

Fifteen Things Every Journalist Should Know About Public Engagement

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When a politician stands at a lectern and speaks to supporters, is this public engagement? When a corporation deploys a multimillion dollar public relations campaign aimed at “educating” the public, is it public engagement?

The social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s produced general acceptance of the worth of citizen input into the issues that directly affect communities and some reforms that actually led to institutional changes that opened up parts of the policy-making process to concerned citizens. But sunshine laws and town hall meetings have not led to meaningful improvement in how we Americans contribute to our nation’s decision making.

Although a sophisticated, nationwide apparatus for supplying information to and gaining the input of citizens has yet to be developed that matches the complexity and seriousness of the issues facing the United States, there is growing acceptance of the belief that one should exist. Aside from the anecdotal evidence of more and more politicians embarking on “public listening tours” and seemingly ubiquitous endorsements by leaders of the premise of taking into account the values and priorities of the American people, there are real indicators that the practice of public engagement is growing in size and sophistication. There is an affinity group of foundations called Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement dedicated to supporting public engagement efforts. There are dozens of academic centers and nonprofit groups working to study and propagate civic engagement practices. And there are more and more advocacy organizations, of many ideological perspectives, teaming with others to help citizens explore issues and come to some agreement about how to proceed.

Although the practice of public engagement is growing and the field is gaining greater credibility, most citizens continue to see voting as their only (rather ineffective) way of giving input in our democracy. But judging by election turnout percentages, voting is not a method of affecting public policy that people seem convinced is effective. Unfortunately, “civic engagement” and “public engagement” are not terms citizens use in their daily lexicon, and relatively few have had direct experience with their practice. Americans rarely see substantive public engagement efforts in the news on television, on the radio, or in their online world.

But that is beginning to change. For example, when *USA Today*’s editorial board member and commentator Richard Wolf was developing a series on the potentially devastating economic impact of the retirement of the baby boom generation, after getting the facts and figures on the problem from think tanks and legislators he sought to understand the public perspective on the potential solutions. He started by investigating the learning being developed by the “Facing up to the Nation’s Finances” initiative. A nonideological project of the Concord Coalition, the Brookings Institution, the Heritage Foundation, Public Agenda, and Viewpoint Learning, the partners were in the midst of a nationwide effort to help representative samples of citizens learn the core aspects of our nation’s financial challenges and weigh in with their own values and priorities. Wolf observed a citizen dialogue with political leaders in Manchester, New Hampshire, and the first piece in his series not only was informed by what he learned there but also included a sidebar looking exclusively at the citizen engagement process, how it worked, and what leaders were learning from the initiative.

As public engagement efforts become more substantial and productive, journalists are beginning to give them more credence and present more information about them in their coverage of issues. But most journalists still have a lot of learning to do themselves about what public engagement really is, what it isn't, and how it could be the best thing to happen to democracy since the civil rights movement.

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Fifteen Things to Know

Here are some things every journalist should know about public engagement.

One: Voting alone doesn't fulfill the promise of democracy. Voting may have seemed innovative in 1776. Considering the available technology and the distance between people at the time, voting once a year was probably the most advanced method of gaining citizen input we could have hoped for. Casting a vote for a representative has never been a particularly accurate way of weighing in on issues, but the complexity of our nation's challenges today behooves us to use the most sophisticated methods possible to bring citizens closer to the problem-solving process.

Voting for a particular representative does not constitute an unconditional endorsement of every legislative or administrative reform action taken by that individual. Nor is it possible for elected officials, let alone appointed ones, to divine the public will on a host of issues on the basis of Election Day outcomes. Even with ballot initiatives, voting alone cannot do an adequate job of bringing citizens of diverse perspectives together with leaders to explore

issues in a fair way—looking even-handedly at the pros and cons of various possible solutions—and developing agreement about how to proceed.

Media often seem to operate under the belief that polling fills whatever gaps may exist in our knowledge of public thinking. Although polling has value, it also has great limitations. Brief phone quizzes don't give us a thorough exploration of any issue. Surveys don't allow citizens to hear the perspectives of other citizens who may have valuable points of view to learn from. Many online enthusiasts have similarly asserted that the World Wide Web presents new ways for citizens to voice their concerns outside of the voting booth, but the format of most online "forums" seems to encourage more screaming past one another or preaching to the converted than real public dialogue.

The level and scope of public engagement in the United States are far from adequate. We have to find ways to bring more people into the process, apply the practice to a greater number of issues, convince more leaders of its value, and create a better system for aggregating citizen input and delivering it to leaders. But public engagement is nonetheless the most sophisticated method available for applying citizen values and priorities to the issues of our day.

