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Conversations that Matter: How a Thriving Public Sphere Makes Better Citizens and Better Neighbors

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Decline. Division. Polarization. These are just a few of the words that frequent news media headlines, the mouths of politicians, and scholarly research when discussing the current political, social, and economic situations facing the United States. From the outward narratives of America's declining economy and infrastructure to the more internal divisions that were exposed during the 2016 presidential election cycle, the visions and reality of decline seem to be everywhere.

This is not new. Recent events certainly highlighted more serious divisions among American citizens and worsening attitudes towards politics and democracy, but this is not an entirely new concept. In fact, going deeper than the cosmetic declines reveals a more disheartening decline of neighborliness and citizenship that affects how people interact, how they communicate, how they participate in community, and how they overcome difference. And this loss is devastating to the American way of life. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* analyzes this phenomena of how American community is collapsing and what the possibilities for the future might be. This concept began with a journal article published by Putnam in 1995. The extent to which his theses garnered attention and sparked ideas for further studies was remarkable, and it was met with as much agreement as it was critiques.

Decreased citizenship comes in many forms, one of which is lower levels of political participation. By and large, compared to its own history, the United States struggles to maintain healthy levels of voting. According to Putnam, it is, "by a substantial margin the most common form of political activity, and it embodies the most fundamental democratic principle of equality," (Putnam 2000, 35). However, he cites rates of declension in voting at

nearly 25%. Voter participation alone does not indicate a society less actively engaged than before; however, "declining electoral participation is merely the most visible symptom of a broader disengagement from community life" (Putnam 2000, 35). Beyond electoral activities, other declines on a local level in political participation are startling. A survey that studied American community involvement between 1973 and 1994 showed that nearly every form of community involvement from signing a petition or attending public hearing to working for a political campaign or running for political office saw decreases. Along with political participation, less civic engagement is also a sign of decreased citizenship. Less involvement with organizations like PTA and other volunteer groups is becoming more and more the norm. Even as memberships stay ahead or remain close to previous decades, there is a lack of actual participation in things like leadership, attendance at meetings, and more according to Putnam. Neighborliness has seen similar challenges. The frequency of neighbors spending time with one another socially declined from 30 evenings per year to 20 among married couples and from 50 to 35 evenings among single people (Putnam 2000). Several other scholars have done further research indicating similar, dim results.

An important discussion moving forward from recognizing these inevitable and growing declines is how to improve community, or more specifically how to make Americans better citizens and better neighbors once again. Of course, there is no one right prescription that restores the neighborhoods and communities of old, but there are community initiatives that seek to bring back a vibrant public sphere that nurtures relationships and welcomes difference. And perhaps reclaiming the public sphere is the key— a return to understanding, practicing, and connecting public life to real, existing places.

What is the Public Sphere and Why is it Important?

A thriving public sphere creates a space where conversation, debate, and learning can take place. One of the early theorists who explored this idea, Jurgen Habermas, detailed a space that "designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction," (Fraser 1990, 57). In this space, there is the expectation of citizens engaging in open ended conversations in which the participants are not talking for themselves, but instead taking on a "second person attitude" causing them to both see their own position and understanding the other sides (Baiocchi 2003). Since the his original writings on the topic, Habermas and others have attempted to refine this idea, and many have critiqued him on the basis that the public sphere he argues for is inherently exclusionary, not equal and fair for all users. With some additions and clarifications to Habermas' original idea, the benefits to such a public space could be innumerable. "Ultimately, democracy resides with citizens who interact with each other and with power-holders of various kinds. Further, interaction is activity and it has its sites and spaces, discursive practices, contextual aspects," (Dahlgren 2006, 274). This is the type of public sphere that this paper seeks to re-create in communities on a local level, so that opportunities for improvements and in neighborliness and citizens can come to fruition.

I argue that revitalizing the public sphere is the key to improving neighborliness and citizenship declines. A thriving public sphere has the capability to develop better neighbors and better citizens is one which creates space for conversation, debate, and decision making on behalf of public interest. Marginalized groups are entitled to a voice in this

sphere. It nurtures relationships and welcomes difference. It should focus on local community because this is where the power will emerge from. Daniel Kemmis makes this distinction: "It would be an insult to these people to assume that they are incapable of reaching some accommodation among themselves about how to inhabit their own place" (Kemmis 1992). Thinking local means thinking about citizens and neighbors as having the power to contribute to it which is the goal, after all.

