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## 21st Century Town Hall Meetings in the 1990s and 2000s: Deliberative Demonstrations and the Commodification of Political Authenticity in an Era of Austerity

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## 21st Century Town Hall Meetings in the 1990s and 2000s: Deliberative Demonstrations and the Commodification of Political Authenticity in an Era of Austerity

### Abstract

The public participation field grew dramatically in the United States during the 1990s and 2000s, in part due to the flagship dialogue and deliberation organization AmericaSpeaks and its trademarked 21st Century Town Hall Meeting method for large group decision-making. Drawing on participant observation of three such meetings and a multi-method ethnography of the larger field, I place these meetings in context as experimental deliberative demonstrations during a time of ferment regarding declining citizen capacity in the United States. AmericaSpeaks' town meetings were branded as politically authentic alternatives to ordinary politics, but as participatory methods and empowerment discourses became popular with a wide variety of public and private actors, the organization failed to find a sustainable business model. I conclude by discussing the challenges for contemporary town hall meetings in an era when political authenticity is a valuable commodity.

### Keywords

Public participation, Deliberative democracy, AmericaSpeaks, Commodification, Town Meeting

Why did AmericaSpeaks' 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings, pioneered in the 1990s as a new form of high-tech town hall enabling large group deliberation, become popular in particular contexts in the United States in the 2000s? What can the carefully-designed features of these processes tell us about contemporary organizational strategies for producing political authenticity? What can the fate of these deliberative demonstrations tell us about the place of the town hall meeting in contemporary society?

This article begins with a description of the author's participant observation of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting, in order to illustrate the unique features of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting in comparison to the other town hall meetings described in this issue. Then I analyze the larger set of contexts in which 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings became popular in the 1990s and 2000s in order to produce public consent for contentious retrenchment, redevelopment, and restructuring policies in an era of austerity. Finally, I describe the closure of AmericaSpeaks and the difficulties deliberation organizations faced in the 2010s in defending their methods, products, and services from non-deliberative competition. To understand the rise and fall of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting, we must envision it as one of a number of competing strategies employed by organizations to manage their political legitimacy in an era when participatory authenticity is deeply contested.

### **Ethnographic Vignette: Community Congress III: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting for New Orleans Redevelopment**

January 20, 2007, 8:30AM: It is overcast as I ease my rental car into the self-parking lot of the Dallas Renaissance Hotel, a pink, lipstick-shaped luxury tower. I head inside and into a bustle of activity as a second floor ballroom is in the final stages of preparation for Community Congress III, a meeting to contemplate the future of a still devastated urban wetland 200 years older, 1,500 miles and many cultural removes distant from the parched southwestern sprawl here at the bottom corner of the United States' prairie heartland. In a massive ballroom hung with crystal chandeliers, officious 20-somethings wearing portable headsets hustle nimbly around the taped-down cords and cables connecting dozens of round tables outfitted with laptop computers. Community Congress II was a big success, so CCIII is a lower-stakes affair, since it is intended to be "the public's collective opportunity to review and give final input on the draft Unified New Orleans Plan (UNOP) before it is sent to city leaders" (UNOP 2007: 1). In other words, the prior meeting was the critical one where current and former New Orleanians could give input on what they wanted to see in draft recommendations for rebuilding the city; this meeting seeks to gain feedback on how those recommendations have been incorporated. While awaiting our table assignments, the other volunteer table facilitators and I mill around the remains of a few trays of cantaloupe in the room reserved for staff

and don our free t-shirts bearing the distinctive listing fleur-de-lis logo of the UNOP.

The headsetted staffers from AmericaSpeaks, the “non partisan, non-profit organization” running this event, bark into their mics instructions that can’t be heard above final A/V checks being conducted on stage in front of the large screen that will display slides and video for today’s meeting. Since public approval is so important, the design of this meeting and the phrasing of options for discussion have been extensively piloted in practice run-throughs by AmericaSpeaks, so there are unlikely to be many surprises in terms of what this particular subset of “the people” have to say regarding their support for different recommendations in the Plan. AmericaSpeaks is experienced at handling the sensitive issues involved in post-disaster redevelopment, because the organization recently completed a much-heralded success running the post-9/11 “Listening to the City” dialogues for rebuilding Ground Zero in New York City. A Who’s Who of philanthropy—the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Case Foundation, Ford Foundation, Greater New Orleans Foundation, Louisiana Recovery Fund, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Rockefeller Foundation, Surdna Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Daimler Chrysler—has footed the bill for first-class events today and a month earlier that are a far cry from spartan public hearings, with touches like local praline candy in the free lunches, public service announcements advertising the meeting by Wynton Marsalis, robocalls from Mayor Ray Nagin urging citizens to attend, and even a second-line parade through the streets of New Orleans to register participants.

The philanthropic support has made a difference—these two events could not be more of a sea change from the many disconnected, fragmented, and competing planning processes that have faltered over the past fifteen months on the critical issues of funding authorization and hot button decisions like whether the city should reduce its footprint and convert low-lying areas to green spaces. Some have wondered whether such a “unified” effort to engage a cross-section of the city and its displaced residents on the critical questions of how to re-grow the city comes too late—when New Orleanians are already exhausted by earlier rounds of participation and angry about the lack of progress thus far, and when major questions, such as the political untenability of shrinking the city, have already been resolved. While some of these anxieties were forestalled at CCII, as at any live simulcast, technical difficulties and unforeseen hiccups can threaten the grueling advance work and hundreds of planning hours already invested: “every detail matters” in an event that manages a nuanced blend of the old-fashioned civic commitment of New England town halls and the evidence-driven decision-making of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Lukensmeyer 2007: 13).

As we near 9:30AM, buses and cars from all over Dallas-Fort Worth are depositing nearly 140 former New Orleanians for the six-hour meeting that is about to begin. As they enter, they are greeted warmly at the welcome area and assigned randomly to our tables. Each 10-seat round table is outfitted with keypads, or “clickers,” linked wirelessly to the audience response system, but this web-enabled, high tech network is also provisioned with humbler stuff for us to arrange at our spots: a table number, pens, markers, handouts, and red, yellow, and green cards to hold up if we need to signal for help from one of the roaming area facilitators or the floor manager. A mini-social service department has been assembled on site, where a village of childcare, counselors, translators, and emergency service personnel stand at the ready with hugs, candy, defibrillators, and tissues.

