The Voices Listening Project
Wick Communications and Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Executive Summary
The Voices Listening Project (VLP) is a 2022 collaboration between Wick Communications and the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University (ASU) aimed at learning more about how Arizona communities find and use local news. This effort was funded primarily by the Google News Initiative through its 2021 North America Innovation Challenge program.

A team of ASU students, Wick product experts and Cronkite School faculty collected 1,638 online survey responses, spoke to 218 people in interviews and through outreach events, including 40 in Spanish, conducted 52 virtual research interviews, and made more than a dozen in-person outreach trips to three target Arizona communities: Tucson, Safford and Maryvale.

Our findings indicate that while most people are consuming news about their communities, local journalism has work to do when it comes to both diversifying content and gaining community trust. People want to see a more balanced mix of community news that is less focused on crime and local politics and more oriented toward community events and solutions to local issues. Among Spanish speakers in Maryvale, the focus on negative news has led some to decrease their news consumption.

Most people engage with local news via mobile devices, particularly through social media, and are generally confident in their abilities to locate credible content. At the same time, however, they find their preferred mediums for news to be susceptible to misinformation. Spanish speakers in Arizona are more likely to get news from local television stations Telemundo and Univision, but they use social media to fill in on details and follow up on ongoing stories that aren’t covered in broadcast.

Misinformation and bias — terms respondents often used interchangeably — were persistent concerns, coinciding with a pervasive perception that there is “a lot of misinformation” across all forms of media, including TV, radio, news websites and social media.

To meet communities’ information needs, local journalism must go beyond simply reporting and disseminating news. Our research finds that local journalism plays an important role in informing communities. But our results show that local news should shift focus toward coverage that offers more perspectives, greater context and potential solutions. To alleviate misinformation and bias concerns, we see promise in tools that help news outlets better communicate their information, including sourcing and reporting processes. Incorporating additional tools (third-party or proprietary) that help people look beyond one news outlet’s reporting and get a more complete picture of a source or event can allow local journalists to act as knowledgeable and accessible information guides rather than asserting themselves as the singular source of local news.
Introduction

Journalism continues to play a central role in disseminating information, but new and familiar challenges continue to reinvent how that role is viewed, used, and defined. The internet has made it equally easy to consume and create information, which has decentralized the power of storytelling. As newsrooms continue to shrink, news deserts spread, and user-generated content grows, local news organizations are looking to maximize their expertise and resources in ways that connect with audiences. One important area for local journalism to thrive is in reporting consistently credible, reliable information about their communities to help counter the impact of misinformation.

About the project

Belief in the power of local journalism is the cornerstone of the Voices Listening Project (VLP). The project, a collaboration between Wick Communications and the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University (ASU), was shaped by a careful analysis of the media diets and local news perceptions of communities in Arizona. The ultimate goal of the project was to apply the information gathered through a series of surveys and in-depth interviews to developing and testing tools to improve local journalism and combat misinformation. This effort was funded primarily by the Google News Initiative through its 2021 North America Innovation Challenge program.

An important and unique aspect of VLP was the opportunity to engage ASU students who come from different degrees, interests, and levels to collaborate on community initiatives. The VLP team was made up of four undergraduate and four graduate student research assistants, and two graduate students studying user experience. Two project managers from Wick and two Cronkite faculty members rounded out the team, overseeing the project and providing training and guidance for the students. The project involved frequent brainstorming, community visits, research and product iterations, and synthesis of interviews and findings. Our work on product research and development benefited from our students’ varied fields, from journalism to public relations to sustainability.

With these joint efforts, the VLP developed a core mission to explore and innovate public trust in media by answering these questions:

“How do people interact with misinformation?”
“How can local journalism combat misinformation in communities?”
“How can local journalism engage audiences to increase trust?”
Related Research

It is well understood that news consumption contributes to higher civic involvement and engagement. Media is a way for citizens to hold their leaders accountable and empower individuals and communities that otherwise would not have a platform to present their realities, develop analytical frameworks which they can use to interpret the world around them, and foster a greater sense of belonging.

