

Scene on Radio: The News
Episode 2: When the News Dies
Transcript

Sound: Corner Cafe hubbub

John Biewen: I sometimes roll my eyes at reporters from major media and their visits to diners to talk with “real” Americans in flyover land. But I found myself one morning at the Corner Cafe on the main street of Elizabethtown, population 3,000-plus, in North Carolina’s Border Belt.

Ed Tatum: Uh-oh.

Jb, in tape: Uh-oh! (someone laughs.) Morning, gentlemen.

John Biewen: A half dozen White men, in their late sixties and older, sat around a table in the middle of the cafe. I’d learned the day before, talking with one of the men, that these guys meet here every weekday.

Ray Cross: Name’s Ray.

John Biewen, in tape: Ray? Nice to meet you. Ray.

Rudy Britt: Rudy.

John Biewen, in tape: Rudy?

John Biewen: Some used to run local businesses, or still do. There’s a banker and a dentist, both retired. Several of the men say an important reason they come to this table most days is to find out what’s going on in their community – cue the self-deprecating quip:

Ray Cross: But the problem is when we get home and the wives say, what did y’all learn today, we can’t, we can’t remember anything. (Chuckles)

John Biewen: But their need for information is no joke. I tell them I’m trying to understand how Americans actually experience the news media. The talk soon comes

around to the news coverage of Bladen County and how barren it is compared to a few decades ago.

Ray Cross: We don't have a source. The Bladen Journal...

John Biewen: This is Ray Cross, the retired dentist. He explains that his wife, Denise Cross, worked at the local newspaper, the Bladen Journal, all through the 1980s and into the 90s, eventually serving as editor. Back then, the paper had a staff of several full-time reporters.

Ray Cross: You know, they'd have somebody, if there was a commissioner's meeting, somebody was there, gave you a report. If there was a board of education, somebody was there, gave a report. You get nothing today. They tell you there's gonna be a meeting, not what happened, what's going on, anything. There was a Bladen County Planning Board meeting last night about a big issue, and you won't hear what it's about. We are really in a starved area as far as local news goes.

John Biewen: For a few years, in the 2000s, the Bladen Journal came out five days a week.

Ray Cross: Now that was a hustle. 'Cause there were actually two papers here, the Southeastern Times and the Bladen Journal at one point.

Robin Summerlin: In the same town.

Ray Cross: Same town. And um, you know, very competitive with, of course you gotta have, sell advertisements to make it a go of it and that type of thing. But just, the small markets started to suffer.

Robin Summerlin: Have you ever looked at the Bladen Journal?

John Biewen: That's Robin Summerlin, who owns a local business, asking if I've ever read the Bladen Journal. It serves this county of 30,000 people and now comes out weekly.

Robin Summerlin: In my opinion, it's nothing but fluff. The headline the other day was 550 people running in the race at Lu Mill. That was the number one top story. No *news* news.

John Biewen: Hear that? No *news* news...

Ray Cross: But once again, it's just him and his wife at the paper. Isn't that right?

Robin Summerlin: Yeah. They have an office person. I don't count her at all...

Crossfade to sound: Traffic etc., Broad St., Elizabethtown

Mark DeLap: We're one of the biggest counties and, you know, we go from, from East Arcadia all the way over to White Oak and...

John Biewen: When I met Mark DeLap in 2025, he was the editor and general manager of the Bladen Journal. He has since retired. He's not from Bladen County, and the paper's owners aren't, either. DeLap ran the paper for Champion Media, based 170 miles away near Charlotte. Champion owns a collection of smalltown papers in seven states, including a handful of others around the Border Belt.

Mark DeLap: We, right now we're heading toward the downtown area. The courthouse is over to the left...

John Biewen: The Bladen Journal's history in Elizabethtown dates to 1898. It was independently owned until the 2000s, when a newspaper chain acquired it. It was sold several more times before Champion bought it in 2017. Mark DeLap is originally from Wisconsin. Before coming to the Journal in 2024, he edited rural newspapers in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wyoming.

Mark DeLap: Um (chuckles), I've been, I've been used to working in, in areas where I'm the staff. Here, when I came here, uh, it was the same thing. And that appeals to me because I have the, I have the creative control of what goes into the newspaper.

John Biewen: When I'm there, in 2025, DeLap does have a customer service rep, a part-time sports editor who mainly covers the high school teams, and a few unpaid contributors, including his wife who writes a food column. Mark inherited a Bladen Journal that had already been downsized. He talks with pride about changes he's made, like ramping up the use of photography.

