

# CONNECTIONS

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Experiments in  
**DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENSHIP**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make 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 interrelated 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](http://www.kettering.org).

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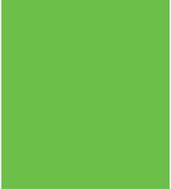
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# Recasting the Narratives That Shape Our Public Life

By Paula Ellis

**T**he power of story to shape thought and influence action has never been more widely understood. Story wars abound.

We've all heard someone say, "We need to control the narrative." This sets off a heated war over words and their meaning. Is it pro-life or pro-choice? Is it undocumented immigrants or illegal aliens?

Stories are the way we transmit our culture and values. It's no wonder, then, that the fights to control the narrative are more well-financed and the storytelling genres more diverse. Narrative techniques have exploded with the plethora of mediums. And the industries devoted to persuasion grow more sophisticated each day.

Story wars are high-stakes business.

If you want to win a public policy point, garner support for your cause, develop loyal followers, succeed in commerce, or advance your personal brand, you must construct a compelling narrative that others will adopt.

Why?

Stories convey information that trigger the emotions that fuel action. They help us make sense of things. They help us know who "us" is and is not. They can change behavior. There are stories of grievance. Stories of hope. Stories of helplessness. Stories of strength. And many more.

These story wars abound at the metalevel when, for example, a country fights to evolve a shared cultural myth against which it can measure the gap between today's reality and its ideals. They abound at the mezzalevel when political candidates shape their now-obligatory autobiography years before announcing a run for office. They abound at the microlevel when a documentary, TED talk, religious parable, or neighborly chat is told and retold, moving easily through the relationship networks in which we live.

Today, social media platforms enable all stories, no matter their origin, to spread more quickly to more people. We are all storytellers. We all have a voice.

Fighting for its place in this increasingly complex ecosystem of persuasion and narrative is journalism, a discipline once readily trusted as an essential source of information from which citizens could exchange views and form their individual or shared beliefs.

While journalism rests on a set of fact-checking and verification processes, modern-day journalists have long recognized that their work no

longer is a matter of “just the facts, ma’am” stenography. Context matters more. Conflict occurs at the intersection of competing values. And as society’s norms have become more contested, the work of journalism began to resemble cultural anthropology. News organizations, always recognized as agents of learning, now also were viewed as agents of enculturation and socialization.

As this shift accelerated, cable news arrived, brilliantly positioned with niche audiences to capitalize on culture wars and tribal instincts. Next came the Internet to enable all forms of distribution—broadcast, narrowcast, and one-to-one—but these privilege the individual.

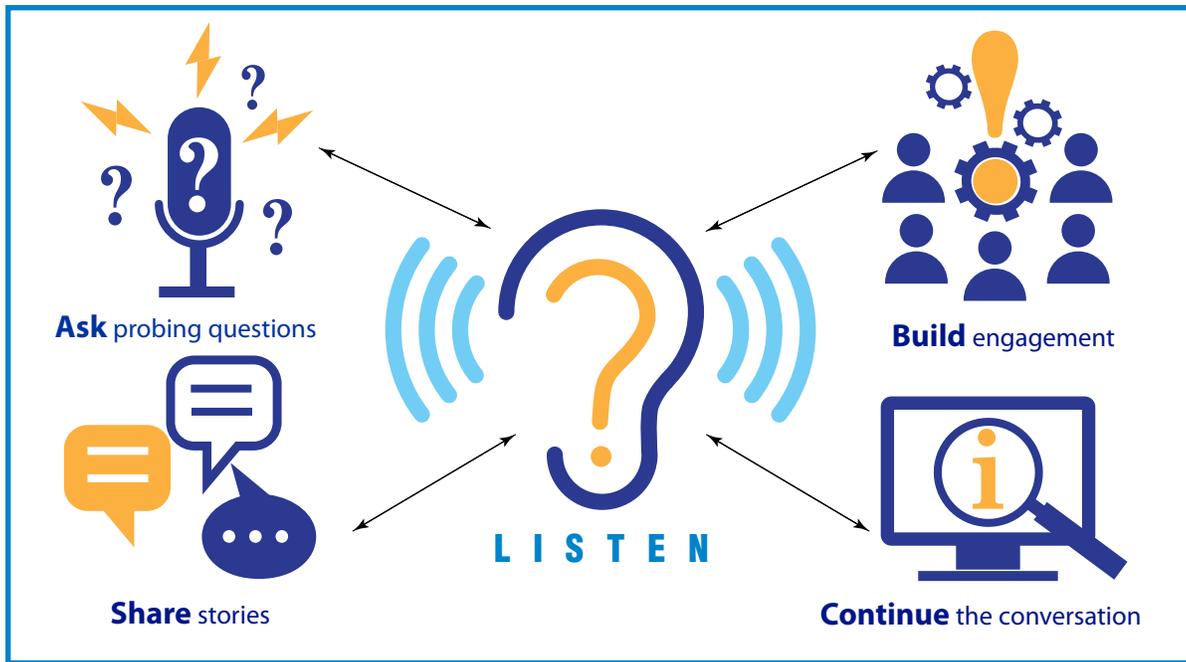
What does all of this have to do with democracy?

