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Citizen Forums: Examining a Journalistic Transparency Initiative's Capacity to Foster Understanding, Connection, and Trust

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory research introduces and evaluates the effectiveness of a "citizen forum" transparency initiative. Survey research shows that most U.S. citizens have a weak sense of connection to news organizations. Many U.S. Americans question the news media's trustworthiness, believe that their news media sources undervalue their audience, and feel that news media do a poor job of explaining story production. Designed to address such disconnects, this research initiative involved conducting two day-long events in two different U.S. Midwestern towns. Inspired by "citizen academies" facilitated in other local civic contexts, the initiative featured in-person panels and forum discussions with journalists and journalism educators. Panel participants talked about journalism-related issues and engaged with audience-posed questions/comments. Employing survey questionnaires and focus group interviews, this study's mixed-method research agenda was structured to examine the extent to which such citizen forum programming can serve to promote understanding of journalism, facilitate a sense of connection with local journalism, and bolster/sustain news trust more generally. Ultimately, this multi-pronged case study offers evidence of positive outcomes relative to citizen forums promoting "engaged journalism," though not without caveats and challenges.

In recent decades, news media industry observers and practitioners have become well-accustomed to discussions of data documenting how the journalism profession suffers from a decline in credibility, authority, and public support (Brenan 2022; Carlson 2017). Though the cause of the apparent "crisis" of faith (Zelizer 2015) in journalism is multifaceted, citizens' use of legacy news media clearly continues to decline (Newman et al. 2022). Meanwhile, ample evidence points to the public's limited sense of connection to journalists and an incomplete understanding of journalistic practices. For instance, while Pew Research polling indicates that a majority of Americans (55%) feel it is either "somewhat" or "very important" to "feel connected to [their] news organizations" (Blazina, Walker, and Mitchell 2020), only about a quarter of Americans (26%) say they

feel "extremely connected" or "very connected" to the news organizations from which they get most of their news and information (Blazina et al. 2022). Furthermore, Pew reports that a majority of Americans (57%) are in agreement with the statement that "the news source(s) I get my news from do not particularly value me." In terms of perceptions of how well news organizations inform audiences on how they produce their news stories, about half of the country (51%) say news outlets explain their process "not too well" (33%) *or* "not well at all" (18%) (Blazina, Walker, and Mitchell 2020).

In light of such findings, we recognize a need for a stronger understanding of effective ways to facilitate stronger bonds between journalists and the communities they serve. Research indicates that Americans who feel valued by their journalism sources are more inclined to hold positive views—level of professionalism, protection of democracy, and care for work product—of the news media (Blazina, Walker, and Mitchell 2020). Genuine trust, connection, and understanding promotes a greater likelihood that citizens seek out and rely upon credible news sources' vetted and verified information. A strong press-audience connection has implications for the health of a democracy (Schudson 2008), including greater social cohesion (e.g., Yamamoto 2011), increased civic participation (e.g., Min et al. 2022), and sustained accountability for powerholders (e.g., Larreguy, Marshall, and Snyder Jr 2020). Although existing research illuminates many facets of eroding trust in journalism, including avenues for mitigating distrust, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the efficacy of in-person engagement with professional journalists at a community-level. Our research offers valuable insight, with both practical and theoretical implications, by exploring and testing a unique, transparency-based approach to fostering understanding, connection, and trust relative to journalism.

This study's exploratory research spotlights two public forum event initiatives focused on the topic of "making the news." The day-long events, followed by focus group discussions, were designed to showcase the inner-workings of journalism for members of the public and facilitate interaction (largely via a question-and-answer format) with community members. This research is inspired by community engagement-based work with "citizen academies." As a form of civic education programming designed to promote positive public engagement (Morse 2012), citizen academies are commonly found in the domains of local government entities (e.g., a police department). Employing *transparency* as a core theoretical framework, this study ultimately offers evidence that a journalism-themed "citizen forum" bears the potential to strengthen public trust, perceived connection, and understanding of journalistic practices. Furthermore, we show how these transparency initiatives can highlight the value of different facets of journalism to citizens and spark appreciation for both in-person interaction with journalists and a diversity of perspectives in the community.

Journalistic Transparency

To explore and evaluate this citizen forum model, the concept of *transparency* serves as an insightful theoretical focal point. Journalism advocates, who seek to strengthen the relationship between news organizations and the communities they serve, increasingly look to transparency-based strategies (Philips 2010). Historically, objectivity has typically been touted as the preeminent standard of journalistic integrity (Vos and Craft 2017).

However, the onset of the digital age, along with the transition to online news venues, has prompted some scholars to position *transparency* as a more primary ethic of news work (Vos and Craft 2017; Craft and Heim 2009).

Researchers generally conceptualize transparency as pertaining to *openness* on the part of journalists, via making visible how news is produced to the public. Importantly, journalistic transparency is not one-dimensional. Extant research points to a multi-faceted framework for understanding transparency, consisting of several distinct forms: *disclosure transparency* (e.g., Craft and Heim 2009; Fisher 2015; Hedman 2016; Karlsson, 2022; Peifer and Meisinger 2021), *participatory transparency* (e.g., Hedman 2016; Karlsson and Clerwall 2018) and *ambient transparency* (Johnson and St. John 2021; Karlsson, 2022). Disclosure transparency relates to journalists' openness about how their work is produced, for instance by clearly identifying their sources and providing access to their source material. This form of transparency also includes descriptions of story-writing choices, along with explanations of errors or corrections to a story (Craft and Heim 2009; Karlsson and Clerwall 2018; Hedman 2016; Fisher 2015). Meanwhile, participatory transparency entails a more reciprocal dynamic that engages with and involves news audiences, ranging from an article having a comment section, to journalist responses to audience comments, to using audience-produced content (e.g., a picture) in news coverage (Karlsson and Clerwall 2018; Hedman 2016). Finally, Karlsson (2020) identifies "ambient transparency" as "techniques or tools that are used/added by news producers in the vicinity of (news) content" (14). Such peripheral information might take the form of hyperlinks linking to additional content or the labeling of a story's genre (e.g., as "sponsored content," "analysis," or "opinion"). Ancillary information resources like an "About Us" page—featuring a summary of a given news producer's values and guiding principles—can also be understood as ambient transparency.

