LOCALISM

A CALL TO CIVIC ACTION

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MAKER CITY® & THE AUTHORS OF HEALING AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: GOING LOCAL

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an Introduction

If you ask an American to tell you about their country, they'll probably paint a bleak picture. Civic bonds are fraying. Division and tribalism dominate the news. The public is losing faith in democracy as the most effective way to govern. At a time of rapid demographic and cultural change, with frustration over economic inequality reaching a boiling point, our national politics has not found a way to generate consensus.

But if you asked the same American about the place they call home, their local community, you'd often hear a markedly different story, one of pride and enthusiasm. Economic development is taking off, new businesses cropping up downtown. More people are getting involved in local issues, and there's a sense of civic rebirth. Despite differences, neighbors are working together to solve problems.

When America is viewed from the bottom up instead of from the top down, a picture emerges of "conditional optimism," as **Our Towns** authors, Deborah and James Fallows, describe it. It's a hope that's rooted in the real productive changes – economic, civic, and cultural – happening in America's cities and local communities, often led by ordinary citizens who aren't seeking power or fame, but just want to get something done at home. This narrative is remarkably similar in towns all over America. Despite the chaos of national politics, localism is a growing force.

In November 2018, leaders from libraries, newspapers, local government, nonprofits, and small businesses gathered at USC Annenberg's Center for Communication Leadership and Policy for a roundtable called "Localism: Rebuilding America from the Bottom Up."

Over the course of our conversation, a set of high-level principles emerged, functioning as guidelines to localism. More specific initiatives, which seem to be effective and replicable, came out of the inspirational stories we heard. This two-part report is a practical call to action that we hope civic leaders, and changemakers of all stripes, will use to bring renewal and hope to their communities.

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PRINCIPLES

GUIDELINES FOR LOCALISM

1. Experimentation is the path to change.

When our national discourse is at an impasse, and the road to progress is blocked, local institutions and communities are in a position to try the new and untested. This is the central argument that Joel Kotkin, an early advocate of localism, has been making for years: rather than waiting for change to happen from above, communities must take it upon themselves to solve problems, focusing on their unique local assets to collaborate and reach consensus on what needs to be done.

Local governments and ecosystems can prototype; they can try new approaches; they can challenge the rules. And, as we heard from the stories our conference participants told, they are doing exactly that. Communities as disparate as New Orleans, Compton, and San Bernardino are building alliances with their local stakeholders to reimagine the places

"I want to spread hope across LA, the county, our state, and the nation. If we can make great things happen in San Bernardino and parts of Compton, great things can happen across the nation."

Jeudy Mom
Director
Compton Initiative

they call home, through the lens of the 21st century. They're testing out new ideas from the ground up, and finding new roles for existing institutions such as libraries, newspapers, and schools.

2. Localism is a network effect.

Networks enable local experiments to grow into national movements. And at a time of rapid simultaneous experimentation, cities and their innovation ecosystems thrive when connected together, learning from peers, sharing what works (and what doesn't), and recognizing new patterns of development. At USC, we saw that energy and creativity flourish when we link people bringing about change in their cities; it's like jazz, or open source software... nothing like politics as usual. There are many groups working to strengthen these valuable connections – for example, participants from **Maker City** and **Living Cities** told us about the shared

insights they're plugging into as part of the **Kauffman Foundation**'s ESHIP (entrepreneurship) community. In 2018, the ESHIP summit brought together over 620 local ecosystem builders (including 121 U.S. mayors) from every state in the country, compiling tools, resources, and agendas for ongoing working groups.

3. Open data is an invitation.

Localism depends on getting everyone involved, and information has a way of bringing people to the table. Beginning about a decade ago, U.S. cities started publishing troves of data about crime, health care, transportation, budgeting, and more. As cities went from impenetrable silos to open data platforms, ordinary citizens started to investigate and make insights.

This transparency inspired individuals and organizations like **Code for America** to build

"Culture change at the local level often involves taking what is a negative self-image and making that a motivating force. Changing that language. We were impressed by the power of civic image and self-narrative. When negative, it can be a disabling thing; but when flipped to the positive, it can be powerful."

James Fallows
Author
Our Towns

solutions to urban problems, like apps for crime oversight and easy online access to public services. The call for participation can go even further with read/write urbanism, which is enabling citizens to source and contribute their own data; in Detroit, for example, schools are collecting data on air pollution and feeding it back to the city.

