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Viewpoint

A Path Toward Depolarization

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A Path Toward Depolarization

The emerging discipline of public interest communications offers solutions to our deeply polarized and divided world.

BY ANGELA BRADBERRY & JANE JOHNSTON

Headlines in the United States tell of bitter political polarization. Take gun control, for instance. Mass shootings have become all too common, followed by news stories that imply that reform efforts are doomed. “As Mass Shootings Continue, Gridlock on Guns Returns to Washington,” laments a January 24, 2023, headline from *The New York Times* after two shootings in California.

But the truth is more complex than the headlines suggest. Although the gun-safety movement has faced serious setbacks, it has also seen gains. Poll after poll shows that Americans overwhelmingly want to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people, and in some states, legislators from both sides of the aisle have responded. In 2018, in the wake of a high-school shooting that left 17 dead in Parkland, Florida, 26 US states and Washington, DC, passed gun-safety laws, including 12 legislatures led by Republicans. Delaware’s red-flag law, which permits police to seize the firearms of those whom mental-health professionals have deemed a threat to themselves or others, passed unanimously that year. Even the sharply divided US Congress in June 2022 passed modest gun-safety reforms as well, with more than two dozen Republicans voting for them.

“For years, the gun lobby has spread the myth that we face a binary choice: guns everywhere, or no guns at all. That’s not true,” says Gun Owners for Safety, a coalition launched by former US Rep. Gabby Giffords, who survived an assassination attempt in 2011 by a gunman. “Patriots of every stripe can agree that the Second Amendment goes hand-in-hand with commonsense measures like universal background checks. That’s what we’re about—bringing together unlikely allies to speak out for safety and responsibility.”

As academics developing the field of public interest communications, we understand the wisdom of an approach that speaks to commonalities instead of differences. We live on opposite sides of the globe and have divergent definitions of public interest communications. But we share several common principles—and we believe these commonalities are critical to addressing the dangerous, often entrenched, political and social polarization that has developed in the United States and elsewhere around the world.

THREE FUNDAMENTALS

Public interest communications is an emerging academic discipline that seeks to use communications to address complex social



issues. At the University of Florida, where Angela teaches, we define it as the use of research-based strategic communications to mobilize people to effect positive social change—usually to attain a specific goal or outcome. At the University of Queensland, where Jane teaches, it’s about prioritizing democratic processes (such as consultation and listening) and enabling reasoned public debate. As such, it’s as much about process as outcome or solution.

Despite such divergence, we share three commitments. First, we favor *moving away from thinking in binaries*. Strict divisions of good and bad, right and wrong, do not apply to our complex social and political world. As Giffords’ group says,

guns are not about all or nothing. Individuals are complex and do not fit into the boxes we usually assign to them. Rather, they fall within a spectrum of progressive-conservative thinking, depending on the issue. George Lakoff, renowned cognitive linguist and analyst of political discourse, calls this “biconceptualism,” meaning that people may harbor both progressive and conservative worldviews. Which viewpoint they apply depends on the situation and issue.

Others see this shift away from binaries as evidence of social progress. Futurist Bob Johansen, for example, calls this new way of conceiving the world “full-spectrum thinking.” Because we increasingly move across roles in society and have multiple identities in our lives, binaries become counterproductive. We are forced to move beyond binary thinking and see things in terms of scale and nuance. This fluid approach to modern life accepts that difference is not as stark as it might once have appeared to be.

Second, we promote *finding shared values*. People who may disagree on issues can often still find shared values from which they may find agreement. In the wake of a horrific string of mass shootings in the United States, news stories highlighted the fact that a majority of gun owners support certain gun-safety measures. Pro-reform messages focus on the shared value of safety, and increasingly we see calls for treating guns as we do cars—potentially lethal equipment that can be regulated to minimize harm.

In Australia, a popular turn toward values of individual freedom, equality, and inclusiveness has seen some social justice issues such as same-sex marriage and voluntary assisted dying (VAD) legalized in recent years. Same-sex marriage was affirmed nationally in 2017 following a national postal vote, with many seeing the change to marriage legislation as a symbolic victory for gender equality more broadly. Likewise, VAD was introduced in the state of Victoria in 2019, with each

other state soon following, so that by 2023 all Australian states now have VAD, with the two territories tipped to follow by the end of the year. These changes—neither of which is unique to Australia—confirm how public values can shift over time, often after years, even decades, of public discussion and debate. Depolarization occurs when the majority of members of a society accept that even if people don't agree on an issue, they hold a shared understanding of the values that underpin it. In democracies, these include the fundamental rights for individuals to have a say in who they marry and how they die.

Third, we favor *actively listening to the arguments of others*. To actively listen, you must see things from the other's point of view; only then can you work through difference. "Active listening" was first coined in 1957 by US psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson. This approach is used in situations as diverse as marriage therapy and employment disputes, classroom conflict and peace building across nations. People can start learning it early in life. The US Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) lists active listening as a way to resolve conflict in schools, teamed with other communication skills, such as formulating questions, reframing, creating

cies needed to navigate different kinds of conflicts. In fact, the center includes a workshop, "How to Overcome Toxic Polarization," through its "political courage challenge" that encourages people to work on themselves regularly to decrease their tendencies toward polarization. This course is organized around a progressive series of exercises to overcome divisive social habits, establish honesty and tolerance, and de-escalate tensions.

Other organizations in the United States have also emerged in this space. For example, One Small Step brings together strangers harboring different political beliefs for a 50-minute conversation. One Small Step is based on contact theory, according to which interaction between two groups can reduce prejudice and conflict. Through conversation, participants can escape stereotypes and discover each other's common humanity. Similarly, Braver Angels and Unify America bring together people of different political views to find common ground.

Research on addressing vaccine hesitancy among certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in nursing homes during the COVID-19 pandemic found that actively listening and acknowledging the legitimacy of their concerns was key. Researchers

with elected representatives, delivering a historic victory for marriage equality in 2015. Among the communication used to gauge public opinion and motivate behavior was the #HomeToVote hashtag, which saw thousands of its diaspora returning to Ireland to cast their yes ballots. The effort's citizen-led assembly ultimately reflected the shift in public opinion, which had previously been politically divided. It reflected grassroots, bottom-up conversations rather than polarizing top-down political agendas.

PUTTING DOWN OUR SMARTPHONES

We know that all societies struggle to varying degrees with political division. Yet research shows that often what we believe about "the other side" is inaccurate, as is what we think the other side believes about us. If we put down our smartphones and step away from our computers to talk to one another directly, we find that we have much more in common than we thought.

Fostering greater dialogue, though, cannot ensure harmony. This is where public interest communications can help. It is not a panacea—too many factors help drive us apart. But if we combine the fundamentals of public interest communica-

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rapport, using language effectively, deescalating negative emotions, and nonverbal communication.

There has been a surge in individuals and organizations using active-listening techniques to help resolve conflict and break through divides. The Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University lists dozens of organizations, groups, and individuals that work to bridge political, economic, and social divides where they exist. They focus on developing the knowledge, skills, and competen-

recommended one-on-one conversations with the CNAs and "establishing trust with CNAs by listening to their fears."

The need to be listened to, rather than talked at, has also seen a trend toward civic participation and direct democracy in decision-making. Everyday citizens, including those most affected by issues, are increasingly demanding a chance to be heard. Take, for example, Ireland's constitutional convention, which launched that country's same-sex marriage referendum in 2013. The convention was made up of 66 members of the public who worked

tions—thinking in nonbinary terms, finding common values, and actively listening to the positions of others, especially to those outside our echo chambers—we can begin to depolarize political rifts and bridge social gaps. •

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