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Bridging the Civic Information Gap: A Comparative Study of Documenters' Notes and Meeting Minutes

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Abstract

The Documenters Network was founded to make local public meeting information more accessible to community residents. Public meetings and their documentation are understudied. With fewer local journalists and declining journalistic coverage, these records now serve as storytelling tools for residents engaged with local government processes. This study compares official minutes taken by city staff with notes taken by Documenters at 46 public meetings. Using a combination of content analysis approaches, it examines these records based on accessibility, transparency, and the provision of additional context. This study addresses gaps in research on meeting documentation, evaluates how effectively each type fills civic information gaps created by the decline of local journalism, and highlights their importance in fostering transparency and participation.

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Introduction

Public meetings are often the only opportunities for community members to access the elected and appointed policy elites making decisions that affect their daily lives (Collins, 2021). Historically, these meetings have been documented through official meeting minutes and information gleaned about policy decisions and decisionmakers was shared with the public through legacy media, such as newspapers. But over the last few decades, many legacy institutions have had to cut staff that typically covered the local government beat because of financial hardships largely attributed to the digitization of traditional media (Besley & Roberts, 2010). As a result of these losses, local political coverage has also decreased (Peterson, 2021). To attempt to bridge the resulting gap left in access to civic information, Chicago's City Bureau began the Documenters Network in 2018 to centralize local public meeting information in one easily searchable online platform. The initiative's success has expanded the Documenters Network to 25 U.S. cities, including the two largest cities in Michigan: Detroit and Grand Rapids.

The Grand Rapids Community Media Center (GRCMC) is a nonprofit media organization serving the Grand Rapids area. Initially a television station, it has since grown to include five programs: a community radio station (WYCE), a performance venue (the Wealthy Theatre), a public access television station (GRTV), web development services, and *The Rapidian*, a hyperlocal news initiative (Grand Rapids Community Media Center, n.d.). *The Rapidian* was originally launched in 2009 and remained active for over 10 years before entering a nearly four-year hiatus. The news site was relaunched by the GRCMC in fall 2023 with new staff and a new chapter of the Documenters Network (Grand Rapids Community Media Center, 2023; 2024). Documenters are community residents who are trained and paid to attend local government meetings and take notes, which are subsequently posted online.

To investigate the impact of their work on the quality and accessibility of civic information, this study analyzes the training that the Documenters receive, as well as the notes and formal minutes of public meetings covered by Grand Rapids Documenters. First, the study outlines the existing scholarship on civic information and the way in which information from public meetings may be evaluated. Using these tools and concepts, this study contributes to the field by comparatively analyzing meeting documentation derived from two different sources.

Literature review

This litereature review provides a summary of previous research regarding civic information, access to public meetings, and communication infrastructure theory.

Civic information

Public meetings are understudied communicative events. Over 20 years ago, McComas (2001; 2003a; 2003b) provided some insight into how community members viewed public meetings, and later they and others focused on rituals enacted by participants therein (McComas et al., 2010). Adams (2004) considered the role of public meetings in American participatory democracy, noting that they are a place where community members may "carry out a political struggle to have their voices heard and recommendations heeded" (p. 52). More recently, Einstein et al. (2019; 2023) found that those participating in both online and offline public meetings are not typically representative of their communities. Collins (2021) questioned the impacts of the

structure of school board meetings in southern California. Fan and Fox (2022) provided an account of how the abrupt transition to online public meetings at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted community participation in two Midwestern U.S. cities.

Local governments in the state of Michigan are required by the 1976 Michigan Open Meetings Act to produce official meeting minutes (Open Meetings Act, 1976). There is very little scholarship focused on meeting minutes or notes. McEachern (1998) cited business communication textbooks recommending that meeting minutes should only include the minimum amount of information. This is in alignment with Robert's Rules of Order, which specified that the content of minutes should "contain mainly a record of what was done at the meeting, not what was said by the members" (Robert et al., 2020, 48:2). From their analysis of public meeting notes in a Rocky Mountain city, Reinig and Sprain (2019) suggested that the practice of note-taking is taken for granted. They found that meeting notes have the potential to do much more than simply document formal motions and roll-call votes. Piotrowski and Borry (2010) included minutes as one of eight components of their framework for analyzing the levels of transparency in public meetings. In contrast to Robert's Rules, they noted that including more information about what was discussed during the meeting leads to greater transparency and more opportunities for the public to hold officials accountable (Piotrowski & Borry, 2010). Indeed, Collins (2021) found that the experiences of witnessing public participation and deliberation between officials and the public were correlated both with increased trust in public officials and an increased likelihood of future public meeting attendance.

Aside from meeting minutes or notes, community residents have traditionally obtained local civic information through journalism produced by newspaper reporters on the government beat. Usher (2019) comprehensively described how local journalism has been researched under the assumption that local communities need information, that these communities are sites where democracy happens, and that policy elites need accountability checks. But approximately 20 percent of legacy media outlets in the U.S. have closed in recent decades, leaving gaps in coverage that have begun to be filled in part by nonprofit news organizations (Usher, 2021; Usher & Kim-Leffingwell, 2023). Following the digitization of the media environment, however, there are innumerable other sources for news that compete for the local audience's attention, including social media (Thorson et al., 2020). This has contributed to the decline in Americans' attention to local news, even while they hold increasingly favorable views of local journalists in terms of reporting accuracy and connection to the community (Shearer et al., 2024). With the loss of revenue from print advertising, many local news organizations have also installed paywalls preventing non-subscribers from accessing content (Olsen et al., 2020). In effect, there has been both a pull and a push away from local news media. This is concerning, as there is support for the positive effect of traditional local media on voter turnout, but not for digital media (Min et al., 2022). The community context has been shown to matter for effects of digital media consumption on other types of participation such as writing to policy elites, donating to causes, or attending public meetings. For instance, Shao et al. (2022) found a negative relationship between social/mobile news consumption and rural residents' online participation, but a slightly positive relationship with non-rural (combined urban + suburban) residents' online participation. Though the findings are mixed, extant research has identified a relationship between local news consumption and political and civic engagement. It follows that lower participation in local public meetings creates an environment that enables less government transparency. Without traditional journalists serving as watchdogs, many community members would be none the wiser.

