

Extending Engagement

Strategies for Promoting Online Deliberation with the Leeds Declaration

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Douglas Schuler

The Evergreen State College and The Public Sphere Project

Abstract

A "Leeds Declaration" was proposed by the author of this paper at the Online Deliberation Conference at Leeds University in 2010. This paper proposes the idea of public declaration as a way to help motivate and cultivate a diverse set of online deliberative projects worldwide. These projects focus on peer-to-peer deliberation between citizens and citizen groups and deliberation between citizens and governments. It develops the case for the necessity of this work primarily because of various collaborative emergencies and the need for citizen involvement in these emergencies. This paper calls for increased and somewhat transformed engagement by social scientists in the shaping of new online venues, arguing for one thing that current circumstances (new opportunities afforded by the Internet and other information and communication technologies and the associated speed of change, for example) require this new approach. The paper proposes 16 tenets that could be used as guiding principles for a new, somewhat open-ended collaboration between social scientists, citizens and a variety of other stakeholders worldwide around the idea of online deliberation. Ultimately, these tenets could be used as the "spine" for an accessible declaration that could be used to help publicize the idea and help mobilize project resources.

Social Science and the Evolution of Cyberspace

Although political (and other social) scientists sometimes venture forth with recommendations or other forms of public assertiveness for the common good (see, for example, Coleman & Blumler, 2009) they generally assume roles with less direct influence — providing, for example, findings related

to public policy-making or analysis and insight after significant changes or other events have occurred. Typically, moreover, the main audience for social science output is other social scientists, whose palate bears little resemblance to that of non-social scientists.

Thus, in the evolution of cyberspace (the constellation of networked information and communication technology) where rapid change is a defining feature, the developers of Facebook or other influential applications are not likely to respond in a timely fashion to the recommendations of social scientists. Regardless as to the degree of influence that social scientists may or may not have, it is fair to say that economic concerns rather than the common good are driving the design and deployment of projects in the rapidly unfolding evolution of cyberspace.

At the same time because cyberspace offers immense potential for altering human relationships for better or worse, the possibility that social scientists might actually play some role in its development does not seem unreasonable. The likelihood that everyday communication between people widely distributed across the planet will continue to increase raises the possibility — at the very least — that a new era of human relationships — whose dimensions and parameters aren't yet known — may lie ahead. Social scientists are presumably motivated (as well as professionally obligated) to study this unfolding phenomenon thoughtfully and painstakingly. The world at large, correspondingly, would presumably appreciate seeing the fruits of this labor since they may ultimately derive some benefit from this focus. Ideally, moreover, the insights from the world of social science should help inform the discussion as to what directions the still-evolving, socio-technological, cybernetic leviathan heads and what possible roles that citizens can assume in this effort. This paper asserts that "business as usual" will be inadequate for this task and that social other potential stakeholders are obligated to step in if positive changes are to be made.

Unfortunately for those of us who believe that a stronger role for social science in pursuit of shared, public objectives is desirable, the rate of change, both technologically and cognitively in the public mind (and probably in the mind of social scientists themselves), is making this increasingly unlikely. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggested, "Special problems arise as a result of differential rates of change of institutions and subuniverses." Particularly in regard to cyberspace, the phenomenon, system, or event upon which a study or software tool is constructed may become irrelevant, non-existent, or otherwise unsuitable for further consideration within a relatively brief time span. This is particularly unfortunate if one is hoping that social science will have some voice in the unfolding of this new medium. Also, as Langdon Winner (1986) warns, "Because choices tend to become strongly fixed in material equipment, economic investment, and social habit, the original

flexibility vanishes for all practical purposes once the initial commitments are made." If the observations of Berger, Luckmann, and Winner hold, social scientists may not only miss this window of opportunity, the window, once closed, is unlikely to ever be reopened.

The Urgency of Deliberation

At the same time that our information and communication infrastructure is expanding and evolving rapidly, the problems facing 21st Century society are becoming more complex and more urgent. These include a variety of environmental emergencies as well as problems of more of a social nature including oppression, exploitation, poverty and the seemingly inevitable potential for war.

