Talk Us Into It

DEMOS

Building everyday democracy

Putting conversation at the heart of the public realm

Samuel Jones

About Demos

Who we are
Demos is the think tank for everyday democracy. We believe everyone should be able to make personal choices in their daily lives that contribute to the common good. Our aim is to put this democratic idea into practice by working with organisations in ways that make them more effective and legitimate.

What we work on
We focus on six areas: public services; science and technology; cities and public space; people and communities; arts and culture; and global security.

Who we work with
Our partners include policy-makers, companies, public service providers and social entrepreneurs. Demos is not linked to any party but we work with politicians across political divides. Our international network – which extends across Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, Brazil, India and China – provides a global perspective and enables us to work across borders.

How we work
Demos knows the importance of learning from experience. We test and improve our ideas in practice by working with people who can make change happen. Our collaborative approach means that our partners share in the creation and ownership of new ideas.

What we offer
We analyse social and political change, which we connect to innovation and learning in organisations. We help our partners show thought leadership and respond to emerging policy challenges.

How we communicate
As an independent voice, we can create debates that lead to real change. We use the media, public events, workshops and publications to communicate our ideas. All our books can be downloaded free from the Demos website.

www.demos.co.uk

Talk Us Into It

Putting conversation at the heart of the public realm

Samuel Jones

DEM⊙S

DEMⒸS

Contents

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Brian Waring and Scott Keiller at Starbucks and to Marie-Louise Fagan and James Ruane of Cohn & Wolfe for making this project possible and for their contribution to many of the discussions that shaped it. At Demos, thanks to Eddie Gibb for setting the work up.

Also from Demos, thanks to all the interns who helped support the project – Noel Hatch, without whose dedication the event that helped shape this research might never have happened, Isabel Martin and Tracey Sartin for their research support, and to all those who helped with the final event. Thanks also to Mark Fuller for his début in seeing the pamphlet through publication and Pete Bradwell, John Craig, John Holden, Melissa Mean and Sam Hinton-Smith and for their insight and comments.

The event in which this research was discussed and developed would not have been possible without the contributions and participation of Simon Parker, Hannah Lownsbrough and Jack Stilgoe of Demos. Their insight and varied expertise was invaluable in shaping the outcome and thinking. Thanks also to Fiona Bruce, Gerard Darby, Penny Egan and Ros Taylor whose speeches and discussion were central to that event and to all those who attended it at Shakespeare's Globe.

Particular thanks, though, to Catherine Fieschi for her time, support and guidance throughout. Her contribution to the arguments and suggestions that this pamphlet makes has been invaluable.

Finally, thanks to all those with whom I have chatted about their thoughts and experiences during the research.

As ever, all errors and omissions remain my own.

Samuel Jones
September 2006

Foreword

Brian Waring

It will not surprise you to hear that the places people go for public conversation in the twenty-first century have evolved, with spaces like coffeehouses, pubs, post offices and even hairdressers playing an increasingly important role in enabling and, on occasion, facilitating conversation and connecting local communities.

The growth of the UK's 'café culture' and use of conversational space coincides with observations and reports in the press that we are talking less. As this report shows, this is not actually the case. It's not that we're talking less – we are just talking in different ways about different things. Put simply, our conversations have become more and more fragmented and we are increasingly less likely to talk to our neighbours.

The problem that Demos highlights in this pamphlet is that while conversation is essential to the structures of our public realm, the nature of conversation has changed. As our conversations change, policy-makers, thinkers on public space and business have a responsibility to re-visit how the spaces around us connect with the changing ways in which we have conversations and how public spaces can be used to facilitate and enable the conversations that are so crucial to our public realm.

Starbucks believes that by working with Demos on this report, practical steps and suggestions have been generated that could improve the quality, vibrancy and frequency of public conversation. Knowing our neighbours by name, helping our children develop the skills to converse effectively, and recognising the value of small talk as a means to foster community spirit and cohesion are just some of the simple, yet effective ways that could encourage conversations and help re-engage a wide range of people to come together, facilitate change and make a difference,

not only to their own community but to society as a whole.

In the UK, over a million people visit Starbucks stores every week. They may come by themselves or to meet others, to converse and share common interests. Two of the most recognisable aural characteristics of the 'Starbucks Experience' are the sounds of espresso machines and of customers talking. Conversation permeates the atmosphere as much as does the coffee. It is a place, according to the author John Simmons, that is 'socially democratic', where the business-man sits in the same space as the mum taking a break from shopping, or the students getting together after class.[1]

Providing a place and space for interaction and dialogue in communities is inherent to the culture of Starbucks, and is something we are intent on developing. We recognise we are a big company with a large international presence; however, local communities are absolutely critical to what we do and we are completely committed to them.

We want to ensure that every store across the country is unique, and provides space for the communities it serves and helps to bring people together. After all, the coffeehouse has long since been a site of discussion, debate and community engagement with many valuable and radical ideas originating from meetings in coffeehouses.

Elsewhere, Starbucks, working in partnership with the Royal Society of Arts, has re-visited this long-held tradition through the creation of the 'Coffeehouse Challenge'. This initiative creates a space for dialogue in our stores and other locations, through which the local community can come and talk about and find solutions to issues that matter to them. Since its inception in 2004, more than 300 Coffeehouse Challenge events have taken place, involving over 10,000 people across the country with over 20 awards of seed funding given out for the most innovative local projects.

We hope that some of the suggestions in this report will help to ensure that individuals and communities are given the space and oppor-

tunities to engage in effective public conversation. A demise in public conversation would be too great a loss to put into words.

Brian Waring, Marketing Director, Starbucks UK

Introduction

> *Democracy isn't solely about polite conversations in parliaments. . . . It needs to be continually refreshed with raw passions, anger and ideals.*[2]

Conversation has long been the cornerstone of our society. From parliament to neighbourhood meetings, it is at the heart of our assumptions about the public realm. There is an intrinsic link between conversation, our notion of the public sphere and the quality of democracy. However, changes within society have weakened the binding force that it can provide. At the same time a series of crises, from the perceived decline of standards of social behaviour to concerns over

security, has dominated the headlines of the papers we read and the news we consume.

This pamphlet suggests that the adherence to outdated ways of thinking about social involvement have intensified concern about our sense of community. This is connected to conversation. There is growing alarm – both in the UK and elsewhere – that we are talking less than we used to. In this pamphlet, I suggest that this is a misconception and that the issue is actually much more complex. New technologies enable us to speak to people anytime, anywhere and about virtually any topic we wish and this has led to a fragmentation of interest groups. As a result, we are talking less with those who do not share those interests and less to people in the areas in which we live and more to people to whom we are tied by interest, but not necessarily locale.

Although interest in community groups and organisations seems to be dwindling, this is not matched by a decline in our will to be involved in decision-making processes that affect the public

realm. The way that we engage with those around us has changed. We no longer necessarily connect with either conventional structures like community societies or even spaces in which we can interact and communicate with each other on a less formal basis, like markets. Instead, we connect in different ways and around different forms of conversation. Community involvement remains of vital importance, but structures of engagement no longer reflect the ways in which people are comfortable in having their say. The issue is that people are not talking about public affairs less – they are engaging less frequently in the means by which their conversation can become public.

On 5 July 2006, Demos convened a group of invited participants to have a conversation about conversation and what it means in the public realm. In that event, and in this pamphlet, we set out to ask some questions about our assumptions of community and the possibilities implied by changes in our society and the nature of our conversations. This pamphlet proposes that, by

combining what we know about conversations with what we know about the changing nature of community, we have the opportunity to reinvigorate the public realm to engage a wider range of people and give voice to the wider range of opinion on which our society is now built.

1. The importance of conversation

A world without conversation is a bleak one. In the *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's Kurtz talks and does little else: 'the man presented himself as a voice'.[3] Kurtz used his voice to construct his own identity, building a realm in which that identity is sovereign. Ultimately, though, he is unbalanced: the problem is that he has developed an identity that is isolated and shorn of contact. He has spent years talking to nobody – he spoke and those around him simply heard and did as he said: they neither listened nor engaged in any real or meaningful sense. As a later commentator on conversation has put it, 'with no access to our species' social feedback and control mechanisms, there will be nothing to keep misunderstanding,

incivility and dishonesty from creeping into our daily life at unprecedented levels'.[4] Our main mechanism of social feedback is real and deep conversation in which we confront and challenge issues, but maintain a civility and public friendship, ironing out disagreement. Without this, there is no understanding: neither negotiation nor sense of reality and community. For Kurtz, the result is haunting: 'The horror! The horror!'

In our daily lives, we avoid such horror by sociability, interaction with one another on an equal footing and exchanges based on conversation. Discourse, speech and talk have long been the keystones of our society. The very number of words we have for having a conversation testifies to its importance. We can gab, natter, chat, debate, discuss, discourse, gossip, gas, shoot the breeze, chew the fat, have a confab . . . the list could go on. All these are prerequisite for common living. Along with opposable thumbs, language is what distinguishes us as a species. Thinkers, from Aristotle to Hannah

Arendt, have consistently identified language as the basis of morality. Rousseau saw the need to communicate our feelings to others as being one of our basic desires. More recently, philosophers and thinkers, names as weighty as Richard Rorty, Georg Gadamer, Stanley Cavell and Michael Oakeshott, have put conversation at the very centre of 'knowing'. Conversation is more than simply a mechanism for managing society: it is the very material of which it is built.

Conversation RIP?

However, the sureness of the foundations that conversation provides have been questioned. Books and articles have carried rumours of its death. On 21 April 2006, a BBC article announced 'The dying art of conversation'. It was based on the findings of the Cambridge International Corpus, a collection of texts used for the analysis of the English language. 'Chit-chat and small talk have taken the place of proper conversation', the article began.[5] In the USA, meanwhile, Stephen Miller has published a book on conversation

entitled *Conversation: A history of a declining art*.[6]

Seemingly, this is out of kilter with our nature and the entire history of political and social thought. Can this really be the case? It is an irony of our newly hyper-connected world that we frequently come across reminders that our face-to-face conversation is lessening. As we develop into a more individualised society, the time that we spend talking and in conversation with each other appears to be being eroded. Looking at the networks within which people discuss different matters, a team of US researchers compared data from 1985 and 2004. Their finding was that the typical American discussion network has slightly less than one fewer confidant in it than it might have done two decades ago. Discussion networks centre on the conversations in which people ask those close to them for information, opinion or help and other routine interactions. The researchers concluded that 'the social environment of core confidants surrounding the typical American has become smaller, more densely interconnected and more centred on the close ties

of spouse/partner. The types of bridging ties that connect us to community and neighbourhood have withered as confidant networks have closed in on a smaller core group.'[7] Still more strikingly, they show that where, in 1985, 10 per cent of people mentioned no confidant with whom they discuss important matters, by 2004, that had increased to 24.6 per cent.

Trends like this are far more than academic observations. They seem reinforced by popular culture. Daily, we can tune into talk shows in which personal topics are discussed and vented on air and before millions. Nominally, this is conversation, but more accurately, these shows thrive on adversarial gobbets of opinion. TV shows like *Jerry Springer* in the USA or *Trisha* in the UK are the most notorious examples of this breed of television, but more high-brow programmes like *Newsnight* can take similarly adversarial stances to conversation. Even the architecture of our politics promotes this logic. Across the world, from the UN to the European Parliament, democratic representatives sit in

egalitarian circles. By contrast, in the Houses of the British Parliament parties sit in opposition, a visual reinforcement of the adversarial nature of political conversation.

Advertising reinforces this culture, charting an idealised land in which conversation flows as freely as milk and honey. Famously, a British Telecom advertising campaign promulgated the truism that 'it's good to talk'. It patently is, so why do we need reminding? The media has aggravated a nagging itch: the suspicion that we might actually be talking less. Other advertising campaigns have picked up on this – slogans rest on the apparent luxury of conversation: 'Who would you most want to have a one to one with?'

Meanwhile, technology seems to promote a culture of isolation. You or I can conduct an everyday experiment that would appear to confirm this. A quick and informal head-count, done over a week on London's public transport system in the interest of this research, suggests that about a third of us spend our journeys plugged into our iPods and MP3s; a further fifth

of us will usually be playing with our phones or Blackberries, often deep in a tunnel, away from any possible reception. 'When I was walking here today', said one speaker at the event we held for this research, 'there were all these people with iPods and mobile phones – they were looking down and, just by having poor eye contact, they were not living in public, they were internalised, existing in their own worlds.'

