

The Changing Conversation in America

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Toward a National Conversation About Public Issues

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In a speech to the National Press Club in 1994, Sheldon Hackney called for a “national conversation” about the issues confronting us as a society. Not only because the National Endowment for the Humanities offered to fund projects that aid and abet such a national conversation, Hackney’s comments have been taken very seriously.

But the term *national conversation* itself is odd. When we think of communication in a national context, we generally think of the mass media. Notions of the *New York Times* or a televised address from the Oval Office come to mind: We think of media moguls, celebrity journalists, and hard-bitten, cynical campaign managers.

On the other hand, when we think of conversation, less public figures in more intimate settings come to mind. For example, one of the illustrations chosen by the Smithsonian to publicize the series of lectures for which this chapter was originally prepared shows a little girl whispering to another, whose face displays delighted shock at the contents of the secret being revealed; another illustration portrays two men in a rustic setting talking amiably.

What have activities as private and pleasant as these to do with the rough-and-tumble hurly-burly big business of communication at the national level?

What, indeed? Joining *national* and *conversation* is a figure of speech, a deliberate oxymoron whose tension creates a space in which we can think of something new or of something very familiar in a new way. The figure of speech can be used to suggest that there is something amiss with communication at the national level, that it has lost—or perhaps never had, or perhaps should be made to have—something of the character of conversation.

Many people in addition to Hackney have taken to using the term *conversation* to refer to communication events broader in scope than those at the dinner table or whispered secrets among friends.² Their purpose is to emphasize the distinctive structure of conversation as it differs from other forms of communication. For example, unlike the one-way, linear model of communication implicit in the metaphor (and often in the practice) of broadcasting, conversations are interactional and systemic.

Let's take these intuitions seriously. Let's assume, at least for the sake of argument, that our national communication would be better if it had more of the characteristics of conversation. If so, we should begin by understanding the characteristics of conversation.

WHAT IS CONVERSATION LIKE?

There are many forms of communication, although we have an underdeveloped vocabulary for identifying and describing them. We might start by contrasting conversation with public speaking (in which one person addresses many, fixed in their role of "audience") and with mass communication (in which messages are produced and distributed to a largely *anonymous class of consumers who are not physically in the presence of the performers or of each other*). That is, although a news release—and the subsequent furor it creates—is certainly part of the process of public communication, the speech in which it is announced and the text that is faxed and reproduced in newspapers around the country comprise different forms of communication than a conversation among senators or newspaper editors about that news release.

The most distinctive feature of conversation can be elucidated from its etymology. The word *conversation* is formed by combining *con*, which means "with," and *vert*, which means "turn," as in a religious conversion, a convertible automobile, or a *version* of a story. A conversation is a form

of communication in which the participants turn with each other in a patterned dance of reciprocity.

But take turns doing what? At the most superficial level, a conversation involves taking turns as speakers and listeners. It is distinguished from mass communication, in which differential access to the means of production restricts the participants to specific roles. Because not everyone owns NBC, only those who do get to "produce" *Dateline*; the rest of us only get to choose whether to watch it. By definition, in "mass" communication, most of the people are "stuck" in their roles as "consumers" of messages. This structure limits the quality of the communication that can occur (Angus, 1994; Dervin & Clark, 1993).

The first and most obvious response to the limiting effects of the structure of mass communication is to call for greater "access" to the means of production of the messages in the system. In fact, the development of new communication technologies makes this vision a feasible one. The "first-unit cost" of producing messages continues to drop with advances in desktop publishing, video cameras and editing equipment, digital recording of video and audio materials, and access to the Internet. It is conceivable that everyone can become a producer of mass-mediated messages.

But is the quality of public discourse necessarily improved if everyone is a producer? Doesn't this vision evoke a sense of cacophony, as every self-indulgent communicator is equipped with the full panoply of modern message-making and message-sending technology? Are the technical and economic restrictions of the "public sphere" to be eliminated only to create the reality of bedlam?

Thoughts like these, I believe, lie behind Hackney's call for a national conversation. Of course we need to increase the access to the means of production of mass-mediated messages, particularly for members of marginalized groups and proponents of marginalized positions. However, it is not sufficient to increase the number of "speakers" unless there is also an increase in the amount of listening, responding, and talking back that goes on.

We know that there are qualitative differences in conversation. Some intimate exchanges of messages are in fact monologues in disguise. The mere fact that speakers exchange "turns" in speaking and not-speaking does not mean that either or both are listening to, responding to, and being responded to by the other.

In what we might call a "genuine" conversation, the participants coordinate with each other in a sophisticated dance in which they exchange "positions" within a common moral order (Harré, 1983; Pearce, 1994;

Shotter, 1992). That is, the difference between "speaking" and "listening" in a genuine conversation is not just a matter of using one's ears rather than one's mouth. It is the assumption of different positions, which are defined by clusters of rights, duties, responsibilities, and obligations.

The existence of this moral order—and of the different rights, duties, responsibilities, and obligations that constitute different positions within it—is no mystery, even though it is so familiar that we often take it for granted. It can be demonstrated easily. If I were to say, "I am hungry," it would make no sense for you to ask, "What makes you think so?" In the statement "I am hungry," I am taking a "first-person position" and avowing something about myself. The right to make such avowals is what constitutes a first-person position.

