A Framework for Civic Conversations

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Systemic changes in people’s relation to democratic government and governance have been widely noted over the last 40 years. Concurrently, participation in civic life has declined. Drawing from approaches in service design, this article proposes a design-led structure for democratic engagement that serves two goals: the provisioning of people’s expertise on policy decisions for governmental use, and scaffolding of civic life. The paper details a structure that has been tested and refined in over 30 community meetings, and suggestions for effectively evaluating meeting outcomes.

Keywords: civic life, conversation, deliberative democracy

Introduction

For democracy in the United States, and for democracies across Europe, it is becoming increasingly apparent that a combination of factors is contributing to a larger trend towards democratic deconsolidation. Over the last 30 years, increasing numbers of voters make critical choices informed by single-issue political organizations, vote for so-called populist candidates, or align themselves with political parties that claim to be anti-establishment (Foa, Mounk 2016). Social media networks like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube have become a site for increased participation in political debate (Vaccari, Chadwick, O’Laughlin 2015), but that participation does not correlate to increased comprehension of the issues at stake (Kalsnes, Krumsvik, Storsil 2014).

Further, democracies exist on a substrate of a larger, supportive society. Yet the mid-level structures — civic organizations — that contribute support to civic life have been in decline over the last 30 years (Putnam 2000). In a review of recent scholarship of this critical mid-level of US society “What We Do Together” (2017), a report prepared for the US Senate Joint Economic Committee, details the decline of what the authors refer to as associational life over the last 45 years. The lenses through which associational life is viewed in this report are: families, religious congregations, secular communities, and workplaces. Across these domains, the report cites a trend where Americans “prioritized individualist goals and professional pursuits over the sustenance of yesteryear’s robust associational life.” (p45) Further, in the quarter-century since he conceived of it, Manuel Castell’s (2010) space of flows (the digital communication network enabled by the internet and small computing devices) has displaced more traditional social structures organized around places. In Castell’s space of flows digitally organized communities of affinity replace neighborhoods as key social units.

While it is not within the scope of this article to offer a full treatment of either democratic deconsolidation, or the implications of the network society and resultant major transformations of social life globally and in the United States, it is within this frame that contemporary democracies must work. Municipal governments are inherently place-based, and depend for their functioning upon an infrastructure of support that is also place-based. Municipal governments supply communities with very direct and instrumental needs, and rely upon residents of the community for feedback that directs and shapes the provisioning and functioning of
government services. In short, while the network might facilitate a set of relationships that are far-flung and time-shifted, municipal governments operate in a world that is circumscribed by local city limits, imminently material, and bound up with concerns of provisioning need to community members. In a set of social structures that were more place-based, where relations were structured principally around proximity, matters of concern (Latour 2004) might have been encountered at the workplace, in the parent-teacher association, again at the bakery or the greengrocers, and again at church. This suite of contiguous but independent institutions engendered more replete relationships based upon spatial proximity. Essentially, people worked, participated in religious and civic life, engaged with the schools near the neighborhoods where they lived.

However, many different agencies shape communities, besides the once dominant consideration of being physically proximate to one another. To put it plainly, geographic territory no longer exerts a dominating influence over how communities are formed. Yet, democracies are still primarily organized around the stewardship of a particular geographic zone, and constructed with hierarchical levels of authority within progressively larger geographic zones. Where participation in democratic government and governance might have once been supported by a number of civic organizations, membership in these organizations is declining as people elect to participate in more social structures organized around place-independent networks.

In 2012, speaking at Carnegie Mellon University, Victor Margolin offered three ways to consider the relationship between design and democracy. In Margolin’s characterization, design of democracy is engaged with designing the institutions of democracy itself — improving the processes and services government provides; design for democracy is engaged with designing the mechanisms of citizen engagement such as voting; and design in a democracy, where the goal of designing is to support actions that are more broadly considered to be democratic in nature, or supporting positive outcomes for a broad range of community members. Margolin enumerates some exemplars of this: maintaining a clean environment, the provisioning of basic needs to people experiencing challenging circumstances, providing quality healthcare. Extending this dialog, Ezio Manzini with Margolin (2017) author an open letter to the design community, exhorting designers to take a greater role in countering trends damaging to democratic governance and participation. Margolin and Manzini add another aspect, highlighting the practice of participatory design: design as democracy.