Mark DeLap: I wanted big pictures. I wanted a lot of color. We went from maybe having maybe four or five, maybe up to eight pictures in the newspaper to almost 40 pictures a week. I'm a photographer, so that's kind of one of my passions.

John Biewen: Mark's own articles are usually profiles of local people and other features ... or light personal essays, for example, about his failed attempts to raise houseplants. He admits there's not a lot of *news* news in his paper.

Mark DeLap: It is a small community. It's not like we've got a lot of news. We have to prioritize what we are putting in. Um, I write so much content sometimes during the week that things, things sometimes don't get in.

John Biewen: DeLap knows that some in the community aren't satisfied with the Journal in its current state, but he says that's the life of a journalist. You won't please everyone.

Mark DeLap: Some people have said this is the best, best it's ever been. And some say, um, no, you don't cover everything you're supposed to cover and things like this. And so, when you got one person, um, trying to run to all the, all the stories and, and cover it all, that's I think the best you can do.

Music

John Biewen: How you doing, Chenj?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey John. Doing all right, one day at a time, man. My dad used to say, 'I'm fighting hard and ducking fast.' But what you found in Bladen County, North Carolina, that's happening in thousands of communities across the country. And some people kind of know about this, especially if you work in media or study media like I do. But I think a lot of people haven't really grasped what's happened to journalism – or, really, *how* this happened to places like Bladen County.

John Biewen: We're really talking about the collapse of local news in this country. And it's happened quickly, in just a couple of decades. And to me, I've got to say, I think this is an example of the news media not doing a very good job of covering the news media.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. I mean, like, it's like the story's been out there but I don't feel like it's really gotten the light it deserves.

John Biewen: Yeah, I think the scale of it hasn't sunk in for a lot of people. And here's a shocking statistic. The per capita number of working reporters at the local level across the United States declined by 75% in less than 25 years. That was the finding of a study that came out in 2025 from a nonprofit group called Rebuild Local News and the journalism website Muck Rack.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yo, 75% is crazy. That's just like, picture four local journalists in your area. Three of them just got raptured. Right? They went away, got a job doing something else, and then they weren't replaced.

John Biewen: It's actually stunning to contemplate. Here's another way of stating what's happened across the country: Imagine you live in a city of 100,000 people. In 2002, your city would have had 40 working journalists. As of 2025, it had eight.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And here's the thing. We both work in journalism, and you know, like, we teach it. So it might sound self-serving for us to talk about how important news reporters are. But on this one, I actually feel like most Americans would agree with us.

John Biewen: At least we used to. Now, these days, people might have so little regard for the news media that a lot of people might feel differently, might just kind of shrug it off. But at the same time, we have access to so much news and information on our devices, and I think that's another reason this story hasn't really landed. It's just so easy to miss what's been lost.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's a good point. I mean, I wouldn't blame people for thinking, what're you talking about, *news deserts*? What news desert? There's a firehose of news and chatter coming at us, right? You open your phone and it just sort of gushes out. So that's how it feels. But in reality, for a lot of people all over the country, that stream of information doesn't include the substantive local reporting about important things going on right around us that folks took for granted just a generation ago.

John Biewen: So, when we talk about a small community – a place like Elizabethtown, North Carolina – having, say, four people reporting the news, and that number drops to one – or none – we're not talking about, like, pet groomers. I mean, no shade to pet groomers.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Definitely no shade to pet groomers. No, but like, journalism is different. Let me give you an example. In my neighborhood, we got a lot of different kinds of treats. You've got bagels and cookies and doughnuts – which is my favorite.

And then you have mini donuts. Now, if suddenly like mini donuts went away, I mean, I'm not saying it wouldn't be a problem – you know, the mini donut community would be very upset. (Both laugh.) But it wouldn't be like, this is a crisis for democracy, like for our whole democracy! We'd be like, this is a mini-donut crisis.

John Biewen: News is different. Right? When you have a market failure in journalism, and it seems like news organizations are firing reporters, not hiring them, that's a problem for everybody. And we're gonna talk more later about precisely why it's a problem.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Listen. The title of this episode is "When the News Dies." And what we're talking about is what actually died – and who killed it.

Music: Theme

John Biewen: From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 8 – The News. Episode 2. I'm John Biewen.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika. In this season we're trying to make sense of just how badly the news is failing us in the United States today, how things got this way, and what it all means.

