

Shots fired: A local news desert leads to lack of crime reporting

Coups de feu: l'absence de médias locaux compromet la couverture des faits criminels

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ABSTRACT

Based on a shooting incident in Halifax, author Pauline Dakin exposes and critiques a striking lack of local news coverage in certain regions of Canada, bringing to light the potential consequences for public safety as well as for police practices and transparency. In a context where funding for journalism is increasingly scarce, her commentary examines the deep crisis affecting Canadian media and advocates for the revitalization of local journalism as a cornerstone of community life and democratic engagement.

RÉSUMÉ

À partir d'un cas de fusillade à Halifax, l'autrice Pauline Dakine, décrit et dénonce une absence intrigante de couverture médiatique locale dans certaines contrées du Canada, mettant au jour les potentielles répercussions en termes de sécurité publique et de pratiques et transparence policières. Dans un contexte où les fonds dédiés aux médias se font rares, son commentaire examine les affres des médias canadiens avant de plaider pour une revitalisation des médias locaux qui sont en réalité au cœur de la vie des populations.



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It was about 8:30 p.m. on a Monday night when I heard the shots. Three of them, somewhere just beyond my central Halifax backyard. *Definitely shots*, I thought. The flat-sounding cracks were not from a car backfiring or fireworks.

Soon flashing blue and red lights of several emergency vehicles were visible beyond the houses behind me. Police cars and armed officers were searching along a street bordering a small park that is one of the tent encampments for unhoused people in the city. I started scrolling for news. For several hours I checked the few remaining news sources in the city.

Nothing.

The next morning on my early-morning dog walk around the neighbourhood I saw the evidence of what had happened the previous night; there was a long trail of blood along the sidewalk. Someone had been seriously injured, maybe killed, judging by the amount of blood. By then the police tape that had surrounded the encampment the previous night was gone. Two police vehicles were still on the scene, parked at two corners of the park. I approached one of them.

“So it *was* a shooting,” I said to the officer in the SUV, pointing to the blood along the sidewalk.

“So you’re still looking for someone then?” I asked.

The officer was friendly but tight-lipped. I finished walking the dog and went home to look for what was being reported about this story.

Still nothing.

Ten hours after it occurred, I could not find a reference to or any coverage of a shooting in a central Halifax neighbourhood in any local news source. In the meantime, the neighbourhood grapevine reported the nearby hospital had been locked down after the shooting, a common precaution when a shooting victim arrives in the emergency room to prevent the possibility of the shooter following to finish the job.

I emailed the morning news editor at CBC Nova Scotia and told him what I knew. Later that

morning I heard a mention of the shooting in some brief radio headlines. As I continued to scan local media I eventually found a [short story](#) on the site of the local CTV outlet. Relying exclusively on bare-bones information provided by the police, the report stated a man had been taken to hospital with life-threatening injuries and that officers had briefly closed some streets (Lombard, 2024). Saltwire (which is now owned by Postmedia Network) also published a [similarly brief story](#) that day (Fairclough, 2024). CTV [followed up](#) its story two days later, on Oct. 31, but police declined to do an interview with them and offered no additional information. The CTV story focused on a neighbour of the tent encampment who’d heard the shooting. She said she was shaken, and upset that police had not released any additional details (Arif & Mott, 2024).

Over the next week I continued to search for news on the shooting but found nothing. I eventually emailed the Halifax Regional Police media contact but learned nothing new. The official response remained that a man was taken to hospital with a life-threatening injury, with no additional information (Halifax Regional Police, 2024).

This appears to be emblematic of a culture of police secretiveness that has long been noted by reporters in Halifax and beyond. *The Globe & Mail’s* Secret Canada series recently called Halifax [an opaque city](#), finding that the municipality has the lowest rate of full disclosure to freedom of information requests (at two percent) and that it is three times as likely as most cities to release no records, in 68% of requests. The national municipal average is 22% (Cardoso, et al., 2024).

