

Communication as Deliberation:
A Non-Deliberative Polemic on Communication Theory

John Gastil, Associate Professor
Department of Communication
University of Washington
Box 353740, Seattle, WA 98195
ph: (206) 543-4655, email: jgastil@u.washington.edu

Author's note. At the invitation of this volume's editors, I have written this essay in as forceful a style as possible. One might find it ironic that a deliberation scholar would write such a belligerent screed, but I would remind the reader that the deliberative ideal welcomes both satire and frank disagreement, all in the spirit of sifting out the truth (and having a good time doing so).

We can best understand communication through the lens of deliberative democratic theory. When communication is not relevant to deliberation, it is frivolous or, more often, in no need of careful study. Communication for the sake of companionship, self-expression, or play is fine, even essential, but cultures have bonded, displayed, and thrived for millennia without careful study of (or even introspection on) such modes of talk. By contrast, much of human progress has centered on our ability to imagine a more deliberative society and work toward the establishment of increasingly deliberative institutions and cultural traditions.

In general terms, deliberation simply means to reflect carefully on a matter, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of alternative solutions to a problem. Deliberation aims to arrive at a decision or judgment based on not only facts and data but also values, emotions, and other less technical considerations. Thus, for a single, solitary individual, deliberation means careful thinking and analysis, a familiar process that all of us go through at different times.¹ Those scholars who speak of “intrapersonal communication”—the talk that goes on inside one’s head—are familiar with this process. I prefer to call this “thinking,” rather than labeling it as a form of communication. When one carries out elaborate conversations in one’s head, the most appropriate research perspective is that of the psychopharmacologist, not the communication scholar.

In any case, individual decisions are rarely, if ever, truly private ones. Even when a single person has the authority to make a choice, the deliberation that precedes a decision involves many other people and many forms of communication. More commonly, what people mean by deliberation is talking to make decisions together as a small group, an organization, or a nation. Whether the decision maker is a single person or a collective body, it is equally useful to think of the communication process as deliberation leading toward a decision.

In this brief essay, I will demonstrate the importance of deliberation in work and family, politics and public life, and our own search for the meaning of life. After revealing the ubiquity of deliberation, I'll narrowly avoid contradicting myself by arguing that we don't do it often enough. That which would seem common is, alas, most rare.

Deliberation in Everyday Life

If you own a small skateboard rental shop near the shore at Pacific Beach, well, you have it made. But seriously, imagine that you owned such a store and needed to decide whether to add in-line skates to your rental inventory. The decision is yours and yours alone, yet your deliberation on this decision will involve face-to-face conversations and online exchanges with friends, customers, beachgoers, and other shopkeepers. You might also do some reading to look at prices and learn the experiences of other renters. And you're likely to track relevant popular trends by drawing on what you've watched on television, heard on the radio, and seen at the movies and on the Internet. These different communication processes all mix together in your mind to yield a decision that is better understood as the culmination of a multi-channel communicative process than the result of a private, closed cognitive process.

Some workplaces, from equal-partner law firms to grocery cooperatives, involve collective, often face-to-face, deliberation among the members of a decision-making body.² Whether firing employees, renting a new facility, or purchasing new stock, these co-workers engage in a range of different communication activities, and all of these feed into a larger deliberative process oriented toward a final decision. Even in many hierarchical corporations or religious organizations, a board of directors or elders deliberates in a similar manner.

But there's more to life than work. Does deliberation have anything to do with how we live as individuals or in our families and close relationships? Again, when deliberation is

generally understood as talk that is oriented toward making decisions through a reflective, analytic process of discovery and judgment, the most important aspects of our personal and family lives can be understood in deliberative terms.

Starting with a hard example, how about deciding where to live, which school to attend, what car to buy, or even who to spend your time with? All are decisions, of course, as decision making is a ubiquitous feature of a free society. Happily, freedom is ascendant in the modern world, and the choices we make involve an ever-expanding array of alternatives with incredibly complex sets of considerations.

Choice has become so pervasive, in fact, that some observers wonder whether it has become excessive, even burdensome.³ Even if we sometimes reasonably avoid deliberation to make trivial decisions about what jeans to buy or which movie to see, we can't help but tend toward deliberating on the more important personal decisions we make.

