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Susan Ritchie, MutualGain  
A Practitioner's View of Democracy

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SOLAR

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### The Personal is Political

It's a phrase strongly associated with second wave feminism, but I explore it here to highlight the need for a better understanding of the personal if democracy is to survive and flourish in the UK. Bringing the personal and the political together could strengthen civic society, improve social policy, and reconnect the personal experiences of 'the people' with the political machinery of democratic governance. Democratic engagement based on better ways of understanding the personal could help build new social norms, improve trust and dialogue, and create new social policy and public services which genuinely help the vulnerable.

This paper outlines a personal experience of learning about democracy and considers why better forms of dialogue are essential if the public is to be served well politically. In the first half I outline my personal journey into *thinking* about democracy, and in the second half my experiences of *acting* to improve our democracy. I use both to call on my peers across the world to help me think and act in a way which could change the practice of not only the elected, but the unelected (those who are paid to work on behalf of our elected members and the public) and the public.

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### The Catalyst

I was a 19-year-old 'disengaged' citizen ignorant of the power of politics on my life, and the 'social' policy that emerges from political decision-making. Unmarried and faced with teenage pregnancy, I quickly learned about social housing policy: Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher's Right to Buy was well under way and we were experiencing a gap in supply and demand of social housing (council housing was being offered to tenants to buy at a significantly reduced rate). The strict eligibility criteria to access a social housing property did not apply to me so my only option was to buy or rent privately.

Forced to move out of London and buy somewhere 'affordable', I quickly learned about monetary and fiscal policy: the mortgage was easy to secure, but within a matter of a few

months the mortgage payments had more than doubled due to increased mortgage interest rates. Rather than 'fail' I rented the house out and went back to live with my dad, heavily pregnant with my second child. I hoped that if we rented the house out for six months we could move back in when the mortgage rates reduced again.

After receiving a letter from the mortgage company explaining that I didn't have permission to rent and neither did I have the right mortgage for renting, the bank took action and repossessed our house. The tenant had informed them of our apparently 'illegal' activity and was allowed to remain in my house whilst we faced in excess of £20k negative equity and no home. At 20 years old I couldn't understand what I had done wrong.

Homeless with two children under two years old we worked all hours to make ends meet so that we could create a home for our babies. We weren't entitled to benefits because we were working (and no minimum wage then!). I would not have considered going to my MP nor would I have participated in any public meetings – I was busy trying to survive. Times were incredibly tough - I remember my mum giving me £5 and it was £5 I hadn't budgeted for. Should I spend this on nappies, food or some beer! Of course the beer didn't win, but the point is that £5 seemed a huge amount of unexpected money. If there were food banks then we would probably have used one.

Some months later my life took a turn for the better. It was near to the day of the repossession, and I was desperate for help. I walked into an insurance company thinking that they might be able to help me because they deal with money (ignorance is not always bliss!). There a wonderful stranger took pity on me when I asked for help and he changed the direction of my life, for which I will be eternally grateful. He took me in a room and gave me some advice which he made me promise never to tell anyone in any authority. Then he gave me a fatherly lecture and I went on my way to put his advice into action. We were back on the property ladder in a pretty dismal 'home' but we had a new start.

Determined to avoid such awful circumstances again I knew I needed a job which paid more money. That made me think about education policy: a change in school admissions policy meant I didn't go the grammar school as planned, and instead went to the school which had places, which also had a lot of problems and would now be considered a 'failing school'; in fact it was shut down the year after I left. I had a lot of fun at school but managed to go through five years of secondary school education without doing a page of homework! I had a series of temporary 'teachers' who just sat at the front of the class whilst we messed about. At 15 I left because there seemed no point in staying, and no one informed my parents or questioned my decision!

With no qualifications I knew I needed to go back to school. Juggling work with children I returned to college to do a computer course to develop my office skills. That was a good move; it secured me a job as a receptionist in a bank (better pay and conditions than the cab offices and waitressing jobs). I only discovered recently that the Computer Literacy and Information Technology (CLAIT) course which I completed was specifically designed for learners who were from ‘deprived’ and ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds – more social policy which impacted upon my life.

