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Interactivity Foundation

Helping America Talk

How Public Policy Can Renew Public Conversation

Policy Possibilities for Public Discussion

Edited by
Jeff Prudhomme
Fellow of the Interactivity Foundation

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Interactivity Foundation

P.O. Box 9

Parkersburg, WV 26102-0009

www.interactivityfoundation.org

NINE CONTRASTING POLICY POSSIBILITIES

FOR PUBLIC DISCUSSION

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DESCRIBING PUBLIC CONVERSATION

AS AN AREA OF PUBLIC POLICY CONCERN

You might think of a democratic society as one that is involved in a grand conversation, a public conversation, about where that society might be headed and how it might get there. Under the name of “public conversation” you might think of all the different ways that we as citizens might communicate with each other, including with our government, about public matters. And if you think in those broad terms, you might discover a number of different kinds of questions or concerns that we, as a society, might be called upon to address, especially as we look to the future.

Sixteen of your fellow citizens came together over the course of roughly a year to think about the public policy concerns that might emerge when we think about public conversation in these broad terms. They thought of “public conversation” as a more welcoming way to think of what we might call “public” or “civic discourse” —since we all know what it is like to be part of a conversation. In their discussions they tried not to get bogged down in precise definitions; they intended to offer instead a description of some possible ways to look at this topic. This introduction presents their description of the basic concerns that might emerge for us as society about public conversation. After this introduction, you’ll find a description of nine contrasting policy possibilities, nine different approaches that we, as society, might take to addressing some of the concerns raised below.

Some Overlapping Considerations

- Different ways to think of public conversation
- Concerns about access to public conversation
- Concerns about what or who might shape public conversation
- Concerns about the value or goals for public conversation

Different ways to think of “public conversation” If you think of the “public conversation” or “public discourse” in very broad terms as all the ways that people might communicate with each other about matters of public or social concern,

you might think of a number of different kinds or aspects of communication. These might be different ways that people could “talk to” or “hear from” each other—but not limited to the literal sense of those words. The people talking to each other could be anyone. You might think of citizens talking with other citizens, or of citizens talking with their government and vice-versa. You might think of citizens who are journalists, experts, pundits, or comedians. And you might think of politicians or public officials. The following are some different notions that might come to mind or some different aspects of public conversation.

- **When is it Public? What makes it Public Conversation?** There’s all kinds of talking or discourse, but when does that talking become part of “public discourse” or public conversation? You might feel like it depends on the subject matter. Discussion becomes “public” when it’s about a public topic or a topic of greater social concern. The setting might be “private”; you might be talking with a neighbor at the back fence, a stranger at the bus stop, or reading a newspaper article alone at your breakfast table. It might be a matter being discussed within government, among citizens, or between government and citizens. If the subject under discussion impinges on our shared life as a community, when it pertains to more than an individual or more than the immediate parties involved in the conversation, then it is likely a public matter. And “talking” about a public matter in some way or another makes it a matter of “public conversation.”

You might also feel like talk or communication becomes part of public conversation when it generates a response from others. If it catches someone else’s attention, then it’s likely part of public conversation—even if the original participants just thought they were talking to each other.

You might feel like talk becomes part of public conversation when it takes place in a public setting, some place where others can notice or respond. A public setting might mean it is an official meeting place, like a governmental hearing or town hall meeting.

It could be a publicly supported space, like a school or park, or just a place where anyone might go, like a bar, a church, or a website.

- **Genuine Dialogue or Interactive Communication.** You might think of public conversation as involving a real give-and-take. A real conversation, after all, is more than one-directional communication. It is more than someone talking at someone. It implies listening and responding.
- **Public or Democratic Deliberation.** You might think of public conversation as intertwined with the practice of deliberation, of thinking about and exploring different possibilities for society. Deliberative discussions might focus on wide-ranging explorations, exploring all sides of an issue. In deliberative discussions we might be exploring the different aims we have as a society and how to meet them. Or we might focus on weighing the consequences and reaching a decision among alternative policies. Deliberative discussions might directly lead up to public action or decisions. Or they might simply be a way to explore possibilities without pressing for a decision. These deliberations could take place inside or outside of governmental contexts.
- **Talking Through Others.** You might think of public conversation in civic or political contexts as involving intermediaries, such as journalists or pundits, who play a role of filtering communication between citizens and political leaders. You might also think of the way that citizens delegate their voices to their elected representatives within government—to carry on the conversation about public matters on their behalf.
- **Debate and Persuasion.** You might think of the argumentative give and take of debate as a key aspect of public conversation. When we engage in debate we might focus more on sound reasoning, marshalling evidence and arguments, to persuade others to support a given approach to some public matter. Or we might focus on rhetoric and emotional appeals to persuade others.
- **Speechmaking.** You might think of speechmaking or other kinds of one-directional communication as a key aspect of public conversation.
- **Different Media—Different Kinds of Conversation.** You might think of all the different ways we can talk to and hear from each other: in-person, online, on TV or radio, through print (in books, magazines, newspapers), through artworks, or public demonstrations. Our conversation could take place in formal settings, like public forums, or in casual settings like a front porch or coffee shop. You might think about the ways that each kind of forum or media enables a different kind of conversation. Each has its own different rules of interaction. We talk to each other differently online than we do in person. You might especially think of the impact of new digital media on the different ways we talk with each other, on the speed of public conversation, on expanding participation in public conversation, and on the expanding resources of information and ideas available for public conversation. Using the web can enable us to form a community in conversation with those around the corner or around the globe. It can also transform our participation from being the passive recipients of what others publish or broadcast to being active and interactive conversation partners.
- **Personal Expression.** You might think of any manner of expressing your opinion about topics of public concern as part of public conversation. You might express yourself in words (answering an opinion poll, by voting, or by symbolic actions (marching in a parade or burning a flag). You might be trying to persuade others to take action. Or you might just be trying to express your point of view, to add your thoughts to the exchange of ideas in the overall public conversation.
- **Storytelling and the Arts.** You might also consider that public conversation is not just, or even primarily, about communicating information, it's about conveying a sense of who we are and what we believe in. It could be about conveying a sense of community or a mood of protest. Stories or works of art (theater, film, song, painting, etc.) do this. They often tell us more and speak to more people than abstract arguments filled with supporting information. They can convey complex ideas in ways that resonate with people in their everyday lives. And they can move people to action in ways more powerful than abstract arguments.

Concerns about access to public conversation

If you think about public conversation in these very broad terms, then one group of concerns that might spring to mind has to do with access to public conversation. How might we, as a democratic society, respond to concerns about access to participation in various forms of public conversation? Some of these concerns are as follows.

