

# Infogagement: Citizenship and Democracy in the Age of Connection



**Matt Leighninger**

Re-Released Version, June 2018  
(Original Release September 2014)

# Contents

*This paper was originally released in 2014 and re-released in 2018 with a new foreword, introduction, and commentaries. Some references in the original paper may not reflect current organizational affiliations.*

## **2018 Foreword: A Two-Way Path for Information and Engagement 3**

## **Four Years in Flash Forward: The Evolution of Infogagement 4**

## **Executive Summary 8**

## **Preface: Overheard at the Local Coffee Shop 11**

## **Introduction: When Worlds Collide 13**

## **1. Citizenship, Through Thick and Thin 15**

## **2. The Death and Life of Great American Media 20**

## **3. Journalism, the Postmodern Profession 25**

## **4. Deserts and Oases: Diversity, Equity, and Networks 29**

## **5. Here Come Everybody's Stories: Organizing and Social Media 32**

## **6. Big Data: Expert Instrument or Do-It-Yourself Tool? 36**

## **7. Conclusion 39**

## **Notes and Further Reading 45**

## 2018 Foreword: A Two-Way Path for Information and Engagement

So much about our lives, communities, and social compact is being re-envisioned—even more than we could have anticipated when originally releasing Infogagement four years ago. Yet here, in the intersection of information, technology, engagement, and public life, are seeds of current American upheaval. Today, trust in our democracy's institutions is at an all-time low and our democracy is, by many metrics, struggling to thrive. Yet the new kinds of engagement explored in these pages also hold the promise of a democracy that more authentically reflects the realities and aspirations of the people our systems aim to serve.

This edition includes new, diverse perspectives from contributors across fields. In sharing it now, we hope to inform reflection on what brought us here and inspire further exploration of emerging areas of threat and potential.

Collaboration is necessary to address complex, changing issues. Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) is a hub of dialogue and network creation where funders come to learn, invest, and act together to strengthen civic engagement and democratic practice.

One encouraging theme of Infogagement is that the path between information and engagement is not one-way. Greater knowledge can spur people to action, which inspires a great deal of effort in organizations that seek to serve the public interest. Yet often, as we see here, it is a desire to act effectively and across boundaries that spurs a hunt for knowledge—whether from media, institutions, data, or the stories of our fellow people.

The changes examined here could lead us away from or closer to the ideals that animate America. Diverse, inclusive engagement, beginning with each of us, will be vital to our direction.

In the spirit of collective growth and innovation, we welcome reflections, feedback, and ideas to shape this vital work together.

**Kristen Cambell**  
**Executive Director**  
**Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement**

**Elizabeth Good Christopherson**  
**President, Board of Directors**  
**Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement**

### *Commentaries include:*

Kelly Born, Hewlett Foundation  
Jennifer Brandel, Hearken  
Jenny Choi, News Integrity Initiative  
Lilian Coral, Knight Foundation

Darryl Holiday, City Bureau  
Abby Kiesa and DC Vito, 22x20  
Micah Sifry, Civic Hall  
Josh Stearns, Paul Waters, and Tom Glaisyer; Democracy Fund

# Four Years in Flash Forward: The Evolution of Infogagement

by Matt Leighninger

Four years ago, the worlds of journalism, technology, and civic engagement seemed to be on a collision course, and I was asked by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) to write a paper on what that meant for the landscape of civic engagement in America. The result was “Infogagement: Citizenship and Democracy in the Age of Connection.” The paper described a number of fast-moving trends: the development of “thick” and “thin” forms of engagement, the financial upheaval in journalism, growing skepticism about the objectivity of experts and journalists, the importance of networks for overcoming inequality, and emerging questions about trust, privacy, and big data.

Four years later, we’ve witnessed the collision between media, tech, and engagement, a fusion that inspired the term “infogagement” in the original paper. While most people viewed our increasingly hyper-connected, hyper-informed state as an annoyance or even an opportunity, rather than a potential calamity. Four years later, some of the dangers evident in the paper have become front-page calamities.

We noted that citizens felt increasingly powerless to affect government and other institutions, a frustration that has since become a central theme in recent events, including the 2016 US presidential election. The growing skepticism about journalists as “truth-tellers” has become a crisis over “fake news.” Furthermore, most media organizations are still seeking a business model that can sustain their work financially. The paper also predicted that “the future of big data may depend less on the skill and expertise of hackers, journalists, and other curators, and more on public trust” – and that trust is being called into question more now than ever, as scandals over data and privacy have embroiled Facebook and other tech giants.

Against the backdrop of today’s tumultuous social dynamics and political uncertainty, so much about our lives, communities, and social compact is being examined and re-envisioned—even more than we could have anticipated when originally releasing this paper in 2014. Given this reality, we felt it was a uniquely opportune time to revisit this inquiry into infogagement. This 2018 re-release comes in the midst of tremendous shifts in this space, and is accompanied by a series of contributions from thought leaders on the front lines of innovation, making strides toward ensuring an inclusive, participatory democracy in this new and rapidly evolving landscape.

## Center-stage problems – but are the potential solutions still stuck in the same silos?

Today, there is more concern from more quarters about the state of infogagement, as debates across the field and commentaries in this new edition attest. However, if we aren’t careful, the solutions could remain stuck in the same silos - purely technological fixes to our tech challenges, purely journalistic answers to the problems facing journalism, and so on – rather than joint solutions that advance a broader framework for a new public square.

Journalists are thinking more about engagement, but most still seem to see it as a transactional relationship, a way to build a broader audience for their products rather than a way to reclaim a public role. Technologists are more aware of the civic impacts of their platforms and networks, but instead of shoring up the “public foundations” of the Internet (as Micah Sifry suggests in his commentary), they only seem to be considering solutions within those platforms, like new algorithms to determine what people see in their social media feeds. Engagement practitioners still tend to describe their work as a way to involve people in decisions made by policymakers – as props for conventional political processes rather than building blocks for new forms of democracy.

While many silo-based solutions may be worthwhile, none seems sufficient for addressing the erosion of trust in public institutions, in journalism, and in experts. Few people are tackling the overarching questions the paper raised, which ask what kinds of infogagement roles, skills, and infrastructure we need to facilitate the nourishing, equitable flow of news, information, and engagement. The solutions being developed within the fields of journalism, technology, and engagement are more likely to succeed and support one another if they are incorporated into a larger, more comprehensive strategy.

### Inequitable impacts, unequal attitudes

“Infogagement” also described how technological shifts were exacerbating socioeconomic inequity and inequality. Because of advances in Artificial Intelligence, the gig economy, and the changing future of work, these trends may now be accelerating: millions of truck drivers and cashiers, for example, may lose their jobs in the next decade.

As their economic prospects change, middle- and low-income people may be looking for ways to articulate their political interests – and not finding many places where they feel their voices will be heard. The lack of meaningful engagement opportunities makes people (understandably) more alienated and alarmed, and perhaps even more likely to turn away from the institutions in their lives, rather than trying to fix them. The tension between experts and citizens laid out in the original paper seems to be turning into a harder division, and that could lead to even greater tension and gridlock at every level of government.

Furthermore, as Kelly Born describes in her commentary, misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda campaigns are calling the premise of facts and objectivity into question and creating siloed communication online that deepens social divisions and disproportionately affects minority populations. These are growing challenges that continue to undermine our democratic norms and values, and are beginning to receive focused attention from funders like the Hewlett Foundation.

### Promising developments, under the radar

Despite these troubling trends, it isn’t all bad news. There are a number of positive developments in the evolution of infogagement, and they deserve more attention. Most of these developments have to do with the new ways in which technologists, journalists, and engagement practitioners are borrowing features and practices from one another. Josh Stearns, Paul Waters, and Tom Glaisyer list many exciting experiments in collaborative and participatory journalism, solutions journalism, community listening, and the ecosystem of local news from their vantage point at the Democracy Fund. The organization also recently led the NewsMatch Challenge, the largest ever grassroots funding campaign to support local nonprofit news journalism, raising over \$4.8 million from a coalition of individual donors and foundations.

Efforts to ensure equitable representation have also taken center stage, with initiatives to understand the diversity of newsrooms and advance inclusion in the spirit of generating civic engagement. In her commentary, Jennifer Brandel of Hearken describes new ways to support two-way interactions between journalists and their audiences by forging deeper relationships with the publics they serve, and Darryl Holliday of City Bureau illustrates how citizens are addressing the issues of misrepresentation in the media by representing themselves and their communities. Both efforts are making great strides and proving their effectiveness, but continue to face existing power structures in journalism, when newsrooms are reluctant to shift their status quo.

In the world of engagement, practitioners are also incorporating technological features so as to combine the strengths of “thick” and “thin” engagement. As the practice of participatory budgeting has grown from one Chicago ward to over 300 districts in 22 cities, new online PB elements are being introduced. Other formats for sustained engagement have emerged, such as “On the Table,” an annual meal-based discussion among diverse groups of people that has involved over 105,000 Chicago-area residents at its peak; On the Table is now being implemented in 25 other cities. “Text, Talk, Act” has combined texting and face-to-face dialogue to reach over 50,000 people in 50 states. Advances in youth engagement and news and media literacy, as Abby Kiesa and DC Vito of 22x20, describe in their commentary, and as the Parkland students embody in their new public roles, are causing us to rethink how citizens can have more meaningful roles in governance.

The hyperlocal online spaces described in the original paper have proliferated dramatically, with growing pains and speed bumps along the way. At first, these were simple, relatively isolated neighborhood listservs and Facebook group papers. Now, Nextdoor has an active presence, with at least 50 users, in 80% of all American neighborhoods, over 160,000 neighborhoods in all. Over two-thirds of the households in Vermont belong to Front Porch Forum in that state.

These developments illustrate whole new possibilities for the public square – new puzzle pieces that could contribute to the jigsaw of democracy. In different ways, they all emphasize trust, evidence, and listening, and they all move beyond traditional, one-way education and information delivery models. We need to incorporate these ideas and people into a systemic analysis, and produce more systemic solutions for reforming our public square. Cities develop comprehensive plans to guide decisions about housing, zoning, parks, and physical infrastructure; they also need plans for strengthening their civic infrastructure.

## What to do next?

In addition to convening these more systemic conversations, particular strategies might also influence the trajectory of infogagement in positive ways. First, as Jenny Choi argues, we need better ways to measure trust and assess what people want from their institutions. To meet that challenge, we could use a range of tools, from simple scorecard systems that allow people to rate engagement opportunities to large national studies like the Yankelovich Democracy Monitor, a new project by Public Agenda to gauge support for participatory democratic reforms.

Second, to begin to address the trust deficit with big data, we need ways for people to sort out whether and how they want their data to be used. While it is true that Google, Facebook, and other companies now possess large amounts of our private data, the nature of Artificial Intelligence means that it requires ever greater amounts of information, delivered in real time. In other words, the horse has not yet left the stable. We may still be able to create the terms of a new relationship, in which people grant permission for their data to be used, exert control over how it is used, and (in some cases) contribute even more data to help researchers and policymakers. This citizen-driven relationship could be one way of establishing public foundations for digital public squares, as Micah Sifry, of Civic Hall, suggests.

One thing that has become clear over the last four years is that public squares don't just build themselves. Democracy is something we can design, and redesign – but if we want to do so, we have to be proactive about it.

All kinds of people should be part of these discussions: technologists, journalists, engagement practitioners, elected officials, funders, researchers...and residents. "Citizens continue to be left out of the design and management of their communities," says Lilian Coral of Knight Foundation. "The results: low trust in democracy, poor policymaking, economic and social dysfunction, and communities that don't reflect the needs and preferences of residents." If trust is the pivotal missing link, we need to approach these questions in participatory ways that reflect the values of our participatory democracy, and more authentically reflect the lived realities of the people our systems aim to serve.

The discussion of what the public square should look like needs to happen in more places, and with more people. It's the reason we re-released this paper—in the hopes of furthering those conversations at a time when they feel especially urgent. The fundamental question remains: What kind of democracy do we want?

# Infogagement: Citizenship and Democracy in the Age of Connection *(2014 Edition)*

## Executive Summary

Our traditional notions about the “public square” are out of date. In thinking about information, engagement, and public life, we have generally put information first: people need to be educated, and then they will become politically involved (the original title of this PACE project was, accordingly, “Information for Engagement”). But as we interviewed leading thinkers and practitioners in the fields of journalism, civic technology, and public engagement, it became clear that the sources of information and the possibilities for engagement have diversified dramatically. Instead of a linear progression from education to involvement, public life seems to seethe and spark with connections and reactions that are often unexpected and always hard to map. Our Norman Rockwell image of public life has become something more like a Jackson Pollock painting.

