



After the Fact | Beyond Polarization: Talking It Out

Originally aired December 1, 2023

Total runtime: 20:15

TRANSCRIPT

Heidi Hernandez Gatty, advisor, education initiatives, Dialectic: If we can see forward to common purpose, then we are better able to find a solution, find a compromise that maybe is better than if either one side had their entire way.

Dan LeDuc, host, "After the Fact" podcast: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. On this season of our podcast, we're talking about political polarization in the United States. There are big, seemingly insurmountable reasons that explain why we have become so polarized. One of those is the rise of social media. That brings us to our data point for this episode: 79% of Americans, according to Pew Research Center, believe access to the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions.

The genie can't be put back in the bottle, so we have to figure out how to use it in better ways. And real dialogue can still take place; we can still talk things out. In fact, there are folks out there showing and teaching ways to do that. Eli Tillemann and Heidi Hernandez Gatty are two of them. We start this episode with Heidi Hernandez Gatty. She is an advisor on education initiatives at Dialectic—she tells us more about what that is.

Dan LeDuc: I've been reading about your organization, and there's this discussion of the real world and there's the virtual world. And boy, has that changed over the last couple of generations. And how has that, how has that dichotomy influenced how we communicate with each other?

Heidi Hernandez Gatty: It's influenced it quite dramatically. These are cognitive shocks that we've experienced in the 21st century. So our minds are not designed to take in the kind of information in the way that we are right now. That IRL, in real life communication we have been honing over millennia.

And these ways in which we are intaking a volume of information. This ongoing barrage has fundamentally altered how it is that we communicate with each other. If you remember the scene in the movie "Wall-E," where humans come off of the ship and we're not really structured anymore to walk on the Earth, but very quickly, we know that we belong here. It's going to take us just a little bit of time to reconnect to how we do this. So in the same way, we've lost some of our cognitive tools to be able to engage with each other one on one.



Dan LeDuc: The definition, of course, of Dialectic is the art of discussing the truth of opinions. And we are in a polarized time in our nation, and so I want to know what Dialectic does.

Heidi Hernandez Gatty: Well, Dialectic's primary initial purpose is actually not to facilitate dialogue between people who disagree politically, but to give us all a framework and an awareness to understand the neurobiological and environmental roots of our own habits of disagreement. Then we can be equipped with the tools to adapt best practices for difficult conversations so that when we do get into those disagreements, we can have good arguments and disagree constructively. Ultimately, as our co-founder Niels Rosenquist notes, we aim to help people change their cognitive diets by giving them better awareness of and options in our digital ecosystems.

Dan LeDuc: Can you tell us more about Dialectic's approach?

Heidi Hernandez Gatty: Dialectic's framework is based on the idea that our human minds have been placed in a world of information and communication that we're not evolved to, and we're not designed for. The people in "Wall-E" didn't get off the ship and try to start jogging.

So when we start to try to engage in actual conversation online, it's really difficult to do so, because we haven't actually had the experience of doing that necessarily in real life. This isn't the first environmental shock we've had to deal with as human beings, so if you think about efforts to curb smoking, encourage healthy food consumption, these are the templates that Dialectic is looking at in order to show us a better way to consume information.

We consume our food based on a food pyramid that many of us met as very young people, but we haven't come up with a similar construction, and that's what Dialectic is offering, a way in which you can be more thoughtful about what you consume. We're not asking you and Dialectic doesn't ask you to never have ice cream. It says, understand that you're having ice cream and maybe sometimes you also need to have spinach.

Dan LeDuc: And you're testing out this approach with young people, high school students, right?

Heidi Hernandez Gatty: So right now, we've got two pilots going in two very different schools at opposite ends of the country. Those programs are running concurrently with discussions happening with other districts nationwide. For kids, this idea of being aware of the difference between what it is to communicate in real life versus in this digital ecosystem.



And honestly, Dan, you'd be surprised, most of the students that I'm aware of, whether my own or others, they do understand the algorithm. They do understand that they're being manipulated. Whether or not they're cognitively able to reel back and stop themselves from doing that, from engaging in that way, is a little bit of a different matter.

