Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation

Field, Jonathan Beecher

Published by University of Minnesota Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/68006.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68006
Town Hall Meeting as Corporate Event

The town hall meeting format also offers a way for firms, or their CEOs, to communicate with employees, customers, and vendors. One index of the popularity of corporate town hall meetings is that planning and presenting them has become an industry unto itself. For instance, Davis & Company is a consulting firm focused on helping firms communicate with their own employees. As their website details, “Communicating change to employees can be a challenge, especially if the change has a big impact on their jobs.” Specifically, “Leaders and managers have an important role in communicating where the organization is headed and what employees need to do to support it.” Evidently one of the ways this firm can help your firm with this task is to host better town halls. The question of what makes a town hall good is one we will return to.

Indeed, corporate town hall meetings have become so ritualistic that in 2017, it was possible for one of the many thought leaders in the industry to propose something akin to the Protestant

Reformation—but for town hall culture. According to a blog post from Poll Everywhere, a company that sells software intended to make town hall meetings more interactive, change begins when CEOs “rethink town hall meetings as two-way conversations.” On one level, this is blue-sky thinking akin to “wheels, but round,” but as the post details, “The town hall meeting—that staple of corporate employee relations—is evolving. Gone are the days of highly-staged annual shows with bright lights and timed musical interludes, topped off with a tightly-vetted CEO Q&A. No more fog machines. No more rock concerts.” The absence of fog machines would come as no surprise to a veteran of actual town meetings. But the need to move beyond such flashiness suggests that within corporate town hall culture, spectacle is much more entrenched than democratic process.  

There are numerous corporations whose town halls could serve as examples of this culture. Apple Inc.’s engagement with the idea of the town hall meeting is more intense than some but by no means exceptional. Until the recent shift to a larger structure named for Steve Jobs, the principal space for public announcements on the Apple campus was an auditorium called Town Hall. Because Apple restricts public access to the entire campus, it functions as a corporate rather than residential gated community. Wendy Brown observes, “While corporations developed research and administrative ‘campuses,’ universities have become increasingly corporate in physical appearance, financial structure, evaluation, metrics, management style, personnel, advertising and promotion.”  

3. Brown, 199.
corporation under the sign of neoliberalism may remind some of the final moments of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*.

On one level, one imagines that calling this structure Town Hall is an effort to humanize a giant tech firm, indeed one that has built its whole brand around humanizing technology. At the same time, the name strikes a false note. A corporation is not a town, and everyone who works for the corporation knows it. Pretending the employees of a corporation are citizens of a town is like when universities pretend that its students, faculty, staff, alumni, and donors constitute a “family.” But at least everyone knows that families are not democratic. The evocation of a town as the model for a corporation conflates what it means to be a citizen and what it means to be an employee in disturbing ways.

Even as Apple shifted its base for public announcements from Town Hall to a new, larger underground facility named for Steve Jobs, it doubled down on the town rhetoric. Per a 2017 announcement, Apple’s retail outlets, which were previously known as “stores,” would be rebranded as “town squares.” This announcement was treated with derision, but Apple has moved forward with the first of these flagship stores in Chicago. Privatization in many forms is one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism—indeed, it was Margaret Thatcher’s signature move. In the United States, Mike Davis narrated the privatization of public space many years ago. What Davis’s *City of Quartz* did not anticipate is that the very concepts of public life, like the public square, could be privatized along with the spaces that supported them. A 2017 report details Apple’s plan to rebrand its iPhone showrooms: “Apple Stores will transform from simply commercial spaces to locations where the company will develop ‘communities’: host concerts, lead workshops, offer up meeting rooms, and teach everything from coding to photography to music-making. Apple frames these disciplines as modern equivalents to the medieval *trivium*—an
essential educational resource that makes a person a person." 4 As Alexis Madrigal observed, “In adopting the faux democratic language of Facebook and Twitter, Apple has made the perfect physical metaphor for the largely ineffable problem the internet poses to democracy.” 5

If Apple deploys town hall rhetoric to woo customers, another much iconic consumer brand uses it to manage times of change and uncertainty. In the wake of Amazon’s acquisition of Whole Foods Market, Whole Foods’s CEO held a town hall for employees. Interspersed with notions of citizenship implied by a town hall, John Mackey leaned on the trope of family to describe this new “corporation”: “And we want Whole Foods people to be at Amazon. . . . When this deal closes, we’re all Amazon people. We’re not Whole Foods people and Amazon people. We’re all Amazon people. We’re one large tribe, one large family.” 6 In light of Mackey’s account of this deal as a courtship and marriage, this language is not surprising but also possibly not entirely reassuring for his audience.

Lower profile companies also embrace the culture of the town hall meeting. In an article hailing a Rochester, New York, data protection company as the best midsized employer in the region, the Democrat and Chronicle hailed the founder and CEO’s commitment to town hall meetings. An employee quoted in the

article “noted the monthly town hall meetings, hosted by founder and CEO Austin McChord, to share the latest news on what and how the organization is doing.” As the employee explains, our founder and CEO “is so incredibly transparent. . . . He’ll tell us anything and everything about the company and trusts us with the information. That trickles down and makes me feel like I can be transparent with my team.” The language here shades toward the popular corporate notion of “best practices,” or ways of doing things that are applicable to almost any business endeavor. As Wendy Brown points out, “Best practices bring with them the ends and values with which they are imbricated; by the experts’ own accounts, these are market values.”

Ironically, advice about town hall meeting best practices can project the culture of the town hall meeting back on to actual town meetings. For example, Convene, a company that hosts corporate events, describes town hall meeting dos and don’ts:

Town hall meetings have served as a means of public communication between groups since the early colonial era in New England. Traditionally, these town halls were a public meeting or event conducted to open dialogue between town officials and citizens. In the modern workplace, corporate town halls parallel that tradition, opening up the lines of communication between executives and employees. This hierarchy of “executives and employees” is inimical to the

Town Hall Meetings and the Death of Deliberation

democratic structure of a town meeting, but it’s easy to imagine this distorted corporate form taking root as the popular understanding of how town meetings work. According to this account, once there were town officials and citizens, and now there are executives and employees. Again, we see citizenship reimagined through the fiscal prism of either employee or customer. At the same time, this analogy elides a key distinction between the leadership of a small New England town and a modern corporation. While town officials are citizens, remain citizens while holding office, and will still be citizens when their terms are up, the distinction between “executive” and “employee” is much more permanent. As offhand as it is, the lede to this article suggests that we have a diminishing ability to recognize what is and is not democracy.