

Knowing Alone?

1. Bowling Alone

In 1993, the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam published an interesting book, **Making Democracy Work**.¹ I recall being recommended it strongly by a friend who at the time was teaching political theory at Harvard. Given that the book was concerned with the introduction of a new level of local government in Italy, this might seem surprising. But my friend had spotted something really important in the book, which led Putnam on to subsequent important work.

What was significant, was Putnam arguing that the new level of government had been effective in those parts of Italy in which there was a tradition of participation in a variety of organizations, the character of which was not of a patron/client character. Putnam was led, by this, to reflect on Alexander de Tocqueville's claims, in his classic work **Democracy in America**, about the way in which civic and other forms of participation played a key role in making American society function effectively. Putnam was struck by what seemed to him a significant decline in social participation in America in recent years.

Putnam argued this thesis in a paper called 'Bowling Alone?',² in which he noted the decline in competitive team (ten pin) bowling in the United States. People still went bowling, but not as typically with teams of people. He then produced a massive book, **Bowling Alone**,³ in which he argued this case at length. He suggested that there was a striking decline in social participation in the U.S., notably in the generation since those who had lived through the Second World War. This involved not just groups of people going bowling, but a fall-off in all sorts of social activity, from people having dinner with one another, through membership of friendly societies. The only exception that he noted, at that time, were members of some evangelical Christian churches, but

their participation tended to be restricted to socialization with other members of the same religious group.

Putnam expressed concern about this, as it seemed to him that a likely consequence of this would be a decline in trust – something that the Italian study had suggested to him was of key importance for the operation of effective government. He made what seemed to me a number of rather poor suggestions about how this tendency might be reversed – even going to the point of wishing for a non-fanatical religious revival. As to what was responsible, Putnam looked at various candidates – ending up by suggesting that one problem was posed by the development of TV.

Putnam came in for a fair amount of criticism. An early example was **The Ladd Report**,⁴ by Everett Carl Ladd, the executive director of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. He argued that Putnam, and others who had made similar claims, had mistaken a decline in some institutions for an overall such decline. It was noted by Putnam's critics that some other institutions – such as the Sierra Club, an environmental organization – had gained large numbers of members, over the same period. Similar criticisms have been made by people who stress the role, in recent years, of internet-based organizations in enabling people to make contact with others.

A key issue, here, however, seems to me to be that the organizations that Putnam was concerned with had typically involved people in leaving the home and actually meeting, in groups, with other people on a face-to-face basis. Organizations such as the Sierra Club have many members. But membership now typically involves making financial contributions, and sometimes visiting facilities that such organizations might maintain, e.g. to enjoy the countryside with one's immediate family or friends, rather than active and in-person participation. On-line activity typically gives people contacts that are focussed rather narrowly on a particular shared interest or, in the case of social media, are apt to create environments which provide support for people's existing

opinions, and which suggest how terrible other people are, all for the sake of attracting one's attention to web pages, and to the (targeted) advertising which appears on them.

Putnam, I suspect, had in fact got things right when he pointed to the significance of television. But since Putnam wrote, the problems of this kind have grown. In Western countries, we can now typically get immediate access to a plethora of world-class entertainment, of almost every conceivable kind, from our sofas. It seems to me all too easy to understand just why people are now less willing to turn out for meetings, talks and entertainment, perhaps of a poor quality, in often uncomfortable venues. In addition, services which in the past were often provided by means of voluntary organisations – such as friendly societies – have now been out-competed by, for example, the commercial provision of insurance. (While the development of the welfare state has also made the need for assistance from such voluntary organizations less pressing.)

2. Karl Popper and Objectivity as a Social Product

A second strand of my argument in this piece, relates to a theme in the work of Karl Popper. In his **The Open Society and Its Enemies**, he discussed the way in which objectivity might best be seen as a social product.⁵ We all, he stressed, bring various kinds of prejudices to the interpretation of the world. There are preconceptions rooted in our biology; others stemming from our social background and the language which we use; still others, from various theories by which we are attracted. Popper further stressed two important points.

On the one hand, our ideas are fallible. Just because some idea that we favour seems to us to be correct – or even obviously correct – does not mean that it is, in fact, true. On the other, we can't discover, on our own, what our particular biases and preconceptions are. Indeed, we may often find that those who proclaim that they are unbiased not only have strong biases, but that it is very difficult to get them to recognise that they are, in fact, prejudiced.