In July 2023, the American Journalism Project (AJP) published the findings of a community listening project related to local news in West Michigan, where the City of Grand Rapids is situated. The Grand Rapids news media landscape was evaluated as a part of this project. The AJP found that the local legacy media, including the *Grand Rapids Press*, owned by the statewide MLive Media Group, as well as WOOD-TV and WOOD Newsradio, have been decreasing their coverage of original news in Grand Rapids. Other organizations include ethnic media and independent organizations that are limited in capacity and scope, or that are reliant on either advertisement or subscription revenues. Of the media profiled, the local nonprofit newsrooms such as *The Rapidian* were determined to have the most growth potential. When residents in Grand Rapids and other West Michigan communities were interviewed individually or in focus groups, people said they wanted more local news overall, and more watchdog journalism focused on local government transparency and accountability (American Journalism Project, 2023). This study was completed just as the GRCMC was planning on relaunching *The Rapidian* with its new Documenters chapter.

Assessing public meeting information

One must be able to access civic information for it to have any effect on knowledge or efficacy. In online spaces, navigability is defined as how easy it is for a person to find information (Wojdynski & Kalyanaraman, 2016). Wojdynski & Kalyanaraman (2016) described three dimensions of website navigability that encompass different features such as links, the wording of text, visual design, site maps, and menus. Changes to these features can lead to an increase or reduction in the search or task time, among other effects. Once a person retrieves civic information, there are several other factors to consider. Studies using information processing theory have found that too much text-based information is associated with higher cognitive overload, which is in turn associated with lower usefulness (Lee et al., 2020). Therefore, length is another important measure for accessibility and usability. For government documents in particular, a higher word count not only increases the size, but also complexity for an average reader (Yusuf et al., 2023).

Content-based accessibility can be measured using tools such as the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE) scale or the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL). Rudolph Flesch was an advocate for plain language and writing who proposed the FRE scale in the late 1940s to measure readability of text (Schriver, 2017). The FRE scale is expressed in scores between 0 and 100, where greater readability is associated with higher scores. Flesch determined that "plain English" was associated with a score between 60-70 (Schriver, 2017). The FKGL unites the FRE with the number of years of formal U.S. education one might need to understand the content (Sparks & Waddell, 2024). FKGL scores between 0 and 6 represent elementary school reading levels, 6 through 9 represent middle school, 9 through 12 represent high school, and 12 and above represent college and above (Readable, n.d.). While imperfect, both tools have been used by scholars to measure reading comprehension in technical documents such as government financial reports (Yusuf et al., 2023) and in news stories (Sparks & Waddell, 2024). However, understanding is not necessarily correlated with usability (Schriver, 2017).

Providing context can increase the efficacy derived from consuming civic information. In their study of local government websites, Musso et al. (2000) defined sites that facilitate both good management and good democracy as "exemplary." These exemplary sites provided substantial information and links to other government agencies and/or nongovernmental organizations. They also found that affordances such as hyperlinks enable interactivity with the site, and thereby serve

as a participatory element (Musso et al., 2000). More recently, Kulkarni et al. (2023) found that providing context around news stories and enabling agency through interactivity with the text increased the effectiveness of online news storytelling.

Communication infrastructure theory

Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) identified two predominant views of the state of civic society: 1) that civic engagement is in decline for a variety of reasons, and 2) that there is a restructuring of civil society happening. The researchers offered communication infrastructure theory (CIT) as a third view, that the strength of civic society in urban environments is dependent on the strength of its communication infrastructure.

The first of two primary components of CIT is the storytelling network, or what Friedland (2001) referred to as the community communication ecology. In CIT, this network comprises three levels of storytellers. At the macro level, storytellers such as metro newspapers or broadcast media focus on citywide, statewide, national, and international audiences. Key meso-level storytellers are geo-ethnic media and both informal and formal community or nonprofit organizations, including local government (Battocchio et al., 2024). Micro storytellers are individuals and neighbor networks. The second element of CIT is the communication action context (CAC). Based both on neighborhood effects research from the sociology discipline and Habermas' concept of the public sphere, the CAC is the boundary of a geographic area as defined "by shared conventions" (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001, p. 396). To measure the quality of a storytelling network, Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) suggested using the level of integration of the communicative actions of storytellers at different levels.

With the decline of local legacy news, the local government and *The Rapidian* with its Documenters serve as key storytellers in the Grand Rapids CAC. This study poses four research questions to explore the nature of citizen documenter summaries of public meetings in comparison to what the government provides.

RQ1: What topics are the Grand Rapids Documenters introduced to in their training?

RQ2: How accessible are formal agency minutes and the Documenters' notes taken at public meetings in Grand Rapids?

RQ3: How transparent are formal agency minutes and the Documenters' notes taken at public meetings in Grand Rapids?

RQ4: What additional context is given for readers of the formal agency minutes and the Documenters' notes taken at public meetings in Grand Rapids?

Method

This study used multiple content analysis approaches to investigate the training received by Grand Rapids Documenters, the Documenters' notes, and the formal agency meeting minutes taken at local public meetings.

