What's right (leaning) with Kansas media: The cultivation of misinformation in rural America

by

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A.A., Hutchinson Community College, 2006
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AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

Misinformation and disinformation have shown the potential to fertilize distrust in the news (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021; Swart & Broersma, 2022), which can allow democracy-damaging polarization to grow within the United States. This polarization often takes root due to the erosion of reliable information that can be exacerbated by confirmation bias that may cultivate filter bubbles and echo chambers (Flaxman et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2021; Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019).

In many cases, politically motivated individuals and media outlets plant these seeds of misinformation and disinformation intentionally, leaving members of society to graze on the subsequent silage of content. If it lacks nutrients, this information constructs a skewed perception of society. This weakens the social capital bonds that germinate a functioning democracy, which sprouts from reliable and public knowledge (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2014; Putnam, 2001). In order to prune misinformation and disinformation from the fields of democracy that are irrigated by journalism's flow of truth, the pathways to news that individuals take and lead them to the invasive species of information must be considered.

This risk is particularly important as it relates to the news consumption habits of rural Americans, who largely live and work in agrarian communities and exist as an important voting block as was evident in the 2016 election of President Donald Trump and the controversy surrounding the outcome of the 2020 election. However, most current research does not examine this group in specific focus or simply largely ignores this swath of the United States population as just "fly-over" country.

Thus, with the purpose of filling a crucial gap in the literature, this study investigated the pathways to news for individuals living and working in rural areas of the country, specifically

rural Kansas. As the investigative focal point, rural Kansas provides a vital case study to explore how rural citizens come to believe in, and potentially further spread misinformation and disinformation, including conspiracy theories spread by partisan media outlets that include, but are not limited to, talk radio, cable television, and social media.

Through the implementation of interviews and an online survey that collected data from these individuals, this dissertation reports how individuals in rural Kansas access and use news in ways that stimulate political division and set the stage for polarization to flourish (Bail et al., 2018; Darr et al., 2021; Gaultney et al., 2022; Talisse, 2021), which can lead to a bruised and battered democracy. This method of inquiry sprouts from the social constructionism perspective of reality. This dissertation thereby positions the media effects theories of Cultivation Theory (CT), Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), and Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) as the optimal lenses through which to examine the pervasive problem of misinformation and disinformation by seeking the root cause of this noxious information's spread.

To that end, this study found that social media and news websites, television, and radio are the primary pathways to news for rural Kansans. The bulk of the content being consumed via these media comes from national and partisan sources, and, in many cases, it consists of opinion-based material. Driven by the state's strong religious alignment (Wuthnow, 2012) and predominantly conservative political stance (Kansas Secretary of State, 2023), the media messages align with the previously held beliefs of the residents, even if the information is inaccurate. This leads to those beliefs becoming more entrenched, and the misinformation and disinformation spreads when individuals discuss the news with their peers.

The fact that individuals do not recognize inaccurate or false information for what it is indicates a deficiency in terms of media literacy skills. Such a finding was made even more

evident by several participants expressing their deeply held beliefs in various conspiracy theories. Compounding this issue is the pervasive lack of trust in the media reported by the respondents. In most cases, individuals said they have little to no trust that they are receiving accurate and complete information from news outlets. This was particularly true in terms of national outlets, and although confidence still wasn't high, local news was found to be more trustworthy.

Still, the overall results suggested that rural Kansans desire more reliable news and information, especially at the local level. Individuals indicated they believed journalism was important for society, and this was even more true locally because study participants suggested engaging socially and politically at that level proved to be more impactful than at the national level. Therefore, the implications of this study are multifaceted. First, misinformation and disinformation are being cultivated in rural Kansas because of the residents' media consumption homogeneity. Also, media literacy skills need to be improved, which can be achieved through educational initiatives. Furthermore, rural Kansans need to be given better news options, and a primary way to achieve this is to improve local news and access to local news across modalities.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wife Kendall and children Presley and Kolten, who are my biggest supporters. Without their understanding, completing this project would have been impossible because this journey was arduous. It tested our family due to the time and stress involved, but they handled it with grace, always urging me forward and encouraging me to do my best. As such, this work is as much theirs as it is mine, and I'm honored to share it with them. I simply hope I have made them proud and shown that the time, effort, and hard work required to achieve dreams and goals is worth it.

Chapter 1 - Tilling the Land by Introducing the Research

Nearly a quarter of Americans can't name a branch of government (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2019, 2021). Additionally, 20% of Americans surveyed believed a 5-4 decision by the Supreme Court of the United States is either sent to Congress or back to the federal court of appeals for a decision (Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2020). This is especially concerning in a time when three-quarters of the American population don't trust the federal government (Pew Research Center, 2021a) and polarization divides the country (Darr et al., 2018, 2021; Padgett et al., 2019). Such political division in the United States led to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol in January 2021. This is because the perpetrators believed President Donald Trump's conspiratorial and baseless assertions that 2020 elections were stolen, which is a falsehood that became known as the "big lie" and harkens back to Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany (Block, 2021).

Despite clear evidence that the election was not stolen or rife with fraud, Republicans remain aligned with the sentiment of Trump's claims. Polls show that nearly 70% of Republicans don't believe President Joe Biden was legitimately elected (Greenberg, 2022). Conservatives in general seem to agree with this line of thinking. Take, for example, the state of Kansas. As a place where Democrats have won the presidential election only five times compared to 26 Republican victories between 1900 and 2020 (Ballotpedia, n.d.; Woolley & Peters, n.d.), Kansas appears to be staunchly conservative. It is considered a "Red-State," which means it is a Republican or conservative region politically speaking (Wenzel, 2020; Wuthnow, 2012). Of course, the state's conservatism can be seen in anecdotal visuals as well. One simply must drive around the state to see the evidence.

Home to the geographic center of the contiguous United States, Kansas is the 15th largest state in terms of land area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and is home to the geographic center of the 48 contiguous or conterminous United States (Geological Survey, 1964). Additionally, Kansas has 105 counties, which is the fifth most in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b). Interstate 70 cuts across the state, going from Missouri in the east to Colorado to the west. Near the middle of Kansas is Salina where the highway connects with Interstate 135. This takes travelers south to Wichita, the most populated city in the state (State Library of Kansas, n.d.). Traveling east to west of Interstate 70, the rolling range of lush grasslands that make up the Flint Hills greet visitors. The landscape then begins to flatten out, giving way to expansive pastures where livestock roam and acres of farm ground filled with wheat, corn, soybeans, and more, depending upon the season.

About three miles east of Salina, one pasture hosts a highly visible example of the state's conservative leanings. Erected on telephone poles, a sign consisting of massive, wooden letters painted red proclaims, "Vote Trump." Below the "O" and the "T" of "Vote" is the shape of the United States painted red. Inside the shape and adorned with a white cross, white lettering spells out the following message: "God Bless America."

Figure 1.1. "Vote Trump" Roadside Sign (Source: Todd R. Vogts)

This photo provides an example of political messages erected along roadways in rural Kansas. This sign was photographed on July 2, 2022, outside of Salina, Kansas.

Other forms of political and religious expression pervade the landscape as well. In Minneapolis, Kansas — a small town north of Salina and home to Rock City, which is a hillside park filled with naturally formed spherical boulders (Schoewe et al., 1937) — a flag proudly proclaiming "Fuck Biden" waves in the Kansas breeze as vehicles travel one of the town's main throughfares. This flag juts out from a tree and hangs next to an American flag. A white, wooden cross leans against the house in the background.

Figure 1.2. "Fuck Biden" Flag (Source: Todd R. Vogts)

This photo provides an example of the vitriolic political messages that can sometimes be seen around rural Kansas. This flag was photographed on July 25, 2022, in Minneapolis, Kansas.

Further west, roadside signs proclaiming political and patriotic affiliations are common as well. These include Trump signs, messages of patriotism complete with American flags, and deeply rooted religious beliefs. For example, along Interstate 70 a series of six signs promote various churches near the town of Quinter, which has a population of approximately 950 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a). Directly blending politics and religion are anti-abortion signs that express sentiments such as "Protect Life" or "My Mom Chose Life" and are accompanied by images of babies.

Figure 1.3. "Take my hand not my life" Anti-Abortion Billboard (Source: Todd R. Vogts)

This photo provides an example of anti-abortion signs that can often be seen along the highways and byway in rural Kansas. This sign was photographed on March 9, 2023, outside of Hutchinson, Kansas.

The issue of abortion took center stage in Kansas during the 2022 primary midterm elections. Conservatives placed an amendment to the state's constitution on the ballot in response to the 2019 decision by the Kansas Supreme Court that struck down a state law banning second-trimester abortion procedures (Smith, 2021). This amendment initiative gained attention after the Supreme Court of the United States overturned Roe v. Wade on June 24, 2022 ("Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization," 2022), which ended federal protections for abortions. The Kansas ballot decision, called the Value Them Both Amendment, sought to give the state legislature the power to regulate abortions within the state (Value Them Both, n.d.). This ballot

measure served as the first test for abortion rights in a post-Roe world (Gowen, 2022; Smith, 2022). In the runup to the Aug. 2, 2022, elections where the amendment's fate would be decided, signs filled yards. The anti-abortion side's Value Them Both Coalition, the organization behind the amendment, implemented purple signs showing the silhouette of a mother and a baby holding one another that combined to create the outline of a heart positioned next to large, bold text that read, "Vote Yes!" On the abortion-rights side, signs with messages such as "Respect Women. Vote No." and "Hands off our rights" could be seen.

Anecdotally, the "Vote Yes!" signs seemed to outnumber the "Vote No" signs in rural and small-town Kansas. Therefore, it made sense that political pundits believed the amendment would pass. Still, local and national media and abortion rights supporters watched the case closely, vaulting the vote to national prominence. To the surprise of many, the amendment was defeated, preserving abortion rights within the state (Kusisto & Barrett, 2022; Smith & Glueck, 2022). What's more, it fell in a landslide by a 20-point margin (Smith & Becker, 2022). This overwhelming victory for abortion rights in a Red-State seemed to give supporters hope that access to this form of healthcare can be preserved in other parts of the country as well (Ollstein, 2022).

Therefore, this positions Kansas as an interesting case place to study a variety of political, communication, and media questions. Kansas is not new to being the national spotlight for these types of reasons. For example, the state is home to the Topeka-based Westboro Baptist Church (WBC). This religious organization is known for protesting at the funerals of American military personnel, and the protesters often hold signs that contain messages such as "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," "Thank God for IEDs," "God Blew Up the Troops," and "Fag Vets," which also

showed stick figures in the middle of a sexual act.[1] WBC leader Fred Phelps maintained that the messages promoted by the church were protected forms of speech thanks to the First Amendment of the United State Constitution (Brouwer & Hess, 2007). After being sued by the family of a deceased Marine, the Supreme Court of the United States agreed with Phelps since the speech dealt with sociopolitical issues such as the war in Iraq and government policy, which are matters of public concern (Bruner & Balter-Reitz, 2013; "Snyder v. Phelps," 2011).

Additionally, Kansas played an important role in the history of civil rights. The state's capital city's school system served as the backdrop in the push to desegregate education through "Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka" (1954) that overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine of "Plessy v. Ferguson" (1896). Of course, to play that role means the schools were segregated based on race at that time. Such a consideration might seem less than progressive, but there are historical figures that counter that narrative. For example, abolitionist John Brown garnered national notoriety for his efforts to end slavery, and Kansas was his battleground as he embarked on a violent guerilla war with proponents of slavery (Post, 2009). The Civil War eventually settled the issue, but the juxtaposition of John Brown shedding blood to end slavery and Oliver Brown suing to end segregation presents a complex, perhaps even confusing, portrait of the state.

Such confusion continues today when looking back at history. For example, in 1896 the famous newspaper editor of The Emporia Gazette, William Allen White, voiced concerns about the direction Kansas was going. His editorial "What's the Matter with Kansas?" criticized

[1] On February 10, 2006, while working as a student journalist in Hutchinson, Kansas, I covered the funeral of Corporal Peter Daniel Wagler. He was killed Jan. 23, 2006, by an improvised explosive device, or IED, that detonated near his M1A2 Abrams Tank during a patrol in Baghdad where he served the United States Army during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Westboro Baptist Church protested outside the church where the funeral took place.

Populist presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan's plans for the country, which included farm programs, graduated income tax, and a paper currency (Frank, 2004). Then in the 2016 presidential election, Kansas went for populist Donald Trump, who used discourse to create cognitive biases that cultivated support of his falsehoods that painted a scene of political elites who were out of touch with the "common" people (Homolar & Scholz, 2019; Steele & Homolar, 2019).

Of course, this apparent identity crisis for the State of Kansas isn't new. Frank (2004) looked at why the state exists as a conservative stronghold, even though many of the Republican policies seem to hurt, rather than help, Kansans. Wuthnow (2019) suggested the general distrust of typical politicians and the government in general stems from perceived threats to the social fabric of rural, small-town America. Other than a few metropolitan areas in the state, Kansas consists of rural, small towns. Part of being largely rural is relying on farming as a key economic activity. For its part, Kansas is third in the country for the amount of farmland it contains, is the number one producer of both wheat and sorghum, and ranks third in cattle production and beef processing (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2022). This would seem to suggest that farm subsidies and other policies put forth by Democrats in the legislature would be perfectly suited for Kansas, but the state's farmers don't vote for people on that side of the political aisle, seeming to go against their own self-interest (Frank, 2004). Undoubtedly, the reasons for this are complex. It could be due to a sense of pride and self-reliance embedded within the culture of farming (Wuthnow, 2015).

Additionally, religion also plays an important role in Red-States (Wuthnow, 2012). According to Pew Research Center (2014), 76% of Kansas adults identify as Christians with 79% saying religion is important in their life and 72% saying they attend religious services at

least once or twice a month. With farming playing such a large role in Kansas, it seems logical that a considerable number of farmers are also religious. Therefore, the reason for aligning with the Republican party and conservativism could be attributed to religious beliefs.

There is another possible reason Kansans associate with conservative and Republican ideals. Media influences could be at play, cultivating particular political ideologies. Media consumption has been shown to impact political activity and belief (Johnson & Kaye, 2013). This proves to be especially true thanks to the wide range of media options available, such as via social media (Gaultney et al., 2022). Individuals engage with a variety of types of media on a daily basis, including news (Pipal et al., 2022). This allows individuals to consume only information that aligns with their previously held beliefs and opinions, which is referred to creating an echo chamber or filter bubble (Nechushtai & Lewis, 2019; Torres-Lugo et al., 2020). Conventional wisdom suggests this type of consumption contributes to polarization and the entrenchment of political views (Iyengar et al., 2019). However, Bail et al. (2018) argued the opposite as they found exposure to opposing views on social media can increase polarization. This can be attributed to the incivility that is generally associated with partisan news and information. However, research found that this incivility can actually decrease polarization if the emotional outbursts come from party-aligned sources, such as Fox News for Republicans or MSNBC for Democrats (Druckman et al., 2019).

Regardless, partisan media provides fertile ground for misinformation and disinformation to spread, fueling polarization and incivility. Social media make it even easier for this false and unreliable information to reach the masses (Gaultney et al., 2022), but misinformation and disinformation travel via all media channels. One goal of this communication is to achieve political goals or promote commercial interests through false or misleading statements designed

to be believed by audiences and disseminators alike (de Ridder, 2021). Another goal is to evoke an emotion and visceral response (Han & Federico, 2018), and both liberal and conservative media do this. However, research shows conservative media create more emotional responses by leveraging outrage (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). Conservatives "have their own cable news network and their own TV personalities. They can turn to nearly any station on the AM dial to hear their views confirmed" (Frank, 2004, p. 142). A prime example of this is conservative talk radio. Names likes Sean Hannity and Rush Limbaugh may come to mind when thinking about right-wing radio. However, the history of conservative media goes back further (Hemmer, 2016). Kansas even has a chapter in this history. "In the twenties and thirties the state was home to a quack doctor of national celebrity, Dr. John Brinkley of Milford, who claimed to cure impotence by surgically transplanting bits of goat testicle to humans. Brinkley was also a pioneer in radio, obtaining a license in 1923 for a clear-channel station on which he broadcast word of his miraculous cure across the entire country. (The station was voted the most popular in America in 1929.)" (Frank, 2004, p. 196).

The prevalence of mis- and disinformation and partisan media outlets fertilizes a distrust of news and journalism. "Fake news" became the rallying cry of then-candidate Donald Trump in the run-up to the 2016 election, and this rhetoric served the goal of casting doubt on media coverage that Trump believed to be unfavorable to him or incompatible with his ideas and opinions. His supporters bought into this line of thinking. The reason people accept and share mis- and disinformation and "fake news" is the subject of many academic research projects and books (e.g., Brummette et al., 2018; Finneman & Thomas, 2018; Greifeneder et al., 2021; Vu & Saldaña, 2021). This is for good reason. Mis- and disinformation breed polarization, and polarization damages democracy.

Investigating ways mis- and disinformation-fueled polarization impacts a democratic society can be approached by looking at the issue through various lenses, one of which is via the media. This is because democracy functions within the public sphere, which is the area of social life where public opinion is formed (Habermas et al., 1974). It is within this space that important discussions and conversations concerning matters of public concern are had among members of society (Habermas, 1991). This discourse exchanged sheds light on how democracy functions (Habermas, 1994), and the media facilitate this communicative act through information dissemination (Habermas, 1994) and by determining what news is reported in what ways (Kent & Davis, 2006; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shoemaker et al., 2009; Whitney & Becker, 1982). When people are informed and able to talk with each other, social capital can be formed (Siisiainen, 2003). Putnam (2001) referred to social capital as a web of mutual trust and cooperation among members of a community or society. Gastil and Keith (2005) built upon this to suggest the term concerned democracy-sustaining social networks.

A byproduct of social capital development is increased civic engagement. This idea can be understood as demonstrating a conscious awareness of and knowledge about political news and actions taking place both locally and nationally within an understanding of the civic process (Bobkowski & Miller, 2016). Community media feed into this by ensuring people receive the information they need (Bressers et al., 2015; Carey, 2020). Being civically engaged goes beyond voting or adopting a mindset of volunteerism (Gibson, 2006). It requires actions that "citizens take in order to pursue common concerns and address problems in the communities they belong to" (Skoric et al., 2016, p. 1822).

When social capital and civic engagement are high, democracy thrives, but the opposite is equally true. Regardless of the positive or negative nature, journalistic products serve as the

field in which democratic seeds germinate or remain dormant. This is due to the intrinsic linkage between journalism and democracy forged through the rights of a free press explicitly defined in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The entire process can be knocked off course, though, if mis- and disinformation seep into news coverage or flood other media spaces, endangering democracy (Morgan, 2018). Community media are particularly well-suited to counter such falsehoods to ensure development of social capital and civic engagement (Bressers et al., 2015; Leupold et al., 2018; Muscat, 2018; Thompson, 2021), but individuals are exposed to far more information than that which comes from the local press. Eventually, people get frustrated and seek ways to make sense of all the information flying around them. If a politician they agree with suggests a given news outlet is or is not reliable, they use that recommendation to shape their own behaviors.

A lack of trust in the news can then develop, especially if the news doesn't align with their political, religious, or other closely held beliefs. Of course, trust also can erode if individuals feel a given institution or organization has failed them in some way (Lewis, 2020) or if they don't feel like they exist as part of the in-crowd (Usher, 2019). As Wuthnow (2019) suggested, those who feel left behind develop more antipathy and seek alternatives to the establishment. Seemingly, such sentiments align with political beliefs, especially when it comes to trust in news. Gottfried (2021) highlighted that even though 83% of United States adults trust political news to some extent when it is coming from mainstream sources, only 24% of Republicans have "a great deal" of trust compared to 53% of Democrats. Such data paints a concerning portrait of the state of journalism, and it gets worse when considering the media more broadly than only political news. According to research, more than 50% of Americans have little to no confidence in the news media nor confidence in the public-interest motives of journalists,

and this lack of news trust becomes more pronounced when divided along political lines as 60% of Republicans believe the media intends to mislead the public, which causes inaccuracies in news reports (Gottfried et al., 2020).

As such, Red-State Kansas and its rural farming communities present an interesting location to explore concepts of mis- and disinformation spread through the media by looking at how residents reach the news and what the implications of that consumption are to a democratic society. Though Kansas is not unique in having political division and polarization, it serves as an example of how media sources cultivate the opinions and beliefs of audiences. Being situated in the middle of the country, removed from the cultural considerations of coastal areas, Kansas is America's heartland. Understanding the state and how its citizens' politics are influenced through their media consumption and exposure to mis- and disinformation can shed light on why seemingly rational people succumb to falsehoods and conspiracy theories that influence their politics in manners that are harmful to their ways of life. As Frank (2004) argued:

> American conservatism depends for its continued dominance and even for its very existence on people never making certain mental connections about the world, [such as the connection] between the small towns they profess to love and the market forces that are slowing grinding those small towns back into the red-state dust—which forces they praise in the most exalted terms. (p. 248)

Therefore, society needs a better understanding of whether mis- and disinformation and division-inducing polarization are being cultivated in rural America's fields and pastures.

Unfortunately, current research largely ignores the news consumption habits and their subsequent effects of rural, Midwestern farmers and ranchers as related to the prevalence of mis- and disinformation within the news and information ecosystem. With the purpose of filling this

gap in the literature, this study investigates the pathways to news of individuals living and working in farming communities in Kansas that lead to the belief in and spreading of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories promulgated by partisan media outlets that include, but are not limited to, conservative talk radio and social media platforms. This is accomplished via a combination of qualitative interviews supported by quantitative surveys from a social constructionism perspective that leverages the theoretical lens of cultivation theory with support from communication infrastructure theory and uses and gratifications theory. Through this, an understanding can be gained concerning how individuals use and are impacted by the news in ways that allow political division and polarization to flourish, which damages social capital and democracy.

Conceptually, this investigation stems from the lived experiences of farmers and ranchers throughout the Midwest who spend countless hours in farm trucks, tractors, and other implements of the farming trade. Whether driving through pastures to check cattle or through fields to plant and harvest crops, these individuals need to pass the time. One way to do so is to listen to music or the radio, and in the rural parts of the country, conservative talk radio is readily available to fill that entertainment void. All it takes is a twist of the dial. Because of this, partisan mis- and disinformation spread. The farmers and ranchers talk about what they heard at the CO-OP and share their ideas via social media. When they receive affirmation, it emboldens them and deepens polarization, and then the process repeats with great amplification and fervor. Yet, national media outlets may not understand this, exemplified by the surprise political pundits experienced when Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton for the presidency, an election many in the national media had called in favor of Clinton before the first ballot was cast. By understanding that mis- and disinformation spread through the speakers of tractors plowing rows in fields, great

insights can be gleaned concerning how misinformation spreads. Though social media play a role, they aren't the only culprit. Perhaps the media ecosystem leans right in Kansas. Consequently, it is possible polarization and mis- and disinformation grow out of the fields in America's heartland.

In the following chapters, this work will tackle the issues through a systematic approach. Chapter 2 reviews literature pertinent to this investigation. Then, Chapter 3 provides an understanding of the operationalized theories, and Chapter 4 explains the methodological design used to investigate the communicative problem at the center of this study. Following this, Chapter 5 relays the results of the investigation, which is then followed by Chapter 6 where those results are discussed. Finally, Chapter 7 proposes future seeds of research germinated through the process and explores the implications of the study.

Chapter 2 - Sowing the Seeds through a Review of Literature

Whether becoming a farmer or adopting a political ideology, an individual needs to be educated in some fashion. According to Van Merriënboer (2016), people learn in a variety of ways, such as by listening, reading, studying, observing others, questioning, paraphrasing information, discussing a topic, and through repetition. A leader in educational research, Biggs (1979), suggested "learning may be conceived in terms of the three stages of input, process and output" (p. 381). Through this process, learning leads to "patterns of thought or behavior that organize categories of information or actions and the relationships among them" (Van Merriënboer, 2016, p. 15). In this way, knowledge is created or constructed, which the overarching perspective of this work: social constructionism.

Social constructionism suggests reality and knowledge are created via social life. This perspective views knowledge as socially constructed through interactions with others and various media in given contexts by connecting, expressing, and reshaping ideas as they relate to individual experiences (Ackermann, 2001; Pass, 2004). This theory has roots in the work of Mead and Schubert (1934), who used symbolic interactionism to suggest identities are created through the use of language and perspective in interaction with others. Berger and Luckmann (1966) built upon this and suggested ideas became truth through the externalizing of thoughts via storytelling either in writing or orally. This process of defining reality is what allows it to have meaning within a social context (Keaton & Bodie, 2011), and that positions human activities and the resulting artifacts, such as written works or painted portraits, as the focus of inquiry (Durrheim, 1997).

As such, investigating discourse or the language being used as an avenue to understand how knowledge and reality are created makes sense because words are powerful (Cap, 2019;

Segre, 2016), especially in terms of naming as a way of identity development (Walton, 2016). This concept shows up in a variety of settings. For example, is used in education research (e.g., Ansarimoghaddam et al., 2017; Castor, 2007; Goodson, 1990), in business and leadership research (e.g., Clifton, 2012, 2019; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010), and psychology and sociology (e.g., Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Durrheim, 1997; Galbin, 2014). Most importantly in terms of this work, it also provides a valuable perspective in political (e.g., Gey, 1998; Gupta, 2007; Ludwig, 2020; Ratner, 2006) and media (e.g., Dawson, 2012; Lay, 2008; Mateus, 2018; Thomson & Greenwood, 2017; Van Gorp, 2007; Zhao, 2020) research. Within each of these areas of inquiry, constructionism fits because it maintains that "language does not mirror reality; rather it constitutes it" (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, p. 174). As such, constructionism is rooted in phenomenology (Schutz, 1970).

Furthermore, due to the wide applicability of social constructionism, it is important to narrow in on specific areas of literature that fit within this framework and relate to this study. Consequently, the following review of pertinent literature will look at research in the realms of pathways to news; media literacy; trusting the news, mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories; community media; social capital; social and civic engagement; and concepts of democracy. This will be followed by a brief a summation of the presented literature.

Exploring Pathways to and Uses of News

Communication provides an important pathway to socialization (Liu & Gastil, 2014), and evidence suggests a strong link between knowledge and the availability of information derived through communication (Elenbaas, 2010). Typically, this information comes via communication in the form of the mass media. Thanks to online and digital technologies, individuals find themselves awash in options for news, information, and entertainment. This can make it difficult

to focus on one medium or outlet and to know where to get the most reliable content. Of course, this isn't a modern phenomenon. In 1964, media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out that society "lives in a world of information overload" (McLuhan, 2003, p. 52). What one pays attention to is considered to be context-dependent based upon what the individual is thinking, feeling, and experiencing (Stephens, 2013). Crary (2001) suggested, "Attention as a process of selection necessarily meant that perception was an activity of exclusion, of rendering parts of a perceptual field unperceived" (pp. 24-25). Therefore, keeping issues of attention in mind as they relate to media serves an important purpose. The news and information ecosystem is fragmented (Searles & Smith, 2016), so understanding how people find and use news helps shed light on how the belief in and spreading of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories occurs.

According to Newman et al. (2021), 66% of Americans got news via online channels in 2021, while 52% used television and 16% used print as their sources for news. Similarly, Shearer (2021) also reported that 52% of Americans preferred digital platforms for their news but found 35% prefer television. Furthermore, 84% of United States adults get their news on digital devices, compared to 67% for television, 50% for radio, and 34% for print publications (Matsa & Naseer, 2021). The dominance of digital platforms, which include social media, should come as no surprise. Such tools provide users the ability to tailor their news exposure to fit within ideological, interest-driven, or any other type of categorization (Batsell, 2015; Briggs, 2020).

Within an online environment, information presentation is more dynamic than in static mediums such as print or television. Users are accustomed to a level of interactivity (Allam, 2019; Belair-Gagnon et al., 2017; Briggs, 2007). For example, links to other pieces of content are an important way people use a news outlet's website (Collier et al., 2021), and being able to comment on a story provides users a way to interact with the news (Liu & McLeod, 2021). Of

course, that presumes an individual is actively seeking news and information. In some cases, a person can "bump into" news online. Wieland and Kleinen-von Königslöw (2020) referred to this as "incidental news exposure," which is when an individual unintentionally comes across news and subsequently consumes it to the point that knowledge is gained. This inadvertent news exposure can cause the consumer to develop an inflated sense of being informed (Song et al., 2020). As Dahlgren (2018) suggested, perceived knowledge impacts participation in public discourse, especially online.

Obviously, other mediums also provide pathways to news. Shearer (2021) highlighted that 22% of United States adults get news from podcasts either often or sometimes. Newsletters also provide an entry point to news consumption (Henneman et al., 2015; Newman, 2020; Tornoe, 2017). Still, as has been highlighted, television still exists as an important way for individuals to get news (Newman et al., 2021), and radio use has remained steady for more than a decade (Pew Research Center, 2021b). Television and radio will be looked at collectively in the following section.

News via the Airwaves

Television

According to the Pew Research Center (2019), 86% of Americans get local news from television. For all news, 68% of Americans use the television (Matsa & Naseer, 2021; Shearer, 2021). Television provides an important pathway for news dissemination and consumption because of how rapidly information can be delivered and how many people can receive it. For example, in the event of an emergency or disaster television news relays important information regarding actions that need to be taken so a person can remain safe. Research suggests that during a public health crisis, such as an infectious disease outbreak, "media messages should

include information about the threat (e.g. likely symptoms) as well as information members of the public can use to protect themselves" (Olson et al., 2020, p. 631). Additionally, the visual aspect of television news can help express the situation people are facing by providing different perspectives, and this can be accomplished through video, as well as photography and drawings displayed during a broadcast (Macdonald, 2021). In this way, television "immerses an audience in an event" (Olson et al., 2020, p. 632).

This immersion also occurs when individuals see people that look like them represented on the screen. A standard way television news accomplishes this is through the use of vox pops. These are brief interviews of ordinary people who have been stopped on the street to be asked questions about particular news events, and through the sharing of their opinions, these people are used as proxies for the general public (Beckers, 2019). Including vox pops in a broadcast encourages engagement with the audience because everyone has the opportunity to be arbitrarily chosen as the interviewee if he or she happens to be in the right place at the right time. However, this form of reporting is problematic because random individuals sharing their opinions tend to be viewed as more influential on viewers' beliefs than experts providing statistical information (Beckers, 2022).

Despite the potential pitfalls of relying on opinions over facts, audiences respond to this type of presentation because it makes the news feel more authentic (Debing, 2016). When something feels real to the consumer, it becomes more accessible and believable. The medium itself helps with that because it "shortens audiences' senses of distances to spaces and places of news" (Gutsche, 2019, p. 1037). Rather than having to travel to another country, the television brings that locale to the viewer. Accomplishing this compression of time and spatial separation gives the news legitimacy by making the events unfolding on the screen relate more to the

individual experiences of the viewers (Kopytowska, 2015). When television news also incorporates content (video, photos, vox pops, et cetera) from the viewers, the legitimacy builds because the audience is engaged and contributing their experiences to the coverage (e.g., Almgren & Olsson, 2015; Bergillos, 2019; Niekamp, 2009; Peterson-Salahuddin, 2021).

Of course, legitimization of news does carry the potential for harm. This is particularly true in relation to coverage of politics. Television journalism exists as a key source of political knowledge creation among viewers (Gutsche, 2019; Ksiazek et al., 2019; Yamamoto et al., 2021). Thanks to cable television, consumers have a plethora of channels they can turn to that provide news. The big three options are CNN, the Fox News Channel, and MSNBC. Despite being news-oriented, each of these channels is on 24 hours per day and actively seeks profit, which influences the types of programming they produce (Jones, 2012). To fill the timeslots, the channels produce a large quantity of commentary and opinion programming, which they were able to do thanks to Reagan-era deregulation that resulted in the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine's requirement of "equal time" being given to competing political voices (Vaughn, 2008; Young, 2021). Though CNN stands closest to the middle and produces more hours of news coverage than its competitors, MSNBC specializes "in left-leaning political commentary and opinion," and Fox News specializes in "right-leaning news coverage, commentary, and opinion" (Anderson et al., 2016, p. 81).

In doing so, these outlets deviated from journalistic norms of producing fact-based content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), and such programming cultivates an atmosphere ripe for polarization. As Jones (2012) highlighted, "Fox News was the first to discover that rejecting the traditional rules of journalism and embracing an overt identification with and projection of a political ideology could be ratings gold," and MSNBC followed suit (p. 150). Through this,

individuals with particular political proclivities could find content that aligned with their previously held opinions and beliefs, which is the essence of media filter bubbles or echo chambers typically associated with online platforms (Flaxman et al., 2016). Even though Groshek and Koc-Michalska (2017) found that filter bubbles may not be contributing to political polarization online via social media as some may think, it seems clear that cable television news channels contribute to polarization. This is accomplished through confirmation bias, or the tendency of a person to focus on messages that confirm their beliefs and opinions while avoiding messages that conflict with their beliefs and opinions (Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019). With this understanding, individuals tend to only expose themselves to media messages from cable news networks that support their political ideologies (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015). This allows them to avoid uncomfortable cognitive dissonance, which is when recently received information that conflicts with previously held information or knowledge (Festinger, 1962; Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020).

As such, partisan cable news channels become a haven for political ideologues. The opposing political party is presented as the enemy and in constant conflict with the other end of the political spectrum, which increases polarization (Han & Federico, 2017). Cable television news does this by relying on outrage, which fires up and exploits the emotions of individuals with certain political beliefs to maintain viewership and increase profitability (Young, 2021). "Outrage sidesteps the messy nuances of complex political issues in favor of melodrama, misrepresentative exaggeration, mockery, and improbable forecasts of impending doom. Outrage talk is not so much discussion as it is verbal competition, political theater with a scorecard" (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 20). In short, when political pundits shout at each other indignantly on television, it is pure entertainment. Unfortunately, consumption of such content results in

more partisan voting during elections (Ksiazek et al., 2019), and the inherent conflict drives individuals deeper into their respective political party's ideology (Han & Federico, 2017).

Even so, Wessler and Rinke (2014) argued that the promise of television news as a widely accessible source of political information makes the medium valued because it "exposes viewers to alternative viewpoints more often than newspapers and thus should support deliberative qualities in citizens more strongly" (p. 828). Such a consideration is important for democratic function, especially within a system of deliberative democracy (e.g., Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Dzur, 2002; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Still, how individuals arrive at and utilize news is influenced by their beliefs and opinions, at least on a basic level. This can be attributed to the intrinsic desire of people to justify and support their sense of self through their media choices (Shalev & Tsfati, 2022). That leaves the channel open for polarization to stream into society, especially via cable television. This is because "cable news networks are no longer in the business of journalism. They are cable channels that program political entertainment television" (Jones, 2012, p. 153).

Of course, cable television news isn't alone. All forms of television news can drive political interest and activity (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2019). For example, local television news, which has seen an increase of 2.5 hours of dedicated time on local channels between 2003 and 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2021c), can also create division. As Levendusky (2022) suggested, the owners of local broadcast stations can influence or even dictate the types of messaging going out over the airwaves, which can influence the political beliefs of the audience. Likewise, radio, especially talk radio, can be a source of polarization even as it serves an important role in the news and information ecosystem.

Radio

Though it is younger than the development of the printing press and the subsequent proliferation of newspapers as a means to consume news, radio holds historical significance by initiating the world of broadcast media. Built upon the 1840s invention of the telegraph, the radio became a mass medium in the 1920s (Campbell et al., 2019). At the time, due to technological limitations, broadcasts had to be done live, which meant performers had to go to the studio (Vaughn, 2008). However, people continually experimented with the new medium. In 1916, Pittsburgh resident and Westinghouse engineer Frank Conrad set up a radio station in his garage, and, with a microphone in front of a phonograph, became perhaps one of the first disc jockeys as he broadcast music to friends to whom he'd given receivers (Campbell et al., 2019). That same year, Lee DeForest dipped into the realm of broadcast news by reporting election returns over the air from his amateur station in High Bridge, New York (Vaughn, 2008). By 1920, thanks to Frank Conrad's hobby catching the attention of Westinghouse executives, KDKA went on the air as what some regard as the first commercial broadcaster and trailblazer in reporting presidential election returns that November (Campbell et al., 2019). However, some dispute KDKA's status as the first. Others point to 8MK, based in Detroit and owned by the Detroit News newspaper, as the first to report election results based upon the station's airing of Michigan state election returns in September 1920 (Campbell et al., 2013).

Regardless which station was first, this began the push for news and entertainment over the airwaves. National networks such as NBC and CBS went on the air in 1926 and 1927 respectively, which made information even more available as local broadcasters signed up to be affiliates of the networks and gain access to the content being produced (Vaughn, 2008). By the 1930s, politicians began leveraging the medium. Most notably was President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who delivered a regular series of radio addresses that were known as "Fireside Chats"

(Vaughn, 2008). In speaking directly to the masses via the radio, Roosevelt was able to engage with the public in a new way, and it set the stage for political communication as it's known today (Craig, 2000). Also, advertising and sponsorships debuted as part of programming, providing a revenue stream for broadcasters (Campbell et al., 2019; Craig, 2000). These commercials supported the programming, allowing networks to produce more content that included news and entertainment. As far as entertainment goes, programming such as "Amos 'n' Andy," "The Shadow," "The Lone Ranger," and "The Green Hornet" brought families together around the radio to tune into the latest adventure in the serial stories or to hear the Ed Sullivan Show's comedic offerings (Campbell et al., 2019). Also, one cannot forget the infamous "War of the Worlds" dramatization on Halloween in 1938 that "convinced thousands of people that an army of Martians really had invaded" (Vaughn, 2008, p. 435). Of course, the number of people who truly believed aliens were attacking is disputed (Croteau & Hoynes, 2018), but it highlighted the power of radio as a medium, especially with impending war as a backdrop (Schwartz, 2015).

