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## Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Reflections on our Five Years as Editors of the Journal of Public Deliberation

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# Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Reflections on our Five Years as Editors of the Journal of Public Deliberation

## Abstract

For the last five years, we have had the honor of serving as editors of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*. This issue marks the end of our editorial tenure, and we take this opportunity to both look back and think ahead. In this brief essay, we reflect on what we've seen during our time as editors. We begin by describing three important special issues that reflect the state of our field, then provide some details about how we have facilitated JPD's growth over the past five years, including publication statistics and article download rates. We conclude by discussing where the journal is now and what we anticipate for its future.

## Author Biography

Laura Black is editor for the Journal of Public Deliberation and an associate professor in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. Her research focuses on group communication in deliberation and dialogue, including conflict management, facilitation practices, storytelling, and the relationship of deliberative groups to their community contexts. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington.

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## Keywords

deliberation, democracy, engagement, state of the field

## **Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Reflections on our Five Years as Editors of the Journal of Public Deliberation**

For the last five years, we have had the honor of serving as editors of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*. This issue marks the end of our editorial tenure, and we are excited to hand over the leadership role to the new editorial team, Nicole Curato, André Bächtiger, and Kim Strandberg. We believe JPD has been very successful over the last five years, and we are thankful for the ongoing support of our sponsoring organizations: the newDemocracy Foundation, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium. We are grateful for their financial support, which makes it possible for JPD to remain free and open access, as well as their ongoing advisory support. We are also grateful for the hard work of our editorial board members and reviewers, for their willingness to serve the journal and volunteer time to give careful and thoughtful feedback to submissions. Finally, we thank authors for submitting their work to JPD and adding to our collective knowledge of the field. We are confident that the new editorial leadership will continue to build on this success and further develop the journal in the years to come.

As we publish our final issue, we take this opportunity to both look back and think ahead. In this brief essay, we reflect on what we've seen during our time as editors. We begin by describing three important special issues that reflect the state of our field, then provide some details about how we have facilitated JPD's growth over the past five years. We conclude by discussing where the journal is now and what we anticipate for its future.

### **Special Issues Reflecting on the State of the Field**

One exciting role we have played is in framing two special issues on the “state of the field,” an unusual honor because of the stark changes in the political landscape and the rise of undemocratic forces nationally and abroad. In 2014, as we were assuming our role, we collected invited essays from leaders in the field of public deliberation. The resulting special issue on *The State of the Field* (Volume 10, Issue 1) featured twenty essays that reflected on our field's scope, challenges, and promising future directions. These essays grew from a series of conversations that we hosted at conferences, such as the Frontiers of Democracy, where leading deliberative scholars and practitioners wrestled with questions about our field's identity and directions.

Looking at the issue as a whole, our concluding essay (Black, Shaffer, & Thomas, 2014) reflects three key takeaways. First, despite having a generally positive

assessment of the quality of our work, our field as a whole lacks a clear image of its ultimate goal. As we noted, “given our field’s emphasis on collaboration and understanding across difference, it is not surprising that we seem comfortable with our fields’ ambiguous sense of an ultimate goal” (p. 2). The flexibility of our field allows the work to be malleable for different contexts, but makes it harder for “outsiders” to understand what we do. Second, we noted, the work is not taken seriously enough by those with positional authority and political power. This makes it difficult to embed the work in larger systems that could affect large-scale social change. That said, the essays as a whole pointed to promising developments in deliberative democracy in the areas of education, civic infrastructure, and mobilization by connecting deliberative work with other forms of democratic engagement.

In December 2018, our second-to-last issue, we framed another special issue on the role of deliberation in the context of creeping authoritarianism. This issue, *Deliberative Democracy in an Era of Authoritarianism* (Volume 14, Issue 2), takes stock of the field in light of the rise of undemocratic political forces globally. This issue expresses serious questions about our field’s core commitments and its capacity to respond to the threats to democracy that are posed by authoritarianism. Bächtiger and colleagues noted that despite the proliferation and successes of our field,

All is not rosy... the world at large appears to be moving in some disconcerting anti-deliberative and anti-democratic directions. Post-truth politics is the antithesis of deliberative democracy. Resurgent authoritarian and populist leaders in many countries have little interest in deliberation--except to suppress it. Even where deliberation is not repressed, we too often see levels of political polarization that signal inabilities to listen to the other side and reflect upon what they may have to say. (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, & Warren, 2019, p. 2)

As scholars of deliberative democracy and JPD editors, we are extremely concerned about these trends. One of the hallmarks of our approach to the journal has been to embody deliberative values in our creation of special issues. This means that we made efforts to gather scholars and practitioners together to talk about important issues in our field and then use JPD as a mechanism to expand the conversation outward. So, as we had done in 2014, we convened workshops and pre-conference sessions to help members of our field discuss how our work could and should respond to the political moment.