There are times when you would deny me the right to make such avowals unchallenged. For example, you might deprive me of my ability to take a first-person position if I denied my guilt but was convicted in a fair trial, if you were a psychiatrist who committed me to a course of treatment even though I insisted that I was healthy, or if I were 6 years old and protested that I did not need a nap and you were my parent and judged that I did. Note that these events are not primarily disputes about the truth of certain propositions; they are struggles about the ability to assume particular positions within the moral order. Felons, psychotics, and children are granted only limited ability to act as "first persons" in relation to their own experience; they are not permitted to be the "agents" of their own purposes and perceptions.

Contrast the rights, duties, responsibilities, and obligations of the first- and third-person positions. If I say, "*You* are hungry," I am taking a third-person position, and it makes perfect sense for you or someone else to ask, "What makes you think so?" In the third-person position, I have the responsibility to account for my observations.

The claim about whether you or I are hungry is trivial except as it reveals the presence of a moral order in which we are all located in various positions and in which each position is constituted by clusters of rights, duties, responsibilities, and obligations. More important are the distinctions in the moral responsibilities of the roles of speaker and listener in a democracy. As Benjamin Barber (1984) put it,

"I will listen" means to the strong democrat not that I will scan my adversary's position for weaknesses and potential trade-offs, nor even . . . that I will tolerantly permit him to say whatever he chooses. It means, rather, "I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good. (p. 174)

It is impossible, both in principle and in practice, to describe fully all the positions that we inhabit and all of the moral injunctions that apply to them. However, our ability to engage each other in conversation is based on a sufficient commonality in our moral orders combined with a sufficient sensitivity to our differences and an ability to improvise such that we can manage to coordinate our actions and meanings. Conversations are dances in which we and others move among positions in the moral order in ways that are contingent on each other and patterned by what each of us does to anticipate and respond to each other.

We might say that Hackney's call for a national conversation is a critique of the forms of communication in which public issues are being discussed. Using this understanding of the distinctive nature of conversation, we might ask several questions regarding the discussion of public issues as such discussions occur in newspapers and radio talk shows, in political campaigns, and on the floor in Congress.

First, are particular voices being systematically excluded? That is, by what means are certain persons, groups, or voices denied the ability to act as first persons in avowing their own experience, perceptions, or purposes? Who are the equivalents, in what passes for a national conversation, of felons, psychotics, and children? Whose ability to act as first persons in such a conversation *should* be limited?

Second, are the participants in these forms of communication accepting the moral obligations of speaking? Does their sensitivity to the duties, responsibilities, and obligations of the first-person perspective equal that of the rights that attend it? That is, do they express their beliefs and passions? When they do, do they express themselves truthfully? Have they accepted the responsibility of reflexive analysis of their own reasons for their commitments? Have they discharged their obligations to consider and to be considerate of the interests of others?

Third, do the participants in the discussion of public issues accept the moral obligations of listening? That is, do they actively work to understand those who disagree with them? Do they strive to create, as Barber (1984) suggested, a "common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good" (p. 174)?

Finally, do they actually *converse*? That is, do they move among the positions of speaker and listener in a patterned dance with each other?

These questions define the basic structure of a national conversation. If any of these characteristics is absent, we might have some form of communication, but it is not conversation.

THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Hackney's call for a national conversation was clearly a criticism of the forms of communication in which public issues are being treated. Stephen Littlejohn is even more specific. There is no shortage of talk about abortion, taxes, the homeless, foreign policy after the fall of the Soviet Union, the quality of life in the inner cities, and so on, Littlejohn (1993) writes, but there is a dearth of communication that has this essential quality of conversation.

Do we really need to strive toward a national conversation? Consider two specific instances in "normal" public discourse.

On August 27, 1994, a "senior White House official" said that there was "a problem with political conversation" ("Balancing act," p. D4). He was referring to an incident earlier that day in which Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-NY) spoke against the crime bill by displaying a picture of a pig and singing to the tune of "Old McDonald Had a Farm" lyrics that described the bill as having "some pork here, some pork there, here pork, there pork, everywhere pork pork."

How should we evaluate Senator D'Amato's singing debut? From a strategic point of view, it was a smashing success: Beyond the Beltway, even as far as Chicago, this was the only aspect of the debate about the bill that was reported on television news. When I described this event in a lecture at the Smithsonian 5 months later, most people in the audience remembered it. Or should we agree with the White House official's probably jealous evaluation that D'Amato's shameless performance shows that there is "a problem with political conversation?" If there is a problem, what is it? I suspect that other "experts" in political communication saw D'Amato's success as the problem: He won the daily contest for the video or sound bite on the evening news.

I am less interested in whether Senator D'Amato or the senior White House official won the daily skirmish than in how the daily skirmish itself constitutes political discourse. One criticism that I would make of D'Amato's doggerel is that it is a "conversation-stopper." It is like a child who expresses his rage by holding his breath until he turns blue; it is like a drunk in a bar who throws a punch rather than reply to a witticism; it is like a professor who responds to an earnest-but-uninformed student's question by pointing out the student's ignorance rather than responding to her interests. Specifically, D'Amato accepted the rights inherent in the role of a speaker but spoke in such a way as to preclude his movement to the role of listener. How might one rebut his singing "some pork here,

some pork there"? Must one adapt a different nursery rhyme to make the point that the crime bill displays remarkable fiscal prudence?

