



# A DCI Deliberation Guide

## Social Media:

*How should we engage and/or regulate it, if at all?*

### Format for Deliberation

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#### Before the Deliberation

Read this document (Required)

The following readings are optional but highly recommended:

- I. [Social Media at a Crossroads: 25 Solutions from the Social Media Summit at MIT](#) from the MIT Sloan School of Management
- II. [Teens and Social Media Use: What's the Impact?](#) by the Mayo Clinic
- III. [Why Kids Shouldn't get Social Media Until they are Eighteen](#) on *Medium*
- IV. [5 Benefits of Using Social Media](#) on *LinkedIn*
- V. [How Bad is Tech Use for Kids, Really?](#) on *Nir and Far*
- VI. [It's Time We Reclaim Our Focus](#) in *The New York Times*
- VII. [Do Social Media Threaten Democracy?](#) in *The Economist*
- VIII. [Yes, Social Media Really is Undermining Democracy](#) in *The Atlantic* by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business.
- IX. [What the Research on Social Media's Impact on Democracy and Daily Life Says \(and Doesn't Say\)](#) by Pratiti Raychoudhury, Vice President, Head of Research, Meta
- X. [Why the Government Should Not Regulate Content Moderation of Social Media](#) from the Cato Institute

#### During the Deliberation

- I. Setting the Expectations - 5 min.
- II. Getting to Know Each Other - 10 min.
- III. Weighing the Effects of Social Media on Individuals and their Relationships – 15 min.
- IV. Weighing the Effects of Social Media on Politics, Society, and Democracy – 15 min.
- V. Suggesting and Evaluating Social Media Practices and Policies - 10 min.
  - I. Reflections - 5 min.

## Background

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In a 2021 Social Media Summit hosted by MIT's Sloan School of Management, researchers and policymakers came together to discuss the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges of widespread social media use. MIT Professor and conference convener Sinan Aral asserted that the effect of social media is synonymous with "rewiring the central nervous system of humanity in real time."<sup>1</sup>

A report from the summit was compiled and identified seven areas of concern for social media that were discussed at the conference. They included issues surrounding privacy, transparency, lack of regulation, lack of competition, algorithmic contribution to bias, racism, and polarization, and political censorship.<sup>2</sup> The report, however, did not examine the social and psychological effects of social media. Multiple organizations, such as the Child Mind Institute and The National Center for Health Research have found links between social media use and depression, anxiety, and loneliness.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, social media use is rampant; 70% of Americans use social media according to The Pew Research Center.<sup>4</sup> Social media use is especially prevalent among teens, with 97% using social media and 45% saying that they are constantly online. Among these teens, studies have shown that even passively using social media for older adolescents correlated with declines in life satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

Social media does have some benefits, however, which can include things like offering a whole new avenue for creatives to publish and share their content while providing everyone a place to curate their memories in an aesthetic way for others to see. A popular concept used to describe the functionality of apps like Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, and LinkedIn is that they are tools for building a "personal brand."<sup>6</sup> Building such a brand is viewed by many as crucial in the job market because so many more jobs today interact in some way with social media.

Beyond the personal mental health effects of social media, questions have emerged about the ways that politics have become a core part of many social media sites and how this development has affected the way we view our political system. A potentially positive consequence of this phenomenon is how government officials now have a clearer, unmediated way to communicate with their constituents. Unfortunately, this development also creates pathways for impersonation of those officials and the spread of misinformation.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Sara. [Social media is broken. A new report offers 25 ways to fix it.](#) MIT Sloan School of Management. June 30, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Sara. [Social media is broken. A new report offers 25 ways to fix it.](#) MIT Sloan School of Management. June 30, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Miller, Caroline. [Does Social Media Use Cause Depression?](#) Child Mind Institute; Novas, Elina and Meg Seymour. [Social Media and Adolescents' and Young Adults' Mental Health](#), National Center for Health Research.

<sup>4</sup> [Social Media Fact Sheet](#). Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> [Teens and social media use: What's the impact?](#) Mayo Clinic.

<sup>6</sup> O'Sullivan, Sadhbh. [Will We Ever Evolve Out Of Social Media?](#) Refinery29.

All of this relates to the topic of this deliberation guide – how can we reduce the negative effects of social media while amplifying its positive effects? More specifically, how should we interact with social media at the micro-level of our personal well-being and relationships, and how should we regulate it at the macro-level of society, politics, and the governance of these sites?

This deliberation guide is designed to guide deliberators through the process of engaging with and better understanding different views on social media. The rest of this background section contains four mini-essays expressing distinct views about social media. The first two present contrasting views on social media's effects on us as individuals – our personal well-being and relationships – while the second two express opposing views on its effects on our democracy, i.e., our broader society and its political dynamics.

