

Applying Theories of Communication to Food Justice in Western North Carolina

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Abstract

Food inequity is highly prevalent across Western North Carolina counties, an injustice exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting underlying disparities and causing supply chain shortages that created more reliance on local food systems, the COVID-19 pandemic produced a unique opportunity to advocate for the importance of maintaining more resilient local food systems. This requires collaboration and communication between community members and advocates. But how can effective communication and collaboration be found among the broad area of Western North Carolina that contains many different local areas? Through a partnership with the Food Justice Planning Initiative, community champions and members were surveyed and interviewed both online and in person in Western North Carolina counties from May 2022 to September 2022. Using Goffman's (1974) theory of communication studies on frame analysis, this research investigated how to frame issues, through what language and methods, to create an accessible and valued avenue of communication to facilitate more resilient collaborations around food justice. This study found that the internet can not be the sole outreach tool, but rather that a wide range of mixed methods and terminology are required to communicate and collaborate in Western North Carolina. Word of mouth, collaboration with local organizations and Facebook were the most agreed-upon avenues of communication. Email and other internet methods were contested depending on the area. Understanding communication, especially what words or vocabulary are well received in each area, is highly impactful in this region's food systems work.

1. Introduction and Literature Review

This section covers key terms around food justice, how it is connected to food systems, why there is a need for more food systems communication, and how this research worked to address this need.

About 129,775,000 U.S. households were food insecure in 2020 with about 35% of these households existing below the poverty line and about 4% reporting very low food security.¹ In North Carolina, 4,387,000 households are food insecure - ranking it the 8th highest state in the nation.¹ Food insecurity is especially prevalent in Western North Carolina as 1 in 4 children face food insecurity.² As defined in Figure 1, food security is “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active healthy life.”³ However, access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food in the U.S. is inequitable.

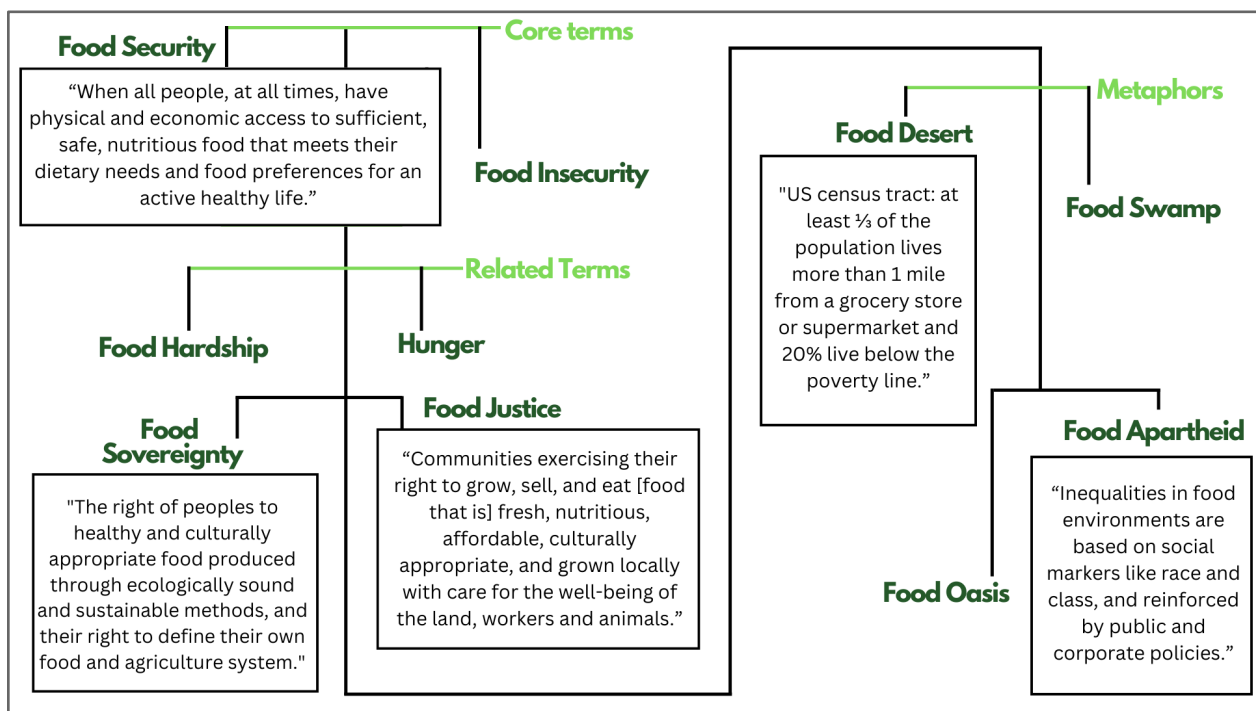


Figure 1. Word diagram of the key terms on the topic of food justice (Adapted from *Everybody Eats* with the food justice definition from *Cultivating Food Justice*).^{1,2}

Often, food insecurity results from unequal opportunities to produce healthy, affordable foods, which are also not distributed evenly. The term “food inequity” is used to address unequal opportunities to produce and consume healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant foods.⁵ Food inequity and insecurity occur within an unsustainable food system. Food systems are circular “complex networks that include all the inputs and outputs associated with agricultural and food production and consumption”⁶ These steps are demonstrated in Figure 2.⁷

