

Visibility for Local News

Daniel Trielli

Smart Cities Roundtable | December 2, 2025



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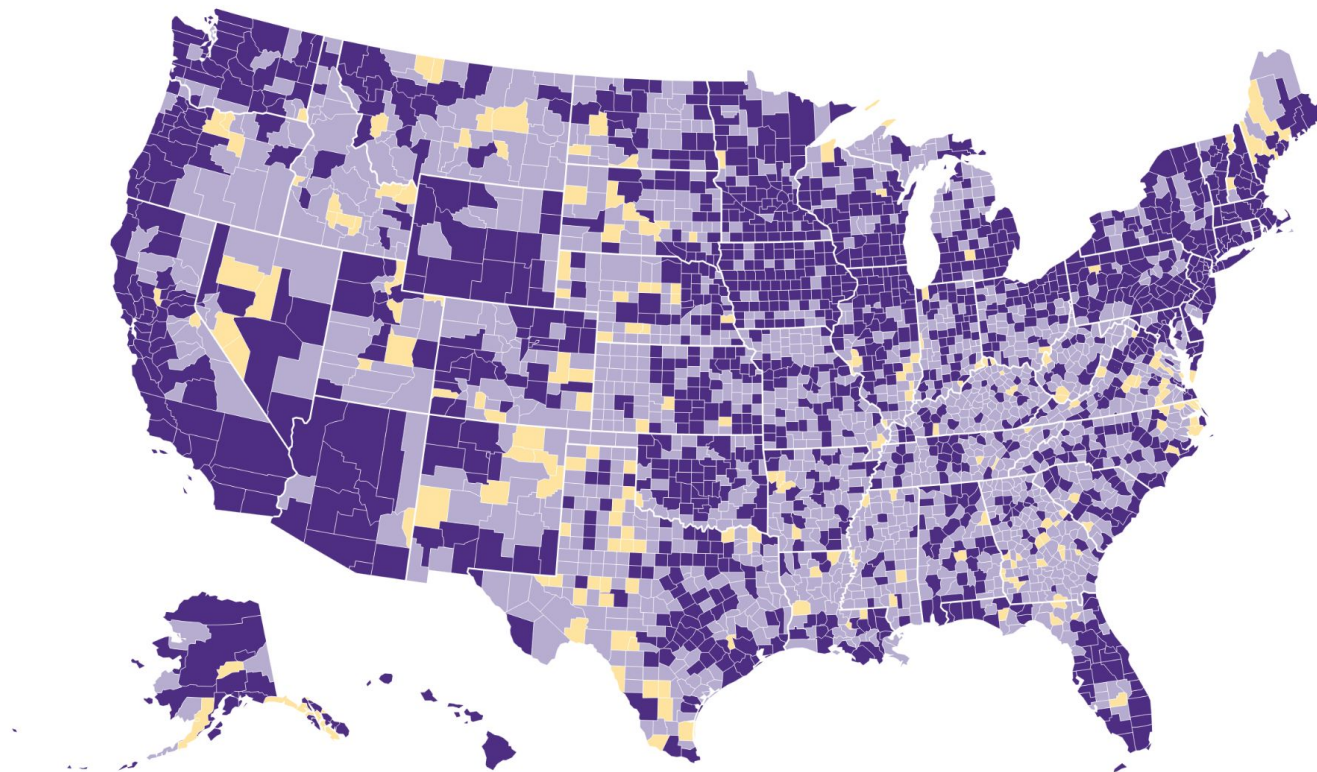
Why local news is important

- Develops a sense of local community
- Reduces polarization
- Informs of events and discussions they otherwise would not know about
- Keeps local governments accountable

How Many News Outlets Are Near You?

There are 212 counties in the United States with no news outlets. There are 1,525 counties with only one.

■ No Outlets ■ One Outlet ■ Two or More Outlets



Map: Medill Local News Initiative • Source: Local News Initiative Database • Created with [Datawrapper](#)



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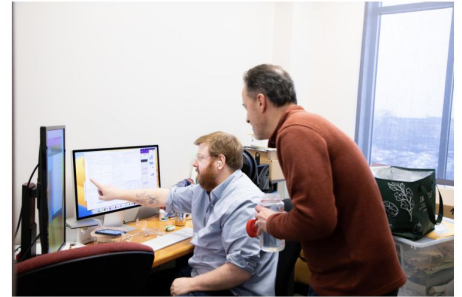
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HOWARD CENTER

Scripps Howard Foundation Provides \$1 Million Grants to Merrill College, ASU to Support Journalists with AI Tools

The University of Maryland will use the \$1 million grant to develop a series of AI products:

