

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

CONNECTIONS

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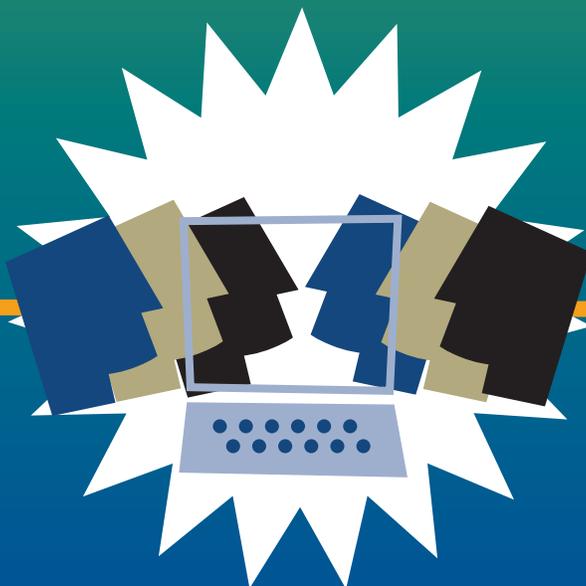
The role of
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Organizations
in today's
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By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach



The Challenges of Civic Life

Editor's Note:

The foundation has a longstanding research interest in understanding some of the barriers to democratic practice. During the past year, we have focused our attention on the kinds of organizations that help promote civic skills and opportunities to address collective problems within communities. We are not alone in noting that a once thriving network of civic organizations has become less “civic” and more “organized,” limiting the opportunities for citizens to feel they can make a difference. The first section of this issue describes some of the challenges this change has had on collective self-rule. Derek Barker provides a brief history and literature describing the reduction in civil society. Martín Carcasson highlights the polarized nature of public discourse and describes a center for public life that is passionately neutral, and thus an honest broker of difficult conversations. Dorothy Battle describes the gap between what citizens might bring to collective problem solving and how organizations often fail to recognize these citizen resources. Scott Peters and others relate the need to connect different ways of communicating and how cooperative extension might weave connections among different perspectives. Finally, Dallas and Marin share a series of multinational perspectives on the need for an independent sector; without it, democracy fails to deliver its promises.



Developing Democracy's HUBS:

Building Local Capacity for Deliberative Practice through Passionate Impartiality

By Martín Carcasson

In the fall of 2006, I created the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD). My experiences as a communication studies scholar in general, and with CPD in particular, have led to two clear conclusions: (1) democracy requires high quality communication to function well and (2) such communication requires significant effort to develop and sustain. In particular, high quality democratic communication does not come naturally and seems to call for what I've termed "passionate impartiality." Passionate impartiality is necessary because the quality of our political communication tends to suffer from a number of ailments

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that only seem to worsen in today's adversarial political culture, and politicians and activists immersed in the culture do not seem interested or capable of improving it. A countertrend that seems promising, however, is deliberative practice fostered by impartial analysts, convenors, and facilitators focused on bringing people together across perspectives, improving our conversations, and, ultimately, increasing the capacity for communities to solve problems collaboratively. Such impartiality is critical for a number of functions, such as decreasing polarization and the misunderstanding it breeds, expanding beyond the usual suspects the audiences involved

What began as an effort to provide students with a substantive curricular experience that went beyond their textbooks has seemingly become a full-fledged attempt to transform the politics of our local community.

in community politics, addressing issues of undue power and inequality, uncovering and helping audiences work through the tough choices and trade-offs inherent to public decision making, and supporting productive interactions between the public, experts, and institutional decision makers. The bottom line is that democracy needs these activities to function well, and our current political system rarely provides them.

I readily acknowledge that the idea of passionate impartiality seems oxymoronic—not too many people are fired up about not having an opinion. The form of impartiality I have in mind here, though, is not a dull, detached neutrality, but one that passionately supports democracy and the values it entails, such as equality, inclusion, and the rights *and* responsibilities of citizenship. At CPD, we are thus impartial but passionate about the work of helping our community communicate better, come together across differences, and solve problems more collaboratively. The ques-

tion thus becomes, how do we develop such a capacity broadly? The answer I would like to call for here advocates for the importance of developing local centers that can serve as hubs of democracy and catalysts for passionate impartiality and democratic governance.

