

# Who will tell the stories of health inequities?

## Platform challenges (and opportunities) in local civic information infrastructure



Ava Francesca Battocchio, Kjerstin Thorson, Dan Hiaeshutter-Rice, Marisa Smith, Yingying Chen, Kelley Cotter, Hyesun Choung, Chuqing Dong, Moldir Moldagaliyeva, and Christopher E. Etheridge

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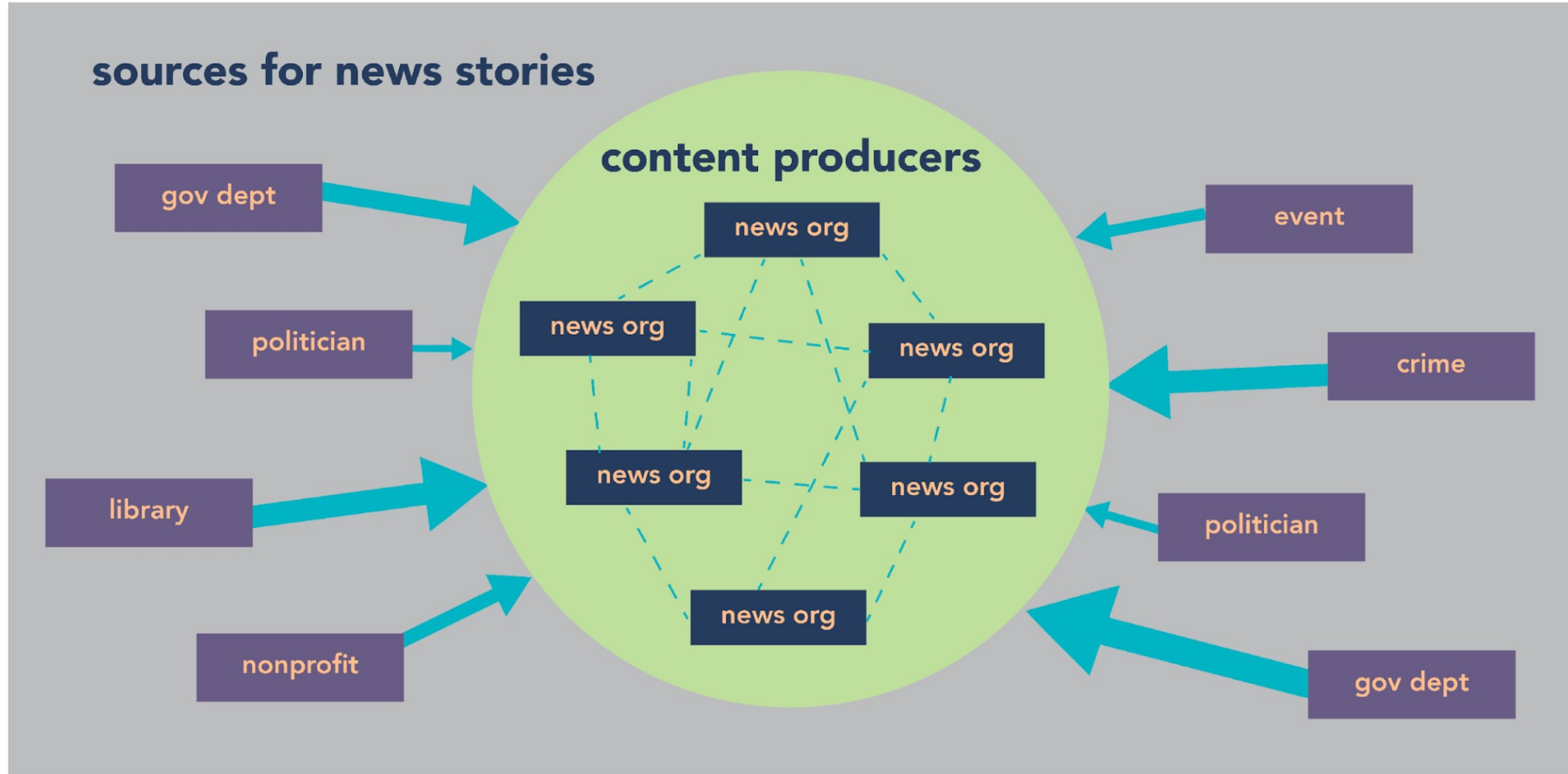
# *Disruption and platformization*

