

# Media Dialogue: Perceiving and Addressing Community Problems

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*Scholars have long debated the role of media and discussion in encouraging tolerance and engagement in politics and community. Theories range from the dismissal of effects to the assertion of powerful influences, and from claims of “media malaise” to the promise of “virtuous circles.” Of course, results from research exploring these issues vary by context and methods of study. Yet most past research is plagued by at least 1 of 2 methodological weaknesses: the difficulty of assessing causality in cross-sectional survey designs and/or of attributing the observed effects to information gains rather than to the deliberative process itself. Acknowledging these weaknesses, we rely on data from a quasi-experimental study examining a media dialogue effort. In this study, randomly selected public television members and partners were recruited into various forms of “real world” exposure and discussion about the documentary film Two Towns of Jasper. This documentary highlights the divisions in*

*Jasper, Texas following the racial killing of James Byrd, Jr., who was dragged to his death behind a pickup truck by 3 White men. Controlling for a wide range of preexisting differences, including past political discussion and participation, we compared individuals who had different experiences of the intervention. Results reveal that media consumption was positively related with willingness to discuss the issue of race and participate politically around this issue. Above and beyond media consumption, participation in a heterogeneous citizen's forum that discussed the documentary contributed to awareness of racism, as well as increased willingness to further discuss and participate on this issue. This article highlights the importance of citizen dialogue in combination with media consumption for engagement, and suggests an alternative to forums such as citizen juries, study circles, and deliberative polls.*

Deliberation has become a central theme in political communication research, especially work focused on collective decision-making and citizen engagement. Yet many of the efforts to test the effects of deliberation have produced mixed results, with the benefits of deliberation often confined to homogeneous groups (Mansbridge 1983), and the consequences often extending to disengagement from politics and distrust of government (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 2002; for a general review of this literature see Mendelberg, 2002; Walsh, 2003b). Building on the work of Walsh (2003a), this article explores an alternative approach to citizen reflection and informed opinion that shares the goals of deliberative democracy theorists but offers a revised methodology.

Our approach, which we refer to as *media dialogue*, shares some commonality with intergroup dialogue programs. These intergroup projects, typified by efforts such as “study circles” and other civic-renewal efforts, have been used to address a variety of public issues, particularly race relations (Sirrianni & Friedland, 2001). Study circles usually bring a diverse group of 8 to 10 participants together over multiple sessions to engage in facilitated discussion. In contrast, the *media dialogue* approach we examine brings a much larger group together for a much shorter duration, and encourages discussion about media content. This media content provides both a resource for talk and a safe way to offer perspectives during conversations about controversial issues.

The potency of combining media and discussion is not a new idea—it dates back to Tarde (1901/1989). Conversation spurred by media content has been linked with engagement in various aspects of civic life, with the effects of news consumption largely mediated by political talk (McLeod et al., 1996, 1999). Unfortunately, most of this research is plagued by one of two major methodological weaknesses: the difficulty of assessing causality in cross-sectional survey designs, and the challenge of differentiating between the positive effects of dialogue and the benefits of media exposure and information gains.

To address these limitations, this study tests the potency of a *media dialogue* intervention by relying on data from a quasi-experimental study examining public

discussion about a PBS documentary. In this study, randomly selected public television members and partners were recruited to participate. Some were asked to attend a media dialogue session focused around the documentary film *Two Towns of Jasper*, while others merely saw the program; a third group of others did neither. The documentary, which began airing on PBS in February 2003, highlights the divisions in Jasper, Texas following the racial killing of James Byrd, Jr., who was dragged to his death behind a pickup truck by three White men. Participants from each condition were then surveyed. Controlling for a wide range of preexisting differences, including past civic participation, we compared effects of media consumption and citizen dialogue.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of interpersonal communication in politics has been empirically documented since the early Columbia studies. According to *The People's Choice*, group contact reinforces voting and attitude stability (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). Stability reinforcement occurs when contacts are homogeneous, which implies that change is significantly determined by the heterogeneity of interpersonal contacts. But then what are the processes that lead to change? The answer offered by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) was threefold: opinion leaders, who mediate between mass media and other people in “their” group; the “crystallization” of opinion that comes from group interaction; and the homogenization of opinion structure by political campaigns.

