

# Who Will Tell the Stories of Health Inequities? Platform Challenges (and Opportunities) in Local Civic Information Infrastructure

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The decline in the number and quality of local news media has led to digital platforms becoming more central in circulating local information, affecting what information and issues are accessible to community residents. We demonstrate this by focusing on health disparities related to COVID-19, examining how both news and non-news civic organizations in six Great Lakes communities addressed pandemic-related racial inequities. Our analysis of interviews and a corpus of Facebook posts suggest that (1) very little discussion of health disparities emerged on Facebook from organizations in these communities, and (2) the majority of this content was produced by local news outlets. This article offers a vision of what local content might look like in the absence of robust local news outlets and highlights potential consequences of local civic information infrastructure with digital platforms playing a central role.

*Keywords:* local news; social media; Facebook; communication infrastructure; nonprofits; local communities

**T**he rapid decline of local news media has led to a dearth of community news content

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DOI: 10.1177/00027162231214398

(Abernathy 2020; Napoli et al. 2018). Community organizations are increasingly turning to social media to communicate directly with local audiences, and news organizations are increasingly relying on platforms for local visibility. As a result, the production and circulation of local civic information are entangled with the communication logics that govern social media platforms such as Facebook, and journalistic news sources are arguably becoming de-centered in local communities (Robinson 2017; Tandoc 2019). This process of *platformization* of local civic information infrastructure has consequences for the production and circulation of information about community issues (Thorson et al. 2020).

The process of platformization—that is, the increasing centrality of digital platforms across multiple domains of everyday life—has received substantial attention in the literature, but little of that work has addressed its characteristics in local community contexts. Similarly, we are beginning to know a lot about the causes and consequences of local news deserts, but we know much less about how other, non-news community actors have responded to increased direct access to audiences via digital platforms, perhaps stepping into the void left by shrinking local news media.

This state of affairs goes to the heart of key questions related to critical information needs in local communities (Friedland, this volume). We can consider the following: Does it matter which organizational actors in communities gather and

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NOTE: Authorship order for coauthors Edgerly thru Etheridge has been randomized due to equal contributions. This article, as well as the data set behind it, would not have been possible without the help of the Civic Infrastructure Lab's undergraduate and master's research assistants from 2020 to 2022. We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the following people: Katherine Denzin, Melody Draeger, Sabrina Kohlmeier, Brandi Stover, and Lydia Werth.

distribute local information? In the absence of local news, but in the presence of social media, will non-news civic organizations rise to meet critical information needs? Can digital platforms—owned and managed on a global scale—make positive contributions to *local* civic information infrastructure?

The goal of this research is to continue building the empirical contributions that will help us answer these big questions (see also Thorson et al. 2020). Our focus in this article is threefold. First, we ask to what extent local civic organizations, both news organizations and non-news organizations, produced and circulated local information around the specific issue of racial disparities in health outcomes related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The confluence in timing of the pandemic and the national racial reckoning sparked, in part, by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis creates an interesting moment in which to consider how organizations attend—or fail to attend—to racial disparities related to health. Second, we explore whether patterns of organizational attention to this issue on Facebook varied across the six communities in our sample, with a particular eye to how the logics of content production might be shaped by historical trajectories related to race and racism in midwestern U.S. communities. Third, we consider whether the affordances of Facebook itself, as a digital platform, supported or discouraged community storytellers in connecting racism and health outcomes in their public posts.

Empirically, we draw on a mixed-method design, combining computational text analysis of Facebook posts from 1,272 local news and community organizations with interview data from communication managers at 17 of these organizations. Across the six communities in this study, we found few posts addressing health disparities or other forms of inequality related to African Americans during the pandemic. Given that local civic engagement around particular issues depends on civic information, we expect this absence to be consequential. Historical inequities in generational wealth and discrimination in health care rooted in systemic racism perpetuate broader racial inequities. Scholarship suggests that health disparities cannot be resolved without recognizing the centrality of racism in health outcomes (García and Sharif 2015). In turn, circulating information about place-based health programs is critical for addressing racialized COVID-19 health disparities. Storytelling about issues helps spur civic engagement and helps communities recognize problems in their midst (Wilkin 2013).

Our findings suggest that narratives connecting the public health crises to systemic inequities in local communities were largely invisible, and what little content did emerge was primarily created by news organizations. Our approach offers a route to envision what the universe of local content might look like in the absence of robust local news outlets, as communities become more dependent on digital platforms and non-news content creators for information.

## Literature Review

### *Changing patterns of local civic information infrastructure*

Local information is critical to the health and sustainability of communities (Knight Commission on Information Needs 2009). In the 20th century, strong

local news media organizations played the “keystone” role as information providers, serving as central actors in the local communication infrastructure (Nielsen 2015). Challenges to business models of local news and the closely related rise of digital platforms have led to the rapid decline of local news—with a variety of negative outcomes for local communities (Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2021; Peterson and Dunaway, this volume). More than one-quarter of U.S. newspapers have been lost since 2004 (Abernathy 2020), and media ecosystems continue to be in a state of flux (Ferrier, Sinha, and Outrich 2016). Those local media that remain have declined in quality, in the amount of coverage of local issues, and in the number of journalists on staff (Hayes and Lawless 2018; Napoli et al. 2018; Pew Research Center 2021). These declines have disparate community impacts that are creating ever-greater divides between communities well served by news and those that are not (Usher 2021).

At the same time, digital platforms have created new opportunities for other types of civic actors in communities to reach audiences directly. While not traditionally studied as part of local *news* ecosystems, community organizations such as nonprofits, government, libraries, and city services are important communicators that coordinate with each other to construct issue-relevant stories, narratives, and discourses within local communities (Liu 2022; Liu, Xu, and John 2021). Empirical research based on communication infrastructure theory has shown that integrated “storytelling networks” that include both local news and community organizations are crucial for promoting community belonging, collective efficacy, and civic engagement (Kim and Ball-Rokeach 2006, 174; Nah et al. 2021).

As a research lab, we focused our broader project on examining these two developments as part of the broader societal process of platformization (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). We recognize that platformization is occurring across many domains of everyday life, with platforms taking on an infrastructural role in news distribution, political campaigning, financial transactions, and cultural expression (Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Westermeier 2020). Actors within these fields are shifting their practices in response to the fast-growing process of platformization, in part by changing their communication strategies to fit into network logics of content production and circulation (i.e., creating content that “works” on social media).

