



# Rural Digital Media

Photo Credit: Front Porch Republic

Max  
Neustaedter



Photo Credit: Brent Lewin

Figure 1: Newspaper companies continue to be at risk in rural areas. Additionally, reading the newspaper is an activity that is continually moving online.

People who live in rural settings experience barriers that restrict information access

Over the last few decades, western society has ushered in the “information age” with the onslaught of the internet (Selwyn, 2004). **The internet provides information and services for anyone with access, such as health advice, updates on community events, financial help, and web-based connection with others** (Hodge et al., 2017). The realm of media includes printed media (e.g., newspapers, magazines), digital media (e.g., blogs, online news, forums, social media), and audio and visual media (e.g., radio, television). This research focuses on digital media. Digital Media is useful in the rural areas to provide information to those who are typically further from resources and lack amenities.

**Unfortunately, common barriers to access media include isolation, lack of resources, distrust in the government, and the “digital divide”** (Collins & Wellman, 2010; Baines, 2012; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012; Cresci & Jarosz, 2010). The digital divide refers to the inability to take advantage of resources if individuals do not use computers or other electronic devices, typically affecting older generations (Cresci & Jarosz, 2010; Hodge et al., 2017). People who live in rural settings experience barriers that restrict information access. Due to the digital divide, many are increasingly at odds of missing out on valuable information to support their well-being (Mehra, Sikes, & Singh, 2020). **The following four precedents focus on how access and use of media can mitigate barriers and shape rural communities for the better.**

## Getting Connected: Chapleau, Ontario

A study done by Collins and Wellman (2010) focused on how gaining access to the internet and online communication transformed the rural community of Chapleau. Prior to this research, Chapleau had experienced a declining population over the previous two and a half decades. The community experienced the loss of many young adults to other regions in order to pursue academia and careers. This resulted in many long-distance connections for the people of Chapleau, further isolating the community. Two prior surveys frame this study, which assessed the community dynamics before, and after the installation of high-speed internet in the town. A main conclusion of the study was that **Chapleau residents believed that having access to internet gave their community a longer life**. It was very clear that community members benefitted from access to information related to health, news, and shopping. Residents from the town of Chapleau felt as though their rural community was now connected to the rest



Figure 2: Aerial view of the Town of Chapleau.

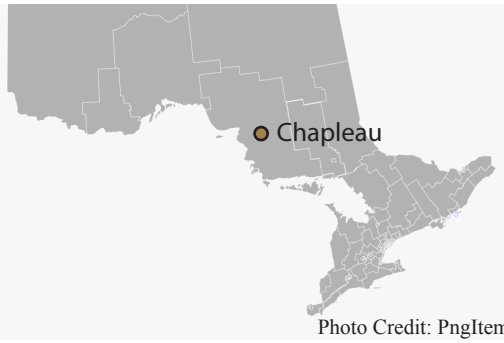


Figure 3: Location of the Town of Chapleau within Ontario.

of the world, and individuals greatly emphasized the ability to connect with distant loved ones. **This change of access allowed residents to remain in their town with the knowledge that Chapleau was now set up to expand socially and economically in the digital age.**

### A Social Media Emergency: Sweden

Social media provides a unique way for people to spread information related to safety concerns such as missing persons, especially in tightly-knit rural communities. A study by Cecceto and Petersson (2022) looked at how social media data can be used to analyze information sharing through three cases of missing persons in rural Sweden. By web-scraping Twitter posts that included the names of the missing persons, the research team identified how online responses impacted the communities. They found that some content shared on social media held potential to affirm the local community's support of the organizations involved in the searches.

**The majority of tweets analyzed were primarily emotional content, which was identified as essential to the creation of connections between individuals across rural areas who are face to face with loss within their community.** These connections are the often the result of isolated individuals trying to make sense of a scary situation while seeking comfort. Further, the ability to share emotional concern helps organizations identify local support.

### Virtual Town Square: Blacksburg, Virginia

Research by Kavanaugh et al. (2014) out of Virginia Tech in the city of Blacksburg, addressed ways that news is currently aggregated on media platforms, and sought to develop a website that encompassed the needed aspects of the various platforms for communities in the United States in order to effectively engage residents with hyper-local information. **This tactic was chosen to counterbalance the loss of printed newspapers in many communities,** and to figure out a way to collect information into one place, as opposed to it being spread across a diverse array of websites and apps. The study identified desired components for their design of an aggregated online hyper-local news outlet, which led to the development of Virtual Town Square (VTS), which focused on predictable, conglomerated information that was relevant to the



Figure 4: A search team led by Missing People Sweden sweeps the rural country side.

**Social Media allows community members to be resilient and problem solve together**

Scanlon, Helsloot, & Groenendaal, 2014

“Increasingly, information technologies are playing a role in helping communities share information (and misinformation) and in fostering interaction and communication among local organizations and residents.”

Kavanaugh et al., 2014



Figure 5: Students walk through Virginia Polytechnic campus.

viewer’s geographical location and included chatting, commenting, and mapping components. **VTS served as a gateway site where local information was sourced to one platform while providing source links for articles, providing ease for the user alongside in-depth local perspectives.**

### Government Communication Through Media: Mexico

A study by Picazo-Vela et al. (2020) looked at strategic ways social media could be used to communicate from the government to citizens of Mexico. Respondents in the study identified that social media posed an easier way for governmental communication, which would allow for public organizations to increase efficiency. **Social media as a middle man proved to increase trust in the government from the respondents as it promoted transparency.**

Five useful tips were pulled out of the focus group research identifying how government communication would be most beneficial for the residents of Mexico: (1) Be aware of the context; monitor information posted and comments, (2) Understand the problem; governments should identify why using specific social medias mitigate communication issues, (3) Develop a plan; create objectives and adjust accordingly to context, (4) Develop guidelines for use of social media; government employees should be given work and personal guidelines for their social media use, (5) Build capacities; train employees to use social media and integrate it into their work affectively.

### Final Thoughts

These precedents reveal the possible benefits that access and use of media provides for rural communities. **Once communities have access to the internet, online media proves to strengthen community dynamics.** This is seen as various citizen to citizen interactions can increase sense of safety, build bonds with those who experience isolation, and provide a way for different perspectives to be heard. Similarly, agglomerated news provides access to information in one space, which is a tool for connection and has potential to reduce the digital divide with ease of use. As government bodies integrate transparency into their media usage, trust can be increased between the government and citizens. Altogether, access to media provides opportunities for connection, increased social participation, safety, and potential growth in rural communities.



Figure 6: Older populations are more likely to experience barriers due to the digital divide.

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## Recommended Readings:

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