

Jurisdictional Information Mismatch: The Structural Inversion of Democratic Information Availability

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ABSTRACT: This paper introduces *jurisdictional information mismatch* (JIM) as a named concept in communication and democratic theory. The argument is that platform-era information systems operated according to an inverted geography: their economic and technical architecture systematically produced and amplified information about national and global actors while structurally underserving local and municipal information environments. The result is a structural mismatch between the geography of democratic power, which is concentrated at the local level for most citizens in most governance contexts, and the geography of information availability, which is overwhelmingly oriented toward national and global scales. JIM is developed as an architectural condition produced by three intersecting forces: accelerating local newsroom closure, platform recommendation systems that are jurisdictionally blind by design, and the attention economy's structural preference for scale. The paper distinguishes JIM from adjacent concepts (news deserts, information gaps, algorithmic bias, market failure), situates it within the Control Room Theory of Democracy as the spatial dimension of the democratic information deficit, and proposes the Jurisdictional Information Coverage Ratio (JICR) as a measurement instrument. Three case strands—the Canadian local news closure, the Fischer et al. (2020) Google News audit, and the Hayes and Lawless (2021) causal-chain study of US congressional districts—illustrate the construct's empirical traction. The paper concludes with policy implications: existing supply-side regulatory responses address local newsroom collapse but do not address the platform distribution architecture that systematically deprioritizes local content.

KEYWORDS: Local Journalism, News Deserts, Platform Governance, Democratic Theory, Information Mismatch, Jurisdictional Federalism, Algorithmic Distribution, Civic Engagement

1. Introduction

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville identified the municipality as the essential unit of American democratic education. "Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science," he wrote; "they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it" (Tocqueville, 1835/2000, p. 67). Whatever the limitations of Tocqueville's observation as political history, its structural claim retains analytical force: the local is where democratic participation is most direct, most consequential for individual lives, and most legible to citizens who engage with it.

Platform information systems have inverted this relationship. Citizens now encounter vast quantities of information about national elections, global conflicts, and international policy debates, delivered through recommendation systems optimized for engagement at scale. They encounter minimal information about the city council vote that rezoned their neighbourhood, the school board decision that restructured their children's educational environment, or the municipal budget process that determined how public resources were allocated in their community. The information environment is richest

precisely where individual democratic agency is least powerful, and thinnest precisely where it is most powerful.

This inversion is the subject of substantial empirical documentation. Research on news desert expansion has catalogued the closure of local newsrooms across North American and European democracies (Abernathy, 2018, 2020; Lindgren et al., 2020). Research on platform information distribution has demonstrated that national and international outlets dominate algorithmically mediated attention even in geographic areas where local news technically exists (Fischer et al., 2020). Research on civic engagement has established a causal relationship between the loss of local news and political disengagement at the local level (Hayes & Lawless, 2021). What the empirical literature does not provide is a name for the structural condition that all of these research streams document in isolation.

This paper provides that name. *Jurisdictional information mismatch* (JIM) is the structural condition in which democratic decision-making authority is concentrated at jurisdictional levels that platform-era information systems systematically underserve. In contrast, those systems amplify information about jurisdictional levels where individual democratic agency is most diluted. JIM is architecturally produced by the intersection of three forces: the economic collapse of local newsrooms, the jurisdictional indifference of platform recommendation systems, and the attention economy's structural preference for national-scale content.

The concept is transplanted and extended from environmental law, where Adler (2005) introduced "jurisdictional mismatch" to describe the condition in which the geographic scale of environmental problems does not align with the geographic scope of regulatory authority. The transplantation is structural rather than metaphorical: in both domains, the mismatch arises from a systematic failure of the institutional architecture to match the geographic scale at which the problem is produced to the geographic scale at which democratic remediation is attempted. In environmental law, the mismatch means that pollution produced at a regional scale cannot be regulated by states whose borders do not capture the full scope of the problem. In information systems, the mismatch means that democratic participation at the local scale cannot be supported by systems operating at the national and global scales.

