



THE PROBLEM OF PUBLIC JUDGMENT IN A DIGITAL AND DIVISIVE AGE

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A Souder Public Judgment Working Paper

PREFACE

The Public Judgment Working Paper Series from Public Agenda

In our age of endemic mistrust, fake news, extreme rhetoric and technology-enhanced manipulation of public opinion, it is increasingly difficult for the public to come to terms with issues in meaningful ways. Public Agenda's Sounder Public Judgment Initiative brings fresh thinking to this profound challenge facing our democracy.

The concept of “public judgment,” in contrast to raw, reactive and unstable “opinion,” derives from the work of Public Agenda co-founder Dan Yankelovich, a pioneer of public opinion research in America. Rather than a particular point of view or ideology, the term is meant to connote that people have thought and felt their way forward on an issue in a reasonably well-rounded, fair-minded way. It is a stage of public thinking at which people having moved beyond simplistic magic answers and developed relatively responsible, stable positions that take into account the tradeoffs inevitably embedded in thorny public problems.

The conditions that support the formation of public judgment have to change with the way information, communications and persuasion change. They do not appear magically, they must be created and, at times, fought for and defended. These papers, by leading thinkers and practitioners across a variety of relevant fields, are intended to help us do precisely that. The current paper, “The Problem of Public Judgment in a Digital and Divisive Age,” examines Dan Yankelovich’s original concept of public judgment, its relevance to the challenges facing democracy today, new thinking that enriches the concept, and potential directions for its further development and more powerful application.

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THE PROBLEM OF PUBLIC JUDGMENT IN A DIGITAL AND DIVISIVE AGE

By Will Friedman, PhD, President of Public Agenda¹

Years ago, John Dewey wrote that “the essential need is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is *the* problem of *the* public.”² If that is the problem—and certainly it is one of the big ones—our situation today is dire and getting worse. The mindless partisan bickering, the loss of local journalism, the politicization of science, the increasingly powerful ways opinion can be manipulated through unprecedented access to personal data, the rapid spread of misinformation, the kneejerk vilification of those with whom we disagree, the sickening amplification of hate speech ... all militate against sound public thinking. If people don’t know what’s real, whom to trust or how to talk to one another, we’ll never build the common ground, political will and civic engagement we need to make progress on urgent problems. How, then, can we create conditions for more productive public conversation and sounder public opinion in our digital and divisive age?

This paper is the first in a series of working papers on the topic produced through Public Agenda, in partnership with the Ford, Knight and Rita Allen Foundations. In it, I review some of what we already know about supporting sounder public judgment. Early on, I draw especially on the late social scientist and public opinion research pioneer, Dan Yankelovich, who in 1991 published the seminal *Coming to Public Judgment*, laying out his thoughts on how the public comes to terms with complex issues and the way in which their views can evolve from raw, reactive, unstable opinion to a perspective which, he argued, could rightfully be called wiser “public judgment.”³

By public judgment, Yankelovich meant public opinion that has become more stable and, in a certain sense, more responsible as people move beyond the fantasy of magic answers and wrestle with tough choices, diverse ideas and tradeoffs in light of their concerns, values and aspirations. The key for him was not whether people agree with one or another ideology but whether they think and feel their way toward deeper understanding rather than just react and accept that their views have consequences with which they’ll have to live—which, as we have seen, many Brexit voters realized only after the fact.

¹ Will Friedman, PhD, is president of Public Agenda. He is an author of numerous publications, including “[Reframing Framing](#),” “[A Decade of Public Engagement in Bridgeport, CT](#),” “[Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Scope](#),” “[Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Power](#)” and “From Employee Engagement to Civic Engagement: Exploring Connections between Workplace and Community Democracy.” He is also the co-editor, with Public Agenda co-founder [Daniel Yankelovich](#), of [Toward Wiser Public Judgment](#), published in 2011.

² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York, NY: Holt Publishers, 1927), 209.

³ Dan died in 2017 at age 91 after having published his last book, *Wicked Problems, Workable Solutions* just two years earlier. Over his long career, he founded the public opinion research firm Yankelovich, Skelly and White; created the *New York Times*/Yankelovich Poll; co-founded, along with Cyrus Vance, the nonprofit, nonpartisan Public Agenda, where I work; and established the Yankelovich Center for Applied Social Science Research at the University of California, San Diego. He received the American Association of Public Opinion Research’s Award for Exceptionally Distinguished Service in 2012 and the Roper Center’s Mitofsky Award for Research Excellence in 2015.

Yankelovich's ideas offer a particularly useful perspective on the public and democracy, one that accounts for people's limitations and irrationalities, on the one hand, and their capacity for common sense and a kind of fundamental wisdom, on the other. The basic proposition is straightforward: when conditions are poor (when, for example, people are pandered to, lied to or inflamed), the quality of public opinion will suffer; when conditions are favorable (they are helped to face up to tough choices; they encounter diverse ideas and trustworthy information; their perspectives can actually make a difference) their pragmatic, problem-solving capacities come to the fore. In those instances, "the role of the public is critical to the successful resolution of issues. Potentially, the public can contribute in ways that elude expert elites and leaders [bringing] to the table a down-to-earth practicality, a non-ideological pragmatic focus, and a strong insistence on the values that hold our society together."⁴

That there still are values that can hold our society together and that the public might actually insist upon may seem a quaint notion in our discordant and turbulent times. But public opinion research suggests that great swaths of the public yearn deeply for a less bitterly partisan and more pragmatic approach to politics and problem solving.⁵ Moreover, our democracy has undergone extreme stresses and divisions before—the Civil War, the Great Depression, the global threat of World War II, the struggles of the civil rights movement, the assassinations and riots of the '60s—and managed to come out the other side, battered, still imperfect, but arguably better in important ways. We can do it again. As Berkeley professor John A. Powell observes, "As dispiriting as world events may seem, humanity has made tremendous progress toward tolerance, inclusion, and equality. We live in a period of dramatic social change and unprecedented openness in human history. Whether we continue to march toward a more inclusive society while taming our baser impulses and steadying our fears' depends on us."⁶

If I start with Yankelovich's thinking, which emerged in a very different era of information and communications than we live in today, I also go beyond it, touching base with other researchers, disciplines and realms of experience, from cognitive psychology to journalism to the arts to the social psychology of social media.

