

From passive to active and back again? How digital media has transformed the role of the citizen in news and political communication

De passivo a ativo e vice-versa?
Como os media digitais transformaram
o papel do cidadão na comunicação
política e jornalística

James Dennis

CICANT, Lusófona University – Portugal
james.dennis@ulusofona.pt

Abstract

This essay examines the evolving role of citizens in news and political communication, focusing on the transition from the “passive consumer” of the twentieth century to the “active participant” shaped by digital media logics. It analyses practices such as gatwatching and engaged journalism from journalism studies, and reflects on the impact of digitally mediated behaviours across a continuum of participation in political communication, which conceptualises engagement as an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome. Through this lens, I consider how digital tools have enabled citizens to produce, circulate, and challenge political messages.

Looking ahead, I investigate whether declining public-facing social media use signals a return to passivity. I argue that, rather than a regression, this trend represents a “private turn” with two dimensions: discursive engagement within private messaging applications and algorithmically curated content consumption on visual social platforms. Despite these shifts, I contend that the notion of the “passive citizen” is a myth. Although the visibility and scale of participatory spaces may change over time, their persistence underscores the continued importance of digitally mediated citizen participation.

Keywords

Political communication
Active audience
Digital journalism
Citizen engagement
Private turn
Platform society

Resumo

Este ensaio examina a evolução do papel dos cidadãos na comunicação política e jornalística, centrando-se na transição do “consumidor passivo” do século XX para o “participante ativo” moldado pelas lógicas dos média digitais. O texto analisa as práticas como o *gatwatching* e o jornalismo engajado (*engaged journalism*) no âmbito dos estudos sobre jornalismo, e reflete sobre o impacto dos comportamentos mediados digitalmente através de um contínuo de participação na comunicação política. Este contínuo de participação conceptualiza o envolvimento como um processo contínuo e não como um resultado fixo. Através desta lente, o ensaio avalia como as ferramentas digitais permitiram aos cidadãos produzir, circular e desafiar mensagens políticas.

Olhando para o futuro, este texto investiga igualmente se o declínio do uso público das redes sociais sinaliza um regresso à passividade. O argumento central é que, em vez de uma regressão, esta tendência representa uma “viragem para o privado” com duas dimensões: o envolvimento discursivo em aplicações de mensagens privadas e o consumo de conteúdos curados por algoritmos em plataformas sociais visuais. Apesar destas mudanças, este ensaio defende que a noção de “cidadão passivo” é um mito. Embora a visibilidade e a escala dos espaços participativos possam mudar ao longo do tempo, a sua persistência sublinha a importância contínua da participação cidadã mediada digitalmente.

Palavras-chave

Comunicação política
Audiência ativa
Jornalismo digital
Participação cívica
Viragem para o privado
Sociedade de plataformas

Political communication research in the 20th century predominantly focused on the relationship between political elites — including governments, parties, and public organisations — and journalists. As early editions of McNair’s (2007) *An Introduction to Political Communication* argue, political communication, in general terms, was a somewhat linear process. Political elites would seek to set agendas in public discourse by generating messages. Journalists would be tasked with the selection, framing, and subsequent dissemination of this information to citizens, acting as gatekeepers of the news they are exposed to. The purpose of this communication was to inform the audience and guide the formation of political attitudes and behaviours. Under this model, citizens were believed to be “passive”.

While such accounts were somewhat overstated, as political messages were debated, contested, and interpreted between citizens in social spaces, the internet fundamentally changed the role of the citizen in this process. As Rosen (2012, p. 13) observes:

The people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from

one another — and who today are not in a situation like that at all.

This transformation has had far-reaching consequences for the interrelated academic disciplines of journalism studies and political communication; citizens are no longer predominantly recipients of political information but active producers who — under certain conditions — can play a disruptive role.

However, is this still the case? Against a backdrop of declining use of social platforms for public communication (Ofcom, 2026), I explore whether the audience is becoming “passive” once more. I examine this idea by first discussing the active audience, considering what it means for the production and consumption of news. Whether producing journalism themselves or collaborating with journalists, the audience now has significant agency in the news process. Secondly, I reflect on how digital technologies empower citizens in political communication, with mixed results for democracy. Finally, I explore claims of the reemergence of the passive audience, reflecting on what influencer-led news feeds and fragmented communication through semi-public and private channels mean for the role of the citizen in political communication.

