

Post-Newspaper Democracy and the Rise of Communicative Citizenship

Good Citizen as Good Communicator

Nik Usher

The answer to the question “What is journalism for?” often turns into a catalog of aspirations. That list might include informing the public, connecting communities, holding power to account, providing guidance and expertise, recording and remembering events, amplifying the voices of the marginalized, serving as a forum for public debate, enlightening readers and viewers, interpreting the complexity of institutions and social life, reflecting on the impact of policies, entertaining audiences, inspiring action, and helping people understand the world beyond their immediate experiences.¹ In reality, of course, journalism often fails to meet these aspirations, just as our actual democracy falls short of our ideal. But even accepting that perfection is never possible, it has become increasingly challenging for journalists today to attempt to meet these democracy-enhancing ideals.

Economic, technological, political, and cultural changes have put at risk the kinds of newsgathering and reporting that feed our civic culture – public affairs and investigative journalism. In the past, the commercial market did not fully support this type of valuable journalism; it was instead subsidized by the larger “newspaper bundle” – the revenue generated by the combination of crosswords, obituaries, and crime, sports, and lifestyle reporting that drove people to subscribe to newspapers.² Local newspapers, which have suffered the biggest cuts in journalism, have long served as the keystone for their communities, providing the most significant portion of original news coverage about any one geographically specific place.³ According to

¹ Jay Rosen used this question as the title for his book. See JAY ROSEN, *WHAT ARE JOURNALISTS FOR?* (1999). His introduction offers an overview of these arguments. *Id.* at 2–5.

² See in particular James T. Hamilton, *News Audiences: How Strong Are the Public's Interests in the Public Interest?*, in *ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO SELL: HOW THE MARKET TRANSFORMS INFORMATION INTO NEWS* 71 (2004).

³ Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Local Newspapers as Keystone Media: The Increased Importance of Diminished Newspapers for Local Political Information Environments*, in *LOCAL JOURNALISM: THE DECLINE OF NEWSPAPERS AND THE RISE OF DIGITAL MEDIA* 51, 51–52 (Rasmus Kleis Nielsen ed., 2015); MATTHEW WEBER ET AL., *LOCAL NEWS ON FACEBOOK* (2019); *Newspapers Still the Best Bet for Local News*, SANFORD SCH. OF PUB. POL'Y (Sept. 12, 2019), <https://sanford.duke.edu/story/newspapers-still-best-bet-local-news/>.

Medill's Local News Initiative, over the fifteen-year span between 2004 and 2019, about 1,800 communities have lost access to regular local news.⁴ Pew Research Center estimates that newspaper employment fell 57 percent between 2008 and 2020, while employment in newsrooms dropped 26 percent overall.⁵ These declines have real impacts on what news organizations can do to cover communities, with estimates suggesting the annual loss of 300–500 news stories about politics per major metropolitan news outlet.⁶ As news organizations are gobbled up by hedge funds looking to sell off distressed assets, they further cut journalism jobs.⁷ Newspapers that are still open for business often have little local news reporting at all; some call them “ghost newspapers”⁸ because they are visages of their former selves, hanging on with no life to them.

This type of journalism, which might be called the “institutional news media”⁹ (although it is often called “mainstream media” by its detractors), has a specific commitment to truth. It serves as a critical institution within civil society and comprises fact-based, truth-seeking journalists and news organizations who see themselves as a part of a profession committed to standards and ethics situated more broadly in democratic norms. As the United States faces the real threat of democratic backsliding,¹⁰ it becomes increasingly clear that the current commercial news media simply lacks the power and capacity to facilitate the development of the “informed citizen” who is foundational to liberal democratic ideals.¹¹ But if the informed citizen model implodes – thanks to factionalism, decaying trust in institutions, and digital platforms that further undermine media economics – what, then, is left?

This chapter argues for the need to reconceptualize citizenship in an era when professional journalism plays a significantly diminished role in directly shaping our

⁴ See Penelope Muse Abernathy, *News Deserts and Ghost Newspapers: Will Local News Survive?*, HUSSMAN SCH. OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA (2020), <https://www.usnewsdeserts.com/reports/news-deserts-and-ghost-newspapers-will-local-news-survive/the-news-landscape-in-2020-transformed-and-diminished/>.

⁵ Mason Walker, *U.S. Newsroom Employment Has Fallen 26% Since 2008*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (July 13, 2021), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/13/u-s-newsroom-employment-has-fallen-26-since-2008/>.

