

**LOCAL NORTH CAROLINA NEWS ORGANIZATIONS: HOW ARE THEY ASKING  
FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT?**

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### **Abstract**

Local journalism is essential for keeping communities informed and civically and politically engaged. Unfortunately, local newsrooms are struggling financially and must seek the funding necessary for survival from their readers. Effective propositional messaging is crucial for this to be successful, which makes it important to explore the ways that local newspapers ask for financial support. Informed by journalism studies scholarship and persuasion research, the present study analyzed the persuasive messaging of 50 local newspapers within North Carolina. These local newspapers were obtained through the US News Desert website; a database developed by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Hussman School of Journalism and media (US News Deserts, 2021). Variables which were used to observe 50 of these newspapers' propositional messages include informational and social appeals, the ask for "donations" or "subscriptions," norms and values noted, using "local" or "community" as a descriptor, framing locality as either as asset or liability, whether or not financial struggles were mentioned, and the use of scarcity or reciprocity as appeals. The findings showed that newspapers tend to ask for subscriptions rather than donations, emphasize their role in informing the community, but often fail to mention how much they must rely on citizens' support. This study can serve as a foundation for further research, on a national level, which can help local newsrooms determine what type of messaging is most effective. Using knowledge from this study, as well as future studies, local organizations will hopefully be able to better frame propositions in order to bring in the level of financial support required for long-term sustainability.

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## Literature Review

### *The Effects of Local Journalism on Civic and Political Engagement*

In order to understand the importance of local journalism, one must understand its impact on the United States as a country. “Civic engagement” is a broad term that captures various types of involvement in one’s community (Wray & Abrams, 2020, p. 12). Different acts of civic engagement include volunteer work, voting in elections, and even citizens’ passionate opinions associated with the community in which they live (Miller, et. al., 2021, p. 234). These activities are considered ways to plug into an individual’s community, be it their city or country, in order to create unity and a sense of belonging. This is something that we have seen a major decrease in, within the United States, over the past decade, through the continued decrease in voter turnout for elections (Hayes & Lawless, 2018).

Local journalism is a significant contributor to civic and political engagement from citizens. Previous research has provided evidence for an association between shrinking local political news coverage and citizen engagement (Hayes & Lawless, 2018). This is largely due to the fact that voters gather most of their political information, throughout campaigns, from their local newspapers (Hayes & Lawless, 2018, p. 333; see also Hayes and Lawless 2016; Vinson 2003). Therefore, when local print media, or local news in any form for that matter, are sparsely available to citizens, they may become disconnected from political affairs happening within and related to their own community.

A recent study that analyzed data from 2010 and 2014 collected as part of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study revealed through analytical findings that citizen engagement, to quote Hayes & Lawless (2018) is “a casualty [of] local political news...diminishing in the United States” (p. 334, 336). While some other sources argue that lack

of local political news coverage is not the *only* factor playing a role in the decrease of civic engagement across the United States, they don't disagree that it is at the very least a contributing factor (Hayes & Lawless, 2015). No matter who is commenting on this trend, researchers agree that there is such little research done on the potentially close relationship between the decline in local political news coverage and lessened civic engagement in the United States (Hayes & Lawless, 2015).

Looking at how local news media relates to voter turnout, as an indication of its impact on civic engagement, may be one of the most pronounced ways to prove the importance of local journalism to the United States as a country. Through a series of studies collecting data on this very matter, it has been found that there is a visibly lower voter turnout within groups which have limited resources, such as immigrants (Baekgaard et al., 2014). There is substantial quantitative data available from this particular study, suggesting that the availability of local political news *does* impact civic engagement, because an increase in voter turnout can be seen when newspapers publish "politically relevant information" and vice versa (Baekgaard et al., 2014, p. 529). This strong correlation speaks for itself in the way that local political news genuinely makes a difference concerning civic engagement, when viewed from the standpoint of voter turnout.