This paper makes five contributions. First, it formally defines JIM and distinguishes it from adjacent concepts. Second, it establishes the three-part causal structure of JIM: newsroom collapse, platform jurisdictional indifference, and attention economy scale preference. Third, it connects JIM to the Control Room Theory of Democracy as the spatial dimension of the democratic information deficit. Fourth, it proposes the Jurisdictional Information Coverage Ratio (JICR) as a measurement instrument that permits cross-community comparison. Fifth, it derives the policy implications: the regulatory target for JIM differs from the regulatory targets for content moderation and supply-side subsidies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Local Journalism and the News Desert Literature

The empirical record of local newsroom closure is extensive and consistent across democracies. In the United States, Abernathy (2018, 2020) documented the loss of approximately 1,800 newspapers between 2004 and 2018, with closure rates accelerating in subsequent years. Abernathy introduced the "news desert" concept (communities with no local news coverage of any kind) and the "ghost newspaper" concept (publications that technically continue but have eliminated the reporting capacity required to cover local institutions).

In Canada, Lindgren et al. (2020) documented 447 local news closures since 2008 and identified specific coverage gaps in rural and northern communities. The pattern is consistent with the US findings: closure is concentrated in smaller markets, the communities losing coverage are disproportionately lower-income and less educated, and replacement by digital alternatives has been partial and geographically uneven.

The causal consequences of local news loss for democratic participation are documented most rigorously by Hayes and Lawless (2021). Analyzing a 15-year dataset on local news coverage and political engagement across US congressional districts, they establish the causal chain: when local newspapers close or reduce coverage, coverage of local governance declines, voters' knowledge of local candidates and issues declines, voter turnout in local elections declines, and electoral accountability of local officeholders declines. The democratic costs are concrete and measurable, not speculative. Napoli et al. (2017) provide the conceptual vocabulary for the normative claim: local journalism must be assessed against the "information needs of local communities", the civic, electoral, and governance information required for local democratic participation.

What the news desert literature does not provide is a structural account of why the gap is produced and maintained at the architectural level. It describes the effects of newsroom closure but does not theorize the relationship between the closure pattern and the platform information architecture that fills, or more precisely, does not fill, the space that local newsrooms once occupied.

2.2. Platform Information Distribution and Geographic Scope

Fischer et al. (2020) provide the most direct empirical evidence for the platform dimension of JIM. Their audit of 12.29 million Google News queries demonstrates that national outlets dominate search results even for searches with local geographic framing. The local information supply that technically exists is systematically deprioritized by recommendation algorithms that, at scale, optimize for engagement signals. National outlets generate more engagement signals than local outlets by virtue of their audience size, not their relevance to any individual citizen's information needs.

Hindman (2018) provides the theoretical account of why this pattern is structurally stable. The attention economy produces a winner-take-all concentration of digital traffic in a small number of high-engagement outlets regardless of geographic relevance. Local outlets cannot generate the engagement signals required for algorithmic prominence because they serve geographically bounded audiences. Geographic boundedness is precisely the characteristic that makes them democratically essential yet algorithmically marginal. Waldman (2011), in the FCC's foundational report on community information needs, identified the platform information architecture as structurally national in scope: platforms are built around national-scale content production and national-scale advertising markets, with no economic incentive to serve local information needs that cannot be aggregated to national scale.

2.3. The Federalism Analogy

The environmental law literature provides both the conceptual lineage and the structural template for JIM. Adler (2005) identified jurisdictional mismatch in environmental federalism as the condition in which environmental problems are produced at a geographic scale (regional air sheds, river basins, multistate groundwater systems) that does not align with the jurisdictional scope of the regulatory authority available to address them. State environmental agencies cannot regulate pollution that crosses state borders. The regulatory authority is confined to a jurisdiction that does not capture the full scope of the problem.