“ As dispiriting as world events may seem, humanity has made tremendous progress toward tolerance, inclusion, and equality. We live in a period of dramatic social change and unprecedented openness in human history. Whether we continue to march toward a more inclusive society while taming our 'baser impulses and steadying our fears' depends on us." - John A. Powell

⁴ Dan Yankelovich and Will Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 28, <https://www.publicagenda.org/pages/toward-wiser-public-judgement>.

⁵ See, for example, Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres and Tim Dixon, *Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape* (October 2018), <https://moreincommon.squarespace.com/hidden-tribes>. Also see Public Agenda's forthcoming findings from the first Yankelovich Democracy Monitor, tracking Americans' evolving attitudes toward what needs to happen to fix our democracy.

⁶ John A. Powell and Stephen Menendian, "The Problem of Othering: Towards Inclusiveness and Belonging," in *Othering & Belonging* (2018), <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>. The scholar referenced is Robert A. Sampson from his *Great American City*, 132

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS IN THIS PAPER

- **DIFFERING OPINIONS ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION.** Since the earliest days of the Republic, Americans have argued about whether to trust the public to exercise good judgment, with some placing great faith in the wisdom of the people and others holding that we should trust elites rather than the uninformed and unstable opinions of the general public. But whether one is an optimist or a pessimist with respect to the public's capacity for judgment, it is hard to argue that creating conditions conducive to a more thoughtful, reflective public is a bad thing, and there are very good reasons to think it would be a good thing.
- **FROM PUBLIC OPINION TO PUBLIC JUDGMENT.** Drawing on six decades of research on public opinion in America, Yankelovich provides a useful framework for thinking about how the general public engages complex issues via his stages of public judgment framework. He describes several distinct stages people tend to go through, beginning with consciousness raising, in which people decide an issue needs attention; then on to working through, in which people wrestle with new information, as well as their conflicts and ambivalences about change; and, finally, resolution, in which people settle into a new understanding and support new norms and solutions. Other researchers, such as Page and Shapiro in their influential *The Rational Public*, have developed related analyses.
- **INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC DELIBERATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE.** Numerous researchers and practitioners have demonstrated it is possible to create conditions and processes through which groups and communities can deliberate effectively and form stable, well-considered judgments about public problems, including (to name a few) Archon Fung, John Gastil, Michael Neblo, Elena Fagotto, James Fishkin, Tina Nabatchi, Martin Carcasson, The Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. Many lessons can be drawn from this research and practical experience to inform efforts to support more and stronger public judgment going forward—although the challenge of doing so at societal scale remains.
- **INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND BRAIN SCIENCE.** Many current attempts to engage the public in issues have yet to take full advantage of developing knowledge about how humans actually think, perceive, interact, form opinions and make decisions, such as the work of Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, among many others. Communication researcher Martin Carcasson and journalist Amanda Ripley are among those who are beginning to chart the ways common methods of communicating with the public often push people into more reactive modes of thinking and are exploring approaches more in tune with contemporary understanding of how people process information and make judgments.
- **THINGS WE NEED TO LEARN.** We conclude by reviewing some of the most pressing directions for research and practice, including the challenge of making the world of digital information and social media more supportive of sounder public judgment.

DIFFERING OPINIONS ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION

Questions about the public's capacity for sound judgment have echoed across American history. For every Hamilton ("The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right"), there is a Jefferson ("I am not among those who fear the people"); for every Walter Lippmann ("The public is often destructively wrong at ... critical junctures"), there is a Jane Addams ("The cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy"); for every H. L. Mencken ("No one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence ... of the American people"), there is a V. O. Key ("Democracies decay not because of the stupidity of the masses, but because of the cupidity and self-seeking of leadership"). The argument has, if anything, gained considerable steam in light of the populism roiling the democratic process in America and many other nations.⁷

Thinking on this question has had very real consequences, beginning with the nation's founding, when Madison ("Measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice ... but by ... an overbearing majority") helped build the architecture of a system of governance designed to create a measure of popular control while countering the danger of "tyranny of the majority." In this constrained vision of democratic participation, citizens were asked not to deliberate public policy themselves, but to choose who would do so on their behalf. Tight limits were placed on what sort of person would be granted the right to vote in the first place—often on the basis of specious arguments about the supposed intellectual or moral incapacity of various groups, from enslaved Africans to women to native peoples to various waves of immigrants. Finally, an electoral college was conjured to stand between the voters and the outcome of their ballots, just in case.⁸

On the other hand, First Amendment rights of free speech, a free press, assembly and petition all point to the importance of the quality of public opinion, voice and participation. The tensions about how capable citizens are and how much power they should have are thus embedded in the Constitution.

The notion that it is necessary to insulate the democratic process from too much of the wrong kind of public influence and participation is understandable. Too many demagogues have risen on the waves of popular fear and rage. Solutions to public problems often require specialized knowledge the general citizenry lacks, and citizens tend to be busy with their private lives, with limited time and energy to devote to public concerns. And yet, the wisdom and power of the people at countless crucial moments of our history cannot be denied. Without the call and response of popular movements and changing norms of public opinion, the nation would not have created what progress we've managed to achieve in securing rights for disenfranchised groups. Without the call and response of public opinion and policymaking, we would not have such widely supported public policies as Medicare, which has helped to make old age more secure and manageable for all Americans.

In the end, whether we lean toward fear of or respect for the public, whether our natural inclination is to empower the people or limit their influence, most would probably agree that public opinion and participation will have their effects, whether for good or ill. From that it follows that the nation would be well served by a public that is more thoughtful and deliberative and ought to welcome inquiry into how to bring that about.

⁷ I discuss one recent debate on the topic in "Fixing What Ails Democracy," *On the Agenda* blog (May 20, 2016), <https://www.publicagenda.org/blogs/fixing-what-ails-democracy>.

