

NATS as a Third Place

Alexis Davis-Hazell



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NATS can serve as a modern “third place,” fostering both social capital and social cohesion. Drawing on Ray Oldenburg’s theory, additional research on civic decline and journalism investigating digital loneliness, NATS President Alexis Davis-Hazell explores how the association can counter the erosion of communal life in the digital age. Davis-Hazell examines the implications of shifts toward fully virtual program offerings, and a rebound in volunteerism amid the reemergence of U.S. Gilded Age–like societal conditions. The column concludes with suggestions for rebuilding social cohesion within professional and civic contexts, emphasizing NATS’s role in sustaining meaningful human connection in our professions.

AS WE BEGIN A NEW SCHOOL YEAR, we want to return to our studios, classrooms, labs, and rehearsal spaces with renewed energy and purpose. For many of us, the start of a performance season marks not only a recommitment to our clients and craft but also an opportunity to reconnect with our professional community. Hopefully we are invigorated by any summer performances or professional development activities in which we have participated. I continue to be inspired by the connections, experiences, and knowledge shared at the Americans for the Arts Conference (AFTACON) in Cincinnati and the eleventh International Congress of Voice Teachers (ICVT) held in Toronto this summer. In this spirit, it is worth reflecting on one of the deeper roles that associations like NATS can play in sustaining our collective well-being—not just in our professions, but as members of a broader civic and cultural fabric connecting the far-flung places we live.

A BELL CURVE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Data tracking civic engagement in the United States shows a bell-shaped trajectory over the past 150 years. Active involvement in fraternal organizations, labor unions, and local clubs peaked in the mid-twentieth century, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, when participation in religious groups, parent-teacher associations, and civic organizations was taken for granted. NATS was born approaching the crest of that curve. However, as sociologist Robert D. Putnam documented in his longitudinal study of civic engagement data points—published as the book *Bowling Alone*—that engagement began a steep decline in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹ Contributing factors studied included suburbanization, the rise of television, and changes in family structure. The decline has accelerated since then and digital technologies often replace in-person interaction. The resultant civic landscape is characterized by division and weakened communal ties. Representing the parallel lower points of the bell curve, societal conditions of the early twenty-first century

bear a noticeable resemblance to those of the late nineteenth century Gilded Age in the United States. Both past and present periods can be characterized by rapid technological change, a widening economic disparity, and tendency towards institutional distrust. In the Gilded Age, industrialization and urbanization disrupted traditional community structures, while wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few.² In the Information Age, globalization has similarly transformed work, communication, and social life, often at the expense of local and face-to-face interactions.

INCREASED INDIVIDUALISM AND LONELINESS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

One of the most significant cultural shifts contributing to the decline in civic engagement is the incentivization of individualism. In contemporary Western societies, success is most often framed in personal and competitive terms—measured quantitatively by individual achievement, self-branding, and accumulation. Individualism is thought to be on the rise in Western countries, and recent research suggests that increasing individualism may even be a global phenomenon.³ While individualism can empower self-expression and innovation, it can also minimize the collaborative spirit necessary for community-building. History professor Steven Mintz describes the interplay in the following way: “Individual autonomy and social cohesion are not mutually exclusive—they can and should complement each other.”⁴ However, when we prioritize personal advancement over communal well-being, we are less likely to invest time in volunteerism, mentorship, or community.

This mindset is reinforced by digital platforms that provide endless visibility and self-promotion but do not necessarily cultivate collaboration and mutual support. American journalist Derek Thompson highlighted a paradox of the digital era: while social media platforms offer constant connectivity, they often leave users feeling more isolated.⁵ Thompson observed that individuals increasingly prefer broadcasting their loneliness online to engaging in meaningful interpersonal relationships. This phenomenon underscores the urgent need for physical, communal spaces where people can gather, share experiences, and build trust. In these situations, professional associations like NATS can work intention-

ally to counterbalance these forces by fostering a culture of reciprocity and shared purpose.

