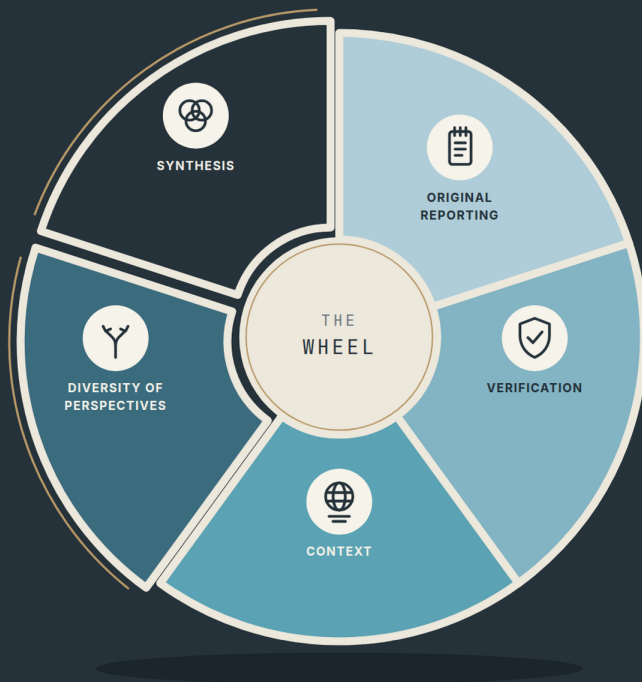


Five Readings of the Wheel

Essay on Information Governance and Democracy

Five essays on the health of our information environment: the ingredients it contains, the citizen it serves, the responsibilities it demands, the institutions that carry them, and the measures that tell us whether it is working.



AN ESSAY SERIES

Information Governance

Five Readings of the Information Wheel

A framework for sustaining independent judgement in a democratic age

Guido van Nispen

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This edition recasts the original five-essay series *Five Readings of the Wheel* as one continuous argument in five parts.

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In brief

Democracy does not suffer from too little information, but from an information environment that has become difficult to see, understand and contest.

This essay bundle introduces **Democratic Information Governance**: the shared stewardship of the conditions under which public knowledge is produced, verified, preserved, connected and corrected. At its centre is the Information Wheel, a practical framework built around five essential elements: original reporting, verification, context, diverse perspectives and synthesis.

Read as ingredients, citizen capabilities, public responsibilities, institutional contributions and observable measures, these elements reveal how independent actors can sustain a shared information environment without prescribing what citizens should believe.

The argument begins with a question of timing. The rapid emergence of generative artificial intelligence has not created the weaknesses of this environment, but it is accelerating all of them at once, and it supplies new instruments for repairing them. That double movement makes Information Governance urgent now. It is also why this edition opens with the case for urgency and closes with a practical agenda for editors, platforms, policymakers, funders, researchers and citizens.

The Wheel is the framework.

Information Governance is the democratic practice.

Independent judgement is the purpose.



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Why now

Artificial intelligence has not created the weaknesses of the information environment. It is accelerating all of them at once, and it has begun to supply the instruments for repairing them. Both movements are underway now.

Two days before Slovakia's parliamentary election in 2023, an audio clip spread across social networks in which the leader of a pro-European party appeared to discuss rigging the vote with a prominent journalist of the daily *Denník N*. The conversation never took place. The voices were AI-generated, and the clip was released during the legal campaign silence before the vote, when politicians and news media were constrained in their ability to respond.¹ Researchers still debate whether it changed the result. What it demonstrated is no longer debated: fabricated evidence can now be produced cheaply, timed precisely and distributed faster than verification can answer.

Incidents like this one make headlines. The deeper change is quieter. Between 2025 and 2026, weekly use of AI chatbots for news rose worldwide from 7 to 10 per cent, and only 42 per cent of those users say they regularly click through to the underlying sources. Trust in chatbot answers stands at roughly 20 per cent, far below even the historically low 37 per cent who say they trust news in general, while 62 per cent of people worldwide now worry about what is real and what is fake online.² Upstream, the pressure is sharper still: search referrals from Google to publishers have already fallen by roughly a third as AI Overviews answer questions on the results page itself, and publishers expect a further decline of around 40 per cent within three years.³

7→10%	42%	-33%	<1%
WEEKLY AI-CHATBOT NEWS USE WORLDWIDE, 2025 TO 2026	CHATBOT NEWS USERS WHO REGULARLY REACH THE SOURCES	SEARCH REFERRALS FROM GOOGLE TO PUBLISHERS, APPROX.	NEWS IMAGES AND VIDEO CARRYING PROVENANCE METADATA

None of these numbers describes a collapse. Chatbot news use grows from a small base; referral traffic has declined before; synthetic media has so far swung fewer elections than feared. The reason for urgency lies elsewhere. These pressures do not land somewhere in general. They land precisely on the five functions that this booklet’s framework, the Information Wheel, identifies as the conditions for independent public judgement.

WHEEL SEGMENT	WHAT AI ACCELERATES	WHAT AI MAKES POSSIBLE
Original reporting	Answer engines absorb the attention and revenue that fund first-hand observation	Document analysis, data work and translation extend what small newsrooms can investigate
Verification	Fabricated audio, imagery and confident confabulation lower the cost of fake evidence	Claim tracing, forensic detection and provenance standards raise the cost of undetected fabrication
Context	Fluent summaries detach events from history, documents and earlier coverage	Archives and public records become searchable, linkable and comparable at scale
Diverse perspectives	Retrieval concentrates on licensed, highly ranked and majority-language sources	Framing differences across publications become measurable rather than anecdotal
Synthesis	Seamless answers conceal selection, uncertainty and disagreement	Source-linked, contestable synthesis becomes technically feasible for the first time

Read down the middle column and the pattern is visible: AI does not attack the environment at one point. It compresses the whole cycle. Weaknesses that could persist harmlessly for decades (unfunded local reporting, unlabelled inference, unpreserved records, unencountered perspectives, untraceable summaries) now compound within a single product cycle. Read down the right-hand column and the same technology appears as an instrument of repair. Which column prevails

is not a property of the technology. It is a property of the conditions under which the technology is deployed.

Those conditions are being set now, largely by default. They are set in product decisions about whether a generated answer links to its sources; in licensing terms between publishers and AI companies; in procurement choices by governments and institutions; and in the adoption, or neglect, of provenance standards, which fewer than 1 per cent of news images and videos currently carry.³ Defaults harden quickly. Once hundreds of millions of people are habituated to answers without sources, renegotiating that expectation will be far harder than establishing a better one first.

KEY TAKEAWAY

AI did not break the information environment; it removed the slack from it. Every weakness now compounds faster, and every repair has, for the first time, plausible instruments. That double movement (urgency and possibility arriving together) is why the governance of the information environment can no longer be postponed, and why this booklet exists.

What follows is therefore not a verdict on artificial intelligence. It is a framework for the conditions under which any powerful connective technology serves independent judgement rather than eroding it. The Foreword defines the project. Five parts develop it. A closing section, *What this means in practice*, turns it into first steps.

Foreword

Democracy does not suffer from a shortage of information. It suffers when public knowledge is produced, tested, preserved, encountered and connected under conditions that no one can see or meaningfully contest. This booklet argues that those conditions have become an object of democratic stewardship, and that the arrival of generative artificial intelligence, for the reasons set out in the preceding pages, has made that stewardship urgent.

Democratic Information Governance is the shared stewardship of the conditions under which public knowledge is produced, verified, preserved, made accessible, connected and corrected so that people remain free to form independent judgements. It is not a ministry of truth, a code for approved opinions or a synonym for organisational data management. It governs the environment around judgement, not judgement itself.

The Information Wheel is the diagnostic framework inside that wider governance project. Its five elements (original reporting, verification, context, diverse perspectives and synthesis) make the environment legible. The Wheel identifies what democratic information must provide; Information Governance identifies how independent actors accept responsibility for sustaining those functions.

The same five elements can then be read at five levels. As ingredients, they describe a balanced information environment. As capabilities, they describe what citizens need for independent judgement. As responsibilities, they define what stewardship must protect. As institutional contributions, they reveal an ecosystem rather than a single controlling organisation. As measures, they become public questions about whether the environment is strengthening or weakening.