Rarely do these warring stories seek to find common ground for action.

“We need to address the ways in which we construct a common narrative from facts,” said Alexios Mantzarlis, head of the International Fact-Checking Network at the Poynter Institute. Combatting “fake news” and verification matter. But, Mantzarlis asked, “Is it still possible in a polarized society to agree on our fact-gathering process? And is it still possible to go from that fact-gathering process to a narrative about what actions should follow?”



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These are central questions for the future of journalism and its role in democracy.

Today’s coarse discourse and paralyzing political polarization are in part shaped by journalism’s approaches to story. But journalism also is shaped by the polarized environment in which it functions. They are codependent.

While this dysfunctional feedback loop clearly serves the interests of some, it does not serve the interests of the many—everyday citizens seeking to identify shared problems and solve them together.

Is there a better way? Can this pernicious system be disrupted?

The disruptors are among us. They are focused on what some refer to

as “people-powered” journalism. Its guiding impulse is to work *with* the people first if the intention truly is to work *for* the people.

Their organizations have names you’ve likely never heard, such as [Hearken](#), [Spaceship Media](#), the [Coral Project](#), [GroundSource](#), and [Screen-door](#). Others are entrepreneurial units within better-known media companies like the [Public Insight Network \(PIN\)](#), [Alabama Media Group](#), [ProPublica](#), and Audio Acad-emy at [KALW](#) in the San Francisco Bay area.

They share the belief that journalism exists to serve the interests of citizens in a democracy and that an antidote to today’s poisonous public discourse must be found.

They are working behind the scenes, as inventors often do, to experiment with new ways that journalists can support the essential work of citizens in a democracy. Their faith rests with the people.

They believe that journalists and news organizations must relate to and engage with members of the public differently. After all, media distribution has moved from a one-way broadcast model to a one-to-one model predicated on two-way communication.

Andrew Haeg, a PIN veteran and movement pioneer, makes the point clearly on the website of GroundSource, which he founded. “Your

community is talking. . . . GroundSource makes direct, two-way engagement simple and scalable. Transform one-way communications into rich conversations, building a loyal and trusting community in the process.” GroundSource has helped a growing number of community media organizations develop “Listening Posts” that employ simple technologies to create public conversations about local issues.

So that we don’t miss the point, these disruptors make their stance clear in their brand-positioning statements:

“Because journalism needs everyone.”

“Your public’s interest.”

“Directly engaging your community.”

“Using media to bridge divides.”

They also spell it out in mission statements such as this one:

“Create joyful, informative media that engages people across the divides in our community—economic, social, and cultural.”

Their philosophy is to start first with the people and the needs of the people as expressed by the people.

These are not one-off projects. They represent a shift in mind-set and tactics, meant to bring about a

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*Innovations in Journalism research exchange participants.*

transformational change that could make the practices of journalism more democratic. Like all inventors, they have more questions than answers. And the questions drive to the heart of traditional tenets of journalism.

