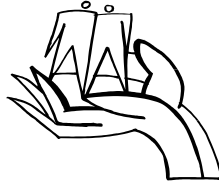


Capturing Public Thinking: Authentic Reporting on Public Forums



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Introduction

*“For democracy to flourish, it is not enough to get out and vote.
We need better public judgment, and we need to know how to cultivate it.”*
-- Public opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich

Deliberative forums, such as National Issues Forums, are one important way to cultivate public judgment. By public judgment, we mean the kind of public opinion that emerges when diverse people talk together about a shared concern, explore and weigh different approaches for addressing that concern, and discover a shared sense of direction.

In contrast to public hearings or opinion surveys, deliberative forums focus on *how* citizens think about an issue, not just *what* they think. They encourage people to talk *with* each other, not *at* each other. They enable people to work together on challenging, systemic problems for which there are no “right” answers or quick fixes.

Why report on forums?

Reporting on public forums furthers the deliberative process in several ways. It enables the forum organizers to be accountable to the forum participants by sharing with them a summary of their deliberations. It engages people who did not attend the forums to join their fellow citizens in talking about the issue. It informs policymakers about how the public views the issue and the trade-offs they are and are not willing to accept.

The contributions of reporting go beyond the particular issue. A forum report can illustrate the nature and benefits of public deliberation as a way for citizens to work together on a wide variety of public problems in their communities, states, and nation.

A few cautions about reporting

The purpose of a forum report is not to hand over a list of recommendations to public officials about what *they* should do about the problem. While there may be policy issues that need to be addressed, the focus of the report is on what *all of us* can do about the issue. Releasing a report on forums does not let citizens off the hook. On the contrary, the report should illuminate the various roles that each of us can play.

There may be certain circumstances in which it is better to not release a report at all. If the community’s social or political climate makes citizens feel unsafe in talking about an issue, a report could be intimidating and discourage people from

participating. The main point is for people to deliberate with one another, and it is important that reporting on forums not undermine the forums themselves.

Another occasion when it may not be wise to issue a report is if the forum participants were clearly unrepresentative of the community as a whole. While it's not necessary that the participants reflect the demographics of the community in exact proportions, it is essential to be inclusive of the variety of perspectives that exist. Without this, the forum report could be misleading or even detrimental.

Features of an authentic report

A well-prepared report captures the dynamic nature of public deliberation. Whereas an opinion survey is a snapshot of people's thinking at a given point in time, a forum resembles a movie that reveals how people's thinking takes form as they deliberate. An authentic report on public forums will:

- ❑ Represent the diverse perspectives that people bring to the issue in a fair and respectful manner;
- ❑ Describe shifts in people's thinking as they talk with one another;
- ❑ Examine what people think should be done about the issue as they consciously recognize the difficulties and trade-offs in all approaches; and
- ❑ Summarize any shared sense of direction, as well as areas of disagreement.

This paper explores three stages of reporting on forums: gathering information from the deliberations, writing the report, and sharing the report. It does not provide a formula or recipe, but rather practical considerations for forum organizers and writers so they can help people make good use of the public wisdom that emerges from their forums.

Gathering Information at Forums

“An emergent world asks us to stand in a different place. We can no longer stand at the end of something we visualize in detail and plan backwards from that future. Instead, we must stand at the beginning, clear in our intent, with a willingness to be involved in discovery.”

-- Social scientist Margaret Wheatley

Deliberative forums are acts of discovery. They enable us to examine our own thinking more deeply and to open ourselves to different perspectives. They help us generate, individually and collectively, new ways of thinking about public problems and how we might work through them together.

Much of this discovery happens among the participants as they deliberate during and after the actual forum. Additional discoveries can occur when we study the proceedings of multiple forums on the same issue held with different groups. A well-prepared report on forums will convey the public thinking that emerged within and across forums.

The best time to start thinking about reporting on forums is before they begin. The richness of the report hinges on the variety and quality of information collected during the deliberations. It is important to identify up front who will be the “information gatherers” for the forums. For multiple forums, having several recorders and observers is helpful. If possible, identify the primary report writer at the beginning to make sure that he/she directly experiences some of the forums.

Three common tools for collecting information are described in this section: notes and quotes from the forums, participant questionnaires, and moderator summaries.

Notes and quotes

Many forum organizers use flip charts to record participant comments. The comments are typically listed for each approach or choice, and often in two columns representing what people like and don't like about the approach. Using flip charts enables the participants to see and validate their comments and provides a visual record for group reflection during the closing of the forum.

