

A person wearing a dark green abaya and a light-colored headscarf is sitting on the sand in a vast, arid desert landscape. They are holding and reading a newspaper. The background shows rolling sand dunes under a clear sky. The overall tone is one of isolation and lack of connectivity.

# NEWS DESERTS

## The Over-looked Crisis

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### WHAT ARE NEWS DESERTS?

Due to severe challenges in the media sector, particularly affecting local media outlets, many of the latter have been forced to close or are unable to provide reliable news. Consequently, some communities are left without trustworthy local information sources. These areas, lacking quality and diverse information, are known as news deserts, media shadows, news holes, blank spots or drylands. According to the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), a news desert is “a geographic or administrative area, or a social community where it is difficult or impossible to access sufficient, reliable, diverse information from independent local, regional and community media.”

### WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

Access to local news is crucial not only for staying informed but also for empowering citizens to actively participate in the life of their community. Without local news, people lose touch with local events, from infrastructure projects to public services and eventually struggle making informed political choices. Imagine living in a place where you cannot find out if a new highway will cut through your town, if your local school is closing, or what candidates are running in your local elections. This is the reality for some communities in Europe affected by the crisis of the local media sector.

### MORE THAN HALF OF U.S. COUNTIES FACE A STARK DECLINE OF LOCAL NEWS ACCESS

The most detailed study on this issue, conducted by researchers from the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, reveals that the rate at which local newspapers are disappearing accelerated in 2023, with an average of 2.5 closures per week. This decline has left 204 counties without any local news outlets and has severely limited access to reliable local news and information in over half of all U.S. counties. Additionally, 228 counties are at high risk of losing their local news sources altogether.

In today's digital age, it is easy to assume that access to news is universal. However, in many parts of Europe, entire communities are cut off from vital local news.

This phenomenon, known as “news deserts,” poses a significant threat to democracy and community well-being.

### NEW RESEARCH ON NEWS DESERTS IN EUROPE

The CMPF, in collaboration with local researchers from 27 EU Member States, conducted the first comprehensive study on news deserts across Europe under the project Local Media For Democracy. This project, a joint effort with the European Federation of Journalists, Journalism Fund Europe, and International Media Support, aimed to understand and address the complexities of local media in various countries.

### CHALLENGES IN ANALYSING NEWS DESERTS

Defining local media is particularly challenging in Europe due to the existence of diverse media systems across countries, and to a variety of languages and socio-political contexts. Another issue is that in smaller countries like Malta, Cyprus, or Luxembourg, national and local media often overlap. Finally, the advent of digital media has blurred geographical boundaries, complicating traditional notions of “local”. The study categorised local media as those operating at sub-national levels, covering events relevant to specific geographic areas and fostering a sense of “place and belonging.” Community media, often non-profit and focused on inclusivity, were also considered.

The challenges are compounded by a lack of financial and audience data at the local level in many countries, as well as limited research on the topic across Europe. While some studies have been conducted in specific countries like Slovakia, Portugal, and Croatia, none offer a comparative approach across multiple nations. The CMPF's study takes a holistic view of news deserts, assessing the situation through various indicators. Moreover, the study's definition of news deserts goes beyond the mere absence of media outlets to include the quality and independence of the available information.

