Institutions Supporting Democratic Communication Among Citizens

Since the earliest years of the republic (or even before if we count the colonial period), democratic practices have been woven into the fabric of our formal and informal structures and institutions. Acknowledging grassroots examples of democratic life is critical, but we haven’t always appreciated the important role of institutions in cultivating opportunities and outlets for democratic life and expression. As we seek to both understand and improve civic life, understanding the roles of institutions in both creating opportunities for robust forms of civic engagement and sustaining those efforts is a critical element of cultivating civic spaces and opportunities.

What follows in this article is an introduction to some of the democratic innovations that have shaped American history and that reside at the intersection of democracy and education, particularly institutionalized efforts to engage publics through discussion in various forms. This brief essay is not exhaustive. Instead, I offer vignettes that can give a flavor for what occurred starting with experiments in colonial America and concluding with the Second World War. I close with what we might learn from those experiments today.

Jefferson and Town Meetings

Thomas Jefferson was one of the great political thinkers who helped to usher in this democratic experiment we know as the United States of America. He offered a simple statement that undergirds the idea that citizens can and should discuss issues of shared concern and that democracy should be “learned and relearned” as Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland wrote in their book, Civic Innovation in America.1 Jefferson stated boldly,

I know of no safe repository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.2

He put faith in people to know best about their lives. But there was a caveat—if people do not understand enough to make decisions, then they ought to have the opportunity to pursue education to address that deficiency. If democracy was to survive let alone thrive, it would require people to become informed and engaged.

Jefferson helped shape a new way of seeing the world and enact a paradigm shift. But this did not come easily. Jefferson struggled with seeing the world differently as he came from a world with monarchs. He was groping for a new world focused on citizens as self-determining actors. Thus, an early draft of the Declaration of Independence points to that shift in thinking from first seeing people as subjects to a divine authority to later as citizens with equal rights and obligations. This reframing was challenging, even for Jefferson. And today we see the limited scope of what equality meant to the founders as some would remain enslaved and many more marginalized.

While Jefferson is a familiar historical figure in the telling of American democracy, there are many other individuals, institutions, and programs that helped to foster the democratic ethos that has been reclaimed and created anew in recent decades, often without realizing these roots. Carolyn Eastman’s study of public speaking and print communication speaks to the great challenges faced in the United States in the decades after Independence, but also the opportunities for citizens to learn with and from one another in new ways.3 The American experiment has been shaped and reshaped by men and women who have sought to see the world differently.
and to marshal in more democratic manifestations of civic life and citizen-centered politics.

In *The Promise of Democracy: A Source Book for use with National Issues Forums*, David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, referred to the town meeting as a story that “begins in 1633, not 1787” because this more citizen-centered form of politics predates formalized models of American democracy. Drawing on the model of congregational autonomy within the Puritan church, in contrast with the hierarchy of the Episcopal or Catholic churches, the New England town meeting emerged as the near equivalent to a religious tradition that privileged local leadership and decision-making. These meetings were fundamentally about how to use common resources, with the Boston Commons serving as a striking example of the tragedy of the commons—in that case about the overgrazing of cows and how citizens could find a way to ensure their individual economic futures collectively. More frequently, however, town meetings served as the preferred way for local governments to convene citizens in order to conduct town business and voting, a tradition that continues to this day. It is significant to recognize the role that discussion groups played in America before the revolution. The first suggestion of a Congress composed of representatives of all the town meetings of the colonies came in 1764, pointing to the deep roots for citizens discussing public problems. As John W. Studebaker, one of the leaders of the forum movement in the 20th century put it, “The Constitution of the United States is the written report of a meeting which was composed of the men trained in the town meeting.”

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While the New England town meeting did not survive as a primary means of governing, it did shape political discourse and, importantly, provided a way to think about and conceptualize education’s role in a democratic society. As Morse A. Cartwright put it, “the New England town meeting [was] a truly democratic educational agency for adults.”

The intersection of adult education and democracy continued throughout the 1800s through efforts such as the Chautauqua Institution and its Chautauqua movement, public lectures, and the open forum movement. To many, the New England town meeting of the 17th century, which “formed the initial adult education venture” in North America, was viewed as an ideal that was often evoked for engaging communities around important social and political issues. Many decades later, the image of citizens gathering together to discuss issues of shared import would lead to multiple approaches with discussion at its center.

