



Creating Citizens through Communication Education in the United States

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Introduction

In any democratic or quasi-democratic system, governments should be accountable their citizens, in the sense not only that government decisions take into account the interests of citizens (this might happen sometimes in an autocracy), but also that citizens decide what their interests are, communicate them to the government, and signal when they feel their interests are served. In this picture, it is too seldom noticed that the first part, deciding their interests, is just as much a matter of communication as the second and third parts, communicating their interests and communicating their satisfaction or dissatisfaction. As others have noted, modern polling techniques tend to presume that most people walk around with well-formed opinions on complex issues, ready at a moment's notice (Fishkin 1995). Even in settings replete with highly educated, well-informed citizens, this may not be true; it is even less true in settings where literacy, education, and impartial media are not readily available.

How, exactly, is the process of opinion formation a communication process? In the most basic sense, people "get their information" from somewhere: the media, their neighbors, the Internet. This, however, is a mainly passive sense of communication (citizen as receiver) and is the notion of communication most likely to provoke anxieties about the manipulation of public opinion. Yet another model is available, the one I want to advocate in this chapter: deliberative democracy, where people's opinions flow, at least in part, from interactions with other citizens. The correct character of these



interactions, generally characterized as *discussion*, is hotly debated, as are the potential outcomes from deliberative discussion.

In a classic confrontation in the 1920s, John Dewey and Walter Lippmann played out the contrast between these two views on the formation of citizen thought (Lippman 1927). Lippmann held in *The Phantom Public* that in a technologically advanced society, only those with sufficient experience could make good decisions, because the average voter was simply unable to muster a rational or cogent opinion on difficult technical policy issues in economics or other areas. Whatever the merits may have been of Jefferson's yeoman farmer as citizen, thought Lippmann, the country in which a farmer's expertise was sufficient was long gone; the public was but a phantom, widely praised but nowhere to be found. Dewey argued, on the other hand, that rational publics could exist; wherever people could come to see a common interest, to perceive themselves as having common cause even with people they did not know personally and never would, a public had come into being. Yet, as Dewey noted in *The Public and Its Problems*, creating the kind of system in which such publics could have an impact on the state or on governance required addressing the underlying problem: "The essential need is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion." The deliberative approach has its advocates and detractors; in particular, those of a harshly *realpolitik* frame of mind often find it too normative and too full of wishful thinking to be taken seriously at the outset. It is worth bearing in mind that if this view were always correct, we would have no functioning democracies at all. Yet it is easy to see the inherent limitations in the "discussion" approach as well, as Harrison Elliot noted in 1928:

There is no magic in this process [of discussion]. Experience has warned us that not all groups are cooperative and that not all group discussion is creative. Unless the conditions are observed, group discussions may end in a turbulent riot or a hopeless insipidity ... it is easy for a group to talk but difficult for it to do real thinking. In conducting democratic discussion we are attempting a difficult feat. ... Well-meaning friends of group thinking have dealt it the hardest blows. ... Democracy is not secured by throwing questions to a crowd without any preliminary preparation; that is anarchy. (Elliott 1928, 11)

Despite this, discussion and forums continue to inspire and motivate citizen activists. In this chapter, I am going to try to outline, based on historical evidence and experience, practical outlines of a deliberative approach. My sources are the "discussion movement" and the "forum movement," widespread attempts in the United States during the 1920s–1940s to reinvigorate and reinvent face-to-face democracy (Keith 2007).

Speaking like a Citizen

The forum approach can strike some people as unrealistic or just odd when first encountered. Every approach will have its assumptions; even the most

rigorous kind of *realpolitik* has its assumptions. I want to outline the ones made here, by noting opposing assumptions and indicating where this discussion will fall between them.

Local versus universal: Clearly, politics is always highly local. Different cultures, societies, religions, economies, and much else contribute to the ineluctably local nature of politics. Yet despite all this diversity, I will take it that characteristics exist that liberal democracies share, or can share, despite all their differences. This does not mean we should not attend to the local or the different, just that we be open to a level of description that transcends them. For example, even if “discussion” is a universal component of deliberation, the exact mechanics of discussion will surely differ from culture to culture, language to language. Making the necessary translations and adjustments to local conditions should not be a barrier to invoking general concepts.

Systemic versus partial approach: By systemic I mean that governance is not a simple matter of governmental procedures and processes (as complex as some of these, such as voting, may be in practice). Rather, governance is a vast and complex system that includes government, people, society, culture, language, religion, and economics. Naturally we will find multiple channels for accountability in such a system, as well as multiple bottlenecks and blockages. There will not be one, or just a few, direct ways to create accountability; I think that many approaches are valid in different situations, and I see myself as offering but one tool among many.