During the three and a half years I've directed CPD, we have continually learned more and more about the need for local capacity for community decision making and problem solving, and sought to situate ourselves to serve that role. What began as an effort to provide students with a substantive curricular experience that went beyond their textbooks has

seemingly become a full-fledged attempt to transform the politics of our local community. As we began to run projects, we realized that our community needed the work much more than we anticipated and that it took more time and capacity than expected. For example, I initially assumed I was primarily teaching students and community members to be moderators, but as we progressed

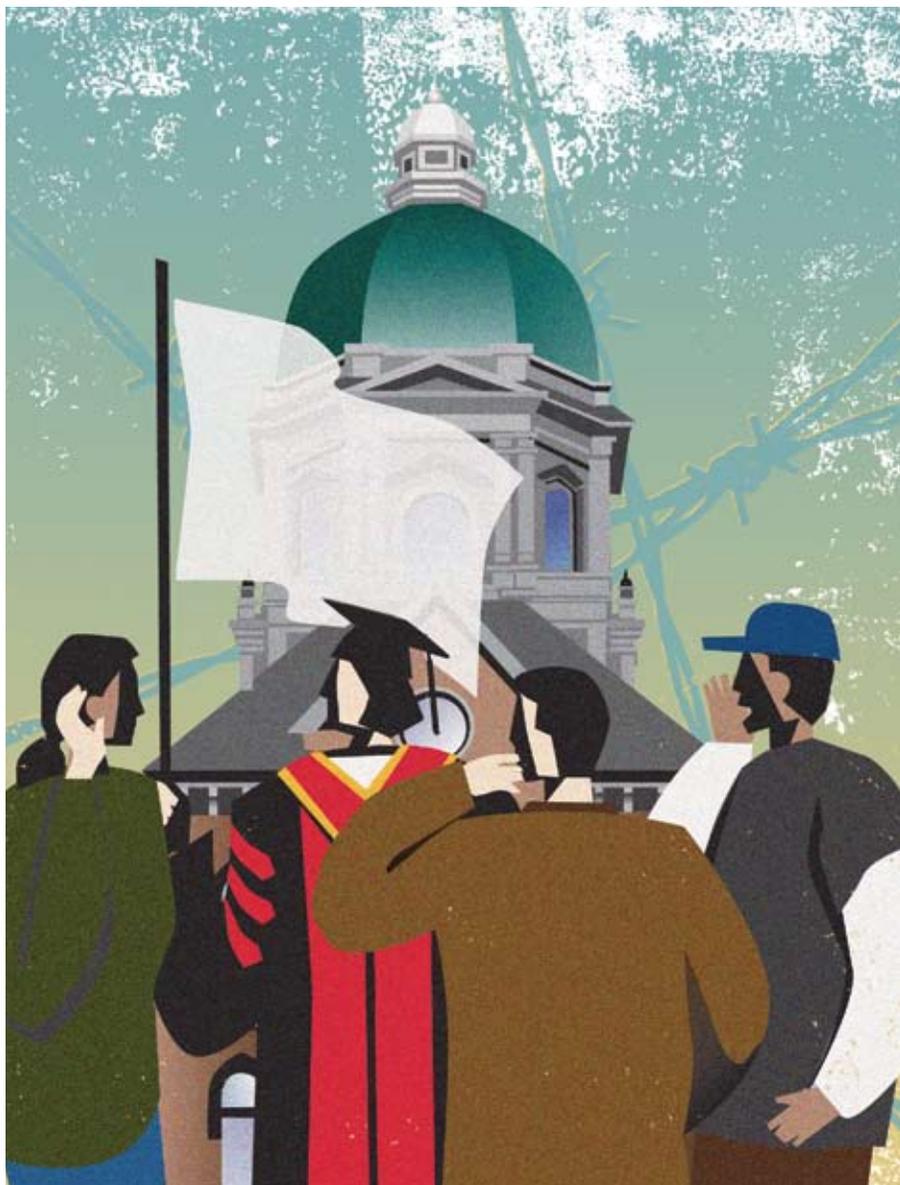
with the work, the tasks before and after the forums—such as researching and framing issues from a deliberative perspective, convening and developing inclusive audiences for the forums, and then analyzing and reporting on the forums to ensure the hard work is utilized—were just as critical, and, unfortunately, just as absent in our communities. Each of these tasks calls for passionate impartiality, in which our communities are often woefully deficient.

It is clear to me now that our work in many ways is attempting to fill a void in our communities that used to be filled by a variety of community organizations, nonprofits, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Those organizations have either professionalized, politicized, or shifted their focus to Washington (as argued by Rich Harwood and Theda Skocpol), or perhaps simply suffered from a general decline in local participation (as argued by Robert Putnam). Our communities still certainly benefit from wonderful

and obviously critically important nonprofits selfishly dedicated to improving their communities and helping people, but they tend to be focused on particular issues and can often only address symptoms of those issues rather than root causes (i.e. addressing hunger rather than poverty). The individuals involved with such nonprofits are also often activists supporting particular perspectives and worldviews, and tend to work among the like-minded rather than across perspectives, and thus are not well situated to serve broader roles of bringing their communities together and supporting notions of democratic governance.