This is not to say that the individuals in question are any less public-minded or any more mean-spirited. Rather, we have more and more opportunity – and are seemingly taking it – to avoid interaction with the world around us: MP3 player sales increased 1270.5 per cent between 2002 and 2004.[8] We exist daily amid signs and symbols of isolationism. The *Washington Post* has described our society as an age of 'sonic smugness', in which we are plugged into our music, but not those around us.[9] The British social scientist, John L Locke, believes that we are on the verge of an 'autistic society' in which 'evidence is accumulating that a sizeable

proportion of those who cannot wait to turn on their computers in the morning are unable to turn them off at night'.[10]

Occasionally, technology is used to protect: at the London School of Economics, researchers for the report *Mobile Life* have discovered that 54 per cent of women under 25 say that they use their mobiles to deter approaches from men. However, as the number of mobile handsets we own outstrips our population at some 62.5 million and an average of 106 million text messages are sent each day, we have to ask what important aspects of face-to-face conversation might be lost in these technological advances.[11] Technological advance is pushing us away from even the most basic of our social units. Forty-four per cent of Britons say that face-to-face conversations are getting shorter. A third of us spend less time talking to friends and family because we can text or e-mail; 46 per cent would text to avoid 'wasting' time in a conversation. One in five say they now know less about what's going on in their friends' and families' lives or how they are

feeling.[12] Elsewhere, researchers have found that heavy domestic use of the internet reduces talking with family members, causing social networks to shrink and increasing loneliness and depression.[13]

Polling conducted by YouGov appears to confirm this less than rosy picture.[14] A sample of British citizens was asked whether they would strike up a conversation in a range of different public places that varied from the pub to the street and the park – the traditional heartland of public space. About three-quarters of us do *not* readily strike up a conversation with a stranger. Still more strikingly, there appears to be a generational split over willingness to engage in face-to-face conversation. Younger people are less likely to strike up conversation with other members of the public. One explanation for this is a natural age gradient in which younger respondents are less rooted to a given locality: as people get older, buy houses and send children to school, we might expect them to express greater concern for their immediate area. Nevertheless, because that same younger generation represents

the future, and will grow up with attitudes shaped by emerging, more individualised and, as we shall see, potentially isolating technologies, the apparent decline in conversationalism does pose worrying questions for our future.

Statistics, though, can occasionally be misleading. The graph in figure 1 appears to show that younger populations are less likely to strike up a conversation in the street or in the pub and, by and large, are less likely to chat to strangers. What it *doesn't* show or imply is that younger people are less chatty in general and, as we shall see, converse using technologies and on the internet in particular. In fact, Kate Fox, who wrote the foreword to *Mobile Life*, believes that 'the space-age technology of mobile phones has allowed us to return to the more humane patterns of pre-industrial society, when we lived in small, stable communities, and enjoyed frequent conversation with a tight social network of family, neighbours and friends'.[15] As one participant in the event we held for this research put it, 'if you look at the proliferation of user groups, marches

Figure 1 GB population: likelihood of striking up a conversation by age range (base: 2458)
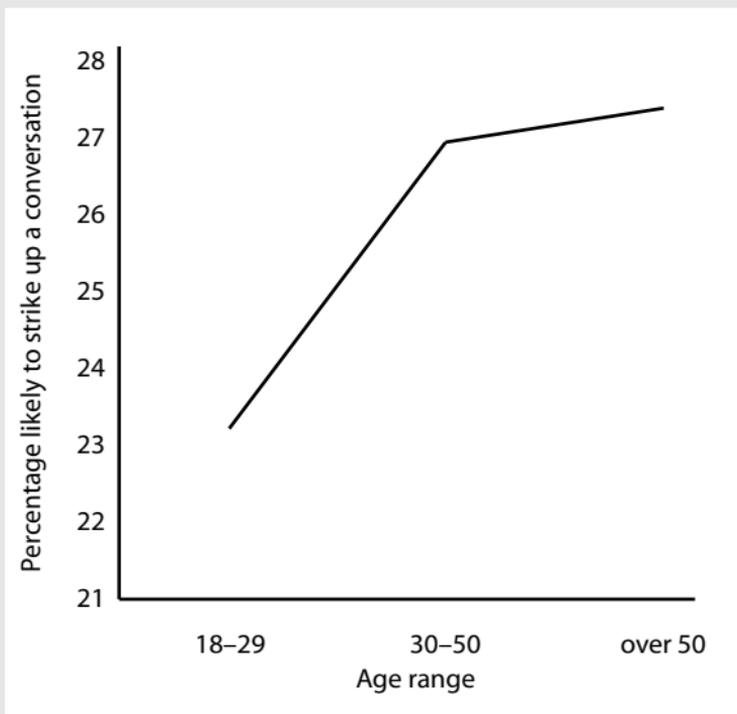
Source: YouGov survey into community, 28 April – 2 May 2006

against Iraq, and newspapers, all of that is rising at the moment, in some way, politically, we are talking more'.

However, while we have redefined the concept of conversation, and the shape of our daily interactions has changed, some questions remain unanswered. The key point is one raised by Thomas Friedman in his analysis of globalisation: when people were able to access information and communicate through one and the same device, 'people all over the world started waking up and realising that they had more power than ever to go global as *individuals*'.[16]

Naturally, we associate with people who share our opinions, attitudes and ideas. However, as technologies and topics multiply, we increasingly speak only to like minds. The snag is that this leaves out of the equation the very geographic and locational ties on which our public realm is built. A statistic from the USA sums this up: by '1994, there was a shocking increase in the number of people who had *never* spent an evening with a neighbour – from one in five to

nearly one in three – a 41 per cent increase since the same question was asked twenty years earlier'.[17] Our assumptions about community and the public realm rely on conversations being structured, however informally. We spoke as members of a class, of a trade union or a particular profession. We spoke as representatives – conceptually at least – of a recognisable group. Now, we speak as individuals. The question is what this means for the public realm.

Case study 1 Brief encounters

As they speed from Nîmes to Nice, commuters on France's SNCF need no longer stock up on pulp fiction or reread the business proposal for the umpteenth time. Now, with bookings on certain long-distance journeys, they can detail their preferences for topics and book in for a conversation. For an extra €1.50, the SNCF offers them the opportunity to register their particular interests and sit alongside people who share them.

This reveals several key things about the way we think of conversation at the turn of the twenty-first century. The first, and most encouraging, is that we like conversation. However – and understandably – we like that conversation to be around topics of our choice. As we shall see, the commodification of conversation – setting personal parameters to interaction – is also important.

The SNCF scheme can be read as both an encouragement and an admonition. It demonstrates that we have no less appetite for conversation than we did before. On the other hand, it reveals some of the new attitudes and expectations we bring to interaction.

2. The public realm

In May 2006, David Miliband, then Minister for Local Government, pledged reform, what he called a 'double-devolution of power', from Whitehall to the town hall, and from the town hall to the neighbourhood. At a time at which the strength of communities is the focus of governmental initiatives – from initiating strategic partnerships, creating a forum for the major institutions of communities, to Sure Start centres designed to bring parents together within communities – if we *are* sharing fewer conversations, then the implications could be drastic. This is especially so if conversation is the essential element of building trust, particularly between people who might not otherwise come into contact. As the Confederation of British

Industry has suggested: 'Authorities should be prepared to use a range of options for empowering local people during the procurement process. Different groups of people will have different needs, and the options for user engagement should be adapted according to the service.'[18]

Participation – the involvement of citizens in shaping and influencing the communities in which they live – has been a dominant theme of recent politics. It allows us as citizens to influence our lives for the better and is important to policy-makers because it offers the possibility of improving social outcomes in ways that are legitimate and have more resonance with those that they will affect. All told, participation – and the conversations on which it depends – is vital for the health of the public sphere.

The 'public sphere' is a familiar concept. The notion comes largely from the work of the German political philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, who believes that 'a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which

private individuals assemble to form a public body'.[19] In relation to physical spaces in which these conversations can take place, thinkers have defined the public *domain* as 'those places where an exchange between different social groups is possible and *also actually occurs*'.[20]

Conversations are at the heart of this exchange: they enable us to evaluate our actions and our opinions, balancing them with those of the people around us. Aristotle defined man as a political animal: we have an innate need to live together and therefore a need for community. Community can be defined as cooperation and taking into account the needs of others. It is also the simple, day-to-day interaction that feeds our knowledge and sense of identity. In this way, there is being *social*, living together in numbers, and there is being *societal*, thinking and acting in ways that will help us to continue to live together. Thinking societally is crucial to our citizenship. No community can exist without some level of commitment from its members. This is not necessarily born of goodwill, but can be born of

self-interest. We cooperate because we need to respond to some force greater than we could face alone. We cooperate because we cannot exist in conflict with those around us. All these concepts, however, rely on understanding, and mutual recognition, and this requires conversation.

Conversation has long been the lifeblood of egalitarian society, from the republican ideals of Cicero's Rome to the civic humanism of Early Modern Europe. It was no coincidence that the theories behind England's Glorious Revolution of 1688 swirled from the coffeehouses of London: the conviviality of the coffeehouse, bawdy and argumentative on occasion, created a forum in which public matters could be discussed. They were arenas in which 'men learnt new ways of *combinational friendship*, turning their discussion there into commercial ventures, critical tribunals, scientific seminars and political clubs'.[21] In the mid-seventeenth century, the political philosopher James Harrington, whose thinking provided the context for democratic innovation from the Glorious Revolution to the American Constitu-

tion, organised a club, the 'Rota' at the Turk's Head coffeehouse in Covent Garden. The rules of participation were that members came prepared, having purchased the pamphlet to be debated beforehand, and the seating plan was designed to provide for equal and egalitarian debate.[22]

Much of this history is rose-tinted, but the ideals that underlie it are telling. The structures and language of conversation and community participation are embedded in our history: the concept of school parent governors, for instance, dates back at least to the 1870 Education Act.[23] Even the language of politics reinforces the importance of conversation. Our representatives sit on our behalf in *parliament*, under the management of a *speaker*. If we want to make our points known, we can do so at *Speakers*' Corner and we have the freedom of *speech* to do this. Even at everyday levels, we can 'have our say' in meetings, in arguments and in discussion. There is an intrinsic link between conversation, our notion of the public sphere and the quality of democracy.

However, events like the bombings of 7 July

2005, the media frenzy over anti-social behaviour and other contemporary concerns have brought into question our overall competence to live in the societal ways that are so central to our public realm. At the same time, our conversations appear to be in decline. The BBC article is not an isolated expression of worry. In an age in which the societal instincts that Aristotle and others identified seem strained, people are beginning to look to their conversations – or their absence – for the answers.

Statistically, there is a clear link. In the YouGov poll,[24] people in Scotland proved the most likely to know people in their neighbourhood by name. Nationwide, the average number of people who knew more than 20 people by name in their neighbourhood is 14 per cent. In the three Scottish TV regions (Scottish TV, Grampian and Border) by which the sample is broken down, this number rises to 23 per cent, 33 per cent and 36 per cent, respectively – an average of nearly 31 per cent, some 15 per cent higher than the national average. This community spirit is echoed in the

Table 1 GB Adult population – scales of neighbourliness and conversationalism (%)

	National average	Carlton/ LWT (London)	Scottish average
How many of the people living in your street (or in the immediate area surrounding where you live) do you know by name? (More than 20)	14	12	31
Do you know the name of your local councillor? (Yes)	42	34	59
At which, if any, of the following places would you be likely to strike up a friendly conversation (not complaining) with people you don't know? (Answer: none)	14	21	12

Source: YouGov survey into community, 28 April – 2 May 2006

polling for political engagement and conversationalism (see table 1).

This data does more than just represent the healthiness of community spirit north of the border compared with London and its environs. It also implies a link between political and community awareness and conversation, and this is what we will focus on here.

3. Concerns over the public realm

Conversations are the means by which we connect our individual will to collective action. This is not to say that all public conversations lead directly to action, but they do create the ethos for action. Democracy works by the concept of possibility. Not all people vote, but it is essential that they feel able to and believe that, if they did, then they would be having their say. The same is true in more everyday terms. Public conversations are essential in building confidence in our ownership of the world around us. It is in conversation that the individual becomes the public citizen that it is in our nature to be.

Conventionally, participation is associated with the structures of our public realm, the organisa-

tions, institutions, processes and procedures with which we engage. However, our willingness to engage with these organisations has been questioned. The decline of social capital – 'the resources for collective action, such as contacts, friendships or the ability to ask favours of people, which citizens access through membership in particular types of social networks'[25] – has been a dominant trend of recent thinking, most famously illustrated by the sociologist Robert Putnam, in the decline of the community bowling team in the USA.