As the ballroom warms up, our peers are conducting similar preparations as 800 New Orleans residents and those displaced to Baton Rouge converge on the convention center in New Orleans. About 65 attendees are making their way to the Marriott Marquis in Atlanta, and nearly 250 are filling tables at the convention center in Houston. Smaller groups in other cities are gathering at public libraries and other venues to participate by webcast. All four main sites will shortly be connected by satellite video feeds, allowing the assembled crowds to cheer and wave at each other like fans on the big screen at an NFL game. Most participants are indeed riled up like fans at a football game, because their scrappy New Orleans Saints have made an improbable run at the NFC championship tomorrow. Many attendees in fan gear are bursting with impromptu “Saints!” cheers and nervous energy.

On the ground in Dallas, local coordinators have been working with community interfaith groups, charities, and service organizations to ensure a good turnout and recruit facilitators. AmericaSpeaks has been tracking the demographics of registrants for weeks and has been involved up to the last minute in recruiting a group that represents the racial, housing status, income, and age makeup of the city before the storm. The non-New Orleanian staffers and observers are primarily white and the survivors attending here in Dallas are nearly exclusively black and low income, as most displaced white and upper-income homeowners have already returned to the city over a year after the storm. Across the sites, nearly 70% of the volunteer facilitators have self-funded trips from all over the US, Canada, and even the UK to be a part of history at the event.

The volunteer facilitator crew is considerably more diverse than the Dallas officials on hand to observe, but includes plenty of white out-of-towners like me, from Pennsylvania; Gary, a gay white man in his forties from Maryland; and others from DC and the Northeastern U.S., including a friend of Carolyn Lukensmeyer, AmericaSpeaks’ president. Facilitators used to leading meetings in other

communities that tend to attract high-income, involved citizens will note to each other at the debrief after the event the unusual level of poverty and illiteracy present among participants, describing participants taking two lunches and tucking extra brownies, pens, markers, and sodas in their bags.

In a report following the meeting, Lukensmeyer celebrated that in this “‘hardest case’ environment” where “the majority of the target audience was living in a postdisaster crisis mode,” the organization “succeeded in giving equal voice to the most disenfranchised,” both the poor, black citizens most affected and those in the diaspora who could not attend public meetings in New Orleans (2007: 11). Each of the survivors assigned to my own table in Dallas is black. This meeting and the one that preceded it are largely seen as do-overs of Community Congress I, a “public” meeting lacking in coordinated outreach that engaged a disproportionate number of white returnees in elevated areas of the city. As such, the black turnout at CCIII, which we will find out is 55% across the sites, is a major improvement from earlier failed processes, even though it falls short of the 67.3% black population pre-Katrina and is slightly down from the turnout at the pull-out-all-the-stops recruitment success that was CCII.

In a whirl of smiling energy, caseworker Susan is the last to arrive at our table and immediately focuses the group’s attention, snapping pictures, shaking hands, and handing out her business card. She works with Katrina survivors in Dallas, having been employed by a federal agency in New Orleans before the storm. When the call goes out for “captains” to volunteer to keep in touch with the group after the meeting, she will take responsibility for maintaining contact and encouraging action after the event, collecting emails and sending us scores of messages with information on upcoming programs and services, keeping Christian faith, and later, praying for the Obama family. Everyone quiets down as the meeting begins, with formal speeches from the local facilitator on the stage and from civic leaders via satellite uplink in New Orleans. A gospel choir sings an invocation. The pain of the prior processes and the disaster are acknowledged, while speakers at the same time strike hopeful, positive notes and emphasize that the focus today is not on public figures but on the participants, who should give themselves a hand for coming and contributing.

Lukensmeyer, emotional at the sight of so many people sharing and listening to each other, leads a long visioning exercise where we close our eyes and imagine ourselves as an eagle flying over the city we would like to see. Gary will later complain that “the eagle visioning was totally inappropriate.” Those at his table rejected the task and wistfully imagined just being able to sit on their front porches again. The first task of the day is to ask my table to think quietly and write down our “experience of inspiration” in the recovery and rebuilding of New Orleans, a

task which Lukensmeyer noted on a conference call for facilitators had gone particularly well in run-throughs. The video monitor shows reports from the different sites, where area coordinators have plucked representatives to talk about their inspirations. General consensus seems to be that events like this are an inspiration.

Next, we begin a round of demographic polling, where participants get a chance to try out the keypads and see “who’s here today.” Pop hits keyed to the theme of the question, like ABBA’s “Money, Money, Money” for income, are played at top volume, to much laughter. The results? Fifty-five percent had participated in CCII, with similar numbers having participated at many of the other planning meetings. The group is asked to take responsibility for thinking of the city’s younger residents and other underrepresented groups as they discuss the options today. The women at my table have fun with the voting, but are nonplussed by the “pomp and circumstance” and by the city officials whom they think have failed those in the diaspora. This running commentary and skepticism of the larger event will continue as the day goes on at my table, which has assumed the role of peanut gallery—my facilitator instructions say to “model attentive listening,” but this has little effect as the group is generally uncooperative with the cornier and more therapeutically-oriented elements of the process.

Despite some boredom and cynicism at my table, Susan keeps our spirits high, I try to keep things moving, and as the day goes on, we will get choked up as we find out that some displaced residents have spotted lost loved ones, scrutinizing the video feeds and the sea of faces across the cavernous meeting rooms. The room is beset with alternating currents of emotion, as participants listen to public officials and community organizers, hear compelling stories from other participants, debate policy incentives for rebuilding, stretch, eat box lunches, listen to slam poetry, grouse about the lack of bathroom and cigarette breaks, clap and laugh, and vote for policy options. Those with their own transportation have begun trickling out to pick up children or go to work by 2:45PM, as participants are asked to think about thorny issues of implementation and to take on responsibility for “action” on the plan. First, table participants are asked to “share some personal lessons of citizens working together on the rebuilding and recovery,” hard for those in the Dallas area who are removed from the ground-level work going on in New Orleans.

