

PART I

The Polluted Public Square

The public square is that literal and symbolic place where we meet to discuss and debate problems of the commons. It may be a church basement, a television studio or around a water cooler, but most importantly the public square is a place where citizens gather to discuss important community matters, governance and participate in democracy.

Our public squares should be forums for open and honest, higher-quality debate, but sadly, these meeting places have become polluted by a toxic mix of polarized rhetoric, propaganda and miscommunication. A dark haze of unyielding one-sidedness has poisoned public discourse and created an atmosphere of mistrust and disinterest. In this first part of *I'm Right* we will examine how we all pollute the public square, and how we can make space for healthier dialogue.



SECTION A

**Smashing Heads
Doesn't Open Minds**

1

Like Ships In the Night

with DANIEL YANKELOVICH

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN thinking about writing this book I invited Steve Rosell to lunch at a little Italian restaurant across the bay from San Francisco in Sausalito, California. I wanted his reaction to my early thoughts. I also wanted to convince him that my ideas were worthy of an interview with his famous colleague, social scientist Daniel Yankelovich. I had first met Daniel Yankelovich more than a decade earlier. I had read his brilliant books and valued his thinking tremendously. Born in 1924, Yankelovich is the author of 12 books and has held professorships or other academic affiliations with New York University, the graduate faculty of the New School for Social Research, the University of California, and Harvard University.¹ Together, Rosell and Yankelovich are pioneers in an evolving field that uses dialogue to deal with highly polarized public conflict.

During my lunch with Rosell I mentioned I was considering calling my next book *Duped and How*, and he immediately expressed concern that such an inflammatory title would set the book up, right at the outset, as a polarizing piece of work. Starting with a title that seems to say “I’m right and you’re an idiot” is not the best way to influence people or help them move toward considered judgment, said Rosell, who has a doctoral degree from Cornell, has been an

advisor to numerous international agencies, major corporations and has worked with four Canadian Prime Ministers.²

Rosell emphasized his point by recalling the 2011 debt ceiling crisis in Washington DC, when everyone argued up until the last minute. This kind of debate, or “debacle” as Rosell called it, is totally ineffective and seemed to him like a stalled airplane was hurtling toward Earth while everyone in the cockpit argued about what to do. Rosell said conspiracy theorists assume there is a clever plan behind such combative exchanges, but the scarier truth is that when it comes to today’s political posturing there is no great and clever plan: “Nobody is pulling the strings. It’s just out of control,” he said.

I was conflicted by this conversation. On one hand I was reluctant to change the title I proposed because I was angry about the pervasive propaganda and underhanded public relations trickery I was witnessing, deceit that conceals the gravity of so many environmental issues. Few speak out about this dark art, and I was keen to expose its perils, the spell it casts over unsuspecting victims. At the same time, how could I dismiss his wisdom? Rosell argued that assuming this stance would slam the door on many thoughtful, open-minded readers.

Later, I realized that by starting out with a polarizing position and aggressive posture emblazoned across the cover of my book, I could ironically and precisely illustrate the conflict-heavy tone I disapprove of. So thank you, Steve, for the title.

I wanted to hear the reactions of these two social scientists to David Suzuki’s question, and also learn more about the power of dialogue, how to mend broken conversations and achieve clear, collaborative communication so we can triangulate issues in innovative ways and find creative solutions. I was interested in their thoughts about the state of public discourse, propaganda, polarization, activism and the work I had described in my book *Climate Cover-Up*.³

Rosell set up the interview,⁴ we three sat down together in San Diego, and Yankelovich got right to the point when he said polarization is dangerous because it interrupts lines of communication

**We have an almost extreme situation
where the very intelligent elites are
sort of mumbling, and bumbling,
and proceeding as if they were
communicating—when they're not.**

DANIEL YANKELOVICH

and leads to gridlock. It stops us from tackling urgent problems because without consensus we cannot take effective action. Rather than highlighting our differences, he said we should be working toward finding common ground, and moving into a place where we can reserve judgment until we have considered other ways to approach controversial issues.