In the UK, most recent commentators argue that this is far from the case, and that 'there is nothing approaching the fall-offs in memberships reported by Putnam'.[26] Membership of community associations is *not* declining: in fact, it increased from 17 per cent in 1994 to 25 per cent in 2000.[27] We may not be bowling together in this country, but we still go to the pub as much as we have ever done – if George Orwell was right, and we go to pubs for conversation as much as beer, then this can only be encouraging.[28]

Figure 2 GB population: membership of organisations (%) (base: 2458)
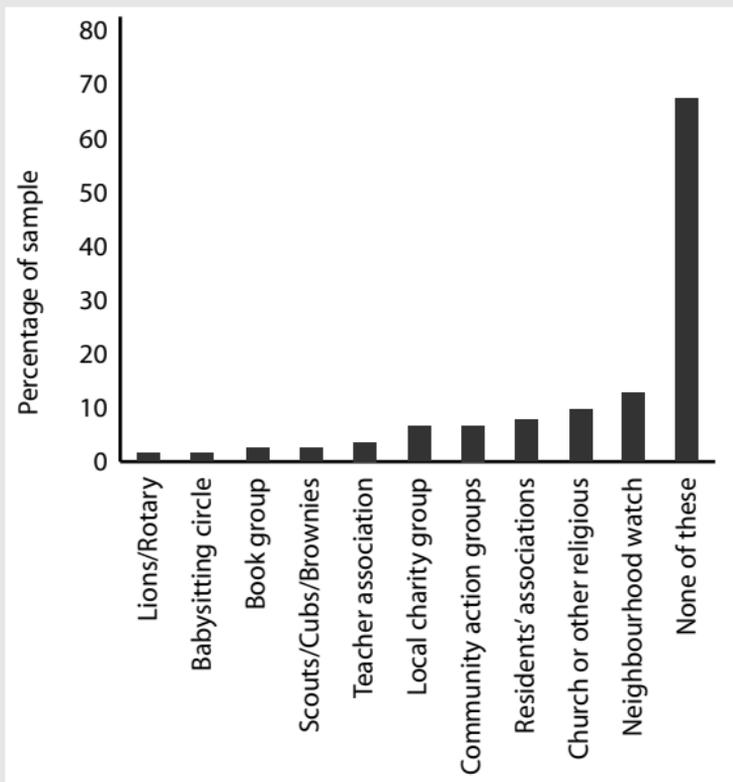
Source: YouGov Survey into community, 28 April – 2 May 2006

However, research belies such optimism. As the YouGov survey shows, disengagement outweighs even the total of all the forms of participation studied (see figure 2).[29]

At first glance, even allowing for the idea that democracy works in aggregate, this seems to present the very bleak prospect that a large majority of us feel isolated and that our sense of community is in decline. Although some participate in the structures of our public life, it still brings into question the egalitarian principles on which they rest. When further figures – this time from the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – reveal that, while 82 per cent of British people think that 'community involvement' is a good idea and 26 per cent say that they would like to do it, only 2 per cent can say that they actually have, this is particularly worrying.[30] Figures from the polling agency Serco, for a more local survey conducted in 2006, show very similar results: 80 per cent of those asked were keen to get involved in public services, but only 25 per cent were actually prepared to give up their time.[31] There

appears to be a disconnect between what people say and the ways in which they are actually leading their lives.

4. An anatomy of conversation

According to the US political scientist, Michael Schudson, 'conversation is not the soul of democracy'.[32] Schudson's statement is bold; but it needs examining. It asks what conversation really is, and why it is so important. Clearly, not all conversations are the same. They vary in both content and context. A pub conversation will most likely be very different from that conducted in a meeting. Similarly, a conversation about the 2006 World Cup is likely to be very different from another about Britain's pensions crisis. In their own way, though, all conversations contribute to our sense of society and community, and it is important to understand how.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines conversation as 'an informal spoken exchange of

news and ideas between two or more people'.[33] Conversation is a collective product. In speech, we use language to negotiate our position in relation to those around us, and so we need people to whom we can talk as equals. By listening and responding to others talk, we understand how they see themselves and how they see us.

Conversations take place in a number of different ways. At a very functional level, we use conversations to organise our lives. The conversations that we have each day contribute to a sense of community and are very important to us. In business, we use conversations to negotiate specific ends and, often, these are structured by agenda and articulated towards a clear purpose. Writing in the *Financial Times*, for instance, two management experts proposed a typology of 'four distinct types of conversations' in the workplace: conversations to make sense, conversations to make choices, conversations to make things happen and conversations to make revisions.[34] These are, of course, very process- and business-oriented categories. By contrast, in our social

lives, conversations are often bitty, disjointed and wide-reaching. To attempt to describe each and every form would be a daunting task. Nevertheless, all of these conversations are the threads that make up the fabric of our lives and, as such, conversation is the subject of much interest, from quick, self-help books on how to get ahead in conversation, to more rigorous investigations of its meaning, like that of Theodore Zeldin.[35]

Gossip, for instance, the bittiest and most everyday of conversational types, has been recognised as playing a specific role. In the snipes at the water cooler, the chats on the phone and the drinks in the pub, we navigate the events that occur in our daily lives. We garner opinion, learning facts from others and building the experience of ideas, life, people and generalities that we need to exist in the modern world. Based on research with the General Teaching Council of England, John Craig has suggested that morale in the teaching profession is low precisely because of the lack of shared rituals and

'water cooler moments'.[36] Gossip soothes the sense of isolation and create a sense of commonality.

For Nick Emler, head of the School of Human Sciences at Surrey University, gossip plays a role that is still more reinforcing. It makes up about 80 per cent of conversations. Contrary to popular belief, very little of that is malicious – it equates to only about 5 per cent of the gossip that does take place.[37] Quite the opposite of being malicious, gossip is constructive. Not knowing something leads to anxiety; in conversation or otherwise, when it becomes apparent that we are unaware of a given fact, gossip can reassure – it allows us to fill in gaps. In the workplace, this is vital, like the water it contains, the gossip that the cooler fosters can refresh and cleanse, especially in contexts in which more formal conversation is often trammelled by concepts of hierarchy and propriety. In this way, and in the way that it provides for greater knowledge and understanding, gossip and chit-chat provides the foundation for building deeper conversations. It helps people feel

comfortable with their environments and with those around them.

There are also more private conversations. These are those that take place between families and close friends and associates. Often, of course, these will relate to private matters. But, in a recent US study, it was found that crime and education in particular are talked about more often in terms of personal relevance, in the home and other spaces closer to the private than the public self.[38] The study identifies these topics in particular as 'bridging' the gap between personal and private conversation, a quality that the authors suggest challenges 'claims that political conversation and personal conversation proceed by entirely different rules'.[39] As we shall see, in tandem with changes in society more generally, it might also reflect the fact that these subjects are those that impact most closely on our personal lives. Following other political observers, from Alexis de Tocqueville to John Dewey, the authors also suggest 'that interlocutors shift readily from the discussion of political issues to aimless chat to

conversation about personal issues in a manner that does not markedly separate the public from the private sphere, producing what we term ordinary political conversation'.[40]

However, it would be a mistake to see these different forms as being unconnected. On one level, and as we have seen, so-called small talk provides for the points of common understanding and reference that enables deeper conversation around subjects that are more contentious or more significant in the public sense. Furthermore, if chit-chat is blurring with so-called 'proper conversation', it may well be because it fulfils a role in which 'proper conversation' – or public conversation – and the structures that facilitate it are no longer adequate.

Defining public conversations

In public conversation we act consciously to manage our lives through negotiation and to discuss content that has impact on the public realm. There are two kinds of public conversation:

○ The first is the conversation that we have in public, in front of an audience, however formal.

○ The second relates to public conversations in which participants consciously cooperate to work on and talk through solutions – deep public conversations – and these require comfortable contexts and situations in which to confront and overcome difficulties.

The first type of public conversation carries with it a number of caveats. More often than not, it will be structured: participants will have in mind a particular point of view, and the purpose is to persuade. These conversations are often very difficult to have. The sociologist, Erving Goffman, demonstrated that the fear of being shown up or humiliated often causes us to be reticent and we become acutely aware of the presentation of the self.[41] This is so even in political activism, a field in which we would not normally expect bash-

fulness: a study of political groups in the US found that – just like people in other contexts – participants are much more likely to express their true feelings after the event and in the company of their close intimates.

Conversation also requires confidence in our knowledge. Formerly, this was provided by chit-chat, but as the sources of information available multiply – some 70,000 new blogs are created each day, each covering different areas of specialisation – this equality of knowledge can only dwindle, especially as our jobs and working lives become more particularised and, in some cases, polarised. For Theodore Zeldin: 'It is time that in our work we got rid of at least some of the barriers that prevent us from sharing the thoughts and language and style of other professions. The term "social exclusion" applies not only to the poor, but to all whose mind-set is confined to a single profession.'[42]

This is a point not about expertise, but comprehension. Good ideas can usually be expressed simply and intelligibly – quite often,

though, professional or complex language and jargon can prevent this, a point made by Stephen Poole in his book *Unspeak*.[43] With knowledge proliferating, we risk what has been called a 'famine', or a situation in which the few have conversational superiority over the many.[44] In the Demos report *Disablism*, the example of the scientific community illustrates this well. For those of us outside that world, it is very easy to assume common intelligibility between, say, physicists and chemists. However:

> *Each group has a very strong culture of its own: a literature, a set of jargon and acronyms that are often totally impenetrable to outsiders. Sometimes, they're even impenetrable to insiders. They have different worldviews, different sets of techniques for problem-solving.*[45]

Imagine, then, what this situation is like across the public realm as a whole. We are much more likely to discuss public content in contexts that

are private, or at least not public in any formal or structured sense. One study in the USA has found that most conversations relating to public content take place in the home, or in other spaces in which participants are comfortable with both their surroundings and the people with whom they are talking. This is down to the security and trust that people feel in domestic situations being more conducive to them taking the risk of stating their opinions. It is no coincidence that some 65 per cent of the sample approached in the US study said that they shared the same general orientation with their intimate circle: we are close to those with whom we share opinions, and so we are more likely to take conversational risks in those circles.[46]

Risk is also central to the second, and very particular type of conversation: deep public conversations. In these conversations, people take the risk of bringing together opinion. For the renowned expert on conversation, Theodore Zeldin, these are the conversations in 'which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly

different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk.'[47]

In 'truly public' conversations, we talk with others who might not share our opinions.[48] Risk, in this context, is not necessarily threatening: it is the challenge of being open and exposing your opinions and attitudes to scrutiny. This process is difficult but, at the same time, it is necessary if we are to live together equitably, democratically and cooperatively. As the *Disablism* report continues:

> *This is why getting them [people with very different opinions] to work together is so valuable. While no one person knows the techniques of every discipline and sub-discipline, if they can communicate and collaborate with people from other disciplines it's possible to draw on other perspectives when necessary. Sometimes, by bringing together different people, amazing things happen.*[49]

Deep public conversation requires true friendliness. This is much more than being nice, comforting, reassuring and placatory. It is the friendliness of honesty, openness and listening – the combinational friendliness mentioned earlier, the societal capacity that *grows from* this sociability: the concern for others and the common good that is born of knowledge and understanding of those around us. Only with this friendliness in place can we have the conversations that really matter: the conversations in which we confront and handle risk.

This is where Conrad's Kurtz went wrong: in his conversations, he took no risk – people were scared of him and they did not listen in the true sense, they simply obeyed. The same applies to public conversations: we have them in private, behind closed doors, where people speak either to those whom they trust and whose opinion they know that they cannot offend, or to those of a similar opinion in the first place. Perhaps, also, the Electoral Commission's estimate that 14.5 million of us take part in a political conversation

every day is less rosy: we might be discussing politics, but is the motive truly public? The Commission also found that 'Britons who take an interest in local issues are ten times more likely to discuss their views in the local pub than at political meetings'.[50] Although 14.5 million conversations might represent an interest in their political content, because they take place in safe, comfortable arenas, and are most likely between friends and associates, they are unlikely to constitute deliberation that overcomes significant difference.

Case study 2 Deep public conversations

In the Demos pamphlet *Hearts and Minds*,[51] Scilla Elworthy and Gabrielle Rifkind tell two stories that reveal the importance of deep conversation and deep listening.

The first is about a consultation organised by the Coalition for Peace and Unity (CPAU) in Afghanistan. The CPAU invited the local

warlord, the commander of some 2000 militiamen. Initially, he took part for reasons of protocol, intending to stay only for the first day. However, so engrossed was he in the discussion that ensued and the different opinions that he encountered, that he stayed for the whole week. At the end of this time, he went home and dismissed his army.