Adler's formal structure maps precisely onto information systems. The critical difference is directional: in environmental law, local authority is insufficient to address a problem that spills over local boundaries; in information systems, the mismatch is the inverse. The national and global information infrastructure is structurally insufficient to meet the local information needs of democratic participation. The geographic relationship is inverted, but the structural logic is the same: the architecture does not match the scale of the problem it is supposed to address.

2.4. Democratic Theory and the Local Information Requirement

The normative foundation for JIM's democratic significance is grounded in two traditions. Tocqueville's (1835/2000) observation about the municipality as a school for democratic participation reflects a structural argument: local democratic participation requires local information to function. Citizens cannot engage meaningfully with a city council decision without information about what the decision involves, what alternatives were considered, who stood to benefit, and what the governance process looked like. The information requirement is not supplementary to local democracy, but is constitutive of it. Dahl (1989) provides the normative standard: for democratic decisions to be legitimate, citizens must have adequate opportunities for "enlightened understanding" of the policies being decided, their likely consequences, and the available alternatives. The criterion applies with particular force at the local level: the decisions most directly affecting citizens' lives (zoning, school governance, municipal services, local taxation) are precisely the decisions about which information is least available in the platform-era information environment.

The JIM analysis sits at the intersection of two further bodies of comparative work that the framework extends. Comparative federalism research (Bednar, 2009; Inman & Rubinfeld, 1997) examines how democratic systems allocate decision-making authority across jurisdictional levels and what conditions are required for each level to function effectively. The standard analysis holds that local governance is most effective when citizens have both the information to hold local officials accountable and the capacity to participate meaningfully in local decisions. JIM analysis adds the information-architecture dimension: the effectiveness of local democratic governance depends not only on the formal allocation of authority but also on the information conditions that make participation possible. Urban political economy research (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Stone, 1989) documents the role of local boosterism and growth coalitions in shaping urban governance, arguing that local governance is frequently captured by development interests whose preferences diverge from those of ordinary residents. The accountability mechanism that theoretically constrains this capture is local journalism. JIM analysis adds the information architecture dimension to that account as well: as local newsrooms close and platform systems deprioritize local coverage, the accountability mechanism assumed by the urban political economy literature is further degraded. The JIM condition structurally enables the capture documented in the literature.

3. Defining Jurisdictional Information Mismatch

Jurisdictional information mismatch (JIM) is defined as the structural condition in which the geographic scope of democratic decision-making authority and the geographic scope of information system distribution do not align, such that citizens have the most accessible information about the levels of governance where their individual agency is most diluted and least accessible information about the levels of governance where their individual agency is most direct.

The definition has three components. The *geographic scope of democratic decision-making authority* is not uniform across jurisdictional levels. At the municipal

level, a single citizen's vote in a local election can determine an outcome. Attendance at a public meeting can influence a policy decision. A phone call to a city councillor is likely to produce a response. At the national level, the same citizen's vote is one of millions: their individual communication with a national representative is a rounding error in the representative's information environment. Democratic power (the capacity to influence collective decisions) is concentrated at the local level for most citizens in most governance contexts. The *geographic scope of information system distribution* operates by an opposite logic. Platform information systems distribute information according to engagement optimization algorithms that are, by design, jurisdictionally indifferent. The attention economy's scale preference means that national-scope content generates more engagement signals across a platform's user base than local-scope content, making national content algorithmically preferable regardless of individual democratic relevance. The *inversion* is that the information environment is richest where democratic power is most diluted and thinnest where it is most concentrated.

JIM is analytically distinct from several adjacent concepts. JIM is not a *news desert*: a news desert is a community with no local news coverage, whereas JIM is available even in communities where local journalism technically continues but is algorithmically deprioritized. JIM is not an *information gap* in the generic sense: the deficit is specifically structured by the relationship between democratic power levels and information distribution levels. JIM is not *algorithmic bias* in the standard sense: platform algorithms are not biased against local content the way they might be biased against marginalized groups, as they are *indifferent* to geographic scale, optimizing for engagement signals without regard to democratic relevance. JIM is not a *market failure* in the standard economic sense: market failure analysis explains why local newsrooms close, but does not explain what happens in the information space they leave behind. Platform systems do not simply leave a vacuum. Instead, they fill the space with available national content, optimized for engagement, and structurally blind to local democratic relevance.