Next, participants are asked to review options for citizen participation that are available and to think about which are best for “citizen interests.” Participants are asked, “What personal commitment can you make to stay involved in the rebuilding of New Orleans?” and the day concludes with voting on the Citizen Participation Plan options, closing remarks, and a final round of voting on four evaluation questions. When participants are asked to rate how satisfied they are with their own

participation, Jessie, a young mom at my table currently working and attending school cries out, “Why do they have to put it on us?” When the results are tallied, 93% of participants commit to remaining engaged. Some new options for participation, such as annual Community Congresses, have been suggested. In a grand finale, the group receives a handout still hot off the copier reporting the votes of the day, so they can show others what happened and remember the options they discussed. We hug, say thank yous, wave goodbyes to the other sites, and promise to keep in touch with tablemates, snaking our exits around the tables amid relief after a long day’s work and lots of cheering for the hometeam. The fans will be crushed tomorrow, as the Saints take a 14-39 beating at Soldier Field in Chicago. What of the recommendations produced by all the participants in CCII and CCIII?

### **Town Meetings as Deliberative Demonstrations**

Foundations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are nothing if not compulsive about evaluation, and commissioned follow-up studies, in addition to the extensive evaluation AmericaSpeaks did in collaboration with scholars of deliberation. Lukensmeyer herself wrote an article, and a Kennedy School of Government doctoral candidate conducted interviews with decision-makers on behalf of the foundations involved. Before CCIII, a foundation-sponsored study found that “Community Congress II engendered ‘buy-in’ from both the public and their community leaders” critical to the future approval of the Unified New Orleans Plan, but that “community leaders appeared far more interested in the event as a means to earn ‘buy-in,’ than as a way to improve the actual plan”: “substance was almost irrelevant” (Williamson 2007: 23-4). None of the leaders interviewed thought of the CCII process “primarily as a way to improve the substance of UNOP” and some had not even looked at the preliminary report on citizens’ recommendations. As with the pilot studies, the key issue of getting the “demographic mix... correct” meant that the preparatory work behind the scenes was far more important than what actually went on at the meetings. The AmericaSpeaks process had built into the fixed set of options room for “other” options, and had taken care to point out where participants were angry, or where options or phrasings were changed based on immediate feedback from the tables.

These therapeutic functions turned out to be extremely important for participants and for decision leaders for whom prior opportunities for neighborhood input had actually seemed to increase citizen anger. The sense that the process incorporated critique—that the public spoke with one voice, and that that voice that was heard—was more important substantively than any of the concrete recommendations, which generally followed planners’ expectations of what was feasible or politically tenable. Many openly acknowledged this: a Mayor’s aide agreed that CCII was important for “consensus-building,” “education,” and “bringing people together,”

but not for the substance of the plan, characterizing the focus of CCII as “motherhood and apple pie” (Williamson 2007: 24). According to Lukensmeyer, “the Community Congresses were a vehicle for restoring community and therefore hope” (2007: 9). In this sense, the process embodied the positive dramatic and experimental elements possible in the “democratic spectacles” described by Mahony (2010).

Not least, the innovations pioneered in this process, like the use of robocalls, and the triumph over the many complex difficulties involved in producing genuine deliberations under extremely difficult circumstances, served to prove the worth of public deliberation generally: “In addition to advancing the level of practice in the field, the Unified Plan process concretely demonstrated two key tenets of civic engagement work: that average citizens *can* make substantive and worthwhile contributions to complicated policy issues, and that reluctant decision makers *can* be effectively brought into these processes” (Lukensmeyer 2007: 11). The \$14.5 billion UNOP was approved by the necessary stakeholders, and rebuilding could continue in a more effective way. CCII and CCIII may not have solved long-term structural problems, but they harnessed impressive citizen participation and demonstrated the potential of a different way of civic life for New Orleans.

How should we understand the impressive deliberative demonstration that is this “21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting,” with its foundation underwriting, civic partnerships, robocalls, celebrity endorsements, precision timing, patient circle sharing, inspirational slam poetry, talking heads, Southern gospel music, earnest Yankee traditions, generous social services, networked infrastructure, positive psychology, live satellite feeds, “attentive listening,” and instant polling? How do we understand why this particular Cadillac—or more appropriately, Mercedes Benz—of civic festivals of inclusion, equality, and democracy, seemingly so hard to achieve in other contexts, is being rolled out for the poorest of the poor, in a time of fiscal retrenchment? In this article, I argue that understanding such events only as remarkable deliberative demonstration projects, rather than as complex organizational interventions intended to produce particular strategic results, prevents us from putting the popularity—and ultimate failure—of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting in context.

### **Researching the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting**

Many scholars have been captivated by the no-detail-too-small professionalism and gargantuan scale of spectacular multi-sited deliberative demonstrations like Community Congress III. Such events are so complex, involve such detailed, place-based policy histories, and the sustained collaboration of so many organizations that they are quite difficult to capture analytically, as the ethnographic vignette

above, which only reveals the perspective from one table in one site, implies. Deliberative demonstrations provide fodder for whole volumes of academic research unpacking the politics of their emergence and long-term effects. The Russell Sage Foundation's commissioning of three volumes on the impacts of 9/11 on New York City created a veritable growth industry in "Listening to the City" studies, filled with thick description and discourse analysis based on hundreds of interviews with participants and community organizations, as well as sophisticated quantitative analysis of thousands of pages of transcripts of recorded table discussions (Marcuse 2007).

Nevertheless, the Community Congresses and other high profile Town Meetings have been analyzed almost exclusively in terms of normative political theory and social movement scholarship: as deliberative demonstration projects that have succeeded in reforming governance despite the resistance of elites invested in ordinary politics. Scholars have scrutinized the stakeholder power dynamics and the micropolitics of reason-giving going on in these discussions without giving much attention to the larger institutional landscape in which deliberative democratic experiments transpire. The role of facilitation organizations like AmericaSpeaks and of process sponsors like the foundations and DaimlerChrysler are practically invisible in these accounts. Why are organizations investing energy and resources in these events, especially if the substantive input they produce is widely held to be "irrelevant"? Political scholars often take the same perspective as Lukensmeyer, arguing that such processes have significance far beyond their actual effects on decision-making and policy, inasmuch as they demonstrate how meaningful participatory processes are in the first place, and why we should have more of them.