Opinion leaders—that is, group members who serve as information gatekeepers—are highlighted as sources of personal influence, and a two-step flow of communication is proposed. According to the two-step flow theory, ideas from the mass media are picked up by opinion leaders, and flow from them to less active or interested sections of the population. Personal opinions and attitudes can be considered by-products of interpersonal relations and the communication they produce (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Drawing on small group theory, Verba (1961) likewise contends that understanding the political process and leadership requires researchers to consider the role of face-to-face encounters. Groups that meet face to face influence the political behavior of members through socialization and pressures to conform. In short, the importance of interpersonal communication is not a new discovery. How it matters, however, is still an open question.

### Discussion to Deliberation

The concept of interpersonal discussion is a broad construct that can be understood as a continuum that includes casual conversation (Scheufele, 2000), dialogue

(Walsh, 2003a), and deliberation (Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000). In all cases interpersonal communication becomes political communication when potential political consequences arise from the interaction. What differentiates among conversation, dialogue, and deliberation is the increasing degree of ruled processes (political formality) attached to the interaction and the explicit focus on decision-making while deliberating.

Casual conversations can be understood as the most informal of the interactions. However, this does not mean that they are completely unregulated or without political consequence. In everyday conversations information is exchanged, identities developed, and mobilization opportunities materialized (Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele, Nisbet, Brossard, & Nisbet, 2004; Walsh, 2003b).

A dialogue would represent an intermediate form of interpersonal communication that is not centered on decision-making, is not necessarily open to all, and where all views are not necessarily present. Yet dialogues have a purposeful and reflective component by bringing together heterogeneous participants to learn about each other and fostering crosscutting communication (Walsh, 2003a).

Deliberation, on the far end of this continuum, is the most regulated or formal process. Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) identify seven minimum requirements for deliberation: publicity, equality, rationality, institutional support, complete information, collective decision making, and argumentation based on general principles that appeal to the common good rather than to self-interest (see also Mansbridge, 1999; Walsh, 2003a). Discussion among citizens across all of these levels of formality has been shown to be beneficial for civil society, by creating an active, engaged, and informed polity.

In particular, political talk has been found to contribute to political knowledge (McLeod et al., 1999; Scheufele, 2000), to bolster cognitive complexity, and to encourage community engagement (see McLeod et al., 2001). These effects and others, including heightened tolerance, appear to be particularly likely when discussion happens through crosscutting social networks (Mutz, 2002). Through these interactions people learn others' opinion repertoires and learn of opportunities for collective action (Gamson, 1992; Tarrow, 1998). In a context of everyday life, Walsh (2003b) shows how casual conversation helps people clarify their social identities and then use these identities to analyze and organize political information.

More formal or deliberative discussion yields similar, although considerably stronger, results. Gastil and Dillard (1999), for example, provide evidence that face-to-face deliberation increases participants' schema integration and reduces attitudinal uncertainty. Fishkin's (1995) deliberative polls found that participants' attitudes are clarified through deliberative discussion, yielding decisions concerning public policy outcomes that focus on the public good. Experimental evidence confirms that deliberation produces more equitable distribution of resources and evaluations of process fairness (Sulkin & Simon, 2001). In short,

deliberation enhances consensus and peaceful conflict resolution, encourages tolerance, and makes citizens more informed, engaged, and active (Mendelberg, 2002; Mendelberg & Oleske, 2000; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Clearly deliberation has many advantages over casual political conversation, although it also has its limitations.

### Potential of Media Dialogue

Despite the expected benefits that have been surveyed, scholars have also pointed out some of the potential problems of deliberation. Inequalities that affect political participation (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) also affect deliberation. As Sanders (1997) notes in his study of jury deliberation, people with higher social status tend to be more persuasive and therefore have a disproportionate amount of influence in the decision-making process. More troubling, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) suggest that deliberation may actually increase political apathy by making it clear to citizens how complex and removed an issue is from them. Furthermore, Mansbridge (1983) suggests that deliberation only works among people with homogenous interests, because among those with heterogeneous perspectives, such interactions maximize conflict and break down the deliberative processes.