Another question animating this PACE project was how to bring “new voices”—meaning young people, poor people, recent immigrants, and people of color—into the public square. But because public officials, journalists, technologists, and citizens (both new voices and established ones) are playing different roles, and interacting in different ways, this too is a more complex question than it first appears. The real challenge is figuring out what the new public squares might look like, how they can be equitable and democratic places, and how they should be built.

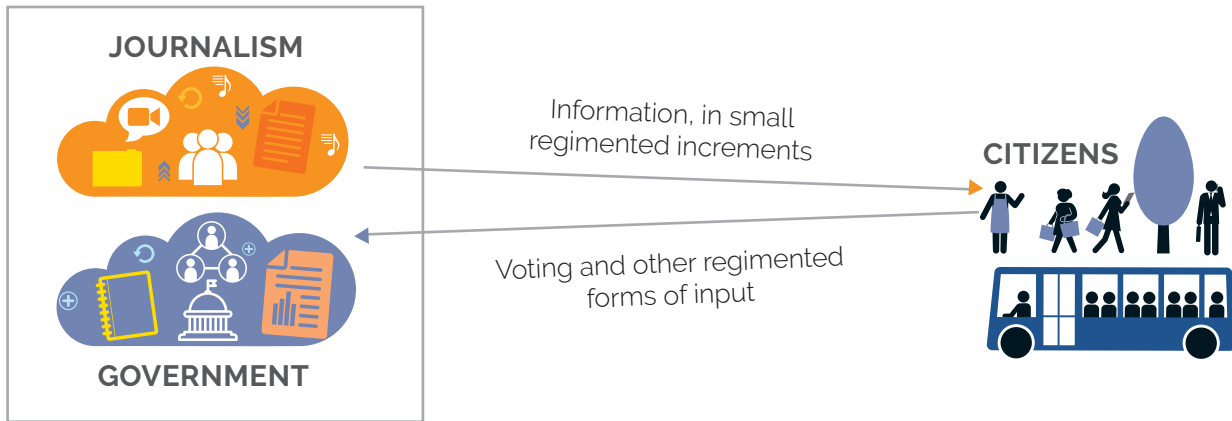
Through interviews and small-group discussions, we have identified and clarified a number of key trends:

- ▶ Thinking of citizens mainly as voters, volunteers, and writers of letters to the editor is no longer sufficient. Civic engagement has changed radically over the last twenty years, spooling out into thick and thin strands of participation. “Thick” engagement happens mainly in groups, either face-to-face, online, or both, and features various forms of dialogue, deliberation, and action planning; “thin” engagement happens mainly online, and is easier, faster, and potentially more viral—it is done by individuals, who are often motivated by feeling a part of some larger movement or cause.
- ▶ The institutions of journalism are going through a painful transition period, but new collaborative practices, “hyperlocal” innovations, and engagement activities (including the use of engagement as a revenue source) may be signaling the rebirth of the field. Meanwhile, in their profession, journalists are employing a greater range of skills and playing a wider range of roles.



## 20th Century

### The public square



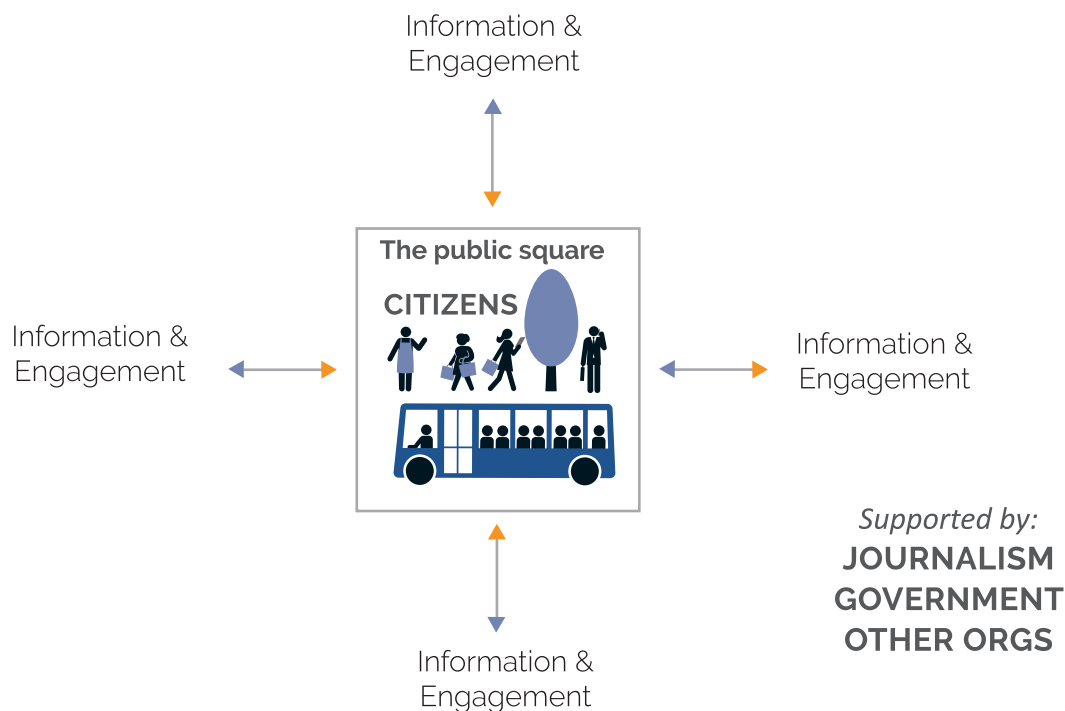
- ▶ Despite the early optimism, the new Internet-connected world of information and engagement has not (so far) been a more equitable and empowering environment for people of color, low-income people, and other marginalized groups. Addressing this challenge will require a better understanding of community networks, how they map cultural differences, and how they channel information and engagement.
- ▶ Storytelling is more powerful and ubiquitous than ever: a much higher percentage of people can share their opinions and experiences, and hear the opinions and experiences of others, in ways that are more convenient, continuous, and public. By comparing notes on what we mean by storytelling—and listening—we might come to a better, shared understanding of why people want to take part in public life, and better recommendations for how to facilitate and support their efforts.
- ▶ Big data, once the domain of experts, is now part of the public engagement picture. The opportunities and challenges of big data may require a set of intermediaries—people and organizations that can curate and interpret data for everyday citizens. The future of big data may depend less on the skill and expertise of these intermediaries, and more on whether citizens trust them.

In the past, discussions of information and engagement revolved around the wrong questions. “I’m pretty tired of the ‘How do we save newspapers?’ discussion, as well as the ‘What’s the latest techno gizmo that will save the world?’ discussion,” says Jon Funabiki, a journalism professor who directs the [Renaissance Journalism](#) center at San Francisco State. It doesn’t seem sensible or compelling to ask how we can bring back the past in the newspaper industry, or how we can realize an unrealistic future with technology.

Furthermore, we can't keep thinking of the public square as a place that is dominated by civic professionals, where citizens occupy a limited set of predictable roles. That vision, which originated with Progressive thinkers like John Dewey, is no longer viable. To help communities build new public squares, we should focus on four questions:

1. What kinds of infogagement infrastructure and institutions at the community level would support the best flow of news, information, and engagement?
2. How can such an infrastructure support a high level of democratic engagement across the community, especially for people who have borne the brunt of past injustices and inequalities?
3. What should be the complementary, constructive, yet independent roles of journalists, public officials, and technologists?
4. What are the core democratic skills needed by people in each of these professions, and how can we provide them?

## 21st Century



## Preface: Overheard at the Local Coffee Shop...

As an affinity group of foundations, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) provides a table for funders to compare notes and learn together about challenges and opportunities. Many PACE members have talked about how they have been approached with proposals that aim to “bring new voices into the public square.” In order to better understand the goals of these projects, and the assumptions behind them, PACE and its member foundations decided to take a closer look at what thinkers and practitioners in the fields of journalism, civic technology, and public engagement are saying about information, engagement, and public life.

This quest, to take stock of how information and engagement interact in communities today, is a massive task. However, behind all the confusing definitions and seemingly abstract questions are some fairly basic concerns. People are unsure about their roles in politics and public life; they are aware that some significant changes are taking place, and they are trying to figure out the new terrain.

The following conversation is fictitious, but it incorporates some of the basic concerns being expressed by public officials, journalists, bloggers, and citizens in communities all over the country.



**City councilwoman:** It seems like people just aren’t as informed about the issues anymore, and don’t know how to get involved. How do we get people the knowledge they need to be engaged citizens?

**City desk reporter:** I’m not sure—people still seem to want the information we’re giving them, but they don’t want to pay for it anymore. I may be out of a job pretty soon.

**Neighbor:** You’ve got it all wrong: information isn’t enough to get people engaged. I’m informed, but whenever I get involved in something—usually a boring public meeting—I go home frustrated.

**Local blogger:** Those public meetings are the problem. People are already engaged with each other online—you public officials just don’t want to listen to what they’re saying.

**City councilwoman:** I listen all the time—that’s practically all I do.

**Neighbor:** Doesn’t seem like it to me.

**Local blogger:** You public officials need to acknowledge what you’re hearing from people, and show that you’re doing something with the ideas and input you receive.

**City councilwoman:** I try, but somehow that message never gets out—the media is only interested in publishing stories that make me look bad.

**City desk reporter:** That’s my job: to keep you honest. Journalists are supposed to be watchdogs for the community, rooting out instances of corruption and incompetence. We need to be independent—you shouldn’t expect me to be your PR vehicle.

**Local blogger:** Never mind the old media—reach out to people directly, online, to let them know what they need to know, and what you have heard from them.

**Neighbor:** Well, that would be nice, I guess, but I just don’t have time to read a lot of emails from public officials.

**City councilwoman:** Yes, people are busy. They only get engaged if there’s an issue that impacts their lives directly—but that means that when they do show up, they’re angry, and they usually only represent one side of the issue.

**City desk reporter:** That’s also my job: giving both sides of the story, including the views of people who have been ignored or excluded.

**Local blogger:** Doesn’t seem like it to me.

**Neighbor:** When it comes to politics, most people feel ignored or excluded.

**City desk reporter:** Yes, but the consequences of being excluded are more significant for people who tend to be discriminated against in other ways, because of their race, age, or class.

**City councilwoman:** Well, you can certainly find lots of views and stories online—but a lot of what you find online is either completely disrespectful or totally false, or both. Where’s the civility? Where’s the truth?

**Local blogger:** Look, we can all agree that it is a brave new world out there, and we have lots of tools and opportunities to make sure everyone is as informed and engaged as they want to be.

**Neighbor:** So what’s the answer?

**Rest:** What’s the question?

# Introduction: When Worlds Collide

The term “Information Age” was coined several decades ago, but like the warnings about climate change that first emerged at about the same time, most people didn’t pay much attention. Now, it is clear to everyone—experts, public officials, journalists, and everyday citizens—that we live in a hyperinformed era, bombarded by facts, data, and stories in all their blurring and bewildering forms. Like climate change, the overabundance of information has become a part of daily life. The first line of the [Pew Research Center’s 2012 Future of Big Data](#) report: “We swim in a sea of data ... and the sea level is rising rapidly.”

Unlike climate change, our hyperinformed, overstimulated state is viewed more as an annoyance than a calamity—a reality of modern life that we must all learn how to manage. But for journalists, public officials, and technologists, there is a growing awareness that information overload is bringing a kind of mutual, creative destruction to their fields, and that the consequences will be dramatic. People who work in these three fields all seem to feel that somehow, their worlds are colliding, either with a sudden, thunderous boom or in wrenching super slo-mo. The fusion of these forces could be called “infogagement.”

Within the fields of journalism, civic technology, and public engagement, there have been many books, articles, white papers, and reports written about how the work is evolving, and where the field is headed. But most of this writing is focused more on a single field, rather than the relationship between them. And while journalists, public officials, and technologists might agree that the relationship between them is changing—that the collision is occurring—there doesn’t seem to be any consensus on what will happen, how quickly it is happening, how we should prepare, or even what questions we should be asking. Author and blogger Allison Fine says that we need to “move up 5,000 feet—all of these shifts are like brushstrokes in a pointillist painting, and we won’t be able to appreciate them unless we pull back.”

