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# Creating Dialogic Moments in Municipal Deliberation: The Case of Recycling in Nebraska

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# CREATING DIALOGIC MOMENTS IN MUNICIPAL DELIBERATION: THE CASE OF RECYCLING IN NEBRASKA

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# CREATING DIALOGIC MOMENTS IN MUNICIPAL DELIBERATION: THE CASE OF RECYCLING IN NEBRASKA

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Networked communication has changed the nature of the public sphere by making it more accessible to more people; however, the networked public sphere also creates issues such as echo chambers, information overload, and polarization. Further, use of algorithms that influence media consumption amplifies to role of information on social identity. This "infocentric identity" driven by algorithms may increase polarization among those interacting in the networked public sphere. Previous research indicates that municipalities are often insulated from such national-level polarization. However, given this infocentric identity, many municipalities may experience polarization to some degree. This study examines if , and how, municipal public discussions experience national-level polarization. Dialogue could be a potential response to polarization stemming from the infocentric identity; thus, this study examines if dialogue or dialogic moments occur currently in municipal public discussions. Finally, the present study explores what, if any, dialogic interventions might be used to insulate municipal public discussions from polarization.

To better understand municipal public discussions, I utilize a case study of a municipal debate about mandatory recycling because the debate was controversial, required compromise that was achieved over time, and occurred in tandem with the 2016 presidential election. The case study demonstrated that while local online discussion may reference national-level discussions, but such national-level polarization was not

mimicked. Further, I found that dialogic moments do occur presently in public discussions when participants asked open questions, recognized different points of view, asserted their stake, and messaged clearly. Focus groups were used to understand how people reacted to the municipal public discussion and what recommendations participants made for improved public discussions. Discussion of findings are discussed in relation to theories of dialogue, networked public sphere, social identity, and public deliberation. Applications to and recommendations for policy practice are also addressed.

# Dedication

*This work is dedicated to younger me, who didn't think she was smart.*

*Girl, guess what you did? (Also, you really like math now.)*

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# Chapter 1 Infocentric Identity in a Networked Sphere

The internet at the turn to the 21st century seemed to serve as a democratized information platform that enabled individuals to represent themselves rather than only being represented by others. Indeed, the emergent "Information Age" was poised to supplant the printing press and electronic broadcast media in terms of both access to information and sharing of ideas. Digital media provided democratized sources for many, particularly for the underrepresented, sometimes leading to such noted uprisings as the 2011 Arab Spring (El-Nawawy & Khamis, 2016; Pfister & Soliz, 2011). While this networked society offers many democratized benefits through the advent of many-to-many communication (Pfister, 2014), there are simultaneously some negative consequences of information abundance: namely, information overload, echo chambers, and polarization. Castells (2011), Sunstein (2009), Sclove (1995), and Dahlgren (2005) all detected the potential of a networked society creating such problems. However, lost in these assessments of the network society is a more intimate change in social identity itself: identity is increasingly becoming "informationalized," as it is structured around the flow of information and information sources.

Information has always been at the heart of questions of public deliberation, such as how information is presented and how informed participants must be to engage. In this dissertation, I seek to understand how problems of the networked public sphere are reflected at the local level, with particular regard to the role of identity in those local deliberations, and how dialogue may serve as a solution to problematic deliberation in municipal policy controversies. Broadly, the effects of the networked public sphere are largely understudied at the local level. The networked public sphere exacerbates

problems like polarization and information overload, exacerbated by mass media's entanglement with internetworked media. This problem is mainly seen at a national level as studied by prominent scholars (Sunstein, 2009). These networked effects seem to impact identity, such as that of political party and media selection, through information choice. Many national and global issues feel more significant at a local level because they impact the neighborhoods where we live. Further, the salience of issues at local levels is often because local policy has the ability to move faster and buy-in seems easier to achieve, particularly in regard to sustainability policy (Lutsey & Sperling, 2008). Local governments often look to networked media (e.g., blogs, Facebook, Twitter, comments on news stories) to understand constituent opinions. Yet, if and how local debate mimics national-level polarized debate is understudied. For example, do local debates on sustainability imitate the language and sources of debate as national political debate on climate change?

If national polarization is present in local controversies, then organizers of public deliberation must strategize ways to address this polarization, often stimulated by overtly biased media, in order to resolve policy disputes in such a way as to win widespread assent. Creating forums for unstructured (informal) dialogue between groups is one such way to depolarize public conversation that is stunted by disparate informational identities. As Diaz and Gilchrist (2010) demonstrate, on a small level, dialogue can be a useful alternative to more structured and agonistic models of debate because it focuses more on perspective changing than winning arguments. Thus, if dialogue can override information-based identities that rely on polarized debate, it might be a useful tool in

local deliberation. Finally, if dialogue is a useful tool to move beyond informationalized identity, then deliberation practitioners and scholars must understand how to utilize it.

To better understand public discourse, this current study builds on Habermas's concept of the public sphere and the deliberative problems associated with it. Habermas (1991) conception of the public sphere assumes that social interaction and public opinion are formed by the merging of private selves with critical public discourse (Calhoun, 1992). The *public sphere* is a space for individuals come together (a public) to engage in collective critical discourse about issues of interest using the faculty of reason. Further, public deliberation takes place in public rather than in secret, allowing for arguments to be tested openly and preventing individual interests from overriding public good. Habermas's public sphere functions to criticize government, open up debate for public scrutiny, and develop a reasoned public opinion. In this space, individuals can gather to discuss societal problems in a manner without reservation and come to a reasoned, unbiased conclusion. A robust public sphere, working outside the administrative corridors of government, is capable of guiding state policy formation in such a way that it generates democratic legitimacy—stakeholder buy-in—for governmental actions.

As the public sphere transformed with a change in media around the turn of the twenty-first century, public rhetoric, too, moved in a way that was both digitized and dispersed. While eighteenth-century public sphere debate took place in coffee houses and salons, present-day deliberation takes place in the networked public sphere enabled by digital media technologies. While this new networked public sphere provides a greater opportunity for participation and engagement, it also presents particular issues that lead to problems with information, identity, and polarization.

In order to establish the need for this study, I will elaborate five major arguments. First, problems of the networked public sphere highlight the need for better public deliberation that still provides accessible opportunities to engage. Second, problems of the networked public sphere amplify identity that is based on media and information through algorithms. Third, though municipalities are typically insulated from national-level polarization, social media and networked media can lead to increase polarization at a local level, which can affect policy making and public engagement. Fourth, dialogue provides a useful tool and intervention to intervene in public discussions to counter polarized rhetoric by turning the discussion from a decision-making focus, to a focus on perspective-taking. Finally, considerations of traditionally polarized issues, such as climate change and sustainability policy, and the urgency of sustainability policy in local governance, provides an ideal area of exploration for this study to examine if and how dialogue occurs in local policy controversies.

### 1.1 Transformation to the Networked Public Sphere

Understanding the public sphere helps to identify the role of deliberation in its present form. The origins of the public sphere created a space for public input into political and cultural issues in new ways. As the public sphere entered the world of networked communication, the availability for public input expanded even further and more individuals could participate. Opening up opportunities for input in to public debate offers significant benefit, it also creates a shift in how that public input is commodified or utilized in shaping the decision-making process.

The theory of the public sphere sets a groundwork for current community engagement efforts towards social change. The public sphere emerged in the 17$^{th}$ and 18$^{th}$ centuries

when changes in markets created a space for public input. There were four key changes that led to the creation of the public sphere: a change in the self-identity of the nobility, a market demand for media, the breakup of the public and private spheres, and the creation of the literary public sphere. Previously, nobility was based on aristocratic lineage. However, with the growth of the market economy, more individuals were able to run businesses, trade (across borders), and own private property. Status became based on money instead of lineage; this change in identity opened up power and influence to more individuals. A new class of *bourgeois* was created. Second, increased trade across borders through the market economy led to a demand in news and information based on the need for pricing information and ship schedules. From this demand came the creation of the stock market (to set prices), post office (to correspond about trade and prices), and press (to publish prices, schedules, and trade details). Third, the changes in the market led to a split in the public and private spheres, due in part to a creation of an intimate sphere. This intimate sphere was part of the conjugal family where families did their own child rearing. Private property also led to a shift in the function of the *oikos*, or household; now families had more private spaces, including back yards, rather than shared community spaces. The private sphere focused on the role of work and labor to support the basic needs of family. Finally, there was a new demand for information and culture. The Reformation meant that art, religious writings, and governing could be debated because they were now seen as separate from the Church. The demand for publishing of independent political and critical journals grew as the state worked to influence the press to publish particular influence. As such, the combination of independent journals, private

spaces, market driven media, and a move from nobility to bourgeois created the *bourgeois public sphere* that Habermas details.

Habermas theorizes that when a group of private people come together as a public to engage in debate about politics, government, art, and literature to create influence, they are engaging in characteristic activities of the bourgeois public sphere. The bourgeois developed a communicative genre that they conceived as rational-critical debate, which they took to shift the legitimate grounds for the exercise of power from authority to reason. To actuate this shift, the bourgeois public sphere aimed to cultivate a disregard of status, discussion of new issues, and inclusivity. A disregard of status was key because anyone with access to culture was welcome to engage in debate. Individuals engaged in discourse about topics that were previously unexplored; many previously unexplored topics were now open for debate after the Reformation. The public sphere used inclusivity to welcome any educated person to engage in debate. Yet, this inclusivity was not inclusive to all; participants were usually educated, white European, male property owners.

At the same time, the bourgeois public sphere created a space for institutionalized criticism of the state. A cultural and political debating society opened up parliamentary debates for public scrutiny; here parliament could be reconsidered, criticized, and deliberated. This public sphere developed a reasoned public opinion that was distinguishable from private opinions in that there was a focus on argument and rationality. Spaces for the bourgeois to gather and engage in public debate emerged in France, England, and Germany. French salons were established where aristocrats and bourgeois could intermingle to engage in critical and political debate. Salons were unique

because on occasion the spaces would include women. English coffee houses grew in popularity for bourgeois to gather and often "hold court" on art and culture. Later, German table societies developed as a place for individuals group engage in discourse over a meal. In Germany, discussions started more privately and later emerged more publicly (Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1991).

The transformation of this public sphere occurred because of the concentration of wealth, spread of mass media, industrialization, and creation of social welfare programs. Concentrations of wealth through capitalism caused a change in class and who was welcome to debate key topics. The spread of mass media created a culture-consuming society rather than a culture-debating society. Individuals consumed more culture and media (e.g., novels) privately rather than sharing them through public spaces. Industrialism changed the state of work and earnings, merging the public and private spheres more closely. The creation of a social welfare state further merged public and private spheres with the state by increasing the dependence of publics on the state (Fraser, 1985). This shift led to more emphasis on celebrity and public relations, away from rational-critical debate. Although a number of scholars have extended and critiqued Habermas' conception of the bourgeois public sphere (Goodnight, 2012; Hauser, 1999; Torgerson, 1999), it remains a concept with significant explanatory allure. Indeed, as a consequence of digital technology reshaping public deliberation, scholars like Yochai Benkler (2006) theorized the "networked public sphere" as a concept that captured contemporary dynamics of dialogue, debate, and deliberation. In the next section, I highlight how the networked public sphere helps to characterize key tensions in contemporary deliberation.

**Networked Public Sphere**

Castells (2011) argues that a network society is characterized by a "pattern of networking, flexibility, the recombination of codes, and ephemeral symbolic communication integrated by a diversified system of electronic media like the Internet" (p. 29). For Castells, culture is spread through media. In this networked world, time and space lines are blurred, and speed and imagination matters more (Lyotard, 1984). This new network society means that individuals are increasingly connected to a diverse network, but through weaker ties that require constant care (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Rather than a single (or few) points of information creation and dissemination, a far larger public, more intensively networked by digital technologies, can generate and disseminate information without a single point of control. From this networked society emerges a new space for public deliberation: the networked public sphere.

Benkler (2006)'s articulation of networked public sphere explains how multiple media are connected into a diverse network. Though discussions of networked information often consider the role of blogs, social media, and other tools, the networked public sphere has more to do with the production of content rather than the tools themselves. Like Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, the networked public sphere spreads power and discourse among a public more democratically (Benkler, 2006). Here, media producers no longer serve as the only gatekeepers of information; rather, individuals participate in a media ecology by producing, reproducing, and engaging with media. Publics can serve as gatekeepers. The networked public sphere opens up the doors to a broader public to engage in deliberation and debate. Mass media no longer is the key gateway to news and distribution; rather, multiple nodes of information are shared,

created, and exchanged in the network. Further, networked media can drive mass media coverage; consider, for example, coverage of policy maker's tweets. Here, networked media can both react to news, and generate it. Benkler posits that "the easy possibility of communicating effectively into the public sphere allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation" (p. 213). Castells (2011) argues that new technology is characterized not by the information itself, but how it is generated, applied, and countered. Individuals become their own curators of information with the ability to instantly react to media. The network creates and prioritizes cultural dissemination and reproduction.

This network technology potentially renews the public sphere, creating a space for many disparate individuals and groups to discuss and address a variety of issues from pop culture to public policy. There are more opportunities for a larger sphere of discourse from multi-perspective global publics. However, Benkler's idea of the networked public sphere is not without its problems. Public discourse through the networked sphere may well provide more robust opportunities for critical debate through tools like blogs and social media (Pfister, 2014), where publics and counterpublics can be included and, together, generate social change. At the same time, there is risk of information overload, polarization, and control within the network.

**Problems with the Networked Public Sphere**

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have problematized the networked public sphere, while others have pushed for a more democratized space for public discourse. Critics argue that the networked public sphere may reduce quality discourse, oversimplify arguments, and lead to misinformation of issues. In this section, I describe the challenges

with a networked public sphere, describing an emergent infocentric identity problematic. I argue that along with the benefits of a networked public sphere, concerns arise about an identity based within information sources.

Several scholars argue that the internet creates an "information overload" that requires near constant management (Lanham, 2006; Sunstein, 2006). For example, G. R. Mitchell (2010) warned that with easily accessible information, a new challenge is how to consume and sort through "ever-expanding mounds of evidence whose relevance on pressing decisions may not be immediately apparent" (p. 99). This concern is a common refrain attached to new media technologies. Early modern scholars shared similar observations over new media tools like the printing press with concern about how individuals could possibly manage all the accessible knowledge available through mass media (Pettitt, 2013). Walter Lippmann (1927) argued that individuals could not be left to sort through or consume all available information and that decisions should be left to the experts. The conflict between knowledge management and decision-making creates a dilemma that is exacerbated by information at our fingertips.

Lanham (2006) describes this networked world of information abundance where attention and engagement have replaced the physical "stuff" as a general commodity for economic exchange. In a networked economy, the stuff we have – our tangible materials – gain meaning by fluff, the emotional significance that we put on materials from our experiences and our attention. Thus, an attention economy is born. Industries are created to attribute fluff to products; more than marketing, fluff ascribes experiences, stories, and affects to products. Further, the fluff itself can become a product. Pasquale (2015) and Dyson (2012) both built on this argument that data guide individual attention through

tailored media messages and framing. Dyson remarked “Facebook defines who we are, Amazon defines what we want, and Google defines what we think” (p. 308). Pasquale (2015) built on this quip, noting that finance companies define individual material worth and reputation companies define opportunity.

Cass Sunstein (2006) argues that as more and more information is received, individuals must increasingly use filters to limit and manage the information they see. This filtering progressively limits the opportunities to see something outside of one’s ideological orbit. Sunstein (2009) posits that this filtering is dangerous to the idea of democracy of information because: 1) people need to be exposed to materials that they have not chosen to see – things that may be surprising to them or show different viewpoints, and 2) most citizens should have a range of common experiences in order to properly address social problems. Putnam (2000) argued a similar point in his book *Bowling Alone*, theorizing that individuals have reduced social capital when they limit their interactions with those who think differently from them. Putman’s claim has since been both praised and contested (Durlauf, 2002; Fischer, 2005). Fischer (2005), for example, argued that rather than social capital, group membership and trust are more apt to describe the limitation of social group membership. However, networked communication rather than face-to-face communication may limit social interaction and membership.

Filtering, because of reduced attention to alternate viewpoints, means that media must focus on generating attention as individuals sort to consume the information that is most pleasant or related to them (Sunstein, 2009). While media is working to appeal to a targeted market, individuals are seeking out more media that provides them with

satisfaction and a social connection. Webster (2011) argues that this duality leads to fragmentation in audience distribution, yielding increasingly polarized audiences (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007; Sunstein, 2009). More to the point, Garrett (2009) finds that individuals are more likely to look at news and information that are consistent with their own viewpoints. Media then becomes more fragmented, increasing polarization among individuals. Conservative and liberal groups have their own information sources. Polarization comes to a forefront as individuals hear and read only their own points of view, creating what is commonly called an "echo chamber" that confirms individual beliefs (Garrett, 2009; Sunstein, 2009).

Filtering and polarization get stronger in the attention economy shaped by flows of data. As Pasquale (2015) argues, data drives not only what we consume, but what we see. Algorithms dictate what individuals see through social media, search engines, and advertisements. These algorithms create a new social norm. Gillespie (2015) states that these new norms are situated in a novel type of social grouping, a "community generated by an algorithm is different from one generated ethnographically" (p. 24). This problem takes deeper root because individuals are choosing which filter tools to use, the tools being the algorithms created by social media and search engines, which are already are doing the filtering on individuals' behalf. The need for algorithms poses its own controversy: it helps to manage information overload, yet limits the unique encounters within individual experience (Pasquale, 2015). This algorithm is deeply tied to an individual person (data) through the combination of advertising and social data. Gillespie argues that the algorithm can be tuned or tweaked, but not recreated.

While it is more pleasant to see opinions and stories that agree with our beliefs or political leanings, it also presents a problem of not knowing what others think. When individuals filter their information, there can be consequences for both individual and group rationale ranging from an overconfidence in one's opinion to extremism. By self-selecting echo-chambers (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Garrett, 2009), individuals limit their ability to hear a new, stronger argument for one's own opinion. Without an emphasis on argument development, potential consequences can lead to a lack of critical thinking and problem solving. Certainly, without understanding the arguments of others, or "both sides," understanding of our own opinions or arguments is only half-way done. Understanding various perspectives on an argument makes one better informed and thus, better able to argue (Whitson & Poulakos, 1993). Likewise, in deliberative environments, hearing more opinions creates better solutions to problems because it forces understanding of multiple perspectives and understandings of a problem (G. R. Mitchell, 2010).

Digitally filtering interactions can have consequences in our face-to-face interactions as well. Because our social selves can be constituted by our digital engagements, individuals may choose to interact with only those who think similarly. Unfollowing or unfriending one's uncle on Facebook because he is constantly posting about his political opinions and Model-A collection makes us ill-equipped to both detail the Ford legacy and understand counter-arguments. Likewise, if our uncle never hears alternate opinions, he may not understand them either. This interaction, or lack of, can impact future face-to-face interactions. Social interactions online may be carried through to face-to-face interactions and vice versa. A lack of engagement leads to lazy discourse.

Considering the problematic of information overload, filtering, echo chambers, and social capital together helps to fully conceptualize the problems of the networked sphere. With too much information, individuals both filter and over-simplify information. Information and individuals are quickly sorted into “us” and “them” categories of ingroups and outgroups, creating echo chambers within our social networks, both online and offline. Instead of being considered as issues to generate discussion, problems are seen as binary: for or against us. Research demonstrates that when individuals interact in a space where they assume both anonymity and homophily among the group, social interactions and deliberations are increasingly negative (Maia & Rezende, 2016). Further complicating this issue is that finding and engaging with information outside of individual echo chambers and algorithms becomes a challenge. The ability to generate dialogue socially seems difficult with limited interactions that allow for individuals to hear different opinions outside of self-selected media sources. Expressions of individual and group identity are shaped by these problems, thus creating a new identity group that is based on the social presence in a networked sphere (Papacharissi, 2011). Information-based identities are generated from information sources that are a constant source of confirmation bias.

### 1.2 The Infocentric Identity

In this fragmented-but-networked public sphere, problems of information overload, filtering, polarization, echo chambers, and algorithms create an even larger challenge of new identity formation. Papacharissi (2011) argues that online identities are self-negotiated and constructed through a combination of identity expression and community building. Networked platforms of interaction are based on the convergence of

social constructs being continuously remixed. Yet, at the same time, fewer, weaker social ties can challenge identity roles and group membership. As Putnam (2000) argued, we are less likely to engage in our communities, the results of which yield decreased public engagement, lower voter turnout, and reduced participation in social member organizations. He argues that community engagement is replaced with media engagement; our once-strong community groups like bowling leagues, are replaced by weak ties in a network of social media groups (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In this telling, identity is tied to our weak, online social presence, and as such, we may see others through such ties. This identity formation is encouraged by media representations of outgroups, which can lead to more stereotyping (Ramasubramanian, 2013). By understanding the role of identity in media use and engagement, scholars can understand how to challenge ideas and move from casual engagement to public engagement.

Identity, and how it is formed and the role it plays, informs our understanding of the world around us, and our interactions. Further, our ties to social groups may inform our social identity. Social Identity Theory seeks to understand how much of an individual's identity is associated with group membership. Tajfel and Turner (1979) introduced Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a way to predict intergroup behavior. SIT states that behavior varies along a continuum between interpersonal/individual behavior and intergroup/social category behavior (Hornsey, 2008). A social identity is shaped by one's own social group categorization and categorization done by others. Likewise, SIT seeks to understand the role of context in influencing the strength of identity between ingroups and outgroups. Our identity is both shaped and explained by communication within, among, and outside of our social groups. While individuals naturally seem to

prefer their own group over an outgroup in order to obtain a positive self-image (Hornsey, 2008), an intergroup approach tries to understand the behavior of people in groups and how groups are framed by others (Harwood, 2010). Frequently, this *intergroup contact* approach is applied to race and ethnicity, though it is sometimes applied to political ideology and other sources of social identity group formation (Ellis, 2010).

Can identity groups be shaped by information sources? Harwood and Roy (2005) argue that our identity is shaped by media, and media is shaped by our identity. They posit that media influences us by influencing intergroup conditions (e.g., encouraging social protest, reaffirming attitudes), helping to develop our group identity (i.e., fans of a particular television show), and portraying identity through roles and ownership in media. Likewise, identity influences media as it dictates both how we understand and relate to media (such as portraying shows with characters like us) and creating demand for representation within the media environment.

Scholars and pundits alike speak to the role of ideologies and political leanings in media to our identity. For example, one assumes that conservatives/ Republicans watch Fox News and read the *Wall Street Journal* and liberals/ Democrats watch MSNBC and read the *New York Times*. These distinctions are fairly minor when examining the propensity of information sources available online swinging from one ideological boundary to another. There are websites for feminists, tea partiers, white supremacists, moderate-leaning economically-driven independents, religious conservatives, religious liberals, and environmentalist hunting enthusiasts. Targeted and tailored sites influence both knowledge and engagement, which can provide influential social connection. For

example, Becker and Copeland (2016) find that individuals who participate in LGBT social media sites are strongly influenced by the connection they have to others and others' political persuasion and participation. Individual social connections can influence politics and engagement of individuals, often leading to advocacy or action efforts, as was the case in Becker and Copeland's study: the social connectivity led to letter writing campaigns and awareness raising activities. At the same time, these social connections can create problems of misinformation when they are too removed from external information sources. This is the crux of engagement in the public sphere: much of it can be cut off from larger discussions, creating limitations to argument and community building. However, networked engagement can also bring groups together and stimulate action.

While Harwood and Roy (2005) argue that identity is influenced by media, I suggest that the use of algorithms that determine what we see amplifies the influence identity has on media. For example, Pasquale (2015) and others argue that media-producers are tailoring to users based on big data collected from countless sources. The combination of information echo-chambers driven by data, and individual tailoring of information select media creates an infocentric identity that is both ill-informed and culturally-cornered. This *infocentric identity* is an identity group in which information sources via tailored and algorithmic domains create an echo chamber so strong that individuals begin to view themselves and others not by ideology, but by media. More than a relationship between identity and media, algorithms strengthen our identity with and through media, creating this infocentric identity.

Here, the Fox News watcher is no longer "Republican," she is a "supporter of Fox News." This identity can be seen in embedded language known to insider groups that trigger reference to particular news sources and media language. For example, the theme of President Trump's inaugural address, "America First" signals an identity politics that exceeds the policy prescriptions associated with it. "America First," a seemingly innocuous phrase alone, gained attention in 2016 via the "alt-right" Breitbart news site (historically inspired, in part, by anti-Semitic sentiment during World War II) (Calamur, 2017). Identity can be shared through the coded language of the historical reference and the source or context of information source. In another example, the *Washington Post* highlighted the use of the "Notorious RGB" a reference to Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (Emba, 2016). The meme is one used by her fans and supporters, often liberal, feminist, and millennial. However, used outside of her supporters, it becomes a tool that sparked a further feud between Justice Ginsberg and President Trump after the Associated Press referred to her by this nickname in her criticism of then candidate Donald Trump. Conservatives rallied that the use of the nickname ("without quotes") implied alignment with her criticism of Donald Trump.

The 2016 election poses a prime example of the problems posed by a networked public sphere and infocentric identity. Multiple identities based on various sources were in conflict not only for the presidential bid, but also for media attention. The infamous fake news sites outsmarted the social media algorithms, prompting further assessment of the role that individuals, media, and social media sites play in critical discourse. After the election, individuals and media creators were forced to scrutinize the cultural bubbles that they helped to create. These bubbles generated identity ingroups and outgroups. Moving

out of those ingroups and creating a public sphere that connects each of the infocentric identity group poses a challenge to 21st century digital media creators and to organizers of public deliberation.

### 1.3 Using the Information Identity: 2016 Election Rhetoric

After Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, many media providers and individuals looked up from their screens and wondered what they missed. The *New York Times* sent letters apologizing to its subscribers after giving Hillary Clinton an 85% chance of winning the election (Katz, 2016). Comedy shows and media that poked fun at Trump and his supporters during the campaign, sought to understand who in America they did not know. Articles poured out of media sources trying to explain why women, Latinos, LGBTQ individuals, individuals on Medicaid, and college students voted for Mr. Trump. When 2017 began, some cultural leaders argued that it would be important to embrace and try to understand the America that voted for Trump. Others, like past presidential candidate and Chair of the Democratic National Convention Howard Dean, argued that it is important to ignore a dying plebeian generational group who voted for Trump and instead focus on a new generation of political leaders (Seitz-Wald, 2016). Claims of international interference, fake news, gerrymandering, and poor algorithms were peddled as a rationale for an outcome with very real impacts for millions of Americans.

These claims aside, examining the rhetoric within the mass and digital media demonstrates the extent of polarization in the United States. Media played a large role in Donald Trump's campaign for presidency. He regularly referenced a perceived liberal media bias and tweeted reactions to news stories. For example, Donald Trump's

perceptions of liberal bias in the media helped to ignite campaign support for those frustrated with the media (Lynch, 2017). At the same time, the news coverage of the 2016 election was largely focused on personalities – asking whether Hillary Clinton was likeable enough, presenting Donald Trump as a business-minded outsider – rather than issues of public policy. This celebrity-based media messaging was, from a Habermasian perspective, entirely predictable. Habermas argues that, in part, the rational-critical debate of the bourgeois public sphere is undone by celebrity and publicity. For example, mass media provides an option for the individuals to consume media alone rather than grouped together. This intermingling of public and private, takes away from a critical, rational space for debate. Here, state and society become interlocked (Calhoun, 1992). Robert Hariman (1995) for example, argues that politics is style, and celebrity, with particular regard to the American presidency, uniquely organizes public attention. For Hariman, celebrity (or "courtly style"), is a societal organizing principle based largely on performances of power and authority. This performance can come by way of likeability, which influences elections; for example, Teven (2008) found that likeability was positively related to a presidential candidate's trustworthiness and competence. Likeability was a point of contention in such presidential campaigns as Quayle v. Gore, Gore v. Bush, and Romney v. Obama (Dickerson, 2012).

Given Trump's celebrity status and command of the contemporary attention economy through his reality television show experience and Twitter presence, he was able to steer a substantial amount of free media coverage in his direction. However, the combination of the celebrity and networked media can have negative consequences for public discourse. As social media presence gained coverage in the mass media, likeability

again became a key issue of debate. For example, Ott (2017) argues that in this new Age of Twitter, emerging media can have a negative impact on rhetorical action: "Twitter promotes public discourse that is simple, impetuous, and frequently denigrating and dehumanizing." However, such new media concerns aren't especially new for presidential candidates; Gabler (2016) writes: "what FDR was to radio and JFK to television, Trump is to Twitter." The concern is not necessarily *that* Trump tweets; the concern is the response to those tweets – public engagement, debate, media assessment, and circulation of tweets related to the context those tweets present. Likewise, Lakoff (2017) suggests that Trump's tweets are strategic to frame, divert, deflect, and try out ideas; in this sense, his tweets seem to work for him. In some cases, Trump tweets are responses to media stories, and in other cases it seems to be a chaotic approach to distraction, taking an audience through contradictory worm holes, such as President Trump's claims of wiretapping within his home.

Traffic moves through the network via algorithms and bots; for example, much of the traffic on Twitter in response to Trump is done via bot (Ott, 2017). In addition, political campaigns are producing their own news via social media, making it more difficult to distinguish between news and campaign propaganda. There are reports of non-public "dark posts" made by the Trump campaign to its supporters to discourage particular audiences (e.g., women, African-American voters) from turning out to vote. These dark posts weren't using advanced data technology; they were created by using Facebook's existing algorithm (Green & Issenberg, 2016; Tufekci, 2018). Because organizations can create their own news, not all "news" is vetted through an educated editor's eye. In this case, news takes on the role of propaganda. The amount of news

information, and the lack of control over it, means that all news, regardless of source, needs vetting, by person or bot. Further, bots are deployed by political actors to use individual social media to communicate and manipulate behavior (Guilbeault, 2016).

Bot and algorithmic control is further complicated by how media is accessed, as most Americans receive their news via social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Because engagement with news happens via social media, news is posted and seen via a data algorithm. This algorithm further complexifies the self-filtering that is already taking place. When news – true or fake – is spread via algorithm, this algorithmic existence has consequences for politics, including polarized voting trends. The Pew Research Center found that the most polarized individuals – those on the far left and far right – tend to have the most sway in the political process (A. Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). Polarized individuals are likely to have like-minded friends, read ideologically similar news sources, and may even lose friendships over political differences. For example, even for those in similar political parties, more Republican voters who voted for Trump reported reading Breitbart news as their "main source" of news, than those Republican voters who supported other Republican candidates in the primary election (Gottfried, Barthel, & Mitchell, 2017). These individuals representing more extreme views are also likely to comment and participate in public discussions.

Individually, it is more difficult to expand our media consumption horizons without a designated effort. Further, many news sources seem to be working against us by tailoring their broadcasts to be ideologically focused and attention-grabbing. Is the onus on Americans to vary their news sources, on media producers attempting to produce eye-catching content, or on new technologies that promise to deliver what we want to

see? The lines of ethical responsibility are blurred. The need to balance exposure in order to hear alternate media sources and alternate opinions is in direct competition with our need to manage information abundance.

This combination of information overload, celebrity, and algorithmic control constantly pulls on our attention. With ubiquitous access to news and the related need to produce enough content to fill 24/7 news feeds and capture our attention; here, news and politics become a source of entertainment. This entertainment among political issues is not a new worry; scholars have fretted about such consumerism for a century. Habermas (1991), for example, argued that discussion "as a form of sociability gave way to the fetishism of community involvement" (p. 125). Political discourse figured as mere sociability is problematic for the practice of public deliberation. For example, in the 2016 election, the public and private spheres blurred in a number of ways: the presidential candidate was a reality star; the presidential candidate had a personal social media presence that included discussion of political issues. Perhaps the most damning result of the gamification and merging of the spheres is the case of debate-night Bingo: a drinking game of chance aimed at mocking propaganda, posturing, and *faux pas* presented in presidential debate. Rock star Michael Stipe (of REM fame) expressed similar worry over entertainment of politics to Alec Baldwin in an interview on his "Here's the Thing" radio program: "it is so sad that we have allowed ourselves to sink to this level of reality entertainment, that's what it is. I blame media completely for [the election results], including 'Saturday Night Live.'"[1]

[1] https://www.wnycstudios.org/story/michael-stipe/

Scholars have expressed similar concerns over the comic and private overlap into the public sphere, specifically wondering if it will simply produce entertainment-focused, engagement-resistant, feature-filtering complacency (Horkheimer, Adorno, & Noeri, 2002; Postman, 1985). Further, this entertainment reliance moves the candidacy discussion beyond issues; for example, Torgerson (1999) argued that "comic politics … risks a lack of concern about either principles or consequences" (p. 86). Likewise, Wells et al. (2016) argue that Trump embodies the inverted worlds of politics and entertainment in a new framework of political communication reliant on social and cultural cues. The commodification of culture occurs as culture is part of our consumption (here, we consume news via social media). Habermas worried that culture would become too private and less participatory. On that front, social media does seem participatory depending on measured engagement; yet, this engagement becomes lazy, reduced to posting and reposting. Quality takes second place behind quantity; engagement is measured in counts of posts, retweets, and memes rather than discussion.

In an election year where 19% of all Americans[2] voted for the current president, a post-hoc evaluation reveals multiple effects of personality-focused rhetoric, polarization, over-algorithmic media, and on-trend lack of voter turnout. At the same time, it's impossible to ignore that a large percentage of Americans did vote for Trump citing reasonable concerns about manufacturing job loss, agricultural economic loss, increased health care costs, and nationalism. Donald Trump was elected president because he was able to dominate social media (and largely, traditional media) and appeal to various groups by tailoring his message for specific audiences. Plenty of other candidates have

[2] Of the overall population, not only eligible voters, which was 26%.

been impacted by memetic moments on social media (notably, Howard Dean's campaign-ending yell, John McCain's on-stage debate misstep gaffe in freeze-frame, Sarah Palin's memorable "mother bear" lines) (Johnson, 2007), yet perhaps Trump was the first person to master a minute-by-minute news cycle.

The 2016 election offers a strong example of the role of celebrity politics and problems within the networked public sphere that influenced an election. Certainly, some aspects of presidential campaign politics remain the same: campaigning requires one to appeal to celebrity and affect. What sparked such interest in this particular campaign was the post-election confusion among so many, including major media sources, who completely missed the formation of a movement underneath them. While individuals may have been perplexed by the election outcome (or either candidate altogether), there was an underlying feeling of betrayal by the media. Now, those who are wringing their hands over the election process and results must consider solutions for future political engagement, whether to follow a similar path of social media candidacy or to create opportunities for digital evolution of critical thought.

