

TFOD Ep. 39 - English

[00:01:25] It's one o'clock on the East Coast, so welcome to the Future of Democracy, a show about the trends, ideas and disruptions changing the face of our democracy. I'm John Sands, director of Learning and Impact at Knight Foundation. We just come through a year that tested the fabric of our democracy, the covid-19 pandemic, the rise of the movement for racial justice and a polarizing national election have further exposed deep rifts in our society that are prompting national soul searching. Can self-government survive in a world where political alliances and economies have been remade by networked information technologies disease? How do we begin to find new common ground? Our guest today believes it starts with a renewed focus on the need for authentic conversation in self-governing communities and our society. She recently wrote, If the American experiment is to succeed, we must improve the quality of our conversations. Emily Chamlee, right, is the president and CEO of the Institute for Humane Studies, where Knight is a proud supporter of the discourse initiative. Her and her expertize covers a wide variety of a wide range of territory from liberal education and economic development to post disaster recovery and campus free speech from twenty twelve to twenty sixteen. She served as provost and dean at Washington College and prior to that she was a professor at Beloit College. Emily, it's so good to have you with us. Good to see you.

[00:02:51] It's great to see you, John. Thanks for having me on.

[00:02:54] Thanks. Before we dove in, I want to invite our viewers to be part of the conversation. Please feel free to send us your questions using the Q&A function Zoome or using hash tag night live on Twitter. Or just leave a comment if you're watching on Facebook or YouTube. So let's get the ball rolling. I think we want to have just kind of natural, authentic conversation. So I think it'd be helpful for our audience to learn a little bit more about the work that the Institute for Humane Studies does. So just give us maybe a little bit of an overview about IHS and some absolutely happy to at the Institute for Humane Studies.

[00:03:29] We work with scholars across the country who are interested in exploring the big ideas that underlie the good society, the society that is a tolerant and pluralistic society where individuals and communities thrive. How how what are the ideas that underlie that kind of society? And there are scholars across the country who dedicate their careers and dedicate their scholarly lives to addressing those questions and the tensions that are presented in liberal democracies and how do we preserve liberal democracies and strengthen them? And those are the kinds of questions that our scholars tied into.

[00:04:06] Talk about a little bit more about who these scholars are, are they are they resident scholars? They come from from different institutions. Is it just kind of a what is it? I guess I'm trying to get a sense of who makes up the institute. Yeah.

[00:04:23] So we have a team that is based at George Mason University. We are at the Arlington campus of George Mason, but we work with scholars across the country and we don't take them out of their environments. We leave them right where they are because that's where they're doing their best work is with their colleagues are doing doing leading edge research, but also teaching students, which is which is an important part of their role as well. And so we work with those scholars by supporting them through grant making, but also by convening them. That's the that's the most important thing that we do, is we gather scholars together for periods of long weekends to dove into original text, for example, or to explore a research area that might be new to them, or they may be experts in and they

want to share their their ideas and their research with other scholars. But those convenience, those opportunities to connect and seminar and research workshop kinds of settings is really the the heartbeat of our organization, because it's there that we cultivate a thriving intellectual community that is subjecting their ideas to challenge and challenging other ideas and building on each other's ideas as well.

[00:05:37] So it seems like you pull people together for a conversation.

[00:05:41] Right, exactly. That's that's that's what we do, is we pull together people for conversations, both in person conversations and written conversations. And you mentioned the discourse initiative. That's a major initiative where we our work is informed by the classical liberal tradition. We also work with scholars across the ideological spectrum, though, because we recognize that if we are going to really dove deep into those ideas and and fortify the ideas that underlie a society that is free and tolerant and pluralistic and recognizes everyone that we are one another's dignified equals, that kind of society needs intellectual support. And and not no single group can provide all of that support. We want to make sure that we're connecting with scholars who are left of center, right of center, classical liberals who are excited about those ideas and fortifying those ideas. And that's a big part of what the discourse initiative is all about.

[00:06:43] What does it mean to be a classical liberal?

