

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2017

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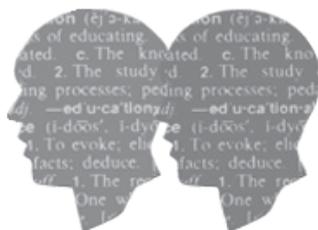
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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We dedicate this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* to Dan Yankelovich, who just passed away. His writing about public judgment has been critical to Kettering's understanding of deliberation. His seminal book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* is required reading for thoughtful scholars of democracy.

He was not only an emeritus board member of the Kettering Foundation; he was also a great friend. We will all miss him.

David Mathews

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THE BUMPY ROAD FROM MASS OPINION TO PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Daniel Yankelovich

As a capacity shared by all citizens, public judgment is different from expert knowledge. However, it is not the same as mere public opinion. Rather, judgment implies a civic process of coming together across differences. The late Daniel Yankelovich illustrates this civic process in a classic study that helped to shape Kettering's understanding of deliberation. The following is drawn from Chapter 5 (pages 59-65) of Daniel Yankelovich's Coming to Public Judgment, published in 1991 by Syracuse University Press.

One must be careful not to denigrate being well informed as a measure of quality in public opinion. This is the dominant norm, and it prevails wherever public opinion is taken into account—in public-policy circles, in academic disciplines that study public opinion, and especially among journalists. What some journalists mean by being well informed is, however, too narrow: it is judging people as if they were memory chips. Fortunately, many journalists (and others who hold this point of view) are too sophisticated to reduce being well informed to a sand pile of data. They have a broader concept that includes coherence of outlook and contextual understanding as well as information about the raw “facts.” But broad or narrow, concepts of quality-as-well-informed all share one common characteristic that differentiates them from the model of quality-as-public-judgment . . . [t]hey all stress the cognitive, information-absorbing side of public opinion. In contrast, the public-judgment model stresses the emotive, valuing, ethical side, which includes the cognitive base but moves beyond it.

In the dominant model, poor quality means that essential information is lacking. In the public-judgment model, poor quality (mass opinion) means being caught in unresolved cross pressures. The difference is striking. Consider a simple example of how, from the point of view of the two models, one might judge poor quality opinion in two people opposed to the nuclear arms race.

Dominant Model. “You can’t take his opinion seriously because he is poorly informed. He doesn’t know that you get more bang-for-the-buck with nuclear weapons than with conventional ones. He thinks, erroneously, that the country can save money on the defense budget by substituting conventional forces for nuclear arms. And he is under the illusion that nuclear weapons accounts for the lion’s share of the defense budget.”

Public-Judgment Model. “You can’t take his opinion seriously because he hasn’t resolved where he truly stands. He is opposed to the nuclear arms race because he fears for the safety of his grandchildren in a nuclearized world, and he wants to see the money now spent on nuclear weapons devoted to some more constructive purpose, like protecting the environment. But at the same time, he is an ardent patriot, and he buys into the argument that loyalty to the administration supports its program of nuclear defense.”

In this example, the opinion holder is poorly informed and is caught waffling between two competing sets of values. But note how different the two

The information-driven model leads to a concept of public education as a one-way process: the expert speaks; the citizen listens.

descriptions are, and more importantly, the implied remedy for poor quality. In the first instance, the remedy is to impart correct information about the relative costs of conventional compared with nuclear weapons, and to gather accurate statistics about the proportion of the defense budget devoted to nuclear defense. In the second instance, the

remedy is to stimulate resolution of competing priorities and values (loyalty to the administration compared with holding opposing convictions).

The information-driven model leads to a concept of public education as a one-way process: the expert speaks; the citizen listens. Questions may arise about the best technique for grabbing the public’s attention and conveying the relevant information. But conceptually, the model is simple and unidirectional: the expert’s role is to impart information to the public skillfully and effectively; the citizen’s role is to absorb the information and form an opinion based on it.

So deeply embedded in our culture is this model that it blocks from view the process of shifting from mass opinion to public judgment. In the dominant model, the remedy for poor quality is to communicate more information. What is the remedy for overcoming mass opinion? How do you get from it to public judgment? Admittedly, the path is difficult—a bumpy road full of potholes and roadblocks and detours. The territory is unexplored because it has been so completely hidden by the more familiar quality-as-well-informed model. But if one steps back to gain perspective, the road from mass opinion to public judgment, as it might be seen on a map, is surprisingly straight and orderly.



There are three stages in moving from mass opinion to public judgment. . . . Only when the full picture of the three stages is clearly set forth can one appreciate how profound the difference is between this concept and the quality-as-well-informed model.

