Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions

Naming and Framing Difficult Issues to Make Sound Decisions is a report for people who want a stronger hand in shaping their collective future and recognize that this requires working through disagreements on what the future should be. Replacing an earlier publication, Framing Issues for Public Deliberation, this booklet incorporates the foundation’s latest insights on how people can describe problems and present different ways to address them so as to encourage sound judgments and avoid immobilizing polarization.

Kettering Foundation | 2011
FREE | 24 pages

Working Through Difficult Decisions

Working Through Difficult Decisions is a brochure for people interested in helping their communities work through their most challenging problems and for anyone interested in moderating forums based on National Issues Forums materials. The brochure speaks to how people can move beyond disagreements to arrive at shared and reflective judgments.

Kettering Foundation | 2011
FREE | 12 pages

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering’s primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering’s research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s website at www.kettering.org.

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Take a look at newspaper comment sections, Reddit forums, and your friends’ Facebook feeds: people are talking past each other, denouncing other points of view, generally hyperventilating. It’s easy to get the impression that deliberative decision making doesn’t—and simply cannot—occur online.

But, actually, this is much like the impression you can get from watching too much cable news—that the only sane thing to do is buy a lot of water and canned goods and move to someplace way, way off the grid. This instinct can certainly strike any of us (particularly when stuck watching something like Headline News in an airport), but it isn’t entirely rational—and neither is dismissing the
Online Deliberative Decision Making

Advantages and Challenges of Online Deliberative Decision Making

Advantages
- Removes location barriers to participation (though does depend on Internet access).
- Removes time barriers to participation (in some formats).
- Easier to capture conversations and reports about forums.
- Popular with younger citizens, which is necessary to keep the deliberative democracy movement vital.

Challenges
- People currently tend to use online communication platforms more for self-expression than active listening.
- Anonymity can undercut some of the conversational norms that normally support deliberative talk.
- People most commonly use the Web for shorter interactions than fully deliberative naming, framing, and choice making require.
- Can be intimidating to older or less tech-savvy citizens, who make up much of the current deliberative network.

Online deliberative decision making has ground rules used to promote active listening and the confrontation of trade-offs and tensions. While it is true that few spaces online promote or enforce such rules of discourse formally, neither do most places of face-to-face talk. And yet, at Kettering, we’re gathering evidence that people can indeed find ways to bring deliberative reasoning to their everyday talk. (See Erika Mason-Imbody’s article “Deliberative Opportunities in Everyday Political Talk,” p. 8.) There is no reason to believe that online conversation cannot do the same or at least be a valid part of an organic deliberative system.

That said, the online medium itself has characteristics that may inhibit deliberative reasoning; for example, the shorter attention span and lack of face-to-face social cues. Again, however, face-to-face situations have their own inherent challenges—they’re just different from those online. All of this means that the arena is ripe for experimentation and innovation. Some of these innovations might take the relatively subtle forms of questions or interventions that can be used in everyday communications online. Other innovations might more directly introduce participants of online dialogues to deliberative decision making in more structured ways.

Kettering is closely observing a number of experiments using a variety of platforms and tools to hold online deliberative forums: Joni Doherty (Franklin Pierce University) recently conducted an A Nation in Debt forum using a time-limited, asynchronous online message board format. Betty Knighton (West Virginia Center for Civic Life) is currently partnering with the design firm Intellictics to test its new online engagement platform, which uses a similar set of tools and features, using the center’s early childhood issue framing. We’re also observing a diverse range of other experiments with online deliberation—from Lucas Cioffi’s onlinetownhalls.com to the Civic Commons (funded by the Knight Foundation), to games and planning platforms developed by the Engagement Lab at Emerson College. We want to learn how these innovators are working to take advantage of the medium and how they are overcoming its challenges.

We will continue to encourage learning from other experiments. Beginning this fall, Kettering will work with San Jose-based Conteneo to develop an online game engine. The objective is to provide an online experience where people can deliberate with others in order to identify or create as much common ground as authentically possible. Many games exist that help citizens to deliberate over a particular issue, especially in the fields of planning and budgeting, but this template should enable participants to deliberate over any wicked problem, from budget priorities to immigration to privacy. That’s the hypothesis, anyway—the experiment will be the games themselves.

How the game will be played:
- Participants will join a game with no more than seven other participants, plus a moderator. They’ll watch the beginning section of a National Issues Forums (NIF) starter video introducing
### Online Deliberative Decision Making

#### A System in Crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step up security along our borders</th>
<th>Strengthen America’s commitment to refugees</th>
<th>Rein in benefits to undocumented immigrants</th>
<th>Provide temporary legal residency for unauthorized immigrants who are minors</th>
<th>Create a seasonal or temporary visa program for agricultural workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blue</strong> = Option 1 actions</td>
<td><strong>Orange</strong> = Option 2 actions</td>
<td><strong>Yellow</strong> = Option 3 actions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a path to citizenship</td>
<td>Issue green cards to foreign students who graduate from US universities</td>
<td>Give states greater latitude to crack down on illegal immigration</td>
<td>Restrict the number of illegal immigrants legally admitted into the US</td>
<td>Shorten the wait time for employer-sponsored green cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear the backlog of immigrants</td>
<td>Make annual adjustments to the number of immigrant workers allowed into the US</td>
<td>Invest in education, communications, and infrastructure in Mexico</td>
<td>Strengthen the naturalization process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### An example of the screen participants in the online forum/game based on the NIF issue guide about immigration, A System in Crisis, might see at the end of their deliberation. The game is able to instantaneously compile the final deliberations of each individual and show the group where there is common ground for action, as well as where there is disagreement. The technology allows participants to clearly visualize the results of the deliberation, and, in the next slide, to contrast the results of the conversation they had together with what would have resulted from simply aggregating the individual preferences submitted before the deliberation began.

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them to the issue and the options. Participants will choose and rank their top seven actions. This information is aggregated and saved but not revealed immediately to the participants.

- Then the actual deliberation begins. Guided by a moderator, participants will discuss options just as they would in a regular NIF forum, but via chat (text, not voice, for reasons to be discussed below). At the end of the discussion, participants will be asked to choose the actions they now support and to rank them. They will then be asked to choose whether they accept, reject, or are conflicted about the trade-off and to enter their reasons in a comment box. All of the participants’ responses will be combined into a single visual graph that will distinguish three kinds of actions: Those that are supported and involve trade-offs that are acceptable, those that are supported but involve unacceptable trade-offs, and those that aren’t supported.

- This graphic is a visual representation of the common ground they were able to identify or create together. The moderator will then reveal a second graphic showing the pre-deliberative rankings the participants submitted. The group can then compare and contrast the decision the group would have made with the decision they made after deliberating together.

- These gamelike features were added to the basic NIF forum design to keep people actively engaged for the length of time it takes to examine options and trade-offs despite the lack of in-person stimuli and to take advantage of the medium’s ability to track the evolution of thinking in a much more detailed way than can be done without digital media. This is the reason we’re beginning with text-only chat, rather than voice—capturing all those citizen conversations and choices will provide a wealth of data to analyze. And because the information is captured as it is entered by the participant, rather than being paraphrased or summarized in a moderator’s report, we think it may be even more useful for policymakers and citizens alike.

- We’re designing this game template so that, eventually, any and all NIF issue guides can be used within it. As people participate, they’ll be helping us to test it, which will give us new ideas for changes or additions to the game design. Over time, we’ll be able to test and compare various iterations and really zero in on the factors that affect deliberation.

- We’re very excited about the research possibilities—if you have ideas about possible experiments in this area, or know of research we should consider as we begin, please get in touch. Just, you know, no flaming.

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