The second relates to Northern Ireland. The patience and determination of Senator George Mitchell in listening to the opinions and beliefs of all sides has been credited as being one of the key foundations of the Good Friday Agreement. As Mo Mowlam described it, it was his policy of listening fully and for 'as long as it takes' that brought all into the process, enabling them to have their say.

5. The structures of the public realm no longer support conversation

Much of the concern over the public realm that we noted earlier relates to the levels of engagement in the structures of community involvement and governance that are currently in place. Clearly, in itself, this is a worry, but it is possible that the barrier is linguistic and conceptual as opposed to representing apathy. As we have seen, people are not talking about public affairs *less* – they are engaging less frequently in the means by which their conversation can become public, a trend that parallels the

disengagement apparent in the YouGov survey.[52]

Connecting conversation with the perceived decline of the public realm gives us a new challenge. Conventionally, commentators have seen two problems. The first is that we are having fewer conversations, and this represents a threat to our public realm – though as we have seen, the situation is a little more complex than that. The second is that we are engaging less in the organisations and institutions that have historically and traditionally represented our engagement in that public realm. The reality is that these are *perceived* ills and, in trying to remedy them, we are pursuing a red herring. Although we are not having fewer conversations of a public nature, we are showing an increased reluctance to conduct them in conventional ways, and this is manifest in our apparent rejection of the symbols of community.

Put simply, we have developed ways of interacting and conversing along lines that the structures of engagement can no longer reflect. It is not our public sphere that is under threat: it is

the logic with which we approach it. For years, we did not think to look *inside* the institutions of governance and engaged with the institution rather than the individual. The police were 'The Police', the health service, 'The Health Service' and so on. This is not to say that individual interaction did not happen, far from it. What has changed is that the relationship between us as users and the individual as representative of the institution has changed. We are no longer as ready to accept organisations and institutions as being communal goods in their own right. Our society has become ever more consumer-focused and driven by personal preference and the service they provide to us as individuals, rather than in societal terms as their being a good in their own right.

Now, we look to the individuals who make up the institutions and organisations and on whom processes and procedures rest rather than the institutions themselves. We complain when we are passed from recorded message to recorded message and we lament the decline of the shop

assistant: it is true, it *is* a more satisfactory experience to be served at the counter than to be siphoned along an aisle. 'One of the most frustrating things is when you're phoning anywhere about anything, and you don't talk to anybody . . . it's like a brick wall,' said one respondent to the National Consumer Council's research into public services in 2005.[53] Indeed, as growing populations and the use of services increases, our constant and ever-present desire for direct engagement has put a strain on infrastructures across all areas of society. In our daily lives, automated ticket machines are a direct result of that strain. In the First National Bank in Chicago, it costs $3 to speak to a cashier or, as they are more phonically known in the US, a teller.[54]

It is not that we have suddenly become more desirous of human contact. What has changed is that cramps on time, infrastructure and finance have forced organisations to use technology to bypass expensive labour costs. As a result, we have become very much more conscious of the role of

direct conversation in service, and so very much more protective and assertive of it. In the USA, McDonald's has calculated that it is cheaper to convey orders at drive-through restaurants to a call-centre, hundreds of miles away, than it is for somebody to take the order face-to-face: the whole transaction can be completed 30 seconds faster, and so more burgers can be sold per hour.[55] At the same time, we have become more assertive of our right to personalise services, using conversation to convey our specific desires. As Charles Leadbeater has pointed out, the 'gap between large organisations and the intricacy of people's everyday expectations and aspirations is a breeding ground for a growing sense of resentment, with private services as much as public'.[56]

Paradoxically, these changes seem to have led to a more personalised approach to the structures of our public realm. Our children benefit from personalised learning, and in museums and galleries visitors are no longer passive consumers of culture, but active participants in the creation

of meaning.[57] Just as our everyday expectations will widen gaps between us and large organisations that cannot move quickly enough to meet them, so quicker, more adaptable means of communication have allowed us to gather around these more specific points of concern and interest. However, this, too, creates a new set of social challenges: 'Even with e-mail and discussion groups, it can be hard for large numbers of people to coordinate around a single opinion, at least when an array of options is itself extremely large.'[58]

Case study 3 An invitation to speak

Now in its third year, The Coffeehouse Challenge, run by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) in partnership with Starbucks, provides the opportunity for people to come together in coffee shops and other venues throughout the country to talk about issues that concern them.

An important part of this is that people are invited to give their opinions free of any institutional agenda. Fellows of the RSA facilitate discussions, and the point is simply to provide a forum in which ideas can be voiced and further ideas can be generated. The conversations that take place, and the relationships that develop around these ideas occasionally provide the basis from which the ideas become reality. One example of this is a not-for-profit car club, initiated by university students using cars fuelled by waste vegetable oil. Organising and facilitating a conversation, though, is not dependent on carrying an idea through into practice. What is important is the collaboration and development of a community that the conversation represents and encourages.[59]

The Coffeehouse Challenge provides a space, physical and conceptual, in which people are sufficiently comfortable to build the relationships

of trust that are necessary for idea generation and association. Overall, the project presents both a role model and a challenge. How can we use the example that it provides to refresh the structures of our public realm? To do this we need to take into account the very particular nature of public conversations and the very particular circumstances that they require.

6. The public must be brought back into conversation

So, on the one hand, we seem more than ever to demand conversation in our engagement with organisations; on another, we seem to be avoiding interaction with the public structures that so depend on conversation.

The snag is that the conversations on which we have built our public realm no longer sit within the same logic. The trend is towards individualism and the personalisation of services, but – for our public services to be sustainable – we need to think societally. The government alone cannot determine what is a public good, and institute for its creation. For policy decisions to

have legitimacy, they must reflect public will.[60] However, *this can be reached and determined only by public conversation that includes the public in the broadest sense*. Structures of public engagement and community membership therefore remain essential, but they need renewal and must be compatible with the ways that we are behaving as a society and the ways in which we currently converse, and must be in contexts conducive to that conversation.

To do this, we must balance what we know about conversation with an understanding of the new forces that have reshaped our public realm. To summarise, the first of these understandings is already in place – conversation will always be the keystone of society, but this brings with it a number of considerations:

○ Deep public conversation requires risk; it opposes opinion that cannot necessarily be reconciled quickly and easily.

○ People are rarely in the situation in which they feel they can take such risk.

○ Current public structures do not engage the public in its broadest sense and so do not bring together the different opinions necessary for a public conversation.

○ The arenas in which public issues are discussed are rarely long-lasting enough to balance out the opposition of opinion.

○ Opinion is often given, but rarely do others take the risk of deep listening as opposed to countering that opinion.

We are at risk of undermining the role of public conversation in our public realm. To restore public conversation to its necessary place, we must look at the second question: How can it fit into a changing society?

Case study 4 Table talk

Established by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust in 2004, with the report published in March 2006, the Power Inquiry set out to investigate how to encourage and build greater participation on the part of UK citizens in the political process. One of the methods it used to examine this and garner opinion was to support over 450 'Democracy Dinners'.

These addressed key questions that face Britain and British politics. Importantly, though, they were convened by the people involved. From the outset, they were therefore reliant on people's own enthusiasm and people's own willingness to talk. They provided the space and time in which they could do so and also the invitation to put individual opinions across. Importantly, the context of a dinner also provided a framework for discussion and a logic by which people could manage the event.

The researchers working on the project reported back that they 'encountered no difficulty in securing or maintaining . . . participants' in the dinners and other events that they supported.[61] The will to participate and talk is there. Overall, the dinners provide an example both of the willingness of people to participate in public conversations in ways in which they are comfortable and the importance of establishing the context in framing and setting the conceptual space for that conversation.

7. Changes in the way we live

Changing conversations, changing communities?

One conclusion to be drawn from stories of anti-social behaviour and contemporary worries over issues that range from leylandii to iPods might be that people simply do not care as much as they might about their communities. There is, however, another, more convincing explanation. What if the way that we conceptualise community is changing and the structures by which we conceive of a sense of community are no longer so reliable a gauge of the new societal instincts that have developed?

The way we live now

Demos research reveals some key changes in the

Figure 3 Ways in which residents meet each other

%

■ Proportion of respondents who had got to know others through these mechanisms

Categories (left to right):
- Live next door
- Bumping into each other on the street
- Through their children
- Through introductions from others
- At local shops
- Brought up together
- Working together
- At local pub
- At local club or group
- Through the residents' association
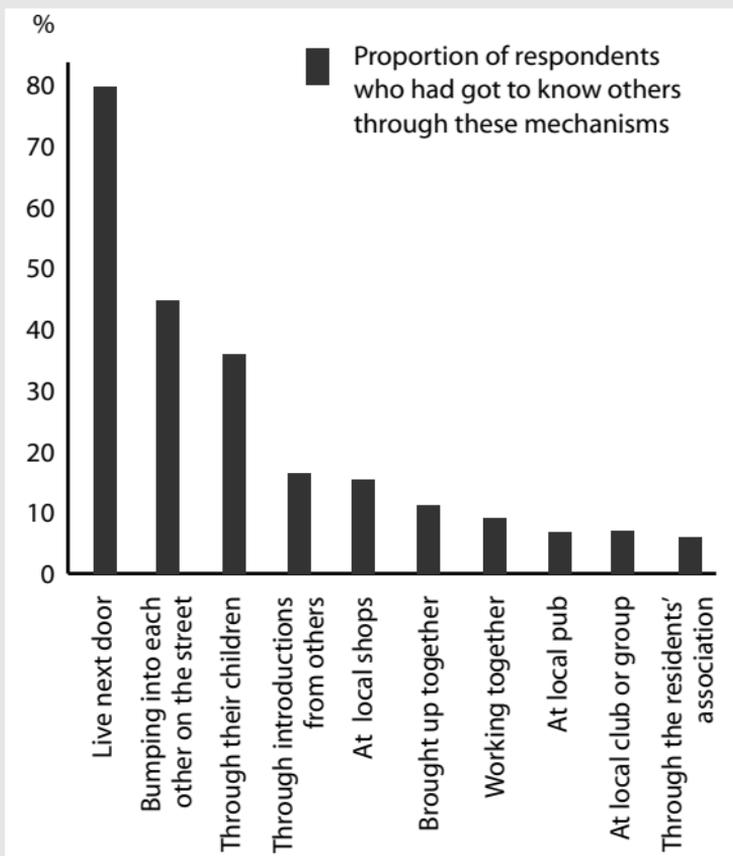
Source: Jupp, *Living Together*

Figure 4 How much would you say you have in common with the following?

Composite measure
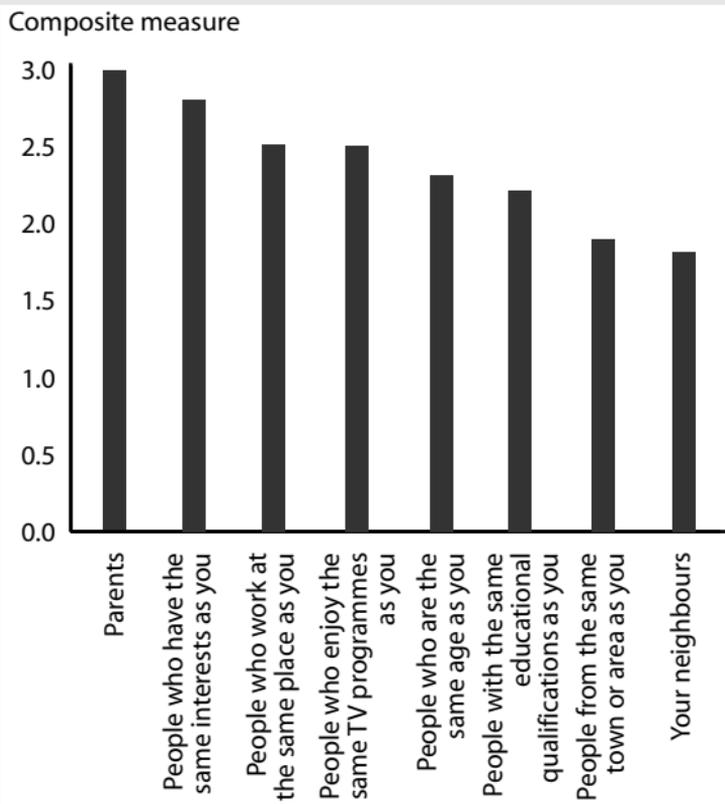
This graph uses a composite scale based on qualitative polling
Source: Henley Centre for Forecasting, *Planning for Social Change* (London: Henley Centre, 1998).

way that we are developing social links. Initially, it is apparent that we meet each other through very much the same structures as we have in the past.

