

Lending our Voices to Public Discourse

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“Political questions are far too serious to be left to the politicians.” Hannah Arendt, one of America’s most creative 20th century philosophers and political theorists, wrote this memorable line in her 1968 book, *Men in Dark Times*. Despite the sound of it, Arendt’s statement was not a cry for any sort of mass populist movement.

Arendt used the line to lead into an essay praising Karl Jaspers, her mentor from graduate school at Germany’s Heidelberg University. Jaspers, in turn, is best known for his academic work in philosophy, but Arendt’s praise was not for his scholarship in that field either.

Instead, the tribute focused on Jaspers’ willingness to step out of academia to become a public spokesman after the collapse of Germany’s totalitarian National Socialist regime. In that role, Jaspers conveyed a humanistic understanding of the public interest that helped reorient the western parts of the defeated country toward forming a new democratic Federal Republic of Germany, also known as West Germany.

Writings like Arendt’s inspire us because we also seek to shine light on the public interest in a modest way. In July of 2011, we met with editors at the San Angelo *Standard Times* to propose a monthly article that would focus on stimulating thoughtful community discussion about the social problems facing the people of San Angelo and the Concho Valley.

We realized then and believe now that responsible public discourse is one of the keys to progress toward solving challenging social problems in the community. The *Standard Times* published the Initial Pathways to Progress on August 31, 2011. This, the 77th article in the series, reflects back to assess the work, and rededicate ourselves to its purpose.

In that initial article, we promised to focus on social problems that are “intractable to many citizens” because they “concern the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the youth, the unemployed, and the minority members of the community.” True to the intent, however, nearly all Pathways have presented problems faced by vulnerable groups in the community who often fall through the cracks of key community institutions.

Accordingly, several articles over the years focused on challenges faced by local schools and colleges in serving the community’s low income and minority children, youth, and young adults. Others featured difficulties in the health care system striving to serve the poor, the uninsured, and citizens suffering some of the most demanding chronic diseases and mental health problems. Numerous pieces probed issues of crime, violence and abuse in the community; while other columns dealt with access, fairness, and inequality issues in housing, employment, and the economic system.

Of course, some readers have reacted negatively, even with hostility, toward parts of the commentary we offered. One reader several years ago had a negative response to a report on data measuring extreme differences in quality of life between the city’s wealthy and poor neighborhoods. “Is this news,” the reader asked? Seeing the contrast between poverty and wealth as inevitable, the reader snapped, “What a waste of time and resources.”

Others have had more personal reactions by directing various allegations from the arsenal of conservative attack points for “liberal academics” who “dumb-down” the young minds of students using inferior science, false history, atheism, Darwinism, and communism in nefarious efforts to undermine the Constitution, Christianity, and hard-working Americans.

Interestingly, this type of scornful hissing in efforts to turn social problems into sinister plots orchestrated by evil forces illustrates what Hannah Arendt meant by “Dark Times.” The phrase was Arendt’s metaphorical way to refer to the shrinking of public discourse that takes place when authoritarian demagogues appeal to the deepest fears of citizens and prevent meaningful discussion of serious issues we all share in common.

Again, recalling Arendt’s essay, it is worth making note of some features of the public interest that Jaspers promoted in the shadows of the failed Nazi tyranny. For a new West German democracy to develop a rich public discourse, Jaspers identified several preconditions. Some were fundamental elements of democratic government such as the need for a constitutional framework enshrining human rights and imposing an ethical-legal order on the state.

The most relevant precondition from Jaspers for the veracity of public discourse in local communities like San Angelo is what he termed communicative freedom. This is a form of freedom that flows from citizens and the positive attitudes they hold toward one another rather than from the structure or apparatus of government. In a pure form, Jaspers saw communicative freedom as the process of community members arriving at mutual understanding on shared social problems and issues through open, honest, and informed discussion completely freed from the corrosive effects of big money, fear-mongering, and all types of manipulation of facts and truth.

Clearly, Jaspers’ communicative freedom represents the opposite of Arendt’s Dark Times. Just as the Dark Times under authoritarianism shrinks public discourse and turns citizens against one another, communicative freedom expands discourse and brings more people together in a snowball effect as integral parts of community solutions to shared problems.

Back in 2011, the same year we began writing *Pathways to Progress*, Lee Hamilton, former U.S. Representative from Indiana and Co-Chair of the 9/11 Commission, detected the consequences of Dark Times in our nation’s Capitol. Writing as director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University, Hamilton observed, “Incivility directly affects both the quality and the quantity of the hard work of governance. Along with the outright rudeness that often marks our public discourse, it makes it virtually impossible to reconcile opposing views and, therefore, to meet our civic challenges.”

Perhaps because the local issues are more directly stamped into shared daily experiences, public discourse in the San Angelo community has fortunately trended toward greater vitality. Since 2011, ASU’s Community Development Initiatives has been honored to contribute useful data and factual analysis to public discourse in areas such as affordable housing, public transportation, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, public education, workforce development, mental health, and public health. A more important development for the community during the same time is an increased degree of what Jaspers called communicative freedom in the leadership of San Angelo’s city and county agencies, schools and colleges, health and mental health organizations, and non-profit service establishments.

Sadly, since Lee Hamilton observed the growing incivility of public discourse in 2011, the grip

of Dark Times has gained strength and become more regular, if not normalized, at the national level. Thankfully, perhaps in response to the demise of national public discourse, more local leaders are discovering that “political questions are far too serious to be left to the politicians.”

In the spirit of communicative freedom, we look forward to any small part we may add to the public discourse of 2018.