Lisa Taylor is a journalism professor at the University of King’s College who has served as both a lawyer and reporter. In her [research](#) on issues related to police withholding of information, she’s found that Canadian police forces have grown increasingly broad in their exclusion of crime details. For example, withholding victims’ names is a relatively new practice, she notes, one that leads frustrated journalists to glean information from social media posts, upping the danger of misinformation at a time when journalism needs public trust (Ridgeway, 2017).

In my case, even though I hadn’t even asked for



Photo by Sioban Howerton (Pexels)

identifying information, I still received very little to go on from the police that might ease concerns in my neighbourhood that a shooter was at large.

It seems clear that the lack of transparency on the part of police compounds the effects of a shrinking media corps in the region, the result being less information for the public. The lack of newsroom response to this story of clear public interest may be a result of fewer newsrooms in Halifax, and the dwindling number of reporters in those that still exist. Professor April Lindgren at Toronto Metropolitan University has tracked the state of local journalism across the country since 2008 in her [ongoing research](#). Lindgren found that in Nova Scotia, as of February 2025, 24 media outlets [have closed](#) since 2008. In that same period 12 new local outlets opened, for a net loss of 12 (Local News Research Project, 2025).

In a [new report](#) on news deprivation in Canadian communities The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives finds that the rate of local news deprivation across the country “is snowballing” despite the federal government’s [Digital News Tax Credit](#), the [Local Journalism Initiative](#) to support local civic reporting in underserved areas, and the CRTC-created [Independent Local News Fund](#) for independently owned television and radio stations. Meanwhile [data](#) from the CCPA report shows a ten per cent drop in the number of local news outlets in Halifax since 2008 (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2025).

Many of those that have survived are depleted. In Nova Scotia, the long-time newspaper of record was *The Chronicle Herald*, now owned by Postmedia. According to the Halifax Typographical Union that represents workers at the publication, there are currently 13 multimedia journalists (and three non-unionized managers) in the newsroom (email correspondence, Mar. 13, 2025). That’s down from 61 in 2016, an almost 80 per cent decline in

less than a decade (HTU, 2016).

Nova Scotia is not alone in that decline. Lindgren and Corbett (2025) show that 529 Canadian news outlets have closed or been closed due to mergers since 2008. The CCPA report finds that “2.5 million Canadians now live in a postal code with only one or no local news outlets” (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2025, p. 3). In the United States., recruiting firm Challenger Gray estimates “at least 2,600 U.S.-based journalism jobs were lost in 2023, with another 500 jobs lost in the first month of 2024” (Angwin, 2024).


Here in Canada, it’s not just private newsrooms that have suffered. In a guest column in Howard Law’s blog about policy issues in Canadian media, [mediapolicy.ca](#), former CBC vice-president Richard Stursburg offered his advice to the new CBC President Marie-Philippe Bouchard. A key piece of [this advice](#) relates to the restoration of local news. He writes:

All market research indicates that local news is the most important form of news, since it is about the events that directly affect people’s lives. Where local news dies, electoral participation falls and local corruption increases. (Stursburg, 2024)

Stursburg recommended that CBC follow through on its promised expansion of local news. On Nov. 12, 2024, CBC had [announced](#) a significant expansion of its local news presence, following the [CRTC’s approval of Google’s plan](#) to compensate Canadian news organizations for the use of their news content (CBC News, 2024; CRTC, 2024). More recently, [CBC has confirmed](#) it will use the money to hire up to 30 permanent new journalists in 22 underserved communities, with most of the jobs going to B.C. and the Prairies. There will be one new position in Nova Scotia (CBC Media

Centre, 2025).

That's good news for the public broadcaster. But it's cold comfort given the number of reporting jobs that have been lost overall.

In my neighbourhood in Halifax, the upshot is that three shots were fired in a Halifax residential neighbourhood close to a tent encampment and the result was someone had life-threatening injuries, but only three media outlets reported it, in a cursory way. Only one of those outlets attempted to follow the story, with limited success. Between tight-lipped police and an apparent lack of interest in or ability to cover the shooting, people who live in the neighbourhood are left wondering whether a shooter is still in the area, and whether police have any leads or concerns for public safety. 

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