

The Domestic Policy Association
A Test of Public Communication
By
David Mathews

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Introduction

In the summer of 1981, representatives of fourteen civic and educational organizations met at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin, to discuss how to fashion a better system for learning and communicating about public policy.

The conversation reflected a deep concern with the fragmentation of the country into special interest groups, with the estrangement citizens felt from their own government, and with the lack of cohesiveness at all levels in America. The war in Vietnam had been divisive and destructive to the nation's sense of shared purpose. Watergate had shaken what faith there was in government and in the integrity of those who serve in it. A decade of inflation and recession, coupled with high unemployment had undermined confidence in the strength of the national economy. A cult of "me first" had made people less interested in broad public issues. The complexity of many national problems made them incomprehensible to even educated citizens. The very core of our democratic system was tested by the public's alienation and resulting apathy.

Although most of the institutions represented at Wingspread were already educating citizens in their own communities on policy issues, they felt a broader effort was needed to develop a new model for public policy education. They agreed to join forces and create a national network of like minded organizations and to devote at least three of their forums to common topics. They called their joint enterprise the Domestic Policy Association. It was to be a voluntary association with each organization supporting its own forums. They had no federal or foundation grant to motivate them. They were creating their own network, a kind of PBS, for those who conducted the face-to-face discussions of public policy.

The topics they were looking for had to have both national and local significance; the organizations involved in the DPA were dedicated to community building but not to parochialism. They wanted to address very fundamental problems, ones that would endure for some time and embrace moral as well as technical considerations. The DPA group was particularly attracted to topics where the experts and the public were almost at opposite poles in the way the problems were defined and debated. It was in such situations that they could best test their new kinds of community discussions, which they called National Issues Forums.

The discussions in the forums had to be informed ones, not outlets for hastily conceived first opinions or the gripes of special interest groups. Their purpose was not only to help people understand the issues in an abstract sense but also to work through hard choices by examining the range of options available and the costs and benefits involved in each. No one expected unanimity to result from the forums, but they did

expect that participants would come away with a clearer understanding of the choices available and a sense of how one group's preferences affected other groups.

Finally, there was the problem of developing forums that would have results—but not be another form of special interest advocacy with expectations of direct political action. No matter how timely the topics, how thoroughly informed the participants, or how thoughtful the forum discussions, there had to be ways of reaching the policymakers. The tie to policymakers had to be made first by involving locally elected officials. But the DPA organizers agreed that some sort of culminating forum, one that would bring national policymakers and forum participants together, would be helpful.

Of course, the actual organization of the National Issues Forums, as all things “New,” had important precedents. Annabel Hagood of the University of Alabama, for example, had translated John W. Keltner's model of decision-making, commitment and problem-solving into a program for the State of Florida that used regional forums, followed by statewide discussions, to bring the views of local citizens to the attention of the governor and other state policymakers. The extension of this kind of consensus building forum on the national scale seemed at least theoretically feasible.

For topic selection, the DPA turned to Dan Yankelovich's Public Agenda Foundation, which had a good sense of the public's concerns based on its experience with opinion surveys. Public Agenda agreed to propose six topics each year, from which the local DPA steering committees would select three as themes for the National Issues Forums. Retirement and Social Security; Inflation; and Jobs and Productivity were selected for the first year's forums. In 1983, the topics were on the Deficit and the Federal Budget Process; Nuclear Arms and National Security; and Priorities for the Nation's Schools.

If the discussions were to be truly informed ones, participants would need textual materials to outline the options for policy decisions. But existing materials were often beyond the means of small, local organizations, and many were too technical to make much sense to those outside the narrow, specialized field they addressed. Once again the Public Agenda Foundation stepped forward, offering to prepare a text, written from the public's point of view, that would do for the discussions what a football program does for a football game—provide meaning to what otherwise would be a jumble of sounds and actions.

Public Agenda was an excellent partner because of its own concern about the adequacy of the existing models of public learning. They had come to believe that information alone was not the answer. The media were already bombarding citizens with information on the nightly news and mounting “specials” to examine complex issues. Yes, the results, as reflected in the ratings, were disappointing. The average person could relate neither to the technical language nor to the football game.

The problem was not so much that the public was stupid or unconcerned, but rather that the issues were not being presented in a way that made any sense to them personally. Mac Davis sang about the average citizen's frustrations in a country music ballad which concluded that the world was in a hell of a mess.