Lyceums, Chautauqua, and Informal Education

First established in the village of Millbury, Massachusetts, lyceums were self-education opportunities for men and women—namely farmers and mechanics. Between 1826 and 1845 more than three thousand town lyceums were formed. As J. Michael Sproule has noted, audiences after the 1820s flocked to hear regional and national experts address literary, scientific, and (later) political topics in town and village lyceums—a practice that, beginning in New England, spread westward with the railroad.

In 1874, Bishop John J. Vincent and colleagues drew on the lyceum tradition and established what would become known as the Chautauqua Institution. Expanding a Sunday school association into a robust adult education venture that resulted in the development of commercial and educational forums that reached across the country, the Chautauqua movement emerged as a popular entertainment and informative medium for communities, especially in rural areas. Building on lyceums and the circuit of traveling speakers and lecturers, the Chautauqua movement spurred informed discussion, reaching its crest of popularity in the late 19th and early 20th century as presenters would go on the circuit of small towns in the summer months. The Chautauqua movement lost its prominence, but the essence of its mission continued and inspired other efforts to create informal educational opportunities for citizens to be introduced to important social, cultural, and political issues. Demographic shifts pointed to increasingly growing urban centers as sites for civic institutions to engage citizens in public discussion.
Defining Institutions of the Progressive Era: Social Centers, Settlement Houses, and Open Forums

“The United States,” Richard Hofstadter wrote in *The Age of Reform*, “was born in the country and has moved to the city.”9 This demographic shift at the turn of the 20th century changed how citizens thought about themselves in both public and private ways. Harry C. Boyte and Nancy N. Kari have written in their book *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* that, “As the nation changed from a largely agricultural and rural society to an urban, industrialized nation, self-employed producers became employees of others. Technological change guided by private business and controlled by experts became the driving force. The rural world of small-scale and household production, small community, and self-sufficiency gave way to a world of large, crowded, anonymous cities, and consumer culture. Finally, a rising class of university-trained experts—engineers, technicians, doctors, lawyers, managers, professional journalists, and many others using the language and appeal of science—increasingly dominated the landscape.”10

This period of transition ushered in what scholars have referred to as the “age of the expert.” The rise of technical rationality emerged with modernity in the Western world, but it reached a highpoint in the first decades of the twentieth century as diverse critics—including Frederick Jackson Turner, Thornstein Veblen, John Dewey, and Lewis Mumford—agreed that “scientific disinterestedness with a practical bent, often encoded as the engineer, held the key to the good society,” according to Robert Wiebe.11 There was great hope that science could bring an end to many of the problems plaguing citizens and the world. As Leon Fink wrote, “the Progressive generation of reformers boldly positioned themselves as agents of social change... To these writers, social scientists, and social workers (and for a time the terms were nearly synonymous) the problems of poverty, inequality, racial and ethnic tolerance, women’s rights, even war were all thought solvable, or at least ameliorable, by a combination of applied reason and active citizenship.”12 The origins of the *National Civic Review* trace to this period in which civic leaders saw an importance in understanding how to manage all facets of incorporated life. But this is only part of the story about the progressive movement. While many were turning to universities and other institutions to help solve society’s problems, others sought to create spaces for citizens to engage one another about the issues they collectively faced.

In his study of the period, *Creating a Democratic Public*, Kevin Mattson highlighted how urban government leaders made efforts to establish and support opportunities for people to deliberate with one another about various public issues. These social centers, in places such as Rochester, New York, offered “an actual institution in which citizens could educate themselves for political deliberation and decision-making” rather than just the rhetoric about democracy that was awash during the Progressive Era.13 What was particularly striking in these social centers was that, unlike Chautauqua and other lecture circuits, citizens themselves decided “what was to be debated and who was to do the debating.”14 The embrace of scientific management and democratic ideals made this period an “odd mix of populism and science” that set American society on the course it largely maintains today with its administrative state, according to J.A. Morone.15 The deployment of social engineering and the intent to solve problems juxtaposed a view that democracy, however flawed, needed non-experts. Nevertheless, the idea of detached, technical knowledge became the dominant paradigm, embodying what James C. Scott referred to as a “high-modernist ideology” which dominated the century in dramatic and often detrimental ways.16

In addition to social centers, there were many other settings in which people interacted and engaged with both ideas and people. Institutions such as libraries, YMCAs, and museums offered opportunities for Americans to learn about public issues and one another through programming that introduced new ideas and concepts while making space for group discussion to occur. Additionally, “Settlement houses and community centers sponsored debate clubs and forum series, and granges provided places where farmers could discuss the issues of the day,” noted John Gastil and W. M. Keith.17 Civic life was cultivated and encouraged in diverse environments.

