



A Pledge Renewed: Courageous Citizenship in the ‘Attention Economy’ Era

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

On the 250th anniversary of the Declaration, the conditions under which Americans practice citizenship have fundamentally changed. The risks faced by the nation's founders were physical and economic; today, democratic participation carries reputational, social, and professional costs. This article argues that the attention economy has created a twenty-first-century challenge for self-government: democracy depends not only on institutions, but on citizens capable of exercising discernment, restraint, responsibility, and meaningful engagement across difference. Courageous citizenship involves the willingness to resist incentives that reward outrage, immediacy, withdrawal, and dehumanization and proposes four practices -- restraint, engagement across difference, principled visibility, and dignity in dialogue. It argues that attention itself has become a critical civic resource.

The American Revolution did not simply divide colonies from empire; it fractured families, businesses, and communities across the Atlantic world. Allegiance to independence or the Crown often carried consequences that extended far beyond politics, reshaping personal relationships and social standing.

The tension between public commitment and private loyalty is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the relationship between [Benjamin Franklin and his son, William Franklin](#). While Benjamin emerged as a leading advocate for independence, William remained loyal to the British Crown, serving as royal governor of New Jersey. Their political divergence was not abstract disagreement but a rupture that ultimately severed their relationship. Despite attempts at reconciliation, father and son remained estranged for the remainder of their lives. For both men, allegiance to principle carried consequences that reached into the most intimate domains of life. In a culture governed by honor, such decisions were not expressions of opinion but declarations of identity—choices that signaled where one stood when competing obligations could no longer be reconciled.

Honor also carried material consequences, particularly for those whose economic standing was tied to the stability of the existing order. [Robert Morris](#), one of the wealthiest merchants in the colonies and a key financier of the Revolution, exemplifies this dimension. By supporting independence and lending his resources to the revolutionary cause, Morris placed his fortune—and the commercial networks upon which it depended—at considerable risk. The outcome was not theoretical. In the years following the war, Morris faced severe financial difficulties and was eventually imprisoned for debt. His experience underscores that honor in the revolutionary era was

not symbolic. It required individuals to absorb real economic consequences in service of public commitments.

In the closing lines of the Declaration of Independence, the signers pledged to one another “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” The phrase signified not only sacrifice but mutual accountability. In the [eighteenth-century civic imagination](#), honor functioned as reputational capital within bounded communities. Political argument traveled through pamphlets, newspapers, and direct debate; speech and character were tightly coupled. To risk one’s honor was to risk credibility within a shared moral and informational field.

Honor is often understood as a personal virtue, but historically it has functioned as a social system—shaping how individuals signal credibility, assume responsibility, and are held accountable. In the late eighteenth-century Anglo-American world, honor operated as a public system of reputation, obligation, and social enforcement. Philosophically, it rested on the premise that character and trust were inseparable; practically, it functioned as a form of social currency governing relationships of trade, leadership, and legitimacy.

This system took on heightened importance in a political environment that lacked fully developed national institutions. Prior to the establishment of the United States as a constitutional republic, there existed no stable centralized authority capable of consistently enforcing law or guaranteeing trust across a newly forming polity. In this context, honor operated as a form of informal governance—structuring expectations of conduct, enabling coordination, and sustaining legitimacy in the absence of robust legal infrastructure. The norms embedded in honor culture—alignment between word and action, accountability to community, and a willingness to bear consequences—helped shape the conditions under which more formal systems of governance could emerge.

Over the past 250 years, the American experiment in self-governance has depended not only on the design of institutions, but on the sustained participation and judgment of its citizens. Democratic governance has always required a public capable of interpreting information, forming judgments, and acting in ways that reinforce—or undermine—the legitimacy of those institutions. While the mechanisms of governance have evolved, the underlying premise has remained constant: that self-rule depends on the capacity of citizens

to exercise discernment, assume responsibility, and engage in public life in good faith.

The conditions under which citizens form judgments, signal commitments, and participate in public life, however, have changed dramatically.

This paper reimagines courageous citizenship for today's attention economy, arguing that "sacred honor" in 2026 lies not only in the disciplined stewardship of truth and attention, but in the willingness of individuals and institutions to publicly uphold their values—accepting reputational risk in a fragmented media environment where visibility, social proof, and narrative dominance shape civic life. In such conditions, the visible defense of democratic norms may become one of the most consequential forms of civic courage.

