



ENP/NICD Civil Online Discussion Spaces Focus Group Summary Report

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Teams at the Engaging News Project and the National Institute for Civil Discourse conducted six focus groups across the country with the goal of a) better understanding how and why people currently use online spaces to access and interact with politics, news, and one another, and b) uncovering ideas for how to create more effective online spaces for political involvement and discussion.

A total of 39 young adults from across the political spectrum with diverse interest in politics and political engagement participated in the focus groups. Among other things, participants shared that they: usually only talk about politics with friends and family, are reluctant to talk politics with people who disagree with them, view online spaces as somewhat treacherous for interacting politically, and use online platforms mostly to gather information when it comes to politics. Participants shared ideas for creating more effective online spaces, some of which involved moderation, anonymity, and mimicking in-person interactions.

The following report first presents a summary of responses gathered from across all six focus groups to each question posed by the moderator. Next, a list of potential ideas for future research inspired by the focus group conversations is presented. Finally, a summary of each individual focus group's responses is provided for a more detailed look at the discussions that took place. The question posed by the moderator is first, followed by a short summary of the discussion.

OVERALL FINDINGS ACROSS FOCUS GROUPS

Q1. In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, engage in political discussion? Can you give a specific example(s)?

Participants ranged in their involvement in political engagement from those who didn't have much interest in politics to those who regularly posted and shared political content online. Overall, respondents reported a preference for in-person discussions about politics rather than those that take place online and voiced a concern that political discussion might lead to conflict.

- Most discussion happens with people that individuals already know (family and friends)
- Most online political activity involved observing political discussion across a variety of outlets, rather than getting personally involved
- Face-to-face interactions thought to be more personal and respectful than online interactions, and, therefore, more civil.
- High emotion and low information lead to avoiding political discussion

Q2. What online platforms and websites do you currently use, if any, to get information about politics? Why and how do you use them?

All of the participants, including those with minimal interest in politics, reported getting news online whether they sought it out through news websites or mobile apps or they were passively exposed to it through social media.

- Preference for online sources that are convenient, accessible, informative, and entertaining
- Concern about the validity/accuracy of news encountered through social networking sites and the utility of comment sections
- Reluctance to directly express political opinions, particularly on controversial topics
- Avoidance of expressing opinions with *likes*, *shares*, or commenting on Facebook for fear of others making presumptions or losing friends

Q3. Describe a positive experience you've had with political engagement (online)? What made it positive?

Although many participants felt favorably about encountering opinions different from their own, positive experiences were commonly described as supportive and devoid of antagonistic conflict.

- Experiences that made people feel involved, close to others, productive, and informed
- Interactions that were anonymous, non-controversial, and with people they knew well
- Correcting misinformation, making an offline difference, having their expressions endorsed
- Gaining information about a topic, gaining a different perspective, and learning about what another person thinks

Q4. Describe a negative experience you've had with political engagement (online)? What would have made it better?

Descriptions of negative experiences resoundingly linked to incivility, particularly ad hominem attacks.

- Experiences where other people are rude, disrespectful, apathetic
- Stereotypical assumptions and commentary
- Aggression, polarization, conflicts, and trolling

- Discussion partners who were aggressive, did not remain calm, showed bias, and valued opinions over facts

Q5. How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

Overall, respondents agreed that engaging in discussions with people who have differing opinions is worthwhile, as it is a great way to learn about other people and issues. Despite this, they are often reluctant to do so.

- Beneficial in terms of gaining information, becoming better able to articulate a point of view, and gaining a more thorough understanding of another person's perspective
- Discussions with disagreeing others often help one understand a divergent point of view
- Preference for interactions that are civil, non-confrontational, and confidential with conversation partners who are experienced, knowledgeable, open-minded, and calm
- Tense and uncomfortable, though more important than talking to those with whom one already agrees

Q6. Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. How would you design this space? What features would it have?