UNDERSTANDING NATS AS A THIRD PLACE

The concept of the “third place” was introduced by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his influential 1989 book *The Great Good Place*.⁶ According to Oldenburg, third places are informal public gathering spaces that are neither home (the “first place”) nor work (the “second place”), but serve as vital anchors of community life. Examples include cafes, barbershops, libraries, parks, pubs, and community centers.⁷ These spaces are characterized by several key features: they are neutral ground where no one is the host and all are welcome; they level social hierarchies, allowing people to interact as equals; conversation is the main activity; they are accessible and welcoming; they have a core group of regulars; they are modest and unpretentious; they encourage a playful mood; and they offer comfort, familiarity, and a sense of belonging. He asserted that third places are essential to the sustenance of societal norms, public governance, and mental well-being. They provide informal settings where people can build relationships, exchange ideas, and develop a sense of community identity.

Subsequent research has reinforced Oldenburg’s insights. Third places connect people across varied backgrounds and strengthen ties within groups. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* echoes this, showing that the decline of such spaces correlates with reduced civic participation and trust. Studies in urban sociology and public health have found that access to third places is associated with lower levels of loneliness, depression, and anxiety.⁸ These spaces offer a buffer against social isolation, especially for older adults and marginalized groups. Third places are fertile ground for building both bridging and bonding social capital. They also serve as incubators for civic action, where people discuss local issues, organize events, and mobilize for causes. In times of crisis, communities with strong third-place networks tend to recover more quickly due to the trust and mutual aid they foster.

For members of NATS, third places may not be physical cafes or parks, but rather conferences, chapter meetings, workshops, and informal gatherings at recitals, student auditions or festivals. These events serve similar

functions: they are spaces where members can connect outside of their formal roles, share stories, offer support, and build a shared professional identity. In this sense, NATS itself can be seen as a distributed third place—a network of opportunities for spontaneous, meaningful connection that strengthens both individual well-being and collective cohesion.

COMMUNITY GLUE: SOCIAL CAPITAL VERSUS SOCIAL COHESION

Through reviving partnerships with state and national arts affiliates, the NATS Arts Advocacy Committee has resumed supporting “the important work that NATS members accomplish every day in classrooms, onstage, and in studios by advocating for public and private-sector resources on local, state, and national levels.”⁹ Reflecting on the excellent public policy presentations at AFTACON reminds me of the vital role we each play as advocates for our art and our science, in our communities. In a preconference session, I was enlightened by an underutilized approach to arts advocacy in the area of social cohesion policy. Often conflated concepts, social capital and social cohesion are different dimensions of the social factors that play a critical role in the survival of modern organizations.¹⁰ Social capital refers to the networks, norms, and trust that enable individuals to work together effectively. It is instrumental and often transactional, facilitating cooperation and mutual benefit. In contrast, social cohesion is seen as more relational. It refers to the sense of belonging, solidarity, and emotional connection that binds members of a community.¹¹ A community may have high social capital (efficient collaboration and resource sharing) without deep social cohesion, and vice versa. Ideally, organizations like NATS need to cultivate both, creating not only a network of professional relationships but also a sense of shared identity and mutual care. Previously reported flattening and decline in volunteerism over the past decade further complicated this landscape. A current positive gauge is that the 2024 AmeriCorps/U.S. Census Bureau survey of civic engagement across the United States, found that formal volunteering is rebounding. The following findings indicate a future turn of the tide:

over twenty-eight percent of Americans volunteered through an organization between September 2022 and

2023, an increase of five percentage points from the historic low documented in 2021. Other civic behaviors that declined substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic are following the same trend.¹²

For NATS, which depends on volunteer leaders, mentors, and event organizers, volunteerism is not merely logistical, it is existential. Volunteerism is a key mechanism through which social cohesion is enacted. It fosters trust, harmony, and a sense of shared ownership. When members are not willing or able to volunteer, the association risks losing the relational glue that binds its community.

HOW NATS CULTIVATES SOCIAL COHESION

Contributing to the rebound of social cohesion in this context, NATS must continue to reaffirm the value of both volunteer time and in-person engagement by emphasizing the unique benefits of face-to-face interaction for building trust and community. We need to remember (and encourage our colleagues) to view participation not as merely transactional—a knowledge transfer, but as a contribution to our shared mission. Recognizing and celebrating volunteer contributions can help reinforce this attitude, as can creating flexible, low-barrier opportunities for engagement that accommodate members’ varied schedules and capacities. Thinking of that accessibility, some colleagues advocate for a shift to fully virtual program offerings, citing user-friendliness, cost, and convenience.

