



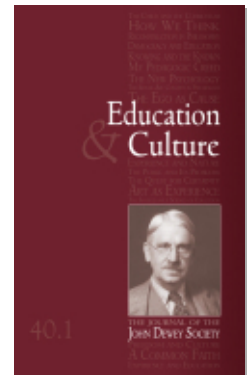
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Rethinking Deweyan Democracy in an Age of Disinformation

R. W. Hildreth

Abstract The new realities of social media, echo chambers, and partisan information sources have created social forces that challenge core assumptions about democracy. Are we in an epistemological crisis, where separate and distinct communities of inquiry limit shared understandings of truth? In this essay, I turn to the political and educational thought of John Dewey to explore this challenge. Though some of Dewey's prescriptions are outdated, I argue that it is possible to reconstruct and extend key insights for our contemporary era. Drawing on Dewey, I offer pedagogical strategies to create conditions where students are more open and able to listen, understand, and work across lines of difference. I highlight themes of structured dialogue to bridge differences, the importance of action, and faith in humankind.

Keywords action civics, democracy, John Dewey, dialogue, disinformation

THE NEW REALITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA, ECHO CHAMBERS, AND PARTISAN INFORMATION sources have created social forces that challenge core assumptions about democracy. Reflecting on the 2020 election, Barack Obama stated, "If we do not have the capacity to distinguish what's true from what's false, then, by definition, the marketplace of ideas doesn't work. And by definition our democracy doesn't work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis."¹ This essay starts from this potential crisis, exploring the following key questions: Has the current information landscape shifted toward separate and distinct communities of inquiry that limit shared understandings of truth? If society is indeed moving in this direction, what

should be done? In this essay, I turn to the political and educational thought of John Dewey to make sense of this potential crisis and to theorize democratic responses to the current political climate.² The essay has three goals. The first is to describe the general contours of the emerging disinformation landscape. The second is to evaluate how Dewey addressed similar issues in the 1920s and 1930s. The final goal is to suggest some Deweyan strategies to address our current situation. In making these suggestions, I am not claiming that Dewey has all the answers. My evaluation of his writings from the 1920s and 1930s casts his limitations into sharper relief. Despite these limitations, I argue that it is possible to reconstruct and extend key Deweyan insights for our contemporary era. Drawing on Dewey, I offer pedagogical strategies to create conditions where students are more open and able to listen, understand, and work across lines of difference. I particularly highlight structured dialogue to bridge differences, the importance of civic action, and faith in humankind.

The paper will be organized as follows. In the next section, I describe my understanding of key terms such as misinformation/disinformation, and briefly review the social science literature on the current information environment. In the third section, I review and evaluate Dewey's responses to disinformation and partisanship during the 1920s and 1930s. In the final section, I advance three Deweyan contributions to address current challenges to democracy.

DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

We are living in an age where the free play of facts and ideas is increasingly fragmented and isolated in antagonistic and sometimes mutually exclusive silos. These information silos compound and are compounded by increasing ideological polarization.³ The result is that the free play of ideas has lost its common referent, or in Obama's words, "we are entering into an epistemological crisis." This crisis—and this age of disinformation—poses significant challenges for Deweyan democracy. In this section, I outline three features of the disinformation landscape that challenge the viability of democratic institutions and practices: political polarization, fragmented news and information sources, and the rise of social media.

Before summarizing these challenges, it is important to define terms. I deliberately use the term "disinformation" rather than a closely related term, "misinformation." Both misinformation and disinformation are describing the communication of false or untrue information. Common definitions distinguish misinformation as "false or misleading information" and disinformation as "the dissemination of deliberately false information."⁴ However, I argue that this distinction, resting on "deliberate" falsehoods is a tenuous one. Intentions are varied, and not always clear.