It was war that elevated radio into a news-dissemination medium beyond mere entertainment. As Vaughn (2008) explained:

> [I]t was in December 1941 that everything changed and news took center stage: when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. It was a Sunday and there was not much news scheduled— mostly religion, soap operas, and sports. But when the news broke and was confirmed, radio news reporters rushed in to work and coverage of World War II began in earnest. (p. 435)

Radio's reporting brought the war into the homes of Americans, making it real and shaping the public discourse (Craig, 2000). The cultural views of the war found support through the radio advertisements that aired on all the networks (Horten, 2002). However, without the news

coverage of the war, the advertisements wouldn't have been so prominent or profitable. In fact, thanks to coverage of the world-wide conflict, time spend broadcasting news increased from 2,396 hours in 1940 to 5,522 hours by the end of 1944 (Vaughn, 2008). This solidified the place of news within the radio ecosystem. Likewise, politics and conceptions of community and citizenship were forever changed. As Craig (2000) pointed out, radio provided programming directly into the homes of listeners, which "blurred the distinction between public and private culture and entertainment. Listeners could not participate in public events such as sporting contests, concerts, and speeches without leaving home" (p. 279).

Eventually, music became more of a focus for radio, especially with the development of the FM band and the Top 40 and other radio programming formats (Campbell et al., 2019). However, news radio broadcasting continues. As was the case in the early days of radio, formats of news, commentary, and political talk shows continue to remain popular (Horten, 2002). Though the technology was disruptive to a media world where newspapers were the norm, radio gave news consumers an immediacy that print products couldn't match, and it was more accessible. As Vaughn (2008) pointed out, "it made life easier for people in rural areas who lived far from where newspapers could be bought," and it allowed individuals "to sit in the comfort of their own living room and listen to experts discussing what was going on in the world" (p. 434). As such, radio provided something for everyone, and that became even more clear when talk radio took root.

Talk radio consists of opinion-based programming, and it is often cited as the most popular format on the radio (Campbell et al., 2019). Since American adults spend almost 12 hours per week listening to traditional radio (Nielsen, 2019), the likelihood that individuals are spending at least some of that time listening to news or talk radio seems high. Of course, talk

radio in its current form would not exist if it weren't for Reagan-era deregulation that resulted in the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine's requirement of "equal time" being given to competing political voices (Vaughn, 2008; Young, 2021). "Radio was now free to air programs that only presented one side, without the obligation to let the other side be heard. By the end of the 1980s, partisan talk shows, mostly from the right wing conservative viewpoint, were proliferating" (Vaughn, 2008, p. 436). One notable name in the talk radio game was Rush Limbaugh.

In February 2021, a year after receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom during President Donald Trump's 2022 State of the Union Address, Limbaugh died of lung cancer at the age of 70 (Folkenflik, 2021), but he left behind an indelible mark on the radio and media worlds. His style of promoting conservative and Republican ideals while simultaneously attacking anyone and anything remotely viewed as liberal turned talk radio into a powerful political force (Jones, 1998). He rarely had guests on the show and only allowed a handful of callers to speak on the air, opting instead to opine about politics and the news of the day through a largely solo performance (Dori-Hacohen, 2013). Through this, he became one of the most prominent voices in politics (Jones, 1998). According to Boyd (1994), Limbaugh's influence over individuals and conservative political talking points stemmed from information distortions he used to convince others to adopt his point of view, and those distortions included the following: Ad Hominem, or attacking a source of an argument instead of the argument itself through name calling and ridicule; Mind Reading, or second guessing motives of an individual; Numbers Distortion, or using numbers vaguely or misusing statistics as a way to impress the audience without providing the proper context; Thinking for Others, or telling people what they should think and believe; and Not Quoting Sources, or not citing any references or sources to support the positions and opinions being expressed.

Limbaugh's approach and influence clearly worked. His show cultivated a massive fan base that even led to his devotees meeting together in real life at locations referred to as "Rush Rooms," which were spaces in restaurants where individuals gathered together to listen to Limbaugh's show and interact with each other (Dori-Hacohen, 2013). His acolytes were so devoted that he was able to move past public outcry over derogatory statements he made about a woman named Sandra Fluke (Bentley, 2012). For what it's worth, Limbaugh attributed his popularity to the idea that he symbolized middle America and its rejection of elitism because the "enemy of the plain people, of good ol' red-state America, is intellectuals. They are the haughty liberal elite under whose tyranny 'Middle America' suffers" (Frank, 2004, p. 192). Regardless, his pioneering programming inspired the likes of conservative talk radio stalwarts Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Glenn Beck, and Mark Levin (Campbell et al., 2019).

It's worth noting that liberal talk radio did exist, but it failed to find a sustainable audience (Campbell et al., 2019; Vaughn, 2008), which is why the medium became the sole domain of conservatives. The reason for conservative talk radio working remains unclear, though, but within conservative circles, the partisan messages clearly struck a nerve. By tuning in to conservative talk radio, listeners "could quickly and easily get detailed, informed assessments from someone they generally agreed with, a fellow conservative—a charming, articulate, well-informed one" (Jones, 1998, p. 370). This again feeds into the idea of filter bubbles and echo chambers that serve as vehicles to reinforce previously held beliefs and opinions (Flaxman et al., 2016; Geiß et al., 2021; Torres-Lugo et al., 2020). Also, the messages are delivered with emotion and energy, which pulls listeners in and excites them. For example, Michael Savage is known for his high intensity (Stiegler, 2014). The passion exhibited by personalities like Savage or Limbaugh typically leverages outrage aimed at opposing political

beliefs or institutions (Shrader, 2013; Young, 2021). Often, this outrage results in the use of hateful and derogatory language that can be viewed as a form of hate speech (Noriega & Iribarren, 2014; Stiegler, 2014). Through looking at the language used between conservative (the right) and liberal (the left) media outlets, Sobieraj and Berry (2011) found "that the right uses decidedly more outrage speech than the left. Taken as a whole, liberal content is quite nasty in character, following the outrage model with emotional, dramatic, and judgment-laden speech. Conservatives, however, are even nastier" (p. 30).

Producing this type of content serves the business interests of the channels carrying such programming. Those who manage a station's purse strings seem to ignore the social responsibility of radio (Shrader, 2013), and advertisers don't seem to care about the messages being broadcast either. "They're buying them because their audience buys tractors, their audience drinks soda, and their audience needs data backup. And that's the place to get those types of customers" (Weinger, 2013, para. 5). Additionally, this type of content breeds incivility — understood to be disrespectful and hyperbolic claims toward a target that are delivered in a purposeful and confrontational manner — within society's political discourse by using emotional appeals that activate negative political beliefs and opinions (Gervais, 2014). Research from Conway and Stryker (2021) found people from all political beliefs recognized the incivility, especially when it came from talk radio show hosts or other broadcast political pundits, but Republicans seemed to be unfazed by the hostility and outrage while Democrats demonstrated more concern about the language being used.

Based upon this and operating under the assumption that talk radio exists as a form of a public forum because people can call in and otherwise contribute to the content (Botes & Langdon, 2006; Dori-Hacohen, 2012), the partisan and polarizing discourse of conservative talk

radio damages democratic society. It fosters incivility in listeners, resulting in increased use of uncivil language when discussing political issues (Gervais, 2014), and shapes knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions about political issues and political actors (Lee & Cappella, 2001). Such impacts are not always positive, which is why Hemmer (2016) highlighted that conservative media permanently altered American politics. Additionally, Gastil and Keith (2005) argued that "the viciousness of talk radio reveals the popularity of a decidedly nondeliberative form of citizen participation" (p. 12-13). It also distorts the shape of the public sphere, which is the communicative space where members of the public can discursively interact with each other (Habermas, 1991), by altering the ability of citizens to acquire the information necessary to effectively participate in dialogue and debate over matters of public concern (Mwesige, 2009).

Furthermore, selectively exposing oneself to partisan media shapes a person's political behavior and overall media use, which has implications for civic engagement (Weaver, 2017) and how dialogue is constructed within society (Lee, 2012). If citizens cannot communicate civilly, democracy fails to function. Boyd (1994) explained it this way:

> In a democratic society, solutions should come out of dialogue, debate, and compromise. The assumption is that no one person has the one true answer, but that through collective decision making, which incorporates many points of view, we may get closer approximations to viable solutions. The democratic process requires the involvement of many persons in the decision making process and is opposed to a monopoly of information and thinking. (p. 259)

If such communicative processes are not able to take place, individuals end up feeling marginalized, excluded, and silenced. As such, public opinion concerning political issues is influenced most heavily by the loudest and most extreme voices, such as those heard on

conservative talk radio, instead of equal input from a diverse array of individuals (Barker & Knight, 2000; Lee, 2007; Lee & Cappella, 2001). Thanks to the selective exposure that constructs filter bubbles and echo chambers, Weaver (2013) argued, talk radio has throttled public dialogue and debate because it "strangles free thinking and obstructs self-agency and participation on both the local and national level. It goes against the basic dialogic principles of communication and thwarts the outcomes for basic education and literacy policies" (p. 298).

Therefore, conservative talk radio fuels polarization and division. It accomplishes this by exaggerating fringe opinions to motivate those who have low trust in the government to engage with politics (Hollander, 1997; Johnson & Kaye, 2013). Again, relying on outrage (Shrader, 2013; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Young, 2021), partisan pundits pontificating over the airwaves broadcast messaging designed to rally the like-minded listener and shore up the conservative ideals being put forth. For the diehard, these political messages confirm previously held beliefs. They can spur action that can be dangerous, such as the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol. However, the larger concern, as Hofstetter and Gianos (1997) suggested, is when the talk show hosts leverage passions, such as religion, to convince vulnerable people to view the world from the their perspectives. This deepens division and cultivates mistrust of the other side. Even though talk radio is more about entertainment than news (Bennett, 2002), listeners often internalize the messaging differently. "When considering elite talk show hosts, they engage in one-sided, monolithic conversation. Their commentary is often passed on as fact. Hardcore listeners embrace their opinion leaders as a primary source for making sense of what is happening in America" (Weaver, 2013, p. 298). As such, despite the ability of radio to disseminate news and information quickly and efficiently, talk radio distorts reality, which endangers democracy.

Synthesis

Clearly, both radio and television, as well as social media, provide powerful pathways to the news. This is especially true when platforms such as television and social media are used simultaneously as a way to engage with and increase knowledge of the news (Yamamoto et al., 2021). Of course, one cannot forget printed newspapers. Despite facing historic lows in circulation (Grieco, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2021d), newspapers rank in the top three of providers of local news (Pew Research Center, 2019). For small, rural communities such as those found in Kansas, newspapers play an important role in community life as an information center and binding agent (Garfrerick, 2010). As McLuhan (2003) suggested, historically "the cultural life of most communities centered about the church, the school, the local library and the local newspaper" (p. 118). This resulted in the first research question:

RQ1: What are the news consumption habits of rural residents in Kansas considering the unfettered access to content brought about by the proliferation of digital technologies?

In Kansas, 58 of the 105 counties have only one commercial newspaper, and one county has no newspaper (Abernathy, 2018b). Aligning with national preference trends (Pew Research Center, 2019), these outlets cover stories of crime, transportation, schools, sports, community events, and government and politics. Reporting on local government is an important service of community news outlets like newspapers, as well as local radio and television stations. Individuals need to be informed about elections, and these journalism entities provide the information necessary to make knowledgeable decisions as the ballot box.

Of course, in the United States, elections include everything from national to local offices. Still, individuals need to pay more attention to local political news instead of national

political news, which will support a stronger democracy. As Metzler (2021) explained, "individuals focusing solely on national news, whether by choice or by lack of options, have insufficient information to make lower-level ballot choices. A decline in local media is linked to increased straight-ticket voting, suggesting that national media further contributes to hype-partisanship" (p. 612). This damages democracy.

Luckily, local news can help to counter this. Huntsberger (2020) pointed out, "community media's concentration on local public affairs, and especially on less partisan issues including housing, emergency preparedness, neighborhood clean-up and America's opioid crisis, can engage local audiences in ways that regional and national providers cannot" (p. 200). In order to keep audiences engaged, though, there must be a mix of content types, such as hard news that covers matters of public importance and soft news that serves more of an entertainment function (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020). By providing this variety, democracy is supported because news consumers can easily access information that assists in making decisions that impact the local community. Their pathways to news become less cluttered, enabling them to use the news more effectively. This resulted in the first research hypothesis:

H1: Rural residents in Kansas get most of their news via national outlets and social media platforms that focus on opinion-oriented content.

For this to come to fruition, though, news consumers must be able to differentiate between reliable and unreliable information. Local news outlets can produce news of variety degrees of quality. Furthermore, with the internet being so pervasive in life, information of questionable validity is readily available right alongside trustworthy content. As such, individuals must be media literate. This concept of media literacy will be explored in the following section.

Unpacking Media Literacy

Research shows all communication can be attributed to either acquiring information or sharing information, regardless if the information being sent or received is more broad-based or personal in nature (Oates, 1985). Understanding such communication is media literacy, which entails acquiring skills to navigate the news media by being able to evaluate and use information critically (Guo-Ming, 2007; Kahne et al., 2012). To that end, media literacy refers to the need for consumers to understand how to use the media effectively. Deriving from the work of media theorists Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman, the concept has come to focus on understanding the content being consumed (Kuskis, 2015). As such, media literacy contributes to the social construction of reality as the consumer interprets the meaning of media messages. "Film, television, music, and other mass media frequently offer audiences ways to make sense of the world, and a critical media literacy education seeks to educate citizens and prepare them to approach such offers critically" (Gray, 2005, p. 224). As a form of communication education, media literacy curricula often includes critical thinking skills as an important attribute (Guo-Ming, 2007). With more detail and specificity, Hobbs (2010) suggested the following regarding the use of the term as it relates to the goals of such an educational endeavor:

> "to encompass the full range of cognitive, emotional and social competencies that includes the use of texts, tools and technologies; the skills of critical thinking and analysis; the practice of message composition and creativity; the ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking; as well as active participation through teamwork and collaboration. When people have digital and media literacy competencies, they recognize personal, corporate and political agendas and are empowered to speak out on behalf of the missing voices and omitted perspectives in our communities. By identifying and

> attempting to solve problems, people use their powerful voices and their rights under the law to improve the world around them." (p. 17)

By adopting this approach to media literacy, the emphasis of hands-on media creation and consumption positions journalism education as an important area of student learning (Emery & Rother, 2002; Mihailidis, 2006; Schmidt, 2013). This is why Dvorak et al. (1994) famously argued that journalism students perform better in school at all levels, leading them to become more productive members of society. When an individual is media literate, they are equipped to perform better in life after school.

However, not everyone experiences journalism education or other media literacy initiatives while in school. Adult education courses could be an option to fill this gap (Morris & Yeoman, 2021), but working journalists can also help through their everyday reporting and journalistic practices and routines (Jaakkola, 2022). By adopting concepts of participatory journalism — such as service, solutions, and constructive approaches — journalists, especially those at the local or community level, can help teach consumers what news is reliable and to be trusted through efforts of transparency and relationship building (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020). By comparing media outlets to museums that practice public pedagogy, Jaakkola (2022) suggested the following:

> "Increasing people's access to journalism shows similarities to audience development and engagement. Audience development refers to the strategic work carried out by the management of cultural organisations aimed at increasing the outreach of their output [. . .] Audience engagement means collaboration with audiences to create mutual relevance and reciprocity, a practice that has also gained ground in the strategies of newsrooms." (p. 1270)

Through this, media consumers can become more mindful about their media choices and deliberate about how they process information, which leads to more critical engagement with the news (Babad et al., 2009) and more skill in interacting with various technologies (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014). Thus, vulnerability to media bias influences can be mitigated, and when such negative impacts of media consumption are addressed, democratic function is supported. This resulted in the second research question:

RQ2: Does the solitary nature of rural life create an environment where selective exposure to partisan media outlets develops powerful echo chambers and filter bubbles?

As Babad et al. (2009) argued, being media literate "can be understood as a dimension of citizenship" (p. 4). Therefore, media literacy endeavors produce better citizens. Through learning about the media, individuals develop independent thought through critical inquiry (Ashley, 2020). Research by Higdon (2022) pointed to the idea that increased examination of media messages can impact how individuals use a given medium, such as social media platforms. Furthermore, Jaakkola (2022) argued that media literacy allows consumers to differentiate between high-quality and inferior news products, developing a demand for quality journalism that creates an atmosphere in which journalism production is improved. From this perspective, media literacy initiates a cycle of ever-improving news production, potentially elevating the profession to new heights. Additionally, the desire for better journalism stemming from media literacy can improve representation of audiences (Stamps, 2021). This resulted in the second research hypothesis:

H2: Rural residents in Kansas struggle to discern between credible and unreliable news outlets.

More importantly, though, media literacy has the potential to counter issues resulting from the spread of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories. This can include "fake news," which "is the intentional deception of a mass audience by nonmedia actors via a sensational communication that appears credible but is designed to manipulate and is not revealed to be false" (Finneman & Thomas, 2018, p. 358). Accusations of "fake news" have damaged the credibility of news organizations, leading to a lowered level of trust in the news (Mason et al., 2018; Middaugh, 2018). With lowered trust in the media comes increased political polarization, which allows mis- and disinformation to spread. When this occurs, democracy suffers (Gaultney et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2018). The ideas of news trust, mis- and disinformation, and conspiracy theories are complex, though. As such, deeper investigation into these concepts is warranted, which will be addressed in the following section.

Trusting the News, Mis- and Disinformation, and Conspiracy Theories

The concept of trust within media provides an important consideration within the communication of society. For journalism to function properly within a democratic society, there must be trust. As Karlsen and Aalberg (2021) pointed out, "trust in news is essential for the ideal of the informed citizen" because "citizenship only works on the basis of common knowledge" (pp. 2-3). Individuals must believe the news in order to use it in their performances of citizenship (Swart & Broersma, 2022). This is especially true during politically divisive times where "fake news" is used as a cudgel to bash any sort of media coverage that is not favorable to previously held beliefs and opinions. To combat such accusations, journalists should do what they do best and report on the claims, showing with evidence why the reporting is solid. To borrow from Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, "the remedy to be applied is more speech" ("Whitney v. California," 1927). For example, implementing fact-checkering can help. However, for it to be

successful it must be done transparently in order to build trust (Humprecht, 2020), and journalists must have the time and skills needed to do so effectively, which Himma-Kadakas and Ojamets (2022) found to be lacking. Still, fact-checking can be done by outside or third-party sources, or the journalists themselves can contribute by practicing what Carson et al. (2022) referred to as "active journalistic adjudication," which requires "reporters check factual claims, weigh evidence, judge the accuracy of competing accounts, and, ultimately, share their findings with the reader" (p. 802). In a perfect world, this would work. However, in times of societal division, pursing such actions is likely to be inadequate. In fact, it could backfire (Carson et al., 2022; Wood & Porter, 2019). "Some individuals might not believe in corrections and instead continue to hold their pre-existing misperceptions even after exposure to evidence" (Tandoc, 2019, p. 6).

This speaks to a lack of trust. Trust can be understood as a relationship between social actors that involves an orientation toward the future, includes risk due to unknown futures, and works to reduce the complexity found in social interactions (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019). Specific to the news media, Strömbäck et al. (2020) suggested a viable conceptualization of trust as a concept, which was adopted for this study and is articulated as follows:

> [A]t the broadest conceptual level, there is significant consensus that news media trust refers to the relationship between citizens (the trustors) and the news media (the trustees) where citizens, however tacit or habitual, in situations of uncertainty expect that interactions with the news media will lead to gains rather than losses. (p. 142)

A societal or professional norm, such as trust, "cannot exist without being discursively articulated" (Vos & Craft, 2017, p. 1509). Therefore, discourse plays an important role "in the way that both journalists and citizens understand journalism's role" in society (Zahay et al., 2021, p. 1042). With understanding comes appreciation and bonding. As Bicas (2021) explained,

"the objective is to strengthen ties, address differences between logics; it is coexistence through ayni (mutual aid). It is a strengthening of a collective experience" (p. 224). To that end, Usher (2018) described trust as a constructed object within journalism and communication more broadly because it must be negotiated by all social actors, which includes journalists, audiences, and sources. Without this construct, the informed citizenry necessary for a democracy fails to come to fruition thanks to choosing partisan sources of information that align with their predetermined beliefs. "When people do not trust news, they are more likely to choose nonmainstream, alternative news sources," which leads them "to rely on their political predispositions" more heavily (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019, pp. 3672-3673).

Even so, trust can be built if news outlets provide coverage in a fashion that adheres to certain norms of journalism. These norms include objectivity and transparency (Boudana, 2011; Parks, 2021; Peifer & Meisinger, 2021; Ward, 2011). One area where this is of chief importance is in politics reporting. Instead of covering political campaigns and elections as horseraces, journalists should report events with less hyperbole and animation. For example, research by Hopmann et al. (2015) found that when individuals were exposed to political coverage that was framed like a game or competition, such as a horserace, those people ended up trusting the news less. Ideally, such an issue could be corrected for if news outlets simply refrained from covering politics like it was a game. However, news outlets are not the only players in the information dissemination game. Social media networks also compete for audience attention, and trust in the media can be heavily influenced by the discourse found on these platforms, especially in terms of politics.

This is due to the fact that social media networks exist as user communities (Walker et al., 2019). As such, these channels provide an avenue for political discussion, so political

ideology and perceived political affiliation of information disseminators via the platforms influences the trust of news found in those spaces (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2021). Furthermore, political actors weaponize social media to increase partisanship by spreading polarized messages, which contributes to the erosion of trust in democratic institutions (Walker et al., 2019). Additionally, opinion leaders, whether politicians or not, permeate social media and spread whatever thoughts and opinions they are promoting. This makes it difficult to know who to trust in the online spaces (Swart & Broersma, 2022). As Dubois et al. (2020) highlighted:

> Opinion leaders can serve as a trusted source for information and thus have the potential to insulate their followers from threats of problematic information flows on social media but they could also amplify the effects of disinformation and echo chambers if their political information verification practices are poor. (pp. 8-9)

Such findings could be explained by a general sense of skepticism social media users have toward information found via those platforms (Park et al., 2020), especially considering people tend to bump into news without intentionally seeking it out online (Swart & Broersma, 2022). Therefore, as research by Kalogeropoulos et al. (2019) found, "choosing social media as the main source of news is correlated with lower levels of trust in news" compared to the trust in mainstream sources of news such as television, print, and other legacy media outlets (p. 3682), and Karlsen and Aalberg (2021) echoed this idea.

Relatedly, research by Newman et al. (2021) found local television news to be the most trusted news source, ranking at least 10% higher than the likes of CBS News, ABC News, BBC News, CNN, the New York Times, NPR, the Washington Post, and Fox News. This is an important consideration because research has suggested that developing trust is an important component of news organizations' economic viability (Fisher et al., 2021). Trust relates to

engagement between news outlets and their audiences (Park et al., 2020), and engagement serves as an important strategy for cultivating loyalty to news brands, which results in financial stability (e.g., Batsell, 2015; Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019; Olsen et al., 2021). How a given news outlet judges its audience's level of trust varies, though. That is why Prochazka and Schweiger (2019) attempted to develop an assessment scale for determining levels of trust in the media. Similarly, Strömbäck et al. (2020) proposed an analytical framework for examining media trust. However, even if outlets know whether audiences trust their products, the issue remains that any lack of trust cultivates an atmosphere that provides fertile ground for mis- and disinformation and "fake news" to grow and flourish, taking over the fields of public discourse like a noxious weed or invasive plant species. This resulted in the third research question:

RQ3: Why do rural residents in Kansas believe and spread mis- and disinformation they encounter?

The concepts of mis- and disinformation (a combination of misinformation and disinformation) and "fake news" are interrelated. As Vincent and Gismondi (2021) highlighted, the terms are often used interchangeably. For example, Gaultney et al. (2022) used "fake news" and misinformation interchangeably, defining misinformation as "misleading information spread regardless of intent" (p. 61), but distinctions exist. Maresh-Fuehrer and Gurney (2021) defined misinformation and disinformation as follows:

> (1) misinformation, or false information that is disseminated without harmful intent, such as posting an article that unknowingly contains outdated information; (2) disinformation, or false information that is deliberately created and shared with harmful intent, such as posting a photo that attributes fabricated quotes to someone; (pp. 149-150)

"Fake news," then, is understood to mean the deliberate spread of the false information of which mis- and disinformation consists (Vincent & Gismondi, 2021). Because it serves as an umbrella term, "fake news" can come in the form of clickbait, satire and parody, hoaxes, propaganda, deceptive framing, and journalistic deception, among other forms, and this makes decerning between credible and "fake" news difficult, especially on social media networks (Collins et al., 2021).

Conspiracy theories also fit under the "fake news" moniker. Conspiracy theories serve as a way to make sense of the world by providing believers with the reason behind certain events that cause wide-ranging effects (Maresh-Fuehrer & Gurney, 2021). Prime examples of this include the "birther" theories concerning President Barack Obama's birth certificate, "9/11 truthers" who believe the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, were perpetrated by the United State government (Vincent & Gismondi, 2021), the origin of HIV/AIDS and it being a man-made virus designed to eliminate Black people (Ross et al., 2006), or even the belief that the moon landing was faked by the United States. White (2022) argued belief in conspiracy theories, as well as other forms for mis- and disinformation, stems from confirmation bias, which Lee et al. (2021) defined as "the act of purposefully seeking out information that confirms our preexisting beliefs" (p. 166). This can be done through traditional media outlets (e.g., Bauer et al., 2022; Hemmer, 2016; Tsfati et al., 2020), and it is easy to do on social media (e.g., Nissen et al., 2022; Pasquetto et al., 2020; Xiao, 2021). This resulted in the fourth research question:

RQ4: How are rural residents in Kansas most likely to encounter and further spread mis- and disinformation?

Banning or blocking conspiratorial content or other forms of mis- and disinformation could help, but research by Innes and Innes (2021) found doing so does not eliminate such

content completely. Of course, this makes sense. Social media algorithms amplify mis- and disinformation (Ingram, 2021), and when a user encounters that content, his or her brain engages psychological mechanisms to process the information, which both affects and is affected by emotions and attitudes (Lee et al., 2021). Based upon this information consumption, value judgements are made concerning the reliability and credibility of the news being disseminated. Research clearly shows that belief in the news stems from political ideology (Bauer et al., 2022; Gaultney et al., 2022; Vincent & Gismondi, 2021). After all, according to survey research highlighted by Lee et al. (2021), "people were much more likely to believe fake news stories that cast their preferred candidate in a good light" (p. 169). The result is political polarization and division.

For example, Recuero et al. (2019) found social media create polarization due to the proliferation of opinion statements, which are sometimes unsubstantiated, spreading on the platforms. Most recently, the 2016 United States Presidential election highlights how polarization, understood to be entrenched beliefs and opinions related to politics or other subjects of public discussion that divide individuals (Gaultney et al., 2022), can be fostered. "[S]ocial media, by acting as portals of shared information determined to be sought (algorithmically or otherwise) by users, may have helped Trump win by cultivating ideological filter bubbles that lacked cross-cutting information" (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, social media can shape perceptions of news because users see comments and opinions of others before being able to consume the news themselves (Gearhart et al., 2021).

Polarization occurs when there is a void of reliable information or when individuals do not feel like their voices are being heard. Darr et al. (2018) found loss of local newspapers increased community division as evident by down-ballot voting patterns. People become less

knowledgeable about politics if no journalists are covering the local politics. Community news outlets can help diminish polarization and increase the democratic practice of voting by focusing editorial writing on local issues (Darr et al., 2021), and the research of Chapp and Aehl (2021) found "[l]ocal papers have a tremendous impact on what happens after voters have registered their presidential preference" (p. 247). One reason for this is that "weekly newspapers are the only steady source of local news for rural communities [. . .], thereby making their role even more critical" (Finneman & Thomas, 2021a, p. 335).

Correcting inaccurate information helps, but if a person is repeatedly exposed to false information, he or she is likely to believe it due to the illusory truth effect (Maresh-Fuehrer & Gurney, 2021). Journalists can help in the effort of countering polarization-inducing mis- and disinformation by reporting on the falsehoods and directly debunking them, but it is the polarization itself that prevents such actions because some individuals will see this type of reporting as evidence of media bias (Saldaña & Vu, 2022). This results in the third research hypothesis:

H3: Rural residents in Kansas distrust the news due to a belief that media outlets are not telling the truth about what is really going on in the world.

Despite such concerns, fighting against mis- and disinformation and other forms of detrimental "fake news" is needed because it damages democracy. Conspiracy theories hollow out democracy (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2019). Furthermore, as Vincent and Gismondi (2021) argued, "Misinformation is a grave concern for democracy, and it is the responsibility of us all to be proactive in discerning fake news and misinformation and reducing their virality online" (p. 94). Failure to do so degrades society's information environment (de Ridder, 2021), which "impedes civic dialogue" (Damasceno, 2021, p. 2). Additionally, mis- and disinformation lead

individuals to make poor political, policy, and health decisions (de Ridder, 2021; Ecker et al., 2022; Jain, 2021).

Therefore, it becomes clear that mis- and disinformation can have wide-ranging impacts, even affecting memories (Loftus, 2005). Again, journalism can help counter these negative impacts (e.g., Chapp & Aehl, 2021; Darr et al., 2018, 2021). Lewis (2019) argued for relational journalism, which focuses on understanding and listening to develop relationships that drive solution-oriented reporting, to address concerns of trust brought about by mis- and disinformation. Such an initiative hearkens to the idea of local journalism, and, as scholars have made clear, community news outlets exist as important sources of news and information (e.g., Bressers et al., 2015; Finneman & Thomas, 2021a, 2021b; Smethers et al., 2021), through which mis- and disinformation can be neutralized. As such, "leaders in American community media agree that the future is inextricably tied to local service" (Huntsberger, 2020, p. 197). Community media, which functions within a relationship between itself and its community, serves as a binding agent that brings residents together with common information and coverage. This can take place via various platforms, such as printed products, radio or television broadcast, or the internet and social media (Butt et al., 2016; Guo, 2018; Skoric et al., 2016; Vaccari et al., 2015; Yonghwan & Hsuan-Ting, 2015).

Regardless, members of the community must feel as though they have a voice and say in the production of the news (Ellis et al., 2021). To accomplish this, media outlets must cover their communities intentionally, considering how to engage residents and ensure their stories and truths are being reported. Through this, social capital is developed, which serves the democratic goals of society by increasing social and civic engagement. To accomplish this, community media provides leadership through its practice of journalism, which leads to increased

engagement with communities (He et al., 2020). The subsequent increase of knowledge empowers community members to make informed decisions about issues of importance, such as politics (Dahlgren, 2018). With power, marginalized voices can be heard and effectively engage with others in the community. Democracy then can be upheld and effectively function. Journalists will cover the people and events for their community media outlets, writing the first draft of history and providing the mechanism for social capital and engagement to continue. Of course, community media entails more than such a simple overview. Therefore, the topic of community media will be discussed more fully in the following section.

Defining the Role of Community Media

Whether an individual identifies as a farmer, Republican, video gamer aficionado, book lover, Democrat, Christian, Muslim, LGBTQIA+, or any other countless descriptors, that person is not alone in his or her association with a certain identity. Community, understood to be a collection of people who live together in a geographic area or as a collection of people with similar interests, binds people together. For example, Kansas largely consists of rural areas that combine to form communities. Making this clear, Gilbert et al. (2010) explained that rural communities are those with less than 2,500 people, consist of large swaths of farm ground, and "tend to be older, less educated, less wealthy, and less mobile than urban Americans" (p. 1,370). Building and joining non-geographic forms of communities has become easier thanks to online technologies such as social media. Regardless, journalistic-oriented entities exist and focus on these different types of populations, creating a form of community media.

The concept of community media includes several definitions. Some scholars defined the concept as local-orientated news that helps people feel like they are part of a community by covering matters and people and institutions of importance (Lowrey et al., 2008; Smith &

Schiffman, 2018; St. John III, 2013). More technical definitions describe community media in terms of frequency of publication and scope of coverage areas (Bressers et al., 2015; Pauly & Eckert, 2002; Smith, 2018). Howley (2007) defined community media as "locally oriented, participatory media organizations that provide groups and individuals whose voices and perspectives are excluded from mainstream media with access to the tools of media production and distribution" (p. 3). Due to the varying nature of how community media is described, an overview of how scholars discuss this type of journalism is warranted in order to understand how community media exists within society, which helps gauge the impact such outlets can have upon its audiences.

Community media provides important information to and about residents. Howley (2007) explained this form of journalism as being uniquely focused on covering and promoting local culture while also encouraging civic engagement and social integration in the form of local access radio and television, alternative newspapers, and computer networks, among others. Perreault (2021) highlighted the important role local journalists play in covering communities, especially in times of disaster. Journalists can accomplish this via social media (Hinsley & Lee, 2020). Bressers et al. (2015) discussed the importance of high school sports coverage as a type of news valued by community members. Community media also covers local government, such as city council meetings, board of education meetings, and other entities that are funded through taxpayer dollars (Karlsson & Rowe, 2019). Such coverage by local journalists provides a perspective unique to the community. When outsiders attempt to cover a news event, the coverage is often different than that produced by those who are part of the community (Goldfarb, 2001). Variations in reporting stem from the proximity local journalists have to the news itself.

Of course, as Perreault (2021) pointed out, there exists internal tension within journalists who have an ethical and professional obligation to stay neutral and unbiased while also existing as a member of communities they want to see succeed. This is an important consideration because "identities motivate behavior and tell people what to value" (Smith, 2018, p. 527). At least one by-product of this identity seeking is reciprocity. Lewis et al. (2014) said, "Reciprocity, broadly defined as exchange between two or more actors for mutual benefit, is a defining feature of social life" (p.2). This exchange can take place online or offline. Harte et al. (2017) emphasized how reciprocity lies at the heart of hyperlocal journalism as it can develop an environment where citizen interactions can be sustained by creating a culture that develops a sense of place among community members, and, as Usher (2019) argued, place is important within journalism studies. This positions the idea of reciprocity at the core of community media practices. Local journalists must work with community members to report the news, and they must build relationships with those people in order to cultivate an audience that will support the journalistic endeavors of the operation.

Efforts of collaboration, which are a key component of reciprocity, can take place through direct exchanges, indirect exchanges, and sustained exchanges (Lewis et al., 2014). Furthermore, reciprocity invokes larger ideals because it speaks to how people within a community identify themselves and each other. Reciprocity can be either negative or positive, with negative reciprocity equating to revenge-seeking and positive reciprocity meaning the sharing of services, favors, or information that benefits all people involved, and this positive form of reciprocity is key for "the formation and perpetuation of community, trust, and social capital" (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019, p. 560). As such, "news organizations can help build

stronger communities and further cement their roles in those communities by considering the community's expectations as inextricably bound with their own" (Lewis et al., 2014, p. 11).

By operating in this way, community media can become even more valuable to the residents it serves. However, doing so could result in a change in how journalists view themselves. "Community journalists burrow themselves into the communities they write about, and they are not only surviving but also even thriving in an emergent media environment because they are not constrained by journalistic norms such as objectivity and detachment" (Smith, 2018, p. 525). For journalism purists, this could be problematic, but such a mindset could be welcomed by the community itself. This comes down to what the audience's expectations are. Tenor (2018) found that hyperlocals strive to serve the public interest of their communities, which can be attributed to the public's expectations that the local media cares about the community and covers problems and solutions the community is facing. Such findings align with the prior work of Poindexter et al. (2006), who found that "for some segments of the public, the press is expected to care about the community, report on interesting people and groups, understand the community, and offer solutions" (p. 85). Such research suggests a preference for positive news. However, the news isn't always positive, and in a situation where relationships are so important, coverage of such news can become problematic. Tenor (2018) explained that "close relationships with people who are directly or indirectly affected by the news can be a double-edged sword" (p. 1,070). This is because, even when something bad occurs, it must be covered whether the subject of the reporting is a friend or not. Such a stance speaks to the watchdog function of journalism, but, as Poindexter et al. (2006) highlighted, "the public's disaffection with the press' watchdog role" (p. 85) can lead to conflict. Once again, the aforementioned tensions of identity can come into play.

Of course, such points of contention do not occur on a daily basis. Largely, community news outlets provide a form of camaraderie. Nygren (2019) highlighted "the social role of local media" (p. 53) as it brings people together and builds relationships due to coverage of shared experiences. Leupold et al. (2018) referred to this as social cohesion. This is how society is developed, through communication process such as journalism. Referring to American philosopher John Dewey, Huntsberger (2020) suggested, "Dewey's theory of knowledge considers communication to be the key to the development of shared intelligence and the formation of cultural and political life. For Dewey, acts of communication are necessary steps required to build the foundations of any community" (p. 193). This communication creates the public sphere, which is a concept coined by German sociologist Jurgen Habermas. The public sphere exists, as Thomas McCarthy said, "between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed" (as cited in Habermas, 1991, p. xi). The public sphere is what creates a civil society in which private individuals form a public (Howley, 2007).