Training sessions

At the time of the writing of this article, the staff of *The Rapidian* facilitated orientation sessions for new Documenters bi-monthly. Two training sessions offered to Grand Rapids Documenters were analyzed for this study. The first was an in-person orientation for new Documenters, held on May 29, 2024, at the Wealthy Theatre located in Grand Rapids' Uptown neighborhood. The second, held on June 17, 2024, was a special training offered virtually via Zoom to current Documenters interested in taking assignments to assist with editing Documenters' notes. An inductive approach was used to analyze ethnographic field notes taken by the author at both sessions, resulting in the identification of themes.

Ten people attended the orientation on May 29, 2024. They came from several different Grand Rapids neighborhoods as well as from communities outside of Grand Rapids. During the hour and a half session, *The Rapidian* staff outlined step-by-step how to apply for assignments, prepare for public meetings, and how to take and structure their notes. They also reviewed how to document audio-only assignments using timestamps, as well as the pay for different types of assignments. Existing Documenters who were interested in taking on newly-created notes editing assignments were invited to attend a virtual training on June 17, 2024. Only those who had already been through the Documenters orientation were invited to participate in this training session, which was advertised in the weekly assignments email sent out by *The Rapidian'*s Civic Producer through the Documenters Network platform. To be eligible to take on these assignments, the two Documenters in attendance were informed that they had to have documented at least three meetings themselves, though the Program Manager noted that it was "kind of a loose rule." (See Table 1, next page.)

Text analysis

The Grand Rapids Documenters covered 66 meetings during the selected study period between September 19, 2023, and June 30, 2024. This timeframe was selected because the author began this project in July 2024 and at that time the Grand Rapids Documenters chapter had only been in existence since September 2023 (nine months). Local government meetings without official minutes posted online (20) include those held by various committees of the City and Grand Rapids Public Schools, the Board of Zoning Appeals, a community master plan feedback session, and a meeting of the Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention/Arena Authority.

To enable comparison, only the 46 meetings covered by the Grand Rapids Documenters that also had official minutes taken by the government body were included in this analysis; therefore, a total of 92 documents were analyzed. When both "full" and "public" minutes were available via the City of Grand Rapids website, the "full" minutes were used because these documents contained more detail. The City Commission is the primary legislative body in Grand Rapids and was the most frequently covered. The City Planning Commission is responsible for guiding development in Grand Rapids and overseeing the implementation of the city's master plan, among other duties. There are six corridor improvement authorities (CIAs) established in Grand Rapids: Michigan Street, North Quarter, South Division/Grandville Avenue, Southtown, Uptown, and Westside. CIAs, brownfield redevelopment authorities, and local development finance authorities in Michigan are authorized through state legislation to raise revenues through the capture of property tax increases for the purpose of funding eligible public projects within their

Table 1

Documenters training topics

Themes	*Subthemes*	*Examples from observation notes*
Ethics	Accuracy	* What should be fact-checked? Answer: Everything (6/17/24) * If they need clarification, they can go to the city manager or communications director (5/29/2024) * Public comment is "one of the most important parts of a public meeting," so they should be sure to capture it well (5/29/24)
	Accessibility	* Clarity and conciseness are crucial – everyone should be able to understand the notes (6/17/24) * Formatting is key, as the "key thing to readability (6/17/24)
	"What do other sources say?"	* Look up who is on the board or body being covered and search for local news on that body (5/29/24) * Provide context and background information (6/17/24) * "If there are debates at the table, capture that to get where officials stand on the issue (5/29/24)
	"Everyone has a worldview"	* "Lived experiences are the lenses we see things through," so they are not asking for full objectivity (5/29/24) * They don't believe there is such a thing as objectivity (6/17/24)
Tools		* They suggested cleaning up the notes and said to use Grammarly if they have it (5/29/24) * At *The Rapidian*, they have a style guide they use when they edit (6/17/24) * Editors have different styles, and they shared one from the Poynter Institute (6/17/24)
Regulations		* The Michigan Open Meetings Act states that meetings must be accessible and noticed (5/29/24) * They showed a separate slide on the Fair Report Privilege and noted that Documenters are protected by this in Michigan as long as they are being honest in their reporting (5/29/24)

designated boundaries (Brownfield Redevelopment Financing Act, 1996; Recodified Tax Increment Financing Act, 2018). The Mobile GR Commission is affiliated with a city department of the same name. It was established to "make sure that all types of mobility are included in the City's vision" (City of Grand Rapids, n.d.). The Grand Rapids Historic Preservation Commission is tasked primarily with reviewing renovation applications from property owners in historic districts to ensure the proposed activities maintain the historic integrity of the structures. Finally, the Board of Library Commissioners and the Board of Education oversee decisions made about the Grand Rapids Public Library system and Grand Rapids Public School District, respectively.

Table 2

Public meetings with formal minutes and Documenters' notes

Government body	*Meeting dates*	*Total meetings*
City Commission	2023: Oct. 10, 24, 31; Nov. 14; Dec. 5, 12 2024: Jan. 9, 23; Feb. 6, 20; March 19; April 9, 23; May 7, June 4	15
Corrider Improvement Authorities	2024: Feb. 2, 7, 14, 15; March 13, 20, 21 April 18; June 7, 12, 13, 20	12
City Planning Commisison	2023: Oct. 12, 26; Nov. 9; Dec. 14 2024: Jan. 11, 25; March 14; April 25	8
Mobile GR Commission	2023: Nov. 2; Dec. 7 2024: Feb. 1 ; March 7 ; May 2	5
Board of Education	2023: Oct. 16 2024: Feb. 20	2
Board of Library Commissioners	2024: June 25	1
Brownfield Redevelopment Authority	2024: June 26	1
Historic Preservation Commission	2024: May 1	1
SmartZone Local Development Finance Authority	2023: Nov. 8	1

Analysis

The meeting documentation was analyzed using both quantitative methods and qualitative content analysis (QCA). As noted in the literature review above, and to answer the research questions, various measures were employed to address the three primary categories: accessibility, transparency and context (See Table 3).

