ASK LISTEN EMPOWER

GROUNDING YOUR LIBRARY WORK IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

EDITED BY **Mary Davis Fournier** AND **Sarah Ostman**
FOREWORD BY **Tracie D. Hall**

ALA PUBLIC PROGRAMS OFFICE

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FOREWORD

TRACIE D. HALL

In the early 2000s, fresh out of library school, I was hired to run the Albany Branch of the Hartford (Connecticut) Public Library (HPL), located in a culturally rich but economically disinvested community, predominantly inhabited by Black and brown residents, many of them from the Caribbean. Like many institutions serving under-resourced communities, the library worked earnestly to meet the traditional library and layered informatics needs of its constituency despite a limited materials budget, too few staff (we were adjacent to a middle school and within four blocks of both an elementary and a high school), and a building with an aged façade and interior in immediate need of renovation. Children packed the library after school in numbers too overwhelming to facilitate the kind of after-school homework help and programming they deserved. Adults, having long since ceded the library to the children, underutilized it, resulting in its perennially having among the lowest circulation numbers in the system. Rather than the branch being a true asset to the community, the library's service gaps unintentionally underscored its needs.

It would take the leadership of former Hartford Public Library Chief Louise Blalock (recognized in 2001 as *Library Journal*'s Librarian of the Year) and HPL managers like Anwar Ahmad to shake things up and turn things around. They did this mainly by being willing to take risks. One of those risks was on me. I came onto the job with my newly minted MLIS from the University of Washington's Information School. Though by then I'd worked a few years in program roles at the Seattle Public Library and the New Haven Free Public Library, I

still leaned heavily on my social work background from my early career days as the director of a youth homeless shelter. I'd focused on youth services in my library work and had taken on projects supporting library services for homeless families and children and those living in public housing, youth in foster care, and career development for adults with low literacy. Under Blalock and Ahmad's stewardship, HPL had retired the title "branch librarian" in favor of "community librarian." When he recruited and hired me, Ahmad advised that my monthly report should show that my work was being felt as much in the neighborhood as it was within the branch's four walls.

Inspired by this proactive model of librarianship in which we were expected to anticipate and not just respond to residents' needs, I worked to become a more effective advocate for my community—someone to rally support for their interests and bring attention to their strengths as well as their struggles. I lobbied for resources to improve the appearance and function of the library, created early literacy programs for Head Start and day-care facilities and adult literacy courses, offered multilevel computer classes, and produced cultural programs that reflected the diverse makeup of our residents.

And importantly, I joined and encouraged my staff to join school and community organizations and advisory boards, which helped increase the community's familiarity with the library. Residents saw that the Albany Branch had skin in the game, that we cared—that we were invested in the future of the entire community and its residents, not just what happened in the building.

Slowly but surely things started to change. Circulation went up, program attendance—importantly, by adults—climbed. The look and feel of the branch changed, and we became a point of pride. I remember one of our regular users walking in with a companion and standing in the middle of the floor as they both looked around. When I came over to ask if I could be of assistance, he smiled and answered, "No, Ms. Hall. This is my cousin. I just wanted him to see our library."

Our library—that deeply felt sense of collective ownership is what we had been working for. Sometime after, the *Hartford Courant* would profile the branch's turnaround in an article it titled "A Light Shines on Albany Avenue." A year or so later, when I announced that I was leaving Hartford to lead ALA's Office for Diversity, one of our most devoted library users told me that I had brought a sense of energy to the library that had changed his expectations of what a library could be. It remains one of the greatest compliments I've ever received.

This is the power of libraries. We are more than buildings full of books and computers. We are essential resources in the fight for information equity, yes. But we are also inherently democratic places for conversation, connection, and exchange. We are gateways to all the information in the world, places where

the richest and poorest, the most regarded and the most disregarded among us may access the same resources for the same cost: nothing at all. We offer infinite possibilities on equal footing, and so we offer hope and opportunity.