Due to this, community media supports democracy. At the most basic level, local news consumers experience greater interest in, expanded knowledge about, and increased participation within their communities' democratic processes (McLeod & Daily, 1996). "Studies show that hyperlocal media play an important democratic role in helping people root themselves in the local community as well as providing the geographic location with meaning," meaning these outlets provide information needed for democracy to thrive and hold local power accountable for its actions (Jangdal, 2019, p. 73). Nygren et al. (2018) pointed out that "[h]yperlocal media can become new platforms for social action, for defending local communities and giving them voice in the public sphere" (p. 46).

Though social media are prevalent in society, they cannot achieve this type of impact as effectively. This is because traditional, community media outlets play an important role in the local society that is a more trusted source of local information than social media platforms like Facebook (Nygren, 2019). Still, technology does play a role in fulfilling information needs. Lai and Tang (2015) found that if individuals are in the habit of consuming community news, they will use different forms of media that can give them the information they desire, which can include social media.

Of course, technology can also allow community members to get involved in the news reporting process. News organizations can leverage citizens to contribute news as user-generated content (Johnson & Dade, 2019; Niekamp, 2009; Paulussen & D'Heer, 2013). If a news outlet doesn't exist or is in danger of shutting down, community volunteers can come together to produce the news themselves (Smethers et al., 2017). Furthermore, as research by Muscat (2018) found, "social media enabled news users to undertake an advocacy role related to the social, cultural, professional, or political dimensions of their particular lives" (p. 225). These types of involvement and engagement are crucial. This is because it is important to ensure subsets of a given community are not ignored or overlooked by the local news outlet (Napoli et al., 2019), which is a problem that can be exacerbated by news deserts (Abernathy, 2018a). This resulted in the fourth research hypothesis:

H4: Rural residents in Kansas do not use community media as a primary source of news in their daily lives.

As should be clear, community media serves numerous functions. Though the business models of local news outlets are evolving (Hujanen et al., 2019), the importance of these journalistic entities remains. How the news is delivered becomes less important as long as it is

being delivered in a way that community members feel involved. Howley (2007) explained that although community media outlets use various communication technologies, the goal is almost always the same: “to provide local populations with the opportunity to participate in civil society; to promote social integration and community cohesion within geocultural communities; and to sustain local forms of cultural expression” (p. 19).

Though Nygren (2019) suggested local journalism might be declining in communities due to competing technologies such as social media, community media and local journalism still serve as a binding agent for individuals living within a given locality. Such news outlets are important for society because they provide a foundation for democracy through connectivity and the creation of social capital. What that means and why it is important needs further exploration. This will be addressed in the next section.

Developing Social Capital

Social capital is a key component of civic engagement. Being civically engaged is crucial for a democracy. Being civically engaged means being aware of the happenings within and being involved in the community. Berger (2011) suggested this umbrella term — which can be broken apart into political, social, and moral components — entails “political participation, social connectedness, associational membership, voluntarism, community spirit, [and] cooperative and tolerant moral norms” (p. 2-3). This could mean being on the local school board or city council because it is at the local level where a difference can be made. Awareness can be attained through information consumption, such as via local media. This is important for community health because the decisions made locally have far more bearing on everyday life than national politics.

As such, how members of society interact with each other points to the idea of social capital. Though arguably made famous by Putnam (2001), Loury (2020) pointed out that he created the term social capital. Putnam (2001) referred to social capital as a web of mutual trust and cooperation derived from the participation in community groups and organizations. Gastil and Keith (2005) built upon this to define the term as "the social networks and mutual trust that sustain democratic institutions" (p. 6). This requires investment within the community. This does not need to be in terms of financial contributions, though. Capital can be any resource used to make progress toward goals (Lin, 2002), such as through engagement. Putnam's research led him to see how social capital as he defined it is a crucial component for social and civic engagement (Maras, 2006). As Loury (2020) explained, "all human development is socially situated and meditated," which means the "development of human beings occurs inside social institutions. It takes place as between people, in the context of human interactions" (p. 178). Mutz (2006) pointed out that there are two types of social capital that Putnam discussed — bridging social capital between social groups and bonding social capital within a social group — and "the conditions likely to promote bonding social capital may be precisely the opposite of those that facilitate bridging social capital" (p. 34).

Matei (2003) suggested that "social capital is the nutritive tissue from which civic organizations and collective action grow" (p. 6). Put another way, a functioning democratic society requires socially connected individuals. This is evident when looking at today's politically divided landscape. As Talisse (2020 December 22) argued, "Bitter partisanship has rendered Americans unable to treat their opponents as democratic partners" (para. 5). Furthermore, this type of polarization "leads to the erosion of moral capacities we need in order to enact democracy well" (Talisse, 2021, p. 17). Of course, this isn't new. Giddens (2013)

mentioned how social ties are coming undone due to political differences, but a possible solution for this is the rebuilding of communal life. This suggests the remedy could be increasing social capital. This could be developed in youth through educational initiatives and programming, such as journalism curricula (Bobkowski et al., 2012; Killenberg & Dardenne, 1997; Lamberth & Aucoin, 1993; Robinson, 2017). This resulted in the fifth research question:

RQ5: How do rural residents in Kansas create relationships with their neighbors and communities?

Importantly, there are two types of social capital — bridging and bonding. As Putnam (2001) described them, "bridging social capital can generate broader identities and reciprocity" (p. 20-21) and "bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves" (p. 21). Due to these two types, social capital isn't necessarily positive in all instances. For example, bonding social capital can cause individuals to become more insular and less open to outside thoughts and opinions, retreating into the comfort of their in-group relationships (Chakraborty, 2016; Mou & Lin, 2017; Yang & Hanasono, 2021). This can result in more polarization and division, which further erodes society and democracy. On the other hand, though, bridging social capital "is likely to be fostered in environments where information flows freely across the groups," and that communicative transaction "leads to higher social trust" that "makes connections between social networks and promotes widespread relationships" (Lee, 2017, p. 5).

If members of society recognize the value of being connected through bridging social capital, positive change can be realized. How those connections are built and maintained, though, may not always look the same over time. "Social, demographic, and technological changes have all put stress on older forms of socializing, but they may also drive the evolution of new ones that are better suited to modern times" (Hudson, 2020, para 57). Giddens (2013) pointed out that

"technological innovation stimulated by capitalistic development alters basic aspects of social life" (p. 116). Putnam (2001) saw a decline in social capital by noticing fewer people were joining bowling leagues and other community organizations, which he attributed to increased television consumption. Despite the fact television news can be a source of political information (Bucy & Grabe, 2010), the issue with television consumption, as some research suggests, is that it can cause viewers to be desensitized, especially to societal ills such as poverty or violence (Edgar & Edgar, 1971). This can lead to a society with less civility, which can negatively impact democracy functioning properly due to the lack of connectivity between citizens (Putnam, 2001). Such impacts can be attributed to less knowledge being available due to the lack of the prescribed engagements (Edgar & Edgar, 1971). Without this knowledge, which is important for being active in a democracy, reasons to become civically engaged dwindle because the idealism, instilled responsibility, and enjoyment of political participation becomes nonexistent (Putnam, 2001). However, social capital has not died. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the public's interest in civic life seemed to be renewed because "critics have found other wellsprings of public spirit beyond the more traditional civic activities that Putnam traced over time. Charitable giving, volunteerism, and more diffuse civic networking may be supplanting lodges, PTA meetings, and bowling leagues" (Gastil & Keith, 2005, p. 15). This resulted in the fifth research hypothesis:

H5: Rural residents in Kansas maintain strong religious beliefs and connect to their communities by being involved in community organizations and causes.

Outside of television, other technologies can have a negative impact on the creation of social capital. This is especially true in the realm of newer technologies, such as the internet and social media. A cause of this could be that users focus more on their digital lives than the social

and civic opportunities around them (Maras, 2006). The research on this, however, is varied. Some scholars believe "online communities will make possible new social arrangements, more democratic and more inclusive," while others believe "social groups facilitated by the computer revolution will, in fact, destroy traditional social bonds, leading to weak social ties" (Matei, 2003, p. 3). Still, the communication supported by the internet can be beneficial, especially when it comes to organizing, activism, and socializing. "In fact, there are examples of digital communication building social capital and promoting democratic ideals in unprecedented ways" (Hudson, 2020, para. 49). Furthermore, it can happen anywhere or any time. "No longer is social capital constrained by time or space; cyber networks open up the possibility of global reaches in social capital" (Lin, 2002, p. 227). Abdullah et al. (2016) highlighted a case where online forums have allowed people to come together and discuss issues their communities are facing. Interacting online can help reduce limitations of participation that are inherent in face-to-face interactions (Beauvais, 2018). Using technology can also help individuals "connect with their neighbors online. It helps them break down social isolation" (Abdullah et al., 2016, p. 4).

Such considerations are germane to the discussion because a society's culture is formed and informed by the mass media consumed as it shapes public knowledge and beliefs (Potter, 2014), and these digital technologies create a portion of the mass media as it exists in society today. As Groshek (2011) pointed out, "it is possible that new media might alter information flows and reshape democratization process precisely because of greater forms of media participation and creation" (p. 1,176). Gastil and Keith (2005) suggested that, even though access to information has increased, Americans are concerned about media ownership concentration negatively affecting "the democratic functions of the fourth estate" (p. 5).

Still, despite the world being digitally connected, “most journalism continues to serve audiences closer to home” (Hess, 2015, p. 482). Therefore, local media plays an important role in connecting and informing the communities it serves, and the reading of local print products is pointed to as being an indicator of having higher levels of social capital (Hess, 2015; Maras, 2006). Print journalism helps counter the feelings of social and geographical isolation that rural residents can experience (Gilbert et al., 2010). Such isolation could contribute to the fact television and other media privatized leisure (Putnam, 2001). The effects of which could be more impactful in rural areas because there is less to do, and television viewing in one’s own home is more convenient (Maras, 2006).

However, even though access in rural areas can be an issue, rural individuals seem to adopt new technologies quite readily, which could be due to a desire to minimize isolation (Gilbert et al., 2010). This is especially true due to social media allowing various individuals to connect over any distance. Even so, rural social media users tend to connect with those closer to themselves geographically (Gilbert et al., 2010). This is because social media platforms allow individuals to surround themselves only with opinions and views they already agree with (Turkle, 2012). This allows for confirmation bias, mis- and disinformation, and the spiral of silence to exist. The spiral of silence suggests that people “with diverse networks refrain from participation in part because of the social awkwardness that accompanies publicly taking a stand that friends or associates may oppose” (Mutz, 2006, p. 3). As such, using technology to increase social capital could create possible drawbacks for individuals in rural communities that focus more on a print product for news. A resulting clash of social norms could hinder the development of social capital (Sass, 2016). This relates to the correlation between increased

technology use and decreased social capital Putnam (2001) suggested. It should be noted, though, that correlation cannot empirically mean causation.

Therefore, social capital is important for a functioning democratic society, and local news outlets play an important role in that space. How this occurs, though, needs to be further explored, looking specifically at community engagement as it relates to social and civic engagement. This will be addressed in the next section.

Fostering Social and Civic Engagement

The concept of engagement presents multiple definitions, especially as it pertains to journalism. Ball et al. (2016) suggested the term's "meaning has become an unwieldy catchall [. . .] touted as important but often oversimplified" (p. 491). Berger (2011) expressed the stance that "engagement entails a combination of attention and energy (or activity)" (p. 3). Batsell (2015) viewed engagement as making strong connections with readers and news consumers to help keep the business of journalism viable with a strong customer base. In academic terms, engagement can be viewed as a type of service-learning urging students to develop self-efficacy by participating in activities of social change (Ball et al., 2016). Of course, this is only one approach. Mersey et al. (2010) looked at the term in a broader way by suggesting it concerns an experience narrowed down to "a specific set of beliefs that consumers have about how some media brand fits into their lives" (p. 40). With such varied meanings for the term engagement, an operational definition is required in order to evaluate how engagement takes place within journalism.

As such, based upon the research of Ball et al. (2016), the definition of social engagement can be understood as participation in social organizations and activities, and, based upon the research of Bobkowski and Miller (2016), the definition of civic engagement can be understood

as demonstrating a consciousness of political news and actions taking place both locally and nationally within an understanding of the civic process. Engagement occurs via communication. This communication involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication (Lowrey & Kim, 2009).

Interacting with or creating journalism is not necessarily attributed to technology use (Carpenter et al., 2015). However, with technology pervading society, the avenues for social engagement by way of communication are ever expanding (Briggs, 2007). This points to the fact that communication affects social interactions, which is a component of media literacy that is key for an informed and active citizenry (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014). In part, social interaction is motivation to develop a sense of self — such as autonomy, competence, and camaraderie – within the social context to become better citizens as supported by the self-determination theory (Gardiner, 2013). Another important output of social interaction is the development of empathy. The human mind supports and becomes more powerful as knowledge of others grows through consumption of various communications or journalistic products (Bech Sillesen et al., 2015). This goes against beliefs that emotions do not allow for rationality, even though research suggests journalism presented in personal fashions can actually foster the development of social engagement by building emotional knowledge of and investment in news events (Bas & Grabe, 2015). Developing such social skills prevent audience members from being powerless or exploitable when it comes to observing the media and the world in which they exist (Cojocariu, 2013).

Based upon media theories such as agenda setting and the media priming effect, it is clear audience members remember facts about a particular topic based upon how heavily and in what light the event is discussed in news reports (Valenzuela, 2009). Donsbach (2003) suggested

social validation and predispositions drive decisions, which is important for social engagement because it outlines ways for individuals to develop the sense of self and arrive at a truth. Personal values that are guiding principles of life are created, which research suggests is impacted by journalism involvement and lead to understanding humans in terms of a cultural society (Carpenter et al., 2015). Part of this culture is technology being used for communication and social purposes (Thurlow & Bell, 2009).

New media technologies present the opportunity for individuals to lead active civic and political lives. Successful civic engagement involves critical thinking skills, communication, organization, and decision-making (Clark & Monserrate, 2011). The best way to build such skills with individuals within a society is to reach them where they are, which is with technology (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014). Access to new media, such as social media, blogging, and video games, via smart phones presents ways to increase this civic engagement (Kahne et al., 2012). Studies support this by pointing out such participative forms of media provide avenues to engage civically in creative fashions demonstrating responsibility and critical thinking (Garcia-Ruiz et al., 2014).

However, it takes more than access to technology to develop this type of participation. Kennamer (1987) suggested that journalism provides a space in which political activity is initiated. Members of a community must learn civic engagement means contributing to society by, at minimum, voting in elections, discussing public issues, and volunteering with organizations dedicated to social causes (Bobkowski & Miller, 2016). Clark and Monserrate (2011) argued, though, that there is danger in allowing individuals to believe volunteering is enough. Volunteering can coincide with journalism, though, when the volunteering means

donating one's time to a community journalism project (Bressers et al., 2015; Smethers et al., 2017).

Knowing oneself is important for effective civic engagement and to be able to weigh in on important matters of all sizes with core a belief and understanding. This suggests that people need to feel heard, especially in the civic realm of politics (e.g., Wuthnow, 2012; Wuthnow, 2019). As Sprain and Carcasson (2013) explained, "political apathy can actually be rather thin if people are given genuine opportunities to interact and make a difference on local issues" (p. 17). Of course, an individual's background or station in life can also influence engagement. Low socioeconomic status can be attributed to lower levels of education, and this leads researchers to conclude people with lower levels of education do not have the same ability to process news information effectively as individuals with higher levels of education (Bas & Grabe, 2015). Furthermore, a distrust of the media could lead to less civic engagement because of ways minorities are represented, or under-represented, in news coverage and on journalism staffs (Amster, 2006; Marchi, 2012).

Though civic engagement can take many forms, the most recognizable method of involvement consists of taking part in politics. Research shows media messaging and how it is presented in any of a variety of formats can impact on how an individual views politics, whether positively or negatively (Faulkner, 2011; Lowrey & Kim, 2009). Regardless of political views, being active in the process allows individuals to develop friendships and bring communities together as social capital is built, which research suggests is important for a democracy to succeed because it allows people to interact and solve problems affecting the community in which they exist (Bressers et al., 2015). This involvement can be as simple as taking part in comment threads in online news publications, which provides new avenues for individuals to

interact with the news and fellow consumers (Ksiazek, 2015). Studies suggest an understanding of this type of interactivity allows for participatory journalism on a larger and more impactful scale (Bressers et al., 2015).

A key component of communication and community engagement is the discourse that is used to exchange information. As such, civil discourse is important in this discussion because it sheds light on how informed the populace is, and the level of knowledge individuals have can be determined by how well discussions can take place with respect and understanding and without becoming hostile (Ksiazek, 2015). Views of journalism and how it plays into civic life can be generational by nature (Andersson & Wadbring, 2015). This speaks to how engagement is created. This resulted in the sixth research hypothesis:

H6: Rural resident in Kansas engage in political actions and discussions on a regular basis, generally adhering to conservative political ideology.

Part of civic development is actively gaining knowledge by way of journalism (Clark & Monserrate, 2008). People most likely to vote tend to be well-informed and regularly consume news (Kennamer, 1987). When it comes to political elections, the media plays a large role by altering how voters differentiate and judge political candidates and parties (Valenzuela, 2009). Research shows, though, media does not dictate what individuals should think but rather what they should be thinking about (Golan et al., 2005). Based upon third-person effects, however, research shows individuals believe they are not susceptible to media influence when it comes to making decisions, such as in casting a ballot, but others likely become swayed one way or the other (Banning, 2006).

Golan et al. (2005) conducted an experiment with college students and arrived at results pointing to increased participation in voting correlating with exposure to media messages that

respondents felt were not affecting their decision but would have large impacts upon others viewing the same messages; however, respondents who indicated they were less likely to vote did not believe the messaging was affecting them less or more than anyone else, leading a conclusion to be drawn that voting when experiencing the third-person effect is an effort to balance the election by offsetting the vote of the more impressionable viewers influenced by the messaging. Media messaging impacts young voter turnout, especially as forms of media being used by political entities and consumers alike change (Kennamer, 1987).

Online communication, such as social media, impacts public perception of political issues at different levels of government or community (Snee, 2015). Use of social media, such as Facebook or Twitter, has been pointed out in research as being an excellent outlet for political dialogue because of its openness for communication between candidates and voters or simply among voters themselves (Fernandes et al., 2010). These instances of political expression via social media consist of personalized and identity-focused communication, which suggests "citizens engaging in political expression need to develop a broader repertoire of political selves which triggers a process of inadvertent civic learning and may lead to spillover effects on real-world political action" (Skoric et al., 2016, p. 1834). Interestingly, though, research suggests engagement occurs more with interactions of national media than community media (Drok et al., 2018). The implications of this for a democracy serve as part of the focus of this study, but in order to fully unpack these repercussions, an understanding of democracy, specifically deliberative democracy, must be achieved. The next section provides an overview of this concept.

Understanding Democracy

Carson (2021) suggested "that a functioning democracy consists of a tripartite classification of government, market, and civil society" (p. 86). As such, the idea of democracy carries with it numerous definitions (Crick, 2002). However, one conception of the term provides more impactful avenues for engagement and participation. This is deliberative democracy. "Deliberative theories are distinctive because they hold that norms of reasonable public dialogue are necessary for a democratic procedure of equally consider interests rather than merely register the most popular private preferences" (Dzur, 2002, p. 323). As Gutmann and Thompson (2004) explained, "deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives" (p. 3). It's that justification piece that separates this concept from participatory democracy and how many might see democracy unfolding in the United States. It is built on the idea of social choice theory, which focuses on ideas of collective decision-making (Bohman & Rehg, 1997). Participatory democracy, though similar in some regards, stands as a separate view of democratic action. In fact, deliberative democracy came about around the time participatory democracy declined in popularity (Floridia, 2018).

Deliberative democracy's rise to prominence came from the fact it focused on providing people a say in their civic and political environments. It places a high value on equal citizenship needed for deliberation to work rather than being solely concerned with deliberation itself (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Including deliberation is key, though. Without it, this way of looking at democracy would not work. For it to work, the deliberations must be inclusive (Floridia, 2018).

Farrell et al. (2019) explained the goal of deliberative democracy is "creating a society that is sensitive to good reason" (p. 10). As such, "[t]he core values of deliberative democracy—

providing reasons to justify laws and policies and demonstrating mutual respect—remain as defensible as ever" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2018, p. 900). Though it isn't the only way to reach a research, deliberation provides the best way to reach the most amenable decision (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). This is because a collective body of equal citizens exercise political power to craft laws by which all must abide (Rawls, 1997). As such, it relates to the idea of a self-governing society. Without deliberation, a democracy cannot be legitimate. As Floridia (2018) pointed out, "the foundation of democratic legitimacy is not the general will, but the deliberation of all. The source of democratic legitimacy is not unanimous agreement, but a deliberative process in which everyone has the right to participate" (p. 42).

Through this process, individual voices can be heard in authentic ways. Goodin (2018) pointed out that accepting different forms of communication creates a more inclusive atmosphere, which is more democratic and allows for information to be conveyed to and from diverse members of society. Furthermore, as Gutmann and Thompson (2018) explained, "In a robust deliberative democracy, there should be many different ways of expressing political views including protests, demonstrations, and strikes" (p. 905).

By engaging in deliberation via all its forms, decisions that impact society can be made. These decisions emerge from the sharing of information that would otherwise be obscured if not for the open communication deliberation creates space for (Goodin, 2018). The media help facilitate this. As Carson (2021) highlighted, the media's role in democracy "includes providing quality information so that citizens are informed and able to meaningfully participate in the democratic process" because "a well-functioning democracy depends on the public being able to monitor its representatives and on the state accepting criticism of its own exercise of power" (p. 12). Chapp and Aehl (2021) suggested that "local journalism is uniquely equipped to meet basic

democratic needs" (p. 249) because "declines in local news corresponded to declines in both political knowledge and engagement" (p. 237). This is because, as Darr et al. (2021) explained, "Communities have critical information needs that help members live safely, access opportunities, and participate in civic life, and local media are the best sources for that information" (p. 8), which provides the necessary knowledge to deliberate and make decisions.

Therefore, as Gutmann and Thompson (2018) explained, deliberation allows for the exercising of political power within public decision-making through respectful exchanges of reason among equals. However, deliberation isn't right for every political situation, but it does provide an attractive method of decision-making, especially in the face of polarization, voter apathy, institutional distrust and mis- and disinformation (Farrell et al., 2019). Again, journalism can help facilitate this deliberation with the added benefit of increasing unification. With more local news coverage exposure, individuals become less polarized (Darr et al., 2021). This resulted in the sixth research question:

RQ6: How do mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories spread by partisan sources create political division and polarization in rural Kansas?

As such, deliberation can have deeper impacts than other conceptions of democracy, such as participatory. Deliberation can bring people together and build mutual respect. "Mutual respect expresses a constructive attitude toward, and interaction with, those with whom one disagrees. It expresses a moral value that treats citizens as free and equal persons, and an orientation toward the political process that sees political agents not only as adversaries but also as colleagues who can work together in the enterprise of governing under a common constitution" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2018, p. 909).

Therefore, like Escobar and Elstub (2017) explained, deliberative processes allow citizens to participate in new ways by bringing together citizens, experts and politicians. Still, fully embracing deliberative democracy can take time. “Human beings may be naturally social animals, but deliberative decision-making is not a purely natural process. It is a socially constructed artifact” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2018, p. 905). This means understanding how the public sphere of communication, emotions and passion, listening, and expertise play into deliberative democracy is important.

The Public Sphere of Communication

To fully understand democracy, one must look at the discourses surrounding it. One can look at the public sphere to gain insights into this. The concept of the public sphere is most closely associated with German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, and according to Finlayson (2005), “The public sphere is a space where subjects participate as equals in rational discussion in pursuit of truth and the common good” (p. 12).

This is where the media come into play, tying together the concepts of deliberative democracy and journalism. The media “provide communication among members of the public” (Habermas, 1991, p. 2). Communication consists of discourse, and considering discourse works well in dealing with the media because it consists of discourse, both in terms of words and visuals. Keeping in mind that discourse theory allows individuals to understand the “why” and “how” of democracy’s processes (Habermas, 1994), this provides a clearer view of how democracy functions. Luckily, discourse creators, or journalists, no longer discuss ideas among elites before putting it out in the world, which is how Habermas (1991) described the function of salons that “held the monopoly of first publication: a new work, even a musical one, had to legitimate itself first in this forum” (p. 34). Instead, journalists write the first draft of history,

including the activities of the democracy. “Although Habermas privileges face-to-face communication in the formation of public opinion, his historical account acknowledges the vital role played by print media—newspapers, pamphlets, journals and the like—in the emergence of the public sphere” (Howley, 2007, p. 1).

As technology has progressed and media outlets have adopted new methods of information dissemination, the journalism-supported public sphere has evolved. Dahlgren (2005) highlighted how the internet has expanded the public sphere and created more space for public deliberation. “Social media’s general structure appears to provide unlimited access to information and equal, protected participation. Further, the Internet is relatively accessible and, in theory, anyone can distribute information, making both participation and information acquisition free from outside influence” (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 63). Similarly, online users of local newspapers can use the comments section of stories to discuss the topics being reported (Kangaspunta, 2020).

Of course, this type of engagement with the news and fellow citizens can be rather shallow. The same can be seen via social media. Turkle (2012) argued that despite the connective promise of such technologies, users end up more isolated. This leads to fewer meaningful interactions and exchanges of information. As Dahlgren (2018) explained, the internet and social media platforms carve out numerous spaces in which democratic participation can occur, but it can also limit participation due to structural and other limitations. Despite the promise of information access and equal participation, these platforms have not lived up to their ideals due to a variety of institutional influences (Kruse et al., 2018).

As such, the available technologies can be both positive and negative to the maintenance and impact of communication via the public sphere. “In journalism studies, the public sphere has

largely been aligned with understandings of the public good and public interest" (Hess & Gutsche, 2018, p. 487). This speaks to the idealism of journalism writ large, which helps establish the importance of the public sphere in relation to democracy and journalism. Via the use of media, individuals can be encouraged and organized to participate in social movements or civic endeavors (Simone, 2004). Of course, it is important to understand that the public sphere can be a space for impassioned discourse. Therefore, the ideas of emotions and passions within democracy need to be unpacked.

Emotions and Passion

Incorporating emotions into ideas such as democratic practice and deliberation might seem like common sense due to the inherent presence of emotional humans in such processes. However, as Goodwin et al. (2001) made clear, that wasn't always the case. However, the fact of the matter is, "there can be no deliberation unless people are motivated to deliberate, and what motivates them is passion" (Hall, 2007, p. 90). Passion leads to emotion. This is because "passion conveys the specific emotion of strong enthusiasm and devotion" toward a person, object, activity, or idea that results in some level of commitment to that thing (Hall, 2007, p. 87). As Goodwin et al. (2001) suggested, "Emotions are part of the 'stuff' connecting human beings to each other and the world around them, like an unseen lens that colors all our thoughts, actions, perceptions, and judgments" (p. 10). This is because emotions exist as evaluations of a given situation leading to action (Neblo, 2020).

Understanding emotions as a motivation to action are key for incorporating the concept into democracy and deliberation. This is because emotions are "culturally or socially constructed" (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 12). Because of this, the ways individuals interact become driving forces in motivating deliberation. An example of this would be listening. If people feel

they are being listened to, which means their input is being valued, they will feel positive emotions toward the democratic or deliberative process. This can motivate them to engage further. “Good listening can enable achieving democratic objectives by enhancing legitimacy, helping to help with deep disagreements, improving understanding and fostering empowerment” (Göker & Çelik, 2021, p. 4). However, a lack of positive emotions can also reduce engagement and increase negative emotions (Wuthnow, 2019; Young, 2021).

Therefore, due to listening, inclusion and respect for ideas can be fostered. That means dialogue can take place because people share ideas and co-create knowledge. As Göker and Çelik (2021) pointed out, “listening is an essential component of dialogue and is crucial in establishing the conditions for productive intellectual exchange” (p. 2). Through the exchange of ideas, empathy can be built, which allows individuals participating in a deliberative process to gain an understanding of the perspectives of others (Neblo, 2020). This means deliberation, as Hall (2007) highlighted, “requires both thinking carefully and caring thoughtfully” (p. 92).

Despite some believing they are completely rational and only use logic to arrive at decisions, “cognitions typically come bundled with emotions, and are meaningful or powerful to people for precisely this reason” (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 15). Furthermore, as Hall (2007) suggested, deliberation requires the weighing of choices and choosing among them through careful decision-making that is intentional and done with purpose. Furthermore, deliberation can “enable ‘ordinary citizens’ to engage in dialogue with both the issues and the decision makers” (Barnes, 2008, p. 468). This means emotional considerations must be at play due to this weighing of alternatives and interacting with other individuals. In doing so, people are making judgments, which means relating the situation to personal experiences and preferences.

When it comes to deliberating with others, one must be prepared to also weigh the options presented by those also participating. Sprain and Carcasson (2013) highlighted that "deliberative processes provide a means of collaborative learning and interaction central to addressing public problems" (p. 15). As such, researchers "view reciprocity and mutual respect as key features of deliberation" (Neblo, 2020, p. 2). Again, listening is important. This means "alongside what is being said, listening also involves listening to the underlying" (Göker & Çelik, 2021, p. 14) sentiments. This involves comprehending the frame of the discourse being shared. Goodwin et al. (2001) suggested a frame could be defined "as an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (p. 6). Frames help everyone categorize and make sense of the world around them using shared ideas and concepts. Of course, this once again brings in the idea of passion or emotion. After all, one cannot understand frames "without noticing people's feelings about specific beliefs" (Goodwin et al., 2001, p. 9).

If, as Hall (2007) suggested, the "point of deliberating is to reach a decision about how to act based on the merits of the various options rather than on chance, or faith, or impulse, or habit" (p. 88-89), then we need emotion or passion to help clarify which option is most likely to result in the greatest good. Still, some might be worried about their passions or emotions getting in the way. This is reasonable because passion can bring with it some danger. When actions or habits designed to protect an individual from actual dangers get turned on enemies that are real or perceived, emotional responses can cloud one's judgement, leading to detrimental decisions being made (Marcus, 2002).

To address such concerns, Sprain and Carcasson (2013) suggested the concept of passionate impartiality, in which those involved "are passionate about their communities, democracy, and solving problems, but are nonetheless committed to serving an impartial, process-focused role in order to improve local communication practices" (p. 19). Maintaining some level of passion is important. Without passion, a group of individuals can be viewed as uninterested or faking it (Barnes, 2008). Within a democracy, therefore, showing a little passion is important. This is because of how people tend to participate in a democracy. "Often in a democracy, citizens participate by speaking in public on issues [. . .] Democratic engagement recognizes that speech and 'having a voice' is simply the first step, however, and that engagement also requires genuine interaction and mutual comprehension" (Sprain & Carcasson, 2013, p. 19).

Various social movements provide clear examples of passion spurring engagement. Goodwin et al. (2001) showed that social movements throughout history relied on passion as the fuel for the engine of change. In highlighting the civil rights movement, Marcus (2002) shared the following: "The images of southern police setting dogs and water hoses against marchers for civil rights no doubt persuaded many Americans that what they were watching could not be the America they knew" (p. 140). That's a passionate or emotional response. Such a reaction exemplifies the importance of emotions within deliberative and democratic process. This is because emotions keep people engaged and committed to a cause or initiative (Barnes, 2008).

Therefore, emotions are what allow the agendas of citizens or groups to be defined and acted upon (Marcus, 2002). Society needs passionate people involved in the deliberative and democratic processes to help ensure progress is made on society's most daunting challenges. "Passion provides the inevitable and essential energy" necessary to see efforts through (Marcus,

2002, p. 25). However, as was hinted at previously, true progress also requires individuals to listen to each other.

Listening

Thanks to technology's firm grasp on society, information constantly flies at individuals through alerts on computers and phones. This makes it difficult to hear individual voices over the din of conversation happening through traditional and social media. The volume can be lowered, though, if members of society stop talking and start listening.

Lipari (2010) described listening as a transcendent activity that requires and allows a listener to put their thoughts and assumptions aside to be present in the moment and sit with what a speaker is saying, adopting and understanding the perspectives and experiences being expressed. As such, listening becomes about the other person and not the listener. Of course, in the current loud social media world that is highly polarized due to political disagreements, being able to do this is no easy task.

Even in polarized times, listening provides value, though. Scudder (2022) pointed out that listening is often associated with empathy. That is, by listening, individuals can understand the perspectives of others, which allows them to relate to the situation they are facing or how they are experiencing a shared encounter based upon their personal histories. Morrell (2018) agreed, suggesting "empathic predispositions are likely to have significant effects on listening" (p. 246). This is important. After all, it must be understood that "the purpose of listening is not to do away with disagreement, but it is about connecting conflicting parties with each other and expanding the possibilities of future interaction" (Hendriks et al., 2019, p. 139).

As such, listening inherently involves making sense of language in use. Therefore, it must keep in mind that "language is one of the most powerful means by which our conceptual" beliefs

are formed, but without listening to communication coming from a diverse range of sources, individuals run the risk of becoming "habituated to the familiar and as a result will hear only what we already know, or expect, to hear" (Lipari, 2010, p. 354). Thanks to the abundance of personal and curated media options present in society, people can surround themselves with content that agrees with their pre-conceived opinions and beliefs, which results in isolation from contrary views and creates deeper divides within society (Drury, 2019). As such, only listening for what one already knows and agrees with increases polarization.

Despite this, media and journalism can play an important role in facilitating listening. Hendriks et al. (2019) suggested "that listening to what others say or write is a critical condition in the emergence of a public sphere," and "online technologies has expanded the way citizens talk and listen to each other in the public sphere" (p. 140). However, being able to leverage these technologies to the benefit of listening requires some level of training. An ideal location for such instruction is the realm of higher education. As Drury (2019) suggested, this is "because productive public speech is rarely modeled by national political debates, college campuses should be sites for students to learn productive habits of engagement for public life" (p. 72). Within such a setting and through reading news coverage via a local news outlet, individuals can learn more about those around them, potentially expanding their circles of influence and experience and leading to a decrease in the division that is prevalent in society. "Emerging experimental research on the effects of mass polarisation also finds that people's views become more extreme not only because of exposure to partisan information but also because of their interpersonal discussions with other like-minded citizens" (Hendriks et al., 2019, p. 138).

Ideally, news outlets provide information that can serve as the fodder for any discussion, dialogue, or deliberation that takes place within the community. This means members of the

community must engage with the news being produced by the journalists while also interacting with the journalists themselves as part of the newsgathering process. Furthermore, as individuals consume the news, they gain knowledge that allows them to discuss important issues facing society. Even when they disagree, they can participate in deliberation and dialogue to make sense of what is going on. “The cultivation of dialogue and deliberation helps them grapple with the trade-offs and tensions among competing values, a necessary step for reasoning and deciding public action” (Drury, 2019, p. 73).

Within that, listening is inherent. The journalists must listen to the audience members as they strive to involve them in the reporting process. The community members must listen to what the journalists report, and then they must listen to each other as they react to the coverage. Morrell (2018), invoking Jurgen Habermas, suggested that within deliberation, dialogue is of the utmost importance because “citizens do not simply put ideas on display but actually have reciprocal discussion” (p. 238). Reciprocity is important for engagement. For democracy to work, people must be engaged in the process in some fashion. This could entail being involved politically, or it could mean working with journalists to produce inclusive and comprehensive news. Either way, it comes down to listening. As Hendriks et al. (2019) made clear, listening “serves an important democratic function by facilitating the flow of diverse information and ideas between citizens, their associations, the media and policy makers” (pp. 138-139). A lack of listening and understanding makes reciprocity among citizens impossible (Morrell, 2018).

What’s helpful is that listening does not have to occur in a predetermined location. It can happen online via social media, email, video conferencing, and host of digital spaces, and it can take place in face-to-face settings, such as local events, meetings, and more. As Hendriks et al. (2019) explained, “In all these spaces, citizen listen to share stories, to build common narratives

and to learn more about the views and arguments of those who share common concerns" (p. 142). It can, and should, be happening all the time. The problem is it isn't easy work. Members of a public struggle to productively engage diverse viewpoints, which can lead to actions ranging from agreeing to disagree to name-calling and physical violence or even hate crimes (Drury, 2019). By allowing these types of interactions to get in the way of listening, society limits its ability to learn for its members. "Our thinking cannot be informed by others' opinions unless we first hear those opinions" (Scudder, 2022, p. 176). One way to accomplish this is by consuming local news, especially coverage of important issues facing a community.

Of course, individuals must be open to receiving information from others. The best way to do this is by listening, but to listen effectively, silence must be welcomed rather than feared as being uncomfortable. To be an effective listener, it is helpful to clear or empty one's mind. Lipari (2010) explained that "emptiness is a form of inner silence that has suspended the noise of inner discursive thought," which helps with "focus and attention that enables one to really absorb the other's words beyond the confines of what has already been thought, believed, or understood" (p. 355).

Remaining silent gives individuals the opportunity to stop talking and consider the new information they are receiving, which allows for consideration on their previously held beliefs (Drury, 2019). As such, silence serves as the best antidote to a noisy world where understanding others becomes increasingly difficult. To that end, it must be understood that silence is needed in the current information-rich and media-saturated world where content is continually pushed to people via their electronic devices because people need time "to process messages, to find deeper information and think about it in a critical way, evaluating arguments and the relevance and reliability of evidence" (Drury, 2019, p. 75).

