

BRIDGING AGAINST RIGHTWING AUTHORITARIANISM:
Creating Coalitions and Sharing Strategies at the
Forum for Democracy and Belonging

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The Democracy and Belonging Forum, based in Berlin, is an institution committed to bridging work, connecting community actors and political organizers towards building a stronger democracy. Their work “aims to build/promote democracies rooted in belonging, reduce fragmentation and mistrust, and oppose authoritarian populism in Europe and the US by connecting and supporting leaders in both regions who are committed to bridging across lines of difference while advancing belonging for marginalized groups.”¹ In collaboration with the UC Berkeley Othering and Belonging Institute, the Forum focuses on supporting and connecting political actors in Europe and the United States towards this aim. The idea of bridging, a term coined by Ross Gittel and Alive Vidal in 1988, describes the practice of connecting across differences. The Forum sees bridging as a crucial part of building strong and diverse political movements with the strategic power to counter authoritarianism and provide alternative social visions. Bridging means working across lines of difference in terms of class, race, political views or otherwise, towards a shared strategic goal. In practice, the Forum facilitates bridging through its work with learning cohorts, which provide space for organizers in different countries and contexts to meet repeatedly over the course of a year to share strategies, difficulties and commonalities between their respective communities. My work there also centered around sharing the results of these collaborative sessions through written and podcast media, as a way to disseminate their insights for a wider audience.

The Forum and its partner, the Othering and Belonging Institute, center their work around the question of creating belonging without othering. In the Forum this question is posed through the lens of democracy. They hold regular conversations about understanding authoritarianism, the relationship between gender and rightwing populism, the difficulties of bridging work and other topics. These conversations are intra-organizational, and serve as gathering spaces for those

¹ [About Us — Democracy & Belonging Forum](#)

in the network - including people from various groups connected to the Forum - to share information and strategize together. These online recorded sessions are made available to partners of the Forum but not the public, while other resources such as the interviews with Catalyzers - the leaders of political communities supported by the Forum - are available through the website. Their work shows how crucial bridging across difference is during the current moment, marked by a rise of rightwing authoritarianism around the world alongside, in the West, a dominant discourse of identity politics and lack of mass movement building on the Left which has weakened progressive political opposition.

However, the idea of bridging also raises questions and potential contradictions. For instance, with whom and ‘how far’ can we bridge? Does bridging with those who hold different values potentially compromise the values of the organizations or movements we are part of? How are marginalized people and organizers affected by the emotional toll of bridging with those in positions of more privilege and/or power? As part of my work at the Forum I was tasked with synthesizing insights from various audiovisual recordings from recent years, from the two series “Making Sense Of” and “Bridgers’ Roundtable.” One event hosted by Christiana Bukalo, founder of Statefree (Germany), and Abir Haj Ibrahim, founder of Mobaderoon Network (Syria) and member of the Women’s Alliance for Security Leadership, focused on these questions, looking at how we can “build more expansive identities that allow for bridging and connection between individuals, while still recognizing differences in power inherent in group identities.” For the creation of mass pro-democracy movements, coalitions between various sectors of civil society and diverse individuals will be necessary. In the discussion sessions and podcasts I worked on throughout my time at the Forum, organizers frequently pointed to the need for people who are able and willing to take the role as bridgers to connect with communities and

