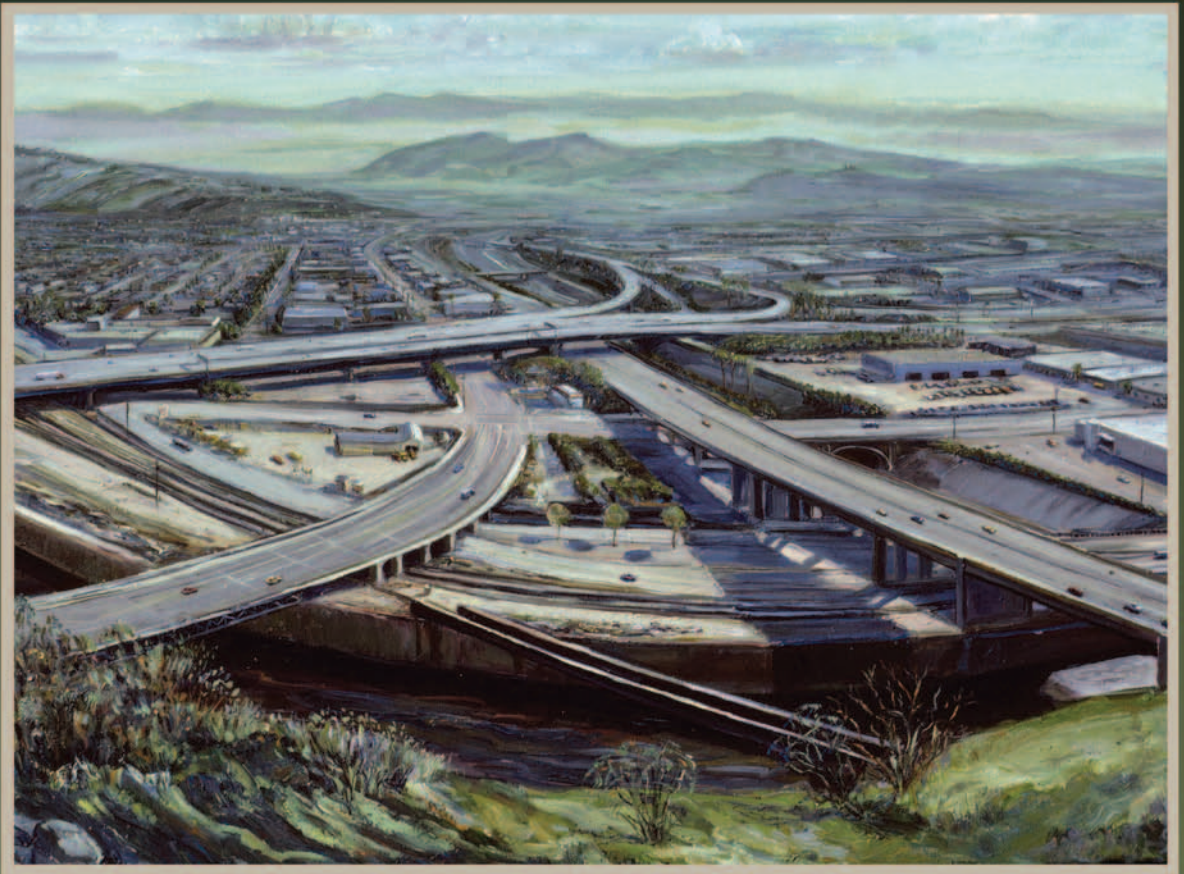


KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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... afterthoughts

by David Mathews

“There is a deeper stratum of democracy, more civic than institutional politics and more political than civil society.”

In a recent *Review*, I wrote about Don, Mary, and their neighbors on the Gulf Coast who wanted to come together to rebuild after their community was devastated by hurricane Katrina. Over the years, in different communities facing similar challenges, Kettering has seen that same impulse—to join forces. Many citizens want a stronger hand in shaping their future and greater control over their lives in the face of a faltering economy, increasing threats to the environment, or alarming crime rates. Their political instincts tell them they have to join forces and act as a community in order to combat such problems.