To date, little research has been conducted on the impact of platformization on civic information availability in local communities—a gap we are working to fill through a series of mixed-methods studies. There are good reasons to expect those impacts to be consequential. First, both news and non-news local civic information providers have begun to depend on digital platforms, especially Facebook, to reach community audiences (Hemphill, Million, and Erickson 2021; Toff and Mathews 2021). In addition, residents of local communities report high levels of reliance on digital platforms to find out what is happening in their communities, especially in those poorly served by local news media (Edgerly and Xu, this volume; Mathews 2020; Pew Research Center 2019).

We conceive of these shifts theoretically as a disruption to infrastructure and what that means for the circulation of information within communities. In our

prior work (Thorson et al. 2020), we began to ask, What would local communication infrastructure look like if it were organized around digital platforms rather than local news organizations? To examine this question, our ongoing project takes a theoretical departure from existing studies of local information ecologies that position news organizations at the center of information networks. Government agencies, politicians, nonprofits, and other types of organizations are typically considered inputs to the system as sources, rather than as information providers (or platforms) in their own right (e.g., Anderson 2010; Carlson 2015; Mitchell, O'Leary, and Gerard 2015). Platforms, like Facebook, have rarely been studied as nonneutral actors that play a significant role in influencing local information landscapes (though see Cueva Chacón and Retis, this volume; Jaidka et al., this volume; Usher, this volume).

Our overall project explores a hypothetical situation in which local information infrastructure is handed over to platforms like Facebook. We aim to understand how platform logics reshape what becomes visible to a community, how residents learn about their community, and how they connect with one another. We also focus on how news and non-news organizations must adapt to the network logics and platform affordances of these sites in order for their content to reach their intended audience.

### *Platforms and information about local inequities*

One area in which the strength of local civic information infrastructure is crucial is in shaping a community's awareness of local issues and its capacity to act in support of the collective good. The strength of local news has been linked to reduced polarization, increased civic engagement, community efficacy, and strengthened community ties (Beaudoin 2011; Chen et al. 2012; Darr, Hitt, and Dunaway 2021), as has the existence of integrated connections between news media and other community storytellers, such as local nonprofits (Wilkin 2013). Wilkin (2013) argued that when local news media and community organizations discuss inequalities and health disparities, local residents are both primed to pay more attention to those disparities and more likely to take collective action to ease them. A strong local civic information infrastructure is necessary to identify local issues and put them on the agenda of local residents.

Existing literature leads us to expect that a local information infrastructure dependent on platforms may be less likely to surface some types of local issues than an infrastructure in which news organizations play the central role. For example, Thorson et al. (2020) found that pressures to be engaging and enhance organizational reputation on Facebook among non-news community organizations made it less likely that organizations produced and circulated information about political issues. On a national level, on the other hand, the pandemic and the racial reckoning in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder drew attention to long-standing structural inequalities in communities. Digital platforms opened up opportunities for activism and social change movements, especially for African American activists (Richardson 2020). Although scholars have long highlighted the interdependence of systemic racism and health outcomes (Fiske et al. 2022),

the pandemic may have created new discursive opportunities for community actors to learn about the relationships between racism and health disparities (Toure et al. 2021).

These circumstances—the combination of increased community reliance on digital platforms, the rapid decline of local news media, and a *potential* discursive opportunity to call attention to health disparities related to the COVID-19 pandemic—create a window to ask new questions about the role of platforms in local civic information infrastructure. We have some reasons to expect that news stories linking COVID-19 to systemic racism may make only limited appearances on digital platforms in local communities. As Torres and Watson argue in this volume, journalism itself has a long legacy of inflicting anti-Black harm and reproducing injustice—including choices about which local issues related to race and identity to cover and how to cover them. A substantial empirical literature has consistently revealed problematic news framing in the coverage of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, with both national and local news sources highlighting riots, rather than the substantive issue focus of the protests (Leopold and Bell 2017; Mourão, Kilgo, and Sylvie 2018). Furthermore, one study showed that news organizations often *avoid* posting stories about antiracism protests to their Facebook pages—a practice suggesting that platform dynamics shape the visibility of public actions designed to highlight social inequalities (Harlow and Brown 2021). Despite some increases over time in newspaper coverage of racialized health disparities (Taylor-Clark et al. 2007), a grim set of findings revealed that only 0.09 percent of U.S. newspaper articles addressed racialized health disparities (Amzel and Ghosh 2007). Moreover, fewer than 5 percent of articles that looked at racialized health disparities did so through the lens of advocating for social justice-oriented solutions (Kim et al. 2010).

We also expect that the processes of platformization may shape the willingness of *non-news* local civic organizations, such as local government, civic services, or nonprofits, to share content that addresses health disparities in the context of the pandemic. Studies show that local government agencies, nonprofits, and community groups are among the non-news civic organizations actively using social media to push important community issues to the public agenda and mobilize local publics to engage in civic activities (Auger 2013; DePaula, Dincelli, and Harrison 2018; Guo and Saxton 2013; Kwon, Shao, and Nah 2020; Meijer and Thaens 2013). However, these organizations are less willing than news media to post content about local political issues (Thorson et al. 2020). Civic communication by non-news organizations is primarily conducted via public relations efforts, which are purposeful, intentional operations that put the balance between organizational interest and public interest in doubt. Some in the nonprofit community have voiced concerns that organizations' involvement in civic communication could fuel debate over sensitive social problems (Grønbjerg and Prakash 2016), especially in today's polarized political environment. Our first research questions ask,

*Research Question 1 (RQ1): To what extent did news and non-news civic organizations in six local communities initiate attention to the connections*

*between the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism on Facebook?*  
(Study 1)

*RQ2: How do news and non-news content producers center local concerns about COVID-19 and systemic racism?* (Study 2)

Our study is also designed to explore the *localization* of platformization processes. That is, we are interested in how civic information production and circulation on digital platforms differs across communities with different historical trajectories, based on the following factors: (1) how well they are served by local news media (Abernathy 2020; Usher 2021), (2) how they experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) what the historical and present-day contexts are for their social inequalities. It is important to note that structural racism has levied a more visible toll on some communities than on others. As we describe below, communities in the Great Lakes region have been differently impacted by phenomena such as the loss of auto and steel manufacturing jobs, massive population decline, and property vacancies and abandonment (High 2013; Sugrue 2014). Others have been affected by infrastructure failures resulting from dwindling tax revenue (High 2013; Rapoport 2014), racialized housing practices that have limited opportunities to areas abutting industrial pollution sites (Sadler and Lafreniere 2017), or the stories of overt racial violence that have faded in and out of public memory (Fedo 2016). Our third research question explores how factors such as these shape the use of digital platforms by local organizations, specifically in the case of discussing complex topics such as racism and health disparities in the context of the pandemic. We ask,

