

RESEARCH · CITIZENSHIP AND VOICE

# The Voice: Where the Press

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## ***TL;DR***

The press did not die. It moved. The new press is X, Substack, podcasts, YouTube, TikTok, Discord servers, group chats. It is also short form, almost entirely, because its readers do not have an hour to give it. Short form is not a degraded version of long form. Short form is the press of people reading at the kitchen table.

Three things were taken from ordinary citizens. *The Time Problem* explained how time was taken. *The Last Ground* explained how ground was taken. *The Voice* is the third panel: how the institutions where strangers became neighbors were taken, and what the new press is rebuilding in their place.

AI is returning time. Local production is returning ground. The new press is returning voice. All three preconditions for citizenship are being restored simultaneously, by tools that arrived in the hands of ordinary citizens before the institutions could capture them. The work is to recognize the new press as the actual press, and to do the integration.

# I. The Press That You Are Not Reading

The press did not die. It moved.

The old press is gone. A small number of national outlets, a national wire service, a thick bench of local papers, all aligned with the institutions of American power. Consolidation killed it. Advertising migration killed it. The trust of the public it claimed to serve drained out before the building was sold.

The new press is X. Substack. Podcasts. YouTube. TikTok. Discord servers, Telegram channels, group chats, the long reply chains in places no one in 1985 thought of as press at all.

It is also short form, almost entirely. A 280 character post is not an article. A two minute video is not a documentary. By the standards the legacy press uses to evaluate "real" journalism, almost nothing in the new press qualifies. That is the misunderstanding the rest of this essay is about.

Short form is not a degraded version of long form. Short form is what the press has to look like when its readers do not have an hour to give it, when their public spaces have closed, and when their communities have dispersed. Short form is the press of people reading at the bus stop, at the break room counter, in the coffee shop between meetings, on the stoop while the kids are still asleep, at the kitchen table while one kid screams and the other will not eat.

The kitchen table is shorthand for everywhere ordinary people actually decide what they believe. The deepest humanity in any society lives at those tables. The legacy press never sat at any of them. The new press does. That is the difference, and the difference is the whole argument.

## II. Why the Press Got Short

Three things were taken from people. The new press is what they built with what was left.

What was taken first was time. Aristotle named time as the precondition for citizenship 2,500 years ago. Without unencumbered hours, no deliberation. Without deliberation, no self government. The industrial revolution promised to give the time back through automation. It did not. Productivity gains accrued to capital. Americans in 2024 work roughly the same total hours as Americans in 1974, despite per worker productivity having substantially increased over the same period (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). I argued the full version of this case in *The Time Problem*.

What was taken second was ground. Public spaces closed or were privatized. Town squares became parking lots. The local main street with the corner store, the diner, and the barbershop became a strip of chain stores. Cities that had been public, walkable, and full of accidental encounter became expensive and segmented by income (Davis, 2006; Harvey, 2012). I argued the full version of this case in *The Last Ground*.

What was taken third was the institutions where strangers became neighbors. Robert Putnam documented the collapse in *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000). The mainline churches, the unions, the fraternal orders, the bowling leagues, the local papers' letters pages, all hollowed out before the people who depended on them noticed. By 2010, the average American had less time than ever, fewer public spaces, and fewer institutions to belong to. Then the smartphone arrived.

Humans never stop doing the things they have been doing. They migrate. The work of citizenship moved to the small windows of time and the small screens of attention that were left.

This is not decline. This is water routing around a stone.

### III. The Pamphleteers Already Did This

The dismissal of short form as "silly" is the legacy press's last line of defense. It is also a misreading of American literary and political history.

The most consequential American writing of the eighteenth century was a pamphlet. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* sold an estimated five hundred thousand copies in 1776 in a colonial population of two and a half million, the per capita equivalent of a contemporary book selling sixty million copies in the modern United States. *Common*

*Sense* is forty seven pages. It is short form. It made the American Revolution rhetorically possible. The literary establishment of the day, such as it existed, did not write *Common Sense*. A failed corset maker turned printer's apprentice did.

The most American writer of the nineteenth century built his career the same way. Samuel Clemens started as a printer's apprentice at twelve in Hannibal, Missouri. He set type for his older brother's newspaper, worked through riverboat piloting, and filed humorist sketches for territorial newspapers in Nevada and California. He published as Mark Twain for fifteen years before his first novel. By the time he wrote *Tom Sawyer* in 1876 and *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, his voice had been formed by a decade and a half of newspaper sketches, humorist pieces, and travelogue dispatches paid by the column inch. The respectable literary establishment looked down on humorists, on newspaper writers, on regional vernacular speech. Twain ignored them and built a body of work that has outlasted every "respectable" writer of his generation (Blair, 1962, in the Riverside Editions at Houghton Mifflin Company).