I argue that understanding the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting in its historical context requires the insights of organizational scholarship on the shifting and unstable relationship of movements, corporations, and civil society in the current era. The difficulty of categorizing messy, multi-sited, multi-organizational deliberations like Community Congress III benefits sponsors, who seek out deliberative demonstrations not only for the positive press to be gained by sponsoring civic interventions, but also for the strategic management outcomes deliberation consultants like AmericaSpeaks sell. By studying field-level marketing discourse, we can see similar promises made about 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings across sponsor categories and for very different types of events. In doing so, I find that deliberative town halls were sold to organizational sponsors as a strategy for disciplining stakeholders by demobilizing dissent and reorienting action on contentious issues. If we view 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings merely as test cases for deliberative democracy, we minimize the larger organizational and political-

economic contexts in which participation facilitation organizations like AmericaSpeaks compete.

Methodologically, this requires a change in focus from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting as a process to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting as a social change management strategy produced by professionals and experts and marketed and sold to client organizations. I adopted this lens in a multi-sited field study, similar to organizational ethnographies like Eliasoph (2009), who documents the shared discourses in “empowerment projects” across contexts and among complex landscapes of funders, experts, and state and non-state actors. The project used a multi-method ethnographic approach, including fieldwork, archival research and surveys, to study deliberation as an organizational strategy produced by experts working within the emerging field of public engagement consulting (see footnote and Lee, 2015 for details on methodology in the larger study).<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on the work of AmericaSpeaks, a flagship and highly influential leader in the larger field of U.S. public engagement. The fieldwork was conducted by the author in the United States and Canada from 2006 through 2010. I sought to understand stakeholder, volunteer, and client perspectives on professional deliberation facilitation through the lens of three major (1,000+ participants) public and non-profit sector 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings run by AmericaSpeaks. Having been certified in deliberation facilitation, I served as a volunteer and as a table facilitator at two national deliberative meetings-- the one on New Orleans redevelopment in January 2007 in Dallas described above, and the “Our Budget,

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws extensively on my book on the field. Additional research on the field of public engagement consulting involved extensive participant observation in various training and certification venues and professional conferences: a weeklong public participation facilitation certification course, three more specialized training sessions, two national and two international professional association conferences, a deliberation methods conference, and monthly webinars and teleconferences. The author also conducted informal interviews with over fifty individuals representing all aspects of the field over the course of the fieldwork. In order to protect confidentiality, some individuals and organizations are pseudonymous. The desire to protect confidentiality has been balanced with citation and identification of historically-important actors and events—for example Lukensmeyer, AmericaSpeaks and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting process they pioneered, in order to provide proper crediting where recognition and publicity are expected. Analysis of deliberation practitioners’ listservs, organization and event websites, blogs, social networking sites, field handbooks, and unique data sources collected by the author supplements the information gathered through participant observation. A non-random online survey of dialogue and deliberation practitioners, distributed through over twenty online listservs and web-based community networks in the field, was conducted in September and October 2009 in collaboration with [a third sociologist] of University of [X], in order to solicit a broader perspective on the findings surfacing in the qualitative research. The survey, whose target population was volunteer and professional deliberation practitioners in the United States, yielded 345 completed responses from US practitioners.

Our Economy” deliberations in Philadelphia, PA on June 26, 2010. As part of a research collaborative, I had full access to one national convention sponsored by professional associations in the performing arts, called “Bigger, Better, All Together” in Denver, CO in June 2008; the meeting featured three daily caucus sessions and, as a finale, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting, all organized by AmericaSpeaks. This project included pre and post-surveys of a random sample of conference participants and interviews with the clients and the chief process facilitator regarding strategic outcomes (for a detailed study of this meeting, see Author and Co-Author 2011). When referencing data from observations, the specific fieldwork setting (a training course, conference, listserv discussion, etc.) is described in the text.

### **Why Did 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings Become a Popular Organizational Strategy in the 2000s?**

A comprehensive engagement strategy can transform your participants into stakeholders with sustained involvement in your project.

-AmericaSpeaks website

A number of trends in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s drove demand for a field of skilled professionals who could facilitate intensive public participation among a broad cross-section of people. There was a sense that civic participation of ordinary folks was declining, and—not unrelatedly—that the participation processes that had been relied on for some time, such as environmental impact reviews and public hearings, were dominated by confrontational usual suspects and litigious interest group professionals who stymied any attempts at consensus-building. The “decide-announce-defend” model of administrative decision-making was not working. Today’s collaborative and deep participation is often contrasted with the comparatively thin two-minutes-at-a-microphone model of gathering public input at hearings. The new public engagement’s focus on reasoned discussion among putative equals has also coincided with a wave of enthusiasm in the academy for the idea of *deliberative* democracy, where participants might change their mind or find common ground by listening to others’ viewpoints.

Thus, the field of professional public participation facilitation consulting developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to demand for better methods of involvement, building on the alternative dispute resolution and community mediation movements of the 1970s and initial successes in the environmental planning field. These collaborative innovations were intended to reduce the

litigation generated by an earlier phase of institutionalized participation enshrined in the National Environmental Policy Act (Layzer 2008; Morrill and Owen-Smith 2002; O’Leary and Bingham 2003; Senger 2003). Public deliberation, as a new civic form that brings together interest group representatives, activists, and laypersons as equal participants in decision-making sponsored by administrators, foundations, and businesses, also reflects the professionalization of activism, the reframing of corporate citizenship, and the increasing cross-sector collaborations that characterized organizational politics and strategy in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century United States (Ansell and Gash 2008; Lee, Walker, and McQuarrie 2015; Soule 2009; Zald and McCarthy 1980).

The outsourcing of public participation facilitation to trained practitioners from private consulting firms or nonprofit organizations like AmericaSpeaks reflects the rearrangements of administrative power through devolution and privatization that characterized New Public Management and related management trends in the 1990s and 2000s (Handler 1996; Kelleher and Yackee 2008). This “veritable revolution... in the formation of organizations and a ‘profession’ devoted to the participation of ordinary citizens” produced an extensive “organizational infrastructure for public deliberation” (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009: 136). The major professional associations in the United States are IAP2 USA, a 500-member affiliate spun off in 2010 from the International Association of Public Participation (originally founded in 1990), and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), founded in 2002. As of 2014, the NCDD had over 2,200 members and 34,000 subscribers to its monthly listserv (Heierbacher 2015).

