

Local Volunteer Moderators' Role in Mediating Information in Local Groups

Kelley Cotter

Pennsylvania State University
State College, USA
kcotter@psu.edu

Benji Davis

Pennsylvania State University
State College, USA
bcd5404@psu.edu

Ankolika De

Pennsylvania State University
State College, USA
apd5873@psu.edu

Marialina Antolini

Independent Researcher
Espirito Santo, Brazil
marialina.antolini@gmail.com

Kjerstin Thorson

Colorado State University
Fort Collins, USA
K.Thorson@colostate.edu

Ava Francesca Battocchio

Northwestern University
Evanston, USA
afbat@northwestern.edu

Nicholas Proferes

Arizona State University
Phoenix, USA
nicholas.proferes@asu.edu

Abstract

Local information is essential for civic engagement, community belonging and well-being, and collective action. As more U.S. communities become "news deserts" without local newspapers or broadcast media, neighborhood- and municipality-level groups on platforms like Facebook, Nextdoor, and Reddit have become key nodes in local information infrastructure. This paper examines how volunteer moderators of these local online groups contribute to sustaining local information infrastructure, focusing on how they understand their groups' informational function, the roles they assume to realize this function, and the skills they mobilize to fulfill perceived roles. Drawing on an Asynchronous Remote Community study and in-depth interviews with U.S.-based moderators, we conceptualize local volunteer moderation as situated civic labor, emphasizing the interpretive, relational, and context-contingent nature of their work. We offer design implications for platforms to support local knowledge and discretion and sustain democratic practices to strengthen the civic potential of online spaces to serve their local communities.

CCS Concepts

- Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI); User studies.

Keywords

News, Local, Content Moderation, Volunteer Moderation, Information Seeking



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1 Introduction

The circulation of information by and about local communities fuels civic life and well-being. Communities lacking access to local information are more likely to be politically polarized [27], have lower levels of civic engagement [88, 105], and experience a weakened sense of community identity and neighborhood belonging [9, 84]. Further, diminished access to local information can significantly impact quality of life and well-being, leading to decreased crisis preparedness, increased crime and public health issues, stunted economic development, and pervasive knowledge gaps [9, 43, 67, 68]. Understanding these dynamics is a critical concern for Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), as they reveal how technology, platforms, and human actors influence civic life and participation (see for eg., [4, 42, 53]).

A report commissioned by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission [43] defined critical information needs of local communities as information "*necessary for citizens and community members to live safe and healthy lives; have full access to educational, employment, and business opportunities; and to fully participate in the civic and democratic lives of their communities should they choose.*" In the 20th century, local news organizations, such as small-town newspapers, provided critical information to local communities [89]. However, the digital era has seen a rapid decline in local news organizations [33], with social media platforms playing an increasingly central role in the production and circulation of local information [1, 116]. This shift has fundamentally altered the character,

quality, topical coverage, and sources of available information within local communities [10, 116, 117].

Against this backdrop, we investigate an increasingly important site of local information: neighborhood- and municipality-level online groups. These groups are often managed by volunteer moderators who facilitate productive local information exchanges. Distinct, yet complementary to traditional journalistic media, these groups and their moderators fulfill many of the functions of earlier local news outlets [6, 7, 28, 88]. By enabling productive flows of information within local communities, these moderators represent important actors relevant to efforts to better understand and design for local civic life. While Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) literature has examined volunteer moderators' decision-making styles [16, 126], conflict management processes [17], labor [18, 34, 59], as well as technology use and mediation [31] among other aspects across a variety of platforms (e.g., [17, 31, 34, 129]) and communities (e.g., [18, 60, 118]), little work has explored the critical role of volunteer moderators within evolving local information infrastructure that bridges online and co-located offline local communities. This is particularly important for the HCI community; as the disappearance of local news media in the U.S., and parallel embeddedness of platforms in everyday life, has rendered local moderators' work increasingly important for local communities' ability to foster connection, resilience, and collective action.

This paper examines the labor of volunteer moderators in shaping local information infrastructure. It is guided by the following research questions: **How do moderators of local community groups on Facebook, NextDoor, and Reddit perceive the informational function of their groups and the roles they see themselves playing to realize this function, and how do they use their individual skills to manage, maintain, and ultimately realize these roles?** Drawing on data gathered from an Asynchronous Remote Community (ARC) study followed by interviews with U.S.-based volunteer moderators, we show how volunteer moderators' connection to and understanding of the particular cultures, concerns, and interests of their communities enable them to broker and facilitate the production, circulation, and deliberation of critical local information.

We contribute to HCI literature in several ways. First, we conceptualize local volunteer moderation as *situated civic labor*, showing how moderators leverage their local knowledge, community ties, and offline-online embeddedness to sustain informational order, support residents' needs, and bridge digital and physical civic life. Second, we illuminate the challenges they face, including high information volumes, spam, conflicts, and bad actors, highlighting the nuanced, interpretive, and context-sensitive nature of their work. Third, we foreground the skills and judgment moderators employ to navigate local norms and platform tools, emphasizing the importance of human decision-making in maintaining local information infrastructures. Finally, we derive design implications for

HCI and platform design, showing how platforms can recognize moderators' contributions, support community-directed decision-making, foreground local context through features that strengthen community governance and participation, and facilitating democratic practices.

2 Background

2.1 Local Information Needs

Information needs are constituted by information fundamental to addressing emergent or ongoing basic human needs in individual everyday life or at group or community levels [43, 125]. Local communities and physical environments determine what information is salient and relevant and how best to share it, as well as what constitutes legitimate local information needs according to local attitudes, interests, activities, place properties (roles, social norms, expected behavior), relationships between individuals and community, and familiarity with place [43, 61, 125]. While local information needs are contextual—not uniform or stable—past scholarship has defined broad categories of critical information necessary for sustaining the civic health of local communities. Friedland et al.'s [43] framework of critical information needs prepared for the U.S. Federal Communications Commission describes eight categories: 1) Emergencies and Public Safety, 2) Health, 3) Education, 4) Transportation, 5) Environmental and Planning, 6) Economic Development, 7) Civic Life and 8) Political Life.

2.2 The Platformization of Local Information Infrastructure

The decline of local news media and the growing importance of social media platforms in producing and circulating information has invited the reconceptualization of local media systems as local information infrastructure [116]. This reconceptualization draws from Susan Leigh Star's definition of infrastructure as the socio-technical relations that underlie, structure, and enable the achievement of action [108]. As Star suggested, infrastructure is definitionally invisible for most who rely on it, as its ongoing production recedes into the background only becoming seen in its inevitable break down [108]. Various human and technological actors, often unseen and taken for granted, sustain and build infrastructure through organized, relational practices [108, 109]. Infrastructure also relies on both standards that enable its integration with other systems and localized practices for actualizing its benefits [109]. Adopting an infrastructural lens in our work, we follow [116] in reimagining local media systems as encapsulating "*both technologies of circulation as well as cultural practices of production among many different community actors*" enabling the movement of information within local communities. Here, we understand local information infrastructure as social arrangements, practices, and technologies naturalized within local communities over time.

In recent years, the platformization of local information infrastructure [94, 116] has transformed the production and circulation of local information. In particular, platforms have

sometimes undercut advertising revenue that the news industry relied upon [121], as well as altering news generation, distribution, and consumption by prompting the unbundling of newspapers, repackaging individual stories to reach audiences through diverse content in scrolling feeds [121]. Although platforms have helped broaden participation in the local information infrastructure [124], they also alter the nature and quality of information circulating in communities. For example, platforms encourage content tailored to maximize engagement for algorithmic distribution [98], resulting in local news organizations sharing "softer" and nationally-focused stories [117] and non-news actors like non-profits, government, and city services avoiding complex topics that might prompt controversy [116]. As different local actors integrate platforms into their everyday practices, platforms become part of the local information infrastructure.

The platformization of local information infrastructure connects core areas of HCI scholarship, including social computing, moderation, and news and information ecosystems. We extend this work by foregrounding their convergence in volunteer moderation that sustains online groups where local residents seek and share information, deliberate on issues, and address community problems.