It is incumbent upon librarians to maintain this equal footing. It's our job to ensure that all users have access to an array of arguments, sometimes competing arguments, so they can make their own decisions about the world and their place in it. Often—especially today, in our increasingly siloed, echo-chambered society—that means libraries must curate and host the conversations themselves.

The voices in this book speak of libraries that are breaking down the walls that separate them from their communities, libraries that are helping to ensure that their communities are seen and heard. The process isn't easy, and it may not come naturally to all of us. Community engagement asks us not only to interact with the people we serve but to understand, empathize with, and build systems of service that respond to their needs and concerns.

The effort to make good on librarianship's greatest goal—to forge a world that invites our communities to learn, grow, and improve—cannot be done behind a reference desk or around a conference table. It requires legwork and embeddedness, partnership and shared power. Libraries have the potential and, I would argue, unique positionality to help our communities realize their highest and most just visions of themselves. That is the work: to empower our communities, to take on their dreams and challenges, to be a partner and modeler in not only setting the table in an information-centered society but also constructing enough chairs to make sure everyone—especially those most likely to be left out—gets a seat. It's a big ask, I know, but libraries can do it. Libraries must do it. And as the pages of this book show, we already are.

INTRODUCTION

MARY DAVIS FOURNIER

If I were permitted to select one term to capture the paradigm of librarianship in these times it would be *community engagement*. The term is ubiquitous these days and often confused with marketing, programming, outreach, and advocacy. Although it may include all those things, community engagement is an active dynamic all its own.

What is community engagement, exactly? Practitioners across the field helped us to arrive at this definition: community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with community members—be they library users, residents, faculty, students, or partner organizations—to address issues for the betterment of the community.

Some in the library field remain dubious about the need for a new understanding of the phrase. Ask a career librarian and that person may reason that the library is, by definition, engaged with its community; for a library to exist, it must provide something that the individuals in its community use and want and need. Some library workers marvel at new job titles like "community engagement librarian" and wonder, "Isn't that what we've been doing all along?"

The answer is a resounding yes. But libraries and library workers are practicing community engagement in new and different ways, with focus on building community, accessing skills that respond to our age's love-hate relationship with technology, isolation, media, collective impact, and communication. Through the practice of community engagement, libraries are doing the work they always have done but are working to fill gaps that may not have

fallen to libraries before, and they are adapting to do it better. One needs to look back no farther than the COVID-19 global pandemic to see community engagement innovation at its finest: librarians reaching out to their patrons through accelerated use of social media and web resources, as well as old-fashioned telephone calls and even library window displays to engage and inform service during a time of mandated isolation. However, the rapid pivot from in-person to online delivery also pointed to the severity of the digital divide and showed how easily people can still be left behind. These challenges have tested libraries' approaches to community engagement and revealed how much work we still need to do to fulfill our profession's commitment to community collaboration, empowerment, and equitable access to information.

As Nancy Kranich explores in our first chapter, U.S. libraries are anchored in the traditions and ideals of civic engagement. So perhaps it should not come as a surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged libraries to amplify these ideals, just as the Great Recession of 2007 thrust many libraries farther to the forefront of community impact. In some of the harder-hit communities, school, public, and college libraries found themselves among the only institutions with the combination of community expertise and culture of responsiveness to help. "The importance of libraries in American life continued to grow in 2008—and accelerated dramatically as the national economy sank and people looked for sources of free, effective help in a time of crisis," notes ALA's 2009 *State of America's Libraries* report. Even as budgets were slashed, libraries acted as community hubs for job seekers and others hit hardest by the collapse.

About this time, from my vantage point in ALA's Public Programs Office, I began to witness library practitioners creating opportunities for dialogue and conversation that went beyond traditional book and film discussions—they led conversations about the importance of community, civility, and compassion; spoke about the complexities of race and equity; and invited the public in for frank discussions of library funding. (Later, we would see heroic responses from libraries like the Ferguson Public Library in Missouri, which served as a community gathering place in the unrest after a police officer shot and killed Michael Brown in 2014.) Libraries began reaching out to me and my ALA colleagues for help navigating these conversations. The Public Programs Office began to explore the impact of dialogue-driven library work with support from organizations like the Fetzer Institute, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities to learn just what libraries would do with the opportunity to create dialogue-to-action programs that responded to community issues.

