

# CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2021

**To Work Together, Learn Together**

By David Mathews p. 2

**Libraries as Islands of Trust**

By Ellen Knutson p. 30

**Getting to We: Bridging the Gap  
between Communities and Local  
Law Enforcement Agencies  
in Virginia**

By Brian N. Williams p. 53



**THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:**  
Fractured or United?

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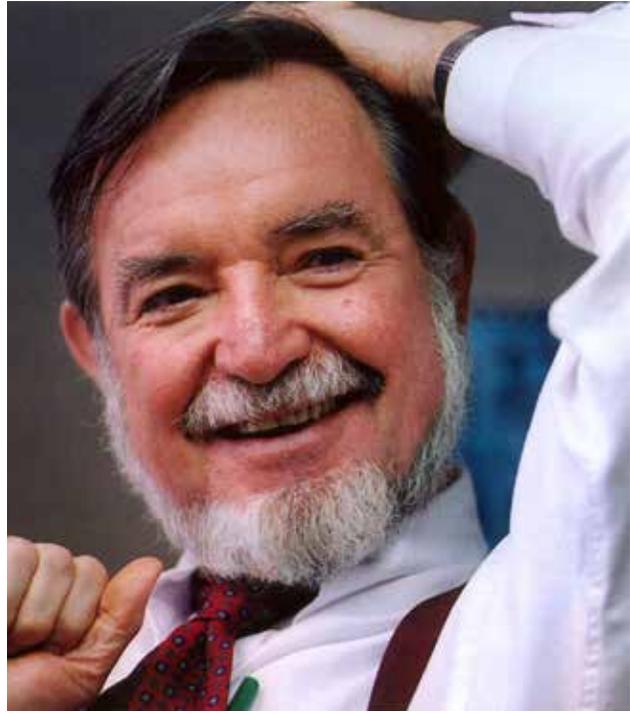
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# CONTENTS

- 2 **To Work Together, Learn Together**  
David Mathews
- 11 **Citizen Space and the Power of Associations:  
An Interview with John McKnight**  
Scott London
- 17 **How Participatory Journalism Created  
Collaborations between Law Enforcement,  
Assault Survivors, and Community  
Advocates**  
Sammy Caiola with jesikah maria ross
- 25 **Community Building in an Old-Fashioned Way**  
Maura Casey
- 30 **Libraries as Islands of Trust**  
Ellen Knutson
- 38 **Rural Life: What Keeps People from  
Getting Involved?**  
Lorie Higgins
- 46 **Redefining Public Safety:  
Professionals and the Public**  
Valerie Lemmie
- 53 **Getting to We: Bridging the Gap  
between Communities and Local Law  
Enforcement Agencies in Virginia**  
Brian N. Williams
- 59 **Democracy Is a Snowball Rolling Down a Hill:  
The 2021 Kettering Multinational Symposium**  
Wendy Willis
- 66 **Catalyzing Change: Unleashing the Potential  
of Communities**  
Richard C. Harwood

# Citizen Space and the Power of Associations: An Interview with John McKnight



By Scott London

*When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, he marveled at Americans' propensity for creating associations. In France, social movements were mobilized by the government, in England by the nobility, but in America, the people banded together and formed an association when they wanted to get things done.*

*John McKnight believes that citizen associations are still the vital heart and soul of democracy. But they have been weakened in recent decades by a confluence of social, economic, and technological forces. Among them is*

*the rise of professional service providers that now do much of the work once carried out by citizens. These institutions act in the public's name, but often without any direct public involvement.*

*The best remedy for the ills of democracy, McKnight argues, is to strengthen the noninstitutional sphere, or "citizen space," where people can come together, discover common purpose, and build productive capacity together. He makes this case in a new book, *Associational Life: Democracy's Power Source*, forthcoming in 2022 by the Kettering Foundation Press.*

*John McKnight is the author of many books, including *The Careless Society*, *Building Communities from the Inside Out* (with John Kretzmann), and *The Abundant Community* (with Peter Block). He is perhaps best known for his community organizing efforts in Chicago. During the Kennedy administration, he worked for the US government on affirmative action and civil rights issues. He later taught at Northwestern University, helping to establish the Center for Urban Affairs and its successor, the Institute for Policy Research. He trained Barack Obama as a neighborhood organizer in the early 1980s and later cofounded the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University. He currently serves as a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation.*

*He sat down with Scott London at his home in Evanston, Illinois, in July 2021.*

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**Scott London:** Your new book explores the vital role of associations in building strong and successful communities.

**John McKnight:** Yes, I'm thinking of baseball leagues, veterans' organizations, sports clubs, advocacy groups, mothers' organizations, churches, and other groups where affinity and common purpose pull people together.