- Decline of local news; rise of news/media deserts (Abernathy, 2018; Ferrier, Sinha, & Outrich, 2016)
- Digital platforms becoming more central to infrastructures across a range of domains (Helmond, 2015; Plantin et al., 2018; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018)

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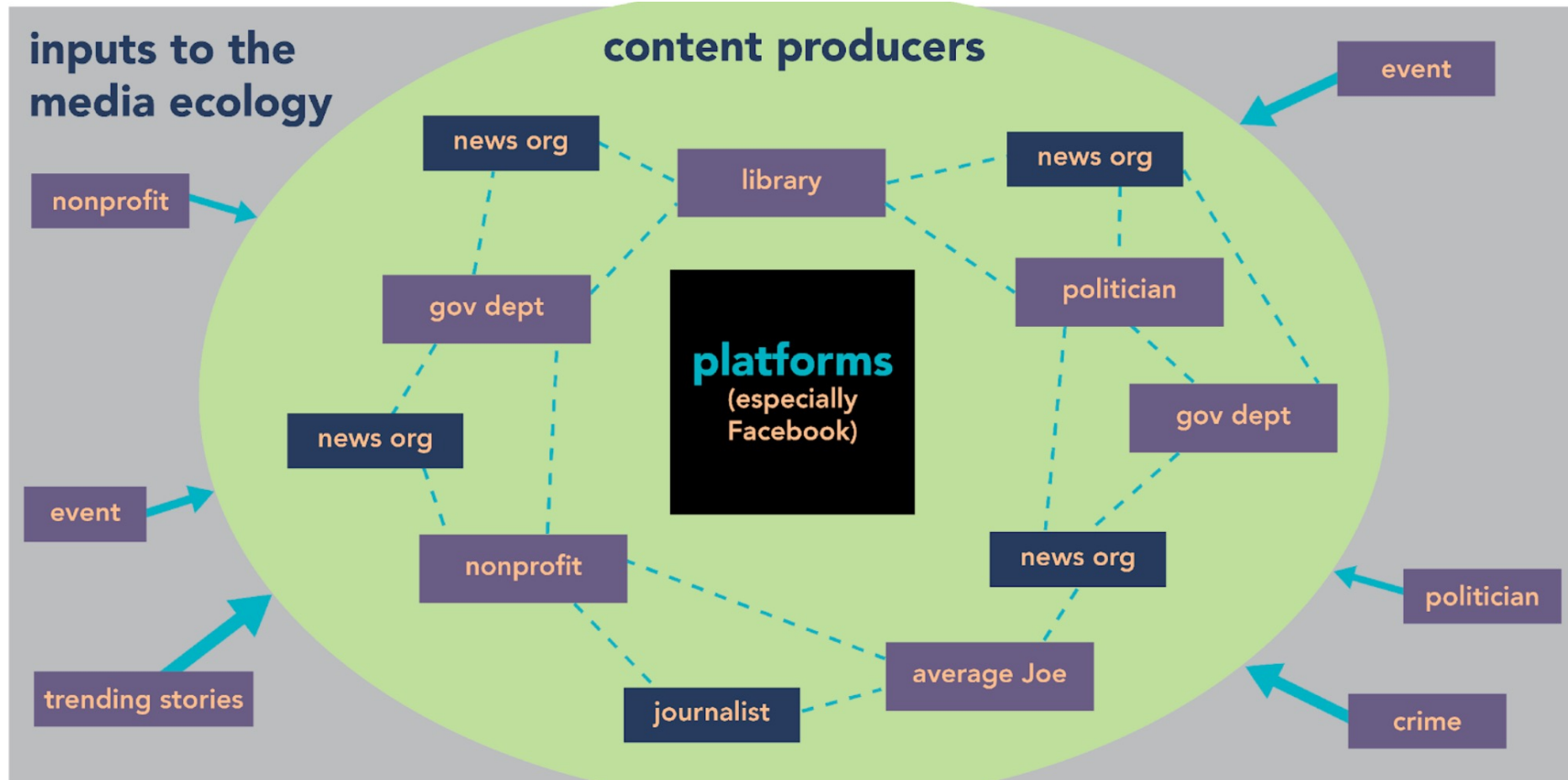
# Media ecologies as typically studied



