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# **Information Deserts and Their Impact on Elections**

## A Global Perspective with a focus on North Macedonia

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# 1. Introduction

## *Overview of Information Deserts*

Information deserts are areas where access to diverse, reliable, and independent news is limited, particularly at the local level. These regions often lack news outlets in general, with the resources for investigative journalism and objective reporting, leaving communities without essential information. Factors like the collapse of local news industries, media ownership concentration, political pressure and the rise of digital platforms contribute to these gaps.

Reliable information is essential for democratic engagement, enabling informed voting and accountability. Without it, information deserts<sup>1</sup> foster voter apathy, spread disinformation, and allow corruption to go unchecked. This paper explores how these deserts impact elections, focusing on the Western Balkans, with North Macedonia as a case study. It examines regional challenges, the role of media capture, and potential solutions for fostering informed democratic participation.

## 2. Global Context: The Rise of Information Deserts

Information deserts spread globally as local news sources decline under economic pressures, digital transformation, and concentrated media ownership. Traditional outlets, such as newspapers and local radio, are closing due to falling ad revenue and competition from large digital platforms like Meta and Google, which prioritise national and sensational content. Consequently, communities across various regions—from rural America to parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe—have little access to reliable local reporting.

This decline in local journalism impacts elections by depriving voters of the information needed to make informed choices, especially in local contests vital to addressing community issues. The lack of local watchdog journalism also diminishes accountability, allowing disinformation to fill the void and polarise communities.

The economic challenges facing local media are compounded by the dominance of large media conglomerates, which often acquire struggling outlets and shift focus to broad, profitable stories at the expense of local coverage. Additionally, digital platforms monopolise ad revenue, leaving local outlets with insufficient funds to sustain independent reporting.

Political influence further undermines independent journalism, as elites control or fund media outlets to shape public opinion or suppress dissent. This influence is especially pronounced at the local level, where publicly funded media often lack resources and are susceptible to political control. Journalists face pressure to avoid critical coverage, which stifles investigative reporting, erodes media trust, and narrows the diversity of perspectives.

Information deserts foster voter apathy and misinformation, impacting democratic engagement worldwide. In the U.S., the closure of over 2,000 newspapers since 2004 has left many rural areas without local news, creating fertile ground for disinformation, particularly on social

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<sup>1</sup> Information desert is a geographic or social area where residents have limited access to reliable, diverse, and independent news sources. In these areas, local journalism is often absent or under-resourced, leaving communities without essential information about local governance, public issues, and community-specific concerns.

media.<sup>2</sup> During the 2020 U.S. presidential election, unsupported claims about mail-in voting led to widespread mistrust in election integrity, contributing to partisan divides and long-lasting doubts about democratic institutions. Notably, by 2024, prominent figures who once spread this disinformation, such as Donald Trump, shifted to encourage all early voting methods, underscoring the influence of evolving narratives.<sup>3</sup> This trend illustrates how communities deprived of reliable local news remain vulnerable to shifting false narratives that can distort electoral outcomes and weaken democracy.

### 3. The Western Balkans: Information Deserts and Political Manipulation

#### *Media Landscape in the Western Balkans*

The media landscape in the Western Balkans is shaped by concentrated ownership, substantial political influence, and a struggling economic foundation, particularly for local media outlets.<sup>4</sup> Across countries like Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, a few powerful media groups—often owned by politically affiliated families or businesses—dominate the market. These conglomerates control significant portions of television and print media, limiting the diversity of perspectives and voices. Meanwhile, local and independent media outlets face severe resource constraints, relying on limited advertising revenue and insufficient financial backing to compete with large, politically connected media firms.

Oligarchs and political actors play a crucial role in shaping media narratives, often using ownership stakes or financial influence to push their agendas. Wealthy individuals and politically influential groups own or fund major media outlets, directing content to support their interests while suppressing critical perspectives. These actors often employ legal tactics—such as strategic lawsuits against journalists (SLAPPs) and defamation laws—to intimidate and silence unfavourable reporting.