⁸ This is not meant as an outright criticism of Madison's ideas, which were brilliant in many respects and revolutionary for the times, helping to build the world's longest lasting democracy. Nor is it a call for direct democracy rather than a representative model. But our version of that model, always far from perfect but thankfully capable of evolving, is not working well in today's world and clearly needs to evolve some more.

NEW AND GROWING CHALLENGES

The problem of public judgment is becoming more urgent in our divisive and digital age, as the ability of partisan actors and special interests to manipulate public opinion for narrow ends and sow discord to distort the political process is growing fast, while society's capacity to foster sound public thinking and forge democratically meaningful common ground on solutions to our mounting problems is failing to keep pace. Arguably, this is a major factor in the unstable populism, political polarization, demagogic leadership and endemic mistrust that is defeating problem solving and endangering democracy itself. At the same time—and this will be a theme—digital communications and technology are a double-edged sword that also create profound possibilities for the rapid sharing and evolution of ideas and norms and more widespread cooperation on finding solutions to tough problems.

Concern for the problematic state of public opinion is evident in new initiatives to combat the spread of fake news and to revitalize local journalism.⁹ Such efforts are critically important to create the conditions that enable the public to come to terms responsibly with difficult issues; they are vitally necessary but, by themselves, insufficient. Journalism helps people work through complex, divisive issues in some respects, but for all its virtues and achievements in supporting democracy, it has its limits—at least as traditionally practiced. The news has often been better at raising the alarm on problems than at helping people work through their confusions before the next headline takes attention elsewhere. Moreover, the frequent tendency in the news of presenting problems as if there are only two polarized sides to every issue can undermine well-rounded thinking.¹⁰

To develop public judgment, people need to encounter and understand diverse perspectives in meaningful ways, move beyond simplistic scapegoats and magic bullets and work through the cognitive and emotional dissonances of the inevitable tradeoffs embedded in thorny public problems. If we want more public judgment, we'll need forms of journalism, as well as other means, that help people do that, and it is heartening that we are beginning to see the promise of that in some quarters.¹¹ Assessing the potential for innovations to foster sounder public judgment will require insight into how the public can most effectively grapple with complex issues. While there is much to learn about that, research from a number of disciplines can provide us with a solid start.

“Concern for the problematic state of public opinion is evident in new initiatives to combat the spread of fake news and to revitalize local journalism.”

⁹ See, for example, Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2018); Peter Dizikes, “Study: On Twitter, False News Travels Faster than True Stories,” *MIT News Office* (March 8, 2018), <http://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>; Josh Stearns, “20 Projects Receive Funding to Combat Misinformation and Build a More Trustworthy Public Square,” *Democracy Fund Blog* (June 22, 2017), <https://www.democracyfund.org/blog/entry/20-projects-receive-funding-to-combat-misinformation-and-build-a-more-trust>; Ruth McCambridge, “Hewlett Pledges \$10M to Study Social Media and ‘Fake News,’” *Nonprofit Quarterly* (March 29, 2018), <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2018/03/29/hewlett-pledges-10m-study-social-media-fake-news/>; and Kristen Hare, “New Fund Gives \$20 Million to Local Journalism,” *Poynter* (September 16, 2018), <https://www.poynter.org/news/new-fund-gives-20-million-local-journalism>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Kyle Jensen and Jack Selzer, “How the Media Encourages—and Sustains—Political Warfare: Oppositional Framing in News Stories Encourages Oppositional Thinking in News Audiences,” *NiemanLab* (September 28, 2018). Of course, the media's conflict bias and polarized framings are exacerbated by the polarized and polarizing political leadership they are reporting on.

FROM PUBLIC OPINION TO PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Dan Yankelovich's work provides a useful platform for confronting the problem of public judgment. Based on six decades of careful study, Yankelovich observed that, over time, the public is capable of progressing beyond reactive, superficial opinions. Public judgment, as he conceptualized it, is marked by being relatively stable (it does not change dramatically at the latest headline or tweak of survey wording) and responsible (in the sense that people have accepted there are no magical answers, struggled with contending ideas and choices and shown willingness to accept tradeoffs and deal with the consequences of their choices).¹²

As an example, Yankelovich felt that "few issues exhibit working through [to judgment] as clearly as the response of Americans to the women's movement," an evolution for which a great deal of data exists. Thus, whereas in 1971 62 percent of Americans agreed that "men are better suited emotionally for politics than women," 15 years later, in 1986, only 36 percent agreed—and many fewer would do so today. "Changes in attitudes toward the role and status of women clearly show how Americans [were] struggling to assimilate new values [around self-expression, self-fulfillment, autonomy, pluralism ...] with traditional ones [around home, family, social status ...]."¹³

Yankelovich described three main stages (each with sub-stages) the public goes through in its learning curve from raw, reactive opinion to sounder judgment.

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING, through which people become aware of an issue and decide it needs their attention, comprises two sub-stages, "dawning awareness" and "urgency," the latter being critical to generating the energy to do the hard work of thinking and feeling one's way through to a new understanding.

WORKING THROUGH, through which people wrestle with their emotional and cognitive conflicts about decisions and tradeoffs, requires them to let go of gross oversimplifications of the problem and conflict-free magical solutions.

RESOLUTION, in which people solidify their support for a path forward on a public problem, typically begins with acceptance in principle but eventually can deepen to include emotional, moral and behavioral alignment.

At each stage, the public judgment process can either bog down or be accelerated and strengthened, depending significantly on the conditions under which people are operating—for instance, are they being pandered to by leaders or helped to confront tough choices and potential solutions? Are they being bombarded by inflammatory, confusing and false information? Or can they draw on accessible, engaging, trustworthy information that helps them think and stories that help them empathize and imagine, allowing them to develop more well-rounded, mature perspectives?