- ▶ **The Beat Book:** The Beat Book will employ artificial intelligence to help local news organizations assess and improve coverage of their communities. Using AI methodologies, the Beat Book will scour a cooperating publication's archives to identify how that publication has covered a particular beat in the past.
- ▶ **The AI Reporter's Tool Box:** An idea initially developed by students at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, the Tool Box will use AI and other machine learning technology to make the reporters' workflows — such as transcribing an interview — more efficient and their reporting more accurate.
- ▶ **AI Meeting Watchdog:** This AI system would monitor live-streaming video of government meetings and provide timely notifications of newsworthy events, story idea tips and summaries of key action.
- ▶ **The Visibility for Local News Project:** This project aims to help local news become more visible online — in search engine results and on social media. The insights from this project will be used in courses for Merrill undergraduate students, who will collaborate with Maryland local news organizations to help them improve digital visibility and track changes in audience.



Howard Center Data Editor Sean Mussenden, left, and Merrill College Lecturer Derek Willis.



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The Beat Book

Goal: Help local news organizations assess and improve coverage of their communities

How: Using AI to scour a cooperating publication's archives to identify how that publication has covered a particular beat in the past

AI Reporter's Tool Box

Goal: Make the workflow of local news reporters more efficient and their reporting more accurate

How: Adapting tools to transcribe interviews, summarize the key points and developing follow-up questions, based on journalism values.

AI Meeting Watchdog

Goal: Relieve local journalists from the labor of accompanying all government meetings; increase coverage

How: Developing tools to monitor live-streaming video of government meetings and provide timely notifications of newsworthy events, and story idea tips



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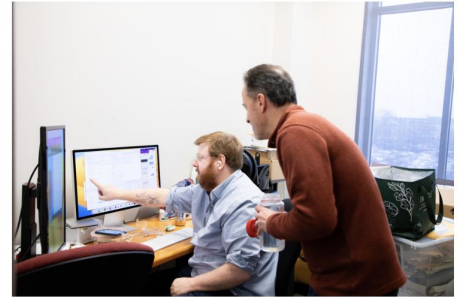
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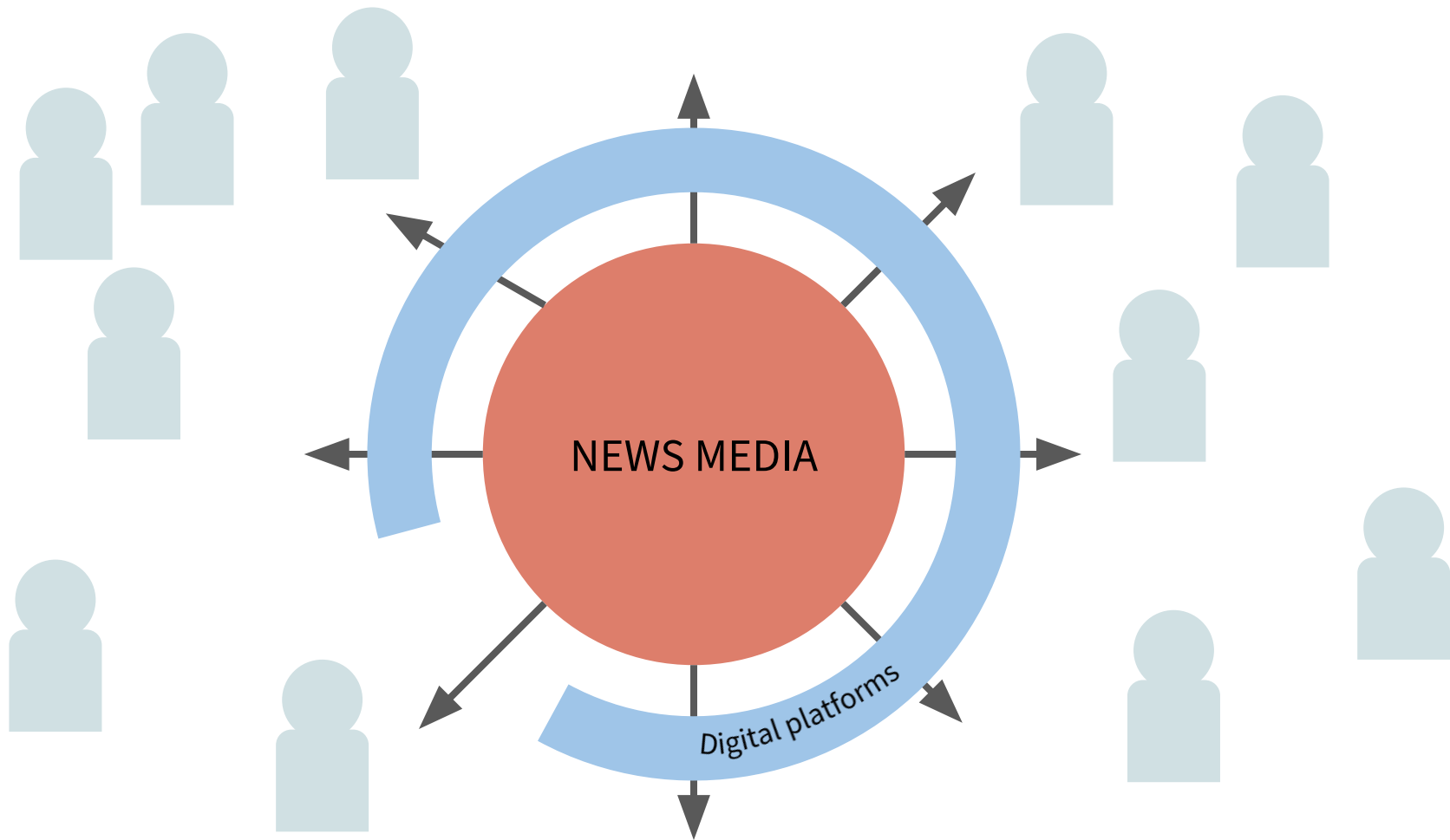
Howard Center Data Editor Sean Mussenden, left, and Merrill College Lecturer Derek Willis.