In response, ALA's community engagement initiative, Libraries Transforming Communities, was born. Since 2014, ALA has offered free training, grant opportunities, and resources to encourage libraries on this journey. We began by collaborating with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation and later

joined with the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation and others. In the process, thousands of libraries around the world—from the United States to India to New Zealand—have learned from and used our materials to better understand their users and nonusers, to lead conversations on hot-button issues, and to move from dialogue to action. And though there have been achievements in the form of political action, retooled programs, approved library tax levies, and increased library leverage, the most significant successes have been countless small events with respectful listening and learning by people across the country. It is these events, in and outside the library, fostered and often led by library workers, that are shifting the field, libraries as institutions, and library practitioners to fully occupy their roles as the "palaces of the people" in this century.

And ALA has not been the only actor in supporting this expansion of the library's role. A convergence of activity and innovation in the realm of needs assessment and program impact in the field led by the Public Library Association (PLA), the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), OCLC, and the Urban Libraries Council, and amplified by the work of the Aspen Institute, the Pew Research Center, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and others, has positioned the field to navigate these seemingly endless waves of societal transition.

In these pages, we will peek into the world of library-led community engagement from a variety of angles, from the theoretical to the pragmatic. Kranich, for decades one of the foremost leaders in library-led community engagement, will take us through the unique foundation of civic engagement laid by U.S. libraries throughout the past centuries. Erica Freudenberger and Susan Hildreth explore how libraries can—and do—use their social capital to empower people to enact agency in their lives and communities and make the change they want to see in the world. Hadiya Evans describes how her Denver Public Library created a unique reading and discussion series in response to the community's turmoil over the killings of African Americans at the hands of police. Cindy Fesemyer shares her delightfully practical approach to partnership building, one of the foundations of community work. And that is only our first few chapters.

This book is intended to examine the context, implications, and applications of library community engagement today. It is meant to be a book for present and future library workers, for lifelong learners within the profession, and, perhaps, for the many collaborators in the work of libraries. We hope to acknowledge and amplify the experiences, lessons learned, pathways to success, and expanding models for library-led community engagement. Although this book is by no means exhaustive, the contributors each exemplify the realized potential for this work and provide valuable insight, perspectives, and wisdom to get you started, whether you are an MLIS student, a mid-career professional, or just starting out in the world of libraries.

1

DEMOCRACY, COMMUNITY, AND LIBRARIES

NANCY KRANICH

At the turn of the twenty-first century, political scientist Robert Putnam reported that Americans were "bowling alone"—leading lives increasingly disconnected from each other and the institutions of civic life. "For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current," Putnam wrote. "Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century."[1]

Putnam observed lower rates of voting, curtailed work with political parties and service organizations, fewer people joining civic groups, and lower attendance at community meetings and political events. A series of forums convened to examine challenges to democracy revealed that participants felt they were bystanders instead of active members of our democracy—consumers rather than citizen proprietors. Others saw themselves as local but not national participants—like citizens of city-states rather than a national democracy. Forum participants also expressed concern about the loss of public space where citizens might meet informally to discuss community problems and political issues in a civil manner. In short, they saw the average citizen as unrepresented, voiceless, and homeless.[2] These sentiments were corroborated by a 2019 Pew Research Center poll that found that 85 percent of Americans are more negative about political discourse in the United States, prompting further withdrawal from the public sphere.[3] Moreover, Americans have lost

confidence in our national institutions, as reflected in another Pew poll that found that only 18 percent of Americans trust the government in Washington to do what's right "just about always" or "most of the time," a drastic decrease from even fifteen years ago.[4]

