

## Tackling Wicked Community Problems: The Role of Deliberative Dialogue

Martin Carcasson  
Director of the Center for Public Deliberation  
Professor, Department of Communication Studies

**CSU Center for  
Public Deliberation**  
Dedicated to enhancing local democracy through improved public  
communication and community problem solving

EMAIL: [cpd@colostate.edu](mailto:cpd@colostate.edu)  
Twitter: @mcarcasson

CPD website: [cpd.colostate.edu](http://cpd.colostate.edu)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Overview: Three Key Arguments

#### #1 – The Basic Reality

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



#### #2 – The Bad News

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



#### #3 – The Hopeful News

Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that can better address wicked problems, particularly at the local level



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Capitalism as a wicked problem

- The “Triple Bottom Line” of
  - Profit (economics, also tied to jobs and taxes)
  - People (social justice, equality, fairness)
  - Planet (environment)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Key American Values**

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Inherent Democratic Tensions**

- Freedom v. Equality
- Our Freedom v. Freedom of Future generations
- Freedom v. Security
- Justice is a tension within itself (justice as the ideal between too much and too little credit or punishment)

**Some others**

- Individual v. community
- Short term v. long term
- Unity v. diversity
- Top down v. bottom up
- Cooperation v. competition
- Flexibility/Innovation v. Consistency/Tradition
- Best use of resources (money, time, people)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Competing values in improving student success**

- Quality/High expectations**
- Affordability/Access**
- Efficiency**
- Individualized Instruction**
- Consistency/Stability**
- Flexibility/Innovation**
- Fairness/Equality**
- Completion / Graduation**
- Focus on the Whole Child**
- Focus on Basics (Math, Science, Reading, Writing)**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Actions to address wicked problems come from multiple levels**

The diagram illustrates an ecological perspective with five concentric levels:

- Public Policy**: national, state, local laws (represented by a scroll icon)
- Community**: relationships among organizations (represented by a construction crane icon)
- Organizational**: organizations, social institutions (represented by a building icon)
- Interpersonal**: family, friends, social networks (represented by a briefcase icon)
- Individual**: knowledge, attitudes, skills (represented by a group of people icon)

Source: Adapted from McLeroy, et al., An ecological perspective on health promotion programs. Health Education Quarterly 1988, 15:361-77.

---

---

---

---

---

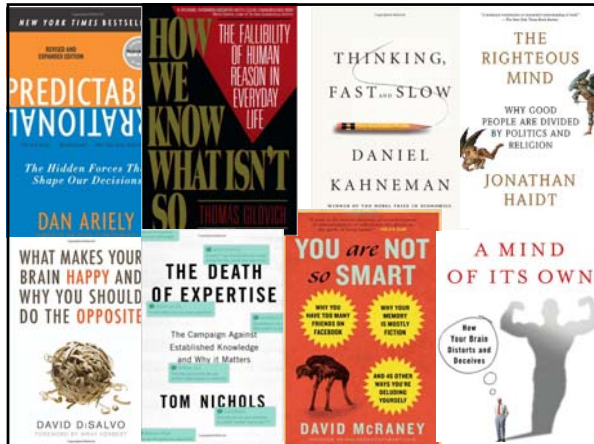
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What We Are Learning from Brain Science

#### The Problematic

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




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

#### Stages of motivated reasoning

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## How we interpret new evidence

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

- Jonathan Haidt and Tom Gilovich

---

---

---

---

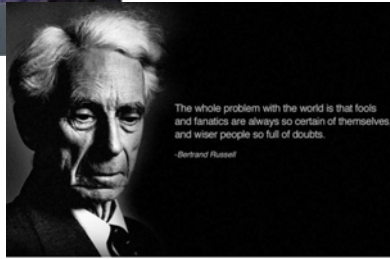
---

---

---

---

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



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Negative Interaction Effects

Kathryn Schultz – *Being Wrong*

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



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Drawbacks of an Overly-Adversarial Political System