Consider the example of marriage or choosing a life partner. This decision is, first of all, a joint one—even when the decision makers are parents setting up an arranged marriage. The parties deciding to join together may work through emotions, hopes, fears, sober financial considerations, and anything else you might imagine. Though the question may be asked on a Jumbotron screen in a sports arena and met with a quick and blushing yes, even then the move from engagement to marriage proceeds as a deliberative one, often involving complex negotiations about the wedding or the marriage itself. After all, many engagements end with separation, amicable or otherwise.

Once joined together as family, the deliberation continues, 'till death do it part. At this point, it is useful to illustrate the more subtle deliberative processes that take place in our lives.

We engage in small struggles every day over how to conduct ourselves. Over time, these typically are resolved in favor of one view or another or some compromise in between.

For example, how should partners in a relationship speak to each other day-to-day? What forms of speech are loving versus cloying, playful versus mean? How often should one call one's partner on a cell phone? What topics are appropriate when strolling in a public park? Each of us answers these questions differently. When in a long-term relationship, partners often negotiate the answers to these questions, even if they never meta-communicate (i.e., talk explicitly about how to talk). Few couples broach these topics in a stereotypically deliberative way by, say, holding a "house meeting" with formal agendas and committee minutes. But most couples do work through these questions over the course of many years. The deliberation proceeds through small, seemingly off-hand comments about each other's behavior, unconnected observations about the way people on television or in movies address one another. Even unconsciously (though often, dare we say, deliberately), the partners talk through these issues and arrive at informal agreements or *détentes*.⁴

Deliberation, Politics, and the Meaning of Life

Deliberation characterizes not only the small, personal questions of our lives but also the largest, most profound decisions we must make together as publics. History has smiled on democracy, and the democratic ideal has spread quickly over the globe, at least when measured in geologic time. Most modern nations make their major decisions through an overlapping series of deliberative processes. Public assemblies, legislative committees, city councils, administrative bodies, judicial panels, and supreme courts all go through quasi-deliberative processes to draft, pass, judge, and execute laws.

Individual citizens also take part in a larger deliberative drama. From one perspective, the consumption of political news and entertainment, from the *New York Times* to *The Daily Show*, provides us with the information and viewpoints we need to arrive at our own private judgments about which candidates and policies to support. Political conversations add more to the mix of ideas and input, though they are often shaped by the same media content we've recently consumed.⁵ (“Did you see the *Oprah* yesterday? She had this woman on who...”)

Taken together, these individual, mediated and social deliberations add up to a process of public weighing and judgment, at least in theory.⁶ In this way, citizens deliberate to decide who to vote for, so that they might deliberate on our behalf as our elected representatives. Or, when voting directly on initiatives, we deliberate through the media and informal interactions with fellow citizens to make laws ourselves, for better or for worse.

In the U.S. and a few other countries, citizens also deliberate as part of the criminal and civil justice system through the jury process. Complete strangers with no technical expertise listen to competing arguments and then retire to the jury room to deliberate. The research done to date suggests that over the course of the trial and in their private deliberation rooms, juries generally work through the relevant legal and evidentiary issues to arrive at verdicts quite similar to those that judges reach through their own deliberative process.⁷

If health care reform, foreign policy debates, and Murder 1 don't strike you as important (though they should), perhaps you could agree that there are other profound questions to answer during your brief existence on Earth. What, you might ask yourself, is the meaning of life? Is there a world beyond the flesh—a god or other supernatural force that transcends our lives?

Even a solitary seeker, such as the ones portrayed in such classic inspirational texts as *Siddhartha* or *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, finds answers to these questions through

contemplation inspired by social interaction. Encounters with sages, fellow-seekers, and unreflective passers-by provide the material necessary for further insight on a philosophical or spiritual journey. To turn about a philosophical truism, the unlived life is not worth examining. How could a person with no real social experience concoct a useful conception of human existence? The cliché of Rene Descartes sitting by the fireplace, sifting through his private musings, ignores the lifetime of conversations, social exchanges, and public activities that preceded his quiet nights by the hearth. Deliberation is the most apt metaphor for how we work through our most basic philosophical and moral questions.

A Deliberative Critique of How We Communicate

All of this is to say that we can think of much of our communication as part of a deliberative process. The preceding examples have shown the prevalence of deliberation in both obvious and obscure forms in our private, social, and public lives. But what I have really tried to show is how apt a metaphor deliberation is for how we *should* conduct ourselves. To an extent, deliberation is inevitable as we talk through our choices in life, but deliberation occurs by degrees. In this sense, deliberation might be even more apt as an *ideal* for much of our communication—a model by which to judge the way we actually make choices.

