# APPLY

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European Network for
Argumentation and Public Policy Analysis

# The APPLY Guidelines for Designing Public Argumentation

*1 project, 3 obstacles, 10 rules*

publicpolicyargument.eu

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# THE CHALLENGE

Deliberative democracy seems poised to deliver on its many promises at scale due to the capabilities of digital platforms, and other emerging communication media, to facilitate large-scale debates. Deliberative democracy's potential as a superior means for widespread, legitimate participation in political action and decision making, however, is also undermined by the design and governance of the same platforms.

Disinformation, polarization, hate speech, cyberbullying, groupthink are just a few critical issues. All these phenomena cast doubt on the prospects for harnessing the wisdom of crowds for policy in a democratically legitimate way.

Thus, it has become crystal clear that *public debate requires principled design to realize its democratic potential*. Deliberative democracy is an achievement that cannot be taken for granted and the large-scale debates that drive it are a challenging form of public discourse to produce.

It is a matter of design that is less about the simple enforcement of discussion rules and more about facilitating conditions that enable reasoned public debate to organically and reasonably unfold.

The question, thus, is to identify *the essential principles for designing public debate*, so that it can act as an effective gateway for democratic legitimacy.

In 2018, the *European Network for Argumentation and Public Policy AnaLYsis* (**APPLY** – COST Action CA17132) set out to address this challenge: after 4 and a half years of scientific collaboration among more than **300 scholars** and **stakeholders** across **39 different countries**, we have produced a condensed ready-to-use guide for policy makers, public administrators, and communication experts.

The purpose of this pamphlet is not to summarize the wealth of scientific studies produced by members of the **APPLY** action, upon which this set of guidelines is based: for that, readers are welcome to consult the "Output" section of the **APPLY** website.

This guidebook serves a more practical purpose: distilling the key insights produced by the consortium on how to best design public debate, to further the ideals of deliberative democracy.

Thus, this text deliberately dispenses with all references and scientific technicisms, to cut to the chase of the challenge ahead:

> *What are the obstacles that prevent public debate from generating its true democratic potential, and how can we overcome such obstacles via smart design of communicative practices?*

# THE OBSTACLES

After repeated consultations with stakeholders in public debate and careful reviewing of the relevant literature, three problems emerged as crucial in preventing public discourse from realizing its full democratic potential.

## LACK OF VALUE

When questioned about the relevance of examining the contents and nature of public discourse online, e.g., on social media, policy makers and political advisors often express skepticism.

The consensus seems to be that there is little value to be obtained by such exercises, since the best one can hope for is the kind of knowledge that would be more readily available by consulting expert focus groups – as it is often done, indeed.

Overall, online public debate is mostly perceived as a lot of worthless noise.

This prejudice is, on the one hand, fairly accurate, insofar as a significant amount of noise is integral to the nature of online communication, often drowning out the most relevant contributions; on the other hand, this line of criticism misses a key source of value inherent in active participation to public discourse via online means (or by any means, for that matter) – the democratic legitimacy that direct engagement can bestow on policy making.

From this perspective, the main value of online public debate is political, not epistemic: the very same course of action is perceived as more legitimate, and therefore more likely to be endorsed, if it is arrived at after collective deliberation, instead of some technical solution concocted by a minority of experts and thereby imposed on the whole society.

This does not change the fact that public debate, in order to be more productive for democracy, should be better designed and less plagued by meaningless noise: yet we must refrain from throwing away the baby of political legitimacy with the bathwater of low-quality online chatter.

Instead, we must strive to offer better platforms and loftier opportunities for public debate online – but with an eye for sound design principles, lest we fall prey of the second pitfall of the current digital ecology.

## LACK OF ENGAGEMENT

When faced with the problem of curtailing poor discursive practices in public debate, the gut reaction of many policy makers and technology developers is to impose hard constraints on participation.

Content moderation is a prime example: a simple way to keep debate civil and constructive is to ensure that each contribution, before being made public, is checked by a moderator.

Imposing strict requirements for joining the platform is another easy fix to keep public debate "honest": by forcing participants to undergo specific training or meet heavy constraints for entry, one can ensure that the community is properly motivated and duly prepared for engaging in meaningful discussion.

Unfortunately, similar shortcuts undermine the very purpose of online public debate, since they produce abysmal (yet highly predictable) results in terms of participation: faced with the choice of either willingly submitting to such harsh conditions or joining one of the many permissive platforms freely available online, people understandably flock to the latter, turning specialized solutions for serious public debate into digital wastelands.

The proper solution, instead, is to strike a balance between preventing unwanted consequences of unregulated online discourse and making the debate platform engaging and easy to use: the latter, however, requires tackling the third main obstacle to the successful involvement of citizens in democratic deliberation.

## LACK OF RESULTS

People are often turned away from debate platforms not only by poor interaction design, but also by the perceived inanity of the whole process: what is the point of investing significant resources (time, energy, study, social image, emotional commitment) into a prolonged public debate, if in the end nothing comes out of it?