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




---

---

---

---

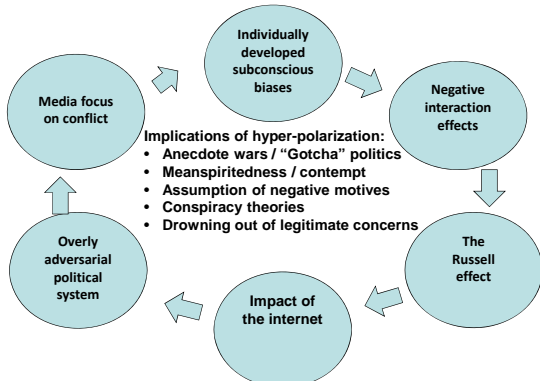
---

---

---

---

### The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

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

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




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Institutional Troubles

### Mediating v. Polarizing Institutions

- Political parties/elections
- Advocacy groups
- Internet / Social media
- Media/Press
- Experts
- Universities
- Community organizations like Leadership Foundations, League of Women Voters, United Way, Community Foundations



More polarizing



More mediating

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems not wicked people
- Be more comfortable with uncertainty
- Focus on improving the conversation not winning the argument
- Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
- Emphasize the ongoing conversation and creative learning process

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

### The Good

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



---

---

---

---

---

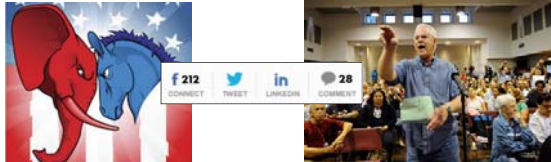
---

---

---

## The Problem We Face

Most of our processes for public engagement and community problem solving primarily activate the negative aspects of human nature, and rarely tap into or nurture the positive.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Consider our Typical Public Processes

- *Our two-party system*
- *Campaigns, referenda, and elections*
- *“Town halls”*
- *Interest groups and lobbyists*
- *Political debates*
- *Congressional deliberations and legislative debate*
- *Social media political engagement*
- *Citizen comment and public hearings*
- *Expert panels*
- *Letters to the editors*
- *Emails and email campaigns to policymakers*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Consider our Typical Public Processes

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

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



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What is Deliberative Engagement?

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

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What is Deliberative Engagement?

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



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

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




---

---

---

---

---

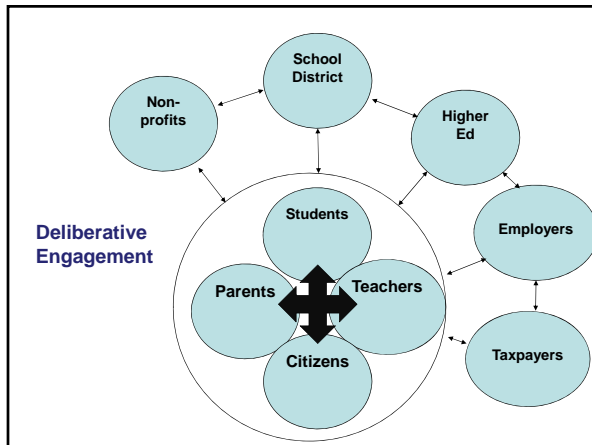
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

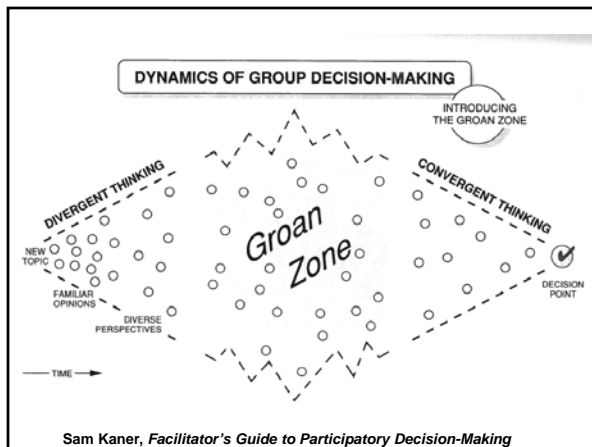
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

