

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2016

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 Library as a Community Center

By Svetlana Gorokhova

The Library as a Community Center project began in 1997 as a partnership between the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature and the Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture in Moscow with the goal of teaching librarians throughout Russia how to convene and moderate deliberative forums. From its inception,

the project aimed to position Russian libraries as active members of their community and to work with citizens to address community issues. The project brings everyday people into the center of community problem solving through the use of deliberative dialogue. In more recent years, the work has expanded to include creating community-based issue guides for these dialogues. The project has been a sustainable way for Russian citizens to deliberate together in order to make sound decisions and identify actions for addressing local problems in partnerships with their local library. The Kettering Foundation is interested in how deliberative practices that have come out of our research have been adopted and applied to suit the needs of people in other countries.



My first experience with deliberating was in 1996 at the Kettering Foundation, and it felt like magic. I, like many Russian people, was skeptical about all forms of civic engagement because in the Soviet state you knew that public forums or meetings were always “pro forma” events. I was disillusioned and doubtful about whether people’s opinions would be taken seriously and be heard. When I got to the forum, I thought it would only be talk, talk, talk and not about doing. I did not think about talking as if it was something that is valuable.

I came to this forum about the environment, and thought, “How does this relate to my life? I’m living through a very difficult time in my

country and am worried about what to eat and how to earn some money to maintain my family. Why should I think about environmental problems?” Then I realized that the issue is not something abstract. People were listening to me and trying to understand my point of view, and I was trying to understand their points of view. After that forum, my perspective changed. It wasn’t a drastic change, but I had a new perspective about the problem and saw the value of talking together. I had a feeling of elation and hope for the future. The magic came with the realization that you can do something and that you are being heard.

Deliberating takes effort. You are working on yourself with other



people, and they're working on themselves. There is a problem that gives us something in common. So my definition of deliberation is hard work that results in a joyful union of different points of view—a shared commitment to solving the problem for everybody. It sounds altruistic because in life, typically, you rarely find emotional support from others, but to be in a forum and to work out a decision—to go through a deliberative process—there is something very valuable for everyone. It was a great surprise for me. Wow! It's difficult to explain the effect because a deliberative forum is something that must be experienced—and more than once. I invite people in Russia to come to forums so they can feel this magic of change in themselves and in their perception of the problem.

My work in deliberative democracy has taught me that when a seed is planted, you begin to think differently. I began to think that people need deliberative practices as much as food, entertainment, love, education. It's a basic right. We had been deprived of this kind of activity in the past, and now we need to build it up. When I explain the purpose of the Library as a Community Center project in my country, I say, "People need to exercise their right to be heard, to deliver their opinion, and to participate in decision making



"The library shouldn't be just a place that preserves knowledge, but also the open space where citizens can come to discuss issues they are concerned with and for librarians to initiate discussions. I can see that this work gives results because people are interested. They want to continue the collaboration because it produces results. They bring new partners in to the project. Deliberation is an effective instrument for involving citizens in public life, for developing an active citizen, and for building a civic society. Having deliberation in the library develops it as an active civic institution."

—Natalia Nestarova,
Chief Librarian, Research and
Methods Department,
Bryansk Regional Library

concerning their life. People need to come together, they need to see that they are being heard, and they need to have numerous experiences like this. It needs to be a normal way of living, just as when you are hungry, you eat. If you're a person, you need to be responsible for collective life. You need to be involved." I wasn't aware of how important this is before I experienced it. Now I know it is important for your inner freedom as well as your outer freedom.

The library is a perfect site for this kind of work. By definition, libraries are a public place. Historically libraries have been the place to go for information, for addressing

difficult situations, for finding a job. Libraries are neutral public places with no affiliation with one religion or with one ethnic group—they are for everybody. In the 21st century, libraries are looking for new ways of playing a more active role in communities. Libraries are looking for ways to respond to people's needs. People need to be heard. People need to be reassured that they can have their own say in what is happening in the country. Not only through voting, but also through talking about the problems they have and trying to understand what lies behind these problems. I can't even name another place, another site in the local community, that would be more appropriate for this kind of activity than the library. Where else would you go? There is nowhere else in Russia that offers this kind of public space suitable for the intellectually hard work of deliberation.