My second example comes from the street rather than the Congress. Referenda about protection of equal rights for homosexuals were introduced in Oregon and Colorado. A documentary about these conflicts (Fort & Skinner-Jones, 1993) included a remarkable scene. The opening shot focuses on two hands, both with index fingers pointed, stabbing toward each other. Angry voices are overheard. As the camera pulls back, we see that the hands belong to a supporter and an opponent of the ballot referendum. Their voices overlap, and the young woman shouts:

It is by sin that men lust after men. It is by sin that women turn away from their normal nature and their lives. It is by sin. . . .

The young man shouts back:

It was by birth. It was by nature. It is. . . . There's nothing wrong with love. Even God Says "Love one another." God says "Thou shalt not judge lest ye be judged." God says "Love thy brother as thyself." God says "Share your life, enjoy the life God gave you."

The woman counters with:

Read Romans. Read Romans. . . . Read where it says in Romans. . . .

As Professor Littlejohn (1993) noticed, there is an ample amount of this kind of public discourse, but it does not have the criterial attributes of public conversation. Whatever else might be said of the exchange, both of these people clung to the first-person position, taking advantage of their rights to avow a moral principle; neither "turned" to a third-person perspective, accepting the responsibility of explaining why that principle is the relevant one, or to the second-person perspective, in which the moral obligation is to listen.

How should we think about such surrogates for conversation as the substance of public discourse? If I read John Dewey (1940) correctly, he would call this form of discourse "treason":

Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of difference of race, color, wealth, or degree of culture, are treason to the democratic way of life. (p. 223)

Democracy, Dewey (1940) believes, requires not "merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties" but "the habit of amicable cooperation," in which conflicts are taken "out of the atmosphere and medium of force . . . into that of discussion and of intelligence" and in which those who disagree with us are treated "as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends" (pp. 223-226). If Dewey is right, then contemporary public discourse is un-American and treasonous. According to James Gouinlock (1986),

Discourse in the United States is in an alarming state of deterioration; it sorely needs critical analysis and reconstruction. Communication has become increasingly ill tempered, abusive, and dogmatic; the agencies responsible for nonpartisan inquiry and reporting are too readily engaged in distortion and special pleading. The intellectual class is smug and intolerant; its members speak with contempt not only for the opinions of the general public, but for those of each other as well. (p. 5)

The situation is likely to get worse as our cultural differences expand and as our communication technology continues to develop. James Carey (1993), dean of the College of Communication at the University of Illinois, argues that

the very technology that is bringing us together physically and imaginatively is just as assuredly driving us apart. . . . To believe that we have a purchase on a new world of diversity is a delusion of those who visit difference armed only with spiritual traveler's checks . . . our received notions of democracy are tested by forms of public diversity they were never created to contain. (p. 183)

Princeton professor Jeffrey Stout (1988) agrees:

Our capacity to live peaceably with each other depends upon our ability to converse intelligibly and reason coherently. But this ability is weakened by the very differences that make it necessary. The more we need it, the weaker it becomes, and we need it very badly indeed. (p. 3)

MORE CHARACTERISTICS OF CONVERSATION

If we hope to achieve a national conversation that serves the interests of a democratic society, we ought to have a fairly specific idea of what its characteristics are. Let me cite four.

The first is that it should have the structure of a conversation rather than of some other form of communication. As described previously, this means that the public conversation will consist of a pattern of coordinated activities in which the participants exchange positions as speakers and listeners within a moral order of rights, duties, and responsibilities.

Second, conversations are made by linking the actions of two or more people. That is to say that none of us alone can perform the actions that we dread or desire; each of our acts becomes an action as it fits into or elicits corresponding acts from other people. Have you ever tried to compliment someone who would not accept it? No matter how hard you try, no matter how many nice things you say, such a person deflects them with denials, misunderstandings, or evasions, until you finally quit trying. One of the most powerful ways of understanding the public conversation is by using this notion that the actions that compose it are conjointly produced.

Third, conversations are seldom primarily "about" something. Often, the most important aspect of the conversation is the conversation itself as it structures an engagement among those who participate in it. The relationships among the conversants and their coordination as they jointly produce the events and objects of our social worlds are themselves the substance of conversations, even though it may seem that we are talking about, for example, the national debt or health care policy. The real questions are: Who am I? Who are you? Who are we? What are we doing together? What is the nature of our relationship? How are we engaged with each other?

Fourth, conversations are rule-governed activities. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) described them as "language games" or, in a more literal translation from the German, "playing in speech." Usually these rules are informal conventions developed within the course of the conversation itself. When the conversation does not seem to be achieving its purposes, the participants sometimes begin to think about the rules they are following and perhaps to develop explicit, formal rules. Those with a particular twist of mind write laws or even constitutions.

The writers of our Constitution tried to structure the public conversation in a variety of ways. They required the officials of government to submit themselves to an electoral process in which the public gets to say "yes" or "no" to their candidacy. Elections are a crude form of conversation, but better than none. In addition, the Constitutional Convention prohibited Congress from making any law restricting the people's rights of speech, press, religion, and assembly. Apparently they thought that the cultural rules for how people should engage with each other were sufficient, if only the heavy hand of government did not interfere.

