

# AVOIDING THE NEWS DESERT: ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AROUND COMMUNITY MEDIA IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING QUEBEC

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Locally produced media, including newspapers and radio stations, knit a community together and contribute to its vitality. In its vitality framework for linguistic minority communities, the Government of Canada underlines media's role in this respect (Canadian Heritage, 2021). Homegrown news-sharing allows communities to keep up with local businesses, politics and local events. The loss of such news sources can impact the sense of community connection among residents (Matthews, 2022).

A 2017 study pointed to the importance of media for the nation's linguistic minorities: "They support the development and vitality of minority language communities and help to bring them out of isolation" (Fry, 2017, p. 4). The report also underlined the government's use of print media to "communicate with the public in both official languages" (p. 4). Owing to this report and others like it, funding has been allocated at the federal and provincial levels to support local media outlets in the face of a changing economic landscape, with results that require further study.

**Metropolitan<sup>1</sup> outlets, which typically behave as local papers themselves, are usually not reliable sources of community coverage beyond their city limits.** English-speaking communities outside of Montreal may read the *Montreal Gazette* but find it lacking in any items involving their off-island or regional communities. Gaps in coverage exist within the realm of radio as well. English-speaking populations in certain regions, such as Métis-sur-Mer and areas of the Lower North Shore, are out of reach of radio towers broadcasting English-language public programming (CBC/Radio-Canada, n.d.).

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada defines a metropolis as an urbanized area with a population of 100,000 or more.

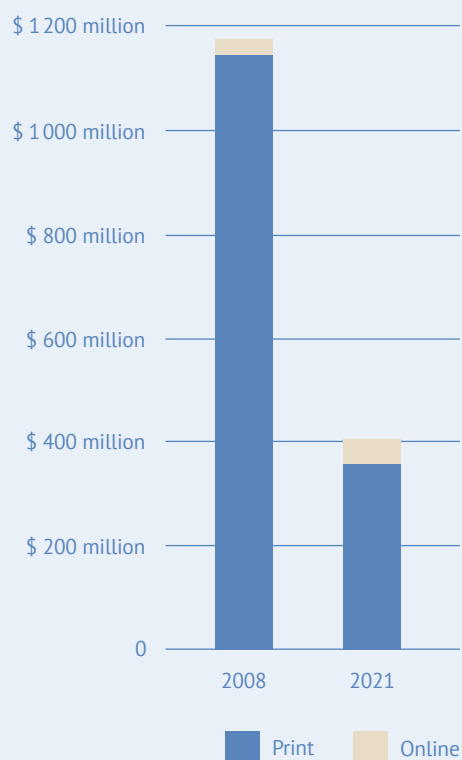
## Local Papers Are in Crisis

What's not news is that for many years print journalism has been at a crossroads. Since the early 2000s, newspapers have seen decreases in publication frequency, moved to adopt a digital model, or shuttered completely. The newspaper advertising model experienced a significant blow following the 2008 financial crisis, which reverberated throughout the advertising industry (Winseck, 2022). **In Canada, total revenue for community newspapers fell by nearly 60 percent between 2008 and 2020**, and most of this was among daily papers (Greenspon et al., 2022). Advertising revenue for community newspapers dropped to CDN\$401 million in 2021 from CDN\$1.17 billion in 2010 (News Media Canada, n.d.) (Figure 1). While acknowledging that something should be done about the fledgling industry, governments have contributed to this decline by reducing their advertising in print publications (Beeby, 2016). Since 2008, at least one third of Canadian journalism jobs disappeared (Greenspon et al., 2022).

Between 2008 and 2021, nearly 450 news outlets including local TV, radio and newspapers closed in more than 300 communities across Canada (Lindgren & Corbett, 2023). **In Quebec, 104 media outlets (newspapers, radio and TV) have either folded, merged or transitioned to an online-only model since 2008** (Figure 2, next page). English-medium or bilingual publications made up 22 percent of these closures or transitions (Lindgren & Corbett, 2023). Given that the Quebec English-speaking community represents 16.9 percent of the provincial population, **these closures appear to have disproportionately affected English speakers**. Thus far in 2023, Quebec has seen the shuttering of several print and online outlets, including the closure of the Métro Média network of publications that consisted of a daily newspaper and 11 weekly publications in the Montreal and Quebec City urban areas, a few of which were nearly 100 years old (Duhamel, 2023).