**London:** Tocqueville observed that these types of associations were a distinguishing feature of American democracy.

**McKnight:** Right. When people come together in associations, he said, they take three powers unto themselves as a group. First, they decide what is an issue, what they want to do, or what they want to create. Second, they decide what needs to be done. And third, they get their neighbors to join them, make a plan together, and then implement it. When people do this, he said—and I think this is a brilliant observation—they are creating power instead of giving power to somebody else, which is what you do when you vote.

**London:** Isn't voting the primary way we exercise our power as citizens?

**McKnight:** Yes, and voting is a very important part of democracy because it's a way to influence and control government. But associations are really at the heart of democracy because that is where citizens decide what they want to do together, how it will get done, and who is going to do it. It is through associations that we create productive capacity together.

**London:** There has been a lot of concern about the decline of local associations. Americans used to bowl in leagues, as Robert Putnam has shown, but today we're mostly bowling alone.

**McKnight:** Yes, in terms of associational life the country has become weaker. One of the causes of this is that institutions have assumed more and more of the functions traditionally performed by citizens. Institutions treat people as consumers rather than producers, as clients rather than citizens.

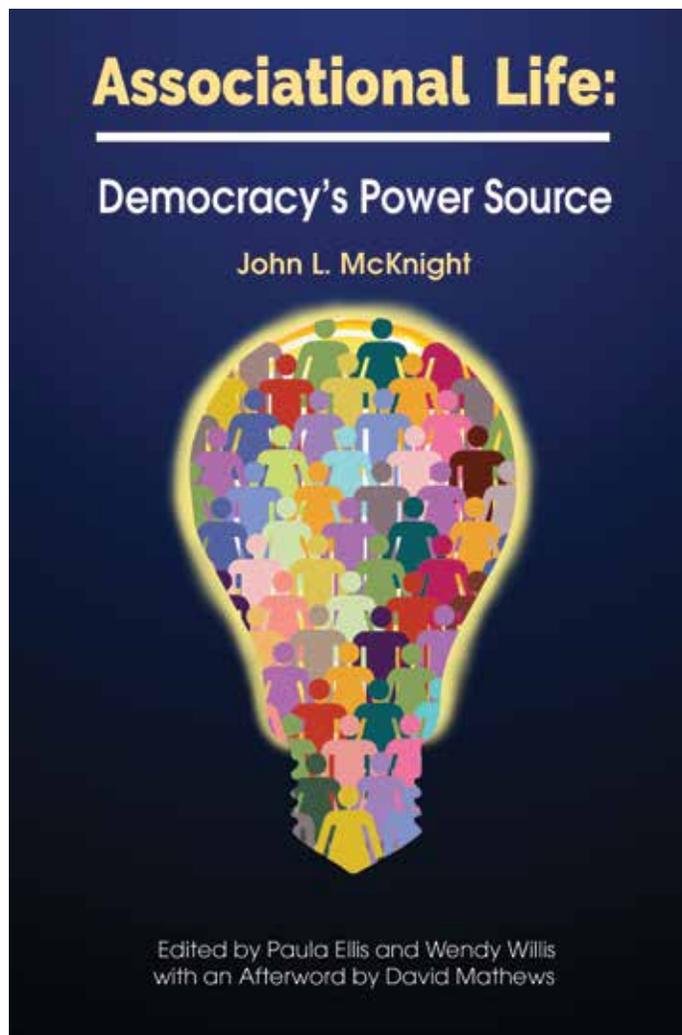
**London:** Where do you draw the line between associations and institutions?

**McKnight:** Associations are groups of people who come together because they care about each other or care about the same thing. They share their gifts, talents, knowledge, and abilities. Institutions are different. They are held together by money.

**London:** But many institutions are explicitly not-for-profit and do focus on caring for people.

**McKnight:** Well, in an institution you're paid to do what you do. In an association, you're not paid. So, something else leads you to join with others to do something, and that is care. An institution can't care. It can provide service.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. At Northwestern University, where I was on the faculty for many years, we always spoke of ourselves as being "a community of scholars." That's a wonderful way of understanding who we are and the service we provide to students. Now



imagine if the university endowment collapsed and none of the scholars got paid. What do you suspect might happen to that community? So, the literal bottom line is that the community of scholars is held together by money.

**London:** What I hear you saying is that associations and institutions exist in an inverse relationship to each other. The stronger the sense of power on the part of citizens, the less of a role there is for institutions, and vice versa.



**We need to discover, explore, and create ways for people locally to feel that they have some power to produce the world they want to live in.**

**McKnight:** Right. It's like a pneumatic device. If you push down one end, the other goes up. As the associational world goes down, the institutional world goes up. I think there is an equilibrium that is appropriate. Associations and institutions each do things that the other can't do. But if the tool of community—the associational world—loses its function and institutions act like they can take its place, what happens is that power is shifted from citizens to professionals. That's the pneumatic problem we have today.