⁶ Erik Peterson, *Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage*, 65 AM. J. POL. SCI. 443 (2021) (see the abstract for an overview).

⁷ Erik Peterson & Johanna Dunaway, *The New News Barons: Investment Ownership Reduces Newspaper Reporting Capacity*, 707 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 1, 74–89 (2023).

⁸ See Margaret Sullivan, *News Deserts, Ghost Papers, and Beacons of Hope*, in *GHOSTING THE NEWS: LOCAL JOURNALISM AND THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY* (2020); see also Abernathy, *supra* note 4.

⁹ Stephen D. Reese, *The Crisis of the Institutional Press*, in *THE CRISIS OF THE INSTITUTIONAL PRESS* 1 (2020).

¹⁰ Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *Gatekeeping in America*, in *HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE* 33 (2018).

¹¹ Michael Schudson, *Reluctant Stewards: Journalism in a Democratic Society*, 142 DAEDALUS 159 (2013). See also Barbie Zelizer, *On the Shelf Life of Democracy in Journalism Scholarship*, 14 JOURNALISM 459 (2013).

news and information environment, especially at the local level. First, I make the case that we must consider what it means to live in a post-newspaper democracy. In a time of market failure for local news, both journalists and the public need to identify which functions are unique to professional journalism as a civic institution.¹² Second, I join others who have argued that we need to move away from the concept of the “good citizen”¹³ as only a consumer of information/voter as their form of civic participation. Instead, I call for reimagining citizenship with communication at its center. Within this theory of “communicative citizenship,” a good citizen plays the civic role of communicator, not as a replacement for journalists, but instead as a facilitator of the flow of reliable civic information from institutions to their fellow community members. If we accept that newspapers and for-profit, digital-first news outlets face an uphill battle to survive, yet we believe that their function is essential to democratic life, then perhaps it is possible to shift some of the responsibility for fulfilling these functions from newspapers to the people themselves.

4.1 THE POST-NEWSPAPER DEMOCRACY

The post-newspaper democracy is not a democracy without newspapers; rather, it is a democracy wherein newspapers can no longer take on all the roles we might hope. Still, newspaper journalism is inspirational: At its best, it is a benchmark to measure the expertise, ethics, and impact that professional journalism can have on society. If we think about the *best* that newspapers promise, we can also identify what is special about professional journalism itself, demarcating the expertise that ordinary people are unlikely to replicate in their own efforts in gathering and sharing news and information. As I have discussed in previous work, especially my book, *News for the Rich, White, and Blue: How Place and Power Distort American Journalism*,¹⁴ a post-newspaper democracy takes seriously the reality that the model of civic life in which people are united together in an imagined community via what Benedict Anderson calls “print capitalism” is now over.¹⁵ While we may lament the decline of newspapers and what that means for democracy, we may actually be mourning the loss of the *role* that newspaper journalism plays in civic life. Just because the local newspaper as we know it may be over in its functional form does not mean we have to give up on what newspapers bring to the civic imagination. Rather, we should focus on identifying the unique values that journalism, and no other social

¹² NIKKI USHER, *NEWS FOR THE RICH, WHITE, AND BLUE: HOW PLACE AND POWER DISTORT AMERICAN JOURNALISM* 237 (2021).

¹³ See MICHAEL SCHUDSON, *THE GOOD CITIZEN: A HISTORY OF AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE* 309–12 (2011).

¹⁴ USHER, *supra* note 12.

¹⁵ BENEDICT ANDERSON, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM* (2016) (see especially pages 22–36).

institution, provides and then on supporting those special attributes of journalistic professionalism and authority. This, in turn, helps us reimagine civic life with communication at the center, including how we practice citizenship and social organizing.

What unique roles do journalists, supported by news organizations, fulfill that make them different from other professions? Professions are defined as specialized jurisdictions over particular forms of work and are bounded by the unique tasks they perform that other professions cannot. They are then granted legal, institutional, and cultural license to do this work.¹⁶ Because journalism is their full-time job, professional journalists are able to be physically present in places and at events that we cannot personally experience. They then share with the rest of us what they deem important for us to know in order to live our daily lives and make informed decisions. Journalists also get to be expert translators, interpreting complicated information that demands subject-matter expertise into insights for ordinary people.¹⁷ While journalists do not always do this perfectly, most of us do not have time to comb through legislation, read scientific articles, and talk to experts about topics of public import. Journalists do this labor for the rest of us. With the concept of professional jurisdiction in mind, I see two roles of professional journalism that need to remain separate from what ordinary people might do in their roles as citizen communicators:

- (1) investigative work/monitoring of powerful institutions, and
- (2) voicing or centering the concerns of the most marginalized in public discourse.

