



# COMMUNICATIONS FOR SOUNDER PUBLIC JUDGMENT IN A COMPLEX WORLD

A Roundtable Conversation

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*A Sounder Public Judgment Working Paper*



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# PREFACE

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## 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, "*Communications for Sounder Public Judgment in a Complex World A Roundtable Conversation*," brings together reflections from a cross-section of thinkers and practitioners at the forefront of communications, public opinion, public engagement, and social change on the challenges of achieving public judgment in our rapidly changing, increasingly diverse world.

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## Acknowledgments

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on conversations with and among a diverse group of leading thinkers and practitioners in fields relevant to public judgment in today's complex world. While touching on a wide range of topics, it centers especially on the role communications can play in addressing the challenges the Public Judgment Working Papers Series takes on.

The contributors, listed alphabetically, are:

**Martin Carcasson**, professor of Communication Studies at Colorado State University, and founder/director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation

**Will Friedman**, president of Public Agenda and coeditor, with Dan Yankelovich, of *Toward Wiser Public Judgment*

**Alan Jenkins**, professor of practice at Harvard University and cofounder and former president of The Opportunity Agenda

**Miriam Juan-Torres**, senior researcher at More in Common and coauthor of the *Hidden Tribes* report on polarization in America.

**john a. powell**, director of the [Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, and an internationally recognized expert in the areas of civil rights, civil liberties, structural racism, housing, poverty and democracy.<sup>1</sup>

For more information on the authors, see page 17.

The paper was constructed through several waves:

- **First**, we conducted a two-week, asynchronous online dialogue in May 2019 with Carcasson, Friedman, Jenkins and Juan-Torres, moderated by Public Agenda senior fellow John Immerwahr.<sup>2</sup>
- **Second**, we interviewed john a. powell individually. We had originally anticipated publishing this interview separately, but the themes discussed were so in sync with the online dialogue that we felt integrating powell's trenchant comments and the dialogue into one document would be more interesting.
- **Third**, we augmented some participants' comments with follow-up conversations and excerpts from their writings.
- **Finally**, we asked all the participants to review the manuscript to sign off on, add to or amend their contributions.

The result is the present paper, which we believe illuminates many of the key challenges to sounder public judgment in today's divisive times and offers vital insights into how to meet them.

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix for fuller participant biographies.

<sup>2</sup> John, an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Villanova University, has served for many years as a senior research fellow at Public Agenda, where he assisted the organization's cofounder, Dan Yankelovich, in the writing of his classic *Toward Wiser Public Judgment* (Syracuse University Press, 1991).

# CHALLENGES TO PUBLIC JUDGMENT TODAY

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**John Immerwahr (John\_I):** My first question has two parts: why is public judgment an important topic in your mind, and what are some of the biggest obstacles to it today?

**Miriam Juan-Torres (Miriam):** What worries me is that public discourse in America has become characterized by a number of separate and often conflicting groups that inhabit different silos. This is, at least in part, driven by social media and increasingly partisan news outlets. Increasingly, news outlets seem to cater more to the “extremes” by triggering emotions that maximize engagement. This is in part in response to failing business models in the modern world, where there is also less investment in high-quality journalism and fact checking, and many journalists are under a lot of strain. It has had unintended effects on the quality of our democratic life. There are real inequalities and injustices, and I am not sure we will be able to overcome them if we keep operating in the same way.

This tribalism is magnified by a culture dominated by moral outrage and a desire to defeat the opposite side, which has gotten so bad that it is starting to consume our politics. It is easier to demonize than to pause and reflect. In this climate every contested issue, whether it be immigration, climate change or any of a host of others, becomes shaped by these tribal identities and our pre-established assumptions of what “the other side” believes, which often does not reflect their actual positions. Indeed, the divisions are even poisoning social and family relationships.

**Martín Carcasson (Martín):** I truly believe that our inability to talk to each other—especially at the national level—is the most important issue facing our nation right now. I don’t think we will be able to move forward on any issue unless we start finding ways to elevate our conversations. But at a time when dialogue on public issues is more important than ever, I feel that many of the processes we rely on for political conversations (or, really, most conversations about big issues) tend to bring out the worst in us.

**Alan Jenkins (Alan):** It seems to me that something is missing from our public space, something related to communications, culture and connection.

More specifically, the greatest obstacles to public judgment right now include a rapidly changing media landscape with fewer established indicators of reliability; a polarized public that can choose to consume only sources that confirm their worldviews; a still more polarized and gerrymandered elected class with fewer incentives to debate honestly or compromise; and active attempts by key politicians and interest groups to undermine the trust in and independence of institutions that have long offered nonpartisan and accurate information.

**john a. powell (john\_p):** I see a number of dynamics happening today that make it harder for the public to grapple with difficult issues effectively.

First of all, in a time of heightened fear and change, such as we are in now, the public is susceptible to being less rational than usual. Then, let’s talk about the way we get our information and the way it is framed today. Does it exaggerate and heighten the fear, or does it invite people to grapple seriously with difficult issues?