[00:06:47] So it comes from it from a tradition that it's what liberalism used to be called, which which is an emphasis on, I think, of the work of Adam Smith as being important, where his his insight was the liberal the liberal plan, the liberal society was one where there was a great deal of of individual liberty, equality and justice. And so that that recipe that that is a liberal recipe of equality, liberty and justice. And if you have those elements, that is that also then informed the founding of the United States. Of course, the Declaration of Independence is a is a kind of classical liberal text. And so those are the ideas that that that we explore at a deeper level. And also, how do we apply those ideas in a context where you mentioned that the challenges that we're facing and in twenty twenty and into this current year, how do we how do we flex those ideas so that we can also be a part of addressing the challenges with respect to racial injustice, with respect to the unfinished liberal project, liberal democracy? I think of liberalism as our compass, the founding ideas as being sort of a compass, but it's not a finished project. And so this is a living intellectual community precisely because there are unfinished elements of of the of the enterprise and of and of the division.

[00:08:20] A little bit more about the unfinished project, because I think I wanted to ask a question about before you described it, the way I wanted to ask about whether you see any whether the past year has exposed any kind of shortcomings of the classical liberal project.

[00:08:37] But I guess framing it more as unfinished work as it is is is more generative for conversation.

[00:08:43] So let's take that tack. What sort of how is the project unfinished where some areas where you think there's there's work to be done?

[00:08:53] One of the things that that happens in any kind of intellectual tradition is, is, is there'll be some moments when certain themes get get emphasized at the expense of others. So I think of, for example, as I moved into my role as a provost at Washington

College, that was in 2012. It was right when free speech on campus initiatives were or those issues were really starting to bubble up and to a fever pitch. And in some cases, and what seemed to me was happening was that people on all sides, most of most people, not all, but most people actually did just want to have improved conversations. They wanted to have better conversations, but they were getting themselves wrapped around the axle by making it all about First Amendment freedoms. Now, everybody at night and everybody at IHS is knows the importance and respects the importance of First Amendment freedoms. But that's just the starting point for good conversations. That's just the starting point, which allows us to be in a self-governing community. And so that's the kind of thing I mean, when when it's an unfinished project is new challenges emerge in a complex society every day. And so how do we or we or old challenges surface every day?

[00:10:16] So how do we?

[00:10:21] Go back to basics, start to think again about how is it that we can develop not just the formal mechanisms of free speech, for example, but those informal sensibilities that lend themselves to productive conversations in which we all feel smarter?

[00:10:41] After having those conversations, you so you wrote a piece recently that basically lays out a few design principles for a good conversation. And maybe before we dove into some of some of the individual ones that I think there's something I really latched onto. Maybe it'd be helpful if you could give us kind of an overview of these design principles that you sure come up with.

[00:11:07] I don't I think this is certainly not an exhaustive list. It's just really I'm hoping to start a conversation so other people can can weigh in as well. But but some things just start up. First of all, intellectual freedom is essential that that if people are afraid that they're going to be in prison for what they say, you can't have good conversations. So that's sort of a baseline constitutional principle of what a good of what's needed for a good conversation. But beyond that, there are there are less formal rules that that inspire good conversations, like, for example, that for us to be in a conversation that's meaningful, you and I have to respect the personhood in one another, that that you have dignity and I have the dignity. You may have a lot more experience and you do on a lot of topics, John, but you also respect that I have standing in the in the conversation. And so similarly, other other principles follow from that, that we should enter into the conversation with a spirit of humility, with the assumption of good faith. We have to have a respect for that, the importance of critical reason. But also even as we're listening for one another's reasoned argument and basis and evidence that we are willing to listen sympathetically to that, that even if I can find fissures in the evidence that you're putting forward, I'm willing to set that aside long enough so I can hear what's behind what's what's driving your intellectual project, what's driving your point of view that you're coming into that conversation with and me being willing to have some me being willing to listen generously to that point of view so that I can come to understand how it is that you are looking at the same world I'm looking at and maybe even at the same evidence, and we're walking away with different conclusions. How is it that two reasonable, thoughtful people can come to different conclusions after looking at the same world? That's that takes a certain kind of not only intellectual but also emotional posture when we enter into conversations. And that's what I mean by informal sensibilities that are required for good conversations.

[00:13:20] Mm hmm. Maybe you you've hit a chord, I think, with this this idea of of of us entering into a conversation, looking at the same world and operating from a shared a shared fact based, I guess.

[00:13:43] And it strikes me that the last year has has really heightened this sense of of epistemological rupture that we that that they're in this incredibly polarized environment that is.

[00:14:03] The people's approaches to to sort of fundamental questions about our democracy, about them, about our communities.

