

# PRINCIPLES OF DIGITAL CIVIC CULTURE

Leading and promoting  
healthy online public  
discourse.

[IDCONLINE.COM](https://www.idconline.com)



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# ABOUT IDCC

The Institute for Digital Civic Culture (IDCC) develops online leadership by teaching the skills and competencies needed to foster healthy online communities.

Our flagship leadership program, housed at the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture is a six-week cohort-based experiential learning program that invites leaders from all sectors of North American society to work together to elevate digital culture and use digital spaces for good.

IDCC also offers consulting, onsite training, webinars and workshops to suit the needs of any organization.





## WHY "PRINCIPLES"?

Rules? Are made to be broken! Or at least, bound by very specific times and places making them inflexible and quickly obsolete. Principles, however, are more adaptable. They allow us to create cultures and communities that can evolve and grow and where self-regulation is encouraged. As we look to develop the Internet, the Principles of Digital Civic Culture found in this ebook are useful across platforms and will serve us well regardless of where we find ourselves online. They are rooted in our humanity, so as long as we're dealing with other humans in digital spaces, we'll benefit from them.

You can download the printable mini-poster of the Principles for Digital Civic Culture [here](#).



# SHARED HUMANITY



## **The Principle of Shared Humanity**

*We prioritize humanity in our digital communications, and refuse to diminish our human interactions by making our online exchanges purely transactional.*

It's easy to forget that there's a person on the other side of our screen. It's easy to forget our own humanity when we feel angry, threatened or wronged by some 'faceless entity' online.

While some of the engagement that happens online might be with bots, it would be a mistake to let those non-human programs dictate how we engage with the billions of real people we meet on our social media.

We have to remind ourselves, constantly, that digital spaces are full of people just like you and me. Most of the people we encounter online are virtual strangers. We don't know their life's circumstances or the events of their day. Robbed of the sensory input we humans evolved to use when meeting people and engaging in social environments, we often resort to making assumptions and assigning motives based on whatever information we can glean and our own cognitive biases.

Our commitment to shared humanity online means defaulting to respect for each and every person we encounter in online spaces. It's giving every person the benefit of the doubt, and recognizing that we are incapable of truly understanding who someone is with whatever limited information we have about them in passing social media exchanges. It means refusing to lump people together or write people off based on their most obvious identity markers. It means recognizing that every person has a unique, complex personality and life history, and deserves to be recognized as deserving of the kind of treatment we would like to receive - online or off.



# INFORMATION INTEGRITY



## **The Principle of Information Integrity**

*We take measures to ensure we are sharing and promoting information that has value from reliable, verifiable sources."*

Information is the lifeblood of the internet, and the foundation upon which all self-governance (personal or collective) is empowered. Without rigorously produced, unbiased, verifiable information, we cannot make the important decisions that we all need to make for the greater good.

Today's internet is rife with misinformation, disinformation, partial truths, opinion masquerading as fact, and all manner of "news" designed primarily to elicit clicks rather than inform.

We must commit ourselves to identifying, creating and sharing information of the highest quality if we want to preserve our democracy, or at the very least, our own online reputations.

The Principle of Information Integrity is a recognition that none of us are passive users of digital media. The decision to "Like" or "Share" any piece of content reverberates out and affects other people. The more we visit specific websites, the more we impact the algorithms that govern those websites. That information is used to produce even more content.

The average person's unfettered access to knowledge and information, and our ability to communicate to a global audience is unmatched at any other time in human history. It gives us power our ancestors never dreamed of. But with great power comes great responsibility.

We must recognize our role, and the impact we have as we disseminate and amplify information that we either directly create or come into contact with online. There is too much at stake for us to ignore this responsibility.



# CONSCIOUS ENGAGEMENT




## The Principle of Conscious Engagement

*We recognize that our words and actions in digital spaces can have an emotional, intellectual, spiritual AND physical impact on ourselves and other people; and we remain conscious of our choices in all our online engagements.*

Much of our online engagement is done with very little conscious thought. Instead, we react - and often in ways that don't reflect our values and ideals. It's not surprising. We're working against three challenges:

1. Our human nature wires us to think about our own safety, causing us to react quickly when we feel threatened or unsure of our environment. Rather than engage in deliberate, thoughtful dialogue, we find ourselves engaged in patterns of knee-jerk fight-or-flight responses to protect ourselves, our beliefs, our reputations and our perceived social standing in a completely foreign place.
2. The overall culture of the internet heavily influences the way we engage. It's incredibly difficult for anyone to remain calm and thoughtful when engaging in a place where the status quo is hostile.
3. The UX of most social platforms combined with the public, performative nature of many of the conversations happening there encourage quick response times. The speed of our online engagement means things can get out of control very quickly.