### ***PERSPECTIVE #1: Social Media Connects Us***

With social media becoming so embedded in our lives, it is natural to want to go back to the days when everything seemed much simpler. Unfortunately, this is neither possible nor desirable. This does not mean that social media does not have its downsides, but that we have become so habituated to its benefits that now we only seem to perceive its flaws. But those benefits are still very real.

Take, for example, the velocity at which information can spread on websites like Twitter and Facebook and the power that social networks have had on political and revolutionary movements. The role of social media in the Arab Spring and in countries like Russia, Belarus, Turkey, China, and the United States to publicize particular issues (e.g., the treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang Province, the death of George Floyd) are good examples of how the interconnectedness that social networks enable has raised awareness about injustices on a scale that would not have been possible before our present technological age.<sup>7</sup> Social media has become the rear-view mirror that shows us how problems are closer than they appear. This may cause anxiety within us but only because we are now aware of problems much faster than we were before.

Social media has also simultaneously disrupted corporate mass media while democratizing the role of journalists, creating a decentralized system of information.<sup>8</sup> Social media has also enabled us to create personal brands that can free us from the limitations of traditional careers.<sup>9</sup> All of this by way of the express lane of the information super-highway that is social media. One of the reasons we are even able to have such rich conversations about how social media affects us is precisely because we can share our experiences via social media.

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Smidi, and Saif Shahin. [Social Media and Social Mobilisation in the Middle East](#). *India Quarterly*, 73(2): 196-209. June 2017; Jacob Mchangama. *Free Speech: A History from Socrates to Social Media*, Basic Books, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Vorhaus, Mike. [People Increasingly Turn To Social Media For News](#). *Forbes*, June 24, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Marr. [12 Easy Steps To Build Your Personal Brand On Social Media](#). *Forbes*, Jan. 6, 2023.

When it comes to polarization, according to some studies, social media is actually the venue where people are most likely exposed to opinions that diverge from their own.<sup>10</sup> Polarization is not necessarily increased by engagement with social media, but rather, social media gives us the opportunity to become educated about others' opinions and discuss them together.

Research also shows that while excessive engagement with social networks can have detrimental outcomes, moderate use of social media can actually result in improved well-being.<sup>11</sup> Such usage may give people a sense of connectedness and belonging as they share their own stories and learn about the joys and trials of their friends and family. To use a different metaphor, social media is like fire – it can burn us if we don't control it, but it can also keep us warm, protect us, and do a lot of other great things for us if we use it well.

### ***PERSPECTIVE #2: Social Media Harms Us***

According to a survey conducted by Statista, the average person spends around two and a half hours on social media: networking, browsing, or absorbing information.<sup>12</sup> While social media has allowed people more “access to information, ease of communication, and freedom,” most respondents to the survey claimed that social media “worsened their personal privacy, increased the polarization in politics and heightened everyday distractions,” begging the question: do the pros outweigh the cons?<sup>13</sup> Empirical studies of social media's harmful effects make it clear that social media negatively affects our personal lives.

In 2018 Pew Research Center surveyed 750 kids aged 13-17 and found that 45% are online almost constantly.<sup>14</sup> The amount of time spent online by these young adults is concerning because social media has been linked to mental health problems. Individuals in their teens who use social media more than three times a day are more likely to have poor mental health and overall well-being.<sup>15</sup> Also, a study in 2016 noted that social media use was linked to lower sleep quality, greater anxiety, and more depression.<sup>16</sup>

Frances Haugen, a former-Facebook employee turned whistleblower testified in front of the US Senate, “Facebook knows that they are leading young users to anorexia content,” showing that social media apps and companies are purposefully promoting harmful information.<sup>17</sup> Social media companies understand that their content contributes to mental illnesses and continue to

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<sup>10</sup> Pablo Barberá. [Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization](#). In *Social Media and Democracy*. Cambridge University Press, August 24, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Mesfin Bekalu. [Association of Social Media Use With Social Well-Being, Positive Mental Health, and Self-Rated Health: Disentangling Routine Use From Emotional Connection to Use](#). *Health Education and Behavior*, 46(2), November 2019.

<sup>12</sup> [“Average Daily Time Spent on Social Media Worldwide from 2012 to 2022,” Statista](#), August 22, 2022,.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> [Teens and social media use: What's the impact?](#) Mayo Clinic.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> [“At Commerce Committee Hearing with Facebook Whistleblower, Klobuchar Highlights How Facebook Algorithm Promotes Eating Disorders Among Young Users.”](#) Office of Senator Amy Klobuchar, October 5, 2021.

sell their product. Why do companies not filter out this content or create different content? Because it is addictive and social media companies know it.

