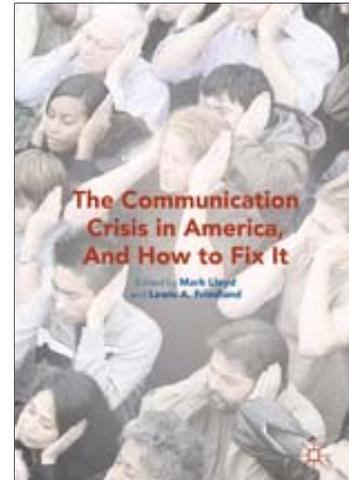


Mark Lloyd and Lewis A. Friedland (Eds.), **The Communication Crisis in America, and How to Fix It**, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 316 pp., \$109.00 (hardcover) \$29.99 (paperback).

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“There is a communication crisis in America” proclaim Mark Lloyd and Lewis A. Friedland in the introduction to their 2016 edited collection *The Communication Crisis in America, and How to Fix It*. On the surface, this is not a new statement; the crisis of journalism is a well-worn topic among scholars and industry watchers alike (e.g., Gasher et al., 2016; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). But Lloyd and Friedland move us to consider the crisis from a different perspective: the local news and information ecosystems of American communities, as well as the critical information needs of Americans. The reason for this crisis is also where the solution is to be found—public policy:



Neither the market nor new technologies have stepped up to address this problem, but it is not a failure of the business community, or the technologists. It is a failure of US public policy. By that we do not mean that it is a failure of government alone, for we understand that business leaders and foundation leaders and community leaders and academic leaders have a strong role to play in US public policy. And the same is true of you the reader. (p. 309)

It is for this policy reason that this book could not have been released at a better and worse time—better because we are desperately in need of a volume that synthesizes the extant research on critical information needs at the local and community levels, and worse because, despite the need, our current political climate does not lend itself well to interventions in public policy.

While concern about the information needs of communities was at the top of our collective tongue five or six years ago—finding its apex in the Knight Commission's 2009 *Informing Communities* (Knight, 2009) report and the FCC's 2011 *Information Needs of Communities* (Waldman, 2011) report—we have diverted from this local concern in more recent years. Today we are more likely to see conversations about “fake news” and digital distribution than about local news and community affairs. We are poorer for it. The local is where democracy begins, and without a robust news and information ecosystem—one comprising commercial, public, ethnic, community, and diasporic media—our democracy suffers. The fact that a small market newspaper just won a Pulitzer Prize underscores the reach and impact of local news.

Despite this victory, however, the latest Pew *State of the News Media* report (Pew Research Center, 2016) demonstrated that 2015 was the worst economic year for newspapers since the Great Recession. Meanwhile, television stations continue on a path toward corporate concentration and political partisanship (Ember, 2017). To our detriment, we know comparatively very little about the other

components of our media ecosystems: ethnic media, non-English-language media, community media, local public media, and small market media. The focus has been myopically on the commercial media system—a system that we know fails to deliver local news and information (Pickard, chapter 9). The danger comes not only in failing to recognize that individuals get their news and information from a diversity of sources (Pew Research Center, 2011), but, as Phil Napoli notes in chapter 2, that only wealthy communities will have access to local news.

The book, therefore, is about the critical information needs (CINs) of American communities: What are they? Why are they? How to study them? How are they fairing? And touching on each of these questions, how can public policy help them develop and flourish? Importantly, many of the authors focus specifically on the CINs of minority communities and the news organizations serving minority audiences—two areas that are woefully underdiscussed in contemporary communication scholarship.

For those familiar with the work of the editors and contributing authors, this line of inquiry should not come as a surprise. As founding members of the Communication Policy Research Network (CPRN), Mark Lloyd, Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, and Lewis Friedland, Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, along with several contributing authors, won a contract with the FCC in 2012 to review the literature on the critical information needs of communities. The final literature review was impressive and comprehensive, describing eight critical information needs: (1) emergencies and risks, (2) health and welfare, (3) education, (4) transportation, (5) economic opportunities, (6) the environment, (7) civic information, (8) political information (CPRN, 2012). A key recommendation was greater study of local media ecosystems by the FCC. Answering the call, a pilot study was organized in South Carolina, but it, along with the entire critical information needs research agenda, was waylaid after intense political maneuvering (Eggerton, 2014; Friedland, 2014). More specifically, an op-ed by then-Commissioner (now Chair) Ajit Pai (2014) in *The Wall Street Journal* galvanized concern among conservatives that the government was weighing into newsrooms. Four years later, this book may be read as a welcome fulfillment of the original CPRN promise.

With a history rooted in policy intervention, the organizing thesis of this volume “is that there must be a public policy for democratic communication and that administrations of both parties have avoided this need for too long” (p. 13). The collection joins the handful of scholars and research interested in reviving the conversation and study of local news, local journalism, and local democracy (see Ali, 2017; Hess & Waller, 2016; Nielsen, 2015). To get us here, the book is divided into four sections: “New Approaches to Solving the Communications Challenge,” “Communication Challenges in a Changing America,” “Government Capture and Market Failure,” and “Net Neutrality is Not Enough.” There are three key takeaways:

1. Policymakers, researchers, and industry watchers need to focus on the critical information needs of American communities, and this begins at the local level.
2. An ecosystem approach is needed to operationalize this focus.
3. Public policy has an active and important role to play in fostering robust local news ecosystems and the information needs of communities.