The active audience in journalism: Producing and participating

Bowman and Wills (2003: 9) consider the digitally-enabled audience in journalism as “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information.” Such engagement can be categorised around two themes. Firstly, how citizens use digital tools to *produce* news in which they control its focus and the storytelling devices used. Commonly described as citizen journalism, this refers to individuals without professional training who use the tools and reach of the internet — blogs, vlogs, and social media accounts — to produce news content. Founded upon a deprofessionalized vision of journalism, the concept’s development has highlighted how the practice can benefit democracy by providing (1) alternative perspectives to those found in legacy news media, (2) political news that — when produced by volunteers — is protected from the financial and audience pressures faced by some privately-owned media, and (3) reporting from those with lived experience of an issue (Allan and Hintz, 2020).

Beyond the work of citizen journalists, the second theme relates to the digitally-enabled opportunities for audience *participation* in the

creation and distribution of journalism by professional newsrooms. Feedback from the audience has shifted from letters to the editor to more substantive contributions that directly impact news production. This includes comments, photos, and videos from citizens unattached to the newsroom but who have experience of an ongoing story. Described as eyewitness media and citizen witnessing, audiences value such perspectives for their immediacy and authenticity (Nelson and Schmidt, 2022). The results can be significant and form a key part of the story itself, as demonstrated by Darnella Frazier, a 17-year-old bystander who filmed the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Richardson, 2022). This footage formed a key part of the powerful visual investigation from the *New York Times* that deconstructed the killing in the days that followed (Hill et al., 2020).

While the ambition for a reciprocal relationship between journalists and their audience is not new — pioneer of the field, James Carey (1987), once defined journalism as “carrying on and amplifying the conversation of people themselves” — treating audiences as collaborators reflects a distinctive shift in the role of citizens in news, from consumers to participants in its production. This approach has been developed by Green-Barber and McKinley (2019: 6) as “engaged journalism”, “an inclusive practice that prioritizes the information needs and wants of the community members it serves, creates collaborative space for the audience in all aspects of the journalistic process, and is dedicated to building and preserving trusting relationships between journalists and the public.” It emphasises changes to working practices, encouraging reporters to listen to and communicate with citizens throughout the reporting process and to produce news that helps citizens in their everyday lives (Green-Barber and McKinley, 2019; Nelson and Schmidt, 2022; Varma, 2026).

Audiences can also influence reporting through the impact of analytics on journalism, where newsrooms analyse data trails that a user leaves as they browse, click, and scroll through digital content (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018). While some of this participation takes the form of conscious acts, such as the decision to share news on social platforms with networked contacts, audiences are typically unaware of the extent to which data of their engagement is collected and analysed by newsrooms. This includes data collected from websites and mobile applications of news organisations, including page views, how much time the audience spends with each story, and the unique number of visitors to a website, as well as social platforms, such as aggregated feedback from the number of endorsements, shares, and comments on posts.

This engagement matters as news organisations increasingly use this data to make decisions about story selection and storytelling processes (Powers, 2018). Furthermore, audience interactions on social platforms play a significant role in determining how news feed algorithms prioritise content (Swart, 2021). The implications of these developments are mixed, with some highlighting the benefits for reporters seeking to understand and represent their audience’s interests (Ferrer-Conill and Tandoc, 2018), while others lament the role that analytics play as a news value, as journalists chase trivial stories that provide the most hits (Pickard, 2021).

These forms of audience engagement demonstrate an evolution in the relationship between journalists and citizens. Bruns (2005) proposes the concept of “gatewatching” in recognition of this — in contrast to gatekeeping, where professional journalists play a critical role in the selection of news that citizens are exposed to — as some agency over agenda-setting and issue framing processes shifts from reporters to the audience.

From access to action: How digital media is reshaping the role of the citizen in political communication

Academic research on political participation predominantly focuses on macro-political activities, those actions that aim to influence rules, laws, or policies. However, the day-to-day experiences that shape our political preferences are equally important (Norris, 2011). This emphasis is significant for political communication scholars, as it highlights how citizens require informational resources, discursive opportunities, and networks to act. I draw on the continuum of participation, a descriptive framework that recognises engagement as a process rather than an outcome (Dennis, 2018), to review relevant literature across its four stages. In doing so, I highlight how digital media can empower citizens in political communication.