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# How we approach local information infrastructure



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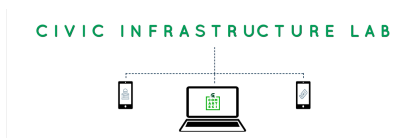
***What happens if local civic  
information infrastructure is  
re-configured around digital  
platforms?***

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# Overall Method

- Sequential explanatory mixed methods
  - Digital data collection (What is being produced? Who is producing it? How does it circulate?)
- +
  - Interviews (Why? How does place matter?)
- Data collected from March 2020 to September 2021
- Conducted across six Midwestern communities



# Community Selection

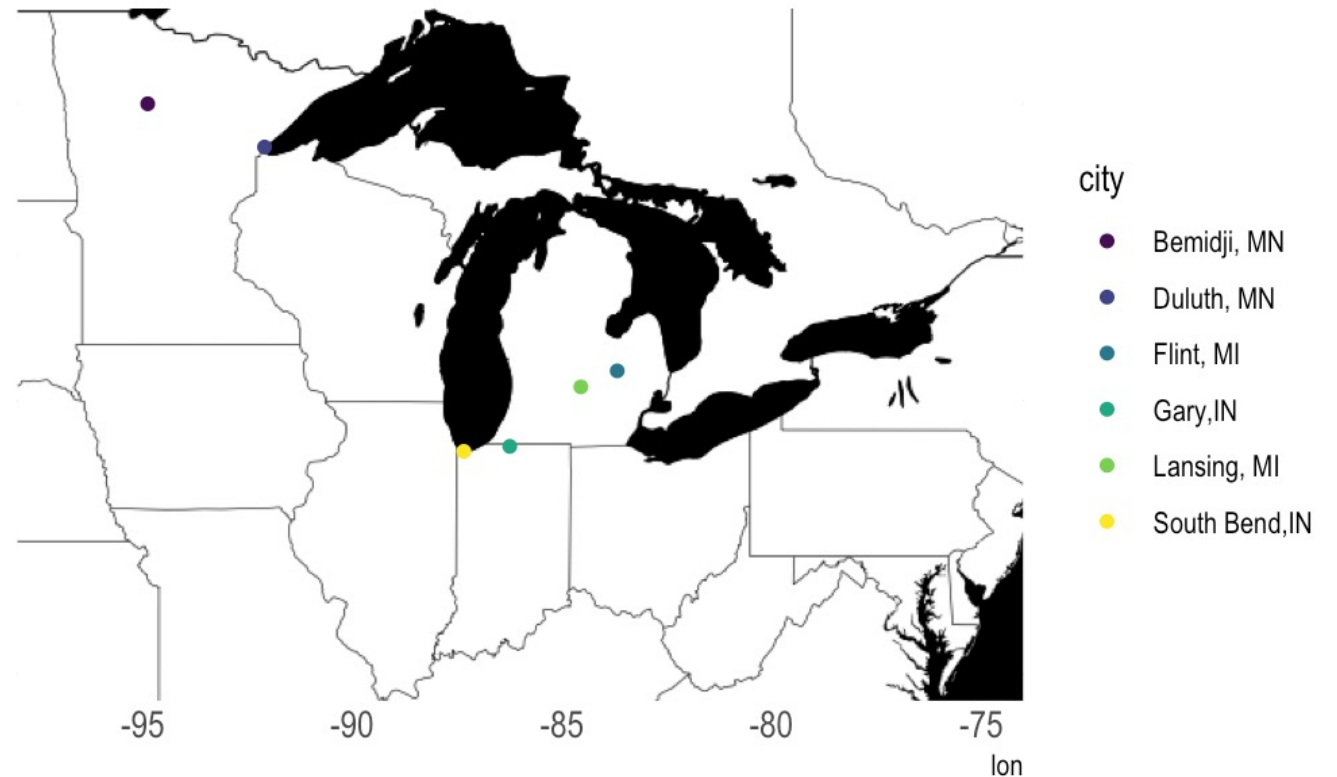
## Great Lakes Context

- Legacy of lynchings, Jim Crowism, and settler-colonial violence (Smiles, 2021)
- Great Migration
- Environmental racism through planning and zoning
- Heavy industry & manufacturing (past & present)