### **Critical Information Needs**

Discussions of the critical information needs of communities are gathered in the first section of this book, and then scattered throughout. Most notable is the focus on local news and information. To that end, Phil Napoli worries about what happens when only the wealthiest communities secure access to local news. Later chapters by Victor Pickard and Danilo Yanich echo these concerns. Pickard recalls the “public good” qualities of journalism and explicates how the history of journalism is one of market failure—wherein the “market is unable to efficiently produce and allocate resources, especially public goods” (p. 124). Yanich runs with this idea, and unpacks how FCC regulation (or deregulation, as it were) allowed for a combination of local television stations that has diminished the amount of original local news reaching viewers. From a broader perspective, Ferrier, Sinha, and Outrich describe the growth of “media deserts” in the United States—communities devoid of access to fresh local news and information. Their use of geospatial Web mapping technology offers poignant visualization of the reduction in local news.

### **Ecosystems**

The approach of Ferrier et al. teaches us the importance of studying ecosystems, rather than focusing solely on one aspect of local news (Ali, 2017). To this end, a number of chapters are devoted to ecosystem system studies and collectively make the point that we need to think more holistically about who produces and who consumes local news. Particularly important here are minority communities and the unappreciated media organizations dedicated to serving their critical information needs. This is the crux of the chapters by Lloyd et al., who focus on diversity in local news; Byerly and Valentin, who offer a feminist perspective and who remind us, in the words of Rita Shelton-Deverell (2009), “It matters who owns it ” (p. 146); Matsaganis and Katz, who also focus on ethnic media; and Subervi, who focuses on Spanish-language broadcasting. All of these authors make a compelling case that we need to spend more time looking at ethnic media as seminal components of the local media ecosystem.

In addition to the need to study ethnic and minority media, an ecosystem approach requires us to appreciate the fact that all media in a community work to serve the information needs of communities. Son and Ball-Rokeach’s chapter, for instance, focuses on Los Angeles, and sees local news and information ecosystems as a collective of storytellers. “Meeting critical information needs,” they argue “requires the circulation of stories that can improve the quality of family and community life” (p. 117). Importantly, this circulation depends on more than just social media; it requires an ecosystem. This point is echoed in Dailey and Starbird’s chapter on the critical information needs of communities during a disaster. They track how social/participatory and legacy media work in tandem to deliver crucial information needs.

### **Policy**

The need for coherent interventions in public policy is the belief system underpinning this book. Each author demonstrates in different ways how policy is necessary to correct for market failure and, even more, has a duty to support the growth of information ecosystems. Lloyd and Park discuss the constitutional argument for greater policy investment, while chapters by Pickard, Hammond, Yanich, and

Rowland examine various aspects of policy failure. Many of these arguments we've heard before, but the strength of the volume lies in the conversation between the chapters.

If one were to critique the book, it is also in this policy capacity. While the overarching argument of public policy to support CINs is convincing, specific policy proposals remain out of reach. To be sure, there are exceptions, such as the aforementioned chapter by Lloyd and Park, and Son and Ball-Rokeach's recommendation for policymakers to "do whatever you can to increase the production of local news that serves increasingly diverse communities" (p. 123). The book was also written in a pre-Trump presidency and (presumably) with the assumption that Hillary Clinton would win the American election. This may explain why policy specifics are lacking, as the authors may have been hoping for a more receptive political climate. Nonetheless, a specific path forward for policy intervention is unclear.

Rather than being seen as a drawback, this can be read as a teachable moment for those using the book in classrooms and colloquia—asking readers to create their own modalities of policy intervention. In this way, *The Communication Crisis in America, and How to Fix It* is nicely paired with another newly released edited collection, Des Freedman and Jonathan Obar's (2016) *Strategies for Media Reform*. Taken together, these books offer detailed analyses of the communication crisis in America and the strategies used to reform media systems to democratic ends around the world.

### Conclusion

The book does a solid job introducing the reader to critical information needs and demonstrating why the market will not right itself in its failures to produce adequate and accessible levels of news and information, especially for minority communities. To correct for this, we need a concerted effort to change the course of communication—moving from a myopic focus on commercial media to an ecosystem approach that appreciates and values the diversity of media available to Americans. It also requires creative policy intervention, embodying the famous argument by former FCC Chair Nicholas Johnson:

Whatever is your first priority, whether it is women's rights or saving wildlife, your second priority has to be media reform. With it you at least have a chance of accomplishing your first priority. Without it, you don't have a prayer. (p. 207)

It will take more than prayer to fix the communication crisis in America, and Lloyd and Friedland have assembled the tools to begin the process.

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