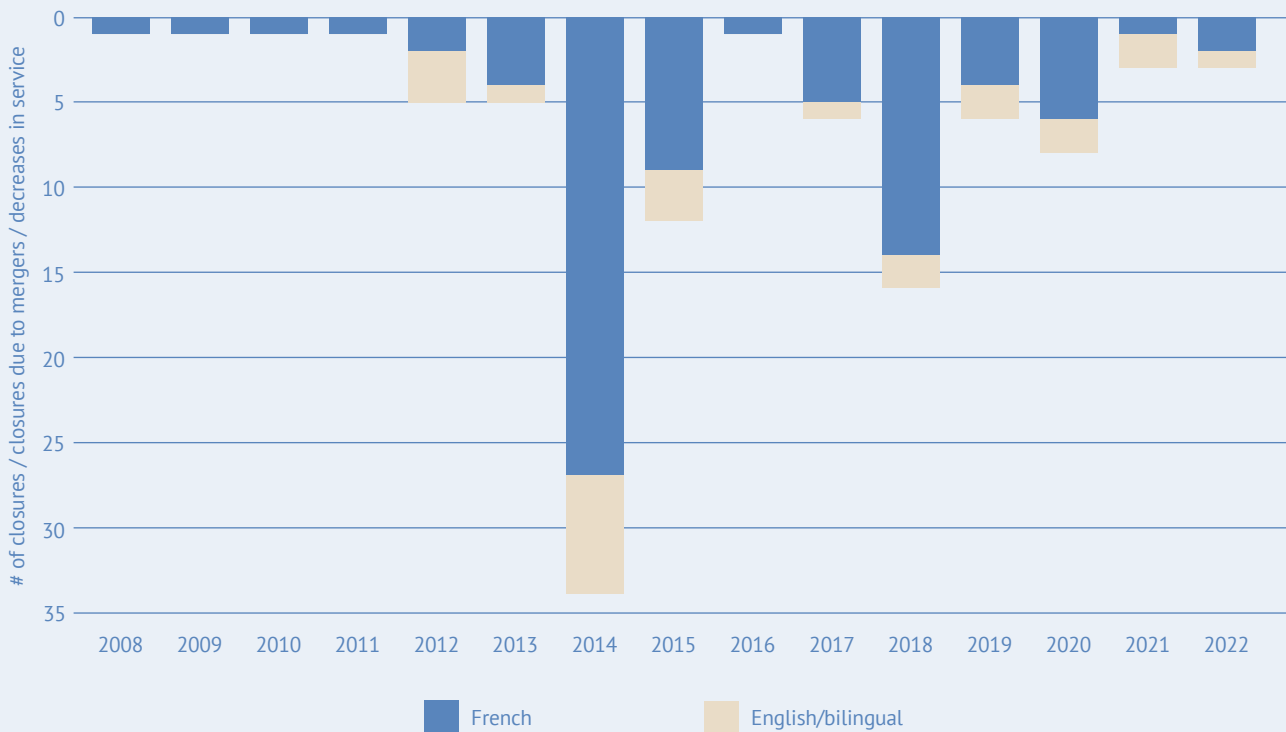
In short, local news is in crisis as a result of various interconnected factors relating to challenges with online revenue and the consolidation of media ownership (Matthews, 2022).

**Figure 1:**  
Canadian Community Newspaper Advertising Revenue



Source:  
News Media Canada, Annual Revenue Surveys,  
2008 and 2021

**Figure 2:**  
**Community Media Outlet Closures in Quebec, French and English, 2008-2022**



Source:  
 Lindgren, A., & Corbett, J. (2023). Local News Map Data: August 1, 2023. Local News Research Project.

### “News Deserts” and the Crisis for Democracy

This changing landscape of dwindling local papers and concentrated coverage of national and international affairs can create what the literature refers to as “news deserts,” or “communities where residents have very limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feed democracy at a grassroots level” (Matthews, 2022).

Such deserts can create “blind spots,” both geographic (when certain areas lack coverage) and thematic (when the news coverage fails to address a diverse agenda), which can have hazardous effects on democracy (Morlandsto & Mathisen, 2022). **Researchers associate the decline in local news with reduced voter engagement, heightened corruption levels, greater polarization, and the election of more ideologically extreme officials** (Waldman, 2023).

