Creating Spaces for Change:

Working toward a "story of now" in civic engagement

W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

"The W.K. Kellogg Foundation supports children, families and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society."

W.K. Kellogg Foundation Mission Statement, adopted December 2007

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation's revised mission statement reflects the foundation's efforts to more sharply focus its work in alignment with W.K. Kellogg's original intent. Part of that effort consists of a new strategic framework, which integrates programming in our areas of expertise (Education and Learning; Food, Health and Well-Being; and Family Economic Security), and which supports and unifies that programming with an institutional commitment to Civic Engagement and Racial Equity.

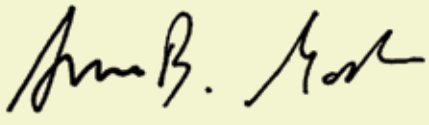
In our on-going work to act on those commitments, in 2008 the foundation launched a "learning year," featuring a dialogue among 40 organizations from across the country, all committed to civic engagement, albeit using a variety of approaches, with a variety of objectives. The outcome was a rich, often challenging, always enlightening conversation about civic engagement means, goals and terminology, among practitioners too often siloed by their field or their network.

Commissioned by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and written by Matt Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, this paper reviews that conversation and extends an invitation to both deliberative democracy and dialogue practitioners and to community organizers to continue it. In doing so, it invites civic engagement practitioners from diverse schools of thought to raise and tackle tough, important questions; to deepen their mutual understanding of other practices and approaches, and of the values underlying and unifying their work; and to propose ideas for working together more effectively, and with greater impact.

We hope that as funders and practitioners, you will read this paper both as an invitation to dialogue and as a path to more innovative, inclusive and effective civic engagement in supporting children, families and communities in their efforts to help vulnerable children succeed.

Sincerely,

Sterling K. Speirn
President/CEO
W.K. Kellogg Foundation



Anne B. Mosle
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When describing how people come together to work on issues of common concern, **Marshall Ganz** lists three necessary narratives: the 'story of self,' the 'story of us,' and the 'story of now.' People need to tell the story of self in order to articulate (for themselves as well as others) why they care about what they're doing. Collectively, they need to weave a story of us that encompasses those shared hopes and concerns. And they must develop a story of now that helps them translate those ambitions into action. This simple formula gained visibility during the 2008 presidential election, which was historic for the sheer volume of civic engagement by people of both political parties. By asking them to develop these three narratives, **Ganz** helped prepare thousands of citizens to work cohesively and effectively on the presidential campaign.[1]

In the diverse, diffuse, and expanding field of civic engagement, we are trying to weave together those same three narratives. Perhaps the main dividing line, and area of negotiation, lies between the people who describe this work mainly in terms of "justice" or "equity," such as community organizers, and those who frame it in terms of "democracy" and "public deliberation." These friendly, intense, difficult struggles have been evident throughout the Kellogg Foundation's Civic Engagement Learning Year (CELY), and they were on display at "No Better Time: Promising Opportunities in Deliberative Democracy for Educators and Practitioners" (NBT), a conference organized by the Democracy Imperative and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium.[2] The "story of self" for each subset of the field is becoming more widely known; the "story of us" is beginning to come together, though challenges remain; the "story of now" lies before us, waiting to be jointly created.

Perhaps the most promising development is that, as they have heard one another's stories, leaders representing the different forms of civic engagement have been impressed by the high level of collective commitment and mutual interest. People recognize that while they come to this work from different directions, they have learned many of the same lessons and share many of the same goals. "It was enlightening to see how many different kinds of people are committed to civic engagement," says **Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin** of the Los Angeles nonprofit Success: A New Beginning. "We may use different terminology and have different local issues, but most of the discussion was about how similar our work is," agreed **Eduardo Martinez** of the New Mexico Forum for Youth in Community. These growing relationships are critical assets for the field; "relational transformation is often necessary before individuals can do anything together," argues **Hal Saunders** of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue and the Kettering Foundation.

For civic engagement to develop from a diffuse set of activities into a more cohesive, coherent field, these leaders will need to work out shared, mutually satisfactory answers to some fundamental questions about power and equity. How should we balance the need for equitable, inclusive processes with the desire for equitable outcomes? Can we incorporate what we have learned about organizing, mobilizing, and involving citizens in the way our communities function, so that civic engagement becomes a regular, broadly supported component of governance rather than a series of ad hoc, intermittent, under-resourced exercises? Ultimately, how can we create systems where people feel valued, independent, and powerful?

The events that informed this report

The Civic Engagement Learning Year was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and coordinated by PolicyLink in 2008-2009. It engaged representatives from over 40 organizations across the U.S. to promote learning within civic engagement through a series of national convenings, working groups, online exchanges, and joint projects among organizations who approach civic engagement from different perspectives, including community organizing, deliberative democracy, race and equity, youth and next generation leadership, communications and technology, and outcome measurement.

"No Better Time: Promising Opportunities in Deliberative Democracy for Educators and Practitioners" was a three-day conference in July 2009 that brought together over 250 practitioners and researchers from the U.S. and other parts of the world. It was organized by The Democracy Imperative and by the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. The focus of the conference, as the title implies, was on deliberative democracy, but it also attracted people who represent a more explicit justice or equity perspective.

"Creating Spaces for Change" was written by Matt Leighninger, Deliberative Democracy Consortium.

