



# Crossing Divides Listening Project

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Qualitative Results  
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## Introduction

The Civic Nebraska “Crossing Divides” Listening Project aims to build understanding about where people get their news and information and how they think about the sources they trust. Team members from Civic Nebraska interviewed Nebraskans from Scotts Bluff County and the City of Lincoln about the information sources they trust, why they trust them, and how their news media habits relate to their concerns about their community and media overall. The results of these interviews, outlined in this report, will be a starting point for conversation. In the fall, participants will be invited to a focus group to discuss the results and where they differ or have similarities in their sources and concerns.

## Methodology

A total of 30 interviews were conducted in June and July 2022. Fifteen interviews each, approximately 30-45 minutes in length, were conducted in both Scotts Bluff County and the City of Lincoln. Demographic information was collected from participants via survey to ensure the sample was representative of the populations in Scotts Bluff County and Lincoln (Table 1). Each interview followed a semi-structured format and was led by a Civic Nebraska team member. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim by Civic Nebraska, yielding 180 pages and 69,804 words. De-identified transcripts were sent to the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center for thematic analysis.

Table 1: Number of interview participants by demographic category

Demographic Category	Number	Percent of Sample
<b>Place of Residency</b>		
Scotts Bluff County	15	50.0%
City of Lincoln	15	50.0%
<b>Age Group</b>		
18 or under	5	16.7%
19-34	5	16.7%
35-54	9	30.0%
55-64	5	16.7%
65+	6	20.0%
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
Lower than bachelor’s degree	14	46.7%
Bachelor’s degree or higher	16	53.3%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Asian	1	3.3%
Black or African American	1	3.3%
Hispanic or Latino/a	2	6.7%
Middle Eastern or North African	1	3.3%
White (Not Hispanic or Latino/a)	25	83.3%
<b>Political Ideology</b>		
Conservative	13	43.3%
Liberal	11	36.7%
Moderate	3	10.0%
Unsure	3	10.0%

Demographic Category	Number	Percent of Sample
Total	30	100.0%

*Note.* Conservative political ideology category includes those who identified as “Lean Conservative,” “Conservative,” or “Very Conservative” on the demographics survey. Liberal political ideology category includes those who identified as “Lean Liberal,” “Liberal,” or “Very Liberal” on the demographics survey.

Transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software, and organized into groups to allow for comparison between political ideologies and location. Participants who identified as “Lean Conservative,” “Conservative,” or “Very Conservative” on the demographics survey were grouped together as “Conservative” for analysis. Participants who identified as “Lean Liberal,” “Liberal,” or “Very Liberal” on the demographics survey were grouped together as “Liberal” for the same purpose.

Transcripts were first coded deductively for specific topics of interest that relate to the following research questions:

- 1) What news source characteristics do participants perceive as trustworthy?
- 2) What concerns do participants have about the news or media?
- 3) What is the relationship between perceptions of trustworthy news source characteristics, news habits, and concerns about the news or media?

Transcripts were then reviewed for themes that emerged from the data and coded inductively. Constant comparison, the process of comparing new findings to existing findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena, was employed throughout the analytic process (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Peer debriefing, the process of working with peers to review and assess transcripts, methodology, and findings, was also used to enhance the validity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Code frequency among transcripts was calculated to help identify important themes to quantitatively justify comparisons made between groups. In total, 26 codes were developed and used in the analysis. Final codes and quotations were then analyzed for themes related to each of the key findings.

## Results

Participants’ news habits and news sources they consume were often associated with certain perceptions of trustworthy news source characteristics and concerns about the news and media. Key findings from the analysis are listed below.

1. Many participants trust news sources they perceive as unbiased, while some trust news sources that espouse similar values or ideological views. This is true for participants from Scotts Bluff County and the City of Lincoln and across the political spectrum.
2. The most frequently recurring concern about the news or media, regardless of place of residence or political ideology, is the media’s role in the division between people of different ideologies or worldviews.
3. Participants get their news from a variety of sources, including newspapers or publications, television, radio, social media, and their interpersonal networks, such as friends and family. Participants also discussed several news consumption habits they engage in, including gathering sources from different perspectives, fact checking the news they consume, and sometimes avoiding the news altogether.

