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Civic Communication in a Networked Society

Seattle's Emergent Ecology

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■ Throughout the history of the American republic, there has been a close relationship between the organization of communication and the form of civic life. From the newspapers and committees of correspondence of the colonial era to the strong relationship between newspaper reading and civic voluntarism, communication and civic life have formed an interlocking system of relationships (Brown 1991; Pasley 2003).

Our democratic and civic institutions and the forms of communication that hold them together shape and constrain each other. This balance is strongly affected by two traditions that run through American history and are sometimes at odds. The first is government support for building communication infrastructure (starting with the roads and postal system of colonial America) and the widespread understanding that we need to regulate communication to ensure fair and equal access (Starr 2004). The second is civic voluntarism, the idea that democratic action best emerges from the community level, and that accomplishing community goals is (sometimes) better done through association than through government action (Putnam 2000; Tocqueville 2004). While these traditions are often posed as being at odds with each other, they are in fact two poles of the same "ecosystem" of communication and civic life in the United States.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore this balance in relation to what I call the civic communication ecology, or the relationships between civic life and local communication. This relationship is rapidly spiraling out of balance. The era of civic life in the United States from roughly 1930 to 1975, the decline of which has been chronicled by Putnam and others, is reaching a point of breakdown because the social conditions of life that underpinned the forms of civic engagement characteristic of that era no longer predominate (Dahlgren 2009; Couldry 2012). At the same time, a networked

communication system has emerged in the past two decades, with breathtaking speed and worldwide scope, that is fundamentally changing the lifeworld of all Americans but particularly those under thirty (Bennett 2007, 2008; Friedland and Morimoto 2005; Mindich 2005; Morimoto and Friedland 2011, 2013).

In the previous era, arguably, there was mutual support between the civic and communication ecologies. The linchpin of both was the daily newspaper, which chronicled civic life and provided critical information on government and community that, in turn, made decision making possible. Whether good citizens made for strong newspapers or vice versa is a debate that has never quite been settled. But that the two together drove both local democratic politics and civic association on the one hand, and the identification of citizens with local community on the other, is quite clear.

Now we see those systems moving apart. As the older system of civic life erodes, particularly in local communities, the new system of networked, online communication is rapidly becoming a parallel world, although one that pervades and remains pervaded by local community. As newspapers continue to economically decline and frantically scramble for a foothold in the online world, a range of civic communication alternatives have started to emerge. These hybrids are a mixture of old media and new, nonprofit and for-profit, professional and amateur (Anderson, Bell, and Shirkey 2013; Deuze 2007; Robinson 2007).

It is too early to know which of these forms will succeed, or indeed whether any will. But this chapter looks closely at the actual alternatives. It begins with the decline of newspapers and how this old system did or did not serve local civic life, then moves to a review of the range of alternatives to the newspaper-driven system that are starting to emerge and explains why we use the term "ecology" and what it means.

I then move to examine the civic communication ecology in Seattle, one of the most advanced in the United States. In particular, I examine three interlocking sets of institutional processes and their relationships: government support for civic communication; communication support in local civil society; and the interplay of the older and emerging media systems. The main claim is that for local civic community to thrive there must be a rich layer of communication capacity at the grass roots, in neighborhoods and the "civic spaces" of a community, and in the media system itself. Further, these two sets of institutions—civic and media—reinforce each other in the new media world, just as they did in the old, but in different and more complex ways. Finally, I point to the role of government in helping make this happen, both directly and indirectly, showing that civic communication ecologies are not just "natural" but they are built through institutions and therefore can be changed and grown.

Before examining the older system of news and civic life, I look briefly at "civic communication ecology" and why I use this term. In sociology, the attempt to understand urban communities as "environments" goes back to Robert Park (1923) and the Chicago School in the 1920s. In this older usage, communities were studied in terms of space and territory to try and understand how this larger environmental pattern of

development affected both smaller spatial units (e.g., neighborhoods) and social institutions within the city (e.g., families, occupational patterns, etc.). Amos Hawley (1950) advanced the study of human ecology to include the study of both spatial patterns and social processes, the perspective of "collective life as an adaptive process consisting of an interaction of environment, population, and organization" out of which emerges the ecosystem (Hawley 1986, 3–4). Beginning in the 1970s, students of communities' interorganizational networks (Galaskiewicz 1979; Laumann and Pappi 1976) examined how the interlocking network structures of communities depended on and shaped each other. Communication scholars (Monge and Contractor 2003) began to examine how networks of communication coevolved with organization and social structures in a more formal way and to look at how "networks of networks" in local communities made some kinds of civic action possible (Friedland and McLeod 1999).

This chapter applies this theory to the problem of the interacting systems of civic life (the ways that citizens in local communities band together to engage in democratic and public life) and the local communication system (the sum of local media, and the networks of communication that have grown up with the rise of the Internet). These structures have evolved over time: the form of local governments, schools, and associations in the democratic and civic sector, the institutions of newspapers and television, and now emerging social media have changed, and these take on a life of their own. That means that local community members may choose to act together but that first they have to act within the "containers" of these social structures, and second they can only act on the information that they have, which is shaped by both local social and communication networks.

The Older Civic Communication Ecology

The era of the modern newspaper runs roughly from 1900 to 2000. It is rooted in the Progressive Era, in the ideal of providing rational citizens with the information they need to make the decisions (particularly voting) to govern themselves. Since Walter Lippmann's (1922) devastating critique of the ideal of the rational citizen in a modern republic, we have understood that most citizens navigate the informational world looking for what they need to know within the restricted sphere of their daily lives. Further, as Schudson (1978) and Hamilton (2006) have demonstrated, this rational ideal of objective coverage, and the corollary separation of fact and opinion, is rooted in the competitive needs of the newspaper for advertising. No potential reader should be alienated so that no advertiser is left behind.

Despite these limitations, newspapers in the traditional civic ecology did fulfill core functions that allowed civic and democratic life to thrive in the local community. First, newspapers provide a *common information environment*, one that was, in principle, publicly accessible to all citizens. The newspaper "surveilled" the broad range of local institutions—government, business, and nonprofit—and allowed any citizen willing and able to buy a newspaper to indirectly monitor their activities (Lasswell 1948).[1]

By gathering the broad civic environment into a public report, newspapers also created possibilities for action, both direct and indirect. Citizens could intervene directly by expressing their views in elections, phone calls and direct contact with public officials, and letters to the editors. They could intervene indirectly through local associations and by activating civic, community, and interpersonal networks in response to news in order to influence decisions through the medium of associational influence, or through collective action (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Laumann and Pappi 1976; Mutz 1998).

The results of reporting sometimes became a stimulus to public discussion. The agenda setting through which the newspapers (and also local television) established what was most salient at any given time in the local community was the most powerful mode of framing local issues. Agenda setting, in its classical formulation, established that the media don't tell people what to think, but what to think about (McCombs and Shaw 1972). In this way they effectively set the boundaries for local discussion: what issues would be discussed by whom and through what sorts of groups or networks.

The newspaper has also functioned to *integrate* the local community directly and indirectly. First, the newspaper has played a central role in creating a *local identity*, or an *imagined community* (B. Anderson 1991). As great cities emerged, the newspaper wove together the stories of multiple neighborhoods into a larger narrative of the city. Later, during and after postwar suburbanization, the newspaper was the central institution that created the narrative of the metropolitan area from the patchwork of regional suburbs. The newspaper was the primary medium that made different groups—across racial, ethnic, and class lines—*visible* to each other, even if often through a distorted mirror, and created the possibility for a broader civic identity with others. Newspaper coverage, at its best, was a catalyst for civic solidarity with both like and unlike groups by enabling citizens to visualize a common fate (Friedland and McLeod 1999; Janowitz 1952; Kaniss 1991).

Beyond social integration, the local media helped generate and sustain (but also at times commercialize and homogenize) local culture and tradition. Local cultural identities were transmitted through many different regions of social life, within ethnic and racial communities and neighborhoods. But to the extent that these were generalized, made visible, and sustained over time, local media played an important role in their transmission.

Finally, and not least, the local newspaper functioned to *entertain* not only through nationally syndicated features like comics and advice columns, but also through its coverage of sports at all levels, of local food, restaurants, and lifestyles, and of the arts. Even when local reporters wrote on nationally distributed movies, television, and books, they helped generate a distinctively local discussion and opinion.

This picture certainly understates the role of conflicting interest, exclusion, and hierarchy. To be sure, the local newspaper was most often an elite institution, whether in the town or city. Publishers were, of necessity or choice, businessmen (and almost all were men) who actively sought the formal and informal support of local elites,

and vice versa. While a broad literature exists debating the extent to which editors and reporters exercised news judgment autonomously from the wishes of publishers and local elites, the setting of public agendas has been largely a top-down affair, in which authority resided with a combination of institutional and political elites and experts. Reporters and some editors might have circumvented these strictures some of the time, but the overall institutional routine reflected elite dominance (Gans 2004; Schudson 2003; Tuchman 1978).