Although some expressed skepticism that such a place can be created online, they were able to characterize an ideal space for political discussion, which included:

- Anonymity, moderation, welcoming of multiple perspectives, personal and trustworthy
 - There were mixed feeling about the utility of anonymity. Although some participants saw anonymity as a way to avoid ad hominem attacks, others saw it opening the door to incivility.
- Small groups, in-person feel, and existing at a set time
- A clear civil mission, providing incentives, void of partisanship/polarization
- Topical information and discussion commentary more easily accessible and well-organized

RESEARCH IDEAS FOR THE EXPERIMENT

Format

- 1) How would incorporating in-person elements like a café design with open windows, art, and photography of great civil leaders like MLK affect commentary?
- 2) How would audio/video of discussion partner(s) affect commentary?
 - a) e.g. Google Hangouts, Skype, Chat Roulette format with Pandora-like features, etc.
- 3) How would incentives or rewards like scoring points for good discussion, treating discussion like a game, or free food or T-shirts for participants affect commentary?
- 4) How would an ability to easily see pro and con arguments affect commentary?
- 5) How would adding TED Talk style videos affect commentary?
- 6) How would a standardized agree/disagree functionality in an online space affect commentary?
- 7) How would a classroom style/university sponsored discussion space affect commentary?
- 8) How would the implementation of small groups/Facebook groups discussions affect commentary?

Rules, mission, moderation, and anonymity

- 9) How would a self-moderated discussion community with incentives for productive discussion affect commentary?
- 10) How does moderator behavior (e.g. enforcing/not enforcing rules, inserting opposing viewpoints, etc.) affect commentary?
- 11) How would having a mission statement and the qualities of that statement (e.g. demonstrating value of persons, emphasizing common identity, importance of diverse viewpoints, importance of discussion, non-partisan, avoiding labels, issue-focused, etc.) affect commentary?
- 12) Would having discussions at an assigned time increase engagement?
- 13) Would a short perspective-taking training or debate skill primer increase discussion quality?

Improving the quality/utility of the space

- 14) How would the inclusion of an elected official affect commentary?
- 15) Will people choose to contact their representatives when links are provided alongside comments? (“Tell my rep” button or ability to share another person’s well-written comment with one’s rep or the editor)
- 16) Will more people post/Where will more people post/Will the quality of comments change when given an opportunity to indicate whether they are “up for debate” or “just here to vent” (think two different comment sections or discussion areas)?
- 17) When given separate places for people who want to engage with likeminded people versus those with differing opinions, which would people want to hear (read) versus where would they like to post?
- 18) How would fact-checking/links to other credible sources/expert opinion affect commentary?
- 19) How would increasing trust and privacy (feel more like face-to-face interactions) affect commentary?

Summary Report - MONTERREY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL PEACE STUDIES

Conducted December 2, 2014

Moderators: Shane Christensen and Raquel Goodrich (NICD)

A total of six participants (two males and four females) between the ages of 26 and 38 attended the focus group. Responses to the short questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as: one Democrat, two Independents and four who indicated some other party affiliation; one Asian, two Caucasians, and three mixed race individuals (Caucasian and Hispanic, Asian, and Middle Eastern, respectively). In response to how often they keep up with current events, all six participants answered “regularly.” Participants reported between one and three indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, discuss politics or public affairs?

Participants agreed that they were most likely to discuss politics with close friends and family. Some also said that they try to avoid political discussion in their personal lives.

2) What, if any, online platforms and websites do you currently use to get information about politics, whether you engage or not?

Participants seemed to agree that online platforms were a good, and often entertaining, place to gather information and stay informed about political issues, but they don’t engage with others online because of the tendency for people online to be disrespectful, ill-informed, and not being capable of productive discussion. Platforms mentioned included: RT, CNN, CCTV, Al Jazeera, ABC, NBC, CBS, The Colbert Report, BBC, Bing News, Google News, NPR, The Guardian, Spanish news platforms, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, The Daily Show, Twitter, and Last Week Tonight with John Oliver.

3) Talk about a negative experience you’ve had with political engagement.

Participants described experiences where other people did not treat them with respect. Online comment sections were mentioned.

4) Describe a positive experience you’ve had engaging online about politics or public affairs.

