How to Promote Enlightened Debate Online

ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)
Some of the user-moderated site's most popular debates center on the existence of God, the ethics of eating meat, and whether the United States should adopt stricter gun-control laws. The Brooklyn-based company won't disclose how many users Kialo has, but college professors and their students are among them, says Pitsos, who grew up in Germany and graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Do you worry that some college students are graduating without the ability to analyze an argument and then devise a reasoned response? I'm not an expert in that, but I've read that the experts are worrying about whether we're training students to be very good test-takers instead of critical thinkers.

FULL TEXT
Frustrated at the lack of reasoned discussion, the son of two philosophers created his own platform. Now some professors are using it to show students how to weigh the merits of arguments.

The internet has become a dark place for civil discourse. Trolls wage ad hominem attacks in circuitous comment threads that render meaningful discussion impossible.

For people fed up with the status quo, Errikos Pitsos created Kialo, an online debate platform "powered by reason."

The site, which went live in August, allows users to start a discussion by posting a point of view on a topic of their choosing. Then others contribute to the thread by posting tightly constructed pros and cons, or "claims," responding to the original thesis. Newcomers can look back at the discussion history to learn more about a topic, and then weigh in. Some of the user-moderated site's most popular debates center on the existence of God, the ethics of eating meat, and whether the United States should adopt stricter gun-control laws. More-innocuous topics include several debates on Game of Thrones.

The Brooklyn-based company won't disclose how many users Kialo has, but college professors and their students are among them, says Pitsos, who grew up in Germany and graduated from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Pitsos, 42, spoke with The Chronicle about using Kialo in the classroom, being the son of academic philosophers, and growing up without trigger warnings.

Your parents are academic philosophers, so you heard your share of debates growing up. How did your upbringing play into your decision to create Kialo?
My parents met when they were doing their Ph.D.s in philosophy. I grew up in a household full of philosophers and professors and Ph.D.s and people who had huge differences of opinions on all matters —the purpose of life, religion, politics, etc. My parents say I was always there at the table.

I don't remember anybody ever being shut out. Everybody was allowed to voice their opinions. It was friendly even
though people were shouting. Everyone hugged at the end. There was food, there was joking. People stayed sometimes for days. I grew up in an extremely enlightened environment. They taught me that it is OK to disagree.

**Have you had a personal experience on social media or online that illustrates why Kialo is a necessary alternative?**

I don’t engage much, because the mediums don’t lend themselves to it. I’ve noticed what’s going on, but I can’t read it. It’s not enlightening. It actually hurts me when I see how emotional people are arguing about some things.

I’m a strong believer that the formats that we use to communicate shape the way we communicate. We don’t ask you for your personal opinion. We don’t have a mechanism for you to get upvoted if you write in a certain way.

**Kialo means "reason" in Esperanto. Why did you turn to that language for inspiration, and how did that name win out?**

Have you ever tried finding a name for a company? It’s hard to find a name and then an available domain. This was a huge debate we had over months about hundreds of possible names. Of course we had the debate in our system —what are the important characteristics in a name? And then we would shoot them down.

This name was a coincidence. We were looking up words in various languages that were related to what we’re doing. My CTO’s wife found it. Like you said, it means "reason."

**Do you worry that some college students are graduating without the ability to analyze an argument and then devise a reasoned response?**

I’m not an expert in that, but I’ve read that the experts are worrying about whether we’re training students to be very good test-takers instead of critical thinkers. One of the most important skills a human could have is being able to critically reason and evaluate things. What are the pros and cons of something? Can you engage with somebody else who has a different opinion?

I’m 42. I didn’t grow up with trigger warnings. I grew up in an environment where I enjoyed being challenged by ideas that were completely the opposite of mine. I believe we grow by being confronted with ideas, by being engaged with the other side. It’s a very important skill for young people —any people —to stand there, listen, learn, and argue against. You can only argue against if you actually listen to the arguments.

**What place is there for Kialo in the college classroom?**

It’s an extremely efficient way to introduce students to a controversy. Today you’re basically giving them reading material from one side and then the other. Then the texts don’t touch on each other. So instead of that, you can use Kialo, and there are a thousand arguments about Confederate monuments. You can point out the arguments and discuss the merits in class.

One professor had 35 students, and they wrote 80 claims in seven minutes. That’s one way it’s being used to facilitate discussion inside class. Another professor used it before class to gauge students’ thoughts on an issue, to see the arguments the students had. Everybody participated in this debate.

At another university, in a Ph.D. class, the professor basically said, "People are very good in essay writing but not so good at thinking things through. I’m going to force them to use it as an outline, so they won’t go off and write 20 pages about the wrong thing."

**Could the debates on Kialo be used for research, in the same way that academics have studied tweets? What might researchers be able to see or learn?**
Some of the most interesting research for me would be comparing the ways that people reason. If you throw people the same thesis, how do people across nations, or the right or the left, reason about a specific thing? What kind of arguments do people make? Do they make an argument based on how they feel?

Here's another one that I would want to see: I would want to understand the performance of Kialo versus long-form text in making people change their minds. If you give someone a book, did that sway their opinion? If you see the other side, does that do something to you? It’s clear it’s a tool that can be used in many ways.

**Is there a particular debate you’d like to see on Kialo?**

I love debates about epistemology. I don’t think we have one on that. But we’ve got 2,000 public debates. I have no idea what’s happening anymore. It’s hard to keep up.

**What do you say to someone who says: “People enjoy shouting at each other online and on social media. I really don’t think there’s a place for something like Kialo in society”?**

Friends tell me, “Either you chose the best moment or the worst moment in time for this thing you’re doing.” I actually didn’t choose this moment. I hoped to be out four years ago.

When I started, I thought this is for the 1 percent who actually care about this. If you look at today’s social media, you would think we missed the market. But we’re seeing positive responses — “Finally, a place where I can have that.” …“I’ve been looking for a place like this for so long.”

We’re not going to replace anything that’s out there. Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit — those are not going to go away. We’re going to just be an added place. We’re not competing with anybody out there with regards to thoughtful discourse. There are a couple of sites that are question-and-answer sites, or commenting sites, or sharing sites, but there’s not a single site for collaborative reasoning — a repository of the why.

The public debates are basically supposed to become a site where people can go and inform themselves. If a debate has over 2,000 unique arguments, it’s going to be hard to find an argument that’s not in there already. You can go there, similar to Wikipedia, and read. Wikipedia tells you the what and we tell you the why.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

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Credit: By Audrey Williams June

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