Social media companies continue to fuel this dangerous fire as people become more addicted to social media. The nature of social media contributes to mental illnesses, which negatively affect the personal lives of people who consistently or even casually use the platforms. A study published by Melissa Hunt, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, that was the first experimental study of the effects of social media on users' well-being, found that participants who maintained their typical social media behavior had higher levels of depression and loneliness than those assigned to a control group that limited their time on Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram to 10 minutes per day.<sup>18</sup>

Negative effects may also come from even limited use of social media; another study discovered that teens who have as few as three interactions with social media a day are more likely to have poor mental health and well-being.<sup>19</sup> Despite some benefits of social media, studies on the negative side effects of social media overwhelmingly show that the cons outweigh the pros.<sup>20</sup>

### ***PERSPECTIVE #3: Social Media Threatens Democracy***

The current social media landscape is bad for society and government should regulate it. Social media constructs a pseudo-reality that captivates the livelihoods of millions. Its influence drastically transforms the norms of human interaction and forces citizens to exist in a fractured duality between the physical and digital worlds. As an artificially-designed realm that allows for clear manipulation by those who hold the technological and monetary means, it poses a serious danger to the public and their governments—through disinformation, misinformation, social isolation, and other harmful effects. Social media's negative influence on society necessitates the legislation of restrictions to limit its unwarranted domination.

A detrimental dynamic created by social media threatens to undermine governments because it is one of the primary mediums people use to access information. However, the validity of the information accessed is highly questionable, and individuals are aware of its inaccuracies even as they continue to use it. According to a survey conducted by the Associated Press, while only 11% of adults in the United States trust the validity of information from social media, 70% still rely on it for weekly information about governmental affairs.<sup>21</sup> Further, within popular platforms like Twitter, algorithms promoting content with high levels of engagement help

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<sup>18</sup> Michele Berger. [Social Media use increases depression and loneliness](#). *Penn Today*. November 9, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> [Teens and social media use: What's the impact?](#) Mayo Clinic.

<sup>20</sup> Weston Blasi. [“‘Young Teens shouldn’t be on Social Media,’ former Facebook Security Chief says,”](#) *MarketWatch*, September 28, 2021; Shankar Vedantam, [Researchers Study Effects of Social Media on Young Minds](#), National Public Radio, August 9, 2016; Rachel Sample, [“Why Kids Shouldn’t get Social Media Until They are Eighteen,”](#) *Medium*, June 14, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> [Social Media in Government: Benefits, Challenges and Impact on Social Perception](#). Ohio University, October 22, 2020.

spread disinformation faster than legitimate information.<sup>22</sup> The widespread diffusion of disinformation undermines democratic values and the integrity of our political systems. Although questions surrounding freedom of speech and practicality create roadblocks, the government must consider effective strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of social media. For example, as Jamie Susskind has recommended, social media platforms can be categorized based on their level of social risk to the citizenry.<sup>23</sup> Categories would be subject to differing levels of oversight to implement apt solutions—such as fines and tough regulatory actions—without overreaching governmental authority. Platforms determined to present significant risk, such as those that are very large and have the potential to influence millions of people very quickly – should be regulated at the system and design level to restructure their platforms.<sup>24</sup> Platforms could be required to have “reasonable and proportionate systems” that reduce the risks of online harassment and foreign interference in the political process.<sup>25</sup>

Doing so will grant governments system-level oversight over social media platforms without requiring them to scrutinize every moderation decision, and it would incentivize companies to “come up with new interfaces, new algorithms, perhaps even new business models” that focus “on reducing social harms rather than amplifying them.”<sup>26</sup>

#### ***PERSPECTIVE #4: Social Media Enhances Democracy***

Government regulation would not eliminate misinformation or harmful rhetoric. Lies don't just exist online. Newspapers, TV shows, or your next-door neighbor can all spew misinformation. If the government were to regulate social media, this type of rhetoric would not disappear, but rather, find a new place to live. The people posting extremist rhetoric will not change their views; instead, they will find new avenues to shout conspiracy theories or anti-government information. And they would, unfortunately, be farther from the rest of us.

Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis said, “Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants.”<sup>27</sup> If one wishes to increase accountability, decrease misinformation, limit polarization online, it is not through regulation that pushes these people to the margins. It is important to be exposed to the negative aspects of social media. Then, they can be discussed and dispelled, and we can move forward as a society.