First, journalists are best positioned to do the work of covering the powerful via routine inquiry and investigative projects. This work requires journalists to be in places that ordinary people cannot: at press conferences, in statehouses outside the reach of anyone without an ID badge, and even past airport security without having to fly anywhere. A press pass permits journalists entry into places where the powerful do their work, giving them a deep understanding of these inner workings.¹⁸ Sharing this knowledge with the public requires skills that most people, even the best citizen communicators, may not have. Industry experts may have knowledge and even independence from the institutions and industries they are a part of, but making these insights understandable requires translation skills, converting complex ideas into words, pictures, sounds, and graphics to make them more understandable for

¹⁶ See ANDREW ABBOTT, *THE SYSTEM OF PROFESSIONS: AN ESSAY ON THE DIVISION OF EXPERT LABOR* 59–60, 86–90 (1988).

¹⁷ Nicole Gesualdo et al., *Journalists as Knowledge Brokers*, 21 *JOURNALISM STUD.* 127 (2020) (see the abstract for a most concise overview).

¹⁸ Nikki Usher, *Using Unexpected Data to Study Up: Washington Political Journalism (and the Case of the Missing Press Pass)*, in *RESEARCH EXPOSED: HOW EMPIRICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE GETS DONE IN THE DIGITAL AGE* 123 (Eszter Hargittai ed., 2021).

ordinary people. At their best, journalists have these translation skills to explain how people, power, and money can impact institutions and, ultimately, the public. In short, journalists tell stories about complicated issues and organizations that generally would not welcome an outsider's regular scrutiny.

Journalists, in turn, benefit from heightened legal protections for their activities.¹⁹ When they are employed at news organizations, journalists (and we, as news consumers) also benefit from layers of editing, verification, fact-checking,²⁰ and, most importantly, independence. At least in theory, journalists will not get fired for holding institutions accountable when they are not beholden to them for employment. Despite critiques about journalists being embedded in power structures, they at least do not have to raise money from special interest groups to support an election campaign or to depend on a corrupt city government for their next paycheck.

This independence gives journalists a second critical role in civic life: the capacity to direct the public gaze by revealing injustice and holding truth to power. As “custodians of conscience,” journalists can draw our attention to shared normative concerns that appeal to human dignity rather than partisan identity.²¹ They remind us that children should not be abused, businesses should not knowingly harm employees or customers, politicians should not steal money, and, fundamentally, that the American democratic project, despite its imperfections, is worth supporting. Journalists, then, serve the role of connected amplifier and public conscience for human dignity. By turning systemic injustice into digestible narratives for public consumption, journalists can help amplify marginalized voices.

Unfortunately, the market failure of journalism jeopardizes the ability of journalists to draw attention to those most hurt by the excesses of institutional power.²² As I argue in *News for the Rich, White, and Blue*, people from marginalized communities are even less likely to become journalists as jobs in the industry become ever more unstable.²³ Those with fewer resources lack a safety net if they lose their journalism jobs, and newsrooms have failed to make meaningful gains in diversity and equity over the past twenty years.²⁴ Moreover, marginalized groups

¹⁹ RonNell Andersen Jones, *Media Subpoenas: Impact, Perception, and Legal Protection in the Changing World of American Journalism*, 84 WASH. L. REV. 317, 348 (2009).

²⁰ Marju Himma-Kadakas & Indrek Ojameets, *Debunking False Information: Investigating Journalists' Fact-Checking Skills*, 10 DIGIT. JOURNALISM 866, 848 (2022), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21670811.2022.2043173>.

²¹ JAMES S. ETTEMA & THEODORE L. GLASSER, CUSTODIANS OF CONSCIENCE: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM AND PUBLIC VIRTUE 3–4 (1998).

²² VICTOR PICKARD, AMERICA'S BATTLE FOR MEDIA DEMOCRACY: THE TRIUMPH OF CORPORATE LIBERTARIANISM AND THE FUTURE OF MEDIA REFORM 212–31 (2014).