While principles of transparency have gained increased attention in the journalism industry over the past several decades, researchers and practitioners alike sometimes raise concerns about the limits and even deleterious consequences of journalistic transparency. Such consequences can include overwhelming audiences with distracting information, violating privacy interests, undermining the expertise and autonomy of journalists, and priming audiences to view journalists/news reporting with suspicion (Craft and Heim 2009; Vos and Craft 2017; Fisher 2015). Furthermore, though *some* forms of transparency may be valued by *some* people (e.g., those already inclined to trust news), strategies of openness on the part of news outlets do not evince a clear track record of winning over those individuals most skeptical of journalists (Karlsson 2022). However, despite its potential flaws and limitations, we posit that transparency remains an important standard in news reporting, even as it may not consistently render measurable positive effects. At a minimum, journalistic transparency is important for modeling and promoting ethical communication practices in society more broadly—practices that are open, honest, forthright, and conducted in good faith (Plaisance 2007). If journalists are to demand transparency from newsmakers in the public sphere (i.e., from public officials and other in positions of power affecting the public interest), it is arguably reasonable to expect a robust transparency norm in journalists' own practices.

Citizen Academies

To evaluate the utility of journalistic transparency in the form of a citizen forum, examination of scholarship on "citizen academies" is warranted. In broad terms, citizen academies function as civic education programming meant to foster various forms of public engagement (Morse 2012). Such public engagement initiatives serve as a venue for civilian-public servant interactions. Academy classes are generally taught by personnel from each respective area of expertise and commonly involve demonstrations, question-and-answer exchanges, and some degree of hands-on learning, such as visits to municipal service centers and local community landmarks. Citizen academies tend to be inclusive, open to any interested adult resident of given locale. They also typically involve a significant time commitment—frequently spanning multiple weeks, hours at a time (Morse 2012). Often dependent on local needs and goals, citizen academies around the U.S. center on a variety to topics, such as historic preservation, walkable community plans, and sustainability (Mandarano 2015). Civic academies can also be found in association with fire departments and local government offices—for instance, a mayor's office providing an overview of city planning, development, budgeting, and municipal services (Morse 2012). But the bulk of citizen academies operate in the realm of law enforcement. Accordingly, existing scholarship on citizen academies largely coalesces around *citizen police academies* (CPAs) (Jordan 2000; Pope, Jones, and Cook 2007; Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders 2005; Lee 2016). Acting as a knowledge conduit between a concerned public and law enforcement officials, CPAs offer an extended forum for civilian-police interaction that feature lectures, demonstrations, gun safety and shooting, and even ride-alongs (Jordan 2000; Palmiotto and Unninthan 2002; Pope, Jones, and Cook 2007; Morse 2012; Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders 2005).

Existing scholarship indicates that police organizers tend to approach CPAs as an avenue for top-down education of the public, rather than as a means to open up opportunities for community feedback (Pope, Jones, and Cook 2007; Jordan 2000), a result perhaps exacerbated by these academies' failure to recruit diverse populations and/or those critical of policing (Jordan 2000; Palmiotto and Unninthan 2002; Pope, Jones, and Cook 2007; Lee 2016). Nonetheless, CPAs have demonstrated a capacity to successfully increase positive attitudes towards law enforcement and their tactics (Becton et al. 2005; Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders 2005; Pope, Jones, and Cook 2007), decrease existing negative perceptions of police (Becton et al. 2005; Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders 2005), and increase perceptions of familiarity with police and their duties (Palmiotto and Unninthan 2002; Becton et al. 2005; Lee 2016). Moreover, empirical studies on CPAs have shown that such academies can be instrumental in increasing community participation in police-related events (volunteering, raising funds, and/or advocating for police), that former participants are more likely to question the validity of media reports on law enforcement, and perhaps most significantly, that CPA graduates are more likely to put their learning to action via educating fellow community members on the police (Brewster, Stoloff, and Sanders 2005).

To our knowledge, the broad concept of citizen academies has not been widely applied to the context of journalistic practice. To be sure, there are aspects of citizen academies—especially when having a top-down orientation, with limited opportunity for community feedback (Pope, Jones, and Cook 2007; Jordan, 200)—that warrant scrutiny

and caution. Nonetheless, given the widespread lack of trust for news organization personnel and journalists' motives, such forums may serve as a useful model for reducing suspicion towards the journalism industry and for facilitating meaningful engagement, learning, and understanding. The citizen academy format offers an intriguing venue for enacting principles of journalistic transparency—encompassing the distinct forms of disclosure, participatory, and ambient transparency (Karlsson 2022). A citizen academy-oriented strategy can help to facilitate personal interaction between community members and journalists, elucidate the decision-making process behind producing news content, and spotlight the contextual values and philosophies (of journalists and news outlets) that commonly orient news work.

Of note, going forward in this research report, we will refer to this transparency initiative as a "citizen forum." The *forum* terminology reflects an aspiration for this public engagement model to feature genuine, two-way interaction—seeking to eschew didactic, one-way engagement that some may associate with the language of an "academy." To evaluate the applicability of a citizen forum for engaging with members of the public, as centered on journalism-related matters, the following research question represents our foundational inquiry:

> RQ: In their own words, how do participants make sense of and evaluate their experiences with a citizen forum focused on journalism?