Further, and closer to the heart of this dissertation project, problems at a national level may be replicated at a state and local level, causing a gap for typically fast-moving policy. For example, if a seemingly innocuous policy may be delayed by specific interest groups mimicking national polarization by media, local or national. *Ordinary democracy*, a term coined by Karen Tracy (2011), is the communicative practices of local, observable democratic action, like that of city council and school board meetings, which make up everyday life. Tracy highlights the importance of communication to address issues and make decisions. However, Tracy also notes that national-level issues often trickle down

to local governance boards, impacting the issues at hand, and how they are discussed. For example, in Lincoln, Nebraska a professional development session for teachers to provide training on gender inclusivity was covered in the national media with *Nebraska Watchdog* website and then with *Fox News*, criticizing the training as school policy based on a liberal agenda (Starnes, 2014). However, it is unknown if this is true: on polarized issues (e.g., climate change, healthcare), do local deliberations mimic the polarized rhetoric at the national level? This replication may be evident in how media sources are used, cited, or shared. Local polarization is understudied, particularly in terms of how arguments or information is spread.

There are few studies that point to local polarization conceptually. For example, Johnston, Manley, and Jones (2016) demonstrate that county-level polarization is often noted by spatial segregation, which can reduce opportunities with those individuals who think differently. Similarly, a study from Pew demonstrates that conservative and liberal differences go beyond political ideologies and influence personal choice such as housing and neighborhood choice (Dimock, Doherty, Kiley, & Oates, 2014). Specifically, local support for climate change policies varies county to county, a variance that is largely ignored by national surveys (Howe, Mildenberger, Marlon, & Leiserowitz, 2015). While local polarization takes a spatial orientation, problems of national polarization often push issues to become local ones. For example, local governments have taken on issues such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions and climate change mitigation while national-level policies are immobilized (Wood, Hultquist, & Romsdahl, 2014). More specifically, Wood et al. (2014) found that ideology in presidential elections (i.e., voting Democrat for president in 2012) was positively related to support for local climate change policies

(both mitigation and adaption policies). Despite these studies, the question of local replication of nationally polarized dialogue is understudied.

Previous discussion on issues, even polarized issues, seem to mirror the national divide at a municipal level by taking place via social media. This online debate ignites a more polarizing rhetoric and forces a public audience to take sides. Further, debate via social media is given a heightened platform when addressed in traditional media. While publics and politicians are commenting on social media and via news outlets, information sources may not only play a role in developing understanding and opinion on an issue, but also in identity formation. It is important to first understand how the role of national debate impacts municipal controversies; thus, the first research question:

**RQ1: How do individuals use national discourse (e.g., sources, arguments, quotes, metaphors) in comments and opinions about municipal issues using information as an identity source, if at all?**

Knowing how individuals use and replicate polarized discourse locally not only informs understanding of information source influences how individual opinions are developed, but also improve methods to address problems like echo chambers and polarization. Although national level polarization within networked communication is well researched, influences within local forums are relatively understudied. In particular, understanding how information sources, identity, and polarization are present in local debate will lead to deeper, less anecdotal, knowledge of the localized impact of broader problems within the networked public sphere. Seeing where polarization is present in local debate will also help in developing local responses by deliberation practitioners on such divided issues.

### 1.4 Using Dialogue to Bridge Digital Divides

Given problems with infocentric identities in a networked sphere, such as extreme polarization and echo-chambers, solutions must be proposed. Though it is a long standing commonplace that tolerance of differences is a necessity for public life (Hauser, 1999), communicative cooperation amidst digital divides may be addressed through intergroup dialogue. Applying intergroup contact approaches that generate dialogic moments can not only increase cognitive responses to controversial topics, but potentially increase engagement and satisfaction by stimulating emotion and connection with others. Dialogue embraces the role of identity and emotions paired with critical deliberation in decision making in order to work towards long-term change in participants.

Dialogue balances the seemingly opposed approaches to decision making in a networked society. Scholars of dialogue view it through disparate lenses: Buber (1958) saw dialogue in a relational perspective to the self; Gadamer (1989) viewed dialogue as a way to construct new meaning; Habermas (1991) considered dialogue through argumentation with a balancing of multiple viewpoints; and Bakhtin (2010) viewed dialogue through a critical-social lens (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2003). Further, dialogue is influenced by a context that is political, social, cultural, and technological. Many communication scholars theorize and study dialogue and dialogic concepts. In the present study, I seek to build on Habermas's approach to pluralism and rational dialogue, while leaving room to address tensions, conflict, power, and context within the public sphere setting.

This pluralistic approach is important when considering public deliberation. For example, there is concern about how to engage broad-scale public participation in order

to hear diverse opinions and work to hear those with less power and unheard voices (e.g., Bohm, 2013). The public deliberation literature recognizes this challenge in public engagement; in fact most public engagement participants are white, male, and well-educated (e.g., PytlikZillig et al, 2018). Lafont (2015) characterizes this tension between micropublics, who participate in typical in-person deliberation representing those with more power and the macro-deliberative processes that work to increase access and representation in policy decisions.

While Habermas detailed the benefits of rational-critical debate, emotion nonetheless intervenes in judgments. Papacharissi (2011) offers a useful framework to shape this knowledge arguing that human understanding comes in three forms: affective (emotional), cognitive (knowledge), and conative (impulse). Our attention and engagement hinges on the combination of these sense-making tools. Much work in this area focuses on the role of knowledge sharing (more of a one-to-many) approach that will appeal to individuals on multiple levels. This appeals to our need for sense-making through affect, knowledge, and relationships. One such method is the use of narrative or stories to create memory. Narratives have long been used to appeal to both the rational and emotional side in a pull between the humanities and the sciences. While stories can be educational and assist in sense-making, they don't fully move into the realm of critical discourse. In local climate debates, studies have shown that quality of information presented bears less influence in support for climate change; rather opinion about climate change is more closely related to individual values and beliefs, both of which are linked to social identity (Sapiains, Beeton, & Walker, 2016).

Dialogue is a type of deliberative activity that is focused on perspective-taking and shared engagement. When trying to understand perspectives, a relatively common solution has been proposing a series of public temperature-taking activities: online surveys, comment sections on blogs, and interactive social media environments like Twitter. These tools appeal to users on multiple levels. Social media, for example, offers connection and impulse opportunity. At the same time, much deliberative work relies heavily on assumptions about the rationality of deliberating citizens, perhaps too much. Public deliberation by definition involves a rational examination of issues and decision-making by participants (Bohman, 2000; Gastil & Dillard, 1999). Even while prioritizing rationality, the decision-making within deliberative events relies on both affect and reasoning of the individual participants. Deliberation generates public engagement about difficult issues, but often does so within a limited framework and few diverse voices, which limits opportunities for knowledge change and action. Ellis and Maoz (2012) argue that deliberation is limited because "there is no room for cognitive movement" (p. 161) because it rarely results in long-term change of one's mind. While deliberation is grounded in rational decision-making, deliberation is often criticized for its bases in competition and power struggle (Fraser, 1985). Here, dialogue provides a better framework for embracing the rational, emotional, environment, and context together, through engagement and perspective-sharing.

Further, dialogue is often grounded in an intergroup perspective. Many defenses of dialogue stem from John Dewey (1916) approach to education that called for civic engagement as a way of teaching democratic discussion skills (Anderson et al., 2003). The importance of dialogue grew in the 1950s and 1960s, based on Allport (1954)'s

theory of intergroup contact. Allport argued that contact between disparate social identity groups was often a mix of anxieties and prejudices. He theorized that prejudice could be reduced by staging contact with four facilitating conditions: 1) equal status among the participants (e.g., a neutral space for discussion); 2) shared goal for the group that includes action in some capacity of all participants; 3) intergroup cooperation wherein all participants have to work together to achieve the shared goal; and 4) support of authorities or laws in which there must be support for the work or decision from the group (Ellis, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Several scholars took up the work of intergroup contact and advanced the ideas of dialogue. The University of Michigan established a Center for Dialogue in the 1980s. However, dialogue took a national stage in the 1990s after the Los Angeles race riots; President Bill Clinton made a call for a national dialogue to address racial tensions (Schoem, Hurtado, Sevig, Chesler, & Sumida, 2001).

Applying an approach like intergroup dialogue helps to satisfy the problems of a networked society and lack of critical discourse within a democratic environment. Dialogue can build connections, even amid controversy. Using intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) as a guide, digital communication scholars can facilitate conditions for dialogic interaction between various infocentric identities. To reduce intergroup anxieties and negative interactions, scholars can apply Allport (1954) four facilitating conditions: creating equal status of both groups, establishing a common goal/task, agreeing on shared ground rules, and cooperating between groups to achieve the common goal. Intergroup dialogue moves beyond intergroup contact by posing a method by which to conduct intergroup contact. Allport's conditions of equality,

common goals, and shared ground rules still remain. Dialogic models build on these conditions and add ways to connect individuals on a more personal, affective level (e.g., storytelling), understanding different perspectives (e.g., asking questions, active listening), and being more open-minded (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Ellis, 2010; Heierbacher, 2008). Individuals may also use a common language to relate to each other and clearly discuss a topic (Heierbacher, 2009). The theory addresses the potential ingroup/outgroup barrier of the infocentric identities and creates a space of issues-based discussion.

This intergroup perspective informs my understanding of the distinctions between debate, deliberation, and dialogue. An *intergroup perspective* recognizes the roles of identity and social group membership, appreciates differences and similarities between social groups, and seeks to decrease anxiety and prejudices between in-groups and out-groups. Though debate, deliberation, or dialogue may include intergroup experiences or dialogic moments within a given setting (Black, 2008), dialogue best addresses the needs of intergroup contact for deeply polarized groups. Dialogue seeks to advance an issues-based discussion that ends with personal growth, social change, and action, not a single policy decision. Dialogue directly takes on problems of intergroup anxieties by exchanging narratives and perspectives. Because debate and deliberation are grounded in rational decision-making, both can be limited in their ability to engage various viewpoints. Further, a common critique of deliberation is that it often includes like-minded individuals rather than gaining multiple perspectives, which dialogue aims to provide.

Dialogue is a process that creates deeper understanding of perspectives and differences (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006; Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010). Public dialogue may occur in a number of situations, but it is only intergroup if it involves two or more groups from different social identities; often, this is thought of in terms of race, but it can be applied to a number of social identity groups (Fletcher, 2007). Dialogue, deliberation, and other modes of public discourse are often considered similar processes. However, there are distinct differences between these modes of discourse, specifically in their approach to decision-making and goals. Dialogue is a process of collaborative communication between a small group of people that explores issues that are often flashpoints of social conflict or polarization (Dessel et al., 2006). *Intergroup Dialogue* is similar in that it is a collaborative communication process exploring key issues, though it involves participants representing two or more social identity groups, and it focuses on social identity outcomes (Schoem et al., 2001).

Dialogue is not debate. Debate is more adversarial than dialogue; it involves establishing a perspective and working to convince others of your perspective. Dialogue is also not deliberation. Deliberation is a process that highlights and relies on rational decision-making about a particular issue. Debate and deliberation are often short term or one-time events; dialogue takes place over time. Further, outcomes of both debate and deliberation are short term and grounded more in a rational paradigm. Goals for dialogue are long-term: personal growth and social change (Dessel et al., 2006; Ehninger & Brockriede, 2008; Majone, 1989; Makau & Marty, 2013). In my opinion, in addition to goal and purpose differences, debate and deliberation focus more as an end (a decision), while dialogue's focus is more on the means (or process) of discourse. Dialogue is well

suited to address issues from an intergroup perspective because it embraces an appreciation of similarities and differences and perspective taking between different social identity groups (Dessel & Rogge, 2008).

From a process perspective, debate, deliberation, and dialogue are approached differently. Debate involves taking and convincing others of sides. It is often grounded in a particular style that is rational and rhetorical. Deliberation involves collaborative decision-making that includes sharing opinions. Black (2008) argues that narratives and perspective taking can create moments of dialogue within a deliberative environment. The key difference is that deliberation poses potential solutions and works to address a narrow issue. Dialogue takes place over time (often several weeks) and seeks to create a collaborative discussion about larger issues.

Dialogue situates individuals in a way that creates a shared understanding and commonalities. Intergroup dialogue is a variation of dialogue that places more emphasis on two or more individuals representing disparate groups (arguably, sides). Dessel et al. (2006) define intergroup dialogue as "a public process designed to involve individuals and groups in an exploration of societal issues … that are often flashpoints for polarization and social conflict" (p. 303). Intergroup dialogue offers many benefits such as impacting social change, advocacy, and conflict resolution (DeTurk, 2006). The use of dialogue builds on Allport's argument that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice. Fletcher (2007) shows that dialogue is effective when groups create shared meaning and increase cultural awareness, social cohesion, and positive attitudes through shared storytelling and articulation of identity (Fox & Giles, 1993). Dialogue further builds a commitment to the public good by highlighting connection and recognizing identity

differences (Black, 2008). In his conception of the public sphere and its structural transformation, Habermas saw the potential for a move from a singular form of rationality to a dialogical one (Habermas, 1991; Torgerson, 1999). If dialogue can serve as a response to social identity group problems, finding ways to teach and integrate dialogue into learning (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010) may provide a solution.

At the same time, dialogue cannot privilege consensus by ignoring tensions and power dynamics. Ganesh and Zoller (2012) suggest, for example, that dialogue can be considered as collaboration, co-optation, or agonistic depending on the way dialogue manages conflict, difference, and how dialogue itself is utilized (Bohm, 2013). Equating dialogue with only the "common good" privileges those in power. Rather than considering dialogue as a way to reach consensus, dialogue is considered as a way to understand perspectives, even those expressing conflict or tension. Dialogue should work within the scope of polarization by addressing it directly.

Further, it is necessary to recognize that there are inherent differences in interactions based on context and environment. Deetz (2014) calls this concept "interaction design." He argues that all interactions have an internal logic, that is, what we should say and how to say it, and that all interactions both enable and constrain how individuals communicate. For example, one would communicate differently in an online discussion group with friends than when serving on a board of directors. Various factors such as formality, setting, and style influence the design of our communication. Deetz notes that all interaction designs must address 1) the nature of the communication, 2) the preferred mode of talk in a given situation, 3) the management of diversity and competing interests (i.e., decision rules), 4) how to address problems of scale (e.g., how

can a small group of individuals make decisions for a larger public), 5) the preferred outcome of the interaction, and 6) the decision and how participants know when it has been made. Different media can facilitate different kinds of interaction. For example, computer-mediated dialogue can take place on given forums and through online media, but may be different on various social media platforms. The privacy constraints or context provide a different setting on social media with selected friend groups versus a public discussion board. When considering online and face-to-face opportunities for dialogue, it is important to understand how the interaction design constraints might change the nature of communication.

How can digital communicators create opportunities that are designed for dialogue? Dialogue must be facilitated, and dialogic scholars argue that its best instances take place offline (Schoem et al., 2001). However, the need for facilitated, in-person settings pose significant barriers to creating opportunities digital dialogue. Reddit's "Change My View" thread[3] works to overcome these barriers by providing rules for submission and commentary to work towards an environment of engagement (Jhaver, Vora, & Bruckman, 2017; Khazaei, Lu, & Mercer, 2017). The overall goal of dialogue is a deep understanding of shared perspectives (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010) that is most effective when it leads to collaborative outcomes such as individual agency or alliance-building (DeTurk, 2006). Success can be seen through personal change. Scholars suggest that, at a minimum, dialogue includes: 1) establishing an environment (e.g. defining guidelines, relationship building, orientation, ground rules discussion); 2) developing a common base (e.g., using common language, definitions, exploring social identities); 3)

[3] https://www.reddit.com/r/changemyview/

exploring questions, issues, conflicts (exploring dynamics, building scenarios, discussion); and 4) moving to action (establishing plans, next steps, alliances).

However, the success of computer-mediated communication for dialogue is mixed (Pang, Shin, Lew, & Walther, 2016; Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, & Shonfeld, 2015). Understanding facilitating circumstances to create critical discourse online is imperative to improve online engagement. It is tempting to be prescriptive in this instance, but also important to know that one-size-fits-all models of engagement often fail. Rather, digital scholars should seek to build on recommendations for intergroup dialogue that increase between-group participation and highlight critical discourse. Digital communicators must act as facilitators, not bystanders, in debate. Dialogic discourse based on dialogic interventions and computer-mediated interventions, such as framing and offering an intervention, facilitating narrative storytelling and self-disclosure, prompting active listening and self-reflection, and moving participants to action, may be effective used either directly or indirectly (Amichai-Hamburger, Hasler, & Shani-Sherman, 2015; Pang et al., 2016; Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2014). Indirectly, as Black (2008) suggests, *dialogic moments* may occur within a deliberative event, sparking affect and change. These moments of dialogue can create transition points as the focus of the deliberation moves from decision-making to perspective-taking. This brings about a second research question:

**RQ2: How do dialogic moments function as transition points in municipal discussions about local controversies, in face-to-face and digitally-mediated contexts?**

Understanding the effects of dialogue on discussions, and how the discussion is altered as a result of a dialogic moment, may demonstrate that dialogic moments can override infocentric identities in localized debate. In part, this local dialogue may rely on the makeup of the community (e.g., community size) as well as the issue at hand (e.g., topic, amount of media coverage of local debate). Thus, understanding both how and where these dialogic moments occur, if at all, will provide valuable insight to how dialogue can be created.

### 1.5 Creating Interventions to Address Infocentric Identities

Epstein and Graham (2007) suggest that polarization may be reduced by encouraging citizen engagement in local political issues. If facilitated directly, specific actions may be taken to move deliberative interactions towards a dialogic framework. Such actions to encourage dialogue may include offering specific prompts and interventions, encouraging storytelling, prompting active listening, and moving participants towards action rather than an opinion.

*Offer intervention*. Being transparent with the goals for the project will help to establish trust and buy-in. Online facilitators may offer clarification as to the purpose of proposed discussions and problems with existing online deliberations. Digital communicators should create a space that offers confidentiality, equality of participation, and protection from problems like echo chambers and polarization. Utilizing prompts to ask about alternate views and coaching for active discussion can generate an online space that will limit these barriers and enhance discussion. This intervention will appeal to individuals' cognitive learning and may work to slow their conative response.

*Facilitate narrative*. Storytelling is a useful tool for generating affect, memory, and cognition. Self-disclosure is already part of the online experience and prompting storytelling can also stimulate connections between participants. Narratives express identity, validate opinions, and build relationships. Fletcher (2007) shows that dialogue is effective when groups create shared meaning and increase cultural awareness, social cohesion, and positive attitudes through shared storytelling and articulation of identity (Black, 2008; Fox & Giles, 1993). In addition, narrative sparks a social imaginary that increases cognition through affect. Digital communicators may ask participants to tell a story, relate to particular ideas, or describe (personal) interest in the issue as a way of entry to the group. As a goal, narrative should to spark relationships between participants.

*Prompt active "listening."* Online, active "listening" may take a different role. Comment posts and responses often include simple links without dialogue. Facilitated online dialogue should include prompts for building discussions, rather than a back-and-forth debate. For example, participants may choose a response type, like asking a question, providing support, critical reflection, or appreciating difference. One goal of digital communicators would be to allow some discussion to occur without constant coaching. By creating shared rules of dialogue in online spaces rather than turning comments off, organizers can support active response and engagement. Additionally, asking individuals to focus on the dialogic aspects of the issues discussion, rather than come to a single conclusion, will help participants focus on the means rather than the ends. For example, Diaz and Gilchrist (2010) suggest offering frequent checks for open-mindedness and understanding by using prompts such as: *Why do I believe this*

*perspective is important?* or *Why do others believe that a certain perspective is important?*

*Move to action.* Dialogue takes place over time, not in a singular event, so recognizing the importance of framing, storytelling, and listening as communicators will highlight the focus on personal development and action, rather than a singular decision. Successful dialogue ends in some sort of action or alliance. For online interactions, organizers should help the conversation move into action as agreement and reflection are realized. This action may not be a singular event but may include moving into the deliberative environments. Dialogue builds a commitment to the public good by highlighting connection and recognizing identity differences. Black (2008) argues that dialogue creates the ability to negotiate identity so that participants see themselves tied to larger groups with a sense of belonging. Treating identity as a dynamic construct that can be created and negotiated through interaction will help the dialogic process move into actionable next steps.

Because of problems within the networked public sphere, such as a strong need to move out of echo chambers or provoke public discourse that cuts across difference, educational centers are being asked to prompt civic discourse. The 2016 election generated concern over a lack of discourse, and calls were renewed for an improved educational focus on generating dialogue between groups and dealing with difference. Colleges and universities are hosting their own dialogic events and restorative processes. Digital communication scholars have the opportunity to take advantage of this trend and steer algorithmic culture in a more dialogical direction by creating space and tools for online dialogue events.

Websites are already working to address a need to restore trust. In 2017, Facebook announced the hiring of *Snopes.com*, a myth-debunking site, that helps to disprove false information, news, and memes. However, Facebook is still working to understand its role in filtering news and content.[4] News sites like *The Guardian* pulled advertising from Google because of the presence of their news items next to fake news sites citing that Google's algorithm was signaling validation of the fake news sites. Changing the standards of celebrity and publicity to new standards of issues-based critical discourse will require a reintroduction to media technologies and examining the role of technology in information sharing and promotion. No longer are media institutions the passive providers of information, rather, media institutions have created algorithmic culture. Further, individuals also bear responsibility to expose themselves to alternate views, hold media accountable, and eliminate false information.

While many were concerned after the 2016 presidential election because of the lack of policy and issues-based discourse, the problem creates an opportunity for media creators and individuals to re-evaluate the state of the industry and set new standards. Individuals must move beyond their infocentric identities, and media (e.g., mass media companies, social media providers, content providers) should provide a space for such movement through dialogue and perspective sharing. At the same time, media content generators should be wary of providing a "both sides" to an issue content focus when it would be unfair to present two sides as equals. For example, presenting climate science as having two sides when climate scientists agree that global warming is occurring and is human caused is not a venerable solution. However, addressing concerns of multiple

[4] https://qz.com/1342757/everything-bad-about-facebook-is-bad-for-the-same-reason/

perspectives to better understand why individuals apply a “belief” to science and disagree with climate-protection measures is equally important. A better framing to this sort of content presentation, would be to generate issues-based discussions that don’t pit “sides” to an issue, but address issues in a well-rounded fashion. Content generators and digital communicators should also be careful not to provide an outpouring of facts and data; data does not change the minds of those where affect has taken a stronghold. Recognizing the role of affect and connection in discourse is just as important as rational fact-finding.

In a networked public sphere, discourse should be open to all and participation should be encouraged. Applying dialogic interventions in a digital attention economy as a way to move away from social algorithms to discourse poses one option. Dialogue should be created, taught and measured with a key focus on knowledge sharing, improved group dynamics through social interaction, personal change, and community impact. Using the bases of the public sphere in a networked environment is to apply a critical, rational discourse that offers equality of opportunity and information sharing. As digital communication scholars, we should help to create, evaluate, and provide credible sources of information to guide the networked public sphere into an informed network that is hospitable to critical dialogue.

### 1.6 Greening the Networked Public Sphere through Dialogue

Environmental controversies pose opportune areas for study. Issues related to sustainability and global warming are increasingly dire and polarized (Cox, 2012; Funk & Rainie, 2015; Kahan et al., 2012). Yet, climate change is a difficult phenomenon for non-scientists to understand (Weber & Stern, 2011), so dialogue about climate change can create confusion, apathy, and skepticism as much as support. Moving from

understanding to action is even more important to accepting green policy change. Studies of climate-change issues argue for the importance of framing and narrative to appeal to both conservative and liberal audiences (Lybecker, McBeth, & Kusko, 2013; Whitmarsh & Corner, 2017; Wolsko, Ariceaga, & Seiden, 2016). When issues are complex, stories (narratives) or framing influence both individual opinion and trust (Lybecker et al., 2013). However, political ideology is not the only motivation of individual views on climate changes; for example, Funk and Rainie (2015) finds that views of climate change are also motivated by the level of faith in scientists.

Municipal programs and policies focused on sustainability, including climate change mitigation and adaption, are increasing, although at different rates. Environmental issues are of importance both globally and locally; because of this, local debates on climate and sustainability planning issues merit further study. Further, municipalities often enact climate change policies at a faster rate than national or state policies (Wood et al., 2014). At the same time, states sometimes preempt or block city policies, including sustainability policies, such as banning plastic bag use (Stahl, 2016). Recycling participation in particular is guided by ideology; scholars have worked to develop specific narratives to encourage recycling participation, such as those that rely on efficiency, responsibility, economic / cost-savings, and global good (Lybecker et al., 2013). As municipalities are tasked with picking up lagging climate change policies, the necessity to introduce and enact environmental measures locally of growing concern. Further, understanding how to appeal to multiple audiences and motivators is necessary to encourage participation and acceptance of policies.

Issues like a city-wide recycling ban include multiple city discussions and perspectives (see Chapter 3). City planners, policymakers, and stakeholders are invested in sustainability, but have to face opposition to the polarizing topic of climate change and concerns about private sector autonomy. More understanding of how to reach polarized publics on topics of climate change in a way that increases action and personal change is needed. Using intergroup dialogue to learn how issues are currently being discussed, where barriers to change exist, and how to create personal growth and social change about such a polarizing issue that is further troubled by problems if information and networked communication.

As Black (2008) suggests, in such moments of debate over polarized issues, moments of dialogue may emerge. In local controversies, these moments may act as transition points in discussions. If these dialogic moments can be created, and even facilitated by discussants, perhaps change and issues-based discussion may occur. Dialogue can a long-term change, whether through opinion or social action. Asking individuals to reflect not only on the discussion at hand, but also on the greater approach to public discussion and controversy may create a long-term change in approach to public controversy. This social learning moves the study of public deliberation from the classroom to the community (Longo, 2013; G. R. Mitchell, 2004). This leads me to pose a third research question:

**RQ3. How can dialogic moments be created to help people reflect on local public discussions to improve social learning?**

Here, scholarship is moved from the academy to interventions for public argument (G. R. Mitchell, 2010). Studies of dialogue to date have focused on local issues within a small,

targeted group (e.g., studying racial divide on a college campus within a class of enrolled students). By understanding how dialogic moments may occur without intervention, and then how these moments can be created with intervention will provide practitioners, stakeholders, and facilitators with communicative techniques to generate dialogic discussion about controversial local issues, such as recycling policy adoption. Further, gathering information on individual reflections on dialogue, in terms of satisfaction, engagement, and argument framing will highlight how and why dialogue should be used, if at all.

### 1.7. Summary

The use of networked communication in the public sphere changed the role of public input over time. While networked communication offers many benefits to political discourse, there are also potential challenges that emerge on a broad scale. Issues such as polarization validated by media choice (active or inactive), can impact identity, thus impacting public discourse. While these issues have been studied at the national level, the role of these challenges in local debate is understudied. This dissertation is focused on understanding the trickle-down effect of how national-level polarization, evidenced by infocentric identity formation and expression, shapes municipal debate over social controversies, and if moments of dialogue can improve discussions about local issues. This study recognizes the role of local problem-solving in larger issues: that if issues can be solved in our own back yards and local public forums rather than national stages, perhaps infocentric identities can be circumvented by place-based identities, particularly on issues such as sustainability and climate change. The research questions posed for this study seek to understand how national-level polarization influences local discussions,

how naturally-occurring dialogic moments shape local discussions, and whether moments of dialogue can be created in a local discussion.

Using dialogue to solve local issues may alleviate the pressure of controversy about national news media, polarization, and networked communication problems. Further, generating dialogic moments in local discussions may directly address larger issues where polarization leads to immobility, like that of climate change mitigation and adaption.

This chapter offered a summary of the current literature problematizing a networked public sphere and an infocentric identity via the lens of climate change, while offering potential solution through dialogue. Chapter 2 will offer specific details in terms of approach, recruitment, methodology, and analysis. Chapter 3 provides a case study of the recycling debate in Lincoln, Nebraska, with analysis of online, print, and public forum discussions, with an accompanying text analysis for dialogue and transition points in argument. Chapter 4 will describe reactions and reflections to the public discussion about the recycling ordinance through focus group interactions. Finally, Chapter 5 will conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings of this dissertation.

# Chapter 2 Methodology for Study

The purpose of this study is to understand how the problems of the national networked public sphere influence a local issue, and how those problems can be mitigated by the presence of dialogue within discussions (both on- and off- line) about the local issue. In this chapter, I provide an account of the methodology for this study, including a description of the case study selection and analysis as well as recruitment tactics, focus group protocol, and data analysis practices for a follow-up qualitative study to address the research questions posed in Chapter 1.

## 2.1 Case Study

Case studies provide researchers with the opportunity to study complex social phenomena within its real life context, often with a particular eye to small group behavior. Early definitions of case studies explain both why and how a decision came to be (Schramm, 1971). Yin (2013) defines case study research as "…a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence." A case study should seek to both describe and explain the topic of contemporary interest. Strength of a case study can be increased through construct validity (e.g., multiple data sources, chains of evidence), internal validity (e.g., pattern matching, rival explanations), external validity (e.g., theory-based cases, replication through multiple cases), and reliability (e.g., following protocol, establishing a database) (Yin, 2013).

Case studies are shown as effective tools to assess and understand deliberative effectiveness (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Gastil, 2000). A case study should have multiple sources of information and evidence, highlight a contemporary issue, and

address *how* and *why* of an issue (Yin, 2013). This study seeks to understand how individuals make sense of and deliberate about a local controversy. By using a case study from a municipal policy debate, I will assess dialogue, polarization, and engagement in public deliberation, as it occurs presently. I will use multiple sources of evidence in this case study to understand the issue including media coverage, video recordings of public hearings, online interactions, and interviews with key participants in the debate. This case study sought to understand how national-level polarization affects community discussions and the role of dialogue in public discussions about local policy controversies. This multi-modal approach to gather multiple sources of evidence (inclusive of interviews, media commentary, news articles, and public hearing videos) will increase the construct validity of the case study findings. The interviews allowed me to test my interpretations of the case with individuals who were involved in the case to increase internal validity of my findings.

**Case Study Selection**

Municipal controversies are often best understood by dissecting public and media engagement with the issue. Of particular interest is the difference in discussions taking place online (e.g., Facebook; newspaper comments) and offline (e.g., public hearings, talk radio commentary). The public discussion recycling ordinance in Lincoln, Nebraska offers a good case of a contemporary municipal controversy with significant and varied public engagement because it stimulated a contentious city-wide debate over recycling and government oversight. This debate engaged various publics and stakeholders through media, public hearings, and social media. Not only is the case of interest locally, it also mirrors challenges at a national level with polarized responses to climate change and

government oversight. Further, the ordinance discussion occurred in tandem with a 2016 U.S. presidential election. Lincoln's recycling ordinance demonstrates how mid-sized municipalities are addressing environmental and sustainability issues ahead of state and national standards. Further, understanding how the ordinance came to be, how a decision was made, and the effects of that decision provide an opportunity to see where dialogue did and did not take place, including understanding how arguments were reframed and understood. This municipal debate is ripe for analyses because it has significant public engagement through multiple avenues, includes polarizing concerns of both government interference and climate change, and ended with a policy compromise between the two opposing views.

In the City of Lincoln, a combination of interest in sustainability and green policies with the limited space in the landfill spurned increased interest and conflict about mandatory recycling. The concept of mandatory recycling efforts created a rift in city council business-as-usual discussions (Garden, 2016; "Solid Waste Ordinance," 2016). The heavily researched mayoral task force proposal was amended by the Council to limit penalties for noncompliance; the amendment was vetoed by the Mayor. After an initiative to add mandatory recycling through a ballot initiative, an ordinance to ban cardboard in the landfill was approved by the Council in January 2017, which took effect without incident in April 2018. However, the ban is without teeth as all penalties for violating the ban were removed for residents. Further, after the controversy and planning, the City now looks to expand the size of the landfill to accommodate growing waste (Hicks, 2017).

Issues like the recycling ban include multiple city discussions and perspectives. City planners, policymakers, and stakeholders are invested in sustainability, but face

opposition to the polarizing topic of climate change and government oversight. More understanding of how to reach polarized publics on topics of climate change and government oversight in a way that increases action and personal change is needed. Using intergroup dialogue to learn how issues are currently being discussed, where barriers to change exist, and how to create personal growth and social change about such a polarizing issue that is further troubled by problems of information and networked communication. Thus, sustainability policy poses an area that is rich for further research.

**Case Study Methodology**

For this case study, three key public hearings around the recycling ordinance, as well as corresponding media coverage (20 newspaper articles) with associated public comments from the online news stories, were analyzed from an intergroup dialogue approach to understand how everyday public discussions are shaped (or not) by dialogue and to understand the influence of networked communication problems. In addition, I conducted interviews with three individuals who engaged in the discussion, either in person or online. The interviews provided additional context and depth to how individuals felt about their participation in discussion about the ordinance. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

A total of 20 newspaper articles highlighting key issues in the recycling mandate were published by the local newspaper, the *Lincoln Journal Star*. Only articles from the *Lincoln Journal Star* were used because they allow for public commenting (via embedded Facebook tool) and the newspaper featured ongoing coverage of the recycling debate. Other news or media outlets (e.g., the *Omaha World-Herald*) only covered a few decision points in the discussion. Of the 20 newspaper articles selected, 17 featured

comments. Online comments varied by article, though they provided an important context to understanding how individuals perceived the recycling ordinance itself, as well as the arguments for and against the ordinance. While many largely attribute online commentary as "sludge," comments help to establish our social networks and perceptions of others (Reagle Jr, 2015).

Discussions about the recycling ordinance from the three selected public meetings (each discussion lasted approximately 1:00 – 1:45 per three-hour hearing) were available from City and CityTV-5 YouTube channel. Each recycling ordinance discussion from the hearings was transcribed.

**Interview Participants**

Participants for interviews in the case study were solicited based on their role in the recycling ordinance discussion, whether in-person or online. Upon a certification of exemption for human subjects research,[5] participants were recruited to participate in a 30-minute phone or in-person interview. Participants were recruited through direct outreach. For example, if a participant spoke in a public hearing or provided commentary online, I reached out to them via social media, email, and/or via phone. None of the online social media commenters responded to a request for interview. Of the 12 individuals requested for an interview, four accepted. The four interview participants were active in promoting an understanding of the ordinance through various avenues.

