

A new civic model

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I teach a class at MIT's Media Lab called "News and Participatory Media" that's become popular with Nieman scholars. I designed it as a class for engineers and software developers — the sorts of folks we expect to find at the Media Lab — with the goal of exposing them to different reporting problems so they understand some of the challenges journalists face, before working to build new tools for use in traditional and non-traditional newsrooms. Nieman fellows find it interesting, I think, because it exposes them both to different ways to think about reporting, and to students who think about news very differently. This leads to some interesting collaborations: a business reporter for one of Nigeria's most prominent newspapers sought out one of my doctoral students for help scraping UK property databases to identify assets owned by kleptocratic Nigerian governors. We have a pretty good time.

Because the class includes reporters, who tend to be very passionate about the future of journalism, and geeks, who

tend to be very passionate about social media and pretty skeptical about the current state of journalism, we have some interesting arguments over the course of a semester. I enjoy stoking these arguments, so I often bring in provocations to get us started. Which led me to bring in a remarkable column from Swiss novelist Rolf Dobelli.

Dobelli was pitching a new book, "The Art of Thinking Clearly" — which purports to use neuroscientific and cognitive science research to explain why it's so hard to think clearly, and thinking as clearly as I can muster, I can't recommend the book. But there's one section...titled "News is Bad for You" that's a very worthwhile read. Dobelli claims that he gave up reading news four years ago and is a happier man for it. He describes news as a drug, a time-wasting habit that gives us the brief sense that we're doing something productive and positive, but actually breaks our focus and distracts us while failing to explain the world in deep and meaningful ways or give us anything we, as readers, can do about what we read.

I figured this would spark a great conversation in our class. Who would rise to defend the importance of staying informed in order to be an effective civic actor? To my great surprise, most of the class — the hacks and the hackers — were in agreement that Dobelli was more right than wrong. In part, this is because we all agreed that there's a lot of badly written news out there — news that provides little background or context...But the idea that had the most

resonance for the class, and for me, was this: news is seldom connected to decisions we have to make as individuals, and that consuming news about situations we can't influence will ultimately instill a sense of learned helplessness.

This is a particularly tricky argument for me, as my schtick for the past decade has been to argue that Americans need more information about the rest of the world... But Dobelli has a point: the stories I've been trying to get Americans to pay attention to through Global Voices — repression and rebellion in Sudan, revolution in Tunisia, the rise of an African middle class — aren't stories where readers have much agency. And part of the reason it's so damned hard to get people to pay attention to events and voices that are geographically far away is that people rightly ask, "Why does this matter to me? Is this going to change how I work? How I shop? Even how I vote?" And the answer is, "probably not."

I thought of Dobelli's questions this summer, when I read Michael Schudson's book, *The Good Citizen*. Schudson argues that the expectation for what a good citizen of America does has changed as our country has changed. In the post-independence period, the good citizen voted to elect the worthiest members of society to represent them — it was democracy by assent, largely non-competitive. In the 19th century, good citizens were members of political parties not because of ideology, but largely because of personal and professional ties, and those parties, while

competitive, competed on personality and organization, not on issues.

Citizenship as many of us think about it is a product of the progressive era, Schudson argues. To overcome the party machines, progressives promoted the model of the informed citizen model, where muckraking newspapers uncovered malfeasance, where newspapers and magazines informed citizens on the issues of the day, where informed voters didn't just elect representatives but voted directly on legislation through the ballot initiative process.

Schudson has at least two issues with the model of the informed citizen — he thinks it's aspirational at best and farcical at worst, and he thinks its time passed somewhere around the 1960s. It's impossible for a citizen to be informed on the range of issues that affect society — here he's echoing some of Walter Lippman's concerns from "Public Opinion" — and that's not how the vast majority of us vote. And, he argues, since the 1960s, civic engagement that's focused on making lasting change has focused on the courts, not on the ballot box — we've got a model of citizenship where lawsuits to establish rights and regulatory agencies that protect them are where much of the work of citizenship gets done

What I find helpful about Schudson's argument is not his vision of rights-based citizenship, but the idea that the shape of citizenship can change over time. I think we're experiencing one of those changes. I think we're seeing a new form of civics that focuses on agency,



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on participation, and on trying to make an impact even at a very small scale.