News Trust

Though not an unquestioned assumption (Schudson, 2019), one of the chief reasons news industry observers and practitioners commonly emphasize transparency as an essential journalism ethic is its presumed potential for promoting trust in news media (Karlsson 2022). Openness, on the part of journalists and news organizations, is commonly theorized as helping to alleviate suspicion about the motives underlying a news outlet's reporting and the due diligence of the methods employed to craft a given news story. Fawzi et al. (2021) define trust in news media as "the individual's willingness to be vulnerable to media objects, based on the expectation that they will perform a) satisfactorily for the individual and/or b) according to the dominant norms and values in society (i.e., democratic media functions)" (p.3). Put another way, news trust relates to the degree of uncertainty an individual holds relative to the motives and methods of a given news entity for fulfilling their desired expectations. Currently, measures of the U.S. public's news media trust demonstrate an historic low in national attitudes (Brenan 2022), though trust at a local level does not appear to be as dire (Gottfried and Liedke 2021).

While the exact causes of the pervasive news media trust deficit are difficult to pinpoint, it does seem fair to posit that "bad journalism" practice is not necessarily the primary cause of declining trust (Schudson, 2019). If poor journalism is not the only, or primary, cause of journalism's trust erosion, it follows that merely doing "good journalism" is unlikely to remedy the problem. Given the widespread pessimism and frustration with the contemporary state of journalism— particularly among U.S. citizens—it is important to continue experimenting with new models of (re)building the trust of the public, those whom journalism is purportedly meant to serve and who are integral to the viability of a given news enterprise. In consideration of scholarly and practitioner-oriented discussions about transparency's potential for reducing uncertainty about journalism's

trustworthiness, one sensible approach for evaluating the effectiveness of a citizen forum initiative is to test whether an experience with such an event fosters trust. Accordingly, we offer an initial formal hypothesis:

H1: Participation in a citizen forum about journalism will strengthen news media trust.

Engaged Journalism

Discussion of journalistic transparency and trust also prompts consideration of *audience engagement*. Though not an altogether new insight, journalism industry leaders, innovators, and scholars increasingly recognize that the "labor of building trust" in journalism should include relational engagement with citizens—both in person and online (Zahay et al. 2021). While there are multiple ways to understand audience engagement (Nelson 2019), the concept broadly pertains to interactions between journalists and audiences, whether related to audiences spending time with and sharing the work of journalists (e.g., as often quantified by audience metrics), conversing on message boards, or journalists engaging in crowdsourcing efforts (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019).

Linked to the concept of audience engagement is the aspiration of "engaged journalism" (Batsell 2015), which has gained greater currency in the realm of journalism practice and scholarship in recent years. With roots in the public journalism movement of the 1990s (Rosen 1999), "engaged journalism" entails news work that prioritizes the needs and desires of the community and seeks to forge collaborations with the community in all facets of the journalism process, including *before* a story topic even is identified (Belair-Gagnon, Nelson, and Lewis 2019; Wenzel, 2020). Engaged journalism bears strong relation to the concept of "reciprocal journalism," a process in which journalism becomes an opportunity for journalists and audiences to mutually benefit from exchanges (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014).

An authentically "engaged journalism" extends beyond the measuring and tracking of audiences' behavior/reactions—the form of "audience engagement" data that, understandably, captivates many news operations (Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018; Nelson 2019). To be sure, it is challenging to facilitate sustained and mutually beneficial (i.e., reciprocal) interaction between journalists and the communities they serve, in the interest of promoting connection and mutual understanding. In this regard, one intriguing format for promoting public understanding of journalism and a participatory news media culture is live events that place journalists onstage in front of an audience of citizens (Batsell 2015; Larson 2015; Vodanovic 2020). Sometimes described as "live journalism" (Ruotsalainen and Villi 2021), "face-to-face journalism," "news on the stage" (Adams 2020), "enacted journalism" (Tenenboim and Stroud 2020), or "live publishing" (Larson 2015), such events involve theater-like performances in which journalists tell true stories, including previously unpublished anecdotes (Lyytinen 2020; Tenenboim and Stroud 2020). These physical gatherings often are revenue-producing events organized by news organizations, which may result in content (produced at the live event) that later appears in print or on a news publication's website (Larson 2015). As Tenenboim and Stroud (2020) explain, this genre of journalistic transparency can facilitate audience participation in civic and political activities while reframing public understandings of journalism.

Drawing from discussions of audience engagement and principles of engaged journalism, it stands to reason that a lack of exposure to and meaningful engagement with journalism/journalists may help explain audience perceptions that journalism is irrelevant to one's life, feelings of detachment from journalists, and/or the limited understanding of how the journalism industry functions (Palmer 2019; Wenzel 2019). Accordingly, another avenue through which the effectiveness of citizen forum-based transparency initiative can be evaluated is by examining the extent to which it bears evidence of enhancing audience engagement. We posit that an effective citizen forum should bear evidence of educating members of the public about journalism and strengthen a sense of (relational) connection to journalism/journalists.

> H2: Participation in a citizen forum about journalism will strengthen an individual's perceived connection to news media.

> H3: Participation in a citizen forum about journalism will strengthen an individual's perceived understanding of journalism practices.

Methods

Procedures

We adopted a mixed methods approach to address our research inquiries, analyzing both post-event focus group discussions and pre- and post-event survey questionnaires. This combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods affords the capacity to both probe individual experiences with the forums in rich depth (i.e., analyzing citizens' own words), while also producing data from before and after the events that can be efficiently aggregated. This integration of methods bears the potential to spark insights from citizens' own reflections—from which to derive cues for future efforts— and provides standardized metrics against which to compare potential future research efforts. The pre- and post-questionnaires transformed the forums into quasi-experimental data collection events (Shadish et al., 2002). That is, each forum group represented a single "experimental group" with pre- and posttest measurements. But there was no random assignment involved—hence, the label of *quasi*-experiments.