Yankelovich once wrote: "Democracy requires space for compromise, and compromise is best won through acknowledging the legitimate concerns of the other. We need to bridge opposing positions, not accentuate differences."⁵ He added that any unyielding one-sidedness creates a mood of corrosive bitterness. Worst of all, it is a formula for losing the battle, whether it's a war on terror or combating global warming. Taking a polarized attitude toward critical issues will inevitably yield answers that are dogmatic—and wrong—and keep us from arriving at truth.

"It's sad to say, but our culture favors debate, advocacy and conflict over dialogue and deliberation," Yankelovich said. These adversarial forms of discourse have their uses when attacking special interests in a courtroom or on television when we want our talking heads to be entertaining, but they're the wrong way to cope with the gridlock that threatens to paralyze our society. He said today's typical model of mass communication—"where people are not listening, being mistrustful, being polarized, not sharing the same basic understandings or mental frameworks"—distorts any possible discussion. We desperately need to find common ground.

Yankelovich believes the quality of public discourse today is “very poor” partly because people are generally inattentive to public affairs and because the media plays by its own rules. In addition, our public discourse is undermined by a lack of understanding about the rules of communication.

In particular, the scientific community is largely innocent of the rules of public discourse. So we have very gifted experts offering abstract, technical, difficult, highly qualified statements, and a media that presents what these people say in the form of controversy. “And since it involves an awful lot of inconvenience, people prefer to ignore it, saying, ‘If you people can’t agree, what do you expect of us?’”

The scientific community assumes the same rules of communication are always applicable and rational, that people are attentive, open-minded, persuaded by facts and believe that those who are presenting information are people of goodwill, and not deliberately trying to manipulate them. But none of those things are true.

Communicating under conditions of mistrust requires a different approach, said Yankelovich, who spent the first 30 years of his career in market research. Under these circumstances the first step is to acknowledge the skepticism or concern people feel, and then encourage them to reason why in this particular instance it isn’t applicable. The approach should be: the burden of proof is on us; performance should exceed expectations; promises should be few and faithfully kept; core values must be made explicit and framed in ethical terms; anything but plain talk is suspect; all bearing in mind that noble goals with flawed execution will be seen as hypocrisy, not idealism.

When dealing with conditions of inattention the objective is obvious: get people to listen. If they are mistrustful at the start, they won’t listen, even to fair and balanced points of view by distinguished and credible scientists. So a key place to begin thinking about this is for policy makers and scientists to recognize that communication is not going on when they think it is. “We have an almost extreme situation where the very intelligent elites are sort of mumbling, and bumbling, and proceeding as if they were communicating—when they’re not.”

Yankelovich explained that university professors are used to communicating under conditions of trust and assuming the public knows they act in good faith and will therefore accept their version of things. Well that's not true either, said the expert. Communicating under conditions of mistrust and political polarization is very different than communicating under conditions of trust. When we understand these elements—inattention, mistrust and polarization—it's clear why the truth about global warming has become so distorted.

Yankelovich added that the advertising profession has developed ways to communicate under conditions of mistrust and inattention, and others should too.

This is also where authentic conversation comes in. Yankelovich believes dialogue is not an arcane and esoteric intellectual exercise. It is a practical, everyday tool that is accessible to all, and when we use dialogue rather than debate we gain completely different insights into the ways people see the world. Those who say they are “dialogued out” on topics such as terrorism or pipelines are actually tired of the lack of real dialogue, because most dialogue is just disguised monologue.

During our interviews, Yankelovich and Rosell explained the clear differences between dialogue and debate: in debate we assume we have the right answer, whereas dialogue assumes we all have pieces of the answer and can craft a solution together. Debate is combative and about winning, while dialogue is collaborative and focuses on exploring the common good. Debaters defend their assumptions and criticize the views of others, whereas in dialogue we reveal assumptions and reexamine all positions, including our own.

I especially appreciated their comment that debate is about seeing weaknesses in other people's positions, while dialogue is about searching for strength and value in our opponents' concerns. This means approaching environmental issues with an open-minded attitude that we could be wrong and others could be right.