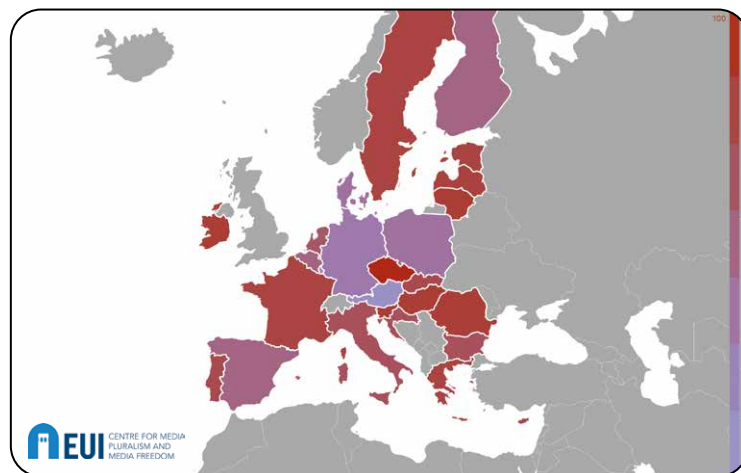


# 5 key indicators of news deserts

## GRANULARITY OF INFRASTRUCTURE

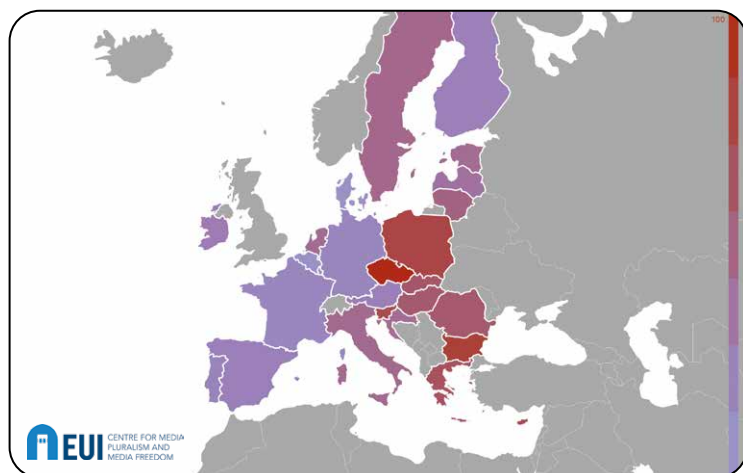
Investigates the number and structure of local outlets. Many rural areas lack local news outlets, and the centralisation of newsrooms reduces local coverage.

This indicator showed medium to high risk in most countries but had the lowest aggregate risk score among all indicators. Issues include the lack of news in rural areas, centralised newsrooms, and a declining number of local journalists. A good network of regional public service media (PSM) branches helps, but these are in some countries diminishing due to funding cuts. The main takeaway is that even the presence of a large number of local media on the ground does not equal good news offer (e.g. in Poland and Hungary).



Map 1: Risk for the indicator "Granularity of infrastructure of local media" in the 27 EU member states

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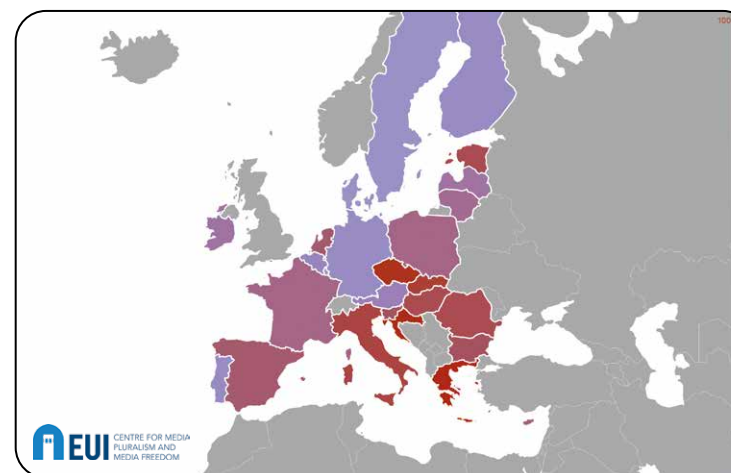


MAP 2: Risk for the indicator "Market and reach" in the 27 EU member states

## MARKET AND REACH

Assesses the market situation of local media. Declining revenues, high ownership concentration, and audience reluctance to pay for news are among the main threats for independent journalism.

This indicator had the highest aggregate risk score. Financial resources are declining, and available funding often lacks innovation and fails to address the specific needs of local media compared to national media. High ownership concentration leads to uniform coverage, disconnecting local media from their audiences.