Participants described experiences in which they were able to contribute in some way to the betterment of community and society, like signing a petition or donating blood. They also talked about experiences where an interaction partner was able to apologize for an impolite comment and experiences where they saw good ideas being widely shared.

5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

Participants agreed that it is a good way to learn and see other viewpoints but they are often reluctant to do so because people have a tendency to be disrespectful and egocentric. Some participants expressed a preference for having such discussions in person rather than online.

6) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. What would that look like? What would that be like?

Participants felt that in-person discussion may hold some advantages; for example, it's harder to be rude to someone's face. Some felt that online spaces might not be appropriate places for political discussion; they would require very strict moderation. Some felt that online spaces might best be used to facilitate in-person discussions. Aside from these initial reservations about online discussion, the group came up with several unique ideas for how to encourage productive political discussion online. Ideas included the use of multi-functional ways to engage, meaning that it should be more than just a text-based chat room; a forum system moderated by community members that quickly weeds out non-productive individuals and discussions and that rewards prolonged and productive involvement in the community; ability to quickly evaluate the credibility and reputation of other participants; reward good comments, punish bad comments; strict moderation and limits on commenting to keep people from going overboard.

Summary Report - GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Conducted November 19, 2014

Moderator: Shane Christensen (NICD)

A total of four participants (two males and two females) all under the age of 35 attended the focus group. Responses to the short questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as: two Liberal, one Conservative, and one Independent; three Caucasians and one African-American.

1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, discuss politics or public affairs?

Participants agreed that they were most likely to discuss politics with close friends and family or in class at school.

2) What, if any, online platforms and websites do you currently use to get information about politics, whether you engage or not?

Participants tended to be reluctant to do more than observe and read from online platforms. Platforms mentioned included: Reddit, BBC, Reuters, New York Times, CNN, Facebook, BuzzFeed, NBC4 (local NBC affiliate), NPR, Politico, The Hill, The Onion, The Daily Show, and The Colbert Report.

3) Talk about a negative experience you've had with political engagement.

Participants described experiences where people were pushy and rude, and where topics were exaggerated and sensationalized.

4) Describe a positive experience you've had engaging online about politics or public affairs.

Participants described experiences in which they felt their voices were being heard and when their interaction partners were respectful and mature.

5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

Participants agreed that it is a good way to learn and see other viewpoints but they were also clear that they would only be okay with it if their interaction partner was open-minded, polite, and willing to disagree constructively. Some participants expressed disappointment that so many people engage about politics at such a trivial level.

7) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. What would that look like? What would that be like?

Participants discussed the importance of intimate, personal, and comfortable settings for productive political discussion to occur. Ideas included beanbag chairs (as an example of comfort) and sharing drinks/food. For online forums, participants also agreed that strict moderation would be necessary in order to maintain good discussion. Clear guidelines for respectful discussion would have to be laid out and enforced. Facebook was used as an example of a place that people are relatively comfortable and among people they know and like, for the most part. Reddit's comment voting system was mentioned as an example of how to reward good discussion and discourage bad discussion.

Summary Report - ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Conducted December 3, 2014

Moderator: Peter Leavitt (NICD)

A total of sixteen participants (eight males and eight females) between the ages of 19 and 25 (and one 36-year-old) attended the focus group. Responses to the short questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as: six Democrats, four Republicans, four Independents, and two individuals who identified only as “conservative;” one Asian, two Black or African American, two Latino/Hispanic and eleven Caucasians. In response to how often they keep up with current events, three participants answered “not too much,” four participants answered “sometimes,” and nine answered “regularly.” Participants reported between one and five (all) indicators of the above referenced online news behavior; most participants reported three or more of said indicators.

1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, discuss politics or public affairs?

Participants seemed to agree that they were most likely to discuss politics with close friends and family or in class at school. There was also some agreement that face-to-face interaction was preferable to online interaction. This point became a touchstone throughout the entire focus group discussion. Several online venues and other media were mentioned as well.

2) What, if any, online platforms and websites do you currently use to get information about politics, whether you engage or not?