For instance, we now know that the opinion hosts Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Laura Ingraham at Fox News knew that claims that Trump won the 2020 election were lies, yet they repeatedly shared this information; this is a clear cut case of disinformation.⁵ Yet, personalities like Alex Jones believed that Sandy Hook was a false flag operation.⁶ What is the distinction between these two sources when both promulgated lies? Is the existence of a false belief enough to categorize something as misinformation (rather than the arguably stronger term, disinformation)? In addition, we must consider the ways in which the profit motive and misinformation are inextricably linked. Both Fox News and Alex Jones have found that outlandish claims are crucial to generating viewers and advertising dollars. In this essay, I use *disinformation* as a general term, rather than attempting to decide when and whether false information was deliberately shared. In keeping with the pragmatist tradition, we should shift our focus from *intentions* to *effects*.

Indeed, no matter the intentions, disinformation is a constant presence in the political landscape. The first feature is political polarization. Americans are deeply ideologically divided, with more Democrats and Republicans who both tend to see the “other party as a threat to the nation’s well-being.”⁷ Another sign is that marriages across party lines are increasingly rare. In a 2009 survey, only 9 percent of all couples consisted of Democrat-Republican pairs.⁸ By 2020, this number had dropped to 4 percent.⁹ Partisanship is exacerbated by motivated reasoning, which is the phenomenon of when individuals are presented with facts that contradict incorrect beliefs, they are more likely to reconfirm their beliefs than question them.¹⁰ Importantly, motivated reasoning is not limited to liberals or conservatives. Nor is motivated reasoning related to cognitive abilities. For example, Dan Kahan found that “subjects who scored highest in cognitive reflection were the most likely to display ideologically motivated cognition.”¹¹ Rather than assuming that motivated reasoning is a domain of the uneducated, it is important to explore how it constitutes political orientations more broadly.

Second, our contemporary news and media landscape exacerbates polarization. Citizens are increasingly *only* reading sources and consuming media that already fit their political views. Such “information silos” reinforce political polarization. According to research by Amy Mitchell and colleagues, in 2020, 41 percent of Republicans and 27 percent of Democrats relied solely on media outlets that supported their views.¹² In a study of Twitter use in the 2016 election, researchers found that these silos were asymmetrical, with a more closed network in the right-wing ecosystem, centered on Breitbart News.¹³ In 2020, the silo shifted from Breitbart to new sources such as NewsMax and One America News.¹⁴ These trends are accelerated by social media. In some cases, social media is the conduit to direct people to partisan news sources. 47 percent of Americans get their news via social media, with 18 percent (mostly young people) relying solely on social media.¹⁵ Social media users were, as

a group, less knowledgeable and more susceptible to false information than people who got their information from news websites, print, or television.¹⁶ Finally, there is a widespread belief that “fake news” is, indeed, real.¹⁷ Both the left and right believe that their ideological opponents are being duped by their own news sources. There is a common trope on both the left and right that if people “did their research,” then the lies of the other side would be exposed.

Third, patterns of news consumption, coupled with social media, create the conditions for disinformation to spread unchecked. In a well-known study, Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral found that lies spread faster and reached more people than truths. They found that “the top 1 percent of false news cascades diffused to between 1000 and 100,000 people, whereas the truth rarely diffused to more than 1000 people.”¹⁸ Moreover, Lazer and colleagues found that fact-checking often did little to correct disinformation.¹⁹ This finding builds on concepts of motivated reasoning and information silos. In addition, the spread of falsehoods is compounded by capital interests, algorithms, and bots; disinformation is a big business. Carlos Diaz Ruiz’s research suggests that the online content business model is “designed to monetize engagement with fringe audiences and encourages actors to create content that can go viral, hence creating financial incentives to circulate controversial claims, adversarial narratives, and deceptive content.”²⁰ Facebook estimated in 2016 that there were sixty million bots that provided substantial political disinformation.²¹ Platforms claimed to push back on bots and falsehoods in the 2020 election. However, media watchdogs like the Anti-Defamation League found that platforms did little of substance while profiting from increased traffic in falsehoods.²²

When taken together, these three trends—political polarization, a fractured media landscape, and the rapid, unchecked proliferation of disinformation—all point toward troubling times. While it is clear to me that the 2020 election was not stolen, as of September 2023, 69 percent of Republicans polled believed that it was.²³ While those on the left would say there was no definitive proof that the election was stolen, those on the right point to numerous “facts” showing fraud. In all these ways, it is more evident that we exist in separate and distinct communities of inquiry.