organizations different from their own and the expansion of progressive thinking beyond a narrow discourse of identity politics, thought they held a wide variety of views on the way in which bridging does/should happen and the centrality of it in their work. As pointed out by Christiana in the Bridgers' Roundtable recording, the formation of perceived group identity always entails the construction of false similarities as well as false divisions, as with the idea of statelessness. Statefree, the organization where she works, is focused on supporting and working for the rights of stateless people, or those without citizenship in any country. However, statelessness as a social category is far from homogenous, and though the many individuals who are part of Statefree share some similarities based on that experience, they are extremely different in other ways. Christiana raised this point to show that common identity is always partial and bringing people together towards political aims, even those within a shared identity, always entails bridging. On the Forum website they write, quote OBI Director John A. Powell, "we aim to be "hard on systems, and soft on people," recognizing that all of us are products of the systems, institutions, and structures that scaffold our lives. Our focus is thus on engaging with people who are to varying degrees different from ourselves, find points of common ground, learn from each other and share ideas, and work to build power, change systems, and counter efforts that weaken our democratic infrastructure." I found this to be a really interesting way of addressing hate, as it recognizes that hateful rhetoric and action are not intrinsic to certain individuals but rather a result of strategic radicalization by authoritarian institutions and factions, which can only be challenged by engaging both with communities affected by hateful discourse and those who are susceptible to replicating it. I wondered often throughout the summer about the relationship between bridging and addressing hate, as I listened to conversations from organizers working in deeply politically divided communities. Much of their work was focused

on the local and small-scale, whether at the level of the town or family, and they shared hope in the power of personal connection and strong community to challenge authoritarian and rightwing populist rhetoric.

One of my main tasks at the Forum was to produce a series of podcasts in collaboration with Suparna Choudhury and the US-based Horizons Project, whose mission is to “strengthen key relationships, foster collaborations, and channel resources within the system of social change to address injustice, advance societal healing, and reimagine our democracy.”² Suparna had been recording a series of podcast episodes with organizers who had participated in a yearlong cohort at the Horizons Project and asked me to produce them. As a sound editor, my work involved listening to the voices of these people who I’d never met, over and over. They felt strangely familiar although I knew nothing about them other than what they shared in the episode, but it was extremely interesting to hear older activists and experienced community organizers talking about their work and ideas for building a just future and countering hate. In one episode, guests Julia Royg and Jarvis Williams talk about the process of change through learning in community. Julia describes her work at the Horizons Project as “connecting ideas, connecting people” towards democracy, though she also questions whether democracy is the best word for what they as an organization are working towards. She is an experienced facilitator and had played a central role in leading conversations during the meetings of the cohort. Jarvis also works at Horizons and formerly at OBI, “at the intersection of religious, academic, policy, and non-profit institutions.” One of the things he shared in that episode has really stuck in my memory. He said, this work is “the politics of using your voice and your agency to help people to hear again, what they’ve stopped listening to. . . That’s what resistance in this movement is gonna require. You

² [Mission, Vision & Values - Horizons](#)

have to find a way to get your audience to hear you again. How do you do that when they've stopped listening to you, or they've programmed themselves to not hear the words you're trying to use. What do you do then?" During the current moment, when hate and division are thriving through political siloing and polarized, algorithmically fueled online discourse, reaching and being heard by the people you're trying to engage is crucial. Jarvis touches on the way in which hate thrives in isolation and in the absence of a shared foundation of understanding. Because of the way in which people often engage politically - through accelerated digital media - there is a lack of grounding in physical political community, allowing hateful discourse to be rapidly and easily shared through online groups that are separated from physical communities, which are more likely to be ideologically diverse. On the other hand, progressive political discourse also becomes separated from the public at large, through the same process of digital siloing. Communicating across that divide is ever more important and, as Jarvis brought up in the episode, the need for a shared language and ability to truly listen is at the heart of political organizing across difference. Later in the episode, Julia poses the question, "How do we support each other in leaning into discomfort?" As we work to counter hate, we must not only challenge the narratives of the groups and individuals we see as promoting hate, but also our own organizations and communities which can also operate in ways that harm our organizing, such as refusing to recognize dynamics of marginalization, faulty strategy or interpersonal conflict. This is uncomfortable and in some ways more difficult than condemning and countering hate as an abstract or far from ourselves. In the learning cohorts, the Horizons organizers were challenged to rethink the ways in which they engage across lines of difference and communicate their message. Being able to engage in constructive conflict is required for the sustaining of movements and all types of relationships, and I appreciated the way in which the conversations

