

JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

"DEATH OF THE DAILY NEWS"

Breaking the news and the rules:
*How citizens must play a part in the
future of journalism*

By Chloe Forbes
August 2025

Editor's note: Following is the last of a three-part series based on the book "Death of the Daily News" by Andrew Conte and examines the issues incurred from the fallout of the loss or decline of local newspapers. These pieces afford an in-depth look at topics covered in the book in a way that's applicable to all communities. Read the [first](#) and [second](#) installments.

When World War I broke out, headlines announced it in large, bold letters strewn across the top of newspapers globally. By the time World War II arrived, though, it was radio that reached more people with the news of the day. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, families gathered around their TVs for the coverage. Today, as crises unfold—from Gaza to Ukraine to the U.S. border—breaking news doesn't just come from newsrooms. It streams live from smartphones in real time. The power to produce and distribute news has shifted from solely institutions to sharing the space with individuals.

But the idea that citizens have the power to produce and distribute content is not new. One of the first people to do it, arguably, was Thomas Paine, striking a match that ignited a revolutionary flame in Americans, advocating for independence from Great Britain in his pamphlet "Common Sense." As the digital age expands and more people have the ability to distribute content at their fingertips, it's a revolution of the journalism industry that must begin.

As written in the past installment of this series, the traditional newsroom model is not well-suited for the digital age. In Andrew Conte's "Death of the Daily News," which this series analyzes and expands upon, Conte addresses the news industry's struggle to recognize citizen journalists: amateur citizens who create and share information or news, whether unwittingly or not.

"Amateur news gatherers rarely call themselves journalists or even think of themselves in that way, but whether they realize it or not, individuals frequently generate original content about the news happening around them, and they make judgments, often with little thought, about what pieces of information to pass along to people around them," Conte writes.^[i] It's this cognizance that is now coming to light as more news industries consolidate and make cuts, leaving a gap filled by citizen journalists. From Facebook groups to community bulletin boards, blogs, newsletters, and TikTok channels, people are engaging in the work of journalism without even realizing it.

Entrepreneur and former journalist J.D. Lasica refers to this as "random acts of journalism."^[ii] While few citizen journalists produce work to the caliber of professional journalists, they can play a meaningful role in conjunction with traditional media.

What is citizen journalism?

Citizen journalism can be difficult to define because it can range from a one-off blog post that sparks conversation to citizens operating as professional journalists outside of an institutional structure. As institutional structures fade, this is becoming more common.

According to Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University's most recent local news analysis, the loss of local newspapers is continuing at an alarming rate, and industry jobs are following.^[iii] A furious pace of mergers and acquisitions has created an avenue for digital local news sites to grow as trust in local news remains steadfast.

From 2005 to 2024, there has been a loss of 3,200 newspapers — almost half of all newspapers in the nation, for context —and with it has come a 73% decline in newspaper jobs.^[iv] Those employees may now find themselves individually competing against their former employers for a slice of the market. Other citizen journalists are merely citizens who have taken on the role of journalists. For example, in 2009, the blog Night Jack won the first-ever Orwell Blogger Prize for citizen journalism as its author, Richard Horton, was a serving police officer who pseudonymously discussed his work and criticized government ministers and police officers.^[v] In this sense, citizens can access places that institutional

journalists cannot. As more individuals fill the gaps left by shrinking newsrooms, a larger question arises: are they prepared for the responsibility that comes with publishing?

Power without a playbook

With the power to publish comes a great deal of responsibility. The question of whether the average citizen can handle or even conceptualize that power is up for debate. In fact, the argument dates back to the 1920s. Walter Lippmann, in his 1922 book “Public Opinion,” argued that the public is too ill-informed and easily manipulated to participate in democratic decision-making. He said the key problem was that people distorted facts based on their emotional factors, ego needs, and stereotypes.^[vi] Arguably, professional journalists are just as immune to this by gatekeeping what goes into an article, which stories make the newspaper, and how those stories are arranged on a page to signal importance. Still, Lippmann believed experts were needed to provide a more valid picture of the environment than the average person could make sense of in their mind.

John Dewey, on the other hand, believed in public education as a bedrock for a functioning democracy and that all citizens should be equipped with the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate information. He emphasized the importance of open dialogue and believed journalism should facilitate it by providing accurate and accessible information and encouraging public participation in the democratic process. In his book “The Public and Its Problems,” published in 1927, Dewey acknowledged the shortcomings of democratic government and the ordinary citizen, but he rejected elitist solutions commonly offered in response. He believed the public must be involved because only then could it truly reflect the needs and interests of the public and create a genuinely democratic society.^[vii]

This is a point often mentioned in the citizen journalist conversation. In his 2004 book “We the Media,” Dan Gillmor examines the cultural shift toward citizen journalism in the years following Sept. 11, 2001. “The rise of the citizen journalist will help us listen,” he wrote. “The ability of anyone to make the news will give new voice to people who’ve felt voiceless—and whose words we need to hear. They are showing all of us—citizen, journalist, newsmaker—new ways of talking, of learning.”^[viii] He believes that citizen journalists fill gaps in news deserts, which are typically underrepresented areas, and provide a new platform for minorities who historically could not work from within the institutionalized journalism machine.