Field leaders often express frustration at the “microscopic” scale of deliberation activity compared to, for example, electoral advertising budgets (Levine 2014b: 1), but the organizations served are some of the largest in the U.S. and internationally, and some of the decisions made—such as those over electoral reforms or health care—can affect state and national policy-making, even if they involve only a few hundred or a few thousand people directly in deliberation. Deliberation in the U.S. is very much a “Fortune 500” phenomenon that has been embraced not only by government administrators and NGOs, but by elites and corporate executives. The fact that “thousands of well-moderated and well-organized deliberations may occur every year in a country like the United States” (Levine 2014b: 1) is not insignificant, especially given that such engagement is far more intensive and demanding than viewing advertising. AmericaSpeaks was a pioneer in “scaling up” deliberative decision-making practices to large groups from a few hundred to a few thousand on issues of statewide or nationwide importance. AmericaSpeaks worked for a variety of public, private and nonprofit sector clients, and promoted itself as well equipped to move political decision-making beyond “the usual suspects” (elites, deep pocketed interest groups, and polarized activists) to those not yet

mobilized: on its website, AmericaSpeaks advertised “unique strategies for engaging a demographically diverse group of unaffiliated citizens to participate in your public forums.”

While most scholarship has focused on public-sector clients like those in CCIII or Listening to the City, what accounts for the fact that clients from a variety of organizations (public, private, and third-sector) and at a variety of scales increasingly sought out 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meetings and other deliberative demonstration projects in the 1990s and 2000s? Deliberation was one strategic choice among other outreach and public relations strategies employed by organizations in this period, including grassroots lobbying, or subsidizing the mobilization of targeted segments of the public, typically an efficient option when some enthusiastic constituency exists (Walker 2014). So when did organizations choose to use deliberation as opposed to or in addition to alternative public engagement strategies?

Deliberation consultants covered a wide range of topics and served a diverse client base in terms of sector and industry, but the conditions under which organizations sought out deliberation had a number of similarities across contexts. Based on analysis of common topics for clients from different sectors, deliberation was typically used in cases where social unrest was likely or had already occurred, and where alternative management remedies were impractical or had already failed. Deliberative demonstrations promised to shift perspectives toward collaborative solutions for organizations managing widespread dissatisfaction from various constituencies over management decisions related to fiscal austerity.

The features that made deliberative demonstrations like CCIII so compelling for participants, observers, and scholars—their capacity for inspiring hope for a different kind of politics, their blending of social justice discourses and New England traditions, their “strength-based” emphasis on community assets rather than community problems—also made them valuable commodities at a time of deep public cynicism about ordinary politics and institutional failures. A facilitator at one of the Community Congress III sites posted on AmericaSpeaks’ website this summary of the context in which the deliberations occurred: “The day progressed, city councilmen, the mayor, community leaders, all got up and spoke about the great city of New Orleans, about it rising again. I scanned the room during these speeches, thinking I would see hope in the faces of those in the room. Instead I saw frustration, concern, disbelief and dismissal. The government failed these people, at all levels, and they know it. The distrust I saw was overwhelming” (Rodriguez 2007). Intensively managed deliberative demonstrations were nearly always extraordinarily successful in garnering immediate satisfaction and positive feelings of empowered engagement in participants, even in hostile crowds and difficult

settings like Community Congress III, where a remarkable 93% of participants committed to staying engaged.

Social unrest and contention related to inequality was increasingly on the minds of organizational and political leaders in the U.S. as the long-term dimensions of the economic crisis in the 2000s became clear. Lee and Romano found that “clients and sponsors typically seek deliberation as a strategy for management problems they face when existing or potential resistance to austerity policies arises from corporate reorganization, state retrenchment, and urban redevelopment” (2013: 743). The three most common topics on which US practitioners surveyed in 2009 had facilitated in the last two years shed light on similar framings of different economic problems. These were: “education and youth” (167 practitioners), “comprehensive community planning and visioning” (147 practitioners), and “organizational development and human resources” (135 practitioners). Deliberations on these topics focused on the difficulty of confronting social problems (typically phrased as making “tough choices”) in a challenging economic landscape of “tight times.” AmericaSpeaks used this language extensively in branding processes to deliberate on shrinking health care budgets, such as “Tough Choices in Health Care” (Maine) and “California Speaks: Working Together for Better Health Care.”

Deliberative processes about youth, such as AmericaSpeaks’ deliberative demonstrations for “Shaping America’s Youth,” typically emphasized local efforts to curb at-risk youth’s socially and economically destructive behavior, especially in cases where corporations have been targeted by activists and regulators, as in the case of childhood obesity (Lee and Romano 2013). Shaping America’s Youth was part of an anti-obesity campaign sponsored by Cadbury Schweppes, Campbell Soup Company, FedEx Corporation, McNeil Nutritionals, NIKE, CIGNA, and ConAgra Foods.<sup>2</sup> Literature for the Iowa Citizens’ Summit on Childhood Obesity notes that the process will “emphasize health-promoting steps that can be taken immediately.” The larger goals of Summit sponsors as stated in the participant guide are “lowering the cost of care” by “getting children and youth more physically active and eating a healthier diet.”

Consultants note that shrinking finances have compelled public clients to seek out deliberations on comprehensive community planning in order to manage protests over cuts. On a practitioner listserv, one director of a deliberation training organization in California marks the influence of budget pressures: “For the municipalities we work with in California, we are finding a desperation on the part of many to involve the public quickly and cheaply in policy discussions from budgets to land use.” AmericaSpeaks facilitated deliberative demonstrations for

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<sup>2</sup> Shaping America’s Youth (2007).

over 40 participatory community planning processes, including “Voices and Choices,” a massive effort to engage 21,000 people in redevelopment planning for Northeast Ohio’s shrinking economy in the heart of America’s struggling Rust Belt. Corporations themselves sought deliberation for use with employees and organizational stakeholders in order to handle contention and dysfunction related to mergers and downsizing. Obviously, managers have a number of tactics readily available for anticipated problems following corporate reorganization, but deliberation is generally employed in those “tough” cases where prior remedies have not succeeded and the range of “choices” facing managers is severely limited.