For Popper, being unbiased is not something that you can manage on your own. Rather, it requires interaction with, and criticism from, other people, especially people who have different views from yours. It is here, it seems to me, that a link starts to form between Popper's ideas and Putnam's. For in interest groups and civic associations of the old kind, people typically had to meet with people who had views different from their own. But if we stay at home, or associate just with like-minded friends, or connect via the internet just with people who agree with us, there is a risk that our prejudices will go unchallenged.

Clearly, to learn from one another – not least, if some of our deep-seated and much-cherished ideas are wrong – requires that we treat one another with respect, and put points in ways that take into account one another's feelings. But it is exactly that which has a reasonable chance of taking place if people with different views, and from different social settings, are associating to pursue other shared goals. Yet how many local bands or choral societies are flourishing these days? How many voluntary organizations – such as the 'University of the Third Age' – can get people readily to volunteer to lead study groups or to undertake committee duties?⁶

An underlying problem here, for Popper's ideas about objectivity, is that while it seems to me that he is correct about what we need, it is not clear that it is something that we would like or would choose. What we like, I suspect, is to have our prejudices confirmed, and to associate with people who think rather like we do. It is the kinds of organizations the decline of which Putnam noted, which helped us overcome these inclinations, for the sake of the achievement, with others, of goals which we thought were important. But not only – where this has been relatively easy to do, as in the United States – has there been an increasing tendency for populations to divide physically on the basis of their broad political and cultural opinions.⁷ While there has been an additional tendency for news outlets to become politically polarised,⁸ and for people to choose news sources which re-enforce their views. This seems to be re-enforced by the kind of development that was pioneered

by Facebook, where people were encouraged to create environments, and to receive news, which was slanted towards their prejudices.

Indeed, 'encouraged' puts the issue much too mildly, as current practise seems to involve tracing all forms of internet activity (on which Google is a past-master),⁹ and then using what is discovered about you to create a kind of profile, in line with which information – including news – is fed to you. There has been a long-standing question as to whether getting what you want – in the sense of what fits your preferences – is good for you. Adam Smith, in a revision of his **Theory of Moral Sentiments** made just before his death, warned that the (attractive-looking) fashions indulged in by the wealthy may be problematic if taken as models by ordinary people.¹⁰ It is certainly the case that, from the point of view of epistemology, the last thing that one wants is exactly what Facebook gives you.

The same kind of problem can arise in other settings, too. One of the rather strange phenomena that has occurred in recent American politics, has been the kind of support that Donald Trump received from people who identified as evangelical Christians. In **some** ways this was understandable. When Trump was initially a candidate, there was discussion in the pages of **Christianity Today** – an evangelical Christian magazine which has serious intellectual and cultural concerns – about the pros and cons of supporting him. And a writer who favoured supporting him, despite everything, did so on the grounds of his support for 'the right to life'.¹¹ This was significant, just because, while previous Republican candidates had made what was, from this perspective, the right noises here for a long time, when in power they had shown little interest in addressing this issue, or in other cultural issues of concern to conservative Christians.¹² Trump, when he was elected, could be said to have delivered on this. He was in a position to make a number of nominations for the Supreme Court, and – as we have seen – this created a majority which called into question abortion rights as constitutional rights, which had been brought in as a consequence of *Roe v. Wade*.¹³

It is, however, another aspect of conservative Christianity in the U.S. with which I am here concerned. It relates to the willingness of conservative evangelicals to give their support to conspiracy theories. Here, an interesting report by Russell Moore in a recent edition of **Christianity Today**,¹⁴ indicates that a considerable number of people – around 30% of those surveyed – identify as conservative evangelicals, but no longer attend church. They: ‘are now... the largest religious body in the South’, and are reported as ‘not only keep[ing] their politics but also [to] ratchet [it] up to more extreme levels’. Moore comments: ‘Going without worship and connection does not end the culture wars—it often heightens them. Almost any disconnection from organic community leads people to extremism and anger, no matter their place on the ideological spectrum.’