The digital footprints we have are longer lasting, and so their effects are longer lasting, and we're not necessarily cognitively able to manage that on our own. The Dialectic framework focuses on classroom activities that give students the opportunity to experience communication, to experience disagreement, so that they can recognize the emotional components of things like fear of being “canceled,” and content that is sensational.

So the curricula right now is very devoted and aligned to social emotional concepts where this can easily fit in, but I really do believe that there's opportunities to embed this curriculum in different ways throughout classes like health, civics, almost any history class. Certainly the history of this country is built on our ability to have productive disagreements, sometimes fundamental ones. And we have come this far and lasted this long because of our willingness to sit down and talk through it.

(Music break, start of Eli Tillemann's interview)

Eli Tillemann, high school senior, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology: I'm the oldest of five siblings, a high school senior and the president of the Young Democrats and Teenage Republicans clubs at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology.

Dan LeDuc: That's Eli Tillemann.

Eli Tillemann: TJ is a school in, uh, the Northern Virginia area. It's regularly regarded as the best high school in the country. I'm very proud of the institution.

Dan LeDuc: Eli is interested in finding ways to bridge the divides at his school as well as across the country.

Eli Tillemann: We realized high school students at TJ weren't learning in school and through practical experience the tools that we needed to navigate our polarized political climate, and we wanted to learn how to do that. And here's where a bit of a stroke of luck comes in.

Dan LeDuc: Eli got connected to the leaders of Dialectic, where Heidi Hernandez Gatty serves as an adviser, to learn more on how to help his classmates hold constructive dialogue and foster a stronger environment for learning and understanding from each other.



Eli Tillemann: We were able to bring them in for guest lectures at TJ and learn about the neuroscience of tribalism, how the internet acts as a polarizing force in modern America, and all these things that we could use to build almost our own student-made curriculum on how to disagree. And we actually do have a curriculum which we're working with them now to develop for other schools, but that, that's a story for another time.

Dan LeDuc: Eli has always been interested in politics.

Eli Tillemann: I was lucky to be born to a loving mother and father who were, at the time of my birth, both congressional aides. My mother was a Republican working in the House of Representatives as an aide, and my dad was a Democrat working as an aide in the Senate.

Dan LeDuc: So that made for interesting conversations, maybe when you were too young to notice, but how have they continued in your house?

Eli Tillemann: It's a regular occurrence for my parents, who don't disagree on everything, to run ideas by each other. They've currently both left the public sector. But while in government, they'd regularly bounce ideas off each other to work cooperatively to improve America as best they could.

Dan LeDuc: So you've got parents from both parties, and now you're the president of both the Young Democrats and Teenage Republicans clubs at your school. We are now seeing why you are here today.

Dan LeDuc: How did you come to run both clubs at your school, other than being a high achiever?

Eli Tillemann: After the pandemic ended, I really wanted to understand how Americans had become so divided over what seemed to me to be basic issues of fact.

I went to both clubs just looking to understand those who disagreed with me. I wanted to learn more and see if we could maybe find any common ground.

So I ran for office in both clubs, and I was elected as initially treasurer in the Teenage Republicans and the activities coordinator of the Young Democrats. And a year later, I ran for president in both clubs and was elected there as well.

Dan LeDuc: So, tell me, like in the hallways, your friends talking, did they get you could do both? Were they confused by this?



Eli Tillemann: There's been a little confusion. Many of my friends are very supportive of a sort of third path forward to America's current two-party binary and are excited to see this. But there are also a lot of one-party system jokes, which is obviously not my intent.

It's certainly confusing for some people to understand. My parents were baffled for a long time. But I think we've done a lot of good work, and as a general rule, a lot of my classmates have been very receptive to this work.

Dan LeDuc: You mentioned there's some one-party jokes. Got any that you can share?

Eli Tillemann: Oh, I don't think I have any particularly funny one-liners to fire off right now, though I am routinely told by my classmates that I should start a Young Pioneers club so I can control all the political parties.