Further, the integrated local narrative also reflected the interests of elites, whether through commercial boosterism, initiatives for "urban renewal" (that devastated some neighborhoods for the sake of suburbanization), or the commercial interests of local sports teams. The local narrative generated by the media may have served integrative functions, but this integration was certainly not always in the equal interest of all citizens, and in some cases it benefited some to the direct detriment of others (Logan and Molotch 1987; Molotch and Lester 1974).

Finally, local television amplified and extended all these processes. Newspapers are and always have been engines of local reporting at the multiple layers of urban and metropolitan life. In the heyday of the metropolitan newspaper, through the 1990s, even a moderate-sized city of 250,000 might have a newspaper editorial staff in the hundreds, while a television news operation in the same city might have had a dozen to twenty. Television news always has relied on the newspaper to do the bulk of local reporting, while providing a visual narrative to (some) stories that were still deemed to be of some public significance. Most air time, however, was filled with a mixture of episodic tragedy—crime, car crashes, fires—and feel-good stories and soft news, weather, and sports. To the extent that a public agenda existed, it was largely *set* by the newspaper but on television more people saw that agenda *portrayed*, even if only in a few voice-overs sandwiched in between more dramatic visuals. So the local media ecology, in its mid-to-late twentieth-century form, has been driven by newspapers for most serious news coverage and public policy agenda setting, and visualized, episodically, by television for a majority of local viewers (Kurpius 1997; McManus 1994).

This *media ecology* in the latter half of the twentieth century, then, represented at best an incomplete, partial, and skewed *civic ecology*; at worst, a distorted and elite-driven one, further reduced to the banal and visual on local television. Nonetheless, this media ecology did intersect with the existing civic infrastructure to enable *some* degree of civic capacity building and civic mobilization, however imperfect. Further, it was a *necessary* component of civic life and democratic participation in the form of community that dominated through the latter part of the twentieth century.

Beyond the effects of media on local civic life, in a federal republic the generation of an activist civic culture, social integration, and cultural tradition at the local level ramifies upward. That is to say, civic and democratic identity and action are not, for the most part, generated at the state or federal level, but are built up out of the repertoire of habits and routines learned and reproduced in local communities (Dayan and

Katz 1988). This is particularly true in the United States with its strong cultural-political legacy of voluntarism and localism. So, in a real sense, elements of national and state civic identity also rest on the generative ability of local civic culture. Because this is true, the role of *local* communication in generating civic identity remains critical to the regeneration of a vibrant national civic life.

The Decline of the Newspaper Business Model

Despite the centrality of the newspaper in maintaining civic life for most of the twentieth century, it is unquestionably in decline and some would say endangered. The causes for decline are complex, but we can point to two major trends. The first is the long-term decline of readership. The second is the failure of the newspaper business model.

Newspaper readership in the United States as a percentage of the population began to peak as early as the 1950s, but this was masked by the continuing growth of absolute numbers as more citizens received higher levels of education. By the 1970s, however, circulation began a steady absolute decline that continues today. In 2007, weekday circulation in the United States fell to its lowest point since 1945. Between 2008 and 2010, eight major newspapers and chains in the United States filed for bankruptcy (although subsequently reorganized) or were being kept alive by their creditors such as McClatchy and Lee (Meyer 2009). US newspapers derive more of their revenue from advertising than their European counterparts (73 percent to 57 percent) and so have been more vulnerable to both secular declines in readership and the severe economic downturn that began in 2008 (Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011).

There are many reasons for the decline of readership. The shift from an industrial to postindustrial economy and the rise of television, along with growing suburbanization and car commuting killed afternoon newspapers. Television news made the morning newspaper less timely for most event-driven news. As discussed, the decline of traditional social capital in local communities both drove and was driven by declining readership in a vicious cycle.

But the greatest blow to newspaper readership is undoubtedly the Internet for (at least) two reasons: the shift to online reading (without pay) and the related destruction of the newspaper business model. First, younger age cohorts, those thirty and below, have all but abandoned readership of the news in paper form. Even those socialized into newspaper reading now read almost exclusively online. So while news readership has not declined anywhere near the extent of news*paper* readership, those reading the journalism produced by newspapers are increasingly more likely to find it through search or social media.

This might be a positive step toward a new journalism model *if* newspapers, still the primary producers of news, received either the brand recognition for their product or the bulk of the revenue. But online readers rarely associate news found through

search or social media content with its original published source, and advertising rates for online news are in the range of 10 percent of print rates (Kirchhoff 2009). Further, newspapers have traditionally relied on three legs for revenue: subscribers, advertising, and classified advertising. Classified revenue imploded with the growth of Craigslist starting in the late 1990s. So even if *readership* holds steady or even grows, advertising and classified revenues are in a downward spiral. The current business model of local newspaper journalism is untenable (Kirchhoff 2009).

Newspapers, then, are caught in a trap. The changing structure of local community, disinvestment in traditional local social capital, and shifts in consumption and advertising patterns alone would have severely challenged the business model of the twentieth-century newspaper. But the rise of the Internet, the shift to online reading among those under thirty-five, the shift of revenue to search and social media, and advertising rates at 10 percent or less of print have killed it.

Is there a form of local journalism that can replace the traditional newspaper while remaining connected to the civic life of local communities? The news industries themselves are, not surprisingly, concerned primarily with their survival as profit-making institutions. So if news consumers demand less news about local civic and public life, and an alternative product can be profitably supplied (e.g., more local sports, lifestyle, etc. without as much (or any) local reporting), then for corporations whose mission is to sell information to consumers at a profit, the radically reduced local newsroom is an acceptable substitute.

But critics have suggested that news is too important to leave to private enterprise, which may skim the profitable information cream while leaving communities without journalism. The major responses to this "news as information commodity" model treat news as a *public good*, that is, something that the public needs but which cannot be produced profitably by the private sector. Former *Washington Post* editor Len Downie and scholar Michael Schudson have called for a large increase in funding for news from the nonprofit sector (Downie and Schudson 2009). They argue that philanthropies should step into the void left by the commercial and technological retreat *and* that they are capable of doing so. Robert McChesney and John Nichols (2010) argue that only the government is capable of providing the capital necessary for adequate news provision for democracy. They have proposed a federally funded $35 billion voucher program to separate federal funding from potential control.

Both proposals are important and innovative, and would have extraordinarily positive effects on civic and public life if adopted. But the current cost of producing daily local journalism in the United States can be *conservatively* estimated at $6 billion (Friedland and Konieczna 2014). Much of this cost (almost 50 percent) goes to the costs of print and distribution, so if we assume that this number is closer to a bare minimum of $3 billion for maintaining current operations in an online environment, this is what would be required from the philanthropic sector. However, *total* philanthropic giving in the United States in 2007 (before the recession) was $44 billion, and giving for news and

communication that year (minus public broadcasting) was about $100 million, or two-tenths of one percent. It seems unrealistic to assume that charitable giving could grow to fill this gap. The McChesney-Nichols proposal faces other obvious difficulties. Amidst economic downturn, political dysfunction, and Republican control of Congress, it is nearly unimaginable that a $35 billion allocation for a new journalism program, or even the $3 billion barest minimum that we estimate, would be enacted in the next decade.

So we are left with a hard dilemma. Is there any way that the current news industry might transition to an online business model while maintaining, or even growing, its commitments to local, civic, and public reporting? And if so how might foundations and nonprofit organizations, and, perhaps governments, realistically contribute to this process with the limited funds they have in a transition period?

There are no simple answers to these questions, but there are some emerging models that combine local media ecologies and robust civic ecologies to begin to create new forms of local journalism with civic focus and outcomes. There are still relatively few that are effective in both journalistic and civic terms and economically sustainable. Those that exist tend to be in communities that have robust local media, a strong civic life, or both. So the new models may be suitable for their specific niches (cities with high social capital and strong media), but not elsewhere. We'll return to this problem in the conclusion. But even if these models are not replicable elsewhere, they offer one realistic vision of what a new civic communication ecology might look like.

New Civic Communication Ecologies

One thing we know about the emerging civic communication ecology is that despite the rapid growth in new forms of online community news, and the steadily declining coverage in traditional outlets, traditional news institutions remain the primary original source of local news in the United States, although the stream of news from these same institutions is in a steady and rapid decline.

The most comprehensive study to date of a single city media ecology, Baltimore, by the Pew Center for Excellence in Journalism (2010) found that the *Baltimore Sun* in 2009 produced 32 percent fewer stories on any subject than in 1999 and a full 73 percent fewer than in 1991, when there were two competing newsrooms. Although there were fifty-three news outlets (from blogs to talk radio), 83 percent of all stories on the six topics researched were repetitive. Of the 17 percent that did contain new information, virtually all came from traditional media, and of these half came from the *Sun*. The study finds that new media have mainly served as an "alert system and way to disseminate stories from other places." A 2010 J-Lab study (Schaffer 2010) of Philadelphia's media ecosystem finds a 17 percent decline in public affairs stories from 2006 to 2009 in the *Inquirer*, although it also found more than 260 active blogs, public policy, or niche web sites, with 60 having "some journalistic DNA, in that they report on the news, not just comment on it." The Philadelphia study, however,

still finds the same paradox amidst a rapid deterioration of the traditional media: old media are still the wellspring of much city coverage. Hindman (2011), in a systematic study of one hundred markets, found that local news sites are overwhelmingly online posts or reposts of local newspapers and television stations.

