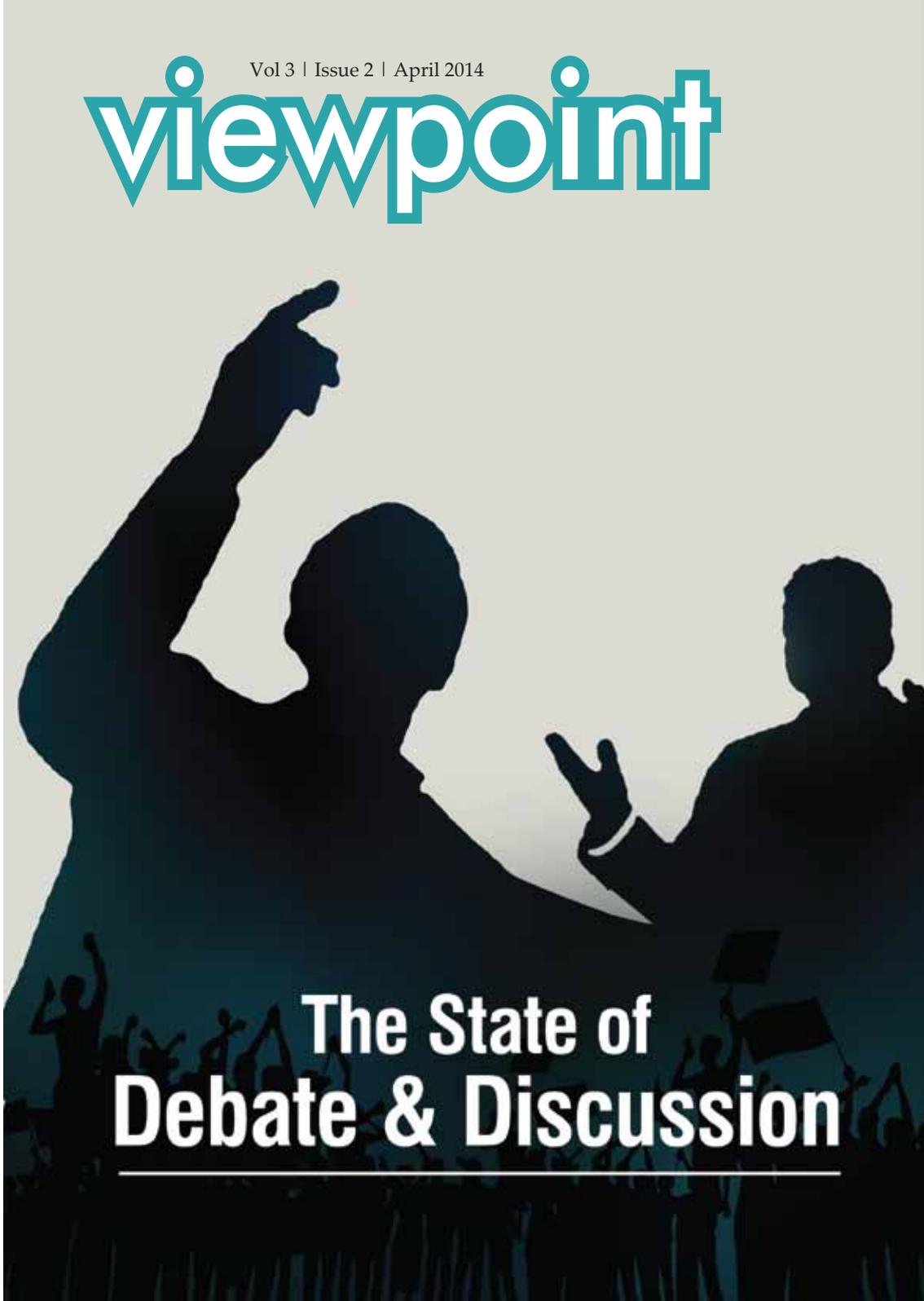


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viewpoint

The background of the right page is a dark teal color. It features silhouettes of several people in the foreground, appearing to be in a discussion or debate. One person on the left has their right arm raised, pointing upwards. Another person on the right is gesturing with their hand. In the background, there are more silhouettes of a crowd, some with their arms raised, suggesting a public gathering or protest. The overall mood is one of active participation and discourse.

