Meaningful Chaos

How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns

A Report Prepared for the Kettering Foundation

by
THE HARWOOD GROUP

Meaningful Chaos

How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns

We propose simply that initiatives to engage citizens on public concerns recognize the idea of meaningful chaos and tap into the possibilities it offers for building new, stronger relationships between people and the public concerns around them.

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The Harwood Group

The Harwood Group is a public issues research firm located in Bethesda, Maryland. The work of the firm centers on social change — helping public and private-sector organizations to define complex issues, understand the attitudes and perspectives of people and organizations affected, and design processes, mechanisms, and strategies that promote sustainable change.

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Factors at a Glance

WHAT WE OFTEN SEE	WHAT CITIZENS DO
Fragmented issues or concerns.	Connections between issues or concerns.
Appeal to people's self-interest.	Context includes life experience, imagination.
Concerns depicted through masses of fragmented facts.	Interest in a "whole story" of deeper understanding.
Polarization and partisans dominate debate.	Debate needs room for ambivalence — allowing for questioning, testing ideas, making connections.
Discourse is "rational," stripped of emotion.	Talk of public concerns is rich with emotion.
Authenticity based on facts and figures.	People and issues must "ring true," reflect a sense of reality.
Public concerns riddled with inaction, stagnation, lack of hope.	Sense of possibility for movement and personal role bolster engagement.
Experts are looked to as catalysts to engage citizens.	People look to everyday citizens in their own context.
People are appealed to as passive consumers of information in the isolation of their homes.	Interaction with others through mediating institutions stirs engagement.

Foreword

by David Mathews

With so many difficult questions before the public today — about the economy, the health care system, America's role in the world — and with so many new efforts to reach the public on those issues — from electronic town meetings to infomercials — and with so much at stake, how the public makes up its mind is no small matter. Because so much of what happens in our country is influenced by public opinion, we are dependent on what we hope will be the eventual good judgment of our fellow citizens. So we have a stake in those processes by which the public makes up its mind about the public's business.

On important issues, the conventional approach is to try to reach the public through publicity. Initially, interest groups and politicians stake out their positions and try to sell the public by publicizing their plans. Eventually, a majority of the interest groups and the political leaders may reach an agreement among themselves on an issue and then launch elaborate campaigns to marshal public support. This competition of competing plans in a free market of ideas is as it should be. And it is good to have politicians who try to reach out to the public; there is nothing wrong with publicizing their plans. The process of publicizing a program, to sell it, however, should not be confused with the process in which the public forms its own opinions.

In a democracy, the public can't just wait around to be persuaded. Democracy is more than watching infomercials. Rather than being passive, the public has to be active in making up its collective mind. Why? Because in our system, citizens have to give direction to the government; it is an undelegable responsibility. (A political system in which the government directs the people is not a democracy.) And for the public's direction to have legitimacy, it must be authentic; that is, it must really be the public's opinion. To be authentic or legitimate, public opinion has to be more than a manipulated response. It has to be formed independently by the interaction of citizens with citizens.

It is the authentic forming of public opinion that makes an issue truly public. When an issue becomes public, people treat it as their own; they work hard, as Jefferson put it, "to inform their discretion." The difference between making an issue public and publicizing it shows up in the results. The result or outcome of publicity is a persuaded population. The outcome of making something public is an engaged citizenry. A persuaded population gives others permission to act; an engaged public acts itself. When issues can only be resolved by public action (as in those situations where sacrifice is required), an engaged public is a necessity.

While there is a profound difference between *making an issue* public and *publicizing it*, we tend to spend more effort on publicity. Those institutions with the capacity to make issues public — the press, public forums, civic associations, the public itself — can't let that happen.

The attempt to legislate coverage for catastrophic illnesses in 1988 illustrates the limits of publicity. While millions of Americans were deeply worried about having to pay for long-term care or exceptionally expensive treatments, Congress had been unable to come up with a bill to provide that extra measure of protection. The reason, in part, was that various interest groups could not agree on the details of the plan and many people were reluctant to pay for the increased costs, particularly if the added coverage was to be paid for through higher, out-of-pocket fees for initial care. Eventually, however, the interest groups and congressional leaders agreed on a piece of legislation. It had widespread support within the Washington Beltway and was passed in record time. However, there had been little opportunity for citizens to consider the trade-offs in the legislation, talk to one another, and inform their discretion. So when news of the legislation's "success" reached the public, it prompted confusion, concern and, predictably, opposition. Overwhelmed by angry citizens, Congress repealed the legislation — again — in record time. The legislation itself became a catastrophe; too little time had been allowed for the authentic formation of public opinion.

The American Revolution, on the other hand, appears to be a textbook case of what happens when authentic opinion has had time to form. Here is John Adams' testimony:

> *Time has been given for the whole People, maturely to consider the great Question of Independence and to ripen their Judgments, dissipate their Fears, and allure their Hopes, by*

discussing it in News Papers and Pamphlets, by debating it, in Assemblies, Conventions, Committees of Safety and Inspection, in Town and County Meetings, as well as in private conversations, so that the whole People in every Colony of the 13, have now adopted it, as their own Act. — This will cement the Union, and avoid those Heats and perhaps Convulsions which might have been occasioned, by such a Declaration Six Months ago.

Several conditions seem necessary for authentic opinion to develop.[1] The first is for the public to grapple with what is really happening and is at issue. People have to confront political realities and not just deal with symbols used to manipulate opinion. Second, there must be open discussion (as contrasted with deal-making behind closed doors) in which the public carefully weighs the pros and cons of each issue; open discussion is needed so that each person's point of view can be tested against the experiences of others. That is how a public develops its common sense, its shared sense of what should be done on an issue.

This study, done by The Harwood Group, sheds more light on the nature of the all-important process of forming authentic public opinion. It suggests that the conventional wisdom about how people form their opinions — how they become clear about and attached to issues — is at odds with what actually happens. (Perhaps the conventional wisdom has been shaped too much by our attention to publicizing issues.) At first glance, the way people deal with issues seems chaotic — full of false starts, lapses, and reversals. Yet closer inspection reveals patterns and discernible principles. Though chaotic, the formation of opinion seems to be meaningful chaos.

When charged with reaching the citizenry or "educating the public," the conventional wisdom says to break larger problems down into manageable bits ("make it simple"), bring out the experts, load on the facts, and stimulate a debate among the contestants (invariably two).

Those steps don't at all match the way participants in this study said they approached political issues. First of all, people don't learn the public's business sitting in a lecture hall, listening to a newscast or reading a report. To be sure, all of these can be helpful in conveying information. But people learn primarily through their interactions with other people. The medium for the authentic formation of public opinion is a conversation that has certain characteristics. The public teaches itself through an interactive dialogue, not a debate — a dialogue that is exploratory and deliberative with people testing their ideas rather than taking positions and trying to score points against some opponent. This dialogue is full of emotion because it is grounded in often painful personal experiences; yet it doesn't have the acrimony or ideological tilt of partisan debate. People say that they need this kind of exchange to sort out the realities of issues, which they see in shades of gray, rather than in black and white. People want a space in which it is all right to be ambivalent and tentative.

The public's dialogue with itself keeps people engaged in political life. It is like the line that links astronauts to space stations. Without that link, political life dies. With it, people become animated; they participate.[2] (Other studies also have reported this tie between public dialogue and political participation. Those interested in increased voter participation should take note.)

Tactics used in publicity campaigns to raise the public's consciousness (perhaps to scare people), efforts to pressure citizens to be advocates of one position or another, and "hard sells" for a particular solution — these all may have their uses. However, they are not compatible with the exploratory process people say they want — once an issue has been raised — to find out if that issue is relevant; nor do they have the deliberative qualities people need to decide how to respond.

Participants in the study described what might be called the "tests" they use to determine when and how to engage issues. One of the tests is whether an issue strikes their vital interests. The conventional wisdom of publicity certainly understands that test ("people vote their pocketbook.") However, Harwood finds self-interest to be broader than immediate interests.

[1] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, German © 1962, English translation © 1989, MIT, p. 221.

[2] See Erickson and Nosanchuk, "How a Political Association Politicizes," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* (May 1990), pp. 206-19.

Participants in the study reported consulting all of their experiences in life in deciding on how to think about a given issue. Their interests ranged over a variety of concerns. And so they wanted to understand the connections or relationships among issues. They used the whole of their experience to provide a context or framework for making sense of simplified — or they might say oversimplified — issues.

Interests seem to be informed by the most basic, human considerations. People want to know how issues affect what is valuable to them in everyday life. Facts are important but these "values" are more important points of reference. People need both emotional and intellectual clarity about issues. "Values" is probably the wrong word because people mean nothing more complex than the things most everyone cares about or hopes for, such as wanting to be secure or wanting to be treated fairly.[3] These "values" are not ideological.

The catalysts people use when trying to make up their collective mind are not, as publicity implies, larger-than-life role models, national figures, or even prominent local authorities. People seem more likely to turn to other citizens. Other citizens, after all, have several influential qualities — among them authenticity and the ability to take us outside ourselves. When citizens are bombarded with information, they don't ask themselves if what they are hearing is correct as much as they ask it if "rings true." They want to know if what they are hearing can be validated in the experience of another person. They look for affirmation, not agreement. And like travelers on an unfamiliar landscape, people often want to know how something looks from another vantage point. Americans seem to have an instinct to "check out" what they are being told.

Perhaps the most important test of whether people invest in an issue is whether they find something that they can do *personally* to make a difference. They look to see if they can get a "handle" on the problem. If they can, they are more likely to be convinced that there is the possibility of change. If they can't find a handle, they may not get deeply invested. In other words, people not only form opinions about the relevance of an issue, they form opinions about what can be done to solve problems. It isn't enough to assure people that someone else is doing something about a serious problem; people want to know if they can do anything themselves.

Where, then, can authentic opinion be formed in America? Where can people find the opportunity to reason together? Perhaps we need to look no farther than the places where citizens naturally congregate. Institutions where people go to attend classes or read books or worship or work or attend to neighborhood business may not fully appreciate the critical role they can play in helping the American public inform its discretion. The implication of the study is that we need more institutions to provide space for the public to shape its initial and individual reactions into more reflective and shared judgments.[4] Woodrow Wilson said it best in 1912:

> *We must learn . . . to meet, as our fathers did. . . . There must be discussion and debate, in which all freely participate. . . . The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another. . . . For only [then] . . . can the general interests of a great people be compounded into a policy suitable to all.*

[3] See Milton Rokeach, "Stability and Change in American Value Priorities: 1968-1991," *American Psychologist*, May 1989 pp. 775-84 for other research on the "values" that lie behind policy choices.

[4] See Daniel Yankelovich's *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991, and his article "How Public Opinion Really Works," in *Fortune* (October 19, 1992) on the stages that the public must go through before initial impressions can mature into public judgment.

Introduction

You are about to embark on a journey exploring the ways in which citizens form relationships with public concerns — how those relationships begin, deepen, and gain meaning.

You will hear citizens reveal, in their own voices, their experiences and thoughts about becoming engaged in public concerns important to them in their daily lives.

In listening to these voices, citizens refer to at least nine factors that play a pivotal role in their involvement in public affairs.

These nine factors are especially relevant today, as America strives to confront a series of public concerns that will shape the nation's future—ranging from deficit reduction, to health care reform, to international trade. Each of these concerns is complex. Each presents tough choices for the nation to make and equally hard trade-offs to consider. And each requires a measure of political will among citizens in order to take sustainable action.

Together, the nine factors in this report help to illuminate the challenges and opportunities for engaging Americans on such critical public concerns.

The Kettering Foundation commissioned this study because it has long been interested in the ways in which Americans come to learn about public concerns and engage in them. This research is aimed at better understanding this vital relationship. The Harwood Group, a public issues research and innovations firm, was asked to conduct this research; the fruits of this effort seek to complement the fine work of others that already has been done in this area.

As you read this report, you will hear common themes emerge that cut across the nine factors. Here is a sample of those themes:

- Citizens lament the fragmentation and sense of isolation that seems to pervade the way we think about and discuss public concerns; people have a keen instinct for wanting to see and feel part of a larger picture that resembles how they experience public concerns in their daily lives.
- Citizens tend to enlarge, rather than narrow, the way they see and act on public concerns; once engaged in public life, people's view of public concerns and their involvement in them seems to grow — with one conversation spurring others, one insight revealing new connections to other ideas and experiences, one involvement leading to another.

- Citizens bring their *whole* lives to the public arena — their past *and* present experiences, their minds *and* emotions, their individualism *and* search for commonly held values and aspirations; engaging citizens is a tightrope walk of balancing these often competing factors.
- Conversation plays a central role in the way in which citizens relate to public concerns — it is through conversation that people learn from one another, that problem solving occurs, and that a sense of hope springs forth for the future. Talk is not cheap to people, as the old axiom goes; it is the valued currency of their public life.
- Imagination must be ever-present in public life; and citizens must be called upon to use it — being able to put themselves in someone else's shoes, or see possibilities in different situations. New possibilities emerge in public life as people use their imagination.

Key Factors

These are the nine factors that emerged in our conversations with citizens:

We could hear people talk in ways that stress a desire to make **connections** between public concerns, rather than to isolate one subject from another; you'll hear a Richmond woman say she hardly knows how to pinpoint one concern — "because I have a lot" — and then proceed to tie poverty, unemployment, and crime all to a central concern about the "lack of a family unit."

