



Creating Civil Dialogue Across Ideological Lines

A CAPE working paper on digital engagement

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Do Americans actually talk to people who disagree with them anymore? Over the past decade, there has been considerable commentary on whether we are becoming two nations, divided by values and perspectives, whether you call them “Red States/Blue States,” “Metro vs Retro,” or something else. Talking to those who disagree is the essence of civil society, and fundamental to true civic engagement. Yet people seem to increasingly get their news from ideologically comforting sources and live in communities of like-minded people. Both how we get our information and how we interact with each other – or fail to – seem to be driving our political debate.

But what kind of information do people need to make sound decisions? And what kind of technological platform could help people talk to those different than themselves? Public Agenda plans to use its election guides, along with a new social networking platform, to experiment in ways where those who disagree about solutions but at least agree on a problem can open discussions with each other.

Election guides

Since 1996, Public Agenda has produced election guides based on our distinctive Choicework approach. Citizen Choicework Guides build on the insights of Public Agenda's cofounder Daniel Yankelovich on how the public comes to judgment on tough issues. The model is based on the recognition that people's views change over time as they learn about an issue, work through conflicts and become more comfortable with new ideas. Public Agenda's engagement work is specifically designed to help people move ahead in this learning curve. It is based on a commitment to helping citizens – individually and collectively – confront tough choices in productive ways. By doing so, people work through values conflicts and practical trade-offs, and develop a sense of priorities and direction.

In our Choicework Discussion Guides we offer readers an “issues grid” laying out different alternatives, or choices, for addressing a problem. Each presents a different point of view, with the benefits and possible costs clearly laid out. Our research and experience with public engagement has shown that presenting alternatives is critical in helping people work through to a decision. It's equally important that the choices be more than a “yes/no” decision and for potential trade-offs clearly stated.

This approach has become a centerpiece to our election guides, precisely because media coverage of presidential campaigns is so focused on “horserace” coverage. Our guides are unique in that they usually do not even mention candidates. Instead, they probe issues, laying out the basic facts and detailing three alternative approaches the nation could take to solve these problems. Each guide is transparently nonpartisan, thanks to the Choicework approach. The guides have been used by organizations ranging from the League of Women Voters to MTV.

Historically, our election guides have been an editorial product – and when it comes to making good voting decisions, content is only part of the picture. Part of the decision-making process is discussing issues with other people. But if current social networking applications encourage seeking out those who already agree with you, how can the average voter – who is likely not intensely partisan – seek out other views?

Initiative Overview

There are a plethora of social networking sites on the Internet, all focused on enabling friends, family, and acquaintances to connect with each other and share information about their lives. In the political sphere, online social interaction is defined by like-minded communities and discussion forums where people typically interact around similar viewpoints.

Interaction is very limited between people with different opinions, backgrounds and life stories. Not only are current social applications not well designed for facilitating dialogue, but the closest functionality – discussion forums – are populated with hundreds of comments reacting to the news of the day either preaching to the choir or disparaging those on other side in open flame wars.

Public Agenda and Ideologue, Inc. have partnered together to tackle this key problem on the internet, where people with different views on the important issues of our time are unable to effectively talk with each other. Networking between people on opposite sides of the political spectrum remains unaddressed among the numerous social networking applications.

The technologies to engage with people are commonplace; the challenge is developing an effective networking and dialogue architecture that extends online interaction patterns to difficult issues. Over the last year Ideologue, Inc. has been building a new Internet application, called Mediem, to create social networking that helps people interact around critical life issues.

One-on-one to many

Mediem emphasizes the process of seeking out those with different views, starting one-on-one dialogues and publishing those discussions to a wider audience. The user experience offers an opportunity to break the barriers we currently experience. Each Mediem user will be able to create a profile of topics they're interested in and some sense of their personal ideology. Once logged in, users can reach out to those who share similar concerns, but different ideologies, and open a one-on-one dialogue with them. Those dialogues can result in a co-authored "white paper," a sort of two-person wiki, that these two participants can then post to the larger Mediem community for comment.

This approach has enormous potential for reaching across partisan divides or for engagement work in polarized communities. The one-on-one connection removes some of the difficulties inherent in managing large discussions. The kind of "flaming" that can drive participants away from larger online discussions is unlikely in one-on-one situations. This allows people who might shy away from talking to each other in real-world settings, or who may never have the opportunity, to make connections.