Although useful, flip chart notes alone do not paint the full picture of the forum experience. It is important to also have observers who take detailed notes and quotes from their seats, who can pay attention to verbal and nonverbal information and the context within which people's remarks are made. An attentive observer/recorder might listen for the following:

- What do people say that reveals why they care about the issue? (*“I worry that I will have to leave here. I like the small schools and safe community. I want to stay. It’s a good environment.” – participant in forum on economic development*)
- Are there signs that people are genuinely listening to each other and considering each other’s points of view? (*“You all know that I usually have strong opinions about things, but I’m having a hard time making up my mind about this issue because I don’t know what people really mean by a ‘community center.’ A community center could be a lot of different things.” – participant in forum about what to do with an abandoned school*)
- When do people “dig deeper” and discover their underlying concerns? (*“What I’m hearing is that people are concerned about security, that it’s not so much about whether the school building is used for a police headquarters as it is about feeling safe.” – participant in forum about what to do with an abandoned school*)
- Where do tensions emerge, and how do people talk about them? (*“Health care purchasing co-ops sound good in theory, but they may not be able to get the best deal.” – insurance agent responding to another forum participant’s suggestion to form health purchasing co-ops for small businesses*)
- What quotes illuminate differing perspectives and the values that underlie those perspectives? (*“We need to begin considering health insurance as a right rather than as a luxury.” – participant in forum on health care*)
- What evidence is there that people are grappling with trade-offs? (*“I’m torn. My whole family is coal miners, but when I see the top of a mountain taken off, it sickens me.” – participant in forum on economic development*)
- What trade-offs are people willing and not willing to accept? (*“I think it’s okay for the public to make decisions about their schools if they’re really involved with their schools and don’t just show up when it’s time to make a decision.” – public school teacher in forum on public education*)
- Are there times during the forum when individuals show a shift in their thinking? (*“Comparing Kent State and Tiananmen Square – Are we really different?” – participant in forum on U.S./China relations after weighing needs for justice and for order*)
- What areas of agreement or common sense of direction emerge? (*“Whatever solutions to Chinese problems there are, they must be Chinese solutions, not American solutions.” – participant in forum on U.S./China relations, reflecting a feeling expressed in multiple forums*)

- Where do people disagree and why? (*"We have a reputation for being a welfare state and for good reason. I ran a business and couldn't find people willing to work." "There are some people who've worked real hard to get off welfare – like my own mom. Now she has a job with her own office, and she's going to college and still taking care of us three girls at home."* -- exchange between participants in forum on welfare)

Participant questionnaires

There are at least three schools of thought about the use of questionnaires. The first is to not use questionnaires at all. Some forum organizers are concerned that completing questionnaires resembles voting and detracts from the importance of the deliberations. Others may be sensitive to participants who don't read well and would have difficulty responding to written questions. If questionnaires are not used, it is critical that the moderator give extra time for the reflections at the end of the forum to validate the thinking of the participants.

A second approach is to use pre- and post-forum questionnaires. This is helpful if the forum organizers want to specifically measure the effects of deliberation on people's thinking. Some also feel that the pre-forum questionnaire is a good way to help people start thinking about the issue they're going to discuss.

A third approach is to use a post-forum questionnaire only. This approach uses the questionnaires to elicit information that validates and supplements how people think about the issue after participating in public deliberation.

Supporters of all three approaches agree on the following: The real meat of a forum is the rich conversations that occur among the participants, and the heart of the forum report is what they said to each other, not what they wrote on a questionnaire.

If you choose to use questionnaires and are using a National Issues Forums issue book, questionnaires are provided. If not, you can design your own using the steps below as a guide.

- *Develop questions to discover how people view the issue.* Review the approaches or choices in your framework. For each, write one or two statements that capture the point of view behind that choice or what people see as the real problem. For example, in a forum about how to improve public schools, one of the choices might be to "increase community involvement in schools." Possible statements include "Community involvement improves the quality of public education," and "Parents and other citizens are not as involved with public schools as they should be." Then create multiple choices to apply to each statement, such as strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and not sure.