The State of Debate & Discussion

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Building Room for Better Debate

Recently a planned debate between two political candidates in South Bangalore was scuttled after a clash between party workers. This is just one example of how difficult it is to build serious and necessary dialogue into the political process. As the election season winds down, all we are left with is posturing on ideology and values.

There is no doubt that we live in ideologically divided times. From time to time, wedge issues – a ban on a controversial book, the ecology versus development debate – emerge to polarize us further. But what fuels our arguments when it comes to these issues: logic or emotions? This is what one of our contributors examines in her article.

Facts and information can be surprisingly elusive even in debates and decisions that involve public welfare. One of our experts uses recent policy debates to highlight how credible research could have been leveraged for better results in these cases.

Debate and discussion are a big part of the modern workplace. But are today's leaders mindful of what it takes to drive productive discussions and effective problem solving within their organizations?

Lastly, if public opinion is the ultimate judge, how are offline and online channels converging to influence the way people think about specific issues?

In This Issue:

Beyond 'For' and 'Against' - Why it is important to step back and examine the nuances of an issue before taking a stand on it.

Making Research Count in Policy Debates - Policy debates often get bogged down in partisan squabbling over costs, implementation hurdles and more. How can data help in moving these discussions forward?

The Route to Better Decision Making - Two simple strategies that can help business leaders foster productive discussions and effective problem solving within their organizations.

The Shaping of Public Opinion - A look at the many ways that opinion is formed, manipulated and moulded in today's world.

Alterpoint - How we use fallacy to build a case.

Beyond 'For' and 'Against'

In most fierce public debates, our tendency is to reactively occupy positions based on emotions, personal beliefs or media coverage. Rarely do we stop to examine all the nuances and diverse perspectives surrounding a given issue.

In 'The Argumentative Indian', Amartya Sen celebrates the historic roots of a society that has prized arguments in many forms. The word 'argument' is interpreted by most people as defending one of two opposing viewpoints, although Sen's definition would embrace a much broader multiplicity of voices and opinions. But with the national elections ratcheting up emotions, and with many people being forced into combative 'for' or 'against' positions, perhaps it is worthwhile to examine if issues are being reduced to simplified polarities with hardly any space for more nuanced middle ground.

Take the Environment versus Development debate, for instance. While pro-environmentalists are often projected as anti-growth, the pro-development lot are similarly buttonholed as being anti-environment. But some people who are exposed to the complexities and nuances of the debate, would tend to occupy a middle ground, perhaps shunning particularly harmful projects where human and environmental costs outweigh economic benefits but supporting less harmful projects whose impact can be redressed by technological or social means.

After all, most humans would agree on the need for unpolluted air and water, and for the long-term viability of the planet. But many would also champion change and economic progress. Isn't tempered growth, with built-in checks and balances, also an option? Does India have to mimic the American trajectory or can we chart our own unique path, taking into



account new knowledge about global warming and its long-term impact?

Similarly, there are people who are either "for" subsidies being given to lower-income groups and those who oppose it on several grounds. A few dissenters, belonging to both groups, would like to reduce the inequality in opportunities and incomes but disagree on how best to approach it. But given that social scientists are studying the impact of subsidies (a recent article in the Outlook titled "The Other India" examines the impact of welfare schemes in various states), perhaps a more reasoned middle ground would agree that we need to continue subsidies that have led to significant gains in health, educational and poverty alleviation outcomes, and abandon or redesign others that have not worked for various reasons. During this process, we need to ensure that voices of targeted populations are not drowned out by louder middle and upper-income voices.