Part of what makes this picture so complex is that the most important brushstrokes are made by citizens themselves, in huge numbers:

- ▶ The purchasing decisions of consumers—how they access information, and who pays for it—have altered the financial model for journalism.
- ▶ Citizen attitudes about government, and their increased ability to find the resources and allies they need to make an impact on issues they care about, have made the traditional processes for policymaking increasingly unworkable.
- ▶ Decisions by citizens about how to connect and express themselves online have shaped the development of the Internet.

These countless individual acts and decisions are making old worlds collide, but there is no collective sense of what the brave new world of infogagement will look like.

For those of us who are interested in engagement, citizenship, and democracy, it is important to survey these new sources and styles of information and information delivery, and come to a better understanding of their effects. We need to decide how to capitalize on these changes in order to achieve more effective governance, stronger self-determination, and greater liberty and equality in society. We should be particularly concerned with the welfare of people who have benefited the least, and could be harmed the most, by the trends in information and engagement. Steve Clift of E-Democracy.org provides one way to articulate the question: “Why are the clear democratic benefits of the digital age not leading to a more representative and participatory democracy for all?”

This paper is intended to aid that process; it relies primarily on interviews with people who are thoughtful and passionate about the future of the (Hyper-)Information Age. “If we can figure out how information and engagement can best interact, we’ll have found the ‘killer app’ for democracy,” says Paula Ellis, who has been an executive at Knight-Ridder and then Knight Foundation. For many of them, it is almost an obsession: Tom Glaisyer of the Democracy Fund puts it rather humorously when he says, “I have been thinking about these issues for far too long!”

As part of the process of writing this paper, the McCormick Foundation hosted a meeting in Chicago among some of its grantees who work at the intersection of information and engagement. An initial frame for the paper came out of that meeting, and was tested and refined at a meeting in Miami hosted by Knight Foundation (this meeting also included representatives of the Case Foundation). Fifteen people were also interviewed by phone.

In the course of the interviews and meetings, it became clear that the interviewees, and the fields they represent, had very different assumptions about key factors like the role of government and the sources of trust. They had very different definitions and understandings of terms like “storytelling,” “media,” and “engagement.” The discussions revealed new questions for research and strategy, along with new hypotheses about information and engagement and new ideas for strengthening our democracy.

# 1. Citizenship, Through Thick and Thin

It seems obvious that the ways in which people access and use information have changed dramatically in the last two decades. But many people do not realize that engagement has changed radically as well, spooling out into thick and thin strands of participation that sometimes interweave but are often completely separate. “Thick” engagement happens mainly in groups, and features various forms of dialogue, deliberation, action planning, and policy choicework; “thin” engagement is easier, faster, more viral—it is done by individuals, though they are usually motivated by feeling a part of some larger movement, group, or cause.

Many of the books, articles, and reports written recently about media and journalism overlook or misunderstand the changes in engagement. Most of them, such as the Pew Research Reports, lean toward the traditional view of citizenship, which holds that people engage primarily by voting and volunteering—and perhaps by attending public meetings or writing the occasional letter to the editor of the local newspaper. And yet voting rates continue to stagnate or decline, frustration with traditional public meetings is higher than ever, and people increasingly spend their volunteer time in ways that don’t fit the stereotype of serving in the soup line at the homeless shelter.

Faced with the statistics about declines in traditional modes of engagement, some leaders and experts seem to believe that simply providing more information will reverse the trend—they assume that if people only knew more, they would be much more likely to vote and volunteer. This opinion tends to rankle the people who work on innovative forms of engagement. “I just don’t understand the people who cling to this traditional view of citizenship,” says Andrew Slack of the Harry Potter Alliance. “They’re on a different planet. They should think more carefully about why people engage in the first place.”

The reasons why people engage, and how they engage, *have* changed over the last twenty years. There are several likely explanations:

- ▶ Higher levels of education, including digital literacy and media literacy, enable people to understand and contribute to policy issues they would not have addressed before;
- ▶ People have different attitudes about government and other kinds of authority—they simply aren’t as deferential to traditional leaders and experts as they once were;
- ▶ Increased use of the Internet has given people a huge variety of ways to connect with one another, with political candidates and advocacy organizations, and with their public institutions.

Citizens seem to want different things, and are able to contribute in different ways, than they did just a generation ago.

This shift in citizen expectations and capacities has forced all sorts of leaders, from mayors to community organizers to nonprofit directors to school superintendents, to react and adapt. In

many cases, they have been hamstrung by the outdated laws and processes for public participation, such as the traditional format for public meetings in which citizens have three minutes at an open microphone to address their public officials.

The official processes for participation rarely draw many participants—unless a public issue has reached such a boiling point of controversy that an angry crowd packs the meeting room. Many local leaders began trying new forms of engagement because of their frustration with these kinds of experiences. “What drove me to try structured, planned public engagement was my awful experience with unstructured, unplanned public engagement,” says John Nalbandian, former mayor of Lawrence, Kansas.

Much of this experimentation, starting in the early 1990s, resulted in participatory formats and processes that could be called examples of “thick” engagement. They typically rely on several key strategies:

- ▶ Assembling a large and diverse “critical mass” of people, usually by recruiting proactively through a variety of community networks;
- ▶ Giving people a chance to “tell their stories,” relating the experiences that explain why they care about their neighborhood or the issue being addressed, usually in structured, facilitated small-group discussions;
- ▶ Presenting participants with a range of views and policy options, and allowing them to decide together what they think should be done about a public issue;
- ▶ Using large forums and online venues to amplify shared conclusions and move from talk to action;
- ▶ Using online tools and arenas in other ways that inform and complement the process; and
- ▶ Encouraging action and change at multiple levels, including policy changes, changes within organizations and institutions, actions driven by small groups of people, individual volunteerism, and changes in attitude and behavior.

The people who take part in these projects are not motivated, for the most part, by a traditional sense of civic duty; they participate because they think they can make an impact on an issue they care about. “There is no yearning mass of people who are aching to take civic action,” scoffs Nick Judd, who has witnessed the development of thick engagement in both the online and face-to-face realms: Judd was the managing editor of the online bulletin [techPresident](#), and worked as a newspaper reporter before that. No matter how they engage, “People are motivated by specific issues and situations,” he says.

## KEY POINTS

*The traditional view of citizens as voters, volunteers, and writers of letters to the editor is no longer accurate or sufficient. Civic engagement has changed radically over the last twenty years, spooling out into thick and thin strands of participation that sometimes interweave but are often completely separate. “Thick” engagement happens mainly in groups, and features various forms of dialogue, deliberation, action planning, and policy choicework; “thin” engagement is easier, faster, and more viral—it is done by individuals, though they are usually motivated by feeling a part of some larger movement, group, or cause.*



Projects that employ some combination of these strategies have been used hundreds if not thousands of times, initiated by a wide variety of local leaders, to address issues such as land use decisions, crime prevention, educational decisions on questions like school redistricting or school finance, racism and discrimination, immigrant engagement, youth development, budget decisions, poverty and economic development, and strategic planning. Recent examples of thick engagement include: neighborhood-level efforts like “Flats Forward” in the Flats district of Cleveland, Ohio; short-term city-wide projects such as “Chapel Hill 2020” in North Carolina; long-running local initiatives like Portsmouth Listens in New Hampshire and Participatory Budgeting in Chicago’s 49th Ward; and multi-state efforts such as the Horizons project addressing rural poverty in seven Northwestern states.

These examples of thick engagement are sometimes characterized as forms or offshoots of community organizing. It is not completely clear how these strategies developed, and community organizing is quite a diverse family of practices, but there are certainly some features and tactics of some types of community organizing that are also evident in—or would mark them as—thick forms of engagement.

Meanwhile, over the last five years, the development of online tools and arenas has included a proliferation of new online engagement opportunities. By sending a text or clicking a link, people can sign an e-petition, “like” a cause on Facebook, retweet an opinion, or donate money to a political candidate or advocacy campaign. Some of these opportunities are made possible by the use of open data, and many practitioners of online engagement think of themselves as open data advocates. Because these actions are so quick and easy, and do not require the time or intellectual, emotional, or political commitments needed for the kinds of “thick” involvement described above, they could be considered examples of “thin” engagement.

Author and blogger Allison Fine says that people do these “online acts of love and kindness” because they are easy and yet personally meaningful. “They are increasingly doing this in the space that used to be filled with what we used to call civic engagement,” she adds. Scholars like Archon Fung argue that in many instances, thin engagement has had considerable political impact. Fung points to the Trayvon Martin case, the Kony 2012 controversy, and the defeat of the Stop Online Piracy Act/Protect Intellectual Property Act (SOPA/PIPA) as key examples.

Fung and others feel that these examples of thin engagement are just the tip of the iceberg. “The skills required for thick engagement are actually not very common,” says Tom Glaisyer. “In the future, there will be more and more technologies that scale it up and thin it out, designed by advocacy groups, nonprofits, and companies.”

The proliferation of thin engagement is exciting to some, and worrisome to others. Fine characterizes it as “impulse giving” that is admirable but still “leaves many big problems unattended. Ideas like social justice don’t get addressed.” In their article on “Six Models for the Internet + Politics,” Fung and his co-authors describe a divide among the scholarly researchers:

*“Scholars who live on ‘technology street’ tend to be optimists about the transformative possibilities of [Internet Communication Technologies] for democracy. Those living on*

*‘political science street’ tend to be quite skeptical because they think technology optimists are inattentive to the mainsprings of politics: interests and institutions. As a result, the two sides talk past one another. Each, the other thinks, just doesn’t ‘get it.’”*

Similarly, the practitioners of thin and thick engagement seem to have coalesced into two different camps. Ironically, it may not be the use of technology that divides them, since many practitioners of thin engagement are passionate about the need for face-to-face relationships, and many practitioners of thick engagement now use online tools extensively.

Instead, the two camps are divided along other lines, such as their different assumptions about government. Practitioners of thin engagement seem more likely to view government as an obstacle to effective problem-solving, whereas their counterparts on the thick side tend to see government as at least a potential ally or problem-solver. The author and blogger Tom Slee writes that “Many open data activists [see] themselves as being idealistic and positive, yet they retain a deep cynicism of government agencies while maintaining faith in the market’s ability to maintain diversity and consumer power.” Practitioners’ prescriptions for improving government vary accordingly: the thin-siders assume that increasing government efficiency (mainly through the assistance of tech-savvy outsiders) will result in greater trust in government, while the thick-siders put their faith in stronger relationships, particularly through face-to-face dialogue, as the way to increase trust and accountability.

The two groups also have different opinions about what motivates citizens. Thin engagement is often characterized as a transaction, in which the citizen (or more often, “user”) receives some immediate gratification or reward. The [Case Foundation](#) has been particularly active in exploring ways to use open data to present citizens with engagement opportunities, through proposals such as its “giving graph” idea that will present users with options for volunteering or donating money based on the person’s past buying decisions. Practitioners of thick engagement are more focused on the establishment of relationships, the possibility of working together on a shared project, and other collective benefits, as motivations for participants.

Innovation has different meanings to the two groups—or at least, their visions of what innovation will look like seem substantially different. In the thin engagement world, the innovator is trying to develop a stand-alone product that solves a unique problem in a unique way. Practitioners with a thick engagement mindset are looking for a stand-alone process that is uniquely appropriate to the policy decision or issue it is designed to address.

There are also some cultural differences between advocates of thick and thin engagement. Practitioners of thin engagement are comfortable with the language of science, and embrace their somewhat nerdy, “geek chic” image. Practitioners of thick engagement are more likely to use the language of community, and are sometimes described as “touchy feely.” Jim Nocas, a Greek-American who has led the pioneering Portsmouth Listens project for many years, was described affectionately by a Portsmouth city councilmember as “Baklava, kumbaya, that’s our Jimmy!”

Finally, the different kinds of engagement may reflect different visions of what democracy could be. Thin democracy would be fast, viral, convenient, fun, and full of choices for people to make

individually. Thick democracy would be informed, deliberative, emotional, and full of choices for groups to make collectively.