If we dare to contemplate how "solutions" to the problems would ever arise, we are forced to think in terms of broad social involvement of the world's citizens. They simply will not arise without the cooperation, if the leadership, of "ordinary" people. For that reason, deliberation is central to the future of the planet, and the quality and outcome of deliberation becomes less a speculative exercise and more of an urgent need. Everyone has a stake in the cultivation of deliberative systems that are at once effective and inclusive.

So, in the hopes of increasing the relevance and potential impact of the social science enterprise in relation to deliberation, the question becomes, *what can be done to increase the timeliness, accessibility, and quantity of relevant social science knowledge — and its positive impact on society — without degrading the integrity of the enterprise — or its practitioners?* Information and communication technology (ICT) which encompasses the Internet as well as host of new digital technology including mobile telephony, with its increasingly global reach is an obvious candidate platform for supporting at least aspects of a future deliberative sphere that could meet these challenges. While science — social or otherwise — seems to be culturally opposed to sounding alarms (although this is changing in some areas), it seems clear in relation to the points raised above, that some sort of "race" — at least against the clock — in the struggle to define and create the future cyberspace is now upon us. How can social science be involved in the ongoing evolution of deliberation in potentially transformative ways using the Internet?

A public declaration has the potential to help initiate this effort. The public nature of the declaration could help raise consciousness among the various stakeholder groups (including the public) and the diffusion of the rationale and the ideas that we believe are important to keep in mind could help with the identification and aggregation of the necessary resources.

Introduction to the Leeds Declaration

I originally proposed a similar declaration in a preliminary form at the 2005 Online Deliberation Conference at Stanford University. With that proposal, as with this current effort, I wanted to help draw attention to this area of applied research to help jumpstart and integrate online deliberation projects worldwide. When I proposed a similar, but more fully formed "Leeds Declaration" in advance of the 2010 Online Declaration Conference at the University of Leeds, the idea (but not necessarily all of the proposed content) was well received by the principals and the hope at that point was to move forward with a declaration. With the (hoped-for) publication of this article in *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* which includes the rationale for a declaration and the original draft declaration (as an appendix), it is hoped that a more-or-less final declaration would be concluded in the near future and published that would be used to promote the broad idea as well as signatories — who would also be potential participants — from around the world.

The declaration should contain four elements:

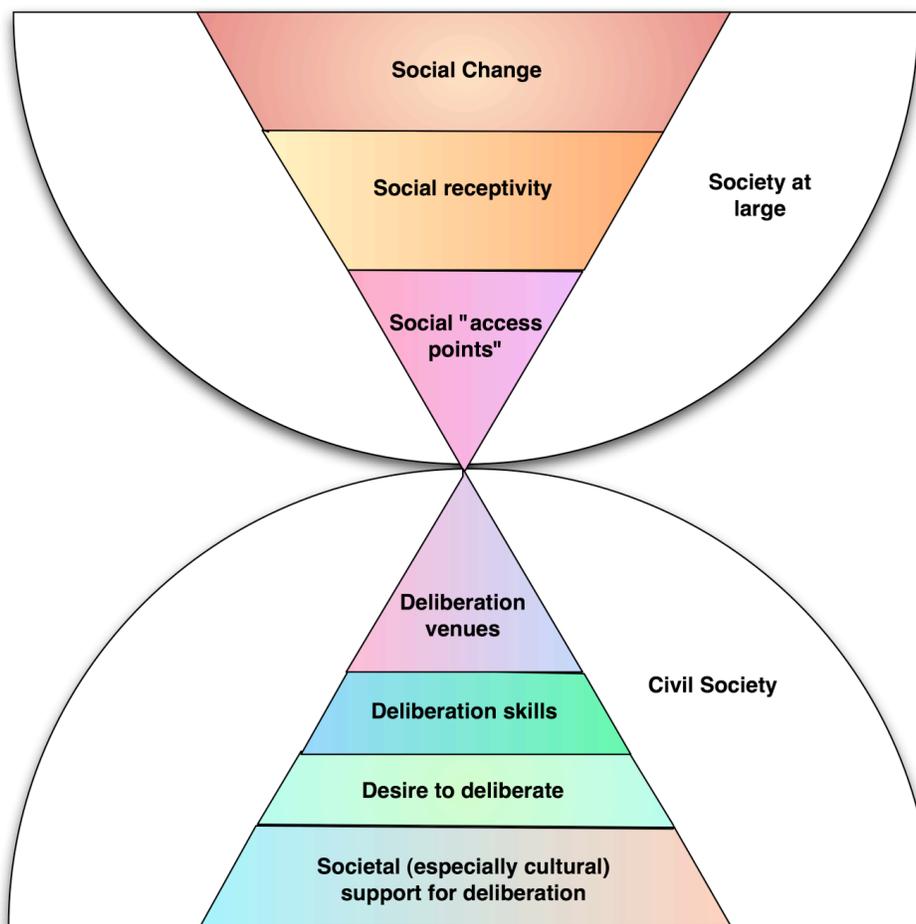
- (1) The document's purpose (to focus more energy, attention, and resources on citizen deliberation worldwide);
- (2) The rationale for such an enterprise;
- (3) observations about the broad aims of the enterprise and what social and design principles should be observed;
- (4) Some recommendations, generally somewhat open-ended

