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A Path to Public Judgment

by Daniel Yankelovich

“There are times when the opinions of Americans do come across as steeped in ignorance, misinformation, prejudice, and mindlessness; but there are also times when people’s opinions are thoughtful and down to earth, bristling with good sense and wisdom.”

Several years after I started to do public opinion research in the 1950s, my doubts about the indoctrination I had received in my graduate school training began to grow stronger. By the 1970s, I had developed serious reservations about the conventional paradigm of knowledge I had absorbed in the Philosophy and Social Relations departments at Harvard. I found that my surveys of public opinion raised a number of puzzling questions whose answers would take me decades to resolve.

Why, I wondered, is there such extreme variation in the quality of public opinion? On some issues, people’s opinions express nothing more than their own unrealistic wishful thinking, or echo what some TV newsreader said that morning. On other issues, people have deliberated thoughtfully, exchanged views with others, and formed judgments of startling clarity and realism. In conducting public opinion polls, there are times when the opinions of Americans do come across as steeped in ignorance, misinformation, prejudice, and mindlessness; but there are also times when people’s opinions are thoughtful and down to earth, bristling with good sense and wisdom.

Extreme variation in the quality of public opinion occurs not only from issue to issue but also on the same issue at different points in time. In the *early* stages of the development of an issue, people seem oblivious to the consequences of their opinions and their views are mushy and full of contradictions. In later stages, their views grow settled, firm, and thoughtful.

In the course of conducting hundreds of studies of public opinion, I have watched as the public gradually has clarified its thinking on issues of importance to it, and eventually

arrived at thoughtful, considered conclusions. I began to think of these as “public judgments.” For example, in the 1950s the public came to the judgment that solitary go-it-alone leadership doesn’t make sense for America and that

In public judgment, facts and values are indistinguishable from each other.

the United States needs allies to help it carry out the leadership responsibilities of a great power. Ever since, the public has never wavered from this judgment, even in periods when foreign affairs distract public attention from urgent domestic concerns or when America’s political leadership is tempted to act alone against the wishes of our nation’s friends and allies.

In public judgment, facts and values are indistinguishable from each other. Average Americans judge whether a policy makes sense without differentiating sharply between practical and moral considerations. In making a judgment,



people take into account the facts as they understand them *and* their personal goals and moral values *and* their sense of what is best for others as well as themselves. For example, in weighing the pros and cons of decriminalizing drugs, people tend to make their judgments on whether “it is the right thing to do” and not only on whether it might reduce crime rates.

The public’s anger at managed health-care organizations for putting profits ahead of people’s health reflects their sense that such policies are destructive both morally and practically. When majorities of the public form judgments about capital punishment, whether for or against, they understand that sometimes the criminal justice system miscarries and innocent people are condemned to death; and simultaneously they take into account their own values about the sacredness of life, the requirements of justice, and the well-being of the society. Their social values and personal morality, their interpretation of the meaning of life, and whatever statistics they happen to know about crime rates are all aspects of a single, indivisible judgment.

We can, of course, separate out the factual information and the values analytically into two piles and insist that policymakers, in the interests of objectivity, put their values aside. But in doing so, we would be playing a game of abstraction that will lead to many undesirable dead ends. I remember when public opinion turned against the Vietnam War. The elites in Washington, “the best and the brightest,” as David Halberstam ironically labeled them, were hung up on their “village pacification ratios” and other quasi facts long after the public had reached its considered judgment that the effort was no longer worth the cost. The public’s judgment was essentially a moral one, and it was a form of knowledge superior to the mountain of factual information at the disposal of the leadership in Washington.

It is not that policymakers deride judgment as a human quality. On the contrary, good judgment is highly valued. But it is valued as a personality trait, like being courteous to strangers or having a good sense of humor. It is not seen as a formal requirement for making policy or practicing one's profession. Some people have good judgment; others do not. That's the way the chips fall. In choosing people to fill top-level policy positions, good judgment is sometimes highly valued. But it is not something leaders expect from the public. And when it comes to defining the kind of formal knowledge needed for shaping policy, moral judgment is usually left out of consideration. The assumption is that moral judgment is one thing, knowledge is another; let's not get the two mixed up.

According to the conventional view, good quality of public opinion comes from being well informed; poor quality of public opinion is synonymous with being badly informed. It would be perverse to deny that in many situations factual information is relevant to quality of opinion. If I want to know whether a bridge is safe to drive on, I want the best-informed expert opinion available. But if I want to know which one of two candidates will make the better president, I would place more trust in the judgment of the voters than in the well-informed views of the TV pundits who follow the campaign.

Obviously, information plays some role in shaping public opinion. But usually it is a secondary role. To assume that public opinion is invariably improved by inundating people with data greatly exaggerates the relevance and importance of information. Over a period of years, it gradually dawned on me that the creative processes whereby people convert raw opinion into considered judgments are essentially dialogic.

