The Local News Landscape is Broken

NewsQ Panel Review of Platform News Products

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Executive Summary

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.¹

The following report begins with an explanation of the dire situation that most local news publishers find themselves in. The report also clarifies the purpose of local journalism: to serve the needs of a local community. In light of this purpose, it outlines the current failures of news feeds based on the panel’s review of sampled results.

Based on the observations from the data as well as personal knowledge and experience, we urgently call for platform news products to actively repair the damage they have caused to the local news landscape. While we provide some ideas for quick fixes, deep changes are needed at the local community level. Given the time it will take to fix this system, action on those deeper questions is also needed immediately.

Introduction

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.

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.² Some large, well-capitalized news outlets have been able to squeeze some advantages out of this system. 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.

¹ NewsQ is a joint initiative of the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism at the City University of New York Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and Hacks/Hackers. The NewsQ panel meetings and paper on local journalism were made possible through the facilitation of Andrea Brás.
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. 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.³

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

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 they attempted to meet the alleged demand.⁴ After the promised returns failed to materialize, many newsrooms pivoted back.

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

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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.

The tech platforms can also use their computational power to better determine “source authority,” or the relative veracity and thoroughness of different local news articles. 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.

However, a real, substantive change will only occur if Google, Facebook, Bing, 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.

**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. Meantime, 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 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.

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:

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.

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.

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

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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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

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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.

Our Process

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. 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; and,
- Natalie Mao, Director of product management at Bing News.

Because news algorithms work according to structured rules, NewsQ provided specific guidance to illustrate how algorithm technology works and might be improved. The project also provided a sample set of news feed results from which the panelists could make evidence-based suggestions or recommendations for improvement. The goal of the analysis was to provide an initial qualitative review, which is why the data collection was illustrative rather than systematically sampled. The NewsQ team also tried to avoid providing results that emerged from any personalization or preferences. They did this by anonymizing the news feeds as much as possible, by considering how the computer and the browser might impact results. For results related to specific cities, a virtual private network (VPN) was used to mimic physical location.

Panelists reviewed results from several different news products gathered across a period from February to June 2020. Not all platform news products aim to deliver local news, which is why the panel examined results from Facebook’s Today In, Google, and Bing. Different cities — Des Moines, Phoenix, and New York City — were chosen to provide panelists with diverse local contexts based upon population, region, and politics.
The results of each sample news feed were captured first in an image screenshot and then translated into a database with the top five articles from each news feed. In addition to the URL link to the original article, contextual information was included such as:

- the article headline
- the date the article was published
- the publishing outlet of the article
- the local city news feed (e.g., Des Moines, Phoenix, New York City)
- the rank or order of the article within the feed (e.g., highest to lowest)
- the date the article appeared in the news feed

When it came to the rank or order of the article, much of our ranking convention was based on news feed algorithms with a vertical, top to bottom visual logic (see Figure 1). All of the platform news products followed this logic at the time of capture. However, midway through our panel analysis, Bing Local News changed its visualization to include a grid layout that presents stories horizontally and vertically in a grid format.

![Google News Feed Example](image)

Figure 1. An example of a Google news feed result from New York City on April 14, 2020. In our database, this vertical layout is represented by 1–5 with “1” representing the top article and “5” representing the bottom article.
As the panelists convened and reviewed the data, the NewsQ facilitator provided questions to guide the discussion. Panelists looked especially at how the local news feeds ranked and recommended local news, taking into consideration the current limitations of news algorithms.


Even with a small sample of data to review, in case after case, the panel found the local news stories recommended by platform news products to be severely lacking, even misleading. This occurred in places with vibrant local news media, like New York City, and areas with modest local coverage, like Des Moines.

At times, the selection of local stories appeared arbitrary and confusing. Across the platform news products observed, there was particular concern about how certain topics of lesser community importance were being amplified, overshadowing important local events and happenings. For example, during the height of the pandemic’s first wave in New York City, Google’s local news feed featured a New York Daily News article about a rat carrying an Egg McMuffin in the subway. Moreover, the choices also included stories that were not news at all. For example, on April 7, 2020, the Google news feed included an article about a $2.8 million dollar home for sale in New York City’s Nolita neighborhood.