These five readings form one continuous argument: informational balance supports citizen capability; capability creates responsibilities; responsibilities

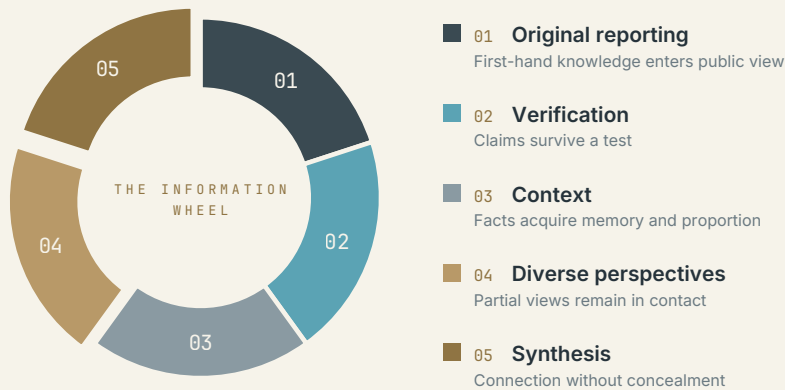
require an institutional ecology; and that ecology needs public, contestable evidence about its condition. The Wheel is the framework. Information Governance is the red thread. Independent judgement in a plural democracy is the purpose. A closing section, *What this means in practice*, translates the argument into first steps and standing questions for the people expected to act on it.

The phrase *healthy information* can sound more neutral than it is. Nutrition can be assessed against the needs of a human body. Democracy contains legitimate conflicts about values, interests and visions of the good life. No authority should prescribe the opinions of a healthy citizen. The Wheel therefore does not define correct conclusions. It proposes conditions under which conclusions can be reached freely and responsibly: original observation, tested evidence, meaningful context, genuine plurality and traceable synthesis.

Nor is the Wheel a programme for increasing the amount of news people consume. Many citizens already feel overwhelmed, exhausted or poorly served. The Reuters Institute's 2026 research found that 42 per cent of respondents across its markets sometimes or often avoid news. In the Netherlands the figure was lower, at 34 per cent, while trust in news remained comparatively high at 49 per cent.² The combination matters. Strong institutions may coexist with withdrawal, fragmentation and a sense that following the news does not necessarily make the world more intelligible.

The ambition is therefore not to defend information abundance. It is to show, in practical terms, what democratic societies would have to protect, connect and measure if they treated their information environment as seriously as other forms of shared infrastructure.

The five readings at a glance



The Information Wheel. Segments 04 and 05 are set apart deliberately: diversity of perspectives exists between publications across the landscape rather than within any single outlet, and synthesis is the newest and least governed of the five functions. They are also the two segments most transformed by AI.

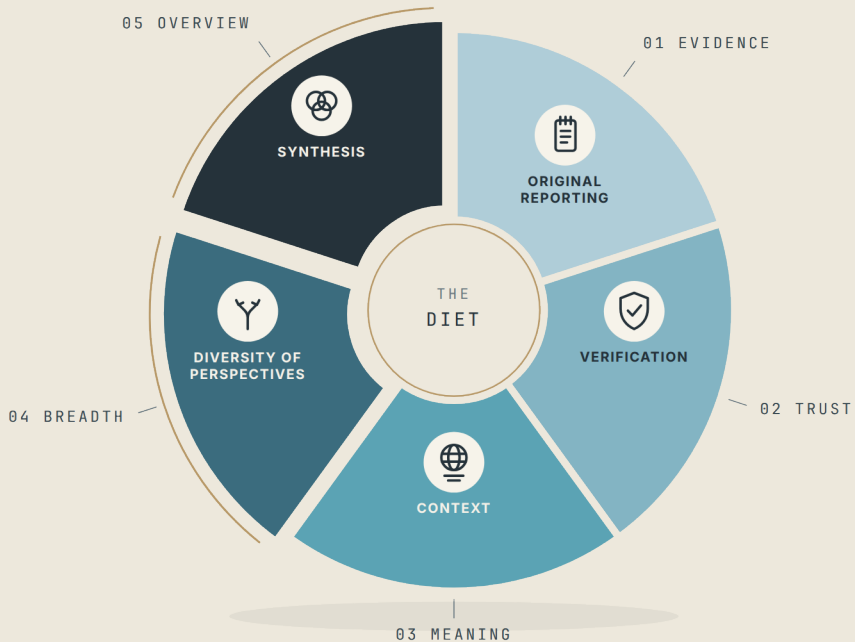
ELEMENT	THE FIVE READINGS
Original reporting	Ingredient: New, first-hand knowledge Capability: Awareness Responsibility: Independence Institutional contribution: Observe and investigate Question: How much genuinely new knowledge enters public view?
Verification	Ingredient: Tested evidence Capability: Justified confidence Responsibility: Evidentiary integrity Institutional contribution: Check, challenge and correct Question: Can important claims and corrections be traced?
Context	Ingredient: History, explanation and consequence Capability: Understanding Responsibility: Memory Institutional contribution: Preserve and interpret Question: Are events connected to causes, institutions and effects?

ELEMENT	THE FIVE READINGS
Diverse perspectives	Ingredient: Relevant differences in experience and interpretation Capability: Judgement Responsibility: Plurality Institutional contribution: Represent and contest Question: Which material perspectives are present, absent or isolated?
Synthesis	Ingredient: Transparent connection Capability: Coherence without false consensus Responsibility: Traceable connection Institutional contribution: Compare and integrate Question: Can relationships be seen without concealing sources or disagreement?

The terms in the last column are deliberately questions rather than scores. A democratic information environment cannot be reduced to a single number. Measurement should make disagreement better informed, not settle it by administrative decree.

From the Wheel of Five to the Information Wheel

Why we need a balanced information diet



01 INGREDIENTS

What a healthy information diet contains

02 CAPABILITIES

What the informed citizen gains from it

03 RESPONSIBILITIES

What sustaining the environment requires

04 INSTITUTIONS

Who carries those responsibilities together

05 MEASURES

How society knows whether it is working

From a wheel of food to a wheel of information

In 1953 the Netherlands was recovering from war and confronting disaster. On the night of 31 January to 1 February, a storm surge broke through dikes in the south-west of the country. The flood killed 1,836 people and inundated roughly 200,000 hectares.⁴ It prompted a profound reconstruction of Dutch water safety and ultimately the Delta Works.

The same year produced a quieter piece of public infrastructure. The Voorlichtingsbureau voor de Voeding, the predecessor of today's Voedingscentrum, introduced the first *Schijf van Vijf*. Its director, Cees den Hartog, had been inspired by an American “wheel of good eating”. The Dutch version reflected the shortages and nutritional knowledge of its time; it has been revised repeatedly since. What endured was not a fixed menu but a method: health depends on a combination of different contributions, and public guidance can make that combination visible.⁵

The historical coincidence should not be forced into a story of common origin. The flood did not cause the food wheel. Yet the two responses express a recognisable Dutch instinct. When wellbeing depends on a shared and complex system, make the system visible. Establish reference points. Divide responsibilities without pretending that any one part can carry the whole.

Our information environment now presents a problem of that shape. The shortage that defined much of the twentieth century has given way to abundance. A person with a phone can reach more reporting, explanation, footage, commentary and rumour in an hour than earlier generations might have encountered in days. But access is not the same as understanding. An environment can be crowded with content and poor in knowledge. It can be accurate in its separate parts and incoherent as a whole. It can offer endless choice while repeatedly leading each person towards the same familiar sources.

The Wheel begins by distinguishing five contributions that a democratic public needs.

Original reporting: something must first become known

Every information system rests on acts of observation. Someone attends the council meeting, reads the court file, visits the neighbourhood, interviews the witness, analyses the accounts, checks the satellite image or asks the question that power would prefer not to answer. Original reporting creates knowledge that did not previously exist in public form.

This sounds obvious, yet digital abundance can disguise how little of what circulates is genuinely new. One investigation may be summarised by hundreds of outlets, discussed in thousands of posts and condensed into millions of generated answers. The surface area of a story expands while its evidentiary foundation remains the work of a small number of reporters. If that foundation disappears, aggregation does not replace it. It merely circulates an absence.

IN PRACTICE

The imbalance is already industrialised. UK regional publisher Newsquest employs more than thirty “AI-assisted reporters” whose systems draft up to thirty stories a day for human checking, and Mediahuis has trialled AI agents that produce first-line breaking news with human review only of the final output.^{3,7} Whatever one concludes about these models, neither attends the council meeting or reads the court file. Generated volume can multiply without limit; the evidentiary base beneath it does not.

Original reporting is broader than the work of professional newsrooms. Researchers make observations, public authorities collect data, civic organisations document experience and citizens record events. Journalism nevertheless carries a distinctive democratic responsibility: sustained, independent observation undertaken for public scrutiny. UNESCO describes journalism as a public good because it provides fact-based information while acting as watchdog and agenda-setter.⁶ This public value does not remove the need for viable organisations. It explains why their viability matters beyond the firms themselves.

The first segment of the Wheel is therefore not “content”. It is first-hand knowledge, produced through methods that can be described and defended.

Verification: evidence must survive a test

Observation becomes publicly dependable only when it is tested. A name is confirmed; a document is authenticated; a quotation is checked against a recording; a causal claim is compared with other explanations; a source's knowledge and interests are considered. Verification is not the absence of error. It is the presence of practices that detect, disclose and repair error.