## Selection Criteria:

- Cultural-historical background
- ACS 2015-2019 5-year estimate data
  - Median household income
  - Race/ethnicity
  - Education

## Communities of Study



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# Majority-Minority Communities

- Once thrived on a strong industrial base
- White Flight, outward migration
- Now facing stark economic inequality

FLINT, MICHIGAN



Source: Forbes

GARY, INDIANA



Source: authors





# Town & Gown Communities

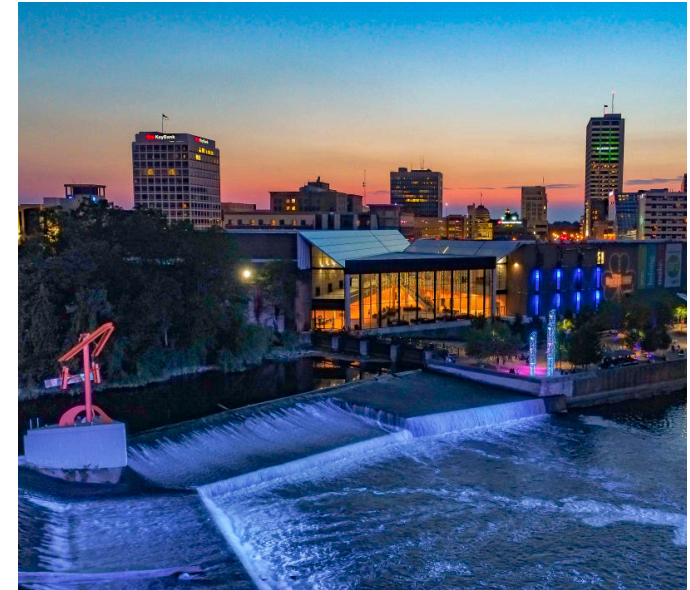
- Professional employment through their universities
- Declining working-class economic system

LANSING, MICHIGAN



Source: Destination Lansing

SOUTH BEND, INDIANA



Source: Visit South Bend

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# Regional Hub Communities

- Outlying communities
- Serve as regional hubs for education and health services
- Economic revitalization thru tourism