- *Develop questions to identify what kinds of actions people do or do not support.* Now go back to your framework and pick a couple actions under each choice that you feel are good examples of what could be done. Using the choice about community involvement, possible actions include "Expect parents and the public to raise funds and volunteer for their schools," and "Create citizen councils to help set policies and priorities for the school." Develop multiple choices, such as strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose, and not sure.
- *Develop questions to probe what trade-offs people are or are not willing to make.* These questions push people to consider what they're willing to give up under each of the choices. Hopefully, the forum also elicited this kind of deliberation. For each choice, come up with at least one statement like "I support more community involvement in schools EVEN IF this requires time and resources that the school could be directing to students in the classroom," or "I would personally be willing to donate an hour or two a week to help improve public schools." Develop multiple choices on a continuum of agreement/disagreement.
- *Develop questions that elicit feedback about how people felt about the forum experience.* These should help assess what happened to the participants as a result of the forum. Possible statements include "I have developed new insights as a result of participating in this forum," and "The forum has given me some ideas about actions I might take on the issue." Develop a multiple-choice continuum, and also ask open-ended questions about new insights people gained or actions they might take.
- *Develop questions to collect demographic information about the forum participants.* Think about demographic differences that might contribute to different perspectives on the issue, such as age, gender, race, education, and income. You may also want to gauge the participants' previous awareness of the issue and their main sources of information (e.g. friends, newspaper, church, etc.) about it. Collecting this information will help you identify trends and will also help determine whether or not your forums engaged a representative cross-section of the community.
- *Test the questionnaire.* The best way to test the questionnaire is to try it out during test forums and ask the participants for feedback on the clarity of the questions. With diverse participants, a good questionnaire should elicit a diversity of responses. You should re-evaluate your questionnaire (or even your framework) if most people answer most of the questions the same way, which might suggest that you haven't really captured the tensions (or that your group was not diverse enough). Also, if large numbers of people answer "not sure" to a question, it may be because the question is not clear enough.

Moderator summaries

The purpose of moderator summaries is to report the forum highlights while they are still fresh in people's minds. They are especially helpful when there are multiple moderators. While the observer notes offer rich detail, the summary is intended to crystallize the essence of what people had to say. The summaries help the report writer glean what mattered most to people as they deliberated.

Moderator summaries may be written or verbal. If time allows, the report writer may want to interview some or all of the forum moderators to hear first-hand their observations. If not, a short (ideally, one page) summary written by the moderator will suffice. The key is to complete the summaries as soon as possible after the forums. The summary may include the following:

- Forum date, location, and moderator
- Description of participants (number, age, other relevant characteristics)
- Highlights of the deliberation

Writing the Report

“A writer always tries, I think, to be part of the solution, to understand a little bit about life and to pass this on.”

-- Writer Anne Lamott

A well-prepared report on forums is more than a record, transcript, or summary of the proceedings. The writer must sift, scrutinize, and organize the information in such a way that the report will contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue and how people think about it. This section describes some considerations regarding report contents, writing in a public voice, discovering key themes, and organizing supporting information.

Report contents

Reports on forums come in a variety of lengths and formats, depending on the nature of the forum(s) and the intended use of the report. In general, it is helpful to describe:

- ❑ *The nature and purpose of deliberative forums.* You may want to refer to the National Issues Forums issue books, which contain a good one-page description of deliberative forums.
- ❑ *The issue people deliberated about.* In addition to the topic of the forum, many writers also describe the choices that were included in the framework. It is important to note, however, that the purpose of the choices is to stimulate deliberation, not to ask people to pick one of them.
- ❑ *When and where the forums happened and who participated.* Numbers and demographics of the participants help the reader understand how broad a cross-section of the public was involved.
- ❑ *The sponsoring organizations.* If your organization sponsors forums on other topics, you might want to note this somewhere in the report and encourage interested people to contact you.
- ❑ *Key themes that emerged from the forums and supporting information.* This is the meat of your report and will describe areas of common ground and disagreement, trade-offs that people were and were not willing to make, and actions they considered taking. (This part is addressed in detail later in this section.)
- ❑ *Any next steps identified by the forum participants.* This should not be a list of recommendations for other people to do, but rather, a description of what actions, if any, the forum participants considered taking.

Writing in a public voice

No matter how hard we try, none of us can ever be completely “objective.” We see the world through our own personal filters, which are shaped by our individual experiences, assumptions, and values. As writers, the challenge is to stay cognizant of our filters and how they might be affecting our representations of what people said and meant during the forums. Try to:

- ❑ Present all perspectives in a fair and respectful manner.
- ❑ Describe people’s thinking using the words they used themselves, whether in direct quotes or your own descriptions; avoid “expert” or “insider” terminology.
- ❑ Give appropriate emphasis in the report to the issues raised during the forums based on how frequently they came up and how strongly the participants felt about them.