*RQ3: How was the production and circulation of local civic information about inequalities during the pandemic shaped by local context?* (Study 1 and Study 2)

## Overall Method

We draw on a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design to answer these research questions, combining (1) a computational analysis of a large corpus of Facebook posts ( $n = 1,110,360$ ) from local organizations, including 1,272 news media, nonprofits, government agencies, libraries, institutions of higher education, and local public Facebook groups from six midwestern U.S. communities (Flint, Michigan; Lansing, Michigan; Bemidji, Minnesota; Duluth, Minnesota; Gary, Indiana; and South Bend, Indiana); and (2) in-depth interviews with 17 communicators from local organizations in these same communities, identified via stratified random sampling from organizations in the Facebook corpus. Our data collection spans the first 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2020 to September 2021. This approach allows us to leverage qualitative interview data to help explain the patterns of content production we observe in the quantitative content analysis (Creswell et al. 2003).

### *Community selection*

We selected six U.S. midwestern communities that represent a high level of variation in the racial diversity of residents, number of local news outlets, and metrics of economic inequality. We conducted a brief, qualitative cultural-historical background analysis of a larger subset of midwestern communities and paired this analysis with data from the American Community Survey's 2015 to 2019 five-year estimates, which include measures of median household income, race, and education (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). We then selected two communities each from Indiana, Michigan, and Minnesota that varied along measures of target interest. Gary, Indiana, and Flint, Michigan, are both majority-minority communities that once thrived on a strong industrial base and are now facing stark economic inequality. Lansing, Michigan, and South Bend, Indiana, are communities known for professional employment through their universities but have a declining working-class economic system. Duluth and Bemidji, Minnesota, serve as community hubs for education and health services. Duluth is balancing shifting industrial priorities with a robust tourism base, while Bemidji includes an extensive Indigenous population. (See online Appendix A for additional detail.)

## Study 1: Computational Content Analysis

### *Method*

*Data collection and sampling.* Following the procedures outlined in Thorson et al. (2020), we identified local news media and other community organizations likely to engage in civic storytelling in our focal communities. For more on our identification of nonprofits, news organizations, local government, politicians, municipal services, institutions of higher education, libraries, and neighborhood associations, see online Appendix B.

*Confirming local organizations.* After removal of no-longer-active organizations or invalid records, we coded the remaining 3,804 organizations based on whether or not the organization served a local audience. Following Riffe et al.'s (2019) recommendations, we randomly selected 95 organizations from the data to establish inter-coder reliability. Two independent coders evaluated whether the organization provided content that served a national audience (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .73$ ), whether it was correctly classified as located in one of our target communities (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .75$ ), and what type of local civic organization it was (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .84$ ). Based on these results, we proceeded with coding the population. Only organizations that produced content serving a nonnational (i.e., local) audience and that were correctly classified as based in one of our target communities were included in our final data set. See online Appendix C for the codebook.

After completing this process, we included 1,272 organizations in the final data set. We collected all Facebook posts from these organizations from March 1, 2020, to September 9, 2021, using CrowdTangle, Facebook's social listening



TABLE 1  
Facebook Posts by Community and Organization Type from March 1, 2020, to September 9, 2021

	Bemidji, MN		Duluth, MN		Flint, MI		Gary, IN		Lansing, MI		South Bend, IN	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Civic service	3,187	0.29	4,404	0.40	416	0.04	407	0.04	5,077	0.46	849	0.08
Education	225	0.02	6,425	0.58	5,491	0.49	4,888	0.44	1,900	0.17	6,219	0.56
Government office	381	0.03	772	0.07	2,483	0.22	5,171	0.47	6,756	0.61	1,100	0.10
Health	2,082	0.19	2,875	0.26	6,858	0.62	724	0.07	2,731	0.25	603	0.05
Library	541	0.05	3,050	0.27	2,030	0.18	938	0.08	4,711	0.42	1,725	0.16
Neighborhood	0	0.00	679	0.06	140	0.01	0	0.00	308	0.03	267	0.02
News	187,856	16.92	106,895	9.63	110,808	9.98	115,592	10.41	147,796	13.31	89,163	8.03
Nonprofit	19,194	1.73	71,420	6.43	66,321	5.97	34,593	3.12	55,149	4.97	12,344	1.11
Politician	1,558	0.14	84	0.01	1,476	0.13	0	0.00	3,698	0.33	0	0.00
Total	215,024		196,604		196,023		162,313		228,126		112,270	

tool ( $n = 1,110,360$ ) (see Table 1). The data set included posts from six cities: Lansing (20.55 percent), Bemidji (19.37 percent), Duluth (17.71 percent), Flint (17.65 percent), Gary (14.62 percent), and South Bend (10.11 percent),  $\chi^2(5) = 47670$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### *Data analysis*

We used a dictionary approach to identify posts about COVID-19, racism, and inequalities, and narratives uniting the two within our Facebook corpus. First, we developed a dictionary to identify posts that mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and/or antiracism; or both COVID-19 and racism. We began by identifying vernacular terms used for discussing COVID-19, racism, and racial health disparities connected with COVID-19 (Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020; Muddiman, McGregor, and Stroud 2019). We generated the list iteratively, moving between word list generation and reviews of posts matching those phrases within the local community Facebook posts database. We also used the Coronavirus Tweets Dataset (Lamsal 2020) to identify additional words for inclusion.<sup>1</sup>

We used our completed dictionary to classify the mention (or lack thereof) of “COVID-19,” “Racism,” and “COVID-19 and Racism” in the post message for each of the 1,110,360 Facebook posts in our time window (Table 2). Each post received a binary classification (0,1). Mention classifications were used to determine which actors were or were not talking about these categories.

