Civic Media in the Second Gilded Age

Darryl Holliday

Platform monopolies have concentrated wealth and power over civic discourse at levels not seen since the first Gilded Age – and the public media system built to counter that concentration has never been adequately funded or broadly enough defined. But a new generation of civic media practitioners, relational technologists, and information stewards isn't waiting for that system to be rescued. It's building locally governed, human-scaled infrastructure for the information people need to participate in civic life – and in doing so, redefining what public media can be. Surviving the second Gilded Age requires recognizing and resourcing the full range of people already doing that work.

Modern tech CEOs have accumulated personal fortunes that match or exceed those of historical industrialists like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie, but in a much shorter timeframe and within a vastly larger global economy. Elon Musk's personal wealth now represents a percentage of the U.S. economy comparable to Rockefeller's wealth at its peak thanks to companies like SpaceX, Tesla, and X (formerly Twitter), his social media business.[1] In June 2026 he became the world's first trillionaire (though he dipped below and over the trillionaire line throughout the month as his fortune fluctuated). Mark Zuckerberg's Meta generated $196.1 billion in revenue from its advertising operations in 2025, up from $163.6 billion in 2024, and has been projected to surpass Google in global digital ad revenue by the end of 2026.[2] Microsoft claimed over $17.8 billion in revenue from LinkedIn for 2025, with a reported increase of 12 percent at the close of the fourth quarter in June 2026; while social media platforms like Snapchat announced $5.9 billion in 2025 revenue and earnings of $1.6 billion at the close of the second quarter in August 2026.[3] Social media advertising revenue is expected to reach almost $500 billion globally by 2027.[4]

This concentration of wealth and power matters because these platforms are not – as is often claimed – "merely technologies that we have designed."[5] They are the products of multinational corporations led by individuals whose personal fortunes rival the economic output of entire nations (Meta's 2025 revenue approached Ukraine's entire 2025 GDP of $212.9 billion).[6] And one of the primary casualties of

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this concentration has been the civic information infrastructure that democratic societies depend on.

I've watched this unfold as a local reporter covering communities for whom such statistics become harsh realities – where the closure of a newspaper doesn't just mean fewer local news providers, but fewer people attending city council meetings, fewer investigations into local corruption, and less coverage of high school sports and community events. The friends and colleagues I know working in local newsrooms aren't fighting an abstract battle; they're trying to sustain organizations that serve as civic utilities in an environment increasingly hostile to their survival.

The financial pressures are well documented. Accountability journalism is often the most visible benefit of local news, but there's also emergency reporting during crises, coverage of municipal proceedings, documentation of community life, and many other forms of local reporting. As a result, communities with strong local news and information ecosystems have higher voter turnout, better-informed citizens, less government corruption, and stronger social cohesion.[7] Yet unlike comparable public utilities (water systems, emergency services, internet infrastructure in some jurisdictions), this critical service has never been adequately financed by public investment in the United States. The numbers are stark: in 2021, at just 0.002 percent of GDP, U.S. allocation to public media ranked twenty-fifth out of twenty-seven representative countries in the definitive comparative study conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania. Following the closure of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting in January 2026, that percentage is now zero.[8] These aren't recent developments; they reflect a long-standing policy choice that has left service-oriented, civic-minded news media in the United States chronically underfunded relative to peer democracies.

The result has been a local news industry with a structurally tense relationship between its mission-oriented mandate and the economic realities of production. News organizations have always struggled to reconcile the public-good nature of civic information with rising costs: physical printing and digital hosting, an increasingly educated (and indebted) workforce, real estate in downtown locations chosen for proximity to civic centers, legal expenses both offensive and defensive. The list goes on.

This tension created vulnerabilities that the companies controlling social media platforms would eventually exploit – though "exploit" may be too intentional a word for what was often mutual capitulation.

Anyone in the news business over the last twenty years has witnessed multiple waves of what might charitably be called strategic misjudgments. The "pivot to video" era (roughly 2015–2017) saw news organizations dramatically shift resources away from written content toward video production, often laying off writers and editors in the process, based on platform metrics that later proved unreliable.[9] This wasn't the first capitulation: the "distributed content" era of the 2010s, years of Facebook news feed dependence (2012–2018), and adoption of Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages framework each represented news organizations giving up control over distribution, audience relationships, and sometimes content format itself in exchange for promised reach or revenue that often failed to materialize or disappeared when platforms changed strategies.