Face-to-face versus mediated communication: As countries grow ever larger, the world grows ever smaller because of the myriad means of mass communication, from television to books and newspapers to the Internet. The promise of such communication—its ubiquity—goes hand-in-hand with its dangers—control by governments or structural or economic bias. I am willing to argue, however, that for all its difficulties something remains to be said for face-to-face citizen communication. It is not a panacea, but as we shall see it can be a powerfully motivating and transformative experience.

Rational versus emotional: Although the meaning of rationality, to an extent, may vary by culture and context, it remains a desideratum of deliberative democracy. At minimum, having reasons and sharing them is a reasonable standard that can be adapted to many conditions. This is not a claim that emotion is invalid or has no place in deliberation, just that deliberation, as a communication practice, foregrounds the rational. I will take it that rationality includes a wide variety of a narrative and rhetorical practices.¹

Means and ends: Finally, I will assume, along with John Dewey, that no nondemocratic road to democracy exists; in parlous times, this seems to many a dangerous assumption—can we wait for the practices and ethos of democratic life to take hold? In my view, there may be no real choice. Few installed democracies have succeeded. In practice, this means that people should not resort to force, propaganda, counter-propaganda, agitprop, and the like.

Accountability requires, at some level, a feedback loop from citizen participation to government law, policy, or action; this loop can be through government-provided mechanisms, news media, or voting on candidates or issues. Yet sometimes citizens actively form opinions and take positions through interactions with others. How do deliberative moments actually happen? The danger is that deliberative forms, organized with clear goals, may simply reproduce either passivity or unhelpful partisanship. So participants need to learn to communicate in appropriate ways. These ways of speaking should not be coerced and will not be foreign to most participants, but they need to be explicitly called forth and encouraged.

Public Audience

Part of the burden of the democratic context is the burden of speaking reasonably to those we do not agree with. Addressing others as partisans, from a position of partisanship, may not be the most effective way to cope with difference; James Madison long ago pointed out the corrosive potential of faction. It is not that citizens should not have strong points of view; they should be able to muster arguments that could appeal to those who hold different positions. The key here is that a civic discussion is not between private individuals, but between citizens, not between “you” and “I” but “us.” Assuming that people possess enough of a sense of common civic identity, partisan positions should be argued with reference to shared interests and values. Obviously, room exists for reasonable disagreements about the best policies to promote public health or national security or a robust economy. Characterizing others as not just wrong but evil, however, or speaking only to those who already agree is not likely to either be persuasive or advance the understanding of the problems and solutions.

Public Reason

A version of Habermas’s conception of public reason is important for deliberative settings (Habermas 1998; see also Bohman 1996). “Public reason” is reason adapted to a democratic polity, in the sense that the reasons given are reasons that all citizen groups or stakeholders could potentially accept. Reasoning based in marginalizing or persecuting a particular group, or based in personal advantage, is not public reason. Citizens should certainly maintain points of view, and argue them, but not by employing arguments that fail to recognize the interests of other citizens or even their status as citizens. Public reason advocates for “us” and tries to make clear how a given policy or choice benefits the public, even if individuals will be unhappy with it. For example, in advocating a public health program, the tax necessary to pay for the program will probably make some participants unhappy. Rather than saying “So what? I need health care” (an appeal to personal benefit), however, an advocate for the program could point out that many people will have access to it, that it is humane, and that it may save the state money overall, especially in the long

run—reasons that appeal to the public good. An emphasis on public reason counteracts the tendency to use political discourse simply to air personal grievances and attempt to settle scores; grievances should be brought forward, and sometimes redressed, but not using justifications that cannot be applied to the group overall.

Cooperation

Despite the legitimately heated disagreement that often attends political discussion, a focus on conflict, whether in terms of tone or structuring the interaction as a debate rather than discussion, may not produce the best results. Introducing participants to a cooperative approach to problem solving may be useful. Participants ought to be able to understand conflicts and disagreements within a framework of cooperation, in the sense that they are disagreeing to make progress on a problem generally recognized as important. Cooperatively oriented groups do not need to strive for consensus, which may not only be an unreasonable goal, but may also be harmful to productive group process. Instead, they need to continually remind themselves that their process and their disagreements are part of a common project of problem solving.

Citizens are constituted as such through modes of communication in settings that enable them speak as citizens, and *not* just processes or procedures such as voting. The trick is to find the right combination of forms (structure of interaction) that enables people to speak in the citizenship frame.

Forms of Interaction

In this section I will discuss three face-to-face forms of interaction. Many more might be mentioned, and in particular hybrid forms that combine face-to-face with mediated interaction over the course of multiple sessions are very interesting.² These examples show both the differences and the similarities of face-to-face forms.

