CITIZENS
And the Work of Self-Government
Editors’ Foreword

This issue of Connections, which focuses on the role of citizens in the work of democratic self-government, was prepared in the weeks immediately after the hotly contested presidential race. During an election season, much of the concern about public life focuses on government and its leaders. The health of the citizenry is gauged mainly by familiar measures such as engagement in the electoral campaign and voter turnout.

By these criteria, the recently concluded election season would be judged a success, a reflection of robust democratic practice. Perhaps because the campaign was intensely partisan, it aroused passions not seen in many years. Substantive presidential debates were watched by many millions of Americans. Voter turnout was higher than it has been for several decades. Isn’t that a measure of our health as a democratic nation?

The answer, says Harry Boyte, codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, is “Maybe. If you think of democracy as elections and voting, this is a great moment. If you think of democracy as more of a way of life, it’s very uncertain what the result is going to be, and the polarization is very troubling. The real question is whether this highly charged electoral season can help revive a larger civic culture and a productive citizenship.”

That is the question we examine here in addressing the subject of citizens and public choice, not in the sense of citizens as voters but people who are able and willing to work collectively on common problems. We look at the role of citizens and their place in democratic decision making, exploring what happens in communities that claim responsibility for their own problems by using deliberation as a resource for moving toward collective action. In particular, we examine serious obstacles confronting citizens, and what can be done about them.

We start with the problem to which Harry Boyte referred: polarization. Many journalists and pundits take it for granted that ours is an increasingly polarized society, suggesting an unbridgeable gap between opposed factions. We explore recent research and the light it sheds on whether the public is as deeply divided as this term suggests, and how deliberative practice can reveal common concerns and broadly acceptable courses for collective action.

A second theme focuses on the public practices involved in community-level problem solving, starting with how citizens claim responsibility for their collective problems. The underlying problem, and one of the main obstacles to effective collective action, is that government has found ways of functioning that do not require much involvement on the part of ordinary citizens. As Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg put it in Downsizing Democracy, “America is becoming a nation of emphatically private citizens—customers and clients who find it difficult to express coherent, common interests through collective political action.”

The third of our themes explores another obstacle to a public practice of democratic politics—the gap between experts and citizens. At a time when the professions seem increasingly remote from (and estranged from) the publics they were intended to serve, we look at notable examples of professional groups that have taken action to radically revise their relation to the public.

Altogether, these essays prompt a series of questions about what we have learned—from our own recent work and the work of others—and how it relates to the broader discussion about the health of our democracy in postelection America. They are questions that were explored in a recent meeting of the Kettering Foundation’s Board members. We invite the readers of Connections to explore them with us.
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Beginning this past July and continuing through the next six months, Kettering trustees, program officers, and associates—along with independent researchers—have been carefully reviewing the foundation’s studies of citizens and their role in our democracy. Ten years ago, we concentrated on the way citizens make collective decisions. Now we recognize that decision making is only one element in a series of interrelated activities that begin well before people are ready to decide and continue afterward in collective actions. Today, the research on citizens deals with everything citizens can do, from naming issues in their terms to learning from their efforts to solve common problems.

Democratic practices, the things people do to govern themselves, are distinctive, yet they are just variations of the things that happen every day in communities—but without involving many citizens. In order for these routine activities to become public, communities don’t have to do anything out of the ordinary—they just have to do the ordinary in different ways. If the routine business of politics is done in ways that are open to citizens, the routines can become public practices.

These practices are reflected in the ordinary questions people ask one another when something threatens their collective well-being. Their conversations revolve around such questions as: “What’s bothering you?” “What do you think we should or can do about the problem?” “If we did what you suggest, what do you think might happen?” “Would it be fair?” “Would we be better off?” “Is there a downside?” “If there is, should we change our minds about what should be done?”

“What would you (and others you can call on) be willing to do to solve the problem?” After a community acts, the conversation picks up again around another set of questions: “What happened?” “Did we get what we wanted?” “Did we learn anything?”

Kettering has selected a set of terms that it uses to describe what is going on politically when people ask these everyday questions. Each term identifies one of the public practices just mentioned. When people talk about what bothers them, Kettering would say that they are “naming” their problems. “Naming” is a political practice because the name that is given to a problem affects what is done to solve it.

Watch lawyers battle with one another over the name given to a case and you will see what I mean. Whether the name is “murder” or “manslaughter” makes a great difference.

When people talk about what can be done, they propose options, and when all the options are put on the table, they create a framework for tackling a problem. The “framing,” which is the term Kettering uses, structures everything that happens thereafter. A framework with only one option sets in motion a political debate that is very different from what happens if there are multiple options on the table.

When people move on to assess the possible consequences that might result from one course of action or another, Kettering would say they are “deliberating.” They are weighing possible consequences against what is deeply important to them. Most people are suspicious of any proposal that looks like a free lunch. So they keep their eyes out for the downsides, for costs or tradeoffs that have to be made. That is all part of assessing or weighing. You can hear it going on over any lunch counter or water cooler in the country, even though no one would call what people are doing deliberation. They are mulling over or sorting out what they hear, perhaps changing their minds as they learn about someone else’s experience. Eventually, they may settle on some work that they need to do with other citizens, something they want a government to do, or both.

Once a decision is made about how to proceed, people test to see if anyone or any group is willing to act on the decision, which is a political practice Kettering calls “making mutual promises” or “commitments.”
Commitments produce collective political will. When citizens then join forces to do something, we refer to that as “public acting,” a practice that brings the many and various resources a citizenry has to bear on a problem. Action is normally followed by evaluating what was accomplished, which the foundation has labeled “civic learning” in order to distinguish collective from individual learning. This practice provides the political momentum needed to follow through on difficult problems.

All six of these practices are part of the larger politics of self-rule, not stand-alone techniques. They rest inside one another, the way the wooden matreshka dolls from Russia do. Naming, framing, and deliberating are included when people learn from the commitments they made (or didn’t make) and the actions they took.

Public judgment

Of all the practices, Kettering has done the most research on the way citizens make decisions, particularly on how first impressions and hasty reactions can turn into more shared and reflective “public judgments.” As background for this issue of Connections, I should say a bit about where we are in this work. The ancient Greeks called the discourse of collective decision making “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act,” and Aristotle described the process of deciding political issues as “moral reasoning.” As I explained, Kettering uses the word deliberation for public decision making. In the United States, citizens have been joining citizens to make choices on issues of common concern since the colonial town meetings. So, by no conceivable stretch of the imagination could public deliberation be called a Kettering methodology. It isn’t even a uniquely American practice. Some variation of the word deliberation can be found in nearly every ancient language.

Public deliberation is a natural act, and its effect on major issues has been documented in longitudinal studies, such as those cited in Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro’s The Rational Public. Their analysis of responses to thousands of questions on a wide variety of policy issues over 50 years shows that the public’s attitudes are consistent, rational, and stable. The public’s views are consistent in that the policies they favor do, over the long term, correspond to what people consider valuable. Public attitudes are rational in that there are clear reasons for them; for example, people favor more spending on employment when unemployment is high. And public preferences are stable in that they change incrementally in understandable responses to real changes in circumstances.

Why are public policy preferences, over time and on the whole, so consistent, rational, and stable? Page and Shapiro believe that it is because the “cool and deliberate sense of the community” eventually prevails on most issues. They cite issues where public opinion developed independently from government policy and paved the way for a change in that policy.

Why, then, worry about deliberation at all? Despite being an ancient and natural practice, public deliberation tends to be overshadowed today by hype and spin. Modern techniques of communication and persuasion are more dramatic and telegenic than the careful, back-and-forth weighing of options. And it is easy to lose sight of the qualities that distinguish deliberation from other forms of political speech—qualities that give deliberation the power to teach citizens before they act. Furthermore, even though the United States has been committed to self-government for more than 200 years, many of our Founders preferred a republic to a democracy, and their doubts about whether common folk have the intelligence and responsibility to govern
The best way to understand deliberation . . .

is not to treat it as a stand-alone methodology but to locate it within the larger context of deliberative democracy and other public practices.

better understanding of the hard work involved in making difficult decisions.

The best way to understand deliberation, as I said at the beginning of this article, is not to treat it as a stand-alone methodology but to locate it within the larger context of deliberative democracy and other public practices. Of all these practices, naming problems to capture the basic concerns of people and then framing issues in ways that promote choice work have gotten a great deal of attention at Kettering recently because these activities are typically carried out in ways that exclude citizens. Professionals name problems but, as would be expected, they use the technical terminology of their field, and they frame issues in ways suitable for expert decision making. The same is true of public administrators and elected officials. The nature of their work requires them to use different terminology and frameworks. Unfortunately, those terms and frameworks are imposed on citizens, and they are put off because nothing resonates with their experiences or concerns and nothing suggests what they might do with other citizens.

When issues have been named and framed in ways that prompt public deliberation, the choice work involved can stimulate a particular kind of reasoning that could be called “public thinking.” One of our greatest challenges in the research is to describe the distinctive way citizens go about deciding. Communicating the results of NIF forums to members of Congress, officials in the executive branch, and the Washington media, gives the foundation an opportunity to contrast the way that citizens form collective opinions with the way officials make up their minds. We have found that public thinking isn’t ideological, but quite pragmatic; it isn’t hegemonic, but sensitive to differences in circumstances. (People may favor doing “x” under one set of circumstances, but adamantly oppose that action if the context is different.) Federal policy, in contrast, has to be uniform; it is necessarily one-size-fits-all. Without assuming one way of coming to decisions is better than another, the foundation has to do more to explain the unique characteristics of public thinking and avoid giving the impression that its research can show what people really think.