- **Access to participate in public conversation.** Who might get to take part in public conversation? Will you get to be heard? Might everyone? Or is it only for a select few, the wealthy or the socially well connected? You might wonder whether every citizen could have equitable or fair access to participate in some way in the discussion of public matters. Should there be a right to participate and how might it be ensured? How might public policy address concerns about fairness of access to the discussion when so many opportunities are spread unequally across society?
- **Access to the information and ideas relevant to public conversation.** Public conversation isn't just about having a voice; it's also about being able to hear. But what if you can't hear what others are saying? How might you and your fellow citizens get access to the information and ideas you might want or need in order to understand, or make decisions about, some matter of public concern. You might wonder about how, or even whether, you might learn about the ideas that could shape the way we, as a society, approach a public matter. Should there be a right of access to information needed for making informed public choices? And, if so, who should have that right, and how might it be assured or enforced? Who decides what information is "needed"? And what about our ability to exchange ideas or to learn of new, or even unconventional ideas? What if some ideas or some areas of information are suppressed or kept from public airing?
- **Access to the media of public conversation.** So many of these concerns about access to public conversation are intertwined with concerns about the access to the media of that conversation. How might public conversation take place? In what formats—and who might have access to these? Further, every medium

of public conversation has its own distinct culture. There are different rules of the game about who might get to speak and how. Print and broadcast media have been dominant formats for public conversation, but there has been a high threshold for participation. They also foster one-directional communication. Recently new digital media have lowered the threshold for participation by citizens in public conversation, by allowing anyone with the relevant telecommunication and computing capabilities to connect with others across the world. These new electronic media also foster more multi-directional communication, with the real back and forth of conversation. But how could more citizens gain access to these new forms of communication?

- **Access to shaping public policy, to having a voice in democratic governance.** You might also think about access to participating in public conversation in terms of participating in the shaping of public policy. You might wonder whether there is a connection between talk and action, whether all that talk can make a difference. You might feel that it is not just a matter of being heard, or of getting to hear others, but also that it is a matter of seeing how that back and forth can shape the way we, as a society, approach an area of public concern. Who should be able to play a role in shaping our public policy?

Concerns about what or who might shape public conversation

When you think about public conversation you might wonder about the forces or factors that might shape it. Who might control, or try to control the flow of information and ideas in public conversation? Who or what might determine the content of public discussion? What role does money, or commercial interests, play in shaping public conversation, whether determining the subjects of conversation or who gets to join in? What about cultural or demographic factors? What role might race, class, or even geography play in shaping the content of public conversation? You might also ask yourself about the role that different kinds of groups might play in shaping public conversation, including those groups listed in the box at the top of the next page.

- The Press, including editorial decisions, the role of journalists and pundits, the different roles of large and small scale outlets, or non-English language outlets
- Government, whether national, state, or local
- Political parties and lobbying organizations
- Corporations in general or media and telecommunication corporations in particular
- Civic organizations or non-profit public interest associations
- Public institutions such as school, libraries, and museums
- The public at large or citizens just like you.

Concerns about the values or goals for public conversation

Another group of concerns that might come to mind has to do with the values or norms that shape different understandings of what public conversation is all about. What makes for a “good” public conversation? Different norms or values might convey different beliefs about what’s important when it comes to communicating with each other about matters of social concern. They might tell us what limits there are to guide our participation in public conversation. Or they might tell us what to aim for. They can also shape the policy goals we have for public conversation. Some ideas that might come to mind are—

- *Equality and equal rights of participation in public conversation*
- *The obligation to participate, to speak up about public matters*
- *Non-intimidation of and non-interference with participants in public conversation*
- *Norms of openness, of respect for diverse points of view and the value of opening up new ways of thinking*
- *The value of dissent*
- *The value of genuine or substantive interaction, the kind of discussion that makes you feel more connected and like it was time well spent*
- *The value of good or useful information and of getting to the bottom of things, of verifying information and testing arguments*
- *The right of access to information and ideas useful for civic life*
- *The value of connecting talk to action, seeing that conversation can shape action about public matters*

- *The value of effective government, of getting things done in public life*
- *The value of governmental transparency, of open government*
- *Values of active citizenship, including thinking about the public good and having a sense of ownership in, or responsibility to, the community*
- *The differing values of private and public life, and their shifting boundary lines*
- *The goal of enhancing participation in public conversation*
- *The goal of increasing the quality of public conversation, whether by improving the quality of the information and ideas that make up its content or by improving the quality of the participants*
- *The goal of freeing up the flow of information and ideas in public conversation, to make it richer and more expansive*
- *The goal of constricting the flow of information and ideas in public conversation, perhaps to make it more manageable*
- *The goal of better managing or controlling the public*
- *The goal of creating a more informed and engaged public*

Nine Contrasting Policy Possibilities

On the following pages you’ll find nine contrasting policy possibilities that are intended to respond in various ways to some of the concerns and questions raised above. Each is intended to offer a broad description of how we, as a society, might approach some of these concerns about public conversation. Each one is intended to convey a big idea, a distinct vision, of how we might approach some of these concerns. They are not intended to be detailed policy statements. Each policy possibility starts with a few imaginative scenarios. These are provided to help you see what these policy ideas might mean, to help you see what the world might be like if this was the basic way we approached public conversation. After the scenarios you’ll find a brief description of the policy possibility and some of the thinking behind it. You’ll also find a few indications of different ways the policies might be shaped in more concrete terms. As you read all this material, try not to get bogged down in thinking about the particular details of how or whether a policy possibility could be implemented. Try to open your mind to think about the basic vision that each policy possibility is trying to present.

I. Getting People to Participate in Public Conversation

When you think about public conversation, you might wonder about how people might be motivated to take part in it. Possibilities A and B address those concerns.

EDUCATE CITIZENS

FOR COLLABORATIVE AND DELIBERATIVE CIVIC DISCOURSE

Imagine . . .

- *As a high school student you and your classmates have been engaged in a yearlong group project in a discussion-based course that focused on the question “what are the needs of our community and how can we help meet them?” You and your classmates, working in small teams, have taken turns facilitating your own exploratory discussions. These discussions have drawn on your other studies, such as science and social studies, and also on conversations you’ve had with community members. In your teams you’ve been honing your abilities to think and work together as a group. Now each team has developed some different possibilities that you’ll be presenting at a community meeting in a local neighborhood center tonight.*
- *Your local museum has replaced its lecture series with a weekly discussion series. Now, instead of quiet hushed tones, you find a room filled with lively conversation about the ways that current exhibits shed light on some contemporary issues. Instead of a quiet audience listening to a scholar, you find a half-dozen small groups of people seated in circles around the room, each with a discussion facilitator who is helping the group sort out their thinking about those issues.*
- *Some students from a local college have been helping your neighborhood association host a series of community discussion nights. The students have been helping you all learn how to discuss community concerns more as a collaborative discussion rather than as the contentious arguments you used to have. As the meetings have become more collaborative, you realized that the attendance has gone up. Tonight you’ll be hosting a group of high school students who will be visiting with your group for a conversation about your neighborhood’s perspectives on community needs.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

You might figure that one way to get people to take part in public conversation is to empower them to participate through educational experiences. The aim of this policy possibility is to use publicly supported educational means, whether these are formal or informal educational experiences, to energize citizens to be thoughtful participants in public discourse. This could provide a way to motivate participation and to improve the quality of that participation at the same time.

When you think about public discourse, you might feel that a chief concern should be to create more active and reflective citizen participants in it. You might feel that the quality of public conversation would improve if citizens had more practical know-how about how to engage in deliberative discussions about matters of public significance. You might also feel that public conversation would improve if we could instill in more citizens the values and attitudes conducive to democratic dialogue. This policy possibility responds to these

concerns by focusing on the hands-on education of citizens for active participation in public discussion.