John Biewen: And, eventually, what to do about it. In this episode, the near death of local news, and how it happened.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And: what does that trend have to do with all these other crises we're living through, including the extreme divisions in our society and the failure of our government to really serve the needs of the people.

John Biewen: We're gonna go back to the Border Belt to see if we can shed light on these things. And then, Chenj, you and I'll meet up again and unpack it all.

Sound: Car door opening

John Biewen: If you want to know why, of all the places we could have gone for this project, we decided to hang out in the Border Belt of southeastern North Carolina...

Sound: Car door slams

John Biewen: ... well, one clincher was finding out that Penelope Muse Abernathy lives here.

Penny Abernathy: (Outside ambi) I'm Penny.

John Biewen: Penny – John.

John Biewen: We're in Scotland County now ... near the County Seat of Laurinburg.

Penny Abernathy: You're almost at peak for the azaleas and the rhododendrons, but...

John Biewen: Penny lives with her husband in her childhood home, which, she tells me, her parents built themselves after World War Two.

Penny Abernathy: (sound: going inside) What people don't realize is when you're living in the country, it's always something. I mean...

John Biewen: Abernathy decided to come home in retirement, but she had a long career holding important jobs elsewhere.

Penny Abernathy: Uh, I am a retired professor, retired business executive for the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and Harvard Business Review. And a journalist. And once a journalist, always a journalist.

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John Biewen: Abernathy ended her career in academia – at the University of North Carolina and then at Northwestern. She's one of the nation's leading experts on the collapse of the journalism industry – and, in particular, on news deserts. More on what that means in a minute. Penny's story offers a revealing window into the media crack-up, especially in newspapers, and how it flowed from bigger technological and economic changes.

Penny Abernathy: The summer after I graduated from high school, I started as a journalist at the Laurinburg Exchange, right here.

John Biewen: The Laurinburg Exchange, which serves Scotland County, is another weekly that dates to the 19th century. Today it's owned by the same chain that owns the

Bladen Journal and has a similar skeleton staff. Penny went to the University of North Carolina in the early '70s, working summers at the Laurinburg and Greensboro newspapers. After graduating she reported for papers in North Carolina, Kansas, and finally at a Dallas daily that no longer exists.

Penny Abernathy: While at the Dallas Times Herald, I had one of those great epiphanies where you realize that the great journalism war that was going on then was not going to necessarily be won by good journalism.

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John Biewen: At the time, in the early 1980s, Dallas was one of the last cities that still had two daily papers fighting for dominance and survival – the Times Herald and the Morning News. Both had good reporters who covered the city well, she says, but Penny saw that her paper was gonna lose out because of unwise business decisions.

Penny Abernathy: ...that were often being made by chains who lived out of the community and basically focused on the profit.

John Biewen: Penny reached out to a trusted mentor, an executive with the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain.

Penny Abernathy: And I called him up and I said, I've just realized the war is gonna be lost here. And he said, if you care about good journalism, you need to learn the business.

John Biewen: Abernathy got a mid-career fellowship at Columbia to study business and economics journalism. She stayed to get her MBA and learn finance.

Penny Abernathy: And you know, what it did is, it taught me to understand what was going on with private equity at that point. It taught me how to understand hedge funds.

John Biewen: In other words, she got educated about the piles of capital that drive what happens in the U.S economy – including the news industry – and how the people who move that money around really operate. Next, Penny spent 14 years at the New York Times company – as an analyst in its regional newspaper group, then as business manager of the Times newsroom. Finally, she rose to a Senior Vice President position, where she oversaw important changes in the paper's business model.

Penny Abernathy: That was also a glorious time because it was the rollout of the National Edition, nationwide. It was the establishment of the full color New York Times. Uh, and it was also the establishment of nytimes.com.

John Biewen: She moved on to other top media jobs: publisher of the Harvard Business Review, Senior Vice President at the Wall Street Journal, and a VP job at the Paley Center for Media, which involved convening, internationally, the CEOs of media companies.

Sound: driving, blinker) Penny Abernathy: Uh, I'm gonna take you a quick loop around, show you where I went to school, but all you're gonna be able to see now is my, where I went in first grade. (Laughs)...

John Biewen: Penny came home to North Carolina in 2008 to a chaired professorship at the UNC-Chapel Hill journalism school. In that job for 12 years, she commuted to Chapel Hill from her home here in the Border Belt.

(Sound: driving) Penny Abernathy: So, you know, Scotland County has had, uh, it is the classic rural agricultural county that has a lot of corporate farming, right?

John Biewen: Take a drive with Penny and you'll get an economic history lesson. We're passing through Laurel Hill, a tiny former cotton mill town.