Public broadcasters and media regulators, which are legally required to remain impartial, frequently lean toward political interests, reinforcing state and party agendas in their coverage. This environment not only sidelines independent journalism but also encourages self-censorship, as fear of retaliation stifles investigative reporting and limits the public’s access to unbiased information throughout the region.

#### *Erosion of Local Journalism*

The 2008 financial crisis led to a withdrawal of foreign funding, opening the door for politically connected businesses to influence media content. Limited revenue streams force many local outlets to rely on pre-packaged content or government-issued press releases, lacking the resources for original reporting on critical local issues.

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<sup>2</sup> Abernathy, Penelope Muse. *News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?* Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media, Hussman School of Journalism and Media, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020. Available at [usnewsdeserts.com](https://usnewsdeserts.com) for an interactive map and additional resources.

<sup>3</sup> Dewey, Caitlin. “Trump Once Called Early Voting a ‘Hoax.’ But Now Plans To Do It Himself.” *Vanity Fair*, 23 October 2024, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/story/trump-plans-to-vote-early-himself-after-maligning-the-practice-for-years>.

<sup>4</sup> A local outlet is a media organization that produces content specifically tailored to a particular geographic area or community, focusing on issues, events, and concerns that directly affect its residents. Local media outlets play a crucial role in informing citizens about community-specific topics, such as local government, education, health, and other public affairs, which are often underreported by national media.

This economic strain results in minimal coverage of local governance, infrastructure, and corruption—key areas for community accountability. In Montenegro, for example, local media often avoid controversial topics to prevent funding cuts or political retaliation, leaving the public uninformed about decisions that affect their daily lives. The precarious financial and political landscape of local journalism in the Balkans thus perpetuates a cycle of underreporting and lack of transparency, weakening democratic engagement at the community level.

### ***Consequences for Elections***

The erosion of independent journalism in the Western Balkans has serious implications for elections, especially at the local level. Without access to reliable information on governance, infrastructure, and corruption, voters lack awareness of issues affecting their communities, leading to disengagement and reduced turnout.

These challenges are intensified by the spread of disinformation, often along ethnic and nationalist lines. Nationalist rhetoric dominates media narratives, sidelining community concerns and fostering divisions. Political actors exploit these dynamics, using media platforms to amplify divisive narratives rather than encouraging constructive debate on local issues. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, media coverage frequently focuses on ethnic identity over pressing governance or economic topics, fuelling polarisation and reducing accountability in local governance. This climate of disinformation and ethnic bias undermines democratic participation and prevents voters from making informed choices.

## **4. Case Study: North Macedonia's Information Deserts**

### ***Media Landscape in North Macedonia***

A high concentration of media outlets in the capital, Skopje, and a notable scarcity of local media in smaller towns characterise North Macedonia's media landscape. This centralisation results in limited access to locally relevant news for residents outside the capital.

The media market in North Macedonia is fragmented, with numerous outlets competing for limited advertising revenue. This economic strain disproportionately affects local media, which struggle to sustain operations due to their smaller audiences and reduced financial resources. Consequently, many local outlets are under-resourced, leading to a decline in the quality and quantity of local reporting.

Political affiliations significantly influence media content and reporting practices. Major political parties have established connections with certain media outlets, which leads to biased reporting that favours their political agendas. This alignment often results in the underrepresentation of alternative viewpoints and a lack of critical journalism, particularly concerning local governance.

The concentration of media ownership further exacerbates these challenges. A few individuals or entities control multiple media outlets, limiting media pluralism and diversity of perspectives.

### ***The Impact of Information Deserts on Elections***

Information deserts have a profound impact on elections in North Macedonia, particularly in rural regions where media outlets are scarce. The lack of locally relevant information contributes to lower civic engagement and a reduced voter turnout. This trend was evident in

the 2021 local elections, where the overall national voter turnout was 51,44 %, but certain rural municipalities, such as Centar Zhupa (25,78 %), Gostivar (39,02 %), Lipkovo (37,49 %), Mavrovo and Rostusha (32 %), Plasnica (34,65 %) and Vrapchishte (36,15 %) reported very low turnouts.<sup>5</sup> The gap between urban and rural areas in terms of media access means that those living outside major cities have limited exposure to election-related news.

