

When misinformation meets scarcity: a Q&A with Kiera Butler | Columbia Journalism Review

By Lauren Harris

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News deserts are complicated things. Penny Abernathy—the primary researcher behind the oft-cited [“news deserts” map](#)—told me last year that while the term originated to mean “a town without a newspaper,” [it had evolved in her thinking](#) to mean “a place where there is limited access to the type of critical news and information that [one] need[s] in order to make informed decisions.” Many factors can limit access to critical information: geographic news deserts, undercovered communities, infrastructural or economic barriers, lack of trust, misinformation. We aren’t always adept at illustrating the complex ways in which people navigate the world beyond the news; it’s easier to report on the presence of bad information than the absence of good information, and it’s even trickier to define the ways in which the two inform one another. But even in news deserts—be they geographic, cultural, digital, or philosophical—people access information. Something always fills the void.

[...]

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