Making sense of this new environment is not easy. New sites proliferate daily and even new *types* of sites are emerging every six months or so. Furthermore, there are different configurations of old and new media types, and the pattern of their connections can be very different. Still, it is worth cataloguing the kinds of sites that are emerging to understand what elements are beginning to combine in specific communities.

This classification moves from the "top" of the ecosystem, the most comprehensive levels of local community coverage, to the most micro- and niche-focused types of sites (Friedland 2001; Schaffer 2009).

Local newspapers online. Local newspapers, especially their online editions, remain at the top of the local media ecosystem, providing much of the content repurposed by others. Local newspapers also remain at the center of the civic ecology, connecting disparate networks and groups across community, city, and metropolitan boundaries. Powerful local online newspapers collaborating with other media are the most powerful examples of how a new civic ecosystem might work. The *Seattle Times* offers among the best examples.

Local comprehensive news sites. These sites are generally run by traditional journalists who have made the move to a pure online model by choice or necessity (often after layoffs or buyouts). They seek to provide a comprehensive account of local news and public policy, but not the complete daily report of a newspaper. They are "second reads," providing depth and enterprise that the daily newspaper can or does not (Konieczna forthcoming). Local comprehensives generally are nonprofit or mixed models, often heavily supported by foundations, especially the Knight Foundation. Leading examples include the *MinnPost*, *Voice of San Diego*, *Texas Tribune*, *New Haven Independent*, and *St. Louis Beacon*. The local comprehensives are thriving with local publics, but to date none is independently sustainable, and all rely on national or local foundation and philanthropic support.

Local comprehensive civic sites. Similar in structure to the local comprehensives, these sites are also city-wide and sometimes engage in policy reporting, but are more focused on community issues and questions, whether urban or ethnic. They have paid staff at their hub, but usually smaller numbers of reporters. They act more as editor/aggregators of local civic news, drawing from smaller micro-local sites, neighborhood or ethnic sites, newspapers, and newsletters. Leading examples include the *Gotham Gazette* and *Twin Cities Daily Planet*. Some, like the *Madison Commons*, are located in journalism schools.[2]

City region sites. Often run by professional journalist-entrepreneurs, city region

sites cover more than a single neighborhood or cover large neighborhoods in major metropolitan areas. City region sites function much like traditional community newspapers online, specializing in urban regions or towns that lie below the ability of the metro newspaper to cover well, and they often include significant government, community, and policy reporting on their neighborhood or region. Leading examples are the *West Seattle Blog*, discussed below, and *Oakland Local*.

Micro-local, hyperlocal, or neighborhood sites. Often run by one or two individuals, usually working as citizen journalists, these are rarely economically self-sustaining (although many make some money). Micro-local sites concerned with civic and public issues generally focus on neighborhood schools, development issues, business, and community events. Some have grown or merged into city region sites.

Niche sites. These sites concentrate on single issues or clusters like schools or politics. More frequently, they discuss local lifestyle options, at the community-wide, city region, or neighborhood level.

Corporate local news systems. These are local (city or town) news sites set up by national news corporations that both generate and aggregate local news that can generate advertising revenue (e.g. Patch/AOL). They may originate some news (Patch has hired editors/reporters in its more than eight hundred national sites) and so contribute to the civic ecosystem indirectly, but they are not a major source of original content.

The challenge in understanding the emerging civic media ecology is in capturing the configuration of these elements in different communities and understanding the dynamics of these patterns. For example, while almost all newspapers now have online editions, fewer have made the transition to a robust online edition that has many connections to other online resources in their local communities. Fewer still have done this in a way that is oriented toward civic or public life. There are clear ecological constraints as well: local comprehensive, comprehensive civic, or city regional sites are less likely to exist in smaller cities because they lack the density of resources or demand to support them (although there are some exceptions). Similarly, niche sites can only emerge where the niche is large enough to support them, whether civic (e.g., about local schools) or lifestyle-oriented (e.g., sailing, local brewing). Right now, we have a poor understanding of either the distribution of the types across different communities, or their interaction, so generalizations about emerging patterns are premature (Kurpius, Metzgar, and Rowley 2010).

The case study that follows is an attempt to demonstrate what a sustainable civic media ecology looks like at the level of a single metropolitan case, what sorts of patterns or combinations of the above elements it would include, and how would they be connected and sustainable.

The Case of Seattle

The city of Seattle provides something of an ideal type, at least in current terms, of what a civic communication environment might look like. It begins with a rich civic environment, which in turn has made successful government support for civic life in the neighborhoods possible. Seattle's traditional media (newspapers and to a lesser extent TV) are making a successful transition to the new media ecology in ways that encourage and benefit from this civic environment. Beyond traditional media, the city has an extraordinary range of online media addressing broad and niche audiences. Its broad city regional sites, covering large sections of the city (e.g., West Seattle) are among the best in the nation; they gather news from neighborhoods under their umbrella and support the thriving micro-local neighborhood coverage that is diverse and rooted in community. Taking all these elements together points toward what a sustainable *civic media economics* would look like: a mix of government support, civically engaged media, traditional commercial media economics, entrepreneurial startups, new local advertising models, and national and local foundation support.

These very strengths mean that Seattle is not a "typical" US city. Still, it provides one of the best cases of a broad range of civic communication and tells an important story of what might be possible in other cities given the right conditions.[3]

First, Seattle has a thriving, postindustrial economy centered on information, which in turn both produces and draws a population that is more educated, prosperous, literate, and technically oriented than the United States as a whole. Second, Seattle has a rich history of the use of public policy at the municipal level to develop civic engagement and address social inequalities of resources, training, and opportunity. Third, this public policy has been explicitly and systematically applied to the domain of communication and information, so the city itself has sought to develop information equity, transparency, and positive civic communication as a foundation of governance. Fourth, Seattle has a long history of independent journalism and communication activism that has spawned an independent media culture. Fifth, and not least, each of these four conditions feed a rich new media ecology at every layer of civic life: individuals and small groups, neighborhoods, communities of interest, "regional" media (covering city sectors), and the larger canopy of the existing commercial media system.

This case concentrates primarily on the city's investment in civic communication and the emerging media ecology before finally evaluating what Seattle may tell us about the more general challenges involved in developing a democratic communication system in the digital environment of the twenty-first century (Durkin, Glaisyer, and Hadge 2010).[4]

Economy and Population

Seattle is the major city of the US northwest, with a 2011 population of 608,660 in a metro area of almost 3.5 million, making it the fifteenth-largest metropolitan area in the United States and the twenty-third largest city. It is among the most wired cities in the

United States based on broadband access, usage, and wi-fi availability, and in 2009 ranked second behind only Silicon Valley among US high-tech centers. Among its internationally known companies are Microsoft, Amazon, Expedia, Boeing, Nintendo, and T-Mobile.[5]

Beyond these large companies, Seattle has what the city's chief technology officer Bill Schrier calls an "ecosystem of technology startups. Folks who got tired, left Microsoft, made money and started their own companies" (personal communication, October 7, 2011). Eighty-eight percent of Seattle residents have computers at home. Seattle residents, by city percentage, are among the most highly educated in the United States, with 47 percent of those twenty-five and older having a BA or higher and almost 90 percent holding a high school degree. In 2010 it was ranked America's second most literate city among those with populations over 250,000, based on six key indicators: newspaper circulation, number of bookstores, library resources, periodical publishing resources, educational attainment, and Internet resources. According to data collected in 2000, approximately 70 percent of residents are white, 8.5 percent African American, 13.5 percent Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 5.3 percent Latino; percentages of nonwhites have risen consistently over the past decade ("America's Most Literate Cities, 2010").[6]

On the whole, then, Seattle is more wired, better employed, more highly educated, and whiter than the nation as a whole. At the same time, it has working-class, ethnic, and immigrant populations that are both geographically concentrated and, in some cases, lack resources. Through systematic public policy, Seattle has attempted to address questions of equity among neighborhoods, including information inequity, as a problem of governance that affects the city as a whole, which makes it distinct, if not unique, in the nation. So the story of public policy and governance is essential to understanding its civic communication infrastructure.[7]

Seattle Governance Policy for Civic Communication

Seattle demonstrates that public policy and civic governance make a major difference in whether communication opportunities are extended to all citizens and, if so, whether these opportunities lead to a richer *civic* communication infrastructure. In Seattle, systematic public policy for neighborhood governance, begun almost twenty-five years ago, has significantly shaped the possibilities of broader civic communication participation, beginning with attempts to forge new relations between citizens and government. This policy rests on three distinct pillars: a general policy of neighborhood governance, community technology for neighborhood development and equity, and information governance for equity.