The ideal type of deliberation is commonly described as being democratic. A fully democratic process for public deliberation would involve rigorous analysis of problems and solutions, and it would require egalitarian discussion norms and an openness to dialogue when participants differed in fundamental ways, such as how to reason or even how to talk.⁸

If you would like an image, picture an idealized assembly of citizen-legislators, working together to reach a decision in spite of their strong, principled disagreements. Or think of the best working group you've ever been on, collecting data, speaking frankly, sharing fears and hopes,

encouraging the quieter members to speak up, and arriving at a final decision. These are ideal-types, and they can help us see the limitations of actual practice.

Returning to the workplace, consider how rarely an office deliberates on matters of grave importance. After all, the slang term “office politics” refers to petty power struggles and self-destructive infighting, not to the model of public deliberation. A workplace misses an opportunity for deliberation whenever a person is fired as a vendetta (instead of owing to proven incompetence), a marketing plan is adopted on the reputation of its author (rather than its merits), or a new set of procedures is adopted due to the whimsical judgment of a boss (in the absence of input from the staff). Even when an organization appears, on the surface, to undertake deliberation, critical meetings, memos, and musings may be nothing more than distractions from an autocratic decision by a manager or CEO who cares not for the thoughts of the rank-and-file membership. Though deliberation takes time, in examples such as these, the time spent deliberating more than pays for itself in higher morale and better decisions.

When we make decisions on our own behalf, we also often fail to deliberate when we should. Advertisers count on you uncritically absorbing mediated images, feelings, innuendos, and the like, slowly building loyalty toward brands and lifestyles. When you walk zombie-like into the coffee shop, muttering “Donuts....donuts,” your choices have been reduced to automatic processes. If you think to yourself, “Sure, but that’s not how I’d buy a car or a home,” think again. The higher the stakes, the more companies invest in your miseducation. Sure, some advertising might really provide useful input into your deliberative process, but more often, the goal is to shift your preferences and build your appetite through guile. And it often works. After all, *Consumer Reports* has never jumped off the racks at the magazine stand.

The countless unconscious social decisions we make every day also fail to meet deliberative standards. More often than not, we uncritically accept the status quo rules for how to treat and view each other. Racist and sexist ideologies reinforce themselves through these daily oversights, even in the actions and thoughts of people who consciously oppose such views. Listening to the sexist gesture without comment, cringing as the stranger walks by, correcting the dialect of a playmate, we make our argument (or silently assent to another's claim) for one particular way of living. Time and again, we let pass a moment where we could have made a modest contribution to a gradual cultural shift, a quiet revolution in how the sexes relate or how cultures co-mingle. The deliberative spirit asks us to engage, to share our views, to reflect on our assumptions, and on those occasions when we do so, we feel alive, engaged, a part of the larger social drama.⁹

As a society, we also have many opportunities to make our public institutions more deliberative. Even the hallmark of deliberation, the American jury system, could benefit from reforms oriented toward making more deliberative. Previous research has shown that these randomly-selected groups of citizens are subject to pernicious gender, race, and class biases, such as the tendency to discount minority views and over-value the perspectives of wealthier male jurors.¹⁰ The deliberative perspective asks juries to be *more* deliberative by addressing biases such as these. This can be done with a reform as simple as adding a paragraph on group communication tendencies to the instructions juries hear before retiring to their chambers.

Elections could also be more deliberative. Politics in the United States is far from a model of deliberation. As is true most everywhere else, political communication in the United States often consists of mudslinging, name-calling, empty stump speeches, misleading campaign

mailings, deceptive television ads, and media coverage oriented toward the horse race more than the issues.¹¹

There are ways, however, to make elections more deliberative. One proposal I have advanced is convening randomly-selected, paid panels of citizens to evaluate candidates and ballot measures. The citizens would deliberate over a period of one week and write up reflections and recommendations that would appear in the official voting guide. This process would let other voters act on the insights of their peers' deliberations, and it could even orient the candidates themselves toward more deliberative platforms, lest they appear shallow or deceptive when evaluated by the citizen panels.¹² British Columbia, Canada has done something similar by successfully convening a random sample of its citizens to draft a referendum on electoral reform.¹³

Aside from politics and structural reforms such as these, each of us has the opportunity to take part in ongoing conversations about the meaning of life and the purpose of human existence. We often think of these as personal questions, but in the modern context, I believe it's clearer than ever that these are questions we must explore together, even if we are unlikely to find the same answers.