All three essential characteristics of dialogue contribute to improving the quality of public judgment. Empathic listening, for example, is indispensable to forming sound public judgments. The quality of people's opinions improves

The creative processes whereby people convert opinion into judgments are essentially dialogic.

as they attend to the views and experiences of others. I have watched people's views change on a variety of issues—attitudes toward their employers, immigration, health care, school reform, teenage pregnancy, assisted suicide, race relations, drug abuse, free speech, punishment for crimes, the president's sex habits—when they have been exposed to a diversity of viewpoints and have listened to them empathically. In forming their own judgments, it is very helpful for people to hear how others feel about the same issues that concern them.

The ability of people to influence one another as equals also contributes to the quality of public opinion. As in all forms of dialogue, the quality of public opinion is best served when coercive pressure is reduced to its barest minimum. An interesting example is the growth of the gender gap in presidential elections in the 1980s and 1990s. Before that time, the women's vote followed the men's. The disparity between the political outlook of men and women culminated in the huge gender gap of 1996—a whopping 26 percentage points. The huge disparity between the male and female vote reflected the growing autonomy of women as they freed themselves from the pressures of husbands and fathers. (In the 1996 election, men and women of both political parties held strikingly different

attitudes toward the role of government in maintaining a social safety net for those in need.)

The dialogic process of laying bare one's most cherished assumptions—the third essential feature of making judgments—works as well as it does because of a dynamic that psychologists

Laying bare one's most cherished assumptions is an essential feature of making judgments.

call “working through”: the hard work involved when people absorb, assimilate, and adapt to emotion-laden events, such as failures, separations, and traumas, that cause them to question their most cherished assumptions. Factual information free of emotion takes very little time to work through. A woman writes a note to her husband saying “I am leaving your dinner in the fridge.” The husband takes no longer to digest this bit of factual information than he does to read the note. But suppose that instead of the note reading, “I am leaving your dinner in the fridge,” it read, “I am leaving *you*.” The information content is conveyed instantly. But it may take months or years for the husband to work through its full emotional meaning.

Why is the exchange of views in dialogue so much more effective in advancing people's understanding than the more direct forms of conveying information to people in the form of news reports, articles, or books? The writings of the late philosopher Hannah Arendt provide us with an insightful answer. She believes that dialogue is a powerful method for uncovering and testing the truths of human experience. It does so through a process that Arendt calls “representative thinking.”

In dialogue, I present my own unique way of looking at an issue. I then heed your way of looking at it. A third and a fourth and a fifth participant in the dialogue present their perspectives. The judgment of all participants is enriched by their ability to incorporate all of the varied perspectives. We are mutually engaged in representative thinking.

When people who share a common purpose do dialogue, each participant develops a depth of perspective that is not possible when the issue is examined from a single point of view. Through dialogue we fashion a communal perspective on the goals and values that guide our lives. To this search for mutual understanding we bring our entire life experience.

When spoken by an individual, the familiar phrase *It seems to me . . .* is just an idiosyncratic opinion. But as dialogue unfolds and people interact with one another, modifying their points of view, each *It seems to me . . .* is tempered and enriched in the light of others. All of the *It seems to me . . .* judgments add up to something more than a random collection of opinions; they reveal an issue viewed from a great variety of perspectives and experiences: they show representative thinking at work. Such truth seeking is a joint endeavor in which we actively pool our collective wisdom. The truths of how to live together can, Arendt argued, be gained only by representing reality from this kind of variety of perspectives.

For this understanding to develop and grow, the shared problems and values of those who would form a community must be viewed from many different perspectives. Out of this cauldron of communal consideration a limited number of shared understandings will be formed, some of which will prove to be transitory while others will stand the test of time.

Thus, in helping people to move from raw opinion to considered judgment, dialogue engages them in a complex, time-consuming, intensely

involving process as they agonize over how to take the perspectives of others into account as they match the facts with their values and feelings on troubling issues.

This process is sharply different from an elite's decision making, in which a conscious effort is

Interaction among people creates shared perspectives in which facts and values are inextricably intertwined.

made to push values into the background in the interest of preserving objectivity. But life being what it is, the values that are shoved out the front door sneak in through the back door. Values can never be excluded from policy decisions. When we try to do so, we delude ourselves.

My first full-time job was with a business research firm in New York in the early 1950s. The firm immediately assigned me to a research project for a client. As the project progressed, I grew more and more enthusiastic about our work because it brought to light information important to the company's future.

When the head of the firm, a thoughtful and perceptive man, failed to send the final report to the company as soon as it was finished, I felt keenly disappointed; and after a week had passed with the report still undelivered, I asked when he intended to mail it to the client. "You can't send a report like that in the mail," he said with some annoyance. "It raises all sorts of questions about the way the company does its business and it calls on them to make big changes. We'll have to go and present it in person. That's what I'm trying to arrange."