Three critical problems

During this six-month review, the foundation has considered the applications of the findings about the work of a democratic citizenry to three critical problems in contemporary America:

• The first is the increasing polarization in the political system that is paralyzing legislative bodies. When the differences of opinion characteristic of a democracy harden into ideologically rigid positions, representative assemblies lose their capacity for practical problem solving. Providing more information about how citizens think when they deliberate may help counter the tendency for legislative bodies to be less than deliberative when they are polarized by ideological or partisan pressures.

• The second is the persistence of “wicked problems” that frustrate communities because they refuse to go away despite the best efforts of major institutions. The characteristics of these problems were discussed in the April 2004 issue of Connections. What is being called the “achievement gap” in public schooling is an example. This and similar problems might be reframed in terms that reflect the public’s concerns and, once renamed, reframed around a broader set of options than are now being considered.

• And the third is the increasing distance between professional or expert views of the country’s problems and the citizenry’s perception of these problems. Here, too, it might be helpful to expand professional diagnoses to include the ways a deliberative public understands problems.

Other authors will flesh out what we are learning about the possible application of the foundation’s research to these three megaproblems. They will tell you about experiments that are under way to test our findings. For example, state representatives and citizens have collaborated in conducting town meetings on issues similar to those on the agendas of legislatures in order to see what influence public thinking might have on the decision making that goes on in these assemblies. You may recall that Senator Les Ihara of Hawaii wrote about one of the first of these experiments in the July 2003 Connections. Now, the National Conference of State Legislatures is taking up the challenge. Others in this issue describe the effects of public action or work in solving community problems and the role that deliberation plays in promoting collective action. And still others will say more about closing the distance between professionals and citizens, which, in some fields, has degenerated into name-calling. A corrective effort, called “civic professionalism,” is under way that emphasizes “practical reasoning,” which has some similarities to public thinking. All in all, we hope this issue will not only show essential connections in democratic politics but also point out connections between your work and the work of the foundation.

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Polarization and Political Gridlock

Keith Melville and John Dedrick

Polarization. Over the past year, this word has been used more often than any other to describe America’s political situation. Repeatedly, we are shown maps of a nation starkly divided between red and blue states. Familiar partisan differences seem to have hardened into an unbridgeable gap. The values and positions of Americans on each side of that gap, we are told, are worlds apart.

If this is an accurate assessment, polarization poses a formidable challenge to a democratic society. “Democracy requires space for compromise,” as Kettering Foundation Trustee Emeritus Daniel Yankelovich commented recently in a Christian Science Monitor editorial, “and compromise is best won through acknowledging the legitimate concerns of the other. When seemingly irreconcilable differences split the nation down the middle, with each half accusing the other of bad faith, paralysis sets in. Polarization solidifies into gridlock, and gridlock blocks us from coping with our most urgent problems.”

In this section, we explore the challenges to citizens posed by the apparent polarity in American public life. And we examine ways in which deliberative practices have the potential to reverse the tendency toward polarization, to identify common ground and courses of action that many Americans endorse and are willing to support.

Are we really polarized?

This section starts by examining the phenomenon of polarization, asking, in the words of John Cavanaugh, KF program officer, whether the nation is really as polarized as it appears to be. We follow with a research report from Dobie Research, in which Juliet Potter and John Doble reflect on recent focus groups conducted for the Kettering Foundation that probed differences about a series of issues, including contentious issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

Their findings corroborate what Daniel Yankelovich said at the foundation’s December board meeting, when he commented that while most Americans may indeed be at odds over issues of social morality, they are not otherwise polarized. To the contrary, Yankelovich...
said, most Americans tend to be pragmatic in looking for solutions to political problems.

That observation is supported by other analysts as well, including political scientist Morris Fiorina, author of the recent book *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*. Fiorina and his coauthors point out that most Americans are no more divided in their views on most issues than they were a generation ago. On all but a few issues, most Americans are pragmatic centrists, not ideological zealots.

This is not to say that polarization is not a problem, or simply a mistaken interpretation of polling results that indicate roughly equal numbers on both sides of many issues. As Bill Bishop of the *Austin American-Statesman* points out, more Americans today live in communities and regions that are mainly liberal or conservative, not a mixture of the two. He found that the number of counties in which one party has experienced a landslide majority in presidential elections—where one candidate won by a margin of 20 percentage points or more—has doubled over the past 25 years.

What appears to have happened, in other words, is that many Americans are no longer in daily contact with people who hold different political views from their own. They live, it might be said, in political ghettos—an insight that has immediate implications for those advocating a more deliberative democracy.

**Legislative polarization**

While most citizens may not be polarized in their views on most issues, the nation’s leadership is increasingly polarized. That has changed the political process, leading increasingly to legislative gridlock. As Ruth Wooden, president of Public Agenda, observes in a recent editorial in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the presumption of polarization serves to justify winner-take-all political combat. “Seeing the nation only in red and in blue,” says Wooden, “blinds leaders to compromise and makes it seem all right to push an ideological agenda without seeking wider public support. Strident advocacy has replaced attempts to build consensus and compromise.”

This is quite a different phenomenon from what the Founders envisioned as the role of Congress in a majoritarian system. In theory, candidates and elected legislators are supposed to converge toward the center to attract as many votes as possible. But in American politics today, rather than moving to the center on divisive issues, both parties are moving away from it.

As a result, as analysts at the *National Journal* recently concluded, “the legislative process is a mess.” The *Journal* characterizes the House of Representatives as increasingly disjointed and dysfunctional, where partisans jockey for position and centrist members who traditionally have found common ground are marginalized.

As Ruth Wooden puts it, “Many of those charged with the responsibility of promoting the common good are doing the exact opposite: relentlessly advancing points of view held by extremes of public opinion… Really listening to the public and seeking out people’s nuanced understanding of issues seem to have become a lost art, disappearing along with respectful dialogue.”

**Discovering common ground**

It is important to understand the phenomenon of polarization and to recognize its corrosive effect, in legislative bodies and elsewhere in public life. It is particularly important to understand what can be done about it, and to understand how deliberative practices help to move toward common ground for public action.

In a season of hyperpartisanship, it is valuable to look at efforts to enable public agencies and legislative bodies to work in a more deliberative fashion. Growing concern about partisanship in state legislative bodies led to the Kettering Foundation’s work with the National Council of State Legislatures.

As those who have participated in public hearings know, it is no easy matter for public agencies or elected officials to engage productively with the public. An engaged public can provide elected officials with a richer, more nuanced understanding of the actions most people are willing to support, and where there is common ground, even on divisive issues. In Panama City, Florida, which Virginia York describes here, state legislators have been working in tandem with community forums, with impressive results that change the substance and tone of public debate, replacing polarization with a sense of public permission.

Based on the Kettering Foundation’s long experience in encouraging deliberation in a variety of settings, we know that public deliberation exposes people to views other than their own and reveals the reasons others differ in the views they hold. Even on divisive issues, it often helps people move toward common ground for action. Especially in a season characterized by polarization and partisan gridlock, deliberative practices make an important contribution.
Political Polarization: A Challenge for KF Research

John Cavanaugh

We’re a country geographically ‘polarized’ by values and lifestyles. This is a masterful explanation for the increasing nastiness of politics, with only one big drawback. It’s wrong.


Robert Samuelson’s challenge to “the reigning theory of U.S. politics,” which describes a dysfunctional civic life caused by a hopelessly deadlocked citizenry, suggests several research opportunities within multiple areas of the Kettering Foundation’s program of study. For, if a polarized paradigm of the public is proven to be true, then our findings from more than 20 years of investigation about the capacity of diverse groups of citizens to work together collectively on tough public problems should be reexamined. In fact, we would need to review our most fundamental assumptions about the ability of citizens to weigh difficult tradeoffs with their neighbors in order to help set new directions for local, state, and national policy. Even our key understanding about what democracy requires of citizens as well as our explanations of self-rule could be called into question.

Fortunately, challenges like this are not new to the foundation. In the early 1990s, conventional wisdom described the American public as largely apathetic about politics. Pundits had convinced nearly everyone that people simply did not care about difficult problems of public policy and administration. However, in a 1991 study produced for the Kettering Foundation entitled Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America, The Harwood Group found that exactly the opposite was true. Far from being apathetic, Americans were frustrated and angry at being pushed out of the political process.

On the outside looking in

As David Mathews noted in Politics for People, “Americans were not apathetic at all but were ‘mad as the devil’ about a political system that has pushed them out of their rightful place in governing the nation.” Such feelings of resentment have persisted well into the twenty-first century. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, describes today’s public disposition this way: “There’s this roiling anger that people don’t know where to direct.”

So, while the label may have changed from a “phantom public” to a now “polarized populace,” the disturbing message from many professional prognosticators is still the same: People are not really capable of governing themselves. Once again faced with such dire assessments of civic capacity, researchers at the Kettering Foundation are summoned to probe beneath surface explanations of political behavior in order to better understand a new political pathology.

It might be helpful to start with Samuelson’s diagnosis: “What’s actually happened is that politics, and not the country, has become more polarized. By politics, I mean elected officials, party activists, advocates, highly engaged voters and commentators (TV talking heads, pundits). . . . The result is a growing disconnect between politics—and political commentary—and ordinary life.” After years of study, Kettering has become well versed in the political consequences of a disconnect between the public and
major institutions such as public schools, the news media, philanthropic organizations—and the government itself.

Thus, if we were to conduct a thorough analysis of political polarization, we would be able to place our specific research findings into a more holistic context. For example, our joint studies with the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) have uncovered similar alarm about hyperpartisanship within many of the state assemblies across the country. Polarization at this level causes the legislative process to bog down and exacerbates the rift between people and politicians. As Bill Chaloupka of Colorado State University notes, “People just don’t know how to be partisan without getting personal.”

Shedding light on old questions

What can individual legislators do to ameliorate this problem? How might a more deliberative public change the

dynamic? These are ongoing research questions currently under consideration that would benefit immensely from a better understanding of the polarization phenomenon.

