The Local News Landscape is Broken: NewsQ Panel Review of Platform News Products

To address the challenge of improving the local journalism that appears in news feeds, the News Quality Initiative (NewsQ), which seeks to elevate news quality when algorithms rank and recommend news, convened a panel of journalists and media scholars to bring a critical eye to how platform news products are serving up local news. The panel’s aim was to identify specific areas where ranking and recommendation can be improved, and to articulate recommendations for both platforms and publishers.

Contents

Vision ................................................................. 5
Mission ............................................................... 5
Values ................................................................. 5
1. Quick Fixes ...................................................... 6
   1.1. Local Reporting ........................................ 6
   1.2. Elevation .................................................... 6
   1.3. Similarity & Sources ................................. 6
   1.4. Diversity ..................................................... 6
   1.5. Opinions ..................................................... 7
   1.6. Geographical Boundaries ........................... 7
2. Repairs ............................................................ 8
   2.1. Engagement .............................................. 8
   2.2. Research .................................................. 8
   2.2.1. Mass Media ......................................... 9
   2.2.2. Context ................................................ 9
   2.2.3. Crises ................................................... 9
   2.3. Categorization .......................................... 9
   2.4. Agendas .................................................... 10
   2.5. Sources .................................................... 10
Administrative Information ..................................... 11
NewsQ Panel on Local Journalism (NQPLJ)

Description:
The NewsQ panel on local journalism met regularly from May to September 2020 to examine how platform news products are currently surfacing local news, to identify areas for improvement, and to draw on journalistic principles to make recommendations.

Stakeholder(s):
- NewsQ Panel on Local Journalism: Members of the inaugural Local Panel included journalists, media studies scholars, and a technology specialist who represent years of experience in newsrooms and industry from different parts of the country. They included:
  - Al Cross: Director of the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues
  - Meredith Clark: Assistant professor in the Media Studies department at the University of Virginia
  - Claudia Irizarry Aponte: Reporter for THE CITY covering Brooklyn
  - David Kroman: Reporter at Crosscut covering city politics
  - Gabriel Kahn: Professor of Professional Practice of Journalism at the USC Annenberg School of Journalism
  - Mandy Jenkins: General Manager of The Compass Experiment
  - Natalie Mao: Director of product management at Bing News

News Platforms:
The way Facebook, Google, Bing, and other large platforms distribute local news is broken. Every day the problem is not fixed does further harm to thousands of local news organizations and the communities they serve.

Facebook
Google
Bing

U.S. Adults:
Platforms hold more power than ever to surface and distribute news. For U.S. adults, social media sites are an increasing method for accessing news. Some large, well-capitalized news outlets have been able to squeeze some advantages out of this system.

Social Media Sites

Small News Outlets:
Yet smaller outlets have no leverage and remain largely at the mercy of platforms to reach their audiences. The platforms also control the digital ad markets, collecting the lion’s share of revenue, and leaving a trickle for local outlets. As a result, local news providers are dying at an alarming rate, leaving news deserts in their wake.

Users:
However, the problem runs deeper than the financial crisis created by this system. Facebook, Google, and Bing have created specific tools for users to find local news stories. Yet in each case, those tools frequently distort the local news landscape by promoting stories that are of scant significance, duplicative, or not even local.

Google Des Moines:
Even a quick check of the first three articles in the Google Des Moines news feed on November 20, which is in the midst of a highly contested Senate race, provided an article about a man dressed up as an elf in order to sell real estate.

News Feed Designers:
The problem may indeed begin with the design of the tools themselves: the platforms dump all local news into a single bucket, making it difficult for the audience to distinguish verified information in the public interest from opinion, press releases, or police reports. The criteria the platforms use to categorize local news are opaque to the point that their selections of top local stories can seem random and even illogical. That does more than just befuddle the audience. This lack of transparency sends a muddled signal to the local outlets as they desperately try to get their work noticed by platform algorithms.

Journalists:
Journalists and publishers are forced to ask themselves, “Does Google want us to do more crime stories? Does Facebook like restaurant reviews?”