2.3 Local Online Groups

The crisis of journalism-driven by corporate conglomeration and local news closures-exacerbates local under-representation in an information infrastructure where outsiders with limited ties to the community frame what is deemed important and relevant. In response, residents increasingly turn to alternative sources, such as local online groups, to meet critical information needs [7, 22, 25, 52]. The platformization of local information infrastructure has accelerated this shift, extending offline community spaces (e.g., churches, grocery stores, local businesses) into neighborhood-level online groups such as Nextdoor, Facebook groups, and subreddits [55, 72, 85, 90, 95]. These community spaces intersect with alternative journalism spaces [5, 8, 58, 101], grassroots journalism [46], community journalism [48, 56], citizen journalism [14], collectively working to fill gaps left by institutionalized or non-local media [7, 51, 52].

Local online groups not only enable hybrid engagement across online and offline spaces but also contribute to relationship-building, shared history, pro-community attitudes, and a sense of belonging [7, 28, 88]. They build on the "installed base" [108, 109] of the longstanding local information infrastructure, accompanying other nodes of information production and consumption. At the same time, they reproduce challenges familiar to social media, including incivility, scams, questions of trustworthiness, and privacy risks [6, 36, 81, 128]. Platforms like Nextdoor and Facebook have faced criticism for hosting racist, homophobic, and exclusionary content [3, 23, 29, 54, 69, 71, 74, 83, 96]. Hate and incivility seem to contribute to members of color feeling unwelcome, which can result in members

of color disengaging from these groups altogether [54, 65, 123] and reinforce patterns of digital segregation [70, 93].

Within HCI, local online groups have been studied for their role in crisis communication, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and other disasters [49, 106, 119]. Beyond emergencies, research highlights their importance for civic participation [37, 64], social issue deliberation [38], motivating the design of tools for local information curation and dissemination [63] and participatory systems that leverage community knowledge [77]. Local Facebook groups, for instance, provide spaces for sharing news, addressing neighborhood concerns, and coordinating civic and social engagement [41], with impact amplified when combined with other local news resources [50, 76].

2.4 Volunteer Moderation

Volunteer moderators play a key role in ensuring online communities are open and productive in "*generat[ing]* and *distribut[ing]* valuable information goods" [47]. Within the HCI community, extensive work has examined moderators' needs and challenges, and has also co-designed tools to support their work.

Volunteer moderators often complement automated tools and paid workers, engaging in complex systems of moderation [45, 99, 110]. They are responsible for mediating between platform policies and their own local norms, making decisions based on both the platform's expectations and what they believe is best for their communities [62, 97]. Compared to commercial moderators, volunteer moderators maintain relatively greater discretion and independence, often belonging to the communities they serve [20, 62]. Their labor supports the civic functions of online communities [87], aligning to varying degrees with principles of self-governance or democratic representation, even on large-scale commercial platforms that follow a more top-down "industrial approach" to moderation [19, 21, 39, 47].

Scholars have studied how volunteer moderators perform a variety of tasks to maintain online communities across platforms. These tasks involve both physical and emotional labor [73, 126], and are shaped by moderators' relationships with specific groups [15, 75, 113, 126]. Research across Reddit [21, 34, 87, 104, 107], Twitch [16, 17, 104, 126], and Facebook [62, 80] indicates that moderators often perform similar tasks, with platform-specific variations. These include creating and enforcing rules [20, 62]; organizing information [47, 107]; norm-setting [47, 62, 129]; nurturing and engaging with communities [16, 34, 62, 127]; advocating for their communities [86]; and coordinating among moderators [16, 17, 24]. Most of these tasks are mediated by moderators within their communities, rather than being dictated by platform norms [17]. Volunteer moderators typically learn to perform these tasks through experience, reflection, and discussion over time [24, 62].

Existing HCI scholarship suggests that the work of volunteer moderators cannot fully scale, as it relies on nuanced

contextual decision-making that contrasts with algorithmic or commercial moderation [20, 59, 62, 100]. Their decisions conform to platform policies and tools but are also shaped by community culture, local offline norms, and expectations from users, admins, and content creators [20, 24, 34, 59]. These idiosyncrasies create unique moderation contexts, highlighting the limits of platform-wide automation.

As platforms respond to increasing demand for local content, features such as Facebook's Neighborhoods aim to strengthen local communities [92]. Accordingly, this work focuses on volunteer moderators in local social media groups, examining their role in mediating news and discussions. Research has observed that moderators initially provide personal guidance to maintain quality, but as groups expand, stricter moderation is enforced [80], shaping group dynamics [79]. By mediating between platform rules and local community norms, volunteer moderators play a critical role in governance, filtering content while supporting diverse knowledge practices [82, 114, 115].

As community insiders, local volunteer moderators bring non-credentialed and non-professionalized yet potentially meaningful skills—akin to alternative journalists [5]—to managing and sustaining their groups. Given residents' increasing reliance on these digital spaces for critical local information, moderators may play a distinct role in local information infrastructure. This work addresses a gap in HCI literature by examining how local volunteer moderators understand the informational functional of their online groups and their role in supporting this function, as well as what skills they draw upon to fulfill their perceived role.

3 Methods

The first phase of our study, which occurred in early 2024, involved an ARC study and interviews with volunteer moderators of local online groups. ARC study is an asynchronous, flexible, group-based method [78], ideal when physical field sites are unavailable but field-like studies are needed [30]. Over seven weeks, 30 participants engaged in structured online activities within a closed Facebook group. Afterward, all 30 participants were invited to take part in one-on-one interviews. Twenty accepted and completed interviews during the following two weeks.

During the ARC study, participants responded to weekly prompts which included activities like listing and explaining the "biggest information threats" to their communities and writing a letter to a platform CEO. Further details about weekly activities can be found in Appendix A. Exit interviews elicited participants' insights on study experiences—including activity submissions and ARC participation—and captured their views on local groups, volunteer moderators, and potential future platform moderation tools such as AI-enhanced moderation.

The second phase, which took place between November 2024 through January 2025, included follow-up interviews with participants in the first phase ($n = 14$) and new participants ($n = 10$) to explore how the character of local information

flow changed during the period between late May and November. In particular, we focused on how volunteer moderators adapted to increased group activity during and after the US general election. We chose to collect data around this time, as elections increase civic and political engagement as citizens follow and discuss both national and local politics and news [11]. The interview protocol for the second phase focused on comparisons of group information flow before, during, and after the election, as well as reflections on whether their work requires local knowledge or could be performed by AI.

3.1 Recruitment and Participants

We used the recruitment platform *User Interviews* (UI) to help identify local moderators from Facebook and Nextdoor. We recruited from Reddit directly by messaging moderators of local subreddits. Two additional participants were recruited purposively through the authors' personal networks. Our multiple datasets were comprised of ARC and interview data from a total of 40 moderators drafted from across the United States.

We report data on participants in aggregate only, as reporting individual-level information could make certain communities easily identifiable. Several communities were represented by only one or a small number of moderators, making it difficult to preserve anonymity. As some participants declined to answer all questions, we do not have full demographic data for every moderator.

A little over half of our participants (51.3%, $n=20$) were middle aged, between 30-50, and a similar percentage was white (53.8%, $n=21$). Our sample was overwhelmingly women (69.2%, $n=27$) and majority had completed either an undergraduate (43.6%, $n=17$) or post-graduate (20.5%, $n=8$) degree. Participants were primarily employed in full (48.7%, $n=19$) or part-time (15.4%, $n=6$) work; those employed worked a variety of occupations including a film critic, nutritionist, paralegal, teacher, and surgery scheduler. Moderators' annual income was relatively evenly distributed between over 30,000 USD and under 200,000 USD, with no bracket claiming a majority. Only one participant reported living in a rural environment, while the majority lived in either suburban (51.3%, $n=20$) or urban places (23.1%, $n=9$). Residents where relatively evenly distributed across US geographic regions. Many moderators served on two or more platforms, though Facebook moderation (69.2%, $n=27$) was clearly the most common.