In the current environment, where local news outlets are forced to vie for scarce resources, giving precious newsfeed real estate to stories of questionable community value is problematic.

Below we detail some of the common problematic traits the panel identified as we examined local news feed samples from Facebook’s Today In, Bing, and Google for Des Moines, New York City, and Phoenix.

**Broad Local News Landscape Distortions**

Including local coverage is, of course, a basic criterion for what should be included in a local news feed. While examining some of the sample news feeds, the panel was struck by the articles that had little or no connection with local communities. For example, the

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Facebook “Today In Des Moines” news feed for June 19, 2020, included the article “16 friends test positive for coronavirus after an outing at a Florida bar” in the top five articles.¹¹ For a time on June 5, the news feed for Facebook’s “Today In Des Moines” featured a story about a red tortoise being stolen from a New York zoo.¹²

In our research, platforms have consistently missed the mark by including “local” news for an area that doesn’t quite fit the audience. For example, at the time of capture on May 18, Facebook Today In featured an article in the number 1 ranking about a car crash in Bergen County, New Jersey, in its New York City feed.¹³ This taps into the observation made earlier that defining a geographical boundary that is logical for all users is not realistic. It can be assumed that Bergen County appears in the New York City feed because of its proximity to the city. It is still, however, in another state and the story’s impact was very location-specific. If this were a 42-car pileup in Bergen County, however, it would be more warranted in the New York City feed.

**Upranking Crime Stories that Only Cite One Source**

Crime stories were the most common type of news to wind up in the top five articles for the local news feeds across the different platform news products the panel examined. While an overabundance of crime coverage is problematic for a number of reasons, it was very troubling to see the number of crime stories that only cited a single source in the top recommendations. Often, in the cases we reviewed, that source was law enforcement. In addition, the stories the panel examined did little or nothing to vet the veracity of the police version of events or to add context around the incident. Of course, single-source crime stories are not new to journalism, and the hollowing out of local newsrooms limits their capacity to provide in-depth coverage on all crime stories, which is an issue at the journalism level.

What we are calling attention to, however, is the sheer volume of these stories in the top positions of feeds. In the small observed sample of 300 articles taken across 7 days from Google and Bing, and 6 days from Facebook Today In, 57 were general crime stories and 37 of those were single source. This makes up over 12% of the top recommended stories.

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Figure 2. Screenshot of Bing news feed for Phoenix on April 6, 2020. This was one example of many that illustrate crime coverage dominating the local news feed.

The Figure 2 image (above) shows a particularly egregious example of this from a Bing Phoenix news feed on April 6, 2020 where all of the top five stories at the time of capture were single-source crime stories.

A quick look through a 12 News Phoenix article titled, “Woman murdered by boyfriend at Phoenix home, police say,” which rose to the second spot for Bing news Phoenix at the
time of capture on June 24, 2020, is an example of the kinds of stories being elevated in feeds:

A woman was murdered by her boyfriend in Phoenix on Tuesday, police said Wednesday. Lori Williams, 58, was seriously injured when police arrived to her home near Loop 101 and 19th Avenue around 4 p.m. Police said they were called to the home for an injured woman who was assaulted by a man. Williams died from her injuries, police said. Investigators developed probable cause that Williams was murdered by her boyfriend, 43-year-old Jeffrey Michael Rhine, police said. Officers eventually located Rhine and took him into custody. He is facing a first-degree murder charge.  

Other examples include the AZCentral article “DPS troopers break up Phoenix street racers twice; driver, passenger arrested” rose to the third-ranked story at the time of capture for Google news Phoenix on April 14, 2020. And the ABC 7 New York article “Suspect killed, several injured in police shooting in Brooklyn” which was the first story at the time of capture on Facebook “Today In New York City” on June 3, 2020.

**Lack of Diversity in the Topics Covered**

In numerous cases, the first five local stories included multiple stories about the same event. While it can be useful to have perspectives from different news outlets on important and nuanced topics, these duplicate stories appeared to often be about roadway accidents or crimes — not subjects where additional reporting is likely to add to the public’s understanding. An example of this is from a sample news feed from Bing news Des Moines on April 6, 2020. In the top five stories served, two were from local news outlets covering the hit and run death of a woman, while two were about a motorcycle crash that led to the death of the same motorcyclist. Similar story repetition can be seen in the sample news feed in Figure 4.