The application is also designed for co-branding and integration with existing website structure and content. With Public Agenda, the architecture represents a good opportunity to integrate Public Agenda's successful election guides distributed via Webby-nominated publicagenda.org. Public Agenda's distinctive election approach focuses on issues rather than candidates, an excellent match for the issues-centric approach that Mediem is taking to facilitating peer interaction.

How Mediem Works

The Mediem experience is summarized in the following workflow:



Users first define their views on issues they care about, which in turn enables the ability to connect with people with different perspectives. From there, users can invite others to a dialogue on the topics of their choosing. One-to-one dialogue is the core experience on the application, but Mediem also takes the experience one step further – enabling collaboration between people to further problem solve around issues of disagreement. Collaborative documents could be edited dialogues to share findings with the public, joint opinions on how to move forward, or letters to policymakers.

Describe and Connect

Mediem provides a multi-faceted identity expression framework that enables people to define both high-level attributes such as nationality, occupation, and religion, as well as very detailed and nuanced policy opinions. Using sliding scales in conjunction with expandable issue trees, participants can easily and quickly create a very detailed personal profile. While very detailed, the identity as a person is still anonymous, providing a safe environment in which to express deeply personal views.

PUBLIC AGENDA
A NONPARTISAN OPINION RESEARCH AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ORGANIZATION HELPING AMERICANS EXPLORE AND UNDERSTAND CRITICAL ISSUES SINCE 1975.

ABOUT US | RESEARCH STUDIES | ISSUE GUIDES | BEHIND THE HEADLINES | PRESS ROOM | PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT | ABOUT POLLING | SUPPORT US | REGISTER | CONTACT US

Founded by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance

SEARCH SITE

Welcome back, jsmith.
You have:
0 messages
1 invites
0 joint documents in progress
2 documents published
[Logout](#)

ABOUT ME
Current Home Country: United States
NY
Country of Origin: United States
Primary Religion: Select a religion
Age Group: 30 - 45
Occupation Experience(s):
Select occupation(s)
Armed Services
Arts & Entertainment
Business
Construction
Education

CURRENT ISSUES
The nation's long-term obligations are staggering. With a national debt of \$8.6 trillion (and rising) and 78 million baby boomers about to retire, straining our Social Security and Medicare systems, our country is on the brink of a fiscal crisis, in the form of steep tax hikes, major cutbacks in federal spending, higher interest rates, inflation and an overall declining economy—not to mention an unsustainable path for our children and grandchildren.

ISSUE MATRIX

	for	neutral	against
Global Climate Change			
Local, National, and International Action			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Increase federal funding for renewables research			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Take international lead to reduce greenhouse gases			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Increase conservation & fuel efficiency standards			
Trust Free Markets			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Work towards international agreements on incentives, investments for green technology			

Chat and Collaborate

The core participant experience is one-to-one dialogue in a safe anonymous online environment. Users are free to explore difficult topics without peer pressure or other limitations typically found in public, debate oriented forums. Participants can also add people to the discussion, and then collaborate on shared documents to express their learning and joint opinions to the broader community. Mediem provides a complete workflow for transformative interaction around difficult challenges.

The screenshot displays the Public Agenda website interface. At the top, the logo for Public Agenda is visible, along with the tagline: "A NONPARTISAN OPINION RESEARCH AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ORGANIZATION HELPING AMERICANS EXPLORE AND UNDERSTAND CRITICAL ISSUES SINCE 1975." Below the logo is a navigation menu with links: ABOUT US, RESEARCH STUDIES, ISSUE GUIDES, BEHIND THE HEADLINES, PRESS ROOM, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT, ABOUT POLLING, SUPPORT US, REGISTER, and CONTACT US. A search bar is located on the right side of the navigation menu.

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Welcome back, jsmith.** You have:
 - 0 messages
 - 1 invites
 - 0 joint documents in progress
 - 2 documents published[Logout](#)
- CONTACTS**

name	messages	invites
lowell	0	0
shone	0	0
sarahw	0	0
dimitri	0	1
- CONVERSATIONS**

topic	count
Climate Change	3
Federal Budget	2
- ACTIVE CONVERSATION**

10/13/07 17:21 jsmith: well, i don't think that should be the point of emphasis, the private sector. we need more regulations..

10/13/07 17:22 sarahw: but isn't is a matter of economics?

10/13/07 17:22 sarahw: Like about those hybrids, you walk by and they're not buying them because the Earth's going to drown. They're buying it because of those gas prices, it's expensive.

10/13/07 17:22 sarahw: the private sector takes care of itself!