Figure 3 shows polling data from the Demos report *Living Together*.[62] Overwhelmingly, respondents stated that they know each other by virtue of fairly expected and conventional means, either living next door, bumping into each other on the street or their children playing together. However, our feelings about what we have in common seem to tell a very different story (see figure 4).

Geographic and neighbourly proximity is far less strong a tie than we might imagine. At the same time, our general perception is that those ties remain.

What really bind us are more particular aspects of our lives, our interests, our professions, our media preference and our age groups. We expect conventional structures of locale to support community, and yet our sense of what defines commonality has progressed at a tangent. In the YouGov survey, 47 per cent of people thought

that neighbourhood and voluntary organisations are the most effective way of taking positive action to solve issues. Yet, as we have seen, this far from reflects the involvement of the same sample in those organisations: 68 per cent of those asked said that they were not associated with any of the organisations listed.[63] Given the way in which we form social ties, such findings can only gain momentum in society at large. In a study of participants in governance roles, around 80 per cent were actively recruited by people they knew.[64] The root of this is more than association: it is in conversation. Socially, we cluster around interest; however, if our interests lie elsewhere, beyond the locale, then it is reasonable to expect that the topics that we want to talk about have developed along similar lines. Nevertheless, the confidence in neighbourhood and voluntary organisations that the YouGov survey suggests remains telling.

The evidence in table 2 demonstrates that people expect and believe in the efficacy of neighbourhood groups: this is consistent across

Table 2 GB adult population – Which, if any, of the following do you think are MOST effective in taking positive action to solve issues in your local community?

Group	Percentage
Individuals	14
Neighbourhood groups	36
Voluntary groups	11
Council	18
Don't know	21

Source: YouGov survey into community, 28 April – 2 May 2006

region, age and social gradings used in the YouGov survey. So, it is not that geographical and locational ties are considered invalid. Rather, it would appear that the structures that are currently expected to express them and the types

of conversation that they facilitate no longer seem to have a great deal of traction with the people that they are designed to represent. The challenge that we face is how to refresh those conversations.

8. Changes in the conversations we have

The information revolution

Thomas Friedman, in his analysis of globalisation, *The World is Flat*, discusses the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 as having opened 'the way for more people to tap into one another's knowledge pools', and as paving 'the way for the adoption of common standards'. Undoubtedly, it did. As Friedman points out: 'In Europe alone, the Fall of the Wall opened the way for the formation of the European Union and its expansion from fifteen to twenty-five countries.'[65] The question we have to ask, though, is to what extent have we, by our own volition, created new walls? The Berlin Wall and the divide that it

represented prevented the spread of ideas from East to West. As we have had the opportunity to chat with people around the world who share our interests, to what extent are we spurning the global and diverse conversation and challenges that achievements like that of 9 November represent?

Globally, recent developments in media and technology have caused a radical shift in the way that we lead our lives. More than ever before, we are able to access material according to very particular interests. Blogging, in particular, has surged in popularity. According to Technorati, a website that tracks some 40.5 million websites, as of October 2005, some 70,000 blogs are created daily, which equates to about one a second.[66] That is more often than you or I take breath.

Each of these blogs caters to a specific area of interest, from gossip to politics, to the household or technology. Of course, catering to specific interest is nothing new. Books, periodicals and the like have long focused on the most particular of subject matter. The coffeehouses of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London were the haunts

of clientele interested in very particular areas of life, from literature to trade: John Dryden's haunt, Will's coffeehouse in Covent Garden, was famously the make or break of dramatists and other literary types.[67] Edward Lloyd encouraged a focus on trade, shipping and insurance at his coffeehouse, which developed eventually into the broker of the same name.[68] The New York Stock Exchange was brewed from similar origins.

What is new is the ease with which we can close off potential avenues of other, more general information – the same sort of background we can get from the surrounding words in books or in day-to-day chit-chat and gossip. Search engines enable us to track down very specific data quickly. It is true that links from websites skew us off into different directions, but they are more often than not partisan. In an ad hoc survey of political websites, for instance, one US commentator found that almost 60 per cent linked to like-minded sites, compared with only 15 per cent that offered users a balanced point of view.[69] Moreover, as many of us become more adept at

filtering our sources, we can set up programmes – RSS feeds – that save us even looking for information: news relative to our specific interests simply appears in our web browsers. As Cass Sunstein has put it, we now read the 'Daily Me'.[70] Where, formerly, technology enabled common points of reference for chats at the water cooler about last night's soap operas, as channels and media proliferate, these shared sources of news and entertainment have fragmented and dissipated.

Globally, newspaper sales are in decline. In May 2006, the *Financial Times* reported that US titles have lost roughly a million readers since last year. In 1948, US households consumed on average 1.3 newspapers a day: by 1998, that figure had shrunk by more than half.[71] In Europe, there has also been a drop in circulation, most severely in Ireland and the UK. According to *The Times*, there has been a 3.6 per cent drop in total UK newspaper sales since April 2005 alone.[72] Where, in the past, our search for yesterday's football scores might have exposed us – at least

momentarily – to the column inches on the latest political scandal or any other gobbet of wider information, now we simply get a text message after the game telling us who has drawn 0–0.

Social software and websites, like myspace.com, also enable us to communicate more freely with people who share our interests.[73] Wikipedia, for instance, is among the fastest growing communities on the planet. The project started on 15 January 2001; within a month it comprised 1000 articles and, by 7 September of the same year, 10,000. Within a year, the number had swelled to 20,000. In March 2005, the number was 500,000,[74] and, in August 2006, the number of entries has more than doubled to over 1,334,266.[75]

Wikipedia and its fellows represent a new form of community. Like all other communities, they find their root in conversation. People are taking part – either deliberately or otherwise – in a commonwealth of knowledge. Motivated by the will to contribute to knowledge in relation to their particular interests, the mass of articles on

Wikipedia combines to become more than the sum of its parts. The question is whether or not these models of community can sustain the public conversation that we need to rejuvenate engagement in the public realm.

The heady cocktail of society and technology

For Richard Sennett, the very logic of the media is a threat:

> *We deny that there ought to be any barriers in communication between people. The whole logic of 20th century communications technology has been bent to this openness of expression. And yet, though we have enshrined the idea of ease of communication, we are surprised that the 'media' result in ever greater passivity on the part of those who are the spectators, personality becomes more and more an issue on the air, especially in terms of political life.*[76]

Sennett's concern is with the media focus on personality, and particularly personality-politics. As history – from the demagoguery of Savonarolan Florence to the Westminster elections of 1784 – amply demonstrates, personality has been a dynamo of politics, but mass coverage and replication of word and image give it much greater amplitude. Essentially, the media is a conversation-killer. We absorb the same mass media, and slowly, but surely, the passivity that this induces irons out the differences on which our public conversation rests.

The same logic stretches far beyond media politics and constitutes a potentially devastating threat to conversation more generally. There is 'an underlying perception that we have no functional need to affiliate with other people because we already have most of the things we need or are likely to get'. Furthermore, as we get wealthier and technologies bring more and more services into our home, we 'don't need to ask a friend or to become a better friend' so that we can ask for

favours, the everyday, conversational favours that bind us together as a society.[77] By virtue of the new, more personalised means of service delivery, 'it is now entirely . . . possible to spend little time in public forums', and this includes not only physical spaces like town halls, parks and even streets, but also the major media of the twentieth century, newspaper columns and general broadcasts.[78]

We have worried about issues such as the stress of our lives and the wider effects of the breakdown of conventional society – everything from litter to ASBOs – for years. But we have never turned things around and thought that the problem might be corroding our very natures. By changing the nature of conversation, harnessing it to our personal convenience, we are undermining the very basis of the public realm. It is not that we lack community spirit, it is that we have channelled the resources that drive the public realm to more personal interests, draining social capital and bankrupting the public sphere.

9. Technology, community and public conversation

We can now access information and services without really having to stretch beyond people with similar interests, and without coming into contact with each other in everyday life. With teenagers increasingly adopting the internet as a means of socialisation, but with 'little intention of developing relationships beyond casual chat', the future of our communities and the conversation on which they depend looks bleak. Although older people *do* use the internet to make new, real-life acquaintances, with 26 per cent of broadband users organising a social or

community event and 35 per cent feeling that broadband made them at least more likely to get involved in community activities, online relationships nevertheless require cementing in the real world and, as we have seen, this requires conversation.

Online, conversations tend to be small talk, the chit-chat that is so essential to our social lives. Some blogs do engage participants in sustained conversation around particular issues like politics. However, it is easy to leave the metropolitan and particular natures of these conversations un-mentioned and so, as the focus on blogs and other web-based means of participation sharpens, the many people who do not use the web to articulate their opinion can be left out of the equation. 'Big talk' – meaningful and purposeful conversation in the sense of its being societal – rarely happens on the internet more generally because users find it difficult to connect it with public processes like governance and renewal: 'you cannot have a conversation in a vacuum'.[79] Especially in the more personality-driven environment in which

we live, it is simply harder to build up relationships of trust online. In online chatrooms, trust is replaced by common interest and conversation is safely corralled; there need be no risk. For us to take the risk of the public conversation, there needs to be a deeper conversation.[80]

So, while information technology has a good deal to contribute, the logic of the public realm still demands conversational involvement in conventional and geographically determined structures. Overwhelmingly, changes in society and our use of technology push us away from this, challenging the logic and foundation that public conversation provides:

○ Information technology has created new forms of community, just as involved as conventional, geographical conceptions of community, but based on specific interest, and accessed only in those contexts.

○ Technology, generally, has

> undermined conversational practice, diverging opinion, but providing few forums where it can be brought together in discussion.

○ Consumer-driven innovation and technology has led to a personalised and individualised worldview, which is in danger of atomising society.

○ Overall, the primacy that we place on conversation has been eroded, and this sits in conflict with the structures of our public realm.

We need to think about how we can progress from this situation. Rather than simply bemoaning the decline of the public sphere, how can we learn from the ways in which we *do* have public conversations and the ways in which we *do* pursue our interests, in order to refresh the organisations and institutions of the public realm better to suit life in the twenty-first century?

10. Reinvigorating public conversation

Reinforced by changes in technology and society, the differences between us are more salient than ever before. We have increasing opportunity to express ourselves, but are less willing to engage those expressions in public conversation, where we bring together *different* ideas constructively, rather than antagonistically.

In a society in which cultural and linguistic clashes are frequent, the need for us to do this has rarely been more apparent. At the same time, it is increasingly difficult, and we do not have the structures to support it. At the time of the London atrocities of 7 July 2005, Scilla Elworthy and Gabrielle Rifkind emphasised the need for

'deep listening' in understanding the issues that different communities bring to society.[81] We need to find a way of talking about the deep differences between us that can counteract the group-think tendency to oppose hoodies with citizenship, and civilisation against civilisation.

> ### Case study 5 Space to think
>
> In early 2006, a team of Demos researchers facilitated a conference at Wilton Park. The project was an investigation into community-based counter-terrorism. For three days, representatives from Muslim and non-Muslim community organisations (religious and non-religious), the Muslim media and media personalities, the Home Office, MI5, the Metropolitan Police, writers, researchers and other individuals involved at all levels (schools, prisons, study groups, mosques, large and small organisations) gathered in a house on the Sussex Downs. The point was to

have a conversation and talk through different perspectives on the highly contentious issues that emerged. Conversation was heated, strained, angry even. As one of the facilitators has written, 'we speak often of deliberation and dialogue as solutions, as panaceas even, to all our contemporary quandaries. And it is, undeniably, a part of the solution. But the harsh truth is that it is difficult and, far from the feel-good exercise that everyone imagines or depicts, it is – initially at least – deeply troubling and extremely uncomfortable'.[82]

Deep conversation is defined by the risk, and openness, that we encountered earlier. The Wilton Park conference succeeded, and points of view were shared and recognised because the discussion was one of a truly public conversation that took the risk of confronting challenges fairly and openly. The point was not to develop and decide on a definite course of action but instead

to develop the ethos and conceptual space in which that might happen: combinational friendship.

The Demos Wilton Park conference was not an isolated application of deep conversation. The Washington DC think tank Brookings has held regular conferences in Doha, Qatar, which create similar spaces for representatives from both East and West to confront the issues that face them. Gatherings like this highlight the need for a very different set of contexts that enable truly public conversation. The ideal situation is one in which a number of needs are met:

- People feel that they are welcome and invited to contribute their opinion.
- People are prepared to take the risk of engaging in public conversation.
- People are aware that they are being listened to.
- There is the time and space to conduct sustained conversation.

○ The conversation is carefully managed and moderated.

