

HELPING AMERICA TALK

How We Can Improve Public Discourse



Edited by

Jeff Prudhomme

Fellow of the Interactivity Foundation

Copy Chief: Chana Garcia
Art Director: Calida Garcia Rawles

Attribution — NonCommercial-ShareAlike License 3.0

This work is provided under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution, Noncommercial, Share Alike License. The basic terms of this license are summarized below. To view a copy of this license together with a link to its full legal code with all its terms, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. This work is also protected by copyright and/or other applicable law. Any use of this work other than as authorized under this license or copyright law is prohibited.

Generally, under the terms of this license, you are free:



To Share — to copy, distribute, and transmit the work.



To Remix — to adapt the work.

Under the following conditions:



Attribution — You must attribute the work by reference to its title, the Interactivity Foundation as its publisher and copyright holder, and include notice that the work is available under a Creative Commons Attribution, Noncommercial, Share-Alike License. In your attribution and otherwise, you must not in any way suggest that the Interactivity Foundation endorses you or your use of the work.



Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.



Share Alike — If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

With the understanding that:

Waiver — Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the Interactivity Foundation.

Public Domain — Where the work or any of its elements is in the public domain under applicable law, that status is in no way affected by the license.

Other Rights — In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:

- Your fair dealing or fair use rights, or other applicable copyright exceptions and limitations
- The author's moral rights
- Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights.

Notice — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to the following Web page: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

How We Can Improve Public Discourse 2

I. GETTING PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE 4



Policy A 6
Teach the People Well: Educate for Collaborative
Public Discourse



Policy B 10
Use Carrots and Sticks to Bring More People in the Door

II. GAINING ACCESS TO PUBLIC DISCOURSE 12



Policy C 14
Here Comes Everybody: Open Up Public Discourse for All



Policy D 16
Money Talks: Let the Free Market Determine Access to
Public Discourse

III. IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE 18



Policy E 20
Quality In, Quality Out: Quality Control for Public Discourse



Policy F 24
Make Words Matter: Connect Public Talk to Public Action



Policy G 28
Make a Game of It: Use Competition to Get Better Ideas into
Public Discourse

HELPING AMERICA TALK

How We Can Improve Public Discourse

Introduction: Some Concerns About Public Discourse



American democracy has always involved talking. In fact, you could look at our democratic society as one big conversation—a conversation about where we are headed and how to get there. Our public talk, or public discourse, covers the different ways that we, as citizens, communicate with each other about public matters. We communicate one on one, and we communicate in groups. We talk to our government, and our government talks to us. Thanks to evolving communication technologies, our conversations flow in infinite directions, connecting all kinds of people and all kinds of communities.

Sure, America talks. But if we can't hear each other, does it count? As our public airwaves fill with shouting matches, can we communicate in ways that generate light — and not just heat? What counts as “good” public discourse? How can we ensure that our public conversation is meaningful and can make a difference?

Sixteen of our fellow citizens came together over the course of roughly a year to explore concerns about public discourse. They explored everything, from what to do about people who can't or won't participate in public discourse to how to improve the quality of the information we use to make public decisions. The group also discussed different kinds of public discourse, from speeches and public demonstrations to neighborhood newsgroups and news shows on TV. They explored the different private and public roles that might affect public discourse, and they explored the different goals or values that might shape our different approaches to helping America talk. In response to these varying concerns, these citizens developed seven policy ideas for improving public discourse.

Each of the ideas outlined here is intended to offer a broad policy description of how we, as a society, might approach core concerns about public discourse. These are possibilities — not detailed policy statements. You'll find a brief description of each policy and some of the thinking behind it. You'll also find a few indications of the ways the policies could work.

The following possibilities are presented in flexible groupings since there is a fair amount of interplay among them. As you discuss them, we hope they spark your own ideas about how to improve our national discourse and get America talking.

I. GETTING PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE





- **What if there aren't enough people included in our public discourse?**
- **How can we get more people to speak up?**

TEACH THE PEOPLE WELL:

Educate for Collaborative Public Discourse

The Basic Idea:

Productive and effective public discourse doesn't just happen. We need to learn how to do it, and we typically learn best by hands-on experiences or by guided practice. This policy approach would publicly fund such educational experiences, both in and out of the classroom. The approach here is that more people would participate in public discourse if they had the know-how.



The focus of this policy would be to provide practical know-how about how to engage in deliberative discussions regarding matters of public significance. This policy approach would develop those capacities in citizens to help them think critically about information and arguments. It would help people make sense of the barrage of information and ideas they confront in the flow of public discourse, especially in this age of electronic media. This policy approach would help people learn how to marshal evidence and reason critically. Citizens would learn that “good” public deliberation and discussion require more than simply voicing one’s personal prejudices or positions. Good public discourse involves careful inquiry, research, and evaluation. It also includes exploring divergent perspectives.