3. Disconnection and the Death of Available Tacit Knowledge

I have already mentioned that one reaction to Putnam’s work has been to argue that he had missed the development of new forms of association, and particularly the sorts of association that are available on the internet. The material about non-affiliated conservative evangelicals, on which I have just reported, suggests a different story. For there is every reason to believe that these people draw information from the internet to support their views. The problem is that – as a writer in **The Economist** commented not long ago – when people say that they have researched things for themselves, what they all too often mean is that they have simply sought out material that confirms – rather than posing challenges for – their opinions, on the internet.

The Economist also recently reported on an extensive study that had appeared in **Nature**, which looked at the degree to which friendships across class lines increased social mobility and decreased poverty.¹⁵ They highlighted the significance, in this context, of exposure to people with different social and economic status (which was significant in universities, but where the chance of this leading to friendships was less than one might have expected), but noted that friendships across

classes within church groups was particularly significant. The broad study was taken by **The Economist** to endorse the message of Putnam's work.

There is, however, another aspect to this. For while the internet now makes available to us an incredible amount of information, it seems to me that its growth – and the development of the rationalization of different services which has come with it – has led to an important loss. What I have in mind, here, is the role that tacit knowledge and its social transmission had in the past.

When I grew up, it was typically the case that people from ordinary backgrounds were in regular contact with those who had more knowledge about how the world worked than they did, because these people supplied various professional services to them. While each of us has an area of knowledge about things in respect of which we have relatively specialized knowledge, there are all kinds of things about which ordinary people's knowledge is very limited. If they need to make choices about things outside of their own areas of relative expertise, they used, in the past, to be able to obtain knowledge – or leads to other people who could provide such knowledge – from the professional people with whom they were in contact. Doctors; bank managers; lawyers; trades union officials and clergymen, would typically have – in addition to their own specialized knowledge – wider knowledge about the world, or contact with other professional people who would have knowledge that they did not have, personally.

This, however, is now – at least in the UK – becoming a thing of the past. Doctors are becoming much more narrowly focussed in their concerns, as are lawyers. They will typically perform with considerable efficiency specific services in which they have expertise. But the scope of their knowledge is now much more limited. And they are reluctant to make the kinds of informal recommendations that they would have done, in the past, for fear of incurring liability if things went wrong. The same is even more true of financial services where, rather than a bank

manager being someone to whom one could go for advice with regard to financial affairs outside of the specific services offered by the bank, one typically deals with low-level functionaries, whose job it is to sell specific products from a wider range of financial services marketed by the bank.

Of course, to balance this – one might say – a great deal more information is now available by way of the internet. But the problem is that, unless one has background in the field in question, or a general ability to undertake effective web-based research, it is difficult for people to know what to make of what is on offer. Further, the fact of internet provision seems, oddly, to now mean that those who used to have know-how in particular fields, such as insurance brokers, often seem to know nothing beyond what they can come up with doing internet searches.

The internet, itself, is an incredible source of information and can be an invaluable tool. I found, when editing Hayek's **Law, Legislation and Liberty** for his Collected Works,¹⁶ that I was able to get access to information about books that he cited and quoted, using sources on the internet, which it would simply have not been possible for me to access if I had had to do so physically. (I did do physical work, at a plethora of libraries, over three continents. But this was expensive, and it would not have been possible to identify where some books were located, or what Hayek was quoting from them, if I had not also had access to such sources as Google, Amazon, Hathitrust, and the on-line facilities of a number of major libraries.) But, in all this, I knew exactly what I was looking for, and knew what to make of the results that I obtained. If, by contrast with this, we are seeking for information in areas in which we do not have good background knowledge, or know how to go about making comparisons of some sophistication, there is a real risk that we will get into trouble.

Our problems are, obviously, not helped by the fact that a great deal of information on the internet is supplied by people who wish to sell us

things. There is nothing wrong with that, as such. But there is a risk that their web sites will not disclose to us all the options that are available – even, options which they have on sale, if one only knows exactly what to look for. While those sites which offer striking services for free need – unless they are publicly funded – to cover their costs by gathering information about ourselves, our preferences and activities, which may involve us in Faustian bargains.

4. What is to be done?

In part, it seems to me, it is important that we restore ideas about 'noblesse oblige' – where this is taken in a very general sense of people who are in relatively advantaged positions being willing to assist other people. In the context of this piece, I mean, particularly, that people who are better-informed should be willing to assist others who are not. Provided that they are not selling something, or in other ways gaining financially, they should be able to do this without liability. For the cost of making people liable for what they suggest, is that they are increasingly likely not to pass on specific recommendations, and the kind of fallible tacit knowledge that they might have about the field in question.