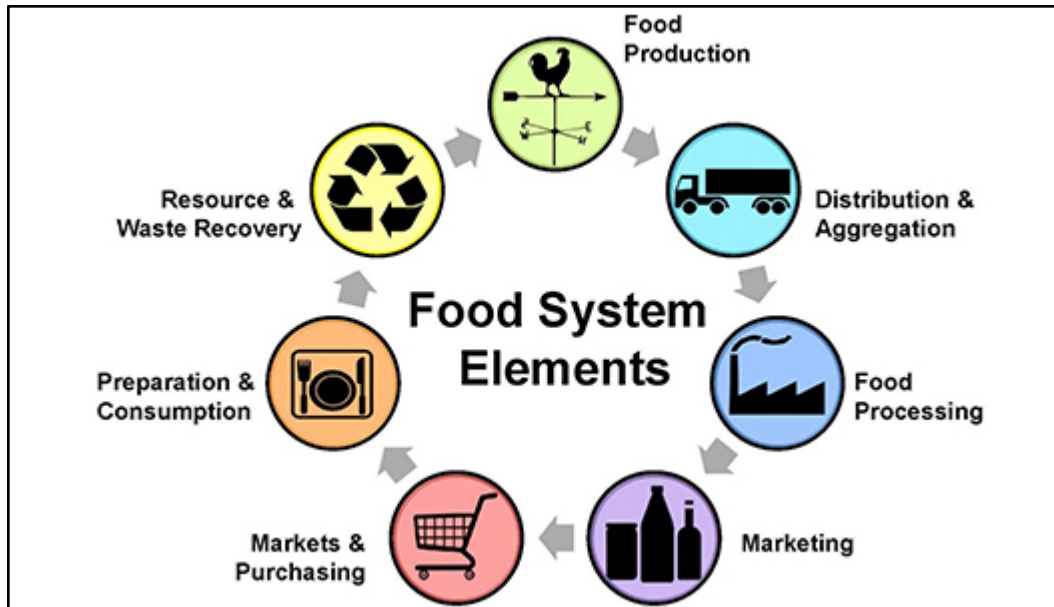


Figure 2: Food system diagram from the Texas Center for Local Food.⁷

A sustainable food system “delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised”⁶ An unsustainable food system does not provide food security for all. According to the UN, sustainability works to meet the needs of everyone now and in the future.⁸ Thus, addressing food insecurity is important for developing sustainability because it recognizes that everyone’s needs are not being met.

Not only has the COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized that not everyone’s needs are being met currently, but it has also shown how interconnected food insecurity and vulnerability to other harmful health effects are.⁹ A study conducted by Northwestern University found a positive association between COVID-19 mortality for older adults and the percentage of the older adult population with low access to food.¹⁰ Another study found that those working essential jobs, those with Major Depressive Disorder, and Hispanic respondents were more likely to experience food insecurity during COVID-19.¹¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated underlying health disparities and exposed cracks within food systems. This is a critical context for this study.

To address solutions to the harmful effects of and correlations to food insecurity, the food justice and food sovereignty movements recognize food inequity and emphasize the importance of communities having the right to construct their food systems.³ This means that to create more equitable food access and enable community members to construct their sustainable food systems, community members need to be able to communicate in a way that is both heard and valued within these existing systems.

Food system communication is the “framework that centralizes the pragmatic and constitutive role communication plays in arranging, negotiating, and challenging meaning-making related to food systems, including their relations, processes, and outcomes”¹² How food is marketed within a local food system can affect how it is purchased and consumed, and so on. Food system communication is used on different scales¹² from local to regional, to national, to global systems³ and changes over different periods.¹² Community-centered communication within these systems is integral in the food justice movement as “land, labor, policy, and property are critical nodes at which intersectional communicative struggles over power take place”¹² If community members are not aware of food availability, or are excluded from participating in conversations around obtaining resources, a power imbalance is established. Accessible communication is important. Are there accessible nodes of communication across food systems? Food system communication is leaning more and more towards using the internet as the primary node of communication,^{13,14} but is this accessible?

In Western North Carolina, not only is there high food insecurity, but there is also a low median of 52.85% broadband internet access, according to a map by NC Broadband.¹⁵ The median is used here because of the drastic outliers in Cherokee (6.91%) and Graham (0%) Counties.¹⁵ Overall, the level of broadband internet access is lower in Western North Carolina compared to the rest of the state.¹⁵ This begs the question - is the internet a reliable method of communication about food resources across all counties? If there is low internet access, how is

information about these resources reaching community members? These questions are especially relevant as COVID-19 has forced many of these resources to communicate solely through online methods.

Figure 3 shows the number of food resources, percentage of broadband internet access, and population in each of the Western North Carolina counties. There is a positive linear correlation between the number of food resources and internet availability - showing that possibly as internet availability increases, the number of food resources in a county increases, and again implores - if there is low internet access, how are food resources reaching community members?

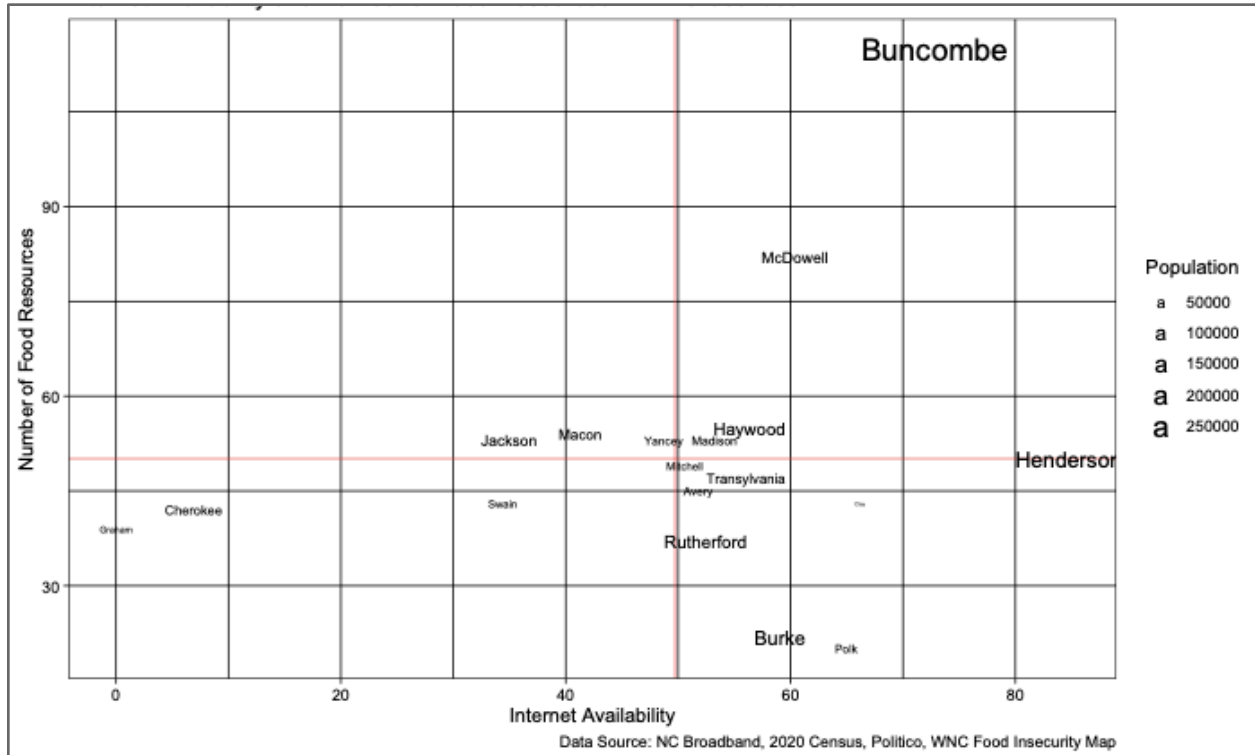


Figure 3. Internet availability, number of food resources, percentage of broadband internet access, and population in Western North Carolina counties.^{10, 11}