Mind science research shows that the unconscious brain activates quickly, and it can be hard for people to slow down and be more rational and deliberative. Given our state of accelerated change, people are exploiting that weakness on social media, which is not typically a medium conducive to deliberation. The message to the public now is, “It’s too long, get it into 128 characters.” That does not permit a whole lot of deliberation on complex issues.

**Will Friedman (Will):** I agree that we live in extraordinarily challenging times when it comes to supporting sounder public judgment. So much has changed in recent years in how we communicate, the media environment and the political culture that I’m not sure how much of what I’ve concluded in the past about how to support public understanding and decision making makes sense any more.

We certainly need to find ways to counter the rapidly growing threats to sound public thinking, such as the trends Míriam and others have mentioned. We also need to explore how new research insights and new modes of communication and engagement can best be applied. We’ve mentioned social media, and the capacity to micro-target the public with disinformation and scare tactics is surely making things rapidly worse. I’m also pretty convinced that the sense of diminishing opportunity and widening inequality is making it easier to stoke and manipulate people’s anxieties and frustrations, while also making it harder for people to listen to one another with generosity of spirit. Finally, I think there’s something about the loss or disintegration of what we might call “integrative societal narratives” that is key here, as well.

**Martín:** I agree, and, as I said earlier, the way political discussion happens today is seriously problematic. The more I’ve done this work, the more I’ve realized how important process design is and how bad many of the processes we rely on are. I joke during many of my talks that if I were actually trying to do the opposite of what I do— if I were trying to design processes to ensure the worst possible conversation about tough issues—I would likely design the U.S. national political system, having things like only two parties, winner-take-all elections, a politicized media, social media and the loudest, most often heard voices being pundits and partisans who dominate the debate. They all fuel polarization and continuously trigger the worst of human nature. They all primarily allow the expression of individual opinions and spark very little interaction, thought or learning. And, perhaps most importantly, powerful interests benefit from the polarization and dysfunction and have a vested interest in its continuing.

Indeed, I think that these bad processes, systems and incentives are the root cause of the problems and that many of the others are consequences (some intended, many not) of the processes. Yes, there are bad actors, but their power is stronger because the system elevates their voices. Yes, there is polarization, but I think much of the polarization is manufactured and exaggerated. Yes, our narratives are fractured—and I love Will’s phrasing of the disintegration of integrative societal narratives, which reminds me of Jonathon Haidt’s discussion of centrifugal and centripetal forces, and how we used to have much more balance and have lost that.<sup>3</sup>

**Míriam:** I share the view that the way in which the system is set up or designed favors polarization and sensationalism, which is reinforced by both traditional media and social media. More outrage leads to greater social media engagement, but with no regard for the health of public discourse or its impact on people’s mental state (causing distrust, constant anxiety and so on).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Haidt discusses centrifugal and centripetal forces in contemporary America here: <https://www.city-journal.org/html/age-outrage-15608.html>.

I particularly worry about how social media companies, perhaps unintentionally, have affected society and public discourse. They developed their algorithms to maximize profit, but they exploit human psychology in a way that is having great and reverberating consequences. I worry about what Molly Crockett calls “moral outrage.”<sup>4</sup> If the algorithms reward engagement, and you are more engaged when you are outraged, that can lead to a constant state of alert and anxiety or to desensitization, where things that were considered shocking before become normalized. Either way, I doubt that contributes to well-functioning societies or civil discourse.

What does all of that do to people who are less active or interested? It can generate apathy or disengagement from the process, and the process then is even more monopolized by those who are more extreme because others detach from it. It is also increasing distrust and a sense of “I no longer know what I can believe in.” In the in-depth interviews and focus groups that we conducted during the *Hidden Tribes* study, I was impressed at the extent to which people in the “exhausted majority,” those who are less engaged, felt anxious about division and the role of social media.<sup>5</sup>

**john\_p:** I agree that one of the problems for greater national unity and shared judgments, even as we deal with our issues and disagreements, is that the *organized* center is relatively weak. The research suggests in 2015 and ‘16 the people in the center, the moderates, were probably growing in number, but—as Míriam points out—they’re not organized, they are largely disengaged and turned off. Right now, as I see it, the political right is *well* organized, the political left is disorganized and splintered and the center is simply *unorganized*, without effective leadership.

I also think there’s a sense today that people are dealing with loss, at several different levels. The loss we tend to focus on most is economic loss—job loss—which is very real. I think some of it goes to the challenges of globalization. Elites made a promise in the late ‘70s, early ‘80s that globalization would grow the economic pie, and we’re all going to be better off. The first part is what happened: the world economy has grown extensively, and incomes have more than doubled. But the second part did not happen. We’re not all better off for it.

Now, I’m not an ideologue, and I’m not against people making money. I’m not saying you can’t have capitalism. But you do have to share. And that’s hard for the type of people who make a lot of money to accept, that they have to share. They’re willing to do it on their own terms, but they are not so willing to be *required* to do it. They’re generally good people; I like them individually. But the “I want to decide” if and how to share my wealth, that individualistic mentality that helped them outcompete and succeed, is really problematic in terms of sharing. In this way, I feel that the elite have been separating themselves from our democracy.