In its materials, Public Agenda aimed to present the issues, written in a way that the Mac Davises of the world would understand. The materials were technically correct and politically neutral, but they went beyond technical considerations to examine the values and assumptions that shaped public attitudes on the issues. Such an approach,

PAF believed, would help participants “work through” the issues—trying various alternatives on for size, revising conclusions, and finally modifying their own attitudes based on an enlarged understanding of both the technical and personal dimensions of each problem. As a test of how much “working through” occurred during the forums, Public Agenda also included in each booklet two survey forms, to be filled out at the beginning and at the end of each forum. These provided some rough quantitative information on the amount of attitude change fostered by the discussions.

In the pilot year the DPA grew to a network of twenty-five institutions spread across the country. Each had a commitment to educating citizens about public policy, and each was willing to work toward the success of the total project. It was a “potluck supper”—what folks from the country would call “dinner on the ground”—with each group contributing what it could to the broad effort.

The Johnson Foundation, for example, already had a radio series, “Conversations from Wingspread,” which was heard regularly on some 185 radio stations nationwide, and it offered to help publicize the National Issues Forums by devoting several of its pre-recorded radio programs to three topics.

The Presidential Libraries offered to provide the link between forum participants and the nation’s policy makers. These institutions had endured heavy criticism of their public usefulness. They were viewed by their critics as the American version of the pyramids—monuments to the egos of the former presidents. The libraries were eager to do something unmistakably in the public interest, and one thing they could do well was to bring together past and present policymakers. The Presidential Libraries proposed to sponsor what are now called the Presidential Libraries Conferences on the Public and Policy making, where representatives from the local forums could voice their own views and those of their neighbors directly to national leaders.

The Benton Foundation, which had an interest in teleconference technology, saw DPA as a way to test some of its theories of “teledemocracy.” It provided two-way hook-ups that allowed thousands of people to participate in the first Presidential Libraries Conference without leaving their own communities. Later it used the same kind of technology to link those planning the 1983 forums, meeting again at Wingspread, in conversation with policymakers in Washington, D.C. Kettering served as general coordinator.

Those with expertise in planning helped DPA plan. Those with experience in running conferences helped train moderators and convenors. Those whose forte was communications helped prepare materials, using a variety of media, that could be used during the forums. As dish after dish was brought to the table, the potluck supper became a balanced and successful meal.

The First Forums

The first National Issues Forums were held in the fall, 1982. They involved 313 meetings in seventeen states, and they brought together nearly 10,000 people. Forum participants included retired executives and school teachers, labor leaders and key punch operators, farmers and students—and many others. They came from some of the nation’s largest cities and some of its smallest towns, and their perspectives on the issues had been

colored by the cultural and economic circumstances they saw around them. Given that diversity of people and perspectives, it is not surprising that no unanimous mandate for public action emerged from the forums. Indeed the forums were not intended to serve as referenda on the issues. What they were intended to do, and what they did to a considerable degree, was to engage citizens in thoughtful discussions of the issues that went beyond narrow self-interest.

Bringing the worlds of public opinion and policymaking closer together demands more than voting in annual elections or writing an occasional letter to one's senator or representative. It requires a better way to close what Public Agenda president Daniel Yankelovich has called "The Gap." The Gap is the difference of perception and language that separate the public and the policymakers. It contributes substantially to the average citizen's sense of powerlessness and of disenfranchisement. The Gap itself was the problem that the Presidential Libraries Conferences were to address.

The first conference was held in February, 1983, at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with former presidents Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter serving as conference co-chairmen. The guest list included former cabinet secretaries, advisors or special assistants to presidents, members of Congress and The White House staff, and leaders from labor, education and the media. It also included sixteen citizen representatives of local forums and thousands of people across the country who could both watch and participate in the conference through the Benton Foundation's teleconference.

Participants, citizens and policymakers alike, talked about the Gap, with President Ford terming it a "yawning chasm." They spoke of the need for policymakers to look beyond the hastily formed opinions reflected in most polls and to listen to voices that were neither as loud nor as insistent as those of special interest lobbies and political action committees. And they acknowledged that Americans would be willing to make the sacrifices that the current times demand only if they felt they had a place at the policymaking table.

Citizens and policymakers also talked more specifically about the concerns that had emerged as the forums tackled Social Security, inflation and jobs, and productivity. The Presidential Libraries Conference did not attempt to produce a consensus. It did, however, give leaders a better understanding of the public's perspective and the public a better understanding of the complexity of the decisions that leaders must make. The objective was to improve the environment for making difficult political decisions, not to advocate any particular action. The purpose of the entire exercise, beginning with the community forums, was to unlock the political system by helping people move from impressionistic first opinions to more thoughtful second opinions. For example, the forum participants reported a significant modification in attitudes on the Social Security issue that indicated a public willingness to accept reforms of the kind later adopted by Congress.