²³ As per Pew Research Center: “In 2020 alone, a third of large newspapers in the U.S. experienced layoffs, and as of August 2020, nearly 2,800 newspaper companies had received federal aid through the Paycheck Protection Program,” Walker, *supra* note 5.

²⁴ Sakshi Venkatraman, *How the Journalism Industry Obstructs Lower Income People*, WASH. SQUARE NEWS (Sept. 3, 2019), <https://nyunews.com/opinion/2019/09/02/journalism-obstacles->

are considered an audience that is unlikely to pay for news or support it philanthropically,²⁵ making it more difficult to tell these stories and maintain fidelity to the experiences of people in marginalized communities.

The specific professional jurisdiction of journalism is not so much that it informs people of important happenings in the community or knits communities together in a shared sense of place and purpose.²⁶ The best use of journalists' special expertise is to speak truth to power through investigative journalism and as custodians of conscience. Particularly in a time of scarce resources, journalists might forego chronicling the day-to-day and attempting to centralize the distribution of community knowledge – for example, spreading word that an event is taking place or a new municipal rule is being considered – because many other organizations can step in to fill basic information needs, from schools to churches to local government.²⁷ In fact, the ability of civic institutions other than journalism to inform the public has grown, and these institutions now have the ability to create and share stories about particular places and their present and past in ways that create identity, belonging, a shared sense of purpose, and cultural memories for communities. But thus far, we have overlooked another group who can also contribute to their local news environment and help mitigate the declines in local journalism – individual citizens.

4.2 DEMOCRACY AND THE EVERYDAY STORYTELLER

Most democratic theory tends to imagine journalism as a critical institution for transmitting the information people need to live their daily lives and make informed choices. But this transmission view of communication – the view that messages travel from point A to point B and, in turn, lead to attitude or behavioral changes – is a simplistic understanding that fails to capture the role of communication and citizenship as integral parts of community life. Scholar James Carey juxtaposed this transmission view, which roots communication in message transference, with the

[low-income-inaccessibility/](https://www.cambridge.org/core); Amanda Dejesus, *Despite Big Commitments to Improve Diversity, Newsrooms' Progress Remains Slow*, LATINO REP. (Aug. 4, 2022), <http://latinoreporter.org/2022/big-commitments-improve-diversity-newsrooms-progress-remains-slow/>.

²⁵ Meredith D. Clark & Tracie M. Powell, *Architects of Necessity: BIPOC News Startups' Critique of Philanthropic Interventions*, 13 ISOJ J. 115 (2023), <https://isoj.org/research/architects-of-necessity/>.

²⁶ Although I've argued elsewhere that this might *be* the most important role of journalists, I'm increasingly not sure that it is the best use of journalists' limited resources, as public holders of memory can extend beyond newsrooms. See Usher, *supra* note 18, at 234; see also Nikki Usher, *Putting "Place" in the Center of Journalism Research: A Way Forward to Understand Challenges to Trust and Knowledge in News*, 21 JOURNALISM & COMM'C'N MONOGRAPHS 84 (2019) (especially page 86 for an overview).

²⁷ See Nikki Usher, *The Real Problems with the Problem of News Deserts: Toward Rooting Place, Precision, and Positionality in Scholarship on Local News and Democracy*, 40 POL. COMM'C'N 238 (2023).

ritual view of communication.²⁸ Under the ritual view, communication, which shares a philological root with community, can also bring people together in a shared experience of the world around them. Ritual communication is part and parcel of the cultural practice of living in a community and sharing stories about who we are and what we value. While information is being transferred and messages are being communicated, the process is embedded in forms that are shared across individuals within a community rather than being atomized into units of individual consumption.

Different forms of democracy center on different communication regimes. Scholar C. Edwin Baker theorized that in elite democracy, journalism functions as a watchdog for the powerful and focuses on the actions and sanctions of other empowered actors while being less focused on informing ordinary people.²⁹ In contrast, liberal democracy centers on the atomized individual as a rights-bearing, informed citizen, with journalism serving as the primary definer of discourse in the public sphere. In this model, the good citizen is an informed citizen who turns to journalism for guidance about their civic participation. But this is not a model of citizenship that makes sense when there are decreasing sources of professional local news and information and when many Americans simply do not trust professional journalism.³⁰ Moreover, this form of democracy centers the individual as the ultimate authority for sensemaking, displacing the role of community as the setting and context through which people make sense of the world.