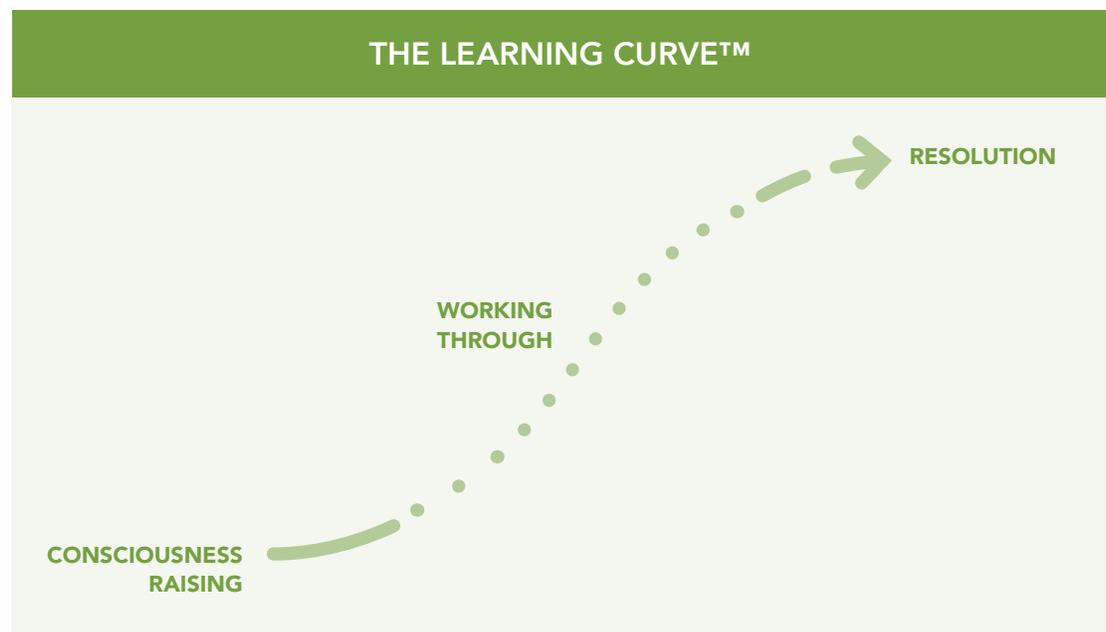
¹¹ In the case of journalism, examples are Amanda Ripley's excellent "Complicating the Narratives," Solutions Journalism Network (June 27, 2018), <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/complicating-the-narratives-b91ea06ddf63>, and Talia Stroud's work at the Center for Media Engagement.

¹² See Dan Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), and Yankelovich and Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*.

¹³ See Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*, 126–34, for his discussion of attitudes toward women's place in society, and throughout for numerous other examples of "working through" to public judgment.

Yankelovich's work helps resolve the argument in American political thought about the public's civic capacity by respecting the public's *potential* for judgment without romanticizing the wisdom of the people. Instead, he turns our attention to the distinctive ways in which non-experts come to terms with complex issues and the conditions and forces that help or hinder them in doing so. Attending to the *quality* of public opinion is crucially important, he believes, because "with sound public judgment, the public voice is a tremendous force for good, a reaffirmation of a healthy and vital democracy. Without sound public judgment, the public voice becomes part of the problem."¹⁴

Seen in this light, it is difficult to overstate the urgency of the problem of public judgment. Not only is innovation advancing rapidly on how to undermine sound public thinking and manipulate mass opinion, but we also face a proliferation of what Yankelovich called "time lag problems." By this he meant problems "so urgent that the lag in the public's normal learning curve may compromise an effective response."¹⁵



These are problems that become ever harder to fix as they fester, including economic dislocation in a rapidly changing economy, climate change, stubborn educational achievement gaps with increasingly pernicious consequences in a post-industrial economy, stagnant wages and beyond-the-pale levels of inequality. If we want there to be a meaningful public voice helping determine our collective future rather than leaving the field of play to the technocrats and power players, we'll need to find ways to accelerate public judgment and make it more resilient, despite the challenges of our digital, divisive and dislocating age of rapid change. "This is why," Yankelovich explains, "we need new methods of accelerating public opinion formation. We need to find new ways to have the American public participate in solving our nation's most pressing problems in a timely fashion."¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵ Yankelovich and Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

MORE FROM THE PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH TRADITION

Other public opinion analysts have added to the research foundation on public judgment, beginning with Page and Shapiro's influential *The Rational Public*, based on a meticulous examination of public opinion data on domestic and foreign policy issues from the 1930s to the 1990s. The authors found that, despite the irrationalities of individuals, the public's collective and overall views evolve, slowly but surely, in ways that can rightfully be viewed as coherent and "rational" (in some sense of that inadequate word) responses to a changing world:

The collective preferences of the American public are predominately *rational*, in the sense that they are *real*—not meaningless random "nonattitudes"; that they are generally *stable*, seldom changing by large amounts and rarely fluctuating back and forth; that they form *coherent* and mutually consistent (not self-contradictory) patterns, involving meaningful distinctions; that these patterns *make sense* in terms of underlying values and available information; that, when collective policy preferences change, they almost always do so in *understandable* and, indeed, *predictable* ways, reacting in consistent fashion to international events and social and economic changes as reported in the mass media; and, finally, that opinion changes generally constitute *sensible* adjustments to the new conditions and new information that are communicated to the public.¹⁷

Page and Shapiro hold, and Yankelovich would agree, that the public is not "well informed" in any academic sense of that phrase—which is why it is always possible, and usually rather pointless, for survey researchers to discover all kinds of things the public doesn't know about public affairs, such as the names of all nine Supreme Court justices. Rather, the public develops a form of rationality, or common sensibility, in their views over time by drawing on their own experience, by using "trustworthy cue-givers of information," by talking among themselves, and so on.

The point is crucial: implicit in the work of many researchers is the notion that if only the public were more like them, able to absorb the latest research and conduct data-based cost-benefit analyses, we'd have solved the problem of incoherent and irrational public opinion. Better to take an ethnographic approach and simply study how the public actually comes to stable and responsible judgment rather than assume the average person can or should process information the way Researchers with advanced degrees do. The question is: how do and how can non-experts grapple with complex public issues more productively¹⁸

Page and Shapiro emphasize that we are often smarter, and even "wiser" (a bold term for academics), collectively than we are as individuals, as arbitrary opinions cancel each other out and the overall knowledge base expands. They posit a form of public thinking "through a complex social system which involves organization, divisions of labor, and transmission through social networks. At its best, this information system contributes to '*collective deliberation*,' in which the public as a collectivity reasons about policy, and collective public opinion becomes something more than a sum of its individual parts."¹⁹

¹⁷ Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), xi.

