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## Just Talk: Public Deliberation After 9/11

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## Just Talk: Public Deliberation After 9/11

### **Abstract**

Critics of public deliberation as conventionally practiced have charged that it is “just talk” in the sense both that it substitutes sociable conversation for practical deliberation and that it substitutes political talk for political action. I argue that both criticisms rest on unnecessarily restrictive models of talk and politics. Drawing on participant observation and interviews with eighty participants in two forums convened to deliberate about the future of the former World Trade Center, I tease out the variety of models on which people styled their discussions, models that included education, negotiation, and advocacy. In ways not often recognized by deliberative theorists, these models helped participants to hone their own opinions and reach agreement across difference. Participants also perceived less of a conflict between deliberation and advocacy than deliberative theorists have tended to do. Insofar as participants’ understandings of what made for good deliberation and appropriate modes of political influence differed from those of forum organizers, they point both to practical challenges in organizing deliberation and to possibilities for organizing it more effectively.

### **Keywords**

deliberation, conversation, public forums, deliberation and politics

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“I delight in talking politics. I talk them all day long. But I can’t bear listening to them.”—Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, Act. 1

Anyone who has participated in a deliberative forum undoubtedly has had the experience at some point of wondering whether what one is hearing is just talk. Friendly, sometimes insightful and engaging talk, but also vague and circuitous talk, full of clichés, generalizations, and points made at cross-purposes, and talk that, in the end, has no clear connection to the people who are actually going to make the decisions that matter.

Democratic theorists, too, have worried that, in different ways, deliberation is just talk. This is the case, first, in the sense that people may mistake conversation for deliberation (Schudson 1997; Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004: 321). If what they are doing is conversing, participants in a deliberative forum express themselves, trade opinions, forge temporary friendships. They do not disagree, challenge each other, evaluate the evidence supporting one position or another, or change their minds about anything (Tonn 2005). Public deliberation may be just talk, too, in the sense that it doesn’t lead to action (Tonn 2005; Cloud 1998). People may leave the forum feeling that they arrived at a set of workable recommendations for decision makers. Decision makers then are completely free to ignore those recommendations. Lacking any means to monitor subsequent policy, let alone influence it, public deliberation may substitute the spectacle of democracy for real mechanisms of accountability.

If these concerns are right, then the consequences are serious. If deliberation as conventionally practiced is just talk, it may generate policy outcomes that are inferior to those generated by other modes of public input (or by omitting public input altogether) and may make citizens more, rather than less, skeptical about their capacities to influence political decision making.

There is empirical evidence to support these concerns. However, I argue that both concerns rest on restrictive models of talk and politics. Criticisms of deliberation as insufficiently deliberative miss the fact that sociable conversation and rational persuasion together do not exhaust the possibilities for how to talk. Those who participate in a forum may switch among these and other conversational models, joining sociable conversation, bargaining, and consciousness-raising, for example, to exploit the trust-enhancing, agreement-fostering, and educational features of each one. Just as there are many ways of talking politically, there are many ways of conceptualizing the link between talk and political influence. In that respect, the claim that public deliberation generates acquiescence and/or skepticism rather than action assumes that people participate in deliberative forums believing that they have a pipeline to those in power. But

they may operate on the basis of quite different models of political influence.

These possibilities invite a fuller exploration of the conversational and political models that underpin concrete instances of deliberation. In this paper, I draw primarily on evidence from a sprawling experiment in public deliberation in 2002, in which thousands of people discussed what to build on the site of the former World Trade Center in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. Based on a study of two of the largest forums, and combining participant observation and interviews with forum participants and planners, I argue that concerns that public deliberation is just talk are both misplaced and on the mark. Such concerns are misplaced, in this case, in that, even as participants recognized the novelty of the forum, they drew on models that included but were not limited to sociable conversation. People likened their groups to think tanks, activist coalitions, juries, teams, focus groups, branding workshops, and the United Nations. They described their conversations as similar to therapy, education, jury deliberation, and community organizing; they talked about learning, sharing, bargaining, and strategizing.

Their discussions, as they described them, did not resemble the thoughtful exchange and scrutiny of reasoned opinions depicted in normative models of deliberation. That was not necessarily a bad thing. To the contrary, the availability of diverse conversational analogues, but in particular, those of education, negotiation, and advocacy, made for better deliberation in several ways. Treating the forum as educational and themselves as learners encouraged people to participate even if they lacked strong opinions about what they wanted. It allowed them to acknowledge the tentativeness of their current opinions without seeming indecisive. Treating the forum as an occasion for negotiation both helped participants to acknowledge changes of opinion that would have been difficult to do otherwise and provided valuable information to those who organized the forum about how strongly such opinions were held. Participants' view of themselves as advocates for the conclusions reached in the forum opened up possibilities for impact that did not depend on authorities' eagerness to listen.

These conversational models carried risks, too, which I discuss. But I focus on a different kind of problem: the fact that participants' conceptions of what the forum was and what discussion should be like in it did not always match those of organizers. This is how the concerns about deliberation that I sketched are on the mark. There were occasions in the World Trade Center forums when people seemed willing not only to share opinions but also to thrash out group recommendations; to move beyond differences to compromises. That possibility was frustrated, however, by facilitators who were instructed to avoid anything that might lead to conflict. In another mismatch, people who participated in the forum wanted to mobilize to press for implementing the recommendations they arrived at but were stymied by forum sponsors' ambiguous role in the rebuilding process.