However, Baker's theory of representative democracy moves beyond the individual citizen and conceives of pluralism and communitarian beneficence as central goals of democratic life. In this mode, journalism is but one of many ways for people to communicate. Art, poetry, movies, entertainment, public forums, and interpersonal communication are all forms of communication that knit together people across differences into a shared cultural project of representative pluralist democracy.³¹ Taken together, Carey and Baker support the idea that the news a representative democracy needs goes beyond just information; it also requires ritual communication grounded in community, with shared knowledge coming from journalism as well as other social institutions and interpersonal communication. This communitarian ethos is also pragmatic. If democracy is instantiated in discourse, the public sphere cannot maintain its dependency on journalism to facilitate the public's broader conversation,³² especially given journalism's precarious financial model and public distrust in its legitimacy.

²⁸ James W. Carey, *A Cultural Approach to Communication*, 2 COMM'C'N 1 (1975), reprinted in JAMES W. CAREY, *COMMUNICATION AS CULTURE* 13 (1989).

²⁹ C. EDWIN BAKER, *MEDIA CONCENTRATION AND DEMOCRACY: WHY OWNERSHIP MATTERS* (2006).

³⁰ Sara Fischer, *Americans' Trust in Media Plummets to Historic Low: Poll*, AXIOS (Oct. 24, 2023), <https://www.axios.com/2023/10/24/americans-trust-in-media-plummets-to-historic-low-poll>.

³¹ BAKER, *supra* note 29, at 129–53. Baker calls this “complex democracy.”

³² See journalism as not conversation: Michael Schudson, *Why Conversation Is Not the Soul of Democracy*, 14 CRITICAL STUD. IN MEDIA COMM'C'N 297 (1997) (Carey in support on page 300).

4.3 COMMUNICATIVE CITIZENSHIP

To address the challenges facing democratic life as professional journalism faces market failure, I want to introduce the concepts of “communicative citizenship” and the “citizen communicator.” This is a new approach that I have begun, theorizing about what ordinary people can do to more actively participate in creating an informed public sphere through and by communication. In the US context, the term “citizenship” can be problematic because it has too often been used as a gatekeeping mechanism for entry and access to participation and representation in government.³³ But given the association between citizenship as a word and its connotation of a shared responsibility in political life, the word remains a powerful way to describe buy-in to a common set of normative assumptions and values about democratic life.³⁴ Embracing my framing of “communicative citizenship” enables a more affective understanding of citizenship. Communicative citizenship is also a feeling – in the sense that people who do not know each other but share some defining characteristic, such as where they are physically located, can develop a sense of belonging beyond a mere legalistic relationship.³⁵ Communicative citizenship retains some of the fundamental premises of the informed citizen model of democracy, namely that good information is necessary to make informed decisions. However, it shifts some of the burden to ordinary people instead of depending on local newspapers to do the job in our communities. The good citizen centers on communication, not just information transfer, as an essential element of performing citizenship.

Communicative citizenship, embodied by citizen communicators, invokes the capacity of ordinary people to use “talk” to help strengthen their local information environments. This is achieved through a more intentional approach to their day-to-day engagement with their communities via both digital and physical spaces; civic institutions, friends, family, and geographically proximate strangers; and the built environment. Certainly not everyone has the same ability or desire to talk about shared concerns, especially with unfamiliar people and given entrenched power inequalities.³⁶ The realization of communicative citizenship is thus limited by the inequalities that plague democratic life more generally. Nonetheless, in their ideal form, the communicative citizen brings with them a willingness to talk about issues and concerns that matter to the community-level public sphere. They strive to be as

³³ Erika Lee, *A Nation of Immigrants and a Gatekeeping Nation: American Immigration Law and Policy*, in *A COMPANION TO AMERICAN IMMIGRATION* 3 (Reed Ueda ed., 2006) (see especially page 13).

³⁴ CARRIE HYDE, *CIVIC LONGING: THE SPECULATIVE ORIGINS OF US CITIZENSHIP* 7 (2018).

³⁵ Cara Wong, *Community & Special Obligations*, in *BOUNDARIES OF OBLIGATION: GEOGRAPHIC, RACIAL, AND NATIONAL COMMUNITIES* 1 (2010).

³⁶ Nancy Fraser, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, in 25/26 *SOCIAL TEXT* 56, 56–80 (1990).

informed as possible to effectively engage in dialogue with others about how to understand and solve community problems.

