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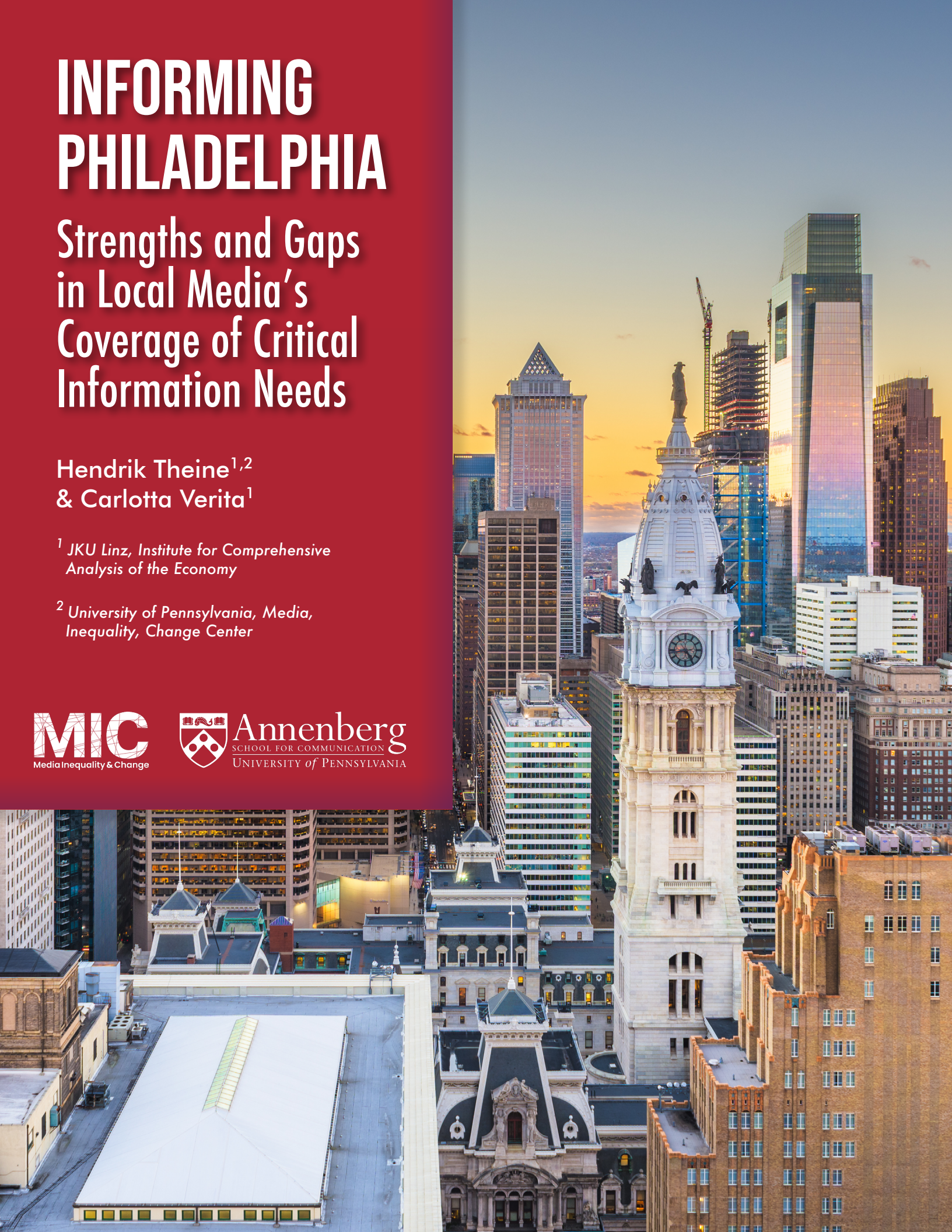
Strengths and Gaps in Local Media's Coverage of Critical Information Needs

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About the Authors

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About the Report

This report looks at how well Philadelphia's local news media keep residents informed about the issues that matter most for everyday life. Local news plays a vital role in helping people stay safe, healthy, and connected to their communities. But in recent years, newsrooms across the country have faced shrinking budgets, staff cuts, and growing competition from digital platforms.

To understand what this means for Philadelphia, we analyzed over 6,000 news stories from 15 local media outlets published in summer 2024. Using structural topic modeling, we examined: Which topics get the most coverage, how much of the news is truly local, and how ownership and media type shape editorial decisions.

Contents

Executive Summary

Local news is essential for keeping people informed and involved in their communities. This report examines how well Philadelphia's local media meet Critical Information Needs (CIN)—the information residents need to stay safe, healthy, engaged, and able to manage daily life. We analyzed over 6,000 news stories from 15 outlets published in summer 2024 using structural topic modeling, a quantitative text analysis method. We show which topics dominate media coverage, how much is locally focused, and how factors like media type and ownership influence editorial choices.

Key Findings

Limited local coverage: Only about 50% of analyzed news stories explicitly focus on Philadelphia-specific issues. This confirms earlier research showing that local news often make up only a fraction of overall media output.

Narrow thematic focus: News coverage is heavily concentrated on sports (18%), emergencies and public safety (14%), and arts, food and entertainment (14%). By contrast, critical areas such as economic development, education, and transportation receive little attention. Local politics is almost entirely absent from front-page coverage.

Ownership matters for media content: Privately owned outlets show the highest local focus (63%), often emphasizing sports and community events. In contract, stock-listed outlets prioritize emergencies and crime (25%), often in sensationalist ways, with limited attention to root causes or systemic issues. Nonprofit and public outlets devote proportionally more coverage to health and civic information but remain under-resourced.

Media type differences: Online-only outlets and daily newspapers provide the most local content, with online outlets especially focused on civic information. Local TV, in contrast, prioritized emergencies and crime.

Structural incentives shape coverage: We argue that topics like sports and crime dominate because they are easier to report, draw audiences quickly, and fit newsroom routines. In contrast, resource-intensive topics like education, health, or local governance require sustained reporting and attract less immediate engagement.

Implications: Philadelphia's local media ecosystem leaves major information gaps in areas essential for civic life, local economic issues, and public well-being. Without policy interventions, funding models for public interest journalism, or innovative local media institutions, critical community information needs will remain unmet—especially in underserved neighborhoods.

Informing Philadelphia: Strengths and Gaps in Local Media's Coverage of Critical Information Needs

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1. Introduction

Local news media play a critical role in informing communities and enabling civic participation, yet their ability to serve essential information needs is increasingly under threat. This report examines how well local media outlets in Philadelphia fulfill Critical Information Needs (CIN)—the types of information necessary for community members to actively participate in public life, remain safe and healthy, and effectively navigate their daily lives. We build on a framework initially proposed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and further developed by recent scholarship to explore whether and how Philadelphia's local news ecosystem addresses those needs.

Our analysis leverages structural topic modeling, a computational text mining analysis designed to uncover prevalent themes across a large corpus of media texts. By analyzing news coverage from fifteen Philadelphia media outlets during summer 2024, this report assesses not only which topics dominate local news but also the factors—including media type and ownership structure—that shape these editorial choices. Specifically, our analysis of over 6,000 news stories reveals a heavy emphasis on sports, emergencies, and community events, while essential areas such as local economic development, education, and health receive limited attention. Additionally, privately owned outlets demonstrated an unexpectedly strong local focus, contrasting sharply with the lower local coverage typical of stock-listed media.

The report is structured in the following way: First, we provide an overview of Critical Information Needs (section 2), particularly discussing the factors affecting CIN Coverage (section 3), followed by an overview of Philadelphia's media landscape (section 4) and an outline of our research methodology (section 5). We then present our detailed analysis of Philadelphia's local media coverage (section 6 and 7) and conclude with a discussion on the implications of our findings and recommendations for enhancing local journalism's ability to serve the community effectively (section 8).

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2. Critical Information Needs, community priorities and local media

The concept of critical information needs (CIN) emerged in the early 2010s as policymakers and scholars sought to define the essential information communities require. The foundational FCC-commissioned report in 2012 argued that there is an "identifiable set of basic information needs that individuals need met to navigate everyday life, and that communities need to have met in order to thrive" (Friedland et al., 2012, p. 40). The report defines critical information needs of local communities as "those forms of information that are necessary for citizens and community members to live safe and healthy lives; have full access to educational, employment, and business opportunities; and to fully participate in the civic and democratic lives of their communities should they choose" (Friedland et al., 2012, p. V). Those needs are local in the sense that "the information must be actively gathered and focused locally" (Friedland, 2023, p. 22).

To meet these fundamental needs, communities must have reliable access to the following eight categories of essential information in a timely manner, via media that are reasonably accessible:

1. Emergencies and Public Safety

Individuals and communities require accessible information regarding emergencies and public safety threats. Such critical information includes alerts about immediate dangers, such as health crises, terrorist activities, Amber alerts, and disruptions to public safety. Moreover, this need extends to ongoing local matters, including neighborhood-specific coverage of policing practices, public safety issues, and community security.

2. Health and Welfare

Communities require information on local health and healthcare. This includes details about family and public health; information on healthcare availability, quality, and services; updates on disease outbreaks and vaccination efforts; and announcements regarding local health initiatives and public health interventions.