But the sense of loss is also about more than economics. What we don’t focus on as much is the *loss of grounding and meaning*, which I think is actually in some ways equally important. The political right has stepped in to speak to that second kind of loss, but in a way that is trying to take us back to an earlier age. They’re saying, “I’m going back to when America was great, when Reagan was great, when Kennedy was great.” But if it was so great, why didn’t it last? I have an image of a butterfly trying to get back into a cocoon. I do understand where that impulse is coming from, but it’s just not going to work; we’re going to have to find a way to be future oriented to deal with things like demographic change, climate change and artificial intelligence.

<sup>4</sup> [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/538ca3ade4b090f9ef331978/t/5a53c0d49140b7212c35b20e/1515438295247/Crockett\\_2017\\_NHB\\_Outrage.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/538ca3ade4b090f9ef331978/t/5a53c0d49140b7212c35b20e/1515438295247/Crockett_2017_NHB_Outrage.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> <https://hiddentribes.us/>.

## HOPEFUL SIGNS

**John I:** You've described a daunting combination of obstacles, including flawed processes, social media and actors who intentionally or unintentionally are actively thwarting sounder public judgment. You've also talked about a sense of loss and how people respond to that. Do you see any positive signs or trends?

**Will:** I've been struck by the fact that (1) the public's judgments and norms can sometimes evolve with unexpected speed these days (as, for example, with gay marriage), and (2) that most people are increasingly frustrated with pointless posturing and bickering while nothing gets solved. The danger here is a rush toward authoritarian-style populism, but if a coherent and compelling vision coupled with a practical program for change were put forth, it could spark the now-stunted democratic imagination of the American people. I just don't see why people's frustrations couldn't go in a more positive direction. That energy needs someplace to go, and I see no reason why it's determined that it go toward fear, loathing and bad decisions.

**Alan:** I also see an exciting possibility here, that we might not just go back to older modes of communication, but that we may be reaching toward something completely new, as John Powell was saying. This is crucial, because the coherence of old narratives and the functioning of public judgment in the past depended in part on the exclusion or marginalization of many voices and perspectives from the democratic discourse. At a time when the voices of most women, people of color, queer folk, people with disabilities and others were absent or on the margins, it was much easier, pragmatically, to maintain platforms for (relatively) civil, fact-based public judgment.

Our goal for 21st century public judgment must be something new, inclusive and dynamic, rather than a return to some old ideal. So, whereas one might argue that the increased diversification of our democratic populace is a challenge to public judgment, it's more accurate to say that the old model—despite its benefits—was fatally exclusionary and cannot and should not be recreated for this new era. That reframing of the question poses a more daunting—and more exciting—challenge toward which to strive.

**Miriam:** In facing up to this challenge, I think there is some good news and potential for change in the fact that many Americans vastly overestimate the degree of polarization in American society. Today, millions of Americans are going about their lives with absurdly inaccurate perceptions of each other. Partisan media consistently elevate the most extreme representations of "them," whether "they" are liberals, conservatives, Hillary voters, Trump voters, immigrants, Evangelicals, Muslims, gun owners, gun control advocates or any other group central to America's deepening tribal conflicts. This creates a false impression that outliers are somehow representative of the majority. In fact, the middle is far larger than conventional wisdom suggests, and the strident wings are far smaller.

My organization, More in Common, recently released a report in which we explored opinions that each side holds about the other and their beliefs.<sup>6</sup> We examined what Democrats think about Republicans' beliefs and the other way around. We discovered that there are huge gaps, that both Republicans and Democrats have wildly inaccurate views of what the other side believes and about the extremity of those beliefs.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a70a7c3010027736a22740f/t/5d101028495118000181fad6/1561333806922/The+Perception+Gap.pdf>.

While all of this is concerning, it also has a positive side in that it shows that *Americans are unaware of how much they have in common*. Another insight from this research is surprising, that those who are most hostile to those with opposing political views usually have the least understanding of those views. But I think this observation may give us some clues for how to create more productive discussions of controversial issues.

**Martín:** Another positive sign is what is going on at the local level in some parts of the country. If we want to develop capacity in people for public judgment, the best place to develop the skillsets and mindsets that are so needed will be at the local level. The good news is, as more and more local communities get exposed to better ways of engaging, I believe they will see the value and recognize the BS at the national level and start expecting and demanding more and more. So that is my focus, both on building capacity and changing the culture here in Fort Collins—where I work most closely with city and county government, school districts, universities, local newspapers and local nonprofits—and helping other communities do the same.

## COMMUNICATIONS THAT ENHANCE PUBLIC JUDGMENT

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**John\_I:** One of the things the members of this panel have in common is an expertise in research-informed communication. Are there ways of communicating with the public that can counteract this sense of polarization and fragmentation that you all seem to agree is a central obstacle to public judgment today? What would you say to agents in leadership or the media who, with the best will in the world, are struggling to find better ways to communicate complex issues to the public?