This strikes at the core of deliberative democracy. As Morrell (2018) pointed out, "the need for citizens to hear and understand one another is at the heart of deliberative theory" (p. 239). In the context of democratic processes, "listening plays an important supportive role in the public sphere by enabling people involved in a controversy to not only share their stories, knowledge and experiences but to channel their emotions into political action" (Hendriks et al., 2019, p. 146). Through listening, individuals can become knowledgeable about what is going on, create and maintain relationships, and foster public interaction (Morrell, 2018).

Journalism provides an avenue for listening that achieves these aims. Even if something is controversial, journalism supports the work of democracy by providing ways in which speech can be improved with more speech. After all, the United States Constitution's Bill of Rights includes the First Amendment, which is directly related to concepts of speech. With the rights for free expression and speech carved out explicitly, it stands as one of the pillars of democracy. Other countries seeking to develop a more democratic approach to governance look to the First Amendment as a key component of their attempts at democratization, even if the same level of protection is not granted. Therefore, it is imperative the First Amendment and what it affords is held in high regard. One way to do this is to exercise those rights often and with passion; however, the idea of listening should not be overshadowed by the expression of ideas. The only way for ideas to develop and mature is to hear from all sides. By taking in such information, whether through individual interactions or the consumption of news, society can be improved and supported. Answers to difficult questions and solutions to wicked problems exist in the ether. One simply must be quiet enough to hear them.

Of course, there exists one particular type of person that warrants special attention when it comes to listening. Such people have specialized knowledge about certain subjects, and with their input, democracy can move forward in positive ways. These people are experts.

Expertise

Unfortunately, expertise seems to be dying (Nichols, 2017). Neblo and Wallace (2021) highlighted how experts are being ignored, even when those doing the ignoring are putting their lives at risk. This was conveyed by looking at the COVID-19 pandemic. “Large numbers of people have protested and refused to comply with the CDC’s policies, producing precisely the spike in cases that it was trying to avoid” (Neblo & Wallace, 2021, p. 4).

As Nichols (2017) argued, “we now live in a society where the acquisition of even a little learning is the endpoint, rather than the beginning, of education. And this is a dangerous thing” (p. 7). These people ignore a key factor that experts have spent most of their lives making sense of their areas of concern. For example, considering medical interventions such as vaccines or drugs and some of the historical mistakes that have been made, Nichols (2017) pointed out that “[i]t rarely occurs to the skeptics that for every terrible mistake, there are countless successes that prolong their lives” (p. 24).

People who are opposed to the vaccine or other medical interventions often claim they arrived at their decisions because they did “research.” Of course, this ignores the true definition of research. Opening an internet browser and plugging search terms into a search engine is not research. It is actively entering an echo chamber that will confirm what they already believe, which is confirmation bias. As Nichols (2017) highlighted, “we hear things the way we want to hear them, and we reject facts we don’t like” (p. 39).

True research involves many more steps and processes. Experts do research. Laypeople Google things. Still, people do not like to admit when they are wrong. This is problematic. People must admit what they don't know and rely on the expertise of others, even if that makes them feel vulnerable or as though they lack knowledge and autonomy (Nichols, 2017). As such, experts should be trusted and listened to because "one of the things that experts do is teach. They distribute their expertise broadly" (Schudson, 2008, p. 119).

In a time when accurate information is so vital, journalism can serve as a conduit between the experts and the laypeople. The media can play a role in keeping people informed, but those journalists are faced with the sad reality that news consumers don't necessarily want expert details but prefer pretty, easy-to-consume reports that support their views and opinions on a matter (Nichols, 2017). Public trust in the news has declined, even before politicians attacked the profession and practice of journalism, and the spreading of mis- and disinformation by public officials feels normal. Without knowing who or what to trust, confusion happens easily" (Lind, 2019).

So, what can be done? Expanding deliberative processes could help. "If deliberation as a social activity does not require certain types of technical expertise to participate, then participants may feel less of a need to engage in facework that manages their perceived competence as participants by deferring to others" (Sprain & Reinig, 2018, p. 367). It is open to everyone, and everyone has a chance to contribute their knowledge to the addressing of the issue at hand. Lind (2019) discussed three types of knowledge that included cognitivist knowledge, which is objective and technical knowledge that results in "appropriate behavior" (p. 6); sociocultural knowledge, which refers to understanding the experiences of others; and

behaviorist knowledge, which "presumes social change must be promoted via other means [. . .] From the behaviorist perspective, knowing is fine but carrots and sticks foster change" (p. 10).

The type of knowledge needed in a given situation is context-dependent. Furthermore, the level of urgency of the issue can also dictate how much individuals can and should contribute. Still, when possible, bringing in outside voices seems to make sense. "Turns to increase public participation are predicated on leveraging the unique knowledge of lay citizens, which is culturally and experientially complex and qualitatively different from the knowledge of subject specialists" (Sprain & Reinig, 2018, p. 359).

Of course, experts still need to play a role. Nichols (2017) explained that "experts are the people who know considerably more on a subject than the rest of us, and are those to whom we turn when we need advice, education, or solutions in a particular area of human knowledge" (p. 29). The problem is, though, that experts are not trusted. The technology available to society should help, but it doesn't. Often, it can make a situation worse. Lind (2019) suggested that "once inaccurate information takes hold, presenting evidence to the contrary makes little difference in what people believe. Perhaps formal deliberations properly structured can stem the tide, but informal public discussions allow social enclaves to entrench themselves more deeply in misinformation" (p. 3). Essentially, the toothpaste can't be put back in the tube. This makes combating mis- and disinformation and "fake news" incredibly difficult. "The Internet gathers factoids and half-baked ideas, and it then splays all that bad information and poor reasoning all over the electronic world" (Nichols, 2017, pp. 15-16).

This damages democracy. Clark and Teachout (2012) argued that "democratic activity has now shrunk until it is unrecognizable. Instead of debating public matters on a weekly or monthly basis, American democracy now often consists of sitting on one's couch and watching

attack ads, and perhaps going to the voting booth once a year" (p. 23). Furthermore, thanks to individuals believing they have more knowledge than they actually do, there exists "a threat to the material and civic well-being of citizens in a democracy" (Nichols, 2017, p. 20).

Despite this, convening people together to discuss topics that impact them and their communities is important. "Stakeholder participation reduces marginalization, increases public trust, and contributes to civic capacity," which means that "participation can co-construct solutions" (Sprain & Reinig, 2018, p. 357). Again, current technologies could play a role in this. However, that isn't necessarily coming to fruition. "The Internet is a magnificent repository of knowledge, and yet it's also the source and enabler of a spreading epidemic of misinformation. Not only is the Internet making many of us dumber, it's making us meaner: alone behind their keyboards, people argue rather than discuss, and insult rather than listen" (Nichols, 2017, p. 9).

By stepping away from their keyboards and paying attention, members of society can learn a lot about those around them. "Language in-use reveals what speakers take for granted as true, hold most dear, and reject out of hand" (Lind, 2019, p. 5). This means there is a need for more discussion, deliberation, and listening. The benefits of such activities are clear.

"Deliberation provides a forum for reciprocal engagement between citizens and experts through which judgments and preferences are transformed" (Sprain & Reinig, 2018, p. 357). Lind (2019) made clear that hearing from all sides of an issues not only helps everyone gain information, but it also helps cultivate a shared sense of community that can guide those involved toward a solution that fits best within the given context of people and places. Using expert knowledge to guide local decision-making isn't problematic on its face if the knowledge is used for informational purposes, but it becomes an issue when governments use the experts to make the decisions without local input (Clark & Teachout, 2012).

That breeds the distrust that is leading to the death of expertise. “Knowing things is not the same as understanding them. Comprehension is not the same thing as analysis. Expertise is not a parlor game played with factoids” (Nichols, 2017, p. 37). History and experiences of individuals contribute to this distrust. If a group of people has been mistreated before, it makes members of that group more suspicious. This is where marginalized individuals become pushed further to the edges of society. When a dominate ideology, race, or religion weaponizes democratic processes to shut out minorities within the local community, problems emerge. “Tocqueville identified this habit as the tyranny of the majority, and he warned against it as a threat to democracy” (Clark & Teachout, 2012, p. 29).

Despite the decrease in trust between laypeople and experts, Warren (2021) proposed that all is not lost, suggesting that deliberative mini-publics where a representative sampling of people come together to discuss issues of import “are one of the most promising ways of reducing the widening gulf between democracy and expertise” (p. 2). As members of such publics, citizens just must be careful to not replicate the past. Nineteenth-century public meetings “were not just a civic experience but a form of contact sport: a combination of politics, theatrics, and community fair, complete with noble rhetoric and occasionally rotten tomatoes” (Clark & Teachout, 2012, p. 21).

Synthesis

Avoiding mistakes of the past can be accomplished by combining these elements of democracy and focusing on the idea of deliberative democracy as the structure in which democratic society functions. Despite the assertion by Schudson (2008) that democracy has “little to do with community” (p. 106), by leveraging the passion of individuals within the public sphere and listening to individuals, especially experts, greater progress can be made on societal

issues at the local and national levels alike. Media can facilitate this by providing information and space for discussion. To accomplish this in the most effective fashion possible, though, journalists and their outlets must seek ways to uphold the ideals of the profession and guard democracy against polarization brought on by mis- and disinformation.

Summation

As Hann (1999) suggested, "Communities are generally established out of a desire to have a commonality of thinking and a way of viewing the world" (p. 4). Based upon this review of pertinent literature, it becomes clear that journalism and conceptualizations of democracy are intertwined. The throughline becomes clear. Democracy serves as a container in which society is contained. When individuals fail to listen or acknowledge expertise, emotions and passion cloud the thoughts and opinions of citizens. The container of democracy develops holes through which civility leaks out. Community media slows this societal drain, but when individuals who are unable to discern reliable from unreliable information and gets news from sources focusing on national news that push mis- and disinformation, society becomes polarized and divided because there is a lack of trust in societal institutions, such as media outlets. In such an environment, social capital cannot grow. It withers and dies, reducing engagement. People end up feeling isolated and without connection to their neighbors, which means they seek out a form of community wherever they can, even if that community exacerbates the problem.

Journalism itself can build community by increasing social and civic engagement among residents of a given locality. This is done through the fostering of social capital. One way social capital can be created is via communication, and journalism provides a form of and forum to express communication, or discourse. After all, language is key to human survival as a means for building community and identity (Iftikhar et al., 2019). Therefore, discourse within the realm of

journalism is important. Not only do journalists create discourse through their reporting that impacts the audience and community they serve, how journalists view themselves also leverages discourse. The idea of viewing oneself is important for society.

Members of a democratic society must understand themselves. “Individuals who have a good understanding of their own emotional makeup, and who are able to communicate effectively with others on a personal basis, are likely to be well prepared for wider tasks of citizenship” (Giddens, 2013, p. 119). People cannot connect with others if they don’t know how they view and present themselves to the world. This lack of personal knowledge creates barriers to developing the social ties that create social capital. Assumptions about roles and identities must combat “a public prone to partisan selective exposure, an emergent media sector willing to deliver partisan content, and a traditional media sector anxious over its—often criticized—ability to deliver news” (Carlson, 2018, pp. 1,880).

The problem is too many people only view themselves in terms of their political affiliations, which then causes them to view others only through a political lens. That must be corrected. For democracy to work, society must work together instead of in opposition to those who have differing political viewpoints. This is not an essay task as the available technology can certainly help further divisions (Hudson, 2020), but it can be done. Talisse (2020 December 22) suggested that “Americans would need to do things together that have nothing to do with politics, engaging in activities that in no way express our partisan loyalties – volunteering with a community organization, for example, or joining a bowling league” (para. 10). Opportunities to engage with fellow residents often are reported by community media. Therefore, journalism serves as a vehicle for civic engagement that can bring people together within common spaces and activities, such as within a community.

By doing this, trust can be rebuilt. “Trust in others generates solidarity across time as well as space: the other is someone on whom one can rely, that reliance becoming a mutual obligation” (Giddens, 2013, p. 127). If people can rely on each other, the benefit of the doubt can be given to those who disagree with a given position or belief, leading to better democratic outcomes and cohesion. Society can be democratized, and the power of the people can truly be realized. People can remain autonomous and maintain their individual rights while also existing in a collective and pluralistic society.

As such, the literature presented illuminates a need to investigate the pathways to news of individuals living and working in farming communities in Kansas that lead to the belief in and spreading of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories promulgated by partisan media outlets that include, but are not limited to, conservative talk radio and social media platforms. There are various ways this can be looked in terms of a theoretical lens. The most pertinent for the purposes of this study will be unpacked in the following chapter.

Chapter 3 - Fertilizing and Irrigating the Research with Theory

Within the world of journalism and mass communication research, theories abound (e.g., Baran & Davis, 2021; Jeffres, 2015; Putnam & McPhee, 2009; Severin & Tankard, 2000; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Each theory exists to help understand how the media function within and exercise power over society. In almost every study, any theory could be applicable, but the fit probably would not be perfect, especially considering the focus and scope of the research. In terms of investigating the news consumption habits of and their subsequent effects on rural Kansas farmers and ranchers, theories of media effects provide ideal lenses through which the prevalence of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories promulgated by partisan media outlets within the news and information ecosystem can be explored to understand the impacts they have on social capital and democracy. These types of theories help researchers explore how the media effects the cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral actions of children and adults, and they came into prominence with the increased popularity of television as a mass medium (Hopmann et al., 2015; Valkenburg et al., 2016). Within this category of schemes, several specific theories exist. One is Cultivation Theory, and it is primary theory used in this work. However, Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) and Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory also provide support. Each of these will be unpacked in the following sections.

Cultivation Theory (CT)

As farmers shape the terrain of their fields by tilling, or cultivating, the soil, media platforms shape reality through the messages they deliver to audiences. From this information dissemination sprouts the concept of Cultivation Theory (CT). This theory fits within the realm of media effects. Its chief focus centers on television and how that medium shapes and distorts viewers' perceptions of reality (Rubin & Haridakis, 2001). As primary developers of CT,

Gerbner and Gross (1976) argued that the "substance of the consciousness cultivated by TV is not so much specific attitudes and opinions as more basic assumptions about the 'facts' of life and standards of judgment on which conclusions are based" (p. 175). This social construction of reality is a complex process that requires more than just a viewer or just a content producer who exercises some form of power or overt influence over the other. It is a two-way street. Gerbner et al. (1986) explained this fact in the following way:

> The point is that cultivation is not conceived as a unidirectional process but rather more like a gravitational process. The angle and direction of the 'pull' depends on where groups of viewers and their styles of life are in reference to the center of gravity, the 'mainstream' of the world of television. Each group my strain in a different direction, but all groups are affected by the same central current. Cultivation is thus part of a continual, dynamic, ongoing process of interaction among messages and contexts. (p. 24)

As such, CT investigates the long-term effects of television viewing as it relates to the shaping of general beliefs regarding society and the moral values of viewers (Mosharafa, 2015). To that end, researchers used CT to look at sexual expectations of romantic relationships due to depictions found on television (Gamble & Nelson, 2016), the relationship between materialism and environmental concerns of television viewers (Good, 2007), the increase of materialism in heavy television viewers (Harmon, 2001; Harmon et al., 2019), the decrease of concerns regarding environmental concerns due to television viewing (Good, 2009), the embeddedness of ethnic stereotypes derived from television depictions of minorities (Lee et al., 2009), how "Grey's Anatomy" viewers perceive doctors compared to patient satisfaction (Quick, 2009), the acceptance of aggressive behavior based on reality television viewing (Scharrer & Blackburn,

2018), and how media exposure impacts body image and body satisfaction of females (Van Vonderen & Kinnally, 2012).

Perhaps the most notable use of CT, though, concerns how depictions of violence on television shape viewers' beliefs about their safety in society. Gerbner et al. (1986) referred to this as the "mean world" syndrome and suggested that "television may cultivate exaggerated notions of the prevalence of violence and risk out in the world" (p. 29), which means that "one lesson viewers derive from heavy exposure to the violence-saturated world of television is that in such a mean and dangerous world, most people 'cannot be trust' and that most people are 'just looking out for themselves'" (p. 28). Fabiansson (2007) argued that concerns about safety at the community level become conflated with national or international events, especially following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and the media's subsequent focus on violence, crime, and war, which cultivated a looming sense of fear within society. With television being dependent on visual imagery, safety concerns are exacerbated when views are inundated with depictions of war and its aftermath (Gadarian, 2014).

The cultivation of society and fear through the "mean world" syndrome occurs through both news programming (Lett et al., 2004) and fictional programming (Appel, 2008; Bilandzic et al., 2019), such as prime time dramas (Jamieson & Romer, 2014), alike. Of course, national programming does not wield this power alone. Gilliam et al. (1996) argued local news paints a problematic picture as well, finding that community media often portray crime as violent and perpetrated by non-White actors. Additionally, Gross and Aday (2003) also looked at local news and found that fear cultivation stemmed from direct experience with crime and violence; however, without direct experience, local news consumption only cultivated opinions that crime is a problem within the community. Such findings appear to align with the assertion by Kim and

Rubin (1997) that cultivation effects seem to relate more to fear of victimization rather than estimates of victimization. Though seemingly at odds with each other, these studies still showcase the power of television's depictions of crime and violence. It's not a leap to suggest that recognizing crime as a problem can easily lead to fear, especially if the crime gets closer to the viewers' homes.

Whether via news or fictional entertainment programming, "heavy exposure to the world of television cultivates exaggerated perceptions of the number of people involved in violence in any given week" (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 28). This presents an apparent negative argument toward covering crime as heavily as news media organizations do. However, crime coverage is a staple of journalism (e.g., Alitavoli & Kaveh, 2018; Grabe, 1999; Lubbers et al., 2000; Parks, 2019; Poindexter et al., 2006). As such, it is part of journalism's ritual. "Ritualized displays of any violence (such as in crime and disaster news, as well as in mass-produced drama) may cultivate exaggerated assumptions about the extent of threat and danger in the world and lead to demands for protection" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, pp. 193-194). These assumptions cross demographic lines, meaning one's race or ethnicity does not preclude them from being cultivated by the media (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2016), so no television viewer is immune. However, this distorted view of reality presented by television is problematic. As Alitavoli and Kaveh (2018) highlighted, fear about crime rises even as crime rates actually decrease, which demonstrates how the media has socially constructed a reality in which crime appears to be prevalent and becoming more so over time, and that "socially constructed reality of the existence of crime urges the public to prioritize crime as one of the most important issues concerning their community" (p. 7).

Obviously, crime and violence do occur. However, some news consumers reported that they feel too much attention is placed on crime coverage (Reber & Chang, 2000). Furthermore, one must admit that other issues facing society are just as pressing. Luckily, CT can help explain the media's interactions with other topics as well. Gerbner et al. (1986) explained this broad connection in the following way:

> Culture cultivates the social relationships of a society. The mainstream defines its dominant current. We focus on the implications of accumulated exposure to the most general system of messages, images, and values that underly and cut across the widest variety of programs. (p. 21)

For example, though tangentially related to concepts of crime, Callanan and Rosenberger (2016) used CT to investigate public opinion concerning the criminal justice system and perceptions of police officers as they relate to racial tensions within the United States, finding that White individuals tend to have a more positive view of police officers and their responses to a given situation when the crime being discussed is perpetrated by non-White individuals. This occurs because television programming appears to focus on non-White actors when the content is negative, leaving television viewers to adopt a worldview constructed by the images, values, and ideologies put forth by television even if such a worldview is not accurate but based on an individual's subjectivity stemming from personal experiences and beliefs (Bilandzic, 2006). Due to the reliance on personal attributes, choice and preference play a role. Serving as a mechanism for cultivation to take place, narratives provide an avenue to shape the beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and values of media consumers. Bilandzic and Busselle (2008) argued that being transported via a narrative can help speed up the cultivation process due to the human affinity for

storytelling. After all, people respond to stories, whether they be fiction or non-fiction (Cron, 2012).

Through storytelling, relationships are formed, and that allows social capital to be built. Since social capital concerns social bonds that dictate communal norms (Putnam, 2001), it works well with CT due to its focus on the construction of reality. Within this vein, Jin and Kim (2014) investigated how watching a specific telethon related to the cultivation of social capital that leads to healthier communities, positive civic activities, and collective morals and values. As morals are a key component of CT (Bilandzic et al., 2019), religion also comes into play. Religious discourse and iconography represent certain morals and values, and followers of a given belief system hold those attributes closely and personally (Chimuanya & Igwebuike, 2021; Putnam, 2010; Wuthnow, 2012). Because of the passion associated with religion, the topic can be a hot-button issue that can cause disagreements, full-blown arguments, exclusion, or even violence, and media consumption can cultivate this type of animosity (Alkazemi, 2019).

When individuals fail to engage in civil dialogue, social capital fails to grow and democracy is damaged because the development of trust among society members collapses. Due to CT's view that media shapes reality by affecting attitudes and beliefs, the theory provides an important lens for looking at trust or mistrust of the media. Shrum (2017) highlighted how television viewing cultivated interpersonal mistrust. Earlier research also found a correlation between television viewing and a lack of trust (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Jin & Kim, 2014). As such, the cultivation ability of mass media discourses becomes evident. Discourse consists of the language, words, images, symbols, and other artifacts being used to create knowledge and reality (Fairclough, 2010; Gee, 2015; White, 2004), so the media fits squarely within this realm because journalists and other content producers create discourse (Costera Meijer, 2020; Ferrucci et al.,

2020; Gerbner, 1985; Mateus, 2018). The ability of media discourses, such as those found on television, to cultivate distrust within audiences can be diminished, though. Gerbner and Gross (1976) found college education and regularly reading newspapers diminished mistrust because those "who do not read newspapers regularly have a high level of mistrust regardless of TV viewing" (p. 193). Knowing this, an increased call for media literacy education efforts seems warranted. Increasing media literacy by "providing audiences with information and critical thinking skills to assess, evaluate, analyze, and process media messages" (Stamps, 2021, p. 234) could help counter the effects of television viewing as they relate to reality construction.

Of course, CT shows up in non-television-related research too. Lubbers et al. (2000) investigated how newspapers characterized ethnic minorities, resulting in negative perceptions about those individuals. Also, a variety of scholars are using CT to explore digital, online, and social media. For example, Williams (2006) found cultivation effects present in video games. Similarly, Scharrer and Warren (2022) used CT to explore beliefs about gender roles and norms impacted by video games and streaming services. In terms of social media, some research shows that the online worlds created by these platforms cultivate opinions based upon the user-generated content to which a user is exposed (Nevzat, 2018). This is important because social media platforms "provide individuals interpersonal connect with others, relational satisfaction, and a way to learn about the surrounding cultural milieu" (Croucher, 2011, p. 261). If these connections radicalize an individual toward destructive behavior, the cultivation of attitudes and beliefs becomes problematic. Furthermore, as Eddington (2018) found, social media networks create an avenue for hate groups and other like-minded individuals to find each other online, further spreading harmful discourses that can then inculcate others. With that in mind, digital technologies and social media provide fertile ground for CT research.

This is because, at its core, CT is used "to determine what, if anything, viewers absorb from living in the world of television" (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, p. 182), but society is saturated with media. Therefore, CT is applicable to all forms of communication because people can absorb messaging via all media platforms. As such, CT shows up in the curriculum of many media and communication programs at the college and university levels (Bryant, 1986). It exists as a historically popular form of research (e.g., Coenen & Van den Bulck, 2016; Dahlstrom & Scheufele, 2010; Klinkenberg, 2015; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015; Mosharafa, 2015). Though associated with television primarily, CT's applicability as a way to make sense of the effects of various media types presents an important way to look at the news usage and opinion construction this study investigates. Along with such considerations, though, one must also understand how individuals access news, information, entertainment, and other forms of media content. There must be a path down which people can travel that gives them the content they want and need. This brings in the idea of Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), which also provides a useful approach to this study.

Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT)

Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) becomes applicable because the media tell the story of a community to its citizens by working with them. As Paul (2015) noted, "CIT emphasizes interpersonal networks and communities. CIT gives attention to how messages are received and interpreted in different ways depending on these interpersonal and community communication and influence networks" (p. 712). The theory explores local communities' communication capabilities by considering two key components:

> "First, the storytelling network (STN) is composed of residents, community organizations, and local or ethnic media that participate in communicative actions about

> the community. These storytellers are not isolated but rather involved in a dynamic conversation, together forming the communicative structure of community. Second, the STN is situated within the communication action context (CAC), which comprises any elements of the built and social environments that enable or constrain the STN." (Villanueva et al., 2016, p. 2708)

More succinctly and as the architects of the theory, Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006a) defined CIT as "a theoretical framework that differentiates local communities in terms of whether they have communication resources that can be activated to construct community, thereby enabling collective action for common purpose" (p. 174).

The core of CIT is the STN, which fosters neighborhood belonging and collective efficacy (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006b). With belonging and efficacy comes trust, which is crucial for community. Since journalism plays an important role in community (Bressers et al., 2015; Smethers et al., 2017; Smethers et al., 2021) and the STN, trust in journalism becomes vital. Largely, community news outlets provide a form of camaraderie, which Nygren (2019) highlighted as "the social role of local media" (p. 53) that brings people together and builds relationships due to coverage of shared experiences. Leupold et al. (2018) referred to this as social cohesion. As Usher (2018) suggested, "Trust in journalism is a critical element of social cohesion: trust enables news media to set the public agenda, influences media effects, and is ultimately the factor that links journalists and audiences together" (p. 565). Community media provides an avenue for the reciprocity found within social cohesion because it functions within a relationship between itself and the citizen being served. As such, the unique attributes of a community must be considered. Usher (2019) suggested this meant that place needs to be a focal point, both in terms of the physical location of the community and individuals' roles within it.

Despite this, political partisanship and division erode the binding relationships with a community, especially when community newspapers close and create a STN gap. “Declining access to quality local news is harmful to voter behavior and responsive governance, leading to more corruption and lower voter turnout. In the absence of quality local news options, Americans may rely on partisanship and national news to inform their political decisions” (Darr et al., 2018, p. 1009). Furthermore, communities and regions without reliable, local news coverage become news deserts (Abernathy, 2018a), which Baran and Davis (2021) suggested creates “an information deficit” (p. 313). This is problematic because “people with the least access to local news are often the most vulnerable—the poorest, least educated and most isolated” (Abernathy, 2018a, p. 8).

Without a local news source, individuals wanting to make a positive impact on their community out of a desire to see it succeed and survive lose a vital piece of the infrastructure serving as an avenue to engage. As Wenzel et al. (2020) pointed out that the networks inherent in CIT “refer to the discursive links between residents, community groups, and local media, who are all involved in sharing stories about their community. When these links are strong, the storytelling network is more likely to circulate stories of a shared community” (p. 289). Though the internet can help news outlets exist and provide a framework for STNs to survive, rural areas suffer from a lack of adequate internet access (Whitacre, 2010), making the discursive connections more tenuous. Of course, even if the infrastructure is in place to facilitate STNs and local media, individuals will engage only if their use provides them with gratification. Therefore, Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G) also provides a useful approach to this study.

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G)

Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), which fits under the umbrella of media effects theories, attempts to understand the "how" and "why" people actively choose certain media to satisfy their needs (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Communication and media scholars Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch developed U&G to its current form (Severin & Tankard, 2000). In their review of the state of gratification research, Katz et al. (1973) laid the groundwork for the full development of U&G by arguing the following:

> [O]ur position is that media researchers ought to be studying human needs to discover how much the media to or do not contribute to their creation and satisfaction. Moreover, we believe it is our job to clarify the extent to which certain kinds of media and content favor certain kinds of use—to thereby set boundaries to over-generalization that any kind of content can be bent to any kind of need [. . .] Though audience oriented, the uses and gratifications approach is not necessarily conservative. While taking account of what people look for from the media, it breaks away from a slavish dependence of content on audience propensities by bringing to light the great variety of needs and interests that are encompassed by the latter. (p. 521)

However, prior to this work, McQuail et al. (1972) outlined four categories of media use, which included the following: Diversion, which includes an escape from routine or problems and serves as an emotional release; Personal Relationships, which considers the media as a substitute for companionship as well as a social utility; Personal Identity, which looks at self-reference, reality exploration and a reinforcement of values; and Surveillance, which entails information seeking.

These categories allowed Katz et al. (1973) to propose five assumptions regarding the relationship between media and audience, and these include the idea that the audience is

conceived as active, linking gratification and media choice lies with the audience, the media and other sources of satisfaction compete with one another, the goals of mass media use can be determined through research that utilizes data coming from individual audience members, and judgements regarding the cultural significance of media should be separated from audience orientations toward the media. This lead to the suggestion that media goals can be grouped into uses such as informing or educating, identifying with characters, entertainment, enhancing social interactions, and escapism to avoid daily life stress (McQuail, 2010).

The history of U&G goes back even further, though. According to research, scholars began looking at media gratifications by investigating how radio listeners used the medium (Lazarsfeld, 1940). Of course, television became a primary focus of U&G once the technology became widely available (Katz et al., 1973; McQuail et al., 1972). This is especially true in relation to entertainment television, such as crime dramas (Brown et al., 2012), reality television programming (Barton, 2013), or sporting events (Billings et al., 2019). Outside of entertainment, U&G also applies to a variety of news and information content (e.g., Sherry, 2006; Towers, 1985; Wei, 2009). "Specifically, attitudes such as news affinity, perceived news realism, and informational viewing motivations" have been the focus of this type of research (Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006, p. 770), which positions U&G as a valuable lens for investigating the spread of mis- and disinformation and how partisan media plays a role.

Of course, U&G kept up with the evolution of technology as well, furthering its utility in the world of communication and media research. This is thanks to the recognition of the important role of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) (Ruggiero, 2000), which considers the process of communication creation and exchange using networked computers and digital media such as email, social media, video conferencing, and other internet-facilitated

forms of discourse (Kiesler et al., 1984; Luppicini, 2007; Romiszowski & Mason, 2013). For example, Kim et al. (2021) studied the motivations and behind cord-cutting, which is moving to streaming media platforms for content instead of relying on traditional consumption methods of cable or over-the-air television content. Additionally, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) investigated the underlying reasons college students use social media platforms such as MySpace and Facebook, finding that maintaining relationships served as a driving factor. Li et al. (2018) explored social gratification and possible positive outcomes of social media use, Hammelburg (2021) discussed the reasons people post to social media while experiencing live events such as festivals or concerts, and Hayes et al. (2016) looked at how single-click affordances of "liking" or "favoriting" provide social cues with the social network and often tell more about the relationships among users than the content itself. This relates to research considering U&G in terms of interpersonal communication via social media networks (Eginli & Tas, 2018). Twitter has also been the focus of U&G research. For example, Kim et al. (2016) investigated how and why journalists use Twitter, paying special attention to how their uses foster engagement with audiences.

Engagement with the news provides an indicator of civic engagement, and the user-generated content found on social media sheds light on how individuals engage civically offline, providing an understanding of their feelings of political empowerment by considering how the consumption and creation of online content provides gratifications (Leung, 2009). Furthermore, U&G can be used to examine how the use social media impacts the frequency of political discussion among people within the same political party (in-group members) and people from different political parties (out-group members) related to motives for using traditional and social media for political information (Ponder & Haridakis, 2015), which is important for

understanding "political socialization" (Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006, p. 770). This relates to research by Song et al. (2020) that looked social media users' perceptions of how informed they are about politics even as they come across news that "finds" them, making social media use more gratifying even if their feelings of being informed are false.

Whether looking at social media or more traditional mediums, U&G provides a valuable method of considering the relationships between audience members and the media. Germaine to this study, as was mentioned previously, the theory is also useful in looking at radio. Laor (2022) investigated how online and on-demand radio has changed listening habits thanks to the disruption of formats and time and place requirements found with terrestrial radio, which shows that on-demand content better serves listeners' needs. This aligns with the work of Richter (2006) that also highlighted the way technological evolutions that provide on-demand audio content can satisfy users' needs. Furthermore, radio plays an important role in news and information dissemination (Ullah, 2018). It provides access to individuals who cannot consume such content via other mediums, due to economic, time and place, or other restriction concerns (Lazarsfeld, 1940).

Therefore, this look at U&G makes clear that as the theory was developed, it became an influential theory for looking at audiences and media effects of a variety of communication platforms and methods (Weiyan, 2015; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014), and it continues to drive an important line of inquiry in media research. This stems from the theory's focus on individual differences that drive media use behaviors (Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006). Within media studies, a scholar might be looking at cultural contexts, the people that make up the audience, the individual behavior of those audience members, or the society in which the media exists (McQuail, 1984). U&G provides an avenue to connect all four of these lines of inquiry. As

McQuail (1984) suggested, the goal of U&G "has been towards the construction of a major highway which serves to link all four purposes in one investigative enterprise" (p. 191). As such, this theory provides important support for investigating mis- and disinformation spread and its impacts because it seeks understanding of why a person uses certain media, such as partisan news outlets, social media, or conservative talk radio.

Summation

Using the frame of social constructionism, the three theories presented here create the opportunity to triangulate how media consumers arrive at and utilize news and information disseminated via various platforms. These work particularly well with social constructionism's position that reality is created through social interactions that exchange forms of discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Durrheim, 1997; Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Mead & Schubert, 1934) because Cultivation Theory (CT) argues television viewing shapes the perceptions of reality held by audiences due to the content and messaging delivered via the medium (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1986). Through this exposure, biases can become more entrenched, leading to greater distrust toward other forms of content, individuals, and entities (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2008). To that point, CT directly informs the following hypotheses and research questions: H2, H3, H6, RQ2, RQ3, and RQ6. This is because at their core they explore media effects by looking into the impacts of news consumption that can breed mistrust and increase polarization.

Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) comes into play by considering the communication resources available that can be used to construct community and enable collective action toward a common goal (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a, 2006b). The media present within a rural area exists as such a communicative resource. As such, CIT directly informs the following hypotheses and research questions: H1, RQ1, RQ4, and RQ5. This is

because at their core they seek to understand the method in which individuals consume news and information. These pathways to journalistic content exist due to the communication infrastructure rural citizens have access to.

Of course, one also must take into account the way these individuals use and are rewarded by the communication messages they interact with. This is the essence of Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory. To that point, U&G directly informs the following hypotheses: H4 and H5. This is because at their core they consider the personal preferences and activities of the study's participants, and by combining these three theoretical perspectives, greater understanding concerning the pathways to news of individuals living and working in farming communities in Kansas is gained. Additionally, insight can be unearthed that help to explain the impacts and spread of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories emanating from partisan media outlets found on broadcast and digital platforms. Based upon this, there are several ways these concepts can be investigated. The method this study employed will be explained in the following chapter.

Chapter 4 - Preparing the Methodological Implements of the Research Design

The people of Kansas are often viewed as hardworking and industrious folks who would give the shirts of their backs to help a person in need (Frank, 2004). Hard work is par for the course in the world of farming, and farming as a key economic activity in the largely rural state. Afterall, Kansas is third in the country in amount of farmland, is the number one producer of both wheat and sorghum, and ranks third in cattle production and beef processing (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2022). If that doesn't scream, "rural," then maybe this will. In Kansas, there are approximately 2.7 million residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a), and according to Department of Agriculture (2022), there are 6.5 million head of cattle in the state. Quite literally, cattle outnumber people in Kansas. This isn't a recent development, though. Crockett (2016) humorously pointed this out nearly five years ago, but it still speaks to the focus on farming and ranching, not to mention the difficult work of keeping that many cattle in line. This positions Kansas a prime location for this study. As such, in order to investigate the pathways to news of individuals living and working in farming communities in Kansas that lead to the belief in and spreading of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories, this research utilized a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews from a social constructionism perspective that leverages the theoretical lens of cultivation theory with support from communication infrastructure theory and uses and gratifications theory. Through this, an understanding is gained concerning how individuals use and are impacted by the news in ways that allow political division and polarization to flourish, which damages social capital and democracy.

Mixed-methods research works within a diverse array of research projects. It has been used in communication and media studies to investigate community news outlets (Smethers et al., 2017), local news website paywalls (Olsen & Solvoll, 2018a), servant leadership in community programs (Beck, 2014), and social media use as a way to political engagement by high school students (Anderson, 2020), among others. This type of research involves collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data during a single research study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). "The key assumption of this approach is that both qualitative and quantitative data provide different types of information" (Creswell, 2014, p. 219) that are brought together to provide a more focused look a given research problem. Furthermore, the mixed-method approach allows for a broader range of questions to be answered (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Because of this, combining quantitative and qualitative methods serves as a pragmatic approach to research (Garner, 2015). Though this form of research, knowledge concerning the world and society is created.

As such, using social constructionism theory as a lens for conducting a mixed-method approach of surveys and interviews furnishes a viable methodology for completing this research. Furthermore, because communication and media inherently involve language, the discourses surrounding media usage and concepts of mis- and disinformation matter, and using surveys and interviews keeps the discourse in mind, which is important since discourse concerns the words, or "language at use in the world" (Gee, 2014a, p. 1). Additionally, these methods take into account the lived experiences of the individuals being studied. Such knowledge provides context, and, as Krippendorff (2019) suggested, context matters and is constructed by individuals experiencing the world around them. This means that through discourse knowledge comes into being as words and symbols create social meaning that leads to understanding and identity (Gee,

2014b). Combining surveys and interviews provided an optimal approach to completing this study by addressing the research hypotheses and questions, each of which was covered by the two methods of data collection. Those will be unpacked in the following section.