This distinction matters because confidence is easy to imitate. A false claim can be delivered fluently. A correct claim can be expressed tentatively. Visual polish, institutional prestige and repetition can all be mistaken for proof. Verification asks the reader to look past the performance of certainty towards the chain of evidence beneath it.

Corrections belong inside this segment, not outside it. An institution that corrects visible errors may appear less perfect than one whose mistakes remain hidden. In reality it offers stronger grounds for justified confidence. A healthy environment allows corrections to travel, records what changed and does not quietly detach a claim from its revision history.

IN PRACTICE

Responsibility survives automation only when it is enforced. In the Dutch market, Mediahuis suspended a former editor-in-chief of *NRC* after AI-fabricated quotes appeared in his newsletter.⁷ The incident was uncomfortable; the enforcement is the asset. In an environment where fluent text is cheap, a visible, enforced line of accountability for verification is one of the few trust signals machines cannot counterfeit.

“Trust” is therefore an incomplete name for the citizen outcome. Democracies do not need unquestioning trust. They need justified confidence combined with the freedom to doubt. Verification should make scrutiny possible, including scrutiny of the verifier.

Context: facts require memory

A fact without context may be true and still mislead. A monthly rise can conceal a long decline. A court judgement can appear to concern farmers when its con-

sequences also reach housing, nature policy, constitutional law and European obligations. A protest can be described accurately as disruption while its history, demands and social composition remain invisible.

IN PRACTICE

The Dutch childcare-benefits scandal shows what the absence of context costs. For years, individual reports of families in sudden repayment trouble were accurate and, in isolation, unremarkable. Only when reporting connected them (to the tax authority's risk-selection practices, to institutional incentives, to the scale of the affected group) did isolated incidents become a recognised systemic injustice that reached parliament and brought down a cabinet. The facts were available long before their significance was.

Context connects an event to time, institutions, comparison and consequence. It asks what preceded the event, which rules shaped it, how similar cases unfolded elsewhere, who benefits, who bears the cost and what is not yet known. Context also restores proportion. The most visible event is not always the most consequential; the newest development is not always the most important.

Memory institutions are therefore part of the information environment. Archives, libraries, universities and museums do not usually break news, but they prevent public life from resetting each morning. Their collections allow today's claims to be tested against yesterday's records. Without that memory, immediacy becomes a form of power: actors can repeatedly present old proposals as new, recurring failures as surprises and settled evidence as though it had never existed.

Context should not become a licence for infinite delay. People sometimes need to know quickly what happened. The point is that immediacy and explanation are different public goods. A balanced environment provides both.

Diverse perspectives: reality exceeds every viewpoint

Plural societies contain differences of interest, experience, discipline, region, generation, faith and political conviction. These are not noise around a single neutral account. They affect which questions people ask, which consequences they notice and which forms of evidence they recognise.

Diversity of perspective is often confused with a parade of opinions. But adding one predictable voice “from each side” can leave the underlying frame untouched. Meaningful plurality begins earlier. Who decided what the story was about? Which people appear as actors and which merely as objects? Which costs are counted? Which time horizon matters? A farmer, a constitutional lawyer, a housing advocate and an ecologist may describe the same nitrogen judgement accurately while revealing different relationships within it.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Diversity of perspectives is a property of the landscape, not of any single outlet. No publication can contain every relevant viewpoint, and none should pretend to. A healthy environment keeps different publications’ partial views within reach of one another, connected by enough shared evidence for disagreement to remain intelligible.

Plurality does not require giving equal weight to every claim. Evidence still matters. A demonstrably false assertion does not become useful because it adds variety. Nor does balance require locating all disagreement on a single left-right line. Many important differences are geographic, professional, cultural, generational or methodological.

The democratic value lies in encountering relevant difference without surrendering standards of evidence. A healthy environment does not promise that everyone will agree. It makes disagreement more knowledgeable about what it is disagreeing over.

Synthesis: connection without concealment

The fifth element is the most promising and the most dangerous. Synthesis connects reporting, evidence, history and perspective into an intelligible account. It can show that an agricultural dispute is also a housing dispute, that a local decision follows from European law, or that several apparently separate controversies share an institutional cause.

Good synthesis reduces fragmentation without erasing difference. It shows where sources converge, where they conflict and why. It preserves provenance:

the reader can move from the whole back to its parts. It distinguishes what is known from what is inferred. It accepts that some questions remain unresolved.

Bad synthesis does the opposite. It produces a seamless narrative by hiding uncertainty, flattening minority interpretations or selecting only the sources that fit. Coherence can become cosmetic. A polished explanation may be easier to believe precisely because the labour, choices and exclusions behind it have disappeared.

	GOOD SYNTHESIS	BAD SYNTHESIS
Sources	Shows what was included, and what was left out	Conceals selection behind a single voice
Disagreement	Shows where accounts converge and where they conflict	Smooths conflict into one reassuring story
Provenance	Lets the reader move from the whole back to its parts	Offers a seamless surface that cannot be inspected
Uncertainty	Distinguishes what is known from what is inferred	Sounds equally confident about everything
Result	Coherence that can be checked	Coherence that must be believed

Artificial intelligence makes this tension newly important. AI-assisted systems can search, translate, compare and summarise material at a scale that may help people discover relationships across institutions and languages. They can also generate false statements confidently, lose track of provenance, reproduce patterns of bias and give unstable answers to the same question. The US National Institute of Standards and Technology calls confidently presented erroneous output “confabulation” and treats it as a characteristic generative-AI risk.⁸

AI can therefore assist synthesis only under evidentiary and governance conditions: source access, traceability, explicit uncertainty, testing, correction and accountable human judgement. It does not turn synthesis into an automatic product. It increases both our connective capacity and our responsibility for how connection is made.

The limits of the nutritional analogy

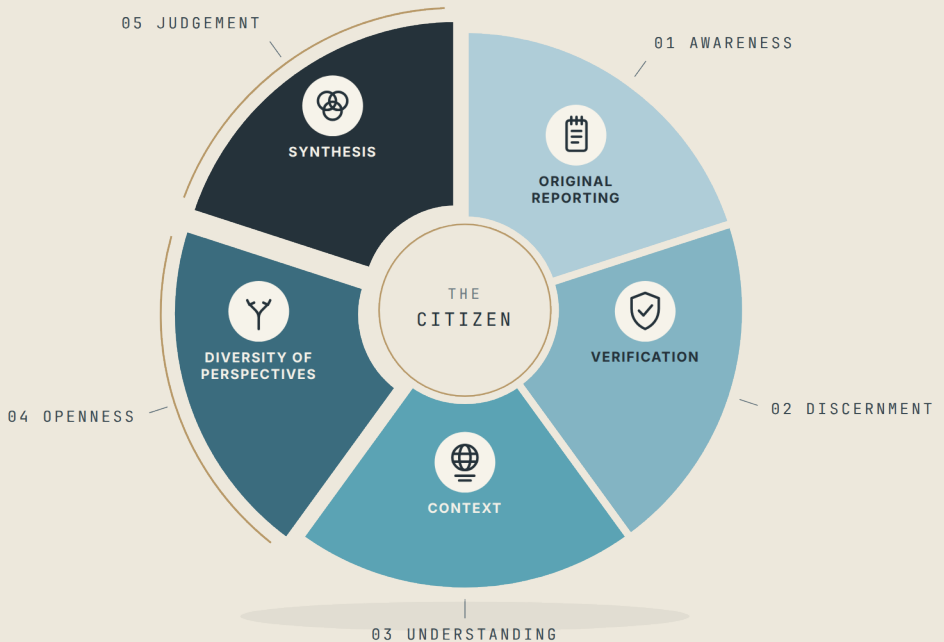
A food wheel implies a body with broadly shared biological needs. An information wheel operates in a democracy where needs and values differ. There is no authorised daily portion of investigative journalism, conservative argument or climate reporting. A government should not prescribe an informational menu, and a technology company should not quietly do so while claiming merely to personalise.

The analogy is useful only if its boundary remains visible. The Wheel identifies functions, not approved opinions. It asks whether first-hand knowledge is produced, claims are tested, events are contextualised, relevant differences can be encountered and connections remain traceable. It does not decide what a citizen must conclude.

Balance is not a midpoint between truth and falsehood. It is a relationship among complementary democratic goods: discovery and scrutiny, speed and memory, individuality and plurality, fragmentation and connection. Those relationships lead to the second reading of the Wheel. If these are the ingredients, what are they for?

From the Information Wheel to the Informed Citizen

Who our information system is designed to serve



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The person at the centre

Information systems are usually described from the outside in. Publishers speak about reach and revenue. Platforms speak about engagement. Governments speak about regulation and security. Technology companies speak about capability and adoption. All of these concerns are real, but none defines the public purpose of the system.

The Wheel can instead be read from its centre. At that centre is not a newsroom, a ministry or a model. It is a person trying to understand enough of a shared world to live and act among others.