¹⁸ This was Yankelovich's approach via qualitative and quantitative public opinion research. Interesting in this regard is Kathy Cramer's work on the way people make sense of politics, which she studies by engaging groups in conversations and listening closely to how people talk about public affairs and the perspectives that underlie their views. See Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public*, 363.

That said, and very much to the point of our present concerns, “the quality of information the public receives matters, too.”²⁰ Shapiro develops this point further in a more recent article on “Political Polarization and *the Rational Public*,” which explores “evidence that political polarization can affect how the *public learns* from new information [which] requires that we sharpen the questions that we ask about the behaviors of political leaders and elites and the conditions under which large segments of mass public opinion may move astray.”²¹ Sharpening those questions is precisely the point of our inquiry into the conditions that obstruct or facilitate public judgment, along with the crucial follow-up: what can be done to have less of the former and more of the latter?

INSIGHTS FROM PUBLIC DELIBERATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Quite a few researchers and observers have studied the impact of group deliberation on people’s thinking about issues, among them Archon Fung, John Gastil, Elena Faggatto, Tina Nabatchi, Laura Black, James Fishkin, Michael Neblo, The Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda.²² I discuss just a few examples here.

James Fishkin has conducted numerous empirical experiments in “deliberative polling,” a methodology that compares the state of opinion of a scientifically drawn sample before and after learning basic facts about an issue, hearing from advocates and experts of different perspectives and engaging in group discussions. This research shows that, given the right conditions, the views of the general public can and do evolve: “Every deliberative poll to date has yielded sizeable and statistically significant changes of opinion on a large proportion of the policy items covered.”²³

Research from the early ‘90s by Public Agenda offers a case in point on criminal justice reform—specifically, alternative sentencing for nonviolent offenders. We wanted to find out if, how and why public opinion might evolve once people have even a single opportunity to learn and deliberate

“ The question is: how do and how can non-experts grapple with complex public issues more productively?”

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Written with Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, presented to the Annual Conference of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, May 18–21, 2006, 3.

²² Elena Faggatto and Archon Fung, “Sustaining Public Engagement: Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities,” an Occasional Research Paper from Everyday Democracy and the Kettering Foundation (2009), <https://www.innovations.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2606765.pdf>; Michael A. Neblo, Kevin M. Esterling, Ryan P. Kennedy and David M. J. Lazer, “Who Wants to Deliberate—And Why?” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (August 2010): 566–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055410000298>; Laura Black, “The Promise and Problems of Online Deliberation,” Kettering Foundation Working Paper (August 12, 2011), <https://www.kettering.org/catalog/product/promise-and-problems-online-deliberation>; Tina Nabatchi and Lisa Blomgren Amsler, “Direct Public Engagement in Local Government,” *American Review of Public Administration* 44, no. 4 (2014): 635–88S, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288156415_Direct_PublicEngagement_in_Local_Government; Martin Carcasson and Leah Sprain, “Beyond Problem Solving: Reconceptualizing the Work of Public Deliberation as Deliberative Inquiry,” *Communication Theory* (2015), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/comt.12055>; James S. Fishkin, Robert C. Luskin and Roger Jowell, “Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, no. 4 (October 1, 2000): 658. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/53.4.657>; John Gastil and Katie Knobloch, “Evaluation Report to the Oregon State Legislature on the 2010 Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review,” Department of Communication, University of Washington, <http://jgastil.la.psu.edu/CIR/OregonLegislativeReportCIR.pdf>; and Katherine Cramer-Walsh, *Talking about Race: Community Dialogues and the Politics of Difference* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007). <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol2/iss1/art1/>, on how his methodology has been applied and whether it is a reliable driver of change and progress. My main focus here is on their documentation of impacts of public deliberation on public opinion specifically.

²³ Fishkin et al., “Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation,” 662. Fishkin and colleagues have been challenged by researchers and practitioners, myself included (<https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol2/iss1/art1/>), on how his methodology has been applied and whether it is a reliable driver of change and progress. My main focus here is on their documentation of impacts of public deliberation on public opinion specifically.

on the topic. In various locations across Alabama, Delaware and Pennsylvania, representative samples of the general public were put through a three-hour program that involved four steps:

- **A PRETEST** on current attitudes toward incarceration for various nonviolent crimes
- **A 20-MINUTE VIDEO** that introduced the concept of alternative/intermediate sentences in addition to either probation or incarceration, with pros and cons of various specific measures discussed
- **SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION** with nonpartisan moderators
- **A POSTTEST** similar to the pretest

In the pretest, a strong majority leaned strongly toward imprisonment in most of the examples of nonviolent offences that were described to them. What effects did learning about and deliberating on “intermediate” sanctions (between probation and incarceration) have on peoples’ views?