The tensions between power and responsibility, elitism and inclusivity have grown in the digital age. While citizen journalism can empower marginalized voices, it can leave the public vulnerable to misinformation when tools and ethics don’t keep pace with influence.

The misinformation dilemma

As noted, sometimes citizens are not even aware that their actions reflect those of a journalist. When McKeesport, Pennsylvania's Daily News shuttered — the basis of Conte's book "Death of the Daily News" — people faced challenges in separating newsworthy information from gossip and deliberate misinformation. They absorbed so many different pieces that they struggled to pull the accurate bits from the background noise. Traditionally, a journalist does that work for a reader, sifting through information and publishing the accurate and impactful points. "Members of the public typically lack any sort of professional training, and they must instead develop their own methods for sorting information and making sense of their local community," Conte writes. "They do this instinctively, assuming information-gathering roles without considering that they are seeking to complete the tasks that professional journalists once performed. Even if they do this work poorly or incompletely, citizens fall into the task naturally as they attempt to figure out what happens in their community so they can make decisions that affect their quality of life."^[ix]

That task is made even more difficult for citizens as social media algorithms are optimized for engagement as opposed to prioritizing accuracy. At a recent conference about ethical artificial intelligence, Maria Ressa, a 2021 Nobel Peace Prize recipient and leading voice on the societal implications of AI on free speech, said that disinformation isn't just an unfortunate byproduct of engagement-driven algorithms, it's the business model. She said that the personalization, intended to enhance user experience, shatters any sense of shared reality and limits each individual to an echo chamber of their own thoughts.^[x] It creates an existential crisis for journalism in which facts struggle to compete with viral falsehoods. A study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab found in 2018 that lies actually spread six times faster than the truth. They also found that the amount of false news spikes during key events like presidential elections.^[xi]

Another example would be in 2013, when the Boston Marathon bombing. Dan Lampariello, a journalism student at Suffolk University and local TV reporter at the time, saw smoke pouring over Copley Square in Boston and immediately took his phone out and took photos. It wasn't until after he and other spectators took shelter that he realized he had captured the second bomb detonating, mid-explosion. It was then that he posted the photos to Twitter. It was one of 27.8 million tweets sent about the bombings that week — solidifying the status of Twitter (now X) as a public square for conversation. The tag "Boston Strong" was circulated throughout social media platforms to show support for the victims, survivors and first responders.^[xii] In those posts was also a wave of misinformation as people misidentified one of the suspected bombers. One

researcher of these social media posts, Kate Starbird, said that she looked closely at “crowd correcting,” the idea that a crowd will correct any bad information. Starbird said the research didn’t entirely disprove that theory, but it showed the correcting system on social media is flawed. While people do crowd correct, it happens at such a low volume that the misinformation spreads further than the correction, and while the crowd may correct one post, there may be many more posted as a result that go unchecked.^[xiii]

It’s a vivid example of Lippmann’s theory that people are incompetent to be trusted as part of the democratic process. However, there’s no longer a way to silence those voices with elite institutions. In the digital age, everybody has a voice. While some voices may bring clarity, many others sow confusion. What’s left now is figuring out how institutional and citizen journalists work together to create an accurate and sustainable news ecosystem. One scholar, Dr. Peter Coe, argues that the way we define “journalists” must change. Instead of the title being based on the education, training, or employment of an individual, it should be based on the social responsibility theory. In other words, it’s an individual working through an obligation to society, employers, and the market. He argues that a functional rather than an institutional approach to defining media determines who should benefit from the enhanced right to media freedom, as expressed in law.^[xiv] As our definition of a “journalist” evolves, so too must our systems for training, validating, and supporting those who step into the role, whether by choice or necessity. That evolution doesn’t mean citizen journalists must replicate legacy journalism, but they do need tools, guidance, and ethical grounding key to the industry to succeed.

Equipping citizens

Traditional newsrooms are increasingly stretched thin, often covering everything a mile wide and an inch deep. But when citizen journalists are equipped with the tools to report responsibly, professional journalists can collaborate with them to verify, expand, and amplify credible stories. Together, they can build a journalism ecosystem that is more sustainable, more localized, and more responsive to the public interest.

That collaboration must begin with a recognition: citizens are no longer passive consumers of information. As Conte writes in his book, citizens must take it upon themselves to verify facts, source information carefully, and resist the spread of misinformation. Yet those skills are not currently built into the public education curriculum. That’s why initiatives such as Point Park University’s Center for Media Innovation’s Citizen Reporting Academy, led by Conte, are essential. The academy is a fully online certificate program to help individuals become citizen reporters and take control of their community’s local stories. Industry

professionals teach classes on conducting interviews, creating stories, marketing work, taking photographs, and even turning a profit from the work.^[xv]

“Citizens have to not only support local journalists but also take up the responsibility of asking meaningful questions about their community, digging for answers, and letting others know the objective truth,” Conte writes in his book.^[xvi] While not everyone needs intensive training, everyone would benefit from a basic understanding of how journalists investigate, verify, and frame stories. An education about those skills could reinforce ethical standards of accountability, transparency, and accuracy.

