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Measuring the public interest

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The public interest is not simple or obvious, but complex and multidimensional.

If we take the definition, adopted by Bob Douglas in this volume, that the public interest is the long-term welfare and wellbeing of the general population, how do we know what contributes to this goal, or how best to achieve it?

On many specific issues that bear on the public interest, the evidence is contested and opinion is divided, often increasingly so. What's more, we can't serve the public interest by 'picking off' issues and policies one by one, whether these concern healthcare, education, drugs and crime, poverty and inequality, or climate change. Although such efforts can sometimes succeed, issues and the policies to address them are linked to deeper questions of ideologies and worldviews and the values these embody.

The public interest has to be addressed at different levels or depths, acknowledging that societies are 'complex adaptive systems' made up of many elements that interact in often multiple, diffuse ways, and whose behaviour emerges from the way the whole system functions; that is, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. We can't look at it piece by piece and expect to understand and control it, which is what we tend to do in both science and politics.

Take the very topical example of the 'je suis Charlie' phenomenon in the wake of the terrorist attack on staff of the French satirical magazine, Charlie Hebdo. The 'official story' is that it was a legitimate expression of defiance and solidarity in defence of Western values, notably freedom. But among other levels of meaning associated with the event is that Western governments - whether wittingly or not - are milking the attack (and other similar events) because it distracts both them and the people from the host of environmental, social, cultural and economic problems they are unwilling or unable to fix.

Democracy - the political expression of public interest - is waning as power is ceded to other, non-democratic bodies, notably global corporations, and as the challenges facing democracy reach a scale and magnitude that is beyond its capacity to resolve (climate change is both a real example and a symbol of this).

With terrorism, governments can act decisively, even heroically. But in responding this way, in magnifying the significance of the events, they play into the terrorists' hands. As in George Orwell's '1984', we seem now to be at perpetual war, which justifies authoritarian control and keeps populations compliant.

Beyond the world of our personal experience, we rely on indicators to define what is in our interest; amongst these are how we measure human progress and development. The orthodox indices and indicators, notably increasing per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), place Western liberal democracies at the top of the international rankings. This model equates progress with modernisation. Broadly speaking the indicators measure the benefits of modernisation, but not its costs (setting aside indicators of environmental impacts). Even the current vogue for measuring life satisfaction and happiness fails in this regard.

Global surveys in 2014 by the Pew Research Center found that life satisfaction rose strongly in emerging economies such as China, India and Brazil between 2007 and 2014, almost closing the gap between them and the advanced economies (where life satisfaction changed little); it also rose in the poorer, developing economies. Life satisfaction increased more in those countries with higher rates of economic growth. In most countries majorities agreed most people were better off in a free-market economy, even if some people were rich and some poor.

People the world over seem satisfied with the way things are going.

Yet other research paints a very different picture. Most people in the developed world do not think quality of life is getting better, and many think it is getting worse. Studies across many countries consistently reveal concerns about the pace of life, loss of community, family conflict and breakdown, growing social inequality and division, crime and violence, rampant consumerism, and destruction of the natural environment. People's preferred futures emphasise close-knit communities, more conviviality and intimacy, social harmony, human-scale settlements and technologies, and a clean, healthy environment.

In a 2005 survey Australians were asked about two scenarios for the nation's future: a fast-paced, internationally competitive society, with the emphasis on the individual, wealth generation and enjoying 'the good life'; or a greener, more stable society, where the emphasis is on cooperation, community and family, more equal distribution of wealth, and greater economic self-sufficiency (these are not the full scenarios). Almost three quarters (73%) expected the first; almost all (93%) preferred the second.

Put another way, people's perceptions of their interest, their welfare, can vary with the context in which it is considered. Framed within orthodox political priorities, they endorse the status quo. Widen their perspective to consider preferred ways of living, their view shifts - radically.

Politics and the media define quite arbitrarily what warrants debate and discussion. Much that is important is excluded. American communication theorist Daniel Hallin distinguished between three spheres of political debate: the sphere of consensus, the sphere of legitimate controversy, and the sphere of deviance. Only matters falling within the second sphere gain attention. (A similar thing happens in science, where established paradigms or theories set the research questions worth studying.)

At this fundamental level, then, acting in the public interest requires us to strive in every possible way - through discussion and action, not just in politics and the media, but also in science, education, law and religion - to expand the sphere of legitimate controversy to encompass more of the sphere of consensus - what is understood to be broadly agreed and accepted - and the sphere of deviance - what is judged to be unworthy, ridiculous or dangerous. This larger agenda includes the assumptions, beliefs and values that underpin modernisation, including Western culturalisation and material progress.

Anything less is not enough.