### *Results*

RQ1 asked whether (and which) civic organizations in six local communities initiated dialogue concerning COVID-19 in the context of systematic racism. An analysis of Facebook posts revealed that 14.51 percent ( $n = 161,110$ ) mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2.5 percent ( $n = 27,791$ ) mentioned racism and/or BLM. However, only 0.06 percent ( $n = 643$ ) posts across these local organizations and communities mentioned racial or health disparities pertaining to COVID-19. Among the small number of posts mentioning health or racial disparities, the majority originated from news organizations (69.98 percent,  $n = 450$ ), followed by nonprofit organizations (29.68 percent,  $n = 133$ ), health organizations (4.98 percent,  $n = 32$ ), government officials (1.71 percent,  $n = 11$ ), educational organizations (1.24 percent,  $n = 8$ ), politicians (1.09 percent,  $n = 7$ ), and civic service organizations (0.31 percent,  $n = 2$ ), with no mentions among libraries and neighborhood groups on Facebook.

News organizations posted more posts on this topic than all other organizations combined, even though there are vastly more non-news community organizations in the data. The low levels of health disparity discussions become even more clear when we compare rates of posting on our focal topic to the numbers of posts that mention COVID-19 in general, as well as more general discussions of racism and BLM. As Figure 1 illustrates, discussions of the

TABLE 2  
 Keyword Mentions from Facebook Posts by Community and Organization Type from March 1, 2020, to September 9, 2021

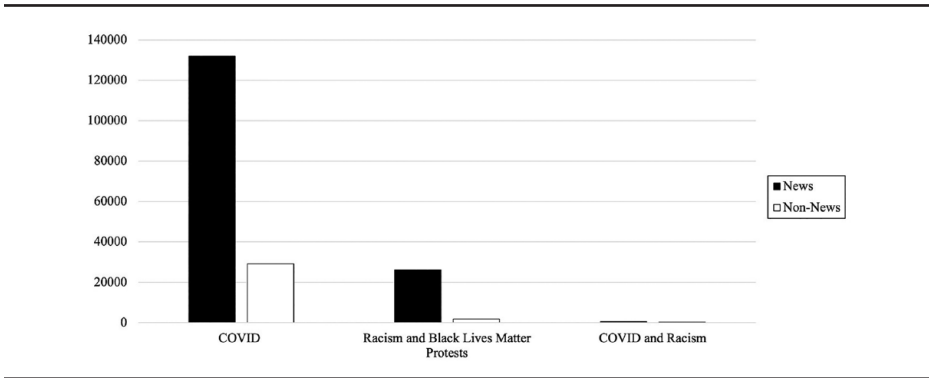
	Bemidji, MN		Duluth, MN		Flint, MI		Gary, IN		Lansing, MI		South Bend, IN	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Dictionary One												
<i>COVID mentions</i>												
Civic service	197	0.12	280	0.17	31	0.02	18	0.01	486	0.30	26	0.02
Education	23	0.01	620	0.38	438	0.27	339	0.21	128	0.08	457	0.28
Government office	59	0.04	154	0.10	217	0.13	329	0.20	1,123	0.70	210	0.13
Health	1,495	0.93	617	0.38	797	0.49	99	0.06	448	0.28	28	0.02
Library	20	0.01	123	0.08	70	0.04	8	0.00	217	0.13	66	0.04
Neighborhood	0	0.00	43	0.03	9	0.01	0	0.00	9	0.01	12	0.01
News	37,026	22.98	20,176	12.52	16,711	10.37	19,302	11.98	23,753	14.74	15,056	9.35
Nonprofit	1,436	0.89	5,624	3.49	3,461	2.15	2,097	1.30	5,991	3.72	454	0.28
Politician	546	0.34	7	0.00	72	0.04	0	0.00	202	0.13	0	0.00
Total	40,802		27,644		21,806		22,192		32,357		16,309	
Dictionary Two												
<i>Racism mentions</i>												
Civic service	16	0.06	9	0.03	0	0.00	4	0.01	4	0.01	0	0.00
Education	2	0.01	44	0.16	18	0.06	25	0.09	8	0.03	31	0.11
Government office	4	0.01	19	0.07	27	0.10	7	0.03	59	0.21	1	0.00
Health	13	0.05	11	0.04	3	0.01	0	0.00	1	0.00	2	0.01
Library	0	0.00	28	0.10	18	0.06	0	0.00	42	0.15	3	0.01
Neighborhood	0	0.00	1	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.01	0	0.00
News	13,541	48.72	3,713	13.36	1,630	5.87	2,593	9.33	2,523	9.08	2,047	7.37
Nonprofit	83	0.30	571	2.05	199	0.72	116	0.42	255	0.92	25	0.09
Politician	60	0.22	0	0.00	21	0.08	0	0.00	12	0.04	0	0.00
Total	13,719		4,396		1,916		2,745		2,906		2,109	

(continued)

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

	Bemidji, MN		Duluth, MN		Flint, MI		Gary, IN		Lansing, MI		South Bend, IN	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Dictionary Three <i>Racism &amp; COVID mentions</i>												
Civic service	0	0.00	2	0.31	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Education	1	0.16	1	0.16	0	0.00	1	0.16	4	0.62	1	0.16
Government office	0	0.00	2	0.31	3	0.47	2	0.31	4	0.62	0	0.00
Health	8	1.24	3	0.47	11	1.71	0	0.00	10	1.56	0	0.00
Library	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
Neighborhood	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00
News	108	16.80	83	12.91	62	9.64	63	9.80	106	16.49	28	4.35
Nonprofit	0	0.00	56	8.71	30	4.67	7	1.09	36	5.60	4	0.62
Politician	4	0.62	0	0.00	0	0.00	0	0.00	3	0.47	0	0.00
Total	121		147		106		73		163		33	

FIGURE 1  
Total Dictionary Mentions by News versus Non-News Organizations



pandemic in general were fairly common in the data, but posts on this topic were predominantly from news organizations. Racism and BLM were also discussed more often than were health disparities, and posts on racism and BLM were also much more likely to be created by news organizations.