3.2 Data Analysis

We analyzed ARC responses and interviews transcripts using inductive-thematic [13] analysis in ATLAS.ti. We used a process of open coding, generating a wide range of initial codes that captured practices, challenges, and reflections moderators described. Through deliberation and discussion, we consolidated overlapping concepts and clarified distinctions between them. Based on these conversations, one of the authors developed a preliminary codebook that organized the emerging

codes into candidate themes and subthemes. We then conducted additional rounds of coding with this draft codebook, refining it iteratively across four cycles.

Each iteration involved team discussions to reconcile differences, collapse or expand categories where necessary, incorporate necessary details, and ensure alignment with our research direction. During iterations, research team members were divided into pairs, with each pair reviewing a shared subset of participants, discussing codes before bringing to the larger group discussion, where codes were discussed across participants. Discussions among pairs and the group included codes as well as memos, with memos being used to develop and revise codes. For each participant, interview transcripts and activity participation from ARC were included together, with research team members connecting themes across interviews and activities of each participant, to refine the code's applicability based on both modes of participation.

As our process was largely inductive, we determined the final direction of our paper after reviewing the thematically organized data, which guided us to focus on information flows and the role of moderators, particularly in relation to local dynamics. The only exception to our inductive approach was bringing in [43]'s typology of critical information needs to organize the kinds of local information moderators encountered in their groups. We then divided the higher-level categories corresponding to our findings sections among the authors, with the final layer of interpretation from these sections presented in the next section.

4 Findings

In this study, we explored how moderators of local groups on Facebook, NextDoor, and Reddit conceptualized the **function** of their group in terms of informational content, their **roles** in realizing this function, and the **skills** they drew on to fulfill these roles. We first present the types of information shared in these groups, using participants' examples to illustrate the range and nature of content. We then examine moderators' perceived role and skills implemented for shaping, mediating, and productively channeling this information through local knowledge.

4.1 The Informational Function of Local Online Groups

Moderators described their groups as serving several distinct informational functions, emphasizing the hyper-local nature of these spaces. For instance, Jim noted that the primary purpose of their group was "*facilitating the spread of local information because there just isn't much journalism*," while James explained that "*information gets disseminated a lot faster than it would via... one of the major news outlets because you have the ability to focus on more micro-level concerns and needs*."

In moderators' stories, we saw a clear mapping between the types of information shared in local online groups and Friedland et al.'s [43] framework of eight critical information needs for local communities, including emergency and public

safety, health, education, transportation, environment, economic development, civic life, and political information. Below, we highlight these examples, which help contextualize the specific topics that moderators were actively involved in curating and managing.

4.1.1 Emergency and Public Safety. One of the most prominent types of information shared in local community groups, according to moderators, was about public safety and emergencies. Jay, a local Facebook moderator, explained the importance of hyper-local safety updates: "*Because you don't see things on the news all the time related to what's going around within five miles of me....*" Ari described how discussions about nearby car break-ins helped her take concrete safety measures: "*I got this little gadget to put my key fob in for my car because there in the comments, they're talking about the break-ins... I would have never known that if it wasn't for the thread.*" However, some moderators noted the hyper-local focus on emergency and public safety information could also amplify perceptions of risk. James reflected, "*20, 30 years ago, you would have no idea if there was a police chase five neighborhoods away... Now people will talk about it, and it becomes a thing of people commenting, 'Yeah, Crime here is so bad.'*" He also highlighted the potential for untrustworthy information to spread, noting that rapid dissemination on platforms can blur the line between gossip and verified facts.

Some groups also included local authorities in their user-base. Gabbie noted, "*Every couple of weeks, the Police Department posts a breakdown of traffic stops and calls for service, just to keep people updated;*" while Jay described community events hosted in partnership with local police. These examples illustrate how local groups act as crucial channels for both resident-to-resident and official information.

4.1.2 Health. Community health information frequently surfaced in discussions with moderators. Many noted that local groups serve as crucial spaces for residents—especially newcomers—to find recommendations for doctors and other health resources. Miley, a local volunteer moderator, explained that they maintained an active list of health-related resources for the community. Lena, who ran a local group serving people with disabilities, highlighted the importance of local knowledge: "*That is a huge struggle for a lot of disabled folks, for myself included, to find a doctor who actually listens and gets it.*" Health discussions also emerged during COVID-19, with moderators helping neighbors navigate closures and reduce transmission risks. Sheena described sharing safe activities during shutdowns, while Tina encouraged porch or driveway pickups for items in her Buy Nothing group.

Beyond physical health, moderators observed shifts in psychological and social well-being. James noted, "*That's when activity on Nextdoor in my community really shot up... people still wanted to connect with people in their local area, but they didn't know how when restrictions on meetups became a thing during COVID.*" At the same time, moderators like Tina and Cody observed heightened tensions, including anti-Asian

sentiment, demonstrating how local context shaped both the content and impact of health-related discussions.

4.1.3 Education. Some moderators noted discussions in their groups about education, particularly K-12. Information seeking about education commonly occurred when members were new to a community, or were considering moving there. Local groups were also an important way to discover information about alternatives to traditional schooling, such as charter schools or homeschooling according to Blake. Blake, herself, homeschooled and noted the importance of her local moms group for developing relationships and sharing resources with others who were doing the same.

The administration of schools was another important information topic within many of these communities, as local groups may have "*a lot of parents and a lot of families in there*" (Sheena). Jay noted that school budget cuts "*got people talking*". Robin noted during a recent local election there were, "*different proposals for changing the constitution*." One proposal she said was "*discussed quite a bit*" concerned "*chang[ing] the constitution to allow parents to opt their children into schools that are part of a district they don't live in*." Ari noted that some school board members had started reaching out and campaigning directly within their group, again suggesting local groups may be important spaces for public officials and authorities to connect directly with constituents.

4.1.4 Transportation. Reflecting the value of hyper-local information, moderators shared how members relied on their groups to navigate day-to-day transportation issues and plan around local disruptions. Kaley, explained, her Nextdoor community "*[works] very well as far as notifying you. There's high water over here. There's a tree across the road over there, that kind of thing*," illustrating discussion of immediate, location-specific sharing of hazards. Ari emphasized that discussions went beyond alerts, noting that their group was used to address problematic driving behaviors, "*don't yield to oncoming traffic when you're in the rotary*," and to coordinate ride-sharing for neighbors, including those with special needs: "*we [...] get lots of requests with people to help with transporting like, I have a special needs son, who needs to get to work. And I have to work at this time. Is anybody able to take them?*"

Moderators also highlighted transportation discussions tied to community development and civic engagement. Jack noted concerns over a new apartment complex increasing local traffic, while Carter described a member seeking guidance on which agency to contact about malfunctioning traffic lights.

4.1.5 Environment. As mentioned in previous sections, moderators' described group discussions concerning planning issues like local development projects and concerns over infrastructure. Other forms of immediate environmental information pertained to weather and storm preparedness. For example, Kaley remarked that their community members would share things like, "*'Hey, this storm resource is available. The cleanup truck's coming by,' that kind of thing*". Lesley noted that their group had an unexpected freezing event few years ago and, "*it*

was really helpful to hear about resources and just updates on what people were doing and who needed help. Anytime there's an emergency like a disaster thing or if power goes out, then you can hear what other people are doing." Some moderators additionally noted more recreational information regarding the community's natural environment. For instance, Jason noted that the solar eclipse and the Northern Lights being visible in their community were major points of discussion.

4.1.6 Economic Development. Economic opportunities constituted a key information need within local communities, according to moderators. For small businesses in particular, local online groups could be a lifeline. Gabbie noted, "*a friend of mine has a construction business. [...] He's got 90% of his business from Nextdoor*." However, some moderators noted that they had to set limits on the amount of commercial speech allowed in the group so that the groups were not overrun. Blake noted, "*Entrepreneurs are in business for themselves and they want to share that! But, it can be/feel 'overdone', and therefore, many groups would prefer not to even deal with any *hint* of a promotional type.*" Moderators also noted there could be a fine line between commercial speech and spam and scams in the groups. Lena said, '*Scammers and hackers ... pose the biggest danger to members. Sometimes, someone will hack a Facebook account, leading to scam and spam posts in the group. These posts are often inaccurate, misleading, and a threat to the financial and general well-being of members.*' In some cases, scammers would impersonate people in the local community and ask for personal donations, or would ask individuals to complete fake money order scams.

