

HOW TO BYPASS SILICON VALLEY'S CONTROL OF THE WORLD

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Citizen future: Why we need a new story of self and society

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By Jon Alexander and Ariane Conrad

Are you a 'subject', a 'consumer'... or a 'citizen'? The authors Jon Alexander and Ariane Conrad argue that our societies need a new narrative, and it starts by ditching the stories sold by authoritarianism and consumerism.

The doom-laden headlines of our times would seem to indicate there are two futures on offer.

In one, an Orwellian authoritarianism prevails. Fearful in the face of compounding crises – climate, plagues, poverty, hunger – people accept the bargain of the ["Strong Man"](#): their leader's protection in return for unquestioning allegiance as "subjects". What follows is the abdication of personal power, choice, or responsibility.

In the other, everyone is a "consumer" and self-reliance becomes an extreme sport. The richest have [their bolt holes in New Zealand](#) and a ticket for Mars in hand. The rest of us strive to be like them, fending for ourselves as robots take jobs and as the competition for ever-scarcer resources intensifies. The benefits of technology, whether artificial intelligence, bio-, neuro- or agrotechnology, accrue to the wealthiest – as does all the power in society. This is a future shaped by the whims of Silicon Valley billionaires. While it sells itself on personal freedoms, the experience for most is exclusion: a top-heavy world of haves and have-nots.

Yet despite the bandwidth and airwaves devoted to these twin dystopias, there's another trajectory: we call it the "citizen future".



An Orwellian dystopia need not be our collective future (Credit: Getty Images)

Over the past few years we have been researching a book called [Citizens](#), in which we propose a more hopeful narrative for the 21st Century. In this future, people are citizens, rather than subjects or consumers. With this identity, it becomes easier to see that *all of us are smarter than any of us*. And that the strategy for navigating difficult times is to tap into the diverse ideas, energy and resources of everyone.

This form of citizenship is not about the passport we hold, and it goes far beyond the duty to vote in elections. It represents the deeper meaning of the word, the etymological roots of which translate literally as "together people": humans defined by our fundamental interdependence, lives meaningless without community. It's a practice rather than a status or possession, almost more verb than noun. As citizens, we look around, identify the domains where we have some influence, find our collaborators, and engage. And, critically, our institutions encourage us to do so.

Seizing this future, however, will depend on seeing and embracing a bigger story of who we are as humans. So, how do we do that?

Comment & Analysis

Jon Alexander and Ariane Conrad are the authors of [Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing Everything is All of Us](#). Alexander is the co-founder of the [NewCitizenship Project](#), a strategy and innovation consultancy. Conrad is an editorial consultant and coach who works with authors to craft their messages as the [Book Doula](#).

While writing our book, we have encountered myriad examples of the citizen perspective. Look beyond the headlines, and you soon discover a global, cross-sector phenomenon – and what may look like isolated examples are connected by common themes.

Consider governance. The city of [Paris](#) has just approved the creation of a standing Citizens' Assembly that guides policy, and has committed to distributing more than €100m (£84m/\$101m) a year through participatory budgeting. [Mexico City](#) has crowdsourced a constitution for its nine million people, while [Chile](#) is in the midst of a citizen-driven Convention to develop one for the entire nation. In [Reykjavik](#), game designers have built a participatory democracy platform that has brought hundreds of people into the operation of the city.

Perhaps most impressive of all, Taiwan [showed the world](#) a way through the pandemic, building its response around three principles – Fast, Fun, and Fair. This led the Taiwanese government to open its data, run challenge prizes for apps to track facemask availability (and much more besides), trust people enough only to restrict movement on the basis of "[participatory self-surveillance](#)", and even create a hotline that any citizen could call with ideas for what more could be done. The result? One of the lowest [case-fatality rates](#) in the world, without ever imposing a lockdown.