It's a version of citizenship that's suspicious of opaque systems and institutions and is highly focused on seeing where effort and money goes — think of Kiva, which encourages people to loan money directly to developing world entrepreneurs, or Donors Choose, where people give to specific schools in need. Think of crowdfunding, where people support individual pieces of art they want to see made, rather than supporting arts institutions. Think of people who are politically engaged in campaigns on single issues — to arrest George Zimmerman or Joseph Kony — rather than to elect a party or a person. This is a version of citizenship that's highly personal, highly decentralized, pointillist rather than sweeping in scope. It's a vision of citizenship consistent with the changes we've seen with media, where everyone is creating media, whether it's a Facebook update for friends or a blogpost that acts as an oped.

And just as we've discovered how difficult it is to navigate news and media in this space — how do we triangulate reports on Twitter and Facebook and government statements in a crisis like the Westgate mall attacks,

especially when it turns out that official government sources are often less accurate than citizen sources — we're discovering that it's really hard to navigate this civic space. When tens of millions of American teens suddenly start demanding that the US put military forces in Uganda to arrest a warlord in the Central Africa Republic, do we treat this as a teen fad or as a serious policy concern? Do we use this as a chance to bring Ugandan voices into the dialog, or do we focus on the personal story of Jason Russell and his nervous breakdown? The KONY 2012 campaign gained an enormous amount of attention and, for a few weeks, shifted public debate. We need help figuring out whether it had impact, a question we should be asking both of campaigns that seek change by marshaling attention, and of journalism as a whole: what's the civic impact?

This is a place where the news can help. We're seeing a generation that's not apathetic — they're desperate to have impact. When we see them shying away from party politics, it's not because they're selfish or self-obsessed, it's because they have a very hard time seeing how writing to their congressperson is going to change anything when con-

gress lurches from shutdown to shutdown and passes historically few laws. People want to have impact, and the news can help.

We can help people understand where and how they can have impact. We can build on what David Bornstein is calling solutions journalism, featuring not just problems but the people and organizations trying to solve them — and we can do this in a way that probes at whether the solutions are as good as promised. We can link news stories to groups and campaigns trying to address the issues in those stories, as the Christian Science Monitor is doing in partnership with Shoutabout on their DC Decoder section. When we report on a crisis like Superstorm Sandy, we're unafraid to drive readers to the Red Cross to help out. When my publication Global Voices reports on Kenya, we can point to ways people can help in the wake of the Westgate shooting, whether that's to groups providing assistance to families, or to civil rights organizations now organizing to protect Kenya's Somali population against an inevitable backlash.

What we cannot do is keep reporting news that keeps our readers informed but ineffective. There's just too much else for them to

pay attention to, whether it's entertainment content or self-reinforcing, comfortable, partisan opinion. We're losing the news not just because the financial models have changed, but because the civic models have changed...I worry that we're failing to do public service because the way the public participates has changed. If we're stuck in a paradigm where we inform citizens, then declare our work done, we're failing in our public service duties.

By now, there's any number of people in the audience waiting to ask the question, "Isn't this advocacy journalism?" Since our forum doesn't let you ask questions, let me go ahead and answer that for you: Hell yes. And we should get used to it, because we're all already doing advocacy journalism. Now that it's incredibly easy to produce and disseminate information, what's scarce is attention. Whenever we make a news judgement to put a story on our front page or deep inside our papers or sites, when we decide to cover a story in Malawi or in Mattapan, we're doing advocacy journalism. We're a part of a complicated ecosystem where everyone — activists promoting a cause, companies promoting a product, reporters delivering news — are competing for attention, and news organizations are very powerful actors within that system.