As polytechnics converted to universities, and colleges extended their offer to meet a new ‘market’, access courses were being offered everywhere. They were a great opportunity for people like me, so a year after the CLAIT course, I registered on an Access to Higher Education course. My introduction to ‘democracy’ had started. Our six week block of politics inspired me: it made sense to me but made me thirsty for more knowledge: social class, electoral systems, political parties and homelessness were four of the topics that challenged my thinking. My big questions were: **“why doesn’t anyone teach you about politics in school? And why don’t policy makers seek the views of those they are supposedly ‘serving’?”** That has driven my career since, first developing my thinking about democracy and then trying to put some ideas into practice. I still think politics should be taught in schools but am less convinced that teachers are the best people to teach it, unless they are well supported to do so. The same applies to public servants in policing, health, and councils - they aren’t always best placed to know what is ‘best’ for those they serve, and should therefore be supported to develop better forms of dialogue with them.

By unlocking the experiences of the public and their resources we have an opportunity to refresh our democracy and build social capital in some of our most deprived areas with some of our most disadvantaged communities. We have no choice but to find ways of connecting the personal to the political.

### Thinking about Democracy

The access course provided me with inspirational and challenging tutorials and a mandatory university application. My naivety was astounding in hindsight: I thought you could only study English, Math or Science at University! Then I remembered my dad shouting at the television saying that the study of Sociology was a ‘mickey mouse’ degree, so I opted for that on the basis that I might not be laughed out of the application stage! When I got the acceptance letter I was genuinely shocked – why would they let *me* go to university? When I later became University Admissions Tutor I realised that getting a place at a ‘new university’ isn’t that difficult, but for me, at that point in my life, it was like telling me I

could go to Oxford. I accepted the place with excitement, pride and a whole new set of possibilities. I am eternally grateful to my access tutor who saw my enthusiasm for politics and advised me to switch course from Sociology to Politics, and to my Philosophy tutor (and now friend) for encouraging me to not only complete the BA degree but to go on and do an MA.

By the time I did my MA I had three children and was making decisions about schools. The politics of choice was prevalent: Prime Minister, Tony Blair had been elected on the mantra of 'education, education, education'. I had worked in his telephone bank researching political intentions prior to the 1997 election and was interested in a form of direct democracy being introduced through referenda. He wanted the public to decide the future of grammar schools through a two-staged process of securing a referendum. It didn't prove very popular with the public despite it being part of Blair's commitment to a Third Way of governing a democracy. Bringing the best of right and left political thinking together in a new form of social democracy was supposed to appeal to the populace and refresh political dialogue. As I navigated the school admission process I wanted to understand more – my Masters research title was decided: 'New Labour: Populism or Democracy?'

The study of politics and political decision making taught me about the machinery of government, but it was the study of political philosophy that not only made me think about the role of government and its relationship with the people it serves, but which literally changed my life again. I became committed to connecting the conversations that take place in communities with those that take place within the 'state'. Public Sector Plc (Local Government, Central Government, the Police and the National Health Service) was employing thousands of people and spending billions of pounds to serve people like me, but communities were becoming more passive and disengaged from politics.

Reviving civic life so that everyone might have a positive experience of being an active citizen seemed to me to be a necessity which ought to be invested in through both the formal routes (as was my experience of accredited courses), but also through the informal day to day interactions which enable the reawakening of the wonderful feminist phrase of 'the personal is political'. **How could we show people that politics *does* affect their personal lives and that without healthy debate and positive engagement by 'ordinary' citizens we run the risk of democracy losing its way and being replaced by autocracy?**

## Acting within a Democracy

Philosophers warn us of the risks to our imperfect system of government. Machiavelli argued that democratic government encourages corruption. For him, citizens who become indifferent to public affairs are, in effect, corrupt: he saw complacency and self-interested citizens as the greatest enemy of free government. Whilst I am not Machiavellian I find this difficult to argue with. However, unlike Machiavelli I do believe democracy is worth fighting for which is generally my starting point in pursuing a better form of it to reflect our changing society.

In February this year the IPPR published 'Democracy in Britain: Essays in Honour of James Cornford' in February this year which captured the variety of ways in which the challenges facing democracy might be explored. In that publication, Sarah Birch wrote about *inclusion* being the 'essence of democracy'.