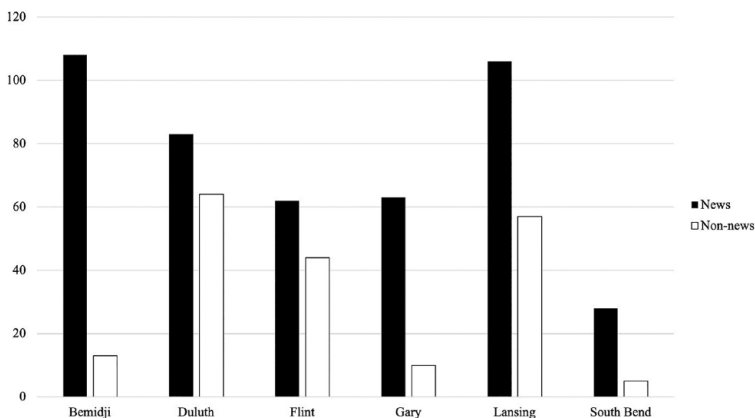
RQ3 asked about variation across cities in our sample in terms of posting about health disparities. To answer this research question, we used a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare mentions of COVID-19 health inequities by news organizations (vs. non-news) and the city of the organization. The analysis demonstrated main effects by city,  $F(5, 1,110,348) = 8.07, p < .001$ . Duluth and Lansing had higher levels of posts regarding COVID-19 health disparities, standing out above both Gary and South Bend (see Figure 2). There were no main effects for news versus non-news organizations; nor was there a significant interaction between news and city. Overall, health disparities were rarely centered in local COVID-19 discussions. However, when they were mentioned, those narratives were more likely to appear in Duluth and Lansing.

## Study 2: Interviews with Local Storytellers

### *Method*

We conducted 17 interviews with social media managers or primary communicators of organizations in our data set between September 2020 and November 2021.<sup>2</sup> We selected every fifth organization from lists stratified by organization type, community, and keyword mentions matching the dictionary (health disparities present vs. absent) for email recruiting. Of those who responded, nine were with nonprofit organizations; two were with local news media organizations; and six were with local government, libraries, institutions of higher education, and other civic organizations. Four organizations were in Duluth and Flint each, Gary and Lansing each had three, two were in Bemidji, and one was in South Bend.

FIGURE 2  
COVID and Racism Mentions by News versus Non-News Organizations  
among Six Communities



The interview guide focused on the organization and community background, local civic information and media ecosystem, the communicator’s strategy for engaging with the community (online and offline), and the impact of social media on political and civic life. Prior to interviews, interviewers reviewed the Facebook pages of the respondent’s organization, as well as several examples of the organization’s post data (collected in study 1) that contained keywords mentioned in the dictionary. Prospective subjects received the consent form during the initial contact and provided verbal consent at the time of the recorded interview.

Interviews averaged one hour and 20 minutes and resulted in 425 transcribed pages. Two coders first inductively coded each transcript and generated a series of open codes. Then, during the axial coding process, the research team collectively reviewed codes to identify connections and higher-level themes related to our research questions (Corbin and Strauss 2014). The concepts that emerged from this coding process as related to our research questions are outlined below.

### Findings

The findings from the quantitative analysis above (RQ1) reveal that non-news local organizations posted less content regarding racial health disparities in COVID-19 than did news organizations. Our interviews illustrate that, although nearly all interview respondents were aware of systemic inequities in their communities, they understood their role in sharing or creating content about social justice issues such as racism and health disparities in very different ways. Below, we explicate several themes that address RQ2. For local organizations, digital platform communication practices and their willingness to address social justice issues were entangled with their perceptions of the platforms and, in particular, organizational concerns about reputation (both their own and that of their community).

*“Stay in your own lane.”* Communicators’ concern about their organizational reputation and how that concern shaped their content creation practices varied by organization type. Storytellers from nonprofits were highly aware of their organizational mission and took that mission into account when deciding whether to post content about social justice or health disparities in their community. We heard that whether or not to post about social justice issues would depend on (1) alignment with organizational mission and (2) risks of reputational harm and/or possible negative consequences in terms of impact on funding or government support. Nonprofit communicators understood themselves as having a role to play in their community, but even social-justice-oriented nonprofits seemed to understand public advocacy work as beyond the scope of that role. For example, Malik pointed out that his Gary-based nonprofit had to navigate relevance and relationships when thinking about what to post online:

It is not that [racial justice] doesn’t matter. It’s just you really have to be focused on what’s your goal. Stay true to your goal.

Similar to Malik, many communicators we interviewed expressed concern over deviating from their organization’s core domain of expertise. For example, explaining why his Duluth nonprofit avoided posting about racial justice, Caleb noted, “When it comes to racial justice issues, our mindset is there are other organizations for that. It’s not that we’re against or for anything, it’s just not our alley or our lane.” Aida, who works at a nonprofit in Flint, told us that she avoids social justice issues on Facebook to “make sure that we’re not in the middle of anything we’re not supposed to be in.”

Similarly, nonprofits, higher education institutions, and libraries in Bemidji, Flint, Lansing, and Gary were concerned about how comments in response to their Facebook posts might affect their reputation. Participants told us they were concerned about politicizing their Facebook feeds. For Jade, a library social media manager in Flint, social justice content was constrained to avoid detracting focus and energy from their target audience: “It’s just an understood rule that it’s nothing too terribly political,” she explained. Local organizations sensed that neutrality on Facebook is safer than taking a stand, a position that we show below is entangled with their perception of the platform itself.

Nonprofit participants wrestled with the possibility that posting about racial injustice might impact their financial stability through their public image. Malcolm, from a nonprofit in Flint, grappled with a desire to support challenging conversations in his community:

I have to be a little mindful because we are a nonprofit that’s trying to grow, and in corporate America, you want to be mindful of that, especially to survive. We know we have to get funding and things like that.

Overall, messaging was guided by the belief that posting practices on Facebook should be open to commentary from the community “because if that’s what someone wants to say, that’s what they want to say,” according to Annika, an

academic librarian in Gary. But moderation is sometimes necessary because if commenters are, as Annika said, “just very unhappy, we will choose to just delete the post because it just takes away from everything” the organization is trying to accomplish. Many of these communities are close-knit; therefore, maintaining offline connections necessitated highlighting positive contributions rather than calling out inequities and injustices in their communities. As a result, many of these more serious conversations about accountability and facilitating social change took place offline.

*Protecting community reputation.* Concerns about *community* reputation also shaped organizations’ likelihood to post about social inequities. Where organizational reputation constrained willingness to post about social issues, a desire to counter disparaging comments about the community in some cases motivated social justice storytelling. Protecting community reputation and assuming a community caretaker role was most prevalent in majority-minority communities like Flint and Gary that have been historically impacted by racist housing policies and deindustrialization.

Caleb, who works for a nonprofit organization in Duluth, described a reluctance to post about disparities and ongoing social justice issues on Facebook because

it’s very common that you see people move away. . . . They move away for four or five years, maybe 10, and then once they start having kids, they generally find their way back. . . . They just want a good job, and they want enough to pay their bills and build a life for their family and a future.