Context for Citizen Deliberation

Figure 1 graphically depicts the broad capabilities or phenomena related to deliberation and society (Schuler, 2010). The hourglass shape suggests that successful deliberation requires two major functions: (1) support for deliberation (the bottom half of the hourglass), and (2) the potential for actual social change to occur as a result of the deliberation (as shown in the top half of the hourglass). Deliberation can't occur without some support and deliberation with no potential to effect change is pointless. The two halves meet at the point where deliberation occurs. The phenomenon listed in each layer relies on the existence of the phenomenon listed in the layer below. For example, deliberation takes place within "deliberative venues" and finds expression only through "access points" in which ideas resulting from the deliberation find their way into the rest of society via the media, government institutions, schools, or other forms of conversation including face-to-face. Because the phenomenon listed in each layer within the two halves must take place and be supported for meaningful deliberation

to occur, each must be reflected in the declaration. It is also important to note that although this basic characterization would be accurate in most situations, it would assume a wide variety of forms depending on the specifics of the situation (compare, for example, China (Leib & He, 2010; Zhang, 2006) and the UK (Coleman & Blumler, 2009), or, even, different regions within a single country. It is also important to note that one aspect of this characterization is that each layer within each social context in which deliberation could occur is marked by various constraints and obstacles that are likely to be particular to the specific situation.

Figure 1. Conceptual Layers of Societal Deliberation



What the figure doesn't necessarily convey effectively is that various venues must be connected to each other. This sector of the hourglass suggests the intriguing and growing need to merge or otherwise integrate venues — and the various "citizens" who have access to them. One way to depict this graphically would be to show multiple venues within the venue layer and have them connected to each other. The idea that deliberation itself could lead to a society in which deliberation was more

acceptable is also not as evident as it could be. The "social change" at the top layer can change the "societal support" or the bottom layer.

Need for Deliberation and Citizen Engagement

The declaration needs to contain both a strong prescriptive statement and an invitation. We want to help engender substantially more interest and activity in this area not only for the existing online deliberation community, but for the large numbers of other people in democratic as well as non-democratic countries who are potential contributors and users of these systems as well. Furthermore the declaration should be somewhat utopian — that's the nature of declarations — it's what gives them their power. At the same time, the declaration should offer believable and attainable outcomes to a variety of stakeholders.

In the declaration we need to avoid presenting a single solution. We can say that we know more than we used to know, but we should avoid prescribing a "one size fits all" approach. That would make the declaration into a position paper and could appear to be self-serving. The declaration should avoid describing in detail why new perspectives like web 2.0 or crowdsourcing are not sufficient by themselves as deliberative tools. It should acknowledge instead the fact that a variety of interesting and innovative ideas, trends, and applications now exist that we can learn from and build upon.