In sum, better understanding what people want from and do in actual deliberative forums not only points to gaps in our theories of democratic participation but suggests very practical changes in how deliberative forums are organized.

### Deliberation as Conversation, Ideology, and Therapy

In a provocative piece, Michael Schudson (1997) rejects the idea, popular since at least Habermas (1989) that vibrant democracies depend on citizen conversation. Conversation, as we tend to think of it, aspires to sociability. It privileges spontaneity and assumes the equality of participants. It is not utilitarian, not aimed at anything other than the enjoyment and edification of participants. By contrast, Schudson argues, democracy requires a discourse of problem-solving, a utilitarian orientation to results, a tolerance for discomfort, and adherence to the rules of civility. Like other contrivances intended to level the playing field, such rules, far from inimical to democracy, are the real stuff of it.

Does public deliberation as currently practiced resemble sociable conversation? Research on citizen talk, generally, gives reason for concern. People worry that to talk about politics will be seen as naïve or grandiose (Eliasoph 1989). They want to express their opinions, but fear others' efforts to try to persuade them that they are wrong, which they see as an attack on their identity (Conover, Searing, and Crewe 2002). Accordingly, they shy away from that kind of discussion. Social psychological research on group decision making has demonstrated diverse conditions in which people are vulnerable to normative pressures that make them, variously, willing to accede to the dominant opinion, likely to polarize rather than moderate their opinions, and reluctant to introduce new information into discussion (Mendelberg 2002). Together, these pressures would seem to render unlikely the prospect of real deliberation.

But an important point can be easily missed. People talk and think about politics differently depending on the setting. Sociologist Andrew Perrin (2006) convened discussion groups of members of churches, unions, business organizations, and sports groups, and asked them to talk about hypothetical political scenarios. Church members were most likely to bring up moral concerns, he found; union members tended to favor personal solutions over collective action, and sports enthusiasts were more than three times as likely as members of any other group to express skepticism about political action. These differences could not be explained by the characteristics of the people who were members of the groups. Rather, the institutional setting favored a certain kind of talk—and Perrin argues, a certain kind of democratic imagination. Even more revealing of the power of how people characterize the setting to affect how they interact within it are social psychological studies of prisoner dilemma games. Researchers have shown that when participants are told that they are participating in a “Community Game” rather than a “Wall Street Game” they are much more

likely to cooperate, this against the economically rational expectation that they would act in their own self-interest (Montgomery 1998).

Presumably, then, participating in an enterprise that is called a “deliberative forum” will lead people to talk in ways that are different from how they talk with friends or talk at a PTA meeting or talk to people seated near them in a public hearing. But deliberative forums involving ordinary citizens have only proliferated in recent years (Ryfe 2007).<sup>1</sup> Few people have had much experience with them. Accordingly, we should see participants adapting expectations from other, more familiar, conversational settings (Poole et al 1986; Polletta 2002). To be sure, the process of adaptation is likely to be a creative one: in ad hoc-ing from one situation to another, people typically create new ways of interacting (Clemens 1997). Still, by paying attention to the analogies that participants use to describe what it is they were doing, we can gain insight into the character of their talk. If someone says their group operated like a “coffee-klatch,” one imagines easygoing, informal, personal, and lively conversation. A “mini-UN” suggests a diversity of viewpoints and an orientation to negotiation. A “consciousness-raising group,” suggests a homogeneity of experience and a drive to generate new insight and action. Expectations would be different too in conversations in which people “educated” or “shared with” each other; “bargained” or “analyzed.”

If we conceptualize conversational schemas as both models of and models for conversation, then we can treat the analogues that people cite not only as descriptions of what was going on but as carrying normative expectations for what should go on. Paying attention to such analogues in people’s retrospective descriptions of deliberation should give us a fuller understanding of how people link talk, reflection, and opinion in deliberative settings (cf. Ryfe 2005 who calls this a “void in the literature”). It should also point to potential problems in deliberation. If organizers operate with different conversational models than participants, both may be disappointed by the outcome (Mansbridge et al [2006] call for this kind of investigation; see Levine and Nierras [2007] comparing organizers’ and theorists’ models of rational discussion; and McCoy and Scully [2002] on the hybrid models that characterize successful deliberation).

A similar set of empirical questions can be asked with reference to the outcomes of deliberative talk. Again, critics dismiss public deliberation as “just talk” not only in the sense of being insufficiently deliberative but of being politically ineffectual. The concern, in short, is that decision makers are rarely bound by the recommendations that emerge from the deliberative forum. At most, they may commit to taking the recommendations, as they put it, seriously. Forum

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<sup>1</sup> Venues in which citizens deliberate, for example, juries, and PTA meetings, are not new, of course. What are new are forums that are convened as one-time occasions (or a limited series of them) for people with diverse organizational and institutional affiliations to discuss matters of public concern.

participants leave with the sense that they have achieved something when they have no guarantee that that is the case. One can imagine several consequences of this state of affairs. Deliberators may be disappointed and angry when they see decisions being made that contravene the recommendations made in the forum. They may, as a result, become more skeptical of the political process and less likely to participate in politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Alternatively, they may accept a disconnect between what happens in the forum and the decisions that are made after it. They may come to view politics simply as about self-expression. One can imagine a kind of therapeuticization of political participation, in which participation becomes an end in itself, rather than a means of accomplishing something (Tonn 2005).