taking place at the Forum brought to the forefront the need for organizers to come together despite disagreements while maintaining strong grounding in their values. Because of the current authoritarian trends in the US, Germany and elsewhere where the Forum works, various organizers in the podcast series brought up the need to move away from a narrowly identitarian organizing focus towards strategies which hold the tension of difference while connecting a wide range of communities into multi-racial, variably situated and progressive coalitions. Therefore, one of the intended goals of the Horizons cohort learning group was to foster the interpersonal skills necessary for that work, including the capacity to disagree, hold discomfort and recognize the difference between safety and comfort. Hate is often invoked through a language of safety - 'Dangerous, criminal immigrants are crossing the border' or 'Trans people will attack you in a public toilet.' This rhetoric is not logical but rather emotionally evocative and relies on reflexive dehumanization of structurally marginalized and othered communities. As we work to counter these narratives, we must remain aware of the reasons why far-right strategies have been so effective in mobilizing large numbers of people towards hateful ends. Progressive organizers must provide counternarratives which address the underlying anxiety around safety and lack of resources that is being used to draw people to authoritarian structures. Over and over in conversations at the Forum, people brought up the observation that politicization occurs in community, where people find a sense of safety - belonging. Hate thrives through providing a 'community' based on othering, which uses this narrative of safety while making many (arguably all) people less safe, and so effective countering must strive to create community based on mutual support and genuine safety for all. Drawing the distinction between comfortability and safety is necessary, as is learning to be uncomfortable to the extent that we can hold space for disagreement, difference and multiplicity.

My role in the Forum as a Communications Intern was focused on using various media to convey the information and insights of various discussions taking place between Forum members. Communication therefore played a central role in my investigation of hate and the ways in which it spreads. How does language work as a tool of mis/communication and how does the intended audience reveal the best format or mode of communication? In the podcasts I was editing, some of the speakers requested certain edits and for some things they said to be removed. In a climate of rising fascism, these organizers, especially those in the US, were concerned about the possibility of saying something that reflected badly on the organizations where they worked. The tension between what they wanted to say and the way they wanted it to be communicated was evident in the behind-the-scenes listening I did during the editing process, as occasionally someone would note that they wanted a sentence taken out or at the end, when I was asked to include a disclosure stating that the views expressed in the episodes were that of the individuals, not of the Horizons Project or the institutions where the activists worked. The Forum had also requested that I not use any AI for my work as a matter of digital safety, since they had recently agreed as an organization on an AI ban to keep members' information more safe after some issues with visas and border control during travel. When governments lean towards authoritarianism, a chilling effect can occur in the political sphere as dissenters try to walk the line of standing firm in their values without endangering themselves, and it was interesting to witness the combination of people speaking clearly and relatively openly about progressive political organizing with a background of awareness that repression was possible if things were not carefully communicated. In audio editing communication also extends beyond the words that people say into the sound and quality of the recordings. Much of my time went into adjusting peoples' voices to give them more presence (make them sound more clear and closer to the mic)

and removing the awkward silences and moments of confusion. In this way, the media changes the message by smoothing out the creases and cracks which a live conversation might have. Although I didn't change anything drastically, I did find it interesting to consider how the adjustments to a person's voice or rhythm of speech affects the way that they are perceived through the audio and in turn, how their message comes across. In the intro to each episode, I selected a snippet of each speaker's voice to include as a hook, and for this I tried to choose parts of the recording that felt engaging and accessible to a wide audience, for instance clips about finding common ground. I wondered whether these recordings would reach people who didn't already agree with the messages being shared, and this brought me to question the extent to which political media is able to bridge outside of the community it emerges from. Through my conversations with my supervisor, Lara, I deepened my understanding of what communications work is and how, when done well, it becomes invisible. The media should