### COUNTERING MISPERCEPTIONS

**Miriam:** One starting place is that we need to find ways to counter the misperceptions that I spoke about earlier, the way in which Americans hold exaggerated and inaccurate notions of each other. In effect, we need to help them understand that they don't really disagree as much as they think they do. Perhaps a way forward might be through addressing these misperceptions, to counter the dehumanization process we have right now, the in-group and out-group dynamics that are shaping how we view others.

We need to explore those gaps more and what's fueling those very inaccurate views and divisions, and particularly how social media are playing a role in it. Because one thing that we found is that *higher media consumption is associated with a wider perception gap: the more media you consume, the more inaccurate your views are of what the others believe*. We need to learn more about that, including the role played by algorithms in social media and the business models of the online platforms, and how they might be deepening our divides.

Once we have a clearer idea of how the misperceptions are formed, we could start to think about the need for more regulation of social media, given the impact they seem to be having on the way we see each other as a society and the way that the loudest voices actually monopolize political discourse. We need to show other stories.



Then there are some other areas that cry out for study and action. For example, our data suggest that the more education you have, the more inaccurate are your perceptions of the other side. This is particularly true on the Democratic side. Perhaps this is because people who are more educated tend to be more insulated from people who have other kinds of views and lived experiences. We would do well to look more deeply into that.

Finally, I think that with the methodology we're using, we tend to emphasize and look more toward people's divisions, their differences. From the research perspective, we need to look into what are the spaces, the policy domains, in which we don't have so many differences. It's really difficult to do that, but I think we need to place greater emphasis on it. Some new brain research is suggesting that, for example, emphasizing human rights abuses may help perpetuate them, as it primes individuals to engage in those acts.<sup>7</sup> Maybe we should put more emphasis on the positive behaviors, as well, to capitalize on the brain's capacity to simulate events so we are reinforcing positive behavior.

**John\_I: Why is it difficult to determine and measure the areas of agreement?**

**Miriam:** If you're asking, "What do people have in common?" it doesn't make for a very insightful question. I think it's something that people really struggle to answer in meaningful ways. You tend to get a lot of surface-level, vague or trite responses. So we really need to dig deeper into that. The way our political conversations work, and the way the media enhance and elevate the most extreme and polarized views, is making it more and more difficult for people actually to realize that they have an interest in common, and that acting together is possible; that they can have differences and actually *be* different, while at the same time having an overarching shared purpose or shared meaning. I think that's something to explore, as well.

**John\_I: This idea of understanding what people have in common and countering exaggerated perceptions we have of each other relates to some work that Public Agenda is taking on. Will, can you say just a bit about that?**

**Will:** Yes, we've launched a new initiative called Hidden Common Ground that speaks to many of the themes you've been talking about, Miriam. It's a collaboration with USA Today and other partners that will run at least through the election season here in the states. In large part, it's a response to the increasingly dominant societal narrative that we've become a hopelessly divided nation whose people are alien to each other and incapable of communicating, finding common ground or working together across differences for the common good.

The initiative will focus on a series of election-year issues, researching areas of common ground among the public on solutions, as well as "nascent" common ground and how to strengthen it and, finally, areas of authentic disagreement that need to be navigated. Our thesis is that it's harder for Americans to tackle their actual differences and disagreements if we're constantly being told that we are powerfully polarized on virtually *everything*. And, based on what you were saying about your new "perceptions" research, Miriam, it really is an exaggeration and distortion of reality. This initiative is about correcting those distorted perceptions and about engaging what you call "the exhausted middle."

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.openglobalrights.org/brain-research-suggests-emphasizing-human-rights-abuses-may-perpetuate-them/>.

## ACTIVATING THE EXHAUSTED MIDDLE

**Martín:** I think it is even more important to find ways to activate the exhausted majority than it is to try to silence the bad actors or depolarize the partisans. It is a basic facilitation move: rather than work to silence the dominator, you work to get others talking in the group by making space for them, lowering barriers and ensuring that their contributions are welcome and will make a difference—efficacy is huge here.

In thinking about this challenge, I've also been playing lately with a new notion of the "ideal citizen." Rather than citizens being people who are "informed and engaged"—which, due to the underlying psychology, often leads to their being biased partisans—my new target is the citizen as "wise collaborator." Wise collaborators are wise in the traditional sense of having good judgment and intellectual humility, and they are collaborators in the sense that, yes, they have their own interests but realize the best way to live together in a diverse society will be to have a collaborative mindset. The shift from an adversarial mindset to a collaborative one can make a huge difference. Of course, we can't just ask people to be collaborative in an adversarial system, so we have to work to create systems that reward that mindset. That goes back to my earlier points about starting locally and thinking systemically.

**Miriam:** Of course, I very much agree with the idea of activating the exhausted middle. It was interesting to see in our research how the "wings" saw themselves as being in a war against the other side, and both had cartoonish views of the other, an "other" they needed to defeat, not understand. At the same time, members of the exhausted majority, when discussing public debate, saw themselves more as spectators, seeing how the other two screamed at each other. So there is a real need to increase the political engagement of people with less extreme perceptions, so the extreme perceptions become less dominant.