Not only is there limited access to internet resources, which affects levels of communication accessibility, but there is also a wide variety of terminology and different systems of value around food. This can cause disconnect and confusion when communicating about food justice. Figure 1 demonstrates how interconnected and wide-ranging language around food insecurity is.³ The terms *food systems*, *food insecurity*, and *food justice* are surrounded by a web of precise language that both “enables and constrains participation in food systems and food justice activism.”³

Language is very important in building meaning, as demonstrated by some of the differences in food system language. For example, while the term “food desert” implies that an area with low access to grocery stores is naturally occurring, the term “food apartheid” recognizes that these areas are man-made through social injustice.³ Additionally, recognizing the difference between the food movement and the food justice movement is important. While the food movement has successfully promoted biologically diverse polycultures and helped farmers’ markets and organic food hold their market price by encouraging people to “vote with their fork,” those involved are mainly white and middle class.⁴ Differing from the food movement, the food *justice* movement is community-driven and argues that there needs to be “just sustainability,” or “sustainability for all.”⁴ Figure 1 presents more terms around food justice, along with their definitions and how they relate to each other.

According to Goffman's (1974) theory of communication studies on frame analysis, people “make sense of and draw meaning from the world by utilizing ‘frames’ of reference.”^{17,18} These “frames of reference” include the language in which food initiatives’ work is discussed and understood. Often the success of a food justice initiative is determined by monetary value.¹⁷ However, these initiatives usually produce hidden benefits that do not fit into a monetary frame of reference. To better articulate and present their work in media, and to collaborators, initiatives

need to be aware of this frame of reference. These frames of reference inform which outreach strategies will be most effective, also determining whether to deliver information through social media, a newsletter, print flyer, newspaper, or another method. “We encounter framing examples every time we engage with media sources, political or social movements, political leaders, or influential individuals. How we frame a message can change its meaning and impact.”¹⁹

Frames of reference, which include both language and methods of communication, are crucial to understanding how people best communicate with each other. Food inequity affects a wide range of differing areas -- from rural to urban areas, from areas dominated by one political view to another, and from areas with wide technology access to little internet service -- as seen by the disparity in Figure 2.^{3, 15} Thus, a generalization that every member of every area all receive information through the same frame of reference is not valid. Varying methods of communication need to be applied to bring people together around a common goal.

This research supported FJPI’s work on building a resilient local food system across all six of their strategy areas: healthy and local food distribution, nutrition and cooking education, community gardens, collaborative agriculture network, food waste reduction, and regional food council.²⁰ FJPI advocates for organizations that have an impact on the climate and marginalized communities and is the vehicle for their voices to make a system-level change. For example, FJPI hosted a series of food council interest meetings with the project titled EmPowering Mountain Food Systems (EMFS) in Western North Carolina in May 2022. EMFS is a three-year project working to expand opportunities to farm and food businesses in Southwestern North Carolina.²¹ Each food council decides its definition, but Community Food Strategies (a North Carolina food council network) generally defines the councils as “community-based coalitions, created to help build a more just and sustainable food system. Each council supports a specific community – usually a county or region, and sometimes a town, city, or neighborhood. A local or regional council is made up of individuals and organizations from that community who represent multiple sectors and work together to build relationships, leverage resources, and learn from one another. The goal of a food council is to influence the redesign of their food system.”²² There are over 35 food councils across North Carolina, covering 60 of the 100 counties.²² In Western North Carolina, there are only 7 food councils.²²

FJPI works to build a more resilient food system network within Western North Carolina. Finding ways for FJPI to better communicate with the communities around them can create a better network of support, making the six strategy areas more impactful and thus developing a more resilient agricultural system and environment. This research aims to contribute to determining which strategies can be developed to create collaborative communication with community members around access to local food resources in different areas of Western NC.

2. Methods

My research focused on how more accessible communication can lead to more resilient local food systems by asking three main questions:

- 1) How reliable is using the internet as a method of communication in Western NC? If internet is unreliable, how do residents learn about food-related topics?
- 2) What strategies of communication do community members recommend or identify as effective for their area? How do recommended strategies differ by county in Western North Carolina?
- 3) What terminology is preferred by community members regarding food initiatives in Western North Carolina?

My methods were inspired by the methods used to create San Diego County’s 2030 Food Vision.²³ Similar to FJPI, this initiative was launched directly before COVID-19 hit. After being forced to go online because of the pandemic, the San Diego Initiative had to reassess the internet as a reliable and equitable way to reach communities.²³ Thus, to find a community-driven vision, they focused on engaging communities through surveys across 12 priority communities.²³ Using the results, they evaluated the effectiveness of the internet as a means of communication within communities and tried to find new ways of communication across different communities.²³ After further research, I found that not only are interviews and surveys strong research methods on their own,^{24,25} but when they are used together as a mixed-methods approach, the “most relevant and reliable data” is produced because more perspectives are captured.²⁴

To answer my research questions and create a strategic outreach plan, I conducted a descriptive survey and multiple interviews from July 18 to September 1, 2022. I used a mixed-method approach so that the interviews could

better inform the surveys and gain more perspectives, thus capturing more holistic communication effectiveness within each county. Before conducting these methods, I applied for and received IRB approval.

Participants from six counties in Western North Carolina (Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, and Macon) were recruited and identified from food council interest meetings, at community events, through community leader connections, and local Facebook pages. This served as a snowball sample of all Western North Carolina (WNC), with the goal that these methods could be replicated in the rest of WNC at a later time.