The case for developing and supporting locally situated centers focused on deliberative democracy is thus, I believe, a strong one. National organizations, such as the National Issues Forums Institute, Everyday Democracy, *AmericaSpeaks*, and Public Agenda, have played critical roles in sparking productive conversations about democracy and in developing processes and infrastructure for improved democratic governance. But as we discover more about deliberative practice and the skill sets and resources required to truly impact communities, it becomes more and more clear that, ideally, each community will develop its own impartial deliberative resources, connected in important ways to the national organizations. The skills needed for running one-time events can perhaps be imported or borrowed, but the skills for the capacity building necessary to develop deliberation as a community habit and a way of life need to be homegrown and continuously present. When situated locally, organizations can develop the reputation for excellence and impartiality necessary to meet emerging community needs. They can more easily move beyond the event model to capacity building and serve as advocates for democracy and improved communication in general. They can nurture stronger relationships with local officials and community leaders to better design projects to best fit the situation. They can serve as key laboratories of democracy that utilize and develop a multitude of methods and processes, constructing a deliberative toolkit that can adapt to any situation. Perhaps most important, they can develop a broad and inclusive network of partici-

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pants and strive closer to the elusive ideal of an engaged, representative community of citizens as collaborative problem solvers.

Interestingly, the history of the NIF network of centers for public life has exhibited a trajectory similar to that of CPD. The network initially had a training focus, developing moderators to run public forums and educate citizens on issues and on a different way of talking about politics. As the deliberative democracy movement began to grow, practitioners focused more on moving from talk to action, many of the NIF centers began to expand their own capacity, focus more on local issues, and develop their own material. Now many of the centers serve as full-fledged, locally situated, hubs of

democracy, brimming with passionate impartiality. Another network, newly formed but quickly growing, the University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG), serves a similar role, cultivating passionate impartiality specifically from university campuses.

So how (and where) can we develop more of these centers? A number of possibilities exist, both profit and nonprofit, but speaking from my experience, I'll focus on the potential of developing them at colleges and universities. As already mentioned, passionate impartiality is a rare resource, but even more scarce are passionate, impartial individuals with skills and resources to do the work well. Colleges and universities, however, actually

represent relatively fertile ground for all of the above. Faculty in a variety of disciplines represent worthy candidates for deliberative practitioners. They often serve as "passionate impartial" in their classes, so the role is not all that foreign, and in public institutions supported in part by taxpayer money, such a role should be natural. As a communications professor, my work with CPD seems to fit exactly the role I believe communications professors should play in society—improving the quality of our communication through our teaching, research, and service. Students also represent a great campus resource. A huge part of CPD's success is due to its access to students. They are often passionate about getting involved and making a difference, yet are not so set in their ways and dedicated to particular viewpoints—at least concerning local issues—so they can realistically play the role of impartial practitioners. In fact, some students find themselves drawn to impartiality rather than partisan advocacy, which they perceive as unproductive and dishonest. Passionate impartiality thus provides them with a meaningful alternative to making a difference in their communities. Although doing this work on campus is certainly still difficult and somewhat disconnected from the mainstream research focus of our campuses, it nonetheless serves as the most likely source for embedding local, passionate impartiality.

I'll close with a simple thought experiment. Imagine the impact on our democracy if just one professor at every college and university across the country focused on cultivating passionate impartiality and developed a local program on deliberative democracy. Imagine the impact if 10 professors at each did so. As the deliberative democracy movement continues to grow and, to use Matt Leighninger's phrase, the "next form of democracy" continues to evolve, local centers of deliberative practice can potentially play a key role. I believe that how we can help develop and sustain local capacity should be a particular focus of our work at this point.

Martin Carcasson is an associate professor of Communication Studies at Colorado State University, and the director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation. He can be reached at Martin.Carcasson@ColoState.edu.