In response to these limitations, we advance the notion of *media dialogue*. This term refers to civic dialogue efforts structured around media content, much in the same way that a book club meets to discuss a novel or biography. The use of the media as a springboard for discussion has tremendous potential, as indicated by past research. Studies relate surveillance uses of media directly with community integration (McLeod et al., 1996), civic engagement (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001), and political participation (McLeod et al., 1999), arguing that media provide informational resources, opposing viewpoints, and mobilizing information much like political conversation (Mutz, 2002). Evidence accumulating under the rubric of communication mediation (McLeod, Scheufele & Moy, 1999; McLeod et al., 2001; Shah, et al., 2004; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001) suggests that news media have indirect effects on participation through citizen communication, which are spurred by gains in knowledge and efficacy.

Political knowledge matters because it enables citizens to “[discern] their individual and group interests, [connect] their interests to broader notions of the public good, and [express] their views through political participation” (Delli-Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 1). The effects of an informed citizenry are increased participation, increased rationality of decision-making (discerning one’s own political interests and connecting those interests with participation), and political tolerance. Beyond cognitive gains, news media use motivates people to participate more through feelings of increased personal efficacy in the political system (McLeod et al., 1999). We believe that all of these effects should be enhanced through citizen dialogue. This counters traditional views that mass and

interpersonal communication are competitive influences (Chaffee & Mutz, 1988). Instead, we emphasize the complementary nature of these factors, especially when media content is thorough, balanced, and informative, and discussion networks are crosscutting and contain the possibility of disagreement (Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995).

Since the early Columbia studies it has been clear that there is a high degree of homogeneity in primary groups (family, personal associations), that most political discussion takes place among people of similar characteristics, and that such discussion is characterized more by agreement than disagreement (see Berelson et al., 1954). Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt (2002) found that 70% of the public interacts with discussion networks that are homogenous. In contrast, in this study we propose that through public dialogue among heterogeneous groups, the democratic potential of a community is enhanced. This builds on Schudson's (1999) contention that for conversation to be the soul of democracy, it needs to happen among heterogeneous groups in a ruled environment.

## HYPOTHESES

Past research regarding deliberation suggests that when heterogeneous groups discuss, people may learn more about why they hold the positions they hold. Rather than reaching consensus, under these conditions ideological polarization can occur. Yet if we only discuss with people who already think as we do, it seems that achieving the conditions necessary for democratic debate and reflection is highly unlikely.

Based on this previous research, we explore the processes and effects of media dialogue. In this situation, heterogeneous groups debate a topic introduced to them through informative media content. Using media content as a starting point for the discussion increases the likelihood of positive outcomes. Unlike the race study circles examined by Walsh (2003a) or the town hall meetings documented by Mansbridge (1983), both of which did not yield many of the expected benefits of deliberation, the use of media as a springboard provides individuals with information they might otherwise avoid. In this way, media works as an expert that provides information resources in the context of deliberative polls, although this transfer of resources is done in a familiar and nonthreatening manner. In addition, media content may help shape the terrain of discussion and provide a safe means for asserting contrary perspectives while debating controversial issues.

In our study, as will be explained in the Method section, *media dialogue* participants are initially shown the television documentary. This exposes participants to a relatively objective external source of information, as well as personal accounts provided by members of other racial groups, instead of promoting discussion based exclusively on personal experience or among closed networks of

like-minded friends and associates. We expect this dynamic to generate positive outcomes at the level of awareness, future discussion, and future participation.