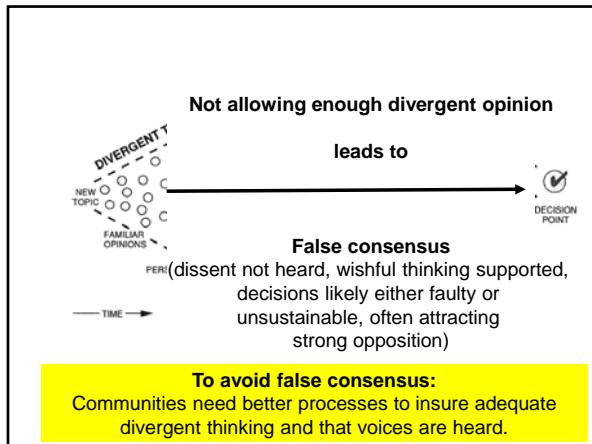
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

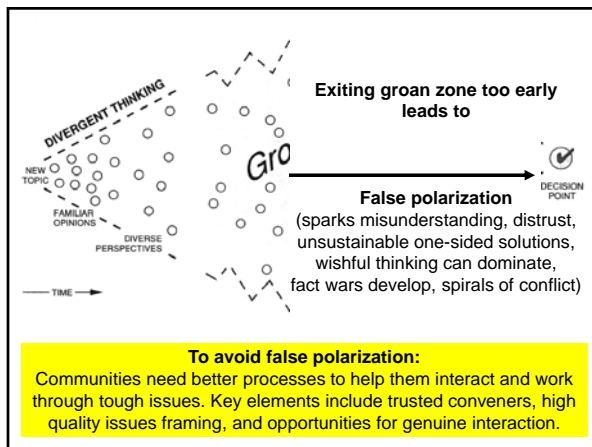
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

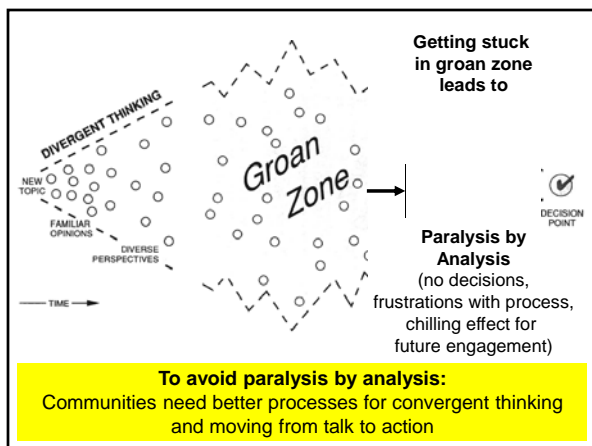
---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

---

---

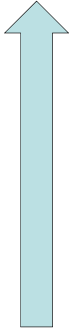
---

---

---

## The Kind of Processes our Communities Need

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




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Potential Applications to the Five Star Leadership Academy

- Working against the negative consequences of overly adversarial processes and the limits of experts
- Helping the community identify and work through tough choices and address wicked problems
- Working to improve communication and increase interaction between decision-makers (school board/principals), experts (superintendent, staff), and the public (parents, taxpayers, businesses)




---

---

---

---

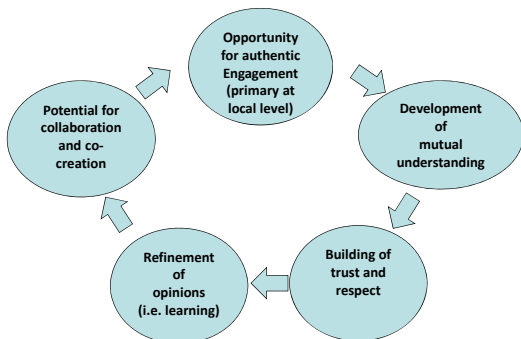
---

---

---

---

## The Virtuous Cycle of Authentic Engagement




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---