

January 31, 2013



The Power of a 'Community Voice' Movement

Posted: 11/18/11 09:42 AM ET

We have a crisis of conversation in our democracy. People want to be heard and to have a voice in our future. It's time for citizens -- you and me, all of us -- to come in from the cold. Whether conservative, liberal, or independent, we are all citizens united with the same rights. Coming together for protest and mutual learning is important but, in addition to face-to-face gatherings in the parks and streets, it is essential to bring our conversations into the mainstream of society. Only a relatively few voices can be heard from the streets but tens of millions can be heard through the airwaves that we, the public, legally own. Many people, whatever their point of view, do not feel their voices are being heard. It's time to give citizens an authentic voice through a "Community Voice" movement that directly fulfills our Constitutional rights to be heard.

Power in a democracy is the power to freely communicate. A "Community Voice" movement could use our amazing array of powerful communication tools:

1. to enable a community to discover the views of its members regarding critical problems and solutions and,
2. to convey those views to elected leaders and the public at large through publicly televised forums.

Our country and our future are in trouble: Our financial future. Our energy future. Our jobs future. Our climate future. Our kids' future. We are in the midst of a full-scale systems crisis. Whatever our differences may be in this country -- and there are plenty -- we all want a voice in our future. Importantly, we require a scale of civic conversation that is equal to the scale of challenges and solutions -- and often these are of regional, national, and global scale.

While there is no debating the power of the Internet, it is important to recognize that, at this critical time, the large-scale conversation of our democracy continues to be dominated by television. As American citizens, [we legally own the airwaves](#) in our local communities. In turn, we have a unique opportunity to coalesce the anxiety and frustration that permeates our society into a positive movement that can truly strengthen our participatory democracy. We can bring the conversations in the streets into our public life with one technology that connects with nearly every home in America -- television.

Here is the opportunity I see: *Within the space of three months, the citizens of a major metropolitan area can take three, difficult but realistically doable steps (I've done them before), to awaken an entirely new level of civic conversation:*

1. Community Voice Organization -- The first step is to create a simple, independent, non-profit organization -- a "Community Voice" organization to represent the communication rights and needs of a major metropolitan area served by television broadcasters that use our public airwaves. (In the 1980s, we called our San Francisco Bay Area organization "Bay Voice.") This organization must authentically represent the diverse constituencies of its community and it must be strictly trans-partisan -- able to stand above and embrace the full range of community views and concerns. A Community Voice organization has only two roles: to listen to the concerns of the community, and to present those concerns for dialogue before the community in the form of "Electronic Town Meetings," and then to "let the chips fall where they may." The organization itself is neutral and does no advocacy; rather, it serves as a vehicle for giving the community a voice in its own affairs and future.

2. Prime Time Access -- The second step is for the Community Voice organization to make a legal request for prime-time from local television broadcasters (ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX) for a series of ongoing Electronic Town Meetings that enable the community to air its views on issues of critical concern. Conversations about the most critical issues of our time cannot be relegated to the wastelands of viewership. Because the laws are unequivocal that broadcasters must serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" before their own profits, the community has every right to expect this trans-partisan request will be honored if the first step has been done well.

3. Electronic Town Meetings -- The third step is for the Community Voice organization to work in cooperation with one of the local TV broadcasters to produce an Electronic Town Meeting (or ETM) with feedback from a "scientific" or random sample of citizens from the community. This can be supplemented with feedback from specific groups (younger, older, ethnic, gender, etc.) that want to participate in non-random surveys via the Internet. The modern ETM process builds upon more than two

centuries of experience with the New England Town Meetings, and is NOT controlled by the television stations or advertisers; rather, it is controlled by the community through its independent Community Voice organization.

From Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine, it is the major metropolitan areas that are the natural scale of organizing for legally effective work to take back the airwaves for a new level of citizen dialogue. If individual communities around the country were to form independent, trans-partisan Community Voice organizations to launch Electronic Town Meetings, it would revolutionize the conversation of democracy within a matter of months. The leadership of one community could inspire and catalyze other communities to create their own "Community Voice" organization and we could quickly have an entirely new layer of sustained and meaningful dialogue sweeping the country. Citizens could voice their concerns, propose and debate solutions, and help break through the gridlock at the state and national levels.

Many people recognize that we are immersed in a world of extraordinary communication technologies and that we now have the potential to raise the level of dialogue in our democracy dramatically. We are needlessly diminishing the richness and power of our democracy by not using these powerful tools to serve our needs as citizens. This is not an idealistic dream. A metropolitan-scale Electronic Town Meeting is the direct expression of our Constitutional rights -- and its workability was demonstrated nearly a quarter of a century ago! ([See the following video clip.](#)) By combining the broad reach of television with the penetrating depth of the Internet, we have the technologies for a revolution in civic communication. Television still offers the largest megaphone for local conversations; however, once underway, many could migrate to various Internet sites better suited to providing depth and perspective.

To meet the challenges of our times, we must transcend our partisan differences long enough to recognize our common need for a system of civic conversation that serves us all. In turn, each major community could create an independent, trans-partisan and non-profit organization that represents the legitimate communication needs of the community in relationship to broadcasters that use their airwaves.

We are all together in this time of great transition, and if we want a promising future it will be vital to pull together in cooperation. The human community has entered uncharted territory. We have never before had to come together like this as a nation and as a world. A perfect storm of global crises is growing in intensity and challenging us to make dramatic changes in our manner of living in the world. We can prepare by building a new level of civic dialogue that will be of invaluable service to us in our time of local-to-global transition. The foundation of a healthy democracy is a rich and vigorous conversation among its citizens, particularly during times of great transition such as we face today. A "Community Voice" movement that brings citizens and communities back into the conversation of democracy has the power to transform our pathway into the future.

Duane Elgin is an internationally recognized author, speaker, and trans-partisan media activist. Previous blogs on media themes include, "[Occupy the Airwaves](#)," "[Take Back the Airwaves](#)," "[The Last Taboo on Television](#)," and "[Can Television Help Awaken a Healthy World?](#)" His website is: <http://www.DuaneElgin.com/>

Been to Occupy Wall Street?

If you've been to an Occupy Wall Street event anywhere in the country, we'd like to hear from you. Send OfftheBus your photos, links to videos or first-hand accounts of what you've seen for possible inclusion in The Huffington Posts's coverage.

Participate

Follow Duane Elgin on Twitter: www.twitter.com/DuaneElgin

9 people are discussing this article in 10 conversations with 15 comments

Comments are closed on this entry.

[Most Recent](#) [Highlighted](#) [Most Faved](#) [My Conversations](#)

• [Linda Buzzell](#) **Become a fan**

• 0

• 0

•

76 Fans · Ecotherapist, co-editor "Ecotherapy: Healing with

"Community Voice" - what a wonderful idea! And Electronic Town Halls are just what we need now.

Reply Fave Share 29 Nov 11:01 AM [Flag](#)

[Mark Goodkin](#) **You are a fan**

• 0

• 0

•

11 Fans

Daune, how would it be if you created a prototype of the type of virtual town hall meeting you're describing. You could enlist others to assist. It could be aired on Web TV and be used as an example for others to use when creating town halls in their respective cities. (By the way, my previous post was a bit over the top, for which I apologize. You've mentioned that you want a town hall which embraces different points of view. I think I just got carried away.)