Kettering is wrestling with the resulting tensions and learning with these and other innovators through a series of learning exchanges that began earlier this year. Among the earliest questions are:

- Could journalism help citizens discover one another's narratives and construct shared ones that don't fall into the polarizing story traps that have been laid by others?
- What could journalism look like if it put citizens at the center and reimagined its role as supporting the work of citizens?
- What role might journalism play in fostering deliberation on the difficult issues communities face?
- Could journalists elevate the value, skills, and techniques for listening to the public? Instead of eliminating online comment sections, can journalists dig deeper into them for understanding? How can technology help?
- Could journalism and news organizations facing an existential crisis find a sustainable path to the future if they more closely



## Amid today's chaos and despair about the future of journalism, these innovators see opportunity.

aligned their interests with those of citizens?

- If one were building a news organization from the ground up to better support democracy and the role of citizens in it, what might it do and how?

These are among the overarching questions that propel these passionate innovators.

Each day, however, they must tackle the nitty-gritty details of upending longstanding journalistic practices and mind-sets.

At Hearken, cofounder Jennifer Brandel and team help news organizations engage with the public at the beginning of and throughout the reporting cycle. “We democratize the editorial process,” said Brandel, who emphasizes that journalists must become better listeners. Hearken means “listen.” In describing its

new engaged journalism model, Hearken proclaims on its website: “An informed citizenry is the bedrock of democracy, and the purpose of journalism. So why not let the citizenry weigh in directly on what information they need?”

Public Insight Network (PIN), incubated at American Public Media and used in 59 newsrooms across the country, is the earliest of these efforts. Developed to encourage news audiences to share knowledge and insights with journalists, it also aims to transform the culture of newsrooms so that journalists can engage more authentically with members of the public. Linda Miller, director of PIN, believes journalists should not sit atop the perch of expertise and use a belief in objectivity to distance themselves from communities. “We should be advocating for thriving communities. There is a tension between the professional ethics of journalism and the desire to be in community.”

More recently, Spaceship Media landed on the scene to reimagine journalism as a way to generate dialogue and engagement on divisive issues. Founders Jeremy Hay and Eve Pearlman are designing and refining a journalistic process that begins with lightly facilitating online dialogue. Shortly after the heated 2016 presidential race, Spaceship Media, work-

ing with the Alabama Media Group, hosted an online dialogue for residents of Alabama and California to explore tension-filled issues that they identified. Abortion, guns, and health care came up. Participants quickly learned that their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences differed greatly. As they worked through the differences, they realized they didn't have all the information they needed to understand the issues and to form judgments. Journalists were asked to fill in the gaps. According to Hay and Pearlman, participants placed more trust in information when they requested it. Chief among the things Spaceship Media has learned is that "connection has to come before the facts," Pearlman said.

Subramaniam Vincent, a digital technology expert at the news Trust Project at Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, has used the tool Screendoor to provide news organizations with a "low-cost, low-touch crowd-sourcing/collective wisdom surfacing" approach. A serial entrepreneur, Vincent said, "The more alienated we feel, the more we crave connections."

Alabama Media Group news vice president Michelle Holmes has led several experiments to listen and learn with the public. A seasoned news leader and innovator, Holmes

well understands the nuanced differences between thinking of people as a public rather than as an audience.

*Whitman, Alabama*, a stunningly beautiful and moving video series in which Alabamians read verses of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" makes this point. "To me it is the same problem—alienation and lack of connection. Connecting people through the words of this deeply democratic poem. It is a commitment to connecting human beings. That is the essential problem of both journalism and democracy, it is feeling part of the whole."

We connect with each other through the stories we tell. His story. Her story. Our story.

Journalism is said to be the first rough draft of history. The stories it tells and the actions they foster become history.

Amid today's chaos and despair about the future of journalism, these innovators see opportunity.

By working *with* the public, our bet is that journalists can find a way forward. ■

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