- Participants who habitually fact check the news they consume often expressed concerns that the current media landscape is resulting in a less-informed public and poor decision making. Participants who habitually gather sources from different perspectives often had concerns about bias in the media.
- Some participants discussed avoiding the news because it makes them depressed, angry, or hopeless. These individuals also expressed concerns about knowing what is “true” and about their community’s ability to discern the truth.

## Perceptions of Trustworthy News Source Characteristics

**Many participants trust news sources they perceive as unbiased.** When asked why they trust the news sources they consume, participants discussed several news source characteristics that signal trustworthiness. Regardless of place of residency or political ideology, many participants trust news sources they perceive as unbiased. Unbiased news sources were characterized as reporting “just the facts” with no opinion or including opinions from multiple perspectives to represent the “whole picture.” Many participants distrust news sources that appear to be biased or present opinions as fact.

*I feel like [my preferred news sources] are stating the facts, they play it down the middle. They are not choosing sides one way or the other.*

*[I trust news sources that] report on an issue from every side and not with an intent to make the other side look worse.*

Participants noted several characteristics that suggest a news source is biased. Participants from Lincoln often perceived news sources as biased if they use sensationalizing or inflammatory language or use “click-bait” headlines. Participants who identified as conservative and participants from Scotts Bluff County often perceived news sources as biased if they were also perceived as being owned by an organization with financial or political interests.

*It’s very clear in the language they are using that they are trying to paint stories or people in a negative light or a positive light...it’s always black and white.*

*I would not trust [a news source] as much if I heard the business was bought by a certain entity that has been known for bias one way or the other.*

**Knowledge and experience promote trust in specific individuals.** For many participants, perceived knowledge on the subject matter and experience promote trust. These participants tended to consider individuals as trusted news sources, such as reporters, writers, family members, or friends.

*People will do Twitter threads where they are able to establish that they know more than the average person on a particular subject [...] If this person knows what they are talking about...then that trust naturally comes from that.*

*A lot of those [sources] that I trust, they have somebody behind them who has some kind of credential.*

**News sources with similar ideologies or experiences are viewed as trustworthy for some.** Regardless of political ideology or place of residency, some participants trust news sources that espouse similar values or ideology and distrust news sources that run counter to their worldview. Some participants felt that while most of their trusted sources align with their own biases and opinions, they are also more reputable.

*[I trust my news sources] because I know that our opinions align. I tend to be more liberal in thinking.*

*Being right-center leaning, I probably would tend to believe somebody like Fox more than I would MSNBC.*

Many participants trust news sources they perceive as reliable or consistent. Participants who identified as conservative and participants from Scotts Bluff County often perceived news sources as reliable or consistent if they report news that aligns with their own experiences and the experiences of their community.

*With local news stations, you can see or hear about something going on in the community. What I hear from KNEB and Star-Herald, they tend to match up with what I hear from family, friends, and co-workers.*

*I do my own investigation too [...] I'll turn to social media or Google or talk to people on the ground.*

## **Concerns About the News or Media**

**Most participants are concerned about media's contribution to division in their communities.**

Participants expressed a variety of concerns about the news or media. The most frequently recurring concern, regardless of place of residence or political ideology, is the media's role in the division between people of different ideologies or worldviews. Participants described their friends and family as living "in a different reality," preventing them from having meaningful dialogue about their differences. Some participants, particularly those who identify as liberal or moderate, are worried this division could lead to violence.

*I feel like there is a direct line from the news that people are hearing and consuming and the divisions that end up in our community or within family.*

*I never used to think about it. I don't think anybody did. I was a Democrat and my best friend was a Republican, and who cared? It was no big deal [...] All of a sudden it became a big deal...I think it's destroyed families. I know it has.*

However, the specific concerns that are perceived to cause this division vary among participants. Many are concerned with the amount of misinformation and bias in the news and media. Participants from Scotts Bluff County were often concerned with negativity bias, while participants from Lincoln were often concerned with sensationalism. Interestingly, many participants who trust news sources because they espouse similar values or ideology are also concerned with bias in the media.