[00:14:15] Is that we're not actually starting from from the same place anymore and that technology is playing some role in exacerbating the this this epistemological schism, I guess that that that I certainly can see in in the work that many of our grantees do, but that we see just in the newspaper every day, that we see the the the the differences between how one media outlet covers the same story versus another, those kinds of issues seem to be exacerbated and more more visible than they have been in the past. I'm curious about your take on that and how we how how we we reclaim, I guess, something of a shared epistemology.

[00:15:03] Yeah, there's two parts to this. And I think and and there are two parts that are somewhat in tension with each other. First of all, I am an economist, so I love the marketplace of ideas metaphor. And I, I, I like to dove deep into that metaphor sometimes perhaps too much. But if we're in a marketplace of ideas, it we have to be fair deal, a fair deal that the reason why we have trust when we're in the marketplace is because our presumption is that people are going to be dealing with us. Honestly, the same holds true for conversations are our markets would break down if we didn't have that basic baseline of trust. Similarly, we have to have we have to enter into and presume that others are entering into the conversation with the intent of being fair dealers. And that means a commitment to honesty. That means a willingness to back away from a position. If you've been shown that that position is flawed in some way, either through a fracture of logic or that evidence doesn't hold up, we have to be willing to back away from our positions, if at least at least long enough to say, well, I'll need to think about that some more. So that's that's one one piece of it. And so that respect for critical reason is absolutely a part of of what we need if we're going to have good conversations. With that said, we can also abuse that language of reason. We can abuse the the language of well, it's all about the facts, as if oftentimes when someone says it's all about the facts, if they even if they import into that to say and therefore the facts are very, very clear about what we should do next, that may not be true. Right. There might be scientific there might be scientific grounding for a truth claim. But what we do next with that is not always necessarily obvious. And there may be trade offs, for example, that hit different people in different ways. And thinking about public health concerns around how we manage covid is a great example of how we can have a shared commitment to truth seeking about what the science tells us, but what the tradeoffs are with respect to public policy around what we do next. That's an area where we can't just simply claim, well, the scientific authority is the only authority in that room. There might be some lived experience on the ground that informs how different public policies play out in different communities that we need to be listening to. And so that's the other half of it, is that the world is a complicated place and we have to enter into any any conversation that's complex with an understanding that we've got a lot to learn from one another, that you're seeing the world from a very specific perspective, and I'm seeing the world from a different perspective. And we need each other if we're going to actually be collaborators in this truth seeking enterprise.

[00:18:08] I was thinking, just as you said, that this is basic this is the underlying premise of Plato's dialogs that we that we only learn how we actually think about something in

conversation with somebody else, that that it's a process of refinement of you may you may come into a conversation with a set of priors. It's going to guide your your understanding of the facts or the particular vision you bring to the facts.

[00:18:37] But that and having having an interlocutor or having somebody to bounce ideas back and forth with them to hear hear some of the shortcomings of your own approach to things.

[00:18:49] And that's right. And that's one of the real traps with people who are who love to think, you know, we we those of us who love to think, we think hard about our positions and we and we subject them to scrutiny even before we bring them out into the public oftentimes. And that's that's valuable. That's a good thing. But what that also means is that sometimes we can enter into a conversation with a very, very strong point of view. Again, not a bad thing, but it means that we're emphasizing some muscles rather than other muscles. So it's like it's like, you know, you've gone to the gym and you've worked out your quads really, really well, but you've forgotten about your upper body. Right.

[00:19:29] So it's a similar sort of thing that if you're really good at thinking through a problem to the point where you've overcome every objection that you possibly can, sometimes that that disables you as a as a good conversation partner because you forget how to ask a good question. You forget how to say, OK, now I'm entering the conversation with John here, and I know that he disagrees with me and I'm going to enter in, ready to come to volley back every single one of his objections, because I thought them through. And that might be a way for us to get at truth that that might be a very, very good exercise for us to do.

[00:20:08] We should also try it out. I should also try it out so that I stop myself short of that. And I say I, I know that John has these objections. Let me go in by asking questions that can help me understand why he has those objections. Help me understand what's informing those objections rather than coming ready to bear with the volleying back. And instead, I just want to try to find that that well, that way of finding the questions so that I'm tapping the knowledge that has been informing your challenges and your perspective. That's a very different set of muscles. Right. Of intellectual muscles that we need to learn how to flex appropriately even as we're sharpening our own intellectual arguments in our own heads.