Study Circles

Study circles have been around for quite a while. They are descended from the American “Chautauqua Study Circles” of the 1870s, which grew far beyond their Methodist Bible study roots and made their way to Germany, Sweden, and Denmark, from where the idea was reintroduced to the United States. The basic study circle is similar to the book clubs popular today: A group of people decide to meet on a regular basis to discuss books or reading, based not on their literary interest, but their public interest; in many cases an organizing authority provides book selections as well as study and discussion questions.

Groups are nonpartisan and geographically based; generally discussants are neighbors. To an extent, this can make it harder for people to speak as citizens, because they know each other privately and may share many private interests. Nonetheless, it has the advantage of providing a kind of supported learning

environment, where people can have the resources to investigate and sift through new ideas and policies; the group helps ensure that no one will get completely “stuck” in trying to understand or think through the issues. In such a setting, meeting with neighbors in someone’s home, discussion is likely to be easy and informal, rather than stiff and debate-like. Study circles have the advantage also of exploiting and developing social capital, as people share information and expertise and deepen their relationships based on discussion of public issues.

Forums

Forums are events organized explicitly for public discussion. Traditionally, the forum has the following basic structure: A speaker, normally an expert on a subject matter, speaks, and afterwards the audience engages him or her with a question-and-answer discussion, which is the “discussion.” Many variations on this form exist. A forum might have multiple presenters, each giving a short speech on one side or portion of the issue (the “symposium”); multiple presenters might discuss among themselves on the stage before opening the discussion up to the audience (the “panel discussion”); two presenters might have a more-or-less formal debate, followed by questions from the audience (the “forum debate”). The forum, unlike the study circle, relies on a supply of expert speakers who should be able to communicate complex material clearly to lay audiences. The forum has a more directly educational and indirectly deliberative function, because discussion per se is fairly limited. Forums, as opposed to study circles, can bring in a much larger segment of a community; in the memorable arrangement of forums in Des Moines, Iowa, in the middle 1930s, weekly forums convened at grade schools and monthly forums at high schools, bringing in automatically different segments of the community. Forums at their best can bring new and vital information and arguments to a community that stimulate discussion long after the speaker has gone.

Town Meeting

Town meetings are usually represented as harkening back to the tradition of the Scandinavian *alting* or “all-think (together)”; sometimes they are aligned with the classical Athenian *ekklesia*, the assembly of voting citizens. They are typically intended to mimic as closely as possible local practices of deliberation. Deliberation means, in a sense, choice, or the reasoning and discussion that leads to choice. So deliberation is not a philosophical ramble, but a kind of discourse that ends in a decision. Even bodies without decision-making power can deliberate as if they had it, and this produces a fairly different process than the forum.

Town meetings, as deliberative, typically try to include all relevant stakeholders, to make sure that all positions are heard. Town meetings that are not pro forma (with designated representatives attending) may take in a broader

or narrower range of the community depending on the issue and the kinds of stakeholders. The government may well sponsor or participate in town meetings as part of its own decision-making process, although dangers to this approach are present, as noted in the next section. Organizers can structure town meetings in many different ways; *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* details many case studies and shows the particular creativity of Brazil and Australia.³ Technology may enhance town meetings by allowing them to combine face-to-face and mediated interactions.

All of these types of civic discussions can be held in various combinations and repetitions; there is no reason they cannot be linked together in useful ways, depending on the setting.

A final consideration about forms is whether they should be *topical* or *formal*. By this I mean that any of the forms might either be convened on a regular basis for its own sake (formal) or convened on a limited basis to learn and deliberate about a specific topic. As much as regular meetings (in the same way the government assemblies and committees meet) seem like a necessary part of a system of accountability, it is unclear whether, without an immediate exigence, the necessary cross section of citizens will want to meet on a regular basis. Experience seems to suggest that bringing people together for a specific topic or purpose will generate more participation, even though it seems like a poor way to hold a government, with all the continuous power of the state, accountable.

Goals

The form of participation, although not the least of an organizer's concerns, is not sufficient by itself. How people participate is just as important as the structures of participation; the quality and meaning of the activity may be equally important to the participants. If people do not fully understand the forum or town meeting, or their place in it, then it will not have the desired outcomes. Participants need to have an investment in the activity. Much depends, therefore, on the possible, practical goals of the activity. Deliberative forms of interaction do not result in direct democracy (as if participants will vote on policy at the conclusion of the meeting), but then again if they bear no connection at all to the formation or selection of policies, citizens will rightly wonder whether there is any point to participating. So a subtle and ongoing problem for any deliberative approach is articulating relevant and achievable goals. In particular, not only is consensus not only an unrealistic goal for almost all situations, it is often corrosive, leading participants to feel forced to agree or to prematurely relinquish their positions. If consensus is to take place, it will likely be about a position or policy that will be a result of discussion, not one brought into the discussion, and it may be a partial consensus (everybody likes features of the solution, but no one likes the whole thing). A fixation on

consensus reveals more concern with outcome than process. As we will see, a well-functioning process might itself be an important outcome. What are some possible goals?