Table 3

Measures for accessibility, transparency and context

Accessibility	*Transparency*	*Context*
Readability	Number of attendees	Hyperlinks to additional information
Document length	Dialogue among staff	Hyperlinks to other media
Navigation	Public comments noted	Hyperlinks to meeting recording
	Public participation noted	Definition of terms in text
	Response to public comment	Contact information provided
	Name of recorder	

Quantitative

The Accessibility items were analyzed quantitatively. Following Sparks and Waddell (2024), readability was measured by the FRE and FKGL scales. These scores, as well as the document length, were calculated using Readable.com, an online tool that analyzes text and uploaded documents for reading comprehension. The total number of clicks it took to get to the minutes or Documenters' notes from a primary starting point were also counted. While not an exact proxy for the three navigability dimensions proposed by Wojdynski and Kalyanaraman (2016), this measure was selected to symbolize the amount of time it took to access the meeting documentation. For meeting minutes, the City of Grand Rapids website (grandrapidsmi.gov) and the Grand Rapids Public Schools (grps.org) website were used.

Qualitative

The Transparency and Context categories were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). In journalism and communication research, content analysis has been predominantly applied quantitatively (Riffe et al., 2019). Citing Morgan (1993), Hsieh and Shannon (2005) referred to this traditional view of content analysis as "quantitative analysis of qualitative data" (p. 1278). In contrast, QCA both describes and interprets textual data (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Upshaw & Davis, 2022). There are three identifiable approaches to QCA: conventional, directed, and summative (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Cho and Lee (2014) noted that the specific procedures also vary based on whether an inductive or deductive approach is taken.

The meeting minutes and Documenters notes from the 46 meetings listed in Table 1 were analyzed using directed QCA, which is a deductive approach. In directed QCA, the initial categories and subcategories are identified using existing literature or theory. During preliminary analysis, revisions may be made to these subcategories. This approach was chosen because the meeting minutes and notes are so differently structured that inductive coding, used in conventional QCA, or predefined keywords, used in summative QCA, would have made comparison significantly more challenging.

While terms like *reliability* and *validity* are used in the traditional, quantitative approach to content analysis, Elo et al. (2014) noted that *trustworthiness* is the most-used term for describing the criteria for evaluating the quality of QCA. Depending on the way that data is collected, QCA may include a varying number of steps within three phases of preparation, organization, and reporting (Assarroudi et al., 2018; Upshaw & Davis, 2022). Building upon Elo et al., (2014), Assarroudi et al. (2018) proposed a 16-step method for establishing trustworthiness in directed QCA using data collected through interviewing. To adapt this process for other types of content, Upshaw and Davis (2022) reduced it to 11 steps, which were followed for this study.

To increase trustworthiness, each step should be delineated within the three phases (Assarroudi et al., 2018). Under preparation, this includes acquiring the skills needed to perform the analysis, choosing a suitable sampling strategy, identifying the unit of analysis, and data immersion. The organization phase involves developing a matrix of categories and subcategories, identifying coding rules and "anchor samples," preliminary coding, categorization, and establishing the connection between the category levels (Upshaw & Davis, 2022, p. 484). Finally, the reporting phase entails providing a detailed reporting of the process and the findings (Assarroudi et al., 2018).

The unit of analysis for this study was the set of minutes or notes. Additional subcategories were added following the author's immersion in the data, and Table 3, on the previous page, includes the final sets for both the Transparency and Context categories that were used. The content of the minutes and notes was explicit, and if a subcategory was present, it was coded as such using MAXQDA software. If a subcategory was present in both the minutes and the Documenters' notes for the same meeting, the coded text was compared. Quotes and examples were selected and described in the findings to illustrate these comparisons.

Findings

Quantitative findings: Accessibility

A one-way ANOVA was calculated using statistical software (SPSS) for all meetings using the recording body as the independent variable and the Flesch Reading Ease (FRE), Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL), and document length (in words) as dependent variables. A significant difference was noted between the minutes and Documenters' notes for Flesch Reading Ease ($F(1, 90) = 4.950$, $p = 0.029$) and for document length ($F(1, 90) = 16.550$, $p < 0.001$), but not for the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level ($F(1,90) = 2.066$, $p = 0.154$). The Documenters' notes had a higher mean Flesch Reading Ease score and there was more consistency across the sample. The mean word count for Documenters' notes was also lower by approximately 4,867 words, which equates to between 10 and 12 pages of single-spaced text, depending on the font used.

Table 4

Descriptives for accessibility measures of readability and document length (*N* = 46)

Measure	M	SD
Flesch Reading Ease (FRE)		
Agency minutes	47.46	10.49
Documenters	51.23	4.68
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level (FKGL)		
Agency minutes	8.49	1.23
Documenters	8.78	0.63
Word count		
Agency minutes	6,486.54	8,068.87
Documenters	1,619.46	857.69

From the City of Grand Rapids website, one must click on "Government," and then "Meetings." From this page, there are three options. In four clicks, starting from the "Meetings Portal," one must hover over three dots to see the minutes for the City Commission, named "Official Proceedings." It is also possible to access the City Commission minutes in six clicks by clicking directly on "City Commission," then "City Commission Meeting Agendas and Minutes," and then "Meetings Portal" as described above. In seven clicks, starting from "Meeting Calendar," one can access all city meeting minutes by clicking on the year, a drop-down menu for the government body of interest, and then on the meeting date and time. This leads to the meeting agenda, which has hyperlinks at the top for "Public Minutes" and "Full Minutes."

