

## What is the point of exchanging reasons?

### On the moral/political purpose of expert communication with the public

Reason = consideration in favour of belief, emotion, or action (there are reasons to believe, to feel, to act)

Distinguish three ways of getting someone to do something or believe or feel something:

1. Your getting someone else to act simply by your moving their body. Or getting them to believe or feel by giving them hallucinogens. Independent of reasons altogether.
2. Your getting someone to believe, feel, or act by threatening or tricking them. In this case, the reasons that *get the threatened or tricked person to believe, feel or act in manner X* are different from the reasons that *motivate the threatener or tricker to get the relevant person to believe, feel or act in manner X*. E.g. When you threaten my career unless I support your research agenda, my reason for supporting the agenda is fear, while your reason could be something quite different (e.g. belief that the agenda is necessary; self-interest).
3. Your getting someone to believe, feel, or act in manner X by offering to them the very same reason that motivates you to believe, feel or act in manner X. E.g. You get me to believe something by showing me the same steps of a mathematical proof that motivates you to believe it.

Education, deliberation, and conversation primarily involve no 3.

Approaches 1 and 2 do not respect the autonomy of the subjected person. That person is used as a means to the agent's end without letting the person assess the end on its independent merits.

'Exchanging' reasons is back-and-forth deliberation of type 3. It moves people through the 'unforced force' of the better argument (Habermas).

Why should experts (including mathematicians) communicate with the public in manner 3?

- Moral duty to treat others as autonomous; moral duty not to lie or coerce
- Education: if I lie about the reason for believing or doing X, then (if I succeed in deceiving you) your understanding of why X should be believed or done is faulty. This infects not only the belief in X itself but also its relation to further beliefs, and your ability to investigate and assess the belief and others.
- Democratic legitimacy: States control powerful tools of coercion of types 1 and 2. If I break the law, I face consequences of type 1 (including, ultimately, having my body moved into prison whether or not I accept this). This type of control requires justification. Legitimacy represents a standard that power must satisfy if it is to be wielded permissibly.

Most democratic theorists maintain that simply giving all citizens equal power at the ballot box is insufficient for state legitimacy. Legitimacy also requires that citizens have equal rights to participate in **deliberation** before voting.

Democratic theorists highlight the importance - along two dimensions - of deliberation in an open public sphere to which all have access:

- (a) **Epistemic:** deliberation makes voters more knowledgeable, and more likely to reach the 'right' answer (see Estlund, Landemore)
- (b) **Self-government:** deliberation enables everyone to participate in political decision-making, delivering self-government for each rather than government by an elite (Christiano, Rostboll)

(For more on these themes, see Habermas and Peter)

Both claims for deliberation seem doubtful in the 'real world':

Contra (a): Even if we screen out the effects of non-deliberative communication (types 1 and 2), the problems of polarisation and conspiracy theories threaten the claim that deliberation can increase our chances of getting to the 'right' answer. Consider the evidence that falsehoods spread faster than truths (perhaps as falsehoods tend to be more surprising) – see Vosoughi, Roy & Aral 2018.

Contra (b): The claim that current public debates enable self-government for each is doubtful, given the huge inequalities in access to the public sphere: some can readily project their views to millions (e.g. through ownership of media organisations), while others lack internet access.

But if public deliberation and voting do not deliver the epistemic and self-government goods, then democratic theorists tell us that government will lack legitimacy: it will lack the moral permission to wield force.

What can be done to help public deliberation serve its epistemic and self-government purposes?