The word *citizen* needs care. It can refer too narrowly to legal nationality and too grandly to an ideal person who follows politics every day. Democratic information also serves residents, young people, migrants, community members and those who participate intermittently or indirectly. In this essay, the informed citizen is not a credential or a social rank. It is a way of naming a democratic capability available to everyone.

An informed citizen is not the person who consumes the most news. Nor is it the person who reaches the approved conclusion. It is someone with a fair opportunity to know what happened, assess why a claim deserves confidence, understand why an event matters, encounter consequential differences of perspective and form a judgement that remains open to revision.

The emphasis belongs on *opportunity*. People differ in time, education, language, interest and trust. They should not be blamed for an environment designed to exhaust, distract or exclude them. The proper object of evaluation is not individual virtue but the conditions that make independent judgement more or less possible.

Awareness: the world enters public view

Original reporting creates awareness. It makes an event, pattern or abuse available for public consideration. This is not merely a transfer of facts. What becomes visible influences what a society can discuss at all.

Every act of attention excludes something else. Newsrooms have finite reporters; public institutions decide which data to collect; platforms decide what to recommend; citizens decide what to share. Awareness therefore depends on agenda formation. A healthy environment needs many independent routes by which neglected matters can enter public view: local journalism, investigative teams, specialist publications, community media, whistle-blowers, researchers and civic documentation.

The capability at stake is not constant alertness. It is the reasonable possibility of becoming aware of consequential matters, including those inconvenient to powerful institutions or distant from a person's usual media habits.

IN PRACTICE

A reader who asks a chatbot what happened in a court ruling may receive a fluent answer assembled from dozens of publications and encounter none of them: across markets, only 42 per cent of chatbot news users say they regularly click through to the underlying sources.² Awareness arrives; the route to scrutiny quietly disappears. The capability and the interface are no longer the same thing.

Justified confidence: knowing why a claim may be believed

Verification should not teach people to trust everything marked “verified”. It should help them see why confidence is warranted. What is the source? Was it in a position to know? Is there documentary support? Has an independent party confirmed it? What uncertainty remains? Is a correction visible?

No citizen can reproduce every investigation. Democratic knowledge depends on warranted reliance on others. The alternative to blind trust is not universal personal research; it is an environment in which methods, responsibilities and challenges are legible enough to support calibrated trust.

This is also why blanket cynicism is not sophistication. If every institution is dismissed as equally unreliable, the best-documented claim loses its advantage over the loudest rumour. Independent judgement requires discrimination: the ability to assign different confidence to different claims for reasons that can be explained.

Synthetic media attacks exactly this capability. The Slovak audio clip described at the opening of this booklet did not succeed because listeners were credulous. It succeeded because it arrived at a moment when the environment offered no fast route to a check: verification existed, but timing blocked the way to it. Justified confidence is therefore not only a personal skill. It is a property of infrastructure.

Understanding: seeing relationships and consequences

Context turns awareness into understanding. A citizen may know that a law passed without knowing whom it affects, what problem it addresses, which alternatives were considered or how implementation will work. The information is present; its significance is not.

Understanding is relational. It connects an event to structures and consequences. It also permits scale: a person can distinguish an exceptional incident from a representative pattern, an early indicator from a settled trend and a symbolic controversy from a material change.

This capacity cannot be measured by recall alone. A person may remember many headlines yet possess no usable model of how institutions interact. Conversely, someone who follows news selectively may understand a subject deeply. The democratic objective is not maximum retention but sufficient orientation to reason and act.

Judgement: living with legitimate difference

Diverse perspectives support judgement by revealing that the same evidence can carry different meanings for people with different values and positions. This is not relativism. Some claims are better supported than others. But evidence rarely decides every political question because politics also concerns priorities, distribution and acceptable risk.

Judgement involves recognising what kind of disagreement is present. Are people disputing facts, causal explanations, values, interests or strategy? A debate becomes needlessly hostile when a conflict of values is presented as a

failure to understand facts. It becomes dangerously empty when factual claims are treated as mere differences of opinion.

Encountering perspective is valuable only under certain conditions. Forced exposure to hostile or dehumanising speech does not cultivate democratic judgement. Nor does an algorithmic stream designed to provoke. Plurality needs intelligible representation, proportion and the ability to answer back. It should enlarge the field of consideration, not simply increase conflict.

Coherence: holding a provisional whole

Synthesis supports coherence: the capacity to see how parts relate without mistaking the resulting picture for final truth. A coherent account is provisional and inspectable. It can accommodate uncertainty, contradiction and revision.

This quality matters because modern information often arrives as fragments. A court ruling appears in one feed, a graph in another, an expert thread somewhere else, a historical analogy in a podcast and a generated summary in a search result. The work of connection falls increasingly on individuals who may lack time, access or specialist knowledge.

Institutions can reduce that burden. Explanatory journalism, public-service media, libraries, educational organisations and carefully governed AI tools can help assemble relationships. But they should not remove the citizen from the process. The aim is not to outsource judgement to a trusted synthesiser. It is to provide a navigable account within which people can question sources and arrive at their own view.

Citizens are participants, not outputs

The phrase “producing informed citizens” is tempting but mistaken. People are not the output of an information factory. They tell stories, record events, organise communities, correct institutions, preserve memories and bring lived experience into public debate. They are participants in the environment as well as people affected by it.

This has two consequences. First, information policy should protect expression and participation, not merely improve delivery. Second, the framework must remain open to bottom-up correction. Communities should be able to challenge how they are represented, identify missing evidence and contest the categories through which institutions see them.

An informed public emerges through reciprocal relationships: institutions make their knowledge and methods accessible; people contribute experience and scrutiny; institutions respond; competing accounts remain available. The citizen stands at the centre not because every informational process revolves around individual preference, but because democratic legitimacy ultimately depends on people retaining agency over their judgement.

The quiet danger of paternalism

Any project that speaks of informational health risks becoming paternalistic. The language of safety can justify censorship; the language of quality can privilege established institutions; the language of shared reality can be used to marginalise dissent. These dangers are not reasons to abandon standards. They are reasons to build limits into the framework.

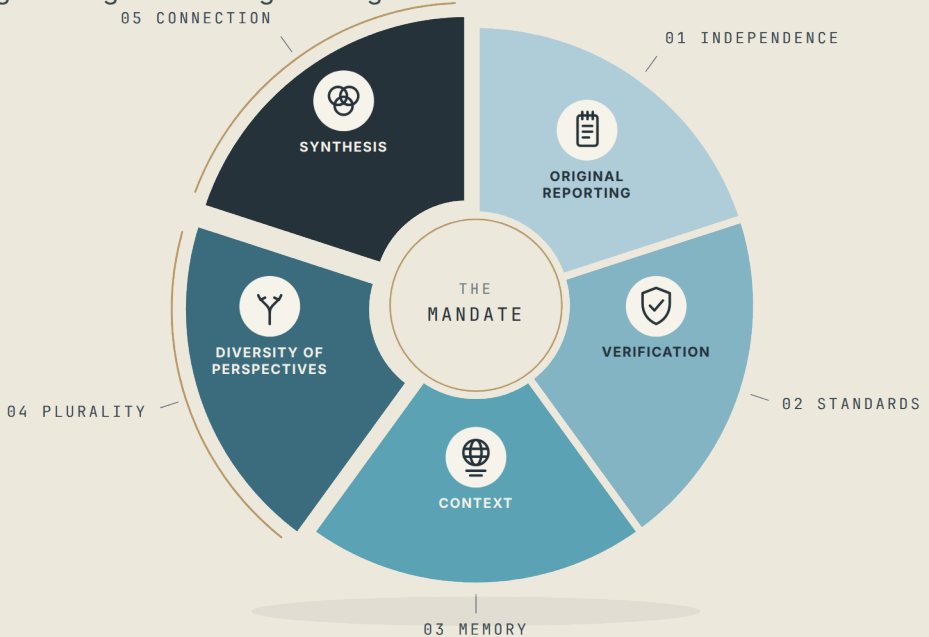
Four limits are essential.

1. **Functions, not conclusions.** The Wheel evaluates conditions, never political outcomes.
2. **Distributed authority.** No ministry, newsroom, platform or model may certify the whole environment.
3. **Open methods.** Classifications and measures must remain contestable.
4. **Protected dissent.** Minority and inconvenient perspectives need protection even when they complicate coherence.

These safeguards point towards governance, but not governance understood simply as control. The challenge is to sustain an environment in which independent institutions and independent citizens can continue to test one another.

From Information to Information Governance

Why the future of democracy may depend less on governing AI than on governing information



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When information becomes an environment

For much of the twentieth century, governance followed institutions. Newspapers maintained editorial codes; broadcasters accepted public obligations; universities governed research integrity; archives followed preservation standards; governments regulated communications and access to official information. Responsibility could be located inside organisational walls.

