

CONNECTIONS

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Citizens in a Global Society

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**From Skepticism to
Engagement**

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**The Kettering Foundation
and US-China Relations**

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Kettering's Multinational Research



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through inter-related program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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The Mediated Town Halls of the Eastern Cape

By Rod Amner

The town hall meeting is a simple, old-fashioned idea: an informal public space in which community members come together to discuss issues, to voice opinions, or to engage with public figures.

But, despite 22 years of democracy, it is a relative rarity in South Africa.

So, it is significant that in recent years, a number of “legacy” and “emerging” community news organizations in the Eastern Cape province of the country have hosted scores of town hall meetings in a range of formats, all ostensibly aimed at reengineering in some way relationships with and between the people they formerly knew as their audiences.

It is also surprising because the Eastern Cape does not immediately suggest itself as a promising incubator of journalistic, civic, or any other kind of innovation. It is South Africa’s poorest province—beset with



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stagnating industries in the urban areas and the frustrating persistence of sub-subsistence agriculture in most of the countryside. Just 26 percent of its citizens have jobs, and its schools produce the worst educational outcomes in the country—and by most benchmarks, the entire world.

On the other hand, despite its apparent marginality, this province has always been an important fulcrum of South African politics. It is a traditional stronghold of the African National Congress (ANC), producing the bulk of its struggle icons (Mandela, Tambo, Biko, and Hani) and nurturing decades of peaceful, mass-based protest.



The Kettering Foundation has a longstanding interest in how journalists go about the work of reporting in a way that encourages greater citizen engagement in the democratic politics of a given community.

So, when the hitherto unassailable ANC lost political control of Nelson Mandela Bay (formerly Port Elizabeth) to the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) in the August 3, 2016, local government elections, the resulting shock waves convulsed the region's post-apartheid political landscape.

But, many of the region's journalists were not shocked. Mainstream media houses like Nelson Mandela Bay's *Eastern Province Herald* and Buffalo City's *Daily Dispatch*, along with community outlets like Grahamstown's *Grocott's Mail*, *Skawara News* in the rural hamlet of Cofimvaba, and radio stations like ZQKM, had for years been convening public platforms for engaging citizens in political discourse. Many of their journalists had therefore been in unusually close and deep dialogue with local citizens and communities and had seen the writing on the wall. The Kettering Foundation has a longstanding interest in how journalists go about the work of reporting in a way that encourages greater citizen engagement in the democratic politics of a given community. The examples in this article reveal how journalism practice and community agency can be transformed by a citizen-centered approach to reporting.

THE DISPATCH DIALOGUES

As far back as 2007, a series of highly successful public lectures and panel discussions, called the *Dispatch* Dialogues, were initiated in Buffalo City. Held about once a month in the city's Guild Theatre, these dialogues were intended to create a platform for a broader public discussion about public issues and to bring audiences into that discussion. *Dispatch* page editor, and dialogues organizer and leader, Dawn Barkhuizen says that what struck her most forcefully about the early days of these events was that “participants were virtually rugby tackling each other to get to the microphone—people wanted to speak.” Former *Daily Dispatch* editor Bongani Siqoko attributes their popularity to the “massive hunger” for this type of platform as “there isn't really anything else like this.”

THE COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

Later, a new, citizen-centric version of the dialogues emerged after Andrew Trench became *Dispatch* editor in 2009. These hyperlocal Community Dialogues attracted large numbers of ordinary citizens, in stark contrast to the poor attendance at other public meetings in these communities. Siqoko comments: “You go to a ward committee [meeting] and all they talk about is the ANC's plan for this area, the ANC's election

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manifesto says this and all that. If I'm not a member of the ruling party, in whose interests is this? They do not discuss issues that actually affect the local community.”

Another strong impetus for the Community Dialogues was that the Buffalo City municipality had been wracked by political infighting, bringing local government in the city to the brink of financial and administrative chaos. In the midst of a visible breakdown in basic service delivery, the Community Dialogues provided a rare “vertical bridge” between those elements in local government still committed to public service and an increasingly exasperated citizenry. In



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this context, it was unsurprising that citizens displayed such overwhelming enthusiasm to participate, as the dialogues may have represented the only viable public sphere able to withstand pressure from political society.