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3. Education

All community members require information about local education. This includes information on school quality and administration, detailed assessments of neighborhood-specific schools, and updates on educational resources such as tutoring, enrichment programs, and after-school activities. Additionally, community members need accessible information on educational opportunities, including charter school performance, and other local educational initiatives.

4. Transportation

Communities need accessible information on local transportation. This includes updates on public transit services, traffic conditions, road closures, and weather-related disruptions at neighborhood and community-wide levels. Additionally, residents need timely access to local public discussions and policy debates concerning transportation infrastructure, including roads, mass transit systems, and related community planning.

5. Environment and Planning

Local communities require access to both short-term and long-term environmental information and planning developments that impact neighborhood and regional quality of life. This includes information on local water and air quality, immediate alerts about environmental hazards, and detailed updates on environmental conditions. Additionally, communities need information on regional planning issues affecting air and water safety, neighborhood livability, toxic hazards, brownfields, and sustainability as well as local environmental protection efforts.

6. Economic Development

Communities need information about economic development, including local employment opportunities, job training and reskilling programs, apprenticeships, and resources for career advancement. Additionally, they require detailed information on local economic conditions, business opportunities, support for entrepreneurship, and broader regional economic developments affecting community livelihoods.

7. Civic Information

Communities require information about key civic institutions, nonprofit organizations, and community services. This includes details on local governance, major civic entities, nonprofit activities, and opportunities for civic engagement. Residents also need clear information about resources offered by libraries, cultural institutions, and community-based organizations.

8. Political Life

Communities require information on political and civic processes at all local levels. This includes details about elections for city councils, county officials, and regional representatives, as well as information about public meetings and their outcomes. Community members also need practical information on voter registration, voting procedures, identification requirements, and absentee ballot access. Additionally, clear explanations of state-level policies and their impacts on local governance and decision-making are essential.

Following the publication of the foundational FCC report, analyses have aimed to extend the CIN framework itself. Based on those contributions, we further add two CIN to the original list (Babel, 2024; Delaney & Eckstein, 2008; Heiselberg & Hopmann, 2024; Leupold et al., 2018):

9. Sports

Communities require information related to local sports, recognizing their significance not just as entertainment, but also as cultural events, economic drivers, and sources of community cohesion. This includes timely coverage of local games and events, profiles of athletes, analysis of team performances, and detailed information about sports organizations and facilities. Such coverage supports community engagement and shared cultural experiences through sports.

10. Arts, Food and Entertainment

Residents need accessible information about local cultural and recreational opportunities, including arts and entertainment events, community festivals, leisure activities and consumption. In contrast to the category "civic information", coverage in this category focuses on the participation and consumption of local cultural, social, and recreational services.

The emergence of the FCC report and the various updates to its framework have helped move local media back into the (academic) spotlight. The ability for communities to satisfy their CINs hinges on the ability of local media to produce and distribute content pertinent to the 10 aforementioned categories. Evaluating how local media is able to serve communities, taking into account this CIN framework, has become an important focus of communications and media research. This framework has been refined and updated over the years: for instance, Napoli et al. (2017) proposed evaluating community news on three levels – *infrastructure* (available news sources), *output* (quantity of news), and *performance* (how much of that output is original, locally focused, and addresses critical needs). Others have emphasized that digital media and social platforms have altered how local information circulates, changing the way communities are provided with and consume content (Chadha et al., 2022; Guo & Sun, 2023, 2024; Weber et al., 2019).

Over the years, the CIN framework has also been used to access the decline of local journalism and its deepening crisis. Scholars have used the CIN lens to assess not only informational deficits in so-called "news deserts," but also the structural inequalities that shape access to local news across different communities. For instance, Friedland (2023) emphasizes that the CIN framework provides a normative standard for evaluating whether the media ecosystem serves all communities equitably, especially amid rising disinformation and collapsing local news markets. Across case studies and approaches, findings consistently reveal significant shortfalls in how well local media meet these needs, especially in underserved communities. Structural inequalities—along racial, economic, and geographic lines—strongly influence both the supply of relevant news and the demand for it, with lower-income and minority communities systematically disadvantaged in terms of access to original, local reporting (Battocchio et al., 2023; Lincoln, 2024; Napoli et al., 2017; Neff et al., 2022; Posey, 2023).

In response to these challenges, Pickard (2020, 2023) argues for the establishment of public media centers—publicly funded, locally owned media cooperatives—as innovative democratic institutions that could address the structural failures of the commercial model and help fulfill communities' critical information needs. This aligns with calls for policy interventions that treat news as a public good, with scholars also advocating for new funding mechanisms and civic infrastructure to ensure robust local news provision (Abernathy, 2020; Chan, 2023; Nadel, 2023; Napoli, 2023).

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3. Factors Affecting CIN Coverage in Local News

"Media" is not a monolithic bloc but composed of different local contexts and ecologies; different intra-media logics, available resources, ownership structures and business models also influence to what extent critical information needs are met—key factors which we examine in this section based on previous literature.

So far, literature points to the diversity of media outlets (or the lack thereof) as an important indicator of CIN fulfillment. For instance, the analysis by Napoli et al. (2018) of 100 randomly sampled U.S. communities highlights that those communities with a diverse mix of media outlets, including newspapers, radio, television, and digital platforms, are better positioned to address CIN effectively. Conversely, areas with limited media diversity often experience significant gaps in critical information coverage. In addition, they highlight that only about 17 percent of the news stories provided to a community are truly local and only about half actually address any of the CIN categories. Even more so, they identified twenty communities without any local news coverage at all. This is in line with the increasingly emerging evidence of local news deserts, i.e., local communities without any original local news coverage (e.g., Greene et al., 2024; Metzger, 2024; Qin, 2024).

A comprehensive study by Mahone et al. (2019) compares how various types of local media differ in their capacity to deliver original, local content that addresses CIN. Strikingly, newspapers account for almost 60% of local news stories in their sample—outperforming TV, radio, or online outlets. In contrast, many local TV stations focus heavily on quick-turnaround stories (crime, weather, traffic) and under-cover beats like education or environmental policy. An analysis of 24 Norwegian local media outlets also points to local newspapers as key providers of local political, business and cultural content. In contrast, broadcasters mostly only cover emergencies and accidents, but disregard other topics (Morlandstø & Mathisen, 2023). Similar findings also exist for Colorado's (Damanhoury et al., 2024) and New Jersey's media ecosystem (Stonbely, 2023).

A third strand of research focuses on how media ownership and business models affect CIN coverage. Across the literature, there is strong evidence that ownership type and funding models significantly shape the volume, originality, and locality of news content. Public, community-based or nonprofit supported outlets tend to

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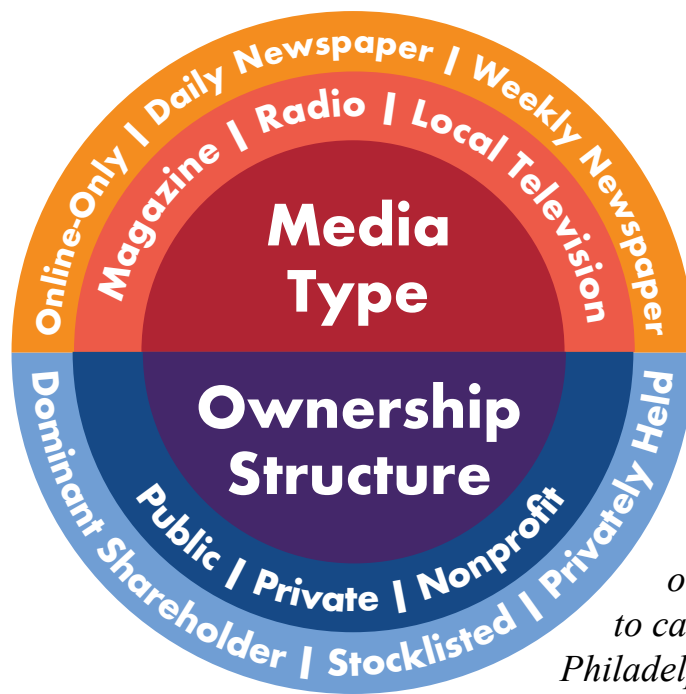
The types of media and ownership structures used to categorize news outlets in Philadelphia's media ecosystem.

provide more CIN-relevant content and produce a higher share of in-house editorial work. In contrast, outlets more heavily reliant on commercial advertising as a primary funding source such as hedge funds or stock market-traded companies often blend original local reporting with syndicated national and international content, diluting the focus on local CIN (Chadha et al., 2022; Dalmus et al., 2024; Neff et al., 2022; Toff & Mathews, 2024). However, those trends are again context dependent; Manninen and Haapanen (2025), in a comparative study of Finnish newspapers, challenge the assumption that corporate ownership necessarily diminishes CIN performance, finding no statistically significant differences between corporate and independent outlets in content quality, localness, or authorship.