Even as people lose trust in our national government, they continue to hold high opinions of their state and local governments, feeling local government is more responsive and less partisan. A 2018 Pew poll found that 67 percent of Americans had a "very" or "mostly" favorable view of their local government, compared to just 35 percent with a favorable view of the federal government.[5] Numerous other studies have shown that neighborliness and civic life are not dead but flourishing in some locales—so much so that it brings with it a sense of opportunity, possibility, and even optimism. Many Americans continue to believe that increased public engagement can rejuvenate hope and the public-mindedness that typify this nation at its best. If they are to fulfill their role as citizen proprietors—a role that prompts them to own shared problems as "ours" and not "theirs"—they want a greater sense of community, safer public spaces, and increased trust.[6] At a time when gaps are widening between citizens across the country, they turn to catalytic, boundary-spanning institutions in their local communities to provide a safe (and brave) place for them to exercise their democratic practices together.

One of these institutions—the library—has a long history of this civic work or *community engagement*—a term that refers to the multiple ways in which we learn about, collaborate with, and support community members.[7] Typical community engagement activities include facilitating community conversations, assessing community aspirations and concerns, involving community members in decision-making, partnering to advance shared goals, promoting civic literacy, convening forums for dialogue and deliberation, and engaging with diverse historic and cultural experiences of constituents. Whereas outreach focuses on extending an organization's reach, engagement begins with building relationships with the community. This chapter will review the history of these concepts and the ways in which libraries have embraced them and provides context for subsequent chapters that describe how such community engagement activities are shaping the future of libraries.

THE REVIVAL OF AMERICAN COMMUNITY: THE CASE FOR A STRONG DEMOCRACY

Robert Putnam's call for the revival of American community popularized a movement that had begun in the late twentieth century. Among the early voices was that of political scientist Benjamin Barber, who prescribed "strong

democracy" as a remedy to incivility and apathy, where "active citizens govern themselves in the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic."[8] Barber claimed that "citizens are neighbors bound together neither by blood nor by contract but by their common concerns and common participation in the search for common solutions to common conflicts."[9]

Barber's pioneering work on the revitalization of citizen participation in community affairs was followed by other political scientists who applied practical techniques to this active citizenship model, engaging lay citizens in deliberation about issues of common concern, and developed theories of active citizenship as well, using new models for reinvigorating communities through the creation of free spaces or commons where citizens participate in shaping the public life in their communities.[10] A tidal wave of other civil society theorists has contributed to this scholarship over the past three decades—scholars who are strong proponents of citizen participation in public life, along with a cadre of community builders who have created tools and frameworks for democratic practices that citizens can apply toward renewing their communities.[11]

Democracy and Citizenship

Democracy as we know it originated in ancient Greece twenty-five hundred years ago. The term is derived from the Greek words *demos,* or the people/citizenry, and *-cracy* (from *kratos*), or the power to rule. In Greece and Rome, governance incorporated popular participation by land-owning male citizens, empowering them to shape their future. Democracy's origins as a political system expected citizens to work together to make life better for everyone. In modern democracies, state sovereignty is located in the people, as citizen proprietors, who are responsible for active participation in public affairs.

Our founding fathers did not mention democracy when they declared independence from Britain, but they did start the new Constitution with "We the People," elevating the people's allegiance to each other rather than as subjects to a king. Although restricted initially to land-owning white men, but later expanded to white women and African Americans, the right to participate in federal and local affairs was extended over the centuries to include all who belong to a community. As "citizens" of our democracy, all of us should aspire to work together to solve common problems and produce benefits for everyone.[12]

No single definition of democracy as practiced in America has dominated political discourse. The founders created at the federal level a representative democracy that would delegate decisions to elected legislators; powers not enumerated in the Constitution were left to states and localities. In the nineteenth century, President Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address,

speaking of an ideal government that is *of, by, and for the people*. In the following century, American leaders saw democracy through different lenses. President Lyndon Johnson considered democracy to be voting, whereas President Bill Clinton saw it as governing. In contrast, President Franklin Roosevelt embraced participation as central to our democratic processes.