DEWEY’S RESPONSES TO THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN THE 1920s AND 1930s

Dewey confronted similar challenges of division, racial hatred, and propaganda during his lifetime. Dewey’s commentary in 1922 could easily be applied today: “This is the era of bunk and hokum—there is more of it in quantity, its circulation is more rapid and ceaseless, it is swallowed more eagerly and more indiscriminately than

ever before.”²⁴ He was keenly aware that the information landscape of his time was constituted by economic and political interests, and that new technologies were enlisted in the pursuit of supremacy and division. In his 1939 essay “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us,” Dewey outlined how such challenges to free communication posed dangers to democracy:

Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life. For everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life.²⁵

Dewey’s response to such challenges was to reemphasize democratic practices and dispositions, arguing that the “powerful present enemies of democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings.”²⁶

For Dewey, democracy itself could help foster these attitudes. It educates when citizens learn the consequences of public actions (including elections, policies, and other actions). In the long run, democracy is self-corrective. The public may be temporarily fooled, but the consequences of “bad decisions” become known. The claim of democracy’s educative function is premised on the public nature of discussion, debate, and persuasion, and in the formation of public opinion. Dewey’s educational and political thought align in emphasizing the need for citizens to understand the consequences of policies and political actions. This was (already) challenging given the complexity of society in the early twentieth century. In 1925, Dewey wrote that his current age had:

So enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of the indirect consequences, have formed such immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis, that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself. . . . There are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with.²⁷

Existing resources could not address such barriers. Yet, Dewey argues that better practices of expert-assisted inquiry and communication might help to overcome these challenges. The propaganda machine during World War I left an indelible mark on Dewey’s political thinking. He was deeply concerned by the way politicians, government, and industry exploited the sentiment of the masses and repressed dissent. Elites capitalized on the national reach of media and “developed an extraordinary

facility in enlisting upon their side the inertia, prejudices, and emotional partisanship of the masses by use of a technique which impedes free inquiry.”²⁸ Dewey was troubled that the professional wartime propagandists became hired publicity agents. Rather than communicate platforms and ideas, the publicity industry aims to manipulate public opinion through public relations. While it can be assumed that manipulation of opinion has always been a tool of the powerful, the 1920s and 1930s saw the professionalization and nationalization of this profit-driven activity; it had become an industry unto itself with unprecedented reach.

On these issues, the Dewey-Lippmann debate looms large. Walter Lippman famously derided average citizens’ competence to self-govern. For Lippman, industrial society was so complex that no single individual could know enough about public matters to make intelligent decisions; individuals are not “omnicompetent.”²⁹ Because ordinary citizens’ stereotypes simplify complex realities, even if the news is “factually” correct, it cannot foster the requisite knowledge or understanding for self-government. As a result, people are the unwitting victims of propaganda. Even if there could be a free and unbiased press, mass democracy would still be inadequate. For Lippman, more and better information could not address these challenges. The immediate nature of news means that the press can only report on events, but cannot reveal the truth of the matter.³⁰ To cure the ills of democracy, Lippmann prescribed that society should be governed—or more precisely, administered—by experts, periodically checked through elections.

It is important to remember that Dewey agreed with Lippman’s diagnosis. He called *Public Opinion* “perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned.”³¹ However, in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey offers a different prescription to cure democracy’s ills—social scientific inquiry repackaged with art. The problem with the social scientific inquiry of his day (and ours) is that its results often come on the scene too late to inform judgments (in addition to being poorly written to reach a general audience). What was needed, instead, was an *artful* presentation of information that is “meaningful, factual, contemporary and quotidian.”³² Dewey wants the news both to speak to the everyday reality of people’s lives (contemporary and quotidian) and to enable citizens to connect the news to broader social processes (meaningful and factual) to render more sound judgments.