TEACH THE PEOPLE WELL:

Educate for Collaborative Public Discourse

How it Would Work:

This policy would encourage public support for teaching civic dialogue and discussions across the curriculum in formal educational contexts, from kindergarten through college. Among the possible approaches:



- 1. Focus on the habits and practices that make for good public discourse with hands-on participation in deliberative discussions rather than abstract civics lessons.**
- 2. Develop a national curriculum to support active citizen participation in public discourse.**
- 3. Develop national priorities while supporting a decentralized, bottom-up approach to encourage experimentation. Pilot various local, regional, state-level civic discourse initiatives with a learn-by-doing model, in which local communities and nongovernmental organizations would play a role.**

USE CARROTS AND STICKS TO BRING MORE PEOPLE IN THE DOOR

The Basic Idea:

This policy possibility would expand the number of citizens participating in public discourse by using a variety of incentives or disincentives. The aim of this policy is to get more people in the door by appealing to their self-interest. This policy takes a carrot-or-stick approach to motivate citizen participation in public discourse.

Democracy can't work unless we have input from a majority of citizens, or at least from a significant portion of them. Every citizen has an obligation to do his or her part for democratic governance by participating in some form of public discussion about matters of public concern. But we don't all have a sense of civic duty or even the interest to take part. So this policy approach relies on public incentives or disincentives to motivate more people to take part.

If we take seriously this obligation to speak up, then it should be enforced by the power of government. Acting in the name of our public interest, the government could offer either positive incentives to motivate people to participate, or it could impose penalties if people fail to participate. These disincentives would make clear that there's a price to pay for civic apathy, since failure to participate in civic discourse would hurt the rest of us.



II. GAINING ACCESS TO PUBLIC DISCOURSE





- **Who gets to take part in public discourse?**
- **Who gets to have a voice?**
- **How will people gain access to the ideas and information needed for thoughtful participation in a democracy?**

HERE COMES EVERYBODY:

Open Up Public Discourse for All

The Basic Idea:

There's a public responsibility to ensure that everyone has some means of participating in a public conversation. Access isn't just about having a voice. It is also about what we are able to hear. It has to do with our ability to get information and ideas about public matters—the kinds of things that we might need or want in order to make informed democratic choices. At its heart, this policy would expand public discourse by ensuring that every citizen has open and equitable access both to the means of participating in public discourse and to its content.

If citizens have unequal access to the means of joining in public discourse, perhaps due to economic status, then they can't fully enjoy equal rights as citizens. The government could address this by focusing on opening up lines of communication and providing a check against commercial, social, or political forces that might seek either to constrict participation or the flow of information and ideas.

Modern communication technologies have the potential to open the door to wide participation in public discourse, but this can only be possible if, as a society, we make sure these technologies are in the reach of most citizens. This policy responds to these concerns by ensuring that all citizens have affordable access to communication



technologies, such as high-speed Internet and Internet-ready devices, such as smart phones, tablets, or laptops, which are essential to equitable participation in public discourse.

This policy is not just about opening up access to the means of public discourse. It is also about opening up access to the content of public discourse. It would require governmental transparency, specifically that public servants make information available to all citizens. (For example, simplifying and expediting Freedom of Information requests and using technology to make such information available and searchable.) This would ensure citizens' access to government officials. (For example, requiring extended office hours to accommodate citizens.) The government would also act as a neutral enforcer of the free flow of public discourse by ensuring that participants in public discourse are treated the same, regardless of their economic power.

MONEY TALKS:

Let the Free Market Determine Access to Public Discourse

The Basic Idea:

Who gets to have a voice in our public discourse? Who gets to hear that voice? And how? This policy possibility lets the free market decide. It allows commercial forces to determine who gets to take part in our public discourse and how they get to take part. The marketplace will decide what ideas and information make it into the public discourse. At its heart, this policy would mean adopting a “pay to play” approach to participation.

A chief policy concern for this approach is keeping communication about public matters free from government or social interference. This approach is informed by the belief that free markets are best left to regulate themselves. A free society should be allowed to participate in public discourse in whatever ways individuals can afford, without intervention from others. Participation in public discourse should be treated as an economic commodity like other goods or services within a free market system.

Private forces should be left alone to determine the flow of information and ideas in public discourse. A citizen’s ability to be heard or to hear others in our public discourse depends on



what he or she can afford to pay. This price would be determined by what the market will bear. So, if a citizen can pay to get his or her ideas into the public discourse, then he or she has a chance to be heard. Whoever can afford the biggest megaphone will speak the loudest. One’s ability to access ideas depends on what one can afford. This would also mean that money would play an unrestricted role in our electoral process. There would be no limits on special interest lobbying, campaign contributions, or commercial sponsorship of specific public policies or of candidates.

III. IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE





- What makes for good public discourse?
- How can we, as a society, elevate the quality of public discourse?

QUALITY IN, QUALITY OUT: Quality Control for Public Discourse

The Basic Idea:

Put simply, this policy approach suggests that public discourse would be better if people had access to good information. The idea is “quality in—quality out.” If we, as a society or as citizens, have poor quality information about public matters, we’ll have poor quality public discourse, and we’ll likely make poor quality decisions. Conversely, if we focus on improving the quality of the information and ideas that make up the content of public discourse, we would raise the quality of public discourse.

This policy envisions a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental efforts to improve the quality of information and ideas that make up the content of public discourse. One way to improve the content of public discourse is to ensure access to a full range of content through our communication networks. Citizens need to have access to a full range of information and ideas about public matters, even if this content reflects minority opinions or runs counter to powerful interests. People need access to information about public matters and about what the government is doing, so this policy would



mandate greater transparency in public affairs, including disclosure of governmental information and the creation of readily searchable databases for public information.

For this policy approach to work, it is vital that people have access to trusted and tested information. The policy would support the work of experts or independent watchdogs who would help verify the quality of information feeding into our public discourse. This approach relies on public interest organizations, whether governmental

QUALITY IN, QUALITY OUT:

Quality Control for Public Discourse

How it Would Work:

1. Within governmental contexts:

- a. Make government, from the local to the national level, more open and transparent by increasing the flow of public or governmental information, requiring open meetings, and making public information readily searchable through online databases.
- b. Require the advance public disclosure of financial relationships and potential conflicts of interests related to policy-makers or those who play an advisory role for policymakers.
- c. Expand the role of nonpartisan governmental research services.
- d. Expand the role of independent watchdogs within government, such as inspectors general and ombudsmen.
- e. Publicly support expanded roles for expert councils or expert advisory bodies to inform citizens and government officials about policy matters.
- f. Offer public funding through grants or awards to foster nongovernmental investigative research and journalism.



MAKE WORDS MATTER: Connect Public Talk to Public Action

The Basic Idea:

One way to improve the quality of public discourse is to give people the sense that their words can make a difference, or to persuade them that public discourse can bring about change. This policy seeks to connect public talk to public action. It would make democratic governance more responsive to public discourse by setting up structures for more interactive communication among citizens and between citizens and government. If people have a sense that their participation in public discourse will make a difference, they will be more likely to invest themselves in it, which should improve the overall quality of our public discourse.



This policy would create opportunities for public discourse to be more interactive and less one-directional. This would mean making governmental deliberations (whether local or national) more open to citizen input so there would be genuine give and take between government and citizens. This would include mechanisms for people to see how government addresses their input. This citizen-government interactivity could take shape in large-scale ways, with citizen deliberative forums that actively inform governmental policy. It could also be done in small-scale ways by making public office holders accountable for responding to citizens' concerns and not just lobbyists.



MAKE WORDS MATTER: Connect Public Talk to Public Action

How it Would Work:

1. Within governmental contexts:

- a. Transform governmental websites to be more interactive, like wikis, enabling the collaborative interaction of citizens with each other and their government and utilizing the social networking capacities of the Web.
- b. Expand and facilitate interaction of citizens and government using high-tech means (online office hours, town hall meetings, and forums) and low-tech means (in-person office hours, accessible schedules, and appointment calendars for public officials).
- c. Establish and expand the role of citizen deliberative councils for official policy deliberations (where citizens could actively determine the shape of public policy).
- d. Establish and expand the role of ombudsmen functioning as independent advocates of citizens' interests within governmental departments and agencies.
- e. Make elected office holders more responsive to the opinions of citizens/constituents by publicly funding elections, freeing elected office holders from the constant demand of fundraising and shielding the process from the corrosive effects of private campaign donations.
- f. Enable more interaction between constituents and office holders by shrinking political districts, bringing representation closer to the level of the people. This could mean expanding the size of Congress so there would be fewer citizens in each district.
- g. Create a publicly funded "multimedia outlet" (parallel to the notion of PBS or NPR, but not limited to a specific technology or media type) with an interactive format to support citizens' discussion of news, information, ideas, cultural performances, etc. It would support public affairs discussions not limited by commercial viability. This public multimedia outlet could be charged with opening up participation in public discourse to more citizens and to a diversity of views.

MAKE A GAME OF IT:

Use Competition to Get Better Ideas into Public Discourse

The Basic Idea:

One way to improve the quality of public discourse would be to improve the quality of thinking that makes up its content. And one way to improve the quality of thinking in our public discourse would be to foster a sense of real competition, to make a real game of it. What if there were a prize or grand challenge for truly innovative and useful public thinking? This policy relies on creating a sense of having something to win or lose on the basis of the quality of your contributions to public discourse. If there's competition and something to win, you might think more carefully about your contributions to our public discourse. If the participants in public discourse generally faced greater accountability for the quality of their contributions, the quality of these contributions would be likely to rise. Unlike earlier possibilities aimed at increasing the quantity of participants in public discourse, this policy approach raises the stakes for participation in a way that might decrease the quantity of participants in the name of increasing the quality of participation.