All participants seemed to engage, or at least consume, political information online. Platforms mentioned included Reddit, Ricochet, Circa News, WikiLeaks, New York Times, Washington Post, Politico, NPR, social media and blogs in general, among others. Political engagement via these platforms seemed to be mostly consumption of information and little direct interaction with other users. Participants agreed that comment sections are terrible. Online platforms were seen as convenient and accessible and a good place to get information.

3) Talk about a negative experience you’ve had with political engagement.

Negative experiences were primarily those in which participants did not feel respected or listened to, including situations where interaction partners were apathetic or not really interested in politics.

4) Describe a positive experience you’ve had engaging online about politics or public affairs.

Positive experiences included those in which participants were able to achieve a resolution of some sort and situations in which one was able to learn or teach something valuable.

5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

Participants agreed that discussing politics with those who disagree with you can be educational and enjoyable. However, participants also expressed that one’s interaction partner has to abide by certain standards of respectful discussion in order for an interaction to actually be educational and enjoyable. There was a tangible sense that participants would engage with others more often if they felt that such standards of discussion would be met.

8) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. What would that look like? What would that be like?

Discussion on this topic often returned to the touchstone mentioned earlier that in-person interactions are usually more valuable than online interactions. Suggestions included getting people together in person, in a setting that encourages people to feel comfortable and be willing to open up. Clear guidelines and rules for discussion were also a major theme for responses. When asked to think of how one might make a good space online some participants responded with skepticism that such a thing could be accomplished. Suggestions for online spaces tended to incorporate the valuable aspects of in-person interaction that had been mentioned before. Most participants agreed that online spaces are difficult to control and are risky places to have political discussion.

Summary Report - UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Conducted November 25, 2014

Moderator: Cynthia Peacock (ENP)

A total of seven participants (three males and four females) between the ages of 19 and 25 attended the focus group. Responses to the short questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as: four Democrats, two Republicans, and one Independent; one Asian, and five Caucasians (four of which noted Hispanic descent). In response to how often they keep up with current events, five participants answered “sometimes” and two answered “regularly.” Participants reported between two and five (all) indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, discuss politics or public affairs?

Participants ranged in their involvement in political engagement from those who don’t have much interest in politics to those who regularly post and share political content online. One participant, although interested and knowledgeable, said he reads comments but never posts. He said he likes to be informed but doesn’t like to engage.

2) What, if any, online platforms and websites do you currently use to get information about politics, whether you engage or not?

All of the participants, including those with minimal interest in politics, reported getting news online. Sources included: Huffington Post, Politico, Facebook, New York Times, Yahoo News, Daily Beast, Twitter, CNN, the White House app, Bloomberg, and The Wall Street Journal. There was some discussion around the validity of news found on Facebook and the ability for college students to discuss politics and public affairs knowledgeably.

3) Talk about a negative experience you’ve had with political engagement.

Descriptions of negative experiences resoundingly linked to incivility, particularly ad hominem attacks based on race and gender. Respondents began voicing an aversion to having their (demographic) identity linked with their comments because it fueled attacks and stereotypical assumptions and commentary.

4) Describe a positive experience you’ve had engaging online about politics or public affairs.

Respondents mentioned correcting misinformation and having that appreciated, making an offline difference, having other online commenters stand-up for them, or having comments they made endorsed. There was a continuation of the discussion of things they don’t like which included: unproductive (inflexible) polarized discussions, arguments rather than discussions, and the lack of “respectful disagreement.”

5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

Overall, respondents agreed that engaging in discussions with people who have differing opinions is worthwhile. They reported benefits in terms of gaining information about the subject matter, being better able to articulate their point of view, and gaining a more thorough understanding of another person’s perspective. There was consensus that these discussions were worthwhile when conducted civilly and when participants were open to others’ ideas. This stood in contrast to the way they

perceive actual discussions with disagreeing others. There was some discussion about the ability of disagreeing conversation partners to identify with or be persuaded by one another.

6) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. What would that look like? What would that be like?

