Design Coalition to Cultivate **User Agency and Skills** in the Digital Age
Proposal for Design Coalition and Education Package

Note: Draft as of October 18, 2023.

The Challenge:

Digital discourse is central to our social and civic life – internet, social media, and digital technology influence how we work, play, communicate and relate to each other. Currently, our online spaces are not structured to give users meaningful control over their digital experiences or to encourage public discourse that would serve the public interest. Instead, they appear to promote ideas and experiences that divide us and undermine our shared sense of reality. Today, 71% of Americans think that the internet does more to divide us than bring us together, triggering distrust and isolation along racial, religious, socioeconomic, partisan, and geographic lines. Community and content moderation alone, especially at scale, cannot fix these harms – design changes and tools that promote explicit user agency are needed, as well as users equipped with the skills to better navigate online spaces. This is part of a broader societal shift towards more participatory and empowering online communities, as building blocks for a healthier and more resilient democracy.

The need for this project is significant, as the digital age is significantly transforming how we learn and interact with information and each other. Furthermore, recent controversies surrounding disinformation and misinformation, and social media harms have amplified the urgency for experimental measures, user and society-centered design, and policy reforms. Finally, both larger and smaller platforms have started offering more options, including ones based on open protocols, for consumers. There is an opportunity to move beyond content moderation and solutions that violate free speech, by focusing on content-neutral design innovations and social and cognitive skills that promote user agency. This dual top-down, bottom-up approach – that shapes the architecture of our online spaces on one hand, and the skills needed to navigate it in on the other – ensures a comprehensive approach to the digital challenges above which is a critical and necessary part of any larger solution for a thriving democracy and resilient communities.

Why Convergence

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides across deep division to solve critical issues. For nearly 15 years, our time-tested collaborative problem-solving methodology has brought people together across ideological, political, and identity lines to meet the urgent needs and improve the lives of millions of Americans. Convergence builds divergent tables that include the diverse political, business, and civil society leaders whose inability to work together has made the issue intractable. Our evidence-based approach is informed by continued advances in contact theory, neuroscience, and psychology, as well as by decades of peacemaking activity. At Convergence, we know from experience that there is incredible power to relational capital and bringing different perspectives to the table to discuss seemingly intractable issues. Our process consistently demonstrates that there is real work to do to build

alignment and consensus but often significantly more overlap and shared principles that can be uncovered through our process that builds trust, identifies common ground, and develops solutions that transcend zero-sum calculations.

The Convergence Collaborative on Digital Discourse convened experts and representatives from major platforms, alternative platforms, academia, law, education, advocacy, journalism, among others, to address the many challenges that face modern digital landscape. The work of the Collaborative was uniquely different from other convenings on the issue because of the wide-ranging viewpoints represented within the Collaborative. As part of the *Convergence Collaborative on Digital Discourse*, we have interviewed over 200 experts, and convened over 20 leaders and stakeholders across disciplines, sectors, and ideologies to tackle deep challenges around digital discourse and drive solutions that foster resilience, constructive and ethical behaviors, and digital wellbeing. Our proposal builds on the existing research, community of collaborators, and consensus proposals coming out of the Convergence project. The *Collaborative on Digital Discourse* is a part of Convergence's portfolio of consensus-building projects on Democracy and Society.

Project Summary – Design Coalition to Cultivate User Agency and Skills in the Digital Age

This project will build a **coalition of "first movers" and experts** to design solutions that empower users with more agency and choice in online spaces and equip them with the social and cognitive skills to engage more constructively and with greater resilience online. "First movers" encompass organizations at the forefront of envisioning, developing, or implementing designs that promote user agency in online spaces.

Project Activity – Design Innovation Coalition

We will build a diverse and influential multi-disciplinary coalition of "first movers", experts and practitioners, and users supporting designs and innovations that promote user agency and encourage thriving digital discourse. Platforms and organizations already employing these designs can educate and model positive impacts. An empowered and active grassroots user base can scrutinize and provide feedback, dynamically advocate for certain options, and "vote with their feet."

We will issue research-based calls for broader scale change by catalytic actors that can influence design, policies, and users. Coalition participants will mobilize their broader networks to socialize our efforts with the media to raise public awareness.