In 1997, the All-Russia State Library for Foreign Literature began working with the Bryansk Regional Library. They started with a forum on ecological problems because Bryansk is close to Chernobyl, and there were concerns about nuclear pollution. People liked the forum, and now there are numerous forum campaigns, including the repatriation of art collections that were looted during World War II, the role of



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the library in the community, and crime. More recently, some of the other regional libraries have also been working on crime, but each chose a different type of crime. In Kemerovo, the community chose to work on cybercrime, which is not even considered a crime by the local police. Elderly people were being taken advantage of, and yet no one was addressing it. In Saratov, they are talking about juvenile crime and simultaneously holding forums on how best to ensure the quality of Russian cinema. The Regional Minister of Culture requested that the library frame the issue because 2016 is the Year of Russian Cinema. So it was an interesting combination of work with both local governmental authorities and the community on issues they care deeply about.

My most difficult challenge in my work at the library is to get people to attend a forum, to encourage people

to talk, and to overcome pessimistic views and apathetic attitudes. We need to capture their attention and to develop the reputation of the library as a place where people can come to really express themselves. In Russia, people are not used to talking publicly. We need to make sure they have a space to talk. In some cases, the challenge is to explain what we are doing to the governmental cultural authorities. I am absolutely convinced that we are doing wonderful things for my country, for my professional community, for me personally, and for other people, but sometimes the historical context and terminology issues interfere. For example, the word *democratic* has a negative connotation for many people because of our experience in the early 1990s, when this word was devalued and many people were disillusioned with the processes happening in Russia at that time.



"When we first met the Bryansk team, their leader Nicolay Kovalenko said, 'Even if something happens in a way that you do not expect it to happen, or something doesn't work, you will still notice that it will change you personally.' When I started working with the project, I was a person who could speak and think and listen. After participating, I learned I also could hear. I had worked with people with whom I had quite a superficial understanding, and through this work of conducting forums, I discovered something in the people who were around me, but not necessarily with me. I discovered something about humanity, not just about one or two people. I also can say that I became more tolerant, patient, and don't get irritated knowing that some people think differently than me."

—*Natalia Moskovtseva,*
Head of the Center for
Intercultural Communications,
Saratov Regional Library

This makes it difficult to explain that democracy is not something that exists outside of a person. Democracy is in you. People need to ask themselves, "How are you responsible? What can you do?" It's a practice. We say you need to train your muscles. You need to train your soul and brain as well. To exercise your ability to make decisions you need to have a space, and I think libraries are very good for that. You can't export democracy, and libraries are doing this work so Russia can find its own way.

The library system in Russia is very structured. It used to be an instrument of the Soviet state for the dissemination of ideological information. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the library system remained in place. It is still a great instrument to disseminate information, but because libraries are close to the local communities, they are now places for a community to work on problems. Today, libraries are a good combination—on the one hand it is a governmental structure, but on the other hand it is a space where people can exercise their basic rights.

We are trying to create more horizontal connections among regions that might not work together otherwise. The Library as a Community Center is giving them a way of getting acquainted, and the regions that are further along are sharing

what they know with newer participants. It is a rich experience of intercommunication that allows us to build the network horizontally throughout the country. In Siberia, Novosibirsk, which has participated in the project for two years, just attracted the Research Library of Tomsk State University, one of the biggest universities in Russia. The Bryansk Regional Library, which has developed a network with other schools and institutions in the region, is another example of how libraries can make these kinds of horizontal connections. They now work with Saratov, even though there aren't direct transportation connections between the two regions. As with Tomsk and Novosibirsk, it is only because of this project that they are connected.

For me personally, it is a joy that so many young people are now so interested in this work. They are doing a great thing for our country. Young people are attracted because it is an active way of being involved. Because they didn't grow up during Soviet years, the young have a lot more access to information. They are more self-assured, travel more, and want to be part of decision-making processes in their country. It is such an inspiration to see these young people move from just being interested, then seeing them doing it, and then wanting to do it more. It's



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a great transformation. Our Library as Community Center project offers people a basic right: the right to be heard. It's not 100 percent easy. There is always the need to explain what we are doing, especially given the historical context. Libraries have always had a public place in Russia, but this project offers the best way of working with local communities. Many regions, regional governmental authorities, and regional libraries are accepting it as a great model. ■

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