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DEMOCRACY'S NEWS

A PRIMER ON JOURNALISM FOR CITIZENS WHO
CARE ABOUT DEMOCRACY

G. Michael Killenberg and Rob Anderson

Since the Founding, America's faith in a democratic republic has depended on citizens who could be trusted to be communicators. Vigorous talk about equality, rights, and collaboration fueled the revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution with its amendments. In a republic, the people set the terms for their lives not individually, but in community. The genius of keeping it alive exists in how everyday citizens talk and listen, write and read, for a common good. Dialogue and deliberation—rather than an accumulation of individual preferences—sustains a republic, yet a diminished and scarred institution of journalism jeopardizes citizens' access to shared and truthful information. A disturbing “what's in it for me?” attitude has taken over many citizens, and a creeping, autocratic sense of dismissive accusation too often characterizes the political style of elected officials.

The basic fuel for democracy is the willingness of informed citizens to take each other seriously as they talk about political choices. Once we begin to clam up, build walls, and dismiss each other, we unravel the threads tying us to the Founders' vision of a republic. A free press and free speech become meaningless if not supported by sustained listening to multiple positions. There are those who profit by dividing citizens into two camps: a comfortable “us” versus a scary “them.” They make their case with accusations and often with lies. They warp the very meaning of communication, hoping citizens never truly discover each other's humanity. *Democracy's News* discusses today's problems of public communication in the context of history, law, and interpersonal life. News should not be something to dread, mistrust, or shun. Aided by reliable, factual journalism, citizens can develop a community-based knowledge to cope with social issues great and small. They come to treat neighbors and strangers as more than stereotypes or opponents. They become collaborators with whom to identify and sustain a working republic where news, citizenship, and public discourse merge.

G. Michael Killenberg is Professor Emeritus and Founding Director of the Department of Journalism and Digital Communication at the University of South Florida.

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