We provided participants with a pen and legal pad and asked them to brainstorm on their own for two minutes after which we moved around the table sharing ideas.

There was some discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of anonymity. While some felt anonymity would open the door to incivility, others described the benefits of not being able to identify a discussion member (demographically) as a way to avoid stereotypical assumptions and ad hominem attacks. The group saw the benefit in rules, a moderator, and a clear civil mission. Other ideas included providing incentives such as access to representatives and lawmakers, food, t-shirts, and a having a common goal. One respondent was passionate about having a space for those who don't have (or prefer to avoid) partisan identification. This idea received resounding support from the group for a space that is issue rather than party centered.

7) We are trying to work on online spaces that would allow for the kind of interactions that you've described. Final thoughts on anything specific about an online space that would make you want to engage.

A theme throughout the focus group was a preference for informed discussion. Members like the idea of fact-checking, links to credible sources, and the ability to access expert resources. They disfavor cursing and party and demographic identifiers. Other suggestions included uniting participants with a common goal rather than setting up a debate, and keeping the space entertaining.

Summary Report - UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

December 15, 2014

Moderator: Ashley Muddiman (ENP)

A total of four participants (one male and three females) between the ages of 23 and 26 attended the focus group. Responses to the short questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as: three Republicans, one Independent, and no Democrats; four Caucasians (none noting Hispanic descent). In response to how often they keep up with current events, two participants answered “sometimes” one answered “regularly” and one answered “not much.” Participants reported between two and four indicators of the above referenced online news behavior.

1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, discuss politics or public affairs?

Overall, respondents reported a preference for in-person discussions about politics rather than those that take place online. Participants reported a hesitance to discuss politics with anyone they were not close with and voiced a concern that political discussion might lead to conflict. Primary discussion partners included: family members, friends, romantic partners, and classmates. While they enjoy talking with others who share their same views or those with differing views who help them broaden their own insight, they do not enjoy rigid and inflexible conversation partners.

2) What, if any, online platforms and websites do you currently use to get information about politics, whether you engage or not?

All participants reported accessing news online whether they sought it out or not. Some used phone applications for breaking news and accessing formal news websites. All reported getting information about politics and current events through social networking sites, including Facebook and Twitter. Rather than seeking out information, some respondents enjoyed letting the news find them and allowing others to be the curators of what is important. One participant discussed a preference for seeking out the news so he could keep abreast of current events and access unbiased sources. In terms of engaging with others in online discussions of politics or public affairs, the participants expressed a reluctance to directly express political opinions, particularly on controversial topics. One respondent noted the threat of expressing opinions as a woman.

3) Talk about a negative experience you’ve had with political engagement.

The negative experiences discussed by participants included: ad hominem attacks—particularly aggression toward women, polarization, conflicts, and trolling.

4) Describe a positive experience you’ve had engaging online about politics or public affairs.

In terms of positive experiences, respondents reported enjoying interactions that were: anonymous, non-controversial, face-to face, with people they knew well, and that allowed them to learn more about issues.

5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

The range of responses to discussing politics with disagreeable others was wide. While some respondents reported passively agreeing with people with whom they disagreed, others reported directly expressing their disagreement. In discussing politics with someone with differing opinions,

respondents prefer interactions characterized by: respect, understanding, non-confrontation, openness, confidentiality, trust, and conversation partners who are experienced, knowledgeable, and calm.

6) What are the benefits of discussing politics with people who you have a difference of opinion with?

Participants reported the benefits of political discussion with people with differing opinions as: broadening one's own opinion, persuading others, better understanding one's own position, and becoming better-informed.

7) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. What would that look like? What would that be like?

Ideas characterizing an ideal space for political discussion included: anonymity, moderation, welcoming multiple perspectives, small groups, in-person, and existing at a set time. A mediated and university required class that focused on current events was discussed. Participants focused on trust as an important characteristic. There was a discussion about whether that trust could exist in an online context. In terms of increasing the personalization of the discussion, participants brought up video comments and Google Hangout-type discussion groups.