## What the Government Has Done to Help so Far

### Legislation

In 2023, the Government of Canada made efforts to address online revenue challenges with **Bill C-18, or the *Online News Act***. Perhaps the most visible federal government intervention to date, **the Act set out to address how Google and Meta (which includes Facebook and Instagram) hold a combined 80 percent share of online advertising revenue in Canada**, an estimated \$9.7 billion a year redirected from local outlets (Sturino & Turner, 2018). Bill C-18 aimed to correct the problem by imposing a “link tax” on the media giants (Bill C-18, 2022). In response, Google and Meta blocked news content from their platforms.

Some claim these boycotts signal a backfire of the legislation itself, doing more harm than help (Ibbitson, 2023). For many small news outlets, social media is a key low-cost tool in building a following and distributing content, and publishers are worried about losing an important element of their dissemination strategy (Rana, 2023). Supporters of the legislation maintain that it is a necessary step to keep the media market competitive, and claim the fees owed by the tech giants would be relatively insignificant to them. A soon-to-be-released working paper by economists in the US estimates that Google and Meta together owe around \$14 billion per year to news publishers in that country (Schiffrin & Mateen, 2023). For context, the 2022 annual global revenues reported by Google and Meta were \$279.8 billion and \$116.6 billion, respectively (Statista, 2023a) (Statista, 2023b).

### Funding

**Quebec is the only province so far to have adopted community media funding programs** (Greenspon et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ***Aide au fonctionnement pour les médias communautaires*** program was expanded to infuse 153 organizations with \$9.5 million in 2021-2022, plus an additional \$6.14 million to 155 organizations in 2022-2023.

Over the last several years, the federal government has introduced a number of programs and tax credits to help mitigate the effects of diminishing resources within the industry. In 2018, recognizing a “devastation of democratic informational pillars,” (Greenspon et al., 2022) the government developed the **Local Journalism Initiative (LJI)**. Fifty million dollars over five years was earmarked for this program, designed for small media organizations to hire journalists in underserved communities. The federal government also contributes to the **Community Media Strategic Support Fund**, which provides planning support and paid internships for Official Language community media (Canadian Heritage, 2018). In 2022, the **Canada Periodical Fund** was put into place and included measures such as the Aid to Publishers program that provides operating support for various categories of publications including print (Government of Canada, 2022).

## New Models

Contrary to previous belief, the shift to online has not proven a one-to-one solution to the decline of print (Hagey et al., 2019). Local newspapers especially have struggled to make up for loss of print advertising revenue, thanks in large part to Facebook and Google. Data has also shown that readers are less likely to pay for local online news than print publications, and community outlets struggle to drum up sufficient web subscription revenue (Walker, 2019).

**New models that do not rely on advertising revenue to such a large extent involve breaking up the “consolidation format” and moving toward trust-based and community donation projects that emphasize “local ownership”** (Sturino & Turner, 2018). Provincial examples of this model include *The 1019 Report*, a hyperlocal online and print publication serving the Vaudreuil-Soulanges region, founded in 2020 by a former writer for the *Montreal Gazette*. After having shut down in 2018 following various buy-outs and consolidations, *The Gleaner* in the Chateauguay Valley was revived through an innovative social economy project involving crowdsourced fundraising and subscription campaigns.

A step further beyond the idea of “local ownership” can be found in the Substack newsletter model. Substack, an online subscription-based platform, allows journalists to create ad-free content accessible for a fee. *The Rover*, founded by another former *Montreal Gazette* journalist, is a popular Quebec-based example.

While local and community radio stations remain less far-reaching in numbers and coverage than local print publications, especially for linguistic minorities seeking local programming, online-based media such as podcasting and video continue to be useful for hyperlocal community communication. These can be consumed by anyone with access to the Internet, allowing for a workaround to issues with radio frequency access. In Quebec, several examples exist and are often led by community organizations rather than journalistic enterprises. The *MCQ Views & Voices* podcast in the Mauricie-Centre-du-Québec region and *Bonfyre Media*, a grassroots media project in the Gaspé, are examples.

## Conclusion

It’s been clear for some time that the media landscape is changing. Research is ongoing, but preliminary scholarship shows that news deserts are becoming increasingly prevalent, with Quebec as no exception. Isolated and/or minority communities are being hit hardest.

This brief has explored the decline of traditional news sources and highlighted innovative local projects that aim to change the landscape. **A possible path forward for government is to support research into these grassroots models to determine efficacy and assess sustainability.** At present, efforts such as the Canada Periodical Fund and Bill C-18 that aim to support existing media are yielding inconclusive results; a contingency plan might be in order.

Government-supported research initiatives of this type would not only acknowledge the need for a local news revival but allow any such government and its citizens to be pioneers of a new media frontier.

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