The intersection of three structural forces produces JIM. *Force 1: Local newsroom closure*. The economic collapse of the local newspaper industry removes the primary institutions responsible for producing information on local governance. *Force 2: Platform jurisdictional indifference*. Recommendation algorithms that optimize for engagement signals systematically prefer national-scale content because national content generates engagement signals across larger user populations. *Force 3: Attention economy scale preference*. The economic model of digital media (advertising revenue tied to audience scale) creates structural incentives to produce content at the largest possible scale. The three forces are mutually reinforcing: newsroom closure reduces the supply of local content, which reduces its presence in platform environments, which reduces its engagement signals, which reduces the advertising revenue that might support its production.

4. JIM and the Control Room Theory of Democracy

Within the Control Room Theory of Democracy (Cordeiro, 2026d), jurisdictional information mismatch falls within the structural-conditions cluster, serving as a foundational condition in the causal chain. While democratic legibility (Cordeiro, 2026a) describes what citizens can read about the systems governing their information, and epistemic velocity (Cordeiro, 2026c) describes how quickly different claims move through those systems, JIM describes *where* those systems provide information and where they do not. It names the geographic architecture of the democratic information deficit.

Democratic legibility (Cordeiro, 2026a) requires both that information exist and that citizens be able to interpret it. JIM operates at the prior level: in communities experiencing severe JIM conditions, the information does not exist to be legible or illegible. The local zoning decision, the school board vote, the municipal budget process. These are not subject to the democratic legibility problem if they receive no coverage at all. The relationship is sequential: JIM must be partially resolved before democratic legibility becomes the relevant problem. In communities where local information exists but citizens cannot interpret the governance systems it describes, democratic legibility is the binding constraint. In communities where local information is lacking, JIM is the prior binding constraint.

Credibility infrastructure (Cordeiro, 2026b) is itself subject to jurisdictional information mismatch. The credibility infrastructure that matters for local democratic decisions is local: the local newsroom that has established verification practices, relationships with local sources, and community accountability. When local newsrooms close, both the information and the credibility infrastructure that made it trustworthy disappear simultaneously. This creates a compounding problem. JIM, in its most severe form, does not merely remove local information; it removes the institutional capacity that could make future local information credible. A new hyperlocal digital outlet serving a news desert community has no inherited credibility infrastructure: no established verification norms, no source relationships, no community track record. JIM, in degrading credibility infrastructure at the local level, makes its own resolution more difficult.

Epistemic velocity operates asymmetrically across jurisdictional levels in the context of JIM. National-scope claims travel through well-developed information networks with established amplification infrastructure: major national outlets, large social media followings, national political figures with direct platform access. Local-scope claims travel through degraded or absent local information networks with limited amplification capacity. The democratic accountability function of journalism (not merely its information function) is jurisdictionally impaired: corrections and accountability in local governance depend on the local information network for propagation, and in communities experiencing severe JIM conditions, neither exists.

5. Measurement: The Jurisdictional Information Coverage Ratio

The Jurisdictional Information Coverage Ratio (JICR) operationalizes jurisdictional information mismatch as a measurable relationship between information supply across jurisdictional levels and the democratic significance of those levels for the community in question. The JICR is calculated as the ratio of a Local Coverage Supply Index (LCSI) to a National Coverage Exposure Index (NCEI). The LCSI measures the quantity and accessibility of locally relevant governance information available to residents of a defined community: the number of active local newsrooms covering municipal governance, the platform accessibility of local coverage (the average rank position of local outlets in platform search results for governance queries), and community awareness of local governance processes. The NCEI measures the quantity of national and international news that residents of the same community encounter in the same time period: the volume of national news content consumed, the proportion of total news consumption accounted for by national versus local outlets, and a survey-based measure of whether residents can identify recent national policy debates.