While outside assistance is appreciated, Don and Mary aren't just asking for help or for assurances that others will take care of them. They and their neighbors want to be more in charge *themselves*. In order to do that, they have to be able to act and make things that will benefit their community. If the threat is reoccurring hurricanes, these “things” could be a neighborhood plan for mutual assistance before relief agencies arrive. Or if the danger comes from drug dealers who prey on children walking home from school, they could be a schedule for adults to patrol the streets.

I mention citizens like Don and Mary because the Kettering Foundation works for them. Of course, we are a research organization, but the objective of our research is to provide insights about how people can make the sound decisions that will lead to effective collective action, both with other citizens as well as with governments and major institutions.

The articles in this issue have to do with the media and journalists, and while we don't study journalism or any other profession, we

do want to know how journalists understand the work that people like Mary and Don do. We also want to know what journalists think are the implications in the work of citizens for their own work as professionals. We listen, too, to physicians, public administrators, and lawyers. And we talk to professionals in a wide range of institutions, from public schools, colleges, and universities, to NGOs and foundations. What do these professionals think citizens are supposed to do, other than the obvious: vote, pay taxes, and obey laws? As Albert Dzur notes in his closing essay, what professionals think and how their work is aligned with the work of citizens is important.

Most professionals believe in serving democracy, but the kind of democracy they have in mind varies considerably when it comes to the role of citizens. The citizens may voice opinions yet not actually produce anything through their collective efforts. That is unfortunate, because if the work that citizens do to rule themselves—the work that gives them the ability to shape the future—isn't recognized, the concept of democracy that will prevail in a profession will be limited.

There are signs that this limitation is already occurring, not because professionals intend to weaken democracy, but because of a number of influences now coming to bear on the media and other institutions. According to a recent report, done for Kettering by the Harwood Institute, entitled *The Organization-First Approach*, some of the nongovernmental organizations that Don and Mary might turn to are looking mostly inward, trying to demonstrate the impact of *their* programs, rather than looking outward to build civic capacity in communities. These organizations want to show measurable results, but building

civic capacity could make it difficult to prove that *their* interventions are the ones that led to progress.

Furthermore, citizen boards for institutions like public schools—which would appear to be naturally venues where people exercise control—can be obstacles rather than avenues if these boards see their role as representing the schools to the community rather than the community to the schools. Many boards, to their credit, have launched campaigns to reengage their communities and its citizens; yet even these campaigns often treat citizens merely as potential “supporters” for schools, rather than as actors in their own right, coproducers of education in concert with schools.

Institutions of higher education, also to their credit, are reaching out to citizens and communities with a multitude of services provided both by student volunteers and faculty with professional expertise. Yet here again, these civic engagement initiatives may not be in sync with the community building that democratically inclined citizens want to do. Although the sample was small, one recent study of university-community partnerships couldn't find any projects designed to build a capacity for self-rule.

Fortunately, there are countertrends. The Centers for Disease Control, for example, is among a group of professionals who realize that a resilient community is greater protection against natural disasters than well-stocked pantries. (Such resilience comes from the results of collective decision making and civic action.) Other professionals are trying to overcome institutional barriers that stand in the way of developing a more civic professionalism. In this *Review*, while Michael Remaley, David Holwerk, and Michael Skoler all recognize institutional barriers, they go on to discuss ways of overcoming them.

On the whole, however, the work that citizens can and must do doesn't seem to be on the radar screen of most professionals, whether they are journalists or in other fields—and more seems to be involved than just institutional barriers. Professionals certainly know people like Mary and Don, yet the political significance of what these citizens do may not be obvious because it doesn't fit the conventional definition of *politics*. In his book *Democratic Professionalism*, from which the essay we publish is excerpted, Albert Dzur suggests that the work that citizens do occurs at a level of politics other than the more familiar level, which is dominated by highly visible elections and much-publicized law-making. Don and Mary's work with their neighbors lacks the drama to be picked up by the "big media," despite the priority they give to local news, David Holwerk observes.

On a more positive note, Noëlle McAfee points out that new media are being created that might be more useful to citizens coming together *in* communities to *build* communities. She describes these as the "little media," and Patricia Aufderheide and Jessica Clark see such media as a vehicle "for public knowledge and action." It will be interesting to see what concept of democracy and citizenship in fact becomes fostered in this emerging media.