It is critical that a strong citizen-oriented point of view be represented in the declaration. That's not to say that other points of view are not valid, only that this is the point of view that is often lacking. Needless to say, government and the academy (and possibly business) should play strong roles but it's absolutely critical to include a wide diversity of other sectors. A central point is that deliberation is — and should be more — connected to the society in which it exists. Deliberation is only meaningful when it is integrated into the rest of the social fabric; education is part of it, for example. And it occurs — and takes a variety of forms — in all countries. And deliberation will face a variety of obstacles that will vary from context to context. For example, media concentration within western democracies insofar as it may act to reduce diversity of opinion or to trivialize public discussion may discourage deliberation.

Finally, the declaration should be simple and straightforward; ideally it would fit on one page. One approach is to offer a brief preamble followed by a list of *tenets* that form the backbone of the declaration. These tenets should be fairly simple and declarative so that the document is easily understood. In addition to being easier to read, using a backbone of tenets will make the document easier for potential contributors to deal with than standard prose. Contributors to the document can

suggest new tenets or suggest changes to existing ones. Contributors can suggest new verbiage to support a tenet and changes to the current verbiage. And of course the order of the tenets could be altered.

Preamble

A preamble provides an introduction to the declaration. It needs to explain why deliberation is critical now and why it should be a concern for everybody. While the critical nature of the deliberation can readily be justified by the ubiquity of potentially catastrophic, complex, and deeply interconnected issues, many relevant issues including the dissipation of citizen power — and the notion itself — may be less well understood or convincing. Please see the appendix for the preamble [and entire declaration?] that was prepared for the conference at Leeds.

The purpose of this declaration is to raise the stature of citizen deliberation with the hopes of increasing its reach, effectiveness, inclusiveness, and legitimacy. In the preamble we can acknowledge that this is an extremely complex project that will require years of nuanced, creative and thoughtful negotiation and collaboration. We are aware that this project will have to address an extremely broad range of social and cross-cultural factors. We, however, believe that beginning this discussion in an explicit and open way is preferable to many other varieties of globalization that lack this transparency.

The preamble will also assert that defining an ideal system in advance is not possible. For that reason, we propose to begin a principled, long-term, incremental, participatory design process that integrates experimental, educational, community mobilization, research and policy work all within a common intellectual orientation: specifically to provide an inclusive and pluralistic intellectual umbrella for diverse, distributed civil society deliberation.

Finally, the declaration will assert that civil society historically is often the birthplace of socially ameliorative visions. This effort is intended to help build a more effective platform for these efforts, to help address humankind's shared problems — such as environmental degradation, human rights abuses, economic injustice and war — that other sectors — notably government and business — cannot solve by themselves.

Tenets

The various tenets (printed in italics below) constitute the basic recommendations that the signatories collectively endorse. They are intended to be "big picture" guidelines to encourage the development of a large constituency. This section is written in a prose style that contains more

verbiage than that in the proposed declaration. And although the tenets are listed in an order that makes sense from a narrative point-of-view they're intended to be considered together and generally at the same time when they are enacted in actual projects.

Humankind is currently facing a number of *Collaborative Emergencies*. A collaborative emergency is a critical, urgent problem in which collaboration of large number of "ordinary" people will be required. This is not to deny the involvement of elite members of society nor the possible importance of technology, new or otherwise. The historic circumstances that we are living in insist that a project like this is critical for the future of humankind and our planet. The case must be made that some urgency is warranted: potential and existing problems often cross borders — as do their causes! Some steps are being taken to address the problem but more (and better coordinated) steps are required. Some of the problems that arise from waiting would be catastrophic.

