

# Wicked Problems & Wise Cities: Building Community Capacity for Authentic and Productive Engagement

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*Director of the Center for Public Deliberation*  
*Professor, Department of Communication Studies*



*Dedicated to enhancing local democracy through improved public communication and community problem solving*

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Workshop materials folder: <https://col.st/XIzYL>

## Reframing Democracy through a Wicked Problems Lens

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When poll is active, respond at [pollev.com/csucpd210](https://pollev.com/csucpd210)  
Text CSUCPD210 to 37607 once to join

## Which statements best describe your view of the current quality of public discussion and debate? (choose up to three)

High quality, informed  
Mean-spirited  
Polarized  
Simplistic  
Dominated by a few loud voices  
Dominated by experts  
Robust  
Weak/limited, people are apathetic  
Productive

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## CPD Projects, 2006-2021

- Civic mission of schools
- Grade configuration of Poudre School District schools
- Statewide dropout rate
- Colorado Health Care Reform
- Student housing
- Improving higher education
- Childhood obesity
- Bicycle safety
- Diversity Dialogues at CSU Diversity Conference
- STEM education in K-12
- Arts Engagement Summit
- CSU/Old Town collaborative project
- School budgeting issues/school closures
- Medical Marijuana
- Regional visioning process
- Water and growth issues
- Poverty in Larimer County
- PSD Student Think Tank facilitator group
- K-12 school improvement
- Improving higher education through student-faculty reciprocity
- Politics of food
- Issues surrounding aging
- Early childhood education
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- On campus stadium proposal
- Senior transportation
- Campus smoking
- School safety
- Bullying
- Mental health
- Nature in the City
- Larimer County Landfill/Wasteshed
- Diversity and Inclusion in Fort Collins
- CSU Innovation and Economic Prosperity
- CSU parking and affordable housing
- Backyard wood burning
- Housing affordability
- Fort Collins City Plan
- K12 substance abuse
- City sales tax proposals
- Data and democracy
- Housing and health equity
- Intergenerational dialogues
- Decarbonization of electricity/Platte River
- CSU Strategic plan



## Overview: Three Key Arguments

### #1 – The Basic Reality

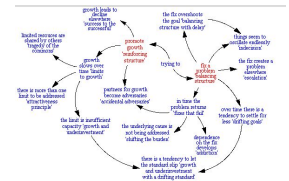
Most of the key problems we face are best understood through a wicked problems lens

### #2 – The Bad News

Human nature and many of our primary institutions and processes are woefully ill-suited to address wicked problems

### #3 – The Hopeful News

Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that cultivate the wisdom so critical to addressing wicked problems, particularly at the local level



## Overview: Three Key Arguments

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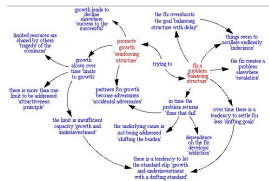
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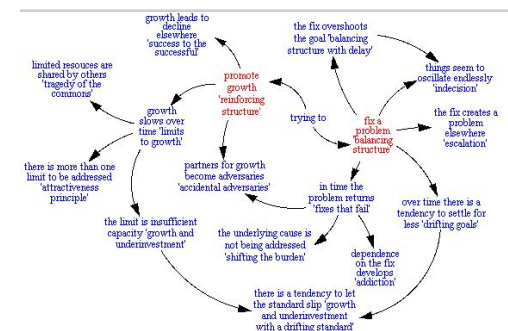
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Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that cultivate the wisdom so critical to addressing wicked problems, particularly at the local level



*Wicked problems* inherently involve competing underlying values, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that cannot be resolved by science.



## Water in Northern Colorado as a Wicked Problem

Some things we care about:

Healthy river with healthy ecosystems

Recreational opportunities

Economic vitality

Water for homes & lawns

Open space and wildlife habitat

Low cost of living

Water for local farms

Local food economy

Freedom of choice of where to live

### Key Deliberative Responses

1. Balancing (the long-term focus)
2. Prioritizing/Re-calibrating (short term corrections)
3. Transcending (short term ideal)

## FOOD AS A WICKED PROBLEM

WHAT DO WE WANT OUR FOOD TO BE:

Inexpensive

Fresh

Nutritious

Safe

Long lasting

Delicious

Convenient

(Accessible, Easy to prepare)

Ethically grown  
(labor/animal welfare)

Our choice

Supportive of a local economy

Supportive of an agriculture community

Grown and delivered in an environmentally responsible manner

Supportive of efforts to reduce hunger locally and globally

## HEALTH CARE AS A WICKED PROBLEM

High Quality

Accessible

Low cost

## Competing Values in Downtown Fort Collins

- Aesthetics/Beauty
- Compassion
- Diversity/Inclusivity
- Economic health/vitality
- Effective use of public resources
- Equality
- Excitement/fun
- Family
- Individual freedom
- Individual responsibility
- Individual rights
- Justice/Fairness
- Public health/environment
- Respect for law
- Respect for others
- Safety

## Parking at CSU as a Wicked Problem

Some things we care about:

Low cost   Fairness   Safety   Work productivity   Flexibility

Aesthetics/  
Campus beauty   Convenience/  
Low time cost   Low community impact/  
Good neighbors

Employee morale   Environment   Consistency/Ease of use

Works for staff   Works for faculty   Works for visitors

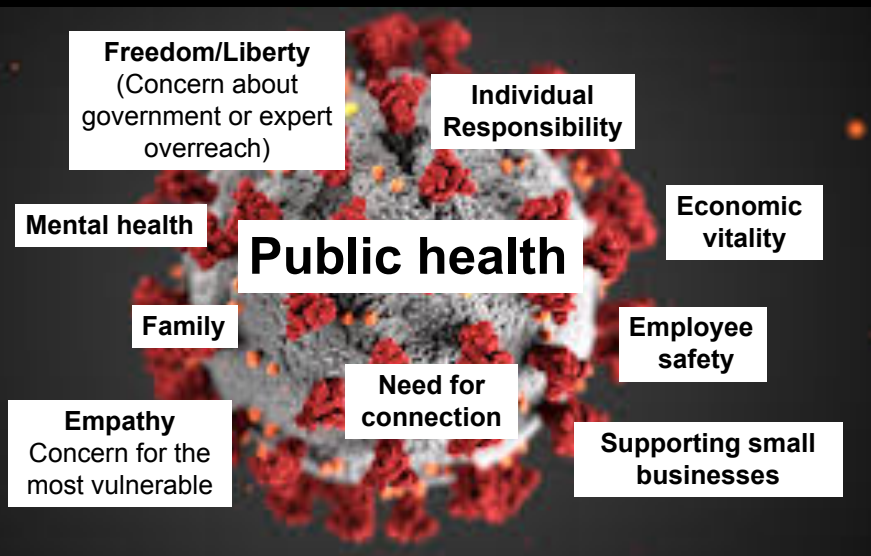
Works for students   Works for working  
parents   Works for commuters

## Capitalism or Sustainability as a Wicked Problem

- The “Triple Bottom Line” of
  - Profit (economics, also tied to jobs and taxes)
  - People (social justice, equality, fairness)
  - Planet (environment)



## COVID 19 and our community response as a wicked problem



We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish **Justice**, insure **domestic Tranquility**, provide for the **common defense**, promote the **general Welfare**, and secure the Blessings of **Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity**, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

## Key American Values

Preamble	Current Phrasing
Justice	Justice
Domestic Tranquility/ Common defense	Security/Safety
General Welfare	Equality
Liberty to ourselves	Freedom (for us)
Liberty for our posterity	Freedom (for future generations)/Sustainability

## American Values as a Wicked Problem

1. Justice

2. Security/Safety

3. Equality

4. Freedom for us

5. Freedom for future generations  
(sustainability)

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Which of these values is most important to you?