Penny Abernathy: Now you talk about something that is, is kind of, uh, (sighs) distressing, is that once you lost the corporate farmers or they transitioned to something else, right? Uh, and you lost the cotton mills, you lost those communities too. So there's nothing really left there except a post office. But it is a good post office, and I sure hope it doesn't get closed or privatized.

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John Biewen: The deep economic changes of the last few decades are key to the story of American journalism and its collapse. But before we tell that story, here's Penny talking about happier times. just one or two generations ago.

Penny Abernathy: I think the kind of golden age of newspaper journalism was from the late seventies up through the early aughts.

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John Biewen: In those years, newspapers were thriving financially and expanding their staffs. Lots of metro papers prided themselves on serving not just their cities, but their states, or big chunks of their states.

Penny Abernathy: For instance, you get the Raleigh paper in North Carolina saying they covered eastern North Carolina like kudzu. (Laughs) And in fact they did. Similarly for Charlotte. So, we benefited in North Carolina by having really four or five really robust metro papers. You had one in Charlotte, you had one in Raleigh, you had the Greensboro and the Winston-Salem paper. And then you had the Fayetteville and the Wilmington papers and the Asheville papers kind of coming in at the, right under that, um, big umbrella.

John Biewen: Between the 1950s and 2000, North Carolina newspapers, large and small, won ten Pulitzer Prizes, including seven just in the 1980s and 90s. They won for investigations into brown lung disease among textile workers, a contaminated smalltown water supply and the local government's failure to fix it. and health and environmental risks from the state's hog farming industry – along with other prizes for cartooning and commentary. In those days, North Carolina's bigger-city papers had one-person bureaus dotted across the regions they covered. So the Raleigh, Wilmington and Fayetteville papers all had reporters working and competing for stories in the Border Belt – in addition to the local papers, at least one in each county, with several full-time journalists. In the early 2000s, North Carolina's two biggest papers, the Charlotte Observer and the Raleigh News and Observer, each boasted a newsroom of 250 to 300 people. But that was then. As of 2026, each of those papers employs just a few dozen journalists – a small fraction of their reporting power a few decades ago. Combined with the collapse of most smalltown papers, this means there's almost nobody covering a lot of these rural counties – period. Through her work at the University of North Carolina, Penny Abernathy popularized the term “news desert.”

Penny Abernathy: I define a news desert as an area, whether urban, suburban, or rural, where there is very limited access, and I want to say very limited access, to the type of critical news and information that feeds a democracy at the local level and brings us together to solve problems.

John Biewen: She considers a *county* to be a news desert if it has only one newspaper – or none. The latest edition of a national report that Abernathy created at UNC found that about two-thirds of North Carolina's 100 counties are now news deserts, including three of the four Border Belt counties we're focusing on for this series – Scotland, Robeson, and Bladen. Penny and her husband, Harry, a retired pastor and, like her, a

former newspaper reporter, are active news consumers. But she tells me, even they just come up empty sometimes.

Penny Abernathy: Let me give you two examples. The first one is, uh, with local county commissioner races here. I tried like the dickens to find out where people stood. I basically ended up not voting in that, because I'm not gonna vote if I can't get the information. The same thing happened with a sheriff's race two years before. And I mean, my husband and I as former journalists, we are diligent. We know how to go get the information.

John Biewen: But you can't find a news article that no one has written or published.

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[BREAK]

John Biewen: So, what happened between that (financial) golden age for newspapers, from the '70s to the 2000s, and today?

Penny Abernathy: Well, you know, we look at two or three inflection points right here. And so it's really quite common to say digital did it. And, uh, Craigslist killed off the newspapers. In fact, Craigslist really hurt the large metros...

John Biewen: In those lucrative years, newspapers made most of their money from advertising, including classifieds. Craigslist, founded in 1995, gave businesses, and anyone with a couch or a car to sell, a cheaper and sometimes free way to advertise. Other online advertisers joined in, from Facebook to Cars.com. For big city newspapers, demand for ads fell off a cliff. That didn't really happen in small towns. Abernathy says, local businesses, like car dealers and retail stores, still routinely advertised in their hometown papers into the 2000s. But the spread of big box stores, like Wal-Mart, took out a lot of retailers, and the Great Recession of 2008 killed off countless other local businesses.

Penny Abernathy: When Wall Street sneezed and then had a cold and then pneumonia, it was disastrous for many of these small rural communities that

were still, uh, supporting a local newspaper. Because Main Street suffered horrendously, especially in the aftermath of the mortgage crisis and everything else.