Contributors to our 2018 special issue reflect on the core values of the field and offer insights about how deliberative democracy can respond through the use of

mini-publics, rethinking our relationship to social movements and activism, cultivating and sharing stories, and resisting authoritarian inclinations (Shaffer & Black, 2018). Authors also argue that deliberative work needs to be aimed at structural change at a much greater scale than it has in the past. These arguments are highlighted in Thomas and Upchurch's (2018) essay updating the "Democracy by Design" framework and assessing the current health of U.S. democratic systems.

The context for deliberative forms of public participation has undeniably changed in the past decade. However, for some populations of Americans who continue to suffer from discrimination and bigotry, what the U.S. experienced in that time was more an awakening to longstanding structural inequality and implicit bias, and not some new form of politics. We examined long-standing issues of diversity and inclusion in another special issue that landed more or less in the middle of our tenure. The special issue on *Equality, Equity, and Deliberation* (Volume 12, Issue 2) was guest edited by Carolyn Abdullah, Christopher F. Karpowitz, and Chad Raphael. The issue features fourteen essays that interrogate the fundamental tension between "equality" and "equity" in deliberative work.

As the guest editors note in their introduction to the issue,

Deliberation presupposes that people deserve equal respect and that in conditions of disagreement, such respect demands the open exchange of views and the mutual attempt to identify fair and just solutions. Yet, how is equal respect constructed in deliberation? For example, if equality means treating everyone similarly, regardless of what they bring to deliberation, there are longstanding concerns that this approach can reproduce and reinforce enduring hierarchies... and even derail the attempt to create conditions in which all perspectives can be included and fully heard. At the same time, if attention to such inequalities means treating deliberators differently, then the worry is that such approaches may stigmatize disadvantaged voices or even provoke a backlash among the more powerful. (Abdullah, Karpowitz, & Raphael, 2016, p. 1)

Contributors to this 2016 special issue argue that equity and inclusion must be considered in deliberative processes and institutions, including Participatory Budgeting, school forums, deliberative public meetings, affinity groups, online communities, and wisdom councils. Authors also argue that equity and inclusion are relevant in assessing the recruitment, process design, and outcomes of engagement events. Adequately accounting for equity and inclusion requires scholars and practitioners to do a great deal of work rethinking our taken-for-granted assumptions about deliberation, dialogue, and civic engagement. The

authors of this 2016 special issue provide some insights that can guide our rethinking, but they also remind us that concerns about equity need to be addressed in an ongoing and vigilant manner.

As we look across these three special issues, we see some steadfast commitments of our field that persist, even as scholars and practitioners make adjustments to respond to changing contexts. Nonetheless, we remain very concerned about the state of current global politics in 2019 and we ask: In an era of rising undemocratic forces, what can deliberation do? Can some of the nation's challenges can be solved by "better talk?" Or is this, as Archon Fung (2005) noted, "deliberation before the revolution?" As Michael Schudson (1997, p. 307) put it, "Conversation provides no magic solution to problems of democracy." In fact, there are times when democracy and "the place of conversation in it would have to take account of the instances where conversation is itself an impediment to democracy's fulfillment" (p. 308). Are we at a point where structured, civil discourse has lost out to situations and challenges demanding social movements, strikes, and/or demonstrations? These questions linger for us as we look back over our editorial tenure and consider our field's role in the larger project of democracy.

### **Readership, Growth, and Internationalization**

Since its beginning in 2005, the *Journal of Public Deliberation* has maintained a commitment to open access, which makes our publications widely available and free to readers. Over the past five years JPD has seen a significant jump in readership from around the globe. As of April, 2019, there have been 319,391 full text downloads of JPD articles. These downloads come from 8,064 institutions in 210 different countries. Notably, more than half of these downloads have happened during our editorial tenure. JPD articles have been downloaded over 40,000 times each year since 2014,<sup>1</sup> which is a substantial increase from the journal's earlier years. We are thrilled to see so many downloads of JPD articles and believe that this is evidence of the growth in our field and the success of the journal.