Good public conversation doesn’t just happen. We need to learn how to do it, and we typically learn best by guided practice, by actually doing it. This policy approach would publicly fund such educational experiences. This could start in schools with K-12 education, continue through higher education or adult education, and extend beyond formal educational settings to reach adults in other public settings. In school settings this could mean developing hands-on “public discussion” courses that would foster collaborative discussion and deliberation about topics of public concern, courses with the genuine give-and-take of dialogue rather than the typical focus on one-directional communication of information. In non-school settings, it could mean structuring public meetings or forums to foster hands-on learning of how citizens might communicate productively with each other about public matters. This could take place

under the auspices of any civically oriented organization, including libraries or museums. It could even expand into other media, say, supporting the development of a television reality-show focused on citizens deliberating about a current matter of social concern.

Suppose you are concerned about the ways that individual citizens might become more active and reflective participants in public conversation. This policy approach responds by focusing directly on developing those capacities in citizens. This entails developing the ability of citizens, from youth onward, to think critically about information and arguments, to make sense of the barrage of information and ideas that they will confront in the flow of public discourse, especially in an age of emerging electronic media. It could also mean learning how to marshal evidence and reason critically. Citizens need to learn that “good” public deliberation and discussion is more than voicing one’s personal prejudices or unfounded positions; it needs to include a phase of careful inquiry, of research and evaluation. It includes exploring divergent perspectives.

If you’re drawn in this direction, you might feel that it is our responsibility as a society to make this happen, to better prepare citizens for public discourse. So we should put our public resources into empowering more active and thoughtful participation in public discussion. Of course, you might see this social responsibility as a way to promote more individual responsibility. By publicly supporting efforts to provide citizens with the habits of mind, the attitudes and skills, they need to be active participants in public conversation, those citizens will in turn take on the individual responsibilities of being engaged about public matters and of being thoughtful and well-informed participants in public conversation. A core focus of this policy approach is to instill in individuals the values of genuine democratic dialogue, including the importance of collaborative thinking and willingness to seek out and test diverse perspectives. If you think of it this way, the policy aims to rekindle for citizens a sense of civic efficacy: that each citizen matters as a thoughtful participant in the grand conversation of the nation. It hopes to foster a sense of public appreciation for public deliberation and discussion, so that it can capture the public’s imagination.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- In formal educational contexts from Kindergarten through college, there would be public support for teaching civic dialogue and discussion across the curriculum
 - o The focus would be on the habits of mind and practices that make for good public conversation (not declarative knowledge about civics but performative knowledge of how to actually do it)
 - o There might be a national curriculum to support the learning of active citizen participation in public discourse
 - o There might be more encouragement of a decentralized bottom-up approach to encourage experimentation and learning-by-doing (non-governmental organizations might play more of a role)
- In less formal educational contexts, which might be more relevant for adults:
 - o Public institutions that are focused on learning, such as museums and libraries, could be transformed as spaces for learning of how to engage in collaborative civic discussion
 - o Public-interest programming could be established with public support in a variety of media (including the genre of Reality TV) to engage citizens in active deliberation about topics of public concern
- The overall educational focus might be on teaching a kind of “wiki culture”: how to engage in collaborative discourse that is constructive; it depends on sound reasoning and a command of facts, but it is not reducible to argument or debate.

USE CARROTS & STICKS TO ENHANCE PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC CONVERSATION

Imagine . . .

- *In order to qualify for a new federal income tax credit of \$300, you've signed up for an online discussion forum sponsored by the federal government. You were assigned to your particular forum on the basis of demographic information so there would be a diverse range of perspectives in terms of income level, gender, age, race and/or ethnicity. To qualify for the tax credit, you must log on regularly, respond to surveys, and offer public comment on topics of public policy.*
- *You are a high school student applying for your first driver's license. At the DMV, before you can take your driving test, you have to complete a mandatory online survey. This survey asks for your input on a dozen or so items that are currently pending for public consideration from the level of your local municipal government to the level of the state government. You may not feel that strongly about a lot of these survey items, in fact, you might prefer avoiding the survey altogether. But, if you don't take the survey, you won't be able to get your license.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

If you're interested in motivating people to take part in public conversation, you might consider offering them some form of incentive, so they'll see it in their best interest to participate. The aim of this policy possibility is to expand citizen participation in public conversation through the use of a variety of incentives or disincentives.

When you think about public conversation, you might feel that a chief concern should be to generate more citizen participation in it. And to motivate this participation, you might figure that the best approach would be to appeal to people's self-interest. That's what this policy approach does, by taking a sort of carrot or stick approach to motivate citizen participation in public discourse. This policy would essentially create a variety of publicly supported incentives to reward citizens' participation in public conversation. It might also include some disincentives to punish failure to participate in opportunities for public conversation.

You might think about this policy approach this way: democracy really can't work unless we have input from citizens, or at least from a significant portion of them. Along these lines, then, you might feel that everyone has an obligation to do his or her part for democratic

governance. Each person has an obligation to participate to some extent in some form of public discussion about matters of public concern. If we take this obligation seriously, then it might be important enough to have it be enforced by the power of government to offer either positive incentives to motivate people to participate—or impose penalties if people fail to participate. Ideally we might feel that we should all do the right thing as citizens and participate in some form of public discourse. But to be realistic, we also know that we can't count on everyone to be so high-minded. At the same time, we do know that people will respond to their immediate self-interests. This policy appeals to that self-interest by offering an incentive, or access to something you might really want, so that you'll participate in some form of public conversation. And once you start participating, it might eventually become a habit. If you think of citizen participation in public conversation as a public good, as something that benefits us all by improving our democracy, then you might consider that publicly funding a variety of incentives, or setting up a variety of disincentives, would be well worth it.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- Setting up mechanisms of public support to lower the threshold for participation, especially for citizens who face obstacles in their home or work life:
 - o Payment of lost wages if time off work is required (as with jury duty), or assistance with travel or childcare
- Use technology to make participation easier through virtual or online meetings
 - o This could entail using public money to make affordable high-speed internet more universally accessible to all citizens
 - o The government could use the online capacities of social networking sites to sponsor virtual citizen discussion groups (like a Federal Facebook or Myspace site) to generate citizen input on policy issues
- Government could incentivize participation
 - o By using tangible benefits, such as tax credits, tuition assistance, or by making participation a pre-condition to access other opportunities (much like vaccination is a prerequisite for public schooling)
 - o By using penalties such as nominal fines (as there are in some democracies that have compulsory voting), community service, or denial of access to other opportunities (no drivers license without participation in some civic discourse event)

II. Gaining Access to Public Conversation

When you think about public conversation, you might wonder how and which people will gain access to such discussions and to the information and ideas they need to be thoughtful citizens and participate meaningfully? Policy possibilities C and D on the following pages largely respond to these kinds of concerns.

ENSURE ACCESS TO THE MEANS & CONTENT OF PUBLIC CONVERSATION

Imagine . . .