In a book titled 'Difficult Conversations: How To Discuss What Matters Most', the authors (Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen) argue that some conversations do tend to become emotionally charged because the issues involved threaten not just our viewpoints, but our very identities. In the recent controversy surrounding Wendy Doniger's book, 'The Hindus', some members of that community felt that their core belief system and way of life were being challenged by a 'foreign' author.

Ironically, Doniger was attempting to enrich Hindu scholarship by capturing the stories of women and lower castes, voices that have been typically exorcised from mainstream religious discourse. But browbeating the publisher to ban and pulp the book is hardly an enrichment of our argumentative traditions. Such actions are a setback, not only for scholarship on any sensitive topic, but also for the tenor of discourse in India today. A more acceptable response would have called for the author's opponents to publish and even promote their contrary viewpoints without necessitating the destruction of Doniger's work.

There are, however, some topics that do not lend themselves to a middle ground. And these are also conversations that we need to engage in, if we want to move forward as a society. Take the issue of gay rights. Again, there are many people who believe that their religious or cultural values are being threatened by laws that support gay rights. On the other side, those who believe that all differences should be celebrated and endorsed would argue in favour of a more liberal position even if it does not resonate with a majority viewpoint.

In such conversations, more people might be won over if they would attempt to first understand opposing viewpoints and the life experiences that help shape them. The authors of 'Difficult Conversations' argue that this entails shifting from a position of certainty to a position of curiosity. Listening and understanding alternate viewpoints can help transcend scripts already playing in our heads.

Besides our proclivity for combative stances, certain media formats also tend to encourage snap judgments and simple opposition. For instance, to increase their TRP ratings, many discussions on TV channels are infused with the emotions of the TV anchor. While Arnab Goswami might be the

Listening and understanding alternate viewpoints can help transcend scripts already playing in our heads.

most well-known performer in such TRP-spiking shows, several other anchors are following suit to draw audiences. Frequent shouting matches on TV are likely to push viewers to unthinkingly occupy positions that support or oppose the outraged anchor.

Social media such as Twitter and Facebook which do not provide enough space for longer and more reasoned arguments, also lead to quick conclusions and easy 'pros' and 'cons' rather than forcing us to dwell on more complex greys. It is challenging to project nuances in a world of limited attention spans, and more so when messages have to be limited to 140 characters.

As Daniel Kahneman very evocatively argues in 'Thinking Fast and Slow', changing your mind about something or understanding a complex, logical argument involves effortful, conscious attention - an increasingly scarce commodity in our harried, multitasking lives. He further stresses that the mind often tricks us into intuitive judgments that might be false. This may be an apt time to slow down, to reason and reflect, and arrive at considered judgments before exercising our franchise.

...it is worthwhile to examine if issues are being reduced to simplified polarities with hardly any space for more nuanced middle ground.