The results of all three statewide surveys are remarkably similar: when educated about the options, a clear majority of citizens support intermediate sanctions for an array of nonviolent offenders ... Indeed, an overwhelming 92 percent of the respondents in Pennsylvania were in favor of intermediate sanctions once they were educated about the issue.²⁴

The Kettering Foundation has generated a wealth of qualitative insights into the nature and process by which public judgment comes about in community settings through observations of deliberation on a wide variety of topics by the National Issues Forums network—a long-term project that was inspired directly by Yankelovich’s ideas. Two long-time observers of the network, Keith Melville and Bob Kingston, explain:

It is not often that the framework and assertions made in any book are tested repeatedly over a period of [several decades], in hundreds of different settings. Yet that is what happened in the case of Dan Yankelovich’s seminal book of 1991, *Coming to Public Judgment*. In many ways, the ideas in this book ... were formative influences in shaping the National Issues Forums (NIF), a popular nationwide network that began in the early 1980s and continues to this day.²⁵

In reflecting on what Kettering has learned through their observations of these deliberative forums and interviews with participants, they note, first of all, that the NIF network “has demonstrated that tens of thousands of citizens in communities across the country are prepared to address complex public issues and engage in the serious work of intentional public conversation from which sound judgment may emerge.”²⁶ As for the effects on participants and their views, they note the following:

- What changes especially “are people’s perceptions of those with whom they disagree. On various issues, forum participants have acknowledged that they come to understand

²⁴ See also “Punishing Criminals: Pennsylvanians Consider the Options,” *Federal Sentencing Reporter* 21, no. 4 (2009): 294–97, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fsr.2009.21.4.294>; David Green, “Public Opinion versus Public Judgment about Crime Correcting the ‘Comedy of Errors,’” *British Journal of Criminology* 46, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 131–54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azi050>; and Will Friedman, Ravi Reddi and David Schleifer, “Where Americans See Eye to Eye on Incarceration,” *Public Agenda*, New York (2018), https://www.publicagenda.org/files/PublicAgenda_HiddenCommonGround_CriminalJustice_2018.pdf.

²⁵ Keith Melville and Bob Kingston, “The Experience of the National Issues Forums,” in Yankelovich and Friedman, *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*, 51–72. For numerous related publications, visit the Kettering Foundation website, <https://www.kettering.org/>.

²⁶ Melville and Kingston, “The Experience of the National Issues Forums,” 53.

and appreciate views they do not themselves hold. That modification helps create an opening so that common ground—a broadly acceptable course of action—can be identified.”²⁷

- Moreover, “people become more confident that what they say matters and are more willing to listen to those with different perspectives.”²⁸
- Anecdotal evidence suggests as well that “participation in forums strengthens people’s motivation to seek out additional issue-related information and take part in other public activities.”²⁹
- Finally, “Almost inevitably, it seems—and this is fundamental in the movement toward public judgment—participation in deliberative forums helps participants move beyond initial preferences to more stable and internally consistent views.”³⁰

This is just a sampling of some of the work that has demonstrated the capacity of “regular people” to deliberate in meaningful ways, the impacts it can have when they do and numerous insights into what helps people come to sounder judgment.

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR FOSTERING SOUNDER PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Deliberative research and practice suggest a number of lessons—or at least hypotheses—about the factors and conditions that help or hinder sounder public judgment.

LEADERSHIP MATTERS. Yankelovich believes that, in a democracy, a qualification for leadership should be that leaders “develop the skill to move the public toward consensus by playing a constructive role at every stage of the public judgment process.”³¹ Ron Heifetz has spent a career exploring the nature of that kind of leadership, beginning with *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, in which he distinguished technical from “adaptive” problems. With the former (for example, reducing infections in hospitals), it is possible to implement technical remedies through an efficient hierarchy of command (by instituting new handwashing practices). With the latter (deciding how to handle death and dying), technical fixes are at the margins of the matter while values are at the center, and leadership entails helping many stakeholders and the community overall to face up to the issue in a meaningful and productive way.³² As John A. Powell explains, “We cannot deny existential anxieties in the human condition. These anxieties can be moved into directions of fear and anger or toward empathy and collective solidarity. In periods of turbulent upheaval and instability, the siren call of the demagogue has greater power, but whether a society falls victim to it depends upon the choices of political leaders and the stories they tell.”

²⁷ Ibid., 67.

²⁸ Ibid., 68.

²⁹ Ibid., 68.

³⁰ Ibid. Find related publications by visiting the Kettering Foundation website (see, for example, Kettering’s Higher Education Exchange, 2017).

Also interesting in this regard is the growing literature on the impacts of participatory budgeting—for example, Matt Leighninger and Chloe Rinehart, “Power to the People! (And Settings for Using It Wisely?): Balancing Direct and Deliberative Democracy in Participatory Budgeting,” *Public Agenda*, New York (2016), <https://www.publicagenda.org/media/power-to-the-people-and-settings-for-using-it-wisely>.

³¹ Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*, 243.

³² See Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), and Heifetz’s many subsequent publications.

ENCOUNTERING AND ENGAGING DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES, PEOPLE AND STORIES IS KEY.

The public's thinking can be undermined by the binary, polarized way in which issues are typically framed by political elites and media coverage, which lock people's thinking and conversations into predictable, unproductive grooves. Reframing issues in ways that help people understand the complexity of public problems, a broader range of solutions and their tradeoffs can help them become more knowledgeable and nuanced in their thinking.³³

The power of story is crucial here—as Daniel Kahneman explains, “No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.”³⁴ The arts are one way we tell each other stories and can be a key to stimulating deeper democratic conversation. Consider, for example, Deaver-Smith's work making theater out of interviews with scores of diverse people caught up in fateful social events, like the civil disturbances in LA. It is hard to imagine a more engaging way to help people look at a social problem from diverse perspectives. And Amanda Ripley lays out the implications of this point for journalism:

- Journalists need to learn to amplify contradictions and widen the lens on paralyzing debates ... As researchers have established in hundreds of experiments over the past half-century, the way to counter the kind of tribal prejudice we are seeing is to expose people to the other tribe or new information in ways they can accept. When conflict is cliché, complexity is breaking news.³⁵

Perhaps nothing opens us up to diverse perspectives more than engaging with people from different walks of life in settings where it is safe to explore diverse ideas:

- The deficit of citizens is not just a matter of factual information or of time to think about issues. It is also a matter of deliberation, that is discussing issues with others with different experiences, holding different views and representing varied and sometimes conflicting interests.³⁶

DATA AND INFORMATION CAN HELP—AT THE RIGHT TIME IN THE RIGHT FORMAT.

