

When the Headlines Fade, the Story Goes On: Investigating How Local Newspaper Decline Affects Firm CSR Engagement

Appendix 1. Interview Descriptions

1.1 Overview of Interview

We conducted **42 semi-structured interviews** with two complementary groups—**22 local newspaper journalists** and **20 corporate executives/public relations managers**—to understand how the decline of local newspapers reshapes firms' visibility, accountability, and CSR engagement. These interviews inform and refine the theoretical mechanisms developed in the manuscript by using practitioner insights to motivate and contextualize our deductive framework.

Recruitment of Journalists

We identified major local newspaper organizations at the county and state levels and reviewed staff directories to locate business reporters, editors, and columnists. A total of **22 journalists** agreed to participate. Their anonymized profiles appear in **Appendix Table 1a**.

Recruitment of Corporate Executives and Public Relations Managers

Corporate executives and PR professionals were identified through LinkedIn, company websites, and business contact databases. This process yielded **20 executives and managers** across diverse industries, ownership structures, and geographic regions. Their anonymized profiles appear in **Appendix Table 1b**.

Dual-Informant Design

The two informant groups provide a **two-sided view of the local information environment**:

- **Journalists** describe oversight functions, local visibility roles, newsroom constraints, shrinking coverage, and changes in firms' communication practices as the local media landscape eroded.
- **Executives** explain how diminished local visibility affects CSR communication, stakeholder engagement, and their reliance on alternative communication channels or nonlocal informational intermediaries.

This cross-informant approach enhances construct validity, mitigates survivorship and recency bias, and enables triangulation across historically anchored (journalists) and contemporaneous (executives) accounts, consistent with established comparative qualitative practices.

1.2 Interview Protocol and Thematic Structure

All interviews followed semi-structured protocols that ensured coverage of core themes while allowing contextual follow-up. Question sets were tailored to each informant group but systematically aligned with the theoretical mechanisms of oversight, visibility, and informational substitutes.

Themes in Journalist Interviews (see Appendix Table 1c)

- Role of local newspapers in business and economic coverage
- Watchdog vs. visibility functions
- Differences between local and national outlets
- Effects of newsroom downsizing and resource constraints
- Coverage of CSR and community engagement
- Shifts toward PR, branded content, and alternative firm-driven channels
- Firm-media relationships and changes after local newspaper decline

Themes in Executive Interviews (see Appendix Table 1d)

- Recognition and valuation of local media
- Expected benefits of local coverage
- CSR, community engagement, and local legitimacy
- Managing relationships with local vs. national media
- Organizational response to local newspaper decline
- Shifts in PR, communication, and visibility strategies
- Adjustments in stakeholder-engagement resources

These themes map directly onto the theoretical mechanisms and contingencies developed in the manuscript (oversight loss, visibility loss, and substitution by nonlocal intermediaries) and integrate the interviews into front-end theory building.

1.3 Interview Administration

All interviews were conducted **via Zoom**:

- **Duration:** 30–45 minutes
- **Format:** Video calls
- **Recording:** With participant consent
- **Transcription:** Verbatim

Prior to each interview, participants were assured that their responses would be anonymized. Any descriptive attributes (e.g., job title, industry, tenure) were taken from **publicly available sources** such as LinkedIn or corporate websites, ensuring no collection of confidential information.

Appendix 2. Interview Sample and Procedures

2.1. Journalist Interviews

Coverage and Exposure to Local Newspaper Decline

Using Gao, Lee, and Murphy (2020), we verified whether each journalist's newspaper county or state had experienced a closure, merger, or transition to a nondaily publication.

- **20 of 22 journalists (91%)** were located in counties/states experiencing newspaper decline.
- **2 journalists (9%)** were in non-decline areas.

Professional Mobility and Experience

Journalists averaged **17 years of experience** (range: 8–35) and typically worked for **3–5 newspapers** across their careers.

Approximately **70%** had covered **multiple counties or states**, often moving to regional outlets or covering multiple counties simultaneously after downsizing. Mobility across decline and non-decline areas enriched comparative insights.