Guiding Research Hypotheses and Questions

The overall focus of this study seeks to understand whether mis- and disinformation and division-inducing polarization are being cultivated in rural America's fields and pastures. As such, using a mixed-methods approach to investigate pathways to news that cultivate the spread of mis- and disinformation allowed for several research hypotheses and questions to be addressed. The hypotheses guiding this research included the following:

H1: *Rural residents in Kansas get most of their news via national outlets and social media platforms that focus on opinion-oriented content.*

H2: *Rural residents in Kansas struggle to discern between credible and unreliable news outlets.*

H3: *Rural residents in Kansas distrust the news due to a belief that media outlets are not telling the truth about what is really going on in the world.*

H4: *Rural residents in Kansas do not use community media as a primary source of news in their daily lives.*

H5: *Rural residents in Kansas maintain strong religious beliefs and connect to their communities by being involved in community organizations and causes.*

H6: *Rural residents in Kansas engage in political actions and discussions on a regular basis, generally adhering to conservative political ideology.*

Supplementing these hypotheses were the following research questions:

RQ1: *What are the news consumption habits of rural residents in Kansas considering the unfettered access to content brought about by the proliferation of digital technologies?*

RQ2: *Does the solitary nature of rural life create an environment where selective exposure to partisan media outlets develops powerful echo chambers and filter bubbles?*

RQ3: *Why do rural residents in Kansas believe and spread mis- and disinformation they encounter?*

RQ4: *How are rural residents in Kansas most likely to encounter and further spread mis- and disinformation?*

RQ5: *How do rural residents in Kansas create relationships with their neighbors and communities?*

RQ6: *How do mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories spread by partisan sources create political division and polarization in rural Kansas?*

To test these hypotheses and answer these research questions, the mixed-method approach used interviews with rural Kansans and a survey that was completed by rural Kansans. The interviews provided the primary method for this study as a way to provide more depth and context to the research. The survey implementation collected supportive and supplemental data that could be considered in comparison to the information derived from the interviews. As such, the parameters of the interviews are explained in the following section.

Interviewing Rural Residents

The first step in cultivating a productive research harvest that addresses the aforementioned research hypotheses and questions necessitated a deeper dive into the thoughts and attitudes of the sample population. This entailed the qualitative method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews exist as social interactions facilitated by conversation (Creswell

& Poth, 2018). Therefore, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) suggested, an interview is a space in which "knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 4). This means the process of interviewing respondents allows the researchers to obtain information he or she would not be able to obtain otherwise. Through an interview, a researcher can gain insights into the individual perspectives and world views of the respondents by mining the opinions, beliefs, and emotions relating to the study focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, the interview process provides opportunities for the researcher and the participant to ask clarifying questions, which help to ensure both sides are understood and maintain validity of the responses being given (Berger, 2020).

For this study, participants were recruited through two methods. In some cases, participants were recruited using direct contact in the form of phone calls and emails to individuals known to the researcher that fit the ideal parameters of the study, which is living and working in rural Kansas. Sample recruitment letters can be seen in Appendix C. In other cases, individuals volunteered to be interviewed by completing a separate form that indicated their willingness to be part of the next phase of the research. This form, created using Google Forms, was made available at the end of the previously discussed survey. By using a separate form, the risk of survey respondents becoming identifiable was minimized as the two sets of data were kept apart. Upon agreeing to be interviewed, respondents signed off on the necessary informed consent documentation as stipulated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Then, via a time and method agreed upon by the researcher and the respondent, the interview questions were asked and observations were gathered. A complete list of the interview questions can be seen in Appendix B, and they were designed to address the aforementioned research hypotheses and questions.

The study saw 35 individuals volunteer to be interview participants, and 25 of them were interviewed for this study. They represented various demographic aspects of the state. Seven of the interviewees were female, and the remaining 18 were male. They ranged in age from 21 to 76, averaging 47.28 years old. Of the 25, 12 worked in agriculture-related fields, such as farming and ranching or agriculture-focused financial industries. The remaining respondents worked in areas such as education, manufacturing, and the service industry *(see Appendix D)*. With roots from across the state, they represented four of the five conservation district areas that divide Kansas (Kansas Department of Agriculture, 2023), with the exception being the region in the northeast corner of Kansas. Because the volunteers came from across the state of Kansas, this served as a purposeful sample. This means the site of the study and the types of participants were intentionally chosen in order to inform the central research question or phenomenon at the core of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014). However, the identities of all the interviewed participants were protected. They were identified by an assigned alias, title, general organizational affiliation, and other demographic information as applicable.

In terms of the interviews, this meant participants were asked a series of questions during a 30-to-90-minute session or series of sessions. They had the opportunity and choice to answer each question. Participants were expected to answer questions they choose to address with openness and honesty, understanding that they could decline to answer any question presented to them. The interviews took place at a time and location agreed upon by all parties, which included in-person meetings, video conferencing such as Zoom or Google Meet, or phone calls. Following the formal interview and administering of the questions, the interview was discussed, which served as a debrief. During this debrief, participants were allowed to provide feedback on the questions and processes as they had been experienced. No one was paid for participating, and the

researcher explained that the information collected might be used for future research without additional informed consent.

The interviews were recorded using video and/or audio recording devices. The recordings were used to develop transcripts of the interviews that were coded and analyzed, but the raw recordings are not being made public. Transcription was accomplished by using Rev.com, which charges $1.50 per minute for human transcription. In total, the interviews resulted in 37.22 hours of recorded conversation and 267,497 transcribed words to be analyzed.[2]

The coding and analyzing of the transcripts used the method of thematic analysis (TA). Thematic analysis, according to Terry and Hayfield (2021), "is a flexible analytical method that enables the researcher to construct themes—meaning-based patterns—to report their interpretation of a qualitative data set" (p. 3), and it is used in a variety of settings (e.g., Connaughton et al., 2017; Norander & Galanes, 2014). This method aligns with constructionist lens (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Terry & Hayfield, 2021).

Furthermore, TA provides an accessible form of analysis that relies upon an iterative and reflexive process of investigating the discourses or words used (Nowell et al., 2017), and it exists beneath the larger textual analysis umbrella (Brennen, 2016; Fairclough, 2010; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Specifically, this research adopted the reflexive TA approach designed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This style of TA utilizes a six-step process for conducting the research (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Terry & Hayfield, 2021), which this research used as its roadmap. This entailed multiple reading and coding sessions to identify and refine themes while organizing and describing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Connaughton et al., 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). The themes were determined through inductive

[2] This makes the combined transcripts longer than *Ulysses* by James Joyce, which contains 265,222 words.

analysis, which allowed the data to dictate the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020) while using the aforementioned research questions as a guide (Saldaña, 2021).

A combination of open and axial coding was used (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014), which helped determine selective codes that developed into the themes (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Matthews, 2022). This analysis was completed using a combination of Atlas.ti analysis software, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, and printed copies where various colored pens and highlighters were used to annotate the data. Each interview was put into the Atlast.ti analysis software for exploration, which included coding and theme development as outlined by Jackson and Bazeley (2019) and Braun and Clarke (2006).

Following the advice of Gee (2014b), themes of the interviews that most directly relate to the research hypotheses and questions were focused on. Therefore, the language used was considered closely. This allowed for an analysis of how the discourse is put into practice (Fairclough, 2014) and looked for patterns as suggested by Saldaña (2021). Using these steps provided an understanding of how "the social and institutional context in which discourse is structured" (Vos & Craft, 2017, p. 1509) shapes the use and perception of news media in relation to the spread of mis- and disinformation. Through this method, one can make sense of the ideologies of the individuals as they relate to the impact the news has upon them (Whipple & Shermak, 2020). Then, in order to support the findings, further research was needed. This came in the form of a survey. This aspect of the overall study is explained in the following section.

Surveying Rural Residents

The second step in cultivating a productive research harvest that addresses the aforementioned research hypotheses and questions was to gather supporting information from the sample population. To accomplish this, a supplemental quantitative survey was conducted to

triangulate the in-depth interview data and ensure the findings were generally consistent with the broader population of rural Kansans' viewpoints. As Creswell (2014) explained, this form of data collection allows for a "numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions" to be gathered (p. 155). Utilizing a survey was advantageous for several reasons. It allowed for data collection from a wide array of respondents with relative ease and was not confined to geographic boundaries formed by the necessity of traveling to gather information (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Specifically, this survey, which was a questionnaire consisting of "a collection of written queries grouped together in a single document" (Hesse, 2017, p. 1717), was administered online using the Qualtrics surveying platform, though the option of a physical copy of the survey with paid return postage was available. This meant the survey was administered without supervision which eliminated the potential for interviewer bias that can arise in a face-to-face setting (Berger, 2020).

Participants were recruited via a multi-pronged approach. First, individuals were contacted using direct contact in the form of phone calls and emails. These individuals were known to the researcher and fit the ideal parameters of the study, which is living and working in rural Kansas. This recruitment method served as a convenience sample (McCracken, 1988; Ruel, 2019; Willes, 2017), and from that sample, participants were asked to share the survey with their peers that also fit the ideal parameters of the study, which was a way to recruit a higher number of respondents. Such a method of increasing participation is referred to as snowball sampling or snowball subject recruitment, which Tenzek (2017) described as follows:

> In this recruitment strategy, a participant recruits people he or she knows to be in the study, those new participants then recruit people they know to be in the study, and so on. This technique is referred to as snowball subject recruitment because, much like a

> snowball is made, as the participants share contacts, more participants are added to the study and there is an accumulation of participants over time. Snowball sampling is a nonrandom sampling technique, similar to convenience sampling, wherein there is not an equal chance for all participants to be chosen. Because snowball sampling allows participants to reach out and find more research subjects, researchers have access to potentially unique, hard-to-reach or marginalized populations. (p. 1613)

It is acknowledged that this approach is not necessarily ideal for this type of project. However, utilzing snowball subject recruitment served as an initial method of recruitment that was supplemented by other tactics.

To that end, another recruitment approach consisted of working with Kansas Farm Bureau. The organization, which is a non-profit advocacy entity, has a presence in all 105 Kansas counties and operates under the mission "to strenghthen agriculture and the lives of Kansans through advocacy, education and service" (Kansas Farm Bureau, n.d.). Every Tuesday and Friday the organization sends an electronic newsletter to 13,000 of its members. A brief recruitment message was included in each issue of the newsletter between Dec. 16, 2022, and Jan. 6, 2023. To incentivize participation, respondents had the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if they completed the survey by Jan. 15, 2023. Similarly, a recruitment message also was published in the email newsletter of the Kansas Sampler Foundation, which is a non-profit organization whose mission "is to preserve and sustain rural culture by educating Kansans about Kansas and networking and supporting rural communities" (Kansas Sampler Foundation, 2019). The newsletter, called "We Kan! Tidbits," goes to 2,400 subscribers. As was the case with the Farm Bureau population, respondents had the opportunity

to enter a drawing for one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if they completed the survey by Jan. 31, 2023.

Additionally, as another way to recruit respondents, the survey was distributed to students, faculty, and staff at both Sterling College in Sterling, Kansas, and Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. Tapping into this population allowed the research to make contact with a wide variety of individuals, and their association with an educational institution means they likely are from various parts of Kansas, not from a single area. In the case of Sterling College, the Vice President for Academic Affairs emailed the recruitment message to all faculty, staff, and students, which equated to 700 individuals. To incentivize participation, respondents had the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if they completed the survey by Feb. 17, 2023. In terms of Kansas State University, the recruitment message was published in the "K-State Today" email newsletter on two separate occassions, going to all student, faculty, and staff email addresses. Each time the newsletter is published, 6,500 faculty and staff email addresses receive it, and approximately 18,900 student email addresses receive it. To incentivize participation from this recruitment effort as well, respondents had the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if they completed the survey by March 12, 2023.

Sample recruitment letters can be seen in Appendix C, and by utilizing these techniques, a sample size of 267 survey respondents was achieved. After data cleaning, 255 respondents participated in the survey and effectively contributed data. *(n=255)*. Based upon established sample size calculations, this resulted in a confidence level of 95% with a 6% margin of error (Gill et al., 2010; Welch & Comer, 1988). This marks the existing sample as reliable if not perfectly generalizable. This calculation was based on a total population of 914,980 rural Kansas

residents, according to numbers reported in 2021 (Economic Research Service, 2022). Of these survey respondents, 87.1% *(n=222)* indicated they have roots in rural counties, while 12.9% *(n=33)* claimed urban counties, which is based on rural definitions from Economic Research Service (2007) that suggested only five Kansas counties are considered urban.

Table 4.1. Rural versus Urban Survey Respondents

	Number	Percentage
Rural	222	87.1%
Urban	33	12.9%

The average age of the participants was 43.16 years old with a median age of 42.00 years old *(SD=17.73)*. For comparison, the average age of Kansas residents is 36.9 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a). Females made up 62.4% of respondents, and 36.1% were males. The remaining participants indicated they identified as a different gender or preferred not to say. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2022b), 49.9% of Kansas residents are female. Of the respondents, 91.0% were White, which also aligns with the U.S. Census Bureau (2022b) data that indicated 86.0% of the Kansas population is White.

Additionally, 60.4% of the respondents indicated they were married, and 70.2% reported the highest level of education they have completed was a bachelor's degree or higher. Relatedly, 6.3% have earned an associate's degree, 16.9% have completed some college coursework, 1.2% have earned a technical certificate, and 4.7% have earned only a high school diploma or an equivalent. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2022b), only 34.4% of Kansans have earned a bachelor's degree or more. The sample for this study relied heavily on Kansas State University and Sterling College faculty, staff, and students, so the oversampling of more educated

individuals is not surprising. However, many still represented rural areas of the state as their hometown roots stemmed from such locations.

Respondents were also asked about their religious beliefs and general income levels. Christianity was reported to be the dominant belief system with 77.7% of the participants claiming that religion. Also, a majority of the respondents indicated they make between $50,000.00 and $139,999.00 per year. This aligns with the state generally, which has a median household income of $64,521.00 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022b).

In terms of political alignment, 38.0% of the participants reported they aligned with the Republican Party and 29.0% with the Democratic Party. A combined total of 28.7% said they were either Independent or Unaffiliated, while Libertarians and other parties made up 4.3%. Such numbers are in line with overall registration numbers in the state as 45% of registered voters in 2020 were Republican and 26% were Democratic (Kansas Secretary of State, 2023).

The survey used in this study can be classified as a descriptive survey. It sought to gather information that could be used to describe and document the current attitudes and conditions of news use and trust within the sample population (Berger, 2020; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Specifically, the survey did not collect individually identifiable information. It only asked demographic information about the respondents without requiring names. It also required respondents to sign off on the necessary informed consent documentation as stipulated by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). With consent and demographic information gathered, those individuals were then asked 50 survey questions that addressed the aforementioned research hypotheses and questions. The survey was segmented into questions pertaining to media use, news trust and mis- and disinformation, and social and civic engagement. These descriptive

groupings were used to align the individual questions with the hypotheses and research questions guiding this study and helped to ensure the necessary data was collected.

Each question was either multiple choice or utilized a Likert or Likert-type scale. The multiple choice questions allowed for only one response as encouraged by Berger (2020). When necessary, an "other" option was presented, allowing the respondent to fill in his or her response if the provided options did not include the answer he or she wished to provide. The Likert or Likert-type scales served as "a bipolar approach to scaling that measures responses to statements along a positive-to-negative dimension" (Gracyalny, 2017, p. 1555). These utilized a 1-to-5 scale. Some questions were true Likert scales using the option range of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," while others used different descriptive labels, making them Likert-type scales.

The final question of the survey was the only question that did not fit into the multiple choice or scaling categories. It was open ended to provide respondents the opportunity to share any other thoughts or opinions they had that were not covered through the survey questions. Again, these responses were gathered to be used in the aggregate as a basis for comparison and to provide a baseline understanding of attitudes and beliefs of the sample population without attempting to be generalizable, which aligns with previously research in the communication and media fields (e.g., Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016; Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). A complete list of the survey questions can be seen in Appendix A. No one was directly paid for participating, and the researcher explained that the information collected might be used for future research without additional informed consent.

With the survey completed, the responses needed to be analyzed. Making sense of the data collected entailed utilizing concepts of descriptive analysis. Through this the responses are

described through the following factors: looking at the average responses to questions, which is the mean; the middle value of responses to questions, which is the median; the frequency of responses to questions, which is the mode; the different between the lowest and highest response values to the questions, which is the range; and the average variation from the average value of question responses, which is the standard deviation (Creswell, 2014; Ormen, 2021). This is also known as descriptive statistics. Ruel (2019) explained that descriptive "statistics are a set of methods used to analyze data to understand and describe the sample" (p. 99). As such, these methods look at the answers to a specific survey question in isolation, comparing the responses only to each other (Ormen, 2021). The analysis was completed using a combination of IBM SPSS Statistics analysis software and Microsoft Excel.

From this data analysis, a general understanding of how individuals living and working in rural Kansas use and are impacted by the news was developed. These findings provided a supporting base of knowledge that helped address the aforementioned research hypotheses and questions.

Summation and Research Limitations

The use of a mixed method approach to research is common within communication and media studies. Numerous scholars leverage the various pieces of data collected via quantitative and qualitative methods in order to develop a clearer answer to their overall research questions (e.g., Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010; Pang & Ng, 2017; Westlund & Ekström, 2021). More specific to this study, the combination of surveys and interviews also work well together. For example, Beck (2014) used quantitative surveys supplemented with interviews to provide more depth as part of a study to better understand servant leadership within community programs. Similarly, Smethers et al. (2017) used interviews and focus groups to gain insights into the

production process of a hyperlocal news outlet before following up with a 45-item questionnaire to community members as a way to understand how the residents perceived the news outlet. Additionally, Olsen and Solvoll (2018a) combined 20 interviews with newspaper managers and a national survey with 1,586 responses to investigate the potential value proposition of news website paywalls as they related to local news outlets and audiences. Clearly, these methods have a place in this study. However, survey and interview methods do have limitations as well.

As Berger (2020) pointed out, surveys can be problematic because people may refuse to answer the questions or not tell the truth when answering. Also, surveys may be completed by respondents that are not part of the target population (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Especially with Liker or Likert-type scales, one must be cautious of the central tendency bias and the social desirability bias. Central tendency bias "reflects participants' desire to avoid extreme positions in their responses to a particular topic," and social desirability bias "may result from the participants' efforts to portray themselves favorably, especially in response to items of social significance" (Gracyalny, 2017, p. 1556). Specific to this study, using an online survey presented a limitation as Internet access might have limited who was able to aware of and complete the questionnaire. Research has shown that access to Internet technologies can be limited in rural communities such as those that were the focus of this study (Whitacre, 2010). Furthermore, even though generalizability is not a goal, the sample size could be viewed as a detriment and hinder the perceived viability of the research, and this study had to overcome a possible perception that there was a risk of judgement. The anonymity of the survey likely helped individuals feel more comfortable answering the questions, but a few respondents left comments or otherwise communicated a dislike for sharing certain pieces of information, such as income levels, that were asked about as part of the demographic data collection portion of the survey.

Interviews can be problematic as well. Whether intentionally or not, people may not tell the truth, remember things correctly, or actually provide useful information (Berger, 2020). As Creswell (2014) highlighted, data gathered through an interview is filtered through the interviewees' views and lived experiences, and the researcher's presence could bias the responses given by the interviewee. Also, people aren't necessarily masters of language and discourse. Different people may use language differently than the researcher, which can cause confusion about meanings (Berger, 2020). "The difficulty is that people do not always say what they think or mean what they say" (Jensen, 2021, p. 292). Furthermore, people want to give the "right" answer. Berger (2020) explained that sometimes respondents give answers that they think the interviewer is looking for "because they like you and want to give you helpful material, they are bored and want to get through the interview as soon as they can, or they want to impress you" (p. 230).

Specific to this study, biases and assumptions about a perceived ulterior motive or underlying intentions of the research may have affected responses. Also, sampling may have been an issue as the participants were self-selected to be involved, which may have skewed the type of individuals who were interviewed by giving those with more motivation a louder voice and further silencing the voices of those who weren't self-advocates. To that end, the relatively small sample size confined to Kansas residents only allowed for an exploration of general themes relating to this topic, so it is acknowledged that a wider array of individuals might uncover more nuanced interactions with news and mis- and disinformation in rural America. However, these results do illuminate how rural citizens encounter and use the news in ways that can cultivate polarization and division.

In regards to both the survey and interviews, the use of snowball sampling also presented a limitation. Tenzek (2017) explained that possible limitations include the following:

> the possibility that all participants share the same beliefs and experiences because of the referral and may respond similarly. The common response pattern may create a misrepresentation of the true issues compared to a snowballing process that began with a different set of persons. Secondly, a person who has many friends or colleagues can contribute a lot of referrals and recommendations, something very good for the study. However, if a person is very shy or does not know many other people, then the snowball process may stall. (p. 1615)

Still this method provided an efficient way to gather information. The collected data helped to shed insight on how individuals who live and work in rural Kansas consume, use, and are impacted by the news, which aided in understanding the spread of mis- and disinformation and helped to fill the gap in the literature concerning this phenomenon as it relates to small-town, rural news consumers. As such, the following chapter harvests the results derived from the methodological implements described here.

Chapter 5 - Reaping the Harvest of Research Results

The mixed method approach to this study yielded a variety of data points. Though the results cannot be viewed as representative of rural Kansans, they do provide a useful snapshot of how rural residents consume and use the news. Furthermore, these results shed light on this particular population's level of trust in the media while also unpacking avenues for dis- and misinformation to spread, which contributes to political division and polarization. These concepts are explored by addressing the hypotheses and research questions guiding this investigation. Those results are presented in the following paragraphs.

Gathering the Grain

Through the analysis, several commonalities came to light. For instance, the majority of the people interviewed *(n=15)* aligned with conservative politics and reported they were registered as Republicans. This equates to 60% of the volunteers, which aligns with Kansas typically being depicted as a conservative state when discussing electoral politics. Four of the interviewees indicated they were Democrats, four said they were unaffiliated, one described themselves as independent, and one aligned with the Libertarian Party. This relates to the survey respondents, which also skewed toward the Republican party.

Similarly, 24 respondents indicated a strong alignment with religion, specifically Christianity. Likewise, 77.7% of the survey participants also claimed Christianity as their religious belief. This aligns with prior research highlighting the importance of religion in rural areas (e.g., Wuthnow, 2012). Though connections exist between such demographic markers and the focus of this study, certain categorical themes emerged from the data that are most salient to this research. These themes include the following: Rural Residents Constantly Consume News,

Roots of Media Distrust Planted by National Outlets, Disinformation Taints Media Diets, Religion Fertilizes Political Beliefs and Community Connections, and Partisanship Plows Rows for Political Engagement. Such themes are explored in the following paragraphs.

Rural Residents Constantly Consume News

The first research question (**RQ1**) asked what the news consumption habits of rural residents in Kansas are considering the unfettered access to content afforded by digital technologies. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, it is clear that news consumption plays an important role in the everyday lives of the individuals interviewed for this study. All but one person reported consuming news daily, and most respondents indicated they do so multiple times per day or even hourly. A 75-year-old male who owns cropland and pastures, who was assigned the alias of Marvin, described his consumption this way: "I'm addicted to the subscription level of *The New York Times*."

On a scale of one to five with one being "never" and five being "hourly," 37.1% of the survey respondents indicated they consume news and information from any and all media outlets an average amount of time. Using this as the dividing line, 35.8% reported they consume news and information less often, and 27.0% reported they consume news more often. For both "never" and "hourly," 4.2% used these designations to describe their consumption habits, making the extremes equal. Though there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 2.90, SD = 0.93)* and urban *(M = 3.00, SD = 1.02)* participants ($t(235) = -0.36$, $p = 0.72$, *equal variances assumed*), this finding aligns with what the interview data showed.

As part of this consumption, certain types of news were frequently mentioned. The two most cited types of news were politics and local. Political news was mentioned by 15 respondents, and local news was mentioned by 13 respondents. A 37-year-old female educator

assigned the alias of Sarah explained the appeal of local news this way: “I think local journalism is important to share information about the community, to highlight things, to let people know if something bad or unfortunate or scary has happened, to bring awareness to that too. So, I think local is really important too just to share information and to highlight things too for your community.” Likewise, sports and weather were each driving factors of news consumption for nine people. World and national news were also cited, being mentioned seven and five times respectively.

Similarly, the majority of survey respondents indicated they also seek out two distinct types of news and information: national and local. With 32.9% of the responses, national news was the top category of news individuals desired to consume. Close behind was local with 24.9%. Other popular types included weather (9.3%), professional sports (7.2%), politics (5.1%), agriculture (4.6%), and entertainment (4.6%). There was no statistical significance ($\chi^2(9) = 3.74$, $p = 0.93$) between rural and urban respondents.

Table 5.1. Survey Respondents’ Most Preferred Types of News to Consume

News Type	Percentage of Responses
National News	32.9%
Local News	24.9%
Weather	9.3%
Professional Sports	7.2%
Politics	5.1%
Agriculture	4.6%
Entertainment	4.6%

Though Marvin was one of only three respondents who mentioned *The New York Times* specifically, all individuals described diverse pathways to the news they take in. For most, this

included four primary avenues — radio, television, print, and online. Such a finding was validated by the survey data, which indicated that social media and the websites of news outlets ranked as the most popular avenues to news for respondents with 32.5% and 22.8% respectively. These were followed by cable/satellite television and local/antenna television, which received 11.4% and 9.7% of the choices respectively. AM radio, FM radio, and podcasts combined to make up 13.5% of the responses. Additionally, streaming television was the top choice for 4.2% of survey participants, daily newspapers accounted for 3.4%, weekly newspapers were chosen by 1.7%, and magazines received 0.8% of the responses. The data revealed no statistical significance ($\chi^2(11) = 17.20$, $p = 0.10$) between urban and rural Kansans in terms of these pathways to news. However, it is notable that zero urban residents indicated using local antenna television, podcasts, or streaming television as their primary medium. Similarly, 5.4% of rural individuals highlighted newspapers as their preferred pathway to news, compared to only 3.2% of urban respondents.

As for the interviewees, 13 respondents highlighted radio as an important vehicle for news reception. For the majority, their radio listening consisted of either conservative talk radio or NPR. A 40-year-old male educator assigned the alias of Montgomery and a 37-year-old male farmer assigned the alias of Cletus were outliers in that they reported listening to both conservative talk radio and NPR; however, most individuals listened to one or the other. Jasper, a 76-year-old rancher, said he listens to conservative talk radio because it's the only content he can tune into while driving through his pastures. Abraham, a 52-year-old male working in the agriculture industry, also indicated conservative talk radio's accessibility is part of its appeal. However, both also indicated they agreed with most of the content, which was a consistent

reason for listening among respondents. Abraham summed it up by explaining that talk radio "validates your thoughts."

In general, radio news consumption was popular among respondents due to them being able to listen while driving or operating farming machinery. Only one respondent indicated they do not listen to the radio at all, meaning 96% of the interviewees listen to some form of radio content. In most cases, these individuals explained they listened to KSAL News Radio 1150, a commercial AM station out of Salina, Kansas, or KMUW, the NPR station out of Wichita, Kansas. For those not interested in any form of news or talk radio, the dial was typically tuned to country music, though classical music and oldies were also mentioned. Still, radio isn't the only broadcast medium that was popular. Television also provided a dominant pathway to news.

Only seven respondents indicated they don't use television to keep up with the news. For example, a 44-year-old female educator assigned the alias of Edna explained she only uses the television to watch DVDs she borrows from her local library. Similarly, a 21-year-old female college student assigned the alias of Helen pointed out she only uses streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ for television-related content, making this type of news inaccessible. As an avenue to news, television was fairly popular, though. Only six respondents indicated they don't watch any television for informational programming, and Patty, a 64-year-old farmer and rancher, said she doesn't like to watch television. However, she explained the television is on a lot in her home because her husband likes to watch it, and his preferred channel is Fox News.

Of the national cable news outlets cited by individuals in this study's population, Fox News was mentioned most frequently. For five of the interviewees, Fox News served as a primary news source, and those individuals discussed watching it often and for longer periods of

time. For example, Monroe, a 50-year-old male educator, said he watches Fox News when he is at the gym. Yet when Fox News was mentioned by others, it was within the context of believing the content was biased and untrustworthy. CNN, MSNBC, and Newsmax TV also were discussed with various interviewees, but those outlets were often mentioned only in passing, if at all. Instead, most respondents suggested they consume more localized television news. Specifically, most individuals said they watch KWCH, the CBS affiliate in Wichita, Kansas. The ABC and NBC affiliates also had viewers.

Relatedly, survey participants were asked about their television consumption habits as well. They were asked separate cable and local news watching habits. For cable news, CNN led with 25.3% of the responses, and Fox News followed closely behind with 24.5%. With 17.7% of the responses, BBC World News came in third, and the fourth choice was MSNBC with 13.1%. Newsy was reported to be the least watched outlet, garnering only 0.4% of the responses. As far as differences between rural and urban individuals go, there was a statistical significance ($\chi^2(12) = 21.71$, $p = 0.04$). With this, there was a notable point concerning the watching habits of these two types of respondents. No urban individuals reported watching RFD-TV, which is "the nation's first 24-hour television network featuring programming focused on the agribusiness, equine and the rural lifestyles, along with traditional country music and entertainment. RFD-TV produces six hours of live news each weekday in support of rural America and is a leading independent cable channel available in more than 52 million homes" (RFDTV, n.d., para. 2), while 6.3% of rural residents selected it as their most-watched channel. Additionally, in terms of local television news, 37.6% of the survey respondents said they do regularly watch, 36.7% said they do not, and 25.7% said they sometimes watch. No statistical significance existed ($\chi^2(2) = 2.20$, $p = 0.34$) between rural and urban individuals.

When it comes to local news, the interviewees also discussed weekly newspapers as a source of news. Ten people indicated they read their local papers in order to stay informed about what was happening locally. That number increases to 14 when including people who read the paper periodically at work, at the doctor's office, or at the grocery store. As a 42-year-old marketing professional assigned the alias of Sherri explained, "Usually it's all local and I keep up with that every week. I read that as soon as it comes out."

Table 5.2. Top Four Cable News Preferences of Survey Respondents

Rank	Outlet Name	Percentage of Responses
No. 1	CNN	25.3%
No. 2	Fox News	24.5%
No. 3	BBC World News	17.7%
No. 4	MSNBC	13.1%

To that end, a driving factor of local news consumption was proximity, as many respondents expressed that they found local news more applicable to them and their lives because they were living it. Despite this high interest in national and local news, 78.5% of the survey participants indicated the news being reported had little to no importance to their everyday lives. There was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 2.80, SD = 1.00)* and urban *(M = 3.00, SD = 0.83)* participants ($t(235) = -0.61$, $p = 0.54$, *equal variances assumed*). Yet, 89.0% reported they generally believe the news outlets cover the important stories. Again, there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 3.20, SD = 1.00)* and urban *(M = 3.42, SD = 0.90)* participants ($t(235) = -1.40$, $p = 0.16$, *equal variances assumed*).

Still, online avenues also provide rural residents with access to news. This includes social media and websites. In terms of social media, Facebook was the most popular platform among

respondents as 19 of the 25 said they had an account. Facebook was also most popular among survey respondents as 67.5% reported using the platform. YouTube was also popular with 44.3% using it, and Instagram followed closely with 43.1% of participants choosing the photo-sharing application. Twitter was the fourth most popular service with 36.9% of the responses, and 34.1% indicated they were Snapchat users. Additionally, 31.8% of the respondents said they used LinkedIn, and 5.9% indicated they don't use social media at all.

Of the survey participants, 70.1% indicated they look at social media regularly, saying they do so almost hourly or hourly regardless of whether or not they were urban *(M = 3.32, SD = 1.35)* or rural *(M = 3.30, SD = 1.20)* ($t(235) = -0.20$, $p = 0.84$, *equal variances assumed*). For the majority, that entailed looking at Facebook, which 39.7% said was the platform they used the most. Instagram was the second-most used, garnering only 12.7% of the responses, but there was no statistical significance ($\chi^2(11) = 13.70$, $p = 0.25$) between rural and urban residents in terms of preferred social media platform.

However, the majority reported that they only received the news via these pathways if one of their connections shared something. Of course, a few of the individuals who were interviewed said they do follow local news outlets on Facebook, so they end up getting a fair amount of news that way. Several respondents also highlighted Twitter as an important news pathway, especially for headlines. Overall, though, only five respondents indicated social media was their primary news conduit. Interestingly, Helen said she not only gets most of her news via social media, but the primary platform she uses is Snapchat, which makes her the only interviewee who uses that particular service in this fashion.

These comments algin with the survey data. Those individuals reported using social media primarily for entertainment (35.4%). General communication (18.1%), consuming news

and information (14.8%), and building and/or maintaining relationships (13.1%) were also popular reasons for use. Relatedly, 46.0% of survey participants indicated they rarely, if ever, use social media for news and information consumption. Furthermore, only 28.7% said they do so half the time, and only 25.3% reported regularly or often using social media for news and information consumption. In this regard, there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 2.80, SD = 1.22)* and urban *(M = 2.90, SD = 1.10)* participants ($t(235) = -0.49$, $p = 0.62$, *equal variances assumed*) in terms of using social media for news and information consumption.

While on various social media platforms, interviewees said the news they encounter usually leads them to click on links and visit the websites of news outlets. For 12 of the respondents, this meant navigating to local news sites. However, 15 interviewees indicated the links in their social media feeds lead them to national or international outlets. The most popular outlets among the respondents were Fox News, *The Wall Street Journal*, the BBC, NPR, CNN, Reuters, and *Yahoo! News*. A 39-year-old male construction worker assigned the alias of Herman said that in addition to Fox News, he also looks at *Breitbart News*, *The Epoch Times*, and *The Gateway Pundit*, which he referred to as "independent media" outlets. Similarly, a 39-year-old male farmer assigned the alias of Kent said he reads CNN, Fox News, *Newsmax*, and *One America News*, and Helen made clear her news consumption consisted of conservative outlets. "I take in a lot of right-wing media," she said.

Relatedly, the second research question (**RQ2**) asked if the solitary nature of rural life created an environment where selective exposure to partisan media outlets develops powerful echo chambers and filter bubbles. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, the answer seems to be "yes" for the individuals who shared their thoughts. To that end, podcasts,

newsletters, and aggregation applications also serve as important avenues to news and information for many of the individuals interviewed.

Of the 25 respondents, 11 cited podcasts as key platform for news and information consumption. Nine individuals specifically mentioned programming with distinct political alignments. For instance, Monroe highlighted conservative commentator Ben Shapiro's podcast as one of his favorites, and Herman mentioned *The Health Ranger Show*, which is hosted by Mike Adams as a subsidiary of his *NaturalNews* website that has been accused of trafficking in disinformation (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020) and conspiracy theories "like the *InfoWars* of alternative health" (Banks, 2013, para. 3). Other podcast listeners focused on true crime, religious, personal development, and academic-oriented content. For example, a 59-year-old male educator assigned the alias of Chalmers explained he listens to religious podcasts and sermons, along with sports news via ESPN, and Montgomery indicated he listens to the *TED Talks Daily* podcast. Of course, the number of people consuming audio content that doesn't come through the radio is increased to 13 if audiobooks are included. However, the types of audiobooks being listened to was not explored, meaning the content may or may not be informational in nature.

On the other hand, batch disseminations of email newsletters and aggregation applications do provide information. Two individuals — Marvin and Chalmers — specifically mentioned subscribing to email newsletters and receiving news from those sources. Similarly, Maude and Monroe mentioned using the Apple News aggregation application as a way to receive news. Combining those with *Yahoo! News*, which also aggregates news from across the Internet, results in five people using these pathways to consume news. This equates to 28% of the interviewees getting their news via batch disseminations.

As the interviewees pointed out, the podcasts, email newsletters, and aggregation applications the utilize allow them to select the type of content they will receive, which can put them in echo chambers where they encounter content that confirms their biases as it aligns with their previously held beliefs and opinions. The reason these individuals gave for choosing these forms of programming, along with the prevailing uses of radio and social media mentioned previously, was accessibility. These pathways to news can be navigated from anywhere. Several individuals cited using radio and podcasts during their commutes, while driving farming equipment, or while accomplishing other mundane tasks such as household chores or exercising. For example, Kent said, "Well, and that's the other thing about being a farmer and pumping wells is a lot of driving around. I mean, no other way to say it. Checking cows can be a lot of driving around. I've always been a huge radio fan, a huge talk radio fan. I do tons of audio books." Even those who said they do not listen to podcasts indicated they are interested in exploring such an option because such content is becoming more available and specific to certain interests, suggesting they believe podcasts will be become as ubiquitous as radio. After all, as Monroe pointed out, "Podcasts. That's like modern radio, I guess."

Therefore, the first hypothesis (**H1**) predicted that rural residents in Kansas get most of their news via national outlets and social media platforms that focus on opinion-oriented content. The results of this study confirm this. Both the survey responses and the interviews highlighted that a majority of the respondents do receive news from national outlets and social media platforms. Likewise, the radio is a primary avenue for content, which aligns with research from Cramer (2016) who found people she interviewed also "reported that a main source of news is radio" (p. 106). Additionally, 13 of the 25 interviewees consumed news from objectively partisan outlets (Ad Fontes Media, 2023; Jurkowitz et al., 2020) that tend to rely on commentary for

content. This can be attributed to a pervasive lack of trust in the media expressed by the respondents.