I have another suggestion that might help engage those more moderate voices that currently feel excluded. I keep going back to the idea that *as important as is our ability to find areas of agreement, it is perhaps even more important for the public to learn how to disagree*. This came up a lot in our research and it seems that we are now in a moment when those who are more polarized judge someone's entire character based on that person's position on a series of contested topics. Having a differing opinion on one of them seems reason enough to dismiss that person or judge him or her as "bad," and I think that is very problematic. We need to be able to hold more complex and nuanced views and understand others as multifaceted human beings. It's not black and white.

**John\_I:** Do you have some ideas for how to support learning to disagree?

**Miriam:** We're following a lot of the organizations working on this, like "Better Angels" and "Beyond Conflict," among others. Most of them work on the local level, as Martín suggests. But I also think it's important to think about how these things can scale and have broader impacts. One question, for example, is, can localized efforts have a "trickle out" effect on surrounding communities?

I think that there's also a role to play for political leaders, modeling behavior. That would also be interesting from the research perspective, to examine what kinds of behavior are being modeled and their effects. Can leaders engage in different kinds of interactions that are less polarizing, and, if so, do they have an impact on the public's behavior?

**Will:** We just did a couple of focus groups on the public's view of what's causing and what would help ameliorate divisiveness in America that offer support for your last comment, Miriam. In both groups people spontaneously spoke of the importance of leadership, how divisive attitudes and ways of reacting to one another "trickle down" from leaders to the public and how better modeling would help.

## POLARITY MANAGEMENT

**Martín:** One of the concepts I use quite a bit in my work is "polarity management," which comes from the business management world but applies well to helping people address wicked problems. I use it as a way to reframe issues from a simple good versus evil frame to a more nuanced one that, ideally, helps shift participants from adversaries to collaborators and helps them engage issues in sounder ways.

Reading through these posts, I see multiple polarities that I believe we need to learn how to manage better in our communities, but, *in most cases, people pick one pole and frame that as a positive value or concept, relegating the other side to being completely negative.* Democracy inherently has many of these tensions and polarities that we cannot resolve but instead must constantly work to negotiate: freedom and equality; structure and agency; equality and equity; democracy and expertise; individual rights and community good; cooperation and competition; strong leaders and collaborative leaders; short term and long term; flexibility and consistency; activism and dialogue. We talk about these all the time but almost always just taking the upside of one versus the downside of the other.

Another example might be diversity and unity. So if I'm for diversity and you are not, you are against me; you are inherently closeminded and even a bigot. When you shift things to engage the polarity, you can often change the conversation. Most people see positives tied to both diversity and unity, and most people can see that both poles can easily dominate too much (all diversity with no unity is a problem, just as overemphasizing unity over diversity is).

By recognizing the upsides and downsides, we can shift a disjointed conversation whose participants tend to talk past each other—highlighting the best possible view of my side and the worst of yours—into a negotiation of how we can work together to try to ensure the positives of each and avoid slipping to the overemphasized negatives. I've found that shifting from a false good and evil dichotomy to a more nuanced tension can be powerful and open up conversation and, ultimately, collaborative creativity.

Finally, note that this is not about getting away from extremes into the murky middle (where we fall into false equivalency and both sides-ism). It is about negotiating the best management of the polarity; and in some cases the best argument could certainly be for a significant recalibration of the tensions to one side or another. "Polarity management" allows for activism and strong opinions and does not equalize all claims that rely on one pole or the other.

**Alan:** Thanks for this, Martín. I like the idea of polarity management and agree that false dichotomies often get in the way of healthy discourse and public judgment. I'm a bit confused by one of your examples, though. It seems to me that the "polar" opposite of diversity is not unity, but homogeneity. Unity is demonstrably possible in diverse groups, and so this can be a "win/win." But the tension between those who want diversity and those who want homogeneity (typically comprising their own group) is a much thornier type of polarization.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.openglobalrights.org/brain-research-suggests-emphasizing-human-rights-abuses-may-perpetuate-them/>.

**Will:** I also like the polarity management idea and can see how it could lead toward more productive public conversation and sounder public judgment. That said, I think Alan raises an interesting and important point about the unity/diversity/homogeneity example, specifically. Reminds me of that debate from a few years back when Robert Putnam published some research suggesting that increased diversity correlated with less trust and social capital in communities. I didn't tend to buy it intuitively, at least as a general rule, but I struggled with what it meant if it were true. Subsequent research has complicated the picture in ways that I think are relevant here, as it is suggesting that "distrust may stem from prejudice rather than from diversity per se."<sup>8</sup>

**Martín:** These are interesting points with respect to the unity/diversity/homogeneity example specifically, and I'll certainly do some thinking in light of them. I do agree that it can sometimes be important to distinguish a false polarity that needs reframing from a deep, inescapably human polarity that needs skillful management.

