

Nikki Usher, **News for the Rich, White, and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021, 376 pp., \$120.00 (hardback), \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

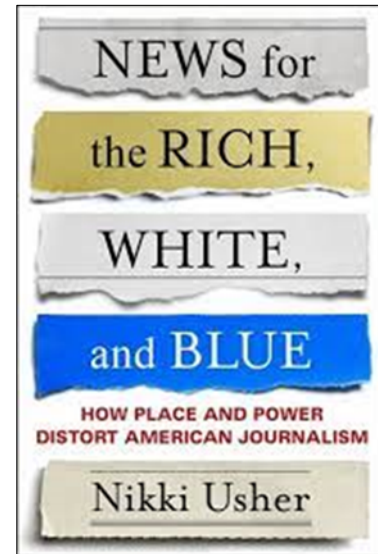
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Professional journalism in the United States faces serious challenges: advertising revenue loss; declines in paying customers; newspaper closings; staff reductions; hyperpartisan news; the spread of disinformation; declining public trust; competition from internet and social media giants; and so on. These challenges have taken a particularly hard toll on local print journalism, with more than 2,000 newspapers closed and 30,000 jobs lost in the last 15 years. The concern is more than economic. Quality journalism is essential to a responsive and responsible democracy.

In ***News for the Rich, White, and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism***, Nikki Usher, associate professor of journalism in the University of Illinois' College of Media, explores how these challenges, and local journalism's responses to them, connect to larger patterns of economic, social, and political inequality. Drawing on her experience as a researcher and journalist, she argues that the country is in a "geospatial realignment where power, inequality, and even identity are increasingly tied to physical geography" (p. 5). Journalism is both affected by and contributes to this place-based "big sort," with profound implications for providing communities with "critical news and information as well as a sense of cultural rootedness and belonging" (p. 5). The result is journalism increasingly designed by and for affluent, white, and liberal citizens.

Usher focuses on what she calls "Goldilocks newspapers"—daily newspapers "not big enough to claim national audiences but still big enough to serve a vital role in the larger national news ecology by being the authoritative voice of a city or region" (p. 11). These papers, ranging in size from the *LA Times* to the *Vindicator* of Youngstown Ohio, "represent the best of what current [local] journalism can offer" (p. 12). They are also, however, the papers most affected by challenges facing the industry.

Usher builds her argument on four premises (chapter 1). The first two serve as sobering cautions against romanticizing the past. Despite popular mythology, the notion of a watchdog press independent from and critical of economic and political power is a relatively new and imperfectly operationalized invention. Additionally, while newspaper journalism often works in service of democracy, it has also paradoxically perpetuated an unequal status quo. Her third premise is that recent market failures have made quality journalism a "private good" designed to serve those who can afford to pay for it. Usher's fourth premise, that "the power to define 'place' has [always] been a source of journalistic authority" (p. 18), is most central to her argument. Her definition of "place" includes the geographic and material setting of news (from the buildings where news is produced to the "where" of what is covered and where it is covered from).



But it also includes the ways in which journalists, audiences, and institutions interact to construct a place-based sense of collective identity and meaning, and an understanding that the ability to define place is a form of cultural, economic, and political power, influencing “the place” of different segments of society in both the geographic and symbolic senses of community.

Usher builds on these premises in subsequent chapters, each empirically grounded through an impressive mix of fieldwork, interviews, statistics, geospatial analysis, textual analyses, case studies, and her personal experiences as a scholar and practitioner (a combination she describes as “gestalt scholarship”; p. 261). In chapter 2 she demonstrates how the increasingly physical, psychological, cultural, and political distance between local journalists and large portions of their publics—driven by the economics of who becomes journalists, how many journalists a newspaper can afford, the shift from advertising to digital subscriptions for revenue, and ultimately who is willing and able to pay for access to their work—leads to journalism by and for wealthier, White communities.