At times during the summer, I felt very disconnected from the rest of the team at the Forum, since all of our work was done online and our meetings, held once a week, were over Google Calendar. Working on projects such as audio editing and online interviews meant that most of my time at the Forum was spent collaborating and communicating digitally, and while I appreciated the flexibility I also missed the chance to have more casual and in person conversations. The team at the Forum is very small - only four people - while the OBI which it works with is located on the other side of the world in San Francisco, so it makes sense for most interactions to happen through phone or email, but it did affect the way that I related to the work. It was interesting to work for an organization that focuses on building and connecting communities as a core tool against hate and authoritarianism, yet doesn't provide physical space to connect within the organization or between partner communities. This felt like somewhat of a

disconnect for me, and raised questions about the nature of online collaboration and its strengths and weaknesses for political organizing. For my work on the podcasts, I would call Suparna, who lives in Canada, and we would often describe where we were sitting and what we could see before getting into our discussion of the audio. One day I sat down with my laptop to go over the soundscape draft for the podcast intro, and was sitting on the balcony of my apartment listening to the trains come into the station behind me, the garden with corn growing below. She was at a lake near Montreal, with her two children, and sent me a photo of them playing in the water just a few minutes earlier. It was beautiful and strange to work for months with someone who I would likely never meet in person, yet who was doing the important work of bridging and organizing against hate far away in another country. After we put down the phone, I was left with the feeling that I was working alongside countless people who I would never meet, all over the world, to create political change. I had a similar feeling when I would interview Catalyzers about their work, or listen to the voices of the guests on the podcasts. I admired them and learned so much from listening to their experiences.

The Othering and Belonging Institute that the Forum, as the European branch, emerged from, defines belonging as “having a meaningful voice and the opportunity to participate in the design of political, social, and cultural structures that shape one’s life — the right to both contribute and make demands upon society and political institutions. At its core, structural belonging holds a radically inclusive vision because it requires mutual power, access, and opportunity among all groups and individuals within a shared container (such as a society, organization, club, etc).” Because belonging functions on multiple levels at the same time, individuals can feel a sense of belonging to a community or movement even in the absence of complete societal belonging. Therefore, when authoritarian regimes hold power and advance

narratives of division and hatefulness, it becomes even more important to cultivate belonging on the scale of interpersonal relationships, communities and political collectives. In a recent article written by the Forum, the practice of Authentic Relational Conversations is shared as a bridging tactic of a progressive network in Idaho called the United Vision Project. Volunteers at the organization are trained to engage in text-message based communication with a white, conservative, Christian demographic. Rather than focus on trying to persuade interlocutors to change their position, the volunteers are taught to focus on building connection, empathizing and listening. Sometimes the perspectives that messengers share are hateful or discriminatory, and it can be difficult for volunteers to remain curious and empathetic without feeling that they're participating in a hateful conversation. However, attempts to persuade or politically challenge strangers are almost universally unsuccessful, and so without a solid base of connection, hateful views cannot be shifted. Reflecting on this work of listening, one volunteer wrote that "all I can hope is that I've planted a seed. The point isn't to change anyone's mind, but I want to make sure there is someone there to listen. There is nothing more powerful to me than disarming someone filled with rage with just some understanding and a "tell-me-more" attitude."³ I can see the way in which these conversations can provide belonging that counters the political siloing between progressive and conservative communities, although I also question whether text-messages with relative strangers can actually shift someone's political perspective.

The Forum's approach to hate, that of bridging and building strong connections, holds potential during times of political polarization and rightwing populism. My time there brought into focus the need to focus on methods of communication and relational skills in progressive political organizing, and to see hate in relation to othering and belonging. I now see more clearly

³ [A Different Kind of Power: How Authentic Relational Conversations Lay the Groundwork for Democratic Renewal — Democracy & Belonging Forum](#)

the ways in which hate arises from the manipulation of people's anxieties and desires, and how strong and diverse communities can counter the narratives of division that authoritarian leaders and institutions spread. I am grateful to all the organizers and mentors from whom I was able to learn, and for the chance to work on sharing their insights within and beyond the Forum.