

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2020

An Experiment Studying Experiments

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From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

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The Work of
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.

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Deliberative Democracy Institute 2020: An Opportunity to Innovate and to Reinvigorate Networking

By Maxine S. Thomas

In March 2020, Kettering decided to postpone its usual spring multinational research exchanges until later in the year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Emails went out to registered participants around the world that the April meeting was being moved. Many of the participants were already under quarantine orders in their home countries. We, in Dayton, would be quarantined the next week. At the time, it seemed we

would only have to tweak the rest of our 2020 calendar to accommodate the delay caused by the virus, but it soon became clear that 2020 was going to offer an abundance of new challenges and opportunities. The only thing that remained unclear was how we would respond.

Our largest international meetings happen annually in July at the Deliberative Democracy Exchange (DDEX). By mid-March, planning for these meetings was well under way. We knew that 2020 DDEX would be very different, and the possibility of moving it online was daunting. For several years, a small committee had been at work designing an online curriculum for participants who were attending the Deliberative Democracy Institutes (DDI) meetings, part of DDEX. We were over-subscribed each year and still others could not come due to visa issues or other situations. Now a new team would have to move everything online and do so quickly. We successfully moved DDI and DDEX online. In the process, we gained important insights about both our in-person and our online sharing of democratic ideas.

For the last several years, we have been working to transform DDI from a large meeting led by Kettering staff to a truly multinational meeting led by leaders from around the world. This made it easier for us to pivot



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to online learning. We were already accustomed to working together, and we easily formed small multinational teams to carry out the work.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

While the task now would include online constraints, in many ways it brought out the best of what was already a collaborative process. With this core multinational DDI leadership group, we created 2-member leadership teams to work with groups of 8 to 15 participants so that every participant would be a part of a small DDI pod for meetings. This meant the groups could be divided up among those who were in similar

time zones, or who spoke similar languages, or who were in countries geographically nearer to the members of each leadership team. This new intimacy allowed deeper conversations and clearer understandings due to shared experiences.

The new approach also created challenges. In such small groups, it was hard for people to get a sense of the whole of DDEX or, indeed, even of DDI. One of the key elements of Kettering meetings in Dayton is the plenaries that include all participants. We saw the need to offer similar opportunities and responded by creating early in the DDI experience a chance for all DDI participants to join a Zoom plenary during which they could become aware of the whole of DDEX.

Once we realized that we were all going to meet on Zoom, a new opportunity presented itself. Kettering has long tried to improve connections with the multinational network. The Zoom call provided an opportunity for us to invite multinational network alumni to that opening plenary. We also invited them to additional plenaries on framing the pandemic for deliberative conversations. It was amazing to have so many from the network that we knew as former residents, DDI members, or multinational associates. It was, for me, a highlight of DDEX 2020.