### ***The State of Local Journalism and Struggles***

Local news organizations must have some sort of funding in order to survive, but it isn't always easy for them to receive that funding. The truth is that without enough financial support, local news organizations cannot really prosper. They must have the finances to pay their employees and be able to send news out into the community, to keep readers informed and

civically engaged. Notably, because not every organization is able to bring in enough money, 200 counties within the United States are without local news coverage (LeDuc, 2020). This means that those counties are left without a sustainable source that would keep them well-informed about their community. The absence of money flowing into these local newsrooms also affects journalists and other newsroom workers. There is evidence of this in the fact that “newsroom employment in the United States has dropped by 26% since 2008” (Walker, 2021, para. 1). Of course, newsrooms cannot operate without workers.

A news desert is described as “a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level” (US News Deserts, 2021). In short, when a county no longer has any local news organizations, they are deemed a news desert. This is something that is becoming more evident as local news struggles for financial support. The magnitude of this trend is evident in the fact that 1,800 U.S. communities, which had local news coverage in 2004, no longer had coverage at the start of 2020 (Stites, 2020).

The number of local news organizations in North Carolina decreased by 22% from 2004 to 2019, leaving only 43 daily newspapers remaining across the state in 2019 (US News Desserts, 2021). Knowing that there are 100 counties within North Carolina, some of them having multiple local news organizations, this means that well-over half of the state was a news desert in 2019 (State Library of North Carolina, *n.d.*). If North Carolina is following the national trend, it can be projected that even more of the state has become a news desert since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the past couple of years, the entire world has been experiencing a global pandemic known as the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, studies show that there has been

a major increase in news consumption. However, this increase in consumption has *not* resulted in an increase in financial support for local newspapers (Flew, 2021). This is largely due to the fact that individuals, now more than ever, are *also* sourcing their news from social media, which is mainly funded through advertising on those platforms at no cost to the reader (Flew, 2021). When consumers gather information from social media, it is often mixed with “fake news,” which creates the difficulty of having to differentiate between a factually accurate story and a fake one (Flew, 2021, p. 16). This issue leads to consumers losing trust in their news sources, even when local news outlets aren’t the ones to blame, which in turn creates a hesitancy in individuals to financially support their local news organizations (Flew, 2021). At first glance, the global pandemic may appear to be improving the financial state of journalism, due to the increased interest in news. However, it is clear, through further analysis of this episode, that what is *actually* happening may actually be worsening the financial condition of local journalism. These news organizations are truly struggling to find ways to generate revenue, in order to stay afloat.

Historically, local news organizations have been financially supported through advertising to their readership. However, the rise in various internet platforms has posed a threat to this route of income, as advertising fills virtual spaces such as Google and Facebook, and leading to decreasing ad revenue for local newspapers (Levin & Milgrom, 2010; Wedel & Kannan, 2016). This creates competition for local news organizations and causes them to search further for innovative sources of revenue.

Since the lack of financial resources is only growing, local news organizations have recently put more emphasis on sourcing their revenue from readers of their publications (Shafer, 2016). This way, those who are interested in reading local news can subscribe and pay a fee in



order to ensure that they are able to maintain access. Evidence shows that news organizations are struggling to make the case to their readers that the news content they produce is not free. A recent study by Pew Research Center (2019) shows that a sizable number of readers may be hesitant to pay the subscription fees, assuming that the money is not really needed. Only 14% of local news readers have financially supported their local news organizations. In contrast, 71% of adults in the United States believe that their local news organizations are financially stable (Pew Research Center, 2019). This presents an additional challenge for news organizations in the way that their readers may not realize the depth of these struggles.

### ***The Analysis of Public Appeals for Local News Funding***

Despite the importance of ensuring funding to support the financial stability of local news organizations, scholarship on this matter remains scarce. One exclusion to this is a study done by Nechushtai and Zalmanson (2019), where they “examined how the 55 most-read US newspapers frame their value proposition when they ask readers to subscribe” (p. 1). This study is one of few which really dig into this topic.