Similarly, our longstanding public journalism research may yield a more precise description of both the causes for and effects of polarization. As Samuel J. Abrams of Harvard and Jeremy C. Pope of Stanford conclude: “Reports of a culture war are mostly wishful thinking and useful fundraising strategies on the part of culture-war guerillas, abetted by a media driven by the need to make the dull and everyday appear exciting and unprecedented.”

Preliminary focus groups conducted for the foundation by Doble Research Associates suggest that citizens themselves are angry about exaggerated press accounts of a bitterly divided populace. This overarching concern about media distortions of a deadlocked citizenry represents a golden research opportunity to further our understanding of how to bridge the disconnect between the public and the press. It also has implications for our studies of the public’s relationship to other nongovernmental organizations such as grant-making institutions. If conventional wisdom holds true, why would philanthropies want to invest scarce resources in communities full of citizens at war with one another? Likewise, how could such a culturally divided public ever take ownership of its local schools?

For more than two decades, the Kettering Foundation has been guided by a central research question: “What does it take to make democracy work as it should?” With that in mind, we are obliged to investigate the current phenomenon of political polarization, since it represents clear challenges to nearly all of our core assumptions about the promise of public politics. Indeed, a study of this nature may provide a rich opportunity to fully realize our plans for a truly interdependent research strategy over the course of the next program year.

As we embark on this important endeavor, we should use as a guide George Washington’s sage observations about American citizens: “With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. You have in common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint councils and joint efforts, of common dangers, sufferings, and successes.” Have we really changed that much after 207 years?

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Central to the health of a democratic society is the public’s ability to consider, reason, and deliberate complex public issues. In the process, a citizenry will establish a broadly acceptable range of political permissions within which policy can be made. This ability to recognize and accept tradeoffs, compromise, and discover the common ground required to take political action depends on a public that broadly shares a set of deeply held core values, even when holding sharply differing opinions.

But should differences in citizens’ values and viewpoints become overly extreme or polarized, the public would lose its ability to make collective decisions on the most troublesome issues. It would lead to a breakdown of the very practices that reinforce democratic self-rule.

Some experts and political commentators believe that this is what’s happening in the country today—that polarization has become so extreme, we are on the verge of being unable to resolve pressing issues. This group, including New York Times columnist David Brooks, Michael Barone, author of The Almanac of American Politics, and John Sperling, author of The Great Divide: Retro vs. Metro America, argues that the country is more divided than it’s been since the end of the Vietnam War. They say that the split into red and blue states during the last two elections was only one indication of the deep ideological and cultural fault lines running through the U.S.

A second group of experts feels that this view fundamentally misreads the public. Social scientists Daniel Yankelovich, Richard Harwood, Alan Wolfe, author of One Nation After All, and Morris Fiorina,
author of Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America, hold that beneath the divisions, Americans continue to share a deep set of core values and beliefs. They argue that a good many of the apparent differences reflect how issues are being framed by pollsters in questions that allow for “yes/no” or “agree/disagree” answers. They say that when people are given a chance to elaborate, common ground emerges among virtually all demographic segments and in every region of the country.

In this context, the Kettering Foundation asked Doble Research Associates, a nonpartisan organization with broad experience studying public opinion about complex issues, to conduct a preliminary study to explore how polarized Americans’ thinking has become.

Our research involved four groups of people representing two ideological extremes. Two focus-group discussions were held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Miami, Florida, cities that voted heavily for George Bush in 2000, with Bush supporters who identified themselves as conservative. Two other groups were convened in Madison, Wisconsin, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, cities that voted heavily for Al Gore in 2000, with John Kerry supporters who identified themselves as liberal.

What we heard

When we asked about the division within the country, people generally compared the national mood to a lake in winter. Metaphorically, they likened the country’s divisions to a lake’s frozen surface. Although the ice may be deep enough to skate on, below the surface lies a deep body of water. To all four groups, the ice represented division while the water below represented a larger body of what Americans believe, value, and share.

We asked participants if they felt the country had become more polarized or divided than it was 15 years ago. They said that the priorities people have for their communities are the same everywhere, adding that Americans subscribe to the same fundamental values, no matter what their political beliefs.

A woman from Miami said, “We voice our opinions … but we're still in it together. We can argue back and forth, but we're still brothers.”

More specifically, people said that virtually all Americans want good public schools for their children, and safe, economically healthy communities where neighbors work together to tackle community problems. They said Americans value diversity and tolerance, believe in equal rights and equal opportunity, and the freedom to be heard. They added that people retain their traditional ability to solve complex public problems no matter what their political opinions. Indeed, some saw differences as a source of strength.

A man from Madison, Wisconsin, put it this way: “There’s always … going to be a wide diversity of people. It’s that process of trying to find a solution or trying to find the truth that makes [democracy] a legitimate system. If [Americans] have the ability to reason together in a group, [we] would come to some sort of consensus about what the problem is and the solution to that problem.”

When we asked how people viewed a specific issue such as gay rights, we were surprised by a theme of tolerance that emerged. Although both conservative groups wanted to amend the Constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage, many
opposed any discrimination toward gays and endorsed the idea of people being in loving, supportive relationships, no matter what their sexual orientation. While some participants were openly condemnatory, most viewed homosexuality as a fact of life and talked about people they knew, including family members, friends, and neighbors, who were gay.

A case in point

We also asked each group to imagine that they were placed on a jury with people who held diametrically opposing philosophical views; then we posed hypothetical, yet very controversial cases, such as that of an ardent right-to-life individual accused of murdering an abortion clinic doctor. We wanted to know if people felt such a group could reach a verdict or whether philosophical divisions would block them from doing so.

The view of a Pittsburgh woman reflected the thinking of most people: “Even though in some cases [we would start] far apart and might interpret things differently, interpreting things differently and reaching a conclusion, are two different things. [Reaching a conclusion] has to do with how much you’re willing to listen to one another…. If we’re in a room together and [asking] ‘What’s in the best interest of society?’ … I think eventually we could find enough to agree on to move forward.”

One striking finding was that people spontaneously brought up the role of the media when asked about divisive issues. They felt the media pay too much attention to the country’s divisions, which exacerbates the problem. A woman from Madison explained it this way, “Some of the things that are being focused on … make us look like we are at each other’s throats about a lot of things, but it’s really a false issue.”

Finally, we emphasize that this was a small-scale study and its results should be seen as interim or preliminary. Clearly, more research is required to reach a more definitive conclusion.

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Theme One

Connecting Citizens and Elected Officials

Virginia York

National Issues Forums (NIF), which bring citizens together to deliberate on pressing public issues, have taken root in many communities across the nation. But Bay County, Florida, forums may be unique in one respect: more often than not, they include local and state legislators among their participants. It is a practice that offers the opportunity for policymakers and other citizens to work together at the level where problems are defined and potential solutions are shaped.

It began more than a decade ago, when then-State Representative Scott Clemons sought input from his constituency on the subject of tort reform. He had learned about NIF the previous year and convened a forum at Gulf Coast Community College (GCCC) to find out what citizens thought about the issue.

Using a framework provided by the NIF issue book entitled, Off Balance: Resetting the Scales of Civil Justice, the large number of citizens who turned out—many of them physicians and attorneys—worked through the benefits and costs of various approaches to the issue of tort reform. Representative Clemons mostly just listened.

Following this event, deliberative forums became an integral part of the way in which Clemons interacted with his constituents. The next step was to expand from the use of nationally distributed NIF issue books to framing local issues. In 1996, Clemons and the Citizen Leadership Institute of GCCC framed an issue called “The Florida State Budget: Priorities for Entering the Twenty-first Century.” The budget priorities were divided into four approaches with four moderators, each presenting one approach.

This was a new experience for most of those who attended. To begin with, the setting was not what many participants expected: an elevated stage for the elected official with chairs for everyone else in neat rows on the floor below. Instead, folding chairs were arranged in a rectangle with an open area in the center. Representative Clemons welcomed all those who attended and, to the surprise of many, told them he was present to listen, not to speak. He wanted to hear them voice their opinions, wrestle with the choices and possible consequences and hear them give him direction and possibilities before he went to the legis-
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"The office I hold intimidates many citizens. In these forums, they seem to loosen up. The process is mystical in that it lifts the veil of the office a bit and instead of only seeing my title, they see me as a human with the same problems they have. After these dialogues, it makes me more approachable. We need to figure out more ways to spread these deliberative forums."

Has deliberation carried over to other settings for the senator? "Sure it has," he said. "Occasionally, when I am on a panel and we interact among ourselves, we use the process in an impromptu way. When I am in a situation that needs to bring out all perspectives, I try to remember how one of the Gulf Coast moderators would control the discussion."

The 2004 elections are over. Bay County will be represented in the state legislature by Speaker of the House Allan Bense, President Pro Tem of the Senate Charlie Clary, Senator Durell Peaden, a physician who chairs the health care committee, and Representative David Coley. The newcomer is David Coley. Coley has been a participant in GCCC's Public Policy Institute and attends forums at the college. These policymakers have already scheduled the next prelegislative forum at GCCC in February 2005. All of them recognize the value of working with citizens, not just for them.

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This second section takes as its point of departure what we at the Kettering Foundation call "wicked problems." These are complex, multifaceted, seemingly intractable problems that plague many communities—ongoing racial tensions, a growing gap in economic inequality, substance abuse, and underachieving schools, among others.

"How do we get at these issues?" asked Virginia Hodgkinson, KF trustee, in the December meeting of Kettering’s board. "How do we get to the people who need to be engaged? The key may be naming and framing.” Hodgkinson, who chaired the committee that selected the themes that will provide direction to the foundation’s research over the coming year, told her fellow trustees that there is serious work to be done on framing. The challenge, as she points out, is to find ways of talking about what many people think of initially as private problems, and then moving those conversations toward a consideration of public actions.