In the eyes of interview participants, especially those in Flint and Gary, Facebook affords nonprofit actors more control over local narratives and allows them to portray their communities in a positive light. Our participants told us that news media often amplify racialized depictions of crime. Linnea, who worked at a Flint nonprofit, pointed out that her city has gained notoriety from several documentaries on the water crisis—narratives that often highlight blight, crime, infrastructural crises, public health problems, and education failures and ignore positive aspects of the community.

Malik and Linnea noted that social media allowed them to “fight the negative stereotypes that come along with our city” and “showcase the positive aspects.” But for Malcolm, countering harmful news narratives and confronting power systems is a complex task, wrapped up in long-standing critiques of the news media:

[News about Flint] is very biased. It’s driven by big-interest folks who have money to control narratives and make sure certain narratives don’t get attention as they should.

Nonprofits in Flint and Gary, which are predominantly African American communities, were not among the most likely to post about racism and the disparate impacts of COVID-19 on their community (Table 2). On the one hand,



storytellers in these communities were straightforward about the intersection of systemic racism and health disparities (e.g., the Flint water crisis). On the other hand, for many, social media is a place to offer a *corrective* counternarrative to the largely negative coverage their community receives in the news media.

*“I don’t care if you don’t like it. You need to see it.”* News media and local government participants in our interview sample saw their role quite differently from those in nonprofit organizations. Even though news media and government have decidedly different missions, both generally felt that their online communication practices should reflect their obligation to share important information with community residents, even if that information might alienate audiences. For Jacob, a local government official in Minnesota, social justice content was “too important to not get out. People might hate it. And that’s okay.” Rowan, an interview participant from a local news organization in South Bend, was similarly unconcerned with how audiences might respond, “News is news. I don’t care if you don’t like it. You need to see it.” While this logic implies greater willingness to discuss health-race narratives than seen among other types of organizations, such content was not a *prominent* focus of the news organizations’ overall coverage. In this sense, news logic can enable and constrain health and race inequalities narratives.

*Making social justice local.* Intertwined with concerns about the health disparities of the pandemic were concerns of racial justice fueled by demonstrations in summer 2020. RQ3 asks how organizations “localized” discussions of racial disparities and other equity issues during the pandemic. In interviews, we found that some organizations focused more on local social justice concerns than on issues that emerged at the national level as the country’s attention turned to the murder of George Floyd. In terms of producing content on national events, Jeanette and Heidi (from a news media organization in Lansing) told us about the kinds of social justice issues they would cover:

Only if [events] come back and then would affect the Lansing area, then yes. Anything LGBTQ-related, Black Lives [Matter], things like that. There really does need to be a local component of either it’s affecting people here or people here are going to those places and they want to talk about their experiences, that kind of a thing. We really try and make it focus back into the Lansing area.

Hundreds of miles away from where the murder occurred, Malik said there was a tension between empathy and relevance:

Not to say that [anti-racism protests] aren’t important, but I guess it doesn’t affect us on the ground level the same way it does in other communities, [like] the individuals in Minnesota who are going through their things.

That said, some local storytellers told us that the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests were a call to “refocus” on racial justice by shifting

behind-the-scenes practices that influenced their community to the foreground. For example, Silvie noted that the educational institution in Gary where she works made internal revisions to equity practices after the demonstrations in summer 2020:

Like a lot of places, we've ramped up our efforts to address [racial injustice] issues, to let people air their concerns about them. . . . We now have a diversity team and strategic plan in place at [our institution].

From his perspective at a South Bend newspaper, Rowan told us the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests precipitated a reevaluation of *how* they constructed everyday stories:

In the last year [there's been] really a heightened, renewed emphasis on diversity in staffing, big emphasis corporate-wide, and also looking at coverage and public safety. Is our public safety coverage reflective of the community? Are we unintentionally creating stereotypes or aggravating stereotypes in our coverage?

Rowan and his colleagues questioned their role in creating or sustaining stereotypes through news content. In contrast, a local nonprofit's efforts in Duluth were more subdued and more likely to be behind the scenes rather than posted to social media. Eleanora said,

We don't post a lot about those kinds of things [social justice]. I think we posted some solidarity thing with George Floyd, and we added some sections on our website to make more clear the equity work we're doing. But we do a lot of behind-the-scenes kinds of work that we don't put out to the community.

In sum, communities in our sample had different needs, shaped by past experiences, that set the context for their public posting practices. When considering health disparities alone, these storytellers maintained a consistent tone of delivering information people needed to know, balanced with community and organizational reputation. Yet when the social justice component emerged during nationwide demonstrations, storytellers offered content that emphasized the neighborhood- or community-level impact, not all of which they perceived to be aligned with issues receiving attention in the national news.

Few interviewees explicitly identified and discussed COVID-related health outcomes linked with racism as particular social justice issues in their communities. The absence of this discussion echoes the near absence of posts on this topic we identified in the social media data—and is contrary to on-the-ground realities. For example, Flint interviewees pointed to the water crisis as an ongoing public health emergency. For many, the crisis demonstrates how infrastructural failure and disparate health outcomes are connected to racialized public policy decisions. Malcolm pointed out that critical public health content often competes for public attention because it is often difficult to disentangle COVID-19 and health issues related to the water crisis.

*Facebook just invites an argument.* Across the interviews, participants reported increasing reliance on digital platforms, primarily Facebook, to

communicate with their audiences. For some, lockdowns in the early phases of the pandemic accelerated planned transitions to more platform-centric communication strategies—often at a pace beyond the capacity and expertise of staff. For example, Jacob, a government communications manager in Minnesota, told us, “The digital world is fraught in a lot of ways. We are completely reliant on it in many other ways. And so, finding a way to navigate through that is part of what keeps us busy.”

Interview participants offered elaborate thoughts about how platforms, especially Facebook, shaped the kinds of content they produced and shared. Participants reported thinking about what types of content would engage local audiences. Most interviewees expressed varying degrees of concern about Facebook’s reputation for surfacing the worst in community engagement, with one journalist noting that “Facebook comments are the cesspool of society.” In turn, this perception often shaped decisions to avoid posting content that could be construed as political. In Lansing, Javier said he posted “very plain-vanilla content” to avoid responses that might be harmful to their nonprofit’s immigrant following. For Malik, posting about racial equity issues and Black Lives Matter protests was off-limits because of concerns about how some people in their audience might respond: “Some people take it on as an invite for an argument.”