The Attention Economy and the Transformation of Public Life

Two and a half centuries later, citizenship unfolds within an attention economy defined not by scarcity of information, but by its relentless excess. Individuals are now inundated by a continuous stream of competing narratives—24/7 news cycles, algorithmically optimized content, and perpetual "breaking" news updates. Attention has become the primary currency, competed for through speed, repetition, and spectacle as much as substance.

This transformation did not occur overnight. As media models fractured in the early 2000s, publishers adapted by designing for "found time" and "bite-sized" consumption—content optimized for fragmented attention. What began as an adjustment has become the dominant mode of engagement. People scroll instead of stay on a page, skim instead of read, and consume in fragments rather than in full. The result is a compression of meaning: frequency begins to stand in for importance, while depth risks invisibility without constant reinforcement.

In this environment, visibility does more than inform—it accumulates. To be seen, shared, and discussed is to hold value, regardless of underlying substance. Public image is no longer static; it is continuously constructed through participation in the attention economy. Those who sustain visibility accrue cultural leverage, shaping narratives and influencing perception.

Nowhere is this more pronounced than in politics. Donald Trump has operated at the intersection of social capital and public visibility, treating attention itself as a governing instrument. Rather than

relying solely on institutional channels, his approach foregrounds narrative dominance—constant presence, direct communication, and the use of spectacle to set the agenda. In this model, what is amplified blurs the lines between policy and social content, often becoming the story of the moment.

The implications extend beyond any single figure. In an attention-saturated environment, reputation is increasingly networked—constructed and circulated across platforms, shaped by engagement, and often detached from direct experience. Historically, reputation was proximity-based, earned within defined communities through repeated interaction. Today, it is dynamic and performative, influenced as much by visibility and narrative as by underlying behavior.

This shift alters how truth itself is established. In a proximity-based system, credibility was reinforced through time and direct observation. In a networked environment, perception is shaped at speed. Information gains traction before it is fully contextualized or verified, and repetition can lend familiarity that is mistaken for legitimacy. The result is a fragmented informational landscape in which competing versions of events coexist, each sustained by its own network of attention.

Media Transformation and Social Disruption

Periods of communication upheaval have historically coincided with institutional strain and social conflict. The invention of the [printing press](#) expanded access to knowledge, weakening centralized authority and enabling individuals to engage directly with competing claims to truth. This shift played a critical role in the Protestant Reformation, contributing to religious fragmentation and prolonged instability. The printing press did not create conflict on its own, but it transformed the conditions under which ideas could scale.

The emergence of radio and television introduced a different dynamic—one of centralization. For the first time, large populations could receive information simultaneously from a limited number of sources. These technologies created shared national narratives, stabilizing public discourse while concentrating authority. At the same time, they demonstrated the power of mass persuasion, particularly during periods of political mobilization and conflict.

Digital media combines elements of both expansion and fragmentation, but at unprecedented speed and scale. Like the

printing press, it lowers barriers to participation; like broadcast media, it operates at mass scale. Yet unlike either, it functions within a borderless echo chamber, where information circulates rapidly and is amplified through engagement-driven systems. The result is a paradox: access to information has increased dramatically, while shared frameworks for interpreting that information have weakened.

Risk Reframed: Then and Now

Risk has not disappeared from civic life; it has changed form. Democratic systems continue to depend on the willingness of individuals and institutions to assume risk in pursuit of collective outcomes. In the revolutionary era, these risks were immediate and often existential—loss of property, imprisonment, or death. The potential reward, however, was collective: the establishment of a self-governing polity.

In contemporary society, risk is arguably less likely to be physical, but no less consequential. It is reputational, social, and economic, shaped by participation in highly visible and networked environments. Public figures—particularly those that challenge prevailing narratives or those coming from positions of authority—often face rapid and amplified backlash across digital platforms or even legal repercussions, illustrating how reputational risk now operates in real time and at scale. Recently, there also have been instances where nonpublic figures have taken controversial positions, inviting criticism, professional consequences, cancel culture, or social sanction. At the same time, the rewards remain collective: the preservation of democratic norms, institutional legitimacy, and a shared civic framework.

Modern Risks in the Attention Economy

In contemporary information environments, reputational sanction has emerged as a primary form of risk. Unlike earlier honor systems, which operated within bounded communities, reputational consequences today are mediated through networked platforms that amplify visibility beyond context. Outcomes are less predictable and more difficult to control, shaped by overlapping audiences with differing expectations.