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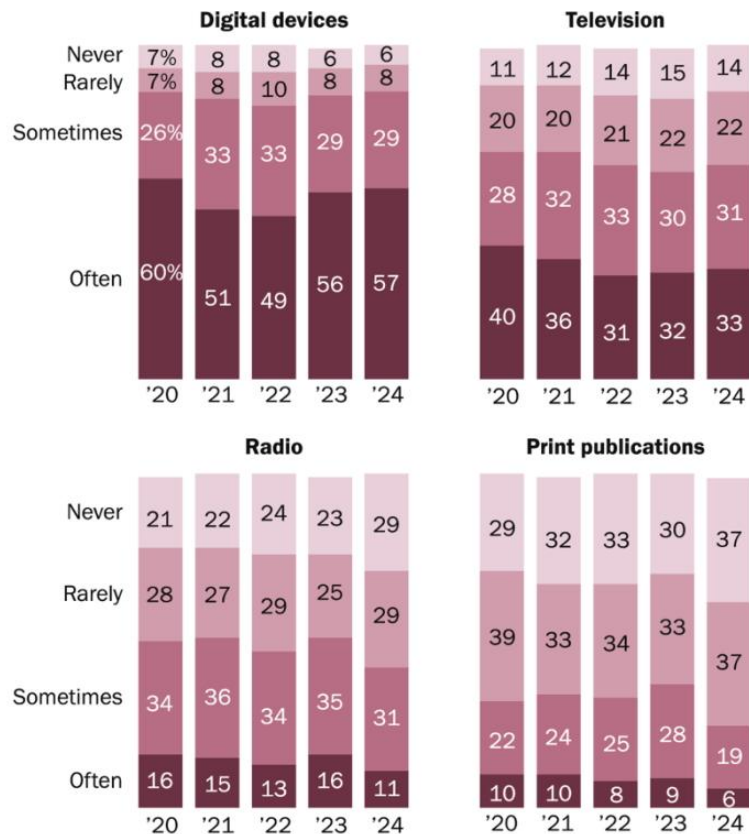
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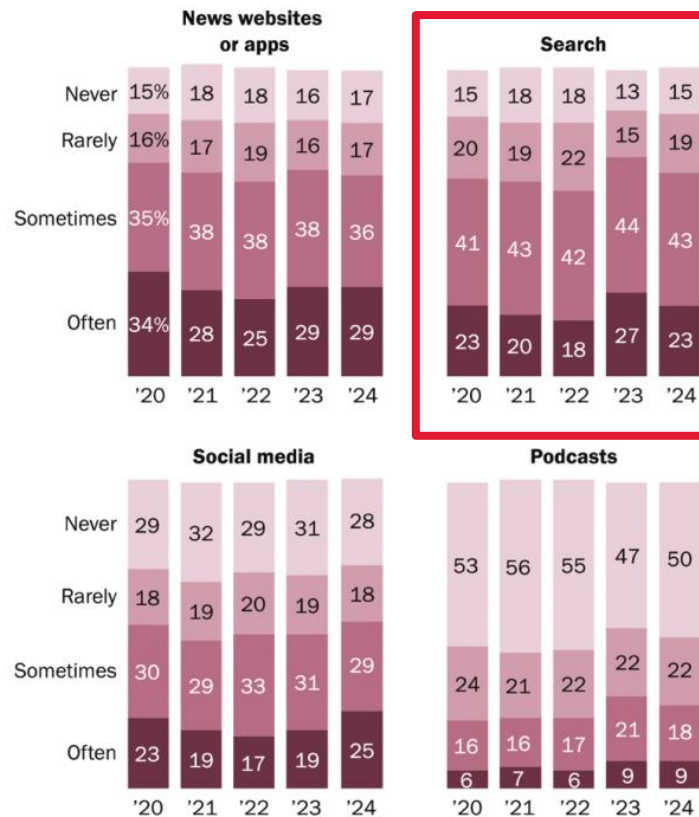
News consumption across platforms

