The current political landscape is marred by a growing disconnect between citizens and their elected officials. Public trust in the federal government is near an all-time low, our political institutions are gridlocked on critical national issues and many citizens are frustrated and angry with elected officials perceived inability to effectively govern. However, these are just symptoms. The underlying challenges our country faces are complex, but at its heart are the dissolution of a viable political center and the rise of political extremes.

What has happened to the engaged middle? Why aren’t their voices a greater part of the political conversation? The disappearing center is a result of gerrymandered districts, entrenched interest groups, extremism in the primary process, and a more fractured media landscape that makes it easy to remain unchallenged in your beliefs. In order to renew trust in government and catalyze more effective decision-making, we need to bring the center back to the table and begin to reengage them in the political dialogue.

How do we begin to reengage the center and those who have “tuned out” due to apathy and disgust? We posit that by engaging with citizens, journalists, and elected officials in a new and dynamic way, we can bring the center back to the table and renew public trust in the American political system.

Democratizing Digital Platforms

The world of news media continues to experience dramatic change, with no clear end in sight. The big, traditional news outlets are greatly diminished. The oversized role they formerly occupied in providing news coverage to the majority of people through “appointment viewing” has declined. Newspaper readership continues to erode; however, online and digital versions of these same newspapers are attracting a new, growing and paying audience. Additionally, the importance of social media and alternative sources for news continues to grow. With the growth and rollout of more refined and efficient technology, individuals and small organizations are able to create a wider range of high-quality multi-media content and reach increasingly larger audiences than ever before.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the proliferation of these new digital options – “traditional” news providers with strong brands have the opportunity to stand out. However, whether the outlet is The New York Times or an emerging new player, a reputation for highly respected content is not enough. To achieve true engagement and fulfill the democratizing promise of the digital age, producers must deploy communications technologies that initiate and sustain ongoing conversations, as well as engagement loops, to create a richer experience, stronger communication and better-informed citizens.

New approach to public engagement

Amid this on-going revolution an opportunity exists to take a fundamentally different approach to public engagement, one that aggressively leverages broadcast and online tools to offer greater two-way communication between news producers and their audiences, as well as between citizens and government. Additional dimensions of these tools enable multipoint conversations between citizens and communities (place based and virtual) and foster greater and more nuanced discussion of important civic issues. The line between news producer and news consumer has blurred and will continue to do so. However, it is important to recognize that even within this hyper-connected world, isolation between different communities and groups of people continues to stand in the way of developing a broader consensus built by an engaged middle.
Isolation Persists

The communities in which people are most active tend to be smaller and more narrowly focused. While some people seek out diverse communities, others tend to limit themselves to communities of people very similar to themselves, which risks the potential of living in an echo chamber with no new information.

In these isolated communities, members pay most of their attention to internally generated, aggregated, and curated content. Rather than breaking down barriers between communities, social media has primarily recreated existing community patterns online. These persistent gaps between communities need to be addressed to advance and maintain a cohesive policy and public affairs dialogue.

Bridging the Gaps

Despite the ever-evolving environment of news media and social media, and the blurring of the lines between news producers and consumers, public media and other major news outlets are in a unique position. With a proper focus on the right issues, guided by good principles for citizen engagement, and leveraging a wide array of digital platforms, news organizations can address this isolation and play a significant role in bringing the disengaged middle into the center of politics and governance.

The remainder of this report looks at those principles for citizen engagement and how they might be reflected in this effort, followed by a discussion of some of the functions that news media could play and some digital tools they may utilize.

Linked to Decision Making

Core to the principles of citizen engagement is the notion that people should have the opportunity to influence the decisions that impact their lives. Practitioners in the field of deliberative democracy typically address this principle by working very closely with policy makers and elected officials to ensure that citizen engagement is linked to decisions within the political process that can be influenced by citizen engagement and dialogue. An alternative approach practiced more often by advocacy groups is to build a large base of citizens that support a particular outcome and encourage them to pressure their elected officials to enact appropriate policy.

News media has the potential to fulfill this principle though it probably requires an alternative approach. News organizations have historically played a mediating role between policy makers and the public, but it has traditionally been a one-way communication role to inform citizens about government. The news media can use this traditional role of covering public affairs to identify the key decision points where citizens are able to influence policy and then employ citizen engagement tools and principles to gather an informed public opinion on those decision points. In addition, news organizations can provide a space for citizens and advocacy organizations to interact with each other and build a public consensus.

Diverse Representation

Many people acknowledge the importance of diverse representation in citizen engagement and policy making. Why is diverse representation important? First, if a plan is being developed that will impact a community, all perspectives should be heard. Second, engaging all perspectives can increase the chances of successful implementation because the plan will have broader community support and more credibility with elected officials. The community will feel greater ownership of the plan and take greater responsibility for implementation. Finally, it enables better decision-making. The challenges facing planning and so many other policy issues are complex and involve many sectors. Good strategies require input from as many different perspectives as possible.

Public opinion surveys achieve diverse representation through random sampling. Deliberative democracy and other
citizen engagement efforts employ random sample methods of their own and/or strategic outreach efforts to ensure different socio-economic groups are engaged. However, strategic outreach can become complicated due to the size and demographics of the sample. It is easier to achieve a representative sample of 100 people than it is of 1,000 people.

While many believe that online engagement has an inherent ability to create diverse representation, the digital divide and isolation in online communities works against that goal. For online and digital engagement tools to build an engaged middle, the challenges of diverse engagement must be addressed.