**Interview Protocol**

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview process to receive detailed experiences of individual events, with specific focus on how individuals participated in

[5] IRB Approval #17960, Certification of exempt category 2, 45 CFR 46.101 / HRPP Policy #4.001.

and interpreted the recycling discussion. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide the interview process and plan for follow up questions, while allowing for flexibility to adapt to the interviewee as needed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Each interview began by asking individuals to articulate their participation in the recycling discussion. Interview questions were related to individual participation in the recycling ordinance discussion, to their opinions of the effectiveness and quality of the public discussion, and how and why they engaged in the public discussion. Participants were asked to provide additional insight into the public discussion including what medium was most effective for sharing information and discussion and how messages were framed with the public. In addition, interviewees were also asked to comment on public discussions more generally, including the role of online engagement, the impact of national level polarization on municipal issues, and how they viewed public engagement in municipal policy. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix D. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

**Case Study Analysis**

Data from the deliberation activities in the case study (hearings, online commentary) were analyzed deductively to look for specific points of argument related to dialogue and deliberation. All transcripts from the case study (interviews, hearings, online commentary) were coded inductively to look for emergent codes and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Comments and quotations were categorized according to content and meaning, using the constant comparison method to look for similarities and differences. Each discussion was coded for dialogic characteristics such as reconstructed

meaning, perspective changing, power changes, voice equality, feedback, turn-taking, and communication accommodation (DeTurk, 2006; Oswick, Anthony, Grant, Keenoy, & Mangham, 1999; Oswick, Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham, & Grant, 2000). The case study drew on the public comments to assess the presence of repetitive phrasing mimicking media talking points and assertion of information-based identity. The public comment and hearings were also coded for perspective changing, turn-taking, and transition points in order to find movement to dialogue or debate by applying interaction analysis to the discussion (DeTurk, 2006; Jordan & Henderson, 1995; Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008; Oswick et al., 2000).

This case study sought to answer the first two research questions, 1) *How do individuals use national discourse in comments and opinions about municipal issues using information as an identity source, if at all?* and 2) *How do dialogic moments function as transition points in municipal discussions about local controversies, in face-to-face and digitally-mediated contexts?*, within the context of Lincoln's recycling ordinance through a text analysis of 17 newspaper articles with comments, conversation analysis of three public hearings, and interviews with key stakeholders who participated in the public discussion, either on or offline:

1. *RQ1: How do individuals use national discourse in comments and opinions about municipal issues using information as an identity source, if at all?* The present study reviewed the public comments to understand how, if at all, individuals are using national discourse within their argument or to identify him or herself as adhering to a particular political ideology (e.g., conservative, liberal, Republican, Democrat). The assertion of media or presence of repetitive phrasing mimicking

media talking points was also reviewed to look for information-based identity assertion. Expressions of identity were either positive, negative, or through sharing of an information source (see ***Table 2.1***).

***Table 2.1 Identity expressions in public discussion***

| Type | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Expression of political identity in the positive** | Commenter asserts political identity | I'm glad my fellow Republicans on the council are preventing this wasteful spending. |
| **Expression of political identity in the negative** | Commenter puts down the other party or political leaning | Those right-wing nuts will come up with excuses. |
| **Expression of information source** | Commenter posts a link to a news, informational webpage, pop culture, or political satire | Market economics predicts that greed is good like the movie "Wall Street." |

2. *RQ2: How do dialogic moments function as transition points in municipal discussions about local controversies, in face-to-face and digitally-mediated contexts?* To address this research question within the context of the case study, a conversation analysis was conducted in order to look for intergroup dialogue moments (e.g., storytelling, empathy, active listening) and discursive turns within argument, wherein the argument transitioned from deliberative to dialogic. In particular, I differentiate between *deliberation*, which relies heavily on rational decision-making and argument, and *dialogue*, which may a) address the issue on a broader scale (e.g., moving from recycling cardboard to local climate change mitigation policy), b) highlight understanding of other perspectives, c) use narrative to advance and explain argument, or d) work towards long-term opinion change. Dialogic moments were characterized as an attempt to understand other perspectives (asking questions), providing a personal account (telling a story), or

actively "listening" by repeating back or responding to points made by others through an interaction analysis (DeTurk, 2006; Jordan & Henderson, 1995) . To understand how dialogue may differ online and offline, I compared the presence of deliberation and dialogue in both settings (see ***Table 2.2***). Finally, I examined discussions through an intergroup perspective to understand when discussion directly involved identity assertion and perspective taking.

***Table 2.2 Interaction types in public discussion***

| Type | Definition | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Engaging with others through questions** | Commenter asks a question or poses a response to a question | What about mattress recycling? Several other states provide that service. |
| **Engaging with others through response** | Commenter engages with an expressed opinion or idea by adding to it or offering a counter point | That is a good point; my company recycles a lot of things… I feel it is dangerous for trash haulers to throw glass in the trash. |
| **Disengaging with others by obstructing argument** | Commenter is not advancing the argument, but offers an unrelated point | Mayor has million-dollar sculptures to pay for. |
| **Engaging the argument by offering support or dissent through expression of rationale** | Commenter states her or his opinion accompanied by a reason | It doesn't make sense to ban the biodegradable items from the landfill. |

Once the local controversy is understood in terms of how arguments and identity intersect, it is also necessary to understand best practices. Following this analysis of public argument about the recycling ordinance, I summarized my findings and selected exemplars for the focus groups to highlight various perspectives of online and in-person discussions.

### 2.2 Focus group

Following the case study and text analysis, examples from the recycling discussion were shared with participants in a focus group to gather their reactions to public debate. Both video clips from the public hearings and photo screen shots of the online discussion (see Appendix C) were presented to focus group participants. The focus groups sought to understand how individuals react to dialogic moments and how dialogic moments can be intentionally created, if at all. In this way, the focus groups both generated and triangulated best practices of public discussion by reflecting on the case study and participants' own experiences.

#### Focus Group Recruitment

After securing an exemption from human subjects research,[6] I recruited participants from civic community organizations and via snowball sampling within my personal network. In order to participate in this study, participants need to be a resident of the community for at least six months and be aged 19 or older. As a primary means of recruitment, I submitted a recruitment script (Appendix A) to civic community groups[7] and among my personal networks. Participants completed a short recruitment survey (Appendix B) to understand demographics, ideologies, and opinions on climate change in addition to preferred participation. This recruitment survey information assisted in creating more diverse groupings of individuals for the focus groups. Participants were

[6] IRB Approval #17960, Certification of exempt category 2, 45 CFR 46.101 / HRPP Policy #4.001.

[7] These civic groups included, but not limited to: Civic Nebraska, League of Women Voters, Leadership Lincoln, University of Nebraska Center for Civic Engagement, Junior League of Lincoln, and the Lincoln Homeless Coalition.

placed in groups based first on time preference, and then separated by demographics and ideology where possible to try to obtain diverse opinions.

**Focus Group Participants**

In total, 35 individuals completed the recruitment survey, and 24 attended focus groups. The 24 participants ranged in age from 27 to 63, with an average age of 42 (M=42.46, SD = 10.26). Most participants were female (n=18) and owned their own home (n=20). All participants had a college degree; 14 had an advanced degree, eight (8) had a four-year college degree, and two (2) had a two-year college degree. Politically, participants identified as Democrat (66.7%), while three participants identified as republican, and three identified as independent. Ideologically, participants were moderately liberal (60.9%) or centrist (21.7%) in terms of economics, while they were more liberal leaning in terms of ideology on social issues. Participants identified as moderately liberal (47.8%), strongly liberal (33.3%) (complete tables can be found in Appendix F).

Participants were asked about their topical knowledge and opinions on climate change and recycling. All participants recycled in some capacity, though most payed for curbside, comingled recycling service (n=18). All participants thought global warming was happening (Yes, definitely happening = 19; Probably happening = 4), though many participants reported that they needed more information on global warming to form their opinion (79.2%). Participants saw global warming as a high risk to public health, economic development, and natural environment. Finally, participants were asked about critical thinking and deliberative engagement (see ***Table 2.1***). This scale measured deliberative citizenship, trust, political self-efficacy, and political motivation (Muhlberger

& Weber, 2006; PytlikZillig, Hutchens, Muhlberger, Gonzalez, & Tomkins, 2018). The deliberative citizenship scale, adapted from PytlikZillig et al. (2018), includes five-point scale measures to the engagement factors individuals have coming into a discussion such as a need for cognition, “I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems” (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982); deliberative citizenship “A good citizen should listen to people who disagree with them politically” (Muhlberger & Weber, 2006); dispositional trust, “I believe that others have good intentions” (Goldberg, 1999). Each item was rated on a scale of 1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. Measures of intrinsic political motivation were rated highly, “I follow political and social issues because I think it's important” (Losier & Koestner, 1999). While results from this survey demonstrate deliberative engagement among participants, results were not applied to sort individuals into groups due to the smaller sample size.

***Table 2.3 Critical thinking / deliberative engagement scale***

| **Critical Thinking Statement:** | **Mean** | **Std. Deviation** |
|---|---|---|
| A good citizen should be willing to justify their political views. | 4.08 | .504 |
| I follow political and social issues because I want to learn more things. | 4.46 | .588 |
| I believe most people try to be fair. | 3.67 | .761 |
| A good citizen should allow others to challenge their political beliefs. | 4.21 | .588 |
| I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics. | 3.83 | .917 |
| I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems. | 4.42 | .654 |
| I believe that others have good intentions. | 4.17 | .482 |
| A good citizen should listen to people who disagree with them politically. | 4.46 | .509 |
| I follow political and social issues because I think it's important. | 4.67 | .482 |
| A good citizen should discuss politics with those who disagree with them. | 3.96 | .806 |

| Critical Thinking Statement: | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| If a citizen is dissatisfied with the policies of government, he or she has a duty to do something about it. | 4.13 | .741 |
| I follow political and social issues because that's what I'm supposed to do. | 3.17 | .917 |
| I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking. | 4.25 | .737 |
| I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something. | 1.63 | .647 |
| I trust what people say. | 3.29 | .806 |
| I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally. | 3.63 | .970 |
| Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on. | 2.46 | 1.141 |
| Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much. | 1.58 | .504 |
| I follow political and social issues because it bothers me when I don't. | 3.00 | .978 |
| Thinking is not my idea of fun. | 1.50 | .590 |
| The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me. | 4.08 | .717 |

*Items rated on a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.*
*N = 24*

### Focus Group Protocol

Focus groups provide an opportunity to observe and understand context because they involve a social interaction (Barbour, 2013). Focus groups allow for a descriptive, nuanced understanding of sense-making processes that individuals use when interacting with others as they compare and contrast ideas with others. A benefit of focus groups is that they generate the presence of meaningful, group interaction to responses of questions, and, as such, they provide insight into how people think and talk about complex issues, allowing a researcher to see different points of view (Morgan, 1993).

Each focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes and was conducted in person at a local community building. A facilitator guided the group following a semi-structured

focus group process in order to gain participant reflections on local, public discussions (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to 1) reflect on dialogue and deliberation in the debate around the recycling ordinance, online and off; 2) compare and contrast the quality of online and in-person deliberations about the recycling ordinance; and 3) discuss potential improvements to public discussions about local policy controversies. Existing literature on measuring quality of deliberation focuses on equality of participation (e.g., measuring speaking length), perspective taking (e.g., balance of perspectives, respect for others), and reasoned justification and decision making (De Vries et al., 2010). Dialogue is typically assessed by looking for knowledge change, personal change / development, issues analysis (i.e., topic-based assessment), or action change over time (Hurtado, 2001). Participants in this focus group were asked to assess quality of deliberation and dialogue argument quality based on examples from the case study utilizing examples from the online discussion and the City Council public hearings.

**Focus Group Analysis**

The focus groups sought to answer the third research questions through thematic analysis: *RQ3. How can dialogic moments be created to help people reflect on local public discussions to improve social learning?* The focus group portion of this study analyzed how individuals reflect on public deliberation using thematic analysis via grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To address this research question, I ascertained how participants understand the public controversy and assess the recommendations the participants make for successful public dialogue. In addition, concerns about public discussion and approaches will also be assessed. Mitchell (2004) notes that "moments of controversy embedded in … dialectical enjoinments may indeed

yield rich arrays of communicative phenomena for rhetorical critique" (p. 211). Asking focus groups to reflect on public controversy and public discussion provided an opportunity to engage in deliberative learning, not about climate change as a framework, but about public discussion itself. Qualitative analyses allows a richer understanding of phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and the thematic analysis provided understanding of how individuals interpret public deliberation, other deliberation participants, and values for public engagement.

Each focus group was transcribed and accumulated 35 pages, or 18,615 words. Transcripts were then uploaded into Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software. Qualitative data was analyzed inductively and included the development of codes as data are collected. These data were placed into categories based on similar content and meaning using the *constant comparison method* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method consists of the simultaneous coding and analysis of data in order to make comparisons in and between categories and to look for similarities, differences, and consistency of meaning. Codes were defined and continued to be refined throughout the research process (Barbour, 2013), and are listed in Appendix G. The resulting categories generated themes as they emerged from the data. Co-occurrence tables (generated by Atlas.ti) also were used to help identify patterns among (see Appendix H). After documenting the themes, I reviewed the themes and looked for commonalities. I reviewed the transcripts again to ensure the participant ideas were accurate and consistently represented with the themes (Braithwaite, Moore, & Abetz, 2014). After four focus groups, prominent patterns began to emerge, theoretical saturation was reached, and I was not learning anything new from

participants (Barbour, 2013; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Data findings were validated using exemplar quotations and constant comparisons (Suter, 2009).

### 2.3 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study is to understand the tenets of public dialogue in local controversies. In particular, I sought to understand how national-level polarization and dialogic moments impact local debate, both on and offline, and how individuals reflect on public controversies. A combination of a case study and follow-up focus groups provided an understanding of local debate amid controversy and will inform future study. This tiered research study uses a case study as the basis for further qualitative assessment in order to gain insight into how individuals interact in public discussion as well as how individuals react and reflect on public discussion.

In the following chapters I present the results of this study. Chapter 3 provides a case study of the controversial municipal ban on cardboard in the landfill and the recycling mandate. The case study addresses the first two research questions (RQ1, RQ2) by understanding how individuals express their identity, interact, and change perspective, if at all, in a public discussion while examining the public discussion for dialogue activity. Chapter 4 presents the results of the follow-up focus group study to understand how individuals reflect on dialogue and debate in municipal controversies in order to answer RQ3. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the results and their implications on municipal public debate in Chapter 5. Specifically, I suggest areas of future applications and research to guide efforts to address local controversies through effective dialogue and public deliberation.

# Chapter 3 Case Study of Lincoln's Recycling Ordinance

The state of Nebraska rates far below the national average in recycling (Cordes, 2015), though the issue is increasingly one of importance for many cities. In the 2017 Taking Charge City Satisfaction Survey, 69% of respondents indicated that their household recycled in some capacity, which is an increase from previous years (PytlikZillig, Walther, & Kawamoto, 2017). The 2013 Solid Waste Plan reported that approximately 24% of residential households subscribed to curbside recycling service (Lincoln, 2013). In the City of Lincoln, the limited space in the landfill, along with concerns for sustainability, spurned increased interest and conflict about mandatory recycling. Before the ordinance, recycling was not required, but several items were banned from the landfill including such items as household hazardous waste, yard waste (between April and November each year), liquid latex paint, and car batteries.

Prior to the ordinance, recycling was available for free at City drop-off locations, or by paid, comingled or sorted, curbside service. The City of Lincoln introduced an amendment to the waste ordinance to require all of the 40 Lincoln waste haulers to offer curbside recycling service to their customers either as an additional service or with current waste service (§83.32.115). Haulers could offer the service themselves for a fee or contract with a different recycling service, but the City of Lincoln required that the option be made available to all customers. Customers, however, were not required to subscribe to the service. This requirement for waste haulers went into effect one year prior to the landfill cardboard ban. The City of Lincoln is unique in that it has 40 private waste hauling companies, which meant that waste efforts would need to be inclusive of private businesses.

While advance efforts were made to formulate public and stakeholder opinion by building recommendations through the Solid Waste Plan (2013), interest groups arose both for and against the proposed ordinance. While proponents highlighted the sustainability and landfill issues, opposition was primarily concerned with government overreach and landlord liability. This chapter reviews this municipal debate by examining public commentary online from embedded Facebook comments linked to online newspaper articles on the *Lincoln Journal Star* website, public commentary at scheduled public hearings with the City Council, as well as input from interviewees who participated in this public discussion about the recycling ordinance.

### 3.1 Recycling Ordinance Timeline

Lincoln's recycling ordinance originated in 2013 with the development of the Solid Waste Plan (Lincoln, 2013). The plan was crafted by a Solid Waste Task Force made up of private waste haulers and environmental groups. As part of the plan's recommendations, waste haulers began to offer recycling services, and the City of Lincoln provided more taxpayer-funded, and thus free to use, recycling drop-off sites. The advisory committee recommended increasing residential recycling by encouraging recycling at multi-family residences (e.g., apartment buildings), banning recyclables from the landfill, increasing landfill diversion education, and reducing organic waste (i.e., food scraps) in the landfill through a diversion program. However, since the plan was crafted, recycling became less profitable for industry (Hicks, 2015). Even with the additional recycling service availability (and an increase in use from 16% to 22% recycling rate), a large percentage of landfill waste remained recyclable material.

Three years after the announcement of the Solid Waste Plan in 2013, the Mayor announced efforts to increase recycling in the City of Lincoln through education, ordinances, and service availability increases. Interestingly, Lincoln residents pay significantly more for garbage hauling than neighboring cities and towns, both of smaller and larger size (Lincoln, 2013) . The Mayor's office argued that because of the price discrepancy, the cost for recycling would not increase for private residences, particularly since free recycling drop-off sites are available. In summer 2016, the Mayor's office proposed a ban on recyclable items from the landfill, beginning with corrugated cardboard, office paper, and newspaper. This ban would act like the current ban on yard waste in the landfill, which carries a misdemeanor charge for dumping between April 1 and November 30 of each year by state law (§LB-1257, 1992). However, the penalty noted in the ordinance was unclear if it would apply to landlords. Businesses and landlords voiced concern about paying the price for tenants who don't recycle.

A new compromise on the recycling ordinance was presented and passed the City Council (see ***Table 3.1*** for complete timeline). However, the new recycling ban is without penalty for residents or landlords and focuses largely on marketing and education. The marketing plans were later reduced after public concern about the cost. Though recycling efforts in the City have increased, the City still falls below average among comparable cities.[8]

[8] The bi-annual *Taking Charge City Satisfaction Survey* demonstrates a significant two-year increase in both household recycling rate (69%) and number of households who pay for curbside recycling (37%). Households that utilize free drop-off sites (43%) have remained the same; use of free drop-off recycling sites outpaces those that pay for curbside recycling (PytlikZillig et al., 2017).

*Table 3.1 Timeline of recycling ordinance and precipitating milestones*

| Date | Milestone |
|---|---|
| **October 2011** | Call for Solid Waste Plan by City of Lincoln and Lancaster County. |
| **June 2012** | Advisory Committee appointed, meets monthly through November 2013. |
| **August 2012** | Baseline survey conducted. |
| **November 2012** | Needs assessment conducted. |
| **November 2013** | Solid Waste Plan released as part of Lincoln-Lancaster County Comprehensive Plan 2014 (prepared by HDR consulting) |
| **November 2013** | Mayor recommends that all garbage haulers offer curbside recycling services. |
| **March 2014** | Work group recommends corrugated cardboard ban in landfill. |
| **August 2014** | City announces plan to spend $20,000 - $50,000 on recycling education in both 2014 and 2015. |
| **August 2015** | Mayor announces goal to reduce city recycling rate to advance sustainability efforts. |
| **May 1, 2016** | Mayor's office releases a draft ordinance with a schedule for banning products from the landfill beginning in April 2017 (corrugated cardboard), followed by news print and recyclable paper. |
| **May 11, 2016** | Two council members voice concerns that increased recycling will reduce landfill revenue to city; reduced revenue will be offset with increased landfill fees (and fees for garbage hauling).<br><br>Mayor's office states that landfill fees will increase regardless of recycling rate. |
| **May 23, 2016** | Mayor announces goal to double city recycling rate by 2020 through education, ordinances, and increased availability,<br><br>A petition supporting the Mayor's effort "Recycling Lincoln," is made available through *change.org*. It obtains 1,715 supporters. |
| **July 18, 2016** | Recycling ordinance is presented to city council. |
| **July 25, 2016** | Public hearing for recycling ordinance is held.<br><br>Business representatives voice opposition to proposed recycling ordinance because of lack of clarity misdemeanor charge for taking recyclable materials to the landfill (for landlords and waste haulers). |

| Date | Milestone |
|---|---|
| | City council vote on recycling ordinance is delayed two weeks due to lack of support. Estimated votes are 3 councilpersons in favor (all democrats) and 4 opposed (all republicans). |
| **August 1, 2016** | Republican majority of city council approves an amendment to the proposed recycling ordinance. The amendment removes the ban, but keeps the requirement of haulers to offer and report recycling and retains $500,000 education budget.<br><br>If approved, the city would have to return $349,000 in state grants contingent on a ban of cardboard. |
| **August 2, 2016** | Mayor announces his consideration of a veto. |
| **August 4, 2016** | Mayor vetoes amended ordinance. Mayor states he may offer a new proposed ordinance on the ballot in the following spring (requiring 7,750 signatures of registered voters). |
| **November 22, 2016** | Residents announce petition drive to get recycling ordinance on the spring ballot. |
| **December 1, 2016** | Over 1,000 signatures are collected for recycling ordinance with aims to gather 10,000 by the end of January 2017. |
| **January 20, 2017** | A new compromise is proposed by the city council, banning cardboard from the landfill, but without criminal penalty.<br><br>Residents collect 6,000 signatures on the petition by the time the compromise was announced. |
| **January 30, 2017** | A public hearing on the new recycling ordinance is held.<br><br>Vote to approve the new cardboard ban in the landfill passes the city council vote, 6-1. |
| **June 9, 2017** | The City begins looking at new landfill sites. Despite earlier estimates of a 2032 full landfill date and increased recycling, the landfill is now expected to fill by 2028. |
| **July 11, 2017** | Mayor releases new proposed sustainability plan aimed at reducing energy costs and clean air and water, called Lincoln Environmental Action Plan, to be presented to the city council at a later date. |
| **July 31, 2017** | City reviews proposed $850,000 recycling research and marketing campaign proposal. The campaign proposes incentives ($750) and a community-based social marketing. The goal of the project is to double the number of current households that recycle from 30,000 to 60,000. |

| Date | Milestone |
|---|---|
| | The City Council delays the vote on the marketing contract for two weeks after citizens raise concerns about cost. |
| **August 11, 2017** | The proposed contractor proposes an option to reduce to one year, $512,757. |
| **August 15, 2017** | The City Council approves the revised, smaller contract for three years totaling $617,522. |

Each of these milestones in the timeline (***Table 3.1*** above) included opportunities for public engagement, whether through stakeholder feedback, public hearings, or comments made through media coverage. Next, I highlight examples from the public discussion around the ordinance in public hearings. I then discuss the commentary to the online comments built into the media coverage through the Lincoln Journal Star. Finally, I support the case study findings with interviews from participants in the discussion around the recycling ordinance in order to assess the role of national level polarization (RQ1) and dialogue (RQ2) in this case study.

### 3.2 Public comment in public hearings

Public hearings from three major stages of the recycling debate were reviewed and analyzed including 1) the presentation of the recycling proposal and accompanying testimony (City Council Public Hearing, July 25, 2016), 2) amendment presentation and approval (City Council Public Meeting, August 1, 2016), and 3) the public meeting presenting and approving the new amended ban on cardboard from the landfill (City Council Public Hearing, January 30, 2017). In the following sections, I describe each hearing and highlight some of the themes that emerged from the public discussion in the hearings.

#### July 25th public hearing: Proposing a plan

This public hearing followed the original presentation to the City Council of the proposed recycling ordinance on July 18th. In that time, there was media coverage of the proposal. Supporters of the proposal arrived at the public hearing wearing green stickers reading "Support Recycle Lincoln!" This public hearing would not feature a vote on the proposed ordinance; rather, it provided the Council time to hear the proposed ordinance, ask clarifying questions, and hear public input.

At the July 25th, 2016 public hearing, Jon Carlson, Mayor's Office, and Donna Garden, Assistant Director of Public Works, presented the proposed changes to the current city ordinance on waste disposal. They also detailed the participatory process they used to work towards this proposal (e.g., by engaging stakeholders from private businesses and environmental groups through the Solid Waste Advisory Committee),the proposed changes to the ordinance including definitions and requirements, and the proposed timeline and impact. Both Carlson and Garden were well prepared to discuss the process and proposal but seemed unclear at times on the exact impact the proposal would have outside of the estimated diverted waste. For example:

> ***Councilperson Christianson****: How many haulers do not currently offer curbside recycling?*
>
> ***Ms. Garden****: I don't know.*

Questions about the ordinance ranged from questions of enforcement, clarification on numbers and rates (e.g., how and when data was collected), clarification on terms and proposals (e.g. how will the city add more recycling drop off sites?), and clarification of alternative considerations (e.g., other recycling possibilities). Specific concerns were raised in terms of logistics and the disproportionate burden that would fall on low-income

renters and landlords. Reasons to support the ordinance included sustainability initiatives, progressive politics, and extending the life of the landfill. Because there was significant lead up to the public hearing, the hearing room was full of individuals on both sides of the ordinance. A total of 40 individuals spoke for no more than five minutes each in favor, in opposition, or to question some dimension of the proposed ordinance. The public hearing lasted nearly four hours, with most of the time spent on the recycling ordinance.

Supporters of the ordinance cited a need for progressive policies to attract businesses and individuals to the city:

> ***Supporter:*** *… Lincoln is in a good position to do this. Recycling makes economic sense because we don't want to build another landfill. As a startup business owner, I would be embarrassed to say this didn't pass. More than 1,100 signers as of today that have signed the Lincoln recycling petition.*
>
> ***Supporter:*** *I'm a junior at Southeast [High School] and I'm president of a Mayors Club. From our younger generation, we want you to know that this is important to us. We don't want to be in a place that is not green that's not up with the standards.*

Further, supporters also used moral obligations and environmental stewardship as a need to mandate recycling. For example, one supporter read from the Pope Francis encyclical on climate change, reading the "These problems are linked to a throw-away culture…. Our industrial system at the end of its cycle has not found a way to adopt a circular process of production like the natural process." The speaker argued that environmental responsibility was a part of morality. Others have historically argued such religious basis

for environmental stewardship, as well as an urgency to address sustainability (Torgerson, 1999).

Often, individuals relied on their own experience to express an opinion or fact. Many individuals used their business experience to justify their support for recycling. For example:

> ***Supporter****: I'm a small business owner in construction. The development in construction alone – cardboard and paper goods are all you get. I recycle 100% of cardboard right now. I think this ordinance is a good thing. I hope it doesn't stop at cardboard. It will help the landfill progress by also doing this with glass and tin and other products. There are cities larger than us that recycle at a higher rate*.

Likewise, landlords spoke both in favor of the ordinance and in opposition to the ordinance.

> ***Councilperson Christianson****: If I am a landlord, who is liable if recyclable isn't taking place – the landlord or the tenants?*
>
> ***Mr. Carlson****: Well, I am a landlord. We have ELL and New Americans, so we help to educate them [on recycling] and work in partnership with our haulers. We encourage them to recycle, and ultimately it is my responsibility.*

> ***Landlord, nonsupport:*** *We have 2500 units. We have a mix of large complexes and smaller units. … If I could get education to stop putting things down the disposals, I would be miles ahead. People still change oil in lots and throw things*

*down disposal. We recycle at home and collect cans. We are for recycling. But you can't put liability on a management company for someone else's behavior.*

Landlords in particular expressed significant concern over being responsible for tenants' behavior. Further, they noted that their tenants would be disproportionately impacted by the ordinance as landlords would have to pay for recycling, whereas home owners could take recycling to drop-off sites. One landlord noted:

> ***Landlord, nonsupport****: … Further, it will put upward pressure on rents. Second, the impact of this forced cost is not insignificant. The renters will bear the cost of the program, and these folks will be the hardest hits. The wealthier individuals can save costs because they can drop off recycling at free drop offs. The poor will have no choice but to pay higher rents, so they cannot avoid the costs. This will impact the poorest in Lincoln. I urge the council to reject the proposal as written.*

At the same time, most individuals who spoke in opposition to the proposed ordinance do recycle in some capacity at their home and/or business. Councilperson Christianson asked all testifiers to report whether or not their recycled at their home and if they used curbside recycling. Curbside recycling use was mixed, but all 40 testifiers participated in a recycling program in some capacity, either through compost, drop-off centers, reuse, or partial recycling programs (e.g., cans only).

While the discussion was more heated at times, citizens largely treated each other decorously. Individuals were respectful and mindful of the time and rules of the chambers. For example, even when questioning about the potentially burdensome process of asking haulers to provide information, ordinance advocates responded directly and on-point.

***Councilperson Christianson****: Frankly, I don't know of any other business that has to take that kind of abuse from the government.*

***Mr. Carlson****: Actually, we ask [the haulers] to provide the information voluntarily right now, so this won't be much of a change.*

By the end of the hearing, 40 comments from the public, two comments from proposers, and multiple comments from the Council members were heard. Members of the public included landlords, business owners, sanitation workers, sustainability workers, nonprofit managers, and students. The hearing produced comments and concerns that were taken into consideration for future amendments to the proposed ordinance.

**August 1st City Council Meeting: Amending the ordinance**

Typically, Lincoln City Council ordinance procedure includes a first reading, a second reading with public hearing, and a third reading accompanied by needed votes and amendments. Votes may be postponed to review amendments if needed, with approval. In the August 1st City Council meeting, no public comment was included as it was not a public hearing. On the afternoon of August 1st, proposed changes to the ordinance were sent via email to councilmembers from the Mayor's Office addressing the previous week's public comments. At the meeting, Jon Carlson, Mayor's Office; Donna Garden, Assistant Director of Public Works; and Tim Sieh, Office of the City Attorney were present to address the proposed changes and answer questions. Additionally, fellow Councilmember Fellers emailed a proposed amendment to the proposed revised ordinance that would remove the ban on recyclables altogether.

Councilmember Jane Raybould made a motion to delay the vote on the proposed recycling ordinance for two weeks due to the late notice of amendments and changes. Ms. Raybould requested time to gather feedback on the proposed changes from the stakeholders and interest groups that spoke at the prior hearing. This motion was discussed at length.

> ***Councilperson Raybould****: My concern was that there was a tremendous amount of testimony last week in support and of those that have raised concerns about how fines would be implemented or executed. Also, we have had presented to us some language from the Mayor's office that is attempting to address those concerns. At the same time, we have been presented with another amendment, which from what I can tell from the few minutes that we had to look it over would drastically alter the intent of that amendment, so a two-week delay is reasonable and practical. I certainly want to get feedback from those that have expressed concerns about how the fines would be implemented to make sure that the language that the Mayor has come up with is acceptable to them and is addressing all the concerns that they have raised. At the same time, I have expressed concerns about something that is going to be introduced by Councilman Fellers. And I would like to have a public hearing on the concerns about removing part of the language of the recycling ordinance that would render the ordinance inoperative.*
>
> ***Councilperson Eskridge****: …It is important to me to get the best thing in place that we possibly can to help Lincoln improve in our recycling efforts and our communities and how we are able to extend the life of our landfill. As a matter of*

*precedent, we want to get the facts and information. I strongly support the motion to delay two weeks.*

With much discussion, the motion to delay failed along party lines with three Democrat councilmembers voting to delay and four Republican councilmembers voting to continue. Following the failure of the motion to delay, discussion of proposed amendments to the proposed recycling ordinance. First was Amendment 1, proposed by Councilperson Fellers to strike any ban on recyclables to the landfill, and instead focus on education, data collection, and hauler measures.

***Councilperson Fellers**: ...By taking away [the] ban, we still can do education campaigns and have ability to do recycling. My amendment removes a couple of provisions but keeps most of the bill intact and moves the city forward in recycling.*

***Councilperson Raybould**: ... Your proposed amendment would emasculate, eviscerate, the intent of the recycling ordinance. I'd like to point out that there was a Solid Waste 2040 Task Force that met for nine months. I was on that task force. We collected data, looked at other municipalities, and looked at items recycled and municipal impact. In a continuation of that discussion, they met with stakeholders to understand that this was something the City of Lincoln could execute very clearly. What you are proposing is to eliminate the recyclable cardboard ban and remove the newsprint being removed from landfill, and also saying that you don't want to see recyclable papers go into the landfill.*

The proposal of eliminating the ban on recyclables from the ordinance was debated at length. In part, previous research demonstrated that education without policy-

driven diversion (e.g., ban) only increased recycling 1-3%, while diversion and education could increase recycling 25%.

> ***Councilperson Gaylor-Baird****: We all support recycling and agree on that. The argument is how to move that needle most effectively and what I appreciate about our task force and the stakeholder groups and data is that despite our love of recycling in this community, we can do a lot better. … This isn't just about the environment and the great feelings that we all have about doing the right thing by recycling. This is about fiscal responsibility and taxes and the rates we pay. The landfill is going to continue to fill up and if we can divert more items, we put off the cost of building a new one. And at last check, that cost was a $10M price tag, not including the closure costs on the current landfill. We have to think about the costs coming down the road. If we can put off that cost, that leaves more money for our budget today. There are more budget implications than the dump rates – every year we put off the landfill costs, we can spend more money on infrastructure. Imagine if we had to plan for a $10M price tag. This is about fiscal responsibility*.

Arguments to remove the ban centered in large part against mandating individuals to recycle versus persuading them.

> ***Councilperson Lamm****: Last week we listened to hours of testimony. Business owners and landlords said that they recycle. And what I heard was that anyone that wants to recycle in Lincoln has access to recycling, and I heard that we have made great progress in recycling. What I heard is that probably is because of education – and that is a big component. One great thing in the ordinance is that*

*by haulers being required to offer the service, they [residents] will notice [recycling as an] option. And we do have $500,000 set aside for education already. I was also disappointed in the lack of recent data. We've had a lot of public input already. And it's not unusual to have amendments in the third reading. The amendment Councilman Fellers offers encourages people to recycle. I prefer the carrot to the stick. It addresses the concerns, so I would support the amendment.*

***Councilperson Camp**: This is a good community. What I am hearing is that 'I don't want the heavy hand of government on top of me.' Everybody is saying that they support recycling, but there are other restrictions imposed. What Mr. Fellers is proposing is a good proposal. We are taking opportunities to people – we can add those sites.*

***Councilperson Christianson**: I like recycling and I love liberty, and they are not mutually exclusive. My wife did not want to recycle, so I persuaded her by buying her a baby grand piano. I believe we owe it to the citizens of Lincoln, we can persuade them. If people are that concerned with recycling, they should persuade their neighbor. We can do this without mandates.*

The amendment proposed by Councilperson Fellers to remove the section referring to banning recyclables from the landfill passed with those voting along party lines: Four Republican council members voted in favor of the amendment, and three Democratic council members voted against the amendment.