Our editorial predecessors, Timothy Steffensmeier and David Procter, worked to make JPD easier to find in online searches and it seems likely that this work paid off in the increase in readership that we have seen over the past five years. Research on public deliberation, dialogue, and civic engagement has also grown a

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<sup>1</sup> The number of full text downloads per year, as recorded by the *Journal of Public Deliberation* online system, were as follows: 48,858 in 2014; 40,406 in 2015; 40,313 in 2016; 41,934 in 2017; and 42,160 in 2018. In comparison, there were 29,739 full text downloads in 2013 and 16,917 in 2012.

great deal during this time and, as editors of the recent *Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* note, “deliberative democracy is now a flourishing field” (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, & Warren, 2019, p. 1). Working within this context, we have made strong editorial efforts to improve the JPD’s visibility and global impact and keep the journal centrally located in the field.

At the outset of our editorial tenure we argued, “we want JPD to serve as a repository for the best work in our field and give both scholars and practitioners a space to ask inconvenient and tough questions about our field. We need more scholarly attention to the takeaways. But we also need to create space for our field to have a sustained conversation about shared purpose” (Black, Shaffer, & Thomas, 2014, p. 5). In our work, we we have sought out and published high quality research and also cultivated these kinds of conversations about our field.

Since 2014, we have published eleven issues of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*. This total includes the three special thematic issues described above and eight regular issues, which feature 66 scholarly articles, eight reflections from the field, and 21 book reviews. As editors, we recognize and value the journal’s long-standing commitment to meaningful, productive conversations between scholars and practitioners. In 2014 we updated our submission guidelines to emphasize that commitment, and we relied on these guidelines to guide our publication decisions. Scholarly articles were asked to include descriptions of how the research can inform future deliberative practice. Reflection pieces, predominantly written by practitioners, describe innovative engagement practices that pose new directions for research. Book reviews highlight important books in our field in accessible and engaging ways. Throughout, we have attempted to broaden the conversation about and understanding of deliberative democracy in practice.

We also made efforts to ensure that the journal continued to present high quality, cutting edge research in the field. We encouraged submissions from a wide range of disciplines and countries. We expanded our editorial board to better represent the international and interdisciplinary nature of the work. We clarified our expectations for submissions and standardized citation style and format to give the journal a consistent and professional look. We also continued to ensure that all scholarly articles went through a rigorous, double blind peer review process that is consistent with review processes at traditional, disciplinary academic journals. During our time as editors, our acceptance rate for scholarly article submissions was 25 percent. Although JPD is not currently indexed with Scopus or Web of

Science, Google Scholar Metrics give the journal an h5 score<sup>2</sup> of 14, which indicates that articles published in JPD are being cited to a moderate degree. This is likely appropriate for a field the size of ours. Nevertheless, there is much room for growth and one of our hopes is that JPD will continue to reach audiences interested in scholarly and applied work in deliberative democracy from a range of countries and contexts.

The breadth of our field is highlighted by looking at download rates for the articles published in JPD over the last five years. When we embarked on this essay, we wondered if we would see clear trends in terms of popular topics, participatory practices, or disciplines represented in the most frequently downloaded JPD articles. We do not. Instead we see that the most frequently downloaded articles vary widely. The articles represent a range of disciplines that include political science, communication, public affairs, and higher education. Further, they highlight participatory practices from many places around the globe. Many of the most frequently downloaded pieces offer broad overviews of the field. These include Nancy Thomas's (2014) article "Democracy by Design," Matt Leighninger's (2014) essay, "What we're talking about when we talk about the civic field?" and Abdullah, Karpowitz, and Raphael's (2016) reflection on equity and equality in deliberation. Topics of other frequently downloaded papers included such diverse foci as Participatory Budgeting, power and equity, civic technology, community development, public dialogue, and assessment of deliberative outcomes.

The conversations taking place within JPD reflect the breadth and depth of people who are concerned about the health and future of democracy - concerns are not limited to one particular discipline or domain. Because JPD is both interdisciplinary and international, the journal serves as a home for these important cross-disciplinary conversations for both scholars and practitioners. The open access nature of JPD means that anyone can utilize and engage the contributions. This is important as we experience stresses within liberal democratic societies as well as trends toward autocratization globally (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019).