A final factor shaping the capacity of CIN coverage are the extent of resources and staffing available to local journalism. Simply put, fewer reporters and limited budgets mean fewer stories, especially on complex, resource-intensive local topics. This is directly tied to the previous question of ownership and business model of local media outlets: Research has noted that corporate-owned outlets, particularly those managed for high profit margins, tend to invest less in local newsgathering and rely more on readymade, national, one-size-fits-all journalism (Ali, 2021; Peterson & Dunaway, 2023; Pickard, 2020). On the other hand, independent, public and mission-driven outlets (including nonprofit newsrooms, community radio, and ethnic media) try to fill important gaps by covering local, controversial, investigative stories, although they often lack appropriate funding, resources and staffing (Carey, 2020; Napoli et al., 2018; Pickard, 2020; Rohlinger & Proffitt, 2017).

Fox 29 Philadelphia's headquarters on Market Street in Philadelphia's Center City. This local television station is owned by the Fox network.

4.   The Philadelphia News Media Landscape

Philadelphia's news media ecosystem appears, at first glance, to be thriving and diverse. The city is home to a wide range of media outlets, including major broadcast affiliates, well-established radio stations such as WHYY and KYW, and legacy dailies like *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Its media system also includes ethnically and linguistically diverse outlets such as the *Philadelphia Tribune* and *AL DÍA* and business-focused publications like the *Philadelphia Business Journal*. True to its nickname, "The City of Neighborhoods," the Philadelphia media ecosystem includes various hyperlocal outlets such as *West Philly Local*, *Passyunk Post*, and the *Northeast Times*. In fact, the extensive report *The news Philadelphians use* by Stroud et al. (2023) identified approximately 100 distinct news sources operating in the Philadelphia area, suggesting a seemingly vibrant and varied media landscape with notable experimentation in nonprofit and alternative funding models.

Yet, the shortcomings of local media ecosystems to meet communities' CIN identified in the previous two sections might very well extend to Philadelphia as the media ecosystem is also affected by declining journalism resources (Neff et al., 2022). In addition, the city is marked by stark racial and socioeconomic inequalities, high levels of poverty, and some of the highest gun violence rates in the nation (Hwang & Ding, 2020; MacDonald et al., 2022). Also, Philadelphia's complex and fragmented local governance demands critical, well-resourced journalism to ensure transparency and civic accountability across city agencies, school boards, and council districts (Goessling et al., 2024; Lee, 2020). The city's large immigrant and

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minority populations, persistent environmental and public health disparities, and deep neighborhood identities underscore the need for a media system that delivers critical, accessible information rooted in the communities (Chadha et al., 2022; Hwang, 2016; Sicotte, 2014).

These structural challenges and premises pose critical questions about the capacity of the city's media to equitably serve all communities. The only two in-depth studies of Philadelphia's media ecosystem to date point to significant gaps between information supplied by local news and civic needs (Neff et al., 2022; Stroud et al., 2023).

Neff et al. (2022) analyze local media's coverage of COVID-19 relative to crime and conclude that it tends to serve older, more affluent, and more highly educated audiences—leaving working-class neighborhoods and socioeconomically marginalized groups with comparatively less coverage. Stroud et al. (2023) compare media's topic diversity of local news with the topic preferences of surveyed Philadelphia residents. They point to stark differences in the coverage relative to residents' preferences; topics such as infrastructure, poverty, homelessness, and public services like transportation and trash removal have been identified as key civic issues, however only received little media coverage. Moreover, many Philadelphians—especially women, younger residents, and Republicans—reported feeling poorly represented by local media and doubted whether news organizations were offering real solutions to their communities' problems.

The study by Neff et al. (2022) additionally highlights that although Philadelphia boasts a wide range of ethnic, community-based, and hyperlocal publications, these outlets generally operate with limited financial and human resources. Most have fewer than a dozen journalists, often as few as two or three, and cannot match the reach, production quality, or web traffic of larger legacy outlets like the *Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Magazine*, or *Philadelphia Business Journal*. These disparities are further compounded by digital business models: larger outlets tend to have paywalls and subscription models that favor wealthier audiences, while smaller and nonprofit publications often provide open access, but struggle with staffing and budget constraints. Neff et al. (2022) also echo existing evidence that publicly funded and nonprofit outlets are more likely to produce higher proportions of COVID-19 coverage relative to crime. In contrast, outlets owned by private equity firms or hedge funds devoted comparatively less attention to the pandemic and disproportionately more to crime reporting.

5. Methodology

To assess how well local journalism meets CIN, researchers have employed a range of methodological approaches, with content analysis being the most widely used (e.g., Danielson & Nykvist, 2023; Napoli et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2015). Complementing this, ethnographic fieldwork and comparative case studies have been used to capture the lived experience of news production and consumption, while interviews with journalists and newsroom leaders provide insight into editorial constraints and decision-making processes (e.g., Anderson, 2013; Nielsen, 2015). Together, these qualitative and quantitative methods help illuminate not just what is being reported, but also who is being served—and who is being left behind.

Our study follows recent scholarship which has increasingly employed large-scale text analysis methods such as topic modeling to analyze the content, scope, and civic relevance of local journalism. For example, Sjøvaag et al. (2019) applied topic modeling to over 847,000 articles from 156 Norwegian news outlets, revealing how local journalism addressed—or neglected—critical information needs across communities. Similarly, Jo (2025) used topic modeling to examine how local newspapers in the U.S. framed climate change, showing that thematic emphasis varied depending on the socioeconomic and political characteristics of the communities served. Martin and McCrain (2019), finally, integrated topic modeling with political behavior data to show how the decline of local news reshapes attention toward national political coverage, potentially undermining civic engagement at the local level.

In line with those studies, we consider structural topic modelling (STM) a valuable method for examining how local media address CIN, for several reasons. First, STM is a probabilistic, unsupervised machine learning technique designed to uncover latent semantic patterns in large text corpora. Building on Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), STM identifies topics as distributions of co-occurring words and estimates their prevalence across documents (Roberts et al., 2019). Unlike dictionary-based or keyword-driven approaches common in computational text analysis, STM is inductive; it allows the thematic structure to emerge from the data itself rather than relying on pre-defined categories. This inductive logic is particularly well-suited for exploring whether and how CIN-related themes—such as public safety, health, education, or civic participation—are covered across diverse media outlets, without imposing narrow assumptions about their representation.

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Second, STM is particularly well-suited for analyzing media texts because it accommodates key linguistic features such as polysemy—the phenomenon where a single word may carry different meanings depending on context—and heteroglossia, the coexistence of multiple voices, perspectives, or themes within a single document (DiMaggio et al., 2013; Roberts et al., 2019). By allowing individual words to appear in multiple topics and enabling documents to carry several topics simultaneously, STM reflects the complexity and nuance of media discourse. This flexibility is especially relevant for CIN analysis, where coverage of critical needs—such as health, education, or public safety—often intersects with broader narratives and framing practices.

Third, STM extends traditional LDA models by allowing the inclusion of document-level metadata as covariates, which can influence either topic prevalence (i.e., how prominently a topic appears in a given document) or topic content (i.e., the specific vocabulary used to express a topic) (Roberts et al., 2019). This feature makes STM particularly well-suited for analyzing variation in CIN coverage across different contextual factors—such as publication dates, media outlets, or political orientations—enabling researchers to examine not only what is being discussed, but also how and under what conditions certain information needs are addressed.

In order to identify relevant local media outlets we relied on existing research—particularly Neff et al. (2022), Stroud et al. (2023) and the State of Local News Project (Metzger, 2024)—due to the absence of a comprehensive and regularly maintained database of local media in the greater Philadelphia area. The final corpus of this study comprises 15 local media outlets (see Table 1) that align with media consumption patterns identified in Stroud et al. (2023). We also aimed to reflect the diversity of Philadelphia's local news ecosystem by including a range of outlet types (e.g., online-only platforms, daily and weekly newspapers, a magazine, radio, and local television stations), as well as varying ownership models (nonprofit, public, stocklisted, and privately held), editorial capacities, and audience reach – all of which are likely to shape editorial priorities and coverage practices (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; Theine et al., 2025). These include nonprofit public service outlets such as WHYY.org and Billy Penn, commercial legacy players like the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *CBS Philadelphia*, and *NBC Philadelphia*, as well as independent and hyperlocal operations such as *West Philly Local* and *PhillyVoice*. Ownership types range from globally held multimedia conglomerates (e.g., ABC and Fox affiliates) to community-based or family-owned publishers. In our analysis we differentiate two types of incorporated companies: Stock-listed refers broadly to publicly listed companies, while 'dominant share' specifically denotes those listed companies that are effectively controlled by dominant shareholders. Editorial capacity varies

Table 1: Overview of 15 media outlets in this study's sample.

