



# Restoring Faith in Government: Encouraging Civic Public Discourse

## FRIDAY, JUNE 8, 2012

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1. If there has been harm, who was harmed?
2. What is causing that harm?
3. What do we need to do to repair that harm?

### LISTENING TO WHY PEOPLE BELIEVE WHAT THEY BELIEVE

**8:45 – 9:45 a.m.**

*Political Discourse 101: Why Do Campaigns Look and Sound the Way They Do? We often lament the state of our political discourse—the seemingly endless barrage of negative ads and personal attacks. But strategic reasons exist for what we see and hear in political campaigns. Our panelists, both political insiders and campaign observers, will offer their perspectives on how campaigns are waged today, their consequences, and whether change is in order.*

*Moderator: Mike Gousha, distinguished fellow in law and public policy*

*Panelists:*

- *Charles Franklin, visiting professor of law and public policy, Marquette Law School, and director, Marquette Law School Poll*
- *Mark Graul, Republican political advisor, strategist, and experienced campaign manager*
- *Joe Wineke, former Wisconsin Democratic Party chairman and former state lawmaker*

### Lifvendahl Questions (used by me to critique)

1. To what extent do the educational and experiential backgrounds of legislators and their media advisors pre-determine the course of discourse/behavior?

- Who drives whom?
- The unholy alliance?

Their focus was primarily on existing political dynamics and the interplay of legislators with the advice given by consultants/media professionals bent on gaming the system...not changing the system to foster transparent communications.

2. To what extent has the ability of viewers to discern messages that are philosophically central to the candidate atrophied?
  - Are we easier to manipulate? (yes)
  - Bifurcation denotes decreased ability to do reflective, critical thinking...the heart of Restorative Justice (open communication)

Partially addressed by panelists. Average voters are unaware of the tools of language that drive creation of political advertising. They are aware of being manipulated but in most cases on a very unsophisticated level. Subsequent observations include:

1. Are campaigns more negative?
  - a. Yes = cost (spending determines method of message)
  - b. Volume = multiple media creates "flood" (noise)
  - c. Image and Text = simplify message (extreme)
  - d. Metaphor = politics as sports (male)
2. How media savvy is the average candidate?
  - a. Social Media = the impact of incessant, interactive babbling amongst younger/middle age (21-30+) voters (generational impact) is hard to gauge. Social media is too new but is having an accumulative impact on the behavior/belief formation of younger voters. What that is becomes speculative.
  - b. Television = Critical Questions
    - i. To what extent do people become "deaf" to messaging?
    - ii. Is there an inverse effect to increase messaging?

Conclusion: the panel tended to state the obvious. Critical questions are presently unanswerable due to the lack of reliable data.

**10:00 – 11:00 a.m. Civic Participation or Recreational Hostility: Policing the Blogosphere?**

*The Internet is a powerful venue for spreading news and for allowing millions of people to express their views publicly. But anyone who has read comments posted about political stories on websites of news organizations knows that the Internet also is a venue for anger, hate, insults, and often-anonymous personal attacks. News organizations have worked hard to keep comments inbounds. Martin Kaiser, a leader in the news industry, and Steve Johnson, an astute observer of what has gone on, will share their perspectives, with Professor Lynn Turner looking at hostility on the Internet from an academic standpoint and Gregory Holding describing how politics at the local level are sometimes shaped by Internet attacks.*

**Moderator:** *Steve Goldzwig, professor and chair, communication studies, Marquette University*

**Panelists:**

- *Gregory T. Holding, alderman, Racine, 11th District*
- *Steve Johnson, reporter, Chicago Tribune*
- *George Stanley, managing editor, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*
- *Lynn Turner, professor of communication studies, Marquette University Diederich College of Communication, and president of the National Communication Association*

**Civic Participation (Personal Stories)**

Steve Johnson = blogging is uncivil and difficult (diatribe, “adult parallel play” [the behaviors of people unwilling to talk to each other and conversing in separate but parallel internet mediated worlds], signal to noise ratio [the relationship between effective communications revealing beliefs and venting], 90% = move on, 9% = try and talk, 1% = the drunk in the bar)

George Stanley = Opening statement – the Journal Sentinel no longer publishes obituary comments...the responses are derogatory and uncivil. Short staffing makes patrolling these communications difficult. Debate in the blogosphere tends to break along generational lines. Because of the dysfunctional nature of blogging, older editors in papers want to restrict comments. Younger reporters want to let things fly (free speech). However, shifting is also occurring among younger reporters because of the hateful “heat” generated by those comments.