At the same time, the democratization of expertise has altered how authority is established. Access to information is widely distributed, enabling broader participation, but weakening shared standards for validation. Competing claims to expertise coexist, and questions of

veracity become more difficult to resolve. The result is a proliferation of parallel narratives, each sustained within distinct informational environments.

A related tension exists between the “court of public opinion” and systems grounded in process and the rule of law. Public judgments now unfold in real time, shaped by visibility and narrative rather than structured inquiry. While public scrutiny can enhance accountability, it operates according to different standards than institutional processes, often privileging immediacy over verification.

For some participants—particularly those inclined toward nuance and deliberation—these conditions produce a different risk: withdrawal. Faced with reputational exposure and social backlash, individuals may conclude that the costs of participation outweigh the benefits. The result is a form of self-selection, where more assertive voices dominate discourse while more temperate perspectives recede.

Under these conditions, the question is not whether risk can be avoided, but how it is navigated.

Reimagining Courageous Citizenship

Courageous citizenship in the [attention economy](#) requires navigating competing imperatives. It demands restraint in amplification, disciplined engagement across difference, and principled visibility when truth is at stake.

Restraint reflects the recognition that not all information warrants amplification. In an environment where [speed outpaces verification](#), choosing not to contribute to the spread of unverified or inflammatory content becomes a form of civic responsibility.

Engagement across difference requires a willingness to operate outside reinforcing informational environments. In fragmented publics, sustaining a shared civic framework depends on the capacity to encounter and engage with competing perspectives.

Principled visibility, however, remains essential. There are moments when silence carries its own cost—when failing to speak allows distortion or injustice to persist. In such cases, visibility becomes a

form of risk-bearing, signaling commitment to shared norms even under conditions of uncertainty.

These forms of discipline do not eliminate risk; they structure how it is assumed.

Conclusion: A Pledge Renewed

The phrase “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor” captured a moment in which risk and reward were both visible and immediate. Those who advanced the cause of independence accepted personal, material, and relational consequences in pursuit of a collective political outcome.

Two and a half centuries later, the structures of governance have evolved, but the underlying dynamic remains. Democratic life continues to depend on the willingness of individuals and institutions to assume responsibility under conditions of risk. What has changed is the nature of that risk and the systems through which it is mediated.

The potential reward remains collective: the preservation and renewal of democratic norms, the maintenance of institutional legitimacy, and the possibility of sustaining a shared civic framework. These outcomes are not guaranteed. They depend on the continued willingness of citizens to engage with care, discipline, and conviction.

The alternative is already visible in the erosion of shared understanding, diminished alignment on “truth” and “facts”, and unprecedented polarization in a world where we are more connected than ever, yet ever more incapable of engaging across differences. In such conditions, the absence of participation becomes as consequential as participation itself. What equilibrium emerges when these norms are not adopted at scale—and when those most willing to engage responsibly are outpaced by those optimized for amplification rather than accuracy?

This tension raises deeper questions about the structure of the environment itself. Can a culture of civic courage realistically sustain itself within systems that reward speed, outrage, and visibility over reflection and restraint? What prevents those who adhere to higher standards from being consistently outcompeted by those who do not? And perhaps most fundamentally, can concepts like honor and credibility be meaningfully restored within modern information

ecosystems, or must they be reimagined through new forms of verification, mediation, or collective accountability?

To reimagine “sacred honor” in the present is not to replicate the forms of the past, nor to romanticize them, but to recognize that the alignment between belief, action, and consequence remains central to civic life. In the attention economy, that alignment is expressed through how individuals and institutions engage with information, navigate visibility, and respond to competing pressures.

If the republic was founded on a pledge of lives, fortunes, and sacred honor, its renewal may depend on citizens willing to bind their attention, speech, and public conduct to the same disciplined standard—openly, and at risk. Whether such a standard can be sustained at scale remains an open question. But it is one that must be confronted directly, as the durability of democratic life will depend not only on the values we espouse, but on our capacity to uphold them under the conditions we have created.

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The ‘MPOWER Project is a nonprofit research and innovation lab designing narrative systems that counter harmful ideologies, strengthen civic resilience, and surface shared humanity—through proprietary research, strategic advisory, and community-based programming. The mission is to build safer online spaces that bridge to more resilient online and offline communities.

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