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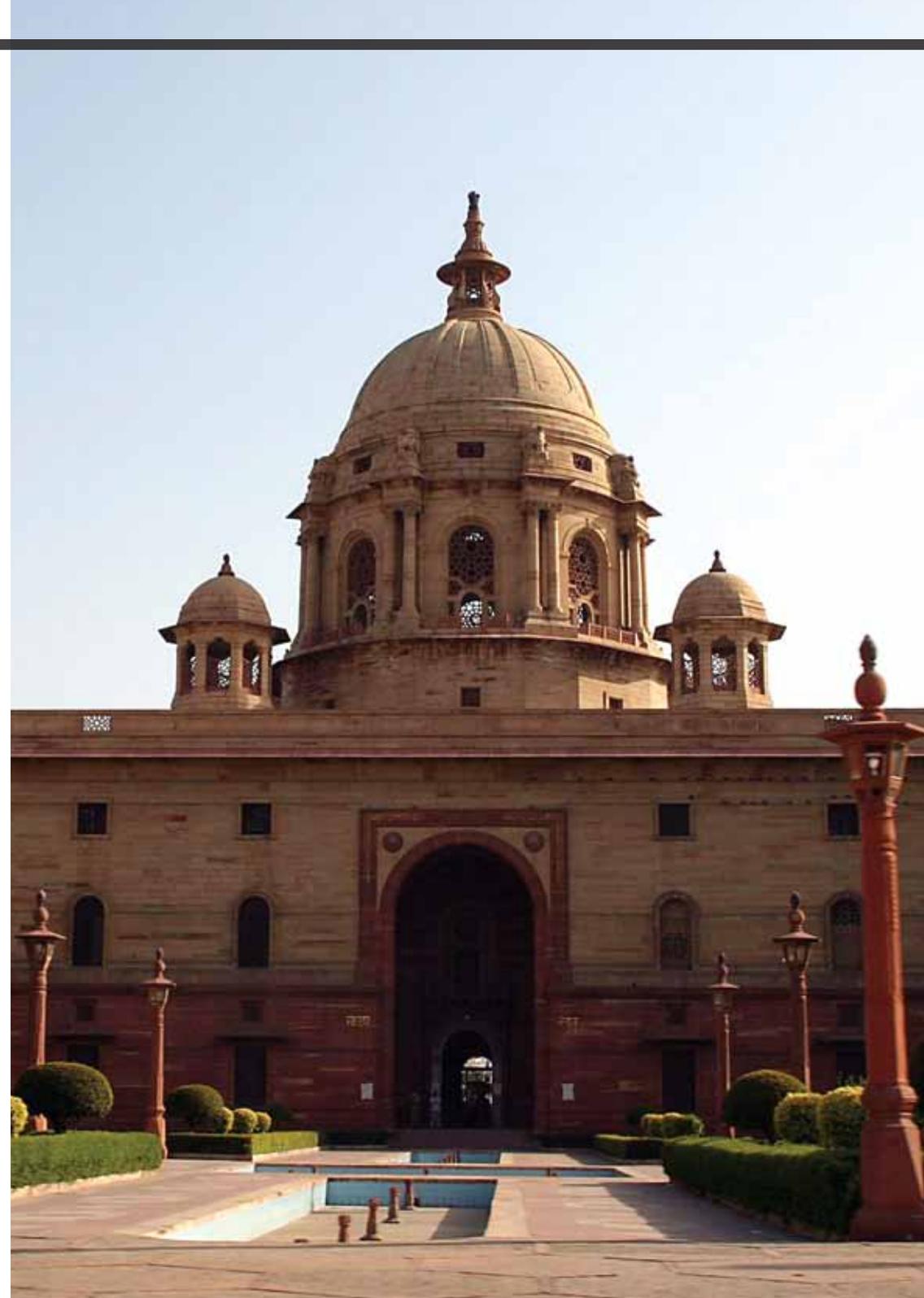
Making Research Count in Policy Debates

Validated data and research can set the tone in public policy debates and help in shaping more effective legislation. However, due to several contextual factors – the stakes involved, the modes of communication used, and the level of receptiveness to data - research does not currently drive policy discussions as much as it could.

Debates are an integral part of a participatory democracy, and are vital for ensuring representation of diverse viewpoints through cogent and well-articulated arguments. In the Indian scenario, particularly, where scarce resources have to be directed at achieving maximum social returns, debates are a valuable tool for investigating alternatives and prioritizing choices.

The structure and quality of debates are strongly influenced by the context within which they occur. This context is defined by the stakes of the participants and audience in the debate (personal versus impersonal/academic); the platforms of communication used (single, multiple); and the audience outlook (defined by their inclination to support either fact-based or emotive arguments).

Traditionally, public policy debates in India have centered around high stake issues such as poverty, jobs and welfare schemes and this is expected to continue. However, there has been a marked change over the past decade in the other two contextual elements – available platforms of communication and audience outlook. Multi-modal media penetration through print, TV, web and social media has increased the number of platforms available for deliberation on such policy issues. Studies have established that greater media penetration and openness of channels leads to better debate and potentially, to better outcomes. For instance, a cross-country study across 60 developing countries showed that there is a demonstrated positive correlation between free media and voter turnout.