Creating communities where neighbors and citizens want to engage and participate in activities helps return conversation, trust, and responsibility which can counteract the division and the decline. Plenty of scholars attest to the sort of benefits that come from such a sphere. Jim Diers argues that beyond the visible financial material benefits are the social benefits that come from having a strong sense of community. "No amount of public safety spending can buy the kind of security that comes from neighbors watching out for one another," (Diers 2004). As Danielle Allen argues, interactions, small and large, can draw citizens into networks of mutual responsibility (Allen 2004). And it starts with the kind of conversation that Habermas described, the kind where people do not argue for their own views and perspectives, but can at least engage someone with a differing perspective. This does not just limit the type of dangerous polarization that goes on today in politics, but it is a way of being a better citizen and a more caring neighbor.

How to facilitate a return to the public sphere will vary from community to community and neighborhood to neighborhood, but I would like to draw our attention here to two overarching methods: civic engagement practices and community planning initiatives. This paper examines one example of each method, critically evaluating them on their ability to strengthen neighborliness and increase citizenship.

Civic Engagement Practices:

Civic engagement, broadly defined, is organized voluntary activity focused on problem solving and helping others (Zukin 2006). Unlike direct political engagement whose activities are directed solely at influencing government action, civic activities seek to influence and affect communities, politically, socially, and otherwise. Developing a community with citizens and neighbors that are engaged with one another and their neighborhood is being examined here as a means of revitalizing the public sphere. Living Room Conversations serves as the example of how this can be accomplished.

Living Room Conversations (LRC) is a way of furthering dialogue that is meant to "empower everyday citizens to discuss important issues with friends of different political affiliations and backgrounds," ("Living Room Conversations, Background"). Those who founded the practice did so with the intention of empowering the people who participate to "reweave the fabric of our civil society" and putting them in an environment where respect is demanded ("Living Room Conversations, The Project"). They believed that starting simple and going back to the basics of conversation actually offers a platform for developing solutions for challenges society faces today. The website houses the resources, topics, and guidance to help people plan and integrate this conversation style into their lives. Recognizing that this will be an adjustment for new users, but there are simple steps to take to begin an intentional LRC. The planner is asked to choose a host and participants, of which there should be a good representation of differing perspectives. Then, a date and location are chosen. The location should be comfortable to the parties participating. Sharing the materials ahead of the discussion is recommended so that everyone can download the resources and be prepared. Then, a conversation can take place. LRCs are not

without ground rules, though. To summarize, participants in an LRC are asked to be curious and open, to show respect and suspend judgement, find common ground and appreciate differences, to be authentic and welcoming, to be purposeful and to the point, and to own and guide the conversation.

Many that have participates in LRCs have reflected upon the experience and its successfulness and effectiveness. And this varies. One woman detailed her experience talking about diversity on campus and balancing free speech. She noted that because the style of the conversations is not strictly structured, it allowed for flexibility in how the topics were approached and gave the participants a fair chance to give background to experiences that affect how they view certain topics. The overall mission of LRC is not to elicit a particular outcome or response from people. They want participants to be contributing to public discourse in a productive manner that gives hope to the future of our country and to the communities they belong to; the goals are to be deliberate in how we approach divisive issues and become better, more active listeners. That success model will be more easily achieved than one that is trying to get participants conform to specific ideologies. LRC has set realistic expectations that citizens and neighbors within a community that meet.

LRC and other civic engagement practices offer encouraging alternatives to the divisive narrative that is today's political environment. They put people in conversation with one another and allow a space for topics that people either shy away from or to which they frequently bring preconceptions and attitudes. As far as improving citizenship, a more acute awareness of political issues and topics and being engaged in conversations with that focus is productive. However, one challenge of this method would be to use it as a tool of

improving neighborliness. If completed among people who are not strangers, then conversations may be more fruitful, but getting people to interact with their neighbors that they do not share a strong background with will introduce obstacles like a trust, lack of understanding, and less comfortability overall. However, the cause of facilitating neighborliness is not lost in using the LRC method of civic engagement. Intentional, respectful conversations like this, done formally or otherwise create a small connection in that network of mutual responsibility that Allen discusses, and when that network grows so does responsibilities to those who are a part of it- which, in some cases, could be neighbors.