A second amendment to change sections 4, 5, and 6 was introduced by Councilperson Eskridge in order to address concerns about landlord responsibility and

waste hauler license requirements. This motion passed on a vote of 6-1 despite concerns about the altered ordinance and lack of delay.

> ***Councilperson Eskridge****: I will support it because it's important that we move forward. The questions of pagination could be clarified in a two-week period of time. It would be better to delay. After working on this for three years, two weeks shouldn't matter that much.*
>
> ***Councilperson Gaylor-Baird****: I will support it as well because it reflects the efforts of the administration to reflect the concerns. It will make a sub-standard piece of legislation a little bit better. I really feel [that] the way this is working out without giving the applicant the courtesy of a delay is an example of the Council not working at its finest.*

Following the approval of the two proposed amendments, there was discussion on the main motion to approve the recycling ordinance. Though council members expressed their disappointment at the revised ordinance proposal, the motion carried 4-3 along party lines.

> ***Councilperson Eskridge:*** *There's no question that we need to recycle, most people want to recycle. But the numbers show we aren't recycling well, and we need to do better – to extend the life of our landfill, and people can get jobs – we are putting people to work if we increase recycling. We are allowing people to make money out of trash. It's a good economic boost. So how do we make this work? We heard good input into the penalty portion of this proposal. You know the "heavy hand of government," locking people up or fining people huge amounts of dollars is obviously a concern. I don't want something in the books*

*that says we are going to do it if we are not going to do it. Twelve years or however long we've had the grass and leaves penalty, never once has that been prosecuted. If we're not doing that it should not be on the books. We're not a police state, that's not something that we do. … We want to make it as easy as possible to move the community forward and have good common sense.*

***Councilperson Christianson**: I have a high regard for people in Nebraska, and I think most of them will do the right thing for the right reason. We are generally a virtuous people, and I think this ordinance is a gentle persuasion in the right direction and I intend to support it.*

***Councilperson Gaylor-Baird**: I will go back to the purpose of the diversion is that we move the needle on recycling so that we do save costs so we create a better recycling community in or economy to make sure we make the best use of the education dollars. We've been told the recycling education without diversion will only move the needle 1-3%. And Lincoln recycles at 25% at the most – that's 10% below the national average. I don't want a city that is 10% below the national average [in anything]. We're at the top of the list in so many other ways and we could be there for recycling too. We don't have to slow down our progress. I believe in our people, and if we provide this next step as we have already done at the landfill, we are on track to just be on average. A lot of cities do more like curbside composting. We're not even talking about that – this is not that. We appreciate the volunteer work that is going into the task force and the committee and the data given to inform the piece of legislation. I am disappointed in where this is headed today. This is minimal progress and minimal gain.*

Council members expressed their disappointment with the proposed amended ordinance as it stood with limited power for enforcement. Those in favor of this revised ordinance argued that Lincolnites were already recycling, and more education about how and where to recycling would continue to increase recycling rates. Further, they argued that enforcing penalties, or having a penalty in name only, was ineffective. Opponents to the revised ordinance felt that investing in education only, without legal obligations, was both too much financial effort for what they felt would surely be just a little increase in recycling. This argument focused on the role of government in influencing resident behavior. Opponents of a full ban on recyclables from the landfill felt it was government overreach into modifying citizens' behavior.

Though this ordinance passed the City Council with the removal of the ban, the Mayor vetoed the ordinance a few days later on August 4th. In his statement, as reported by the *Lincoln Journal Star*, the Mayor argued that without the ban the recycling ordinance was useless.

> *You cannot take out the key portion and claim progress," he said. "The council has essentially given us a car without an engine. It might look like a car, but it will get us nowhere.*

Council members cried sour grapes, claiming that the Mayor was ignoring public input and disappointed at not getting his way. However, the veto did not halt the efforts to increase recycling rates and availability in Lincoln.

**January 30th Public Hearing: Approving a Compromise**

Following the veto of the recycling ordinance as previously proposed, a group of Lincoln residents began a petition to put the recycling ordinance on the ballot for city

vote in May 2017. a total of 7,760 unique and valid signatures are needed to add an item to the ballot in the City of Lincoln; this petition had significant momentum, with 6,000 signatures by mid-January. With the pressure of a ballot initiative forming, the City Council, Mayor's Office, and the City Public Works Department moved towards a compromise proposing a ban on corrugated cardboard from the landfill beginning in April 2018 (postponement) with no additional bans within the legislation, and no misdemeanor or fine for residents or landlords. The only fine incurred would be for haulers refusing to separate recyclable material. With this proposed initiative, the grant funding for additional bins and recycling education would remain with the City.

At this hearing, the Mayor's office presented the proposed ordinance compromise and discussed it with the City Council. Members of the City Council did have questions for the two City staff persons: Donna Garden and Jon Carlson. One of the major changes to the ordinance was removing the misdemeanor charge and creating a citation for waste haulers.

> ***Councilperson Lamm****: So for now, responsibility is only on the haulers at the landfill?*
>
> ***Ms. Garden****: Yes, that's correct.*
>
> ***Councilperson Lamm****: And did I understand correctly that if they get to the landfill site and they have cardboard, they could offload the cardboard and take care of it themselves, there is not a fee, only if they [the landfill employees] have to sort it for them?*
>
> ***Ms. Garden****: Yes, that's correct.*

Some council members expressed concern that if there was no misdemeanor, that the cost-benefit would not be as significant as a full mandate with penalty. The new ordinance as proposed expects that the combination of education and mandate will encourage recycling increases, even without penalty.

> ***Councilperson Gaylor-Baird****: If the no requirement to sort the cardboard, do you expect to get the same results as you did before if it could all end up at the landfill?*
>
> ***Mr. Carlson****: I think that most people when they understand the rules, and see the convenience of the curbside recycling, they will take advantage of that. What we know is that we've seen that people over the last 18 months is that they are interest in recycling opportunities and that is what we are providing for them. And we thank the Council for allowing us to move forward, we say let's just take this step and do our metrics and evaluate so we can be better prepared to answer those questions.*

Still, concern lingered for how costs would trickle back from waste haulers to property owners, as expressed in this interaction between Councilmember Camp and Mr. Carlson, both of whom are landlords.

> ***Councilperson Camp****: What is the charge to practice on building and property owners? Won't there really be a charge back? How do you control a herd of cats that live in your apartments?*
>
> ***Mr. Carlson****: I look at the circumstances you have now where you have occasional tires or others end up in your dumpster. You can't control all of the times. The waste haulers are here to talk about this, and they are much more*

> *eloquent on this subject than I am. But the benefit is that we have 40 odd haulers in Lincoln and their one mission is to provide service to their customers. My experience is very positive with the haulers. They are able to track that back, and we educate the tenants. We do have hiccups and we will. There will be a change and education necessary for tenants.*

Similarly, a commercial property owner indicated his property's participation in recycling efforts since opening:

> ***Mr. Wegoner:*** *I'm a commercial property owner at Turbine Flats and I want to comment from the commercial property owner side. We've been employing recycling since we opened 8 years ago. And I can say that cardboard is the easiest to recycle…. We have a number of volunteers in our building that take the totes out and put them by the street. We don't need to hide our bins, we are proud of them.*

After council members asked questions of the staff, there was time for members of the public to testify. This order of events paired with a vote was based on a prior meeting's motion to allow for testimony, debate, and a vote on this ordinance in a single meeting. Thirteen individuals offered testimony, including individuals who helped to organize the petition, individuals speaking in support of recycling efforts, and business organizations. All members of the public who testified offered support for recycling, some in support of the ordinance and some wishing the ordinance went further to include single stream recycling. Those who organized the ballot petition stated their intention to cancel the petition if the ordinance passed. Members of the public and the City Council expressed support for the idea of a compromise.

> ***Mr. Swanson****: I led the project for Recycle Lincoln to gather signatures to get this on the ballot. Thank you for letting me speak here today. I've had the great pleasure of working with you in an effort to move this forward. Your willingness to see this through sets a good example for all of us to compromise. We all have different ideas of how to do it but compromise is a great start. I want you to know that while we have the signatures to have this on the ballot, we will fully adhere to the ordinance as voted on here and you can hold me to that. Lincoln is a great city and seeing the City Council come together to pass a popular ordinance, one supported by people on both sides of the aisle, really has renewed my faith that the city is in good hands. Any council member can talk to me at any time. I want to clarify that I've talked to thousands of people about this issue, and it doesn't matter who they voted for president, they want to see this ordinance passed.*
>
> ***Councilperson Lamm****: And it is the intention that you will not move forward with this ballot initiatives if this passes tonight?*
>
> ***Mr. Swanson****: Yes, that is correct: we will stop collecting signatures*.

Throughout the public discussion, recycling itself was viewed as a nonpartisan issue. Mr. Swanson (above) indicated as such when he mentioned "it doesn't matter who they voted for president" in a way that directly referenced the 2016 election. By expressing the bipartisan nature, he highlights not only that many people support recycling, but also that municipal policy issues are viewed differently than national-level politics.

Waste haulers also spoke about how they would implement the proposed ordinance and their current process.

***Jimmy, Waste Hauler****: I own the company Alley Cat Disposal and Recycling. I love this city, I wouldn't trade it for anywhere else. Whatever you folks do tonight, we are prepared to carry on with recycling. Recycling is going on in this city and will continue. My company has offered recycling for four years and curbside and carry out for our elderly customers.*

***Councilperson Camp****: Mr. Klein, will you discuss, you've worked on four-year recycling voluntarily. This program would increase education on recycling. Is it possible to get a good return on recycling with stepped up education?*

***Jimmy, Waste Hauler****: Well, we are going to need a lot of education, especially for apartment dwellers and commercial buildings because it's big. We need a lot of education. All you have to do is drive through there, and people think they are a free drop-off site. And I know myself and my competitors keep this city clean and we will continue to do that.*

***Councilperson Camp****: What will do you if you get one of those $100 charges? Are you going to handle that? Will you pass that through?*

***Jimmy, Waste Hauler****: I don't have an answer for that. I don't know*.

In addition, the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce was in attendance to support the ordinance and recycling efforts. This demonstrated support among businesses. The Lincoln Independent Business Association (LIBA) was not in attendance at this public hearing, so businesses represented themselves or were represented by the Chamber of Commerce. Councilperson Camp did continue to express concern about mandatory recycling efforts:

***Kyle Fisher, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce****: We are a group of 1700 businesses here in Lincoln working to grow our economy, 'pro jobs.' I do appear in support of recycling and support recycling in Lincoln, in general. I praise those who came before me in finding compromise. I think that I'll chose to quote a former councilman that 'if no one is happy then you're probably doing something right.' ... You need to be commended on that we are doing something for its citizens by extending the life of the landfill. On the issue itself, we've had our share of open forums among our members. What we've found is that most of the business here in Lincoln are doing recycling already and they are doing what they can to cut their costs to not put as much waste in the landfill and be good stewards of the environment. Recycling is not difficult. There are some parts of this legislation where maybe I'm not fully behind or totally satisfied with, but you can't please everyone all the time. As a business organization, we'll find a way to work with you and this administration, Jon, Donna, and others to do what we can to education our members and the public to make this work.*

***Councilperson Camp****: In your remarks, you said you support recycling. Is that mandatory or voluntary?*

***Mr. Fisher****: Well, uh, I think that to support recycling you support it in any of its forms. There may be parts of this that our business owners might not be fully satisfied with, you know with commercial buildings buying extra bins, but you know, I think even if you asked those property owners that feel they are being forced into something, on a base level they would say that they support recycling.*

In addition to businesses, several college students offered their support for the ordinance as proposed. For example, “I’m a biology student and I’ve learned a lot in my studies and environmental studies that I want to echo things that she had said…” and “I am a civil engineering major at UNL and my specialty is environmental engineering. What we are talking about here is very relevant to what I have been studying and very relevant to what my career will be….” The ordinance brought out support by business owners, waste haulers, start-up companies, young adults and college students. With the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as the third largest employer supporting nearly 27,000 students each year, UNL boasts a large influence on Lincoln’s economy and policies. As more individuals from disparate groups spoke in support of the ordinance, it demonstrated wide-spread support.

Overall, the compromise ordinance was well received by City Council members and the public. Most councilmembers spoke in favor of the recycling plan; the proposed ordinance passed in a vote of 6-1.

> ***Councilperson Lamm****: We’ve heard again how important recycling is to Lincoln. And the landfill, especially people in North Lincoln are especially interested in what is going on with our landfill and I heard this and obviously we have heard this isn’t the best of anyone’s world, and this seems to be the best at this time. What I love about the recycling ordinance is that it does say that we are being intentional and that’s important. We join the efforts of business that have mentioned being intentional in their efforts and individuals who are intentional in their recycling efforts ….*

> ***Councilperson Fellers****: Here we are again, and I want the thank my colleagues for talking about this together. I also want to thank the Mayor's office for working to put the language together…. These were all drafts at some point and we've had the opportunity to put their touch on it. I think we've done this right here today. I appreciate the feedback from the community and feedback from Donna about the myths and facts of what's out there today. I got a call from a construction company the other day concerned with how they would implement this and I said "Let's sit down and talk about this" and I set up a meeting with the mayor's office to figure out a solution for homebuilders. I feel really comfortable about how this has moved forward.*
>
> ***Councilperson Camp****: Well I agree with supporting recycling. I have one difficulty with this legislation, and that's the required recycling. I think we do need to step up education, I'm happy to see all the factors in here and that we won't lose the state grants.*

The final, revised ordinance was well received. In this last hearing, the discussion participants often positively referenced the act of compromise. For example, all City Council representatives complemented the process, making statements such as: "I feel really comfortable about how this moved forward" and "I'm happy to see all factors here" and "We are being intentional, and that's what is important." Likewise, business owners also expressed interest in support and compromise with comments such as, "As a business organization, we will find a way to work with you and this administration." Statements such as these highlight that compromise is being made in real time through the discussion process. Further, public respondents praised the idea of compromise. Mr.

Swanson, who led the petition effort, praised the City Council for reaching a compromise; Mr. Fisher, representing the Chamber of Commerce, also "commended" the City Council for working towards a compromise.

When the ban on cardboard from the landfill began in April 2018, and although implementation and impact has yet to be measured, response has been more positive than expected with few calls or complaints to haulers or city government. This lack of confusion or complaint suggests that the education campaign was effective, and perhaps that many began recycling prior to the requirement.

**3.3 Public comment on media coverage**

Unlike the commentary in public hearings, public comment through media coverage demonstrated less interest in compromise. Media coverage for the recycling ordinance included the local newspaper, *Lincoln Journal Star* as well as local television stations, and targeted websites (e.g., Watchdog.org, Waste360.com). The *Lincoln Journal Star* website supports Facebook-embedded comments to articles which allow users to post comments and interact with each other via their Facebook social media profile. For this study, I examined 20 newspaper articles from the *Lincoln Journal Star* covering key time points in the debate over local recycling. Of the 20 newspaper articles selected, 17 also featured web-based public commentary.

A total of 255 comments from 97 individuals 17 articles were recorded and analyzed. Each comment was organized by commenter name, number of likes, number of replies, and date; then, each comment was coded by type. Comments were grouped into categories: 1) for or against the recycling ban and their stated rationale (legal, economic, scientific, fairness, or not a strong enough reason); 2) stated opposition to the

conservative right or liberal left; 3) obstructionist argument (i.e., not engaging with others but offering unrelated comments); 4) engaging in discussion (e.g., asking a question or offering a response); or 5) other type of response. Counting the number of "likes" and replies to each comment provided insight into how individuals engaged with each other in addition to signaling which comments were most engaging to others involved in communicatively interacting about this campaign.

***Table 3.2 Likes and replies by comment type***

| Comment Type (Primary) | Count by Primary Comment Type | Likes | Replies |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Pro-Ban: county** | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Pro-Ban: support** | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| **Pro-Ban: science** | 6 | 2 | 3 |
| **Pro-Ban: legal** | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| **Pro-Ban: landfill** | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| **Pro-Ban: economic** | 5 | 1 | 7 |
| **Other** | 12 | 6 | 6 |
| **Opposition: anti-right** | 16 | 6 | 18 |
| **Opposition: anti-left** | 41 | 87 | 32 |
| **Engage: response** | 49 | 15 | 13 |
| **Engage: question** | 9 | 12 | 10 |
| **Engage: obstruct** | 30 | 30 | 11 |
| **Concern: landfill sites** | 2 | 7 | 1 |
| **Concern: economic** | 10 | 9 | 7 |
| **Concern: compromise** | 2 | 4 | 1 |
| **Anti-Ban: science** | 7 | 7 | 5 |
| **Anti-Ban: not enough** | 17 | 21 | 24 |
| **Anti-Ban: legal** | 10 | 9 | 4 |
| **Anti-Ban: landfill** | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| **Anti-Ban: economic** | 26 | 35 | 17 |
| **Anti-Ban: county** | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| ***Grand Total*** | ***255*** | ***255*** | ***166*** |

**Polarizing messages receive the most engagement**

Comments that were coded as "anti-left" or in opposition to the liberal left received the greatest number of likes and replies (see ***Table 3.2***). There were 46 anti-left

comments in total. Comments were noted as anti-left when the comments made a specific put down to liberals or Democrats such as attributing a decision to “dumb liberals;” likewise, comments were considered anti-right when they made a specific reference to denigrate “right wing conservatives.”

Anti-left comments were often making fun of liberal or progressive ideals for a lack of strength. Comment posts sometimes highlighted the Democrat majority on the City Council (see ***Figure 3.1***).

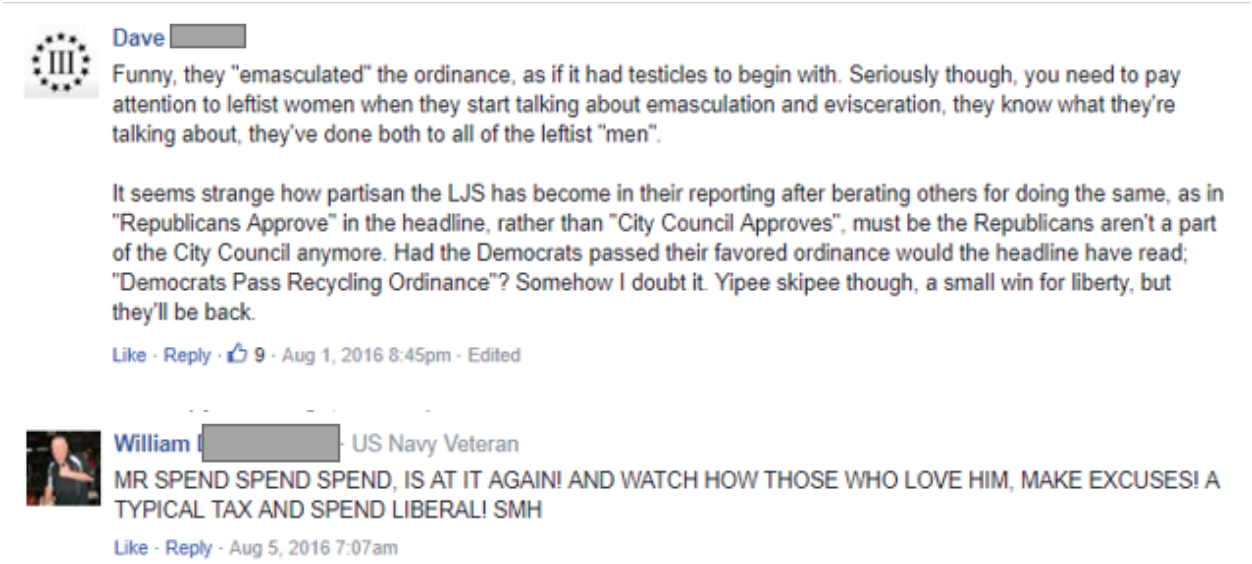



***Figure 3.1. Example from Facebook discussion: Anti-left comments***

Though it seems like Dave’s comment in ***Figure 3.1*** might be offensive, he is reiterating what was said by Councilperson Raybould, who argued previously that an ordinance without enforcement was “emasculating” the recycling ordinance. Here, Facebook commentary builds on what is said in public hearings, indicating that comment writers are paying attention to in-person discussion to an extent. William, on the other hand, seems to focus on the cost; he comments are less related to public debate. At the same

time that anti-left comments received the majority of likes and replies, anti-right comments were also present (***Figure 3.2***).

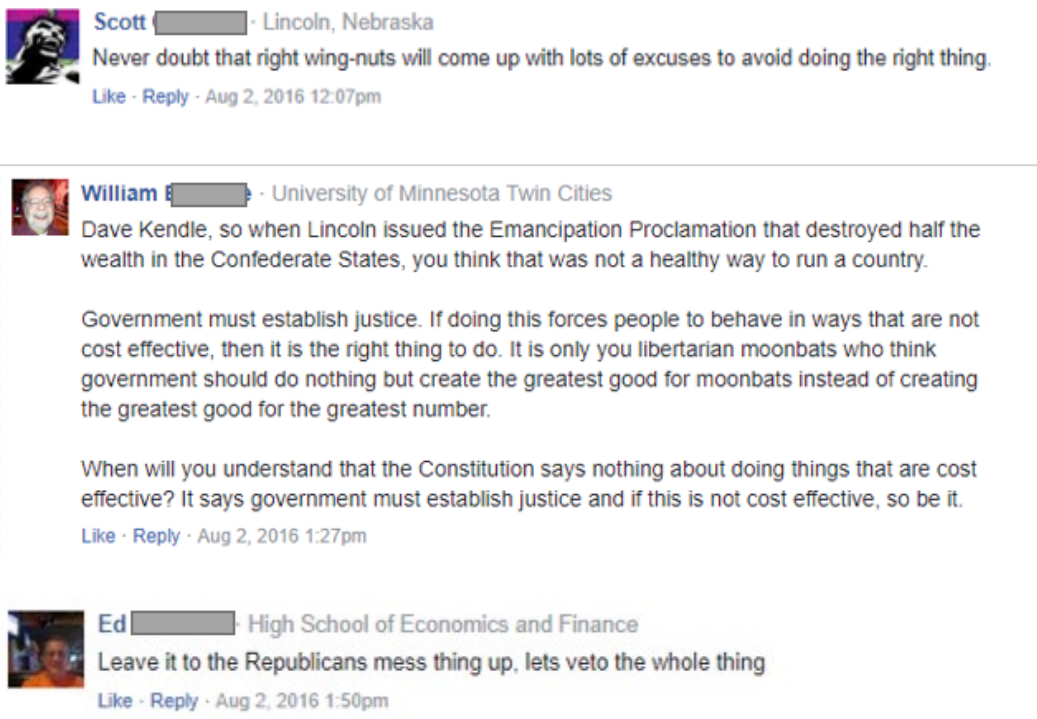



***Figure 3.2. Example from Facebook discussion: Anti-right comments***

***Figure 3.2*** highlights that mudslinging occurred at both conservative and liberal audiences. For example, both Scott and Ed argue that Republicans do not want to "do the right thing" and will "mess thing[s] up." William, a frequent commenter, tends to argue from a constitutional historical perspective repeatedly, offering multiple, long-form comments. Likewise, commentary related to presidential politics frequently surfaced because the recycling ban debate took place over a presidential election year. In some cases, conservatives and liberals were equated with the two candidates: Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton. For example, in ***Figure 3.3***, Andy makes reference to "Hillary who is above the law." Andy is building off of the polarization like the anti-left and anti-right comments and adding reference to national-level politics.

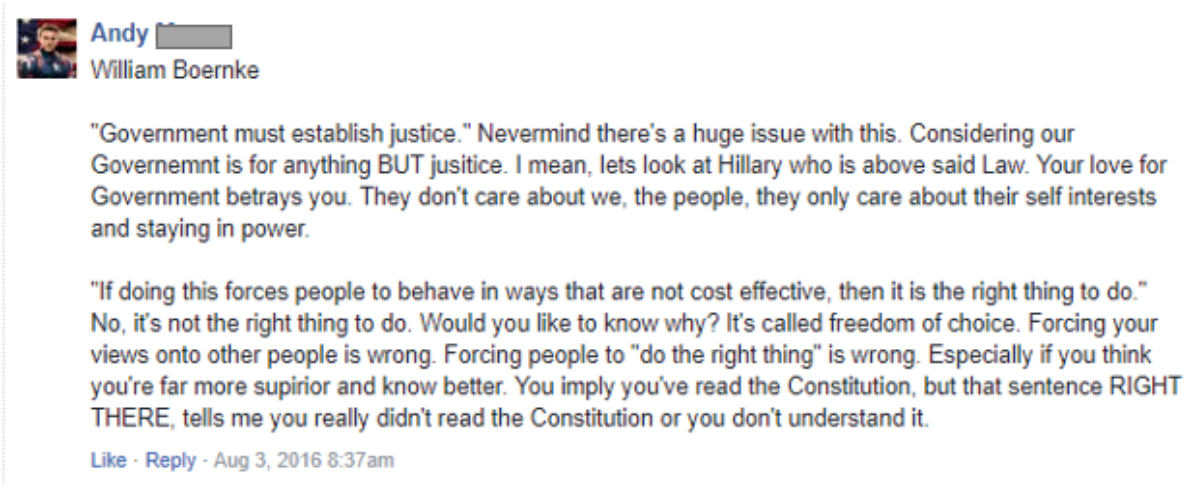



***Figure 3.3. Example from Facebook discussion: National issue***

Additionally, the third most popular comment type was an obstructionist comment (***Table 5***). Obstruction comments tended to run from topical on recycling ("…smear a little [grease] on every piece of cardboard and then we can just throw it in the garbage") to sassy ("Apparently someone has too much time on their hands") to references of other, seemingly unrelated issues ("He [the Mayor] has million dollar sculptures to pay for!"). These obstructionist and anti-left/right comments highlight that polarization is occurring at the local level. On occasion, these comments are referencing national-level arguments by referencing direct issues (e.g., "crooked Hillary") or national-level issues ("Typical Democrat obstructionist!").

**Public comments allowed for online engagement**

Despite the sometimes-intense partisanship of online commentary, it does provide an infrastructure for discussion. While many individuals were posting oppositional comments, participants seemed motivated by offering responses to claims or questions posted by others. For example, the 10 comments that posed open questions generated an equal number of replies (10) and received 12 likes. In fact, the most common comment

type was a response (49) to either a question or comment (see ***Table 3.2***). Thus, questions seem to bring about more engagement and potentially higher quality engagement by generating engagement from others. For example, participants in the discussion were responsive to questions asking for clarification on ideas (***Figure 3.4***).

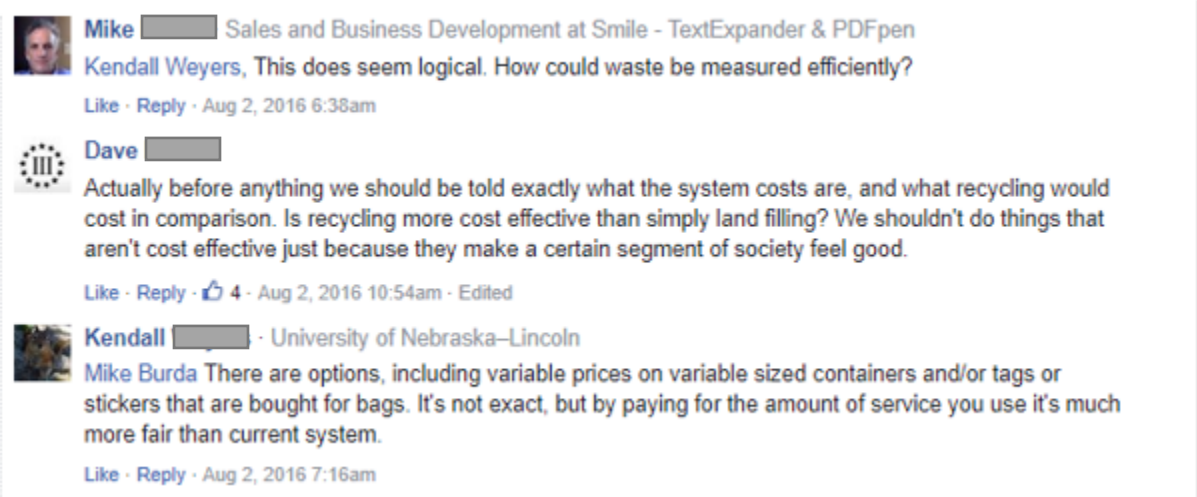



***Figure 3.4. Example from Facebook discussion: Question and response***

***Figure 3.4*** demonstrates that there was effort on the part of many commenters to engage others in discussion and ask questions. Additionally, certain topics seemed to encourage more collaborative thinking. The concern that seemed to bridge divides was that the ban was not enough. Comments about the City not doing enough ranged from covering the cost, "In my hometown, recycling is free, so everyone does it," to providing additional waste services such as "What about mattress recycling?" and "I would like to see two more household hazardous waste sites that are open regularly." Some other commenters were interested in other recycling options such as "pay-as-you-throw" models. Some wondered why the City opted to ban cardboard rather than other non-biodegradable, recyclable items such as plastics or glass. In these topical examples, commenters who provide additional ideas about recycling process are generating

engagement through replies and likes. Often, other commenters engaging in this type of interaction are seeking clarification.

Similarly, commenters sought clarification about the ordinance itself (***Figure 3.5***). For example, there was a need for clarification on corrugated cardboard, and why corrugated cardboard was chosen as the material of choice over plastic, glass, or aluminum.

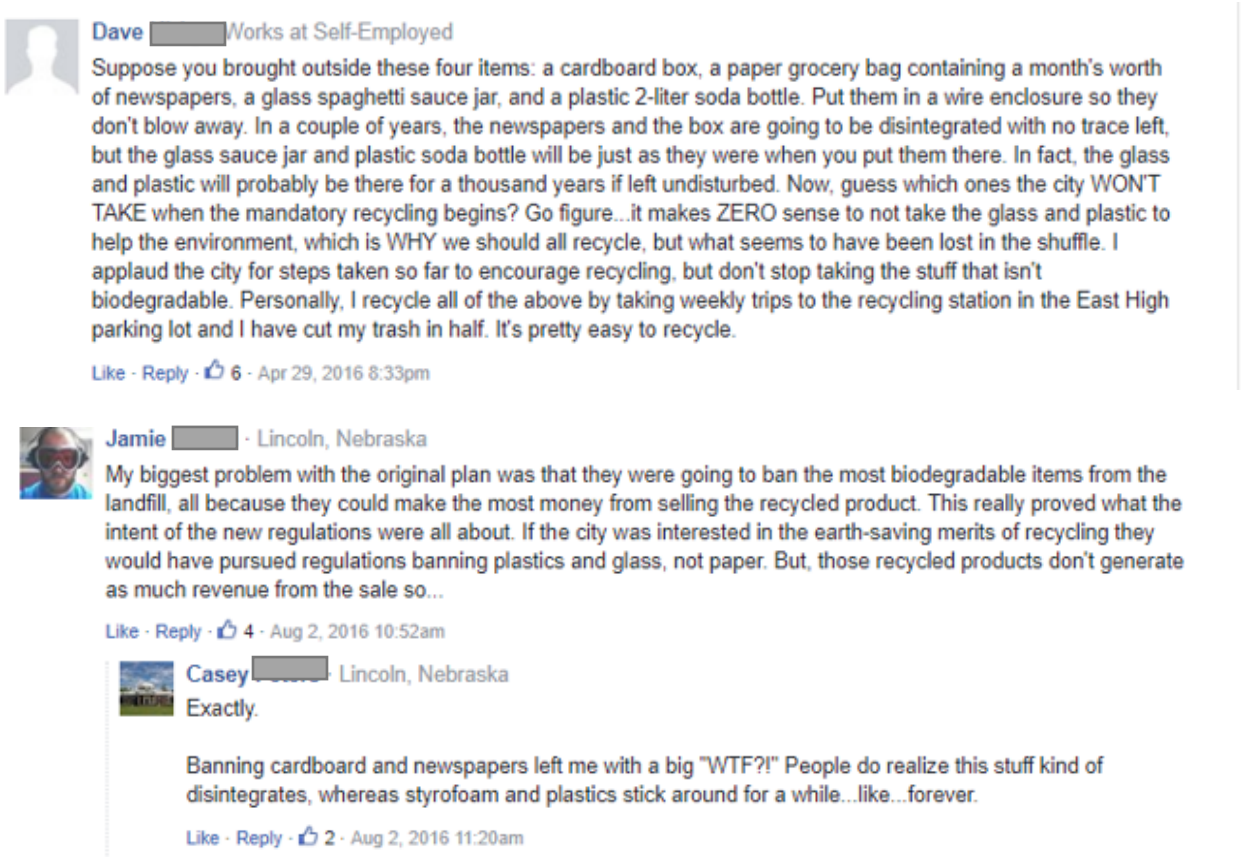



***Figure 3.5. Example from Facebook discussion: Seeking clarification***

Overall, the online commentary indicated some support and strong opposition for the proposed ordinance. Online discussion ranged from dialogic at times, to abrasive and argumentative at others. If commenters asked open questions, the comments invoked a more dialogic response by sharing perspectives. However, there was a significant

reflection of polarization in the number of anti-left/right comments and in the comments for the purpose of obstructing the conversation. . Compared to the in-person public discussions at hearings, comments online were less attuned to dialogue and were instead more polarized. Interviews with stakeholders helped to inform some reasoning for polarization, dialogue, and decision-making.

### 3.4. Stakeholder Interviews

Four individuals were interviewed to provide additional insight into the public discussion about the recycling ordinance. Interview participants were all involved in the recycling ordinance public discussion in some capacity. Interviewees were asked to describe their role in the recycling debate, discuss what they thought went well (or not) in the public discussion around the recycling ordinance, and reflect on municipal public discussions generally (see Appendix D for protocol). Within the recycling ordinance public discussion, interviewees found key influencers, public engagement, and messaging made a difference in the public discussion. Like the online discussion, polarization impacted how individuals perceived the discussion and the ordinance.