Too many public debate initiatives make the capital mistake of considering debating an end in itself: even if it this was true, this is not the perspective endorsed by participants, and rightly so – they legitimately assume their activity to be taken seriously, and thus expect its output to produce tangible results.

When this does not happen, the whole exercise backfires quite dramatically: what is worst, it ends up disillusioning towards the democratic value of public debate the very people that proved willing to invest in it, which, as discussed, tend to be few enough to begin with.

The solution is not to turn any public consultation into an exercise of direct democracy (an untenable position, in most cases), but rather to ensure full transparency in the expected results of the proposed debate.

This is where some design guidelines mark the difference between success and disaster.

## THE GUIDELINES

Neither the number nor the order of these guidelines are set in stone: they are simply meant to provide general guidance in the difficult task of designing effective public debate interventions and platforms, with an emphasis on balancing widespread participation and democratic legitimacy. To each guideline we associate also an APPLY motto, to facilitate memorizing the basic rationale underlying each measure: a more detailed commentary is also included, as succinctly as possible.

### 01. MOTIVATE PARTICIPANTS TO ENGAGE

The APPLY motto: *Give me a reason!*

As discussed, lack of engagement threatens to undermine public debate from the start: therefore, motivation is a key element of design.

Here the common tendency to prioritize lofty motivations (e.g., "You should engage in public debate because it is your democratic duty to do so") should be resisted, and more mundane aspirations ought to be leveraged to attract people towards high-quality public debate platforms.

This includes tailoring the debate to the policy issue at hand. It can also include heightening the sense of having fun with other citizens while learning something and promoting social transformation on a scale that make sense to participants.

Gamifying collective problem solving and turning dialogical confrontation into an enjoyable practice (for all parties involved, not just for whoever ends up "winning" the debate) are key priorities for designing successful debate experiences.

### 02. GUARANTEE ACTIONABLE OUTCOMES

The APPLY motto: *What you say is what you get!*

As mentioned, there is nothing worse than perceiving one's participation in public debate as a huge waste of time and effort, due to lack of significant consequences.

To avoid such disastrous backlash, transparency by design needs to be implemented on how actionable the outcomes of debate are intended to be.

Not all public discussion should result in immediate action: in fact, only a tiny minority of public consultations can aspire to have such a direct impact on policy making.

Nonetheless, all instances of public debate must be allowed to produce meaningful outcomes, and how exactly such outcomes will become relevant needs to be made clear to participants in advance, to ensure motivation to engage and avoid ex post disillusionment.

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## 03. FOCUS ON MEANINGFUL ISSUES

The APPLY motto: *Keep it relevant!*

A key element in facilitating engagement is the relevance of the issues to be discussed.

Insofar as relevance is a cognitive factor depending on the debaters' goals and interests, maximizing it requires focusing on issues that are significant for participants, not in some distant or abstract way, but as tangibly as possible.

"Mitigating human-made climate change" or "Promoting worldwide peace" are in principle relevant issues for everyone, yet they might remain too remote from current concerns of the participants to elicit engagement: in contrast, similar problems must be broken down to the appropriate level of granularity, given the scope and nature of the debating community – e.g., "Reducing energy waste in our urban area" or "Integrating war refugees in our civic life".

The design of public debates must include the design of the issues and keep such user-centered aims in mind, to maximize active participation.

## 04. SELECT TASKS COMMENSURATE TO PARTICIPANTS

The APPLY motto: *Keep it manageable!*

The principle of proportionality between debaters and issues apply not only to motivation (see above), but also to competence: public debate is at its best when it focuses on issues on which participants can express significant views, not something too technical, complex, or vague as to be impossible for them to tackle.

This is the capital mistake often made by so called "big ideas debates": tasking people with solving incredibly complex problems (e.g., "How should we stop climate change?") results in public discussion that is at worst meaningless, and at best confined to a small minority of expert stakeholders, while all other participants find themselves relegated to the role of mere spectators and thus soon lose interest.

What makes an issue manageable via debate is not always technical expertise: quite often, participants' views are crucial due to their personal involvement and stakes in the matter under discussion, and that is what makes the issue manageable by them.

Regardless of the specifics, public debates must always be focused on problems over which participants have the potential to make a difference.

## 05. CALIBRATE GROUP SIZE TO DEBATE AIMS

The APPLY motto: *Heed the wisdom of small crowds!*

The design of public debates must resist the illusion that "the more, the merrier": whereas it is a key aim of deliberative democracy to involve as many people as possible in active participation in political discussion, it does not follow that productive debates need to include everybody everywhere all at once.

On the contrary, there are clear and well-known trade-offs between number of participants and debate quality: thus, there is value in breaking down discussion of complex issues across smaller groups, since it is easier to promote widespread participation and avoid silent majority effects in discussion among fewer people.

Current public debate initiatives tend to split debates along thematic lines (e.g., the 10 topics of the Multilingual Digital Platform, Decidim, and the resulting 4 European Citizens' Panels organized within the recent Conference on the Future of Europe) and/or geographical areas (e.g., as part of the aforementioned Conference, National Panels were also run): improved design of public debates requires us to do more, facilitating further, more fine-grained articulation in smaller sub-debates, with clear rules for subsequent aggregation of the results of each discussion thread.