*Especially with social media, there is a lot of misinformation out there [...] I think lots of people misread the news and sometimes get their news from an unreliable source.*

*I hate all the violence on the news. I know it is a part of what's out there, but can't you show the good side? I think they like to glorify that kind of stuff on the national level [...] I want honesty and humanity. I don't want the negativity.*

**Some participants are concerned with media being incentivized by profits.** Misinformation, bias, negativity, and sensationalism were often attributed to the news and media being primarily incentivized by profits, regardless of political ideology or place of residency. Some participants, particularly those who identify as conservative, are concerned that the news and media, or those that “control” the news or media, are intentionally influencing the public to serve their political and financial interests.

*I feel like it is more about advertising and the money than actually presenting information.*

*You do wish that the truth could be told, but there's so much corruption in our government. There's corruption in the news people too.*

**News “echo chambers” and no fact checking is believed by some to result in less-informed public.**

Participants from Scotts Bluff County and Lincoln and across the political spectrum also expressed concerns with the current media environment creating “echo chambers,” where media consumers are only exposed to news that affirms their existing opinions and worldviews. Participants also expressed concerns about consumers of the news and media not engaging in fact checking or research before trusting the accuracy of news they consume. Many participants felt that these concerns, along with misinformation and bias in the media, leads to a less-informed public and ultimately poor decision making.

*I think the whole social media algorithm is designed to exploit [us]. [...] Everybody has been living in these echo chambers, and they only want to hear what their side has to say.*

*I have this same issue too, so I am not judging anybody, but a lot of people don't read the article. They read the headline, and then they just share the article on their social media or integrate it into their belief system. And they don't really think about if they are getting the full story.*

*It makes things less efficient...responding to things that are not problems, that are not actually happening. They're just fantasy. [...] It was on a national level for a while, and now you are seeing it trickle down into local level things, city councils, those kinds of groups.*

**Many participants expressed difficulty in knowing what is “true.”** As a result of the current media landscape, many participants expressed difficulty knowing what is “true.” Participants were also concerned with their community’s ability to discern the truth. These concerns were often expressed by participants who identified as conservative and participants from Scotts Bluff County.

*It's a very, very confusing time because I don't trust any news source to tell me unequivocally without any bias.*

*It is really hard to trust, to know what is real. And everybody is saying something different.*

*I think our residents are getting more and more like me, they are paranoid. What are the facts? What is the truth?*

## **The Relationship Between News Habits, Perceptions, and Concerns**

### **Individual news habits are associated with perceptions of trust and concerns about the media.**

Participants get their news from a variety of sources, including newspapers or publications, television, radio, social media, and their interpersonal networks, such as friends and family. Participants also discussed several news consumption habits they engage in, including gathering sources from different perspectives, fact checking the news they consume, and sometimes avoiding the news altogether. News habits and news sources were often associated with certain perceptions of trustworthy news source characteristics and concerns about the news and media.

**Social media is used to consume news or assess perspectives on the news.** Social media is used to gather information by all groups. However, social media is used in different ways to consume the news. Some participants use social media to gather news from friends and family and particularly value social media's ability to collect a variety of opinions from their interpersonal network. Others use social media to follow newspapers and publications who post links to articles. Regardless of the way in which it is used to consume news, many participants like the accessibility and convenience social media offers as a news source.

### **Information received from interpersonal networks influence perceptions of news source reliability.**

Participants from Scotts Bluff County often reported getting at least some of their news from their interpersonal network. These individuals often got their news from friends, family, or co-workers, and often perceived news sources as reliable or consistent if they report news that aligns with their own experiences and the experiences of their community.

**Newspapers/Publications, Radio, and Television were often perceived as unbiased.** Many participants who get their news from newspapers, publications, radio, and/or television tend to trust sources they perceive as unbiased. Newspapers or publications are typically accessed online, though participants 65 years and older tended to prefer printed newspapers. Participants who discussed gathering sources from different perspectives and fact checking the news they consume often get their news from publications or newspapers.

**Reviewing a variety of news sources and perspectives was used to fact check news stories.** Participants often reported that they "fact check" the news they consume by verifying information reported in other sources. If the same information is reported across several news sources, participants trust that the information is true. Many individuals who engage in fact checking do so by seeking out a variety of online newspaper or publication news sources. Participants who habitually fact check the news they consume often expressed concerns that the current media landscape is resulting in a less-informed public and poor decision making.

