



North Omaha Information Ecosystem Assessment

June- August 2017

Introduction

In June 2017, staff members from the Listening Post Collective visited North Omaha to talk with residents about the news and information environment in their part of the city. This “information ecosystem assessment” set out to explore which issues are most important to local people and how connected residents feel to sources that keep them informed about city life and the policies that affect it.

North Omaha is a community with the unique distinction of having the only independent black-owned newspaper in Nebraska, The Omaha Star. For almost eight decades, The Star, founded by Mildred D. Brown, has provided a positive counter-narrative to the crime-focused coverage of North Omaha by many mainstream local media outlets.

But the paper is at a crossroads as the media landscape has changed. Residents of North Omaha are searching for other reliable sources of news to keep them informed and reflect their voices on topics like education, jobs, community development, health, housing and more.

The assessment will consider the existing media scene and other efforts underway to circulate community news and information, and share some examples of news engagement projects in other places that might be instructive to media and community groups in North Omaha.

This assessment is not meant to be an exhaustive conclusion about information flow in North Omaha. Rather, it is designed to share insights from stakeholders in North Omaha about how the city’s black community is covered and informed by local media, and to provide a snapshot of media and information flow in the city. We decided not to identify the 15 people we spoke to when quoting them in this document so that local people reading the assessment can take in the information without attaching it to specific people they know. We also realize that the 15 people we spoke to do not represent all of the folks working hard to make a difference in North Omaha on a daily basis.

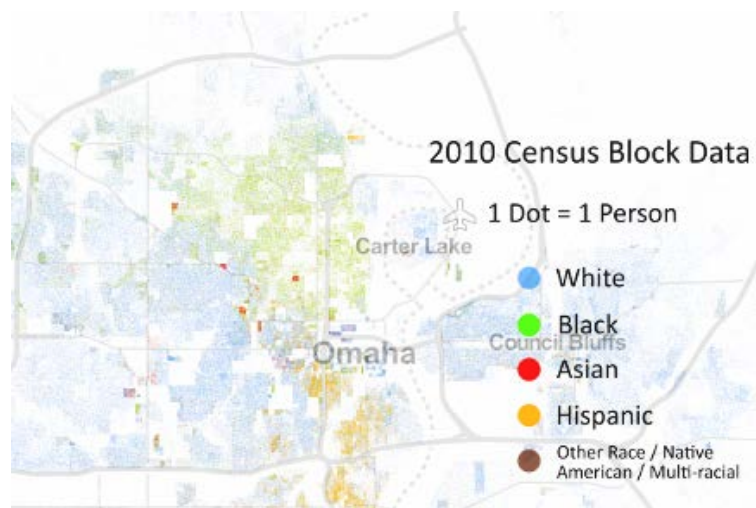
This report considers some successful approaches to transmitting information in North Omaha, and it also shares ideas on some online and offline information sharing strategies being tried in other parts of the United States and the rest of the world. Ultimately, the goal is to support a richer and more useful flow of information and conversation through the community, so that residents can get the news they need, and also have their voices heard more frequently.

North Omaha Overview

We heard time and again from local residents that North Omaha functions as a bit of an island from the rest of the city.

“North Omaha might as well have a wall around it,” said one born-and-raised community member, now in his 60s, who also described Omaha as a whole as having a “fairy-tale mentality,” ignoring the institutionalized issues that create disparity.

Considering race as the dominant factor in North Omaha’s isolation, one community activist referred us to University of Virginia [census map that charts racial demographics](#) around the country. The northern half of the city is entirely green, indicating African American residents. North Omaha is home to not only the majority of the African American residents in the city, but also the state of Nebraska.



Poverty is also a strong factor in North Omaha’s isolation. While Omaha has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the U.S., residents in North Omaha have a very different reality, where around 20% of people are jobless. The [poverty rate in North Omaha](#) is close to 30%, although many locals told us that percentage is much higher.

North Omaha has a rich civil rights history, and some of the first bus boycotts happened there. In the late 1960s, an Academy Award nominated documentary, [A Time for Burning](#), explored the topic of Northern racism, focusing on Omaha. North Omaha is also the birthplace of Malcolm X. His legacy lives on through the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation. *The Omaha Star* was founded in 1938 by Mildred D. Brown, the first black woman to start a paper. Over its nearly 80 years, the paper has focused its resources on “positive news and to be a vigilant champion for African-American progress.”

Based on our conversations with 15 different local stakeholders, North Omaha, where the majority of the city’s approximately [60,000 black residents live](#), is underserved in terms of regular, insightful coverage relevant to the experiences of black residents.

North Omaha is unique in media terms because it has its own storied news outlet. *The Omaha Star* was created in 1938 to share weekly information relevant to the lives and experiences of the city’s black population. The paper is searching for ways to establish its identity and relevance with a new generation of North Omaha residents. *The Star* is generally, “revered, but not read,” said one local community organizer.

According to those surveyed, prominent media outlets in the city, including the *Omaha World Herald*, the local paper of record, and local television news stations, often limit coverage of North Omaha to violence and crime. They are also less likely to spend extensive time in North Omaha as a way of developing stories and sources. *The Reader*, a city-wide weekly, which is delivered to around 50 locations in North Omaha, does make an effort to investigate issues related to that neighborhood. One [recent story](#) took a historical look at the bi-annual Native Omaha Days, a celebration when North Omaha's diaspora returns to see old friends and relatives. "People will read it (*the Reader*) if content is relevant to North Omaha life," said one local resident.

There are also a host of other home-grown news and information channels seeking to document life in North Omaha, including some new community-focused low power FM radio stations, Facebook pages dedicated to North Omaha, and local non-profits attempting to keep residents informed on specific issues. But right now, there is not one trusted go-to source of news and information for North Omaha, like the *Omaha Star* was in its heyday.

There are serious topics that North Omaha residents would like to see documented more, utilizing local voices: the lack of black teachers and high rate of student suspensions in local public schools; infrastructure issues that residents say get fixed at a much slower rate in North Omaha; the disconnect between young adults in North Omaha and local churches; outside real estate developers acquiring North Omaha properties; and why unemployment citywide is a little over 3% but in North Omaha is 20%.

Information Needs

Questions:

In order to research information needs in North Omaha, we asked the following questions to our 15 respondents:

1. What's a recent news story about North Omaha you felt didn't get covered enough?
2. How does North Omaha traditionally get covered by local media here?
3. Which media do folks in North Omaha rely on to know what's going on in their community?
4. What are all the different ways people get local information in North Omaha?
5. When you want to get news and information out to community members, how do you do it? Tell me about a time you really wanted to get the word out; what did you do?
6. What methods do folks in North Omaha use to get heard by the larger Omaha community?
7. What community spaces -- physical and online -- do people in North Omaha access to get and share information?
8. Which social media sites and websites do a good job of sharing local information for North Omaha?