Dewey anticipates an obvious objection that “the mass of the reading public is not interested in learning and assimilating the results of accurate investigation.”³³ He argues that the masses could become more interested through better presentation; and presentation is a question of art. Dewey sees a special place for art in democracy because “men’s conscious life of opinion and judgment often proceeds on a superficial and trivial plane. But their lives reach a deeper level. The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness.”³⁴

This call for social scientific inquiry in the name of democracy still carries the risks of domination by experts.³⁵ Dewey agreed with Lippmann that modern societies are too complex for ordinary citizens to grasp and therefore expert analysis is needed. It is important to note that Dewey recommends an experimental approach to social science. Rather than the logic of laboratory science and the search for universal laws of human nature, the experimental approach argues that analyses and recommendations are tentative hypotheses to be tested, and that policies should be seen “not as programs rigidly adhered to and executed, but subject to test, observation, and revision.”³⁶ Acutely aware of the power of partisan ideology, Dewey argues that the results of experimental social science will not erase or even dampen differences of opinion and interest “even when the two sides are using the same facts.”³⁷ However, it is preferable that public decisions and policies will be “informed by a greater degree of knowledge and citizens would base their beliefs and judgments to a greater degree of evidence.”³⁸ Against Lippmann, Dewey says that the role of experts should be limited to discovering and making known what he calls “social facts.” The role of the expert stops at inquiry—then it is up to public officials and the public itself to construct hypotheses and implement policies.

While compelling, I argue that Dewey’s idea of artful presentation and broad dissemination of social inquiry fell short in his time, and may not be adequate to ours. Though I hate to say this, I agree with Lippman’s claims that stereotypes seem to be more powerful than careful inquiry in framing how information is processed. It is also difficult to overcome Dewey’s anticipatory objection that people are not interested in this type of information. For Dewey, people could be more interested in good information, presented artfully. Yet, many of the communicative conditions that Dewey identified as needed to repair democracy in the 1920s and 1930s have, arguably, been achieved through information technology. We live in an age of unprecedented freedom of inquiry and communication. There is also no shortage of artful and timely presentations of social scientific inquiry. Award-winning stories such as the *Washington Post*’s “Hidden Below the Surface” and NPR’s “Beyond the Poles: The Far-Reaching Dangers of Melting Ice” combine art, video, and scientific data in visually stunning, information-rich, and publicly accessible formats.³⁹ While important, these forms of media might not reach the 46 percent of Americans who do not see climate change as a major threat.⁴⁰ Here, the greater threat may be our increasingly separate information communities.

Dewey would likely agree with this assessment, returning to his view that “*everything* which bars freedom and fullness of communication . . . undermines the democratic way of life.”⁴¹ In arguing for better practices of communication and inquiry, Dewey did not intend to prize any particular solution or strategy. In contrast, as Dewey reminded us, a major problem for political thought in the early twentieth

century was that the “old principles do not fit contemporary life as it is lived.”⁴² He argued that we should not valorize the past nor blindly accept practices and institutions. Rather, we should critically interrogate their use for the present situation. In what ways are Dewey’s ideas of the artful production of social scientific inquiry undermined in our era of likes and retweets? How might his careful articulation of the role of experts apply to current trends dismissing or ignoring expertise? Or might his democratic criteria of individuals participating fully within groups, and free and full interaction among groups, characterized by freedom of social inquiry, still possess some critical traction?