Also, what we know to be true today, may not be true tomorrow. In an Atlantic article by Jeff Koseff, a United States Naval Academy cybersecurity-law professor, “the prevailing view of what counts as misinformation changes over time.”<sup>28</sup> In the early days of the pandemic, mask wearing was discouraged by the U.S. government. And, according to Koseff, “the hypothesis

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<sup>22</sup> Steven Lee Meyers. [How Social Media Amplifies Misinformation More Than Information](#). *New York Times*, October 13, 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Jamie Susskind. [We Can Regulate Social Media Without Censorship. Here's How](#). *Time*. July 22, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Alasdair Roberts. [Where Brandeis got “sunlight is the best disinfectant.”](#) March 1, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Jeff Koseff, [“America’s Favorite Flimsy Pretext for Limiting Free Speech,”](#) *The Atlantic* (January 2022).

that the coronavirus escaped from a Chinese lab was a fringe idea in 2020 but gained some mainstream acceptance in the United States in 2021.”<sup>29</sup> Vanderbilt professor Jacob Mchangama argues that “sometimes what we think is an informed choice at one point in time looks less informed ten or twenty years later...The only way that we can get to that is through discussion and investigation of our preconceived ideas.”<sup>30</sup>

Government regulation of speech would also worsen the distrust in government that leads to much of this misinformation and harmful speech. The people responsible for much of the weaponized political rhetoric will become more entrenched in their anti-establishment beliefs if the government were to regulate them.<sup>31</sup>

Aside from misinformed rhetoric, there is a lot of potentially harmful information on social media. However, no one is forcing people to use these platforms. If some people deem social media “bad,” they should simply delete their accounts. In doing so, individuals self-regulate what they see. Individuals, not the government, should decide what they are exposed to.

The social media landscape today is good for society because it exposes us to opinions we disagree with and can increase tolerance and understanding. Government regulation would fuel fringe beliefs and push conspiracy theorists and their followers underground. Instead, people should self-regulate and engage with rather than try to censor information on social media.

## **I. Setting Expectations (5 min)**

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In this section, we will review the “Expected Outcomes,” “Deliberative Dispositions,” and “Conversation Agreements” below.

### **Expected Outcomes of the Conversation**

The purpose of this deliberation is to deepen our understanding of the arguments surrounding the use and regulation of social media. Over the course of the deliberation, we will have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of our fellow deliberators as well as share our own experiences and beliefs related to social media. By the end of the conversation, we will have deliberated about the strongest and weakest arguments about the advantages and disadvantages of social media in terms of both our individual well-being and relationships and our broader politics, society, and democracy. Finally, we will have reflected on our conversation, our areas of agreement and disagreement, and what we have learned from our time together.

### **Deliberative Dispositions**

The DCI has identified several “deliberative dispositions” as critical to the success of

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sean Plunket, “[Jacob Mchangama on the importance of free speech](#)” *The Platform*, March 11, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob Mchangama. *Free Speech: A History from Socrates to Social Media*, Basic Books, 2022.

deliberative enterprises. When participants adopt these dispositions, they are much more likely to feel their deliberations are meaningful, respectful, and productive. Several of the Conversation Agreements recommended below directly reflect and reinforce these dispositions, which include a *commitment to egalitarianism, openmindedness, empathy, charity, attentiveness, and anticipation*, among others. A full list and description of these dispositions is available at <https://deliberativecitizenship.org/deliberative-dispositions/>.

### **Conversation Agreements**

In entering into this discussion, to the best of our ability, we each agree to:

1. Be authentic and respectful
2. Be an attentive and active listener
3. Be a purposeful and concise speaker
4. Approach fellow deliberators' stories, experiences, and arguments with curiosity, not hostility
5. Assume the best - and not the worst - about the intentions and values of others, and avoid snap judgements
6. Demonstrate intellectual humility, recognizing that no one has all the answers, by asking questions and making space for others to do the same
7. Critique the idea we disagree with, not the person expressing it, and remember to practice empathy
8. Note areas of both agreement and disagreement
9. Respect the confidentiality of the discussion
10. Avoid speaking in absolutes (e.g., "All people think this," or "No educated people hold that view")

## **II. Getting to Know Each Other (10 min)**

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In this section, we will begin by introducing yourself by stating out name, job title or year as a student, where we are from, and our pronouns. Then, we will answer at least one of the questions below. Each deliberator should speak for about 60-90 seconds.

- If you can remember, how did you first get introduced to social media?
- What kind of social media apps do you use, if any, and to what extent are they integrated into your daily life?
- How do you see social media apps affecting those closest to you?

## **III. Weighing the Effects of Social Media on Individuals and their Relationships (15 min)**

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Now that we have introduced ourselves, we will discuss whether or not social media is a net good or bad for our individual well-being and our relationships. We will each take one minute to



answer the questions below, and then we will have a chance to respond to one another's thoughts and ideas.