These possibilities are speculative, however. The key empirical question is how people conceptualize the relations between forum participants, organizers, and policymakers. Again, the models they draw on in that process may open up possibilities for impact that have been neglected by critics of public deliberation. They may also open up practical possibilities that have been missed by forum organizers, if the latter are operating on different models of political influence. In sum, evaluating the charge that public deliberative talk is insufficiently deliberative and largely ineffectual—that it is just talk—requires a better understanding of the institutional models that shape what people want, expect, and do in deliberative forums.

#### Public Deliberation after 9/11

In the wake of 9/11, in a city known for contentious battles over development, there was remarkable agreement that deciding what to build on the site of the former World Trade Center should be a public process. What was attacked was “our democracy,” officials said repeatedly, and the only answer was more democracy. Public forums proliferated in the weeks and months that followed: from community meetings in high school gymnasiums to university-sponsored panels, do-it-yourself design websites, electronic town meetings, and “visioning workshops.” Two of the largest forums were organized by coalitions of civic, neighborhood, art, and environmental groups. Imagine New York, which was spearheaded by the Municipal Arts Society, brought 3,500 people from the metropolitan area to 230 facilitated workshops in venues ranging from private homes to museums and universities. Participants were asked, “How can we move forward from September 11<sup>th</sup>?” and then worked jointly to identify themes and practical ideas in the answers that were generated. These were recorded by group facilitators, and the resulting 19,000 ideas were synthesized into 49 draft vision statements by Imagine New York’s steering committee. The draft vision statements were reviewed, amended, and ratified by 300 retuning participants at a summit meeting. The final visions were released to the press and submitted to the

official rebuilding agency, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, and other decision-making agencies (Polletta and Wood 2005).

Listening to the City was sponsored by another coalition, the Civic Alliance, in conjunction with the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owned the WTC site. On July 20, 2002, 4,500 people met at tables of ten in a midtown convention center to discuss preliminary plans for the site as well transportation, housing, and economic development options. The “electronic town meeting” format pioneered by AmericaSpeaks joined group discussion with individual polling. Participants discussed design and policy options in their small groups. A group member typed the results of their discussion into a laptop computer, which were relayed via computer network to a “theme team.” The theme team synthesized responses and projected them onto giant screens along with illustrative quotes. Periodically, participants registered individual preferences on their personal keypads on issues such as the importance of housing on the site, how they rated each of the six proposed plans, and how confident they were that decisionmakers would listen to their recommendations.

By the end of the day, the six site plans that the LMDC had proposed had been rejected. Participants were uniformly critical of them as well as of the proposal to build eleven million square feet of office space on the site. Shortly after the event, which received intense media coverage in New York and nationally, the LMDC announced that it had scrapped the plans and arranged for a panel of architects and planners to select seven teams of architects, many internationally known, to develop new ideas for the site.

Together, the two forums offered a remarkable opportunity to get at the range of people’s motivations for participating in the forum, their expectations about what the forum would achieve, and whether and how their discussions affected their own opinions. In addition, close study of the planning of the forums would allow me to compare participants’ expectations of good deliberation with those of forum organizers. Accordingly, I joined the steering committee of Imagine New York in December 2001. I was trained and worked as a facilitator, helped to plan the workshops and to synthesize ideas generated in them for the draft visions, and interviewed organizers. My research team and I observed twelve workshops and the summit. We interviewed 32 workshop participants by phone in open-ended interviews about their experiences of the workshops and ideas about the rebuilding process more generally (see Polletta and Wood 2005 for a fuller discussion). I interviewed the organizers of Listening to the City, participated in the day-long event, and, with my research team, interviewed 50 participants. We interviewed 24 of them again a year later.

In our interviews with participants, we asked several questions designed to get at the conversational and political models on which they operated. For



example, we asked participants, “Have you ever done anything like Listening to the City (or Imagine) before?” (and a follow-up: “Have you ever participated in a group discussion that was similar to this one?”) and “when you decided to come to Listening to the City, what did you imagine that you would do in it?” We also paid close attention to the analogies that people cited in answer to other questions.

In the following, I report the results as they relate to the questions I posed earlier about the relation of talk to political opinion, on one hand, and to political action, on the other.

### What do people do when they deliberate?

Participants in Listening to the City and Imagine New York referred frequently, and admiringly, to the fact that the forums were not, as they put it, “political.” By that, they seemed to mean, not that the forums were not oriented to policymaking, but that they were uncontentious and nonpartisan. “It was as nonpolitical as it could have been,” said a Listening to the City participant. “People weren’t campaigning” (L1-FP10).<sup>2</sup> “I broadcast this to everyone I knew,” said another. “I said, ‘the most amazing thing happened, I was in this town hall and no one argued, and I was listened to and it was a great day’” (L-FP5). Our interviewees appreciated that their table-mates had been “respectful;” that discussion had been “calm,” that people didn’t “rant,” that “there was no shouting and everyone heard us.” They referred frequently to the fact they liked their table-mates, that their group had, as one put it, “clicked” (L1-LW4).