The Network Increases in Size and Scope

The DPA as an idea and as an organization is still evolving. Even at this early stage in its development, however, it is notable in several respects. First through the

combination of local forums and Presidential Library Conferences, it has put in place a key piece of institutional machinery with the potential of translating the old New England town meeting into a form, sensitive to the new media technology, that can stimulate productive public discussions year after year.

The DPA is notable in its motives; its aim is the enlarging of the common ground upon which our heterogeneous citizenry can agree, and it is notable in its methods. It is a nation wide effort, based on cooperation, a different kind of text, and the latest in communication technology. But by using existing forums, the DPA has not had the problems of de novo organizations—particularly the need for the infusion of large sums of money. Participants, by and large, have simply agreed to do together what they otherwise would have done (albeit less effectively) alone. As such, the DPA is an enterprise in the best American barnraising tradition.

Finally, DPA is notable for its ability to engage the interest of all kinds of institutions, from libraries and museums to schools and civic clubs, which have public policy education programs. And it has helped stimulate more general discussions of the public and the public's role in American life among scholars in disciplines ranging from public administration to theology.

Since the beginning of 1983, about seventy-five new organizations have joined the twenty-five that participated in the initial National Issues Forums. The types of sponsoring organizations show a healthy diversity. Under the leadership of Joseph V. Julian, vice president for Public Affairs at Syracuse University, for example, National Issues Forums are being used as programs for the University's alumni organizations in New York and Florida. Berks Community Television, a cable service in Reading, Pennsylvania, is experimenting with using forums and interactive media. And more civic organizations, such as the leadership groups in cities like Memphis and Cleveland are adapting the forums to serve their alumni groups.

Materials developed for the National Issues Forums are finding uses among groups not directly in the forums themselves. Civics and government classes at selected high schools in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York and Oregon are planning to use the issues books as part of their curriculums, and some faculty groups are considering their use in undergraduate and internship programs.

A step-by-step instruction guide is also being prepared for those who would like to conduct National Issues Forums more informally, on a home or neighborhood basis.

The Role of Scholarly Organizations

Several scholarly organizations, allied in purpose but not directly connected with the DPA, have been engaged in sharpening the conceptual tools for thinking about public life. For example, a National Conference on Citizenship and Public Service, sponsored by the American Society for Public Administration and the National Academy of Public Administration was convened in April 1983 to explore the public's role in public administration.¹ It is impossible, in a democracy, they voted to have a theory of government administration without a theory of how the public relates to that administration.

Another conference on Public Life and Civic Literacy, held at the University of Chicago, brought together scholars from theology, sociology, medicine, government and several other disciplines to examine what has happened to public philosophy.ⁱⁱ In a related enterprise, those most thoughtful about the common values that undergird the tradition of liberal arts education, are examining anew the civic purposes of liberal learning. Led by the American Association of Colleges, this inquiry goes far beyond the question of teaching civics in a particular course to the larger issue of developing civic intelligence.

In conclusion, because of the growing ability of interactive media and the seductive simplicity of deciding all public questions by sitting alone, privately, in front of our TV sets and pushing a button, we are faced with the possibility that our oldest and most original political institutions, the voluntary associations and the town meeting, may be in serious trouble. What the DPA is really deciding is whether those direct, face-to-face, essentially local institutions of public discourse can take on a new form. The questions go beyond those comprehended terms like “communication” and “participation.” If the answers were as simple as just increasing both, we would have solved our problems a long time ago.

The case for public, face-to-face, policy conversations is the same as it was when Woodrow Wilson addressed the issue in these remarks made in 1912:

For a long time this country of ours has lacked one of the instruments which free men have always and everywhere held fundamental. For a long time there has been no sufficient opportunity for counsel among the people; no place and method of talk, of exchange of opinion,...

I conceive it to be one of the needs of the hour to restore the processes of common counsel, and to substitute them for the processes of private arrangement which now determine the policies of cities, states, and nations.

The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend upon the understanding of one man, but to depend upon the counsel of all. For only as men are brought into counsel, and state their own needs and interests, can the general interests of a great people be compounded into a policy suitable to all...

None of us will be unaffected by what happens to the quality of the public discussion of public issues. And I do not think any of us can stand apart from the questions that issues raise about the models of communication we have available to us.

We need new models of public learning and we need institutions that skillfully use those new models.

ⁱ George Frederickson of Eastern Washington University is publishing the proceeding in the *Public Administration Review*.

ⁱⁱ The major themes of the conference are reported in the Antaeus Report (A Symposium on Public Life and Civic Literacy). (Fall, 1983)

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Further Reading

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