From the Grand Rapids Public Schools website, meeting minutes are accessible in seven clicks by first clicking on "Our District," then "Board of Education," and scrolling down to the button for meeting notices and agendas. A separate website called Board Docs opens, and then one must click "Enter Public Site," followed by "Meetings" on the right before being taken to a list of meetings. At the time of writing, minutes are available for most full Board of Education meetings, but not all.

For Documenters' notes, there were three local options for starting points: The GRCMC website (grcmc.org), *The Rapidian*'s news platform (therapidian.org), and *The Rapidian*'s weekly email newsletter, *The Current*. From the GRCMC website, one can access Documenters notes in two clicks by first clicking on the button for "*The Rapidian*" and then on "Documenters." From *The Rapidian*'s separate site, there is currently no direct link to Documenters' notes. At the time of writing, this site is in the process of being redeveloped by the GRCMC Web Services department. For subscribers to *The Current*, Documenters' notes are accessible by scrolling to the "GR Documenters" section, which includes a list of the meetings recently covered, a short description of each, and a link to the notes in one click.

Qualitative findings: Transparency and context

The variability in the structure of meeting minutes was considerable. Most of the government bodies used a similar heading format that includes the city's logo, meeting name, meeting location, date, and time. The commission or authority members who were present and absent are listed at the top. The results of motions were highlighted in gray text boxes that included the names of the mover, the seconder, the yea votes, the nay votes, the recused, and the absent. Beyond these elements, there were differences in what was included. The corridor improvement authorities showed an "other" category for attendees, which could include staff, whereas the City Planning Commission specifies "staff present." These elements aligned with the requirements of the Michigan Open Meetings Act of 1976, but beyond them there were significant differences. In particular, the City Planning Commission minutes included more narrative and dialogue to a degree not seen in any other meeting documentation examined for this study.

The City Commission minutes deviated from the structure used by other government bodies, as did the Board of Library Commissioners and the Board of Education in different ways. Documenters' notes, by contrast, followed the same general format for all meetings covered. Staff at *The Rapidian* provide Documenters with a template Google document that includes placeholders for the name of the meeting, the name of the Documenter, the date, and a link to the meeting information on Documenters.org at the top. Other sections include "pre-research," which was typically populated with additional information about the commission or authority and links to the

agenda, agenda packet, and video or audio recordings of the meeting. "Notes" were typically organized by the items listed on the meeting agenda. "Highlight" is reserved for making note of something particularly interesting that happened during the meeting, but it was not always used. A bulleted list of what happened at the meeting is included in the "summary" section. The "follow-up questions" provides a space within which the Documenters can ask questions about what happened or what was covered in the meeting. According to the May 29, 2024, Documenters orientation, this section informs the interview questions for elected and appointed city officials on *City Connection*, the monthly television program co-produced by *The Rapidian* and GRTV, as well as other reporting by *The Rapidian*.

Names and contact information

Robert's Rules of Order state that minutes "should be signed by the secretary and can also be signed, if the assembly wishes, by the president" (Robert, 2020, 48:8). All meeting minutes of the City Commission and the School Board in the sample included the name, but not the signature, of the City Clerk or the Executive Assistant to the Superintendent, respectfully, at the end of the documents. The minutes for the City Planning Commission for all but one of the meetings in the sample included the name and title of the recording secretary, but in the beginning of the documents in the "staff present" section. This represents just over half of all the meetings in the sample.

As part of the template for the Grand Rapids Documenters' notes, the same email address was provided at the end of document with a note asking readers to contact the GRCMC staff if they find inaccuracies in the notes. Email addresses were also provided in the minutes of the City Planning Commission for each agenda item assigned to staff. There was no additional contact information provided in any of the other government bodies' meeting minutes.

Public comments and participation

There was more variability in how and whether written comments were discussed in the Documenters' notes than in the minutes for the City Commission meetings. In many cases, the Documenters' notes and the meeting minutes matched, using the language directly from the agenda. The word "regarding" was used often, indicating the topic of the comments but not details of support or opposition by the submitter. In other cases, the Documenters' notes contained this additional detail whereas the minutes did not. There were also several meetings for which the Documenter made no mention of written comments received. For the City Planning Commission meetings, there was often more detail provided in the minutes on written comments received than in the Documenter's notes. For example, the minutes from the City Planning Commission's meeting on March 14, 2024, indicate that:

> Staff has received letters of both opposition and support. Those in opposition expressed concerns related to traffic, density, the navigability of the streets during the winter due to the substandard nature of the streets, existing street parking, and specifically related to the Mason Street Garage, which is south of the site across Mason St. Those in support indicated that this is exactly the kind of development that Grand Rapids needs to provide the needed housing in the community (p. 4).

In contrast, the Documenter's notes for this same agenda item stated simply that "ten letters and a petition from nearby residents were attached to the agenda regarding this project" (p. 2).

The city was inconsistent with quantifying the number of written comments received for a given issue. When the city did note the number of communications, the Documenter also included this information if they made mention of submitted written comments. In two instances, the minutes did not reflect the significant number of written comments submitted, whereas the Documenter's notes did. An example is shown in Table 5, below.

Table 5

Comparing quantification of written comments submitted (City Commission, Nov. 14, 2023)

Meeting minutes	*Documenter's notes*
93046 Result: Received and Filed. Communications received urging the City Commission to fund community needs, not provide military aid to Israel. (p. 1)	Communications received urging the City Commission to fund community needs, not provide military aid to Israel * Available on the city's website. * According to City Clerk Joel Hondorp, There are "approximately 375+" of these communications. * Received and filed. (p. 3)

There was a sizable difference observed between the minutes and Documenters' notes regarding how the public comment sections were described in City Commission meetings. There was no documentation of the content of public participation or the number of people who spoke during the public comment portion in any of the minutes for the City Commission meetings. This is also the case for all but one of the minutes documents for the CIA meetings. In contrast, the Documenters' notes provided either a summary of comments made or a detailed accounting of each person's individual comments, depending on the Documenter, for all meetings in the sample. In many cases, direct quotes from commenters were included in the notes.

