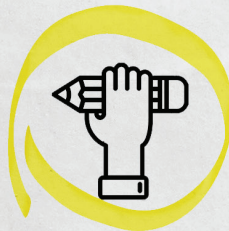


Re/Inventing
Journalism to
Strengthen
Democracy

Insights from Innovators



Edited by Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis

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The Charles F. Kettering Foundation, headquartered in Dayton, Ohio, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Founded in 1927 “to sponsor and carry out scientific research for the benefit of humanity,” the foundation is inspired by the innovativeness and ingenuity of its founder, the American inventor Charles F. Kettering. For the past four decades, the foundation’s research and programs have focused on the needs of democracy worldwide.

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Introduction

by Paloma Dallas and Paula Ellis

Recent years have laid bare how fraught and fragile democracy's promise is: the idea that a people, with all their differences, can together chart a shared future. That they can do so with empathy and collective wisdom. That they can trust their institutions to be vehicles for self-governance. And, finally, that they can see one another as equals, recognizing their own agency while tempering their actions with the recognition that others have agency, too, ever mindful that we are in this together, our destinies intertwined.

To expect all this of any one of us, let alone all of us, is a big ask.

But it is the fundamental promise of a democracy. It is the promise of one person, one vote. It is the exhilarating ambition of "We the People," even if it has never been fully realized.

In a democracy, each generation is asked to revisit the decisions of those who came before them, remedy errors, tackle problems long left unresolved, and confront unforeseen challenges.

To help members of the public do this work of self-governance responsibly, and knowledgeably, is what journalists are called to do. It is why the role of a free, independent press was deemed so essential to democracy that it was enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. The founders knew that the fledgling

American republic's experiment in democratic government needed the free circulation of information and ideas to survive. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."¹

In this collection of essays, the authors, all journalists, reflect openly and honestly on their attempts to find ways that journalism can better serve democracy. Their reflections offer insights into how journalism, with shifts in its professional mind-set and practices, might help repair our civic fabric and strengthen democracy, a task that has seldom felt more urgent.

As this book was coming together, worries about the future of democracy in the United States moved from academic sanctuaries to city streets, from neighborhood bars to corner bodegas and the bleachers of suburban soccer fields. Each day's news brought another in a seemingly endless wave of reports about racial injustice, police brutality, political malfeasance, disregard for the rule of law, and example after example of how one democratic institution or another was failing the people. While some leaders preached their belief in the search for common ground, their hopeful messages seemed muted against the timbre and intensity of the discord.

Americans do agree on one thing: a 2022 public opinion poll found that 69 percent of both Democrats and Republicans think "the nation's democracy is in danger of collapse."² No doubt their reasoning differs, but agreement on this stark assessment is worrisome.

People's confidence in all kinds of institutions, including in the three branches of the federal government, has diminished. While this trend has been a long time in the making, it has hit new lows with only

25 percent reporting trust in the Supreme Court, 23 percent in the presidency, and a mere 7 percent in Congress.³ Trust in the media to report the news fairly has similarly declined, further weakening an embattled industry beset by rapidly changing technology, an advertising-based business model that internet competitors disemboweled, and the shifting news consumption habits of people who now have many more information options.

While people have more access to information than perhaps ever before, the sheer volume and speed at which it travels makes it more difficult to discern its validity, and the fragmented media ecosystem has contributed to the fracturing of the body politic. Recognizing and solving shared problems seems more difficult than ever.

Yet solve them together we must. Our ability—or inability—to collectively participate in self-governance is the central democratic challenge that journalists address in this book. They recognize that the nitty-gritty work of democracy is rooted in the daily actions of citizens who eschew highfalutin theories in favor of practical solutions. They aren't nostalgic about a golden age of journalism or democracy; they dissect lessons of the past as they respond to the challenges of today. While these authors respect the critical role the press must play in holding elected officials and others in power accountable to the public, they are concerned that it is not enough.

In this book, the authors speak to the practical work of a democratic citizenry that undergirds our system of representative government and elections, and they reimagine how journalists might work *with* this democratic citizenry. They're not just imagining though. These authors recognize that this time of tumult and questioning creates opportunities to experiment with putting new ideas into practice.

