

THE FACTORS BEHIND THE FAKE NEWS LABEL:
WHY SOME PEOPLE DISTRUST NEWS MEDIA

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by
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THESIS APPROVAL

THE FACTORS BEHIND THE FAKE NEWS PHENOMENON:
WHY DO SOME PEOPLE DISTRUST NEWS MEDIA?

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
the field of Journalism

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ABSTRACT

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TITLE: THE FACTORS BEHIND THE FAKE NEWS LABEL: WHY SOME PEOPLE
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News organizations across the country have struggled with the fake news labelling effect, meaning news one labels “fake” because one dislikes or disagrees with it, rather than the spread of misinformation itself, for a number of years, most prominently since the 2016 presidential election. The trend highlights a growing problem for journalists: the establishment of trust between news organizations and news consumers. The concern for many journalists is that left unchecked, a vicious cycle sets up that could threaten democracy itself: Consumers distrust information from media sources, then engage more with less trustworthy content that corroborates their own biases and serves them, algorithmically, more information that will further entrench those views. This ultimately lessens the ability of journalists to serve as a check and balance on government power, as in Edmund Burke’s classic Fourth Estate theory.

The fake news labelling effect poses a challenge for researchers. People who do not trust news organizations at all may be unwilling to engage in research that helps those organizations or even the field of journalism itself. However, news organizations have an opportunity to build

trust with their audiences, in spite of the algorithmic nature of social media news feeds, at least when it comes to those whose distrust of news media is not complete.

To test the hypothesis that how news organizations interact with people on social media may influence the extent to which news consumers trust them, the researcher sought out users who commented on the social media accounts of a mid-sized market news/talk radio station and conducted a series of in-depth interviews exploring their social media habits, news consumption habits, and personal beliefs. Analyzed qualitatively, the results showed transparency in reporting, ownership and other aspects of news reporting matters much more than social media engagement when it comes to improving trust between news consumers and the media outlets that generate news. The results also showed that the people who comment on a local news organization's social media accounts may not necessarily live in the geographic area covered by that organization.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research project focuses on the effects of social media interactions on trust in news media. The aim of the project was to determine whether news organizations could improve trust relationships with their audiences through social interaction, and if so, how.

The fake news labelling effect, here defined as audiences labelling traditional news outlets of being “fake news,” rather than the spread of actual misinformation, is a major concern to those same media organizations.

Fake news has many definitions. Lazer et al. (2018) defines fake news as information that has been fabricated to imitate information from a legitimate news source while intending to deceive. Gelfert (2018) argues it should only be used when a claim is presented specifically to mislead. Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg & Schatto-Eckrodt (2019) argue more precise definitions are needed, as the phrase can be either a pejorative directed at media organizations or journalists with whom one disagrees, or it can indicate either unintentionally or deliberately false information. Corner (2017) argues that fake news (in this case, news reports based on false information) exists solely because it is profitable, establishing that there are organizations and actors taking advantage of it to sway public opinion and engagement. Interestingly, in analyzing books written after the 2016 presidential election, Corner finds that the stage was set for the current predicament as far back as the 1950s. Certainly, fake news itself is not new, but Corner argues newer technology has allowed it to take hold in a way it would have been difficult to foresee even just a few years ago.

Tandoc, Lim & Ling (2018) conducted a literature review analyzing the use of the term in scholarly articles, identifying six ways in which academic researchers used the term between 2003 and 2017. They found that people who distrust media label those media outlets as being

fake news, a derogatory term that has less to do with an organization's credibility and more to do with whether users perceived that outlet as biased or even agenda-setting. During the 2016 election cycle in particular, the use of the term as a pejorative, indicating disdain for reporters or reporting, became more and more common. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, we rely on the definition of the fake news labelling effect as information the audience labels as fake news because they disagree with it or discredit it.

The phenomenon describes a vicious cycle; people who already have a certain viewpoint and who consume information online are likely to see only more of what already supports their viewpoints rather than divergent and contrasting content by virtue of social media algorithms, creating an amplification and an echo chamber effect. Tandoc, Lim & Ling tell us that people who accuse reporters or news outlets of being fake news are really accusing them of bias, having an agenda, and being untrustworthy. Most reporters became familiar with that use of the term during the 2016 election cycle, courtesy of then-candidate Donald Trump (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), as it was increasingly lobbed at them and their newsrooms, even when the information they were publishing or broadcasting was thoroughly fact-checked, vetted and verified.

Complicating the vicious cycle is the change in technology since Edward R. Murrow's famous "wires and lights in a box" speech of 1958. Allcott & Gentzkow point out that we consume media in a far different manner than we did in Murrow's time: through social media, news organizations have the ability to communicate directly with audiences beyond their traditional delivery methods. But illegitimate sources of information have access to the same social media platforms. As a result, most Americans have been exposed to stories that are not true, damaging the reputations of legitimate or traditional media organizations. Couple that evolution with the contention of the 2016 election season and zero in on the growing dependence

of news media on social networking sites to deliver their product, and it becomes clear how the fake news labelling effect may be amplified (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Caplan & Boyd take it a step further, suggesting Facebook's Edgerank algorithm may have taken over the role of gatekeeping from media outlets (2018), meaning that instead of media outlets taking advantage of algorithms to ensure consumers see their content, it is in fact the algorithm that is in charge of who sees what. Then, there is a new wrinkle of which media outlets must be aware: growing evidence that third parties, neither media nor consumers, are purposefully sowing disinformation in order to create discord and mistrust in media as well as change or at least influence public opinion (Corner, 2017). Much research is already being done on how media outlets can begin to counteract that damage — a lot of it centering on having journalists think of themselves as brands in order to rebuild trust and repair audience relations (Habibi, Laroche & Richard, 2014). What we did not have before now is concrete information on what truly works to repair trust at the organizational level, even as organizations worked to disseminate information in the presidential election year of 2020.

This research set out to answer the primary question: Why do some members of the public distrust news organizations? Secondly, can news organizations influence that trust through public interactions on social media? Through a series of in-depth interviews with people who commented on the social media accounts of news organizations in the year leading up to the 2020 election, we sought to evaluate the factors that lead people to trust or distrust news organizations, explored what, if anything news organizations could do to improve trust with their audience on social media, and evaluated the findings in light of existing research on fake news, brand trust and social media. The interviews provided a series of unexpected findings, including that many users do not see themselves as having interacted with a news organization at all, but

instead seemed to think they were interacting with a friend or family member, and that those interacting with a local news organization do not necessarily need to live in the geographic area served by that organization to see and interact with its content on social media.

Problem Statement

All of this matters, because many news media organizations have observed that the fake news labelling effect acts as a vicious cycle. When audiences distrust what they read on social media or websites, they accuse journalists and the media outlets behind those journalists of being fake news. Because of the algorithmic nature of social media information delivery, users tend to see that with which they already agree, creating an echo chamber in which their own viewpoints are amplified, meaning they are then served more of the same, while at the same time, they see less of anyone else's divergent viewpoints. Compounding that is the nature of how information spreads on social media; research shows that the crowd, rather than influencers such as celebrities or media outlets, has much more impact on what goes "viral" (Zhang, Zhao & Xu, 2015). This crowd mentality then has an amplifying effect of its own.

At a certain point, if journalists cannot effectively disseminate important information to news consumers, they cannot effectively serve as a check and balance on power. Therefore, we come to the question: how can we reverse the trend and rebuild trust for journalism and journalists among users of social media?

Chapter 2: Survey of Literature

The literature included in this review covers a wide range of topics, including the spread of false information, mistrust in news organizations, and how commercial brands interact with consumers, but in terms of areas of study, they can all be applied to two broad theories: Gatekeeping and Cognitive Dissonance. Because the problem is a complex one, the solution is similarly rooted in multiple areas of communication theory. Only by taking a multifaceted approach can we truly appreciate the many factors at play in the fake news labelling effect.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Leon Festinger first introduced the idea of cognitive dissonance with *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1962). The idea is that it becomes psychologically uncomfortable for a person to hold two inconsistent beliefs, and that person must therefore adjust in one of four ways: changing behavior, justification by changing understanding, justification by adding to the understanding, or ignoring or denying the information. With the fake news labelling effect, it is this fourth method that is employed to address the cognitive dissonance of the person who disagrees with the information. For example, photographs of President Donald Trump's 2017 inauguration showed much smaller crowds than administration officials claimed. Rather than back down from the claims or admit they were wrong, adviser Kellyanne Conway famously coined the phrase "alternative facts" to explain the discrepancy.

Van Bavel and Pereira's (2018) research on party loyalty demonstrate, through that same example as well as others, that political beliefs can be so tied to a person's self-worth and identity, they choose to reject verifiable truth rather than betray their own belief system. Applying that same line of thinking to reporting, now two years and change later, cognitive

dissonance can explain much about the behavior of people on all sides of the political spectrum who accuse even their local news outlets of being fake news.

Cognitive dissonance theory would tell us that consumers of news on social media are not just victims of algorithmic preferences but are also self-selecting the information to which they are exposed. Jeong, Zo, Lee & Ceran found that while the algorithms do tend to create an echo chamber effect, users of social media are also amplifying that themselves through actions such as “unfriending someone who frequently posts contrary opinions” or hiding posts that disagree with their own beliefs (2019). Further, McDermott would caution us against assuming that those who take action to resolve cognitive dissonance are somehow less intelligent, saying these tendencies “represent universal aspects of human information processing. We all share basic biases in information gathering and we all suffer from biased reasoning and biased recollection” (2019). And to be clear, the echo chamber and amplification of social media is not unique to those who support President Trump or lean to the right of the spectrum; the same algorithmic gatekeeping that tends to show someone who distrusts the media more stories that support their point of view also tends to show those who support news organizations more stories that explain why their friends on the opposite end of the spectrum don’t trust the news.

Many studies conducted around cognitive dissonance explore whether brands can influence or change this effect to their benefit. A field study of direct engagement between news brands and Facebook users (Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman & Curry, 2014) found some support for the idea that news organizations can influence the tone of conversation in user comments by interacting with the users. The authors randomized engagement on different days with respect to political stories to be either an anonymous station employee, a recognized political reporter, or no engagement from the brand at all. About half the time, journalist engagement resulted in a

more “deliberative” tone from users, and the rest of the time, the conversation tended to be more relevant to the discussion at hand as well as civil.

To summarize, cognitive dissonance theory helps explain why consumers of news and information on social networks may discredit that news and information because it does not align with their own preconceptions. It encompasses all backgrounds and levels of education. It does not take political sides — people affected by cognitive dissonance can be at any point on the political spectrum. While algorithms may account for some of the echo chamber effect that creates feedback loops in which people who already hold one type of belief are subjected to more information that supports that belief, cognitive dissonance accounts for the people who then self-select even more information that upholds their existing beliefs.

Gatekeeping Theory

Gatekeeping theory defines journalists and news outlets as gatekeepers, controlling the flow of information. Kurt Lewin (1943) first coined the term, referring to the idea that decision-makers may influence society, culture, ethics and even politics, based on what information filters down to those on the other side of the gate.

Gatekeeping theory applies to trust in news media in several different ways. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) note that the rise of social networking has removed journalists from their traditional gatekeeping role. In other words, through social media, people share things that have not been vetted and verified, which then are shared by more people. Because there is no one keeping the gate, there is an increase in both “good” information (that which is true) and “bad” information (falling into the category of fake news, harassment, etc.). Allcott and Gentzkow theorized that the flood of misinformation negatively impacted the ability of Americans to make decisions in the 2016 election cycle. They conducted both qualitative and quantitative research,

analyzing false news stories from both Democratic and Republican perspectives, then studied respondents' ability to tell "real" news from fake. They concluded most Americans were exposed to at least one and frequently more false stories related to the campaign, with slightly more of those articles pro-Republican. However, it is important to note that they could not conclusively prove their own hypothesis, because they could not tell how many people exposed to fake stories would have voted the way they ultimately did regardless of their exposure to the false information.

Another study that specifically addressed the 2016 presidential election considered social network algorithms to be largely influential in terms of limiting the role of journalists or even the public as gatekeepers of information (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Bakir and McStay posit that the influence of algorithms on both journalism and digital advertising contributes to the spread of false or even deliberately misleading content, while also amplifying its influence. Their case study of Facebook's Edgerank algorithm, analyzed thematically and qualitatively, shows that curating content using an algorithm can result in further gatekeeping of the gatekeepers. The influence of digital advertisers, who stand to gain financially by the spread of false information, makes them a secondary gatekeeper in that algorithmic world.

Caplan and Boyd (2018) take this a step further, hypothesizing that the algorithm itself has become the gatekeeper, rather than news media. Caplan and Boyd conducted a case study of the use of technology by newsrooms to spread messages, finding that journalists' dependency on social networks and their algorithms have fundamentally changed the way the media does business, and in the process, journalists have abdicated their gatekeeping responsibility.

This, then, leads to a new way of thinking about false information being spread online. Who is responsible for the spread of misinformation? Is it journalists? If journalists have given

up their gatekeeping role, is it computers? Lazer et al. (2018) conclude journalism needs an ecosystem overhaul, in a case study of false stories published and spread during the 2016 election cycle. They theorized that an evolution of society and political preferences created an environment in which fake news attracts a larger audience, then self-amplifies as a result. Once again, the algorithm itself emerges as having either become the gatekeeper or thwarted it; the findings conclude that each social media platform's efforts to combat fake news falls short in part because of an algorithmic dependence on ad revenue and attention-seeking.

Next, we look at the sources that people choose from which to get information. Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zuniga (2017) established a relationship, though not a correlation, between people who trust traditional news and their use of traditional news. However, they could not establish a link between people who prefer social media or citizen news and those people's distrust of traditional media, which suggested gatekeeping alone may be just part of the underlying issue. While not part of their research itself, the basis for their study was founded on the idea that people may seek out alternative sources for information such as citizen and social media because they no longer trust traditional journalists' gatekeeping abilities, preferring to serve as their own gatekeepers.

Some researchers zeroed in on the role of media literacy in gatekeeping theory. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) conducted a qualitative analysis of viral phenomenon throughout the 2016 presidential campaign. Paying special attention to the spread of misleading or incorrect stories that spread widely, they found the media may need to rethink media literacy education, rather than focusing solely on correcting and exposing false information. Once again, because the algorithm itself may be serving as a gatekeeper, members of the public are increasingly

exposed to views with which they already agree rather than a diversity of opinions and ideas, amplifying this polarizing effect.

Marchionni (2015) examined online story comments, finding a similar trend in users serving as their own gatekeepers. Interestingly, Marchionni was unable to prove that users got more perceived value out of conversations with journalists and other users on these comment boards, which was at the heart of the study. However, it does provide more evidence that users are at least sometimes concerned that journalists, serving as gatekeepers, have been withholding important stories and information from the public.

Another study that examined online comments concluded that journalists were more likely to “flag” incivility or partisan terminology as inappropriate than the public, suggesting users may prefer to serve as their own gatekeepers (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). The researchers analyzed millions of comments on stories from The New York Times while screening for certain keywords to determine the presence of incivility or partisan commentary. Users were more likely to “upvote” or approve comments with partisan terminology or even swearing than journalists given the role of moderating the discussion.

A third study of user-generated comments (Santana, 2014) explored the role of anonymity in civility and interaction among users on websites. While the users appreciated being able to serve as their own gatekeepers, the qualitative analysis found of all the comments deemed “uncivil” by three independent coders, 65% came from anonymous users, compared to 35% from users who were identified. In other words, people did not have to have anonymity in order to engage in incivility, but anonymity seemed to mean they were more likely to do so.

One area of study centered on the idea that decreasing trust levels in media corresponds with decreasing trust levels in government. Zuckerman (2017) posits that a shift in civics, as

young people focus on effecting change through markets and norms rather than changing laws, can explain the decline of trust in both journalists and government institutions. Zuckerman examined multiple surveys and studies in the decades since the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s to show that the decline of trust is not new, and not unique to journalism, combined with an analysis of changes in civic engagement over that same time frame. The findings suggest an echo chamber effect; once again, people do not like to think that either journalists or the government might, in their gatekeeping roles, prevent them from knowing all there is to know.

Gatekeeping can also explain how trends emerge on social media. Zhang, Zhao and Xu (2015) studied the emergence of new slang technology on China's Twitter-like platform, Weibo, tracing the origins of each word along with their popularity in terms of peaks on a graph. The findings showed that the crowd, not influencers, had more control in terms of what went viral on social media. New slang spread most quickly in its early stages, before well-known influencers were aware of or used the words. In other words, while algorithms play a role in what information spreads online, the users of a particular platform also hold some influence on the gatekeeping process.

Several studies within the gatekeeping theory arena cited the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman, et al, 2017) or used its research as a jumping-off point for their own. This survey of 70,000 people about their news consumption habits was coupled with qualitative research in an ongoing study that has been updated annually. The findings demonstrate modern users consistently mistrust social media's abilities as a gatekeeper in filtering out fake news, and in countries like the U.S. where political views can be polarized, there was a direct correlation between distrust in media and perceived bias.

Newman and Fletcher (2017) conducted a qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses to the Reuters report, coding and analyzing those response and identifying common threads within them. They found that a significant percentage of those who do not trust the media perceive journalists as biased; there was also concern about information being held back inappropriately, as though journalists are failing to do their gatekeeping job properly. The findings also concluded journalists need to set themselves apart from “clickbait,” and do a better job of separating fact from opinion.

In conclusion, a wealth of available research shows that journalists may have unintentionally surrendered their role of gatekeeping to algorithms on social media platforms, while the public has asserted its right to serve as its own gatekeeper.

Chapter 3: Theory and Methods

Theoretical framework

Initially, cognitive dissonance theory formed the basis of this study for several key reasons. First, while contagion theory may help explain why fake news (in the sense of information that is untrue) spreads (Zhang, Zhao & Xu, 2015; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017), it stops short of providing insight into why a news consumer is willing to discredit information that is demonstrably true. Second, there are a number of scholarly articles that address the rise of distrust in media through gatekeeping theory (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Caplan & Boyd, 2018), but they again leave the reader understanding the result without the cause. However, while cognitive dissonance helps get at the “why” behind the fake news labelling effect, it does not fully explain how we got where we are. Therefore, viewing cognitive dissonance through the lens of gatekeeping theory provides the more complex point of view needed to explore this complex problem.

While cognitive dissonance theory shaped much of the thinking behind the research itself, the research itself could not conclusively prove its role in the formation of opinions or establishment of trust and distrust between news consumers and news organizations. In part, this is because no individual who completely distrusts media or considers news organizations “fake news” agreed to take part in the research. However, a number of people who stated they trust local news organizations also went on to talk about how they independently verify the information they glean from those sources. Additionally, while most of the subjects interviewed for the study were identified because they had interacted with news organizations on social media in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election, nearly all of them denied ever commenting on the Facebook pages of local news organizations or stated doing so very rarely.

Research questions and hypothesis

This study sought to answer the primary question, ‘Why do some members of the public distrust news organizations?’ To do this, we broke down the primary question into three research questions to explore in-depth. They were:

RQ1: Why do people who distrust a media organization choose to interact with that organization on social media?

RQ2: Do these same users interact positively with a media organization, or solely in a negative way?

RQ3: Can a news organization sway public opinion about its brand by either exerting more control over gatekeeping or offering more gatekeeping control to users?

RQ1 and RQ2 were aimed specifically at cognitive dissonance theory and its potential role in the fake news labelling effect. Theorists in this realm have established their belief that news consumers do tend to discount information, even factually proven to be true, that does not uphold their own beliefs or values. What was less clear is why someone would choose to interact with a brand they don’t like. RQ3 focused on gatekeeping theory and its role in a user’s trust (or distrust) of an organization, which led to the hypothesis:

H1: Word choice in social media posting and interacting after the initial post can influence whether and the extent to which a user distrusts a media organization or considers it “fake news.”

In the end, we must conclude that the word choice in social media posting and interaction after the fact can make a difference with respect to trust in a news organization. However, more important than that may be the original content the news organization is sharing, whether on a traditional medium such as radio or television or emerging technology such as web, mobile

application or social network. In addition, transparency may play a significant part in the trust of the audience for a news organization.

Method and Sample

A wealth of quantitative research already existed to establish that mistrust and distrust in news media not only existed before now, but is not new. However, there was a dearth of research exploring the reasons why that might be, which is why qualitative study seemed warranted. Additionally, much of the past research has focused on large media organizations that cover an entire country, but not on the smaller local media companies that provide coverage in a city, state or region. This study focused on in-depth interviews conducted with news consumers who commented on the Facebook page of a news/talk radio station in a mid-sized broadcast market during the 2020 presidential election cycle.

First, the researcher identified users who commented on multiple posts from the radio station's Facebook page related to the 2020 presidential election as candidates for in-depth interviews. Based on the available content of the page, these social media posts tend to attract the most polarized comments from the public, as well as the most comments accusing the organization of being "fake news." The 2020 presidential election thus provided a specific lens through which to examine trust in news organizations on social media.

As Berger (1998) notes, in-depth interviews can help answer "why" questions through extended one-on-one conversations with one person at a time. Berger suggests depth interviewing can be ideal in the commercial world to find out why someone prefers one brand over another; conversely, depth interviews should provide good insight into why one does not trust a brand or would discredit its validity.

Kumar further suggests the benefit of in-depth interviews comes from the freedom within the format (2014): they provide a layer of flexibility. Finally, Brennen points out that interviews allow researchers to broaden their understanding and consider new perspectives (2017). We began with a script of 16 specific questions aimed at gauging the user's perceptions about their local media brand, but based on the user's answers, went deeper on topics brought up by the user, asked them to elaborate on certain positions, and as a result, achieved a more well-rounded overview of what they think and feel. Where necessary, probing questions were asked to get them to explain more about their positions.

The disadvantage to this method is the time involved both to find subjects to interview and in conducting the interviews themselves. Because of the concern that people who already distrust media may not willingly or honestly participate in an interview with someone who would be disclosed to them to be a reporter or connected with a news organization, we offered an incentive in the form of a \$15 Amazon gift card to each participant who completed an interview. This ultimately did not entice anyone who specifically distrusts local news organizations or accuses them of being fake news. In fact, it took much longer to find willing participants than expected, as many of the people identified as possible interviewees never responded to the request to participate or opted not to take part. However, once completed, it did yield a cross-section of political beliefs, from liberal to conservative, as well as a wide range of ages, educational levels, occupations, and backgrounds. We ultimately reached out to hundreds of users who interacted with local news organizations on social media in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election to end up with a total of 12 completed in-depth interviews.

As Kumar states, the quality of the interviewer and potential researcher bias also can be downsides. The interviewer took care during the interviews not to include personal opinions,

insights or backgrounds, so that the subjects would not be unduly influenced by any bias of the interviewer.

Another potential limitation is the quality of the interviewee – not everyone is comfortable in an interview setting, and people are not universally perceptive or able to speak with clarity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As such, we carefully considered the wording of the questions, the order in which they were asked, and possible preconceived notions or biases on the part of the interviewees ahead of conducting the interviews.

As a result of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, all 12 interviews were conducted using remote video conference technology. All of the interviews took place in June and July of 2021. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The researcher asked a series of 16 open-ended questions in a casual format, though semi-structured, to help participants feel comfortable and encourage them to elaborate on their answers.

Analysis and Validity

The oldest participant was in their 70s, the youngest in their 20s. There were six men and six women, six of whom held advanced degrees, two of whom described a high school diploma as their highest level of education, and the remaining four somewhere in the middle. Four of the subjects self-identified as either liberal or liberal with conservative to moderate views on some issues. Six self-identified as conservative or conservative with some liberal or moderate views, and two who self-identified as “former” Republicans who now call themselves moderate. Nine of the subjects were married; three either single or divorced. Some had children, some had grandchildren. Only three of the 12 were not a parent.

In all, we interviewed the subjects at length about their perspectives on local news, journalists, trust in news organizations, and their interactions with news organizations on social

media. The group was identified through their comments on social media pages belonging to local news organizations; however, most of them did not see themselves as having commented on those pages or believed they did so only rarely. Potentially, this points to some additional cognitive dissonance at play.

The interviewer recorded and transcribed the interviews, then pasted them into a Word document to further analyze. The interviews were carefully analyzed for themes and patterns. Their answers resulted in the identification of five common themes: transparency and bias, media literacy and gatekeeping, accuracy, moderation and free speech, and news consumption. Interestingly, these themes appeared regardless of educational background, geographical location, age, or political leanings.

Chapter 4: Results

What follows is an analysis of the subjects interviewed and their responses in light of the proposed research questions: (RQ1) Why do people who distrust a media organization choose to interact with that organization on social media? (RQ2) Do these same users interact positively with a media organization, or solely in a negative way? (RQ3) Can a news organization sway public opinion about its brand by either exerting more control over gatekeeping or offering more gatekeeping control to users? The responses of the 12 subjects clearly brought up five distinct themes, which will be addressed after their introductions.

Participant summaries

Subject 1

Subject 1 is a divorced male in his late 40s who lives in the Midwest and works in the medical field. He described himself as a military veteran and a liberal with “some” conservative views. He did not pursue a formal education beyond high school. Subject 1 thought most of the news available to him included some kind of inherent spin or bias. “You’re not really hearing a story, you’re hearing spin on a story,” he said. While he once worked as a camera operator for a local television station, he says he now gets most of his news from social media or word of mouth. However, he indicated he likes to look for the source information behind news stories himself, regardless of how he encountered the news:

If I find it newsworthy and interesting enough that I want to know what happened, then I’ll go, like, for instance, ‘did you hear what Trump said this time?’ And, again, I hate to use the name because we’re all sick of him. But I wouldn’t just say, ‘Well, what did he say?’ and listen to what was said and be like, ‘well, he’s a dumb ass.’ I would go look for the clip. I would, I would find the news bit where he actually said what he said so I can

get the context myself. And look at the background and what the whole thing's about. I don't -- I don't trust anyone's one source enough to say that, you know, this side's right, or that side's right. Because both sides are putting their spin on. I want to -- I want to know what happened without the spin.

Subject 2

Subject 2 is a divorced female in her early 40s who owns her own business. She described herself as a liberal, specifically a moderate Democrat, and holds both bachelor's and master's degrees. She lives in the Midwest. Subject 2 indicated a general distrust for the local news organizations in her area, which she described as biased:

I don't trust my local news very much. To be trustworthy, I would say I would be looking for less bias. So, I would look be looking for the news, too, to report facts in an unbiased way, whereas I've lived in different places and read news in different places, and where I currently live, I feel like I can recognize the bias in a way that maybe people who have always lived here and grown up here haven't noticed because they don't have that outside perspective. So, I, I very rarely tune in to local news, unless there's some local event or weather that I want to see.

However, she considers herself an “over” consumer of national news – while working, she tends to keep cable news running in the background but will frequently double-check the information she hears and sees with an internet search of her own to verify details or get more details. Like subject 1, she feels both comfortable doing her own fact-checking but also confident in her ability to do so. “If I want more information, I just usually go to Google and Google whatever the story is that I’m looking for and see what things pop up,” she said. She specified that she

looks for reliable sources to back up that information, and when asked what a reliable source is, described it as a source with which she's familiar.

Subject 3

Subject 3, a married female in her mid-30s, is a stay-at-home mother to a young child. She described herself as conservative but leaning moderate, then clarified further to call herself a moderate Republican. She holds a bachelor's degree. She lives in the Pacific Northwest. Subject 3 felt local news organizations who do their own research can generally be trusted, but said she looks carefully to be able to tell that the reporters involved truly know the area:

If they're, if they're talking to people themselves, if they're, if they're going out and doing the work themselves, if I see too many bylines, from somebody that doesn't know, local issues about a local thing, then I go, I don't think that particular article is as trustworthy as others. ... I don't trust any of them completely. But the ones I trust more are ones that are local, where I recognize the names of people they've talked to, I -- I know who they've interviewed, I know, I know that street, I know that person. They're, they're talking local stories. And, and I can tell that they've done their research.

She described herself as being somewhat news "addicted," frequently scrolling through headlines and articles on her phone. With that, she pointed out that she follows both CNN and Fox but did not say that political leanings were behind that choice. Instead, she said, "they have different strengths and different weaknesses. CNN is better with international stories and not sounding like it's the end of the world and everybody's angry. Fox is better at covering the smaller national stories that mostly CNN doesn't bother with."

Subject 4

Subject 4 is a married female who works full-time in the legal field. In her early 50s, she also provides care for her aging mother. She lives in the southern US. In her own words, she called herself a “recovering Republican,” who described the 2016 election cycle as a “reckoning” for her. She now considers herself “maybe a conservative,” but when pushed to elaborate, settled on “moderate” as a descriptor of her political views. “I am a moderate, and I guess I didn’t change, but everybody else did, is kind of how I feel,” she said. Subject 4 considers her own local news organizations to be “pretty credible.” She appreciates that her local media outlets do not tend to sensationalize:

I think what I feel most comfortable with is when we can report the news and it doesn't, where it's not very sensationalized, where it doesn't have the -- I mean, all of them are going to have like these little bites to make you want to listen to that, like, Wow, that sounds like an interesting story. Let me tune in at 10 o'clock and find out what it is. But then there's also, there are stations that tend toward a little more of the dramatic, I think, than some of the others, which -- I don't think what they're reporting is erroneous, or whatever. I think it just sort of, sometimes I think the, the headlines can be a little more sensationalized than necessary.

In terms of national news, subject 4 considers CNN “the least slanted” of the available options. She expressed frustration with news organizations that provide too much analysis or explanation of the reporting. For example, when covering a presidential address, she said, “I don’t need the 45 pundits afterward, you know, telling me what I heard. I already know what I heard. I heard it. I don’t need you to mansplain it to me.”