## 06. MANAGE REPUTATIONAL CONCERNS

The APPLY motto: *Saving face doesn't save the world!*

A key vulnerability of public debate stems from the fact that it is, indeed, public: i.e., participants expose their views and exhibit their communicative performance in front of large groups of people (in the public eye, as it is).

As a result, reputational concerns are arguably the single, greatest distorting force in public debate, especially online, where it is harder to assess the exact scope and nature of one's audience.

Such reputational effects (together with commercially oriented algorithms for content selection) play a key role in preventing social media discourse from being more valuable for collective deliberation.

Designers of better platforms for public debate must avoid this "facework pitfall", yet without curtailing reputational pressures altogether, since they can still serve a useful, twofold purpose: motivating people to actively engage to increase their status as responsible members of the community, and keeping participants honest via public condemnation of abuse or anti-social conduct.

Therefore, reputation must be managed, not eliminated, in public debate design.

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## 07. MAKE COMMUNICATIVE ACTS HIGHLY CUSTOMIZABLE

The APPLY motto: *Personal messages are public actions too!*

A simple yet effective way of managing the distorting influence of reputational concerns in public debate (see above) is to move beyond broadcasting as the default mode of communication – contrary to what happens in social media.

Broadcasting is particularly prone to reputational distortion because it maximizes face concerns and imposes a heavy toll on communication, by exposing all participants to public scrutiny; quite often, better results can be achieved by resorting to more private communication channels, and public debate platforms need to support and encourage a plurality of communicative options in terms of publicity and addressee selection.

The use of defaults in platform design is particularly relevant here: even though most current debate apps already allow a high degree of customization for communicative acts, the default setting tend to be (some form of) broadcasting. More dynamic and varied defaults need to be engineered into the system, to make participants' contribution most valuable for deliberation, rather than for self-promotion.

## 08. INJECT HIGH-QUALITY INFORMATION

The APPLY motto: *Public debate is not just debating!*

To assume that participants will enter public debate with the appropriate degree of competence and high-quality information is idealistic, and to delegate opinion formation and information search entirely to external means is risky. Instead, the collection, elaboration, and further circulation of relevant know-how must be incorporated as an integral component of effective debate platforms, and thus be given priority in their design.

This also conveys a clear and important political message: public debate requires a commitment to knowledge, because sound collective action can only be based on knowledge. This entails responsibility at the individual level: engaging in public debate should not be perceived by participants as merely "speaking my mind", but rather as "making up my mind in a responsible way, so that my views can have real value for the community".

Cultivating such attitude in participants does not require imposing barriers on participation (the old-fashioned and misleading view of public debate as an "experts only" affaire), but rather giving more prominence to activities like consulting documents, discussing data, comparing sources, considering objections, and so on – all of them incorporated by design as necessary steps in public debate, instead of being presented as due diligence to be done outside of it.

## 09. PROMOTE CIRCULATION OF VALUABLE CONTENT

The APPLY motto: *Make virality great again!*

Promoters of healthy public discourse online tend to consider viral content as the bane of critical thinking and responsible engagement.

But this prejudice is tied to an accident: the fact that currently virality, especially on social media, tend to be associated with superficial and silly memes at best (e.g., cute videos of kittens), with problematic contents at worst (e.g., disinformation and propaganda campaigns, hateful remarks).

However, there is no reason to relinquish the many advantages of virality to irrelevant or harmful contents, since ensuring that sound arguments, good information, sensible ideas, and reasonable discourse spread more widely and more quickly than flawed arguments, bad information, crazy idea, and unreasonable drivel is a key priority in designing public debate platforms.

Instead of considering virality as an enemy, we need to realize its potential as the best ally in making public debate work: seminal, highly successful campaigns to curtail disinformation across the world have been based on this very same principle, demonstrating the usefulness of leveraging virality to circulate high quality arguments.

## 10. ACCEPT THE EXISTENCE OF FRIVOLOUS DISCOURSE

The APPLY motto: *Not all that speaks is debate!*

Sometimes a better design for public debate is presented as the natural evolution of collective discourse on social media, as if new debate platforms were supposed to replace completely other, less productive forms of online discussion. This vision is both unrealistic, unnecessary, and possibly undemocratic.

There is no reason to expect, or even hope for, a complete shutdown of pre-existing discursive engagements, no matter how trivial they might be in terms of democratic participation: realistically, people will keep chit-chatting online without much purpose or value for prolonged periods of time, since this is just human nature – a fact that public debate designers need to accept and factor in their own plans for better platforms and interventions.

In fact, new tools for public debate should be mindful of the abundance of less demanding alternatives for online social engagement that users have; therefore, the proposed novel platforms must (i) offer something unique and attractive to participants, (ii) maintain their distinctive character with respect to other tools and apps, and (iii) empower users with the kind of critical literacy needed to better navigate public discourse online, regardless of where it takes place.