The authors, some of the nation's leading innovators in journalism, are accomplished storytellers who understand the power of narratives to shape the way we see ourselves and understand one another. They are exploring the role journalism might play in creating a narrative of American identity that is more equitable and inclusive, reflective of a broader and ever-evolving sense of ourselves as a people. Rather than stand apart from communities to report *on* them, they want to work and report *with* people, recognizing that as journalists they, too, have a stake in thriving, equitable communities. They want to contribute to building trust, not only with the media but also between people, and they see a profound role to play in fostering a sense of belonging so that all people in this country see themselves as part of the democratic experiment.

The journalists whose essays appear in this collection participated in meetings at the Kettering Foundation, beginning in 2016. That year, trust in the media in the United States had hit a historic low, with only 32 percent reporting “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust in the media. The decline in trust was especially steep among Republicans, with only 14 percent reporting trust in the media, a precipitous decline from the 32 percent who had reported they trusted media just a year earlier.⁴

Rather than initially focus on building or rebuilding trust, we centered our meetings around the simple question that the Kettering Foundation asked for years: What does it take to make democracy work as it should? Then, we asked about the implications of the answer for journalism. What more, or what else, is required of journalism as an institution to strengthen our democracy and ensure it serves the interests of all people?

The journalists gathered periodically at the foundation's Dayton, Ohio, campus and on Zoom to identify the problems of democracy and of journalism that most concerned them. Many had already begun to experiment with a wide range of innovative ideas that challenged existing journalism orthodoxy. Over the course of a few years, we met regularly and learned together. The journalists reported on their efforts. Sometimes they succeeded; sometimes they fell short. Regardless of the outcome, we asked them to tell us, and each other, what they had learned. Foundation folks, drawing from decades of scholarly and practical research, added to the mix.

In this book, we step back to offer all these innovators an opportunity to deepen their own understanding and ours by writing about their learning journeys. In the essays, the authors mine their experiences for insights and inflection points, for flashes of comprehension and the slower slog of sense-making. We hope their stories suggest entry points for others—both journalists and non-journalists—to launch experiments. We think small-*d* democrats everywhere might view these journalists as allies in fashioning new narratives about our collective identity and in creating a more constructive public square.

Precisely because these innovators have mastered the craft, they are able to imagine what could be done differently and credibly invite others to join them in reinventing journalism to better serve democracy. That said, this book is not a roadmap for fixing journalism. And it doesn't purport to offer a tool kit of any sort. Instead, it offers a candid assessment of journalism's relationship to democracy. In fact, it offers 10 such assessments. As the authors in this collection take stock of their profession and how we have landed at this point of deep distrust—of each other, of the media, and of institutions of all kinds—they also offer ideas about ways forward.

The authors take on journalistic “objectivity,” the overreliance of the media on experts and institutions, and the tendency toward an extractive relationship with the public. They also take on perceptions of who “belongs,” how this has shaped mainstream media culture, and what that has meant for democracy.

They raise pivotal questions that shifted their own thinking.

For David Plazas, it was: “Why should I trust you?”

For Martin Reynolds: “Are you going to be sustainers, creators, deniers, facilitators, or dismantlers of systemic racism?”

For Linda Miller, they were questions she asked of others: “What does it sound like, look like, and feel like to be accurately represented in the media? How would more accurate racial narratives influence how you experience public life and decision-making?”

The volume opens with an essay by Subramaniam Vincent, who directs Journalism and Media Ethics at Santa Clara University’s Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. Vincent describes how journalism has evolved together with liberal democracy, with both now facing pushback around the globe. American journalism’s claim and ability to support democracy is undercut, he argues, not only by the destruction of its business model and the challenges brought on by the internet and social media but also by a journalistic culture shaped by dominant White cultural norms and a “proximity to elite power and official authority and at a relative distance from the democratic agency of the people.” He builds his essay toward a series of suggestions for how journalism might “reclaim its democratic potential.” They include newsrooms recognizing a hierarchy of values, understanding that some—such as dignity, equality, fairness,

and justice, for example—are absolute, while neutrality must always be qualified: “Neutrality toward whom? Neutrality to what end?”