Government and citizens learn about each other: Mutual understanding is no small goal in many situations. The tendency to see one's political opponents as evil and ignorant, even when they are not, seems universal. Part of crafting policies with broad applicability requires synthesizing diverse stakeholder interests, and this cannot proceed until interests are all out in the open. Sometimes people discover they are more similar to each other than anyone thought; sometimes they discover the exact nature of their differences. In either case, this is knowledge that proves useful in articulating, defending, and acting on one's view.

In addition, apathy can sometimes be a by-product of feeling that one's views are not represented in the larger public discussion or that no one quite understands them. Having a forum where one can be heard and given the chance to articulate and develop one's point of view can powerfully motivate citizens to continue participating in the process. Of course, sometimes people would like validation, to be told their views are correct, but in many cases the legitimacy of being heard in a neutral setting is sufficient to convince people that they are part of the larger civic conversation.

Education: Interesting questions of public policy are invariably complex and multifaceted, resisting easy summary or superficial treatment. Of course, those who are both literate and motivated can seek out experts or information to improve their understanding of a difficult topic. Study circles, forums, and town meetings can also be occasions for gaining expertise in a subject matter. Not only is interaction with fellow citizens a good way to learn, but learning a topic in the context of debates or disagreements can be useful in understanding its political aspects, not just a dry digest of information. Forums are especially potent in this regard, because they bring in experts who not only can speak authoritatively on an issue, but can also answer questions about it. Well-constructed study circle materials can also be effective, though there is no one on the spot to answer questions.

Understanding of issues gained through forums can influence voting; because knowledgeable voters are universally agreed to be a prerequisite of a well-functioning democracy, forums' effect on voting indirectly helps to keep the entire system accountable. Knowledge is power, the saying goes, and an informed citizenry can mobilize itself effectively, and, more importantly, it can speak with authority to the government. Obviously, if the government, or its agencies, are keeping secrets, that information is harder to get. In many cases, however, an understanding of basic issues in economics or public policy is a powerful tool in the hands of citizens who wish to contest a government policy.

Deliberation: Public forums or town meetings can also be set up to help citizens review and develop policy choices, as well as reasons for and against them. It is important to recognize that even though participants are only going

through the motions of deliberating policy (because they have no power to enact or enforce it), the experience is most useful when it is fairly realistic, that is to say, not realistic in format (because parliamentary debate is not an effective or friendly tool for local citizen groups), but realistic to both the diversity of stakeholders and the facts of the issues. A good deliberative experience includes enough variety of positions and viewpoints that participants are forced to engage each other. It should also have sufficient knowledge resources that participants can access relevant facts and hold each other accountable to them.

Lessons from the U.S. Forum Movement

Many different organizations, inside and outside higher education, seek to teach the skills of democratic discussion. What could they learn from the experiments of the 1920s–1940s? At each turn, I think, we will see that the devil is in the details. No matter how much theory we bring to the process, the actual details of interaction—who, what, when, where, how?—will determine the success or failure of public deliberation.

Agonism versus Cooperation

In Jane Mansbridge's pioneering work on the practice of public deliberation in the United States, she distinguishes between unitary and adversary democracy. Although the terms would have been unfamiliar, the concepts would have been obvious to the discussionists and the forumites. Adversary democracy is heavily proceduralist, designed to protect the presumably conflicting interests of participants. Unitary democracy assumes that common bonds and social ties allow for the emergence of a consensus point of view. Mansbridge readily admits that her vision of unitary democracy is bound up with the face-to-face tradition of deliberation:

To people steeped in the adversary tradition, the very notion of unitary democracy usually appears naïve and impractical. They assume that interests are always in conflict, that individuals never respect one another equally, that consensus is always a sham in which some are afraid to make their true feelings known and that face-to-face meetings are too cumbersome to play a significant role in a modern national polity. (Mansbridge 1980, 23)

Mansbridge allows us to see practical problems here, because agonism and cooperation are the communication elements that correspond to adversary and unitary democracy. Obviously, adversary democracy is going to value debate and the clash of ideas (and hence interests), whereas unitary democracy will focus more on discussion and the attempt to find consensus.

Both elements must be present, but it is unclear what the right mix is, or if the right mix depends mostly on the circumstances. The early discussionists probably overemphasized cooperation and consensus (much as Habermas

later did). Conflict, however, though entertaining, often does not allow for much progress and may create an atmosphere in which things get so polarized that almost nothing can be accomplished. So there is a problem of finding a balance, both theoretically and practically. Debate, when everyone is being a good sport, can be tremendously productive, and discussion ought in principle to include sharp questioning and well-honed arguments. The practical problems include making sure that, regardless of the specific format of a deliberative group, the members are aware that neither an agonistic nor a cooperative focus is the only one, and that they should maintain a productive tension between the two.