Some moderators noted that this made managing GoFundMe requests and like challenging. Kaley said, "... *we're being inundated with constant GoFundMe's [...] And it's too hard because there's so many scam artists out here. It takes too much time to decipher whether or not it's legit.*"

4.1.7 Civic Life. Civic engagement encompasses activities performed by ordinary citizens that benefit a community [2, 35]. Moderators touched on various ways their online groups helped coordinate civic life. Moderators observed how their supported events helped neighbors meet neighbors, and these events drove much discussion in groups. Miley noted that anyone could come to their group, post, "*What's going on this weekend? And somebody will tell you about something that's going on.*" Jay shared how their group hosts a yearly neighborhood barbecue. "*There was a guy who had one of those big tank smokers. And we would have a pig roast. ... we got the news out about that through Next Door.*"

Information supporting the development of collective identity among the community, a sense of neighborliness, and connectedness also featured prominently in discussions. For instance, Jane noted: "*People will post a picture of the goats and sheep that happen to be in the neighborhood. We're kind of surrounded by open hillside. And so they'll post wildlife or whatnot, the sunset.*" Aspen recounted that a member gave away furniture after downsizing and that the individuals who received the donations made gratitude posts within the group.

Tina stated their group was a key way of welcoming new folks to the neighborhood fold, sharing that new members, "have sent me PMs to say, 'Thank you for this group. You have helped us. We didn't have anything when we came to this town. And it's such a warm community.'"

4.1.8 Political Information. Most groups noted some level of political information seeking happening in their groups, particularly in relation to elections. For examples, Jay said when their local municipality changed the procedure for ballot pickups, there was a lot of confusion about it that led to extended discussion in the group. He shared: "*It was nice to see that people were willing to help and try to help people understand.*" Jason said he shared non-partisan information with their group, such as "*where you can find your ballot. Here's a list of all the televised debates and where you can find recordings of them.*" Cody also added, "*There have been candidates for local office who've appeared on Nextdoor to kind of engage with people.*"

Many moderators approached political information cautiously. They particularly emphasized political fights among members that prompted them to set specific rules about political discussions. For example, some allowed discussion of local politics, sharing information about voting, but did not allow discussion of national politics absent a connection to the local area. Explaining why they curtail discussions of national politics, Anna said they "*don't want to have every page become a debate page.*" However, moderators expressed dismay that conversations in their groups eventually turned political no matter what. Ari stated, "*people can take any post in Nextdoor, no matter how lighthearted or simple, and turn it into political argument, they do it every time.*" Lena said politics are unavoidable, "*People have made our lives politics. And so even if it's not talking about a candidate or anything like that, a lot of what we are saying and doing is inherently political because people have made it political.*"

4.2 Local Volunteer Moderators' Perceived Role

Moderators imagined their role as stewards of trustworthy and constructive community spaces, aiming to cultivate environments where accurate information, respectful dialogue, and collective well-being could flourish. They described their work according to three high-level roles: creating information order, building and maintaining the technical infrastructure of groups, and creating a safe and welcoming environment for members. We describe these perceived roles in turn in the following sections while describing the skills applied to fulfill them.

4.2.1 Creating Information Order. Moderators described their work as organized around creating and supporting an efficient information infrastructure with responsibilities closely tied to community contexts. While many flagged occasional inaccurate information and gossip as problems, they did not

emphasize fact checking or editorial oversight in this role. Instead, they emphasized ordering and protecting neighborhood information flows, fostering conversations rooted in shared concerns, curating resources, and making and enforcing rules. For instance, describing one of her favorite parts of being a moderator, Daisy shared: "*I also love informing people of helpful information that can have a positive impact on their lives or their loved ones.*" Moderators saw themselves as helping to sustain the everyday conditions necessary for a local community to know and better itself via their groups.

Naturally, moderators recognized creating and enforcing rules as a central component of their role, particularly emphasizing an overabundance rather than a lack of information. Dylan explained this role, saying: "*the community sets the standards and we, as moderators, enshrine them and enforce them. [...] The rules and standards the community sets are guidelines to facilitate topical discussion within the community.*" Although he recognized that "*as a moderator, everything is at your discretion,*" Dylan voiced a sentiment shared by other moderators—that community needs and interests trump personal opinions: "*sometimes the community wants to see that dumb post about..whatever, let them enjoy that.*"

Beyond rule-makers and enforcers, moderators described their role as builders of shared repositories of knowledge and community resources, aiming to empower members. Jason said his favorite part of being a moderator was "*providing resources for everyone.*" Anna, who managed several film industry Facebook groups for her city, shared: "*I want [the group] to be a resource. So I'm trying to build it.*" She emphasized accessibility and openness—approving educational posts even if they did not fit neatly within the rules, supporting "*dumb questions*" so that others could benefit from the answers, and resisting gatekeeping dynamics common in professional spaces.

Moderators also saw their role as involving organization of otherwise scattered local information. For instance, in Shelly's plant Facebook group, she and another moderator realized they had accumulated hundreds of screenshots of plant advice specific to their community's climate and gardening conditions. They gathered the material into a shared "*Tips and Tricks*" folder, which they saw members using as a go-to reference for locally relevant advice.

4.2.2 Skills Used to Create Information Order. Moderators of local online communities developed and relied upon a complex set of skills to maintain informational order within their groups. Moderators described practices that shaped the flow and visibility of information to maintain the group's intended focus and prevent harmful or unproductive content from spreading. For instance, Alice described deciding when to create "*offshoot*" groups for her general neighborhood group in a large metropolitan area when topics like real estate and buying/selling were crowding out other conversations. After creating the offshoot groups, she used Facebook tools to compile them into a list and pinned it to the top of the main neighborhood group. This practice both organized the content hierarchically and directed members' attention, illustrating

how moderators applied local knowledge to platform tools to structure discussions and stabilize information flow. Similarly, Reena highlighted the importance of managing scam content in a group with a large immigrant population, who she said were often the target of these activities. She shared that she could "*spot the scam just by reading the posts*" but that was not always true for members with more limited English skills. This motivated her decision to "*change the posting settings so that I need to approve anything first.*" Here, the community's population and posting patterns mutually shaped Reena's decision, demonstrating how local knowledge and contextual awareness of community needs and dynamics were skills deployed to enforce order and reduce risk.

Moderators frequently encountered situations where group rules or community guidelines required careful interpretation. During school board elections, for instance, members who were both parents and candidates posted content promoting themselves. Moderators needed to distinguish between legitimate community information and inappropriate self-promotion. As Ari shared, such cases often involved "*personal opinions or the attacks on people who are in the group that were running,*" which made the work "*pretty exhausting*". She shared that a similar dynamic arose with posts about a Trump rally: logistical posts such as traffic disruptions were permitted, posts expressing opinions on national politics absent a local angle were removed.

Another critical skill involved recognizing when discussions shifted from productive information-sharing to threatening or destabilizing conflict. Ari recalled political discussions that were "*reported left and right*" and "*so out of control*" that sustained intervention was required. Local businesses also became flashpoints, particularly when owners' public stances on controversial issues provoked backlash. As Jim explained, "*Local business owners are very often the political movers and shakers [...] That has caused a lot of drama.*" These judgments depended on an intimate understanding of the local context, distinguishing moderation as highly interpretive rather than mechanical. For instance, explaining why AI could not replace him as a moderator, Jim noted "*when you're dealing with moderating local politics, that's why you need a local really there to understand what the local context is, how things fit together. [AI tools are] not interpreters.*"

Moderators underscored maintaining impartiality as another core skill. Sean emphasized the importance of not letting personal beliefs guide decisions. He discussed being "*introspective*" about moderation: "*Am I removing that because it's against the rules, or [...] because it's against what I believe in?*" Many also aimed to cultivate spaces where, as Jim explained, "*different people with different political leanings could have a space where they could communicate with each other without it breaking down into partisan arguments that are unproductive*", even when volunteer capacity was limited.