Deliberative marketing materials generated support for organizational priorities through an emphasis on mutual collaboration and co-creation. Powerful organizational actors are typically referred to as “stakeholders” with roles equal to those of ordinary citizens. Literature for the Iowa Citizens’ Summit on Childhood Obesity suggested that corporations and government officials could play a primary role as change agents not as powerful economic and regulatory actors but as “stakeholders” and “partners” with “clout” among consumers and communities observing “adverse social norms.” The participant guide specifies that corporations can help communities solve their own problems by investment in social marketing efforts “to advocate products and activities that encourage healthy lifestyles... Employers and advertisers can distribute media messages that continually reinforce the basic principles of movement, exercise, and good nutrition, and offer role models for children.” As in CCIII, where participants were told to applaud themselves for participating, shared that the process itself was an inspiration, and finally recommended more Community Congresses, deliberations like the Summit were advertised within processes as examples of successful social marketing campaigns that demonstrated the potential of multi-stakeholder collaboration as an economical and socially-productive solution to “shared” challenges.

Despite the dire framings of the tough choices administrators had to make, when it came to participant actions, deliberative marketing emphasized positivity. Methods adapting principles from positive psychology were ideal for producing alignment in behavior since they emphasized the power of individual action in overwhelming circumstances. As in the CCIII eagle visioning and sharing of “inspiration” from the recovery of New Orleans, the “Appreciative Inquiry” method is used to frame social problems and organizational failures as wellsprings of creative generativity. One handbook encouraged those marginalized in a downbeat economy to see hardship as an opportunity and turn lemons into lemonade, through the examples of a microbrewery that sells “Bailout Bitter” and a Utah woman’s successful “home tending” business “as the home foreclosure crisis leaves whole neighborhoods almost abandoned.” In deliberation on organizational development and community planning projects, communities and employees in crisis were celebrated for putting

a brave, happy face on their losses, competing with similarly-depleted peers in other organizations and communities to decipher the best way to turn “social issues” into “new sources of value.”

As Martin argues in the case of state governments, “State officials concede new procedural rights of consultation-- and create new opportunities for nongovernmental brokers of consultation-- when their extractive demands provoke resistance” (2015: 110). This finding complements reports from practitioners that demand for deliberative “choicework” surged globally during the financial crisis. While the research in this article focuses on the U.S., AmericaSpeaks’ international consulting arm, Global Voices, also ran 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meetings at similar events like the UK National Health Service’s “Your Health, Your Care, Your Say” and the 2005 World Economic Forum’s Global Town Hall on “the toughest issues facing the international community.” Scholars in Europe and Australasia have also found deliberation used to tame public hostility and oppositional conflicts over decision-making on economic development and private-sector growth (Atkinson 1999; Barnes et al. 2007; Head 2007; Talpin 2011; Williams 2004).

### **Why Did 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings Ultimately Fail to Survive in the 2010s?**

The fact that deliberative demonstrations were used increasingly to manage contention created distinct challenges for practitioners in the field. The cooptation or corruption of deliberative techniques was a primary concern for respondents in the 2009 survey, who reported that one of five leading obstacles to deliberative processes was “participant experiences with bad processes” and “client experiences with bad public participation.” Organizations from outside the public participation field resorted to deliberative tactics when other change management strategies did not work. As employees, consumers, and community members became more cynical about standard marketing and employee control techniques, firms without much experience in deliberation changed their own tactics to integrate engagement into management.

The 2000s, for instance, saw the rapid explosion of software for budget calculators that enabled citizen “choicework” to take place cheaply online for all kinds of clients (Ganuza and Baiocchi 2012). At the same time that there was excitement about the diffusion of participatory budgeting, a well-known and respected deliberative method, its potential contamination by deployment in rigged or non-deliberative settings provoked discussions among public engagement proponents, who anticipated that such efforts might be manipulated for sponsor gains but might also affect public trust in deliberative solutions. An expert on online budgeting software asked about a “budget challenge” run by the Los Angeles Mayor’s Office:

“So is the Budget Puzzle in its current form deliberative? Hardly.” The Kettering Foundation, a non-profit foundation that researches deliberative democracy, asked on their Facebook page: “What do you think: are budgeting exercises like these what we would call ‘deliberative choice work’? If not, how are they related?”

The popularity of deliberative demonstration projects led to a number of unintended consequences resulting from the diffusion of public participation technologies across contexts and with new actors seeking political legitimacy. Providers of products and services to facilitate deliberative engagement faced the prospect of expansive growth in and steep competition for the public participation facilitation market from public relations firms and other organizational consultants (Edelman 2010; Martin 2015). Certainly, new technologies and new markets for democratic services opened up extraordinary opportunities for facilitation organizations like AmericaSpeaks to implement 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meetings with new audiences in global markets (Papadopoulos 2013). But pursuing these opportunities entailed risks to the perceived political authenticity of deliberative demonstrations, which was critical to establishing their value as a space apart from “ordinary politics.”

Participants in deliberative demonstrations could be “highly critical” of “the top-down power dynamics” in processes and skeptical of “broader societal or political impacts,” suggesting that the field needed to go “beyond engagement exercises” (Powell et al. 2011) or beyond the “field’s strong emphasis on temporary public consultations” (Scully 2014: 1). Leighninger went so far as to describe a “harmful identity crisis” in the field in the lack of clarity around the democratic aims of practitioners’ tools: “these aren’t just props for conventional processes, but building blocks for new political systems” (2014: 1).

Certainly, the framings used in deliberative demonstrations could fall flat, and were frequently challenged as they were by Jessie and others at CCIII. When deliberation is successful, such participant anger is respectfully acknowledged and defused by organizers, as in an IAP2 training on “Emotion, Outrage, and Public Participation,” in which practitioners learn “strategies for assessing and addressing outrage and how to plan for it in your public participation program.” While studies have documented cases of increased engagement following process participation, survey research of participants in NPAC’s Bigger, Better, All Together Conference found that, even when the subject of deliberation was development of a collective action agenda, participants were actually less interested in participating in collective action following the intensive 4-day deliberations than they were before (Author and co-author 2011). In line with the argument made here, a social marketing campaign was participants’ top priority for national-level action (Author and co-author 2011). Consensus emerged over the course of the meeting that national

change was needed, but the local scale was the most likely to yield effective action. NCDD director Sandy Heierbacher noted in a 2014 essay “a strong swing back to a focus on the local level” from the national level—with even national-level efforts focusing on supporting local groups (2).