Key Terms

Citizen: **There is intense discussion about the use of the word "citizen." Some argue that it has acquired an exclusive meaning that privileges some people at the expense of others. "It sends a message of exclusion, especially with the immigrant backlash," says Maggie Potapchuk of MP Associates. Others argue that we should try to revive its broader, historic meaning rather than giving it up entirely. In this guide, I use the term "citizens" to refer to all kinds of residents, not just citizens in the narrow legal sense.**

Civic engagement **is also a widely contested term; it has been used to describe traditional political activities, like voting; more active forms of participation in government, such as public meetings or advocacy work; and categories of public opinion, like the level of attachment that residents feel for their communities. This report focuses on two of the main forms of active civic engagement: community organizing and deliberative democracy. Practitioners of these approaches mobilize ordinary people to influence and inform public decision-making, and (in some cases) to contribute their own effort and ideas to public problem-solving.**

Who are we? The roots and branches of active civic engagement

"Active civic engagement" is a rather dry term for a concept with a rich historical tradition. The work as we know it today is descended from at least a century of social movements: efforts to mobilize ordinary people to advocate for their interests. These movements for civil rights, women's rights, labor, and other causes have left deep imprints on the values and tactics of civic engagement today. Most current practitioners think of their work as either directly or indirectly contributing to values like justice, liberty, and equity; they are all trying to maximize "the power of people to make change," as **Martha McCoy** of Everyday Democracy puts it. Many of the basic strategies pioneered in those movements are still evident: emphasizing networks and relationships to recruit people, giving people opportunities to share their stories and decide what they want to achieve, and encouraging people in all kinds of action efforts, from volunteerism to advocacy.

On the other hand, even though people in this field still like to use the term "movement" to describe their work, civic engagement has lost much of its movement flavor. For example, even though many community organizers trace their work to the historical contributions of people like Cesar Chavez, Jane Addams, or the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., they seem less likely to connect what they are doing locally with any present-day national leaders or organizations. Furthermore, these tactics are being used in a wider variety of settings, partly because people who started out as community organizers have gone on to serve as public officials and in many other decision-making roles. These policymakers have adapted the skills and philosophies of traditional community organizing to fit the perspectives and needs of their new positions.

There is a similar degree of diversity – and a similar disconnect between "national" leaders and their local counterparts – within the set of people working to advance deliberative democracy. The leaders who are mobilizing citizens to address public issues, consider different policy options, and create action plans include public officials, planners, human relations commissioners, school administrators, police officials, funders, and neighborhood leaders. Most of these people don't identify with "deliberative democracy" – and many have never even heard of the term.

In fact, deliberative democracy may be the most muddled, least understood strand of civic engagement. Part of what happened at the "No Better Time" conference was the advocates of deliberative democracy explaining, to themselves as well as to others, where they have come from and where they are trying to go. They too have incorporated, and lifted up, elements of the earlier protest movements, including critical masses of participants, small groups that feature storytelling as well as deliberation, and action at a range of levels. But they are just as likely to trace these practices to the grassroots adult education formats of the late 19th Century, or to the town meetings of 18th Century New England, or even to ancient Athens.[3]

What confuses everyone else, at least in part, is that many of the practitioners and researchers who identify with "deliberative democracy" see deliberation and dialogue among diverse groups of people as an end in itself, not just a vehicle for combating injustice and inequality. They think of citizen participation as both a process and an outcome. As **Laura Harris** of Americans for Indian Opportunity puts it, "Our CELY group was surprised that not everyone defines civic engagement as being all about social justice."

There is an important racial dynamic at work here as well: most of these deliberative democracy advocates, at least at the national level, are white, whereas the leaders of community organizing and racial equity are a racially diverse group. **Maggie Potapchuk** of MP Associates says that "Racial equity organizations have not fully utilized or even been aware of deliberative democracy technologies and processes. The disinterest is partly due to the perception/reality that deliberative democracy is predominantly a 'white field' that may not embrace principles of equity."

Why did this happen? How did a set of people who share so many of the same influences and goals become so segregated that they now have trouble seeing what they have in common? A number of reasons have been proposed. Some people point out that the "national" or "organized" leaders aren't representative of the people organizing deliberative democracy efforts on the ground – that at the community level, the practitioners are much more racially (and politically) diverse than any of the of national civic engagement camps. Others argue that few people have the luxury of devoting their time to issues of democracy and citizenship, and that the demographic makeup of the institutions offering those kinds of jobs – universities, foundations, certain nonprofit organizations – tends not to reflect the racial diversity of the population as a whole.

Personally, I wonder if another part of the answer lies in how the leadership of social movements changed over the last half-century. Before the 1960s, it was quite common for white people, and white males in particular, to be among the leading advocates on behalf of others – doing much of the talking, helping to carry the banner for the poor, or women, or people of color. But by the end of the '60s the leaders of those movements were almost invariably people who represented those populations: people of color, women, and poor people were the ones doing all of the leading, talking, and banner-waving. By the time I got to college in the '90s, it seemed even more obvious that other demographic groups didn't need white males like me in the most visible, public leadership roles. There was, however, a need for public spaces where all kinds of people could do their own talking – and where that talk could actually have an impact on political decisions and, ultimately, on the living conditions of ordinary people.[4] So deliberative democracy, which to some may seem like an unappealing abstraction, became for others of us a compelling, concrete strategy for achieving justice, liberty, and equity. As the work has proliferated and as the organizations have become more established, we find ourselves with a set of national leaders who talk in inspiring terms about the need to reorient democracy around the needs of the broader public – and who are themselves not terribly representative of that broader public. For me, this is a somewhat awkward realization, because in this analysis, the work of people like me can also be viewed as a way for us to maintain our own positions and perceptions of leadership and worth to society – and in spite of that, I think that it is of worth to society.

Other factors contribute to the divide between the national and local advocates of civic engagement (or the "formal and informal fields" as **Eduardo Martinez** described them). One factor may be the attitudes and communication styles of some of the national leaders. For example, "The organizing community often treats people in a pejorative manner," argues **Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin**. "Meanwhile, the deliberative democracy crowd includes a lot of extremely intellectual types," he says. "Neither group owns up to the things they can do better to relate to people."

Civic engagement is divided by geography, with some (but not enough) overlap between local leaders and the academic researchers and practitioners who communicate nationally.

Civic engagement is also divided by the issues people are working on locally.

Finally, local civic engagement practitioners may simply have a more pragmatic view of their work than the national leaders. They are motivated primarily by the need to make progress on a particular issue area, such as education, crime prevention, race and difference, land use, poverty, or public finance. Many of the public officials are motivated by bad experiences in the past – they are trying to find ways of working with the public that reduce tension, rebuild trust, and lead to better, more informed policy decisions. They don't necessarily think of their efforts as having to do with democracy or deliberation. Similarly, local community organizers may be less likely than their national counterparts to use terms like social justice.