Justice

Equality

Security/Safety

Freedom

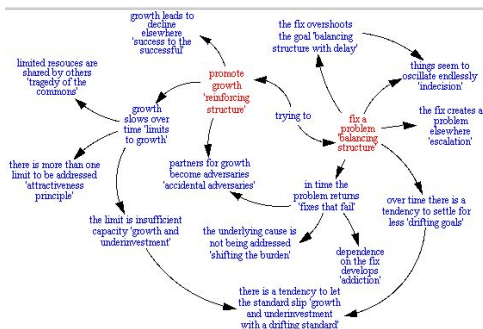
Freedom for future generations

## Which of these values is least important to you?

Justice  
Equality  
Security/Safety  
Freedom  
Freedom for future generations

Start the presentation to see live content. For screen share software, share the entire screen. Get help at [pollev.com/app](https://pollev.com/app)

*Wicked problems* inherently involve **competing underlying values**, paradoxes, and tradeoffs that **cannot be resolved** by science. They call for ongoing high quality **communication, creativity**, and broad **collaborative action** to manage well.



## Inherent Democratic Tensions

- Freedom and Equality (and Equality and Equity)
- Our Freedom and Freedom of Future generations (Sustainability)
- Freedom and Security
- Justice is a tension within itself (justice as the ideal between too much and too little credit or punishment)

### Some others

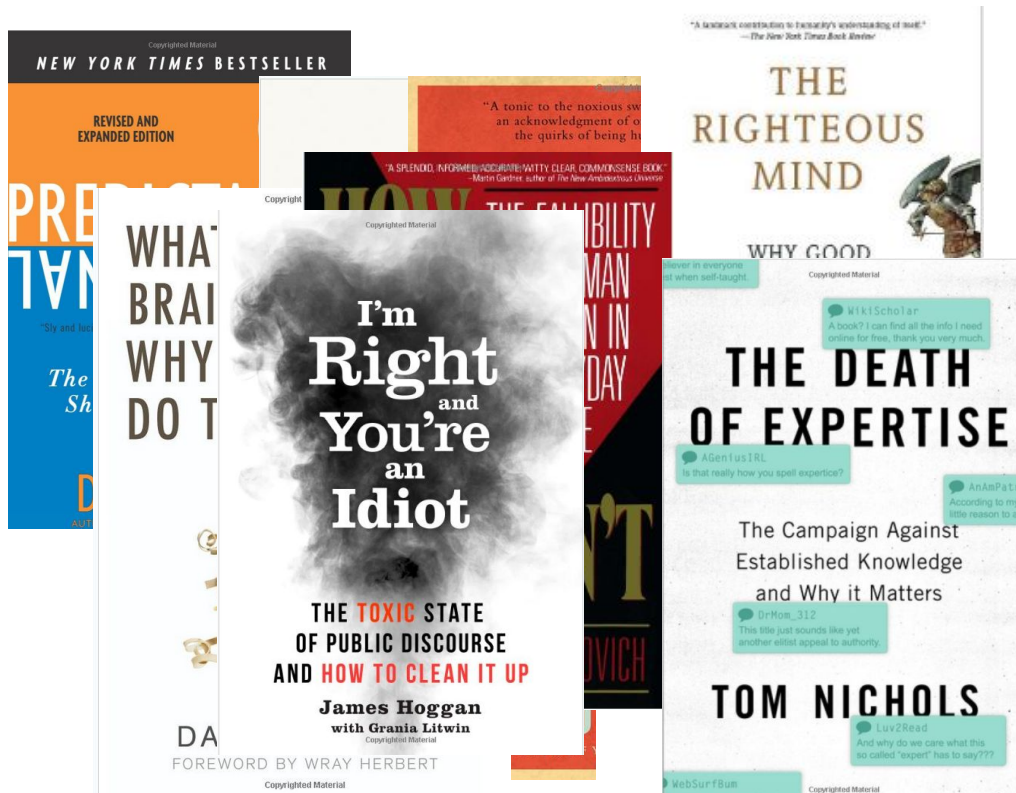
- Short term and long term
- Individual rights and community good
- Unity and diversity
- Cooperation and competition
- Structure and agency (or opportunity and individual responsibility)
- Flexibility/Innovation and Consistency/Tradition
- Best use of resources (money, time, people)

## Actions to address wicked problems come from multiple levels



Source: Adapted from McLeroy, et al., An ecological perspective on health promotion programs. *Health Education Quarterly* 1988; 15:351-77.

**Top**



# What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

## The Problematic

- We crave certainty and consistency
- We are suckers for the good v. evil narrative
- We are “groupish” (prefer to gather with like-minded)



# What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

## Stages of motivated reasoning

What and who we expose ourselves to

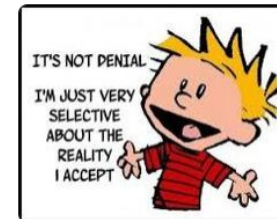
*selective exposure /  
echo chambers/  
filter or media bubbles*



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- We filter & cherry pick evidence to support our views



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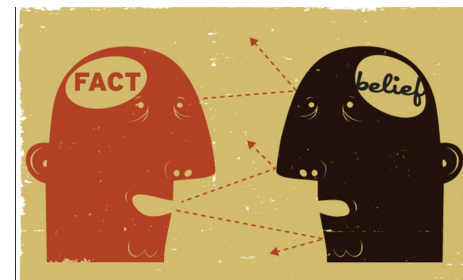
## Stages of motivated reasoning

What and who we expose ourselves to

*selective exposure /  
echo chambers/  
filter or media bubbles*

How we interpret new evidence

*confirmation bias,  
backfire effect,  
cognitive dissonance*



# How we interpret new evidence

“when we want to believe something, we ask ourselves, ‘Can I believe it?’ Then...we search for supporting evidence, and if we find even a single piece of pseudo-evidence, we can stop thinking.... In contrast, when we don’t want to believe something, we ask ourselves, ‘Must I believe it?’ Then we search for contrary evidence, and if we find a single reason to doubt the claim, we can dismiss it”

- Jonathan Haidt and Tom Gilovich

# What We Are Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

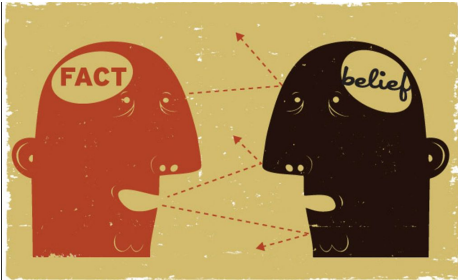
## Stages of motivated reasoning

What and who we expose ourselves to	selective exposure / echo chambers/ filter or media bubbles
How we interpret new evidence	confirmation bias, backfire effect, cognitive dissonance
How we make attributions and tell stories	egoism, illusory correlation, negativity bias

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Bush: 'Too often we judge other groups by their worst examples, while judging ourselves by our best intentions'



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What and who we expose ourselves to	<i>selective exposure / echo chambers / filter or media bubbles</i>
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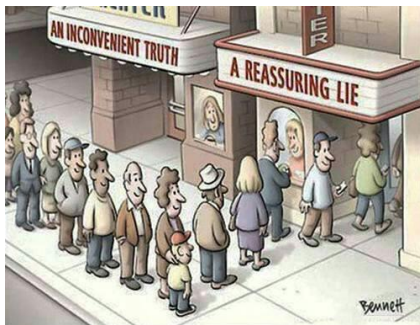
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How we make decisions	<i>heuristics, self-serving bias, social proof</i>
What we remember	<i>availability bias</i>