Advance registration for each forum began about a month before the respective events and involved completing an online questionnaire that included survey questions pertaining to basic demographics, political orientations, media use habits, and pretest attitudes/perceptions about various facets of news media. Participants were also able to complete the questionnaire upon arrival at the forum events. Each forum was held in a public space on a Saturday. Forum 1 took place in the host town's arts and education center – a space for governmental, non-profit, educational, youth and community group use. The second forum made use of a local Boys & Girls' Club gymnasium and the center's adjacent meeting rooms.

Recruitment

The two citizen forums at the center of this research effort were conducted in April 2019 and February 2020, respectively, in two different towns approximately 25 miles apart in

the state of Indiana. These towns were selected for both pragmatic and strategic reasons. The logistics of facilitating these forums dictated that the locations be a reasonable distance from the university supporting the events. These locations were also selected for their potential (within the context of the region) to draw a diverse audience in terms of race/ethnicity, class, age, and political ideology. These were also ideal locations because they exist outside large metropolitan areas, thereby representing regions more susceptible to becoming "news deserts."

Working with local news, civic organizations, and other community representatives to publicize the events, we used a variety of outreach methods to recruit citizen participants for the forums. These recruitment efforts included social media outreach (Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit) communications (e.g., newsletter announcements and email blasts) via community organizations like the League of Women Voters, the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, a local press club, and other civic groups. We placed flyers in public spaces—public library, city hall, coffee shops, local community colleges—and worked with local high school journalism advisors to publicize each event to students (18 years or older). Reaching out to local churches was part of the recruitment strategy as well, though we found limited success in that regard. We also purchased mailing address lists from a regional newspaper for each town/region—for both the 2019 and 2020 events—and selected 1,500 addresses from each list, for the purpose of sending out postcard invitations for each forum.[1] Several local news outlets, including the local newspapers and radio stations, produced news coverage of the citizen forum opportunity in advance of the event. In addition, several outlets aired announcements or aired/posted/printed advertisements about the events.

Approved by an institutional review board (IRB protocol #1901934417 and #1912525273, respectively), recruitment communications informed recipients of a daylong "Making the News: A Community Conversation" event that would feature "discussions, presentations and conversations about the news gathering process and how journalism might better serve you and your neighbors." Informed consent was obtained in pre-event online questionnaires for all study participants. Invitees were informed that the forum was part of a research study designed to explore public perceptions of journalism and that all participants would be asked to complete an online survey in advance of the event, attend the daylong citizen forum, and complete a feedback questionnaire at the end of the day. Community members were also invited to participate in focus group discussions upon completion of the day's programming. As incentive, invitees were informed that lunch would be served free of cost and that they would receive a gift card for their participation. For the first forum event (2019), participants were offered a $70 gift card. For the second event (in 2020), all participants were offered a $40 gift card; those who agreed to participate in a post-event focus group received an additional $20 gift card.[2] Recruitment communications stipulated that a participant must be 18 years or older with a primary residence in the (county-level) region.

Programming of Forum Events

The daylong programming for both forum events included several sessions that showcased different facets of "making news," including (though was not limited to) the topics of "deciding what's news," "navigating today's media landscape," and

"investigative journalism." Both forum events included panel discussions on the different topics in focus, featuring representatives from local/regional media outlets and journalism educators. The structure of both events facilitated multiple opportunities for audience comments and questions throughout the sessions. For instance, in Forum 1 (April 2019), the first session of the day included an exercise in which audience members viewed a sampling of actual news headlines from the local newspaper and then discussed which stories should be prioritized in terms of placement and extent of coverage, all in conversation with the panel of news editors and managers on hand. For Forum 2 only (held in February 2020), participants had—in the second session of the day—the opportunity to select which session to attend from a menu of topics including "Reporting on community controversies and crises," "Making news viable with non-traditional business models" and "Know your news: Tips for evaluating information sources." (The latter session was led and facilitated by a community engagement librarian from the local library.) These smaller group settings were designed to give participants some autonomy within the program structure and to facilitate closer interaction with media professionals. In sum, the transparency-based focus of the event programming was chiefly designed to promote understanding of the process and guiding values behind the work of "making news." Additional goals included the facilitation of in-person engagement and interaction with local news media professionals, and—by virtue of the conversations and explanations of each respective session—to foster a greater sense of personal investment, interest, and commitment to local news media. The event sessions concluded with participants filling out a paper questionnaire, which asked for feedback on the event (i.e., "please share any thoughts about what you found to be most (a) memorable and/or (b) informative about today's program of events and conversations; you should also feel free to share any other concerns or observations") and included post-test measurement of various news media-related attitudes/perceptions—mirroring questions posed in the pre-event questionnaire. In total, the forum programming for each event lasted between 5-6 hours.

For the first forum event, all attendees (N = 26) subsequently participated in 45–60-minute focus group discussions. Focus group facilitators simultaneously facilitated four group discussions for the Forum 1 event. For the larger Forum 2 in February 2020, 22 attendees agreed to participate in a post-event focus group; all Forum 2 attendees (N = 43) were invited—either in advance or at the event—to participate in a focus group. Four focus group discussions were simultaneously conducted for the second event as well.

In sum, eight focus group discussions were conducted across both events. Seven focus groups were led by a pair of facilitators from the sponsoring university, including faculty members, graduate students, and a staff member. One Forum 2 group's discussion was led by a single facilitator. The discussion facilitators met together in the days prior to each event to review the semi-structured discussion protocol to be used. Both sets of focus groups covered a range of topics (not all reflected in this paper's analyses), including matters like news consumption habits, how individuals perceive the motives of journalists, and how well people feel they understand how news is produced. More specifically, moderators posed questions like, "How do you find out about what is going on in your community?"; "What is good journalism? What is bad journalism?"; and "What are some things that you learned today [at the citizen forum]?" Of note, because each set of focus groups (four per forum event) were held concurrently, led by different discussion

facilitators, not all groups covered the exact same questions.Most pertinent to this present study, all the focus groups discussed participants' reactions to the daylong journalism forum they had attended. Each focus group conversation was recorded (audio) and subsequently transcribed.