This points to the ability of open debates to enhance democratic participation.

Education is another determinant of the quality of public debates. With education levels rising among the youth of the country, there has also been greater public interest in performance, growth and governance issues as opposed to identity driven politics and populist measures. While these trends are encouraging, the use of research in public debates remains limited. The core questions surrounding the issues often remain unasked owing to an excessive emphasis on political ideologies and confrontational viewpoints.

We only have to examine recent, fiercely debated policies such as the Food Security Act, Right to Education, and poverty line definition in order to test this hypothesis:

Food Security Act

Research utilization: Low. The extensive research available on the subject went largely unused in mainstream public debate.

Debate quality: The debate focused on symptomatic and sensational issues such as the Act's contribution to the fiscal deficit and the cost of financing rather than tackling the fundamental question of whether the new Act would be effective in tackling malnutrition, the core issue. Moreover, existing research on the performance of the current Public Distribution System (PDS) remained largely unreported.

Conclusion: The ongoing debate on the Food Security Act is characterized by high personal stakes and limited integration of available research into public discourse, causing it to be centered around rhetoric. Issues such as technological participation in targeting beneficiaries and implementation challenges could have added to the quality of the discourse and dispelled ambiguity about the Act's effectiveness on the ground.

Poverty Line Definition

Research utilization: Low. Multidimensional poverty measurement, a crucial alternative to income-based measurements, did not feature in popular discourse on the subject. With increasing politicization of the issue, vital research on poverty measurement was ignored.

Debate quality: While the debate within policy circles was based on academic and conceptual comparisons of multiple standards and their success rates in identifying and measuring poverty, larger media coverage of the issue was emotional and relied on anecdotal evidence to substantiate or undermine arguments.

Conclusion: The poverty line definition debate involved high personal stakes. This, coupled with a lack of contextual research, led to a debate that was characterized mostly by rhetoric. A more neutral view of measurement methods and individual features could potentially have helped design welfare interventions appropriate to the Indian context.

The Indian policy debate environment has still not completely transitioned to a largely fact-based format, and perhaps never will in its entirety.

Right To Education

Research utilization: High

Some gaps in utilization: The Bill provides for the right to schooling and physical infrastructure but does not guarantee the quality of education. There is still work to be done in establishing well-defined learning outcomes. A 2007 NCERT study establishes, for example, that students' performance is below what is appropriate for their grade levels. Such findings were articulated in the debate but not addressed through the Bill.

Debate quality: The diagnosis of the core issue of access to primary education is accurate. The discourse has been predominantly fact-based. For example, the recommendations put forth by the NAC Committee on RTE calls for periodic program evaluation and clearer definition of outcomes. Though symptomatic issues such as reservations and the role of unaided schools could not be completely avoided, the overall utilization of research resulted in a better informed discourse.

Conclusion: The debate on the Right to Education was characterized by limited personal stakes, progressive audience outlook, and multiple communication platforms, leading to greater usage of facts in the presentation of the debate.

The Indian policy debate environment has still not completely transitioned to a largely fact-based format, and perhaps never will in its entirety. However, greater public awareness and involvement, coupled with lower search costs for relevant research insights herald a brighter future for fact and research driven discussions. Irrespective of the final outcomes, such debates can help us focus on real issues and keep us from getting bogged down by emotional views and rhetorical loops.

Reference: Turnout in Developing Countries – The effect of mass media on national voter participation – Clemence Vergne (2009)

Studies have established that greater media penetration and openness of channels leads to better debate and potentially, to better outcomes.



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The Route to Better Decision Making

Some of the challenges in organizational decision-making can be traced to the fact that an individual or individuals are not willing to give up control of the process. By relaxing this control and encouraging others to do so also, managers can facilitate more fruitful discussions and efficient problem solving within their organizations.

The quality of outcomes, whether at the workplace or anywhere else, depends upon the quality of decision making. It is, therefore, not surprising that over the decades, the management theme that has drawn the consistent attention of writers and researchers alike has been the process of decision making.