% of U.S. adults who ____ get news from ...



News consumption across digital platforms

% of U.S. adults who ____ get news from ...



Markers of quality, relevance and authoritativeness

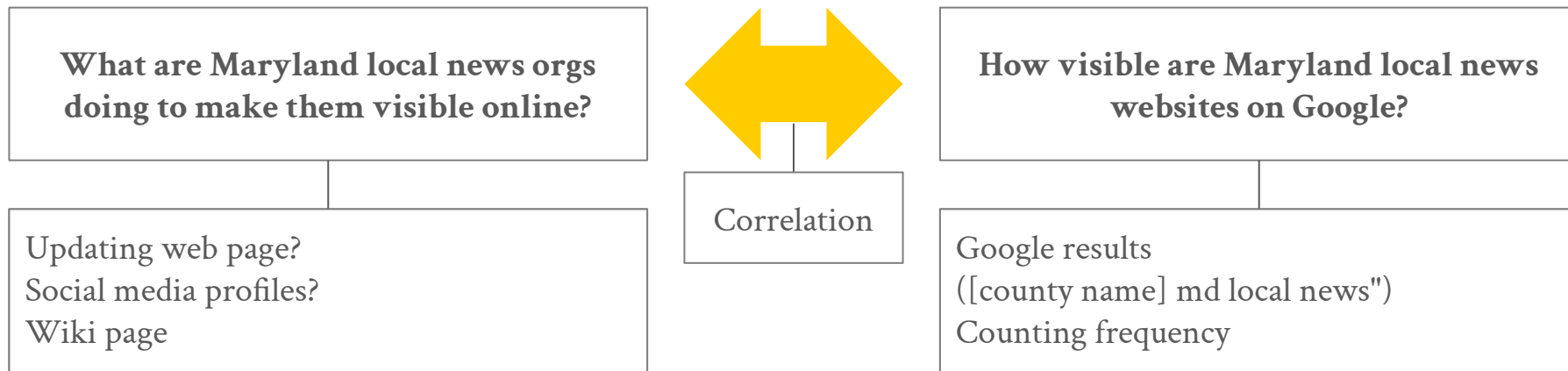
- Search Engine Optimization
- Multimedia content
- Updated information
- Recent updates
- Wikipedia presence
- Social media profiles