#### Polarization impacted public discussion

Interviewees recognized that polarization was influential in public discussions. In particular, polarization affected how people initially formed their opinions before participating in the public discussion. Additionally, polarization influenced how individuals interpreted the statements of others participating in the public discussion. Here, interviewees recognized the role of information and political motivation.

*What I've seen is most people seem to be coming to the issue from a philosophical view point, either right or left, and then they read what they want to read that agrees with every point that's sent to them by whatever groups they belong to.*

*I'm assuming there is an implication that is politically motivated. Maybe people have just gotten meaner. But I think they are doing it in the service of politics. If that is the case and you find an issue like that that has broad-spectrum political support, it's different. So, if you do your early work and work that is based on a broad community vision, then you've automatically eliminated some of that, the nasty back and forth.*

However, they did not feel that sustainability or recycling itself felt more insulated from polarization. Like the public discussion and the online comments, recycling alone seemed to carry bipartisan support.

*I think there is a perceived controversy [about sustainability] … We've looked a little at people's beliefs versus their behavior and attitudes, and I think there are certain trigger words that they will hear that they have a negative reaction too. And by negative, I mean that they oppose it, but in actuality they may behave in a sustainable way. Sustainability, it's so multi-faceted, so people are reacting to the politics of an issue, and I think that's very different than how it is perceived in the community if there is a large community opposition, they are probably more likely to lean that way, or if there is more support they lean that way. Then there is their private lives and they may not think "I actually do conserve water, I do ride my bike," but I think people do want to, even if they don't say "Oh I'm not a hippie."*

> *... I think everybody wants to protect where they live, protect their habitat. I think it is a perceived controversy and I think there are challenges that we are all going to face sooner or later and that's what could unite people.*

Likewise, participants suggested that the issue around the ordinance was not recycling or sustainability, but the concept of mandating a behavior and thus, government overreach. In part, this concern was that the ordinance required a behavior change that was also a personal reflection. Similarly, a City Council member also brought up this concern previously.

> *In one example, there were two people ...[who] opposed the ordinance, they were recyclers, they just didn't like being told that they had to recycle, and for them it was almost like an insult, and they used the drop-off sites.*

Addressing this polarization to work towards a waste management solution was important for interviewees participating in the public discussion. Interviewees noted that successful tools to address the public discussions were using key influencers, providing opportunities for public engagement, and developing crafted messaging to guide the public discussion.

**Key influencers changed the public discussion.**

Influencers and groups served an important role in the public discussion about the recycling ordinance. For example, between the announcement of the goals in the Solid Waste Plan, which included recommendations for mandatory recyclables, and the ordinance proposal, three years elapsed. One interviewee suggested the reason that it was brought up was because recycling became a necessity to appeal to the emerging start-up community.

> *They [the start-up businesses] basically resurrected this whole conversation because they were embarrassed because they had investors who were carrying their recyclables in their bags home. Other people who had exposure to cities that were doing it; it was kind of an embarrassment.*

Additionally, media carries some influence in shaping decisions when individuals are engaging with it, whether by reading, writing opinion articles, or participating in comments sections. One interviewee suggested that media can be a generative place for further engagement as other media sources and thought leaders will cite and build off of newspaper articles. In this way, media can influence the public discussion.

> *Newspapers used to be [influential], but I'm not sure how much they are anymore because [there are] so many fewer subscribers. I know that other media pay attention to what [newspapers] write because [newspapers] can provide the most in-depth coverage and often know things before they do. …. Coby Mach [local radio host and LIBA executive director] will get ideas from [newspaper articles] for his show. Some of the politicians still think [newspapers] are important because they still use them to get their point across.*

Interviewees suggested that groups, such as political groups, as well as key individuals in the community can more easily share points of view by representing larger groups of individuals. For example, one participant discussed the influence of the Local Independent Business Association (LIBA), which has been affiliated with conservative political action locally.

> *And they made their wishes known in part by going to public hearings and in part because they let groups like LIBA express their point of view for them. I think both sides were represented in both the public and private discussions.*

In this way, resident voices are amplified by the groups representing them, and they feel bolstered by a group statement. These groups build opinions both ways: the group helps to shape individual decisions, and individuals help shape the opinion of the group. This process creates a unified message on behalf of the organization. In Lincoln, when LIBA members speak, they are all saying the same thing. Further, interviewees suggested that these groups can assist in getting information and opinions in front of the City Council because they understand the process.

> *So, if you are with a group in which your leaders will build that relationships then you have an inside way to talk to people. Otherwise, you need to be organized, like on this issue, so you know when the public hearings are, you know how to email your council people to get a point across, so you can show at the public hearings that there is support of whichever direction where you are coming from.*

Additionally, when these groups carry enough influence, whether through the number of individuals they are representing or the power to persuade built over time, these organizations can influence policy direction. They do so by not only speaking at hearings and writing letters to the editor, but also by being identified as a stakeholder and gaining representation at the table. For example, though LIBA was an advocate against the ordinance as it was originally written and spoke about it at public hearings, the LIBA executive director was on the Solid Waste Task Force that developed the 2013 Solid Waste Plan. .

> *The folks that sit on the council are human beings and they are swayed, not always completely, but they do pay attention to what they hear. And if it agrees with their own internal bias then it goes to help them vote the way they think if they are passionate one way or another. … The public conversation about that particular item changed the way the council, changed the actual decision they are going to make. LIBA has an advertising and marketing campaign. And Americans for Prosperity also has a spending account and they are anti-government, so they encourage people to write letters to the council.*

Groups of key influencers are not always represented by one individual, but they can easy operationalize into letter writing campaigns to influence City Council representatives and policy.

However, while these influencers affect policy, online comments are only recognized to an extent. Online comments, while important, are not as influential as a phone call, letter, or speaking at a hearing. Of those who are using social media to promote recycling, they are using it more to broadcast information rather than address concerns or comments.

> *The types of comments that we would monitor online, we keep track of articles about recycling. …We were very interested in recycling barriers and benefits. Any indication of that to inform what benefits were could share with people and what barriers we were trying to help them get over.*

> *The recycling office has a Facebook page, but there is not the bandwidth to reply to comments there, or at least as consistently as they would like. …We hear them; we just can't get back to everybody.*

Influencers can impact local policy and direct the discussion around issues of interest. In the recycling ordinance discussion, influencers brought mandatory recycling to the table, and influenced how it was perceived within the community. In addition, having influencers shaped the ordinance from the beginning with participation on the Task Force, and then throughout the process by including influencers engage in the public discussion.

**Public engagement builds buy-in.**

The recycling ordinance began with the stakeholder discussions, development of the Solid Waste Plan, but public engagement played an intentional, key role throughout the process, even after the corrugated cardboard ban went into place.

> *The Solid Waste Group [worked to] set the broader community goal of what our solid waste management goals are. So that's an earlier round of vetting that sets the goal for the community. So you've got that tool as we try to do broad community outreach on the goals before you get into the particulars of what you are proposing.*

The public engagement process was also used in the educational campaign via a community-based social marketing model, which sought to understand the benefits and barriers individuals saw with the recycling policy. Interviewees described learning that the barriers to recycling was not the practice of recycling in itself but the mandate.

> *… everyone understood why it [recycling] was important. They just didn't want to be told to recycle or forced to pay more money than they valued it at. So the conservation ethic is really built in, it is those blockers and barriers that we've talked about that people hesitate and walk away if you don't reach them.*

This public engagement process is common to Lincoln and the current mayoral office. The Mayor's office regularly engages the public by asking for feedback on issues, more so than is required by the policy making process (e.g., public hearings and readings).

> *Early on, [the city] made the big change to outcome-based budgeting with the Taking Charge process. [The City does]… town halls, online [surveys], focus groups, paper surveys, all that stuff. And all that was early on re-imagination of how early on government does its work. … So instead of a city of 15 departments, we are a city reflecting 8 visions the community wants to achieve: livable neighborhoods, healthy & productive people, etc.*

Public engagement helps to shape policy before it is officially proposed. This engagement helps with messaging to the City Council and public by demonstrating public support and guidance. As such, when an ordinance is proposed, it is proposed with some buy-in from the beginning.

> *…You want to pull together your various stakeholder groups and introduce your idea. It's not a policy, it's an idea. And in Lincoln, we want to contact industry, neighborhood groups, environmental people and whatever and we want to vet this idea. …We are going to sacrifice efficiency for efficacy.*

As the interviewee suggests, the City of Lincoln will spend more time engaging the public and garnering public opinion in the lead up to introducing an ordinance or recommendation in order to have the buy-in from the start. The interviewee suggests that while this may not be a quick process, it increases the likelihood of introducing an idea based on the perspective of many different stakeholders.

At the same time, it is important for public engagement to be done in a way that welcomes divergent opinions or the process can seem biased. A biased process can undermine how much trust council members and the public will have in a proposed ordinance or process. One interviewee suggested that while the City is typically mindful to bring together disparate opinions, the Solid Waste Task Force represented fewer different opinions.

> *The Solid Waste Plan, they did not use the old-fashioned way of which you brought a group together of people with divergent views and you let them sit around and talk about thing until they get agreement. It was very focused on specific outcomes from the beginning. The meetings were very timed. It was clear the administration and contractor who was hired to do that process intended to come out with the certain verdict and the people who were not especially environmentally prone did not feel like they had a voice.*

Likewise, multiple interviewees stressed the need for decision making and recommendations through an engagement process that used multiple viewpoints. Hearing different ideas can lead to better solutions and demonstrate more trust in the idea.

> *One of the best ways to do it was you got a group of people together with opposing viewpoints and you had multiple meetings with them to propose a*

*solution by coming up with common ground, a proposal that you could agree on. I don't know if you could do that in today's climate where people are so set in their ways and people refuse to moderate or find common ground*.

Overall, public engagement was able to help build buy-in to the ordinance. In addition, many saw recycling as an issue that crossed typical political boundaries. For example, one interviewee stated, "The opposition, I don't feel like, was particularly coordinated because it doesn't have a traditional base." In this way, messaging played a key role in developing support for the ordinance.

**Messaging drives the issue.**

Messaging was important to all individuals who participated in the recycling ordinance whether conveying a policy opinion or an educational component. Participants discussed the need for the ordinance to appeal to people on a variety of levels: "So there are certain issues with an educational component and some issues where you have to translate the broader policy issue in a way that is more impactful for [the public]." Interviewees suggested for some, they were already recycling.

*If you are a city that embraces recycling, it says something about your city. There is a certain branding element about it too. People recycle for a number of different reasons when you do your research. They will think [recycling] through at various different levels of complexity, but people also just want to recycle because then they are recyclers. People want to bike because they are bikers. They want that identity because that identity has a meaning to them over and above the actual effects. So that functions on multiple levels. Some people want their landfill to last a long time, but they don't wake up thinking about that.*

Interviewees suggested that messaging helps public audiences understand how an issue will affect them personally in order to better understand the issue. Appealing to the public was important, and interviewees made the point that the public is not going to dissect a policy issue; they rely on the city council and city officials to do so. Interviewees made the point that though the city also bans household hazardous waste and leaves and grass from the landfill, cardboard and recyclables send a different message.

> *We have leaves and grass, and everyone loves to say that, but it does feel different because it is part of our household waste. And it is this big sea change in thinking about what we consume, because it's your Amazon boxes, and thinking about what goes to the landfill and what is remade. And as you know, recycling isn't the only answer when it comes to sustainability. It's consumption too.*

Messaging helps individuals understand an ordinance in both knowledge and perspective. For example, messaging can clarify what the ordinance is instructing, but it can also explain why the ordinance is important and what the role of different stakeholders will be. Because the household recycling seems more personal than other landfill requirements (e.g., leaves and grass, car batteries), those who were thinking about how to message the ordinance during the discussion and in the lead up to implementation had to consider messaging that would motivate individuals who change their behavior.

At the same time, interviewees felt that some of the strongest messaging relied on facts and rational argument. Participants in the public discussion used facts and arguments to answer questions and provide clarification on everything from estimated tonnage of recyclable cardboard in the landfill to the vetting of recycling methods and requirements.

> *One of the things also thinking about [the ordinance was] that the City was ready for this change because they had done their research learning about our city and how it is structured and our systems and our waste and recycling market, and also, he follows national and international news. He had done his research.*

Messaging about the ordinance helped in its success. When the ordinance went into effect on April 1, 2018, there were fewer than expected calls to the City, the health department, or to haulers. Currently, the City is focusing on extending recycling coverage to multi-family housing. Of those in multi-family housing that have landlord-provided recycling service, implementation has been effective. From the stakeholder perspective, utilizing key influencers, engaging the public and stakeholders, and clear, consumer-based messaging enhanced the effectiveness of the ordinance and led to successful implementation in April 2018.

**3.5 Summary and discussion of findings**

Overall, public commentary at City Council hearings was restrained by the interaction design, particularly the rules of order. While many testimonials and statements were emotional, most followed decorum as described and provided thoughtful questions and responses. Online participation had less decorum, and online commenters had less expectation for reciprocal dialogue. National-level dialogue was not replicated locally through in-person interactions, and only somewhat online; this lack of replication may be because the topic of sustainability and recycling was less polarizing than other issues, as interviewees suggested. Additionally, the formality of the environment at public hearings increased opportunities for dialogue and moves towards agreement on an ordinance. Online discussion was less dialogic; a lack of face-to-face discussion, informal

space, and lack of facilitation created an environment for debate and blanket opposition. For example, on interviewee stated, “I avoid the comments section… mostly people are ranting on one side or the other.” Dialogic engagement was encouraged through both open question and response as well as positive affirmation or active listening. Finally, participants in the discussion, both on and offline tended to reference their identity in terms of occupation or experience, as a way of bringing validity to their opinion. Next, I summarize how the case study findings inform the research questions.

**National discourse and municipal public discussions**

The first research question asked: *How do individuals use national discourse (e.g., sources, arguments, quotes, metaphors) in comments and opinions about municipal issues using information as an identity source, if at all?* In this case study, I found that discourse did not mimic national level polarization in the City council discussions. While there were moments referencing polarization, particularly within the online discussion, the public discussion was focused on engagement from multiple perspectives.

Some difference was heightened by strategic messaging from the Lincoln Independent Business Association (LIBA) and its more conservative talk radio show. This messaging streamlined concerns around the misdemeanor penalty and lack of clarity in the legislation for landlords and multi-family dwellings, raising strategic points of concern rather than polarizing the issues. Here, the issue was framed less as “us versus them,” but instead the issue brought up a legitimate concern for landlords that needed a response from the City. Including a misdemeanor penalty in the ordinance while verbally saying that it would not be enforced, was not a reasonable response to landlords who

could be at fault if their tenants did not recycle. This issue raised a point of concern, but still allowed for productive discussion, particularly at in-person discussions.

In the public hearings, there were occasional references to divisive politics, but mostly as a way of differentiating local politics from the national level with statements such as "both sides of the aisle" and "regardless of how people voted in November." Online discussion, on the other hand, was more severe in its reference to national-level polarization with comments degrading those who lean conservative or liberal. No references to polarized news sources (e.g., Fox News, MSNBC) or websites were noted, though there were references to LIBA's on-point messaging about the ordinance penalty and one reference in the online commentary to a conservative video via YouTube link.

This difference between online and in-person discussions may be guided by interaction design, at least in part. The formality, environment, and rules of order (e.g., time limit) may impact the choices of those participating in the public discussion. In addition, City Council meetings require speakers to identify him or herself along with their address on a recorded meeting. Online discussions, on the other hand, are more accessible, free of rules, and anonymous. Here, interaction design helps to shape the expectations of each interaction. Interviewees suggested both the format and the topic may have constrained how individuals engaged on this topic. One interviewee stated:

> *When you have the discussion at a public hearing level, people are almost required… to be polite. And to not, if you start doing name-calling, the council chair will cut you off and tell you "No, you can't do that kind of thing." So at least you have a dignified conversation about a controversial subject when you do*

*it in a public arena like that as opposed as to what can happen online where it degrades to name-calling and things like that.*

Because polarization is less apparent in the in-person environment, in-person discussions are often favored by the scholarly literature on dialogue (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). While there were some moments of dialogue online, the most favorable moments occurred in-person at events where procedures and rules of order managed response and engagement. Further, in-person engagement fostered positive interaction through question and response. However, I would not conclude that national discourse had no impact on municipal public discussions; rather, I suggest that the impact is less overt. For example, some public discussion participants referenced political party or ideology (conservative, liberal) outright ("spend-spend liberal"), while others referenced the ideals: reducing government oversight, decreasing costs, increasing sustainability. In addition, often individuals would work to appeal to the other's ideals. For example, a person who was pushing for the recycling ordinance for the purpose of environmentalism, would appeal to the economic benefit of recycling. This less overt influence of polarization seemed to influence how others viewed each other, rather than dictating statements in municipal public discussions.

**Dialogue in municipal public discussions**

The second research question asked: *How do dialogic moments function as transition points in municipal discussions about local controversies, in face-to-face and digitally-mediated contexts?* In the case study, dialogue is heighted by question and response interactions in addition to recognition. Participants in public discussions desire to be heard and understood, and the affirmation and questions assist in encouraging

individuals towards perspective taking, and as such, dialogue. Further, while it often seems that local public policy discussions occur within a vacuum of hearings and behind-the-scenes preparation, utilizing public engagement in the early stages of the policy process can help individuals feel heard and understood. This public engagement paired with strong messaging assists in setting a foundation for dialogic engagement. Finally, clarification of motivation assists with perspective-taking: asserting one's identity and motivation helps clarify their own perspective. As such dialogic moments occur within the framework of public discussions when there is open engagement through question and response, when participants feel heard and recognized, when identity is clear, and when messaging sets a strong foundation.

*Open questions and response led dialogic engagement*

Questions and responses created positive transition points in arguments by allowing for better understanding among those participating in discussions of the recycling ordinance, both online and in-person. In order to generate perspective taking or dialogic response, the questions must be genuine, or not sarcastic or leading. One online commenter, frequently asserting sarcastic commentary, asked a genuine question, "Is recycling more cost effective that land-filling?" This question generated further discussion about cost effectiveness of programs, and which recyclables are most cost efficient to recycle. Likewise, happened in public hearings when members of the city council or members of the public would ask questions and respond to others. Further, when questions were taken seriously and given legitimate response, individuals would build off of one another's perspective. For example, in the public hearing, a concerned

resident mentioned previous comments, “I am pro everything they said [earlier], but not of the negatives that I see have been brought up.”

Active listening and engaging in others’ perspectives are key to dialogue (e.g., Schoem et al., 2001; Zuniga et al., 2014). This listening was more likely to occur in person than online. One may assume this happened less online because commenters are not required to and do not often review all comments before adding his or her own commentary, whereas in person, respondents are present in the audience prior to commenting.

*Recognition of disparate points of view increased opportunities for dialogic engagement*

When questions and points of information were shared in the public hearing, the proposers and city council members replied with affirmative comments such as thanking individuals for their comments, replying or asking others to address questions, and taking notes of information to update within the ordinance. This positive reinforcement was noted in the City Council Meeting, where City Council members raised specific comments from the public from the previous hearing or those they received via email or call for references in questions or comments. Though it cannot be claimed that this led to better commentary, the commentary on this issue was thorough and responsive and appeared to elicit respect among the public present at the hearings.

In this way, engaging multiple perspectives in both the policy development and roll-out were effective to understanding individual barriers and benefits to the proposed ordinance. For example, landlords, haulers, and those who live in multi-family units, all may have different motivations for engaging in the discussion. For example, one interviewee discussed this intentional process:

> *[The City] engaged landlords early on. …We have over 40 independent haulers in Lincoln. Early on when doing the analysis, you have to look at the most efficient system. A single point of collection like other cities, won't work in Lincoln. So people were concerned about the number of trucks driving up and down the street. And [the City] had to recognize that.*

> *After you do your research, you want to pull together your various stakeholder groups and introduce your idea. It's not a policy, it's an idea. And in Lincoln, [the City] wants to contact industry, neighborhood groups, [and] environmental people to vet this idea.*

When the ordinance was introduced, significant engagement was done ahead of time to address any causes for concern.

> *…We had a lot of meetings where we reserved 15 minutes for people to complain, and then we could get to the questions and solutions. They just need some time to hear them. …That is part of our goal, is just hearing people, acknowledging people and what their challenges are. I guess, what their perceived barriers are.*

One interviewee suggested that this also helped individuals on the city council feel able to vote in favor of an ordinance: "You need that to keep the council members safe to feel like they could vote for that [ordinance], and so they don't have any serious problems after it [the ordinance] started."

Public engagement throughout the process helped the public feel heard and understood. Likewise, at public discussions, both online and offline, recognition of individuals was helpful to promote perspective-sharing. As with daily interactions, the

ability to perceive that someone is hearing and understanding individuals help to build report and understand one another's perspectives.

*Identity assertion was key to validation*

Information-based identity assertion was not prevalent in the public hearings. Some information-based identity sharing arose online with more coded commentary through phrases such as "crooked Hillary." However, when positing arguments for or against recycling, members of the public often identified who they were or why they had a voice in the issue. For example, residents would say "I'm a landlord" or "I'm a waste hauler" or "I'm a business owner" to describe their point of view. This framing of identity provided insight into their expertise and provided validity to their point of view. Often, this assertion of identity would lead to questions from City Council members or others as to how they understood portions of the ordinance and how they would comply. Members of the community used their identity as a way to assert their experience with recycling or sustainability, their authority on a subject, or their passion for the subject. In multiple hearings, students (both high school and college) asserted their desire for environmental stewardship to preserve the Earth for "future generations." Others identified as business owners to demonstrate that their authority from a business perspective and as a resident of the City. This identity was also used to validate opinions by the City councilmembers. For example, when those identified as representing a group (e.g., Recycling Lincoln or the Chamber of Commerce), the City Council knew to ask them questions as representing the group in an official capacity. Others used their identities to validate their experience as in the case of property owners whose tenants participated in recycling or waste haulers who educated their customers on proper waste disposal.

Identity assertion seemed key to note group membership or validate experience, as supported by Social Identity Theory (e.g, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Assertion of political identity came up more often online as individuals asserted their political identity by putting down the opposing political ideology. Both on and offline, individuals asserted their identity as a way of expressing experience, expertise, and validation rather than information-based identity sharing.

*Clear messaging sets a foundation for positive interactions*

In the stakeholder interviews, it became clear that messaging was important throughout all states of the recycling ordinance. This messaging can include a shared lexicon, understanding of concepts and policy options, and clarity in the messaging. Key for public engagement was utilizing language everyone would understand.

> *…Understanding the knowledge of your audience. For example,…there were a lot of people who didn't know what mixed recycling was … and we were already indoctrinated with the language of the recycling sector.*

> *[The City had to] educate about what is corrugated cardboard a lot by showing the view of it and pointing to the ripples.*

In addition, policy makers recognized that the public does not spend time dissecting policy issues, so those wishing to enact the ordinance would need to directly address how members of the public would be affected by the ordinance.

> *We are all participating in the government, whether [people] are making bread, being plumbers, doing important research; and some of us are in these proxy roles. So communication is important. People don't have all the time in the world*

*to research all the policy implications of this. So, in the end, you have certain policy implications on top that may look like sloganeering.*

*...you have to translate the broader policy issue in a way that is more impactful for [the public]. So extending the life of the landfill was one of the talking points, but there was also the notion of recycling in general.*

By using clear terminology and concise consumer-based messaging, everyone engaged in the public discussion around the ordinance can work and discuss from a shared foundation of knowledge. This foundational knowledge allows for more shared perspectives because it works out of a more settled and shared—however momentarily—bedrock of terminology and concepts.

RQ2 asks if dialogic moments occur in public discussions, and if they do, do they function as transition points in the discussion. Findings from this case study indicate that dialogue can exist within public discussions in their current form, as they did throughout the recycling ordinance debate. These moments of dialogue enhanced how individuals shared their perspectives and understood each other's perspectives. Dialogic moments are not necessarily moving the discussion towards consensus; rather, these moments function in a way that builds understanding, which is precisely the aim of dialogue.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the two-year long public discussion around municipal engagement in recycling through an ordinance that prescribed education and a ban on certain recyclable materials in the landfill. Through public comment and action (e.g., the petition to put the issue on the ballot), an engaged citizenship was able to force the

council and Mayor's office to reach a compromise to increase city-wide recycling rates in Lincoln. Key to this effort helpful dialogue within the community and led by city council leadership and rules of order. Overall, I found that dialogue was most favorable in-person, with genuine question and response participation, paired with identity assertion, and affirmation of active listening and public engagement. These qualities of public argument are in line with the literature on dialogue as a way of progressing argument. Also consistent with the literature is that dialogue occurs more often in-person than online.

In the next chapter, I will present the results of the focus group wherein participants reviewed excerpts from the recycling ordinance discussion and suggested guidelines for future discussions about municipal controversies, both on- and offline. Focus group participants provided insight on best practices of public discussions for municipal controversies, with an emphasis on how to create dialogue within those public discussions.

# Chapter 4 Focus Group Results

In the current chapter, I provide the results of the focus groups and a discussion of those results as they pertain to research question three. These findings address reactions to public discussion and recommendations for future discussions. As described in Chapter 2, focus group participants reviewed selected excepts from the municipal debate on the proposed recycling ordinance, featuring online and in-person public discussion (see also, Appendix C). The focus groups sought to answer *RQ3: How can dialogic moments be created to help people reflect on local public discussions to improve social learning?* Participants were asked for feedback about the discussion as it occurred, and then they were asked to consider:

- What went well in the public discussion?
- What did not work well in the public discussion?
- What would improve public discussion in the future?

To answer my third research question, "How can dialogic moments be created to help people reflect on local public discussions and improve social learning?," I asked participants to describe their reactions to online and in-person discussion examples from the case study of public discussion around the recycling ordinance including their initial reactions, what would improve the public discussion, how they have participated in public discussions, and general thoughts about public discussions. As I analyzed the data, I organized the results into themes that answer this research question and match participant opinions (as highlighted in ***Table 6***).

I find that participants had pre-existing values for public discussions, participants recognized the impact that polarization has on public discussions already, and

participants had specific ideas to improve public discussions that are closely related to dialogue. This chapter discusses these findings further and concludes with a discussion of the results and implications of the findings from research question three. The following sections reflect how participants felt about public discussions around local policy controversies.

***Table 4.1. Results: how participants understood public discussions***

| Theme | Explanation | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Participants had pre-existing values for public discussions.** | | |
| **Accessibility to public discussions is valuable.** | Participants feel that the ability to participate in public discussions is a value of democracy, so expanding ways to to participate is important. | I definitely like the alternative forums, I think it's important to have interpersonal discussions. Even in the online forums are important because it brings out a lot of issues so there are different ways that people can communicate. |
| **Affiliation is important when expressing opinion.** | Affiliation is important for those listening to others in public discussions because it provided insight into motivation. | You have to identify what your stake is in the discussion. Often, you do this by telling who you are and what you do. |
| **Logical and rational argument is necessary for public discussions.** | Participants initially thought that rational argument would provide better public discussions. | Facts, when there is data attached or openness. So when one side starts to open and say 'Oh yeah, I could see it from that.' That starts a real dialogue, discussion. |
| **Individuals should prepare their thoughts, even minimally, before engaging in public discussion.** | Participants noted that individuals who prepared for public discussions were more articulate and on point. Individuals seemed more likely to prepare for formal thoughts as opposed to online forums. | So, the first thing I think of is how much research the folks who went up to testify either did their background research or made sure that they at least put something down on paper with the exception of maybe the last guy. But |

| Theme | Explanation | Example |
|---|---|---|
| | | clearly had a whole thought process before going up there and the points that he wanted to make. |
| **Validation of online commentary was not supported by participants.** | While listening and providing opportunities for public discussion seemed valuable, there were concerns about utilizing online comments for public decision making without any formality. | I've been sitting in board of trustees meetings, and the board of trustees are taking snippets of what someone said on Facebook and bringing it into public record and using it as a defense of their reasoning. |
| **In-person public discussions are preferred to online public discussions.** | In-person discussions, formal or informal, were preferred so participants can read verbal and nonverbal cues and so inflammatory language is reduced. | Well, and you can understand their inflection and their tone, all of that above that I don't get in a written medium. |
| **Many individuals are afraid to participate in public discussions.** | Individuals were nervous to participate in public discussion online or in-person for fear of the consequences. Participants were often hesitant to participate in online discussions at all. | We have to protect ourselves too. We all have our trigger issues. Things that are so near and dear to our hears that you just can't step on. I say out loud that I need to surround myself with people who think differently, but I can't do it 24/7. |
| **Interaction design guided how individuals participated in public discussions.** | Individuals recognized that the formality of in-person public hearings or informality and anonymity of online engagement impacted how individuals communicated their opinions. | It's easy to say whatever you want in this setting. You can make any sort of statement and you are kind of hiding behind the comments thread. …Which makes me wonder if people would say some of the same things face to face. |
| **Participants recognized the impact of polarization.** | | |
| **The need to listen and hear both sides was important to participants.** | Participants often referred to the need to listen to both sides or hear opinions from across the table. | I also think that it's just sometimes hard to engage across the table. It can be so hard and so exhausting that I think it's just, I |

| Theme | Explanation | Example |
|---|---|---|
| | | bounce back and forth between yes, we should always engage with others that have different thoughts and who challenge us to grow and experiment with different ideas. But on the other hand, that can be exhausting. |
| **A lack of valid or reliable sources made it difficult to understand concepts and points of view.** | Participants recognize that it is often difficult to know which news and media sources are providing accurate information without opinion. | I don't even know where to go to find real facts anymore. That used to be my go to, that we could at least agree on facts, and apparently we can't even agree on that anymore. |
| **Those who participate in public discussions often can represent more extreme or solidified views.** | Participants felt that centrist or those who did not feel passionately would be less likely to engage in public discussion, either online or in person. | And I do think there is something about online discussion, well I know the research shows, that online discussion can enable people to express more extreme or fringe more than they would in person or on the phone or in other media. |
| **Participants had specific ideas to improve public discussions that are closely related to dialogue.** | | |
| **Interaction design facilitated the public discussion process by placing natural constraints on personal expression.** | Participants recognized that there was a fundamental difference in context and environment between a city council hearing and a newspaper comment section. | It seems to me that there are a lot of inherent differences in a city council meeting. For one thing, it's not an audience of people all having a discussion with each other. It's a group of elected representatives speaking with a person, a member of the community who has researched and is testifying about something. |
| **Asking genuine questions encouraged dialogue.** | When the example discussions engaged in questions and responses, participants felt that the | The face to face, the personal discussion or statements lend themselves |

| Theme | Explanation | Example |
|---|---|---|
| | public discussion was more productive. | to people being able to ask questions to clarify. |
| **It was important to connect arguments or engage with others participating in public discussion.** | By connecting with other discussion participants or other arguments, participants felt that the public discussion was productive and engaging. | Well, and even with the discussion, they could refer back to each other. You see less of that online. The only way they refer back to each other is adversarial. |
| **Emotional arguments can aid in discussion, but emotion-caused inflammatory language can be problematic.** | The use of emotion can indicate passion and assist in communication in public discussions. However, relying on emotion alone can lead to inflammatory language, particularly in online environments. | And you still heard the emotion in both Mike and Fred. You could hear emotion in their voice. But it was still civil. So we talked earlier about the emotion of what gets people going. |
| **Consider interventions to improve public discussions.** | Suggested interventions to prevent inflammatory language included moderators, nudges, restrictions, framing, and length limitations as well as technological improvements. | It could be helpful to flag as "this is rude" and then if people want to see that and they can click on it. Or you can click "this is insightful" for the insightful comments. Like up voting. |
| **Active listening is important to understand other perspectives.** | Participants suggested that listening, providing feedback, and understanding the perspectives of others is key to effective public discussions. Hearing new ideas is important. | Part of it is, you have to go into those situations where you know things will be discussed that you don't agree with. And you have to think, is it worth me saying something, or is it better for me to just listen and reflect on why I don't believe that. |

### 4.1 Participants had pre-existing values for public discussions

When asking participants about their reactions to the public discussion examples, many participants discussed ways in which the public discussion exemplars were engaging well or not well. As the discussion continued, and participants compared the

online and in-person public discussions, it was clear that participants held pre-existing values for public discussions. These key values for public discussions included accessibility, affiliation assertion, logical argument, preparation, validation, and in-person participation. They recognized that the format and environment of an interaction impacted how individuals shared their opinions. At the same time, participants were often hesitant to participate in public discussions themselves about such municipal policy controversies.

**Accessibility to public discussions is valuable.**

Accessibility was a key issue for participants. Often, they felt that participating in-person at a city council hearing, for example, was restrictive to people who were uncomfortable with participating, those who did not have the time, or those who had trouble with transportation. For example, one person stated, "it's great to go to the City Council, but how many people can actually go?" (S3). Likewise, participants felt that alternative forums could increase the diversity of public input on issues.

> *I think it is important to make [the] process accessible to people if you can't get a broad range of demographic perspectives then your process is not accessible and if it's not accessible, then it's not a demographic process. (*A3*)*

Though participants liked the accessibility of online interactions, they often felt that the medium was not the most useful option.

> *What I love about the possibility of an online interaction, is that it's easy and accessible, and you don't have to go down to city council and do that. And you can still maybe get your point across, and, on the other hand, that burns out a whole bunch of people who aren't keeping themselves in check either. So, I don't*

> *know how to balance … I kind of always believe that the more people that have input the better, but if that's the input that they are giving, maybe it's not better.* (T2)

Online discussions provide options for individuals that are busy or unable to attend in person, but accessibility is not the only barrier to participation. Often, individuals can be intimidated by the process itself. For example, one participant said:

> *You mentioned the 'systems,' and that's been top of my list in my work. How do we teach that systems literacy?... I think that is the challenge to civic education. Just teaching [that] basic systems literacy, how to navigate something like that.* (A3)

Other participants worried about the power dynamic imposed by the setting of a hearing and not knowing how well a statement will be received or considered. Further, without being a direct stakeholder, individuals may not realize how much stake they have in an issue.

> *One thing that I feel like often is not considered within systems like this is the fact that just people living within a space who are affected by these things have like 40 things to consider, and it's a little bit difficult to address all those; whereas the people in the industry have one very specific concern because it is their livelihood. So, it's a little harder to engage the people who are affected more than the people who are benefiting*. (Ab3)

Overall, participants echoed their desire for freedom of speech as a key value of public discussions; they felt that accessibility was a part of this free speech. For instance, one participant stated, "I'm an advocate of free speech, and especially on a public forum

like the LJS, I don't think if you use a name like 'Right Wing Nut' [that] you should be kicked off" (B4). Individuals should have the opportunity to participate in public discussions. Overall, accessibility was a central value of public discussions in democracy for participants.