Both media content and interpersonal discussion can produce increases in knowledge. Therefore, we expect that being exposed to media content that explores a case of racial intolerance will heighten people's awareness of racial issues in their community. In addition, we believe that viewing this content in conjunction with an opportunity to discuss the issue with a diverse group of community members will also promote awareness. Thus, we offer the following hypotheses:

*H1a: Participants engaging in a media dialogue will increase their awareness of racism in the community.*

*H1b: Participants exposed to race-related media content will increase their awareness of racism in the community.*

Because higher levels of information facilitate further talk on an issue, we expect that people who engage in a media dialogue on race or are exposed to media content regarding this issue will be more likely to engage in future discussion about this issue with friends and acquaintances. Thus, we offer the following hypotheses:

*H2a: Participants engaging in a media dialogue will increase their willingness to discuss racial issues.*

*H2b: Participants exposed to race-related media content will increase their willingness to discuss racial issues.*

A large body of research confirms that interpersonal discussion and surveillance media use are tied to greater civic participation. We expect that people who are exposed to interpersonal interactions in the form of media dialogue on racial issues will be particularly likely to participate around this issue. We also expect to find positive effects for program exposure. For these reasons we offer the following hypotheses:

*H3a: Participants engaging in a media dialogue will increase their willingness to participate on racial issues.*

*H3b: Participants exposed to race-related media content will increase their willingness to participate on racial issues.*

Furthermore, we are interested in establishing whether our media dialogue approach is a more powerful intervention than mere exposure to televised content. To make the case for an intervention such as the one proposed in this article, it is important to establish the effects of a media dialogue. However, if equivalent effects

can be obtained from just being exposed to media content, the case for media dialogue is reduced

Therefore we pose the following research question:

*RQ1: Will participants that engage in a media dialogue increase their awareness and willingness to discuss and participate on this issue beyond the levels of those that are solely exposed to the program?*

## METHOD

To assess the effects of media programming and citizen dialogue activities, we conducted a quasi-experimental field study in the Madison area. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Wisconsin Public Television (WPT) sponsored the study of citizen dialogue activities related to the premiere of *Two Towns of Jasper*. Working with the National Center for Outreach, WPT hosted “Coming Together,” a special preview screening of the *P. O. V.* documentary followed by a facilitated discussion. This event occurred just prior to the broadcast premiere of *Two Towns* and was supported by partner Web sites and public and commercial television programming, such as a PBS Town Hall meeting with Ted Koppel, an episode of *Oprah*, and ABC News *Nightline*.

Assessing the effects of these efforts is a tricky business. The people who come to such citizen dialogue events or seek out related content are most likely different from those who choose to avoid such events. To minimize these potential differences and to get a closer look at the effects of media dialogue, 3,000 public television members (along with members of advisory groups such as the NAACP, Equal Opportunities Commission, the Boys and Girls Club, and Centro Hispano) were randomly selected and invited to *either* attend the “Coming Together” event or watch the broadcast premiere.

More than 300 people attended the event, which included a preview screening of the documentary as well as a facilitated discussion about race and diversity issues in the community. Between the preview screening and the 90-minute facilitated discussion, participants could mingle with representatives from local groups that were working to end racial intolerance. The documentary itself dealt with the gruesome death of a Black man in the town of Jasper, Texas. Two film crews, one White and one Black, documented the views of the respective races within the town during the trials of the three White men accused of the killing. At the event, participants were divided into groups and given a series of questions regarding race, diversity, and prejudice within the community. Many participants shared stories of experiences with racism in the community. Intermittently, representatives from the small breakout groups were asked to express the thoughts shared within their small groups to the other 300 participants.



Shortly after the event and the broadcast premiere, a survey concerning media, race, and community engagement was mailed to all 3,000 members, along with members of partner organizations who participated in the “Coming Together” event. By inviting only a portion of this population, self-selection factors were decreased. The use of public television members also increases the similarity of the three comparison groups: (a) those who participated in the media dialogue, (b) those who encountered *Two Towns* as media content but did not participate in a facilitated dialogue, and (c) those who did not encounter *Two Towns*.

Nearly one-third of the original sample completed the survey, resulting in 925 survey responses. The survey included several measures of demographics and past behavior to further control for remaining differences between participant groups, allowing for a more conservative additional test of quasi-experimental effects.