Recognising the imperfections in both the willingness of the public to engage in collective decision-making, and the translation by our institutions of the democratic ideal into the reality of politics, she still believes there has been a 'worrying *deterioration* of the ability of our political system to include all citizens in the decision-making process'. Studies show that alienation and trust are key contributing factors to the decline in participation. She refers to a study where it was found that the *words* politicians' use, as in not providing straight answers to questions, was more influential in determining their trust of politicians than the misusing of official expenses and allowances<sup>1</sup>. This is important for public engagement and civic engagement generally, not just at election points. When thinking about reform Birch argues that our political and social institutions need to reframe:

- the way people see politics
- the incentives they have to engage with the political process; and
- their understanding of what they risk losing should they disengage

Birch cites the various reforms used to attempt to address this in recent years: Citizenship Education, flexible voting arrangements to encourage more convenient ways to vote, the Nolan principles of public life, Freedom of information, and debates about devolution. Yet as she points out, the average turnout for the UK Police and Crime Commissioners in 2012 was 15% and we still see low voter turnout at our local elections. Birch argues that there are four manageable ways to achieve the reframing of the above, outside of some of the more challenging issues such as the links between political and social exclusion:

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<sup>1</sup> See Birch in IPPR reference, but for a full analysis she signposts us to Allen and Birch,

1. more robust citizenship education programme
2. lowering the voting age to 16
3. make taking part in the electoral process mandatory for first-time voters
4. a more determined approach to enforcing what is effectively compulsory electoral registration in the UK.

Recommendations 2 – 4 are of course all related to voting within the political system we have in the UK, and puts voting as the temperature gauge of the health of our democracy, but I think that is limited and misses the point of what she is trying to address.

Democracy has to encourage the connection between the personal and political beyond the two minute exercise of casting your vote. Citizens have to play their part in that if democracy is to flourish. Unlike Machiavelli, De Tocqueville believed that *‘the people who join with their neighbours to settle common problems and disputes will learn the importance of co-operation, feel a strong attachment to their community, and develop those habits of the hearts that led them to identify their own welfare with the welfare of the community as a whole’* (Ball and Dagger (2004)).

But this doesn’t just happen. We have a society that has lost faith in politicians, mistrusts local government and the police, and is increasingly questioning the honesty and integrity of those working in education and health. Voting once every four years has always felt like a democratic right that I would be willing to take to the streets for, but paradoxically it is also a minuscule part of what I believe our democratic reform should focus on.

Building new relationships that connect the personal with the political are essential to refreshing democracy: we need new relationships between neighbours, and new relationships between the state and the individual. Relationships are central to developing trust; with good relationships we can achieve more together than we can alone.

Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam are the founding fathers of thinking about relationships as ‘capital’. John Field summarises social capital simply as ‘trust, norms and networks’. He argues that with these in place organisations can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions. He rightly (in my opinion) identifies a key barrier to this happening – people need to feel obliged to help each other, but how do we legislate for that obligation? We can’t. We need to renew the social contract between the state and the individual by focusing on the social space that we inhabit collectively. Not through legislation and huge machinations of government, but by investing in communities to connect and engage in dialogue which brings the personal together with the political.

Social Capital achieves more than financial efficiencies – it creates places that feel safe, supportive and connected. The evidence is well documented in academia: Rosenfeld et al (2001) produced evidence that social capital had a significant effect on homicide rates, net of other predictors, while the unemployment and age composition of population had no effect.<sup>2</sup> Coleman showed that social capital wasn't limited to the networks of the powerful, but 'conveyed real benefits to the poor and marginalised' (Field (2010: p23). Social capital arises out of trusting relationships between people who share assets such as knowledge and skills. Knowledge and skills which the elected and unelected decision makers must learn to unleash and value.

The challenge for our democracy is how we build socially connected citizens who create their own social capital and value the democratic space they inhabit. By bringing the state and the individual together within a democratic social space we might bring politics closer to those who feel marginalized and disengaged. It is therefore the responsibility of the State within a democracy to nurture the right environment for those relationships to be built. The social, financial and political costs of not doing so will influence the future of our democracy, and our society in a negative way.

