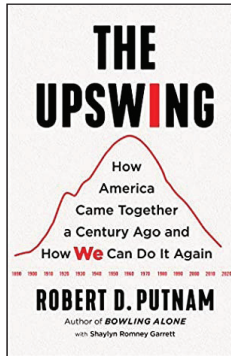


Understanding (and marketing to) a changed America.

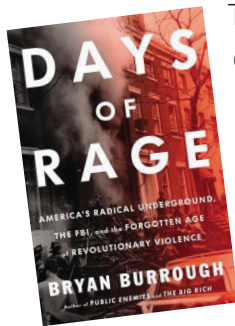
by Robert Ferguson



Twenty years ago, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* famously described the decline of community life and how this trend impacted American society. It was a very influential book helping nonprofits think strategically about their role in a changing America. In late 2020 Putnam produced a kind-of sequel, this time with Shaylyn Romney Garrett as his co-author: *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can do it Again* describes how the America of 2020 got this way. The question for nonprofits remains: what can they do to help America rebuild its diminished sense of community and restore its sense of shared values?

How we got to now

Travelling through 1830s North America, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville regularly encountered Americans who implicitly understood good neighborliness and collective problem solving helped achieve their self-interests. Yet, sixty years later, America had been transformed by a hyper-individualist creed. The response of reform-minded Progressives to The Gilded Age was to recreate an inter-connected America more conscious of its shared values. The sweeping social innovations they launched returned America to a “we” society where collective progress took precedence. That spirit buoyed Americans through two wars, a pandemic, and the Great Depression, but it couldn't survive 1968.



The late 1960s were “a middle state” wrote John Updike, foreshadowing “something darker.” Vietnam had descended into bloodshed and madness; domestic terrorism replaced the peaceful civil rights movement after Martin Luther King’s assassination; Watergate was the final nail in the coffin. These events may have been unrelated but collectively, Putnam says, they “seem to have had a synergistic effect, producing something like a national nervous breakdown.” As Brian Burroughs wrote in his book, *Days of Rage*, “the last shreds of civilization appeared to be disintegrating.” The result was that Americans stopped believing they were in this together.

After a decade of bad news, the Boomer generation wanted to forget and go to the disco. This was “The Me Decade” when “people stopped aspiring to fix society and started to think only of fixing themselves.” Since then, our drift toward self-centeredness in private life and in the public square has intensified. We’re in a new Gilded Age where the pursuit of unfettered self-interest is considered laudable, but it has left American politics paralyzed. Putnam believes the narcissism of today “makes it so difficult to achieve the unity of purpose required to change our national course.”

America is changing...maybe

Americans have a new president ushering-in the most progressive, big-government agenda since FDR in 1933. Covid made voters feel vulnerable and pushed them to the left; they're more willing than ever to support government efforts that reduce their vulnerability, further empowering Biden to act like a new "New Dealer." But his Progressive-redux moment may not be easy to sustain: Lawrence Martin reminded *Globe and Mail* readers "this is not the 1940s...This is the Internet era when truth is a moving target, when the public is much more susceptible to a sea of lies, when strait-jacketed party allegiances make consensus next to impossible."



There is a role for nonprofits to help engineer another movement today

The Progressive movement of the early twentieth century was truly grassroots and had "no one party, no one policy or platform, and no one charismatic leader." Rather it featured countless citizens reevaluating their shared values and sense of purpose as a nation and coming together to ensure America's values shifted from "I" to "we."

Rebuilding a "We" culture won't be easy. As Putnam remarked in his famous study *Bowling Alone*, people have lost their sense of attachment to organizations, and organizations have lost the trust of donors who are more focused on their own interests and no longer know what is expected of them. Nonprofits are uniquely positioned to maintain and increase their trust with the public by leveraging the wealth of content for engagement and learning. But if people aren't coalescing around them, maybe it's because nonprofits aren't effectively engaging their interests through storytelling.

Small thinking plagues nonprofits

You are, undoubtedly, asking the question "What will cause people to support us?" You should know that embracing superficiality and spectacle to compete for donations has built the wrong kind of identity. Money may not your number-one problem. The issue may be your branding. More specifically, the stories you tell (or don't tell) to engage your audience.

People don't know you. We've seen the impact meaningful stories can have on brand perception compared to projects starved for substantive content or relevance. Unfortunately, nonprofits have a built-in sense of fear when it comes to innovating about how they communicate. Managers undermine the future with careless budget cuts depriving the organization of its facility to understand what it wants to be bold about – they lose sight of their identity and their mission gets off track – which leads to entrenched uncertainty and organizational weakness.

Put your organization at the center of a vital public conversation

Your organization has been trying to get donors to identify with it, but that's the wrong tack: the brand is not about "you" – it's you who has to demonstrate your organization identifies with them. Ensure your work focuses on problems audiences care about. When you put your organization at the center of a vital public conversation – giving them information they care about and a forum to learn and discuss – you are addressing their needs. Substantive content is more powerful than advertising at overcoming skepticism, raising awareness, and building the trust essential to successful fundraising. The larger share of voice you can grab, the more you will define your organization in a cluttered marketplace.



Do this and you will be better understood (and supported) for identifying with your audience, and your community will grow – you will also be helping the broader society rebuild consensus.

Nonprofits can help reverse the "I" culture and the downward drift of society. This goal may seem like it aims above the typical nonprofit mission – which, some will argue is narrowly-focused on a specific (even incremental) societal challenge – but we disagree. The pandemic reminds us we are "all in this together": your efforts to build community and a sense of trust for your own organization help ensure all of us succeed.

Retool Lab is a collaborative focused on helping cultural, entertainment and public institutions regroup, reshape, and retool their strategy to recover from the economic impact of the current crisis, and to use these insights as a springboard to thrive far into the future. You can contact us at info@retoollab.com or at www.retoollab.com.