Discovering key themes

This step is about sifting and scrutinizing all the information collected from the forums – notes and quotes, participant questionnaires, and moderator reports – to find out what key themes emerge. When reporting on multiple forums, it is ideal to bring all of the moderators and observers together for a “debriefing” on the forums to discuss and compare their perceptions.

The following questions can help in your analysis:

- ❑ Why did this issue matter to the forum participants? What were their major concerns about it?
- ❑ What were the major areas of agreement and disagreement in how they viewed the issue?
- ❑ As people deliberated, did you observe any shifts in their thinking or in how they responded to the thinking or others? Describe.
- ❑ What actions were the groups most willing to support and why?
- ❑ What actions were the groups least willing to support and why?
- ❑ What trade-offs were the groups willing and not willing to make?
- ❑ What did forum participants talk about doing about the issue, individually and collectively?

After considering the above questions, review the questionnaire results. Do the questionnaire responses reflect what moderators and observers observed? Further examine any points where there are discrepancies.

The next step is more art than science: Review your analysis, and list those points that you feel should be included in your report. Then consider the best way to organize them. One approach is to crystallize the findings into a few main statements (preferably no more than 6), as illustrated in Example 1. Another approach is to group multiple points into a few categories, as presented in Example 2.

Example 1: What Citizens Think We Should Do About the Uninsured

1. Nearly all forum participants viewed health insurance as a significant problem for themselves and/or others.
2. Nearly all supported at least basic health coverage for all state residents.
3. Nearly all supported expansion of public coverage for children, though they want those programs to do a better job of reaching eligible children.
4. Most felt that adults deserve health insurance as well, but recognized that this will be more difficult to achieve.
5. Nearly all felt that people should be required to contribute a reasonable amount toward the cost of their health care.
6. Most believe that individuals and employers cannot manage rising health care costs alone.

Example 2: Citizens Talk About Their Relationships with Public Schools

1. How does the public feel about its relationships with its schools?
 - a. Relationships between parents and educators
 - b. Relationships between communities and schools
 - c. Relationships between citizens and education policy-makers
2. What would people like that relationship to be?
 - a. Education as a public or private concern
 - b. Education as a professional or lay concern
3. What actions do people support to improve the relationship?
 - a. Professional accountability
 - b. Parental responsibility
 - c. Community involvement

Organizing supporting information

After you've identified and organized the key themes, you can go back through your notes and quotes to select those that best illustrate each point. It is important to include enough examples to adequately support each point, but not so many that the reader feels bogged down in detail.

The other major decision you will need to make is how to use and present the questionnaire results. Some writers prefer to include the results in an appendix, separated from the narrative about the forums. This approach uses the questionnaire results to validate the extent to which the way people talked during the deliberations is how they responded individually.

Others prefer to integrate the questionnaire responses where appropriate within the main body of the text. This approach uses the questionnaire results to add to, as well as validate, the findings about how people deliberated.

There is no "right" way of presenting the questionnaires as long as you remember that the focus of the report is on the deliberations that occurred among the participants, not the statistics generated from the questionnaires.

Sharing the Report

“It is no longer a matter of left or right, but the extent to which a society can structure itself to use feedback and, where appropriate, to change the game and write new rules.”

-- Economist Hazel Henderson

Forum reports are an excellent source of feedback to society on specific public issues, as well as on the value of deliberation as a way for citizens to become more engaged in public life. Sharing these reports expands the value of the forums beyond those who participated directly. The reports may spur further deliberation among the people and groups that read them and help them discover ways they can act together on the issue.

To make the most of forum reports, it is helpful to identify your target audiences, choose appropriate reporting formats, and working effectively with the media.

Identifying target audiences

Forum reports are intended for people from all walks of life who care about the issue – from citizens, to professionals, to policy-makers – because the practice of public deliberation recognizes that everyone has a role to play, that no one party can “fix” the problem. While you may want to release your report to the general public through a news release or other means, it is also helpful to identify and follow up with those audiences who have a particular interest in the issue. As you put together your list, consider the following:

- *Who has a personal stake in the issue?* On an education issue, for example, students, parents, teachers, principals, and school board members are all directly affected. In addition, business people care about the issue in part because it impacts workforce development. Taxpayers care because they pay for public education. Elected officials care because they set education policy and are accountable to the voters.
- *What individuals and groups may want to act on the issue?* Think about the shared sense of direction and the potential actions that emerged from the forums. Who needs to be involved in those actions? Most public issues, like education, need action on many levels. Identify the potential actors and how they can contribute to working on the issue.
- *Who is interested in the process of deliberation, beyond the particular topic?* Many people and groups value public deliberation as a means of engaging citizens and strengthening our democracy. Forum reports can help further their understanding of the deliberative process.