(See our project: [newpublicsphere.stir.ac.uk](http://newpublicsphere.stir.ac.uk))

- Regulation: media monopolies can be limited to reduce some voices' excess communicative power; broadband rollout increases the communicative power of others. But regulating content is harder (cf. Mill's famous arguments for 'free speech').
- Systems design: design for publicity and anonymity in the right places (cf. O'Neill on the value of 'imprints' in book publishing); design to ensure relevant alternative arguments are presented (cf. Sunstein); think about design in relation to algorithmic biases (Noble).
- Roles: several important roles enable people to dedicate themselves to contributions to the public sphere that enhance its epistemic or inclusive aspects - contributions that the ordinary citizen does not have time, ability, or desire to pursue:
  - Investigative journalist, expert, teacher, activist, influencer, politician, citizen. Note how roles are affirmed by institutions (e.g. universities, political parties).

## What do we need from the role of 'expert', if it is to enhance the epistemic and self-government aspects of public deliberation?

- Experts bring important but difficult-to-uncover, technical information to the debate.
- They can also bring important 'meta' information about the debate (e.g. information on the relevance of expert disagreement, on degrees of belief within a divided expert community).
- Their contributions are themselves a model of a good deliberative contribution: a good use of reason of type 3.
- See O'Neill's notes on the public use of reason (i.e. reasoned communication with an open-ended 'public'):
  - o An expert contribution must be genuinely 'intelligible' to the diverse others constituting 'the public' and (when it is *practical argument*) 'followable in action' by a diverse public too.
  - o This raises difficult questions about education, translation, 'dumbing down', and the avoidance of manipulation. How can someone with a statistician's grasp of the spread of the pandemic convey **their own reasons** to non-experts in a type 3 way?

### Common errors in thinking about expertise and the public:

- "There is a sharp fact/value distinction; experts help the public grasp the facts, and the public then makes a value judgement about what to do." No. Much expertise includes evaluative elements (e.g. about what a good theory looks like).
- "The expert is impartial and separate/above the political fray." No. Proper expertise on many issues – e.g. climate change, health policy – involves partially-political expertise, e.g. about the distribution of goods or freedoms necessary to achieve a policy goal.
- "The expert is unlike the ordinary citizen in that experts do not have their own interests to defend in the political debate." No. Experts gain distinctive interests from their role.

### Better:

- o Think about the distinction between different roles you occupy, and the prominence your communications deserve in the public sphere due to each role: as expert, as citizen, as advocate. [We want both **truth** and **fairness in communicative power** – don't use your expertise to gain prominence for points where you are not expert.]
- o Think about the limits of your expertise (in each role).
- o Think about the interests that we unavoidably gain as a class by being experts.

### Further practical conclusions for the expert supporting democratic deliberation:

Don't mislead – aim for type 3 communication.

Don't aim to be 'impartial' or 'apolitical' so much as to be open and honest about your own background, interests, and varied roles you occupy (without being distractingly self-focused).

Recognise and be honest about the limits of your own expertise.

Face the difficulties of conveying complex technical information to people with varied prior understanding and varied conceptual frameworks.

Recognise the non-institutionally-grounded expertise to be found in the public – e.g. expertise on the experience of particular policies in practice.

## REFERENCES

- Christiano, Thomas 2008: *The Constitution of Equality* (OUP).
- Estlund, David M. 2008: *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton).
- Habermas, Jürgen 1996: *Between Facts and Norms* (Polity).
- Landemore, Hélène 2017: *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton).
- Mill, J. S. 1991 [1859]: 'On Liberty', in J. S. Mill, ed. J. Gray, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (OUP).
- Noble, Safiya 2018: *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (NYU Press).
- O'Neill 1996: *Towards Justice and Virtue* (CUP).
- \_\_\_ 2022: *A Philosopher Looks at Digital Communications* (CUP).
- Peter, Fabienne 2009: *Democratic Legitimacy* (Routledge).
- Rostboll, Christian 2015: 'The Non-instrumental Value of Democracy: The Freedom Argument', *Constellations* 22 (2), 267-278.
- Sunstein, Cass 2017: *#Republic* (CUP).
- Vosoughi, Roy & Aral 2018: 'The Spread of True and False News Online', *Science* 359, 6380, 1146-51.

Rowan.Cruft@stir.ac.uk