- *You're someone who, in the past, could never have afforded a computer, never mind internet service. But now you've been able to buy, in installments, a low-cost laptop for \$100 through a state-sponsored program and the city has wired your whole neighborhood with high-speed internet, which shows up as a nominal fee on your utilities bill. In the past your busy work and family schedules have kept you from attending community meetings, especially school board meetings. Now you are able to find the information you need online and, in some cases, to participate in online meetings from home.*
- *Recently you've become concerned about the impact on your child's asthma from a proposed expansion of a power plant upwind from where you live. While your job hours have kept you from attending public hearings on this proposal, you are able to visit the EPA website, since your neighborhood has recently been wired with publicly subsidized high-speed internet access. You quickly find not only a webcast of those public hearings, but also all the information about the potential environmental and public health impacts from the proposed power plant. The EPA website includes a forum section where members of the impacted communities can both post questions and comments and rate the comments that have already been posted so that the most highly rated submissions rise to the top of the list. You post your concerns about the proposed power plant. You also recently joined an online community forum for your neighborhood, and you email your neighbors with a link to the EPA forum and with an invitation to post their own commentary and/or to vote on yours.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

If you're wondering about who will get to take part in public conversation, this policy possibility responds that there's a public responsibility to make sure that essentially everyone has some means of participating. You might also consider that "access" also has to do with people's ability to get information and ideas about public matters, the kinds of things that people might need or want in order to make informed democratic choices. This policy possibility responds that there shouldn't be any barriers to the flow of that information or those ideas. At its heart, this policy aims at expanding public conversation by ensuring that every citizen has open and equitable access to both the means of participating and to its content.

When you think about public conversation, you might feel that a chief concern is to open it up, to free up access to participate in it and to free up the flow of information and ideas that make up its content. You might feel that citizens should have equal access to participate in public conversation.

If citizens have unequal access to the means of joining in public conversation, perhaps due to their different economic status, then they really can't enjoy fully equal rights as citizens. Modern communication technologies could really open the door to wide participation in public discourse, but this can only be possible if, as a society, we make sure these technologies can be within the reach of most citizens. This policy responds to these concerns by ensuring that all citizens have publicly supported affordable access to the communication technologies, such as high-speed internet, essential to equitable participation in public conversation.

But access to the means of public conversation is only part of freeing up participation. What if you can't find the information about some topic of public concern that you need in order to make an informed choice about it? What if some ideas or points of view that would be helpful to you in thinking about all the policy options on a given public matter were kept out of discussion? You might feel that opening up access to participate in

public conversation won't mean anything if there are barriers to getting access to the information citizens need or want in order to engage in informed discussions. So this policy responds by actively eliminating or reducing barriers that citizens might face in finding the information and ideas relevant to public conversation. The goal is to provide as ready access as possible, both to public conversation and to the information and ideas that make up the content of public conversation, so that all citizens can really interact with each other about public matters.

You might think of this policy as embodying the belief that when it comes to public conversation, more is better. More opportunities for public conversation, more access to more information and more ideas—all of this makes for better public discourse in our society. You might think of this policy as motivated essentially by a vision of society as an interconnected network, a web of conversation, where everyone is assured a point of access to that network. Everyone should have a connection point, a way to gain access to the grand conversation. If you're drawn in this direction, you might feel a need to eliminate disconnectedness in society. The policy aims to free up the possibility of being connected, allowing citizens ready access to the technical (and non-technical) means of communication by making sure that no one is excluded simply because of her/his economic status.

You might think of an expanding public conversation as a kind of public good, then you might feel that every citizen really should have a right to share in that public good. And you might feel that this right entails a corresponding public responsibility to make sure that citizens have some kind of equitable access. If participation in public conversation is a public good then we should invest in that capacity to take part. Just as we, as a society, invest our common resources in public goods like roads or transit systems for all to use, we would, as a society, invest in the networks or opportunities of public conversation. This could take the shape of making sure that every citizen has access to the networks of communication that are vital to public discussion of public matters. If there is unequal access to the means of communication (say depending on one's ability to pay), then there will be unequal participation in public conversation, especially in light of the increasingly pivotal role new electronic media (such as broadband internet)

are playing in public discourse. These new media have the capacity to greatly expand active citizen participation in public discourse, but only if they are made readily available to all citizens, regardless of one's financial status.

If you take seriously the idea of opening up the conversation, then you might think about how this doesn't just mean opening up to the numbers of people who can take part, it also means opening up the access to the information and ideas people might find useful in their lives as democratic citizens. This policy aims to free up the flow of information and ideas, enabling citizens readily to seek and find the information and ideas they desire. This means there's a public responsibility to make sure that ideas and information can flow freely. In more concrete terms, the policy would require governmental transparency and that government make any civically useful information readily available to all citizens (for example, by simplifying and expediting Freedom of Information requests and using technology to make such information more readily available and searchable). It would also ensure citizens' access to government officials (for example, by requiring office hours for citizens). It's also part of the responsibility of government to act as a neutral enforcer of the free flow of public conversation, for example, by assuring network neutrality, so that participants in public discourse are treated the same, regardless of their economic power. The governmental focus would be on opening up lines of communication and providing a check against commercial, social, or political forces that might seek either to constrict participation or constrict the flow of information and ideas.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- Use public money to make affordable high-speed internet more universally accessible to all citizens
- Simplify and expedite FOIA requests and make more governmental information publicly available and searchable by the internet
- Require government officials to be publicly available to respond to citizens' concerns (via public electronic posting of office hours and schedules)
- Enforce network neutrality to make sure that all communications are treated equally

COMMERCIALIZE PUBLIC CONVERSATION

Imagine . . .

- *You work in the marketing division of Good Earth, a natural foods company. Your company supports legislation that would require stricter public disclosure of nutritional information, including higher standards for certification of organic food or foods free from genetic modification. Of course your company has hired a lobbyist and makes direct campaign contributions to politicians who support your position. But now you've launched a marketing campaign that links your new line of "Better Earth" organic grain cereals and breakfast bars directly to political contributions to support your legislative efforts. You're re-branding your products in a way that lets your customers know that by buying your product, they'll be directly supporting your political efforts, since 10% of the profits will be used for political contributions and lobbying to support stricter regulation of organic foods, etc. Your product advertisements highlight how buying "Better Earth" bars is a way for your customers to get politically active and to help make, well, a better earth.*
- *It's election time for an open Congressional seat in your district. You're trying to decide among three candidates: one whose campaign is sponsored by a major media conglomerate, OmniTelcoVision, one whose campaign is sponsored by Energize America, a consortium of energy corporations, and a third candidate who seems to be supported by small donors. You've learned a lot about the OmniTelcoVision candidate from the extensive coverage on their television and radio networks' news magazine shows and in the favorable coverage of the pages of your local newspaper, also owned by OmniTelcoVision. And Energize America has run a series of paid infomercials on their candidate. It's a bit harder for you to find information on the third candidate, who doesn't seem like a serious contender, given the lack of media coverage.*
- *You're part of a small communication technology company that has just hit the big-time with a breakthrough application that will allow media companies to transmit huge amounts of programming and web-content over existing internet networks at much higher speeds. Today you'll finalize a deal with a consortium of major media companies and major communication network companies for a premium service that will allow them to transmit their content, whether news and information or entertainment content, far more quickly than ever before. As part of this agreement, the communication network companies have agreed to slow down transmission of communications for anyone outside of the corporations involved in this deal. Your firm is so young, you haven't focused much on lobbying or worried much about public policy. With your newfound success, you've bought a membership in a corporate policy bank, which enables you to access a reserve of industry-friendly policy positions or to commission new policy positions for your company's legislative needs.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

You might be wondering who, or what, will decide what ideas and information make it into public conversation. You might be wondering who or what will decide who gets to take part or how people might get to take part in public conversation. This policy responds that we should simply let the market decide. Let's simply allow commercial forces to determine who gets to take part or what ideas and information can make it into public conversation. The aim of this policy possibility to allow participants in public conversation to take part in whatever ways they can afford.