Of course, the current situation differs from any that the Founders could have envisioned. They could not have imagined the development of mass media of communication that are controlled by market forces rather than political pressures, and they probably did not anticipate a society as large or culturally diverse as ours. Given the realities of contemporary society, it makes sense to ask whether the rules of engagement in public conversation are sufficient to the task.

"RULES OF ENGAGEMENT" IN THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

The term *rules of engagement* links Wittgenstein's (1953) concept of language games to current military practice. By articulating rules of engagement, commanders well behind the front lines control their battlefield forces by giving tactical commanders a basis for decision making.

In the infantry, these rules define "zones" in which soldiers have different rules for firing their weapons. By defining such zones, commanders hope to prevent casualties to noncombatants and friendly forces and to avoid "incidents" detrimental to the political and diplomatic stance of the country. As I describe these zones, think of them as analogies for public discourse. In a "free fire" zone, soldiers are told to fire at anything that moves. In a "fire on warning" zone, soldiers must first warn the other of their intention before firing. A "fire for fire" zone, of course, means that only someone who fires at a soldier is a legitimate target for return fire, and a "no fire" zone is one in which the soldier is not permitted to fire even if fired upon (M. Lyons, personal communication, November 1994).

If we do not push it too far, the concept of *rules of engagement* can be useful in understanding the ways various persons and groups relate to each other in the public conversation. Comparable to the orders about the circumstances in which soldiers may use their weapons are the rights and responsibilities to speak, to speak the truth, to disclose one's purposes, to respond to others, to respond coherently, to listen, to understand, and so forth.

I suspect that the Founders envisioned a "free marketplace of ideas" along the lines of a New England village commons, where the people know each other, are locked into complex relationships of reciprocal responsibility with each other, and regularly exchange the roles of buyers and sometimes sellers. Perhaps the rules of engagement in the village common prescribed a "no fire" or a "fire for fire" zone. However, the village common and the rules of engagement embedded in it are a poor

model of the world in which we live, Diana Woods Kincaid (1994) observed that the contemporary "marketplace of ideas" is better thought of as an anonymous shopping mall or the shopping channel on cable television. Sometimes it seems that political campaigns and radio talk shows are "free fire" zones.

FOUR CRITICISMS OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Many contemporary observers are sharply critical of the quality of public discourse. In this section, I summarize four of the major categories of criticism and elaborate on them a bit by recasting them in terms of the "national conversation" and the "rules of engagement" in that conversation. In the final analysis, however, I am not interested in criticism simply for the sake of criticism. The more important question is what we should and what we can do to improve the quality of public discourse. As I review these criticisms, I indicate in each instance how some concerted effort is being made to achieve something that approximates the ideal of national conversation (see also Pearce, 1995).

Aesthetic Criticism: The Rules of Engagement Permit Poor Forms of Public Discourse

Who articulates and enforces the rules of engagement? By what process is it decided that some forms of public communication are legitimate and others are not? Is the public domain less a free marketplace of ideas than a jungle in which the only law is "kill or be killed"?

There are two forms of the aesthetic criticism. One focuses on "conversation-stoppers," or the things that disrupt the conversation itself; the other focuses on the requisites of sophisticated argument.

Conversation-Stoppers

Some thoughtful observers argue that the rules of engagement are defective because they allow conversation-stoppers. One way to stop a conversation is to destroy your interlocutor. Perhaps you noted that the structural definition I've given for *conversation*—a pattern of engagement in which the participants exchange positions as speakers and listeners within a moral order—does not distinguish a civil discussion from a war. We can extend the description of a "good" conversation by specifying that unlike a war, in which each is trying to destroy the other or at least to end

the conflict, the participants in a "good" conversations are committed to continuing their engagement with each other. "Keeping the conversation going" is itself an important goal of good conversation.

This characteristic explains why I do not enjoy Rush Limbaugh's programs: They are too much like serious talk to be taken as mere comedy, but they function as conversation-stoppers, designed to discredit, demean, and belittle those with whom Limbaugh disagrees rather than to engage them in conversation.

If we are to attain and sustain national conversations such as Sheldon Hackney called for, I believe that we must develop the ability to distinguish among forms of speech that continue and enrich public conversations and those that "stop" or demean them.

In addition to attacks, there are certain positions that one can take in public discourse that function as conversation-stoppers. Catharine Stimpson (1994) suggests that the role of "total victim" is one. She rightly notes that the rhetoric of victimage has become increasingly popular of late and is an effective way of achieving certain strategic objectives, including government entitlements and insurance pay-outs.

The rhetoric of victimage functions as a conversation-stopper, because if I and the class of people like me are positioned in a conversation so that we are totally victims, then *we* have no responsibility, but *you* do. This is a conversation-stopper, because such absolute claims preclude the exchange of positions in a conversation.

Stimpson (1994) describes the rhetoric of "total identity" as another conversation-stopper, and rightly so. I used to shudder when President Reagan would tell the story about how "our" forefathers left England to seek a life of freedom, and so on. There are many Americans whose stories are not included in this account of the Founding Fathers, among them virtually all of the African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American citizens of this country. Reagan's "official" telling of just this story stopped the conversation by giving them no place in it.

There are at least two ways of responding to conversation-stoppers. One consists of changing—or specifying more clearly than they are now known—the rules of engagement. For example, James Davison Hunter (1994) describes four features of the "Williamsburg Compact" that offer guidelines for conducting civil public debate:

- First, those who claim the right to dissent should assume the responsibility to debate.
- Second, those who claim the right to criticize should assume the responsibility to comprehend.