Community Planning Initiatives

Civic engagement activities are one way of trying to improve the neighborliness and citizenship of a place, bringing it back into the public sphere once again. However, the use of community planning initiatives that change how a community looks or is structured is another method of trying to reach the same goal. Community planning is the process of long term thinking and planning for projects that will further or develop and improve a community physically. The goals of these projects can range from improving sustainability, increasing feelings of safety, economic growth, and other community needs, but they ultimately try to better neighborhoods for the residents and visitors. This method focuses less on how to get people to start these uncomfortable conversations and more on creating an environment in which they can happen naturally. In examining what types of initiatives in the physical planning of a neighborhood would bring residents back into the public sphere, constructing more sidewalks was identified.

Urban planners and those involved in the processes that physically build places have a unique responsibility to, at minimum, consider how a community will utilize the space. And knowing where to put the public walkways is a key component to that. Sidewalks are more than just a connector between places and a method of transportation. They have long been related to the idea of public space. Mayors and city planners in cities all over the globe have been innovators of more mixed use of sidewalks, making them places for selling food and goods, relaxation and leisurely activities, as well as for the normal traffic for transportation (Kim 2012). Sidewalks are also key to public interactions. If done properly, "an ordinary citizen can move through her world with heightened attentiveness to which spaces are safe enough for talking to strangers," (Allen 2004). These structures are shared, bringing people into the public sphere where they can meet strangers, participate in activities, and communicate.

Examples of this method are varied greatly. For instance, the City of York in Pennsylvania has an initiative to transform sidewalks into interactive art. This is not necessarily the "planning" part of community planning, but it does view sidewalks as a method to energize the community. "14 murals are being created on sidewalks near schools, health organizations and other civic hotspots around the city," (Pavoncello 2017). Once completed, the art will be coated so that it can remain durable for the future. Many will include positive messages and themes and generally brighten the atmosphere of the spaces they are placed. Another example is from the cities of Tucker and Northlake near Atlanta who developed a plan to tie together to historically distinct communities "into a more cohesive community with a common identity and a shared sense of place" ("Tucker-Northlake CID plans sidewalk initiative"). The Community Improvement District sees this

as a plan of connectivity that will provide pedestrians a safe alternative to driving. In partnering with another beautification initiative, the leaders of the initiative hope to encourage more walking, enabling the citizens of both cities to interact and become better neighbors.

Perhaps more clearly than the Living Room Conversation model, increased use of sidewalks brings an element of the public sphere directly into the lives of citizens who transport themselves from place to place- at least in part- with the help of sidewalks. However, the intentional engagement piece is missing. A user of a sidewalk may meet someone by happenstance, but the choice to engage in a conversation is just that- a choice. Even so, the placement and use of these in neighborhoods brings people of a community together in a space where an interaction can be the formation of a network, of a relationship, and maybe even responsibility.

Conclusion

America has a lot of work to do to to create the citizens and neighbors that can counteract the decline, division, and polarization that plagues the country. No small change will do it. No one kind of change will do it. But more productive conversations and an effort to create spaces for that to happen is a place to start. Civic engagement and community planning initiatives have the potential to accomplish the goal of returning to the public sphere in a few unique ways. But apart, they only do part of the work. A mixture of the two could build the type of public sphere with spaces that encourage meeting strangers like sidewalks and conversations that address and engage in topics that are important, albeit

historically polarizing. Even small actions can make important improvements in attitude that make more informed citizens and more caring neighbors.

One thing that became increasingly obvious was the blurred distinction between terms and ideas like citizen and neighbor and community planning and civic engagement. These did not demonstrate the clear and distinct differences that were assumed in the beginning. Citizenship, in many ways, carries a legal and official meaning behind it. In order for someone to gain citizenship to a country that is not native to them, there are many legal elements to this, but there is no mistaking the responsibility that comes with being a "citizen" of a place. Studying ways of being civically engaged as a part of a neighborhood showed that there was a deeper meaning behind that word that beared resemblance to neighbor. In some ways, this indicates a call not for citizens and neighbors, but citizen-neighbors— those who have developed the responsibility to care and be active in the lives of other people and the places they live in.

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