If the Public Square of Persuasion Empties, Can Democracy Survive?

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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 communication suggest: that in politics today the traditional persuasion model is no longer available—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 preselected 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—one 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.

As a communication professor at the University of Texas at Austin, for many years I used Nimmo’s work to help explain to students the rhetorical strategies and allocation of resources in political campaigns at all levels of government. I also used it as a political consultant to assist candidates running for office.

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.

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