**All this requires
time, effort and
resources**



Method

Collect two modes of data and cross-analyze them

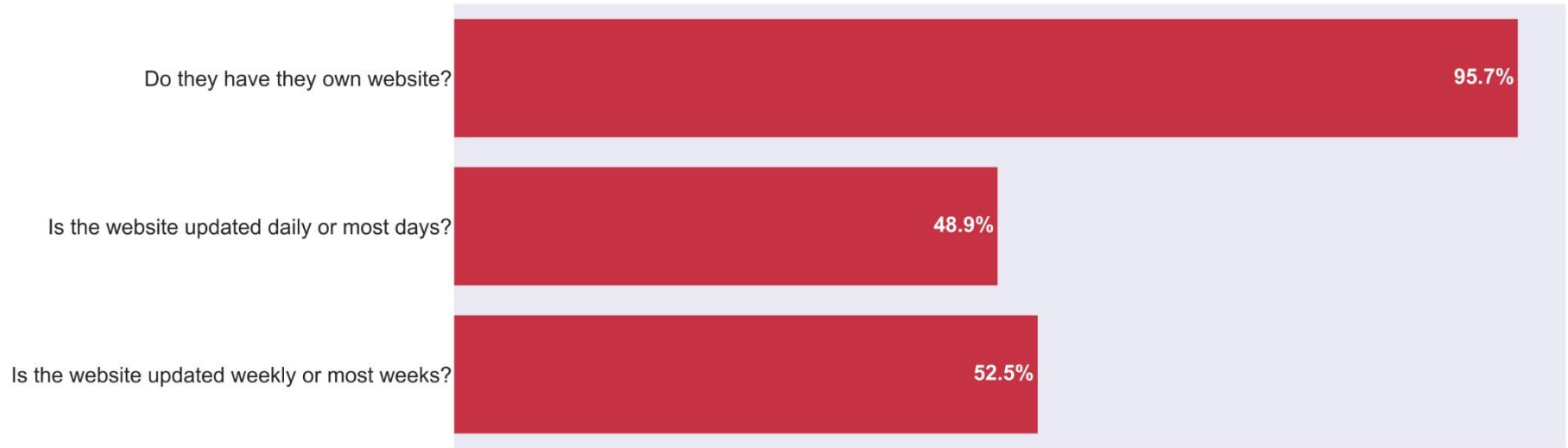


Digital positioning data collected about the local news organizations

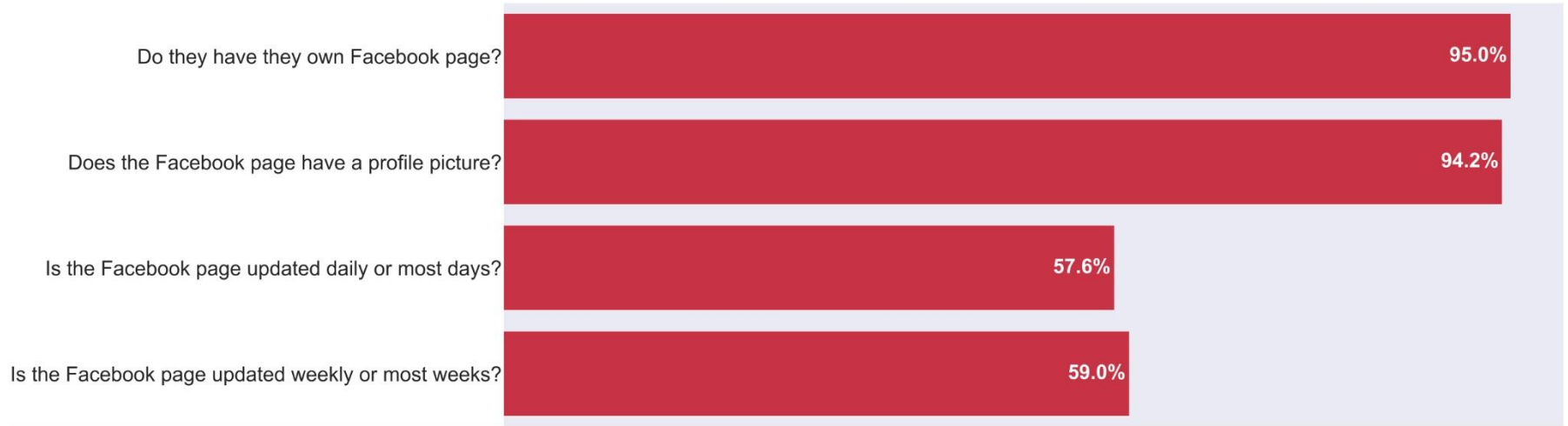
Website	Do they have their own website?
	Is that website updated every day?
	Is that website updated every week?
Social media: Facebook	Do they have a social media page on Facebook?
	Does that Facebook page have a profile picture?
	Is that Facebook page updated every day?
	Is that Facebook page updated every week?
Social media: X	Do they have a social media profile on X (formerly Twitter)?
	Does that X profile have a profile picture?
	Is that X profile updated every day?
	Is that X profile updated every week?
Wikipedia	Do they have a Wikipedia page?
	If they do have Wikipedia page, is it a stub?