BEMIDJI, MINNESOTA



Source: Bemidji Area Chamber of Commerce

DULUTH, MINNESOTA



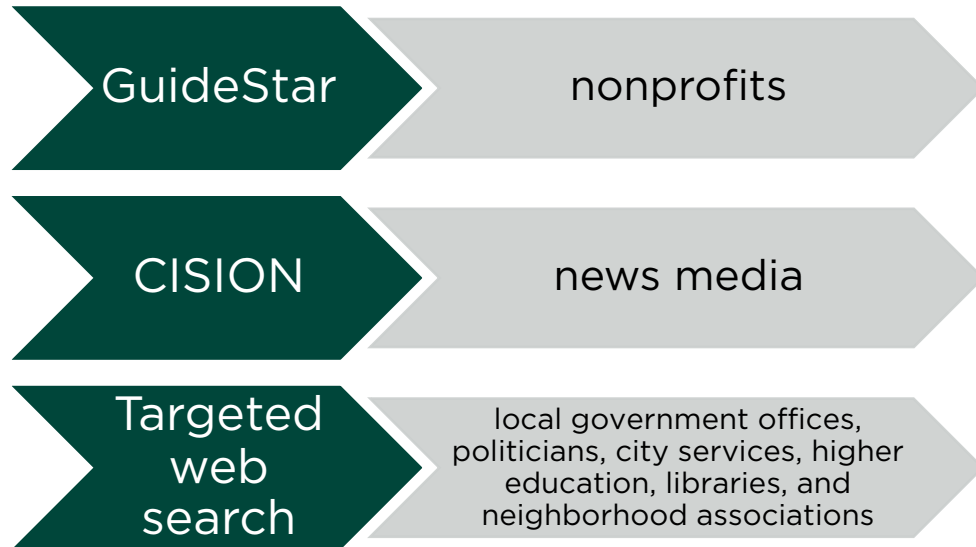
Source: authors

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# Local Organization Identification

Organization identification process following Thorson et al.(2020)



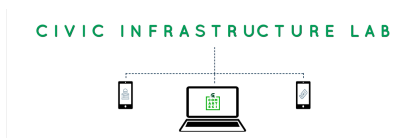
- Identified 11,524 potential organizations
- De-duped
- Checked against definition
- Checked against location
- Identified Facebook page with recent activity

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# *Identification Intercoder Reliability*

- Coded remaining 3,804 based on if served local audience or not following intercoder reliability
- Randomly selected 95 organizations (Riffe, Lacy, Watson, & Fico, 2019)
- Based on two independent coders
  - served a national audience (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .73$ )
  - correctly classified as located in one of our target communities (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .75$ )
  - type of local civic organization (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = .84$ ).



# *Study 1: Computational Content Analysis*

- **Computational Textual Analysis (Study 1)**
  - Corpus of Facebook posts (N = 1,110,360)
  - From local organizations (N = 1,272 )
  - **Dictionary Approach**
    - COVID (including COVID euphemisms)
    - Racism/Black Lives Matter
    - COVID + Racism/Black Lives Matter

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# Research Questions

- **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*)
- **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*)

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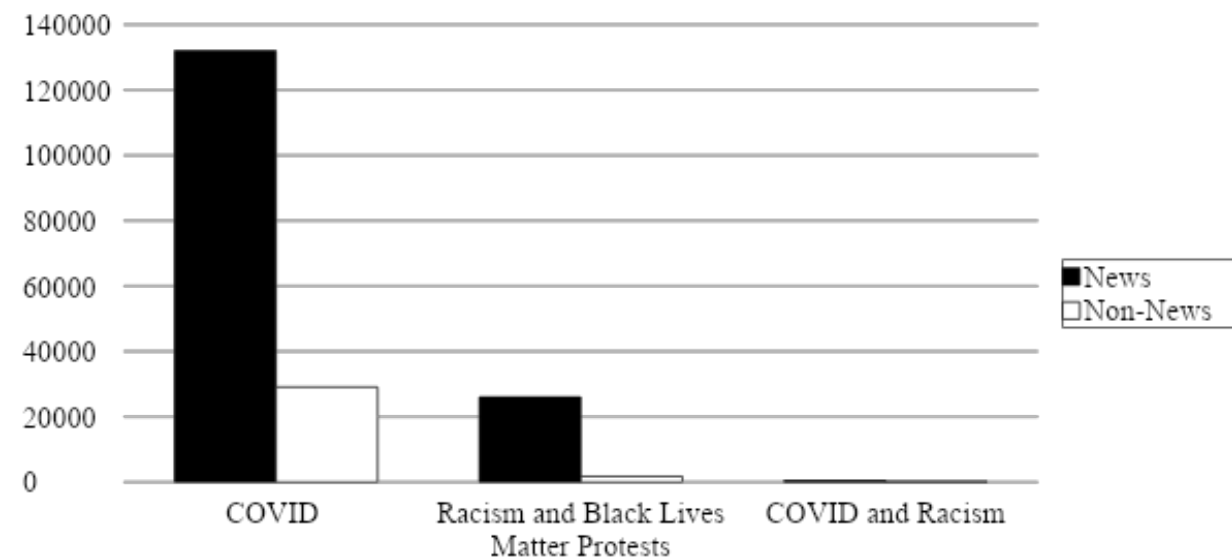