With the challenges posed to civic organizations, the critical substrate of democratic institutions, in developing new social structures, residents have lost some of the literacy that civic organizations served to exercise and reinforce. Ultimately, this kind of designerly understanding alone cannot “save” civic organizations — the middle tier of social relations — but designerly understanding can approach democratic engagement by scaffolding the interactions of constituents within government. While this middle tier of social relations has begun to deconsolidate due (in part) to the organization of new types of social relation, design can serve to reshape democracy to be more accommodating to participants, as well as support people to reconnect with the local.

The Civic Conversation

Government can, however, work to more effectively support people to engage with policy matters, and can help people to engage more actively with governance and government, and offer scaffolded opportunities to reinvigorate participation in civic life. Supporting civic life could come in the form of design to support the practices of democracy. Margolin & Manzini’s categorizations offer an effective way to think about how designers might support democratic institutions, and we designers must also think how design might effectively support democratic practices. One key way that government can help people to connect more meaningfully with civic action is to help people to surface their values in relation to matters of concern that lay before the government. A form that government can engage in to promote this social infrastructuring, is effective design and implementation of a civic conversation.

Conversation is a key component of human activity and civic life. In the context of governmental practice, conversation and speech-acts are components found everywhere. Debate, deliberation, speech making, negotiation, argument are all conversational acts. Conversation is a key act of governing, the fundamental act of human communication—and a principal way that human beings relate to the material world. The offering that occurs in James J. Gibson’s affordances (1979) could be interpreted as the opening a type of conversation between the user and the object. Architect Louis Kahn advocated conversations with materials as a mode of discovery for designers (Turkle, 2011, quoting Nathaniel Kahn, 2003). The conversational mode of interaction—two or more humans conversing with one another—is the underlying principle for mediated
communication technologies like email, text-messaging, social networking, and for proximate communications like meetings and expert consultations.

Conversation theory, pioneered by Gordon Pask, created structured definitions and relations between concepts like agreement, understanding, and consciousness (Pangaro, 1996). Conversation theory has cybernetics at its foundation. It is a central aspect of design practice and encompasses the goals of designing for communicating. Within, and tangential to the field of design, practitioners and scholars such as Hugh Dubberly, Paul Pangaro, Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, Jeff Conklin, and Horst Rittel have examined the theoretical underpinnings of conversation—both as a model for designing, and as a central concern of cybernetics. Following John Searle, Fernando Flores and Terry Winograd developed Language/Action perspective as a way to structure conversations for action to help participants move from irresolution to resolution in a conversational situation (Winograd & Flores, 1986).

Conversations are the medium through which people collaboratively deliberate, or together, make sense of complex situations. Deliberative conversations occur in every knowledge domain. A wide array of academics have researched the deliberative conversations that occur in their own knowledge domain and have provided models and best practices for practitioners to engage in those conversations. James Fishkin (1991), Robert Cavalier (2011), and Elinor Ostrom (1990, pp. 88–102) have offered models for democratic deliberation; these models have been operationalized through the work of Carolyn Lukensmeyer (2007, 2017) and others. Deliberative conversation is a particular type of conversation that has the following characteristics:

Participants are engaged in face-to-face discussion. Participants conscientiously raise and respond to competing arguments. Participants arrive at considered judgments about solutions to public problems. (Fishkin, 2008)

Fishkin’s definition of deliberation contains some key words—which we will return to later—that imply how designing to support this format can proceed.

Through the work with the PDD, I, working with Dr. Robert Cavalier (political and pragmatist philosopher, senior faculty at CMU and director of the PDD), Tim Dawson (then a doctoral candidate in CMU’s English/rhetoric program) and Selena Schmidt (a public engagement consultant with the Public Broadcasting System) developed an agenda-based approach to serve as the framework for two series of meetings for different clients. Cavalier had been approached by the City of Pittsburgh to help plan new capital budget hearings. Once the initial development of the framework was complete, the practical work of designing and hosting the specific meetings was delegated to me and Dawson. PDD agreed to host the second set of meetings as part of a study in collaboration with the CMU Remaking Cities Institute (RCI). The goal of the meetings was to develop information for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) to guide further development along Route 51. At the time, PennDOT was already engaged with the CMU Robotics Institute to analyze traffic flows and develop algorithms to increase throughput and reduce pollution. As a component of that larger infrastructure, the RCI applied for and received funding to create a master plan to guide development. RCI engaged the PDD through Cavalier to conduct the community engagement efforts along the corridor. Dawson, Schmidt, and I were recruited to support this endeavor. The community meeting format was developed collectively over a series of meetings by the PDD group in consultation with architects from RCI. The PDD group elected to use this format for nearly all subsequent meetings.