I remember arguing with him: "Isn't it a waste of time and money for us to take a sleeper back and forth to Detroit?" (There were no jets at the time.) "Besides," I added, "there isn't much we can add to what is already in the report. Isn't it better for them to read it at their own pace than to have to listen to so many detailed findings in one sitting?"

He replied, "Oh boy, have you got a lot to learn!" Patiently, he explained the facts of life to me: "There's a lot at stake for them. If they do what the report suggests, it's going to cost them millions of dollars, and it's a huge risk. Top executives don't make up their minds from a piece of paper. Our fancy methodology isn't going to convince them. They want to see us, ask us questions, see if we know what we're talking about. They trust me because I've been working with them for years. But this is a bigger deal than anything I've done for them up to now. And the only thing they know about you is that you're young and inexperienced. Luckily, they don't know what an innocent you are. They have to size you up, see if you speak with forked tongue."

I respected the judgment. But I still thought it odd that a company would spend tens of thousands of dollars on a factual inquiry conducted



in the most rigorous fashion and then judge its validity through an oral presentation and a conversation with us. It didn't make sense to me. I had come from the world of academic standards. I wasn't familiar with the practical world.

As a method of adding wisdom to knowledge, dialogue ought to enjoy greater credibility.

That was my first exposure to two different ways of assessing validity—through formal methodologies and through making practical judgments about the people doing the research. In subsequent years, I would recall my youthful naïveté with embarrassment. It soon became apparent to me that there was *always* a gap between facts and the decisions executives make, and the more important the decision, the larger the gap. To cope, executives learn to place their confidence in a combination of their own experience, available information (however limited), and their personal values applied to judging people.



Most policies depend far more on values than on factual information. In our political system, for policies to be acceptable they must be seen as consonant with a wide range of values, such as fairness, freedom, compassion, safety, moral legitimacy, the preservation of public order, and so on. In policies that arouse the most passion and concern, these values often conflict with each other. Current drug policy, for example, insists that marijuana be branded as an illegal substance, even though from a pragmatic point of view decriminalizing pot might reduce crime rates. Here the value of public safety conflicts with the value of moral legitimacy. Proposals for education reform to give vouchers to parents so that they can select the school of their choice for their children pit the value of preserving the public school system against the value of individual choice. Welfare reform that requires mothers of young children to enter the workforce even though doing so may not be good for the children pits fairness against concern for children.

All significant social policies call for weighing competing values against one another and playing them off against whatever factual information may be available. In this complex process, the interaction among people creates shared perspectives in which facts and values are inextricably intertwined. These shared perspectives, in which values are central, constitute an important form of knowledge. It is not fake knowledge, second-rate knowledge, or mere ventilation of feelings. It is simply a different kind of knowledge than the kind experts generate. In our culture, however, value-laden perspectives aren't considered to be knowledge and so are not taken seriously when policy is being shaped.

Leaders know how much discipline it takes to stay with the facts and not let their own wishful thinking and personal values confuse issues. They perceive, correctly, that the public

does not observe this discipline and that average Americans are long on feelings and opinions and short on factual information. In their view, to enter into dialogue with the public for purposes of shaping policy is to put feelings ahead of facts and to compromise the standards associated with objectivity, professionalism, expertise, and specialization. In effect, to endorse dialogue with the public enthusiastically, they would have to abandon a paradigm of knowledge that is as much a part of them as the way they sign their name or part their hair.

Even leaders who are flexible about most things will cling tenaciously to the cognitive frameworks they developed in their youth for coping with the confusion of the world. These tend to be among the deepest layers of one's buried assumptions. They are difficult to change even when they have grown obsolete and dysfunctional.

It is so, at least partly, because our culture is hooked on splitting the world into artificially separate compartments of facts and values. The solution is to become less rigid about the split and to devote more attention to ways of knowing, including dialogue, that intermingle values and facts.

Webster defines *wisdom* as "the ability to judge soundly and to deal sagaciously with the facts, especially as they relate to life and conduct." This dictionary definition helps us to distinguish between information and wisdom. Information is fact-driven. Wisdom is the more encompassing term; it goes beyond factual knowledge by adding values to facts. Since most public policies bear on life and conduct, we need to bring values as well as factual knowledge to bear. The methods of science and professional expertise are excellent for generating factually based knowledge; the methods of dialogue are excellent for dealing with this knowledge wisely. The point of engaging the public in dialogue

is that by adding the value-rich perspectives of the public to the information-rich perspectives of the expert, we can create wiser policies.

The claim that policy should be grounded in judgments that mix fact and value together collides so directly with the positivist paradigm of knowledge that either the claim must be false or the paradigm flawed. Since I believe that the claim is valid, the fault must lie with the paradigm.

