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Designing Difficult Community Conversations for Multiple Stakeholders

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Abstract

This paper will detail the design and development of a series of 9 community conversation events discussing 3 different issues, that were designed and conducted by the author, in cooperation with the Pittsburgh public television channel WQED. These events centered on the topics of Guns, Poverty, and Equity/Opportunity each in turn. Each topic encompassed preliminary research, planning conversations with community stakeholders, public conversations regarding the matter of concern, and televised conversations with experts and a studio audience. This paper will discuss the underlying structural design of those conversations in relation to Björgvinsson's (infrastructuring) participatory design practices.

The underlying claim of the argument presented is that a designer convening a network of stakeholders to design and conduct a community conversation is working towards outcomes at several levels: the level of the stakeholder network, the level of the individual participants' experience, and the level of infrastructuring within the broader community. The paper will take up each of these levels of interaction through the lens of Gastil, Knobloch and Kelley's (2012) evaluation of participatory processes.

Introduction

Often, when one thinks of public conversation, for some, the first thought is of public meetings in the sense depicted in the famed Norman Rockwell painting, *Freedom of Speech*, where one man rises from the crowd to speak out to the city council. Those of us more involved with constituting public dialog might think of the deliberative conversations convened by government entities, where citizens have the opportunity to participate in the decisions of government. (Kim et al. 1999) Designers and architects might think of charrettes where the material of the community is made manifest and the opportunity to influence design outcomes is put before neighbors, community stakeholders, and commercial entities. Any or all of these may come together with government representatives to discuss the design of a potential construction, zoning, or land-use project. A related type of public conversation would be the participatory design event, where the goal is for participants to contribute meaningfully to a set of decisions about designing something in or for the community.

Community conversations are contrasted with participatory design (Ehn 1988), where the goal is to help the community design something, but more related to participatory design as presented by Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren (2012) where the goal is to facilitate the community designing some *thing*, as in socio-material assemblies / community infrastructure.

Community conversations might be held in response to a (traumatic) event, or in response to a challenging mood or attitude (Flores 2012) that is emerging or extant within a community, or may deal

with underlying stresses that a community experiences. While governmental public conversations are typically tied to a burgeoning policy outcome, community conversations may have little or no specific consequences or outcomes.

One finds that they are in a difficult conversation if one's own identity is at stake in the conversation. (Stone, Patton, Heen 2010) For instance, when a person is discussing end-of-life planning with their mother, their identity as a good and loving child might become at stake in the conversation. A predominant part of the conversation becomes the defense of that identity, rather than the matter of concern. (Latour 2004) The challenge of designing this conversation is to attempt to de-escalate feelings of jeopardized identity throughout the participant group. One way to do that, is to begin the event design considering the difference of participants as a resource, and engaging stakeholders throughout the community that represent a diversity of approaches to the matter of concern.

Community infrastructuring in a contemporary media landscape

This work was completed in collaboration with Selena Schmidt, Tim Dawson, and various staff of WQED.

In 2016, WQED multimedia launched the THINK! Initiative. THINK! sought to support a multi-modal community conversation about the "issues that confound and divide us" by developing a generative interplay among face-to-face community forums, online and social media engagement, and a live televised panel discussion. To advance this initiative, WQED enlisted us as a partner that would help to support this initiative through a series of three separate conversations focused on specific topics.

Rather than developing a new framing for issues, we sought to capitalize and expand on already ongoing conversations. The first conversation sought to build on a multi-year collaboration between the Program for Deliberative Democracy at CMU and the League of Women Voters (LWV) of Greater Pittsburgh. Through this collaboration, the League of Women Voters had organized and we had facilitated several Deliberative Community Conversations entitled "Living with Guns in a Free Society." The second THINK! conversation addressed "How to promote Equity and Opportunity in Southwestern Pennsylvania" and the third focused on "The challenges of poverty in Southwestern Pennsylvania."

These broadcasts were preceded by a multistage engagement process that fostered dialog about each matter of concern within the community:

1. Convening of diverse stakeholders to set an agenda
2. Facilitated community conversations
3. Media-based community conversations
4. Broadcast event supplemented by expert and community conversation.