This *Review's* discussion of democracy at two levels contributes to the foundation's investigation of "the politics that isn't called politics." We think there is a deeper stratum of democracy that is more civic than the grass roots of institutional politics and more political than civil society. Just as there are wetlands in our physical environment, we suspect that there are wetlands for political life. This is where the citizens who are struggling to build resilient

communities live and work. We do *not* assume, however, that everything in the wetlands of politics is beneficial, nor that everything that happens at the institutional level (where professionals have a prominent role) is bad. The comparison to physical wetlands has been useful in describing our findings because these acres of mud and matted vegetation, once overlooked and unappreciated, are now recognized as indispensable to life everywhere. Swamps along the Gulf Coast, for example, were filled in by developers, and the barrier islands were destroyed when shipping channels were dug through them. The consequences were disastrous: sea life that bred in the swamps died off, and coastal cities were exposed to the full fury of hurricanes.

The wetlands of politics play roles similar to swamps and barrier islands. They spawn political life in the seedbeds of kinship groups and social gatherings, and they protect people against the ravages of natural disasters—even repression and war. Yet their structures, like informal gatherings, and ad hoc associations, are easy to dismiss because they are so fluid. And the banter that goes on when people mull over the meaning of their everyday experiences may seem insignificant when compared with professional analysis and partisan debate. Even though a standard for politics may be what happens in elections, legislative bodies, and courts, what happens in the political wetlands has both intrinsic value and importance to politics at the institutional level. Talking over the meaning of everyday experiences in grocery stores and coffee shops can be a wellspring of public decision making; connections made in informal gatherings can become the basis for political networks; and ad hoc associations could evolve into civic organizations. If without vibrant wetlands, our physical environment suffers, the same seems true of political wetlands.

During this past year, we have sharpened our understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the political wetlands, which we see as more organic than institutional. For instance, in organic politics, citizens are defined by what they do with other citizens in collaborative, civic work. That is different from the way citizens are defined in institutional politics, by what they do as voters, taxpayers, consumers, supporters, and critics.

In organic politics, change occurs as a result of civic or collective learning. This civic learning isn't about acquiring information; it is learning as a political mode. In the politics of learning, the citizenry is both the agent and the object of the learning. People learn through experimentation, trying what seems best and then assessing the results for the next experiment. Did we have the most complete definition of the problem? Did we consider all that was truly valuable to us? Did we have all the options on the table? Did we weigh the pros and cons fairly? Did we identify the resources that might help us? Did we organize our efforts so they were mutually reinforcing?

We have noticed that communities that are resilient in the face of adversity are eager learners. They are somewhat like inventors in that they pay attention to what others are doing; but they don't imitate, they create. They have learned how to fail successfully; they know how to benefit from their mistakes.

Learning to invent suggests the ability to redefine problems, to name them in ways that open the door to new approaches and new actors. We've seen this occur during deliberative decision making because the first and ever-present questions are, what is the problem? what does it mean to us? why do we care? what is deeply valuable that is at stake? As people struggle with these questions, the name of the problem changes: it expands to include

different people's experiences and concerns. And this change promotes innovative action.

So in this *Review*, Michael Remaley advises journalists to pay more attention to public deliberation, because it plays a key role in civic learning—so much so that the ancient Greeks called it “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.” While there are many forms of deliberation going on at different levels of politics from the Supreme Court to Don and Mary's decision making with their neighbors, public deliberation is an organic practice. We have been surprised to see deliberation written off as simply a mode for civil discourse that has no relation to action, or that is, confined to well-educated, affluent citizens with a virtuous bent. Officials in the Pennsylvania prison system, who have encouraged deliberative forums among inmates on issues that prisoners will face when they are released, would take exception to this characterization; so would tenants' associations that hold deliberative forums. The decisions citizens make about what their community *should* look like evoke serious, value-laden disagreements that can't be resolved by negotiating, mediating, or even voting. These decisions require the sound collective judgment that can come from public deliberation.

If organic practices in the “political wetlands,” then, can enrich democratic politics through civic learning, if they can be sources of innovation, and if they can provide opportunities for generating the sound judgment needed to inform the work of citizens, what are the implications for professionals and the institutions they direct? Professionals and their institutions don't necessarily have to add to what they ordinarily do in order to better align their routines with the work of a democratic citizenry. They might, however, consider doing what they do differently.