Digital distribution has stretched the journey from observation to understanding across many actors. A report may be indexed by search engines, excerpted on social platforms, ranked by recommender systems, interpreted by commentators, translated automatically, summarised by generative AI and forwarded through private groups before it reaches someone who never sees the original. Each transition can add access and meaning. Each can also remove provenance, context or correction.



EACH STEP CAN ADD ACCESS AND MEANING · EACH CAN REMOVE PROVENANCE, CONTEXT OR CORRECTION

The journey of a claim. Each transition can add access and meaning; each can also strip provenance, context or correction from what finally reaches a reader who never sees the original.

Information has not ceased to be a product, asset or right. But it also behaves as an environment: a set of conditions created by many interacting decisions. No participant controls the whole, while every participant can affect what becomes visible and believable.

This is where democratic Information Governance becomes operational. Organisational regimes still govern records, retention, access, privacy and compliance. Democratic stewardship begins where those regimes meet: in the conditions under which public knowledge travels between organisations and supports free judgement. It does not replace editorial ethics, data governance, media law or AI governance. It makes their interdependence visible and answerable.

Independence: protecting observation from power

Original reporting requires independence. Reporters and sources must be able to investigate governments, owners, advertisers, political movements and technology companies without those actors determining the result. Independence is never absolute (every organisation has funding, law, culture and audience), but it can be protected through transparent ownership, editorial statutes, source protection, plural financing and accountable leadership.

The European Media Freedom Act, in force since 2024 with most provisions applying from August 2025, seeks to strengthen editorial independence, source protection, ownership transparency and scrutiny of media concentration.⁹ Such protections are not peripheral to the Information Wheel. They help ensure that the first segment continues to produce observations that powerful actors might prefer to suppress.

Independence also matters for research, archives and civic organisations. A statistical office must resist political manipulation. A museum must preserve uncomfortable memory. A community group must be able to document experience without becoming a communications arm of its funder.

Evidentiary integrity: making claims answerable

Verification rests on standards that can be examined. These include sourcing rules, research methods, correction practices, disclosure of conflicts, reproducible analysis and distinctions between evidence, inference and opinion.

In a networked environment, responsibility for verification is distributed but not diluted. A journalist remains responsible for an article even when software helped search documents. A platform remains responsible for the effects of its ranking and labelling systems even though it did not create the underlying claim. A provider of an AI system has responsibilities for testing and transparency; the institution deploying it has responsibilities for the chosen use, oversight and remedy.

The OECD's updated AI Principles emphasise transparency, the possibility of challenging outputs, robustness, traceability and accountability across the AI li-

fecycle.¹⁰ Those principles become concrete in information work when a reader can identify the underlying sources, understand the role of automation, report an error and reach a responsible institution.

Meaningful transparency describes function, not merely presence. “AI was used” says little. Did it transcribe an interview, translate a document, retrieve sources, classify a corpus, propose a summary or generate publishable prose? Different uses create different risks. Disclosure should illuminate responsibility rather than operate as a ritual label.

The infrastructure for such disclosure barely exists. Across the news industry, fewer than 1 per cent of images and videos currently carry content-provenance metadata under the C2PA standard.³ In an environment filling with synthetic material, the ability to show where content came from and how it was edited is becoming a competitive asset rather than a compliance cost. The gap between that fact and current practice measures how much stewardship remains to be done.

Memory: preserving the possibility of context

Context requires durable, accessible memory. Public records must be retained; links must not silently rot; corrections must remain attached to claims; archives must preserve formats that commercial platforms abandon. Libraries and cultural institutions need the resources and rights to keep material available.

Digital memory is paradoxical. More information is stored than ever, yet access may be fragile. A platform closes, a subscription expires, a website changes ownership, a model’s training data remain undisclosed, or a search ranking makes an existing record effectively invisible. The attrition is measurable: a Pew Research Center analysis found that 38 per cent of webpages that existed in 2013 were no longer accessible a decade later.¹¹ Preservation is therefore not enough. Democratic memory also requires discoverability, metadata, legal access and interpretive capacity.

Privacy and remembrance can conflict. Not every fact should remain permanently prominent, and vulnerable people should not be condemned to endless re-discovery of an old event. Democratic information governance must balance

public memory with proportionality, data protection and human dignity. The Wheel does not solve that conflict, but it makes clear that forgetting is also a governed outcome.

Plurality: keeping partial views in contact

Plurality requires more than the existence of many outlets. Ownership may be concentrated; local reporting may disappear; different brands may reproduce the same underlying agency copy; recommender systems may repeatedly present familiar viewpoints. Conversely, a small number of institutions may still sustain meaningful diversity if their reporting, staffing, sources and frames differ.

The responsibility is therefore to protect both independence *and encounter*. Distinct communities need space to speak in their own voices. They also need bridges through which their knowledge can enter a wider public conversation. Journalism, public-service media, education and civic institutions can create those bridges without demanding assimilation into a single perspective.

Plurality has boundaries grounded in rights and evidence. Incitement, targeted harassment and coordinated deception are not democratic contributions simply because they differ. Yet restrictions themselves require law, proportionality, transparency and appeal. A healthy environment cannot be built through an unreviewable power to remove inconvenient speech.

Traceable connection: governing synthesis

Synthesis carries a responsibility not to hide its construction. A reader should be able to ask: which sources were included, why were they selected, what was excluded, where do accounts disagree, what did automation contribute and who stands behind the result?

This is where AI creates a new layer of governance. A system may retrieve only licensed or highly ranked material, rendering local or non-commercial sources invisible. It may treat repetition as corroboration even when many texts derive from one report. It may translate away culturally important distinctions. It may

produce a balanced-sounding answer in a debate where the evidence is not balanced.

The answer is not to prohibit connection. It is to require stronger conditions for consequential uses:

1. **Provenance:** claims should link to identifiable underlying sources.
2. **Source plurality:** retrieval should be tested for systematic exclusions.
3. **Uncertainty:** unresolved questions and inferential steps should remain visible.
4. **Contestability:** affected people and institutions should be able to challenge outputs.
5. **Correction:** errors should be repairable and revisions propagated.
6. **Accountability:** a responsible human institution should own the decision to publish or rely on a synthesis.

These conditions do not guarantee truth. They make error and power more visible.

Six failure modes

Governance becomes credible when it anticipates failure.

FAILURE MODE	THE RISK	THE SAFEGUARD
Capture	A state, dominant platform, wealthy owner or professional guild defines “quality” in its own interest	Polycentric authority, transparent standards, independent review
False consensus	Synthesis smooths real disagreement into a reassuring common story	Explicit representation of convergence, uncertainty and conflict
Prestige bias	Established institutions become synonymous with trustworthiness, excluding local knowledge and justified dissent	Evidence-based inclusion; routes for new actors to earn credibility
Metric gaming	Institutions optimise the indicator rather than the democratic outcome	Multiple measures, qualitative review, regular revision
Surveillance	Measuring the environment becomes a pretext for monitoring individual reading	Data minimisation; public-content and voluntary research
Dependency	Public knowledge relies on proprietary systems that cannot be scrutinised	Interoperability, public-interest infrastructure, the capacity to exit

These are not side issues. They are part of the definition of informational health. A system that produces accurate summaries through concentrated, unchallengeable power would still be democratically unhealthy.

Stewardship rather than command

The word *governance* often evokes a regulator issuing rules. Regulation is sometimes necessary, especially where rights, competition and systemic risks are involved. But environments are also governed through standards, professional norms, funding, technical architecture, procurement, education and everyday institutional choices.

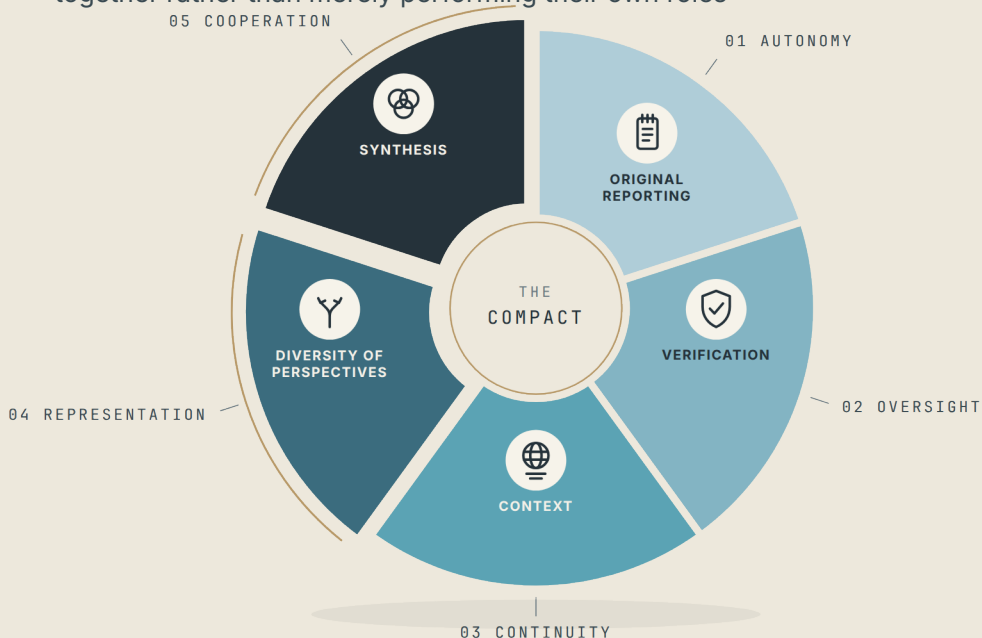
Stewardship is the better organising idea. A steward does not own the whole environment or dictate its conclusions. A steward accepts responsibility for maintaining a function on which others rely. Newsrooms steward original reporting; archives steward memory; universities steward methods and knowledge; technology companies steward connective infrastructure; governments steward rights,

fair conditions and public resources; citizens and civil society steward participation and challenge.