By and large, the people interviewed for this paper felt that both thin and thick engagement have their merits—and their shortcomings, which have some interesting parallels. Thin civic innovations often have limited impact because they are isolated products that are seldom incorporated into any larger engagement plan or infrastructure. Thick civic innovations tend to be temporary processes, and they too are seldom incorporated into any larger engagement plan or infrastructure. Either way, we are not giving enough attention to questions of infrastructure, and how institutions ought to operate. “This information and engagement challenge tends to be framed in terms of what individuals want, and what is best for them,” says John Sirek of the [McCormick Foundation](#). “But we also need to look at it in terms of the institutions—what kinds of information and engagement are necessary to make them work effectively.”

One worthwhile goal for the field would be to find better ways to weave together these two strands, thickening the thin forms and thinning out the thick. At the end of the “Six Models” article, Fung and his colleagues make a similar case about the divide among academic researchers: “We hope that our more durable contribution to discussions of the role of the digital communication technologies in politics is to encourage each of the two ‘sides’ of this debate—the starry-eyed technologists and the hard-headed political analysts—to take the other more seriously.”

However this discussion plays out, it seems clear that the traditional view of citizens as voters, volunteers, and writers of letters to the editor is no longer accurate or sufficient. The varieties and vehicles of information are diversifying, and so are the varieties and vehicles of engagement.

## 2. The Death and Life of Great American Media

While the changes in how citizens engage may be flying under the radar, the shifts in journalism, and in particular the financial troubles of traditional, “legacy” media, are hard to ignore. Over a fifth of the jobs in the newspaper industry were lost between 2000 and 2010, and the trend seems to have accelerated since then: newspaper revenues have gone down 40% in the last three years, according to Michael Maness of [Knight Foundation](#). John Henry, owner of the Boston Red Sox, recently bought the Boston Globe for only \$70 million—\$12 million less than the contract he gave to free agent pitcher John Lackey. Television news viewership has also declined steadily. To many journalists, this feels like the death of their industry. But a few journalism experts, echoing Jane Jacobs and her famous thesis about the regeneration of cities, believe that new funding sources, collaborative practices, hyperlocal innovations, and engagement activities are supporting the rebirth of the field.

One of the points of controversy is whether financial stability for journalism is even a realistic possibility. Observers like Lew Friedland, a journalism professor at the University of Wisconsin, say that the 20th Century business model, when advertising rates supported media corporations, was actually just a passing phase, an anomaly rather than a constant. Friedland, who has also led the development of the university-based news site [Madison Commons](#), thinks of journalism as a “public good” in the strict economic sense. Your consumption of a public good—common examples are fresh air, national defense, and street lighting—does not prevent other people from consuming it as well. Since you can’t exclude people from enjoying the benefits of these goods, it is very difficult to make a profit on them. “Because journalism is a public good,” argues Friedland, “it is systematically being under-produced or not produced.”

Friedland rejects the assumption that “somehow, free-market forces will cause critical reporting on public issues to spontaneously emerge.” He also dismisses the related notion that the mere presence of the Internet will make up the gap on its own—that “everything important will somehow magically get done by the crowd.” For Friedland and others, the recognition of journalism as a public good is a powerful rationale for the role of government and philanthropy in helping to support it.

Foundations, if not governments, have indeed played a larger role recently in the struggle of journalism to adapt and survive. A new category of nonprofit organizations dedicated to investigative reporting has emerged. Robert Rosenthal’s [Center for Investigative Reporting](#) (CIR) is one of the best-known examples, with 74 people on staff and a budget of \$11 million. Based in California, CIR is a multimedia outfit, providing audio, video, and written content for radio, TV,

### KEY POINTS

*“As journalism reinvents itself, engagement won’t just be a good thing to do, it will be an economic necessity,” predicts John Esterle. The institutions of journalism are going through a painful transition period, but new collaborative practices, hyperlocal innovations, and engagement activities (including the use of engagement as a revenue source) are signaling the rebirth of the field.*

and newspapers. CIR has received support from PACE members such as the [Knight Foundation](#), the [Open Society Foundations](#), the [Hewlett Foundation](#), the [Mott Foundation](#), and the [Whitman Institute](#), as well as a number of other funders. It was one of the first journalistic nonprofits to charge for its content, and now receives \$750,000 annually from sales of content. CIR also sells memberships, in addition to attracting grants. Charles Lewis, who founded the Center for Public Integrity and is now the executive editor of the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University, finds it ironic that as organizations like CIR have begun taking members, more traditional sorts of nonprofits are now selling advertising in their outreach messages— so that nonprofits and the media are now mimicking one another.

Rosenthal, who edited the Philadelphia Inquirer in the 1990s, is a veteran of the wars between the newsroom and the boardroom. He enjoys the new energy and the different questions that accompany the shift from legacy journalism to the nonprofit model: “The old question was ‘What’s it going to cost, and what will be the return?’ Now we ask, ‘Will this be a great story, and have a big impact?’”

Nonprofit media organizations like CIR are pioneering a hybrid business model that combines sales of content or advertising, memberships, and grant funding. Another example is ProPublica, based in New York, an “independent, non-profit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest.” Founded by a former editor of the Wall Street Journal, ProPublica was the first online news organization to win the Pulitzer Prize, in 2010. (ProPublica, whose supporters include PACE members Hewlett, Knight, and Open Society, won another Pulitzer in 2011.) Zócalo Public Square, based in Southern California, is a project of the Center for Social Cohesion at Arizona State University and the New America Foundation that describes itself as a “not-for-profit Ideas Exchange that blends live events and humanities journalism.” In addition to having a broader revenue mix, these hybrids are also quite lean, points out Kara Carlisle of the Kellogg Foundation. “More of journalism will have to be lean like this,” she says.

These hybrids aren’t limited to New York and California, either: other examples include New Mexico In Depth (NMID), supported by the Kellogg Foundation; the New England Center for Investigative Reporting (NECIR), supported by the McCormick, Knight, and Open Society Foundations and others; the Investigative Reporting Workshop (IRW), supported by Rockefeller Brothers, Kellogg, Knight, McCormick, and others; and the Texas Tribune. Some of these hybrids, like Madison Commons at the University of Wisconsin and IRW at American University, are based at journalism schools and add university support and student labor to their mix of resources. Many hybrids seem to have a progressive perspective, but there are also more conservative examples, like the Fiscal Times. Many hybrids, such as NMID, partner with more conventional news organizations, such as for-profit newspapers, to provide them with long-form content. Heath Haussamen of NMID, reports that “The for-profit side does a great job of breaking news and doing day-to-day reporting; nonprofit journalism with donors and grant funding can more easily slow down and do bigger thinking, long-form, contextual, investigative journalism.”

Some journalists and journalism experts think that the for-profit elements of the hybrid model will grow, and make these media organizations less reliant on philanthropy. Though he has helped pioneer nonprofit journalism, Rosenthal is one of those who believe that the for-profit

opportunities will continue to expand. Charles Lewis, who has also been an influential pioneer of nonprofit journalism, predicts that “As we increasingly have more video on websites, we’ll have more stickiness for advertising dollars. And while this is more of a hope than a certainty at this point, the general consensus is that advertising will continue to be a principal source of income.” Dan Moulthrop, a former public radio journalist who helped found the Civic Commons and now runs the City Club of Cleveland, agrees that as long as the private sector continues to believe in the concept of advertising, media organizations will find some way to make a profit. “Businesses still see value in attaching corporate identity to something of public value,” he points out.

But if there is innovation at the CIR/ProPublica level of reporting, then hyperlocal journalism is even more of a petri dish. Hyperlocal media organizations are the “mom-and-pop” shops of the journalism industry; most often, they focus on a neighborhood, a suburb or town, a school system, or a particular issue within a metro region (for example, Urban Milwaukee covers planning issues in Milwaukee, and PlanPhilly does the same in Philadelphia). Many of the people driving this new sector are journalists who left or lost their jobs in the legacy media. Jan Schaffer of J-Lab, an “incubator for news entrepreneurs and innovators” that has sponsored projects like these as well as Madison Commons, sees a whole new rough-and-tumble ecosystem emerging, with tiny for-profit blogs opening and closing all the time. J-Lab is supported by the McCormick Foundation, Knight Foundation, and other funders. “It is a new circle of life,” says Schaffer, “where these hyperlocals get guerrilla advertising, cover community news and events, and feed content to local newspapers and radio stations.”

This has led to the rebirth of certain kinds of reporting, Schaffer argues. “The hyperlocals are covering news that no mainstream news organization has covered for years. They’re going beyond just covering the chicken dinners—they’re actually breaking news—and more traditional types of journalists and media outlets are starting to respect them.”

There have been some attempts to bring hyperlocals together under one roof. Patch.com was intended as a sort of national infrastructure for hundreds of smaller news sites. “There’s something really interesting in the Patch model, but it needs more rigor,” says Fine. “You could train a cadre of investigative reporters to flow into those networks.” Schaffer feels that Patch was more of a corporate initiative than an attempt to seed, shelter, and connect independent hyperlocals. Earlier this year, AOL sold Patch to an investment firm, which cut staff, changed the advertising model, and reported a profit this spring, according to the *New York Times*.

Other observers are less enthusiastic about hyperlocal journalism, pointing out that it bubbles up more readily in higher-income, higher-literacy communities that are already information-rich. Fine worries about “what happens in smaller communities when you don’t have that beat reporter going to every single boring school board meeting.” Michael Maness fears that we are entering a “dark valley” for journalism. “There will be some scandals that cause people to wonder, ‘Why weren’t there journalists covering this?’”

Heath Haussamen, on the other hand, feels that many of these gaps are being filled, not by new hyperlocals but by increased collaboration between traditional small-town newspapers, big-city

outlets, and the new hybrids. “In New Mexico, it used to be that state legislators from rural areas didn’t care what was printed in the big-city paper, because they didn’t think their constituents would read it,” he says. “That’s not true anymore.”

But perhaps the most intriguing development in the financial saga of journalism is the growing awareness that engagement can be profitable. A rising number of both traditional media companies and enterprising new startups are convening public meetings and holding real-time online discussions as a way to sell advertising dollars, in addition to fulfilling other aspects of the mission of media organizations. One of the leaders in this regard is the Texas Tribune, which was founded in 2009 by venture capitalist John Thornton. From the beginning, Thornton envisioned a hybrid business model that included philanthropic support. He argued that, “In [Microeconomics] 101, we learn that such ‘public goods’ as clean air and national defense will not be produced in sufficient supply exclusively by market forces... ‘Capital J’ Journalism—journalism that takes on serious, complex issues and puts them in the context of how citizens interact with their government—is such a good.”

The Texas Tribune hosts weekly free, public events involving public officials and other decision makers, along with an annual ideas festival. The Tribune generated close to a net million dollars from advertisers’ sponsorship of the weekly events, and by selling tickets to the ideas festival. It now has 35 staff, more than half of whom are reporters, and a readership that spans the state. The Tribune has more reporters in a statehouse bureau than any other news organization in the country, and provides Texas stories to national outlets. When a Texas state senator filibustered an abortion bill, over 180,000 viewers tuned in through the Tribune’s YouTube stream.

Engaging citizens by convening interactive discussions—a relatively thick form of participation—has become an important part of the Tribune’s business model. However, some engagement practitioners are skeptical about the quality of these events. One of these practitioners says that they represent “a check-the-box sort of engagement, for journalistic sorts—there is very little interaction among the participants.” It would seem that local governments and media organizations could collaborate to increase both the quality and legitimacy of engagement efforts, but this might raise questions about the use of engagement as a journalistic revenue-raiser. In any case, there seems to be very little of this sort of media-government cooperation so far.

Zócalo Public Square is testing the profitability and sustainability of engagement by organizing events that are sponsored by universities and community organizations. Local museums like the Getty provide space for convenings, sometimes at a discount. Zócalo’s California editor Joe Mathews says this kind of engagement is an opportunity to build an audience for content around the events—and ultimately add to readership and spark ideas for stories. “In some cases, the people who attend or participate in the events have produced some of our most compelling stories. In other cases, stories lead us to do events,” Mathews says. “It can be a virtuous cycle.” For example, a local doctor attended one of the events and was inspired to write a story for Zócalo, “[How Doctors Die](#).” The article received so much attention that Zócalo ended up organizing an event focused on end-of-life issues.