Institutional appetite for an asset-based approach to social policy is starting to develop, not just in the theoretical thinking but also in the willingness to invest in the practice. Some forward looking organisations acknowledge that with the greatest will in the world, and significant funding, adopting a deficit model of public service delivery where we 'fix' communities rather than build on the strengths that they have, is just not working. Direct measurement of impact is however hard to measure and it often acts as a blockage to meaningful investment in communities. Norman (2010) warns us that *"releasing this energy is not a simple matter"* it is *"a monumental shift in culture"* (p196)

### Changing the Culture of Democracy

Let's look at that culture. All governments must demonstrate their ability to serve the public well. Our recent history has shown the Blair and subsequent 'New Labour' governments measure this through the public confidence and satisfaction ratings of Public Services Plc. Citizens' Charters, pledges and Local Area Agreements were put in place to encourage organisations to check they were serving the community well. Partnership working became statutory for police and partners through Community Safety Partnerships. Engaged



Communities was one of the hallmarks of success; surveys were used to measure success, which were the levels of confidence and satisfaction of the public.

Practice became distorted by targets; rather than focus on building relationships with the public, they built a huge machinery of officers and systems which looked for better ways of increasing *response rates* to surveys. I was part of a 'successful' Council programme which invested £60,000 in communications 'spin' just before the confidence and satisfaction surveys were conducted. We were praised for the manner in which we had successfully improved our relationship with the community, but we hadn't improved relationships, trust or norms, and we hadn't reduced demand on public services. We had managed to temporarily convince people that we were doing good work on their behalf, and as a result they should feel satisfied and confident in our services.

The problem with measuring success in that way is that branding and communication become key; local government becomes preoccupied with its own messages and disingenuous in its approach to 'service' and social change. Laws and regulations become the norm, and enforcement the remedy for fixing 'bad' people. The New Labour governments during this period introduced an average of 3,071 new laws per year under Prime Minister's Blair and Brown, set against a previous average of 1,724 (Norman, 2010)

When the coalition government took power in the UK they built on the learning from predecessors and the UK witnessed the birth of the new drive to build a Big Society. For Norman, the Big Society is

*'a set of interlocking ideas, even a philosophy: a concerted and wide ranging attempt to engage with the challenges of social and economic decline, and to move us towards a more connected society. It rests on the bold conjecture, that lying beneath the surface of British society is a vast amount of latent and untapped potential energy'*

Connecting that energy so that we encourage a greater sense of cooperation does indeed need a monumental shift in culture. It requires a much greater sense of cooperation between those serving the public and the public themselves. The gap between the state and the individual needs to change to reflect a greater commitment to cooperation and meaningful dialogue: the personal must become political, and the political must understand the eclectic nature of the personal.

Cooperation is a craft that we have lost over time (Sennett 2012). The 'good citizen' isn't so much about Aristotelian morality, but more a case of social competence in practical skills: good listening skills, being empathic, adopting a greater sense of curiosity, and following it up, are all positive characteristics of cooperation. Government with its laws and

enforcement has arguably deskilled communities of those social competencies needed in a modern society to help manage aggression and improve the way we cooperate. With less cooperation and increased social incompetence it is no surprise that people revert to defensiveness and aggression. I have discovered over the last 15 years that those competences must be reflected in the practice of 'the state' itself if it is going to encourage them in society more widely.

It is indeed the 'fetish of assertion' (Sennett 2012) which our parliament and public sector bodies display that demonstrates its discomfort with conversation and dialogue at a national and local level (Sennett, 2012). We need to allow communities to define and measure what is important to them instead of imposing it to fit with the organizational need to compete with or blame other partners and/or to report to central government.