Made most famous by Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago, settlement houses served as critical sites for civic education and opened up opportunities for
immigrant communities and others marginalized by society to have continuing education opportunities beyond school settings. As Nicholas Longo put it, “Addams called for communities to be the center of education.” In an 1892 talk entitled “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements,” Addams outlined the purpose of settlement houses; they were established in poor urban neighborhoods as residences for reformers and social workers (usually of a middle- or upper-class background). Settlements provided diverse social programs including medical treatment and educational lectures as well as playground space for children and space for hosting community events. Settlements were distinctively local institutions which brought reformers into close proximity with the impoverished communities that they sought to aid. Addams argued that settlements served a unique and necessary social function for democracy and were necessary to create connections across class lines. They were sites where democratic learning could occur in everyday interactions and experiences.

While settlement houses were rooted in particular urban communities, the open forum movement built on the model established at Chautauqua by having speakers present to large crowds in more formal settings.

Establishing Urban and Rural Sites for Public Discussion

One of the best known examples of public discussion came about through the work of John W. Studebaker. While superintendent of the Des Moines, Iowa, public school system, Studebaker used public schools as sites for forums where citizens could learn about diverse issues through lectures and discussion with others. The response to these forums was hugely positive: in their first year 13,404 individuals attended, and in the second year attendance rose to 70,000. Studebaker played a central role in raising the prominence of discussion and forums as a means to respond to what he considered to be the greatest enemy of democratic government—civic ignorance. Just as farmers were trying to save the soil from erosion and being swept away by the wind, discussion was to save the “top-soil of our democracy.” What needed to be done was to “plant centers for public discussion in every rural and urban community” to serve as a “wind-break against the gusts of emotionalized propaganda,” he wrote.

In his book The American Way, Studebaker argued that the most important problem facing the United States was “to save the democracy of free learning and to make possible, through it, intelligent choices.
at the happy medium between the old democracy of rugged economic individualism and the new democracy of cooperative effort.” He observed that “our common problems have become so complex that the ordinary citizen begins to despair of his ability to understand them—and more important still, of his ability to retain, and adequately to discharge, responsibility for their solution,” noting that a possible solution was the use of public forums as a means of preserving democratic ideals. He believed that the interest in public discussion expressed through the forum movement was “neither a passing fad nor a temporary excrecence of political or economic unrest.” What’s striking is that Walter Lippmann, in books such as *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public*, saw the increasing complexity of modern society as justification for greater reliance on experts rather than turn to ordinary citizens to discuss and understand these collective challenges.

The interest in public forums continued and 10 federal forum demonstration sites were established in places as diverse as Portland, Oregon, to Monongalia County, West Virginia. Building on the forums in Des Moines, the Federal Forum Project would expand into a national system of forums involving millions of Americans. The project established Cooperative Forum Centers and Forum Counseling Programs in partnership with state universities and departments of education. A 1937 story from *The New York Times* referred to these centers as “beacon lights of democracy” scattered across the country with the first line in the article stating that “The future of democracy is topic number one in the animated discussion going on all over America.”

Alongside the efforts of Studebaker and others in urban settings, rural communities were also experiencing increased opportunities for public discussion about a range of relevant topics to communities thanks to government administrators within the USDA such as M. L. Wilson. While more detail on this particular initiative can be found in an article recently published in the *National Civic Review*, a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), land-grant universities, and the Cooperative Extension Service enabled rural people to take up and consider the implications of a number of policy issues shaping not only the future of agriculture, but society in general.

Viewed by USDA leaders as a critical element of its work with rural citizens, discussion became a central approach for community-based Extension educators as they engaged men, women, and youth in discussions about diverse issues. Discussion was what kept democracy standing and it was essential to reinforce that central and critical stone through democratic masonry. The discussion project encouraged Extension educators to view themselves as facilitators and trainers rather than content experts in things like agriculture or home economics. On the front end of this project a preliminary report was produced highlighting the efforts that had been undertaken in 10 states across the country. Concluding this report was a statement that captured the department’s desire to institutionalize and systematically support citizen discussion groups:

> As a nation we have always had periods in which the people discussed the nation’s affairs at great length and with high interest. We seem to be in another era when the average citizen is talking much about important issues. The aim of the informal methods is to go the cracker box or hot stove sessions at least one better—by making the discussion of lay people more systematic than they usually are, and by laying before them the schools of thought which bear on the questions they are considering.