My main point is that polarity management is about two positive concepts that have an inherent tension between them, the kind where if one starts to dominate too much it causes problems. The trap we too often get into is framing one pole (our favorite) as an absolute good and the other (the one that makes us uncomfortable) as a complete negative and then getting locked into circular arguments with people who go the opposite way. Polarity management helps us avoid this trap. As another example, most people see positives tied to both freedom and security, and most people can see that both poles can dominate too much. All security with no freedom is a problem—we've certainly seen how that doesn't work out. And overemphasizing freedom over security can expose us to dangers—think about going through the TSA checkpoint at the airport. We accept that we need some security controls, but we also want that balanced with practicality and enough freedom of movement.

**Will:** That's helpful. Martín. Alan, from what I've seen of your work it seems to me that one way you try to manage polarities is by appealing to relatively universal values and cultural narratives. Is that right? Can you mention any other guideposts from your work on how to bring more people to the conversation in constructive ways that are more likely to lead toward public judgment rather than thoughtlessly polarized squabbling?

**Alan:** Absolutely, Will, and let me stick with the diversity example here. Our research and experience show that most people are carrying around at least two narratives in their heads regarding diversity: (1) the belief that diversity is one of our country's greatest strengths and helps us to innovate and solve problems (*e pluribus unum*) and (2) the idea that increasing diversity—or deviance from the dominant group—is a threat to societal norms, success and sometimes safety. As you note, we (and others) have suggestions on how to make the first narrative more salient and, in turn, open up new possibilities for pragmatic, factually based discussion. As we strive to improve conversations about race, racism and racial justice in this country, the environment in which we're speaking seems to be constantly shifting.

My original point, though, was that sometimes the dichotomies are real, not false. Diversity versus homogeneity is an actual dichotomy. The tools that I reference above are intended to "win" the argument in favor of diversity while opening up new avenues for public judgment in pursuit of unity.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-diversity-create-distrust/?redirect=1>.

## SHARED VALUES AND INTEGRATIVE SOCIETAL NARRATIVES

**John\_I:** Alan, let's talk more about "opening up new avenues for public judgment," whether in pursuit of diversity and unity or in relation to other public problems, by starting with shared values. Can you say more about how, practically, that works?

**Alan:** In our work at The Opportunity Agenda, we urge people to lead with shared values on controversial issues. Rather than leading with dry facts or hot rhetoric, begin the conversation with values that are shared by all parties, such as opportunity or community. For example, in discussing racial profiling by police, we urge participants to connect this issue to broader social values, such as the well-being of young people and the importance of public safety, since these are values that are widely shared. We then can move on from there to solutions that people can agree on.

But, as Martin noted earlier when he was talking about polarity management, the goal is not to avoid hard conversations. Once a sense of shared values has been established, it can be time to bridge from those values to specific situations that are in conflict with them. For example, there is wide acceptance of the idea of equal opportunity, but that affords a bridge to questions of how the educational system today, where children of color face overcrowded classrooms, uncertified teachers and excessive discipline far more often than their white peers, is hampering our ability to improve the education for all children so that we can be the nation we aspire to be.

**Will:** Alan, it seems to me that your emphasis on leading with shared values is related to what I was reaching toward before in talking about the loss of integrative narratives that enable Americans to have the kind of conversations that foster sound public judgment. What else could those narratives be based on but shared values and goals? So I'd like to try to dig into that question a little more to see if it's useful.

Take "The American Dream" as an example, the idea that even starting from modest beginnings it is (or should be) possible to make something of your life in America, achieve a measure of economic security and see your kids do better than you did. Americans have argued about how true that narrative is, how fair our society is to all its members with respect to it, how far we've come and how short we fall from being a real land of opportunity. But we were having the same conversation, and at times arguments, about something that most people believed ought to be true and was a worthy goal. In that sense I would call it integrative, bringing us together even in our disagreements and often producing productive public conversation—and, with it, struggle and points of progress, from voting rights to an expanding middle class with a rising standard of living.

This point is illustrated nicely by our own Alan Jenkins in an excellent post on The Opportunity Agenda website about effective communication on expanding opportunity called, "Preserving the American Dream for All."<sup>9</sup> But that was written in 2010, and I wonder if the American Dream narrative is losing resonance and is harder to work with today. It feels that way to me, in part because of the way our economy is going. As inequality increases and the middle class shrinks, resulting in fewer dependable career paths out of poverty, the very undergirding of the American Dream narrative and the useful conversation and struggle it could engender feels like it's crumbling like the rusted undergirding of our physical infrastructure. This sense of lost potential and possibility strikes at the heart of the narrative,

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/preserving-american-dream-all>



and, indeed, public opinion research shows fewer people believe the next generation will do better than the one before.

If I'm right that The American Dream is losing power as an integrative narrative for productive public conversation, is the answer to try to breathe new life into it, or to replace it with something else? And, to the extent this notion of integrative narratives is valid and important, are there others that are emerging or could emerge, despite the segmented psychology that the Hidden Tribes research describes and the (thankfully) multiplying voices that Alan spoke of?