Similar to how a study titled Kitchen Connects in Greensboro North Carolina³ used a survey to gather information about the surrounding communities, I used a survey, but administered 50% of the responses online and 50% in person. In giving the survey in person, I hoped to reduce the bias of an online survey reporting on the accessibility of the internet. To reach people in the wide scope of this research in a short time period, online methods had to be utilized as well. The online survey was conducted through google forms, and the in-person survey was given out at community events such as a farmers' social and a community potluck. I identified and recruited individuals for the online survey by asking local Facebook pages to repost it on their page, being connected with community members through a domino effect of FJPI leaders connecting me with community leaders who connected me with other community members, and through emailing community members listed on a contact spreadsheet attained from county food council interest meetings. This spreadsheet was created from those that attended food council interest meetings in May 2022 that FJPI and EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems hosted in each of the WNC counties. Working with my FJPI contact, we sent out an email with the survey (google forms) to the contacts spreadsheet compiled from food council interest meetings. We then followed up with one-on-one emails to each contact on the spreadsheet.

At the beginning of the online survey, a consent statement was given in the introductory paragraph stating that if the participant continues to complete the survey, they are consenting to be a part of the study. The questions were descriptive with short answer responses asking about the participants' experience with communication, events, and internet accessibility within their county. Additionally, I was inspired by a food council interest meeting I attended in Clay County hosted by EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems at which community members were asked to give feedback on the language of a goal statement for food systems within the county. Community members gave a lot of detailed feedback. Thus, I also asked in my survey for feedback on the language of FJPI's mission statement.

Individuals for the key informant in-person interviews were identified and recruited at follow-up food council interest meetings, other FJPI events, and email introductions through FJPI-connected community leaders. The participants for the interviews were leaders within their county who were involved in putting on community events. Key informants provide a "deeper insight" into the environment around them as "natural observers" due to their "position within a society" and "personal skills."¹⁹ The pre-established questions in my interview guide were similar to the online survey but asked for more elaboration on the most successful and accessible methods of communication within the participants' county. Careful not to ask leading questions that would bias the results, I conducted key informant interviews with 10 total community members. These interviews took place either online (via phone call or Zoom), in person at a public establishment near the participant, or after the events that I attended - whichever was most convenient for the participant. I used a phone to voice record the interviews, with the interviewee's permission, which is a common method that has been used in other settings.¹⁹ At the beginning of the interview, I asked for the participant's consent to proceed and had them fill out a consent form for use of direct quotes.

I analyzed the survey data by compiling it, both the online and print responses, into an Excel spreadsheet. From there, summary statistics were calculated. To analyze the interview data, I gave each interview a number. Then I transcribed the recordings and created an Excel spreadsheet that included for each interview the interview number, county of the community member, role of the community member, recommended communication strategies for the area, feedback on if the internet is reliable, language / terminology around food work used, barriers to communication, and specific resources listed by the community member. I used this spreadsheet to look for patterns and found 11 main categories of recommended communication strategies. I then calculated the percentage of support for each category based on how many interviewees mentioned or recommended it. I also calculated the percentage that reported reliable internet, the percentage that was unsure, and the percentage that reported no reliable internet. Lastly, I looked for overall themes around language and calculated percentages of support for each theme. I then found quotes that further elaborated on overall themes. After analyzing both the survey and interview data, I created a detailed overall results outline that included evidence found to answer each research question. Graphs of key findings were created using the statistical programming platform R.

3. Results

The following questions were explored in this research. The results of my research on each question are addressed separately in the subsections below the results overview.

- 1) How reliable is using the internet as a method of communication in Western NC? If internet is unreliable, how do residents learn about food-related topics?
- 2) What strategies of communication do community members recommend or identify as effective for their area? How do recommended strategies differ by county in Western North Carolina?
- 3) What terminology is preferred by community members regarding food initiatives in Western North Carolina?

Between July and September 2022, I surveyed and interviewed community members. Half of the 38 survey responses were received in-person at community meetings, such as a potluck, a board meeting, and a networking social event. The other half of the responses were received through Google forms and reached community members through email and Facebook. Ten key informant interviews were conducted. Most of these interviews took place online through a phone or Zoom call after meeting the interviewee at an in-person event. The number of survey respondents was roughly evenly distributed across counties, with the lowest number in Haywood County (Table 1). However, Haywood County had a higher number of in-person interactions and interviews for this study than all other counties except for Cherokee County. In addition to interviews and surveys, anecdotal evidence was also gathered at in-person community events within the counties, especially within Macon, Cherokee, Clay, and Haywood counties.

Table 1: Number of Surveys Received by County of Western North Carolina

County	Number of Surveys Received (and percent of total)	Number of Interviews Conducted
Macon	9 (24%)	1
Jackson	11 (29%)	2
Haywood	3 (8%)	2
Graham	6 (16%)	1
Clay	5 (13%)	1
Cherokee	4 (11%)	2
Total	38	11

Before conducting interviews and surveys in the summer of 2022, I coordinated and connected with community members and leaders through email and in-person events. To do so, I scheduled meetings, planned events, networked, shared resources, and obtained approval to survey and interview participants. The lengthy preparation and high level of connection required for this work demonstrate the level of collaboration and follow-up needed in food systems work.

The selection bias and the small sample size of this study mean that it is not a truly representative sample. However, there is a high amount of anecdotal evidence that impacts community member livelihood within these counties, and thus the evidence gathered is highly important. A mixed-methods approach was used to examine different communication methods. This helped capture more perspectives and minimize bias towards one method of communication. The mixed-methods approach is important when working to provide multiple perspectives.¹⁸ These methods also gained IRB approval in May 2022.

3.1 Internet as a method of communication

All survey responses, interview responses, and other evidence from in-person events emphasized that the internet can not be the sole communication tool in Western North Carolina. When asked if the internet is reliable, 75% of the interview respondents either said “definitely not” (55 %) or “it could sometimes be used if paired with another method of communication”(45 %). Of the survey respondents, 68% indicated that they had reliable internet access at home, which is less than the 80% that NC Broadband reports.¹⁰ Thirty-two percent reported not having internet access at home. Out of this 32%, some clarified that they occasionally use a hot spot, only have internet some days, use satellite internet, or use the internet at a community center. During an interview, a community champion from Clay County expanded on this saying:

“When I was working in Clay County in a rural community, the internet was a tool but it can not be the only tool. There is not a lot of broadband access everywhere and so you have people that don’t have internet or email at all. People that aren’t on Facebook. Especially the older generations. You have to use mixed methods of communication.”