Subject 5

Subject 5, a single male in the Intermountain West in his mid-40s, described himself as leaning conservative. He completed some college beyond high school but did not earn a degree. He works full-time. Of all the people interviewed, he came the closest to espousing a view critical of news organizations in the vein of fake news but did not go as far as to call local news organizations fake news. “I don’t necessarily agree with the term fake news. But I get where he’s coming from kind of, I guess,” he said. Subject 5’s biggest frustrations with local news organizations came down to accuracy. In response to the question of what makes a local news organization trustworthy, he said:

Accuracy for one. And... trustworthy. I have issues with [redacted], because I’ll go and read the articles and I can find errors and a lot of them. And a guy that never finished college shouldn’t find articles, find errors in your article. Some are typos, that’s fine. But, But still, I mean, don’t they have editors down there? And then other times, it’s, you know, stuff’s just incorrect. And it’s like, you know, there seems to be this whole thing of distrust in the media. And it’s like, well, get I mean, if I can read through [redacted] articles and find errors and things that aren’t correct and accurate, then why would I trust you?

He trusts local news media more than national news outlets but suggested that preference may have more to do with paywalls on national news sources than with the content they produce.

Subject 6

Subject 6 is a married male who holds a master’s degree. In his 60s, he is retired, lives in the Intermountain West, though he lived in New England and the Midwest at different times. He described himself leaning conservative but moderately so. Despite disliking the former president,

Donald Trump, subject 6 voted for him because of his own beliefs and principles, rather than Trump's. "I vote on beliefs and principles, not really on people, which sometimes, it's a little difficult to my wife, who is sometimes a little off on that, because I support a candidate that might not be to her liking, but because of the principles or the, all the views of the of the party, then I would vote for that candidate, even though personally, I might not like them," he said. To him, he perceives most of the national news organizations available to him to be slanted or biased in some form.

I don't know that there's any that I really trust. Right. I used to -- I used to, you know, probably before the last election cycle, or, you know, whatever you call the election cycle, right? The last two presidential elections, if you would ask me that before those last two presidential elections, I would have probably said, Fox News was the one I came close to trusting. Right. And again, I think, you know, the stuff like CNN and, and whatever the others are MSNBC, and that kind of stuff, those, those to me are always so slanted and always really have been. Or so slanted. That I just go, yeah, I'm having a hard time digging through what's your opinion and what the News is. And, and I think Fox has kind of gotten that way, as well. And so I've kind of just given up on most of those. And literally, if I see something, and I'm, if I see something from CNN, when I scroll through, like Google News, or Yahoo News or something, and the source is CNN, for example, I'm probably less likely to click on that, than I would be anything else. Just because I feel like again, they're they're slamming every everything in a specific direction. And what I really want is just the base information, just like let me know, give me the information, I can make my own decision, I don't need you interpreting that information with your slant to make me try to think one way or the other.

He tends to prefer local news over national news for that reason and continues to watch his local television station's 10 pm newscast. However, he could not specify why he liked one station's 10 pm newscast over another except to say that's the one he'd always watched.

Subject 7

Subject 7 is a married female who considers herself conservative, but moderate. For example, she described the former president as “a lunatic,” and expressed a desire for both extremes of the political spectrum to look for ways to meet in the middle. She is in her 60s and lives in the Intermountain West. She holds a bachelor's degree but is now retired. Subject 7 described transparency as critical to her evaluation of a news source as being trustworthy. She wants to know what content is meant to be opinion and what content is meant to be news, in a clearly labeled manner. In answer to the question of what would make a local news organization trustworthy, she said:

You know, that they just report what's going on? And, you know, if it's an editorial, they let us know, what's an editorial and you know, they just get on they tell us what's, what's happening and and report it and leave their opinions out. ... I think that we need to all of us, try to be honest and have integrity and and just say what we think.

She also tends to question what she sees in local and national news reports. An experience in her youth left her with some skepticism regarding the trustworthiness of news; a relative who was featured in a news report relayed that his action in the story had been staged at the request of the reporter who interviewed him. “It was interesting talking to him later, he did what the journalists asked him to do,” she said. “I felt like, ‘Well. That’s – that’s interesting that they’re trying to shape the news, rather than just report on it.’” As this happened on a national report, she feels more comfortable trusting local news organizations.

Subject 8

Subject 8 is a married male in his mid-20s who works full-time and holds a bachelor's degree and is currently pursuing a master's degree. He described himself as "fairly" conservative with some moderate views. He lives in the Intermountain West. Subject 8 felt that news organizations should face consequences for providing false or incorrect information. "I feel like there should be consequences for them based on the news that they give like, if the news is incorrect or false, then there should be some sort of check to them," he said. He did not think of himself as a heavy consumer of news, but said he frequently used Reddit to find information and news in his area and nationally.

I feel like today, in this technological age, we can get news in so many different ways that whatever the first way it gets to me – that's just, that's how it gets to me. I'm not like exclusively reading newspapers or reading – listening to the radio. It's just, however it gets to me, that's how it gets to me. ... I use Reddit a lot. I follow a lot of the local area subreddits, like discussion boards. And that's how I get a lot of my news.

He prefers his news to involve first-party sources, such as eyewitnesses to an event, and dislikes what he described as political spin or agenda in reporting. Once he no longer trusts a news organization, he feels like it would be difficult for that organization to regain his trust. "It's like they say: 'Once a cheater, always a cheater.' If it happens once, I'm under that belief that it's always going to be happening. And so, I don't know if there is a way to get that trust back."

Subject 9

Subject 9 is a married male in his late 40s who holds multiple degrees. He described himself as a moderate who used to be a Republican. He works full-time in the legal field and lives in the Midwest. The son of a newspaper editor, he grew up with newspapers in the house all

the time and with a healthy respect for local news broadcasters. But he also learned from his father to watch for bias or slant in reporting, particularly in headlines, a habit that carried over into his formal education.

My dad always encouraged me to challenge even my teachers. I mean, I can think of a handful of teachers that I got in trouble because they would say something wrong about history. My dad was a huge history guy. He had a master's degree. So he had every book. So if he had told me something I heard different in class, I'd go back to him and say that you told me that, my teacher said this, and he would then go get out a book. And he'd show me the book, I'd take the book to school, and the teacher would be like, would get upset because I was like, I was like, see, it's right here. This is history.

As a result, he likes to consume news from a variety of sources as an adult so that he can compare the reporting on one topic from different news outlets and come to his own conclusion. Like subject 7, subject 9 dislikes what he describes as the intermingling of opinion or editorial content and news content. "If you just watch just the non-opinionated sections of any of the major news programs, I think you can get a good chunk of news, real news. But it's just that most of what they have on is opinionated stuff."

Subject 10

Subject 10 is a retired, married male in his 70s who lives in the Midwest but spent his youth in the South. He completed a master's degree and most of a Ph.D. program but did not earn his doctorate. He described himself as a liberal and elaborated on that to specify progressive. Like several of the other interviewees, subject 10 consumes a lot of news but also does a lot of his own fact-checking about the news he consumes. Before the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, subject 10 described himself as consuming a lot of news from a lot of

different sources, both nationally and locally. However, during those election cycles, he found himself shying away from what he saw as more conservative sources such as Fox News. “I pretty much retreated into listening only to MSNBC, and to praying daily and offering thanks that MSNBC existed, that there was a counterpart to Fox News. And so, I mean, you can still -- you can still do your due diligence, monitor for objectivity and balance and honest analytics on a liberal station the same way you would on a moderate station or conservative station.” However, he feels that teaching that skill to others might prove difficult:

And if I had to teach students in a writing class, how to distinguish between honest writing and, and disinformation in the news media, I think that would be a good thing to tackle. But it wouldn't be easy to do. You have to, you know, I formed these habits before I was 10 years old.

In general, he trusts news organizations more than he does his fellow news consumers, feeling strongly that not enough people know, as he believes he does, to approach news with skepticism and a willingness to check stories for yourself. “You can't count on the great American population to differentiate between reliable news and false news.”

Subject 11

Subject 11 is a married female who runs her own in-home business and holds an associate degree. She described herself as a conservative and a Republican. In her mid-50s, she lives in the Intermountain West. While she may be the most conservative leaning of the interviewees, she generally trusts local news organizations, though that may be less due to her politics than to proximity. She was friends with someone who was the victim of a high-profile crime and established relationships with a number of local journalists as a result. “Most of the reporters have a level of professionalism, and they are courteous to the people that they're

interviewing, and they show an interest in having actual correct facts pertaining to the story that they're reporting on," she said. She seems to believe most journalists truly do their best to present factual reporting.

For me, it's all about truthful facts, you know, providing facts and and I think the, the reporters that I've read or listened to, for the most part, really tried to be clear on their facts. And for me, it's not about getting the news to me the fastest, it's about getting accurate news to me.

However, she was also willing to do her own verification of local journalism by looking for the same story from multiple sources.

Subject 12

Subject 12 is a married female who holds a master's degree and is currently working on a doctorate. She is in her mid-30s and lives in the Intermountain West. She works full-time. She considers herself moderate to liberal politically. Subject 12 dislikes news she perceives as biased, which she extends to the ownership of a news organization. However, she acknowledged she could not think of a specific example that backed up this perception.

I guess I can't prove it. But I always have it in the back of my head that organizations that are owned by a specific political religious party, either way, either side, in my view, will not report or say certain words that puts their party in a bad way. But I can't even think of an example, I mean – well, beyond the local level.

When asked what local news organizations could do to mitigate that perceived bias, she said they should be transparent about who funds them and how they work to address potential bias.

Demographic summary

Six women and six men between the ages of 20 and 75 participated in the interviews. Nine of the 12 are currently married; three described themselves as either single or divorced. All but three are parents; another three are also grandparents. Most described themselves as Caucasian. For two subjects, their highest level of completed education was high school; one had an associate degree, three more held bachelor's degree, and six held a master's degree or equivalent. They live in six different states, with one residing in a rural area, three in a medium-sized city, and the remaining eight in major metropolitan areas. Their income levels range from \$50,000 to over \$150,000 annually, with most in the middle of that range. Half of the subjects described themselves as conservative or conservative with some moderate-to-liberal leanings politically; four described themselves as liberal or liberal with some moderate-to-conservative leanings; two described themselves as politically moderate.

Theme 1: Transparency and Bias

Who pays the bills?

Two subjects, 7 and 12, specifically mentioned a desire for greater transparency from their local news organizations, whether on social media or in traditional reporting, an indication of concern about who does the gatekeeping of the news they consume.

In particular, subject 12 noted the appeal of clear disclosure of ownership and funding sources. One of her local news organizations is indirectly owned by a large religious organization. "So the stories are coming through that lens, and that's when I don't totally trust it," she said. When asked how organizations might mitigate that perception, subject 12 recommended full disclosure of funding sources. "Be open and honest about where they get their funding from, and then how they seek out different views."

Interestingly, subject 7 found herself more comfortable with the same local news organization that subject 12 distrusted because, in subject 7's words, she saw its ownership and leanings as more aligned with her own.

I think because when I was out here going to [a university], that was the, that was what we would flip on. And I just, I felt comfortable with [a TV station]. And you know, my husband and I were talking about it, well, maybe it's because we align more with their political views or how they spend things that we don't see it as a spin. But, you know, they get on if they report the news, they have a good camaraderie. And, you know, it's just easily accessible.

Later, she elaborated to say she felt the news organization in question went out of its way to find positive stories to report.

That was one thing that has always impressed me with [the TV station] is, you know, no matter how ugly the news of the day may be, I feel like they try to always find one story that's a feel good story where you find someone in the community that's doing a good thing. And they mentioned it, you know, and I think that's lovely. Because I think it's, it would be difficult to be a news agency that has to report the ugly stuff every day.

To sum up, one participant felt the ownership of a media organization could negatively influence its trustworthiness, while to another participant, that exact same ownership heightened the organization's trustworthiness. Their perceptions about what that ownership meant influenced their willingness to trust a news organization.

Bias or slant

Seven out of the 12 subjects referenced concerns about potential bias, and four out of the 12 used the word “slant” to describe similar concerns. (One, subject 9, described this as a “bent.”) Subject 1 described this as “spin,” but said in general, he believed national news organizations were more guilty of this than local news organizations. “The big names, the ABCs, the CNNs, the Foxes, the ones that are, they -- they have more of an interest in, ‘we want you to believe this certain things. So we’re going to put this article out in this light, and with this spin, so that, you know, you’ll think this way.’” Subject 5 expressed similar concerns about national news organizations: “Whatever I read or look at, I’ll consider with a grain of salt. And you can, it’s getting more and more where you can just kind of see right through it where you can, I don’t know, you can see where they’re spinning in a certain way or it’s, you know, framed to look a certain way.” Generally, these subjects expressed a tentative willingness to trust information from local news organizations, while also suggesting they felt a responsibility to verify that information independently, an indicator of some cognitive dissonance.

Subject 9 expected local news organizations to have biases, but was comfortable with that so long as the reporters who work there took steps to mitigate their biases:

You know, every liberal person should be able to look at Fox and say they do a good job of policing the president no matter who he is. Everybody should be able to see the same thing with CNN and MSNBC, and say they do a good job of policing that person. ... My dad was a newspaper man, certainly was a very liberal guy, for the most part. And he was he had no qualms about that. He called himself a bleeding-heart liberal, and he was proud of it. But he was always felt like the job of the newspaper was to report the facts and investigate in a neutral fashion. And he did that. He did that.

Subject 2 wanted to see any assertion made in a news story properly attributed to a source she could look up and verify herself if she wanted to. She said transparency in reporting and sourcing the reporting was important to her:

If I then go into the file and they haven't – or not into the file, but into the story, and they haven't like, properly, giving me citations of like, who said this or what this person's title is or what this person does. Or if there's, you know, if they make these generalized statements, rather than giving me specific statistical information, then that, that puts me off. And lets me know that that's not really something that I can trust.

Only two of the subjects, 3 and 8, did not raise concerns about bias, slant or transparency in reporting with respect to their local news organizations. However, subject 3 said she preferred local news sources that appeared to talk to a wider range of voices and viewpoints. “They tend to go to a small, smaller group of people to comment. The same group for the same sets of stories,” she noted. She also raised a concern about transparency without giving it that label, in pointing to an experience where she had been listening to a national news report.

There was an incident in my early 20s, where I was listening to a news organization that is by far one of the most trusted in the United States. It ends up being on lists of being very balanced and very trustworthy. And they were having -- they were interviewing someone who spoke Spanish, and they were having the interpreter do a vocal overlay on this Spanish speaker. And I could tell that the interpreter was not interpreting the speaker, she was not speaking at all on the same topic, as the interpreter was talking about. That would be a big one.

Subject 8, likewise, said he would likely distrust an organization that had been shown to mislead him in order to push a specific agenda, hinting at bias concerns without calling it bias concerns. He made reference to widespread protests in the summer of 2020 over the shooting of unarmed Black men at the hands of police. In his words:

I feel like a lot of those interviews were, especially when they were like, looting – or Minneapolis or Minnesota when they were like burning down buildings and stuff. Like, I feel like -- I don't want to say there was a narrative behind it because what happened there should not have happened, but I feel like those news organizations took that opportunity and pushed it for as long as they possibly could, just over and over and over again. And if there was a resurgence, they went right back to that to push whatever ideology they wanted their viewers to listen to. And so, I'd rather -- going back to the first question trying to tie it all together, I'd rather have a news organization that would just give me the facts straight. And let me take from it what I want to take from it instead of trying to take something that they're trying to give to me.

Once trust was lost, subject 8 felt it would be difficult for an organization to regain his trust.

Blurred lines

Another pair, subjects 4 and 7, decried the lack of distinction between news and opinion content on radio and television broadcasts, and suggested a more transparent line between those two areas of broadcasting would help their trust in news. Subject 4 specifically called out Fox News as an example of intermingled news and opinion content where the distinction is difficult to make. “There’s just a feeling on Fox that I’m being manipulated,” she said, referencing Tucker Carlson’s show, which she described as news, but which is a talk show, and therefore expresses the host’s opinions regularly. This speaks to both gatekeeping and cognitive

dissonance, along with a lack of proper labeling of their content by news organizations. Subject 7 felt similarly about Rachel Maddow on MSNBC, but also described her show as being a news program rather than talk or opinion based:

You see their true colors when they start reporting, and they're refusing to look at the other side or to, you know, work, or that they need to say, this is an entertainment section of our news, rather than this is us reporting the news.

In a specific example involving a local radio talk show with a host discussing a recent murder, subject 7 did not distinguish between the program as being an opinion or talk-based show as opposed to a news program or news cast:

The one thing about [the host] that really bothered me is she inserted herself in the news. ... she interviewed her daughter and her friends because they had known her and I thought, I need to back up a little bit, you know, and report the news rather than inserting yourself. And so that bothered me.

Subject 9 also felt local news organizations frequently fail to make a distinction between opinion and fact-based content and felt more likely to distrust organizations where the distinction is not clear. However, subject 9 felt confident in his own ability to make the distinction.

I'm like, because – they're trying to make themselves out to be a news organization. If you, if you have a bent, if you have – if you say, 'We are out to do X,' then fine, do it. But let it be known. I mean, it's like, let it go be out there. Don't hide what you're doing. And then make people think you're somehow a neutral party. There is some – there is some logic to having people with different viewpoints, advocate for those viewpoints.

And do it out in the open. That's what free speech is all about. I don't – I just don't like it. When it feels like that there's a bent. There seems like there's a bent to me.

To summarize: transparency means different things to different news consumers.

However, it could benefit news organizations to be transparent and honest about their ownership and funding, any potential biases and what they are doing to mitigate those biases, and the distinction between news-based content and opinion, “talk” or entertainment content.

Theme 2: Media literacy and gatekeeping

Consuming news critically

Only two of the interviewed subjects reported receiving any kind of advice or instruction prior to college on how to read or consume news with a critical eye. Those two both received that education from family members rather than from a formal school setting.

Subject 4 learned to consume news skeptically from her mother, whom she described as needing proof for everything.

She doesn't believe anything on face value. She's very, ‘prove it to me, what's the proof of this? Where did you get that from? Who'd you hear that from?’ So that was kind of a just sort of the given at my house, that we didn't just believe things because somebody told you that.

Subject 9, the son of a newspaper editor, described his father teaching him to read full articles, not just headlines, and look for bias and slant in news.

And he would teach me things like that you don't always look at the headlines.

Sometimes you got to look at the article, because he always said, and my dad was a newspaper man, as a former editor, he said sometimes editors have certain bents that you

see in the headlines. So you got to read the article, because sometimes, sometimes the headline's article matches, but sometimes they don't. So you got to read the article, read the substance of what's there. So you can try to figure it out for yourself. And that naturally led me to want to sort of expand my horizons and and try to get news from different sources.

Not one of the 12 subjects received any kind of training in media literacy in K-12 schooling. Only two learned about media literacy at a college level – subject 5 in a journalism class, and subject 2 as a communications major. However, all but one of the 12 expressed some awareness of the need to know how to spot bias or slant in reporting. For example, subject 1 felt compelled to seek out original source material on his own to ensure the news reporting he sees and hears does not miss important context:

Biden said this, or Trump said that, and it's so hard to know, you know, for at face value, well, did he really say that? Um, is that taken in, in context or out of context? And is there spin put on it so that I'll think less of, you know, Biden or Trump or more of Biden or Trump. We shouldn't have to, you know, interpret the news organization to get to the real truth. The -- it should be the other way around. The news organization should give us the real truth and let us develop our own opinions on it, rather than having those opinions implanted. ... I can't trust what anybody says anymore. It doesn't really matter what side they're on.

As referenced in the section on transparency and bias, two subjects who complained about blurred lines between opinion and fact in broadcasting also did not seem to be able to

easily distinguish between those types of content, suggesting a need both for transparency in broadcasting around that content and a need to better educate the public on the difference between news reporting and talk or opinion content.

Trusting but verifying: Self-gatekeeping

10 out of 12 subjects described a willingness to either check their own facts independently of a news source or to consume a story from multiple sources to confirm the veracity of a report.

Subject 2 felt comfortable and confident fact-checking even sources she generally trusts.

In her words:

Like, even with CNN, which is, like I said, the one that I have in the background, we recognize that there's bias in it, like sometimes they'll, you know, they have an agenda. And sometimes I will notice that they're, they're pushing something in particular, for whatever reason. And I'll think, you know, that's not quite true. So I'll, I don't mind, you know, doing a little bit of my own research to see, like, what I really feel about a thing, because I don't want to just listen to bias.

Subject 3, as previously stated, said she deliberately uses both CNN and Fox as sources in part because she sees them as biased in different ways and uses their perceived opposing points of view as a way to do her own fact-checking on both of them.

I think really, my – my main issue in trustworthiness and journalism is a matter of so much people's opinions. And you cannot, you cannot gain an adequate point of view of what is going on, if you're just trusting one source, one opinion.

Subject 5, who took at least one journalism class in college, described feeling obligated to view all news with a certain amount of skepticism:

I think there's a pretty noticeable divide where, you know, on the right side, you've got the Fox News, I think, I mean, and then on the, like CNN and stuff on the left side. So I mean, going into the understanding that it's like, I don't, I don't really trust any of them to be, they're all gonna present stuff in a certain way. And it's, it's, you know, I couldn't sit here and tell you like, where would you go to get unbiased news? I don't know. Because, because I don't know. So, you know, whatever I read or look at, I'll consider with a grain of salt. And you can, it's getting more and more where you can just kind of see right through it where you can, I don't know, you can see where they're spinning in a certain way or it's, you know, framed to look a certain way.

Subject 8, who likes to use Reddit as a kind of news aggregator, described feeling a need to vet the information he finds there. “You have to be careful, which is why I like to look around through, like, some different sources,” he said.

Subject 10 felt while the responsibility for trustworthiness should fall on news organizations, the availability of information from multiple sources makes it easier for him to do his own fact-checking and verification.

Nowadays, we don't get the whole story from any one reporter or anchor, we get snippets of it for many of them. And in a way that should help you to be a diligent consumer, be an educated consumer of the media that's streaming at you, because you're getting multiple versions of it, and you can test them against each other, and you can weigh, the

way a jury weighs, who's telling the truth here. And I guess, as citizens in a, in a democracy, and potential jurors in jury trials, we have to all take that seriously.

Only one of the 12, subject 11, expressed a willingness to simply trust a local news organization without feeling a need to verify the information elsewhere. However, she suggested that any experience with inaccuracy would lead her to choose a different news organization the next time. “I think that if they report too quickly, and inaccurately, is -- they wouldn't be my first source to go to. I would choose a different first source,” she said.

Fact-checking the other users

Several subjects pointed out their biggest frustrations come not from news organizations on social media, but from the other users who share their comments and opinions on the accounts of those organizations. Subject 1 described encountering the spread of false information from other commenters during the 2020 election season on a post involving the COVID-19 pandemic. “They were posting something that was intentionally misleading Um, and I went and pulled the actual current CDC guidelines on the masks and said, You're wrong. This is the real thing. I don't know what era you got your information from, but this is, I pulled this just now. And he got all riled up. And then that, you know, got the trolls going. And suddenly, it was, it was a free for all for, you know, us versus them.” When pressed to elaborate, subject 1 said it did not seem to matter to the other people commenting about where the facts came from, although it did matter to him. “Nobody cared about where the actual source came from. It all became, ‘They’re (the media) lying to us.’”

Only one subject, 2, seemed to enjoy or seek out commenting or engaging with other users, but she seemed to see it as her role to correct bad information from those other users. “I

want so badly to educate people,” she said, noting that she felt that way even when she knew it would become a flame war. “At some point, I’m, like I said, I’m going to give up and I’m going to be like, this is pointless. People are crazy, but I don’t know. I just still feel like I guess I’m an optimist.”

Theme 3: Accuracy

Facts, spelling and grammar

A full nine subjects out of 12 said a significant barrier to their willingness to trust local news organizations either on social media or elsewhere came down to accuracy. Several pointed out that simple spelling or grammar errors could result in a loss of trust for a local news organization. As subject 5 noted, “I mean, if I can read through [redacted] articles and find errors and things that aren't correct and accurate, then why would I trust you?” An error in a social media post might prevent them from clicking on and reading the associated article, for example. “If you can’t even get that right, what else are you not getting right?” he asked.

Subject 11 suggested that she would be willing to extend trust again to an organization she previously distrusted if they proved a commitment to improving accuracy. “They just really would need to work to get their facts straight,” she said. “And maybe they would need to do a little bit more research on topics that they’re reporting on.”

Subject 1 recommended news organizations take time to present quotes, soundbites or video clips in full context, rather than edited into a story. “Report everything, just like it is and say, um, this was actually said, here's the entire news clip with, you know, context.”

Sensationalism

At least four subjects disliked it when a news organization reported accurate facts, but in a way that they perceived as exaggerated or sensationalized to get more views, listens or clicks.

Subject 6 said he found even weather reports now feel as though the word choice and language, in social media and on broadcast reports, are designed to alarm him regardless of whether there is cause for alarm. “When I was a kid, there was no such thing as ‘wind chill,’” he said. “Because ten below zero was cold enough, right? And they didn’t have to try to go, ‘Oh, but it feels like it’s 20 below.’ I’m like, no, ten below is sufficient. I don’t need to know that it feels like it’s 20 below.” He also suspected broadcast news networks have a vested interest in sensationalism:

The whole 24-hour news cycle is, is this probably a stupid thing to say? But it’s probably more of a source of many of the problems in the country today than we typically think about, right? Because they gotta, they’re gonna be on the air 24/7, they got to have something to talk about. And if there’s not something useful to talk about, they’re going to dig something up to talk about and keep talking about it. And I just kind of thing that’s, that stirs a lot of the pot, that probably creates a lot of the anxiety that’s in the country today. Is that continual? Just, we got to find something to talk about, and the more controversial it is, the more we’ll talk about it.

Subject 2 decried “clickbait” style headlines that she also described as misleading, a sentiment shared by subject 5.

Subject 4 felt more trusting of news organizations that she did not perceive as sensationalizing facts. In her words, “I don’t think what they’re reporting is erroneous, or whatever. I think it just sort of, sometimes I think the, the headlines can be a little more sensationalized than necessary, really.” She continued:

I like that it seems more objective to me that there is a, you know, there's a reporting, but there's not the histrionics or the sensationalizing of the thing. I mean, like, tell me what's going on. I mean, there are some situations that are just catastrophic. And, you know, like, the whole thing with the building in Miami, I mean, that was, you know, you don't need clickbait to make that more important. It's already a horrible thing. You don't need to make it more, more awful than it is just to get people to look at you.

Theme 4: Moderation and free speech

Several participants in the research expressed frustration over the comments of other news consumers on the social media accounts of local news organizations, more so than what the local news organizations were sharing. As subject 1 noted, it would take a lot to entice him to engage in the public discourse on a Facebook post from a media outlet:

It's gonna take a lot for me to reply. Most of the time, if I'm replying, it's because I'm saying, you know, don't take that at face value. Find out for yourself. This is -- this is a, this is a conspiracy theory, you know, make sure you know you've got the actual story or there were a couple of times where somebody would post something that was obvious spin and say, you know, this is obvious spin. Don't give us obvious spin. Think about what you're saying.

Similarly, subject 2, who likes to try to educate other news consumers, said she finds herself commenting on news organizations' social media posts on occasion, but requires more motivation to do so. "I get sucked in sometimes," she said of engaging with other news consumers. "I try not to, because you're not going to win. You're not going to educate people. It's like, such a losing battle. But there I go. I try."

Only a couple of participants could recall the news organization who maintained the Facebook account stepping in to moderate comments or reply to their users. When asked whether that would have made a difference, though, most did not appear to think it would help, with a couple of exceptions. Subject 2, who was one of the few who acknowledged commenting on this type of social media content from news outlets, felt as though news organizations should be more pro-active in engaging in their own comments. In her words:

I think being more available, in terms of interaction would probably make me trust them more. If I felt like they were responsive. Like I, if I'm watching something on TV, I'll go, 'This is stupid,' right? But there's no interaction with it. They don't know that I think that. I'm sitting here thinking, 'this is stupid.' Or I'm sitting here critiquing that, you know, they have this right-wing bias, or this, you know, this really chauvinistic sort of worldview. They don't know about that. Right? So if they were to, if -- I guess if I were to interact on a story, they were to interact with me and say, Why? Then I would have -- I guess, it's an opportunity to then press back, you know, what I'm seeing that's, that's wrong. So they could potentially change that. If I felt like they listened and heard that and then reincorporated feedback into the way that stories are covered, it would probably take some length of time to establish that that trust.

Subject 7, who said she avoids commenting on these pages at all costs, felt more comment moderation from news organizations would help encourage more civil engagement on their social media accounts. However, she worried about the impact on free speech:

How do you avoid that without trotting on free speech? By, by – or maybe in the comments, you know, it was like with the cheerleader that had gone on, I don't know if

it's TikTok or what social media thing, that it spewed the profanities and got removed, and then the Supreme Court ... as much as I hate that ugliness. I guess my feeling is, my choice is to walk away from it. And I don't know how much you can tell people.

Subject 5 also raised concerns about the impact of comment moderation from local news organizations on free speech within their social media accounts. He did not recall having commented on any news organizations' social media accounts, but instead mentioned comment moderation on their websites:

It's like straight up censorship sometimes, where it's like, I'll, I'll make a comment that I think is totally innocuous, or there's, I don't have any ill will or – it's just vanilla basically. And it still doesn't get printed. And sometimes they, you know, sometimes they surprise me, and they do print stuff. So it's -- it's inconsistent, and it's heavy handed. And I think that I'm not the only one that thinks so.

This moderation practice, even with clear rules posted on the websites, led him to more distrust for a news source. “You understand which comments you’ve tried to make that didn’t make it... how many people’s other comments are not getting published and things like that?”