# RQ1 Findings

Overall mentions across organization type and communities:

- COVID-19: 14.51% (n = 161,110)
  - Racism and/or BLM: 2.50% (n = 27,791)
  - COVID-19 racial or health disparities: .06% (n = 643)
1. news organizations (69.98%, n = 450)
  2. nonprofit organizations (29.68%, n = 133)
  3. health organizations (4.98%, n = 32)
  4. government officials (1.71%, n = 11)
  5. educational organizations (1.24%, n = 8)
  6. politicians (1.09%, n = 7)
  7. civic service organizations (.31%, n = 2)
  8. libraries (n = 0)
  9. Facebook neighborhood groups (n = 0)

Total Dictionary Mentions by News versus Non-News Organizations



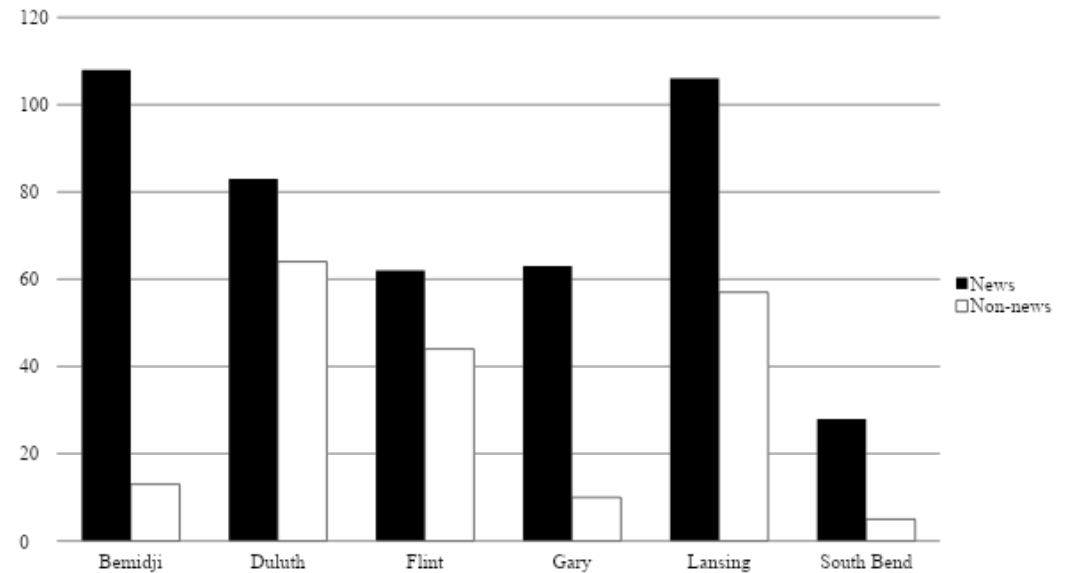
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# RQ3 Findings

- Two-way ANOVA to compare mentions of COVID-19 health inequities by news organizations (versus non-news) and the city of the organization
- Main effects by city,  $F(5, 1110348) = 8.07, p < .001$ .
- Duluth and Lansing had higher levels of posts regarding COVID-19 health disparities,
- standing out above both Gary and South Bend
- no main effects for news vs. non-news organizations, nor a
- No significant interaction between news and city.
- health disparities were rarely centered in local COVID-19 discussions
  - narratives were more likely to appear in Duluth and Lansing

*COVID and Racism Mentions by News versus Non-News Organizations Among Six Communities*



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# Study 2: Interviews with local storytellers

- In-depth interviews with communicators from local organizations in sample communities (N = 17)
- Interviews between September 2020 and November 2021
- Identified via stratified random sampling from organizations in the Facebook corpus
  - Email recruiting for interviews by selecting every fifth organization stratified by
    - Organization type
    - Keyword mentions
    - Health disparities present vs. absent
- Respondent Breakdown
  - Organization type
    - Nonprofit organization (n = 9)
    - Local news media (n = 2)
    - Local government, libraries, higher ed and other civic organizations (n = 6)
  - Community
    - Duluth (n = 4)
    - Flint (n = 4)
    - Gary (n = 3)
    - Lansing (n = 3)
    - Bemidji (n = 2)
    - South Bend (n = 1)



# Research Questions

- **RQ2:** How do news and non-news content producers center local concerns about COVID-19, discussions of systemic racism, and connections between the two issues? (*Study 2*)
- **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*)



# *RQ2 Findings*

- Several themes impacted posting of social justice content related to racialized health disparities
  - 'Stay In Your Own Lane'
  - Protecting Community Reputation
  - 'I don't care if you don't like it. You need to see it.'