Even if the internet is used, it should be used alongside other communication methods. On average, interview respondents recommended 12 other communication methods, showing that the internet by itself may not be sufficient. Internet methods such as email and Facebook, the primary internet communication methods reported in this study, can be effective if used alongside other outreach avenues.

Throughout this study, emails were found to be very effective in communicating with organizational leaders. The wider the audience for a singular email, the lesser the likelihood that I would receive a response. A majority of the survey responses received from email were attained through one-on-one emails. Between June 1 and July 18, 2022, a total of approximately 290 overall emails were sent and received for this research. Eighty-five different people were involved in these separate emails, which also shows the high number of people involved with food systems work. However, the 290 emails only include those that involved me. Often, the process involved waiting to hear back from someone, who was waiting to hear back from someone else, who was waiting to hear back from someone else. Because this process involves people who are often spread thin, with key leaders doing many different tasks, scheduling and collaborating throughout this process required flexibility and at least a week’s time to receive a follow-up email.

While email was the most popular survey recommendation with about 90% support, only about 62% of the interviews mentioned email. Interview respondents mentioned 6 other methods more consistently than email. When a community member mentioned email in an interview, they mentioned it alongside using other communication methods. While email was the number one method cited by the survey, the respondents were given the option to select multiple methods, which all did. Thus, email may be useful, but is not consistently useful and should be used alongside other methods.

The other top online method of communication reported in this study was Facebook, which both survey respondents and interviewees supported more than emails as a method of communication. Of interview respondents, 88% mentioned email, and about 82% of survey respondents selected Facebook as an effective internet method of communication. Community members who participated in the interviews clarified that this was mostly local group pages such as a local newspaper Facebook page. A community member in Clay County asserted that Facebook is mostly used for community members above the age of 40 years. Facebook as a method of communication was again emphasized by longtime community members at a Cherokee County community potluck. If community members do not have access to the internet at their home, they reported gathering at a local establishment such as a library, McDonald’s, or gas station for internet, Facebook, and email access, which was a common theme found in this study.

3.2 Community-identified effective communication strategies

Across this study, community members emphasized the importance of identifying effective communication strategies about food in Western North Carolina. For example, at a Cherokee County food council interest meeting, many community members reported that they buy their eggs commercially, which come from the Kentucky area, while recognizing that many local community members in this small county produce a surplus of eggs to sell. This shows a need for better food system communication. At the same food council interest meeting a woman mentioned her success in placing 3 by 9-inch “rack cards” into kids' backpacks at a local school to promote an event. This brought one of the biggest turn-outs for a farm event that the community had seen. Another meeting with local community leaders again emphasized the importance in understanding specific methods of communication in Haywood County, as they discussed successes and struggles of communication, especially throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences show the merit in understanding what methods of communication work best within different counties.

Word of mouth was the most recommended method of communication from community members at in-person events and in interviews (Figure 4). At an event I co-planned with the Collaborative Agriculture Network, an FJPI strategy area, 100% of the attendees reported word of mouth as the number one method of communication in their area and the number one way they heard about the event. These were mainly residents from Macon, Cherokee, Clay, and Jackson counties. Word of mouth specifically happens through routine gatherings at a wide range of public establishments within the area such as McDonald’s, community centers, libraries, and gas stations. Contrastingly, word of mouth was the third most effective communication method reported from the survey.

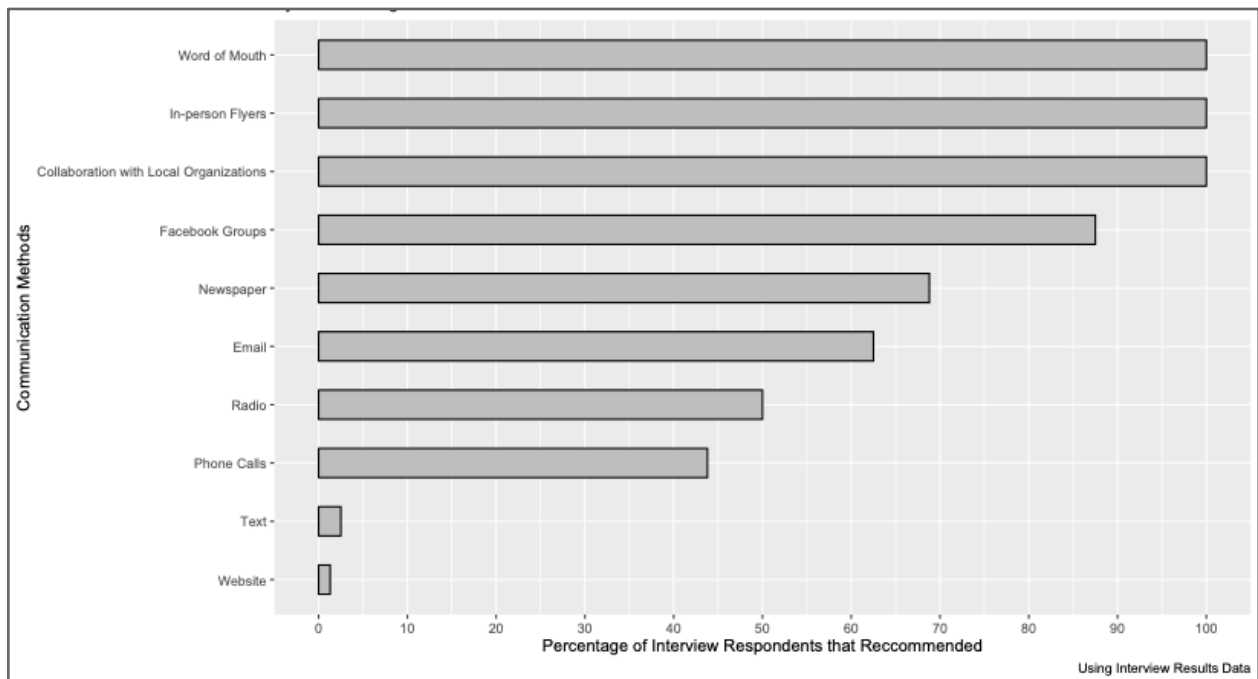


Figure 5. Recommended Communication Methods Reported by Interviewees

While 53% of the online surveys supported word of mouth, 68% of the in-person written surveys supported word of mouth (Figure 5), showing a possible bias due to survey methods.

