

THE *Current*

October 4, 2024

[Keith Hamm](#)

Tania Israel's new book teaches civil conversations in divisive times

Tania Israel is no stranger to divisive conversations. Back in the 1990s, she started a group to bring together pro-choice and pro-life people through dialogue. And for the past 25 years, as an expert on LGBTQ issues, she's interacted with plenty of people with whom she does not see eye to eye.

Leading up to the 2016 presidential election, once-amiable Americans were clearly having trouble connecting across political and cultural divides. When the trend did not slow down after the election, Israel recognized a disintegration of dialogue and sought to address it through her unique lens.

"As a counseling psychologist who does interventions, I am not as much about investigating the problem as I am about investigating solutions," said Israel, a professor in the Department of Counseling, Clinical & School Psychology at UC Santa Barbara and author of the newly released "Facing the Fracture: How to Navigate the Challenges of Living in a Divided Nation" (Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2024). "I thought, 'Is there something I can do to help?'"

Solutions, she knew, often emerged from effective communication, and she drew from her growing collection of dialogue-based resources to craft her first book, "Beyond Your Bubble: How to connect across the political divide" (APA LifeTools Series, 2020).

However, deep into the pandemic, Israel observed divisive speech ramping up again, and the vitriol continued to climb heading toward the 2024 presidential election. She realized she had more work to do.

Let's start with a brief synopsis of your first book and more detail on how that work led to your new book.

Tania Israel: "Beyond Your Bubble" was about how to have dialogue across political differences with a skills-based approach to listening and how to manage the emotions that come up when someone is saying something that pushes your buttons. The book presents a clear path about how to have dialogue and develop those skills.

But I also heard from a lot of people who said, 'You know, dialogue isn't my main problem.' Either they don't want to talk to those other people, or they don't have anybody like that in their lives. But they were saying, 'I'm still losing it. What do you have for me?'

As I listened to the challenges people were facing beyond dialogue, I realized that there were things about the way we're interacting with media, and with our cognitive biases, and the way we encounter a lawn sign or a bumper sticker — it wasn't all about how we were interacting with other people. What was standing in the way of dialogue wasn't necessarily just a lack of skills. There was also a lack of desire because of some of the ways we think about people on the 'other side' really had to do with the media and social media content of people being extreme and hostile, compounded with our own cognitive biases. The work I'm doing now with "Facing the Fracture" is really taking a more comprehensive approach to how we can manage those stressors.

I'm a psychologist — I have to talk about what's going on in our minds. We gobble up content that's consistent with our biases that tend to see other people as more extreme, less informed and more hostile and irrational than they truly are.

And aren't the algorithms to blame for feeding our biases?

You would think that that's the case, but there's actually research where they were like, 'Fine, let's get rid of the algorithms.' It turns out that it's the way we're using social media that's actually really problematic — we just want to look at the things

that support what we already believe to be true. It turns out social media is not the best realm to grapple with political division. So even if the algorithms aren't driving it, our own confirmation bias is driving it. We ignore or dismiss things that aren't consistent with our existing beliefs. And this has been going on long before social media became so prominent.

Early in the book, you explain that people's differences of opinion are often not as far apart as they think. Talk about this perception gap.

We overestimate the distance between Democrats' and Republicans' opinions, for example. There's decades of research showing that. People think that the big problem right now is that we have radically different views from each other. But the problem is not so much that our views are different. The problem actually has to do with affective polarization, which is the animosity we feel toward people who hold different views than we do. And that is what has increased dramatically over the last few years. Increasingly, people do not want to live near, work with, or have a family member marry someone in another political party — that's what is really breaking apart the bonds in our society.

You also write about media literacy as a valuable tool.

People often talk about media literacy to combat misinformation, and people are very concerned about misinformation. What I'm going to tell you now is not what most people are saying about misinformation, but it's what the data say: Misinformation is not as prevalent as we think it is, and it also doesn't have as direct an impact on behavior as we think it does.

We love to think that misinformation is a huge problem for the 'other side,' and we very seldom think that it's a problem for 'our side.' But we're not divided so much because of misinformation as by misperception. We're divided because we misperceive the other side to be much more different from ourselves, and we do that because we are exposing ourselves to a very narrow range of information, and at the same time, those 'other people' are exposing themselves to a very different, narrow range of information. When they aren't aware of what we're aware of, we think, 'Oh, they don't have the right information; they're misinformed.'