In part, we should feel an obligation to participate in face-to-face activities, with a mixture of people. It is in this way that our prejudices can be corrected, and useful knowledge passed on. A key issue, here, is that the kinds of issues to which I have referred are typically by-products of other activities. There are many things which we would find desirable which it is difficult to attain, if we try to pursue them directly. (I have found this, for example, with attempts to lose weight!) What, on the face of it, is needed, is to discover activities which we are happy doing for their own sake, which have, and can select, as a by-product the achievement of the goals in which we are interested.¹⁷ This, however, means that various kinds of social entrepreneurship are needed to create such things, as well as a willingness on people's part to participate in running them. This may also require a certain willingness

to persist with organisations and ways of living with offer desirable side-effects, even in the face of, say, commercial competition which offers what one wishes for more directly.¹⁸

Next, I think that we have to make choices where we can do so, for the provision of services and advice on a subscription basis, rather than just accepting what we are given for free. The problem with what we get for free, is that it is likely to be being provided either by people who want to sell something to us, or by people who have been paid by those who want to sell something to us, or by those who are collecting information about us to sell to those who want to sell things to us. This can, obviously, be useful. But as I argued in an earlier piece, 'Under the Influence', the problem about just using such sources, is that one cannot tell the degree to which those involved are also acting in our interests, rather than just their own.

Finally, I think that we might take inspiration from some remarks that the British comedian Michael Flanders made in the course of his introduction to his and Donald Swann's 'At the Drop of Another Hat'.¹⁹ He said: 'The purpose of satire, it has been rightly said, is to strip off the veneer of comforting illusion and cosy half-truth - and our job, as I see it, is to put it back again.' What I have in mind, here, is this. In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century, welfare functions were widely provided by a variety of so-called 'friendly societies'.²⁰ These typically offered male companionship, the undertaking of charitable functions, and the providing of insurance and beyond this certain kinds of charitable assistance for their members.²¹ It is also worth noting that, in his **Philosophy of Right**, Hegel had discussed the way in which guild-like bodies which had crystallized out of the division of labour in market-based societies, performed similar kinds of functions for their members.²²

These organizations were far from perfect. On the one hand, they typically covered just some parts of the population. There was also the problem of how they were organized and run. In some cases, those who did this as a service may not have been up to the job.²³ While, today, there is a risk (although it obviously has its positive side) that

those who, in the past, might have performed such functions can now much more easily put their talents to use in the commercial sector, or in government service.²⁴ An additional problem – of which I have come across reports from two widely different sources²⁵ – is that, in the past, mutualist welfare organizations got into trouble with demography. For they had expected – and their members had expected – that benefits of certain kinds would be paid out, if they paid regular subscriptions to the society. But their ability to do this was undermined, when people started to live longer – and to need pensions or other benefits, over a longer period.

All this pointed to the attraction of various forms of universal state provision, with the possibility – in the event of actuarial calculations being upset by greater life expectancy – of calling on taxation of the wider working population, rather than just member contributions, for support. The problem about this, however, was that one shifted from a form of mutualist provision, to something that was bureaucratic. It seems to me that, in the light of the issues with which I have here been concerned, that it is worth investigating the degree to which state benefits can be channelled through re-created mutualist organizations.²⁶ Working out what the possibilities are, here, would be an interesting and difficult intellectual and practical task. But it would seem to me well worth undertaking, given the situation that we are in currently.

¹ Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, **Making Democracy Work**, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993.

² **Journal of Democracy** 6, Number 1, January 1995, pp. 65-78.

³ Robert Putnam, **Bowling Alone**, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

⁴ Everett Carlil Ladd, **The Ladd Report**, New York: Free Press, 1999.

⁵ See, on this, Karl Popper, **The Open Society and Its Enemies**, London: Routledge, 1945 etc, chapter 23.

⁶ I write this with some feeling as the former Chairman of our local U3A.

⁷ See Bill Bishop, **The Big Sort**, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

⁸ I suspect that this is to a degree a cyclic phenomenon, in the sense that in earlier times newspapers – e.g. in the US – were often highly partisan. For an impressionistic account, see Sam Jefferson, **Gordon Bennett and the First Yacht Race Across the Atlantic**, London: Adlard Coles, 2016.