Media Outlet	Type of Media	Ownership Type	Editorial Staff
Billy Penn	Online-only	Public	>10
Main Line Times & Suburban (PA)	Daily Newspaper	Private	>10
Metro - Philadelphia (PA)	Daily Newspaper	Private	>10
Northeast Times	Weekly Newspaper	Private	>10
Philadelphia Inquirer	Daily Newspaper	Nonprofit	<200
Philadelphia Magazine	Magazine	Private	10-20
Philadelphia Weekly	Online-only	Private	10-20
South Philly Review	Weekly Newspaper	Private	>10
WHYY.org	Radio	Public	20-50
CBS Philadelphia	Local TV	Dominant shareholder	20-50
NBC Philadelphia	Local TV	Dominant shareholder	20-50
ABC Philadelphia	Local TV	Stocklisted	20-50
Fox Philadelphia	Local TV	Dominant shareholder	20-50
PhillyVoice	Online-only	Privately held	10-20
West Philly Local	Online-only	Privately held	>10

Source: own analysis based on media outlet's websites and S&P Capital IQ.

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significantly across the sample, from outlets with more than 200 staff members (*Inquirer*) to smaller operations with fewer than 20 people. Similarly, estimated web traffic for these outlets ranges from below 50,000 to over 200,000 monthly users, reflecting considerable variation in local news reach and influence.

To collect news stories from the 15 selected outlets, we developed a customized web crawler using the *RSelenium*, *rvest* and *dplyr* packages in R (for a similar approach see: Khanom et al., 2023). For each source, a specific extraction function was created relying on rvest's commands "FindElements" and "GetElementText". This extraction function specified the relevant HTML code from each source's online website to get the article contents and desired metadata. The extraction function was then fit into an automated process: using RSelenium, the program would go to each source's homepage, find all links to content posts, and then run the extraction function. The crawler was programmed to extract all news articles published on the front page of each outlet simultaneously at 11:00 am (CST). Data collection was conducted between July 18th and the 23rd of August in 2024. In total, 18,230 news stories were retrieved (6,089 stories after excluding duplicates) across the 15 outlets (see Table 2).

Prior to running the STM, all articles were pre-processed and cleaned using standard natural language processing procedures, including tokenization, lowercasing, stop word removal, and lemmatization. We also removed duplicates from the data set. Three document-level covariates were included in the model: media outlet, media type, and ownership (see Table 1). Following the modeling strategy outlined by Roberts et al. (2013, 2014), we estimated multiple models with varying numbers of topics. The final model—selected based on a balance of high semantic coherence and exclusivity as well as thematic fit—produced 38 topics, which form the basis of our subsequent analysis.

To allocate the initial topics to the CIN categories, we conducted a close qualitative inspection of each topic's top word list and examined exemplar documents in which the topic appeared with high prevalence, in order to better understand its thematic content and contextual nuances (Gillings & Hardie, 2023). This interpretive process allowed us to assign topics to specific CIN categories based on both their semantic structure and the narrative context in which they appeared. Additionally, we classified each topic according to its primary geographic focus— distinguishing whether it predominantly addressed local issues or (inter)national concerns—so as to assess the extent to which local media outlets engage directly with community-specific information needs.

Table 2: Media outlet, number of news stories per outlet, average time a story remained on the front page.

Media Outlet	Number of Articles	Maximum days an article remained on main page	Average days an article remained on front page
ABC	892	35	1.3
BP	168	36	10.2
CBS	577	35	0.04
FOX	715	6	0.52
INQ	874	7	0.03
MAG	101	-	-
Main	292	17	2.7
Metro	361	35	0.12
NBC	1,059	29	0.15
NE	198	35	7.36
PV	259	8	0.05
PWE	91	35	13.93
SPR	90	26	6.32
WHYY	212	2	0.01
WPL	200	35	6.34
Total	**6,089**		

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

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6. Findings I: Overview of CIN coverage of local news in Philadelphia

In a first step, we examine how local news media in Philadelphia cover CIN. Figure 1 illustrates the prevalence of each CIN category, highlighting substantial variations in how these topics are prioritized by local media. Sports emerges as the most frequently covered category, representing approximately 18% of total coverage, followed by Emergencies and Public Safety at 14%; Arts, Food and Entertainment at 14%; and Politics at 11%. Conversely, other critical areas, such as Education and Economic Development, receive significantly less attention, with each around 3%.

Figure 1: Prevalence of Critical Information Needs Coverage by Local Philadelphia News.

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

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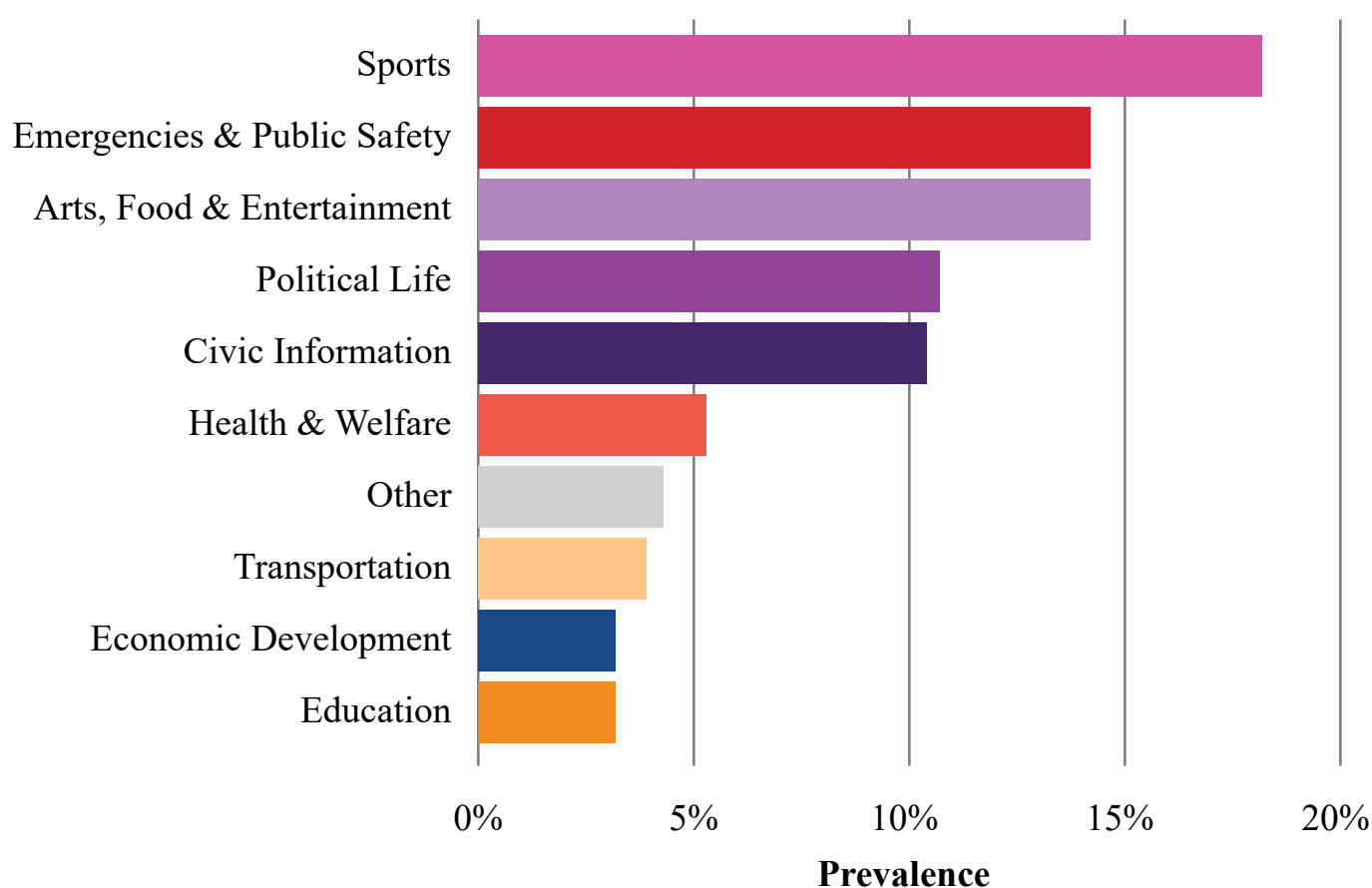
Figure 2: Prevalence of Locally-focused Critical Information Needs Coverage by Local Philadelphia News.
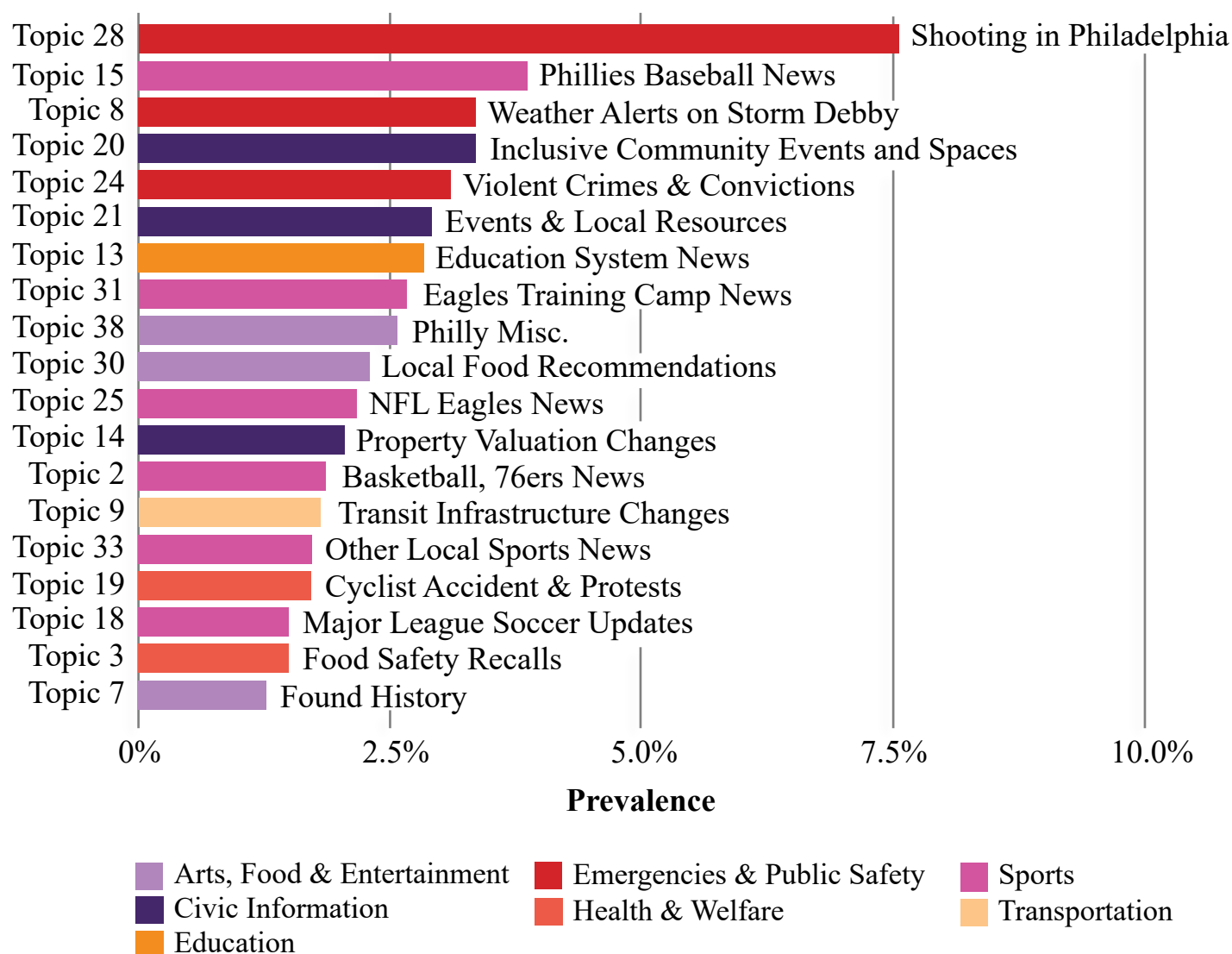

