunities, and participate in civic life, and local media are the best source for that information (Friedland et al. 2012). As local newspapers disappear from communities and create deserts in many Americans' news diets, those critical information needs go unmet and are replaced by polarizing national news.

Local news differs from national news in several important ways, with consequences for American democracy. First, local news outlets are the only outlets willing and able to meet the critical information needs of local communities and empower democratic accountability (Napoli et al. 2017; Waldman 2011; Arnold 2004). Second, local news outlets are more trusted than their national counterparts (Gramlich, 2019; Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2018), giving local news unique influence over their readers' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Third, and most important for our purposes, local news chooses what to cover based on relevance to the community rather than partisan conflict. Local news without the spectacle of national party politics could ease the polarization that grips Americans' political attitudes.

The purpose of this Section is to demonstrate why local newspapers matter. We also detail the threats facing local news, describe how these threats contribute to concerning trends in American politics, and show that exposure to national news does not increase local political knowledge and contains more polarizing language. A local newspaper that emphasizes its home style can reach readers and meet their needs better than national news can.

2.1 Local News and Political Accountability

The downsides of losing local newspapers may seem apparent to some, while others may wonder why they should care. After all, newspapers are arguably an elitist and antiquated way to deliver information, and a poor fit with the conveniences of today's digital media environment. Local television news attracts plenty of criticisms too: it is overly focused on traffic, weather, and sports, and barely discusses public affairs. What is it about local news that makes it so unique and so important? Why can't the rising tide of national news lift all boats?

National outlets cannot and do not cover all 535 legislative offices of the United States Congress, much less the fifty state governments or thousands of municipal governments (Arnold 2004). Instead, they focus on the president and

national institutions such as Congress, the courts, and federal agencies (Gardner and Sullivan 1999), with a bias toward institutional and elite conflict (York 2013).

Local coverage of elected officials focuses on their geographic constituency (Arnold 2004). State and local politicians use local news to cultivate their “personal vote,” touting their service to locals (Trussler 2018; Fenno 1978). Unlike national outlets, local newspapers are interested in elected officials because of their local relevance, not their leadership positions, ideology, or prominence in Congress. Local newspaper coverage of legislators and their accomplishments for their district particularly influence voters in the opposing party (Schaffner 2006), overcoming partisanship and placing district considerations at the top of voters’ minds (Trussler 2018). By covering legislators’ locally relevant activities, local newspapers deemphasize partisanship, inform voters about their representatives’ actions for the district, and provide a platform for local issues (Snyder and Stromberg 2010).

There is a strong link between healthy local journalism and accountability in local government. State government is more corrupt when local coverage is worse, such as in states with remote capitals (Campante and Do 2014). Poorly covered representatives exert less effort for their constituencies, are less likely to vote against their party or serve on relevant committees, and bring less funding back home (Snyder and Stromberg 2010).

Citizens’ trust in local news (e.g., Gramlich 2019; Prato 1998) makes it uniquely informative about representatives’ activities (Fowler 2020; Miller and Krosnick 2000). Citizens’ attentiveness, knowledge, and participation are higher in areas with better local coverage (Hopkins 2018; Hayes and Lawless 2015; Gentzkow et al. 2011). Less local coverage makes local elections less competitive, typically to the benefit of incumbents (Rubado and Jennings 2019; Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2013; but see Gentzkow et al. 2011).

In spite of Americans’ trust in their local news, it is not without flaws. Newspapers are often geared towards elite audiences and may perpetuate inequalities in political knowledge. The arrival of broadcast television helped remedy some inequalities by expanding the news audience, but is largely considered superficial, fleeting, and uninformative (Prior 2007). As cable expanded the media landscape in the 1970s and 1980s, it increased pressure to focus on profits, affecting the incentives and outputs of news organizations.

Rising corporate media ownership and consolidation brought superficial coverage, fewer locally focused stories, and less diverse viewpoints (Martin and McCrain 2019; Napoli 2003). Types of owner include chains, local, private, nonprofit, and public-shareholder (Dunaway 2013, 2008; Hamilton 2004;

Schaffner and Sellers 2003). Competition and ownership affect staffing, production processes, and the news product itself (Peterson 2020; Martin and McCrain 2019; Usher 2019; Archer and Clinton 2018; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Dunaway 2008; Hamilton 2004).

Companies that oversee large chains invest less in newsrooms and produce more sensational and less local coverage (Dunaway 2013). Similarly, publicly traded companies maximize profit return to shareholders (Hamilton 2004; Baker 2002), and often reduce staffing and other newsroom resources after taking control. Hedge funds, a new and emerging class of owners, are rapidly buying up local newspapers and stripping them for parts (Abernathy 2018). Like publicly traded companies on steroids, hedge-fund owners slash newsroom staffs and reporting resources (Peterson and Dunaway 2020), drastically reducing the amount of political coverage those newspapers provide (Hare and Laforme 2020; Pompeo 2020; Peterson 2019). Hedge-fund owners brazenly shirk the civic mission of newspapers in favor of maximizing profit margins.

Ownership structures affect news outputs. As newsroom staff decreases, so does the amount and quality of coverage (Peterson 2020; Dunaway 2008), making hedge-fund ownership models particularly troubling (Abernathy 2020). Cost-cutting and aggressive profit-seeking commonly result in frivolous, sensational, and negative coverage of politics (Dunaway and Lawrence 2015; Dunaway 2008; Hamilton 2004).

2.2 Consolidation and Localism

Debates about media consolidation raged throughout the broadcast era. Struggles to ensure that news audiences had access to a diversity of local perspectives began well before the current era of declining local news: in the wake of the 1996 Telecommunications Act, corporate media lobbies increased pressure for further easing of cross-ownership restrictions aimed at preventing local information monopolies. Alarm over rising consolidation compelled a media reform movement from citizen groups concerned about the ability of consolidated corporate media to serve the public interest (McChesney 2004). Media deregulation critics argue that “outsourced news” robs local communities of physically present and familiar journalists that provide higher quality local news coverage (Usher 2019; Hood 2007).

Although local media owners may feel more invested in their community (Yan and Napoli 2006; Napoli and Yan 2007), the evidence regarding the effects of chain media ownership on localism is mixed. Chain owners can exploit economies of scale to provide more public affairs coverage among the