In another instructive instance, the German Marshall Fund in the USA partnered the Rockefeller Foundation to develop a similar format for conversation, this time in Berlin. During the day, participants who brought with them very different opinions focused on a series of weighty and challenging issues that brought their attitudes into opposition. In the evening, though, participants sat and conversed side by side, watching cultural performances and listening to music from the different countries represented. This provided a release, the common enjoyment of culture. In establishing the conditions in which deep conversation can take place, it should not be forgotten that moments like this can be far more than light-hearted diversions: they can provide the crucial level at which people bond as human beings, rather than dividing over issues determined by factors such as nationality, economics or religion. In this way,

they can provide the basis for the conversational bonds that are so crucial in overcoming challenges of difference.

Towards some contexts of conversation

For the pamphlet *The Real Deal*,[83] Demos researchers consulted over 150 young people about their views of politics, social exclusion and government policies. *The Real Deal* was important not just in the representation it provided to politicians, but also in the significance and recognition it gave to the young participants. As one of them put it, this relied on conversation:

> *Coming to the Real Deal meetings is the only say we have ever had, like no one has asked us about politics before, no teachers, parents or anything like that. This is the only opportunity we have ever had to talk.*[84]

Contrary to popular belief, conversation *about* public matters in the private sphere is *not* on the

wane, but conversation about public matters in the public realm may be. We chat behind closed doors and with close friends, and we engage with matters that interest us online, but in groups and among friendship circles in which conversation is safe and reinforcing, rather than challenging and changing. The nature of our conversation has changed and yet the structures of our public realm, dependent on conversation, have not. We need to reconnect the everyday sphere of our lives with the public sphere.

To do this, we need to reconceptualise the spaces, physical and conceptual – like the Coffeehouse Challenge, the Wilton Park Conference – in which we can conduct conversations. The challenge that this pamphlet sets out is to refresh our public realm in ways acclimatised to the new means by which we pursue our personalised preference and our more particular ways of seeking information. We need to ensure that the public conversations that we can access occur in places where public conversations actually happen.

We must develop spaces that bridge the personal and the public in relation to:

- ○ our interests: they must fit into the new contexts of our lives, and yet connect them to a sense of the public realm
- ○ the new ways in which we lead our lives: they must connect our new interests with more traditional concerns of community
- ○ our conversations: they must facilitate the types of conversation that we now have, but offer us the chance to realise their relevance to the common good
- ○ the need for sustained conversation: they cannot simply be points of sporadic contact, and must encourage us to engage with each other and the issues that we bring in the long term.

Recent Demos research into public space has demonstrated the importance of the public's

sense of ownership of spaces, highlighting the inadequacy of explicitly 'political' and civic arenas. This reflects a more assertive approach on the part of users that parallels many of the developments that we have observed online and elsewhere. The pamphlet *People Make Places* argues that 'the separation of commercial and civic life is artificial; the ancient agora was successful as a public space not because it was a political civic space – it was the market that drew people in'.[85] The point is not that people are necessarily more comfortable in either commercial or civic spaces *per se* and because they are either commercial or civic, it is the sense of ownership that matters, and this is reliant on the space meeting people's needs. The very word 'domain', used in relation to public space for public deliberation and conversation, implies ownership. What is important is that people feel welcome, secure and familiar with their surroundings, and that this gives them the confidence and trust that they need to have the deep, public conversations that matter.

Familiarity, though, is also based on conversation and – in seeking to refresh the spaces on which our public realm is based – this presents us with a challenge. The same Demos research confirmed that, in communicating and getting to know a certain place,

> *word of mouth is king and the messenger generally has to be someone who is known and trusted by the potential user. Repeatedly, when we asked an individual why they had come to a particular place, they replied that a friend or family member had either brought them the first time, or had suggested they might like it.*[86]

In many ways, this ownership of space is dependent on similar ties of self-interest and security to those that we have seen cushion and couch the conversations that take place on the internet. We go to a given space because of peer-recommendation and very much individualised rationales – by and large, the conversation and

interaction that this encourages will be confirmative, rather than risk-taking. Conversely, when we do not use given spaces, we do so either because they do not suit our purpose, or because they do not meet with the logic with which we approach them.

As we have seen, though, for our public realm to be restored to the discursive state in which it must exist, we require spaces in which we are comfortable in confronting those of a *dis*similar persuasion – we need to do more than simply surround ourselves with like minds. Looked at in further detail, theories of public space provide an answer and do point to ways in which we can refresh the physical spaces for deliberation that are so central to our public realm. 'Interactions between . . . people are easily brokered through well-known rules such as queuing, choosing goods and paying for things.' Although 'the literature regarding public space can be dismissive of this consumer-based exchange . . . it is an important part of people's lives and often their identities'.[87] Similarly, and as we have seen,

accepted rules and decorum are what make deep, public conversations – from Harrington's 'Rota'[88] to Wilton Park – possible. We need to devise formats in which these rules are combined with the motivations and principles by which we now conduct conversations.

The discussion for which this pamphlet is a provocation will bring together policy-makers, thinkers and practitioners on community affairs and people whose expertise lies in designing and structuring the public domain. The challenge that faces us is to bring these areas of expertise together to think anew about the kind of spaces and thinking that we can use to refresh our public realm.

11. Talk us into it: some starting points for discussion

This pamphlet has set out a key challenge that faces us at the turn of the twenty-first century. At a time at which the engagement of the public in British politics is a cause of worry to thinkers and politicians alike, and in which, globally, our conversations can tend to be more individualised and particular, how can we use conversation to include and allow people to take ownership of their public domain?

The problem is complex, demanding far more than a single solution can provide and asking questions of several areas of contemporary life

and policy. On the one hand, the public realm rests on the foundation of conversation, but the structures that comprise it can no longer support the types of conversation that we expect and want to have. On the other, we cannot – and do not want to do without the locational ties and links that those structures provide. So, we need to find a balance between the more individual interests to which we are used and the more societal instincts that people think are necessary, but rarely actually commit to.

Above and beyond this, there is a further challenge. As the Power Inquiry and other initiatives like the examples mentioned in this pamphlet show, there is a public appetite for discussion, from the chit-chat on the train, to more intense debate like the 'Democracy Dinners' or the Coffeehouse Challenge. People *like* being involved; people *like* to talk and have their say. The challenge for policy-makers and others is to provide a framework in which that involvement can result in the free and more integrational discussion that invites, allows and encourages us

to do this and so brings together our very different points of view.

As we have seen, for this to happen, several conditions must be met. We must also be able to manage and conduct the deep, public conversations in which we confront issues for ourselves, but we must feel comfortable and validated in doing so. We suggest three ways in which to promote the attitudes and spaces that will be necessary if we are to place public conversation centrally in a more democratically secure and grounded public realm:

- conversational competence
- providing space for deep public conversation
- refreshing the structures of the public realm.

Importantly, these recommendations are mutually reinforcing and should not be read as separate recommendations. They are about creating the ethos and environment, both

conceptual and physical, in which deep public conversation can take place.

Conversational competence

Chit-chat and gossip are essential in providing the knowledge and background information that we need to engage in deep public conversation. They also comprise a vital testing ground for the formation of personal opinion and conversational technique that we need to build the confidence and skills necessary to take the risk of public conversation. Some suggestions include:

     ○   developing the spaces in learning in which young people can practise public conversation. Original polling for Demos raises serious questions about the conversational competence of our younger generations: 68 per cent of human resources directors listed 'communication and the communication of ideas' as being one of the top three skills, qualities or

aptitudes that they looked for in a graduate employee. However, this is the area in which graduate employees feel least equipped by their education: 43 per cent feel awkward challenging senior colleagues, 35 per cent feel awkward making presentations, 28 per cent feel awkward speaking in meetings and 25 per cent feel awkward negotiating – one in eight even feel awkward answering the phone.[89]

We need to develop the spaces in learning and the curriculum in which young people can practise public conversation and learn to control the confrontation of different points of view. This is already part of the curriculum, but could be developed further as a good to be pursued in its own right, rather than simply as a means to an end.

An example of this might be the initiation of debating groups as part of the curriculum; at the moment, many schools have debating societies, but this could become a part of the regular school week throughout the education sector.

GCSE, A and AS level topics in conversation could be a chance to develop this further. Alternatively, conversation, the discussion of ideas and debate could be promoted as a major part of a range of subjects, in particular in English and the Humanities.

○ providing opportunity – as in the conversational tickets offered on French trains (see page 32) – for citizens to engage in sporadic and informing conversation more often.

Importantly, this is not with a view to harnessing these conversations directly to a wider democratic process, but simply as a supportive background for engagement in the public realm and a richer life in general. By engaging more freely in conversation, people can develop the confidence and knowledge to participate in deeper public conversation.

An example of how this can be done is to provide people with the opportunity to participate in conversation with each other. The SNCF initiative works because passengers retain the right to choose whether or not they engage in conversation. However, it does not necessarily bring the different opinion that we need for conversational society to flourish. By using schemes

like this to bring opinion together and promote the healthy discussion of difference, this could be a valuable means of encouraging people to encounter different opinion and so contribute to building a more widespread and tolerant public realm.

Providing space for deep public conversation

This pamphlet has made reference to several successful examples of the kinds of deep, public conversation in which people confront and deal with difficult issues and can reach commonly grounded and democratic decisions. The conditions necessary for this have already been mentioned; however, to achieve these, policy-makers and other recognised public bodies like councils or key leaders must do the following:

○ Provide the invitation and leadership that legitimises and validates the discussion, creating an atmosphere of

listening and trust, demonstrating –
like George Mitchell in Northern
Ireland – that they are open and
willing to hear different and
potentially difficult points of view.

In areas of particular interest or
concern, key figures and organis-
ations – from neighbourhood
watch groups to political figures
and parties – should encourage the
interaction of their constituents in
deep public conversation, not as
an exercise simply in opening their
own views to public debate, but
also as a means of bringing
different points of view to bear on
a common situation.

The role of the figure or
organisation would primarily be to
act as an arbiter for different
opinion. They would also act to
validate the event, making clear its

credibility as a forum for opinion and debate. One problem, of course, is that this could easily be used as a forum for complaint. In itself, however, protest and dissent is healthy. For deep conversation to be possible, discussion would have to be led so as to allow for opinion to be expressed, with time then allowed for participants to hear and confront one another's views on an equal footing.

○ Provide the space in which people are comfortable enough to take the risk of participating in and contributing to deep public conversation. As with the conference run by the German Marshall Fund, cultural programming can provide a vital and alternative channel in which people can interact around a common experience and as

individuals with different perspectives
and backgrounds, rather than as
figureheads for opinions.

Cultural display can provide a
neutral but stimulating
environment in which different
opinions and viewpoints can be
accessed and shared. Culture can
provide a commonly felt point of
reference that can provide a point
of interaction to help participants
overcome disagreement and allow
people to discuss their opinions in
a different and often less
contentious frame of reference.
The culture displayed may not
necessarily mean an artform
(although the efficacy of such
forms as the visual arts, theatre
and dance in helping to bridge
between opposing points of view is
proven) but can extend to a means

by which people can read, understand and enjoy the worldviews of others; food is another example of how this can be achieved.

When spaces for deep public conversation are planned and provided for citizens, then cultural programming should also be considered, both as relief after the pressures of conversation when contentious topics are discussed and as a means of connecting with the opinion of others. One possibility is that, where different interest groups or cultures are brought into conversation, cultural performance or production by one of those groups or by practitioners who bring similar attitudes is used as a specific means of communication.

Refreshing the structures of the public realm

This pamphlet has argued that the way we have and seek conversations using the technologies and attitudes now available to us has diverged from the conversational structures of the public realm. The challenge is therefore to reconnect them.

- The eagerness with which people have seized on new conversational forums and media, such as blogs or mobile phones, warns against trying to turn the tide. The reason that these platforms have met with such success is that we choose them because they allow us greater control over our lives and our personal interests. It is less the forums *per se* that encourage 'group-think' than the attitudes with which we approach them – we seek blogs on particular aspects of our interest and so, by and large, we will encounter like minds. In particular, online

conversation does not facilitate deep conversation. By reconceptualising the engagement of our citizens around interest groups, we can refresh the locational and geographic ties that are so important to our public realm.

Currently, we look to membership of set, local groups as a gauge of community spirit. Often, these are more representative of people in a given area who share an interest, rather than people who share an interest in a given area. Just as we click into blogs that reflect our interests, so we join groups that represent our interests. We need to think of these as a 'Long Tail' of conversation. This is Chris Anderson's theory that 'our culture and economy are increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits

(mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve, and moving toward a huge number of niches in the tail . . . the true shape of demand is revealed only when consumers are offered infinite choice'.[90]

We need to access this 'Long Tail'. In *Start with People*, Demos suggested that the deliberative and representative aspects of participation could be strengthened by inviting people to join together within a community of interest to reach a proposition that would gain the right to initiative only if countersigned by a certain number of community organisations.[91] Thinking of this in terms of conversation, these interest groups would have to be driven by the multiple interests

within the 'Long Tail' of conversation.