This lack of local media in rural areas leaves these communities vulnerable to disinformation and nationalist narratives that exploit ethnic divisions, particularly between Macedonian and Albanian communities. Leading up to the 2024 elections, there was a marked increase in online hate speech and disinformation, much of it targeting ethnic differences and inflaming existing tensions. In areas without robust local media, these divisive messages can spread more easily, often unchecked, shaping perceptions and influencing voter behaviours based on fear or division.

Addressing information deserts in North Macedonia is essential for fostering a more informed electorate and reducing the impact of harmful, divisive narratives. By strengthening local media presence in rural areas along with objective and professional reporting, the country could improve voter engagement, mitigate the spread of disinformation, and promote an electoral process that better reflects a diversity of perspectives and a commitment to social unity. In the long term, expanding access to accurate and impartial information could help North Macedonia counteract the forces that currently drive political polarisation and hinder truly representative governance.

## **5. Addressing Information Deserts: Solutions and Challenges**

### ***Global and Regional Solutions***

Global and regional solutions for information deserts focus on revitalising local journalism<sup>6</sup>, fostering sustainable business models, encouraging collaboration among media, and enhancing media literacy to empower citizens against disinformation.<sup>7</sup> These initiatives are crucial for rebuilding local news ecosystems and ensuring that communities, particularly in information deserts, have better access to reliable information.

### ***Strengthening Local Journalism Through Grants, Training, and New Business Models***

International organisations have provided support to struggling local news outlets. These funds help outlets survive in economically challenging areas, allowing them to report on local issues. Such support also included funds for investigative projects.

Training programs are also critical for developing local journalism. NGOs and media organizations often fund these programs, which teach skills in investigative reporting, digital journalism, and ethical standards. Organisations like the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the European Journalism Centre (EJC) offer valuable training and mentorship, particularly in regions with limited resources, building a skilled workforce capable of producing high-quality, independent reporting.

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<sup>5</sup> In Centar Zhupa and Mavrovo & Rostusha, the election was invalidated due to insufficient voter turnout.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, local journalism is meant to report news and issues relevant to a specific community, covering topics like local government, public safety, and community events. It fosters civic engagement and accountability by informing residents about local affairs and holding officials accountable

<sup>7</sup>

New business models have also emerged, including non-profit journalism<sup>8</sup>, relying on donations, grants, and memberships, reducing dependence on ads. Community-supported journalism, where readers contribute directly through subscriptions or donations, is another option, with outlets like [ProPublica](#) in the U.S. and local non-profits such as [Mississippi Today](#) focusing on high-quality investigative journalism funded by readers and grants. This model fosters editorial independence, empowering communities to sustain their own news sources.

### ***Collaborative Journalism Initiatives***

Collaborative journalism enables multiple local outlets to share resources and expertise and jointly cover issues that are too complex or resource-intensive for a single outlet. By pooling resources, these initiatives improve coverage quality and reach broader audiences, even in areas with limited resources.

Collaborative projects such as the [Panama Papers](#) investigation demonstrate the power of resource-sharing among journalists. While global, these projects also inspire regional collaborations. In Europe, the [Balkan Investigative Reporting Network](#) (BIRN) facilitates cooperation among journalists in the Western Balkans, covering cross-border issues like corruption and environmental policy. In North Macedonia, collaborative journalism has exposed underreported issues, such as organised crime and environmental challenges. Such collaborations strengthen reporting quality and extend the reach of important stories, making them accessible to more citizens and enhancing public awareness.

### ***Specific Efforts in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia for enhancement of Investigative Journalism***

The EU plays a leading role in promoting independent journalism throughout the Western Balkans. Recognizing the importance of a free press for democratic development and European integration, the EU has directed significant funding and resources toward supporting media independence in the region. These efforts include grants specifically allocated for investigative journalism, capacity-building programs for newsrooms, and training initiatives aimed at equipping journalists with critical skills to produce high-quality, ethical reporting. By providing direct financial support to media organisations, the EU helps counterbalance the influence of political elites and reduces the dependence of local outlets on politically driven funding.

