

# Integrating conflict prevention tools into deliberative democracy online platforms

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## Abstract

This paper presents a set of preliminary guidelines for conflict prevention developed within the EU-funded research project ORBIS (“Augmenting participation, co-creation, trust and transparency in Deliberative Democracy at all scales”) whose goal is developing online platforms that enable citizens to enhance their participation in democratic processes, through open discussions around important political topics. Based on previous research on communication and argumentation in conflict resolution discourse and on the empirical analysis of discussions around deliberative democracy topics, this paper highlights recurrent interpersonal communication problems that might occur in group discussions around complex topics and that, if not handled well, can lead to conflicts; and introduces a first proposal for solutions to help, both through technology and with the assistance of human moderations, participants in such discussions to avoid the development and the escalation of conflicts.

**Keywords:** conflict resolution, deliberative democracy, argumentation, dialogue

## 1. Purpose of the guidelines

This paper presents preliminary results concerning of conflict detection, prevention and resolution tools based on discourse and argumentation into online **platforms for deliberative democracy**. It is not uncommon, in fact, for conflicts between individuals or sub-groups to arise in group discussions around important topics that impact people’s lives. While having different positions and ideas around a specific issue is normal and it can potentially be a good thing (from disagreements may arise new ideas or solutions for problems), when people start to ‘fight’ with the intent to prevail over the other there are usually negative consequences (see Greco 2020). Namely, the interaction may shift from an opportunity to have a fruitful discussion around the exploration of realistic solutions to common problems or ways to reach common goals, to an argument in which the main goal is to ‘win’ by discrediting the other (see Greco 2020). At the theoretical level, this paper is based on research on argumentation in conflict resolution and professional dispute mediation of interpersonal conflicts (e.g. Aakhus, 2003; Greco, 2011; van Bijnen and Greco, 2018; Greco, Cigada & Jermini-Martinez Soria, 2024). On the basis of this research, we have first analyzed an empirical dataset of discussions regarding deliberative democracy organizations, identifying needs for conflict prevention. Subsequently, we have turned to a design perspective, suggesting possible tools for conflict prevention to be integrated in deliberative democracy online platforms as based on needs emerged from the organizations’ talk. While this paper presents preliminary results of an ongoing project and draft solutions, it also shows a possible methodology to design conflict prevention tools in online platform as based on the requests explicitly or implicitly emerging from participants to discussion., .

## 2. Methodology

The methodology used for designing these guidelines is based on a qualitative approach, using a cycle that goes from deductive, to inductive, and cycles back to deductive qualitative research. The process was inspired by Bingham (2023) and adapted to the specific goals of these guidelines. In particular, the methodology designed for these guidelines includes three steps: 1) We derived *inductively*, from previous research on conflict resolution, possible sources of conflict and misunderstanding. This research step is based on our team’s existing research and analysis of a dataset of conflict resolution interactions concerning interpersonal conflicts on several topics (around 180K words); 2) We compared the possible sources for conflict with the existing five datasets collected within the project. While the type of discussion is different, we can assume that some discursive elements of conflict escalation are present across different fields and geographical areas (e.g. Greco, 2011). On the basis of this comparative evaluation, we identified the main emerging needs for conflict detection, prevention and resolution. The annotation was jointly developed by the two authors; the first round of annotation was done by author 1; all problematic cases were then discussed by both authors to find joint interpretations and verify reliability of the annotation. We also identified needs emerging from the datasets that were not present in our original list of sources of conflict; thus, we included an *inductive* dimension in the research; 3) Going back to our research on conflict resolution, we connected each emerging need to possible discursive conflict resolution tools, reflecting on how these could be integrated into platforms for deliberative democracy. For step 2, the researchers have analyzed five anonymized cases constituting “the ORBIS dataset”; three of them that have been collected in the project to elicit organizations’ needs for tools for online deliberation platforms (and three *Building Blocks for Democracy* events organized by project partners. All