In the twenty-first century, attempts to reclaim a participatory democracy have focused on strategies to bridge some of the divide separating the public from our representative government as a collaborative venture of institutions working *with* citizens, not just for them. In a participatory democracy, authority does not descend from the top down from competing leadership but rises from the bottom up from an undivided base. This grassroots form of democracy begins at a smaller scale locally and offers citizens opportunities to become full-fledged players by examining problems and finding solutions together. In communities, citizens do the "public work" of discussing concerns openly, finding common ground, and making decisions through small, informal groups like clubs, organizations, and other associations. For success, community members must develop social capital—the trusted bonds and bridges that connect those who are both like and unlike them. They also need civic spaces where they feel safe to make mutually beneficial choices, recognize possibilities, and cocreate solutions. Catalytic, boundary-spanning institutions can assist them by bringing them together to learn, build collective knowledge, develop partnerships, and share leadership.

Toward an Informed and Engaged Citizenry

America's founding fathers proclaimed loudly and often the necessity of an informed citizenry in order to exercise their civic responsibilities wisely. This creed of the informed citizenry became a central theme in American life, a conviction that has helped articulate the relationship between citizens and self-governance since the early days of the republic. Also key to the emerging American democracy were the associations and activities that create the glue which strengthens civil society and that ensure a structure and climate for active citizen participation in our democratic system, notably described in the early nineteenth century by French diplomat and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville.[13] Later in that century, the populace founded libraries, colleges, schools, newspapers, and the post office to inform a growing citizenry. For generations, belief in the role of an informed citizenry has served as a guidepost for these institutions, validating their essential role in promoting political, economic, and social prosperity and in building the capacity for current and future citizens to participate effectively in the processes of democracy.

The Jeffersonian conviction of an informed citizenry, embraced throughout U.S. history, has evolved over time as more and more information has become readily available to all. An informed public constitutes the very foundation of a democracy; after all, democracies are about discourse—discourse among the people. If a free society is to survive, it must ensure the preservation of its records and provide free and open access to this information to all its citizens. Yet historian Richard Brown contends that the broadening of rights to participate in American civic life has changed the definition and meaning of an informed citizenry, resulting in the gradual dissociation of knowledge and citizenship today.[14] Instead, the contemporary notion of an informed citizenry implies simply an initial stage of participatory democracy—a one-way relationship in which government compiles and delivers information to citizens.[15] Sociologist Michael Schudson considers this form of engagement "monitorial" citizenship, whereby citizens only pay attention when things go wrong, and political scientist Benjamin Barber refers to it as "thin democracy," dominated by representative institutions with relatively passive citizens.[16]

A more interactive stage of participation—the consultation stage—constitutes an interactive, two-way relationship between informed citizens and their government, whereby voices are heard through public opinion surveys and commentary related to proposed legislation and regulations. Citizens have an opportunity to express their preferences—a stage that Barber refers to as "plebiscitary democracy."[17]

A third, more active stage of participation occurs when citizens engage directly in the decision- and policy-making process, proposing options and shaping outcomes—a stage that Barber calls "strong democracy," whereby citizens "regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society."[18] As a remedy to incivility and apathy, this stage, according to Barber, enables active citizens to "govern themselves in 'the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic.'"[19]

Barber's strong democratic practice ideals are reflected in the work of several information theorists who recognize that self-governance requires an engaged as well as informed citizenry. To this end, communications researcher Leah Lievrouw describes an information environment that must shift from "informing" to "involving," contending that an involved—not just informed—citizenry is more likely to participate in democratic political processes. "How can it be that American citizens by and large feel alienated from the very political system they profess to believe in, at the same time that they have an ostensibly unprecedented array of media and information sources at their disposal?" she asks.[20] This approach is reflected by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, which stated, "The time has come for new thinking and

aggressive action to ensure the information opportunities of America's people, the information health of its communities, and the information vitality of our democracy."[21] Among the commission's recommendations are strengthening the *capacity* of individuals to engage with information and promoting individual *engagement* with information and the public life of the community.