These are not simple questions, and they do not lend themselves to “yes” or “no” responses. In contrast, we might ask: how, and in what ways, might Deweyan ideas—of communication and democracy—offer insights for our contemporary political challenges? The current information landscape calls for a rethinking of Dewey’s political and educational thought. While I find Dewey’s ideas around communication less persuasive, it is important to remember that he also called for fostering personal prodemocratic attitudes and habits. What might it mean for students to learn to interact across lines of difference? What might it mean for them to practice democratic participation on a smaller scale? With these habits, *might* individuals be interested in learning about social scientific inquiry? What would it be like for them to practice public communication? As noted earlier, Dewey argues that creating prodemocratic attitudes is the best defense against the forces of intolerance, coercion, and control. As such, there might also be opportunities for us to draw on Dewey as a source of contemporary democratic renewal.

DEWEYAN STRATEGIES

A wide group of other scholars have utilized Deweyan resources to attempt to combat the contemporary challenges of disinformation, political partisanship, citizenship, and other related questions.⁴³ While this literature is broad, several scholars have particularly focused on the potential *civic* resources of Dewey, especially for those engaging in communication across a polarized and partisan landscape. Several stand out, including Sarah Stitzlein, Michele Moses, and Scott Stroud.⁴⁴ Each author touches on key insights that address contemporary democratic challenges. First, and most notably, they highlight how (civic) education involves a whole person, embedded in lived realities. Learning, for Dewey, is an embodied, social, emotional, moral, cognitive, and collective process. Civic learning therefore involves acquiring factual knowledge, exploring moral convictions and positions, and building habits of prodemocratic communication and action. Stitzlein calls for stronger civic

education and highlights the importance of critical information literacy.⁴⁵ Moses points to structured dialogues as a means for citizens to explore the moral dimensions of controversial and divisive topics. Dialogue, for Moses, is not a means to resolve intractable divisions but rather a way to engage and learn to live with them as a society.⁴⁶ Stroud stresses the importance of habits of communication as a different way to process information and interact with others. All of these scholars also highlight that correct information does not necessarily change people's beliefs.

Building on these scholars, I argue that Deweyan civic education provides the means to disclose and reconstruct habits and customs that we take for granted. We could also label these as stereotypes, sources of motivated reasoning, or prejudices—but the important point is that they structure how people interpret the world, and they precondition the ability to understand. From this starting point, I stretch Dewey's educational theory to apply it to our current situation. I outline a process in which civic education can be a means to examine our unreflective beliefs, learn to understand others, and work together through civic action.

It is first worth noting that Dewey explicitly argued against civic education in a narrow sense. He stated that it is a fallacy “to suppose that there is any one particular study or mode of treatment that can make a child a good citizen.”⁴⁷ Instead, he treats education for citizenship as coextensive with education in general. For Dewey, all education is education for citizenship. When Dewey does explicitly address civics, he states its goal is to develop “discriminating inquiry and discriminating belief, the ability to look beneath a floating surface to detect the conditions that fix the contour of the surface, and the forces which create its waves and drifts.”⁴⁸ In other cases, Dewey calls this political judgment.⁴⁹ Thus, political judgment is based on a critical understanding of how political, social, and economic systems actually work. We learn how systems work by engaging with systems. Dewey claims that schools have overemphasized civic knowledge—learning about the institutions of government, how a bill becomes a law, et cetera. Standard civics education exclusively focuses on processes and institutions rather than looking at how government actually works. He goes on to say that:

I don't think we can pride ourselves upon really preparing our student body to make good citizens from a political point of view. We are preparing a somewhat passive body of citizens who will be managed and exploited either by political machines, or in reaction against them, by demagogues and agitators.⁵⁰

There have been several efforts to recommit to civic education—not just as civics classes but across all schooling: these include Educating for American Democracy, Civic Mission of Schools, icivics, etc.⁵¹ These are all important, and include history,

civics, and economics in their scope. Some also include digital literacy. So how might we develop political judgment in our current climate? I see three important Deweyan contributions.