Maintaining the tension is partly a problem of philosophy, how a particular group understands its values and mission. As Francesca Polletta has argued, a group's self-identity may be tied up with rigorous adherence to a particular version of democratic practice, even if that practice is sometimes rather dysfunctional (Poletta 2002, ch. 9). If a group understands deliberation as purely cooperative, then they may deal poorly with the tensions that naturally arise over difficult issues. A group heavily invested in parliamentary procedure, a fairly adversarial system, may find members consistently trying to get around these procedures to introduce some cooperation into the deliberations. In addition, as with other living, breathing social organisms, deliberating groups are individual, and their characteristics will vary. The equilibrium point between struggle and cooperation that produces high functionality will vary from group to group, and so probably no general answer can be found about "ideal" procedures or process that will guarantee quality deliberation.

A related problem concerns the role of consensus. The discussionists and Dewey placed a high value on consensus, and Mansbridge points out that "the central assumption of unitary democracy is that, while its members may initially have conflicting preferences about a given issue, goodwill, mutual understanding and enlightened preferences can lead to the emergence of a common enlightened preference that is good for everyone" (Mansbridge 1980, 25).

Philosophers have tended to focus on whether this is possible (Is such a resolution likely to exist in every case?) or desirable (Habermas long maintained that consensus was the normative ideal in democratic argumentation). The experience of the forums and contemporary deliberative groups suggests that a more pressing concern is whether a preoccupation with consensus enhances the functionality of groups. Very likely, it does not, especially in the short run, but then neither does a speedy recourse to voting and the creation of disenfranchised minorities. Dynamic partial agreements are possible, where everybody agrees (for example) to a description of the problem or on an improvement to the situation, even though it does not constitute a "solution" or a final resolution to the problem.

Scale and Meaningfulness

Scaling up the small-town meeting to accommodate big-city, regional, or national deliberation remains a major problem. Most of what is attractive about the discussion or forum setting does not scale up well; the more people involved, the less actual discussion takes place. We need to reconsider, therefore, the relative desirability of the main features of small groups.

Giving up on face-to-face interaction certainly makes it easier to scale up public deliberation. In Michael Warner's model of circulating texts, deliberating in person barely figures in at all (Warner 2002). To what extent do the goods of deliberation attach to a face-to-face encounter? Mansbridge defends it strongly, even while acknowledging its downside:

Experience teaches us, however, that in practice face-to-face contact increases the perception of likeness, encourages decision making by consensus, and perhaps even enhances equality of status. . . . On the positive side, it seems to encourage the actual congruence of interests by encouraging the empathy by which individual members make one another's interests their own. It also encourages the recognition of common interest by allowing subtleties of direct communication. On the negative side, it increases the possibility of conformity through intimidation, resulting in a false or managed consensus. (Mansbridge 1980, 33)

If we agreed completely with Mansbridge on this, however, it would mean that any worthy system of public deliberation would have to either be very small and possibly representative (such was the design of the original U.S. republic), or it would have to be a vast network of small groups of people. Coordinating and consolidating the results of such groups would pose a massive and complex challenge, and it is not at all clear how that challenge would be met.⁴ Perhaps technology could step in (Keith 2003). Linked in online systems, large numbers of people could communicate, synchronously or asynchronously, about public issues. Yet the scale problem can reemerge here. Even though the online setting preserves many of the valuable features of face-to-face interaction (more or less, depending on the format: listserv, chat room, bulletin board, and so on), as the numbers of people grow, fewer can interact directly (users can read only so many posts), and the problems of coordinating the results become just as acute as with multiple face-to-face groups.

So probably, like the forums of the 1930s, we are going to be left with deliberation and "discussion" happening in fairly large groups, with from 50 to 500 people. In such a setting, most people would be observers rather than participants. The solution of the 1930s forums was not a bad one. If the goal of the forums is redefined from actual decision making to education, larger groups can be perfectly functional; nonparticipants, even in a large group, can learn a great deal about both the issues and how to think about them.

At this point, however, we need to step back and consider whether or not we have broken our connection to what was originally attractive about

deliberation. This issue about the loss of connection has two sides, one for organizers and one for participants. For organizers, the problem is: Why go to all this trouble to organize forums? Studebaker and his associates had no trouble seeing themselves as part of an evolving adult education movement, one with a liberal, civic purpose. Contemporary organizers seem very concerned with the effectiveness of the format, that they are helping people to directly influence political outcomes. For participants, the issue is similar; they are typically motivated by the sense that their deliberative labors lead to a “real” outcome, that talking has a chance of making a difference with the problem they are considering. If it is “just talk,” then why bother? Seen in this way, making forums meaningful and motivating participants amount to figuring out how to get the forums attached to the levers of political power. That turns out to be fairly difficult, especially as the size of the forums is scaled up.⁵