Neighborhood Governance

Seattle's efforts to develop neighborhood-based governance began in 1987–88, when "district councils" were formed to represent independent community councils in its

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then twelve major neighborhoods. An Office of Neighborhoods was established, along with a city-wide Neighborhood Council consisting of representatives from each district council (Sirianni 2007, 2009). For almost two decades, this citizen-led, neighborhood-based planning grew through an active Department of Neighborhoods, led starting in 1988 by long-time community organizer Jim Diers, who had worked in the south side neighborhood of Rainier Valley in the 1970s. Among the core design principles were "building relationships and partnerships, citizen coproduction of public goods, deliberative democracy, and asset-based community development" (Sirianni 2009).[8]

Two key programs developed by the Department of Neighborhoods (DON) laid the foundation for *common civic space* throughout the community. First, in 1989 a neighborhood matching fund was established, which grew from $150,000 to $4.5 million by 2001 before it was slowly cut back for budgetary reasons. The city awarded grants to neighborhood-generated projects that committed to matching in-kind contributions, cash, and labor from citizens. Among the many types of projects developed over the decade were community playgrounds, arts, and gardens; neighborhood environmental projects; and community learning centers, the latter often computer-equipped. In this way, the DON and matching fund contributed to the development of (1) a city-wide civic culture of collaboration and public work with broad equity and diversity, (2) common civic spaces, and (3) *community-wide communication infrastructure*, more evenly distributed than in many US communities. This in turn laid the foundation for a broader, common communication infrastructure as new media blossomed in the 2000s.

Also, the Department of Neighborhoods established neighborhood service centers in all twelve (later thirteen, then recently consolidated) Seattle neighborhood districts. The centers have served individuals in the tradition of "little city halls," providing a place to pay taxes and utility bills, traffic violations, etc. But they also provide applications for neighborhood matching grants and free public access to the Internet. The neighborhood service centers also engage in civic convening designed to add democratic capacity to Seattle governance. Service center coordinators act as organizers, staff members for the district councils, and elected leaders.

The neighborhood governance system has suffered some erosion since its peak under Mayor Paul Schell from 1998 to 2002 (Sirianni 2007, 2009), but it has nonetheless contributed to a framework within which specific civic communication initiatives can flourish.

Community Technology Program: Extending Neighborhood Governance to Civic Communication

The Community Technology Program (CTP), located within the city's Department of Information Technology (DOIT), lies at the heart of Seattle's effort to build and

sustain neighborhood civic communication. CTP is headed by David Keyes, who joined the city in 1997 with a background in social work and communications. Since 1998, the CTP has run a Technology Matching Fund, separate from but inspired by the Department of Neighborhoods Matching Grants. A total of $1.9 million has been disbursed for 139 community communication projects. Civic and community groups can apply for up to $20,000 in matching funds. There is a focus on underserved and diverse communities, and a citizen board guides the awards.

The CTP has actively leveraged neighborhood contributions: Keyes estimates a three-to-one return on its investment. In 2007–08 more than $230,000 was disbursed in matching funds. Thirteen funded projects served more than 1,343 individuals at twenty funded locations including 81 seniors, 751 young people, 870 immigrants and refugees, and 775 low-income individuals. Of those, 46 percent gained technology-based employment skills and 55 percent completed ESL and citizenship education. Public terminals were placed in ten neighborhood service centers, two police stations, and ten community learning centers. Free broadband access was provided at 130 locations at more than 500 computers. Beyond wi-fi in community centers, the CTP helped provide free public wi-fi to more than 16,000 users in 2008, expanding access to citizens in parks and other open spaces (Keyes 2009).[9]

The range of grants awarded in 2010 offer a strong picture of the role that the Technology Matching Fund grants play in bridging the digital divide in Seattle, expanding access and inclusion, and stimulating civic communication. Twenty-four grants totaling $300,000 were awarded, including for expanding low-income access and training in the South Lake Union neighborhood center and public housing. Low-income women were taught basic life and computer skills. Computer resources for the homeless were expanded through the Plymouth Housing Group. Young women in the juvenile justice system learned the media skills to tell their personal stories at the Reel Grrls media boot camp, and Native American youth were funded to build dance arcade games compatible with their culture. The Vietnamese Friendship Association is creating a media lab for Vietnamese youth that includes resume building and college application training, and the New Horizons Ministries helps homeless and street youth to get off the streets. Seniors in the Central Area Senior Center received upgraded computer labs and skills instruction. Assistive technology evaluation centers were built by the Alliance of People with Disabilities and Provail. And to increase civic engagement directly, the Rainier Beach Community Empowerment Coalition 2.0 began training and support for an innovative team of "information stewards" to manage an online "information and exchange commons" to improve the flow of communication among Rainier Beach neighbors. As part of this mission, in 2010 the Rainier Beach Coalition established "Seattle Freedom Net," which encourages and trains young people to become citizen journalists using cell phones, iPads, cameras, and social media, contracting with Ken Gilgren, a Seattle community media veteran for training. The Knowledge as Power Citizen Seattle Outreach developed an online civic

engagement portal that helps residents track legislation on civic issues. Each of these projects met real information needs of distinct and specific communities, bridged the digital divide, and provided essential skills, all of which are preconditions for civic participation in an online community. The Rainier Beach Coalition and Knowledge as Power more directly advanced citizen use of information and communication for civic engagement.[10]

Beyond the provision of core skills, technology, infrastructure, and civic skills, the Community Technology Program launched the Seattle Communities Online Project (SCOP) in 2009 to help neighborhood groups actively engage community members by teaching them to use Web 2.0 online tools, including wikis, blogs, Facebook, iPhone Apps (as language translators), and other social media. Led by Amy Hirotaka, then a student at the Evans School for Public Affairs at the University of Washington and a CTP intern (now graduated), SCOP was founded after the CTP realized that community and neighborhood groups were actively seeking to use new technology to increase civic participation beyond face-to-face meetings.

District coordinators interviewed about the needs in their communities unanimously felt it was necessary for "neighborhood groups to build capacity for the use of online tools to communicate" (Hirotaka 2010, 24). SCOP trained district coordinators in the use of online social networking tools. The projected long-term outcomes of SCOP are to (1) engage more people to participate in neighborhood groups through online discussions, (2) have groups share information, tips, and advice on SCO blogs, (3) increase knowledge about neighborhood-specific information, and (4) increase the number of groups using online tools (Hirotaka 2010, 14).

An important step toward meeting these goals is the SCOP Neighborhoods on the Net project, designed to make it easier for residents by listing virtually all online resources in their communities—blogs, Twitter feeds, neighborhood lists—by neighborhood, in one place, with addresses, by both neighborhood and district.[11] Neighborhoods on the Net has developed a citizen curriculum, teaching citizens and neighborhood leaders how to choose web tools for specific community communication-building purposes, use them better, and get help and training. It has also posted instructions on how to host a locally filtered version of Neighborhoods on the Net on neighborhood websites or blogs and how to subscribe to official city blogs via RSS.

Critically, SCOP has taken an inventory of all local and neighborhood-based online activity in Seattle and has identified more than 250 online modes for hyper-local, neighborhood, and neighborhood-regional (e.g., West Seattle) communication. Although there is some repetition of sources (e.g., for a given source Twitter and Facebook feeds are counted independently), there are still more than 150 unique sources.[12] While no systematic comparisons exist, this suggests that Seattle is among the most dense local communication environments in the nation.

The CTP also supports Puget Sound Off, an innovative partnership with the Center for Communications and Civic Engagement at the University of Washington,

headed by Professor Lance Bennett, the YMCA, and One Economy. Launched in September 2008, Puget Sound Off encourages youth civic engagement through its online portal and skills training in blogging, storytelling, and Web 2.0 tools. As of late 2009, the site had more than 1,100 users, who started 620 events, posted 330 videos, started 90 groups, and administered 68 youth polls.[13]

Taken together, these programs demonstrate the extraordinary, perhaps unique commitment of Seattle government to support *citizen-led* efforts for civic communication in every neighborhood in Seattle, and for many groups that otherwise would not have access to local computers or training. The civic commitments go beyond simple access, important as this is as a prerequisite to participation, to begin to outline a positive vision of digital inclusion, which encompasses the development of active communication skills and social and physical infrastructure for civic participation.

City of Seattle Information Governance

Parallel to its broader civic infrastructure, Seattle has one of the most robust city communication infrastructures in the United States, led by its Department of Information Technology (DOIT). Specifically, the Seattle infrastructure is oriented toward government *provision of necessary information* (not only infrastructure) through various means, including clear information transparency goals, as well as the civic communication goals discussed above.

DOIT has outlined a series of "Goals for a Technology Healthy Community," including furthering educational opportunities, solving social issues, fostering civic participation, relationship building and community development, sustainability, and ensuring that technology is affordable and equitably distributed. The DOIT goals line up with both the governance culture of civic participation and the broader culture of healthy communities and sustainability.

DOIT has been led by chief technology officer Bill Schrier since 2003. Schrier describes the Community Technology Program matching grants as "extraordinarily important," because "access to education, good jobs, information, and quality of life" depend on the ability of individual citizens to access and use technology. "Some people can afford computers or have access to broadband; some can't. This is a way to level the playing field for a whole set of people, those who are low income or speak English as a second language."[14]

Finally, the city maintains a large, common data site at *data.seattle.gov*, which includes information from almost every city agency, up to 150 data sets on police, neighborhood crime, potholes, schools, water consumption, museums, neighborhood fishing, and the mayor's visitation logs, to list just a few. These data are being widely used. Beyond the data sets themselves, DOIT is leading the development of an "ecology of applications," through public-private partnerships, in which private developers are encouraged to develop useable interfaces for government data. One example

is the "Public Data Ferret," a resource to summarize data in clear language, provide analysis, and increase usability for citizens and journalists, created by Matt Rosenberg, former journalist and former director of the King Countywide Community Forums.[15]

Seattle's infrastructure of civic and neighborhood governance, as well as its specific civic communication investments, is extensive and deep, reaching down to every neighborhood, including those traditionally excluded, and up throughout the governance process. Although there will almost certainly be some retrenchment as the city, like others, faces massive budgetary problems in the decade ahead, the governance structures established in the 1990s and 2000s give both the traditional media and the new online media ecology roots in the neighborhoods upon which to build.