Subject 9, a lawyer, said he noticed news organizations sometimes interceding when conversations became too ugly or heated, but did not worry about that moderation squelching free speech. He said:

I had no problem with it. I mean, my firm belief is, your posts, you have the right to edit, plain and simple. You know, if it's -- I feel like there's responsibility on my part, if it's my post, it gets out of hand, I'm gonna try to keep it, keep it within the bounds, whatever I believe is civil. And so I have no problem with an organization doing that. I think that

they have -- they're a business, they're their own entity. They are a free speech entity. But, you know, I think that on those of us who are either in the free speech business, or are in the constitutional business, I think we have more of an obligation to, to be good safeguards of that and regulate our own content. I think that's important for organizations to do.

To summarize, news organizations could likely improve the number of people willing to comment on their social media accounts if they do more moderation to remove personal attacks and other “ugliness,” in the words of subject 7, but they also risk losing trust because of the perception of censorship in the process.

Theme 5: News consumption on social media

Six of the 12 subjects described themselves as avid consumers of news both on social media and by traditional means. Four described themselves as more moderate consumers of news, with just two saying they rarely consumed news in any form. Most used some kind of mix of television, radio, online, print and social media to consume news. How frequently they consumed news and in what manner did not seem to affect their level of trust in news organizations.

Subjects 3 and 4 described themselves as heavy consumers of news more likely to skim headlines and read online articles or stories posted to social media over watching a video or listening to an audio report. Subject 4 described wanting to feel as though she was up to speed on current events:

I kind of like to skim the headlines, you know, I skim – skim the headlines nationally and locally. I like to look over NPR. I think they – they have good national coverage. Or, like,

I like the Washington Post's website, you know, just kind of get a gist. I don't drill down a lot.

For the subjects who described themselves as avid news consumers, five out of the six picked up those habits in part from watching their older relatives consume news as they grew up. Subject 10 called his late parents "inveterate readers" who subscribed to multiple news magazines and frequently talked about current events in front of him.

They talked about news constantly with each other. And, and if a brother or a cousin or an aunt or uncle came by the house, we talked about, my parents talked about news with them. And I was fascinated by those conversations. And I sat around and listened avidly to them, mostly a silent listener.

Subject 2 recalled watching television as a child with her grandmother, though without the type of in-depth family conversations around news events that subject 10 remembered. Similarly, subject 7 recalled her family always having newspapers around. Subject 9, the son of a news editor, learned to read news because his father read news:

I think really, it was my desire, you know, for the – to get those magazines, was my desire to sort of broaden, you know, where I was getting my information from. I think probably the newspaper – just watching Dad read the newspaper every day, I just sort of got into that.

Nearly all of the participants did not see themselves as engaging with local news organizations on Facebook, or saw themselves as having done so only rarely, in a nod to cognitive dissonance. When asked to elaborate, it became clear that many users do not have to "follow" a local news organization on Facebook or other social platforms in order to interact

with that local news organization in that space. Because of the nature of algorithmic delivery of information, they may have been served content shared by a local news organization in their Facebook feed because of their geographic location, because people they know had commented on that same content, or for a number of other reasons. Engaging with that content in their news feed tended to lead them not to recognize they had, in fact, interacted with a local news organization but instead had interacted with their friends or family. However, these interactions still influenced their overall opinion of the news organizations.

While the research initially focused on people who interacted with a specific local news radio station on social media, they did not necessarily live in the region served by that local news radio station. This, again, may be a result of the algorithmic nature of how content shows up in people's Facebook feeds. If they have friends or family in a certain area, who interacted with that content, they are more likely to also be served that content by the algorithm in spite of not living there.

(RQ1) Why do people who distrust a media organization choose to interact with that organization on social media?

Despite the fact that the subjects were identified primarily because of their use of social media and engagement with local news organizations on Facebook in particular, most denied commenting on posts made by local news organizations on the platform or said they did so only rarely. For many of them, the reason to engage with a specific post from a local news organization came not because they followed that organization on Facebook but because someone else in their friends list had done so. So an interaction with a local news organization does not necessarily indicate a trust relationship with that organization. Rather, it merely indicates that the content has appeared algorithmically in the user's feed for any one of a number of reasons, which could include following that account but could also indicate that someone they know has interacted with that brand.

Secondarily, most of the subjects interviewed had some level of distrust in news media – but that didn't necessarily mean they did not consume news or interact with the news media. For the most part, they willingly accepted responsibility for their own fact-checking or verification in consuming news. The notable exception, subject 11, may have been more likely to see local news organizations as people she knows, not some nebulous "media," because of her proximity to a high-profile crime investigation in her area. Therefore, it's hard to say whether her general trust of local news organizations came from past consumption or direct contact and relationships.

(RQ2) Do these same users interact positively with a media organization, or solely in a negative way?

This question becomes trickier to answer in light of how few of the subjects admitted to engaging with local news organizations on social media. Most seemed to have seen themselves

as interacting with someone they know rather than with an organization. As such, their impressions of positive or negative interactions tended to be more likely the result of their interactions with other users than with the news organizations themselves. Potentially, this makes the case for more moderation from local news organizations.

(RQ3) Can a news organization sway public opinion about its brand by either exerting more control over gatekeeping or offering more gatekeeping control to users?

By and large, users seem willing to do their own gatekeeping. What it would seem that they want is for news organizations to be more transparent in a variety of areas: about who funds them, about where their facts come from, about potential unintended biases, etc. Organizations should also be more transparency about the gatekeeping that they do, as news consumers want to know how newsrooms make the decisions they make in terms of coverage, why they leave out what they leave out, why they talk to the people they talk to, etc.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Transparency in reporting seems much more important to consumers of news in terms of their willingness to trust local news organizations than how those news organizations interact with them on social media. News organizations should be as open and honest as possible about where they get their information, who provides their funding, why they report the stories they report, and the work they may be doing to address any potential inherent bias – whether on traditional media such as print or broadcasting or in newer territory for journalists such as social media. This may extend to the type of content being presented. Users want clear separation and labeling to distinguish between “opinion” content and “news” content.

Other factors that may influence trust in local news organizations on social media include accuracy, even at the level of spelling and grammar, and media literacy. Participants generally felt that a basic error, from a typo to the misidentification of a source, indicated a local news organization could not be trusted with more important facts. This perception persisted regardless of whether the error occurred on the air, in print, online or in social media. Users did not make a distinction between reporting on social media or reporting by other means. With respect to media literacy, as none of the participants received any formal K-12 education about how to read, view or listen to news content critically, it became clear that local news organizations may need to take responsibility for this type of education among users. This may require cooperation between news organizations and a commitment to combatting false information together.

Finally, local news organizations will need to strike a balance between a need to decrease offensiveness or rudeness in online or social media comments so that more of their users will feel welcome and willing to engage there and ensuring that the rules are fair and equal so that no one feels as though they are being silenced while other voices are amplified.

Theoretical Implications

Trying to understand the “why” behind people’s attitudes toward news media – and to a certain extent, finding out whether interaction with members of the public can change whether they consider a news organization to be fake news – required qualitative insight: the motivations behind why people think and feel the way they do is not something you can merely capture by measuring stress hormones or brain activity. However, the same cognitive dissonance that may have led some users to view local news organizations as “fake news” may also have led them to so distrust those organizations as to be unwilling to participate in research to improve that trust.

Cognitive dissonance may also explain why some users did not see themselves as having interacted with local news organizations on social media while also having commented on the accounts of those local news organizations on Facebook. While some users also did not think media organizations could do anything to regain their trust, cognitive dissonance potentially suggests a reason to test this further. In addition, cognitive dissonance could explain how some participants simultaneously extended at least a modicum of trust to local news organizations to provide factual and accurate information, while also feeling obligated to double-check that information themselves to verify its veracity. Of course, that tendency could also be just healthy skepticism on the part of media consumers.

Gatekeeping remains an important function of news organizations but incorporating the need of users for transparency and honesty and allowing them input on gatekeeping could help improve trust. In a social media world, communication is no longer one way from news organizations to their audiences, but two ways – yet it would seem a number of news organizations do not listen to the feedback their users are providing.

Practical Implications

Local news organizations should examine their reporting, on social media and in other places, to look for opportunities to improve transparency with their audiences. While it may seem repetitive, pointing out with every story that relates to their ownership about their ownership could go a long way toward repairing and rebuilding trust. Online, creating a page that answers questions about ownership and bias, as well as the organization's conflict of interest policy, could be useful as news organizations could then use that page URL to provide to people who comment on their social media accounts with criticisms about ownership or transparency. When it comes to transparency in reporting, any assertion needs to come with a cited source, so that it is always clear where the information comes from. Local news organizations should also take care to clearly delineate news content from opinion or talk content. Similar to the website on ownership and bias, creating a landing page with information on their website about the differences between opinion and news content could also help build trust while also directly addressing the need for media or news literacy.

It goes without saying that accuracy in reporting should always be a priority for any news organization, but this research showed the importance of getting even the most minute details correct. Along the lines of transparency in reporting, ownership and other areas, transparency in this realm could also help build trust. When newsrooms make mistakes or get something wrong, they should own up to that in a transparent way: tell the audience how you messed up, what you did to make it right, and what steps you will take to make sure it does not happen again.

Audiences do not distinguish between content from local news organizations that comes to them via traditional means and content delivered via social media. Therefore, news organizations should treat their social media accounts with the same professional standards

applied to their print, on-air and online products. If a story is not published on a website without having an editor check it for accuracy, style, grammar, etc., the same story should not be shared on social media without carefully checking the accuracy, style, grammar, etc. on the text that goes with that story. Social media offers a unique place for an audience to interact with a news brand; but the flip side of that coin is that brands need to live up to the high expectations of their audience in order to maintain the immense trust audiences place in them.

Limitations and Future Research

Massive developments took place during the time frame in which this research was designed and conducted. First, a global pandemic fueled some of the flames of misinformation and distrust in news organizations on social media. Second, a large group of people used social media to spread false claims that the 2020 presidential election had been stolen and that Donald Trump was the rightful winner. Third, some of those same people rallied in Washington, D.C., then violently forced their way into the US Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the election results that declared Joe Biden the winner. Even now, comments from members of the public indicate that some people, months after the Capitol incursion, discount the severity of the events there. Presently, local news organizations get messages from users who believe they are deliberately misleading them about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, a subset of the population that comments on news organizations' social media accounts insists that Joe Biden did not win the election and that Donald Trump did. All of those developments potentially shaped people's views on and trust in local and national news organizations, while also remaining outside of the scope of this research project.

Another possible limitation of the research was the refusal of some people to take part in the study due to their belief that anyone working in news media is a part of or proponent of fake

news. A \$15 Amazon gift card was not enough incentive to persuade anyone with that specific point of view to take part. Most of the users who seemed hostile to the news media, based on their comments, never responded at all to the invitation to take part in the research. The few who did respond told the researcher they had nothing to say or add. That means while their comments provided insights into part of their relationship with news organizations, the researcher could not probe into the reasons why with this specific segment of the news consuming audience.

Future research can and should address both limitations. Perhaps future research on the social media activity of participants of the Jan. 6 incursion could focus on quantitative, rather than qualitative, data, to overcome the problem of willing participation. Qualitative research in this area could be more beneficial if generated from a different area of study, such as psychology rather than journalism, to overcome the reluctance of some people to interact with and engage with a journalism study. Perhaps a larger incentive would have made a difference, or a different sampling method that cast a wider net – as we now know that people who comment on one news organization’s Facebook account may not actually follow or “like” that account and may not live anywhere near its location.

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Appendix: Interview Transcripts

Interviewee: Subject 1

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: June 29, 2021

List of acronyms: S1 = Subject 1, BZ = Interviewer

S1: My name is [redacted]. Um, I am currently employed at the [redacted] in [redacted]. 42, no 49 years old, psh, I wish I was only 42. I have two cats. I'm divorced, have three kids, two daughters and a son that wants to be my daughter. Um, and that's about it, I guess.

BZ: Where would you describe yourself on kind of the political spectrum?

S1: I'm probably pretty far left. But realistically, I mean, I try to stay as apolitical as possible. Because I hate to use the quote, that there are, you know, some pretty good points on both sides. I have -- have a few conservative views that, you know, a lot of people don't really agree with. But most of my views pretty much tend to be left.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S1: I would find the term fake news is just about most of what you see out there. What really saddens me with, with news that becomes fake news is it's -- you're not really hearing a story, you're hearing a spin on a story. Um, so if -- if well, like Trump loved to use the term fake news for you know, for anything that didn't, you know, paint him in a good light, whether it was true

or not. And some of it might have been true, and some of it might not have been true. But well, when all came down to it, it was just a thing that happened that some people were painting it this way, say 'hey, Trump did this and it was really bad.' And then other people are saying, 'Trump did this' and painting in another way that makes Trump look good. And you lose the sense of what really -- what it was that actually happened.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S1: A local news organization? I actually worked for a local news organization, about 20 years ago. I worked for [redacted], up on [redacted]. A local news station is just the local crew. They have their own broadcasting station there in the local area. They do the local happenings, local weather. And then when they get done with their stuff, then they pass it off to the syndicated news, which is your national news and who ultimately owns the company. So like, channel [redacted] is your local ABC Company, and then ABC is the national version of that.

BZ: What would make a local news organization trustworthy to you?

S1: Being factual, and not editorial.

BZ: Say more about that.

S1: So pretty much just like, hey, this thing happened, this is the cause of what happened, this is the results of the -- the thing that happened. And, you know, here's some, you know, facts

leading up to, you know, what might have caused it. Instead of saying, you know, this guy went out and did this, and he's probably thinking this and that, and, and putting a spin on it. Just... Just keep it to the facts, just, just say, this happened. And, you know, let people create their own opinions on it.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child or as a teenager.

S1: Um, you know, as a child or a teenager, I didn't really pay a whole lot of attention to the news, I was -- I was really more busy with my own things. So I don't really know how to answer that question. Because I... no, I do know that. You know, I remember, whenever we did hear news, when I was, you know, with my parents, my dad always had something to say about it. He was very anti-government, he was very conspiracy theoretical, and it was always, 'they're trying to control us, and they're lying and all that,' which got a little bit old after a while. And I guess that might be one reason that I had a tendency not to pay attention to, because all I ever heard was, lies, lies, lies. Whether it was true or not, it was it was that's -- that's how it was interpreted for me when I was growing up.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S1: Um, now most of what I hear, I hear because I don't watch television. So, I hear news from an article that somebody posted on Facebook, which, you know, sounds really bad. Or, you know, I'll hear somebody talking about this thing that happened, or this thing that somebody said, but what I'll do, if, if I, if I find it newsworthy and interesting enough that I want to know

what happened, then I'll go, like, for instance, 'did you hear what Trump said this time?' And, again, I hate to use the name because we're all sick of him. But I wouldn't just say, 'Well, what did he say?' and listen to what was said and be like, 'well, he's a dumb ass.' I would go look for the clip. I would, I would find the news bit where he actually said what he said so I can get the context myself. And look at the background and what the whole thing's about. I don't -- I don't trust anyone's one source enough to say that, you know, this side's right, or that side's right. Because both sides are putting their spin on. I want to -- I want to know what happened without the spin.

BZ: Would you say you're more likely to home in on you know, local news versus national news. Any particular type of news, like whether it's a newspaper or radio or TV?

S1: Um, in the last few years, most of my concerns were political. But it was mostly because of, you know, the -- well, it was the sign of the times, it was what was going on. I wanted to know what was happening, where we were headed. Now, I mean, if, if there was an accident somewhere or a wreck or a national disaster, I'm more concerned with, you know, is everyone okay? Is this, is this a storm that's going to be heading my way? Or is this an earthquake that you know, has potential to cause other earthquakes? And is it, you know, pointing in the direction of where we are headed in as far as climate? But mostly if it's, if it's not really relevant to, to myself, personally, or to the well-being of the global population, I kind of just like, let it slide.

BZ: Would you say you're more likely to follow news on social media or through like, traditional means?

S1: Social media, but again, only because I don't watch television, and I don't listen to the radio, so I don't have the opportunity to follow it through mainstream media. I said, if, if I hear something, it's because I've heard some people talking about it at work, or somebody posted an article on Facebook, or Reddit.

BZ: Do you follow any local news organizations on social media?

S1: No.

BZ: What about national?

S1: No.

BZ: What type of content are you really kind of looking for when it comes to news that you encounter on social media?

S1: Um, well, again, just content that is, you know, forewarnings of things to come, you know? I'm looking more for, how does this, you know, whatever I've heard, affect the future? Is it something that I need to be worried about? Or is it just a news of the day to keep everybody you know, interested? Um, if I could backtrack a little bit, you asked where I got my news source, sometimes I will flip over to the -- you're on Reddit, right? So you have the homepage, and then you have the popular page. And then you go the other way, and you have the news page. And

every once in a while, I'll flip over there and scroll and see, you know, current events and see if anything catches my eye. But I haven't really done that for a while. And again, I was mostly looking at, you know, where are we headed politically, because I felt that it was very important to know, you know, which side was winning and which side was not winning. And I can't -- I hate to say it is pitting us against them or one side winning versus the other side. But that's kind of, you know, how I felt. That if things were going to go the way the last four years have gone, you know, it was going to be a rough patch. So now, I mean, I'm kind of over that. I like to keep just enough feel on it to know if we're gonna go through the same thing, but with a different culprit. So I, you know, kind of keep my eye on what Biden's doing and saying just -- just enough to, you know, not get into the whole he said, she said, or who's better than the other? Just what's going on? Is there anything that I need to be worried about that's going to cause you know, trouble over the next few years?

BZ: What kind of social media content Are you the most likely to comment or reply on when it comes to news?

S1: Um, probably still political. But it's gonna take a lot for me to reply. Most of the time, if I'm replying, it's because I'm saying, you know, don't take that at face value. Find out for yourself. This is -- this is a, this is a conspiracy theory, you know, make sure you know you've got the actual story or there were a couple of times where somebody would post something that was obvious spin and say, you know, this is obvious spin. Don't give us obvious spin. Think about what you're saying. I can't think of anything -- well, local or non-political that I would really need to put a comment on, because it's mostly your political stuff that's getting the most spin, that

or it says it's something that's irrelevant that's happening that somebody put a political spin on. That's sad that, you know, they're taking some, you know, people will take the randomest thing and make it political. Yeah.

BZ: Okay, so think back to an interaction that you may have had on social media in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election, either on a local news organization's account or some kind of news story, how would you characterize that interaction?

S1: Um, well, it actually turned out pretty volatile. Because somebody was posting -- it was, it was about the masks, you know, us wearing masks, and they were posting something that was intentionally misleading. Um, and I went and pulled the actual current CDC guidelines on the masks and said, You're wrong. This is the real thing. I don't know what era you got your information from, but this is, I pulled this just now. And he got all riled up. And then that, you know, got the trolls going. And suddenly, it was, it was a free for all for, you know, us versus them. And it was, it was pretty sad.

BZ: I'm guessing that, you know, there was kind of non-news people piling on each other, right?

S1: Yes.

BZ: And did the news organization in question get involved at all?

S1: No, it was it was strictly, you know, somebody said something that they saw, it was supposedly an article that said that masks were not working, they weren't effective. And we really shouldn't be wearing them, and that's what they were, you know, trying to do, but the source that he was getting his stuff from, it never got questioned, it was -- the actual article that he was quoting, never, once I came back and said, this is the CDC guidelines right now. It all became about the CDC was lying, and that political spin all over again.

BZ: But mostly, like, regular person to regular person?

S1: Regular person to regular person, it wasn't -- it wasn't any kind of the news station or the article, the source of the article never weighed in.

BZ: Do you think that would have made a difference? If they had?

S1: I'm pretty sure the piling on would have happened regardless. Because once they got to that point, it was just nobody cared about where the actual source came from. It all became, they're lying to us. And if -- if the news article's source had piled on, then the other side would have just said, No, you're just lying and spinning to get us to do what you want us to do or believe what you want us to believe. So it had already degraded to the finger pointing, and he's saying and she's saying.

BZ: Think about news organizations, organizations that you maybe trust or are more likely to trust than others. Why do you trust them?

S1: Um, well, I can't think of anything that I do trust more than I trust others. There's -- I guess, I would trust the [redacted] just because, you know, I used to work for them. But then again, you know, I'm only looking at them so far as this wreck happened on [redacted] or this you know, company had a fire or you know, the -- the local relevant stuff. I don't think there's any local station that I would trust more or less than any others. As long as it stays local, it's -- Where I get my hesitation and grains of salt, you know, from our -- the mainstream, the syndicated stations, the -- you know, the big names, the ABCs, the CNNs, the Foxes, the ones that are, they -- they have more of an interest in, 'we want you to believe this certain things. So we're going to put this article out in this light, and with this spin, so that, you know, you'll think this way.'

BZ: Think about organizations that you don't trust. And let's talk a little bit about why you don't trust them. I mean, I'm picking up a theme here. Would it be fair to say that for you bias and, and slant are kind of a turn off?

S1: Yes, it's very much a turn off. Again, because, well, it's so hard to know. Like, to, okay, so, Biden said this, or Trump said that, and it's so hard to know, you know, for at face value, well, did he really say that? Um, is that taken in, in context or out of context? And is there spin put on it so that I'll think less of, you know, Biden or Trump or more of Biden or Trump. We shouldn't have to, you know, interpret the news organization to get to the real truth. The -- it should be the other way around. The news organization should give us the real truth and let us develop our own opinions on it, rather than having those opinions implanted. [unintelligible], they're reported, because they're reported as, 'this is fact, this is -- this actually happened, and this

person is just outright evil, because he did this.' When it's not really that cut and dry. And so yeah. I can't trust what anybody says anymore. It doesn't really matter what side they're on.

BZ: What would it take for you to gain trust in a news organization?

S1: I don't think -- I don't think that's doable. Because the, you know, all of the, the mainstream... Well, at least the big names have already shown their colors, they they've, you know, shown for years that they don't care to spin it to the to make you think, you know, one way or the other. I guess, you know, what it would take would be a brand-new company to come out if they were to survive. And -- and report something, you know, report everything, just like it is and say, um, this was actually said, here's the entire news clip with, you know, context. This, you know, is something that you might, you know, not know about it, and this is something else on the other side that you might know about it. Form your own opinions. Tell us what you think, instead of, this is what you should think.

BZ: Is there anything else that you'd like to add to the discussion that I that I didn't ask you, anything you think might be relevant?

S1: I've been saying this for a long time. And I'd love to get this out there because I think it kind of puts it all into perspective. So we've got this, this COVID thing and the only thing we heard for the entire first part of 2020 is, it's a hoax. It's not real. You know, and at the same time I was watching, you know, this one person in particular at the [redacted] fighting for his life, straight up in a coma, because of the COVID. Yes, he had, quote, co-morbidities and all that, but that

was the COVID that put him in the hospital. That was the COVID that he was fighting. And you know, it, the thought that struck me is, with all of the misinformation that you see, all of the false news stories on social media, all of the spin from all of your different news sources, if some country was to create a biological weapon, and decide they wanted to use it against us, all they would have to do is deploy it in a very small amount. And put out that information that it's a hoax, don't believe it. And we're doomed. Because you're going to have those people that will take the misinformation as fact and develop their own conspiracy theories, and destroy the actual, you know, news story of the virus itself, to where nobody believes it, and then they put out the rest of it. And it's just gonna demolish us because nobody's gonna believe it's true. That's the sad part. The -- everybody's cried Wolf so much, that is something serious were to happen, we're not going to be able to stand a chance against it because you're gonna have everybody at each other's throats saying that, no, you're lying. No, you're lying. And in the meantime, we're just going to get decimated.

BZ: Is there a way to fix that, though?

S1: I don't know. I mean, there's, there's no way for anybody to come in and fix it. The only way that it's going to get fixed is for everybody to stop and open their eyes and realize that just you know, spouting something off that you've heard just because you like the way it sounds, is -- it's detrimental. I mean, we've got to all be honest with ourselves and honest with everyone else, and stop pointing fingers and start thinking about, you know, what we're repeating because if, if we're fed lies, and then we repeat lies, then all we have is lies and the truth is going to be so buried in all of the misinformation that it's never going to get out. And then like, you know, it's

like racism, and any, any other kind of, you know, mass problem. The only way for it to get fixed is for everyone to open their eyes and admit that there's a problem and just stop perpetuating it.

Interviewee: Subject 2

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 6, 2021

List of acronyms: S2 = Subject 2, BZ = Interviewer

S2: Okay. I have a bachelor's from the [redacted]. I have a Master's from the [redacted]. I have worked in the tech industry for over 20 years. I -- I am a Democrat. And I'm a moderate Democrat, which is really unusual in these days and times. So it's kind of interesting. I don't fit in anywhere.

BZ: Okay, how would you define the term fake news?

S2: To me, fake news is like something like the Onion. It's news, which is not real. It's it's satire.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S2: Like a local newspaper or a local TV station? Things like that? You know, whereas like, national would be like, Reuters or something.

BZ: So is it like a geographical kind of constraint?

S2: I mean, yeah, it could be anywhere. Geography -- I mean, like, you could have local stations in California or local stations in Kentucky. I don't mean... yes. Local to where you are.

BZ: What makes a local news organization trustworthy to you?

S2: Ah, I don't trust my local news very much. To be trustworthy, I would say I would be looking for less bias. So, I would look be looking for the news, too, to report facts in an unbiased way, whereas I've lived in different places and read news in different places, and where I currently live, I feel like I can recognize the bias in a way that maybe people who have always lived here and grown up here haven't noticed because they don't have that outside perspective. So, I, I very rarely tune in to local news, unless there's some local event or weather that I want to see.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child and as a teenager.

S2: Um, well, I mean, I can recall that even very early on I was aware, I thought the news was kind of boring. But you know what, we had the news on in our house. Don't... I remember, like the earliest newsworthy event that I remember was the Iran Contra affair. When I was a kid. And my grandma, like it would interrupt the soap operas every day, they would show them on regular TV. And so my grandma would like have them on. And we would watch them together. And I would try to understand what was going on, as we watched the hearings. And then, like, the next newsworthy thing, I remember was probably the Challenger explosion. And then I remember glasnost and perestroika and the wall coming down. And then I remember the Gulf War. So that

takes us to about seventh grade. That's when, when the gulf war happened, and we saw a war on live TV. That was the first time I started watching the news with real interests. So we cared -- all of those things that you were kind of paying attention to or noticing.

BZ: Was it like background noise? Or were you like involved?

S2: Don't I mean, what is involved? Me? That's a good question.

BZ: Did you -- do you remember having conversations like, you talked about watching with your grandmother? Do you remember having conversations with your family about what was going on?

S2: Yeah, I mean, minimally? Yeah, I can remember some of like, their views on things. And like the Challenger explosion, like I said, that was kind of a big deal, where I remember that. I remember Reagan as president and how my family felt about him. You know, I think I think we had some discussions about that. And I certainly I was a nosy kid. So I always wanted to overhear what the adults were talking about. Even if I wasn't being it wasn't being discussed directly with me.

BZ: Do you remember anybody ever having like a conversation with you, or even a lesson about kind of how to watch or read news critically?

S2: No, no, I don't. Well, like at any point or as a child?

BZ: We're still talking about childhood, yeah.

S2: No, I don't think so.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now as an adult?

S2: I over consume the news. The news is my background. I work at home. So I have, I have like CNN on in the background 100% of the time, if I'm not watching some other show. So if I'm just working or whatever, that -- that's my background noise, because I'm so afraid that something's going to happen and I'm not going to know.

BZ: And when it comes to types of news you consume as an adult, I mean, other than, you know, CNN in the background, do you prefer TV or radio or newspapers, websites? What's -- what's your go to?

S2: Um, that's a good question. I mean, CNN is like my go to you in my background, you know, like, that's always on. So I kind of know, if I want more information, I just usually go to Google and Google whatever the story is that I'm looking for, and see what things pop up. Sometimes if there's an interest, like a topic that I want to learn more about, or an in-depth story, I hear a reference somewhere, then, you know, go and look up that article, whether it's from the Times or wherever, a lot of times somebody shares something on Facebook, and it's like, oh, okay, let me - - that's an interesting headline. Let me see what this is about. Paywalls make that difficult

sometimes to get like, you know, sources that you really want to read or you think that are reliable sources, and then you run into a paywall, and then you're like, Well, okay, I'll Google something else.

BZ: So what are reliable sources?

S2: I mean, if it's, I guess I determine that based on -- Is it something that I know, is it you know, the Boston Globe, is the New York Times, is it, you know, whatever? Is it CNN, is it MSN, is it Fox? Like, depends like, I get all kinds of sources. Also, like, I have an Apple phone, an iPhone. So that takes, like, even stuff I would normally read and on their little news section, there's just, like, headlines from all different kinds of sources. So sometimes I'll look there. And there's something interesting on there that I want to read. It might even be from a source that, you know, I wouldn't normally get stuff from but, you know, I'll go ahead and read it and see what that's about. How do I determine? I mean, there, you know, when all the fake news stuff started happening, there are these like charts that they have online that show you how biased or unbiased certain, you know, sources are. And so I think, at that time, you know, maybe five years ago, was where I paid more attention to what the bias was in different sources, and started actually really looking that up and questioning. But I think before then, I mean, from college, I kind of learned how to question what a reliable source was. But generally, you know, if it's something that's a big source that you've heard of, then it's been pretty trustworthy over the years. Like, if there's a website on there, that's like, some news source that you've never heard of, that's probably not trustworthy. Anything like that. I always take to Snopes, or Google, the story to see, was that

really true? Or, you know, what is the source that I've never heard of? Where did this come from?

BZ: It sounds like you're pretty comfortable doing your own fact checking too?