Participants

Among those who attended the daylong event and completed the pre- and post-event questionnaires, Forum 1 (which met in April 2019) included the involvement of 26 community members ($N = 26$). Within this group, 42% identified as female ($n = 11$) and 58% as male ($n = 15$); their ages ranged from 18 to 88 years old, with an average age of 58 ($M = 57.65$, $SD = 14.56$). About 42% reported having "some college" ($n = 11$) and 50% reported having a Bachelor's degree ($n = 7$) or more ($n = 6$). Two participants reported no more than a high school diploma. The group was predominantly White (92%; $n = 24$) and a plurality of the participants (50%) identified as politically independent. The independents were comprised of those who said they leaned Democrat ($n = 4$), leaned Republican ($n = 6$), or were close to neither party ($n = 3$). Meanwhile, 42% identified as Democrat (42%, including both "strong" or "not very strong" Democrats) and two individuals identified as Republican (one "strong" and one "not very strong").

Forum 2, which met in February 2020, consisted of 43 individuals ($N = 43$) who attended the full event and completed the pre- and post-event questionnaires. Within this second group, 58% identified as female ($n = 25$) and about 42% as male ($n = 18$). Age for Forum 2 ranged from 18 to 87 years old, with an average age of 65 ($M = 64.88$, $SD = 16.83$). In terms of education, 7% had a high school diploma or less ($n = 3$) and nearly 84% had earned a bachelor's degree ($n = 10$) or more ($n = 26$). This group was predominantly White (81%; $n = 35$) also, with about 5% identifying as Asian ($n = 2$) and about 9% who indicated they "prefer not to answer" ($n = 4$). Finally, nearly 63% identified as Democrat (including both "strong" or "not very strong"); the remainder of the group (37%) identified as independent—including those who said they leaned Democrat ($n = 12$), leaned Republican ($n = 2$), or were close to neither party ($n = 2$).[3]

Of note, both events involved more people than the samples described above, including organizers, research personnel, and the journalists/ journalism educators who took part in the panel discussions. For Forum 1, about 15 journalists and journalism educators (not including the focus group facilitators) were involved in the day's programming—including sitting in on panel discussions and facilitating panel/audience discussions. Similarly, for Forum 2, approximately 18 journalists and journalism educators were involved in the forum's programming. Panel participants included many local news organization representatives and educators from local universities as well as representatives from several regional and national news-related organizations.[4]

Measures

News Media Trust was measured at two time points for Forum 1 participants (i.e., pretest and posttest) and was introduced with the prompt: "thinking in general about the most popular sources of news for Americans, how much of the time do you think these news

sources … " Using a 1–5 scale ranging from 1 = "almost never" to 5 = "just about always," respondents rated five statements (see Gaziano and McGrath 1986): "Report the news accurately," "Report the news fairly," "Report the news without bias," "Tell the whole story," and "Can be trusted" (Pre-event: $M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.99$, α = .92; Post-event: $M =$ 2.79, SD 0.96, α = .96). In Forum 2, a more succinct measure of trust was adopted, using a 1–5 scale before and after the event with the following question: "Thinking about the news media industry in general, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? [In general the news media can be trusted]." (Pre-event: $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.17$; Post-event: $M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.72$).

Perceived Connection to News Media is a measure developed for this research effort, though it was inspired by prior polling on the question of whether journalists are perceived to be "in touch" with their local community (Pew Research Center, 2019). This was measured on a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 5 = strongly agree) only after the Forum 1 event. Respondents read the question, "I feel more connected to my local news sources as a result of today's event programming" ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.04$). A slightly modified question—designed to be less overtly tied to the forum programming—was employed both before and after the Form 2 event: "I feel a strong sense of connection to local journalists" (Pre-event: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.07$; Post-event: $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.12$).

Perceived Understanding of Journalism was examined in Forum 1 with a question created for this project: "How well do you feel you understand the behind-the-scenes process of how the news is produced?" (Pre-event: $M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.21$; Post-event: $M =$ 3.42 $SD = 0.90$). The Forum 2 measure for Perceived Understanding was modified, as inspired by Delice and Dağlar (2011) research on CPAs, using respondents' indicated level of agreement with the statement, "I feel like I have a pretty good understanding of the behind-the-scenes process of how the news is produced" (Pre-event: $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.06$; Post-event: $M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.88$).

Analyses

Using the focus group and survey data collected at the two forum events, this study's mixed methods plan of analysis first utilizes several statistical tests to either examine change (as the data permits) from before and after the events, or to contrast response averages with a defined data point (i.e., neutral midpoint of a scale). These statistical tests will be addressed in the H1-H3 analyses. Secondly, to address the research questions of this study, we use the focus group data and the open-ended questions in the post-test questionnaires as our scope of analysis. We employed a qualitative method of open and then, axial coding to systematically assess both the transcript data and the text-entry data from a question on the post-event surveys. First, upon having the focus group discussions transcribed, the authors read through all the conversations to become familiarized with the data. Then, we read through the transcripts and the survey question data three more times while making initial coding decisions. Initially, we arrived at the open coding of nine general themes. We reviewed the transcripts and questionnaire comments several more times and conducted axial coding on the initially identified themes, whichled to the combination of several themes. Upon collapsing the

categories, we arrived at five distinct coding themes, which are discussed in the findings section below.