- *What venues are available for sharing the forum findings?* Find out what upcoming meetings, conferences, and other gatherings can offer time on their agendas for hearing about and considering the forum findings. For example, on an education issue, explore meetings with PTAs, teacher associations, superintendent associations, school board associations, legislative committees, chambers of commerce, etc.

Choosing reporting formats

There are many ways to share the findings of public forums, and a solid written report can serve as the foundation of those efforts. Depending on the length of the full report, the intended audiences, and available venues, you may want to develop additional formats, such as:

- *An executive summary:* These are commonly used for lengthy reports when the audience may not have the time or inclination to read the “whole story.” Elected officials, for instance, often feel bombarded with information from various constituent groups and value concise summaries. The challenge in writing executive summaries on forum reports is to preserve the dynamic nature of the deliberation and not report the findings as though they were the results of a public opinion poll.
- *A bulleted outline:* When making a presentation to a group, it is often helpful to present a bulleted outline that walks the audience through the highlights of the report. You can take a high-tech approach to this, using a variety of computer software designed for this purpose. Or you may find that a low-tech approach, such as writing your points on a flip chart, is preferable in some situations.
- *Audiovisual presentations:* If you have the ability to videotape some of your forums, you may want to put together a few minutes of edited clips that reveal people’s thinking about the issue, as well as the nature of deliberation.
- *Personal conversations:* Do not underestimate the value of simply talking with people about what came out of your forums. One of the best ways to help deliberation become embedded in our society is to talk about and practice it throughout our work and life.

Working with the media

In working with the media, it is important to understand the circumstances and motivations that members of the media bring to their work. Commercial media, in particular, wants news that can be investigated and written up under pressing deadlines and crystallized in a small amount of space or air time.

The process of public deliberation, on the other hand, is not a singular event with a reportable conclusion. It typically involves diverse people interacting in multiple settings over a period of time. The findings of forums are multifaceted and usually not conducive to sound bytes.

Therefore, it is important to develop relationships with members of the news media to find intersections of mutual interest, where your forum findings can be fairly represented and reporters can meet the demands of their jobs. Tips on developing these relationships include the following:

- ❑ Seek out reporters who seem to have a knack for presenting multiple perspectives on an issue, who capture the complexity of public issues and don't present all issues as "either/or." Invite them to attend forums and talk with them about the process.
- ❑ Seek out reporters whose beats are related to your issue. Get to know the "education reporters" if your issue is about public schools. Talk with them early and often as you plan and conduct your forums.
- ❑ Write op/ed articles and letters to the editor. Following the release of the report, encourage forum conveners, moderators, and recorders to write about the process and findings of forums to submit to their local newspapers.
- ❑ Engage newspaper publishers in promoting and reporting on forums. Advertising departments are sometimes willing to donate space to publicize forums and to print a summary of the findings.
- ❑ Look for broadcast media venues that can allot more than a minute or two to your report. Many public radio and television programs have formats that are conducive to reporting on forums. Commercial talk radio shows might be a good venue if the atmosphere is inquisitive, versus combative.

Endings and Beginnings

“There may be no pat political answer to the world’s problems. However, the important point is not the answer, but rather the softening up, the opening up of the mind, and looking at all the opinions.”

-- Physicist David Bohm

Well-prepared reports on forums provide no “answers” to public problems. Rather, they reveal new ways of thinking about a problem that can emerge when people open their minds together.

Equally important, forum reports signal beginnings, not endings. The deliberations on an issue don’t end when the report is released. The report is simply a way of “taking stock” of public thinking after citizens participate in structured, deliberative forums. This can spur further deliberation – formal and informal – among even wider circles of people. As more people participate and as their understanding of the issue deepens, they can discover new possibilities for working through the issue together.

Public forums call upon their organizers and participants, along with the people who write about them, to approach public problems with a great deal of patience and respect. Margaret Wheatley says, *“Every act of organizing is an experiment. We begin with desire, with a sense of purpose and direction. But we enter the experience vulnerable, unprotected by the illusory cloak of prediction. We acknowledge that we don’t know how this work will actually unfold. We discover what we are capable of as we go along... Every act of organizing is an act of faith. We hope for things unseen which are true.”*