A JICR of 1.0 indicates proportional coverage: the ratio of local to national information supply matches the ratio of local to national democratic significance for the community. Values below 1.0 indicate JIM conditions; values substantially below 1.0 indicate severe JIM. The JICR requires a Democratic Significance Weight (DSW) to

account for variation in the democratic significance of governance decisions across jurisdictional levels, calculated as the product of an individual agency coefficient (the degree to which individual citizen action can influence the decision outcome), a material impact coefficient (the magnitude of the decision's effect on residents' material conditions), and a reversibility coefficient (the degree to which the decision can be reversed by subsequent democratic action).

The DSW is a *normative-empirical* construct rather than a purely technical parameter, and the choice of weighting scheme is consequential for cross-community comparison. The framework recommends reporting JICR results across at least three weighting schemes with conceptually distinct bases. *Equal weighting* (each jurisdictional level (municipal, regional, national) weighted at 0.33) is the conservative null. *Decision-frequency weighting* derives weights from the observed frequency of consequential decisions at each level for the community in question (a municipality with active rezoning, school-board reorganization, and budget contestation will weight municipal decisions at a level higher than 0.33). *Authority-power weighting* derives weights from the formal authority of each level over the policy domains most material to the community (e.g., for a community where housing-cost stress is the binding policy concern, the authority-power weighting will assign a higher weight to whichever level holds zoning and tenant-protection authority). The three schemes will produce different JICR estimates for the same community; reporting all three makes the normative dependence of the resulting JICR explicit rather than concealed in a single technical-looking number. The choice among schemes for any specific policy or research application should be argued for, not assumed; the framework's contribution lies in the structured comparison, not in a privileged weighting.

The JICR can be applied at three scales. At the *community level*, it enables the identification of severe JIM conditions and comparison across communities with similar population size and demographic composition (Hayes and Lawless [2021] provide the methodological template). At the *platform level*, it permits comparison across platforms and assessment of platform-specific JIM amplification (Fischer et al. [2020] provide the methodological template). At the *regulatory-period level*, it permits assessment of whether regulatory interventions (such as Canada's *Online News Act* (Government of Canada, 2023), the EU *Digital Services Act* (Regulation [EU] 2022/2065, 2022), or Canada's Local Journalism Initiative) reduce JIM.

6. The Self-Reinforcing Dynamic and Empirical Traction

JIM follows a self-reinforcing dynamic that tends to increase in severity over time without structural intervention. The dynamic operates through five stages: local newsroom closure reduces local coverage supply; reduced local coverage reduces community awareness of local governance processes and electoral engagement; reduced electoral engagement reduces political pressure on local officials to maintain the conditions that support local journalism; reduced political pressure reduces the policy interventions that might slow or reverse newsroom closure; and accelerated newsroom closure deepens the local coverage deficit. The self-reinforcing dynamic has a specific political economy: the actors who benefit from reduced local coverage accountability (local political officials who face less scrutiny, developers whose projects receive less investigative attention, and institutional actors whose decisions receive less public examination) have resources and incentives to resist the policy interventions that might reverse the dynamic. The democratic counterpart (the citizen who needs local information to participate effectively) lacks the concentrated incentive and resources to match this resistance.

Three case strands illustrate the empirical traction of JIM. The Canadian case provides an unusually well-documented instance at the national scale: 447 local news outlets closed between 2008 and 2020, with rural and northern communities disproportionately affected and Indigenous communities facing the most severe JIM conditions (Lindgren et al., 2020). The Canadian *Online News Act* (Bill C-18, 2023) and the Local Journalism Initiative represent two regulatory responses that focus on the supply side without addressing the platform distribution dimension. The Google News audit by Fischer et al. (2020) provides direct empirical evidence for the platform dimension. Across 12.29 million news search queries in 200 US metro areas, national outlets dominated Google News results for searches related to topics with both national and local relevance, and local outlets appeared prominently only when users explicitly included geographic modifiers in their queries. The study by Hayes and Lawless (2021) establishes an empirical causal chain from the loss of local news coverage to a decline in democratic participation: the loss of local newspaper coverage of House races was directly associated with reduced voter knowledge of candidates, reduced electoral accountability, and electoral effects concentrated specifically within the local electoral context.