The common thread: platforms held all the leverage and could change terms unilaterally. News organizations, especially commercial organizations desperate for audience and revenue, had little choice but to accept whatever terms were offered.

Meanwhile, journalists and journalism-support organizations largely abstained from policy battles that affected their core interests. Unlike the platform companies – which engaged heavily in policy advocacy to their own benefit – the news industry declined to participate in movements aligned with their sustainability. Municipal broadband initiatives that would ensure universal internet access (and therefore access to digital news) proceeded without significant journalism industry involvement. These broadband networks – from Chattanooga's EPB Fiber system to the more than nine hundred community-owned networks documented by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance – have expanded digital access for residents across the country, built entirely through utility and municipal advocacy without the news lobby showing up as a stakeholder.[10] Policy frameworks that might have supported civic media have also received limited advocacy. The chilling effect was visible in episodes like Facebook's temporary news blockade in Australia and Canada in response to legislation requiring Meta to pay local news companies for publishing links to their work.[11]

This wasn't entirely a hit job from external forces; it was enabled by a profit-first orientation within much of the news industry itself, which brings us back to the nature of these digital platforms.

In Mark Zuckerberg's 2012 IPO letter to prospective shareholders, he wrote that "Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected."[12] Whatever the sincerity of that initial vision, the incentive structures of publicly traded companies ultimately prevailed. Social media platforms are not neutral technologies or public utilities. They are advertising businesses whose products are designed to maximize user engagement – which in practice means capturing and monetizing attention.

I think about the attention economy differently now that I'm raising a two-year-old. Evidence of social media's harm to children, particularly teenage girls, keeps mounting.[13] As someone who uses AI tools like Claude to stress test and reformat ideas rooted in decades of work in local news and information, I'm watching the next evolution of these attention-capture technologies with the same concern. The devices we buy are no longer optimized primarily for our benefit. They're optimized to extract behavioral data and capture attention that converts to advertising revenue.

When FCC Chairman Brendan Carr began his campaign to defund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) in 2025, he cited concerns that public media stations had violated their charter by airing advertisements.[14] Anyone who's watched or listened to NPR or PBS knows that "underwriting" – the euphemism for those brief sponsor messages – is functionally advertising, albeit heavily restricted.[15] Underwriting from companies like Google, Viking Cruises, Charles Schwab, AT&T, and ExxonMobil are common on local stations, making Carr's targeting of this vulnerability strategic. He went for the Achilles heel: public media's compromise with commercial imperatives in an already underfunded system.

The Trump administration's unilateral defunding of the CPB in 2025 (which provided 1–2 percent of NPR funding and around 15 percent of funding for PBS) represented not just an attack on specific institutions but a broader assault on the principle of publicly financed civic information.[16] If 0 percent public funding is the current administration's goal for public media, it's worth considering what other merit goods – public services that individuals in a society should have access to based on benefit rather than ability and willingness to pay – might also end up on the chopping block: vaccination programs, public education, emergency services, subsidized housing, public transportation.[17] Advocates in these sectors might find common cause in advancing a public media system that informs, engages, and equips Americans to protect these pillars of civic life.

The last several years have revived age-old fissures in the business of news, over commercial versus nonprofit, public versus private, top-down versus bottom-up. The next several years could end the argument, not through reasoned analysis but through the elimination of one side of the equation. Big tech platforms, increasingly aligned with an administration hostile to public institutions, appear positioned to complete what market forces began: the marginalization of public, noncommercial civic media – and independent media more broadly – in favor of attention-economy platforms optimized for engagement and advertising revenue.

This trajectory is not inevitable. What's emerging instead is a recognition that the problems created by platform scale might require solutions at a fundamentally different scale: the local. By "local," I don't mean only physical geography, though that's part of it. Local can also refer to a thing that is intentionally limited in its scale or scope, like an affinity group or a cultural identity. Local is the opposite of what makes social media platforms ungovernable.

