

FIVE STRATEGIES TO REVIVE CIVIC COMMUNICATION

Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communication, is a new policy paper by CIRCLE Director, Peter Levine. It was released on June 10, 2011 in Chicago at a high-level roundtable discussion. The report calls on community and elected leaders to adopt sensible strategies to strengthen civic communication and citizen engagement. The paper was commissioned by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. It is the sixth in a series of white papers aimed at implementing the recommendations of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy.

The strategies posed in the report include reforming existing federal, state and local programs and institutions that could make significant contributions to the information environment and health of local communities through a Civic Information Corps; engaging young people in building the information and communication capacity of their communities; realigning incentives in higher education to turn these institutions into local information hubs; investing in public deliberations; and mapping the civic networks that exist in communities.

USING TECHNOLOGY AND EXISTING INFRASTRUCTURE TO REBUILD THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Information by itself is inert. It begins to have value for a democracy when citizens turn it into knowledge and use it for public purposes. Unless citizens interpret, evaluate, and discuss the vast supply of data—everything from government spending to global temperatures—information cannot lead to civic action, let alone *wise* civic action.

ONE THING IS CLEAR: WE MUST REBUILD OUR PUBLIC SPHERE WITH NEW MATERIALS, AS OUR PREDECESSORS HAVE DONE SEVERAL TIMES IN THE PAST.

To create and use knowledge, individuals must be organized. Formerly, many Americans were recruited to join a civil society of voluntary membership associations, newspapers, and face-to-face meetings that provided them with information, encouraged them to discuss and debate, and taught them skills of analysis, communication, and political or civic action. That traditional civil society is in deep decline.

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Tufts
UNIVERSITY

Jonathan M. Tisch
College of Citizenship
and Public Service

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THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

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Today, different institutions have the resources and motives to perform civic functions. There are also new tools and technologies available that may help, although it remains to be seen whether the new communications media are adequate to the task of civic renewal. One thing is clear: we must rebuild our public sphere with new materials, as our predecessors have done several times in the past.

STRATEGIES FOR REVIVING CIVIC COMMUNICATION

CIRCLE's report, *Civic Engagement and Community Information: Five Strategies to Revive Civic Communications*, provides the following recommendations for reviving civic communication.

Strategy 1: Create a Civic Information Corps using the nation's "service" infrastructure to generate knowledge. Take advantage of the large and growing infrastructure of national and community service programs by requiring all service participants to learn civic communications skills and by creating a new Civic Information Corps—mainly young people who will use digital media to create and disseminate knowledge and information and connect people and associations.

Strategy 2: Engage universities as community information hubs. Take advantage of the nation's vast higher education sector by changing policies and incentives so that colleges and universities create forums for public deliberation and produce information that is relevant, coherent, and accessible to their local communities.

Strategy 3: Invest in face-to-face public deliberation. Take advantage of the growing practice of community-wide deliberative summits to strengthen democracy at the municipal level by offering training, physical spaces, and neutral conveners and by passing local laws that require public officials to pay attention to the results of these summits.

Strategy 4: Generate public "relational" knowledge. Take advantage of new tools for mapping networks and relationships to make transparent the structures of our communities and to allow everyone to have the kind of relational knowledge traditionally monopolized by professional organizers.

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Strategy 5: Civic engagement for public information knowledge. Take advantage of the diverse organizations concerned with civic communications to build an advocacy network that debates and defends public information and knowledge.

The paper concludes with a list of specific recommendations for action by a variety of institutions and by citizens themselves. The following institutions are called upon, with a brief description of the actions they can take to help revive the civic communications sphere and foster a more productive, more democratic culture of civic engagement.

- The Corporation for National and Community Service, with congressional authorization and appropriations, should create a Civic Information Corps that provides training, grants and meetings for service organizations that emphasize the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The Corporation should also include the development of civic communications skills in desired learning outcomes for its programs. Congress should fund the Corporation for National and Community Service to do this work.

CITIZENS SHOULD SEEK OPPORTUNITIES TO CREATE AND SHARE PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AND DISCUSS PUBLIC ISSUES; EXPECT THEIR GOVERNMENTS TO BE OPEN, TRANSPARENT AND COLLABORATIVE; VOLUNTEER TO THE BEST OF THEIR ABILITY; AND CREATE AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE NETWORKS AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.

- Federal agencies that fund research and scholarship (National Institutes of Health, National Sciences Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts) should fund and evaluate scholarship that benefits local communities as well as efforts to aggregate and disseminate such research. Agencies that address community-level problems, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency, should support community-wide public deliberations about those problems through a mix of grants, training and technical assistance.

- State and local governments should provide physical spaces for public deliberations. Local governments should fund and/or promote online knowledge hubs in partnership with other local institutions. They should also convene deliberative forums and support ongoing training for deliberative democracy.

- School systems should make civic education a priority and include within the curriculum media and communications skills and service learning opportunities that involve media.

- Colleges and universities should reward research and engagement that are helpful to their immediate geographical communities and make such research easily accessible to the public. They should make civic learning opportunities available to non-students. Journalism schools and departments in particular should play leading roles in creating and maintaining public information portals and related resources. Programs in library and information sciences should help design, maintain and evaluate public online archives, networks and relationship maps.

- Foundations should support pilot projects to build civic communications infrastructure and skills. Special attention should be given to funding community-based nonprofits that serve marginalized populations, including non-college attending youth and young adults. Foundations can also fund processes such as public deliberations at the local level.

- Citizens should seek opportunities to create and share public knowledge and discuss public issues; expect their governments to be open, transparent and collaborative; volunteer to the best of their ability; and create and share knowledge about the networks and relationships in their communities. ★

