

Proposal for a Network of Deliberation

The nation needs a collective dialogue. A wide variety of economic, environmental, and political problems demand a deeper involvement from civil society. We need to invite new ideas, and to ensure that the best ideas are discovered, refined, and acted upon.

To make this discussion effective, we need new structures for deliberative problem solving which invite involvement, learning, commitment, and effective solutions. International debate summits and scientific journals provide models, but they are too slow and exclusive. Wikipedia represents another vision of collaboration, it is not focused on deliberation.

The Deliberative Network is a response to this problem, by providing a new structure of social interaction. The Deliberative Code, laid out below, sets the rules for this network. It supports deliberation by many means, including through meetings, wikis, and journals, while encouraging the results of those many forums to mingle and evolve.

While this proposal encourages many forms for the network and its constituents, a new kind of online forum brings these ideas most clearly into focus. The closest analog is MIT's Deliberatorium. However, the engagement envisioned here extends far beyond the online realm, so I will wait until the third section to lay out a concrete proposal for the technological component.

Under this proposal, each group in the network would hold meetings and create a publication (online or in print). The publication would be an opportunity to develop ideas between meetings, and share ideas across institutions. Articles in the publications would be entirely available for reprinting, merging, and general derivation by any other member of the network, with appropriate attribution. This process of sharing and re-sharing articles and their revisions will be central to the deliberative process.

Also central is the relationships between the articles. By providing ways to build connections between our ideas, the articles themselves form a network of connections, responding to each other, providing counterpoints and justifications. This aims toward a kind of map of any issue, by finding the minimum complete collection of responses to a point, and the responses to those responses, and so on.

Together, the code provides a set of rules for a vast decentralized network of dialogue. The network would consist of online and print publications nationwide, which share articles and convene discussions. The best ideas and more important connections would be built upon and refined, and filtered into proposals worth acting on.

A Code for Deliberation

The rules for the Deliberative Network are embodied in this code. Groups gain the benefits of using the material on the network in return for adhering to this code, which includes both rights and responsibilities.

1. Any individual or organization may join the Deliberative Network by adhering to this code in full. Below, all such individuals and organizations are referred to as “publications”.
2. Any publication may reprint any non-proprietary content on other adhering publications, according to the following rules. All non-proprietary articles are subject to reprinting and derivation. Proprietary articles must be marked as such.
3. Non-proprietary articles must begin with a preface, containing a title, attribution, and relationships (defined below). If the article is longer than a page, the preface should include a synopsis.
4. The attribution includes contributing authors for all original content. If the article is copied or derived from one or more sources, the attributions must include the term "copied from" or "derived from", respectively, followed by the original publication information.
5. Relationships are a list of related or referenced articles. All articles must have at least one relationship to another article. Example relationships are "extended by", "addition to", "contextualized by", and "response to".
6. The publication must provide ways to respond to articles. Responses follow the same rules given here for articles. Publications have the responsibility to publish the best responses as related articles.
7. When an article is copied from another publication, the responses and other relationships should be copied or merged, aiming to reduce redundant points.
8. The publication must advertise meeting opportunities to discuss articles. Notes from the meeting must be published, as revised articles and key responses, before the next meeting.

9. The publication must review at least one other publication. Reviewing a publication consists of reading its articles, contributing appropriate responses to them, and reprinting the best articles.

10. Reference to this code must be provided on the front page of the publication.

11. A list of publications adhering to this code will be published online. If a publication fails to follow these rules, it will be removed.

An Online Structure for the Deliberative Network

At the center of the Deliberative Network, at least in the near term, would be an open-source website. The website would embody the code of the deliberative network, making it easy for people start their own forums. These forums would act as many entry points into the site, and new forums would instantly have access to re-post the entire wealth of material available throughout the network, with their own changes and ideas for how the ideas can be related.

However, far from being a collection of static fora, the default form of articles on the Deliberative Network website would be highly dynamic and interactive. A user can sift through the entirety of the network of ideas surrounding one problem or proposal, and add ideas of their own. Their activity would then inform how this vast collection is presented to future users. One can think of the online form of the Deliberative Network as a cross between Wikipedia, MIT's Deliberatorium, and github (an open-source collaboration site).

Whereas Wikipedia aims to present a canonical version of any topic, the Deliberative Network would invite new ideas. When someone has a response-- positive, negative, or new-- to any element of an article, they can form either a new version of that section of the article, or a link to their response. These response would act like a dialogue embodied in a network. Users could explore the objections to an idea; the responses to those objections; and other versions of the article that incorporate the ideas that come out of these discussions.

Whereas the Deliberatorium has a single version of each response, the Deliberative Network would have many. The form of an article that is posted most often would be the default view of it, but users could explore the network of versions of that article, including prior versions, proposed edits, responses, and mergings between articles. This would be true of both whole articles and all of their component sections.

Like github, forums would be free to create copies of the an entire article's dialogue network to clean up and re-target. These new networks would both be available to others both

explicitly, as independent branches, and implicitly as they search through the range of ideas on a topic.

Finally, many of these collaborative features would be transparent, in the sense that it would be easy to just focus on the “cream of the crop”. The best ideas would float to the top, and be readily available to answer any question. However, in the spirit of deliberation, rather than providing a single answer to any question, the Deliberative Network site would offer a range, along with the discussions that lead to them and result from them.