## Measures

*Criterion variables.* As suggested in the hypotheses section, we have three criterion variables: awareness of racism in the community, willingness to discuss racial issues, and willingness to participate in civic activities regarding racial issues. *Awareness of racism* was measured by asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following two statements: “There is more racism in Madison than I would like to admit,” and “Citizens in the Madison community are sensitive to race issues.” Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*definitely agree*) to 7 (*definitely disagree*). An index was created by averaging scores across two measures ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ , interitem  $r = .21$ ). Scores for the first question were reversed, so that higher scores indicate a greater perception of racism in the community

The measure of *willingness to discuss racial issues* consisted of two questions gauging how likely respondents were to participate in the following activities: “Discuss issues of race with family or friends” and “Discuss issues of race with co-workers or acquaintances.” Again, a 7-point scale was used from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). An index was constructed by averaging the scores from these two items ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ , interitem  $r = .70$ ).

*Willingness to participate* was composed of six items assessing how likely respondents are to participate in the following activities in the context of racial issues: “Learn about opportunities to work on a community project,” “Contact an organization to do volunteer work,” “Contact a news organization or call in program,” “Attend a political or public meeting, presentation, or rally,” “Circulate a petition for a public issue,” and “Contact a local public official.” Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). An index was created by averaging scores from these measures ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Independent variables.** Two independent variables were employed: media dialogue participation and exposure to the broadcast of *Two Towns of Jasper*. *Media dialogue participation* was measured by asking respondents whether they participated in the preview event and discussion forum. A total of 10% of respondents to the survey ( $n = 92$ ) attended the event, a proportion consistent with the response rate.

Media exposure was measured by asking respondents whether they had watched *Two Towns of Jasper* on WPT. A total of 26% of respondents to the survey ( $n = 239$ ) had watched the program on television.

**Control variables.** We employed a variety of control variables to test the effects of event participation. Although we had taken care in sending invitations to view the program or attend the dialogue on random assignment, we had no final control over who came or who watched, so self-selection of participants is a possible explanatory factor. When predicting our criterion variables, three key variables were considered as controls: modern racism, past political discussion, and past participation.

*Modern racism* was measured by asking respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following five statements: "There are times when racial profiling is acceptable for police practice," "The confederate flag helps preserve Southern heritage," "Property values tend to decline when minorities move into a neighborhood," "Racial diversity helps the health of the community," and "I have friends from various races and ethnicities." Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*definitely agree*) to 7 being (*definitely disagree*). An index was created by averaging scores across three measures ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .60$ ). Scores for the first three questions were reversed, so that a higher score indicates racist attitudes.

Past political discussion consisted of two items measuring how often during the past 6 months respondents had engaged in the following activities: "Discussed politics with family and friends" and "Discussed politics with coworkers or acquaintances." A 7-point scale was used for each item from 1 (*very rarely*) to 7 (*very often*). An index of past political discussion was created by averaging scores across measures ( $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ , interitem  $r = .73$ ).

The measure of past civic participation consisted of six questions asking how often during the past 6 months respondents had engaged in the following: "Did volunteer work," "Worked on a community project," "Contacted a news organization or call-in program," "Attended a political meeting, rally, or speech," "Circulated a petition for a candidate or issue," and "Contacted a local political official." A 7-point scale was used for each item from 1 (*very rarely*) to 7 (*very often*). An index was constructed by averaging scores from these items ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha = .73$ ).

In addition, we included measures of general trust, a variable that has been considered central to civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). Respondents indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “Most people are trustworthy” and “Most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance.” Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale from 1 (*definitely agree*) to 7 (*definitely disagree*). An index was created by averaging scores from these measures ( $M = 5.10, SD = 1.03, \text{Interitem } r = .34$ ).