Citizen communicators are critical agents in helping others around them fulfill their critical information needs, or “those forms of information that are necessary for citizens and community members to live safe and healthy lives; have full access to educational, employment, and business opportunities; and to fully participate in the civic and democratic lives of their communities should they choose.”³⁷ Communicative citizenship has three central pillars: the multifaceted role of the communicative citizen, the utilization of digital technology, and the purposeful use of communication. The communicative citizen serves as the sender, receiver, node, and infrastructure in the communication process, leveraging digital technology to amplify their efforts and employing communication to foster solidarity and a shared commitment to a hopeful vision for a better future.

4.3.1 *The Good Citizen as Sender and Receiver for Community Information Needs*

As both senders and receivers of news and information, ordinary people can take on a more deliberate and intentional role by actively surveilling local institutions, businesses, and localized spaces of civil society and passing on this knowledge to others. Communication theory has long recognized that certain individuals, often the heavy media consumers, become “opinion leaders” for their friends and family.³⁸ Information overload – from digital entertainment content, ads, peak TV, digital news content, social media messaging, search results, and more – is real.³⁹ Through their voracious and omnivorous news consumption, opinion leaders help their friends and family by filtering out irrelevant content and sharing the information they believe is essential. Opinion leaders are the people in your life who write long Facebook posts before elections about local candidates, send you reminders about various school deadlines, tell you when it is restaurant week, let you know when local politicians are in town, and so forth. Perhaps you are this person. As local newspapers are less able to comprehensively cover communities, this role becomes critically important because, without it, people will simply have to work even harder on their own to seek out the information they need.

Communicative citizenship goes one step beyond the news. For instance, when a new school board issue arises, journalists can help direct attention to the issue and explain where to find more information about the concern. But even if the journalist

³⁷ LEWIS FRIEDLAND ET AL., REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE REGARDING CRITICAL INFORMATION NEEDS OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC 5 (2012).

³⁸ Elihu Katz, *True Stories*, 608 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 301, 301 (2006).

³⁹ David Bawden & Lyn Robinson, *Information Overload: An Overview*, in OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF POLITICAL DECISION MAKING 4 (David P. Redlawsk ed., 2020), <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/23544/1/information%20overload%20-%20an%20overview.pdf>.

has not been able to fully interrogate the news story and the issue at hand, the community does not have to step back and suffer from a deficit in news. Rather, people who have the capacity to learn more, interrogate further, and share this information play a critical role in filling the gaps that journalists cannot address. For instance, a community member with legal or accounting expertise can spend some extra time reviewing documents to assess various concerns about problematic expenditures or conflicts of interest. Not everyone will be able to be a citizen communicator, and even those who can be citizen communicators are unlikely to be generalists. Most will likely be subject-matter experts on issues they follow; one person might know the intricacies of park permitting while another may know the best way to deal with local utility companies, among many, many examples. Regardless, the good citizen of today has shifting opportunities to focus their energy on gathering, analyzing, filtering, and sharing information that is valuable to their community.

4.3.2 *The Communicative Citizen as Node and Infrastructure*

As node and infrastructure for community information needs, the citizen communicator is the interpersonal glue that connects people to other individuals, sources of professional news and information, organizations, and civic institutions or associations. Sandra Ball-Rokeach and her colleagues at the University of Southern California developed the “communication infrastructure theory,” which conceives of these connections as a “storytelling network” embodied in “communication action contexts.”⁴⁰ In other words, the spaces of communication are materially instantiated by people and places – not just as text, images, or sounds transferred, most often, via electronic or digital media. In this theory of community-distributed information and service sharing, physical experiences of place and space are critical, specifically third spaces like public libraries,⁴¹ schools, coffee shops, post offices, hospitals, and other “structural infrastructure” of civil society. Empirical evidence supports the notion that stronger storytelling networks are connected to more robust measures of civic efficacy, better resilience among historically marginalized groups, and a stronger sense of community belonging, even across racial and ethnic differences.⁴²

Communities that prioritize communication among people and places, across a variety of social institutions, and as a natural outgrowth of day-to-day experience can help bolster democratic culture. A key entry point for citizen communicators is to

⁴⁰ Yong-Chan Kim & Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, *Civic Engagement from a Communication Infrastructure Perspective*, 16 COMM'C N THEORY 173 (2006); Yong-Chan Kim et al., “Geo-ethnicity” and Neighborhood Engagement: A Communication Infrastructure Perspective, POL. COMM'C N 421, 422 (2006).