To these findings, add the finding that less than one third of the interviewees in either forum acknowledged having changed their minds or altered their opinions *about anything* as a result of their discussions and we seem to have a prime example of conversation substituting for deliberation. Then add the fact that the only strong consensus that emerged from Listening to the City was that all six preliminary designs should be scuttled and any idea of the discussion as genuinely deliberative seems naïve. There was no argument but neither was there persuasion. Discussion was friendly but it generated little in the way of agreement or enlightenment.

However, further examination complicates this assessment in several ways. First, interviewees who said that they had not changed their mind about anything tended to interpret “changing your mind” as meaning abandoning one well-defined position in favor of another. Many of our interviewees emphasized that they did not have well-defined positions to begin with. Indeed, they had come to the forum precisely for that reason. They wanted to clarify their opinions; to

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<sup>2</sup> To preserve the confidentiality of interviewees, names are not used. Numbers and letters in parentheses indicate the forum and interview phase (“L1” is Listening to the City; “L1B” the interviews conducted with Listening to the City participants a year later; “I” is Imagine New York); the interviewer; and the interviewee.

figure out what they felt about questions they knew were both important and complex; to learn. “It’s not that I didn’t feel this way and now I do,” one interviewee explained. “I clarified something. I was torn between do we rebuild the towers, how much business do we put there, do we make it all a memorial—I was hearing all these things. Where were my thoughts in all this?” (L1-FP9). Asked whether the discussions had led him to change his mind about anything, one Listening to the City participant said, “I don’t think it did,” and then went on to say, “[It] opened my mind; [I] thought about other possibilities” (L1-IP3). “Probably not,” said another, and went on, “It gave me new insights into things” (L1-IP4). We might well describe these people as having altered their views as a result of their discussions, even though they were adamant that they had not changed their minds.

Interviewees wanted, they said in different ways, to make sure that their opinions were based on grasp of all the issues at stake, which included the priorities of different groups. Participants referred repeatedly to the impact of their interactions with others in their groups. One interviewee commented, “Families and evacuees say the whole thing should be a memorial site. And yeah, I understand what they’re saying. And then you hear businesspeople saying, we need business... I became more open to a tall building....” I asked this person to clarify. “So, you were exposed to ideas that you hadn’t been exposed to?” “I became so *through the people*,” she emphasized (L1-FP9). Respondents referred with pleasure to the experience of being affected by other participants’ arguments. One said, “The fact that I was willing to listen to other people’s point of view was very exciting and to really see other people’s point of view [was too]” (L-LW18). A respondent who described herself as politically conservative said she was “amazed at what came out of my mouth. I said there should be low income housing down there.” (L-LW18). Another explained, “much of my thinking prior to the event had been solo thinking. The experience made me aware of other people’s experiences...” (L-LW19).

Remarks like those above suggest that being exposed to *people* espousing different views had a value that just being exposed to different views by, say, reading about them would not have had (pace Goodin 2000). What exactly was the value? How did exposure to other people’s views influence participants? Our interviewees often referred to becoming “aware” of other points of view and being “affected” by them. This suggests a model of successful deliberation based on persuasion (note that it was persuasion with an emotional component). But many interviewees talked instead about other people making them more willing to *compromise*. As a Listening to the City participant recounted: “I guess I come from a higher income family than some of the people at the table, and other people have different priorities. You can’t ignore them when there is someone in front of you rather than just a statistic. You have to say, ‘I guess they’re right, we

should compromise on this fact, on affordable housing, and things like that” (L-LW21). Another interviewee: “Some of my opinions were changed but nothing drastic, more compromises that I could see” (L1-FP2). Another was pleased to discover that “people are much more willing to compromise” than she had thought (L1-LW21).

Interviewees’ emphasis on compromise represents a second counter to the charge that what passes as deliberation is merely sociable conversation. Compromise is not a common feature of sociable conversation. Nor is it a feature of deliberation typically understood, in which people seek to persuade each other of the merits of their own opinion by appealing to common beliefs and values. Compromise is a key feature, rather, of bargaining or negotiation, which is usually seen, along with voting, as an alternative to deliberation (Elster 1998). Reaching compromise implies not that people have altered their preferences but that they are willing to endorse, at least in part, preferences that run contrary to their own in the interest of gaining the endorsement of part of their preferences.

While foreign to deliberation in a classical mold, compromise is, of course, familiar to anyone who has ever been party to playground negotiation, workplace allocation of tasks, and spousal discussions of household responsibilities. But why did participants treat their discussions as like those other kinds of interaction? Why did they treat deliberation as negotiation? After all, they had been told that they were participating in a forum and that all their voices would be heard and registered. Why did they think it important to seek compromise? I believe for two reasons. One is that it is easier to compromise than to acknowledge changing one’s mind—even to oneself. And the other is that participants saw themselves as vested by their diversity with the power to make binding decisions. Let me say a bit more about each.

Research by Conover, Searing, and Crewe (2002) suggests that people are unwilling to disagree with each other in political discussions because they consider their opinions to be an expression of their identity. When one expresses one’s identity, one wants to be heard, to be respected, to be recognized, and to be sympathized with. Having one’s opinion challenged or rejected or disagreed with is thus experienced as an attack on one’s identity, an attack on the self. If the authors are right, then to acknowledge changing one’s mind—even to oneself—is surely also difficult. Agreeing to a compromise is easier. One gives up some of what one desires, not who one is. The person who has compromised may well be seen as cooperative and strategic. The person who has changed her mind may be seen as weak-willed. Where, if Conover, Searing, and Crewe are right, we tend to see persuasion as threatening, we tend to think of compromise as hard but rewarding work.