7. Policy Implications

Current regulatory responses to the local news crisis target the supply side: subsidizing local newsroom operation (Canada's Local Journalism Initiative, European local journalism funds), requiring platform contributions to local news funds (Canada's *Online News Act*, Australia's *News Media Bargaining Code*), and mandating platform transparency about content distribution (EU *Digital Services Act* researcher access provisions). These interventions address real problems but do not directly address the JIM condition. The supply-side interventions assume that if local newsrooms can be sustained, the local information they produce will reach the democratic participants who need it. The platform distribution dimension of JIM challenges this assumption: even where local news exists, algorithmic deprioritization limits its reach. A locally produced account of a city council meeting that does not surface in algorithmically mediated search results and feeds fails to reach the residents for whom it is democratically relevant, regardless of its production quality.

Anti-JIM regulation must address the production architecture that systematically deprioritizes local content, not only the economic conditions that constrain local newsroom operation. Three regulatory mechanisms follow from the JIM analysis. *Geographic content obligations* could require platform recommendation systems to maintain minimum coverage ratios for locally relevant civic content for users in specific geographic areas. This is analogous to the public interest obligations imposed on broadcast licensees: a local broadcaster cannot fill its entire schedule with national network programming because of the geographic specificity of its license. *Transparency requirements for geographic distribution* could require platforms to disclose, at the community level, the proportion of civic content delivered to residents that is locally, nationally, or internationally sourced. *JICR-based accountability standards* could require platforms to meet minimum JICR thresholds for communities with populations above a minimum threshold.

8. Limitations and Conclusion

The framework has acknowledged limitations. The JICR distinguishes between local coverage supply and platform distribution, and the empirical separation of these dimensions requires methodological precision: a community may have low local

coverage supply because newsrooms have closed, because existing local news does not reach residents through platform distribution, or both. Policy implications differ across these scenarios. The Democratic Significance Weight requires normative judgments about the relative significance of governance decisions at different levels, judgments that different democratic theories would weight differently; this paper used Dahl's enlightened understanding criterion as the normative foundation. The empirical literature on platform geographic distribution focuses primarily on Google News and Facebook; other platforms (TikTok, YouTube, X/Twitter) distribute civic content differently, and the JIM condition may vary substantially across platform types. The paper treated local newsroom closure as a supply-side collapse without fully assessing the degree to which digital alternatives (hyperlocal newsletters, community Facebook groups, local podcasts) might partially replace the democratic information function of traditional local news (Friedland et al., 2012).

Democracies are built on the assumption that citizens have access to the information their participation requires. The jurisdictional level at which information matters most for ordinary democratic participation (the municipality, the school board, the local election) is the level at which the platform-era information environment is most impoverished. The level at which information is most abundant (national and international affairs) is also the level at which individual democratic agency is most diluted. *Jurisdictional information mismatch* names this structural inversion. It is an architectural condition produced by the intersection of economic forces, technical systems, and political economy dynamics; like the physical infrastructure problems it parallels, JIM is invisible until the democratic consequences it produces become too severe to ignore. The contribution of naming the condition is not merely taxonomic. The policy implications of JIM differ from those of adjacent concepts with which it might be confused: addressing JIM requires interventions at the production-architecture level (geographic content obligations, platform transparency requirements for geographic distribution, JICR-based accountability standards) in addition to the supply-side interventions that current policy focuses on. The control room of democratic information, it turns out, has a geography. It is oriented toward the national and the global. Local citizens, at the level of governance where their participation most matters, are watching a feed from a control room that is not watching them back.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the RTA School of Media, The Creative School (FCAD), Toronto Metropolitan University, for research support.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflicts of interest: None declared.

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