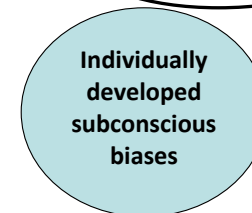
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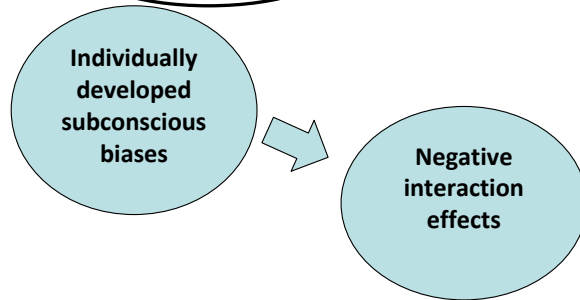
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- We avoid values dilemmas, tensions, and tough choices



## The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



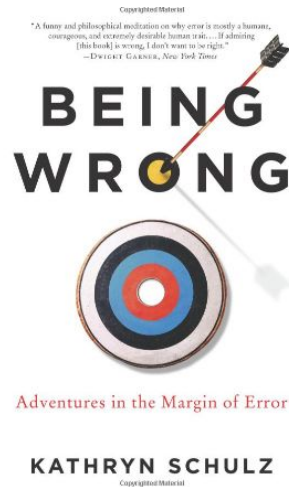
## The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



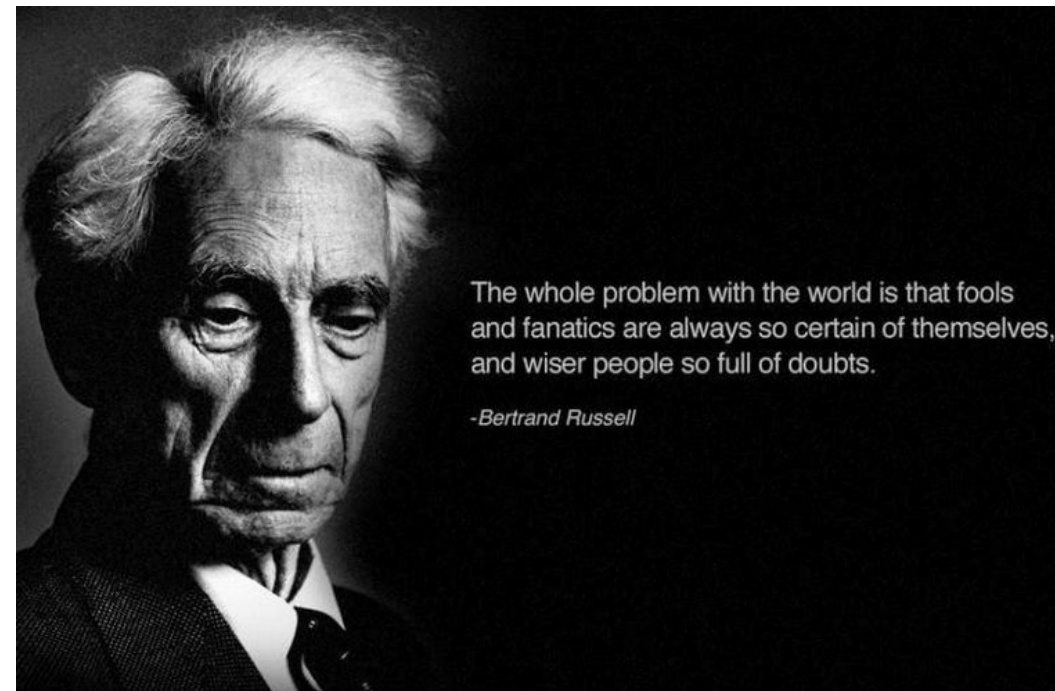
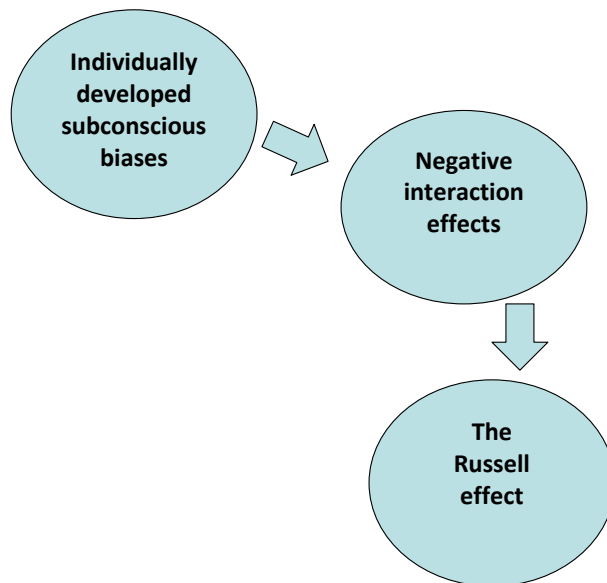
## Negative Interaction Effects

Kathryn Shultz – *Being Wrong*

- First step: Ignorance assumption
- Second step: Idiot assumption
- Third Step: Evil assumption



## The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



## #1 – The Basic Reality

## #2 – The Bad News

### #3 – The Hopeful News

The flowchart illustrates the 'growth trap' and the 'growth trap' in the context of the 'growth trap'. It shows a cycle of factors that can lead to a growth trap, starting from 'growth trap to growth' and moving through various stages of economic development and growth. The flowchart is a circular diagram with arrows indicating the progression of the cycle. The stages are as follows:

- growth trap to growth** (top left)
- the growth trap to growth** (top right)
- the growth trap to growth** (right)
- the growth trap to growth** (bottom right)
- the growth trap to growth** (bottom)
- the growth trap to growth** (bottom left)
- the growth trap to growth** (left)
- the growth trap to growth** (top left)

The flowchart also includes several key concepts and factors that influence the growth trap, such as:

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- the growth trap to growth** (left)
- the growth trap to growth** (top left)

```
graph TD; A((Individually developed subconscious biases)) --> B((Negative interaction effects)); B --> C((The Russell effect))
```

Individually developed subconscious biases

Negative interaction effects

The Russell effect

```
graph TD; A((Individually developed subconscious biases)) --> B((Negative interaction effects)); B --> C((The Russell effect)); C --> D((Impact of the internet));
```

The diagram illustrates a cyclical relationship between four concepts, each enclosed in a light blue oval. The flow is as follows:

- Individually developed subconscious biases** (top left) leads to **Negative interaction effects** (top right) via a downward-pointing arrow.
- Negative interaction effects** leads to **The Russell effect** (bottom right) via a downward-pointing arrow.
- The Russell effect** leads to **Impact of the internet** (bottom left) via a downward-pointing arrow.
- Impact of the internet** leads back to **Individually developed subconscious biases** via a downward-pointing arrow, completing the cycle.

```
graph TD; A((Individually developed subconscious biases)) --> B((Negative interaction effects)); B --> C((The Russell effect)); C --> D((Impact of the internet)); D --> E((Overly adversarial political system)); E --> A;
```

The diagram illustrates a cyclical process with five stages, each represented by a light blue oval with a black border. The stages are connected by light blue arrows, forming a continuous loop. The stages are: 1. **Individually developed subconscious biases** (top), 2. **Negative interaction effects** (top right), 3. **The Russell effect** (bottom right), 4. **Impact of the internet** (bottom), and 5. **Overly adversarial political system** (left). The arrows indicate a clockwise flow from one stage to the next, suggesting a reinforcing cycle.