For their study, Nechushtai and Zalmanson (2019) used “the Meyer-Allen organizational commitment framework...[to analyze] the informational, social, and normative elements mentioned in ‘subscribe now’ webpages” (p. 1). Using this approach, they were able to come up with some substantial findings. One thing they found was that although news organizations suggested they used subscription models as a way to provide their readers with “unlimited access to quality information,” 67% of the propositional messages observed within the study utilized further appeals in conjunction with informational language (Nechushtai & Zalmanson, 2019). This finding by itself is enough to question what is *really* causing hesitation within readers to

subscribe to local news organizations. Could it be due to a lack of clear communication from newspapers to their readers? Perhaps readers just don't understand what they are getting in return for their subscription fees because news organizations aren't making a powerful enough case for this in their persuasive appeals.

Another major finding of this study, closely related to the last finding discussed, is that not only are news organizations failing to use informational language, but they are also “emphasizing additional types of benefits,” pulling focus away from their main objective (Nechushtai & Zalmanson, 2019, p. 13). This can confuse readers and have them wondering why they should even subscribe in the first place. From a marketing perspective, it is known that consumers search for benefits which outweigh the cost that they pay for products and services (Pacyniak, 2018). This remains true for all products and services across different markets. Being made aware of this, it is all the more crucial that news organizations are communicating *what* the benefits are for their consumers. This is where research on persuasion can prove useful, by providing guidance on the principles of constructing persuasive messages. One such seminal work is that of Cialdini (2009), who identified six principles of persuasion, including reciprocity, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority, and scarcity.

A study conducted in 2012, which was used to support that of Nechushtai and Zalmanson, confirmed that a significant amount of online news readers are hesitant to pay for the content that they are viewing (Chyi, 2012). In fact, the majority of this readership does not even have the intent to financially support the organizations that provide them with such news (Chyi, 2012). This is problematic for news organizations, given the financial need that they so clearly have in order to remain in operation. However, it is likely that readers could become more willing to pay for subscriptions in case of more persuasive appeals.

From these studies that have been conducted over the years, it is already clear that there are a few issues in the language of news organizations attempting to gain subscribers. What newspapers need to be doing is making a persuasive case for their readership as to *why* subscription models are necessary and *what* they gain from subscribing. Furthermore, it's plausible to suggest that news organizations also need to be making this language comprehensible and free from distracting verbiage that is not focused on the main objective. Perhaps if these alterations were made, subscriptions would increase and financial stability for these struggling organizations would be easier to come by.

The present study does not intend to study changes in readers' perceptions or changes in their motivation to subscribe or donate as a result of being exposed to various kinds of public-facing appeals. However, the previous scholarship from both communication and marketing sensitizes us to the importance of studying content *before* its effects on audiences, be it newspaper appeals for financial support or any other unit of persuasive communication (Sparks, 2015; Kolbe, 1991; Vespestad & Clancy, 2021). The present research also contributes to this body of scholarship, which has been done at the national level, by analyzing the public appeals of local newspapers and, by doing so, intends to offer a comparative perspective on this topic.

### **Methodology**

This research drew on the content analysis of the online verbiage of public-facing appeals of local newspapers in North Carolina. In order to do so, I went to the US News Deserts website, which is a database maintained by The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Hussman School of Journalism and Media (US News Deserts, 2021). Using this database, I compiled a list

of all the news publications local to North Carolina. This search yielded 154 newspapers, of which 50 were randomly chosen for analysis.

After selecting 50 local newspapers to analyze for this study, I re-visited each newspaper's website and captured a screenshot of each of their online public-facing appeals, in which they request subscriptions and/or donations. Each screenshot was saved into an online folder, for deeper analysis at a later time. Once each message was saved, they were analyzed on the basis of several chosen variables discussed below.

The first variable used for coding included the type of propositions "informational or social" (Nechushtai & Zalmanson, 2019, p. 6). The other variables were informed by the analysis of current trends in the state of local journalism discussed above and included the following: the request for either "donations" or "subscriptions," norms and values mentioned, using "local" or "community" as a descriptor, framing locality as either an asset or liability, whether or not financial struggles are mentioned, and the appeals of scarcity and reciprocity. In the following paragraphs, I describe each variable and provide examples for each of the possible values for these variables.