"Public action" most often means government action. Citizenship is normally understood as a collection of rights or individual entitlements. The role of citizens is commonly understood as what we do as individual voters or taxpayers. What is missing is an understanding of public action that involves groups of citizens working together in local communities on common concerns. This is quite a different way of understanding the role of citizens in democratic communities from what is intended by the phrase "consent of the governed."

Judging by recent studies conducted both by the Kettering Foundation and by others, most Americans find it hard to envision an active, engaged citizenship. For those of us who are convinced that revisioning the role of citizens is a crucial step in getting public life to work as it should, it is important to understand what the exercise of citizenship looks like when people come together to address problems in the communities where they work and live.

Much of the recent commentary about public life has focused on apathy and symptoms of disengagement. However, as Randall Nielsen notes in the opening essay in this section, there are many reasons to conclude that apathy and disengagement are not the main sources of our civic troubles. What we should focus on, Nielsen says, is the connection between deliberation and complementary public action, and the act of public choice making.

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson point out in their influential book *Democracy and Disagreement*, that the one indispensable feature of democratic
communities where citizens grapple with common problems is the presence of deliberative conversations. These conversations, say Gutmann and Thompson, are a key element of citizenship in action, and they need to occur in many different places in the life of communities.

As illustrated by Suzanne Morse’s account of how the citizens of Owensboro, Kentucky, have come together in recent years to deal with pressing concerns, repeated experience with public deliberation has changed the community in important ways. As a result, Owensboro has developed a new set of civic habits. And it has gained a new sense of confidence about the town’s ability to come to grips with its problems.

What happened in Owensboro underlines what happens when community members come together to address common problems. Still, this kind of community-level problem solving is the exception. What, exactly, needs to happen to encourage people on the path of public engagement? A recent report from The Harwood Institute, excerpted in this section, traces the steps of the “engagement path,” identifying key hurdles people face at each stage, and what is needed to move through these stages.

In the final piece, Melanie Bush provides an account of what took place at a recent symposium at the L.B.J. School of Public Affairs. The symposium focused on how public involvement has changed over the course of the civil rights struggle. Bush notes that today, 40 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, this generation uses a wide array of tools to advance civil rights, relying more on lobbying and legal recourse than on direct citizen action.

This section explores fundamental questions about the role of citizens in getting public life to work as it should. Especially at a time when many Americans are unable to envision an engaged role for citizens, it is important to provide vivid examples, and to understand what citizens do when they come together to deal with common problems. The challenge is both to understand the obstacles to an engaged citizenry and to shed light on the experience of communities that are learning to work together as an engaged and effective public.

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Theme Two

Communities of Actors: Dealing with the Problems Communities Face

Randall Nielsen

Communities are increasingly recognizing the challenge of dealing with issues that, by their nature, require multiple levels of complementary action by a variety of actors. Issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and the education of young people simply cannot be dealt with through institutional means alone. It has become clear that such political issues can be dealt with only through widespread, ongoing, mutually reinforcing action. The actors need to include individuals, families, ad hoc associations (some that may only temporarily form around a particular sort of action on an issue), civic and professional organizations, and government agencies.

The challenge is to find ways to develop and use all these civic resources in ways that are reinforcing. There is more to that challenge than simply increasing civic involvement. In fact, KF research has found that the challenge in public life is often not that people and organizations are inactive or disengaged. More often, it’s the contrary—there are all kinds of activities, but the actions not only fail to complement each other; they are often at odds. Public schools, for example, do not suffer from a lack of “reform” efforts and other sorts of attention. What many communities lack are parental, civic, and school efforts that complement and support each other.

The research is, therefore, not about how to engage people. It is about how to recognize and reinforce the practices and institutions through which people engage their issues. What can increase the capacity of communities to act on the challenges they face?

The role of public deliberation

Some 20 years ago, the Kettering Foundation identified a fundamental challenge to “making democracy work as it should.” It began by recognizing choice making as the essence of politics, and public choice as the essence—and the challenge—of democracy. While elected officials—in their offices and in their assemblies—had developed practices through which issues and the tradeoffs among options could be recognized, citizens—in their homes and in their assemblies—had little access to any such practices. Thus, citizens had few means to make collective choices and engage problems they share with others and, as a consequence, little ability to direct, moni-

Issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and the education of young people simply cannot be dealt with through institutional means alone . . . such political issues can be dealt with only through widespread, ongoing, mutually reinforcing action.

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This diagnosis led to experiments with what the foundation, recalling its entrepreneurial beginnings, called “political invention.” It began with a simple question: What if citizens had access to similar sorts of materials that officeholders are given to identify political challenges and the tensions among the options for action? Would the deliberate recogni-
The practices of public deliberation are thus conceived not as an abstract normative ideal, but as a functional form of human interaction that makes dealing with political issues more effective.

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The foundation has learned a great deal about the nature of deliberative forums. Public deliberation can be an essential part of the development of a shared sense of direction on an issue. What that means in terms of the practical nature of decisions has been difficult to pin down, in part because of variance in the nature of issues. However, we have learned more about how that shared recognition can result in the political will necessary to bring what often seems to be a cacophony of activities into more harmonious concert. It can also facilitate the identification of actions that might otherwise have gone unrecognized. This is a key element of what has come to be termed “public knowledge.” We can thus show that politics is not merely a matter of organizing or allocating existing resources; it can be a generative, creative force.

The practices of public deliberation are thus conceived not as an abstract normative ideal, but as a functional form of human interaction that makes dealing with political issues more effective. Public deliberation is not the end; it is a necessary means of making democracy work as it should.

A critical research challenge

The challenge is to understand how the outcomes of public deliberation on issues such as those typically addressed in National Issues Forums’ issue books can provide a context for the decisions to be made by the different actors necessary for effective engagement of such challenges.

Distinct decisions to act and the corresponding commitments—made by families, individuals, organizations, and institutions—are generally not made in the course of deliberation that occurs in public. For example, an individual from an organization or institution generally could not unilaterally commit that organization to an action. Similarly, an individual would rarely enter into a public forum and commit her family to act.

How, then, can the outcomes of public deliberation affect the ability of the variety of actors in communities to deal effectively with the problems they share? The evidence we have suggests that given the shared sense of direction that can emerge from communitywide deliberation on an issue, citizen groups can meet further to decide what choices for action have been framed for them by the results of the public deliberation. (The choices implied will differ from group to group.) This suggests that the shared sense of direction that can emerge from public deliberation serves as a step in clarifying options for various actors to consider, rather than a “decision” in the usual sense of the term. These groups will generally include organizations with different decision-making protocols. Some may vote, some may have agreed to submit themselves to top-down management. The resulting action is “public,” not because each action has been collectively decided on in the literal sense, but because the decisions to act are made in the context of a shared sense of direction that was “decided” through deliberative public engagement.

There is a great deal we do not understand about how the process works, and about what sorts of institutions and practices might improve it. One set of questions relates to the nature of public choice, where “choice” refers to the development of a shared sense of direction, or a “public judgment,” as Kettering Trustee Emeritus Daniel Yankelovich puts it. We know that a publicly shared sense of direction on an issue is more than the outcome of a single forum or a simple addition of multiple forums. How can the various deliberative spaces that make up a truly public deliberation connect in a way that the outcomes are seen as the legitimate public voice on an issue? What characteristics are necessary for a “shared sense of direction” to be recognized as such?

Another set of questions relates to the practical links between public deliberation, the resulting shared sense of direction, and the corresponding decisions to be made about complementary acting.

• How can the results of public deliberation be taken back to the places where the potential actors make their decisions?
• How does that work, and could choice work in public be structured so that it would work better?
• When actors do come to a decision about the role they will play, how are those commitments to act communicated in public?
• How are the commitments publicly judged?
• How are the resulting actions judged?
• How are the varieties of actors that have been implicated by a shared sense of direction held publicly accountable for what they then do or don’t do?

It’s good that we have a lot of work to do.

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in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions. . . .

When a culture encourages the practice of impugning the motives of one’s opponents instead of assessing the merits of their positions, deliberation withers. When the “imputation of bad motive” dominates an institutional culture, citizens do not reason together so much as they reason against one another. They reflexively attack persons instead of policies, looking for what is behind policies rather than what is in them. In a culture where moral disagreement turns so readily into general distrust, citizens are not disposed to think and act in a reciprocal frame of mind.

Living with disagreement

A reciprocal perspective is important not only to enable citizens to resolve disagreement but also to enable them to learn to live with it. Certainly, citizens should welcome agreement when they can agree that what they can agree on is morally right. But given the intractable sources of disagreement, citizens cannot expect to reach mutually justifiable agreement over the whole range of significant issues in politics. . . . The conception of deliberative democracy . . . puts moral reasoning and moral disagreement back at the center of everyday politics. It reinforces and refines the practices of moral argument that prevail in ordinary political life—the ways in which citizens deal with moral disagreement in middle democracy. Its principles show citizens and their representatives how to live with moral disagreement in a morally constructive way. Deliberative democracy is more idealistic than other conceptions because it demands more than democratic politics normally delivers. It is more realistic because it expects less than moral agreement would promise. While acknowledging that we are destined to disagree, deliberative democracy also affirms that we are capable of deciding our common destiny on mutually acceptable terms.

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How Communities Come Together to Solve Problems

Suzanne W. Morse

The following essay is excerpted from an article, which appeared in the Summer 2004 issue of the National Civic Review. It was adapted from material that appears in the author’s book: Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future (2004).

Americans need to practice politics. In an election year, the focus is all about getting out the vote. Voting is one important practice of citizenship, though certainly not the only one. What happens in between two- and four-year electoral cycles can make all the difference. One of those regular acts of citizenship comes from opportunities to deliberate with others on the critical issues of the day.