In short, the challenge for democratic participation today is no longer the lack of information but an absence of engagement. Active citizens must not only become well informed about their government and the issues of the day but also "participate fully in our system of self-government, to stand up and be heard. Paramount in this vision are the critical democratic values of openness, inclusion, participation, empowerment, and the common pursuit of truth and the public interest."[22] We need an informed *and* engaged populace if our democracy is to thrive in the twenty-first century.

Participatory Democracy

"Democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community," American philosopher and education reformer John Dewey wrote in 1917.[23] To Dewey, face-to-face interactions in which people work together cooperatively to solve common problems build the foundation of participatory democracy—to work *with* the community, not *on* it or *in* it. Citizens working together in communities find ways to act to solve problems. When these problems are "tame," experts can solve them with measurable desired outcomes, as when doctors set a broken arm. But many of the problems we face are considered "wicked"—shared problems such as poverty, crime, and homelessness that defy simple solutions.

The Charles F. Kettering Foundation has identified six core democratic practices that reveal the "ways citizens can work together—even when they disagree—to solve shared problems":[24]

1. Identifying or naming the issues facing citizens in terms of what is meaningful and valuable to them.
2. Framing issues so that a range of actions are considered and the trade-offs evident.
3. Making decisions deliberatively and weighing the trade-offs among choices to move toward sound public judgment.
4. Identifying and committing civic resources that are available.
5. Organizing civic actions to address a public problem in a complementary and coordinated fashion.
6. Encouraging constant collective learning to maintain momentum.

Another organization that has described democratic practices, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), uses a "spectrum" to differentiate the resources citizens need to participate in ordinary public discourse (figure 1.1). The IAP2 spectrum ranges from informing at a lower level of engagement to involving, collaborating with, and empowering future citizens on the issues of the day at higher levels of engagement.[25]

FIGURE 1.1 | **IAP2 SPECTRUM OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.

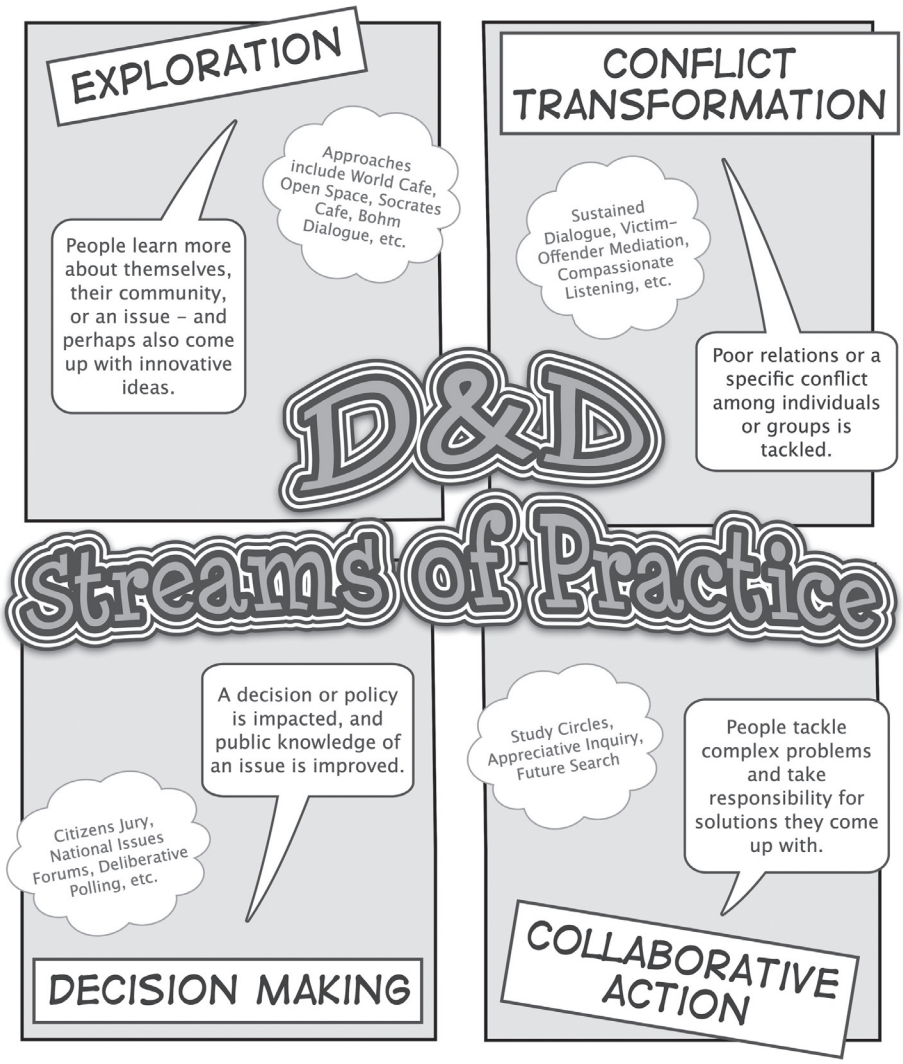
INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Likewise, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) offers a *Streams of Engagement* framework with four different approaches to citizen participation, breaking down participatory processes best suited for specific dialogic circumstances (figure 1.2):