So, agreeing to compromise may be easier than acknowledging enlightenment while still requiring that discussants scrutinize and moderate their

opinions. In addition, participants' view of themselves as a deliberating *body* probably made it seem appropriate to negotiate with the aim of compromise. Our interviewees referred frequently and favorably to the diversity of participants. Indeed, for 48 percent of the Listening to the City interviewees and 22 percent of the Imagine interviewees, it was the single thing that they liked the most about the forum. But, crucially, they valued diversity not only because being exposed to a variety of perspectives would ensure that their own opinions were well informed. Rather, they talked about their diversity as carrying the force of representativeness. They were representative in a statistical sense, they suggested: they were a "microcosm of New York", a "tiny little miniature New York at each table" (L1-IP3); a good "cross-section" of the city (L1-LW21); with "people from all different socioeconomic groups" (L1-FP10); who were "representative" of the "population at large" (L1-LW6); "a good demographic representation" (L1-LW9); "not a bad sample" (LI-IP1). Articulating the distrust of opinion polls that Herbst (1993) argues is common among Americans, one interviewee compared Listening to the City favorably to a poll: "Usually when they do polling they use a much smaller sample size, about a couple hundred people or so. Here they had a sample of 5000 people" (L1-MS9).

Our interviewees also suggested that they were representative of the public in a more political sense. "I felt I was representing a voice of the city," one Listening to the City participant said (L1-LW4). Another interviewee was disappointed, she said, "that there wasn't more Hispanic representation." She went on, "The Hispanic Community is abdicating responsibility here" (L1-LW18). At least two interviewees likened Listening to the City to the United Nations, again alluding to a body made up of representatives. Interviewees seemed to be saying not only that their own opinions were influenced by hearing diverse points of view but also that the conclusions the group reached had authority by virtue of the diversity of viewpoints that were reflected in it. That authority came with the responsibility to reach agreement or, where agreement was impossible, to reach compromise.

Now, importantly, participants were not representative in any true sense, and that posed a problem that I will return to in a moment. For now, I note simply that popular views of compromise as difficult but virtuous, as less threatening than to be asked to change one's mind and as more authoritative than simply registering one's personal opinions may have made participants work harder to reach agreement on issues. In fact, participants would probably have liked to spend more time working out compromises than they were permitted to do. Interviewees from both forums sometimes complained about the only minimal opportunity for the kinds of discussions that might have carved out firmer recommendations for rebuilding. In the Imagine New York workshops that I and my research team observed, participants made repeated efforts to respond to other

people's arguments, to corroborate pieces of evidence they offered, to suggest alternatives to portions of their recommendations, and to probe the implications of their opinions rather than simply listen to them. When they did so, they were urged by the facilitator to return to the round-robin non-participatory style.

Why did facilitators discourage such interaction? They were instructed to do so by organizers of the forum (Polletta steering committee notes 2/28/02). In part, this was because of the volatility of the topic. Gianni Longo, who designed the Imagine workshops, said that his usual workshops involve a segment in which participants prioritize their preferences. However, the raw emotions still attached to the World Trade Center site made such an exercise inappropriate (Longo interview, 3/9/02; see also Moore, Longo, and Palmer 1999). Respondents said that they appreciated the fact that everyone's ideas were heard and recorded and treated as equal in value. But they also complained about the paucity of discussion and some regretted the fact that the small group brainstorming at the end was so brief.

My argument is not that forum planners erred in discouraging conflict. To the contrary, one of the striking things that emerged in the interviews was the extent to which participants disliked conflict. What I am suggesting is that a language of negotiation may aid people in disagreeing without antagonizing each other. This is not a common view. Matthews writes: "I can't emphasize too strongly that the outcome of deliberation is neither agreement nor compromise" (1999: 50). Similarly, in identifying the kinds of talk that facilitate deliberation, McCoy and Scully contrast deliberative dialogue favorably with "narrowly defined negotiation" (2002:125). And Mansbridge et al. characterize facilitators' tendency to seek "common ground" in discussion as "a kind of compromise, but far more than a crude aggregation or averaging of participants' private interests" (2006: 23 of 44). Participants in the New York City forums, however, did not seem to view compromise as a crude aggregation or averaging of their interests. The notion of compromise was both familiar to them and had positive associations. That made it a useful tool in discussion.