As a high-profile field leader advancing large-scale deliberative demonstrations, AmericaSpeaks got caught in the middle of these tensions between deep structural inequalities and the individual-level empowerment on offer in deliberative demonstrations. While the satisfaction rates for direct participants in AmericaSpeaks’ 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meetings like the Community Congresses were typically above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, public response to the political authenticity of deliberations became more skeptical over time. As one participant at the NPAC Conference reported just a month after the meeting,

To me, it was an exciting and intellectually stimulating experience. Very intense but valuable. Although when I got home that energy dissipated which I’m sure was true for most. So the challenge is to keep that focus and build on the energy... The dialog needs to continue. It must continue for something to happen... Not that it merited intense journalistic scrutiny but it’s almost like it never happened. And to the nation, to individual people – the people we want to bring to the arts -- it really didn’t.

When I checked in with Susan from CCIH in January 2008, she had moved back to New Orleans and her fortunes had plummeted with a health crisis and a job that did not provide her with enough income. She still had faith in the plan and carried good feelings about the meetings, despite her struggles:

I do think that the time spent in those meetings were worth the time and effort... As if these meetings and plans have affected our city in a concrete way is still left to be seen. Progress is slow and citizens are still having difficult times trying to rebuild their lives. I for one am struggling so much until I feel like a victim all over again.

On the one hand, AmericaSpeaks leaders like founder Carolyn Lukensmeyer knew that building national infrastructure for deliberation (institutionalizing deliberative reforms more deeply in decision-making) would require further leveraging critical relationships not just with reformers, but with elites: The field should “focus its energy on... building a cadre of elected leaders and public officials... [and] engaging

with the media so that it becomes an effective partner...” (2014: 1). On the other hand, by strategically engaging with politicians and foundations to advance the results of deliberative demonstrations, it risked compromising the perceived political authenticity of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting.

AmericaSpeaks’ six-hour “Our Budget, Our Economy” meetings on the nation’s fiscal priorities, organized in 2010, prompted considerable cynicism of this kind. The reaction from the left? “A vast right-wing conspiracy” designed to terrorize Americans into cutting Social Security and Medicare. The reaction from the right? A biased civic pageant designed to scare the public into raising taxes. The rejection of the “Our Budget, Our Economy” discussions across the blogosphere precipitated baffled distress from public deliberation advocates and leaders. On the NCDD listserv, Sandy Heierbacher described her fears that anti-engagement rhetoric would manipulate the public not to endorse a particular outcome, but to avoid public engagement altogether:

I find this situation so alarming and fascinating (and important for us in the D&D community to be aware of) because in the internet age it’s incredibly easy for partisan groups and interest groups to spin public engagement efforts in ways that manipulate citizens and threaten our ability to recruit a balance of perspectives and our perceived legitimacy (and therefore our potential impact on decisions)... Regardless of the process that was used or the people involved, in some ways the integrity of the work we all do—and the principles we stand for—is being called into question.

It turned out that Heierbacher’s concerns were not misplaced. On January 3, 2014, AmericaSpeaks announced in an email that it was shutting down operations:

AmericaSpeaks has an unparalleled record of organizing more than 100 major citizen deliberations in all 50 states. After 19 years of working as an independent, national, nonprofit organization--sustained exclusively by grants and contracts--AmericaSpeaks will close its doors for good today. (Brigham et al. 2014)

This was a major blow to the field, inasmuch as in addition to its 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meetings, AmericaSpeaks had led innumerable national collaborative efforts in service of advancing research and practice in the dialogue and deliberation professional community. Reactions from D&D practitioners on the web ranged

from sadness to shock to dismay at the loss of a trailblazing organization when a national government so deeply tangled in partisan gridlock seemed to need rational public voices for change more than ever.

The grief was palpable on an “AmericaSpeaks legacy” Tumblr site that organization staff, ever the masterful facilitators, had set up for former volunteers, discussion participants, and facilitators to “share your perspective on how AmericaSpeaks impacted you” (Brigham et al. 2014). On the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation listserv, practitioners alternately expressed hope that the model developed by AmericaSpeaks would continue and laments about the problem of competition among D&D organizations at a time of shrinking philanthropic giving and government retrenchment.

Some prominent bloggers and leaders in the field placed blame elsewhere. They acknowledged that AmericaSpeaks had led the field for years, but that making change in the contemporary political context of the United States in the 2010s—an environment remade by the promise of deeper participation in politics, media, and social institutions over the last two decades, even as troubling signs of inequality were deepening—was a tall order. Peter Levine, a civic studies scholar, AmericaSpeaks board member, and author of a hopeful book on the “promise of civic renewal in America,” reflected on his blog that AmericaSpeaks’ closing carried grim lessons for the field:

In essence, the people and organizations that really care about nonpartisan, open-ended citizen deliberations don’t have a lot of money to pay for it, and that is a problem that affects more than AmericaSpeaks... the ultimate failure of the business model raises serious questions about elites’ support for civic engagement in America. (Levine 2014a)

Joe Goldman, a former staffer at AmericaSpeaks and later a funder of the organization through the Democracy Fund, reflected in a blog post that the larger field should take a deeper look at its commitments in light of the contemporary political and media culture of the U.S.: “While we should not give up on our principles, we need to acknowledge that not enough progress has been made in institutionalizing the practices that we have spent so many years developing and defending” (Goldman 2014).