S2: Yeah, I mean, for sure. Like, even with CNN, which is, like I said, the one that I have in the background, we recognize that there's bias in it, like sometimes they'll, you know, they have an agenda. And sometimes I will notice that they're, they're pushing something in particular, for whatever reason. And I'll think, you know, that's not quite true. So I'll, I don't mind, you know, doing a little bit of my own research to see, like, what I really feel about a thing, because I don't want to just listen to bias. I really mean, I like BBC sometimes, because it's, I just feel like they don't have any particular interest in the outcome. And then, like, in my house, my Alexa has NPR. So it kind of hits me with the day's top story everyday as well. And I didn't mention that before. But yeah, I'm an over consumer of news.

BZ: And do you follow any local news organizations on social media?

S2: Um, local to me, or just local, very...?

BZ: Just local period, I think. Although, yeah, I'm curious to know whether you follow any of the ones local to you, knowing what you think about them.

S2: I don't follow any... Well, no, I take that back. Well, I -- I don't know. Does it count? Um, I

yeah, I follow a local station. I think I have [redacted]. And then one of the local radio stations, but it's not a news radio station. Um, so [redacted], I have on here. But I don't, I don't really ever go to their page. It's just like, if there's a big story or whatever, then I'll, I might comment on something. So yes, I do. Um, and then I follow ones that are not local to me but are local to other places that I've worked or, you know, whatever.

BZ: What about like a statewide-type organization?

S2: For example?

BZ: Well, I said statewide, but really, I guess I'm thinking like, big city newspaper. So like a local [redacted, redacted].

S2: Yeah.

BZ: So while you're not technically in those cities, they might be covering your region. That's, I guess what I'm kind of getting at.

S2: Um, yeah, I mean, I don't, I don't know whether or not -- I couldn't tell you whether or not I follow them. I have lots of friends from [redacted]. So I see [redacted] stuff. Or, you know, [redacted] as well, actually, sometimes, so I don't -- I know 100% I don't follow [redacted]. I'm... I don't know whether or not I have a little bit like the [redacted] saved on there not, couldn't tell you.

BZ: Why the ones that you do follow -- we know for sure that that's [redacted] and maybe a radio station? Why do you follow them? Why not -- Why them over somebody else even?

S2: It's the most access possible. They're -- they're the ones that have the good weather, when something is going to be shut down in the winter. So that's probably why I initially followed them. I also follow the weatherman. Because that's the local story that I'm interested in. That makes -- it's not -- it's not biased. Yeah.

BZ: Yeah. So for you, it's not so much about like the types of stories that they're telling. It's about literal information that affects your day to day.

S2: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I will comment on a story. Like, it sucks me in though, because at some point, like, you know, they have those little bait-clicky headlines. And there's so many people who just are oblivious, that I get sucked in sometimes. I try not to, because you're not going to win. You're not going to educate people. It's like, such a losing battle. But there I go, I try.

BZ: So about those national organizations. Do you follow any of their social media accounts?

S2: Um, I'm sure that I do. I don't know if I can name who I follow again, off the top. But yeah, I mean, I'm sure that I 100% get 5000 hits of news when something big happens from all different sources. So yes.

BZ: Do you ever comment on those national stories?

S2: I'm sure I do.

BZ: What type of content are you hoping to see from either type of national, national or local news organizations on social media? Obviously, weather? What else are you looking for?

S2: That's a good question. I don't know. I'd like from -- from local. Yeah, whether I'm, what am I hoping to see? I'm hoping to see one day that there's like a change. And that things are, I don't know, just even reported fairly or -- No, No. and No, I don't think I'd go in with a hope of seeing something so much as with the hope of my view being represented, if that makes sense, because I already know that it's really biased in a different direction. And I always hope that, like, I'm going to see something that fairly represents like, here's the argument for here's the argument against, hear the facts, and make your own decision. Like, that would be the most wonderful day if I just woke up and all news were that way again.

BZ: What types of content from those organizations are you more likely to comment or reply on?

S2: Controversial stuff, worse stuff about COVID, stuff about politics? I don't know, whatever, like stuff about celebrities, probably, if they've done something controversial. I mean, those are probably the things that I get sucked into the most.

BZ: And what's interesting to me is I know a lot of people see that kind of content and they, they're just like, 'I'm out,' right? 'This is going to be a troll war, and I don't want any part of it.' So what is it about those types of things that, you know you're going to be doing battle with trolls and you're OK with that?

S2: I don't know. I just like, I want to educate people. I want so badly to educate people. And I want to support the people that are out there trying to educate people. So I guess that's why like, okay, yeah, there's going to be trolls and at some point, I'm, like I said, I'm going to give up and I'm going to be like, this is pointless. People are crazy, but I don't know. I just still feel like I guess I'm an optimist.

BZ: I want you to think back to an interaction that you had with the local news organization if you can on social media in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election. First things first, how would you characterize that interaction?

S2: Like, just like when you say that, I guess I'm trying to understand exactly the question, that link where I commented on something on a post? Is that what you're saying?

BZ: So if your local news organization posted something related to the election before election day, and you commented, what was that interaction like?

S2: I mean, not pleasant.

BZ: You want to elaborate?

S2: I'm sure it was something to do with somebody saying how great the, you know, the current president was. Somebody else saying something about how terrible, or they would ask these, like, really controversial questions like, 'Will Trump win again?' Like everybody would comment. Yes, no, I don't know, so stuff like that. I'm sure that's like, how it went.

BZ: Do you know if an organization under those circumstances ever replied to a comment that you made?

S2: Particularly about the election? Um, I don't think so. I mean, I think it was largely like other people. I don't recall that the news stations ever replied back to anything. Occasionally, I guess they will, when? I don't know, like if somebody tagged them in a post, but like just interacting not so much.

BZ: What about other people? I mean, do you do you recall if anybody particularly responded to you, and not just kind of in general to the question?

S2: Oh, I'm sure they did. Yeah, I just did like, specifically, though, I don't know. I don't have any that stick out in my mind in particular.

BZ: Think about the news organizations that you trust the most that are on social media. Why do you trust them?

S2: They've been around for a while, they're established. I feel like they – I don't know. I mean, it's a good question. I don't really -- I don't, I mean, other than the fact that I recognize them, they're established. And I trust them because they've been around forever. And I've, over that time, have built up a trust that I believe the things that they say. I mean, that's, that's the best explanation, I guess, that I can give. I think the things that they say are true, because I go out, and I verify them with other sources. So yeah, that mean that guess I guess that's the best way I can answer that.

BZ: What about the ones that you don't trust? Can you talk to me about why you don't trust them?

S2: Yeah, I mean, like I said, if, if there's bias apparent from a headline, then I'm already cautious. If I look at it, and then I see www-dot- some weird thing that I've never heard of, then that makes me cautious. If I then go into the file, and they haven't, or into not file but into the story, and they haven't like, properly, giving me citations of like, who said this or what this person's title is or what this person does. Or if there's, you know, if they make these generalized statements, rather than giving me specific statistical information, then that, that puts me off. And lets me know that that's not really something that I can trust. I want people's names and badge numbers and cities. Instead, I want things that are fair, viable, that I can go out and then Google this person and say, you know, is this person really, you know, did they do the thing that they're being quoted as doing or you know, whatever is being reported on.

BZ: So let's talk about for just a second about an organization that you do trust. Would it be possible for them to kind of ruin that? Like, what would it take for them to become untrustworthy?

S2: Yeah, I mean, that that's a that's a very good question, I guess it would, it would take being really wrong about something very big. Or it would take multiple instances of being wrong. Or even very biased, and probably biased in a way that I'm not biased for me to recognize it and go, Wait, I'm not gonna sit here and listen to this. Because this isn't they're not even reporting the other side of this, but it probably takes them saying something I don't agree with, for me to like, even question it. Probably -- because I probably, if we share the same bias, then I'd probably go, 'Yeah, that's right. That sounds right to me.' Right. So it would take not it would take not them being, like I said, wronged. Or reporting untrue things multiple times. And like I said, probably also untrue things that I disagree with.

BZ: On the flip side of that, let's take [redacted], for example, somebody that, you know, you trust their weather, but maybe you're not so great on their news. What would it take to turn that perception around? Is it even possible for them to gain your trust?

S2: It's, yeah, it would be possible, I guess, um, I just -- I don't know, I mean, I think being more available, in terms of interaction would probably make me trust them more. If I felt like they were responsive. Like I, if I'm watching something on TV, I'll go, 'This is stupid,' right? But there's no interaction with it. They don't know that I think that. I'm sitting here thinking, 'this is stupid.' Or I'm sitting here critiquing that, you know, they have this right-wing bias, or this, you

know, this really chauvinistic sort of worldview. They don't know about that. Right? So if they were to, if -- I guess if I were to interact on a story, they were to interact with me and say, Why? Then I would have -- I guess, it's an opportunity to then press back, you know, what I'm seeing that's, that's wrong. So they could potentially change that. If I felt like they listened and heard that and then reincorporated feedback into the way that stories are covered, it would probably take some length of time to establish that that trust. So yeah.

BZ: Well, that's pretty much all I have. But is there anything that you'd like to add to the discussion that I didn't ask you?

S2: No, I don't think so. I don't think so.

Interviewee: Subject 3

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: June 25, 2021

List of acronyms: S3 = Subject 3, BZ = Interviewer

S3: So I'm 33, live in [redacted], stay at home mom.

BZ: So tell me a little bit about your your background in terms of like education and politics.

Where do you stand in that area?

S3: I have a bachelor's in history. Um, my, my views politically tend to be all over the spectrum, depending on the issue, but I can go ahead and stylize myself as a moderate Republican. I have a next-door neighbor who's a Trump forever, anti-vaxxer. I can get along just fine with her. And I've had friends who were very much exactly on the opposite side of the spectrum, and I get along with them, too. And the whole concept of trusting news organizations hits squarely on to one of my favorite one of my preferred soap boxes, so I went, Yeah, I'll talk about that.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S3: An overused hyperbole that means whatever the person saying it wants to be. Um, what I think it's been used enough that it no longer actually has much meaning.

BZ: Okay. Do you think it for you, personally, is fake news real?

S3: One of the most important takeaways that I took from my degree was the idea that everyone has their own perspective on things. And that often enough, you cannot look at any particular perspective to really find anything resembling the truth. And so the worst of the fake news stories that I have heard in my life, I have been able to find something resembling truth in and the most virtuous, this is really what happened, stories that I've heard in my life, I've been able to find an argument against.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S3: I'm usually -- something that is based in the same state I am based in. I would not say the same town because I live in the middle of nowhere. So something that is reporting on cities, potentially that I've been to, that would be local news organization.

BZ: What makes a local news organization trustworthy? In your view?

S3: Yep, they do their own research. If they're, if they're talking to people themselves, if they're, if they're going out and doing the work themselves, if I see too many bylines, from somebody that doesn't know, local issues about a local thing, then I go, I don't think that particular article is as trustworthy as others.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child or as a teenager yourself. What can you remember about the way that you grew up and how you interacted with news? Did you

have any particular, you know, habits that you picked up from your parents when it came to the way in which you consumed news as a child or a teenager?

S3: I actually ended up -- my parents weren't terribly drawn towards the news. And so as a child or as a teenager, I mostly ignored the news. It wasn't until I got into college. I did enjoy elections. I watch read everything when it came to the elections. But between then I could, we'd listen to NPR sometimes, and I would go months without actually knowing what was going on in the news.

BZ: Did you have any, like requirements for current events during your schooling, anything like that?

S3: I was in high school during September 11. So there's my requirement for current events. Yeah, well, did that. Yeah. As far as in my civics history, government education, which is basically all crammed into one teacher, felt like one class, I was not particularly required to know what was currently going on. They would bring up various issues, and some debates were had in high school in regards to particular issues, but not as much in terms of this is what's going on right now.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits if you have any now?

S3: I'm slightly addicted. I check the news a lot.

BZ: Say more about that.

S3: So I am currently nursing and I find it difficult, more difficult than I thought, before I had children, to read a book while nursing. And so it's a lot easier to hold my phone and check various news things. So I pretty much every time the baby needs to be fed, I will be checking one of six different news sources.

BZ: Do you have thoughts about whether you're more likely to engage with content that comes from one of those local news organizations or a national one? Or, you know, is it a traditional publication or something that you would consider new media where where do you tend to find yourself gravitating?

S3: So I check my favorite local news site and CNN, Fox about every other one. And then I will check in with my international news sources maybe once a month or so.

BZ: I was really intrigued that you said both CNN and Fox -- is that by design?

S3: Yes.

BZ: Talk to me about why that is.

S3: They have different strengths and different weaknesses. CNN is better with international stories and not sounding like it's the end of the world and everybody's angry. Fox is better at covering the smaller national stories that mostly CNN doesn't bother with.

BZ: For the most part, when you're saying you're engaging on your phone, are you going directly to their apps? Are you looking at like a social media feed where those headlines have been shared? Where -- Where are you engaging?

S3: Oh, go to their websites.

BZ: How many local news organizations would you say you follow on social media? Or do you know? Do you ever comment on social media posts from either local or national news organizations? Which ones do you tend to engage with?

S3: I will engage if it's someone that I know, who has engaged with that source on social media. And if I feel like I can add something to the conversation.

BZ: Do you follow any national news organizations on social media now? What type of content would you like?

S3: I go straight to their websites. I don't go through Facebook or whatever to go to see. But if somebody that, you know, has commented that I have a story, then you'll engage there.

BZ: If you were going to follow one on social media, and here we're talking about local news organizations, what types of content would you be looking for from them?

S3: The most that I've followed the local news and that was checking four or five times a day was last summer during the wildfires. So engaging five or six times a day to check on the local wildfire situation, to see who's been hit, who needs help, how close the fires are to me. Um, I was rather obsessively refreshing various news organizations to make sure that I knew everything that...

BZ: I know that you were more likely to engage on social media with news content, if somebody that you knew was also engaging in that space. Was there a specific type of content that you were more likely to comment or reply on? I mean, like photos or video or links, or?

S3: I don't know, usually not video, usually links, particular stories would be what I read and and maybe comment on.

BZ: Would you -- so you would read the article before weighing in?

S3: Yes.

BZ: Oh, think back to an interaction that you might have had on social media with respect to some of that local news content, particularly in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election. How would you characterize that interaction that you had?

S3: It... was interesting. To find out, I had a friend who was a very staunch Democrat who was posting many things and some with news sources attached and some not, but a lot along the lines of, "Why would any thinking person not be a Democrat?" And I decided to answer. And I pointed out some things that the Democratic Party could do better if they wanted to attract more rural votes. And she told me that I was in such a minority being rural [redacted] that it just simply didn't matter.

BZ: Hmm. Did you ever have in your comments on local news organizations where you had somebody else who also commented, did a news organization ever respond to anything that you commented?

S3: No, I have never had that pleasure.

BZ: Think about the news organizations that you trust the most. And talk to me about why you think it is, as opposed to others?

S3: Well, I don't trust any of them completely. But the ones I trust more are ones that are local, where I recognize the names of people they've talked to, I -- I know who they've interviewed, I

know, I know that street, I know that person. They're, they're talking local stories. And, and I can tell that they've done their research.

BZ: Talk to me a little bit about a news organization that you might trust the least. And why you distrust that organization, you don't have to tell me who it is.

S3: I'm trusting them less, because they tend to go to a small, smaller group of people to comment. The same group for the same sets of stories. They, even their news articles, read more like editorials. And they put in more, everybody should think this way, then then start recording. This is what happened on this day.

BZ: What would it take for you to lose trust in the organizations that you trust the most?

S3: There was an incident in my early 20s, where I was listening to news organization that is by far one of the most trusted in the United States. It ends up being on lists of being very balanced and very trustworthy. And they were having -- they were interviewing someone who spoke Spanish, and they were having the interpreter do a vocal overlay on this Spanish speaker. And I could tell that the interpreter was not interpreting the speaker, she was not speaking at all on the same topic, as the interpreter was talking about. That would be a big one.

BZ: What would it take for you to gain trust in an organization that you trust less?

S3: Time. If they if they started reporting in what I considered to be a trustworthy manner, and over a period of time that I would trust them more.

BZ: I guess the most important question I ask anybody is whether there's anything else that you'd like to add to the discussion that I didn't ask or anything else that you'd like to tell them, tell me about with respect to the topic?

S3: I think -- I think really my, my main issue in trustworthiness and journalism is a matter of so much people's opinions. And you cannot, you cannot gain an adequate point of view of what is going on if you're just trusting one source one opinion. And so the best, the best news media out there, the ones that I trust the most, are the ones who are very careful to acknowledge and understand.

Interviewee: Subject 4

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 6, 2021

List of acronyms: S4 = Subject 4, BZ = Interviewer

S4: I am a 52-year-old woman, recovering Republican, um you know, Mom, wife, you know, the things.

BZ: What do you mean by recovering Republican?

S4: 2020 or 2016 was a was a reckoning for me. I -- I did not board the Trump train. I am still flummoxed as to how any of that happened. So yeah, I am of -- I'm kind of of the mindset of, 'This is what republicans are now. I don't -- I am not one of those. I'm maybe a conservative, but I'm not, I'm not like that.'

BZ: So -- so if you had to put yourself on kind of a political spectrum, would you put yourself as like moderate, leans right, leans...

S4: I am a moderate and I guess I didn't change but everybody else did, is kind of how I feel. Like, I'm yeah, I'm not that -- I can't be that far right. That's almost insanity to me. I think we shifted way too, I don't know, it was almost like we stepped into step through the, you know, the rabbit hole and ended up in Wonderland.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S4: What it actually is or what people think it is?

BZ: How do you perceive it?

S4: Um, fake news, I think is the, what I would consider to be fake news is Joe Bob's blog posts to, you know, gets up one morning and decides that he likes certain facts over other certain facts and so he just says it like it's gospel truth with no verification whatsoever. But unfortunately, on social media, most of the time anybody screams fake news. It's because you brought up a fact that they're uncomfortable with you know, you can use it derogatorily at anything you don't happen to like, whether it's true or not.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S4: Here in [redacted], I, I think our news is pretty credible. There are some -- there are some stations I like more than others, but I think that's more personal preference. Then whether -- whether or not I think that their veracity is in question.

BZ: Would you define them as being like something that covers your area?

S4: Yeah, I mean, they -- they do state and local, state and local and national news. But yeah, most of the time, a lot of it, it's within this, you know, the television viewing area. [redacted]

covers a big a big area. So there's a couple states, right? Yeah, because we're right at the corner of there's a tri state area. So yeah, it's a pretty big swatch of area that they cover.

BZ: So what makes a local news organization trustworthy? In your view?

S4: I think I think what I feel most comfortable with is when we can report the news and it doesn't, where it's not very sensationalized, where it doesn't have the -- I mean, all of them are going to have like these little bites to make you want to listen to that, like, Wow, that sounds like an interesting story. Let me tune in at 10 o'clock and find out what it is. But then there's also, there are stations that tend toward a little more of the dramatic, I think, than some of the others, which -- I don't think what they're reporting is erroneous, or whatever. I think it just sort of, sometimes I think the, the headlines can be a little more sensationalized than necessary, really, but I know they're, they're looking for viewers, and it's all a ratings race. So you got to get those faces in front of the TV.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news when you were growing up. So think back to you know, being a child, being a teenager, what you were exposed to at home, what you might have seen at school, any of that that you can tell me.

S4: I -- you know, I'm 52. So I remember Walter Cronkite. I remember, I remember my mom watching all of Watergate. I do remember that. I remember being really upset that, you know, my shows weren't on, but my mom was really into Watergate. I mean, the six o'clock news was just a thing. You know, there wasn't, there wasn't 150 channels. So you, you watch the news. I mean, it

was just, it was -- they just talked about what was happening, and it wasn't -- so it didn't seem to be as political as it is. Now, you know, there wasn't like seven different brands of news that you can get. You know, it was just the news. And that's what it was. And they told us about what was happening. And, you know, you could make your own opinions about what that meant.

BZ: Do you remember whether at any point in time you had whether this was like formal instruction or just kind of an informal from your parents, any kind of a lesson, if you will, on sort of reading critically, or news literacy?

S4: Not really news literacy, but my mom was always -- my mother is a big critical thinker. She's, you know, her, you know, she should have been from Missouri because 'prove it to me' is her. You know, she's very, you know, she doesn't believe anything on face value. She's very, 'prove it to me, what's the proof of this? Where did you get that from? Who'd you hear that from?' So that was kind of a just sort of the given at my house, that we didn't just believe things because somebody told you that.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now as an adult?

S4: I, I read most of my news, rather than watch it. I'm more of an online. I absolutely -- I don't watch a lot of, if I were going to watch a channel, I would probably I mean, other than local news. I would probably watch CNN, because they seem they seem the less, the least slanted to me. I mean, everybody's got a slant now. But I just feel like I don't need to be told what to think. You know, tell me what happened and I'm smart enough to make my own decisions about what

that means. You know, like when we listen to like, if there's a presidential address, you know, listen to the presidential address, but I don't need the 45 pundits afterward, you know, telling me what I heard. I already know what I heard. I heard it. Oh, I don't need you to mansplain it to me.

BZ: Do you tend to skew more towards following local events or national events? Or is it about like a special interest area for you when it comes to what you're reading online?

S4: I kind of like to skim the headlines, you know, I skim -- skim the headlines nationally and locally. I like to look over NPR. I think they -- they have good national coverage. Or, like, I like the Washington Post's website, you know, just kind of get a gist. I don't drill down a lot. I just kind of, unless there's something particularly, you know, that's huge that's going on that I really need to, I try. And I think I got over -- 2020 changed me a lot with that, that I think I got overwrought, with information that I was kind of driving myself insane between politics and pandemics. And you know, the disaster of the day that I just kind of -- Okay, let me become reasonably informed. And then -- Okay, I'm going to go about my life now.

BZ: So when we talk about online, are you are you specifically going to like a news organizations website? Or are you reading articles on social media that have been shared?

S4: They're a little of both. I like to, I like to scan, you know, the ones that I like, personally, and but I do read some of the stuff, but I'll look to see who, where the article is from before I click through? Because some stuff you just know. Yeah, it's Yeah.

BZ: How many local news organizations would you say that you follow on social media? Or do you follow any?

S4: I do. I do. I follow probably to the -- to my, the two stations that I am most likely to watch. I follow them on social media, just to kind of get breaking news if something's going on, specifically in our area. And then, you know, I might follow some national ones as well. Like I said, I've, you know, I like to know about breaking news, if something's happening. That's, you know, very important, but I'm not a junkie, I'm not a news junkie. My mom is a serious news junkie. She has all -- she watches all of it all the time. And it would, it just makes me want to like throw -- I can't, I can't handle it that much.

BZ: Why the organizations that you do follow? Why them and not the others? There's something about them that you like?

S4: I like that the again, I like that it seems more objective to me that there is a, you know, there's a reporting, but there's not the histrionics or the sensationalizing of the thing. I mean, like, tell me what's going on. I mean, there are some situations that are just catastrophic. And, you know, like, the whole thing with the building in Miami, I mean, that was, you know, you don't need clickbait to make that more important. It's already a horrible thing. You don't need to make it more, more awful than it is just to get people to look at you. Yeah.

BZ: Do you ever comment on social media posts from those news organizations?

S4: Very rarely, the comment section is the vortex of hell. I used to, but I don't anymore because it gets into these ridiculous side discussions that you never win. I mean, it's arguments you can't win and you can't change anybody's minds about so -- very rarely. I don't even read the comments most of the time. I'm so there.

BZ: When it comes to those social media pages or accounts from those organizations, what types of content are you looking for? You mentioned breaking news. What else?

S4: Just I mean, if there are you know, just -- I'm really, I'm kind of weird and eclectic. Like you know, just -- I like science breakthroughs. I like, you know, I listened to a lot of you know, the -- the news about the vaccine. I found it fascinating how you -- all this new technology and, you know, and you know, and I liked things that were debunking kind of the myths around the vaccine, you know, I was trying to share that to get, you know, trying to influence people to, you know, be more open to getting a vaccine rather than some of the less-than-savory things that you know, you try. You try to combat histrionics with, you know, some reason, truth. But you know, at some point, you realize that people are going to believe what they're going to believe. And you can bash your head against the wall. And you know, I have, I have a dear friend from high school who works for the, for the NIH. And so I, you know, shared some stuff that her, you know, her offices shared and, you know, just interesting stuff. I like a little bit of everything.

BZ: Is there a particular type of content that you would be more likely to comment on? Or reply to?

S4: I know, I would, I would like it. But it would be nice if the comment section were more of a discussion, then, you know, like an exchange of actual ideas with people. I mean, I don't mind having conversations with people, people with whom I disagree. I mean, I think you can, I think both parties can learn a lot from another perspective, but it just gets so ugly, so fast. You know, I think that that we are lacking because we don't actually -- we talk at each other and not talk to each other. And, you know, I think, you know, especially, you know, articles about, about race and about, you know, social justice and that kind of thing, I think we could really, if we were really interested in hearing what the other person had to say, I think we could gain a lot from that. But it's, it's not that way.

BZ: I want you to try and picture, if you can, an interaction that you might have had on social media, either with a news organization or with somebody else in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election. And specifically, related to that topic. How would you characterize that interaction that you had?

S4: I, as I said, before, I was not ever a fan of Trump, I always thought it was insane. I thought when he was going up the escalator, that it was the biggest joke in America, and that nobody was going to take him seriously. And it would be about three weeks, and it would be over. And we would, you know, all the smart people in the room would take over. And as we, you know, because I thought there were so many other people that were running that year that were so much more qualified for the job. So I was like, you know, it'll, it's gonna be, you know, Ted Cruz or Marco Rubio or whoever it was, I mean, these were people who actually had experience, like, doing a job. And I was, I was struck very soon about how quickly the, how quickly the Trump

train left the station and how many people got on from the word go and how I was sort of viewed as the aberration as to – why, you know, you are, you are this, you know, Christian person who has, you know, traditionally voted Republican -- why you know? It, I think it was the equation of you believe this, therefore, you have to vote for him. Like, no, I really, really don't. And so it was, it was shocking to me in the beginning, how quickly it amped up. I didn't understand and I still don't understand what the appeal of him particularly was.

BZ: Do you recall during that timeframe, if you ever had any kind of interaction with a news organization on social or on their website?

S4: No, no, no, they were I think they were just, you know, reporting what was happening. And we were all just kind of going, What in the world is this? I don't think anybody expected it.

BZ: I'm sensing that a lot of people's biggest beef is with other people, not so much with the news.

S4: Yeah, I never had a problem with any -- I mean, other than Fox News, which I mean, you know, what you're getting when you turn on Fox News. You know, what, you know, you're signing up for a, you know, an arrogant white guy telling you how to think. That's what fox news is, or, you know, carbon, you know, the cookie cutter blonde woman sitting next to the ridiculously arrogant man telling you how to think. That's, that's the brand. That's what you know, when you turn that on, that's what you get. But I never had that idea when, like, I was

watching my regular news, I never got the idea that they were for or against whomever, I mean, it was just, you know, this is what's happening.

BZ: Think about the news organizations that you tend to trust the most. And talk to me about why you trusted them in particular.

S4: Locally, there – our NBC affiliate is probably my favorite. If I had to choose them, I feel like there's just sort of an there's a steadiness to them that I appreciate, like I said, there's not the dramatics. I mean, yeah, they have the breaking news and exciting headlines and whatever. But the whole theme of the kind of the, the feel of the broadcast is very calm. It's very, you just feel it. It feels trustworthy. To me. I mean, I've just you, I tend to shy away from the super dramatic, or the, you know, the sensational. I just got like, No, I don't think we need to, that feels like a sales job. To me. And I just want to -- I mean, I think people watch the news because we want to know what's going on. And I know I don't want to be sold something on the news.

BZ: When it comes to the organizations that you trust the least, what makes you distrust them?

S4: I believe that they're one that they are, the slant is the sale, you know? That they, that they, I hate when they sensationalize a huge story. And then you get to it, and it's really not as dramatic as what they sold it to you as, or if there is a -- if -- there's a feeling that they're trying to sell you a mindset. You know, they're trying to, they're trying to tell you what to think thing. You know, this is, this is how, you should be really be upset about this, because this is upsetting. Well, tell

me what happened, and then I'll decide how I feel about it. Maybe it's upsetting and maybe, you know, maybe you just -- you just don't like it. I don't -- I like for the news to feel more objective.

BZ: What would it take for you to lose trust in one of those organizations that you already trust? What would they have to do to really ruin it for you?

S4: I want the Walter Cronkite thing, that he came, and he was steady and he was calm. And he just told you what happened. And he trusted you to be smart enough to know what to do with that. That's what I think really good journalism is, is that they bring you things that are important, and that if they're important enough, you're going to care about them. Because they're important not because somebody told, you know, somebody sold it to you or they manipulated you emotionally about it. If it's important, it's important. You don't have to do a huge sell job on that.

BZ: So to use Fox as an example because I'm picking up that they're one of your least trusted...

S4: Oh god yeah, yeah.

BZ: What would it take for them to turn that around and for you to be like, you know what, I've got to give them some credit and some trust.

S4: Get rid of Tucker Carlson. I just I -- they would probably have to fire everybody and start over. I just, I don't like -- there's just a feeling on Fox that I'm being manipulated. You know that,

you know, the whole, like, the whole thing with January the sixth. I have dear sweet friends who are Fox News junkies. And, you know, when the arrests started and all that, it was not, you know, you know, these people were spurred on by rhetoric by people, you know, by the Trump administration, or whomever it was, 'Oh, it's antifa. It's only antifa.' That's what it was like, and antifa doesn't organize. You know, that's kind of not their thing. Yeah, so I, there's just a whole -- everything has like this, you know, or, I was at the gym the other day, and Fox News was on one of the big screens that you can watch however much TV, and he goes, "The border crisis that no other news station is telling you about." Like, maybe, because there's nothing really going on there. But you need for it to be going on there to drum up drama. So yeah, it would, it would take a whole lot for me to -- pretty much at this point, if it's on Fox News, I probably don't listen to it.

