



Political Communication

# Deliberative Democracy and its Ramifications for Political Communication

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*BC Citizens' Assembly members in the Asia Pacific room of the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver. Photo courtesy of The Vancouver Sun*

*"If policies are increasingly determined by public opinion, then the design and presentation of policy has been delegated to those whose interests are not necessarily those of the public" ~Brian McNair (2007, p37)*

The agendas in current western-democratic politics are being determined by celebrity politicians, tabloid journalists, spin doctors, low-attendance voters, minority governments, swing ridings, marketed policies and complacent citizens. Is this “democracy”? Democracy literally means “rule by the people” from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power). Democratic governing therefore means putting the power into the hands of the people. Concerning our current political stage Brian McNair notes, “Not only policies, but leaders are selected and jettisoned according to the whims of public opinion, regardless of their intellectual qualities” (ibid, p36). McNair establishes that succumbing to public opinion in an attempt to be governed “by the people” has disastrous outcomes (ibid). This paper aims to demonstrate that healthy implementations of democratic deliberation and political communication with the people cannot only result in more legitimate governing by the people but a successful model of governing for the people.



*"Because democracies large and small require coordination among their members, democracy cannot long survive without communication" (Gastil 2008, p8)*

Frequent, effective and easily digested political communication is essential for a properly functioning democracy. However, many citizens now lack faith in their governments' communication strategies. As demonstrated by a recent survey in the USA, 88% of respondents said they felt government leaders "tell us what they think will get them elected, not what they are really thinking" and 75% subscribed to the notion that politicians "work for themselves and their own careers, not the people they represent" (Kay 1998). Although it is evident for many politicians (particularly at lower levels) those opinions are often incorrect, it does demonstrate that the current system of mediated political communication and popularity politics is inadequate. In most western democracies there is minimal systemic and nonpartisan political communication, with the responsibility largely falling into the hands of private institutions, such as the mainstream press (Gastil 2008, p8). The political communication required for effective democratic governing is therefore mediated by this mainstream media and hence relies on negativity and sensationalism for coverage (ibid, p95).

*"Voting is a sacred act in democracy. Whatever its virtues, a political system cannot begin to call itself democratic unless its citizens, one and all, have the right to vote. By degrees, many societies have met this basic standard, with each of their citizens empowered to elect representatives or vote directly on policy. But is that enough?" ~John Gastil (2008, p3)*

Deliberative democracy hearkens back to an era when oral communication was more important in politics (Dryzek, 2002). John Wiseman defines deliberative democracy as "strengthening citizen voices in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions" (2004, p54). Involving a random, proportional sample of the population in dialogue and deliberative decision-making is taking a step closer to the democratic ideal. Currently, there are many anomalies and biases in modern democratic procedures – even public hearings are often far from democratic (McNair 2007, p23).



Robert Dahl defines three criteria for the democratic process: inclusion, effective participation and enlightened understanding (1989). This cannot be achieved if a government relies solely on elected representatives and even an ideal press. The problematic situation is magnified if the elective representatives are not an accurate representation and the press is partisan and tabloid in nature.

In a democracy it is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to effectively govern without consistent public support (Gastil 2008, p208). Often governments are deemed unpopular when making decisions that are good for the people but too complex for widespread acceptance. However, initially unpopular decisions which may be in the people's best interests are more popular if they are conceived and deliberated upon by citizens because they have a broader and deeper understanding. If a suitable model of deliberative democracy for decision-making is then paired with a good political communication strategy, the public are much more receptive to change (ibid).

The extensive range deliberative democracy models vary in their organisation, communication and legislative powers. These range from deliberative polling where citizens are provided information and time to deliberate between polls through to large scale citizens' assemblies that operate regularly over months and exhibit legislative powers. In each case deliberation tends to "steer people toward outcomes in the interest of the community," generate learning, help to form consensus and place the ownership in the hands of the citizens (Carson & Hartz-Karp 2005, h6).

In most democratic constitutions, the only time non-elected citizens are directly handed the responsibility, and privilege, of making decisions is in the case of a referendum. However, many citizens are uninformed about the context or ramifications of their vote (Ivins 2004). To compound the issue, the wording on most referendum questions are too specific for full acceptance – voters leave their booths feeling cheated (Gastil 2008, p91). Uninformed voters are inconsistent, and their votes are often misguided due to lack of understanding.



Countries which subscribe to the ideal of democracy are neglecting the importance of education; as McNair claims, "...the normative assumption of a 'rational' citizenry is not realistic" (2007, p21). Along with this, the media is largely responsible for setting the political agenda and being the platform upon which much of it is played out (Gastil 2008, p58). The media is being charged with the role of informing citizens, educating political meaning and significance, acting as a conduit for public political discourse, providing publicity, advocacy and review of political viewpoints (McNair 2007, pp19-20). The question therefore becomes: is this current media-centric discourse adequate, or even democratic? Moreover as consequence, we need to consider how this process can be improved.

James Curran argues that the media "should keep people informed about public affairs so that individuals are adequately briefed when they take part in the process of self-government" (2005, p120). However, contrary to popular belief, the actual democratic role of the media is rather limited. First, for the media to be used as an effective form of democratic political communication it needs to be non-partisan, balanced, detailed and easily digested. However, concentration of media ownership and conflict of interest poses problems with a non-partisan and balanced ideal (Jowett & O'Donnell 2006, p30). Furthermore, most political discourse is too complex to be understood through the media, hence the need for a deliberative process. As scholar Terry Eagleton explains:

*"All propaganda or popularization involves a putting of the complex into the simple, but such a move is instantly not constructive. For if the complex can be put into the simple, then it cannot be as complex as it seemed in the first place; and if the simple can be an adequate medium of such complexity, then it cannot after all be as simple as all that." (1986)*

It should be noted that even successful implementations of deliberative democracy are facing post-deliberation communication problems. The complex nature of politics which governments deal with every day still exists with deliberative democracy. Simpler policies will often be more popular than their more complex, alas superior, counterparts. Therefore, to influence public policy the implementation "should either have a commitment from policymakers or receive wide media coverage, or both" – and even then it



will still need a clear, positive and simple message to be communicated effectively to the wider public (Crosby & Nethercut 2005, p114). Regardless of the methods chosen, it can be difficult to simultaneously provide high quality results and still achieve the popularity needed for civic acceptance (ibid).

This is compounded by the fact that all political communication (including deliberative) is at risk because of the shrinking attention span of the public, broadcast airtime and investigative journalism (Gastil 2008, p96). Furthermore, the time people devote to understanding news, especially politics, is rapidly decreasing (Gamson 2001, p56). Although there is an increasing consumption of news online, there are still significant barriers with an evident digital divide at many different levels (Norris 2001). Research about public knowledge and opinions in the US concluded that their public's judgements are "hardly the stuff of informed consent, let alone of a working representative democracy" (Carpini 1996). Even if these findings were concentrated to just the US public, which is hardly the case, it would still imply current western models of democracy are in dire need to prove themselves against the upcoming economies of the world.

In conclusion, ideological democracy is impossible to achieve, however, the use of good political communication alongside democratic deliberations has the potential to bring 'democratic' governments a step closer to this ideal. A significant amount of research is still needed in the methodology of political communication for deliberative democracy. To move forward citizens' need to be empowered to engage in dialogue in a way that is not hijacked by and partisan system. Furthermore, governments need to understand that citizens' preferences are not fixed and therefore policy acceptance is much greater when citizens' are involved in the deliberations. In the current state of economic and environmental crisis the public sphere will either advocate for political reform or cling to what they know – if democracy its to prove itself we can only hope for the former.



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