These responsibilities should remain distinct, interdependent and visible.

From the Newsroom to the Information Ecosystem

Why democracy depends upon institutions working together rather than merely performing their own roles



01 INGREDIENTS

What a healthy information diet contains

02 CAPABILITIES

What the informed citizen gains from it

03 RESPONSIBILITIES

What sustaining the environment requires

04 INSTITUTIONS

Who carries those responsibilities together

05 MEASURES

How society knows whether it is working

From organisations to an ecosystem

No hospital creates public health by itself. Public health emerges through relationships among hospitals, general practitioners, laboratories, universities, insurers, public authorities, communities and individual behaviour. No school creates an educated society alone. Families, libraries, cultural institutions, employers and digital services all contribute.

Information has a similar institutional shape. Journalism performs an irreplaceable function, but journalism alone cannot preserve all memory, conduct all research, represent all experience, build every discovery tool or teach every citizen how institutions work. Nor can a platform, university or ministry assume those functions without sacrificing essential forms of independence.

Information Governance therefore becomes an institutional question without becoming a search for one lead institution. The relevant issue is which relationships allow distinct organisations to perform their roles, correct one another's blind spots and remain independent enough to challenge power.

The Information Commons

UNESCO's Windhoek+30 Declaration describes information as a public good and calls for environments that support free, independent and pluralistic media.¹² The idea is useful because the democratic value of information extends beyond the transaction in which it is produced or purchased.

The language of a commons adds another insight: shared environments can depend on rules and cooperation without being owned or commanded by one authority. Elinor Ostrom's research showed that communities can develop durable arrangements for governing common-pool resources, contradicting the assumption that only privatisation or central control can prevent failure.¹³

The analogy has limits. Information is not a fishery. It can often be copied without being depleted, while attention, reporting capacity and public trust are scarce. Much information is privately owned or access-controlled. Some must remain confidential. The "Information Commons" should therefore not be imagined as one universal pool of freely available content.

It is better understood as a shared democratic layer: the rights, standards, institutions, records and connective arrangements that allow public-interest knowledge to be produced, tested, preserved, encountered and traced. Its resources include independent reporting, public data, archives, correction systems, metadata, open standards, research methods and civic participation. Its health depends on both access and boundaries.

What each institution contributes

INSTITUTION	DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION
Independent journalism	Observes, investigates and holds power to account; its first obligation is disclosure, not consensus
Universities and research institutes	Generate specialist knowledge, test claims, preserve methods and translate complexity, though academic incentives do not always reward accessibility
Archives, libraries and museums	Maintain collective memory and access; supply continuity across political and commercial cycles
Public authorities	Protect rights, provide official records and statistics, maintain fair conditions and fund public goods; their power makes independence and legal limits indispensable
Public-service and community media	Connect general information with local, regional and cultural experience; create encounters that commercial segmentation may not
Civil society	Contributes lived experience, scrutiny, representation and organised challenge, often identifying harms before established institutions do
Technology companies	Build the search, recommendation, translation and synthesis systems through which information is discovered; connective power brings duties of testing, transparency, access and remedy
Citizens	Witness, interpret, create and correct; the ecosystem loses legitimacy if people appear only as audiences to be measured or influenced

The allocation is not exclusive. Journalists verify; universities observe; citizens preserve memory; libraries synthesise. The point is to identify distinctive strengths and prevent every participant from claiming to perform the whole.

Relationships are the real infrastructure

Institutional lists are easy. The difficult work lies between the entries.

A correction should travel from a publisher to the platforms and services that amplified the original claim. A public dataset should carry stable identifiers so reporting and research can cite it reliably. An archive should be able to preserve public-interest digital material. A generated explanation should link to its evidence. A local outlet should be discoverable even if it lacks the scale to dominate engagement rankings. Researchers should be able to audit systemic effects without gaining access to individuals' private reading histories.

Five relationship types deserve deliberate design:

1. **Provenance relationships** connect public claims to sources, methods and revisions.
2. **Correction relationships** propagate repairs across distribution chains.
3. **Access relationships** allow institutions to retrieve public-interest material under fair and lawful conditions.
4. **Accountability relationships** create routes for challenge, explanation and remedy.
5. **Learning relationships** allow evidence about the ecosystem to change standards, products and policy.

The system succeeds when these relationships become routine rather than depending on exceptional goodwill.

IN PRACTICE

These routes are beginning to be used. Mediahuis's youth brand SPILNEWS publicly challenged TikTok's opaque moderation and shadow-banning (visibility limits imposed without notice, explanation or appeal) as inconsistent with the European Media Freedom Act.⁷ Whatever the outcome, this is an accountability relationship exercised across the publisher–platform boundary: exactly the kind of connection the ecosystem needs to make routine.

A Dutch instinct, not a Dutch export

The Netherlands offers a powerful metaphor for institutional interdependence. Water boards are among its oldest democratic bodies. National agencies, provinces, municipalities, engineers, landowners and citizens have distinct responsibilities, but no single organisation keeps the country dry. Cooperation arose not because interests became identical, but because the cost of ignoring interdependence became undeniable.

This history should inspire humility as well as pride. Poldering can exclude people who lack a seat at the table. Consensus processes can privilege established organisations and turn urgency into endless consultation. The lesson is therefore not that Dutch institutions possess a ready-made answer. It is that shared infrastructure requires representation, reference points, maintenance and the capacity to act despite continuing disagreement.

Information governance must widen the table. Local communities, younger people, minority-language media, independent researchers and groups affected by automated systems need routes into decision-making. Otherwise an Information Commons would reproduce the institutional landscape it is supposed to connect.

What collaboration should not mean

Collaboration between journalism, government and technology carries obvious risks. A newsroom that becomes dependent on government approval cannot hold government to account. A university that relies on proprietary access may be unable to publish unwelcome findings. A platform that funds verification may influence which harms receive attention.

Cooperation must therefore be structured around separations as well as connections:

- common technical standards without common editorial conclusions;
- shared research infrastructure with independent analysis;
- public funding protected by arm's-length governance;

- access for audit without access to private individual behaviour;
- collaborative correction mechanisms without a central ministry of truth;
- interoperability that reduces dependence on any single provider.

The objective is coordinated stewardship, not institutional fusion.

The Dutch market already contains a working example of that balance. In GPT-NL, a Dutch-language model initiative developed with TNO, SURF and the Netherlands Forensic Institute, more than thirty news brands are pooling their archives to help train a model built on copyright protection and fair compensation.¹⁴ The design is instructive precisely because of what it separates: shared technical infrastructure and shared licensing terms, without shared editorial conclusions. It is the compact of this essay in miniature.

A practical civic compact

The ecosystem could begin with a limited compact rather than a grand new authority. Participating institutions would make five commitments.