Kahneman's admonition about stories versus numbers notwithstanding, data can, at critical moments, be helpful. Generally, people need some orienting information up front on the nature and scope of a problem—just not an overwhelming data dump that advantages elites and experts while freezing the average person out of the conversation. Truly consequential confusions and information gaps need to be corrected, and identifying which confusions or knowledge gaps actually undermine people's ability to come to terms with an issue and which make no real difference is part of the art of fostering public judgment. Finally, as people deliberate they will inevitably develop questions they want to answer to deepen their thinking, and making it easier for people to gain accessible, accurate, fair-minded information on a “just-in-time” basis to further their thinking can be truly helpful to them—generally more so than attempting to educate people in great detail prior to deliberation.

There are also hints that different ways of presenting facts and arguments can foster public judgment. For example, research has shown that presenting information graphically can enhance the ability

³³ Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment*, 246–50; Will Friedman, “Reframing Framing,” *Public Agenda*, New York (2007); Alison Kadlec and Will Friedman, “Beyond Debate: Impacts of Deliberative Issue Framing on Group Dialogue and Problem Solving,” *Public Agenda*, New York (2009); and James N. Druckman, “Political Preference Formation: Competition, Deliberation, and the (Ir)relevance of Framing Effects,” *Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (November 2004): 671–86, <http://faculty.wcas.northwestern.edu/~jnd260/pub/Druckman%20APSR%202004.pdf>.

³⁴ In Michael Lewis, “How Two Trailblazing Psychologists Turned the World of Decision Science Upside Down,” *Vanity Fair* (November 14, 2016),

³⁵ Ripley, “Complicating the Narratives.”

³⁶ James S. Fishkin, Robert C. Luskin and Roger Jowell, “Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, no. 4 (October 1, 2000): 658, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/53.4.657>.

of the public to consider facts that may be opposed to their own views and decrease “false and unsupported factual beliefs.”³⁷

INSIGHTS FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY AND BRAIN SCIENCE

Recent developments in research on how people actually process information and make decisions have fleshed out Yankelovich’s original theories on the factors that enhance or hinder the ability of the public to reach stable public judgment. Carcasson, of Colorado State University and its Center for Public Deliberation, connects the dots between so many of our cognitive, emotional and social tendencies and our struggles to engage issues and public life in productive ways, especially in light of the way our political system and process is organized and the way in which our political culture has evolved:

Sadly, based on the developing knowledge of social psychology and brain science, we fall woefully short in terms of the public processes we primarily rely on to support public decision making. Indeed, if I were to purposefully design a system to ensure polarization and division [rather than public judgment], I would likely conjure up a two-party system with winner-take-all elections that are so exceedingly expensive that they require absurd amounts of fundraising and that are heavily influenced by both unproductive social media interactions and a politicized, profit-focused media. Such a system takes the inherent features of [distorted] reasoning, and exponentially multiplies its effects.³⁸

What we need, then, are better public processes, ones that “allow people to develop mutual understanding and trust, ... that help us elevate quality arguments and expose weak or manipulative ones, ... that incite learning and the refinement of opinions ... These are all possible despite our mental peculiarities, but they call for different ways of engaging.”³⁹

Clues to the design of such “better public processes” may be found in Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, in which the Nobel Prize-winning psychologist and pioneer of behavioral economics describes two “systems” by which we humans process information and make judgments and decisions. There is the quick-reacting, “automatic” System 1, and the slower, more effortful and reflective System 2. While System 1, our rapid response to the world, is not inevitably wrong, it is prone to a variety of systematic errors and biases. An example is confirmation bias, wherein we tend to zero in on information that confirms our preexisting beliefs and ignore that which refutes them.⁴⁰

One of the problems imposed on human judgment that is highlighted by this research is that “System 1 ... does not generate a warning signal when it becomes unreliable”⁴¹; subjectively we feel like we are processing information just fine when we’re really falling prey to systemically distorted ways of thinking. Kahneman’s advice: “The way to block errors that originate in System

³⁷ Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, “Misinformation and Fact-Checking: Research Findings from Social Science,” Media Policy Initiative Research Paper, New America Foundation (February 2012), https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/Misinformation_and_Fact-checking.pdf.

³⁸ Martin Carcasson, “Why Process Matters: Democracy and Human Nature,” *Kettering Review* 34, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 20, https://www.kettering.org/sites/default/files/periodical-article/Carcasson%20KFReview_Fall_2017.pdf.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 417.

1 is simple in principle: recognize the signs that you are in a cognitive minefield, slow down, and ask for reinforcement for System 2."⁴²

Alongside such cognitive challenges to sounder public judgment are deeply felt emotional ones. "Emotions can destabilize a community and fragment it, or they can produce better cooperation and more energetic striving toward justice,"⁴³ writes the philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her recent reflections on democracy. She especially keys in on the role that fear can play in our public life, an emotion which, she argues, "all too often blocks rational deliberation, poisons hope, and impedes constructive cooperation for a better future."⁴⁴ When not "filtered by careful and extended public deliberation," fear "has a way of running ahead of careful thought. It's that stampede to hasty action, prompted by insecurity ... that undermines fraternity, poisons cooperation, and makes us do things we're deeply ashamed of later."⁴⁵

Such fear-based dynamics often play out politically via what John A. Powell terms "othering," the tendency of human societies to "organize and collectively define themselves along dimensions of difference and sameness." As he explains, studies since the 1950s demonstrate the tendency of people to identify with whom they are grouped, no matter how arbitrary or even silly the group boundaries may be, and to judge members of their own group as superior ... Once established, group-based identities may seem so fundamental that we ordinarily perceive them as "natural." As one scholar noted, "Race may be widely dismissed as a biological classification, [but] dark skin is an easily observed and salient trait that has become a marker in American society, one imbued with meanings about crime, disorder, and violence, stigmatizing entire categories of people."⁴⁶

Jonathan Haidt adds in *The Righteous Mind* that we also have trouble understanding and accepting one another because of the ways different groups tend toward different types of moral reasoning based on biological and evolutionary factors that operate below conscious awareness.⁴⁷

In searching for solutions to our tendencies toward faulty thinking, Carcasson concludes there is little hope of changing the equation on the level of national politics, where forces antithetical to public judgment are so entrenched as to make surmounting them hard to imagine. But there is hope at the local level, where helpful conditions are easier to organize and where politics tends to be less ideological and more pragmatic. Public problems, from potholes to public health, are felt by people viscerally, injecting just enough reality and pragmatism into public life that ideology, symbolic politics and culture war distractions are less apt to dominate.