'They're ignorant.'

Exactly. And both sides think that. What we need to focus on are the narratives, the media narratives, the stories that we are drawn to, the support for those stories, and to recognize that a narrative about an issue is not the only story. There are other narratives about the same issue, with information that supports those other narratives.

Knowing this might not change what we think about the issue, but it might change how we feel about people who disagree with us, and that's going to be much more important for bridging the divide and resolving interpersonal challenges than simply trying to spot misinformation.

Is it practical to inform ourselves via multiple narratives on a certain topic? That sounds like a lot of work.

The trick is not to try to immerse yourself in all narratives. That could be a real challenge. What you want to do is simply recognize that you are being exposed to a particular narrative and ideally have some curiosity about what other narratives might be out there. You don't have to go seek them all out.

But what it might lead you to do is this — When you are confronted with somebody or have the opportunity to engage with somebody who has a different view, rather than promoting your own view, you might try to broaden it by trying to understand more, like, 'What am I missing here? What can this person share that I have not been exposed to?'

At the same time, how important is it to reduce the amount of polarizing input that we absorb? What about just turning down the volume a little bit?

Most of the breaking news alerts that we get on our phones can wait. Turn off your notifications. No doom scrolling before bed. People keep telling me that they can't sleep, and I say, 'Well, what are you doing right before bed?' They're reading the news and they're doom scrolling.

Remember when we used to read books or watch a little TV before bed?

Yes, but now we have other stories that we're very interested in. But we can create some boundaries around our media consumption. We can turn away from our screens and toward three-dimensional human beings — and they don't even have to

be people who disagree with us.

After we've sorted through the noise, what does it mean to build capacity?

Once we've turned down the volume, what do we want to build up? What we want to build up first is resilience. We want to have the capacity to face challenging situations, and to bounce back or even learn from them.

For example?

We have physiological reactions to things that feel like threats. In a politically polarized environment, even a lawn sign, a bumper sticker or a hat can trigger those fight, flight or freeze responses. This goes back to human evolution. Humans evolved living in small groups of people, and we relied on those small groups because it was a harsh environment and we couldn't survive without them. We were protecting ourselves and our people from the environment and from other small groups who we competed with for scarce resources.

Our brains developed thinking, "Our group is good and protective and the other group is a threat to survival." And today we are using our very old brains and viewing the current political landscape in that way. It's perfectly natural to do that.

So what do we do?

First we recognize that that's what is happening. So when we experience a threat, we can sort it out: Am I unsafe or am I unsettled? That's a very important skill to have, to know if we should really fight or flee, or should we try to calm our nervous system? Should we do some deep breathing? Should you ground yourself physically, just by feeling the chair underneath you? These things will help to get you out of that automatic response that your body produces.

Later in the book, you write about strengthening connections.

Strengthening our connections to others is important, but we're not always ready to lead with that, and that's why it doesn't come until the last part of the book. You can go through two thirds of the book without ever having another conversation with a human being. After you finish part two in the book, I say, 'Maybe you've gotten everything you need out of this, and then you can just stop here. But maybe at this

point, you might be interested in engaging with other people.’

If you are trying to engage across the divide, there are some effective ways of doing that, ways of approaching those conversations with curiosity and thinking about the context and your goals.

How might we engage?

There are a lot of ways to work with people, such as volunteering, coaching, tutoring and working toward common goals. Engaging with actual humans, rather than with their social media accounts, can help us to break out of those narrow views of who other people are. Not only can volunteering help your community, but it’s also good for you.

Anything you’d like to add?

The more that I have gotten engaged in this work, the more good news I see and the more optimistic I am. The more I work on political division, the more I see people coming together. There’s a bridging movement in the U.S., more than 500 organizations working on strengthening our social cohesion and our democracy. And they aren’t trying to make money off of this. It’s just a passion. People are seeing a problem and trying to solve it. That’s very encouraging. It really restores my faith in humanity and the future of our country.

Tags

[Books](#)

Media Contact

Keith Hamm

Social Sciences, Humanities & Fine Arts Writer

(805) 893-2191

keithhamm@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community

of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.