BZ: My favorite question to ask is whether there's anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask you?

S4: Um, I think that -- I hate that fake news is now not a fact, but an accusation. You know, that anything you don't want to hear is now fake news. And the truth is not subjective. You know, the truth is, what the truth is, whether it makes you feel warm and fuzzy or not. And, you know, you don't have to actually have a good argument anymore. You just start screaming fake news, like, you know, a toddler. And that's supposed to end the argument. You know, so people aren't actually, we're not actually having discourse anymore. We're not actually exchanging real ideas. We're just screaming at each other fake news. And that's not getting us anywhere.

BZ: Do you have any sense of how we fix it?

S4: I think we're gonna have to get -- In a perfect world, I think we would get rid of a lot of members of Congress that are on both sides that are playing everybody against the middle. I think there are people in in Congress who have been there way too long. And like I said, on both sides, and I think they've created this ideological gridlock where we can't actually get anything done.

Interviewee: Subject 5

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 6, 2021

List of acronyms: S5 = Subject 5, BZ = Interviewer

S5: Okay, I'm 45. I just turned 45. And I went through most of college, but I didn't -- haven't got my degree yet. But I've done 90% of it. But what I do, the work I do doesn't really require a degree. So I haven't bothered with finishing it. So that's just, you know, as far as education goes. I'm probably more conservative leaning as far as politics go. I don't know what if you got any specific questions, I can answer whatever you want.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S5: What, that it seemed to have been something that Trump started throwing around and, and so it's just it? I don't know that that. Yeah, it just seems like Trump's blanket way of disagreeing with the media or saying that the media wasn't pointing out things that were accurate and -- and even before he said that I had noticed things like that before, but I don't necessarily agree with the term fake news. But I get where he's coming from kind of, I guess.

BZ: What would constitute a local news organization in your review?

S5: So I think the main one here -- Well, I guess they've got I remember years ago, and they they still have presences online to local news organizations. The [redacted] and the [redacted] were

the newspapers and not that anybody, I mean, they've got you know, their websites now, but I think most people to consume news in this area will go to like, it's called [redacted]. So that's the news source I typically look at. So that's probably the main one here. I think that the [redacted], I think that their website went to this subscription-based thing. So you can only read a couple articles without subscribing and [redacted] I'm not even sure. So yeah, I think they're both online now.

BZ: So to you, when I say a local news organization, does that mean, you know, they need to be based in your city or based in your state? Is it a newspaper? Or is it a TV station? Is that all of that?

S5: In order for me to consider them local? They -- Yeah, cancels local livability downtown, and it's all focused on [redacted]. So it's what I would -- I would definitely consider them a local news source.

BZ: Okay, what makes a local news organization trustworthy in your view?

S5: Um, accuracy for one. And... trustworthy. I have issues with [redacted], because I'll go and read the articles and I can find errors and a lot of them. And a guy that never finished college shouldn't find articles, find errors in your article. Some are typos, that's fine. But, But still, I mean, don't they have editors down there? And then other times, it's, you know, stuff's just incorrect. And it's like, you know, there seems to be this whole thing of distrust in the media.

And it's like, well, get I mean, if I can read through [redacted] articles and find errors and things that aren't correct and accurate, then why would I trust you?

BZ: So tell me about your experiences consuming news growing up. So now we're talking like child years, teenage years? Any habits that you might have learned from your parents? Whether you were exposed to news in school, anything?

S5: Well, I did deliver the -- I was a paper boy for the [redacted] back then. That was like the worst job ever. But I liked, yeah, I guess I would read the newspaper? Because I mean, I don't know. It's, but I -- you know, I wouldn't read it cover to cover like some people would, but just trying to think, yeah, I would read it for the wanted ads or the sports stuff. And I was probably not, I was not very interested in national or even local news. But it's more like sports and, and, you know, things like that. I wasn't totally shut off from the news or anything like that. I had free access to it. And -- but I was, you know, maybe not even marginally interested in it. Just, you know, a lot of times I was reading the newspaper, because there's nothing else to do.

BZ: Do you remember a time, like in school, for example, when current events was part of the curriculum?

S5: Oh, gosh, it sounds familiar. But I can't tell you what grade that was. I mean, I'm sure we did that at some point. But I don't remember when.

BZ: Do you remember ever being taught like how to read something critically and tell whether it was correct or not?

S5: I took journalism in in college, but this was like, late 90s, I would think so I'm sure that we were talking about things like that, or, and a lot of that was like, the best way to word things or, you know, headlines and things like that. And there was probably only one or two classes always -- it wasn't. It wasn't like an in-depth thing or anything like that. But I'm sure we were critically reading and then I remember watching, you know, they would have us watch news clips and talk about, you know, things that should say, or you shouldn't say.

BZ: Okay. How would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S5: Um, basically, you know, no one seems to read the newspaper or get a physical one anymore. So I'll go to [redacted] once in a while. And a lot of what I just do on there is just looking at the classifieds for guitars and stuff like that, but, but I'll glance through the headlines, and then I'll just click on certain things, things that and it, you know, if I had to pick a number, like how many articles that actually read a week, maybe five or something a week, so it's not a ton. It's not like I go through and read everything that's like, you know, I'll just read things that catch my eye and but a lot of it's probably because why don't I just -- yeah, so yeah, I'm not a huge consumer of news. I don't really watch it on TV, because it seems to be the same crap over and over kind of thing. But you know, when I when I go to [redacted] on, you know, a handful of articles each week, and then and then yeah, I mean, seriously, a lot of times I'll get two

paragraphs in and I'll find a mistake and that, and I'm, I don't know. I'm petty like that. I guess. Like, how does? How does this happen? How do they make this mistake? And so.

BZ: Do you -- when you look at news, are you more likely to look at local versus national? Or does it seem to make a difference to you?

S5: It's pretty much all local, I guess. Yeah, I don't remember. The last time I really looked at national news sources, and I think some of it because it was -- most people are consuming their news online, you know, on websites and stuff, but a lot of them that are there are now subscription based. Those, like, if you want to finish reading an article, you got to subscribe, or pay money or something like that. And is that your -- my, my interest just faded there.

BZ: What about like, do you make a distinction between newspaper Radio TV, or is it all like, online articles that you're looking for?

S5: It would pretty much all be online. I don't. Yeah, like, on the -- I don't remember the last time I sat down and watched the news that they leave it on here, I'll turn it before. Well, we leave that -- we leave the TV on here for the dogs. So I make sure it's not on news when we leave. So that's funny.

BZ: Do you ever wind up looking through social media to see headlines? Or is that mostly...?

S5: I'll see a lot of that. And I mean, and a lot of that, too, is -- it's a lot of the same things you'll see just on the, you know, but someone will share an article or whatever. So you'll see the headline, and then, odds are, I won't read it, but sometimes I will. But there have been times where you do cuz just I'm thinking over, like, the last 20 years where I'll read an article. And the headline is misleading, doesn't it, you know, isn't matched with what the article actually says? Or? Or that's something I started to notice. Over the past. I don't know, I guess, 20 years, that that. So I remember taking the journalism class, or classes, and, you know, seemed like they were still there, we're still talking about, you know, the news needs to be unbiased and just present the facts and, and things like that. And then through the years, I started noticing headlines, I was like, well, this headline's worded in a certain way to make me think a certain way, and it's not presenting facts, it's trying to direct me to, to a certain opinion, or to think a certain way and, and, and there's like, that's probably not what they should be doing. So in my opinion, anyway, my opinion on the op ed piece, that's one thing, but you know, for this, it seemed more and more somewhere more deliberate than others.

BZ: You follow any of those news organizations on their social media accounts when you purely just go straight to their website?

S5: What I follow is like [redacted], sports. I've looked at their Twitter before and it's not very, I mean, they post all their stuff. There's not too much. There's not too much commenting on that. And they're, you know, they have a Facebook where a lot of people comment, I don't do that. But what I will do is they have you can comment on the articles themselves on their website. And I mean, I'm just an asshole. Most of my comments are unconstructive, so they don't get published.

So -- but a lot of times, it's just like, they had one just like two days ago, where it's about some guys on motorcycles that were doing, ripping up the canyon and cops were chasing them and the line in the article was “the deputies lost sight of the bikers,” and they spelled it s-i-t-e. Seriously. So I made that comment, submitted it and it didn't get approved, of course, but a couple hours later, the words changed in the article to s-i-g-h-t, which is what it should be. Like, come on. You want to be taken seriously? Then do a good job. And that's nitpicky, I get it, but still - details like that matter. And I mean, I've noticed details like that go overlooked and It's like, well, if you can't even get that right, what else are you not getting right?

BZ: Do you ever comment on their social media posts? Or is it purely straight to the website?

S5: Yeah, it's pretty much just straight on their website. I don't follow them on Facebook or anything like that. I don't know. Because that just turns into, you know, a whole lot of back and forth, you know, arguing on something I'm not interested in, especially on Facebook, I don't try to get into that nonsense. Because you're not, you're never gonna change anyone's mind. So I just like to try to get my shot in on their website.

BZ: Do they moderate the comments at all?

S5: I think this is only within the last couple years I have been commenting on their stuff and their moderation -- it's like straight up censorship sometimes, where it's like, I'll, I'll make a comment that I think is totally innocuous, or there's, I don't have any ill will or – it's just vanilla basically. And it still doesn't get printed. And sometimes they, you know, sometimes they

surprise me, and they do print stuff. So it's -- it's inconsistent, and it's heavy handed. And I think that I'm not the only one that thinks so.

BZ: Does that influence how you think of them as an organization?

S5: Yeah. I mean, I guess if you really want to go duke it out with people, you can go do it on Facebook, but I don't -- I don't want to do that. So I'd rather you know, -- just deal with the comments that are attached to the articles on the website. But you know, and that's the other thing too, you start reading. You, you understand which comments you've tried to make that didn't make it and you know that were not, you know, they didn't bother posting, and then it's like, well, how many others are like that? Sort of a trend to steer the conversation in a certain way or not? Or, you know, how many people's other comments are not getting published and things like that?

BZ: So do you know if there are rules for what gets accepted? And what's not accepted? If that's needed?

S5: There's a whole thing on it. And a lot of it's language based, and I understand that so I don't put foul language in them. Because it will even if you do it immediately flags and says you can't say this or try again. And I think it's just as like, keep on topic. And don't be -- Don't be rude basically, Don't be a jerk. I -- you know, it's the little disclaimers on there.

BZ: Have you ever had an experience where you commented in that way and had the news organization actually respond or engage with you?

S5: No, and I've only seen that a couple of times where someone will make a comment. And then there's an actual response from a [redacted] person. I've seen that a couple times, but not very often.

BZ: When you think about the organizations that you trust the most online or offline, why do you trust them?

S5: I don't, you know, these days, I think there's a pretty noticeable divide where, you know, on the right side, you've got the Fox News, I think, I mean, and then on the, like CNN and stuff on the left side. So I mean, going into the understanding that it's like, I don't, I don't really trust any of them to be, they're all gonna present stuff in a certain way. And it's, it's, you know, I couldn't sit here and tell you like, where would you go to get unbiased news? I don't know. Because, because I don't know. So, you know, whatever I read or look at, I'll consider with a grain of salt. And you can, it's getting more and more where you can just kind of see right through it where you can, I don't know, you can see where they're spinning in a certain way or it's, you know, framed to look a certain way and it's just like, right.

BZ: And when you think about the organizations that you trust the least, what makes you distrust them?

S5: Um, I guess just the same thing where it's like you can use -- you can read the article or read the headlines, and you can just, they're just blatantly pushing one opinion or the next and it's like, well, because there's a way to work things to just present the facts and it's easy to see that very little these days. Monster shock when I see something that's like, Hey, this is unbiased, or they're not trying to -- they're just laying out facts, not, not with any kind of any type of you know, they're not trying to get the readers to think a certain way. And, you know, it's funny, it's like, I've always, you know, come to the conclusion, as I heard is, you know, the media on the right's portrayed, portrayed things this way, the media on the left portrays things this way. There's like, why did it get like that? Who's -- what's -- who's? What's anyone's advantage in doing this? Or what are they gaining? What are they getting out of this company?

BZ: Um, is there anything that organizations could do to restore trust for you? Or is that kind of a lost cause?

S5: Um, I don't know, that's a good question, I guess, what could they do to restore trust? I guess, just, if I went through and read a bunch of headlines, and actually the articles and didn't get it, you know, have, you know, feeling or are, you know, that they're trying to push one way or the other, whatever, then that would be one thing. But the thing is, I don't know that I read the news enough for that to happen, or, you know, there's because there's people that will probably read whatever newspaper or the, you know, website start to finish every day, and I'm just not like that. So, you know, I've read enough to where it's like, you guys are full of crap. A lot of times, you know, I'll pick and choose what, what content I look at, or what I actually believe here. Because, you know, like the article about a house fire, you know, there's, it's about a house fire

where, you know, it's not a political leaning, or anything as far as like, just government stuff, National News and World News, it always seems like there's a spin on it or, or anything like that. So I mean, you can read that stuff, if you understand that. They're probably trying to get, you know, trying to get there. Or they're, they're telling the story with a certain slant, or whatever. And that's fine, as long as you can decipher that and understand that. But yeah, it'd be nice to have a source that didn't, you didn't have to do that. And maybe the writing will be boring, though.

BZ: Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask you?

S5: Um, so what is What are you writing about? Like regarding fake news, right. Is it that that phenomenon? Because I mean, I think the term fake news is a little bit juvenile.

BZ: And, and I started there, because that's kind of what people the term that people are using. Does that make sense?

S5: Yeah, yeah. So I mean, I understand he, I don't necessarily agree, that too, but I mean, I get, and I understand, and I agree with a lot of, you know, like, where, just where, but I guess To put it simply is like, Look, if I go read a news article, now, I'm not just taking it, that everything's on the up and up and is completely factual. And I understand that these guys could be the news media, or the organizations aren't, you know, for whatever reason, like I said, it all comes down to why, which I don't understand. It's like, they're trying to steer things in a certain direction, or paint a picture a certain way. So, you know, I, I just say, consume news with a grain of salt these

days. But it's like, Look, I don't, I'm, I'll read your article, but I doesn't. I'm not going to take it for gospel.

BZ: Yeah, okay. I am specifically looking at local news versus national news, because there actually is research on national news, there's not a whole lot on local.

S5: So you're Are you talking to people that like, I'm in [redacted], so you're talking to people in Denver, Portland, or whatever?

BZ: It started in [redacted] because I'm located in [redacted]. So it's easier for people here, but I don't have a geographic parameter on the research. What I'm mostly interested in is, wherever you live, What's your relationship, like with those local organizations that are reporting the news in your area?

S5: Yeah. Alright. So here's the one, I'll go to [redacted]. And I'm prepared to roll my eyes A lot of times what I see so so whether it's error, or just, you know, you know, a biased headline or something like that, and just so I mean, if you're from here, then you you've seen it, too, but and I mean, you may disagree with me, I'm sure plenty of people do. But that's what I see. And it's, it's weird. It's something I noticed. Because Yeah, when I was growing up, I didn't critically read or anything, but then, you know, over the last one years, where I've started noticing things, and it's like, hey, that that's worded. to elicit a certain opinion, or whatever you're done. You know, if I bothered to do more, digging into it, or actually read the article, a lot of times, the headline doesn't even even say what, like the article, or the headline says this, and then you go further into

it. And you actually read the articles like, well, the headline, or the article kind of says, what the headline is, but not really. So there's just you, you see enough stuff like that, and it's just like, Well, you know, take it for what it is, it's like.

BZ: Well, I'll let you get on with your evening. I'm sure you have other things you need to be doing. But I do really appreciate your time.

Interviewee: Subject 6

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: June 29, 2021

List of acronyms: S6 = Subject 6, BZ = Interviewer

S6: Well, what do you want to know?

BZ: Um, education, politics? Where do you see yourself in life? Anything you want to tell me, really.

S6: Well, I, I guess education wise, I -- So I grew up in a really small town in [redacted], and, and went to school at [redacted]. So I have a bachelor's degree from there in mechanical design and engineering, I met my wife there, we moved to the eastern half of the country, to the [redacted] area, just outside of [redacted] in [redacted]. And and while we were there, I did a master's in business at [redacted]. So that's my, that's my educational background. I guess politically, I'd say I'm, I'm probably your, you know, average, you know, 60-year-old white male Westerner. So I'm fairly conservative politically. Not really very active politically, I guess I vote obviously, but they, but I don't, I think, you know, I don't -- I vote on beliefs and principles, not really on people, which sometimes, it's a little difficult to my wife, who is sometimes a little off on that, because I support a candidate that might not be to her liking, but because of the principles or the, all the views of the of the party, then I would vote for that candidate, even though personally, I might not like them.

BZ: So how would you determine, how would you define the term fake news?

S6: You know, I guess that's, that's a term that that probably came out in the last, you know, four years of presidential stuff. And, and I think that I would probably define that as unreliable news, news, it's, that's not just the information, but whoever's producing that information, putting a slant on it, even if even at the level of the headline, that that shows some point of view, even just like in the wording of a headline that shows a point of view that I look at and go Yeah, that's not really accurate. So that's that's probably how I would define fake news is it's it's news that is that slanted by the new source one way or the other, rather than producing, you know, providing the information and let me do this myself.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization? What would that mean to you?

S6: I guess that would be a an organization that focuses probably the majority of their, their resource on local news and local events. And, and obviously, still, you know, still reports on national stories, but but also is more focused on you know, a local, local information. So I probably say that being all that and I'm just making up the numbers but you know, maybe they spend 80% or 90% of their time focused on local stuff and 10% rolling in on national stories.

BZ: What would make a local news organization trustworthy to you?

S6: Well, though, the lack of the things that I mentioned, which I thought were faking it, right, so the day, they deliver information in a neutral fashion, much less than, you know, kind of the national 24-hour news sources, but a lot of times seem to be slanted one way or the other. And I think sometimes it's, it's easier probably for them to do that, too, because the local news doesn't have as much, you know, that slant, usually politically based and, and the local news when you're reporting, you know, the fire in downtown [redacted] today. Right, there's, there's not as much opportunity to to slant that one way or the other.

BZ: So tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child or a teenager.

S6: Wow. I know. Was there news back then? I don't remember that. I think that, you know, it was it -- was local, it was a local station, stations, TV stations, we got came out of [redacted]. So the only thing I remember is watching, you know, the the nightly news from 10 to 1030, with [redacted]. And that's probably not a surprise to you that and, and, you know, that was on, we watched that from 10 to 1030. Every night. I don't know that I ever really read a newspaper when I was that young. And that's where the news came from. And I guess we did watch, you know, my parents, on occasion would watch a national broadcast, which at the time was Walter Cronkite. And I believe that's when he was and and he was one of those and and it seems like and maybe it's just, you know, the years that have passed that, in that area, that era, they reported the news without the opinion. Right? So it was in the definition, it was non fake news. Because there was much more reporting of just the facts of what was, you know, what was going on? That's my memory of watching the news, the only the only thing other thing I can remember, and I have to look back at the, at the timeframe, but you know, obviously, I took a government class

in high school or, you know, civic affairs or whatever they called it at the time. And, and I think that was at the time of the [well-known crime] in, in [redacted]. And I remember that was a topic that got discussed in class, you know, kind of in the current events part of class, but I don't remember anything else that ever got discussed. But I was, I was in high school, at the very end of the Vietnam War. So I never remember a lot of discussion, at least in you know, in classrooms around my house much about the war, which was kind of a big deal, but never really got discussion.

BZ: So it's probably fair to say that there was never any, like, formalized, you know, news, literary literacy discussions in your house or at school was more like exposure to news.

S6: And yeah, I would I would agree with that. I don't think that, you know, news and politics and that kind of stuff. were ever a topic around the dinner table at my house.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S6: So they're a little bit different. So I'm still I'm still connected to [redacted]. Right? They the players have changed, but, but and I still watch that same newscast, every night. And so I watched the 10 o'clock, I'm very, very seldom watch any other any other time, or I never watch any other source. I keep off on a couple of internet based, like, I look at Google News on a regular basis, I look at the [redacted], you know, at least once a day, I look at Google News usually once or twice a day and you know, kind of whatever stories are, are there I peruse the ones that look of interest, or don't look of interest or don't look overly slanted one way or the

other. And, and then on occasion, you know, when I'm in the car, I'll listen to to News Radio, [redacted].

BZ: Do you ever find yourself you know, reading articles online? Are you looking for like a physical paper or listening to it's all it's all primarily online?

S6: In fact, I don't you know, it would be like I said, the Google News or google.com whatever the web pages annoying when they switch me over to their app. But But yeah, so I'm I read it and I actually They find it annoying when it's a video, because I'd much rather read it. Here's an essay, you know, the textual contents exactly the same. I very, very seldom if there's a, if there's an opportunity to listen to it on video or read the text, I usually read the decks.

BZ: Do you follow any local news organizations on social media?

S6: I probably follow -- Yeah, I think I follow [redacted] and maybe [redacted] radio?

BZ: Do you have any idea why you might follow them compared to you know, somebody else?

S6: Is there anybody else? Yeah, if there's been known to be a few people in the business, yeah. I from a local perspective, I guess just because I think it probably goes back to my parents. Right? Because that was the news when I was a kid. And, and that's always been, like, the news source. When I remember was in college, we, we put up with the news just to get to Johnny Carson back

then. And, and that was a station Johnny Carson was on. So that was the news, you watch them. And it's just kind of always been that way.

BZ: Yeah. Do you ever comment on social media posts from those news organizations?

S6: Very, very seldom? I have a comment -- comments are so, you know, I read them for entertainment sometimes. But never for anything seriously thought provoking. Because they're all, you know, it seems like, you know, all the people that are kind of out in left field or right field somewhere, and they seem a bit extreme for any of my viewers. Usually. I don't read them very often. Once a while I'll read them on it. You know, like that. I mentioned the story at the the [redacted] fire today. I looked at the comments on that, because it wasn't, you know, that wasn't going to be there was there was no real source of I guess there could have been, but there was, you know, it's unlikely that somebody is going to make some kind of far-left wing or right wing comment on that news story. So I go read it.

BZ: What type of content are you hoping to see from local news organizations on social media? Does it matter to you, you know, whether it's politics or not politics or crime? Or do you just kind of want to see what's going on in your neighborhood?

S6: Yeah, I think so. Just Yeah, what's going on, kind of in the state geographical area? And then I'll get, I'll just look at kind of headlines and go, Hey, am I interested in that now? You know, yes or no, and then read the article. And so yeah, all those things more, again, kind of more of the

local, you know, 80 or 90%, local content, as opposed to, you know, on some splash of national content, but most of the local.

BZ: If there's a story that a local news organization has shared, um, what makes you more likely to comment on it?

S6: Again, I don't I don't remember the last time I commented on an article. Because I, you know, the reality is, I don't know what the what would be, you know, my justification or my interest in spending 10 minutes commenting on a news article? No, I hate to sound that way. But am I really going to get anything out of it? Probably not. And is anybody else really getting anything out of it? Probably not.

BZ: When you have commented, and I understand that, that's very, very rare. So if the answer to this is I don't remember, that's fine. But when you have commented on local news organizations, social media stuff, particularly in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election, yeah? Did the organization respond to you ever?

S6: I don't think so. I never remember having a response from the organization itself.

BZ: What about other people? How would you characterize any of those interactions?

S6: No, I think, I don't remember anything. That was really, you know, significantly positive or negative. I don't think anybody really trashed me. And I don't think anybody wanted me to run for office as a result of whatever comments I make.

BZ: Has anything stood out to you about any of those interactions?

S6: No, I don't think so. Like I said, it's pretty, pretty rare. That I would do that.

BZ: So think about the news organizations that you trust the most on social media. And here I'm talking media in general, not just local. Why do you think you trust them?

S6: I don't know that there's any that I really trust. Right. I used to -- I used to, you know, probably before the last election cycle, or, you know, whatever you call the election cycle, right? The last two presidential elections, if you would ask me that before those last two presidential elections, I would have probably said, Fox News was the one I came close to trusting. Right. And again, I think, you know, the stuff like CNN and, and whatever the others are MSNBC, and that kind of stuff, those, those to me are always so slanted and always really have been. Or so slanted. That I just go, yeah, I'm having a hard time digging through what's your opinion and what the News is. And, and I think Fox has kind of gotten that way, as well. And so I've kind of just given up on most of those. And literally, if I see something, and I'm, if I see something from CNN, when I scroll through, like Google News, or Yahoo News or something, and the source is CNN, for example, I'm probably less likely to click on that, than I would be anything else. Just because I feel like again, they're they're slamming every everything in a specific direction. And

what I really want is just the base information, just like let me know, give me the information, I can make my own decision, I don't need you interpreting that information with your slant to make me try to think one way or the other. And like I said, I that goes all the way to headlines. You know, I was like, I read the headline, and I go, you know, one of the ones in, you know, again, probably my right wing leaning coming out, but the whole the whole discussion going on with voting and, and states changing voting laws. And I read a headline, and it's an if, if it says that they're trying to restrict voting laws, or voting on kind of going, that's not really what they're trying to do. And I saw right at the headline, I'm like, Oh, yeah, that article just because a headline appears to have a point of view that I don't think is down the middle and just information. It's got some slant to it. Right. I think if you ask the whoever they are, they know the governor of Texas, if you ask him, Are you trying to restrict your you're trying to stop people from voting? He'd go, No, I'm not trying to stop people from voting. I'm trying to stop. I'm trying to make sure that people who vote who have the right to vote vote and those who don't have the right don't vote. And and that's way different than what you know, that headline that says he's trying to stop people from voting. So it's that kind of stuff. And and the whole 24 hour news cycle is, is this probably a stupid thing to say, but it's probably more of a source of many of the problems in the country today than we typically think about, right? Because they gotta, they're gonna be on the air 24/7, they got to have something to talk about. And if there's not something useful to talk about, they're going to dig something up to talk about and keep talking about it. And I just kind of thing that's, that stirs a lot of the pot, that probably creates a lot of the anxiety that's in the country today. Is that continual? Just, we got to find something to talk about, and the more controversial it is, the more we'll talk about it.

BZ: Would it be fair to say if you saw a clear pattern of some of those organizations, just you know, going back to more, for lack of a better term neutral reporting, both in the headlines, and then the reporting itself? Would that help you build trust again with them?

S6: Oh, definitely. Yep. No question. And that's, I think, if you if you can't think about the local, I think the local news does a lot less of that kind of stuff, because they only you know, they obviously have other newscast, but only about half hour Mike diamond evening. Right? And, and they don't spend as much time going out trying to figure out how they're going to fill 24 hours with, you know, some smart guy somewhere that they're paying for his opinion. And so I think I have a lot more trust in local organizations because they don't have all that fluff they're trying to fill in. And, and again, it's harder to do on local things. So if you asked me about fake news, I'd say you know, fake news at the 95% level comes out of national news organizations, and not out of local because a local folks just don't have the time to do the only fake news And this is, yeah, the only fake news I see from them or that I would kind of categorize that is is over sensationalizing stuff. Right? They kind of blow some things out of proportion. And, you know, this whole drought thing is and I'm not saying I know we're in a drought. I'm not arguing that, but but, you know, they'll make a statement. Oh, we've been in a drought for 10 years. And I go, yeah, three years ago, we had more snow and more water than we knew what to do with. And I'm going so why are you saying we've been in a drought for 10 years, because it's not really 100% accurate. But they do that, because it you know, it's a little more extreme. And, and there's some other things like, you know, when I was a kid, there was no such thing as wind chill. Because 10 below zero was cold enough, right? And they didn't have to try to go Oh, but it feels like it's 20 below. I'm like, no 10 below sufficient. I don't need to know that. It feels like it's 20

below, I know what's called now. And then, over the last like five years, they've started on the other end. Now. There's now a heat index. Right? So 100 degrees. And that's a lot more prevalent in the East where it's a lot more human. Right? And they go, Oh, it's 90 degrees today. But it feels like 102. And I'm like, I really don't care. 95 is hot. That's fine. I don't need the extra seven degrees that you generated, because it's also humid outside. It's, can I make this sound even more extreme than it than it is? And I'm just and I think that's a trend across a lot of stuff. And I always just laugh at them the weather people. And I think that's sometimes gets blown out of proportion. And, and then you get to the point where you get they go, Oh, there's a blizzard come and we're going to get two feet of snow and we get two inches and I'm going Okay, next time they say there's going to be two feet, I'm going to expect two inches. So that's that's the place where the local stuff, I think gets gets kind of off on that path sometimes.

BZ: Yeah. And to be fair to the weather, guys, I think instead of filling content with a lot of political talk, what happens in your local half hour newscast is man, we don't have any news today. Hey, can you fill?

S6: I wouldn't be surprised. I don't know that that's the case. Well, as you know, I remember when I was a kid, I used to always think why can't they give sports more time? And I was like, Yeah, yeah, let's talk more sports. Got some of that news and weather stuff back. You know, and let's get more sports. I don't I don't pay that much attention to that anymore. But But yeah, it's. But yeah, that's, that's kind of the another thing that I think is funny, that's kind of this extreme thing. We got to make it sound as bad as we can. And then the next time around, you just go I

don't believe me anymore. So you're like Cried Wolf last time. And after they cry wolf three or four times, it's just like, okay, I don't believe what they're, I just wait and see.

BZ: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to add to the discussion?

S6: No, I don't know. I don't think so.