***Type of propositions:*** The operationalization of this variable was informed by Nechushtai and Zalmanson's (2019) study and coded as either informational or social. A proposition was coded as *informational* if it was framed in terms of a trade-off between the newspaper and reader: "payment in exchange for information" (p. 6). This type of proposition is very forward in stating that readers must offer some sort of payment in order to receive full access to the information that they view as valuable. Through framing the proposal in this way, it is assumed that the audience is making a cost/benefit analysis in order to decide whether or not they will subscribe or donate to the news organization. Throughout our data collection and observation,

these particular kinds of statements included keywords that indicated the high quality of information that a subscriber would get in exchange for her money, such as “important,” “best,” and “quality.”

A proposition was coded as *social* if it “highlight[ed] affective and interpersonal benefits by suggesting that buying a subscription is a way to create/intensify social ties” (Nechushtai & Zalmanson, 2019, p. 6). This particular kind of appeal is made with the intention of making readers who offer financial support feel like they are more in-touch with their community. On the other hand, this sort of claim can also make those who choose not to offer payment feel like they may lose touch with their community by making this decision. A keyword that was used within statements that was interpreted as indicating a social appeal, throughout this study, is the word “community.”

***Donation/subscription:*** The request for either “donations” or “subscriptions” was defined in terms of word choice within the proposition and coded based on whether a newspaper used the word “donation” or “subscription.”

***Norms and values*** mentioned within each proposition were open-coded and grouped in order to understand how each news organization is framing their message. Some of the main norms and values that were mentioned throughout our study include importance, connection with the community, and quality of news.

***Using “local” or “community” as a descriptor*** was a variable that was coded based on whether these words were used by newspapers by describing themselves, their audience or the service they provide their readers. It was important to decipher between these two different words, due to the fact that they each have a slightly different connotation. Whereas “local” is more formal, “community” may evoke a more emotional response from the audience.

*Framing locality as either an asset or liability* served to understand whether or not local newspapers are framing their news in a way that seems to be more valuable to the community than larger-scale sources. It is also important to determine whether or not these local organizations are making it known that funding is much lower in comparison to larger-scale news organizations. Keywords that were used in these types of propositions include “best,” “trustworthy,” and “quality.”

*Whether or not financial struggles are mentioned* was coded for simply based on the mention of such within each organization’s proposition, i.e. whether the financial struggles were mentioned or not.

The propositions were also coded for whether they relied on two principles of persuasion conceptualized by Cialdini (2009): scarcity and reciprocity.

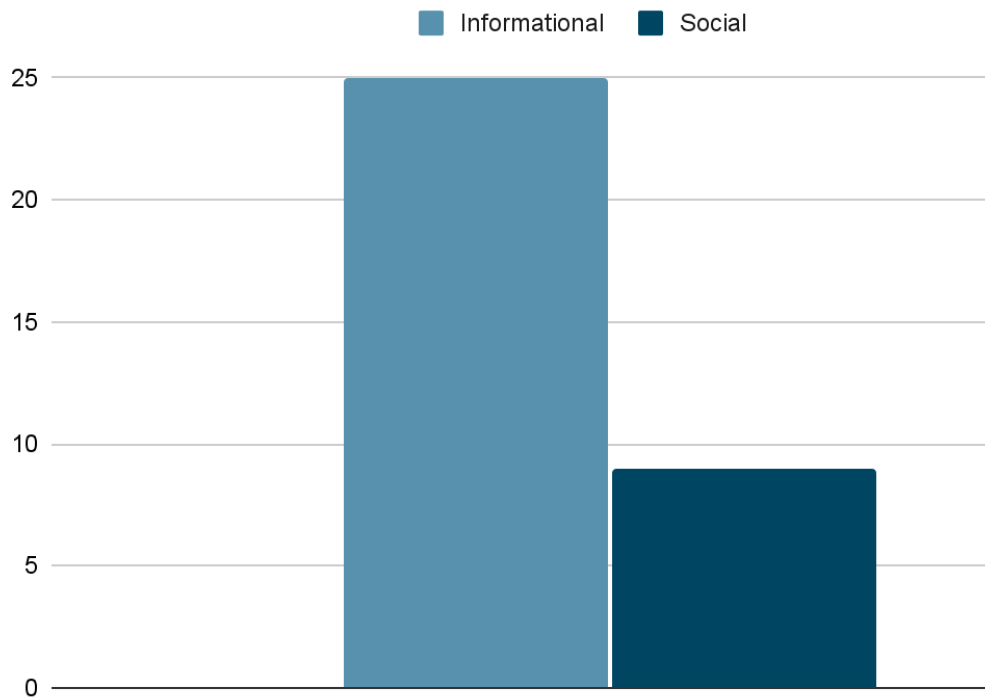
*Scarcity* was coded for with the purpose of understanding whether or not local news organizations were making it seem as though their news was difficult to receive without that organization publishing such or if the conditions of subscribing or donating to the organization were to last for a limited period of time. This approach makes the audience feel like there is a low supply or limited access to something (Cialdini, 2009). In this case, the assumption is that when an audience feels a sense of scarcity of local news, they will feel a stronger desire for such, leading them to financially support the organization. Examples of the verbiage that appeared during the coding of this category include “unlimited access” (which suggests that access without the subscription would be limited) and “hurry.”