**Affiliation is important when expressing opinion.**

Stakeholder status and affiliation were recognized as important factors in helping participants react to opinions within public discussion. Affiliation was particularly important in in-person public discussion opportunities. Participants felt that affiliation informed the motivations and perspective of the individual speaking, whether as a hauler, resident, landlord, or business owner.

> *I was struck by how all three speakers came from a point of expertise, right, 'I'm in solid management,' 'I'm a private business owner,' or 'I represent the Realtor's association and I own an apartment building.' So they each, beyond affiliation, they talk about how this policy will affect them hoping to inform this power structure*. (Ab3)

> *The affiliation gave them this idea of it wasn't just their opinion, it was the particular group and in the online comments we had the similar reaction like that's where he works, who he is affiliated with. So maybe subconsciously gives you, not a stronger opinion, but it changes the perspective*. (M3)

Online, it was more difficult for participants to understand individual perspectives. Participants were unsure if they could trust online profiles, and at times, profiles seemed a bit misleading.

> *I noticed whereas with the first slide there was some civility and logic, it has their affiliation listed. Dave, who maybe dabbles a little bit in society, doesn't have that. And on the next page, there is no affiliation. It just says that Scott lives in Lincoln and we don't know about Dave. So there's a little more accountability if you are with UNL or a Sales and Business accountability at Smile*. (Ab3)

The anonymity of online discussions may also lead to less civil discussions and may provide protections to individuals who wanted to participate anonymously.

> *When it's not anonymous, it's much more civil when you are looking at someone in the eyes. You are trying to put forth your perspective, but there is a little more engagement and trying to be polite, if you will. And not be, and it's not anonymous, so you don't feel like you have this safety net to be able to be rude and obnoxious*. (J3) *And how do you make a productive conversation out of an online forum where people can hide behind , you don't even have to put a picture of yourself or your real name because anonymity is a strong drug and it's really something that I don't have to be myself, then I can make up comment out of turn and go to the work the next day and people aren't like "I can't believe what you said on that forum last night" versus in public where people know who you are or at least recognize your face*. (R4)

On the other hand, participants also felt that their affiliation was important to how they participated in public discussions. Their affiliation not only influenced if they would participate, but also what they said. In some case, participates were motivated to speak to represent their organization. At other times, participants felt restricted in what they could say in the public setting as to not reflect poorly on their organization.

> *I have a board. And I'm supposed to be talking and representing minority and diverse voices from Lincoln from [my organization's] perspective. I'm supposed to have something important to say about DACA or any of the issues that people face. And so I don't want to make a mistake. I don't want to mess it up. So I'm really, I have to really think carefully about what I say and what I write. You know, I can't call people ass holes. Even if they are online. I can't say that*. (S1)

Likewise, for businesses, they seemed sometimes hesitant to participate in public discussions as to not impact their customer base.

> *A lot of times in the business community, they don't want to make a stand because, this is just general observation that I've seen, like I saw today in the clip and in my interactions myself is that the business community just says what he says, "Just tell us what to do and we'll do it" but in a way they don't want to make a stand because they don't want to offend one customer or another. And they aren't going to ever choose additional costs*. (L4)

Overall, participants were more comfortable with the idea of expressions of their stake and affiliation to accommodate additional understanding of motivations and perspectives of individuals participating in public discussions that occur online or in-person. Participants felt that this identity could be expressed as name, affiliation, motivation, stake in the issue, or city of residence. At the same time, identification, as opposed to anonymity, may prevent some individuals from participating in public discussions if they feel it will impact their livelihood, organization, or family. Participants felt that affiliation should be clear when participating in public discussions.

**Logical and rational argument is necessary for public discussions.**

Participants valued logical and rational argument from those participating in public discussions. For example, they complimented public discussion participants for citing facts to support arguments for or against the recycling ordinance. Logical arguments were valued for clarity and effectiveness.

> *I thought the first two presenters were really effective. They brought facts, said here's the current situation, here's what will change. They did a really good job of what was the rationale for their opinion rather than just spouting 'It's all wrong!' or 'It's all right!' It was 'Well here is the situation, and here is the way we will be experiencing it, and here are the problems*.' (N3)

In the online discussions, participants made comparisons between facts versus *ad hominem* arguments. Many participants were not surprised by name-calling in online discussions, and were more surprised by rational, public discussion with logical exchanges of information taking place online. They appreciated the sharing of information, including those commenters that attended online discussions seeking clarification.

> *I was struck by the practical nature and the being kind of kind to one another in this back and forth. They seem to be trying to share information and having logical, rational conversation online versus the second [example of online discussion] is exactly one of the reasons that I avoid the comments*. (J3)

Further, for in-person discussions, participants appreciated logical exchanges of information and questions. Questions seemed to spark these exchanges in the public hearings and in online discussions.

*Mr. Camp made a reasonable challenge to "How do property owners get fined and how will you?" ... and Ms. Raybould said, "Well, how do you do it today?" Both were reasonable challenges*. (T2)

Overall, participants seemed to value logical arguments first and foremost among participants, even from those individuals with whom they disagreed. Participants characterized this rationale as sharing facts and information or relaying personal experience without an argumentative tone (e.g., neither sarcastic nor defensive). At the same time, they often would state that people who disagreed with them were often illogical. For example, one participant stated, "…we need to find those forums that we can find the [very conservative individuals] of the world so we can ask them, 'You really believe this and there is no changing your mind?'" (R1). However, rationality remains important in the exchange of perspectives both for sharing opinions and for preventing name-calling.

**Individuals should prepare their thoughts, even minimally, before engaging in public discussion.**

Participants appreciated that in the City Council hearings participants brought prepared statements. In part, the formality and time-limit of the City Council meetings dictated that individuals be prepared to an extent. In online discussions, individuals seemed less prepared and less thoughtful.

*The nice thing about prepared statements were nice because they took some thought as opposed to online comments that take no thought at all. I sometimes type out statements and I stop because I think, 'This isn't coming out the way I want it to,' but some people just hit posts or send*. (C2)

> *I think it goes to the idea that if you are in front of it you will be very thoughtful, whereas if you are behind a screen*. (K2)
>
> *So, the first thing I think of is how much research the folks who went up to testify either did their background research or made sure that they at least put something down on paper with the exception of maybe the last guy. But clearly [they] had a whole thought-process before going up there and the points that he wanted to make. And they all seemed to do that. And I don't know if that is by virtue, because I've not watched a lot of city council hearings because I don't have to. … But it seems like if it has to do with the venue, so you're in a city council building and you're in an environment where that is the norm to be professional and make good points that the city council will understand and that they can have back and forth with you and that you aren't concerned with the people behind you shouting…* (R4)

Participants also felt that along with prepared statements, it was important to be considerate about where you chose to engage in public discussion. Those who participated in every public discussion were viewed as less valuable than those who chose topics on which to engage.

> *I think there is some selectivity about what you are dialoging about. You can be passionate about things, but to be out there on every single topic can mute a little bit that passion or your perspective. I would say that I haven't been super engaged in recycling, I didn't show up at the hearings or write a letter to the editor*. (M3)

> *Well, [S] was just in the paper on Monday, and there are certain topics where her voice is loud and heard, and there are other things that she is very passionate about that I haven't seen her talking about. I think that's a good thing. I think when you do speak, it has strength*. (M3)

Likewise, participants should choose when to engage with others. This choice to engage indicated preparation for participants. In addition, choosing when to participate on a limited basis also was indicative of reputation; limited commenting was preferable to engagement on every issue.

> *I, in fact, spent all of yesterday morning planning a response to someone's Facebook comment…. Through my whole shower yesterday I had written this unbelievable thing and I'm like, I can't do this. For one thing, I don't know that person. And the person, anyway, just let it go. How is this going to help*? (S3)

Preparation was important to participants, though at the same time, the perception of authentic, natural public engagement was also valued. One participant said of an exemplar who was less prepared, "The third guy wasn't as prepared, but it was more natural. ... there was an authenticity to it, more so than those who came with a prepared statement" (C3). There is a need for balance between preparation and authenticity, though participants valued preparation in written or verbal statements. Prepared statements supported rational arguments, which participants also valued.

**In-person public discussions are preferred to online public discussions.**

Participants preferred in-person discussions over online discussions. The rationale for in-person discussions included the ability to read non-verbal and verbal cues, eye

contact, and context. Individuals in online discussions were more likely to assert their identity, prepare thoughts, and understand each other's' perspectives.

> *Along with that, the eye contact, that personal connection, I think they are less likely to maybe jab not personal attack. Not to… so along with the time limit, because it is more of a formal setting, there are microphones, you have to wait your turn. (T3)*
>
> *The face-to-face, the personal discussion or statements lend themselves to people being able to ask questions to clarify. Like in the last example, 'what would you do if this happened?'* (L1)

The idea of needing to "look someone in the eye" was important to participants, who felt that eye contact increased civility in discussions. For example, one participant said, "When it's not anonymous, it's much more civil when you are looking at someone in the eyes" (J4).

In addition, participants preferred in-person discussions to address difficult or potentially contentious issues in their own work or personal life for many of the same reasons.

> *… I'm at a point where there is a contentious issue, I try not to have those discussions via email anymore because I do not find it to be overly productive. … I can't understand someone's tone and inflection. It's much better [by phone] at least verbally if not in person, rather than email. A similar situation as online versus in person. But I have found that for me, I get too many lines of miscommunication if I don't at least have a verbal interaction over an issue.* (T3)

Generally, participants felt that in-person discussions were preferred over online issues, particularly when addressing controversial or contentious issues. In-person discussions increased civility and clarity in conversations. At the same time, accessibility was an important factor, as mentioned previously.

**Interaction design facilitated the public discussion process by placing constraints on personal expression.**

Like the preference for in-person discussions over online public participation, focus group participants did suggest that the environment, power, context, and expectations informed how people engaged in public discussions. This reliance on reading the cues from the interaction design impacted the experience.

> *Typically, online I see a lot of just shut down language. … Because you need somebody monitoring and keeping score. And I think that's why hearings work because you have somebody keeping score and keeping track and trying to keep us settled.* (R4)

> *But [online is] maybe even less civil because at the city council meeting, you have to look people in the eye, say your name and address*. (N2)

Participants recognized that there were larger consequences to participating in-person than online, particularly under the constraints of a public hearing.

> *I think there is a big difference between when you talk to a person and you have to see them as an actual person and you have the consequences of those interactions as opposed to when they are faceless, and you can just vent.* (A3)

> *You're going to get immediate feedback too potentially if you act inappropriately or are out of line. Whereas you don't have that online. You have a public shaming almost [in person]*. (L4)

Similarly, the purpose of interacting at a public hearing or online was different.

> *And your goal is different too, right? So your goal is to persuade the City Council to vote one way. My comment on a Lincoln Journal Star article is not, first of all the City Council probably doesn't read the Lincoln Journal Star comments. So, my goal is not to sway the City Council, it might be to sway Lincoln community a certain way, but not the sway the City Council to make a position*. (R4)

Interaction design dictated how participants in public discussion were going to engage with others. Participants felt that there were fewer constraints online as opposed to in-person discussions. Participants made mention of "eye contact" as playing an important role the interaction design of in-person communication. For these public discussions, formality, environment, and expectations guided the communication.

**Support for using online commentary in public discussions was mixed.**

Though participants indicated a preference for in-person interactions, they recognized the online commentary is occurring and is influential. When online comments are provided for a public discussion, participants had mixed opinions on how to use such input. Participants recognized that individuals do often provide input on issues in an online capacity. In some cases, such online commentary becomes part of the official public record when elected officials or policy makers are reading or sharing them in an open forum such as a city council meeting.

> *I've been sitting in board of trustees meetings, and the board of trustees are taking snippets of what someone said on Facebook and bringing it into public record and using it as a defense of their reasoning*. (T3)
>
> *I'm sure it's happened at [the] Public School Board. I don't know that I've seen it at a City Council meeting. But I've heard 'This is what I'm hearing online.'* (C2)

At the same time, participants recognized that online commentary was impacting policy, even when the public reads online comments. Participants felt that reading the comments was enabling unhelpful commenters to continue commenting.

> *We give these trolls this avenue or to people with mental health challenges the sole purpose or place to create this conflict. And we still have a group of people wanting to use it to solve a problem, albeit very small now. Like us having a focus group in here with three people who are trying to derail it. (*J3)
>
> *But we are allowing it online. We allow it by reading it. I allow it by reading it, giving it time, by affirming it. And I'm guilty of it. (*T3*)*

Participants likened online comment trolls to those that attempted to derail in-person discussions. They argued that the formality and design of in-person public hearings helps to prevent such attacks, whereas online forums lack the constructs to manage off-topic comments and name-calling. Further, online comments are validated by the media when news media report online commentary along with the news.

> *I have noticed that on Good Morning America, they will sometimes report on what some people have said online when they report on the article…. They will say "Well, Sally from Such-and-Place said this…" so they are starting to use those comments in their news reporting. (*L4*)*

Participants grappled with how to handle online comments. While wanting an accessible forum, they also wanted some control about what comments were included in decision making. In particular, participants noted that online forums do not often gather moderate viewpoints.

> *It brings the question, there are many avenues where our elected officials should be listening and when people are vocal on polar opposites of the issue that if you don't actively seek, because people aren't going to actively seek your views unless they feel very strongly, so you are kind of getting one and one, not the ten between*. (K2)

One participant suggested that someone screen and summarize comments for elected officials: "maybe someone looks for a city council member or mayor looks at the comments and says, 'Hey mayor, here's the pulse of the community' so that other people don't have to read that nasty comments …" (B4). Cities must consider how to process online feedback, particular with a need to provide opportunities for accessible public engagement. At the same time, participants were slightly unsure if those participating online should have a voice at all, if, for example, they were not a member of the community or were paid to voice a particular opinion.

> L4*: Because it got to the point where you start to see a lot of the same people e commenting over and over. I've heard, and I don't know if it's true, that some people are paid to comment on every article on certain topics and thinking that possibly could be true, I really don't want to get involved with it because someone is just getting paid to put some negative information out there that may or may not be accurate.*

M4*: And they are probably from Russia. Haha.*

In this exchange, participants expressed doubt that online comments should be trusted or utilized at all, particularly in an era of fake news. In addition, this comment highlights that national level discourse (#fakenews) is making its way into perceptions of how others are participating in public discussions. While participants felt that online commentary could be a useful tool for accessibility to democracy and pubic discussions, they were equally concerned with incorrect applications or influence of such public commentary.

**Many individuals are afraid to participate in public discussions.**

The pressure of public discussions also made participants feel nervous or afraid to participate in public discussions, online or in person. Participants did not want to harm their own identity, and they were also nervous about participating generally.

> *Well for me, public speaking is really hard, and I stutter sometimes. So, it's easier for me to participate online because I have the time to say what I need to say without standing in front of people, but it's like: how do I say what I need to say*? (D3)

> *Yeah, I write responses that I keep in a word document before I decide, "you know what, I'm not going to engage because this is going to be taken wrong probably." So yeah, I think it's nearly scarier online almost to put yourself out there to let people see it*. (R1)

Participants were hesitant about participating in in-person discussions when they did not know how well commentary or input would be received.

> *I think one of the challenges is that you don't know how much the people in power care about what you have to say. You don't know what you are saying is actually being considered as a well-considered argument with good points that is relatable, and they won't care. That makes it difficult for people to pitch something when they don't know how it will be received*. (A2)

Additionally, participants felt the need to protect themselves from online discussions or negativity. They felt reluctant to participate in online forums in any capacity. For example, one participant stated, "I read these comments and I'm like 'I can't handle this' and turn it off" (B4). Likewise, another participant stated, "My gut reaction is that I'm tired of it always going there. I don't even read it any more. I'm so sick of it" (M4).

Participants felt frustrated with online comments, and while some did read the comments, it was less about learning anything new or trying to understand perspectives, and more about reading for entertainment. Thus, participants were nervous to participate in public discussions as a way to protect themselves, either from harming their identity or harming their state of mind.

In sum, participants had values that informed their feelings about public discussions. They felt these values were often inherent to participate in public discussions, particularly given a specific interaction design. For example, for an interaction taking place online was inherently different than one occurring at a council hearing. At the same time, values, such as rational argument and preparation, improved their perceptions of those participating in public argument.

### 4.2 Participants recognized the impact of polarization

As mentioned previously, polarization in the networked public sphere is having an impact on how individuals are participating in public discussions. Focus group participants recognized the challenge of polarization, and it impacted their values and interpretations of public discussions. Participants felt that hearing "both sides" of public arguments was important to represent "both sides of the aisle" or a "two sides to every argument" perspective. In addition, the concept of "fake news" made participants hesitant to trust information they read or heard, and hesitant to trust information others were sharing. Finally, participants suggested that those who do participate in public discussions likely represent more extreme views; indicating that those individuals with moderate opinions are less likely to attend public forums, on or offline. To address this issue, cities will need to provide strategic opportunities for public engagement that increase participation from those with more moderate opinions, not only stakeholders and those who share more extreme opinions.

**The need to listen and hear "both sides" was important to participants.**

Participants indicated a desire to hear other arguments or "both sides" of an argument. When shaping their own opinions, participants thought learning about both arguments was important. Participants commented that they enjoyed hearing other perspectives even through this focus group.

> *I just was thinking that I, until three years ago, I didn't have an opinion … on a pretty major topic that people generally fall on one side or the other. And, I finally took the time to listen to both sides on the issue. And I was like, "Oh, I do finally have an opinion about this*." (R1)

*Sometimes when I read things online, I do kind of pick which one that I really do care to read about. So anyway, I enjoyed hearing both sides. (C1)*

Though the idea of hearing of two sides came up frequently, participants seemed hesitant at times to actively hearing what the other side was saying. Some participants indicated that hearing opposite opinions can sometimes seem overwhelming and offensive even if they feel they have a duty to hear other perspectives.

*But on the other hand, that can be exhausting. Sometimes I do just want to retreat into a bubble of friends or family that think in a similar fashion, and I feel like there are times that I need to do that. (T3)*

Participants also recognized the role of national politics on polarization. They suggested that national events and polarization impact how people engage in local public discussions and consider local policy issues. For example, one participant indicated that leaning towards a political party to filter information and opinions acts like a short cut to making opinions. Further, participants also felt that the 24-hour news cycle exacerbated these one-sided opinions.

*I think that it's a mental short cut, we all have mental short cuts to get through life because there is just too much information. We are more than our political affiliation or other aspects about us. I think the polarization that has been getting a lot worse in terms of political polarization makes us all one-dimensional in real life.* (N2)

*I think my family has become more political in this cycle. The reason I didn't have an opinion on the death penalty was that we didn't discuss politics around the*

*dining room table. But now, every time we get together, they are actually asking "What are your thoughts on this, what are you thinking?"* (R1)

C2*: I have to try really hard. Because I remember the whole Obama presidency saying that you have to respect the office. And I'm having a hard time respecting the office right now. But that's exactly what they thought about Obama. So, I have to keep it in check.*

T2*: It's eye-opening too. I feel like I'm getting a perspective that I didn't have for the last eight years.*

Likewise, participants stressed a need for bipartisanship and reaching out to different sides.

*And then bipartisan, either bipartisanship or by political alignment somehow. You would think seemingly recycling, "hey, we are all for that," but then it quickly turned into political split.*

Participants felt that polarization is increasing in the present political environment. They suggested that individuals seemed more polarized online. At the same time, they recognized the importance of understanding both sides of a policy issue.

**A lack of valid or reliable sources made it difficult to understand concepts and points of view.**

In an era of "fake news" the concern about reliable information was very present for participants. Participants discussed a lack of valid sources for themselves and others. They also recognized that certain information sources were viewed as biased or right- or left- leaning. Information sources could include news media but may also include research and reports.

> *Well, in the world of fake news, I can't even direct people to Snopes anymore because now Snopes is biased and liberal leaning…. I don't even know where to go to find real facts anymore. That used to be my go to, that we could at least agree on facts, and apparently, we can't even agree on that anymore.* (C2)
>
> *…You almost sometimes have to be concerned with the source of research too because if there are certain firms that are funding research…. Like Coca-Cola funding sugar research.* (K2)

Further, participants felt like previously reliable sources were less reliable and more opinionated than before.

> *Speculation and opinion pieces. I subscribe to the Washington Post, and more and more of the articles that WP publishes are opinion pieces. Where is the news? This is opinion. It used to be a pretty solid newspaper. I like the opinion pieces generally, but I recognize what is and is not an opinion piece. Where do you, when you think that you are subscribing to the newspaper that is supposed to be "fair and balanced" and I don't know.* (S1)

Participants acknowledged the role of 24-hour news networks and the role of news media in shaping public opinion about issues.

> *Well, my sister works at a bank that only has Fox News on. And she cannot say "I don't want to listen to this." … And now, it's either or. You either watch this news or that news. You are not watching… you are either or. …Now, it is "I just get my news from one source and that's the way it is." It's very discouraging*. (C1)
>
> *I have friends that are MSNBC junkies and it's like … ugh. I told my parents, "do not retire into 24-hour news" First, you don't need to worry about most of this*

> *stuff anymore. Just enjoy, I'll let you know if there is something to worry about. That is brain-rotting, on either side. And that's you know, that's where we are as a society. We are relying on that, and that's not news. That's speculation*. (R1)

Generally, participants felt that news media and information sources were less reliable in the current political climate, and that this change in perceptions of media is affected by polarization. Participants felt that the lack of valid resources impacted multiple perspectives, whether conservative of left-leaning. A decreasing amount of trust in media and information made the opinions of others more circumspect or extreme.

**Those who participate in public discussions often can represent more extreme or solidified views.**

In addition, participants felt that when people did participate in public discussions, they were likely representing more extreme views, or felt strongly for or against an issue. Participants suggested that those with more moderate or centrist opinions would not feel strong enough to engage in public debate.

> *And I do think there is something about online discussion, well I know the research shows, that online discussion can enable people to express more extreme or fringe more than they would in person or on the phone or in other media. (*N2*) Yeah, and honestly, you don't review a restaurant unless you really loved it or really hated it, right? Who bothers to five a 3-star review? You don't weigh in or take the time unless you are really upset or really happy often.* (C2)

Online discussion in particular featured more immoderate opinions.

> *And I do think there is something about online discussion, well, I know the research shows, that online discussion can enable people to express more extreme*

*or fringe views more than they would in person or on the phone or in other media*. (N2)

*I think that too about comments on the Lincoln Journal Star. They are always so intense, they are just the very extreme, harsh.* (O2)

Broadly, participants suggested that of those who do engage in public discussions, they represented more extreme or solidified views. Without centrist views, participants were concerned about the value of opinions provided in public comments, particularly online commentary. Participants had hope that online access would increase equality of participation in public debate by increasing opportunities for more moderate views to be expressed; however, participants recognized that the current online environment was represented more extreme views in typical forums.

### 4.3 Participants had specific ideas to improve public discussions closely related to dialogue

Participants were asked about public discussions more generally, and what suggestions they would have to improve public discussions. Many of their suggestions were in line with a dialogic approach: asking genuine questions, connecting with others, understanding perspectives of others, utilizing interventions such as external moderators, listening actively, and implementing a balance of emotional and logical response. Each of these suggestions are summarized below.

#### Asking genuine questions encouraged dialogue.

Participants appreciated the back and forth nature of questions and responses, both in person and in online discussion. Questions provided opportunities for both

clarifications and challenges without name-calling. The caveat was that questions needed to be genuine and open as opposed to sarcastic or inflammatory.

> *And also, asking questions and not pointing. So, it was inquiring about different information.* (T1)
>
> *I love it when boards or committees ask questions of the people who are presenting and create more of a dialogue. I think that is so powerful and it, you often elicit more information, more perspectives, when the body that is hearing the testimony is silent and doesn't ask questions or even, there were some soft challenges. Then [if they don't ask questions] it feels a lot less productive and [not] really understanding of other people's points of view and where they are coming from*. (N2)

Participants found that there were more opportunities for asking questions in person than in online public discussions.

> *The face-to-face, the personal discussion or statements lend themselves to people being able to ask questions to clarify. Like in the last example, what would you do if this happened?* (L1)
>
> *... So [in person] you can instantly ask too, Did you mean this or this? And being aware that it's okay to ask and setting that scenario up is so much more effective. And you can't do that online unless you have that education*. (J2)

Asking questions provided opportunities for clarification, expression, challenges, and further engagement. Questions seemed to increase the likelihood of understanding others' perspectives. The process of asking questions and offering response appears to generate dialogic interactions wherein perspective-taking can take begin.

**It was important to connect arguments or engage with others participating in public discussion.**

Connection provides opportunity for arguments to build and engage with each other, as opposed to only stating one's point of view. This connection can provide linkages between points of argument and between individuals participating in arguments. For example, one participant stated, "So when one side starts to open and say, 'Oh yeah, I could see it from that [point of view].' That starts a really dialogue, discussion" (K2). Finding points of agreement help those participating in discussions understand one another's point of view.

> *You remember the end goal instead of just … because you all want to get the same place.* (K2)
>
> *Finding that thing in common, you mention values, and that world won't work with everybody, but what is the thing we are both trying to accomplish here? Can we at least agree that the landfill is going to be so full at some point that we don't have another option? …We agree on that point, so we can start to talk about solutions. So finding that agreement, maybe that's why my marriage is okay. Because when we find things that we agree on, we high five. And there are actually a lot of things that we agree on*. (C2)

Like previous methods of public discussion, participants felt that connection was more likely to happen in person, rather than online.

> *Well, and even with the discussion, they could refer back to each other. You see less of that online. The only way they refer back to each other is adversarial.* (L1)

Similar to asking questions, the concept of connection and engaging with each other was important to successful discussions.

**Emotional arguments can aid in discussion, but emotion-caused inflammatory language can be problematic**.

While participants preferred logical, rational argument, they also recognized the role of emotion and narrative in public argument. Their characterization of emotion included passion about a topic; expressions of anger, care, or frustration; and negative emotion leading to name-calling or inflammatory language. One participant argued for the benefit that emotions bring to public discussion, "I want to push back a second on being emotional. I think having emotion about things you are passionate about is okay." Participants felt that expressions of emotion or passion often helped to clarify perspectives of others and should not be something viewed as negative.

> *It is the way we express them. Are you a yeller? Are you a crier? How does that emotion come out? … So it's okay to have emotion and to feel really strongly about something. You also have to read the other person.* (C2)
>
> *And I do feel like there is a place for uncivil discourse. I kind of hate to say that. Sometimes making my case calmly and point my point, they are like "Well thank you for my feedback" and throw it in the trash. And when you get mad and say, "No you aren't hearing me," then they pay attention. There is fine line between getting upset and starting to call people names. And maybe that's the grey area where we are at*. (B4)

Further, participants noted that emotion can be used to elicit a response when decorum is preventing voices from being heard. This argument is not a new one; Lozano-Reich and

Cloud (2009) argue that there is cause for incivility and emotion to demand that voices be heard, particularly those of the powerless. Using emotional responses can be used to bring attention to an issue.

Participants also felt that while it was harder to read emotions online, individuals participating in public discussions were more likely to express negative emotions online.

> *You don't have to, it could be so much more emotionally charged if you were having a faced to face conversation, which makes me wonder if people would say some of the same things face-to-face*. (L1)

Additionally, commentary can trigger a more emotional response from readers or others engaging in discussion. If, for example, the readers already felt emotional and opinionated about an issue, they tended to read opposing views online as being harsher and more offensive.

> *Even in this one, like you mentioned, there is an emotional tie behind that "we shouldn't do things that make a certain segment feel good;" there is a feeling of threat, somehow bringing out something in us that makes us respond in this way*. (K2)

> *I think about myself even, when I feel a little more strongly about something. So, I saw something that Coby Mach posted about this university student that has been doing a lot with "Turning Point," and so in that instance, I was not a moderate view. I had an emotional reaction to that, it was civil, but it was emotional*. (K2)

However, negative expressions of emotion can deter individuals from engaging in dialogue. For example, if such expression reduces conversations to name-calling, dialogue is less likely to take place.

*I think it's about how it's started and first presented. Because when you trigger into the emotion, then it's done. You won't get anywhere so you might as well stop. So, it's almost more responsibility on the person who initiates the discussion to be nonbiased. Not that they can't express their opinion, but they would write more how they speak or think about how they would talk to this person, then you might actually get somewhere online. That's hard to do once the emotion is there*. (J2)

Further, internal reflection on one's own emotions seemed to help individuals engage in public discussions from an open mind and increase perspective taking. Self-awareness helped individuals understand their own response and motivations, and more empathetic with others.

*I think look internally first and understand, 'Where am I coming from?' and first seek to understand before being understood, whatever that saying is. That starts you in a place where you can listen and have a civil discussion without being emotional because you can understand where someone is coming from and why they are having a visceral response*. (K2)

*I think that when it gets to that point, my boss always says, "You don't have to attend every argument that you are invited to." It's about being self-aware and that idea of "Are you just doing this to win?" ... Is it meaningful, is it purposeful, and are we going to get somewhere? Are we arguing because we are trying or are you just trying to win. So that being self-aware of your emotions and how you are going to use them*. (A2)

Participants considered emotions to be important to how individuals participated in public discussions by creating understanding, explaining motivations, and shaping interactions. At the same time, emotion also guided an individual response to public discussion, and as such, needed to be managed at times. While an emotional or unmanaged response might disrupt public discussion, emotion often provided motivation for others to participate.

**Consider interventions to improve public discussions**.

Participants were asked to consider interventions that might aid in public discussion, both online and in-person. Many participants suggested a type of moderator to manage commentary. For example, one participant suggestions, "It could be moderated for civil discussion. Where there are some moderated forums I guess" (S1). At the same time, participants also found that moderation must not limit a freedom to participate: "… who moderates that? And then if someone's comments get blocked or removed, they are like 'well, why does so-and-so get to decide?'" (T1). Participants also suggested limitations such as time, type, or character limits.

> *Well, it is interesting applying some the parameters they've put on a council meeting or other open forum… to an online venue because I've been involved with those public forums before where there is a certain time limit, they ask you to put your name … and your address. Maybe online [an] address isn't good, but you have to be willing to give certain information about yourself and limit the amount you can put on there like limited time. And then a warning to "Please keep your content to the topic." … [Then,] if they do put mudslinging on [the*

> *forum] it will make a sad face. Or a picture of your mom, going "No, no! Are you sure you want to say that*?" (L4)

Some participants suggested the more official forums for engaging individuals in public discussion that was productive and welcomed multiple points of view. There was a continued desire to understand other points of view.

> *It would be great if there was a forum that you knew people were just going to be there for the discussion. Like a multitude of ideas and different opinions. Not the echo chambers that we are usually in but people who don't call people "right wing-nuts." You know*? (S1)
>
> *If you could somehow focus the conversation around the idea of it being an opportunity to learn and not judge or be judged in that the people who come together who all have different perspectives simply want to learn about what someone else thinks … And I don't know, my goal wouldn't be to change their point of view, but my goal would be to understand their point of view*. (L1)

However, many participants were concerned that individuals would not attend such a forum for public engagement.

> *I was just thinking about voter turnout. And being nearly the already engaged citizenry, we get really excited about this sort of thing. But the people that need to hear it? I don't know what would attract them.* (R1)

Participants recommended a "nudge" or gentle suggestion to participants in public discussions to use appropriate language and engage in a productive, helpful manner. In addition, participants also suggested ways to "vote" on the comments to force productive comments to the top of the discussion and help filter out less useful comments. Currently,

several sites use this type of tool already to sort through and prioritize engagement including Reddit, Yelp, New York Times comment sections, and Wikipedia.

> *One thing you both were talking about is what would be really valuable would be a way to distinguish between the comments that are just mean and have some value to them. Facebook doesn't have that, you like it and that's just it. But like in Yelp, you can add tags if it's useful or helpful. It could be helpful to flag as "this is rude" and then if people want to see that and they can click on it. Or you can click "this is insightful" for the insightful comments. Like up-voting. This would be a neat way for forums like this to self-regulate so other users can still make those comments, so it's not censoring*. (B4)

Overall, many participants did think public discussion would be aided by some sort of intervention, whether a moderator, filter, limitations, or tool. There was concern that if there were limitations, even by using a moderator, that people would be less likely to participate. Accessibility and voice were important to participants, but they also desired a method to manage, rather than enable, commenting.

**Active listening is important to understand other perspectives**.

Finally, participants continued to support the concept of active listening. Listening provided the ability to understand someone's perspective. Participants placed a value on listening. They noted that often the frustration with online discussions is that individuals do not "listen" to each other completely; for example, people will skim comments rather than fully read them.

> *The third clip did seem more productive. It seemed as though it was a group of people working towards a solution as opposed to a group of people sitting hearing and listening to a presented giving their point of view*. (T2)

At the same time, participants doubted individual interest in listening online.

> *I don't mean to be curmudgeonly, but do people even go online to understand each other's perspectives? … Because I don't know that people are there to learn. I suspect, I don't read the LJS comments, so I don't have anything to compare this to. …Were they learning or expressing or to be angry or because they have free time?* (L2)

In addition, the local school district was hosting listening sessions to help improve discussions and solve a school policy issue. Similarly, schools are beginning to implement restorative circles to deal with discipline issues as part of the "restorative justice" process that includes a discussion with students, family, and community rather than punitive punishment.[9]

> *Made me think about a …small group of people in the schools are starting restorative circles, so some of those structures like taking turns, listening, speak from the heart, speak just enough. And because I'm task-oriented, sometimes it's really hard for me to be fully present, like "Okay, I'm sort of invested in this circle, can we just get this done and move on?" But whenever I'm in this circle, like it proves to me just the power of having everyone turn to speak, everyone to listen to. And I've seen two parents that in the situation, the girls were intimidating each other outside of school online and both parents, what they had*

[9] https://k12engagement.unl.edu/strategy-briefs/Restorative%20Practices%208-28-2015.pdf

> *in common was a struggling teen, and they grew to understand each other's perspectives. But before the circles, they were like, "Why are you letting your kid do this?" But after the circles, it reminded me the power of really truly listening and slowing it down*. (T1)

This process of mediation and listening rather than punitive and reactive response to addressing issues is one that dialogic public engagement can utilizing. Listening helps with problem-solving skills, finding common ground, and perspective taking. Active listening is key to dialogue and addressing long-term change, and participants recognized the importance of listening in public discussions. Participants felt that listening was apparent when individuals asked questions, connected arguments, and used introspection to understand their emotions.