I do think there's a yearning for unifying narratives that balance our pluribus with some version of *unum*. John Powell has suggested in his writing that the story we need to tell ourselves at this juncture is that we are a changing nation of highly diverse people who need to build a future together. We can't go back to the past, much as some would like to, and our increasing diversity will necessarily change us; but if we build that future together it can work for all of us, not just some of us. David Brooks weighed in on this theme recently in a column which concludes, "I used to think that America had to find a new unifying national narrative. Now I wonder if not having a single national narrative will become our national narrative."<sup>10</sup>

**john\_p:** On this point I think about the way we tend to talk about things like gay marriage and Muslim immigrants. The traditional response coming from liberals is, "They're just like us." So we should support gay marriage because people who have a different sexual orientation really want exactly the same thing that we all do: a stable family, love. And, obviously, there's truth in that, but it's also overstated. Same for Muslims: like many of us, they go to religious services. Even if maybe they dress and look a little different and pray to God more often than we do, it's basically the same.

This is understandable, to try to find some commonality, but it's also lazy and doesn't resonate with people. So, what's the alternative? It's a much heavier lift. The alternative is that the future is going to be different from the past, that it will change us in some ways, and we have to come to terms with that.

All these people coming from different countries will cause us to change, and we don't know exactly how, and many people didn't ask for it. It's not true that immigrants are exactly like us in how we have lived in America for a long time. Nor is it true that we can assimilate them completely into our culture without ourselves changing as well. All of that is too simplistic, because we *will* change.

That's the future that we have to try to talk about. We will change, and that's both exciting and scary. I don't know what that "us" will look like. There's already research suggesting that gay marriage has actually changed even the expression of heterosexual marriage. And, certainly, the number of immigrants from Mexico who are going back and forth is different than the Irish, who came and never left. And then globalization in general is changing us. The world is much smaller now.

**John\_I:** How do we make what you're saying here, about how immigration will indeed change us, less scary so people can deal with it without retreating into their shells (or "tribes") and becoming defensive?

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/opinion/america-radical-pluralism.html>. Another interesting essay on this theme is Jill Lapore's "A New Americanism: Why a Nation Needs a National Story," in *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019.

**john\_p:** A concept I've been working with on this is that of "co-creation," the idea that we, a diverse people, co-create the future together. Because, in fact, it's not your future or my future; it is *our* future and country, and out of that can come something quite remarkable. And the only way it can happen well is if we do it together. If we try to do it completely separately, there's a good chance that none of us will have a future.

This is what Europe has been struggling with recently. In a sense, what Europe is fighting over is, can we have a big "we"? Do we have small "we" that is exclusive, or do we have large "we" that is inclusive? In this it's important to know that if we have a large "we," there are still ways for people to have their local identities. You can be European and you can be German, or European and French—more than half the people in Europe actually embrace the notion of two identities. The Canadians have also done a pretty good job with this in that you can be Canadian but also French Canadian. Here in the United States I do not think we have actually embraced this idea of a large identity, a big "we," that permits some kind of unity without creating a false uniformity.

It's important to be clear here that "identity politics" is not the problem; what I call "breaking politics" is the problem. "Breaking" occurs when change happens fast and people experience anxiety. That's not good or bad; it's normal, it's just anxiety. Today we are experiencing a lot of demographic changes in this country, with a lot of people here today who are not part of what was traditionally the dominant group. And so when people think in terms of breaking politics, they are seeing those who are not part of that dominant group as somehow dangerous. It could appear that they're stealing our jobs or they're stealing our women. It could be an existential threat—even asking, will Western Civilization exist? When breaking politics is taken to the extreme, it even refuses to acknowledge another person's humanity and can encourage violence.

But there is another major register that I call "bridging." It says the world is changing, we are changing as a culture, as a people, but we've always been changing, people always change. We're learning, developing, and I want to hear your story. I want to hear why you're here, and I want to hear about your suffering. Bridging requires a human connection, empathetic listening, engagement. How people respond to the anxiety caused by change depends on a number of things, including—to return to the earlier theme—the *narratives or stories* we're told, which usually come from opinion leaders or leaders generally.

Relevant here is some work I'm doing with Contact Theory. Contact across divides is great, and stories about this are important, because we don't actually see most Americans. But connection is also clearly about more than one-on-one and face-to-face contact, as important as that is. There are no natural tribes except for hunter gatherers, and those tribes were 50 people who you had daily contact with. How is it that I identify with millions of people? How is it the two billion Christians in some way can feel an affinity for others they don't know all over the world? They can never really know each other, they speak different languages, but there is an affinity, a recognition.

What does it mean to be an American? How can I identify with 350 million people? ? It's not based only on personal contact; it can't be. But that's not necessary. It's helpful, but it's not sufficient by itself. Can we tell stories and have cultural expression that unites us without diminishing our differences? I think we can.

## SUMMING UP

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**John I:** I'd like to close, first, by thanking all of our contributors, and then by reflecting for a moment on the ways their thinking has converged around a number of important themes.

Several have noted the ways in which today's polarization, or what Miriam calls "tribalism," impedes the public's ability to come to terms with complex issues in productive ways, turning them into bitter, stubborn debates with seemingly no viable way forward. But there appears as well to be agreement that this is not an inevitable attribute of the public but, rather, something that is created or exacerbated by certain attributes of our systems of public life, as well as specific actors who, inadvertently or intentionally, provoke division rather than foster common ground and collaboration.