Findings

Hypotheses Testing

H1 predicted that people's participation in a citizen forum about journalism would strengthen news media trust; this hypothesis was supported. For Forum 1, a one-tailed test demonstrated a significant difference ($t(25) = -1.73$, $p = .05$) in citizens' general trust towards the news media such that trust increased from the pretest ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.00$) to the posttest ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.96$). Addressing H1 for Forum 2, a one-tailed test revealed a significant difference ($t(41) = -3.55$, $p < .01$) in citizens' general trust towards the news media such that trust increased from the pretest ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.16$) to the posttest ($M = 3.95$, $SD = -.74$).

For H2, we anticipated that participation in a citizen forum about journalism would strengthen an individual's perceived connection to news media. H2 also found support. With Forum 1, a one-sample t-test, using the neutral point of the scale (3) as the test value, indicated that participants felt significantly more connected ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.04$) to their local news source following the citizen forum programming ($t(25) = 6.21$, $p < .001$). For Forum 2, a one-tailed t-test indicated that participants were significantly more likely ($t(42) = -2.72$, $p = .01$) to feel a stronger sense of connection to their local journalist from the pretest ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.07$) to the posttest timeframe ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.12$).

Finally, our findings offer partial support for H3. Using a one-tailed t-test with the Forum 1 data ($N = 26$), we found no significant change in participants' perceived understanding of "the behind-the-scenes process of how 'the news' is produced" ($t(25) = -0.82$, $p = 0.21$). While the posttest rating ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.90$) for this question increased after the forum event, there was no statistically significant difference in perceived understanding from the pretest ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.21$). Yet, with a larger sample, we do find a significant change among Forum 2 participants' understanding of the "behind-the-scenes process' ($t(42) = -1.86$, $p = 0.03$), such that participants self-reported a stronger sense of understanding of journalism practices in the posttest ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.88$) compared to the pretest ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.06$).

Focus Group Analyses

To address our research question of how participants made sense of and evaluated their experiences, we examined participants' reflections and comments about the citizen forums. Using both the focus group data, in which participants spoke at length on their opinions immediately following the forum events, and the open-ended (text-based) survey data, we synthesized participants' responses into the following five categories: 1) Appreciation for the accountability function of journalism, 2) Perception of journalists' self-promotion and bias, 3) Valuing interpersonal interactions, 4) Desire for diverse perspectives and civility, and 5) Enthusiasm for the institution of journalism. Although these themes may not capture the full gamut of the community

members' experiences and comments, they do provide insight on the repeated, and in many cases strongly-held, attitudes of those who took part in the respective one-day events.

Appreciation for the Accountability Function of Journalism

Broadly speaking, this thematic category describes participants' references to journalism's idealized roles/functions in society, the challenges journalists face in this role, and the potential power of their reporting. In particular, numerous focus group comments and open-ended question responses pointed to journalism's capacity to hold people accountable—consistent with the common comparison of journalism acting as a "watchdog." Notably, several participants did use the term "watchdog" to describe their understanding of journalism's role for maintaining a healthy democracy, though many participants used alternative descriptions to acknowledge their recognition and appreciation for the investigative facets of journalistic inquiry. Here again it is important to point out that both forums dedicated a session to the topic of "investigative journalism." In these sessions, a formal definition of investigative journalism was mentioned by the session panel moderator, who described it as "reporting, through one's own work product and initiative, of matters of importance which some person or group want to keep secret." One focus group member recalled the poignancy of this "very concise statement about uncovering secrets that someone or some group does not want uncovered," adding that "when I heard that, I felt better. There's something noble about that." Another, citizen commented that:

> I think one of the things that for me, came up today, was that it would be a scary world without reporters sitting in on the local government, city council meetings and holding the police department accountable. Somehow, someway we need somebody performing that function whether it's our news reporter or someone else. The watchdog.

A number of other participants in the forum expressed a similar sentiment, albeit in more implicit terms, when they noted that journalists are fundamental for a free society and an accountable government.

Marking another facet of this theme, attendees expressed their surprise at the resistance journalists commonly face as they work to be a voice of accountability. One participant admitted, "I was not aware of all the challenges facing investigative journalists." Participants' deepened (or renewed) appreciation for journalism's accountability role was commonly tethered to a sense that reporting can have potent effects—not just in terms of holding those in power to account, but in other ways. In one notable comment, a participant describes how such stories shared by the journalists helped him to understand the prosocial role of journalism in a society:

> The part I liked the most was the panel discussion with the investigative journalists who told us their stories, because my whole thing is, by telling our stories, we heal ourselves and others to hear their actual stories and why they were relevant, and the difference they made [in] people's lives because of it, was really good (sic).

Participants expressed appreciation for the power of journalists' stories in terms of simply finding them interesting. But in addition to capturing audience attention, participants

noted that these stories revealed the dedication, ethical quandaries, and strong skillset that journalism requires of its practitioners. Perhaps most importantly, many participants noted that these stories bolstered confidence in the belief that "the panelists were truly experienced in dealing with important issues."

Critique of Journalists' Self-Promotion and Bias

While not an overwhelming theme, several participants offered observations about the panelists that highlight a key challenge of conducting citizen forums. In part due to the programs' time constraints and the unequal ratio of participants to panelists, the session time of the forums was disproportionately skewed toward the media professionals (i.e., the panelists) in conversation with each other, as compared to time spent in more direct interaction with the audience. This likely contributed to one audience participant's comment that the panelists "enjoy[ed] hearing themselves talk," and another saying, "I would welcome the opportunity to participate in some more back-and-forth." Relatedly, one citizen participant commented that "what wasn't good is that [some panelists] were tooting their own horns." Yet another attendee felt that some panelists were overly assertive in expressing their opinions. One particular journalist who spoke on a panel was referred to as "biased." This citizen participant said, "I felt a bit like I was being preached at." However, this same journalist (on the panel) was also praised in other comments for having "bold opinions," "pass[ion]," "credibility," and putting a "face" to the story the journalist described. We speculate that this particular contrast of bias-versus-passion may be a product of the politically-charged nature of the topic itself (i.e., discussion of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election). Nevertheless, we fully expect that concerns of bias would be a common critique in any citizen forum on journalism, particularly in contexts where the group of participants are relatively diverse in political orientations. Therefore, though not a dominant theme in the focus group discussions and marking a difficult-to-avoid dynamic, the issue of perceived self-promotion and bias is a significant one to bear in mind when conducting forums of this nature.