We could hear people talk about the importance of **personal context** — the lens through which they view public concerns. People's definition of personal context goes beyond the age-old notion of pure self-interest; instead people typically draw on their life experiences and imagination to establish ties to public concerns. You'll hear a Hartford man refer to a longstanding concern about education which resulted from his own experience with his children: "My kids have benefited by some of the programs in their younger years, and I would like to see other kids get those."

We could hear people express a keen desire for **coherence** in understanding public concerns — wanting to know the "why's" and "how's" behind a public concern, the history, and all sides of a debate — a need that often is not satisfied, indeed which often is undermined, by today's explosion of fragmented information. In his search for coherence, a Hartford man wanted to know, for example, more about the ballooning of his state's budget deficit — not just what happened, but "*how* could this thing [happen]?"

We could hear people insist that they need **room for ambivalence** in the public arena — an opportunity for fact-finding, listening, testing of ideas, and figuring out what they believe and how they feel about a concern. "That is not happening today," as one Los Angeles man told us.

We could hear people express a range of **emotion** — saying that they are "fed up" or that a situation is "incredibly scary"; from our

citizen conversations, emotion emerges as a natural and vital part of people forming relationships with public concerns.

We could hear comments about **authenticity** as being a crucial filter through which people view public concerns; you'll hear people blocked from public engagement because the information that they see, or hear, or read, does not ring true to them, such as the Indianapolis woman who suggested, "first, you shoot all the experts" because the language they use all too often fails to capture the meaning of people's concerns and lives.

We could hear people say that they want a greater **sense of possibility** in public life — an abiding belief, a feeling, that it is *possible* to make progress on a public concern and that they themselves can play a meaningful role in bringing about that progress. As a Little Rock woman commented, people have to know that their engagement "wasn't a wasted effort."

We could hear people talk about individuals in their daily lives — the person down the street, the family member, the friend — who serve as the **catalysts** spurring them to discuss and act on public concerns; you'll hear a Hartford woman say of her brother, "After I talked to him and others, I thought, 'Wow, I should be doing this myself!'"

We could hear references to **mediating institutions** — a school, a church, a neighborhood council — that provide places for people to come together and talk about, learn, and act on public concerns.

The Idea of Meaningful Chaos

At the heart of this study emerges a dynamic picture of the way in which people form relationships with public concerns. We describe this picture as *meaningful chaos* — making use of two words seldom juxtaposed to capture the very essence of the stories and experiences we heard in these citizen conversations.

Chaos suggests the seemingly random interplay that occurs among the nine factors. At any single point in time, each individual factor may act on its own; and yet, when one steps back to discern a larger picture, it becomes evident that the factors are linked inextricably, reinforcing one another, each and all of them in play *throughout* the process. It is this interplay that creates for people the sense of meaning, which enables them to form relationships with public concerns. Thus, the term *meaningful chaos*.

The references to *relationships* in these pages tells a great deal about the way in which we perceive how people and public concerns come together. This idea of relationships is distinct from other approaches that suggest people become connected to public concerns through a series of concrete steps kicking in sequentially, almost mechanically, one after the other. A common example of such an approach is the public official who attempts to "tell and sell" a major policy proposal to the public — always speaking at the public. But merely following a series of steps intended to "win over" the public for a major proposal risks failing to "engage" people — and thus enabling them to form a relationship with the public concern. Such

an approach all too often treats citizens as passive consumers of information. It can push people away from public debate by asking them to consider public concerns that hold little meaning to them.

In sharp contrast to those ideas, our picture of meaningful chaos stresses the combination of steps that occur over time, that occur at different times, that occur in ways that actively reinforce one another — much like the process by which any relationship forms.

So, for those who work on forming relationships between citizens and public concerns, we believe that this report can serve as a cautionary note about excessively tidy schemes that do not capture the meaning of these factors individually, or the power of chaos that they hold collectively.

To those who want to tap the possibilities that chaos presents, we propose this framework as a "roll call" of factors to use creatively, in different combinations, in attempts to build relationships between citizens and public concerns.

Indeed, we believe that there are concrete actions that can be taken to foster and nourish the relationship between citizens and public concerns; we explore these ideas in the concluding section on "Making Sense of Chaos."

The Research Approach

Our approach in conducting this project was to listen to people describe, in their own voices, their experiences and ideas about the relationship between themselves and various public concerns. It was an exercise in discerning and understanding people's own stories and perspectives.

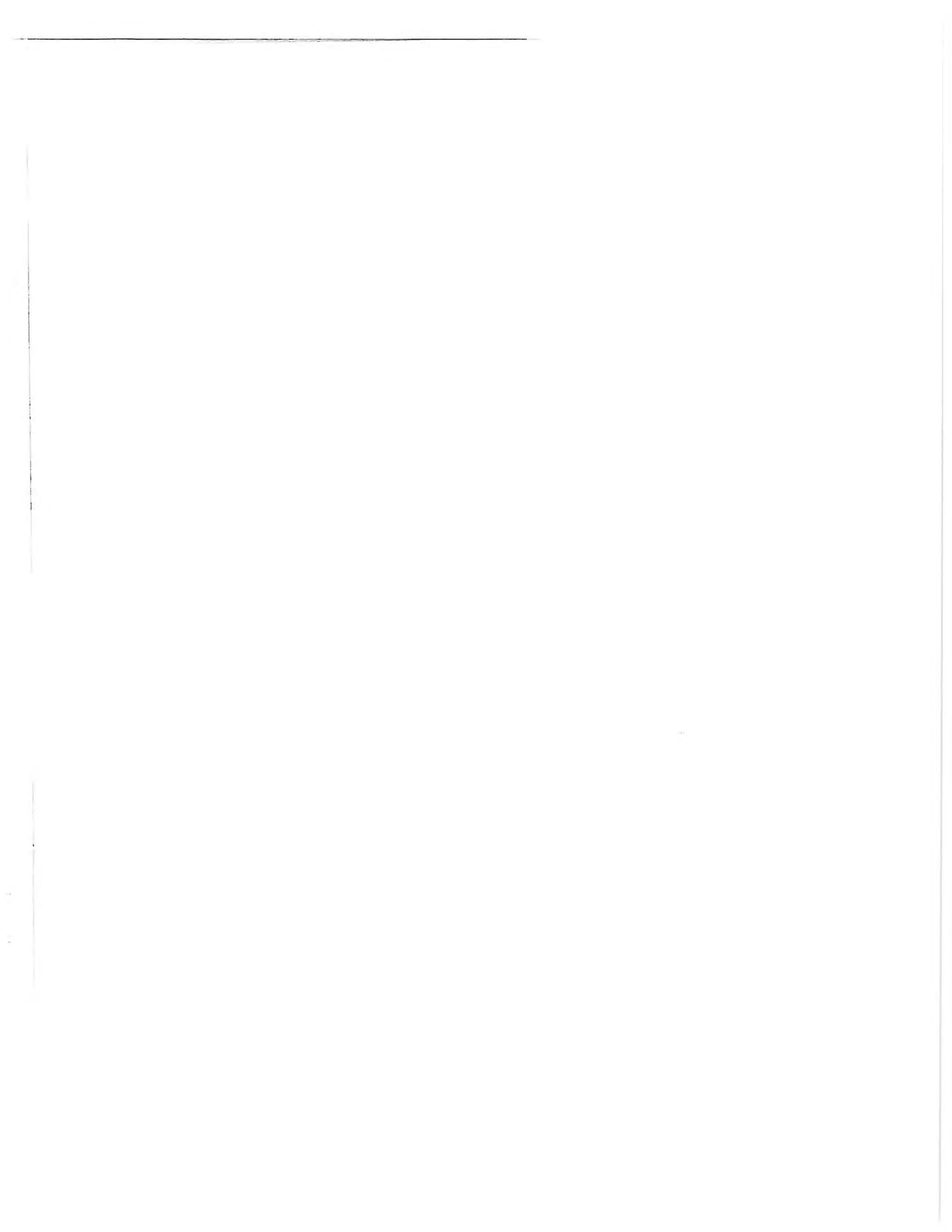
We convened six focus groups around the country. In these groups, people spoke to us about specific cases in their lives in which they formed a relationship to a community or national concern. They spoke to us of the obstacles they encountered in learning or caring about such problems. They also offered ideas about how to make attachment more likely in the future, for themselves and others.

In these wide-ranging citizen discussions, we could hear various factors at play as people described how they came to relate to public concerns. From these voices we derived hypotheses about the conditions under which people form relationships to public concerns.

Then we conducted 13 "expert commentator" interviews with people who could offer different perspectives on the relationship between citizens and public concerns by dint of their diverse fields of expertise and experience; their experience ranges from sociology to journalism, from psychology to government. A list of those individuals interviewed is found in the Appendix.

Organization of the Report

On the following pages, we discuss each of the nine factors in greater detail, listening to focus group participants as they speak about their relationships with public concerns. These texts are accompanied by occasional "idea bursts" from our expert commentators, offering perspective on the text and perhaps provoking the reader to think further about the implications of various citizen comments for approaches to engaging the public on public concerns. The report then concludes with a section on, "Making Sense of Chaos." A section on methodology is found in the Appendix.



Connections

People tend to enlarge, rather than narrow, their views of public concerns, making connections among ideas and topics that society tends to fragment.

When one listens to the news, or to speeches by experts, or reads the position papers of political candidates, discussions of public concerns often seem to focus on narrowly defined "issue" areas. Yet participants in these discussion groups talked about public concerns in ways that indicate a desire to enlarge, rather than to narrow, their view of them. They described various topics as connected to one another, creating for them a truer picture of how they experience these concerns in their daily lives than any single or fragmented topic could by itself.

Time and again in the group discussions, one could hear people making connections between topics as they spoke about various concerns important to them. In some cases, these connections seemed to be random — a simple stringing together of areas of interest that may have struck people at the particular moment in time. But more often these connections seemed more thought-out — with people moving from one idea to the next, or perhaps to a set of ideas, in a way that invited a computer metaphor: For participants, single concerns served almost as software "icons" that, when "clicked on," displayed a network of interrelated ideas.

When asked to talk about an issue that was important to them, many people put this "connection software" to work. "I would say that what concerns me the most is drugs," said a Richmond woman. Then almost immediately she enlarged the issue, stating: "I think the lack of individual moral responsibility that I see" is related to my concern about drugs.

Another Richmond woman began her comments by admitting up front the difficulty of narrowing her focus. "I hardly know how to pick one concern because I have a lot." She then went on to talk about the "lack of a family unit," saying that it "comes from poverty, unemployment, and crime." She concluded, "It's just all intermingled together. I don't really know how to separate it all." For one Richmond man, naming just one topic placed an artificial constraint on what he wanted to say. Initially, he talked about career success and its connections to education:

> I'm deeply concerned about the education of our children today . . . because I see a lot of prospective applicants when they come through applying for work and jobs, and . . . they don't have the adequate basic education.

A commentator said . . .

In describing their concerns, people may use some of the same words found in conventional "issues" talk — such as "family" — but the meaning and connections are typically more complex, less ideological. For example, the focus may be less on "family values" and more on what makes families and neighborhoods work.

He quickly moved on to a concern about a lack of discipline in society: "Another problem that I see is discipline. That's one of the biggest problems that I see in the rearing of children and respect for their parents [and] elders in society today." Then he returned to his initial focus on career success, showing the connections among his concerns: "I think that [respect] is one of the keys to success" in life.

A Little Rock man also resisted pinpointing his concerns too narrowly. Playing off the comments of others in his group discussion about the problems of crime and inadequate education, he observed, "They're all interrelated." He continued, "My main concern is all these issues." He proceeded to note that the key to straightening out a number of problems was "to get people trained . . . educated correctly . . . so they have a chance not to go toward crime."

An Indianapolis woman described her concern about teen pregnancy by making a number of connections between it, the welfare system, and education: "The system is not teaching [young girls] how to live," she started. "With the economy being the way it is, welfare is not helping. There are no jobs, there's lack of education, and yet these young girls are constantly having babies."

Commentators said . . .

The public is often forced to deal with their webs of concerns in a one-by-one, fragmented way. One commentator said that his community's process of creating a plan for the future provided a chance for people to frame their concerns differently — allowing them to make connections between concerns.

For other participants, too, naming just one concern could not adequately reflect what was on their minds. One woman from Little Rock, asked to name her top concern, combined "the economy and environmental issues." Another discussion participant linked the economy and health care, while a third linked "crime, health care, and the school system."

Throughout many of the group discussions, the federal deficit either emerged or was raised as a topic of discussion. Here too participants drew many connections, often viewing the deficit as a symptom of something else, or perhaps as a symbol for some larger constellation of concerns.

For example, a Los Angeles man who saw the deficit as a result of other events, observed: "My feeling about the deficit is that the savings and loan . . . was the biggest thing." A Seattle man said the deficit is an illustration of a broader problem — the political system itself: "It's really just a symptom of what's wrong with the political system, that can't stop playing this game," he said. When today's leaders approach the deficit, he suggested, "the music starts playing, and they're doing this dance." And when asked during the course of her group discussion, which is more important to her, the federal deficit or the unemployment problem, a Hartford woman echoed the ways in which people in the discussions consistently made connections between issues: "I definitely think they are related."