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

It is important to note that this initial overview does not distinguish between local and non-local news coverage. In fact, only about 50% of news stories explicitly focus on Philadelphia-related issues, while the remainder address national or international topics.

When examining only the locally focused CIN coverage, a somewhat different pattern emerges (Figure 2). Sports and Emergencies and Public Safety remain predominant with about 14% each. Likewise, categories such as Civic Information (8%) and Arts, Food and Entertainment (6%) also remain notably important. In contrast, local coverage related to Politics and Economic Development is entirely absent.

A detailed inspection of these non-local CIN categories reveals that Politics primarily involves national or international issues, including topics related to the US presidential election (Topic 4), the assassination attempt on former President Trump (Topic 36), Pro-Palestine protests at the Democratic National Convention (Topic 11), and a Russian prisoner exchange (Topic 1). Similarly, the Economic Development category is narrowly focused, predominantly consisting of financial market updates (Topic 32). Moreover, local politics and economic issues might be covered elsewhere in the media outlets, but not on the front pages.

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Figure 3: Prevalence of Locally-focused Topics by Local Philadelphia News.

Topic	Label
Topic 28	Shooting in Philadelphia
Topic 15	Phillies Baseball News
Topic 8	Weather Alerts on Storm Debby
Topic 20	Inclusive Community Events and Spaces
Topic 24	Violent Crimes & Convictions
Topic 21	Events & Local Resources
Topic 13	Education System News
Topic 31	Eagles Training Camp News
Topic 38	Philly Misc.
Topic 30	Local Food Recommendations
Topic 25	NFL Eagles News
Topic 14	Property Valuation Changes
Topic 2	Basketball, 76ers News
Topic 9	Transit Infrastructure Changes
Topic 33	Other Local Sports News
Topic 19	Cyclist Accident & Protests
Topic 18	Major League Soccer Updates
Topic 3	Food Safety Recalls
Topic 7	Found History

Prevalence

Legend:
- Arts, Food & Entertainment
- Civic Information
- Education
- Emergencies & Public Safety
- Health & Welfare
- Sports
- Transportation

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Figure 3 provides a more detailed analysis of locally focused news coverage. Notably, three topics within the Emergencies and Public Safety category prominently appear among the most covered local issues: coverage related to gun violence, crimes, and convictions (Topics 28 and 24), as well as severe weather alerts (Topic 8). Within the Sports category, local coverage primarily centers around stories about the Phillies (Topic 15) and the Eagles (Topic 31). Meanwhile, coverage categorized as Civic Information is largely composed of reporting on community events and local activities (Topics 20 and 21).

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7. Findings II: the influence of media type and ownership on CIN coverage

In a second step, we zoom in on how factors such as media type and ownership structure influence the CIN coverage in Philadelphia.

Regarding media type, we find that the coverage in online news particularly focuses on local news stories with 64% of all identified topics, followed by dailies (57%) and local TV (43%) (see Table A.1). Focusing on those local topics, Figure 4 shows that Dailies and similarly Weeklies particularly cover Sports (23%), followed with some distance by Emergencies and Public Safety as well as Civic Information (both approximately 10%). Local TV, in contrast, is much more focused on Emergencies and Public Safety (about 20%) followed by Sports (9%).