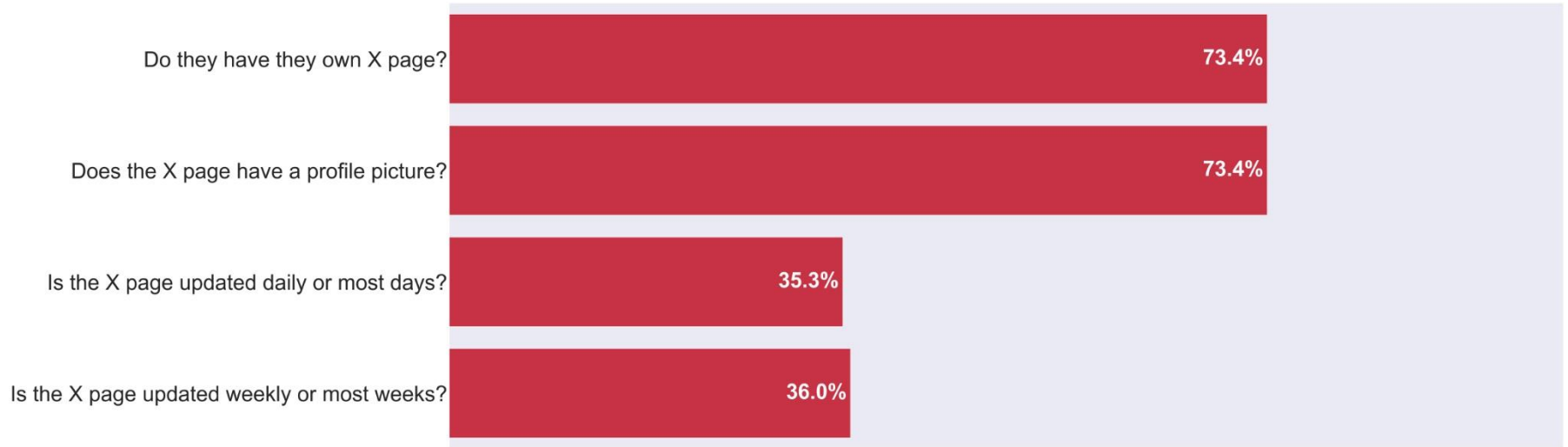
Results: Digital Positioning



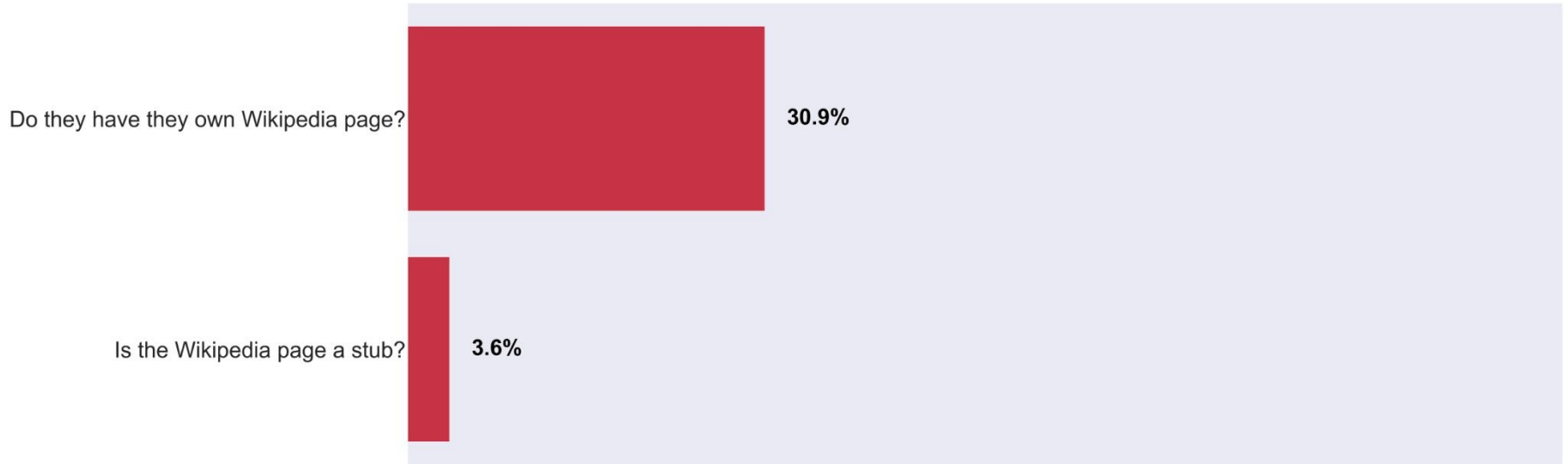
Results: Digital Positioning



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Results: Digital Positioning