In chapter 3, Usher explores whether this sociogeographic “big sort” portends a future in which quality journalism is “written by journalists living in big blue bubbles and only listened to and paid for by those who vote blue” (p. 68). Her findings, based on statistical analyses of where retrenchments are occurring, tell a complicated and nuanced story. Losses in journalists over the past decade are not correlated with increases in Republican voting. But her data also suggest that this is in part because local journalism was already concentrated in “bluer” communities prior to the late 2000s. For example, she finds that of the over 2,000 mainly working-class or rural counties that did not have measurable newspaper employment between 2007 and 2018, 95% became more Republican. In short, both the relative absence of quality local journalism in many rural and working-class communities, and “the parochialism that limits big-city journalists’ understanding” of these communities “is a far more enduring and consistent concern that extends beyond . . . any new data about journalism job losses” (p. 77).

In chapter 4, Usher draws on interviews with 18 Washington correspondents to “show how place shapes the norms, routines, and practices of journalists” (p. 103). Once considered a vital link between “the beltway” and the “heartland,” the number of DC-based journalists working for local newspapers declined from approximately 220 to 75 between 1997 and 2017. As a result, the coverage of Washington politics has been largely ceded to national news outlets, who lack the knowledge and incentives to connect their coverage to the interests and concerns of local communities. In addition, the locally employed but DC-based journalists who remain struggle with tensions inherent in having a foot in each of these very different worlds.

Through a combination of “industry voices, fieldwork, and popular and trade press coverage of the economic unraveling of newspapers” (p. 132), as well as case studies of the *Boston Globe* and the *Dallas Morning News*, chapter 5 uses place as a conceptual tool to show that “where a newspaper is located intersects with its digital monetization destiny” (p. 132). Usher argues that, while newspapers bear as much responsibility for their economic collapse as do digital giants like Google, Facebook, and Craigslist, the feasibility of the most envisioned solution—paywalls and digital subscriptions—is dependent on local circumstances and often exacerbates the bias of news for the rich, White, and blue.

Chapter 6 moves from a focus on Goldilocks newspapers to *The New York Times'* efforts to "conquer place by scale" through an expansion of "its paying audience beyond local, state, and even national borders" (p. 162). The result mirrors the elitist, White, and liberal biases found in local newspapers (albeit on a national and international scale), while also serving as an increasingly "placeless" counterpoint to local journalism. Usher also notes that the *Times'* success is an exception that provides little guidance to most local newspapers that are struggling to survive.

If digital subscriptions are not a panacea for local journalism, what alternatives are there? In chapter 7, Usher examines the growing role of philanthropy. Through case studies and data analyses, she finds that the "placed-based inequities" found in market responses to journalism's economic crisis are "being baked into news philanthropy" (p. 195). Communities most lacking in local news also lack local philanthropies that are interested and able to provide support. Most national philanthropies committed to journalism are in elitist, liberal-leaning cities, and their patterns of what, who, and where to fund bear little relationship to the interests or journalistic needs of the hardest hit communities. And even at its best, philanthropic support is far too little to solve local journalism's economic crisis.

Usher concludes with several "paths" for finding "a way out of the dismal future of news for the rich, white, and blue" (p. 237). These include journalism that is a part of, rather than apart from, the communities it serves; focusing on what journalism does best, ceding the rest to other local or national entities; news and newsrooms that are authentic to and inclusive of the communities to which they belong; disentangling legitimate concerns about "fake news" from the potentially valuable presence of opinionated news that reflects the values of a community; and understanding the factors that allow some communities to rise above the absence of professional journalism through less obvious or studied parts of their local information ecosystems.

*News for the Rich, White, and Blue* is not without shortcomings. The chapter on philanthropy oversimplifies the more creative approaches being tested. Too little attention is paid to government and public financing as possible solutions to the crises of local journalism. The data analyses are more suggestive than definitive. At times, the generally valuable theme of "place" feels a bit forced. But this is an insightful and important book. There are few villains—only imperfect people and institutions struggling to do their jobs in the face of short- and longer-term headwinds. Usher tells their stories in a clear-eyed, empirically grounded manner, while also showing deep respect for local journalism and the important role it aspires to play.