

# THE VOID WE MUST FILL

Richard C. Harwood

“ . . .we must make a fundamental shift from simply finding new ways of aggregating information to generating true public knowledge rooted in a fundamentally different notion of what it means ‘to know’ a community. ”

I am writing this essay at a time when our society continues to fragment and re-configure itself, and when people feel more and more disconnected from one another and their leaders. The very groups that once connected us to one another, such as newspapers, broadcast news and robust civic and religious institutions, hold little relevance nowadays. We are drifting away from one another with too few opportunities to pull us together. The void is great and I fear it is expanding.

In most communities across the nation the right conditions and capacity necessary to support widespread change simply do not exist. Go to any community and people will talk about this lack of civic foundation. They will tell you about their community’s fragmented efforts, its negative norms for public discourse, the lack of trust they

have in leaders, and the dearth of catalytic organizations working for the common good, not just for their own good.

Some believe that the Internet can be a panacea, enabling us to re-knit our communities. Many people with noble intentions have launched new and ever more sophisticated social networking sites, such as Facebook and Change.org. I believe these sites will emerge as new seedbeds of democracy, where people can forge new relationships and trust. But the Internet has also proven to be the perfect tool for enabling society's relentless push to create consumers out of citizens, helping build a world where individuals are free agents, able to create their own communities, aggregate their own news, amplify their own voices—and go their own ways.

How can public life and politics work if there is not an expressed intent to see and hear one another, especially those who are different from us? How can we create shared realities and discover ways to act together? Indeed, how will we collectively address the pressing issues of our times?

I believe the Internet may yet be one of our best bets for rebuilding the civic foundation of our communities. It can enable us to build new “community knowledge hubs” that will help re-engage people and allow them to forge pathways into public life. But to seize this opportunity will require that we embed in our sites and spaces an intentional and decidedly public orientation.

First, our efforts must focus on creating “public knowledge.” When people talk about new online community hubs, they often start by reciting exhaustive lists of information they want to gather and post. The result sounds like a description of your junk drawer, a stuffed catchall for everything and representing essentially nothing. In still other areas we see single-issue groups serve up highly specific, expert-driven information on particular issues, and countless advocacy groups whose sole purpose is to advance their own cause and to

rally supporters and donors. Further, while Facebook and other social networks connect us to friends and colleagues, the content usually revolves around the personal, and still encourages us to see and hear from only those we choose.

Replicating or aggregating these ideas, tools, or approaches alone will not produce new and useful knowledge for communities. The problem has never been a shortage of information online. Instead, we must make a fundamental shift from simply finding new ways of aggregating information to generating true public knowledge rooted in a fundamentally different notion of what it means “to know” a community.

Based on over 20 years of research, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation created a framework called the “7 Public Knowledge Keys” to encompass seven factors that, when taken together, help people see a broader and deeper picture of their communities and the people who live there. These knowledge keys include:

- Issues of Concern—the issues, tensions and values people are wrestling with
- Aspirations—the aspirations people hold for their community and future
- Sense of Place—including its history and evolution
- Sources—the sources of knowledge and engagement people trust most
- People—the things people hold valuable to themselves and the community, and the language and norms that shape their lives and interactions
- Civic Places—the places where people get together and engage (offline and online)
- Stereotypes—the stereotypes or preconceived notions one must watch out for

Of course, wikis hold much promise for generating content, even knowledge. But to generate public knowledge is something else, requir-

ing us to actively engage people from across a community, because that is the only way to bring the “7 Public Knowledge Keys” alive. What’s more, such engagement must be an ongoing effort, since communities, issues, and people will forever change. The very process required to create this knowledge breaks us out of the relentless segmentation that drives so much of society. The essence of public knowledge is its currency and credibility.

Second, in many communities, scores of good groups do good work in small niches; but very few groups actually span boundaries. Online hubs must intentionally span these boundaries. We desperately need groups that bring people together across dividing lines, incubate new ideas, and spin them off. We need a mirror held up to our efforts so we can see and hear one another and our shared realities. This boundary spanning function sits at the heart of my notion of community knowledge hubs. Without these boundary spanners, the void in communities will grow and our connections will fray even further.

Some may argue that many online sites already span boundaries with blogrolls, RSS feeds, recommendation filters, rating tools, and so on. Such functions make the web what it is—robust, vibrant, alive, teeming with activity. And yet I believe that community knowledge hubs must serve a different purpose. They must turn from simply aggregating, recommending, and sharing content, and focus on the relationships between and among different facets and sources of public knowledge. By spanning traditional boundaries, people can see and make connections on issues and ideas that are often intentionally kept separate. On an issue like public schools, we find many groups advocating for their own “solution” based on their specific frame of the problem (charter schools, parental involvement, teacher performance and pay), when individuals in their daily lives actually experience the issue in a way that connects and cuts across these artificial boundaries.

We must swiftly move away from hyper-segmentation, which,

while valuable in connecting and accelerating like-mindedness, creates needless and harmful divisions in public life. Bringing disparate pieces of public knowledge together gives people the chance to see and understand the rich diversity within public life and politics. And it is from this understanding that people gain a sense of their own capacity to step forward and engage.

Third, it is important to understand how change occurs in communities. In the 1990s, when I worked with newspapers to help them better connect with their communities it was clear that they saw their role as the destination site for all things community. But people in communities told us they viewed newspapers as only one of many sources for learning about the community and forming their own judgments about key concerns and issues. What newspapers often missed was that people were piecing together their lives over time, and that community awareness and change emanated from a host of factors, of which newspapers were only one component. What they lacked was a sense of humility about their place in the community and how they could best fulfill their role.

It is essential that those creating community knowledge hubs avoid this mistake. At a recent meeting with a community foundation and thought leaders on these issues, I was struck by the extent to which, like newspapers, they believed that change was to begin and end with them. Creating a community knowledge hub, they assumed, meant they had full responsibility for driving out all change associated with it. When they talked about pursuing community knowledge hubs, they often envisioned some single, large civic effort that they would identify, direct, own and manage! Faced with such a daunting prospect, many of the leaders were fearful of undertaking any such effort.

Most change in communities occurs through small pockets of activity that emerge and take root over time. These pockets result from

individuals, small groups, or an organization seeing an opportunity for change. Seldom are such pockets orchestrated through a top-down strategic plan; instead, they happen when people and groups in communities start to engage and interact, and when they create a sense of what I call authentic hope. In this way, community knowledge hubs can play a crucial catalytic role—helping to foster the conditions for people to tap their own potential to join together to forge a common future.

The Internet holds enormous potential to help rebuild the civic foundation of communities. My hope is that people will band together and build these new community knowledge hubs, enabling them to help re-knit their communities. It is a vitally important task. But these community knowledge hubs will only spark the change we need if they have a decidedly public orientation that says that we must be able to see and hear one another. This is the void we must fill.

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### *About the Author*

Richard C. Harwood is founder and president of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, a non-profit catalytic organization dedicated to helping people imagine and act for the public good. For nearly two decades, Harwood has led the charge to redeem hope in our politics and public life, discovering how to create change in the face of negative conditions.