Publishers
Anne Christnovich:
Anne Christnovich is the audience engagement manager for Seattle-based news site Crosscut. In an interview, Christnovich says that she and her team are in a constant struggle to guess how platforms want them to behave. “Our social media strategy is largely based around what Facebook tells you to do,” she says. Except Facebook never actually tells you. Things just change, and referral traffic tanks, Christnovich says leaving everyone in the dark. “I’ve spoken to Facebook reps and they understand the algorithm much the same way we do. They have some educated guesses on what the algorithm changes are,” she adds. But no one can provide clear guidance on what the new editorial strategy should be once Facebook tweaks its algorithm. An example of Facebook’s power over the journalism industry can be seen in its infamous 2015 “pivot to video,” which led parent companies to lay off journalists in droves as

— continued next page
Stakeholders (continued)

they attempted to meet the alleged demand. After the promised returns failed to materialize, many newsrooms pivoted back.

Crosscut

Professional News Organizations:
Yet there are both immediate changes and long-term approaches that the platforms can adopt that would improve this situation. After close examination of the platform’s inputs and outputs for local news, our panel has identified a path forward. Google, Facebook, and Bing can create a transparent set of criteria about how they establish a “news agenda,” a ranking of the importance of different news items. These criteria already exist but are shrouded from the public and professional news organizations, making it impossible to understand why stories are ranked as they are.

Tech Platforms:
The tech platforms can also use their computational power to better determine “source authority,” or the relative veracity and thoroughness of stories to favor. This can help raise the profile of stronger journalistic work. Platforms can also improve their labeling and categories of local news. This can result in giving more weight to essential service journalism and other types of stories that currently can be swamped by more “breaking” stories of car crashes or crimes.

Local News Organizations:
However, a real, substantive change will only occur if Google, Facebook, and others launch a long-running process of engagement with local news organizations. This must function as a true partnership where both parties agree to work toward a common goal of improving the information landscape of communities. It requires the platforms to commit to carrying out something they have so far been unwilling to do: sign on to a set of commonly accepted values about what constitutes quality in news gathering.

Local Reporters:
When is News Really Local? — It is unrealistic to come up with one geographical definition that can fit all communities. In New York, local news could be about Williamsburg, Brooklyn, or New York City as a whole. Meanwhile, local news in Los Angeles, with a population of four million, is likely as relevant to residents of Beverly Hills or Santa Monica, because of the way people move between boundaries throughout the day. At the most basic level, local news means news produced by or in collaboration with reporters who are part of the community they serve. A national or international news outlet’s story about a local community is news “about” that community, but it is usually for a broader audience, not “for” the local community. Yet that definition is not complete because of the way different communities define themselves. A story about the New York City subway system can be local, even though it serves a community of eight million plus. Meanwhile, news from the governor’s office in Laramie, Wyoming, might not feel local to someone in Jackson Hole, even though the state’s population is less than 500,000. It is important to lay out a set of grounding definitions about what we mean when we talk about “local journalism.”

Local Communities:
Local journalism is reporting done in the service of the local community. In the vast majority of cases, the topics covered by local journalism are directly relevant to the audience. Local outlets thrive when they respond to and anticipate the information needs of their community. In the best examples, they live off trust accumulated over years. One way to think about quality local coverage is that it allows a community to have a conversation with itself, based on facts. In practice, local journalism produces stories which can be grouped into several main categories. We distilled the following categories which express different ways that local journalism meets community needs.

Local News Audiences:
Six Different Types of Stories — These six categories provide a roadmap for how to think about a vast majority of local coverage, according to community needs we identified. If platforms can recognize the value in these six different types of stories, and perhaps the quality as well, then they can assist in spotlighting these types of stories for broader audiences... This list of categories is by no means exhaustive. There are numerous other categories, from local sports to local crime (we will address crime coverage further down). However, we are listing these story types precisely because they represent the primary missions of a responsible local news outlet and because the absence of these stories in recommendation and ranking algorithms poses a serious problem not just for local journalism but the communities they serve.

Service Journalists:
Service Journalism — Service journalism is the bread and butter of local journalism. Service journalism provides a guide for local residents that helps them navigate unfamiliar terrain. This can be as basic as a list of local food bank locations, regular updates of school closures, or a voter guide to help people understand down-ballot items like referenda and propositions. Here, local reporters are taking the time to collect and present information that helps people go about their day. These stories do not generate emotional responses from readers the way a politics, sports or crime story might. Their utility is not measured in comments or shares but in the value of the information itself.