However, not all communicating actors avoided posting about equity and disparity issues. A key theme among nonprofits was thinking creatively about how to post on Facebook about racial injustice and/or health disparities in a way that would support productive community conversation and avoid potential reputational harm. For example, Malcolm described a time when a post about COVID-19 helped open a discussion about how the pandemic impacted individual community members. The willingness to facilitate injustice-related discourse was contingent upon those with opposing beliefs being respectful and “express[ing] their views in an intelligent way without trying to really harm someone.”

As many of our interviewees pointed out, social media content decisions were often fraught, especially when posting about social justice issues. Despite these challenges, these communication specialists indicated that disruption to Facebook would be detrimental to the community communication system. As Amelia explained, Facebook is as, if not more, important than the one local newspaper in Bemidji:

[Facebook] is our major way of communicating to the community, our biggest way, our most popular, I guess, overall. I think it would make a huge difference, much more than our official website. I think the two biggest ways that we communicate are through traditional news media, like the newspaper, and through Facebook.

## Discussion

In U.S. communities, the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with renewed attention to systemic racism prompted by the murder of George Floyd and the resulting nationwide protests. This confluence of events

had the potential to create a kind of “stress test” for local civic information infrastructure. Indeed, the pandemic alone challenged existing communicative practices for news media and community organizations alike and rapidly intensified the reliance on digital platforms for tasks ranging from reporting local news to hosting government town halls (Budd et al. 2020; Cueva Chacón and Retis, this volume; De’, Pandey, and Pal 2020; Van Aelst et al. 2021).

We drew on a sequential mixed-methods design to provide a rich description of the community actors involved in producing content about the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic inequities in health outcomes across six communities in the U.S. This approach identified three key findings. First, discussions of health disparities by both news and non-news organizations within these communities were limited. Second, local news organizations produced the majority of content related to COVID-19 and racism and/or BLM that circulated on Facebook in our selected communities. Without these news organizations, the volume of discussion on these topics would have been much lower, at least in the Facebook ecosystem involving local civic organizations. Third, non-news civic organizations often created content with the intention of protecting organizational and community reputation and maintaining a focus on their mission. Largely due to concerns about reputation when content becomes visible on social media, these organizations generally avoided rather than tackled issues that community audiences might find complex or unpleasant.

Despite the decline in local news media, these organizations still remain the primary storytellers on topics of racialized health disparities and were, in fact, responsible for much more of the available content on our topic of interest. Given the news media’s dominant role as storytellers, we must consider how the visibility of discussions regarding health inequalities and racial injustices may diminish when local news media are eliminated or face additional losses in these regions.

Non-news organizations share local information, and many see doing so as a part of their mission. Still, when fulfilling their civic communication roles, they primarily consider their own instrumental goals, such as enhancing organizational reputation, seeking and maintaining funding, and promoting their events and services (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). In contrast, news media actors in our interview data expressed less concern about sharing potentially controversial content and spoke about the responsibility they felt to address a range of newsworthy issues in a community—especially in the face of news closures and reductions in staffing. In practice, this means covering small amounts of a variety of topics and taking cues from national events about which issues are most important for local communities to learn about (Toff and Mathews 2021).

A focus on reputational concerns on the part of non-news organizations is entangled with perceptions of Facebook (the dominant digital platform for our interview participants). A common theme among participants was that Facebook can be a dangerous place for conversations about social justice. As a result, non-news organizational storytellers risk hearing from opinionated, negative commenters and being criticized for going outside their expertise, or not “staying in their lane.” Further, interview participants realized that national political tensions

are frequently localized within their communities, as shown in scholarly research. For example, one large-scale study found that news coverage of COVID-19 was highly politicized in the news and social media discussions, even from the earliest stages of the pandemic (Chipidza et al. 2021; Hart, Chinn, and Soroka 2020). This politicization led to a surprising outcome: even community organizations actively working on social justice issues within their own communities told us they were unlikely to tackle a discussion of related topics on social media.

Lastly, we see that platformization is not a totalizing process. Instead, our findings across both studies speak to the power of place. We observed substantial differences by community, some of these counterintuitive, in terms of attention to our focal topics. This tangled set of findings requires a more nuanced understanding of the power of place and its role in community storytelling. As Wells et al. (2021, 6) argue, “Location and communication dynamics intersect to shape the sense citizens make of their political circumstances.” These discourse patterns are related to community history and demographic composition in complex ways.

Organizations in Duluth, for example, produced the largest number of references to health disparities. For some communicators, like Jacob (who worked in government), the willingness and obligation to share and connect racial justice-oriented stories were associated with community-level racial reckoning. On June 15, 2020, the city marked 100 years since the mob-incited racially motivated murders of Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie. That anniversary fell just 22 days after George Floyd’s murder. A community-level, grassroots effort to revive the story and advocate for memorialization (Bakk-Hansen 2000) led to a sustained dialogue about the community’s need to address its participation in racial violence (and narrative suppression) and to push for community-level social change (Lawler and Erkkila 2020). Duluth shows how a community-level racial reckoning and discourse, particularly in predominantly white communities, can potentially permeate the everyday practices of community storytellers.

In contrast, organizations in Gary were among the least likely to mention health disparities when compared to the organizations in Duluth and Lansing. Furthermore, organizations in Flint did not produce the greatest number of mentions to race with respect to COVID-19. These findings were surprising as Flint continued to suffer from one of the worst examples of environmental racism and health disparities in the country, the Flint water crisis (Butler, Scammell, and Benson 2016). In Gary, notoriously high levels of industrial pollution, along with housing practices exploiting race and class divisions, have contributed to long-established health issues (Brady and Wallace 2001; Hurley 1995). We speculated that, based on their history and demographics, these communities might be the most likely to discuss disparate health outcomes. However, what we found was that the perceived power of platforms was seen as an opportunity for caretaking and counternarratives.

In both communities, our interview respondents told us that stories depicting their cities had long been incomplete and imposed on them by outsiders (O’Hara 2011). To address these portrayals, these communicators acted as “community caretakers” of local narratives. The distorted regional and national coverage of

their communities had made them aware of the potential for narratives to reach outside of the community and become situated in a national context (Freeman and Hutchins 2022; Mathews 2021). In some cases, they omitted difficult truths to help protect the reputation of the community as a whole (Mathews 2021). In others, their omissions, made in response to Facebook's potential to generate arguments, were intended to minimize incivility within community discourse and preserve amicability among neighbors (Hess and Waller 2020).