When you think about public conversation,

you might feel that a chief concern is to keep the marketplace of communication about public matters free from government or social interference. Markets are best left to regulate themselves. So, you might think that participants in a free society should get to participate in the free market of public conversation in whatever ways they can afford without intervention from others. This policy responds by treating participation in public conversation as an economic commodity like others within a free market system. The ability to communicate or converse with others is an economic good that people, or other commercial agents, should be

able to buy or sell like any other. And anyone, or any organization, acting in the marketplace should be able to buy or sell the information and ideas that might make up the content of public discussion.

You might be drawn to this policy if you believe markets should largely be free from social or governmental intervention and if you believe that the economic marketplace should play the determinative role regarding participation in, or contributions to, public conversation. This means that commercial or market forces should be left alone to determine the flow of information and ideas in public conversation. In more concrete terms, this could mean that the corporate owner of a communication network might negotiate lucrative financial relationships with media corporations, or content providers, to transmit their content more quickly than those who won't or can't afford to pay for such favorable treatment.

If you think that the pursuit of self-interest is a core value for a free society, this policy approach follows that up by holding that individuals and other private agents (such as corporations) should have the right to seek their own economic self-interests in regard to public conversation. There would be little or no public or governmental responsibility in regard to this marketplace of communication. The content of public conversation, the information and ideas relevant to the discussion of public matters, should be treated as an economic commodity, as something to be traded, and as a means toward private economic gain. This could mean, for example, that a media corporation could use its economic power to block the publication of information or ideas that run counter to its own corporate interests. At its heart, this would mean adopting a "pay to play" approach to public conversation. If you can pay, then you can get your ideas into public conversation. And it could also mean that money could play an unrestricted role in our electoral process, including an expansion of special interest lobbying and unrestricted campaign contributions.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- There could be corporate sponsorship of policy ideas, with the branding of specific products or corporations by their associations with public policies they support
 - o Commercial television shows might be developed to market specific policy ideas, or viewers might call in (as with American Idol) to determine policy winners
- There might be increasing politicization of commerce, with consumers or investors demanding public disclosure of the policy positions of corporations
- There might be corporate deliberative councils or policy bank to shape and market public policy ideas that other various organizations might buy
- Citizens might enter the market by renting out personal message space for others' public policy messages

III. Addressing the Quality of Public Conversation You might feel that a major concern should be to improve the quality of public conversation. What makes for good public conversation, and how might we as a society elevate the quality of public discourse? In addition to possibility A above, possibilities E, F, and G below and on the following pages speak to these concerns.

CREATE & SUSTAIN QUALITY CONTROL FOR PUBLIC CONVERSATION

Imagine . . .

- *Your rural community is facing a referendum about the development of a wind farm on a local mountaintop. There has been a slew of concerns raised about land use, power transmission lines, reduction in energy costs to your community, impacts on migratory birds, and impacts on environmental tourism, since the area is a popular hiking destination. There have been so many arguments made from each side, it has been hard to sort out the reliable information from misinformation. Fortunately a new federal program has funded your town council's request for an advisory report from a panel of experts at the National Research Council. This initiative is part of a new program that publicly supports "helper networks" of experts to serve on advisory bodies for local communities. Your town's advisory panel includes experts on various issues relevant to the wind farm referendum. Their report will sort out the facts from fiction. Prior to the referendum vote, the panel will be visiting your town to host a public forum to explain the issues and their recommendation.*
- *You've completed your degree in journalism and are preparing for your professional licensing exams that will certify you as a professional journalist. While such credentials, which emphasize accuracy in reporting and the critical analysis of information, are not necessary for every journalistic position, it will help open more opportunities for you. Increasingly a number of non-profit organizations have taken a lead role in supporting investigative journalism, and part of the rise in stature of these news organizations is their emphasis on fact-finding through credentialed journalism. These credentials can also open up opportunities in the newly expanded ombudsmen and inspectors general positions within each federal agency. These public offices, as representatives of the interests of citizens, are focused on investigating the facts about public matters and on the public disclosure of the workings of government.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

If you're wondering about how to improve the quality of public conversation, one obvious place to start would be to focus on improving the quality of the information and ideas that make up the content of public conversation. The aim of this policy possibility is to do just that, whether by making sure that the participants in public conversation have ready access to trusted information and enhancing the role of knowledge-based expertise or independent watchdogs on various topics of public concern.

When you think about public conversation, you may feel that a chief concern should be to raise the quality of its content and to free up the flow of that content. You might reason along the lines of "garbage in—garbage out." If we don't focus on testing and improving the quality of the information and ideas flowing into public discussion, we won't be able to raise the substantive quality of that public discussion. Further, if powerful commercial or partisan interests are able to monopolize the

avenues for accessing information and ideas, then citizens might be shut off from the information and ideas they want or need in order to make up their minds about public matters. People wouldn't really be able to engage with the issues, so they'd effectively be shut out of meaningful public discussion about those topics. You might feel there should be a level playing field for all participants in public conversation, where everyone can have ready access to all the information and ideas they feel they need. This policy responds to these concerns by envisioning a broad range of governmental and non-governmental efforts to improve the quality of information and ideas that feed into public discussion and to improve all citizens' access to such information and ideas by assuring the free flow of networks of communication.

You might think about this policy this way, public conversation will be better if people know what they're talking about. We all need good information in order to engaged in informed

deliberative discussions about public matters. We need to be exposed to well thought out ideas from a variety of perspectives. For us to get to this point, there has to be a sense of social responsibility for public-interest organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, to play a watchdog role over the quality of the information that enters public discussion. Getting access to tested information or thoughtful ideas, especially about complex public topics, could mean expanding access to the thinking of knowledgeable experts on a given topic. It could also mean having a means of independent review by watchdogs, those who can play the role of critically reviewing the participants in public discourse, and to help use the information or knowledge from experts to debunk misinformation and better inform the public about matters of public concern. You might be drawn in this direction if you place a lot of stock in taking a reality-based approach toward the discussion of public matters.

You might also be concerned about the potentially corrosive influence that commercial or partisan interests might have on the flow of public conversation or on access to information and ideas. This policy responds by saying there is a governmental responsibility to make sure that no single player or group of players is able to monopolize public conversation or to control the flow of information and ideas. There should be essentially a level playing field, so that all information and ideas are able to find their way into the forum of public discussion. This would mean, for example, enforcing network neutrality, so that all telecommunications would be treated the same. You couldn't have a situation where some communications are slowed down because people couldn't afford to pay the communication network for more favorable service.