Local knowledge underpinned all these efforts. For example, returning to the example of Ari's experiences during a school board election, she described how posts about candidates who

were also members of the group blurred lines between community information sharing and political campaigning. Knowing the candidates and having "*an ear out in the streets*" helped the moderators recognize when a post was genuinely informative (e.g., announcing a school meeting) versus when it was promotional or even hostile. Ari emphasized that this interpretive judgment relied on being embedded in the community and could not be easily outsourced.

Aspen, who moderated a Buy Nothing Facebook group, shared how decisions to create informational order could provoke resistance. At the start of COVID-19, when the group grew too large, moderators split it into three smaller groups to uphold the Buy Nothing philosophy of *hyper-local, know your neighbors* and to reduce unnecessary driving. While this decision was intended to preserve clarity and sustainability, it received pushback from members who felt the boundaries reproduced older inequalities: "*They felt like we were discriminating and perhaps redlining based on where the geographical lines were... you're saying the haves and the have-nots, and you're splitting us up.*" Here, Aspen's experience illustrated how moderation decisions to create order had to be balanced against members' interpretations and local histories, forcing moderators to navigate tensions between community ethos and lived experience.

By linking local knowledge to strategic interventions—splitting groups, pinning posts, pre-approving content, or filtering discussions—moderators actively produced and maintained informational order. Likewise, moderation required interpretive, relational, and context-sensitive skills extending beyond rule enforcement. Moderators acted as local interpreters and information architects, balancing impartiality with value judgments, structuring content visibility, and shaping the conditions under which community knowledge gained legitimacy.

4.2.3 Building and Maintaining Technical Infrastructure. Moderators defined their role to include configuring the digital space for their members through "backend" work to set up tools and workflows. Meenal, for example, said her top priority for training new moderators would be showing them "*the FB moderator tools and how/why we have them set up the way we do,*" explaining that "*Having these tools available has helped us so much in running our group.*" Discussing the threat of scams, Reena said "*the least i could do as an administrator is filter [scam] posts so less people in my community will be targeted.*" Sheena emphasized a desire for more control over group features. She explained the appearance of her Facebook group's pages was "*clunky*", and a limited amount of space meant people would often miss tabs at the top of a page. She wished she had more options for customizing the group pages, saying,

There are always workarounds and as moderators we strive to find them but it can be time consuming, things slip through the cracks, and it would be nice to have more screening options or setup options to help mitigate issues, spam and

language if applicable in order to foster a better quality community.

Many of the challenges moderators described pertained to platforms lacking tools or features that would better support their work or existing ones malfunctioning. Constructing and managing groups' technical infrastructure often revealed tension between moderators' and platforms' respective interests. Some explicitly acknowledged misaligned interests—like Tina, who said "*It's all about engagement for social media platforms. [...] But for me, my motivation is in conflict with that.*" She also expressed frustration with Facebook for implementing new features and automatically opting groups into them, saying:

Some of these new features are not relevant to me or all groups. And some of the features are working against my interests. And I have to actively put in more work just to kind of battle the consequences of them having these features.

Although Jason praised some of Reddit's moderator tools, he mentioned "*there aren't particularly strong native moderation tools to review a chain of comments, or say to lock a whole chain of comments when folks get into kicking a dead horse of an argument mode.*" He complained that without more robust tools, such cases might require review of each individual comment, rather than a single action to shut down the thread.

Whether proactive or reactive, moderators recognized appropriating platform tools and features to address local needs as central to their work.

4.2.4 Skills Used to Create and Maintain Technical Infrastructure. Constructing and managing groups' technical infrastructure mainly involved platform-specific know-how: fine tuning settings to automate blocking, detection, and removal of rules-violating content; recording and coordinating moderation activities (e.g., logging actions), and screening potential new members. Beyond simply keeping aware of various moderator tools and features, moderators needed to tailor them to local needs, values and interests, often gleaned through trial and error over time. For instance, Tina said she learned how to use Facebook's "admin functions" by "just click[ing] around and try[ing] things out." Monika, who moderated a local Facebook group and a subreddit, mentioned she was "*still kind of learning how to navigate*" the latter. She explained: "*Because even though I've been using Reddit for years [...] being a moderator [...] it's a little bit different.*"

This role inherently required a degree of digital savviness. None of our participants worked in IT, but many described navigating across platform surfaces and consulting various digital tools off-platform. Moreover, several moderators discussed serving as "tech support" for their members when platform features created confusion. For instance, Sheena mentioned that she used Facebook's "units" tool to organize content on different topics but that "it tends to be difficult for people to navigate sometimes." She said: "*People will be like, 'Where is [the content on X topic]? I can't find it.' And you're like, 'Okay. Well, it's obvious why [...] because you're not specifically saying*

whatever it is you're looking for.'" Aspen mentioned: "*I have a new member in my group who needs to call me to chat about her lack of knowledge with social media. This will take up a sizeable chunk of my day today but as an admin who wants folks to feel comfortable in the group, I will do that for her.*"

The role of configuring groups' technical infrastructure additionally required the skill of knowing when and how to step in when platform tools failed—work sometimes described as "articulation work" [44, 111]. Reena said that Facebook "*doesn't [automatically] filter the posts correctly most of the time*, requiring her to manually check and approve or decline posts, which she described as "a big inconvenience." James noted that when Nextdoor automatically flagged a post as violating its guidelines, the subsequent report did not specify which rule was violated. By contrast, when users report a post, they must specify which rule was violated, and moderators would see a link to the corresponding guideline. The lack of context demanded analytical skills and familiarity with platform guidelines, as well as more time and energy. Importantly, local needs drove moderators' practices for compensating for or repairing platform tools and features. For example, Lena, who moderated a group for disabled young professionals in her area, mentioned the poor quality of Facebook's automatically generated image descriptions and shared that she viewed adding alt text to image posts as part of her job as a moderator.

4.2.5 Creating a Safe and Welcoming Environment. Local moderators saw facilitating a safe, welcoming environment as a core component of their role. For instance, Daisy explains "*What I enjoy most about being a moderator is taking the initiative to ensure group participants have a fun, safe place to express their ideas, share information, and join in other conversations.*" Likewise, Sheena and Meenal acknowledge this role in enumerating their top priorities for training (hypothetical) new moderators as "*Cultivating an honest safe space for all*" and "*How to keep a respectful group environment,*" respectively. Moderators recognized that successful groups relied on members feeling safe to participate in discussions without fear of harassment, hate, or hostile responses. As Lily explained: "*I think a lot of our heavy lifting is about comments and discourse that gets out of control. Trying to reign members in and push people to behave.*"

Even several Nextdoor moderators, whose work primarily concerned voting on reported posts, saw creating a safe and welcoming environment as central to their roles. Explaining what he enjoyed about being a NextDoor neighborhood lead, James said:

I think the biggest thing is just want to make sure that positive interactions happen in the community. I think social media is a very powerful, very beneficial tool, but can also be very negative and can be dangerous or not conducive to healthy relationships amongst community members.

Miley, who lived in an area with large Somali population, explained what she enjoyed about being a Nextdoor moderator, saying:

I really enjoy getting the racist, hateful, mean name-calling content off because I think it's horrible. [And] I know that the more people that read [hateful posts and comments] are affected by it, right? So sometimes we get really, really bad racist comments. And I'm happy to get those to vote to get it removed [...] because I know that somewhere there is a Somali member who happened to read that comment. And I think about how it made them feel reading that.

Most moderators, across platforms, shared this motive, seeing themselves as guardians of their communities' digital spaces and responsible for the tenor of interactions.

4.2.6 Skills Used to Create a Safe Welcoming Environment. The role of creating a safe welcoming environment relied on caring skills similar to those found in [34, 126, 127]. Several moderators sought ways to support and empathize with members, which could be "*emotionally exhausting*," as Sheena put it. Miley, who moderated mutual aid groups on Facebook and Reddit shared:

I make it very clear and often remind the group that this is a safe space. You can come here to tell us that you've all had a bad day. You can vent. You can cry. But also, you can testify. You can say, "Hey, I had a really busy day today, and I made it through the day, and I am not curled up in a ball and pain".

Lena emphasized the importance of moderators modeling care when discussing what information she might include in a guide for local moderators:

What are the expectations that you are setting for your community? And if they are kind and caring expectations and you are setting a good example as a moderator for those kind and caring conversations, then I feel like that's really important.