Interviewee: Subject 7

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: June 25, 2021

List of acronyms: S7 = Subject 5, BZ = Interviewer

S7: I've kind of lived around the country, a wife, two children and four grandchildren. You know, anything else?

BZ: Yeah. Why don't you tell me about like, your educational background and kind of where you fall on the political spectrum?

S7: Yeah, I'm, I would consider myself a moderate conservative. Was not a Trump supporter at all, thought he was a lunatic. And just wish we could get to the middle a little bit on both sides. So that's where I am politically. Educationally, I graduated from [redacted] with a bachelor's degree in justice administration many years ago.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S7: Oh, where, where news agencies try to put in spin on things to to show their own bias or slant rather than just addressing the news like they did years ago, where it was just they reported the news, and they left opinions out.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S7: You know, I feel like the local news organizations to me, you know, when I realized this was more about local news, rather than national news, I don't really see the bias there. I felt like they try to, to just cover things that are going locally, you know, they may mention some national things, but, but they're just reporting what's going on. And I feel like they I don't see slant in local news.

BZ: So does a local news organization to you though, does that mean, like, within a specific geographic area?

S7: I do, I do just whatever, whatever area that they reach out to, you know, whether it's, you know, I watch [redacted]. So, it's, you know, kind of the state of [redacted] and [redacted] news and, and that kind of area.

BZ: What would make a local news organization trustworthy? In your view?

S7: You know, that they just report what's going on? And, you know, if it's an editorial, they let us know, what's an editorial and you know, they just get on they tell us what's, what's happening and and report it and leave their opinions out.

BZ: So it sounds like transparency is kind of important to you.

S7: Yeah. Yeah. I think that we need to all of us, try to be honest and have integrity and and just say what we think.

BZ: So tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child and as a teenager. You know, what kind of habits you picked up from your parents, whether you were exposed to news at school, that kind of thing.

S7: You know, I don't really remember news in terms of you know, elementary, junior high as much. In high school, I still think that they stuck to the topics whether it was world history or US history. I don't. I don't remember the current events. I did take a current events class at [redacted] that was taught by [redacted] who ended up being a spokesman for [redacted] years later. But, But you know, he was Palestinian, it was really quite interesting, because I felt like he was the only person that I ever listened to that talked about the Arab Israeli conflict and left his opinion out. So I was, I was really surprised when I saw him on the news one day, and realized, oh. But you know, what, my parents, you know, there was always a newspaper around and we always had the, the national news on and the local news and my I had an uncle that was in the Vietnam War. And so it was, I will say, that was really pretty interesting, because, at one point, you know, my mom would always come running from the kitchen when they were covering the Vietnam War. And one day, they showed my uncle, and he was by a stream, and took his helmet off and poured water over his head and smiled at the camera. And of course, she burst into tears and ran out. But it was interesting talking to him later, he did what the journalists asked him to do. Really? Already. I felt like Well, that's, that's interesting that they're trying to shape the news, rather than just report on it. Yeah, I wonder.

BZ: That just takes me to a whole other series of questions. Did you have any other experiences where you have reasons to kind of doubt what you were seeing or hearing?

S7: No, no, you know, because, you know, back in the day, and I just felt like they were just very reputable men. And you know, because there were very few women at that time reporting the news. And I felt like they got on, they said, this is what's going on. So yeah, that was the only time that when I thought, Oh, that was interesting to learn later on.

BZ: Did you ever in that timeframe, did you ever remember having a conversation either with like a parent or an educator or even your friends like about sort of news literacy, if that makes sense? like telling the difference between an opinion piece and something that was more fact based?

S7: You know, honestly, I don't remember. You know, I don't, of course, I'm old. I don't I don't know that we did have those conversations growing up in it, because I feel like the whole fake news thing has only been, you know, after Trump, or, you know, during Trump.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S7: You know, I'm not as good as I should be. You know, we always watch the 10 O'Clock News on [redacted]. If I'm in the radio, I have [redacted] radio. I, I stopped watching the, you know, the 24/7 news cycles, I started with MSNBC and switched to Fox. And again, I feel like

those agencies, they're promoting agendas, you know, all of them. And, you know, there's no found fair and balanced reporting from any of them. So that's why I tend to stick more locally. And then I watch NBC News.

BZ: So yeah, so it sounds like if you had to choose, you know, local versus national, you're going to skew local.

S7: Yeah.

BZ: Do you have preferences when it comes to the type of medium such as you know, newspaper versus radio versus television?

S7: Well, you know, we have honestly, we haven't subscribed to the newspaper for years, and didn't [redacted] just drop down to a weekly one? So yeah, so the the [redacted] and the [redacted] have gone more or less digital only.

BZ: What about like commercial versus public broadcasting? Do you make a distinction there in terms of which you prefer?

S7: Well, no, no, I mean, I just like I said, it's [redacted], NBC and, you know, that's, that's pretty much it.

BZ: Do you find yourself in – for instance, our newspapers in particular are digital now. Do you find yourself following those types of stories in a traditional format, or on a website or on social media or all of the above?

S7: Well, you know, I follow [redacted] on my, I think they pop up on Instagram and on Facebook, and then I get notifications on my phone when there's a local thing going on. And so if it's something that I'm interested in, I'll click on and then follow and read it.

BZ: How many local news organizations would you say that you follow on social media?

S7: So, radio and TV?

BZ: Yeah. So basically just, I guess you could say to, if you want to go that in depth, why do you follow them?

S7: You know, I think because when I was out here going to [redacted], that was the, that was what we would flip on. And I just, I felt comfortable with [redacted]. And you know, my husband and I were talking about it, well, maybe it's because we align more with their political views or how they spend things that we don't see it as a spin. But, you know, they get on if they report the news, they have a good camaraderie. And, you know, it's just easily accessible. And it's both my husband, I've always just skewed there.

BZ: Um, do you comment on their social media posts, the two that you follow?

S7: Rarely? And, you know, part of that is because to me, once you hit the comments, you enter a rabbit hole. So I, you know, yeah, I don't want to spread the ugly.

BZ: I understand. What type of content would you be hoping to see from a local news organization on social media? Is it links? Is it pictures? Is it a specific type of story?

S7: Well, you know, just recently, I have felt like the, the drought information has been very helpful. As far as you know, here are things that you should be doing to help conserve the water that we have. So we're going to do that. And of course, I go with a sports with [redacted]. You know, and just just the the local things, you know, I think I was with [recent murder investigations], you know, I followed that pretty carefully. And the night that that [redacted] was murdered. My husband was traveling, so I was up until two or three following, you know, the coverage. I like to the information on governor [redacted], when you know, and for a long time, I was watching pretty carefully the COVID coverage. But you know, now that I'm vaccinated, it's kind of like, Well, whatever. My husband did not appreciate the the pictures of people being given shots, because he is has a needle phobia. So we got to the point that we play the game of what, how far into the news cycle, is it going to be before we suddenly see the shot? Yeah, just...

BZ: Okay. That gives me a good idea. So it sounds like kind of like anything that might affect your life, in a direct way is kind of what you're looking for. What kind of social media content are you most likely to comment on? Knowing that, you know, you're in general reluctant to make those comments? Because social media?

S7: Yeah, no, that's a good question. I don't -- I mean, I may go in and like someone's comment, that seems like they're being respectful, but making the point, you know, but I, I don't know that I really go in and actually make the comments.

BZ: What gets a like from you? What gets that kind of reaction from you?

S7: As well, of course, if they agree with my opinion, but they've said it in a respectful manner, where they're not just suddenly going and thinking that it's their job to troll people and to make inflammatory inflammatory comments that they're just saying, you know, I appreciate this, for instance, when Governor [redacted] came out and said, We need to pray for rain. And I thought, Yeah, we do. And, you know, as I read the comments, you know, with that, I had to chuckle because people then started targeting the local cities and things which they made a good point that, you know, they need to pull their watering back as well. But, you know, just where, where we've got to be respectful. You know, we just, we better listen to each other with FM name calling.

BZ: Would you say that it's fair to describe your interactions with kind of those those stories as more about what other people are saying and less about what the news organization I have to say?

S7: No, no, because like I said, normally, I will just read a few comments and I'm like, I'm done. I you know, because it just gets nasty too quickly.

BZ: Think back to an interaction that you might have had with a local news organization on social media in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election. How would you characterize that interaction?

S7: And again, I just usually if I go on, I read read the article, I'll like it, if you know if it means enough to me to like I really Yeah, have just tried to step back.

BZ: Would you say most of your interactions have been kind of in that neither positive nor negative space? Or have you, you know, been kind of soured by what you're seeing out there? Or did you come away? feeling kind of like, okay.

S7: You're talking prior?

BZ: Yeah. before the election.

S7: Um, you know, I, I would read articles, you know, I felt like I was hearing enough about that if I just turned on the TV. So honestly, probably, when it came to my social media things when there were articles, I may have had just kind of skirted those a little bit. And I felt like I was getting enough information. And probably because of my slant on feeling like Trump is one of the most dishonest individuals that has ever walked the earth. And, and my slant was, if you can't pay these little, small companies that you're hiring out, and you find reasons not to pay them, and to be dishonest with them, you're gonna do the same thing with us. If you've taken out

bankruptcies because you don't care to pay your bills, you're going to do the same thing with us. So I went into that having no respect for him. But I also, you know, I think Biden is a decent man. But I didn't like him either.

BZ: Well, let's talk about some of the the times when you've either liked or even maybe responded to somebody on a post, whether it was about the election or not, can you? Can you recall if any local news organization ever actually responded to something that you had to say?

S7: I don't again, I don't think I actually commented on the post. But I, you know, with [redacted], I felt like he was trying to be pretty centrist. And he would see the faults of the Republican party and would find ways to agree with the Democratic party when, when he agreed with them, rather than just this completely separate attitudes. I liked the comments there. So that tells you where my political leanings.

BZ: Yeah, no worries. Um, okay. So think about for just a second, kind of like all of the news coverage, and particularly on social media during that election cycle, right? Did your perceptions change over that course of time, about what you were seeing from news organizations reporting about the political situation?

S7: You know, again, because it was canceled, and I was falling, I felt like they were reporting the news. I didn't feel like they were trying to insert their own opinions on it. You know, they would they would say when, you know, somebody would make a gaffe or, you know, so I felt like there were pretty direct.

BZ: Think about news organizations more broadly. So now I'm talking both national and local, right? And specifically ones that you maybe have a trust relationship with on social media. Can you talk to me about why you feel like they're trustworthy?

S7: Well, and again, I don't follow any of the national news organizations other than what will just pop up? You know, from time to time. I lost faith in NBC with the Brian Williams debacle for us, you know, again, where they, I have a real problem where I feel like reporters are trying to make themselves part of the news rather than just, you know, object, you know, standing back and reporting. I, you know, to me when I was watching, the challenge was a challenger. When we had the disaster, and I was glued to MSNBC and Greg Jarrett, I had a lot of respect for with his reporting. And while this is going to show my age, Tim, here, he covered the 911 incident, and I can't think of his name now, but he died of a massive heart attack he had. –

BZ: Tim Russert.

S7: Yes, loved him. But he was, it was interesting, because he did insert himself, I remember during 911 about, you know, I'm an American first and, you know, just made a comment in passing. I would report it had I known anything, rather than just standing back to report the news. And I respected that and really liked him but you know, is Rachel Maddow? Rachel Maddow? Yeah, Maddow, I have a sweet daughter in law that is from New Jersey that's very left leaning. And she would, would send me some things because we try to talk pretty openly and respectfully when we talk politics. But she sent me something, maybe at the beginning of Trump running,

that I pointed out to her, I said, you need to look at the inflammatory words that she's using, you know, it wasn't just, you know, and I can't even think of the words, but you know, where you suddenly make comments about, you know, the person individually, you know, kind of like with Trump with his main calling, which I felt like the news should never have even anytime he referred to lying TED or, you know, pick, pick an opponent, I wish they would have just bleeped him on that, because that doesn't deserve reporting, you know, because he's, he's a five year old child at that point in my mind. So, you know, I like Shep Smith, because I felt like he tried to cover the news, and respected the fact that he left Fox because of the direction they were going. But yeah, I mean, those are kind of the people that I trust. And, and I think it would be good if, if somehow, well, in my husband, I've talked a lot about we feel like, you know, the these big companies that are 24, Seven News, I, you know, they beat a subject to death, because they run out of things to say, but then again, I felt like they make certain things worse, not because they're trying to objectively look at it, but it's like they're trying to drum up more new stories as a result. And, you know, so that's why I've really avoided them in the past couple of years.

BZ: So to go to your Brian Williams example there for a second, is that a pretty good example of what it would take for you to lose trust in somebody that you once had trusted in that space?

S7: Well, you know, that, that, but I also again, you know, you see their true colors when they start reporting, and they're refusing to look at the other side or to, you know, work, or that they need to say, this is an entertainment section of our news, rather than this is us reporting the news. For instance, like on [redacted], with with [redacted]. Yeah, yeah. So have listened to them, you know, I don't get out in the car as much with COVID. So, you know, I have kind of lost that. But,

you know, going back to the [redacted murder victim's name], the one thing about [redacted] that really bothered me is she inserted herself in the news, but I had to remind myself, this is not as much of a news group is more of an entertainment. But you know, when she was a spokesman for the, for the FBI, and then with with [redacted], she interviewed her daughter and her friends because they had known her and I thought, I need to back up a little bit, you know, and report the news rather than inserting yourself. And so that bothered me.

BZ: On radio, and on TV, both it sounds like and correct me, if I'm mischaracterizing this, it sounds like you would be in favor of some more clear labeling around the type of content.

S7: Yeah, I think that would be good. You know that this is more of an interview, you know, and maybe we're just supposed to assume that it's entertainment, versus, you know, just news actual news reporting. That, yeah, I think that would be helpful.

BZ: What would it take for you to lose trust in an organization that you have that trust relationship with?

S7: Well, again, when when the inflammatory words start being used, when you can tell that there's a political slant to the pieces, you know, any of those things, rather than just saying this happened.

BZ: On the flip side of that, if there's an organization that you you're kind of looking at askance right now, and you don't really trust as much, what would it take for you to turn around your opinion of that?

S7: Well, for them to do the opposite, to start just reporting the news to be reporting what's going on, without the obvious bias that they insert.

BZ: I am actually, at the end of my list of questions here. Um, I can't tell you how grateful I am for your time and your insights. But I'm wondering if there's anything else that I didn't ask you, that you'd like to add to the discussion before we wrap up?

S7: Right. I mean, just in terms of of national and maybe it's national for a reason. I look at some of these 24/7 news agencies and think, you know, there's things going on outside of the United States, why are we not -- you know, rather than beating a certain topic to death? Why are you reporting things that are happening in other countries? You know, they focus on three news items every day. And that's it until they wear it out rather than saying, you know, there was an earthquake in this country or, you know, I feel like they're doing their viewers a disservice by not expanding themselves.

BZ: I don't have this one scripted, but I'm curious if if there was a way to somehow make that a friendlier environment. would that change how you feel about engaging?

S7: No, I don't know. I mean, because perhaps, but you know, how do you avoid that without trotting on free speech? By, by or maybe in the comments, you know, it was like with the cheerleader that had gone on, I don't know if it's TikTok? Or what? what social media thing that it spewed the profanities and got removed, and then the Supreme Court, you're back on and you know, as much as I hate that ugliness. I guess my feeling is, my choice is to walk away from it. And I don't know how much you can tell people. Well, and I have to say, that was one thing that has always impressed me with [redacted] is, you know, no matter how ugly the news of the day may be, I feel like they try to always find one story that's a feel good story where you find someone in the community that's doing a good thing. And they mentioned it, you know, and I think that's lovely. Because I think it's, it would be difficult to be a news agency that has to report the ugly stuff every day. I'm so... yeah, I really like to say that anyway. I -- just like for too many 30 year old white men sitting in their parents basement in their underwear with nothing better to do. Like, oh, you know, [radio show host] left and I was never a [radio show host] fan. But when he came out a couple of years ago, and on talking about civility, and, you know, we really need to figure out a way to bring civility back.

BZ: Well thanks so much for your time.

Interviewee: Subject 8

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 6, 2021

List of acronyms: S8 = Subject 8, BZ = Interviewer

S8: Okay, so my name is [redacted]. I am 25 years old, currently living in [redacted], been married to my wife for three years now. We are expecting our first baby girl in October. Very exciting. I am currently a graduate student at the [redacted] studying my Master of Finance. My wife has an associate degree. So we're trying to figure out when she goes back to school. Do you want like political leaning or anything? Or like? I don't know.

BZ: I don't need to know if you're necessarily like a card-carrying member of a party or anything. But like, where would you put yourself on that political spectrum?

S8: I would probably put myself fairly conservative with some, I guess, like leaning conservative, moderate, right there in that middle leaning. Right.

BZ: Okay. How would you define the term fake news?

S8: You know, I feel like, even with like that definition, I feel like there's a lot of stuff going on working get misconstrued in some ways. I think fake news is, honestly, I think it's real news that can be misconstrued, or when framed in a different way can give false information, or, I guess, advocate for incorrect cause, you know what I mean?

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S8: Honestly, what I think of local news organization, I try to think of local newspaper, like journalists. I don't have television, like cable, but if I had cable, I'd probably think like the local news stations, like in [redacted], it's like [redacted] news. That's the [redacted] Fox station. And so, um, yeah, I guess that's how I would probably define local area news.

BZ: What would make a local news organization trustworthy? In your view?

S8: I think that they should have some sort of relation to the area that they are giving the news to. And I feel like that they should have I guess the word is not repercussions, but I feel like there should be consequences for them based on the news that they give like, if the news is incorrect or false, then there should be some sort of check to them. You know what I mean?

BZ: Um, tell me about your experiences consuming news when you were growing up. So I'm talking about your childhood, your teenage years, what you might have been exposed to at school, what you were exposed to at home, that kind of thing.

S8: Oh, yeah. So I think Mostly growing up the -- My parents are fairly conservative people so we would watch fairly conservative news networks like Fox News, dad would listen to like conservative radio shows. We never got to like Rush Limbaugh levels of conservatism. But um, we would mostly watch that. I don't ever remember watching like CNN, or like BBC or

anything, mostly just the local Fox for as a teenager, I guess going through school, you are exposed to more BBC, CNN. But growing up in rural [redacted], most people lean into that conservative news. So mostly Fox.

BZ: Did you ever have like, whether this was formal instruction, or just a casual conversation -- Did you ever have any kind of sense from your parents or teachers or anybody else that like, how you should consume news? Doing so critically? Like, was there any kind of sense of news literacy?

S8: I'm not, I wouldn't say necessarily, I think anytime there was like a big commotion or a large event, like we you just take it at face value, but I was never told directly, hey, this news is more liberal leaning. So like, or I didn't know of any new source that had a political leaning. And so I was just told to take it at face value, if I didn't believe it to go research other sources and try to get to the conclusion that I need to get to.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S8: I'm on a scale of one to four, I guess on a scale of low to high, I would probably say, medium to low. I don't really -- I look at the news when it pertains to me, or if I'm interested in it. But I, I'm not really one to be connected one on one, to always have like a newsfeed going across my phone? Or I guess I don't really, in my social media uses. I don't follow news channels with like, the latest updates, if it's if it pops up and pops up, but I'm not out there looking for it.

BZ: So would you say you're primarily exposed to news like on websites and social media versus actually seeking it out and watching it or reading a newspaper?

S8: I would say so. Yeah.

BZ: Does it matter to you if it's like commercial broadcasting versus public radio? That kind of thing? Does it make a difference?

S8: I think, I think it mostly depends. Whichever is the easiest for me to get to it. Like, I feel like today, in this technological age, we can get news in so many different ways that whatever the first way it gets to me, that's just, that's how it gets to me. I'm not like exclusively reading newspapers or reading – listening to the radio, it just – however it gets to me, that's how it gets to me.

BZ: Okay. Do you follow any local news organizations on social media?

S8: Um, I think on my, so I use Reddit a lot. I follow a lot of the local area subreddits, like discussion boards. And that's how I get a lot of my news for from these local areas, like, here in [redacted], if anything big happens, usually it pops up there. My wife is from [redacted]. So whenever we're down there, I usually try to follow that one a little bit more. Whenever we're back in [redacted], usually I read that or, like I said, if something just pops up and it hits me then.

BZ: Yeah, so Reddit is kind of its own animal in that. You don't get a lot of like official accounts from big organizations. So it's mostly like other users, right?

S8: Yeah. Like, I was like, I don't know if you want me to explain.

BZ: Yeah, yeah, go ahead, go on.

S8: So mostly, it's like, if I'm looking for news, there's actually a portion in the app where if you you can you have your own home feed, then you have whatever's popular. And then if you scroll all the way to the left, they have World News, which is usually like curated news posts from those organizations that do have a specific user on the website. And so a lot of that can be fake news, too. And you have to be careful, which is why I like to look around through like, some different sources. Not very much, like I said, pretty medium to low, but um, if anything big happens, it's usually right there and I'm pretty accessible to it at the moment or a couple moments after it happens.

BZ: Um, what kinds of stories or content are you more likely to comment on or reply to or engage with?

S8: I think in terms of like, politics, I think there's any big laws being signed in, that I may have a disagreement with. I'm not usually one to post on social media. But if I feel like I have some point to get across, then I feel like I would interact more with that. If it's like, just more like any big news, if it's like, someone dies, or it was like a natural disaster, I feel like there wouldn't

really be much for me to give to. But if they're like, if someone is, I feel false about a belief that I hold on to, or I guess a political leaning that I adhere to, that I would probably be slightly inclined to post and respond to that person.

BZ: Think back to an interaction that you might have had on a social media network, either with a local news organization or on a local news story. In the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election, how would you characterize that interaction?

S8: I'm going to give you both sides, my side and what I thought the other person was doing. For my side, I would probably have thought, indifferent, not very enthused. I'm just like, for background, I don't feel like either of the candidates really had my political beliefs or whatever I valued in there kind of in there. What is it called? Their like -- their campaign, their platform, that's the word. But from what I've seen on the social media posts that I have, I feel like very divisive. People are very, either one way or the other way. And there's no middle ground. It's either you're all in or all out. And that it's almost like, there has been an evaporation of that moderacy that I feel like should be there. But yeah, like for me, I feel like I was pretty middle. But everyone else around me was either super super into it or super, super not into it. You know what I mean?

BZ: Yeah, I get the sense that there are a lot of folks that find themselves in that kind of middle ground that maybe would have engaged in those types of conversations, but who felt really reluctant to in the last, you know, year, a few years? Because it's just kind of a an ugly space?

S8: Yeah.

BZ: Think about the news organizations that you trust the most, why do you trust them?

S8: I feel like the news organizations that I trust the most are the ones that dropped the story in the, I guess, in the instance that that happens, whether it breaks a couple of minutes or hours afterwards, but they're cut and dry. With the fact that there's like any witnesses to what happened and in some way, eyewitness accounts, no political spin, or no, I guess political agenda to it. If I want to consume my news, I'd rather just get it for the sake of getting news than having some agenda pushed on to me.

BZ: And for the organizations that you trust less, or you trust the least, what is it about them that you that makes you not want to trust them?

S8: I was -- probably about the opposite of what I said, some political leaning, where -- or I guess some -- I don't want to say like an agenda because I don't feel like news organizations should have an agenda. But in this world, I feel like a lot of stuff that should be important, can be obscured or completely covered. If it doesn't match, something that that news organization is trying to convince you of. Like I see, I don't want to get like too into it. But with all like those Black Lives Matter riots. There's a ton of stuff out here in [redacted] and out here in the West. And I feel like a lot of those interviews were, especially when they were like looting or Minneapolis or Minnesota when they were like burning down buildings and stuff. Like, I feel

like -- I don't want to say there was a narrative behind it because what happened there should not have happened, but I feel like those news organizations took that opportunity and pushed it for as long as they possibly could, just over and over and over again. And if there was a resurgence, they went right back to that to push whatever ideology they wanted their viewers to listen to. And so, I'd rather -- going back to the first question trying to tie it all together, I'd rather have a news organization that would just give me the facts straight. And let me take from it what I want to take from it instead of trying to take something that they're trying to give to me.

BZ: What would it take for you to lose trust in an organization that currently you already trust?

S8: Probably some big scandal with how they are trying to misinform me for their own personal gain. Like if -- if it broke that they have purposely misconstrue, misconstrued a story to try to push for like, a candidate's election, or the passage of a law. And then after the fact that that candidate had been voted in, or if that law had been passed, and after the fact, they went back and tried to cover up their story by rewriting some of their articles, they would probably lose a lot of trust in that.

BZ: And then the flip side of that, let's say there's an organization that like right now, you just don't trust a word that they have to say, what would it take for you to gain trust in them?

S8: Honestly, I, I feel like once you lose that trust, or if you don't have that trust, I feel like it's really, really hard to get that trust back. It's like they say, once a cheater, always a cheater. If it

happens once, I'm under that belief that it's always going to be happening. And so, I don't know if there is a way to get that trust back.

BZ: I really kind of covered everything I wanted to cover. I really appreciate your time and your insights. Is there anything though, that you would like to add to the discussion? Before we wrap up, anything I didn't ask?

S8: Um, honestly, I feel I feel pretty good. If there's anything else you want to dig deeper into, I've got plenty of times, if you want to go back into something I I'm more than happy to keep talking.

BZ: Um, no, I, you're the so far the first person that I've talked to that's really been into Reddit, which was kind of nice, because I want to make sure that it's not just about Facebook, right.

S8: Yeah. Well, it's like, and it's even worse, because there are some of those discussion boards, where you could even say, like, Hey, I have conservative leanings, you'd be instantly banned from that discussion board. Yeah, where it's like they could, they -- it's not even like de-platforming you but it's -- they take away that voice that you have and like, like, they have the Reddit moderators, which are like the five big guys, and they each, you know, each Discussion Board has their own moderators, they can go in and I guess go through all of this, and I feel like if some posts don't fit a certain narrative, or if some of those posts don't agree or push what that discussion board is trying to say, then you -- you don't have a voice there. And you will just -- you're not allowed to speak. I've seen and I mean, there's extremists on both sides. I don't know if

you're familiar with the Donald. Yeah, I -- obviously you are, if you're doing something on the news organizations, but like, I think it's crazy that something like that could even happen where it becomes an echo chamber where if you don't allow those voices of opposition into your discussion, that you will just get more and more and more radicalized until a breaking point, which I think really culminates into that January 6, whole fiasco. Because you, you definitely know that some of those guys were probably some of those ringleaders in there. But then I also think, on some more very liberal subreddits, where if it's like, the woman has a right to an abortion, which obviously they should, but if you say hey, I think I'm pro-life, I think that babies should stay alive. That same radicalization happens on the other side, until they get to the point where there is no listening to any kind of opposition or any kind of formal discussion. And I, I kind of think that that's kind of led to us not being able to hit a middle ground with anyone you know, like, everyone is so afraid of offending other people, that you can't have arguments without it boiling out in some sort of fistfight or some intense hatred for other people. Like, there's no discussion that's being stimulated due to that radical and those echo chambers and you can see it on Twitter. You can see it on Facebook. I don't know. It's crazy. But yeah, yeah. And then the other really bad thing about Reddit is that you have these companies, I'm going to use the example of GameStop. You know, of all the GameStop situation. So I am on Wall Street Bets, you know, like, yeah, Apes, Together Strong, Diamondheads Brothers. But there have been posts of these companies saying, hey, you should get in and help us do a pump and dump and like, like, do these illegal financial strategies? And like, if they have the audacity to come do that to us? Like, what do you think these news organizations are doing? Buying some of these users with really high priority, or their posts always go to the front page? Why shouldn't I just pay this guy like \$20,000 to post something about how stupid President Trump is to try to rile up these

conservatives? You know? Yeah, it's, it's like just the manipulation that could be done. Oh, especially over that course of time in those echo chambers, I feel like could be pretty catastrophic if they could harness that. Most people can't -- most people on Reddit can, are pretty left leaning, but they can see through most of that stuff, but there are some people that just do not, like use their brains and just like, go crazy over that kind of stuff.

BZ: Yeah, and I don't know how you fix that.

S8: I mean, but you can't fix that. I feel like, unless you can have that discourse, that there's no way to fix that.

BZ: But the reality is, you have human beings doing the moderation.

S8: Yeah. And then what makes it even harder is that you can pay the moderators to fit, like, you could be doing some shady stuff with moderators to try to call out any posts that go against your narrative. And so I don't know.

BZ: Yeah, that's a lot.

S8: It's just, it's just, it's real hard to get, especially on Reddit to get like actual news, unless you actually go look for it. And I feel like it's the same with just every news organization.

BZ: Well, I really appreciate all of your insights, and especially your time.

Interviewee: Subject 9

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 5, 2021

List of acronyms: S9 = Subject 9, BZ = Interviewer

S9: Well, I am 46 years old. I'm an attorney with the [redacted]. I've been an attorney since 2003. On my second marriage, I've got five kids, three of my own, two of hers. Basically, their dad's not involved. So I'm their dad. I go to [redacted] Baptist Church in [redacted]. And I love law, theater, politics into. And that's that's me.

BZ: Talk to me a little bit about your political leanings. I don't necessarily need to know if you're a card-carrying member of a party or anything. But like, do you consider yourself middle of the road, more to the right, more to the left? That kind of thing?