- **Exploration:** community conversations about aspirations and struggles;
- **Conflict Transformation:** poor relations or specific conflict tackled;
- **Decision Making:** decision or policy impacted and public knowledge improved; or

FIGURE 1.2 | **NCDD ENGAGEMENT STREAMS**



This is a snapshot of the Engagement Streams Framework developed by Sandy Heierbacher and members of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) in 2005. The framework helps people decide which methods of dialogue and deliberation best fit their goals and resources.

For the full framework, go to www.ncdd.org/streams.

- **Collaborative Action:** complex problems tackled with responsibility for action taken[26]

NCDD also offers a useful typology for considering goals of participatory dialogue, each level moving toward improving civic and community capacity to address issues and take collective action:

1. **First-order goals:** issue learning, improved democratic attitudes and skills
2. **Second-order goals:** individual and community action, improved institutional decision-making, and managed conflicts
3. **Third-order goals:** improved community problem solving, and increased civic capacity[27]

LIBRARIES AND THE CIVIC RENEWAL MOVEMENT

Librarians have long recognized the importance of engaging communities in democratic discourse. Since their founding, libraries have regularly served as "important public spaces for the kinds of meetings and informal gatherings that knit communities together."[28] In the late nineteenth century, public libraries continued "the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people's university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life."[29]

By the 1920s, the idea of libraries as informal education centers that advanced democratic ideals took hold.[30] After World War II, a nationwide discussion program was launched to rejuvenate the democratic spirit in the country, a program that provided ideal opportunities for libraries to assume community leadership roles by spreading "reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action."[31] In 1952 the American Heritage Project fostered discussions in libraries that considered traditional American values and "demonstrated its belief that loyalty to democracy and commitment to free speech were not only compatible but identical."[32] In that same year, the American Library Association (ALA) joined a national effort to increase voter turnout by distributing election information and organizing activities that positioned public libraries to offer "an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it."[33]

Not until the late 1980s did libraries around the country resume the convening of local citizens to deliberate about issues of the day. A 1992 *National Issues Forums in Libraries Newsletter* showcased some of these dialogue initiatives

LIBRARIES STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY

Libraries are adopting innovative approaches to engaging their communities and strengthening democracy, reflecting the IAP2 spectrum that ranges from informing at a lower level of engagement to involving, collaborating with, and empowering future citizens on the issues of the day at higher levels of engagement.

Expanding on their more traditional roles, libraries inform citizens and help them sign up for government services like the Affordable Care Act through model e-Government services, such as those offered at Florida's Pasco County library system. Other libraries, such as Rutgers University Libraries–Camden and the University of Texas at El Paso Library, produce civic engagement LibGuides as starting points for students enrolled in service-learning classes. A University of Kansas community engagement librarian has recorded a Campus Compact webinar showcasing creative ways to increase access to engaged campus scholarship and to build bridges across campus. And at American University, librarians partnered with their student government, development, and alumni relations office and the DC League of Women Voters to develop a toolkit to help more than one thousand students apply for absentee ballots.