These collaborative emergencies absolutely establish the *Need for Deliberation and Citizen Engagement*. Deliberation exists to address conflicts and complex shared issues in legitimate, thoughtful, and non-violent ways. We assert here that no country can claim to be democratic without strong, informed citizen engagement and that deliberation includes both citizen-to-government and citizen-to-citizen approaches to deliberation. Whenever we refer to deliberation among people we generally makes three basic assumptions about *Meaningful Deliberation*. The first is that the input from the participants is substantive; it is not simply a yes or no vote or a numerical rating; it involves problem-solving and the design of solutions. Second, deliberation is, most importantly, a *process*, in which the decision or other product of the group is formulated over time. Third — and this seems to fly in the face of established cyberspace conventions, it seems to be necessary to establish constraints on the ways in which people can interact with each other (opportunities for all to speak, for example) — at least at critical phases within a larger process. A recent empirical finding helps underscore this assumption (Woolley et al., 2010). In this study, 699 people worked in small groups on a number of problems ranging from visual puzzles to brainstorming, negotiations, and design tasks. The study revealed that *group* intelligence (an intriguing potential analogue for the type of work citizens in democratic countries would, could, or should engage in) depended to a large degree on the relatively equal distribution of conversational turn-taking. And well-established parliamentary procedures such as Roberts Rules of Order (Robert McConnell Productions, 2001) devote considerable attention to managing discussion to minimize unfair dominance.

Unfortunately, meaningful deliberation without genuine *Social Inclusion* is not possible. Although the so-called "have-nots" constitute the majority of the world's population, it is all too easy

for the "haves" to not take notice (see Connell, 2007 for a thorough discussion of the origins and implications of this vast blind spot). While true social inclusion will doubtless take considerable time to take place, we can — and must — make progress on this front, if deliberation becomes more commonplace as a problem-solving strategy. Having the potential of connecting every person on the planet to every other person, the Internet (or to be more and less precise, the constellation of networked information and communication technology that includes mobile telephones, increasingly the access points for the world's poor) offers unprecedented potential for expanded citizenship. Hence, we establish *ICT as a Critical Platform* tenet to make this explicit. Although the access (and the *quality* of the access) to this critical platform still heavily favors the privileged (Zhang, 2010), the ICT can provide the necessary "glue" that will help integrate the variety of venues, conversations, languages, and media that will be needed to realize strong citizenship. Facebook and other social networking platforms can provide important venues for deliberation but the development of independent applications will be absolutely critical for many reasons.

Because ICT is so central to deliberation and to our future, it will also be important to ensure that the Internet continues to provide a platform that supports civil society. While this observation may help further enlarge (and, hence, complicate) our view of what the field of deliberation should entail, it is nevertheless a reality that we ignore at our own peril. On the other hand, it's important to assert that the Internet (and ICT generally) is not "magic" — it seems to be generally amenable to censorship by authoritarian governments (see, for example, a recent survey by Drezner, 2010). Also it does not and cannot relieve humans of their responsibility to engage in the social realm. This concern is rooted in the ongoing discussion of the efficacy of "virtual" interactions as political / social work, particularly as it relates to development of policy or impacts on the actual loci of power.

Although information and communication technology (ICT) will doubtless play a strong role, citizenship deliberation is primarily a social issue, not a technical one. Thus *An Emphasis on Social Innovation* must be given special attention as the driver of technological innovation. This means that a wide variety of people including social designers and the ultimate users of the systems as well (Schuler & Namioka, 1993) must be involved in the design of these systems and that purely technological "solutions" are generally unrealistic. It is necessary to build legitimacy to promote the type of *social* innovation that is currently needed. *The Importance of Civil Society* includes the organizations of civil society as well as people who aren't part of the economic or political sectors, especially in societies where civil society is weak. Part of this emphasis implies *Building on Current (and Building Additional) Knowledge*. This tenet acknowledges the existence of useful ideas such as Web 2.0,

crowdsourcing, and Roberts Rules of Order (Schuler, 2009), especially as conceptual blocks that people are familiar with. This tenet also acknowledges that cultural and other characteristics may be important considerations in localized, deliberative venues. Additionally, affordances of the Internet have helped promote relevant ideas in the political realm such as transparency and open government (see for example, Lathrop & Ruma, 2010).

For deliberation to actually have a chance to be more of a prominent decision-making technique worldwide (supplanting, for example, governing by force and/or economic exploitation), *Building Across Boundaries As Well As Within Boundaries* will be required. This means working across national (and other political) borders as well as social and cultural borders. It also pertains to the necessity of building beyond purely Internet-based approaches into media, education, and place-based (public libraries, for example). This means including and engaging groups from across the political spectrum, marginalized groups; and across various "divides" and boundaries. Robert Putnam (2001) referred to the two form of social capital, binding (*within* boundaries) and bridging (*across* boundaries), that are analogous here.