Consider content moderation, the governance challenge that has defined social media's limitations. At the current level of social media's aggregate scale, there is no amount of moderation that will suffice to account for the 5.6 billion people using these platforms (or the harm that it does to the people unfortunate enough to be employed as moderators), nor will a marginal move toward decentralization (for example, Mastodon) solve such a critical failing. The core mathematical problem is this: even a 1 percent error rate at a billions-of-posts scale means millions of mistakes. Perfection is impossible; acceptable performance may be impossible too. More critically, you cannot scale human moderation without creating a traumatized underclass of workers doing fundamentally harmful work. And even if you could hire infinite moderators without causing harm, you couldn't hire enough to make the math work.

But moderation that's unworkable at platform scale becomes manageable at local scale, where stewards can sustain it within the bounds of human capacity. This is the true lesson from decentralization efforts like Mastodon: the answer isn't just technical decentralization, it's relocating governance and stewardship to "local" communities that can exercise it.

What does stewardship mean in practice? Drawing from both civic media and digital-space building, local stewards are people who actively cultivate healthy community environments by setting norms, managing interactions, and supporting members much as librarians guide patrons or journalists serve information needs. In the digital context, as organizations like New_ Public define it, stewards are volunteers and community leaders working to make online spaces inclusive and public-spirited, setting guidelines, navigating conflict, and deepening social trust.[18] In the civic media context, information stewards are the documenters at public meetings, the community correspondents gathering neighborhood news, the information organizers who help residents access what they need to participate in local decision-making.[19]

The common principle is that stewardship operates at a scale where relationships matter more than metrics, where governance emerges from community participation rather than corporate policy, and where the goal is enabling civic action rather than maximizing engagement. Local stewardship isn't about building audiences of millions, it's about equipping specific communities with the information and connection they need to thrive. It's sustainable precisely because it doesn't attempt infinite scale.

This principle of local stewardship is now animating work in two separate but increasingly aligned fields: civic media and relational technology.

In technology, a small but growing community of practitioners is building what they call "relational tech": digital tools designed around mutual benefit and collective thriving rather than engagement metrics and advertising revenue. But this isn't simply about creating public versions of existing platforms. As Josh Nesbit, cofounder of the Relational Tech Project, put it, "We've been robbed of plurality and diversity" by big tech training us to show up online in standardized ways.[20] "We don't know all the forms" that digital community could take when ideas about how we relate "run into a place and people and geography and cultures."

What makes relational tech different starts with what Nesbit calls the "3PM" framework: purpose, process, path, and math. The purpose is explicitly "to serve us, to reconnect" – not world domination or data extraction. This repositions technology as "pure assistive tech," a tool for communities rather than a product communities serve. The process inverts typical tech development: instead of spending most resources on fundraising and implementation with minimal community engagement, relational tech aims to "spend a luxurious amount of time in community" with execution happening rapidly through AI assistance for technical tasks. The people with the most at stake are not just consulted but become central to design.

Paths emphasize "scaling by spreading": tools that can be remixed and adapted place to place rather than deployed identically everywhere.[21] The math is perhaps most radical: instead of the typical tech ratio of one builder creating for millions of users (which "flattens the world and experiences – gentrification in tech form"), relational tech operates at 1-10-100 scale. One builder works with ten co-creators who care deeply about a specific place or community, who then serve their one hundred community members. "That can be a good place for something to live," Nesbit explains.

In practice, the relational tech model looks radically different from the infinite scroll on platforms like Facebook. In San Francisco's Outer Sunset neighborhood, the online dashboard outersunset.today aggregates information from twenty different local sources such as the neighborhood pizza place, community event organizers, and local services providers. On a single block, neighbor hub cozycorner.place allows residents to coordinate block parties and sign up for roles. A third tool, communitysupplies.org, emerged when someone bought too many supplies for a kid's birthday party – now it's a way for the block to share resources. These three tools communicate with each other through an open application programming interface (API), creating what Nesbit calls "compostable tech": things that are "not wasteful but thoughtfully go away and get composted into new ideas."

The result becomes "part of local culture. In the same way people might take you to a local bookstore or coffee shop." Except right now, Nesbit notes, "everyone's taking you to the McDonald's" of platform monopolies. Relational tech asks: What if digital tools were fit for specific purposes, specific times, specific people, rather than optimized for universal scale?