Dan Moulthrop affirms that engagement is becoming an important source of revenue in journalism—one that plays to the unique strengths of media organizations. “News organizations are finding they can be relevant by becoming conveners of the important conversations. They are better able to inform those



conversations than other conveners.” In an essay titled “Engagement Can Save Journalism,” he adds:

*As large journalistic institutions (the ones capable of playing this role on a significant community-wide scale) do [engagement] successfully and strengthen their relationships with the communities they serve, the revenue should follow, whether it’s advertising, sponsorship, underwriting, philanthropy, subscriptions or individual contributions. After all, when you’re more important to the community, you’re more important to the people who want to reach the community.*

John Esterle of the Whitman Institute suggests that “As journalism reinvents itself, engagement won’t just be a good thing to do: it will be an economic necessity.”

No matter what kind of financial models emerge to support journalism, it seems clear that the institutions of journalism are changing irrevocably. And even if, in the long run, journalists view these changes positively, they will have cost publishers, editors, and reporters a great deal of angst. “Too many journalists feel entitled to their jobs, and to their old broken business model,” says Moulthrop. “It is understandable and frustrating at the same time.”



### 3. Journalism, the Postmodern Profession

Just like the institutions of journalism, the individuals of journalism are adapting to new realities, despite their angst. In fact, the evolution of journalism as a profession may be even more dramatic, since the field seems to be decentralizing, diffusing, and postmodernizing into a more broadly distributed set of skills and roles. “Media is becoming increasingly personal, portable, and participatory,” says Eric Newton of [Knight Foundation](#). These trends provoke new questions about reporting, journalism, and the truth.

Perhaps more than any other profession, journalism has defined and justified itself according to its relationship with the truth. One of the core journalistic skills is investigative reporting: finding the truth, or truths. Journalistic objectivity is the reporter’s stance toward the truth, her or his mindset of fairness, open-mindedness, and careful skepticism. Storytelling, in a journalistic sense, could be defined as the ability to tell the truth in ways that help people understand and connect with it. (Section 5 will delve more deeply into storytelling, because it has always been part of other professions and aspects of life, and because it encompasses many other trends in the relationship between information and engagement.) The diversification of media organizations and venues, along with our new understanding of the critical role of networks, further complicates the way in which journalists deliver the truth to their readers, viewers, and listeners.

One element of the sea change in citizenship has been the way in which ordinary people have become more skeptical of experts, scientists, elected leaders, and other figures we once treated as “truth-tellers”—and more eager to find, interpret, disseminate, and “own” truth for ourselves. It makes sense that this shift would have corresponding impacts on journalism.

The very fact that many people have become more skeptical of journalists as truth-tellers has, understandably, made some veterans feel that their field is no longer anchored to its original mission. Charles Lewis laments that people seem to “cling to beliefs rather than information.” He notes that a large percentage of the American public (over 60% among Republicans) still believes that Iraq had developed Weapons of Mass Destruction, despite the fact that even the architects of the Iraq War now concede that Saddam Hussein had no WMDs. “Some people think Rush Limbaugh is just as much a journalist as Bob Woodward,” Lewis says.

This line between advocacy and reporting has become blurrier at both ends of the ideological spectrum. In 2013, the nonprofit organization [InsideClimate News](#), which was founded to “give the public and decision-makers the information they need to navigate the heat and emotion of climate and energy debates,” made waves when it won a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for a series of stories on a little-known oil spill in Michigan. The mission statement of InsideClimate News argues that:

*“Climate and energy are defining issues of our time, yet most media outlets are now hard-pressed to devote sufficient resources to environmental and investigative reporting. Our goal is to fill this growing national deficiency and contribute to the accurate public understanding so crucial to the proper functioning of democracy.”*

The core funders of InsideClimate News are the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Marisla Foundation, and the Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment. Knight Foundation's Andrew Sherry says that "What these organizations do is journalism, even if it comes from a point of view. This represents an important and growing part of the journalism ecosystem, and certainly one where information and engagement converge."

As the financial terrain changes for journalism, some observers worry that the job of investigative reporter may be losing its definition and its professional skills, along with its popular truth-finding status. As legacy media wane, investigative reporters either leave the profession or abandon newspapers for nonprofits and advocacy groups. Furthermore, the professional pipeline that brings in new reporters may be drying up. Kara Carlisle is concerned that journalism schools may begin to lose enrollment and support. This also worries Lew Friedland, who feels that skilled, unbiased reporting is the essential skill that cannot be supported by the market alone. "Journalism is actually a profession, not just a source of information—and this is a fundamental point," he says. "Journalists are human beings exercising critical judgment, reporting, asking questions about equity and fairness, telling stories in ways that are compelling to people."

Other observers are less concerned about the future of investigative reporting, not only because they are optimistic about new financial models, but also because they don't think journalists have ever been terribly objective, in any phase of the development of the profession. "There has always been advocacy in American journalism, for good or ill," says Nick Judd. "Yellow journalism advocated for the Spanish-American War and, it has been persuasively argued, the second Iraq War." Joe Mathews quips that "Objectivity was always BS anyway—when you observe or cover something, you change it." Judd also points out that in the middle of the 20th Century, in the "golden age" of newspapers, the typical reporter didn't even have a college education, let alone a degree from a journalism school.

Journalists are trying two types of engagement that test new possibilities for the way they interact with the truth. The Center for Investigative Reporting demonstrates one type when it engages citizens to find out what issues or topics they would like the organization's journalists to cover. This work began under the heading of California Watch, a CIR project that has since been subsumed into the rest of the organization. "The California Watch process goes into the community before they do the journalism," says John Esterle of the Whitman Institute, a CIR funder. "They want to find out, 'What are the stories that need to be covered?'" Journalism professor Jay Rosen had piloted this idea as a "Virtual Assignment Desk" that was incorporated in a short-lived, hyperlocal news site called "The Local: East Village," a partnership between NYU and the *New York Times*. A national version of this idea, the Public Insight Network, has been created by American Public Media. People sign up for free to offer insights and tips, and answer targeted questions; journalists then use the information to identify and research stories.

## KEY POINTS

*The individuals of journalism are also adapting to new realities: as a profession, journalism seems to be decentralizing, diffusing, and postmodernizing into a more broadly distributed set of skills and roles. This has led to a great deal of soul-searching among journalists, but also an opportunity for them to clarify what they want to do. Paula Ellis reports that "Old-line journalists would always say to me, 'We're in service to democracy'—and then never ever say what that means."*

Rosenthal says that “Building engagement into our process took several years. We started pounding the pavement in 2009. Now we have an engagement editor, staff, and social media team. We try to figure out, with our audience, what kind of an impact our stories might have, and who are they going to reach?” This type of engagement centers on input-gathering: giving people a collective say on how to apply the skills of individual journalists.

Josh Stearns of the media advocacy group Free Press wonders if newspapers should take this one step further, and experiment with converting their editorial boards (which, in many cases, no longer take decisive stands like endorsing political candidates) into engagement boards. “What if editorial boards opened up the meetings in which they debate who they will endorse and turned them into something akin to a town hall?” Stearns asks. “I think we can create a better endorsement, one that more concretely serves the local community and builds engagement and trust amongst readers (even if they disagree with the endorsement itself).”

Other media organizations employ a second type of engagement: using news stories and opinion pieces in meetings and online discussions to frame an issue, inform participants, and present a range of views. This practice, which is at the heart of what has been called “public journalism” or “civic journalism,” was pioneered in the 1990s by newspapers such as the *Wichita Eagle*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Portland Press Herald*. The support of the *Portsmouth Press Herald* has been a key element of the award-winning public engagement work of Portsmouth Listens over the last twelve years. If the CIR work exemplifies engagement “at the front end” of the journalistic process, John Esterle puts it, this second practice is engagement “at the back end.”

Joe Mathews of Zócalo argues that this second type of engagement provides a way out of the “objectivity trap.” In his view, when journalists help convene events, frame and inform the discussions, and then report on what people said to one another, and how leaders responded, they strengthen the reputation of journalists as skillful, trusted arbiters of the truth. “If your game is to piss people off, like Fox or MSNBC, you can’t be impartial because you need to get attention,” says Mathews. “But if you’re a convener, you can live in impartiality. After all, the media you want is a media that forces people to talk to each other, both online and face-to-face.”

Both these types of engagement open up new roles for journalists, and new ways for outsiders to practice journalism. For one thing, many media organizations are realizing the need to have people with engagement skills on staff. “Engagement thinking has to be built into different stages of the journalistic process,” argues Rosenthal, “but fundamentally, it has to be someone’s job.” Second, the desire to become more proactive about various forms of engagement has led media organizations to collaborate more with one another, and with nonprofit and advocacy groups.

Journalists are also collaborating more because they feel the need to provide content in multiple media, so that the same story or investigative report can reach people through video, audio, social media, and print. “In the age of technology,” says Rosenthal, “the question is how to take the core of what a journalist does, and do that in as collaborative a way, in as many different media, as possible.” The people trying to spread news and information are faced with an increasingly complex set of ways to deliver the truth: they have to factor in more media, more organizations, and more opportunities for readers, watchers, and listeners to give feedback, pushback, and analysis.

Like pinball wizards, journalists survey a more intricate system of bumpers, levers, and wheels than ever before.

It is evident that journalistic skills are bleeding into other realms (especially when one considers storytelling, the subject of Section 5), in ways that may be confusing but are probably beneficial. But among the people who are trained specifically as journalists and who think of themselves as members of that profession, there remains a need to decide and understand what they mean by it.

Jon Funabiki, a journalism professor who directs the Renaissance Journalism center at San Francisco State (supported by the Whitman Institute, McCormick Foundation, and others), is one of those who is trying to figure out who journalists think they are, and what they think they are doing. “I’m interested in getting into journalists’ heads and finding out what they think moves them, motivates them, what is their mission,” says Funabiki. “For most of them, there is a lot more to it than ‘We have information, and we want to get it out there.’ Some will talk about how their personal experiences shaped their careers; many also have an explicit social justice mission.”

The shifts in the field, and in the interaction between information and engagement, between truth-tellers and the truth, have provoked a great deal of soul-searching among journalists—but also an opportunity for them to clarify what they want to do. Paula Ellis reports that “Old-line journalists would always say to me, ‘We’re in service to democracy’—and then never ever say what that means.”

## 4. Deserts and Oases: Diversity, Equity, and Networks

One way for journalists to serve democracy is to expose inequities and injustices, and lift up the experiences and voices of people who have historically been marginalized or excluded. Many journalists have this mission, as Jon Funabiki points out. And in the Internet/Information Age, many argue, it ought to be easier than ever to lift up people's voices in more equitable and empowering ways. Steve Clift advocates the idea that:

*We must dedicate ourselves to aggressively sharing democracy online with ALL. We must work to make it far more relevant to less represented groups in society. If we don't, our investments of time, energy, and passion will further empower the empowered and unintentionally deepen our civic and democratic divides.*

Our frustrations in making this happen—and the ways in which diversity and equity play out online—demonstrate the need for a better understanding of networks and how people communicate within them.

It is unclear whether low-income people have more access to news and information than before. But it is clear that, at least when it comes to traditional types of engagement, the Internet does not seem to have empowered marginalized groups. In fact, a recent Pew report on ["Civic Engagement in the Digital Age"](#) found that the Internet may actually be widening the social and economic gaps in engagement. The opening line of the report: "The well-educated and the well-off are more likely than others to participate in civic life online—just as those groups have always been more likely to be active in politics and community affairs offline."

The Pew report focuses mainly on traditional forms of engagement: most of the survey questions asked whether respondents used online tools to contact government officials, sign petitions, or write letters to the editor. It shouldn't be too surprising that being able to do traditional engagement online has not made it more appealing to traditionally marginalized groups. For one thing, there are the obvious digital divides: Who has broadband access? Who has the technological skill to use the tools? For another, these types of engagement are generally undertaken by people who believe that public officials, other decision-makers, and institutions in general are open to their hopes and concerns, and will act on what they hear from citizens. The Internet has not reversed the decline in these beliefs among citizens as a whole, let alone people who have been particularly excluded in the past.

But even if traditional forms of engagement were never terribly equitable or empowering, their decline still threatens to increase the social and economic gaps in society. Mark Ridley-Thomas, the Los Angeles County Supervisor who has been supporting neighborhood Empowerment Congresses for nearly twenty years, says that "Low-income people—the 'least of these'—are the ones most affected by the low level of engagement overall."

On the information side, Lew Friedland sees a similar pattern emerging, with a similar impact on equity. With the decline of legacy media organizations, he says, “We’re seeing news deserts start to emerge in different areas of the U.S. The problem is when you get these gaps in local areas, it’s like any other ecology: You get a vicious spiral. People become less informed and then they become less engaged.”