Forum organizers and deliberative theorists might object to promoting a language of compromise for several good reasons. One is that compromise may be too quickly arrived at. It may be a way for hurried deliberators to avoid the careful scrutiny of problems, solutions, and tradeoffs that is essential to good deliberation. Premature compromise, in which participants mistakenly believe they have solved the problem, is certainly worse than no agreement at all.<sup>3</sup> Another danger is that participants may be forced into compromise, not by a lack of time, but by the stratified character of their group. Some deliberators have more status, a greater command of argument, and more support in the group than

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the point.

others. Their opinions are likely to be favored by any compromise. In the New York City forums, I have no firm evidence on whether people were or were not being pressed to agree to compromises that disadvantaged them. However, interviewees from both Listening to the City and Imagine referred frequently to the fact that they themselves and others in the group had “strong opinions.” One Listening to the City participant observed that people were much more willing to compromise than she had anticipated *and* that “everybody seemed to want to voice their own opinion...people dug in their heels and they were like, ‘this is my point of view’” (L1-LW21). “People were open but had distinct opinions” (L1-LW13) said another. Comments like these seem in some tension with the idea that many people came to the forum precisely because they did not have clear opinions. I interpret them as indicating interviewees’ belief that people were not easily pushed around. Certainly, however, this very real danger suggests that if forum organizers and facilitators do encourage a language of compromise, it is essential that they make clear that compromises are not required and that “minority reports” or other mechanisms for registering dissenting opinions are valuable products of discussion.

A third danger of styling deliberation as negotiation is that trying to satisfy everyone a little bit may satisfy no one—and may make for bad policy. If deliberation aims for “win-win” solutions, in which participants end up making the most enlightened choice, the compromises achieved in negotiation may end up “lose-lose,” and may be likely to fail practically. In this respect, it is worth noting that the clearest area of agreement among participants in Listening to the City was that none of the proposed plans for rebuilding ground zero was good enough. There was agreement, then, but with little indication that any particular alternative down the road would secure support. Again, working toward compromise can be a way for people to more comfortably scrutinize and modify their opinions, but it should not foreclose the effort to identify the best solution, which may be only one of those on the table, or may be one initially not on the table at all.

Finally, forum participants here were not, contrary to their own characterization, representative. Despite organizers’ strong efforts to secure diverse participation, neither the participants in Listening to the City nor those in Imagine New York accurately reflected the demographic makeup of the city. Participants were not elected or appointed as representatives of the public. They could not be held accountable for their decisions. They were not in regular consultation with the public. They did not reflect the range of views that were held by people with a stake in the rebuilding process (see Brown 2006 on these criteria of representativeness; and Brown 2006 and Hendriks 2005 on common confusion about representativeness in deliberative practice). One danger, then, of participants’ understanding of deliberation as negotiation is that they mistakenly assume themselves vested with the power to negotiate. On the other hand, it is

probably useful for decision makers to know what this, admittedly select, group of people are willing to give on and what compromises they see as viable. Presumably, too, deliberators could be asked to envision compromises they might strike with people holding other positions, not represented in the group itself, but still imaginable. Indeed, in deliberative forums in the environmental arena, nonhuman actors have been granted legal standing as a way to take their interest into consideration.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, participants' apparent comfort with conversational models of learning and negotiation suggests that forum organizers might capitalize more on those models. Rather than rather than only encouraging forum participants to be "open-minded" and willing to change their opinions (see Barabas 1998 on the fact that this is what forum organizers currently do), forum organizers might also cast the forum as an opportunity for people to figure out their opinions. And rather than encouraging people to disagree with each other (something they are apparently very reluctant to do) (delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2003), organizers might encourage people to try to work out compromises, both among members of their groups, and with imagined interlocutors.

#### What do people expect politically from deliberation?

The second version of the concern that deliberation is just talk is that deliberation substitutes for action. Either people discover that their talk has no effect on policy and become more, rather than less, trusting of the political process. Or they come to see deliberation as an end in itself. They come to believe that the solutions to problems are individual. Again, my study of public deliberation about the World Trade Center gives reason for concern. Most the people we interviewed--eighty percent--said that they were not confident or only somewhat confident that authorities would follow the recommendations that had come out of the forum. Compare that figure to the level of confidence that most Americans had in local government at around that time: only 22% had very little or no confidence (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll [December, 2000]).

Listening to the City participants attributed their skepticism mainly to their belief that the important decisions had already been made (31%) and/or that developers' interests would ultimately prevail (29%). To be sure, when asked why they had decided to participate, a number of our interviewees said that they wanted to have a "voice." But later in the interview, some of those same people said approvingly of the dialogue, "people heard me." Does that mean that people define political voice in a therapeutic way? Is the goal not to instrumentally effective but simply to be heard by someone, anyone?

No. A year after their initial interviews, we interviewed the same

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Kathy Quick for the point.

participants again and asked them about just that formulation. “We found that a lot of people talked about ‘wanting a voice’ or ‘wanting to be heard,’” we said. “Do you think they meant ‘heard by decisionmakers’ or heard by someone else?” No one we asked said that they, or, they thought, anyone else, wanted to be heard just by each other. Their main concern was to influence decision makers but they were under no illusion that rebuilding authorities would simply take their marching orders. One participant said that she was skeptical, but still hopeful, that decision makers would listen. “And I thought that at least there’s a chance for me to hear what other people were saying, for the sense of community, to have a dialogue, for the interaction” (L1B-FP9). Similar formulations—often that they were “cynical” about the likely effects of the forum but were still hopeful or “willing to take a chance”—appeared in many interviews. “You expect the worst and hope for the best” (L1B-FP9), as one put it.