In the news and information ecosystem, a similar rethinking is underway. Through my work with News Futures – a network of more than eight hundred local news providers, philanthropic funders, and journalism support leaders – I've watched a community of practice coalesce around principles that challenge traditional industry assumptions.[22] These organizations have signed on to a shared charter advocating for news as service-oriented, participatory, and reparative, treating it as a community asset and essential public utility rather than a commercial product. The charter's principles include requiring that people excluded from and harmed by traditional news media have a reparative role in shaping its future, that collaboration across community stewards replaces competitive gatekeeping, and that the goal is vibrant civic life rather than newsroom profit centers.

The individuals in this network have founded and operate organizations like CivicLex, which covers local government in Lexington, Kentucky, while also convening civic infrastructure. In March 2026, it hosted Lexington's first-ever Civic Assembly, bringing together thirty randomly selected residents across seven sessions to deliberate on changes to the city's Urban County Charter. Other organizations include Documented, which covers immigration policy and provides immigrants in New York City with curated information on local social services through WhatsApp and other channels; and the Department of Public Transformation, whose Amplify Rural program is building a cross-sector coalition of civic media organizations committed to rural storytelling.[23] These aren't theoretical models. They're operational organizations demonstrating what civic media can look like when it's not constrained by commercial imperatives or platform dependencies.

The *Roadmap for Local News*, a report I coauthored in 2023 with Civic News Company founder and CEO Elizabeth Green and Free Press's senior director of journalism and civic information Mike Rispoli, proposed reframing the challenge around expanding "civic information" – information that equips people to improve their communities – rather than saving the news business.[24] Its four core strategies include direct investment in civic information production, building shared services to sustain emerging networks, cultivating supportive public policies while maintaining editorial independence, and coordinating work across what the report termed "civic media" practitioners: not just traditional newsrooms but also grassroots community groups, libraries, schools, and public media institutions. What's significant is that many of these recommendations are now being implemented by organizations that didn't exist when we wrote them.

Consider the Documenters Network, a program I cofounded in 2016 and scaled nationally through the civic media lab City Bureau beginning in 2019.[25] The problem it addressed was straightforward but pervasive: as local newsrooms declined, coverage of public meetings – where city councils, police boards, school boards, and advisory committees make decisions affecting communities – was among the first reporting to be cut. As this coverage disappeared, so did public attendance. Today it's not uncommon for consequential public meetings to proceed with no journalists or residents present.

The solution was to train and pay community members to attend and document these meetings in collaboration with journalists. Over nearly a decade, the program has trained thousands of people across two dozen sites nationwide to report on tens of thousands of public meetings, paying out more than $1.15 million to those most impacted by the decisions being made. But the measurable outcomes go beyond attendance numbers. Documenters created a new public record where none existed through meeting notes, transcripts, and coverage of governmental processes that otherwise wouldn't leave the halls of power. More significantly, it demonstrated a different relationship between journalists and communities: not journalists as sole watchdogs serving passive readers, but journalists facilitating civic participation by equipping people with information-gathering skills they didn't know they could exercise.

What civic media and relational technology share is more than timing or rhetoric. Both recognize that local stewardship – community-scale governance of information and connection – is the corrective to platform excess. Both understand that the problems created by optimizing for infinite scale require solutions designed for finite communities. And both are betting that sustainable alternatives can be built without replicating the wealth concentration and power asymmetries that define platform dominance.

But this raises an unavoidable question: How do these approaches survive economically? The answer draws from a far wider range of possibilities than subscription and membership models alone, and it's more nuanced than a simple commercial versus noncommercial binary. It includes philanthropic funding like the national effort organized by Press Forward, public investment at local and state levels (rather than federal) as advocated by groups like the Media Power Collaborative and Rebuild Local News, and collective ownership models like *The 51st* and *Defector*. Crucially, these aren't just theoretical proposals – the infrastructure is being built now. As the *Our Common Purpose* report projected, by the end of 2026, a tax structure in the news and information space may well be established, with funds allocated to support local news providers, public-platform experiments, and growth in the civic media field.[26] If so, it will be thanks to coalitions organizing journalists and members of the public who care about healthy civic information systems.

The platform companies solved the revenue problem by building advertising machines optimized for attention capture. That generated extraordinary wealth for founders and shareholders while creating the harms documented in the first half of this essay. The civic media and relational tech movements are explicitly rejecting that model, and in doing so, they're demonstrating that economic sustainability doesn't require replicating platform-scale extraction. What remains to be seen is whether the emerging funding infrastructure can scale quickly enough to meet the need.

