

Why Conversation is not the Soul of Democracy

A brief analysis of Michael Schudson's claims and the relationship between dialogue and democracy

Summary

In Michael Schudson's piece on "Why Conversation is not the Soul of Democracy", he offers an overview into the different elements of conversation and how they inform participation in the democratic process. The short introduction summarizes the beliefs of two democratic theorists, Jurgen Habermas and John Dewey who hold that specific forms of public discourse are essential to democratic life. Subsequently, in the next section entitled, *The Place of Conversation in Democracy* Schudson begins to construct his argument. He first cites James Carey's argument that the responsibilities of the conversational public have been relegated to the press who inhibit the independent exchange of ideas between citizens. This perspective sets up subsequent refutation of the ideas in the introduction. Schudson's specifically argues that the type of conversation that guides democracy is not spontaneous face-to-face interactions but public, rule governed conversations that seek to solve a problem. The nature of this type of conversation makes democratic talk inherently uncomfortable.

He further claims that conversations in democracies come in two competing forms, the sociable model and the problem-solving model. In the sociable model, participants focus on engaging with each other to understand the world around them. Whereas in the problem-solving model, reason and justification are important elements in order for problems to be uncovered and addressed. He goes on to explain different characteristics of ideal participants for each type of conversation. To effectively engage in a sociable conversation, participants need to be able to keep the conversation lively and entertaining. Participants in problem solving conversations must

be reasonableness and articulation. The ground rules that govern each type of conversation maintain control and civility of the discussion. These norms of conversation are what yield impactful results not simply just the act of having conversation. Schudson exemplifies this point using testimonies of Vermont residents who attend town hall meetings. The hybrid of conversation and government can create hostile environments that discourage participation when interlocutors do not maintain civility and uphold an egalitarian environment. He continues by discussing different methods to express opinions in the form of heterogeneous or homogenous conversation. The former refers to conversations between individuals who do not share the same values and the latter is conversation between individuals who do share the same values. Based off of the theories from legal theorist Bruce Ackerman and Stephen Macedo, these opinions must also be expressed reasonably (in public specifically) and in the name of cooperation. In the section “The Subject of Conversation” Schudson claims that the origin of conversations comes from the content of the press. Herein lies the core of his argument where he states, “Conversation in democracy may differ from conversation elsewhere not because democracy bubbles up from conversation but because democratic political norms and institutions shape conversations to begin with.”¹ A direct echo of James Carey’s opinion. Even though Schudson affirms that conversation is an important element of democracy, he views it as a byproduct rather than a driving force of the system.

Discussion

Schudson provides a sound argument for the true role of conversation in democracy. The structure of the article sometimes made his stance unclear because he does constantly affirm the existence of different types of conversations in democracies. The very section, *Place of*

¹ Michael Schudson, “Why Conversation is not the Soul of Democracy,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 14 (1997), 305.

Conversation in Democracies comes across initially as puzzling given the title of the article is “Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy.” However, soon it became clear that there was a major distinction between “soul” and “place” even though he does not explicitly state the difference. Upon first glance at the text, I assumed Schudson would deny that conversation had any place in democracy and instead provide examples of how other elements of democracy were more important. After understanding the organization of the paper, his claims begin to make more sense. One element of democratic conversation that was particularly resonate was the discomfort of such conversations. “Democratic talk is not necessarily egalitarian, but it is essentially public, and if this means that democratic talk is talk among people of different values and different backgrounds, it is also profoundly uncomfortable,”² which is true. The democratic process will only work if citizens from different backgrounds come together to discuss their grievances and expectations. Take for example the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960’s in the United States, where the plight of Black Americans was a rather contentious subject for the mainstream white population. It took many uncomfortable discussions to turn the wheels of democracy to enact change. Dr. Martin Luther King held televised interviews with white counterparts who challenged the strategy and aim of the civil rights movement³. Furthermore, King held conversations with Lyndon B. Johnson and ⁴ John F. Kennedy⁵ to galvanize support in legislature full of Southern Democrats who were genuinely against enfranchising the Black population. It was only after careful and contentious discussion, that landmark legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were signed into law. I

² Schudson, *Why Conversation is not the Soul of Democracy*, 299.