4. It all starts with trust.

In every example we heard, from Compton to Kansas City, change required a foundation of trust – without it, nothing worked, and with it, anything seemed possible. Nowhere was this clearer than in the example of schools in Los Angeles, where initially, legislation to improve performance was experienced as an outside imposition on the local community and got stuck in a legal quagmire. Robin Kramer and Larry Frank were tasked by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa with finding a solution, and

they knew they had to build trust. They worked with parents and teachers to help lead the schools in a new way. When undocumented parents were afraid to speak up, they spent time building relationships with each school, learning about its unique culture and history. The resulting **Partnership for Los Angeles Schools** has been a remarkably successful collaboration, resulting in improved attendance, test scores, and safety.

5. The story you tell matters.

America is built on our stories – and if the national plot has taken a dark turn, it's imperative that we write new narratives of hope and renewal in our local communities. Localism requires that we replace pessimism, which tends to be counterproductive, with a "conditional optimism" that opens the door for imagination and action. As Jim Fallows said at the conference, "Culture change at the local level

often involves taking what is a negative self-image and making that a motivating force by changing that language." We learned, for example, that the city of Fresno has long thought of itself as "America's most broken city," despite having a lot to be proud of. Then Fresno started calling itself an "underdog city," and this new language has become central to its revitalization.

6. Strength comes from what makes a place different, not the same.

According to our experts, too often when cities strive for economic development, they try to replicate things that have happened in places like New York and San Francisco. But in fact, strength comes from the opposite: it comes from identifying your city's own heritage, talent, and beliefs. Joel Kotkin, Executive Director of the Houston-based **Center for Opportunity Urbanism**, said cities must ask themselves who they are and what they have to offer – instead of why people moved away, why did new people move there?

In Houston and New Orleans, the key was to leverage their distinct industrial potential. Austin is about being weird. Louisville has played to its advantages with logistics investments (capitalizing on its UPS hub and infrastructure), appliance start-ups (GE Appliances long time presence and a rich maker community led to FirstBuild, a microfactory in which the community has created dozens of new appliances), and craft beverages (the Bourbon heritage!) Cities should embrace their unique civic culture, even if it's out of step nationally.

"My fear is that for progressives who have joined us late in the game, the moment they gain national power back, they're going to abandon localism," Joel warned. "If Charlotte wants to have transgender bathrooms, let them do it. If a small town doesn't, let them not. You have to give small communities more leeway."

"Partnership schools (parents, schools and the district) have an ethos. They don't want to just replace management and do the same old thing ... They start with individual children and ask them what they care about, and then build the learning around those interests."

Robin Kramer
Managing Director
The Smidt Foundation

WAYS

TO TAKE

ACTION

INITIATIVES

1. Involve the community and empower its ideas with experimental prototyping.

Tactical urbanism is a way of complementing city processes by rapidly testing, sharing, and scaling new citizen-sourced projects. Local participation is key to placemaking. By finding creative ways to generate concepts and buy-in, new projects, from public art installations to redesigned bus stops, can proceed with trust and end up giving more agency to the community.

After **Gray Area Foundation for the Arts** moved into SF's Tenderloin district, Executive Director and Founder Josette Melchor told us, "We realized the city wasn't going to do anything to solve the street issues. In response, we developed the **Market Street Prototyping Festival**, which invited the community to redesign the streets themselves." A total of $25K was invested in 25 prototypes that were developed over 3-6 months and deployed through a weekend street closure permit. The street festival allowed 5,000 citizens to experience redesigned sidewalks, with everything from new concepts for street lighting to public urinals developed by artists.

The festival led to **Living Innovation Zones**, a program where neighborhoods can apply to become testbeds for new ideas, which has spread to other cities.

2. Direct attention and energy to neglected public spaces.

Revitalized downtowns can draw a lot of attention, yet focused efforts in underserved areas are often overlooked, wasting the potential for a significant ripple effect on the community..

For example, Alex Beltran from **San Bernardino Generation Now** told us about bringing in over 100 artists to paint murals in a local park ("some were graffiti artists from competing crews, but they worked together"). She said, "Many residents were shocked to see how the park was transformed, and where they once avoided it, now felt comfortable going there." **Generation Now** also cleaned up an old abandoned building, formerly a water department, and with the help of local leaders, turned it into a community center drawing crowds to its affordable theater shows and art classes (Wine and Paint Night is a hit with young people).

"We use reward systems in gaming and virtual worlds. People will spend an amazing amount of time and even money to achieve high ranking or renown. In using the incentive power of prizes and prestige, we see they have an enormous effect on how people behave. In life, we have things like prizes: Nobel prizes, Pulitzers, Oscars. Think of other prizes, prizes of civic leadership, of coverage of civic leadership."