Valuing Interpersonal Interactions

Despite some participants viewing the forum as a lopsided interaction in favor of journalists' talking at length, many participants praised the in-person format for giving them the opportunity to interact with fellow community members, the organizers of the forum, and with the journalists themselves. In one subset of comments, forum attendees expressed appreciation for opportunities to meet the journalists, shake their hands, and see "where they fit into the community." In addition to these interactions, participants also valued the forum for "put[ing] a genuine face on genuine journalists." For example, a community member noted:

> I think it caused me to think about journalists more and what it would be like to be one. So often you see their product but don't think about the people behind it. [Local journalist's name] had cancer, I knew it in my head, but I didn't … I don't look at her articles and think about it. It's always good to realize that people are human beings and not just names.

In comments such as these, it is apparent that the forum allowed the community participants to see the journalists as people, in addition to their identities as journalists. Another

attendee noted that the panelists seemed grateful to the audience for their attendance. These comments point to the humanizing potential of a citizenship forum, which may not only lead to increased perceptions of transparency, but also facilitate understanding when news stations acknowledge and correct a mistake. In sum, while participants' comments about the forum interactions included critiques, those in attendance overwhelmingly voiced support for increased interaction, including proposals of additional opportunities for smaller group audience-and-journalist discussion (i.e., seating journalists with community members at tables during lunch).

Desire for Diverse Perspectives and Civility

This report's description of the participants' demographics (see above) highlights how the forum attendees were disproportionately older, white, and Democrat. Notably, several participants agreed with the sentiments of one commenter who said, "I would have liked a more diverse generational crowd." Some participants wished more of the forum attendees were younger— specifically high school and college-aged. While several of these comments were offered out of a concern for younger generations and critiques of younger people, perceiving them as being insufficiently informed, a number of forum participants yearned for opportunities to interact with and learn from younger people. Furthermore, several people commented on the disproportionate political representation of the forum attendees, which heavily leaned Democrat. Some explicitly expressed interest in having a more balanced representation (e.g., referring to those who wear "MAGA hats"). Although it proved to be a challenge to organize panels that were racially and ethnically diverse, participants emphasized appreciation of other diverse aspects represented by the panelists:

> I was impressed by the caliber of the people that you had here. I was. I sat there and was like wow, these are people that have experience and have street credibility. It's not just local, but national and international. To me, that showed the thought that you put into this forum and to me, showed that it was a serious discussion.

Moreover, participants enjoyed the diverse range of topics presented and especially appreciated that the journalists came from different outlets and yet were able to have "civil," engaged conversations. This last point is notable given that attendees expressed frustration with the inability to have serious conversations with those in their community across the political divide.

Enthusiasm for the Institution of Journalism

Finally, perhaps one of the common response themes in both forums was that participants expressed a sense of enthusiasm about the importance of journalism as a democratic institution and admiration for the work of journalism. While some noted particular journalistic attributes that they witnessed at the event (i.e., ethical reporting), many admired journalists' dedication to their jobs, in spite of the increased criticism and potential danger to their well-being. A participant wrote:

> I have a tremendous respect for journalists, and would like to support with all my heart and might, especially this time and date as they are doing so many heroic jobs in county and abroad even jeopardizing their lives. They are my modern day heroes!! I have never been appreciating more than ever. Pen is mighty stronger than the sword (sic).

One citizen said, "today, you know, punched my card in terms of reaffirming my belief in the news system," while another commented that the forum programming led them to "feel optimistic about the future of good journalism." Lastly, quite a few participants stated that they appreciated the entirety of the program and several asked for the forum organizers to come back to help their communities organize more events of this nature.

Discussion

In view of this article's central theoretical framework, it is useful to discuss what this project's integration of research and community outreach can illuminate about journalistic transparency. The findings of this exploratory research suggest that a citizen forum can be aptly described as a transparency initiative, particularly in terms of three key dimensions scholars often employ to conceptualize transparency (i.e., disclosure, participatory, and ambient transparency; see Karlsson, 2020). Evidence points to the forums indeed serving to successfully *disclose* details about the intentions and decision-making processes behind news coverage in the surrounding community/region; of bolstering the *participatory* dimension of the local news culture, bringing citizens into closer conversation with the local journalism profession through in-person interaction and fostering a sense of personal investment in local news; and of serving to shed light on the *ambient* contextual factors and guiding values that shape the operational decisions and coverage of local news outlets and journalists.

Moreover, by enacting these dimensions of transparency, the citizen forums demonstrated indications of positive outcomes. The study findings are indicative of forum attendees perceiving journalists to be worthy of a degree of *trust* (though not unbridled trust). Survey responses indicate the forums helped to facilitate *civic education*, as evidenced by attendees feeling modestly more informed about the behind-the-scenes work of journalism. And the study findings suggest that the forum events bolstered attendees' sense of *connection* with news personnel and organizations, helping to further "humanize" journalists in the surrounding region.

Examination of the focus group discussions helps to highlight several keys reasons for these outcomes. The group conversations underscored how a citizen forum initiative has the potential to foster new understandings—or in some cases, remind citizens—of journalism's aspirational roles in the society, particularly as a force of accountability. Given how the news media's "watchdog" role is central to the set of role conceptions that journalists commonly espouse—what Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit (2019) describe in terms of an *interpretive-watchdog* function of journalism—the focus group participants' responses in this regard indicate how a citizen forum can help facilitate a stronger shared understanding between journalists and the communities they serve. Furthermore, the focus group discussions highlight the power of a forum to generate enthusiasm for journalism and an appreciation of the challenges inherent in conducting news work. These discussions showcase significant relational engagement facilitated by the events, particularly in terms of interpersonal interactions and via fostering a desire for engagement with a diversity of perspectives and personal investment in local news.