It is trust in media that connects journalists with their audiences. It can also predict an industry’s capacity to sustain itself among the public and in the business.

For local or community-centered journalism, audiences appreciate constructive coverage of their community and more accurate and respectful representations. Factors that have affected trust in local journalism are “affective and relational,” such as the kind of stories produced about the neighborhood and lack of coverage of issues relevant to the community.

When there is lack of diverse media representation and local coverage, it prompts communities to create their own spaces for information sharing where their local realities are reflected and highlighted. Without the rigors of editorial practices, like verification, these spaces are threatened by misinformation.

Process and Methods

Phase one

In spring 2022, the team focused their efforts in the Arizona communities of Safford, Tucson, and Maryvale. These three communities were chosen based on several reasons:

- Safford was chosen because Wick Communications has a newspaper there, the Eastern Arizona Courier. It is also a small town outside of the normal coverage areas of large city papers.
- Maryvale was chosen for its connections to ASU. It is a diverse pocket of the Phoenix metro area.
- Tucson was chosen because it is a smaller city than Phoenix with diverse communities and perspectives living there.

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First, students conducted 16 initial interviews with stakeholders in all three communities. These background interviews included prominent leaders in the community, such as nonprofit organizers, political representatives, superintendents, and religious leaders. Through these conversations, students received insight into how the community was organized, the beginnings of the problems the community faced, and a foundation off of which to base further questions.

Then, the team surveyed 413 residents in the three target communities. The goal of the survey was to learn more about Arizona residents’ information habits, their thoughts about local news in their communities, the role of misinformation in the media diets of people in these communities, and potential ways to combat it. We also investigated how people connect with their communities online.

Students conducted 42 in-depth virtual interviews with survey respondents and community members. An additional 110 interviews were conducted in person at community events. Empathy interviews were used as an after-survey tool to gain in-depth understanding of respondents’ perceptions and knowledge of local journalism. In the roughly one-hour interview, our questions focused on uncovering more about interviewees’ media habits and views on content moderation, misinformation, and verification. Empathy interviews were used as a qualitative tool to substantiate and give greater depth to survey results. In some cases, it affirmed a pattern we observed in the surveys, primarily on perceptions of what misinformation means, media trustworthiness, and social media trustworthiness.

Phase two
In summer and fall 2022, the VLP team focused their efforts on generating more quantitative data by administering a statewide version of the survey, conducting empathy interviews with Spanish-speaking residents and, finally, prototype testing and usability interviews. The team conducted 40 interviews in Spanish and eight product interviews.

The combination of targeted and broad research efforts allowed us to identify relevant distinctions between our three identified communities and Arizona as a whole. These efforts affirmed a broad pattern for the following areas:

- **Media skepticism:** respondents consistently reported their belief that outlets only tell one side or version of a story, thus audiences are less likely to trust what they consume. This skepticism also impacted people’s perceptions of misinformation.

- **Loss of relevant coverage:** respondents agreed there are not enough local news outlets covering community stories—thus, there are not enough hyperlocal stories about their communities— and that current local news outlets are unable to consistently give timely information or focus too much on one kind of news (e.g. university news or crime).

Our Spanish surveys and interviews also uncovered contrasts when it comes to language. Spanish-speaking respondents reported on language barriers as an access issue. English
media has more resources. Although it does not provide relevant community coverage all the time, it has more timely information which makes some community members opt for English media over Spanish media even though it is their preference. Though they had the most trust in television news, we found that limited options and a lack of variety of coverage topics in local media led many Spanish speakers to backfill their information needs with social media. Several interviewees said they found social media to be helpful for providing additional context on an event and for staying up-to-date on an ongoing story, as they found local professional media did not always follow up on evolving stories.

Community Surveys and Empathy Interviews Results

Overall, survey results showed that target communities seek local journalism that goes beyond crime reporting. They look for news about local events and journalism that is more solutions-oriented, especially in Maryvale.