Local Government Reporters:
Coverage of local government — School board meetings, city council hearings, or zoning changes rarely make for racy headlines. Few local readers may click on a headline about a city council vote. But that lower level of engagement obscures the inherent value in this coverage. In these cases, journalists are standing in for the public, going to these meetings so you don’t have to, and recording the outcome. Producing this kind of news can be a chore, but its impact is powerful. Airing these issues out in the open allows the public to follow and connect with local government, which enhances trust. And a reporter at these gatherings is a watchdog on public officials. When there is an advocate for the community present, there is less likelihood of malfeasance or corruption.

Accountability Reporters:
Local accountability reporting — Who will go through the local school budget line by line? Who will keep tabs on donations made to local candidates? Who will count up how many potholes have been filled? Who will look at the racial breakdown of police stops? These tasks are tedious, and they don’t always succeed in digging up dirt. But they are one of the essential functions of local reporting. And when they do land,
they land with impact, such as a recent story about a small-town city manager making more than the president of the United States. In understanding the value of these stories, we must move beyond the classic measures of engagement (e.g., clicks, shares), and think about what it means when local news media are not around to do this reporting. Who would be there to hold local government accountable, to shine a light on racial or wealth inequities? Platforms might ask themselves how can they do their part in elevating these rare but important examples.

Community Historians:
Institutional memory of a community — “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” wrote George Santayana. One core responsibility of the local press is to provide that institutional memory for a community. Did the police department get caught up in a case of racial bias? The local news media are the keeper of the community memory, and can provide the appropriate historical context that might include a similar incident in the same department years earlier.

Feedback Monitors:
Community listening post — Local media are where community members go when they need to air a complaint, a concern, or a worry. Community members can (and do) vent on Facebook, but local news outlets are the ones to distinguish between a solitary rant and a growing problem that impacts many. They are the ones to be able to determine if a complaint is credible or not. They are there to catch, filter, and vet concerns expressed by the community, and, through reporting, give those concerns a voice.

Local Context Reporters:
Framing broader issues in a local context — Tip O’Neill, the legendary former speaker of the House, famously said, “All politics is local.” On many occasions, the same is true for news. Coronavirus is a national emergency. Reporting on the number of new infections or hospitalizations in a county is a local one. Similarly, when Congress approves a tax bill, local communities feel the impact differently. Quality local reporting helps draw the connection between broader narratives and local impact. It helps locals see where they fit into a larger development, such as reporting on how a federal eviction moratorium could affect renters and landlords in one county in Ohio.

Local Media Association
Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers

Vision
The local journalism that appears in news feeds is improved

Mission
To improve how platform news products are surfacing local news

Values
Local Journalism
Quality
1. Quick Fixes

*Adopt quick fixes to address some of the more egregious issues*

The gap between local needs and platform news results is wide and requires more complex long-term changes. In the meantime, there are some quick fixes which may address some of the more egregious, low-hanging-fruit issues the panel observed.

1.1. Local Reporting

*Prioritize original reporting done by local news outlets*

When a story is broken by a local news outlet and reproduced by a national outlet, priority should be given to the local outlet. Local news outlets are competing against better-resourced national outlets, but this doesn’t always mean that the quality of the reporting is better coming from national outlets. Local reporters are more familiar with the communities they serve and better positioned to break news at the local level. To clarify, we are not proposing a blanket ban on national outlets in local news feeds, especially when those outlets work with local reporters as is the case with ProPublica, for example.

**Stakeholder(s):**

Local News Outlets

1.2. Elevation

*Elevate stories that have more than one source*

Many stories elevated by the local news products the panel observed were single-source articles based on police or government press releases. The public is increasingly aware that taking the word of police at face value with no additional context is problematic. Elevating stories that include more than one source could help weed out these lower quality news reports.