*Reciprocity* gives the audience a sense that they must financially support the news organization in order to receive news in return. This approach frames financial support as a trade-off for what the news organization provides their audience (Cialdini, 2009). Key phrases

that stood out during the coding of this category include “your subscription supports...” and “to continue reading...”

### **Findings and Results**

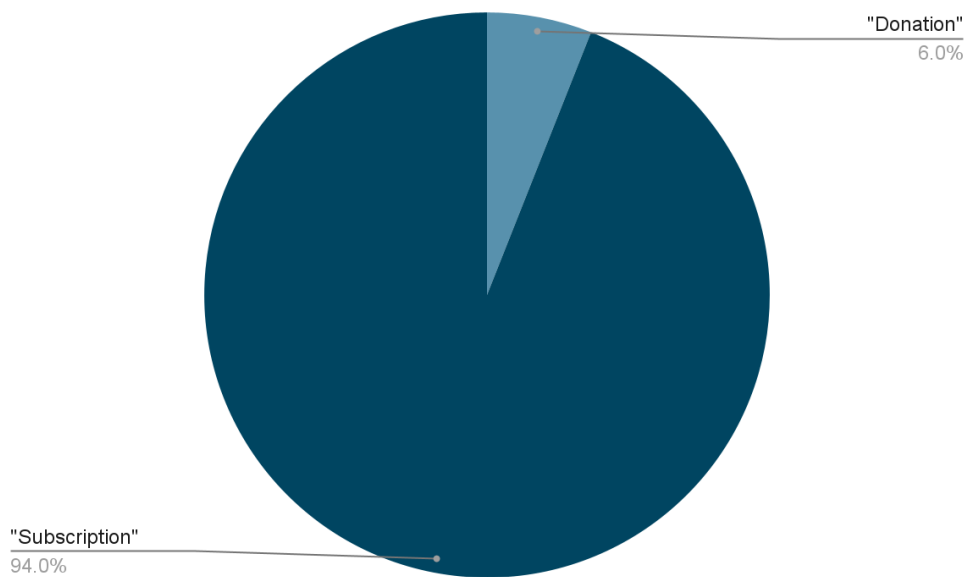
As Figure 1 depicts, a significant portion of news organizations in my sample claimed that subscription fees enable them to provide readers with unlimited access to valuable information (50%, or 25 newspapers). Along with informational appeals, 18% of the newspapers in my sample (nine newspapers) utilized messaging that contained social language. Specific norms and values were mentioned by 42% of the newspapers (21 newspapers): 22% (11 newspapers) mentioned importance, 12% (six newspapers) mentioned trustworthiness, and 10% (five newspapers) mentioned things like connection/support or quality of coverage. In some cases, newspapers mentioned more than one specific norm or value, attempting to entice their audience to a higher degree.



*Figure 1.* The distribution of the types of appeals in the sample.

One element that I decided to hone in on was the differentiation between newspapers requesting donations or asking for subscriptions. As shown in Figure 2, only three newspapers (6%) leaned toward donations, while the rest (94%) asked their audience to subscribe. Some may assume that this is because the majority of the newspapers within the sample require more continuous support as opposed to one-time donations.