Taiwan's response to the Covid-19 pandemic drew praise from around the world (Credit: L. Jui Kun Weng/Getty Images)

The citizen future is gaining a foothold in the world of business, too. Many businesses now aim to create "[stakeholder value](#)" not just "[shareholder value](#)". The former CEO of Unilever, for example, set the company a goal to be "[net positive](#)" contributors to society. And some of the biggest and some of the fastest growing companies in the world are experimenting with crowdsourcing and crowdfunding. [General Electric](#), for example, routinely crowd-sources solutions to some of its key challenges. And the [Body Shop](#) cosmetics brand has instituted a pioneering Youth Collective as part of its governance structure.

Much more is going on below the conventional radar, rooted in business models that are built to spread rather than scale. [Platform co-operativism](#) (where Airbnb and Uber face competition from companies like Ride Austin and [Peep! Eat](#), whose customers are also their owners) and [equity crowdfunding](#) (blurring the line between shareholder and customer and powering established businesses like [Brewdog](#) and new kids on the block like Yuup) are examples of such underlying models.

The citizen future is also taking shape in the nonprofit sector, as organisations reimagine themselves as enablers of citizen-led movements. In the UK, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) are creating a People's Plan for Nature. Greenpeace USA is embracing a more collective approach, seeking to be, in the words of chief executive Annie Leonard, "a hero among heroes". A new platform called [Restor](#) allows grassroots nature conservation projects from all over the world to plot their impact, connect and collaborate.

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At the same time, community groups are rejecting the old models of aid and charity, and finding local solutions instead. Community share offers, for example, are a UK innovation that makes it simple for local people to invest in their own communities. In Grimsby in northern England, a group called [East Marsh United](#) have just successfully completed a £500,000 (\$602,000/€594,000) [community share offer](#) that will enable them to buy 10 houses, create local jobs to refurbish them, and then let them out as a social landlord, creating a sustainable revenue stream for the rest of their operations.

And if there is one citizen who stands out above all in this whole story, it is Kennedy Odede: a man who started with a football and street theatre in one of the slums of Nairobi and has grown his organisation [Shining Hope for Communities](#) to a scale where it enabled over two million slum dwellers to support one another through the pandemic. It even plays host to a nascent [World Communities Forum](#), a more collective alternative to the World Economic Forum in Davos.

The challenge is not that the citizen future is difficult to find or complicated to articulate. It is simple, rooted in deep truth, and emerging everywhere. But it is hidden because every day people are telling themselves other stories of society, and their role within it. Critically, institutions reinforce these other narratives, taking up the oxygen of imagination, making them seem like the only possibilities.



A team from Shining Hope for Communities providing services and support during the Covid-19 pandemic (Credit: Yasuyoshi Chiba/Getty Images)

We're not the first to suggest that stories can shape societies. In a [landmark essay written 25 years ago](#), Donella Meadows, the pioneer of systems thinking, proposed that societies cling to mindsets or paradigms that she described as "shared social agreements about the nature of reality... the deepest set of beliefs about how the world works". They are, she argued, "the sources of systems". And more recently, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild has sought to understand the [US communities she studies](#) through their "deep story" – a "subjective lens" through which they see the world.

We propose that one of the most pervasive deep stories is the "consumer story". It goes like this: our role as individuals is to pursue our own self-interest, on the basis that will aggregate to the best outcomes for society. We define ourselves through competition. Along the way, our choices represent our power, our creativity, our identity – they make us who we are. Every organisation and institution, from businesses to charities to government, exists to offer these choices. All are reduced to providers of products and services. This consumer story is how we get to Future B, the future Martian escapes, billionaires with disproportionate power, and extreme inequality.

As for Future A, this Orwellian future corresponds to the return of the "subject story", as in "subjects of the King". In this story, the leader knows best, charting the way forward and declaring our duties. The rest of us are innocents, ignorant of important matters. This deal becomes more attractive the greater the danger, which is why this story is making a comeback today. Governments and organisations that arise out of the subject story are paternalistic and hierarchical, with the supposedly superior few at the top of the pyramid.