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Figure 3: Screenshot of Bing news feed for Des Moines on April 6, 2020.
Figure 4: Screenshot of Bing news feed for Phoenix on April 30, 2020.

Unlabeled Opinion Pieces Clearly Marked as Local News Instead

While we did not necessarily oppose the appearance of opinion pieces in a local news feed, we believe news platforms should always label opinion articles. This was not the case in some of the sample news feeds we examined. For example, the Google local news feed for New York City on April 6, 2020, included two New York Post articles in the first five positions.
These articles were clearly labeled as opinion by the outlet through a red label above their titles, but no indication of their classification was apparent in the Google feed.¹⁷


**Stories from Outlets that Weren’t Really News Outlets, Such as Local Music Stations**

Many news outlets observed by the group were republishing material from other sources, often with poor labeling and sourcing. For example, on Facebook’s “Today In...” for New York City on June 2, 2020, the top five articles at the time of capture included an article from Hudson Valley-based WRRV, “Vase or Bong? HV Facebook Listing Sparks Massive Debate.”

The Gap Between Local Community Needs and Platform Results

As noted earlier, results like these compound the already dire situation of local news. The results produced are often not informative and rarely showcase the best of local journalism. They tend toward the gory, clickable, sugar-rush type of story. Though these rankings might not be useful, they are powerful. Appearance on the top five list for Google or Facebook can cause a spike in traffic. These spikes then drive editorial decision-making in the newsroom, as journalists, editors and audience engagement coordinators try to repeat that success – more crime stories, more road accidents. This becomes a race to the bottom which, over time, risks eroding the credibility of the news source. As one of us shared during a panel discussion, “It is a little bit of chicken or the egg. In newsroom meetings, we always talk about this is a story we want to do despite it
potentially not ranking as high or being as popular. That is a friction that we have to deal with constantly.”

This vicious cycle may be partly the result of misaligned metrics used by the platforms. Like many other features, these local news feeds appear to be optimized for engagement, defined by clicks and shares. However, news is more than just a sum of clicks. It means not just giving people what they want but giving them what they need — the kind of service journalism and accountability journalism that helps a community function.

If platform news products were designed to meet community needs described above, such as the need for basic information, local accountability, community memory, and adequate reflections of what the community has become, then outlets that produce quality local coverage may be better compensated.

There is a tremendous opportunity right now to re-examine and re-engineer this system so that it begins serving all three constituencies of local residents, news outlets, and platforms. Below, we outline the first steps that could lead to a more equitable and informative news ecosystem at the local level.

**Quick Fixes**

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.

**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.

**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.
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.

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.

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.18

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.”

**Repairing the Local News Landscape**

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

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.

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.

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 hyper-specific 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.19

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.

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.20 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.21 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.

In addition, there are a number of more specific measures that platforms can address:

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.

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.

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.
Conclusion

Fixing these local news feeds requires urgent attention. They are spreading poor-quality journalism, hurting news outlets, and discouraging deep reporting. Yet there remains great potential to turn this vicious cycle into a virtuous one. Opening up a dialogue with local news outlets, allowing them to share their process while building algorithms that can better recognize quality, impact and depth can create a rewards system for those who seek to inform and enrich their communities.

The unpleasant truth of this situation is that no one is served by the current system. The public is given a mix of stories that can appear haphazard, and therefore of little value. News outlets are left in the dark about what kind of stories “work,” as if constantly trying to appease a fickle deity with a cruel sense of humor. And the platforms themselves are missing out on an opportunity to provide a crucial public service to their users, which could enhance trust and build loyalty.

But the damage cuts more deeply. These tools may offer little utility, but they remain immensely powerful. Small news outlets in particular are platform-dependent. The status quo creates a skewed system of incentives that can subvert efforts to provide quality news in the public interest.