The Documenters' notes similarly covered public participation at City Planning Commission meetings, but the minutes from those meetings include much more of a point-by-point description for each person making comments. An example comparing the two is shown in Table 6, below.

Table 6

Comparing documentation of public participation (City Planning Commission, Jan. 11, 2024)

Meeting minutes	*Documenter's notes*
Marcus Ringnalda stated that he is founder and President of Friends of Four Star which owns and operates the Four Star Theatre. Mr. Ringnalda feels this is a cool project and he is totally supportive. He wished to speak to the Area Specific Plan and the parking because the next phase of the Four Star Theatre will be asking for another variance for an occupancy of 400 or higher. He has heard chatter about the City owned lot and that Mobile GR has issues with it; it is expensive to maintain and there is illicit activity. As a result, there is potentially a RFP for development of that site. As a district, and for the sort of things the applicant wishes to do, that parking is essential. The Area Specific Plan has a very small portion showing transit oriented development. Parking is an asset to projects like this in the community and he hopes it can remain that way. (p. 36)	Marcus Ringnalda, the founder and president of Friends of Four Star, stated that he supports the project, but had questions about the City-owned parking lot. He wondered if the lot would be redeveloped. (p. 10)

Members of the Board or Commission were noted as responding to public comment only in the minutes of the City Planning Commission and the School Board. However, the Documenters' notes showed that the City Commissioners did indeed respond to the substance of public comments indirectly during their deliberations. The Commissioners addressed and elaborated about the topic at hand, provided instruction, and expressed gratitude and defensiveness in their responses. In some cases, the Commissioners or the Mayor simply recognized certain groups in attendance. Examples of each of these types of responses are provided in Table 7.

Table 7

City Commission responses to public comment in Documenter's notes

Response type	*Documenter's notes*
Elaboration	Commissioners Knight, O'Connor, Ysasi, Robbins and Perdue addressed the comments made about transportation, traffic safety, protected bike lanes and microbobility. • Multiple commissioners also spoke about some of the items discussed during the Public Safety Committee meeting, which took place earlier in the day. • Commissioner Perdue spoke about "the concept of thinking long-term" and emphasized her commitment to a "holistic approach to public safety" (p. 5). (January 23, 2024)
Instruction	Mayor Bliss asked that public comments related to the Butterworth Street and Eastern Avenue projects wait until their respective public hearings (p. 2). (February 6, 2024)
Gratitude	Commissioner Perdue thanked those who gave public comment for Illustrating the "overt and covert ways that racism still operates in our City in the past and the present. And certainly I think there's a role in government to try to right someo f those wrongs and a role for us in community to help right those wrongs and work together." (p. 6). (May 7, 2024)
Defensiveness	Robbins: "I do think if there is an important distinction that I want to make about varying levels of government and what we can do and what we can't do and I recognize that probably the purview that we have as a body is not as far-reaching as many of you would hope, but I do hope you know that we as a body, and myself, remain committed to making sure that our community is a place that's safe and welcoming to all people. I know some people mentioned it tonight… contacting representatives at the federal level to talk about things that are going on at a global scale as it pertains to different conflicts and so I hope that me encouraging you to continue to do that provides you a productive means to channel… emotions and thoughts about certain things and (I) just hope you know that… when it comes to our role and what we can do from this dais – we are committed to keeping our city safe and welcoming to all people" (p. 9-10). (November 14, 2023)
Recognition	She recognized a group of students from Calvin University, expressing her hope that they had an opportunity to learn (p. 5) (February 20, 2024)

Most of the responses to public comments from the City Planning Commission and the School Board fall into the elaboration, gratitude, and recognition types. In the Documenters' notes for the School Board meeting on February 20, 2024, one of the Board members was noted as stating that the Board does not respond to public comments. This was not reflected in the minutes, but one of the Board members "responded to the public comments and assured the community he is a volunteer on the board" (p. 5).

Dialogue and deliberation

As with the public comment subcategories, the official minutes of City Commission meetings did not reflect any dialogue or deliberation among members or between members and City staff. Documenters' notes demonstrated that this did occur, but it is only described in the notes from three of the 15 covered City Commission meetings. The City Planning Commission minutes again provided significant detail on back-and-forth dialogue among the members, between members and staff, and between members, staff, and applicants. This was also the case for the minutes of the one Historic Preservation Commission meeting in the sample, which were coincidentally taken by the same recording secretary. Like the records of public participation, the Documenters' notes were much more concise in their descriptions than the minutes from the City Planning Commission, as shown in Table 8.

Though present in the minutes, there was no mention of dialogue or deliberation in the Documenters' notes from the Historic Preservation Commission, the Board of Library Commissioners, or the School Board meetings. However, the Documenters captured dialogue and deliberation in their notes for eight of the corridor improvement authority meetings whereas the minutes for those meetings only reflect these phenomena in one.

Additional information

Only the two sets of School Board meeting minutes contained hyperlinks to additional information, and all four of these links connect to videos. By contrast, all the Documenters' notes included links to several types of media, including video recordings of the meetings and one audio recording, taken by a Documenter, of a meeting without video. The notes often linked to news stories from Grand Rapids-area television stations such as Fox 17 and WOOD-TV; newspapers such as the *Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News*; WGVU, the local National Public Radio affiliate station; the hard paywalled *Crain's Grand Rapids Business*; the soft paywalled MLive.com, a statewide news website; and *The Rapidian*. National or out-of-state news stories were also occasionally linked, as were social media posts and books.