Farther along the IAP2 spectrum, librarians are helping students become civic actors by incorporating civic literacy skills into their instructional strategies, such as those at William Paterson University in New Jersey who partner with the campus activities office and student leadership to sponsor an academic learning component for service-learning. At the Urban School in San Francisco, librarian Sarah Jane Levin collaborates with teachers to help students develop critical civic "skills that help our citizen students recognize how to enhance service work and become agents of change in a democratic society."[1]

To facilitate engagement, many libraries have refurbished or built exciting new spaces for their libraries—spaces that also serve as public gathering spots that anchor neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, and campuses. A good example is the public library in Salt Lake City, which built a dramatic new facility designed by Moshe Safdie "to create common ground"—an award-winning facility considered the community gathering place where "citizens practice democracy."[2] Community rooms in many public and academic libraries now serve as the locus for facilitated community conversations that strengthen those libraries' civic missions.

NOTES

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2. John Berry, "Where Democracy Happens," *Library Journal* 131, no. 11 (June 15, 2006): 32.

that were hosted from New York to California and even featured radio-library forums, which were held in Ohio and Minnesota. Later that decade, echoing broader calls for civic renewal, a cadre of library leaders began advocating a broader new "civic librarianship," in which libraries strengthen democracy by building and renewing communities and engaging citizens in public work.[34]

Moving Libraries from Informing to Engaging Citizens

Today's public, academic, and school libraries are moving from collection-focused to engagement-centered models of service to increase their impact and significance. Leaders across the profession now talk about the need to engage their communities by building partnerships that deliver impact and results, realign their civic missions, and embed their services in their communities. ALA and its Public Library Association, the Urban Libraries Council, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, the International City/County Management Association, and the Aspen Institute have all launched collaborative initiatives to advance community engagement through libraries.

Most notably, ALA's Libraries Transforming Communities initiative, in collaboration with such organizations as the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, has trained several thousand librarians in these approaches. "My interest in libraries is that they're essential to the civic life of communities, and . . . libraries still have a great reservoir of trust in communities that a lot of community and public institutions no longer have," Richard Harwood, founder of the Harwood Institute, said shortly after the launch of Libraries Transforming Communities in 2015. "I think they're essential right now to helping us rebuild our sense of connection to one another, and the ability of communities to come together and solve problems together."[35]

Transforming Libraries into Agents of Engagement

Democracy needs libraries to provide opportunities and safe spaces for citizens to engage. Unquestionably, librarians are ready and eager to adopt new practices to align their work with the aspirations and concerns of their communities. Yet, even though libraries are among the most trusted of public institutions, they need to "look carefully at opportunities to strengthen their role in addressing serious problems in their own communities."[36]

The realm of listening to communities and convening public conversations necessitates the adoption of new competencies as well as a shift from a mission that informs citizens to one that also *engages* them.[37] As the nation's great experiment in democracy comes under increasing threat, libraries that transform into agents of a *strong* democracy will bring communities together and empower citizens to participate actively in civic life.

NOTES

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2. National Issues Forums Institute, *Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public Role* (Dayton, OH: National Issues Forums Institute, 2006); and *A House Divided: What Would We Have to Give Up to Get the Political System We Want?* (Dayton, OH: National Issues Forums Institute, 2019), https://www.nifi.org/sites/default/files/product-downloads/A%20House%20Divided%20Digital%20Version.pdf.
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GA: CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement, 1997), 9. The Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement uses this definition: "people working collaboratively, through inspired action and learning, to create and realize bold visions for their common future." Tamarack Institute, *Our Growing Understanding of Community Engagement* (Waterloo, Ontario: Tamarack Institute, n.d.), https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/316071/Resources/Article/Our_Growing_Understanding_of_Community_Engagement.pdf.

8. Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 148.
9. Barber, *Strong Democracy,* 219.
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