There's another challenge these movements must navigate: the sheer power asymmetry. As mentioned, the largest platforms boast revenues exceeding many nations' GDP. The platform companies have effectively unlimited resources for user acquisition, feature development, and – crucially – policy advocacy. Local civic media organizations and relational tech start-ups are operating at a fundamentally different scale of resources.

But this isn't the first time concentrated private power has threatened public goods. The policy victories that created America's civic information infrastructure – media mail rates that made magazine subscriptions affordable nationwide, the public library system, low power FM radio, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, universal postal service – were all won against similar odds. These weren't technological solutions or market innovations; they were political achievements that established certain functions as too essential to leave entirely to commercial interests. They recognized that informed citizenship and community connection were prerequisites for democracy, not luxury goods for those who could afford them.

The local news field has largely forgotten how to win these fights for robust and service-oriented civic information. While platform companies have spent the last two decades building sophisticated policy advocacy operations (visible in everything from Facebook's news blockade in Australia to the defeat of privacy legislation in the United States), journalism advocates have mostly stayed out of policy battles. This is partly understandable; most are focused on survival, on serving their communities with inadequate resources. But it's also strategic misdirection. No amount of innovation in news production will matter if the economic infrastructure remains hostile to public-good media models.

The good news is that policy infrastructure is beginning to re-emerge. California's Civic Media Program (a $20 million local news fund), New Jersey's Civic Information Bill (and the resulting Civic Information Consortium), various state-level news voucher proposals, and municipal broadband initiatives that treat internet access as public infrastructure represent a renewed understanding that civic information requires public investment and democratic governance, not just entrepreneurial hustle.[27] The coalitions forming around these efforts (Media Power Collaborative, Rebuild Local News, Common Cause California, the League of Women Voters, the Press Forward network) are relearning what earlier generations understood: that the choice isn't between market solutions and government control, but between organized advocacy for public interest and platform companies writing the rules themselves.

What would it take for local civic media to become more than boutique alternatives? The same thing it took for public libraries, public broadcasting, and universal mail service: a political consensus that access to civic information is a public good that requires public investment, a reimagining of "public media" accordingly. The infrastructure is being built in the forms of civic media organizations, relational tech prototypes, and new funding mechanisms. But without policy victories that establish sustainable public financing, editorial independence from commercial pressure, and protection from platform monopolization, these efforts will remain perpetually under-resourced experiments rather than the civic utilities they need to become.

During the Gilded Age, the concentration of wealth and power in industrial monopolies eventually prompted regulatory responses: antitrust action, labor protections, public utilities frameworks. Those reforms didn't eliminate private enterprise but established that certain functions like education, infrastructure, and basic services required public investment and democratic governance rather than pure market logic.

We're now arguably in a Second Gilded Age, with comparable wealth concentration in platform companies whose products shape civic discourse, community connection, and information access. The question is whether we'll develop comparable correctives, or whether the alliance between platform power and hostile political administration will eliminate the possibility.

The honest assessment is that social media's effects appear highly dependent on context, user characteristics, and platform design, creating both genuine benefits and genuine harms distributed unevenly across populations and use cases. But the current design paradigm consistently prioritizes engagement over well-being, advertising revenue over civic benefit, and platform control over user agency.

Civic media and relational technology don't offer a complete solution but a proof of concept: that civic information technologies can be designed for local stewardship rather than attention extraction, for community benefit rather than shareholder value, for sustainable scale rather than infinite growth. Whether these models can survive and spread depends partly on their own sustainability but mostly on whether we treat civic information infrastructure as we treat other essential utilities – as something that requires public investment rather than being left entirely to market forces and platform monopolies.

The stakes are clear – concentration of wealth, power, and prestige at levels rarely seen in human history – and the window for change may be short. These emerging fields need support in the form of high-quality research that propels and challenges core assumptions and outcomes. The leaders of these fields need to be networked together in peer-led spaces that value intentional growth, development, and camaraderie as the ever-present forces of burnout, co-optation, and entropy inevitably arise. The publics that benefit most from their work need new language and frameworks that enable them to name challenges and demand better.

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This compilation draws primarily on the Neighboring Commons knowledge base, a curated set of 198 entries assembled by the Neighboring Commons project. It is supplemented by stories and tools surfaced through the Relational Tech Studio, a living library maintained by the Relational Technology Project."

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