### **Looking Ahead**

The submissions we have received and articles we have published speak to the interdisciplinary space in which public deliberation resides. Given the diversity in

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<sup>2</sup> Google Scholar defines the h5-index as "the h-index for articles published in the last 5 complete years. It is the largest number h such that h articles published in 2013-2017 have at least h citations each."

our most frequently downloaded and highly-cited articles, we anticipate that research published in JPD will continue to address a wide range of questions about deliberative theory, engagement practices, and democratic outcomes. Although this is not a comprehensive list, we have seen a growth in submissions that take a systems perspective and explore how deliberative practices can be embedded into civic infrastructure. We anticipate continued growth in topics that develop connections to other democratic institutions. Additionally, we anticipate future research in topics such as deliberative innovations and civic technology. Finally, our field must continue to grow in ways that respond to authoritarianism and anti-democratic political contexts.

We believe that the journal will continue to develop and that the new editors will build on our accomplishments to further JPD's success. At the same time, we expect that future editors will need to continue to manage the diverse needs presented by the growth of our international, interdisciplinary, expanding network of scholars and practitioners. On our homepage, the *Journal of Public Deliberation* is described as "a peer reviewed, open access journal with the principal objective of synthesizing the research, opinion, projects, experiments and experiences of academics and practitioners in the multi-disciplinary field of deliberative democracy" ("About Public Deliberation," n.d.). This description highlights an important and delicate balance between two potentially competing goals. JPD is simultaneously committed to being both an outlet for high quality research and also a home for meaningful conversations between scholars and practitioners. As editors we have embraced both of these goals, and see synergistic connections between research and practice that are essential for moving the field forward.

What remains challenging, though, is that these two commitments do not always align logistically. By standardizing our article format expectations and continuing to adhere to rigorous peer-review standards, we have increased the visibility of JPD's scholarly articles. Publishing two discrete issues per year fits well with the academic publishing schedule. By partnering with sponsoring organizations like IAP2 and newDemocracy Foundation, we have made efforts to get JPD's research into the hands of policy makers to help people in power better understand the work of our field. These are indications that JPD is having success in its academic mission. However, these choices do not always meet the needs of practitioners. Our attempt to create a category of articles called "Reflections from the Field" was only moderately successful at promoting a space for practitioners to share their innovations and successes. This is partially because the academic publishing timeframe is very different from practitioners' work timelines and needs. The special issues we published served as meaningful venues for mutually-beneficial conversations among practitioners and academics, and we think part of this

success comes from the fact that these issues were based in thoughtful discussions that occurred at conferences and other deliberative gatherings.

As we noted in our concluding essay to our 2014 “State of the Field” special issue,

Traditionally, journals haven’t played a central role in social change. But for JPD, we have the potential to do more than a traditional “academic” journal. This is not to be interpreted as a diminishment of rigorous scholarship; instead, we see it as a commitment to making scholarship meaningful to people and communities. We hope that scholars and practitioners will seek to advance important conversations by listening to what others write and then continue the conversation, both in JPD and at future conferences like *Frontiers*.

But we argue that this conversation is not enough. Given the state of our field, we think it is time to interrogate the limits of our practices. We are very committed to the theory and practice of public dialogue and deliberation, and yet we acknowledge that there may be times when we need to step out of that role and take other kinds of political action. Our field faces some important questions about who we are, what we are doing, how we can and should wield influence, and what limits we face. Our scholarship, practice, and action need to take these questions seriously. (Black, Shaffer, & Thomas, 2014, p. 5)

Through our editorial tenure, we have tried to embody the ideals of deliberation by bringing groups of people together to talk about the state of the field and ask difficult questions about issues that we collectively face. As our field continues to grow, we believe that JPD can continue to be a leader in making deliberative scholarship meaningful for people and communities. But that leadership depends on consistent attention to the diverse needs of the range of members of our field.

Finally, we want to stress that public dialogue and deliberation do not happen in a vacuum; they are most useful and impactful when there is a need for increased understanding, community building, social change, and better public policies. With this broad charge, deliberative democracy has broad application and potential to re-instill in people a sense of shared responsibility for each other, of place, and of democratic principles and practices. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to serve as conveners and facilitators in this important field, and look forward to being active participants in the next stage of the work.

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