

Tackling Wicked Problems: The New Public Participation

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Overview: Three Key Arguments

#1 – The Basic Reality

Most of the key problems we face are best understood through a wicked problems lens



#2 – The Bad News

Human nature and many of our primary institutions and processes are woefully ill-suited to address wicked problems



#3 – The Hopeful News

Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that cultivate the wisdom so critical to addressing wicked problems, particularly at the local level



Wicked problems inherently involve **competing underlying values**, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that **cannot be resolved** by science. They call for ongoing high quality **communication, creativity**, and broad **collaborative action** to manage well.

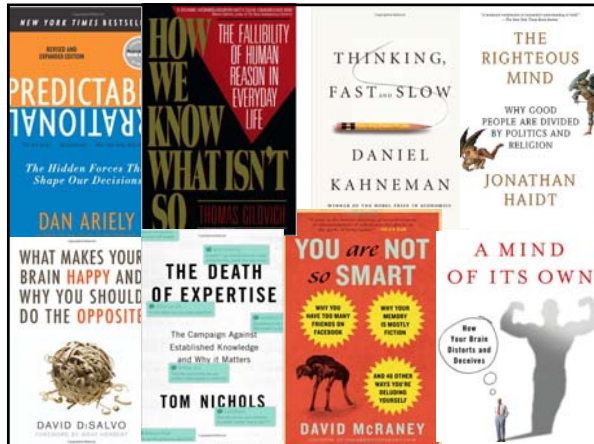




Key American Values

Preamble	Current Phrasing
Justice	Justice
Domestic Tranquility/ Common defense	Security/Safety
General Welfare	Equality
Liberty to ourselves	Freedom (for us)
Liberty for our posterity	Freedom (for future generations)

- Inherent Democratic Tensions**
- Freedom and Equality (and between equality and equity)
 - Our Freedom and Freedom of Future generations
 - Freedom and Security
 - Justice is a tension within itself (justice as the ideal between too much and too little credit or punishment)
- Some others**
- Short term and long term
 - Individual rights and community good
 - Unity and diversity
 - Cooperation and competition
 - Structure and agency (or opportunity and individual responsibility)
 - Flexibility/Innovation and Consistency/Tradition
 - Best use of resources (money, time, people)



What We Are Learning from Brain Science

The Problematic

- We crave certainty and consistency
- We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
- We strongly prefer to gather with the like minded
- We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views
- We avoid values dilemmas, tensions, and tough choices



What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

Stages of motivated reasoning

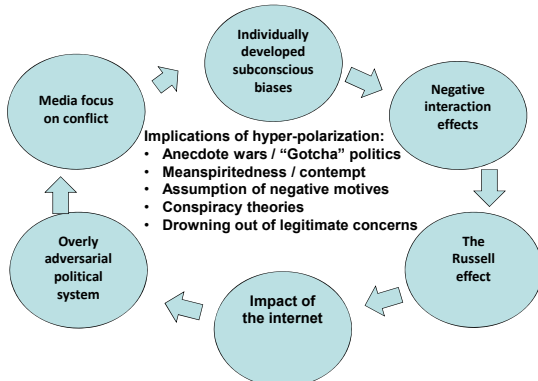
What and who we expose ourselves to	<i>selective exposure / echo chambers / filter or media bubbles</i>
How we interpret new evidence	<i>confirmation bias, backfire effect, cognitive dissonance</i>
How we make attributions and tell stories	<i>egoism, illusory correlation, negativity bias</i>
How we make decisions	<i>heuristics, self-serving bias, social proof</i>
What we remember	<i>availability bias</i>

How we interpret new evidence

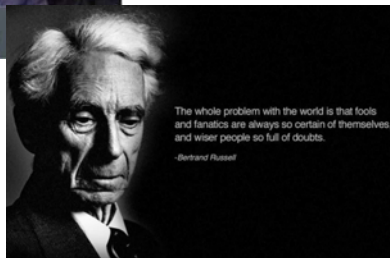
“when we want to believe something, we ask ourselves, ‘Can I believe it?’ Then...we search for supporting evidence, and if we find even a single piece of pseudo-evidence, we can stop thinking... In contrast, when we don’t want to believe something, we ask ourselves, ‘Must I believe it?’ Then we search for contrary evidence, and if we find a single reason to doubt the claim, we can dismiss it“

• Jonathan Haidt and Tom Gilovich

The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



Bush: 'Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions'



Negative Interaction Effects

Kathryn Shultz – *Being Wrong*

- First step: Ignorance assumption
- Second step: Idiot assumption
- Third Step: Evil assumption