Seattle's Media Ecology

The media ecology of Seattle has been both a driver of civic communication and an effect of its civic life. Seattle's traditional media—its newspapers, TV, and radio—have a history of strong local coverage and have paid particular attention to civic and public life for decades. They were also quicker to adapt to the changing online media ecology than most, with several innovative partnerships. And, in turn, the new media ecology is quite dense, layered, and linked to civic life. We discuss each in turn.

Traditional Media

Seattle has historically been a strong newspaper city, consistent with its high levels of education, literacy, and civic engagement. Seattle had two dailies for more than a hundred years, the afternoon *Seattle Times*, locally owned by the Blethen family (with a 49.5 percent stake held by McClatchy, acquired in 2006), which went to a morning edition in 2000, and the Hearst-owned *Post-Intelligencer*, known as the "PI," which became online-only in 2009 after years of declining circulation.

The *Times* has a history of participation in the public journalism movement. Rosen (1999), Friedland (2003), and Haas (2007) provide substantive overviews of the public journalism movement.[16] From 1994 to 1999 the *Times* teamed with public radio stations KPLU and KUOW in the "Front Porch Project," part of a national NPR project in public journalism (more below). It covered elections in a "citizen-centered" way, as well as the issues of transportation, property taxes, and more general quality of life issues under the leadership of executive editor Mike Fancher (now a participant in Journalism that Matters–Pacific Northwest and the Puget Sound Civic Communication Commons).

By the 2000s, the paper, like most, was de-emphasizing its formal public journalism efforts, but it continued to invest heavily in local news coverage, winning four Pulitzer Prizes in that decade, including one in 2010 for its breaking news coverage of the murders of four Seattle police officers and the manhunt that followed. The *Times*

also invested heavily in the online transition, partnering early with the *West Seattle Blog* published by Tracy Record (more below) and other neighborhood publications. After the PI ceased paper publication in 2009, the *Times* circulation rose, not surprising given the demise of its major competitor, but still bucking the national trend of declining newspaper circulation.

In 2007, the *Times* editorial pages published a series of essays, titled "The Democracy Papers," that examined the role of media in a democracy, with an eye to this century's increasing media consolidation and the effects of online media on traditional media. Owner Ryan Blethen continues to discuss these issues in his blog on the *Times* website. The *Times*, under the editorship of David Boardman, continues to invest heavily in the local communication ecology, serving as an umbrella for much of the regional and local online activity that thrives at the neighborhood level (discussed below).

Television

All three major Seattle television stations have had national reputations (at times) for high quality and independent production extending back to the 1950s. While these have declined significantly (paralleling local television more generally), during the last three decades, their (varied) emphasis on community and special projects has continued to place them above the national trends. For decades, KING was the leading television station in the city, and it developed an early tradition of in-depth coverage of civic news and public affairs. In 1979–1980, it sponsored the KING City Fair, for which Anne Stadler, a legendary local activist and television producer, was engaged as the assistant director of public affairs to form a "People Power" coalition that assembled 2,500 volunteers to gather best civic practices in six areas including food, energy, and waste management. In 1992, the station was sold, eventually becoming part of the Belo Broadcasting chain of Dallas, and its investment in politics and community affairs contracted significantly.

The other two commercial stations, KIRO and KOMO, competed with KING to provide local coverage, setting off a virtuous cycle (at least in the lowered expectations of local television) for the last several decades of the twentieth century (former mayor Norman Rice was a KOMO reporter). This legacy continues in a higher-than-average level of community coverage in local television today. In contrast, public television station KCTS-TV has long seen itself as a national producer. Although it has partnered with the *Seattle Times* for some local coverage, today it is seen as distanced from local public affairs.

Seattle Radio

Seattle public and noncommercial radio has a long-time engagement with democracy, civic life, and alternative politics and culture. KUOW, affiliated with the University

of Washington, is the flagship NPR affiliate in Puget Sound, with almost 400,000 listeners. It is the number two ranked radio station overall in the region, making it one of the more locally influential NPR affiliates in the United States. KUOW was a key partner in the "Front Porch Forum" in the 1990s, which it helped initiate along with KPLU, a second strong NPR affiliate located at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma. It was among the most significant public service projects in both stations' history. The project was part of a national NPR–Poynter Election project, which was funded by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism. The *Seattle Times*, under Mike Fancher as executive editor, joined the project, in part because it was free to find an independent path. KUOW continued with a strong program of civically oriented programming.[17]

Beyond exceptionally strong public radio, Seattle has an unusually vibrant community, alternative, and micro-radio scene. Today, there are at least ten public and student radio outlets in the region, including colleges and high schools. KRAB, founded in 1962, was one of the first of a new crop of alternative community radio stations in the United States that began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s (the Pacifica radio network began after World War II), organized by radio pioneers Lorenzo Milam and Jeremy Lansman. The National Federation of Community Broadcasters, founded in 1975, grew from this effort. KRAB was a hotbed of alternative music and culture and laid the groundwork for Spanish-language KDNA, "La Voz del Campesino," which began in 1977 and evolved into community station KSER. KRAB's general manager Sharon Maeda went on to found "Reclaim the Media" and provide training in media for at-risk youth in South Seattle. And there are at least eight low-power and micro-radio stations in the Puget Sound region, some, like Central Seattle Grassroots Radio, with explicit social movement and democratic missions (Lawson n.d.).

Alternative and Community Press

Seattle is also served by a number of other alternative and niche print publications. The *Stranger* is Seattle's alternative newsweekly, founded in 1991, which combined satire with serious city and state news coverage (former publisher David Brewster now edits the *Crosscut*, a civic news comprehensive site). There are three weekly neighborhood publications owned by Robinson Newspapers: The *Ballard News-Tribune*, *West Seattle Herald*, and *Highline Times*, as well as alternative weeklies and monthlies covering many other Seattle neighborhoods. There are weeklies serving African American, Spanish, Asian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Japanese communities, the gay community, business, and the homeless, among others, a much richer and denser mix than we would expect from a metro area of Seattle's size.

Seattle's traditional media, then, have a stronger orientation toward civic life, public participation, and overall news quality than most other cities. Until recently it was a two-newspaper city, and the *Seattle Times*, the surviving paper, has both a history of public journalism and a continuing commitment to local reporting at all levels, as well

as an innovative orientation toward collaboration with neighborhood online media. The leading commercial television broadcaster, KING, had an explicitly civic orientation for decades, and although this has become attenuated under chain ownership, some legacy of local reporting remains. Public radio is a central local news source and also has a history of civic engagement, and a vibrant community radio scene continues to enliven grassroots media from the bottom up. Clearly there was a vibrant civic media ecology that preceded the growth of online media, but that also helped prepare the groundwork for the explosion of local, community-based online media in the 2000s.

The New Media Ecology

The new media ecology in Seattle is a work in progress, but it is already seen by national observers as a laboratory for the rest of the United States. It encompasses at least five identifiable layers. The first is the intersection of the new media ecology with the traditional media system, in particular the *Seattle Times'* new media efforts. The second is the layer that we are calling "city regional" new media, referring to reporting ventures that aggregate multiple neighborhoods, for example the *West Seattle Blog*, which covers an area of seventy thousand residents and functions effectively like a large online community newspaper. These regional media are particularly robust in Seattle and are among the first in the United States to have established deep roots and developed a plausibly sustainable economic model. The third layer consists of the neighborhood-level blogs, sometimes called micro- or hyper-local reporting. Some of these are quasi-commercial ventures, which are either owned by or affiliated with regional or traditional media, and of these some focus more on neighborhood issues, others on specific lifestyle issues or communities (music, food, arts). Others, as in those supported through the Community Technology Program's Seattle Communities Online, are noncommercial, written by citizens or city district coordinators or their staffers, and have a directly civic purpose. The fourth layer consists of city-wide online ventures. There are many of these, particularly in lifestyle areas, but we limit our discussion to those that are specifically civic or political. Finally, a fifth layer consists of several national online organizations (AOL, Yahoo, MSN) seeking to build a local media presence through aggregation, which may affect the longer-term development of Seattle's new media ecology.