Dialogue Across Differences

Following Moses, the first step to counter partisan division is to help students learn to actively listen to others, to take others' experiences seriously, and to work for mutual understanding. Though Dewey was not an explicit theorist of dialogue, he does offer resources. I start with Jim Garrison's excellent essay "A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening," and then enhance his argument with examples from contemporary dialogue and deliberation initiatives. Garrison's essay draws on the scholarship of Hans-Georg Gadamer to help develop a Deweyan understanding of listening across differences—these might be race, class, gender, sexual orientation, political ideology, etc. Garrison underscores the importance of Gadamer's concept of prejudice—the fact that our ability to listen and interpret in conversation is conditioned by historical circumstances. In Gadamer's terms, "prejudices of the individual constitute the historical reality of his [sic] being."⁵² While many liberal political theorists see prejudice as an impediment to rational discourse, Gadamer shows how it is a precondition for understanding. In Garrison's terms,

The point is not to free ourselves of all prejudice, but to examine our historically inherited and unreflectively held prejudices, and alter those that disable our efforts to understand others, and ourselves.⁵³

Here is where engagement with differences becomes the key catalyst for disclosing prejudices and coming to new understandings of one's self and others.

When structured well, dialogues can help participants be open to others, to risk the certitude of their assumptions, and to be willing to engage in conversation toward mutual understanding. Garrison then connects Gadamer's ideas of prejudice to Dewey's notion of habit. According to Dewey, habits are "mechanism[s] of action, physiologically engrained, which [operate] 'spontaneously,' automatically, whenever the cue is given."⁵⁴ As such, habits are the means to *act* in the world. But more than action, habits are also means of observation, interpretation, judgment, and even thinking. In Dewey's terms, habits cover our "basic sensitivities and ways of meeting and responding to all the conditions which we meet in living."⁵⁵ The disruption of habits is an opportunity to learn and to disclose prejudices otherwise taken for granted. Garrison argues that dialogue is a particularly powerful tool for this.

Extending Garrison, I want to offer some thoughts on how dialogue can be structured on Deweyan lines to address differences. Importantly, you cannot simply put students from the left and right together in a room and have a discussion—that would most likely reproduce division. Instead, there needs to be a structured process. A good beginning step is introspection—for participants to look at the course of their lives and the influences and experiences that made them who they are. This exercise hopefully will make them more open to hearing from others. Initial dialogues should center on sharing personal experiences, learning active listening, practicing openness, and should followed by reflection. Care should be taken to identify and consider power dynamics. Who is participating and who has discursive power is important. Initial dialogues might be more homogeneous to provide a space to practice dialogue. After participating in dialogues that focus on personal experiences, it is possible then to introduce general content. Importantly, the goal is always to understand the other participants, and in doing so, come to a new understanding of oneself.

Only then should there be structured dialogues across differences. At that point, participants will have practiced and seen the power of dialogue to learn from others. Differences become an opportunity for individual growth and mutual understanding, rather than an occasion for blame and ridicule. By continuing to build on the trust of earlier dialogues, it is possible to move to deliberation and to discussing alternative plans and the consequences of possible actions; or, in Dewey's terms, an "imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct."⁵⁶ There is good work being done in this field—organizations such as CU Dialogues (dialogic learning), Public Agenda (deliberative polling), Braver Angels (policy discussions across difference), Everyday Democracy (study circles), and the Kettering Foundation (structured deliberation) are excellent.⁵⁷ Importantly, if we are attempting to actually address these divisions, these different approaches need to be structured and sequenced.

Action Civics

Dialogue and deliberation, while necessary, are not sufficient.⁵⁸ For Dewey, action is essential to test hypotheses developed through deliberation. A Deweyan approach encompasses what is now called "action civics."⁵⁹ This includes youth participatory action research, community organizing, and arts-based inquiry. Each involves investigating actual conditions, formulating plans for action, and implementing those plans. Remember that political judgment means understanding the power behind politics. It is only by engaging these processes that this power can be disclosed. Preliminary experiments and disclosures can, in turn, expand the horizons of how actors understand the possibilities and barriers of further action. Because dialogues

precede civic action, the hope is students would be more open to collaboration and engagement as part of their work toward social change.