THE HERALD COMMUNITY DIALOGUES

The *Dispatch*'s work did not go unnoticed by other media houses in the province, including its sister newspaper, the *Eastern Province Herald*, in Nelson Mandela Bay.

When Heather Robertson was appointed editor of the *Herald* in 2011, she was instructed by Times Media that she would need to work hard to shift the paper from a suburban white audience base into one that served the whole city, which she did within four years.

According to Robertson, one of the key reasons for the transformation was her discovery of the *Dispatch* Dialogues that had been running in neighboring Buffalo City for some time before her return to the province. Thus began a series of engagements with communities all over Nelson Mandela Bay to air what she called “the really hard public issues.”

In March 2011, Robertson persuaded an aloof Eastern Cape education department head to listen to the concerns of 600 principals, teachers, parents, and community members in a giant community hall. During a youth dialogue in 2012, the *Herald* got opposition DA student organization members to listen to ANC youth league members and vice versa. In 2015, they organized dialogues



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aimed at making sense of the student anticolonial #RhodesMustFall movement. They also hosted high-profile and well-attended book launches that have turned into major philosophical musings on the country's political crises.

At one dialogue, the chief financial officer of the metro came face-to-face with citizens at the receiving end of his budget. He recorded complaints and handed out his direct e-mail address so that problems highlighted could be addressed. Robertson said that one of the most memorable dialogues was when more than 1,000 citizens at a dialogue told local politicians to stop the petty political bickering that had plunged their city into a crisis. The speakers at the dialogue pleaded with local government ministers not to turn a blind eye “while Rome is burning.” A resident, Xolani Nkonko from Ward 21, said: “We don't want to see who is bigger than who—we just want services.” These voices were brought into the mainstream of the paper and on its digital platforms.

THE HERALD EDUCATION FISH BOWLS

One of the most important ongoing dialogues covered by the *Herald* was about education. In partnership with the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy



These hyperlocal Community Dialogues attracted large numbers of ordinary citizens, in stark contrast to the poor attendance at other public meetings in these communities.

(CANRAD), the *Herald* engineered a unique format for these dialogues—“fish bowl” dialogues, which had about 80 officials, educators, learners, parents, and ordinary citizens attending each one (sometimes together and sometimes separately). The fish bowl consists of a small group who have speaking rights in an “inner sanctum,” with the rest of the participants observing in radiating circles. The sanctum is constantly replaced by fresh rings from the outside. It emerged swiftly at the first fish bowl that despite all efforts on the part of some who are clearly committed, something is fundamentally wrong with Eastern Cape education.

The lack of commitment from teachers, in particular those affiliated with the SA Democratic Teachers'

Union (SADTU), was questioned. One principal spoke of how “useless teachers were kept in the system and protected by the union.” Sapphire Road Primary School principal Bruce Damons asked whether teachers would want their children attending the schools at which they teach and why. “We have become so slack and lazy, and have just stopped caring,” he said. “But parents are failing their children too,” noted another delegate.

In response to the questions of “what can be done?” and “what do we need to do?,” an air of optimism suddenly pervaded the room. Practical action on the part of participants included committing to get teachers and parents to work together, presenting a parenting skills program, showing teachers more appreciation, and initiating focus group interventions to get to the nitty gritty of specific failings and teacher grievances at a particular school. Paul Miedema, of the Calabash Trust, hits a positive note: “We must share our success stories. Finding out what works is a fundamental antidote to identifying what is wrong.”

Robertson said of this series: “It has been most constructive in terms of getting towards solutions and seeing schools as community resources—for literacy, after-care, vegetable gardens, etc. By the 10th one they’re getting used to understanding that they have the capacity to solve these

problems.” She added that the fish bowl reporting was different from previous reporting because “it was more solutions oriented.” Also, a number of dialogues have led to follow-up stories and Robertson says the journalists are “out there showing that we are not just highlighting the problems but that we have attempted to be part of finding solutions. It does change the perspective of who we are as a media organization.”