A more powerful way to justify participation in public deliberation approaches politics from a systemic perspective. If we have given up on the “great man” theories of politics, perhaps we need to give up the lingering remains of the “great institutions” accounts of politics. Identifying the “levers of power” solely with the city council, the state legislature, or the U.S. Senate misses the truth that these institutions are deeply and thoroughly bound to a complex set of systems, including public opinion, local constituents/voters, the courts, business interests, the economy, foreign policy, and much else besides. Although it may appear superficially that the legislature can just make things happen, in fact many conditions have to be in place for a law or policy to be passed, let alone enforced. Public opinion—informed and educated opinion, in particular—is very much a part of the political system.⁶ As James Fishkin has argued, polls and polling should be derided only when they use uninformed or nonopinions to guide policy. So although the 1930s discussionists and forumites tended to speak of education in terms of preparing better voters, a worthy but limited goal, a revised understanding of the workings of our political system could bring a whole new meaning to the education of citizens through deliberation.

Trust/Suspicion/Neutrality

Deliberative democratic procedures require participants to bracket partisan concerns, at least temporarily, and adopt a somewhat objective standpoint; they need to balance their partisan interests with recognition of other stakeholders’ interests. The ability to bracket is clearly a learned skill of civic discourse for most people and cannot be taken for granted. If participants see a deliberative occasion as “partisanship by other means,” the discourse may be neither very productive nor educational. Similarly, participants need to have confidence that the forms themselves are not structurally biased toward one group, or one policy, which is a particular problem for events sponsored (even with the best intentions) by government agencies. Unless some effort is expended on declaring and then demonstrating the (reasonable) neutrality of

forums or town meetings, perceptions of bias will limit the positive outcomes of the meetings. Obviously, the suspicions that people might have will depend on local history and politics, and just as clearly the means for reassuring them will depend on local conditions. Some thought needs to go into this. Appendix 1 reproduces a very interesting statement given to forums in the United States during the 1930s, when people were quite suspicious that they were being used as a propaganda arm of the Roosevelt administration.

Importance of Good Leadership

Whether forums or town meetings, they will need a leader or facilitator, and this person is crucial to the success of the event. Forum speakers have to be interesting and compelling speakers and able to reach audiences no matter what level—or differing levels—of education are present. It is not enough to be an expert on a topic (though some expertise is necessary), and so it is not clear that college professors are always the best choice for forum speakers; as experienced teachers, however, they are often very good at facilitation. Forum leaders and facilitators have a very difficult task; Appendix 2 reproduces a list of “tips” for forum leaders that gives a good sense of the complexity of their job. They not only have to manage the difficult interactions of the event, but do it in a way that models the best practices of political communication. Leaders and facilitators need to keep things interesting and moving along while convincing their audience they are impartial and that the process is fair to all points of view. Leaders and facilitators should have the tact and skill to quash disruptive elements without appearing heavy-handed or dictatorial. They have to be able to find and hold a thread of argument while challenging participants to articulate clear arguments for their positions.

Good leaders, hidden talent, may well be available in the geographic areas where they are needed, but depending on this is risky. Resources should be devoted to recruiting and training competent leadership, not as an afterthought, but as a central part of any program. Once a forum or a town meeting format is well established and well attended, over a number of years, recruiting leaders from participants will be possible. Until then, however, sponsoring organizations will need to produce sufficient numbers of leaders and facilitators.

The Entertainment Problem

Commentators today regularly complain about “infotainment” and the lack of seriousness applied to political discourse. Yet they speak as if this were a new problem. In the United States, each of the predecessors to the forum disintegrated into a vapor of cheesy entertainment.⁷ The plain fact is that keeping people interested is hard. For people accustomed to the fast and visual pace of television and video games, talking heads, even in person, can be less than compelling, which is an argument for a set-up where everybody can talk. We probably have to accept that audiences bring generic expectations to face-to-face deliberation, and those expectations matter. The problem

of an entertainment-focused culture is not a new one, but it is possible that movies, television, video games, and the Internet have changed the way people approach live interactions.

One important solution is to fold deliberative practices into activities that are locally compelling and entertaining. As part of a program of music, comedy, or local theater, forums or town meetings might get the attendance they deserve. Giving citizens multiple reasons to show up and interact does not detract from the immediacy and relevance of well-designed programs and allows organizers to tap into local, indigenous types of motivation. When people show up, the possibilities for interaction increase.