10/14/07 16:03 jsmith: what's the benefit for me to solar my home? not much, in fact it costs a lot. so i'm not going to do it

10/14/07 16:00 sarahw: but soon energy prices will be high, and people will want to explore new options. the private sector will supply those...

Buttons: **SEND** **EXPORT** **ADD PEOPLE** **CLOSE DIALOGUE**

At the bottom of the page, there is a footer with the following text: "© 2007 Mediem Inc. Home | About Public Agenda | Research Studies | Issue Guides | Behind the Headlines | Press Room | Public Engagement | About Polling | Support Us | Register | Contact Us"

Explore and Learn

The Mediem learning process involves both private dialogue and exploration of public conversations, joint opinions and collaborations. One of the challenges with “Web 2.0” applications is that people can post content very easily, making it difficult for readers to find helpful information. In Mediem, all public content must be approved by all parties in the dialogue, creating a natural vetting process that makes the exploration of public content much easier and more relevant.

The screenshot displays the Mediem application interface with several sections:

- Navigation:** WELCOME, DIALOGUE, WORKSPACE, PROFILE, CONNECT, PUBLIC.
- MY DOCUMENTS:** A table showing document counts by topic.
- FILTER DOCUMENTS:** Checkboxes for document types (dialogues, joint statements, letters) and location filters (region, country).
- FILTER BY ISSUE AND TAG:** A tree view of categories including Government, International Affairs, Iraq (U.S. Policy), and others.
- SEARCH RESULTS:** A table listing search results with columns for title and date.

A tooltip is shown over the search result 'Military Personnel', providing the following details:

- Title:** Military Personnel
- Authors:** ahmed, amy
- Document type:** Joint statement
- Date:** Dec 12, 2006

The tooltip also contains a summary of the document's content:

Our dialogue, between two people from civilian and military backgrounds, resulted in a new understanding about the role of U.S. military personnel in Iraq. Specifically, our shared...

Buttons for **FLAG** and **DOWNLOAD** are located at the bottom of the tooltip.

Prototype and Alpha Testing

New web application development tools make it feasible to build alpha versions of robust applications for budgets that are significant yet don't break the bank, assuming a strong technology team is involved. A well-thought-out prototype to help guide development – a clear vision for an application – combined with a graphic artist to bring the application to life visually can provide a strong boost to early stage development. Having a base to work from allows the pieces to fall together more easily, and provides software developers with a clear path to follow.

Still, building software with a high usability factor is a steep challenge. This challenge is compounded when working with an application that has a strong societal dimension: the product needs to have breadth and legitimacy while being simple and approachable. Often political issues are steeped in complexity and details. Issues such as the environment, health care, and the federal budget are so complex that people have difficulty engaging on different viewpoints. Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Guides help make these complex issues approachable, and Mediem provides a simple way for people to express, network and interact around Public Agenda's content.

Initial results from the alpha version and user testing were that the application needed work before launching in prime time. As simple as we designed the application, it was still not intuitive for first-time users. Usability is critical for peer-based learning. If there is any hindrance or roadblock as a user goes through the application then it becomes too easy to get stuck. In addition, we have learned that usability is not just about instructions. Rather, the feel of the application and intuitiveness through which users interact with the functionality itself is also extremely important. Functions that are clearly laid out for a demo and tell a great story in a presentation format are not necessarily effectively designed for someone actually working with the application. This is a subtle yet important distinction.

Although perhaps stating the obvious, software "bugs" also pose usability challenges. It can be tempting to overlook small problems assuming the main story is attractive to users. In reality, though, those details are what often stand out, defining user perceptions in small yet important ways. As mentioned above, even a tiny hurdle can end a user's experiment with new technology. While Public Agenda and Ideologue are attempting to address big picture problems, we have also found that details remain equally important and cannot be overlooked.

Redesigning for the future

The cliché in product marketing is always listen to the customer. This initiative is no different; we are listening closely to the results of early stage testing and making adjustments accordingly. The respective strengths of Public Agenda and Ideologue, Inc. are a good match to tackle a major problem that has remained unsolved on a large scale for literally thousands of years. We are excited about continuing on our path over the next few months, and feel very strongly that we are laying the groundwork for a new form of peer interaction and dialogue that can scale in ways we may not yet know.

Social interaction on difficult issues is limited without quality content to help users educate themselves and engage effectively with each other on major contentious issues. Public Agenda's unique focus on approachable content structures helps with this challenge. A technology/content partnership also provides a clearer path to effective application development, as the real world context is closely linked to the application code.