Drawbacks of an Overly-Adversarial Political System

- Plays into flaws of human nature
- Often focuses on “winning” vs. solving problems
- Zero-sum game incentivizes “bad” communication, strategic research, and problematizes implementation
- Often focuses on blaming (them) vs. taking accountability (us)
- Relies on narrow value frames (thus avoids tensions)
- Attracts/privileges organized, entrenched voices
- Negative side effects like polarization, cynicism, and apathy (which then cause even worse communication)
- Assumes a narrow role for citizens (citizens as voters, consumers, or spectators)



Key Problems with our Typical Public Processes

- *Engage too late in the process when issues are simply framed as “yes” or “no”*
- *Primarily provide opportunities for individual or group expression*
- *Caters to entrenched and organized voices*
- *Little to no effective interaction or learning/refinement of opinion*

Why Experts Can't Save Us
(though they can certainly help when used well)

- Good data is undermined in a polarized environment
- Facts don't change minds or behavior
- Experts by definition are focused on a specific, narrow aspect of the problem (i.e. they struggle with wicked problems).
- Experts often focus on being "value free" (they tell us what *is* or what *could* be, not what *should* be)
- Expert perspectives can overemphasize what can be measured and underemphasize what cannot
- Expert dominated processes shut out the public



**Key Steps for
Local Communities**

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- Build local capacity for deliberative engagement
- Reinvigorate or create new key bridging institutions
- Cultivate citizens as wise collaborators



The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
- Become more comfortable with uncertainty
- Focus on elevating the conversation not just winning the argument
- Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
- Work toward creating a learning community

Traditional v. Facilitative Leadership

Traditional

- *Strong opinion*
- *Charisma*
- *Public speaking skills*
- *Mobilization of the like-minded*

Facilitative

- *Strong on process*
- *Trust and respect*
- *Facilitation skills*
- *Collaboration between broad perspectives*

What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

The Good

- We are inherently social and seek purpose and community
- We are inherently empathetic
- We are inherently pragmatic and creative
- We can overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits



What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

Bottom line: The most powerful thing to help people overcome their biases and tackle wicked problems well is **genuine conversation with people they respect.**



What is Deliberative Engagement?

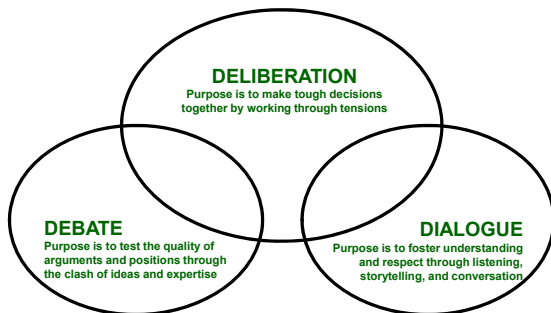
- Deliberative democracy
- Community problem-solving
- Collaborative problem-solving
- Participatory decision-making
- Slow democracy
- Strong democracy
- Multi-stakeholder dispute resolution
- Public participation
- Democratic governance
- Collaborative governance
- Organic or community politics
- Consensus building or seeking processes
- Organic politics

What is Deliberative Engagement?

Deliberation is an approach to public engagement in which **citizens**, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in public decision making. Often working with facilitators or process experts who utilize a variety of deliberative techniques, citizens **come together** and **consider relevant facts and values from multiple points of view**; **listen** to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them; consider the underlying tensions, **tough choices**, and varied **consequences** inherent to addressing public problems; are willing to **refine and adapt their opinions and interests**; and ultimately seek to come to some conclusion for **collaborative action** based on a **reasoned public judgment**.