When you think about opening up the flow of information and ideas, you might also think about improving people's access to information about what their own government is doing. This policy responds with a sunshine policy for governmental activity, mandating public disclosure of governmental information. The government at all levels would be required to make information about its activities and policy deliberations readily available to all citizens (expediting and simplifying Freedom of Information requests and using technology to make such information more readily searchable). It would also require the disclosure of financial

relationships and potential conflicts of interests related to policymakers or those who play an advisory role for policymakers. The aim is to make as much relevant and substantive information available to citizens as possible, to help improve the quality of their deliberative discussions about public matters.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- Within governmental contexts:
 - Make government more open and transparent by increasing the flow of public or governmental information (information about the government or information that government has about public matters) and making it readily searchable by the public through online databases
 - Expand the role of non-partisan governmental research services
 - Expand the role of independent watchdogs within government, such as inspectors general and ombudsmen functioning as agents of citizens' review within government
 - Publicly support the expanded functioning of expert councils or expert advisory bodies to inform and advise citizens and government officials alike about complex policy areas
 - Offer public funding through grants or awards to foster non-governmental investigative research and journalism
- Within non-governmental contexts:
 - Expand the role of non-profit organizations (including universities) in investigative research and journalism
 - Expand credentialing practices or professionalize journalism, emphasizing fact-checking and independent investigative research, as an additional qualification (not a prerequisite) for journalism (along the lines of licensing for other professions)
 - Expand whistle-blower protections (both inside and outside of government) to encourage the disclosure of truthful information and to counteract the powerful interests that might seek to keep the true state of affairs concealed from public scrutiny

CREATE STRUCTURES FOR CONNECTING PUBLIC CONVERSATION TO RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE

Imagine . . .

- *Governmental websites have been transformed from public relations vehicles into “wiki” websites—which allow you, as a citizen, to post questions, concerns, and suggestions for relevant governmental agencies, for the White House, or for legislators. These governmental wikis also allow you to rate your fellow citizens’ entries, so that the most highly recommended topics rise to the top of the list.*
- *You’ve been concerned about the lack of sufficient public transportation in your neighborhood and you’d like to see your Congressperson advocate for greater federal support. Fortunately, her schedule is publicly available at her website, and you can track who she is meeting with and about what topics. On her website she is also required to host “citizens’ office hours” on a weekly basis to respond to questions and concerns from any citizen (rather than just campaign donors). By using a computer at your local library you are able to email your concerns to her.*
- *You’ve recently been appointed as a public ombudsman within the Department of Transportation. Your job is essentially to serve as a public watchdog and something of a devil’s advocate as the representative of citizen concerns within your agency. Citizens are able to contact you through the Department’s wiki website with their concerns or questions. You have the authority to audit governmental actions and to represent citizen or community concerns.*
- *Last year you joined a community discussion group that was supported with meeting space and facilitation guidance by a government grant at your local library. Your discussions have focused on urban development, how people need to go through longer and longer commutes to make their way to work, how hard it is to get by without a car, and how few people can afford any longer to live near where they work. After months of discussions you have explored several different policy suggestions that make sense to your group. Last week your group entered these ideas on the wiki websites of your Congresswoman and of the White House. Now you find that not only have your ideas been “recommended” into the top position on your Congresswoman’s website, but you’ve been contacted by a dozen other community organizations who share your interests and concerns.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

If you’re wondering about how to improve the quality of public conversation, you might think about increasing the opportunities for citizens to interact in meaningful ways with each other and with their government. You might think about ways for talk to make a difference, ways to connect public conversation to public action. The aim of this policy possibility is to make democratic governance more responsive to public conversation by setting up structures for more interactive communication both among citizens and between citizens and government.

When you think about public conversation, you might feel that a chief concern should be to improve its quality. And you might feel the quality would improve if opportunities for public conversation were structured to be more interactive, to create more responsiveness among those involved in the conversation rather than just one-directional communication. This responsiveness would give people a sense that their talk matters, that participating in public conversation makes a difference in terms of the way our society might operate. This policy

responds to these concerns by creating opportunities for more responsive or interactive communication among citizens or between citizens and their government about matters of public concern. By creating more mechanisms for people to engage in deliberative discussions about public matters with each other and/or with their government, this policy aims to provide a broad range of ways to connect public conversation more clearly to public life and public action.

You might think of interactive or responsive public conversation as discussions or communications where there is genuine give and take. If we emphasize this give and take, if we create more opportunities for this kind of give and take, people will likely get a sense that their participation in public conversation leads somewhere. If there’s give and take in public discussion, then people can see how they can build on something or how it can have an effect. The result will be that participation in public discussion will be far more meaningful for all involved. Citizens will have a greater sense of civic efficacy, that their participation in public deliberation and discussion can make a difference in civic life.

When you think about the kind of genuine give and take between citizens and their government that this policy would try to create, then you might think about how government would really have to be open to citizen involvement. This approach would be motivated by a sense of social responsibility on the part of government so that it would be obliged to respond to citizens, to be open to their input and questions. This approach goes beyond government transparency so that citizens can be well informed about public matters (though it would include that). What this policy has in mind is to shape interactions between citizens and government so that communications would flow more actively in both directions. There should be real give and take so that citizens could, for example, question public officials and offer input about public matters—and those public officials would be compelled to respond. This could be done in both low-tech and high-tech ways. On the low-tech side, there could be a requirement for public office holders to have “citizens’ office hours” (along the lines of Parliamentary “Question Time”) where officials would be required to respond to questions from actual citizens (rather than lobbyists) not selected by those officials. Citizen participation might be publicly supported at a minimal level, for example, by counting as an officially excused absence from school or work, or at a maximal level with reimbursement for lost wages or expenses. On the high-tech side, such forums could be hosted online, using the capacities of social networking and user-rating software so that questions or issues that were of concern to the greatest number of actual citizens (rather than selected members of the press at a press conference) would rise to the top of the list for governmental response. Governmental websites could be transformed from their current state as public relations vehicles or one-directional depositories of information into portals or forums for people to interact with their government. They could be engineered to be more like “wikis” —online sites that are shaped collaboratively by users—in this case by the interactions of citizens and government officials. New communication technologies, such as high-speed internet, can greatly lower the threshold for enabling deliberative interactions between citizens and government—but this benefit won’t really be captured in any wide-scale way unless these technologies are made more universally accessible to all citizens. So this policy approach could include public funding to make access to high-speed internet affordable to virtually all citizens.

Of course, if you think about making public discourse more interactive, you might also think the give and take of citizens with each other. This policy would respond by providing public support for grass roots discussions among citizens that may or may not ever percolate up to direct interactions with government. Public spaces, such as museums, libraries, or schools, could be transformed from places for one-directional communication to hosting sites for deliberative discussions. You might think about the ways that public funding could enable deliberative discussion opportunities that would focus on exploring the various facets of a complex area of public concern—essentially making room for reflective investigation by citizens. Such early stage public discussions could foster greater public understanding of the policies that eventually might take shape and greater support for the eventual policy choices to be made. There could also be public funding support for late stage public discussions, where citizens deliberate together in order to make policy recommendations. This support could include creating agenda-setting forums, whether in-person or online, to foster citizens’ discussion of overall directions for policy at a local level and at a national level. These approaches are largely structural, but they are intended to address concerns that citizens’ participation in public conversation be more than “just talk.” They are intended to show that such “talk” does make a difference in how our society governs itself.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- o Transforming government websites to be like “wikis”; using online town-hall meetings and forums and in-person office hours for citizens
- o Requiring officials to respond to questions in public forums and that public policies be guided by input from public discussions
- o citizen deliberative councils for official policy deliberations (where citizens would actively determine the shape of public policy)
- o independent watchdogs, such as inspectors general and ombudsmen
- o public funding of elections
- o expanding the size of Congress so there are fewer citizens in each district
- o Creating a “public multimedia outlet” for discussion of news, information, ideas, etc.
- o funding for deliberative discussions
- o More affordable communications technology
- o developing spaces for public conversation
- o Expanding whistle-blower protections

IMPROVE PUBLIC THINKING BY CREATING A SENSE OF COSTS & BENEFITS

Imagine . . .