S9: Well, at one time I probably considered myself more conservative. And a lot of people who know me probably think I am conservative. But here recently, I've been sort of reevaluating things and, and a lot of my views are sort of -- I mean, I think if I had different conversations with different people that they would, some people might, depending on the conversation, and the issue, describe me as a liberal, and others describe me as conservative. Matter of fact, I've had conversations, literally, at the same time, simultaneous text conversations with a conservative family member and a liberal friend, lawyer friend, and the conservative member called me a brainwashed liberal. And the lawyer friend called me a brainwashed conservative. I don't really think those two can be the same. But that probably defines kind of who I am. So I

mean, I would say I'm middle of the road in the sense that, that depending on the issue, I could fall either way. There is a certain amount of -- of animosity toward people, people they call middle of the road, because they think that means that you're just kind of waiting for the best, best idea, when in reality, sometimes what it is, is you just have different views on different issues. And it just means that that that I might side with my fellow conservatives sometimes, my fellow liberals on other times, and so I probably am more in the middle of the road, and probably I'm leaning that way just due to multiple reasons.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S9: I would define that term as, as one, anything that misconstrues facts or misconstrued -- misconstrues somebody's opinions on things. So you might -- and I think to a certain degree when you leave stuff out, so you might do a clip of what's of a sentence someone is saying, and then they use it for a different meaning from what it really was intended. I think that certainly just boldface, facts that aren't true, is certainly fake news. I think also just characterizing people in a wrong way also is fake news.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization, what would that look like to you?

S9: Um, I would define that as definitely somebody that's, that's in sort of in my surrounding. So I Live in [redacted]. So local news to me would be the local paper, the local news stations, local radio, I mean, we have some pretty decent stations, local stations. Now some of those are connected, because you got to watch that, because some of those, quote local radio stations are

actually connected to the bigger companies. So they might actually not be local. But when you first say that I'm envisioning, like, our local news stations here, the local paper.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child or as a teenager. So here I'm talking about, you know, habits you might have picked up from your parent experiences that you might have had in school, that kind of thing.

S9: Okay, so certainly, my dad was a newspaper man. So I was huge newspaper person. I mean, from the moment that I could really start getting interested in that, I read that, I read the newspaper. I also realize -- relied heavily on, as a kid, local news stations, you know, whether it was the, you know, [redacted], and those guys for that type of news, and pretty much the paper. Also, as I got older, I got a job, I also started getting different magazines, US News and World Report, Time, those things, it's more of a national kind of look at how things were.

BZ: Was that like a choice? Or was that you know, just something you kind of learned or an interest that you had?

S9: I think I think really, it was my desire, you know, for the -- to get those magazines was my desire to sort of broaden, you know, where I was getting my information from. I think probably the newspaper, just watching Dad read the newspaper every day, I just sort of got into that. And sort of missed some of that, because there was some that -- there was definitely some value to that. And he would teach me things like that you don't always look at the headlines. Sometimes you got to look at the article, because he always said, and my dad was a newspaper man, as a

former editor, he said sometimes editors have certain bents that you see in the headlines. So you got to read the article, because sometimes, sometimes the headline's article matches, but sometimes they don't. So you got to read the article, read the substance of what's there. So you can try to figure it out for yourself. And that naturally led me to want to sort of expand my horizons and and try to get news from different sources.

BZ: Yeah. So it sounds like your dad kind of provided some news literacy.

S9: Oh, yeah, definitely.

BZ: Did you ever get anything like that out of school?

S9: I think? I mean, I think -- I think there was some of that. But nothing that just kind of, kind of strikes me. My dad always encouraged me to challenge even my teachers. I mean, I can think of a handful of teachers that I got in trouble because they would say something wrong about history. My dad was a huge history guy. He had a master's degree. So he had every book. So if he had told me something I heard different in class, I'd go back to him and say that you told me that, my teacher said this, and he would then go get out a book. And he'd show me the book, I'd take the book to school, and the teacher would be like, would get upset because I was like, I was like, see, it's right here. This is history. And so -- and so probably not as much as I, as what I got at home.

BZ: That's really interesting. And what would you describe as your news consumption habits now? How's that different from when you were growing up?

S9: Oh, my so different. I mean, our local paper is now actually run by [redacted]. And we have local reporters, and I don't get the paper. I pretty much have done, you know, I pretty much do like – a thing that a lot of people do, is I -- I use different resources. Like, whether it be -- I do look at the mainstream stuff, Fox, MSNBC, CNN, but also just kinda, if I hear something happen, I try to look at it, and get a video on it and try to listen to it. And so, I do listen to local news as well, sometimes but just not as much as I used to. But it's -- a lot of it is mostly on the internet, I don't get the paper anymore. There were some, what I might call some moments with our local paper that I just felt like that they were a little bit -- had more of a liberal bias than I like, in the sense, in the sense that -- and it really was the editorial pages. I mean, I don't have a problem with how, how the [redacted] reports, I've never seen something that I would say like, they're reporting something wrong. So it really was their editorial pages. And they were they did have -- have a, you know, I felt like they're too much of a liberal bent. And that just becomes upsetting, because I was like, you know, what, I'm just not gonna buy, I'm not gonna use that anymore. And so that's when I started, you know, and I really -- So, I rely on those types of things. But I tried to do a diversity of things. So if there's a, an event that happens, and let's say I get it from Fox News, I will go find the direct opposite of what I think Fox News is, and then I'll try to find, then I'll try to go look at some, you know, just, you know, different viewpoints on it, and try to make up my own mind about what's going on.

BZ: Do you think in terms of what you're consuming, do you skew more towards local or national now?

S9: I think it's a good mix. And I think that that's intentional. And, you know, you can get so much now thrown at you that I think you have to be intentional in your media consumption, you have to be intentional about not consuming too much of one source. There's so much infotainment news now. And, you know, and so I just I feel like I have to be careful, have to be careful to make sure that I'm basically skeptical on everything. And really, you know, that I'm getting the facts. Like, I love it. For instance, when you -- if you watch just the non-opinionated sections of any of the major news programs, I think you can get a good chunk of news, real news. But it's just that most of what they have on is opinionated stuff. And so there's -- but if you look at what they're presenting, as far as the news, they may not present all the news that each other station presents, but in the general they present it, I think in a good fashion. But I think what a lot of people quote, say is "news" nowadays, which is why that I think maybe like with fake news, gets where people call so much fake news, is because they're looking at the opinionated part of it. It's like, you know, at least when you have a newspaper, there's an editorial section. So you could skip over that if you don't want to look at it. But now, it's just it's intermingled, it's intertwined. And so a lot of people think, well, that's news, when really, it's not news, it's an opinion. It's someone making a commentary on the news, as opposed to actually just reporting the news, reporting what happened or what didn't happen.

BZ: Do you find yourself checking out stories that you find on social media? Or are you more likely to seek out stories that you find through kind of what I would describe as traditional means?

S9: I do some social media. I mean, if I see something, a story that someone's posted on Facebook, or, or a link on Twitter, I do look at that. If it interests me enough that I click on it, to read it, at least for me, I'm going to, I'm going to look at it and try to really get, you know, look elsewhere. I've started thinking about getting back into maybe subscribing to like traditional news, like newspapers, I love the idea of a newspaper. My dad was a newspaper man. So the fact that all these newspapers have folded, just hurts my heart because I'm like, there was a time where I believe that the news really was the news. Like I could count on -- like, I could read the paper, and at least know they're going to give me the facts. I was -- My dad, my dad used to always say that. It's just the facts. That's what you want in there. And you try to leave the commentary out and everybody has their biases and even dad knew that, but when he was an editor, he tried to do the best to weed that out that in those articles. That it's about, you know, what the facts are, what happened, what didn't happen, covering that source, investigating that source, you know, investigating, you know, what happened with the government. And so I think, I would like to feel I could trust somebody to give me, you know, that sort of, that -- just the straight facts without the opinionated commentary coming in. But now I feel like I'm just kind of, I'm just -- I'm having to weed stuff out myself. And, and it would be nice to have a source that I feel like I could go to and be like, I know they're going to just give me the facts about what's going on, and then leaving the commentary for somebody else.

BZ: How many local news organizations would you say you follow on social media, if you follow any?

S9: Of my big ones? Probably [redacted]

BZ: So just one? Why them?

S9: I think I probably always followed them. I mean, at some point, I just started watching them. And, and, you know, and it seems like that there's, it seems like that they try to do a good job of not having, they try to do their job of being a news organization. Now, I've watched some of the other channels. And you know, I gotta say, the local, the local people seem to do a good job of that, that they that they really report things as, as they happen, or what they said, and they don't do a lot of that mix. And that is, so I really do like that. But, you know, it's just, you know, it's [redacted]. That's just where I go, I guess.

BZ: Do you ever comment on anything that they post on social media?

S9: Very rarely, very rarely?

BZ: What -- How about national news organizations? Do you follow any national news organizations on social?

S9: Let's see here. I do. They're escaping me, but I can tell you. Let's see, where it is. So, I like AP. I follow AP, Wall Street Journal, BBC News. I love that, that perspective, they have a -- Reuters. And then I also have a little bit of -- they're -- if... I can't remember the name of it, but I had this. There's a -- it's not really a news media source. It sort of, kind of is, but I forget the name of it. But it's one of these things where, where, basically, it's sort of a collaborative effort between the followers. So they have a news organization, and then you sort of can, can tag it and say, Hey, this is what I found out. So I found that interesting, but it's really not what it's supposed to be, I think, and so I don't follow it as much. But those are the ones that I follow. Like, if I just want to look at the news on my phone, that's what I'm gonna, those are the ones that I'm going to follow. I like USA Today as well. I don't know if they have a bent either way, but I like some of the stuff that they do as well.

BZ: Same question, then. Any particular reason why those organizations over others?

S9: Well, I think I've found over time, that I feel like that they do present a lot of the facts in their reporting, their sort of factual reporting that they do, that it's a place that that I can get just the basic information, without a lot of commentary. And so I just trust those, and I've made a point to really try to go out of my way to figure out which ones that I trust. So those definitely are ones that I just feel like over time, give me a good perspective.

BZ: What type of content would you want to see from local news organizations on social?

S9: Well, I think certainly the very quick timing of of local, of local stuff that affects us. And certainly, you know, what's going on. I mean, it's, it's like, you know, we don't need to know, you know, there's a time and place for why, but I think local local news organizations would benefit, would be beneficial to people and to me, if they just reported the facts of things, the what, not, you know, or or the how something occurred, but not necessarily why it occurred or whether it was right or wrong. You know, but certainly, good solid information because it would be nice to be able to have a connection that was local, where they could -- where I felt I could trust them. And, and I think I see that. I see that now in -- in the one, the one that I watch. But I still think they could probably do a better job.

BZ: Um, is there any particular type of social media content from a local news organization that would make you more likely to comment or reply to it?

S9: No, because I just for me, I think that that's a very, that's a danger zone. Because I think that some articles that are posted on news, news articles are -- the people that can be commenting are just going to drag you into the mud. And so for me, I wouldn't do that. I don't mind commenting on my own posts with friends that I have. Because you obviously if you're connected to me, at least, I feel like that they you know that I'm a post on what you have to say. So I don't mind doing that. But, but on some of those local stuff that I've just seen those go go crazy. And I just, I just I don't think that, that I'd want to do that. It's crazy. I mean, like, I've just, like, there's a, there's a lawyer friend, and we're together, we, you know, we routinely go out for drinks and, and with other lawyers, we have legal discussions, and we're fine, we have different viewpoints. And for, like, literally years, we would do that. And we started doing, with another friend of mine,

just a sort of a group, text chat. And the guy's crazy on text. I see him in person, we're fine. But he says things. I'm like, Did -- You're insulting me, we're not having a conversation or discussion, or reasonable debate, you're insulting me, so I'm just not gonna deal with it, I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna do that. But he won't. That doesn't happen in public, he's fine. And so there's just this thing about the phone or the media, using the thumbs or typing, that people just feel like, they just can go crazy. And other than, you're like, I don't get this at home, I don't get this, when you come over to my house and visit, and we're talking, we can disagree, we can disagree in a very good manner. And so I completely -- I completely understand that. Because, you know, I think maybe what my distinguished moderates, quote, "moderates" from other people might be their desire that, like, I'm constantly reevaluating things, and, and it's my constant drive to learn. And so I'm always willing to think, okay, if someone gives me an argument to think about, I'll think about it, and read, you know, evaluate why I believe something, and see if it holds true. And if it doesn't hold true, then I'm going to really think about that. And I think -- So I'm not necessarily, I don't feel like I have to like stand, you know, and just keep myself grounded in a position just just to just to fight the position. That's when I engage in talk or debate, I'm really engaged in it to find, to make sure that we know what the truth is about something. We know the reason about something, what is the right thing to think, and the right thing to do and to support. And I believe that. In every conversation that I engage like that, but some people don't, it's a battle. It's about being right, instead of making sure that we that we are all looking toward what is right, if that makes sense.

BZ: It does. It does. Okay, so I'm going to make you go into the time machine with me here for us, okay, bear with me. Before the 2020 presidential election, we're going, right, like, feels like

ancient history at this point. What I specifically would like you to do is to think about an interaction that you might have had either with an organist, a local news organization or with people on a post of theirs. Does that make sense? How would you characterize that interaction?

S9: Well, I can think of -- and I believe what happened was I was tagged by somebody else. And so I started going through it and I believe that I made a couple of comments. You know, in a couple of them where it just, you know, it just really got distasteful, I mean, you know, it's almost like it leaves a bad taste in your mouth. Because I was like, I was like, what I said, you know, I'm very careful about what I write. Words have power as a lawyer, people know, I'm a lawyer. And so sometimes they think I'm trying to use words against them. So I try to be careful what I say. Because I'm very, I'm very aware of how people perceive me as a lawyer and think I'm trying to twist things and so I really am trying to be careful what I say. And I've learned that it helps. I've learned that in conversations, hard conversations, it helps to be careful about what you say. And you know, people get can read, quote, "the wrong tone" of your text, or "tone" of your typing, even though there is no tone. There can be a certain amount of things you can do. But if you're writing one sentence, no one can really tell you if you're angry or mad or sad, unless you specifically put that in there. So in that, what I'm thinking, I don't remember what the, what the comment, what it was about, but it just was -- I did, I said a couple things. And then literally 20 people responded in very negative ways. And, and it just -- it just was like, I'm just not going to do it. Because it's like, it's almost like a -- maybe it's because those things are typically public. Now you're going to want, a local TV station will want to keep those things public, so people will come and comment on them. That's the desire to get those people to watch you and view what you're having to say. And so those are all public, anybody can look at them. And so they're

gonna get all kinds of a cross section of people commenting and you know, and that's, that's probably one reason why I don't do it. I don't do very often.

BZ: Do you know or can you recall whether the organization stepped in at all? Once there was that piling on happening?

S9: They did. They really, it may or may have not been on mine. But there was clear throughout there, I could tell where there was a comment. And there was a string of comments. And there were some things that were missing. So I could tell that, that it went from one comment to another, and they just didn't match up. So I knew that there was something in there. My perception was that the organization was the one who took it out. I mean, because it just -- they just didn't seem to mix. I could be wrong about that. But that would be the only way. I'm not the type of guy, if you're going to like, throw any bad comments toward me. If it's my post, I'm going to delete you. But if it's somebody else's post, I'm probably not going to report you. Unless you say something like a terrorist terroristic threatening type of thing, I would, but other than that, I'm not going to report you. So I'm not going to ask the organization to do that. But yeah, I kind of got the sense that they stepped in a little bit.

BZ: How did you feel about that?

S9: I had no problem with it. I mean, my firm belief is, your posts, you have the right to edit, plain and simple. You know, if it's -- I feel like there's responsibility on my part, if it's my post, it gets out of hand, I'm gonna try to keep it, keep it within the bounds, whatever I believe is civil.

And so I have no problem with an organization doing that. I think that they have -- they're a business, they're their own entity. They are a free speech entity. But, you know, I think that on those of us who are either in the free speech business, or are in the constitutional business, I think we have more of an obligation to, to be good safeguards of that and regulate our own content. I think that's important for organizations to do. Yeah.

BZ: So think about the news organizations that you trust the most on social media, and this could be local, national, doesn't matter. Why do you trust them?

S9: I trust them because I've done my research. So if they, if you know -- at some point, if I've said okay, I think I want to use this new this news organization, I'd check what they say. And I do that all the time. So if they say one thing, I check it out, and I think I try to look at other sources, resources, and try to you know, I'll be honest with you, try to look at whatever someone says is the opposite of that organization. I try to look at them and say is that really, is that really what's going on? You know, a lot of people think that, well, they're all lying. I don't believe that. I don't believe that, that in the scheme of things if, if you have multiple news organizations reporting something, I think it's not an argument to say that they're all in cahoots together. So that means they're wrong. I think it's a cop out. I think it's what people say, to support their own beliefs. You know, now, I'm just always I'm amazed at how many people do that, but I check them out. I verify things and, and then once I do that enough, I still do it -- not as much. But, you know, I feel like I do enough verification to think that they're, that they're doing a good job. They're doing a good job as far as a news organization.

BZ: How about the ones that you don't trust? Can you give me some insights into why you might distrust them?

S9: I think when I'll read an article, and I see commentary, that is obvious one way or another. I mean, then that's embedded – and that it seems like it's a factual thing. But when you look in there, it would these, these these comments are like -- that doesn't belong there. That's like, it tells you what's going on. But then they insert this this almost like, edit -- Like they're trying to sneak in an editorial amongst the, the news. I have had big issues with that. And so to me, I don't I don't like that. I mean, obviously, if there's somebody that has been, you know, caught? I mean, I think a -- Breitbart might be the one of the examples, or feel like that they're pretty disreputable. I don't like Vox a lot, because I feel like that they have a clear bent. I don't, I personally, don't think that those two organizations lie about their bent. I think they're pretty clear about it. But I don't like that. I'm like, because they're trying to make themselves out to be a news organization. If you are, if you have a bent, if you have, if you say we are out to do X, then fine, do it. But let it be known. I mean, it's like, let it go be out there. Don't hide what you're doing. And then make people think you're somehow a neutral party. There is some -- there is some logic to having people with different viewpoints, advocate for those viewpoints. And do it out in the open. That's what free speech is all about. I don't -- I just I don't like it. When I feel like that there's a bent. There seems like there's a bent to me.

BZ: It sounds to me like what would be really important to you is some honesty and clarity.

S9: Yeah. Sure. I mean, I think that's that's -- that's important. It is important for government too. I mean, I mean, I think that's all connected for me, is knowing, you know, what, what everybody is about. And that's that's highly, highly important.

BZ: Is there anything else that I didn't ask that you'd like to add?

S9: No, I mean, I think that, I think this fake news idea is used too often. Whether it's local or national, I think people who say fake news, fake news, fake news -- And I'm a big proof guy. You know, if you're going to say that, about something, prove it, don't just call it fake news. And even if, you know, because if you're a news organization, you're going to you're going to make mistakes. There's gonna be times where you run something too soon, where you report something the wrong way. You just need to get out in front of it and say, Sorry, guys, we messed this up. But if you're going to come back to me and say, well, they got this wrong, which means everything else is wrong -- I'm like, if we're all judged by that standard, then what are you going to believe? You're not going to believe anything. I certainly think that I wish -- I don't like the movement of all of the major national cable networks and how they're moving. They're making these lines in the sand about what they support. And I don't know if we have any capable news organization out there. Who's gonna uncover something? Because they have made us, they've decided, we're against this, in my opinion, news organization. They need to be watchdogs of everybody, you know? Vote, you have your opinions. Vote in the voting booth when you -- but when you're, but -- you know you should be, you know, every liberal person should be able to look at Fox and say they do a good job of policing the president no matter who he is. Everybody should be able to see the same thing with CNN and MSNBC, and say they do a good job of

policing that person. Now, now if during the course of a campaign, you found out this politician was lying, expose it. If you found out this politician was lying, expose it, but but I just feel like that they're not doing that. And that's a real loss. I, I believe that Nixon was rightfully taken down. And that was because two reporters did their job. I don't know if that would happen. I don't know if that would happen today. And I think it needs to be all -- all of the press. And I don't know what the answer to that is. And that's why I feel like a decline in the newspapers is the issue. You know, my dad was a newspaper man, certainly was a very liberal guy, for the most part. And he was he had no qualms about that. He called himself a bleeding-heart liberal, and he was proud of it. But he was always felt like the job of the newspaper was to report the facts and investigate in a neutral fashion. And he did that. He did that. And, um, and I think that's a loss and that's and I think that can hurt our our democracy. I mean, I really do.

BZ: Well, thank you so much for your insights.

Interviewee: Subject 10

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 6, 2021

List of acronyms: S10 = Subject 10, BZ = Interviewer

S10: Well, I'm from [redacted]. I went to college at [redacted] University, and then came up to the [redacted] area to go to to get a master's degree which I did at [redacted], just on the east side of [redacted]. And then from there, I -- I wound my way into a Ph. D. program at [redacted] in [redacted]. And I, this was back in the 70s. And I did the classic thing. I did, I finished everything but the dissertation and, and left and took jobs in the corporate world with it -- without ever finish, without ever, ever completing a Ph. D. And so, let's see, I worked for several corporations, the [redacted] company, [redacted] Corporation. And then my wife and I started our own company in 1990. And I just retired from that job a couple of years ago.

BZ: Politically, where would you put yourself on the political spectrum?

S10: I'm a progressive.

BZ: How would you determine, how would you define the term fake news?

S10: The term what?

BZ: Fake News.

S10: Fake news? Boy, it's obviously defined in many different ways by the impassioned users of it. I would say it's -- it's misinformation, disinformation, that's presented as legitimate news, and apparently legitimate, I'm sorry, by an apparently legitimate news organization. So you couldn't get fake news from, say, a poster at that the arena, it has to come from something that would want some source that in one way or another is or resembles a medium.

BZ: And how would you define a local news organization?

S10: Yeah, I noticed. I was I was thinking about that when I saw your written description of the subject matter here. It seems to me that social media, as the term is conventionally understood, are mostly national or -- and indeed global. But of course, when you're talking to your next door, neighbor who lives 500 feet away on a social media like Facebook or Twitter, then it's very, very local. And you may be talking about very local events and issues. And I'm not aware of -- Well, let's see, our neighborhood has a local social medium called, called Next Door. And, and here, there are about 20 neighborhoods surrounding this one that are all in that issue. So I guess I would say that local social media is Next Door and the local tentacles of Facebook and Twitter and whatever, whatever national global media reaches into your area.

BZ: Do you follow any local news organization? So like your [redacted] -- That kind of thing on social media?

S10: Yes, I, I listen to [redacted]. All three of the local network affiliates. And I listen religiously to National Public Radio on the local affiliate here. And I am a former subscriber to the [redacted], which was, not too long ago, a great newspaper. Now it is sadly depleted in staff and budget and, and the scope of its vision, and in the profits it can make. So all of those worthy journalistic efforts go unfunded, a tragedy that's happening in too many local newspapers these days. And I think -- I think the television stations are not, and the local radio news on NPR, are not filling that gap, because they they have never had and are unlikely to have the budget to do so.

BZ: So what would make a local news organization trustworthy to you?

S10: Hmm. You -- it would be in recent years, I've kind of redefined every answer to that question for myself. You, you -- when I was growing up, we thought of a trustworthy news organization as one that was objective: verifiably, observably objective. And that meant, back then that meant that the news organization would present both sides or multiple sides of issues that came up. And that that hallowed journalistic tradition got reduced, especially in the last 15 years, by partisan politicians, and and other means, and now you can't you -- It's like when you go into politics, and you say the Democrats are supporting increased integration in American schools. And the Republicans are dragging their feet on that. And there are two sides to that story, there's a pro integration story and anti-integration story. We'll present both sides. Well, that's, that's not objective anymore, because there really is no cogent argument to be made for racial segregation. So the -- and many media outlets still try mistakenly to hold on to that old

30 year old view of what objectivity is. And so they, they present all these one sided stories as if they're two sided, and they're not.

BZ: Talk to me about your experience consuming news when you were growing up. So I'm talking about when you were a child or a teenager, what you observed in your home, whether you were exposed to news at school, that kind of thing.

S10: My mom and dad were only high school graduates, but they were both inveterate readers, and so we we had magazines coming into the house. Colliers and Newsweek and Saturday Evening Post and others. And so I began, I was a nerdy little reader at a very young age. And so I'm -- I was reading those magazines, especially Colliers and Newsweek, before I was eight years old, and when I was eight years old, we got our first television set. And so we had -- then had access to network news from [redacted] and [redacted]. But I continued to be a reader. And we subscribed to Colliers until it ran out. And I was a lifelong subscriber to Newsweek. My parents read it when I was a kid. And, and when I went to college, I took a [redacted] subscription and continued to until just a few years ago when they went digital and became a much less reputable outlet.

BZ: And I'm wondering if you can put a finger on -- and you might not be able to and that's okay -- why you picked up those habits from your parents? Did they talk about news with you?

S10: They talked about news constantly with each other. And, and if a brother or a cousin or an aunt or uncle came by the house, we talked about, my parents talked about news with them. And

I was fascinated by those conversations. And I sat around and listened avidly to them, mostly a silent listener. But in the, in the, from the Roosevelt era, my my family, my [redacted] family, a large family was strongly liberal Democrats, Roosevelt Democrats. And my parents remained that way the rest of their lives. Some of their siblings have fell off and voted for Eisenhower and so forth. But -- but some of us went, you know, what, I remember in [redacted] being as a 16 year old, campaigning avidly for John Kennedy. And that was not a popular thing to do. And he probably didn't get 500 votes in our county. Yeah.

BZ: But it's interesting to to think about how political leanings have changed. Not just in [redacted], I think, you know, to be a Republican now means something different than it did 30 years ago. And I think the same is true in [redacted] and being a Democrat means something different now than it did.

S10: Yeah. Yeah, we've all been pushed, or pulled to the, to the right, to the more -- to the more conservative viewpoints. Which I think is a very tragic development. And I think it has largely been executed through misinformation and cynical misuse of the media.

BZ: Do you ever remember having like, and it doesn't need to have been formal, but instruction, whether that was from you know, your parents or a teacher or your peers about like, kind of thinking critically about the things that you would read in the news?

S10: Yes. One of the big issues in my family and in my culture, in my community, Southern culture, community when I was growing up was, was a whole issue of race. And [redacted] was a

Union state during the Civil War. But in the decades after the Civil War, it rapidly became sort of Southernized and racial attitudes in [redacted] are -- are not anything to brag about. As there's a lot of, a lot of institutionalized, a system of past racism. And you -- one thing you look at when you're listening to media is how they're telling a story and how they approach telling both sides of it. And my my teachers at school very much told a -- they, they said that the Civil War was not about slavery, it was about state's rights. And they, this was -- my high school didn't integrate until a year after I graduated. But the teachers talked about, oh, how, how it is, how it is wrong for people to push in where they're not wanted, and things like that. And, you know, if you listen to, during the 50s, even before the Civil Rights movement started, if you'd listened to national news, and you saw you saw things on television, that, that, that just seemed ugly. The one side of the question, most questions was ugly, and the other side was rational. And, of course, there were many questions where you could have two opposing rational views. What are some of those key things in -- especially racism? There are no two sides, there are no two sides to that story, we need to, we need to root it out. And we need to as a as a country, we need to face our past and, and accept our mistakes and our misbehaviors and, and move forward. And those who argue that we don't need to do that, are not just the -- not just the opposing view. They are deluded. And there are many questions in the news that you can have an intelligent, conservative or liberal discussion on, but some of them don't, some of them don't work for that discussion. And you as you, as you watch news media trying to deal with those issues, you see one one way of dealing with it on one news outlet and another way on another news outlet. You -- I became a big, I became aware at a very early age that Newsweek Magazine was more liberal than Time Magazine. I was paying attention to that when I was 10 years old. If I, if I said anything about it, my mom would say well, Henry Luce is a, is a, is a Republican. And he, of course, you could

look it up he was. So you could -- you could follow those discussions and -- and the discussions were fascinating and, and back then they were much more honorable. Except for the Dixiecrats, the National Republican Party, [people] didn't engage in overt race bashing. They didn't use the code words that that started with Nixon and Reagan. And, you know, when you learn those code words, because you're hearing them in your neighborhood, and then you go to listen to older content, right, wrote Walter Cronkite or Edward Merle. It's very apparent that there are two ways of talking about these things. And that one is sensitive and fair minded and openly exploratory, and the other is closed off and, and characterized by prejudgments.

Yeah, so well, you know, my mom and dad, I guess you, you know, you hear your mom and dad, listening to an Eisenhower speech and reacting one way and listening to a Truman speech and reacting another way. My parents loved Adlai Stevenson, who was a great articulate liberal and statesman in the, in the 50s. And, and for some time afterwards, and you, you start even as a child, if you're paying attention to words and the nuances of life. You start detecting those differences and you respect the news organizations, the media organizations that also respect those differences. And a lot of times it wasn't that the -- I can't recall that any of the -- of the two stations we watched in our home network television stations. Two of them are [redacted], which is a very southern city, and one was in [redacted], just over the river, from [redacted] and [redacted] is by no means a liberal bastion. But, but I recall those, those network affiliates as being reasonably objective and fair in their presentation, of course, there were a lot of things they just didn't present. But what they did present was fair. And you, if we went to church on Sunday, you were able to hear things from the pulpit, like "good Baptists do not vote for a Catholic candidate for president," "the pope will be having breakfast in the White House before January

1,” and all this kind of stuff. And you know, the, the differences were not subtle, the differences between objective, fair-minded analytical approaches that would listen and and consider varying viewpoints fairly and engage in a free and open discussion, with the other guy, whether it was another liberal or conservative, or a moderate, or, or a, a blundering schoolteacher. I got kicked out of class a lot of times for supporting progressive viewpoints. And it was always national politics and national issues. But there were, you know, there were the conservatives. And we had a small weekly newspaper, run by two brothers, [redacted], and it was the [redacted] in [redacted]. And they were incredibly conservative. They were, I believe, card carrying members of the John Birch society. And so, you know, there, there was, there were no articles on race in the [redacted] that that you could call fair and balanced, news of any news and reportage -- they didn't have much of the other kind either. They just kept it out of the newspapers, but, but they did use all the code words and, and the code words, the codes were codes that citizens of the average citizens of [redacted] were very familiar with, were comfortable with and embraced.