This format is designed to accommodate a larger number of participants at a formal meeting. Over the course of three years conducting meetings in this format, we have hosted between four and 162 participants at a single meeting. Generally speaking, from the perspective of a participant, a deliberative community meeting designed in this framework takes about 2½ hours. This was done for several reasons: it was generally felt that the longer form of meeting (all day, or two days during a weekend) was extremely burdensome for participants (especially lower-income participants), and not practical from the perspective of executing events that were either unfunded or poorly funded. Perhaps most significantly, the time window was chosen because the City of Pittsburgh hosted similar meetings in the past using that time window, and 2½ hours would fit neatly.

To operationalize Fishkin’s deliberative characteristics, PDD works with the following structure for each deliberative forum.
Elements of a Community Deliberative Forum

Arrival: participants gather and receive table assignment and briefing documents from event staff.

Informal Greeting: participants are greeted by the table moderator, receive background information and given time to meet other participants and read the briefing document. We strongly encourage the convening organization to set aside part of the budget for a light dinner for the participants. If food is provided, the participants eat at this time.

Pedagogical Introduction: a nonpartisan “teacher” gives participants a short overview of the topic area(s), what is to be achieved by the deliberation, and an explanation of how data generated by the participants will be used.

Deliberation: led by the table moderator, participants engage each other in free-form small group discussion of the agenda issue(s). The briefing document is referred to as a source of additional information.

Question Writing: led by the table moderator, participants write a question or questions to pose to the expert panel for the Expert Questions and Answers (Q&A).

Question Asking: participants pose their questions to the expert panel and receive answers.

Post-event Survey: participants fill out an exit survey indicating their opinions on the agenda issues, suggest new agenda issues.

Departure: event staff thank participants for their time and thoughts. Participants chat informally with each other and expert panelists.

All of the elements above were iteratively and intentionally designed to create a “smooth” experience. The meetings are staffed by a number of volunteer facilitators and registrar(s), an emcee, a member of the convening organization who shares key information about the context of the discussion, and a panel of recruited experts.

This information is offered for background and a richer understanding, as the focus of this paper will be principally my reflections on the design process that supports these fora and directions for further research. During the development of these fora, I was involved principally as the document designer and collaborated iteratively with the writer (Dawson) to develop briefing materials to support the conversation. This paper details my personal experience with writing, designing, and developing these critical pieces. Data were collected through participant observation throughout the development and planning process. Further data were collected at public meetings, at a post-event debriefing with the table moderators, and with a post-event debriefing with city, county, and committee representatives. During this process, I observed several aspects where the design process of the creation and iteration of briefing materials impose a kind of discipline on the way organizations understand the issues they deal with, as well as the way the deliberative process is informed and even structured by the design process.

Developing supporting materials

Designing a deliberative forum begins with the question, “What is it that we want to know from the people we are convening?” One approach to answering this question is that the initiating organization (city government in this case) has a plan or concept that they want analyzed or validated by a representative group of subjects. In this case, the initiating organization wants to use the deliberative forum as a filter that will pass through validated information, goals, or approaches (Fishkin, 2008). In another approach, the organizing group wants to understand how citizens might prioritize a set of goals or actions, as pertains to their local situation. On some occasions, the organizing group has a general concept for engagement but no clear questions. One
approach that was useful in this situation, is to frame the civic conversation as a learning opportunity, asking what the conveners might want to learn from bringing this group together.

Regardless of the content of this critical question, one of the first steps in preparing for a civic conversation is to prepare a briefing document, which contains background information necessary for the participants to have a legitimate and conscientious conversation of the matter(s) of concern. In the course of the design process, this briefing document becomes a MacGuffin, the object which drives inquiry, prioritization, and the structuring of many other components of the forum. The MacGuffin is a dramatic plot device used in films to introduce tension in the plot and drive action. The reason the character’s behavior is driven by the MacGuffin is usually left unexplained. The device was first introduced by Alfred Hitchcock in his 1934 film The Man Who Knew Too Much (Ackroyd, 2016). Following is Ackroyd’s description:

> It is, to use a more familiar phrase, the red herring, the device that sends the plot and the characters on their way—such as the attempt to assassinate a foreign leader in this film—but remains of little or no interest to the audience; it is simply an excuse for all the activity on the screen. (Ackroyd, 2016, p. 61)