Special interests and partisan politics are so loud and often so shrill that the public’s voice is hardly a whisper. However, over the last decade we have seen a push by communities and their citizens to have a more informed say on the issues affecting them most. We know from generations of examples that public deliberation among people in a community helps solve problems—clear and simple. Communities of all sizes have reaped the practical rewards of organizing themselves to talk and act. Deliberation creates a pathway to action.

A survey commissioned by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change in 2003, shows that America is brimming with individuals who are ready and willing to get involved in improving the quality of life in their communities. The survey results depict the public as a largely untapped resource whose collective skills and enthusiasm could profitably be brought to bear on such persistent problems as hunger, illiteracy, and neighborhood safety.

In searching around the country for models of public deliberation and action, I saw a variety of configurations and approaches. Common to communities that are finding success in addressing problems effectively were two critical design elements: (1) a vehicle to engage citizens in real issues in real time, and (2) a process for action.

One such community is Owensboro, Kentucky, which began six years ago bringing people together to talk, first through National Issues Forums and later in study circles. These early experiences led to more formal and widespread adoption of deliberative forums.

In Owensboro, as elsewhere, lack of access to high-quality, affordable health care was a major problem. Recognizing this need, more than 20 organizations decided to sponsor a comprehensive health-needs assessment in 2000 for a 7-county area surrounding and including Owensboro, an Ohio River city of 54,000. The study, conducted by the University of Kentucky (UK), identified two major barriers to a healthier citizenry: limited access to health care and unhealthy lifestyles.

Rx for a healthy community

A number of organizations in Owensboro and Daviess County were already focusing on lifestyle issues raised by the UK report. But no one was focusing on impediments to health care access. This prompted the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro to take the initiative in stimulating public discussion on the access problem. The foundation spurred creation of the “People’s Health Project,” an opportunity for citizens from all parts of the community to identify their chief concerns and priorities and to gauge the kinds of action steps the community would be inclined to support.

The Public Life Foundation prepared public discussion guides for 7 issues related to access to health care and organized 52 forums throughout the city and county in 2001-2002. The foundation also enlisted community groups—churches, neighborhood associations, civic and service clubs, professional and trade associations, and others—to reach out
to potential participants who collectively would constitute a cross-section of the community. More than 1,100 people received personal invitations. These efforts attracted 578 participants to the forums.

Drawing on local data and information, the discussion guides helped frame the health care access challenges identified in the UK study. The organizers worked hard to design discussion booklets that would be compelling to participants and would lead to discussions relevant to the prospects for local action. They took great care as well to craft the booklets in a way that rendered them accurate, balanced, and easy to understand.

In another community, public deliberation might have come to an end with the conclusion of the People’s Health Project forums. But that was not the case in Owensboro. The forums served to heighten recognition by both the general public and community leaders that limited access to health care is a serious problem in Owensboro and Daviess County, according to the organizers. They believe that a number of initiatives undertaken by groups would not have happened as quickly, or might not have occurred at all, had it not been for the People’s Health Project assessment and forums.

For example, on learning that one-fourth of the adults in Daviess County do not have a regular doctor and hence use the local hospital emergency room to obtain their primary care, the hospital added a social worker in the emergency room to help patients connect with a primary care provider. The hospital also funded a full-time physician to work in a free clinic. The hospital health department, and county government are collaborating on crafting a comprehensive health access initiative modeled after the Buncombe County (North Carolina) Project Access program.

The Public Life Foundation of Owensboro has taken other action as well. It has, for example, helped organize, and provided support for the community’s first grassroots health care coalition, Citizens Health Care Advocates (CHCA). This group of interested, engaged citizens emerged from the People’s Health Project forums. The CHCA now has more than 80 members and has attracted more than 300 citizens to its monthly meetings. The early success of CHCA reflects the growth of a constituency for improvement in health care that did not exist previously, or at least had not yet mobilized.

About the same time the project was being organized, another group of community leaders was participating in a 20-month partnership with the Kettering Foundation. In mid-2000, members of this group established Community Conversations, Inc. (CCI) with the aim of identifying and developing an inclusive, deliberative process that would aid the citizens of Owensboro in exploring and discussing important public issues.

Framing local issues

CCI’s first forums were built around NIF issue books. Success with this deliberative model encouraged the organization’s board members to frame and deliberate issues unique to Owensboro. They believed that citizens needed a way to continue talking with each other over a longer period of time than a single two- or three-hour forum affords, and to examine a wide range of choices. Participants also needed time to find ways to act, individually or together, in response to their findings and conclusions.

Clearly, one of the greatest benefits of citizen involvement is that it can help alleviate community problems. But in addition, citizen participation can promote community dialogue and give citizens the confidence that together their efforts can make a difference. The challenge for community organizations lies in knowing how to connect community problems with a public willing to work to solve them. Public dialogue and discussion make this possible.

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Public deliberation among people in a community helps solve problems—clear and simple. Communities of all sizes have reaped the practical rewards of organizing themselves to talk and act. Deliberation creates a pathway to action.
Critical Junctures along the Path of Engagement

Richard Harwood

This article is excerpted and adapted from a report entitled The Engagement Path: The Realities of How People Engage Over Time—and the Possibilities for Reengaging Americans soon to be published by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation.

We live in a time when many Americans have retreated from politics and public life, and many civic-minded organizations and public leaders seek to reengage them. These efforts are taking place through school districts and civic organizations, foundations, and leadership programs, as well as elsewhere. But to what extent are these engagement efforts sensitive to the realities of how citizens engage?

The Engagement Path lays out a framework for addressing the subject of public engagement. Like any framework, it creates a way of thinking about the topic at hand; it is not intended to serve as a rigid system or a foolproof model. Among other things this report identifies key hurdles people face as they move along the engagement path. The Harwood Institute calls these challenges "inflection points."

Inflection points are inherently dramatic. At each inflection point, people reach a critical juncture; their engagement will either move forward, be derailed, or simply get stuck. Too often, when inflection points are reached, people try to go around them, hope they will fade away, or pretend they do not exist. The key to engagement is to identify and grab hold of inflection points—to use them to generate progress. The Harwood Institute has identified a series of key inflection points that can beset engagement.

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1. Frustration Overload

When people engage, their conversations often start with their own frustrations or even with demands and claims. While this is a vital forerunner to the process, things can easily get stuck here. And, when they do, people often disengage, feeling a lack of possibility. People want to know that their conversations are leading somewhere, that they will be productive.

The key to moving through this inflection point is to pose the right probing questions. Such questions open up new space for engaging people, creating a path for them to articulate and discover shared ideas, beliefs, and emotions; such questions set people on a quest to figure things out, thus generating the sense of possibility so necessary in engagement.

2. The Missing Story

Sometimes when people engage on an issue they feel as though they are making progress—but then it "happens. The conversation goes in circles, repeatedly coming back to the same topics and issues. Someone says, often with a touch of disgust or exasperation, "Didn’t we already talk about that?”

The problem is that people do not take the time to define an issue in their own words. Instead, as the conversation progresses, people simply assume that everyone is in agreement—"We all know what we’re talking about.”

But what is missing, and what is critical for moving along the engagement path, is the vital sense of coherence. People need room to figure out what it is they are talking about and to describe it collectively using their own language. When people can authentically capture the essence and complexity of an issue, things begin to make sense to them. People gain ownership.

3. Too Little Tension

Discussions on many public concerns can become mired in conflict. However, conflict comes about, people often shy away from it, sidestep it, or opt out of the conversation. The conversation is then stymied. Tension is absolutely necessary in order for people to move along the engagement path. Tension is rooted in wrestling with competing values, different assumptions, and underlying worldviews. Tension produces creative juices and ideas. It emerges from points of ambivalence—those instances in which people feel truly torn over what they believe, or how they feel, or what to do. At issue is whether people can successfully recognize and turn moments of conflict into points of tension.

We find that by acknowledging tension it is possible to accelerate and deepen people’s engagement. When people engage with tension it produces a sense of possibility—that there is a role for them to play. By engaging tension, people become actors rather than bystanders or spectators in public life.

4. The Imagination Trap

People will sometimes move along the engagement path and then hit a spot that stops them in their tracks; they simply cannot imagine a way to act on the dilemma at hand. At issue is whether people can trigger their imaginations to find an alternative to current conditions and practices—that is, how things can get done, why, and by whom. Moving through this inflection point takes people reimagining what progress might look like and what steps can be taken along the way.
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Disconnected Action

A vital point in engagement is when people simply fail to connect their discussions about actions to the substance of their engagement conversations. As a result, when it is time to decide what actions to take, people reach back for their favorite ideas, the ones they had long before the engagement ever began. They pine for the quick fix and they look for what might sound good to others.

The key to moving through this inflection point is to use the conversation as a filter or lens for generating actions. It takes enormous discipline and vigilance to check how one’s proposed actions fit with earlier conversations. At the point of “action” in engagement, people typically want to move quickly, but the results of people’s conversations need to be placed side by side with proposed actions to check their alignment.

The Time Is Not Ripe

There are times when people in a community may not be ready to move along the engagement path. And yet, there is an attempt to move too quickly. This inflection point is about ripeness: Are people ready to take the next step along the engagement path? Our caution is clear: pushing too hard can result in people retreating from public life.

Getting beyond these obstacles is not easy. They are often embedded in our own assumptions and reflexes about

At each point, people reach a critical juncture; their engagement will either move forward, be derailed, or simply get stuck... The key to engagement is to identify and grab hold of inflection points—
to use them to generate progress.

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From Black and White to Color: The Evolution of the Civil Rights Movement

Melanie Bush

Rainy television news film, taken four decades ago, tells a story of a major moral struggle. The footage is of hundreds of thousands gathering on the national Mall, of police officers training fire hoses on children, of white Americans taunting the few brave African American students willing to walk into segregated schools. When we watch them today, these images remind us of the hateful legacy of racial discrimination in our country, and of the power of people to change public policy through collective action.

