

## SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

### Civic experiment shows knowledge changes minds

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Mark Aberle, a retail-supply manager who lives in North Bend, thought he was pretty well informed about the thorny international issues of our times.

After all, "I watch CNN. I watch Fox. I watch the news all the time," he said.

Then he spent all day Saturday listening to experts and talking with strangers about America's role in Iraq, in global trade and in the world generally. Now, he feels not nearly informed enough.

And that was the point of Saturday's "By the People" civic experiment in Seattle and nine other cities, organized by public television's MacNeil/Lehrer Productions and co-sponsored locally by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

In each city, two groups -- scientifically selected from the local community -- were polled on national security and trade policies. And in each city, one group spent the whole day talking and listening, while the other didn't, producing two sets of widely divergent views.

The idea was to illustrate how public opinion might change if people had more information and spent more time thinking about it.

For example, 68 percent of the 80 men and women who talked all day in Seattle believed that the war in Iraq impeded rather than advanced the international war on terrorism.

But only 42 percent of the other Seattle group believed so, according to By the People spokeswoman Dana Robinson Slote.

Also, 46 percent of the talking group believed that the North American Free Trade Agreement helped the U.S. economy, compared with 20 percent of the non-talking group.

"It's surprising how being educated more about the issues can make a difference," said Ronan Murphy, 34, an Everett neurologist and an Irish immigrant who became a U.S. citizen in 2000.

Murphy said he came to Saturday's discussion thinking that free trade is generally a good thing. But he didn't realize that many poorer countries are not part of the World Trade Organization process, and that polluting the global environment and even forcing people into slavery will not necessarily exclude countries from trading.

"We have to have some way of saying, 'We aren't going to buy this unless you meet this very minimal standard,' " Murphy said.

Both Murphy and Aberle said they received information, not indoctrination, from the experts leading Saturday's discussion, although Aberle said he detected a slight "left bias."

Another participant, Jim Watson, a teacher who lives in West Seattle, said: "I read a lot. I'm well-educated. I'm older, so I'm interested in passing along a world ... that would be good for my grandchildren."

Still, despite diligently following local TV and print news, he was startled to learn Saturday that the Bush White House has a policy of "pre-emptive war" -- attacking countries based on perceived threats.

"That is a shift," he said. "I'm 61. We have never had that policy before."

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*P-I reporter Larry Johnson contributed to this report.*

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