

Backtalk

Jack Schneider



Let's start talking and listening to each other

The Internet is making it very easy for us to communicate only with those who agree with us. But that's not helping us solve our common problems.

Pick a topic in education — say, school funding, for example.

Then choose a side. “School funding doesn't matter,” for instance.

Then type that phrase into a search engine.

Almost without fail, you'll be directed to hundreds of blogs, commentaries, op-eds, briefings, and position papers with which to buttress your opinion.

Of course, you may have to wade through pieces that contradict your claim. After all, the search terms for each position are mostly the same. Yet you'll find ammunition for any topic, any side.

No wonder then that the policy environment is increasingly fragmented and venomous, with each side marshaling its own evidence and accusing the other of cherry-picking. And it's no wonder that each side has resorted to turning up the volume, tuning out the opposition, and attacking ad hominem.

JACK SCHNEIDER (@Edu_Historian) is an assistant professor of education at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Mass. He is author of *From the Ivory Tower to the Schoolhouse: How Scholarship Becomes Common Knowledge in Education* (Harvard Education Press, 2014).

This is problematic for a number of reasons. But it is perhaps most troubling for its effect on what we think we know.

Certainly we have always self-selected our sources — from our magazine subscriptions to our conversation partners. But the Internet and the rise of new digital platforms have intensified this phenomenon a thousandfold. Today we can corroborate our preconceptions in an instant across seemingly endless sources. In short: It has never been easier to be extremely well-informed in an incredibly constricted way.

Intellectual myopia

This intellectual myopia plays out in public and private, in our casual decisions and our formal policies. And it poses a serious threat to public education.

As with any complex problem, there is no clear solution. Still, one format that seems especially useful is dialogue. Not between confederates, but among adversaries.

Unfortunately, I have learned that digital platforms aren't particularly conducive to dialogue. Six months ago, I began an *Education Week* blog with Michelle Rhee — with whom I vehemently disagree about

a number of issues — and we learned very quickly that producing a dialogue online wasn't easy. Each entry required dozens of emails and an occasional clarifying phone call.

We also realized that technological issues aside, neither of us was very well-practiced at listening to and actually engaging with the other side. After our agreed-upon 10 weeks were up, we were both exhausted by the experiment. Rhee handed back her keys to the blog. And I was about to as well. But we hadn't realized our fundamental aim — of getting beyond sound bites — and that nagged at me enough to keep me around.

Enter, the diablog

In the subsequent months, I've taken on several partners in multiweek conversations (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/beyond_the_rhetoric/). And though it's always tempting to simply talk past each other — like trains on different tracks with different sets of passengers — I believe I'm improving.

Certainly I'm learning about format. Choosing a good question is incredibly important, and nothing can be accomplished in fewer than 1,200 words.

But I'm also learning more

about the positions maintained by others. I'm getting better at seeing the world as they see it. As a consequence, I think I'm getting better at talking with them.

Perhaps most important, I'm asking myself tougher questions about educational policies and practices. Although I have yet to change a position on anything, I am thinking in more nuanced ways about issues that I had previously made up my mind about. I feel more thoughtful.

So here is my proposal, delivered for the digital age in the form of a neologism: the diablog — an online conversation in which the aim is not to conquer but to seek. Because the world needs less ranting and more listening. Because the world needs less circular hyperlinking — with all web pages eventually returning to themselves — and more synthesis of a wider set of arguments and facts. Because maybe this could happen online.

My diablog is still a work in progress. It can be incredibly frustrating and, given the energy it requires, I'll eventually walk away from it. Yet there are moments when it feels like a door has cracked open. I'm anxious to see where it leads. **K**