Respondents across all surveys cited a concern about the choice of sources used in news stories. We found in our interviews that respondents view a lack of diversity in sources to be indicative of biased or partisan reporting. This, in turn, can be perceived as misinformation. Although they did not typically use the word transparency to describe their suggestions, some in-depth interview subjects talked about being interested in the reporting process of a news story and background information about the reporter.

Key themes from the community surveys focused on trust (or lack of trust) and relevance of local news. Few community respondents indicated they trusted any one source or medium all the time for local news. At best, they would sometimes trust what they get from newspaper/magazine, radio, word of mouth, and public events. In the same vein, all communities perceive a misinformation problem in all kinds of sources, from traditional media to social media. It should be noted that misinformation is sometimes perceived as biased or partisan reporting.

Respondents expressed a need for local journalism that is relevant to their specific community, as opposed to the broader metropolitan area or state. One participant in southern Arizona commented that their local newspaper’s front page “was pretty much the same thing that has been on for the last three days” and that “Many days there’s no local news on page one, and it makes me want to tear my hair out.”

A shortage of locally produced stories means that people have to work harder to find information about their communities. One participant said, “You have to want to find news in order to find it because you’re not going to find it on the local media stations.”

This was particularly true for Maryvale residents, who felt their neighborhood was not typically covered by local news outlets. The issue was not only that there was a lack of coverage, but that even if there was coverage or a local news outlet, it did not produce stories that were
important to the respondents. Respondents indicated that they typically find local news that focus on crime coverage, and that they seek coverage that goes more on solutions.

In our open-ended question “what challenges do you have when getting information about your community?” respondents commonly cited access and availability to news, which spans from having the means to get news to having news that is relevant to the community. This concern spans across responses like paywalls and timely local information.

Another common theme in the open-ended questions are respondents’ challenge with truthfulness and factuality, which often follows with misinformation. Other themes that surfaced were challenges with certain topics like finding too much negative coverage than positive coverage about their community.

The empathy interviews we conducted revealed additional insights into people’s news habits and perceptions about the media. One overarching theme is that people want to be in charge of what they consume. This was often presented as “doing their own research.” For example, one participant said “... [B]ut then I popped out and went to Google to say, look, this person’s name. Did they actually say that? Was there any way that this video could have been misconstrued?” Another said she loves things like Safari and Google because, “somebody will say something to me about Senator So-and-So and boom, I’m on there.” Though independent verification is a long-time concept in media and information literacy education that encourages people to use verification techniques to decode media messages, it has recently taken on new meaning in fringe and conspiracy groups. We took this feedback as an opportunity to inform product designs that provide additional context and background about topics, reporters, and sources.

As in the surveys, the empathy interviews revealed that there is not enough local coverage in our test communities. Interviewees were looking for more credible places to find information about local events and happenings, and stories that highlight successes and solutions to important issues. And though it was mostly thought of as divisive, most respondents got at least some of their local news from social media, a contradiction of sorts that also provided product opportunities. For instance, Community connection and personalization are areas in which social media can excel for local journalism. One interviewee said, “For me, it’s like my community... It's like hanging out at the coffee shop for me.” Statewide results show a significant concern for business models of journalism, such as ads and paywalls, which was not as much of a concern for our community respondents. Consistent with our targeted surveys, the statewide results also view misinformation to be a problem on any platform, and some see misinformation as biased or partisan reporting.

**Statewide Survey Results**

Following the initial community surveys and empathy interviews, we conducted a statewide survey of 1,076 Arizona residents to learn more about levels of community involvement, their media and digital technology habits, and perceptions of local news across the state. This survey
sample was also used for follow-up interviews to discuss product prototypes. The sample population was normally distributed by age, with 72% identifying as white and 27.6% identifying as Hispanic or Latino. Those holding an associate’s degree or higher comprised 39.2% of the sample, with 23.5% identifying as high school graduates, and 24.1% indicating they had some college. Gender was evenly split between male and female, with 9.3% identifying as other.

