

# Learning to speak the truth without punishing the listener

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**I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean it Up** by James Hoggan with Grania Litwin

**G**un control. Transgender rights. Black Lives Matter. The war on terrorism. There are many hot-button issues these days, complex topics that demand consideration and debate. But the efficacy and repercussions of such polarizing debates are also open to question.

Minds aren't changed. People scream and yell. Insults are hurled. And much worse.

When public discourse turns hateful — as it so often does — I've often wondered if anything is being accomplished.

So when I came across a book titled, "I'm Right and You're an Idiot: The Toxic State of Public Discourse and How to Clean it Up," I was thrilled. I dove in hoping to find answers about why these exchanges on Facebook or Twitter, in the streets or in public squares, can get so ugly so quickly.

I didn't. Not directly, anyway.

Turns out, I misunderstood the author's use of the term "public discourse." Rather than talking about online comment culture or how average individuals use angry rhetoric in public forums, the book is geared toward larger-scale public advocacy, toward those people who are systemically or professionally involved in persuading others about their causes.

More specifically, it relates to those engaged in advocating for environmental protection. All of which makes sense, given that the author, public relations executive James Hoggan, has spent decades demanding action on climate change and combatting what he sees as the deliberate denial of scientific evidence.

Grania Litwin, newspaper columnist for the Times Colonist in British Columbia, is listed as co-author, but the book is written from Hoggan's point of view.

Out of frustration more than anything, Hoggan set out to understand what makes presumably reasonable people dig into unreasonable positions.

While Hoggan's quest to understand his particular experiences frames the book, he makes frequent efforts to broaden his topic.

And there are many larger lessons to be learned here.

The book's organization is key: Each chapter pulls from the author's conversations with an impressive array of diverse thinkers such as linguist-political theorist Noam Chomsky, social psychologist Carol Tavris and public policy scholar Marshall Ganz.

One of my favorite chapters, "Facts Are Not Enough," features American linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff and his longstanding work on "frames," the value-laden lenses through which we perceive the world. According to Lakoff, we don't perceive facts objectively. Facts are always framed, and, therefore, advocates should not simply rely on their own understanding of "the facts" to persuade others. Lakoff advises, "Get clear on your values, and start using the language of values."

Similarly, the chapter titled "Matters of Concern" revolves around French philosopher Bruno Latour and his work on "controversy mapping." This involves getting the lay of the land of a shared dispute: who the experts are, and, most importantly, which biases are held by whom. An absolute "truth" is set aside, in favor of engagement.

The shared dispute becomes the common ground.

While every chapter offered me something — a new author to read, a new frame to consider — some were a bit lacking in complexity.

The last chapter, "We Need Warmheartedness," centers around Hoggan's encounters with the 14th Dalai Lama who states, "We must respect all different forms of life, with less concern for getting something back."

With all due respect for His Holiness, the book, at times, neglects to dig deeper into these kinds of statements and can read like an environmental policy version of "Eat Pray Love."

Hoggan's public relations background may have something to do with it. In fact, he acknowledges his profession's tendency toward simplification, stating, "our role is to create understanding with maximum clarity and brevity."

But the book is clearly a labor of love, stemming from Hoggan's heartfelt desire to understand why consensus on climate change is so hard to come by. It will have the highest appeal for those folks who have shared a similar journey, those deeply involved in environmental causes.

And for those of us looking for a broader understanding of the dynamics of polarized public debate? Well, we might wish for more examples outside of environmentalism, but there's plenty to ponder.

At its best, the book is a forum, a gathering of minds exploring the underlying history and psychology of public discourse. And, further, it offers some practical methods for overcoming barriers to real communication and cooperation.

As such, this book should be required reading for politicians and public advocates. And good news for those politicians who aren't big readers: The authors construct the book as a whole, laying out pieces that connect with each other as you progress, but each short chapter is easily digestible on its own.

Hoggan concludes with "Lessons Learned," a smattering of hopeful points that should offer soul-balm to even the most cynical public servants and issues advocates. Hoggan writes that "the goal of public discourse should be to encourage participation and expose the truth, not to discourage opposition or crush those who disagree."

He goes on to draw inspiration from the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, who claims that we should "speak the truth, but not to punish."

Hoggan surmises that we must "develop a greater capacity for self-awareness and self-control because people who monitor their attitudes toward others and don't allow resentment to flare can actually hear what others are saying and begin to communicate."

Easier said than done, of course. But that doesn't mean it isn't worth saying. And doing.

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