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## Reflecting on the State of our Field: Challenging our Purpose, Impact, and Potential

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## **Abstract**

This "Afterword" essay was written several months after the Frontiers of Democracy 2014 conference. It offers the Journal of Public Deliberation's editors' reflections on the conference and connections to the articles published in this special issue.

## **Acknowledgements**

Authors are listed alphabetically. All authors contributed equally to this work.

The June 2014 Special Issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* contains essays by democracy reformers, public engagement practitioners, advocates for civic renewal, and scholars from multiple disciplines who study deliberative democracy and civic studies. Charged with the task of assessing “the state of the field,” these authors responded to questions such as: *Is there a “civic field? What challenges does the field face? What promising directions should the field pursue?* In July 2014, many of these same authors gathered with many others doing comparable work at the *Frontiers of Democracy* conference hosted by Tisch College at Tufts University, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and The Democracy Imperative in Boston. There, participants discussed the essays and the framing questions.

Since that time, we have wrestled with what can and should be said to follow up from the conversations at the *Frontiers* conference. More than eight months after the conference we find ourselves in a challenging position where we see times that our field’s commitment to civil and neutral facilitated processes may be unwelcome as a catalyst for social change. With protests and political and social upheaval happening on large scales around the globe, is there a place for our work? What is that place? And how do we know?

As we wrote this essay, we recognized that we had different thoughts and perspectives on the next steps for the group of scholars and practitioners who gather annually to share with and learn from one another. Interpreting the essays and conference discussions is a bit like a Rorschach test, but we (the JPD editors) see a few takeaways worth identifying.<sup>1</sup> We offer these as suggestions for moving this work knowing that these are not the only ways for framing the significant reflective essays that comprised the special issue (Volume 10, Issue 1) on the state of the field.

**Takeaway #1: Whether we see ourselves as a “field,” “network,” or “community of practice,” we lack a clear image of the “mission accomplished.”**

Conference attendees seemed to be bound together by a belief in the capacity of all citizens to work together to solve public problems and a conviction that planned, facilitated, deliberative processes can build relationships, improve individual behaviors and attitudes, as well as strengthen community life, public policy making, and democracy. Indeed, as both our special issue and the *Frontiers* conference demonstrate, there appears to be a burgeoning “industry” of people with expertise in organizing and facilitating collaborative processes in settings ranging from the family dinner table to the workplace to socially diverse neighborhoods to national issue discussions. As NCDD’s Roshan Bliss said

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<sup>1</sup> In this essay, comments by specific individuals are paraphrased, not verbatim.

succinctly, “Democracy needs a whole slew of people who can engage in quality deliberation and public participation. We are the ones who are teaching it.”

*But to what end?* There is no lack of opinions about the purposes, just no clear consensus. To some, deliberative democracy is a distinct form of *political engagement* critical to effective *policy making*, as Tim Shaffer (co-director of the Democracy Imperative) argued, an improvement over partisan, gridlocked politics. To others, the goal is to *empower everyday citizens* as activists and social change agents, with or without government participation or intervention. Still others believe that the desired outcomes are interpersonal. For example, Bob Stains (Public Conversations Project) said, “Much of the work we see is about fractured relationships. Dialogue as a process for *healing relationships* through conversation, and that then translates to future collaboration.” Others argue that the goal should be *social and political justice*, a way to provide a seat to those who have been historically unwelcome at the table *and* to reduce inequality. Penn State’s John Gastil said, “We are not a field per se, but we are community of research and practice, or interlocking communities that come together periodically. What brings us back together is democracy, an ultimate goal of *stronger democracy*. We have put our bets on deliberative democracy as a way to transform people and thereby institutions.”

Several people at the conference – including Michele Holt Shannon (New Hampshire Listens), Everett Hill (Everyday Democracy), and Martha McCoy (Everyday Democracy) – expressed concern over the tension between creating an inclusive process and achieving more equitable outcomes. Those with experience in deliberative and dialogue processes should tackle growing economic and social disparities, not as a matter of discursive process, but as a goal of the work.

On the one hand, given our field’s emphasis on collaboration and understanding across difference, it is not surprising that we seem comfortable with our field’s ambiguous sense of an ultimate goal. Perhaps the fact that our goal is flexible and open to multiple perspectives is what allows us to do our work successfully at local levels. Yet, it also makes our field more difficult for outsiders to understand. Without a common language to describe why we do what we do, it is difficult to fully integrate our work into larger civic structures.

**Takeaway #2: The work of our field is not taken seriously enough by those with power and privilege.**

Perhaps the stickiest challenge is that people with positional authority (e.g., policy makers) and those with structural advantages (e.g., the wealthy) can easily disregard our work. Our field, while growing, is simply too small and marginalized a group to have the kind of impact on democracy that is needed. We have had many successes at local levels. Yet, scaling up – particularly without a

unified commitment to clear purpose and outcomes – is difficult. National organizations within our field have helped us to become aware of one another, but we are challenged to leverage these larger identities to impact social action and policy decisions at state and national levels. For everyday people to share in governance and community change, people with power and privilege need to yield, and they have no incentive to do so.

Yet providing incentive in itself is not enough—we need to retain some authority with respect to implementation and evaluation of engagement processes. Otherwise, we risk having our terminology become buzzwords used by those in power to advance their own interests. Calls for “civil dialogue” can easily be used to silence dissent. Corporations or political groups can use the trappings of different participatory methods to hold “dialogues” or “community conversations” that are designed more as public relations campaigns than as efforts to build mutual understanding, transform conflict, or enable more engaged and educated citizens. These are real dangers to our field that can shift the ground beneath us, diminish public interest, discourage participation, and minimize our ability to make positive social change.