Modern Islamic terrorism, for instance, relies on sharp cultural divisions between one set of believers and another. To the extent that all varieties of Muslims, Christians, Jews, atheists, and others can talk openly with one another about their convictions, we decrease the potential for misunderstanding, prejudice, and dehumanization. Theological deliberation does not eradicate terrorism, but the careful cultivation of the deliberative spirit undermines movements and ideologies that rely on ignorance, intolerance, and isolation.

Conclusion

In the end, the deliberative perspective is only one way of looking at communication. There are many other modes of talk that are useful, vital, and enjoyable. And there are other critical yardsticks by which we can measure our discourse. Nonetheless, deliberation aptly characterizes much of our communication, particularly the important decisions we must make as individuals and collectives, and it is equally valuable as a standard by which we can judge the ways we talk with each other.

Fortunately, it is likely that deliberation is a self-reinforcing process. The more often we deliberate together, the better we become at it, the more we come to expect it, the more often we expect it to work, and the more motivated we are to try it.¹⁴ Scholars in political communication, political science, and public administration already have come to recognize the potential power of deliberation. Its reach could extend even farther if we came to recognize the prevalence of deliberation—and the value of deliberative critique—across all spheres of human experience.

¹ John Dewey aptly described this process in his classic text, *How We Think* (New York: Heath & Co., 1910). Dewey's work strongly influenced later writings on decision making, such as Dennis S. Gouran and Randy Y. Hirokawa's "Functional Theory and Communication in Decision-Making and Problem-Solving Groups: An Expanded View," in *Communication and Group Decision-Making*, 2nd ed., Randy Y. Hirokawa, and Marshall Scott Poole, pp. 55-80 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1996).

² For a description of one such co-operative workplace, see my book *Democracy in Small Groups: Participation, Decision-Making, and Communication* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1993).

³ On the tyranny of choices in the modern world, see Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2004).

⁴ Roger Fisher, famous as a co-author of the bestselling *Getting to Yes*, saw how apt the negotiation metaphor was for relationships and co-wrote with Scott Brown *Getting Together: Building Relationships As We Negotiate* (New York: Penguin, 1989).

⁵ On how we talk about politics, see William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁶ On the mediated view of deliberation, see Benjamin Page, *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁷ See Valerie P. Hans and Neil Vidmar, *Judging the Jury* (New York: Perseus, 2001) and Hans' *Business on Trial: The Civil Jury and Corporate Responsibility* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸ This definition comes from Stephanie Burkhalter, John Gastil, and Todd Kelshaw's "The Self-Reinforcing Model of Public Deliberation," *Communication Theory*, Vol. 12 (2002), pp. 398-422.

⁹ Sociologist Anthony Giddens offers a comprehensive theory of society along these lines in *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁰ For a critique of juries and the promise of deliberation generally, see Lynn Sanders, "Against Deliberation," *Political Theory*, Vol. 25 (1997), pp. 347-76, and Tali Mendelberg, "The Deliberative Citizen: Theory and Evidence," *Political Decision Making, Deliberation and Participation*, Vol. 6 (2002), pp. 151-93.

¹¹ On discourse in American politics, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) and my review essay, "Undemocratic Discourse: A Review of Theory and Research on Political Discourse," *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 4 (1992), pp. 469-500. For a book on campaign communication from the perspective of those who practice it, read Judith S. Trent and Robert V. Friedenberg (eds.), *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices, 4th ed.* (New York: Praeger, 2000).

¹² I propose citizen panels in *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy Through Deliberative Elections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Early pioneers in deliberation include Ned Crosby and Jim Fishkin, both of whom have recently published books on how to make elections more deliberative. See Crosby's *Healthy Democracy: Empowering a Clear and Informed Voice of the People* (Edina, MN: Beaver's Pond, 2003) and Fishkin's book, with Bruce Ackerman, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹³ For more on the Citizens Assembly, visit <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public>.

¹⁴ See the second half of the article by Burkhalter et al., *op cit.*, pp. 411-418.