But while poor people, the less well-educated, and people of color may be more isolated from mainstream sources of information and engagement, the strength of the connections within some of these communities may be stronger than ever. Jon Funabiki attests that “Ethnic media, and media in languages other than English, are steadily growing in importance.” This connection is not tied solely to first-generation immigrants, either. “Even though the second and third generations are much more English-dominant, there is still a lingering loyalty to their language heritage.” Funabiki can point to cities where the Vietnamese-language newspaper is thriving while the main traditional newspaper is dying. The decline of legacy media may be leaving oases as well as deserts.

The Pew report does find some oases online as well: there has been a rise in the use of social networking sites to learn and talk about public issues, and this rise is far more evenly distributed among people of different races, ethnicities, and income levels. It is only when people try to “take action” (again, the report uses a wide definition, tending toward the more conventional forms of advocacy) on the basis of those social networks that the socioeconomic gaps become clear once again: the actors still tend to be the well-educated and the well-off. Peter Levine and the researchers at CIRCLE came to similar conclusions when examining the political talk and actions of young people, people of color, and people who did not attend college.

Kara Carlisle of the Kellogg Foundation sees this phenomenon as an example of the complexity of networks, and the importance of individual and group ties to the nodes (or oases) of those networks. She relates it to the story of Paul Revere and William Dawes, an analogy used by author Malcolm Gladwell and extended by management professor Brian Uzzi. Revere and Dawes both made midnight rides to warn Massachusetts colonists of the impending march of British troops. Revere was more effective because he had relationships with far-flung sets of people who were not connected with other network nodes—but who did trust him. Dawes, on the other hand, apparently had a smaller set of acquaintances who already knew one another. In other words, Revere traveled to a wider variety of oases, and was welcomed in those places, whereas Dawes spent more time wandering in the desert. Carlisle uses this analogy to stress the importance of people who are node connectors/interpreters/aggregators, especially when it comes to informing and empowering people who have traditionally not been included in public life.

## KEY POINTS

*Despite the early optimism, the new Internet-connected world of information and engagement has not (so far) been a more equitable and empowering environment for people of color, low-income people, and other marginalized groups. A better understanding of networks, and how people communicate within them, may be critical for addressing this challenge. While it is important to know whether marginalized people are receiving news and information, we also need to find out whether and how they are using information, how those forms of engagement are evolving, and whether community networks serve to deepen divides or help to bridge them.*

Funabiki agrees that in the Internet-connected world, there is a “crying need for trusted curators and conversation facilitators. Whatever you are, rich man or poor man, you’re now trying to figure out who you can go to who will filter information so that you get the news and opportunities you want.”

Some of these connectors and curators may be professional journalists. Therefore, one key goal for Carlisle and the Kellogg Foundation is to ensure that the next generation of people entering the field embodies diversity in all its racial, ethnic, and economic forms. “White males still predominate in the media right now. We’re helping to train a cohort of young people, and embed them into existing organizations,” says Carlisle. By focusing on the pipeline of new professionals rather than seeding new organizations, Carlisle feels that Kellogg is making change “at a scale that can be supported.”

Heath Haussamen of New Mexico In Depth says that a fundamental goal of his organization is “involving populations in journalism who haven’t historically been there—both by diversifying the journalists themselves and the people they write about.” This is important, he feels, because “You’re never in somebody else’s shoes, no matter how hard you try.” Joe Mathews believes that diversity has been a key component of Zócalo’s success. “We are a young and diverse organization, with diverse leadership. We bring in people who look like us, and the organizations and institutions we work with want those audiences.” He argues that “If traditional media got more diverse, that would help them.”

But of course there are many other people who are not professional journalists who occupy the roles of network node connectors and curators. For Funabiki, this suggests fertile ground for research. “We need to figure out where these trusted facilitators and curators are, both high-profile ones and grassroots ones. This will require us to better define the roles and decide how to measure them.” From her standpoint as an observer of hyperlocal journalism, Jan Schaffer agrees that “No one has measured how this news ecosystem affects diversity, and whether it is a better setup for covering low-income communities and communities of color.”

Another question for research and strategy is how to raise the level of trust in the connections between different nodes in the network. If the people within each node are united by common identities and common interests, then the connections between nodes—the Paul Revere relationships, between people who may be different from one another in significant ways—would seem essential to the social capital of the community as well as the ability of marginalized voices to be heard. According to scholars like John Gastil, Katherine Cramer Walsh, and Harry Boyte, there seem to be two common factors in building trust among disparate groups: 1) discussions that allow people to explicitly raise issues of difference, such as race, gender, age, and class, and 2) activities that get people working together on tangible projects. These factors have been more common in thick forms of engagement rather than thin ones.

While it is important to know whether marginalized people are receiving news and information, the discussion on diversity and equity can’t stop there. We also need to find out whether and how they are using information, how those forms of engagement are evolving, and whether community networks serve to deepen divides or help to bridge them.



## 5. Here Come Everybody's Stories: Organizing and Social Media

The people interviewed for this paper used the word “story” countless times—and defined it in seemingly countless ways. In “Here Comes Everybody,” Clay Shirky describes how the Internet has enabled collaboration among huge numbers of people; while it is debatable whether this sort of “organizing without organizations” can accomplish all the tasks that need doing in society, it seems clear that online communication is having a transformative impact on storytelling. The huge underlying shift in citizen expectations and capacities means that a much higher percentage of people can share their opinions and experiences, and hear the opinions and experiences of others, in ways that are more convenient, continuous, powerful, and public than ever before.

In these interviews, some people used the word “story” in the most traditional journalistic sense, to denote the skill of the reporter in weaving new facts into a compelling narrative. Though this type of storytelling is being done by journalists through a broader array of media, it is still a largely one-way transmission of the reporter’s version of the truth.

Other interviewees were involved in training people outside the traditional boundaries of journalism in how to “tell the story” of their organization, community, or cause. The Community Media Workshop (CMW), a grantee of the McCormick Foundation, has trained thousands of grassroots leaders and nonprofit executives. CMW’s Thom Clark argues that this training can help nonprofits change the kind of media coverage they receive, which often focuses on the personalities of the people running the organizations. “I think the story should not be about the executive director, but about what the organization is doing,” he says. “My interest in helping organizations tell their story more effectively is to get other people to join the journey.”

This version of storytelling reflects a much broader understanding of media and its importance in our culture. “Training in story production is a form of civic engagement training,” says Diana Hess of the Spencer Foundation. Eric Newton of Knight Foundation takes an even broader view: “Every organization is a media organization, and every person is a media person.”

In some cases, this type of storytelling was presented as a sort of journalistic skill for non-journalists—and some people certainly viewed it as a response to the decline of journalism. Charles Lewis puts it more negatively when he points out that the number of public relations professionals has doubled as number of journalists has fallen; he and other observers might argue that as this skill is taken outside the profession, its practitioners are increasingly

### KEY POINTS

*Storytelling is more powerful and ubiquitous than ever: a much higher percentage of people can share their opinions and experiences, and hear the opinions and experiences of others, in ways that are more convenient, continuous, and public. By comparing notes on what we mean by storytelling—and listening—we might come to a better, shared understanding of why people want to take part in public life, and better recommendations for how to facilitate and support their efforts.*



disconnected from the principles that ought to govern its use. In this definition, storytelling is still a one-way transmission of some version of the facts, but more people are doing it, with fewer restraints.

The interviewees who come from the field of engagement use the word “story” very differently. In their parlance and practice, it is critical to give people a chance to tell their own stories, including the personal experiences that inspire their political opinions. This type of storytelling has played a key role in many forms of community organizing, where it is often accomplished first through personal interviews, or “one-on-ones,” between the organizer and the residents, and then in a group fashion at “house meetings.” (The term “relational organizing” is often used to describe this sort of storytelling-centric work.)

In the development and proliferation of public engagement during the 1990s, incorporating personal stories as one element of the process seemed particularly well-suited to the issue of race, which was perhaps the most common topic for these kinds of projects at the time. In all the forms of thick engagement, storytelling helps people learn from each other, form stronger relationships, and make the connection between their individual interests and the public good. This is multi-way storytelling, rather than a one-way transmission of the truth. In face-to-face engagement, it is limited in space and time—people share their stories in the context of some sort of meeting, happening in a particular time and place.

The Internet has of course allowed people to test those boundaries of space and time. People now use Skype and various forms of videoconferencing, along with text-only forms of communication, to share stories with people anywhere in the world. Through social media, people share their stories, photographs, videos, and the lists of friends or colleagues with whom they are connected, and our access to this information is limited only by whatever restraints people put on it themselves. Online platforms like the [Civic Commons](#), which was initiated through a grant from Knight Foundation, combine the capacity for online dialogue with profiles that allow people to learn more about each other. We don’t need to live near one another, or agree to meet at the same time, to hear each other’s stories.

Now the emotional and intellectual impact of exchanging stories and information online is not nearly as strong as it is with face-to-face communication. People empathize more with one another, they ask more questions, and they learn more from a live conversation than one that takes place online in real time, or asynchronously through social media. For John Esterle and other advocates of face-to-face engagement, this justifies a continued interest in the geographic ties of neighborhood, workplace, school, even in a digital world: “The vehicles for sharing information and inspiring engagement can be physical, not just conceptual,” he says. “Places matter.” Nick Judd, a student of online engagement, agrees: “Working purely in the digital world isn’t enough—our unifying concern is usually our connection to a physical space.” The combination of the physical and the virtual is quickly becoming an integral part of engagement: neighborhood online networks, which are being established by for-profit companies like [Nextdoor](#) as well as nonprofit groups like [E-Democracy.org](#), are proliferating dramatically all over the country. Civic Commons, which can be used by anyone, anywhere, at any time, has still had its greatest success by connecting people who live in Northeast Ohio (where the organization is based) and often as part of initiatives that include face-to-face meetings as well as online discussion.

However, the multi-way, online storytelling that is not face-to-face, or connected to place, still allows people to form relationships with friends and contacts. This is not always a direct, mutual exchange of stories, either: reading or hearing more about the people they admire enables citizens to assemble more detailed and positive perceptions of leaders like Barack Obama or Lady Gaga, with whom they will never have direct contact. These real and imagined online connections are often personally meaningful and politically powerful.

It is important to point out that there doesn't seem to be an either/or between online and face-to-face communication, or between two-way or multi-way formats: people are connecting in meetings and through computers, around place-based concerns and global issues. Physical spaces like libraries, schools, and neighborhoods are now digital spaces as well. These are complementary, not competing, forms of storytelling.

One final definition of "story" that came up in the interviews was offered by Andrew Slack of the [Harry Potter Alliance](#). The Alliance mobilizes people for fundraising and activism on charitable causes by capitalizing on their shared "fandom"—their affinity for a cultural phenomenon like J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels. The Alliance has worked with fans of other books or movies, like the Star Trek series, to raise money for Haitian relief, push for reforms in the chocolate industry, and donate books to libraries around the world.

Slack thinks of books and films as "meta-stories" that help people articulate their own stories. "Most people feel pretty disempowered, either as citizens or consumers," he says. "People don't view themselves as heroes, and yet our culture is saturated with hero stories. We need to build an apparatus to connect the hero story with our own stories, and those of others." On the Alliance website and through its social media campaigns, Harry Potter fans talk about their stands on issues like gay marriage under campaign headings like "What would Dumbledore do?"

TYPE OF STORYTELLING	CHARACTERISTICS
Reporting	One-way, by trained professionals
Reporting, messaging, and public relations by non-media organizations	One-way, by a wider array of professionals and amateurs
Sharing of experiences in thick forms of engagement	Multi-way, by all kinds of people, limited by space and time
Posting, tweeting, and sharing on social media platforms	Multi-way, by all kinds of people, not limited by space and time
Art, fiction, and mythology, used as "meta-stories" for many other stories to connect with	Two-tiered—one-way and multi-way

This understanding of story has two tiers: the first is a one-way narrative, and the second is made up of multi-way storytelling that is inspired and convened by the original story. (As Slack points out, organized religion is perhaps the original two-tiered story.) Slack thinks we need to pay more attention to these different definitions of story and how they relate: “We need more of a synthesis between the personal story, the collective story, and the mythological story.”