³ See King, Martin Luther. “Interview on “Meet the Press””. Interview by Ned Brooks. *National Broadcasting Company*. April 17, 1960. <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/interview-meet-press>

⁴ “A conversation between LBJ and Martin Luther King Jr.” *LBJ Presidential Library*. November 25, 1963. <http://www.lbjlibrary.org/lyndon-baines-johnson/timeline/a-conversation-between-lbj-and-martin-luther-king-jr>.

⁵ James Goodman, How Martin Luther King Persuaded John Kennedy to Support the Civil Rights Cause. *The New York Times*. June 29, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/books/review/kennedy-and-king-steven-levingston.html>; See also Steven Levingston. *Kennedy and King: The President, the Pastor, and the Battle over Civil Rights*. New York: Hachette Books, 2018.

firmly believe that the interlocutors delving into the discomfort of the circumstance yielded these impactful results.

Additionally, in the coda Schudson also mentions that sometimes civil conversation will not suffice for democracy. “Democracy may sometimes require that your interlocutor does not wait politely for you to finish but shakes you by the collar and cries ‘Listen! Listen for God’s sake!’” manifesting in the form of demonstrations and protests. Again, in the context of the Civil Rights Movement, this tactic proved to be invaluable for deconstructing the racist norms that deprived people of color from civil rights. A typical conversation would not have been effective because of how engrained racism was in the public’s consciousness and the inferior perception it had of the Black population. In order to communicate the severity of the matter, exclamatory marks were needed. Schudson’s core argument about conversation not being the soul of democracy: “Democracy creates democratic conversation more than conversation naturally creates democracy,⁶” also has validity. At the inception of the United States, conversation literally culminated into a democratic nation starting from the first Constitutional Convention in 1787. The founders had to bring about a system for a legislature, voting process and a president all by conversation. Whereas today, though this should still be the model, citizens are now making decisions based off the ideas fed to them by the media. Spontaneous conversation regarding the country’s state of affairs does not happen between average citizens. Now the media has the power to control the public’s psyche rather than the other way around. Schudson essentially claims that the media acts as the soul of democracy biasing citizens towards certain issues and thus certain courses of action. Individuals are not controlling the fate of this country, institutions are.

⁶ Schudson, *Why Conversation is not the Soul of Democracy*, 306.

Perhaps this justifies the need for a deliberative democracy as put forth by James S.

Fishkin. Americans need to be galvanized to inform themselves and to believe that their opinion has an impact in the grand scheme of the government. Schudson's point about the media influencing conversation may stem from the fact that people do not see the purpose in forming their own opinion. This phenomenon has been coined as rational ignorance⁷. Yet the sum of people who adhere to rational ignorance represent a critical mass and "if [the public] is uninformed, it may be manipulated even if it is highly engaged..."⁸ One strategy to encourage people to inform themselves would be to help them recognize the power of their opinion as a member of a larger group. Groups such as an organization of proponents for abortion or as a citizen of their county would give perspective to citizens about the power they can wield for change. If everyone in their group votes a certain way, it could make a difference. It all begins with the motivation to self-inform outside of the mass media's content.

In the end, Schudson still leaves room for many questions about the relationship between democracy and conversation including:

- 1) What is the soul of democracy? What is keeping democracy alive if not conversation? Is it voting behavior? Or is democracy dying in the United States?
- 2) Are there more effective ways to participate in democracy other than dialogue?
- 3) As mentioned in the first part of the coda, why does democracy require withdrawal from certain conversations? Who decides the type of conversation that the government will entertain? Could withdrawal from conversations be a danger to democracy?
- 4) What place does conversation have in democracy?

⁷ See James Fishkin. "Democratic Aspirations," in *When the People Speak*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 11

⁸ Fishkin, *When the People Speak*, 6.

- 5) Regarding current debates, do you think interlocutors are following the conversation norms outlined by Schudson?

Works Cited

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