Joseph Unger
CEO
Pigeon Hole Productions

Jeudy Mom, Director of the **Compton Initiative**, explained that beautifying his Compton neighborhood helped foster trust at a time of changing demographics ("from mostly black to mostly brown"). He noticed that the longtime homes of his elderly neighbors, their families having moved away, were falling into disrepair, and they had no one to help. "We organized thousands of volunteers from churches, schools, companies, and the community to paint homes, schools, churches, plant gardens and make other beautification efforts in Compton. Now, every quarter we have more than 1,500 volunteers, including students who make the trip to volunteer over spring break. Church and college groups from across the nation participate," Jeudy said. "Working on this very intimate level, neighbors helping neighbors, has eased tensions."

3. Connect the voices of progress and share stories of hope.

Philip Zelikow, the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia and an early expert on localism, told the Atlantic in 2016 that "There are a lot of more positive narratives out there – but they're lonely, and disconnected. It would make a difference to join them together, as a chorus that has a melody."

Often, entrepreneurs and innovation centers have taken up the task. But more and more, traditional newspapers are finding a role to play, not only as localism's natural storytellers, but as its new protagonists. Tony Berg, the publisher of **The Kansas City Star**, told us, "We now have to reshape our model and think, how can we put a journalist in a position to make a difference in this city?"

The Star has developed a **Maker City section**, which will connect entrepreneurs, inventors, makers, and civic-minded enterprises and foundations. They will profile "Maker of the Week," local Maker Spaces, and entrepreneurs who create jobs, while also giving space for guest blogs. Furthermore, as Tony said, "We've been able to sit down with the communities in Kansas City and ask, what is our new role in reflecting community priorities and facilitating moving those priorities forward?" These co-creation sessions resulted in initiatives such as citizen science and the revamping of bus stations across the city, particularly in the area west of Troost (which has traditionally been ignored). The Star is just the first adopter of a vision that, through the **McClatchy Company**'s newspapers, is spreading to cities across America.

"There are lots of things going on simultaneously in a city, but they aren't always connected. Convening can make a big impact. Libraries and trade schools are redefining their civic roles, thinking about how we do all of this and actually grow revenue."

Peter Hirshberg
Chairman
Maker City Project, Inc.

"Much of our innovation projects were blocked by bureaucratic processes. We discovered how important it is to continually throw it in their face. I had to get 62 permits to deploy the projects I described. I found an ally in the planning department who helped me to get the permits. This was critical to our success."

Josette Melchor
Executive Director
Gray Area Foundation for the Arts

4. Gather the community and its resources (perhaps in a familiar place).

In the 21st century, the information and services that people rely on to thrive as citizens are rapidly changing, and they need a place to go to find it. Historically, libraries were places to be alone with a book – but they're now hubs of public information and services of all kinds, becoming vibrant community centers.

John Szabo, City Librarian of the **Los Angeles Public Library**, told the story of finding new ways to serve unique local communities. LA libraries started with adult literacy, STEAM and other programs for kids, ESL courses, information about citizenship, and access to computers for job searches — all relevant topics for most residents. Then, they did a major outreach program to understand the special needs of each neighborhood that were not being met elsewhere. As a result, each library now provides a variety of specialized services that, depending on the location, can include citizenship classes, connecting the veteran community, hands-on help with resumes and interviewing, helping job seekers research companies, and online coursework towards high school graduation. These libraries are now informal places to host meetings on local issues.

The Annenberg School's **Center on Communication Leadership & Policy** Director Geoffrey Cowan, pointed out that just as newspapers are becoming virtual connection centers for civic reinvention, libraries are becoming important physical ones.

5. Everyone: run for office!

A powerful way to help shape local government is to become part of it. As the past year has underlined, there is a revival in local politics; people with no political experience are running for office and winning. We've seen that in their communities, Americans are ready for new ideas and new leaders. A few years ago, Alex Beltran wouldn't have dreamed of running for office in her hometown of San Bernardino. One of the oldest communities in California, home to a mixed-ethnic working-class population that is majority LatinX and African American, San Bernardino was in a leadership crisis; the city declared bankruptcy in 2012. In 2013, a group of young adults founded **Generation Now** to fight for their city. "We came together and shared our ideas, but the council did not take them up," Alex told us. "It was this situation, in addition to the many problems that our local government does not address, that gave me the courage to run for city council."

Alex went door to door, talking to voters about the opportunity to build a more responsive local government. And she came about as close to winning as one can. 30 long days later it was determined that she lost the seat by eight votes. Eight votes: the importance of registering voters and getting them out to vote cannot be overstated. The California midterms saw similar races across the state – long waits before final results; winners flipping back and forth; and in many cases (e.g. Josh Harder in California's Central Valley) the new upstart won by a narrow margin. So, everyone: run for office and tell your friends!