Commentators said . . .

People think of public concerns in webs of multiple, interconnected concerns. One commentator suggested that people often have their own starting points for making these connections that must be understood.

These discussions point to an instinct among group participants to make connections among concerns; this desire to make connections is a theme that recurs throughout people's comments

in this study. It poses a striking contrast to many discussions of public affairs these days — discussions in which issues are divided into fragments for "easier" digestion of facts and more pointed discussion. And yet, as one Indianapolis woman said of the budget deficit, "you pull one string of it and something else comes unraveled."

In our political discourse today, are enough connections made among public concerns so that they reflect the ways in which people experience those concerns in their daily lives and seek to relate to them in their public lives?

Personal Context

People relate to concerns that "fit" with their personal context — not only their own self-interest, but that which is meaningful or imaginable to them in their lives.

Striking at people's pure self-interest has long been the conventional approach for engaging Americans on public concerns. No doubt, it often works. People do form ties to public concerns because they hold a clear "personal stake" in them — a stake that typically focuses on themselves, or on their children and on other loved ones.

But participants in our discussion groups showed that they form relationships to public concerns often through a broader personal context — one that is derived from a sense of meaning in their life experiences, that goes beyond simply asking, "What's in it for me?" These relationships form in response to people seeing a connection between a public concern and experiences in their own lives; or when something speaks, or is *imaginable*, to people — that it resonates within the realm of possibility to them.

In all these instances, participants pointed out the dynamic nature of personal context — that it constantly expands, with one experience leading people to see connections to other concerns around them. This idea of an ever-expanding context — that there is a broadening of perspective and experience in public life — is an important theme that repeats itself throughout this report.

At the most basic level, discussion participants spoke of becoming engaged on public concerns that were directly relevant to their own *self-interest*. A Little Rock man, when asked what kind of information grabs him, said: "Real issues — issues that affect *me*." He continued by saying, "then issues that affect friends of mine . . . and [finally] issues that have a broader spectrum." A Los Angeles woman put it this way: "Nobody gives a shit until it comes home. I know somebody that knows somebody that knows somebody. Then, it's me — *then*, it matters!"

A Seattle woman echoed the sentiment that a prime motivator for people becoming engaged with a public issue is how they perceive that they are personally affected. "People get involved when it comes to them being denied rights, or if [certain actions] are affecting our pocketbooks." A Hartford man, when asked why he felt so strongly on the issue of a new state income tax, said, "Well, probably because they're taking money out of *my* check every pay period."

A woman from Little Rock explained her efforts to support an anticrime program in her neighborhood this way: "I literally found syringe needles and stuff lying on the side of my house." She continued, "I said, my God, I've got to do something. I can't go

to bed here at night knowing that this is going on in *my* driveway."

It comes as little surprise that a mere extension of people's self-interest is their concern for their own family and loved ones. One Los Angeles man said he had become involved with his local school board because he feared the potential adverse effects of various teacher and program cuts on his children. "I had three children in school at the time, so I took issue with the fact that they were cheating my kids." An Indianapolis woman also said the bottom line for her was the effect of certain actions on her kids —whether today, or in the future:

> The wetlands, the environment, the condor, the owl — I think those are very important, but to be honest with you, I want them to be there for my kids. Yes, it all does come back to whether or not it affects you — whether it affects you today, or whether it affects you 20 years from now.

Beyond pure self-interest, the comments of group participants point to personal life experiences as an important context for people forming relationships with public concerns. We asked one Los Angeles man, who was working to help the homeless, how he had become engaged in this area — was it, for instance, something he had read or learned from experts? No, he replied, for him it was "basically witnessing it. I mean, I've *lived* in some of the hard neighborhoods around town."

A commentator said . . .

Everyone comes to public discourse through the filter of his or her own experiences, reasoning process, and skills. Those who wish to support public discourse must allow for these various filters, avoiding single approaches for engaging people.

A Richmond woman who had done work to help the homeless also demonstrated the role that personal experience can play in someone forming a relationship with a public concern. When asked if the news media, public officials, or others were her main source of information on the homeless, she said, "I got it firsthand from meeting with them." Similarly, another Richmond woman, this time someone who had done literacy training, suggested her interest in that field emerged from her own personal experience when she "graduated from high school with people who could not read and write." She continued, "I love to read, and it's very important . . . I've always felt that anybody who wanted to should be able to read. We should be able to help."

Then there is the example of the Hartford man who became involved in housing concerns "because I know a couple of families, and [their] house was burnt down because of the bad wiring of the house." There is the Little Rock woman who decided to take care of unwanted pets because "there's a bridge in front of our house" where animals are abandoned; the animals became part of her daily life. Finally, recall the Richmond man who made the link between education issues and his work life experience: "I see a lot of prospective applicants when they come through applying for work and jobs."

Commentators said . . .

People are moved to care about something beyond their own context based on a connection they make with their own experience. One commentator noted that TV viewers were moved to contribute money after watching a documentary and saying to themselves, "I remember my family being in that situation," or "I remember the look on my father's face" when that happened.

As participants told their stories in our interviews, it also became clear that they form relationships to public concerns, not because those concerns enter their lives directly, but because they are made so *imaginable* to them that they "fit" within their own personal context— that they speak to their life experiences. The Los Angeles man who worked with the homeless demonstrated this

relationship. While he had never been homeless himself, he said: "Any one of us could be homeless. All we got to do is lose a job, and we're out." A Little Rock woman, suggesting that a public concern must speak to her life experience if it is to become a genuine concern, said for instance about AIDS: "The TV needs to show that it happens to real people more often," and she cited Kimberly Bergalis as an example of an AIDS victim who attracted media attention and with whom she could identify. A Richmond man went even farther, saying that the media — specifically television — could help him relate to AIDS if there were somehow a local angle, with "programs concerning people dying or infected with the disease, but not from New York, but right here in Richmond."

Another man from Richmond said he had not become engaged on the concern of AIDS because it had remained too abstract and distant to him.

> I didn't know anybody with it, you know. So secretly in my head, I'm thinking that, you know, it's not that big. If I knew several people, even in my community, or even out there in the street, if I knew people who had it.

He added that people might not be convinced about the dangers of AIDS from drug abuse "unless they actually see people dying of it. It's important that they see people dying."

The need for a public concern to speak to people's lives also was raised when it came to the environment. A woman from Little Rock suggested that there is a need for tangible images to make environmental concerns more concrete so that people can identify with them: "They should keep showing people these trees, the forests dying, these lakes dying."

Finally, comments made by a number of group participants suggested that people's context for forming relationships with public concerns is not something that is set in time, but dynamic over time. Indeed, it can start at one point, and then expand.

Consider these examples: A Los Angeles woman said that her involvement with community mental health programs was initially connected to problems of her son; then, from what she had learned through that experience, she told us that her interest spread to the mental health problems of the homeless. Likewise, for a Hartford man, concern about his own children had prompted him to become involved in local education, and then his initial involvement blossomed into concern for others:

> I think it's very important that [my two kids] get a good education, and what's happening in the town that I live in, they want to cut [the budget] and every year I see a watered-down education for my kids. My kids have benefited by some of the programs in their younger years, and I would like to see other kids get those.

A Seattle woman traced her involvement in education — an involvement she was now renewing years after her first contacts — back to her son: "One of our kids is adopted (from another culture) and came to us when he was seven years old. And it was partially

Commentators said . . .

People's ability to relate to a public concern is not built exclusively on their self-interest. To be interested in education, for example, a person doesn't have to have a school-age child, but experiences that include children. People care about things that are part of their own experience, and that experience can take many forms.

A commentator said. . .

An important step in engaging citizens in public concerns is not to ask people to throw away their own contexts, but to help them find common threads in each other's context.

through his experience that I began to look at education in a different light."

The importance of personal context in people forming relationships to public concerns emerges clearly from these citizen discussions. Group participants said in various ways that they want to fit public concerns into a context of meaning in their own lives — a personal context that does not necessarily need to be exclusively self-centered. It is possible, they suggest, to form this context through a direct personal experience, or by being able to see or imagine something as relevant to hearth, home, or values.

Do we tap into people's broader life experiences and imagination enough in engaging people on public concerns and in challenging them to move from a private to a public perspective?

Coherence

People want public discourse to tell the "whole story" on public concerns — with explanation, memory, and a sense of overview. They are seeking a deeper sense of understanding and meaning.

Although efforts to engage people on public concerns often place a premium on deluging them with hordes of facts, figures, and other information, group participants sensed that a "big picture" or "whole story" often eluded them. These citizen discussions suggest people are seeking insights that cannot be reflected merely through a single set of facts or single tale; instead, people want a sense of coherence that enables them to understand the whole story on a public concern.

As people told their own stories, a variety of themes emerged about the kind of coherence that they deem valuable, but sense is lacking now. Participants said they want a "whole truth," reflecting a gut-level feeling that they are not receiving all the information there is to be had; they want a more balanced treatment of all sides of a concern; they want to know more about the "how" and the "why" of a story; and they want a greater dimension of time and consistency — *a public memory* — in tracing how public concerns evolve.

Listen first to the general, visceral feeling among citizens that they are not getting the *whole truth* they seek. A Richmond woman said she felt "not informed enough" about public concerns generally because "the information that we get" is slanted and partial. "We're not getting *all* the information," she complained forcefully. A Los Angeles woman criticized a local newspaper for the same reason, declaring that the paper is "extremely selective about what they put in." She said that "they don't put in the whole truth."

A similar observation, that the whole truth is missing from discussions on public concerns, could be heard from an Indianapolis woman when she was discussing the federal budget. She complained about so-called off-budget expenditures that do not seem to receive attention during debates on the federal budget. "When they're not even telling us *all* that they're spending, they're only telling us certain things, then who could get a handle on it?" She said that she could not.

But most people in our conversations went beyond the visceral sense that information around them often was incomplete and offered more specific thoughts about what helps them form relationships with public concerns. For some people, seeking a sense of coherence means hearing all sides of a story.

In the eyes of a Los Angeles man, speaking in one of our discussion groups held about three weeks after the 1992 Democratic Convention, media cover-

Commentators said . . .

Public affairs is communicated to people in bits and pieces; and thirty-second commercials or bites of individual facts, for instance, cannot convey a story in a way that shows its meaning and connection to people's lives.

age about Democratic candidates Bill Clinton and Al Gore had left out anything negative on them since their July nominations. "After the Democratic Convention, you have heard nothing that Clinton and his running mate have done wrong." He said with a mocking tone, "Everything is just marvelous."

This concern among people that they are not hearing all sides of a story was pinpointed by a Seattle woman who talked about the media's treatment of African-Americans, which she viewed as unbalanced, indeed predominantly negative. She asked, "Why are we always seeing something negative and relating it to someone black?" She wondered aloud about why positive aspects of black family life are all too often ignored in media coverage.

An Indianapolis woman who said she cares strongly about family issues complained about what she perceived as the lopsided portrayal of a speech by Vice President Dan Quayle — the now oft-quoted speech from which the initial reference to the TV character Murphy Brown was taken.

A commentator said . . .

Today information is presented largely through visual images, which people generally cannot sort out and make sense of very well.

> They took one sentence that he said. If anyone would have read the entire speech that he made, it was wonderful, it was beautiful. . . . And they took one little sentence and blew it completely out of proportion.

A positive example of people believing that they are receiving all sides of the story came from a Little Rock woman. She applauded a TV morning show as valuable precisely because she sees it as presenting a more complete story. She observed, "You can read, but you don't always comprehend [different sides] when you read the newspaper. But when you watch 'Good Morning, America,' they really get into both sides of it."

Discussion participants also said that they want to know more of the why and the how behind public concerns. A Hartford woman, frustrated about discussions on the federal deficit, complained: "Nobody is coming to the one conclusion of *why* this is all happening."

A Hartford man, referring to Connecticut's own fiscal problems, which prompted statewide debate over a new income tax, said, "I never felt that I had the facts." But the facts in this case were not just more details of numbers and charts, but an analysis of why the fiscal situation unfolded as it had. He continued, "My big problem was, *how* could this thing go from X-number of million dollars to a deficit of $280 million."

A commentator said . . .

One president who communicated in coherent ways to the public was Franklin Roosevelt. FDR, in his fireside chats, really made the case for his policy positions, addressed the arguments of his opponents, and explained how he chose one particular option.

An Indianapolis woman, asked how she would like to hear the federal deficit problem talked about, specifically told us that she wanted answers to how and why questions: "I would want to know where the money went, where the money is, how we can get more money to pay it back." And she noted the frustration that comes from the lack of such answers:

> You just hear references to the deficit, and it's like this hopeless tone of voice, like now, it's so many trillions of dollars and we don't know where it went. We don't know where it's being used.

And a Seattle woman remarked that she did not feel any real sense of attachment to the federal deficit issue because of the sense of incoherence in what she was hearing and learning about it:

> I know about the budget deficit, but I can't really get a grasp on it.... I see us spending all this money and I keep hearing that we have a deficit, but if we're spending all this money, putting ourselves in more and more debt, and we're not really seeing not a big change, then *how* can that be?

Then on a more personal level, an Indianapolis woman said she sought a more coherent story about how her children are being educated — a story that she could gain by pursuing a conversation with the people who teach her kids: "I want to know what people are thinking when they deal with my children. I want to know these people," she said. "I want to know what's on their minds, how they teach, how they think."