Roots of Media Distrust Planted by National Outlets

Out of the 25 individuals interviewed for this study, only five described their trust in the news as more than "half," "average," or "medium," and only two of those people described their trust as "high." Abraham succinctly summed up his views: "I think they're full of shit." A 43-year-old male dairy farmer assigned the alias of Eddie went a step further. He said he had zero trust in the news. "The media is a propaganda arm for their owners, the deep state cabal, George Soros, all of those group of guys, Klaus Schwab, any of those that are connected," he said. Helen agreed: "I don't trust them at all.

The feelings of distrust pervaded the opinions of all respondents, regardless of their political alignment or preferred news outlets. Individuals representing both sides of politics ideologically speaking expressed such sentiments, and some directed their criticism toward outlets they viewed as representing political views that were opposite their own. For example, Murphy, a 46-year-old dairy farmer, explained it this way: "I think of sitting in high school government class and hearing about, this sounds terrible, the German Nazi propaganda machine with the news and everything. And I almost feel like in some minds that's kind of what *Fox News* is in a way." Others described the issue more generally as not being tied to politics. Bart, a 37-year-old male educator, suggested he doesn't feel like he always gets the full story. A 73-year-old male farmer assigned the alias of Quimby agreed, suggesting it is difficult to get clear and reliable information because too much of the information being presented is conflicting. Barney, a 34-year-old male financial professional, viewed the media's focus on being first instead of right as a major factor in cultivating distrust.

For a majority of the respondents, though, the level of trust in the media can be broken down between national and local outlets. Sixteen of the 25 interviewees suggested they trust their local outlets more than national outlets, even if the difference was marginal. In many instances, this stemmed from views that national outlets were more focused on entertainment, political alignments, and ratings as they tried to persuade audiences, while local outlets avoided political partisanship and focus on news that has a more direct impact on the lives of interviewees. This seems to fertilize trust because, as Cletus explained, "If it's not in your backyard, you really don't know. So that's why it's easier to trust your locals because you're in the same community with them." Ned and Sarah expressed similar views.

Likewise, whether survey respondents trust a given news outlet or journalist also depends on whether or not the outlet is national and local in nature. For national outlets and journalists, trust leaned toward "none" as 78.6% ranked their confidence anywhere from average to zero. There was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 3.22, SD = 1.03)* and urban *(M = 3.50, SD = 0.90)* participants ($t(223) = -1.34$, $p = 0.09$, *equal variances assumed*). Locally, though, trust trended in the opposite direction as 77.8% ranked their confidence anywhere from average to high. Still, there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 2.71, SD = 1.00)* and urban *(M = 3.03, SD = 0.90)* participants ($t(223) = -1.76$, $p = 0.08$, *equal variances assumed*). Regardless, 81.9% of the participants disagreed with the idea that the "press is the enemy of the people," and there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 2.40, SD = 1.24)* and urban *(M = 2.42, SD = 1.15)* participants ($t(223) = -0.14$, $p = 0.89$, *equal variances assumed*). Additionally, 50.2% of the respondents indicated journalism is "extremely" important for society, and there was no statistical significance between

rural *(M = 4.30, SD = 0.95)* and urban *(M = 4.10, SD = 1.14)* respondents ($t(223) = 0.83$, $p = 0.41$, *equal variances assumed*).

Even though local news seemed to be more trusted than national news, several interviewees suggested local news could do better. “We all can't be at our local county commission meeting, or the State House in Topeka, or even in D.C. So, there has to be someone there to tell the story,” Murphy said. “And it would be nice if they would just be there unbiased, telling the story of what happened today. But anymore, I think that's a pipe dream.” From the perspective of a 31-year-old female veterinarian assigned the alias of Maude, including more perspectives from local residents would benefit the local news environment. “I love reading the opinion pieces that get submitted to the paper,” she said. “I would like more opinion in a thoughtful manner, and I think when you type something out and submit it to a paper, maybe it’s a little bit more thoughtful because of the time and effort that goes into it.” Sarah also expressed a desire for a localized focus, specifically on high school athletes. She explained it this way: “When I was growing up, the local newspaper covered everything. All the different school events and community events, and it was in the paper. And now there's not much in there. I would always read about games and stuff like that for sports, and you could find out about opponents and things like that. And now I know it's all on technology. There are grandmas and grandpas who don't have access to that stuff. I think they really do miss the newspapers because otherwise they have no idea what happened.”

Highlighting this issue, the survey data also pointed to a need for improvement, particularly in the manner of being present within the local society. The majority of respondents (68.4%) reported rarely or never seeing local journalists or reporters talking to community members, and there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 3.23, SD*

= 1.40) and urban *(M = 3.52, SD = 1.23)* participants ($t(235) = -1.10$, $p = 0.28$, *equal variances assumed*). Similarly, 83.1% of the individuals indicated they see local journalists or reporters covering community events only sometimes, and here was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 3.10, SD = 1.12)* and urban *(M = 3.23, SD = 1.02)* participants ($t(235) = -0.79$, $p = 0.43$, *equal variances assumed*). To improve this, 60.3% of participants said they wished local journalists or reporters would work with the communities they serve to develop story ideas or contribute content in order to provide more news of local importance, and 26.2% were open to such an idea. Also, 45.6% reported they would actively participate if such an opportunity arose, and 35.4% would consider it. For this, there was no statistical significance ($\chi^2(3) = 6.91$, $p = 0.75$) between rural and urban respondents.

Another way local news could improve would be to document and showcase the history of the community. Abraham shared that he enjoys reading about what happened five or 10 or more years ago, which he argued helps the community members see how connected they are. “I think it builds the community,” he said. “I think it makes it stronger.” Similarly, Chalmers suggested he would like to see more uplifting news about the local community. He explained it this way: “I get a lot of enjoyment out of just the human-interest stories of things that people are doing either for other people or things that they're doing out in the community that helps support the community. So those are things that I really enjoy reading about and am sometimes not even aware of that people are doing certain things, and I think that's really neat. And sometimes reading those types of things encourages other people to get involved with things if they may not even be aware that it's a need. Let's say they do a human-interest story on a family in town that really needs this, that or the other because they're in crisis, I think that's really important and things I'd like to know about.” Along those same lines, a 47-year-old female educator assigned

the alias of Doris argued for more inclusive and well-rounded reporting. “I think the more homogenous your community is, the more important it is to highlight the diversity of your community, whatever it is that exists,” she said.

Jasper expressed sadness for the loss of local news, specifically mentioning how his hometown paper got purchased by a chain, losing its individuality and local focus. Clancy, a 37-year-old male manufacturing worker, agreed: “I hate to see these local newspapers die off. I think a lot of people enjoy them. They want to know what's going on locally; however, social media's really taking that apart. Sometimes the tangible piece of paper is . . . It's something to hold onto, and it’s nostalgic.” Quimby seemed to agree, but he reiterated the need for the news to be presented transparently and without bias.

To that end, the second hypothesis (**H2**) predicted that rural residents in Kansas struggle to discern between credible and unreliable news outlets. This hypothesis is supported. Overall, individuals viewed the news as more trustworthy when looked at only through their preferred news outlets. This relates to concepts of reliability. In terms of television viewing, the survey respondents selected BBC World News as the most reliable outlet as it received 29.5% of the responses. CNN followed with 22.4%, and Fox News ranked third in terms of reliability with 19.4% of the responses. Also, MSNBC was viewed as reliable by 9.7%. The least reliable outlet was a four-way-tie among NewsNation, Free Speech TV, Newsy, and One America News Network (OANN) as each received 0.8% of the responses. Based upon this, there was no statistical significance ($\chi^2(13) = 14.67$, $p = 0.33$) between rural and urban respondents. However, it is notable that 7.3% of the rural residents indicated RFD-TV was the most reliable option, while zero urban individuals agreed.

Table 5.3. Survey Respondents' Top Four Most Reliable Cable News Outlets

Rank	Outlet Name	Percentage of Responses
No. 1	BBC World News	29.5%
No. 2	CNN	22.4%
No. 3	Fox News	19.4%
No. 4	MSNBC	9.7%

For Marvin, trustworthy and reliable sources of information can be described as "legitimate media," while several others suggested their levels of trust increased if the outlet was "recognizable" and "reputable." Also, seeing the same story being reported by multiple outlets increased trust for the interviewees. Still, Murphy cautioned that even an individual's preferred or "trusted" source needs to be viewed critically, paying attention to whether the language being used is slanted, biased, or otherwise polarized. However, even recognizing potential biases in the content does not change the minds of some individuals. For example, Helen explained she leans on outlets that align with her beliefs, which are conservative, but that recognition does not change her level of trust in the information she consumes. "I'm aware of it. I know what I take in is biased," she said. "Everyone has a bias."

Despite the lack of trust described by the interviewees, 15 believe the news is largely accurate. According to Sarah, the accuracy comes from the access reporters have: "I think, well, they're just sharing what they see or what they know. Their eyes and ears of places that we don't have, we can't be, or maybe don't want to be." Overall, though, the view on the news being accurate or not broke on lines of local versus national organizations and outlet preferences. Clancy expressed the opinion that the information within news content is accurate but that the outlets present it in a way that attempts to persuade or convince the audience. Moe, a 35-year-old service worker, agreed: "I think, for the most part, the news media is accurate at giving the

information. I think the news should just be told as information. And when you start going away from information, it becomes more inclined to whatever whoever's telling the news wants you to maybe think or hear." Doris echoed such sentiments. She suggested the content of the reporting is accurate, but she has a problem with the presentation of the information, arguing it is often sensationalized, out of context, and lacking verifiable sources. "It's opinion I have a problem with. I love a book with 30 pages of endnotes," she said.

Therefore, the third hypothesis (**H3**) predicted that rural residents in Kansas distrust the news due to a belief that the media outlets are not telling the truth about what is really going on in the world. This hypothesis is supported. The perceived amount of opinion and bias caused the other respondents to believe the news is inaccurate. Though there may be kernels of truth presented in the reports disseminated by these outlets, Jasper said, "They're clearly quite colored with the particular author's viewpoints. I think so much of it is agenda driven now." Bart agreed: "What we are being told and what's going on isn't the same thing." Likewise, Sherri believes the news "is too skewed," and several respondents discussed how they believed the media exaggerates or sensationalizes the news. For example, Patty explained it this way: "They can make a big deal about nothing. It doesn't amount to piddly dink."

For Kent, the concept of accuracy doesn't factor into his trust in the media because the coverage might be the same, but the way it is presented is different. "It's not really a matter of being accurate or inaccurate," he said. "Everybody's cheering for their side to be right. Everything's right versus left instead of right versus wrong." To that end, several interviewees mentioned they do their own research, which often entailed looking at multiple news sources and using Internet searches in an attempt to suss out the truth. Quimby alluded to this as well: "You have to get both sides of the story."

The quest for truth was another commonality among the respondents. “I’m after truth,” Herman explained. Kent agreed. “I’m looking for the truth. It isn’t readily available. No one’s really after the truth. They try to persuade you to see it through a lens,” he said. For some, such as Edna, truth is information that is “fact-based and you can verify it.” However, for others, true news is determined by the source. Ned explained his perspective in this fashion: “If you see it on TV, you have to trust it’s real.” In short, the truth seems to be in the eye of the beholder. This cultivates fertile ground for mis- and disinformation to take root.

Disinformation Taints Media Diets

To that end, 84% of the survey respondents indicated they believe mis- and disinformation are a problem in society, and there was no statistical significance between rural *(M = 4.34, SD = 0.90)* and urban *(M = 4.32, SD = 0.90)* respondents ($t(223) = 0.73$, $p = 0.94$, *equal variances assumed*). Additionally, all interviewees also indicated they believe mis- or disinformation exist. However, not all of them agreed that it was a problem for society. Five of the 25 interviews suggested it either isn’t a problem or isn’t a full-blown problem yet. Both Ned and Kent explained it isn’t a problem because inaccurate information and politically motivated news have always existed. Kent cited the examples of World War II propaganda and the newspaper wars of yellow journalism between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. From her perspective, Sarah believes it is sometimes a problem because of social media, which allow anyone to share anything just because they want to regardless of its accuracy. Helen agreed for identical reasons. Quimby, on the other hand, struck a more optimistic tone. He suggested mis- or disinformation is just starting to become a problem: “I think you're hearing too much one-sided stuff.”

In contrast, the 20 other respondents all agreed that mis- or disinformation is a problem for society. Maude argued that its existence damages communities and social ties, especially when a person pushes back against inaccurate information. She explained it this way: “I think it breaks down trust and it makes trust harder to build from the beginning. If you're always saying like, no, I don't think that's right or I don't agree with that, I think it's harder to build those bonds with individuals. I think some people when you say, yeah, I don't agree, that maybe is a trust-building thing, but I think for the majority of individuals disagreeing prevents trust or impeaches trust.” According to the respondents, a lack of trust can lead to division and polarization. “I think it's largely responsible for our division in this country, which seems to keep getting deeper all the time,” Marvin said. In terms of politics, this was a common refrain from the interviewees. For example, Sherri suggested each political “side” has its own media. “It makes us more heated against each other,” she said. “I think it pits us against each other instead of seeing each other as allies when one side has to be wrong if you're right.” Doris agreed and argued social media is a powerful force driving a wedge between members of society and injecting confusing into the public conversation.

Similarly, many respondents suggested it makes it difficult to know what is true or what can be trusted. Barney pointed out that this causes a snowball effect, leading to multiple issues. One such issue is apathy, and that leads members of society to simply stop paying attention to the news, according to Jasper. Chalmers also expressed the idea of apathy by explaining that he doesn’t do much digging into whether something is accurate when it gets reported, instead relying on his trust level of the outlet doing the reporting. Additionally, Edna pointed out that democratic decision-making suffers if mis- or disinformation flourishes: “If decisions are made on either the local, state, national, or international level based on mis- or disinformation, then

those policies affect the safety and well-being of people. Yeah, it's a problem." Such a sentiment was of key concern to Nelson, a 55-year-old male who works in the manufacturing industry. He expressed the view that mis- or disinformation inhibits an individual's ability to make their own decisions, which stems from the power of media to manipulate and shape people's opinions. Doris also shared such worries and feared it could be catastrophic for society: "Worst case scenario, it's the end of our democracy."

To that end, the third research question (**RQ3**) asked why rural residents in Kansas believe and spread mis- and disinformation they encounter. A primary reason cited by interviewees was politics. Murphy explained it this way: "Politics clouded the judgment of otherwise good people." From Abraham's perspective, mis- or disinformation spreads because "it's too easy to confuse people." Such a statement aligned with the general consensus of the interviewees that social media and national news outlets are leading spreaders of this faulty information. Maude pointed at talk radio as a vocal part of the problem. According to Marvin, outlets like Fox News, *Newsmax*, and *One America News* are prime examples of the issue as well. "That's where I believe disinformation bloomed," he said. Cletus agreed, adding CNN to the list of perpetrators. Kent also laid the blame at the feet of cable news, but he had a different perspective. He explained his views this way: "I think the left has a lot bigger voice through a whole lot more stations, TV personalities or whatever, to put it out there. I mean, talk radio is completely, I mean, conservatives dominate talk radio, English, Spanish, whatever. But, TV, I mean, MSNBC, NBC, ABC, CBS, all that legacy media, they all lean left and lean left hard, which is why they all hate Fox News so much. It's the one that's not."

As such, the fourth research question (**RQ4**) asked how rural residents in Kansas are most likely to encounter and further spread mis- and disinformation. The interviewees pointed to

television as a primary purveyor of this content, and the survey data aligned with that finding. In fact, television was deemed to have a lot of mis- or disinformation as 85.8% of the survey participants indicated the medium has an "average" to "an extreme amount" of this type of content, and there was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 2.44, SD = 1.00)* and urban *(M = 2.16, SD = 0.90)* participants ($t(223) = 1.50$, $p = 0.13$, *equal variances assumed*).

Of the major cable networks, Fox News was viewed to be the outlet that spreads the most mis- or disinformation as 38.7% of the survey respondents chose it. CNN came in second with 22.2%, and MSNBC checked in with 9.8%. There was no statistical significance ($\chi^2(12) = 14.14$, $p = 0.29$) between rural and urban respondents. On the flip side, BBC World News was reported to spread the least amount of mis- or disinformation with 38.7% of the responses. Despite the results of what outlets spread mis- or disinformation, CNN and Fox News were the second and third choices for also spreading the least amount of mis- and disinformation with 16.4% and 12.0% respectively. Again, there was no statistical significance ($\chi^2(14) = 15.92$, $p = 0.32$) between rural and urban respondents.

Outside of television, respondents cited social media often when discussing how mis- or disinformation spreads. Several of them pointed out that because anyone can post, the content is often more inflammatory and one-sided. "The negativity can really suck you in," Doris said. This leaves a void of honest and reputable sources of information, according to Moe. "Opinions seem to be overpowering what the real news is," he said. The survey data aligns with as 46.2% of respondents indicated they believe "an extreme amount" of mis- or disinformation is present on social media. An additional 47.1% reported they believe the amount is "average" or higher.

There was no statistical significance between the responses of rural *(M = 4.11, SD = 1.00)* and urban *(M = 4.50, SD = 0.90)* participants ($t(235) = -1.85$, $p = 0.07$, *equal variances assumed*).

From Montgomery's perspective, this results in a domino effect that perpetuates mis- or disinformation and causes more of it to spread. "I think that's sad because I think people just see that information right away and they believe it. And it's sad. Maybe it shows the uneducatedness of the United States of America. Or the dumbification." What's more, this was not a unique view. The sentiment of education levels being related to believing and spreading mis- or disinformation came up with a few different respondents.

Maude suggested less educated, lower socioeconomic individuals, who are typically white males, are some of the worst offenders. Marvin and Murphy agreed and suggested religious beliefs can play a role, which Montgomery agreed with. Doris shared parallel views: "I think it's White Christian nationalists. The White conservative men. But I do think both sides are guilty. I absolutely do. Extremists on both sides want to get their headlines and all that too. So it's certainly not just White Christian nationalists that are fanning the flames, but I feel like it's more prominent coming from them." Similarly, several interviewees argued rural, small-town citizens spread mis- or disinformation more than their urban or suburban counterparts due to the previously highlighted education and socioeconomic concerns, as well as a narrower worldview stemming from less exposure to a diversity of thoughts and opinions.

Additionally, perceptions of money and power influenced respondents' views of how mis- or disinformation spreads. For example, Nelson explained that those with the most wealth and influence get to dictate what is reported, whether it is accurate or not. Herman, as well as several others, related this idea of money and power to ratings, which they acknowledged news outlets needed to make money and stay in business. Bart took this a step further. He suggested

news outlets twist facts to make stories "juicier" and more interesting, which increases audience attention and results in more profitability. As Sherri argued, "They know who their viewers are, and they know what sells and they know what gets them to come back. And I feel like some of it is reported in that way for that purpose." This relates to the views of radio and printed media that were shared by the survey participants.

In terms of radio, most survey takers (47.6%) reported believing only an "average" amount of mis- or disinformation was going out on the airwaves, but 34.3% indicated radio carried little to no mis- or disinformation. In this case, the difference between the responses of rural and urban Kansas residents is statistically significant, though, because the results of a t-test found that ($t(223) = -2.60$, $p = 0.01$, *equal variances assumed*) rural respondents believe there is more mis- or disinformation on the radio *(M = 2.81, SD = 0.87)* than their urban counterparts *(M = 3.30, SD = 1.03)*.

Additionally, survey respondents reported printed news products such as newspapers and magazines as having the least amount of mis- or disinformation as 82.6% indicated they believed those products contain an average amount of mis- or disinformation or less. Again, the difference between the responses of rural and urban Kansas residents is statistically significant because the results of a t-test found that ($t(223) = -2.00$, $p = 0.05$, *equal variances assumed*) rural respondents believe there is more mis- or disinformation in these printed products *(M = 2.73, SD = 1.00)* than their urban counterparts *(M = 3.10, SD = 1.00)*.

To that end, the fourth hypothesis (**H4**) predicated that rural residents in Kansas do not use community media as a primary source of news in their daily lives. This hypothesis is supported. In discussing mis- and disinformation, local news outlets rarely came up. The focus remained entirely on national media organizations. This indicates the primary news sources of

the respondents were not community-based. Even if this study highlights a desire for local news, national sources are the dominant players in the media ecosystems of these individuals. In this way, the national news outlets are planting seeds of dissent that will lead to a crop of audience members who can be harvested for profit. All that is needed, then, is to cultivate the existing fertile soil that consists of religion and social capital found in politically favorable fields.

Religion Fertilizes Political Beliefs and Community Connections

Only one person interviewed indicated they had no religious affiliation. The remaining 24 claimed Christianity as their chosen religious belief structure, making this particular belief system the choice of 96% of the participating people. This aligns with survey data. For the majority, religion was reported to be highly impactful as 54.4% indicated it was more than "average" in terms of importance. Importantly, the difference between the responses of rural and urban Kansas residents is statistically significant because the results of a t-test found that ($t(215) = 2.02$, $p = 0.05$, *equal variances assumed*) rural respondents see religion as important more *($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.50$)* than their urban counterparts *($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.61$)*.

As such, religion appears to be an important aspect of life for rural Kansans. This speaks to what Wuthnow (2012) highlighted as "the social role of churches" in rural life (p. 195). Those interviewed for this study often cited their religious affiliations as key to numerous aspects of their lives. For example, Chalmers said, "I believe my religious views shape everything I think about." Also, nearly every individual who defined themselves as either conservative or Republican suggested their political alignments stemmed from their religious beliefs. This was especially true when it came to social issues such as abortion, immigration, gun control, parental rights, and marriage equality, among others. Using abortion as an example, Herman argued that a person cannot call themselves a Christian and be OK with abortion. "There's always a way for

God to help, whether adoption or whatever the case may be. There's plenty of ways to help," he said. In contrast to such sentiments, 84.4% of the survey respondents indicated their religious beliefs only have some impact on their political views, and there was no statistical significance between rural *(M = 2.81, SD = 1.41)* and urban *(M = 3.10, SD = 1.50)* respondents ($t(215) = -1.04$, $p = 0.30$, *equal variances assumed*) in this case.

How any of these individuals came to align with a religious belief such as Christianity appeared to be consistent across the board. Everyone said they were raised in Christian households, and many shared they had been baptized in their churches, especially if they specifically aligned with Catholic or Lutheran denominations. For some of them, even if they grew up with religion being part of their lives, their affiliation with Christianity was solidified by personal examination. For example, Helen said, "The more that I explored it myself in high school and college, the more that I agree with the values of caring about people and loving people." Similarly, Montgomery discussed how he has studied several different religions, and though he considers himself a Christian, he tries to learn from all belief systems because each has value to society. He explained it this way: "I think that I try to take the strengths from each one of those religions. I think that it's something that we've lost in America, and I don't mean that we have to have religion. I think we have to have some type of identity where people understand that service, some type of giving back are so important."

However, not all the individuals professed to be devoted Christians for their entire lives. For example, Abraham said, "Am I a believer? Yes. I'm a believer in Christ and God, but I do not attend any formal church. I've never been sewn to any one religion." Nelson shared a similar sentiment. After growing up Catholic, he explained he fell away from the church a bit, but he maintained his faith. For him, it is a focus on morality. "It comes down to the moral things of

right or wrong," he said. Bart also expressed the idea that being a good person was his focus rather than a particular religion. "I think all religions have that," he said.

Regardless of their devotion to a given belief structure or simply a desire to be a good human, all but three of the individuals represented in this study are involved in their community in ways not related to their professions, equating to 88% of the people being active in their communities. Seven people related their involvement to their religion associations and participation within their chosen churches. Such activities ranged included, but were not limited to, participating in charitable drives, helping with afterschool programs, volunteering at vacation bible school, and supporting local chapters of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Also, 10 individuals discussed being involved through agriculture-related organizations such as 4-H, county fair boards, cattleman associations, the Farm Bureau Federation trade association, state and national crop and dairy boards, farm credit unions, local water boards, and county extension offices, to name a few. Being involved with local schools and military organizations also came up often, along with helping the needy with a given community.

To that end, the fifth research question (**RQ5**) asked how rural residents in Kansas create relationships with their neighbors and communities. A majority of people suggested being involved locally was important to accomplishing such relationships. Patty explained it this way: "I think that it pulls your community together, makes it a tighter-knit community, and I think it's important." For Eddie, being active locally means being heard. "I've always found grassroots involvement and involvement in the community, that's always been important, and even then, in organizations as far as having a voice, you can't argue or complain if you're not willing to take part and let your voice be heard," he said. Maude echoed such sentiments by suggesting that a larger impact can be made at the local level, and Barney argued helping one's community is

important to help the area grow and thrive, which builds trust within the community as individuals become acquainted by working together on community issues.

This positions trust as a fruitful and connective aspect of community life. Yet the survey data suggests concerns for the rot of distrust harming such relationships. According to the responses, 20.3% of the participants indicated they trust their neighbors an average amount. However, 58.5% said they trust their neighbors more than average and "a lot." In this instance, though, the difference between the responses of rural and urban Kansas residents is statistically significant because the results of a t-test found that ($t(215) = -2.33$, $p = 0.02$, *equal variances assumed*) rural respondents trust their neighbors more *(M = 2.32, SD = 1.16)* than their urban counterparts *(M = 2.84, SD = 1.10)*.

The fifth hypothesis (**H5**) predicted that rural residents in Kansas maintain strong religious beliefs and connect to their communities by being involved in community organizations and causes. This hypothesis is supported. The high number of individuals who both express religious beliefs and place a high value on being involved in their local communities paints the picture that these two concepts go hand-in-hand. Cletus suggested it comes down to "Midwest values" that bind people together. This indicates bonding social capital, which can foster hostility toward out-groups due to the insular nature of the tight-knit bonds in this form of social capital (e.g., Frank et al., 2004; Jin & Kim, 2014; Putnam, 2001; Yang & Hanasono, 2021). Prior research supports this (Wuthnow, 2019) and focuses on shared "work ethic or values" (Cramer, 2016, p. 165). Furthermore, as many individuals explained, these religious beliefs and value of community involvement led them to their political beliefs. Combined with media consumption, this sets the stage for political activity.

Partisanship Plows Rows for Political Engagement

In line with the fact that so many of the individuals interviewed for this project expressed alignment with a particular political party, only four of the 25 people indicated they don't vote at all or don't vote regularly. Abraham indicated he doesn't vote because he believes politicians don't vote for their constituents, making voting pointless. "It just doesn't matter," he said. "I just have never felt like my vote really makes a difference where I live." Sarah and Moe both shared that they don't vote on a regular basis, primarily because they feel uninformed despite high levels of news consumption.

Though Monroe also reported that he doesn't vote regularly, he suggested his reason for not voting was due to having recently moved. However, when he does vote, he said he takes a unique approach. "I like to look up all the judges that you are voting to retain or not to retain. Because I feel like a lot happens locally based on whether or not judges are prosecuting certain things or the positions that they take on certain things," he said.

As for the remaining 21 interviewees, they stated they vote regularly and in nearly every election. Three specifically expressed a focus on local and state politics. The prevailing sentiment was that local politics was where people felt they could have a larger impact. Murphy explained it this way: "It's your local politics. It affects you every day, all day. And the national, I mean, what are you going to do? I mean, I vote, but at the end of the day what are you going to do about a decision that's going on in DC?" Also, people expressed the feeling that voting necessary as part of democracy. For example, Ned said, "I think it's important just because of duty as a citizen of the United States, regardless of whether your county has 2,000 or 200." To complete their duty, nine individuals reported they vote the party line or straight ticket each time they enter the polls.

This aligns with the survey data as 72.4% of the respondents reported voting in every election, both national and local ($\chi^2(6) = 7.94$, $p = 0.24$). For example, in the 2012 presidential election, 30.9% voted for the Democratic Party ticket, and 27.6% said they voted for the Republican Party ($\chi^2(4) = 2.81$, $p = 0.59$). In 2016, though, 38.2% voted Republican, while 28.1% voted Democratic ($\chi^2(6) = 9.45$, $p = 0.15$). Then, in 2020, more individuals voted for the Democratic Party (41.5%) than the Republican Party (38.7%) ($\chi^2(4) = 6.49$, $p = 0.17$). On average, only 23.8% indicated they did not vote in any of the elections. As far as these forms of engagement go, there was no statistical significance between the political actions of rural and urban respondents.

Relatedly, during the summer of 2022 Kansans were faced with a state constitutional amendment vote that sought to overturn the Kansas Supreme Court's ruling that abortion was legal (Gowen, 2022; Smith, 2022; Smith, 2021). The amendment was defeated (Kusisto & Barrett, 2022; Ollstein, 2022; Smith & Glueck, 2022; Smith & Becker, 2022), and 49.3% of the survey respondents reported they voted against it, which contributed to the amendment not passing. Of course, 18.4% said they did not vote. To that point, how rural and urban participants voted was statistically significant according to a Chi-Square Test ($\chi^2(2) = 11.68$, $p = 0.003$). This is because 21.5% of the rural respondents did not vote in this instance, while all urban respondents did. Also, 74.2% of the urban individuals voted "no," and 45.2% of the rural individuals voted "no." When it came to voting "yes," the percentages were closer as rural residents in this sample outweighed urban 33.3% to 25.8%.

Despite frequently voting, a majority of the individuals expressed distrust of politicians. In fact, 98.2% of the survey respondents indicated they have little to no trust in politicians, and there was no statistical significance between rural *(M = 2.10, SD = 0.80)* and urban *(M = 2.13,*

SD = 0.81) respondents ($t(215) = -0.40$, $p = 0.70$, *equal variances assumed*). Additionally, only a few interviews suggested they trust politicians in general, though some did stipulate that they trust local politicians more. “I actually know those people,” Sherri said. However, the majority of interviewees discussed how they believed politicians only looked out for their own interests instead of the people they are representing. “I have much more respect for the populace than I think that many politicians have,” Jasper explained.

Moe agreed and suggested politicians were too focused on transactive relationships: “They’re only in it for people as long as the people give them something in return.” Barney took a more critical approach. “I feel like most of the time they talk out of both sides of their mouths. They want to appease their audience, and that’s it,” he said. Monroe summed up his views succinctly: “They all lie.” Ned agreed, saying, “I don’t think they’re going to follow through. I think they’re just telling us what we want to hear so they get elected.” Helen also viewed politicians in a similar way. “I just hate politicians. I just think there’s too much secrecy,” she said. “Politics in general has just become about putting on a face and just putting on your best face. Well, that's not real. And social media and online, everything anymore has made that possible because you can put whatever you want online without people knowing what actually is going on.”

Doris suggested the way the system is set up creates an environment where trust can’t be built because “with no term limits, it’s self-preservation for them.” Political agendas also seemed to erode trust. Chalmers explained it this way: “I don't know that it's smart to put complete trust in any politician just because I think everybody has their own agenda so to speak. And I believe that in the political world there's a lot of pressures and things that people are trying to do for their

own purposes. And no human is pure enough to say that everything that they do has to do with in the best interest of other people."

Eddie and Herman argued for a reset of the political system to solve the trust problem. "They're freaking crooks. The best thing we could do as a country is wipe out the whole damn system. Get rid of the IRS, get rid of it all and start from scratch," Herman said. "So, I don't trust them as a far as I can throw them. I think we need to gut the whole system and start from scratch. And I mean both sides of the spectrum, not just one, and not the other. Tank them all, start from scratch. We don't need government governing us. They work for us." Eddie echoed such views. "I think we need a blank slate, a clean slate. I think we need term limits and anybody who's been there for very long has been corrupted by the system and they're no good," he said.

However, 73.8% of the survey respondents described their trust in the government as average to "extreme." Again, there was no statistical significance ($t(215) = -0.16$, $p = 0.88$, *equal variances assumed*) between rural *(M = 2.94, SD = 1.10)* and urban *(M = 2.30, SD = 1.14)* respondents. Similarly, 83% indicated they largely were satisfied with democracy as a method of self-governance, and having roots in a rural *(M = 3.61, SD = 1.10)* or an urban *(M = 3.42, SD = 1.03)* area of Kansas presented no statistical significance difference in how the participants responded ($t(215) = 0.90$, $p = 0.40$, *equal variances assumed*).

To that end, the sixth research question (**RQ6**) asked how mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories spread by partisan sources create political division and polarization in rural Kansas. The ways such content could trickle down through the populace came down to social media and conversation, according to the interviewees. Of the 25, only four individuals indicated they share news and information via social media on a regular basis. Eddie, who reported he shares content via social media all the time, argued he has to do so because "I feel some sort of

obligation to share a balance of what is out there." On the other hand, nearly everyone interviewed reported they share information in conversation, whether with family and friends or other people they encounter throughout their days.

Regardless of whether they share via social media or personal conversation, most people explained they are cautious about doing so because of existing political divisions and polarization within society. Several individuals shared concerns about being attacked for their views on various issues, alluding to the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). For example, Doris said, "I recognize that among our social group, the small social group that it is. I am an outlier politically, and it's just easier to not talk about it." Such a statement relates to the Spiral of Silence theory. This suggests that people don't speak up if they believe their views go against the dominant opinions on a given subject, especially if it is a controversial or value-laden subject, and the ensuing silence stems from a fear of being ostracized, isolated, or other negative consequences (Alkazemi, 2019; Kolotouchkina et al., 2021; Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Similarly, the majority of the individuals reported they will not correct people when they share incorrect information, even when such content could be classified as mis- or disinformation. Monroe explained his hesitancy this way: "I mean, nobody has ever felt better after getting into a heated Facebook debate. Nobody ever shut their laptop and were like, 'Yes. That was really helpful.' Usually, you're still fuming, or, usually, you haven't changed any minds." Even so, nearly all respondents believed the news and information they consume shapes their opinions and beliefs. Marvin suggested such an impact was most evident in other people. However, Jasper admitted his content consumption has a more personal affect. He explained it this way: "I do see I make changes in where I'm at politically or philosophically because of

outside sources of information." Quimby agreed. "Well, if you consume that stuff, if you listen, it could affect the way you'd vote for, well, anything."

For some, the impacts news and information consumption have on individuals were viewed as problematic. Abraham argued the amount of news and information available "desensitizes people and makes for everything being just a little more acceptable." Alternatively, others believed the impact as positive. For example, Edna suggested that consuming news and information gives people a wider perspective and allows them to see the bigger picture. Chalmers agreed. "It keeps me cognizant of the things that are going on around the world. And I think that can affect how you think about your own faith and maybe what's going on with certain things in the world," he said.

Such impacts can be amplified when conspiracy theories are added to the mix. Seven individuals claimed to believe, or at least be open to, what others might deem to be conspiracy theories. From Edna's perspective, individuals believe conspiracies due to fear of the unknown. She explained it this way: "Anxiety was a big one on the list. People want a sense of certainty and having some knowledge that everything's explainable, and that there's a single source for all this powerlessness that we feel that makes us anxious."

This seemed to be the reason Patty didn't believe. "I don't want to deal with it," she said. "It gives me anxiety." However, Patty did indicate she believed that schools were allowing students to identify as cats and were providing litterboxes for them. Outside of that, a few individuals said they find conspiracy theories entertaining, and others indicated they could be convinced of their veracity if they were presented with credible evidence. Still, skepticism remained the primary stance on the subject. "If it doesn't sound rights, it's probably not right,"

Sherri said. For some, their disbelief in such theories stemmed from simply not caring. As Helen explained, “I don’t know. I’m never going to know. I don’t care.”

In line with these responses, a series of six survey questions presented various conspiracy theories respondents as a way to gauge levels of belief in these types of statements. The majority of the survey participants reported not believing them. Only one conspiracy theory presented received more “neutral” responses, and that one read as follows: “Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in President John F. Kennedy’s assassination.” Of the respondents, 33.8% reported they are unsure about what occurred, yet there was no statistical significance between rural *(M = 3.00, SD = 1.24)* and urban *(M = 3.00, SD = 1.20)* respondents ($t(223) = -0.07$, $p = 0.95$, *equal variances assumed*).

For his part, Jasper explained that he believes some of conspiracy theories because of their accuracy. “Some of those conspiracy theories have proven to be true, which I find pretty scary.” Eddie agreed and discussed theories concerning child sex trafficking and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For his part, Kent also suggested he believed some conspiracy theories and echoed the idea that some of them are true. He specifically discussed the stories of Ghislaine Maxwell, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the World Economic Forum and Klaus Schwab, George Soros, and the COVID-19 pandemic, among others.

COVID-19 came up frequently among the interviewees. Kent explained his suspicions about the pandemic like this: “Are we really supposed to believe that COVID come out of a guy eating a bat soup that wasn't cooked right? Or out of a big virology institute that does this sort of thing, that had employees that worked there, that said it came out of this lab, and then a week later these employees are gone and nobody knows what happened to them? I mean, those are all facts. That's not a theory or anything conspiracy.” Similarly, Eddie described the pandemic as a

key component of his views. “This COVID and everything else, that truly sent me down a path of questioning everything. I question everything, everything that we have thought was, whether it be history or whatever. I don't know what's coming exactly. That's why I like to listen to some of these things, is because it's like, well, if I see some indicators of some things happening, I'm not going to be completely caught off guard. Maybe that means that I'll have some silver stored up or whatever. I've got to be able to protect my family, provide for them,” he said. “I'm not worried about food because we have freezers full of beef and a tank full of milk. I'm not a doomsday prepper, but, at the same time, you can still look at what's going on in the world and take small steps to be prepared. We saw what happened with the toilet paper shortage. Well, I mean, it'd only take one week of nobody having food in grocery stores before people start coming out of the big cities to the country looking for food. It's like, I hope I never have to witness that, but it's not far from reality. It doesn't take much for something to happen.”