These disconnects are apparent in the practice of civic engagement: some local efforts appear to have been modeled on examples from other communities, or based on guidelines provided by a national organization, but many others seem to have been created from whole cloth. It is difficult to estimate just how many of these 'home-grown' efforts have taken place. One example is the state of California, where "Hundreds of deliberative participation activities are taking place annually," reports **Terry Amsler** of the Collaborative Governance Initiative of the Institute for Local Government. "Most of them appear to be homegrown, either managed by city or county staff or by private consulting firms." The best projects tend to exhibit some of the same principles – local organizers simply learned them by trial and error, or applied them from previous experiences in working with citizens.

One thing seems clear: the demand for this kind of work is outstripping the capacity of the civic engagement 'field' to describe and support it. As active civic engagement has evolved from a series of social movements, and an even older set of democratic traditions, it has become more common and less clearly defined. "People doing this work on the ground need practical applications they can use immediately," says **BongHwan Kim** of the Los Angeles Department of Neighborhood Empowerment, "and they often don't know where to turn. In fact, they often fail to realize that other people are facing the same challenges, so they try to reinvent the wheel." At a time when knowledge about how to organize, mobilize, and involve citizens is more needed, by more different kinds of leaders, than ever before, fewer people seem to recognize that this knowledge already exists, or that there are organizations and individuals equipped to help them use it.

What do we have in common? Riding the tide of civic change "simotiously"

This proliferation of civic engagement activities seems to be propelled by larger shifts in citizenship and the relationship between residents and governments. Over the last twenty years, ordinary people have developed new civic attitudes and capacities; they are better educated, more diverse, less apt to defer to government and other forms of authority, more adept at using new technologies, and more willing to take productive (or disruptive) roles in public decision-making.

All kinds of leaders – not just elected officials but anyone with any kind of membership or constituency – have had to adjust to these shifts, and all the new tensions and opportunities they bring. A number of common adaptations have developed, often separately from one another. **Michael Brown**, from the New Mexico Forum for Youth in Community, describes it eloquently and creatively when he says that civic engagement work has evolved "'simotiously.'"

All of the different strands of civic engagement have been affected by this tide of civic change, and it seems to have created more commonalities between them:

- Becoming more proactive in the ways they reach out to all kinds of citizens, who are busier than ever and more selective about how they spend their time.

- Becoming more committed to bringing together different kinds of people – across lines of race and class, political affiliation, or decision-makers vs. residents – so that those people can interact, dialogue, and negotiate directly rather than through intermediaries.

- Providing more opportunities for people to share their experiences – as **John Esterle** of the Whitman Institute puts it, "emphasizing the power of story."

- Giving people more opportunities to make up their own minds and take initiative themselves – **Ian Bautista** of the United Neighborhood Centers of America says that in his work, the "predisposition toward working 'with,' not 'on,' or 'for,' is another key tie to democratic practices and deliberation."

- Becoming more insistent on the need for political legitimacy, and developing more sophisticated analyses of how power operates in communities (though the different civic engagement camps continue to use different language about power – more on that on the next page).

The notion of "deliberation" is often identified with advocates of deliberative democracy, but some community organizers argue that while they don't always name it explicitly, the idea figures prominently in their work as well. "The practice of deliberative dialogue...is already utilized by our organization to collect community voice on a number of issues," says **Eduardo Martinez**. "While we did not refer to the process as 'deliberative dialogue,' the dialogue process usually opens our Forums and/or community planning sessions as an introduction to deeper strategic or community planning sessions."

The shared lessons became more evident though the CELY meetings and the NBT conference, to the extent that different kinds of practitioners felt that they are now all in the same boat. Many stereotypes fell by the wayside: it became apparent that community organizers are just as likely to build relationships and negotiate with local officials as they are to "march on City Hall;" it was revealed that deliberative democracy practitioners do not routinely win "million-dollar grants." It became clear to community organizers that deliberative democrats do in fact care deeply about moving from dialogue to action and tangible outcomes; deliberative democrats were reassured that community organizers care deeply about the quality of the discussions they lead and convene. "Stereotypes are natural," says **Danielle Atkinson** of Michigan Voice, "and they're often based in some sort of reality – community organizers may care most about action, deliberative democracy people may focus more on talk. But when we get together, we realize we have a lot more in common, and that the 'other' is not the enemy."

A key part of puncturing these stereotypes was enabling participants to get beyond the sometimes impenetrable terms that are so common in civic engagement. Once they understood the labels more fully, people recognized the shared principles that lay behind them. For example, one commonly heard refrain from people who had just been introduced to the concept of deliberative democracy was "I didn't know there was a name for what I was already doing."[5] Different people gave prominence to different terms – for example, **Danielle Atkinson** defined deliberative democracy as a subset of community organizing – but it was clear that they had a great deal in common.

Some participants described this realization in personally significant terms. "I had an epiphany in New Hampshire," says **William Burton** of Common Ground Resolution Services. "I hadn't expected to see all these alignments with things that I'm already doing. One of the most exciting takeaways for me is that this field is a work in progress – I felt like 'I've got to get in on this.'" The term "deliberative organizing," coined by **Maryanne Galindo** of Success: A New Beginning, began to gain some currency as a way of describing the melding of these different approaches to civic engagement.

…And what are the differences?

In the rush of unexpected harmony and good feeling, however, it is almost too easy to gloss over the fact that some significant differences remain between civic engagement approaches. Furthermore, these distinctions may become more critical, not less, as the rising tide of citizen energies and expectations leads to heightened interest in the ways that people interact with their institutions. In other words, if there is greater demand for civic engagement, it will become more important that we have a common understanding of what engagement means.

Difference #1: Naming 'the field' and the goals of the work

There seems to be broad agreement among people representing different strands of civic engagement that the language we use is often an obstacle. "Language problems always happen to new movements," **Laura Harris** laments.[6] There are two levels to this discussion: the more superficial question about the terms and labels we use to describe our work, and the more fundamental question about how we explain our goals.