1.3. Similarity & Sources

*Avoid elevating stories that are similar and with a limited number of different sources*

Don’t elevate the same story to the top of the feed — The panel was not against multiple stories with different relevant angles on the same topic (e.g., COVID-19 or the presidential elections), but analysis of the news feeds surfaced a number of days where the top five articles were dominated by one or two stories that were nearly identical from three or four different sources.

1.4. Diversity

*Diversify publishers in the feeds*

Diversify publishers in the feed — which will diversify coverage — Outlet diversity in the top five results of the sample news feeds showed a lot of publisher repetition, even in a robust news environment like New York City. For example, out of 100 articles examined in the New York City news feed, 47 of the articles were pulled from five outlets. This lack of publisher diversity was a greater issue in the more modest news environments like Des Moines, where the top five articles were dominated by many of the same publishers. In the Des Moines feed we reviewed, 85 of 100 articles were pulled from four outlets. Even in Phoenix, 87 articles out of 100 in our dataset...
were pulled from only seven outlets. All of these cities have many more than four to seven outlets. In addition, these publishers represented similar media types, such as a prevalence of TV news. This is, of course, a small sample size and also a potential reflection of the media environment, but these numbers hint at a need for diversification at the outlet level as well as the diversity of media type. This will require platforms to work with local communities and the journalism community to create robust processes for assessing outlet authority. This is addressed further down in the paper.

**Stakeholder(s):**

**Publishers**

### 1.5. Opinions

*Label opinion*

Always label opinion — Distinguishing opinion from news content might be beyond the current limitation of a news algorithm alone, however, when an outlet labels an article as opinion, news feeds should clearly reflect this categorization and label it. This is especially important at a time when surveys show that Americans increasingly have difficulty distinguishing between fact and opinion, and when cable news channels spend more time delivering opinion than fact.

### 1.6. Geographical Boundaries

*Improve transparency around geographical boundaries*

User transparency around geographical boundaries — As is the case so often with products from big platforms, this could be improved by a little transparency and user choice. A user could define New York City as the designated area, or the New York metropolitan area, and so forth. In areas where news coverage is sparse or even absent, the geographical boundary might need to be expanded, even statewide. If this is clearly communicated to the user, then the utility of the feature improves. This is also an opportunity to let users know whether they live in an area that is “news poor” or “news rich.”
2. Repairs

*Repair the local news landscape*

To truly repair the local news situation, platforms will have to go well beyond quick fixes.

2.1. Engagement

*Engage with the local news community*

The first, and most essential, piece of fixing this broken system is for the platforms to engage seriously with the local news community. An initial, multi-method research agenda must frame the problem by developing a shared understanding between publishers and platforms. An effective, networked partnership to address this research might include university-based researchers already embedded in local communities working with local outlets and sponsored by platforms to design, oversee, conduct, and analyze the results of the inquiry. Key questions should include:

- How do local news outlets define their own community boundaries differently from the way the platforms do?
- How do news outlets in various geographical areas approach their coverage differently and why?
- What drives an outlet’s editorial decision making?
- Why do they invest in certain coverage that may not appear as financially rewarding?
- What kind of listening do outlets do with their audiences?^ This will be a lengthy process. It involves understanding how news judgement, journalistic ethics and practices have evolved over time. It might mean speaking to reporters and editors about the work they and the communities they serve have found most rewarding. It might also include more personalization settings at the user level. Options like these need to be further explored.

**Stakeholder(s):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media Platforms</th>
<th>Local Media Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local News Community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Research

*Understand what drives information needs within a community*

We are also suggesting a process that puts local folks at the center of ethnographic research in order to understand what drives information needs within a community that the local news outlets aim to serve. We advocate for a process that can account for differences within communities, one that recognizes inequities and does not attempt to apply a one-size-fits-all solution to a complex problem. This will require developing profiles of multiple user/audience types that will undoubtedly have some commonalities, even across disparate locations, economies, and even value systems.
2.2.1. Mass Media

*Learn mass media are failing to serve people*

Through a series of focus groups with diverse, self-defined community groups, platforms and local news publishers should build on communication theorist Harold Lasswell’s foundational question to assess the effects of mass media in the 20th century: "Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect?" As the 21st century can be characterized by the development of a constantly evolving, fragmented, and hyperspecific media reality, we must now ask, “Who (uses) What (news), and How and Why do they use it?” to understand the reciprocal impact between access to differentiated news sources and audience needs/demands, to learn where the processes now in place are failing to serve people.