Our contributors have pointed to such factors as social media and the algorithms that govern them; structural elements in our political processes, including the two-party system, winner-take-all elections and profit-driven news media; leaders and interest groups deliberately stoking disagreements for their own benefit; the rapid pace and unmanageable quantity of information and communication, which inhibits thoughtful consideration of complicated issues; the diminishing opportunity in our economy and the loss of meaning in our society that amp up anxiety in a rapidly changing world; and attributes of our cognitive and emotional psychology that lead to flawed reasoning and make us vulnerable to all of the above.

We learned as well that research shows that most people exaggerate the amount of polarization that actually exists, often have wildly distorted views of those on the other side of the partisan divide and fail to see how much they have in common. We also saw that on a local level it seems more possible to counter the forces of distortion and division and foster deliberation and collaboration. These factors suggest that the situation is not as hopeless as it sometimes seems, and contributors explored numerous potential solutions. These include strategies to manage better the polarizing tendencies in our public life, such as by framing issues in more productive ways, correcting the exaggerated perceptions of the "other," helping Americans better appreciate their common ground and helping them develop healthier ways to disagree. The strategy of concentrating first on the local level, where it is more possible to experiment with ameliorative practices and systemic reforms, and build up from there was another promising focus of the conversation.

Finally, a good deal of attention was paid to the importance of engaging and empowering the "exhausted majority" of Americans in the middle of the electorate. There was agreement that there are shared values that can be marshalled to help people think and talk about issues in productive ways that reveal people's common interests and that can become the basis for "integrative social narratives," overarching visions that are widely shared even by groups that disagree with each other on specific issues. On the one hand, contributors acknowledged that some older narratives have lost some of their potency, while others have needed to fall by the wayside, as they had been based on the exclusion of marginalized members of society. Nonetheless, several saw evidence that healthier shared narratives may be emerging, and all agreed that a diverse democratic society must find ways to work together to co-create them.

## CONTRIBUTORS



**Martín Carcasson, Ph.D.**, is a professor in the Communication Studies department of Colorado State University, the founder and director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation (CPD).

Carcasson also currently serves as the chair of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation Board of Directors. His research focuses on helping local communities address “wicked problems” more productively through improved public communication, community problem solving, and collaborative decision-making. The CPD is a practical, applied extension of his work, and functions as an impartial resource dedicated to enhancing local democracy in Northern Colorado.



**Will Friedman, PhD**, is president of Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and public engagement organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and expanding opportunity for all Americans.

Before becoming president, Will was the founding director of the organization’s public engagement division, as well as associate director of research. He is the author or coauthor of numerous publications, including “Reframing Framing,” “Transforming Public Life: A Decade of Public Engagement in Bridgeport, CT,” “[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 coeditor, with late Public Agenda cofounder Daniel Yankelovich, of [Toward Wiser Public Judgment](#), published in February 2011 by Vanderbilt University Press.



**Alan Jenkins** has recently joined the faculty of Harvard Law as a professor of practice, teaching courses on race and the law, communications and social change and social justice.

Previously, he was president and cofounder of The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice communication laboratory dedicated to the idea that our nation can and should be a place where everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity. Alan has also served as Director of Human Rights at the Ford Foundation; Assistant to the Solicitor General at the U.S. Department of Justice, where he represented the United States government in constitutional and other litigation before the U.S. Supreme Court; and Associate Counsel to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.



**Miriam Juan-Torres** is a multidisciplinary researcher at More in Common, where her work draws on a variety of disciplines, including law, political science, economics and anthropology.

Her aim is to bridge the gaps among academic findings, policy and implementation, applying research insights to designing real-world solutions to complex challenges. Miriam is particularly interested in the ways in which psychological vulnerabilities and cognitive biases are targeted to produce behavioral change, and how they translate into political action. She is also interested in exploring how social justice—and, particularly, gender equality—can be advanced through artistic expression. Previously, Miriam worked in Ghana, where she conducted research on peace processes and mechanisms implemented to prevent election-related violence, and she has been a consultant to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia.



**John A. Powell** is an internationally recognized expert in the areas of civil rights, civil liberties, structural racism, housing, poverty and democracy.

John is the director of the [Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society](#) at the University of California, Berkeley, a research institute that brings together scholars, community advocates, communicators and policymakers to identify and eliminate the barriers to an inclusive, just and sustainable society and to create transformative change toward a more equitable world. John also holds the Robert D. Haas Chancellor's Chair in Equity and Inclusion and is a [Professor of Law, African American Studies, and Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley](#), and he has written extensively on structural racism, racial justice, concentrated poverty, opportunity-based housing, voting rights, affirmative action in the United States, South Africa and Brazil, racial and ethnic identity, spirituality and social justice and the needs of citizens in a democratic society. John is the author of several books, including his most recent work, [Racing to Justice: Transforming our Concepts of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society](#).



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