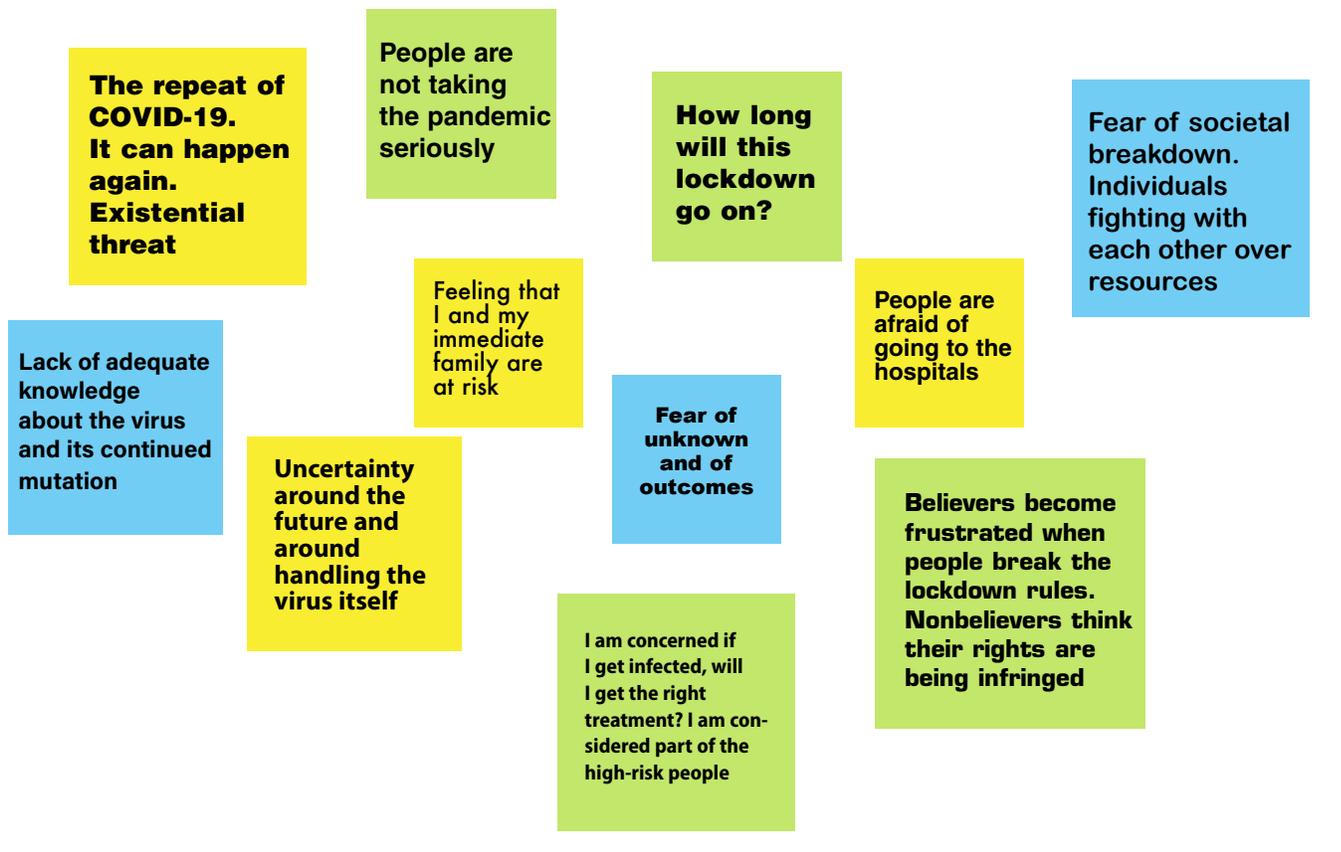


An early decision by the DDI leadership team was to extend DDI to six weeks. The thought was that this would provide more time than the usual week in Dayton for participants to exchange, reflect, and think together. While it did allow for such reflections, what we did not consider was the multitasking that completing DDI during a pandemic—while working, caring for family, and/or experiencing internet connectivity issues—would expose. In the end, we realized that for many, even though they were very excited about the ideas, six weeks during a pandemic



Last year was overwhelming. This year we had time to process the information. It gave me an opportunity to share with my family.”

– DDI II participant from Italy



Concerns gathered by a DDI team developing a framework on how to address the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities. The group included participants from Armenia, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, and Ukraine.

was too long for participants to give their undivided attention. But we also learned that some preliminary online work was exceedingly helpful in allowing participants to connect with small groups. When we hold DDI in Dayton, it is often extremely difficult for participants who do not get over jet lag before it is time to go back home to truly process the experience. Clearly, some combination of online work, both pre and post, even when

we have an in-person DDI, would be preferred.

Another advantage of the Zoom-based DDI is it allowed participants to share the experience with those with whom they worked or to connect with alums who were in their communities. If the network is to grow, these kinds of connections are critical. Because we were meeting by Zoom, we decided to invite multi-national alums to join our framing

work. They participated in the Zoom calls and worked in small breakout groups to consider how to frame an issue on the pandemic. DDI members would go on to continue this effort, and at the close of the program, we invited yet another group of alums to engage around the framings. We closed DDI 2020 encouraging any who were interested to get together and move these or other framings forward. We wanted to see what would happen organically if Kettering was not in the center. We have been delighted at what we have learned about the vibrancy of the network. Small groups met over the summer and into the fall developing framings. Our hope is that we can come together to reflect on what allowed this to grow naturally. What we learn, then, will inform how we network with multinational alums in the future.

CONNECTING IN SPITE OF LIMITATIONS

But we must realize that for many around the world who are on the frontlines, even DDI online is a challenge. Often people complained about others' internet connectivity issues. We must ask ourselves, How can we better connect with those who will not and cannot have stable internet? Don't they deserve to know of these ideas as well? Our chal-



“[This] changed my perspective on how to work.”

—DDI I participant from India

lenge is to understand nonexclusive ways of sharing these ideas. David Mathews has written several books and publications that are central to understanding this work, and we have worked to make sure that these are translated for use in communities around the world. But translations are not enough. Networks both global and regional will be an important part of this mix, and local and regional meetings or pods are part of it as well.

I am eternally grateful to all those who worked so hard this summer as leadership teams, participants, and Kettering staff. I was reminded each time I joined an early Zoom that many others had participated at odd times of day for them as well. We ended the experience tired yet enthusiastic. It provided an opportunity to see just how these ideas were being received and to test the strength of our networks. Again and



How Kettering would respond to 2020 is now very clear. We have taken the challenges as an opportunity to innovate and to reinvigorate networking, to ask new questions, to begin new research, to find new answers, and to explore new hypotheses, in short, to break new ground while we stay the course.

again, we were made aware of alums who were continuing to work in their communities and to reach out to newbies to join DDI and this work. The emails of alums interested in the organic pandemic framing were even more exciting. Kettering has invested deeply over the last 30 years in a network that we now see is vibrant and alive and continuing to explore the role of deliberative democracy in communities.

The year 2020 has provided many challenges, but if there is a silver lining, it is that it shook us out of patterns that we had been following so long we did not even realize they were patterns. It also introduced new online technologies as it reminded us that just because an app was available did not mean it should be used—Teams, Zoom, Padlets, Slack, etc., the list goes on. We must take this opportunity to discern what works best where, when a phone call is better than a Zoom call, when an email is better than Slack, and so forth. These are exciting and challenging times, and I am delighted to be a part of so much learning.

How Kettering would respond to 2020 is now very clear. We have taken the challenges as an opportunity to innovate and to reinvigorate networking, to ask new questions, to begin new research, to find new answers, and to explore new hypotheses, in short, to break new ground while we stay the course. Six months after the pandemic changed our work, in September Dayton Days we began reimagining Kettering’s multinational exchanges in 2021 and how DDI and DDEx will change, comfortable with the challenges and opportunities next year will present. ■

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