In addition to these media, the Documenters' notes included hyperlinks to other local, regional, state, and federal government websites and both local and national businesses. Connections to the websites of nonprofit and community groups, most of which are local neighborhood, advocacy, or charitable organizations, were incorporated. The notes also included links to Documenters' notes from previous meetings. Finally, specialized terms such as 'variance' and 'parking bollards' were defined and sourced via hyperlinks by Documenters in four sets of notes from City Planning Commissions.

Table 8

Comparing documentation of dialogue (City Planning Commission, April 25, 2024)

Meeting minutes	*Documenter's notes*
Ms. Bersche explained that she read through the due care plan. She asked if there is continued ground water monitoring in the southern parking area and where the high concentrations are located. Mr. Strautz agreed. He explained that they would like to keep the portion of the site they aren't developing encapsulated. Full remediation will be done everywhere to the east of the red line and to the west they would like to continue to monitor and encapsulate so as not to disturb what remains there. Ms. Bersche clarified that they wish to retain the parking areas that are there. She asked if there are any areas of cracking or escape happening from the ground water there now. It doesn't appear to be in great shape. Mr. Strautz replied that it isn't in great shape. SME comes out routinely to continue checking the site to ensure they are following all protocols and that they don't have to make any major deviations or site improvements to ensure everything remains encapsulated. Most of the basements they encountered in the due diligence plan are to the north. At the 1601 Madison building they had 8-10 ft. of undercutting that was necessary. (p. 11)	Kristine Bersche asked for clarification regarding the parking lot and if there is continuing groundwater monitoring. Strautz confirmed that SME, an engineering consultant with locations in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio, is coming around routinely to check the site and ensure that all protocols are followed. (p. 5)

Discussion

There is debate about whether to refer to what the Documenters do as some new iteration of journalism. While civic or citizen journalists are often compared to professional journalists in scholarship, there does not appear to be an agreed-upon modern definition of what constitutes adequate professional training; instead, the word "professional" is assumed to be universally understood. Documenters receive training that echoes several of the elements that comprise the first principle of the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, "seek truth and report it" (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). They are taught to prioritize accuracy, provide context, document dialogue, provide access to source material via hyperlinks, and attribute quotes. They are positioned as having protection from accusations of defamation by the Fair Report Privilege precedent in the same matter as professional journalists (Revised Judicature Act, 1961). Ellis et al. (2022) presented a journalist continuum, with professional journalists on one end and independent citizen journalists on the other. They placed the Documenters at the "guided citizen reporting" location along this continuum, just one move away from the independent citizen journalist (Ellis et al., 2022, p. 71). However, the authors noted that citizen journalists are also capable of performing the tasks typically associated with professional journalists. Usher (2021) agreed, and among their suggestions for how to move forward following the decline of local news, they proposed the "unbundling" of journalism, "leaving other sources and community institutions that are already able to pick up some of these functions to do so" (p. 245).

The Documenters program also offers a unique opportunity for residents to actively participate in their community. At the beginning of the May 29, 2024, orientation session, attendees shared reasons for their interest in becoming Documenters. The group was split nearly in half: either they had a background in writing or journalism, or they wanted to better inform themselves and support accountability and transparency in local government. *The Rapidian* staff provided an overview of the pay that Documenters earn for covering meetings, but none of the attendees focused on this aspect of the role during the question-and-answer period at the end of the session. While future research is needed to understand whether the Documenters' notes lead to increased civic or political participation at the community level, the program's existence does empower those with certain backgrounds, skill sets, and interests to become involved.

Just as there is a question about whether what the Documenters do is a form of journalism, their role in the local community communication ecology is not easily defined. As residents alone, they might be designated as micro storytellers according to CIT. However, their connection to *The Rapidian* and the GRCMC and the broader availability of their meeting notes via the Documenters.org platform places them more accurately in what Friedland (2001) referred to as a transitional, meso-micro storytelling role within the communicatively integrated community. In public meetings, Documenters serve as proxies for all Grand Rapids residents. They are encouraged to ask questions in their notes about the meeting norms, procedures, or the topics being discussed. Their notes, following editing by *The Rapidian* staff, then become part of the suite of services being offered by the GRCMC to fulfill its mission to "connect local communities through media" (Grand Rapids Community Media Center, n.d.).

This study found both similarities and significant differences between the city's minutes and Documenters' notes from public meetings in Grand Rapids. In terms of accessibility, the Documenters' notes were found to be slightly easier to read according to the FRE scale but were still found to be more difficult to read than Flesch's "plain English" standard (Schriver, 2017). However, they were also consistently shorter than meeting minutes, on average, which can support

greater comprehension and usefulness (Lee et al., 2020; Yusuf et al., 2023). It also takes fewer clicks to access the Documenters' notes from all three primary starting points: the GRCMC site, *The Rapidian'*s site, and *The Current*, the weekly email newsletter produced by *The Rapidian*. As of July 2024, there were 208 subscribers to the weekly newsletter published by *The Rapidian* (A. Dressler, personal communication, July 25, 2024). Growing subscriptions to this newsletter would provide the most direct access to the notes taken by Documenters at recent public meetings.

Except for the minutes from the two School Board meetings, the starkest difference in content was in the presence of hyperlinks to additional information provided in every set of Documenters' notes and the lack thereof in the meeting minutes. Having additional information and context readily available in the notes from these meetings may have an impact on efficacy. Internal political efficacy has been defined simply by Beaumont (2011) as a confidence in one's own ability to participate, and Anderson et al. (2016) found internal political efficacy to be a mediator between media consumption and participation. These links also connect readers to other community storytellers such as news media, social media, governments, and nonprofit organizations. While not measured in this study, this points toward the possibility for future integration of the local storytelling network with the Documenters as a catalyst.