Forms of Interactive Communication

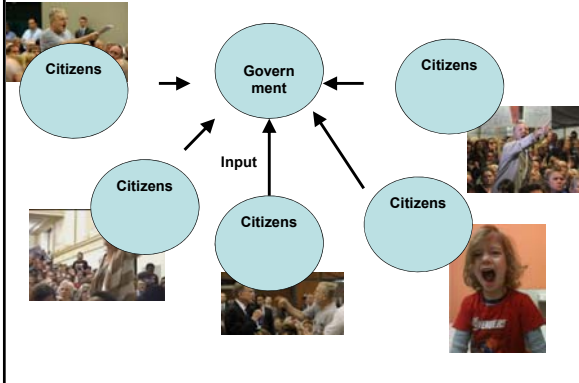


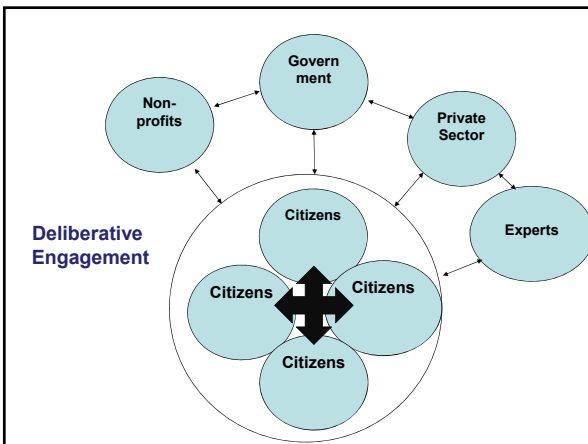
Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

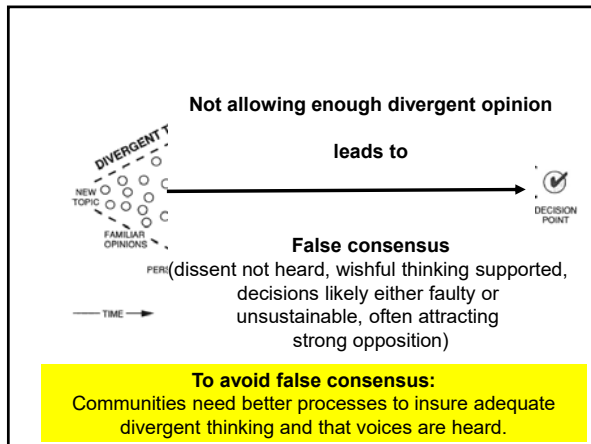
- Overall deliberative framing
 - Wicked problem, multiple approaches, broad range of actors, starting discussion “upstream” (before polarization)
- Discussion guides/backgrounder
 - Base of information, something to react to, framed for deliberation, not persuasion
- Small, diverse, representative groups
- Processes designed for interaction and learning
- Deliberative facilitators

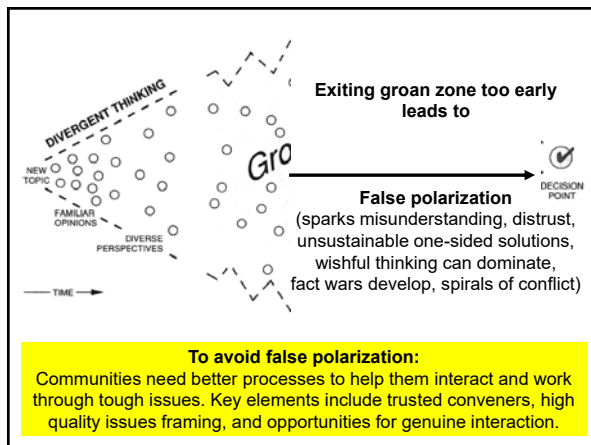


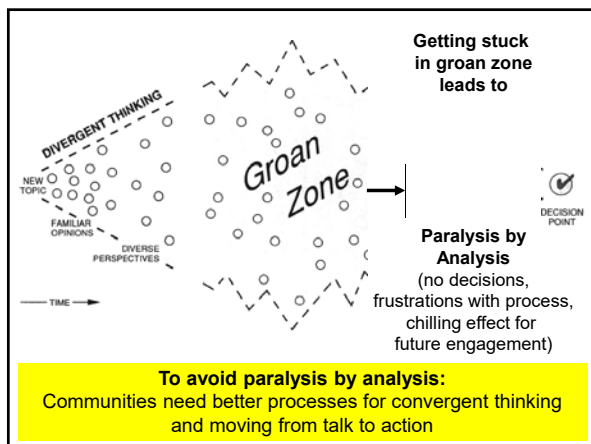
Traditional Forms of Public Participation





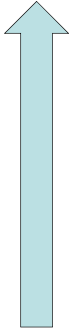






What we need public process to do

- Build capacity for **wisdom, collaborative action** and **co-creation**
- Spark **collaborative learning** and the refinement (not just expression) of opinion
- Help **differentiate** strong and weak arguments
- Build mutual **understanding** and development of **respect**
- Support **listening** and genuine **interaction**
- Provide opportunities for **voice** and public input



Institutional Troubles Bridging v. Polarizing Institutions

More polarizing
↑
↓
More bridging

- Political parties/elections
- Advocacy groups
- Internet / Social media
- Media/Press
- Experts
- School districts
- Universities
- Community organizations like Public Libraries, Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, League of Women Voters, United Way, Community Foundations, Leadership programs



The Virtuous Cycle of Authentic Engagement