## Drawbacks of an

- 

## #1 – The Basic Reality

[illegible]

**Human nature and many of our primary institutions and processes are woefully ill-suited to address wicked problems**



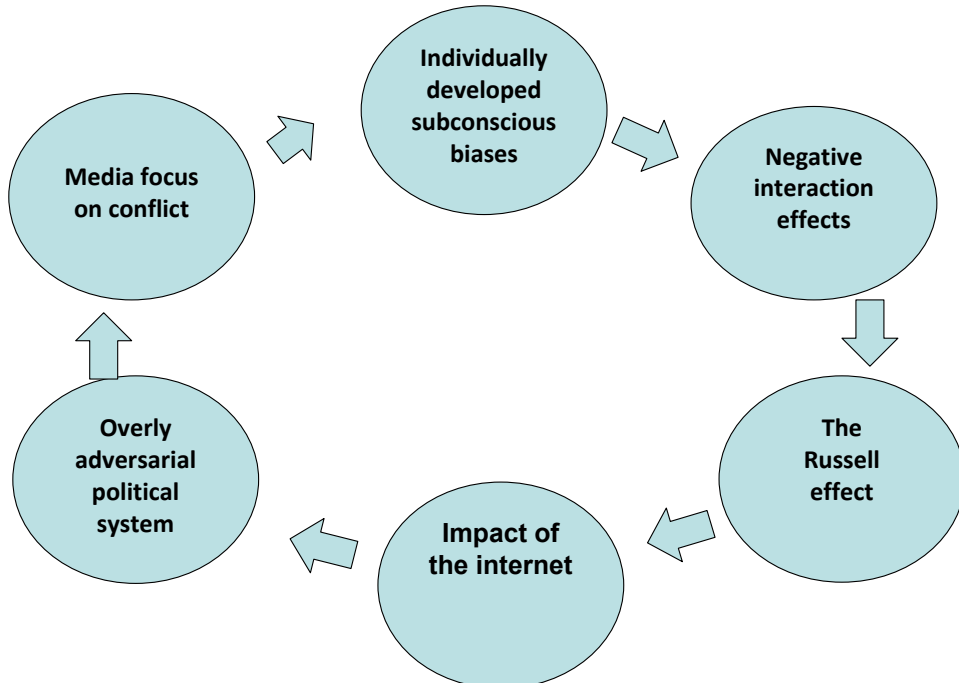
Once we realize #1 and #2, we can build capacity for the kinds of conversations, processes, and institutions that cultivate the wisdom so critical to addressing wicked problems, particularly at the local level



## Key Problems with our Typical Public Processes

- *Engage too late in the process when issues are simply framed as “yes” or “no” and teams are already set*
- *Primarily provide opportunities for individual or group expression*
- *Caters to entrenched and organized voices*
- *Little to no effective interaction or learning/refinement of opinion*

## The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



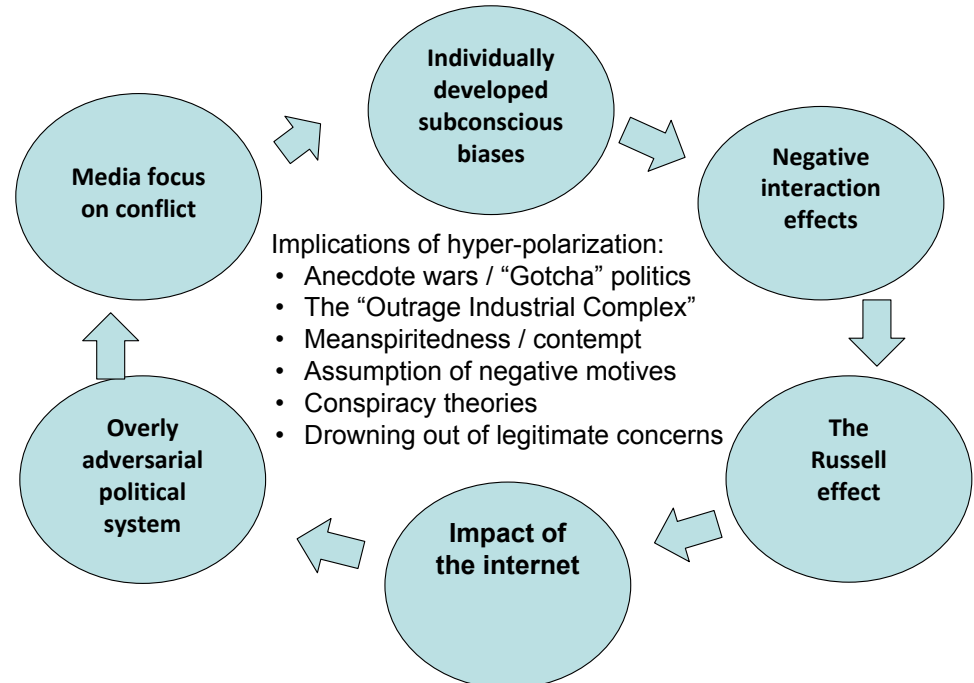
## Why Experts Can't Save Us

*(though they can certainly help when used well)*

- Experts by definition are focused on a specific, narrow aspect of the problem (i.e. they struggle with wicked problems).
- Experts often focus on being “value free” (they tell us what *is* or what *could* be, not what *should* be)
- Expert perspectives can overemphasize what can be measured and underemphasize what cannot
- Good data is undermined in a polarized environment
- Facts don’t change minds or behavior
- Expert dominated processes shut out the public



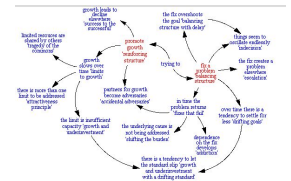
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## Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset

Short term



Long term

## The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
- Become more comfortable with uncertainty

## Traditional v. Facilitative Leadership

### Traditional

- *Strong opinion*
- *Charisma*
- *Public speaking skills*
- *Mobilization of the like-minded*

### Facilitative

- *Strong on process*
- *Trust and respect*
- *Facilitation skills*
- *Collaboration between broad perspectives*

## The Wicked Problems Mindset

- Presume wicked problems, not wicked people
- Become more comfortable with uncertainty
- Focus on elevating the conversation not just winning the argument
- Put your energy toward identifying, engaging, and negotiating inherent tensions
- Work toward creating a learning community

# Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- **Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature**

Short term

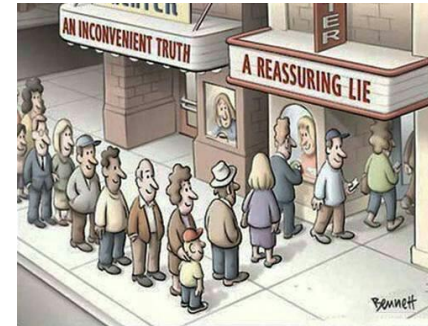


Long term

## What We Are Learning from Brain Science

### The Problematic

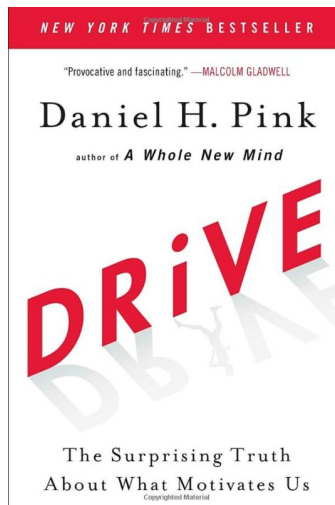
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## What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

### The Good

We are inherently social and seek purpose and community



## What Are We Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

### The Good

- We are inherently social and seek purpose and community
- We are inherently empathetic
- We are inherently pragmatic and creative





# What Are We Learning from Brain Science and Social Psychology?

## The Good

- We are inherently social and seek purpose and community
- We are inherently empathetic
- We are inherently pragmatic and creative
- We can overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits



## The Four Key Shifts of Deliberative Engagement

- From wicked people  to wicked problems
- From adversaries  to collaborators
- From inciting the worst of human nature  to bringing out the best of human nature
- From facts as cherry picked ammunition or “fake news”  to facts as tools for addressing problems together

# What We Are Learning from Social Psychology and Brain Science

Bottom line: The most powerful thing to help people overcome their biases and tackle wicked problems well is **genuine conversation with people they respect.**



## Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- **Build local capacity for deliberative engagement**