MAP 3: Risk for the indicator "Safety of local journalists" in the 27 EU member states

## SAFETY OF LOCAL JOURNALISTS

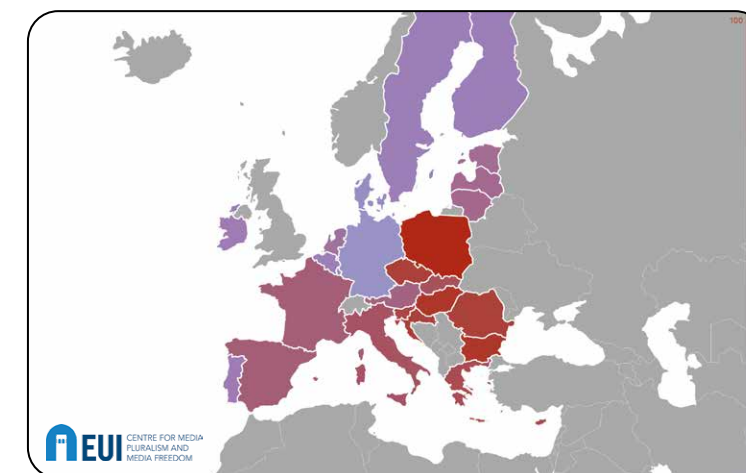
Looks into the safety and working conditions of local journalists. Low salaries, unstable working conditions, and increasing online threats undermine their safety and morale.

Threats are often more direct and less visible in smaller communities. Bad working conditions at the local level, particularly for freelancers and self-employed journalists have been detected. In addition, the threats of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) are also worrying (with particularly high risks of SLAPPs in Croatia, Czech Republic, Cyprus, France, Greece, Ireland and Italy).

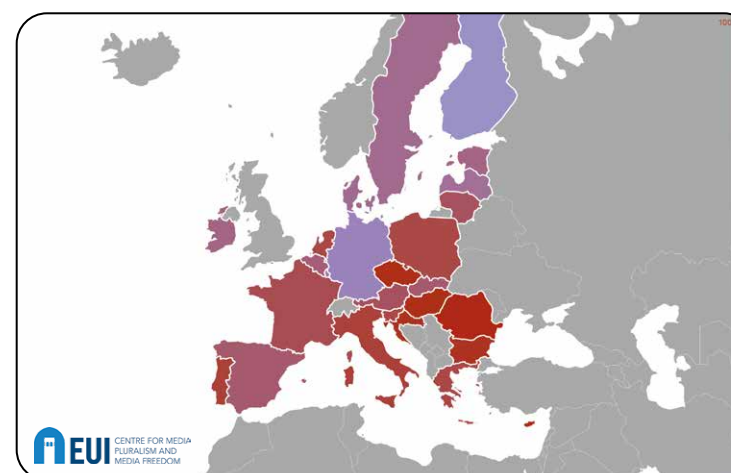
## EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE

Examines commercial and political influences on editorial independence. Non-transparent distribution of state advertising and political control through direct or indirect ownership pose significant risks, especially in Central and Southeastern Europe.

Local media often lack independence from local authorities and politics, and self-regulation is also lacking in some countries. Municipality-owned media create unfair competition with independent outlets, receiving direct state funding and offering biased coverage (e.g. in Poland and Slovakia).



MAP 4: Risk for the indicator "Editorial independence" in the 27 EU member states



MAP 5: Risk for the indicator "Social inclusiveness" in the 27 EU member states

## SOCIAL INCLUSIVENESS

Assesses coverage of minority and marginalised groups as well as whether local media meet public information needs. Marginalised groups often lack adequate representation, and minority news programmes are scarce, particularly in private media outlets.

Many local media focus on "soft news" or replicate national news, failing to provide critical public-interest information at a local level. In some cases, this is linked to political interference (e.g. in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovakia) or clickbait tactics. However, higher levels of trust in local media rather than national ones were reported in some countries (e.g. in Greece, Croatia, Ireland), highlighting the important role of local media in fostering community connections.

»Even in countries with a stable local media situation, the threat of news deserts looms if proactive measures are not taken soon.«

#### DO YOU LIVE IN A NEWS DESERT?

The risk of news deserts varies across Europe. Northern European countries like Denmark and Finland generally fare better, while Central and Southeastern Europe are more affected by this phenomenon. Sometimes, news deserts can be found even in suburbs of major capitals such as Riga or Dublin. Even in countries with a relatively stable local media situation, the threat of news deserts looms if proactive measures are not taken soon.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Despite the grim picture, there are some bright spots. Best practices include innovating the local media offer by proposing new formats—such as newsletters and podcasts—or fostering transnational collaborations. For example, VierNull in Düsseldorf, Germany, publishes news as an online newsletter, avoiding social media algorithms and retaining control over content dissemination.

