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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preamble</th>
<th>Current Phrasing</th>
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<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic Tranquility/</td>
<td>Security/Safety</td>
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<td>Common defense</td>
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<td>General Welfare</td>
<td>Equality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberty to ourselves</td>
<td>Freedom (for us)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberty for our posterity</td>
<td>Freedom (for future</td>
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<td>generations)</td>
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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?

<table>
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<th>Stages of motivated reasoning</th>
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<tr>
<td>What and who we expose ourselves to</td>
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<td>How we interpret new evidence</td>
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<td>How we make attributions and tell stories</td>
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<td>How we make decisions</td>
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<td>What we remember</td>
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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

Implications of hyper-polarization:
- Anecdot wars / "Gotcha" politics
- Measuritedness / contempt
- Assumption of negative motives
- Conspiracy theories
- Drowning out of legitimate concerns

Booth: "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 the public out

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

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**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

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**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?

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.
Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

- Overall deliberative framing
  - Wicked problem, multiple approaches, broad range of actors, starting discussion “upstream” (before polarization)
- Discussion guides/background
  - 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

Deliberative Engagement
The Four Key Shifts of Deliberative Engagement

- From wicked people ➔ to wicked problems
- From adversaries ➔ to collaborators
- From inciting the worst of human nature ➔ to bringing out the best of human nature
- From facts as cherry picked ammunition or “fake news” ➔ to facts as tools for addressing problems together
Not allowing enough divergent opinion leads to False consensus
(dissent not heard, wishful thinking supported, decisions likely either faulty or unsustainable, often attracting strong opposition)

To avoid false consensus: Communities need better processes to insure adequate divergent thinking and that voices are heard.

Exiting groan zone too early leads to False polarization
(sparks misunderstanding, distrust, unsustainable one-sided solutions, wishful thinking can dominate, fact wars develop, spirals of conflict)

To avoid false polarization: Communities need better processes to help them interact and work through tough issues. Key elements include trusted conveners, high quality issues framing, and opportunities for genuine interaction.

Getting stuck in groan zone leads to Paralysis by Analysis
(no decisions, frustrations with process, chilling effect for future engagement)

To avoid paralysis by analysis: Communities need better processes for convergent thinking and moving from talk to action.
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

- 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

- Opportunity for authentic engagement (primary at local level)
- Development of mutual understanding
- Greater refinement of opinions (i.e. learning)
- Building of trust and respect
- Potential for collaboration and co-creation