Tectonic Episode 01: Regaining Trust in Institutions

Brendan Karch 00:03
We live in the midst of profound global challenges in public health, the environment, in our economies, and the path to solving them is not always clear. What role can science and expertise play? And how do they earn the trust of the public and policymakers? Tectonic is a podcast devoted to these fundamental questions at the intersection of science and society. Over the next five episodes of our premiere season, we'll examine these issues by looking at big institutions, or global food supply, and local urban ecosystems.

Ethan Zuckerman 00:44
I think Facebook may be one of these broken institutions, where we actually need to replace it with something different. There is no such thing as a community of 3 billion people. And I don't know that 3 billion people are governable as a group in any sort of healthy fashion.

Brendan Karch 01:05
This is Tectonic. I'm your host Brendan Karch. Our guest, an early internet pioneer and scholar says mistrust in our institutions is eroding our democratic norms. But he also believes we can harness our doubts to actually rebuild our social fabric. He joined us from his home in western Massachusetts, surrounded by the sounds of nature.

Ethan Zuckerman 01:31
Hi, I'm Ethan Zuckerman. I'm Associate Professor of Public Policy, Information, and Communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I study technology and social change. And my new book is called Mistrust.

Brendan Karch 01:48
Ethan spent the 1990s developing new internet technologies, even gifting us the pop-up ad. He then became a scholar focused on how these same technologies are changing our societies. For nearly a decade, Ethan led the Center for Civic Media at MIT. There, working with students, he came to rethink the role of activism in society.

Ethan Zuckerman 02:13
I grew up in a left-wing American household. My parents were both involved with the Civil Rights Movement. And I'd really internalized this theory of change, in which change comes from writing and passing legislation, winning Supreme Court victories, and having change in the legal system that leads us towards increased social justice.

Brendan Karch 02:41

That was Ethan's generation, one that came of age in the 1980s. But as he realized, younger millennials and Gen Z had largely lost faith in the levers of government to drive change.

Ethan Zuckerman 03:02
The more that I hung out with my students and their friends, and learning about movements like Occupy, and then later the movement for Black Lives and Me Too, the more I began to discover that many of the younger people that I was working with just didn't buy this model at all. The notion that somehow change was going to come through Congress seemed almost farcical to people. And at first, I wondered whether this was a form of nihilism like nothing can change, there's no possibility that the world is going to get better. What I learned very quickly was that actually, what it really was was a much broader theory of change. It was a much broader understanding of how change could happen, that sort of grows out of widespread mistrust of legislative and judicial institutions, which is a real factor in contemporary civic life, not just in the US, but a whole lot of democracies.

Brendan Karch 04:11
Ethan believes that this mistrust in our core institutions is the single most critical threat facing our democracies using polling data. He dates its origins in America to the 1970s, with the Nixon scandals as a watershed moment.

Richard Nixon [Archive Recording] 04:25
I first learned from news reports of the Watergate break-in.

Brendan Karch 04:29
While Ethan's work focuses on the US, he says mistrust isn't just an American problem. It's a global one, or at least an international one.

Ethan Zuckerman 04:39
What it actually is, is a very complex phenomenon involving mature democracies. When you look at East Asia, for instance, you look at China, you look at Taiwan, you see lots of trust in government institutions. And you often see a pattern, which is sort of the reverse of what we see in the United States, what we often see in western and southern Europe, which is in the US, we have very low trust in institutions, we have reasonably high interpersonal trust. If you ask people, do you trust your neighbors? Can you trust random individuals? There's reasonably high trust. In China, there's very, very low trust of neighbors, and very high trust of government. And every time I bring this up, people like to say, well, of course, that's because in China, people are worried that they're going to get arrested by the government, if they say they don't trust them. Sorry, that's a little simplistic. You actually have the same pattern in Taiwan, where you really don't have that worry that the government is going to arrest you, you've got quite a liberal, but very new democracy. But you've got this pattern of low individual trust. And so you want the institutions to help you because you don't necessarily trust your neighbors.