Frederick Douglass made the same move with the same form for higher stakes. Born into slavery, Douglass taught himself to read from scraps of newspaper. He escaped to the north and founded *The North Star* in 1847, a four page weekly newspaper with the masthead motto "Right is of no Sex, Truth is of no Color." For the next sixteen years he published short editorials, news dispatches, and reader letters that argued the abolitionist case to a reading public the legacy press would not address. The legacy newspapers of his day either ignored him or attacked him. *The North Star* outlasted most of them.

Ida B. Wells made the same move at the end of the century. A Memphis schoolteacher and former enslaved person, Wells began publishing investigative pamphlets on the lynching of Black Americans in 1892. *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record* compiled statistics, eyewitness testimony, and primary documents on extrajudicial killings the legacy press refused to cover honestly. Wells was driven out of Memphis by a mob that destroyed her newspaper office. She kept publishing from Chicago. The pamphlets are still in print. The Memphis newspapers that drove her out are gone.

The pattern is consistent across two hundred fifty years. Each new short form is dismissed as silly, scandalous, or beneath serious notice. Each new short form turns out to be where the next century's voice was being trained. The penny press of the 1830s.

The pulp magazines of the 1920s. Television. Talk radio. Blogs. The dismissal is wrong every time, for the same reason every time.

A TikTok dance trend looks silly to a *New York Times* editor in 2026 for the same reason a riverboat humor sketch looked silly to an *Atlantic Monthly* editor in 1865 and an abolitionist pamphlet looked seditious to a Boston broadsheet editor in 1850. The judgment is wrong for the same reason. Membership in a community requires shared recognition. Recognition requires a shared something, a hymn, a union song, a haircut, a dance, a printed slogan, a forwarded clip. The function is identical (Boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011).

What looks like the death of seriousness to outsiders is the construction of community by insiders. Paine knew this. Twain knew this. Douglass knew this. Wells knew this. Their respectable contemporaries did not. The respectable contemporaries are mostly forgotten. The pamphleteers are still in the canon.

## IV. Why Civil Society Wins

The most useful thinkers on what comes next are the ones who understood that political change does not start in the legislature.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political theorist imprisoned by Mussolini in 1926, distinguished between two struggles. The *war of maneuver* is the direct contest for state power: the election, the protest, the policy fight. The *war of position* is the slower work of building shared understanding in civil society over decades, through schools, presses, civic institutions, study groups, and neighborhood networks. Gramsci's claim was that the war of position is the precondition for everything else (Gramsci, 1971).

He was not the only thinker to see this, and he was not even the first. Alexis de Tocqueville, traveling in America in the 1830s, argued that American democracy depended not on its federal structure but on the dense network of voluntary associations through which Americans actually conducted their public lives. Without that civil society infrastructure, Tocqueville wrote, formal democracy would hollow into something brittle and managed (Tocqueville, 1835). Edmund Burke, writing decades earlier from a conservative tradition, made a structurally compatible argument: that the

"little platoons" of family, parish, guild, and neighborhood are the foundation of any free society, and that political legitimacy flows up from those associations rather than down from the state (Burke, 1790).

These are three thinkers from three different political traditions, in three different centuries, making the same observation. Whoever controls the production of common sense in civil society controls the conditions under which formal politics can happen. A society that has not done the long work of building shared understanding through its civil institutions cannot resolve its political contests democratically, because the ground of those contests is itself controlled by whoever controls the press, the schools, the churches, the associations.

For most of the late twentieth century, the production of common sense in the United States was controlled by a small number of legacy institutions: the major newspapers, the network broadcasters, the elite universities, the foundations, the publishing houses. The framings these institutions provided were the framings most Americans used to understand their own country.

What is happening now is that this production has been forcibly redistributed. The legacy institutions still exist. They no longer have a monopoly. The point is not that the new framings are uniformly better. The point is that there is now an actual contest, where for fifty years there was a soft consensus.

This is the war of position reopening, after a century in which it was effectively closed.

## V. The Quiet American Censorship

The dominant image of American censorship has been the wrong one.