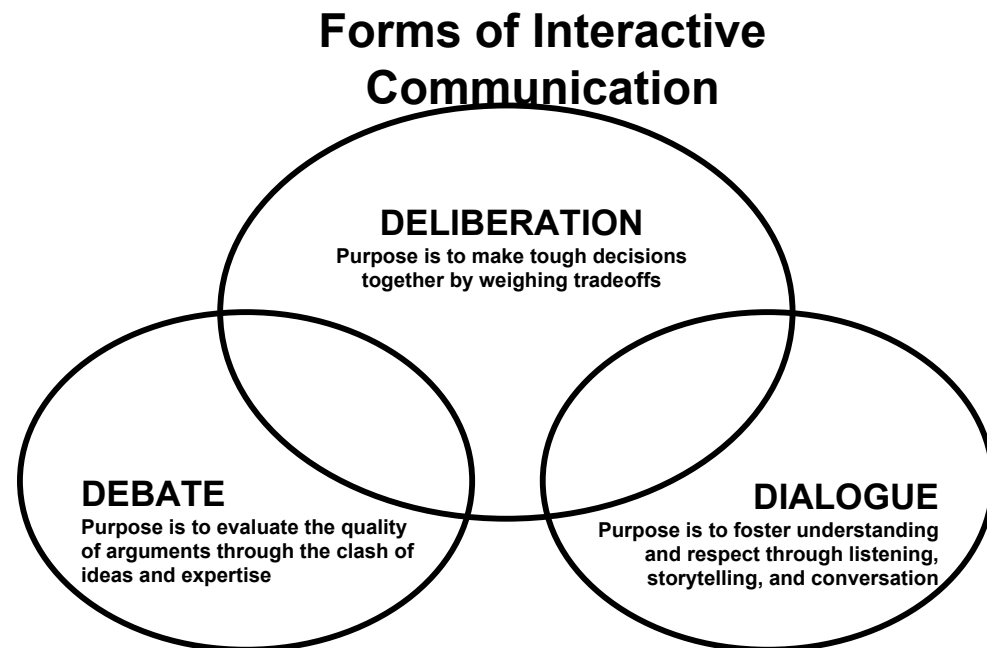
Short term



Long term

# What is Deliberative Engagement?

Deliberative democracy  
Community problem-solving  
Collaborative problem-solving  
Participatory decision-making  
Slow democracy  
Strong democracy  
Multi-stakeholder dispute resolution  
Public participation  
Democratic governance  
Collaborative governance  
Organic or community politics  
Consensus building or seeking processes  
Organic politics

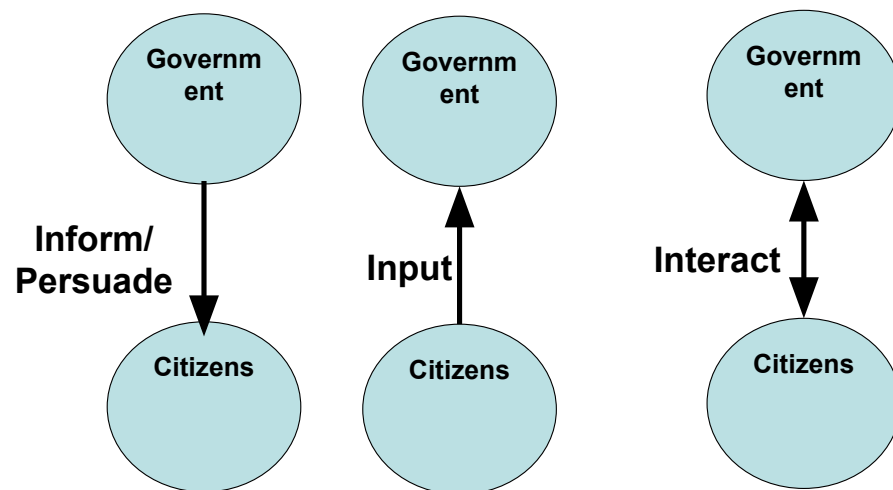


## Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

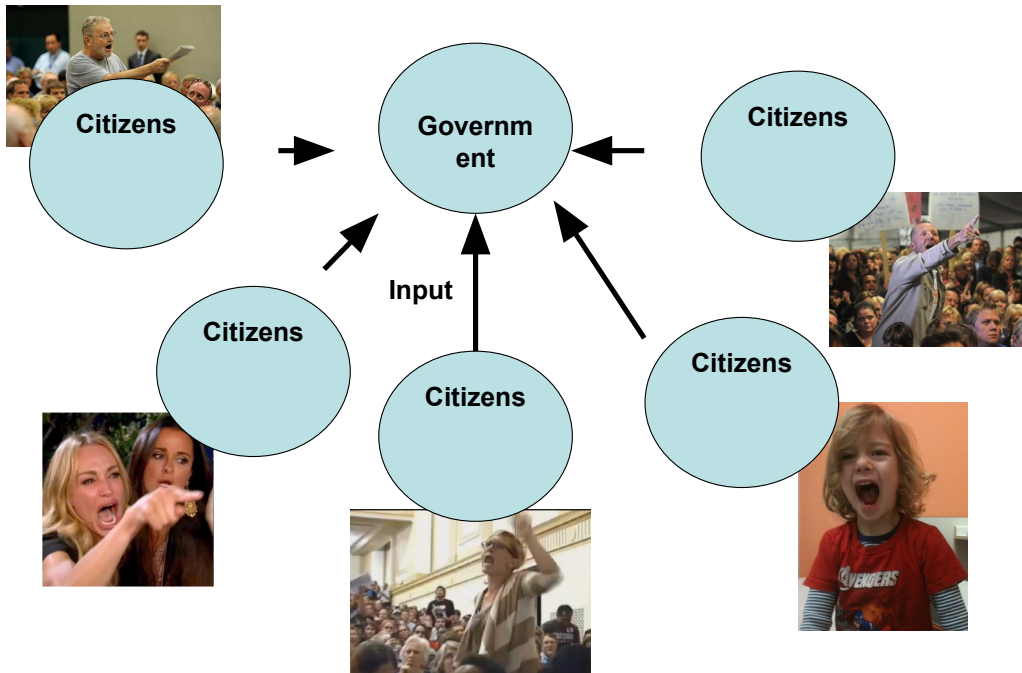
- Overall deliberative framing
  - Wicked problem, multiple approaches, broad range of actors, starting discussion “upstream” (before polarization)
- Discussion guides/backgrounder
  - Base of information, something to react to, framed for deliberation, not persuasion
- Small, diverse, representative groups
- Processes designed for interaction and learning