It is easier for people to talk about the question of how to name 'the field.' No one is fully satisfied with any of the over-arching, macro-level terms for the practice of engaging citizens in public life. Civic engagement, public involvement, public participation, and all the other civic synonyms have fuzzy, overlapping meanings, and none of these terms seems compelling to ordinary people.

This dissatisfaction with the terms also applies to the different strands of civic engagement. Many advocates of deliberative democracy admit that "deliberative democracy" is overly abstract, intellectual, and off-putting. Similarly, some proponents of "community organizing" feel that that term has been stretched so far over the last forty years that it has lost much of its meaning.

In this discussion of labels, different people have different ambitions. Some seem to be looking for language that will be catchy and compelling enough to build broad popular support for civic engagement or one of its strands. Others want a term like "deliberative organizing" that will help unify different camps. Still others are focused simply on finding terms that accurately describe what they mean. (One of the surprises at No Better Time, in fact, was that people who had considered themselves outsiders to deliberative democracy thought it was an apt and welcoming term. "It has meaning," says **William Burton**, "and it provides a hook for a longer elevator speech." "It's awesome – don't give it up!," says **Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin**.)

If our main ambition is to build popular support and recognition, one way forward would be to conduct more thorough research on how ordinary people respond to different terms and explanations. Communications experts and organizations could help civic engagement advocates understand what kinds of language will resonate with the public, and lay out some informed choices about how to describe the work (either the 'field,' or the different strands, or all of the above).

That kind of research would be premature, however, if the field hasn't dealt adequately with the more substantive – and delicate – side of the language discussion: the question of how to name the goals of civic engagement. Many advocates of deliberative democracy argue that efforts to engage citizens must be described in broad, open-ended, value-neutral terms – attempts to help the community "make progress" on an issue, for example, or "chart a course" for the future. They claim that projects must be framed in ways that welcome a broad range of people and viewpoints, including conservatives as well as progressives. "Our job is to create the space within which democracy can happen," wrote one respondent to the follow-up survey for the No Better Time conference. "I worry more about alienating the right than the left," wrote another respondent.

Some of the people who identify more with community organizing approaches say that goals of "equity" or "social justice" must be stated explicitly. Some also prefer titles and descriptions that privilege particular segments of the population – hearing the "voices of the underrepresented," for example. One respondent to the No Better Time survey asked, "Why work for democracy or be in a democracy if you are not working for justice and equality? Otherwise 'deliberative democracy' is just [nonsense]."

Difference #2: "Neutrality" and equity in processes and outcomes

A separate but related difference has to do with what happens once citizens have been 'engaged,' and are communicating with one another about their concerns and priorities. For deliberative democrats, the notion that good group process techniques can provide a sufficiently level playing field for these discussions is the conceptual backbone of their work. They put their faith (and expertise) in several strategies:

- Assembling a set of participants that mirror the broader community, usually by mobilizing a very large, diverse critical mass of people;[7]
- Convening people in small groups (generally 8-12 participants), at least for the most substantive parts of the process;
- Training facilitators who can ensure that all participants have a chance to speak, that a range of viewpoints is considered by the group, and that the group manages its time and topics wisely – and who can do this without inserting their own views and opinions into the discussion;
- Giving groups the opportunity to set or at least 'buy in' to a set of ground rules or norms that will help them govern their behavior;
- Encouraging participants, especially at the beginning of a process, to share experiences that relate to the issue or topic at hand; and
- 'Framing' public issues up front, usually in some type of written guide, in a way that provides unbiased background information and lays out a range of views or options.

Deliberative democrats are confident that these techniques can establish neutrality in the process. Furthermore, they feel that equitable processes produce equitable outcomes – that deliberative democracy is an important tool for achieving social justice and racial equity, even if (and perhaps because) those goals are seldom listed explicitly by the initiators of a project. "If the deliberative process is truly open, transparent, participatory, and broadly diverse, positive progress on social justice will emerge," wrote one respondent to the No Better Time survey.

Many other civic engagement practitioners are skeptical about these assumptions. To them, the whole notion of 'neutrality' sounds naïve. "Neutrality would be beautiful if it were real," joked **Everette Hill** of the New Mexico Forum for Youth and Community. "Before the conference, I never even thought of neutrality as a key component of democracy," says **Danielle Atkinson**. Underneath the high-blown language, critics suspect, deliberative democracy processes might easily be used to submerge critical voices and justify the maintenance of the status quo in a community. "Two questions typically come up," says **Maggie Potapchuk**. "One, whether these technologies are being implemented with inclusion and equity principles, and two, whether consensus-building activities include accountability mechanisms to ensure the marginalized voices have an equitable voice and role in the decision-making process."

"The field of dialogue needs to improve its ability to tackle tough issues such as racism," agrees **Chris Wagner** of the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network. "More attention needs to be paid to how to effectively deal with these issues within processes that are often open-ended, driven by personal experience, and often conducted by community members rather than experts in social justice."

Practitioners with a more explicit focus on justice and equity use the term "democracy" to imply equitable outcomes, not just neutral processes. "Democracy is about more than just ensuring that every voice is heard," says **Danielle Atkinson**. "In fact, sometimes participation must be inequitable in order for outcomes to be equitable." This inequitable participation takes two main forms: first, some practitioners focus on numbers and representation, and try to ensure that the 'marginalized' or 'under-represented' members of a community constitute the majority of the voices at the table. The assumption here is that the voices of the powerful, and those who benefit from the status quo, are already well-represented in public life and decision-making, and so any attempt at broader engagement should favor populations who have not benefited – typically the poor, people of color, and young people. **John Gaventa** of the Institute for Development Studies, who has worked extensively on civic engagement efforts in the Global South, argues that much of this work relies on "creating situations where a public official or some other leader is in a room with people who are poor and disadvantaged, and has to listen carefully to what they are saying."[8]

A variation on this strategy is to do a better job of incorporating under-represented groups in the planning stages of civic engagement efforts, so that the eventual pool of participants is naturally more diverse. **Maggie Potapchuk**, among others, points out that deliberative democracy projects are often initiated by relatively homogeneous sets of people, and that this often has a major impact on the way issues are framed. Potapchuk suggests that "deliberative democrats should always be asking, 'Who has been affected most?' by a particular issue and policy – and support their leadership to frame the issue, recruit other people affected, and help people move from discussion to action."