George Orwell, writing in 1948, imagined visible coercion: the boot on the face, the Ministry of Truth, the explicit prohibition of inconvenient facts. The image was vivid. It was also, for the United States, the wrong image. American censorship has almost never operated through visible state coercion. It has operated through institutional capture: a small number of gatekeepers in publishing, broadcast, and academic institutions deciding which stories deserved coverage and which did not.

This mechanism is softer than Orwell's boot. It is also more effective. A society where inconvenient facts are simply not covered, because no respectable outlet thought them worth covering, is a society where those facts effectively do not exist for most citizens.

The pattern is not contested by serious historians of American media. It is documented in three settled cases.

The first is the postwar program through which agencies of the United States government cultivated relationships with editors, reporters, and publishers across the major American newspapers, magazines, and broadcast networks. A 1976 Senate select committee publicly confirmed that government agencies had operational relationships with hundreds of American journalists during the Cold War, and that those relationships shaped what Americans were and were not told about their own government's activities (United States Senate, 1976). It is not a conspiracy theory. It is a declassified Senate finding.

The second is the consolidation enabled by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Before the Act, federal rules limited how many radio stations, television stations, and newspapers any single corporation could own. After the Act, those limits were substantially relaxed. Within ten years, the number of corporations owning the majority of American media had collapsed from approximately fifty to approximately six (Bagdikian, 2004). The narrowing of viewpoints, the decline of local newsrooms, and the standardization of editorial sensibility across previously independent outlets followed directly from this concentration.

The third is the *New York Times*' coverage of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq from 2002 through 2003. The paper's reporting, particularly by Judith Miller, repeatedly cited anonymous government sources to support the existence of Iraqi WMD programs that did not in fact exist. The reporting helped create domestic political support for a war that subsequent investigation determined was launched on false pretenses. The *Times* published an editorial in 2004 publicly acknowledging the failure of its own coverage (*The New York Times*, 2004). These three cases span three different mechanisms: covert state collaboration, regulatory consolidation, and editorial credulity toward anonymous government sources. They span sixty years of American history. They are documented in declassified government records, peer reviewed scholarship, and the legacy press's own published apologies. A serious reader of any political tradition can review them.

The platform shifts of the early 2020s opened a visibly wider range of speech and introduced new mechanisms for transparent fact checking, including community based note systems since adopted in modified form by Meta, YouTube, and TikTok (Wojcik et al., 2022). The shift is best understood as the substitution of one moderation regime for another, with the new regime operating on more transparent and more contested terms.

Whether this shift becomes durable depends entirely on whether the people who have benefited from it organize themselves into something that survives the next swing of the pendulum.

## VI. The Ladder Has No Value in Itself

A ladder has no value in itself. It has value only insofar as it allows you to reach something otherwise out of reach.

Every tool in the new press is a ladder. Substack is a ladder. X is a ladder. Discord is a ladder. The podcast feed is a ladder. The TikTok account is a ladder. AI is a ladder. None matter in isolation. They matter because of what they let citizens reach.

What citizens are trying to reach, when they post and stream and record and write, is each other.

This is the simplest and most consistently missed observation about the new press. It is not a content business. It is a connection business. A subscription to a Substack is not a transaction for words. It is a small civic act, the modern equivalent of putting a coin in a tin cup at a pamphleteer's table. A reply on X is not a contribution to discourse in the abstract. It is one citizen recognizing another. A Discord membership is not an entertainment subscription. It is a kitchen table set for a hundred people who would otherwise eat alone.

The legacy press misread the situation because it kept evaluating the new press as a content business and finding it wanting. It is not a content business. The content is the ladder. The reaching is the point.

This reframing also clarifies why so much new press work that looks unprofitable per piece is actually working economically. A Twain newspaper sketch did not make a publisher rich on its own. A century of Twain sketches built an audience that paid for lecture tickets, books, magazine subscriptions, and merchandise. Paine's *Common Sense* was sold as a single short pamphlet. The political audience it built funded a revolution. The economics worked across the whole career, not in any single piece. The same is true now. The Substack post that loses money on its own pays for itself across a year of paid subscribers, a podcast deal, a book advance, a paid speaking engagement, a consultancy.

Commercial value compounds across the whole climb, not at any single rung.

For a voice to survive into the next century, it must have commercial value. This is not a betrayal of seriousness. It is the precondition for seriousness lasting. The ladder is the platform. The reaching is the citizen. The reaching is the whole thing.