For Doris, COVID-19 lead to her “break up” with Facebook. She said she permanently logged off the platform when the discourse surrounding the pandemic reached a point where she couldn’t stand to subject herself to it any longer. Likewise, Sherri explained she stopped watching the nightly news because of the depressing nature of the coverage, which at the time focused heavily on COVID-19. Maude also shared a similar experience. She said she got into more heated discussion on social media because of the pandemic, causing her to scale back how much she used the platforms.

In the case of Murphy, though, COVID-19 and people’s reactions to it resulted in a crisis of faith. “I'm Catholic, a very devout Catholic, and again, really had my, I guess, faith shaken by how our local diocese handled or did not handle the pandemic,” he said. “Our response was totally different than others, and I think a lot of the way ours was is because of the bishop that's

in charge of our diocese. Even prior to the pandemic, he was an anti-vax and anti-science. I also feel that because when we shut down the state, and rightfully so, and inside church attendance wasn't allowed, I think it was the lack of tithing that the church started getting nervous. That's why they wanted to open everything back up just because, well, they want the money, which is sad. And, we had one local priest who is actually from my home church, and he'd been on this big 'Democrats are ruining our country and they're turning us into the communists' kick, and when the pandemic hit and Governor Kelly took the steps that she did to keep us all safe, that just gave him a louder platform to speak from. It just was like a snowball rolling down the hill at that point." As his wife worked in the medical field and saw the pandemic as a serious concern, Murphy found it disheartening that his faith community, as well as that of his friends and neighbors, refused to take COVID-19 seriously and listen to science. He explained it this way: "I guess that was the biggest disappointment for me being in the agriculture profession was we as an ag community have been trying to tell our urban neighbors, 'Your food is safe. We eat the same food you guys do. We're not harming the earth. We're not doing anything to poison you or the food supply or damage the environment.' And then here comes the pandemic, and what's the first thing some in the ag community start doing? Popping horse pills to prevent COVID."

COVID-19 also came up in terms of being an indicator of political beliefs. A few interviewees mentioned that masks were used to determine where a person stood on the political spectrum. For example, Kent said, "This issue turned into left versus right. If I see somebody walking in a mask, I'll just almost bet that that person's going to pretty much vote Democrat." From Nelson's perspective, this kind of division causes communities to fracture, and such fissures are widening, he said, because now people are discouraged from congregating together, whether at work in the breakroom or elsewhere.

Figure 5.1. "Trump 2024" Roadside Sign (Source: Todd R. Vogts)

This photo provides an example of political messaging that can often be seen along the highways and byways in rural Kansas. This sign was photographed on April 2, 2023, at the Ellsworth, Kansas, exit on Interstate 70.

Therefore, the sixth hypothesis (**H6**) predicted that rural residents in Kansas engage in political actions and discussions on a regular basis, generally adhering to conservative political ideology. This hypothesis is supported. The interviewees described sharing and discussing news and politics on a regular basis. These discussions are often framed within conservative political ideologies. Also, political action in the form of voting is high, and those individuals hold their political views tightly. The majority of the individuals indicated their political activity is confined to voting or serving on the boards of community and industry-related boards. However, a minority of respondents did say they put political signs in their yards or have run for public

office, and one individual even held public office — Quimby reported he was a former county commissioner. Likewise, survey respondents indicated they have not run for an elected office (91.2%) ($\chi^2(12) = 14.14$, $p = 0.29$) or ever held an elected office (89.4%) ($\chi^2(1) = 0.20$, $p = 0.65$).

Leaving the Field

The harvest of data points from this study was bountiful. Several key insights can be drawn from the survey responses and the discussions that were had with the individuals who volunteered to be interviewed. Though the results cannot be viewed as representative of rural Kansans, they do provide a useful and nuanced snapshot of how rural residents consume and use the news, which can serve as a connective tissue among rural community members (e.g., Cramer, 2016). What these results mean will be thrashed in the following chapter. During this process, more understanding will be unearthed regarding the implications of this population's level of trust in the media and the available avenues for dis- and misinformation to spread. Such insights are important as part of the investigation seeks to gain a deeper grasp on how mis- and disinformation cultivate political division and polarization.

Chapter 6 - Evaluating the Yield by Discussing the Results

Just as agriculture reshapes the land, the media is shaping the opinions and beliefs of rural Kansans. That means their realities are being constructed through the social interactions they have with each other and the media messages they consume. This is the essence of social constructionism (e.g., Ackermann, 2001; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015; Pass, 2004), which was the primary lens through which this research investigated how pathways of news provide fertile ground for mis- and disinformation to spread in rural America. As the results indicated, most of the media being consumed by rural Kansans is biased and partisan. This is a problem. It allows mis- and disinformation to seep into the public discourse with little resistance. That damages social capital, or the web of mutual trust and cooperation needed for a democratic society to succeed (Gastil & Keith, 2005; Putnam, 2001), and creates more polarization and division among individuals.

This occurs due to bonding social capital, which cultivates homogenous social groups that are resistant to outside beliefs and opinions (Arachchi & Managi, 2021; Heath & Waymer, 2014; Heath & Lowrey, 2021). Through such groups, mis- or disinformation can spread more easily if it aligns with the beliefs of the members (Bringula et al., 2022; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019; White, 2022). This is problematic. The further spread of mis- and disinformation can occur thanks to the influence media content has on society. After all, as Zhang and Seltzer (2010) argued, “media foster cynicism or distrust on the part of media consumers and thus alienate them from political or civic activities” (p. 157), and the information put forth by the available media messages infiltrate society, in part, via the web of connections created by social capital (Putnam, 2001).

As Marvin said, “Misinformation is going to further split our country.” Without taking steps to stem the flow, such a prediction undoubtedly will come true. However, effectively combatting dis- or misinformation may not be easy. Considering the microcosm of rural Kansans and their news consumption habits, several hurdles to combating faulty and inaccurate information become evident. Respondents in this study indicated they consume news at high rates. Most of the interviewees said they read, watch, or listen to the news nearly constantly, and more than half of the survey respondents indicated they do so at least daily. However, the pathways they use seem problematic. A large portion relies on partisan and biased news outlets to become informed about what is going on in the country and the world. As such, dis- and misinformation taints their media diets, which causes distrust to grow.

The tendency to consume partisan and biased news as the default can be attributed to selective exposure. This concept explains that people to prefer information and sources that align with their previously held beliefs and opinions, and, consequently, people avoid content that runs counter to those views (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019; Weaver, 2017). Those beliefs and opinions are further developed and embedded into the minds of people thanks to a process of cultivation, which suggests perceptions of reality are shaped and attitudes altered because of media exposure (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1986; Good, 2009; Harmon et al., 2019; Mosharafa, 2015). Such impacts are amplified by heavy and long-term exposure (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2016; Morgan et al., 2015; Weiss, 2020).

Some might believe this doesn’t affect them. In fact, Abraham claimed as much. However, nearly all interviewees admitted the news they consume impacts their views on society in some fashion. For example, Jasper, who explained he believes abortion is morally and biblically wrong, said his perspective has changed slightly to the point where now he is more

comfortable with allowing abortions up to 15 weeks of pregnancy if such an option has to be pursued. Previously, he thought four weeks was the maximum window during which the procedure should be allowed. He attributed this change in views to some of the news he consumed. Also, Sherri described the impact news consumption has on her by explaining that she had to stop watching the news each night because it was impacting her mental health. One reason for this could be the type of content she and others are focusing on.

Across the board, political news ranked high on the list of what people indicated they consume, and most of that comes from national sources via social media and news websites, television, and radio. However, those mediums are rife with mis- and disinformation. Because of the easy access and ability for anyone to create content, study participants placed a lot of blame on social media for the spread of mis- and disinformation. Since nearly everyone uses such platforms at least some of the time, it should come as no surprise that this contributes to political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Vincent & Gismondi, 2021).

Notably, though, nearly half of this study's survey respondents reported not using social media for news and information consumption, which countered the consensus of the interviewees who often used social media for news and information consumption. Regardless, as Collins et al. (2021) pointed out, the nature of social media allows messages to "rapidly spread" (p. 247), and if those messages are inaccurate or false, they can cause "enormous damage to our society and [. . .] democracy as well" (p. 248). The worst part is that verifying social media messages can be tough to do. As Xiao (2021) suggested, "Because of this challenge to interpret and evaluate a social media message, social media users are found to be persuaded by views that have no factual basis" (p. 213).

Even though Ned said that seeing something on television made it true, that is not necessarily the case. Television can be manipulative and also leverage persuasion to push an agenda. Benkler et al. (2018) referred to this as the "propaganda feedback loop," which positions the media, political actors, and the public "in a self-reinforcing feedback loop that disciplines those who try to step off of it with lower attention or votes, and gradually over time increases the costs to everyone of introducing news that is not identity confirming, or challenges the partisan narratives and frames" (p. 79). Additionally, technology has made it easier for visual content to be manufactured (Thomson et al., 2022). Now, people cannot simply trust what they see.

Even so, "television is identified as the most trusted source of accurate political information for adults in the United States" (Yanich, 2020, p. 23). Arguably, this can be attributed, in part, to the fact that views feel gratified by the content, which relates to Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G). According to McQuail et al. (1972), people use media for one of four reasons: Diversion, which includes an escape from routine or problems and serves as an emotional release; Personal Relationships, which considers the media as a substitute for companionship as well as a social utility; Personal Identity, which looks at self-reference, reality exploration and a reinforcement of values; and Surveillance, which entails information seeking. Considering that, U&G focuses on individual differences that drive media use behaviors by exploring how and why people choose the content and platforms they do (Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006; McQuail, 1984; Weiyan, 2015).

Similarly, U&G helps explain the popularity of radio (Laor, 2022; Lazarsfeld, 1940; Ullah, 2018) and podcasts (Berry, 2015; Perks & Turner, 2019; Perks et al., 2019). Podcasts were mentioned with some frequency in the interviews for this study. One reason was because everyone can find a podcast about something they are interested in or passionate about, and they

can listen from anywhere at any time. The same goes for terrestrial radio. There's a station out there for everyone. All it takes is a twist of the dial, point to the gratification of convenience.

In rural Kansas, radio provides a key pathway to news and information because individuals can listen while they work, whether that involves driving or operating farming machinery or accomplishing other tasks. Like its audio descendant podcasts, radio is a passive activity. In many ways, though, radio's impact on public discourse is more sinister than social media or television. Mis- and disinformation spread without consequence because it is fleeting. As Phil Boyce, a conservative talk radio veteran and a program director for Salem Communications, said during a special podcast series called "The Divided Dial" that was produced by *On the Media*, "It's almost better to say it on the air than to post it in a Tweet because you post it in a Tweet, it's out there for the end of time. You say it on the air, maybe they didn't hear it" (as cited in Thornton, 2022a).

Additionally, radio lives and dies on opinion-based programming. As Hemmer (2016) highlighted, talk radio has been leveraged as a political platform since the 1930s. These early political pundits laid the groundwork for the modern-day commentators. Then, in the 1980s, highly divisive and emotionally charged content started to take hold by hosts who came to be known as "shock jocks" (Thornton, 2022b). These gurus of gab leveraged passion, regardless of whether or not it was in support or opposition of the points they were making, and it worked. The result was an enduring focus on outrage, which fires up and exploits the emotions of individuals with certain political beliefs to maintain viewership and increase profitability (Shrader, 2013; Young, 2021).

With a captive audience of farmers stuck in combines slowly rolling through the harvest fields and ranchers sitting in pickup trucks bouncing through pastures in order to check their

cattle, the impacts of this content can be significant. Political beliefs become ingrained, and the indignant shouting coming from the speakers starts to feel normal and right. Intolerance for opposing views becomes deep-seated, which alters how people interact with each other. Polarization and division take root and grow.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that some of this study's respondents expressed a feeling of helplessness in terms of the news. Both Sarah and Patty didn't see how worrying about the news could matter because they couldn't do anything to change what was occurring. Sarah did say she prays about those issues, though, which speaks to the deeply held religious beliefs found in rural Kansas. Similarly, Bart suggested what he consumes stays in his mind, and that would undoubtedly affect his thought processes. Ned agreed, and he also brought up that where he lives plays a role in how the news impacts him. "You're not engaged down here in the middle of the country," he said. "Yeah. It affects us, or just our overall thought process. But it doesn't change how I carry on."

No matter the rationalization, these impacts stem from the type of news these individuals consume. As the survey results and interviewees revealed, this consists of a fair amount of biased and partisan media outlets. A few individuals even pointed this out. They discussed how the news they trust and distrust are guided by their political beliefs. As Herman said, "People want to hear what makes them feel warm and fuzzy." This speaks directly to the root of this study. It highlights how and why mis- and disinformation is believed and spread in rural Kansas. It is about selective exposure and confirmation bias (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2021; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019).

Every person interviewed shared certain news outlets they trusted more than others, and the survey specifically asked respondents to choose their preferences. "Rather than not trusting

any media, [. . .] the public indicates that it trusts only some media and not others" (Yanich, 2020, p. 23). For many, it was the difference between local and national. However, a majority of the individuals also said they trusted, at least to some degree, specific national news organizations. In nearly every instance, these outlets are known to have a political bias (Ad Fontes Media, 2023; Jurkowitz et al., 2020). Therefore, if those are considered to be trusted news outlets by the rural residents, they will continue to consume the content those organizations produce. The result is the construction of an echo chamber where individuals are only being exposed to messages that agree with their pre-existing beliefs and opinions. To borrow from Barney, this creates a snowball effect. Political beliefs influence the media being consumed, and then the media being consumed reaffirms political beliefs. It becomes a perpetual motion machine that results in distrust of news and information that doesn't come from the selected outlets, and that breeds dis- and misinformation.

Figure 6.1. "Ask For A Paper Ballot" Roadside Sign (Source: Todd R. Vogts)

This photo provides an example of political beliefs fueled by conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation. This sign was photographed on April 2, 2023, at Wilkens Manufacturing Inc., which is located south of Stockton, Kansas.

Of course, interviewees seemed to understand how this works, but they also considered themselves immune to the effects. Several made it a point to suggest they see others being influenced in this way, but they believed they weren't impacted. For example, Patty said she was exposed to Fox News regularly because her husband watches it, but she said she didn't pay any attention. Then she expressed her disgust at schools putting litter boxes in bathrooms for students who identified as cats, which is a debunked hoax pushed by Republican political candidates (Kaczynski, 2022; Stanford, 2022).

Similarly, though he said he only trusts certain people he follows on Facebook, Eddie's entire perspective on the world was changed during the COVID-19 pandemic when he watched the "26-minute video called 'Plandemic,' a slickly produced narration that wrongly claimed a shadowy cabal of elites was using the virus and a potential vaccine to profit and gain power" (Frenkel et al., 2020, para. 3). Eddie repeatedly expressed the belief that he didn't blame others for not being better informed because he had been misled before too, but he said people needed to open "their eyes and start to connect dots, which isn't very difficult to do."

Such discussions highlight the problem of conspiracy theories. Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) defined these ideas in the following way:

> Classic conspiracy theory, whether it is true or not, tries to make sense of the political world. There are no accidents, no unintended consequences [. . .] classic conspiracism insists on proportionality and undertakes painstaking detective work: it is a kind of investigation that at least pretends to follow journalistic or even scientific standards. (p. 20)

Though the majority of the respondents to this study claimed no belief in such ideas, those who do believe these "answers" seemed to do so out of an apparent need for order. They don't want to live in a world of the unknown. As Edna suggested, anxiety might drive people to believe conspiracy theories because they want a sense of certainty that tells them everything is explainable.

Regardless of the reasons, though, these ways of looking at the world are damaging. They impact the public discourse, which can further divide society (Mahl et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2006). Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) argued conspiracy theories often have political and partisan links, and "the corrosive effects [. . .] are distinctive: to delegitimate foundational

democratic institutions and, in a more personal mode, to disorient us" (p. 169). Innes and Innes (2021) highlighted this by investigating how COVID-19 was discussed on Facebook.

Even more disturbing is the idea that religious leaders have been shown to support conspiracy theories. As Chimuanya and Igwebuike (2021) argued, "Religion can be a functional force, helping to promote civil society, community values, and education. Still, it can also become a dysfunctional influence, stifling rational discourse and promoting the belief that only faith and devotional life will solve our myriad of national problems" (p. 402). Since religion plays such an important role in the lives of rural Kansas as the results of this study indicated, it seems plausible that individuals can be exposed to and influenced by conspiracy theories without even realizing it because they trust their pastors or priests. In fact, Murphy shared this type of experience. It caused him to start questioning his faith, which made him question his identity.

With mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories existing as a part of the media ecosystem, it makes it hard for individuals to trust the news and information they consume. The results of this study highlighted this as nearly everyone expressed lower levels of trust in the media. One reason for this was attributed to the perceived amount of opinion and bias rural Kansans see in the news, and they aren't alone. Research literature often highlights these attributes as drivers of mistrust (e.g., Fisher et al., 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Swart & Broersma, 2022; Usher, 2018; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). Accuracy in reporting is also important. Individuals want to be able to verify what they are being told is correct, and, if they can, mistrust can be decreased (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2020; Saldaña & Vu, 2022; Wenzel, 2019).

Unfortunately, too often that means these individuals turn to their preferred sources of information for fact-checking and debunking of claims they feel are inaccurate. Doing so further

embeds them into their echo chambers and filter bubbles. This activity of "doing their own research" isn't research at all. It is relying on lay opinion instead of expert knowledge, which can result in people making uninformed and harmful decisions about their health or on other issues (Carrion, 2018). Even so, individuals don't see this as a problem, believing they know the truth and can't be swayed by unreliable content.

Statements made by interviewees who claimed to be immune to mis- and disinformation's detrimental impacts speaks to a couple of ideas. First, it alludes to third-person effect (TPE) hypothesis, which "deals with an individual's tendency to believe that the effect of a message on others will be greater than on himself or herself" (Guo & Johnson, 2020, p. 2). Whenever an interviewee suggested they see others being influenced by media messages more than they are influenced, TPE was invoked. This highlights a lack in understanding how content impacts them. This brings up the second idea, which is media literacy.

Media literacy is the ability to understand and analyze media messages (Gaultney et al., 2022; Matthews, 2022; Potter, 2016). Several interviewees also mentioned this idea. Generally, it came up in the context of looking at multiple sources and doing the "research" necessary to verify the information. Cletus and Montgomery even explained that they intentionally listen to outlets from both sides of the political spectrum in order to develop a more complete picture of what is happening in the world. However, that wasn't the norm for most interviewees. Instead, they tended to rely on partisan news outlets or local.

A lot of local television news is aired each day (Yanich, 2020). With its wide availability, it comes as no surprise that the medium is popular. Furthermore, the fact that local was viewed as being more reliable and trustworthy can be attributed to the perception that those outlets and their journalists understand rural residents more. Sherri explained it this way: "I don't know,

sometimes in rural areas I feel like we're kind of throwaway in terms of media, in terms of big cities reporting on us." A component of this is that local news organizations represent the values of their audience. This representation also applies to national outlets, though. If Fox News or MSNBC aligns with an individual's beliefs and values, that person feels seen, which cultivates a sense of belonging and affiliation. As Cramer (2016) argued, people who feel misunderstood or misrepresent tend to retreat back into their comfort zones because they believe they are being ignored or not taken seriously. That sows the seeds of distrust that are fertilized by the mis- and disinformation spread by partisan media outlets as they plow through the fields of the media ecosystem available to rural Kansans.

To that end, it makes sense to instigate a local news revival in the spirit of religious tent revivals. Such an analogy fits because those tent revivals focused on the spatial relationships of individuals (Burchardt, 2020), and local news is inherently tied to concepts of proximity, community, common interest, and place (e.g., Harte et al., 2017; Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020; Usher, 2019; Wenzel et al., 2020). Also, it's at the local level where impactful change can be made (e.g., Darr et al., 2021; Katz & Nowak, 2018; Sullivan, 2020). Through both the interviews and survey underpinning this study, respondents indicated they wanted their local media outlets to do more, especially since they trusted community news more than the national products. There are several ways this improvement could take place, which are covered in more detail in the following chapter, and revitalizing local news would be an important and productive venture.

Of course, doing so will require media organizations and communities to confront the increasing spread of news deserts, which are areas where there is a lack of local news coverage (Abernathy, 2018a) brought about by newspaper closures stemming from disruptions to the media business models induced by the Internet and other technologies, and these news deserts

are spreading as corporate owners continue to seek profitability over quality journalism (Bartelme, 2022; Stites, 2018). Kansas fits into the category of having areas where residents do not have journalists dedicated to reporting on their communities (Abernathy, 2018b), and, since Kansas is largely rural, such a finding aligns with other reports. For example, Brounstein (2017) highlighted that news deserts are often found "in rural and economically distressed areas of the country, where for so long local newspapers were the main source of news for small communities, and which now are disappearing at an alarming rate" (para. 1).

News deserts aren't the only issue, though. A drought of journalism can also come in different forms. For instance, some areas have news outlets that have been reduced so greatly in terms of coverage, staffing, and resources that they can barely fulfill their journalistic duties. These are referred to as "ghost newspapers" (Sullivan, 2020). However, whether a news outlet disappears completely or just becomes a shell of its former self, the reasons underlying the change are what matter. Demographic changes in communities and other economic considerations could be at play (Claussen, 2020b), or a change in the news consumption habits of audiences could be blamed (Claussen, 2020a). Regardless, the lack of dedicated and reliable local news damages communities and democracy. Research shows that communities without local news are more polarized (Darr et al., 2018), while the presence of a local newspaper can counteract polarization (Darr et al., 2021). Furthermore, as Chapp and Aehl (2021) suggested, community media consumption impacts levels of social and civic engagement, such as voting.

Since the results of this study pointed to a strong desire for local news that is reliable and not just what random community members post on social media, change must be pursued. Such a need is evident from the research of Smethers et al. (2021) who found that community members see "a centralized source of professionally sourced news" (p. 384) as vital. Therefore, due to the

current media environment, the business models must be re-imagined. Rather than relying on advertising or subscriptions, new ways of funding news must be explored. After all, younger news consumers, such as 21-year-old Helen, indicated they don't want to pay for it because they can get information and news content from other sources. Luckily, innovations are taking place. Some news outlets are pursuing non-profit business models (Birnbauer, 2019; Bodrozic & Paulussen, 2018; Konieczna & Robinson, 2014). In other cases, college and university classes are creating news outlets to cover community news and bring a little informational rain to the drought-stricken news deserts (Finneman et al., 2022). Also, some community members are banding together to keep news alive through volunteerism (Bressers et al., 2015; Smethers et al., 2017).

For any of these or other efforts to work, though, trust must be rebuilt. Though non-profit news organizations might aim to do that (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014), more needs to be done. This could be accomplished through visibility and interaction via social media (Fisher et al., 2021), but research has shown that use of social media as a primary pathway to news is an indicator lower levels of trust (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019), which is a finding this study supports. Instead, news organizations need to engage with the local audiences more and actually listen to the needs of those individuals (Lewis, 2020). Engaged journalism (Batsell, 2015) or participatory journalism (Borger et al., 2013) provide avenues for this type of audience-focused work to occur. In these models, the proverbial doors are thrown open, and the community members are invited in to help cultivate the news harvest. It is done with an eye toward serving the public in a transparent and responsive fashion, and this type of effort has roots in Kansas media. In fact, it grew out of the Wichita Eagle, located in Wichita, Kansas.

It is called public or civic journalism, and former Wichita Eagle editor Davis "Buzz" Merritt[3] and media scholar Jay Rosen developed the idea. Lowrey (2012) explained that public or civic journalism typically "(a) seeks 'citizen voices' through feedback, articles, forums; (b) represents diverse views; (c) enables citizen involvement; and (d) helps solve community problems by offering solutions" (p. 95). Merritt (1997) positioned the concept as a desire for journalism to do more and present the news in a manner that benefits society and supports public life. Meyer and Daniels (2012) described it as "the late 20th-century movement in which some news media actively involved community members in the news process and the media in turn participated in efforts to address community issues," which aimed "to enhance the role of professional news outlets as conduits for communication about important issues" (p. 205-206).

To that end, public or civic journalism centers on listening to and working for the community. Dzur (2002) described this listening as "public listening," which "involves finding out what is of concern in a community and then reporting on how those concerns are or are not being met" (p. 316). Too often, "decisions about online news features and content may be shaped more by routines and resources of the news outlet than by needs specific to the community" or community news outlets "are making less effort to aid communication in fragmented communities" (Lowrey, 2012, p. 99). Public or civic journalism can counter this by further inserting the media as a key component of the community and the citizens, and this would counter the negative effects of Cultivation Theory (CT), which can include the breeding of distrust (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2008).

[3] As an undergraduate at Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas, I had the good fortune to take an ethics class from "Buzz." At the time I didn't know about his work and books in the realm of civic journalism. I found out later, and in reviewing literature about the concept, I once again wished I had the necessary knowledge to ask him questions about the topic.

Doing so could allow journalist to reconnect with communities and refocus on what is important to the people living in those areas, allowing the unique aspects of the individuals in the particular place to drive news decisions (Usher, 2018, 2019; Wenzel et al., 2020). According to the results of this study, such initiatives not only would be welcomed, but they would be supported. What's more, though, this could counteract the mistrust that currently pervades rural communities in America, which is undoubtedly present due to more partisan and opinion-based content being injected into the local public discourse that allows dis- and misinformation to spread and drive wedges between community members.

This results in the local storytelling networks (STN) to become overwhelmed with destructive messages (Wenzel, 2020). STNs are at the core of Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), which is "a theoretical framework that differentiates local communities in terms of whether they have communication resources that can be activated to construct community, thereby enabling collective action for common purpose" (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006a, p. 174). As such, local media plays a social role and connects individuals (Nygren, 2019; Smethers et al., 2021). This leads to social capital development, especially through reciprocity (Bressers et al., 2015; Lewis et al., 2014; Richards, 2013; Smethers et al., 2017).

Social capital is a web of mutual trust and cooperation among members of a community or society that are necessary for democracy to function (Gastil & Keith, 2005; Putnam, 2001). With strong social capital comes strong social and civic engagement, and those forms of involvement are also needed for democratic functions. Of course, social and civic engagement can take on many forms. An easy way to look at them is through memberships in community organizations and voting. Based upon the results of this study, rural Kansans are fairly engaged.

Nearly all of them reported voting on a regular basis, and even if they weren't actively involved in their communities, they expressed the importance of such engagement.

This showcases, at least at a subconscious level, an understanding of the important role social capital plays in a community. In most cases, that engagement came through participation in their church communities, but a few were involved in local politics even beyond voting or interested in greater involvement. Either way, the underlying current was that they could have more of an impact by giving back to their local communities instead of worrying about what was going on at the national level. This also contributed to the pervasive view that politicians could not be trusted, except for some of the local individuals. Again, such perceptions indicate strong bonding social capital and weak bridging social capital. This combination provides fertile ground for polarization and division to grow as individuals seek refuge in their social spheres that provide them the most comfort and affirmation in relation to their beliefs and opinions (e.g., Docherty, 2020; Lin, 2002; Mou & Lin, 2017; Yang & Hanasono, 2021).

Even so, nearly everyone who participated in this study recognized the existence of mis- or disinformation, and a few showed great concern for what its continued spread could mean for society. That alone should serve as a clarion call for dis- and misinformation to be doused with informational herbicide. More than handwringing is needed. Action is necessary. This is especially true considering that that rural and urban Kansans rarely differed greatly in their thoughts and opinions that were explored in this study.

Therefore, the power of partisan and biased media outlets must be inspected closely, and news consumers need to put a check on the information dissemination practices of these organizations. As ranchers raise and care for their cattle through the process of animal husbandry (Kron, 2014), these agenda-driven media outlets and actors are breeding and feeding news

consumers a diet rich in empty content calories in the form of mis- and disinformation. With the goal of raising a herd of polarized media consumers. This equates to "societal husbandry," which aims "to cultivate the types behavior patterns among the populace that the elite behavior-control experts would judge as being for the common good" (Jones & Butman, 2012, p. 166). Combatting it will require the hard work rural Kansans are known for, and it leads this study to its implications and conclusions. Those are explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 7 - Germinating Future Research by Exploring the Conclusions and Implications

As tractors drag plows and seeders through the fertile soil of Kansas's plains, more than clouds of dust are being created. Family legacies are being planted. "We grew up on a farm. I think it's in your blood. That's all I've really ever wanted to do. I love my life. All day long, I do things I like to do," Kent said. "It's a good lifestyle. I get to spend some time with family. I mean, there are times when you get real busy and it feels like you don't, but kids can always go with you and get to be a part of what you're doing. It's a good way to raise a family." Also, Midwest values of hard work and patience are grown. "I enjoy it. Very much," Cletus said. "It's the ability to see something from the time when you plant something to watch it grow, evolve, and then being able to harvest it and reap the benefits of everything, all the work that you've put in. Being able to work with my hands, being able to be outside. Then just the lifestyle it brings to the family and the kids. I do hard work, but it's very rewarding." Patty agreed. "I think it's very important. I just think the rural community is a great place to raise kids and they learn how to work hard, and I think that's something that our society's lacking," she said. "That's what's wrong with our society. People don't do physical work anymore. I just think that right there's our downfall in our society. It's hard to get people that work and know how to work and have good work ethic."

However, more is being grown. Leveraging the beliefs and political views of farmers like Kent, Cletus, and Patty, partisan media outlets are cultivating misinformation that yields a harvest of political division and polarization. These seeds of discord sprout into grains that individuals gobble up, leading the inaccurate information to seep into the public discourse. Such vittles lack sustenance, which results in an unhealthy society that pits family, friends, and

neighbors against each other. In short, mis- and disinformation are spreading from the farming fields of rural America because the media ecosystem leans right in the state, aligning with the Red-State reputation of the region.

To that end, this study sheds important light on how rural Kansans receive news. By understanding that many rural Americans are heavily influenced by their chosen media outlets, we can better approach concepts of media literacy and how to more effectively combat dis- and misinformation. An important aspect of this is media representation. When consumers feel vindicated in their opinions and beliefs because the media they consume gratifies them, stronger and more entrenched views are cultivated, producing polarization and division. Even reasonable individuals, such as the ones interviewed for this study, can be misled by the news if their media diets consist of unhealthy content that lacks nutritious information.

Though this study might be limited by the relatively small sample size that was confined to Kansas residents only, it opens an important line of inquiry that sets the stage for future research. Even though rural areas contain only about 20% of the country's population, they make up nearly 97% of the land mass (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). That is a large amount of the United States that often gets ignored, yet people living in those areas exist as an important voting block within democratic politics as was evident in the 2016 election of President Donald Trump and the controversy surrounding the outcome of the 2020 election.

Therefore, in order to better understand the country and its media consumption as it relates to polarization and division cultivated by mis- and disinformation, one must understand the rural citizens of the United States. By zooming in on rural Kansas, this study highlights how rural citizens encounter and use the news in ways that can cultivate polarization and division. This foundational study prepares this otherwise fertile ground for future academic study.

Increasing the Research Acreage

In the short term, this inquiry will be extended in two distinct ways. First, this work will be transformed into academic journal articles. Different aspects of the study will be used as the foundation for pieces that will be submitted for publication. It is estimated that at least two or three articles could be developed. Doing so would aim to expand knowledge concerning mis- and disinformation, which can further impact how society understands such a democracy-endangering form of content.

Turning this study into a book, ideally one that targets both the academic community and the popular press, would be a welcome outcome as well because more of society could be educated by the colorful snapshot this work develops. Doing so is not unprecedented. As the title of this study pays homage to, Frank (2004) did something similar while focusing on Kansas in his *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* that was a best-seller. Using that idea to look at Kansas from a different perspective, O'Malley (2018) published *What's Right with Kansas: Everyday Citizens Transforming Their State.* Of course, both titles reference an editorial written by the famous Kansas newspaperman William Allen White (White, 1946). Also, Procter (2005) wrote *Civic Communion: The Rhetoric of Community Building*, which focused on rural Kansas communities, but these are just a few examples of works that have centered on the Sunflower State. The point is, Kansas provides rich soil in which research can be planted.

To begin such efforts, this study has already been transformed into a book chapter that has been accepted for publication. A publication date is not available as of this writing, but the chapter is slated to appear in the forthcoming book — *Political Communication in 2020: Social, Cultural, and Ideological Rifts between Red and Blue America in the Digital Age*. It is being

edited by Dan Schill and John Allen Hendricks, and the Peter Lang Group plans to publish it. This opportunity to share the research of this work begins to firmly plant this study in the realm of community-engaged scholarship. However, it is just the first sprout.

As such, the second way this inquiry will be extended in the short term is the further development of a website created to accompany this study. It can be found at www.cultivatingmisinformation.com[4], and this website will provide an invaluable avenue for engaging with rural communities as part of the on-going investigation into the intersection of rural America and mis- and disinformation. The website will provide a foundational online presence for a possible podcast titled "Cultivating Misinformation," and it will serve as a resource for research and information concerning mis- and disinformation. This will be accomplished by sharing content related to such topics, whether that comes in the form of overviews of books, academic journal articles, popular media reports, or research data, or through the sharing of the author's personal thoughts, observations, and experiences. Additionally, as more research unfolds, timely insights will be shared that can be used both by news consumers and news producers. Such items will aim to support individuals become more aware of their news diets, how news is produced, how to improve news production, and generally educate with the goal of increasing societal media literacy, at least within rural communities.

Also, the website will serve as the online home for future surveys concerning the spread of mis- and disinformation. This is important as the immediate goal is to expand to a national study that seeks input from rural Americans in all parts of the country. For this next step, the same survey will be used with minor adjustments to make it more generic for a national

[4] This website is currently live, and content is being added from time to time.

population and to make needed updates based upon feedback received from participants. Interviews will still be a component of this, though an in-person option will not be made available. In the effort to pursue this new scope, the website will make it easier to direct people to the survey and interview sign-up form.

More importantly, though, these research activities highlight the enduring aspirations this study stimulates. To that end, in the long term, this study tills the ground for future avenues of research. Journalism and communication are big umbrellas such a research agenda lives beneath. More specifically, though, ideas of mis- and disinformation, sports media, journalism education, leadership, and community media are the focus. This is especially true when adopting the definition of community developed by Macqueen et al. (2001) who suggested there are five elements that create this type of social formation: "locus, sharing, joint action, social ties, and diversity" (p. 1930). Leveraging such a view of community allows for the various forms of communication to be tied together and looked at from a more localized or micro perspective.

A key component of this approach is to zero in on specific types of communities, and rural communities are of particular interest. As this work pointed out previously, understanding how rural citizens' politics are influenced through their media consumption and exposure to mis- and disinformation can shed light on why these individuals succumb to falsehoods and conspiracy theories that influence their politics in manners that are harmful to their ways of life. Too often these individuals are ignored, both in terms of politics and academic research. That is why the overarching research agenda this study seeds will be continued, but to do so effectively requires intentionality and a carefully crafted implement.

To that end, this study drives the posts that will fence off the boundaries of a new venture. In the coming months, a nonprofit organization will be developed that will focus on the

intersection of rural communities and the media. It will be called the Rural Media Research Institute (RMRI).[5] This entity will conduct and support research concerning rural media. This will include media created in rural places and media consumed by rural citizens. Associated with this, concepts of mis- and disinformation, media literacy, student and citizen journalism, and rural representation will be considered among others. With this in mind, the general mission for RMRI will be to support rural citizens by working in partnership with content producers and consumers to develop research that benefits the media ecosystem, strengthening democracy and leading to a more informed public.

The creation of an organization such as RMRI is important for several reasons, which this study highlighted. Rural citizens need to develop media literacy skills. This is due to an apparent lack of understanding about mis- and disinformation and how news consumption can influence beliefs and opinions that cultivate polarization and division, which currently pervade society. Luckily, many rural communities already have a pathway to improving the present situation — local media outlets. However, as the terrain for local news experiences erosion and leaves citizens struggling to remain informed in the resulting news deserts, community media needs support. RMRI would help do this, and the necessity for such actions is a key implication of this study.

Unpacking the Study's Implications

This research has several implications. First, it argues that mis- and disinformation are being cultivated in rural Kansas. This stems from a lack of diversity in the media consumption habits of rural residents. These individuals maintain strong political and religious beliefs, which

[5] A website has been established in preparation of creating the nonprofit. It can be viewed at www.ruralmediaresearch.org.

lead them to viewpoints touted by certain media outlets. This demonstrates how rural citizens participate in selective exposure, which is the tendency for people to prefer information and sources that align with their previously held beliefs and opinions while simultaneously avoiding content that counters those views (Hameleers & van der Meer, 2020; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2019; Weaver, 2017). Often, such content comes via biased and partisan news outlets and actors, and social media and websites, television, and radio are saturated with those types of entities and individuals, which increases negative ramifications of this genre of content because a majority of the people who participated in this study indicated they receive the bulk of their news and information via those mediums.

Subsequently, the preexisting beliefs and opinions are solidified based upon the content being consumed, which cultivates distinct perspectives among the audience members. That's because of Cultivation Theory (CT), which lives in the media effects corner of mass communication theory. It means that an individual's perceptions of reality are shaped and distorted, altering attitudes and impacting views of society and societal institutions (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1986; Good, 2009; Harmon et al., 2019; Mosharafa, 2015).