It is here that controversy arises. My goal is not to propose some grand new paradigm of knowledge in order to justify a claim about the truth value of dialogue; that would be like building a library in order to house one book. Far more modestly, I am proposing to take a single step outside the conventional paradigm by challenging the usefulness of the rigid distinction between facts and values when it comes to discovering truths about human living.

As a method of adding wisdom to knowledge, dialogue ought to enjoy greater credibility than it now has. Without such credibility it will remain a mere nicety, suitable for earnest civic groups practicing citizenship or for organizations seeking to build closer bonds among people



who work together. With it, it will become a powerful tool both for shaping policy and for strengthening our democracy.

Astonishingly, the idea of knowledge as a hierarchy has persisted for 2,500 years, although the form of knowledge privileged to perch at the very top has changed a number of times. Over the centuries the Platonic Ideas were dis-

Each tool of knowledge has its own appropriate uses . . . those of dialogue and related ways of knowing are designed to understand the human predicament and the truths of living.

placed from their privileged position at the apex of the hierarchy by other contenders for top billing such as conceptions of God revealed through faith, conceptions of reason revealed through logic, and, ever since Newtonian physics in the 17th century, the laws of nature revealed through scientific inquiry.

But the bottom spot on the hierarchy has never changed. There, occupying the pits, never being elevated above their lowly rank, are found the judgments of the masses, still deemed to be imprisoned in a dark cave of ignorance and prejudice, mistaking appearances for reality.

To myself and others privileged to attend elite colleges, it made perfect sense that we were being trained as an intellectual and professional elite who would be privy to the highest reaches of knowledge, separating us from and elevating us above the opinions of the mass of people, who do not have access to the same knowledge. In earlier eras, priests who had been trained to

believe that their form of sacred knowledge belonged at the top of the hierarchy must have felt the same thrill at being initiated into the mysteries of true knowledge. Many of today's elites share this same conviction that they possess a higher order of knowledge than others in the society.

Like most people raised in the Western tradition, I began my professional life with the assumption that knowledge is ordered in a hierarchical fashion, with science at the top, professional and scholarly knowledge in the middle, and the opinions of the mass public at the bottom. It did not take long for disillusionment to set in. After several years of studying the opinions of the public, I realized with a shock that average Americans possessed insights different from, but certainly not inferior to, the knowledge of elites. Yet for most of my professional life I was rarely able to convince those who had little contact with the public of the validity of this insight. They were too immersed in the tradition of the hierarchy to see what, from their point of view, had to be a disagreeable reality they would rather not see.

Each tool of knowledge has its own appropriate uses, those of science being to understand, predict, and control nature while those of dialogue and related ways of knowing are designed to understand the human predicament and the truths of living. The ideas that come from science and the ideas that come from dialogue are both parts of the web of knowledge.

Another influential philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, has devoted a large part of his life's work to elaborating a theory of pluralistic ways of knowing. Habermas has tirelessly argued that knowledge is *inextricably* linked to human purpose and is never a stand-alone body of information and theories. This means that instead of a single hierarchy of knowledge there are multiple ways of knowing, each appropriate for a different purpose.

Knowledge, then, is a pluralistic phenomenon. For purposes of gaining control over people and things, the knowledge of technical and scientific experts has proven superior to other ways of knowing. But for the truths of human experience—learning how to live together in peaceful, creative, civilized societies—technical expert knowledge is awkward, heavy-handed, and unresponsive. It fails to address the great questions of how to live, what values to pursue, what meaning to find in life, how to achieve a just and humane world, and how to be a fully realized human person—all essentially issues of judgment often arrived at through dialogue.

It would be nonsense to claim that dialogue gives answers to life's dilemmas and that through dialogue people will find values to live by. The knowledge claims I am making for dialogue are much more modest. We need to use dialogue to focus on the collective problems of living together in communities. For all of its powers, scientific expertise has no answers for us here. But dialogue can help us discover the truths of living together *if* we change the prevailing paradigm of truth and wisdom.



In summary, the strategy I am proposing is aimed at reducing elite resistance by focusing on the obsolete nature of the notion of a single hierarchy of knowledge—the main intellectual supports of the elites' blind spot. The last thing we want to do is to bog policymakers down in an overly idealistic or naïvely populist conception that “the people” are always ahead of the experts and elites. Going this route would rob the concept of public engagement of its seriousness. Having made this acknowledgment, however, the next step in the argument is to deconstruct the elites' blind spot. It makes no sense to draw sharp lines between facts and values or to assume that there is one and only one path to knowledge and truth. I believe that the judicious use of dialogue can transform the public into an invaluable partner of leaders and elites in shaping policy because dialogue brings forth the wisdom inherent in the collective public experience.

Public-opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich is the co-founder and chair of Public Agenda and the author of twelve books. This essay is excerpted from his 1999 volume, The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation.

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