In this article, I want to touch upon two common decision making and problem solving traps that many smart organizations, and smart people, consistently walk into without even realizing it.

Solving the wrong problem

This starts with the way someone defines a problem in an organization. What exactly is a problem? A problem emerges when expected outcomes are not met. Expected outcomes may not be met due to a variety of reasons. In real life, the number of variables that impact an outcome are many. However, organizations and management experts have figured out that most variables can be classified under six to eight broad themes – strategy, structure, people, and so on.

Here are three examples in each of which a given problem is stated in two different ways:

Statement 1: “Sales have dipped by ten percent this year”.

Statement 2: “Commission plans are not working and we need to redesign the plans”.



Statement 1: "Things have been slipping behind schedule".
Statement 2: "We need to set goals for the team so that they clearly understand what they need to deliver and when".

Statement 1: "The collaboration between the Marketing and Operations teams is sub-optimal".
Statement 2: "Marketing needs to be decentralized, and the marketing managers in the regions must have solid line reporting to the operations heads in the regions".

You may notice that the first way of stating the problem does not involve any judgment. It does not pretend to know the answer. It is stated with humility and openness. It is stated in a way that lends itself to group discussion and to solutions, based on that discussion. There is also an implicit acceptance of personal responsibility and the assurance that "I am prepared to do what it takes to solve the problem".

The second way of stating the problem has shades of: "I know what we need to do, and by the way, the problem has nothing to do with me". There is a degree of arrogance and evidence of a closed mindset associated with the statement. Managers and leaders who have been trained to believe that they need to know all the answers, and for whom asking questions is a sign of weakness, are likely to state problems in this manner. Once someone - especially a person in a senior role - has stated the problem in this way, it is very difficult to get everyone to look at it in any other way. The entire organizational effort is then directed towards fine-tuning the 'answer'.

It is common to devise a structural solution to a problem that has its roots in strategy, a compensation/commission solution to a problem that is essentially created by inadequate reviews, or a strategy solution to a problem that is caused by poor hiring choices. Therefore, however sophisticated the solution, however deep the attention to detail, however expensive the fix - in terms of time and money - the solution will be ineffective because it has not addressed the right problem, which will resurface or persist.

Therefore, every time a problem comes up, ask your team to define it in a way that lends itself to finding the right solution. Let people be willing to examine it with an open mind and explore causes that force them to think hard and identify what they should be doing better.

Assuming you need to solve every problem

Most driven people assume they need to solve every problem. Young and smart people (including young and smart CEOs) often fall into this trap. Smart people can solve most problems if they try hard enough, but, by doing so, they may be wasting their time. They are not building decision-making and problem solving capability within the organization. Therefore, this model is neither scalable nor sustainable. Those who feel compelled to solve every problem are also the ones most likely to build weak teams.

Smart people can solve most problems if they try hard enough, but, by doing so, they may be wasting their time.

On the contrary, there are those who have the capability to tackle most problems but choose to focus only on the most important ones. They are content, either ignoring the others or delegating those to levels where they are best solved.

Therefore, the next time you have a smart and competent person on your team - or in your organization - take some time to observe whether he or she has a scalable or a lost-in-the-weeds style of operating. If the latter, help the person realize that their true strength in an organizational context - especially in those organizations experiencing hyper growth - lies in finding smarter people who can solve most of their problems. This will allow the person to keep a razor sharp focus on the two or three problems where his or her attention could make all the difference.

Simple as they may sound, these two approaches that leverage productive team discussions and efficient use of personal capabilities, require individuals in key positions to relinquish some control. In the long run, however, they can pave the way for better decision-making and quality outcomes in the workplace.

...every time a problem comes up, ask your team to define it in a way that lends itself to finding the right solution.



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The Shaping of Public Opinion

Time was when our opinions regarding issues were highly influenced by what we read in the media or discussed within our social circles. That has not really changed but in an environment where so much is discussed and shared online, it is worthwhile to examine how public opinion is shaped in this new world order.