In most cases, results from the statewide survey supported what we learned in our initial three communities. Increasing our sample size offered the additional insight to confirm that the challenges local journalism faces are pervasive across Arizona.

**Importance and Relevance of Local News**

Respondents agreed that it is important to be informed about their community (73.3%) and that local journalism is important to the community (58.7%), but the level of involvement in neighborhood projects or groups was more evenly distributed, with 22.8% reporting they are involved or very involved. When asked what drives them to connect with their local community, 71.5% of respondents said it was to know more about local happenings. About a third of the sample indicated they were aware or very aware of local policies and projects (31.9%).
Eighty percent of respondents said they look for news about their community at least some of the time, with 20.2% reporting they look all the time. Respondents were generally satisfied with the quality of their local news, with 48.4% saying there is a variety of stories. However, 18.8% said they “hardly find any news about my community.”

Relevance, representation, and diversity of viewpoints mattered most to respondents when it comes to what could maintain or improve trust in local news. Efforts to increase transparency and engagement, including creating more ways to provide feedback and knowing the reporters covering the community, were less popular suggestions. It's worth noting that 35% of respondents said that not having to pay for the news would help maintain or improve trust while only 8.2% said that paying for news would help, opinions that underscore the conundrum of sustainable business models for local news. The most common among the write-in responses for the 1.8% who chose “other” related to reporting verifiable facts or “truth” using credible sources.

Survey responses support ideas that have been growing in popularity within the journalism industry — and have been put into practice at Wick Communications through the Voices Listening Project, NABUR, and other initiatives — namely, that local news content should be reflective of the community it serves.

Zooming in closer, survey and qualitative interview responses indicate that people want to see news coverage that is useful to the community, including stories that propose solutions to local problems (62.7%) and highlights local news and events (58.7%). Coverage of crime, violence, accidents, and justice was named as the type of coverage most commonly found about respondents’ communities (75.8%), but it was also identified as one of the top three types of stories respondents want to see (55.1%). Stories about local politics, policies and government were the second most commonly found local stories (59.5%) but were less popular when it comes to desired community coverage (46.7%).

**Technology, Community, and News**

Technology use was high among respondents, with 85.9% stating they used technology at least sometimes to connect with people in their community. More than 85% of respondents said they felt natural or very natural using technology; social media was the most popular way people interacted with others in their community (71.6%). The majority of respondents have used mobile apps, radio or podcasts, websites, video/television, and email to access local news.
The only source of local information that was deemed more untrustworthy than trustworthy was word of mouth, though most sources were about even in terms of perceived trustworthiness. It's worth noting that 37.5% percent of respondents indicate they don't get information from newspapers or magazines.
Do you trust local news/information from these sources?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>I generally do not trust it</th>
<th>I generally trust it</th>
<th>I don't get news here</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers/Magazines</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television News</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
<td>428</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desktop/Laptop</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Phone</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word of Mouth</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>59.8%</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Impact of Misinformation

Several questions in the survey aimed to learn more about respondents’ media literacy habits and thoughts about misinformation.

Overall, participants agreed there is a lot of misinformation on TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines (72.2%), news websites, online radio, and news streaming sites (70.5%), and social media (78.3%).
There is a lot of misinformation on TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines.

There is a lot of misinformation on news websites, online radio, and news streaming sites.
In an open-ended question about what could improve information quality on online news sites, respondents commonly mentioned “truth” and “facts” in terms of reporting that is committed to reporting facts instead of opinion. Subsequently, the next most common mention is “bias”, especially in terms of political leanings. Respondents desired news that focused on more objective reporting, which anecdotally ties in with the need to know who and what sources are used in a news story. Some respondents commonly understand the use of sources to signal a “side” that’s being presented, with more diverse sources meaning a more balanced story.

Participants were also asked how information quality could be improved on social media. A key theme that emerged were strong sentiments about accepting that social media is as it is – unreliable and opinionated – and that it would be pointless to seek some change from it. But the majority of respondents pointed to truth, facts, and verification as concerning aspects of social media that need help – whether it’s having fact-checkers or better content control. Other interesting themes were some respondents’ desire for less censorship, more freedom of speech, and safer spaces.