Multi-level engagement

Stakeholder network

First, working in collaboration with WQED and the Art of Democracy, we collaborated with diverse community stakeholders, who helped to establish an agenda for each specific THINK! Conversation. These stakeholders were invited to represent a diverse set of ideas and approaches to each issue.

In establishing this agenda, stakeholders worked from their understanding of the current state of a conversation to identify what specific conversation the people of Southwestern Pennsylvania needed to have about a particular issue. In addition, to provide a basis for the briefing materials that would be developed for the face-to-face forums, they identified what people would need to know to have an informed and inclusive conversation. Further, to provide a basis for the surveys that participants would complete, they worked to identify what would be useful to learn from these participants.

This network of community stakeholders served in a complex fashion, facilitating the development of the dialog in rich and mutually co-affective ways: as experts who were able to inform and position the dialog, as resources providing access to richer and situated information, as key partners who promoted the event. But most importantly, the moment of the broadcast event and the related community conversations served as a subtle organizing force in the community, offering the opportunity for these community stakeholders to come together and become aware of each other's viewpoints, mission and activities.

These organizing meetings provided critical information and content for the television broadcasts, but also served to provide opportunities for the stakeholders to create richer connections.

Individual participants

These events could be thought of as staging the practice of conversation for the participants. The dramaturgy of conversation events create a structure that can support the surfacing of values for the individual participant. When examining the design of the event from the perspective of the individual participant, one might understand the event as primarily structured by protocols.

Research that employs these protocols reveals that Deliberative Community Forums have the following benefits:

- Participants develop an opinion informed by relevant facts, expert information, and an understanding of how issues and policies affect others in their community.
- Participants enrich their understanding of their own perspective.
- Participants develop understanding of new or alternative perspectives.
- Participants develop a more comprehensive knowledge about the issues.
- Participants practice skills of civil deliberation.
- Process fosters civic connectivity. (Young 2000; Cavalier 2011; Crowley 2011)

While the protocols are designed to achieve these benefits within the context of an event of a specific forum, practical experience instantiating these protocols indicates that these benefits are more likely achieved if efforts are made to engage different perspectives and viewpoints at the beginning and throughout the process of organizing a deliberative community forum. As a result, organizers should engage diverse stakeholders in the process of setting an agenda for the forum, developing briefing materials and surveys, recruiting participants, and identifying experts for the resource panel.

Generating attendance by the "general public" was an aspiration of the organizers throughout the THINK! Initiative. However, participants in the community conversation were not simply the interested individuals of a community-minded spirit who sometimes attend meetings convened by the city

government. Here, participants desiring to be involved in these conversations participated because they had some connection to the dialog that was ongoing. Participants volunteered or worked for not-for-profits that engaged in the topic area, were public officials or ministers that had been affected by the issue at hand through their role as community leaders, or people who had some deep personal experience with the issue.

Community infrastructuring

Infrastructuring occurs when the social and/or material extend beyond a particular event, or moment to become a durable part of a community. (Star & Ruhleder, 1996) In the case of the THINK! initiative, we came to understand that infrastructure can be latent in a community, and that these events, or participating in the practices of deliberative conversation offer the opportunity for these infrastructures to be foregrounded.

Over and above the stories, conversations, and resources archived online, the first THINK! conversation fostered connections between the expert panelists and with participants. Specifically, the conversation facilitated connections among various people who might not otherwise have come in contact, such as a suburban gun safety instructor who, after some conversation, offered to conduct free gun safety classes in association with the Homewood Children's Village in Pittsburgh. In addition, outside of the THINK! Initiative, the LWV convened a separate conversation with the panelists from the community meetings and from the live broadcast to share the results of the THINK! conversation on guns and consider how they might move forward in collaboration to reduce the costs (psychologic and financial) of gun violence and promote gun safety as a cultural norm.

Noticing this, in the second and third THINK! conversations, we engaged the community of interest that surrounded the issues to participate in the agenda-setting process. Participants included nonprofit leaders for organizations that provided services to the community, as well as organizations focused more on advocacy. Local government officials, public school administrators, and leaders of faith communities were also represented.