Greg Holding = public officials can use “comments” in both negative and positive ways. Lawsuits can occur when blogs drive legislator response. Most elected officials take a minimal response stance to public statements (less said, less to report, less for bloggers to disseminate on-line (think the camera phone snippets of comments taken out of context and dumped online).

Lynn Turner =As an academic she came to the discussion from a research standpoint. Information conflation [statements made as facts without research backing them up] are the norm in blog communications. Little research exists on evolving media (generally or by format) to form opinions about media effectiveness right now.

Definition of Civility – it encompasses public behaviors that *prevent* civil life from disintegrating.

Webster’s Definition of Civility – training in the humanities; civilized conduct; *especially* Courtesy, politeness; a polite act or expression; also the act of showing kindness for others.

Dr. Turner’s observations were primarily based on research in communications. She included:

- Why being “mean” is a new norm = people are being alone together...that is we exist in exclusive on-line communities reinforce belief systems and are immune from outside critique. That research continues the idea [my thought] of “bowling alone”, (See [link](#) to book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*) cocooning is enabled by media ‘habituation’. This boils down to “I watch what I want to watch and nothing else”.
- Uncertainty – all technologies create a situation wherein the familiar becomes unfamiliar (turbulence). That turbulence creates uncertainty and uncertainty leads to protective behaviors...making those who disagree with you the “evil other”.
- Face saving (self-importance) reinforces media responses from those who are challenged in their thinking and/or rationalization.
- Different media provides differing support for controlling people’s political environment. I want to hear that which reinforces my pre-conceived notions, not that which challenges them.

- Dr. Turner highlighted the dichotomies of Informality... that generate Diminished Competence and Formality... which tend to Reinforce Civility. Because respect for others (age, education, gender, etc.) is diminishing, we are reduced to “respecting” the opinions of people who have not earned it. All internet pundits are equal

Conclusion: controlling discourse via the use of social media/internet is increasingly difficult.

***11:00 a.m. – Noon From Demonizing Rhetoric to Respectful Difference: Suggestions from Public Policy Mediators***

*The panel members, all with decades of experience in mediating public policy conflicts throughout the United States and internationally, will describe policy mediation and other public engagement processes that provide productive discourse where incivility and polarization might otherwise frustrate progress and problem solving. Panelists will offer their observations regarding opportunities for, and challenges to the application of, these approaches to controversial issues in this country.*

***Panelists:***

- *Howard S. Bellman, mediation and arbitration*
- *Susan Carpenter, public policy mediator, Susan Carpenter & Associates*
- *Susan Podziba, public policy mediator, Podziba Policy Mediation*

Howard Bellman = Bellman opened the discussion by citing the following examples of actions reflecting the need for mediation. These included:

1. Exodus of Senators in Protest
2. Madison Protest Demonstrations
3. Supreme Court Justice literally fighting (pushing) each other.

Mediation has a long history in Wisconsin. Mediation is a form of public policy making that is future oriented, not just designed around solving a specific problem.

- Mediation reveals hidden desires leading to conciliatory solutions.
- The result of the mediation is transactional, non-litigated applicable legislation.

In essence, he focused on why properly utilized mediation has a salutary effect that can be translated into actionable legislation designed to solve real problems.

Susan Carpenter = alluvial fans (geologic deposits that form in a fan onto valleys in California that have become the prime real estate for development in Greater Los Angeles).



They also affect habitats and stakeholder well-being. In order to mediate the contending forces she noted that you need to:

- Frame the issue in ways that diminish friction and guide people to focus on “real” issues.
- Create Listening sessions that define leadership needs for buy-in.
- Define why people fight.
- Create a fair process (transparency) that build on “Collaborative Processes”.

Susan Podziba = offered case studies around the affect of *coded* words that constrict creative thinking and open communications. Mediation highlights the fact that we devolve into contending rhetorical camps that keep us from hearing the “other”. One case took over 6 years to resolve. It involved a group of committed women tasked to decrease conflict generated by a murder of an abortion provider. Three pro and anti-abortion individuals were brought together and guided through an intense mediation process. At the end of this process people still held their beliefs but understood that those beliefs were formed around morally reasonable arguments that could be respected by all participants.