In the group discussions, participants also suggested that they want a greater dimension of *time* when it comes to understanding and relating to public concerns; they want a story that is ongoing, in which consistency is achieved, in which memory is developed. A Seattle woman conveyed this image when criticizing the absence of memory in news stories that she hears and reads: "There's like a whole story that we don't even know, way down here under the ground." She was frustrated because to her too few connections are made when relating elements of information that emerge or take new shape over time. She continued, "And, a year later, here comes this story, and we say, 'well, we heard that one little incident, but where did the rest of this come from?'"

A Richmond woman bemoaned presentations of AIDS information, noting that counterproductive fears about AIDS are "escalated by continual reports about how it can be caught." She suggested people would gain a greater sense of bearing if new information were placed in the context of the whole story: "It seems like every other month or so there's some new report that says, 'oh, we've left something out.' And I think the more that happens, the more afraid people are."

A similar sense of unwanted surprise and inconsistency seemed to hinder a Little Rock woman's ability to relate to AIDS as a public concern. She noted, "Well, I know they say that AIDS is a sex thing, and I know that part.... [But first,] they say it's just homosexuals that do it, and then all of a sudden everybody's getting it!" Like the man from Richmond, she seemed to need different pieces of information connected so that she could gain a sense of coherence of the overall story amid breaking news.

A Los Angeles man's frustration with his own inability to create a sense of a whole story — over time — emerged when he recalled for us the instance of a jetliner crash. "The last I heard, they were looking for the black box" so that they could gather more clues to explain the crash; but then suddenly another major international news story erupted and, he said, the black box hunt seemed to be

Commentators said...

People pursue a sense of coherence by being eager question-askers, trying to figure out the "real stories" behind circumstances. In this search for understanding, it would be helpful to treat people as active, involved decision makers, not as passive recipients of information.

Commentators said...

Memory is one key aspect of a story that people need. Weaving a story over time can help public concerns take root in people's minds and can help engage more people on those concerns. But memory, as opposed to newness, is not a quality that is valued in public discourse today.

Commentators said . . .

Public figures can play an important role in helping to create a sense of coherence for people. President Kennedy was such a figure. As he spoke, he was able to create a coherent story for people by making essential cross-references to related ideas and by calling on memories and insights from past experience.

forgotten. He complained that he never did hear what was concluded from the search.

The same Los Angeles man even turned to pop culture for an example of how the lack of memory on how public concerns evolve can undermine people's sense of coherence in public life. He talked about "Lou Grant," a former television series that was about a newspaper. "It is the epitome of what the news media is about," he said. "They would get into these issues and they would get this story. . . . and then I'm waiting for part two, resolution to the [news] story, and they're on to some other story."

A Los Angeles woman pointed out another way that the media can adversely affect people's sense of time: "It's almost like they come in a little late, first of all. I mean, the issue exists *long* before the media attacks it or puts it out there. . . . But then they do, and it's like they take credit." For her, these kinds of media splashes undermine a sense of continuity and coherence on public concerns.

Finally, a woman from Seattle did recall a situation in which a sense of time and memory did come through in a community crisis — and it helped. She referred to public discussion about a regional water shortage, noting that a more complete story, with public memory, provided a sense of hope and progress:

> They didn't just tell us, well, we're going to run out of water, but they said, this is what you can do to save water. And they put it on the TV and in the paper and everywhere you looked, the little chart showed how well you were doing. And they sort of cheerleaded you along and kept saying, good going, you guys are the good guys.

What emerges from the participants in these group discussions is a desire for the "whole story" — a sense of coherence — that helps to create and nourish people's relationships with public concerns. For this coherence to develop, participants say they want the "whole truth," all sides of a story, the how and the why of a story, and the piecing together of a story over time. People are seeking insights, patterns, explanations, and memories that, in fact, run counter to the fragmentation of information that so often is found in society today.

Do we help people piece together the "whole story" on public concerns — creating a sense of coherence about how and why things fit together today and how they have evolved over time?

Room for Ambivalence

People resist polarization on public concerns, seeking instead room for ambivalence — a gray area in the public debate in which to question, discuss, test ideas, and gain confidence about their views.

Americans regularly tell pollsters that they want less talk and more action on public concerns. But the constant drumbeat of that message can be misleading. Citizens interviewed for this study indicate clearly that along the way to action — *before* action is taken — people want room to explore what they believe on a public concern and how they feel about the concern. They want the opportunity to question, listen, learn, test ideas — to "work through" their views. People suggest that having such room — what we call *room for ambivalence* — is essential if they are to form relationships with public concerns. Yet all too often that room is absent from our public life.

Toward the conclusion of the Los Angeles discussion, as participants looked back on their conversation, one man said that these kinds of conversations are important because people can raise and discuss openly differing opinions. He noted that it was possible for people to learn from one another, without fear that the discussion would fill with animosity and become polarized.

> Nobody's really coming out and really . . . arguing They're sitting here thinking she has her opinion, and she has her opinion. I think it's great. It's not that she has to agree with her or she has to agree with her . . . because at the end of [this discussion] . . . we all listened to everybody else's opinion and I think we all got something out of it.

Ross Perot's push for nationwide "town meetings" (during election '92) was seen by another Los Angeles man as a symbol of the need for more open discussion today. "That's what this country was based on — the town meeting — everybody getting together, discussing his point of view. That is not happening in this country."

Indeed, a Los Angeles woman emphasized the value of exchanging different views on issues. She suggested that it is "important to get new information, or to get information that you disagree with" when thinking about issues. More people, she argued, need to approach such information with an open mind. "It's all just information," she said. "Nothing is wrong. It's all just different." She went on to say that when people discuss such information, they must feel "safe" enough to say, "Wait! I have no clue what you're talking about. Can you explain that to me?"

Other people echoed the need for having more room to learn in public life — to exchange views and ideas. A Seattle man, when asked whether people

should wait to become involved in a civic group until they develop a firm stand on the group's main concern, said, "If you joined a group, you could learn more about [the concern]," thus helping to form your opinion. Then a woman in the group immediately chimed in, "When I'm undecided about something, I seek opinions from both sides."

A commentator said . . .

It is vital to give people time to deal with their ambivalence about public concerns, not to push them immediately to make a decision or to vote. Indeed, sometimes an individual will revisit a subject a month later and decide on a point of view. Time spent in thinking about a public concern gives people greater confidence and creativity as decision makers.

The focus group discussions themselves produced explicit examples of what it sounds like when an antidote is found for the boxed-in feeling that so many participants complained about throughout these discussions. When possible, participants took a welcome opportunity to share a view that differed from the apparently predominant opinion around the table. In the Seattle conversation, for instance, after comments had been made about the deficiencies in the local schools, one man said, "Perhaps the schools are a bit overdone. I think that the problems are there before the children get into the schools." To that, a woman responded, "Yes! Thank you for saying that." The man then continued, "It's a real complicated issue. I've been puzzling over it for years."

Commentators said . . .

The process of engagement starts where people's own interests and ideas start, so it is important to validate and support these starting points. People benefit when their own inclinations are affirmed by others — as in a simple conversation where someone says, "That's a good idea."

Another example came in the Los Angeles group. After concern had been voiced about the plight of the homeless, a man noted a personal experience with an individual who had been successful in soliciting money from passersby. He said about the soliciting, "I have some serious mixed feelings about that. . . . I think I kind of resent the fact that they are homeless and are probably making more money than I do." To that, a woman responded, "I have a similar issue. Thanks for bringing it up. I didn't want to, but it is the homeless." Trying to balance a sense of sympathy and anger that she feels toward the plight of the homeless and their soliciting money on the streets, she said, "I have both feelings about it."

An Indianapolis woman, who said she is pro-choice on abortion, remarked after listening to comments from someone who is pro-life, that she did not want the discussion of the topic to become polarized: "I certainly don't want to change anybody's mind tonight." Instead, she said, "I would like to see more dialogue between the two groups. I don't think anybody *likes* abortion."

Another Indianapolis woman, looking back on the focus group in which she participated, suggested that conversations with a diversity of people are not common, and if they were more common, they need not be as polarized as people might expect:

A commentator said . . .

Ambivalence cannot be worked through alone. It must be done *with* others, through conversation and making decisions together.

> We all tend to spend most of our time with people like us. These people [around the table] are all different, and they have different perspectives. I don't often get a chance to talk to people who have different ideas . . . and have a convivial conversation with people who disagree with me.

She continued:

> To me, this is very stimulating to sit down and talk like this . . . talking to people and not shouting at one another . . . I think that this not happening could be part of the problem why we've gotten into a mess [in the country]. Because nobody is intelligently, really calmly, sitting down and talking about things.

Indeed, many participants said that there is not enough room for ambivalence in discussions about public concerns today. An Indianapolis woman recalled a recent conversation in which "I felt that we were all treading on eggshells. No one really wanted to say what they really felt because of what the other people might think." A Little Rock woman, discussing what discourages her from exploring different positions on the abortion issue, noted that she hesitates to talk with her friends about it because the discussion becomes polarized so quickly. "They'll take it to extremes," she said. "I feel very strongly about things, but . . . I believe you can stand up for what you believe in and support it without going to extremes." Similarly, a Hartford woman painted a negative picture of conversations about the debate over the Connecticut income tax, suggesting that they became polarized too often: "At cocktail parties we'll talk about it, but most of the time it leads to arguments."

A commentator said . . .

The false choice of liberal vs. conservative is "stupid." The old political rhetoric has little to do with the reality of people's lives.

Then there is this Los Angeles man who captured the sentiments of many people who participated in the group discussions when he said:

> There are a number of issues in this country where there seems to be very little gray area. And that's something I am afraid of in this country — a general issue, the polarization. You've got to be this way, or you've got to be this way. If you're not for it, you're against it.

Indeed, people in the group discussions said that they want more room to engage in give-and-take discussions — in which they can listen to one another, ask questions, learn new insights, gain confidence in what they think and how they feel on a public concern. Today, that gray area seems only either black or white.

How can more room for ambivalence be created in public discourse today — room in which people are encouraged to question and learn, to consider different points of view?

Emotion

The presence of emotion in public life is essential if people are to form and sustain relationships with public concerns.

Emotion at times is viewed as a villain in public discourse and decision making, undermining a "rational" approach to conducting public affairs. But participants in the group discussions suggest that emotion plays an essential — indeed a natural and nurturing — part in their building of relationships with public concerns. When people spoke about important concerns to them, emotion — including fear, anger, sadness, happiness — was consistently at the heart of their stories.

Listen to the range of emotions in the citizen comments that follow — people being **"fed up"** or **"really mad,"** or finding something **"incredibly scary"** or **"pitching a fit."** You can hear people describe these emotions as a key motivating factor in their forming of relationships with public concerns. And while there were occasional red flags raised by participants about the power of emotion to freeze engagement — to be a harmful force — people typically spoke of emotion as a key to sustaining their involvement in public affairs.

As a motivating force for engaging with public concerns, the emotions of being fed up or angry were a unifying theme among many citizen stories. A Los Angeles man, who took an active interest in creating job-training opportunities for students, said his involvement was motivated by an anger over the local school board's plan to cut student counselors. "Basically, I just kind of **pitched a fit** and raised enough hell until some people figured that [the counselor cuts] is not a good idea." A Seattle woman, involved in a fight against a dance club moving into her neighborhood, described a situation in which residents felt misled by the club's promises and practices. "I got **really mad, furious** at the manager, and so that was what crystallized" my interest in this concern. She continued, "I began with the neighborhood action club, and [then] another neighbor . . . asked questions. She got **mad**, and we . . . got the whole community involved." A Seattle man said that a sense of anger prompted him to become engaged on abortion concerns: "I began to be **disturbed** that a lot of personal freedoms were being destroyed, and one of the more important ones is freedom of choice."

At the time of these citizen interviews, group participants said that a general sense of anger about politics had motivated people to get more involved in public affairs. Widespread support for Ross Perot's presidential candidacy was cited as an example of this. "When people get angry enough," a Los Angeles man said, they get involved. Elsewhere in that

Commentators said . . .

Emotion cannot be separated from the deliberation process — feelings are intimately tied to public engagement. It is a myth to think of decisions as exclusively intellectual.

conversation, two other participants cited anger as a factor in motivating more people to get reinvolved in public affairs. A woman said, "We're just getting a resurgence of involvement, and that has to do with the fact that our tolerance level is very low." A man added, when talking about the ills of America's political process, "We're sick of it." Speaking more hypothetically, an Indianapolis woman affirmed the importance of dissonance. "I guess if there's nothing you object to, you tend not to pay attention."

Emotions other than anger also motivate people to form relationships with public concerns. A Hartford woman described her attachment to the abortion issue in terms of fear, saying the subject grew in importance "when I realized the *Roe vs. Wade* could be reversed. To me, it's like going backwards. I just think it's incredibly scary." A Seattle woman told of her involvement as a volunteer in the local grade school being a result of an unsettling experience in a classroom: "I decided it was time for me to get involved a little bit because it really scared me that this teacher had 35 students in her classroom and no help. It really scared me." Recall the Little Rock woman who got involved in neighborhood anticrime efforts after she learned of drug use and prostitution threatening her security, "I said, my God, I've got to do something. I can't go to bed here at night knowing that this is going on in *my* driveway."