People often do their best—and most creative—thinking when there's a sense of competition, a sense of having something on the line. Nothing seems to weaken our thinking more than the sense of having nothing at stake. This policy responds by creating a sense of what is at stake, which could stimulate more creative public thinking.



This policy could be implemented in very direct ways to foster a sense of competition. It might publicly establish, or encourage, the private development of a prize (or prizes) for particularly useful and innovative ideas for public policy. This reward could be a monetary award, like the X-Prize for technology breakthroughs, or it could take the form of public recognition. Recognition for positive social accomplishments can be a powerful motivator for individuals. Monetary incentives could also be part of an expanded use of “prediction markets,” which essentially function as market exchanges, where people invest in (or bet on) the likelihood of something coming to pass. Such market exchanges could run with real or virtual currency and would be subject to the same sort of government regulation as financial markets.

MAKE A GAME OF IT:

Use Competition to Get Better Ideas into Public Discourse

How it Would Work:

1. Develop public policy “idea banks” or other intellectual property systems to encourage innovative thinking with social and/or financial recognition for genuinely useful policy ideas. This would provide a way for public thinkers to capitalize on their ideas.
2. Support the development of policy analysis markets (like prediction markets), where people could invest in competing policy ideas and where policy ideas could be tested by the wisdom of crowds. Such exchanges could be publicly regulated like other financial markets.
3. Encourage the creation of prize or award systems, whether under public or private auspices, to recognize genuinely useful or innovative policy ideas. The rewards could range from social acclaim to various forms of financial awards.



CONCLUSIONS AND OTHER IDEAS

We hope these ideas have spurred your own thinking about the ways our public policy could help America talk. You may have some ideas that were not captured here. We welcome them.

The participants in the original project generated some additional ideas that address ways to manage public discourse. One suggested that, as a society, we should leave public discourse to its own devices. The aim would be to keep public discourse free from all governmental intervention.



The other policy idea suggested that public discourse is such a great public responsibility that the government, as the paramount representative of the public's interest, should take an active role in managing and shaping it. This policy approach would enable the government to control and manage the ways people might engage in public discourse, who could participate, as well as the topics of their discussion. This would mean that the government would be able to restrict and monitor citizens' speech, that freedom of speech could be limited to "free speech zones" in public areas, or that only supporters of governmental policies might be allowed to speak at governmental forums.

In the end, the participants found it useful to discuss these additional ideas. They felt that the ideas were worthy of exploration. But they also felt certain that most people would discover these ideas on their own and that it wasn't necessary to include them here.

We hope that the ideas in this report will be useful for your own explorations for whichever directions your discussions may take.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS OF THE INTERACTIVITY FOUNDATION

Discussion Report

The Future of Higher Education (2012)
America's Democratic Promise (2011)*
Democratic Nation Building (2011)
Food: What Might Be For Dinner? (2011)*
The Future of Energy (2011)
The Future of K-12 Education (2011)*
Future Possibilities for Civil Rights Policy (2011)*
Helping Out: Humanitarian Policy for Global Security (2011)*
Health Care: The Case of Depression (3rd edition, 2010)
How Will We All Retire? (2010)
Privacy & Privacy Rights (2nd edition, 2010)
The Future of Regulation (2009)
Property (2009)
Rewarding Work (2007)
Science (2007)
Anticipating Human Genetic Technology (2006)

Other Discussion Reports

Julius "Jay" Stern: A Biography (2010)
Contrasting Possibilities & the IF Discussion Process (2nd edition, 2009)
Facilitation Guidebook for Small Group Citizen Discussions (2nd edition, 2009)
Support Materials for the IF Discussion Process (2009)
Teaching Tips (2009)
Guidebook for Student-Centered Classroom Discussions (2008)
Public Discussion as the Exploration & Development
of Contrasting Conceptual Possibilities (2006)
Facilitation Guidebook (2005)

*Reports are available in Spanish

In pursuit of its mission to encourage and enhance the discussion of — and engagement with — broad public policy ideas (or “possibilities”), the Interactivity Foundation continues to conduct new discussion projects and develop new Discussion Reports from those projects. It is also continually revising its prior reports and developing new discussion guidebooks and other materials. The above list of publications was accurate as of the print date. For an up-to-date listing, visit the IF website at www.interactivityfoundation.org. Interactivity Foundation provides copies of its reports both online and printed without charge and encourages others to use, share, redistribute, and modify the reports within the terms of the creative commons license found on the inside front cover.