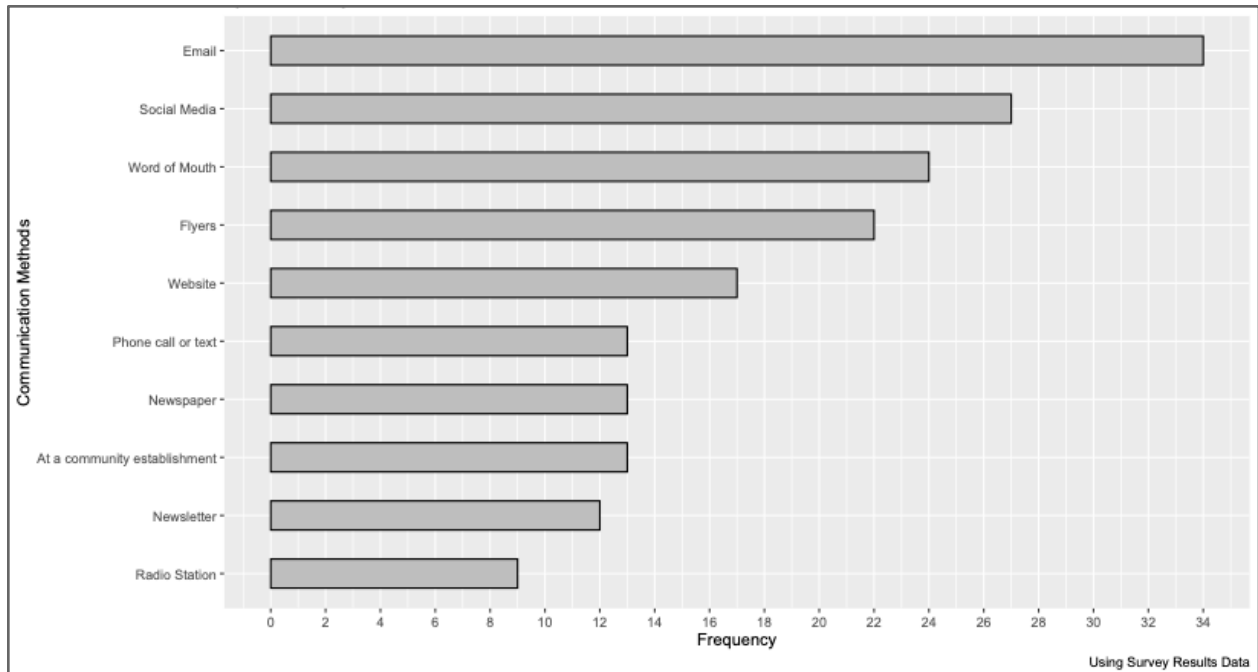


Figure 6. Communication Methods in Western North Carolina as Reported on Written Surveys

As a part of the word-of-mouth method, every interviewee mentioned that reputation, relationship, and personal connection is very important. Community members from Clay County mentioned that it is very important for people to trust your knowledge, which comes from having a good reputation, relationship, and connection. In Jackson County, another community member asserted that it is crucial to meet farmers where they are, which builds connection. It is very hard to communicate in these areas without a good reputation, relationship, and connection to other members of the area, especially as an outsider. These values can be built by attending community meetings and events and listening. A Cherokee County member mentioned that this even includes showing up at the local gas station where community members gather every morning before work. Often collaboration with other local organizations, another method cited by interview respondents, helps build connections. For example, interview respondents cited churches, health departments, the extension agent, the largest employers in the area, schools, community colleges, community centers, the Chamber of Commerce, county commissioner meetings, and the county manager’s office. The extension agent was the number one collaboration recommendation in Cherokee, Jackson, and Clay Counties, especially for farmers because they are already paying attention to the message board and calendar.

Flyers were another popular method from both survey and interview results. However, the 11 survey responses specifically emphasized that these are online flyers while another 11 responses highlighted in-person flyers. All interviewee respondents cited in-person flyers, specifically at community establishments and in-person events. This includes food distributions, farmers’ markets, places like seed stores where farmers frequent, churches, schools, or as a Graham County community member stated, the one grocery store in the county. Haywood county’s food resource guide was highlighted as pivotal in helping the community recover from the local flood and during COVID-19. This food resource guide is well-known within the community and is updated monthly.

Other methods were hotly contested or did not have enough support to argue for strong use. Among the methods that differed by county is the newspaper. Community members in Cherokee and Graham Counties, the counties with the lowest NC Broadband access, cited the newspaper as useful. Both counties have long-standing papers that the “old timers” engage with and in Graham County, there is a page dedicated to a listing of community events. In all other counties where the paper was not effective in communicating, the local newspaper’s Facebook page was effective. While factors like the size of the county can cause differences in communication among the counties, there

are themes across all counties. For example, as one Haywood County community member said about collaboration: *“There is no way we could serve the number of people that we do without collaboration. Collaboration is the key. Geographically we are a mountain county, so we have mountain issues. We are a large county (population is probably 60,000). We’re spread among 3-4 different towns. If we did not have the collaboration between nonprofits, churches, individuals, and clients, we could not do what we do.”*

Similarly, a Graham County community member expressed a different scale of collaboration: *“Word of mouth is real important here. A majority of the people that came to the meeting were by word of mouth. It kinda shows how we are very small. The county has about 8000 residents. It is a small rural county. A lot of times if it's a meeting to help out the community, it's a lot of the same folks that show up every time. We get to know each other.”*

While Graham and Haywood Counties differ in size, both counties rely on a high level of collaboration to maintain lasting communication. In Haywood County, it may be a collaboration between organizations while in Graham County it may be a collaboration between individuals. Although the Western North Carolina counties sampled in this research differ, word of mouth and collaboration are key communication themes across the area.