Last spring, the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs hosted a symposium to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. The symposium began by honoring the courage of those who had led the civil rights movement.

Participants at the opening ceremony watched black-and-white news footage of people such as Diane Nash, who led the Nashville sit-in movement and later organized freedom rides through the South. Nash, one of those honored at the symposium, talked with the audience about her experiences then, and about her belief that the nation still confronts major civil rights issues.

Civil rights in black and white

The old black-and-white news footage carried multiple messages about the nature of the struggle. It was largely a struggle by black Americans (and their supporters) against an entrenched system of racial segregation and discrimination by whites. The easily recognizable characteristic of skin color simplified the practice of discrimination, and simplified the organization of protesters who considered ending racial discrimination in their self-interest.

But it also conveyed clear moral issues in black and white, placed in sharp relief by the contrast between the nonviolence of the demonstrators and the violence that segregationists used to defend their system. Segregated schools and public facilities, racial slurs, brutal beatings, murders and lynchings were widespread and excessive enough for many Americans to believe that segregation was morally indefensible. In response to this blatant violence, the leaders of the civil rights movement were committed to achieving power and support through nonviolence. Once the photos and video footage of nonviolence met with violence were transmitted into living rooms across America, blacks and whites alike questioned the moral grounds of segregation.

Organizers of the movement harnessed the role of the media brilliantly. The violence and deplorable segregation in the South reached more households than ever before through television, while the eloquent messages of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. educated the white masses who had never really heard an African American speak before. Symposium speaker Dan Rather, who as a young reporter was assigned to the civil rights movement, observed that Martin Luther King, Jr., Wyatt Tee Walker, Andrew Young, and others harnessed the new medium of television in their efforts to draw attention to their movement. Incontrovertible evidence of southern states’ defiance of federal law beamed across the country, and the planet, on the nightly news.

The violent footage made America look shameful in the eyes of the rest of the world. At the height of the Cold War, images of America’s internal racial strife compromised the “moral goodness” of America and raised questions about the reality of democracy in the “free world.” The Vietnam War was escalating, and more and more African Americans were dying overseas. Symposium participant and former national correspondent for Time magazine, Jack White argued: “How was America going to [convince] people in Third World nations, who are mostly ... people of color, that America was a superior and better system than what our competition offered?”

Civil rights in color

By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement that once galvanized the nation seemed to have lost much of its power. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 meant for many blacks and whites that the issue had been resolved. The creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and offices of civil rights...
in every federal department, and court orders to desegregate schools required that civil rights leaders act within existing institutions and conventional politics—rather than in the streets—to effect further change.

The movement took off in new directions. Martin Luther King, Jr. began to confront the subtle forms of racism in the North, speak out against the Vietnam War, and launch a fight for economic equality, not just legal equality. But frustration over the slow pace of change gave rise to more militant groups such as the Black Panthers, and violent riots in several major cities produced a backlash against the hard-won nonviolent efforts of civil rights leaders.

Backlash, and the fact that equal protection under the law for African Americans had been achieved, caused the once-cohesive civil rights coalition to splinter. Cesar Chavez began organizing farmworkers into the Chicano movement. Women began pushing for their own equal rights amendment. Antiwar protesters questioned the morality and racism at home and abroad in the conflict in Vietnam. People with disabilities began to fight for equal access. The moral and racial simplicity of the black-and-white civil rights era was transformed into a much more complex, more richly textured set of claims raised by an increasing number of groups.

Is there still a civil rights movement?

The civil rights movement is still very much alive but it uses a wider array of tools, and its methods do not produce the same great television footage. New and emerging issues have taken up where the former movement left off. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the nation’s oldest and largest civil rights coalition, now counts among its membership more than 200 organizations, large and small, fighting for economic equality, gender equality, sexual equality, environmental equality, ethnic equality, and cultural equality. This diversity highlights the challenges to building a cohesive movement today, symposium participants found.

Where African Americans were easily discriminated against and easily organized by their skin color, today recognizable characteristics have been blurred. A Hispanic woman in Texas could be a recent immigrant or from a family who has lived there for 400 years. A young man could be gay or straight, and of any race, profession, and age. A woman may or not be a feminist. A child could be disabled and you might never know it on the playground.

Increasingly, the politics of identity are replaced with issue politics: pro-choice versus pro-life, the right to bear arms versus gun control, anti-globalization versus free trade. The public is inundated with causes to support, from local community safety issues to the question of whether to go to war or broker peace. Citizens are barraged with information from both sides of every issue. Footage of violence and suffering around the world is available instantaneously, 24 hours a day, through television and the Internet. Americans are more educated and more informed than ever before, but often suffer from issue fatigue, news fatigue, and information fatigue.

The movement relies more on lobbying organizations in Washington, D.C., and legal recourse than direct action. The way people and resources are organized now has changed dramatically, too. While community-based organizations still thrive in local communities, national campaigns increasingly rely on Web-based technology to disseminate information, raise money, and mobilize people into action. The birth of the listserv and Web sites allows busy citizens to simply click on a link to weigh in with their members of Congress in a matter of seconds.

The bulk of mass mobilization is now taking place where issues of survival are much more urgent and individual power much more tenuous. Welfare rights activists, public housing tenant organizations, and immigrant rights organizations, for example, still attempt to use mass numbers of people, rather than conventional politics, to raise their issues in the media and in the halls of government, because their political power and access remain limited. No longer unified by race, those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder remain outside the conventional political process and still take to the streets.

While the dramatic events of the movement have declined as the issue has become more mainstream, it has been replaced with new issues and broader coalitions of organizations to wage its battles. As our nation and world continue to evolve, civil rights issues will continue to emerge. Symposium speaker Tim McFeeley, executive director of the Center for Policy Alternatives, put it succinctly: “The American Revolution is still going on. It’s called the civil rights movement.”

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Our topic in this final section is the gap between professionals and the public. This subject is less often noted but no less important to democratic self-rule than either legislative polarization or engaging citizens in the common work of community-level problem solving. It is a paradox, as Robert Yinger notes in the essay that opens this section, that professional groups—physicians, attorneys, professional educators, among others—have never been more influential. But at the same time, they have never been so distant from the public or so widely mistrusted.

It is increasingly apparent that most public problems cannot be solved by the technocratic expertise of experts who rely on technical or scientific analysis and judgments in their understanding of why problems arise and what should be done about them. Professionals bring expertise to the task of problem solving. But that is quite a different thing from public judgment, which draws on values and an understanding of the context in which problems arise.

How public issues are framed was one of the themes in the discussion that took place in the December meeting of Kettering’s board. As board members noted, the divide between elites and the public is caused, in part, by the legal and technical framings favored by elites, a practice that tends to alienate the public. The estrangement is a result, in part, of the training professionals receive, which leads to a special language and distinctive ways of understanding problems that are often at odds with the public’s understanding. Jean Johnson, who joined the board discussion, notes in remarks we have included here, some of the differences between the way professionals and citizens understand public concerns.

The often-noted symptoms of this widening gap are expressed, among other...
ways, in declining public confidence in the major professions. Less apparent are deep structural trends that have driven a wedge between the public and professionals. Philosopher William Sullivan notes the erosion of an implied contract between professionals and the public that binds them together in a larger “body politic.” Political scientist Theda Skocpol illuminates what she calls the “great civic reorganization of our time”—the shift in recent decades away from broad-based, popularly rooted membership associations toward professionally managed organizations that have little need for members who actively participate in the work of the organization.

These shifts help to explain why many Americans have grown disenchanted not only with government but with professionals. Citizens are increasingly marginalized from the political process. Few truly public spaces remain where diverse groups of Americans can deliberate together about common problems and figure out what should be done about them.

Recognizing the gap between professionals and the public and doing something about it are, of course, two quite different things. Clearly, we need to find new ways to reconnect professionals and the public they are expected to serve. In the essay that opens this section, Robert Yinger asks what has been learned from recent efforts of educators and other professionals who have struggled to reconnect their work to the work of civil society. Maxine Thomas and Kenneth Brown describe what the American Bar Association has done in an ongoing effort to re-create its relationship to the public. Harry Boyte examines what happens when a profession—in this case, family therapy—is recast as public work. And Connie Cahagan examines the efforts of the International Association of Participation Practitioners and its work with government agencies that are struggling to increase public involvement.

In each of these instances, we see promising efforts to bridge the gap between professionals and the public, thoughtful explorations of how professionals can conduct their work in a way that makes it more likely that the public will take responsibility for the work it must do.

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Lessons in Professionalism

Robert Yinger

Teachers and teacher educators have made significant investments in the last decade in promoting a model of professionalism rooted in knowledge-based professional standards for practice and professional control of training, licensure, and accountability. As this strategy has come under attack from those who advocate deregulation and free markets as the best way to ensure teaching quality, educators are beginning to realize that teaching is not the only profession facing new societal pressures.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most professionals are caught in the same dilemma. On the one hand, the work of professionals has never been more dominant and crucial to the functioning of modern society. The professional knowledge and expertise wielded by physicians, lawyers, and educators are at the core of our most powerful private and public institutions. On the other hand, professionals feel increasingly beleaguered as many of the most distinctive features of professionalism—control of specialized knowledge and self-regulation—are being restricted by government policy, bureaucratic oversight, or public access and scrutiny.

In U.S. medicine, these threats have taken the form of managed care and the easily accessible medical information available on Internet sites such as www.webMD.com. In the U.S. legal profession, state and federal legislation dictating sentencing guidelines for judges, restricting lawyer/client confidentiality, and allowing nonlawyers to provide certain legal services have had similar effects.