**4.4 Summary & Discussion of Findings**

This chapter sought to answer *RQ3: How can dialogic moments be created to help people reflect on local public discussions to improve social learning?* While many focus group participants had pre-existing notions of successful public discussions, such as preparation, rationality, and accessibility, participants also saw aspects of public discussion as necessary to improve the experience. Participants recognized the negative effects of polarization on public discussions and indicated that polarization appeared to have a larger impact online, in the networked public sphere. The polarization was heighted by a seemingly lack of valid sources of facts, even when individuals are looking to cite research in public discussions.

Participant suggestions for improving public discussions were similar to those supported by a dialogical approach. Using active listening, asking genuine questions,

creating connections with others, and reflecting on one's own emotional response are all characteristics of dialogue that have been applied in practice previously. In addition, the interventions to improve public discussions such as facilitation/moderation, seeking additional points of view, and placing gentle rules on interactions supported dialogue in such public discussions. Once again, these interventions were similar to those seen in the dialogue literature (Hurtado, 2001; Schoem et al., 2001; Zuniga et al., 2014).

Listening to the suggestions, dialogic moments can be created by creating forums that place a value on active listening, on asking questions, on connectivity among participants, on creating space for logic and emotional arguments to understand perspectives and solve problems. Further, participant feedback indicates that these moments can be created outside of a controlled environment, and may be applied to broader public discussions, as it was in the example of discussions in a school context.

This chapter provided the results of the focus group discussions, while seeking to understand how individuals perceive public discussions online and in-person, and gather participant recommendations for creating opportunities for understanding others' perspectives. In doing so, I found that participant suggestions were linked to theories of dialogue that have previously been applied in controlled, classroom environments (Schoem et al., 2001). This finding indicates that there may be opportunities to create dialogue within municipal public discussions. The following chapter will discuss how the focus group results relate to the case study findings, the implications of the these results, and how this exploratory study may lead to future research in dialogue and public discussions.

# Chapter 5 Concluding Discussion

The central purpose of this study was to understand how dialogue occurs, if at all, within municipal public discussions, particularly given issues with the networked public sphere. Previous research about dialogue is typically examined in a classroom setting over time (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Schoem & Hurtado, 2001), though it has been tested online with mixed results (Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, & Shonfeld, 2015). A majority of the existing literature does not examine dialogue within such a municipal setting. Because public engagement is needed in policy making, particularly municipal public policy, and public engagement is complicated by problems of the networked public sphere, it is necessary to examine what interventions, such as dialogue, can enhance these public discussions. The present exploratory study provides insight into how current municipal discussions occur, how these discussions are influenced by national-level polarization, and how individuals understand public discussions and potential interventions in such discussions. The present study demonstrated that dialogic moments are found in municipal public discussions, and these dialogic moments increase perspective-taking among public discussion participants.

First, I sought to understand the role of national discourse in municipal issues and whether such national discourse comes through in expressions of identity with RQ1: *How do individuals use national discourse (e.g., sources, arguments, quotes, metaphors) in comments and opinions about municipal issues using information as an identity source, if at all?* Expressions of identity related to national-level discourse were most present in the online discussion within the case study as anti-left and anti-right comments were most prominent. While this was most apparent in the online discussion, focus group

participants also noticed that such polarization can impact how individuals participate. For example, focus group participants noted that individuals typically only trust news and information sources from known sources that tend to agree with their bias. Further, recent distrust of the media influences how individuals perceive information, no matter the source; participants noted that even academic research studies were suspect based on funding source. This distrust of media and perception of polarized comments impacted how those who participated in the public discussions were perceived.

Second, I sought to understand how dialogue functions in municipal discussions about local controversies, in both online and in-person discussions with RQ2: *How do dialogic moments function as transition points in municipal discussions about local controversies, in face-to-face and digitally-mediated contexts?* Many findings reflected the literature in that 1) in-person discussions experienced more dialogic moments than online discussions; and 2) open engagement with active listening made participants feel heard and apt to listen to others' perspectives. Additionally, assertion of identity clarified individual (or group) stake in the public discussion, whether the speaker was an influencer in the discussion or a stakeholder. Clarity and efficacy in messaging was also key to setting the groundwork for public discussions. When individuals had a shared understanding, there were more productive conversations with room for perspective-taking. Through this analysis, I learned that dialogue occur in moments of municipal discussions even as they are currently structured.

Finally, knowing that dialogic moments do occur in public discussions, I sought to understand how dialogic moments can be created and how individuals understand public discussions with RQ3: *How can dialogic moments be created to help people*

*reflect on local public discussions to improve social learning?* Participants in this study also asserted that that in-person discussions, improved interaction design, open question asking, and active listening were important to creating dialogic moments, similar to the case study findings. Additionally, focus group participants saw a need to balance rational and emotional arguments and connect points of view. Participants strived to generate interventions for public discussions by suggested limitations and moderators. Participant suggestions were reflective of the existing literature on dialogue, suggesting that as dialogue functions in the classroom, it may also be applied to municipal public discussions. In this concluding chapter, I discuss the potential implications of these findings on theory, method, history, and policy.

## 5.1 Theoretical Implications

### Implications for Dialogic Theory

The findings in this study confirm many theories of public dialogue. Dialogue is a communication process that is focused on understanding one another's perspectives and creating a shared understanding (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006). The findings of this study support existing research on dialogic models by finding that such dialogic moments, as Black (2008) indicates, can occur within public discussion. Further, these moments are brought about by traditional features of dialogue: connection, asking questions, active listening, perspective-sharing (Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Ellis, 2010; Heierbacher, 2008), and a shared common language (Heierbacher, 2009). In addition to supporting these elements of dialogue, this study finds that this dialogue can occur within existing public discussions as they currently exist. Little previous research indicated that dialogue might occur outside of a structured framework. However, Black (2008) argued

that dialogic moments can occur in deliberative environments. This study supports Black's argument, and additionally suggests that dialogic moments might be created in public discussions by using dialogic techniques such as asking questions, active listening, and using a shared language. In addition, this dialogic approach can help to address issues of the networked public sphere.

**Implications for the Networked Public Sphere**

Chapter 1 described the networked public sphere and some of the problems created by it, such as information overload and echo chambers. The networked public sphere provides further accessibility for individuals to contribute to the public sphere, which was important to focus group participants and anticipated by scholars (Benkler, 2006). At the same time, participants recognized these problems of online engagement and sought to balance the issues with the need for accessible, democratic engagement. Participants desired a way for increased participation with fewer barriers than in-person engagement.

> *... my City Council person is Jane Raybould and I live just a couple of blocks from her, so when she was campaigning she came and knocked on my door, but that's the only interaction I've ever had with her or her office. And I know that sometimes there are these city surveys for priorities for health and safety, but I never seen anything like that for other elected representatives, so I know that [my congressman] is making decisions on the basis of the few people that write him emails. I would really like more officials to do more systematic surveys of their constituents and make decision on that [basis].*

Participants desired a way to share their views on policies in an accessible way, though they also recognized the challenges with such participation.

The networked public sphere does not only provide an avenue for democratic participation, but it does shape individual understanding of others' participation. For example, focus group participants used their knowledge of the networked public sphere and how individuals engaged online to shape their perceptions of others online and in person. For example, one participant stated, "I call them Captain Sweatpants and they are just writing and waiting, and they have all the time in the world to troll because mom is going to bring them a sandwich in the basement. The world is filled with Captain Sweatpants, and we don't have time to engage with them." While the terminology of this example might seem silly, it demonstrates that individuals are making value judgements about others through avenues of the networked public sphere. Focus group participants saw individuals who participated in person as being extremely passionate or representative of larger interests. Participants felt online participation was not as valuable because of such negative engagement. Still, participants recognized that policymakers take online participation into consideration. As such, scholars must also consider the role of value judgements of democratic engagement within the networked public sphere.

**Implications for Social Identity Theory**

In this study, I proposed that information played a stronger role in social identity theory that previously thought due to the advent of the networked public sphere. Harwood and Roy (2005) argue that information media directly interact with the formation of identity. I suggest that the algorithmically-driven networked public sphere strengthened the role that information media played in shaping identity. In this study,

references to media in the case study were not overt. However, the role of media was present in how individuals understood those participating in public discussions. Focus group participants recognized the role of media in their reflections of public discussion. For example, one participant stated, “And now, it’s either or. You either watch this news or that news. You are not watching… you are either or.” Here, where you watch the news influences your identity and how others perceive you. Focus group participants referred to individuals as “MSNBC Junkies” and “Fox News watchers.” Further, concerns about “fake news” resonated with focus group participants as they noted concerns about information sources and reliability.

The findings in this study suggest that information and information-source are increasingly for individuals in how they perceive issues and others’ interest in the issues. People who participate in public discussions often use their affiliation as a way of expressing their motivation or stake in a particular issue. For focus group participants expressed that they appreciated statements of identification wherein a participant would say “I’m a trash hauler.” For example, one participant stated, “I think context for me always helps. So even just that the person is from Lincoln gives me more information than Dave, who I’m like could be anywhere.” Expressions of identification, such as stake and location, appeared to mitigate some concern about motivation to participate in public discussion.  This study demonstrates that rather than explicit demonstrations of identity in public discussions, individuals are viewing others through the lens of identity, whether real (as in affiliation) or perceived (assumptions of information source or political affiliation).

### 5.2 Implications for Deliberation Methodology

Public deliberation approaches and methodology have long been focused on decision-making. Dialogic approaches are focused more on long-term opinion formation and perspective change. Municipal discussions typically operate within the public deliberation approach because of their focus on a specific policy decision. However, this study suggests that dialogic approaches may be enacted to generate more long-term opinion change. This approach is important for both practitioners those seeking to use such a public deliberation approach in scholarly research.

Historically, deliberation is used for decision-making; however, by introducing dialogue intentionally into the deliberation process, the focus can be on both decision-making and perspective-taking. Deliberation can be approached in a myriad of ways (Gastil, 2009), though deliberation often follows a pattern of gathering individual input to reach a decision. Bohman (2000) defines public deliberation as "process of exchanging reasons for the purposes of resolving problems that cannot be settled without interpersonal coordination and cooperation" (p. 27). Public deliberation to inform policy and practice often includes deliberative discussion, based on necessary information and rationale, with accountability of participants and policy makers (Makau & Marty, 2013). Dialogue often begins similar to deliberation by establishing an environment, but then moves to building relationships, finding commonalities in language, definitions, and identities, exploring questions and issues, and then moving into actions and long-term change. The key difference is that dialogue can shift perspectives, and deliberation is often focused on a short-term decision. Dialogic moments, as Black (2008) suggests, can be created within public deliberation, and often overlap with dialogue in approach (see

Table 7). Deliberation scholars should work to create such dialogic moments in public deliberation.

***Table 5.1. Creating dialogic moments in deliberation***

| | Deliberation | Dialogue | Dialogic Moments in Deliberation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Coming together** | Gather stakeholders together to make a policy decision; may be in-person or online | Gather individuals with diverse perspectives together in-person | Gather diverse stakeholders together to make a policy decision over time; may be in-person or online |
| **Decision Rules** | Decision(s) may be made via vote or consensus (all must agree on the decision rule) | No decision rules, rather rules oversee engagement (e.g., listening, turn-taking) | Deliberative decision is made in combination with a focus on perspective-taking |
| **Process** | Can be led by a facilitator / neutral 3rd party; may be a formal procedure such as a hearing<br><br>Relies on argument & logic, information sharing | Should be led by a facilitator / neutral 3rd party to build relationships, encourage story-telling, and urge perspective-sharing<br><br>Relies on perspectives, information-sharing | Relies on rationale & logic, information sharing<br><br>Relies on perspectives, information-sharing |
| **Desired Outcome** | Decision or recommendation for a policy or practice | Perspective change, action, and/or alliances | Perspective change and decision or recommendation for a policy or practice |
| **Technique** | Establish shared decision rules<br>Provide clear, unbiased information<br>Encourage reciprocity in discussion<br>Accountability to recognize voiceless and listen to decisions | Ask questions<br>Encourage active listening<br>Promote story-telling<br>Share perspectives | Combination of deliberative techniques (decision rules, clear information) and dialogic technique (listening, story-telling, asking clarifying questions) |

| | Deliberation | Dialogue | Dialogic Moments in Deliberation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Interaction design** | Formal or informal<br>Specific decision rules or engagement rules specified by environment (e.g., hearing, online forum)<br>Decision is made and shared with policy makers | Less formal, but structured by facilitation<br>Environment is conducive to discussion (e.g., learning circles, classrooms)<br>Achievement is perspective change and/or movement into action | Formal or informal<br>May have specific decision rules based on the environment<br>Decision is made and shared with policy makers<br>Achievement is perspective change and/or movement into action |

To combat influence from national polarization that seems to be trickling down to a local level, municipalities should work to intentionally create dialogic opportunities within public engagement events/opportunities to continue the neighborliness of cities that protects them from national level political posturing. By combining public deliberation with dialogue purposefully, deliberation scholars can supplement the deliberative outcome; and scholars should use this testbed to measure the impact of such an approach. I suggest that these moments of dialogue within public deliberation when created with intention can create both a dialogic impact, such as perspective-taking, long-term change, in addition to reaching a policy decision. For example, when focus group participants were asked to listen to the public hearing examples featuring different perspectives, they indicated that they felt they had a better understanding of "the other side" more than they did reading newspaper articles. In the focus groups, participants were actively listening and considering what was being said in the hearings and online. By intentionally exploring those perspectives, they better understood alternate perspectives. At the same time, this need for dialogic engagement demonstrates that individuals cannot take in everything they need to know by reading news articles.

Deliberation scholars should test such an intentional approach in deliberative events to assess participant satisfaction, engagement, and attitude change.

### 5.3 Applications to Policy Practice

Like deliberation scholars, policy makers and practitioners must also consider methods to engage the public in policy. This engagement includes considerations of accessibility, participation opportunities, information sharing, and interaction design. Though practitioners are seeking a deliberative decision, they should also take advantage of opportunities to encourage dialogue. Benefits of dialogue can assist engagement levels by encouraging individuals to ask questions, understand each other's perspectives, and listen to other participants. For example, when focus group participants listened to three examples of public engagement at a City Council hearing, they began to understand other perspectives, even with those they did not agree with:

> *I was … standing on the other side of this issue, thinking "this is the way this [recycling ordinance] should be done." I hadn't thought about it in his perspective and [the speaker in the video] made some points. I hadn't thought about it being more of a challenge for a landlord and how to handle that, … and how police enforce [recycling]. You know, I thought, as a consumer and an individual, this is pretty easy for me to participate in.*

This study demonstrates that dialogue can occur within public deliberation, as it currently exists. From this, practitioners and policy makers should seek to understand how to create and enhance opportunities for dialogue while creating accessible, public engagement opportunities.

#### Building Interaction Design

As present in this study, the environment and expectations are critical to how individuals interact in a public deliberation. Dialogue is more likely to occur in an in-person setting than online as seen in this study and in previous literature (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001; Zúñiga, Naagda, & Sevig, 2002). In addition, a sense of formality or limitations seemed to encourage dialogic expressions such as listening and asking questions, while reducing name-calling and expressions of political identity. Strategically bringing groups together to discuss difference, perspectives, and action through in-person discussion is part of a dialogic model (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001) and similarly, one recommended by facilitation professionals (Schuman, 2005). Given such opportunities for engagement, it seems that practitioners and policy makers should work to create an interaction model that focuses on in-person, more formal interactions. Though in-person interactions often have limited participation, practitioners should be intentional about hearing diverse voices (Lafont, 2015). Zúñiga and Nagda (2001), for example, argue that the creation of dialogue requires a communicative environment that is different from everyday life. A structure that supports equal participation (as Allport (1979) also suggests) and active listening becomes necessary. Zúñiga and Nagda suggest that the four stages of dialogue occur by 1) setting the environment; 2) developing a common base; 3) exploring questions, issues, and conflicts; and 4) moving from dialogue to action, and dialogic models follow these stages.

However, dialogue within public deliberation and municipal policy issues, does not always follow such a clear organization. Here, practitioners should work to design a space for dialogue within a broader deliberative framework, while being mindful to provide oportunity for a multitude of perspectives. By adopting traditional dialogue

(based on Zúñiga and Nagda's descriptions) into public deliberation, either online or in person, practioners can provide avenues for dialogic engagement. Table 8 describes ways in which dialogue can be created by practitioners within public deliberation.

***Table 5.2. Incorporating traditional dialogue into deliberation***

| **Dialogic Stage** | **Dialogue in Deliberation** |
|---|---|
| *1. Setting the environment.*<br>This stage focuses on setting a purpose, establishing guidelines for engagement, sharing expectations, and setting the tone. | • Host in-person public engagement opportunities.<br>• Provide instructions such as limitations (such as time or length), topical direction, and moderation in both in-person discussions and online engagement. |
| *2. Developing a common base*<br>This stage includes equalizing knowledge level, developing a common language or vocabulary, and, perhaps, sharing stories. | • Share factual, unbiased information generated independently and inclusive of different perspectives.<br>• Information is equally and accessibly with a variety of audiences to establish common knoweldge.<br>• Provide common vocabulary for the discussion to prevent misunderstanding.<br>• Encourage storytelling by asking participants to share their stake or motivation for participation about this issue. |
| *3. Exploring questions, issues, or conflicts.*<br>This stage is focused on exploring the issue(s) deeply and listening to other perspectives. | • Ask questions about the issue that seek to understand both opinion and perspective, while not leading or presuming bias.<br>• Provide instruction about listening (or reading) others' commentary. |
| *4. Moving to action.*<br>This stage creates opportunties for collective learning and inviting individuals to next steps. | • Invite participants to engage in next steps through coalition building, community engagement, peer-to-peer information sharing, or action-oriented tasks. |

By applying a dialogic approach to deliberation, practioners can gain input into decision making, and work to build perspective-taking in order to insulate city decision-making from national-level polarization. For example, if the City were utlizing a dialogic approach to the recycling ordinance they would host the various stakeholder groups for an in-person discussion of the issue wherein a moderator would be present to guide the

discussion and encourage story-telling and active listening. In addition, the City would work with an independent partner or group of diverse individuals to create and distribute factual, neutral, sourced information to participants. In addition to asking for feedback on the recycling ordinance itself, a moderator would pose questions such as, *What is your experience with recycling? What motivates you to (or not to) recycle?* and *Describe how this ordinance would affect you*. These open-ended questions will help individuals share their perspectives and hear from others. Further, the City would be informed of potential barriers to the ordinance prior to the public hearing. In this instance,they may have learned that recycling was not the barrier, but rather the mandate felt like and overstep of government to some individuals. In addition to ending with a recommendation for the ordinance, the City or moderator might invite the participants to action by asking them if they would be a peer educator to promote recycling practices in their neighborhood.

**Engaging Stakeholders & Publics**

To some extent, policy makers must engage stakeholders and publics to create effective policy and generate buy-in among constituents. Some engagement occurs as part of the governance process, whether through public hearings, town hall meetings, or open comment periods; through media, by way of letters to the editor, press conferences, or other news stories; or through ordinary discussions of issues (Tracy, 2011). Municipalities have an opportunity to build on existing engagement and build processes that support engagement through dialogue. Cities are engaging stakeholders and publics in shaping policies by hosting public deliberation events, broadcasting public meetings, utilizing social media and surveys to gather feedback, and inviting publics and stakeholder groups to participate in shaping recommendations (Carcasson & Sprain,

2015; Fishkin, 2018). Some municipalities have gone even further, sharing their data with the public through "smart city" initiatives to inspire citizen-driven solutions (Matheus, Janssen, & Maheshwari, 2018; Ojo, Curry, & Zeleti, 2015). Building opportunities for dialogue requires more than information sharing and participation; engaging stakeholders in dialogue requires intentional framing without seeming to manufacture support.

Further, prioritizing accessibility of engagement is necessary according to focus group participants in the present study. As, Lafont (2015) highlights the tension between *micropublics* that prioritize face-to-face deliberation and participate in deliberative polling, and citizen juries with the *macro*-deliberative processes that prioritize broad-scale public participation. To counteract this tension, micropublics can inform legislative bodies and promote confidence in policy decisions (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). However, such tension should not privilege power over unheard voices (Bohm, 2013). Focus group participants suggested that although online engagement was not currently ideal, the accessibility provided by online engagement opened opportunities for more participation. Policy makers also recognize this tension. For example, one interviewee discussed how stakeholder engagement is a necessity to shaping both the policy itself and the branding.

> *Therefore, in the end, you have …a branding element. You have the instant identification, and the sentence that goes along with that and then the elevator speech. And you are basically cultivating that with your stakeholder groups. Not in a Machiavellian way, but in a legitimate way. They are helping you articulate that.*

Policy makers and practitioners are increasingly using selected micropublics to generate support among the broader population. However, this process is privileging

certain voices, and is not necessarily focused on dialogue across difference. Instead, policy makers and practitioners should create dialogic opportunities for publics and stakeholders within existing deliberation processes. To do so, focus group participants recommended asking questions, connecting opinions and arguments, encouraging active listening, and utilizing a moderator to facilitate dialogue. These activities take place currently in public hearings, but public hearings are not always accessible to publics.

The networked public sphere provides opportunity for more accessible engagement to those with internet access, but the networked public sphere brings engagement issues along with it. Further, policy makers are already using online avenues to gather feedback and listen to constituents, whether through online surveys or social media. Policy makers are already taking online input seriously; as such, policy makers must also consider how to increase the quality of such public input. Pang, Shin, Lew, and Walther (2018) argue that in order to generate quality computer-mediated interactions with stakeholders, it is necessary to first build relationships, which takes significantly more time than in face-to-face interactions. I argue, like Black (2008), that dialogic moments may still be created. For example, in the case study of online interactions, contributors moved towards understanding other perspectives when they asked questions, "listened" to other arguments, and utilized narrative to explain their stake in the issue. Practitioners could engage a neutral moderator or instruction to generate this sort of interaction through online feedback.

**Setting Policy Guidelines**

Finally, policy makers and practitioners should consider how to create a governance process that uses public engagement, encourages dialogue, and uses online

input wisely. Many current governance processes include avenues for public engagement through public hearings and representation. However, given new concerns of the networked public sphere, policy makers and practitioners should formalize a process for such public dialogue to clarify access and process.

Online engagement was a particular concern for focus group participants. For instance, one participant asked: "That brings the question of what is the purpose of this elected forum. Do we think that our elected officials are taking these comments into account, or is it just airing a grievance?" Further, online engagement is a two-way street: policy makers are listening to constituents, and constituents are interpreting feedback from policy makers via online media – in some cases, as a way of increasing trust in government (Park, Kang, Rho, & Lee, 2016). Policy makers should determine a process for utilizing online public input and how, if at all, to filter online input. For example, should all online input in city policy be hosted by municipal governments? How should online engagement be entered into the public record? Will online input be anonymous or identified? How can online engagement provide accessibility to public engagement and address these concerns?

Given the results of the present study, combined with the issues generated by the networked public sphere, I recommend that municipal governments employ a strategic focus on public dialogue by employing a neutral party to serve as a public dialogue officer. Efforts led by the government itself are prone to be seen as selective and biased. Utilizing a neutral party or external moderator can steer public deliberation towards dialogue by shaping questions, providing engagement opportunities both on and offline, and sharing unbiased information. In addition, issues viewed as more polarizing to public

audiences should necessitate a public dialogue process that engages multiple audiences and stakeholders to increase buy-in about policy and strengthen information-sharing.

**5.4 Limitations**

While the findings of the present study complement and build upon the existing research on dialogue and the networked public sphere, the results should be interpreted with considerations of the limitations of this study. First, my focus group sample was educated and relatively left-leaning. Most participants identified ideologically as moderate left or centrist left, though they identified as being quite liberal on social issues. This limitation is likely a result of the sampling technique, wherein I reached out to members of existing civic groups. As such, the focus group participants demonstrated quite a bit of similarity in their approach to public engagement. Few members of the focus groups mentioned references to "the other side" and to "Trump supporters" being less willing to engage in public engagement. While I did reach out to conservative individuals and groups, many declined to participate. Future research should include a larger variety of public input and perspectives.

A second limitation of this study is the lack of educational diversity of participants. Nearly all participants had a college degree, many with Masters and PhDs as well. Educational diversity may influence the results of how individuals participate in public discussions and how they view policy. For example, particular avenues of participation may feel less accessible or welcoming. Focus group participants in particular expressed the need for accessibility in public discussions, mentioning that attending a city council meeting or keeping up with public discussions can be difficult. Previous research demonstrates that individuals who participate in public deliberation are

highly educated (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004), so it would be useful to understand perspectives of those who might be less inclined to participate in public deliberation events.

### 5.5 Directions for Future Research

Beyond the limitations of this study, it is important to highlight the potential for future research. I consider this study exploratory in nature, by examining functions of polarization and dialogue in municipal public deliberation. Suggestions for future applications are included above, but there are several additional directions for research inquiry. The present study set out to explore how individuals understand and engage in municipal public discussions using this particular case study. This exploratory study intended to set the groundwork for future research to understand how public discussions function on a local level, how problems of the networked public sphere influence local discussions, and how dialogue might be used to address such problems. Though the present study was limited in breadth by its small sample and scope, the study did provide a deep dive into the public discussion about the recycling ordinance. Future research should examine how individuals participate in local public discussions about a breadth of issues that might be more and less polarizing.

Second, future investigation of polarization at a municipal level would benefit from inquiring specifically how online commenters are utilizing media sources in shaping opinions. In the present study, I looked for more obvious references to news sources, such as references to talking points or links to news website. Future research should seek out only commenters to better understand their motivations. Contacting online commenters is a challenge because the anonymity is part of online commenting.

However, a stronger understanding of commenters' decision-making process, motivations, and information source would inform the online public engagement process. For example, do online or in-person commenters use local or national news sources in shaping their opinions? Do they see media as playing an active or passive role in shaping their opinions? A commenter might cite something she or he heard via a news source, or s/he might instead feel that they reached that opinion outside of the influence of the press and that the press outlet merely supports their opinion. Further attention should be given to the role of neighbors and friends in directing individuals to such news sources: Are commenters directed to news sources because of their friends? Such a study could also explore how prevalent communities see polarization in local policy making. Participants in the present study certainly discussed the effect of polarization but felt it less so within their own communities. Exploring the impact of polarization at a municipal level more explicitly will inform how cognizant policy makers and dialogue practitioners should be and how they should work to counteract the impact of polarization within their municipality.

Third, while dialogue within computer-mediated communication has mixed results (Walther et al., 2015), assessing moderated computer-mediated dialogue around a particular policy issue using various strategies would be of particular interest. For example, would municipal publics engage in online dialogue wherein their shared their identity, had set ground rules, and engaged with a moderator? Would such a situation encourage dialogue and be viewed as a neutral? Zúñiga and Nagda (2001) suggest the four stages of dialogue are required to accomplish perspective sharing, and Pang et al. (2018) suggest the computer-mediated communication can only produce trust when

relationships are established over time. Such online dialogue may require a structured environment that establishes avenues for dialogue over time via relationship-building. Future research should explore opportunities for dialogue, particularly in comparison to social media, to examine trust, dialogic opportunity, and satisfaction. Examination of online opportunities can inform policy makers on the best way to engage publics online.

Finally, many participants suggested bringing individuals together who thought differently to discuss policy and perspective issues. For example, one participant stated, "It would be great if there was a forum that you knew people were just going to be there for the discussion. Like a multitude of ideas and different opinions. Not the echo chambers that we are usually in, but people who don't call people 'right wing-nuts.'" Likewise, another participant stated, "If you could somehow focus the conversation around the idea of it being an opportunity to learn and not …. And I don't know, my goal wouldn't be to change their point of view, but my goal would be to understand their point of view." While participants argued for this type of engagement, they also indicated how difficult it can feel to engage with others who think differently: "I say out loud that I need to surround myself with people who think differently, but I can't do it 24/7. I have to do it in small doses, my blood pressure is already high." As such, research can investigate if individuals came together in such a forum, if it is possible to engage stakeholders in discussions for the purpose of perspective sharing. Examination of structured groups centered on dialogue outside of a classroom, focused on policy, will better inform the dialogue literature to additional applications and environments.

Overall, while researchers are working to understand impacts of polarization and the networked public sphere on policy making and public engagement, more research is

needed to develop interventions that are achievable at the local level. Research-informed and data-driven policies are needed to guide how policy makers should hear disparate voices, engage publics, and consider online forums. My present study adds to the literature on public engagement and dialogue within the networked public sphere. It is critical that we continue to consider the implications of online communication and media identity into how public audiences interpret policy, perspectives, intentions, and interactions.

# Appendix A: Recruitment Scripts

**Focus Group**

You are invited to participate in a study to understand how individuals understand discussions about local issues.

Many people feel that we are more divided than ever, and this political division may impact local discussions. I want to understand in if national divisions impact local discussions, and what makes local debate work well.

To participate in this study, you must:

1. Be at least 19 years of age, or older;
2. Be a resident of Lincoln, Nebraska (for at least 6 months)

**For participating in this research, you will receive $10 in compensation.** Participation will include a brief survey and participation in one focus group lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The focus group may be online (via video conference) or in-person. Your information will be kept confidential.

If you are interested in participating, please complete this brief survey to indicate your availability and some brief information about yourself:

https://go.unl.edu/focusgroupsignup

Thank you in advance for your participation and sharing this call with your personal networks. Your insight is truly appreciated!

Focus group data and identifying information will be confidential. Your participation, non-participation, or withdrawal from this study will not affect your relationship in any way with the your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or any other entities associated with this research, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Primary Researcher:**

Janell Walther
University of Nebraska- Lincoln Department of Communication Studies &
University of Nebraska Public Policy Center
402-472-2762
Jwalther2@nebraska.edu

**Interview**

*[This email will be sent to identified participants and organizations in the Lincoln recycling ordinance. Participants will be identified by:*

1. *Those who participated in the comments to the news articles online by direct message; or*
2. *Those who spoke at public hearings and identified that they represented groups or organizations.]*

Dear _____:

My name is Janell, and I am conducting a research project looking into the mandatory cardboard recycling ordinance that went into effect this April. I am interested in understanding how individuals participate and make sense of discussions about local issues.

Many people feel that we are more divided than ever, and this political division may impact local discussions. I want to understand in if national divisions impact local discussions, and what makes local debate work well.

As a person who actively participated in this discussion, I would like to hear your insight on what you think what contributes to these local discussions, both on and off line. I would like to meet with you, via phone or in person, for a brief interview at your convenience, lasting no more than 30 minutes to hear your ideas about local discussions. Any information that you provide in this interview will be kept confidential.

If you are willing or able to participate, please contact me at the information below. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you in advance for your valuable time and insight,

Janell Walther, Ph.D. Candidate
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Department of Communication Studies
Jwalther2@nebraska.edu
402-613-6404

# Appendix B: Recruitment Survey

## Qualifications

You are invited to participate in a study to understand how individuals discuss local issues.

Many people feel that we are more divided than ever, and this political division may impact local discussions. I want to understand if national divisions impact local discussions, and what makes local debate work well.

To participate in this study, you must:

1. Be at least 19 years of age, or older;
2. Be a resident of Lincoln, Nebraska (for at least 6 months)

**For participating in this research, you will receive $10 in compensation.** Participation will include a brief survey and participation in one focus group lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The focus group may be online (via video conference) or in-person. Your information will be kept confidential.

The focus groups will be held between the dates of April 30 - May 30.

## Participation

**Would you be willing to participate in a 60 to 90-minute group discussion about local problem-solving?** If you are chosen to participate, you will receive $10 for your time.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

**If yes, please indicate when you are typically available**:

- ☐ Weekdays, evenings
- ☐ Saturday mornings
- ☐ Weekdays, lunch hour
- ☐ Weekdays, mornings
- ☐ Other: _____

**Would you prefer to participate via online video conference or in-person focus group?** If you choose to participate online, you'll need a computer video capability for audio and visual connection and internet connectivity. If you choose to participate in person, a convenient location will be chosen and refreshments will be provided. *If you have no preference, please select both.*

- ☐ Online video conference
- ☐ In-person meeting

**Please complete this information so we can contact you to participate:**

- Name:
- Phone Number (call):
- Phone Number (Text):
- Email:
- How would you like to be addressed (e.g., Ms., Dr., nickname)?

**About You** We are interested in knowing a little about the preferences and beliefs of people attending this focus group. This information helps organize group participants.

**Ideologically, which of the following best describes you:**

| Overall | Strongly Liberal | Moderately Liberal | Weakly Liberal | Centrist/Middle of the Road | Weakly Conservative | Moderately Conservative | Strongly Conservative |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **ECONOMIC issues** | Strongly Liberal | Moderately Liberal | Weakly Liberal | Centrist/Middle of the Road | Weakly Conservative | Moderately Conservative | Strongly Conservative |
| **SOCIAL issues** | Strongly Liberal | Moderately Liberal | Weakly Liberal | Centrist/Middle of the Road | Weakly Conservative | Moderately Conservative | Strongly Conservative |

**Politically, which of these describes you?**

- ☐ Democrat
- ☐ Green Party
- ☐ Independent
- ☐ Libertarian
- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Other: _____

## Climate Change Opinion

Global warming refers to the idea that the world's average temperature has been increasing over the past 150 years, may be increasing more in the future, and that the world's climate may change as a result.

**What do you think? Do you think that global warming is happening?**

| Yes, definitely | Probably Yes | Probably Not | No, definitely not | Don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

On some issues people feel that they have all the information they need in order to form a firm opinion, while on other issues they would like more information before making up their mind.