Resources were created to train people in discussion methods and how to facilitate robust and engaging conversations. Additionally, materials for a range of topics such as questions about farm ownership, taxes, soil conservation, and relationships between urban and rural communities were produced and widely (and freely) distributed to Extension agents across the country. Local communities were also encouraged to create their own issue guides to respond to localized problems and they did. There are numerous examples of the coordinators of this project to adapt and borrow the structure and guidelines presented in the official USDA materials to what was needed to help rural communities engage the tangible and lived issues in their specific localities.
There were a number of reasons both the Studebaker and USDA forums ceased. First, in the case of the rural forums, concerned parties such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, the major agricultural interest group, expressed discontent with the direction the USDA had taken broadly with locally-based planning efforts. Discussion work was wrapped up with those efforts and, subsequently, was a casualty of Washington, D.C. politics. Funding was cut from these programs until entire staffs were laid off. Eventually these action-oriented and citizen-centered efforts folded into a research office that would conduct surveys of rural people rather than engage them in discussion about issues of public concern or through planning processes. Second, for the Studebaker forums, one of the challenges was overcoming what William Keith and Paula Cossart refer to as the “standard educational experience: an expert speaks, audience members ask some questions for clarification, and everyone goes home.” Opportunities to learn about issues and to discuss them were more formalized and less interactive, but they were also not always connected with policy making. To discuss and learn is one thing, but it is quite another to also feel there is a connection to political issues that can be addressed. Third and finally, both urban and rural discussion efforts also dealt with a significant shift that altered the once promising participatory and democratic landscape: the radio and then later, television. While initially a powerful supplement and resource, emergent technologies turned face-to-face interaction into more of a novelty rather than a necessity.

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The Role of Radio for Education and Democratic Life
While democratic discussion typically translated into small groups of people gathering together to talk about an issue of shared concern in school auditoriums or grange halls, radio offered a new medium for engaging increasingly diverse—and dispersed—populations. By the beginning of the 20th century, Progressive Era reformers were concerned that rural America was being left behind with respect to social and technological revolutions. President Theodore Roosevelt established a Commission on Country Life to “look into the ‘deficiencies’ of agriculture and country life and the means by which they might be remedied,” as S. J. Peters and P. A. Morgan have noted. Many would view the recommendations as an attempt to bring rural Americans more in line with their urban counterparts, especially with respect to what reformers saw as the four critical innovations—the telephone, the automobile, radio, and electricity. Rural communities needed to be re-conceptualized for a new world, quickly moving towards mechanization and increasing international markets for their goods. The ways of the world were leaving the small farmer without technology behind. One of the most dramatic ways this was made apparent was through electrification and the presence of radios in homes.

In the early 1920s, radio broadcasting exploded in pervasiveness and popularity. While there were only a handful of transmitting stations in 1922, they were joined within two years by over 500 licensed broadcasting stations. By one account, in the decade after 1922 the diffusion of radio receivers in U.S. households went from a market penetration of 0.2 percent to 55.2 percent before eventually reaching a total of approximately 81.5 percent of all households immediately before World War II.

Before World War I, AM broadcasting stations were experimental at best, with scheduled and continuing programming beginning with station KDKA in Pittsburgh in November, 1920. Largely, the 1920s saw a paradigmatic shift in American radio; as Hugh Richard Slotten put it, the change was from a “largely amateur, nonprofit, and local activity conducted by a diverse range of institutions and individuals to a predominantly professional and commercial pursuit dominated by national networks interested in selling audiences to advertisers.” In 1924, Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, spoke about the “central role of education” in broadcasting and how radio stations at
universities and colleges were “a step towards the realization of the true mission of radio.” Land-grant universities were particularly engaged with radio as a means to communicate weather forecasts and other agriculturally-focused information with farmers. As Josh Shepperd stated, “…educators, largely at land-grant universities, believed that radio held capacities effective for swaying public judgment and promoting pedagogical initiatives that had originated in distance-learning programs and adult education courses” and, significantly, the “character of public airwaves—which owed a great debt to land-grant university physics experimentation between 1900 and 1921—was monolithically delegated to the networks with the Communications Act of 1934.” Just as those interested in broadening democratic discussion and debate were preparing to utilize this new technology, the model was shifted. The purely educational and amateur ideals gave way to commercial interests. And while commercialization did not end such forums, the purpose shifted.