This diversity of approaches offered a rich mix of knowledge and experience to draw from, and proved synergistic on several levels. Ongoing processes seem small, but are important: sharing the contact information, organizations, email addresses and phone numbers of the participants facilitated continued interaction. Showcasing the work of different not-for-profits through the episode created a media object that could be shared by participating organizations, which encourages ongoing engagement with the recorded show as a complete media object. This offers viewers a broader perspective on the activities of government and not-for-profit organizations in the region.

Evaluating Participatory Processes

All too often, participatory processes are evaluated in a less structured way. Events might be reduced to a narrative of a particular participant's experience, or can be characterized only by the effect that the event has in the context of a legislative process. In contrast, Gastil, Knobloch and Kelley (2012) offer four key criteria for evaluating participatory processes. These criteria are shown here, with the information that pertains to this event series:

1. Design Integrity	
a. Framing the issues	Throughout the THINK! series, framing was community-led by a diverse group of expert stakeholders invited by WQED.
b. Procedural design	Each participatory event was designed as facilitated deliberative inquiry. The television broadcasts were semi-scripted interviews.
c. Representativeness	Our first meeting did not have a representative spectrum of viewpoints, as our collaborator, the LWV offered to host the forum in their downtown Pittsburgh upper floor office space. LWV members were overrepresented, and no dissenting viewpoints were available. After that, we held events in public spaces that were more accessible. A broad range of people were invited, but attended based upon their relation to the topic. We achieved a convenience sample, not a representative sample.
2. Democratic Deliberation & Judgement	
a. Deliberative analytic process (deals with the depth of inquiry)	Throughout the process, participants were encouraged to interrogate their own views and engage with the views of other participants.
b. Democratic social process	The THINK! events provided an open system, and the event design offered an opportunity for open dialog. Rather than voting, viewpoints were captured as survey data, notes, and video recordings.
c. Sound judgement	At these conversations there was no attempt to reach a collective judgement, though participants alternatively shared and interrogated their own viewpoints.
3. Influential Conclusions/Actions	
a. Influential recommendations	The goal was not to generate any specific recommendations for policy actions, but to open conversation about these issues in public fora.
b. Effective coordinated action	The production of the shows themselves were a key coordinated action. The activity the shows entailed catalyzed further action between the

	organizations by bringing leaders from these organizations together, and providing opportunity for dialog.
4. Long Term Effects	
a. Transforming public attitudes and habits	Not assessed
b. Changing public officials' attitudes and behavior	Not assessed
c. Altering political choices	Not assessed

These conversations seek to reveal what people think about an issue after they have engaged deeply with multiple, alternative perspectives. Deliberative Community Forums rely on protocols for informed, inclusive, democratic engagement developed through research conducted by Carnegie Mellon University's Program for Deliberative Democracy. These protocols are designed to provide the resources individuals need to develop an opinion informed by relevant facts, expert information, and an understanding of how issues and policies affect others in their community. Deliberative Community Forums are not a decision-making protocol, however. They are not designed to drive participants towards a consensus, and they do not culminate in voting. Instead, they support the articulation of diverse viewpoints and the recording of individuals' informed opinions so that these can be a resource for individuals, organizations, and decision makers as they craft policy to address the problems of their community.

Conclusions

The THINK! initiative was an ambitious attempt to facilitate transformative, wide-ranging, multi-modal conversations about "the issues that confound and divide us." As was noted during a debriefing meeting after the first conversation, the process of creating resources for and launching numerous components, and of developing necessary partnerships, and of devising strategies for collaboration among organizations with differing missions, types of expertise, and methods was like "trying to put together a car while you are driving it." This description of the challenge remained illuminating throughout the initiative. Even as the partners devised strategies to account for challenges affecting earlier conversations, new challenges emerged.

Nevertheless, over three episodes, this initiative served as a catalyst that engaged a broad array of voices, connected diverse organizations, captured important stories, and focused attention on the particular challenges about gun safety, equity, and poverty that are of concern in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The initiative also created an archive of compelling stories, rich conversations, and resources that elected officials, policy makers, stakeholders and the broader public can draw from as they work to devise strategies and to take action to address these issues.

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