Doug Oplinger, former managing editor of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, who later led a statewide media collaborative in Ohio, takes readers on a journey that spans a half century. His evocative descriptions lead the reader from the bygone era of “fuzzy black and white televised images” to today’s chaotic and often discordant media ecosystem. Throughout the twists and turns, Oplinger held fast to his enduring commitment to the communities he served and experimented with different ways of engaging them while fending off accusations of advocacy or “boosterism.” He draws a contrast between such experiments and the extractive “parachute journalism” that has led many citizens to believe that the media doesn’t care about them. Journalism, he writes, “should be integral, vital, living threads in the fabric of democracy, stretching and flexing so that people see us as partners, as vital to improving their lives.”

Michelle Holmes, former vice president of content with Alabama Media Group, begins her essay with a lyrical encapsulation of how to recognize a healthy democracy. It depends on “whether its people use ‘we/ours’ or ‘they/theirs’ when they speak of public life,” she writes, before exploring the role newspapers have historically played in creating a sense of belonging for many, even as they excluded others. Holmes details a series of efforts to help foster an inclusive sense of belonging. That, she writes, is where the future of journalism lies. The news media must be “something greater than tellers of tales, compilers of facts, or uncoverers of injustice.” Rather, they must be mirrors that allow “humans to see themselves in relation to the whole, and to feel their own place inside of it.”

Martin Reynolds, former editor in chief of the *Oakland Tribune* and co-executive director of the Maynard Institute, also takes up the idea of “belonging” in an essay that begins with his tears of rage while watching the video of a White Minneapolis police officer kill George Floyd by pinning the unarmed Black man to the ground with his knee. Reynolds explores the tension between his training as an “objective” reporter and his experiences as a Black man with a Black son. He writes of his efforts to bring new perspectives to the paper’s community coverage, with the founding of Oakland Voices as one prescient example. And he draws on his experience as a musician to suggest how dismantling systemic racism in newsrooms might truly foster a diverse and inclusive sense of belonging that can radiate out “through the shifting of the journalistic gaze, away from Whiteness, to the kaleidoscope of gazes that reflect our society and our world.”

Jennifer Brandel, cofounder of Hearken, wants to help remake journalism so that it is fundamentally responsive to people, rather than mediated by the editorial sensibilities of the newsroom. Journalism’s routines, she writes, are rooted in the machine age, when information was scarce and “newsrooms competed with one another to be the go-to source for truth.” In the digital age, we’re oversaturated with information. In response, Brandel founded Hearken, a public-powered journalism company, which is but one of the companies she has created in an effort to change the culture of journalism into one that fosters cooperation, transparency, and responsiveness to the people it serves. She imagines a system in which journalists are “incentivized to support collective sense-making, or to distribute the responsibility for care within a community, or to provide a forum for people to find common ground and other like-minded people to take civic action.” Brandel describes experiments that begin to make this paradigm shift.

Ben Trefny, interim executive director of KALW Public Media serving the San Francisco Bay Area, begins with his experience anchoring live coverage of the 2016 presidential election results. After Donald Trump was declared the winner, one of Trefny's guests commented that he now felt like a stranger in his own country. Trefny responded, "Clearly a lot of people already did." "In a democracy," he writes, "the people—all the people—are supposed to govern themselves. So, it fails when entire communities are misrepresented or excluded by those who wield power and influence. Journalism contributes to that failure." Trefny chronicles his radio station's efforts to better connect with the diversity and complexity of the communities it serves, sharing the missteps and opportunities that emerged along the way. His takeaways include the power of partnering with other journalism organizations, the importance of connecting with organizations in the community, and the conviction that journalism is best practiced with the people.