For others, like the man in Los Angeles who said that he was helping the homeless as a result of seeing their plight firsthand, the element of sadness or sympathy comes into play: "It gets to you," he said. A Hartford woman who became involved in a housing-for-the-needy project said that, when she decided to participate, she thought to herself, "It will make me feel better." For the woman in Richmond who said that she had done literacy-training work, recall that one of her reasons for involvement was emotional: "I love to read."

In addition to serving as a motivator, participants portrayed emotion as something that helps to sustain and support their relationship with a public concern *over time*. As one Los Angeles man put it: "You've got to be excited about whatever . . . you're doing in order to devote time, effort, and money to change it." He then continued by saying, "If you're going to get involved in anything controversial, you have to have some . . . emotion in it."

A Seattle woman referred to passion to describe the underpinning of what keeps people going in the public arena. "Everyone has to have a passion in order to sustain you. . . . You have to pick and choose. You have to have some passion, whatever it is you do."

The woman in Los Angeles who said she was active on immigration concerns, discussed her experiences in a way that suggested a pattern of anger that sustained her interest in that area.

> It was anger that motivated me when a block on either side of me during the riots was being burned down. It was anger when I was watching it on television and I was told that most of the people who were looting were illegal aliens. And it was anger that motivated me when I found

out that the ACLU was investigating . . . that [the immigrants'] human rights had been violated, as opposed to the people's stores that they were looting.

Also recall the Hartford man who became "fed up" over his state's income tax. His anger was an important factor in promoting a pattern of expanding interest in public affairs. After becoming involved in the income tax battle, he told us that:

> From that point on, I said, I'm going to get the most out of what votes I have here and there . . . and it was after that I became aware of a lot of town issues where I never was involved before. . . . I've become a little bit fed up with what's going on. But I'm more aware of things now than ever before.

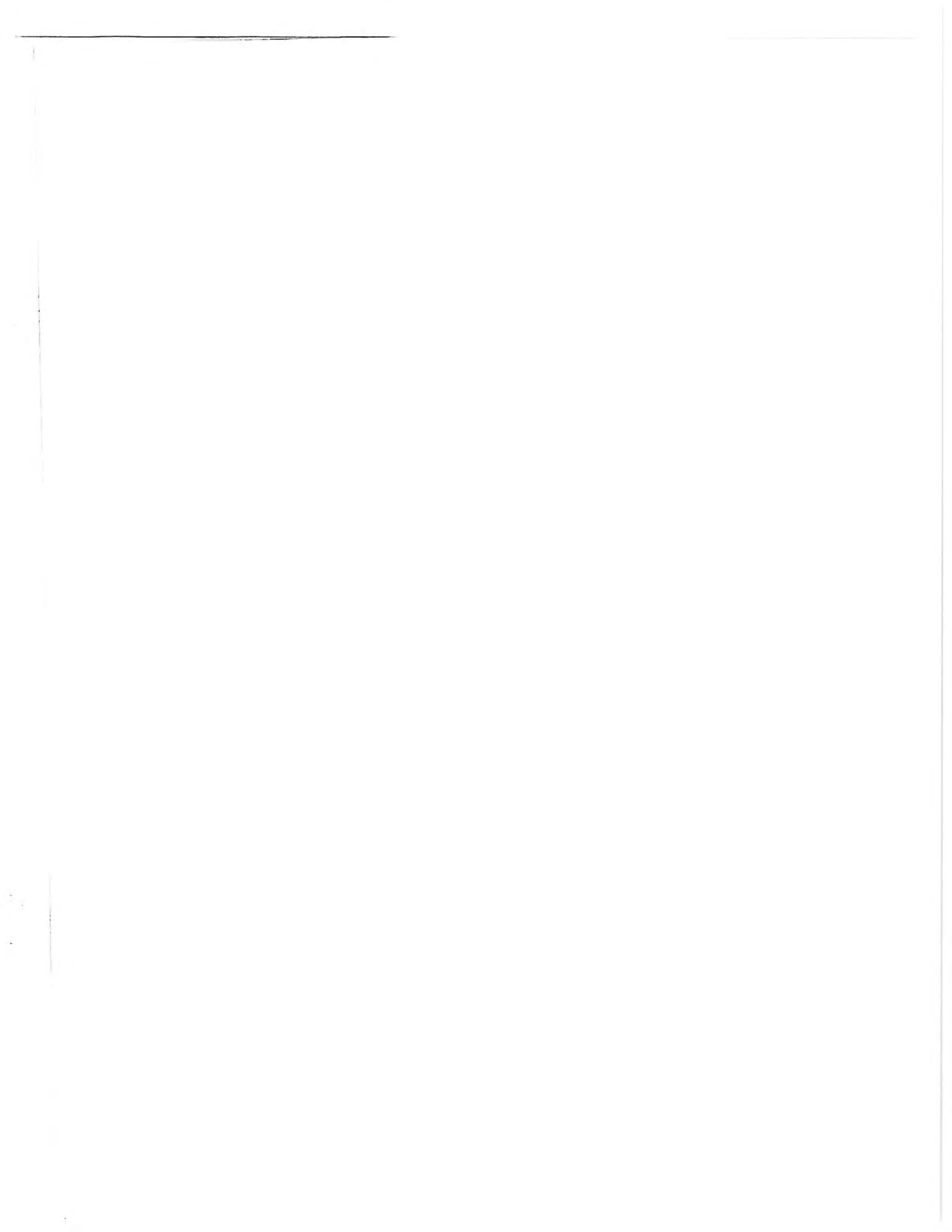
Commentators said . . .

Of course, emotion cannot be the sole basis for making decisions. People need to be given enough other information and sufficient opportunities for deliberation so that they can move beyond their visceral reactions and make decisions based on other considerations, too.

As a counterpoint to the power of emotion to sustain or stir engagement, some participants suggested cases where emotions like fear or frustration can paralyze people, actually hindering their relationship with a public concern. Listen to these two participants describe such an effect in relation to a public concern like AIDS. "I think sometimes you're even just too scared to even think about it as an issue," a Richmond woman said. "It's so terrible. You know, the numbers are increasing, and all that. I just can't think about that." A Seattle woman made much the same point in responding to a participant who had said people who do not push for AIDS education "don't really give a damn." Her response was: "Fear makes people . . . doubt sometimes. If you don't understand something and it scares you, you turn it off."

What is clear from these citizen discussions is that emotion is a vital part of people forming relationships with public concerns. It helps to motivate people to form the relationships and then to sustain them. A range of emotions were present in people's stories — running the gamut from "pitching a fit" to "feeling good." The role of emotion in these conversations has critical implications for the ways in which we present, discuss, and act on public concerns today.

In attempting to make public life more "rational," do we too often strip away emotions from public discourse — thereby draining the energy that is vital to people in forming and sustaining relationships with public concerns?



Authenticity

Information and individuals must "ring true" to people — reflecting to people a basic sense of reality and the general belief that they are being squared with.

So-called truth and credibility in public affairs often seems judged by whether a piece of information or a statement is based on scientific or statistical evidence. "Give me the facts, ma'am!" is the standard refrain. But focus group participants suggest that they are looking for an authenticity that is not possible to measure or create so easily. *Their* standard is whether individuals, information, and situations ring true to them. Group participants suggest that today citizens are bombarded with information that fails to meet their standard and which, in turn, pushes them away from participating in the public arena.

Three standards for authenticity emerge from our citizen conversations, each of which goes beyond people insisting that their own personal prejudices merely be reaffirmed by what they see, read, or hear: people want discussions of public concerns to reflect a basic sense of reality — which the current level of sensationalism in news coverage and public discourse often undermines; people want information sources to reflect an understanding of their experiences and values — and yet such experiences and values often seem dismissed as "soft," "fluffy," and "unreliable" in today's rational world; and people want to be squared with, told the straight story about public concerns — but, participants say, such candor is hard to find in public life today.

Participants suggested that much of what they hear about public concerns does not ring true to them; it lacks a sense of reality — and they look to the media, public officials, and others as contributing to this problem. A Little Rock man complained that news audiences are bombarded with claims every day that he said make the following case: "This is a great story. It's louder, and it's wilder, and there's more violence!" Commenting on this approach, he stated, "I get tired of that after a while. There's some reality in this world." He then observed, the "media doesn't always portray that reality. They just go after the big story and flash and things that sell."

In Hartford, a man said that public concerns too often get distorted because of "the sensationalism, the quick run-through" that occurs. A man in the Los Angeles discussion complained about the sense of "unreality" that can come from celebrities being involved in public concerns: "A media event tends to get amplified once you start to have celebrities involved. . . . They can make a small gathering into a big one. It's sensationalism." And recall the Los Angeles man who argued that, from his perspective, media coverage of candidates Clinton and Gore after their July 1992 convention did not portray a basic

A commentator said . . .

Public discourse often has little authenticity because it does not relate to people's need for problem solving. People know that their choices are not a simple "A" or "B," and when their choices are put in those terms, people feel powerless and frustrated.

sense of reality: "After the Democratic Convention, you have nothing that Clinton and his running mate have done wrong. Everything is just marvelous."

What is the effect of media coverage and public discussion that is not grounded in a sense of reality? An Indianapolis man said this about sensationalized coverage: "[The media] tend to make people prejudiced before they actually get all the facts." And a Richmond man suggested that sensationalism does not reflect well on our democracy. "What much of the media does, they sensationalize things. It's not a very good example of democracy at work."

Another important standard for people in judging authenticity is the "believability" of an institution or individual that is conveying information to them. Participants make such judgments based on whether a source seems to reflect their values and concerns; people want to feel or imagine a relationship with information sources, and know that those sources understand their lives.

Here are a few concrete examples of the ways in which people think about this relationship. A Richmond man suggested that often he discounts what he hears on television because TV commentators do not seem to understand the life he leads. "I think television is worst of all because you have people who earn a million dollars a year and more, who are pleading all over the lot. To me, they can't tell me anything about [life]." A Los Angeles man echoed this disconnected feeling from information sources, pointing to an apparent lack of empathy evinced by a local TV newscaster when reporting on various tragedies:

A commentator said . . .

Political stories, such as the image of America as a "shining city on the hill," have broken down and don't square any longer with people's own lives and experiences. New common stories are needed.

> My man comes on every day: "Good evening. This many people got killed." I keep wondering, how can these people keep telling, every day of their lives, tragedy after tragedy, death after death. . . . There has to be something in them to look at this stuff every day and not be affected by it.

When discussing the subject of believability, what a Little Rock man said he was seeking in information sources is simply this: "People who care."

In the Indianapolis discussion, participants showed they were applying a similar test to public officials and opinion leaders — that is, a test of "do they understand me, the kind of life I live?" A man in the group reflected what was at the time a well-known frustration among Americans: the 1992 "House Bank" situation, which served to deepen people's belief that some members of Congress do not live the way their constituents do. This situation undermined a sense of believability and authenticity. "It's like banking in special banks and stuff — I don't understand that." He noted, "I'm just frustrated with it."

A commentator said . . .

People have real "shit detectors," or screens through which they accept or reject information. People automatically register gaps between what they're being told and what they know from their own experience; in order to move people beyond what they already know, it is important to involve them in a learning process on a public concern.

An Indianapolis woman offered the sharpest criticism of opinion leaders who lack authenticity as a result of failing to reflect how real people live. When asked how she wants information presented so that she can form relationships with public concerns, she said:

> I think first you shoot all the experts — anybody who's an economist and who has a Ph.D. or master's or something in economy. . . . They have a whole language, and it has a lot

of letters in it, and I don't know what those letters are, and they have a lot of these things that they talk about, and normal people don't understand that.

Participants also say that an essential part of authenticity is believing that others are squaring with them. Such comments arose most frequently during discussions on the federal budget deficit. A Seattle man, when asked if more information would help him and his fellow citizens come to grips with the deficit issue, said, "I don't think we need to hear any more about it. All we would hear is more lies. I think people are fed up." On the deficit, he said, "You don't know who to believe anymore."

A Little Rock man suggested that Ross Perot provided him with a sense of authenticity on the deficit. Why? Because he believed that Perot had made an honest effort to confront the truth:

> Perot comes up and says, "I'm not going to give you any tax breaks. One time only, I'm going to charge every family a hundred dollars more for this year. This is going to allow us to cut the deficit by three-quarters. We'll do the rest, I promise you, in ten years. Otherwise, I'll walk out."

The Little Rock man then asked rhetorically, "You don't think we would accept that?" He believed that people would. "Would you believe somebody if he would show you in black and white — and for one time there was an honest person out there — that you could just sacrifice a little bit more to help this country? Would you not do that?" People sitting around the table in his group conversation nodded that they would.

A Little Rock woman argued that an honest, no-nonsense discussion in which leaders told citizens the straight story about the deficit would create a greater sense of authenticity:

> If [a leader] would admit that the country was in bad shape .... And if he got the facts from the people rather than from his advisers. ... And if he came out there and said, "OK, we've all discussed it, you have written me and I have read, I have listened, and this is the way we think we can do it. And we're going to do it — otherwise, I'm out of here."

But politicians "skate around the issues, they don't talk to us," this woman lamented. "[Everyone] sits up there and reads a doggone speech that was written by [somebody else]."

