Have ‘Political Persuaders’ Killed the Public Square?

Richard Cherwitz

Dec. 24, 2019

Richard Cherwitz (Photo: Contributed photo)

It no doubt is the case that the political landscape has changed significantly since Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. It also is true that these changes were occurring well before Trump and that he simply magnified and exploited them. This has prompted political analysts to lament that the “public square,” a shared place where historically open minded people came together to resolve problems, may no longer exist.

This observation seems to resonate with what some scholars in political science and communication suggest: that in politics today the traditional persuasion model may no longer be available or useful — a model that assumed Americans of all political stripes are open to changing their minds.

Unlike in earlier decades where there were only three television networks and the internet was in its infancy, people today rely more on social media and a wide array of pre-selected news
sources consonant with their views — something that exacerbates political polarization and renders the possibility of changing one’s opinions less possible.

What this indicates is that the process of persuasion in our current political culture is geared to “intensifying,” “reaffirming” and “validating” rather than “shifting” beliefs — a process focused primarily on “motivating” and “mobilizing” more than “changing.”

This hearkens back to portions of political science and communication professor Dan Nimmo’s model of persuasion delineated in his 1970 book "Political Persuaders." His model focused on the many different goals and strategies of political communication — including altering the beliefs of voters, motivating them to act on those beliefs, and mobilizing them to persuade others. I first studied Nimmo’s work as a graduate student in rhetoric at the University of Iowa and for many years used his model to help explain the rhetorical strategies and allocation of resources in political campaigns at all levels of government.

Assuming the public square no longer is available, however, in 2020 the usefulness and applicability of Nimmo’s analysis of persuasion must be rethought. This is far more than an academic issue. The questions for politicians, political analysts, as well as those of us who study communication, therefore, are: (1) If in fact the public square no longer exists, how can we resurrect this place that for centuries has been the hallmark of and essential to deliberative democracy and political persuasion? (2) Assuming that is not possible, how do we recalibrate Nimmo’s concepts of “motivating” and “mobilizing” to better explain and implement productive options for persuasion in our current political climate?

Answers to these questions not only might reshape academic theories of persuasion but could well determine how and whether America’s great experiment in democracy can function productively to address important issues and problems in the 21st century.

Richard Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin. He is a University of Iowa graduate with a BA in Political Science and History and a MA and PhD in Communication Studies.