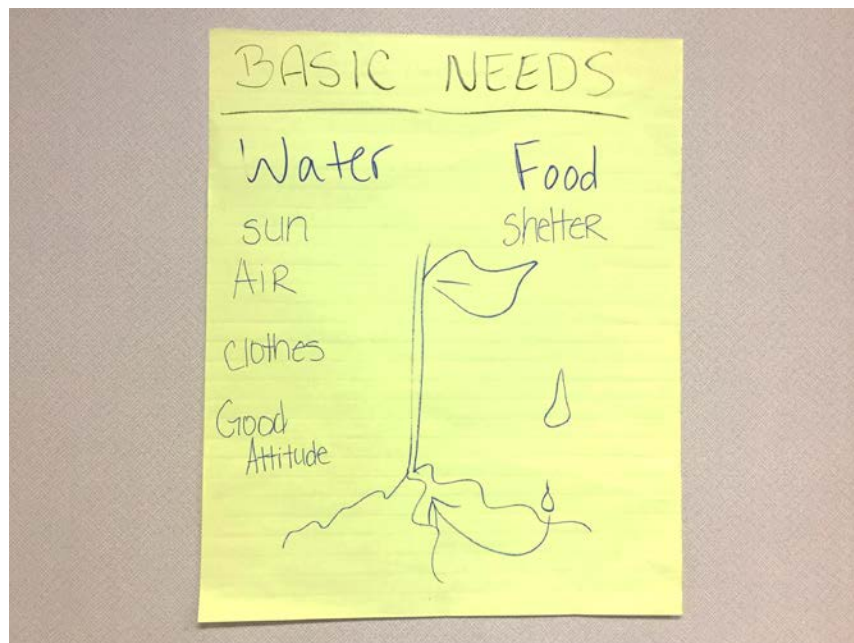
9. What news/information topics are most important/essential to living in North Omaha?
10. Do you remember a time when information sharing in North Omaha was really effective?
What was happening that was different?
11. What is working now in terms of information sharing? Any positive examples of information flow?
12. What's a topic in North Omaha you would really like to see covered more in-depth?
13. What are some of the barriers to people in North Omaha being better informed?

Answers:

We heard time and again that one of the largest information gaps in North Omaha is around local government. One person said that there is a lack of information around the political landscape of Omaha as a whole, and poor civics education in the area. This person pointed to this information gap as a reason for low voter turnout. "That's why we always have below-average voter turnout, because there isn't a connection to the political realm, as well as there is a lack of understanding of what those people can do for the people of North Omaha," the person said.

Another person we spoke to suggested that civics isn't taught to kids in North Omaha and that more effort needs to be made to ensure kids understand their rights. This person said that people in North Omaha need to be informed about how local and national policy decisions will affect their community, pointing to President Trump's proposed cuts to social welfare via the budget and health care reform, as an example.

Beyond civics, one of the major themes that emerged was a need for better coverage of issues relevant to daily life in the area. Poor road conditions and other infrastructure issues came up often. Folks are looking for increased coverage of these problems, but also investigation and explanation as to why they happen more often in North Omaha than the rest of the city.



-Drawing at Malcolm X Center, North Omaha

We heard from many people that we spoke to that folks don't consume local news because they don't find that it meets their needs or that it's relevant to their lived experience. Several people mentioned education as a topic that needs better coverage. *The Omaha Star* does a good job of

covering graduations or scholarship awards, said one person, but there's a need for better understanding of systemic education issues. One person wanted to understand why suspension rates are so high in North Omaha.

Overall, folks want a meaningful exploration of larger issues challenging the community and relevant information they can actually use. We met one resident at a McDonald's in North Omaha and they said, "If the menu changed and coffee went up a buck, the old people in here would have a fit. That's relevant, that's a story that impacts people here. That's what has to happen. Stories that impact people on a day-to-day basis."

Information Landscape

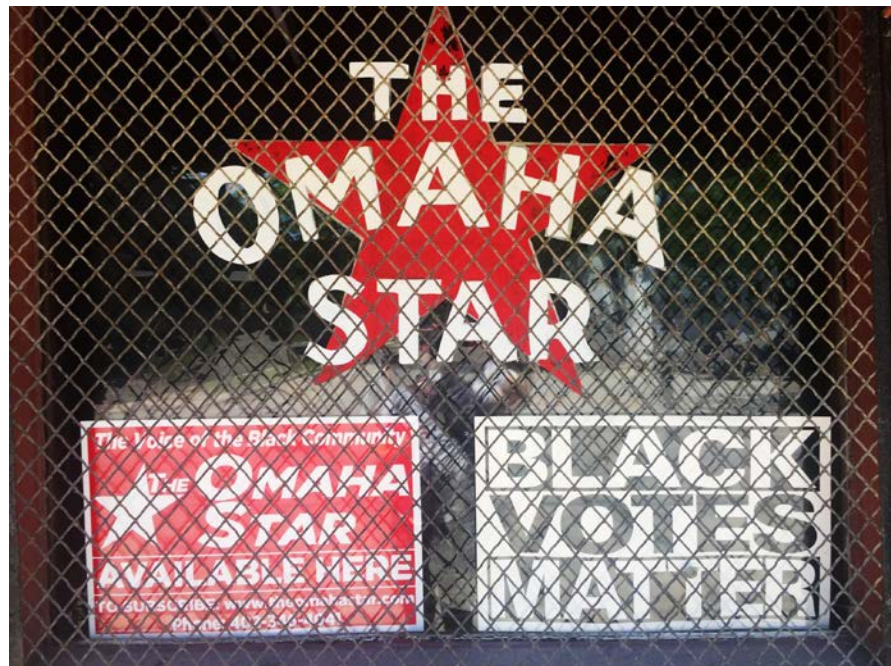
The information landscape is composed of the physical and institutional infrastructures that support information production and flow, including media outlets, distribution systems, and production units. In addition, we examine the characteristics of information providers, including the media, government, private industry, and civil society, and their capacity to support robust information flows.

This is not a complete review of all media in Omaha, but snapshots of where people are getting information for and about North Omaha.

Mainstream Media

[The Omaha World Herald](#) dates back to the 1860s. Now the paper of record in Omaha, the *World Herald* was [purchased by Berkshire Hathaway](#), the Warren Buffett-owned investment firm, for \$150 million in 2011. Like many mid-sized papers, the *World Herald* is able to develop some young talent, but by the time they begin to dig deeper into community issues and develop important sources, many head to bigger media outlets.

[The Omaha Star](#) is looking for a new chapter after nearly 80 years of publishing a weekly, and now bi-weekly, paper highlighting the accomplishments of the local black community. The paper is available in around



-Storefront window of *Omaha Star*. 24th street, North Omaha

25 locations, mainly in North Omaha, for 75 cents. The *Star* itself is for sale, and looking for an owner who knows and respects the important history of the outlet.

Opinions on the current state of the paper varied. Younger North Omaha residents did not make the *Star* a priority, and felt it didn't reflect their experiences as much as an older generation of residents. One respondent said, "nobody under 40 or 50 pays attention to the *Star*." The same respondent said they were glad the paper still existed, but that it was not able to keep pace with relevant news the community needed, instead reprinting articles from other outlets and editorials. Another respondent said in order to survive, the *Star* would need to grow its digital footprint and web revenue sources. The paper does have a website, and recently had much of its decades of archives digitized, but more up-to-date news is not regularly featured on the page. Some local residents said they still appreciate the paper's focus on positive news about Omaha's black community, a hallmark of the paper since it started. One younger community member said *The Omaha Star* wasn't as relevant now, and that many residents don't have a clear sense of what its future is. "People have thoughts about how it can reinvent itself, or reconnect itself to the masses of people. Whoever has those plans or whatever those plans are, they haven't been rolled out yet," they said.

[The Reader](#) is Omaha's free alt-weekly, with a goal of, "building the news, not breaking it." The *Reader* is delivered to around 50 locations in North Omaha; lunch spots, gas stations, and other places where at least 25 copies will get picked up.

One respondent said the *Reader* routinely gives more press to North Omaha than other local media. Another person we spoke to said, "people will read it if there's content relevant to North Omaha life." The *Reader* editorial staff traditionally look to share news content they think another local news outlet might benefit from republishing or reporting on further. The *Reader* also oversees a local Spanish-language weekly called [El Perico](#) that focuses on south Omaha, the city's Latino hub.

We did not visit any local television stations, but did speak with community members about coverage. One respondent said they had stopped watching local TV news because it didn't fairly depict North Omaha. Another person said local TV focused mostly on [violence](#). One person said even when local TV stations are invited to cover something positive in North Omaha, they rarely attend. "They have to be called multiple times in order to possibly show up for a positive event or for a positive press conference, or a serious press conference," they said. "Other than that," this person said, "it's pretty much a negative perception of what happens here."

Community Media

One of the most enthusiastic responses we got related to media and North Omaha referenced a now-defunct programming schedule at [Public Access TV](#) Channel 22. For more than two decades, Channel 22 was the grapevine for North Omaha, according to this person. It shared essential civic information about what was happening in the city, and highlighted voices of local non-profits, activists, and cultural institutions. In 2012 the Channel changed hands, but is still [community access](#).

Only one of the people we spoke to talked about local [public radio](#) and television. Their comment related to the fact that hearing black voices, either hosting programming or as part of news coverage, was rare. “There’s no public in public radio or television, nationally as well as locally,” that person said. One of the respondents we spoke with tried to rectify the lack of diversity in local public media programming by writing letters to the Omaha public radio station pointing that fact out. That effort ultimately led to that person having a community forum radio program for a few years. As of a year ago there are two new North Omaha-based low power FM stations; [101.3](#), Mind and Soul radio, which is based out of the Malcolm X Center and is focused on community news and information, with some music programming, and [95.7 the Boss](#), which plays mostly music.



-101.3 low power FM radio station in basement of Malcolm X Center, North Omaha

We spoke to a few people who have programs at 101.3 FM, which began broadcasting in October of 2016, and we also sat in on an evening community focused program. 101.3 has a morning program that shares some community news and information. They also have community hosted programs throughout the day that share history, culture, and news with listeners around the city. One of the DJs at 101.3 FM said, “I get a chance to connect to the conscious community as well as the young people, as well as a little bit of the street community, as well as a little bit of the young professional community. And then people that are outside of the North Omaha black community that have paid attention to my show. And I think every single host has a group that they come from and represent, or are connected to.”

There is also a steady flow of community news about North Omaha available via social media. A number of people we spoke with mentioned the Facebook group [Proud to be from North Omaha](#) as a space where they had conversations about what’s happening in the community.

Social media also came up as a conduit for rumors about local issues that pick up steam and gain credence in the community despite lacking accuracy. One example involved a rumor around area teens disappearing on a daily basis. The lack of a more formal journalism footprint in these online spaces makes it tough for people to feel confident about the information they are getting and sharing, and also more difficult to dispel rumors with professional coverage.

Grassroots Information Sources

Many people we talked to mentioned how effective more grassroots methods of information sharing were. One community member said, “it has to kind of be a feet on the ground, people in neighborhoods, people in these lifestyle areas, talking, explaining, introducing, and sharing as much as possible. Building those relationships with the community.” By lifestyle areas, they meant local businesses including barbershops, hair salons, restaurants, and grocery stores. We met one of our respondents at the McDonald’s on 30th and Ames. They said around 6:30 every morning a group of older community members meet and share news about the neighborhood.

For the past decade there has been a community conversation project called [Table Talk](#) connecting residents from all parts of Omaha. The goal is to bring people together in informal settings to get and share information on a variety of issues facing the city.

Another person said if you want to get the word out in North Omaha, head to to [Levi Carter Lake Park](#) on Sunday. “That’s one of the few times when you can find a lot of your household, every day people, and you can go and talk to them. Pass out fliers and let em’ know, hey, this is what’s going on,” they said.

List of Omaha media outlets:

<http://thereader.com/>

[101.3 low power FM radio](#)

[95.7 the Boss Lower Power FM in North Omaha](#)

<http://theomahastar.com/>

<http://reviveomahamagazine.com/>

[Omaha World Herald](#)

[El Perico](#)

[91.5 FM Omaha Public Radio](#)

[Nebraska PBS](#)

[Local NBC](#)

[Local ABC](#)

[Local CBS](#)

[Public Access TV Channel 22](#)

Facebook pages:

[Proud to be from North Omaha](#)

[Positive Community Events in Omaha](#)

[North Omaha Pride](#)

[Omaha Loves Black Business discussions and Celebration page](#)

Community Information Centers:

[Heartland Workers Center](#)

[Aframerican bookstore](#)

[Table Talk](#)

[Do Space](#)

Production and movement

Production and movement looks at the variety of information and the diversity of content within an information ecosystem, whether from the government, community news sources, social media, word of mouth, and other local information producers. It also examines the role of internet and mobile media as new and rapidly expanding sources of information.

A number of respondents to our questions said while coverage of issues related to North Omaha have improved since Warren Buffett purchased the *World Herald*, the tendency is still to print “[if it bleeds it leads](#)” type stories, focusing on violence and crime. The paper was also singled out for two specific pieces of journalism. The first was a series from 2007 called “Omaha Black and White,” that highlighted the disparities between North Omaha and the rest of the city. That was shared as an example of insightful, deep-dive reporting that led to larger conversations, and even some action, when a group of religious organizations toured the deep South to [explore race and civil rights](#). But most people we spoke to said there hasn’t been any similar in-depth reporting about North Omaha since that series was published.

The second piece of journalism that was referenced multiple times was a more recent story about [local serial killer](#) Nikko Jenkins. When he was caught, the *Omaha World Herald* [published a pictorial](#) with 38 members of his extended family who have been convicted of crimes. One person surveyed said that anyone in North Omaha with those last names felt stigmatized by that coverage. “These headlines impact how people feel about the community,” they said.

One of the media outlets that the older guard in North Omaha are more likely to feel connected to is the *Omaha Star*, which during their lifetime has helped establish a positive, success-driven portrayal of the neighborhood that was not covered by other media. But one North Omaha resident we spoke to said that effort was not as relevant as it might once have been. They said despite focusing on the African American community, the *Omaha Star* didn’t reflect the experience of the vast majority of families that currently live in that part of town. “*The Star* caters to middle class stories; this person graduates, this person got a scholarship. People want



-Family of the Week column, *Omaha Star*

relevant stories to their lifestyle,” they said. When asked what kinds of relevant stories they’d like to see, this person pointed to a nearby abandoned factory. “That’s been empty since I was a baby. A lot of those have been empty. Why did those businesses move? Where did they go? And what’s going to replace them? If the answer is nothing, then we need to get more businesses up here.”

One North Omaha native talked about how rumors can dominate the neighborhood’s narrative because locals are not connected to active, factual media covering their area. This person gave the example of community development projects in North Omaha. They said when new projects come in, especially housing, people are afraid that gentrification is on the doorstep, and rumors start. In one case they said they met up with somebody in the community who was spreading rumors about a particular project they worked on, and tried to answer their questions. This person said some mainstream media have covered this particular North Omaha housing project, but articles are generally generic, focusing on a groundbreaking ceremony. They said the articles tend to have, “lots of words like hope and transformation, things that are kind of absent of any of the context.”

This same respondent said this kind of overly positive coverage can be great, but like focusing too much on crime when covering North Omaha, it doesn’t get at the specifics, and the nuances of important issues, like housing and development. “There are really hard questions to ask about our project. If somebody’s paying attention, the questions that should be asked are difficult for me to answer,” they said.

One of the most effective ways this person has found to share information about this community development project is by connecting with a local church that’s near the construction. “We do a lot of our community events there. And just talk to different people about what we’re doing, get feedback from folks,” they said.

Increasingly North Omaha residents are sharing community information and event notices on Facebook pages. Here’s a few of the pages people mentioned they frequent.

[Proud to be from North Omaha](#)

[Positive Community Events in Omaha](#)

[North Omaha Pride](#)

[Omaha Loves Black Business discussions and Celebration page](#)

One local media maker we spoke to said they’d like to see support and funding for more hyperlocal online news content. They referenced the active local news blogging culture that some other cities benefit from. “We seem to just not have that. I would love to see that, I would love to help seed that,” they said.

Dynamic of access

This dimension focuses on the political, cultural, time, cost, and other factors that affect information flows. In particular, it seeks to identify any barriers to inclusive interaction and participation within an information ecosystem. Broader structures that influence access, such as legal, political, economic, and infrastructural factors are also included here.

One of the more insightful conversations during our visit was with a community leader in North Omaha who broke down how younger black Omahans get their information. They divided North Omaha into three groups; black professionals, activists and community connectors, and folks working hard to simply make ends meet.

This person said upwardly mobile young black Omaha allies itself with the professional organizations like the Urban League of Young Black Professionals. This group sticks to mainstream media for information, reading the *World Herald*, *the Star*, social media, and some radio.

The next group they identified was the, “activist, conscious,” black community members who might have gone to college, although not all did, and that are a little more, “underground.”

They said this group is an active conduit of community information, putting out useful information in the community, through radio programs, live events like hip hop shows, community posters and fliers, and booths at local events. This group’s media consumption habits might include the *World Herald* and *Star*, but also includes a lot of grassroots information sharing.

The last, and largest group of North Omaha residents is mostly connected to community information via word-of-mouth and social media. “Maybe they’re hearing news from their peers, a barbershop, a gas station, something like that. Maybe they see a flier because we are still a city that puts up posters and passes out fliers,” said our source.

According to a few of the people we spoke to, the traditional gatekeepers of information and influence in the North Omaha are involved with [the Empowerment Network](#), a local initiative



-Lawn signs on 30th street, North Omaha

started by black business leaders in 2006 to spur increased job creation, community development, and economic prosperity in North Omaha by 2025. A few respondents mentioned police and community dialogue was improving in North Omaha thanks to Empowerment Network efforts. In general, there's a more open channel than in the past between local government and North Omaha, where local voices and concerns are more likely to be heard. One person talked about a dialogue that was created with the Empowerment Network and North Omaha residents on what people wanted to see in the neighborhood.

The Mildred D. Brown Center offers some [college scholarships](#) and a [youth journalism program](#) with a goal of developing local African American journalism talent. However, even if younger people get a media skillset, it's often difficult to get them to stick around. "I don't think young black people with options think of Omaha as choice A. Especially when you leave here and you get a sense of what else is out there," one person said. One local media worker told us that young journalism talent of any kind is likely to move on after a few years to a bigger outlet, making it tough for mainstream media to develop the kind of sources needed to really understand and document some of the important issues in North Omaha.

Impact of information

This dimension looks at the relationship between information, knowledge, and larger-scale behavior change, such as collective community action, policy change, and planning for the future. Broadly, it examines how information affects individual and community opportunity, wellbeing, and development.

Just about everyone we spoke with mentioned the impact local media has had on the perception and identity of North Omaha. The neighborhood has historically been covered in a one-dimensional way and that practice continues today. "It's pretty much a negative perception of what happens here," one person told us. "And that perception gets into the thought process of everybody, whether you're white, black, whatever. Everyone learns to buy into that perception of North Omaha being a place that you do not want to go at night. Some people tell you you don't want to go even in the daytime," they said. The people we spoke with are working to change this



-Community bulletin board at Washington public library, North Omaha

perception but many feel the media is working against those efforts. “Our media doesn't help us, because often they play right into the stereotypes,” one resident said.

One person spoke more specifically about the role of *The World Herald*. They said, “it's a good paper, but it's historically complicit with a lot of the racism that happened here, and enforced it with the narrative that was created.” They said that it's a real battle to get the media to cover the community in a positive light. “If there's going to be a story, it's going to be about a shooting in North Omaha. If there's going to be a story, it's going to be about how this black kid got out of North Omaha. Look at how tough it is here. That's the narrative. As opposed to, yeah, we have beautiful sunny days, and people playing in the park. Community gardens and stuff, people are working really hard so that their children can go to dance classes and summer clubs,” they said. We heard many times that young people from North Omaha, given the opportunity, leave. Negative media portrayal of the neighborhood surely contributes to this trend.

One of the more compelling issues that arose during our discussions in North Omaha was the beginnings of gentrification in the area. There is a feeling that, while it hasn't happened yet, gentrification and displacement are inevitable. This is largely tied to the neighborhood's proximity to downtown. As young people begin to move back into downtown Omaha, rents are rising and developers are looking for ways to expand downtown. North Omaha is one of the only “underdeveloped” areas where this expansion can happen. The process has already begun along the border of downtown and the northside. One person told us about the rebranding of this area. “There's an area now called ‘NoDo’, North of Downtown. It's North Omaha, but realtors don't want to call it that because of negative association with North Omaha,” they said.

Information, or lack thereof, will play a major role in how development, gentrification, and displacement in North Omaha will play out. Speaking about gentrification, one person told us they want to know “how it happens, is who is a part of that conversation. And who knows that information, and what are they using it for.” Those outside of the neighborhood are getting wise to the potential for profit and, according to several people we talked to, buying up vacant properties in anticipation of an influx of development. Tax evaluators are assessing these vacant properties and property values are rising. We heard from folks who said that community members need information about how to combat this process and secure their future in the neighborhood. One person said, “That's been the biggest challenge, a consistent form of communication, that is clear, that is relevant to people, and they feel like has relevance in their lives. So that people can feel equipped with information so they can do something, and make good choices. That's the ultimate goal.”

Social trust

This dimension looks at trust in information sources, medium, and content, as well as characteristics and events that influence trust around information.

According to one community activist we spoke to, the biggest barrier to creating a more trusted information flow in North Omaha is for local media to spend more time in the neighborhood. "It's the lack of connection between them as a people, or as an organization or a business, and in the neighborhood, in the homes, with every day struggling, working class, poor working class people. There's a complete disconnection," they said.

Part of the struggle of creating a more lasting connection is the fact that most media don't have or dedicate the resources to spend more time in North Omaha. "There aren't enough reporters on the scene to have trust or a relationship with the community," one local media person noted. And, as was mentioned before, even if a local reporter makes some inroads with the community, they often move on to a different media outlet after a few years.

And it's not just a disconnect between media and North Omaha residents, one person said a lot of the social service providers struggle to get the word out. I don't think that people distrust as much as they just don't know, or are just not connected to what's going on. North Omaha lives 90% at or below the poverty line," they said. Meaning people are not necessarily going to have the recourse to find the service, or the news they need on their own, as they struggle to get through the day.

Another person said that rerouting existing media and their approaches to better serve North Omaha might be too difficult at this point. "You'd almost have to carve a new path, in terms of media, if you're going to be effective," they said. The key to sustaining better news flow in North Omaha they said is engaging the community, and partnering with some of the community connectors like neighborhood associations, churches, small businesses, and nonprofits who have already successfully built trust with local residents. "It takes a lot of in-your-face, talking to you, on and on and on, showing up all the time, in order for people to understand, oh, that's who you are. I saw you there, I saw ya'll there," they said.

Some of the local information channels are fraying as well. One local nonprofit worker told us that there is a growing meeting fatigue in North Omaha. They said as they've tried to get more involved in community groups, they've noticed a desire for less discussion and more action oriented events. "A lot of membership in neighborhood associations have fallen because people are feeling like I'm not getting anything from this. I'm tired of talking. What are we doing?" they said. And a number of community members said they feel more than ever there's a real need for awareness of what's happening in and around North Omaha, and action around that. Many fear that a renewed interest by all Omahans of living closer to downtown will disrupt their community.

Influencers

Influencers are the people, organizations, and institutions that affect how information flows throughout a community. We are also interested in seeing how influence can change overtime, especially during or after a crisis.

Business leaders

[The corridor along 24th street](#), just north of Cuming, is home to both remaining historic businesses, like the *Omaha Star*, and a growing group of new businesses and community initiatives, like Union for Contemporary Arts. This area has maintained its role as a leadership hub in North Omaha.

Another hub being created is a mixed-income housing and community development

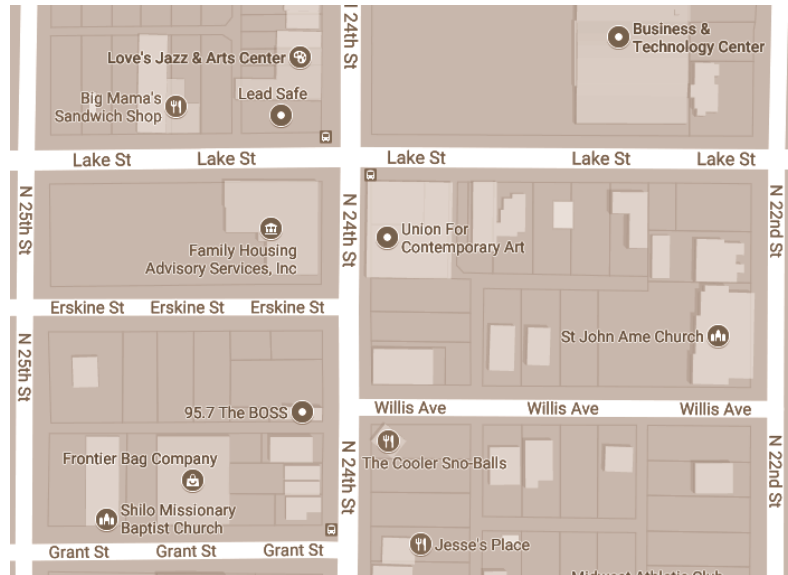
project called [Seventy-Five North](#), off of 30th street. Built on the site of former public housing, this initiative is promising to create a space where community members can take courses, incubate business ideas, and even get healthy food.

The Empowerment Network has created a powerful presence in black Omaha in the past decade. They have established key ongoing dialogues with city leaders and local law enforcement about North Omaha. But many younger North Omaha natives we spoke to felt like there's also a gatekeeper mentality with the organization, and the older generation in North Omaha in general. One young entrepreneur said, "(among) a lot of my friends who live here, there's a reluctance to get involved because there's sort of this sense that there's no room for them at the table."

Another respondent mentioned a weekly meeting for people working and living around the 24th street corridor. They said that the first meeting they went to included a conversation with the Omaha Economic Development Corporation. "I was the youngest person in the room by 20 years," they said, noting the fact that community decisions are still heavily influenced by a small group of elders in the neighborhood.

Politicians

North Omaha's most decorated politician is state senator Earnie Chambers, who has represented the community on and off for four decades. He's been influential for so long that the *World Herald* published a [web timeline](#) of his life. Unfortunately we weren't able to get a meeting



with state senator Chambers during our visit, but every single person we spoke to referenced him in relationship to the past, present, and future of North Omaha.

North Omaha is Ward 2, and has been represented on the city council by Ben Gray since 2009. Gray is a former local TV host and photojournalist. For years he was part of a long-running local public affairs program. In the most recent city council election this past spring, one of Gray's challengers was a high school senior from North Omaha named [Maurice Jones](#). One of the local community activists we spoke to highlighted Jones as an example of a young North Omahan that will hopefully stick around and continue to try and have an impact.

Churches

There are dozens of churches in North Omaha, the largest and most influential, according to most locals we spoke to, is Salem Baptist Church. While churches still have more traditional roles as influencers and information sharers with the older generation in North Omaha, we heard from a number of younger residents that they felt less interested and connected to that institution.

We did speak to one local pastor who talked about their innovative attempts to sustain an audience in North Omaha.

That person explained that like many churches around the US, they were seeing a downturn in attendance. "Churches aren't the center of the community like they once were," they said.

This pastor's approach to trying to connect with younger North Omahans has been to, "meet them where they are." They encourage parishioners to use social media during services, tweet quotes from his sermon, and even follow a Facebook Live feed of his services from home. This person also talked about sharing information relevant to the community and his church via a robocall service, email newsletters, going on 101.3, the nearby low power FM station, and local print publications like the *Omaha Star* and [Revive](#). They said conversations with his church members about life in North Omaha helped him tailor sermons to important issues like healthcare and criminal justice. They also tried to weave important topics around pop culture, like current movies and music.



-Community flier posted N. Maple Street, Omaha

Neighborhood Associations

There are a number of neighborhood associations in North Omaha that organize and do outreach for community events and information, often on social media. This group includes the [North Omaha Neighborhood Alliance](#), the [Northwest Neighborhood Alliance](#), and OIC Neighborhood Association, that work on supporting local businesses, connecting community members with each other, and improving safety and security issues in the area. The city of Omaha's planning department has a [comprehensive map](#) from 2015 of neighborhood associations throughout the city, although it does not indicate how active each group is.

Diaspora

North Omaha has a very active diaspora spread out around the country. Many people come back every other year for the [Native Omaha Days](#) celebration. People also put on similar North Omaha related events in places like Dallas, Phoenix, and California, where there are clusters of people who grew up in North Omaha and relocated.

Two famous diaspora names that came up a lot in our conversations about media were North Omahans [Cathy Hughes](#) and [Symone Sanders](#). Hughes got her start at the *Omaha Star* in the 1960s, and now runs the DC-based national broadcaster Radio One. Sanders is a 27-year-old Creighton University graduate, Democratic Party strategist, and recently served as spokesperson for the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign.

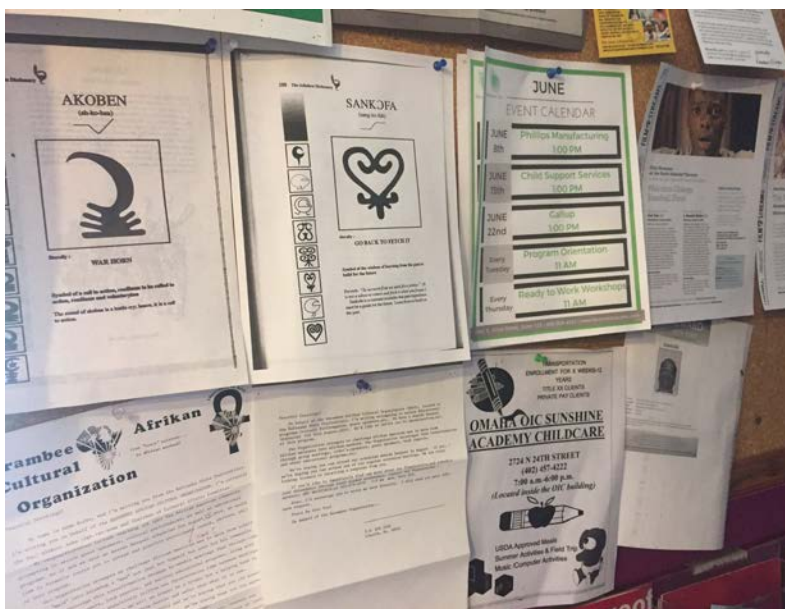
Community Hubs

[The Malcolm X Center](#) is a hub for North Omaha activity and the home of the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation. It hosts community events, classes, occasional rallies, and is also the location of community radio station 101.3 FM [KXNB/KJSO](#).

[The Union for Contemporary Arts](#) was established in 2011 in North Omaha. It occupies an iconic block of buildings that used to house restaurants, a famous nightclub, and professional offices. Those spaces now are occupied by a variety of community arts resources managed by Union staff. The goal is to strengthen the creative culture of Omaha and they believe that the arts can be a vehicle for social justice and greater civic engagement. The Union provides support for local artists such as classes and trainings, [civics](#) training and classes for community members, and has established resources like a tool library and cooperative garden space in North Omaha. A few respondents indicated that the Union is not currently being embraced by North Omaha because it's new, it occupies an iconic building, and many community members don't see it as a homegrown institution. One respondent said the building offers a lot of useful resources for North Omaha families, and eventually some people will start using it for its youth programs. But that person said, "by the time they discover it's use, the ones who really need it will be gone (displaced from the neighborhood)."

A number of people mentioned the [Heartland Workers Center](#) as an information hub in both South and North Omaha that connects people to employment opportunities, and also a variety of social services.

The [Afra American Bookstore](#) is a North Omaha based independent bookstore started in 1990. In addition to books and cultural items, the bookstore also hosts an active bulletin board of community events.



There are three Public Library locations in North Omaha. We visited the [Charles B Washington Branch](#) near 30th and Ames and the newly renovated [Milton R Abrahams branch](#). People were accessing the internet to apply for jobs and connect with friends and family at both locations. There were also a variety of community bulletin boards listing jobs and community events.

-Community events board at Afra American bookstore, North Omaha

Key Findings

- Information flow in North Omaha is very grassroots, but there are not a lot of formal media outlets that have a grassroots approach to engaging North Omaha.
- North Omaha residents don't just want to see their community covered more often, they want to see depth to the reporting, and sustained interest in topics like affordable housing, local jobs, infrastructure, school policy, criminal justice issues, local arts, and community investment and development.
- In addition to in-depth reporting around ongoing issues, community members need more information they can use in their day-to-day lives.
- North Omahans are open to the *Omaha Star* being a continued media resource for the local black community, but it would need to expand its role beyond its current focus of editorial and promotional content, and include more news and information reflecting current realities in the neighborhood. One respondent said, "if the *Omaha Star* wants to survive, it has to be handed over to some younger people."
- If local media outlets make regular efforts, like the *Reader* does, to cover issues related to North Omaha, people will respond by consuming that news.

- There is a feeling among young North Omaha residents that, given the choice, it's best to leave the neighborhood. This has led to a lack of younger talent pushing the neighborhood forward or preparing to take over for an older generation of community gatekeepers.
- There is a generational divide in North Omaha, particularly around how information is shared and consumed. There's a need for consistent and trusted information that bridges this divide.
- There is a growing concern by local residents that North Omaha is going to change fundamentally in the coming decade. People are worried that the combination of outsiders buying up both rental properties, and vacant property and land in North Omaha, and new housing developments will price them out of their traditional neighborhoods. "Anybody who leaves Omaha today and comes back in 15 years, North Omaha is going to be all white," said one long-time community member.
- The North Omaha diaspora is influential, diverse, and growing as gentrification grows in scope. Community members who left for school and careers still feel an attachment to the area they grew up in, and participate through North Omaha gatherings in their new cities, or via Facebook groups. Also, a growing number of people are being displaced to the periphery of Omaha, and want to maintain ties with their traditional communities in North Omaha.
- There are some new community resources being developed in North Omaha (101.3 FM, Seventy-Five North, the Union for Contemporary Arts) that could be accessed and utilized as a way to stimulate information flow in the neighborhood.

Insights and Suggestions

There are some great existing organizations, resources and information channels in Omaha that are already attempting to get vital information to residents on the north side of the city. Despite these efforts, it seems like many North Omahans feel both under-informed, and at times unheard, when it comes to how they are impacted by topics like education, healthcare, housing, jobs, and more. We're interested in brainstorming some possible steps forward with the core group of individuals who were kind enough to share their insights and thoughts during our visit. For now, we wanted to share a few ideas that came out of our time in North Omaha.

Insights

Here are a few examples of existing projects around the world that have some potentially useful elements to an innovative North Omaha news effort.

[Boyle Heights Beat](#) is a bilingual community newspaper and website that focuses specifically on sharing hyperlocal information with residents of a downtown Los Angeles neighborhood. One of the innovations of this project is its training and use of community members and local high

school students to contribute as reporters. This is a news-focused media outlet of and for the community it covers.

[Outlier Media](#) is a Detroit-based news initiative that seeks to get community members important data and information related to predatory housing and financial practices. The project specifically fields questions and shares answers via text message and Facebook.

[Quartz](#) and a host of other media outlets are exploring a “here’s what you need to know” style of news gathering (sometimes called “explainer journalism”), sharing daily and weekly rundowns of a curated list of stories, often through [email subscription newsletters](#).

[DailyTalk](#), in [Monrovia, Liberia](#) is a simple, effective community information initiative that relies on a physical news presence to engage residents every day. A large billboard sits at a central traffic circle in Monrovia and shares daily headlines relevant to the lives of community members. During the cholera epidemic that greatly impacted the country in 2015, Daily Talk was a reliable source of information for people on what they needed to know during that crisis.

[East Boston, Nuestra Casa](#) is a community media project in the rapidly gentrifying East Boston neighborhood that uses postcards, mailed directly to residents, to spread information about displacement, tenants rights, and available legal resources. In addition to the postcards, there is a [Facebook page](#) and group where residents share questions, concerns and stories around housing.

Suggestions

News bulletin

- North Omahans could benefit from a hyperlocal news initiative that is platform-agnostic and gives residents a rundown of what they need to know about their community every week in print, as an email newsletter, online, on the radio, and even distributed via text message. This straightforward news bulletin would cover essential topics like housing, education, healthcare, jobs, civics, safety, and more.
- Existing community-minded media, including the *Reader*, the *Omaha Star*, and community radio station 101.3 FM could help disseminate the news bulletin as an insert, or read the weekly rundown on the radio, as both news sharing, but also to stimulate on-air conversation by hosts and listeners.
- A community engagement aspect of the project would include sharing the news bulletin in key community locations; local parks on weekends, monthly community events, neighborhood association meetings, church services (pamphlet inserts). A similar poster-sized printout of this news could be placed at local libraries, community centers and businesses (barbershops, restaurants, gas stations) interested in partnering with the project.

- There would also be a digital focus, sharing the news bulletin through North Omaha focused Facebook groups, Twitter, and an email newsletter.
- Ideally this bulletin would be produced weekly by a paid community reporter, and a few assistants (ideally local journalism students).

In-depth story investigation

- Another focus we thought made sense would be to take an in-depth, longer term reporting approach to one topic, and enlist the community's help in investigating it.
- One idea would be to create a data reporting project around home and property ownership in North Omaha, with an eye on also creating a news conversation around displacement and gentrification.
- A paid community reporter would take a two-pronged approach to this topic. They would investigate the issue as it impacts North Omaha through conversations and interviews with residents, local leaders, community organizations, and businesses.
- The community reporter would also establish a neighborhood outreach aspect to the project, potentially combining the [postcard journalism](#) model in Boston and the [Outlier Media](#) model in Detroit. North Omaha residents would get a postcard in the mail, or through community events and spaces, with a question related to their housing and a phone number they can call or text to participate. This would present North Omaha residents with an opportunity to contribute to reporting on this important issue, and give the community reporter and local media partners a way to reach out to these participants, via phone or online with the results of the reporting, and to keep the news conversation going for future topics.
- Like the [Outlier Media](#) example, community members could text in for information for who owns their specific property, and that data could go into an open sourced map that shows who actually owns property around North Omaha, and how ownership is changing on a daily basis.
- As data is gathered, and stories developed, a group of media partners can also share the reporting and important information. Partners could include the *Reader*, *Omaha Star*, and 101.3 FM.
- Over time, this project would expand to collect data and share news on other specific topics impacting the community.

Additional thoughts:

- The Union for Contemporary Arts offers a [year-long fellowship](#) that comes with an office space and a project stipend. The organization also is home to facilities that could support a news initiative, including meeting space, event space, a digital design studio, a photo shop, and even a print shop. This 24th street based organization is also uniquely positioned, geographically and economically, to connect with North Omahans of all generations. We could see developing a North Omaha focused news concept as part of the Union fellowship.

Applications are due by August 31st, 2017.

- 101.3 FM has a great opportunity, with some additional community engagement strategies, to really establish itself as a go-to information source in North Omaha. It's geographically located in the heart of the community, inside an existing community center. The radio station could partner more with other existing media that have shown willingness to cover North Omaha more in depth, like the *Reader* and *Omaha Star*. Based on conversations with a variety of community members, to develop a real trust around information, something with less history, good or bad, in Omaha, like 101.3 FM, would be an ideal way to develop a new connection with the community around news and information.



-Community print shop at Union for Contemporary Arts, North Omaha

- Whatever kind of news project develops, it needs to address the current needs of community members. Right now that seems to be keeping people up to speed on how North Omaha is changing. Also, keeping people who have already been displaced or left North Omaha connected to their friends and neighbors, and to events and news that relate to that community, whether they still live there or not.

Conclusion

North Omaha has a complicated history when it comes to media, including highs -- the *Omaha Star's* holistic coverage of the neighborhood during its heyday -- and lows, the *Omaha World Herald's* continued feast-or-famine approach to crime and feel-good stories. "You'd almost have to carve a new path, in terms of media, if you're going to be effective," said one community activist we spoke with.

Based on our conversations, it feels like this is an especially crucial moment for North Omaha, especially considering growing investment and interest in the area by both private and public outside interests. One community organizer we spoke to said, "everything we do has to change if we want to keep up." In order to "keep up," community members need to more information to better understand how they stand to benefit or not from these potential changes. Their voices also need to be covered in a professional way so they can be heard by the city at large.

A very simple news effort could ensure North Omahans have information on essential topics like housing, employment, education, safety, and health. A project partnership with existing citywide media could carry that hyperlocal conversation to a wider audience around Omaha as well.

Background

This assessment is sponsored by the Omaha-based Weitz Family Foundation. Information ecosystem assessments can help provide, through interviews with local stakeholders, a snapshot of how information moves through a community, what issues are most important to residents, and how best to expand the news conversation to a diverse audience. The goal of this assessment is to identify what kinds of existing efforts exist to both get and share news and information with local residents specific to their communities, and also share examples of news engagement projects in other places that might be useful or instructive to media and community groups in North Omaha.

This assessment is being developed by Internews, an international NGO that has media development projects in more than 50 countries. Internews has begun utilizing its extensive knowledge of helping local media around the world become sustainable and effective stewards of information on projects here in the United States. Internews has a wider mission to support healthy information ecosystems, capable of serving communities with relevant and timely news. They traditionally manage projects related to human rights and media, health and environmental information, humanitarian communications, and governance and transparency.

Jesse Hardman and Burgess Brown conducted the fieldwork for this assessment. Hardman has been a reporter for two decades, and spent the past 10 years teaching journalism, working in media development and supporting community journalism in Pakistan, Mexico, Peru, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and other countries. Hardman also created the Listening Post project in New Orleans, partnering with Internews on bringing community media engagement strategies they'd developed outside the U.S. to a domestic audience. The Listening Post has dedicated itself to spreading its lens and megaphone throughout the city by establishing recording posts in community centers and libraries where residents can record their experiences and thoughts

about important topics. That audio has been shared online and on the air through local NPR station WWNO. The project has also used creative outreach methods, partnering with relevant topic experts (nonprofits, city government, business leaders, citizens, etc.) and their networks, to reach new audiences and capture a representational perspective on issues.

Burgess Brown created a similar Listening Post project in his native Macon, Georgia in 2015. Brown is now a graduate student at The New School in New York, and is the community manager for the Listening Post Collective, a website and support network for similar media engagement projects around the country.

Process

Several months before our trip to Omaha, we began researching the information ecosystem in the area. This started with an examination of the formal network of local media entities – newspapers, radio and TV stations, and alt-weeklies. We also explored more informal spaces where information is shared online, focusing heavily on Facebook pages dedicated to North Omaha. We kept a running list of information sources that can be found in the Information Landscape section of this report. In addition to media, we researched civic organizations active in North Omaha. We started to reach out by email to folks involved in Omaha media, specifically those with an understanding of how information flows on the north side. As we set up meetings we'd ask for folks to connect us with other people who would be good to talk to and slowly filled our schedule with meetings for our visit.

Our fieldwork consisted largely of these meetings. We drafted 13 questions that we worked into each of our 15 interviews as we attempted to better understand information flow and needs in North Omaha. Our meetings were located all over the neighborhood ranging from libraries to a McDonald's. We spent time driving and walking around North Omaha, checking out shops and restaurants and looking at how information was shared in physical spaces. We were also fortunate enough to be given a comprehensive tour of the neighborhood by one of the folks we met with. They took us to community hubs where residents gather and discuss events and issues relevant to North Omaha. We made sure to research Omaha before arriving, but remained flexible in our plans while on the ground, always asking for suggestions from each person we spoke with about other people we should talk to or places to visit.

Interviewees

John Heaston is the publisher of Omaha's Alt-Weekly, *The Reader*. Heaston has also recently purchased the Spanish-language weekly, *el Perico*. He is on the Board of the Mildred D. Brown Center and was instrumental in the digitization of the *Omaha Star's* archives. Heaston is active in the North Omaha community and has a wealth of knowledge about Omaha's history.

A'Jamal Byndon is a Community Initiative Consultant at Nebraska Families Collaborative. Previously, Byndon worked at Omaha's public radio station hosting a show called *Community Forum*. He also helped start a project called *Omaha Table Talk* focused on improving race

relations through facilitated community conversations. Byndon grew up in North Omaha and his mother fought to desegregate Omaha schools and buses. He served in the Peace Corps in Botswana before returning to Omaha to start a family.

Claudette Grinnell-Davis will be an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of Oklahoma in August. She most recently was an Associate Professor at the Grace Abbott School of Social Work at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Grinnell-Davis is plugged into the issues facing both the black and Native communities in Omaha.

Kevin Lytle Jr. is an educator, poet, and entrepreneur from Omaha. Lytle hosts a radio show called “Truth Speaks Lounge” on Mind and Soul 101.3, one of two low power FM stations in North Omaha. Mind and Soul is based out of the Malcolm X Center. Lytle is also the founder of AK Consulting Group and the FUTURE Foundation, where he focuses on youth outreach and development in the black community.

Phyllis Hicks is the Director of Advertising & Marketing for the Omaha Star newspaper, the first black female founded newspaper in the country. Hicks also has written an opinion column for the *Star*. She founded and remains a mentor of the local drill team “The Stepping Saints.”

John Pierce is the President of Board of Directors of the Mildred D. Brown Study Center. Pierce spent 35 years as a counselor and administrator at Creighton University, focusing on Affirmative Action and access to higher education for low-income students.

Tonya Cooper is the subscription coordinator for the Omaha Star and is the president of the OIC Neighborhood Association in North Omaha.

Tony Sanders is an author and the Senior Pastor at Koinonia and Friends of Christ church. Sanders believes in meeting people where they are with his message and is creative in his delivery. He regularly engages with parishioners on social media and live-streams his sermons.

Othello Meadows is the Executive Director of Seventy Five North Revitalization Corp. and is overseeing a mixed income development project in North Omaha’s Highlander neighborhood. Meadows is from Omaha and returned to his hometown to lead a non-partisan voter registration drive that registered over 10,000 new voters in eastern Omaha prior to the 2008 presidential election. He previously practiced law in Atlanta, GA.

Leo Louis, a native of North Omaha, is an activist and entrepreneur. Louis has been politically active especially surrounding police shootings of black men. He organized town hall style meetings and marches after the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown.

Dawaune Hayes is the communications manager for the newly-opened Union for Contemporary Art, housed in the historic Blue Lion building on N. 24th Street. The Union uses the arts as a vehicle for social change and civic engagement. Dawaune, a recent Creighton

University graduate, is tasked with getting the word out about the mission of the Union as well as the resources available to those in North Omaha.

Walter Brooks, a native of Seattle, has lived in Omaha for 40 years. Brooks cut his teeth writing for the *Omaha Star* and spent 35 years working in communications and public relations for Mutual of Omaha, ConAgra, and University of Nebraska. Brooks is on the board of the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation, and hosts a weekly show on 101.3 FM.

Rose McGee works for the Minnesota Humanities Center as the Program Officer for their Omaha Public School programs. McGee is also nationally known for her [Sweet Potato Comfort Pies](#) project where she delivers homemade sweet potato pies to folks mourning tragedies like the killing of Philando Castile or the Orlando night club shooting.

Denise Chapman is the Associate Director of the Performing Arts Collective at the Union for Contemporary Art. Chapman is a graduate of Creighton's theatre program and an adjunct professor at Metro Community College.