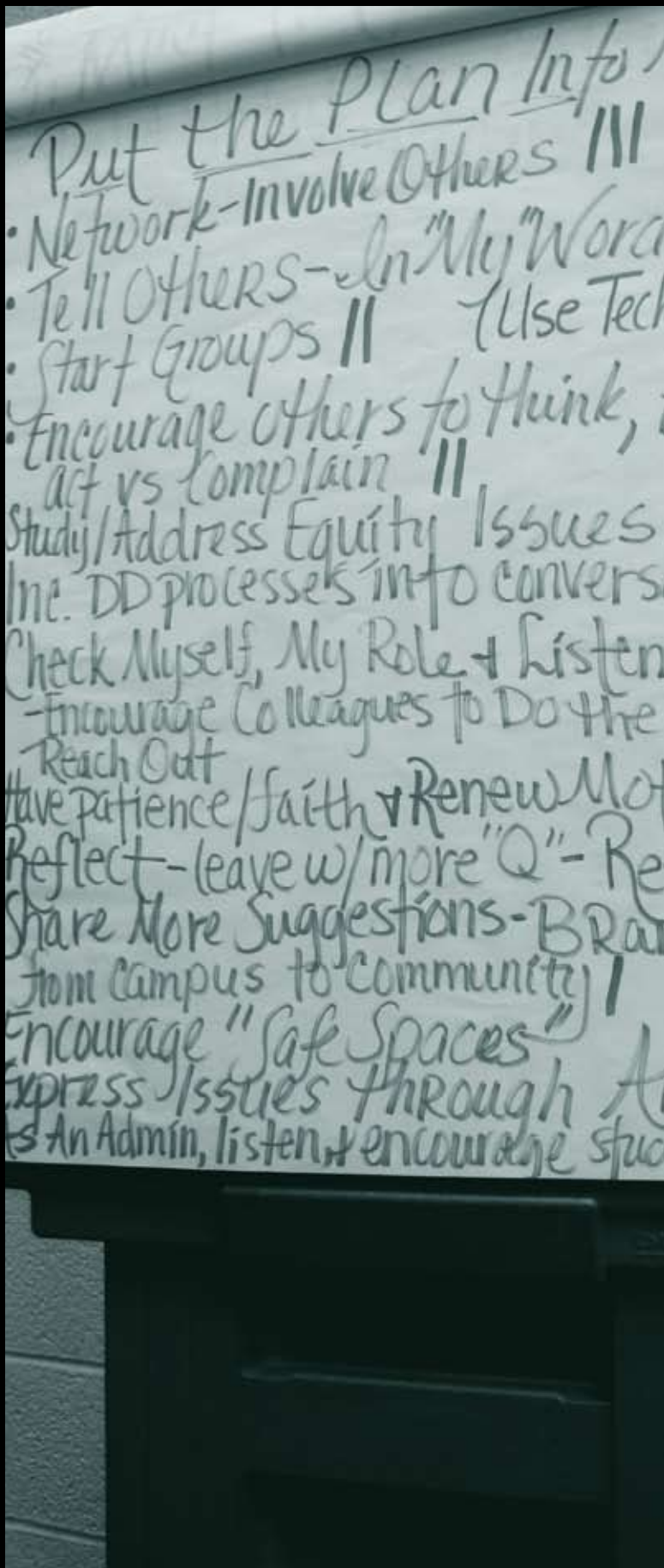
A second tactic is to facilitate the discussions or meetings differently. Facilitators can argue for viewpoints that are under-represented, present information that supports those claims, or lead exercises that prompt participants to think more critically about mainstream views. "Facilitators need to understand power dynamics and structural racism, and have the skills necessary to intervene – which includes questioning stereotypes," says **Potapchuk**. "It also means asking questions about the impact of policy decisions on different groups, having historical knowledge of cumulative and systemic advantages for whites and disadvantages for people of color, and discussing common values to ensure equity for ALL, not some."

There is no clear consensus on these two tactics for achieving equitable outcomes, even among people who identify with an explicit justice or equity focus. Some practitioners uphold the need to bring a higher percentage of 'under-represented' voices to the table, and reject the idea of non-neutral facilitation ("If you have the right mix of people in the room, passive facilitation is better," says **Atkinson**). Others support the latter and reject the former: **William Burton** says, "I hate the idea of just bringing the 'marginalized' together. There has to be a point in time where we can all interact and talk about common aspirations. In fact, the idea that we can't create level playing fields may itself be discriminatory."

I think that, fundamentally, all of these differences over neutrality and equity have to do with how people view their relationship with government. Most community organizers think of their work as taking place outside 'the system' – they are mobilizing people to have an impact on the leaders who retain decision-making power. To them, trying to create neutral processes and arenas seems like a distraction at best; at worst, bringing in other viewpoints may weaken the independent voice and power of the base they have built in the community. Deliberative democrats, on the other hand, aren't trying to affect the system: they are trying to reconstitute the system along more participatory lines. They aren't building an independent power base to challenge or negotiate with decision-makers – they're trying to change where and how the decision is made.

(A couple of caveats here: first, as is evident throughout this report, the views and strategies of community organizers and deliberative democrats are shifting and perhaps converging. The generalizations made in the previous paragraph are just that, and they are probably less true than ever before. Second, it would be easy to characterize community organizing efforts as civic engagement initiated by people outside government, and deliberative democracy projects as civic engagement initiated by governments. In fact, most deliberative democracy efforts are organized by leaders outside government, and many public officials have used community organizing strategies and messages to mobilize their constituents.)

It may be that both community organizers and deliberative democrats have a far too government-focused view of public decision-making and problem-solving. Framing every effort to engage citizens as if it were either in opposition to, or in the service of, government may severely limit the potential of civic engagement.