these five discussions have some elements in common: first, they were all conducted in English, which guarantees a common basis for the linguistic-argumentative analysis of the interaction. Second, they all included meta-reflection by participants regarding conflict resolution and what they would like to see implemented in the platforms for deliberative democracy in order to improve the quality of the interactions. Before proceeding, it is necessary to specify they did not find direct indication of existing conflict during the recorded discussions but rather “emerging needs” for possible conflict resolution prevention tools. With the term *need* for conflict prevention mechanisms, we indicate clues that show potential or real problems that the parties have identified in their experience of deliberative democracy, such as moments of *impasse* (see Aakhus, 2003) in the discussion, problematic situations that lead to potential frustration or conflictual behavior. The goal of the online platforms for deliberative democracy that are being developed within the ORBIS project is both to ensure good quality interactions among users of the platforms, in order to guarantee respectful and inclusive exchanges, and to come up with concrete proposals to foster positive social changes: in this sense, the identification of “needs” is then followed by a design reflection on what features would be desirable to have in online platforms in order to increase the possibilities to have such a positive discussion environment and to reach the goals of deliberative democracy. The process of annotation was done using Microsoft Excel to annotate data from the datasets listed above: we reported in an Excel file excerpts in which emerging needs for conflict prevention, management and resolution were present, classifying the type of need according to the categories described in Section 3.

### 3. Needs for conflict prevention

In this section, we will discuss the main needs for conflict preventions that we have identified in the ORBIS datasets, namely:

1. Silence and lack of participation
2. Issue management and need to shift from the problem to the options
3. Lack of common ground
4. Presence of dysphoric emotions
5. Who should participate in the discussion?

#### 3.1 Silence and lack of participation

One of the issues that participants describe and that generate a need for conflict prevention is the difficulty of including a wide range of ‘voices’ in the discussions, as it frequently happens that it is always the same - restricted - group of people that engages in the deliberative democracy talk. This category regards a basic problem in communication, namely participants’ active presence. It is a category we derived inductively from the analysis of the ORBIS

dataset, In larger group discussions, the problem of silence and lack of participation is an important indicator of possible conflict. The presence of silent members who do not express their opinions may be problematic for different reasons: if the people who talk are somehow representatives of the same ‘group’ (e.g. gender, ethnicity,...) the opinions and concerns of minorities can go unnoticed; if people do not overtly express their opinions it is difficult to guess whether this means they agree with what has been already said or not; people with specific and valuable knowledge about a relevant aspect of a context are not involved in the discussion and so on. Silence could therefore be an indication of the presence of a “cold conflict” (Greco, 2020), in which people cultivate resentment or disillusionment.

#### 3.2 Issue management and need to shift from the problem to the options

Since the issues addressed by participants to democratic discussions are mostly complex political ones, oftentimes it becomes difficult to structure a discussion in a way that is functional to the emergence of concrete and feasible proposals for solutions to address said issues. For example, each participant might insist on focusing only on one specific element (e.g. time, when to do something) of an issue without considering other crucial aspects. For moderators, it is difficult to balance the freedom of participants to express themselves and the need for efficacy.

As it is known from previous research, in conflict resolution typically, after the analysis of the dispute, it is important to move on to discussing possible *options* for its resolution (Greco, 2011, p. 75); this is part of the issue management that conflict mediators operate to create a discussion space conducive to a productive resolution of differences of opinion. After having listened to different points of views, it’s difficult to enter a phase where concrete proposals that everyone agrees with are to be made. To be able to do so, it is fundamental to make sure that all parties’ interests are duly taken into account, otherwise the discussion will not move forward as people might perceive that ‘giving up’ one’s own idea corresponds to the risk of not having their interests and needs met (see Greco, 2011).