In her IPPR paper, Birch argued that to renew democracy we need a more robust approach to active citizenship in schools. Many years ago I agreed with her and was asked to join the team of researchers who were looking for the evidence base for citizenship education. Sponsored by the Teacher Training Agency and the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) we produced the first EPPI Systematic Review of the impact of citizenship education on the provision of schooling (Crick et al (2004)). This is what we found:

- The quality of dialogue and discourse is central to learning in citizenship education. Pedagogies need to be: facilitative; conversational; transformative; dialogical; and participatory.
- Teacher-pupil relationships need to be inclusive and respectful. Teachers may need to 'let go of control'. Students should be empowered to voice their views and gain meaning from their life experiences. Opportunities should be made for them to engage with values issues embedded in all curriculum subjects.
- Contextual knowledge can lead to citizenship engagement and action.
- A coherent whole-school strategy, including a community-owned values framework, is key. Participative and democratic processes in school leadership require particular attitudes and skills; schools often restrict participation by students in shaping institutional practices while expecting them to adhere to policies. Strategies for consensual change have to be identified by, and developed in, educational leaders.
- Teachers need support to develop the appropriate professional skills.

Replace the references to education and teaching with references to democracy and public servants and what you'll find is my challenge for our democracy. Ten years later little

happened as a result of citizenship education because it wasn't valued in the curriculum: it was always the poor relation; the add-on subject rather than the foundation for all other curriculum subjects. Teachers received INSET days where they were given guidance on how to teach Citizenship but it varied: my children were taught that the Labour Party were the blue party and the Conservatives, red! These are very basic concepts which we expect our teachers to know, but are often untaught. Some of those teachers came from backgrounds like mine and would not have had the privilege of thinking about democracy and may not see the importance of it. We did see much teaching of campaigning and protest (important for our democracy) but not much about cooperation, dialogue and social responsibility despite lesson plans and guidance encouraging them to do so.

It is a grim picture if we look at democracy through the deficit lens. But if we think about the richness in diverse 'private' lives across communities in the UK we might be able to breathe a huge kiss of life into our formal view of democracy. The personal (for many) is not reflected in the political.

Any observer of UK democracy could reasonably argue there is ample opportunity to participate in decision-making in between elections: it is on the face of it a good example of pluralism:

- 'Have your say' opportunities are in our local newspapers, bus stops, twitter, Facebook etc.
- In a commitment to extend democracy in 2012 the coalition government gave the electorate in England and Wales an opportunity to democratize policing through the introduction of Police and Crime Commissioners.
- Every GP practice receives payment from the government to establish a Patient Participation Group to hear the public voice in health
- Statute states that any significant changes to services must be consulted on in health in particular
- The housing regulatory framework requires greater tenant engagement
- Councillors are networking better with the rise of online social engagement
- Residents can choose whether to have an elected mayor
- Central Government has made petitioning easier on line
- New laws around planning give communities the right to challenge and the right to build
- A new Social Value Act aims to improve the social value added through contracting

I could list so many opportunities ‘offered’ to the public by the State, but the fact remains that engagement outside moments of national crisis moments remains a challenge for the public sector. Without it we waste huge amounts of public money creating unsustainable ‘solutions’ to ‘problems’ which are defined by statistics and only show the surface of a situation.

In the last 15 years I have taught potential teachers at degree and masters level, headed a service in local government committed to hearing the voice of local people, and managed programmes across the UK on behalf of the Home Office where we have explored how people choose to spend public money on listening to the voice of the public. Now I run MutualGain which is designed to help support politicians, practitioners and the public to come together and build social capital.

Working with MutualGain (and my co presenter here today – Rhion Jones from the Consultation Institute) has reinforced my view that without building the skills and experiences of active citizenship with all parties together we continue to offer ‘projects’ which won’t be mainstreamed, and training which will be forgotten once the delegates have left the room. MutualGain delivers the reframing which Birch calls for:

- the way people see politics (politicians, practitioners and the public)
- the incentives they have to engage with the political process; and
- their understanding of what they risk losing should they disengage

Here are some anecdotes which typify the challenge we have ahead:

### **Politicians and Practitioners:**

Practitioners (*unelected* civil servants and local practitioners or policy makers) spend an inordinate amount of time pacifying elected members. They often do what they can to keep elected members *away* from the business of governing the public. I can sometimes understand why they do this – the NHS reconfigurations of services are a good example in the UK at the moment where some elected representatives spearhead campaigns to ‘save our hospital’, mobilise tens of thousands of people to sign petitions to support the campaign despite clinicians concerns about the safety of patients in the hospital. One doctor recently described this to me as tantamount to ‘killing a significant minority of his constituents’ but it goes down as a success if the building (not services) is saved.