Eve Pearlman writes about what led her to cofound Spaceship Media and its dialogue journalism approach. It was created, she writes, in response to the coarsening and dehumanizing of so much political rhetoric. "Our journalistic institutions were doing what we had always done, even as the landscape was changing," she writes. What could journalists do to support and create an informed public whose members can engage with one another about the issues that matter in a democracy? How could she combine her moderating and mediating skills with her more traditional journalist's tool kit to help repair the damage? Dialogue journalism was born as a process for convening and hosting journalism-supported conversations across social and political fault lines. "If what we're doing isn't working, if people don't trust us, if civil dialogue is contracting, how can we adapt our practices to better serve our highest calling, supporting our democracy?"

David Plazas says he returns again and again to a question he was asked at a Rotary Club event in 2018. “Why should I trust you?” a man in the audience asked. That question led Plazas, the opinion and engagement director for USA TODAY Network–Tennessee, to grapple with the uncomfortable impressions some of his rural neighbors had about “media elites” who looked down on them. Plazas describes his efforts to truly examine that critique and respond by leading changes that included a Civility Tennessee initiative, a podcast (*Tennessee Voices*), and the publication of two newsletters (*Black Tennessee Voices* and *Latino Tennessee Voices*) that try to shift from “telling stories *about*” people in these traditionally underrepresented communities to “telling stories *for* and *with* them.” These and other efforts are aimed at connecting with people in the communities his news organization serves. “This is about meaningful and intentional public service for our fellow citizens in order to help preserve and strengthen our democratic republic.”

Linda Miller began collaborating with Kettering when, after leading the groundbreaking Public Insight Network (PIN) at Minnesota Public Radio, she was encouraging journalists to deepen their relationships with residents and advocate for the community. She now leads the Multicultural Media and Correspondents Association’s Equitable Media and Economies Initiative. In her essay, Miller explores what it might mean to adopt an ethic of care in journalism. While it’s acceptable for journalists to care about seeking the truth about the *issues* they write about, she says that openly caring about the *people* they write about is often thought to interfere with news judgment. “Yet,” she writes, “if journalists cannot advocate for their communities’ well-being, what, exactly, is their purpose?”

In his role as cofounder of City Bureau and codirector of national impact, Darryl Holliday, a former beat reporter and photojournalist,

is leading a movement to update the way we visualize democracy. He begins with the proposition that, for the most part, the professional media workforce—“disproportionately White, male, able-bodied, and cis” and “significantly more wealthy, educated, and politically left” than those in the communities they serve—cannot fully reflect those communities. One way to remedy the situation, he says, is through expanding the ranks of those who produce journalism, “not just as news consumers, but as distributors and—most important—producers of local information.” The process is already underway in the form of new, participatory media organizations, such as his own City Bureau, a civic journalism lab cultivating the information and storytelling networks that democratize access to civic power. “Our vision for the future of local news . . . reframes the traditional consumer-producer relationship into one of cocreation, with journalists and communities working together to produce essential public goods.”

These essays are just a sampling of the innovations afoot in journalism and provide a peek into the kind of behind-the-scenes introspection about craft that the public rarely sees. We hope you will enjoy getting to know these journalists in their own words. By providing this deeper look at the care with which they, and thousands like them, approach their work, we also hope to add dimension to the public’s view of journalism.

As editors partnering with these gifted writers, we were reminded that writing is, itself, a process of learning. Writing is a disciplined form of thinking that requires assessment, reflection, and revisions that hone understanding. As Joan Didion famously said, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means.” These authors dug deep into themselves and their experiences to add to our understanding of democracy and

to help us understand the different ways that journalism is being reinvented to strengthen it. We are grateful they did.

We live in a time of deep distrust—of each other, the media, and institutions of all kinds. In this volume of essays, innovative journalists from newspapers, public radio, civic media groups, and new media collectives examine how we've reached this point. The loss of newspapers and fracturing of the information ecosystem have weakened our sense of a shared identity, but many people have long felt excluded, misrepresented, and unable to see themselves and their experiences reflected in news reporting. These essays highlight opportunities that are emerging as old practices give way to the new demands of an engaged, diverse, and restive public. They call on us to create a more inclusive democratic narrative that better captures the rich diversity of our nation and its complicated history.

Contributors:

Jennifer Brandel

Darryl Holliday

Michelle Holmes

Linda Miller

Doug Oplinger

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