- *Recently a local state university received a federal grant to start up and maintain a “policy analysis market” as essentially a legalized betting exchange on the likelihood that competing policy approaches will be effective responses to given public needs. The bets aren’t large—there’s a maximum of \$500 for any individual to play (and a minimum of \$5). Through the university’s extension service, you can arrange to have policies of local interest placed into the market. Since you serve on the town council, you’ve found this very helpful as your town of 5,000 is considering a proposal to establish a wind farm on a local mountaintop to supplement of the town’s electricity needs. This has enabled you to test the viability of your town’s proposal by tapping into the wisdom of a market of speculators, many of whom are researchers at a network of linked universities.*
- *Your county is facing a referendum on a proposal to require incarceration in the county jail of any undocumented persons as a way to address concerns about a perceived influx of illegal immigrants. Initial polling has shown public support for this proposal in the 70% range. As part of your state’s new policy of public disclosure of costs and benefits, this proposal cannot be offered as a stand-alone proposition. It must be linked to an official “estimated impact statement” that spells out the likely real economic costs and benefits from this proposal. It must also include proposals to address these costs and benefits. In the case of this referendum item, you now realize that if you vote “yes” to support the proposal, you are also agreeing to give your county supervisors the authority to proceed with any of the listed proposals to address the potential costs of any additional incarceration of illegal aliens. As you read the “estimated impact statement” in your morning paper, you realize that you’ll have to agree to give pre-approval to your county supervisors to choose from any of the following options: raising the local sales tax by 1% and/or cutting the budget for the public school system’s athletic program. Now you’ve got to think about whether these costs seem worth the benefit.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

If you are wondering about how to improve the quality of public conversation, you might think about the ways that the prospect of rewards or losses can motivate more careful thinking. The aim of this policy possibility is to improve the quality of public conversation by encouraging more accountable participation, since participants would have some “skin in the game” – the possibility of gaining or losing something.

When you think about public conversation, you might feel that a chief concern is to improve its quality. And one way to improve its quality would be to improve the quality of the thinking that takes place through it. Just consider how people often do their best and most creative thinking when there is the prospect of reward or the risk of loss. You might also feel that people need a sense that their democratic choices matter, that these choices make a difference whether in terms of a price to be paid or a gain to be won. What is really toxic to democratic deliberation is the sense that it’s all the same, that our talk, our ideas, our choices, make no

difference in the end. This policy responds to those concerns by encouraging the use of incentive systems to reward truly useful contributions to public conversation. It would also entail the prospect of some loss, whether in terms of reputation, social recognition, or financial cost, for ideas or positions that turn out to be wrongheaded or not so useful.

You might think about this policy approach this way: people think more carefully when there is a real prospect of gaining or losing something. If there is a cost of citizenship, if there is a price of admission to be paid to enter public conversation, then people might take that public conversation and their civic life more seriously. If you have something to lose or gain, you’ll likely take a more active role in making sure you are well-informed about public matters and that you think more carefully about them. Rather than emphasizing the freedom that citizens have to participate in public conversation, this policy emphasizes more the obligations that individuals have to think and speak carefully and responsibly.

You might wonder whether having a cost of entry might deter some participants, especially those who are apathetic. But this policy approach is not concerned with increasing the quantity of public discourse or expanding the numbers of participants. It is concerned with increasing the quality of contributions to public conversation. But you might keep in mind that the costs and benefits, or the potential rewards or losses, need not be financial in any immediate or personal sense. This policy approach could mean making the costs of different policy choices clear to citizens. It could mean requiring an advance disclosure to citizens of the potential costs and benefits for policy choices. Citizens should know in advance that if they support a given policy choice, that it will have the following costs (for example, voting for incarcerating more people will mean voting to raise your own taxes by X amount). Putting a price on the costs and benefits of policy choices is likely to capture citizens' attention and get them to think more carefully about those choices.

the contributor's prior status in the community (e.g. people who continually got things wrong would have very low rankings, despite the fact that they might have positions of power in the media)

- Encourage accountability by prohibiting or limiting anonymous participation in public discourse; people would have to take ownership of their words and the prospect of diminished reputation if their ideas are wrong-headed
- Require that there be a public policy impact statement in advance for proposed public policies, so that citizens could better deliberate about the extended costs and benefits of a public policy proposal
 - o This could be combined with an agreement that if citizens vote for X proposal, they are agreeing to pay the following costs to cover it

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- Encourage the development of an intellectual property system for public policy ideas to generate social and/or financial recognition for creators of genuinely useful or innovative public policy ideas
- Encourage more widespread use of decision or prediction markets so that people could invest in competing public policy choices
- Create an incentive system to reward genuinely useful public policy ideas; rewards could be financial, whether as a direct cash award, tax credit, other benefits (such as scholarship funds), or rewards could be strictly social, such as acclaim or public recognition
- Create reputation tracking systems, especially online, for tracking the positive and negative recognition for public policy ideas
 - o This could include user-generated reputation or recognition systems that allow useful ideas and credible contributors to percolate up organically rather than by

IV. Managing Public Conversation

When you think about public conversation, you might wonder about whether or how it could be managed. Policy possibilities H and I, below and on the following pages, respond to those concerns in different ways. Of course, many of the other policy possibilities in this report also speak in different ways to concerns about managing public conversation.

LET PUBLIC CONVERSATION SELF-REGULATE

Imagine . . .

- *There has been an explosion of media content as it has gotten easier and easier for everyone to publish their thoughts and transmit their creations via the internet. As this has integrated with TV and radio, there has been an explosion of “channels” available for electronic communication, from user-generated material to the corporate broadcasters. There’s no real limit to what you might find when you scroll through the television channels or peruse the blogs and Podcasts available on your computer. You can find almost every point of view there. Of course, there are some times when you worry about what your kids might be watching, but you figure it’s your responsibility to block their access to inappropriate channels or websites.*
- *Until recently you worked as a reporter with the online edition of your city’s major newspaper, but thanks to a recent corporate merger, you’ve vaulted into greater exposure online and on-air. Your corporate partners now include several local radio stations, a local television network affiliate, and a major broadcast and cable news network. Since the merger, you’ve been able to share your political reporting through appearances on your corporate TV and radio affiliates to supplement your writing for the online newspaper. Of course, before the merger you would occasionally get invited on-air, but now that it is part of one big corporate family, such appearances are a much more regular occurrence for you.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

You might be wondering about how, if at all, public conversation might be regulated or controlled. This policy responds that generally, as a society, we should leave the public conversation to its own devices. We shouldn’t interfere. If you’re wondering about whether there should be any kind of social or governmental control over the means or content of public conversation, this policy responds with a simple “no.” The aim of this policy possibility is basically to allow the public conversation to govern itself and to keep it free from governmental intervention.