8) Final thoughts

Final ideas shared by the group revolved around the need for trust and respect between discussion members and whether that is possible in online forums. Participants also voiced a concern over whether young people were informed enough to discuss political matters. One participant cited political polarization as a reason for a lack of knowledge and interest in politics. They suggested a classroom setting as a safe space to learn about politics—particularly a middle ground—and share their opinions.

Summary Report - UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Conducted February 11, 2015

Moderator: Cynthia Peacock (ENP)

A total of two participants (one male, one female) between the ages of 25 and 29 attended the focus group. Responses to the short questionnaire indicate the makeup of the group as: one Democrat and one Republican, both Caucasians. In response to how often they keep up with current events, both indicated “not too much.” Participants reported between zero and one indicator of the above referenced online news behavior.

1) In what ways, if at all, do you, personally, discuss politics or public affairs?

The two participants both reported trying to avoid discussing politics sometimes due to their own lack of information and sometimes due to the intensity of would-be discussion partners.

2) What, if any, online platforms and websites do you currently use to get information about politics, whether you engage or not?

The participants discussed passive exposure to news that friends had posted to Facebook, and one discussion member reported “liking” CNN on Facebook. When asked what they like about getting news that way, they described the convenience of having it all in one place, the ability to access it through mobile devices, and the ability to unfollow or de-friend people who post views with which they disagree. The participants reported not posting, liking, sharing, or commenting on news stories/ political topics posted to Facebook for fear of others making presumptions about them or being “de-friended.” Regarding in-person interactions, they noted avoiding discussions with those who are irrational, close-minded, and uninformed.

3) Talk about a negative experience you’ve had with political engagement.

Descriptions of negative experiences linked to discussion partners who were aggressive, did not remain calm, showed bias, and valued opinions over facts. Respondents voiced a preference for conversation partners (and themselves) having ample information to discuss the topic and being open enough to listen to and consider the other person’s perspective.

4) Describe a positive experience you’ve had engaging online about politics or public affairs.

Although not able to recall specific encounters, respondents mentioned gaining information about a topic, gaining a different perspective, and learning about what another person thinks.

5) How do you feel about discussing politics with people who disagree with you?

Respondents described encounters with disagreeing others as tense and uncomfortable, although one person noted, “it’s more important than talking to those who already agree with you.”

In terms of benefits, discussants named: seeing another person’s opinion and weighing it against your own, seeing how other people think about issues and the reasons they think that way—which makes people better able to understand their own thoughts. One member suggested, “rather than trying to pick apart an argument, trying to see how they got there and the values and information they include and exclude.” Drawbacks included: creating enemies, losing friendships, hurting relationships, and the drawback of having to become more informed which would require a time and interest commitment which is currently missing.

6) Suppose you were in charge of creating a new space for people to discuss political issues. What would that look like? What would that be like?

Ideal spaces included those that made accessing both the topical content and discussion commentary more easily accessible and well organized. There was a desire for discussions that were well informed and preference for information over opinions. Other preferences revolved around feeling like the conversation matters, knowing what the goal of the interaction is, and avoiding interactions based on pointing out others' weaknesses or flaws.

7) So much of the discussion has revolved around being informed. We have been thinking about including bullets/pro- con- arguments under a story. What are your thoughts?

The members of the focus group had a positive reaction to this, noting that many online discussions are based solely on opinion and that including digestible information could make for a higher quality discussion that would be more appealing and be inviting to people who want to voice their opinions but don't have enough information. The participants questioned whether in the pro- con- setup people would be exposed to conflicting data, which could cause confusion.

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The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD), housed at the University of Arizona, integrates research and practice to support and enable: elected officials capable of working to solve the big issues facing our country, a public demand for civil discourse and a government that works in the best interests of the country as a whole, and a media that informs and engages citizens.

The Engaging News Project (ENP), housed in the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin, aims to provide research-based techniques for engaging online audiences in commercially-viable and democratically-beneficial ways. The project tests strategies for informing audiences, promoting substantive discourse, and helping citizens to understand diverse views. At the same time, ENP analyzes business outcomes, such as clicks and time on page.