Figure 4: Prevalence of Locally-focused Topics across different media types (dailies, local TV, online news and others).
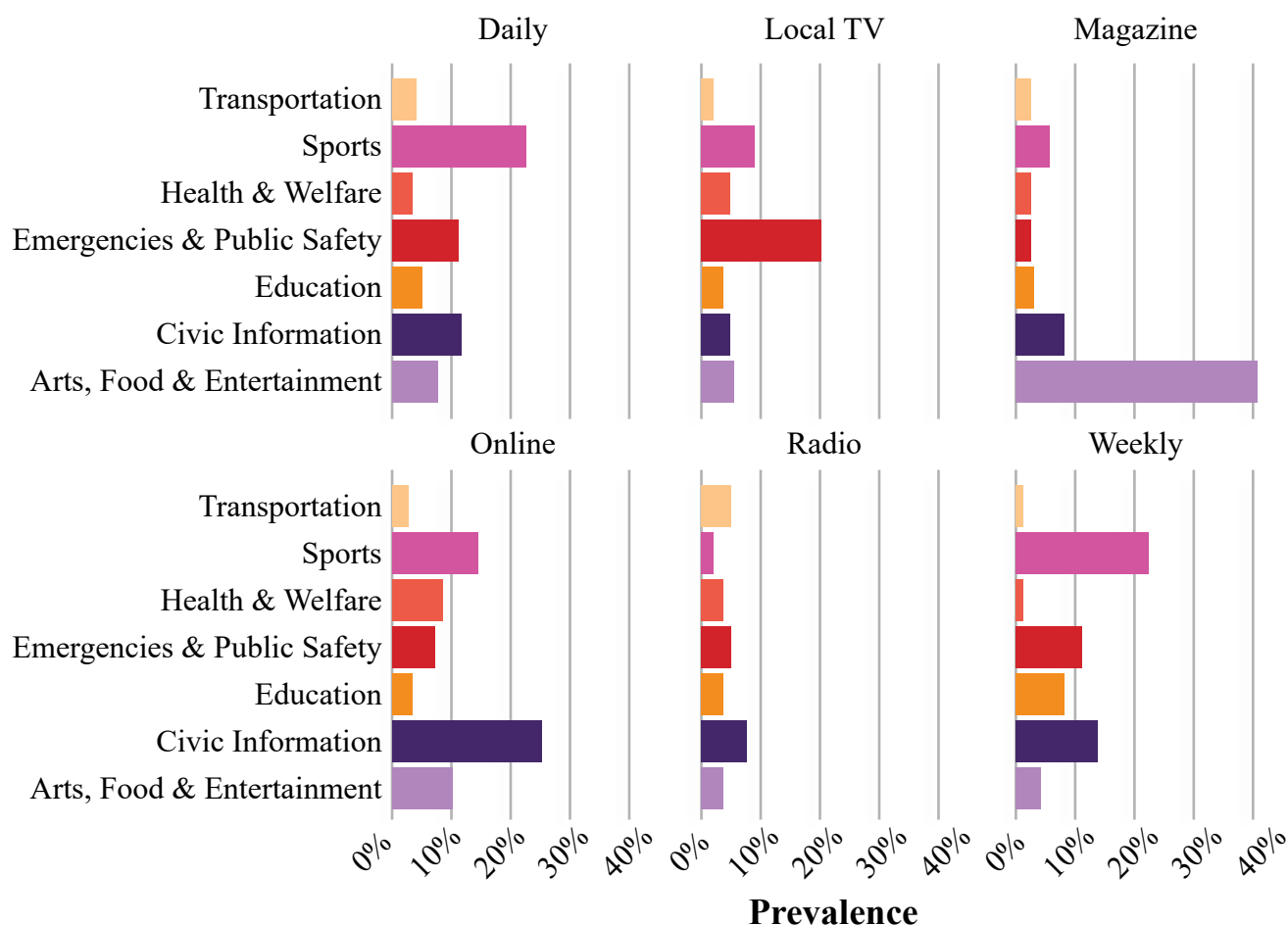
Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Figure 5: Prevalence of Locally-focused Topics across different ownership types (private, public and non-profit and stock-listed).
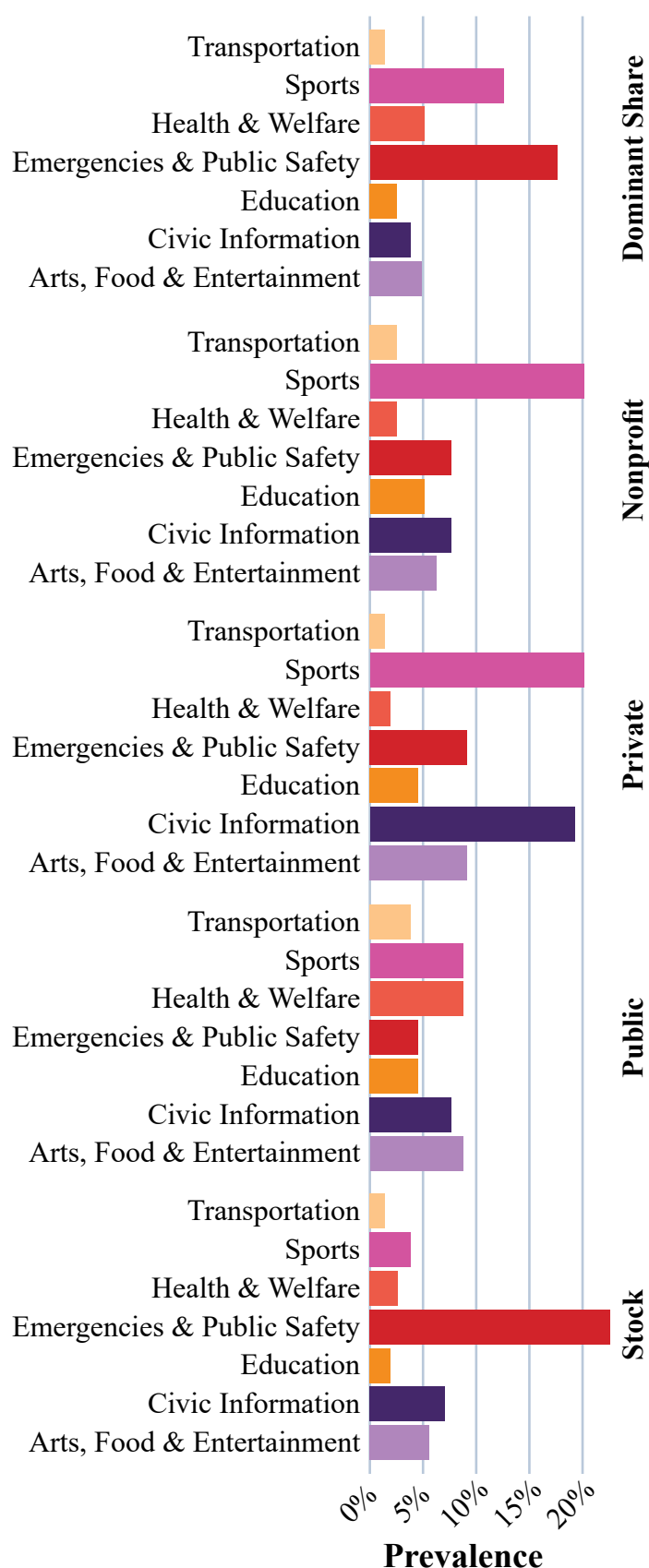
Online news has a very strong prevalence of Civic Information (about 25%), followed by Sports (approximately 14%). Radio has a low presence of all categories. This is partly driven by the relatively low number of stories in our sample. Other categories such as Transportation; Education; Arts, Food and Entertainment; and Health and Welfare are only covered to a limited extent by online news, dailies, weeklies, radio and local TV.

Turning to how ownership type influences coverage, we compare private, public and non-profit as well as stock-listed and dominant share media outlets. According to Table A.2, private media is focusing the most on local topics (63%), followed by public and non-profit (48%) as well as stock-listed media (42%). Of those locally-focused topics (see Figure 5), private media particularly covers Sports (20%) and Civic Information (18%), while disregarding Transportation (1.9%) and Health and Welfare (2%). Public media has an equal focus on Sports; Health and Welfare; and Art, Food and Entertainment (~ 8%), whereas non-profit media focused heavily on Sports (~20%). Stock-listed media heavily covers Emergencies and Public Safety issues (25%). This is also true for media stock-listed but with a dominant shareholder, which alongside Emergencies and Public Safety issues (17%) also features Sports (12%).

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

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Zooming in on the specific local topics (see Figure A.1 in the appendix), we note a striking overrepresentation of two particular topics within emergency coverage, namely shootings in Philadelphia and violent crimes and convictions. This difference in topic prevalence is particularly stark comparing dominant shareholder and stock-traded media on one hand to nonprofit and public media on the other. This reflects the sensationalist tendencies of profit-oriented media, where gory, quick details make for more clicks online (Arbaoui et al., 2020; Berman, 2021; Ryu, 1982). In addition, the hyper focus on violent crimes may also lead to increased stigmatization and scrutinization of certain parts of the city and an over focus of emergency information to only those which can produce a sensationalist reaction (Angermeyer & Schulze, 2001; Jahiu & Cinnamon, 2022; Parham-Payne, 2014). Qualitative reading of the coverage also shows that much of this reportage also remains surface level, missing any larger commentaries or critiques on a systemic level which question the root causes of violent crime or gun ownership, for example.

8.   Discussion and conclusion

Our analysis highlights significant strengths and weaknesses in Philadelphia's local news landscape regarding Critical Information Needs. While sports, emergencies and public safety issues, and civic information receive ample attention, critical gaps remain, especially in coverage of issues around economics and local politics, but also education, transportation, and health. These deficiencies suggest a pressing need for targeted interventions, policy support, and funding models aimed at bolstering the capacity of local media outlets to produce comprehensive, inclusive, and genuinely local content.

Notably, the dominance of sports and emergency coverage across platforms reflects broader structural incentives in the local news market. Both categories tend to "sell" better because they are emotionally engaging, easy to dramatize, sensationalist and offer clear narratives with heroes, villains, and outcomes— particularly in a city with strong sports teams on a national stage and frequently occurring shootings and crimes. These topics also align well with established newsroom routines and audience expectations, making them attractive for outlets with limited resources and sensationalist tendencies. However, this emphasis often comes at the expense of more complex and less "marketable" issues such as education policy or local governance, which require sustained, investigative

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reporting and may not yield immediate audience engagement and sensationalism (Ryu, 1982; Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). As a result, critical yet underreported topics are increasingly crowded out of the local news agenda.

Future research should continue to monitor these trends longitudinally, exploring how structural changes in ownership, media funding, and community engagement practices can influence the equitable provision of essential local news. At the same time, there is a growing need to critically examine how social media platforms are increasingly serving as sources of local news—often filling gaps left by traditional outlets. This raises important questions for journalism scholars about how we define "news" (Reese, 2020) and what counts as essential information, not to undermine journalism's democratic role, but to acknowledge that many people are turning to non-traditional platforms precisely because key issues are no longer being covered by legacy media.

Our findings offer insights into how Philadelphia's local news ecosystem aligns with or deviates from existing scholarship on CIN. In line with previous research, our results confirm that only about 50% of analyzed news content has a genuinely local focus. This aligns with earlier research (e.g., Napoli et al., 2018) highlighting that local topics often constitute only a small fraction of overall coverage, particularly among broadcast media. Our results similarly indicate that online news sources exhibit the highest focus on local issues, whereas television consistently performs weakest in providing local-focused content.

Consistent with prior research, we observe considerable variation across media types and ownership structures regarding which CIN categories they emphasize. Daily newspapers heavily focus on Sports coverage, while local TV prioritizes Emergencies and Risks, echoing findings by Mahone et al. (2019) and Morlandstø & Mathisen (2023). Interestingly, online outlets dedicate substantial attention to Civic Information—covering community events and local resources extensively— which suggests that hyper-local online media can—if well resourced— function as an important addition to more traditional local media.

Across all examined categories, notable coverage gaps emerged. Crucially important topics like Economic Development, Politics, Education, Transportation, and Health had received little to no local attention. This raises concerns about potential information deficits that could impact residents' quality of life and civic engagement—especially given Philadelphia's unique socioeconomic challenges. While recognizing the potential influence of the study's specific time frame, we are confident these observed patterns reflect persistent structural issues in local media coverage rather than temporary fluctuations.