BZ: Okay, so to refocus on your news consumption habits. Let's talk about your habits of consuming news as an adult now. Do you prefer local or national newspaper, radio, TV, internet? What are your preferences?

S10: I still love NPR. And I was -- I've been all my life. I've been a big CBS fan. But CBS has been radically underfunded for the last 20 years or so and is not hitting the licks it used to. I continued reading Newsweek until about 20 years ago. And when I was in college, I read some of the ultra-liberal or over liberal counter revolutionary magazines and papers, evergreen review and various ones. And then after I got out of graduate school in the humanities and went into

business, I became a daily reader of The Wall Street Journal. And the New York Times,.The Wall Street Journal, during the, during the period when I was reading it regularly, always had good interpretive and background pieces. Two of them starting on the front page, one in the far left column, one in the far right column. And they were not, they -- those articles, and I tried hard to detect it, did not seem to share the bias of the publisher for conservative causes. So you could, you could just by reading the analytical reportage out of the Wall Street Journal you could get good news. I've always found that news on national and regional issues out of local television stations is pretty flimsy. But for years the [redacted] was an outstanding newspaper and I read the [redacted] daily. See, I remember when cable news started. That was -- I was really excited at the idea that you could have 24-hour news, 24 hour news around the clock. And I became sort of a consumer that although the -- the headline news channel was -- pretty soon, wore its welcome out just by being so superficial, but CNN was a was an amazing thing. And developed, oddly enough by rather moderate or conservative businessman Ted Turner. And then I have to confess with some something of a red face, but during the Trump election, during the 2016 election, and during the Trump administration, I found all of the news so wrenching to consume that I, I pretty much retreated into listening only to MSNBC, and to praying daily and offering thanks that MSNBC existed, that there was a counterpart to Fox News. And so, I mean, you can still -- you can still do your due diligence, monitor for objectivity and balance and honest analytics on a liberal station the same way you would on a moderate station or conservative station. But MSNBC saved my sanity between 2016 and until this last election.

BZ: How many local news organizations do you think you might follow on social media?

S10: They all have, they all have websites, if we consider a journalism outlet's website, social media, I'm not sure that counts. So I think that question of what genuinely counts as social media is a layered one.

BZ: It's partly why I asked you for your definitions at the beginning.

S10: Yeah. So I guess I would say I mean, we'll -- we're often, at least every week, checking the local TV affiliate websites to get the latest update on the weather or something that they're not talking about right now. That's the great thing about social media, and worst. The sinister thing about social media is that it's always there. You don't, you don't have to wait until 530 to hear what Walter Cronkite thinks. You'd get on social media and find out what some anchor thinks right now. And for it -- for the diligent and conscientious consumer of news, that's a good thing. For the, for the casual, unthinking consumer of news, that's had a very pernicious effect. In our culture, lots of people tune in and the liar sounds just as honest to them as the guy who's telling the truth. And there are lots of markets where the consumer makes purchases, without knowing which product is better, what advantages are, and news works that same way. And if you want to look for reliable news, you can find it, but most people have never bothered to look for it. They aren't in the habit. And in the last -- in the last time since Facebook became a household word, we've got, we've got inferior product, fake news products all over. And they assiduously, in many cases, most cases, present themselves in the guise of being objective news bearers. They're not, but that's a -- that's one of the great dishonesties that's been perpetrated and you, you can't count on the great American population to differentiate between reliable news and false news.

BZ: Do you ever comment on a social media post from a news organization?

S10: I have in the past, but I don't do it commonly. There are -- on Twitter there are posts by news organization sometimes, of course, very common to see posts from individuals who are on the news teams at various organizations. So, and I, when I first got on Twitter, I, I did some, I tried to do some reasonably astute responding to those, to those comments, whether you're from an organization or from a leading reporter. But you know, you're really, really throwing a rock into a big pond on Twitter. And sometimes you'll put something out without thinking about much and 180 people are very impressed by it within 20 minutes. And, and other times you tell the truth, and nobody apparently hears it. So it's a very, you can't metric it, you can't measure it. So no, so no, I think I'd say I have a, you know, on -- on Facebook, for example, though, the news organizations have Facebook pages, but the big game on Facebook, is to do a survey. And we need your opinion on this. Well, actually, they're trying to find out what your attitudes are so that they can hit you up for money if you're on their side, and loads. So the -- all of those surveys, it's real bad, must be causing nightmares for the people who are in the business of running honest surveys and polls, because every idiot is out there now with a fake news survey. And there's a -- you know, how, how do you feel? Should Ivanka Trump run for president in 2024? And you know, it's just silly. But again, sizable, large, large portions of the public consuming media apparently cannot tell the difference between the drivel, and the stuff that could be serious.

BZ: Can you think of any interaction you may have had with a local news organization on their website on social media? Just anything in general in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election?

S10: Um, I don't know. Well, I have occasionally -- I will see, I will send compliments to a news anchor or reporter. I remember this a little bit further back, but they had the MSNBC had this guest analyst I thought was really good. His name was Ari Melber. And I, after watching him a few times, I've sent a note in to MSNBC, you should make him an anchor. And within a few weeks, they did. I was surprised to find out how closely they listened to my opinions and acted on them. But that's, that's pretty, it's pretty rare. And I am so -- I'll send compliments to, right? Rachel Maddow, or other anchors on the news. And but it's never -- it's usually not anything that requires an answer.

I should, if -- this may, this may make my my total response to your interview moot but I, my biggest cultural heroes, from the time I was a little kid have been journalists. And and I continue to feel that way. I think I think the New York Times and the Washington Post, saved this nation over the past four years. If it has been saved, if it turns out that we have been saved, and we wiggle our way out of this, thank God they were there. You know, then they were almost the last two. There weren't any other national outlets that you could count on. And then, you know, MSNBC pops up. But, of course, MSNBC is largely reporting what they just read in the Washington Post and the New York Times. So. So yeah. Yeah. And I do send, I guess, the most recent comments I've sent off have been to Washington Post, New York Times, columnists or reporters, or to the publisher. But again, I haven't raised substantive points other than saying,

thank goodness, you covered that that way. Yeah. I also know, my local reporters. Years ago, I had, I lived in [redacted]. And I had a 60 Minutes news crew come into my house to interview my wife and me about a local news item that had become national news. It was race related. But no, I have -- no, I have -- a friend of a friend of mine is the book editor at the [redacted]. And the the books section of the [redacted] is still robust, and, and reliable, mainly because this lady runs it and runs it very well. But so, I comment to her all the time about books. And sometimes those books are about political issues. But it would that would that's kind of a stretch. No, I've seen I'd say no, no engagement with any local news people.

BZ: Okay. Well, to go back to the the organizations that produce news that you trust, whether we're talking local or national. Why do you trust the ones that you trust?

S10: Oh, boy, I wish I had a cogent, quick and pithy answer to that. A casual listener could say, this guy is a knee jerk liberal, and he just likes everything put out by the liberal media. And, and, you know, I've already admitted that I've watched MSNBC to a fault for the last four years. But I think there are basic you know, you can't, it's not easy to teach this. I mean, we, we all say to our friends, when you get a -- you get a weird piece of, of what may be propaganda on Facebook. Oh, don't take their word for it, go look it up with one of the fact checkers, you can do that quickly. We tell people how to do that. But most people are still not going to do that. It's easy to do. But, but, you know, confirmation bias works. People want to hear their biases confirmed in the news they consume more than I want to hear the truth. And if I, if I had to, I used to teach, at the college level, humanities courses. And if I had to teach students in a writing class, how to distinguish between honest writing and, and disinformation in the news media, I think that would

be a good thing to tackle. But it wouldn't be easy to do. You have to, you know, I formed these habits before I was 10 years old. And you, you find that you like -- I guess if you're a good person, you'd like good reporters. And you -- and in the same way that you can tell a used car salesman or an insurance man or a vacuum cleaner salesman, by their kind of questionable body language and their unverifiable claims. You know I guess, I guess the same people who consume misinformation avidly in the social media probably are getting taken by vacuum cleaner salesmen and used car salesmen too, because they, they are willing to believe what they're hearing without examining it. So, so the way you have to, the way you have to decide if a news source is trustworthy, and you know, a news source can be trustworthy on one issue, and then two issues later, they can be lying their teeth off about it. So, you, you can't just do it, you can't just trust the news purveyor. You have to be, you have to be able to trust the story that's emerging from that news provider. And of course, nowadays, we don't get the whole story from any one reporter or anchor, we get snippets of it for many of them. And in a way that should help you to be a diligent consumer, be an educated consumer of the media that's streaming at you, because you're getting multiple versions of it, and you can test them against each other, and you can weigh, the way a jury weighs, who's telling the truth here. And I guess, as citizens in a, in a democracy, and potential jurors in jury trials, we have to all take that seriously. We have to, we have to weigh what we're hearing from anybody. It could be your high school kid saying, Oh, no, I was in the library. And I just, I don't have beer on my breath. That's Kool Aid. You have to make judgments on the veracity of what you're listening to and be an intelligent, adult consumer. And you have to be, you have to be fair and compassionate and interested and curious. And you have to fight any tendency that's in you to confirm your own biases, which builds up your comfort level, but may leave you being made a sap of some opportunities on the other side.

BZ: On the flip side of that, it sounds like the New York Times, The Washington Post, MSNBC are all organizations that you trust a lot. What would it take for them to lose your trust?

S10: Well, they -- they do, every day. Well, probably not every day, but fairly frequently. You'll -- you'll read a story. You know, if you're if you're an avid news consumer, you might read parts of 40 or 50 news stories a day in New York Times, or, or the Washington Post or on NPR? And you some of those you're going to go, that's baloney. That doesn't make sense. So you you're not just saying okay, NPR, I will believe anything they say. You still weigh and assess every story and the honesty of the reporter, and the, and the clarity and concision of that reporter's language. I realize I'm talking like a teacher, a high school teacher. But that -- that's what we have to do. In the same way that you can't trust the language of a used car dealer when you go into that used car lot, "This is the best car I've ever seen." And it you know it feels a little bumpy. But you'll -- like that, you don't put up with that, you don't trust that, you don't let them set the hook and reel you in without asking questions. Is this guy telling truth? Is this guy being honest? Is this guy saying things that are good for me or things are good for him? And is there -- is there a middle ground where it's good for both of us or good for everybody? And that -- those are the kinds of things you look for. And they're common-sense things. You don't have to have a PhD in journalism to do that. But boy, it is -- it does seem to be a somewhat rare kind of sophistication. We think, we think we are all, "I know how to tell the lies that a used car salesman is going to tell me. I will not be taken in by that guy." But apparently most of us are because, you know, Fox News is worse than any used car salesman and yet they're swallowed, hook line and sinker. You used to have clients in corporate America and you go into many, many, many, many, many Fortune 500

lobbies. And they have a channel on TV on and it's almost always on Fox News. And you know that's, that's not it? That's not at the Koch brothers, that's like at Coca Cola and and AT&T and Boeing, you know, so yeah, of course I guess maybe the receptionist is the one who decides what to watch but, or the security guard, which would be worse. But it boy, it's you -- we have to do that. And the fact that we haven't been doing it, that we're letting our daily newspapers die, we're not requiring honest, reliable news out of our, of our television and radio stations, and out of any media that purports to be bringing you news of any kind. If you are not consuming that with care, then you're like the young lady that goes into the bar and doesn't notice when a stranger puts something in her drink. You're -- you're going to get raped. And you know, it's a -- it's an evil world out there, that kind of that, that willingness to let yourself be fooled is a serious risk to your life and your health and your sanity. And to the democracy you live in. And I -- Good heavens, how could we get? How could we get? There must be, there must be online games that game designers could create that would reward intelligent consumption of news and reward -- reward you for identifying misinformation and news. Somebody should do that. Yeah.

BZ: That's all the official questions I have. I do have one final question that I like to ask everybody. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that I didn't ask you?

S10: Oh, no, no, I had -- I had no idea what we were going to talk about. Your questions were good. And, and you were a good listener, and you didn't cut off any of my rambling answers. So I think I covered far more than I had hoped I would be able to cover.

Interviewee: Subject 11

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 6, 2021

List of acronyms: S11 = Subject 11, BZ = Interviewer

S11: I'm a childcare provider. I take care of children 12 hours a day, five days a week.

BZ: Tell me a little bit about your background, your education, you know, where you find yourself on the political spectrum.

S11: I think that I would probably be considered a conservative Republican. I graduated from high school. I have an associate's degree in child development. And I've been in a childcare, the childcare industry for 34 years.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S11: To mean news that it would be news that is not factual.

BZ: What about how you would define a local news organization?

S11: I think that I'm more trusting of news sources that are maybe national or local, accredited news organization rather than maybe private publications. So for me, that would be like network news.

BZ: What would make a local news organization trustworthy to you?

S11: To me, I've just always trusted them. I think that they do -- Most of the reporters have a level of professionalism, and they are courteous to the people that they're interviewing, and they show an interest in having actual correct facts pertaining to the story that they're reporting on.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news as a child or as a teenager. So at school or at home when you were growing up? What was your exposure to news?

S11: My dad was a big national, local news, network type of person. We always had five o'clock news and 10 o'clock News. We also had the local [redacted] paper in our home. I didn't see much news it at school at all, it was mostly in my home.

BZ: Would you say you were influenced by you know, your parents' habits in that respect?

S11: I think possibly. It's quite possible. I'd might have been influenced by that.

BZ: Did they or did school at any point can provide you with how to read news critically or kind of news literacy?

S11: I don't think they really offered an opinion. They just -- we would just have it but it was wasn't till much older that they really would talk about stories that we've read in the news or saw on the news. So I was more of an adult.

BZ: How would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S11: I think I read a lot of news I, I really want to know what's going on in the world. And I'm concerned about how bad the events that are happening in my community will affect me and my family.

BZ: So what about like, when you you say, affects your family? Do you tend to skew more towards like local news, national news? Or is it all of the above?

S11: I think I kind of -- I think I kind of branch out, I start with local and then kind of move into national because I think that a lot of times, things like press, presidential elections and things like that affect us as a whole as a country, but primarily in the same perspective as that you might have a local type of election, those would probably affect me more than nationally. Because I really feel like that senators and legislators have more of an effect on what happens in our community than the whole national news.

BZ: Does it make a difference to you, you know, whether you're using a newspaper or the radio or the TV or a website, like do you have a preference?

S11: I think I primarily have evolved into reading a lot more digital news. So I have to look at the sources that I'm reading. So if it would be like a piece that I was reading from [redacted] or [redacted], [redacted] or one of the local news as I might read that more than more of an opinion paper like the onion or something like that. Sure.

BZ: Do you follow any local news organizations on social media?

S11: I follow all of them.

BZ: Any particular reason why you follow the ones that you follow?

S11: No, not really, each reporter has a different thing that they -- they pull from. And so sometimes, the one reporter will report more information than the, than another reporter, or even sometimes it's based on the people that they interview because each interview they receive comes from the interviewee's perspective.

BZ: Do you ever comment on social media posts for those local news organizations?

S11: I think I do. But I don't think I'm an avid commenter, commenter. I'm more of a casual commenter.

BZ: Sure. How many national news organizations do you follow on social if you follow any?

S11: Um, I probably don't follow any of the national ones that, but I do read them from time to time. So...

BZ: What type of content would you be hoping to see from a local news organization on social media?

S11: For me, it's all about truthful facts, you know, providing facts and and I think the, the reporters that I've read or listened to, for the most part, really tried to be clear on their facts. And for me, it's not about getting the news to me the fastest, it's about getting accurate news to me.

BZ: What kind of social media comment content would you be more likely to comment on? You've described yourself as a casual commenter, is there a type of story that you're more likely to engage with?

S11: Well, anything that I think that has to do with children? I would probably comment on anything that might have a provider perspective. Or domestic violence or domestic abuse, because I come from a history of that. So I would have a an opinion, definitely for that.

BZ: So would it be fair to say just, you know, topics that you feel kind of connected to?

S11: I think so.

BZ: Think back to an interaction that you might have had with a local news organization on social media or with a -- another person commenting on a local news organizations post that makes sense in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election. How would you characterize that interaction?

S11: Well, my interaction, as I try not to be confrontational, I try to, just try to express an opinion of maybe a perspective that might be different than theirs. Simply saying, have you ever thought about this type of perspective? And maybe I'll post that, maybe to create more conversation or maybe to help people see that there might be a different perspective to a certain topic.

BZ: Did you have people respond to you?

S11: Yeah, I did. But it wasn't like confrontational. Most of it wasn't. Yeah. That's a good point.

BZ: So actually, kind of more of a positive interaction.

S11: Sure. Yeah. Probably more positive.

BZ: Did the organization, the local news organization, wind up being part of that conversation at all?

S11: No.

BZ: What stood out to you about that interaction with other users?

S11: Well, I think that in any any kind of interaction you get, and not particularly target at meet, but you could get some, some calling people and you could get some really mean and nasty people. So I think that I tried to stay clear of the mean and nasty who truly type people.

BZ: Okay, so think about organizations that you do trust when it comes to news on social media. Can you talk to me about why you trust them?

S11: Hmm, I guess, I'm just guilty of just trusting big news organizations that are consistent, and reporting. So like, I'm, I like watching things in progress. Sometimes that's not good. Like when we had the the protesters in [redacted], and I didn't feel like that was a protest at all, I felt like it was it was crazy and out of control. That was frightening to watch. But I still watched it.

BZ: Well, on the flip side of that, think about organizations that maybe you don't trust? Can you talk to me about why your perception of them is different, why you don't trust them?

S11: I felt like that they weren't always being truthful. So I could find something on there. In the in their publication, and then I would turn around and go and do a little bit more research and and different sources and and find that their perspective was completely different, maybe than three or four other different sources that I read from.

BZ: What would it take for you to lose trust in a news organization that you currently have a trust relationship with?

S11: I think that if they report too quickly, and inaccurately, is -- they wouldn't be my first source to go to. I would choose a different first source.

BZ: On the flip side of that, what would it take for you to gain trust in an organization that currently you don't trust?

S11: They would, they just really would need to work to get their facts straight. And maybe they would need to do a little bit more research on topics that they're reporting on.

BZ: Is there anything I didn't ask you that you'd like to add?

S11: Oh, not on this subject. This was interesting.

Interviewee: Subject 12

Interviewer: Becky Bruce Zani

Date of interview: July 5, 2021

List of acronyms: S12 = Subject 12, BZ = Interviewer

S12: Um, I'm a mom. I live in [redacted]. I work at [redacted] University in higher education, teacher preparation. And I am also going to school right now get a doctorate degree.

BZ: Tell me a little bit about your educational background and your politics. Like, did you finish college? Are you working? Like I know you said you're in school, but be a little bit more specific.

S12: Okay. Sure. Yeah, I have two bachelor's degrees from the [redacted], a Master's from [redacted], and I am enrolled in [redacted] in their Doctorate of education program. Politically, I'm a Democrat. And I have always lived in [redacted], which I know so that's the minority here, which I think is kind of interesting. But my I come from a family of Democrats, and they're probably lean a little more liberal than most.

BZ: How would you define the term fake news?

S12: Oh, um, okay. So if I did define fake news, I guess I would say a complete lie. And I guess that's hard, because I think it also extends to partial lies, you know, some of the story can be partially true. And that's still fake news. But yeah, I guess, if I were to define it, it would be just a totally fabricated story.

BZ: How would you define a local news organization?

S12: Um, anywhere from, like a newspaper, radio, news, television, trying to think of a word for that. And even maybe down to neighborhood level, you know, city neighborhood cannot be news organizations.

BZ: What would make a local news organization trustworthy in your view?

S12: If they are unbiased to their own opinions and views. So, for example, I'm sure we will probably get into this, but in [redacted], one of the newspapers that, I don't know if I should name it, I'll just say it's the [redacted]. I believe, I actually haven't looked this up in a long time, but I'm pretty sure it's owned by the [redacted]. And so the stories are coming through that lens. And so that's when I don't totally trust it.

BZ: So that's more of like an ownership thing, I guess. Right.

S12: Yeah. Because... Yeah, I don't know how you would know down to the reporter level. Yeah.

BZ: Um, can you talk talk to me a little bit more about the types of bias that you see?

S12: That's a really good question. I think you've stumped me. I think I'm I don't know, I guess I can't prove it. But I always have it in the back of my head, that organizations that are owned by a specific political, religious party, either way, either side, in my view, will not report or say

certain words that puts their party in a bad way. But I can't even think of an example. I mean, well, beyond the local level with this isn't a reporting organization, I guess it is? The White House during the last administration, the Trump administration. You I could tell that, that the stories that were coming out, were bent towards whatever narrative they wanted to tell, not an honest truth.

BZ: So take that back for just a second to local news organizations. Is there a way that a local news organization could make you feel like they've done something to mitigate that bias?

S12: I mean, just be, I would say, just total transparency and just write about, you know, be open and honest about what where they get their funding from, and then how they seek out different views.

BZ: Tell me about your experiences consuming news as you were growing up. So think back to your childhood teenage years, what was that? Like?

S12: Oh, yeah, um, newspaper, we got it every day. And I don't, I never really read it growing up. But I remember, you know, seeing it around the house and sometimes flipping through it. And then, of course, always the five o'clock news or the [redacted] was on at nine. And basically, just to watch the very top stories, and then, you know, go in my day.

BZ: Did you ever have any requirements about current events in schools?

S12: Like, when I was going to school, that the school, I, I want to say we maybe had an assignment or two, and when we had to find a newspaper article and write a report on it, but we didn't have like a, like a school, newspaper or school. You know, they do it now, on the TV, sometimes. We don't have anything like that. So no, I would have to say.

BZ: Was there ever a point in your education where somebody like, talked to you about or instructed you in kind of reading critically news sources?

S12: I think so. Um, because I think I remember needing to find newspaper articles to bring in and talk about and how to read them. Um, I want to say that was, if I'm remembering correctly, that was like, the most elementary for me, but it's probably middle school age is like, seventh or eighth grade. But other than that, I don't think so.

BZ: Okay. Um, how would you describe your news consumption habits now?

S12: I mean, to be honest, Facebook, you know, what pops up, I follow [redacted]. And here in [redacted], and I follow national news and guts that's put on by Dan Rather, I think that's mostly how I get my news. And sometimes, I like NPR up first, the podcast, because it's short, as well as the skim, because they go real short, and I have a short attention span for that stuff. That's about it.

BZ: If you had a preference in terms of like, what you're consuming Now, does it tend to be more local, more national or kind of a mix?

S12: If it's probably a mix, but I think I like local a little bit more, because I feel like it affects me more. But I do follow, you know, some national stories, but it's mostly I pay most attention to local.

BZ: Do you tend to favor like, public broadcasting, for example, you know, kind of going back to that conversation we had about ownership.

S12: What do you mean by public broadcasting?

BZ: So like, you mentioned an NPR podcast, if you're consuming something on the local level, would you seek out an NPR affiliate or would you go -- Or does it matter?

S12: Okay, um, it doesn't matter. If it was easy for me to find public, I would do that. But I don't know, like the first step to do that. But I would think that's more trustworthy than commercialized.

BZ: So it -- and it sounds like social media is kind of key to how you find information.

S12: Yeah.

BZ: Okay. How many local news organizations would you say that you follow on social media?
local news?

S12: Um, well, I follow I, one of [redacted]. And then two. I don't know if this would count, but the city of [redacted]? Um, I don't know. Yeah, it's there. Yeah. The city itself, [redacted], I think is the government page. But it's how I get information about what's going on around here.

BZ: Why in particular, those two organizations do you know?

S12: I don't know. Um, well, I know the city of [redacted], I've sought that one out, I wanted to know, but then I don't know how I got on [redacted] instead of like [redacted] or ABC news. She's sort of -- maybe I if I were to guess I would say it started out as you know, friends, or people I know, comment on it, that it pops up on your feed. And so then, you know, I went in and I liked it. I gave it a thumbs up.

BZ: Do you ever comment on social media posts from [redacted]?

S12: I think I have once but I learned my lesson not to because it just frustrates me.

BZ: What type of content would you be looking for from those local news organizations? What what types of things do you want to see?

S12: Um, well, you know, I think things changed since COVID. I didn't used to care so much what the governor had to say, um, but now I do. Because now I can really see how his decisions affect the state. And so I like all the updates from the governor, obviously, all the updates from

the CDC for the health crisis going on right now. But other than that, you know, missing persons, it's always good to know that. I don't -- I don't know if we have this problem in [redacted].

Because I don't see it. But I know that there is a lack of diversity in posting missing persons, to usually a white person. So that would be good to see more of -- I don't, but I don't know if that's a thing or not. Um, and then, I guess, just like local happenings, you know, in traffic?

BZ: Yeah. Well, so what do you mean by local happenings, just stuff in your neighborhood, stuff in your state?

S12: Stuff probably in the state, I have seen a few things. I live in a neighborhood that's pretty popular. And so I have seen statewide posts about things that are happening my neighborhood, but I think more on a state level. So like, like the arts fair, or you know, any type of presidential motorcade, we've had those come through, they're kind of exciting, just those kinds of things.

BZ: So you know, if something is like an event in the state, or a happening rather than, like, say crime news, is that kind of what you're saying?

S12: I mean, I, I would need both, for sure. Because I think it's important to share the crime news as well.

BZ: What kind of social media content would you be -- and I realize you've only done this once. So just work with me hypothetically here. What kind of social media content would you be more likely to comment or reply on from a local news organization?

S12: Kind from a local um Well, the ones that I'm tempted to are always the ones that are a little bit controversial. And that's when I have to tell myself, 'Don't go read the comments,' cuz I'll end up upset because I want everybody to think the way I do. Um, but you know, like, recently, the fireworks bans, before that, shut downs for COVID, you know, kind of in support of, I would comment in support of those stories or actions.

BZ: All right, So it almost kind of sounds like, kind of those hot button issues, but on a local level.

S12: Yeah.

BZ: How many national news organizations do you think you follow on social media?

S12: Um, I know that I follow one and I also follow the White House. I don't know if that counts. So one, maybe two. Or I guess, I don't know if this counts, either, but I follow Dateline. And I know they don't. Okay. Three. Okay.

BZ: And much like we talked about with the local organizations, do you have a sense for why those particular things that you follow?

S12: So, I think the White House, I started with Barack Obama. And that was, you know, he became president when I was in my late 20s. So, I think that's when I really started to kind of

care about things. And then, Dateline, because I've always watched their shows, you know, huge fan of Keith Morrison, um, and then News and Guts, I started because of the last presidential administration, and I was, you know, I, I liked what the stories that they were putting out.

BZ: Do you ever comment on those national organizations' posts?

S12: No.

BZ: Think back to an interaction. And I'm assuming there might only be one that you've had, within comments on social media for a local news organization, in the year leading up to the 2020 presidential election. How would you characterize that interaction that you would have had?

S12: Um, it would be? It would be a handful of people agreeing with me. And then how long -- it's usually in my, in my experience, one or two, that go hard arguing with me. And in the year leading up to the election, I don't think I ever responded to any of those people who commented on my comments, because I know it won't help.

BZ: So overwhelmingly, positive, overwhelmingly negative, kind of a mixed bag?

S12: I would say negative, I just shouldn't -- I don't see a point in commenting anymore.

BZ: Did the organization whose posts you were commenting on, did they step in at all?

S12: No.

BZ: So basically, your entire interaction was just kind of person to person?

S12: Yes.

BZ: What was your perception of that organization before that happened? And after that, was it affected at all by that exchange with the other people?

S12: No.

BZ: What stood out to you about that conversation?

S12: Um, what stood out to me? Gosh, you know, it's just nobody wants -- It didn't ever feel like a constructive conversation. And I'm not one to argue. And I, when I have commented, it was just, you know, it's not hard, you know, some kind of question, a conversation trying to start, and it doesn't go that way. It's just they just, they say, just want to fight. Both sides. Everybody.

BZ: Think about the news organizations that you trust the most, particularly about social media for those organizations. Why do you feel like you trust them? Do you trust them?

S12: Why do I trust them? Um, no, no, I think I'm -- on the national level, I think it's just because I honestly, it's probably because I agree with what they're saying. And then on the local statewide level because they've been around for a very long time. And so I have some trust in that.

BZ: What about the organizations that you might trust less? What, what is it about them that makes you not trust them?

S12: If everything that they post is, you know, just with a specific view. I can think of a couple where I know if I were to go on it, I would not get any other type of reporting, it would just be, you know, this is what we think, and this is what we're going to report on. So, I wouldn't trust them.

BZ: What would it take for you to lose trust in an organization with which you currently have kind of a trust relationship?

S12: Oh, boy, finding out if they align.

BZ: What about on the other side of that? If there's an organization that currently you're kind of skeptical about? What would it take for them to build trust with you?

S12: Hmm. Um, you know, probably, going back to what I've said, is just maybe be transparent, and you know, talk about their own biases and, and where they're coming from, I think that's a huge part of trust.

BZ: Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you'd like to add?

S12: Mmm, hmm. I do like that question. And they always ask that at the end of job interviews, too. And I usually have to come, You know, I think about it and prepared for it. Um, boy, okay, maybe, um, maybe you did ask this already. But have I increased commenting or decreased commenting? Since the saying your time frame the year leading up to the election? And to answer that probably decreased.

BZ: Why do you think that is. Just the negativity?

S12: Yeah. And I think I have learned that that's social media, commenting is not going to make anybody change your minds. It's not going to open up a conversation. And so it's just not worth it. Yeah.

BZ: I cannot thank you enough for your help.