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Curious about what the communications scholar Lewis Friedland would have to say about social networks in politics today, *Kettering Review* coeditor Noëlle McAfee conducted an interview with Professor Friedland, reflecting on the evolution of his network theory over the past twenty years.

**Noëlle McAfee:** You are known for your work on communication networks. Could you say a bit about what you mean by networks, especially in the context of everyday politics?

**Lewis Friedland:** To begin with, we need to define what a network means. Fortunately, today almost everyone understands that a network is a collection of nodes, which can be anything (actors, organizations, events) and the connections among them, which are edges or, more colloquially, the lines we see in the now ubiquitous tinker-toy diagrams. So far, pretty simple. But to add our first layer of complication, many of our commonsense, everyday entities can also be analyzed as networks: our families, work and peer groups, religious and community organizations, neighborhoods, cities, and so on. For those of us who work on civic and public life, all of these are potentially relevant. We might think of the pattern of interconnections among these different elements as the infrastructure of civic life, the pattern of potential connections through which all possible communications flow. In the context of everyday politics, the kinds of connections a group or neighborhood has make a huge difference in whether they have civic capacity (sometimes under the rubric of social capital), what kind, and how much.
In my own work, I make a three-part distinction: “Community” is the substrate of all of those relationships that are relevant to a given domain or problem. Usually this is a geographic area but, of course, increasingly, our relationships are online (although, for most people, most of the time, online relationships are partly extensions of geographic relationships, past or present). So all of our potential relationships (more formally the set of all of them) are contained within this framework of communities. Within those, there are civic relationships, or networks, which are actual or potential. By civic networks, I mean those through which we connect to others in order to accomplish something through association. There is a lot to say about this on the normative side, of course—Are all relationships of association properly civic? What are the ideal civic relationships in a democratic society? But for now, let’s just say that civic relations are a subset of community relations. We can engage civically only with others with whom we can potentially connect. Finally, we come to what you’ve referred to as everyday politics. There are many dimensions of everyday politics. Some focus on deliberation, and this activity grows directly out of our civic networks, others on power, which crosscuts community and civic life. But networks are relevant to any form of politics, deliberative or conflictual, because they are the paths through which we form goals and interests with others.

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experience the boundaries of groups, and, not least, define ourselves as members of different communities, which may or may not have common interests or resources.

NM: What’s your ideal for how communicative networks should function? I mean this very broadly. Some theorists might think they should transmit individual preferences so that political systems can aggregate them. Others might think that they should allow for interest groups to get their voices heard. What do you think they should do?

LF: That’s a good and a hard question today. My ideal of how communication networks should work in a democratic society is very close to Dewey’s idea of a great community bound by communication, filtered through Habermas’s more formal analysis of communicative action. Communication networks in a democracy should provide a means for smaller publics to form and find common interests,
define their differences with others, and, in some broad sense, work them out. If you read *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey clearly had this hope for the then-emerging medium of radio. Of course, it didn’t turn out that way, as radio evolved into television and then the mass communication system we have today, which is, essentially, an aggregation of publics whose tastes have been shaped by mass consumption.

**NM:** I’m glad you brought up Dewey who, as I understand him, believes communication is crucial for people to begin to fathom the problems that beset them, identify the sources of those problems, and come together as a public to address these problems. Since Dewey, the philosopher Jürgen Habermas continues this kind of project, right?

**LF:** Yes. In fact, when I invoke communicative action, what I mean is that Habermas outlines the formal conditions through which publics can sustain an argument, query each other, and reach a consensus. In his *Between Facts and Norms* and elsewhere, he draws on Bernd Peters’ model of “sluices,” which allow aggregated public opinion to flow upward. When the internet was in its infancy in the 1990s, many people (myself included) believed that it might serve as precisely this kind of medium, allowing for greater horizontal dialogue among many different types of groups and interests, which then would be aggregated “upward” through representative democracy, filtered again through the medium of congressional debate, and then turned into law and policy. I and others did caution that a certain degree of “blue-sky” rhetoric always accompanied new communications technologies, starting with (at least) the telegraph, but that was more of a note. Of course, it didn’t turn out that way. The internet, or more precisely, social media-driven communication platforms that most people now use most of the time to communicate with others have funneled us into ever narrower communities of like others, which, in turn, become easily manipulable by strategic political actors and even hostile foreign powers.

That said, I have understood (as does Habermas) that public opinion always has the possibility for both strategic and manipulated communication. To think realistically about how communicative networks ideally work, we need to also understand how they can and are distorted, whether unintentionally, through

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misunderstanding, or intentionally through deception, lying, propaganda, or what the philosopher Harry Frankfurt has analyzed as “bullshit,” which is when actors no longer even pretend to address the truth. Arguably, that is the dominant characteristic of the current regime of public opinion in the US, and it is a precursor to authoritarianism. All of this means that simply specifying ideal relationships is not, in my view, very useful. Understanding the full range of possible distortions is more important today than ever.