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Appendix

Table A.1: media coverage of CIN categories according to their local focus and media type.

Media Type	CIN	Local Focus	Prevalence
Daily	Civic Information	No	0.0282
Daily	Civic Information	Yes	0.0942
Daily	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.0656
Daily	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.0676
Daily	Economic Development	No	0.009
Daily	Education	Yes	0.04
Daily	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.0977
Daily	Health and Welfare	No	0.0207
Daily	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.02
Daily	Other	No	0.0101
Daily	Politics	No	0.1152
Daily	Sports	No	0.0229
Daily	Sports	Yes	0.2311
Daily	Transportation	No	0.013
Daily	Transportation	Yes	0.023
Local TV	Civic Information	No	0.0222
Local TV	Civic Information	Yes	0.0358
Local TV	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.0787
Local TV	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.0396
Local TV	Economic Development	No	0.0488
Local TV	Education	Yes	0.018
Local TV	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.195
Local TV	Health and Welfare	No	0.0137
Local TV	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.0317
Local TV	Other	No	0.0354
Local TV	Politics	No	0.1307
Local TV	Sports	No	0.0664
Local TV	Sports	Yes	0.0938
Local TV	Transportation	No	0.024
Local TV	Transportation	Yes	0.0128

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Note: "Other" category includes media types not very common in our dataset (weekly newspapers, magazines).

Table A.1: media coverage of CIN categories according to their local focus and media type.

Media Type	CIN	Local Focus	Prevalence
Online	Civic Information	No	0.014
Online	Civic Information	Yes	0.2481
Online	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.1112
Online	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.1053
Online	Economic Development	No	0.004
Online	Education	Yes	0.0229
Online	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.0409
Online	Health and Welfare	No	0.0589
Online	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.0574
Online	Other	No	0.0043
Online	Politics	No	0.0305
Online	Sports	No	0.0077
Online	Sports	Yes	0.1397
Online	Transportation	No	0.0088
Online	Transportation	Yes	0.0243
Other	Civic Information	No	0.0204
Other	Civic Information	Yes	0.1025
Other	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.0239
Other	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.1033
Other	Economic Development	No	0.004
Other	Education	Yes	0.048
Other	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.066
Other	Health and Welfare	No	0.0186
Other	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.0117
Other	Other	No	0.151
Other	Politics	No	0.1076
Other	Sports	No	0.0056
Other	Sports	Yes	0.1024
Other	Transportation	No	0.0038
Other	Transportation	Yes	0.0181

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Note: "Other" category includes media types not very common in our dataset (weekly newspapers, magazines).

Table A.2: media coverage of CIN categories according to their local focus and ownership type.

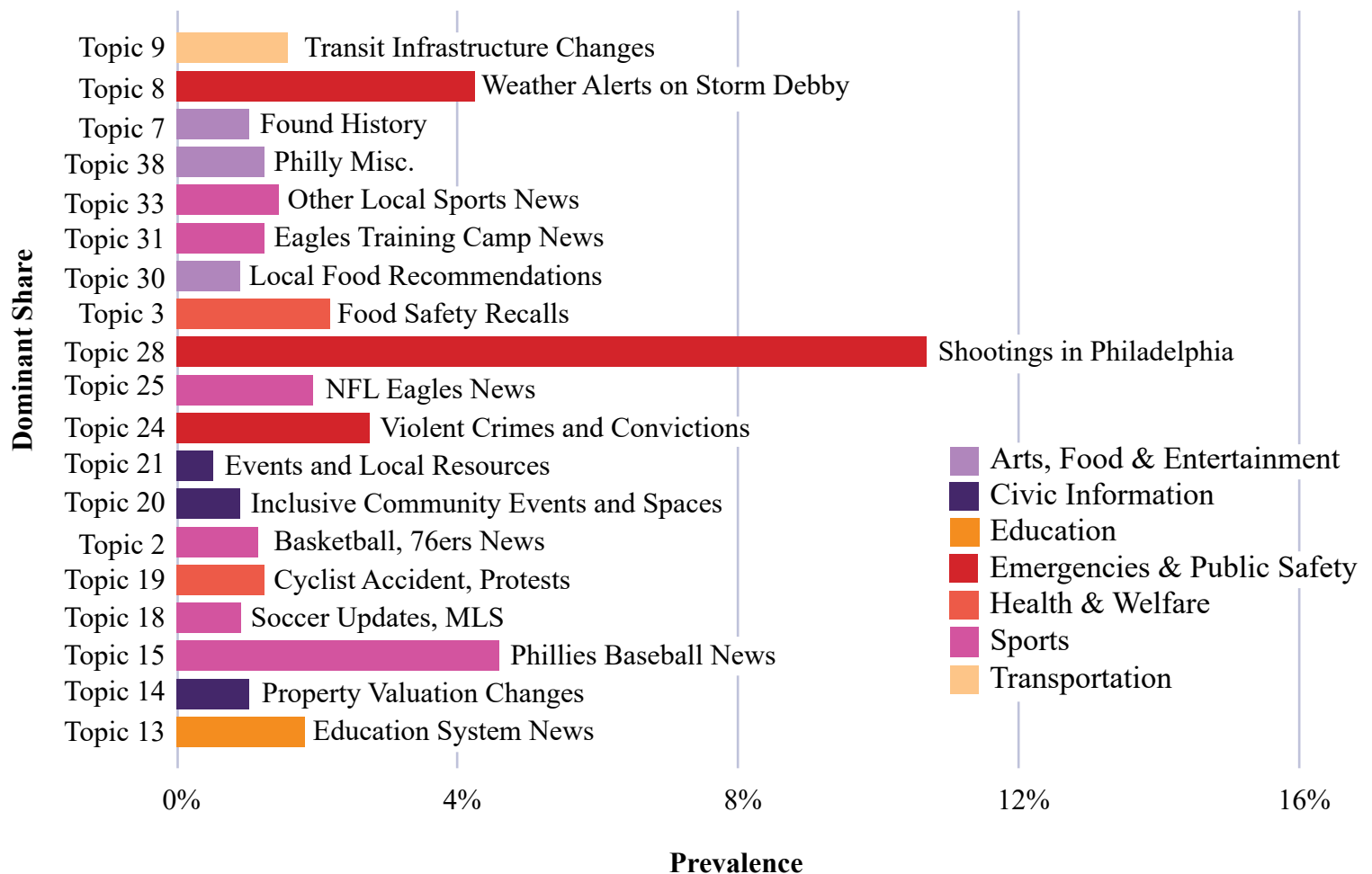| Ownership Type	CIN	Local Focus	Prevalence
Private	Civic Information	No	0.01259334
Private	Civic Information	Yes	0.18332185
Private	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.09113859
Private	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.09285794
Private	Economic Development	No	0.00465848
Private	Education	Yes	0.03669765
Private	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.09045124
Private	Health and Welfare	No	0.03606469
Private	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.01579488
Private	Other	No	0.00411071
Private	Politics	No	0.04391165
Private	Sports	No	0.00663774
Private	Sports	Yes	0.19256573
Private	Transportation	No	0.00350201
Private	Transportation	Yes	0.01878085
Public & Nonprofit	Civic Information	No	0.03609942
Public & Nonprofit	Civic Information	Yes	0.07325958
Public & Nonprofit	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.03929664
Public & Nonprofit	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.07432184
Public & Nonprofit	Economic Development	No	0.00918785
Public & Nonprofit	Education	Yes	0.03819579
Public & Nonprofit	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.05921178
Public & Nonprofit	Health and Welfare	No	0.02210333
Public & Nonprofit	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.04270831
Public & Nonprofit	Other	No	0.08193466
Public & Nonprofit	Politics	No	0.15356191
Public & Nonprofit	Sports	No	0.02655563
Public & Nonprofit	Sports	Yes	0.16600383
Public & Nonprofit	Transportation	No	0.01821273
Public & Nonprofit	Transportation	Yes	0.02673836
Stocklisted	Civic Information	No	0.02222497
Stocklisted	Civic Information	Yes	0.03575334
Stocklisted	Arts, Food and Entertainment	No	0.07873339
Stocklisted	Arts, Food and Entertainment	Yes	0.03962533
Stocklisted	Economic Development	No	0.04882597
Stocklisted	Education	Yes	0.0180359
Stocklisted	Emergencies and Risks	Yes	0.19504201

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Table A.2: media coverage of CIN categories according to their local focus and ownership type.

Ownership Type	CIN	Local Focus	Prevalence
Stocklisted	Health and Welfare	No	0.01368829
Stocklisted	Health and Welfare	Yes	0.03173655
Stocklisted	Other	No	0.03540926
Stocklisted	Politics	No	0.13073318
Stocklisted	Sports	No	0.06637231
Stocklisted	Sports	Yes	0.09381873
Stocklisted	Transportation	No	0.02401151
Stocklisted	Transportation	Yes	0.0128221

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Figure A.1: Prevalence of Locally-focused Topics by ownership type.