Importantly, action civics is an excellent way to develop critical media literacy. A research project conducted at Stanford by Sam Wineburg and colleagues recently found that 82 percent of students today cannot recognize fake news (and that professors don't fare much better).⁶⁰ It is clear that young people need to learn how to decode information and check for facts themselves. We know that fact-checking has limited efficacy. Building on Dewey, the creation of content for real purposes as part of action civics is also a lesson in decoding and fact-checking, allowing students to engage in advocacy via the creation of content and then challenging their peers to decode each other's work. This can both involve young people in direct action and create spaces to collectively rethink the role and function of traditional and social media.

Faith in Humankind

Finally, I think it is important to hold onto Dewey's faith in the intelligence of *all* people. Rather than blaming people's ignorance, let's analyze the conditions that produce ideological frames. While it is hard to see the ways in which common ground is possible, Dewey argues that because we belong to many social groups, there are always new possibilities to understand the broader consequences of our actions and possibly the things we have in common. On the occasion of his eightieth birthday in 1939, Dewey penned the essay "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." Against those who criticized him for having an "undue, a utopian, faith in the possibilities of intelligence and in education as a correlate of intelligence," Dewey doubles down on democracy as a personal way of life.⁶¹ And this doubling down was in the context of grave threats to American democracy, both external (the rise of fascism and imperialism) and internal (depression, racism, and class prejudice). Squarely facing antidemocratic forces, Dewey advances the key line of the essay: "Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action *if* proper conditions are furnished."⁶² And indeed, this is a big *if*. And in many ways, Dewey's theories need to be rethought as we try to come up with ways to furnish conditions that meet our contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSION

I imagine Dewey might say, "Of course you should abandon systems of thought from bygone eras and reconstruct to address the problems of the day." He would

likely also continue to hold onto the belief in democracy and the possibilities for intelligent inquiry. After all, what are the alternatives? The proposals I have advanced are tentative. I am trying to work out a pedagogical vision of how we might respond to division and disinformation. A harder question, and one that is beyond the scope of this paper: how realistic would it be to implement these proposals? I can imagine that Deweyan proposals would be summarily rejected by many on the right. Following Dewey, then, rather than giving up in despair, it is vital to engage, to try out strategies and courses of action—even on a smaller scale. Only then is it possible to imagine how such practices might both spread and reinforce each other. While it is hard to see how common ground is possible, Dewey shows that common activities can be conducive to growth. Dialogues help foster openness, presence, humility, and reflection in learning with and from others. Action civics fosters an experimental attitude, and collective work is situated in the realm of the possible. Both are undergirded in a basic faith in others. Because humans are complex beings whose lives are structured by a variety of associations, there are openings to find connections across divisions. Given where we are, I fully believe that Dewey still offers insights toward more creative democracy.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Goldberg, “Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy.”
2. All references for John Dewey are taken from the *Collected Works of John Dewey*. The notation is as follows: title, volume, page number. I abbreviated the volume notation as follows: EW = *John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882–1898*; MW = *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*; LW = *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*.
3. Noel, *Political Ideologies and Political Parties in America*.
4. Stahl, “On the Difference or Equality of Information, Misinformation, and Disinformation,” 86.
5. Peters and Robertson, “Fox Stars Privately Expressed Disbelief.”
6. Williamson, “Here’s What Jones Has Said about Sandy Hook.”
7. Pew Research Center, “Political Polarization in the American Public.”
8. Rosenfeld, Reuben, and Falcon, “How Couples Meet and Stay Together.”
9. Wang, “Marriages Between Democrats and Republicans Are Extremely Rare.”
10. Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, “Conspiracy Endorsement As Motivated Reasoning,” 824–44.
11. Kahan, “Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection,” 407.
12. Mitchell et al., *How Americans Navigated the News in 2020*.
13. Benkler, Faris, Roberts, and Zuckerman, “Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media Ecosystem

Altered Broader Media Agenda.”