Under Robertson’s leadership, the newspaper’s reporters made strong use of social media—including Twitter, Instagram, and the biggest Facebook page in the province by some distance—which garnered a diverse following. Editors and journalists were available to citizens through cellphone numbers and e-mail, and they invited citizens to get to know them and their journalistic processes. *Herald* journalists actively attempted to take their content to where citizens were located online, rather than hoping those citizens would find them.

Both the *Herald* and the *Dispatch* are commercial entities operating under very difficult economic constraints, but neither can be accused of pandering to the wealthy and powerful segments that are supposedly most attractive to profit-driven news managements. This is not to say that these public dialogues were blind to, or insulated from, a concern

with profit, but the testimony of the newspaper's editorial leadership would indicate that they were primarily guided by a concern for social responsibility and quality editorial in the public interest.

CITIZEN MATTERS

A media development NGO, the Eastern Cape Communication Forum (ECCF), has worked with a range of smaller, Eastern Cape community titles—some in marginal, rural hamlets—to launch a series of dialogues called Citizen Matters. These dialogues have dealt with problems like the lack of local government service delivery, poverty, crime and public safety, alcohol and drug abuse, public housing, xenophobic attacks on immigrant communities, unemployment, and so on. But, some were simply billed as community dialogues, in which citizens were invited to raise with the news organization whatever was on their minds.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC PROBLEM SOLVING

What are some of the ways that journalists and citizens could collaborate on public problem-solving efforts in a sustainable way, despite some of the constraints posed by the South African context? It is relatively easy to learn about public problems and



Many Eastern Cape journalists are committed to the idea of nurturing a more dynamic and inclusive public sphere and are continuing to use face-to-face town hall meetings, in tandem with online technologies, to make this happen.

by helping to share its agenda-setting function with the public, town halls have helped journalists do this. But, to the extent that solutions were found to any of these problems, it is illuminating to consider who exactly acted (if acting is defined as either designing or implementing solutions).

Town halls have often fallen short of a more deliberative model of public problem solving that journalists could help promote. To help sustain a public sphere to which all citizens have access, and in which all topics of concern to citizens can be articulated, deliberated, and critiqued, Eastern

Cape journalists would need to engage citizens in an ongoing way.

Eastern Cape journalists could be doing much more to encourage citizens to continue their deliberations—and act upon their outcomes—within the institutions of the wider civil society. To aid this process, journalists could offer mobilizing information—for example, information on how to join relevant civic organizations. They could also describe what citizens in other localities have done in the past or are doing to address similar problems; create spaces for citizens to deliberate about those problems among themselves; encourage citizens to join existing or create new (local or larger scale) civic organizations; and publicize citizens' application for resources.

Of course, while some problems are potentially resolvable by citizens themselves, deep wicked problems like dysfunctional schools require more deep-seated, systemic intervention. In these cases, journalists should encourage citizens, in consultation with experts who have particular knowledge about the problems in question, to formulate possible solutions that would include what they might do among themselves, as well as to lobby relevant government officials to enact policy solutions. The fish bowl dialogues began this process—but, this work

was not sustained, and policy has not shifted.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Many Eastern Cape journalists are committed to the idea of nurturing a more dynamic and inclusive public sphere and are continuing to use face-to-face town hall meetings, in tandem with online technologies, to make this happen. Some journalists are going still further by creating more impromptu venues for interaction with citizens—in public libraries, coffee shops, pop-up news cafes, and forums in public spaces.

The mediated town halls described here may have fallen short of the ideal, which sees citizens share a commitment to engage in sustained deliberation that leads to effective public problem solving. But, it is difficult to deny the power of what has already been achieved or the potential represented by the undiminished desire of Eastern Cape citizens to have both voice and agency in a hard-won democracy. ■

Rod Amner worked for more than 10 years as a writer, sub-editor, and editor for a range of news agencies, newspapers, and magazines in South Africa before joining the country's premier journalism school at Rhodes University. He is currently researching and testing alternative approaches to education reporting and participatory communication for his PhD. In 2016, he joined the Kettering Foundation for six months as a Fanning resident. He can be reached at r.amner@ru.ac.za.