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John Biewen: Across the country, newspapers were now hemorrhaging cash and market value. Several thousand went under. The U.S. has lost one-third of its newspapers since 2005, according to Abernathy and her colleagues at Northwestern. The collapse of their business model brought about a dramatic shift in the incentives for newspaper owners. Penny explains: Before the Great Recession, if you wanted to buy a strong local newspaper, you had to pay about 14 times that paper's annual profit.

Penny Abernathy: Think about that for a moment. That means if you're going to own a newspaper for 14 years, you're gonna have to invest if you wanna sell it again.

John Biewen: In other words, you had to keep the paper strong for more than a decade just to get your investment back – and to entice the next buyer.

Penny Abernathy: In the aftermath of 2008, suddenly you could own a newspaper for three times earnings.

John Biewen: Now, as an investor, you could get your money back much more quickly. This was like a flashing blue light special for private equity firms to buy up newspapers by the dozen.

Penny Abernathy: And at the end of three years you can decide, you can come in and the first thing you're gonna do is you're gonna slash costs, and I'll go on and milk the cow, harvest it, or I will flip it, which, there was a lot of flipping. Or the third thing, you can just say, oh gosh, we've cut costs, there's just no – we're going to consolidate it with another paper four counties away. (Laughs) And that's how you end up with getting what I call ghost newspapers, uh, papers that are still published either online or in print, but they have really nobody on staff.

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John Biewen: The newspapers we're talking about in the Border Belt, like the Bladen Journal we visited in this episode, are not quite ghost papers by Penny's definition. They have at least one full-time journalist on staff. But they are a shell of what they used

to be. The barebones staffing of papers like these affects not only the stories that are covered and not covered. but also the quality of what they print.

Althea Weaver: The confidence and the trust has really, really diminished.

John Biewen: This is Althea Weaver. She lives in the tiny, mostly Black town of East Arcadia, 25 miles from Elizabethtown. She was chair of the Democratic Party in Bladen County from 2023 until the spring of 2025.

Althea Weaver: Sometimes there's editorials that are in the Bladen Journal that I would call questionable.

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John Biewen: A disturbing example, she says, came in 2024. The day before the general election, November 4th, the Bladen Journal printed a statement from Weaver's Republican counterpart that contained inflammatory misinformation.

Althea Weaver: The Republican party chair, he put an article that was very, very controversial. Talked about, uh, immigrants in Bladen County being allowed to vote and they were not registered and just stirred up a whole bunch of controversy that was not true.

John Biewen: The claim was that *undocumented* immigrants were voting, which of course would be illegal. It would have been one thing if the paper had quoted the man making these accusations in a news article, while accurately identifying him as a partisan official and pointing out there was no evidence for his claims – which there wasn't, according to the North Carolina election board. But that's not what the Bladen Journal did. It billed its article as pre-election voting information from neutral government officials. The lead referred to "last minute updates" from the state and county election boards. The article then reprinted a short press release from the state election board in Raleigh – routine stuff about who was eligible to vote. Followed by this, in the same article:

Bladen Journal, November 3, 2024, Voiceover: The following was sent via email from Wayne Schaeffer of the Board of Elections:

"FYI! Important to note that Hispanic voters are suddenly showing up at the polls—at the last minute, despite 17 days of available early voting. We are seeing reports of Guatemalan and Venezuelan individuals showing up to vote, but not all of them have proof of citizenship, OR of legitimate photo ID. If you see this sort of thing going

on...”

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John Biewen: In case you didn’t catch it, the article had a serious factual error – aside from the unsubstantiated allegations about voter fraud. It wrongly identified the author of the statement, Wayne Schaeffer, as being a member of the Bladen County Election Board, when in fact he was the county Republican Party chairman. Not a non-partisan government official, but very much a partisan player. The paper’s manager and editor, Mark DeLap, told me it was an honest mistake, and not his fault.

Mark DeLap: That was kind of a strange situation, 'cause...

John Biewen: DeLap said he mistakenly described Schaeffer as being with the county Board of Elections because a member of that board emailed him Schaeffer’s statement along with other information from the board.

Mark DeLap: We pretty much just print what the Board of Elections sends us.

John Biewen: DeLap said a board member named Michael Aycock sent him the Schaeffer statement.

Mike Aycock, on phone: Hello.

John Biewen, oh phone: Hello, Mr. Aycock.