'Birds of a feather flock together' may be an oversimplified representation of how we make friends and form groups but it is not too far off the mark. In today's world, an individual's level of global exposure can range from low to high depending on whether they have had an insular or more open upbringing. Regardless of this, finding like-minded individuals to socialize with is a priority for most people.

Our circles of family and friends are the filters through which we interpret experiences, events, people and more. Although we are not always entirely aligned with our friends' views on these subjects, we do tend to think as they do, to a large extent.

Our opinions are not rigid and unchangeable and we can certainly progress from a conservative outlook on a topic to a more liberal stance and vice versa. Our life experiences, including the people we interact with and the places we live in – all of these have a role to play in moulding our views and opinions. But, ultimately, we seek validation and affirmation for these through our groups or circles. If there is safety in numbers, our circles provide a secure place from which we can hold on to our views on politics, world events, books, movies and more. In that sense, public



opinion may be going the way of religion with organized groups demonstrating high levels of group think.

Our circles are now online but their role in influencing our opinions is as strong as ever and perhaps even magnified by social media effects. Media stories may still sway us but that effect is tempered by the parameter of what our friends are watching and reading. The ability to share and post stories that we connect with gives every single one of us the power to project our ideas and views on to a larger group. Depending on the content and the receptiveness of the group to these ideas, the result could be viral gold for the given news item, video or post.

There are now other groups and special interests ranging from school committees to fitness clubs that also vie for our attention. Affiliating ourselves with these groups is part of the whole image calibration exercise that we all unwittingly participate in online. But it also places us at the receiving end of more messages and ideas to imbibe and potentially act upon.

In addition, there are the opinions of people whom we 'follow' online. Although this dynamic may be overrated, there are clearly celebrities whom we respect and whose views we don't easily ignore because of who they are and what they have accomplished. A tweet by a Nobel laureate on the effects of global warming, for instance, may give us pause more than a doomsday scenario outlined by a co-worker.

When the idea or opinion that is being propagated has real world implications that touch a chord with many people, the results can be startling. This is clearly what happened in the Middle East in 2011 when discontent simmering beneath the surface was torched into life by a series of tweets.

Yet, ultimately, the uprisings failed to achieve desired results for the countries involved because they lacked the organization and vision needed to see them through. The same is true of the Anna Hazare movement, the initial fire of which was fueled by the frustration that ordinary Indians felt with the rot and corruption in the system. The fire died a natural death after it became clear that Anna's convictions and principles alone were not enough to sustain and guide the movement. The movement's legacy may live on through the other leaders that it spawned, but that is fodder for another debate.

What these examples illustrate is that a trickle of opinion can grow quickly to become a torrent. In other words, the medium can create a movement. But it still requires on the ground planning, strong leadership and an overarching strategy to see real success.

At the individual level, we may disagree with certain posted views or accord more value to the views of certain friends. But, the very fact that

It can get even more ugly as you move beyond the sanitized safety of your circles and discover that the internet is not really a place for moderate opinion.

these opinions originate from within our network may allow us to entertain them with a greater degree of tolerance and understanding. But the limits of this tolerance can be reached very quickly. While many online discussions are of the friendly variety – the semi-serious exchange of views you may find when friends get together over drinks or dinner or both – there are others that can border on hostile and aggressive.

It can get even more ugly as you move beyond the sanitized safety of your circles and discover that the internet is not really a place for moderate opinion. It harbors trolls and flammers who specialize in posting incendiary comments and is a space where successes are routinely belittled and failures just as regularly exaggerated. There are organized groups that target those who disagree with them as well as governments that try to keep sentiments from being shared too freely.

Which brings us to the conclusion of this analysis: yes, public opinion can be shaped by everything that is shared, viewed and propagated online. But, at the individual level, opinion can also be threatened, manipulated and – if all else fails – suppressed.

...public opinion may be going the way of religion with organized groups demonstrating high levels of group think.