The purpose of bringing the differences between the two models to light is both practical and theoretical. The practical purpose is to develop a methodology for enhancing quality public opinion. American society possesses a wide range of institutions for conveying information and making citizens better informed. So powerful are these that the danger of information overload is greater than the danger of information malnourishment.

And yet, ironically, there is want in the midst of plenty. As we have seen, Americans are not materially “better informed” than they were forty years ago when people were less well educated and not nearly as bombarded with information. This opinion poll finding suggests that something is dreadfully wrong—either in the definition of what it means to be well informed, or with how information is organized and conveyed to citizens, or, as I am proposing, with the very concept of quality public opinion. If we focus on the new model of quality-as-public-judgment, we will discover new technologies for overcoming mass opinion and new ways to navigate the tortuous path to public judgment.

In the several decades I have been studying the differences between mass opinion and public judgment, it has gradually dawned on me that, apart from its practical uses, there is an important theoretical objective to be gained. The “laws of motion” in moving from mass opinion to public judgment are so different from those involved in moving from being poorly informed to being well informed that a whole new light can be shed on the nature of public opinion, and particularly on how Americans gradually force themselves to resolve their conflicting values to form a mature body of responsible public judgment. Therefore, a better theoretical understanding of how public opinion deepens in quality and judgment contributes to our understanding of what makes our democracy work.

Before plunging ahead on the journey from mass opinion to public judgment, it would be good to say a word about the *desirability* of the practical objective. There will be some readers who think: “If American attitudes toward capital punishment and abortion and sex education in the schools are examples of public judgment, then the last thing our society needs is new techniques for generating it more quickly and efficiently. These are divisive, emotion-laden issues on which large parts of the public hold wrong-headed views. If my only alternative is mass opinion, then I will take that. If people are inconsistent and

hold mushy points of view, they are easily persuaded to shift one way or the other, leaving room for leadership to do what is right without ‘consulting’ the public.”

This is not a trivial argument. Moreover, in one form or another, it is held by many of our elites. But it is untenable when examined closely. First of all, not all instances of public judgment are divisive and controversial. Most, in fact, help the country to move toward the kind of consensus on which successful political

If the public is bound to have the ultimate last word—and it is—it is far better that it be based on responsible public judgment, however prickly, than on mass opinion, however malleable.

action must be based. Examples include: public support for the foreign policy of the postwar period, with its willingness to offer reconciliation to former enemies and to devote considerable resources via the Marshall Plan to reconstructing the economies of our allies. It includes also the post-Sputnik consensus that America had to improve its technical and math education in the schools to meet the Soviet challenge in space, and the post-Afghanistan consensus supporting both Presidents Carter and Reagan in their

policies of increasing the US defense budget. The country is now in the throes of forming a national consensus on the importance of doing more to protect the environment. . . . It will take several additional years before public judgment on this issue has jelled, but the direction is clear.

In our system of representative democracy, settling for mass opinion instead of public judgment is not viable. If the United States were not so active a democracy, perhaps this alternative might work. In countries like Japan or Germany, where there are strong traditions of authority, the point of view of elites carries much more weight than does public opinion. In fact, elites often shape public opinion. In the United States, however, elites still exert much less influence than in these other countries despite the creeping expertism that we have already noted. Sooner or later public opinion makes itself felt, sometimes directly, as in the public pressure that undermined the policy of support for the Contras in Nicaragua in the Reagan administration and persuaded President Reagan to withdraw the marines from Lebanon after a number of marines had been killed by a terrorist bomb.

More often, public opinion makes itself felt indirectly through watershed elections. The election of 1980 is a good example. The country turned to the right-wing populist Ronald Reagan out of disillusionment with the

policies of liberalism that had characterized both political parties in earlier years (including the Nixon and Ford administrations). The public forced the change in the country's direction.

If Americans had a choice, if, that is, American culture and its institutions supported governance by elites, with the public staying out of the political process except on rare occasions (as in present-day Japan), then perhaps an apathetic, malleable public mired in mass opinion might be a thinkable option. But given the system as it now exists, there is no way to keep the public out. If the public is bound to have the ultimate last word—and it is—it is far better that it be based on responsible public judgment, however prickly, than on mass opinion, however malleable.



From Mass Opinion To Public Judgment

In the quality-as-public-judgment model, there are three stages of evolution. The first is “consciousness raising.” The second is “working through.” The third is “resolution.”

Stage I

Consciousness raising is the stage in which the public learns about an issue and becomes aware of its existence and meaning. I call it consciousness raising because this term, borrowed from the women's movement, is more accurate than “creating greater awareness.” Consciousness raising means much more than mere awareness. One can be aware of an issue without feeling that it is important or that anything needs to be done about it. When, however, we speak about consciousness raising on the environment, for example, the intention is clear. When one's consciousness is raised, not only does awareness grow but so does concern and readiness for action.