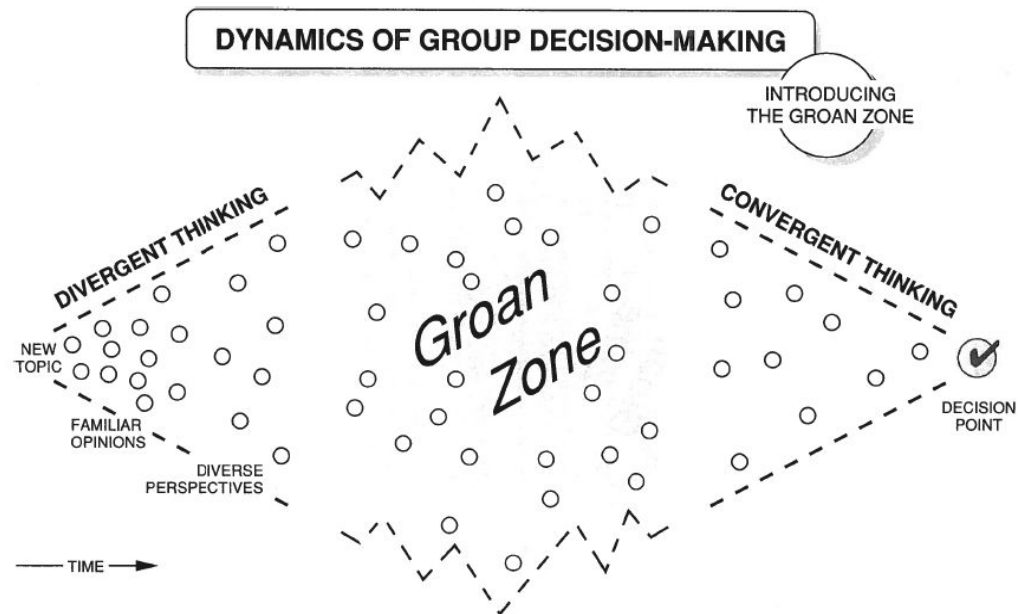
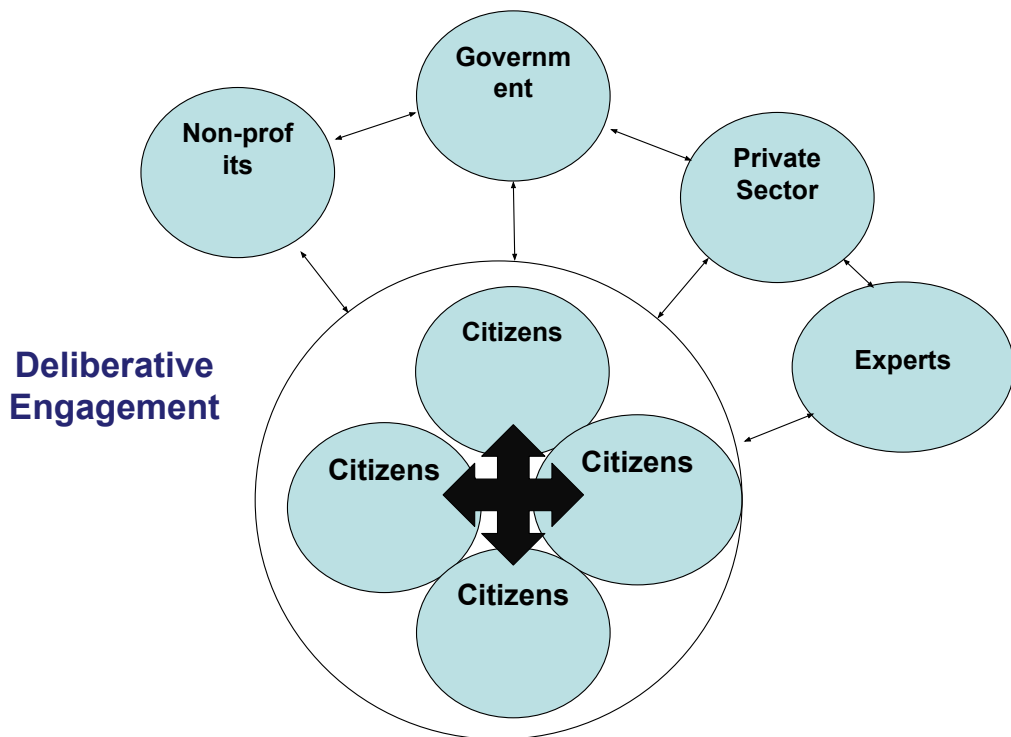
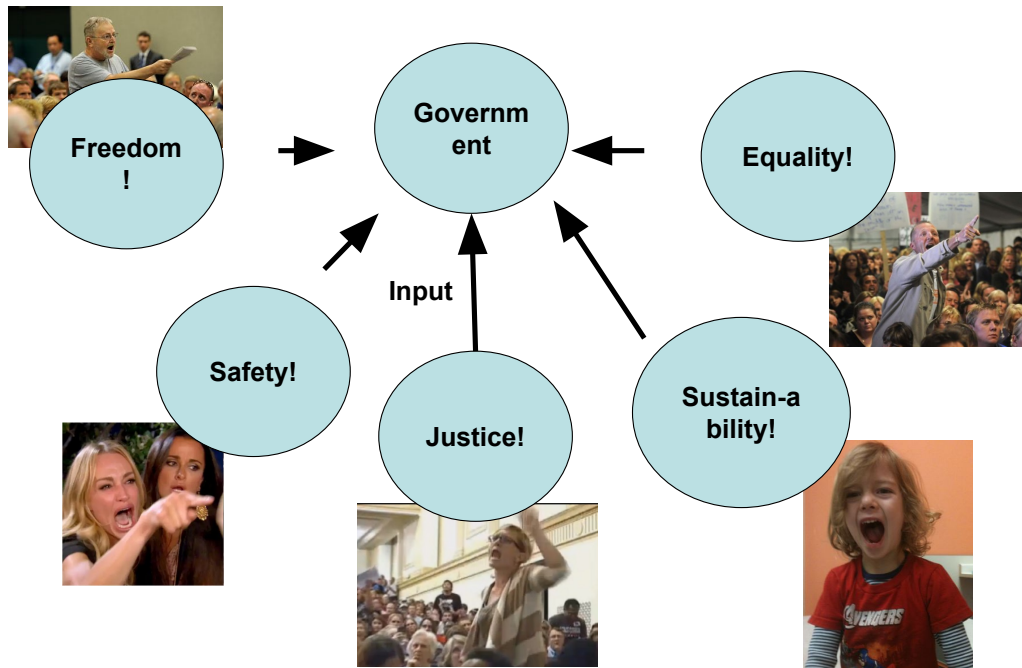
## Traditional Forms of Public Engagement



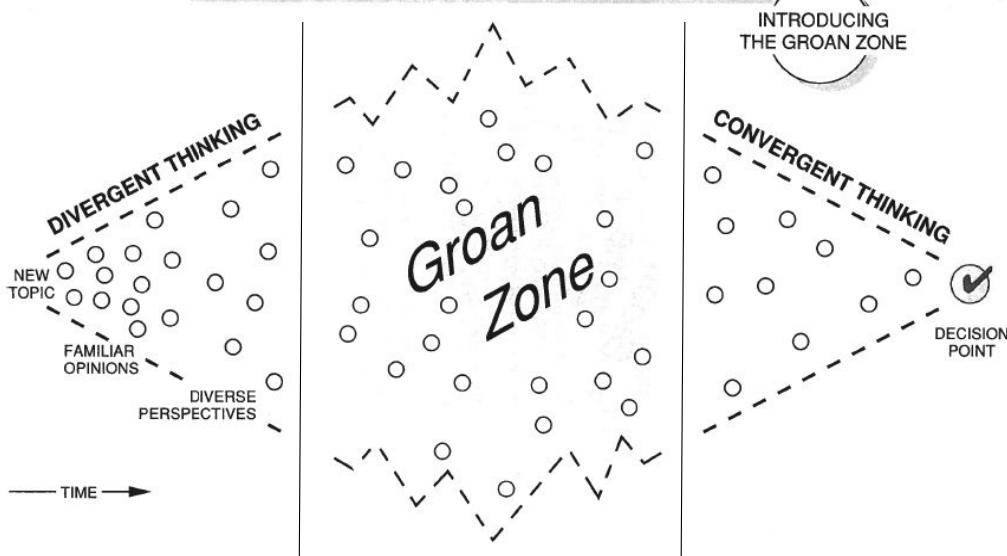
## Traditional Forms of Public Participation