**Stakeholder(s):**

Community Groups

2.2.2. Context

*Add specific context*

Next, a series of insight interviews can add specific context, allowing platforms and publishers to build on the initial themes arising in the focus groups, and solidify their understanding of the need fulfillment that audiences seek by searching out news about topics relevant to their lives. Finally, large-scale surveys or other quantitative research tailored for specific localities can help platforms confirm whether the themes and profiles they have built from the ethnographic research resonate with audiences across psychographic depictions. To encourage trust and facilitate participation, this overall process should be made relatively transparent to the communities under study.

2.2.3. Crises

*Examine examples of when local news reporting has helped a community confront a moment of crisis*

We also encourage platforms to examine examples of when local news reporting has helped a community confront a moment of crisis, for example the 2014 Charleston Gazette-Mail report about local water authorities’ failure to identify contamination sites near the Kanawha Valley water treatment plant. And we also encourage them to examine how misleading or false news has caused harm as it spread through communities, such as the Idaho town that was gripped by hysteria about a fictitious account of Muslim refugees committing a sexual assault. The goal of this process is to emerge with a deeper understanding of how local journalism creates value, and to move beyond a narrow set of metrics based on the volume of clicks and shares, so that platforms might be better able to measure impact and importance.

2.3. Categorization

*Create categories*

The platforms dump local news into one bucket, making it difficult for the audience to distinguish verified information in the public interest from opinion, press releases, or police reports. Yet for centuries, outlets have created news agendas to help the public navigate the relative importance of the day’s events and distinguish between different types of journalism. The most immediately recognizable example of a news agenda is the old-fashioned newspaper front page, with a lead story defined by headline size and position on the physical broadsheet, with secondary stories lower down, and so forth. The architecture of the newspaper has evolved over time in order to communicate to the reader what stories are local, which pieces are less urgent, about local events, opinion, and so forth. This system is far from perfect, but it has some utility. It is also part of our commonly understood news lexicon. Finding some way to replicate the function, if not the format, of this type of
categorization would help users better navigate the news landscape and would allow for a more refined way of classifying the importance of local news. Creating a news taxonomy, perhaps based on the types of stories offered earlier, would also allow local outlets to better segment their coverage rather than try to satisfy the narrow demands of an algorithm that might favor a bloody road accident over a school-board budget debate.

2.4. Agendas

Craft a clear news agenda

As noted above, clear communication of news article “types” based on community needs is an essential tool for user navigation. And lumping all news types together into one list leads to confusion and dissatisfaction. A news agenda is also an editorial statement of news value and importance. Even though platforms might be reluctant to admit that they are making these kinds of value judgments, the fact that they are creating a daily ranking of local news stories is a de facto editorial statement of the news agenda. But what is driving this? What criteria are employed? This remains opaque to both news outlets and news consumers. We need a clear set of norms that establish importance. This will not be a perfect system. But it will be far superior to the current one. This, again, requires long-lasting engagement with the local news community, and an understanding of different information needs of various communities. At present, it appears that newness is a primary criterion. Freshness has value. But so does impact. Is a story broadly relevant to a community? Or does it only affect a few? A story about the location of local food banks might not be “fresh” two days after it’s published, but it might be increasingly relevant and useful. These questions and others must be addressed by the platforms in consultation with their partners in the news business.

2.5. Sources

Determine source authority

While there is no sure-fire way to check the thoroughness of a piece of journalism, recognizing the depth and diversity of sourcing is one of the most credible measures. Does a crime story only cite law enforcement? Does a local political story only quote one candidate or party? Do pieces cite and link back to original documents, such as budget proposals, campaign finance records, or official meeting minutes? Determining source authority, and then allowing that attribute to influence an algorithm’s ranking is one of the most basic ways in which platforms could reward diligent news reporting. This is a mark of original newsgathering.
Administrative Information
Start Date: 2020-11-30
Publication Date: 2020-12-07

Submitter:
Given Name: Owen
Surname: Ambur
Email: Owen.Ambur@verizon.net
Phone: