

Nomination for the 37th Annual Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize

Nominated Program: *An Issue of Trust: Democracy and the Future of Journalism*

Council: Humanities Nebraska

Nominator: Christopher Sommerich, Executive Director

In the fall of 2018, Humanities Nebraska (HN) conducted a series of six community conversation programs throughout Nebraska entitled *An Issue of Trust: Democracy and the Future of Journalism*. As part of the “Democracy and the Informed Citizen” initiative administered by the Federation of State Humanities Councils and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, this program series brought the general public together with panels of journalists representing local, regional, and national media outlets. HN’s goal in undertaking *An Issue of Trust* was to enable people with diverse perspectives to come together to talk about the relationships between journalism, democracy, and an informed citizenry, exploring topics such as challenges facing national, state, and local news media; concerns raised over “fake news” and biased news reporting; and the state of journalism in rural and urban areas. By engaging audience members in an interactive discussion with panelists on these often contentious topics involving the media’s role in our democracy, we hoped they would come away with an enhanced appreciation for the changing landscape of journalism, a deeper understanding of the opinions of others, and a renewed desire to stay civically informed and engaged.

The host communities for *An Issue of Trust* were spread across the state and included the larger cities of Omaha and Lincoln as well as smaller cities of Kearney, Norfolk, North Platte and Scottsbluff. A combined total of more than 900 people attended these programs, ranging from high school and college students to retirees and including diverse political views and many who were not typical humanities program attendees. Each panel included local and regional or national journalists, and the Pulitzer Prizes office assisted in recruiting Pulitzer winners and finalists to serve on each panel. Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET, an NPR affiliate) filmed the programs in Kearney, Lincoln, and Norfolk and is producing a television segment for broadcast later this year.

HN engaged several statewide partners who could contribute to the success of *An Issue of Trust*: the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), the Nebraska Press Association, and Nebraska Educational Telecommunications (NET). HN also engaged local partners in each community, particularly newspaper publishers and editors, who were enthusiastic in becoming involved. These local partners helped with planning, promotion, and identifying ideal panelists for their community.

For each community, HN facilitated planning committees made up of representatives from our local partners, current and former HN board members, and other interested individuals. These local committees helped identify potential panelists that would be ideal for their community, and the best venues for holding the programs. Local newspapers and media outlets were generous in providing publicity and coverage for our events, as well as improving and fostering new relationships with local businesses and community members. HN created and distributed a statewide press release announcing the series as well as press releases for individual sites. HN also created flyers for all sites and program-style cards for each that had the names and brief bios of the panelists on the front with “ground rules for a productive conversation” on the back.

Through the support of professors and the dean of the UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications, HN was able to utilize the college's expertise and contacts in creating several of our panels. The University of Nebraska at Kearney included some of our panelists in an additional panel discussion on campus over the noon hour that was attended by more than 100 students and faculty. The Nebraska Press Association provided strong promotional support throughout the series, making sure their network of journalists and media outlets was aware of the programs and helping to promote them. HN separately funded a grant for NET to film three *An Issue of Trust* programs and produce a TV segment.

A website was created for *An Issue of Trust* (<https://humanitiesnebraska.org/trust/>) that included a biography of each panelist, a list of resources developed by staff and panelists, more information about the program series, and details surrounding each individual event. This website helped promote each program and the whole series, and gave people who were interested in attending an opportunity to do some of their own research before and after.

HN budgeted \$47,600 to implement *An Issue of Trust*, and actual expenses came to \$46,463. In addition to \$30,000 from the Mellon Foundation funds administered by the Federation, HN received \$5,000 from the James and Rhonda Seacrest Foundation and \$4,553 from the Johnny Carson Fund at the Nebraska Cultural Endowment (a portion of a larger funding distribution) to support *An Issue of Trust*, with HN covering the remainder through unrestricted funds.

In follow up surveys, 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that as a result of attending, they had a better understanding of the role that journalism plays in fostering an informed citizenry; 82% agree or strongly agree that they better understand the role the humanities play in fostering an informed citizenry; and 90% agree or strongly agree they will become a more critical consumer of media. Sample comments from the survey responses include:

"This was eye-opening for me. Sometimes we need to be brought up to speed on reality. We need our eyes opened and [to] become informed citizens." (Norfolk)

"[This program was] very informative and helpful it made me realize my responsibility of becoming an informed citizen, and the correct means of staying informed." (Norfolk)

"I thought the program was good. It was well managed as it was obvious that many people came with very closed minds where journalists are concerned. Decorum was maintained by the facilitator and speakers." (Scottsbluff)

"It was very informative. The moderator handled a couple of disruptive moments very well. The program didn't seem to be swayed toward either political party." (Scottsbluff)

"Best conversation I have heard in years." (North Platte)

"Excellent discussion! This kind of event is a vital conversation in our democracy." (North Platte)

"Since I...have a degree in mass communication, I didn't score the event as a major life epiphany - it did reignite my fire for journalism. I honestly loved every minute and wished I had brought someone who would discuss it with me. This was very timely!" (Kearney)

"I was impressed with the caliber of the panelists. They were open-minded and articulate in their expressions. I learned a lot." (Kearney)

"I have never attended anything like this. I found it enlightening, I learned a lot from the panelists, and was impressed with the intelligent questions from the audience." (Lincoln)

October 16, 2018 – Norfolk (Northeast Community College)

Moderator: Kent Warneke, *Norfolk Daily News* editor (and HN board member)
Panelists: Clark Kauffman, *Des Moines Register* reporter (Pulitzer finalist)
Jenna Johnson, *Washington Post* reporter
Frank Partsch, *Omaha World-Herald* editor (retired)

October 18, 2018 – Scottsbluff (Midwest Theater)

Moderator: Steve Chatelain, former publisher of the *Kearney Hub*
Panelists: Charlie Brogan, AlphaMedia/KFOR radio reporter
Clark Kauffman, *Des Moines Register* reporter (Pulitzer finalist)
Anna Staver, *Denver Post* reporter

October 30, 2018 – Omaha (UNO Milo Bail Student Center)

Moderator: Dr. Barbara Pickering, UNO College of Communication, Fine Arts & Media
Panelists: David Fahrenthold, *Washington Post* reporter (Pulitzer winner)
Dr. Victoria DeFrancesco Soto, University of Texas professor
Henry Cordes, *Omaha World-Herald* reporter

November 14, 2018 – North Platte (Prairie Arts Center)

Moderator: Steve Chatelain, former publisher of the *Kearney Hub*
Panelists: Matthew Hansen, *Omaha World-Herald* reporter
Sarah McCammon, National Public Radio reporter
Joe Starita, UNL College of Journalism professor (Pulitzer finalist)

November 15, 2018 – Kearney (World Theatre)

Moderator: Sarah McCammon, National Public Radio reporter
Panelists: Shon Barenklau, *Kearney Hub* publisher
Erin Grace, *Omaha World-Herald* columnist
Matt Waite, UNL College of Journalism professor (Pulitzer winner)

November 28, 2018 – Lincoln (UNL Nebraska Innovation Campus)

Moderator: Bill Kelly, Nebraska Educational Telecommunications producer
Panelists: Laura Bauer, *Kansas City Star* reporter (Pulitzer finalist)
Mitch Smith, *The New York Times* reporter
JoAnne Young, *Lincoln Journal Star* reporter