Two: The conditions for citizen input have to be right. If you pick an average Joe off the street, stick a television camera in his face, and ask, "So what do you think we should do to improve the economy?" you are likely to get, at best, a simplistic answer like, "Create more jobs." However, if you ask the same individual to come to a several-hour-long dialogue session where time is taken to explain the core challenges and the basic approaches to fostering a strong economy and tell him that he will be able to offer his own input on how leaders should address the issues, a number of things happen. One, in a surprising number of cases, the citizen actually volunteers his day to contribute to the process. Two, he has a good

time interacting with citizens of diverse perspectives, learning about the issues and talking about the possible policy solutions from his own perspective. Three, he actually shares ideas that are coherent, thoughtful, and enlightening to leaders. The person isn't transformed (public engagement isn't magic), but the dynamic of our politics is changed.

You can't expect citizens to be thoughtful on complex issues unless you furnish a meaningful process that allows them to learn, discuss, and decide. Too often journalists, politicians, and citizens themselves complain that people just give silly answers when presented with tough issues. But if we present a silly process for asking citizen input such as man-on-the-street interviews and quickie polls that elicit only top-of-the-head responses, we can only blame ourselves for the stupid answers we get. Citizens can give valuable insights under the *right* conditions.

Three: Citizens bring something to the table that experts can't.

In the United States, public decision making is typically the domain of elected officials (who are arguably increasingly distant from average Americans), powerful interest groups, and highly specialized experts. It is generally the most well-funded and best-organized interest group concerned about an issue that is able to move public policy to its advantage. Leaders tend to view experts, whether academically credentialed, representing a reputable think tank, or employed by a special interest group, as the only reliable resources for the development of legitimate public policy. The public, on the other hand, is generally viewed as an audience to educate or a problem to manage. Citizens are far too infrequently viewed as a vital resource or potentially powerful partner in problem solving.

Though few politicians have come around to seeing citizens as partners in the decision-making process, they have witnessed the great limitations of polling research and have experienced humbling defeat when citizens rise up in opposition to unpopular leg-

islative efforts. A few political leaders are learning that well-organized citizen dialogues that focus on the basic information people need to know and that help citizens process complex issues can lead to new revelations and creative approaches to dealing with issues. Most politicians who give lip service to public engagement continue to see it as a tool to gain citizen acquiescence. But leaders who are willing to trust citizens and believe they have valuable experience and diverse knowledge to apply to public issues are learning from the public and applying what they learn to policy decisions.

In its primer on public engagement, Public Citizen itemizes how bringing together a broad cross-section of leaders, citizens, and other stakeholders produces sustainable public policies:

- Multiple points of view inform decisions.
- Public and diverse stakeholder involvement, early and often in the change process, not after decisions have been made, creates legitimacy and a sense of shared responsibility.
- New allies and opportunities for collaboration appear.
- Broad awareness and momentum for change result.

Four: Forget about "public hearings."

Many journalists have witnessed, with revulsion, so-called town hall meetings and other public hearings where one or all of these things happen: a panel of experts is presented to "talk" to the public, but there is no real role for members of the public, who are there only to be "educated." Or perhaps there is a question-and-answer period in which angry individuals rise to the microphone and confront leaders; a screaming match ensues. Or the meeting is open to the public, but the discussion is hijacked by a special interest group that not only has lots of resources at its disposal and may not represent the best interests of the community but also has special ties to decision makers. None of these things happen in a well-organized public engagement dialogue.

Lots of people use the term *public engagement*, and so they may have quite different objectives when they employ their own version of it. Here is what we mean. Public engagement is not an event; it is an ongoing process involving diverse citizens (not just the usual suspects) in dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative problem solving around a common concern.

To be truly effective, public engagement should never be a “one and done” event. These public conversations should be considered as moments of reflection in the life of a community that is learning to improve how it communicates and to generally become more organized, democratic, and capable. Simply presenting a host of alternatives for addressing a problem and then taking a vote among those assembled may be an improvement over citizen exclusion, but these steps don’t go far enough. The best, most comprehensive form of public engagement brings together a diverse array of stakeholders—including citizens who do not usually get asked to events—for problem solving that fits within a larger effort to build a community’s capacity to work collectively.

Five: Broad inclusion is the key.

Reaching beyond the usual suspects is absolutely essential to an authentic public engagement process. It is easy to bring together those people who are already powerfully involved stakeholders, as well as those who love to sound off in public. Finding ways to include or represent the broader public, especially those whose voices have traditionally been excluded, is a more challenging proposition.

Journalists who are observing public engagement forums or other parts of the process should ask organizers how they went about bringing folks to the table and what constituencies are being represented through the process. Even though it is impossible to bring every voice of every possible stripe into a single room at one time, the whole of the public engagement process should reach out to all of the major groups that are attempting to affect or will be affected by the solutions being explored.