We also saw that the exclusion and reframing of the discourse about racism and health disparity were intended to challenge negative media portrayals through counternarratives. Among African American-led organizations in our interview sample, language was a tool of collective identity and resistance against socioeconomic and sociopolitical oppression (Gaines 2021; Lanehart 1996). The presentation of counternarratives that centered community consciousness, solutions-oriented content, and positive elements of the community was a means of pushing back on dominant media depictions and reclaiming community representations (Gaines 2021). Ultimately, storytellers used their power in content creation and Facebook's reach to regain control of narratives and attempt to break the cycle of outsider dominance in the depiction of their communities.

### *Policy implications*

The decline of local news has significant implications for policy and practice (Napoli, this volume). One hopeful possibility on offer is that the loss of local news will be offset by the rise of digital media options. Non-news organizations now have extensive capacity to reach community audiences directly, and we know from existing literature that many such organizations consider informing their communities as part of their mission. From a critical information needs perspective, then, perhaps it does not matter who answers local information needs—either news organizations or other information providers in the community.

But our findings in this article, along with our prior work (Thorson et al. 2020), suggest that this optimistic vision of the rise of new, local civic communicators is not likely to come to fruition. Even though social media platforms, like Facebook and TikTok, may be the “modern broadcasters” of the 21st century, they do not adhere to the same principles of localism and civic duty that set the normative framework for traditional local news media. A fundamental precept of media policy is that an informed citizenry is dependent upon communities' sufficient exposure to local information (Napoli, this volume). This normative perspective is not characteristic either of digital platforms or many non-news local organizations.

Our findings suggest that the loss of local journalism would eliminate the dominant actors covering key community issues within local civic information infrastructure. As Aitamurto and Varma (2018, 698) note, advocacy is often inherent in journalism, as reporting on community issues often straddles the line between reporting facts and surfacing injustice. The loss of local news coverage, and its disappearance from the local civic information infrastructure, will likely

hinder the identification of social justice issues, such as health disparities, environmental racism, and other increasingly politicized human rights concerns. In turn, the loss of such discursive opportunities will only serve to reinforce the structures of oppression that have historically benefitted from stories of injustice remaining in the dark and thus impede initiatives for social change (see Jaidka et al., this volume; Torres and Watson, this volume).

As traditional journalism declines in the local civic information infrastructure, the responsibility for creating content on community issues increasingly falls on other actors. Local non-news organizations, despite their organization-focused missions, have demonstrated potential for news creation and public issue engagement. Policymakers might explore ways to support local nonprofits and leverage their issue-relevant expertise and local connections to help them become stronger advocates for important issues. In providing such support to non-news organizations (and local news as well), they need to account for the unique characteristics of each community and foster a robust engagement with a broad range of topics and audiences; that way, these entities can be a truly valuable resource for local service delivery.

### *Limitations and future research*

Several limitations should be considered alongside our findings. First, our study is limited to our sample's six U.S. midwestern communities. While we purposefully selected these communities based on several criteria, we cannot assume that other U.S. or international communities are experiencing the same discourse patterns as our selected cases. Second, in our examination of the platformization of storytelling in communities in study 1, we focused exclusively on the dominant digital platform for local organizations—Facebook—but did not consider other types of social media platforms or messaging applications where digital storytelling occurs. Future studies should include a more thorough assessment of how organizational communication patterns vary among groups, platforms, and themes. Finally, through our selection of search criteria and our attempts to characterize social justice topics exhaustively, how these issues are framed may vary across communities and, as such, our characterization would benefit from replication and extension. Our attempt here is to provide an outline for studying these topics in this context in hopes that other scholars will grow this area of scholarship.

## Conclusion

The two studies we conducted point to the complex infrastructure that has shaped local storytelling about health and race disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings indicate that news organizations have a distinct (yet limited) role in surfacing narratives about racism and social inequalities to the public consciousness. However, different, non-news organizations may also have a role

in communicating about these narratives; if, and how, they do so will reflect a complicated set of considerations that involve organizational and community needs as well as platform constraints. That said, we would suggest that platformization offers an opportunity for local organizations to engage in the journalistic role of communicating about important issues like racial disparity and COVID-19 within their communities. In addition, by identifying the distinctive ways that news and non-news organizations engage with social media platforms, our research reveals the limitations and pragmatic concerns surrounding these organizations' participation in the local civic space and helps illuminate the contingencies around platformization. In practice, our findings could assist local organizations, particularly those in the communities studied, in analyzing their present communication strategies and assessing their responsibilities and ability to contribute to local civic engagement.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. COVID: covid, coronavirus, covid-19, pandemic, infectious disease, social distanc<sup>o</sup>, quarantine, ventilator, contagious, corona, flatten the curve; unprecedented time<sup>o</sup>, trying time, difficult time<sup>o</sup>, unprecedented, new normal; Racism and Black Lives Matter protests: george floyd, minneapolis, police brutality, racism, black lives matter, protest<sup>o</sup>; COVID and racism: racial disparit<sup>o</sup>, health disparit<sup>o</sup>, healthcare disparit<sup>o</sup>, disproportionate impact, social inequalit<sup>o</sup>, disparit<sup>o</sup>. (Note: The <sup>o</sup> acts as a search query wildcard that allows for matching of word variations. For example, "social distanc<sup>o</sup>" could return a match to "social distancing" or "social distance.")

2. The interviewee list, using fictional names, their organization type, and what keywords they talked about are: Bemidji: Lucas (government and pilot interview without Facebook data), Amelia (library, COVID); Duluth: Graham (nonprofit, racism), Jacob (government, COVID, racism); Gary: Annika (university), Malik (nonprofit, COVID), Silvie (community college, COVID, racism); Flint: Aida (nonprofit, COVID, racism), Jade (library, COVID, racism), Linnea (nonprofit, COVID), Malcolm (nonprofit, COVID, racism); Duluth: Eleanora (nonprofit, COVID & racism), Caleb (nonprofit, racism); Lansing: Javier (nonprofit, COVID, racism), Jeanette and Heidi (newspaper), Tawyna (nonprofit, COVID, racism, COVID & racism); South Bend: Rowan (newspaper, COVID, racism, COVID & racism). See online Appendix D for additional details.

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