Consciousness raising is a process that our society understands well and that our institutions perform well. More surprising, perhaps, are the number and variety of obstacles that prevent consciousness raising from proceeding smoothly. These obstacles are worth citing and illustrating.

There are several clear-cut features of the consciousness-raising stage. It is largely media driven. Events are a major factor in expediting the process (e.g., the accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl raised people's

consciousness about the safety problems of nuclear power very quickly). Sometimes consciousness raising proceeds with agonizing slowness, but, unlike the other two stages, it is often accomplished with great speed and in “real time” (i.e., in the time it takes to convey the relevant information). And the public whose consciousness is raised can be in a passive and receptive frame of mind without needing to exert any special effort.

In recent years we have seen large-scale consciousness raising on a variety of issues, including:

- the dangers of AIDS;
- the difficulties that beset primary and secondary education;
- the threat to US competitiveness from Japan;
- the end of the cold war with the Soviet Union;
- the importance of nutrition and physical fitness;
- the dangers of drug addiction;
- the mounting threats to the environment;
- the dangers of being dependent on the Middle East for our oil supplies.

Stage 2

For the second stage, I borrow a term from psychology, “working through.” When the consciousness-raising stage has been completed, the individual must confront the need for change. The change may be slight or it may be very great. A woman who has undergone consciousness raising in her marriage may be faced with the prospect of separation or divorce or confrontation with her husband. A man whose consciousness has been raised about the dangers of cholesterol may be faced with the need to make drastic changes in his diet. Many changes are less demanding and traumatic. . . . Often it is not people’s overt behavior that must change, but their attitudes: the man caught in the cross pressures of loyalty to his president and the desire to switch national priorities is obliged to face up to his ambivalence and stop waffling—to come down on one side of the issue or the other.

As observers of human psychology know well, all change is difficult. When people are caught in cross pressures, before they can resolve them it is necessary to struggle with the conflicts and ambivalences and defenses they

arouse. Change requires hard work. Rarely does the course of change proceed smoothly. Rather, it is full of backsliding and procrastination and avoidance. “Two steps forward and one step back” is the apt common description for the process. Psychologists call it “working through,” especially when one is reconciling oneself to a painful loss.

To an extraordinary degree, the requirements of the working-through stage differ from those of consciousness raising. When working through, people must abandon the passive-receptive mode that works well enough for consciousness raising. They must be actively engaged and involved. Rarely is working through completed quickly. Typically, it takes an irreducible period of time—much longer than the time needed to convey and absorb new information. The length of time depends on the emotional significance of the change to the individual.

Though events can sometimes affect the working-through process, they are not critical to it: working through is a largely internal process that individuals have to work at and ultimately achieve for themselves. Nor is working through media driven or information dependent as is consciousness raising.

Generally, people engaged in working through may have all the information they need long before they are willing to confront the cross pressures that ensnare them. And, finally, unlike the consciousness-raising stage, our society

is not well equipped with the institutions or knowledge it needs to expedite working through. Our culture does not understand it very well, and by and large does not do a good job with it. In brief, then, there is a wrenching discontinuity between consciousness raising and working through that is a major source of difficulty in any effort to improve the quality of public opinion.

To complete working through successfully, the public must resolve where it stands cognitively, emotionally, and morally.

Stage 3

Stage 3 is resolution, the result of successful consciousness raising and working through. . . . (To say that public judgment has been achieved is just another way of stating that the public has completed its journey through the three stages.)

The most important point to make about Stage 3 is that resolution is multifaceted. On any issue, to complete working through successfully, the public must resolve where it stands cognitively, emotionally, and morally.

These facets of resolution are interrelated, but they each require hard work in their own right and are surprisingly independent of one another.

Cognitive resolution requires that people clarify fuzzy thinking, reconcile inconsistencies, break down the walls of the artificial compartmentalizing that keeps them from recognizing related aspects of the same issue, take relevant facts and new realities into account, and grasp the consequences of various choices with which they are presented.

Emotional resolution means that people have to confront their own ambivalent feelings, accommodate themselves to unwelcome realities, and overcome their urge to procrastinate and to avoid the issue. Of all the obstacles to resolution, none is more difficult to overcome than the need to reconcile deeply felt conflicting values.

In arriving at moral resolution, people's first impulse is to put themselves and their own needs and desires ahead of their ethical commitments. But once they have time to reflect on their choices, the ethical dimension comes into play and people struggle to do the right thing. Issues such as AIDS and homelessness and health care for those who cannot afford insurance cannot be resolved until the ethical dimension has been considered and dealt with, one way or the other.

Each one of these dimensions is beset with obstacles.



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