A Civic Communication Corps.

BY DEB ROY

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We live in an age of social media and polarized broadcast media in which the loudest voices and most extreme opinions dominate. Americans have self-sorted into politically and culturally isolated enclaves, susceptible to false narratives trafficked by political and media opportunists. The collapse of shared truths that inform us of the nuance and complex lived experience of our fellow citizens, and of empirically grounded knowledge, has put our country in grave danger. For those of us committed to the idea that all people have equal rights to live together as part of one democracy (a majority of Americans, I believe), we need to build new civic communication infrastructure that enables communities to be heard by one another, for improved mutual understanding, and by leaders, so that government becomes more responsive to citizens. To do this, Biden should work with Congress to create a national Civic Communication Corps. Members of the corps would work together with communities across the country to facilitate thousands—and one day even millions—of conversations (virtual, and in-person as the pandemic recedes), open to all, with an emphasis on surfacing hopes, concerns and stories of the underheard. The corps would collaborate with communities to identify areas of commonality and difference, make sense of those patterns, share insights with local media and make recommendations for action to improve people’s lives. Municipal, state and national public institutions could in turn commit to listening and responding to the needs and interests of those who have shared their time and perspectives. To support the corps and maximize its impact, I envision a state-of-the-art AI-powered digital technology platform designed to capture, make sense of and share community conversations at scale. The principles of transparency and accountability must be baked into the design to balance privacy with visibility. A pilot project along these lines, the Local Voices Network, suggests the approach can work.

The ultimate goal would be a nationwide network of communities, fueled by strong local organizing, that would reverse the erosion of a shared understanding, build trust and strengthen our democracy for generations to come.

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