The *Times* New Media

After a decades-long history of civic reporting, the *Seattle Times* is expanding to every layer of the new media ecology, becoming a central hub through both its own internal efforts and a series of agreements with regional bloggers, called the *Seattle Times* partner network, that began in 2010. Bob Payne, a thirteen-year *Times* veteran, is the director of communities and is responsible for the project. He says that the *Times*

had been looking for a way to cooperate for several years, recognizing that the region-als were doing important work. A grant from J-Lab, then a Knight-funded project headed by Jan Schaffer (former director of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism) was an impetus, giving a "little bit of money, enough to charter five partner sites," and hire a half-time person to coordinate the network. The five key partners were the *West Seattle Blog*, *Rainier Valley Post*, *Next Door Media* group, *Capitol Hill/Central District*, and *Local Health Online*. As of 2011, the five partners had grown to thirty-three, twenty-three neighborhood sites and ten topical sites, ranging from health to sailing to beer.

The inclusion of the partnerships is changing some of the *Times* workflow. Stories are flowing back and forth among the partners, often with a spot news story starting in the blogs, then being reported more systematically by the paper, whose report is then linked back to the blogs. Photos are also being shared freely, although Payne stresses that the paper is careful to make sure that permissions are given in order to ensure proper credit and payment.[18]

Probably the richest civic collaboration to date, reminiscent of civic journalism, is a joint series on the homeless, "Invisible Families."[19] The project began when a freelance photographer who worked with *BloggerFriend Aurora* (a *Times* partner) wanted assis-tance from the paper with a project on the homeless. That didn't work out, but it evolved into a partner-wide collaboration, with support from the Gates Foundation and Seattle University, including stories on African immigrants, refugees, fathers, and children, as well as possible solutions to some of the problems they faced. The final project involved three regional partners, local neighborhood blogs, and freelancers, and it continues to influence debate in the city. Payne stresses that "we're not trying to tell the blogs what to do; it's completely up to them. We're a partner, not the flagship of a network. They are completely autonomous." In 2010 the *Seattle Times* won the Associated Press Managing Editors "Innovator of the Year" award for its social media efforts as well as its partner-ships with neighborhood blogs in the Network Journalism Project.[20]

This networked approach is changing the *Times* itself. In early 2011, the *Times* underwent a complete reorganization to become a fully digitally integrated publica-tion, with two managing editors, one for content creation and the other for curation and distribution, reflecting a growing awareness that the primary task of news orga-nizations is to gather and add value to the best local reporting, rather than to be the sole owner and originator of content. Kathy Best, the managing editor for content creation, had been the managing editor for digital innovation since 2007. Best believes that community partnerships are necessary for survival as a community-oriented news organization: "As resources shrink, if we're going to continue serving the community on *any* platform, we can't do it by ourselves anymore. This was a need we couldn't meet and a recognition of reality. Hyper-local sites are springing up, some very good. Why not partner with them and let them provide us with content?"[21]

But Best believes that while partnering is the future, it has to be intentional: "There

is a fundamental threshold for partnering. We only partner with people who share our journalism values . . . we want to create a network of journalism that can be trusted in an environment where there's a lot of journalism and not all of it *can* be trusted."[22]

Beyond the *Times* partnership efforts, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* began online-only publication in March 2009, but has cut its staff from 165 to 20. It features neighborhood blogs in Seattle and collaborates with KOMO-TV in news sharing. But its reporting online lacks the depth of the *Times* and its partnerships are much weaker. It is allied with KOMO/Fischer Broadcasting, which connects it to the network of KOMO Communities blogs, but these are also small efforts without, to date, the depth of coverage of the *Times* partner network.

City and Regional Civic and Public Sites

Beyond the partnership hub centered on the *Times*, several news sites reach across Seattle and the Puget Sound region, with explicit civic and political aims. All three are a mix of the local comprehensive and civic types discussed above.

PubliCola: Seattle's News Elixir (named after the alias of the authors of the Federalist Papers) was formed in 2009 by Josh Feit, a news editor and state reporter for the alternative weekly *The Stranger*. Feit became the first online-only reporter to get state capitol news accreditation. He was joined by *Stranger* Seattle city hall reporter Erica Barnett, who had covered city politics since 1998. *PubliCola*, which mixes daily political reporting from city hall and the statehouse, has won wide praise and readership. The site sees itself as nonpartisan and balanced, albeit with an "urban green politics." It serves as an aggressive watchdog, similar to the function the *Stranger* previously played.[23]

Crosscut began in 2007 as both a daily guide to local and Northwest news and a forum for writers and citizens from many points of view to report and discuss local news. Originally a for-profit, in 2008 it became nonprofit entity with a civic board and a mission "to produce journalism in the public interest." Revenue comes from memberships, grants, and donations in a "public radio" model. It focuses on news analysis, rather than breaking news, by highlighting the "best local journalism" and commentary, whether from large news organizations or micro-bloggers, and it selects all links by hand. Crosscut also publishes its own journalism and commentary. Its primary editorial stand is "to encourage and strive for good journalism that is accurate, fair, civil, and transparent. Our political disposition is to encourage communities to create sustainable solutions to major issues." *Crosscut* compares itself to other mixed new journalism sites, including the *Voice of San Diego*, *MinnPost*, and *St. Louis Beacon*, discussed above.

Finally, *InvestigateWest* is focused broadly on the Pacific Northwest and West.[24] It's one example of a new type of nonprofit investigative organization supported primarily by foundations and memberships, as discussed by Friedland and Konieczna (2010).

City Regional Sites

The four major regional online news producers in the Seattle area have diverse approaches and organizations. At their best, they are independent news organizations, with a deep community connection.

The *West Seattle Blog* (*WSB*), which has garnered the most national attention, was started in 2005 by Tracy Record, a journalist with more than thirty years' experience in newspapers, television, radio, and online news, and her husband, Patrick Sand. Originally, they wrote anonymously about news around the neighborhood, in which they had lived since 1991. In 2006, a large windstorm hit the Puget Sound region, and the *WSB* gathered news, informal notes, and posts, becoming a critical hub for the entire neighborhood. By 2007, readership had built to the point where local businesses asked whether *WSB* would consider selling ads, and Record and Sand (who have a young son) decided to make a go of it. Record describes the *WSB* as developing organically; for example, when people started reporting lost pets on the site, the *WSB* posted a dedicated pets page. The *WSB* is a serious news organization (albeit of only two and a half people; their son also takes pictures and creates graphics); it was the first online news site in the region to get police credentials. Record says that she is "not looking for free labor," so they pay freelance writers and photographers.

Record says the "advertising business model is not dead." The question is whether new organizations can evolve and adapt. Creating large news infrastructures to aggregate, as in Patch (discussed below), is, she believes, an ineffective strategy. Further, the loss of news from the decline of traditional media is overstated: "[W]hen the *Post-Intelligencer* stopped printing, everyone was lamenting the loss of investigative journalism. The truth is, there wasn't a whole lot of that happening anyway. In some cases, a lot of civic issues are getting more coverage [now]" (Leadingham 2010, 10–11).

The *WSB* coverage of the "California Park Place" on March 6, 2009, by Record, a controversy over three design changes in a proposed park in the North Admiral neighborhood, lays bare the intersecting lines of regional coverage and the civic ecology. This is not a remarkable or exceptional story, but one that shows how the day-to-day cumulative coverage of civic and public life can have a small effect.

First, Record advances the story of a public meeting, letting citizens know twenty-four hours in advance what the three designs will be, and also notifying them that they *can* participate and showing them *how* to get involved. This technique goes back at least to the public journalism practice of the *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot* in the 1990s (Friedland 2003). It was developed by then managing editor Dennis Hartig and public life editor Tom Warhover. There's no evidence that Record is drawing from this earlier precedent. Rather, it shows an elective affinity between public journalism and certain practices of the newer media ecology.

The group that ordered the designs, Friends and Neighbors of North Admiral (FANNA), had obtained a $15,000 city matching grant from the Department of

Neighborhoods for the designs and public workshops. Record reports on the history of the planning process by FANNA, as well as efforts by opponents to block the change. She carefully reports on challenges to the facts presented by FANNA and publishes the opponents' document, which to that point had not appeared online. She carefully reconstructs the back-and-forth and asks readers to comment on whether she has missed anything, with a promise to follow up. She examines *each claim* carefully, with a response "What we found," not simply stating claims and counterclaims, but trying to adjudicate the facts themselves to give citizens a more firm foundation for decision making. Comments from readers/citizens both thank Record for her "superb point-by-point analysis" and for being a "diligent and fair source for neighborhood information" and ask her for further coverage, such as video from the upcoming meetings.[25]

Record is practicing an exemplary civic journalism (although she herself does not use this label) in the new media environment. Not only has the *WSB* covered the community closely but it has (1) aired conflict systematically, in a way designed to give voice fairly to all sides such that they could recognize themselves in her writing, (2) provided actionable civic information that would not otherwise be available and aggregated it in a nonpartisan manner, (3) presented the story in a way that does not downplay conflict but offers multiple parties access to the underlying facts in a way that makes civic solutions possible, and (4) opened up its pages as a voice for sometimes strident but nonvituperative civic and public dialogue. This particular case also shows how the new neighborhood media, when handled with the care, sensitivity, and thoroughness of a professional and careful reporter, can amplify other governmental civic efforts.