The coalition will be made up of the following **key stakeholder groups**:
- A **core group of "first movers"** at the forefront of design innovations, tools and insights that amplify user agency, including larger (e.g., Threads, Reddit, TikTok) and alternative Bluesky, Mastodon, Front Porch Forum) social media platforms, non-social media technology companies (e.g., Open AI), app and middleware developers,
- A **broad audience of online community architects** to explore design solutions coming out of the core group, including platform representatives, especially product managers and designers
- **Researchers** specializing in cognitive and social science
- **Instructional designers** to build an innovation education package

- **Policy experts** specializing in social media and online behavior, and free speech
- Social media influencers, community moderators and user advocacy organizations, to represent the **user base** more directly

Project Activity – Design Code and Education Package

We will generate actionable materials to incentivize solutions that promote user agency and build user skills

On the design side, we will **develop and promote a menu of actionable designs, tools and policy opportunities** that are content-agnostic and promote user agency, constructive online interaction and thriving digital discourse. We will build on our existing [Design Code for Social Media](#). Design features include nudges and other interventions informed by behavioral science, and policy options include interoperability, transparency, design codes and public support for digital infrastructure. This will be bolstered by demos, workshops, and targeted briefings to showcase the positive impacts of and the business and societal case for these design innovations and tools, and model ways to approach them.

On the education side, we will **develop and pilot an education package** that cultivates social and cognitive skills to empower users in our increasingly technology-mediated world. These skills will enable users to engage more constructively online, better navigate online information ecosystems, and leverage the benefits of, while building resilience to the harms, of digital spaces. This will be done in continuous consultation with a series of focus groups and panels of our target audiences to user test the package before piloting.

The education package will build the following **skills**:
- Social skills, including (1) active and empathetic listening, (2) dialogue across differences, and (3) non-violent communication
- Cognitive skills, including (1) adversarial idea testing and problem solving, (2) resilience to identity-protective cognition, and (3) evaluation of information, and algorithmic and search literacy.

Below is an **example sequence of modules** to illustrate the essential topics and concepts for fostering these skills in citizens. Each module will be paired with workshops, guides, and other tools to bolster uptake.
- Module 1: Introducing Responsible Behavior Online – On understanding responsible and constructive engagement with information and each other online and exploring the impact of online behavior on society.
- Module 2: Practicing Active and Empathetic Listening – On the difference between hearing and listening, techniques for active listening. Bolstered by role-playing exercises to practice skills and build empathy.
- Module 3: Engaging in Dialogue Across Differences – On identifying biases and prejudices, exploring diverse perspectives, learning strategies for engaging in constructive dialogue. Bolstered by practice on discussion and collaboration fora.
- Module 4: Using Non-violent Communication – On recognizing escalating conflicts online, and strategies to navigate online disagreements constructively, and de-escalate conflicts. Bolstered by step-by-step and situational guides and role-playing exercises to practice conflict resolution. Example: [The Better Arguments Project](#).

- Module 5: Building an Idea-Testing Mentality – On learning to systematically evaluate the merit of ideas by looking at them from different angles, testing them to find problems or weaknesses, and finding ways to make them stronger. Bolstered by deliberation fora.
- Module 6: Cultivating Cognitive Resilience – On building cognitive resilience to false and manipulated information and extremist ideologies, recognizing cognitive biases and logical fallacies. Bolstered by interactive scenario workshops and games. Example: CIRCE.
- Module 7: Developing Information, Algorithmic and Search Literacy – On responsible information consumption, empowering participants with the ability to evaluate information for credibility, understanding the architecture behind and influence of algorithms, news feeds, and search results, and how to improve query skills. Bolstered by guides and games. Examples: Google Search Literacy Lesson Plans and News Literacy Project.