## Traditional Forms of Public Participation



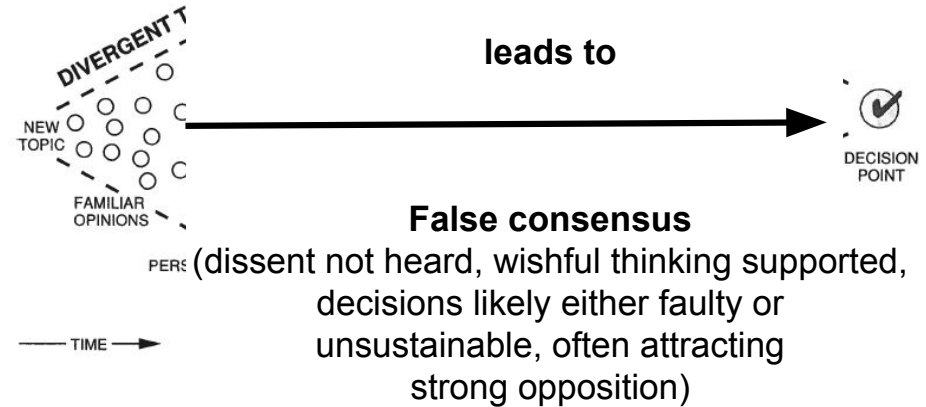
## DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING



Sam Kaner, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*

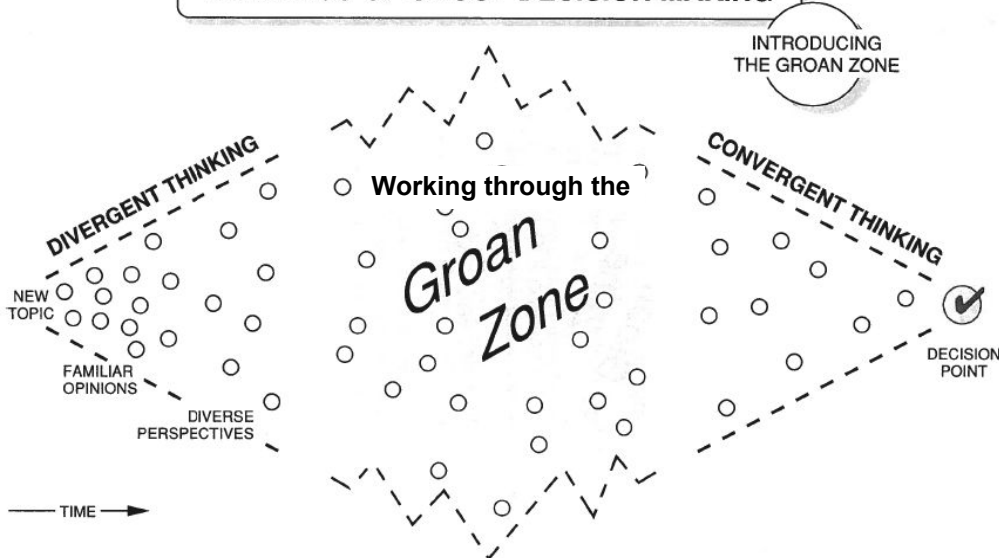
Not allowing enough divergent opinion

leads to



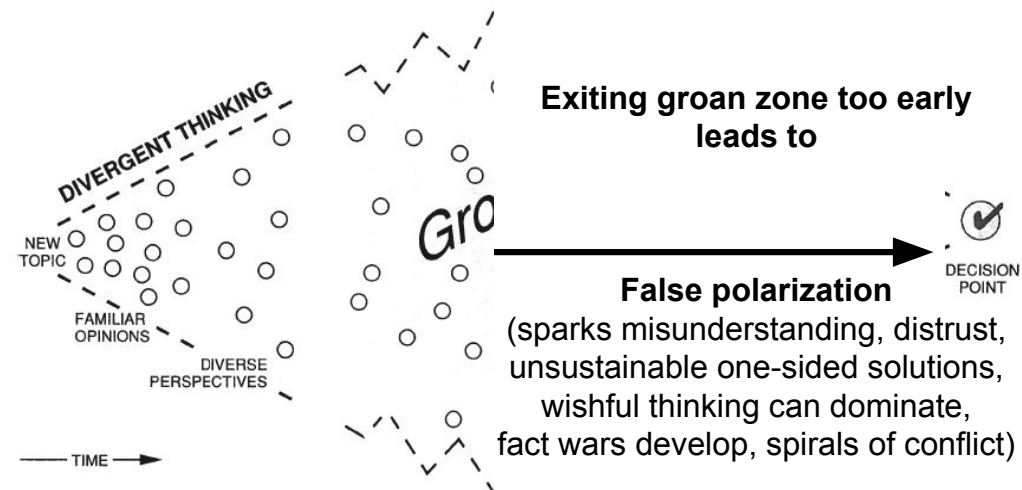
**To avoid false consensus:**  
Communities need better processes to insure adequate divergent thinking and that voices are heard.

## DYNAMICS OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING



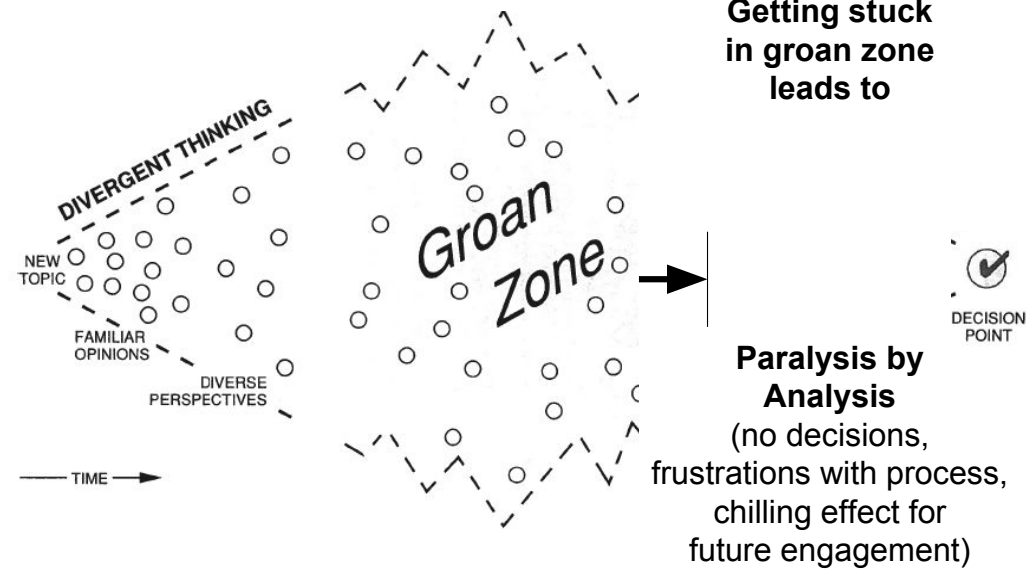
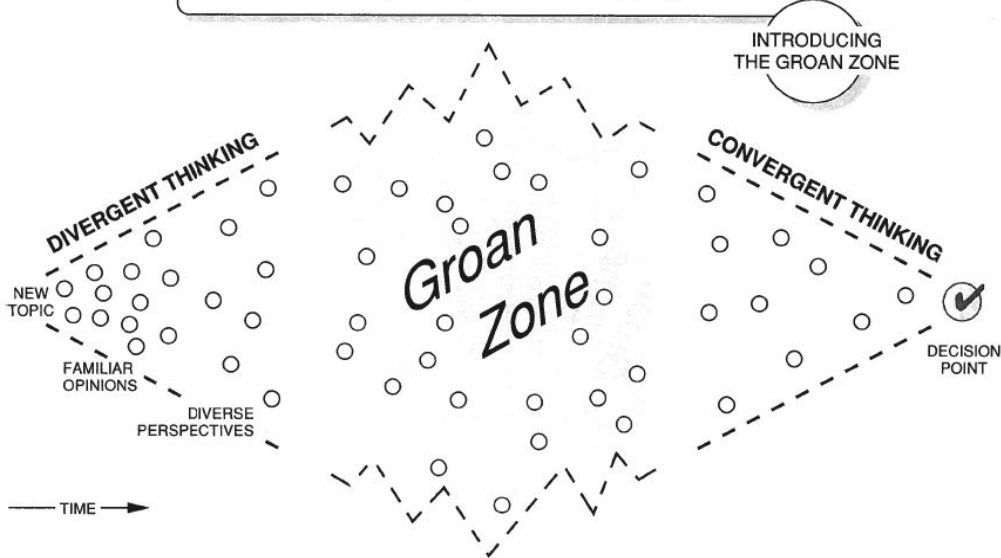
Exiting groan zone too early