⁴¹ ERIC KLINENBERG, PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE: HOW SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE CAN HELP FIGHT POLARIZATION, AND THE DECLINE OF CIVIC LIFE 16 (2018).

⁴² Kim & Ball-Rokeach, *supra* note 40; Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, *Storytelling Neighborhood: Paths to Belonging in Diverse Urban Environments*, 28 COMM'C N RSCH. 392, 410 (2001).

consider how to reintroduce temporality, materiality, and common concerns into conversations that take place between people who live and work in geographically bounded communities. Citizen communicators can connect other people to storytelling networks and the stories that matter to them, as well as to the organizations that can help them find out more. Indeed, we can conceive of democratic life as the outgrowth of storytelling networks, where individuals, organizations, and media together serve as nodes of connection between people, places, and the resources individuals need to navigate everyday life.⁴³ As a result, information transfer does not need to be entirely professionalized but can be embedded in the fabric of everyday interactions as people engage in their daily lives, existing in shared spaces outside their individual dwellings and experiencing the serendipity of accidental encounters with new people and experiences. While we may not all be journalists, as *homo narrans*,⁴⁴ we are all storytellers. The capacity to share stories with others about experiences and perspectives they have not yet encountered is the starting point for thinking of communication as a central aspect of citizenship.

As nodes in a storytelling network, ordinary people bring together a diverse set of connections through their unique daily experiences. When these connections are activated to link and inform others who lack these same ties and domain-specific knowledge, ordinary people can also help bolster the infrastructure of the communication context in which they live. This infrastructure support comes through simple acts like sharing an email address or phone number or mentioning the name of a relevant organization to help another person meet a critical information need and, in turn, better navigate daily life. While our casual accumulated knowledge from the industries we work in or the places where we spend our leisure time is rarely thought of as useful in the service of citizenship, this folk expertise is the “node” – the knowledge hub that the citizen communicator can leverage. This is where the citizen communicator can shine: Our everyday engagement in politics is not so much political as it is civic.⁴⁵ Those who have leisure time and work in knowledge sector positions may need to be more intentional and confident about both their community knowledge and their efficacy in being the first stop for connecting not only friends and family but also acquaintances or even strangers.

4.3.3 *Citizen Communicators Mobilize Technology to Serve People, Not Profits*

When it comes to community life, communicative citizenship recenters the exchange of ideas and information away from the atomized digital ecosystem and

⁴³ Nikki Usher et al., *Media Policy for an Informed Citizenry: Revisiting the Information Needs of Communities for Democracy in Crisis*, 707 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 8, 13 (2023).

⁴⁴ Walter R. Fisher, *Narration, Reason, and Community*, in *WRITING THE SOCIAL TEXT* 199 (Richard Brown ed., 2017).

⁴⁵ NANCY L. ROSENBLUM, *GOOD NEIGHBORS: THE DEMOCRACY OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN AMERICA* 234–36 (2016).

returns it to a space of collective sensemaking. The attention economy monetizes individualized acts of information consumption – one click, one user.⁴⁶ This mass individual content consumption – a “for you” that also appears in feeds of another one million people or more – is a false promise of collective experience. The targeted audience is imagined as an individual alone but at scale, with individuals making (forced) choices about information consumption and distribution as atomized units. Finding more individualized and customized ways to keep users on a site⁴⁷ requires fine-tuning algorithmic weights from an individual user’s historical data matched with real-time preferences to be more precisely targeted to goose the dopamine of one person.

Communicative citizenship shifts the burden of citizenship from the individual to the collective and uses digital and physical spaces to counter platform power. The citizen communicator can augment community information ecologies by being physically present in places journalists can no longer go to because of resource constraints, such as school board meetings or high school football games. Ordinary people can use digital platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to provide essential follow-ups, including posting conversations in community forums, sharing information among their friends and family, or using their spare time to ask new questions or connect people to additional resources. Collective sensemaking can happen through various channels, such as Facebook community pages, Nextdoor forums, community listservs, WhatsApp groups, and, most importantly, physical spaces for meeting and speaking about problems, concerns, and opportunities within communities or for celebrating the wins.