The soul-searching experienced by the dialogue and deliberation community in the wake of AmericaSpeaks’ demise described an uncertain future, characterized by alternating currents of hope for what the field had achieved in terms of refining

innovative methods like the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meeting and frustration that such gains could be lost so quickly and change was so slow to arrive. In the 2000s and 2010s in the United States, at a time of deep apathy and cynicism about national politics, the value of demonstrating genuine public voice and citizen engagement grew. But “fake” participation had also exploded, whether from consulting firms soliciting public engagement on behalf of well-heeled clients or industry groups masquerading as the voice of the people (Bonnemann 2010; Kuran 1998; Levine 2009; Snider 2010; Walker 2014). Town hall meetings were as likely to be sponsored by a deliberation consultant as an international engineering firm’s public engagement arm (Colom 2014). Even the terminology of America’s voice was deeply contested—with the Republican Party sponsoring a soundalike interactive website called “America Speaking Out.” By February 2015, the “americaspeaks.org” domain was occupied by an electronic cigarette industry-sponsored blog advocating “vaping for a strong economy”—a tragic end for the online home of an innovative organization committed to countering special interests with a credible public voice in national politics. Securing the deeper social change that transformative public engagement promised in an era of stark inequalities seemed more difficult than ever.

### **Looking Ahead: The Future of the Town Meeting**

To understand contemporary deliberative demonstrations like the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meeting in context, we need to understand the ways that stakeholder discussion and action were subtly managed in public engagement in the 1990s and 2000s. First, deliberative process forced empathetic identification with the difficulties of others—that speaking should be accompanied by active listening. Processes began with expressions of individual interests but used small group methods to assemble those individual expressions into collective realization of the multi-sided nature of problems. Following expressions of their own perspectives, those with individual-level interests and agendas were asked to understand the “tough choices” decision-makers faced through role-playing as hypothetical or actual decision-makers. Second, by putting citizen voice at the center, processes moved sponsors and powerful actors to roles as collaborative “stakeholders” who were equivalent contributing members of the democratic polity: supportive, respectful witnesses standing by to make their own unique contributions and to subsidize the individual actions stakeholders were ready to undertake in reciprocal processes of “co-creation.” Faced with complex challenges, citizens and employees were asked to assume the burden of problem-solving at the community level, while decision-makers and market actors are “flattened” to the position of claimants, incapable of producing change without the assistance of the public. As such, the empowerment and political action produced by deliberative demonstrations were

real, but small-scale in scope, more likely to contain unrest than to challenge national or global-level structural inequalities.

Process framings emphasizing constructive solution-generation even in dire circumstances limited more substantive political action by providing opportunities for small-scale change and allowing stakeholders to vent. Citizens were encouraged to govern themselves as a way of enacting civic virtue: by eating responsibly and staying healthy, by caring for their spouses and parents, and by making sure that their children are educated, productive members of society. The grassroots action encouraged in deliberative demonstrations reinforced institutional authority—whether of agribusiness companies to manage commodity and consumer product supply chains, or of governments to impose taxation on citizens, or of companies to reduce health benefits in order to stay afloat.

In terms of topics, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meeting was not exclusively about empowerment but also about slashing benefits and jobs while keeping up morale, about youth development, urban growth, and personal social responsibility. The Meetings were not exclusively about civic discussion, but about positivity and appreciation, a few hours' worth of generous social services and new age visioning, serious invocations of patriotism and sacrifice, irreverent celebration of pop and soul hits, edgy slam poetry, and quirky, amateurish art. To this point, analyses of the cultural resonance of public engagement have understood deliberative demonstrations in terms of “motherhood and apple pie”: chicken soup for the soul in a cynical age. In fact, deliberation as practiced in the 1990s and 2000s was both deeply nostalgic and technocratically future-oriented. But the nostalgia evoked was not for the reassuring touchstones of 1950s domestic life, but a blend of modern social justice and 19<sup>th</sup>-century virtues—for a burnished Yankee past of centuries-tested town meetings, (evoking localism, communitarianism, and humble nonpartisanship), and for the heady romance of 1960s and 1970s activism (evoking racial and ethnic diversity, gender equality, personal growth, environmental awareness and radical critique).

Certainly, the “democratic spectacle” (Mahony 2010) of deliberation at many Town Halls addressed structural inequalities or regulatory solutions, and education is one form of meaningful social change. But their episodic nature, emphasis on immediate individual action, and focus on powerful actors as constructive collaborators produced an explicitly disciplinary, narrow message about the viability of social action: as the participant guide for the Iowa summit on obesity put it, youth needed to be “shaped” into socially and economically beneficial forms, and plans needed to focus on “actionable steps that each of us can take and promote today and tomorrow.” In selling its management services, AmericaSpeaks claimed that it was “the leader in managing large public events that ensure effective citizen

engagement and wise use of resources.” But their not-for-profit, nonpartisan business model did not work at a time when deliberative methods were valuable commodities precisely because of their association with political authenticity.

At the turn of the last century, the traditional New England Town Meeting—as varied as that tradition was, as this volume attests—was blended with contemporary values and for contemporary uses. A time traveler might be confused by the giant conference space, the round tables, the video screens, the artists and community service workers and emergency medical technicians, all the social services of a sophisticated society—to say nothing of the ear-splitting rock music played during “clicker” voting. But to focus on these newer elements of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Meeting would be to ignore the importance of the “traditional” trappings that the “town hall” name and the practice of talking to diverse others in small groups invokes.

What was sold in the Zen and New Thought and positive psychology-rich settings of deliberative demonstrations in the 1990s and 2000s was not religion or therapy but social change—political mobilization, speaking truth to organizational power, and collective action—as not just congruent with capitalism, but transcending it entirely for a space that was not just cold business but also warm family and center square. Despite the fact that these blendings of settings, sectors, and logics are the ultimate goal, the power of deliberative demonstrations, and their commercial value for sponsors, rests in the integrity of their political authenticity—still powerfully invoked by the ideal of everyday citizens talking to each other to resolve common problems.

Even as budgets for public participation have grown, and as deeper forms of public engagement have been integrated into public, private, and nonprofit organizations as a matter of course, the boundaries of this dialogue in the 2010s are increasingly fuzzy, and the ability of deep democracy practitioners to gain a share of those budgets in their competition against other consultants and public relations firms is very much in doubt. While the D&D field in the United States is maturing, it nevertheless faces significant challenges (Black et al. 2014). Chief among these challenges are concerns about the means and ends of participation: both ensuring access and equity in professionally-run deliberations themselves, and securing the deeper social change that transformative public engagement promises in an era of stark inequalities.

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