Brendan Karch 06:01
In fact, many countries whose citizens trust their governments the most aren't really democracies at all. According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, China, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

are home to the highest citizen trust in government, all at over 80%. Compare this to the US were 42% trust their government, or Spain at just 34%. These results have led Ethan and others to ask: is global faith in democracy waning?

Ethan Zuckerman 06:31
One thing that's enormously worrisome is something that Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk refer to as democratic deconsolidation. And this is really controversial. But there's some good research to support this idea that people who live in mature democracies, particularly younger people in those mature democracies, if you ask them, Is it essential to live in a democracy? They will tell you" No, maybe not. You know, maybe it's not essential. And in fact, when you get into some very young groups, sometimes people will say, maybe we would be better with a military dictatorship, maybe they could get things done. And I think the only way you can read that is really intense unhappiness and dissatisfaction with the circumstances that we're experiencing right now.

Brendan Karch 07:33
If this is our crisis, then is all hope lost? Ethan remains an optimist. He thinks that even if many citizens increasingly feel their voices are not heard at the ballot box, there are still other outlets to practice democracy.

Ethan Zuckerman 07:50
I actually think it's worth asking that question, how can people be the most efficacious? What I see in some of my research subjects of the book is that they often feel that their efficacy is not by voting or not by, you know, joining a political party. Their efficacy might be by creating a social media campaign, or, you know, leading the MeToo hashtag or starting a business that they think has a better chance of actually making an impact around social change than trying to get legislation, you know, restricting carbon emissions.

Brendan Karch 08:31
It is in these alternate forms of practice that Ethan sees democratic promise. These pro- democracy actors who aren't in government, that instead are on social media, in the streets, forming businesses. Ethan gives them a name. They're the insurrectionists. He sees several ways that insurrectionists are strengthening our democracy beyond our parliaments and legal systems.

Ethan Zuckerman 08:55
You don't need to limit yourself to trying to change laws. Laws are one of at least four levers that we use to shape society. We can also shape norms, we can change people's hearts and minds. And that often changes behavior. We can use markets as a lever. We can try to make some behaviors expensive, other ones cheap. We can use technology. We can create new technologies and new systems that make behaviors easier or harder. And so the first thing that I try to do is get people to expand their toolkit. I get them to sort of say, Look, if you feel like the lever of law is stuck, that you are not at a good place to pass laws to make change that way, that's fine. Let's look at other levers that you feel like you have better access to, and let's think about how those levers can work in parallel. How do you bring

people together so that they are working simultaneously on changing not just law, but also norms and markets and code at the same time.

Brendan Karch 10:04
The goal of this expanded toolkit is not just to topple our institutions or lead a revolution, although Ethan does claim some entities like Facebook may need to die in order to save our democracies. But for the most part, Ethan is interested in reform: holding our institutions accountable to their aims and their constituents. To achieve this, he identifies two key methods. The first is radical institutionalism.

Ethan Zuckerman 10:35
Radical institutionalism is is sort of a judo move. It basically says, can you look at the history of how this institution came about, and try to bring us back to the core of what it was.

Brendan Karch 10:46
The second: counter-democracy.

Ethan Zuckerman 10:49
Counter-democracy is this beautiful theory put forward by a French scholar named Pierre Rosanvallon. He is just one of my favorite theorists. It is just a shame that he has not read enough in English-speaking circles, because he makes the argument that the French vision of democracy that comes up in 1789, after the French Revolution actually has some admirable components of it, one of which is this notion that there are institutions that hold institutions responsible. And those include the press, those can include the judiciary, but it's decided that you can stand outside an institution and sort of push on it, not to topple it over but to strengthen it, and that we actually need to think of those counter-democratic institutions. And they are the press. They are investigative journalism. They can be NGOs and advocacy organizations. They can be systems like cop watching, like going out and watching the execution of justice and making sure that it actually happens fairly. That is not subverting democracy, it's actually strengthening democracy.