Insofar as interviewees were hopeful, however, it was by no means a naïve optimism. To the contrary, interviewees were sophisticated about their prospects for influence. What impact the forums would have, they said, would likely be due to the fact that the scale of the tragedy had made government more sensitive to citizens; to the precedent set by the design of the last memorial to a terrorist act, in Oklahoma City, which had involved significant public input; that, in the case of *Listening to the City*, rebuilding authorities had helped to sponsor the forum and therefore could be held accountable to it, and, again in the case of *Listening to the City*, to the media attention awarded the event. Said one interviewee, “Maybe when there’s a big tragedy like this, the government is more responsive, but in general I don’t think so. Like I said, it really depends on media attention. It’s only when you get their attention that they’re going to respond to the public” (L1B-FP14). “It took away some of their wiggle room,” another interviewee speculated about *Listening to the City*’s influence on rebuilding authorities. “It didn’t eliminate it but it took away some of it” (LI-FP11). An *Imagine NY* participant: “Because of Oklahoma City, [rebuilding authorities] might feel also it to be politically the wrong message to send [to not listen to the public] (I-GSA11).

Interviewees also emphasized that the organizers of, and indeed, participants in, the forums, would have to press their case in order to have real influence. Asked whether he thought *Listening to the City* would influence decisionmakers, one respondent answered, “it depends on the people who put *Listening to the City* together, how vigilant [they are]...If they back off and let them maneuver and manipulate this situation, it will be null and void what we did.” (L1-FP12). Another *Listening* participant said that had he been running the event, he would have pushed LMDC and Port Authority representatives to make a firmer commitment, to “strip them bare,” as he put it. “They were still wearing their skivvies when they walked out” (L1-FP2). Participants hoped, and sometimes expected, that they would be involved in advocating for the



recommendations they had arrived at. Several people who had been in Imagine workshops volunteered suggestions in their interviews for how to maximize the forum's impact: the organizers should get a story in a high profile local magazine, get a powerful person in politics to take on the rebuilding agenda, mobilize participants for a letter-writing campaign. Listening to the City participants, too, imagined a continuing effort. "I hope that we will have some kind of influence, being that we were a collective, what you would say an alliance," said one. "Because there's power in numbers" (L1-FP12). This interviewee went on: "We need to protest, shut things down if we have to to make sure they commit to really taking our—the stuff we did with the selection process and voting and the whole democracy thing—taking it seriously." Another participant became less confident of the possible impact of the forum, she said, when she saw that "they weren't talking about expanding the process" (L1-LW8). Indeed, when interviewed a year after Listening to the City, participants complained that organizers had not capitalized on their enthusiasm. "We were never invited to participate again. I think there should have been a second or a third follow-up with the rest of the plans" (LIB-GE2). "With the exception of you people doing this work," an interviewee said about my team's research, "there's nothing that I really see that continues to involve this group of people" (L1B-FP2).

As these comments suggest, participants in both forums saw the exercises as something more than a one-time effort to solicit public opinion about rebuilding options. They saw themselves as a *group*, a group that could be mobilized to press for the recommendations they had reached. They operated with a model of political influence that combined pressure with persuasion. These views were in some tension with those of forum organizers—and highlight the ambiguous role in which organizers found themselves. Initially, both the Municipal Arts Society and the Civic Alliance, the organizers, respectively, of Imagine and Listening to the City, saw their role as one of expert consultant to rebuilding authorities. The Municipal Arts Society had secured no formal commitment from rebuilding authorities to consider Imagine's recommendations in advance, and once made public, the recommendations were virtually ignored by decision makers. But this rebuff did not immediately push the MAS into an adversary role. As MAS's Holly Leicht put it, the question was whether to be "an outside advocate or a monitoring partner." Quiet lobbying was an "MO that MAS uses all the time" Leicht explained. But she confessed that striking a "balance between staying public on issues and having a quiet relationship—influential board members talking to people in LMDC" was no easy task (Leicht interview, 10/17/02). Eventually, Imagine's organizers became more comfortable with a role as public critic. They joined with advocacy groups to outline nine principles that had not been addressed by the LMDC's guidelines; invited Imagine workshop participants back to comment on the second set of design plans—and

then presented a summary of those findings at LMDC hearings—convened another set of workshops to solicit public input about transportation issues at the site, and held educational seminars and workshops for people to weigh in on the proposed designs for a memorial at the site.

The Civic Alliance had more success in gaining officials' ear early on. Alliance head Robert Yaro explained in February 2002 that that "our role is not to be directly part of the public process but to be a resource to people who make decisions" (quoted in Pedersen 2002). The group was successful, at least initially, in that consultative role. The LMDC and the Port Authority helped to sponsor *Listening to the City*, and representatives from both organizations were at the event and were vocal about their commitment to incorporating the day's outcomes into future planning. When, in spite of the huge amount of publicity generated by forum participants' rejection of all the preliminary plans, however, the LMDC made no immediate move to shelve the plans that had provoked such antipathy (they would do so shortly after), the Civic Alliance adopted a more publicly critical stance. "Because *Listening to the City* was such a phenomenal success from a media standpoint, the club we were swinging was bigger than anyone was used to," one Civic Alliance member explained later. After that, the group began to be more vocal in criticizing rebuilding authorities for their failure to solicit more public input. At the same time, however—and probably in part both cause and consequence-- the Civic Alliance was losing its place in the consultative loop on rebuilding (Polletta and Wood 2005).