Listening is possibly the most important aspect of any public engagement process. Understanding the public’s starting point and the best ways to communicate with and engage people on tough issues requires careful and systematic listening. Public engagement efforts should avoid making faulty assumptions about people’s positions, or using jargon that, however useful to experts, is counterproductive when it comes to engaging the public.

Six: Public engagement can take different forms.

Community dialogues are gaining more and more currency in the world of public decision making, but there are other forms of public engagement that can also be informative and valuable. Interviews, focus groups, and other forms of qualitative research are almost always a useful first step in engagement efforts. In some instances, survey research can add considerable value to a public engagement initiative, broadening insight into the public’s starting point.

Like other aspects of our lives, public engagement is beginning to migrate online. Many organizations are experimenting with online forums, community message boards, and other mechanisms using balanced citizen education materials that in some ways replicate live community conversation. To date, no online forums truly capture the same quality of face-to-face dialogue. But online dialogue has great promise for the future.

Seven: It’s not just talking for talk’s sake.

Public engagement is purpose-driven. Journalists often question the import of community dialogues: “What’s the point of having a bunch of people who don’t know anything about the issue just talk and talk? . . . and nothing’s going to come of it anyway.”

Citizens are experts on certain important elements of any public issue equation. They are uniquely qualified to discuss how issues could have an impact on their lives and reflect on the values and priorities they would apply to solving problems. This is not to say that citizens have innate ability to be familiar with all the elements of a given problem or that their

assumptions about certain “facts” shouldn’t be challenged. But their inclusion in the process helps leaders and interest groups understand the public’s starting point and, once citizens know the basic facts, how they would apply public resources to solving the problem.

Community dialogue should never be just a one-day talk-fest. It should include serious planning about what to do with citizen input and discussion of how citizens can be involved in solving the issue beyond the day’s event. Journalists should ask organizers where the initiative is going and what the long-term plan is for going beyond just citizen voices, to citizen action.

Eight: Dialogue, not debate.

Every public engagement process, whether in a community forum, online dialogue, or an interview with stakeholders, should start with a brief reminder that public engagement focuses on the need for dialogue, not debate. This means that every aspect of the process is aimed at finding the areas of common ground and places of agreement that can be built on. Areas of disagreement should absolutely be delineated and discussed, but the starting point should be that we are working together to find solutions, not to prove who is right or wrong.

With debate, one assumes there is one right answer, and I have it! Dialogue assumes many people may have pieces to the answer. In debate, you listen for flaws in people’s thinking and make counterarguments. In public deliberation, you listen to try to understand different points of view and hear new ideas. In debate, you want to end with a conclusion or a vote that validates your own position. In public deliberation, you aim to discover new options and ways of working together that lead to stronger communities and better public policy.

Nine: Choicework is an important tool.

Public Agenda’s “Citizen Choicework” discussion guides are an extremely valuable tool for creating the right conditions for effective public engagement in

community conversations. These discussion starters are generally composed of three or four perspectives on the issue at hand—distinct approaches with different strengths, weaknesses, and tradeoffs—that serve as the basis of discussion in a moderated dialogue session.

The choices in these discussion starters, although delineated as distinct approaches, should not be treated as necessarily mutually exclusive. Moderators should reinforce the concept that the framework is a means of helping participants disentangle key elements of complex problems, allowing people to more effectively grapple with the conflicts and tradeoffs of each approach, but also that individuals certainly can express interest in pursuing elements of various approaches.

Using Choicework in public engagement takes the process beyond just bringing diverse stakeholders *to* the table; it also puts diverse ideas *on* the table. Starting with a clear understanding of the main approaches that have been proposed to address the problem produces greater clarity about disagreements, clarifies lingering questions, gives impetus for new ideas for addressing problems, and ultimately results in greater understanding and common ground. As people work through the Choicework guides, they have an opportunity to work together in their deliberations, which builds mutual respect, deepens the sense of purpose, and narrows divides between people.

Choicework materials should always include a full range of ideas that could realistically be considered to address the problem, with even-handed discussion of the tradeoffs and potential consequences of each. Journalists should not be shy about asking to review discussion starter materials for fairness and accuracy.

Ten: It’s not about kowtowing to public opinion.

The public doesn’t have all the answers. In fact, sometimes the public holds onto beliefs and wishful thinking that well-constructed public engagement can help overcome.

One of the most important things public engagement can do is help citizens confront conflicting impulses and deal with the real trade-offs of difficult choices. If we choose low taxes, what does that mean for the education of our children or the future of our infrastructure? What does it really mean when we say we want government accountability? Which specific reform measures would people support? Whereas telephone polls are usually limited by time constraints to ask simple questions with binary or multiple choice answers, public engagement processes can take the time to delve more deeply into issues and help the public confront the realities of their decisions.

