

What a News Desert Means for Finding a Notice

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A news desert is not a metaphor for bad Wi-Fi. Researchers use it for a place where residents have very little — or no — local news outlet based in their county. The Medill Local News Initiative’s 2025 count put that map at **212** zero-source counties, plus **1,525** counties down to a single remaining source, usually a weekly. About **50 million** people live in those places with limited or no local news.

Public notice is a different object from journalism. A notice is the government’s and the litigant’s duty to tell the public that a hearing is set, a bid is open, a creditor must speak, or a property will be sold. For a long time the default door was the same weekly that also ran school scores and obituaries. When that door closes, the statute often remains. The shared place to look does not.

The bulletin board thinned out

UNC Hussman’s Expanding News Desert work, led by Penelope Muse Abernathy, mapped this loss earlier. By 2018, more than one in five U.S. newspapers had closed over about fifteen years. Almost **200** counties had no newspaper at all. Half the country’s counties had only one paper left — usually a small weekly. Many surviving titles were already “ghost newspapers”: still printed, but with thinner staff and thinner coverage.

The 2020 follow-up, *News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers*, put the longer arc in plain numbers: from 2004 into early 2020, on the order of **2,100** papers gone; surviving papers down to about **6,700** from nearly **9,000**. Roughly half the newspaper journalists and half the newspaper readers had vanished over about fifteen years.

Medill’s later county counts show the desert map kept growing. Closures did not stop when the research moved from Chapel Hill to Northwestern. Close to **3,500** newspapers have vanished since 2005, per Medill’s count. Most desert counties are rural. Digital startups, where they appear, cluster in richer metro counties — not in the places that just lost the weekly.

What that means for a legal ad

When people say “I never see those ads anymore,” they are often describing an audience problem, not a filing problem. Zoning still changes. Tax sales still run. Probate still needs creditors. The text may still be published somewhere the law allows — a remaining paper an hour away, a clerk site, a county portal. The resident who used to flip the same pages on Thursday no longer has that habit.

Pew’s 2024 local-news survey helps explain the habit change. Preference for a print newspaper for local news sat at **9%**. More people preferred online sites or social media. The share who follow local news “very closely” fell from **37%** in 2016 to **22%**. Online forums such as Facebook groups and Nextdoor became a common place people say they get “local news.”

Medill’s 2025 Qualtrics survey of desert counties found something sharper: among daily news consumers in deserts, **51%** relied on non-journalistic sources — social groups, influencers, friends and family — slightly more than those who relied on news organizations. Many desert residents still said local news was easy to find. They often counted feeds and out-of-county outlets as enough. Trust in local news ran lower than in news-rich counties (**46%** vs nearly **60%** saying they trust it very or extremely well).

A legal ad that once rode along with the sports page now competes with a feed that was never built to show a foreclosure caption or a bid opening. That is the desert’s notice problem in one sentence: the audience left the

building; the duty did not.

Findings synopsis

Here is what the cited research found, in plain English:

- **Medill 2025:** 212 U.S. counties had no local news source; 1,525 had only one; about 50 million people lived with limited or no local news. Nearly four in five deserts were rural.
- **UNC / Abernathy 2018–2020:** Newspaper loss created empty and near-empty counties; “ghost” papers kept titles alive while coverage and staff shrank; thousands of papers closed from the mid-2000s into 2020.
- **Pew 2024:** Americans still value local outlets, but fewer follow local news closely, fewer prefer print, and more get “local” information from digital and social paths.
- **Medill desert survey 2025/26:** In counties without a local outlet, daily consumers often lean on social and personal sources; many do not feel “thirsty” for a paper that is already gone; trust and contact with journalists are thinner than in news-rich places.

None of those studies claim that public notices stopped existing when papers closed. They describe where people look — and where they stop looking.

What a register is (and is not)

Notice Nearby is a public-notice register operated by Record of Sale, LLC, an Oregon company. A paid Public Register Placement puts the notice text on a public URL that can be found by county and by search. It can carry a publication number, a SHA-256 fingerprint of the filed text, and a Placement Certificate. That is complementary discoverability. It is not Legal Publication. It is not a newspaper of general circulation. It is not a government site.

Where a statute still names a newspaper, a county website, or another eligible outlet, that duty still belongs to that outlet. A register does not rewrite the statute. It answers a different question: after the shared door thins out, can a stranger still find the words?

Closing

A news desert means fewer reporters in the room. For public notice, it also means fewer eyes on the old bulletin board. The law’s job and the findability job are related. They are not the same. Keep them labeled.

Sources

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