⁹ While it is in some respects a terrible book (the author has a range of what seem to me remarkably silly views about economic, social and political theory, which she presses, relentlessly, on readers, and writes at inordinate length), Shoshana Zuboff, **The Age of Surveillance Capitalism**, New York: Public Affairs, 2018 also gives a useful overview of some of the important issues in this field.

¹⁰ See, on all this, my 'Under the Influence' ['Pod utjecajem'] in **Ideje**.

¹¹ See for example James Dobson, 'Why I Am Voting for Donald Trump', **Christianity Today**, September 23, 2016; see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/october/james-dobson-why-i-am-voting-for-donald-trump.html>.

¹² An oddity, here, is that opposition to abortion rights had, for a long time, been a Catholic issue in the U.S. It seems to have become an issue for conservative Protestants when the evangelical cultural commentator Francis Schaeffer made an issue of it, and this was then taken up as part of the agenda of the 'Moral Majority'.

¹³ 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

¹⁴ See Russell Moore, 'When the South Loosens its Bible Belt', <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/russell-moore-white-evangelicals-bible-belt-south-church.html>, which refers to research reported on at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/august-web-only/church-attendance-sbc-southern-evangelicals-now-lapsed.html>.

¹⁵ See <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/11/friendship-across-class-lines-may-boost-social-mobility-and-decrease-poverty>, which refers to R. Chetty et al, 'Social capital I: measurement and associations with economic mobility' & 'Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness', by R. Chetty et al., Nature, 2022. See <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04996-4>, and <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04997-3>.

¹⁶ F. A. Hayek, **Law, Legislation and Liberty** ed. J. Shearmur, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

¹⁷ I have discussed this as a problem in my **Political Thought of Karl Popper** and in my 'Hayek, Disaggregation and the Political Economy of the Good Society', **PEGS Newsletter**, 2, No. 1, Winter 1992. Oddly enough, a striking example of one way in which one such problem might be overcome was described in the account offered in Jia Tolentino's **Trick Mirror**, London: Fourth Estate, 2020. In this the author describes, inter alia, her experiences in a particular kind of up-market

gymnasium: not only were the products of this judged to be desirable, but the experience itself seems to have been cherished in itself.

¹⁸ I should stress that I am not against commercial provision where it looks also to wider effects: see, in this context, my piece in **Ideje** on Celebration, Florida as offering – when it operated well – one such model, where people chose to live in a private town, with distinctive rules developed to offer them the kind of life that they desired.

¹⁹ Flanders and Swann produced two wonderful collections, 'At the Drop of a Hat' and 'At the Drop of Another Hat', which put delightful English humour to music, and are strongly recommended to anyone who has a taste for such things.

²⁰ See, for a useful guide, David Green, **Reinventing Civil Society**, London: Civitas, 1993; available at: <https://civitas.org.uk/pdf/cw17.pdf>

²¹ This came with the advantage that it came from people who were one's fellow members, rather than from privileged members of the upper classes.

²² See G. W. F. Hegel, **Outlines of the Philosophy of Right**, §252.

²³ There is an interesting discussion of this is offered in Michael R. Weisser's **Brotherhood of Memory: Jewish Landsmanshaftn**, New York: Basic Books, 1985.

²⁴ It is interesting, in this context, that those in more recent years who have been interested in following in the path of Saul Alinsky's community organisers have found (on Alinsky, see Sanford Horwitt, **Let them Call Me Rebel**, New York: Knopf, 1989), when they tried to use his approach, that his advice of working with existing organizations in a community could no longer easily be followed. I recall someone who had tried this describing the way in which, in the area of Baltimore in which he had tried to work, by saying, roughly, that there was 'nothing there but liquor stores and store-front Pentecostalist churches'.

²⁵ See Weisser's **Brotherhood of Memory**, and also Stephen Davies, **Beveridge Revisited**, London: Centre for Policy Studies, 1985.

²⁶ It is worth bearing in mind here the way in which, in the past, various traditions have been invented: see **The Invention of tradition**, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Against the concerns of Hobsbawm, this might, surely, be taken as an inspiration by those who wish to follow the path suggested by Flanders and Swann.