**NM:** Are such distortions in tension with a network model, especially when there are very different kind of entities—from neighborhood associations to bureaucratic agencies—with different motivations and imperatives? It seems like more often than not these entities are at loggerheads, not in network.

We might think of the pattern of interconnections as the infrastructure of civic life.

**LF:** Well, first of all, being at loggerheads and networked relations are by no means opposites. Networks make all communication possible today; they structure and shape it. So even conflict (maybe especially conflict) is networked. As early as 1995, I wrote about the possibilities of networked civil society, mostly positively, assuming that if networks were the growing medium of communication, they would also, by definition, be the primary medium of association, and, by extension, associated action. And I think this was and still is true. It’s just that the Deweyan and even Tocquevillian strains of networked association—the ability to collaborate and do what Harry Boyte has called public work—are not the only, or even dominant ones. To address your question about neighborhood associations, my friend and colleague Sandra Ball-Rokeach and her students have done marvelous work exploring how community networks of communication in very diverse communities use different forms of networks and different media of communication to come together in broader neighborhoods and communities to accomplish common aims.

And of course, the term *bureaucracy* itself has an older ring about it in an era of “flat,” i.e., networked organization. But in the end, networks are still just the patterns through which humans are connected to accomplish certain ends. Some are associative and public. Some are administrative, strategic, and bureaucratic. And some are simply nefarious.

**NM:** I know you’ve done a lot of research on the ground. I’m wondering if you have any examples to share of community networks that function well
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question. When communities were facing the problems that were typical of the post-WW II period, problems with the decline of social capital that Putnam famously analyzed, or problems of deindustrialization—but not under our current conditions of extreme polarization—then mobilizing civic and community networks was a plausible solution to a broad range of issues. And this is still true. My longtime collaborator Carmen Sirianni in his forthcoming book Sustainable Cities in American Democracy shows that civic problem solving is alive and well on the environment and climate change in places like Seattle, where publicly supported community gardens have long brought different parts of the community together, or Portland with its strong bicycling associations. Of course, these are medium-large, progressive cities with deep traditions of active neighborhood and civic engagement. Chicago took the lead on the first climate action plan in 2006-08, but of course, much civic activism in that city has shifted focus to issues of racial justice. So, there are many examples of unified civic problem solving across various lines in the US. James and Deborah Fallows take an in-depth look at community and civic problem solving in almost 30 US communities in their recent book Our Towns. The problems that many of these cities faced were similar—a lack of good jobs, young people leaving, decaying infrastructure, downtowns drying up, health-care access and the opioid crisis—and many of them have found strong, enduring ways to work across political and other divides, like class and race, to find solutions.

But, and I want to stress this, when we think about networks, or problem solving, the larger context matters enormously. Civic problem solving in a US that is facing global competition and critical global warming, increased immigration and rapid demographic change, continuing racial conflict, health-care crises, and, not least, extreme political contention is...
just not the same as it was even 10, much less 20 or 30 years ago. And those of us who work in this area have to have a deeper sense of historical context. This is one point I want to make about networks and communication. Networks are pathways of connection, but also disconnection, and these are shaped by these larger political, economic, and social patterns. There is nothing special about networks per se, nor about communication.

**NM:** Have you noticed ways in which various entities, especially those with different motivations, can best align to produce better functioning politics?

**LF:** I have been doing research (with an extraordinary group of colleagues) on Wisconsin’s political communication ecology, contention, and democracy for more than six years. Wisconsin was ground zero for the mobilization of anger and resentment in 2010-11 that exploded nationally in 2016. So, we have had a laboratory to observe what happens to civic life when there is a crisis in civil society and how this is then extended to public life and legitimacy more generally. In *It’s Worse Than It Looks*, Norman Ornstein and Thomas Mann, longtime non-partisan observers of Washington, concluded that political polarization is asymmetric. We’ve observed something similar in Wisconsin, where the Republican Party, starting with the election of Gov. Scott Walker in 2010, sowed anger and division in the state and accelerating with Act 10, which decertified public workers’ unions, on through to measures making it more difficult for many groups, particularly minorities, to vote. The ability to create a better functioning politics is not independent of the party system or how it operates. Many of us, and I include myself, have focused for many years on civil society as if it were partly (or even wholly) independent of politics and parties. I think this was a mistake not simply of omission, but one that required an active and abstract separation of politics and civil society. That’s completely untenable now. Bringing about a better functioning politics will require, in my view, a more realistic and grounded understanding of how conflict is actively generated in our political system, not just as a by-product of disagreement, but with the active, strategic intention of groups and parties. Those of us hoping to reconstruct or repair civil society, in Jeffrey Alexander’s term, need to more deeply examine the forces that are actively and intentionally tearing it apart.

**Lewis Friedland is a professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and an affiliated professor in the department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He founded and directs the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Communication and Democracy. He is interviewed here regarding his current research on how modes of communication and connection form networks that contribute to democratic life.**