**Figure 2.** Distribution of the types of support requested.

Pressing further on the importance of word choice, I looked into the amount of newspapers that used “local” or “community” as descriptors. While 26 of the newspapers (52%) did not use either of these words within their messages, seven newspapers (14%) contained the word “community,” 14 newspapers (28%) contained the word “local,” and three newspapers (6%) used both of these keywords.

Overall, it was found that none (0%) of the newspapers observed throughout this study mentioned any sort of financial struggles in order to receive support. This was without a doubt one of the most unexpected findings, as it was proven through previous research that the majority of local news organizations *are* struggling for financial support. Furthermore, 38 of the newspapers (76%) within the sample did not frame their locality as either an asset or a liability. While 24% of the newspapers (12 newspapers) *did* frame locality as an asset, none of them (0%) framed it as a liability. This was another interesting finding, which is closely related to the lack of admission of financial struggles, as it seems that these newspapers are being passive about the liability of their locality as well.

Other major aspects of these messages that were studied include the appeals of scarcity and reciprocity that are mentioned by news organizations. Thirty-three of the newspapers (66%) utilized scarcity within their messages to gain support, while 13 (26%) of them attempted to give a sense of reciprocity to their audience. The findings in connection with these two elements were important for the study, in order to discover the types of emotional approaches that these newspapers may or may not be taking advantage of.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there are indeed certain limitations when it comes to this research and the usefulness of my findings. That is because every study conducted will always have its limitations. These are unavoidable and do not discount the overall value of the research, but they are important to recognize in order to understand *how* the study should be considered.

Most evidently, it is clear that the results of this study may not be indicative of the persuasive messaging that is put out by news organizations in other states within the United States. In fact, it may not even be an exact measurement of the messaging that is dispersed within North Carolina as an entire state, as this study only takes into account 50 local newspapers. In relation to these limitations, it is also crucial to be aware of the fact that not all local news organizations have clear messaging posted for their online audience to consider supporting. Lack of clear messaging is an entirely different situation to study, so it should be acknowledged that this study does *not* dive into such.

A final limitation of this study to consider is interpretation, as I was the only coder involved in this study, due to the nature of this project as an independent study completed for an honors thesis. For future research, scholars may want to conduct a similar analysis with the use

of multiple coders. As I did utilize the previous work of other researchers during the coding process in order to maintain a sense of consistency, it is still possible that some personal biases could have interfered with my coding process. Aside from that, mistakes are more likely to have been made throughout the coding process, given the fact that coding was not numerous times by multiple other coders. This is simply a limitation of having only a single coder throughout a study and is the reason why researchers often involve multiple coders whenever possible.

### **Discussion**

This study sought to contribute to journalism studies research by analyzing public-facing appeals for financial support in North Carolina as a state that, similarly to other parts of the country, has seen a decrease in the number of local publications (US News Deserts, 2021).

Research preceding this study informed me that there is an incredible need for financial support of local news organizations, due to the extent to which the majority of them struggle. However, my findings indicate that North Carolina newspapers are not being explicit with their audience in terms of articulating their need for financial support. This may be one of the contributors to the fact that 71% of adults in the United States believe that their local news organizations are financially stable (Pew Research Center, 2019). Clearly, they have not been made aware of very-present financial struggles within local newsrooms. This shortcoming can be reflected in the fact that only 14% of local news readers have financially supported their local news organizations (Pew Research Center, 2019).

In light of this conclusion, which was reached through thorough examination of the sample consisting of public-facing appeals for financial support, sourced from the websites of 50 local news publications in North Carolina; it can be assumed that the analyzed newspapers are

not taking full advantage of the opportunity they have to reach out to their audience and ask for financial support. This suggests that these organizations could be utilizing techniques that they currently aren't, in order to have more success with receiving subscriptions and donations.

Overall, the underutilization of certain approaches captured by this study may be contributing to the lack of funding for local newspapers. If the techniques addressed by this research were used more frequently, as well as more strategically, there could likely be an incline in the amount of financial support for local news organizations.