Relatedly, Niemi et al. (1991) described external efficacy as personal feelings about how responsive a government will be to individuals' actions. The documentation of dialogue among Commission or Board members, between members and staff, and between members and the public at these meetings transforms Documenters' notes and meeting minutes into versions of mediated deliberation (Page, 1996). In alignment with Collins (2021), both external efficacy and trust may increase when readers can see that their local elected and appointed officials are responsive to each other and to the concerns of those who attend public meetings or submit written comments. Consuming such documentation may encourage readers to become more involved themselves with local government on issues important to them.

There was also substantial variability within each category of documentation. For the minutes, this variability typically aligned with the type of meeting. Each of the bodies covered in this sample operate under different rules and procedures. In the City Commission's Standing Rules, for example, the City Clerk has jurisdiction to include or not include information when recording the communications received in the minutes. Though the structure of minutes is not specified, the rules also state that anything not covered therein may result in in the use of Robert's Rules of Order (Grand Rapids City Commission, 2017). Like other bodies covered in this study, the bylaws of the City Planning Commission also refer to Robert's Rules, but more detail is given on what should be included, at a minimum, in the public record of the meetings (Grand Rapids City Planning Commission, 2018). There is a specific section of the School Board's bylaws that specifies what should be included in the minutes, even though it is ordered strongly that "in no event shall the Board adopt or otherwise use Robert's Rules of Order or any other standard code of parliamentary procedure," (Grand Rapids Public Schools Board of Education, 2017, 1330-4).

The minutes of the City Commission and the City Planning Commission meetings were the outliers in terms of form and the amount of content provided. On one end, the City Commission minutes adhered substantially to Robert's Rules. On the opposite end, the full City Planning Commission minutes included what was said, not just what was done. The other meeting minutes in the sample fell somewhere between these two poles. Though they were not used for this study, the "public" minutes from the City Planning Commission more directly align with the others in the sample by focusing primarily on the actions of the meetings. Both versions of the minutes are

available from the same location on the city's website, but regardless of whether they were posted, the "full" minutes are, in fact, public.

There was less variability in structure of the Documenters' notes because all Documenters use the same general template and *The Rapidian* staff put each set through a two-step editing process. However, there were 17 different Documenters covering the meetings included in the sample. For official meeting minutes, it is typical that the same person takes them at each meeting; indeed, this role is often assigned to a specific position in the bylaws or rules of procedure. While there are Documenters who appear to prefer certain types of meetings over others, they do not necessarily have a "beat" that they consistently cover. For these reasons, the style and presentation still differed somewhat.

Limitations and considerations for future research

This study is necessarily limited to one community, which is not representative of other cities or the United States as a whole. Future research might consider expanding this study to compare meeting minutes and Documenters notes across other cities with Documenters chapters. A more quantitatively-driven approach may also produce interesting findings.

Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006) suggested using the level of connectedness to an integrated storytelling network to measure the impact of the communication infrastructure on individual residents. The integrated connectedness to the storytelling network (ICSN) is measured as a weighted sum of the connections to local media, community organizations, and intensity of interpersonal storytelling. These variables could be operationalized in a future survey of Grand Rapids residents.

Of the meetings without official minutes, the Public Safety Committee, Community Development Committee, Committee on Appointments, and Committee of the Whole meetings were live-streamed and posted on the City's YouTube channel and its Facebook page. The City Commission meetings and the Planning Commission meetings were also live-streamed and posted on the City's YouTube channel and its Facebook page. A recording of the one Brownfield Redevelopment Authority meeting covered by the Documenters was also posted on the City's YouTube channel, but not on its Facebook page. The two Public School Board meetings covered by the Documenters during this timeframe were recorded and posted on the Grand Rapids Public Schools' YouTube channel in English and dubbed in Spanish. In preparing for this project, the author noted the YouTube and Facebook views, and some meetings number in the thousands. While not considered directly in this study, future research should attempt to measure the impact that providing these recordings might have on political efficacy, knowledge, and participation.

Conclusion

The recording and posting of meeting minutes was never intended to serve as a substitute for local journalism. It has historically been just one of the many legal requirements to which government officials must adhere. While not by design, the storytelling roles of local governments have expanded in areas where public meeting news coverage has waned, and other sources of civic information are lacking. The Documenters provide another option. As the Documenters Network continues to grow, it will be increasingly important to study the impacts of their work on local communities. In each Documenter site, from Atlanta, Georgia to Wichita, Kansas, to Los Angeles, California, residents now have access to civic information about their local governments that they

may not have had before. As previously noted, nearly one third of the meetings covered by the Grand Rapids Documenters during the timeframe of this study did not have minutes posted online. Because public meetings are typically so sparsely attended, most residents would not have been able to learn what happened at therein without the work of the Documenters.

In addition to the benefits brought by Documenters covering meetings within their own communities, there are also broader implications of their work. According to a recent interview with the Documenters Network Director of Network Services, each new Documenters site joins as part of a cohort with chapters in other communities, and they meet regularly for mutual support and idea-sharing (Fischer, 2024). Additionally, individual Documenters can attend trainings held by other chapters, or join virtual communities of practice for encouragement and advice through Documenters.org (Documenters Network, n.d.). When innovation happens in a particular Documenters chapter, it has the potential to spread across the network, improving local meeting coverage across the diversity of demographic and socioeconomic profiles of the communities served.

The findings from this study show some promise that this model will be able to at least partially fill in the gaps left by the decline of local news in communities across the U.S. Though there are many in government who support the concept of open public meetings, they do not always support the goal of transparency on their own (Piotrowski & Borry, 2010). The Documenters are providing a new and more accessible public record so that community residents have the information they need to hold their elected and appointed officials accountable.

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