An Indianapolis woman implied that squaring with the audience is a crucial factor in figuring out whom and what she would believe when it comes to the federal budget:

> Somebody that knows about it, but isn't selling their viewpoint of it. ... You know, because it seems like the only specifics we get about it are, "I'm telling you this because . . . this is *their* fault." And you don't get an objective viewpoint to what's going on.

The citizens we interviewed have their own internal touchstones for judging what rings true, what makes sense to them. Their judgments about what is authentic has less to do with objective

A commentator said . . .

Citizens would be more likely to believe the authenticity of information if more attention were paid to finding out what sources of information are accepted by the public.

A commentator said . . .

People form stronger relationships to public concerns when there is clarity about the possibility for action and what they want to achieve, and the ability to see success over time.

Commentators said . . .

People are seeking a personal role in finding the "truth." Their skepticism about authenticity can be eased if they gain greater access to various sources of information themselves. This can help people develop a greater sense of independence and confidence in what they come to know.

proofs than if something or someone reflects the realities of their lives, or if they can make something possible to imagine, or if they feel they are being squared with.

How can a greater sense of authenticity be created in discourse on public concerns, so that information and individuals "ring true" to people?

Sense of Possibilities

People are seeking a sense of possibility — that action might occur on a public concern, and that they might play a personal role in it.

People assail the wasting of energy and shun the stagnation in public affairs today, suggesting that these characteristics of public life frustrate them and hinder their engagement with public concerns. What group participants demonstrate in their comments in these discussions is a keen desire — a hope — for a sense of possibility in the public arena.

People say that this need for possibility is a vital part of their forming relationships with public concerns. Indeed, group participants suggest that people like themselves will respond with interest in — and perhaps even action on — public concerns when signs exist that things are getting done, or that things *might* get done. Central to this process for people is gaining an answer to a basic, and seemingly ever-present question: "What can I do?" In today's world, this is a difficult question for people to answer.

One clear message from these focus group discussions is that people want nothing to do with the oft-noted "wheelspinning" now associated with public affairs. A Los Angeles woman said she abandoned a group that appeared to match her interest in environmental concerns because, "I just lost interest. I got mad things weren't being accomplished." A Hartford man, when asked to compare the relative importance of the federal deficit and unemployment as issues, explained: "The deficit is something that has to be addressed, but I don't see any politicians really doing it." So, "I think it's less important," he concluded.

This sense of frustration about the lack of apparent progress being made on public concerns was repeated by one group participant after another, including a Seattle woman who, in commenting on the deficit, said of public officials: "[They're] not going to do anything about it no matter what we do. So we kind of tend to overlook it." A Richmond man had this to say about stagnation in public affairs: "Politics is so drawn out. You try to get something done and it might be three years later. . . . All this political stuff is just too drawn out!" And a Los Angeles man said that when it comes to becoming engaged on public concerns, he and others would be encouraged by an actual sign of movement. "Once the ball gets rolling, it's easier for other people to join in," he observed. Then, adding some historical context, he noted, "You can look back, I suppose, at the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam where you had demonstrations. They tend to feed off themselves at that point."

sense of movement — of possibility — when citing their own experiences with becoming engaged on particular public concerns. A Little Rock woman said that she does fund-raising for various initiatives, and that she was especially enthusiastic about supporting local police projects because the police do good work and it makes a difference: "I know the policemen go to all the different schools and teach kids about [drugs], so that's why I really want to do it for them. They do a lot...." A Seattle man involved in abortion issues said that his interest emerged during college as he networked among people who, as he noted, "were very active" and helped to provide him with a sense of action. It is also worthwhile to recall the Seattle woman who seemed to draw a real sense of possibility from a citywide effort to combat a water shortage. "They put it on the TV and in the paper and everywhere you looked. The little chart showed how well you were doing. They sort of cheerleaded you along and kept saying, 'Good going.'"

Still, even in the context of people knowing that *something* can be done *by others*, participants returned throughout the conversations to their basic question, "What can I do myself?" The lack of a personal role can act as an important obstacle to citizens forming a relationship with a public concern. "My husband talks about [the federal deficit] constantly, and I keep saying I know, I know, but what can *we* do about it?" a Hartford woman said. Without an apparent answer to that question, she continued, "I think I'm turning a deaf ear." A Seattle man echoed the need for a personal role. He said that people would engage in public action "when people have some kind of see-able, do-able task that they can organize and work on." He continued, "But we haven't been given that opportunity as a society. Our leadership has not provided us with that."

A commentator said...

People will grab hold of new information about a public concern if you invite them to think *with you* about that information and not just "tell" them. The communication cannot be one-way or else people will reject ownership of the information.

The Richmond woman who became involved in a presidential campaign said her initial experiences were marked by that unmet need for a so-called do-able task. "You know, when someone first said, 'Do you want to help the campaign?' My first question is, 'What can I do?'" A Los Angeles man, who said he had become involved in combating homelessness, observed that not knowing what *he* could do about the related problem of unemployment stopped him short of *further* involvement; he explained, "I don't know how to get involved in that, or what I can really do." A woman from Indianapolis said the same thing about the abortion issue: "I'm not active in it politically because I don't know what to do."

Commentators said...

Discussion helps people to see possibilities for action. Conversations bring out the individual *and* collective strengths of people, building their confidence as decision makers and helping them deal with conflicting information.

Some focus group participants offered prescriptions for prompting greater civic involvement among people. A man from Little Rock, when asked how to address obstacles that might undercut people's desire to be involved, noted that the first step is for them to make contact with like-minded people.

> A lot of times, you don't know where to go or who to contact. You don't have the ability... [to] do it by yourself. You find out a lot of people don't care about the issue, you can't find anybody to talk to....

Whereas, he said, like-minded people could help each other discover and reinforce a common sense of possibility. A woman from Indianapolis commented that "people would get more involved" as they came to know more about a public concern — in particular, "what you can do to change it."

A Little Rock woman agreed that people need some degree of guidance about possible actions, because "you don't really know where to join, and people really need to know where to get involved. I don't go to church, but I'm sure if more people would go to church, they would get into more. . . ."

In a Richmond discussion on AIDS, when obstacles that block a person's involvement were raised, a woman said she would need to be given information on "what to do" before she would contribute two spare hours every week to that cause: "If somebody came to me and said, 'Look, we've got X program. All we need is two hours a week of your time. You'd be doing something to help this issue.'" Then, she said, under those conditions, she would go to work.

Another consideration for some participants was the need to know not only that they could do something, but that their actions might make a difference — that the possibility for change exists. Indeed, a Richmond man suggested that it is important not just to show people what they might do, but also "the outcome of it."

A commentator said . . .

The media and others need to give more attention to stories in which people did make a difference. In that way, people gradually can be encouraged to think more seriously about their own role in public concerns, rather than fall back on the idea that there is nothing that they can do.

A Little Rock woman echoed this idea when she was asked for a strategy to motivate people in forming relationships with public concerns; she said that a person has to be given a chance to really make a difference. "How many times have you started to do something and said, oh no — just me! — what difference does it make?" People have to know "it wasn't a wasted effort," she said.

An Indianapolis woman who had become involved in a successful campaign for school-funding legislation said she was more likely to be active in related issues again because of that earlier experience. "It made me realize firsthand, 'Yes, we can make a difference!'"

Finally, some participants' comments suggested just how important it is to remember that the process of becoming engaged with a public concern does not always take a predictable, logical and linear path — that is, that various factors can coexist for a time and then combine, almost in a single moment, when they are ripe to spur action. A Hartford woman spoke of an instance when suddenly the pieces fit together for her and she was ready for action; she talked of a field trip of adults and children that was about to embark on a mission to help improve housing for the needy: "Something just clicked when I was in church last week. I said, this is something I can do!" There is indeed an element of unpredictability in some people's discoveries of their roles.

A commentator said . . .

One way to help people connect to a public concern is to focus on the solving of a problem. A newspaper story whose basic message is "here's a problem in a small town" could be rewritten to say, "here's how people in one town are addressing a problem." This would make the story more relevant and create a sense of possibility.

What emerges from these citizen conversations is that participants form relationships with public concerns when they

can discover or strengthen a sense of possibility for action and a worthwhile role for themselves to play in it. A "complete victory" does not seem to be the goal — more than progress is imaginable, and a sense of movement might be visible.

How can people gain a greater sense of possibility in public life today and see roles that they themselves can play to bring about change — so that discussion on public concerns does not seem so isolated from action?

Catalysts

Everyday Americans, not just experts and elites, are key catalysts in helping people form relationships with public concerns.

Discussion of public concerns in America often turns on "experts" or "prized sources" of information — these are the people on whom we seem to rely for helping citizens form relationships with public concerns and to act on those concerns. Yet what is clear from this research is that group participants often turn to a more mundane cast of characters to play that leading role of catalyst. The valued qualities of a catalyst are found in people from all walks of life, people seldom found on the cover of *Time* or *Newsweek*. These qualities include the ability to touch someone's life, to stir interest, to nurture a sense of possibility. As respected individuals, these catalysts are looked to for motivation or guidance in a personal, rather than a distant and disconnected, way.

Listen to people in these conversations mention their catalysts — family members, friends, others in the neighborhood —sometimes in an offhand, casual way. Note that the status they hold is closely tied to the importance of other factors we have discussed, such as the importance of personal context and authenticity. Also listen to the comments that describe what makes a good catalyst.

For some participants, the catalyst was as close as a member of their family or a loved one. A Los Angeles man who had become active in school issues and formed a group to oust local school board members said, "My wife was the catalyst." A Los Angeles woman, working for a senior nutrition center, told us, "My sister was working there, she got me into it." A Little Rock woman who expressed interest in environmental issues explained that her son prompted her attachment to those concerns: "My son is an environmentalist. In fact, I was never really concerned about" environmental issues until he became involved in them, she said. Likewise, there was the woman from Hartford who explained her growing involvement in the abortion debate by citing her brother's interest: "After I talked to him and others, I thought, 'Wow, I should be doing this myself!'" And then there was the Los Angeles woman who said she had become interested in wetlands issues because "I have a boyfriend who got me involved."

In other cases the catalyst was as close as a friend or neighborhood contact, or sometimes even an acquaintance. An Indianapolis woman who had become involved in school-related issues said, "The initial grabber, I guess, was just a friend asking me to get involved in this one particular issue last year." A Little Rock woman, explaining her involvement in

A commentator said . . .

Studies have noted that people do not make up their minds on voting by reading news. Rather, their decisons are guided more by the network of people they respect — people often found in their own neighborhoods.

helping the Humane Society, credited an associate of that organization. "I guess their investigator . . . was the one who spurred me on because he was so dedicated to it." A Hartford man who became engaged in a local water-rights dispute attributed his interest partly to his contacts with a neighbor, who happened to be a state officeholder. "For one thing, I was made aware because I had a (state) senator that lived right across the street from me, and he was directly involved in that." A Seattle woman, tracing her involvement in public lands concerns, pointed to a personal acquaintance. "I was fortunate enough to meet an older man who had been a Department of Interior lawyer. [He] told me about the public trust doctrine. He showed me how to use the law library." Recall the Richmond woman who spoke about what it would take for her to become involved in AIDS concerns. She said she might become active if there were a catalyst — "if someone came to me and said, 'Look, we've got X program. All we need is two hours a week of your time, and you'd be doing something to help this issue.'"

Sometimes the catalyst for action is not a single individual, but is a result of an overall sense of momentum that engulfs people. Recall the Seattle woman's comments that portrayed a *citywide* effort to combat a water shortage — no single catalyst was necessarily present, but there was a sense of possibility created among people:

Commentators said . . .

Qualities that make a good catalyst include the early inclination to be involved in a public concern, being trusted and respected by others, and authenticity — embodying the things that one is calling for in others.

> They didn't just tell us, well, we're going to run out of water, but they said, this is what you can do to save water. And they put it on the TV and in the paper and everywhere you looked. The little chart showed how well you were doing. And they sort of cheerleaded you along and kept saying, "good going, you guys are the good guys."

Also recall the comments of a Los Angeles man: "Once the ball gets rolling, it's easier for other people to join in. Somebody has taken over the leadership of it," he said, then adding some historical context. "You can look back, I suppose, at the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam where you had demonstrations. They tend to feed off themselves at that point."

These citizen discussions do not point to a simple definition of an ideal catalyst, but they do suggest at least four recurring themes. First, the catalysts themselves were engaged on a particular public concern; they cared. Second, the catalysts generally had knowledge and guidance to impart about the public concern at hand. Third, the catalysts had a quality of authenticity — they were believable. Fourth, the catalysts were part of a person's own world, own realm of experience, own context, but were at the same time capable of moving a person farther outside of him- or herself and into a broader world of public concerns.

Commentators said . . .

While people tend to like doing things together, they are not reminded of this by the values often implicit in the marketplace of ideas or in television news. The messages the public receives tend to spotlight individuals placed apart from, or in competition with, each other.

Are everyday Americans recognized and supported as catalysts who can help others understand, form relationships to, and act on public concerns?

Mediating Institutions

Mediating institutions are key places where people come together to talk and act on public concerns.

For many Americans, society has become increasingly fragmented, isolating one person from another. There seem to be fewer places today where people can come together to talk about and act on public concerns. And yet, for the citizens who participated in these group discussions, local organizations — sometimes called mediating institutions — provided a key link to the larger society around them and to forming relationships with public concerns.