In addition, five demographic variables typically related to participation and awareness of racial problems were also considered: age, income, gender, race (a dummy variable with non-White coded 1), and party identification. Preliminary analysis (not shown) indicates that the types of people who attended the “Coming Together” event differed markedly from those who merely viewed the program or avoided it altogether. They were significantly more likely to be women, younger, lower income, non-White, ideologically liberal, racially tolerant, and politically outspoken and active in the past. Thus, even with the uniformity of the pool from which participants were recruited, self-selection apparently produced substantial differences. This confirms the suspicions of some that the relationship between participation and media use may run from past participation to information-seeking behaviors, and confirms the need for experimental and quasi-experimental studies like the one presented here.

## RESULTS

To test the hypothesized relationships, we ran a series of regressions analyzing awareness of racial issues, willingness to discuss racial issues, and willingness to participate. As an initial test of H1, H2, and H3, we ran regression analyses in which both quasi-experimental conditions predicted our criterion variables (Table 1). As a final test of our hypotheses, and to account for possible differences due to self-selection, controls were introduced (Table 2). In the final models, past behaviors (participation and discussion), orientations (racism, trust, party identification), and demographics (gender, race, age, education and income)

TABLE 1  
The Effects of Media Dialogue and Media Exposure

	<i>Racism Awareness</i>	<i>Willingness to Discuss</i>	<i>Willingness to Participate</i>
Media dialogue	.186***	.199***	.306***
Media exposure	.085**	.163***	.112***
Total R <sup>2</sup> (%)	4.5	7.3	11.3

Note. Entries are standardized regression coefficients; Significance levels: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 925$

TABLE 2  
The Effects of Media Dialogue and Media Exposure after Controls

	<i>Racism Awareness</i>	<i>Willingness to Discuss</i>	<i>Willingness to Participate</i>
<b>Control variables</b>			
Age	-.030	-.133***	-.143***
Income	-.059	-.010	-.012
Sex (female = 1)	.088**	-.032	.010
Education	.105**	.026	.008
Race (non-White = 1)	.047	.042	.007
Party ID	.043	.001	.043
Modern racism	-.314***	-.120***	-.113***
General trust	-.096**	.035	-.032
Past political discussion	-.037	.407***	.139***
Past participation	.025	.085**	.498***
<i>Inc. R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	<i>17.7</i>	<i>33</i>	<i>46.5</i>
<b>Media and Dialogue</b>			
Media dialogue	.076*	.085*	.120***
Media exposure	.025	.098**	.056*
<i>Inc. R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	<i>0.6</i>	<i>1.6</i>	<i>1.6</i>
<i>Total R<sup>2</sup> (%)</i>	<i>18.3</i>	<i>34.6</i>	<i>48.1</i>

*Note.* Entries are standardized regression coefficients; Significance levels: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 925$

were included in the regression as an initial control block, with the subsequent introduction of media dialogue and media exposure.<sup>1</sup>

### Awareness of Race Issues

In our initial test, the media dialogue condition contributed positively to awareness of racism in the community ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as to the media exposure only condition ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Overall these variables accounted for 4.5% of the variance on racism awareness and offer initial support for H1a and H1b.

For our final model, control variables were introduced. Among these, several variables were significant predictors of awareness of racism in the community. Specifically, those who display less racism ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and less social trust ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were more likely to be aware of the problem of racism in the area. In contrast, past discussion ( $\beta = .04$ , *n. s.*) and participation ( $\beta = -.03$ , *n. s.*) were found to have no significant effect. In terms of the other control variables, respondents who are female ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and more educated ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ )

<sup>1</sup>Following the suggestion of our anonymous reviewers, a model including interaction terms for past behavior (participation and discussion) and participating in the media dialogue were tested without significant results.

were more likely to be aware of racial problems. Overall, these control variables accounted for 17.7% of incremental variance ( $p < .001$ ).

After controls, the effects of forum attendance remained positive ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $p < .05$ ), whereas related media use had no significant effect ( $\beta = .03$ , n. s.). These variables accounted for 0.6% of incremental variance. Overall, these results provide support for H1a but not for H1b.