## VII. What an Organized New Press Would Look Like

The new press has all three layers a healthy press needs. They exist in different forms than they did in 1985, and they are not yet talking to each other.

**Layer one: long form analysis.** Substack, independent websites, long X threads, book length podcasts, the academic blog ecosystem. The function is to set the terms of debate. Layer one writers operate mostly without coordination. Some have larger audiences than the legacy magazines did at their peaks. Most are invisible to each other.

**Layer two: short form commentary, reporting, and connection.** X, TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, podcast clips, the comments and quote replies around any major story. Layer two does three things at once. It is present in the news cycle. It surfaces stories legacy outlets miss. And it does the community work the legacy press never did. Layer two is where the actual conversation happens. It is the stoop, the union hall, the parish, the kitchen table, the break room. The legacy press's failure to recognize this is its central failure.

**Layer three: schools of popular education.** Discord servers where serious readers discuss books together. Spaces on X where audiences listen to live conversations among researchers. Podcast networks that function as graduate level seminars on specific

topics. Reply chains where people learn to think by watching others argue. The function is to develop organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971), people from outside the credentialing system who develop genuine expertise through engagement rather than instruction. Layer three is being built right now, mostly by people who do not realize what they are building is a school.

The organization problem is not that the layers do not exist. The layers exist. The problem is that they do not yet recognize each other as parts of the same project.

A serious Substack writer in layer one is rarely connected to the X poster doing layer two commentary on the same questions, who is rarely connected to the Discord server in layer three where the audience for both is having the actual deep conversations. The integration that an old style press provided through institutional structure now has to be provided through deliberate coordination, and that coordination is mostly not happening.

This is the work. It is not glamorous. It does not require a charismatic leader, a foundation grant, or permission from any existing institution. It requires people who recognize what is happening to start linking the pieces.

## VIII. What Is Actually New

Three things are genuinely new in the last twenty years, and all three sharpen the case for organizing what already exists.

**The cost of publishing has collapsed.** Starting a serious publication in 1985 required a printing press, a distribution network, a fulfillment operation, and several million dollars. In 2026, it requires a Substack account, an X account, a podcast feed, and a credit card with twenty dollars on it.

**The audience for serious analysis has grown.** The dominant narrative is that "no one reads anymore." The data is the opposite. Long form readership has grown substantially in the last decade. The most successful Substacks have larger paid subscriber bases than legacy magazines did at their peaks. Podcast listenership is at all time highs.

**AI has compressed cognitive labor.** Writing a literature review used to take a researcher a week. It now takes an afternoon. Synthesizing twenty academic papers used to require a graduate student. It now requires a prompt. Drafting, editing, fact checking, translating, these were the time consuming tasks of intellectual production. They have been compressed by an order of magnitude.

The combination is significant. AI is returning time. Local production is returning ground. The new press is returning voice. All three preconditions for citizenship are being restored simultaneously, by tools that arrived in the hands of ordinary citizens before the institutions could capture them.

This is the trilogy. *Time, ground, voice*. Each was taken in a different wave. Each is now being returned. Whether the return becomes permanent depends on what citizens do with the tools.

## IX. The South Coast Example

I live on the South Coast, the coastline where Massachusetts meets Rhode Island. Westport, Dartmouth, Fall River on the Massachusetts side. Tiverton, Little Compton, parts of Newport County on the Rhode Island side. The region is one place divided by a state line drawn by King George II in 1746. The people here share a coastline, a fishing economy, a Portuguese American cultural inheritance, a whaling history, and centuries of intermarriage.

The region has been written about with seriousness before. Bill Reynolds, a sportswriter who spent a year following the Durfee High School basketball team in 1991, produced *Fall River Dreams*, a book that used basketball as a window into the soul of a working class mill city in decline (Reynolds, 1994). It was a regional book that became a national one. It proved the South Coast could be taken seriously as a place worth understanding. The work has not been picked up since. Most of what gets written about the region now is real estate copy and tourism listicles.

The region's legacy press has collapsed. The local papers have been gutted. The radio stations are syndicated. The regional television markets are split between Providence and Boston, neither of which covers the South Coast as a coherent place.

The region's new press exists in fragments. South Coast accounts on X. Local Substack writers. Podcasters interviewing fishermen, farmers, and conservationists. Discord servers and Facebook groups where neighbors discuss what is happening in their towns. TikTok accounts run by farm stands and bakeries that do real community building in forms the local paper never had. The fragments do not yet recognize themselves as a regional press, because the people doing the work are operating in their own niches without coordinating.