John Biewen: When I reached him on the phone, Mike Aycock – a Republican member of the 5-member election board – confirmed that he’d received the statement about illegal voting written by the GOP chairman and passed it on to Mark DeLap at the newspaper. He told me, he’s sure that DeLap knew who Wayne Schaeffer was, so he can’t explain why DeLap’s article misidentified Schaeffer as part of the election board.

Mike Aycock: I am regretful that Mr. DeLap apparently, um, had a lapse or whatever and got it wrong. Sorry that happened, it happened. You can’t go back and fix it. I am confident that it was an oopsy, if you will. He did not mean anything malicious by it or whatever. It just, I was in the military for 23 years and shit happens, so...

John Biewen: Mark DeLap concedes that his paper printed false information. But despite a request from the state board of elections that he issue a correction, he told me he’d felt no need to do so.

Mark DeLap: I would not have run a correction because it came out of their office.

John Biewen: That is, from the county election board.

Mark DeLap: If I write something and I make a mistake, I'll write a correction. But if I didn't write it, how am I gonna correct it? That's not journalism.

John Biewen, in interview: Your newspaper printed it though, and it was...

John Biewen: Actually, it is journalism. DeLap printed a factual error, not to mention explosive, baseless allegations. Good reporting would have meant correcting those errors.

Music

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Damn.

John Biewen: Let me just say here, Chenj, that I first learned about this incident with the Bladen Journal from a non-profit, online publication, the Border Belt Independent. We're gonna hear more about that publication later in our series.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, I definitely want to hear about that. And there's just so much in this story to highlight, that I think talks about what it means to really understand what's happened to news. Let's go all the way back to those guys in the diner that you talked to, the first conversation, right? They're talking real clearly about the disintegration of their local newspaper over a couple of decades. And, you know, they're thinking about why it happened, and for them it's about the difficulty of finding advertisers, right? And of course that is part of it. But then Penny Abernathy – and by the way, oh my god, what a career. She takes everything to a whole 'nother level of understanding. So she talks about why the newspaper business hit a brick wall. Not just, actually, Craigslist, right? But also this has to do with what was happening in the economy, around Walmart and the stores that would have been buying ads.

John Biewen: And the Great Recession.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, and the recession. And ultimately this basically turns the newspaper business into something really different, actually. We're looking at it like it's the newspaper business, but to a large extent, in that context, once you understand what's going on there, the prices are going down, and why people are suddenly buying

these papers up, they're not looking at it as a for-profit civic institution. It's just an investment opportunity for a few private equity firms, and vulture – or venture capitalists, whatever you prefer. (Laughing.) I prefer vulture. But, and then we come to this last story about the Bladen Journal and that reporting blunder, and it's like it really drives it up. I just think about Penny and her husband, they're trying to find real news about the elections! And then you have this reporting error. And yeah, it's just a really interesting throughline and a concrete example of how those changes affect everyday people, and the kind of news and information that we have access to.

John Biewen: In this case, an article in the newspaper the day before an election.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, right.

John Biewen: We're trying to tie this to the importance of journalism in a democracy, and, you know, it's almost too spot on.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: As I'm understanding this, Mark DeLap, the editor of the Bladen Journal, he's basically a one-man news operation, right?

John Biewen: Yes. Along with a few volunteers and a part-time sports reporter.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And the dude is probably overwhelmed, he said he's pressed for time, and maybe that's why he didn't have time to check out these explosive claims that were sent to him about people voting illegally. And maybe that's the reason he slipped up in identifying the guy making the claims.

John Biewen: And it's also important to say, DeLap was new to Elizabethtown when this happened. He'd been there less than a year.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I just want to point out that this isn't really a story about his bad intentions, necessarily, as some kind of partisan actor. It doesn't have to be about that. Because even if we give him the benefit of the doubt that it was an honest mistake, and he just forgot that the guy, Wayne Schaeffer, was the chair of the Republican Party in his county and not part of the elections board, it still shows that there's been like this structural weakness put in, because now you have news organization who has to cover the news in that area, but he doesn't even know the community that well.

John Biewen: And look, he has a tough job. I worked in very small public radio newsrooms in small cities early in my so-called career, where we had just a couple of reporters. But these were places, you know, bigger places that had solid newspapers

and other media at that time. And I felt like I could just find some decent stories that my listeners would find interesting, knowing the essential stuff was being covered by *somebody* and that my listeners had access to it. You know, somebody was covering the city council and the school board and, you know, city government and so on and so forth. I can't even imagine being basically the only working reporter in a county with tens of thousands of people and trying to report on everything that matters. It's just really not doable.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And by one estimate, that's the situation in almost one-third of counties in the U.S. right now. One thousand counties don't have the equivalent of even one full-time journalist. Which is – whew.