Deliberation in society won't be effective without adequate social interest. At the same time, the dwindling interest in political engagement that statistics from around the world seem to reveal, cannot be taken as givens. Social modeling, incentives, interesting approaches — and most importantly adequate consideration of the products of citizen deliberation by the elites, should be initiated to help stem the undeliberative tide. No one group would be affected by enlightened and empowered citizenship. And no one group will be responsible for bringing it about. For that reason, we need to explicitly mention the importance of *Many Audiences, Many Stakeholders*. We need to explicitly appeal to many constituencies and this tenet can help promote the needed inclusivity. Since the connections may not be obvious we can list many of the stakeholders and describe in a terse but general way what their role could be. The academic and research community can play vital roles of course, as could parents, teachers, and other educators; governments at various levels; the media; funders, non-profit and other non governmental organizations; and, most importantly, people / citizens, who are the ultimate users of the systems and processes that come into being.

As mentioned earlier, we believe that we need to advocate for a *Diversity of Deliberative Spaces and Approaches*. Of course this implies the parallel necessity of learning from them all as well as integrating and bridging them. Facebook and other social networking sites will necessarily play roles here, but as mentioned earlier, they should not be seen as the final word on deliberation. The *New Venues, Transformed Venues* tenet acknowledges that the merely adding another venue, a particular

type of online forum, for example, is not enough: existing institutions must be transformed over time if enlightened and empowered citizenship truly emerges. We could include ideas for proposed online deliberative spaces here, including, for example, mobile telephones or any of the myriad community networking systems (see De Cindio & Schuler, 2007), as access points to deliberative venues. And the centuries-old tradition of people *meeting face-to-face* should not be abandoned in a misguided rush to position media at the center of all human interaction. These venues are still absolutely critical as institutions that are often still viable and should ultimately (at least) be connected to other venues, studied for their relevance to the design of new deliberative venues and possible augmentation with online deliberation or other ICT support.

Throughout this declaration, a certain type of design process is implied, the *Envision, Build, Evaluate Cycle* makes this explicit. Since the end state is not known, we have no choice but to adopt this type of process. We can however optimize the process to some degree in various ways such as planning with evaluation in mind and being aware of other approaches that are exploring similar terrain. It should also be stressed that certain software development approaches are more amenable to future evolution of individual applications as well as future linkages between systems. Ultimately of course, the actual *Support for the Deliberative Community* must be considered. This includes a wide variety of material and intellectual resources including conferences, online resources, case studies, shared problems, comparative studies, open protocols, transformable systems, online tools, links, references, and source code.

If deliberation, online or otherwise, were easy or universally desirable, it probably already would be in place. The truth is that *Obstacles to Deliberation and Citizen Engagement* are ubiquitous. Media concentration and lack of citizen access to media, corporate "front groups", intentional obfuscation, lack of citizenship training, repression, economic prerogatives, lobbyists, among other obstacles help keep the idea of deliberation distant and unrealistic. Each layer within the hourglass figure is subject to specific obstacles that will often vary from context to context. Sometimes the intent is malicious and comes from outside; sometimes, of course, well-meaning people can't come to an agreement or they are confronted with a strong natural obstacle such as the lack of a common language with which to communicate.

Finally, the ultimate aim is increasing humankind's *Civic Intelligence* (Schuler, 2001). Civic intelligence is the ability of people working together to address shared problems. It's a type of community capacity, the capability of *addressing civic ends through civic means*. Many authors invoke the idea of civic intelligence with other expressions. Civic intelligence was a primary theme of John

Dewey although he employed other names including *social intelligence* and *social inquiry* (Batner, 1939). Boyte (2005) and Briggs (2008) use the term *community capacity*, Dahlgren (2009) discusses *civic agency* and *civic culture*, while Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland (2001) have focused on *civic innovation*. Thus, deliberation while crucial in and of itself, should also be seen as an important approach towards improving civic intelligence.

