



Critical Information Needs of the American Public: Definition, Evaluation, Barriers

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... and others.

**The Communication Policy Research Network (CPRN)
includes over 30 members from across the U.S.**

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Challenges facing the public and policymakers

- **Radical transformations of the U.S. society**
Transition from industrial to post-industrial, information age society
- **Technological shifts and changes in the media system**
Massive restructuring of all media systems brought about by the introduction of disruptive technologies
- **Widespread concerns about the availability & quality of information**
Information needs of communities not adequately met, democracy at risk
- **Claims that new technologies serve information needs better than ever**
Do digital platforms solve availability, accessibility and participation challenges?
- **New analytical approaches needed in this complex environment**
Both for diagnosis & prescription, to smooth the emergence of new regulatory, legal, and commercial actions & to ensure critical information needs are met.

Analytical Approach

- **Two years of discussion with experts from the CPRN network and beyond.**
An interdisciplinary approach to re-evaluate categories like diversity, participation, digital divide, critical information needs, and more in a digital age.
- **Systematic examination of the literature in a wide range of areas.**
Communication, journalism, economics, sociology, political science, geography, urban studies, urban planning, library & information science, health, education, transportation, environmental science, emergency & risk management.
- **References contributed by scholars & experts from across the U.S.**
Over 20 major contributors, a wide variety of areas of expertise.
- **An initial list of 1000 works narrowed down to ~485 annotated entries.**
Examining CIN, the media ecologies that serve them, barriers to participation, and a range of available methodologies and measures.

Meeting the Critical Information Needs of Americans



- **A Moving Target: Capturing CIN in a Changing America**
Policy-relevant definitions of diversity during the ongoing vast demographic shifts.



- **Defining Critical Information Needs**
Emergency & public safety, health & welfare, education, transportation, economic opportunities, environment, civic, political information



- **Differentiation of Critical Information Needs**
Within/between communities; Demographic groups; Platforms



- **Shortage of CIN Research in Key Areas**
Local education, health, and political coverage, particularly in marginalized and low-income communities. Lack of literature on CIN across levels of the local information ecology.

Critical information Needs and the Media Ecosystem

- **The Role of Traditional Media Outlets**

Traditional media do not have a working business model, yet they remain the main source of the information circulating local media ecosystems.

- **Patterns of Original News Production**

Substantial changes over time point to the need for continued research on the production and flow of original news and information.

- **Different Media Platforms Serve Different Social Functions**

Differences for both producers and consumers; ongoing shifts over time.

- **Women & Marginalized Groups in Content Production & Distribution**

Existing works w/too narrow focus on Hispanics & African-Americans. Measures are fairly superficial; additional studies of the ownership - employment - content relationship needed (including ones focusing on online dynamics)

Barriers to Addressing Critical Information Needs



- **Barriers emerging from marketplace dynamics**
Access to capital, advertisement dynamics, etc.



- **Barriers emerging from organizational dynamics**
Ownership, hiring practices, etc.



- **Individual-level barriers to participation**
Access to technology and infrastructure, digital literacy, linguistic, cultural, underrepresentation, etc. Noteworthy distinction between barriers to *access* vs. *participation*.



- **Both information needs & barriers evolve over time**
Much like minimal standards for telecom public service.

Summary

- **Analytical approaches, methods & metrics, available data sets and resources**
Critical review of existing methodology & available data indicates good foundation but existing analyses do *not* effectively answer FCC's questions.
- **Key barriers, shifting social dynamics, and the cost of exclusion**
Shifts in technology and society lead to changes in CIN that need to be studied.
- **What does policy-relevant research look like today?**
Large-N econometric studies cannot fully capture the complex dynamics and interdependencies of the multi-platform digitally-enabled local media ecologies.
- **Needed next: multi-level analytical framework grounded in ecological thinking**
Grounded in existing demographic models & data, w/ a range of media measures (surveys, content analysis, social network analysis, and qualitative research).
- **Developing robust and testable indicators of performance**
For internal evaluation, policymakers, local government, etc.

Recommendations

- 1. To fulfill FCC's statutory mission, need to investigate whether and how local information needs are met > critical first step to understanding how markets, government policies and individual and group actions can meet the information needs of their communities.**
- 2. Take into account variations w/in communities and specific populations in studying CINs – Look to America of 2042.**
- 3. Incorporate into analysis the exponentially growing costs of network exclusion & increasingly complex functioning of local media systems.**
- 4. Complement existing econometric analyses w/ additional analytic models such as a communication ecological approach (multi-level/multi-method); aim to be valid, replicable, and parsimonious.**
- 5. Develop robust, testable indicators of performance for policy-/community-relevant evaluation.**

Conclusions

- ✓ **The American public has measurable, significant & unmet information needs at the individual and community level**
- ✓ **The FCC can track CINs consistently with rigorous research that can meet standards of comparability, parsimony *and* economy.**
- ✓ **Access to actionable & objective information across multiple platforms and disciplines is essential to community economic wellbeing and democracy.**
- ✓ **Full integration of *all* Americans into the information economy is necessary pre-requisite to better inform and educate a nation of pluralities, to serve compelling governmental & public interests.**