Yankelovich stressed that the special form of communication called *dialogue* is only needed when people don't share the same framework, when ordinary conversation fails and people are passing

each other “like ships in the night.” Authentic dialogue takes some effort to achieve and would not be worth the trouble if we could communicate more simply. In other words, when everybody is singing off the same sheet, shares the same values, goals and framework, we can all communicate just fine. But when we have highly educated scientists communicating with poorly educated citizens, as well as policy makers, people from the oil industry and stakeholders, it’s obvious that everybody brings a different frame to the issue.

Climate change is a perfect storm when it comes to communication, because it involves a broad array of stakeholders, people with differing values, frameworks and levels of education—all being whipped up by winds of passion and emotion. Rosell added that a growing gap between elites and the general public breeds mistrust between those different universes of discourse. “Government folks talk in jargon, and scientists talk about data. The public talks a different language, and you have to earn their trust. You can’t assume trust anymore.”

In our lawyer-ridden society the dominant mode of communication is advocacy, Yankelovich observed. Advocates are trying to sell something, whereas dialogue needs people who will listen, pay attention and suspend judgment so there is enough shared framework that even if people disagree, they can find some common ground.

When I asked Yankelovich how he became absorbed in the world of dialogue, he described an interesting journey. After having trained in philosophy and psychology, he moved into market research and public opinion polling, but was disappointed in the level of public discourse and the fact people rarely gave thoughtful, considered responses. He noticed this kind of “raw” opinion has certain structural characteristics. For one thing, it is full of contradictions. Ask people the same question at different times and you get different answers. Change the wording slightly and answers change again. People’s views are inconsistent and, most importantly, people don’t tend to think through the consequences of their views.

Having isolated these characteristics, Yankelovich determined to

find out under what conditions people could move from raw opinion to more thoughtful judgment, where their views would be consistent and where they would be aware of the consequences. In the course of trying to answer these questions, he came upon dialogue, and that led to his ongoing work on how to improve the quality of public discourse and public trust.

Yankelovich and Rosell have identified a process they call *the public learning curve* that describes maturing public opinions, where people's views evolve from poorly informed reactions to more thoughtful conclusions. The three-stage process begins with building awareness and consciousness (where advocates and the media typically do a good job). The second stage involves working through wishful thinking and denial, resistance to change and mistrust, grasping at straws, deliberate obfuscation and lack of urgency (which is where dialogue comes in). The third part of the learning curve is when people come to resolution (which is handled by decision-makers and governance institutions). "Much of our work focuses on improving the 'working through' stage, which our society does not handle well and where critical issues like climate change can get stuck for years or decades," said Rosell.

The dialogue specialists have developed tools and techniques to accelerate this process, but it still takes time, and Rosell explained that's to be expected. Experts in all fields have taken many years to master a sphere of knowledge and understand an issue. "There is an assumption that somehow the public will do that instantly, but they don't. They need time to work through the learning curve, and it can take decades in some cases."

In conclusion Rosell emphasized: "Public discourse matters, public confidence matters and trust matters if you want to achieve anything collectively. But what's going on now is not competent, not effective, not legitimate and it's undermining public trust."

The ability to have an honest conversation is a tremendous national and public resource, but what Rosell sees happening now is a deliberate attempt to fracture society. We've all been exposed to

this during election campaigns, when we hear outlandish attacks, out-of-control PR and distorted information, but Rosell said this conduct has a cost when it enters everyday life. "You keep doing that, and doing that, and you basically pollute the commons."

Protecting the public square and the public good is an objective worthy of support, he said, and by working to create a climate of trust, a community of discourse, we build up capital that we can use to deal with tricky issues in the future. On the other hand, when public conversations are corrupted, when we can't think things through because of a tangle of polarization, attack rhetoric and failure of experts to communicate, it is difficult if not impossible for people to move from raw to considered opinion. It is hard enough to go through these stages when we are exposed to clear arguments and healthy discourse, he said, and added that people can surprise themselves when they find common ground and manage to talk and disagree in a different way.