A majority of respondents said they double-check information online before they share it more than some of the time (62.4%), though 14.1% said they rarely or somewhat rarely double-checked information before sharing.
Key Themes from Open-Ended Responses

Several open-ended survey questions provided additional context related to journalism trust and value. Respondents at times conflated bias and partisan opinions as misinformation, suggesting that the presence of bias led to a decrease in trust. This was often coupled with respondents’ belief that there is often a lack of transparency in sharing opinions and citing credible sources, which also contributes to a decline in trust. A related discussion involved the cost of news and its perceived value. Few respondents indicated a desire to pay for news as a form of quality control; however the presence of too much advertising was viewed by some as a cheapening of the quality of information. This tension is at the core of issues of journalism sustainability.

Product Development and Testing

Based on our survey and interview findings, the VLP team shifted focus to product design. User pain points were identified by the team, then distilled into problem statements. These served as prompts for our product brainstorming.

The first problem chosen was: “People trust themselves to determine what's true and false online based on gut feelings.”

Through our interviews, we found that participants decided what information to trust based on trust in their own intuition. When asked to expand, participants generally couldn’t point to a specific process or signals that led to those decisions. However, many did say they did things...
like check multiple sources and browse multiple publications to get a more complete picture or balance perceived biases.

"I take everything with a grain of salt," one Tucson resident said. "I am just very careful with things I find online," one Safford resident said.

For the next problem, the team chose: “People doubt the credibility of the sources news organizations cite in their journalism, and have low trust in the information they see online from those organizations.”

Through this ideation, the research team focused on three product categories:
- Tools for users, like browser extensions, to improve media literacy;
- Tools for journalists to build increased transparency and trust in their work;
- Existing solutions from other companies that presented a third-party perspective on the publication or information.

Researchers started by sketching low-fidelity wireframes, which were presented to the team for voting. Two ASU graduate students majoring in user experience were hired to build high-fidelity prototypes of the winning ideas.

The designs were packaged into a product feasibility study and sent out to our statewide survey respondents for review. The test design asked respondents to rate each product based on how likely it would be to improve their online browsing experience. They were also given the opportunity to provide short-answer feedback.

Researchers then conducted feasibility interviews with seven of these community members to gain greater insight into the products’ usability. We asked participants questions about where they get their news and what they look for in a credible source. After showing them our design prototypes, we asked for first impressions, potential to improve local news content and mitigate misinformation, and potential for audience adoption.

**Discussion and Next Steps**

We grounded the Voices Listening Project in existing research and projects aimed at tackling issues related to trust in local news and the impact of misinformation, including Wick’s NABUR initiative. Our goals of listening to the information needs of Arizona residents and designing journalism products to address those needs were met through a nearly year-long research effort that yielded compelling and useful, if not altogether unsurprising, results.

Through our mixed methods approach, we were able to dig deeper into key themes emerging from our survey results. The in-depth interviews we conducted in English and Spanish provided rich context about how people find and use information and certain barriers people face to accessing credible information about their local communities. Our three target communities value local journalism, but also seek local coverage that is relevant, diverse, and representative
of their neighborhood. Though respondents did not generally react to the need for more transparency or interaction with local news providers, their responses. Transparency and engagement with local news sources did not seem to resonate as constructs among respondents; however, survey and interview responses indicated it was important to have more information about the sources used in local news. Thus, transparency may be best viewed as a tool for seeing and evaluating journalists’ efforts to be relevant, diverse, and representative.

We found that most people are heavily reliant on digital technology, search (especially Google) and social media for finding out about local news and events. But even as use of these tools is quite high, it is complicated by the pervasive feeling that online information — especially that found on social media — is unreliable and not trustworthy. From this contradiction, it was clear that products we developed should bridge the gap between people’s media habits and their skepticism about online news.