14. Blake, “Newsmax and One America News Gain Prominence as They Push Trump’s Baseless Theories.”

15. Lazer et al., “The Science of Fake News,” 1096.

16. Mitchell et al., *How Americans Navigated the News in 2020*.

17. Lee and Hosam, “Fake News Is Real,” 996–1018.

18. Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, “The Spread of True and False News Online.”

19. Lazer et al., “The Science of Fake News,” 1097.

20. Ruiz, “Disinformation on Digital Media Platforms.”

21. Quoted in Lazer et al., “The Science of Fake News,” 1095.

22. Anti-Defamation League (ADL), “Hate, Conspiracy Theories and Advertising on Facebook.”

23. Agiesta and Edwards-Levy, “CNN Poll: Percentage of Republicans Who Think Biden’s 2020 Win Was Illegitimate Ticks Back Up Near 70%.”

24. Dewey, “Public Opinion,” MW13, 329.

25. Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” LW14, 227.

26. Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” LW14, 226.

27. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, 314.

28. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, 341.

29. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 284.

30. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 358.

31. Dewey, “Public Opinion,” MW13, 337.

32. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, 347.

33. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, p. 347.

34. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, p. 349.

35. See Diggins, “Pragmatism and Its Limits”; Kaufman-Osborn, “John Dewey and the Liberal Science of Community,” 1142–65.

36. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, p. 362. See Kaufman-Osborn, “Pragmatism, Policy Science, and the State,” 827–49.

37. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, 347.

38. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, 362.

39. Kaplan et al., “Hidden Beneath the Surface”; Sommer et al., “Beyond the Poles.”

40. Tyson, Funk, and Kennedy, “What the Data Says About Americans’ Views of Climate Change.”

41. Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” LW14, 227.

42. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, LW2, 319.

43. Many Dewey scholars have addressed contemporary political challenges, most notably Sarah Stitzlein. See her recent book, *Teaching Honesty in a Populist Era: Emphasizing Truth in the Education of Citizens* (Oxford, 2024), as well as other articles, including “Populist Chal-

lenges to Truth and Democracy Met with Pragmatist Alternatives in Citizenship Education” and “Teaching Honesty and Improving Democracy in the Post-Truth Era.” See also Boyte, “A Different Kind of Politics,” 1–15; Flowers, “Information and Communications Technologies and Democratic Education,” 39–63; Lowery, “The Role of Education in *The Public and Its Problems*,” 3–34; Rogers, “Education for ‘Not Being Duped’ in an Era of Fake News,” 291–304; Wahl, “Learning in Democracy,” 517–36; Gordon, “Lying in Politics,” 60; Wilson, Hastings, and Moses, “Opting Out as Democratic Engagement?,” 231–55.

44. Stitzlein, *Teaching Honesty*; Moses, *Living with Moral Disagreement*; Stroud, “The Challenge of Speaking with Others”; Stroud, “Connective Democracy.”

45. Stitzlein, “Populist Challenges to Truth and Democracy.”

46. Moses, *Living with Moral Disagreement*, 87.

47. Dewey, “Ethical Principles Underlying Education,” EW5, 59.

48. Dewey, “Education as Politics,” MW13, 332.

49. Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education*, MW4, 290.

50. Dewey, *Social Purposes in Education*, MW15, 163.

51. See, for instance, iCivics, “Educating for American Democracy”; Gould, Hall Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, and Smith, eds. *Guardian of Democracy*; iCivics, “Why Civics?”

52. Garrison, “A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening,” 429–51.

53. Garrison, “A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening,” 434.

54. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, MW14, 38.

55. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, LW13, 19.

56. Dewey, *Ethics*, revised edition, LW7, 275.

57. See CU Dialogues Program, “About”; Public Agenda, “Homepage”; Braver Angels, “Homepage”; and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, “Homepage.”

58. Hildreth, “Word and Deed,” 295–320.

59. Levinson, “Action Civics in the Classroom,” 68–72.

60. Wineburg et al., *Evaluating Information*.

61. Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” LW14, 227.

62. Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” LW14, 227.

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