3.3 Food language and terminology

All interview and survey results emphasized that language and words are important, especially in framing communication. In the survey, community members were asked to give feedback on the following FJPI mission statement: *“FJPI strives to create a thriving, regenerative, resilient local food system with food justice for all in WNC.”*

Of the survey responses, 55% indicated some sort of confusion with this mission statement, especially around the words food system and food justice. When asked about what words they use around food work in their area, interview respondents also expressed confusion in these terms, saying that they seemed inaccessibly scholarly and implied a level of judgment. A Cherokee County community member elaborated that this difference in language creates tension within the county, saying:

“There's always the outsider, the people from ‘off’ attitude from the locals that creates a little bit of tension when ‘off’ come here and try to change things. If you’re from ‘off’, then you’re not from around here. You’ll hear, ‘oh they’re from off’. Having people that grew up in the area for outreach is invaluable.”

Additionally, all interview respondents recommended avoiding political language. As stated by another Cherokee County community member, the word “policy” in a meeting title can reduce participation in the event, showing the importance of framing a meeting correctly: *“One word change made me almost decide not to go. It was the switch between a ‘food council’ and a ‘food policy council.’ limiting the scope of your work will limit the people that are willing to participate.”*

Instead of using political or confusing terminology, an interviewed Jackson County community member and Western North Carolina leader recommended outsiders to “say what you mean” within this area. Broad terms should be defined instead of stated. Additionally, interviewed community members recommended positive language that avoids blame and judgment. Offering a meal or food component is also a popular way to gather others. Words like “dish,” “potluck,” “dinner,” “harvest,” “food,” and “community” highlight this point in the word cloud below. This cloud was created from survey responses to the question: “If you have heard about, attended or planned community events, what are some commonly used titles of the events? (words used).” The darker the color of the word and the bigger the font, the more it was mentioned in survey responses (Figure 6).

respondents were asked more in detail about general outreach within their county. Either way, word of mouth is a top communication cited by the surveys, interviews, workshops, events, and meetings in the study.

Similar to this process of collecting specific methods, another movement titled “Kitchen Connects GSO” from Greensboro, North Carolina used data collection and management as a communication resource to organize their next steps.³ As part of the data collection process, Kitchen Connects asked a sample of particular communities how they found out about the program. Their results (shown in Figure 7) provide insight into marketing and media strategies and show similarities to the Western North Carolina study. Further research could examine disparities in communication between Eastern and Western North Carolina beyond these two studies.

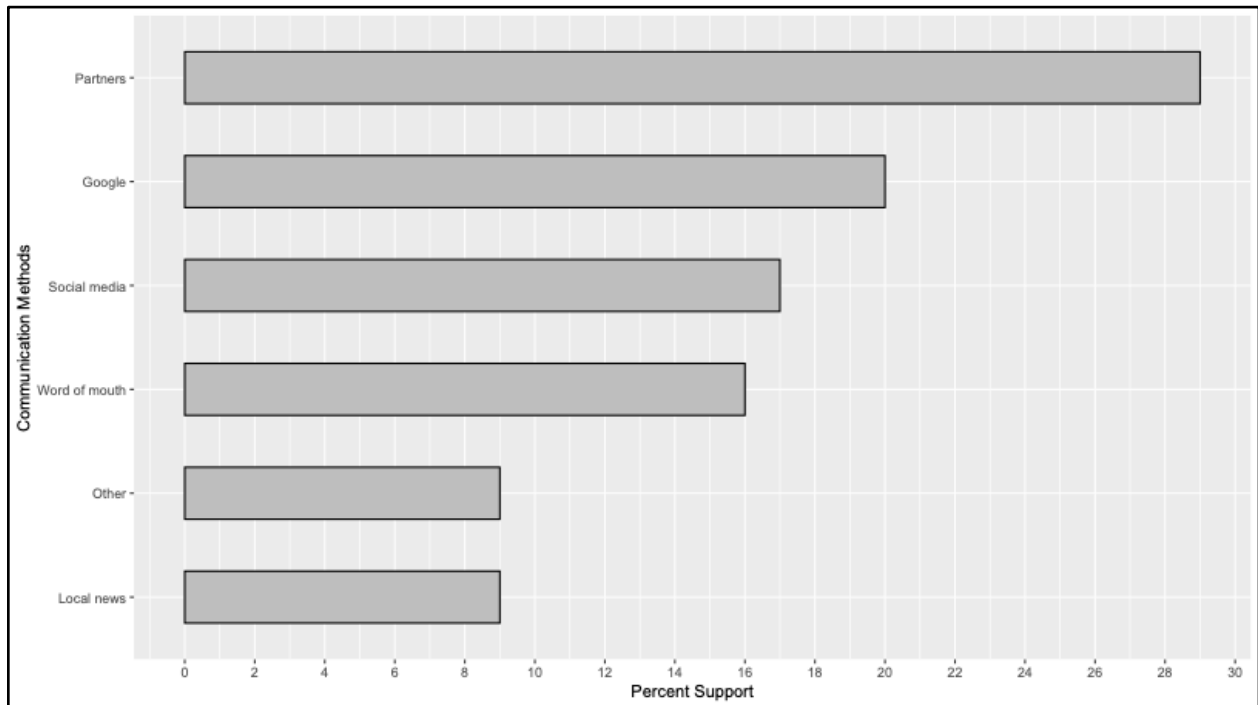


Figure 8. Media and marketing reach for Greensboro Kitchen Connects Program.³

Both my study and the Kitchen Connects movement found partners to be a highly cited communication method.³ However, this Western North Carolina- based study cited fewer internet methods. Half the methods from the Greensboro study require internet, while this Western North Carolina cited more in-depth methods, which could have caused a higher proportion of non-internet methods to be cited.³

Another movement, titled “Mass in Motion,” also found collaboration with partners to be a highly effective communication method. The movement used similar methods of communication in order to use the “current momentum in addressing emergency needs” from COVID-19.²⁶ Working as a communications channel to community members across the state of Massachusetts, the program created social media posts, “education outreach,” and collaboration between multiple existing organizations to accomplish specific goals.²⁶ The initiative also supported their partners’ initiatives through updating and distributing a list of emergency food resources.²⁶ This demonstrates the importance of collaboration and multifaceted communication when advocating for more equitable food systems.