The lesson from the lyceum and the Chautauqua is, unfortunately, that some of the things that increase the entertainment value of the civic talk itself, and hence help motivate people to attend, work against high-quality deliberation. The underlying question that remains is whether deliberation and entertainment are intrinsically opposed, or is the opposition a practical problem. If it is a practical problem, no one seems to have yet found a good solution. If they are intrinsically opposed, it is not clear why. Video games are also hours of work to learn, yet youths and adults spend the time to learn them. Perhaps the problem is about “fun”; it is fun to listen to someone savage your political opponents, because you can feel smug and secure. As the discussionists pointed out many times, however, real discussion is often uncomfortable. When does discomfort, combined with hard work, become fun? Perhaps this is a problem of education, as Dewey and followers foresaw. If children get the right kind of civic education in their formative years, they might become accustomed to, and even seek out, situations of discomfiting political engagement.

Teaching Communication Skills

In the long run, a strong connection between school curricula and the public forums is an important part of sustaining public involvement in government accountability. Teaching children the skills and meaning of civic discourse may be more effective in the long run than working only with adults.

Teaching public speaking involves both technical and communication skills. Students learn techniques of outlining, organization, research, and argument; however, teaching public speaking (especially for adults) does not have to require a high level of literacy and can easily take place in environments where there is limited access to learning technologies, and it can take place in local or regional dialects. Training in public speaking helps people feel more confident about standing up and speaking, but more importantly, learning to engage audiences as communicators. What I mean is that they do not just “present” information or research, or just tell their personal story, in front of an audience, but they design or adjust their talk to the audience and try to accomplish a goal with them, persuading, motivating, opening new possibilities, and so forth. The most important concept for public speaking is “audience.” A group

of people listening is not simply a collection of demographic categories (gender, race, class, age, religious affiliation, and so on) but is potentially many different kinds of “publics” depending on how the speaker chooses to address the group. The speaker can address them as citizens, taxpayers, residents of their town or state—or many other identities as well.

The key point is that the speaker addresses the audience in such a way that the audience members can see themselves as more than private individuals, and as part of a public, with public concerns. This is less training in the performance aspect of speaking (though that is important too) as it is training in thinking about oneself and others as part of a public, which may or may not have interests opposed to the government (which is supposed to serve the public interest). This is a crucial move. If people are going to mobilize themselves for joint action, they must arrive (through mutual persuasion and speaking) at an identity as a public, a position from which they can challenge a government on level rhetorical ground. Most people naturally begin persuasion thinking from their own personal/private interests (“Here’s what happened to me ... here’s how I have suffered”), but these are easy to dismiss as individual or exceptional problems. As citizens learn to frame their cases *as citizens*, they gain enormous rhetorical power; moving from “this is my problem” to “this is *our* problem” is a precondition to joint action and government accountability. This training can have another effect. As people learn to formulate their problems in terms of a relevant public, they may also be forced to reflect on how their concerns fit into a larger picture; they may come to understand both the connectedness of various problems and the limitations of simple solutions.

Teaching public speaking in the schools, as well as to adults, can be a crucial part of growing a democracy for the future. It is not a panacea, but if democracy is the faith that problems are local, that citizens understand them, and that they have a valuable part to play in their solution, training in public speaking may be a precondition to the development of a public sphere in which government accountability becomes a reality.

Appendix 1

Example of Statement for Forum Leaders in the Opening Series

The public forum discussion is one of the oldest and best respected of the traditions of American Democracy. It is a way of adult education by which the people of the community may come to understand the social, economic and political problems of their day and thus exercise their privilege of citizenship with greater responsibility and intelligence.

Public education is promoting its major objective when it conducts an educational program designed to produce a more enlightened public opinion.

In this and other forum meetings the people may avail themselves of the constitutional rights of free speech and free assemblage in an organized consideration of public affairs.

As the leader of the discussion, it is my purpose to open the subject for discussion; to outline as fairly and impartially as possible the major issues involved in our problem; to interpret briefly the important and opposing points of view on these issues; and to share with you the factual material which is essential to an understanding of the problem.

It is not my purpose to convince you that my opinion on this subject is correct or to urge you to accept my views. Naturally, having studied this problem, I have come to certain conclusions which form the basis of my opinion or action. These conclusions I hold are subject to change in the light of new evidence. If from time to time I express my personal views it will be in the spirit of the phrase “as I see it.” But the most important thing in public discussion is not what you or I conclude but how and why we come to a particular conclusion.

Our quest in this discussion is for an understanding of the problem and a clear view of the alternative solutions proposed. We approach this problem in the spirit of give and take, respecting the right of each one of us to hold what opinions he will. We seek by the exchange of opinion, by reminding each other of salient and important facts, and by critically questioning each other’s premises, to arrive at a better understanding of the problem before us.

Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Series 190, Box 2, File, “Memos from the Commissioner,” “Exhibit No. 7”; n.d., probably 1936.