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# *‘Stay In Your Own Lane’*

“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.”

**Caleb**  
(Duluth, nonprofit)

“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.”

**Malcolm**  
(Flint, nonprofit)

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# Community Reputation

[hesitance to post social justice issues]  
“already struggling to fight the negative stereotypes that come along with our city.”

**Malik**  
(Gary, nonprofit)

[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.”

**Malcolm**  
(Flint, nonprofit)

[social media allowed them to]  
“showcase the positive aspects.”

**Linnea**  
(Flint, nonprofit)

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# *Informational Obligation*

[social justice content]  
“too important to not get out.  
People might hate it. And  
that’s ok”

**Jacob**  
(Duluth,  
government)

“News is news. I don’t care if  
you don’t like it. You need to  
see it.”

**Rowan**  
(South Bend,  
newspaper)

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# *RQ3 Findings*

- Several themes emerged that guided whether or not organizations made national-level social justice issues local
  - Local relevance
  - Argument avoidance
  - Local media ecology



# Local 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, the individuals in Minnesota who are going through their things.

Malik  
(Gary, nonprofit)

Only if [events] come back and then would affect the Lansing area, then yes. Anything LGBTQ related, Black Lives, 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.

Jeanette and  
Heidi  
(Lansing, news)

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# Facebook just invites an argument

[avoided Black Lives Matter content]  
“Some people take it on as an invite for an argument.”

Malik  
(Gary, nonprofit)

[avoids to] “make sure that we’re not in the middle of anything we’re not supposed to be in.”

Aida  
(Flint, nonprofit)

“Facebook comments are the cesspool of society.”

Rowan  
(South Bend, news)

“very plain-vanilla content”  
[to avoid responses that might be harmful to their nonprofit’s immigrant following]

Javier  
(Lansing, nonprofit)

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# *Digital dependance*

[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.

**Amelia**  
(Bemidji, librarian)

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# Discussion

- Few discussions of health disparity and inequalities require acknowledge racism in health outcome
- Majority of this content was produced by local news organizations
  - What happens if news goes away?
- Power of place and role in community storytelling

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# Power of Place - Duluth

- Most references to health disparities
- For some, connected to community-level racial reckoning
- June 15, 2020, 100-year commemoration of lynching of 3 Black circus workers
  - 22 days after George Floyd's murder
- Sustained dialogue in community regarding its participation in racial violence



Source: Minnesota Public Radio News



# *Power of Place - Gary & Flint*

- Gary, IN, among the least likely to mention health disparities; Flint, MI was not in top
- History of environmental racism (e.g. Flint Water Crisis, industrial pollution)
- Platforms offered opportunity for counternarratives
  - Community caretakers
  - Reframing media presentation



Source: Tyrell Anderson/ Decay Devils

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# *Limitations*

- U.S Midwest communities
- Limited to Facebook



# *Thank you!*

***Kjerstin Thorson***

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

[thorsonk@msu.edu](mailto:thorsonk@msu.edu) @kthorson

***Ava Francesca Battocchio***

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

[battocch@msu.edu](mailto:battocch@msu.edu) @\_afbat

***And the amazing team:*** Dan Hiaeshutter-Rice, Marisa Smith, Yingying Chen, Kelley Cotter, Stephanie Edgerly, Hyesun Choung, Chuqing Dong, Moldir Moldagalieyeva, and Chris Etheridge, as well as former RAs: Melody Draeger, Sabrina Kohlmeier, Lydia Werth, Katie Denzin

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