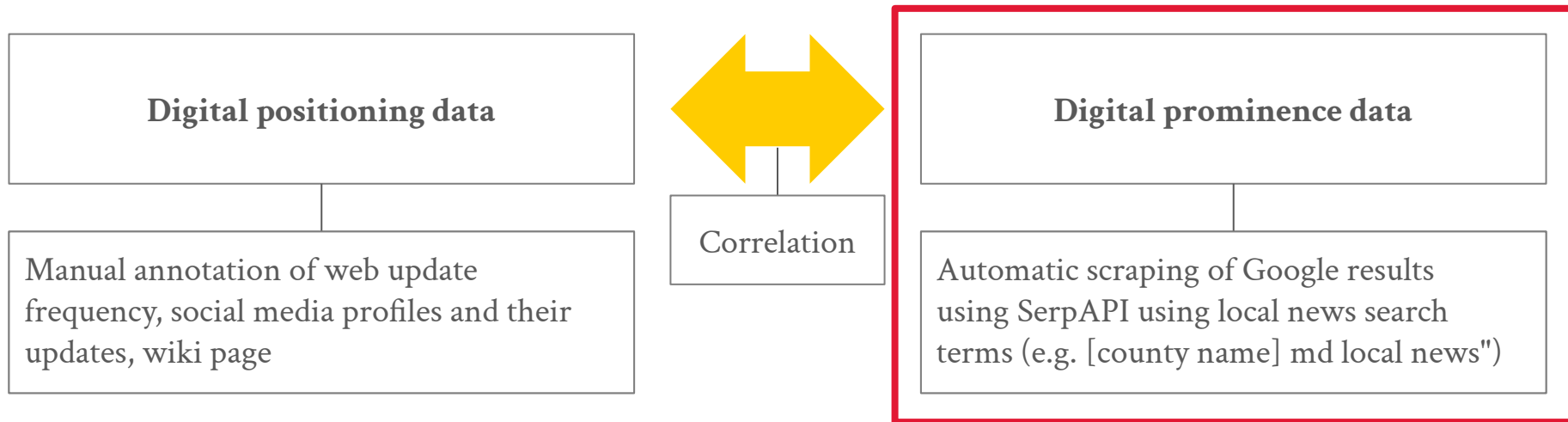


Results: Digital Positioning

Metric	Value
Average number of positioning features	8.4
Median number of positioning features	9.0
Standard deviation of positioning features	3.0
Maximum number of positioning features	12.0
Minimum number of positioning features	1.0

Method

Collect two modes of data and cross-analyze them



List of search terms used to scrape for digital prominence data

[county name] local news

[county name] news

[county name] politics

[county name] traffic

[county name] crime

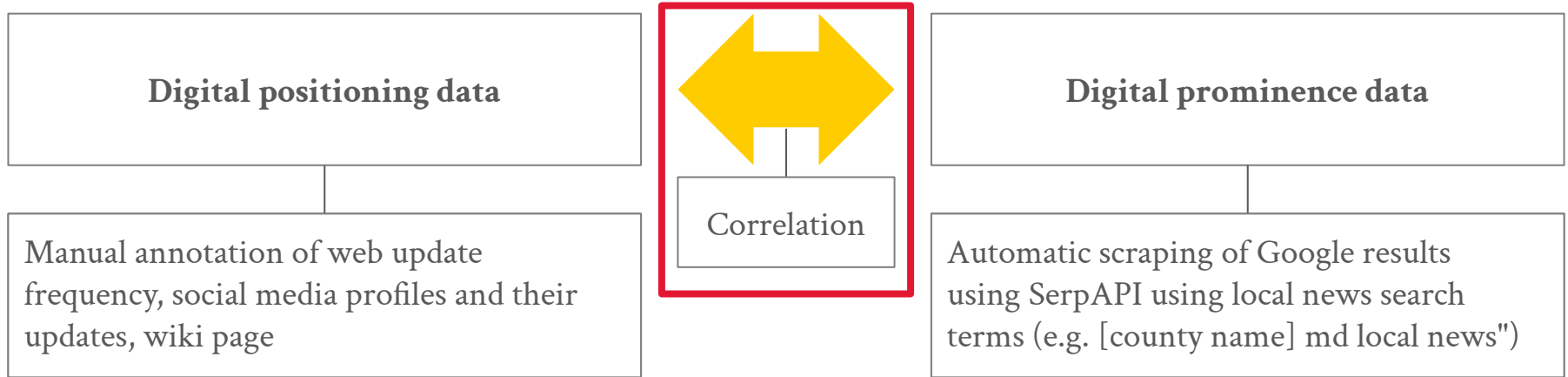
23 counties + 1 city x 5 terms per county = 120 search terms