Brendan Karch 12:01
But if these interactions are to strengthen democracy, they might run into a problem: mistrust. In a deeply divided society, groups like MeToo or media sites are often filtered as friend or foe. Where can we turn to rebuild society-wide trust? One answer is to rely on actors most trusted across political divides. And polls show that we most greatly trust scientists and people in our local communities. So is this where we start? Nowhere is this question more relevant than in the Coronavirus pandemic.

Ethan Zuckerman 12:44
Nurses come up as one of the most trusted professions out there, they're at about 94 or 95%. Current thinking about vaccination and the pandemic, and trying to figure out why the US has ended up in this really peculiar situation where we have sufficient supplies of vaccine but we cannot get more than 50% of people to take it, may have to do with the fact that we have not thought enough about those dynamics of trust. People want to hear from their doctor or their nurse, their family doctor, I have taken the vaccine, you should take it too, and if you come to my office, I will give you a dose of it. And that's

not actually how vaccination has been carried out in the United States. It's been carried out through pharmacies run by big corporations. It's been carried out through public vaccination centers run by the government. These are not trusted institutions. Community doctors, community nurses are trusted institutions.

Brendan Karch 13:47
Rethinking vaccine distribution may be one aspirational way to leverage trusted actors. But we're not there yet. Are there any examples then of real-existing success stories? Ethan's book features one story of social media activism success from some plucky insurrectionists in Italy of all places. Their target? The Sicilian Mafia.

Ethan Zuckerman 14:14
In southern Italy, there's very low interpersonal trust or low inter-familial trust, and businesses don't grow much larger than the size of the family. Whereas in northern Italy, there's much more trust and it ends up being an economic lubricant.

Brendan Karch 14:31
In this environment, southern Italy needed to adapt to its lack of legal institutions. And so, ironically, the mafia emerged as the ersatz trust broker.

Ethan Zuckerman 14:47
You had a class of people who would be trusted by both parties to ensure the deals happen fairly. If I brought my cow to the market, and you were going to pay me certain amount of money for it, you weren't going to stab me and take my cow. And this group of people who sort of regulated the market in the absence of trust became very strong, very powerful, ultimately quite brutal, but ultimately had this regulatory effect for society.

Brendan Karch 15:22
Fast forward to today, however, and the mafia feels very much like an institution that has outlived its historical role as a trust broker. But how is a local economy still beholden to mafia payouts supposed to find a way out?

Ethan Zuckerman 15:38
If you go to Sicily right now, you will find that there is a very active addiopizzo movement, the movement to reject the pizzo, which is the tax provided by the mafia. [Italian voiceover.] And this was started by a bunch of young Sicilians who are graduating from college, wanted to start a bar, and in budgeting for the bar realized that they had to put in protection money to pay off the mafia, decided that they really didn't want to pay off the mafia, and in the process had to end up creating anti-mafia institutions. [Italian voiceover]

Brendan Karch 16:24
That's Dario Riccobono, one of the cofounders of the addiopizzo movement, giving a talk at TEDx Palermo.

Ethan Zuckerman 16:36

Let's imagine that you want to run a restaurant that doesn't pay the mafia. Well, you might need a food supplier who isn't paying the mafia. And so they ended up in the process having to create a non-mafia supermarket. Then you might need to advertise your business, and so they now do pizzo-free tourism. They're actually shifting the norms of Sicilian society.

Brendan Karch 17:08

In other words, the mafia might not be totally gone, but a major sector of the economy shifted norms enough to escape its grip. Ethan's arguments can sound compelling, but no ideas should go unchallenged. So I pushed Ethan on a couple of points. The first was his stance towards our media institutions. On the one hand, Ethan celebrates social media campaigns like MeToo. But on the other hand, he condemns the companies controlling these media outlets. So can social media both be the hero and the villain?