Dan Hill (2012), brings to design the concept of the MacGuffin as a force at work in design projects. Hill asserts that the development of a relatively unimportant object can drive forward a strategic process:

> The MacGuffin helps drive this process through its gravitational pull, through its requirement for rigour. [...] It is a classic MacGuffin; not especially relevant in itself, but the entire plot cannot exist without it. It is the reason for the entire story, and yet beside the point. The wider story is ultimately more interesting, more affecting. (pp. 55, 57)

The briefing document is used in the forum, but the participants view the briefing document as ephemeral and not a central aspect of their experience. The process of creating the briefing document, however, drives regular meetings with all stakeholders in the project and forces an in-depth examination of the issues and the language used to describe the issues. These issues in turn structure the agenda for the deliberative event and prefigure the questions that are on the exit survey. The briefing document is that thing that, as Hill states, has enough importance that the design team will be compelled to carry it forward, and will also drive the development process. Though Hill’s example of MacGuffin-in-action drives a strategic goal that is largely extrinsic to the design process, the writing and design of the briefing document drives learning and crystallizes a new understanding of the issues within the client organization.

**Some challenges of designing for civic conversations**

Approaching designing for a civic conversation holds key differences from other design activities. If a designer did not approach the matter in a considered way, a civic conversation might mistakenly be thought of as a conversation between two groups: an expert (members of government) and a client (residents). Yet in actual practice, considering a conversation such as a civic event, the dyadic model of the expert/client expands into a more complex structure. Agency for decision making is effectively owned by elected officials or government staff. The civic conversation exists to provide input on that decision for residents access to the agency of the elected official or government staff, otherwise understood as influence. Minimally, residents gain the perception of agency. While the decision rests with agents of the government, the stakes of that decision are born in different ways. Residents are at the forefront of people who experience the consequences of decisions.

As described by Pelle Ehn (2008) the two central values of participatory design are legitimating democratic participation, and informing a design process through participants’ tacit knowledge. Though civic conversations are not participatory design, civic conversation is a closely related activity. Within the context of the work I have done, the central value of an event is to evoke the gradient of opinion and understanding that exists within the room. Because participants construct their perspective of the issues based upon relations to others’ perspectives, (Spinosa et al., 1997) this activity is highly relational in character.
These civic conversation events can provide a rich psychosocial frame for participants. The act of coming together as a community to articulate a shared future is a powerful metaphor. In his 1991 book, Human Scale Development, Manfred Max-Neef, a Chilean economist, pens a most compelling and thoroughgoing systemic architecture of human need. Max-Neef’s approach understands needs across nine categories of human engagement, and four contexts. He suggests various satisfiers that operate across the matrix of 36 contexts/engagement pairings, and describes a number of satisfiers that are synergistic satisfiers that meet multiple contexts/engagement pairings. For instance, in the context of having (things), only the engagement of subsistence deals with material accumulations. One might have a need for symbols of belongingness, values, customs, all of which would fall into a context of having and an engagement of identity. These civic conversations are synergistic satisfiers, in the sense that they offer the experience of satisfiers over several types of engagement of interacting, (understanding, participation) as well as types of planning (doing/protection) and expressing opinions (doing/participation).

**How to evaluate a Civic Conversation**

Considering the power relations as described above, the question of “who evaluates” these events is worthy of consideration. Typically it is the convening organization, or agents of the convening organization who perform an evaluation of the deliberative event. More rarely, a participant or witness will write an evaluation of an event. In the course of my work I have only encountered these accounts when a participant has what could be termed a “significantly negative experience”. Caitlin Luce Christiansen (2017) authored an evaluative account of the public organizational meeting of Indivisible Pittsburgh focused on a conversation that happened after the meeting ended, where two women of color (an attorney and a community activist) confronted a meeting organizer (a CMU faculty member) about the lack of inclusion of people of color in the meeting and the organizational structure of the new organization. The particulars of this account are compellingly written, and it details that significant challenge that was experienced by a number of people, a crucial lapse that was made by the organizers of the event. However, as a tool to improve participant experience from a design perspective, this account principally underscores well-understood foundational principles of constructing an inclusive dialog in a public space. An aggregate of personal accounts serves to construct one aspect of understanding of events.