Dan LeDuc: I like it. I like it. Is there resistance by some of your friends? The friends who may be solidly D or solidly R who say, "No, we're divided, and the other side is wrong and you gotta pick a side"?

Eli Tillemann: I'm very cognizant of the fact that the issues that divide us politically are very serious ones. You can't just gloss over them. But there are some people who do believe the best way forward is to do what we're doing now and just make sure that their side is winning. And I can respect those people. But I do truly feel that by working for bipartisan understanding and through building solutions by a compromise of ideas and a competition of solutions we can end up with the best possible outcomes for America.

Dan LeDuc: Are you the only guy that shows up at both meetings? Or do you have classmates who are coming to both meetings?

Eli Tillemann: Yeah, right now there's even another officer in both clubs. He's a fantastic guy, and there's a chance he may even follow in my footsteps to be president of both clubs.

I also think that a lot of young people are refreshed to see some change to the political system instead of just factional bickering 100% of the time. We're having honest discussions through individuals who are invested in the ideas that come out of both clubs.

Because the fact of the matter is, governing America has to be a bipartisan process. We've got a very diverse population with diverse political needs, and if a leader is going to be effective in America, they need to be able to listen to the needs of all their citizens. And I think that's part of what this is stemming from.



We've seen partisan conflict for so long that seeing a new way forward through understanding is just, it's, I think it's a bit of a beam of hope in these dark times.

Dan LeDuc: So how do we talk to each other when we disagree? And we need to find a common solution here. So how do we do that?

Eli Tillemann: What we've done in the short term at TJ is, last year we ran a series of lectures, and we covered a wide variety of subjects. We've learned a lot. One of the easy things, which you might have guessed but we found is pretty important, is, face-to-face discussions are ideal for politics. If you're just typing an angry rant on Twitter, not only is that rather dehumanizing for the person you're about to go off on a tirade on, but it also robs subtlety and nuance from the conversation.

Face to face, not only is it harder to make typos, but it's also easier to understand this is a person sitting across the table from me as we discuss politics. I should listen to and understand their opinions. And that's another level of this. We've learned civility is very important. Effective discussion. By recognizing that you can be wrong. We gain the ability to build better solutions through our debate. If someone points out a flaw in your argument, you go, OK, how can we build a better policy around this flaw to meet your concerns and meet my concerns? Or if we can't meet both equally, to meet somewhere in the middle, where both of us are getting something out of this.

Dan LeDuc: I wanted to ask you about the technology part of it, because you're like the first generation where digital literacy is just a natural instinct for you, unlike people like me. Is that a good thing that it's natural to you, or is it something you need to grapple with? I think it's because I remember when people talked to each other and that they didn't engage in war on some social platform, so I remember the good old days. You guys don't remember the good old days.

Eli Tillemann: On one hand, technology is an incredible tool. It's really hard to find good cat videos in print, but beyond this, we can connect with others and coordinate on a scale that we've never seen before in human history. So this digital literacy is really awesome. I go to a STEM school, and you would not believe some of the stuff my classmates are able to do just with a desktop and a couple hours of time. It's incredible.

On the other hand, it's true we are missing this memory of constructive debate. I remember back when the Blackberry was the cutting edge of technology, but not much before that, and I know that, at least my parents tell me that in a time before Twitter, we used to discuss things in a slightly more effective manner. Polarization was not the crippling influence on our society that it is today.



The bigger issue is, are institutions as they were, were not really prepared to handle the internet and a whole bunch of societal changes that have happened and more changes that will happen still.

Dan LeDuc: Do you think, at least based on your experience in school, that most of your peers are looking for a middle ground? That they're tired of what they see in the news?

Eli Tillemann: I increasingly speak with my peers who just want a chance to talk about politics effectively. They want solutions that allow for more creative thinking and better political debate. Most Americans don't live in a political binary of ideas. I have a lot of classmates who will lean very hard left on some issues and then lean solidly right on other issues.