**London:** Many scholars cite technology as a primary culprit in the decline of local associations.

**McKnight:** Yes, technology is a significant contributor. I also think the idea of management has been critical to this shift—the idea that things can't be done unless they are professionally organized and

managed. A third factor is the idea of consumerism. Instead of seeing ourselves as local citizen producers, many of us see our needs being met by access to the marketplace, to professionals, and to public programs. These three factors—control, efficiency, and consumption—are the abiding nature of the culture we live in.

**London:** Many Americans, young people in particular, have never known the kind of robust associational life you're describing. For them, community is something you have on Facebook, not something you have with the people in your neighborhood.

**McKnight:** Yes, we have a pretty arid desert in the place of rich communities. I think we're in a place of experimentation and discovery now and we need to invent, not go back. We need to discover, explore, and create ways for people locally to feel that they have some power to produce the world they want to live in.

**London:** What do we say to those who worry that traditional communities, for all their benefits, have become repositories of dysfunction, prejudice, and backward-thinking?

**McKnight:** Well, that's not new. Democracy is about freedom of expression. It's a way of coming to grips with the fact that some people have opinions that other people think are bad or nutty. The possibility of

creating a kumbaya world is just not real. As Justice Brandeis said, the answer to bad speech is more speech. And the answer to bad associations—if you believe there are bad ones—is more of them.

**London:** I hope you're not suggesting that the answer to misinformation and conspiratorial thinking is more platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

**McKnight:** [Laughs] No, no. In my sense of what makes democracy work, you've got to be face-to-face. The reason we don't see our national polarities reflected to the same degree at the local level is because of the synthesizing effect of our presence. I think being face-to-face is a great mediating force.

**London:** There is a lot of optimism today that we can recreate those face-to-face gatherings using online technologies like Skype and Zoom.

**McKnight:** I know. But that's a world of illusion. If you want to be with other people, all of your senses and all of their senses have to be engaged for the relationship to be deep, strong, and real. When you're connecting online, you can't touch, you can't taste, you can't smell, and you can't even really see or hear what you would if you were here in the room with me. My friend, Ivan Illich, used to say that if you're in a situation where none of your senses are

present with another, what you have is "non-sense."

**London:** A point you make in the new book is that we live in a culture that is overly preoccupied with problems. We have an ingrained belief that it's only by defining, analyzing, and studying problems that we can create a better world.

**McKnight:** Yes. When you identify a problem, you have at the same time identified something you think is wrong. So, starting with the problem as though that is going to get you anywhere misses the point.

**London:** You spent much of your early career as a neighborhood organizer. Organizing is an advocacy-driven tradition aimed at fixing problems and redressing grievances.

**McKnight:** Right. As an organizer, I talked to lots and lots of people in a neighborhood about what they were angriest about. That's how I'd get people together. Nothing pulls people together like an enemy. Advocacy is appropriate and you've got to do that because of the realities people face.

**London:** Barack Obama was a student of yours in the early 1980s. How did it happen that he came to you for training in community organizing?

**McKnight:** When I was at Northwestern University, an organizer friend and I started a training program. We ran ads in the Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago

newspapers offering to train people to be world-changers. We selected a group of 20 people to come and work with us in Chicago.

I remember the first evening we got them all together. One of them stood up and introduced himself as the tall guy with big ears and a funny name. It was Barack Obama.

At the time, he stood out from the others in the group. He was very thoughtful, always trying to understand how society works. When I was with him personally, he would ask questions about community dynamics and power structures: “How does this work?” “Why did that happen?” Most of the others in the group were just interested in technique. He was too, but he was trying to educate himself about the realities of social change.

After about three years, he concluded that he had learned what he wanted from local organizing and was ready to transition into a different kind of public leadership.

**London:** You helped him get into Harvard. Then, after getting his law degree, he set out on a remarkable career in politics.

**McKnight:** He recently gave a long interview where he reflected on his years out of office. The interviewer asked him what he saw as the most important lever in terms of making change. He said, “What

people do at the local neighborhood level.” He has seen the world from the bottom and from the top. And he concludes that the most important thing is to focus on growing the power of people at the local level.

**London:** What can we do to begin discovering the source of our power together?

**McKnight:** We can begin by looking at what is already there in the community—the human abilities, capacities, and needs manifested often through associations. For years, I tried to get the advocacy neighborhood organizations to do creation and asset-based organizing too. Advocacy is important, but there is another space in the community where what is appropriate is the creation of power to do things, to imagine things, and to create something new. What I’m trying to draw is a community where one space is a problem-space, another is a creation-space, and a third is a we’re-just-enjoying-each-other space. We haven’t had a synthesis of these approaches yet. But I still hold to the ideal of what I would call two-fisted organizing, where you’re able to both create and advocate. ■

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*Scott London is a California-based journalist and author. He is host and executive producer of the forthcoming Kettering Foundation podcast, Speaking of Democracy. He can be reached at [slondon@kettering.org](mailto:slondon@kettering.org).*



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