Through this, the reality of such individuals becomes socially constructed through the messages they encounter most frequently, which relates to the overarching lens of this study: social constructionism. This perspective suggests reality and knowledge are created via social life through interactions with others and various media that develop meaning within a social context (Ackermann, 2001; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015; Keaton & Bodie, 2011; Mead & Schubert, 1934; Pass, 2004). As such, the pathways to news rural individuals travel down must be considered. Of course, even if an informational avenue is riddled with mis- and disinformation, a savvy consumer can effectively navigate the treacherous terrain.

This leads to a second implication. According to this study, a media literacy deficiency provides avenues for mis- and disinformation to spread. Because participants highlighted social media, television, and radio as their primary pathways to news, Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT) comes into play. This "emphasizes interpersonal networks and communities. CIT gives attention to how messages are received and interpreted in different ways depending on these interpersonal and community communication and influence networks" (Paul, 2015, p. 712). CIT provides a foundation for how individuals come to news and information. However, it does not fully consider the choices of that consumption.

Through media literacy, individuals can decide what news and information to pay attention to, which gives them the opportunity to make the interpretations that occur as part of CIT. Such a consideration is important because media literacy consists of the skills needed to evaluate and use information critically, which allows consumers to determine if news and information products are high-quality or not (Guo-Ming, 2007; Jaakkola, 2022; Kahne et al., 2012). Though the majority of this investigation's respondents claimed they wanted reliable and unbiased news, many of their preferred sources are considered to be biased and slanted toward a particular political angle (Ad Fontes Media, 2023), which demonstrates a lack of media literacy as mis- and disinformation originate from opinion-heavy and politically charged content. Such consumption results in polarization and division, and it could be counteracted through increased efforts at media literacy education.

Of course, partisan and biased media outlets succeed because they satiate the audience's desires. This leads to a third implication, which relates to the idea of selective exposure discussed previously. It also evokes the concept of Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G). As another media effects theory, it considers "how" and "why" people choose the media they select

to meet their needs (Barton, 2013; Billings et al., 2019; Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006; Katz et al., 1973; Li et al., 2018; Valkenburg et al., 2016). Based upon the findings of this study, rural Kansans seem to find reward in these forms of media because they align with their views, causing them to feel either vindicated or enraged (Shrader, 2013; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011; Young, 2021). After all, everyone wants to feel as though they are right and on the winning side of an argument. Partisan media outlets provide this, which aligns with what Mwesige (2009) argued. To that end, rural Kansans need to be presented with news options that enrich their knowledge and bring them together by relying on facts instead of opinions.

Most importantly, though, this study highlighted how rural residents desire reliable local news and information, which is a fourth implication. Yet, mis- and disinformation fertilized by partisan actors and political and religious beliefs stunt their ability to consume healthy content. This damages the local community and weakens society as the social fabric that connects individual residents becomes frayed. Local news can help, and this research suggested ways this can be done.

Based upon the interviews that were conducted, local news is clearly important, but most of the individuals reported they don't pay for local news. In most cases, they watch local television stations, listen to it on the radio, or stumble across local news on social media, in which case the content usually isn't coming from journalists or media outlets. Even if a local newspaper exists, most people said they only read them when in waiting rooms, while waiting in line at the grocery store, or if someone they know has a copy. "Let's be real. I don't want to pay for a newspaper subscription," Helen said. "That's why I don't get the newspaper. If they just drop the newspaper at everyone's house, I would probably read the newspaper, but I just don't want to pay for a subscription."

Alternatively, online news outlets could be an option. However, barriers exist. Research suggests rural residents lack broadband Internet access (Whitacre, 2010; Whitacre & Manlove, 2016), which is important for accessing multimedia content often found on news websites. Likewise, cost is an issue. Paywalls are popular among news organizations (e.g., Macnamara, 2010; Olsen & Solvoll, 2018b), but these prevent would-be readers from accessing the content without putting in a credit card number. This is particularly problematic if what is behind the paywall lacks enough perceived value to get people to pay for it (Olsen & Solvoll, 2018a).

Abraham argued that digital news products aren't viable in small communities because it still costs money despite the fact there is no tangible product that makes a person feel like they are actually buying something and getting something of real-world value for their money. “I understand having to charge for it. I mean, the Internet's not free. I pay to have the Internet brought into my home. So if you're going to put things on the internet, it's not free. You have to maintain a website. You have to pay somebody to put the content on there,” he said. “So I'm just going to grab it off the free side. And I tell you it's valuable information, but there's other ways of getting it now.”

That “free side” he speaks of is social media, and, as has been established, that pathway to news is rife with mis- and disinformation, which often is presented as opinion. As this study suggested, many people want their news to be just the facts. To them, transparency is key, and biases need to be left proverbial door if a news organization is going to claim to be doing journalism.

As such, community media outlets in rural Kansas can work to counter mis- and disinformation and polarization among residents by considering different ways of financing and practicing journalism. First, the business model needs to be reconsidered. This is especially true

for existing newspapers. If free avenues to content are more popular than newspaper subscriptions and paywall fees, perhaps a free-distribution model could be considered. Doing so would increase access and consumption. If such a paper were distributed to every resident in the community, it would also increase the value proposition for advertisers as they would be able to reach more potential customers. This would make the venture more financially viable as well. In many ways, this would replicate the successful business models of social media, television, and radio.

Alternatively, if no physical product is needed, an online outlet could be built. This could consist of a website, but it could also mean an email newsletter, a podcast, a YouTube channel, or any number of other digital options. In many cases, these ventures cost little to no money, depending on the choices made and the quality desired. A viable business structure to support digital options is a non-profit model, so a non-profit news organization could be created. Such an entity would be funding through sponsors, donations, and grants from charitable foundations (Konieczna & Robinson, 2014; Scott et al., 2019). This would allow everyone to have access to the news as long as they had an Internet connection.

Second, community media outlets in rural Kansas need to refocus their energies on being a source of local news and information that stays away from biased reporting. Instead of worrying about issues happening in other parts of the world, community outlets need to be the go-to source for what is happening in their backyards. The state, national, and world news can be found via other sources, but people cannot be informed about what happened at the most recent city council or board of education meeting unless local journalists are there to cover it. This is the value proposition community media needs to provide — a hyperlocal mindset serving the

needs of the residents. To accomplish this, though, these outlets need to reconnect with their communities.

Therefore, and finally, community media outlets in rural Kansas need to develop closer ties, or social capital, with the people they are covering. As Montgomery suggested, "Relationships are number one." This is important because, which the study's results pointed out, local journalists are not visible enough in their communities. Residents don't see reporters covering community events frequently. Also, they don't work with the community members to develop story ideas or figure out what is most important and in need of coverage. The failure to connect and be present in the communities leads to negative downstream affects. Residents can feel like the news outlet is just using them for financial gain or that the journalists don't really care about them or the community. This can result in alienation. When people feel as though they are alone and lack a news outlet that they can consider their own, they will seek out a place where they feel valued and welcomed. In such a vulnerable state, they are ripe for the picking by national and partisan outlets.

Making these changes and others is important for the long-term viability and existence of community media, but it is crucial for a healthy society and democracy. If community media better serves its residents, those individuals will have news and information they can trust. Then they will not be swayed by mis- and disinformation. They will be more informed, giving them common knowledge to use in discussing important topics and decision-making processes. What's more, rural Kansans appear to be open to this. Numerous interviewees expressed their willingness to help improve their local media, and the survey data also showcased this.

The implication of this is simple. Local news can be a powerful force for good. Community media outlets can act as an herbicide that kills invasive vines of mis- and

disinformation at the root, effectively inoculating rural citizens from the disease of "fake news" spread by partisan news outlets and allowing such individuals to thrive in their information ecosystems by cultivating a nutritious media diet.

Final Thoughts

Despite popular culture's depictions, rural citizens are not unintelligent or "country bumpkins." They are hardworking, caring, and compassionate. They are complex and intelligent individuals who make decisions based upon opinions and beliefs derived from their faith and lived experiences. As is the case with anyone, there is always room for growth, but simple categorizations do not fit. Rural Kansans, and rural Americans in general, carry "a strong sense of identity as a rural person" (Cramer, 2016, p. 89), and that should not be overlooked. That identity is part of this country's fabric and aspirations (Procter, 2005; Wuthnow, 2015, 2019). As such, rural individuals are worthy of academic inquiry. This study helps showcase that and inspires future investigations.

Like a foal standing for the first time, this line of research focusing on the intersection of misinformation and rural media is just finding its legs, but those legs will grow in strength. They will power societal change by contributing to the broader body of knowledge and encouraging better media literacy. Through this, social capital and trust can be rebuilt, bolstering democracy and stamping out polarization and division sewn by mis- and disinformation. After all, as Yanich (2020) pointed out, "The information-seeking behavior of the public is circumscribed by the media environment that surrounds it" (p. 25). This requires that attention be paid to the media ecosystem because an informed public is a cornerstone of democracy. Though access to information has increased thanks to digital technologies, it has also allowed mis- and disinformation to be become more prevalent. When people struggle to know what to believe or

trust about important issues that impact their lives, they cannot make informed decisions. By pursuing the type of work presented in and inspired by this study, the media can be pushed back straight, eliminating the lean to the right and providing quality news and information that benefits individuals, communities, and society.

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Appendix A - Informed Consent Form and Survey Questions

INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Below is information you need to know before agreeing to be a participant in this study. If all of this is acceptable, you can select the appropriate response to the following questions. At the end, you can volunteer to be interviewed by the researcher (through a separate survey) as a way to gain deeper insight into the focus of this subject.

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: Should the subject have any questions or wish to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or IRB, he/she/they have should contact the following individual: Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: Current research largely ignores the news consumption habits and their subsequent effects of rural, Midwestern farmers and ranchers as related to the prevalence of mis- and disinformation within the news and information ecosystem. With the purpose of filling this gap in the literature, this study investigates the pathways to news of individuals living and working in farming communities in Kansas that lead to the belief in and spreading of mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories promulgated by partisan media outlets that include, but are not limited to, conservative talk radio and social media platforms. This is accomplished via a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews from a social constructionism perspective that leverages the theoretical lens of cultivation theory with support from communication infrastructure theory and uses and gratifications theory. Through this, an understanding can be gained concerning how individuals use and are impacted by the news in ways that allow political division and polarization to flourish, which damages social capital and democracy. The data collected will contribute to a doctoral dissertation and/or other projects, such as academic journal articles.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: This research will employ an initial quantitative method of a survey that will not collect individually identifiable information but only demographic information and survey question responses to be used in the aggregate as a basis for comparison. This will then be followed by a qualitative method of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with observations of volunteers electing to be interviewed by completing a separate form that keeps identifiable data separate from the survey data. All interviewed participants will be identified by an assigned alias, title, general organizational affiliation, and other demographic information as applicable. In terms of the interviews, this means participants will be asked a series of questions during a 30-to-90-minute session or series of sessions. They will have the opportunity and choice to answer each question. Participants will be expected to answer questions they choose to address with openness and honesty, understanding that they can decline to answer any question presented to them. The interviews will be recorded using video and/or audio recording devices. The recordings will be used to develop transcripts of the interviews that can be coded and analyzed, but the raw recordings will not be made public. The

interviews will take place at a time and location agreed upon by all parties, and the interview will be discussed following the event, which will serve as a debrief. During this debrief, participants will be allowed to provide feedback on the questions and processes as they've been experienced. No one will be paid for participating. The information collected might be used for future research without additional informed consent.

LENGTH OF SURVEY: 30-60 minutes (50 questions excluding demographic collection)

LENGTH OF INTERVIEWS: 30-90 minutes

RISK OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: There is no anticipated risk from participating, and it is not anticipated that any portion of the process will make an individual uncomfortable. However, should an individual feel any form of discomfort in any way, the individual can stop participation in the survey at any time.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: This research benefits the communication research community by contributing to the body of knowledge.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: No survey participants will be identified by given name, title, organizational affiliation, or other demographic information. The information gathered will be used in the aggregate form only. All interview participants will be identified by an assigned alias, title, general organizational affiliation, and other demographic information as applicable. The information collected might be used for future research without additional informed consent. All data collected will be kept on a password-protected computer in a home office that has a door with a lock, and this home office is located within the researcher's personal home, which is also equipped with doors, locks, and security cameras.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

Furthermore, I consent to being recorded via video, audio, or other means as part of the study for the purposes outlined above in the event I volunteer to be interviewed.

I verify that my signature below and/or selecting "agree" indicates that I have read and understand this consent form and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature/selection acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form or have otherwise retained a copy of this digital form for my own records.

I _____ to participate in this study.
**By selecting "Agree" below, it is a confirmation that the individual completing this form has read and understands this consent information and willingly agrees to participate in this study*

under the terms described. Clicking "Disagree" means that the individual does not consent and will not participate in the study.

- Agree
- Disagree

DEMOGRAPHICS

How old are you in years?

- 18-29
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23
- 24
- 25
- …
- 86 or older

What gender do you identify as?

- Male
- Female
- Trans Male/Trans Man
- Trans Female/Trans Woman
- Genderqueer/Gender Nonconforming
- Different Identity

What sex were you assigned at birth, such as on an original birth certificate?

- Male
- Female

Do you consider yourself Hispanic/Latino or not Hispanic/Latino?

- Hispanic/Latino
- Not Hispanic/Latino

Which of the following racial designations best describes you? More than one choice is acceptable.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Two or more races
- Non-Resident Alien (of any race or ethnicity)
- Race unknown

What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual or straight
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Not listed above (please specify): _____

What is your relationship status?

- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Dating
- Long-term committed relationship, unmarried
- Other: _____

Where do you live in Kansas?

- Allen County
- Anderson County
- Atchison County
- Barber County
- Barton County
- Bourbon County
- Brown County
- Butler County
- Chase County
- Chautauqua County
- Cherokee County
- Cheyenne County
- Clark County
- Clay County
- Cloud County
- Coffey County
- Comanche County
- Cowley County
- Crawford County
- Decatur County
- Dickinson County
- Doniphan County
- Douglas County
- Edwards County
- Elk County
- Ellis County
- Ellsworth County
- Finney County
- Ford County
- Franklin County
- Geary County

- Gove County
- Graham County
- Grant County
- Gray County
- Greeley County
- Greenwood County
- Hamilton County
- Harper County
- Harvey County
- Haskell County
- Hodgeman County
- Jackson County
- Jefferson County
- Jewell County
- Johnson County
- Kearny County
- Kingman County
- Kiowa County
- Labette County
- Lane County
- Leavenworth County
- Lincoln County
- Linn County
- Logan County
- Lyon County
- Marion County
- Marshall County
- McPherson County
- Meade County
- Miami County
- Mitchell County
- Montgomery County
- Morris County
- Morton County
- Nemaha County
- Neosho County
- Ness County
- Norton County
- Osage County
- Osborne County
- Ottawa County
- Pawnee County
- Phillips County
- Pottawatomie County
- Pratt County
- Rawlins County

- Reno County
- Republic County
- Rice County
- Riley County
- Rooks County
- Rush County
- Russell County
- Saline County
- Scott County
- Sedgwick County
- Seward County
- Shawnee County
- Sheridan County
- Sherman County
- Smith County
- Stafford County
- Stanton County
- Stevens County
- Sumner County
- Thomas County
- Trego County
- Wabaunsee County
- Wallace County
- Washington County
- Wichita County
- Wilson County
- Woodson County
- Wyandotte County
- I don't live in Kansas. I live in _____.

What is the highest level of education have you completed?

- Less than high school diploma or equivalent
- High school diploma or equivalent
- Technical Certificate
- Some college coursework, but no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree

What political party do you align with?

- Republican Party
- Democratic Party
- Libertarian Party
- Green Party
- Alliance Party

- Independent
- Unaffiliated
- Other: _____

What religious beliefs do you align with?

- Christianity
    - Protestant
    - Catholic
    - Mormon
    - Orthodox Christian
- Unaffiliated
- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Other: _____

What is your general income level?

- Less than $20,000
- $20,000 to $49,999
- $45,000 to $139,999
- $140,000 to $149,999
- $150,000 to $199,999
- $200,000+

What best describes your current employment status?

- Student
- Unemployed, looking for work
- Unemployed, not looking for work
- Part-Time Employment (1-39 hours per week), hourly wage
- Part-Time Employment (1-39 hours per week), salaried wage
- Full-Time Employment (40+ hours per week), hourly wage
- Full-Time Employment (40+ hours per week), salaried wage
- Self-Employed
- Retired
- Disable, unable to work

What best describes your current, primary occupation?

- Student: Undergraduate
- Student: Graduate
- Oil and natural gas occupations
- Wind and solar power occupations
- Farming and ranching occupations
- Wildlife, fishing and forestry occupations

- Computer and technology occupations
- Education occupations (teacher, administrator, paraprofessional, librarian, etc.)
- Law enforcement occupations (police, sheriff, etc.)
- Health and medical occupations (CNA, nursing, physical therapist, etc.)
- Emergency services occupations (dispatcher, EMT, firefighter, etc.)
- Retail occupations
- Manufacturing occupations
- Automotive sales occupations
- Automotive repair occupations
- Legal services occupations (lawyer, judge, attorney, paralegal, law clerk, etc.)
- Governmental occupations (city administrator, county clerk, mayor, etc.)
- Architecture and engineering occupations
- Farm sales/repairs occupations (equipment dealer, etc.)
- Insurance occupations
- Real estate occupations (agent, broker, etc.)
- Accounting occupations
- Banking occupations (teller, branch president, etc.)
- Construction and extraction occupations
- Community and social service occupations
- Plumbing, heating and air occupations
- Electrician occupations
- Not Applicable
- Other: _____

How did you come to participate in this survey?

- Via Social Media
- Direct Mail or Email
- Personal Recruit by the Researcher
- Other: _____

MEDIA USE QUESTIONS

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "never" and 5 being "hourly," how often do you consume news and information from media outlets?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Hourly*

Where do you get the most of your news and information?

- FM Radio
- AM Radio
- Podcasts
- Local/Antenna Television
- Cable/Satellite Television
- Streaming Television
- Daily Newspapers
- Weekly Newspapers
- Monthly Magazines

- Quarterly Magazines
- News Outlet Websites
- Social Media

Of the following options, which cable television news outlet do you feel is the most reliable?

- CNN
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- Newsmax TV
- NewsNation
- Blaze TV
- Free Speech TV
- RFD-TV
- CNBC
- Bloomberg Television
- Newsy
- Fox Business Network
- One America News Network (OANN)
- InfoWars
- BBC World News

Of the following options, which cable television news outlet do (or would) you watch the most?

- CNN
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- Newsmax TV
- NewsNation
- Blaze TV
- Free Speech TV
- RFD-TV
- CNBC
- Bloomberg Television
- Newsy
- Fox Business Network
- One America News Network (OANN)
- InfoWars
- BBC World News

Do you regularly watch local news broadcasts from local affiliates/channels of CBS, ABC, NBC, or PBS?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

What social media platforms do you use? Check all that apply.

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- TikTok
- Snapchat
- Pinterest
- YouTube
- Reddit
- LinkedIn
- WhatsApp
- Other: _____
- None of the Above

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "never" and 5 being "hourly," how often do you look at social media?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Hourly*

What social media platform do you use the most?

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- TikTok
- Snapchat
- Pinterest
- YouTube
- Reddit
- LinkedIn
- WhatsApp
- Other: _____
- None of the Above

When on social media, what is your primary purpose for using the platform?

- Posting/creating content
- Selling items
- Marketing purposes (self-promotion or business promotion)
- Building and/or maintaining relationships
- Consuming news and information
- Entertainment
- General communication
- Other: _____

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "never" and 5 being "often," how often do you consume news and information on social media?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Often*

Regardless of the medium (print product, radio or television broadcast, or social media), what type of news and information do you seek out the most?

- Local news/information
- State news/information
- National news/information
- Professional sports news/information
- Political news/information
- Entertainment news/information
- Weather news/information
- Business/stock news/information
- Agricultural (farming, livestock, etc.) news/information
- Energy sector (oil, gas, solar, wind, etc.) news/information
- Other: _____

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none at all" and 5 being "extremely," how often does the news reported by the media feel important to your everyday life?

None At All 1 2 3 4 5 *Extremely*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "never" and 5 being "all the time," how often do you think the news media misses the important stories?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *All The Time*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "all the time" and 5 being "never," how often do you see local journalists or reporters in your community talking to community members?

All The Time 1 2 3 4 5 *Never*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "all the time" and 5 being "never," how often do you see local journalists or reporters in your community covering community events?

All The Time 1 2 3 4 5 *Never*

Do you wish local journalists or reporters would work with the community (develop story ideas, contribute content of articles or photos, take part in focus groups, etc.) to provide more news of local importance?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- I Don't Know

If given the opportunity to work with local journalists or reporters (develop story ideas, contribute content of articles or photos, take part in focus groups, etc.) to provide more news of local importance, would you do so?

- Yes
- No

- Maybe
- I Don't Know

NEWS TRUST & MIS- AND DISINFORMATION QUESTIONS

Please provide the year you were born in:

_____

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "extremely" and 5 being "none," how would you rank your trust in the news media and journalists in general?

Extremely 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none" and 5 being "extremely," how would you rank your trust in the national news media and journalists?

None 1 2 3 4 5 *Extremely*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "extremely" and 5 being "none," how would you rank your trust in the local news media and journalists?

Extremely 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "an extreme amount" and 5 being "none," how much misinformation or disinformation is present on social media?

An Extreme Amount 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "an extreme amount" and 5 being "none," how much misinformation or disinformation is present on the television?

An Extreme Amount 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none" and 5 being "an extreme amount," how much misinformation or disinformation is present on the radio?

None 1 2 3 4 5 *An Extreme Amount*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none" and 5 being "an extreme amount," how much misinformation or disinformation is present in printed news products such as newspapers and magazines?

None 1 2 3 4 5 *An Extreme Amount*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree," rank how much you agree with the following statement: "The press is the enemy of the people."

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*

Of the following options, which cable television news outlet do you feel spreads the most misinformation or disinformation?

- CNN
- Fox News
- MSNBC

- Newsmax TV
- NewsNation
- Blaze TV
- Free Speech TV
- RFD-TV
- CNBC
- Bloomberg Television
- Newsy
- Fox Business Network
- One America News Network (OANN)
- InfoWars
- BBC World News

Of the following options, which cable television news outlet do you feel spreads the least misinformation or disinformation?

- CNN
- Fox News
- MSNBC
- Newsmax TV
- NewsNation
- Blaze TV
- Free Speech TV
- RFD-TV
- CNBC
- Bloomberg Television
- Newsy
- Fox Business Network
- One America News Network (OANN)
- InfoWars
- BBC World News

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none whatsoever" and 5 being "extremely so," do you feel that misinformation and disinformation are a problem in society?

None Whatsoever 1 2 3 4 5 *Extremely So*

Using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree," rank your reaction to the following statement: "Aliens are real. They landed in Roswell, New Mexico, and Area 51 contains evidence that the government is hiding from us."

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*

Using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree," rank your reaction to the following statement: "No one has ever landed on the moon. The moon landing was faked and filmed on a soundstage in Hollywood."

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*

Using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly disagree," rank your reaction to the following statement: "Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in President John F. Kennedy's assassination."

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Disagree*

Using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly disagree," rank your reaction to the following statement: "President Barack Obama was not born in the United States."

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Disagree*

Using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree," rank your reaction to the following statement: "Donald Trump won the 2020 United States presidential election."

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Agree*

Using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "strongly agree" and 5 being "strongly disagree," rank your reaction to the following statement: "Birds aren't real. They are surveillance drones for the United States government."

Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 *Strongly Disagree*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "extremely," how important do you feel journalism is to society?

Not At All 1 2 3 4 5 *Extremely*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "extremely," how relevant do you feel national journalism is to your daily life?

Not At All 1 2 3 4 5 *Extremely*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "extremely," how relevant do you feel local/community journalism is to your daily life?

Not At All 1 2 3 4 5 *Extremely*

SOCIAL & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONS

How frequently do you vote?

- In every election, both national and local
- Only in national elections
- Only in local elections
- Only in presidential election years
- Most of the time
- Some of the time
- Only when an issue important to me is on the ballot
- Never

Have you ever run for an elected office (board of education, county commission, city council, state legislature, etc.)?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever held an elected office (board of education, county commission, city council, state legislature, etc.)?
- Yes
- No

Who did you vote for in the 2012 Presidential Election?
- Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan (Republican Party)
- Barack Obama and Joe Biden (Democratic Party)
- Gary Johnson and Jim Gray (Libertarian Party)
- Jill Stein and Cheri Honkala (Green Party)
- Virgil Goode and Jim Clymer (Constitution Party)
- Rocky Anderson and Luis J. Rodriguez (Justice Party)
- Other: _____
- Did not vote

Who did you vote for in the 2016 Presidential Election?
- Donald Trump and Mike Pence (Republican Party)
- Hillary Clinton and Tim Kaine (Democratic Party)
- Gary Johnson and Bill Weld (Libertarian Party)
- Jill Stein and Ajamu Baraka (Green Party)
- Darrell Castle and Scott Bradley (Constitution Party)
- Evan McMullin and Mindy Finn (Independent Ticket)
- Other: _____
- Did not vote

Who did you vote for in the 2020 Presidential Election?
- Donald Trump and Mike Pence (Republican)
- Joe Biden and Kamala Harris (Democratic Party)
- Jo Jorgensen and Spike Cohen (Libertarian Party)
- Howie Hawkins and Angela Walker (Green Party)
- Don Blankenship and William Mohr (Constitution Party)
- Other: _____
- Did not vote

Did you vote "yes" or "no" on the Kansas Constitutional Amendment referred to as "Value Them Both" that sought to overturn the Kansas Supreme Court's ruling that abortion was legal because of ideas of bodily autonomy?
- Yes
- No
- Did not vote

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none" and 5 being "extreme," how would you rank your level of trust in politicians?

None 1 2 3 4 5 *Extreme*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "extreme" and 5 being "none," how would you describe your level of trust in the government?

Extreme 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none" and 5 being "extreme," how would you score your satisfaction with democracy as a method of self-governance?

None 1 2 3 4 5 *Extreme*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "a lot" and 5 being "none," how would you describe your level of trust toward your neighbors?

A Lot 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "none" and 5 being "extreme," how would you rank the importance of religion in your life?

None 1 2 3 4 5 *Extreme*

On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "a lot" and 5 being "none," how would you describe the impact of your religious views on your political views?

A Lot 1 2 3 4 5 *None*

As you know, it is very important that survey respondents answer questions accurately. This is a quality control item. Please answer "I agree" below.

- I don't agree
- I agree
- I may agree later

CLOSING QUESTIONS

What questions regarding news use, community journalism, media trust, and mis- and disinformation did this survey not ask that it should have? What else would you like to discuss that wasn't covered?

Would you be interested and willing to be interviewed about the topics of this survey and more? Interviews would be conducted via the phone, video conferencing, or in person depending upon preference and availability.

- Yes — Complete this Form
- No

Appendix B - Interview Questions

1. How do you prefer to be referred to?
2. How old are you?
3. What gender do you identify as?
4. Where do you live?
5. What level of education have you completed?
6. Do you align with a particular political party? If so, which one and why?
7. How do your political beliefs impact your views on politics, society and the world?
8. Do you align with a particular religious belief? If so, which one and why?
9. How do your religious beliefs impact your views on politics, society and the world?
10. Are you involved in any community organizations? If so, which one(s) and why?
11. What is your profession?
12. How long have you been doing this type of work?
13. What does an average day look like for you in your line of work?
14. What made you want to pursue it?
15. What is the hardest part of the job, and what is the most rewarding aspect?
16. Do you do any other jobs/work that you don't consider to be part of your primary profession but contribute to your overall income and activities?
17. What technologies do you use in order to accomplish your daily duties?
18. What technologies do you use on a daily basis that may or may not contribute to your profession?
19. Do you listen to the radio? If so, where? What type of programming do you listen to the most and why?
20. Do you use social media? If so, what platforms do you use the most and why?
21. Do you listen to the radio or use social media during the times you are working at your job? If so, explain how such uses work within the confines of your duties?
22. How often do you consume news?
23. What types of news stories do you prefer to consume (e.g., politics, sports, weather, crime, economy, general, et cetera)?
24. Do you read newspapers or magazines? If so, what types of outlets do you consume?
25. Do you listen to news or talk radio? If so, what programs do you gravitate toward?
26. Do you get news from social media? If so, how much of the news you consume comes from social media, and what platform provides you with the most news and information?
27. How often do you share news you consume with family and friends, whether it came from social media or not, and how do you share it (via social media, in conversation, or something else)?
28. How open-minded would you describe yourself? Do you change your mind easily or stay firm in your stance in most situations? Please explain.
29. What impact does the news you consume have on your beliefs, opinions and perspectives of the world in terms of politics, society and other aspects of daily life?
30. How do you describe the news media? Why?
31. Describe your level of trust with the news media. Are there certain outlets you trust more than others? If so, what are they and why do you turn to them more often as trusted sources of information?
32. Are you more likely to trust local news outlets or national news outlets? Why?

33. How often do you believe the news media is accurate?
34. How often do you believe the news media is inaccurate?
35. Do you believe disinformation is a problem in society? Why or why not?
36. Who seems to be the most likely to spread disinformation? Please explain.
37. Have you ever spread disinformation via interpersonal communication or social media? Please explain.
38. Do you think the news media spreads misinformation? Why or why not?
39. Have you ever spread misinformation via interpersonal communication or social media? Please explain.
40. Have you ever believed a certain piece of information and found out later that it was inaccurate? Please explain.
41. Have you ever believed a certain piece of information and continued to believe it despite evidence suggesting it was inaccurate? Please explain.
42. When you encounter information you know is false, do you take steps to correct it or ignore it? Please explain.
43. How likely are you to believe a piece of information if it is relayed to you (via the news media or social media) if it comes from an outlet or individual you believe to be trustworthy or otherwise contain expertise in the subject matter? Please explain.
44. What causes you to not believe a source of information? Please explain.
45. Do you tend to believe, what others might classify as, conspiracy theories in general or any conspiracy theories in particular? Please explain.
46. Are you involved in your community? Please explain.
47. How important is being involved in the community to you? Please explain.
48. How involved in politics are you? Please explain.
49. Do you put political signs on your property? Please explain.
50. Do you share political messages or opinions on social media? Please explain.
51. Are you more likely to vote in local elections, state elections, or national elections?
52. Do you feel you are most informed about local politics, state politics, or national politics? Please explain.
53. What type of news and information do you consume to be informed about politics?
54. How would you describe your level of trust in politicians?
55. How would you describe your level of trust in the government?
56. How would you describe the importance of journalism?
57. How would you describe the importance of community journalism?
58. If given the opportunity to contribute to news coverage of your community, how would you do so and what types of news would you push to see more of?
59. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic that we haven't covered?

Appendix C - Recruitment Letters

Email Message

To Whom It May Concern:

Hello. My name is Todd Vogts. I am a doctoral student at Kansas State University, as well as a resident of Kansas.

I'm writing you today because of my student status. I'm doing my doctoral dissertation research in the realm of journalism and mis- and disinformation, and I am investigating how rural, Kansas residents get their news and how mis- and disinformation spreads in the state.

To accomplish this, I am conducting a survey and looking for volunteers to be interviewed.

If you would be willing to assist me by taking part in one or both of these methods of collecting information, I would be grateful.

Here's a bit of a breakdown of what each method would entail . . .

The survey will not collect individually identifiable information. It only asks demographic information without requiring your name. Then, there are 50 questions that are either multiple choice or "on a scale of 1 to 5"-type questions.

As for the interviews, we would agree on a time and method to talk. Anyone who is interviewed will be identified by an assigned alias, title, general organizational affiliation, and other demographic information as necessary. Each interview should take 30 to 90-minutes, and they will be recorded so I can produce transcripts of what we discussed, which will be how I make sense of the information and insights you provide.

If you are willing to participate, the digital survey and the interview sign-up Google Form I've created will allow you to "sign" that you are agreeing to the study and understand the details of the research.

To take the survey, please follow this link:
https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3HF78mstUQTeVym

To sign up to be interviewed, please follow this link:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScaoMujVSlkOTMNselSQxLMKAKfvG4D9yMeYPtdQ11xofPO3w/viewform?usp=sf_link

Of course, if you have any questions, please let me know. I'd be happy to discuss this project in more detail with you.

Thank you for your consideration, and I hope to talk to you soon!

— Todd Vogts

Social Media Post

I'm working on completing my Ph.D., which means I need to write a dissertation. As part of this, I need to do some research.

I'm exploring journalism and mis- and disinformation, and I am investigating how rural, Kansas residents get their news and how mis- and disinformation spreads in the state.

To pull this off, I've made a survey that I'm needing at least 500 people to complete, and then I would like to interview 50 people to get a little more depth.

That means I could use your help.

If you live and work in rural Kansas and are willing to help out, please click on one or both of the links below.

SURVEY: https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3HF78mstUQTeVym

INTERVIEW SIGN-UP:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScaoMujVSlkOTMNselSQxLMKAKfvG4D9yMeYPtdQ11xofPO3w/viewform?usp=sf_link

If you have any questions, please let me know, and thank you in advance for your consideration!

Farm Bureau Newsletter Recruitment Blurb

How do you get your news? Why do fake news and misinformation spread? How do we know if we can trust the media? That's what K-State graduate student Todd R. Vogts is trying to figure out, and he needs your help. He is conducting a survey to find out how Kansans get their news, and he would appreciate it if you would participate by clicking on the link below. The survey is anonymous, and participants will have the opportunity to enter a drawing to win one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if it's completed by Jan. 15, 2023.

https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0MVArC1eJdL4MFo

Kansas Sampler Foundation Newsletter Recruitment Blurb

How do you get your news? Why do fake news and misinformation spread? How do we know if we can trust the media? That's what K-State graduate student Todd R. Vogts is trying to figure out, and he needs your help. He is conducting a survey to find out how Kansans get their news, and he would appreciate it if you would participate by clicking on the link below. The survey is anonymous, and participants will have the opportunity to enter a drawing to win one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if it's completed by Jan. 31, 2023.

https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9NVvsJjU8Rzh84m

Sterling College Recruitment Blurb

Enter to Win a $50 Amazon Gift Card by Completing This Research Survey

How do you get your news? Why do fake news and misinformation spread? How do we know if we can trust the media? That's what K-State graduate student and Sterling College assistant professor Todd R. Vogts is trying to figure out, and he needs your help. He is conducting a survey to find out how people working, living, and learning in Kansans get their news, and he would appreciate it if you would participate by clicking on the link below. The survey is anonymous, and participants can enter a drawing to win one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if it's completed by Feb. 17, 2023.

https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9o7h1SgCyX0n0Z8

K-State Today Recruitment Blurb

How do you get your news? Why do fake news and misinformation spread? How do we know if we can trust the media? That's what K-State graduate student Todd R. Vogts is trying to figure out, and he needs your help. He is conducting a survey to find out how Kansans get their news, and he would appreciate it if you would participate by clicking on the link below. The survey is anonymous, and participants will have the opportunity to enter a drawing to win one of two $50 Amazon gift cards if it's completed by March 12, 2023.

https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_5upW2lrmf7WO6G2

_____

• *K-State Today for faculty/staff* | *K-State Today for students*

• *Volunteer opportunities*

HEADLINE:
Research Survey Participants Needed

SUMMARY:
How do you get your news? Why do fake news and misinformation spread? How do we know if we can trust the media? That's what K-State graduate student Todd R. Vogts is trying to figure out with a survey as part of his dissertation research project.

COMMENTS FOR THE EDITOR:
I have IRB approval for this research project. My number is as follows: IRB-11307

Appendix D - Interview Participants

Assigned Alias	Reported Age	Gender Preference	Professional Industry	Education Level	Political Alignment	Religious Affiliation
Abraham	52	Male	Agriculture	High School	Republican	Christianity
Barney	34	Male	Finance	Bachelor's	Unaffiliated	Christianity
Bart	37	Male	Education	Master's	Unaffiliated	Christianity
Chalmers	59	Male	Education	Doctorate	Republican	Christianity
Clancy	37	Male	Manufacture	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Cletus	37	Male	Agriculture	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Doris	47	Female	Education	Doctorate	Democrat	Christianity
Eddie	43	Male	Agriculture	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Edna	44	Female	Education	Bachelor's	Democrat	None
Helen	21	Female	Student	High School	Republican	Christianity
Herman	39	Male	Construction	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Jasper	76	Male	Agriculture	Doctorate	Republican	Christianity
Kent	39	Male	Agriculture	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Marvin	75	Male	Agriculture	MFA	Democrat	Christianity
Maude	31	Female	Agriculture	Doctorate	Unaffiliated	Christianity
Moe	35	Male	Service	Bachelor's	Unaffiliated	Christianity
Monroe	50	Male	Education	Doctorate	Libertarian	Christianity
Montgomery	40	Male	Education	Doctorate	Independent	Christianity
Murphy	46	Male	Agriculture	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Ned	69	Male	Agriculture	High School	Republican	Christianity
Nelson	55	Male	Manufacture	High School	Republican	Christianity
Patty	64	Female	Agriculture	High School	Republican	Christianity
Quimby	73	Male	Agriculture	High School	Democrat	Christianity
Sarah	37	Female	Education	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity
Sherri	42	Female	Marketing	Bachelor's	Republican	Christianity