In summary, all panelists noted that to be successful:

- Political will is needed before solutions can be determined that are “ripe for resolution”.
- Shared public goals (the creation of “civic fusion”) must be formed and articulated in an open, transparent environment.
- Design processes that sustain fusion (reduction of confusion to target achievable, beneficial action).

**12:30 – 1:30 p.m. • Keynote Address**  
**How to Heal Polarization in America**

*Keynote speaker John Avlon is a senior columnist for Newsweek and The Daily Beast. He is the author of Independent Nation: How Centrism Can Change American Politics and Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe Is Hijacking America. Previously, he served as chief speechwriter for former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and was a columnist and associate editor for the New York Sun. He is a CNN contributor.*

### Overview

The effect of “over-reach” (seeking too much) and lash-back (anger at “loosing”) communications creates a cycle of dysfunction that dominates contemporary public discourse and endangers the ability of all of us to have a functional government. Using quotes from the Farwell Address of George Washington in 1796 (see [link](#)) Avlon worked to show that the consequences of party based extremism are as old as the Republic. He used a medical metaphor to diagnose and prescribe how to “fix” the system. He noted that politicians’ are captive to their political base and the associated hyper-partisanship of those people. He believes that, over time, cult-like behavior of forced conformance begins to dominate group dynamics and this phenomenon negatively influences governmental effectiveness.

He noted that generational behavioral differences are emerging with Millennial(s) becoming apathetic to the behaviors of their elders. In regards to healing the system, he suggested the following actions we all can individually foster:

- Election Reform = gerrymandering (break the cocoons)
- Independents = change the process to give them a voice in the nominating process
- Diminish the Effect of Money = warping and inherently negative
- Incentive Structures = how to we focus on problem solving/break the party line
- Filibuster Reform = no “skin in the game”
- No “Secret Holds” in the Senate
- Lobbying Reform

### Lifvendahl Questions:

You are a Media Guy. I am trying to tie all the panel discussions together into a more inclusive whole. Given that global government(s) (democratic and non-democratic) and global media frame the discourse...

1. Are Millennial Americans merging with their generational cohort (people of China/Middle East/etc. global youth) who see political change as impossible to achieve in the contemporary political climate.

2. Are they cocooning (Face booking) themselves away from conventional government based solutions (we are fed up and are not interested any more in changing a corrupt system)?
3. Are global solutions transcending calcified governmental ability to solve these problems?
4. And, is the new media facilitating communications on a new global scale that by-passes governments?

His response to my questions was “not enough is known right now”. I tend to answer my own questions YES. In addition, I believe that bodes ill for finding solutions using conventional media (TV, print, etc.).

Piggybacking on those comments and others generated by subsequent audience observations he posited that media use is evolving both technologically and behaviorally at a rapid rate. It is hard to know at the aforementioned macro scale to know what is happening.

He ended the presentation by admonishing all of us to get involved in governmental reform. We are at a precipice and pulling ourselves back is a crucial action we all must take.

Because of prior commitments, I DID NOT ATTEND THE FOLLOWING...

*1:30 – 2:30 p.m.*

***Name Calling and Personal Attacks on Candidates and Elected Officials—What Is the Impact?***

*Restorative justice asks this question: "How are people and institutions being harmed by negative conduct?" This panel of current and former politicians will share their insights and experiences on how the current tenor of the political world affects who decides to run for office, how they run for office, and, ultimately, how they can govern.*

***Moderator: Janine P. Geske***

***Panelists:***

- *Timothy Cullen (D), Wisconsin state senator*
- *Margaret Farrow (R), former lieutenant governor*
- *Barbara Lawton (D), former lieutenant governor*
- *Dale Schultz, (R), Wisconsin state senator*



**2:30 – 3:15 p.m. *The Future: Is the Next Generation Optimistic?***

*Moderators Janine P. Geske and Mike Gousha talk with some of the next generation's potential leaders in this session with a student panel from the Marquette University Les Aspin Center for Government. Together the group examines the question, "Why do you want to pursue public service?"*

**Moderators:** *Janine P. Geske and Mike Gousha*

**Conclusion**

This was a worthwhile conference. Diverse people spoke on complex topics without yelling at each other. An excellent model for restoring justice to a dysfunctional political system.