Finally, the *West Seattle Blog* demonstrates how this new regional neighborhood media serves as an essential bridge, gathering civic information from "below," but also channeling it upward and outward. The *WSB* is a core partner of the *Seattle Times*, and through the *Times*, the kind of in-depth coverage discussed above becomes available to other citizens, neighborhood leaders, and government decision makers (of course, they could read the *WSB*, but the *Times* curates content from across the partners to make them easily accessible).

Other major regionals include The *Rainier Valley Post*, run by Amber Campbell, covering the southeast region of Seattle. It blogs on neighborhood issues, but taken as a whole is a more typical micro-blogging site, with a strong emphasis on local community and lifestyle. *Next Door Media*, founded in 2008 by Kate and Corey Bergman, began with *My Ballard*, a blog about the neighborhood of Ballard, and has since expanded to eight additional neighborhoods covering the north central region of Seattle. *NDM* claims to be the "most-visited network of neighborhood newsblogs" in Seattle and has won two national online journalism awards. The Bergmans' tagline is that the sites are edited by trained journalists, but "powered by the neighborhood." *Capitol Hill Blog*/*Central District News* began when Justin Carder moved to the Capitol Hill

neighborhood in 2006, one he describes as the center of nightlife, gay culture, and the music scene. But as a resident, he found that many things "just weren't covered, so I began to focus more on its geography." Eventually, the *Capitol Hill Blog* attracted advertising, and he took on the *Central District News* to the south. Carder had worked at Microsoft in analytics but had a background in journalism, and the new venture was a natural merger of the two.[26]

An analysis of regional bloggers shows many stand-alone regional bloggers (including pioneers in 2005–2006 like *West Seattle Blog*, *My Ballard*, and *Capitol Hill*) are now being integrated into content and ad sales networks, suggesting that by 2011 a new media ecology had emerged. Regional networks are the most important "meso-layer" of this ecology (Friedland and McLeod 1999). They allow for (even demand) close contact with all the micro-bloggers in a region: civic blogs stimulated by the Community Technologies Project and Seattle Communities Online, small neighborhood independents, and commercial and lifestyle blogs. The daily bread and butter of the regionals is to report, gather, and aggregate micro-content, and then repurpose it in a variety of ways. This allows for a channel upward, primarily to the *Seattle Times*, but also through the KOMO-TV-driven network. Our discussion of the Seattle Communities Online Project (above) referenced some 150 independent voices (aggregating for Twitter and Facebook streams under the same editorial control).

This stream of small neighborhood voices at the micro-level helps bring the ecological framework into focus. Some micro-blogs "naturally" occur, that is, independently of higher-level stimuli (such as the Community Technology Office or ad-driven support networks), as individuals decide they want to speak out on some neighborhood issues, voice opinions, or simply write about lifestyle or personal issues. Many of these die quickly, within days or weeks, but some of these micro-blogs take hold with micro-level publics, networks that are large enough to extend beyond a relatively small, personal circle of friends but that do not capture the attention of a larger region or network. These become a source of energy for the regional blogs, which thrive on either aggregating the successful micro-blogs or on adding significant value to them through new reporting (e.g., West Seattle). This codependence is critical. Without the regionals, the micro-blogs would stay small and hyperlocal and would die out fairly quickly. Without the micro-locals, the regionals would be overextended and would find it more difficult to add new journalistic value, either to the meso-region, or to the larger macro-region.

This new media ecology is not, of course, necessarily civic. The analytical difference between community and civic media ecologies often becomes blurred. But community media ecologies help like-minded communities to thrive by networking them together, as the example of the regional–micro-blogging relationship makes clear. At this level, Seattle is an extraordinary, perhaps unique, example of how information flowing across the macro-meso-micro-layers of the communication ecology helps create new forms of information and new kinds of advertising support. This kind of

community ecology is a prerequisite for a civic communication ecology, but it is not in itself sufficient. The Community Technology Office and Seattle Communities Online have systematically tried to address equity and skills gaps in the community ecology, while also raising the *civic skills* of communication: deliberative discussion, problem solving, and decision making. The *West Seattle Blog*, driven by the journalistic orientation of its owners, has taken some of the routines and ethics of both traditional and civic journalism and applied them to the meso-regional level.

To what extent will the continual generation of micro-blogging take on (however partially) this civic dimension? Is it necessary for government-sponsored programs like the Community Technology Program and Seattle Communities Online to generate civic content that would not be spontaneously produced otherwise? And if so, is this even possible over the long run? The strength of the community ecologies is that micro-blogs do emerge organically from below, reflecting the specific interests and passions of their writers. It's unclear whether a top-down framework, however rooted in the neighborhood, could continue to generate the civic dimensions.

The Civic Communication Ecology of Seattle

Seattle has a robust civic communication ecology, one of the strongest in the nation. It generates a significant amount of autonomous communication by citizens at every layer of the city and, of equal importance, it allows communication from lower layers (neighborhoods and regions) to travel upward so they can affect the interactions of key actors and groups at higher levels. Individual citizens and small groups can express themselves with a reasonable chance of being picked up by neighborhood bloggers. Neighborhood bloggers can be picked up to shape the discussion on issues and policy in regions like West Seattle. Regional bloggers have a range of alliances with each other and with traditional media, most of all the *Seattle Times*, which has put together a working network of autonomous regional bloggers, initially with the assistance of the national journalism incubator J-Lab. Not least of all, the city has taken a long and proactive role in ensuring that the conditions exist in every neighborhood for citizens to have access to both communications technology and skills, including, through CTP-funded programs like the information stewards in Rainier Valley, skills of finding relevant, actionable, civic information.

Multiple layers of a rich civic communication ecology are present in Seattle. First, the citizenry itself is highly engaged. Some of this is predicted by the high levels of education and literacy that correlate strongly with traditional measures of civic engagement. But it is also driven by a long history of movement activism, including activists in the sphere of communication itself. Further, the city government has a unique commitment to the active development of civic communication capacities in its neighborhoods, particularly to those who are historically underserved. This commitment extends to both *technology* and *skills*, and skills training itself moves beyond

how to use technology generally to training in *civic skills* of community expression (Hargittai and Walejko 2008). This latter commitment is partly responsible for the lower levels of disparity in communication infrastructure among neighborhoods (although they still exist). While the city's commitments are markedly atypical in the United States, they offer a clear path for emulation for those cities that wish to increase civic communication and engagement. Indeed, while many recommendations for building civic communication focus largely on technology training and the nonprofit civic sector, Seattle shows that government investment is essential if the civic communication playing field is to be leveled. Further, there are a large number of important intermediary civic institutions, funded in part by government (neighborhood service centers, district councils, an engaged public university, public libraries) that stimulate ongoing civic engagement and boundary crossing.

Second, Seattle has a number of unusual characteristics that add to its civic communication capacity. It has a high base of technology use, driven by its high-tech economy, and widely accessible broadband, in both city-supported spaces (district and neighborhood centers) and commercial places, particularly coffee houses. While the economic aspects of Seattle's high-tech base may not be easily replicable, one key lesson is that widespread broadband access as a policy goal is integral to both economic development *and* to civic life in the twenty-first century and this, too, is a legitimate and attainable goal of government.

Third, there is a history of strong, competitive, community-oriented journalism across many of the traditional media, which has created a deep foundation of civic communication in the city. While the historical role of newspapers in communities is not subject to revision, the future of newspapers in some form will almost certainly play a critical role in fostering community-wide, civic problem solving. Public policy to support newspapers, in the interest of local democracy and not the special interests of newspaper owners, was discussed in Congress and at the Federal Trade Commission and Federal Communication Commission in 2009–2010 (2009 FTC Workshop, n.d.; Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities 2009; Waldman 2011). While a policy of public support for newspapers is almost certainly on hold through at least 2015, given divided government, the example of the *Seattle Times* and its partner networks points toward one possible avenue of reinvention for newspapers elsewhere, as hubs of civic networks, partners in content creation, and curators of the best and most important content locally.

Fourth, Seattle demonstrates the ongoing role of a base of journalists and "parajournalists," with the skills and incentives to gather and aggregate the news as entrepreneurs, citizens, and freelancers. While it is unclear what policies would stimulate this pool (as the debate over the role of the "creative class" in urban economic growth demonstrates) the examples of the *Gotham Gazette*, the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, and Seattle itself show how important this pool can be in feeding the middle and lower

layers of a civic media ecology. The examples of Deerfield, New Hampshire (and to some extent the *Twin Cities Daily Planet*) also show how associated citizens can play a similar role (Schaffer 2009).

Lessons for the (Very Near) Future

Civic communication in the twenty-first century is inevitably a networked affair (Friedland, Hove, and Rojas 2006). Despite lingering nostalgia about traditional media and the superiority of face-to-face communication for civic action, the new civic communication environment will inevitably combine large-scale news organizations, entrepreneurial efforts, existing civic networks, expanded online civic communication networks, and the individual efforts of citizens to express themselves about issues large and small. Seattle has shown how important government policy for democracy can be in creating an equitable civic communication infrastructure. To move forward, we need to answer (at least) two questions: What configurations of these elements are most likely to work, and what can policy do to support the growth of new civic ecologies?