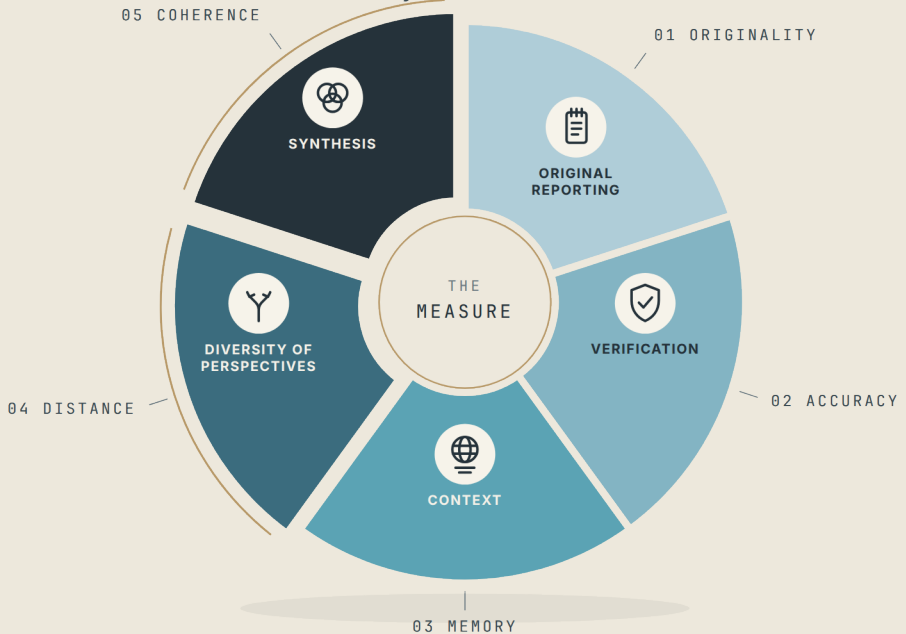
They would protect the production of original public-interest knowledge. They would make important claims, methods and corrections more traceable. They would preserve and connect public memory. They would test whether relevant perspectives are systematically absent. And they would ensure that synthesis remains contestable and linked to sources.

The compact would not certify approved information. It would establish practices that make the environment easier to examine. Universities and independent auditors could study whether the commitments work. Citizens and civil-society organisations could challenge their definitions. Standards would evolve in public.

That compact would turn the Wheel from a diagram into an institutional experiment. The final question is how to evaluate it without creating the very concentration of informational authority the framework is designed to resist.

From Measuring News to Measuring Democracy

Why the future of democracy may depend on measuring the health of our information ecosystem



01 INGREDIENTS

What a healthy information diet contains

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How society knows whether it is working

The citizen becomes the purpose, not the datapoint

Every participant in the information environment already measures success. Publishers track subscriptions, attention and loyalty. Platforms measure engagement and retention. Governments monitor trust, security and participation. Universities study media use, literacy and misinformation. AI companies evaluate model performance and adoption.

These indicators reveal how institutions perform. They do not necessarily reveal whether people gain a fairer opportunity for informed judgement. A publisher can grow while local reporting shrinks. A platform can reduce one category of harmful content while narrowing the sources people encounter. An AI assistant can become more fluent while making provenance harder to see.

The citizen should become the measure in a normative sense: the reason for measurement, not an object of surveillance. The default should be to study public content, institutional practices and voluntary research rather than track individual reading. The purpose is to assess enabling conditions, not score people's opinions.

The fifth reading of the Wheel

Each segment can be translated into an empirical question. The translation must remain provisional: indicators are representations of democratic qualities, not the qualities themselves.

One change deserves notice at the outset. A decade ago, tracing claims and comparing frames across an entire media landscape was prohibitively labour-intensive. The same language technology that now pressures the environment makes its observation tractable for the first time. The instruments of the problem can serve the diagnosis, provided the governance of the measurement is stricter than the governance of the systems it examines.

Original reporting as originality

The simplest measure would count original articles. The better question is whether genuinely new, first-hand knowledge enters public view and remains available.

Possible indicators include the proportion of consequential claims based on first-hand observation; the number and distribution of reporters covering local institutions; the diversity of organisations producing source material; and the share of widely circulated items that can be traced back to an originating report.

The unit matters. An article may be original in wording but derivative in knowledge. Another may synthesise existing work while adding a crucial new document or interview. Measurement should follow claims and evidence, not merely similarity of text.

The validity risk is rewarding volume. A newsroom could generate many minor original items while neglecting expensive investigations. Quantitative indicators therefore need expert and community review of public significance.

Verification as traceable accuracy

Accuracy can be sampled by checking factual claims against evidence, but error rates alone are insufficient. A healthy environment also reveals its methods and repairs.

Indicators might examine whether high-impact claims cite accessible evidence; whether corrections are labelled and linked; how quickly verified corrections appear; whether downstream services update summaries; and whether readers can distinguish reporting, analysis, opinion and generated material.

The validity risk is hiding uncertainty. Institutions may avoid measurable errors by making fewer testable claims or by writing vague prose. Verification measures should reward explicit evidence and calibrated uncertainty, not defensive ambiguity.

Context as usable memory

Context can be observed in the relationships an account makes available. Does it connect an event to relevant history, governing institutions, comparable cases, affected groups and plausible consequences? Can readers reach primary documents and earlier coverage?

Indicators could sample major public issues and code the presence and quality of these connections. Link persistence, archival access and the reuse of public records can also be measured.

The validity risk is equating length with context. A long article may contain background without explaining significance. A short graphic may provide an excellent institutional map. The measure must focus on relevant relationships, not word count.

Perspective diversity as meaningful distance

Perspective is the most delicate dimension. Political-position scores are tempting because they are easy to visualise, but they can reduce pluralism to one axis and encourage the idea that truth lies at the midpoint.

A richer approach compares framing. For the same event, which problems are named, which actors receive agency, which evidence is foregrounded, which consequences are counted and which time horizons are used? The “distance” between accounts can then describe material differences without declaring one ideological centre.

The objective is not maximum distance. An environment in which accounts share no facts is fragmented, not diverse. The relevant questions are whether consequential perspectives exist, whether citizens can encounter them and whether they remain connected through enough common evidence for disagreement to be intelligible.

The validity risk is treating manufactured extremity as valuable plurality. Expert judgement, affected-community input and evidentiary thresholds are needed to distinguish a missing perspective from a merely provocative one.

Synthesis as traceable coherence

Coherence is not easily counted. A useful synthesis should identify relationships, preserve disagreement, expose its source base and allow readers to inspect the path from evidence to conclusion.

Indicators might assess source traceability, diversity of source types, explicit treatment of uncertainty, representation of disagreement, correction capacity and whether important claims survive comparison with their cited evidence. AI-assisted syntheses can be tested repeatedly for stability and systematic omission.

The validity risk is rewarding neatness. A fluent answer may score well with readers while concealing a weak evidence base. Evaluation must therefore separate readability from evidentiary coherence.

A worked example: one nitrogen judgement

Consider a major Dutch court judgement affecting nitrogen policy. The Wheel suggests a research design.

1. **Originating knowledge.** Identify the judgement itself, reporting from the hearing, interviews and relevant data. Map which widely circulated accounts rely on which original sources.
2. **Verification.** Do accounts describe the ruling accurately, link to the decision and correct early misunderstandings?
3. **Context.** Do they explain the legal history, European obligations, scientific evidence and policy consequences?
4. **Perspective.** Is the event framed as agriculture, housing, nature protection, administrative competence, regional inequality or constitutional constraint? Which affected groups speak, and which are merely described?
5. **Synthesis.** Can a person find an account that connects these dimensions, shows where interpretations differ and links back to the underlying evidence?

No single score is required. The result could be a public map showing strengths, gaps and relationships. Newsrooms could learn where their reporting contrib-

utes something distinctive. Researchers could compare events over time. Citizens could see why accounts differ without being told which opinion to adopt.

A shared reference level

In 1683, Amsterdam mayor and mathematician Johannes Hudde ordered marble reference stones placed in the city's locks. They provided a common basis for maintaining dike heights. Over time, Amsterdam's reference developed into the *Normaal Amsterdams Peil*, maintained nationally by Rijkswaterstaat and used as the reference height for the Netherlands.¹⁵

A shared datum does not tell a water board which project to build or how much risk to accept. It allows parties with different responsibilities to describe their disagreement against the same reference. The analogy is helpful precisely because a datum is not a verdict.

The Netherlands later applied a similar instinct to wellbeing. Statistics Netherlands' annual Monitor of Inclusive and Sustainable Well-being looks beyond gross domestic product to social, environmental and intergenerational conditions. It presents multiple indicators rather than one total score and distinguishes wellbeing "here and now", "later" and "elsewhere".¹⁶

An information monitor should follow that plural approach. It would not declare democracy healthy or unhealthy. It would show whether the five functions are strengthening or weakening, how outcomes are distributed and where institutional relationships fail.

Principles for responsible measurement

Any observatory built around the Wheel should follow seven principles.

No single index. Preserve multiple dimensions and tensions.

Public methods. Publish definitions, samples, coding rules, limitations and changes.

Independent governance. Separate funders, measured institutions and evaluators.

Privacy by design. Prefer public-content analysis and voluntary panels; minimise personal data.

Right to challenge. Let measured institutions and affected communities contest classifications without controlling conclusions.

Distribution matters. National averages can conceal local, linguistic, socioeconomic or generational gaps.

Revision is a strength. Indicators should change when evidence shows that they misrepresent the quality they claim to measure.

These principles turn measurement into a democratic practice rather than an administrative technology.

A research programme in three stages

The work can begin modestly.

Stage one: map the public environment

Select a small set of consequential events. Trace original claims, source flows, corrections, contextual links, frames and syntheses across a diverse sample of publications and services. Publish the method and invite critique.