Both groups, then, found themselves awkwardly embracing an advocacy role that was more in line with what participants imagined for them. *AmericaSpeaks*, for its part, which had conducted several public forums before *Listening to the City*, described its role generally as one of "neutral, honest broker," emphasizing that "any organization attempting to involve the public must position itself so that citizens have confidence that the forums they are participating in are unbiased and meaningful" (*AmericaSpeaks* 2002: 1,2). The question raised in this case, and likely in others, however, is whether guaranteeing "meaningful" forums sometimes requires that the sponsoring organization move from serving as "broker" to serving as public advocate for the positions arrived at in the forum.

In several recent articles, scholars of deliberation have suggested that, rather than being fundamentally opposed, deliberation and activism may serve different but sometimes complementary functions in processes of political influence (Fung 2005; Levine and Nierras 2007; Hendriks 2006). The experiences of those who organized the New York City forums suggest that if it is unrealistic to think that contention can be removed from any political process, just how to combine the two is difficult. Few organizations can move seamlessly from sponsoring neutral forms to advocating on behalf of their outcomes. This is not

because of a lack of political commitment or will but because it simply isn't clear how they can be most effective in a political process that has multiple players and sources of influence. There are additional difficulties. Listening to the City's huge scale generated publicity that gave it an immediate impact on the rebuilding process. On the other hand, Imagine New York's smaller scale and its connections to a number of civic groups allowed MAS staffers to turn the project into an ongoing seminar and referendum on the development process, something the organizers of Listening were not able to do (see Carson and Hartz-Karp 2005 comparing forums that did and did not focus on the implementation of findings).

Finally, of course, there may have been no effective way to make the rebuilding process truly responsive to the public. Five years after the rebuilding forums, it is hard to see much of the imprint of the public on what rebuilding has taken place in Lower Manhattan. Not too long after the Civic Alliance lost its clout with the LMDC, the official rebuilding agency, the LMDC lost its clout too. After the agency bowed to public pressure and launched a new design competition attracting internally known architects, its pick for a master plan designer was overridden by the Governor of New York. After that, any semblance of a public process crumbled as the major leaseholder of the site, Larry Silverstein, announced that he was hiring his own architect to design the buildings on the site. The official master planner, architect Daniel Liebeskind, was left awkwardly claiming to still have some influence while his design was, for all intents and purposes, scrapped (Pogrebin 2004).

Of course, the balance sheet of the forums' impact is more complicated than that (see, eg. Polletta and Wood 2005). But, without minimizing the quite substantial obstacles to effective public influence no matter how energetically advocated for, I argue that the organizers of deliberative forums would be well served by considering more fully the roles that some forum participants apparently expect of them. To be sure, some deliberative forums are intended to be purely advisory to a legitimate decision making body, or are intended to educate participants more than influence political decision makers. Still, in many cases, forums' mandate is neither so clear nor so narrow. As our interviewees were keenly aware, there is more than one way to get decision makers to listen. And that is what distinguishes politically effective deliberation from talk in the sense of a feel-good exercise without enduring effect.

## CONCLUSION

One way to sum up the foregoing is to say that people should just talk. Or, rather, they should keep on talking the way they are talking. More than democratic theorists have recognized, people "just talk" in deliberative forums in ways that help to clarify their opinions, consider alternatives, and work toward compromise. But the other way to sum up the foregoing is to say that people never "just talk."

Their conversation is always informed by institutional norms that define what topics are relevant, what kinds of utterances are appropriate, whose opinion is authoritative, and what success looks like. In an unfamiliar setting, I have argued, people adapt more familiar models of interaction and conversation, capitalizing on the convenience and mutuality of expectations associated with those models while adapting them to the situation at hand. In this case, I have argued, participants did not rely exclusively on a model of sociable conversation. Rather, they talked and listened, they said, in ways that resembled variously, education, negotiation, and advocacy. In important ways, this made for deliberation that was more effective than had participants relied on a classical model of deliberation, seeking only to persuade each other through the exchange of good reasons.

The conversational and political models that appear in participants' descriptions of a forum can also alert us to potential roadblocks to effective deliberation, however. If forum organizers, sponsors, and/or participants operate with different models of talk or different models of politics, one or more of those groups' expectations about that the forum should accomplish are likely to be unmet. In this case, there were two areas of disagreement. Forum participants were more comfortable with the idea of hashing out compromises than were organizers. This was in part because participants operated with a mistaken view of their own representativeness. They felt that their diversity gave them the mandate—and the responsibility—to act for the “the public.” On one hand, they did not have that mandate. On the other hand, I wonder if, given the right encouragement, participants may be able to think of themselves as representatives also of groups not present. The other area of disagreement was about the place of the forum in a policymaking process. Participants saw less tension than did organizers between deliberation and advocacy. That discrepancy is surely due in part to the fact that organizers have firsthand experience of just where those tensions are. But it may also be because of a tendency among those who talk about deliberation to see it mistakenly as a zone or sphere or activity that is somehow removed from political contention.

These findings point, most obviously, to the need for more research on what actually transpires in real-world deliberation. They suggest, more specifically, that we pay attention to the institutional models of talk and politics that underpin people's practice of deliberation (see Lee [2007] on models behind the formal organization of deliberative forums). Recognizing that typical forum participants may operate with different understandings of, say, talk or politics or democracy than do forum facilitators or organizers or sponsors can shed light on common misunderstandings. But it can also illuminate possibilities for doing talk, politics, and democracy better.

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