- Third, those who claim the right to influence should accept the responsibility not to inflame.
- Fourth, those who claim the right to participate should accept the responsibility to persuade. (p. 239)

But who will enforce these rules? And don't these rules privilege some groups over others?

A second way of responding to conversation-stoppers is based on the notion that the actions of a conversation are jointly produced. If this point is understood, it becomes clear that a conversation cannot be stopped by the utterances of one person: The significance of those utterances is completed by the response of the other participants.

For example, when the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory was being debated, the great and already famous Albert Einstein, the revered inventor of relativity and one of the great minds of our times, pronounced it flawed, saying, "God does not play dice with the Universe," to which Niels Bohr replied, "Albert, will you quit telling God what to do?" What Einstein clearly intended as a conversation-stopper did not function as one because of Bohr's irreverent response.

You see where I am headed: Of course there are many participants in public discourse who would like nothing better than to stop the conversation, so long as they have the last word. It is our responsibility to see that they are not successful. Rather than prohibiting them from speaking, we should insist that they speak in a forum in which there will be a response, and we should make sure that we are sufficiently clever to respond in a way that will keep the conversation going.

The Requisites of Sophisticated Argument

The other aesthetic criticism is motivated by the often wide gap between standards of good argument and the rancorous din of uncivil squabbles that fill so much of the space in public discourse. Good argument is precarious and difficult; it requires the patient development of a line of reasoning, the meticulous checking of evidence, and the careful phrasing of conclusions so as not to say more than is warranted—and it is increasingly difficult to do this kind of argument in public. It is difficult to find a space sufficiently sheltered so that lines of reasoning can be developed without interruption by casual passersby with their own agendas or to find an interlocutor sufficiently skilled and motivated who will commit him or herself to the conversation.

In this litigious era, there is a whole class of lawsuits filed because the plaintiffs know they have a chance of winning even though they do not

have a good case. These are called "frivolous suits"; they waste time and money and call for a miscarriage of justice, but the rules of engagement permit them to be filed. In the same way, there are many people who join in the national conversation frivolously. They have no real point to make, but they enjoy being included and making trouble for other people; they disrupt the flow of reasoning from data to conclusions, inflame emotions, and distract attention from serious matters. Should the rules of engagement in the national conversation permit this?

I believe that we should work hard to inculcate a taste for good argument in our citizens. Like broccoli, perhaps, an ability to savor good argument is an acquired taste, but it seems that this taste is essential to a government willing to be guided by public discourse. Members of the communication discipline have fought long and hard to make training in public speaking and argumentation part of the curriculum of American universities. As an undergraduate, I belonged to a national fraternity of people who participated in intercollegiate debate. Our motto was a quotation from the sophist Protagoras; roughly translated, it proclaims "the art of persuasion" to be "both beautiful and just." These efforts are certainly in the right direction; they should be expanded beyond the walls of academia.

Cultural Criticism: Various Groups Have Incommensurate Rules of Engagement

Other observers are struck by the cultural diversity of the polity. Not only do various groups of us disagree about what is right, true, and prudent, but we disagree about how to handle our disagreements. That is, we bring different rules of engagement to the conversation (Fort & Skinner-Jones, 1993; Freeman, Littlejohn, & Pearce, 1992; Hunter, 1992).

My colleagues and I call these "moral conflicts" (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) because the basic worldviews of the participants are implicated. We found a curious asymmetry in the discourse that occurs in these conflicts. When people from different moral worlds communicate with each other, the public discourse is rhetorically and morally attenuated, often consisting of reciprocated name-calling and shouted slogans. From the text of these messages, it would be reasonable to infer that the participants were childish and demented, perhaps deserving to be denied a first-person position in the national conversation. However, when these same people talk to someone not identified as an enemy, they can articulate a reasoned and reasonable position. Apparently, something in the logic of the interaction between people whose moral orders conflict attenuates their conversational abilities. What can this force be?

The ability to perceive cultural diversity brings with it an interesting conundrum. Those who can discern the difference among the moral orders of various cultures are confronted with the problem of choosing, in Alasdair MacIntyre's (1988) phrase, "Whose justice? Which rationality?" to privilege in any given conflict. The choice of one's own moral order, of course, throws one into moral conflict with those who choose otherwise; the choice not to choose throws one into a rootless relativism. On the other hand, those who cannot discern the difference among these moral orders have no such conundrum to confront but keep finding themselves deeply enmeshed in moral conflicts without understanding either why or what is happening to them.

By definition, conundrums do not have solutions, but we must find ways of working with them. A first step is to realize that whatever counts as "good argument" in a culturally diverse society will not be the same as any particular culture's concept of eloquence. By definition, we will have to develop rules of engagement that transcend our own—and "their" own, at least "locally," in a given time and place. One way of doing this was developed by the Public Conversations Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts.² Another was developed by the Kaleidoscope Project.³

Political Criticism: The Rules of Engagement Provide No Place for Public Conversation

One aspect of the political criticism of the public conversation focuses on the tactics used by the major players in the conversation. Political discourse has become a game played by experts in which the goal is to win an election or to pass a bill. The means for achieving these objectives are sometimes at odds with the requisites for democratic national conversation.