This is not to say that informal or de-institutionalized evaluative accounts have lower value to the design process. An important consideration when designing to engage with communities that have experienced trauma at the hands of other groups, is centering accounts (like Christiansen’s above) that question the trustworthiness of the conveners, or the convening organization. For many participants, civic conversations are not one-off events, but are perceived in the continuum of a history of acts by a political administration or other organization. The above account details a broken trust. Trustworthiness of an organization is a compelling aspect. Considering the organization by extending the idea of interpersonal trust, people come to a
civic conversation with a history of relationship, but also with some hope that positive outcomes will result from the engagement. People from groups that have experienced trauma at the hands of another group may have a deep-seated mistrust of such events. It may take concerted outreach, followed by years of successful experiences with an organization for people to begin to believe that that organization might be trustworthy. (Stalvey, 1989)

For a citizen to desire to be a part of a civic conversation and consequently attend implies the existence of three states.

Table 1 Heuristic of factors that support civic conversation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trust (memory)</th>
<th>Need</th>
<th>Hope</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Future</td>
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Another possible way to evaluate the civic conversation is to use the heuristic above: does the event provision for these states of a person? Does the planned experience offer an opportunity to explicate needs that the person is experiencing? Does the event as a process validate that explication by offering the potential for a positive future vision to be realized? Is the event hosted by trusted entities?

Over the three years of fieldwork I have met only a handful of people who have attended more than one meeting that I have hosted. Even those who have attended multiple meetings have an engagement with the topic, a need that is a part of their present life-moment that intersects with the topic of the meeting in some fashion. Need is one aspect (perhaps the primary aspect) that contributes to a desire to attend. While experiencing need is not enough alone to ensure that someone will attend, need is one compelling factor that drives participation, even in the light of low trust and low hope.

The more overt needs that drive attendance are typically tied to a perceived threat to one’s neighborhood or business, or the potential for a perceived gain. This is known colloquially as NIMBY (Not In My BackYard) politics. But this solipsistic point of view merely replaces other politics that are inadequate to the challenge of approaching complex, systemic issues. NIMBY politics can be interpreted as a rejection of decision-making by experts (Ravetz, 1999) or as a symptom of “low resolution” within the broader system of civic feedback. (Boyer & Hill, 2013) For Boyer & Hill, NIMBYs would like green projects accomplished, but do not want to bear any of the burden of those projects, or experience any consequences. However, in spite of Boyer and Hill’s characterization, NIMBY-ism should not be viewed as a problem that must be dealt with. It is important to understand that, especially for people attending a civic conversation for the first time, there exists a strong likelihood of attending because of a NIMBY-related need. NIMBY-ism, far from being a potential negative is merely one aspect of viewing an issue that will motivate a person to take action and initiate action through civic conversations. The other side of NIMBY that drives attendance at civic meetings is what I would call a “pothole mentality” is where participants think about the issue that they are passionate about (e.g. potholes on the roads that they use regularly), without considering the broader context of that project, or thinking about their needs in light of the needs of the entire street or neighborhood. Essentially though, these needs – whether they are framed positively or negatively – are what inspire someone to be involved in a civic conversation. Perceiving that the civic conversation might be a site to speak about a matter of concern means that participants are properly connecting their foregrounded, perceived needs to the opportunity to speak back into the system of government.

One important aspect of this work centers around the designer’s re Framing of people’s conversation. When people come to a civic or public conversation bearing their matters of concern, the conversation has the potential to be a veritable potluck of matters. Through framing the process with scaffolding documents, framing the experience as a search for what neighbors need to discover about problem, the designer has the opportunity to help people organize their matters of concern, and understand them in the light of the concerns of their neighbors. Ultimately, these meetings represent the potential for opening of neighbor’s worlds to other worlds through disclosive conversation. The designer is part of the process to design the physical environment, but also to shape the social and conversational environment towards inclusive discourse that evokes participants’ lived experiences. Through considered research, through engagement in the network
of stakeholders that surrounds these issues, designers play an important role that isn’t taken up by other actors.

Conclusions

Design and designing are acts that are inherently bound up with the creation, shaping and maintenance of society. Democratic government offers explicit and structured opportunities for participation through voting, but can also support richer engagement with people through the medium of civic conversation events. These events, in addition to providing rich data on people’s situated knowledge and experience of the effects of policy, can also act as a support to and an opportunity to practice re-engagement in civic life. Through a series of successful events, designers have an opportunity build trust, surface need, foster hope, and strengthen democracy and civic life.

References