**Takeaway #3: Promising developments include education, infrastructure, and mobilization.**

One way our field is addressing these challenges is to focus on education and innovative forms of engagement. By engaging children in schools, college students, and people in communities, members of our field work to make deliberative practices more ingrained as part of everyday life. Some essays in this issue highlight successes working in higher education environments or using technology to help educate and engage. Deliberation and dialogue become more than concepts when put into practice with students in classrooms and residence halls.

Essays in this issue call for more attention to civic infrastructure, a theme equally strong at the Frontiers conference. One example of an effort to incorporate deliberation into civic infrastructure is the Citizens Initiative Review (Gastil, Richards & Knobloch, 2014), which uses a modified citizen jury method to promote deliberation on ballot initiatives. The CIR brings together a randomly selected, demographically representative group of citizens to deliberate on a ballot initiative for five days and then write a one-page statement to go into the voters’ guide. The CIR started in 2010 and is now a state law in Oregon and has expanded in some form to areas in Arizona, Colorado, and Washington.

Participatory budgeting has also been lauded as an strong example of creating a civic infrastructure that creates space for citizen participation in meaningful decision-making processes that gives power to ordinary citizens rather than those

in elected or official positions. Yet, as the essay by Vera Schattan Pereira Coelho shows, institutionalizing participatory budgeting can be extremely challenging. Civic professionals play an enormous role in bringing citizens to the table. Thus, building a sustainable civic infrastructure involves collaborating with public officials and demonstrating the value that participation holds for both those officials and the state. Carolyn Lukensmeyer's recent book aimed at public managers highlights the importance of having government officials understand the role that public managers play in the vitality of democracy (Lukensmeyer, 2013). We can desire citizen-centered politics, but we must acknowledge and work within the larger democratic ecosystem that goes beyond simply the role of public managers (Mathews, 2014).

Another solution may be to connect our field with other reform efforts and mobilize together. Deliberative public engagement may be one dimension of a civic or democratic reform agenda, Nancy Thomas suggested, but it is not the sole, or perhaps even the most effective, reform mechanism. For a community of scholars and practitioners, we should not simply publish articles or employ our deliberative techniques and approaches without acknowledging there are issues of real significance. For example, the rise of #blacklivesmatter stemming from judicial decisions made in Ferguson, Missouri; Staten Island, New York; and Beavercreek, Ohio; among others, points to a society longing for interaction and engagement beyond being told what to do—either by media pundits or police officers. And as the response in New York City has demonstrated, there need to be alternatives to creating hostile “us-versus-them” mentalities. As a field, we have (importantly) taken on the task of creating safe, public spaces for diverse voices and perspectives to be heard. But one outcome of this approach has been the challenge to respond to protest politics. As editors of JPD, we find ourselves asking: Where does deliberation and dialogue play a role in times of crisis and anger, such as when organic citizen-led protests have taken over streets in cities across the United States?

The solution should be more democracy, more dialogue, and more nuanced approaches to talking about these problems. Invoking Benjamin Barber's ideal of a “strong democracy” (1984) Nancy Thomas suggests that democracy is founded on four pillars: a strong civil society; freedom, equal opportunity and equity; public access to accurate information; and fair and functional government structures. We can debate the pillars. The point is that those who are working on strengthening these pillars—whether wealth equality, transparency in government, or voting rights—are also part of “the field.” Deliberative democrats need to build connections with and work to strengthen the other reform areas. Sustainable democratic reform and civic renewal will not take hold if sought by a narrow slice of reformers.

We see the promise in the work of our field, but we also think this potential is not being reached. There is an immense body of work being accomplished in dialogue and deliberation, but the larger implications are not well understood or articulated outside of our sphere. As practitioners and scholars in this field we need to ask ourselves serious questions like: Are we needed? If so, how and by whom? What can we do? What should we stop doing? What are the limits of our practice?

### **Going Forward: Conversations and Action**

As we see it, there is much work to be done. As editors for the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, we hope to provide a forum for this work and these conversations. We want JPD to serve as a repository for the best work in our field and give both scholars and practitioners a space to ask inconvenient and tough questions about our field. We need more scholarly attention to the takeaways. But we also need to create space for our field to have a sustained conversation about shared purpose.

As we continue to question who we are and what we do as a “field,” we should attend to questions raised by C. Wright Mills in 1959 about how we actually “help cultivate and sustain publics and individuals that are able to develop, to live with, and to act upon adequate definitions of personal and social realities” (Mills, [1959] 2000, p. 192). What are we doing, as both scholars and practitioners, to help create and support both individuals and communities that can respond to the issues confounding contemporary life?

Traditionally, journals haven’t played a central role in social change. But for JPD, we have the potential to do more than a traditional “academic” journal. This is not to be interpreted as a diminishment of rigorous scholarship; instead, we see it as a commitment to making scholarship meaningful to people and communities. We hope that scholars and practitioners will seek to advance important conversations by listening to what others write and then continue the conversation, both in JPD and at future conferences like Frontiers.

But we argue that this conversation is not enough. Given the state of our field, we think it is time to interrogate the limits of our practices. We are very committed to the theory and practice of public dialogue and deliberation, and yet we acknowledge that there may be times when we need to step out of that role and take other kinds of political action. Our field faces some important questions about who we are, what we are doing, how we can and should wield influence, and what limits we face. Our scholarship, practice, and action need to take these questions seriously.

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