The conventional wisdom among such professionals is that the public is apathetic, that the issues of the day are best left to the experts, and that anything—so long as it is legal or at least deniable—is legitimate if it serves the higher good of getting one's candidate elected. This is, of course, a harsh characterization, and although you should question my authority in making it, you might accept the testimony of Michael Deaver. In *The Public Mind*, broadcast on PBS in 1989, Bill Moyers asked Deaver if he was proud of the presidential campaign he ran for Ronald Reagan. Deaver replied,

Well, I couldn't change that. If I had tried to do what I thought was, hmm, say, the right way to go about it we would have lost the campaign; people would have been bored to tears. In a democracy that's interested in where their people, where their leaders stand, in what they are going to do on the

issues, that would have been the right thing to do. But this country isn't interested in it. They want "feel good" and "fuzz" and to not be upset about all of this. They just want to sit in their living rooms and be entertained. And, no, I don't feel good about that at all. (Moyers, 1989)

Deaver should feel bad about that style of campaigning. Not only does it reduce a candidate to a marketable commodity, but it impoverishes the public conversation by infantilizing it. That is, the feel-good politics of image-mongering exclude "moments of moral doubt and strategic indecision. . . . There can be no room for qualification, no allowance for unforeseen contingency" (Weiler & Pearce, 1992, p. 13). In such a shallow discourse of short thoughts and simple images, it is impossible to address the complex issues that confront contemporary society.

Another reason why Deaver should feel bad is that this kind of discourse "creates what it portrays itself as responding to: an apathetic electorate, uninterested in the campaign, uninformed about the issues, and increasingly alienated from the practice of national political power" (Weiler & Pearce, 1992, p. 14). Recall the woman and man shouting at each other about a ballot referendum in Oregon. Whatever else might be said about their participation in the political process, it is not that they are apathetic. They are on the street, not in their living rooms, and they are certainly not content being entertained by feel-good campaigns.

The public's participation in the public conversation is often disparaged by communication professionals. Paraphrasing antidemocratic sentiments as venerable as Plato's, they describe "public opinion" as fickle, internally contradictory, and without conviction—clearly, not a good basis for national policy.

However, veteran pollster Daniel Yankelovich (1992) argues that we should distinguish *public opinion* from *public judgment*. The American people sometimes arrive at judgments that are not fickle, that are no more contradictory than anything else, and that are embraced with sufficient conviction that the people are willing to accept the consequences of the actions that emerge from them.

Yankelovich (1992) argues that there is a three-step process by which public judgments are achieved. First, the people have had their consciousness raised about an issue. Second, they have worked through the various alternative ways of thinking about and responding to the issue. Third, they have committed themselves to a course of action such that they are willing to accept the consequences for it.

Yankelovich (1992) pointedly asks where such processes can take place. The mass media of communication have become the predominant place where the public conversation occurs. This includes television news, the

broadcast of so-called debates, radio talk shows, newspapers, direct mail campaigns, e-mail chat rooms, and billboards.

One way of thinking about the mass media of communication is that they have become a place in our society like schools, churches, shopping centers, and courtrooms. Like other places, only certain things happen there, and what happens there is shaped, at least in part, by the fact that *there is where it happens*. Strange things happen to events when they get "in the media." In the movie *Nell*, the lives of many people were changed forever as soon as Nell's existence was in the media. As I was writing the Smithsonian lecture, the murder trial of O. J. Simpson was the highest-rated soap opera on television. Among other reactions, I had considerable sympathy for all the major participants, whose lives have been changed by being in the media. For example, to ensure a fair trial, Judge Ito's expertise apparently must have included both the law and media management.

However, the media are different from other places in our society; they have a strange geometry in which distance is not important (something can be "live" from Los Angeles anywhere in the world) and a strange physics in which time is curiously twisted (an aging actor said that he watches his old movies just to see his hairline recede). Further, in terms of places, the media have a strangely "flat" moral order in which everything is the same because there are no boundaries between the ridiculous (*The Three Stooges*) and the sublime (*Northern Exposure*) except the click of a remote control. One can sit quietly during a 30-minute newscast and watch the "anchors" somberly describe acts of wanton destruction, joke about the weather, and take seriously the fortunes of the Cowboys or Bulls. As places, the media have a strange capacity to create the appearance of intimacy while actually separating producers and recipients of messages in time and place, making the text of the message independent of the relationship between them. In the commercial media, the "product" of the media is not the message, but the audience: packaged, described in terms of its demographics, and sold to the advertisers.

The result of all of this is that the primary places for public discourse—the media—function extraordinarily well for the first of the three steps in "coming to public judgment" but extraordinarily poorly for the second and the third. That is, the media are great for raising consciousness but very poor for working things through and committing to a line of action.

To the extent that we are serious about a national conversation, we will create places where the public can work things through and commit to lines of action. One example of a group that has done this is the National Issues Forums, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation.⁴

Radical Criticism: The Rules of Engagement Exclude Important Voices

There are two strands in this criticism. One uses the categories that sociologists teach us to use and identifies particular groups who have limited access to the media of communication. That is, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, young people, old people, poor people, and so forth are described as marginalized because they do not have equal access to the place where public conversation occurs—that is, to the media.