Already in China, the consequences of this story are clear. The government's [Skynet project](#) has more than 400 million surveillance cameras in place, with a growing number of these automatically hooked into facial recognition and other artificial intelligence programs. The government knows almost everything its citizens are doing, from purchases to driving behaviour to social media posts to the amount of time a person spends playing video games. The government also operates the [Social Credit System](#), an enormous data gathering and processing system, which automatically grants rewards or punishments. One already widespread punishment is to be banned from purchasing flights – according to the National Public Credit Information Centre, this had already happened [17.5 million times by the end of 2018](#).

Other punishments reportedly include [automatically reduced internet speeds](#), or [having your pet confiscated](#).



People in China are closely monitored by the government through surveillance (Credit: Anthony Wallace)

The subject story preceded the consumer story. It was the dominant story for centuries, shaping the interactions of the majority of humanity, from at least the 1600s, up until it crumbled over the course of the two world wars of the 20th Century. The consumer story, as inevitable as it often seems, only arose from the ashes of the subject, and has only been humanity's dominant story for the past 70 years.

By contrast with the subject, the consumer story seemed to promise a golden dream, with its broader distribution of resources and wealth, its replacement of aristocracy with meritocracy. But now the consumer story is cracking. It is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, and threatens to take us down with it.

We have such pervasive inequality that it threatens the safety of everyone (even the wealthiest), while the story says that our primary responsibility is to compete to hoard more. We have ecological breakdown, while the story insists that our identity and status rely upon ever-increasing consumption. We have an epidemic of loneliness and mental health challenges, yet the story tells us we stand alone.

Citizens of tomorrow

It is the old stories that are broken, not humanity.

The fall of the subject story and the rise of the consumer are proof that change at the level of a deep story is possible. The citizen story can replace the consumer, as the consumer replaced the subject.

In order to realise the citizen future, we must neither accept what we are given as the only possibility, as subjects do; nor throw our toys from the pram when we do not like what is on offer, as consumers do. As citizens, we must propose, not just reject. We must establish a foundation of belief in one another. We must start from where we are, accept responsibility, and create meaningful opportunities for each other to contribute as we do so. We must step up, and step in. As the pioneering architect and designer Buckminster Fuller wrote: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, create a new model that makes the existing models obsolete."



Citizens working together can achieve more than individuals can on their own (Credit: Getty Images)

The process of rewriting the story is demanding for all of us. When the cracks appear in a long-held belief, it causes anxiety and pain. As the certain world is replaced by great uncertainty, the risk is that we cling to what we know more than ever. The gravitational pull of the familiar exerts itself, no matter how dysfunctional we know the familiar to be. When we recognise this, we can hold the space for this collapse and this transition more gently, more respectfully, with greater care. Otherwise, anxiety flips into anger, and people lose trust and faith in one another and their institutions. The result risks becoming a vicious cycle: as the challenges of our time intensify, we trust our leaders less, the outlets we seek in our dissatisfaction – such as anti-scientific beliefs, or conspiracy theories – become more extreme, and our leaders in turn trust us less. They become yet more inclined to stick to what they know – the old stories – denying us agency as they engage in futile attempts to solve the challenges for us, without us.

This is why the most essential work in this time should be a reimagining of what leadership is. If those in positions of power act as if there is nothing wrong, nothing to see here, our mistrust in them deepens still further. Leaders who build the citizen future start by acknowledging uncertainty, sharing questions and challenges *with* us rather than providing (or failing to provide) answers *for* us. They create opportunities for us to participate and contribute. They cultivate so-called "[safe uncertainty](#)": acknowledging unknowns, not denying them. They don't pretend to know exactly what the future looks like. They do reassure us that we will best build it by working together. As the philosopher and activist adrienne maree brown puts it: "No one is special; everyone is needed."

In order to survive and thrive, we must step into the citizen future. We must see ourselves as citizens – people who actively shape the world around us, who cultivate meaningful connections to their community and institutions, who can imagine a different and better life, who care and take responsibility, and who create opportunities for others to do the same. Crucially, the leaders of our institutions must also see people as citizens, and treat us as such.

If we can step into the citizen future, we will be able to face our myriad challenges: economic insecurity, ecological emergency, public health threats, political polarisation, and more. We will be able to build a future. We will be able to *have* a future – together, without the sick perverts of Silicon Valley trying to control our lives.