Conclusions

The preamble and the tenets above are intended to supply a compelling and holistic narrative to support the case for online deliberation. They are also intended to provide specific guidelines for thinking about and designing deliberative systems.

Langdon Winner (1996) made the following statements in relation to the advent of ubiquitous digital computer networks:

"As we ponder horizons of computing and society today, it seems likely that American society will reproduce some of the basic tendencies of modernism:

- Unequal power over key decisions about what is built and why
- Concerted attempts to enframe and direct people's lives in both work and consumption
- The presentation of the future society as something nonnegotiable
- The stress on individual gratification rather than collective problems and responsibilities
- Design strategies that conceal and obfuscate important realms of social complexity"

Although Winner was referring to the United States, his warnings are generally applicable in this context. Does deliberation have the power to prevent any of those unwanted tendencies? Is possible to shape ICT, or — more accurately — to shape the ways that people interact with each other to address their shared problems?

Social scientists have a critical role to play at this historical moment and this role must take a form much different than their customary modes of operation. This is especially important if they / we expect to keep up with "internet speed" in which developments in ICT are taking place. Developing and publishing a Leeds Declaration may be a useful way to help promote and orient these new approaches to engagement.

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Appendix A

Preamble to Original Declaration

All over the world attempts are being made to trivialize citizenship and reconstitute citizens as (everyday) consumers and (sporadic) voters. At the same time, real power is in many ways being transferred to large corporations and other unelected organizations such as the World Trade Organization. We, the organizers and attendees of the Online Deliberation Conference at the University of Leeds, June 30, 2010, hope to help counter that trend with this declaration.

Realizing the growing and critical importance of citizens and civic society in addressing humankind's common problems, we the undersigned propose the initiation of a prolonged and multi-pronged focus on deliberation. We realize that this is an extremely complex project that will require years of complex, nuanced, creative and thoughtful negotiation and collaboration. We are aware that this project will have to address an extremely broad range of social and cross-cultural factors. We, however, believe that beginning this discussion in an explicit and open way is preferable to many other varieties of globalization that lack this transparency.

Moreover, we realize that precisely defining an ideal system in advance is impossible. For that reason, we propose to begin a principled, long-term, incremental, participatory design process that integrates experimental, educational, community mobilization, research and policy work all within a common intellectual orientation: specifically to provide an inclusive and pluralistic intellectual umbrella for a

diverse, distributed civil society effort.

Civil society historically is the birthplace of socially ameliorative visions. This effort is intended to help build a more effective platform for these efforts, to help address humankind's shared problems — such as environmental degradation, human rights abuses, economic injustice and war — that other sectors — notably government and business — are seemingly powerless to stem.

Appendix B

Proposed Tenets

Collaborative Emergencies

Need for Deliberation and Citizen Engagement

Meaningful Deliberation

Social Inclusion

ICT as a Critical Platform

An Emphasis on Social Innovation

The Importance of Civil Society

Building on Current (and Building Additional) Knowledge

Building Across Boundaries As Well As Within Boundaries

Many Audiences, Many Stakeholders

Diversity of Deliberative Spaces and Approaches

New Venues, Transformed Venues

Envision, Build, Evaluate Cycle

Support for the Deliberative Community

Obstacles to Deliberation and Citizen Engagement

Civic Intelligence

Author Note

I want to thank Weiyu Zhang, Matthew Horwitz, and Ralf Groetker for their many useful suggestions.

Douglas Schuler

The Evergreen State College & the Public Sphere Project

Douglas Schuler has written and coedited several books, including *Participatory Design: Principles and Practices* (Erlbaum, 1994), *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* (Addison-Wesley, 1996), and most recently, *Liberating Voices: A Pattern Language for Communication Revolution* (MIT Press, 2008). He is president of the Public Sphere Project (<http://www.publicsphereproject.org/>) and former chair of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. He is also a co-founder of the Seattle Community Network, a free, public access computer network supporting community and civic engagement that first went online in 1994. He is a member of the Faculty at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, a non-traditional liberal arts college. He has a masters degree in computer science (University of Washington) and a masters degree in software engineering (Seattle University).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Douglas Schuler, douglas@publicsphereproject.org.