The use of radio in rural communities, similar to their urban counterparts, became a lifeline to the happenings elsewhere in the country and world. As Morse H. Salisbury, chief of the USDA’s Radio Service put it, “Common sense reflection leads one to surmise that the radio, by subjecting the rural mind to the same sort of influences as the city mind and speeding up the tempo of news, entertainment, and information for the farm home, has changed farm thought and attitudes enormously.” By 1930 over half of farms in the United States had automobiles, about a third had telephones, and smaller percentages had electricity and radio. However, as Steve Craig noted, “the coming of the Great Depression altered adoption patterns considerably. Throughout the 1930s the percentage of farm homes with automobiles remained flat, while the number with telephones substantially declined. Yet during the same period, the number of rural families owning radios nearly tripled, and by 1940 more farm homes owned radios than had telephones, automobiles, or electricity.” It is important to note the pervasiveness of radio during this period and in relationship to democratic discussion because this marks a shift with respect to both “means” and “ends.” Discussion would continue, but in an altered way.

In Radio’s Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s, David Goodman highlights the many ways in which radio was used for civic and democratic purposes. Studebaker and Wilson, both champions of face-to-face discussion took to the airwaves to speak about the importance of democratic discussion in their respective contexts. Using the technology as a way for advertising upcoming events, discussion advocates also engaged in conversations on the radio as a model or example for what is possible when people talk with one another. For Studebaker the “essence of democracy” was “freedom of choice” and being aware of multiple perspectives on an issue. The radio was a tremendous asset in making that possible. Others, such as George Denny who was part of Town Hall’s America’s Town Meeting of the Air, made efforts to “get neighbors…to listen to the other side” on issues of great importance but which were not necessarily discussed. As the most well-known and best resourced radio forum, America’s Town Meeting of the Air was broadcast on NBC from 1935 and then, after the separation of NBC’s networks, on ABC from 1943 to 1956. The face-to-face interactions found in the social centers of Rochester, in the school auditoriums of Des Moines, or the grange halls in rural Michigan gave way to individuals or families listening to broadcasts privately in their homes. Long before Robert Putnam would sound his alarm about people bowling alone, shifts from public spaces for civic concerns were taken indoors to the comfort of one’s living room.

Radio forums were blended with substantive content and discussion as well as theatrical flourishes that kept people listening. By the mid-1930s each major radio network had its own national forum program. And while this would continue in the coming years, World War II would shift priorities and some of these democratic experiments would cease to exist. And, much as radio had only decades earlier been the new technology, it was being replaced by not so much a means of communication, but of entertainment: the television. In the following decades political discussion was seen less as an opportunity to be introduced to new ways of things but, instead, in the words of David Goodman, “broadcast political discussion between people of opposing views had become routinized, not something that was going
to change the world.” Keith and Cossart were right: people would listen (or watch) to what was being said on radio or television and then would “go home,” meaning they would simply turn it off. Current topics were discussed, just not with the same intimacy or impact. American life had shifted from public—and civic—spaces in neighborhoods and communities to newly constructed homes in suburbs and beyond.

Recognizing Institutions in Democracy

John Dewey, in *The Public and Its Problems*, wrote that “Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.” The process of coming to understand and situate oneself as part of a larger community with a sense of purpose and identity has long been a cultural and political struggle. Efforts made by Studebaker, Wilson, and others in social centers, the Hull House in Chicago, or the picturesque shores of Lake Chautauqua point to both the possibilities and challenges that confront those with civic-minded approaches to public problems. What’s instructive about Dewey’s perspective, especially in *The Public and Its Problems*, is that the quest for what he called the “Great Community” had to go “hand-in-hand with the revitalization of the local community,” as R. B. Westbrook suggests. That personal interaction with others was critical if the public, broadly understood and defined, was to have any role in public life. Citizens needed to find themselves—they needed to talk with others and embrace their individual and collective voices and agency in civic ways.

For us, what’s important is to recognize the role that institutions and those within them have played in this framing of democracy. This brief overview has pointed to situated institutions and actors who, often in professional capacities, sought to create space for citizens to consider topical matters and to become more informed. Some of these scenarios were more passive as people listened to lectures, sprinkled questions, and went home; but other efforts, such as the one led by the USDA with Extension, point to another model. Alongside county land-use planning efforts, discussion helped men and women consider the complexity of issues and how concerns about soil erosion had more to do with international markets and taxes than at first thought. David Mathews has written about the ecology of democracy, and it is striking to be reminded of the role that civic organizations have played in the cultivation of citizen-centered political life. Ecosystems are reliant on many aspects to ensure vitality.

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As we look back at these democratic experiments, we would be remiss to overlook institutional efforts to support democratic communication among citizens.

Notes

2. Ibid., 273.


14 Ibid., 52.


25 Ibid., 14.


31 Ibid., 9.


37 Goodman, 311.


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