I don't want to take away from this criticism, even by noting that what I call the "second wave" of communication technologies has the effect of lowering the barriers to access to the media. In 1950, for example, one had to invest a lot of resources to produce a video program; today, the technology is widely available, reasonably priced, and easy to use. However, I do want to focus on a more subtle and even more critical form of this criticism.

A few years ago, I was arguing politics in London with a friend who, in the normal course of the conversation, described himself as a "subject of Her Majesty, the Queen." This term revealed to me something I had always taken for granted before: that I was a *citizen* of this country, not a *subject* of it, and I had to pause to think through the implications of that difference. Shortly after that, I was doing research for my book about the impact of the Reagan administration on political discourse, and I found that the same man who said that "the United States is a people who have a government, not the other way around" unabashedly set up in the White House an office that used the techniques of market research to guide the president's communication activities. Whatever else this might have done, it made my status as a citizen become something more like a consumer, with messages fed to me by my government. That same president appointed Michael Deaver, who described himself as a "Hollywood Producer," making my role as citizen become something more like an audience in a theater.

People of all races, creeds, and economic strata are marginalized because the media construct them as "consumers" or "audiences" rather than as interlocutors, conversants, or citizens. The marginalization process is accomplished through controlling the discourse in which the issues of the day are discussed; even when the people are invited to speak, it is in the terms that others have set for them. As Ian Angus (1994) put it, because contemporary communication systems produce audiences without the capacity "to transform themselves into speakers. . . . Audiences tend to remain simply audiences; that is, communication systems tend to sever

audiences from reciprocal production of social knowledge and engagement in decision-making" (p. 233).

None of us ever says all that we expect to be heard as having said. That is, every communication message is interpreted on the basis of its context, and its meaning and significance are determined by the way it relates to that context. For example, ABC News prides itself on being the primary news source for Americans. But the 30- to 60-second reports it gives are more like anecdotes than full-fledged narratives. These anecdotes are intelligible because they fit into larger narratives that are understood by people who watch many newscasts but that are never fully articulated—and are thus never held up to specific criticism.

One part of the context of any message is the larger narrative of which it is a part. As a culture, we tell stories about heroes, villains, and fools. In the first part of 1995, the current story in Washington was the "Republican Revolution." Stories inconsistent with that narrative required too much explanation to make them coherent; they didn't seem plausible; and thus they weren't selected for the evening news—and thus the existing narrative was reinforced instead of challenged, which made it even harder for the next day's inconsistent story to be told.

Minority voices in this country are excluded from the public conversation not only because of the race, creed, or economic level of the speaker, but also because what they say does not fit into the larger, usually unspoken story that serves as a context for what is heard. They are excluded not by a refusal to allow them to speak, but by the creation of a context in which what they have to say appears foolish and, because of this, is not heard or responded to. If what we say does not fit into the existing narrative, then our freedom to speak is perhaps psychologically important but is a politically powerless opportunity. For example, those who first spoke of protecting the environment, enfranchising women, or achieving equality for African Americans all suffered the same fate: What they said did not fit into the larger narratives and thus fell unheard, unresponded to, and thus politically impotent.

Our official national history features a story of adversity, steps taken to overcome it, and an idyllic state that has been reached or might soon be reached by our nation. The specific form of the story depends on whether it is told by the party in power or the party seeking to take power. What stories important for the national conversation are often excluded because they do not fit into this grand narrative scheme? How well does this story do in providing a place for discussion of the increasing irrelevance of national policies in a global economy controlled by international busi-

nesses? How well does this official story deal with the problem of drugs? Specifically, how well can it identify what is the problem with drugs?

The drug issue has been framed in this country as one of morality and legality; that is, drugs are seen as illegal and immoral, and the appropriate responses split among interdiction, education, and punishment. But who gets to decide that the discourse of morality and legality is the only or even the best way of thinking about this issue? There are other possible discourses in which to think that would bring about other insights. For example, we might look at drugs as an economic issue. That is, we would see the problem as the facts that criminals are getting rich and that taxpayers are paying exorbitant sums for police forces, jails, courts, and crime. Instead of sending those dealers we find to expensive jails, if we framed drugs as an economic issue, we might ask how we could destroy or restructure the business. The savings and loan fiasco shows that we have the expertise and technology to ruin a business—why not ruin this one?

Please note: I introduce the issue of drugs as an example of how an issue is framed in a particular discourse rather than in some other. I am not advocating a new policy about drugs. Rather, I am asking how, in the public discourse about this important, terrible issue, just this one way of framing the issue became the only way, and how voices that might suggest other ways have been marginalized.

Those of us whose role as citizens has been constructed into something resembling consumers or audiences have been marginalized in, if not excluded from, the public conversation by being stuck in a third-person position. Although we have the right to speak, we do not have the ability to speak as a first person who will be heard and whose comments will elicit thoughtful responses.

Looked at in this way, calls for “a new decorum,” “civility,” or “tolerance” often function as code words for suppressing voices or means of expression that do not fit into the mainstream narratives. To reclaim our position as full-fledged interlocutors, we must disrupt and displace the larger narratives or discourses in which our voices are mute. There are ways of doing this, although they often result in communicative acts that seem, by conventional standards, awkward or rude. That is, they violate the current rules of engagement.