While the kinds of mediating institutions with which people associate vary, common themes about people's experiences emerge from our conversations. What often makes these places important to citizens is the opportunity to interact with people with whom they may not otherwise come in contact; the spark they provide to expand people's outlook on a public concern — to make connections between concerns; and the avenues they open for people to discover new opportunities for participating in public life.

Mediating institutions such as places of worship or schools or neighborhood organizations often were mentioned as key settings for people in their forming relationships with public concerns. Recall the Hartford woman who had embarked on a housing-for-the-needy field trip. For her, church was the launching pad. "I didn't know much about [the housing program] until recently — we were talking about it every Sunday." Then after attending church for some time, and hearing about the program on occasion, she told us: "I [had] been thinking about this for a while, but last weekend," just one weekend before the Hartford focus group, "watching them all . . . getting on the bus to go to Vermont to help build all these houses, I thought I'm going to do one of these trips."

A Little Rock woman also cited the role of a religious institution in her forming of a relationship with a public concern, saying that she had become concerned about teen pregnancy problems "because I'm involved in a church."

For other participants, mediating institutions were not only their launching pads for action, they provided the place in which people's views formed and evolved. A Richmond woman told us:

> I got involved in [homeless concerns] in my church. . . . It amazed me, because up until I got really involved with the homeless, I believed, like a lot of people, that it was something that was their own fault. . . . And

getting to know those people and working with those people. . . . I found out that it's not always the case.

A Seattle woman said that she had become active in a school for homeless children because of what she learned during her involvement in a neighborhood council. In working with a local school committee for the council, she said, "I started realizing how little money" is in the school's budget, and this led to an "evolution of seeing how desperately needed the things are for the public schools." Also recall the Los Angeles man whose initial involvement in a school committee spurred him to form another group intended to improve career training for young students. He said he had "pitched a fit" in response to what he had learned about school budget plans, and "that started the whole process" that led to his forming of the training group. And a woman from Indianapolis pointed out that, "Once you get involved in your kid's school . . . all of a sudden, you see an area that needs doing, you go to a meeting and you find out, hey, there's a literacy program beginning and they need volunteers." Her comment is another illustration of a crosscutting theme in this report: the dynamic pattern of an initial interest leading to deeper involvement, an initial perspective leading to a broader view.

Commentators said . . .

Mediating institutions, such as churches, have great value. Through involvement in such institutions people can gain a sense of responsibility, listen to various perspectives on public concerns, and take advantage of stepping-stones to other involvement.

Another example of this expanding pattern of learning and involvement was offered in the Seattle discussion. There a woman told of becoming a volunteer in her local school, tracing her involvement back to an earlier experience in which she learned just how little classroom support the teachers had. "Based on what I learned, I said, 'Well, I will become an avid member of the P.T.A. and I will come and help the teacher.'"

For another Seattle woman, a neighborhood council served as the focal point for expanding her view of public concerns. As a council member, she said she had come to understand some of the arguments of local businesses against planned restrictions; she ultimately played a role in reversing her council's decision against the businesses. Asked if this involvement prompted her to do anything differently after that experience, she said, "It made me think about other issues."

Commentators said . . .

People become more engaged when they have the chance to interact, offer input, take partial ownership of ideas. Simply talking at or lecturing to people will not engage them in public life.

There were, of course, participants in the conversations who did not have stories of their own concerning the role of mediating groups, but they, too, talked about the importance of such groups in helping people form relationships with public concerns. In the Little Rock conversation a woman said that joining an organization can be an important step for people in connecting with public concerns. "I don't go to church, but I'm sure if more people would go to church, they would get into more." But she added, "You don't really know where to join, and people really don't know where to get involved."

An Indianapolis man, asked how he would want to receive information about the federal deficit, suggested "groups like this [discussion]," meeting fairly informally, at which someone knowledgeable about the issue would speak in real people's language: "Go into an area where we would be represented maybe by our congressman or somebody who would know what they're talking

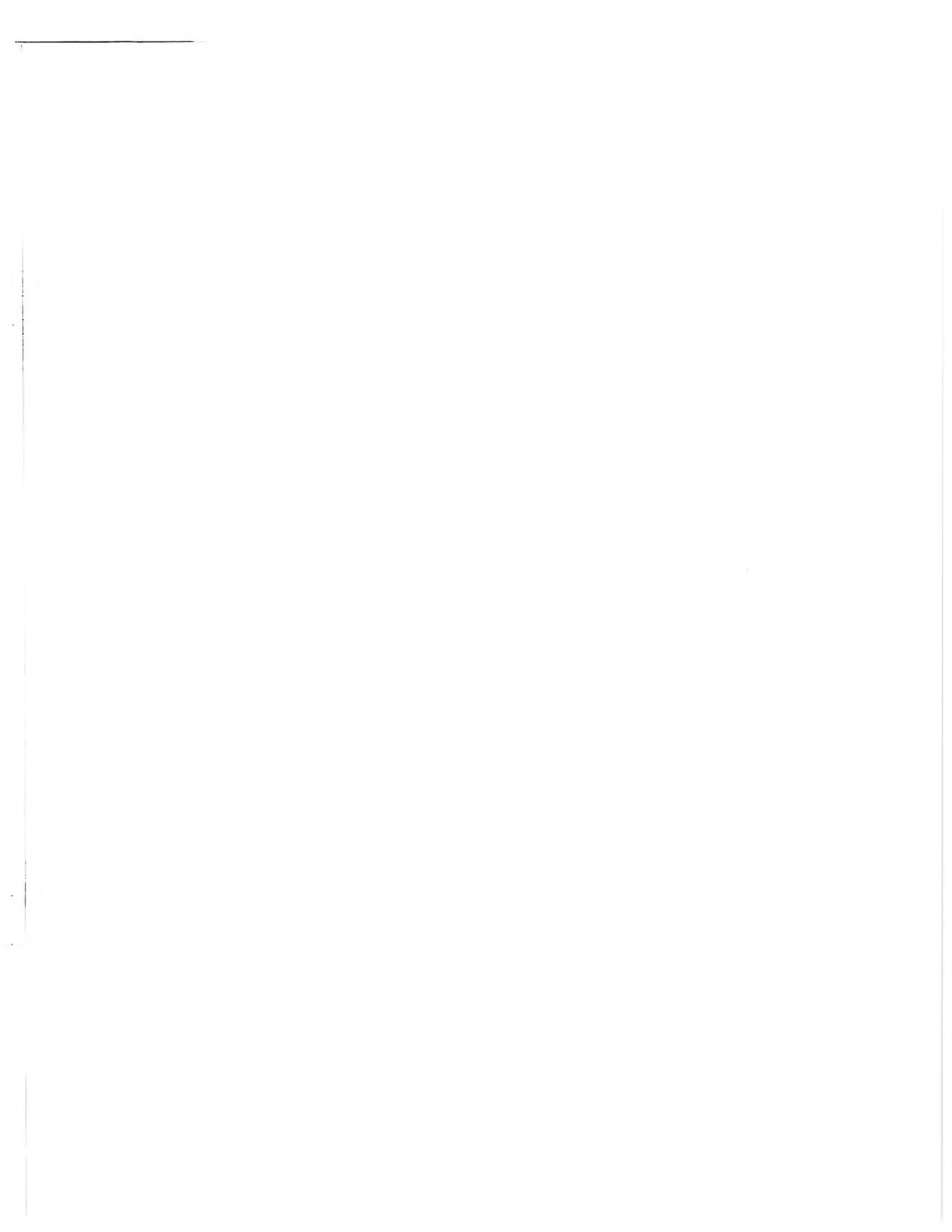
about and tell us about the budget and bring it down to our terms so we can get a handle. . . ."

As we listened to the citizen voices in our discussion groups, it became apparent that various institutions — a church, a school, a neighborhood council — play central roles in people forming relationships with public concerns. It was in these places that people found other people with whom they could talk and learn about public concerns; often it was these places that provided the launching pad for citizen action; and it was from these places that some people begin to expand their horizons — taking an initial interest in a public concern and broadening it to other concerns.

Commentators said . . .

The predominance of single-issue or narrowly focused groups is a distraction for many people. Such groups do not reflect how many people see the world: as a series of connections.

Do we take full advantage of existing mediating institutions in promoting the building of relationships between citizens and public concerns?



Making Sense of Chaos

A Commentary by The Harwood Group

This study comes at a time when the opportunity — indeed the need — for sensitive and perhaps innovative approaches to engage citizens is especially great. Throughout the 1992 election, many Americans opened the door, if ever so slightly, to a potentially new era of participation and possibility in politics. For many citizens, they could imagine new relationships with public concerns — new connections to them, new interests in understanding them, new aspirations for addressing them. Many citizens placed their hopes and fears, their differences and similarities, on the table of public debate during the election year.

But now, in 1993, we find signs of tremendous challenges ahead. Tensions continue to mark the public affairs arena as all levels of government — and society itself — confront growing lists of what must be done on tough problems, hard choices about the directions in which to move, and painful limits on financial resources.

Amid this changing political landscape, and despite efforts to the contrary, many public leaders and others will not change the way they relate to the public — falling back into old patterns of politics as usual. And citizens too, no doubt, will continue to be plagued by their own resistance to change — safeguarding their own self-interests and resisting calls for personal sacrifice.

How is it possible then to engage citizens on the public concerns that demand attention today? How can the continuing possibility for change, glimpsed in 1992, be made real for people — so real in the contexts of their own lives that people form meaningful relationships with public concerns? How can these relationships be made ongoing and stable, while recognizing that the only constant in such relationships is chaos?

We do not proclaim that the factors presented in this report are newly discovered or, for that matter, are remarkable as separate characteristics of the ways that people think about and act on public concerns. That would be naive. We all know — and have known for some time — that people are subject to a variety of factors as they confront or withdraw from challenges within public life.

What *is* newsworthy? That as citizens themselves talk about public concerns, we discover that these factors are not isolated, nor single in their effects. They coexist. They reinforce one another. And they each — often simultaneously — drive the way in which people connect with public concerns.

In that insight are lessons for the building of relationships between citizens and public concerns.

These factors reflect the chaos of circumstances that surround people's public lives — about relationships formed over time, in different ways, on different schedules, under different influences, with different results. They reflect the fact that people bring their whole lives to this process — their thinking and their feeling; their sense of disconnection from public concerns and their quest for depth and meaning; their frustration with being overwhelmed by stagnation and gridlock and their desire for a sense of possibility and action; their experience as passive spectators in the public affairs arena and their capacity to involve themselves deeply in a public concern.

These factors, taken together, offer insights into the nature of people's relationships with public concerns. They create for us a picture of *meaningful chaos.*

They suggest that those individuals who ponder people's relationships with public concerns — seeing these relationships as the sustenance of America's political life — might do well to consider and embrace this diversity of factors as part of their own conversations and their own work. We hope that the true value of this framework will be in its use as an aid to those endeavors.

A Different Approach

We believe that strategies that seek to improve people's relationships with public concerns must explore whether, for instance, our attempts at public discourse and deliberation pay enough attention to:

- individuals' instincts for making connections.
- people's natural tendency to tap into a personal context that extends well beyond mere self-interest.
- the abiding presence of emotion in people's lives and in their connections to public concerns.
- the consistent need for a gray area in public debate as a place for learning and discovery — which is so much at odds with the work of special interests and the passion of media pundits and others for a "good fight."
- the yearning among people for a sense of possibility for movement and a personal role in bringing about change.
- the role of catalyst that everyday citizens play in each other's lives.

What emerges from this research is a constellation of factors that is constantly at work as people form relationships with public concerns. Any approach that uses an overly narrow lens for understanding this constellation, and forming the basis for action, risks missing essential parts of the picture, missing some of the entry points or leverage points where relationships with public concerns can begin and grow, missing where political support for

public concerns is nurtured and ultimately solidified.

Yet many efforts today pursue a linear, *step-by-step* approach that can fail to capture the essence of meaningful chaos; these can fail to account for the diversity and the overlap in the factors that drive the ways in which people form relationships with public concerns. The interplay between and among the various factors is critical in this constellation; *that* is where the factors draw their power and relevance to citizens.

In suggesting this framework, we have no desire to replace, or even to criticize, those approaches that tackle one or another aspect of the challenge of helping people form relationships with public concerns. The goal here is more direct:

> *We propose simply that initiatives to engage citizens on public concerns recognize the idea of meaningful chaos and tap into the possibilities it offers for building new, stronger relationships between people and the public concerns around them.*

Tapping into the Possibilities

Here, then, are some thoughts on this and how we can tap into the inherent energy created by meaningful chaos in many ways.

On Connections

Society tends to fragment public concerns so as to make them easier to discuss, think about, and act on. But often this does not work. These fragments fail to reflect the ways in which people actually experience public concerns in their daily lives. People take a broad, rather than narrow, view of public concerns. For acting on connections, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must listen for how people approach public concerns. What is their starting point — what "icon" (word or phrase) do they use initially to describe their concern?
- We must understand what lies beneath the "icon." What connections do people make between and among public concerns — and why?
- We must capture the language people use to describe their concerns.
- We must reflect in the conduct of our public discourse (in speeches, news stories, policy discussions, etc.) how people define important concerns if we are to help people form relationships with them.
- We must help people make important connections that they may not make on their own.