When piloting the MutualGain model of building social capital, we came across politicians who wanted to stop us from talking to the public, and wanted us to work just through a

select few who were known to them. They were vehemently opposed to incentivizing the 'ordinary citizen' and felt they ought to value democracy as much as they did, and if they didn't, well they wouldn't get a say! This doesn't display the skills of letting go of control, and facilitation that the EPPI review required of teachers, and doesn't demonstrate the need for a new type of leadership which Christiansen and Bunt set out in their NESTA study in 2013.

Cast your mind back to when I was homeless with two children and poor, I didn't have time to engage in politics, but if the incentive right was right, and the experience fun (see Involve (2011)), I could have bought assets of knowledge, skills and tactics to the table of policy makers and helped them serve me better.

The legitimacy of our public sector is under threat because of tokenistic consultation and engagement; confidence of the public is waning and trust is fast declining because of self-interested actors within the system itself (as much unelected as well as elected). Our public sector has become hard to reach for the public; it has lost its way when it comes to listening. It thinks that if it *tells* the public to engage, it will, but as so many public servants witness as they ask citizens to engage, they won't. The public need to know that if they give up their time to share knowledge and resources, that there will be some return on investment. All too often the results of consultation and engagement sit in unanalysed boxes of surveys or are dismissed by those very servants who are not committed to democratic dialogue and participation.

Gary Younge made the point in a guardian article about racism in the USA recently that '*the legal right of people to mix does not inevitably change the power relationship between them*'. The same can be said of democratic participation: The right to participate does not mean people will participate. Having the structures for engagement does not mean people will want to engage. Without participation though the gap between the personal and the political will increase, discontent will grow and the threat of dictatorship could become more likely.

This personal journey has demonstrated to me the limitations of our 'democratic' institutions to adequately engage and understand those they serve; the unwillingness to share power between organisations to benefit those they serve, and the challenge of persuading the public to trust those who are there to serve them. If democratic government in the UK is founded on a social contract which permits 'representatives' to govern on our behalf, democracy is indeed in crisis. We can choose to focus on increased voter turnout, continue with populist election campaigns, and use enforcement and law to fix the social problems we face. Or we could reframe the way we look at society and create public policy so that we connect the conversations taking place in communities with those in

organisations so that we encourage a form of positive social capital to grow. Community skills, knowledge and learning might prevent the gloomy predictions associated with what one local Council calls the ‘graph of doom’<sup>3</sup>, and a new form of social contract developed at a local level could reinstate the legitimacy of the state to govern us effectively.

If the underlying principle of democracy is government for the people, of the people, by the people maybe we need to look beyond the formal mechanisms of ‘representativeness’ to discover what actually happens within society. Whether you are an advocate of direct democracy, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, consensus democracy, social democracy or indeed agonistic democracy the underlying principle and goal is the same. I don’t think I am arguing in favour of any specific brand of democracy, but rather calling for a refresh of the way in which we enact the social contract which underpins democracy in the UK. Capacity build those working within the state to develop social capital and active citizenship and we might lead by example and see a positive shift in our democracy.

#### *Note about MutualGain*

The raison d’etre of MutualGain is to empower organisations and communities to reconnect in the social space which lies between the state and the individual. Ultimately, we aim to promote greater participation and active citizenship within our democracy and increase social capital, for the mutual benefit of all. To do that we believe that we must unleash the assets of our public sector frontline, as well as tapping into the spirit and energy of the citizens they serve. There is little point (as we have seen in history) of embarking on meaningful community engagement without being prepared to listen to what emerges, and similarly little point in investing in new initiatives and grand statements of empowering the frontline if there is no will to seriously consider stopping some of the more traditional methods of engagement.

For more information and films about our approach please see [www.mutualgain.org](http://www.mutualgain.org) or contact [susan@mutualgain.org](mailto:susan@mutualgain.org)

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<sup>3</sup> [http://ssrg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/John\\_Dix\\_SSRG\\_AW\\_2013.pdf](http://ssrg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/John_Dix_SSRG_AW_2013.pdf)

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