I am sympathetic to this argument and agree that working on renewing democracy locally, from the ground up, is crucially important and that doing so at a societal scale is hugely challenging.⁴⁸ I also think, however, that our democracy is approaching such a deep state of dysfunction and disrepair that we are obliged to explore broader-based societal solutions to the problem of public judgment. Success is not guaranteed, but there are reasons for hope. We've learned a great deal about what helps and what hinders public judgment, providing some guideposts for our thinking as we consider new strategies. Moreover, if the internet can provide the means to challenge democracy at scale, it might just provide the means to make it better at scale, as well.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Martha Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 12.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5–6.

⁴⁶ Powell and Menendian, "The Problem of Othering," 132.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2012).

⁴⁸ Will Friedman, "Democracy and the Problem of Scope," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 2, no. 1 (2006), <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol2/iss1/art1>.

THINGS WE NEED TO LEARN

Much remains unknown, murky and in need of further and fresher exploration if we're to crack the code on fostering deeper public judgment in today's world. For example:

- What are the situations in which efforts to foster public judgment will have the greatest positive impact? For example, when are “nudges” (subtle ways of encouraging positive behaviors) or “thin” forms of engagement (such as online ways for people to quickly provide input to public policies) sufficient to enable progress—and when is it especially important to invest the energy needed to support “thicker” forms of public engagement that help people deliberate and deepen their understanding of complex issues?⁴⁹
- What are the political/societal conditions under which the development of public judgment has fast and powerful impacts (for example, the recent evolution of policy on gay marriage) versus those in which it does not (the longstanding stasis on curbing gun violence)?
- How can we measure the public's progress from raw opinion to sounder public judgment? Yankelovich made an early attempt in what he called a “mushiness index,” but there is much more work to do here.⁵⁰
- What new discoveries can we make about how to navigate people's normal cognitive biases to make crucial facts and data relevant to people's opinion formation? And, more generally, how can important facts and data be made trustworthy in a low-trust age?
- What is the role of leadership, and what kind of leadership, in fostering sounder public judgment?
- What challenges do differences of race and other dimensions of identity pose to the public's capacity to come to judgment, and how can those challenges be navigated?
- How can the arts play a more powerful role in promoting more empathic and well-rounded consideration of difficult issues?
- What are the growing trends in society that are supportive of public judgment, and how can we work with them? An example is the shift in emphasis in education from rote learning to critical thinking and problem solving; another is a similar shift in high-performance workplaces from rote behaviors to collaboration and problem solving across the organization.
- Perhaps the most fundamental and practical question on the topic today is how to create the conditions for sounder public judgment at a societal scale in our age of digital information and communications technology. For example:

⁴⁹ On thick versus thin engagement, see Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), as well as the related concept discussed by Ethan Zuckerman in “Beyond ‘The Crisis in Civics’: Notes from My 2013 [Digital Media and Learning] Talk” (March 26, 2013), <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2013/03/26/beyond-the-crisis-in-civics-notes-from-my-2013-dml-talk/>. On the science of “nudges” toward prosocial behavior, see Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁵⁰ Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Inc., “The Mushiness Index: A Refinement in Public Policy Polling Techniques” (March 1981), available from Public Agenda.

- What can social media data analysis tell us about public judgment formation that traditional public opinion research cannot?
- Can artificial intelligence be applied in ways that meaningfully inform people's thinking, stimulate productive dialogue, identify common ground and clarify meaningful differences and encourage more thoughtful civic participation? Are there online platforms, algorithms and practices that, as Carcasson puts it, can "help us elevate quality arguments and expose weak or manipulative ones [and] incite learning and the refinement of opinions"?
- Can engaging, smart games be developed to help large numbers of people across the political spectrum explore issues in rewarding and deliberative ways?
- Following the work of Talia Stroud and others, are there online news innovations that simultaneously foster public judgment and support successful news enterprises?
- Can digital tools help spread community-level deliberation that fosters public judgment by making it more cost effective, easier to organize and of higher quality?
- How might we apply the tools of persuasive communications on social media to foster public judgment, such as framing and messaging that help inoculate the public's hard-won public judgment against misinformation or manipulative, inflammatory rhetoric?
- Are there, or could there be, public judgment "influencers" naturally occurring on social media? If so, how can we find and leverage them for a stronger democracy? If not, can we incentivize people to play that role?
- Can we create approaches to online interaction that lessen vitriol and increase learning and problem solving?

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Whether one is an optimist or a pessimist with respect to the public's participation in democracy, it is hard to argue that a more thoughtful, reflective public is a bad thing, and very good reasons to think it would be a good thing.

It should be clear by now that the kind of enterprise we've been discussing is distinct from most traditional political communications meant to influence public opinion and behavior. Whereas the latter is about getting people to think, feel and act in ways that will contribute to victory in a political or policy battle, the former is about helping citizens come to their own judgments in a fair-minded way on behalf of a healthy democratic process. *Both are vitally important to a thriving democracy, but in our society the balance is off.* There is an overwhelming cacophony of persuasive communications and framing battles and altogether too little in the way of deliberative public engagement that helps people sort through competing narratives and solutions in a fair-minded way and develop mature opinions—rather than the “right” opinions, by any particular partisan's lights.

Dan Yankelovich's pioneering work on the stages of public judgment provides a foundation on which to build an understanding of how to bring this about, and many researchers and practitioners from varied disciplines provide building blocks of applicable knowledge and insight. But many questions remain on how to apply those insights in powerful ways. Perhaps most central is how to scale up principles we know are effective within group and community settings to have broader societal effects, putting those principles to work in wholly different and more scalable ways. For while much of this battle will surely be fought on the level of community and in the context of face-to-face relationships, a very large part of what this task seems to ask of us today is how to bring out the democracy-enhancing possibilities of our digital age to engage and stimulate people's minds and hearts, wherever they are. ■



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