Google and Facebook often serve as a local news outlet’s most important editors. Producing a story with a certain topic, keywords or other attributes puts it high in the rankings of Google News local feature or Facebook’s Today In, and can be the equivalent of hitting the reader jackpot. Audience numbers rise, ad revenues accumulate. The editorial staff at these outlets are eager to repeat the success. When thinly sourced stories of lurid crime incidents land at the top of the list, as they often do based on our research, that sends a signal to the newsroom: Order up more crime stories.

This phenomenon erodes established news judgement and ethical journalistic practice. It also caters to and amplifies the worst elements of crime reporting: sowing fear, furthering racial stereotypes, and treating a police account of an incident as unchallenged truth. Local news feeds can tilt toward stories like this simply because platforms have rewarded this type of coverage, which means “whoever designs, optimizes and maintains newsfeed algorithms has an impact upon which journalism is monetized and compensated.” In the short term, this may drive traffic. But in the medium and long term, it reallocates scarce newsroom resources toward reporting that can be sensationalist. This is, unfortunately, a zero-sum game. Time put toward single-source crime stories is time stolen from reporting on other issues that may be more consequential to the local community.

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At the heart of this problem lies the opacity around the criteria that platforms use to evaluate news. The criteria they choose has a profound impact on what people learn, think, and do, as well as what news is produced. Upon reflection, it is mind-boggling that such a consequential choice is made without direct, open, and clear consultation with news organizations.

We understand there are reasons why platforms are reluctant to have this discussion in an open and transparent manner. Making calls about what constitutes responsible news selection in the public interest is a declaration of civic values. These mega-companies, increasingly exposed to regulatory risk, have historically been reluctant to sign on to any value statement for fear it could drag them into a partisan slugfest. Some political actors may complain that “their” media doesn’t get the treatment it deserves. Frankly, it’s a little too late for that. And the costs of not doing it outweigh the perceived dangers.

News organizations are hardly the only ones to experience this frustration. An article by Vox’s Recode echoes the frustrations felt by lawmakers as they attempted to work with Facebook’s misinformation strategy in preparation for the 2020 election. Some government sources reportedly compared the experience to “banging their heads against a wall.”

Certainly, there is no formula that can automatically and consistently produce a news digest that ticks all the boxes of smart editorial judgement. Our values as a society around news are constantly shifting. But there is also more than a century’s worth of professional practice and standards that serve as a guide to what constitutes responsible newsgathering. Our goal here is to point to those standards and help translate some of them for online technology. We also seek to better understand how long-lived journalism standards could be recognized by algorithms and incorporated by platforms. The result, we hope, will bring some sunshine to a process that has been shrouded in secrecy and lead to more rational, understandable rulemaking that creates a healthier news landscape for all.

Step one in this process is for Google, Facebook, and others to actively engage local news outlets in an open discussion about community information needs. These companies have large, talented teams devoted to how people interact with news. They have accumulated reams of data, and they understand the behavior, needs, and desires of local news consumers better than the local newsrooms themselves. Yet, for the most part, their connection with news outlets is prescriptive and one-sided.

These platforms already have relationships with media companies and journalism associations, such as the Local Media Association and the Local Independent Online

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23 Shirin Ghaffary, “Democratic Party leaders are “banging their head against the wall” after private meetings with Facebook on election misinformation,” Vox Media, October 1, 2020, https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/10/1/21497453/facebook-democrats-2020-election-misinformation.
News (LION) Publishers. Platforms can, for example, leverage these relationships to begin this sort of dialogue. The key, however, lies in going beyond the conversations to use that feedback to create change.

Substantive dialogue between search and social platforms and local news outlets can lead to a more inclusive and healthy definition of news that can serve the interests of communities. If the skewed incentive structure put in place by these companies, which currently drives the editorial process at countless newsrooms, can be replaced with one that rewards strong reporting, public accountability, and the sharing of crucial information, the benefits will be great. Replacing the incentive structure has the potential to set off a virtuous cycle that improves the utility of these local news products, enriches the quality of community conversations, and provides financial rewards to responsible news organizations.

This will, as alluded to above, require these companies to endorse a list of values about information in the public interest. This is less controversial than it might appear. Particularly in the local context, there is already widespread agreement on what those values are. The dangers of sticking with the status quo (where definitions are murky, constantly changing, and produce paltry results) far outweigh any risks of opening this conversation.