Experience Across Decline and Non-Decline Regions

Roughly **three-quarters** of journalists reported work experience in **both** decline and non-decline counties, allowing them to contrast oversight, visibility, and corporate–community relations across divergent news ecosystems.

Interview Modality

All journalist interviews were conducted via Zoom (30–45 minutes), recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

2.2. Executive Interviews

Exposure to Local Newspaper Decline

Using Gao, Lee, and Murphy (2020), we verified whether each executive's headquarters state experienced a local newspaper decline:

- **17 of 20 executives (85%)** were based in exposed states.
- **3 executives (15%)** were based in non-exposed states but worked in multi-site organizations with operations spanning decline-affected regions.

Professional Mobility and Experience

Executives averaged **19 years of experience** (range: 10–32) in communications, public affairs, CSR/ESG, or corporate strategy. Many held positions in multiple regional offices or divisions, providing firsthand comparison of regions with active vs. diminished local newspaper presence.

Firm Composition

The executive sample represents a diverse set of firm types:

- **Publicly traded firms:** 14 (70%)
- **Privately held regional/local firms:** 4 (20%)
- **Subsidiaries/divisions of multinationals:** 2 (10%)

This cross-section captures variation in visibility pressures, stakeholder expectations, and informational environments (e.g., national outlets, analysts, rating agencies).

Interview Modality

All interviews were conducted via Zoom (30–45 minutes), recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Appendix Table 1a. Journalist Interview Sample and Exposure

| Journalist # | Job Title | Years of Experience | Newspaper Location | Decline Exposed |
|--------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Reporter | 8 | AL | Yes |
| 2 | Managing Editor | 28 | CA | Yes |
| 3 | Senior Business Reporter | 30 | FL | Yes |
| 4 | Business Reporter | 9 | FL | Yes |
| 5 | Managing Editor | 42 | GA | Yes |
| 6 | Business Reporter | 7 | IA | Yes |
| 7 | Columnist | 22 | KS | Yes |
| 8 | Business Reporter | 3 | MA | Yes |
| 9 | Business Columnist | 37 | MN | Yes |
| 10 | Business Reporter | 3 | MO | Yes |
| 11 | Business Reporter | 6 | MO | Yes |
| 12 | Business Editor | 27 | MO | Yes |
| 13 | Technology and Innovation Reporter | 9 | NC | Yes |
| 14 | Business Reporter | 31 | NJ | Yes |
| 15 | Energy and Business Reporter | 13 | NM | Yes |
| 16 | Business Reporter | 8 | NV | Yes |
| 17 | Business Reporter | 18 | NY | Yes |
| 18 | Business Reporter | 46 | PA | Yes |
| 19 | Business Reporter | 10 | TX | Yes |
| 20 | Reporter | 4 | TX | Yes |
| 21 | Business Reporter | 10 | UT | No |
| 22 | Reporter | 1 | WY | No |

Appendix Table 1b. Corporate Executive and Public Relations Manager Interviewees' Profiles

| Executive # | Job Title | Years of Experience | Industry | Firm Location | Decline Exposed |
|-------------|---|---------------------|------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Senior Public Relations Manager | 30 | Rail Transportation | IL | Yes |
| 2 | Senior Vice President | 32 | Investment Banking | WI | Yes |
| 3 | Global Director of Marketing and Public Relations | 19 | Auto Parts Manufacturing | MI | Yes |
| 4 | Senior Vice President of Communications | 16 | Banking | MN | Yes |
| 5 | Vice President of Public Relations and Brand Strategies | 21 | Banking | MO | Yes |
| 6 | Global Public Relations Manager | 30 | Industrial Equipment Manufacturing | TX | Yes |
| 7 | Vice President of Public Relations | 28 | Mortgage Finance | DC | No |
| 8 | Senior Director of Public Relations | 23 | Home Services | SC | No |
| 9 | Public Relations Manager | 34 | Motorcycle Manufacturing | WI | Yes |
| 10 | Head of Public Relations | 26 | Healthcare Technology | NY | Yes |
| 11 | Vice President of Communications and Public Relations | 34 | Government Services | DC | No |
| 12 | Vice President of Global Analyst and Public Relations | 18 | Digital Marketing Software | NY | Yes |
| 13 | Senior Public Relations Manager | 9 | Online Employment Services | TX | Yes |
| 14 | Public Relations Specialist | 23 | Consumer Electronics | KS | Yes |
| 15 | Assistant Director of Media Relations | 23 | Professional Sports Team | KS | Yes |
| 16 | Senior Communications Manager | 10 | Telecommunications | NM | Yes |
| 17 | Senior Lead Regional PR Manager | 21 | Telecommunications | CA | Yes |
| 18 | Director of Public Relations and Reputation | 32 | Automotive Manufacturing | VA | Yes |
| 19 | Communications Specialist | 5 | Automotive Manufacturing | TN | Yes |
| 20 | Public Relations Director | 23 | Telecommunications and Media | GA | Yes |