**For global warming, where would you place yourself?**

- o I need **a lot** more information
- o I need **some** more information
- o I need **a little** more information
- o I **do not need any** more information

| **In your opinion, what is the risk of climate change exerting a significant impact on…** | **No risk at all** | **A slight risk** | **A moderate risk** | **A high risk** | **A very high risk** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *...public health* in your region? | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| …economic development in your region? | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| *...nature*, that is, the natural *environment* in your region? | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |

## Recycling Participation

**How do you recycle, if at all?** *Please mark only one box*.

- ☐ Pay for curbside recycling service, not sorted
- ☐ Pay for curbside recycling service, sorted
- ☐ Sort and take my recycling to City drop boxes
- ☐ Recycling, provided by my landlord
- ☐ Do not recycle
- ☐ Other

## Demographics

**What is the highest level of education you have achieved**? *Please mark only one box*.

- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ Some high school
- ☐ High school diploma
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Two-year college or technical degree
- ☐ Four-year college degree
- ☐ Some graduate school
- ☐ Advanced degree

**What is your age in years?** _____

**Where do you live?**

- ☐ Own my home
- ☐ Own my apartment/condo
- ☐ Rent apartment/room/house
- ☐ Dormitory/college residence
- ☐ Someone else's apartment, room, or house
- ☐ Shelter (transitional living center, temporary facility)
- ☐ Residential facility
- ☐ Other housed (specify): _____

**What is your gender?** _____

**Critical Thinking**:
Please rate your agreement with the following statements. (Optional)

**Please answer the following.**

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral/No Opinion | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A good citizen should be willing to justify their political views. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I follow political and social issues because I want to learn more things. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I believe most people try to be fair. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| A good citizen should allow others to challenge their political beliefs. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I believe that others have good intentions. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| A good citizen should listen to people who disagree with them politically. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I follow political and social issues because I think it's important. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| A good citizen should discuss politics with those who disagree with them. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| If a citizen is dissatisfied with the policies of government, he or she has a duty to do something about it. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I follow political and social issues because that's what I'm supposed to do. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I like to have the responsibility of handling a situation that requires a lot of thinking. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I trust what people say. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I usually end up deliberating about issues even when they do not affect me personally. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| Learning new ways to think doesn't excite me very much. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| I follow political and social issues because it bothers me when I don't. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| Thinking is not my idea of fun. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| The notion of thinking abstractly is appealing to me. | SD | D | N | A | SA |

**Thank you for your time! A member of the research team will be in touch with you to schedule a focus group.**

If you have any questions, please contact Janell Walther at jwalther2@nebraska.edu.

# Appendix C. Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for attending our discussion today; we appreciate your time and insight. My name is Janell, and I will serve as your facilitator today.

We expect that this session will last no more than 90 minutes. Information you provide in this session will be kept confidential; your name will not be shared. We would like to both audio and video record this session for our research purposes. Is that okay with everyone?

## Orientation

*(5 min)*

One of the purposes of our discussion today is to better understand how individuals improve discussions with each other. There is some research that argues that rather than hearing new opinions from different perspectives, we are prone to silo our opinions by blocking our people with different views on Facebook, or limiting our news sources to only those that reflect what we believe. Many media sources themselves are silo-ed. In this sense, we create our own echo chamber, so we aren't hearing various opinions. Scholars say that this can impact our critical thinking, problem solving, and even our ability to communicate with each other.

Today, I'd like to first share what I learned in a brief case study about a recent controversy here in Lincoln. Then, I would like to get your insight, feedback, and reflections to understand:

- What you thought went well in the public discussion;
- What you thought did not work well in the public discussion;
- What you think would improve public discussion in the future.

**Case Study Summary**

*Brief summary of context*: In the City of Lincoln, the limited space in the landfill has spurned increased interest and conflict about mandatory recycling. In addition, Lincoln and the State of Nebraska recycling at significantly lower rates than the national average and lesser than comparable cities. The concept of mandatory recycling efforts created a rift in city council business-as-usual discussions.

In 2013 and 2014 work groups and task forces created a Solid Waste plan and recommendations for managing solid waste and recycling in the City of Lincoln. One of those recommendations was to increase recycling efforts in the City through various methods like increasing recycling education and mandating recycling of certain recyclable materials.

In May of 2016, the Mayor's office proposed an ordinance to make materials mandatory for recycling, beginning with corrugated cardboard and advancing to paper in later years. City Council members and the public took issue with the ban on cardboard because:

1. Not recycling corrugated cardboard could be considered a misdemeanor (same as the current ban on leaves and grass from the landfill), punishable by fine or jail time. This was a particular concern for landlords whose tenants may not recycle.
2. Concern about reduced landfill collection fees at the landfill site for dumping trash could result in less City income; the resulting recommendation was increased landfill fees by $0.60 per ton.

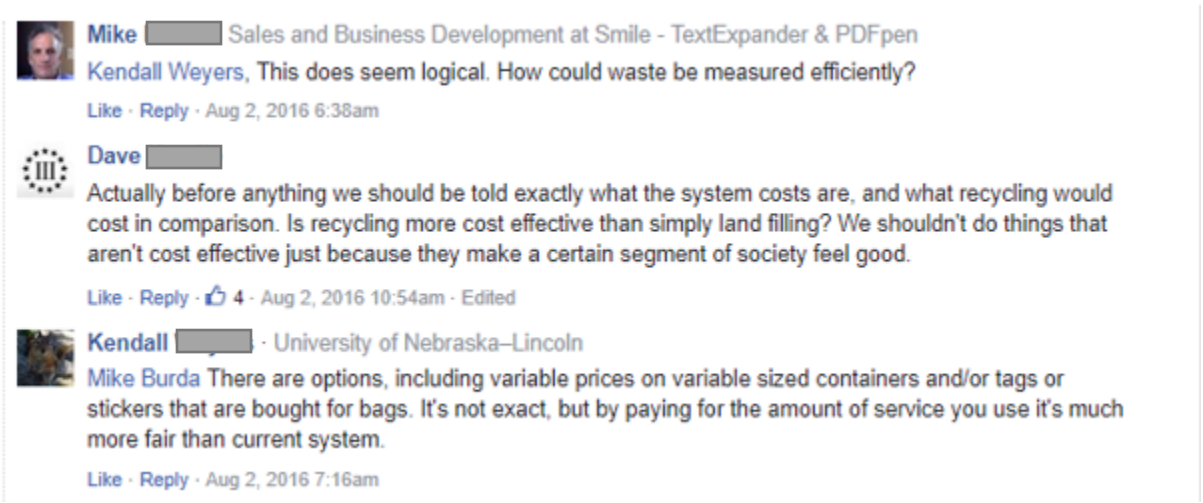
Opposition to the ban led to the City Council voting down the ordinance along party lines, 4-3. However, the recycling effort as a whole received public support, so a group organized a petition to add the ordinance as a ballot initiative at the next City vote. To prevent this ballot initiative and a City vote, a compromise was proposed to ban the materials from the landfill, but without the misdemeanor penalty.

First, I will show you a screen shot of the online commentary for discussion. Then, I will present a brief video clip of the in-person public hearing.

*Online commentary*

Online discussion was mixed between discussion of ideas (e.g., asking questions) or expressions of political identity.

**Example 1.** Questions & response




**Example 2.** Expression of political identity in the negative


**Given these two examples, please respond to the following questions:**

1. What are some of your initial reactions to the online conversation?
2. What would improve the online discussion, in your opinion?
    a. What would help people understand each other's points of view online?
3. What would make the public discussion worse (e.g., increase disengagement)?

*Video clip of public hearing and text:*

**7-25-16: Public Commentary**

**Supporter:** I want to extend the life of the landfill is good business. **I'm a business owner** and I **regularly take items** to the landfill. I believe this will be a short-term heartache for our businesses. I believe the cost is justified by the end result. Thank you.

- *Councilperson C*: Do you recycle at home?
- *Supporter*: Yes. I live in the country so I don't have curbside, but we do recycle at home and at my business.

**…**

**Fred, Realtors Association**– I represent the Realtor's Association of Lincoln and I'm also individually the operator and landlord of a lot of real estate. We lease to residential tenants and much like Lynn, affordable and housing credit. So we don't have any room for additional costs. The association supports voluntary recycling. The association believes any recycling should be voluntary and opposes and mandated recycling would have elements or results of obligations on landlords for waste removal, or cost to landlords, and criminal violations with fines or jail time unless such violation is the intent and profit of the actor. In the residential and commercial, we can't monitor who puts stuff in it. We just can't do it. I read the act and what I envision may come to that act. The people on the hook for the recycling programs are landlords and it is something that is not written into leases as it is now except Mr. Carlson. I see a lot of leases and I run the realtor's hotline. It's not a common provision. Leases would have to be rewritten or modified to accommodate this. Real estate would have to be reconfigured to accommodate this. Imagine doubling the size of all the waste corrals to accommodate the size of the recycling.

**1-30-17 Public Hearing**

**Jim**: I own the company Alley Cat Disposal and Recycling. I love this city, I wouldn't trade it for anywhere else. Whatever you folks do tonight, we are prepared to carry on with recycling. Recycling Is going on in this city and will continue. My company has offered recycling for 4 years and curbside and carry out for our elderly customers.

- *Councilperson E*: Thank you for being here. The previous testifier indicated that a customer indicated that people would need all separate bins. Do you need that?
- *Jim*: For recycling, all recycling can go into one bin and it's sorted later.
- *Councilperson R*: I want to say thank you for the program where you assist seniors. I know the current hauler helped my parents tremendously that you were kind to go up to the house and do that for all seniors who request it.
- *Councilperson C*: Mr. Klein, will you discuss, you've worked on a 4-year recycling voluntarily. This program would increase education on recycling. Is it possible to get a good return on recycling with stepped up education?

- *Jim*: Return money wise? In terms of single stream recycling, no, there's not a lot of money in it.
- *Councilperson C*: I mean people recycling.
- *Jim*: Well, we are going to need a lot of education, especially for apartment dwellers and commercial buildings because it's big, we need a lot of education. All you have to do is drive through there and people think they are a free drop off site. And I know myself and my competitors keep this city clean and we will continue to do that.
- *Councilperson C*: What will do you if you get one of those $100 charges? Are you going to handle that? Will you pass that through?
- *Jim*: I don't have an answer for that. I don't know.
- *Councilperson R*: How do you currently handle appliances, tires, grass clippings and other household hazardous waste?
- *Jim*: We contact them. We write it down and send them an email, call… I education is key.

**Given these three examples, please respond to the following questions:**

4. What are some of your initial reactions to the conversation at the hearings?

5. What would improve the in-person discussion, in your opinion?
    a. What would help people understand each other's points of view?

6. What would make the public discussion worse (e.g., increase disengagement)?

7. What are some of the similarities and differences between the online and in-person discussion?

# Appendix D. Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting with me today! As part of my dissertation project, I'm conducting a case study on the recycling ordinance discussion here in Lincoln. I would like to understand how we can improve public discussions about various issues at a local level; and I'm interested in the cardboard recycling discussion as an example of a public discussion about controversial issues.

You were identified as a person involved in the mandatory cardboard recycling discussion. I would like to ask you some questions about the discussion, what you thought what did and did not go well, and your recommendations for handing public discussions well in the future.

I expect this interview to last 30 – 45 minutes. Information you provide will be kept confidential; your name will not be shared. I would like to audio record this interview for my research purposes. Is that okay?

Do you have any questions about the interview process or the project?

**On the Recycling Ordinance & Public Discussion**

1. Describe your role in the mandatory recycling ordinance discussion (e.g., committee member, council member, participant in a public meeting).
    a. What formal or informal roles did you have in advocating for or against the proposal?
2. What avenues or media did you express your opinion about this recycling ordinance?
    a. Did you share your thoughts online? If so, what venues did you use?
        i. If yes, What did you think was useful about this online discussion?
        ii. What was not helpful or useful about the online discussion?
        iii. Why did you choose this medium for sharing your ideas or opinions?
    b. Did you share your thoughts in person, at a City meeting, hearing, or event?
        i. If yes, What did you think was useful about participating in the City hearing, meeting, or event?
        ii. What was not helpful about participating in the City hearing, meeting, or event?
        iii. Why did you choose this medium for sharing your ideas or opinions?
    c. Did you share your thoughts anywhere else, such as media (radio, newspaper), advocacy meetings (e.g., LIBA, League of Conservation Voters), or community groups?
        i. If yes, What was useful about <the media you chose> for discussion?

ii. What was not useful?

**Practices for Public Discussion**

3. How often to you participate in discussions about civic issues, locally?
4. When sharing your opinion, what, if any, national-level media or other media did you use to help shape your thoughts, argument, or ideas?
    a. What websites, social venues, or media sources to help inform your opinions?
5. If you were participating in a discussion about a city issue in the future, how would you participate and why?
    a. What media would you use to engage with others?
    b. Describe what style of engagement, or how you would discuss an issue, with others.
        i. How would you try to frame your argument or opinion when interacting with others?
6. What recommendations do you have for others engaging in discussions about city issues, like this one?
    a. How are your recommendations different for participating in discussions online versus in person?
    b. How would your recommendations be different for an issue at a state or national level?
    c. What techniques, if any, do you use when engaging with others in discussions about local issues?
        a. For example, what do you say if someone disagrees with you?
7. What would improve public discussions about controversial issues?
    a. Who should make changes to public discussions?

# Appendix E. Informed Consent Forms

Department of Communication Studies, 432 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0329, (402)472-2069, comm.unl.edu

## Informed Consent Form: Interview

**TITLE:** DIALOGUE AS SOCIAL LEARNING: IMPROVING DELIBERATION IN MUNICIPAL CONTROVERSIES

**Purpose:** We are interested in learning more about public discussions with local controversies and issues. This study seeks to understand how individuals understand public discussions and how to improve public discussion, both online and in person. Your knowledgeable input will help us understand how residents make sense of policy topics using different approaches in a group setting.

In order to participate in this study you must:

1) Be a current resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, and
2) Be at least 19 years old.

Participation will take place over the phone or in person at community buildings in Lincoln, Nebraska.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in one interview, lasting approximately 35 minutes, with a member of the research team. The interview will be audio recorded.

**Benefits**: There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant except potentially gaining knowledge about local sustainability policy and public dialogue.

**Risks:** There are no known risks for participating in this research. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable completing the interview, you may terminate your participation b without damaging your relationship with the University of Nebraska. If you choose not to complete the interview, your data will not be included in the associated research.

**Confidentiality:** Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office or within secure, password protected files on a computer and will only be seen by the investigators during the study and for five (5) years after the study is complete. The information

obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data, so that no individuals can be identified. While researchers will have access to the names and associated survey responses, names will not be used to match respondents with their responses.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or any other entities associated with this research, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:** You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

☐ This interview will be audio recorded. Please check this box to indicate that you agree to have your participation in this interview audiotaped.

**Signature of Participant:**

_____ _____

Signature of Research Participant Date

_____

Printed Name

If you have any questions, please contact us.

Primary researcher: Janell Walther, (402) 472-2762, jwalther2@nebraska.edu

Researcher: Jordan Soliz, Ph.D., 402-472-2070, jsoliz2@unl.edu

Department of Communication Studies, 432 Oldfather Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0329, (402)472-2069, comm.unl.edu

## Informed Consent Form: Focus Group

**TITLE:** DIALOGUE AS SOCIAL LEARNING: IMPROVING DELIBERATION IN MUNICIPAL CONTROVERSIES

**Purpose:** We are interested in learning more about public discussions with local controversies and issues. This study seeks to understand how individuals understand public discussions and how to improve public discussion, both online and in person. Your knowledgeable input will help us understand how residents make sense of policy topics using different approaches in a group setting.

In order to participate in this study you must:

1) Be a current resident of Lincoln, Nebraska, and
2) Be at least 19 years old.

Participation will take place online or in person on the UNL campus or in community buildings in Lincoln, Nebraska.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in one structured focus group in person, lasting approximately 75 minutes, with a member of the research team. The focus group will be audio and video recorded.

**Benefits**: There are no direct benefits to you as a research participant except potentially gaining knowledge about local sustainability policy and public dialogue.

**Compensation/Credit:** All participants are eligible for $10 in compensation.

**Risks:** There are no known risks for participating in this research. If for any reason you feel uncomfortable completing the focus group, you may terminate your participation by exiting the focus group without damaging your relationship with the University of Nebraska. If you choose not to complete the survey or the focus group, your data will not be included in the associated research.

**Confidentiality:** Due to the nature of a focus group, we cannot guarantee complete confidentiality of participation within focus groups, but we ask all focus group participants to not share what is said in the focus group with others. However, any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principal investigator's office or within secure, password protected files on a computer and will only be seen by the investigators during the study and for five (5) years after

the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported as aggregated data, so that no individuals can be identified. While researchers will have access to the names and associated survey responses, names will not be used to match respondents with their responses.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study. Or you may contact the investigator(s) at the phone numbers below. Please contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or any other entities associated with this research, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:** You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

As a participant in this project you will receive compensation in the amount of $10 for your time.

☐ This interview will be audio and videotaped. Please check this box to indicate that you agree to have your participation in this interview audiotaped.

**Signature of Participant:**

_____ _____

Signature of Research Participant Date

_____

Printed Name

If you have any questions, please contact us.
Primary researcher: Janell Walther, (402) 472-2762, jwalther2@nebraska.edu
Researcher: Jordan Soliz, Ph.D., 402-472-2070, jsoliz2@unl.edu

# Appendix F. Focus Group Participants: Complete Tables

***Table F.1. Participant education level***

| Educational Level | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Two-year college degree** | 2 | 8.3 |
| **Four-year college degree** | 8 | 33.3 |
| **Advanced degree** | 14 | 58.3 |
| ***Total*** | ***24*** | |

***Table F.2. Participant household type***

| Type | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Own home** | 20 | 83.3 |
| **Rent apartment, house, or room** | 4 | 16.7 |
| ***Total*** | ***24*** | |

***Table F.3. Participant recycling pattern***

| Recycling method | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Curbside comingled** | 18 | 75.0 |
| **Curbside sorted** | 1 | 4.2 |
| **City drop box** | 4 | 16.7 |
| **Landlord recycles** | 1 | 4.2 |
| ***Total*** | ***24*** | |

*Table F.4. Ideology on economic and social issues*

| | Economic Issues – Count | Economic Issues - Percent | Social Issues – Count | Social Issues – Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Strongly Liberal** | 0 | - | 8 | 34.8 |
| **Moderately Liberal** | 14 | 60.9 | 11 | 47.8 |
| **Weakly Liberal** | 1 | 4.3 | 2 | 8.7 |
| **Centrist** | 5 | 21.7 | 2 | 8.7 |
| **Weakly Conservative** | 2 | 8.7 | 0 | - |
| **Moderately Conservative** | 1 | 4.3 | 0 | - |
| **Strongly Conservative** | 0 | - | 0 | - |

*Table F.5. Participant political affiliation*

| | Economic Issues – Count | Economic Issues - Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Democrat** | 16 | 66.7 |
| **Independent** | 3 | 12.5 |
| **Republican** | 3 | 12.5 |
| **Other** | 2 | 8.3 |
| **Green Party** | 0 | - |
| **Libertarian** | 0 | - |

*Table F.6. Participant opinion of global warming ("Do you think global warming is happening?")*

| | Count | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| **Yes, definitely** | 19 | 82.6 |
| **Probably yes** | 4 | 17.4 |
| **Probably not** | 0 | - |
| **No, definitely not** | 0 | - |

***Table F.7. Participant opinion of global warming ("For global warming, where do you place yourself?")***

| | **Count** | **Percent** |
|---|---|---|
| **I need a lot more information** | 0 | - |
| **I need some more information** | 5 | 20.8 |
| **I need a little more information** | 14 | 58.3 |
| **I do not need any more information** | 5 | 20.8 |

***Table F.8. Participant opinion of climate change impact***

| **In your opinion, what is the risk of climate change exerting a significant impact on…** | **Mean** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|
| *…public health* **in your region?** | 3.71 | 1.12 |
| **…economic development in your region?** | 3.96 | 0.81 |
| *…nature*, **that is, the natural** *environment* **in your region?** | 4.13 | 0.80 |

# Appendix G. Codebook

| **CODE** | **Accessibility** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Mention of the need for debate/democracy/ policy input to be accessible to multiple public audiences. |
| When to use | Use code when participants mention the need for allowing multiple points of view without limitations on accessibility. May be related to in-person, online, or other democratic participation. |
| When not to use | Do not use when referring just to an easier way to participate. |
| Example | "What I love about the possibility of an online interaction, is that it's easy and accessible and you don't have to go down to city council and do that." |

| **CODE** | **Affirmation / Validation** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to those participating in public discussions has having their points of view recognized, either positively or negatively, rather than ignored. |
| When to use | Use when participants discuss the role of recognizing opinions or comments, either online or offline, positive or negative. Opinion or statements may be recognized by public officials, or others engaged in the discussion. Use to demonstrate when comments become a part of decisions or discussion. |
| When not to use | Do not use to indicate validation of points based on identification, instead code Identity/Affiliation. |
| Example | "I was looking at the number of likes, Dave evidently has a following and his [comments have] been edited both times, which I wonder what it was before. Is it toned down or is it worse?"<br><br>"I have noticed that on good morning American they will sometimes report on what some people have said online when they report on the article, a top article or something they are covering. They will say 'Well Sally from Such-and-Place said this…' so they are starting to use those comments in their news reporting. " |

| **CODE** | **Asking Questions** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the process of asking questions in a discussion to advance dialogue. |
| When to use | Use code when participants mention the use of questions to help discussions, either online or offline. |

| | |
|---|---|
| When not to use | Do not use to indicate sarcastic / inflammatory questions (code as "Inflammatory") |
| Example | "[In} the face to face, the personal discussion or statements lend themselves to people being able to ask questions to clarify. Like in the last example, what would you do if this happened? I mean,…" |

| **CODE** | **Both Sides** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the need to hear "both sides" of an argument, idea, or policy within a discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the use of hearing both sides as important to counteract polarization or to be civil. May be positive or negative. May be overt or more vague references to the concept of two sides. |
| When not to use | Do not use for indicating a need for bipartisan agreement. |
| Example | "I also think that it's just sometimes hard to engage across the table. It can be so hard and so exhausting that I think it's just, I bounce back and forth between yes, we should always engage with others that have different thoughts and who challenge us to grow and experiment with different ideas." |

| **CODE** | **Connecting / Referencing others** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | This code refers to the act of connecting arguments or referencing statements made by others when engaged in discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants referencing how the examples referred back to each other, the desire to connect to each other, or how the examples utilized others in the room/discussion group. |
| When not to use | Do not use for referencing documents outside of the immediate presence. |
| Example | "I was struck by the practical nature and the being kind of kind to one another in this back and forth. They seem to be trying to share information and having logical, rational conversation online" |

| **CODE** | **Context** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the idea that the context surrounding comments are important to a full understanding of them. |
| When to use | Use when participants are indicating the need to see comments or framing of arguments amid a larger context. |

| | |
|---|---|
| When not to use | Do not use to refer to interaction design as context. Do not use for perspective-taking, but it may be a step towards perspective taking. |
| Example | "Yeah, because it's all about building that context and background. So maybe there is a real reason why a person thinking that that I never knew. So that may help me interact with people who are similar, but not the same." |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **Dialogue/ Discussion** |
| Full Definition | Refers to the process of using public discussions to solve problems. |
| When to use | Use when participants reference a desire to engage in discussions, hear points of view; or the process of using discussions as part of the democratic process. Sometimes used to refer to the idea of "civil discussion." Often used in combination with other codes. |
| When not to use | Not necessarily indicative of dialogue or debate in the academic sense. |
| Example | "I always like to have discussion, and I think I probably like our discussions too. It's how I learn and like to learn, and I wished ore people liked to learn."<br><br>"And teaching people that is what leads ot more results and better discussion." |

| | |
|---|---|
| CODE | **Emotional** |
| Full Definition | Refers to the use of emotion in discussions, either online or offline. |
| When to use | Participants refer to the overt or vague use of emotional statement, emotional intonation, passionate stance or related in public discussions. May be online or offline, positive or negative. |
| When not to use | Do not use for name calling or inflammatory language. |
| Example | "And you know, I want to push back a second on being emotional. I think having emotion about things you are passionate about is okay." |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **Engaged / Informed (ill-informed)** |
| Full Definition | Refers to the idea that people are informed or engaged in local discussions, policies, or politics (or a lack thereof). |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the idea that those engaging in public discussions are informed (or ill-informed) or engaged in the issues (or not engaged). |

| | |
|---|---|
| When not to use | Do not use to refer to the process or level of engagement with an issue, i.e., not measurable engagement levels. |
| Example | "C: No, it is "I just get my news from one source and that's the way it is. " It's very discouraging.<br><br>R: And it's not just students. I have friends that are MSNBC junkies and it's like … ugh."<br><br>"I was struck by how all three speakers came from a point of expertise… So they each, beyond affiliation, they talk about how this policy will affect them hoping to inform this power structure. How the policy like what consequences the policy would have, both intentional and unintentionally. Knowing the policy is applied very broadly for a wide spectrum of things, even if it wasn't a wide back and forth dialogue." |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **Identity / Affiliation** |
| Full Definition | Refers to the use of identity factors (e.g., organization, workplace, community) in public discussions. |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the use of identity (or the absence of) in expressing opinion, either in the examples or their own participation in public discussions |
| When not to use | Do not use for participant expression of identity. |
| Example | "I have a board. And I'm supposed to be talking and representing minority and diverse voices from Lincoln from [my organization's] perspective. I'm supposed to have something important to say about DACA or any of the issues that people face. And so I don't want to make a mistake. I don't want to mess it up. So I'm really, I have to really think carefully about what I say and what I write. You know, I can't call people ass holes. Even if they are online. I can't say that." |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **In Person** |
| Full Definition | Refers to public discussions that take place in person. |
| When to use | Use when 1) participants are discussing the public discussion that took place in person, or 2) participants discuss ways in which face to face / in-person discussions offer opportunities for dialogue. |
| When not to use | Do not use when referring to public discussions online. If comparing online to in-person discussions, can use both codes. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Example | "T: Well, and you can understand their inflection and their tone, all of that above that I don't get in a written medium." |

| **CODE** | **Interaction Design** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to ways in which the context, environment, formality, design of the discussion impact how people engage in public discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants describe ways the environment impacts how or what people say in discussions. |
| When not to use | Do not use when the reference is to a broader context or simply comparing and contrasting in-person versus online discussion. |
| Example | "Along with that, the eye contact, that personal connection, I think they are less likely to maybe jab not personal attack. Not to… so along with the time limit, because it is more of a formal setting, there are microphones, you have to wait your turn." |

| **CODE** | **Interventions** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to intentional modifications to facilitate public discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants describe existing modifications or propose modifications to improve or facilitate public discussions. |
| When not to use | Interventions should be somewhat tool-based (e.g., facilitator, time limit), rather than environmental (e.g., ignore online commentary). |
| Example | "It could be moderated for civil discussion. Where there are some moderated forums I guess." |

| **CODE** | **Lack of valid sources** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the difficulty finding information or reliable sources to inform public discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants describe difficulty finding reliable information or news sources, or the difficulty others have finding support for arguments in public discussions. |
| When not to use | Do not use to describe unacceptable arguments in public discussions. |
| Example | "Well, in the world of fake news, I can't even direct people to Snopes anymore because now Snopes is biased and liberal leaning." |

| **CODE** | **Listening** |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the idea of listening to others points of view, active listening. |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to active listening or listening to others' arguments or points of view. |
| When not to use | Is not as strong as perspective taking. |
| Example | "Part of it is, you have to go into those situations where you know things will be discussed that you don't agree with. And you have to think, is it worth me saying something, or is it better for me to just listen and reflect on why I don't believe that. And then we leave, and I tell my kids not to think that. |

| **CODE** | **Logical** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the value of logic or rational arguments in public discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the use (or lack of) logic or rational argument in public discussion. |
| When not to use | Use for specific mentions rather than concepts (e.g., cost-benefit analysis). |
| Example | "And adding on to that, these first ones are logical and still logical in the little amount you have to say your thoughts. It's never going to go too deep…" |

| **CODE** | **Name-Calling / Inflammatory** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to use of inflammatory statements or name-calling in public argument. |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the existence of inflammatory statements in public discussions, either online or in person. May be used for the lack of name-calling when used comparatively. May also be called trolling, mudslinging. |
| When not to use | Do not use for references to off-topic comments. |
| Example | "Well, in this example, this seems more typical of online discussions that I've seen. They both make very inflammatory statements. Both of those are meant to stir the pot and not really promote discussion. The previous ones seemed fairly like discussion." |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **Nervous / Afraid to participate** |
| Full Definition | Refers to a lack of confidence or hesitation to participate in public discussion, any capacity. |
| When to use | Use when participants express their own, or others' hesitation to participate in public discussions, online or in-person. May also include hesitations to view public discussions or comment sections. |
| When not to use | -- |
| Example | "I think it's scary. Testifying instead of like a legislative committee or a school board meeting. I testified when they were debating going to a middle school. And there was no way, but when I started listening. And it was scary to testify, and I thought I had all my ducks in a row, and then you also become the person who is 'Oh, you're the one who didn't want to do this?'" |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **Online** |
| Full Definition | Refers to public discussions taking place online. |
| When to use | Use when participants are reacting to online commentary or sharing opinions about online discussions. |
| When not to use | When comparing to in-person discussions, use both codes as appropriate. |
| Example | "Well for me, public speaking is really hard, and I stutter some times. So it's easier for me to participate online because I have the time to say what I need to say without standing in front of people, but it's like How do I say what I need to say…" |

| | |
|---|---|
| **CODE** | **Perspective Taking** |
| Full Definition | Refers to the concept of absorbing and understanding another public discussion participant's perspective. |
| When to use | Use when participants a desire to, an understanding of, or a need to understand other points of view or motivations. Has dialogic implications. |
| When not to use | Do not use when it's simply referring to "both sides." |
| Example | "love it when boards or committees ask questions of the people who are presenting and create more a dialogue. I think that is so powerful and it, you often elicit more information, more perspectives…" |

| **CODE** | **Polarization** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to political polarization or the existence of "the other side." |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the existence of polarization, polarization hindering public discussions, or public discussion participants being more polarized or extreme in their views. |
| When not to use | Do not use to refer to hearing or understanding both sides of an argument. |
| Example | "And I do think there is something about online discussion, well I know the research shows that online discussion can enable people to express more extreme or fringe more than they would in person or on the phone or in other media." |

| **CODE** | **Prepare Thoughts** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to idea of preparing words, thoughts, or ideas in advance for public discussion. |
| When to use | Use when participants discuss the need or existence of those engaging in public discussions as being prepared, having prepared remarks, needing to prepare remarks, or having time to consider what they want to say. Can also be contrasted, as in, people do not prepare their thoughts. |
| When not to use | Must be explicit mention, rather than vague reference to (e.g., "throwing fear into the void"). |
| Example | "In contrast, for me to get involved in an online discussion, I feel like I am committing to respond if people respond to me. So often I'm like I don't have the time or effort or energy, so I am not going to engage. I don't' like the idea of just a one-liner and then moving on." |

| **CODE** | **Verbal / Nonverbal cues** |
|---|---|
| Full Definition | Refers to the benefit of in-person discussion because you can view emotive verbal or nonverbal that influence the reading of a person engaging in public argument. |
| When to use | Use when participants refer to the existence of or need for verbal or nonverbal cues to better understand those participating in public argument. May also include commentary on the examples having particular nonverbal cues. Of co-occurs with "in person" code. Could co-occur with online if referring to the difficulty of comprehending perspective without nonverbal or intonation. |
| When not to use | Do not use to capture eye contact. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Example | “One thing about the online is that you have to read between the lines, so you know, when you talk to people face to face, I feel like it’s easier because they come across clearer, and this is just like a snap.” |

# Appendix H. Code co-occurrences

***Table 15. Co-Occurrence by Code***

| Emotional | Dialogue / Discussion | Context | Connecting / Referencing | Both Sides | Asking Questions | Affirmation / Validation | Accessibility | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | **Accessibility** |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | **Affirmation / Validation** |
| 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Asking Questions** |
| 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Both Sides** |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Connecting / Referencing** |
| 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Context** |
| 8 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 7 | **Dialogue / Discussion** |
| 0 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | **Emotional** |
| 0 | 13 | 2 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | **Engaged / Informed** |
| 1 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | **Identity / Affiliation** |
| 5 | 16 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 3 | **In-Person** |
| 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Interaction Design** |
| 0 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | **Interventions** |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | **Lack of valid sources** |
| 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Listening** |
| 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | **Logical** |
| 4 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | **Name Calling /** |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | **Nervous / Afraid to** |
| 8 | 9 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 8 | 7 | **Online** |
| 2 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | **Perspective taking** |
| 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 3 | **Polarization** |
| 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **prepare thoughts** |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | **Verbal / Nonverbal cues** |

| Name Calling / | Logical | Listening | Lack of valid sources | Interventions | Interaction Design | In-Person | Identity / Affiliation | Engaged / Informed | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 3 | **Accessibility** |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | **Affirmation / Validation** |
| 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | **Asking Questions** |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | **Both Sides** |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | **Connecting / Referencing** |
| 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | **Context** |
| 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 16 | 4 | 13 | **Dialogue / Discussion** |
| 4 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 0 | **Emotional** |
| 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 0 | **Engaged / Informed** |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 9 | 0 | 2 | **Identity / Affiliation** |
| 3 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 0 | 9 | 4 | **In-Person** |
| 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 10 | 2 | 0 | **Interaction Design** |
| 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | **Interventions** |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | **Lack of valid sources** |
| 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | **Listening** |
| 6 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 | **Logical** |
| 0 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | **Name Calling /** |
| 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | **Nervous / Afraid to** |
| 34 | 11 | 3 | 4 | 12 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 3 | **Online** |
| 3 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 1 | **Perspective taking** |
| 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | **Polarization** |
| 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 3 | **prepare thoughts** |
| 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 | **Verbal / Nonverbal cues** |

| Verbal / Nonverbal | prepare thoughts | Polarization | Perspective taking | Online | Nervous / Afraid to | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 7 | 1 | **Accessibility** |
| 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 0 | **Affirmation / Validation** |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | **Asking Questions** |
| 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | **Both Sides** |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | **Connecting / Referencing** |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 0 | **Context** |
| 1 | 3 | 2 | 10 | 9 | 0 | **Dialogue / Discussion** |
| 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 1 | **Emotional** |
| 0 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 3 | **Engaged / Informed** |
| 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 2 | **Identity / Affiliation** |
| 5 | 7 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 1 | **In-Person** |
| 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | **Interaction Design** |
| 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 12 | 2 | **Interventions** |
| 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 | **Lack of valid sources** |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 3 | 1 | **Listening** |
| 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 11 | 0 | **Logical** |
| 1 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 34 | 3 | **Name Calling /** |
| 0 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 9 | 0 | **Nervous / Afraid to** |
| 2 | 4 | 12 | 6 | 0 | 9 | **Online** |
| 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 1 | **Perspective taking** |
| 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 12 | 3 | **Polarization** |
| 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 1 | **prepare thoughts** |
| 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | **Verbal / Nonverbal cues** |

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