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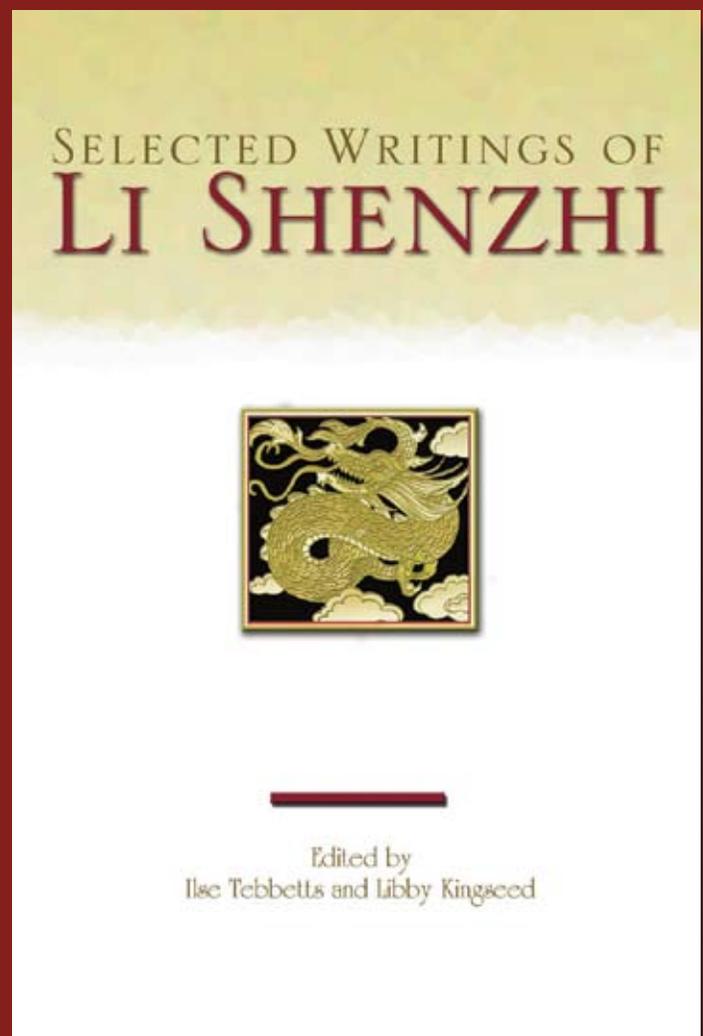
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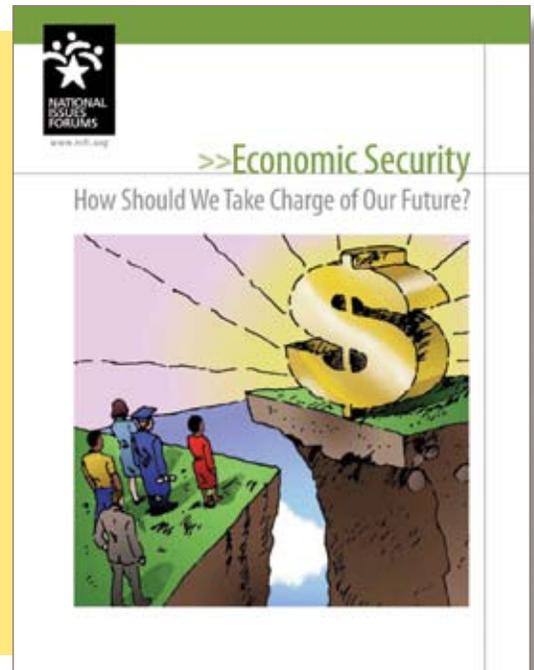
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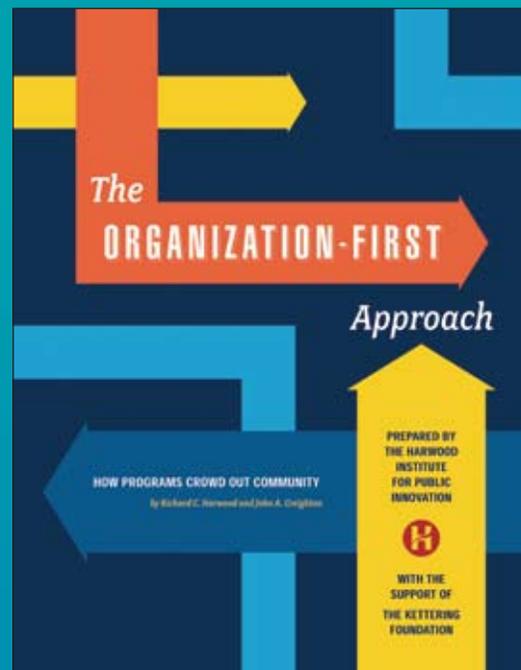
The Organization-First Approach

How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

“The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization’s programs and agenda instead of the community’s needs or aspirations.”

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

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Doing Democracy

A report for the Kettering Foundation

by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.



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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research 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.

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