On Personal Context

Attempts to engage people in public discourse often revolve around appeals to their narrow *self*-interest and *private* opinions. In doing so, these appeals fail to tap people's potential for using a broader lens in forming relationships with public concerns, missing the possibility for engaging people through their life experi-

ences and imagination. For acting on personal context, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must tap people's life experiences — understanding the range of experiences people bring with them to their public lives, the common threads that run through these experiences, and the differences that suggest the entry points different people need to connect with public concerns.
- We must prompt people to use their imagination. We must understand the possibilities for such efforts, balancing the need to stretch people's minds with the need to reflect the reality in which people live.

On Coherence

Sometimes it seems that more attention is paid to the quantity and newness of information than to its quality; indeed, people are bombarded daily with bits of facts and figures, revelations about old news, conflicting or unconnected statements about a public concern. People often cannot make sense of all this information — it lacks coherence. For acting on coherence, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must help to create a "whole story" for people — a sense of coherence about how different pieces of information fit together.
- We must provide for people the "why's" and "how's" behind a public concern — for instance, why do certain things exist or how did something happen?
- We must help people understand "all sides" of a public concern — illuminating, for instance, the range of points of view on a concern, different ideas for action, and the trade-offs involved in pursuing different paths of action.
- We must create a public memory for people — for instance, placing into a larger context emerging pieces of information, recalling the history or origin of a public concern for people, and helping people weave a story among ongoing or renewed discussions.
- We must understand the questions people have on their minds about public concerns and help to answer *those* questions. And we must ask people questions to help them become active learners and create their own coherent picture of a public concern.
- We must recognize that more information is not always better; people are seeking coherence — the "whole story" — and not necessarily all available information.

On Room for Ambivalence

In public discourse, people are forced all too often to take positions long before they are ready, thereby polarizing debate and those who participate in it, while forcing others completely out of

the debate. This condition within our political process stifles people's ability to form relationships with public concerns. People want more "gray area" to explore what they think and how they feel about issues. For acting on room for ambivalence, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must expand public discourse beyond the extreme positions and include a range of options for people to consider and work through.
- We must engage people actively in the process of working through their ambivalence — encouraging and helping them to ask questions, listen, test ideas, and learn.
- We must help people learn the skills they need to engage in public conversation.
- We must provide examples to people that demonstrate that it is possible for public debate to move from ambivalence to action, and that it is even possible to move from a polarized debate, to a state of ambivalence, and then to action.

On Emotion

There is a tendency to strip emotion from our public discourse and decision making so as to preserve or create a "rational" approach to public life. But this seems *irrational* to many citizens. It denies the inevitability of emotion as part of the mix of public life. Emotion is an essential element in people forming and sustaining their relationships to public concerns; it provides people with a sense of meaning. For acting on emotion, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must understand the range of emotions that people feel on a particular public concern.
- We must incorporate emotion in how we talk about and present public concerns — reflecting the range of emotions that people bring with them to public debate — thereby enabling different people to connect to the public debate in different ways and illuminating different perspectives for people.
- We must actively consider the challenge of gauging the necessary presence of emotion in public discourse with the need ultimately to make informed judgments that are neither impetuous nor prejudicially impassioned; the challenge is to avoid stripping away emotion in attempts to bring order from chaos.

On Authenticity

"Truth" often is measured by the degree to which we use hard and reliable facts and figures. But citizens tend to use other measures or standards — they seek to determine if something "rings true" to them, if it resonates within their own context of

meaning, life experiences, and imagination. For acting on authenticity, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must understand what creates authenticity in public discourse from citizens' perspectives, and not just from that of experts, technicians, and elites.
- We must identify the language and symbols people use in thinking about and discussing public concerns in their own lives — so that discussions resonate with people's fundamental values and concerns.
- We must find ways that information sources — newspapers, television stations, public officials, and others — can come to understand and convey people's values, concerns, and lives. These attempts must be genuine, moving beyond marketing and public relations ploys.
- We must make sure to avoid offering people "false choices" in the public debate — which people see as lacking authenticity and which prompt them to turn away from public discourse.
- We must provide people with the "straight story" — squaring with them on public concerns, even if the information being conveyed does not conform immediately to their individual experiences.
- We must recognize that authentic sources of information are not necessarily those people or institutions in the news every day, that people look for guidance from their family, someone down the block, neighborhood leaders, coworkers, and others close to them. We must learn who are authentic sources on different public concerns.

On a Sense of Possibilities

Nowadays people associate public discourse with gridlock and stagnation, and with their having only a limited role to play in addressing public concerns. These deeply rooted, persistent convictions can short-circuit people's attempts to engage in public life. People want a greater sense of possibilities for movement on public concerns and having a role to play in bringing about that movement. For acting on a sense of possibilities, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must move beyond presenting just "bad news" to people — which often paralyzes people because it does not lead them anywhere productive — and inject into public discourse a sense of movement and hope.
- We must tell more stories about those situations in which movement did occur, in which people did make a difference, so that people can imagine action on concerns important to them. These stories must consist not just of sterile facts and dates, but of the process of people relating to public concerns — from their aspirations at the start, to their accomplishments at the end, reflecting the stages in-between.

- We must help people discover a role for themselves in bringing about change. This will take more than providing people with "laundry lists" of activities they can do; people must see potential roles for themselves within the context of specific challenges.
- We must prompt people to engage one another in conversations that can help to create for them a sense of possibilities by seeing they share common concerns and can act together.
- We must keep people posted on progress in acting on a public concern — thereby creating a sense of possibility over time (and completing the "story" on a concern).

On Catalysts

Society often delegates — indeed relegates — the work of so-called leadership to a seemingly separate caste of "experts," "officials," and "elites." And yet many times these "leaders" strike people as being disconnected from their lives and concerns, or they simply may not be the best catalysts for prompting people to connect with public concerns. In reality, people often find the support or the impetus they need to form relationships with public concerns from a more mundane cast of characters — from family, friends, people down the block, coworkers. For acting on catalysts, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must recognize the power of everyday Americans to act as catalysts in helping people learn about and act on public concerns.
- We must remind people regularly that each individual in America is a potent catalyst; indeed, people must gain a sense of validation that they have something to offer.
- We must identify those people who act as catalysts on particular public concerns and then incorporate these people as sources of information in news stories and as examples of people making a difference.

On Mediating Institutions

The current culture of mass communications often treats people as passive consumers of information and as isolated atoms in their own orbits around public concerns. But this is not how people form relationships with public concerns; instead, they do so by coming together with friends, with neighbors, and with people whom they may not even know. And they do so often by meeting at so-called mediating institutions — a church, a neighborhood council, a school. For acting on mediating institutions, our research and experience suggest that:

- We must place greater emphasis on creating public places — mediating institutions — in which people can come out from their homes and interact in public life.
- We must encourage people to have conversations on

public concerns in those places in which they do interact — to learn from one another, and to start the process of expanding involvement that exists in the meaningful chaos of public life.

- We must pursue efforts to create mediating institutions, and to prompt citizen interaction within them, as a routine matter in engaging citizens in the process of forming relationships with public concerns; too often we leave such initiatives for special (and temporary!) community projects.
- We must seek to create mediating institutions that have broad-based agendas so that people can discuss and act on issues as they experience them in their daily lives.

Harnessing Meaningful Chaos

Out of this research emerge two clear conclusions — that there is chaos here, and that there is a need to probe and nurture the meaning that lies within that chaos.

This story of meaningful chaos is one in which influential factors overlap and certain themes cut across them. There is a clear resistance among people to fragmentation, a keen instinct and desire for seeing and being a part of a larger picture. There is a tendency to enlarge, rather than narrow, one's perspective and level of involvement, once the process of engaging in public life begins. There is the fact that people bring their whole lives to their relationships with public concerns — their past, present, and future; their values and aspirations and fears; their minds and emotions; their insistence to stand alone and their yearning to interact with others. There is the need for conversation and for imagination in public life. And within this picture, there can be found no exact order of interplay between and among the various factors.

It is important not to let this theme of chaos carry these conversations into an abyss of unpredictability and hopelessness, as if there are no handles we can grab. The point is that this chaos, if we recognize and approach it with a sense of purpose and care, provides *numerous* means of nurturing relationships, many points of entry into public work. By tapping this chaos we believe that it is possible to capture the sense of depth and meaning citizens are seeking in today's ever-changing world. Then, new relationships between citizens and public concerns can form.

APPENDIX

A Note about Methodology

The Harwood Group used a combination of focus groups among a cross section of citizens, expert interviews, and related background readings to prepare this report.

Focus groups — or group discussions — are an ideal research method for this type of endeavor. They provide citizens with the opportunity to think about various issues and topics over the course of a discussion, to talk about their views and feelings in their own words, and to describe the underlying assumptions behind their views. Moreover, this research technique helps to identify the language that citizens use to talk about specific topics; and focus groups allow citizens to react to new information and proposals during the course of a discussion. Such interaction is difficult — often impossible — to obtain through public opinion surveys.

There are, of course, limitations to group discussions. The research is qualitative. Thus, the observations detailed in this report should not be mistaken for findings from a random sample survey. They are, technically speaking, hypotheses, or insights, that would need to be validated by reliable quantitative methods before being considered definitive. Still, the insights are suggestive of how citizens view public concerns and their relationships to them.

Each of the group discussions conducted for this study comprised approximately ten people, representing a cross section of race, age, education, and income. The demographic breakdowns of the focus group participants in these categories are, approximately: 80 percent white, 20 percent African-American or other minority; 58 percent female, 42 percent male; 15 percent in the 18-29 age group, 45 percent in the 30-45 group, 23 percent in the 46-55 group, 17 percent aged 56 and above; 23 percent with high school education, 30 percent with some college education, 47 percent with at least a college diploma; and 17 percent who earn less than $20,000 annually; 23 percent who earn $20,000-$29,000; 35 percent who earn $30,000-$49,000; and 25 percent who earn $50,000 or more.

An attempt also was made to recruit individuals who had demonstrated some direct involvement in public concerns so that their remarks could reflect personal experience. Individuals were asked to say whether they had been actively involved with a community or national issue or problem during the past year, and whether that involvement prompted such actions as voting, attending meetings, working with others on a project, contributing money, or doing volunteer work such as tutoring or coaching.

In the first two focus groups, people who were involved and people who were not involved were both included. In order to gain richer insights, the last four groups consisted only of persons who met the criteria of involvement.

The participants were recruited by a professional public opinion research firm in each location. Each group meeting lasted for about two hours and was led by a trained moderator. Participants were promised that their names would not appear in this report in order to respect their privacy.

To ensure geographic diversity in this study, six focus groups were conducted across the nation in the following communities:

Richmond, Virginia	July 1, 1992
Little Rock, Arkansas	July 7, 1992
Hartford, Connecticut	July 8, 1992
Seattle, Washington	July 27, 1992
Los Angeles, California	July 28, 1992
Indianapolis, Indiana	October 12, 1992

Together with the focus groups, 13 "expert commentators" were interviewed and asked for their comments on the preliminary hypotheses emerging from the focus groups. The 13 commentators were chosen informally on the basis of their backgrounds in various disciplines and the relevance of their own work to aspects of this study. The goal of these interviews was to solicit ideas that could suggest new perspectives on the focus group participants' comments, to produce a component of this report that might stimulate further conversation by drawing connections between the focus group quotes and an even wider range of experiences.

The following individuals were interviewed as commentators:

Robert N. Bellah	Professor of Sociology, University of California at Berkeley; coauthor of books on community connectedness and how Americans relate to public concerns, including *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society.*
David Cohen	Codirector, The Advocacy Institute, a center for training, counseling, and support of public interest advocates — both professionals and citizen activists — within the United States and abroad, on a wide range of public policy issues.
Sheri Dill	Executive Editor, *The Wichita Eagle*; conducted research and was otherwise instrumental in the newspaper's efforts to encourage greater community engagement with, and discussion of, public concerns.
Howard E. Gardner	Professor of Education, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, a respected scholar in cognitive science, and author of such books as *The Unschooled Mind: How*

Children Think and How Schools Should Teach.

Paola Gianturco	Vice-president/management supervisor, Saatchi & Saatchi Corporate Communications in San Francisco, who has done research and project design work related to communication strategies to build citizen support of education.
Valerie P. Hans	Professor in the Criminal Justice Program at University of Delaware's Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, coauthor of *Judging the Jury*, and a student of the jury decision-making process.
Daniel Kemmis	Mayor of Missoula, Montana, author of *Community and the Politics of Place*, and chairman of the National League of Cities Leadership Training Council.
Lynda M. Maddox	Consultant and associate professor of marketing, The George Washington University School of Business and Public Management; teacher of advertising and marketing principles.
Bill Moyers	Noted journalist and television producer with a background in federal government service and print journalism, as well as in television news and public affairs programming on a wide array of issues.
Judith Davidson Moyers	President, Public Affairs Television, Inc., education specialist and corporate director, and producer of numerous public television broadcasts.
Ray Oldenburg	Professor of Sociology, University of West Florida, author of *The Great Good Place*, examining settings for conversation in communities in the United States and abroad.
Gerald Taylor	National staff, the Industrial Areas Foundation, the nation's oldest and largest community-organizing network. He has been a community organizer for more than ten years.
Terri Waller	Managing Partner, National Jury Project – West, Oakland, California, a firm working with lawyers to better understand the behaviors and perspectives of jurors.

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