

## **Being Seen: Turning America Downside Up**

John McKnight

Co-Founder, Asset-Based Community Development Institute

Senior Associate, Kettering Foundation

Many Americans of diverse persuasions feel that they are not “heard”. They express their grievances in various forms from demonstrating in the streets to posting on social media. The focus of their grievances is our large institutions – government, business, not for profit agencies.

There are two major characteristics of these institutions that makes them structurally unable to hear. The first is their scale, both the scale of the institution and the scale of the complaining population.

The major institutions are huge multi-layered systems and bureaucracies. They try to respond to the thousands of voices of constituents and customers with faceless internet boilerplate messages or by connecting them with a real but powerless person in the Phillipian Islands. They are inherently unable to hear people because of their own scale and the millions seeking to be heard.

In addition, government is uniquely unable to hear the millions of Americans who vote but their candidate loses. They feel they are not heard.

In the case of government and nongovernmental institutions, the scale is such that for most people the idea of being heard is unrealistic. And those who are fated to “reform” the institutions so that they can respond meaningfully have a sad history of failure.

The second cause of institutional unresponsiveness is that by their nature they are remote and impersonal. There is no powerful real person within the institution who a citizen/consumer can engage. There is, instead, a non-person

hidden behind the letters CEO, COO and CFO or the words Executive Director, Chairman or President. Those seeking to be heard are John and Jane, persons with personal concerns. However, they are fated to interact with a structure designed to be impersonal.

When we “institutionalize” something, we mean that there is now a structure within which a person is transformed to an entity called “employee”. They fill a slot. They are a replaceable part. The institution will move on without them.

These employees are confronted by John or Jane who have a personal grievance and are often in pain. Within the institution they can’t engage a real person with the power to really hear them. Instead persons called John or Jane are transformed into clients or consumers – the most powerless status in society.

In the large-scale world populated with inherently impersonal institutions, even democratic societies are structured so that millions of citizens feel, accurately, that they are not being heard. These unheard people are structurally out of touch. The exception is those select people who are privileged. Privilege is a name for those with enough power to actually be heard. They “end run” the structural barriers. Traditionally, they are white, male and have a lobby.

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It is useful to consider how people would come to know they were being heard:

Is it through their vote where the minority are unheard?

Is it the result of receiving a form letter from a legislator speaking evasively when “no” is the answer?

Is it the official hearing where they are “heard” but the vote goes against them?

Is it the corporate Customer Service Representative who is institutionally present while sending your message into a vaporous cloud of data?

Perhaps there is another way that people feel heard. We tend to think of “being heard” as the result of seeking authorizations, benefits, rights, services, etc. In this kind of “being heard,” we are consumers seeking institutional benefits. They have it. We want it. If we get it, we’re heard.

However, If we are citizens we are producers as well as consumers. The vehicle for most of our productions is our associations, clubs , organizations and churches. Here we live personally and collectively using our power to solve problems and create better ways of doing things. This happens because in this associational world, people of all persuasions hear each other. It is this local hearing that results in the creation of the infrastructure of local communities.

So, there is a power making domain in which people get heard by each other. Their shared voices result in something they can see. There is an immediate connection between their voices and the outcomes they collectively produce. Through this process there are millions of visible community benefits created and experienced by local citizens.\*

While these benefits are pervasive in functioning neighborhoods and towns, they are largely unseen at the institutional level. If seen, viewed as “ nice but insignificant.”

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\* The actual examples of local public benefits can be seen at:

[A Study of the Community Benefits Provided by Local Associations](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Formatted%20SG%20Study%203(1).pdf) by John McKnight (2013),  
[https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Formatted%20SG%20Study%203\(1\).pdf](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Formatted%20SG%20Study%203(1).pdf)

[Directory of Spring Green Associations](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Community%20Resource%20Guide.pdf), <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Community%20Resource%20Guide.pdf>

[Spring Green Study Questionnaire](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Questionnaire%2010_10_11(1).pdf), [https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Questionnaire%2010\\_10\\_11\(1\).pdf](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Questionnaire%2010_10_11(1).pdf)

It may be for many Americans an essential cause of their voicelessness is not that they are unheard but that they are unseen, unrecognized, unsupported or celebrated as they do the basic work of building our communities.

So, suppose we understood that the most basic working parts of our country are local – family, friends and neighbors joining together in groups that make up the base of society. If this base were the domain institutions could see as the most important space in America, they could put themselves in a new perspective. They would see themselves as servants of the local associational structure. They would act like servants – public servants, social servants and service sellers rather than acting like Lords who dominate their citizen servants through high scale remote impenetrable systems.

This transformation to a citizen-centered associational society would shift the functions and power of the institutions. The institutional questions would become:

1. How can we get out of the way of citizens being producers?
2. How can we step back so their power can grow?
3. How can we support their work so that it is more powerful?
4. How can we publicly report their powerful work every day in our media?
5. How can we celebrate their work now that we see them as the central producers of our well- being and our future?

To be heard I am acting as a supplicant and a consumer. However, to be seen I am a powerful creator in the associational world. When I am institutionally seen as part of the citizen center where I work with my neighbors, left and right, then I can sense my real power. I will feel much less aggrieved because the institutions around me will honor my capacities and support my being evermore productive. My complaints with the mega-systems will diminish because I am at the center of power. I have no one to complain to but myself.

When we are “seen” we will realize much more clearly the significance of our collective capacities, our community building work and our power. We will take

on more functions and authority as institutions step back and become our servants rather than our Lords.\* And we won't need to live lives of grievance, hopelessly dependent on powerful institutions with the basic inability to hear or see us.

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\* For a definition of powerful local function see [Neighborhood Necessities: Seven Functions That Only Effectively Organized Neighborhoods Can Provide](https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Neighborhood%20Necessities%202013.pdf) by John McKnight (2013).  
<https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/Neighborhood%20Necessities%202013.pdf>