The high level of collaboration and face-to-face communication in Western North Carolina cited in this study, could be due to inconsistent internet access. A community leader from Cherokee County summed this up by saying:

“Really, the only way that I get the internet is someone in the community making it accessible. If we’re all going to go to a public space to use the internet, we might as well get together. I think that is what drives the focus here in the far far west on face to face communication.”

How are these community connections found and created? The communication strategy guide by The Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Futures' Food Policy Network identifies three key contexts to identify in order to frame an issue: the political climate, economic climate, and social climate.¹⁹ For example, stakeholders in Dayton, Ohio demonstrated an understanding of social climate as they framed inequitable food access as an "issue that needs to be in the communities hands" and identified this frame as vital in building a movement.¹⁹ A consistent theme across food council interest meetings, community leader meetings, networking events, surveys, and interviews was that political polarization is a barrier in these areas. A community champion in Cherokee County stated that he almost did not attend a meeting because the title was changed from "food council" to "food policy council," implying policy and thus politics. How do community members and leaders work together through this polarization?

The Food and Nutrition Board of Health writes that trust is the key to communicating effectively, citing that the most mistrusted information in a food literacy workshop conducted by the National Academic Food and Nutrition board was on natural toxins, genetic engineering, and pesticides.²⁷ During the WNC study, a community champion in Clay County reported that:

"You have to understand that a lot of people that lean more conservative, they feel that if you are talking about getting rid of pesticides, you are talking about getting rid of farmer livelihood because how can they make money without using pesticides. You have to understand that and approach it differently."

Community champions in Jackson, Clay, and Haywood Counties specifically cited that in these areas sustainable food practices need to be viewed through an economic perspective instead of an environmental one. However, this was contested at the Cherokee and Clay County food council interest meeting when community leaders and members decided on a goal statement around food in their county. They pointed out that the words "economic framework" implied an over-emphasis on the economy and suggested the words "economic, social, educational network" instead. This shows the impact that presenting topics through different frames can have on trust and thus valued and heard communication. In Clay County, a community champion cited that "reputation" gained through trust was the most important communication method. Furthermore, in creating trust, language should be positively flipped so that farmers and practices are not "demonized."

The food literacy workshop also mentions that streamlining and tight communication can be a barrier to clear communication.²⁰ "Limiting the scope of your work will limit the people that are willing to participate," stated the Cherokee County community champion mentioned earlier that did not want to attend an event because of the additional label "policy." All interviewed community champions, except for those from Jackson and Clay counties, emphasized that inclusive language needs to use words that explain exactly what they mean. Additionally, all interviewed community champions and over half of the surveyed community members found the broad terms like "food justice" and "food systems," mentioned in the introduction of this paper, to be confusing. According to the community champions and members, these terms imply an "off" judgment and inaccessible scholarly discourse. As explained by a community member in Cherokee County: "If you're from 'off', then you're not from around here. The outsider, or the 'off' attitude from the locals creates a little bit of tension when 'off' come here and try to change things." This community champion and member of 20 years within her county cautioned food work advocates to be careful with using language that could imply an outsider trying to create change in an area where people have been for hundreds of years. Terminology is highly important in creating effective communication, as emphasized by all of those interviewed in my study.

5. Conclusion

After reading the book *Everybody Eats* and other research around the Kitchen Connects movement in Greensboro, North Carolina,¹ I found that there was similar research around food and communication in Eastern North Carolina, but a gap in Western North Carolina. My research worked to address and fill that gap, but there were many challenges.

First, the size of the geographic area is so expansive that it was hard to conduct a fully representative study of the area in the limited time allotted for the research. In person communication was ideal, but it takes hours to travel to most of the far west counties.

Additionally, as addressed above, these areas are highly sensitive to outsiders and so this work requires time to build trust. For example, before conducting the surveys and interviews, I made observations from the process of coordinating and collaborating with community members and leaders for approval and preparation. This includes meeting scheduling, event planning, networking, resource sharing, and obtaining approval to survey and interview participants. I sent over 300 emails, demonstrating the high level of collaboration and follow-up in food systems work. These emails involved 85 different people, also showing the high number of those involved with food systems work. Because this process involves people who are often spread thin, with key leaders doing a large portion of the work, scheduling and collaborating throughout this process required flexibility and patience. For example, the event planned for this research had to be rescheduled at the last minute because of miscommunication and schedule changes.

While these survey and interview responses are not the most representative because of the small sample size, the information gathered is still anecdotal, relevant, and important because it impacts how valuable resources are shared. Food is a vital resource, and this research works to explore how it is shared and communicated.

Through the process of working with a grassroots effort and engaging people across Western North Carolina, I found that email was the primary method of communication for food system leaders. Although I learned it is not practical to coordinate quickly, I wonder if there is a way to do so through a more efficient method of communication that can engage people's schedules in real-time - such as a survey sign-up to coordinate meeting times.

Additionally, I recommend that future research take more time to make connections and build trust or focus on a smaller area to be able to be the most connected and thus produce the most representative results. Attending community events are invaluable in this research and leads to important relationships within the community. Thus, community events should be prioritized in gathering data. Researchers and advocates need to meet often over surveyed and spread-thin community members where they are, working to build a relationship first then only after that connection and relationship is made, surveying or asking something from them. If unable to attend events, introductions via mutual connections are highly recommended.

This research found that while the internet can still be used to reach people in these areas, it should be seen as one of many tools. Multiple methods of communication, especially word of mouth through existing community organizations and establishments, should be used in trying to inclusively reach people in these counties. It is highly important that advocates need to meet farmers where they are. Throughout this communication, the language should be specific, not mentioning broad, policy, or trigger words to foster trust and relationships, which create more effective communication. More understanding of communication and vocabulary specific to different areas is highly important in breaking down polarized barriers and gathering around the same page that everyone needs to eat.

FJPI has stated that this research has the potential to create positive food system change. Results will be used to advocate for an increase of funds towards FJPI outreach, to inform FJPI's six strategy areas, and to create a strategic outreach plan that will be available to all community members within these counties, specifically those that were involved in this study and those that are involved in food work within the counties. Further research will focus on receiving feedback from community members on the strategic outreach plan. These efforts all work to establish more resilient and collaborative local food systems in Western North Carolina.

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