Other donor's support also remains essential, with agencies such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) providing funding aimed at establishing sustainable financial models for local journalism. These models offer critical financial lifelines to news organisations that might otherwise be forced to close or compromise their editorial standards due to financial constraints. Donors have also funded numerous media projects in North Macedonia to encourage transparency, journalistic integrity, and media pluralism. In the framework of these projects, NGOs frequently partner with local outlets to provide training on investigative techniques and digital reporting, ensuring that journalists have the tools to deliver impactful, unbiased reporting. Such partnerships are vital in building a resilient media sector that can withstand both political and financial pressures.

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<sup>8</sup> **Non-profit journalism** is a model of journalism operated by organisations that prioritise public service over profit. These organisations produce news and investigative reporting funded primarily through donations, grants, and memberships rather than advertising revenue.

As mentioned above, organisations like BIRN have also been instrumental in promoting independent media and supporting journalists in the Balkans. It offers resources, networking opportunities, and platforms for collaborative investigative projects that reveal cross-border issues like corruption, organized crime, and environmental degradation.

NGOs play a crucial role in promoting media literacy across the Western Balkans, recognising that informed, critically thinking citizens are essential to a healthy democracy. These organisations conduct workshops, seminars, and community programs to teach citizens how to evaluate news sources, recognise biases, and verify information before accepting it as fact. In North Macedonia, for example, civil society groups have launched initiatives aimed at educating the public on identifying and resisting propaganda, as well as discerning credible news sources from those that are politically motivated or sensationalised. This focus on media literacy is especially important in regions susceptible to disinformation and nationalist rhetoric, as citizens with a stronger understanding of media dynamics are less likely to fall victim to manipulative or misleading narratives.

In addition to funding and training, emerging business models are being explored across the Balkans to sustain local journalism amid economic challenges. Crowdfunding, for example, is gaining traction as a way for communities to support their own news outlets directly. Through small, regular contributions from readers, media outlets can secure a stable income independent of advertising or political funding, preserving their editorial independence.

Together, these efforts in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia address the rise of information deserts by empowering journalists and citizens alike. The EU, other donors and NGO's support for independent journalism, combined with innovative funding models and grassroots media literacy programs, creates a foundation for more resilient, independent, and informed local media. These initiatives are critical to fostering a democratic environment in which citizens can access reliable information and engage meaningfully in political processes, reducing the risks associated with unchecked political influence and misinformation.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

### ***Recommendations***

- **Strengthen Local Journalism:** Implement grants, subsidies, and training programs to support financially strained local outlets. Encourage sustainable business models, such as non-profits, community-supported journalism, and crowdfunding, to reduce dependence on politically influenced funding.
- **Foster Collaborative Journalism Initiatives:** Promote partnerships among media organisations to pool resources and improve coverage quality, especially on complex, underreported issues, to strengthen community awareness and engagement.
- **International and Regional Support:** Leverage support from the EU, other international donors and NGOs, to bolster independent journalism in the Western Balkans. Expand initiatives that promote media pluralism, transparency, and regulatory reforms to protect editorial independence.



- **Develop Sustainable Economic Models for Local Journalism:** Future research should prioritize identifying viable business models, such as community-supported or non-profit journalism, to ensure the financial sustainability of local outlets, particularly in information deserts. These studies can offer guidance on economic frameworks that enable local journalism to thrive independently, even in economically challenging regions.
- **Evaluate and Expand Media Literacy Programs:** Conduct rigorous evaluations of media literacy initiatives to determine best practices for reducing disinformation and promoting informed citizenship. This research should also examine how media literacy can be integrated effectively into school curricula and community programs to foster a critically engaged public.
- **Implement Policy Interventions and Technology-Based Solutions:** Investigate policy frameworks that enforce transparency in media ownership and limit political monopolies, fostering media pluralism. Additionally, research into collaborative journalism, public funding models, and digital platforms' roles can reveal strategies for increasing independent media funding, improving hyper-local reporting, and holding tech companies accountable. Together, these approaches aim to counteract information deserts and support democratic engagement globally.

These interventions are crucial for counteracting information deserts, ensuring communities have access to reliable information, and fostering democratic resilience. Addressing these challenges can create a more informed, engaged, and empowered electorate, which is essential for a thriving democratic society.

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