Survey and interview results also showed that many people conflate partisan, opinion-based information with misinformation and lament the presence of bias in the news. While the two have been known to overlap, it seems apparent from our research that much of the concern about misinformation in local news is related to news commentary. Whether that comes from friends, family, connections on social media, or professional journalists is unclear, but in a digital media environment where we see updates from all those places at once, it may not matter. The point is that the reputational damage has been done, and journalists must acknowledge this in order to repair the relationship.

We learned that most people double-check facts they read online, at least some of the time. People talked of doing their own research, which underscores the importance of media literacy to help guide people to evidence-based credible sources. We concluded that one way to help guide people in doing this is to increase visibility and access to sourcing within a news article. This became one of the more popular product prototypes we tested, based on our usability testing.

In general, those who participated in usability testing responded positively to tools that add more context or background information about a news story, such as who the reporter is, why were the sources chosen, and the verification process. This ties strongly to a common practice of people pursuing their own research on a topic. Usability interviews affirm a trend of people needing more information to come to their own conclusions instead of having a tool to label what is or is not factual. People want to be able to exercise their own judgment and see misinformation tools as ways to supplement their ability to judge. These products provide some signposts to help guide people toward credible and reliable sources; in this case, journalists and news organizations can act as guides rather than simply detached presenters of facts. Ideally, this also helps prevent the pitfalls of “doing your own research,” which include leading to results that are not factual but reinforce existing beliefs or are promoted by platform algorithms.9

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From the outset, we had two ultimate goals for this project: 1) Incorporate our learnings into strategy for our own organizations and 2) share them widely for the benefit of our industry.

At Wick Communications, impacts from this research project are being felt most acutely with our NABUR initiative. The Neighborhood Alliance for Better Understanding and Respect, for which Wick received a separate round of Google News Initiative funding in 2019, is a community conversations platform that allows people to discuss local news and issues in a journalist-moderated forum.

First, The Voices Listening Project research reinforced our underlying thesis for NABUR: people often distrust the information they see online, often rightly so, and are looking for a trusted alternative.

It has also led to some very tactical product changes in our approach. This year we began development of a next-generation NABUR platform, spurred by the VLP research, the macroeconomic pressures on the journalism industry, and the multifaceted issues impacting existing social media companies.

This second-generation platform will have custom tools for journalists to add context to community conversations and will natively incorporate Newsguard, a third-party service that rates news websites based on standardized trustworthiness principles. This product was tested — and very well received — in our product feasibility study.

We're also working with our content management system provider, TownNews, to build some of the article-level features that originated in this project. First on the list is the “Reporting Process” text block, which offers readers a high-level summary of the steps the author went through to source their article. This feature builds on the existing work of several other organizations, including the Trust Project and Trusting News.

The VLP offered students the ultimate experiential learning experience. Students learned product development skills such as empathy interviewing, product development sprints, survey creation, prototyping, and more from the team of journalism and research experts at Wick and Cronkite. The interdisciplinary team of students led the entire process from research design and implementation to community engagement through interviews in the field and online, to pulling it all together in the product development process. The practical application of the project, as described above, made it tangible and relevant for students about to embark on their own careers. The strength of the project came from the students’ fresh perspectives, commitment to honoring the communities involved, and dedication to tackling the challenges facing the local news environment.

Product development and product management are not typically part of a core journalism curriculum — and the Cronkite School currently does not offer a class in this area — so this project gave students insight into an important part of the journalism and media industry that directly translates into marketable skills for future jobs.
The team has turned these learnings into an open-source syllabus for 101-level research-driven product design for journalists. We’ve made this resource available to anyone to adapt and use in their classroom or newsroom.

Finally, we’re making all of our learnings available to the journalism industry through our project website, voiceslisteningproject.org. It contains this whitepaper, top-level learnings from our research, case studies on our products and the syllabus.

Over the coming months, we plan to publish additional supplementary articles from our research and how the findings are assisting in our community-building strategies.

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Mingson Lau, Daniel Ogas and Celeste Sepessy also contributed to this report

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