One such awkward event was Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. It was delivered to an audience that wanted to celebrate the Union victory over the Confederates in a desperate, destructive war. Remember how Lincoln carefully avoided any mention of either side; instead, he praised those brave men, living and dead, who fought at Gettysburg—without differentiating between those who fought under his command and those who

sought to overthrow it. The speech seemed a colossal failure, disappointing the audience and receiving scathing criticisms in the editorial pages the next day, both because it refused to fit into a public discourse dominated by jingoism and because it hit the bull's-eye of a target that others could not see: It exemplified a nobler and more benevolent patriotism committed to unity and reconciliation. Ironically, although the speech "failed" by the usual criteria, it was surely one of the things that brought forth what Lincoln himself, in his Second Inaugural, called the "better angels of our nature." The true measure of the Gettysburg Address is that it changed the larger narratives of the public conversation to make a space for itself.

If we are sufficiently clever, and if we have our own priorities right, we can, like Lincoln, engage in communication acts that transform the contexts in which they occur. One way of doing this is to adapt for use in public some of the communication practices developed by therapists, mediators, negotiators, and others in the "alternative dispute resolution" movement. For example, the Kaleidoscope Project is attempting to adapt circular questioning, the use of reflecting teams, and the technique of "harvesting" as a way of intervening in public discourse.

CONCLUSION

Any democratic form of government must give attention to the quality of public discourse. I've argued that in our society, public discourse should have at least some of the features of a national conversation.

Like many others, I believe that the quality of public discourse is poor. I reviewed four major criticisms of public discourse and, in doing so, tried to redefine them in terms of a distinction between the general term *communication* and the more specific term *conversation*. Thinking of these criticisms from a conversational frame not only allows us to sharpen those criticisms by asking, "What's the problem here?" but it suggests practical ways of dealing with those criticisms.

In sum, there are three steps toward improving the quality of public conversation. The first step is to be engaged. We will not accomplish anything if we remove ourselves from the conversation, even if we are offended by its rancor and poor argumentation. The rules of conversations, after all, are rules of engagement. I've cited several examples of such engagement: the National Issues Forums; the Public Conversation Project; the Kaleidoscope Project; deliberately awkward forms of communication that challenge, expand, or enrich the dominant discourses; deliberately

unconventional forms of responses to what others say that prevent them from stopping the conversation; the explicit articulation of rules of engagement such as the Williamsburg Compact; the continued instruction in *communication practice and criticism by my discipline*; and the self-conscious development and adaptation of conversational skills to the public context.

Second, we must develop a certain sophistication and skill that allow us to act strategically. I do not mean just to fight fire with fire; I have more in mind the building of a fireplace around *their* fire so that it not only is safe but heats *our* house. I do not mean simply doing one to them before they do one to us, but to join our actions with those of others so that the conversation continues, so that what might have been intended as conversation-stoppers are redefined as useful acts, and so that those voices excluded from the conversation by the dominant discourse are given a place.

One of the characteristics of a conversation is that what is done by any person's act is "moved toward completion" by the acts of others. This provides us with our opening: If we are sufficiently clever, we can join our acts to theirs in ways that keep the conversation going and improve its quality. I suspect that our ability to do this is local—specific to particular conversations—rather than general.

Finally, we will be more likely to keep the public conversation going and improve its quality the more we understand conversation. Not all communication is conversational; conversations have specific characteristics, including reciprocity; engagement; continuity; and rights, duties, and responsibilities, and on these specific characteristics hang much of our *ability as a society to respond to the challenges that confront us*. If we are to have any hope of maintaining a national conversation, we must be able to differentiate conversation from other forms of communication and *differentiate contributions to that conversation that enrich and continue it from those that demean and would end it*. Fortunately, the concepts we need are available; the task before us is tactical: how to employ them effectively.

NOTES

1. For example,

If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists or philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to seeing *conversation* as the ulti-

mate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards of justification, and from there to the actual changes in those standards which make up intellectual history. (Rorty, 1979, pp. 389-390)

Note that this move to a conversation-centered approach stands in sharp contrast to the approaches of those, like Richard Bernstein (1992), who believe that "the very idea of dialogue and communicative rationality belong to the dustbin of the now discredited history of Western rationality and metaphysics." I agree with Bernstein's take on what are often called the "postmodern debates" among Habermas, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and others. These critics have shown us that "such ideas as authentic dialogue, community, communication, and communicative rationality *can* potentially—and indeed *have* in the past—become 'suffocating straitjackets,' and 'enslaving conceptions.'" But just this passion for exposing the ways in which "much can go wrong—even tragically wrong—in the folds of communication" reveals their commitment to "the fragile, but persistent 'ideal' of dialogical communicative rationality—an ideal which is more often betrayed than honored" (Bernstein, 1992, pp. 50-53).

A faith in "dialogical communicative rationality" underlies my whole approach. Although my agreement with Bernstein will not answer skeptics, I hope that it will forestall my being prematurely dismissed by them and will create an opening for further dialogue.

2. For information about the Public Conversations Project, write Laura Chasin, Project Director, The Public Conversations Project, 46 Kondazian Street, Watertown, MA 02171.

3. For information about the Kaleidoscope Project, write Kimberly A. Pearce, Department of Speech Communication, DeAnza College, Cupertino, California, 95014.

4. For information about the National Issues Forums, write the National Issues Forums Institute, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio, 45459-2777.

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