Digital platforms help the citizen communicator do the work of communication at scale. But one major challenge is that platform companies do not care about informed citizens; they care about maximizing their profits. The more time we spend on their sites (and thus the more data we share), the more money these companies can reap from the digital attention economy. Platform companies like Meta have de-emphasized local news, and local news about politics is often the least engaged content on Facebook.⁴⁸

But demand still drives algorithmic discovery. As people search for content and reward the activities and posts of citizen communicators on digital platforms, our hunger for more information can help tilt the algorithmic black box to work *for* us. Here arises yet another critical role for the citizen communicator: educating others about algorithmic inequality and the power imbalances on platforms, which are often perceived as neutral brokers when they are not. Indeed, citizen communicators can help others establish greater knowledge and agency over how they use

⁴⁶ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Attention Machine*, in *ANTISOCIAL MEDIA: HOW FACEBOOK DISCONNECTS US AND UNDERMINES DEMOCRACY* 79 (2018).

⁴⁷ Nitasha Tiku, *The WIRED Guide to Internet Addiction*, WIRED (Apr. 18, 2018), <https://www.wired.com/story/wired-guide-to-internet-addiction/>.

⁴⁸ WEBER ET AL., *supra* note 3.

digital platforms, directing others about how to be more deliberate in how they search for and engage with digital content.

There are modest movements afoot to reimagine digital infrastructure as public, such as alternative channels of publicly funded platforms.⁴⁹ While I do not see this effort as likely to catch on outside of the already existing platform infrastructure (in part due to network effects and the fact that people are already on commercial platforms), I do see another window to facilitate communicative citizenship. One regulatory option may be to create on these corporate platforms more algorithmically optimized, community-driven sites, many of which already exist in our communities. I can imagine how the town Facebook group can be institutionalized within legal frameworks through similar regulatory reasoning that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) uses for licensing radio and television: A station should support “public interest, convenience and necessity.”⁵⁰ Platform companies might similarly be required to work within this ethic for the public, facilitating civic information discovery through some sort of favorable algorithmic weighting.

Intentionally claiming these digitally mediated public spaces as places of dialogue helps to dislodge the responsibility put on individuals to do all the work alone, with the scales tilted against them as they are uniquely targeted for their preferences. Thus, a major reorientation from individual acts of content consumption to recognizing the collective power of communities sharing and engaging with media content, whether about civic life or something else, is a critical part of this new imagined citizenship.

4.4 CITIZEN COMMUNICATORS AND SOLIDARITY

Citizenship is often understood primarily through the lens of politics and political institutions⁵¹ rather than the relationships that we have with each other and the communities around us. Because the state grants citizenship, it is also often framed as conditional, implying that citizens “owe” something to the state in exchange for being given the autonomy to help chart its direction.⁵² This may include voting, being informed, and engaging with the community.⁵³ But the concept of the informed citizen has always been more of an ideal than a reality, particularly because being informed requires time, access, and the capacity to comprehend

⁴⁹ Ethan Zuckerman, *The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure*, 20-01 KNIGHT FIRST AMEND. INST. (Jan. 17, 2020), <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/the-case-for-digital-public-infrastructure>.

⁵⁰ Federal Communications Commission, *The Public and Broadcasting* 4 (Sept. 2021), https://www.fcc.gov/sites/default/files/public_and_broadcasting_o.pdf.

⁵¹ See generally HYDE, *supra* note 34.

⁵² RICHARD HAASS, *THE BILL OF OBLIGATIONS: THE TEN HABITS OF GOOD CITIZENS* 14–15 (2023).

⁵³ *Id.*

and discern key insights for civic action amid a cacophony of strategic actors trying to influence the information available.

When good citizenship centers the role of communication, and the aim of that communication is to help connect others to navigate civic life and to engage more fully in their communities, the focus of democratic life shifts from cause-to-cause interactions to strengthening person-to-person community ties. Unfortunately, performing citizenship is a privilege accorded to those who have the time and the capacity to think beyond immediate survival needs. The reality of citizenship in a capitalist society is that not all citizens are able to participate equally due to structural inequalities such as racism, poverty, limited access to civic institutions, and other barriers. But talk is cheap, and people do have expertise about their own lives. The most marginalized members of our polity have valuable insights that those of us with more privilege need to hear. While the ability to communicate in a normative way also creates barriers, conversation may be the most direct way of connecting people with nothing in common. In this regard, citizenship that centers communication and refocuses our attention on people's agency to engage in the transfer of interpersonal knowledge becomes a building block for realizing a representative democracy that fosters pluralism, tolerance, and a shared commitment to hope for a better future.