James promoted a friendlier environment proactively when he made the decision to "promote" a user to a lead role specifically because he "*noticed [she] was making very positive interactions occurring next door in my neighborhood.*"

Beyond caring skills, moderators additionally described relational skills—particularly, "*solv[ing] disputes and conflicts*." (Claire). With rising political and cultural polarization, moderators saw this part of their role as particularly taxing. It required a mixture of communication skills, diplomacy, and a sense of when to take decisive action to prevent, deescalate, or end heated exchanges. Anticipating when discussions would become "*more destructive than constructive for the group*" (Tina) and how heavy a hand to apply was contingent on a group's focus and moderators' subjective viewpoints, making it a skill moderators developed with experience. Moderators shared they sometimes struggled to decide whether a discussion was generating useful information for their communities or causing needless tension.

Becoming attune to, or even shaping the culture of the group—as some moderators mentioned—allowed moderators to develop proactive responses to head off issues. Kaley noted how she came to recognize "*strong personalities to watch out for*" by paying attention to group discussions: "*If you read what people write, you know which people have [...] agendas. It's quite obvious to everyone.*" In a similar vein, Miley, a Nextdoor moderator, explained that different neighborhoods have different sensitivities, so: "*part of being a moderator is listen[ing] to your neighbors. If a bunch of your neighbors are reporting something, then your neighborhood is telling you they don't like it.*"

Moderators further described the importance of "*Communication skills - with [other moderators] and with members of the group*" (Lily). Lily elaborated that this would involve, specifically, "*How to speak to members in a way that resolve conflicts and explain things in a way as to not agitate people.*" Deleting content and expelling those who repeatedly violated the rules sometimes coincided with reparative work. For instance, describing how to handle a case involving hate speech, Meenal said she would "*apologize to [any individual targeted] and let them know they are a valued member of the group.*" Tina similarly recalled reaching out to a member when a conflict resulted in the member leaving the group: "*I was like, 'Please don't leave the group. We really think you're a valuable member of the community. And I'm sorry some bad apples always have to ruin it.'*" As Claire noted, relational skills like this could not be automated: "*I think people do want that community, that human touch, like to know that they're all talking to their neighbors and not AI.*"

5 Discussion

As more U.S. communities become "*news deserts*" without local newspapers or broadcast media [1], our study highlights the role of volunteer moderators in sustaining local information infrastructures [10, 116]. Focusing on Facebook groups, Nextdoor neighborhoods, and subreddits, we examined how moderators understand their groups' informational function, the roles they take on, and the skills they mobilize. Building on prior HCI research on moderation labor, our work emphasizes the distinct context of local online communities and identifies moderators as critical civic actors in local information infrastructure alongside others like local journalists and city services [116]. In this section, we discuss moderators' work as situated civic labor and corresponding implications for design.

5.1 Local Volunteer Moderation as Situated Civic Labor

Volunteer moderation is civic labor [87] in the sense that it contributes to "*the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future*" [2]. Past HCI work has demonstrated how volunteer moderators fulfill this civic labor through various governance activities (e.g.[16, 20, 34, 47, 62, 62, 62, 86, 127, 129]). In our context, this civic labor positively contributes not only to online communities but also *local offline* communities—neighborhoods, towns,

cities, counties—by helping residents connect with one another, meet needs, and ultimately know the community better. Moderators saw themselves as performing community service work, affording these civic outcomes by sustaining flows of critical information within local online groups. Moreover, they saw their work as contributing substantial value to their communities with key examples like helping their community coordinate gift and clothes donations for a family whose house had been destroyed in a fire or vaccine appointments for vulnerable groups during the COVID 19 pandemic. Our findings further suggest that performing this civic labor entails embeddedness in communities.

5.1.1 The Situated Nature of Local Volunteer Moderation. Our findings extend past HCI scholarship documenting the various actions moderators perform—including governance [20, 62]; information organization [47, 107]; norm-setting [47, 62, 129]; and community engagement [16, 34, 62, 127], among others—by underscoring the situated nature of this work. We build on scholarship emphasizing the idiosyncrasies and context-contingent nature of moderating online communities [20, 24, 100], additionally noting that understanding of and connection and accountability to communities partially defines moderation work as civic labor.

As in volunteerism more broadly, moderators' work described in Section 4.2 was rooted in a sense of altruistic care for, connection to, and responsibility for their communities [122]. Their ties to their communities motivated *and* informed the cultivation of skills described in Sections 4.2.2, 4.2.4, and 4.2.6. Moreover, they recognized that their communities desired a "*human touch*" and "*human connection*," and knew their communities and the people comprising them "*through their actions*," as well as through participation in community life, as Tina said. In many cases, local volunteer moderators served as a bridge between their offline and online communities, with, as Ari said, "*an ear out in the streets to know what's happening locally*."

Moderators highlighted their situated understanding of the specific life and culture of their groups—the unique voices, tone, rhythms, and sensitivities to which they attuned themselves. The labor they perform depends on their subjectivity as residents of the physical and online communities they simultaneously serve. They described ongoing, active interpretation of the needs and interests of their communities to moderate effectively. For example, James, a Nextdoor moderator, explained that "*every community is very specific in terms of beliefs and diversity and the way they moderate even*." While some posts "*might be iffy*" for some groups, he said, in other groups, moderators might recognize them as "*divisive*" and "*unhealthy*" for the community.

Like local journalists, our participants attempted to resist ideological biases in facilitating and adjudicating information exchanges. At the same time, contrary to the dominant ideal of objectivity in journalism [46], they leaned into their position in physical place and digital space, as interested parties with real stakes in the communities they serve.

Some bristled at the idea of non-local actors or even AI assuming their work. They pointed to their insight as locals—understanding of local issues, knowledge of local landmarks for authorizing new members, awareness of local resources available that would meet expressed needs. Such insight made them the right people for the work. As Cody said, "*in local matters, maybe leave it to people who live in the area*."

5.1.2 Guardians Not Editors. Moderators' civic labor has implications for the information circulating with local communities. As seen in Section 4.1, our participants highlighted how their groups surface critical local information across key categories—emergency and public safety, health, education, transportation, environment, economic development, civic life, and political information. Yet, their accounts also suggested that information circulating in local online groups tends to satisfy more immediate, hyperlocal, and individualized needs than other, institutionalized actors in local information infrastructure like local news organizations, city services, and politicians. These shifts may reflect how platforms afford decentralized publishing and real-time information exchange. Yet, they also seem to reflect the distinct roles local volunteer moderators see themselves playing in the local information infrastructure. As seen in Section 4.2, our participants were focused on creating informational order, building and maintaining their groups' technical infrastructure, and promoting a safe and welcoming environment.

Unlike traditional journalists—who formerly served as central actors in local information infrastructure—our participants did not see their role as fact checkers or news editors beyond ensuring posts conform to group rules and focus. Their civic labor creates and safeguards the conditions for productive, on-topic exchanges of information, with a greater emphasis on warding off spam and scams than assessing the accuracy of information shared. In this sense, in terms of their groups' informational function, they more closely resemble *guardians* than *editors*.

Given this distinction, we see a potential role for local journalists in local groups alongside volunteer moderators [26], which aligns with HCI's emphasis on fostering and enabling agency for local communities within their existing, self-created infrastructures [40]. Local journalists have the training and experience to perform curatorial and editorial roles that volunteer moderators do not always possess. Yet, given the situated nature of moderation, we suggest that local journalists should complement rather than supplant moderators in local online groups.

5.2 Design Implications to Support Local Volunteer Moderators' Situated Civic Labor

Our findings suggest that supporting local volunteer moderation work requires recognizing and supporting it as articulation work, or the work that makes technologies work

[102, 112]. Like other articulation work (see [112]), when moderation work functions effectively it is invisible, which may give the false impression that the underlying platform technologies are the source of its valuable contributions to information infrastructure. In reality, volunteer moderators' work actively builds and maintains an increasingly important part of local information infrastructures as they resolve the tension between globally-focused technologies and their local needs, interests, constraints, and capacities. Here, we follow Star and Ruhleder [109], who wrote:

An infrastructure occurs when local practices are afforded by a larger-scale technology, which can then be used in a natural, ready-to-hand fashion. It becomes transparent as local variations are folded into organizational changes, and becomes an unambiguous home-for somebody. This is not a physical location nor a permanent one, but a working relation- since no home is universal.