The recent evolution of information and engagement could be considered a story about stories. The explosion of expression, online and off, is blurring the lines between the personal and the political, between journalism and citizenship, and between information and engagement.

All of these forms of storytelling can help citizens take on more meaningful roles in public life. If people can find new ways to connect the forms—online and face-to-face, one-way and multi-way, abstract and experiential—they may be able to create powerful models for organizing. Marshall Ganz, the former community organizer and current Harvard lecturer, created one such combination when he designed the training for field organizers in the 2008 Obama Campaign. In his process, participants shared the “Story of Self,” then formulated a “Story of Us,” and then began working on a “Story of Now.” In his book, “We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For,” Peter Levine agrees that:

*...the campaign was structured in ways that reflected Obama’s civic philosophy. Volunteers were encouraged and taught to share their stories, to discuss social problems, to listen as well as mobilize, and to develop their own plans. There was a rich discussion online as well as face-to-face. His deliberative style was particularly attractive to young, college-educated volunteers, who felt deeply empowered and who played a significant role in the election’s outcomes, especially in the Iowa Caucuses.*

Most of the rest of Levine’s book outlines how and why the Obama Administration has failed to employ the engaging, storytelling strategies of the Obama Campaign.

If we want to play a more influential role in this unfolding story about stories, those of us who care about information and engagement would do well to re-examine our assumptions and definitions. By comparing notes on what we mean by storytelling—and listening—we might come to a better, shared understanding of why people want to take part in public life, and better recommendations for how to facilitate and support their efforts.

## 6. Big Data: Expert Instrument or Do-It-Yourself Tool?

Numbers—big numbers, anyway—used to be the domain of experts. Going back to the Progressive Era reforms of a century ago, one of the key ideas was that public administrators could use scientific management practices to make decisions and deliver services in more efficient, enlightened, and impartial ways. This technocratic bias only got stronger with the advent of computers in the middle of the century, and may have had a last hurrah with the “reinventing government” craze of the 1990s, which encouraged public officials to think of citizens as customers and focus on the financial numbers of government’s bottom line.

It is one sign of the shift in citizen capacities and attitudes that many people now think of data—especially “big data”—as a key element of public engagement. In fact, when you listen to some open data advocates, it sounds as though there is nothing more to engagement than the willingness of public institutions to provide reams of public datasets in a machine-readable format. In this vision of democracy, there is now so much skill and expertise outside government that our best move is to allow tech-savvy citizens the data and freedom they need to create a better life for all of us. “For many people, using your hacker skills to parse and mash up public data has become the epitome of citizenship,” says Allison Fine.

This vision of democracy is highly controversial in the field of public engagement. There are three fronts in the war over data. First, a number of nonprofits and foundations have become highly critical of the belief that quantifying outcomes is the best way to evaluate the effectiveness of grants or the accountability of government. Some of the more prominent engagement organizations, such as the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda, argue that purely quantitative analysis is an insufficient and often misleading approach to accountability. The title of a 2011 Kettering/Public Agenda report, “Don’t Count Us Out,” captures the frustration with an over-reliance on numbers; it argues that “many typical Americans are deeply skeptical about the accuracy and importance of quantitative measures.” Public Agenda’s Jean Johnson, one of the authors of the report, fears that this use of data is just another power play by experts, a way for foundations or government critics to attack programs they don’t like with a torrent of confusing numbers.

Pro-data pundits and funders like Jacob Harold have reacted by trying to soften their pitch, urging nonprofits to adopt a “medium data” approach. Medium data, Harold writes, “is simply organized storytelling—and if there’s one thing nonprofits do well, it’s tell stories about the need in our communities. Now is the time for us to tell an honest, open, shared story about ourselves.”

### KEY POINTS

*It is one sign of the shift in citizen capacities and attitudes that many people now think of data—especially “big data”—as a key element of public engagement. But big data is highly controversial, for a number of reasons. The opportunities and challenges of big data may require a set of intermediaries—people who can counteract the potential data manipulations of big business and curate and interpret data for everyday citizens. The future of big data may depend less on the skill and expertise of these intermediaries, and more on whether people trust them.*

Second, many longtime practitioners of thick engagement are dubious about the effects of data on public participation. While they may value the kind of ‘civic hacking’ Allison Fine refers to—at least cautiously, since they aren’t exactly sure what it is—they doubt that more than a few citizens will embrace this role. “The vast majority of citizens will never want to parse a dataset,” says one practitioner. Finally, they fear that the rising tide of data will subsume other key aspects of engagement, including social connections, face-to-face dialogue, the facilitative leadership of public officials, and the careful public consideration of options and trade-offs.

The third front in the data debate is being argued out primarily among futurists and technology experts. Most of these experts see the potential of big data to improve productivity, efficiency, transparency, and adaptability, and many feel that citizens’ ability to use it themselves will increase exponentially. “Do-it-yourself analytics will help more people analyze and forecast than ever before,” wrote an expert who was consulted for the Pew Research Center’s report on “The Future of Big Data.” But many are concerned that big data will also be used, particularly by corporations, to produce misinformation, widen societal divisions, and deepen economic inequalities. “Big Data will generate misinformation and will be manipulated by people or institutions to display the findings they want,” wrote one person interviewed for the Pew report. It “will predominantly be used to feed people ads based on their behavior and friends, ... and to essentially compartmentalize people and expose them more intensely to fewer and fewer things,” said another. “The collection of information is going to benefit the rich, at the expense of the poor,” argued a third.

Some technology experts point to instances where they think this has already happened. In an essay called “Seeing Like a Geek” (riffing off James Scott’s classic, “Seeing Like a State”), the author and blogger Tom Slee describes a number of situations where open data has been used to mini-mize the experiences, capacities, and knowledge of citizens. “The valuing of technological facility over idiosyncratic and informal knowledge is baked right in to open data efforts,” he writes. The key to leveling this playing field, he asserts, is giving people chances to engage that allow them to both analyze the data and lift up their own knowledge and experiences. “Making data available is not enough. Instead, transparency must be linked with deliberative development.”

Most of the people interviewed for this paper feel that the opportunities and challenges of big data require a set of intermediaries—people who can counteract the potential data manipulations of big business and curate and interpret data for everyday citizens. For some, the ideal intermediaries are journalists. “We’re trying to change the adversarial relationship between journalism and government, and to give journalists access to public data as part of that shift,” says Michael Maness of Knight Foundation.

The Center for Investigative Reporting, for example, now includes reporters and staffers with high data skills. “On Shaky Ground,” its report on the earthquake readiness of California’s public schools, drew on digitized maps from the California Geological Survey, fault data from the U.S. Geological Survey, the database of public schools provided by the California Department of Education, Google Maps, an evaluation of school building “collapse risk” compiled by the Division of the State Architect, and district-level lists of school construction projects. CIR staffers not only had to compile all of these public records into a single database, they also ended up having to clean the data and reconcile contradictory pieces of information. Robert Rosenthal

sees the project not only as a triumph of data-delving, but of journalistic collaboration: “A project of this size ordinarily wouldn’t be possible for media outlets in smaller places, but we were able to crunch the data and then share it with lots of small newspapers and public broadcasters,” he says. “For the local angles, we gave them the data, and they did the stories.”

But crunching and interpreting data can also be done by the kind of “information curators” described by Jon Funabiki and others in Section 4. These non-journalists (or at least, people who aren’t paid primarily to be journalists) “are growing in importance,” says Funabiki, “and they can be any kind of individual or organization: neighborhood associations and nonprofits, but also churches and parent networks.”

Whether or not they are professional journalists, these data curators will have to have the trust of everyday citizens—not only so that they have networks and audiences for their efforts, but so that citizens are comfortable with the idea of sharing their data in the first place. Some funders and public officials feel that we are experiencing the beginnings of a backlash against big data, spurred by news events like the NSA scandal, in which people become increasingly protective of their privacy. After the 2012 presidential election, the full story of the Obama Campaign’s success in “microtargeting” voters—and related stories, about the use of George Clooney to compel donations from middle-aged women—caused many of us to wonder whether Organizing for America, the independent, nonprofit arm of the Obama Campaign, could ever be held accountable by the voters. OfA had compiled huge quantities of data about the American public, and the American public couldn’t access any of it. In his essay on “The New Manipulative Politics,” Peter Levine writes that “Microtargeting is like using drones: it’s great if you’re the only one who has them. Of course, it’s a lot better to be microtargeted than to be hit with a drone strike, but in both cases, the only decision-maker is the one with the machinery.”

Citizen demands for accountability could even affect the collection, sharing, and use of aggregate data, not just individual information, by governments and corporations. “We need public pressure to keep open government going,” says Michael Maness. “We need to get to the point where people think of open data like a public utility—when it gets turned off for some reason, you react like you would if your house lost electricity. But we’re a long way from that.”

Even if it is too late to prevent the deluge of big data—“You can’t put the genie back in the bottle,” says Nick Judd—a citizen backlash could prevent the use of data by governments, while allowing corporations a relatively free rein. It might also mean that data about governments and citizens is available, but data about corporations is not. “Disclosure is problematic when you fail to recognize that corporations will evade transparency, while citizens and public institutions won’t,” Judd says.

The future of big data, therefore, may depend less on the skill and expertise of hackers, journalists, and other curators, and more on public trust. It would be easy for people to go back to thinking of numbers as the province of technocrats, to agree with Mark Twain that “there are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics.” If we want an environment where people believe the information they receive, and feel in control of how their information is used, we’ll need policies and processes that allow that trust to grow.

## 7. Conclusion

Taking stock of the state of information and engagement in communities is a complicated undertaking, and trying to anticipate how these changes will shake out is even more complex. It may be helpful to focus on the basic goals and concerns that motivated the four fictitious speakers at the beginning of this paper, and envision a scenario in which they were able to sort out their roles and differences:

Overheard at the local coffee shop, five years later...

**City councilman (formerly a local blogger):**

Do you remember that conversation we had five years ago, when we were all frustrated and we couldn't agree on what to do?



**Newspaper publisher (formerly a city councilwoman):** Yeah, we couldn't even agree on what the right question was, let alone come up with a good answer.

**Neighbor:** Yes, things have changed. This city is no utopia—we are still frustrated by some things—but in general I think we're a lot better off.

**Local blogger (formerly a city desk reporter):** And at least I have a job!

**Neighbor:** That planning process we went through was a big help. It led to a whole bunch of things: the whole system of youth councils, the monthly block parties and weekly lunches, the polls you can vote in by texting...

**Local blogger (formerly a city desk reporter):** ...the neighborhood online network...

**City councilman (formerly a local blogger):** ...the annual city-wide Participatory Budgeting process...

**Newspaper publisher (formerly a city councilwoman):** ...public meetings based on small-group discussion rather than that 'three minutes at a microphone' nonsense we used to do....

**Local blogger (formerly a city desk reporter):** ...that online map we use now where you can report a pothole, find out about a rezoning application in your neighborhood, see which school catchment area you're in, or organize a street cleanup...

**Newspaper publisher (formerly a city councilwoman):** ...the events we now organize that help set the editorial agenda for the paper...



**City councilman (formerly a local blogger):** ...the new school/community center we built, with the computer center in it...

**Neighbor:** ...the library/community center we built in the neighborhood where all the immigrants have moved in—the events they have there are pretty fun...

**City councilman (formerly a local blogger):** ...and the neighborhood mini-grant program.

**Newspaper publisher (formerly a city councilwoman):** But I think what's most important is that all these things seem connected to one another. Some of these things were already happening before, or were at least in the planning stages, but they were all pretty isolated. Now, it is easy to find out about one by participating in another.

**Neighbor:** Actually, I think the most important thing is that they're fun. Getting engaged used to be a lot more frustrating. We still disagree with each other...

**Local blogger (formerly a city desk reporter):** A lot!

**Neighbor:** ...but at least the meetings are pretty friendly, and there's usually food, and I can bring my kids.

**Newspaper publisher (formerly a city councilwoman):** Of course, this process led some of us to change jobs, too.

**City councilman (formerly a local blogger):** Yeah, turns out that being able to connect people online, give them choices, and tap into existing conversations on social media are all handy skills for a public official.

**Newspaper publisher (formerly a city councilwoman):** And people tell me that my ability to 'tell it like it is' works better at a newspaper! Plus, I enjoy using my connections to get decision-makers and citizens together in events, and online, where everybody has a voice.