Appendix 2

Hints for Forum Leaders

1. Forum leaders should group the audience near the front of the room.
2. Leaders should avoid splitting the audience so that the group is seated on two sides of the aisle.
3. Leaders should give care and thought to lighting. Avoid lights that shine directly in the eyes of the audience.
4. No forum leader should talk longer than forty minutes.
5. If the discussion topic is technical, the leader may vary the set routine of the meeting by interspersing short periods of question and discussions throughout the main presentation.
6. When a question is asked of the forum leader, he should always repeat the question either before he himself answers it, or before he passes the question on for comment to someone in the audience.
7. The leader can and should avoid answering question directly, by turning the question back to the persons asking them or by referring them to other persons in the group. The leader often allows himself to be “put on the spot” by answering too many questions. Hecklers do not enjoy having their question referred to other members of the audience.
8. The leader should avoid sarcasm. Sarcasm on the part of the leader makes people timid and afraid to speak. It kills the possibility of good discussion.

9. In closing the forum a brief summary (two or three minutes) skillfully given is highly desirable. Unless the important points which were brought out by the leader and the audience are summarized, the audience goes home feeling confused.
10. The forum leader should never lose his temper or display irritation over the ignorance or disagreement of any member of the audience.
11. The leader should make members of his audience feel that he values the opinion of each of them.
12. Every leader should know the fundamental principles of public speaking.
13. Whenever possible, a forum leader should tie in local problems with the subject under discussion.
14. Leaders should be adept in changing tactics of discussion. If the discussion drags, a change of tactics or a different approach will often throw new life and spontaneity into a dull meeting.
15. It is just as important and sometimes more important for the leader to conceal, rather than reveal, how much he knows. Audiences are awed and made timid by leaders who display too much knowledge.
16. Leaders, to be successful, must realize that the average individual cannot relate a generalized moral or ethical abstraction to an actual living experience of himself or his neighbors.
17. No forum leader can be successful unless he is truly interested in the workings of the human mind.
18. He should not take sides on the question.
19. He should not talk too much.
20. He should not take it upon himself to answer questions and suggest solutions. Rather, he should refer these questions to the proper discussion leaders and he should leave the formulation of solutions to members of the group.
21. He should not allow anyone to monopolize the talking. ... To stop the talkative individual without hurting his feelings is a matter calling for all the tact that the chairman may possess.
22. He should not allow the group to waste much time giving their guesses about matters of fact. ... The chairman should assign someone to look up the matter and report at the next meeting.
23. He should not be afraid to lead the discussion into points that stir emotions and arouse prejudices if these points are necessary to an understanding of the problem. Steering discussion around such points does not cause the group to forget them.
24. The chairman should, whenever possible, recognize a member who has not spoken in preference to one who has.
25. The chairman should guard the group against the tendency to act first and think afterwards. The whole legislative procedure ... is wise in that it guards against too hasty action.

26. But the chairman should also guard against the opposite extreme, of never taking a position on a question. One of the values in having members of the group vote in some way at the conclusion of the meeting is that it forces them to make a decision.
27. Occasionally, someone may introduce unfortunate personal allusions and attacks into the discussion. This happens but rarely. Usually the best procedure for the chairman is to make no reference to the “hitting below the belt” but to make some remark that will bring the discussion back to the subject. . . . Only in the case of a continued use of personalities should the chairman make a direct reference to what is happening. Then his position should be clearly and firmly stated: “This discussion is an opportunity to think through an important problem. It is not an occasion for the airing of private differences.”
28. Careful study of techniques is essential. . . . And in a real sense discussion leading can only be learned through experience. It is essentially an art and not a science, to be acquired by watching the performance of the adept and by studying one’s own mistakes rather than by learning rules. All art can be learned to some degree, however, and the study of techniques will improve the methods of any leader.

Source: J. V. Garland, *Discussion Methods, Explained and Illustrated* (1951, 1st ed. 1938), 341–43; a footnote reveals that “The first seventeen items are from *Choosing Our Way*, written by John Studebaker and Chester Williams of the Federal Forum Project (1937); while items 18 to 27 are from the booklet *How to Conduct Group Discussion* by A. F. Wilden and H. L. Ewbank, published by the Extension Service at the University of Wisconsin.”

Notes

1. For example, see Fisher (1987), Hauser (1999), Rorty (1982), and Young (2000).
2. See Gastil and Levine’s *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (2005) for examples.
3. Gastil and Levine (2005).
4. Some of the chapters in Gastil and Levine (2005) present creative attempts to deal with this problem, particularly chapters 9 and 10.
5. Again, some of the essays in Gastil and Levine (2005) show creative, though complex, attempts at this; see especially chapters 11–13.
6. In *Who Deliberates?* (1996), Page shows that government actions in responses to perceived crises go through complex layers of public deliberation before anything happens, and that even spin by the press does not particularly affect the outcome.
7. Angela Ray (2005, 3) argues that this is exactly what happened to the lyceum movement in the nineteenth-century United States.

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