6. To kickstart economic development, connect your city's strengths and build what it's missing.

Our conversations identified three related requirements for effective local economic development:

◊   Education that's tightly aligned with industry needs
◊   Places where people are inspired to work and learn together
◊   A community that believes in positive change

In every city, the recipe is similar – but the ingredients will look different, and some might have to be made from scratch.

In Fresno, entrepreneur Jake Soberal who is the CEO and Co-Founder of **Bitwise Industries** saw a nascent tech industry – some startups, but no incubator where they could co-work and share ideas. Potential talent – the children of migrant farm workers who'd been told tech jobs weren't possible for them – needed access to programming classes at a low cost, and a practical path to the workforce. The local community, with deep roots in agriculture and the self-image of a broken city, was mistrustful of shiny new ideas. So Jake created **Bitwise**, a 250,000 sq. ft. training and innovation center downtown that doesn't represent a new Silicon Valley, but rather an improved Fresno. **Bitwise** operates in constant conversation with the community, putting tech offices next to nonprofits, and inviting kids and families to tour its facilities and watch performances in its theater space. In 5 years, **Bitwise**'s **Geekwise Academy** has graduated 3,500 students that reflect the demographics of the community exactly. It builds connections with local industries – agriculture, health care, government – to discover what coding skills are needed and ensure its graduates succeed.

Larry Frank, President of **Los Angeles Trade Technical College**, told us a similar story of how in LA, they're making rigorous workforce development classes available free of charge to residents who might not otherwise be able to afford such education, as a way of making sure that the talent capacity in the city is prepared for jobs of the future. This is in turn generating a new culture of hope and enthusiasm: "I would not underestimate the power of being able to say, "Community College is free," Larry said.

7. Use interactive media to tell your city's story in unexpected ways.

To reach the people in your community, they have to hear your message above the noise of national dysfunction. As Joseph Unger, Co-founder of **Pigeon Hole Productions**, a Virtual World Building and Creative Infrastructure Co., pointed out, "creating

your own media channels is a powerful way to connect with others outside of the mainstream media." With Twitch, YouTube, Facebook, and other apps, "we're all capable of making our own CNN story every day… that is a form of pure power – creating your own audience and monetizing that value, and then using that value to create action."

Joseph has gone a step further with world building in video games, making virtual reality simulations of real cities that players can explore and enhance. The games are a low-risk way for the community to work together and test solutions, generating the trust that's essential to making progress in the real world. Some of the best ideas to come out of these games are now being applied in real life.

8. Inspire action with data that pinpoints local issues.

The more focused and specific a problem is, the more actionable it becomes. Christina Altmayer, Vice President of Programs for **First 5 Los Angeles**, told us about learning this lesson when her organization was trying to mobilize support for investments in early childhood. She started collecting data on kindergarten readiness to help rally support for her goals, and she quickly realized that sharing the most specific statistics yielded the most direct results.

When she told people that that 50% of children in California weren't ready for kindergarten, this figure was too broad; it wasn't clear how anyone could make an impact. So she mapped the data to specific neighborhoods, which made local parents, school districts, and civic groups take interest. She went further by piecing out data that showed a correlation between kindergarten readiness and future property values and taxes, attracting the support of the business community. As a result, cities are now acting: Mission Viejo made it a policy that every child in the community gets a library card at birth, and Santa Ana decided to convene educators to improve investments in early childhood.

"Almost all the social systems we built at the governmental level have developed top-down. We almost never think, 'let's go up the thing.' It's like salmon swimming upstream. When we think about the existence of social systems at the horizontal level that would mimic our current, flattened communication systems, we don't really find them. I hope one thing that comes out of this is developing new social systems that match the innovativeness of our new communication systems."

Morley Winograd
Author
Healing American Democracy: Going Local

OUR PROCESS

We began our discussion the evening before so that we could include thoughts from a few people unable to make the actual convening. On the day of the convening, our process involved two moderated sessions:

1. Session 1 used an economic and political lens.

2. Session 2 used a cultural and civic lens.

Both sessions entailed a lively discussion encompassing stories from participants covering projects they have done and what they have learned. As they were speaking, we pulled out the themes as fodder for our afternoon brainstorm.

During lunch, Deb and Jim Fallows (authors of **Our Towns**) shared their reflections from their travels to towns across America and how those intersected with the morning discussion.

In the afternoon we brainstormed moving forward. We asked, what insights did we uncover that could provide an agenda for cities looking to make a difference at the local level? Through discussion and evaluation, the ideas were narrowed down to eight initiatives, which you just read.

The central premise is that the most positive and practical developments in this stage of American life are happening at the local and regional level—but that most Americans have barely heard of those developments except in the communities where they themselves live.

–James Fallows