John Biewen: So, it's not about beating up on Mark DeLap. It's about the systemic disintegration of local news – which has happened before our eyes, again, in only 20 or 25 years. In fact, let's take a second and describe this [visual image](#). Chenj, you and I both have it in front of us. It's from that study by the group Rebuild Local News, in partnership with Muck Rack. So, for the listeners: Picture a map of the U.S., with thin lines marking off the nation's 3100 counties. OK? Each county on this map is color-coded according to how rich or poor it is in journalists. So, it's deep blue if it's got lots of reporters, per capita, light orange if it has just a few for every 100,000 people, and dark orange for a county that has less than one journalist per 100,000 people.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: When you understand what this map means, it's chilling. In the year 2000, the average county would have been blue. Now the map is mostly orange – pale orange and a whole lot of dark orange – with patches of blue here and there, like lakes dotted across the landscape of Mars or something like that. It almost doesn't make sense to talk about news deserts, as if they're isolated pockets. This map I'm looking at, most of the country is a news desert! And this isn't some academic observation, or just something we should be sad about. This is incredibly dangerous. When you don't have any news reporters to hold people and institutions accountable, that just puts even more power in the hands of people who already have disproportionate power.

Music

John Biewen: Now, what's the bigger picture behind this mostly-orange map? What's the underlying economic reality that made this collapse possible?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Well, the people with power in the United States decided, over a couple of centuries, and certainly over the last forty or fifty years, that, for the most

part, we're gonna have a for-profit, market-based news media.

John Biewen: Yes, a much more thoroughly market-based – and with a lot less public funding for journalism – than most other rich countries.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So I mean, to me, this is what you get when you've set things up that way: a media system that depends on advertising to pay the bills, and then the business model crashes and burns. And we'll have more to say about journalism as a for-profit commodity as we move through the season. But I actually think we should slow down and really think about this for a minute. Because, you know, it's obvious that when you have a big news desert like this, when you have most of the country looking like a news desert, people aren't gonna get the information they need. But there's also a whole set of other consequences that aren't as obvious.

John Biewen: Yeah, in fact, let's bring in one more voice, one more interview I did. Angelica Das is with Democracy Fund – it's a grantmaker that works to shore up news organizations with funding and other kinds of support.

Angelica Das: Uh, there are so many different angles to this crisis. It's not just one thing...

John Biewen: Here's Angelica.

Angelica Das: ...but I think that, from any angle, I think we can all agree that the status quo is fundamentally broken.

John Biewen: To your point, Chenj, about these deeper kind of ramifications for communities and for democracy, Angelica talked about a [report](#) that Democracy Fund put out a few years ago, called "How We Know Journalism is Good for Democracy." It pulled together a bunch of studies on what you might call the civic health of communities that have – or don't have – a strong news presence.

Angelica Das: Some of what they have found is that, when there is a lack of specifically local news, that voter turnout declines; people are less likely to vote in local elections; people are less likely to generally be civically engaged; fewer people run for office; and people are more likely to vote along party lines on the ballot. And that's just, that's just kind of the tip of the iceberg.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, man. I mean, there's a lot there. First of all, it's just fascinating that that's true, and maybe not totally obvious. Because why would people

become more disengaged and less likely to vote or run for office because they live in a news desert? There is some well-known research that could shed some light on this. It was done by a couple of scholars at the University of North Carolina, as it turns out, in the 1970s, and it looked at the “agenda-setting” role of the media.

John Biewen: Yeah, the agenda setting role. What these researchers found – they surveyed voters, around election time, about what the most important issues were in a political campaign. And they found that folks’ answers lined up very closely with the issues the media focused on in that campaign. Surprise, surprise.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So it’s like the significance of the research can be broken down like this: the news media can’t really tell people what to think, but it does have real power in telling its readers and viewers what to think *about*.

John Biewen: What to pay attention to.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: A strong local newspaper – or radio or TV station or whatever – can really focus people’s attention on what the issues are, the problems that local leaders and activists are trying to solve. And if you don’t have that kind of gathering place for news and information, and you just have word of mouth, or social media chatter about a couple of topics, people can almost forget that there *are* shared issues to deal with in their community.