- ***What are some of the benefits of social media with regard to individuals and their relationships?***
- ***What are some of the disadvantages of social media with regard to individuals and their relationships?***
- ***Is social media a net positive or negative for our personal well-being and our relationships?***

#### **IV. Weighing the Effects of Social Media on Politics, Society, and Democracy (15 min)**

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We will now discuss the advantages and disadvantages of social media with regard to politics, society, and democracy. We will each take one minute to address the questions below, and then together we'll explore our areas of agreement and disagreement.

- ***What are some of the benefits of social media with regard to politics, society, and democracy?***
- ***What are some of the disadvantages of social media with regard to politics, society, and democracy?***
- ***Is social media a net positive or negative for our politics, society, and democracy?***

As time allows, we should engage with one another on our answers to these questions.

#### **V. Suggesting and Evaluating Social Media Practices and Policies (10 min)**

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We will now discuss different practices and policies that we think might maximize the upsides of social media while minimizing its downsides. We will each take one minute to address the questions below, and then together we'll explore our areas of agreement and disagreement. These questions can help us address our original query – how should we engage and/or regulate social media, if at all? We can both highlight recommendations we've heard from others as well as generate new ideas that may transcend and elicit more support than existing proposals.

- ***What are 1-2 practices or policies that might increase the benefits and reduce the costs of social media with regard to our individual well-being and relationships?***
- ***What are 1-2 practices or policies that might increase the benefits and reduce the costs of social media with regard to politics, society, and democracy?***
- ***Who should implement these practices and policies – individuals, social media companies, or governments?***

In thinking about all the proposals that we have identified, we might discuss to what extent they are contingent on government policy or dependent on developing new social norms around social media use. We might also consider whether just one of these approaches is sufficient or if a combination of government policy and social change is needed to address the challenges of social media.

## **VI. Reflections (5 min)**

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While today's conversation is an important step in the journey, figuring out how to appropriately engage and regulate social media will take time and commitment. Please reflect on the insights from your discussion with your fellow participants today, and then answer one of the questions below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group is welcome to continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

1. What was most meaningful or valuable to you during this deliberation?
2. Where are the areas of both agreement and disagreement in your group?
3. Have any new ways to think about this issue occurred to you as we have talked today? Any new ideas that might transcend our current way of conceiving of the problem and its potential solutions?
4. Was there anything that was said or not said that you think should be addressed with the group? Are there any perspectives missing from this conversation that you feel would be important to hear?
5. What did you hear that gives you hope for the future of conversations on issues related to social media?
6. Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the deliberation you just had?

## About This Guide

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### The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative

The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative (DCI) is dedicated to the creation of opportunities for Davidson students, faculty, staff, alumni, and members of the wider community to productively engage with one another on difficult and contentious issues facing our community and society. The DCI regularly hosts facilitated deliberations on a wide range of topics and organizes training workshops for deliberation facilitators. To learn more about these opportunities, visit [www.deliberativecitizenship.org](http://www.deliberativecitizenship.org).

### DCI Deliberation Guides

The DCI has launched this series of Deliberation Guides as a foundation for such conversations. They provide both important background information on the topics in question and a specific framework for engaging with these topics. The Guides are designed to be informative without being overwhelming and structured without being inflexible. They cover a range of topics and come in a variety of formats but share several common elements, including opportunities to commit to a shared set of Conversation Agreements, learn about diverse perspectives, and reflect together on the conversation and its yield. The DCI encourages conversations based on these guides to be moderated by a trained facilitator. After each conversation, the DCI also suggests that its associated Pathways Guide be distributed to the conversation's participants.

### DCI Pathways Guides

For every Deliberation Guide, the DCI has also developed an associated Pathways Guide, which outlines opportunities for action that participants can consider that are related to the covered topic. These Pathways Guides reinforce the DCI's commitment to an action orientation, a key deliberative disposition. While dialogue and deliberation are themselves important contributors to a healthy democracy, they become even more valuable when they lead to individual or collective action on the key issues facing society. Such action can come in a range of forms and should be broadly understood. It might involve developing a better understanding of a topic, connecting with relevant local or national organizations, generating new approaches to an issue, or deciding to support a particular policy.

If you make use of this guide in a deliberation, please provide attribution to the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative and email [dc@deliberativecitizenship.org](mailto:dc@deliberativecitizenship.org) to tell us about your event. To access more of our growing library of Deliberation Guides, Pathways Guides and other resources, visit [www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources](http://www.deliberativecitizenship.org/readings-and-resources).