Firstly, “access” refers to cognitive engagement and how citizens pay attention to politics and public affairs. The annual Digital News Report, provided by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, tracks digital news consumption internationally. While its latest report finds fragmentation in news use across online platforms, with reliance on Facebook being replaced by visual social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, the study continues to show the important role the internet plays as a source of news (Newman et al., 2024). What may sound like an overly simplistic observation is

sometimes overlooked, especially when one considers the shortcuts to political information provided by the everyday use of these tools (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018; Dennis, 2024; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021). This is not to say such news consumption online is without problems, with significant issues relating to the distribution of misinformation, platforms deprioritizing news in their algorithms and questions over the type and quality of political information that is amplified on social platforms (Swart, 2021). However, the relative importance of digital media as a news source within citizens' media consumption is clear.

Secondly, "expression" encapsulates forms of political communication between citizens, which are integral for political learning and forming opinions. There is some evidence of rich political talk emerging organically during the everyday use of digital media in non-political spaces (Graham, Jackson and Wright, 2015). Such conversations demonstrate how citizens can challenge political narratives under certain conditions. This was evident in the memes created during the 2017 UK general election that redefined the "Strong and Stable" slogan at the heart of the campaign to support the then Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party, Theresa May, as something negative, suggesting that she was robotic, boring, and out of touch with young people (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021).

Thirdly, "connection" represents the processes of political organisation, as citizens use digital media to establish and join networks and mobilise for political action. Two significant innovations stand out in the literature. Firstly, the ability for citizens to self-organise. Social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Nummi, Jennings and Feagin, 2019) and Occupy Wall Street (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) demonstrate citizen-led organising without the infrastructure, hierarchical leadership, and communicative support of formal organisations. Secondly, the ability to rapidly collate the public's views at scale. This has led to advocacy groups using digital media to more effectively measure, learn, and respond to the interests of their supporters, offering more meaningful opportunities to shape the direction and strategy of the organisation (Dennis, 2018; Karpf, 2016; Vromen, 2017). Such tactics are also increasingly being adopted by traditional organisations, which use digital tools to mobilise audiences to engage in a range of actions, including fundraising, modes of elite contact, and the facilitation of decentralised campaigns (Gibson, 2015; Hall, Schmitz and Dedmon, 2020).

Finally, "action" signifies goal-oriented, public political acts. These acts can be undertaken exclusively online, such as using public-facing social media to lobby corporations, journalists, and political

representatives and efforts to establish counternarratives to dominant frames in public discourse. This is sometimes described as “hashtag activism” and uses reputational damage as a strategy for influence (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020). Similarly, petitions offer a quick and efficient means of representing public discontent in response to the fast-moving development of a news story or political event (Chadwick and Dennis, 2017; Langer and Gruber, 2021). Beyond behaviours confined to digital space, “action” also refers to interconnected engagement repertoires that blur digital and real space tactics, such as during demonstrations, as activists share information and coordinate strategy in real time (Theocharis, 2012).

It is important to stress that not all participatory opportunities are good for democracy (Quandt, 2018). A growing body of work demonstrates how citizens produce and circulate harmful content online. This can come through the amplification of disinformation and misinformation from political elites (Chadwick, Vaccari and O’Loughlin, 2018) and intolerant and uncivil expression in public-facing online spaces (Boulianne, Koc-Michalska and Bimber, 2020; Rossini, 2022). Abusive communication by citizens targeted at elected representatives and journalists is especially problematic for women, people of colour, and other marginalised groups, who are more likely to be subject to harassment, security breaches that increase the risk of violence, and coordinated disinformation campaigns designed to delegitimise them as professionals (Harmer and Southern, 2023; Sampaio-Dias et al., 2024). The consequences of this are far-reaching, reducing the likelihood that politicians and reporters will collaborate with citizens in the future, increasing self-censorship on critical social issues — especially gender and race — and, for some, it can result in them withdrawing from their profession completely (Harmer and Southern, 2023; Lewis, Zamith and Coddington, 2020). Such toxic communication can also impact the participation of other citizens, as, when exposed to hateful speech, others — especially marginalised groups — can be discouraged from political engagement as they associate the characteristics of such participation with abuse (Southern, 2026).

What the private turn in political communication means for the changing role of the citizen

Partially as a result of such toxic communication, as well as the wider understanding of social and reputational risks that accompany public contributions (Weeks, Halversen and Neubaum, 2024), there

is growing evidence to suggest that public-political expression on social platforms is declining (Altay, Fletcher and Nielsen, 2024; Ofcom, 2026). Rather than indicating a return to passivity or a rejection of social media, I suggest that this represents a tactical shift in how news audiences and citizens participate. As a report on how citizens in eight countries view digital media shows, public attitudes are complex (Ejaz et al., 2024). In everyday use, citizens are “platform ambivalent”, relying on social platforms for news but remaining sceptical of the information they encounter. The type of digital tool is also significant, with respondents believing that video networks, such as YouTube, and private messaging applications have a positive impact on them personally as well as on society more broadly. Therefore, I contend that these shifts signal a transition towards participation that is characterised by two layers: one defined by private discursive engagement and the other by algorithmically curated public consumption.