The work is recognition first, then coordination. A South Coast press already exists in distributed form. What it lacks is integration: a shared editorial calendar, a shared writers' bench, a development pipeline that moves a community college student from a reading group to a podcast guest spot to a published essay to a paid contributor position over five years.

The same is true of every American region. The Driftless area in the upper Midwest. The Border country between New Mexico and Texas. Cascadia. Appalachia. The Black Belt. The Inland Empire. Central Florida. Each has the fragments of a regional press already operating in distributed form. None has done the integration work yet.

The national press will not be rebuilt by reforming the legacy outlets. The legacy outlets have aged out of relevance. The national press will be rebuilt as a federation of regional presses that figure out how to coordinate. The fragments are already there. The integration is the project.

## X. The Inheritance Is Open

To be a citizen, you need three things. Time of your own. Ground of your own. A voice that other citizens can hear.

A voice without a press is a voice that does not travel. A voice that does not travel cannot find its allies. Citizens who cannot find each other cannot organize. People who cannot organize cannot defend the time and the ground that make citizenship possible.

The press is the war of position. Not the only piece, but the connective tissue that makes the other pieces visible to each other. The community garden that wins its fight with the developer is a victory. The X thread that documents how it won is what makes the next

ten community gardens possible. Each victory without a press is a one time event. Each victory with a press is a precedent.

The American press was founded by a Boston printer's apprentice with no formal credentials. Benjamin Franklin set type at twelve, ran his own press at twenty two, published the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Poor Richard's Almanack*, and shaped the political imagination of a colony that became a country. He understood at twenty two what most American writers still have not understood at fifty: the printer's apron is the citizen's tool. Publication is the act that turns private observation into public argument. A republic without a working press is a republic in name only. The work has to pay its own way to last.

The thread from Franklin's print shop to a TikTok account run by a Westport farmer is continuous. The technology has changed. The work has not. The ladder is different. The reaching is the same. The inheritance is not anyone's property. It is open to anyone willing to pick up the tool.

The Long **Family Archive** documents that Peter Folger of Nantucket, my eighth great grandfather through the Coffin and Folger lines, was the maternal grandfather of Benjamin Franklin. The line is verifiable through the Nantucket genealogical record. The personal note is small. The argument does not depend on it. The inheritance, as I have said, is not anyone's property.

## XI. The Work Is the Work

The most important civic act of the next decade may also be the most mundane.

Write the next essay. Record the next podcast. Run the next reading group. Mentor the next analyst. Coordinate with three other publications. Recognize that the new press is the actual press, that you are part of it, and that the integration is the work.

Time was taken. Ground was taken. The places where strangers became neighbors were taken. The press that existed when all three were available has died with them. The press that exists now has been forced into short form by the constraints that remain.

Long form returns when time returns. Public assembly returns when ground returns. Community returns when ordinary people produce it again, in person and online, on stoops and in Discord servers, in town halls and in TikTok comment sections, at the kitchen tables and break rooms and coffee shops where Americans actually decide what they believe.

Thomas Paine spent forty seven pages building the rhetorical case for an independent nation, from a pamphlet shop with no formal credentials. Benjamin Franklin spent fifty years building an American press out of a printer's apprenticeship that started before he was old enough to vote. Mark Twain spent forty years building an American voice out of newspaper sketches that ordinary people paid to read. Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells built abolitionist and anti lynching journalism out of pamphlets and four page weeklies the legacy press refused to address. Antonio Gramsci spent eleven years in a prison cell building a theory of how civil society actually changes. None waited for permission. None waited for the legacy institutions of their day to recognize the work. They wrote, they printed, they organized. They built ladders. The institutions caught up later, or they did not.

The empire is preoccupied elsewhere. The contest over what Americans accept as common sense is happening anyway. It will be won or lost in the next twenty years by the people who notice the work, name the work, and do the work.

The press did not die. The press was reborn in a form most people did not yet recognize. The tools to organize it are already in your hand.

The ladder is in front of you.

What you reach is up to you.

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The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with [The Periscope](#) as the catalyst essay, [The Map](#) as the compressed survey, [The Absent Presence](#) as the meta-frame, and [Acting in the Cracks](#) as the applied note. The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

Reader correspondence is welcomed; see [On Correspondence](#).