Ethan Zuckerman 17:48

Social media serves a very useful connective purpose in society. We're very mobile right now, we're very virtual right now. Having that sort of ambient connectivity to each other is actually extremely useful as social glue. There's a lot of benefits to these systems, and I don't think for the most part people want to get them up. I think at the same time, yes, I am absolutely critical of a media environment, which for me, includes everything from, you know, reported journalistic media, through social media, which ends up feeding it and amplifying it. And there's no question in my mind, that that system often does not work well, produces really damaging effects. My version of this is to look at this and say, if social media is important, and I think it is, I think it might be too important to leave it purely up to the market.

Brendan Karch 18:47

This is an area Ethan cares deeply about, having spent his whole career working nd thinking about the internet. And so it's also a place he's investing his time in solutions.

Ethan Zuckerman 18:58

And the message of Mistrust is, you should find a problem, where you feel like you, through your knowledge and your expertise and your positionality might have a chance to fix things, and then you should work on that problem. And the problem that I am working on right now is the future of social media. And I'm in an interesting position for that. I helped invent social media in the late 1990s, and I've become a scholar of it. And I now feel like I am standing at a reasonably secure place, when I can look at it and sort of say, this is not working the way that we'd like it to. We should really imagine and build something new. And my argument is that we need to think vastly beyond just fixing Facebook. I think Facebook may be one of these broken institutions, where we actually need to replace it with something different. And my vision for what the something different would be is: What if we start the process of imagining and building tools for small communities, that we actually control ourselves that we actually govern jointly, and that we build out from there, from that healthy paradigm of self-governing communities, rather than try to fix a, quote unquote, community of 3 billion people.

Brendan Karch 20:32
Ethan is passionate about finding ground-up solutions to democratize our media and rebuild social trust. But what kind of outcomes does he expect? Ethan admits he's a creature of the political left, and almost all of his positive examples from his book point that direction. But what if we rebuild a high-trust, flourishing democracy that ends up tilting more right then left? That wants less racial justice, tighter immigration, stricter policing? Or is rebuilding trust supposed to produce more left-leaning outcomes?

Ethan Zuckerman 21:11
I think that you're not going to see truly high-trust and representative societies veering towards ultra-nationalism. But I'm also open to the idea that maybe I'm just wrong. And you know, part of this is that, you know, we want to see the data. This is really where this book came from. This book came from a surprising piece of data. I really assumed that trust in the United States had collapsed in the last five to 10 years. The answer is trust in the United States really takes a dip in the 1970s. And going and sort of asking that question of what it means to have something unfolding on those long, society-level scales, that's where things get truly interesting. That's my hypothesis, but I hope that if I am proven wrong, I will be good enough to stand up and admit it.

Brendan Karch 22:25
If you're interested in hearing more from Ethan Zuckerman, check out the Institute for Digital Public Infrastructure at UMass Amherst, where Ethan hosts the podcast series called Reimagining the Internet. On the next episode, we tackle the interface of science and policy. We'll hear from Noel Selin, professor at MIT, atmospheric chemist, and an expert on the element of mercury.

Noelle Selin 22:49
Mercury is a really interesting pollutant because people and societies have used mercury for millennia, for a variety of different applications. It's been important in industry, it's ubiquitous in society, and it's also a global pollutant.

Brendan Karch 23:04
She'll tell us about her experience building relationships between science, policymakers, and the public. Tectonic is hosted by me, Brendan Karch, with sound design and editing by Anour Esa. We want to thank Malcolm Farnsworth and www.watergate.info for the snippet of Richard Nixon, and addiopizzo travel and TEDx Palermo for the two clips in Italian. We are a production of Swissnex in Boston, a science and technology consulate connecting Switzerland to the world of ideas. You can find Swissnex on LinkedIn or on Twitter at SwissnexBoston. Or you can come visit us in the heart of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Thanks for listening to this episode of Tectonic, a podcast that uncovers the shifting foundations between science and society.