Still, education alone is not enough. Institutions — from universities to newsrooms and local organizations — must meet the moment, too. Instead of treating citizen journalists as threats, professional journalists should see them as partners. They can mentor, fact-check, and add depth to community reporting. Community-based organizations can convene that work by hosting forums, building infrastructure, and funding grassroots journalism. We must build systems that educate, support, and elevate responsible citizen voices without losing the rigorous standards that define journalism at its best. What’s at stake is not the future of the media, it’s the health of democracy. As many voices compete for attention, journalism must move beyond the walls of the newsroom. The next chapter will not be written by institutions alone; it will be co-authored by citizens who choose to care, question, and tell the truth.

References

- ^[i] Conte, Andrew. *Death of the Daily News*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 20 Sept. 2022.
- ^[ii] Ibid
- ^[iii] Metzger, Zach. The State of Local News: The 2024 Report. Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, Oct. 23, 2024, <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2024/report>.
- ^[iv] Ibid
- ^[v] The Orwell Foundation. “Night Jack.” *The Orwell Foundation*, 2009, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/blogger/jack-night/>. Accessed Aug. 6, 2025.
- ^[vi] Lippmann, Walter. “Public Opinion.” 1922. Transaction Publishers, 1998. Accessed using Monoskop.org on Aug. 5, 2025.
- ^[vii] Dewey, John. “The Public and its Problems.” Originally published by Alan Swallow, 1927. Accessed by reprint via The Project Gutenberg, 2023, on Aug. 5, 2025.
- ^[viii] Gillmor, Dan. *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, For the People*. O’Reilly, 2004. Accessed via Authorama at <https://www.authorama.com/we-the-media-1.html> on Aug. 6, 2025.
- ^[ix] Conte, Andrew. *Death of the Daily News*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 20 Sept. 2022.
- ^[x] Jones, **Hessie**. “When the Truth No Longer Matters: How Social Media’s Engagement Obsession Is Killing Democracy.” *Forbes*, 13 Feb. 2025, www.forbes.com/sites/hessiejones/2025/02/13/when-the-truth-no-longer-matters-how-social-medias-engagement-obsession-is-killing-democracy/. Accessed Aug. 7, 2025.
- ^[xi] Study: False News Spreads Faster Than the Truth. MIT Sloan Ideas Made to Matter, 8 Mar. 2018, mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/study-false-news-spreads-faster-truth. Accessed Aug. 7, 2025.
- ^[xii] Olson, Emily. “How the Boston Marathon Bombings Changed Twitter, Media and How We Process Tragedy.” *NPR*, 15 Apr. 2023,

www.npr.org/2023/04/15/1170082886/marathon-bombings-twitter-media-boston-strong. Accessed Aug. 7, 2025.

[xiii] Henderson, Jamala. "Twitter Lessons From the Boston Marathon Bombings." *KUOW*, 15 Apr. 2014, kuow.org/stories/twitter-lessons-boston-marathon-bombings/. Accessed 7 Aug. 2025.

[xiv] Peter, Coe. "Media Freedom in the Age of Citizen Journalism." *Birmingham Law School Research and Scholarship Blog*. University of Birmingham, Dec. 22, 2022,

<https://blog.bham.ac.uk/lawresearch/2022/12/media-freedom-in-the-age-of-citizen-journalism/>.

Accessed Aug. 6, 2025.

[xv] Point Park University. *Citizen Reporting Academy*. School of Continuing and Professional Studies, Point Park University,

<https://www.pointpark.edu/academics/schools/continuingandprofessionalstudies/citizenreporting/index>.

Accessed Aug. 6, 2025.

[xvi] Conte, Andrew. *Death of the Daily News*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 20 Sept. 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Chloe Forbes is an award-winning local journalist with a bachelor's degree in journalism communications who has written for numerous newspapers and magazines in Pennsylvania, New York and Ohio. She is currently a news editor and reporter at The Meadville Tribune, a contributing writer for the Erie Reader, and a copy editor at the Jefferson Educational Society.

Subscribe to JES Publications
Mailing List!

Support JES | Donate

In Case You Missed It

[Book Notes #207 | American "Pop:" Notes on American Popular Music, Part Two](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Andrew Roth**

[Death of the Daily Newspaper | Read between the lines: How local journalism addresses loneliness and polarization](#) written by **Chloe Forbes**

[Men in Crisis | Can Manufacturing Revive Men's Search for Meaning?](#) written by **Jeff Bloodworth**

[On the Waterfront | Bay-Rat Google: The 1950s Encyclopedia](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. David Frew**

[‘I’ve Seen This Before’ | Civil society – the lifeblood of democracy or just an illusion?](#) written by **Lena Surzhko-Harned**

[The Wider World | Trust, but Verify](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Diane Chido**

[Truth in Love | Rosa Parks: Resolute Leader America Needed](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris Baker**