We're advocating for the idea that what we're covering is worth someone's attention, and is worth more attention than something we've chosen not to cover. What Laura and Chris Amico have done with Homicide Watch

is advocacy journalism at its very best — they advocate for the idea that everyone killed in DC or Chicago deserves to be reported on, whether they were black or white, rich or poor. When Godwin Nnanna reports on Nigerian governors buying mansions in Mayfair with money looted from Nigeria's treasury, he's committing advocacy journalism, just as he should, demanding that kleptocrats be held responsible for their crimes. When the Guardian puts Glen Greenwald on the front page, asking hard questions about government surveillance gone mad, it's most certainly advocacy journalism and it's advocacy journalism that we need if we want journalism to survive in the face of unconstitutional actions that changed forever our ability to assure sources that their identities will remain confidential and that they can talk to the press without fear of losing their jobs.

The problem isn't journalism that advocates — it's journalism that advocates a sadly limited set of options: vote for this guy or for that guy. We need journalism that helps us understand how we can participate and be effective, whether it's through an election, a petition, a boycott, a new business model or technology. We need to ask whether our stories are teaching our readers to be helpless, or helping them become effective citizens. ■

<http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2013/09/28/saving-the-news-with-advocacy-journalism-ten-minutes-with-the-nieman-foundation/#sthash.DdwwnJ.dpuf>

Libya, Syria and R2P

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It is only too obvious that thus far the peoples of the democratic states have failed in our responsibility to protect the people of Syria. This is hardly a failure to intervene: external intervention has been constant from the beginning. A ferocious, well-armed proxy war is devouring Syria, with weapons pouring in from all sides. Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the Gulf States, and Hezbollah have each tried to tip the military balance in favor of the regime or the rebels. Far from succeeding, they have aggravated the atrocities and exposed civilians on every side to repeated, deliberate, and murderous attack.

The doctrine of Responsibility to Protect, or R2P, defines the protection of civilians as the sole legitimate reason for the use of force

besides self-defense. Developed by an international commission of which I was a member, it has been endorsed over the past decade at least in principle by almost all UN member states. If our goal is to protect civilians in Syria, the R2P doctrine clearly suggests that further supplies of weapons to any side will only make matters worse.

The closest that the international community has come to applying this doctrine in Syria came when the Security Council dispatched Kofi Annan and then Lakhdar Brahimi to seek a ceasefire. Both attempts failed. Russia and China's opposition has made it impossible to secure Security Council approval for no-fly zones, humanitarian corridors, or other measures that could have protected civilians from the brutality of the regime — and the reprisals of the rebels. Russia in particular has done its best to render the responsibility to protect inoperative, shipping weapons to a tyrant while lecturing the world on respect for international law.

In situations like Syria where the Security Council refuses to authorize force, the states that act alone or in concert with others will lack legal authority to do so. For Russia and China, and for many *international lawyers*, the matter *ends there*. If there is no legality, there cannot be legitimacy; and if there is no legality, any use of force in defiance of the Security Council weakens international law.

But the matter does not end there. When the Security Council blocks action

and states get away with gassing their own people or killing them en masse, the rule of law suffers and the authority of the Security Council is diminished. It also suffers when rebel groups commit atrocities that go unpunished. States that act to defend civilians in the absence of Security Council approval have political, if not legal grounds to argue that they are, in fact, defending international law.

The fact is that what law forbids, conscience may still command. What law forbids, international peace and security might still require. What is legal is *not always legitimate*. Those who argue that international legality is the sine qua non for legitimate action in the international arena ignore the fact that there are situations of extreme necessity in both domestic and international law where obeying the strict letter of the law may allow a greater harm to occur.

When legality and legitimacy part company, as they have done in Syria, those who say strict legality must prevail have an obligation to explain how this squares with morality, just as those say that morality should prevail need to explain why they are justified in breaking the law.

A veto at the Security Council against protecting civilians in Syria has moral consequences. Such vetoes enable a ruler to continue butchering his own people and driving millions into exile. If a veto has these ghastly consequences, who would call it legitimate? Who would dare believe that such a veto strengthens the rule of law?