Establishing officers and spaces within the community to convene discussions that bring together these niche interests within locales and geographical areas would create a point at which these interests could come together. The role of specific officers could be initiated to convene and manage deep public conversations between different parties, bringing together people with very different opinions to talk through issues related to the public realm. In inviting people with different opinions to discuss a particular subject, the role of these 'conversation conveners' would be to draw together different opinion in a public space simply with a

view to the spontaneous generation of ideas. The approach taken in doing this should not be one of extracting opinion, but should rather be the provision of an open forum in which ideas can be developed spontaneously.

It would be necessary to motivate these interests to come together and this could be a means of achieving funding and support for the initiatives developed. To avoid the Wildean fatigue of socialism, whereby it takes up too many Saturday evenings, attendance would be optional and need not be regular. In line with the ways in which we more generally pursue conversations and interests nowadays, it would be driven by particular interest in a given topic. The effect of bringing these people

together on the basis of locale
would be to restore the necessary
geographic ties to neighbourhood
by bringing together in
conversation interests that have
locality, but often little else in
common.

Appendix: The Long Tail and conversation

In 2004, Chris Anderson wrote what has become a seminal article for the online journal *Wired*, called 'The Long Tail'.[92] He argued that there is 'an entirely new economic model for the media and entertainment industries, one that is just beginning to show its power'. As the opportunities for purchase of books, music, videos and other media have multiplied, what drives the market is the 'Long Tail' of more idiosyncratic purchases, niche interests that individually amount to far fewer sales than mainstream and blockbuster titles, but *en masse* can and are driving a new market. Anderson wrote:

For too long we've been suffering the tyranny of lowest-common-denominator fare, subjected to brain-dead summer blockbusters and manufactured pop. Why? Economics. Many of our assumptions about popular taste are actually artefacts of poor supply-and-demand matching – a market response to inefficient distribution.

Anderson's idea has taken off and he has since developed the idea in a book.

The theory of the Long Tail can be boiled down to this: our culture and economy are increasingly shifting away from a focus on a relatively small number of hits (mainstream products and markets) at the head of the demand curve, and moving toward a huge number of niches in the tail . . . the true shape of demand is revealed only when consumers are offered infinite choice.[93]

Figure A represents the Long Tail in a simple, diagrammatical form.

Importantly in the context of conversation, the Long Tail principle can also be applied to our interests at large. Every day, we chat about endless numbers of topics. It is the sum total of these chats and conversations that make up the fabric and detail of our lives. More particularly, conversations are the means by which we connect our individual will to the collective action that we earlier saw makes up social capital. It is only by talking things through that we can cluster around interests and create interest groups that range from informal decisions – for example when to go and have lunch with colleagues – through to more public demonstrations of will from protests over war through to the political parties.

This is not to say that all public conversations lead directly to action, but they do create the ethos for action. Democracy works by the concept of possibility. Not all people vote, but it is essential that they feel able to and believe that, if they did, then they would be having their say. The

**Figure A The new marketplace: the Long Tail**
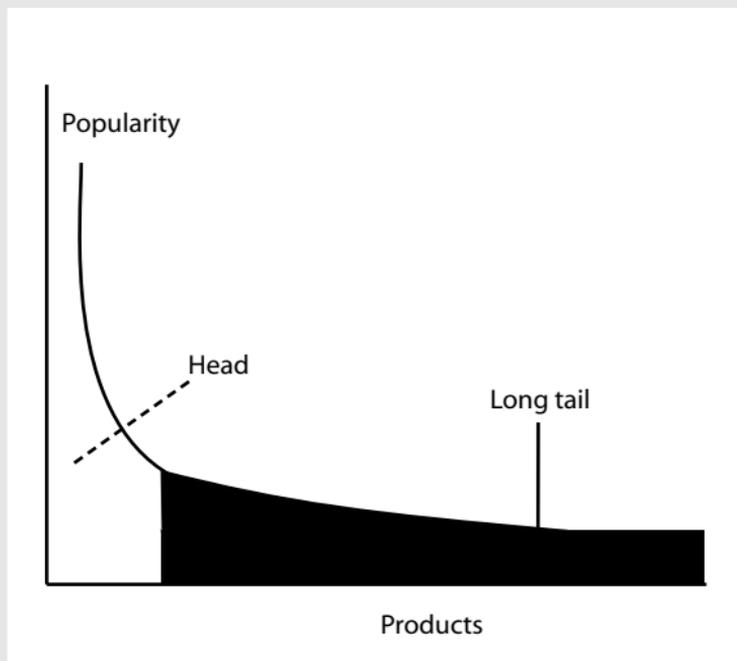
Source: This diagram is adapted from Chris Anderson's models in *The Long Tail*

same is true in more everyday terms. In order to build confidence in our ownership of the world around us, it is essential that we have conversations about matters of public interest. It is in conversation that the individual becomes the public citizen that it is in our nature to be.

The problem is that in pinpointing and targeting the more particular topics of conversation, the structures of our public realm miss a good deal of the richness and diversity that is in the 'Long Tail' of the many conversations that we have everyday. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the structures also assume particular types and topics of public conversation that may not necessarily carry the weight that they once did. Figure B maps the Long Tail onto the interests represented by the memberships of groups in figure 2 (see page 44).

Figure B is intended more as an illustration than a direct mapping of data. Nevertheless, it demonstrates well that there remains a vast richness of conversation that goes on *outside* those structures.

Figure B: GB population: membership of organisations and the Long Tail (%)

Percentage of sample

The focus of current structures of the public realm

Multiple interests that are currently uncaptured

Organisations (see figure 2)
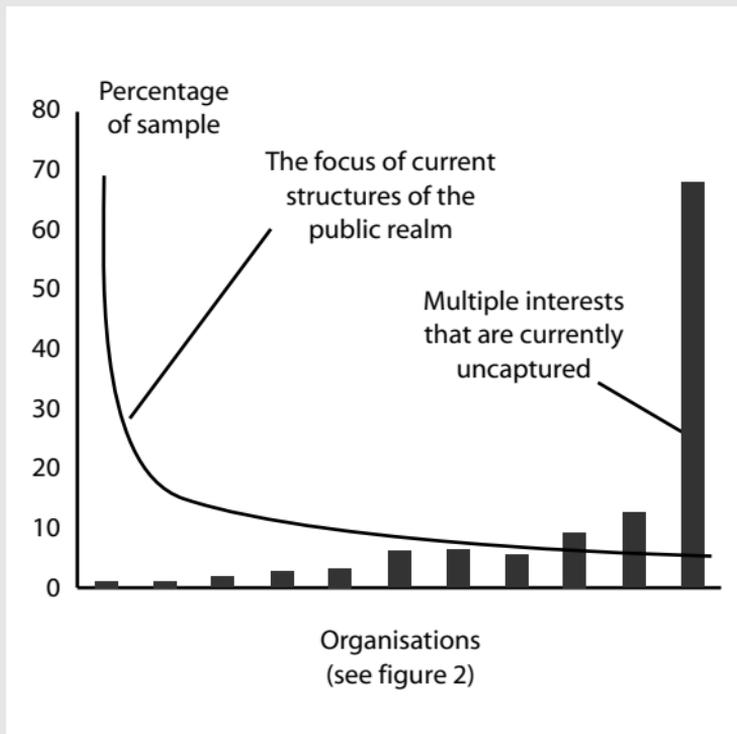
There is a strong possibility that people are not talking about public affairs *less* – they are engaging less frequently in the means by which their conversation can become public. The public realm is suffering from what Anderson calls 'the tyranny of lowest-common-denominator fare'. In order to draw on the multiple and fragmented interests that we now have, it is necessary to rethink the structures of the public realm in ways that can capture the many but disparate concerns that we now have . . . and these are raised primarily in conversations.

Notes

1 J Simmons, *My Sister's A Barista* (London: Cyan Books Ltd, 2004).
2 G Mulgan, *Good and Bad Power: The ideals and betrayals of government* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).
3 J Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London, Penguin, 1973).
4 S Miller, *Conversation: A history of a declining art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
5 See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4927580.stm (accessed 15 Aug 2006); for the Cambridge International Corpus see www.cambridge.org/elt/corpus/ (accessed 15 Aug 2006).
6 Miller, *Conversation*.
7 M McPherson, L Smith-Lovin and M Brashears, 'Social isolation in America: changes in core discussion networks over two decades', *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006).
8 See Mintel's report, *Portable Audio Players in the UK* (July 2005), available at http://reports.mintel.com/sinatra/reports/search_results/show&&type=RCItem&page=0&noaccess_page=0/display/id=114673/display/id=172781&section#hit1 (accessed 15 Aug 2005).

9   Ibid.

10   JL Locke, *Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More: The de-voicing of society* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).

11   The *Mobile Life* report is cited in D Smith, 'Women use mobiles to deter chat-ups', *Observer*, 23 Jul 2006.

12   This data is from a 2004 survey undertaken by British Gas.

13   Locke, *Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More*.

14   YouGov survey into community, 28 April – 2 May 2006.

15   K Fox, cited in Smith, 'Women use mobiles to deter chat-ups'.

16   TL Friedman, *The World is Flat: A brief history of the twenty-first century* (London: Penguin, 2006).

17   Locke, *Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More*.

18   J Worron, *Empowering Neigbourhood: Delivering better local services for local people*, briefing document (London: Confederation of British Industry, Jul 2006).

19   J Habermas, 'The public sphere: an encyclopedia article' in D MacKay Kellner and SE Bronner (eds and intro), *Critical Theory and Society: A reader* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

20   M Hajer and A Reijndorp, *In Search of New Public Domain* (Rotterdam: NAi, 2001).

21   M Ellis, *The Coffee-house: A social history* (London: Phoenix, 2005), my emphasis.

22   Ibid.

23   P Skidmore, K Bound and H Lownsbrough, *Participation: Who benefits? Community participation in*

governance and social capital (London: Demos, forthcoming).

24   YouGov survey into community.

25   This definition is taken from Skidmore et al, *Participation: Who benefits?*

26   WM Johnston and R Jowell, 'How robust is British civil society?' in A Park et al, *British Social Attitudes: Public policy, social ties*, the 18th report (London: Sage Publications, in association with National Centre for Social Research, 2001), see www.sagepub.co.uk/ booksProdDesc.nav?currTree=Subjects&level1=J00&le vel2=J30&prodId=Book224905 (accessed 21 Aug 2006).

27   E Keaney, *From Access to Participation: Cultural policy and civil renewal* (London: institute for public policy research, 2006).

28   Miller, *Conversation*.

29   YouGov survey into community.

30   Quoted in 'In fact', *Prospect*, Apr 2006.

31   Worron, *Empowering Neigbourhood*.

32   M Schudson, 'Why conversation is not the soul of democracy', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 14 (1997).

33   See www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/ conversation?view=uk (accessed 15 Aug 2006).

34   D Sull and B Bryant, 'More than idle chatter', *Financial Times*, 6 Apr 2006.

35   Entering 'conversations' in the search option of amazon.co.uk, for instance, produces titles that vary from R Maggio, *The Art of Talking to Anyone: Essential*

people skills for success in any situation (New York: McGraw Hill Higher Education, 2005), to D Fine, *The Fine Art of Small Talk: How to start a conversation in any situation* (London: Piatkus Books, 2005), and Miller, *Conversation*. See also T Zeldin, *Conversation: How talk can change our lives* (London: HiddenSpring, 2000).

36 J Craig, unpublished research, cited with permission.
37 Professor Nick Emler, quoted in 'Why do we love to gossip?', available at www.open2.net/society/media_communications/communication_gossip.html (accessed 15 Aug 2006).
38 R Wyatt, E Katz and J Kim, 'Bridging the spheres: political and personal conversation in public and private spaces', *Journal of Communication* 50 (Winter 2000).
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 E Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981).
42 Zeldin, *Conversation*.
43 S Poole, *Unspeak* (London: Little, Brown, 2006).
44 C Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
45 P Miller, S Parker and S Gillinson, *Disablism: How to tackle the last prejudice* (London: Demos, 2004).
46 Wyatt et al, 'Bridging the spheres'.
47 Zeldin, *Conversation*.
48 The term is Michael Schudson's, see Schudson, 'Why conversation is not the soul of democracy'.