Take the matter of aligning institutional routines with work that citizens have to do in order to make sound decisions—that is, decisions consistent with what people consider most valuable. Professionals might pay more attention to how citizens name problems when they deliberate. The names that people give to problems reflect the things they hold dear and their fundamental concerns, their highest hopes and deepest fears as human beings: being safe from danger, being treated fairly, being free to act as they see best. These names are different from those that people use when they are acting as professionals and politicians. Citizens, for example, want to feel that they are secure in their homes, and this feeling of well-being is less quantifiable but more compelling than the statistics professionals use to describe crime. Michael Skoler points out how important such intangibles are in the way people experience and name issues—and how easily these subtleties are overlooked by journalists. Of course, professionals shouldn't forgo statistical data and precise terminology; they could, however, be more open to the names that people use and what citizens hold dear.

When editor of the *Virginian-Pilot*, the late Cole Campbell encouraged his reporters to listen to the way people named their problems in living room interviews. What Campbell heard led him to two simple but profound questions: what do people need to know in order to govern themselves? and how do they come to know it? These questions take journalists straight into the political wetlands. Citizens don't come to know what they need to know in the same way that professionals do. Recognizing this difference has implications for the professionals who create expert knowledge, as well as those who disseminate it. Professionals create knowledge by vigorous

scientific investigations. That is unquestionably necessary and useful. Yet it isn't sufficient to answer the questions citizens face, which are normative or moral, not technical. These are questions of what we *should* do, and they are matters of judgment. Facts alone won't provide answers. The knowledge that informs this judgment has to be socially constructed ... in deliberation.

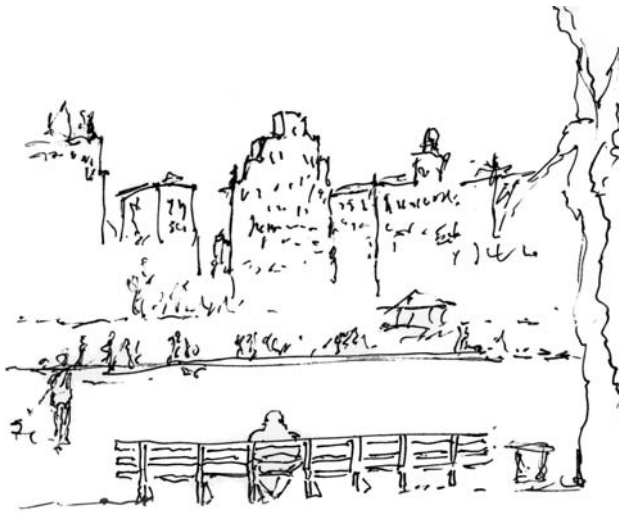
What role, then, might journalists play in the creation of this knowledge? Campbell knew this was a tough question because it challenged the dominant paradigm of his profession, which (as he pointed out in the *Winter 2007 Review*) presumes "that someone always knows the truth about complex issues, and the public interest is served when journalists faithfully fulfill their role in transmitting expert truth to the public." This professional paradigm doesn't recognize the knowledge that citizens construct out of their experiences and what they hold dear. So the professional paradigm is misaligned with the democratic practice of creating what the Greeks called "practical wisdom."

Campbell's question hasn't been fully answered; nor has the misalignment of public with professional routines been fully addressed. That probably won't happen until civically inclined journalists are able to experiment more with ways to augment organic practices like public deliberation. The same is true for other professions. Initial experiments can be done simply and inexpensively; they can start inside people's heads. Professionals can explore questions like, "if our job is to serve the public and there is no public, what is our job?" Or, more straightforwardly, professionals can ask, "what is the work of public citizens and what impact are we having on it?" These questions were implicit in the issues Campbell was raising. Fortunately, journalists in the

United States and in other countries like South Africa, Colombia, and Kenya are taking up Campbell's quest, because democratic movements in those countries require citizens to act and make things. Though they may be continents away from Mary and Don, these experiments

may help them and every other community that sees the need for people to come together, as a community, to sustain the community.

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