While virtual offerings allow expanded participation and democratized access, a balance must be maintained, lest a complete pivot to virtual programming risk undermining the very social cohesion that sustains the organization. Virtual platforms are effective for transmitting information, but often less effective at fostering deep emotional bonds, spontaneous interactions, and the informal social rituals that build trust and solidarity. Likewise, a fully virtual model may exacerbate digital fatigue and reduce long-term engagement. In-person gatherings allow for serendipitous conversations, shared meals, and embodied experiences that are challenging to replicate online. These moments are essential for building the kind of emotional resonance and mutual investment that define social cohesion. Hybrid models

offer a promising middle ground, and they can also be a cost challenge. A goal to be financed could be for NATS to design digital platforms that foster genuine interpersonal connection prioritizing dialogue and empathy over passive content delivery. Preserving some in-person engagement is crucial for sustaining the relational fabric across the association.

CONTINUED ENCOURAGEMENT

As singing teachers, trainers, and researchers we are uniquely positioned to model the very values we hope to instill in our students: empathy, collaboration, and the joy of enhanced communication. In a world that can feel fragmented and isolating, our work is inherently connective. Whether we are guiding a student through skills and assignments, mentoring a colleague, or volunteering at a chapter event, we are building bridges between people, across generations, and within communities. Let this academic year be filled with evidence that our professional association is more than a network—it is a harbor. By investing in each other, showing up for one another, and embracing both the challenges and the triumphs of our shared vocations, we can continue to cultivate a vibrant, resilient, and deeply human community of voice professionals. Welcome back, and thank you for the work you do and the people you serve.

NOTES

1. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000), 57–58.
2. Charles W. Calhoun, *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 11–14.
3. Henri C. Santos and Igor Grossmann, “Individualistic Practices and Values Increasing around the World,” *Association for Psychological Science*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/individualistic-practices-and-values-increasing-around-the-world.html>.
4. Steven Mintz, “The Rise of the Self: How Individualism Transformed Western Societies,” *Inside Higher Ed*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/columns/higher-ed-gamma/2024/09/26/how-individualism-transformed-western-societies>.
5. Derek Thompson, “The Anti-Social Century,” *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine>

</archive/2025/02/american-loneliness-personality-politics/681091/>.

6. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Da Capo Press, 1989).
7. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*. 39–40.
8. Katherine V. Bruss, Puja Seth, and Guixiang Zhao, “Loneliness, Lack of Social and Emotional Support, and Mental Health Issues — United States, 2022,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 73, no. 24 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7324a1>.
9. “NATS National Committee Assignments and Appointments,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed June 11, 2025, <https://www.nats.org/Committee-Assignments.html>.
10. Selma Mulunga and Rashad Yazdanifard, “Review of Social Inclusion, Social Cohesion and Social Capital in Modern Organization,” *Global Journal of Management and Business Research: A Administration and Management* 14, no. 3 (2014): 15–20.
11. Mulunga and Yazdanifard, “Review of Social Inclusion, Social Cohesion and Social Capital in Modern Organization.”
12. Laura Hanson Schlachter, “Renewed Engagement in American Civic Life,” *Volunteering and Civic Life in America Research Summary 2024*, accessed June 9, 2025, https://www.americorps.gov/sites/default/files/document/CEV2023_HeadlineReport_11052024_final_508.pdf.

Alexis Davis-Hazell is a singing actor of opera, concert, and musical theatre repertoire. Her performance highlights include operatic and symphonic works with regional organizations in the United States and Mexico, over 130 performances of *Porgy and Bess* at international venues, and contributing to the GRAMMY™-winning album *Grechaninov: Passion Week* with the Phoenix Bach Choir and Kansas City Chorale. Davis-Hazell has over twenty years of teaching experience in adjunct college, tenure-track university, and private studio owner roles, and a variety of higher education administration experience. As an interdisciplinary collaborator and session presenter at conferences and arts research alliances, her research interests include African American folk and art music, Russian art song literature, and lyric diction pedagogy. She served in chapter leadership roles immediately upon joining NATS in 2010. She was a NATS Emerging Leader Award recipient in 2014, and accepted regional appointments in the Cal-Western and Southeastern Regions, as well as national committee appointments. Prior to a focus on NATS’ strategic goals as president-elect, Davis-Hazell was instrumental in the development of a comprehensive membership retention and recruitment guide for district NATS leaders. Davis-Hazell is assistant professor of voice and assistant director of undergraduate studies at the University of Alabama School of Music. <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9558-1092>