#### 3.3 Lack of common ground

When many different people discuss together about a complex topic, it is inevitable that they have different levels of knowledge about each aspect of it. This might create misunderstandings and confusion among participants, as one might not understand well what someone else is saying or why. This issue is partially linked to “issue management” (3.2), in the sense that to be able to have a fruitful discussion about a complex topic, it is fundamental to establish a solid common ground *first* - otherwise people risk addressing the topic only with their partial and not overlapping knowledge in mind, which might create frustration and confusion in other participants.

### 3.3.1 Identification of interests underlying positions

Very often, when involved in disagreements or debates, people will clearly express their positions, i.e. their point of view regarding an *issue* - for example whether they are in favor or against a political decision, and they will argue to support their thesis. However, through a deep discussion based on active listening and questioning, also their needs might emerge. We typically hold a position because we think that is 'the solution', i.e. what will have our needs met - but that might not be the only answer. It is not easy for people to spontaneously focus on their interests leaving aside their positions because "people's egos become identified with their positions" (Fisher, Ury and Patton, 1991, p. 11).

### 3.3.2 Conflicting frames and getting to know 'the others', their points of view

To have a fruitful and open discussion, it is fundamental to consider one's interlocutors as 'worthy' and value their ideas (see the concept of "exploratory talk", Mercer and Littleton, 2013). For this to be possible, each person needs to believe that it is possible for different points of views to coexist and to be equally valid. This does not mean that everyone will agree with the others, but that decentrating and listening to the others' point of view is a prerequisite for having a respectful and open discussion. Participants need to understand the 'frame' of the others to be able to further discuss and possibly come up with ideas that will be acceptable to all (Shmueli, 2008; Mercuri, 2023).

### 3.4 Dysphoric emotions

From the analysis of the dataset, it is clear that the topics related to democratic participation addressed by the use cases participants are usually topics perceived as personally important (e.g. unemployment) and therefore addressing them might provoke difficult emotions in participants that, if not handled well, might even trigger conflicts. As Jones (2001) explains, "emotion results from a perception that something personally important is at stake" (Jones, 2001, p. 94), and, therefore "the triggering events that 'cause' conflicts are, by definition, events that elicit emotion" (Jones, 2001, p. 90).

### 3.5 WHO should participate/not participate in the discussion?

From our inductive analysis of the data, it emerged that, in order to be able to find solutions that can really be implemented, it is crucial that all the people who have a say/a decision-making role in the matter are actually involved in the discussion process.

## 4. Tools that can be used in the project's deliberative democracy platforms

In this section, we move on to a perspective of design to make hypotheses about tools that can be potentially integrated into online platforms for deliberative democracy (Table 1) based on the needs emerging from the analysis of the ORBIS dataset and described in Sect. 3. The shift from the analysis of conflict prevention needs to the design proposal

requires interdisciplinary collaboration, which is currently ongoing with technical partners of the ORBIS project; therefore, what we propose in this paper is a preliminary set of hypotheses that still need to be implemented and tested. At the moment, we draw the hypothesis that these tools may be based partially on automatic alerts and generative AI, while partially they may require the presence of a human moderator. While the tasks performed automatically could also be attributed to a human moderator, since the goal is to create online tools that function in the best way possible automatically, it makes sense to limit the intervention of human moderators to perform tasks that cannot be performed by the technology. Moreover, it is important to point out that a moderator is *not* a professional mediator, as s/he has not received the same specific professional training – however some of the communicative techniques employed by professional dispute mediators are also useful in the context of moderation. All tools proposed (both automatic alerts and human moderations) have been drawn from existing and well-established literature on discourse and argumentation in conflict resolution and dispute mediation (see section 1). The discussion about implementation is still in progress in ORBIS.