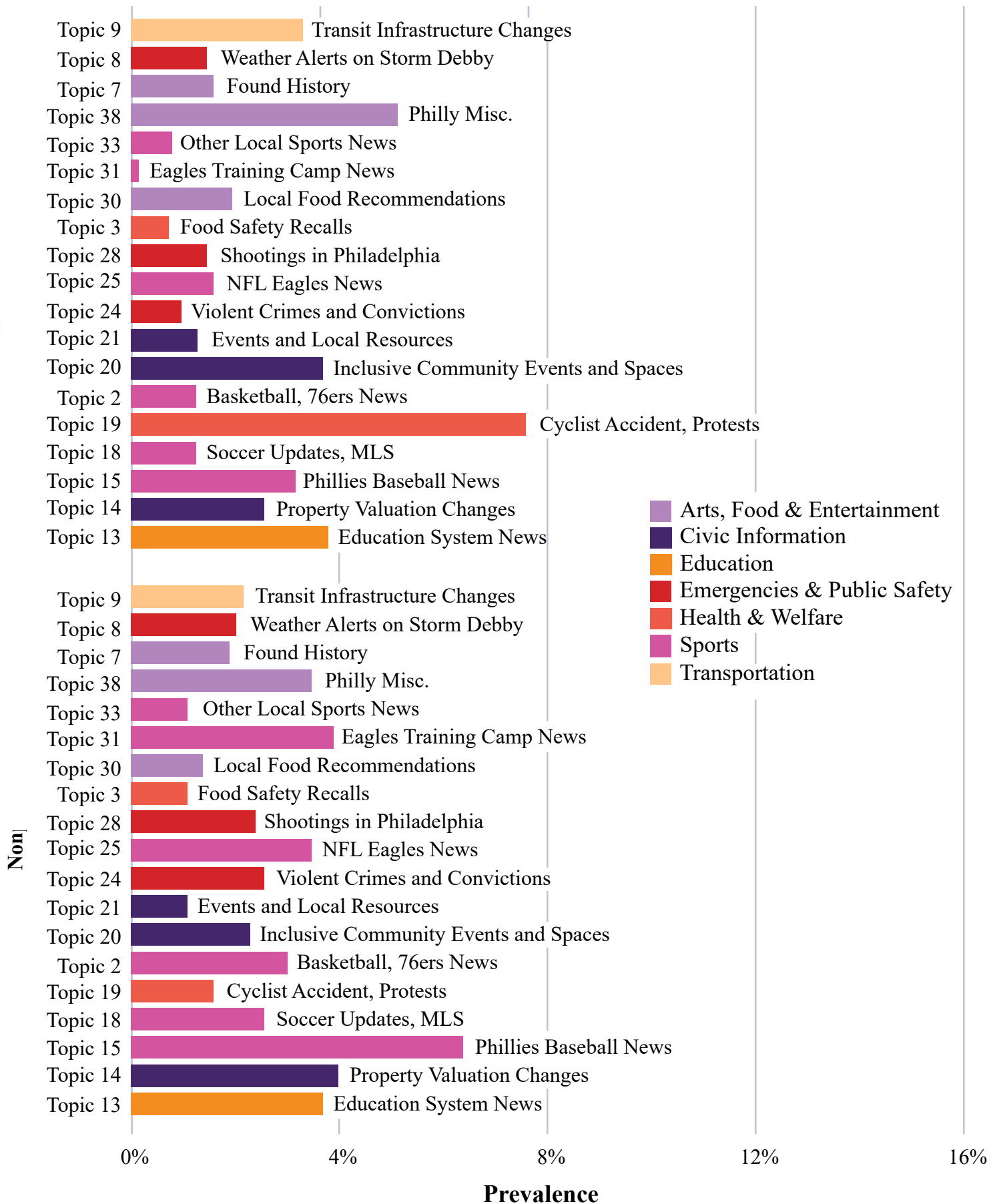*Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.*

Figure A.1: Prevalence of Locally-focused Topics by ownership type.

Topic 9	Transit Infrastructure Changes
Topic 8	Weather Alerts on Storm Debby
Topic 7	Found History
Topic 38	Philly Misc.
Topic 33	Other Local Sports News
Topic 31	Eagles Training Camp News
Topic 30	Local Food Recommendations
Topic 3	Food Safety Recalls
Topic 28	Shootings in Philadelphia
Topic 25	NFL Eagles News
Topic 24	Violent Crimes and Convictions
Topic 21	Events and Local Resources
Topic 20	Inclusive Community Events and Spaces
Topic 2	Basketball, 76ers News
Topic 19	Cyclist Accident, Protests
Topic 18	Soccer Updates, MLS
Topic 15	Phillies Baseball News
Topic 14	Property Valuation Changes
Topic 13	Education System News

Legend:
- Arts, Food & Entertainment
- Civic Information
- Education
- Emergencies & Public Safety
- Health & Welfare
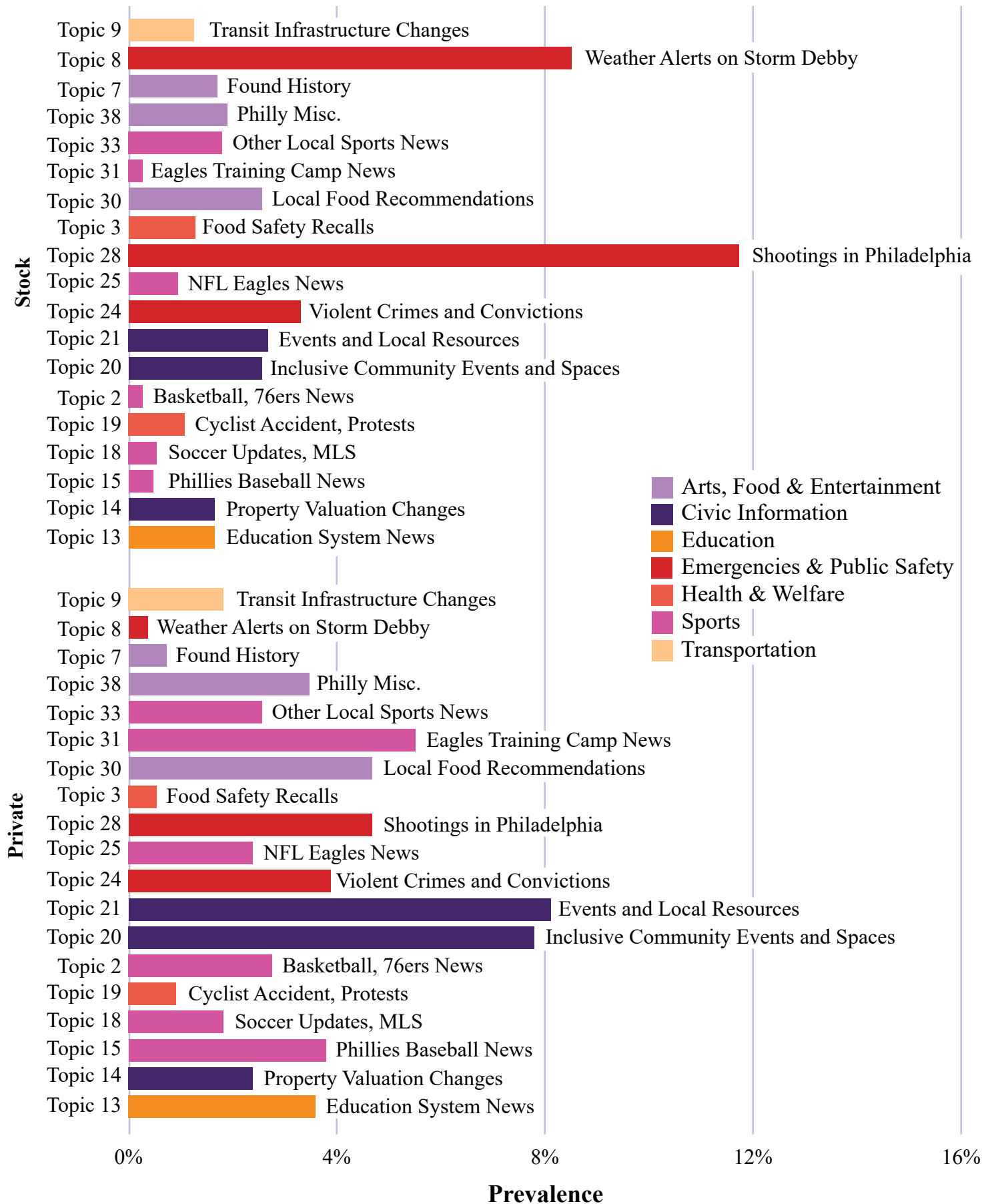- Sports
- Transportation

Prevalence

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

Figure A.1: Prevalence of Locally-focused Topics by ownership type.

Source: own analysis based on 6,089 news stories of 15 local news outlets.

About the Media, Inequality & Change Center

The MIC Center produces engaged research and analysis while collaborating with
community leaders to help support activist initiatives and policy interventions.
The Center's objective is to develop a local-to-national strategy that
focuses on communication issues important to local communities
and social movements in the region, while also addressing
how these local issues intersect with national and
international policy challenges.