### Willingness to Discuss

A separate regression analysis tested the effects of these variables on the willingness to discuss racial issues. In the initial test of H2a and H2b, the media dialogue condition ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the media exposure only condition ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were both positive predictors of willingness to discuss. Overall these variables accounted for 7.3% of the variance on willingness to discuss racial issues; the results offer initial support for H2a and H2b.

For our final model, controls were introduced. The control variables, including past behaviors (discussion and participation) and orientations (racism and trust), accounted for 33% of the incremental variance of willingness to discuss racial issues, with past discussion ( $\beta = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) making the strongest contribution. Also, respondents who were more participatory ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and less racist ( $\beta = -.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were more willing to discuss racial issues. Age was negatively related to the criterion ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ), whereas gender, race, education, and income were found to have no significant effect.

Even after controlling for these blocking variables, the effects of media dialogue participation and *Two Towns* media consumption were found to contribute significantly to willingness to discuss (incremental  $R^2 = 1.6\%$ ). Those who attended the forum ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or watched the program ( $\beta = .10$ ,  $p < .01$ ) displayed greater willingness to discuss racial issues in the future. These results provide strong support for H2a and H2b.

### Willingness to Participate

To examine willingness to participate, we ran another regression, paralleling our analysis of awareness of racism and willingness to discuss racial issues. In the initial test of H3a and H3b, the media dialogue condition ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the media exposure only condition ( $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were both significant predictors of willingness to participate. Overall these variables accounted for 11.3% of the variance on willingness to participate, providing initial support for H3a and H3b.

In the final model to test the effects of media dialogue on participation, controls were introduced. The first block including past behaviors and orientations accounted for 46.5% of the incremental variance in the willingness to participate, with past participation ( $\beta = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ ) making the strongest contribution. In ad-

dition, individuals who discussed more ( $\beta = .14, p < .001$ ) and were less racist ( $\beta = -.11, p < .001$ ) were more likely to express a willingness to participate. Among demographic variables, only age had a significant effect. Young people were more likely to participate in the future ( $\beta = -.14, p < .001$ ).

After controls, the effects of media dialogue participation and *Two Towns* media use explained another 1.6% of the variance in willingness to participate. Individuals who attended the forum ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ) and those who watched the program on television ( $\beta = .06, p < .01$ ) were more willing to participate in the future. These results provide support for H3a and H3b.

In sum, our results indicate that media dialogue participation played a significant role in awareness of the problem, willingness to discuss it further, and ultimately participate around this issue. Media exposure, on the other hand, was significantly related to willingness to discuss and participate around the issue, but did not raise awareness of the problem.<sup>2</sup>

### Further analysis

Having established that participating in a media dialogue had a positive effect on the criterion variables, we examined whether this effect was significantly different from the effects of mere exposure to the television show. Under both the dialogue and exposure conditions, individuals viewed the documentary program. Therefore, any differences between the influences of the two conditions would be attributable to the additional facilitated discussion that took place as part of the outreach project.

To test this proposition and to answer research question 1, we performed a series of *f* tests (not shown) that compared the models, including different effects for the two conditions with restricted models that required the two factors to have the same coefficients. The test comparing these models thus considers the null hypothesis that the two factors have the same coefficient, with significant results implying the coefficients are significantly different. For issue awareness the difference between media dialogue ( $\beta = .07$ ) and media exposure ( $\beta = .03$ ) was significant at the 95% confidence level ( $f = 4.69$ ). Regarding willingness to discuss the issue in the future, the relative contributions of media dialogue ( $\beta = .09$ ) and media exposure ( $\beta = .10$ ) were not significantly different ( $f = 2.64$ ). Finally, for variance explained in willingness to participate, the media dialogue ( $\beta = .12$ ) and media exposure ( $\beta = .06$ ) contributions were significantly different at the 99% confidence level ( $f = 17.82$ ). In short, participating in a media dialogue had a significantly stronger effect on racism awareness and willingness to participate than did merely viewing the documentary on PBS.

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<sup>2</sup>Parallel analyses were performed only for the White population of our sample with identical results.