*I read [articles] and I fact check some of them when I read, if it is a story I really care about. I fact check, search it up, and see if it is a reliable source.*

*I value when I can corroborate what one source is saying with another. Usually when I read something in one of those sources, it's not being disputed widely. Because other sources are saying the same thing, it makes them seem more trustworthy.*

Some participants intentionally consume news sources from a variety of perspectives. These participants often expressed the belief that the “truth” is “somewhere in the middle.” Some participants particularly value the perspectives of people who are not journalists, including people they follow on their social media, their friends or family, or people who comment on news stories. Participants who habitually gather sources from different perspectives often had concerns about bias in the media.

*I don't trust any source so I prefer to aggregate my information, so I will get information on a topic from many different sources online. I will see what people on Facebook are saying about it. I will at both sides...then I make a judgement on my own.*

*I think it is important to check both sides, or all sides if there is more than two, and try to come to a middle of the road opinion. Because the truth is never quite as black and white as one side would have you believe.*

**Perceiving the news as negative and untrue contributed to avoidance of the news.** Some participants, particularly those who identified as conservative, discussed having symptoms of “burnout” as a result of media consumption. For these participants, the news often makes them depressed or angry and leaves them feeling hopeless. To cope with these feelings, many participants have limited their news intake. These individuals also expressed concerns about knowing what is “true” and about their community’s ability to discern the truth. They also often expressed concerns about misinformation in the media and the media intentionally influencing the public to serve political and financial interests.

*I want to keep on top of stuff, but at the same time, I don't...because I find it too depressing to listen to what goes on in the world anymore.*

*You hear a story that kind of gets you going, and you kind of get angry about it, but there is nothing you can do about it. There is a hopeless feeling in watching the news.*

## Conclusion & Considerations

Participants get their news from a variety of sources, including newspapers or publications, television, radio, social media, and their interpersonal networks, such as friends and family. Participants also discussed several news consumption habits they engage in, including gathering sources from different perspectives, fact checking the news they consume, and sometimes avoiding the news altogether. Discussions related to each research question are below.

### 1) What news source characteristics do participants perceive as trustworthy?

Many participants trust news sources they perceive as unbiased, while others trust news sources that espouse similar values or ideological views. This is true for participants from Scotts Bluff County and the City of Lincoln and across the political spectrum. Other trustworthy characteristics identified included reliability, consistency, knowledgeable, and experience.

### 2) What concerns do participants have about the news or media?

The most frequently recurring concern about the news or media, regardless of place of residence or political ideology, is the media’s role in the division between people of different ideologies or worldviews. Other concerns included misinformation and bias in the media, profit or political incentives

influencing how news is reported, news “echo chambers,” knowing what is “true,” and a perceived lack of fact checking habits among the public.

### **3) What is the relationship between perceptions of trustworthy news source characteristics, news habits, and concerns about the news or media?**

Participants’ news habits and news sources they consume were often associated with certain perceptions of trustworthy news source characteristics and concerns about the news and media. Participants who habitually fact check the news they consume often expressed concerns that the current media landscape is resulting in a less-informed public and poor decision making. Participants who habitually gather sources from different perspectives often had concerns about bias in the media. Some participants discussed avoiding the news because it makes them depressed, angry, or hopeless. These individuals also expressed concerns about knowing what is “true” and about their community’s ability to discern the truth.

While this project aimed to gather diverse perspectives from two different communities in Nebraska, the perspectives shared may not be fully representative of the population. The results of this project should not be considered generalizable. However, they do provide insight into how perspectives of news media and trustworthiness are formed and how those perspectives influence how these participants consume media.

Key considerations for further exploration might include:

- 1) Further examine specific concerns related to the media’s contribution to division in families and communities.
- 2) Further examine whether a lack of trustworthiness perceived in news media is contributing to hopelessness and news avoidance and explore strategies to cope with these feelings.
- 3) Gather input about how to improve or find solutions for trustworthiness of news media. Such solutions could include policy, individual, or community-led solutions to media.

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