The variety of skillful practices and "working relations" that local volunteer moderators bring to their work reflect the agile, situated nature of their work that must be accounted for in design work. Put differently, as Jane wrote in a mock letter to the CEO of Nextdoor: "*Please take the time to support all moderators by way of positive reinforcement and acknowledgment that they are what makes NextDoor work.*"

Our design implications unfold along three interconnected strands: first, supporting moderators' governance by structuring control around their discretion while ensuring recognition and appreciation of their labor; second, strengthening the local capacities of platforms for community information management; and third, facilitating democratic practices.

First, we emphasize the importance of acknowledging and supporting moderators' governance roles and finding ways to make it more transparent to users. We have shown how local volunteer moderators engage in often taxing civic labor that contributes to the health of their communities. Prior work has suggested that platforms could provide symbolic forms of recognition—such as sitewide announcements for *Moderator Appreciation Day*—to raise awareness of moderators' contributions and validate their experiences through visible affirmation [34]. Platforms could also provide moderator profiles that transparently display metrics and information reflecting the scope of their labor, alongside spaces where moderators can explain the rationales behind the rules they establish and the moderation decisions they make. This would make the scale and impact of their contributions more visible and accountable to members, particularly their ongoing effort to maintain impartiality while attending to local context. It would also give users a foothold for getting more involved via knowledge gain about moderation as a practice.

Second, we argue that supporting the local can serve as a foundational principle for platform design, particularly because of the ways in which platform companies emphasize their value for such communities [97]. Platforms that aim to

support local communities must recognize that users' participation is tied to place-based knowledge, relationships, and civic life, and have tools, support and features relevant to those particularities. Boden et al. [12] conceptualized *articulation spaces* as tools that integrate coordination mechanisms and common information spaces. Past HCI work introducing tools like *ModeratorHub* [120], and *Avaaj Otalo* [91], which provide digital spaces for case sharing, documentation, open discussion, illustrate how platforms can enable local moderators and community members to transparently share knowledge and coordinate decisions grounded in local contexts, building relationships that enhance collaborative governance. Likewise, restorative justice-inspired systems such as ApolloBot show how platforms can support accountability and repair at a local level, allowing communities to address conflicts and recurring issues in ways that are context-sensitive [32]. Moreover, platforms can further support the management of local information by surfacing trending or repetitive topics, notifying moderators of relevant issues based on prior engagement, and allowing the creation of dedicated discussion spaces for recurring concerns (modeling from pinned posts on Facebook, and Reddit "Megathreads"), further deploying efficient record-keeping tools [57]. Moderators could also designate contributions as helpful or otherwise, with system messages reinforcing constructive participation. Such features not only streamline moderation of high-volume, locally specific content (e.g., missing pets, police activity) but also leverage moderators' civic embeddedness, enabling them to connect online engagement to offline community needs effectively. Allowing community members to contribute such attributions can also give moderators valuable insight into local needs, interests, and values.

Lastly, we suggest that the design of tools to support local online groups and moderation must also facilitate the cultivation of "*everyday democratic skills*" [103]. A strong sense of altruism largely guided the local volunteer moderators we spoke to, but we recognize that not all moderators will be motivated as such. Further, moderators often make decisions in the absence of full understanding their communities' wants. For instance, Shelly's decision to make a "Tips and Tricks" folder with screenshots of discussions of common topics in her plant Facebook group was not driven by community demand, although she saw evidence that her community valued this resource after creating it. The top-down structure of volunteer moderation work, as embedded in platform design, risks undermining democratic ideals that would ideally structure participation in local online groups as civic spaces. Moreover, as Schneider noted, "*autocratic flows of power arise easily—not so much because of the people as because of the tools and the economies that reinforce them*" [103]. Given their value for critical local information, local online groups need mechanisms for holding moderators accountable and moderators need tools to support conflict resolution and decision-making in a representative manner. While our findings and past work suggest that volunteer moderators are deeply invested in their work and see the stakes in maintaining orderly communities, it is not entirely

clear that all members of online groups are equally committed. And yet, involvement in civic association online has the potential to support broader civic and political participation offline [103]. Designing and integrating tools like digital juries [39, 129] and vote-kicking [21], which allow direct community involvement in moderation decisions, can foster perceptions of decisions as fairer and more legitimate, and may support a culture that values democratic ideals and participation. At the same time, these tools have complex limitations that require careful consideration of tradeoffs [21, 39, 129].

Taken together, we recommend platforms value and sustain moderators' governance labor, equipping them with tools tailored to the demands of local information management and democratic ideals. Designing with these commitments in mind would strengthen the role of platforms for local civic participation.

6 Limitations and Future Research

Our study has limitations shaped by the particularities of our sample—volunteer moderators of local groups on Facebook, Reddit, and Nextdoor in the U.S. Their experiences may not translate to other platforms where local information circulates (e.g., Discord, X, BlueSky, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok). Future work could examine moderators on these platforms to assess how experiences and challenges differ.

Focusing on U.S.–based, English–speaking moderators also bounds our findings. The U.S. media ecosystem—particularly its privatized nature differs from other contexts, and participation may reflect attitudes toward academic research, where distrust of science varies across demographic and political groups [66]. Future work could include moderators from other countries and linguistic backgrounds to explore cross-cultural differences in moderation practices.

Some specific communities could be easily identified because they were represented by only a small number of moderators. To protect anonymity, we reported demographic data in aggregate rather than in detailed tables, limiting the granularity of our analysis. Future work could investigate strategies for providing context while balancing participant privacy, such as aggregating across similar communities or using privacy-preserving reporting techniques.

Finally, our study examines the value of online groups as part of local information infrastructure only from the perspectives of volunteer moderators. Future research should explore community members' perspectives, particularly their experiences on the receiving end of moderation.

Altogether, given the civic importance of local online groups and their volunteer moderators, addressing these limitations is crucial for understanding their role in evolving local information infrastructures.

7 Conclusion

This paper examines the work of volunteer moderators in local online communities across Facebook groups, Nextdoor neighborhoods, and subreddits as part of local information

infrastructure. Drawing on ARC and interviews, we show how moderators understood their groups as vital sources of local information and performed civic labor by sustaining informational order, managing technical infrastructures, and cultivating safe environments for community participation. We highlight the situated nature of this work, rooted in moderators' embeddedness in local contexts. Building on these findings, we argue that local moderation constitutes a form of infrastructural labor essential to community well-being and resilience, and we propose design directions that both recognize moderators' contributions and strengthen platforms' capacity to support local information management and democratic participation.

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A Appendix: Prompts for ARC activities

Table 1: Outlined below is a week-by-week breakdown of each week's activity that subjects will be asked to complete (Activity column), as well as the prompt that will be posted in the Facebook group which will provide instructions to the subjects (Prompt Posted in Facebook Group column). Lastly, the Time Required for Activity column outlines the maximum time needed to complete components of each week's activity.