[00:20:56] So we've got about ten more minutes. And I want to I want to save time for three things. One, I'd like to talk a little bit about the role that technology has taken in mediating our conversations over the past year. I'd like also to be able to spend a little bit of time talking about.

[00:21:14] You know, the changes that are happening on the ground in real communities and how that's how that's impacting our ability to have have substantive conversations. And I'd also like to find some time for some of the audience questions that are coming in.

[00:21:30] Let's start with the technology of the last year for me has been particularly challenging because I feel like the bulk of the work I do moves forward through in-person interactions with people, meeting with grantees, meeting with with folks who have great ideas and talking about those ideas in real time.

[00:21:53] And and as a result, it's been it's been kind of a challenge for me to to just personally to move the work forward. I'm curious to know what you make of the way that

technology where we're now having a conversation mediated by who knows how many digital intermediaries right now.

[00:22:16] I'm curious to know, like what you what you make of the shift in how technology is going to as has been mediating our conversations and what you think the future holds. I mean, are we going to have this model going to to be with us for the for the foreseeable future?

[00:22:36] Yeah, I think that there are both dangers and opportunities with with technology, with respect to how we how we speak with each other and how we interact with each other. It was at a Knight Foundation function that I learned that there are malicious bots through A.I. that are that are designed to corrode social trust. Well, that that's a terrifying prospect. And people don't even know that it's about right, that that's a terrifying prospect. But it also raises the challenges. The question, can technology be aimed in the exact opposite direction to so we can deliberately use technology to open up those spaces? There's been the emergence of online platforms like clubhouses is, I think, a really cool experiment where we're we're using technology to use people's human, real humans, engaging in real conversation with real voices, with their names attached. And this is a kind of big social experiment to see if we can rebuild social trust with the mechanisms of technology. So that's that I'm I'm I'm a half glass full kind of person. I tend to see that in moments of disruption, the human the human ability to set out to worry about that disruption and then say, what are the potential solutions? I don't know what all those solutions will be, but I do tend to have a lot of faith in human ingenuity to people care about this this kind of problem. And that disruption is the source of of new technologies and new and and new solutions that we might not have thought of before because we didn't need to think about it before. So I'm mostly pro technology, even though I think that we need to have eyes wide open about some of the very real dangers out there.

[00:24:27] Now, I'd also be interested in your reaction to this piece that I saw in yesterday's New York Times, which to me suggests that the physical conditions for conversation at the same time, the technological possibilities for conversation are increasing.

[00:24:43] The physical conditions for for real conversations are actually diminishing within our communities. The story said that it's not just that many voters live in neighborhoods with few members of the opposite party. It's that nearly all American voters live in communities where they're less likely to encounter people with opposing politics than we'd expect. So this piece is based on some research by Harvard scholars Jacob Brown and Ryan. So I'm curious to know what what you make of the fact that we seem to be moving while technophile technology is creating a kind of playing field for us all to be together.

[00:25:26] In reality, the reality on the ground is actually quite a bit different, and we seem to be moving more and more into siloed, siloed communities based on partizanship.

[00:25:36] The research is fascinating that you describe in the article covers really well. And I'm not the expert in this in this field. I would love to have you in the conversation with this question. I would ask them is, is this really new? In other words, the technology allows us the data technology allows us to map the neighborhood level. We can see these clusters of blue and red and that we didn't see before. And my question is, is it new or is it that the technology is allowing us to see something that was probably pretty much always there anyway? And the thing that the reason why my head goes in that direction is because I think I'd say. At the linguistic religious community, clustering that we'd known about forever, class clustering, we've known about forever. So is is what we're seeing here