When you think of public conversation, you might feel that a chief concern is to maximize freedom by keeping the restrictive hand out of government out of it. Think of a really good conversation you’ve had. It’s likely that it went well because you just let it unfold. Everyone involved in the conversation just let it go its own way. In

contrast, you might think of a time when you had a really bad conversation because you felt someone was trying to steer you toward certain topics or to limit the things you could say; someone was trying to control the conversation. This policy approach says that it’s the same at the large scale of public conversation. The government should stay out of the business of interfering with public conversation. It shouldn’t exert any control over the topics people might discuss or the ways they might discuss them. As a society, we should just let public conversation manage itself and let whatever happens happen.

One way you could think of this policy approach is for the public, acting through the government, to take a strict “hands-off” approach to public conversation. The government should stay out of the business of trying to oversee or manage any aspect of public discourse. This means the government shouldn’t try to control or oversee at all

what people might say or talk about in public conversation. The government also should not try to control or oversee the means of conversation. This means that the private companies or corporations who own or control the means of conversation, whether media corporations or network corporations, should be able to set up whatever policies they'd like. The companies who control the media or networks of public communication would make the decisions about the ways that people might engage with each other in public conversation and about the kinds of topics or content they might discuss. In short, our public policy regarding public discourse would be to have no "public" policy, since we'd leave it up to private development, a *laissez-faire* approach. This approach would embody more of an absolute belief that there is no governmental or public role in dealing with public conversation.

Another way you could think of this policy approach would be to take more of a gradual or "wait and see" approach. In general you might feel it's probably better to let public conversation just unfold as it will and to keep it free from governmental interference. But you might also think of times when the public, acting through the government, might have to step in to get things back on track. This approach would allow public policies for public discourse to evolve carefully and incrementally in response to the public concerns that emerge over time. This approach would embody more of a conditional approach, informed by the recognition that we tend to do a better job of adapting to known realities rather than predicting future developments. By and large we should pursue a minimalist approach to public policy for public conversation. The contours of our public policy should evolve over time incrementally and in response to changing conditions in the sphere of public conversation.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- This might take shape as a strict hand-off approach when it comes to governmental or social involvement in public discourse
- Or it might take shape as a more incremental or "wait and see" approach—which would allow some governmental involvement in regulating or intervening with public discourse to address specific problems that threaten to disrupt core aspects of the public conversation

LET GOVERNMENT MANAGE PUBLIC CONVERSATION

Imagine . . .

- *You and several colleagues won majority control of your town council largely by campaigning on a platform that included support for greater energy self-sufficiency for your town by developing a nearby wind farm. The town council will be holding several forums to present the plans for the wind farm. Since the majority of the citizens obviously support your position on developing the wind farm, you decide that only speakers who support the development of the wind farm will be allowed to participate.*
- *Your ringing cell phone wakes you with a text message from the State Department of Homeland Security to warn you of a nearby highway closure due to a tanker truck's spillage of hazardous waste. In the past such alerts would have been limited to the radio or television. But now that there are so many new forms of communication, governments, whether at the national, state, or local level, have a right of access to virtually every form of communication in order to communicate to citizens. When you first activated your cell phone service it was automatically registered to receive such governmental messages. Of course, this also means that the federal government has a registry of all cell phone users that is accessible to local and state governments as well.*
- *As a student at a state university you're organizing a group of your fellow students to rally in protest at a scheduled speech by the Governor, who has recently cut support for higher education. You'll have to conduct your rally within a roped-off area set up by the local police in stadium parking lot several miles from where the Governor will actually be speaking. You're used to this kind of a set-up, since your university also has such "free speech zones," which are the only areas on campus where student protests or impromptu assemblies are allowed. You're also aware that as the organizer of this protest, the state police are likely monitoring your cell phone and email communications. But you figure, as long as you're not doing anything illegal, there's no problem with the authorities monitoring your communications.*

The basic idea of this possibility . . .

You might be wondering about how, if at all, public conversation might be regulated or controlled. This policy responds that this is such a great public responsibility, we should make sure that the government, as the representative of the public's interest, should take an active role in managing and shaping public conversation. The aim of this policy is enable the government to control and manage the ways the people might engage in public conversation as well as the topics of their discussion.

When you think about public conversation, you might feel that a chief concern is to make sure that the will of the majority, as expressed through their elected government, can be effectively communicated across society. This policy responds to that concern by enabling government to set the terms of participation in public discussion in such a way as to maximize support for governmental policies. You might also feel that it's in the interest of us all to keep the public focused on our national

agenda. If you think of an efficient society that stays focused on a national agenda as a public good, then you might see the government as best positioned to keep the public focused by managing the topics of, and participation in, public discussion.

If you think of our elected government as the representative of the will of the nation, then this policy responds that there is a social responsibility for the government to help shape public opinion in support of governmental policies. It is motivated by the belief that government should be an active player in public conversation, rather than a neutral referee. For example, government might limit participation in public discussions to only those citizens who agree to express support for certain governmental policies. The government could also use this power to mandate some level of citizen participation in public discussion opportunities. Government might constrain participation, for example, by making access to certain privileges contingent upon participation in some form of public discourse, whether participating in a public hearing or providing input on a survey.

You might consider that if the government is going to manage public conversation effectively, it should have the right and ability to monitor and censor the content of public conversation. This could include prior restraint of any talk that it might find objectionable. For government to manage the content of public discourse you might feel it should have the ability to establish and enforce standards of decency in public communication. The government would also have a right of access to communicate with citizens regardless of the media format (whether with broadcast, electronic, or print media). In times of emergency, for example, this could help the government reach the public with timely information more effectively.

In more concrete terms this could mean. . .

- The government at various levels could set barriers to participation in public discourse, for example, it might allow only those who support governmental policy to attend public forums on those policies
- The government would have the right and ability to monitor and censor the content of public discourse
 - It might use technology to monitor all discourse for off-limit topics or positions
 - It might use prior restraint to shut down discussion of off-limit topics or banned positions
- The government at various levels would have the right to access discourse space regardless of the type of media (print or electronic) to have a guaranteed public communication slot in the ever expanding media for public discussion
- The government might establish a multimedia outlet (along the lines of PBS and NPR, but not limited to any specific media type) as an outlet for governmental communication
- The government could require participation in various forms of public discourse by certain citizens (e.g. through offering incentives or threatening penalties)

An Open Invitation to Further Discussion & Interactivity

We hope that you will use this report to carry forward the discussion begun by our project panels.

We have developed a discussion process that may be helpful for groups interested in discussing the ideas presented in our reports or in discussing matters of public interest more generally. We have also developed facilitation and discussion guidebooks to assist in the planning and conduct of these discussions. These materials, as well as copies of this and other Interactivity Foundation reports, may be downloaded from our website (listed below). You can also obtain additional printed copies of any of our publications (at no cost) by sending us a request that briefly indicates their intended use. See the contact information listed below.

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Finally, we welcome your comments, ideas, and other feedback about this report, its possibilities, any of our publications, or our discussion processes.

You may contact us via any of the addresses listed below.

Interactivity Foundation
PO Box 9
Parkersburg, WV 26102-0009

Website: <http://www.interactivityfoundation.org>

Email: if@citynet.net

Thank you! We look forward to the interactivity.