Seattle is both an ideal case and a hard case: ideal because all these elements are present and offer a vision of how they might work together, hard because it seems to be too demanding. We might ask: Which of these elements are necessary for a new civic ecology to emerge and which are sufficient? Answering this question with greater certainty would demand a broad and comparative investigation of many cases of civic ecologies, centered on their successful outcomes in multiple dimensions: sustainability, reach across diverse neighborhoods and communities, and, most important, evidence of stimulating civic engagement (Kim et al. 2013). But Seattle offers some hypotheses.

First, a robust, healthy local newspaper, with a strong online presence that is central to its mission, is necessary. As we have seen, the newspaper remains the central connector and source of news in local communities. But that role is changing rapidly. The newspaper of the future, if it is going to play a role of civic catalyst, will be a hub of connection, rather than the single authoritative fount of knowledge. Rather than trying to cover all the news (and inevitably falling short), the online *civic* newspaper will recognize its shortcomings and reach out to others—regionals, micro-locals, and individual citizens—to include them as full partners. At this writing, the *Seattle Times* may play this role better than others in the United States.

Second, it is necessary that a civic communication network be equally accessible to everyone. As a minimal condition of civic communication, this means that the city is wired for all, that broadband access is not restricted by ability to pay, and that citizens have access to skills, training, and assistance (Hargattai and Walejko 2008). Here too, Seattle comes closer than many cities, in no small part because of systematic public policy put into place almost two decades ago. There are different paths to

accessible broadband, but if some parts of the community can access the new civic media ecology and others cannot (or can only do so at slower speeds), then the formal conditions for equality are not being met.

Third, a larger civic communication ecology must rest on the foundation of a (minimally) robust micro-ecology, among individuals, niches, groups, and neighborhoods, that generates information from below. This need not be "civic" in any formal sense. Just as Putnam's account of associational life posits that social capital can emerge from groups that have no formal civic or public intent, civic life in the networked environment rests on a foundation of networked communication among many different types of individuals and groups, most of which will *not* be formally civic. The knitting group, the mother's group, the beer "community," as well as loose informal networks of people communicating via Facebook, Twitter, FourSquare, or other social media about the best place to hang out, hear music, or find tacos all contribute to the minimal conditions of integration that are necessary for trust to emerge in any civic environment. This is the element most likely to emerge spontaneously from the way individuals are increasingly integrating their lives with and through new media.

Each of these conditions—community integrating, online professional journalism, equal access to the new media environment, and robust micro-ecological networks—are necessary for an emergent civic ecology. It is too early to know whether they are sufficient.

A more difficult question concerns the meso- or middle layers of the civic ecology: Are they necessary to connect the most local layers with larger governance issues, and are they supportable? This is likely to depend on scale. The case of the *West Seattle Blog* shows that in a larger city, there is a need for an intermediary journalism that both reports and aggregates. This contemporary case displays functions similar to those described in Janowitz's (1952) study of community newspapers. Without it, much of what goes on at the micro-level will not be shared with the broader community, since it will be lost in the daily online noise. We simply don't know yet what the tipping point of scale is. But it seems likely that any community in the range of 150,000 to 200,000 is likely to need this middle layer to function well, a hypothesis supported by the Madison Commons experiment, which has shown both a need for civic news in the "middle layer" and the capability of providing it under the right conditions (Robinson et al. 2011).

To this point, we have discussed aspects of the media ecology. But it is also reasonable to ask: Does a robust civic media ecology require a strong *civic* infrastructure? If it does, then perhaps we have not advanced much beyond Putnam's questions about social capital in new media guise. If a strong civic infrastructure *is* necessary for the civic communication ecology to function, then causality would only work in one direction; the media system would be a secondary effect of a robust civic life. Seattle's strong civic history certainly contributed to its robust civic communication ecology,

and, in this case, it's impossible to separate the two. One of the key premises of the public journalism movement was the idea that strong civic and public media *can* give rise to stronger civic and democratic engagement (Friedland and Nichols 2002; Nichols et al. 2006). Unfortunately, the Seattle case alone does not shed much light on this problem.

But we can imagine cases in which weak but minimally significant civic communication ecologies give rise to stronger trust, common visibility, and community problem solving, including some briefly noted above. The *Oakland Local* is driven by a small group led by Susan Mernit, a dedicated editor who through sheer effort of will has managed to connect many parts of a community divided by race and class. In a different vein, *Barrista* has helped tie together a community of northern New Jersey and become commercially viable.[27]

Beyond a strong civic infrastructure, Seattle clearly demonstrates the powerful effect that local collaborative governance can play in building civic communication and how that might be used to leverage *some* greater equality of unequally distributed skills and resources. Seattle is a work in progress, and the foundation on which that progress was built, neighborhood governance, the Neighborhood Matching and Community Technologies Programs, will almost certainly be cut back as the fiscal crisis of local government continues into the next decade. The larger question is whether such a governance structure might be implemented elsewhere. Others in this volume have addressed the question of new collaborative governance structures, and their plausible advancement in an era of fiscal retrenchment is beyond the scope of this chapter. But it does seem clear that public policy for civic communication is a step that *can* be taken, as part of the tool kit of both governments and funders in the field, and that formalizing the lessons of Seattle for other governments, and comparing Seattle to other cities in this regard, would be an important first step.

The major funder of civic communication has been the Knight Foundation, which has put several hundred million dollars into the field in the past decade (Friedland and Konieczna 2010). It has launched a major communities initiative, in partnership with local community foundations, which has been successful in raising millions of dollars for local civic communication. But there has been very little work in collaborative governance for civic communication among the funding community or the federal government. The federal government would be best positioned to invest in the kinds of experiments in collaborative governance for civic communication that we find in Seattle, in ways that would allow them to diffuse across a broader landscape, but this seems unlikely in the next decade. Seattle, for now, will serve as a model of what could be if collaborative governance, robust local digital journalism led by a forward-looking newspaper, and robust neighborhood journalism can combine in the same community, alongside citizens deeply engaged in producing all sorts of new media content related to their daily lives.

Notes

1. Lasswell (1948) named three functions of media: surveillance, correlation, and cultural transmission across generations. Surveillance creates a common information environment that can be scanned by citizens, elites, and organization.
2. *Gazette*: *www.gothamgazette.com*; *Twin Cities Daily Planet*: *www.tcdailyplanet.net*; *Commons: madisoncommons.org*.
3. Charles Ragin's method of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) offers a promising method for exploring the possibility space of civic communication ecologies (Ragin 2008). In brief, Ragin allows us to ask what are the necessary and sufficient conditions under which a civic media ecology would thrive across the range of variables identified in the Seattle case, a necessary first step in the direction of a formal comparison. For an early application see Kim et al. (2013).
4. A case study of Seattle for the New America Foundation, by Durkin, Glaiyser, and Hadge (2010), was developed in parallel with this one but was published earlier, which gave me the benefit of lead researcher Jessica Durkin's research and knowledge of the city. I gratefully acknowledge her assistance in identifying some key partnerships that I had not previously discovered. Also after this research was completed, former *Seattle Times* executive editor Mike Fancher published "Seattle: A New Media Case Study" (Fancher 2011), which was also an important resource.
5. *www.seattle.gov/dpd/Research/Population_Demographics/Seattle_at_a_Glance*.
6. Bill Schrier, phone interview, October 7, 2011; John Miller, "America's Most Literate Cities 2010," Connecticut Central University, *www.ccsu.edu/page.cfm?p=8140*.
7. Wired city: Forbes, 2009; Rank as high tech: Milken Institute, June 2009; US Census Bureau, Quick Facts: *quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5363000.html*.
8. Jim Diers, interview, January 7, 2010.
9. David Keyes, telephone interview, October 11, 2010.
10. For a complete list, description, and funding see *seattle.gov/tech/tmf/projects2010.htm*; Gregory Davis, board chair, Rainier Beach Community Empowerment Coalition, telephone interview, February 20, 2013.
11. Amy Hirotaka, telephone interview, October 5, 2010.
12. *www.seattle.gov/communitiesonline/neighborhoods.htm*.
13. For Puget Sound Off, see Keyes (2009) and *www.pugetsoundoff.org*.
14. Bill Schrier, telephone interview, October 7, 2010.
15. For Seattle city data, see *data.seattle.gov*; for Public Data Ferret, see *socialcapitalreview.org/public-data-ferret*.
16. Public journalism was a movement in the 19902 and early 2000s that attempted to change the fundamental routines of journalistic practice and reach out to citizens in more direct way, listening to and writing about their concerns. It included newspapers and commercial television as well as public media.
17. For a complete account see *www.cpn.org/topics/communication/frontporch.html*.
18. Bob Payne, telephone interview, January 26, 2011.
19. *seattletimes.nwsource.com/flatpages/local/invisiblefamilies.html*.
20. *www.apme.com/news/51325/The-Seattle-Times-Wins-APMEs-Innovator-of-the-Year-Award.htm*.

21. Kathy Best, telephone interview, February 4, 2011.
22. Kathy Best, telephone interview, February 4, 2011.
23. *publicola.com*.
24. *invw.org*.
25. *westseattleblog.com/2009/03/california-place-park-controversy-the-no-change-documents*.
26. Justin Carder, telephone interview, November 19, 2010.
27. *oaklandlocal.com*, *baristanet.com*.

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