Appendix Table 1c. The List of Questions for Journalists

| Theme | Interview Question |
|--|--|
| Role of Local Newspapers | Why are local newspapers important in general? |
| | How do local companies typically value coverage from local newspapers? |
| | How does your newspaper typically cover local businesses or local economic development? |
| Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Community Engagement | Do you cover corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of local companies? |
| | Can you describe how CSR or community engagement is typically reported in your outlet? |
| | Do you perceive coverage of CSR to be generally positive, neutral, or critical? |
| | What makes a CSR story newsworthy from your perspective? |
| | Are CSR stories typically pitched to you, and how do you evaluate those pitches? |
| Watchdog Role vs. Visibility Role | Are there differences in your treatment of small/local vs. large/national firms when it comes to CSR? |
| | What kinds of CSR stories do you ignore or avoid, and why? |
| | In your reporting, do you see yourself more as a watchdog or as a visibility provider for firms? |
| Differences Between Local and National Media | How do you balance the tension between investigative reporting and relationship-building with local businesses? |
| | Do you see watchdog and visibility roles as complementary or conflicting? |
| | What are the main differences between local newspapers and national outlets in terms of covering businesses? |
| | How does the audience shape how stories are written in local vs. national papers? |
| Industry Change and Resource Constraints | Do national and local outlets complement or duplicate each other's roles? |
| | Have you noticed any overlap or transactions (e.g., content sharing) between local and national media? |
| | How has the decline of the local newspaper industry affected your ability to report on business or CSR? |
| | What impact has newsroom downsizing had on your business coverage or investigative capacity? |
| | Do you feel pressure to prioritize content that drives traffic over traditional journalistic priorities? |
| Additional Questions | What do businesses do when they can no longer rely on local newspapers? |
| | Have you observed firms shifting to self-promotion through PR, social media, or other means? |
| | How does the rise of branded content and corporate channels affect your coverage or editorial decisions? |
| Additional Questions | Do you think CSR has changed in the absence of local media oversight? |
| | Given the decline of local newspapers, why might firms change their CSR activity? |
| | Have you personally observed a shift in how companies communicate with the public due to changes in the media landscape? |

Appendix Table 1d. The List of Questions for Corporate Executives and Managers

| Theme | Interview Question |
|---|---|
| Recognition of Local Media | To what extent does your company recognize and care about local newspaper coverage? Do you care more about local or national media coverage, or does it depend on the context? |
| Expected Benefits from Local Media Coverage | What kind of benefit do you expect from local media coverage? Do you have any specific examples of how your organization benefited from local media? |
| CSR and Community Engagement | What does community engagement or corporate social responsibility mean to your organization? How does the local newspaper usually cover your CSR or community engagement activities? Do you reach out to local media proactively for community events? |
| Managing Media Relationships | How do you usually manage the relationship with local media? Do you have any specific media strategies or tips for working with local outlets? Are there differences in how you manage relationships with local versus national media? |
| Changes in the Local Media Landscape | How has your organization responded to the decline of local newspapers? If local news disappears, how would that affect your organization? Have you observed changes in local media (e.g., downsizing, closures) and how do these affect your PR? |
| Strategic Communication Adjustments | Have you changed your PR strategy in response to shifts in the local media landscape? Do you rely more on internal communication channels now (e.g., social media, newsletters)? Has your resource allocation to CSR changed due to media coverage limitations? |