Taking stock of these underlying dynamics together evokes principles of "engaged journalism" (Batsell 2015), which emphasizes the necessity of connecting with audiences both through strategic journalism practices and personal interaction. An examination of

the benefits identified by the focus group participants illuminates the potential for citizen forums to help build reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationships with a given community (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014). The forums demonstrated a capacity to serve as an avenue for expressing needs and desires for both citizens and journalists. Open discussion between journalists and forum participants—with opportunities for interpersonal inter-action—allows journalists to talk about their experiences of doing their work and, perhaps, becoming more humanized in the eyes of the participants. Additionanlly, these spaces for conversation may allow audience members to feel like they are able to better hold journalists accountable.

Importantly, this exploratory work also highlights an instructive point of caution: in efforts to enact principles of transparency and "engaged journalism," it is critical to bear in mind common suspicions about the self-serving motives of news organizations and journalists. Whether based on fair suspicions or not, if a citizen forum engagement effort is seen as being strongly motivated by self-promotion or self-serving "public relations" for a news organization, the success of such initiatives—in terms of fostering, trust, understanding, and connection—will be limited. This is particularly evident when the self-service occurs at the expense of genuine community engagement. We perceive that citizen forum efforts will be most fruitful when there is truly a reciprocal dynamic between journalists and the communities they serve.

It should be emphasized that the attendees recruited for the forums at the center of this research were self-selecting groups who were, in many respects, already somewhat appreciative of local journalism's value and supportive of its core aspirations. Further-more, they represented individuals who were uniquely flexible in terms of having ample time to attend a daylong (weekend) event. We cannot assume the forum partici-pants were representative of their broader community. This issue raises question of how to address the challenge of cultivating a diverse audience for such forums. How can such forums be inclusive of those most critical, skeptical and/or apathetic about jour-nalism? Given the extent to which this project's organizers sought to include a wide range of participants (see the "Recruitment" section), it is not obvious how to motivate more robust engagement. However, we would posit that a potentially effective approach is to identify common ground in each community and leverage local sources of credibility that appeal to a wide range of interests—for instance, securing the support and involve-ment of valued leaders/organizations in the community. Organizing a forum within the context of a parallel reason for gathering—for example, a community dinner and trivia night hosted by local news organizations—may be another option (Elizabeth 2022). While not simple to achieve, we also suggest that forum participation (on the part of jour-nalists) should ideally feature a range of news organizations—not just one or two. A col-laborative effort across multiple news organizations, should help to enhance a forum initiative's credibility, deterring criticism that a given forum is merely the self-promoting efforts of a certain news organization. (See Part D of the Online Supplemental Material for additional recommendations on facilitating a forum.)

Future Directions

This study contributes to the foundation for further experimentation with, and research of, journalism-focused citizen forums. Looking to future research in this domain, it

would be valuable to examine the experience of journalists themselves within such initiatives. What are their experiences like? Do they have meaningful reservations/skepticisms about citizen forums? In view of the reciprocal intentions of such a forum, would journalists consider implementing suggested ideas/changes from citizens due to these interactions? It would also be worthwhile to probe the perspective of forum participants who identify as being among the strongest skeptics of journalists—particularly in terms of factors like political ideology, age, class, race, and religion. In addition, future work could improve upon measures of engagement relative to participating in a forum. While the measures used for testing H1-H3 were insightful, the single-item measures were rudimentary. Finally, future work could also examine the longer-term impact of such forums in terms of fostering trust and connection beyond the day of the events.

In closing, it should be recognized that a community forum event of this nature may not overtly change a multitude of minds about journalism. Within the context of a highly polarized era in which grievances against "the media" play a central role in a great deal of political rhetoric, it is unrealistic to expect citizen forums to provide a panacea for the challenges of promoting a healthy news media ecosystem. Still, it is important to note that we do not find evidence of this transparency initiative significantly *undermining* faith and trust in journalism/journalists (see also Karlsson, Clerwall, and Nord 2014; Peifer and Meisinger 2021). Furthermore, based on evidence that the citizen forums featured in this project sparked enthusiasm and a sense of investment among those in attendance, we posit that community forums of this nature wield particular value as a way to cultivate and empower "citizen ambassadors" for journalism. Perhaps one of the most valuable affordances such a transparency initiative offers is that it can provide grounding for faith in journalism/journalists among those perhaps already inclined to appreciate the value of responsible and ethical journalism. Such "ambassadors" within the community may very well be more effective in advocating for the societal value of journalism than journalists, media educators, and other news organization leaders themselves. In this respect we offer, in closing, the following comment from one focus group participant:

> I feel like I can help defend the profession to friends or family members when talking about it … because everybody was so personable, that I could contact any of these presenters with any question or comment or anything, and it would be well-received. And I couldn't have said that before because I didn't know them.

Notes

1. The 1,500 postcard addresses were randomly selected from a purchased list containing all mailing addresses in the Forum 1 town's zip code. For the second forum event—held in a larger town—1,500 addresses were selected via a purposive sampling approach, targeting select sections of the Forum 2 region along the lines of class (i.e., lower income) and ideological diversity (i.e., areas of the city with a more conservative-leaning reputation).
2. The incentive for participation was slightly reduced for the second forum due to (a) perceiving that attendees from the first forum did not seem strongly motivated by the amount of the incentive and (b) our desire to include more people for the second forum.
3. For additional information on the community context of this research, including Census data and state-level research findings about news media trust, see Parts A and B of the Supplemental Material Appendix.

4. See Part C of the Online Supplemental Material for an overview of the region's news media environment.

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