Recent efforts to resist these changes by powerful professional organizations such as the American Medical Association and the American Bar Association have been less than successful. Philosopher William Sullivan argues that the major weakness of these efforts is their focus on professional expertise alone as the basis for professional control of this work:

Expertise does not provide much leverage for asserting traditional professional privileges in the face of calls for greater efficiency and cost reduction let alone public demands for more personalized attention and care in dealing with complex technologies and more daunting social problems. What is missing from these ways of responding to contemporary challenges is precisely the moral code of professionalism: the contract between professional and society in which [professional and client] are bound together within a larger “body politic.”

As other professions have struggled with changes in modern society, alternative conceptions have converged on reconnecting professional work to the work of civil society. Out of this response some common strategies have been deployed. What can educators learn from other professionals as we jointly struggle with these issues? Here are some lessons from which we might benefit:

- You can’t solve this problem with public relations or marketing campaigns. A first response by professionals when criticized has been to argue: “We are really doing a good job. We just need to communicate and market our work better.” At best, this response merely plays into the consumer and market orientation that defines the service relationship many clients have adopted. At worst, these “campaigns” have been perceived by the public as defensive and self-interested. The opportunity to redefine medical professionalism with the public has only recently resurfaced with the public’s growing dissatisfaction with the corporate business model of health care utilized by managed-care organizations. The American Bar Association has experienced similar frustration with improving the public perceptions of the legal profession by marketing campaigns. They have instead turned to a strategy of directly engaging citizens around specific legal issues that concern the public.

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• Don’t count on the big guys for support. The public journalism movement in the U.S. has sought to explore the role of the journalism profession in reconnecting with citizens in order to make public discourse, public deliberation, and public life more viable. Jay Rosen of New York University, a leader in this movement, has reported that some of the biggest resistance he has met to these ideas has come from the largest and most prestigious American newspapers. Some editors from these newspapers have argued that the public engagement and participation advocated by public journalism is contrary to the “values and methods” of modern journalism that prize a distanced and detached “objective” reporting. In my own work examining the usefulness of increased public participation in the work of teachers and schools, I have encountered similar concerns from teacher union representatives and other professional association leaders who prefer to operate in public relations modes and through special interest politics.

• Experiment with new working relationships. The core work of the professionals who are seriously reevaluating themselves centers on developing new relationships with those who are served by their work. This is happening both at the level of individual clients and whole communities. One of the conceptions that is most radical in relationship to the dominant “scientific management” paradigms applied by most modern professions is that of the covenant relationship. The concept of a physician’s covenant is developed by W.F. May in his book *The Physician’s Covenant: Images of the Healer in Medical Ethics*, and summarized in an M.A. thesis prospectus by L. B. Bateman at Baylor University:

> The covenant model highlights the element of human gift in relationship. . . . [It] obliges the more powerful to accept some responsibility for the more vulnerable and powerless of the two partners. Patients are by definition vulnerable, but today physicians (though knowledgeable in matters medical [are] vulnerable personally, morally, and legally. Therefore, patients have a responsibility to work with their physicians and other health care workers to achieve their own healing.

President David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation advocates exploring new community-level relationships such as public deliberation and “rechartering” that aim at fundamentally redefining public work and the social contracts underlying public institutions. Rosen describes several models that have helped to make journalism more public: creating “citizens’ agendas” and convening “community conversations.”

• Go public. As noted above, most of the strategies that other professions have undertaken to redefine professionalism have engaged the public. All of this work is grounded in conceptions of participatory and deliberative democracy and focuses on professionals working with community members to define community issues and to work in partnership with the public to define and solve problems. The first shock of professionals who begin to embrace public professional strategies is the loss of exclusive control of practice. The second shock is that professionals will likely need to leave the comfort and safety of existing professional organizations to do this work. Experience has indicated that these public strategies will be more successful if undertaken outside of bureaucratic organizations in so-called “boundary-spanning” organizations as community groups and civic associations that are more likely to take on the form of community deliberation and community action.

• We must prepare professional candidates in different ways. All the professions that have undertaken projects to redefine their work have acknowledged the need to educate professionals in a different manner. May and Sullivan have identified specific agendas, particularly the infusion of work in the humanities and in character ethics. These include, among other recommendations: moving beyond purely technical preparation, focusing on core assumptions, goals and values of professional work, emphasizing an understanding of the moral core of professional work, and developing skills for engaging in the public work of professions.

The importance of the professions will only increase in the twenty-first century as national development and globalization increase the value and economic rewards associated with the ability to organize knowledge and expertise. There is a real danger that individualism and consumerism will undermine traditional social and cultural communities leading to a breakdown of the social contract. A renewed professional ethic emphasizing social responsibility and the public good may become an important counterweight to consumer society. The role of educators will become even more crucial. It is they who will shape understandings of the “good society” and they who will prepare young people to enter this world as productive workers and citizens. How we think now about the profession of teaching can fundamentally shape the world of the future.

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When Experts and the Public Talk past Each Other

Jean Johnson

Near the end of The China Syndrome, Jack Lemmon, playing a nuclear engineer who believes the power plant he manages is near meltdown, has the chance to speak on national television. With a microphone in his face, he tries to tell people about the danger, but he can’t break free from the technical jargon. He just can’t make himself understood.

It’s a fictional example, but it suggests an important truth. The gap between experts and the lay public in contemporary America is often vast and sometimes it threatens our future. The public, for its part, often doesn’t grasp important insights professionals have gleaned from wrestling with problems for years. Professionals are sometimes so specialized and cut off from the citizenry that they experience a kind of cultural isolation.

When it comes to the issues of the day, many professionals and experts don’t spend much time talking with typical Americans. Over time, they become insular and tone-deaf about public concerns. Some are even dismissive and disrespectful of the views of those who aren’t certified members of the club.

This cultural isolation can lead them to cling to solutions that are theoretically attractive, but don’t mesh with the values and experiences of those who must live with the results. Some expert-driven solutions are useful of course, but some that fail to incorporate the views of vast segments of the public are simply unrealistic. Others are essentially self-serving, mainly designed to ensure that professional sovereignty is not questioned.

Public Agenda’s research offers many examples of the sometimes astonishing gap between the way experts and typical Americans think about the country’s problems. Our recent work with Kettering on business ethics is one case in point. Concerned about scandals at Enron and in the mutual fund industry—and fearful that the public might call for more government regulation—corporate leaders focus on issues of governance and transparency. They discuss the workings of corporate boards and propose alternative policies on stock options and executive pay. But while their take on the problem may have some usefulness, it entirely misses broader concerns the public mentions when it is asked about the subject.

For typical citizens, the most egregious ethical lapses are not insider trading or fat pay packages. What jars most people is a sense—an anxiety really—that many top companies no longer keep faith with employees, customers, or the communities and nations in which they operate. People complain about companies that summarily lay off employees or slash their benefits, or manipulate customers, or sacrifice the economies of entire communities in order to maximize profits—not to make a profit, but to maximize profits. This more far-reaching indictment is one that few corporate leaders have their eye on.

Public education also offers plentiful examples. One is the movement to inject accountability and corporate-style pay incentives into teaching. Concerned about the quality of teaching, some education experts and reformers call for more teachers with stronger command of the subjects they teach. They also want monetary rewards for teachers whose students do well and bonuses for those willing to teach in areas where there are shortages. Teachers, they reason, are like employees elsewhere—make sure they know their stuff and offer them incentives for meeting goals. They’ll work harder, and soon you’ll see results.

These ideas may or may not have merit, but they seem oddly off-point given the way teachers and parents talk about the same issue. For these groups, good teaching is far more than having the right college major. People want teachers who understand kids and have a knack for dealing with them, who are patient and unflappable, who are creative and energetic, who have a personal interest in the future of each child. Having studied the right subject in college is often the least of it.

Ask teachers what will help them help their students do better, and they have lots of ideas—better school discipline, more involved parents, more student effort, smaller classes, better ideas for motivating kids, more reading at home, less television, and so on. Paradoxically, teachers rarely complain about the current incentive structure. In fact, surveys of new teachers show that most would choose a job in a school with better discipline and parent support over one where they could earn more.

So what do we have here? Experts who promote a valid, but insufficient definition of good teaching and urge reforms that presuppose that teachers will respond in a certain way. Meanwhile, nearly everything we hear from teachers and parents suggests that each group has a very different vision of what good teaching requires and a very different path for getting there.

When experts and the public talk past each other, the country can lose years, perhaps even decades, finding solutions to some of its most pressing problems. Finding a common language for talking about an important issue, and a common vantage point for debating it, does not solve the problem, of course. But it ensures that the discussion is clear and purposeful. At least we would all know what we’re talking about.

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Jean Johnson
Moving Beyond the Disconnect: Professionals and the Public Revisited

Maxine S. Thomas and Kenneth A. Brown

Early Kettering Foundation research revealed a growing estrangement between the public and the professions and institutions that were supposed to serve them—not just professionals in government agencies and departments, but also scholars, doctors, lawyers, and journalists to name a few.

However much the public might respect the skill and expertise of professionals, most citizens, it seemed, felt disconnected from them. When people asked for more information they were buried under a deluge of data. When they asked to be heard, they were targeted by public outreach campaigns whose primary message seemed to be aimed largely at trying to convince them that the professionals and institutions in question had, in fact, been doing an outstanding job.

Professionals tend to isolate the public in other ways. Words are important and the way professionals name and frame problems often excludes the public. As David Mathews explains in his introductory essay to this issue of Connections, “Professionals name problems but, as would be expected, they use the technical terminology of their field. . . . Unfortunately those terms and frameworks are imposed on citizens and they are put off because nothing resonates with their experiences or concerns and nothing suggests what they themselves might do with other citizens.”

Professionals and the public

Over the past few years, more recent foundation research has revealed something new. Through workshops, roundtables, and studies, we have learned that a wide range of professional groups have come to see their lack of connection with the public as a critical problem. For their own work to progress, they have come to see reconnecting with the public as essential. Here are some key examples.