| Emerging needs   | Possible tools (automatic alerts)  | Possible tools (human moderation)  |
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| <i>Silence and participation</i>   | <b>Questions</b> to engage participants who are silent (after 5 minutes, ask question to silent participants: do you want to say something?)   | <b>Alerts</b> can be sent to a human moderator after 5 minutes a person has been silent. The moderator will decide what to do.   |
| <i>Need for issue management (includes: need to shift from the problem to the options)</i> | <b>Automatic summaries</b> of what has been said are made visible but does not interfere with the progress of the discussion.<br><b>Regular reminders</b> of the main issue of the discussion are shown. | <b>Reformulations:</b> if negative terms are present in the summaries, the moderator can decide to change the terms from negative to a more neutral formulation. For example, a sentence such as "The other party does not understand the situation" can be reformulated with "I understand that there are different perspectives on the understanding of this situation". |

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|   |  | <p>Often, reformulations can be done by moving from verbs or adjectives to nouns (<b>nominalization</b>), for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participant A is wrong → “There is a different perspective on the issue between you and A”</li> <li>- “These people create problems” → There is a problem that you all need to discuss.</li> </ul> <p>A human moderator can also be trained to decide when it is the moment to <b>shift from the problem to the options for its resolution</b>, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Now you have acknowledged that you have a problem of management of participations of young people. How do you think you can resolve it? Do you have suggestions?”</li> </ul> | <p>ask to the other participants to better understand their positions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is there anything you want to add about your position and why you are proposing it?</li> </ul> <p>All this requires adding a space for <b>Clarification questions to the other participants</b></p> | <p>more?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How would you describe the reasons why you have this position? Is there any aspect you want to share?</li> <li>- Is there anything you want to know about someone else’s positions and why they hold it?</li> </ul>  |
| <p><i>Lack of common ground (includes: confusion between interests and positions Conflicting frames and need to know the other)</i></p> | <p><b>Automatic prompts asking for meta-reflection</b> to the involved participants. These prompts must be visible to each party individually but not to the others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is there anything you want to</li> </ul> | <p><b>Open, explorative and non-accusatory questions</b> on the parties’ profound reasons behind their positions. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do you feel you could explain your position enough? Do you want to add something</li> </ul>   | <p><i>Presence of dysphoric emotions</i></p> <p>–</p>   | <p><b>Open, explorative and non-accusatory questions</b> on emotions, including dysphoric emotions. When there is a negative emotion, it should not be covered but the parties need to be given space to explain what are the reasons behind the emotions. This needs to be done by a human moderator because it is a delicate option, which risks to create escalation.</p> <p>A possible tool to introduce these questions is the “<b>I hear you say</b>” <b>intervention</b> (van Bijnen and Greco, 2018), in which the human moderator can say for example “I hear you say that you are concerned, can you explain</p> |

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|  |   | <p>more?”. This mitigates the question and offers an opportunity to the speaker to explain the reasons behind emotions, opening up a space for argumentation that includes personal worries.</p> <p>Dysphoric emotions are often related to feelings of guilt and resentment. The literature shows that a potential useful tool in these cases is <b>reframing from individual to system</b> (Putnam, 2004) or <b>from individual to species</b> (Jermini, 2021). This means reminding to the parties that the problem does not necessarily concern them only but it can concern other people. This helps removing blame and feelings of guilt. Possible formulation of this reframing are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “All the citizens who are interested in their cities have this sort of problem”</li> <li>- “I feel that also other participants to this discussion sooner or later had to face this problem”</li> </ul> |
| <p>Who should participate in the discussion?</p> | <p>Adding a <b>List of further participants that would help solving the issue</b> could help to see whether</p> | <p>Human moderators can decide how to organize the following sections taking into account the list proposed by the participants.</p>   |

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|  | <p>important stakeholders are missing. The system might automatically ask participants to think about this issue, for example by asking: “can we make a decision on this topic or someone else need to be involved?”</p> |  |
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Table 1: Emerging conflict prevention needs and possible tools to be integrated into the platforms

Working together with technical experts within the EU-funded ORBIS project, the next step will be to select the tools that can more easily be implemented in online platforms for deliberative democracy and to have use cases participants test the platforms including these integrations, in order to see if they are effective to prevent conflict escalation and how they can further be improved.

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