## DISCUSSION

Our analysis of this unique quasi-experimental study again demonstrates that informational use of mass media works to encourage discussion and participation. What is new and most intriguing here is the potential of media dialogue—the combination of relevant media content and a structured discussion—to produce these effects after controlling for a host of variables. In fact, media dialogue proves to have a greater effect than content by itself on measures of issue awareness and willingness to participate.

Participation in the “Coming Together” event had a range of effects, both localizing and amplifying the issue of race relations. As a result, participants became more aware of the problem, more likely to discuss the issue with others in the future, and more likely to participate in community activities aimed at addressing the issue. These data provide stronger evidence than many past studies that both media content and dialogue are the cause of these changes. Although this is a quasi-experimental study with its concomitant issues of self-selection, considerable efforts were made to draw respondents who were invited into different conditions from a relatively homogeneous pool of people. Furthermore, our analysis controlled for a range of factors that might explain self-selection into different conditions—variables that accounted for a considerable amount of variance in the criterion variables. Nonetheless, we observed clear effects of the media dialogue intervention above and beyond these blocking variables and media use. These data, in our view, support the claim that media dialogue has positive effects on community engagement.

The dialogue component of the media dialogue seems to enhance the benefits obtained from mere exposure to media content. The comparison of relative effects showed that, in two out of three cases the media dialogue had a greater impact on the dependent variables than that of media exposure. Furthermore, the dialogue reported in this research did not produce any of the negative consequences that have been hypothesized for deliberation among heterogeneous groups. Participants in the media dialogue not only gained new insight on the community, but they were also more likely to discuss the issue than nonparticipants, and more likely to participate than both nonparticipants and those who only viewed the media content.

Of course, the effects of media content itself should not be ignored. Exposure to the program was related to increased interest in discussion and participation. The data did not support H1b—that media exposure would raise awareness of the problem in the community. This may stem from the fact that the case presented had occurred in a different community, making discussion with local community members necessary to “bring the program home.” This suggests media dialogues may be an effective means of localizing issues.

The results suggest media dialogue projects are superior to simple exposure to media content. We believe that dialogue projects may offer distinct advan-

tages over other forms of discussion as well. The use of media content as a starting point may not only provide a resource for discussion, but may also make people aware of alternative viewpoints and this may render these perspectives more acceptable in subsequent discussion. Individuals who might not otherwise have shared their views may feel more comfortable and confident making claims that reflect those presented in media content, but are drawn from personal experience.

The research reported here has a considerable advantage over previous research on deliberation. By being able to distinguish media exposure from media dialogue, we are able to show that the dialogue component matters significantly. Past experiments in deliberation have often included exposure to information as part of the project, but failed to distinguish information effects from discussion effects, lumping both factors together.

Nevertheless, this research has some limitations. Most notably, our research measures the intention to participate in the future rather than the actual behavior. Despite Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) contention that there is a high correlation between intention and performance, and the argument made by McLeod et al., (1999) that intention is a surrogate for genuine participation, future research should examine actual behavior relying on panel designs rather than recall or participatory intent.

A second limitation of our study is that our results are from a quasi-experiment that is confined both geographically and topically. It may be that the findings we observe are particular to Madison, Wisconsin. Because they come from a community widely regarded as a progressive bastion, our respondents may have been more open to learning about community issues, as well as particularly surprised to learn that fellow members of the community found it to be racially hostile. Would residents in other communities respond similarly? That is a question that requires further research to answer. Future studies should also test whether media dialogue works for issues other than the one studied here. There are certainly documentaries and longer-form news programs on topics such as the environment, assisted suicide, gay rights, and women's issues that could be used as a springboard for discussion. A more strict experimental study could be constructed around one of these issues. A study that incorporates nondichotomous measures and is sensitive enough to capture change over time, would go a long way toward addressing some of the limitations of our study.

Nonetheless, the consistent pattern of effects of media dialogue on our three criterion variables—one perceptual (issue awareness), one relational (discussion in social networks), and one behavioral (action in the community)—suggests that this approach has the potential to serve as an important tool in the arsenal of politicians, media elites, and community groups interested in encouraging civic renewal.



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