This stage asks what the environment contains and how its parts connect. It can largely use public data.

Stage two: study public experience

Use voluntary panels, interviews and experiments to examine whether different informational arrangements help people explain an issue, identify uncertainty, recognise perspectives and revise judgements. Avoid testing whether participants reach a preferred opinion.

This stage asks whether the proposed ingredients correspond to real capabilities. It may reveal that some assumptions behind the Wheel are wrong. Perhaps more perspectives sometimes reduce understanding; perhaps provenance matters

only when trust is challenged; perhaps local context matters more than source quantity. The framework should be exposed to those possibilities.

Stage three: test institutional interventions

Pilot correction propagation, shared provenance standards, public-interest retrieval, cross-newsroom contextual tools or source-linked AI synthesis. Evaluate both benefits and unintended effects.

This stage asks whether relationships can be improved without weakening independence, privacy or plurality. Successful interventions should be interoperable and replicable; failed ones should be documented.

What the Wheel cannot do

The Wheel cannot resolve political disagreement. It cannot guarantee wisdom, civility or participation. It cannot determine which institutions deserve trust for all time. It cannot replace the economic work needed to sustain reporting, the legal work needed to protect rights or the educational work needed to develop critical understanding.

It also cannot remain innocent of power. Every classification privileges some distinctions over others. Every corpus has boundaries. Every measure can shape behaviour. That is why the framework must remain transparent, plural and revisable.

Its contribution is smaller but still important. It offers a common language for asking whether our information environment provides the complementary functions on which independent judgement depends. It shifts attention from the survival or success of individual institutions towards the relationships that form public understanding.

The conversation to begin

The Netherlands learned to measure water because water connected people who did not otherwise share the same interests. A reference level did not eliminate politics. It made collective responsibility more practical.

Information now connects democratic institutions with similar insistence. Journalism cannot flourish if discovery systems detach reporting from its source and value. Technology cannot provide reliable synthesis if original knowledge and public memory deteriorate. Governments cannot protect democracy by regulating platforms while neglecting media independence and civic participation. Citizens cannot exercise judgement if the system offers either isolated fragments or a seamless answer they cannot inspect.

The five readings of the Wheel describe one movement. Original reporting, verification, context, plurality and synthesis are ingredients. They support awareness, justified confidence, understanding, judgement and coherence. They create responsibilities for independence, evidentiary integrity, memory, plurality and traceable connection. Those responsibilities are distributed across an institutional ecosystem. Their condition can be observed: imperfectly, cautiously and in public.

Taken together, the five readings define democratic Information Governance: not the central control of information, but the shared stewardship of the conditions in which public understanding is formed. Its purpose is to keep knowledge independent enough to challenge power, dependable enough to support judgement, plural enough to reveal what any single viewpoint misses and connected enough to remain intelligible.

The purpose is not agreement. A democracy in which everyone reaches the same conclusion would be neither plausible nor desirable. The purpose is to maintain enough shared evidence, accessible difference and transparent connection for disagreement to remain a form of collective reasoning rather than a collapse into separate realities.

The first Schijf van Vijf did not settle nutritional science, and the first water gauges did not end floods. Their achievement was more practical: they made a shared condition visible, gave disagreement a common reference point and allowed institutions to learn over time.

The Information Wheel should be judged by the same modest standard. Not whether it provides the final theory of democratic information, but whether it helps institutions and citizens ask better questions together:

What are we learning about the world? Why should we believe it? What gives it meaning? Whose experience changes the picture? And can we still see how the pieces connect?

If those questions become part of how we design, govern and measure the information environment, democratic Information Governance will have acquired both a practical language and a public purpose.

The Wheel is the instrument.

Information Governance is the democratic practice.

Independent judgement is the purpose.

What this means in practice

A framework earns its place only when people can act on it. This closing section translates the five readings into first steps and standing questions for the six groups on whom the information environment most depends.

The steps below share three properties. Each can begin without waiting for legislation, coordination or permission. Each strengthens a segment of the Wheel rather than merely defending an institution. And each is falsifiable: a year later, it is possible to say whether it happened.

01 · EDITORS AND PUBLISHERS

Make your contribution traceable

WHERE TO BEGIN

- Disclose AI by function, not presence: state whether it transcribed, translated, retrieved, classified, summarised or drafted, and who reviewed the result.
- Make corrections travel: attach revision histories to publications and notify the platforms and services that amplified the original claim.
- Invest where machines are weakest: first-hand observation, documents and presence. Industry leaders already plan this pivot, with net planned investment of +91 per cent in original investigation and +82 per cent in contextual analysis.³
- Adopt content-provenance standards such as C2PA before they are demanded of you.

KEEP ASKING

Which consequential claims in today's output rest on our own observation? If this publication disappeared, what knowledge would leave public view with it?

02 · PLATFORM AND AI COMPANIES

Design for the journey back to sources

WHERE TO BEGIN

- Link generated answers to identifiable sources by default, and treat click-through as a health metric rather than a leak.
- Test retrieval for systematic exclusion of local, minority-language and non-commercial sources, and publish the method.
- Represent disagreement and uncertainty explicitly instead of averaging them into one confident voice.
- Give affected people and institutions a working route to challenge, correction and the propagation of repairs.

KEEP ASKING

Would our system's answers survive comparison with their own cited evidence? Who can tell us we are wrong, and what happens when they do?

03 · POLICYMAKERS AND REGULATORS

Govern functions, not conclusions

WHERE TO BEGIN

- Treat the information environment as infrastructure: fund the functions (reporting capacity, archives, research access) rather than only policing content.
- Enforce the instruments that already exist, from the European Media Freedom Act to platform-transparency duties, before creating new ones.
- Protect researcher access to systemic data without opening individual reading behaviour.
- Keep authority polycentric: no single ministry, regulator, platform or model should certify the whole environment.

KEEP ASKING

Does this intervention strengthen a segment of the Wheel, or punish a symptom? Could a government we distrust abuse the power we are creating?

04 · FUNDERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Fund the relationships, not only the organisations

WHERE TO BEGIN

- Direct support towards the connective tissue: correction propagation, shared provenance infrastructure, cross-institutional standards.
- Support the segments markets underprovide: local reporting, memory institutions, minority-language media.
- Require method transparency from what you fund, and guarantee its independence from yourselves.

KEEP ASKING

Which segment of the Wheel is weakest in the communities we serve? Are we widening the table, or funding the usual seats?

05 · RESEARCHERS

Map before you judge

WHERE TO BEGIN

- Trace claims, sources, frames and corrections for a small set of consequential events, and publish the method for critique.
- Study whether informational arrangements help people explain, doubt and revise, not whether they reach preferred opinions.
- Expose the framework itself to falsification: the Wheel should change when evidence shows one of its assumptions is wrong.

KEEP ASKING

Are we measuring the conditions for judgement, or drifting towards scoring opinions?

06 • CITIZENS

Use the five questions

WHERE TO BEGIN

- When a claim matters to a real decision, run the Wheel once: What is new here? Why should I believe it? What is the history? Who sees this differently? Can I reach the sources?
- Keep at least one route to first-hand reporting about your own surroundings, and pay for it if you can.
- Treat a perfectly timed revelation (on the eve of an election, at the peak of a crisis) with the caution the Slovak case teaches: timing is part of the technique.

KEEP ASKING

When did I last change my mind because of something I read, and what made that possible?

None of these steps requires the others to move first. The civic compact of Part IV can begin between two institutions; the measurement programme of Part V can begin with a single event; a reader can begin with the next claim that matters. The Wheel does not need permission to be used. It needs users.

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Further reading

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OECD, updated AI Principles on human agency, transparency, robustness, traceability and accountability.

Guido van Nispen, international benchmark of the Dutch media landscape, extending the work of Stichting Democratie en Media during *Media voor Democratie 2026*.

About this edition

This edition recasts the original five-essay series as one continuous argument in five parts. It establishes Information Governance as the governing idea and the Information Wheel as its practical framework, while preserving the five distinct readings: ingredients, citizen capabilities, responsibilities, institutional contributions and measures.

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Information Governance

Five Readings of the Information Wheel

A framework for sustaining independent judgement in a democratic age

Guido van Nispen

Democracy does not suffer from too little information, but from an information environment that has become difficult to see, understand and contest.

This bundle of essays introduces Democratic Information Governance: the shared stewardship of the conditions under which public knowledge is produced, verified, preserved, connected and corrected. At its centre is the Information Wheel, a practical framework built around five essential elements: original reporting, verification, context, diverse perspectives and synthesis.

Read as ingredients, citizen capabilities, public responsibilities, institutional contributions and observable measures, these elements reveal how independent actors can sustain a shared information environment without prescribing what citizens should believe.



The Wheel is the framework.

Information Governance is the democratic practice.

Independent judgement is the purpose.