**Neighbor:** Yeah, I didn't realize before that you're actually a pretty good listener.

**Local blogger (formerly a city desk reporter):** The work I do now—telling the stories that aren't always heard, digging into touchy subjects and bringing out the facts that would've been covered up otherwise—is the kind of thing I always liked, I just didn't have the freedom and support to do as much of it as I wanted. And this job pays a little better, thanks to the memberships and the grants.

## KEY POINTS

*The Progressive Era notion of a public square dominated by civic professionals is no longer viable. Communities should take stock of the infogagement infrastructure they have, and plan collaboratively for the public square they want. Public officials, journalists, and technologists will probably have different roles, and need different skills, than the ones they have now. There may be a core set of "democratic skills" that would benefit all of these roles. There are at least twenty questions, for research or strategy, which could help us rethink local infrastructure, roles, and skills.*



**City councilman (formerly a local blogger):** We all know a lot more about each other.

**Neighbor:** Well, there is one thing I haven't told you.

**Rest:** What?

**Neighbor:** I'm running for mayor.

Our four speakers have helped build a new public square in their town. If we want to help real, live local leaders build their own public squares, we will need to delve into some critical questions. The people interviewed for this paper have contributed many different possibilities.

Some of them are relatively specific questions, for research (either quantitative, qualitative, or both):

1. **What sorts of information—hard news, social information, policy information, critical communication during emergencies—have become harder (or easier) to find?**
2. **What kinds of communities can support hyperlocal journalism?**
3. **What is the current demographic composition of journalism as a profession, and are the demographics different for hyperlocal journalism?**
4. **Is hyperlocal journalism more effective for producing information for or about marginalized groups?**
5. **Are thick forms of engagement more likely than thin forms to attract and empower marginalized populations?**
6. **What are the typical qualities of a trusted information curator?**
7. **How can we map the connections between and among the nodes in a communication network?**
8. **How do we measure the level of trust in communications about data, or those that are informed by data?**

Other questions are more open-ended and strategic. Several of the interviewees are journalists or former journalists who are convinced that adopting engagement practices is a way out of the financial and philosophical traps they face, and will lead to a renaissance in their field. In an essay titled "[Engagement Can Save Journalism](#)," Dan Moulthrop asks,

*As many news organizations begin to implement strategies based on events, what if those events actually had an impact on policy making and did the work of connecting*

*citizens to the government they pay taxes to support? Could an engagement strategy like this change the coverage a newsroom produced, bringing the news closer to the community, making it more relevant to more people?*

Moulthrop's two questions here could be rephrased a bit to ask:

- 9. Under what conditions would an engagement process or event be most likely to affect public policy or lead to collaboration between citizens and public servants?**
- 10. Does this more proactive, intensive kind of engagement create a larger audience for media organizations?**

But engagement is of course a moving target: as Section 1 demonstrated, the challenge is not just to do more engagement, but to find ways of doing it better—especially by combining or weaving together the strands of thick and thin engagement. It is also apparent that engagement will not be the sole domain of public managers, or journalists, or technologists, or any other form of civic leader, and so the ability to understand and improve engagement would seem to be a valuable attribute for all of these roles, including the role of citizen. Therefore:

- 11. What are the essential engagement skills—or “democratic skills”—and how can we equip people in a wide variety of civic roles to use and hone them?**

The advocates of engagement in journalism are also conscious of the obstacles they face: chief among them, the mindset and upbringing of journalists to be watchdogs and truth-tellers, intellectually independent from the communities they cover and serve. Moulthrop feels that:

*As journalists, we often don't know how to engage with communities. For the last hundred years, the model has been something along the lines of “we report, you read it and if it really provokes you, you write a letter to the editor or post a comment.” Online journalism has created a few new interactive opportunities—the odd civic game or searchable database—but it's still largely a “we produce, you consume” transaction. We can do better.*

This leads to an obvious question about journalism education:

- 12. How can we change how journalists are trained so that they receive the skills and mindset necessary to engage citizens in productive and innovative ways?**

Some of the other infogagement thinkers have strategic questions that incorporate but go beyond the roles of civic leaders. These are planning questions, about how a community could be equipped to facilitate informed, deliberative communication between and within the nodes of its various networks. Lew Friedland frames this inquiry by asking:

- 13. What kinds of infrastructure would provide the best flow of news, information, and engagement?**

A key attribute of this infogagement infrastructure would be its ability to help people survive the information overload of stories and data. “If everyone’s telling their stories....that’s a lot of stories!” jokes John Esterle. “Who’s doing the listening?” Eric Newton has a similarly irreverent line about information: “Mark Twain once said that the two sources of light were the sun and the Associated Press. Now we’re in a completely different era—on Miami Beach in the middle of the day, you don’t need a spotlight, you need sunglasses.”

**14. How will this infrastructure help people understand and analyze both stories and data?**

It is hard to imagine any sort of community infogagement infrastructure that doesn’t have a role for government—seeding, supporting, legitimizing, responding, input-gathering, funding, or some combination of all of the above. But “it is complicated when you ask government to participate in this arena, given the potential for politicization,” says Kara Carlisle. “The media has to be independent somehow.” So:

**15. How can journalists, public officials, and other local leaders jointly support infogagement without negatively affecting the credibility and autonomy of any party?**

Some of these planning questions would test how well such an infrastructure would meet the needs—and be compelling to—everyday people:

**16. How much will people take advantage of these opportunities to gain information or engage in their community?**

**17. Will these infogagement opportunities be meaningful and enjoyable?**

**18. Will these opportunities allow people to make an impact on things they care about?**

**19. Will these opportunities raise the levels of justice and equality in the community, especially for people who have borne the brunt of past injustices and inequalities?**

And perhaps the ultimate question about infogagement, given the shifts in citizenship that have turned our world upside down, is not what kind of infrastructure you can envision to support it, but how you can develop such an infrastructure (or plan, or strategy) *with* citizens rather than *for* them.

**20. How can you plan and construct an infogagement infrastructure in a way that builds support for, trust in, and ownership of that new public square?**

These twenty questions could be summarized in four overarching questions:

- **What kinds of infogagement infrastructure and institutions at the community level would support the best flow of news, information, and engagement?**

- ▶ **How can such an infrastructure support a high level of democratic engagement across the community, especially for people who have borne the brunt of past injustices and inequalities?**
- ▶ **What should be the complementary, constructive, yet independent roles of journalists, public officials, and technologists?**
- ▶ **What are the core democratic skills needed by people in each of these professions, and how can we provide them?**

Summarized in this way, the questions presented by the people interviewed for this paper seem incredibly ambitious. Yet we may be at another juncture in the history of our democracy where ambition is not only possible, but sorely needed.

There is a prominent plaque at the main entrance to the Columbia Journalism School that reminds us of a similarly ambitious time, roughly a century ago. It reads:

*Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mould the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations.*

This quote, from Joseph Pulitzer in 1904, captures some of the key civic assumptions of the Progressive Era: that the American political system was a republic, that a republic relies on informed voters who trust the system, and that journalists could be professionals, facilitating the exchange of information and mediating between the citizens and the system. (Historians have also wondered whether Pulitzer's sense of guilt—his reporters practiced the unethical “yellow journalism” that helped produce the Spanish American War—was one of the reasons why he supported journalism schools. That history does at least help illustrate the kind of corruption and misconduct the Progressives were reacting against.)

Pulitzer's quote also captures the sense of civic construction that predominated in the Progressive Era—the fact that public leaders were conscious and proactive about the need to build civic infrastructure. They weren't taking “the system” as a given, they were creating it, or at least refashioning it.

The “public square” built by the Progressives a century ago doesn't seem to exist anymore. The republican virtues affirmed by Pulitzer, such as voting, remain critical but no longer seem sufficient to keep the attention of 21st Century citizens. The civic professionals who first emerged in Pulitzer's time, including journalists and public managers, need to rethink their roles in order to remain relevant. If they can do this thinking and planning, in informed and participatory ways, with citizens rather than for them, they may be able to build the public squares of the next hundred years.

# Notes and Further Reading

## Section 1

For more on Archon Fung's treatment of thin engagement, see his [Frontiers of Democracy 2012 conference presentation](#).

[“Six Models for the Internet + Politics”](#)

In his essay titled “Are the Open Data Warriors Fighting for Robin Hood or the Sheriff?” Mike Gurstein writes that “the ‘open data/open government’ movement begins from a profoundly political perspective that government is largely ineffective and inefficient (and possibly corrupt) and that it hides that ineffectiveness and inefficiency (and possible corruption) from public scrutiny through lack of transparency in its operations and particularly in denying to the public access to information (data) about its operations. And further that this access once available would give citizens the means to hold bureaucrats (and their political masters) accountable for their actions. In doing so it would give these self-same citizens a platform on which to undertake (or at least collaborate with) these bureaucrats in certain key and significant activities—planning, analyzing, budgeting that sort of thing. Moreover through the implementation of processes of crowdsourcing this would also provide the bureaucrats with the overwhelming benefits of having access to and input from the knowledge and wisdom of the broader interested public.”

Tom Slee, [“Seeing Like a Geek”](#)

[www.portsmouthlistens.org](http://www.portsmouthlistens.org)

## Section 2

The economists' conditions for public goods are that they are “non-excludable” and “non-rivalrous.” See Mancur Olson, [“The Logic of Collective Action”](#)

[www.madisoncommons.org](http://www.madisoncommons.org)

[“Life After Patch.com,”](#) The Awl

[“What Makes the Texas Tribune's Event Business So Successful?”](#) Nieman Journalism Lab

Dan Moulthrop, [“Engagement Can Save Journalism,”](#) The Huffington Post

## Section 3

"The Missed Opportunity of Newspaper Endorsements," Groundswell

"Can Public Engagement Rescue Professional Journalism?"

Public Insights Network

## Section 4

The Pew report on "Civic Engagement in the Digital Age"

Neighborhood Empowerment Congress

Lew Friedland's research for the FCC

CIRCLE's research on non-college youth

Gladwell and Uzzi on Paul Revere

Gastil's report on the Oregon Citizen Initiative Review

Walsh, "Talking About Race"

Boyte, "Constructive Politics as Public Work"

On racial demographics of the media

"A New Underclass: The People Big Data Leaves Behind"

## Section 5

For more on the characteristics of online communication, see Nabatchi, Gastil, Weiksner, and Leighninger, eds., "Democracy in Motion"

Peter Levine, "We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For"

## Section 6

Leighninger, "There's More to Engagement than Transparency"

"Don't Count Us Out"

Levine, "The New Manipulative Politics"

## About Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)

Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, PACE, is an affinity group of the Council on Foundations and serves as a learning collaborative of foundations doing work in the fields of civic engagement, service, and democratic renewal. Eight years ago PACE was created as the next iteration of a previous affinity group, the Grantmakers Forum for Community and National Service. The Grantmakers Forum focused exclusively on the issue of service and after a strategic organizational review, the decision was made to broaden the purview of the group to include the diverse field of civic engagement and democratic reform and renewal. PACE is headquartered in Washington, DC. To learn more, go to [www.pacefunders.com](http://www.pacefunders.com).

**Our thanks go to the following PACE members whose support made this project possible:**

Rita Allen Foundation  
Case Foundation  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation  
McCormick Foundation  
Rockefeller Brothers Fund

**Special thanks to the Rita Allen Foundation and John S. and James L. Knight Foundation for their support in making the 2018 Re-Release possible.**

## About the Author

Matt Leighninger is the Vice President for Public Engagement, and Director of the Yankelovich Center, at [Public Agenda](http://PublicAgenda.org). Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that helps diverse leaders and citizens navigate divisive, complex issues and work together to find solutions. Over the last twenty years, Matt has worked with public engagement efforts in over 100 communities, in 40 states and four Canadian provinces. During much of that time, Matt served as Executive Director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, an alliance of major organizations and leading scholars working in the field of deliberation and public participation. He also led a working group that produced a [model ordinance on public participation](#) and developed a new tool, “Text, Talk, and Act,” that combined online and face-to-face participation as part of President Obama’s [National Dialogue on Mental Health](#). He has assisted in the development of [Participedia](#), the world’s largest online repository of information on public engagement. His first book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, is a firsthand account of the wave of democratic innovation that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. His second, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, co-authored with Tina Nabatchi, is a comprehensive look at participation theory, history, and practice, and explains how we can transition from temporary engagement projects to stronger democratic infrastructure.





# PACE

*Philanthropy for  
Active Civic Engagement*