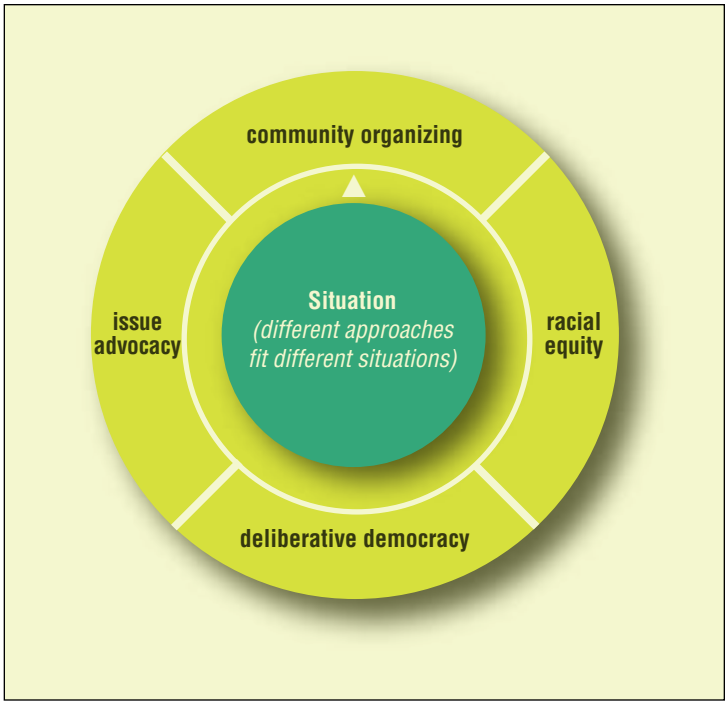


Improving engagement and improving democracy

The "story of us" that is emerging from these conversations on civic engagement reveals a great deal of convergence among different practices and approaches. Even when they were confronted with the differences over questions like neutrality and equity, the participants in the CELY meetings and NBT conference tended to emphasize the commonalities and the idea that people should choose different approaches for different situations, rather than sticking to a single, "correct," one-size-fits-all strategy.

The different approaches, many people felt, complemented one another more than they conflicted. **Danielle Atkinson** described this as a "wheel of engagement" that illustrates the impulse to "get people involved somewhere – each activity has a value – it isn't a hierarchy – you can step in anywhere" (see illustration).[9]

Many others wanted to meld the different approaches even further, by raising awareness of the common principles and helping practitioners learn more from the tactics used in other strands of civic engagement. "What are the components of all these processes that allow people to fully participate?" asks **Laura Harris**. **Ian Bautista** says that his network could "gain from the expert and seasoned practitioners who have created processes and refined practices around deliberative democracy. Likewise, our members' experience and intimate knowledge of their neighbors and their neighborhoods would be highly beneficial to deliberative democracy practitioners in accessing hard to reach populations. This combination of skill, talent, and opportunity would likely lead to more enlightened strategies for neighborhood and community development going forward."



In addition to national gatherings to facilitate this learning, many participants spoke of their desire to work together on more specific local projects. "It would be an immense opportunity," says **Kwaku Sraha** of New Mexico Voices for Children, "to engage communities in all of your work by collaborating with funders to use deliberative dialogue to set priorities for issues." "There is a lot of room for collaboration, and I believe the conversations we are having now are just the beginning," agrees **Alice Siu** of the Center for Deliberative Democracy.

But an even hotter topic was the question of how to integrate the principles and strategies of civic engagement more thoroughly in the way that communities function. The urgency of this desire came partly from people's frustration with the often temporary, project-based nature of much civic engagement work. "In my mind the better question is when and how do we incorporate [this work] into the fabric of our communities, jurisdictions and culture," says **William Burton**. "I am not sure how we can hope to get citizens to participate with other organizations and institutions without there being the expectation that this is how we do business." It was also based on a shared, critical analysis of the state of American democracy, which, as **Laura Harris** describes it, is dominated by "representative government and corporate structures – the most frustrating forms of governance." **Everette Hill** seemed to summarize the views of many participants when he said that "Our purpose is to transform systems."

This question brings the different views about power into sharper relief. There was broad agreement that, as **Will Friedman** of Public Agenda put it, "talking about how to 'embed' this work in community life really means talking about power." "Deliberating may be the easy part of the equation," says **Burton**. "People and systems do not generally share or relinquish power easily if at all. Yet, the logical outcome of a deliberative process is that the power dynamic is altered to be more representative and authentically inclusive." The challenge of moving from successful techniques for mobilizing people to successful structures for self-governance may be the 'story of now' in civic engagement.

When they talk about embedding civic engagement work, the CELY and NBT participants refer repeatedly to several key ideas:

- **Proven process techniques** for bringing citizens to the table, and for making the discussions meaningful and productive. "There is a valuable process perspective and a supporting skill set that comes from this work," says **BongHwan Kim**. "Most neighborhood leaders and elected officials don't think about process – they think about meetings."

- **Working directly with public officials.** Many people argued that elected officials and other leaders need to be more directly involved in mobilizing citizens and interacting with them. "We need to have more elected officials participating in civic engagement," says **Rodney Locks**, a city councilman from Brevard, North Carolina. "You need to be talking with local officials and asking what they are doing to integrate community participation in their work," agrees **Kim**. "If you're not working with government you're missing a pretty key player."

- **Giving people the sense that they are valued.** In a side discussion at the NBT conference that included most of the people quoted in this paper, terms like "legitimacy," "membership," and "belonging" kept coming up over and over again. "Legitimacy" was used to describe the sense that elected officials and other decision-makers are interested in what people have to say; "membership" referred to the sense of being part of a group united around common goals; "belonging" meant the psychological attachment between the individual and the community. But all of these words were used to describe the kinds of feelings that we seek to create as we work to mobilize people – feelings that keep those people engaging with one another over the long term.

- **Recognizing that this work is about community, not just politics.** All kinds of civic engagement practitioners have made the mistake of over-emphasizing issues and decisions, and failing to provide ways for people to connect socially. **Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin** envisions neighborhoods and communities where "people are connected with one another, not just on a particular issue, but on an ongoing basis. The relationship needs to be the constant – we check in with each other as people, then we see what we can do together. That's what democracy is: 'checking in with each other.'"