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ALTERPOINT

OBSERVATIONS AT THE JUNCTION OF LIFE AND ART

Scoring With Fallacy

The many ways in which we pepper our arguments with fallacies and get away with it.

Debate coaches will tell you that the best place to start if you want to poke holes in an opponent's argument is to go after the fallacies in it. That means scouring it for faulty assumptions, flawed logic, and more.

In his treatise on the subject titled 'Sophistical Refutations', Aristotle listed thirteen types of material and verbal fallacies prevalent in arguments. More than 1,600 years after he laid them out in this manner, many of these still muddy our premises and render our conclusions shaky.

We continue to use them with fervor because they can actually be very effective. In fact, fallacy is often the hook on which many arguments are hung and won – and convincingly, at that.

The most pervasive one may be ad hominem – a strategy under which one attacks the character or credibility of a person in order to undermine their story.

If the movies are to be believed, this is a common tactic in legal or criminal defense. In many a riveting courtroom drama, a star prosecution



witness is dragged through difficult questioning regarding her lifestyle, past run-ins with the law and more, all with a view to destroying her credibility and diluting her testimony.

A closely related fallacy is called 'tu quoque', Latin for 'you too', and apparently inspired by Julius Caesar's dying reprimand of Brutus. It exists in responding to an attack by accusing the attacker of similar missteps or errors. Politicians use this all the time. A party usually counters the opposition's critique of its record by bringing up all the ways that the latter has also stumbled.

In fact, political debate the world over is riddled with examples of fallacies. Pinning down a politician for a straight answer is never easy even in normal times. But during election season, when the stakes are raised, the air rings with all manner of logical fallacies from straw men to red herrings, creating a slippery atmosphere designed for dodging the real question.

Often, these sound bites are recognized for the necessary noise and din that accompany election campaigns. For example, the BJP's charges against the incumbent government follow the classic 'post hoc ergo propter hoc' fallacy which, in essence translates into: If something happens after something else, the previous event must be responsible for the more recent one.

The crux of the BJP's argument then is that the country's recent economic woes are necessarily a result of the government's policies merely because the former followed the latter in the chronology of events. Under this reasoning, other factors that could also have contributed to this state of affairs, including global economic developments, are completely discounted. It is a fallacious stance in the technical sense but it is one that every political challenger employs, often with good results.

Politicians also often resort to the 'straw man', a slightly more questionable tactic in which the opponent's statement is deliberately twisted or re-interpreted in order to push them against a wall. Mitt Romney did this, during the 2012 US presidential campaign when he said at a rally: "[President Obama] said something ... which really reveals what he thinks about our country, about our people...he said this, 'If you've got a business, you didn't build that, somebody else made that happen.' "

That, of course, was not a completely accurate representation of Obama's remark but by separating it from context, the Romney camp gained some ammunition to hurl at the other side in the weeks that followed.

Appeals – whether to emotion, tradition, or authority – are liberally used in the world of advertising. Ads that tug at the heartstrings are used to sell everything from soap to credit card services. Throw in a reunion of long separated friends, a prodigal son making his way home, a baby taking her first steps and ad makers know that they will have their audience hooked, tissues and all.

...the mere presence of a fallacy doesn't falsify the premise or negate the conclusion of an argument.

Tradition is often evoked in advertising as it is in other forms of media communication. The logic that something is sacrosanct and unquestionable because it has stood the test of time is an argument that we see in many ads. And, of course, celebrity endorsements are really a way to use a form of authority to establish the worth of a product or service, regardless of how tenuous this connection may be.

If these examples prove anything, it is that fallacy is closely woven into everyday statements and arguments. We can no more purge it from our lives than we can tell people to refer to a textbook before speaking. The positive aspect of all this is that the mere presence of a fallacy doesn't falsify the premise or negate the conclusion of an argument. It merely means that there are weaknesses in it that a watchful opponent can exploit. His or her ability to do that will determine the nature of the debate.

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Appeals – whether to emotion, tradition, or authority – are liberally used in the world of advertising.