leads to



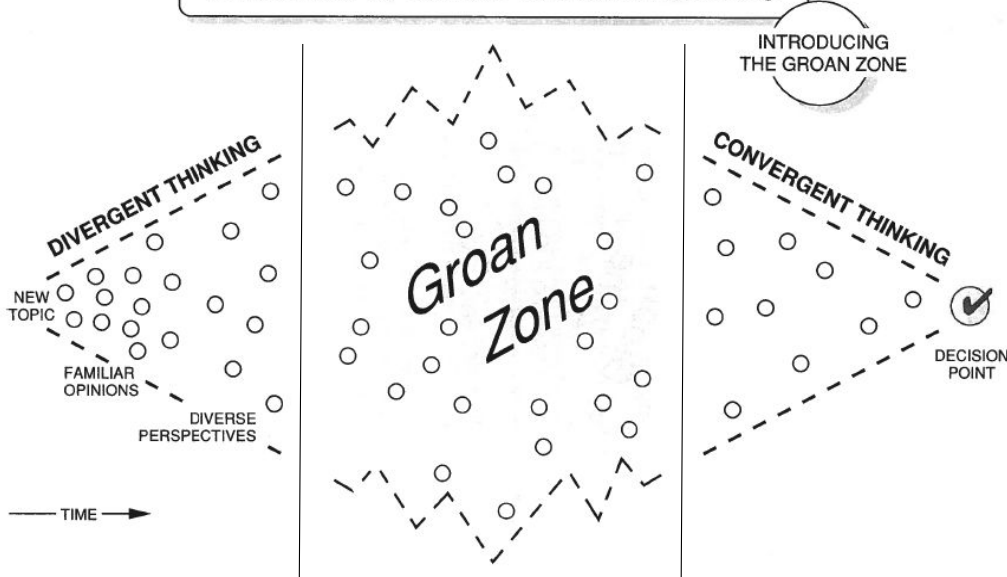
**To avoid false polarization:**  
Communities need better processes to help them interact and work through tough issues. Key elements include trusted conveners, high quality issues framing, and opportunities for genuine interaction.

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**To avoid paralysis by analysis:**  
Communities need better processes for convergent thinking and moving from talk to action

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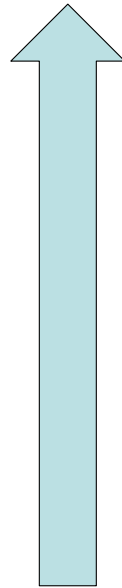
## Key Components of Deliberative Engagement

- Overall deliberative framing
  - Wicked problem, multiple approaches, broad range of actors, starting discussion “upstream” (before polarization)
- Discussion guides/backgrounder
  - Base of information, something to react to, framed for deliberation, not persuasion
- Small, diverse, representative groups
- Processes designed for interaction and learning
- Deliberative facilitators



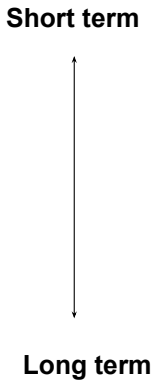
## In the End, We Must Elevate the Conversations in our Communities

- Build capacity for **collaborative action** and co-creation
- Spark **collaborative learning** and the refinement (not just expression) of opinion
- Help **differentiate** good and weak arguments
- Positively **manage conflict**, build mutual **understanding**, and develop **respect**
- Support **listening** and genuine **interaction**
- Provide opportunities for **voice** and public input



## Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- Build local capacity for deliberative engagement
- **Reinvigorate or create new key bridging institutions**



## Institutional Troubles Bridging v. Polarizing Institutions

More polarizing



More bridging

- Political parties/elections
- Advocacy groups
- Internet / Social media
- Media/Press
- Experts
- School districts
- Universities
- Community organizations like Leadership Foundations, League of Women Voters, United Way, Community Foundations, , Leadership programs, Boards and Commissions

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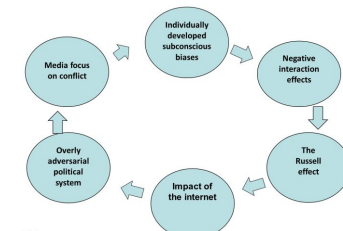
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## Key Steps for Local Communities

- Adopting a wicked problems mindset
- Better processes - tap into different aspects of human nature
- Build local capacity for deliberative engagement
- Reinvigorate or create new key bridging institutions
- **Cultivate citizens as wise collaborators**

Short term

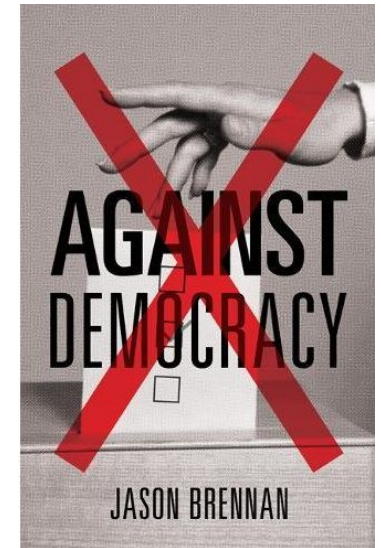
Long term

## Brennan's *Against Democracy*

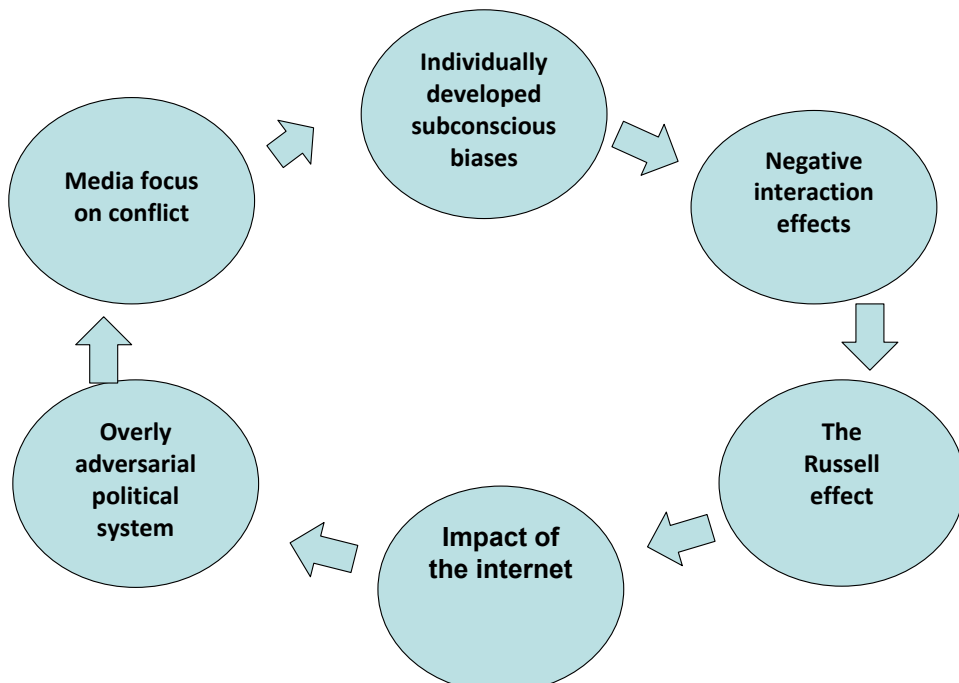
Three types of citizens:

- Hobbits
- Hooligans
- ~~Vulgar~~

Wise collaborators



## The Vicious Cycle of Exaggerated Polarization



## The Virtuous Cycle of Authentic Engagement