- **Developing a stronger, more supportive legal framework** that upholds the rights of citizens to participate in more meaningful, powerful ways. **Laura Harris**, who has watched tribal governments struggle to craft their own legal codes, reflects that all kinds of people "act like Moses handed down the Constitution and that was it." It is daunting to think about how to codify the tenets of active civic engagement, which has been a very fluid, organic movement – and yet doing so can provide communities with what **Harris** calls "a vehicle for liberation – the safety and the rich creative environment where you can do something different."

This discussion of "embeddedness" (for lack of a better term) seemed to transcend the older, narrower questions about civic engagement. Participants in the CELY and NBT meetings didn't just want to develop better ways of organizing citizens to affect policymakers or "get involved" in government; and they didn't just want to help or compel governments to become more responsive to citizens. Instead, they were looking for more sustainable forms of public participation, in which government was just one part of community governance. **Everette Hill** argues that "We need safe spaces outside government, and all other groups and institutions, in order to tap all the assets that a community possesses."

New priorities and next steps

It is clear that practitioners of the different forms of civic engagement want to learn more from one another. They are also interested in doing some of this learning in community contexts, in addition to national meetings. They want to look more closely at the relationships between process equity and outcome equity. And they are resolved to "transform systems" – to find ways to shift civic engagement from a sporadic, temporary activity reliant on organizers to a sustained, accepted part of community life. "The paramount political question today," says **Hal Saunders**, "is how spaces can be created in which citizens can discover their capacity to respond to or generate change."

This discussion suggests a number of strategic opportunities to advance the development of civic engagement:
1. Invest in systems for measurement, evaluation, and accountability – "We need stronger systems for capturing and measuring impact," says **Chris Wagner**. A wealth of evaluations, reports, and academic literature has been amassed, and yet when they are challenged on the efficacy of their work, most civic engagement practitioners resort to talking about their own experiences rather than speaking more broadly for the field. Even more importantly, communities are not taking full advantage of the new capacities of citizens and online technologies to make evaluation a more broadly shared, democratic activity. Here are some potential next steps:

- Assemble and summarize all of the existing results-oriented research on civic engagement, so as to explain more concisely the state of our knowledge about the field.
- Conduct in-depth research on cutting-edge questions, such as the impacts of 'embedded' forms of engagement vs. temporary organizing efforts, and the impacts of civic engagement on basic living conditions.
- Develop online tools for tracking, measurement, and accountability – particularly methods and systems that would allow ordinary people to participate in the evaluation process in ways that enhance learning and accountability.

2. Build a stronger infrastructure for civic engagement – Because this work has proliferated outside the boundaries of any single profession, political philosophy, or civic tradition, many local leaders and organizers don't know where to turn for advice and assistance. Leaders who have some financial resources (such as government officials) turn to private consultants who may be disconnected from the larger discussions about equity and effective practice. Leaders without ready financial resources are often left reinventing the wheel.

- Match up the situations and tactics on the "wheel of engagement" – **Danielle Atkinson's** wheel of engagement (see p. 13) could be a valuable tool for all kinds of local leaders and active citizens. Getting down to the specifics of which approach to use in what situation would be an important field-building conversation for community organizers, deliberative democrats, and other civic engagement practitioners.

- Convene national or state-level meetings for practitioners of community organizing and deliberative democracy to flesh out broader, more coordinated, and more sustainable strategies for civic engagement. Produce 'how-to' materials that summarize the conclusions reached, and provide the latest lessons learned on face-to-face and online civic engagement.

- Provide technical assistance to communities (local coalitions that include public institutions like governments and schools as well as nonprofits, community organizers, and others) trying to 'embed' democratic practices in the way they do public business.

- Convene national or state-level conferences to bring together local officials, community organizers, school administrators, and civic engagement practitioners around questions of civic engagement and 'embeddedness.'

- Commission research on public spaces that exhibit qualities of joint ownership.

- Create online resources that give people basic information about civic engagement, including relevant community examples and resources for further learning.

3. Advance the justice/democracy discussion so that civic engagement advocates can describe their work in more consistent, compelling ways – The CELY and NBT gatherings have shown that honest conversations between people from the "justice" and "democracy" perspectives can be productive and enlightening. They also showed that the language of civic engagement is not only an impediment to understanding among practitioners, but a major obstacle to the proliferation and advancement of what (for lack of a better term) we call civic engagement. "In Los Angeles, we are just turning the corner toward trying to 'popularize' the Neighborhood Councils," says **BongHwan Kim**. "We need to frame our own message so that it is more easily understandable by people who have no knowledge of this work."

- Bring selected groups together – national civic engagement practitioners for example, or state-level practitioners, or foundation staff and grantees – for highly structured discussions or trainings focused on racial equity, justice, and democracy.

- Diversify the leadership of the existing deliberative democracy networks. "Diversifying the field is really important," says **Danielle Atkinson**. "You can think you're bringing in all the perspectives, but you just don't know unless they're at the table."

- Commission research that focuses on questions of process equity vs. outcome equity, and how they play out both in temporary civic engagement initiatives and more 'embedded' structures for civic engagement.

- Use the conclusions reached in meetings of civic engagement advocates and practitioners to determine whether and how the language of this work can reflect shared goals and strategies.

- Work with a communications firm to develop new language, based in part on the outcomes of the justice/democracy discussion, and test it with ordinary people.

4. Mobilize the resources of higher education – **Jah'Shams Abdul-Mumin** points out that "Colleges and universities have a wealth of information and manpower that could be coordinated to help residents and other concerned citizens participate." This was in fact a common realization among practitioners involved in these conversations: that there were people on campuses who had similar goals and had resources that could be helpful to community work. **Nancy Thomas** of the Democracy Imperative points to two key priorities for higher education: teach democratic principles and practices across the curriculum (not just to select students in certain programs or activities), and teach youth leadership and political engagement skills. "To address these priorities," she says, "Colleges and universities need to realign teaching methods and student learning outcomes with democratic principles and practices." She also urges the colleges and universities to "attend to the civic leadership development needs of everyday citizens, not just matriculated students, and to provide countless opportunities for the campus and local community to come together to learn about and grapple with public problems." Finally, she stresses the role of schools of education and "the need to teach teachers to educate for democracy."