#### Recommendations from the CMPF's research include:

- **A united front:** Local and community media should join forces to lobby for better conditions and support.
- **Government support:** Strategic, proactive government support for independent local journalism is crucial, with transparent monitoring of its impact and success.
- **Improved data collection:** Better collection of audience and financial data is essential to enhance research and understanding of local media markets.
- **Continuous monitoring:** Ongoing monitoring of the local media landscape is needed to track changes and identify emerging news deserts.

»By understanding the challenges and taking proactive steps, we can help prevent the spread of news deserts and ensure that all communities have access to the vital information they need.«

#### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As a citizen, you can make a difference. Support trustworthy local media by subscribing, sharing their content, or participating in local journalism initiatives. Promote a healthy news diet among your peers and help safeguard the media landscape in your community.

Universities can play a role in combating news deserts. Students can contribute to local journalism, providing news content and developing new, accessible forms of journalism. By taking action, you can help ensure that your community remains informed, engaged, and democratic.

#### CONCLUSION

News deserts represent an overlooked crisis in Europe, threatening democracy and community life. The CMPF's research highlights the need for collective action to support local media. By understanding the challenges and taking proactive steps, we can help prevent the spread of news deserts and ensure that all communities have access to the vital information they need.



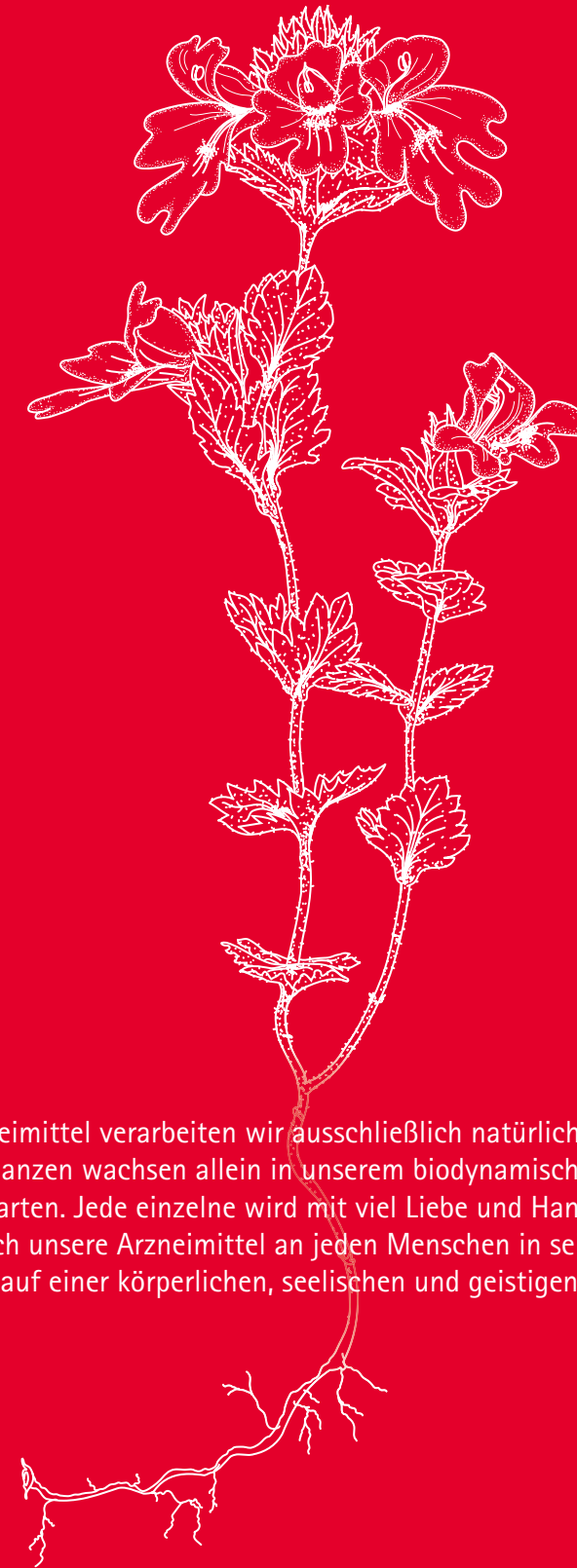
→ For more information about the study and its country results, visit the CMPF website.

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