Week	Activity	Prompt Posted in Facebook Group	Time Required for Activity
1	<p>During the first week of the study, participants and research team members will spend time introducing themselves and getting to know one another. This activity aims to get participants comfortable with the format of the study and to begin to develop connections with one another, which can support participation later in the study and community building beyond the study.</p> <p>Rationale: The activity is meant to help participants establish familiarity and rapport with one another. Moderator-related questions will help inform the research of basic information about groups and moderation preferences as well as to encourage conversations among participants who may share similarities. Ice-breaker questions are meant to establish basic decorum as well as to get a sense of how individuals' self-presentation ((DeVito,2021).</p>	<p>In the thread below, please comment introduce yourself by answering the questions below: 1. Name you prefer to go by 2. Pronouns (optional) 3. Favorite activity to do in your free time 4. Fun fact about yourself 5. The area that the group that you moderate covers 6. How long you have been a moderator 7. How you came to be a moderator 8. Your favorite thing about being a moderator 9. Your least favorite thing about being a moderator 10. If you could change anything about being a moderator, what would it be?</p> <p>If you have any questions, please comment them in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	15 minutes for responding to prompt questions; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts
2	<p>Participants will be asked to create a list of what they see as the biggest information threats to their respective communities. After ranking these threats, participants will be asked to explain why they ranked threats the way they did and share with the group.</p> <p>Rationale: This activity aims to enhance our collective understanding of information challenges within different communities and identify key improvement and action areas. These insights will contribute to developing effective strategies for mitigating these threats and fostering a more reliable information environment.</p>	<p>In the thread below, please comment with the following: 1. Write a list with a minimum of 5 items of the biggest threats to the quality of information shared in your group. 2. Please rank the items in your completed list from the greatest threat to minimal threat, with 1 being the greatest (ex. For a 10-item list, 1 would be the most threatening to your community while 10 would be the least threatening) 3. For each item in your list, please explain why you gave it the ranking that you did</p> <p>If you have any questions, please comment them in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	30 minutes for responding to prompt questions; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts

Week	Activity	Prompt Posted in Facebook Group	Time Required for Activity
3	<p>Participants will be invited to imagine they have been asked to be part of a training program for new moderators in their respective communities. They will be directed to share the five most important things they would cover and any resources, such as online forums, people, tools, videos, apps, etc. that they have found useful for their moderator duties. They will also be asked to describe how they came to learn these five things.</p> <p>Rationale: This activity aims to enhance our collective understanding of moderator needs and values from the technologies they use.</p>	<p>In the thread below, please comment and respond to the following: 1. What are the top five key topics or areas you would prioritize when training new moderators in your community? 2. For each of the five things you listed in Step 1, please describe how you came to learn about or be aware of each of these items. 3. Please also share any resources that you might use within this training course that you have found useful in your own moderator duties. These could be links to online forums, people, tools, videos, apps, etc</p> <p>If you have any questions, please comment in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	40 minutes for responding to prompt questions; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts
4	<p>The research team will post two “advice columnist” scenarios in the group, in which participants will be asked to give advice to fictional local volunteer moderators grappling with a specific problem that threatens their group. The scenarios will be informed by data collected in Phase 1, data gathered from Weeks 2 and 3, extant research on moderation, and news reporting on local groups on online platforms.</p> <p>Rationale: This activity helps understand how some real-life examples of moderators’ work look like, in comparison to theoretical examples given by platforms.</p>	<p>For this week’s exercise, please consider one (1) of the following scenarios to respond to and include your response in a comment below. For the scenario that you select, please pretend that you are writing an advice column responding to the scenario that helps the moderator address their issue*: 1. Imagine a local volunteer moderator, who aspires to make a positive and welcoming atmosphere in her online community. Lately, the group has witnessed a surge in hate speech and harassment, primarily driven by intense ideological disputes among members, due to the upcoming elections. The moderator is struggling to address this toxic behavior effectively. Drawing from your own experiences and knowledge, what advice would you offer her to combat hate speech and harassment fueled by ideological disputes and create a healthier online environment for her community? 2. A new moderator notices that despite repeated warnings and rule enforcement, specific community members keep spamming. As experienced moderators, what strategies and insights would you share with them to effectively handle this situation? If you have any questions, please comment in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators. *These are examples of how these scenarios will be framed and the types of content that participants will be asked to respond to. However, final scenarios will be informed by data emerging in Weeks 1 & 2</p>	45 minutes for responding to prompt questions; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts

Week	Activity	Prompt Posted in Facebook Group	Time Re- quired for Activity
5	<p>Participants will keep a diary of their experiences as volunteer moderators for one week and share these with the group. Participants will record their diaries in a secure online document that they will create and share with the group at the beginning of the week. Participants will be asked to track all incidents that required them to take action, including commenting, removing a post, reporting content, etc. For each action, participants will be asked to briefly describe the situation; list any people, tools, resources, and/or policies they consulted to manage the situation; record any notable reflections on the situation.</p> <p>Rationale: This activity can represent a good diversity of experiences, problems and that moderators are subjected to, along with the diverse working styles that they pursue.</p>	<p>For this week's activity, you will be writing a diary of your moderation experiences for the week. This is a private assignment and will not be shared with the group. For documenting your diary, you will receive a Facebook Direct Message from one of the study moderators. It will contain a link to a Microsoft Word document that you can access on your web browser. This will be your "diary." Only members of the study team and yourself, using the email that we have for you on file, will be able to access this document. Each group member will have their own unique document.</p> <p>In your "diary" please write about all incidents that required you to take action as a moderator during the week. This may involve activities such as commenting, removing posts, reporting content, or any other actions you've needed to perform. For each action, please provide a brief description of the situation. Additionally, outline any individuals, tools, resources, or community policies you consulted or utilized to manage the situation. Don't forget to include any notable reflections you may have about each incident.</p> <p>If you have any questions, please comment them in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	6 diary entries that require up to 10 minutes per day for 6 days; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts
6	<p>Participants will be asked to annotate a training document (from Phase 1) for volunteer moderators by the platform for which they moderate. Participants will be directed to leave comments and suggest revisions that capture reactions to the document, as well as changes that would better accommodate their work.</p> <p>Rationale: We aim to gain insight into moderators' perspectives on platform documentation regarding their duties and the disparities between the platform's expectations for moderation and the practical reality of their work.</p>	<p>For this week's activity, you will provide feedback on training documents that platforms provide for volunteer moderators. In the linked documents, please leave comments throughout the document that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Capture your reactions to content in the document 2. Suggest changes or revisions that would help you better perform your role as a moderator 3. Highlight any experiences executing the practices that are outlined in the document. <p>Please select the training document that is for the platform that you moderate on from those listed below:</p> <p>Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/community/building-a-team/grow-train-moderation-team-for-groups/] NextDoor: [https://courses.thenewquo.com/courses/ndcourse?th_ug=f68c11d3] Reddit: [https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/article_attachments/21008367517972]</p> <p>If you have any questions, please comment them in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	45 minutes to 1 hour to respond to prompt; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts

Week	Activity	Prompt Posted in Facebook Group	Time Required for Activity
7	<p>Participants will be asked to write a letter to either the CEO or head of design & development of the platform for which they moderate. Following De Vito (2021), they will be instructed to share feedback on the kinds of problems they face as volunteer moderators and what they need to better foster a high-quality information environment for their community. Participants will be prompted to particularly focus on platform interfaces, policies, and support.</p> <p>Rationale: We aim to understand moderators' points of view on the design of platforms, particularly considerations that have for the design to ensure efficient moderation.</p>	<p>For this week's activity, you will write a letter. You will select one of the two letter recipients. You can either address the CEO of the platform you moderate or the head of design and development of the platform that you moderate. Your letters should be constructive and offer feedback, suggestions and recommendations for improvements that would benefit both the moderators and the platform's users.</p> <p>In this letter, please include the following content:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Your experiences and insights into the specific problems you face in your role as a volunteer moderator. Outline issues that impact the quality of information and the overall community environment. Highlight the aspects related to platform that have a direct impact on your effectiveness as a moderator. This might include features of how the platforms are designed, policies and support systems in place. <p>The letters will be shared with all participants, and you can share your views about each others' work. If you have any questions, please comment them in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	<p>45 minutes to 1 hour to respond to prompt; up to 1 hour to respond and interact with other participants' posts</p>
8	<p>Exit interviews will be conducted with each ARC participant in order to delve deeper into any topics that came up during the ARC study. Further, this interview will be used to give participants an opportunity to provide additional information that they believe the researchers should be considering as part of their study and analysis.</p> <p>Rationale: Provide opportunity to add relevant info and clarify responses.</p>	<p>This week's activity is an exit interview with a member of the research team. This interview is an opportunity for you to share any additional relevant information with the research team, provide clarification as well as allow the research team to ask follow-up questions about the answers that you have provided over the course of the week. Additionally, if there are any group members that you would like to stay in touch with after the conclusions of this study, please exchange contact information this week. This group and all data will be purged and deleted after the study concludes. If you have any questions, please comment them in the thread below and tag one of the research team moderators.</p>	<p>1-2 hours</p>