really just more a proxy for class sorting that we've seen across neighborhoods that that probably feel much more familiar? But it does in another sense. It doesn't matter. It's it's still interesting for us to know that this that this is a reality on the ground. To me, it points to the tensions between what we want in terms of a healthy, pluralistic society and also freedom of association. When you have freedom of association, one of the things we're going to do is we're going to cluster with people who make us feel comfortable. I think that's probably really important for people who spend, particularly members of minority groups that are in a in a community, a work community all day where they're dealing with what we might describe as the dominant culture all day. It might feel really nice to be able to retreat back to the neighborhood and kind of take your hair down and feel like, oh, I can kind of just sort of be myself, have the same vernacular, have the same go to cultural references, joke about the same stuff. So that's part of what it means to be able to have freedom of association is is to live intentionally in this way. It only becomes problematic if I am living and working and congregating and all of my civil society interactions are always with the same cluster. I think that's particularly dangerous if you are a part of the dominant society, because then you think of your experience as being everybody else's experience. And in fact, it's not right that there's a lot more nuance out there. And I think that that's also then where we get the polarization is people start talking as if their experience is everyone's experience and it hits the wrong note. It hits the wrong chord with others who say, well, that might be your reality, but it's not my reality. And and and the lack of trust that is is seeded in that when that conversation goes wrong, instead of actually bringing us together because we have lots of opportunities to connect and to educate one another about our lived realities, instead, it ends up being more polarizing and we end up spinning society out towards the polls rather than kind of coalescing to recognize that there are some shared experiences and there are some things that we're going to be agreeing to disagree about. If we don't have any opportunity to have conversation, that's where we should start to worry about the phenomenon that's described by Brown and.

[00:29:07] It's a great point. So a couple a couple of comments have come in in the chat, and I'm curious about your reaction to one of them, which is that someone has taken issue with with, I guess, a characterization that we had and notes that most citizens aren't at all interested in truth seeking exercise.

[00:29:30] To the contrary, Americans are far more interested in emotional stimulation and thoughtless entertainment. Indeed, that's a fair description of today's electoral and social politics. What do you make of that?

[00:29:39] Do you really feel like we've moved to do you feel like we've gotten to a point where.

[00:29:50] We're basically Americans are no longer interested in the in the sort of mechanisms that that are required for self governance, I think would be interesting would be the biggie.

[00:30:02] Yeah, I appreciate the challenge. I think the challenge is a good one. If if if what our barometer is, is what we see on social media. I completely understand why that's the takeaway, because it looks because there are mechanisms on social media that that don't reward truth. They don't reward someone. If you if you post something and I and my mind is changed by it, oftentimes that doesn't seem to be the currency of of what elevates your status on social media. It's it's more that you have more people who already agreed with you and you just found new words for them to have sharper, more powerful and inadequate likes.

[00:30:51] But that that is a problem. And I do see that that is part of what's spinning out our conversations towards the polls, and that is a problem.

[00:31:00] Let us remind ourselves, though, of all of the conversations that happen at the dinner table, all of the conversations that happen and that where we can hopefully once again happen have have unmasked conversations across the fence fenceposts with our neighbors or on our patios over a glass of a glass of wine or a beer and and talking about life in the world.

[00:31:25] And not everything is about politics either. And we and we engage in persuasive activity really more often than we do anything else. We're constantly engaged in persuasive activity. I love Giurgiu McCluskey's work on this show economist who writes about the liberal project. But one of the things that she writes about is, is how so much of our commercial lives, so much of our work lives, so much of our family lives is really all about persuasion. It's all about sweet talk. And and sometimes we're in the mode of persuasion as in as an academic exercise. But a lot of times it's it's nudging our colleagues or family members to see the world a little bit more from our vantage point and to see what they might discover there. And so if we start to look across all of the academy, but also civil society and what happens in families and in neighborhoods and in workplaces, so much of our work is about truth seeking, small t truth. Right? It's it's about I think I think that what our client base needs is this. And someone else says, no, I don't know. I think it's that that's still a truth seeking enterprise, even if it's a very casual conversation, even if it's just battering across the back and forth, that the banter back and forth around what a good television show looks like with our neighbors, that still kind of like because I think we're trying to get at the meaning of that television show. And so I actually am more bullish on on Americans being truth seeking animals. We just have to make sure that we're looking for it in all the right places.

[00:33:11] Emily, this has been a terrific conversation. Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you, John. And I hope you'll come back and maybe maybe we can do a clubhouse chat at some point. Yeah. All right. Thanks very much, everybody, for joining.

[00:33:27] Tune in next week on hashtag KnightLive for another deep dove into the dynamics of our cities on coast to coast, the Knight Foundation show that explores building engaged communities in a time of rapid change. As a reminder, this episode will be up on the website later. You can see this episode in any episode on demand at Carfagna of the show. You can also subscribe to the Future of Democracy podcast on Apple, Google, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. Feel free to email us at the show officially ckg if you have any questions and to send us home. The Miami songwriter Nick County follows him on Spotify, thanks for joining us. Have a good week.