There has been a private turn in social media use, as more citizens resemble what I have described as “listeners” (Dennis, 2018), consuming political information on public social platforms but taking to private and semi-public spaces for political expression and connection. Much of this discursive engagement takes place in private messaging applications, such as Signal and WhatsApp, or in the messaging functionality of popular social platforms, such as Instagram Direct Messenger. While end-to-end encryption makes tracing the spread and impact of false and harmful information more challenging, emerging research also offers some positive indications of information literacy skills formed in these spaces. The collective norms formed among friends, families, and colleagues can help mitigate the sharing of misinformation (Chadwick, Anne-Hall and Vaccari, 2023), while users leverage the reputational expertise of their personal peers to navigate and verify numerical claims (Lawson et al., 2025).

The private turn means that our news feeds look very different. Whereas Facebook and Twitter, at their peak, were predominantly formed of posts from one’s personal networks, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube — most popular among younger audiences for news (Robertson et al., 2026) — are more typically populated by content that has received a high level of user interactions. As such, posts are less likely to be prioritised in a feed because a user has deliberately formed a connection with an account (e.g., a friend or follower). Instead, as pioneered by the TikTok “For You Page” and emulated by the likes of Instagram “Reels” and YouTube “Shorts”, viral content rises to the top. There are legitimate concerns about this change, such as the extent to which algorithms may amplify harmful accounts

(Haslop et al., 2024). Technology writer Cory Doctorow (2025) describes the change as an example of “enshittification”, whereby technology companies prioritise design decisions that maximise attention and revenue at the expense of civic value.

However, just as digital-native news organizations like BuzzFeed and VICE leveraged the social sharing algorithms of the mid-2010s (Dennis and Sampaio-Dias, 2021), some content creators who specialise in news have adapted to the current interaction-led environment. Described as newsfluencers (Hurcombe, 2025), they share some characteristics with professional journalists to varying degrees, such as in their training and professional norms, but use audience engagement modes that emulate those of digital creators. By embracing the communicative logics and storytelling practices native to popular social platforms, newsfluencers feel relatable. These alternative sources are particularly relevant to marginalised communities, such as young people and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, as they cover issues and perspectives overlooked by legacy news media (Dennis, 2024; Robertson et al., 2026).

Conclusion

Karpf’s (2020) intervention on temporality and digital politics is useful in making sense of these changes. He advocates that scholars document and compare different periods of internet history, describing the impact of evolving technological standards and affordances to better understand their use. In this essay, I have explored how the role of the citizen has changed. For students and emerging scholars in this area, it summarises how Web 2.0 standards and the rise of the platform society have transformed the role of the public within political communication. For established academics, I reflect on what the private turn and the changing makeup of news feeds on visual social platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube might mean for such forms of engagement in the future.

In contrast, one constant is the porous boundaries between information consumption, discursive engagement, and participation. The notion of passive citizens has always been — and remains — a myth. Citizens have long benefited from spaces where they consume news in an interpretive, collective setting, such as watching the evening news bulletin with family or listening to the radio at work. However, the configurations of who was included in such spaces and what would be discussed were limited by physical proximity and media scarcity.

Whether through public-facing online communication or increasingly private and semi-public messaging, digital media blurs the lines between news exposure and engagement. As this essay shows, while the visibility and scale of such spaces might be changing, their persistence underscores the enduring significance of digitally-mediated citizen participation.

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Biographical Note Nota Biográfica

Dr James Dennis is a Researcher at the Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture, and New Technologies (CICANT), Universidade Lusófona (Portugal). He serves as Co-Editor of *Political Studies Review* and Co-Convenor of the Political Studies Association Media and Politics Group (UK). His research explores the intersection of political communication and journalism, specifically social media, political participation and citizenship, and how young people experience news. James is the author of *Beyond Slacktivism: Political Participation on Social Media* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and his work has appeared in the *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, *Journalism Studies*, and *Political Studies*.

ORCID ID 0000-0002-5638-0407 | **Ciência ID** 721C-717C-9DC9

Website <https://jameswilldennis.com/>

Address CICANT, Rua Augusto Rosa, nº 24 at Pç. da Batalha, 4000-098, Porto, Portugal.

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