Coffeehousing: Rethinking Community, Compromise and Democracy in America

*The 17th-century English coffeehouse was a social-networking marvel that changed the world. Maybe it’s time for a reboot.*

E Pluribus Unum (out of many one) was the motto of America’s founding fathers. Toxic polarization is not what they had in mind.

People need to talk to people face-to-face—including strangers, the other, the unlike-minded. Coffeehousing, the experimental model I am proposing, is a grassroots effort to create positive change at the local level and depolarize civic life.

Coffeehousing is a back-to-the-future reboot: a 17th-century English coffeehouse or penny university reimagined for today’s contentious times.[[1]](#footnote-1) It would consist of neighborhood-based gathering spaces with formal and informal ways to connect, to learn, to discuss controversial issues in a calm, respectful manner, and to get involved in local problem-solving.

But saving the world isn’t for everyone, and even global visionaries need to kick back and relax now and then. Open daily and not too far from home or office or campus, these community centers would also serve as casual drop-in spots for coffee and other light refreshments. Possible venues include coffeehouses, cafés, bookstores, libraries, banks and shopping malls.

Independent bookstore and café owners could use the coffeehousing model to grow their market. For these early adopters, it’s a way to serve the local community and support democracy while gaining publicity for their business and expanding its customer base.

**Back to the Future**

The 17th-century English coffeehouse was a social networking marvel that inspired an eclectic mix of people and ideas and unexpected discoveries that changed the world. For the price of a penny cup of coffee, men from all walks of life could read newspapers and bulletins, gossip, learn from friends and strangers, debate the pressing issues of the day, advance human knowledge, and seek common ground. (Women, except for prostitutes, were pretty much excluded).

Some of these egalitarian hangouts became impromptu hubs for political discussion, scientific education and business innovation. A series of learned arguments in a coffeehouse led to Isaac Newton’s writing of *Principia Mathematica.* In London, merchants congregated at Jonathan’s Coffee House that eventually became the city’s first stock exchange.

Like the penny university, today’s coffeehousing sites would be open to the general public, welcome a diverse group of people, sell coffee and other light refreshments, and encourage the cross-fertilization of ideas. The price of a cuppa, alas, would be considerably more than a penny.

**Please Talk To Strangers**

Space permitting, a coffeehousing site would include a casual seating area for coffee, snacks and conversation, and a separate room for scheduled public lectures and moderated discussions. The informal coffee-and-conversation space would include the usual tables-for-one and tables for friends and family.

In a separate section, however, some mix-and-mingle tables would be set aside for drop-in patrons who choose to engage with strangers and serendipity. This *please-talk-to-strangers* model already exists. Amtrak’s Coast Starlight train running between Los Angeles and Seattle has tables for four in the dining car. At lunch and dinner sittings, individual patrons are randomly assigned to tables to fill up all the seats.

**A New Kind of Neighborhood Center**

When disinformation buries facts, cancel culture substitutes for polite disagreement and constructive debate, loneliness and isolation are public health concerns, firearms are the leading cause of death among children and adolescents, and compromise seems so yesterday, face-to-face engagement on neutral turf can provide opportunities.

Coffeehousing venues would be open either daily or several days a week. To encourage a diversity of age groups and opinions, moderated discussions and informational lectures would typically take place during evening hours or on weekends.

Moderated discussions that are scheduled in advance would deal with controversial issues such as affordable housing, artificial intelligence (AI), gun control, immigration, freedom of speech, and income inequality in a non-confrontational manner and explore the possibilities of compromise. These structured exchanges would encourage people to clarify their differences, share their views, learn from each other, and learn about each other.

**News Deserts and Local Problem-Solving**

One of the paradoxes in today’s hyperconnected world is the decline of local news. Since 2005, roughly 3,200 U.S newspapers have ceased publication. More than half of all U.S. counties now have limited access to reliable local news and information.[[2]](#footnote-2) The growth of alternative local news sources — digital and ethnic news outlets as well as public broadcasting — has not kept pace with the need for replacement media.

Coffeehousing could help by keeping people plugged into critical local issues and encouraging their participation in community-based problem-solving. The admonition to think globally and act locally suggests that people should consider the health of the entire planet and then take appropriate action in their own backyard. Scheduled lectures by civic and business leaders could include information on the local job market, education and training programs, neighborhood volunteering opportunities.

**Grassroots and The Power of Now**

America at its best is a nation of laws and due process on the one hand, and individualism on the other. Combining the need for order and continuity with a knack for innovation and independent thinking is --or was--the country’s secret sauce. Maintaining that balance is tough and getting tougher.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Our communities are rife with problems that resist timely solutions. Plodding bureaucracies, lengthy court deliberations, powerful lobbies, take-no-prisoners politics, and a welter of local zoning laws are enemies of change and efficiency.

Experimental coffeehousing is relatively free of these red-tape hurdles. If you’re a bookstore, public library, or off-campus hub that already houses a café and meeting rooms, you could launch a coffeehousing experiment today. No special permits are needed. It’s a matter of tweaking your calendar of public events and educational programs and adding one or more moderated discussions on controversial issues to the mix.

That’s about it. If the program doesn’t work, you cancel it. If it does work, you find ways to improve and expand it. You also spread the word via online and offline media in addition to word-of-mouth, so that other communities will be encouraged to seek local solutions to stubborn problems.

Democracy thrives on trust, respectful disagreement, peaceful political participation, and compromise. The fight to heal our nation requires a ceasefire among ourselves, and local battlefields are a good place to start.

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1. Tom Standage, Writing on the Wall: Social Media - The First 2,000 Years (New York: Bloomsbury, USA, 2013), 104-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Zach Metzger, *State of Local News Project: 2024,* Medill Local News Initiative, (Evanston, IL: Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University. )

   https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/news/2023/more-than-half-of-us-counties-have-no-access-or-very-limited-access-to-local-news.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance,*  (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)