In the future, there are a couple of directions that a similar study could be conducted in. First, I would recommend that this study utilize the assistance of multiple coders. As mentioned earlier, this would help ensure that coding is consistent with the guidelines put in place and natural human error will be less of concern. Other benefits of using multiple coders in future research also include having diverse perspectives and a deeper overall understanding of findings. When there are many people combing carefully through the data, there is sure to be a wide range of ideas resulting from the collection, due to the variation in the way that different people think.

Another future approach that could be taken, in relation to this study, is doing a similar study but using a national sample as opposed to a statewide one. Expanding the sample across the U.S. will allow researchers the opportunity to discover whether or not the findings from this study remain consistent. Measuring the level of consistency between that study and this one will allow news organizations across the country to understand how they can better-position themselves, as far as propositional messaging goes, in order to receive more financial support.

Last, this study could also lead to a future study that empirically tests the effectiveness of various kinds of appeals through relying on experimental research. In order to do this, experiments would need to be conducted that would expose participants to propositional

messages from news organizations that include these appeals, as well as similar messages that lack them. By comparing the responses from these slightly differing messages, it will be possible to determine whether or not the use of specific appeals makes a difference in the audience's likelihood to support local journalism. From there, it will be possible to move forward with the potential implementation of appeals that have been empirically proven to improve the likelihood of receiving financial support from their audience.

The possible future directions mentioned above will be able to use my study as a foundation to further build upon the knowledge in this area. As far as research goes, this is what it's ideally all about; providing another layer to what is already known, in order to lay the groundwork for future discoveries. I can only hope that this study will follow suit in doing the same.

## Appendix A

### 50 NORTH CAROLINA NEWSPAPERS USED FOR STUDY

NEWS ORGANIZATION	COUNTY	NEWS ORGANIZATION	COUNTY	NEWS ORGANIZATION	COUNTY
1. Asheville-Citizen Times	Buncombe	12. News-Topic	Caldwell County	23. Up & Coming Weekly	Cumberland County
2. Black Mountain News	Buncombe	13. Hickory Daily Record	Catawba County	24. The Dispatch	Davidson County
3. Alamance News	Alamance County	14. Observer News Enterprise	Catawba County	25. Thomasville Times-Enterprise	Davidson County
4. Mebane Enterprise	Alamance County	15. Chatham News & Record	Chatham County	26. Davie County Enterprise-Record	Davie County
5. BlueRidgeNow, Times-News	Henderson	16. Cherokee Scout	Cherokee County	27. The Herald-Sun	Durham County
6. Alleghany News	Alleghany County	17. Clay County Progress	Clay County	28. The Winston-Salem Journal	Forsyth County
7. Anson Record	Anson County	18. The Star	Cleveland County	29. The Franklin Press	Franklin County
8. Ashe Post & Times	Ashe County	19. The News Reporter	Columbus County	30. The Cherryville Eagle	Gaston County
9. The Avery Journal- Times	Avery County	20. The Coastland Times	Craven County	31. The Graham Star	Graham County
10. The News Herald	Burke County	21. Sun Journal	Craven County	32. Butner-Creedmoor News	Granville County
11. Independent Tribune	Cabarrus County	22. The Fayetteville Observer	Cumberland County	33. The High Point Enterprise	Guilford County

NEWS ORGANIZATION	COUNTY	NEWS ORGANIZATION	COUNTY	NEWS ORGANIZATION	COUNTY
34. News & Record	Guilford County	41. The Sanford Herald	Lee County	48. News of Orange County	Orange County
35. The Mountaineer	Haywood County	42. The Highlander	Macon County	49. Richmond County Daily Journal	Richmond County
36. Smoky Mountain News	Haywood County	43. The Charlotte Observer	Mecklenburg County	50. Rockingham Now	Rockingham County
37. Mooresville Tribune	Iredell County	44. The Charlotte Post	Mecklenburg County		
38. Crossroads Chronicle	Jackson County	45. Montgomery Herald	Montgomery County		
39. Four Oaks-Benson News in Review	Johnston County	46. The Pilot	Moore County		
40. Johnstonian News	Johnston County	47. Star News Online	New Hanover County		

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