I have classmates who might be very socially liberal and fiscally conservative or the other way around. And when they don't see their ideas represented in politics, when they see this strict binary, it can definitely appear disheartening, which is part of why people have responded so positively to this third way forward of constructive disagreement.

Dan LeDuc: Yeah. What if you were to, and I don't mean to be provocative here and put you on the spot, but what if you were to say, "Hey, I'm president of the Young Republicans, I'm president of the Young Democrats, and guess what, everybody? We're merging them and we're going to call it the Group for Better Government." You think that would fly?

Eli Tillemann: Someone suggested that once, and while I understand the logic, I do think that's not the right course forward. It's in my opinion critical to make sure that we're presenting separate ideas. For all the one-party system jokes that I get, a competition of ideas is what will generate good solutions, not just through civil debate.

We need to be able to disagree with each other. Not just to disagree civilly, but to actually have these different ideas that we can run in contest to each other to build the best solutions. We're encouraging students to attend clubs beyond their political circles if we can. We think it's important to understand diversity of perspectives beyond your own. What we want to do is, within our existing political party structure, push for better understanding.

(End with Heidi Hernandez Gatty, music transition)

Dan LeDuc: One of our earliest exposures to people who have other perspectives or lead different lives happens when you first go to school. If we want to inspire future generations of Americans to understand each other better, it could start with education. Here's more from Heidi Hernandez Gatty.



Heidi Hernandez Gatty: Education is the place where we experience community for the first time. So how you experience your schools becomes a template for how you will experience community and social life in general. So if our schools are welcoming places, if our schools provide us with opportunity and allow us to express ourselves and help us navigate all of what it means to be in community with each other, then we will produce not only great people, but better citizens.

Dan LeDuc: Where are parents in all of this? Are they seeing stuff in their kids that they wish was different? Would they like them to grow up where they can communicate better and have gentle disagreements with those that are around them and do that in a meaningful way?

Heidi Hernandez Gatty: I think so. I think there is always a challenge, a fundamental challenge in communicating with your own children. You are in a power position. Our kids fight with us because they know that we will be here for them. They save the worst for their parents. And in some ways, that's how you know you're doing your job right as a parent.

I think parents want schools to teach their kids well. I believe that we are looking to be able to have our kids grow up and resolve their own challenges by themselves and for themselves. I don't think we always know how to do that well. A lot of our instincts are to come in and protect and helicopter over. And that leads to a lot of finger pointing also. Not a lot of reflection. I think as parents, we're not always willing to imagine that our kids perhaps had something to do with the fact that they were in trouble or maybe actually did take that inappropriate photo or said something mean about a friend on a text message.

We have to be able to have those open dialogues also within our families, and it's one of the things that's compelling about Dialectic, because it's not just about education. You can utilize these tools within the context of your family. And then there's the application for different types of communities, whether they're faith communities, whether they're school communities, to be able to work together a little bit differently than we have been recently.

Dan LeDuc: So, what gives you hope in your work with young people and Dialectic, that we can indeed do better at disagreeing with one another?

Heidi Hernandez Gatty: I think as parents, we are generally allowing our children to express who they are without stifling it. We're not expecting them, I hope, to fit into all of these cookie cutter molds of what is right or good. The young men in my oldest child's class tell each other that they love each other all the time. I can't imagine that having happened, that a group of young boys when I was in high school would have left each other with, "I love you, man, I love you, bro." And they mean it. They're not being silly. They're not making fun of anyone; they don't have any qualms about that level of emotional expression. We could



have a whole other conversation about what is expected of boys and girls and what is working and what isn't about that. What I see in this generation is a real openness and willingness and curiosity to understand how people are living and feeling and wanting people to feel like they can live and feel and be whoever they need to be. The kids are all right, man. The kids are all right.

Dan LeDuc: We hope you'll join us next time for the final episode of our season, when Utah Governor Spencer Cox tells us about the role policymakers can play in helping to bridge divides. He's chairman of the National Governors Association, and he's helped launch an effort called "Disagree Better." Thanks for listening. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."