John Biewen: Or that they as a citizen might have a role to play in working on or even caring about these issues. Listen to something Althea Weaver said to me. She’s the woman from Bladen County we heard from a few minutes ago. She’s done two stints as Democratic Party Chair in the county, one here the 2020s and another term twenty years earlier.

Althea Weaver: I can say that this by far has been a lot different than it was from 2000 to 2004.

John Biewen, in interview: Say more about that. How so?

Althea Weaver: Uh, membership has dropped off. Drastically. Cannot seem to get young people involved. Young people nowadays just don’t seem to, I don’t wanna say they don’t care, but they’re just not really concerned enough to get involved. Our daughters, you know, we got two daughters, one is 33 and the other one is 26, and they are concerned about doing nothing except voting. (Claps hands.) Once they vote, that’s it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Wow. Now there could be a lot of reasons for a shift like that, but it's consistent with the studies showing that people get less politically engaged when their sources of local news dry up. But it's also about what happens when people are a little bit engaged, right? So, I want to pick up on something else Angelica Das said – that studies have found people are more likely to vote along straight party lines when they don't have good local news.

John Biewen: This is really interesting and, again, it's not obvious why it would be the case.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But if you think about it, the lack of local news leaves a void, right? Where people used to give some of their attention to reading or hearing about issues and leaders close to home, like the stuff happening in your neighborhood, right? So now, that information isn't there. So what winds up filling the void and taking all of people's attention is *national* news – or stuff that isn't really news, it's what folks call “news-like information.”

John Biewen: Which can mean everything from podcasts to social media to late night comedy shows. Here's Angelica Das again.

Angelica Das: When there's no local news and information, then the national news cycle is even louder. And what we know about national news is that it amplifies polarization. It drives people to their camp and their tribe. It amplifies the us versus them narrative.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And why? Because national news coverage is so steeped in the partisan horse race, and almost everything's framed as left-vs.-right, Democrat vs. Republican. That's the case with mainstream media, and of course it's even more amped up on social media.

John Biewen: The clickbait is wild. If you've watched some videos, say, on YouTube, that have to do with politics, the algorithm will quickly decide what your politics are, and then offer you an endless stream of clips with screaming headlines. Right? So-and-so, on your side of the political divide, “destroys,” or “demolishes,” or “dismantles” somebody on the other side.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So we all know that's the media world we live in now. But the fact that local news has just shriveled the way it is really makes the problem worse. Because people are spending more time steeped in these national wars over politics

and culture.

John Biewen: We've been talking a lot about politics and voting and all that, but there's so much more that a functioning news organization does in a city or town or rural place. And then, as a result, so much more that's missing in a news desert.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, man. I mean, like, look. Just to keep score: In a news desert, there's little or no coverage of what's happening in the schools or what the school board is up to. Right? No one keeping tabs on local companies and employers – whether they're polluting, how they're treating their workers. No coverage of police – except, typically, taking reports *from* the police and sticking them into the newspaper or a news website with no checking or vetting. You're getting no investigative reporting about any of these institutions to hold them accountable. And definitely little if any coverage of marginalized communities – unless they show up in those police reports.

Music

John Biewen: There's real evidence that the catastrophic decline of local news is hurting communities, and our society, our democracy, as a whole.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It is a problem that people are aware of, at least some folks. And there's a lot of exciting stuff going on, people and organizations doing some good work, trying innovative ways to fill the void. But man, if you look at that map – it's a big hill to climb.

John Biewen: And, you know, when you refer to people doing interesting things, that's true in the Border Belt, too. We're gonna hear more about some efforts to plug the hole in the Border Belt, and about what it would really take to fix the country's broken media system, later in the season. But next time:

New Gingrich, 1994: Now I recognize, sadly, that the Washington press corps is all too often the Praetorian Guard of the left,

Laura Ingraham, "The Ingraham Angle," Fox News, July 25: No wonder people hate the media. Now at this point, neither the Democrats nor the press have a shred of cred....

John Biewen: Some people might have listened to all this talk about disappearing journalists and thought, good riddance. The fewer reporters the better! Because

everybody knows the news media, on the whole, has a liberal bias. But does it? We'll take a fresh look.

The News was created and produced by me, John Biewen, with Chenjerai Kumanyika and story editor Diane Hodson. Assistant producer, Arlene Arevalo. Fact checking by Anna Pujol Mazzini. Production help this time from Robert Frazier. Music by Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band, Michelle Osis, Lili Haydn, Alex Weston, goodnight Lucas, James Nathan Jones, and Jason Hill. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. You can find transcripts at our website, Sceneonradio.org. The show is distributed by PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.