49   Miller et al, *Disablism*.

50   See Electoral Commission, 'Britain is hidden hotbed of
      political debate', 3 Jun 2004, available at
      www.electoralcommission.org.uk/media-
      centre/newsreleasereviews.cfm/news/325 (accessed 15
      Aug 2006).

51   S Elworthy and G Rifkind, *Hearts and Minds: Human
      security approaches to political violence* (London:
      Demos, 2005).

52   YouGov survey into community.

53   E Mayo, *A Playlist for Public Services* (London: National
      Consumer Council, 2005).

54   Locke, *Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More*.

55   Friedman, *The World is Flat*.

56   C Leadbeater, *Personalisation through Participation*
      (London: Demos, 2004).

57   For personalised learning, see the Department for
      Education and Skills website,
      www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/personalisedlearning/
      about/ (accessed 15 Aug 2006), and for the emergence
      of more personalised means of engaging in culture, see
      S Jones, 'The new cultural professionals' in J Craig (ed),
      Production Values (London: Demos, 2006).

58   Sunstein, *Republic.com*.

59   More details of the Coffeehouse Challenge are available
      on the website of the Royal Society for the
      Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and
      Commerce, www.thersa.org/chc2006/ (accessed 15 Aug
      2006); the discussion of the scheme in this pamphlet is
      based on conversations with Gerard Darby and

Henneke Sharif of the RSA.

60   Ibid.

61   A Lent, *Power to the People, the Report of Power: An independent inquiry into Britain's democracy* (York: Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 2006).

62   B Jupp, *Living Together* (London: Demos, 1999).

63   YouGov Survey into community.

64   J Birchall and R Simmons, 'A theoretical model of what motivates public service users to participate', ESRC Democracy and Participation (2002) cited in J Aspden and D Birch, *New Localism: Citizen engagement, neighbourhoods and public services* (London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005).

65   Friedman, *The World is Flat*.

66   See www.technorati.com/weblog/2005/10/53.html (accessed 15 Aug 2006).

67   Ellis, *The Coffee-house*.

68   B Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The emergence of the British coffee-house* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

69   Sunstein, *Republic.com*.

70   Ibid.

71   A van Duyn, 'Newspaper circulation down as readers turn to the internet', *Financial Times*, 8 May 2006.

72   These statistics are taken from www.timesonline.co.uk/section/0,,1782,00.html (accessed 15 Aug 2006); for further details on the decline of print media, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/3767267.stm (accessed 15 Aug 2006); see also Sunstein, *Republic.com*.

73   An example of this is http://del.icio.us, which enables
      users to 'tag' the websites that they have visited,
      creating an organic catalogue of what is the most
      looked for, the most visited and the most searched-for
      information; see also http://myspace.com (both sites
      accessed 15 Aug 2006).

74   G Mulgan, T Steinberg and O Salem, *Wide Open: Open
      source methods and their future potential* (London:
      Demos, 2005).

75   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Statistics
      (accessed 22 Aug 2006).

76   R Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin,
      2002).

77   Locke, *Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Any More*.

78   Sunstein, *Republic.com*.

79   J Craig and J Stilgoe, *Broadband Britons* (London:
      Demos, 2005).

80   It is not always the case that technology runs against
      the concept of community, based on public
      conversation. Former Minister for Local Government,
      David Miliband, established a blog on which the public
      could comment, and engage him in conversation
      around specific issues. Labour Party Chair, Hazel
      Blears, too, has launched 'Let's Talk', a forum based
      online that will allow the government to 'hear new
      ideas and solutions'. See www.labour.org.uk/
      blog/index.php?id=125 (accessed 15 Aug 2006).

81   Elworthy and Rifkind, *Hearts and Minds*.

82   The account of the Wilton Park Conference is based on
      C Fieschi, 'Deep difference', work in progress, cited with
      permission of the author.
83   T Bentley and K Oakley, *The Real Deal: What young
      people really think about government, politics and social
      exclusion* (London: Demos, 1999).
84   Ibid.
85   M Mean and C Tims, *People Make Places: Growing the
      public life of cities* (London: Demos, 2005).
86   Ibid.
87   Ibid.
88   See chapter 2 and Ellis, *The Coffee-house*.
89   S Gillinson and D O'Leary, *Working Progress: How to
      reconnect young people and organisations* (London:
      Demos, 2006).
90   C Anderson, *The Long Tail: How endless choice is
      creating unlimited demand* (London: Random House,
      2006); the 'Long Tail' analysis of conversations is
      included in the appendix to this volume.
91   P Skidmore and J Craig, *Start with People: How
      community organisations put citizens in the driving seat*
      (London: Demos, 2005).
92   This article is available online at www.wired.com/
      wired/archive/12.10/tail.html (accessed 15 Aug 2006).
93   Anderson, *The Long Tail.*

DEMOS – Licence to Publish

THE WORK (AS DEFINED BELOW) IS PROVIDED UNDER THE TERMS OF THIS LICENCE ("LICENCE"). THE WORK IS PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT AND/OR OTHER APPLICABLE LAW. ANY USE OF THE WORK OTHER THAN AS AUTHORIZED UNDER THIS LICENCE IS PROHIBITED. BY EXERCISING ANY RIGHTS TO THE WORK PROVIDED HERE, YOU ACCEPT AND AGREE TO BE BOUND BY THE TERMS OF THIS LICENCE. DEMOS GRANTS YOU THE RIGHTS CONTAINED HERE IN CONSIDERATION OF YOUR ACCEPTANCE OF SUCH TERMS AND CONDITIONS.

1. **Definitions**
   a **"Collective Work"** means a work, such as a periodical issue, anthology or encyclopedia, in which the Work in its entirety in unmodified form, along with a number of other contributions, constituting separate and independent works in themselves, are assembled into a collective whole. A work that constitutes a Collective Work will not be considered a Derivative Work (as defined below) for the purposes of this Licence.
   b **"Derivative Work"** means a work based upon the Work or upon the Work and other pre-existing works, such as a musical arrangement, dramatization, fictionalization, motion picture version, sound recording, art reproduction, abridgment, condensation, or any other form in which the Work may be recast, transformed, or adapted, except that a work that constitutes a Collective Work or a translation from English into another language will not be considered a Derivative Work for the purpose of this Licence.
   c **"Licensor"** means the individual or entity that offers the Work under the terms of this Licence.
   d **"Original Author"** means the individual or entity who created the Work.
   e **"Work"** means the copyrightable work of authorship offered under the terms of this Licence.
   f **"You"** means an individual or entity exercising rights under this Licence who has not previously violated the terms of this Licence with respect to the Work, or who has received express permission from DEMOS to exercise rights under this Licence despite a previous violation.

2. **Fair Use Rights.** Nothing in this licence is intended to reduce, limit, or restrict any rights arising from fair use, first sale or other limitations on the exclusive rights of the copyright owner under copyright law or other applicable laws.

3. **Licence Grant.** Subject to the terms and conditions of this Licence, Licensor hereby grants You a worldwide, royalty-free, non-exclusive, perpetual (for the duration of the applicable copyright) licence to exercise the rights in the Work as stated below:

    a to reproduce the Work, to incorporate the Work into one or more Collective Works, and to reproduce the Work as incorporated in the Collective Works;

    b to distribute copies or phonorecords of, display publicly, perform publicly, and perform publicly by means of a digital audio transmission the Work including as incorporated in Collective Works;

    The above rights may be exercised in all media and formats whether now known or hereafter devised. The above rights include the right to make such modifications as are technically necessary to exercise the rights in other media and formats. All rights not expressly granted by Licensor are hereby reserved.

4. **Restrictions.** The licence granted in Section 3 above is expressly made subject to and limited by the following restrictions:

    a You may distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work only under the terms of this Licence, and You must include a copy of, or the Uniform Resource Identifier for, this Licence with every copy or phonorecord of the Work You distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform. You may not offer or impose any terms on the Work that alter or restrict the terms of this Licence or the recipients' exercise of the rights granted hereunder. You may not sublicense the Work. You must keep intact all notices that refer to this Licence and to the disclaimer of warranties. You may not distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work with any technological measures that control access or use of the Work in a manner inconsistent with the terms of this Licence Agreement. The above applies to the Work as incorporated in a Collective Work, but this does not require the Collective Work apart from the Work itself to be made subject to the terms of this Licence. If You create a Collective Work, upon notice from any Licencor You must, to the extent practicable, remove from the Collective Work any reference to such Licensor or the Original Author, as requested.

    b You may not exercise any of the rights granted to You in Section 3 above in any manner that is primarily intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation. The exchange of the Work for other copyrighted works by means of digital file-sharing or otherwise shall not be considered to be intended for or directed toward commercial advantage or private monetary compensation, provided there is no payment of any monetary compensation in connection with the exchange of copyrighted works.

    c If you distribute, publicly display, publicly perform, or publicly digitally perform the Work or any Collective Works, You must keep intact all copyright notices for the Work and give the Original Author credit reasonable to the medium or means You are utilizing by conveying the name (or pseudonym if applicable) of the Original Author if supplied; the title of the Work if supplied. Such credit may be implemented in any reasonable manner; provided, however, that in the case of a Collective Work, at a minimum such credit will appear where any other comparable authorship credit appears and in a manner at least as prominent as such other comparable authorship credit.

5. **Representations, Warranties and Disclaimer**

    a By offering the Work for public release under this Licence, Licensor represents and warrants that, to the best of Licensor's knowledge after reasonable inquiry:

        i Licensor has secured all rights in the Work necessary to grant the licence rights hereunder and to permit the lawful exercise of the rights granted hereunder without You having any obligation to pay any royalties, compulsory licence fees, residuals or any other payments;

        ii The Work does not infringe the copyright, trademark, publicity rights, common law rights or any other right of any third party or constitute defamation, invasion of privacy or other tortious injury to any third party.

    b EXCEPT AS EXPRESSLY STATED IN THIS LICENCE OR OTHERWISE AGREED IN WRITING OR REQUIRED BY APPLICABLE LAW, THE WORK IS LICENCED ON AN "AS IS" BASIS, WITHOUT WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EITHER EXPRESS OR IMPLIED INCLUDING, WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTIES REGARDING THE CONTENTS OR ACCURACY OF THE WORK.

6. **Limitation on Liability.** EXCEPT TO THE EXTENT REQUIRED BY
    APPLICABLE LAW, AND EXCEPT FOR DAMAGES ARISING FROM LIABILITY
    TO A THIRD PARTY RESULTING FROM BREACH OF THE WARRANTIES IN
    SECTION 5, IN NO EVENT WILL LICENSOR BE LIABLE TO YOU ON ANY
    LEGAL THEORY FOR ANY SPECIAL, INCIDENTAL, CONSEQUENTIAL,
    PUNITIVE OR EXEMPLARY DAMAGES ARISING OUT OF THIS LICENCE OR
    THE USE OF THE WORK, EVEN IF LICENSOR HAS BEEN ADVISED OF THE
    POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGES.

7. **Termination**
    a   This Licence and the rights granted hereunder will terminate
        automatically upon any breach by You of the terms of this Licence.
        Individuals or entities who have received Collective Works from You
        under this Licence, however, will not have their licences terminated
        provided such individuals or entities remain in full compliance with
        those licences. Sections 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 will survive any termination
        of this Licence.
    b   Subject to the above terms and conditions, the licence granted here
        is perpetual (for the duration of the applicable copyright in the
        Work). Notwithstanding the above, Licensor reserves the right to
        release the Work under different licence terms or to stop distributing
        the Work at any time; provided, however that any such election will
        not serve to withdraw this Licence (or any other licence that has
        been, or is required to be, granted under the terms of this Licence),
        and this Licence will continue in full force and effect unless
        terminated as stated above.

8. **Miscellaneous**
    a   Each time You distribute or publicly digitally perform the Work or a
        Collective Work, DEMOS offers to the recipient a licence to the Work
        on the same terms and conditions as the licence granted to You
        under this Licence.
    b   If any provision of this Licence is invalid or unenforceable under
        applicable law, it shall not affect the validity or enforceability of the
        remainder of the terms of this Licence, and without further action by
        the parties to this agreement, such provision shall be reformed to the
        minimum extent necessary to make such provision valid and
        enforceable.
    c   No term or provision of this Licence shall be deemed waived and no
        breach consented to unless such waiver or consent shall be in writing
        and signed by the party to be charged with such waiver or consent.

d This Licence constitutes the entire agreement between the parties with respect to the Work licensed here. There are no understandings, agreements or representations with respect to the Work not specified here. Licensor shall not be bound by any additional provisions that may appear in any communication from You. This Licence may not be modified without the mutual written agreement of DEMOS and You.