- Convene state-level gatherings that bring together civic engagement practitioners and local leaders with potential allies on community college and university campuses.

- Develop various kinds of curricula that universities and communities can use to educate students and citizens in participation skills and democratic ideals. These could include curricula for traditional college courses, training programs that appeal to community members or mid-career professionals, or modules to be used as a component of service learning programs.

- Provide opportunities for college administrators and professors, K-12 administrators and teachers, and student leaders to develop new models for the civic education of young people.

- Work with public administration schools or other degree programs within higher education to help them produce graduates with the civic skills and mindset that communities need. "PA schools train public administrators, who end up in positions where they need to be modeling and doing civic engagement," argues **Kwaku Sraha**.

5. Focus on key policy targets in local governance – Though there is more attention to the challenge of 'scaling up' civic engagement to the federal level, the most innovative work is still happening at the local level. Over the last decade, local officials as a whole have become much more experienced in civic engagement, and have pushed the discussion of these issues into their state and national associations. The 'story of now' for civic engagement and the 'story of now' for local governance need to be brought together.

- Convene national or state-level discussions between officials and civic engagement practitioners.
- Provide technical assistance to communities working on cutting-edge civic engagement questions and challenges.
- Develop more supportive legal frameworks for citizen participation. It is daunting for civic engagement practitioners to think about the legal aspects of their work. **Laura Harris** and **BongHwan Kim** warn us that not exploring these issues can have major consequences for communities. Ten years after the creation of the L.A. neighborhood council system, **Kim** reports, "Interpreting the Brown Act (California's open meetings law) is still a problem." **Harris** has watched native communities attempt various kinds of constitutional reform, "only to have the lawyers get hold of it and change everything."

Articulating the 'story of now'

Moving forward in these directions will require higher levels of collaboration between the different strands of civic engagement, between academics and practitioners, and between public officials and other kinds of leaders. In many cases, it will also require new investments by governments, foundations, or other funding sources – a tall order in the current financial climate.

The funding picture is also complicated by the fact that the divides and misunderstandings between different approaches to civic engagement are mirrored in the foundation community. **John Esterle**, chair of Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement, suggests that funders would benefit by the same sort of conversations that practitioners enjoyed during the Civic Engagement Learning Year and the No Better Time conference. **Esterle**, **Atkinson**, and others suggest that the techniques for productive discussion pioneered by civic engagement practitioners should be put to use in conversations among funders, practitioners, and other leaders. **Esterle** argues that "The processes of dialogue and deliberation we talk about really need to be practiced between and among all the different players – that will help us shift into gear around some of the key embeddedness/infrastructure issues."

Meanwhile, the tide of civic change will continue to present both challenges and opportunities for active civic engagement. The shifting expectations and capacities of citizens, the attempts to employ democratic principles in governance and on the campaign trail, and the continuing development and adoption of online technologies will generate ever more renditions of the 'story of self' and the 'story of us.' In this environment, adapting to changes 'simotiously' seems like an increasingly inadequate response. To catch up with the needs and goals of the ordinary people they wish to serve, the advocates and practitioners of civic engagement need to articulate a more compelling and unified 'story of now.'

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[1] Ganz, a longtime community organizer turned Harvard academic, was the primary architect of the "Camp Obama" workshops that Obama organizers went through when they joined the campaign. Ganz feels that much of this knowledge and resolve were lost in the transition from the campaign to the administration – he and Peter Dreier (Peter Dreier and Marshall Ganz, "We Have the Hope. Now Where's the Audacity?" *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2009.) have urged the president to revive "'movement' tactics, from leaflets, vigils and newspaper ads to nonviolent civil disobedience," in his effort to pass health care reform. Hal Saunders gives a somewhat different critique: "The Obama Administration may be failing to distinguish between (1) *mobilizing* support in an election or for a president's programs and (2) *creating spaces where citizens can discover* their capacities to 'rebuild America one neighborhood at a time.'" This report is in part an attempt to sort through these different approaches to organizing, and describe how they might be incorporated into the work of governance.

[2] A grant from the Kellogg Foundation enabled key participants in the Civic Engagement Learning Year to attend the No Better Time conference. This report is based partly on conversations with these participants at the conference and telephone interviews afterward.

[3] James Morone's *The Democratic Wish* and Carmen Sirianni's *Civic Innovation in America* are helpful for looking at the long-term and more recent history of democratic governance in the U.S.

[4] Philosophically, this notion was in keeping with the spread of postmodernist ideas, which emphasized the importance of "discourses" and "counter-discourses," on college campuses.

[5] Ian Bautista says that "Many of our members still employ 'talking circles,' 'minute circles,' or something strikingly similar to a 'study circle,' as employed by our colleagues at Everyday Democracy. Almost all of our members still hold community forums at which neighbors are given the opportunity to provide input about and learn about civic decisions, meet policymakers, meet and discern candidates for public office, discuss important neighborhood and community-wide issues and challenges, and otherwise engage in democratic practices on their terms."

[6] Harris went on to say that "Part of the problem is that the right-wingers stole all our good words and ruined them." Terms like "democracy," "liberty," and "citizen" now have negative connotations for many people.

[7] There is also a set of deliberative democrats who use polling techniques to recruit a small representative sample of the community, instead of organizing meetings that are open to the public. They argue that these Deliberative Polls(tm), "citizens' assemblies," and similar exercises can both provide informed input to public officials and serve as a model for more widely dispersed deliberations.

[8] Gaventa is an eloquent advocate for the notion that the advocates and practitioners of civic engagement in the Global North have a great deal to learn from their counterparts in the South. See Gaventa and Nicholas Benequista, "Reversing the Flow: A New Democratic Conversation?," Alliance, June 2009.

[9] The idea is that the situation dictates the strategy. Atkinson also suggests that the wheel could be drawn so that the inner circle refers to the interests and skills of the individual, rather than the situation.

Photographs courtesy of Jessie Neikrie.

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