Results: Digital Prominence

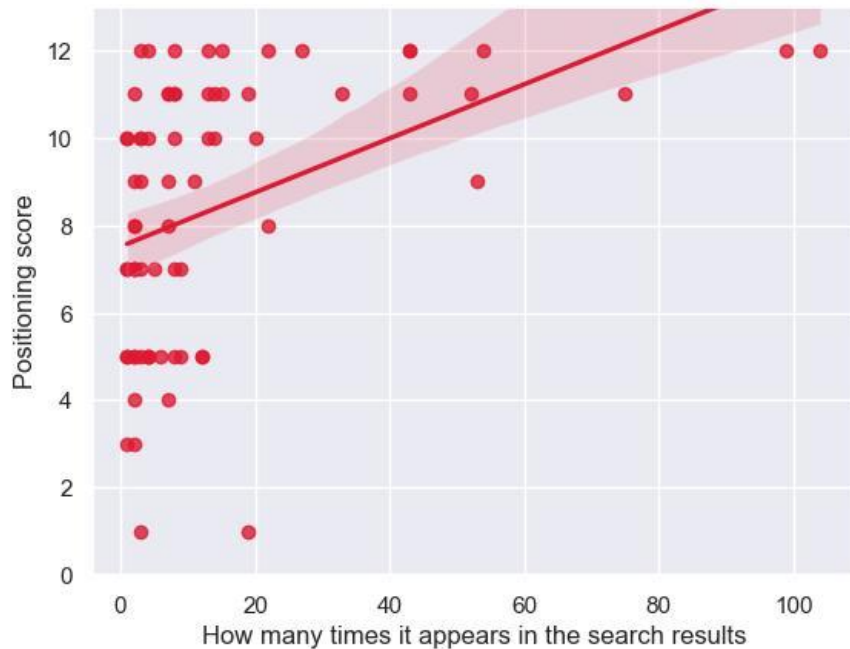
	Local news organizations	Other sources	Total
How many individual sources	102	1375	1477
Percent of individual sources	6.9%	93.1%	100.0%
How often they show up on results	1216	8267	9483
Percent of time they show up on results	12.8%	87.2%	100.0%
How often they show up on top ten results	231	967	1198
Percent of time they show up on top ten results	19.3%	80.7%	100.0%
Average position in result ranking	44.5	48.3	47.8
Median position in result ranking	44.0	48.0	47.0
Standard deviation of position in result ranking	29.3	28.5	28.7

Method

Collect two modes of data and cross-analyze them

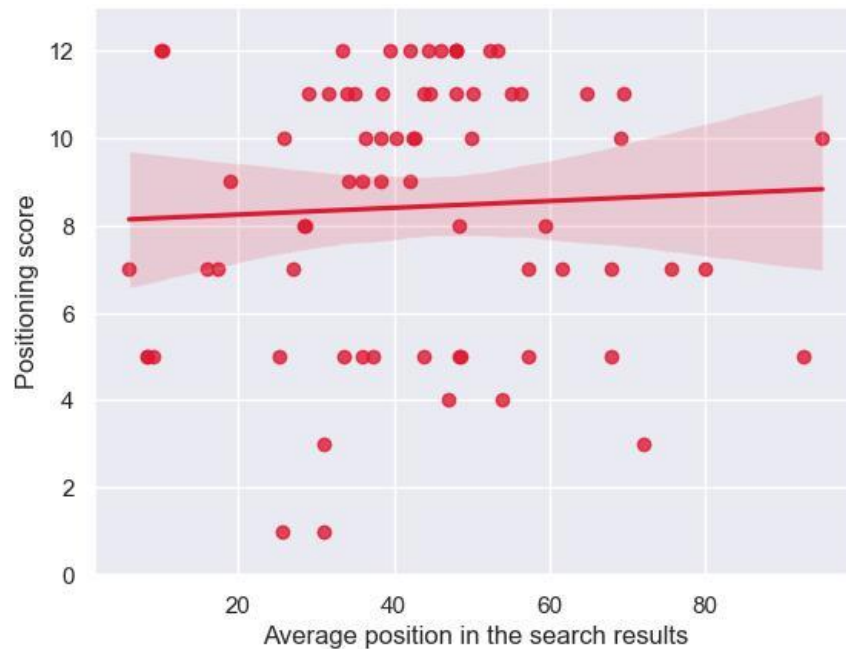


Positioning score x times a local news organization shows up on Google



Pearson correlation: 0.434
P-value: 0.0002

Positioning score x average ranking on Google results



Pearson correlation: 0.049
P-value: 0.686

Summary and implications

A lot of local news organizations **do not update** their websites or social media pages even every week.

6.9% of sources represent **12.8%** of results on Google.

The usage of the digital positioning strategies we have measured is positively associated with **presence** in Google results (though not on average ranking).

Therefore, we propose that these positioning strategies is the **minimum** that a news organization must do to be successful online.

Current work

Differentiate which strategies are the **most effective**.

Measure online presence of local news in **other digital platforms**.

Collect digital presence for **a longer period of time**.



Research

Collaboration

Teaching



Teaching and collaboration

We want our students to:

See the **reality** of local news.

Discover your **needs and constraints**.

Come up with **actionable information**.

Options to how to do that:

Embed them in local newsrooms.

Have them **observe and interview**.

Come up with **individualized reports**.

Interested?
Fill out this form:
go.umd.edu/vln