Collaboration among these stakeholders will lead to a well-rounded and effective education package that addresses the complexities of teaching social and cognitive skills that build character in the digital age. Illustratively, **elements of this package** would include:

- Just-in-time workshop modules that encompass interactive tutorials and personalized learning paths
- Peer learning and collaboration, including collaborative challenge spaces for tackling social and civic issues, empathy-building storytelling, and deliberation fora
- Customizable digital guides for varied constituencies
- Design-based interventions that enhance users' cognitive and social skills, such as microlearning nudges, gamified learning, VR simulations for scenario-based learning, prompted divergent thinking to imagine alternatives, and digital mindfulness nudges
- Continuous assessment and feedback via quizzes, reflective exercises, and feedback loops to reinforce learning

Our **target audience** focuses on:

- Youth, most active online and the future of our society, and youth serving organizations
- Local government officials, who must manage public meetings on polarizing issues
- Workplaces, which are hubs where we are most likely to be exposed to different people and viewpoints
- Community-based organizations, including libraries, place-based online social networks, and civic engagement nonprofits
- Online communities, which struggle to moderate and manage division and disinformation in their spaces.

Project Activity – Accountability

We will set shared goals and mechanisms for accountability by establishing collective commitments and setting measurable goals to implement designs that enable user control and public discourse that serves the public interest.

Project Distinctiveness

While some efforts have been made to address digital discourse challenges, online toxicity and misinformation, this project distinguishes itself by offering impact areas and solution sets that move beyond partisan framings and divides and galvanize broad consensus support. Our project also integrates expertise across a unique configuration of disciplines and sectors, spanning software development and product management, behavioral and cognitive science, social psychology and anthropology, users themselves, and more.

Project Impacts

Social media designs allow for choice and thriving digital discourse
- Platforms shift practices and implement design innovations and user tools that promote user control and cognitive and social skills that cultivate character in the digital age.
- Users enjoy greater agency online, feel empowered and educated to leverage the positives of social media, and report better wellbeing online.

Citizens have the skills to navigate, connect, understand, and act constructively
- Local government officials, youth-serving organizations, workplaces, online community managers and moderators, and community leaders pilot our education program and benefit from a less polarized staff, citizenry, and community.
- Youth, employees, citizens, platform users, and community members feel empowered and educated to leverage the positives of social media and report better wellbeing online. They feel greater connectedness than division within and across their communities, online and offline and engage in more pro-social and pro-civic activities.

Demonstrated efficacy of multistakeholder engagement and problem-solving
- Experts across disciplines, sectors, and ideologies mutually benefit from collaborative problem-solving across differences.

Project Timeline and Budget

- **Year 1:**
  - Research and build the coalition via stakeholder consultations and workshops
  - Launch and convene coalition
  - Collaboratively research and co-create materials on design innovations and tools that promote user agency and thriving digital discourse
  - Assess the landscape and design the education package via focus groups and expert consultations and workshops
  - Start piloting the education package
- **Year 2:**
  - Continue convening the coalition and developing solutions
  - Socialize coalition outputs via briefings, demos, and media opportunities
  - Build out coalition with additional relevant constituencies, including continued activation of grassroots user bases
  - Continue piloting education package with additional audiences, collecting learnings, and iterating
  - Rollout the education package more broadly

Program Activities and Costs	Program Budget

Staff | Full-time Project Director and Project Associate at current salary rates and a 3% raise in year 2	• Year 1 - $225,500 • Year 2 - $233,000
Build Coalition | Convene "first movers" for eight in-person meetings (assuming $4k/meeting); travel for staff (assuming $1k/trip and two trips/meeting); a budget for expert consultants (such as a cognitive scientist or product designer); and professional facilitation of select meetings ($2100/day for 12 days).	• Year 1 - $46,600 • Year 2 - $46,600
Develop Education Package | Instructional designer to package content into educational materials ($170k), graphic design ($20k), video production ($35k), and web design ($20k).	• Year 1 - $215,000 • Year 2 - $30,000
Socialize Solutions and Build Awareness | Brand design ($10k); conference fees and travel to in-person trainings or workshops ($15.6k assuming $300 per conference registration for twelve registrations and $1k per trip for twelve trips); public relations consulting ($20k); and an evaluation consultant ($15k).	• Year 1 - $32,800 • Year 2 - $27,800
Overhead | Shared operating costs associated with this project, such as supervision, administration, accounting, software, videoconferencing, office supplies, and more. Budgeted at 14% of project costs.	• Year 1 - $82,000 • Year 2 - $55,000
TOTAL:	$994,300

Link to budget: Convergence_DigiDis_OnlineCommsEdSkills_CoalitionProposal_budget.xlsx

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