**Informed Participation**

An important difference between traditional public opinion surveys and deliberative engagement efforts is the extent to which people are given the chance to better understand an issue before they are asked their opinion on the issue. Public opinion surveys typically provide little or no information about an issue and simply ask questions. Deliberative engagement efforts take care to frame the issue in such a way that helps participants understand the context, relevant information, different points of view, and the potential impacts of different outcomes.

News media is well positioned to enable informed participation. Informing readers about public affairs has been a primary objective for traditional news organizations. One challenge here though is making it accessible (and interesting) to a larger audience. The important details of policy are generally less entertaining reading than the drama of politics. Developing new forms of presenting information, including multi-media presentations, gamification, mini-documentaries, and even fictionalized stories with an educational purpose will be required.

**Facilitation**

Finally, a critical principle and practice in citizen engagement is the facilitation of dialogue between participants. There are several goals of facilitation:

1) Everybody has a chance to participate
2) Nobody dominates the conversation
3) People treat each other with respect
4) People explore differences openly and honestly
5) People understand and appreciate different points of view
6) Participants find consensus where possible
7) Participants stay focused and on task

Traditionally, citizen engagement has achieved this with the help of human facilitators. This reliance on human facilitators has been an obstacle to taking deliberative democracy to a significantly larger scale. Most online dialogues without any support from human facilitators, especially those that relate to public affairs and politics, tend to be uncivil and unproductive. Some efforts have been made from within the dialogue and deliberation community to create online dialogue forums, but they have not been able to attract participants and have not yet proven that they would be effective with large numbers of participants. Could some form of online tool that combines a reputation system, peer-monitoring, language processing, sentiment analysis, and targeted interventions by human facilitators overcome this challenge? This is an area that requires considerable experimentation along with some research and development.

Practitioners of citizen engagement have been hampered by their inability to separate methodology from the principles discussed above. It is difficult for experienced practitioners to set aside their traditional methods. In order to find new ways of achieving these principles in online engagement, extensive collaboration with those experienced in digital engagement will be necessary.

**What can news media do?**

This section looks at four functions that news media might support as part of an effort to bring greater citizen engagement and connection to decision-making and governance. The functions include new approaches to traditional roles, as well as new roles.

**Education**

Public education has always been core to the work of news organizations. However, a focus on fostering citizen engagement will require a shift in the way information is presented. When creating news stories, writers and producers must not only ask if all of the relevant information is included, but also evaluate the accessibility and usability of the material. By usability, we mean how an individual can act upon the information. Including this action-oriented
component enables the news consumer to see news as part of a larger democratic activity that requires action on behalf of citizens. Furthermore, news media will need to find ways to heighten the entertainment value of the presentation, without falling into the trap of focusing so heavily on the political drama.

This new approach will benefit not just from greater use of digital engagement tools, but also different forms of presentation. Short videos that cut to the heart of the issue will need to be the norm. Employing gamification techniques to inform citizens about issues will be needed. A more involved effort could be a reality-TV show where popular participants work together to understand and react to current news events. To help people better understand different points of view, news media can build upon existing models (such as The New York Times “Room for Debate” feature) and allow their audiences to associate with one perspective or another, identify what they respect from differing points of view, and add their own points of view.

**Citizen Decision-Making**

To help citizens fully understand the complexities of policy making, they need to be given the chance to participate in decision-making, whether it is merely an exercise or something more substantive. The decision-making should take place in the context of education, so that it is informed participation. To make the results more credible with decision makers, news media can take steps to ensure that the participants (or at least a subset) match the demographics of the larger community.

This decision-making can consist of individual activities and activities where citizens interact with each other to build consensus. For example, traditional surveys can be embedded in short videos and articles or second screen polling technologies can be used in conjunction with news programs or the aforementioned reality-TV show. Discussion forums that employ crowdsourcing, sentiment analysis, and live moderation can help move a group towards a consensus outcome.

**Action Building**

In addition to strengthening the connection between citizens and government, news media can help to foster interaction between individual citizens and non-governmental organizations. This interaction can focus on what the larger community can do, either in partnership with or independent of government, to address important public issues. This new function would be consistent with a growing understanding that government cannot fix many of our issues, and that citizens need support to address issues themselves in a constructive and cooperative fashion.

News media can serve as a resource to link individuals and organizations already working on an issue with interested citizens. Crowd funding (with matching dollars from advertisers) could be used to support citizen or non-profit led programs and services. News media can harvest discussions and information across multiple social media platforms on a single issue to bring these sometimes dispersed and disconnected pieces together to become part of a more shared dialogue.

**Accountability**

Finally, news media can take a lead to help citizens not just hold government accountable, but hold each other and non-governmental organizations accountable as well. Accountability has been a part of news media’s traditional role and it requires greater citizen engagement to be effective (especially within an environment of reduced resources). News media can draw links between the collective views expressed through citizen decision-making, government action, and the commitments and efforts emerging from non-government actors for action building. In an effort to increase the media’s role as a mediator, we suggest media developing accountability tools and activities that citizens can use to assess government and non-governmental actions and follow-up activities for citizens to share that assessment publicly and with the responsible actors.
Conclusion

Many of us in the world of deliberative democracy and citizen engagement have sought ways to institutionalize stronger links between citizens and decision makers within government. While those efforts should continue, building infrastructure and capacity for more informed, citizen-based decision-making and action within other sectors is needed. The news media and the evolution of digital platforms and engagement tools provide a powerful opportunity for this.

News media and deliberative democracy share an understanding of the importance of strengthening the connections between citizens and government to promote a healthy democracy. Though they have viewed this connection in different ways and employed very different implementation methods, both need to learn from each other, shift their approaches, and create something new together to accomplish the shared goal of engaging ever larger numbers of people, especially from the political center, in governance and strengthening our democracy.