Public engagement also brings citizens closer together with leaders and experts. Public engagement that brings together all of the stakeholders presents an opportunity for citizens, experts, and leaders to learn from each other and for each to contribute knowledge and values to the decision-making process.

Eleven: Supplying a foundation for strong, principled leadership.

Too often citizen participation is viewed as making demands on leadership rather than as a support to it. Political leaders are pulled in a lot of directions and have many competing demands—from party leaders, special interests, voting bases, and contributors. Sometimes taking a principled stand that benefits the whole of the public rather than the leader's voting base or other interest is extremely difficult. Strong citizen participation and a clear voice of public preferences can make it easier for politicians to act in concert with the public good.

Political leaders are besieged with requests and have lobbyists at their doors every day. Political leaders must have a way to come into close contact with the values and priorities of the whole of the public, not just their contributors and the party faithful. Public engagement can take on that function by bringing leaders together with citizens, or by bringing the voice of citizens to leaders with reports, multimedia presentations, and face-to-face conversations with public engagement organizers.

Twelve: It's about citizen action, too.

Public engagement isn't just about galvanizing leadership action. The process should also spark citizen action. When done well, each round of public engagement will set the stage for citizen action.

Even if the dialogues are not specifically designed to create an action plan that citizens can participate in (although many are), participants often come away excited about the possibility of becoming involved in an issue they hadn't previously been engaged on. The best public engagement processes creatively harness that enthusiasm and offer opportunities for citizens to stay involved.

Citizens who participate in public engagement initiatives should be encouraged and supported to act on their deliberations and not just wait for officials to act on their behalf. The whole concept of public engagement is predicated on the idea that tough public problems require the work of many parties on many levels. Well-designed engagement opportunities energize citizens and lead many to want to roll up their sleeves and get involved. Encouraging and enabling citizen action in response to public deliberation gives people a role and a way to contribute. It also gives them more of a personal stake in the success of the whole public engagement process.

Thirteen: It's about building democratic habits in communities and in our nation.

Public engagement efforts should always work on two levels simultaneously. On one level it is about addressing a concrete problem, such as improving education, public safety, or jobs. On another it is about growing what philosopher John Dewey called "social intelligence," the capacity for a democratic community to communicate and collaborate effectively in order to solve its common problems and enrich its public life.

Engagement processes are not only exercises in public problem solving. They are civic experiments that help people learn how to more effectively reach out to and include new people, frame issues for deliberation more effectively, and facilitate dialogue and col-

laboration across boundaries that typically have not been crossed. They build common vision and common ground that allows different kinds of people, with their own interests and experiences, to work together to make headway on common problems.

Fourteen: Journalists should be asking questions about public engagement initiatives.

Just as there are some basic principles that must be employed to produce legitimate polling, there are basic elements of public engagement that journalists should know and feel comfortable asking about.

Here are some of the essentials: What efforts were made to include a broad range of citizens, leaders, and other interested parties in the process? Were the citizens a self-selected group, or were efforts made to bring together a group that represents the whole population affected? How were the issues being discussed chosen, and do they fairly represent a range of the major approaches that have been put forward to address the problem? Who is controlling the initiative, and what is at stake for them? Is this a one-time event, or part of a larger process? What will happen with the views expressed by citizens, and is there a substantial plan for not only taking those views to leaders but also welcoming and facilitating citizen participation over time?

This is hardly an exhaustive list of questions for journalists to ask. But journalists are likely to come into contact with public engagement more and more as the field continues to grow. When journalists ask the right questions of those who run engagement initiatives, they help to both clarify the quality of the dialogue and encourage the greater legitimization of high standards of public engagement practice.

Fifteen: Journalists may have do to some explaining.

A lot of people—citizens, leaders, and policy types alike—don't get public engagement yet. Journalists may have to give a little background and offer some explanation of the process when they talk about public engagement deliberations so their audiences have the full context.

Authentic public engagement initiatives and other events that purport to be public engagement but fall far short of the mark (such as “listening tour” events, where only the party faithful are allowed in) require equal degrees of inspection and questioning. Journalists should ask the same questions about who was included, what the starting point of conversation was, who has a stake in the outcomes, and what will happen with the concerns expressed by citizens whether the public engagement initiative seems to be well intended or not. The answers to their questions should be included in the piece so that media consumers have the full story.

Conclusion

These fifteen points for journalists are merely an introduction to public engagement. They can learn best about this topic by observing initiatives in action and asking questions of those who run public engagement programs. One of the most important things journalists can do is to begin asking political leaders and experts how they are engaging the public on issues in a comprehensive and authentic way. By now, we've all witnessed enough tightly scripted town meetings run by politicians. There are serious and sophisticated methods of really connecting citizens to issues, and journalists can play a crucial role in examining this growing democratic movement by asking the right questions and focusing more squarely on public engagement practices.

Reference

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