In 2001, the American Bar Association’s (ABA) Standing Committee on Judicial Independence as well as the organization’s Coalition for Justice came to the conclusion that their public relations campaigns were not working. Looking for a new way to engage the public, a small group from the ABA joined with citizens to frame an issue book on the problem. Called And Justice for All: Ensuring Public Trust and Confidence in the Justice System, it gave judges and lawyers some surprising new insights on how the public perceived the legal system, where they saw racial and gender barriers, and why they were concerned about the impact of special interest groups. More importantly, perhaps, was that they began to learn more about how the actions of lawyers, judges, and court personnel make the public feel locked out of their own judicial system. It proved to be a critical insight.

In 2005, the ABA is about to embark on a similar effort in frame the public’s concerns about the jury system. For the Kettering Foundation it provides an invaluable way to learn more about how professionals come to envision a new relationship with the public and how they attempt to create it.

Citizens and the press

Other professionals and other organizations are having similar insights. Some of the more interesting opportunities for research in this area involve the media—newspapers, radio stations, and television networks that are looking for new ways to connect with the public. Sometimes the motivation stems from a deep-seated concern for the community at large. Other times it includes a concern over shrinking market share or relevance. Connecting with the public in a meaningful and lasting way is seen as critical for their long-term survival.

In the District of Columbia, concern over the rapidly growing problem of gang violence in the Latino community has led the Washington Hispanic, a local Spanish-language newspaper serving the D.C. area and Univision, the nationwide Spanish TV network, to organize a series of community forums on the issue. Frustrated by the inability of traditional investigative reporting and feature stories to help the community come to grips with the problem, they partnered with community leaders, churches, schools, law enforcement officials, and gang members themselves in September of 2004, to organize a series of meetings to help local leaders and local citizens come together to begin addressing the problem. Their first meeting drew more than 400 citizens. It has also attracted the attention of people in Latin American embassies in the D.C. area who are looking for ways to carry the conversation back to their own countries where many of the gangs are headquartered.

Learning from the public

This interest in creating a new relationship includes not just media outlets with a special tie to a particular community, but larger national networks, as well. Last September and October, for example, ABC News partnered with the UN Foundation to sponsor a series of forums around the country called “The People Speak.” In eight weeks, roughly 4,000 community forums and discussions were held on the topic of Americans’ role in the world. Faced with growing competition from cable and satellite television, many in the television field have come to see reconnecting with the public as critical—offering not just a service to the public, but a relationship to the public that restores and engages their audience.
With ABC News providing its correspondents and news anchors to host the largest forums, the events revealed a number of unexpected insights. Rather than simply educating the public, the hosts, according to the UN Foundation’s Chief Operating Officer Kathy Bushkin, came to realize that the public is actually far more informed and far more passionate about the issue than they had ever realized. They came to believe that the public actually has better questions and insights than many of the experts they commonly feature in their own programming. They also came to realize that the real issue at stake for the public was far different than the one the professionals had initially imagined.

As the UN Foundation’s Bushkin explained at a recent Kettering Foundation roundtable on Americans’ role in the world at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

I think what Americans are struggling with is not only America’s role in the world, but Americans’ role in their own democracy. People are feeling left out and disenfranchised from the debate and the discussion. I don’t think it’s that people feel they should be the ones to make the determination or lead the discussion. It’s not so much that they feel they need to call the shots or make the final determination. It’s that the issue gets fully aired and discussed, and that they have a place at the table.

That others are reaching these kinds of insights suggests that the foundation’s research has been on the right track with regard to the increasingly troubled relationship between professionals and the public. How professionals and the public try to work together on this new shared awareness of the problem, in turn, provides the foundation with new direction for its research on the relationship between professionals and the public.

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Professions as Public Work

Harry C. Boyte

This article has been excerpted and adapted from the author’s book, Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life, ©2004 University of Pennsylvania Press. It is reprinted here by permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Professional systems have come to structure much of American life, from education to medicine, law to urban design. In dominant approaches today, the professional is the creative, active agent while the people are reduced to clients and customers. In their normal training, professionals learn to see ordinary citizens in a particular fashion—as needy, victimized, and requiring rescue by educated elites.

Nevertheless, it is in the long-range self-interest of many professionals to become more interactive with citizens in order to accomplish the broader public purposes of their craft. Incorporating the concept and practice of public work into professional cultures, using concepts and practices of everyday politics unleashes the democratic potential of knowledge power and thus points toward a different sort of professional practice. Public professional work frees the powers not only of ordinary citizens but of professionals, as well. But changing professional practices and cultures is difficult because the process entails changing identities and practices to make them more public, as well as adding public concepts.

A new look at family therapy

“Psychotherapy in its various manifestations would appear to be the quintessentially private profession,” wrote William Doherty and Jason Carroll in their introduction to a new section of Family Process, a journal of family professions. “People go to therapists to deal with personal problems, and many therapists are drawn to this work because they enjoy intimate psychological dialogue.” Norms and regulations stress privacy and confidentiality. Therapists are expected not to be involved with clients outside the therapy room itself. “It seems a big leap, then, to think of therapists as public citizens engaging in the work of building community and creating social change.”

But encouragement of such work is the point of the new section, entitled “The Citizen Therapist and Family-centered Community Building.” Its mission is to develop “new forms of public practice alongside traditional forms of clinical practice, forms of practice for citizen therapists who are, or may be, involved in their communities while still earning their living as clinicians.” To accomplish this, “we have to confront head-on the historic mistake made by the helping professions in the last century—the disconnecting of the work of personal healing from the work of citizenship and democratic action.”

William Doherty, professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota and past president of the National Council on Family Relations, is one of the nation’s leading theorists and practitioners of family studies and family therapy. Since 1996, he has been engaged in action research projects to develop examples of family practice as democratic public work.

Doherty discovered Amitai Etzioni, Alan Wolfe, and other communitarian thinkers while writing his book, Soul Searching, about the need for therapists to think about and work with the larger moral questions and dilemmas involved in individuals’ personal struggles. First, he and his colleagues created “salons” or “networker forums” in an effort to create a collective way for therapists to think about these issues. “These groups tapped the idealism of therapists who had entered the field in the 1960s. At the organizing meetings, people agonized about wanting to change the world. They would say, ‘Then I settled into private practice. The frustrated idealism was palatable.’

Yet options seemed limited, Doherty said. “I didn’t have the words for it, but I knew something was missing from how we were all thinking about ourselves as citizens and professionals. Communitari-
CONNECTIONS

Public-Building and Public Administration

Connie Gahagan

The Kettering Foundation has long noted that when a name is put to a problem, the language used can either open a pathway for public involvement or limit the discussion to expert and media elites. Naming a problem represents an opportunity for professionals to invite the public to the table. The nature of the problem may indeed be complex, but the naming fairly simple; for example, consider the difference between “acceptable levels of contaminants” and “the air we breathe.” One will eventually reveal the other, but only “the air” places laypersons on an equal footing with experts. It gathers us all into a common concern. From there, we can begin together to build a public for a problem that professionals may have feared was theirs alone to solve.

People need opportunities to come together to work out a “big umbrella” name for a problem because they aren’t really sure what they think until they’ve weighed the impact that a policy choice has on the lives of others. By asking the public what issues are of concern to them, or what they think could be done, public administrators can harness the knowledge that only the public, doing the work of the public, can come to know. Professionals...
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One such practice, for example, is the public hearing. Public administrators who attend Kettering workshops report that such hearings are not, in fact, particularly meaningful, largely because they favor those with an organized voice such as interest groups, while overlooking the voice of the nonaligned or unaffiliated public. As Mike Pompili, a former assistant health commissioner for the Columbus, Ohio, Health Department put it recently, “Public hearings can actually be detrimental because only those impacted strongly negatively or positively are there to testify.” Public hearings thus allow knowledge gaps to be folded into public policy formation. As Pompili says, “it’s easy to get the opinions of people who support or oppose, but you can’t make good public policy that way. You need to encompass all of the public.”

While the specific mission of IAP2 is to “protect the integrity of public participation practices,” professionals in a broad range of fields struggle similarly, for their own purposes, to increase public involvement in decision making. Public school administrators, of course, have a long history of public outreach in support of schools. Today, health officials and environmental and safety agencies are among the many data-driven professions that cannot do their work without an informed, active, and partnering public.

Kettering regularly gathers groups of public administrators who are looking critically at their organizations to consider how they may function more effectively. In a discussion paper prepared for the foundation, Jeffrey Greene of the University of Montana noted that professional and membership organizations have very disparate conceptions of civic or public engagement. Skeptics among them are likely to argue, among other things that:

• “It’s all talk and no action.”
• “It tends to attract the same people all the time.”

Can public administrators overcome these obstacles and conduct their work in such a way as to make it more likely that the public will take responsibility for the work it must do? We have seen that it is possible. Government organizations that have attempted to do their work in this way range from regional planning commissions to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. What these administrators tell us is that allowing space for citizens to arrive at a collective conclusion about what needs to be done, and what role they themselves will play, can take public administrators “off the hot seat.”

Public professionals often seek a new “tool” or “technique” for public engagement, but there is no such thing. There are only relationships with others, and practices that enhance or thwart the strengthening of those relationships. Where the nature of a problem is unclear and the stakes are high, professional expertise should be married to public process, not take precedence over it.

Public participation can be a legitimizing exercise for decisions administrators have already made—or it can build relationships with a public prepared to take on tasks that ensure effective action. Public deliberation of problems can be viewed as a tool for the education or persuasion of a group of citizens—but wise administrators will see it as a dynamic process that benefits both public administrators and the citizens they serve.

Expert knowledge is fact-based and technical. Public knowledge, on the other hand, is rooted in values—in things held dear—and formed in the act of a broad public thinking together.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a $250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.