To be effective in any space we have to remain aware of where we are, who our audience is (and who may be looking on), and what we're trying to accomplish. This is an exercise in self-mastery. It's easy to forget. It's easy to get sucked in to emotionally-driven knee-jerk back-and-forth exchanges that override our reason and rely instead on rhetoric and aggression in a battle of ideological supremacy. A commitment to conscious engagement requires a constant practice of mindful communication.

A blurred background of a desk with a laptop, glasses, and a plant. The text is overlaid on this background.

**"NEVER DOUBT THAT A SMALL  
GROUP OF THOUGHTFUL,  
CONCERNED CITIZENS CAN  
CHANGE THE WORLD. INDEED  
IT IS THE ONLY THING THAT  
EVER HAS."**

**MARGARET MEAD**





# HUMBLE EXPERTISE



## **The Principle of Humble Expertise**

*We offer our expertise with humility, and understand that we can't teach if we don't respect the intellect and autonomy of even those with whom we disagree.*

Humility is an essential quality for leaders. For one thing, intellectual humility has been demonstrated by behavioral psychologists to be essential for gaining new knowledge.

The pursuit of knowledge inevitably produces more questions. If, after acquiring new knowledge, we don't come away with even more questions, we may be more interested in dogma than in the pursuit of truth.

Seeking knowledge demands an openness to being wrong at any point on the path. If we're true 'seekers' we must be willing to embrace our own ignorance - just as much as we do our expertise.

We can't insist on our right to question everything and then act as though it were a personal affront when others question our expertise. Doing so is a sure sign that ego and narrative control have overtaken our commitment to truth.

Furthermore, condescension, intellectual elitism, and ideological cliques that otherize the very people who need to hear our message work against us and make it next to impossible to impact the world for good.

What is the point of expertise if it can't be offered in service to those who need it most?



# PROACTIVE PLURALISM



## The Principle of Proactive Pluralism

*We proactively reach out to and include those who are different from us in our online community so that our online community can benefit from diverse ideas and opinions.*

Pluralism gets a lot of lip service as an ideal, but when it comes down to it we often feel threatened when we are required to live and work with people who have very different identities, beliefs and ideologies. It's human nature to want to be 'with your own people.' Especially in an environment as hostile as many digital spaces tend to be.

But making an effort to surround ourselves with a pluralism of identities, ideologies and personalities is the only way we are able to maintain an accurate picture of the world we live in. If we're serious about solving problems and doing meaningful work, ignoring - or worse, demonizing - the identities and deeply held beliefs of other people with whom we share our society is sheer folly.

Since most social media platforms make it easy for us to filter out things we don't like, our efforts to maintain pluralistic digital spaces must be proactive and ongoing. It takes effort to seek out and associate ourselves with people who are not like us.

When we meet people who fundamentally disagree with us we feel a sense of psychic unease. This is especially true if they disagree with us politely, because it makes it even harder for us to dismiss their views as intentionally antagonistic. That sense of unease we feel is not a bug in a pluralistic system. It's a feature. Pluralism is important because it gives us the widest set of information and ideas from which to work. It also accurately reflects the state of the world and of humanity. To embrace pluralism means to get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

And being uncomfortable is how we grow.



# PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY



## **The Principle of Personal Accountability**

*We refuse to blame others for our mistakes, and publicly correct ourselves when we share bad information, mislead others (even unintentionally), and when we fail to live up to our own standards of engagement.*

Our culture is one that offers us a never-ending stream of leadership hoping to gain our support by telling us our problems and someone else's fault. What makes for public discourse is often not much more than a series of logical fallacies deployed to detract, deflect and blame someone or something else.

On the other hand, efforts to encourage personal responsibility can quickly be appropriated by those who seek to blame actual victims and excuse themselves from acting on their behalf.

Where is the line between that which for we must hold ourselves accountable, and that which simply happens to us - for good or ill? At what point do we cede our own agency and accept the status of passive victimhood, or decide to admit our own errors which contribute to our condition?

These are not easy questions, but they are important for leaders to constantly think about, because our ability to take personal responsibility is inextricably linked to our credibility and the amount of faith and trust those around us feel they can place in us.

Our commitment to the Principle of Personal Responsibility demands that we continuously evaluate our own statements, actions and behaviors and make adjustments or corrections whenever necessary - and publicly if it is required. To do so not only keeps us honorable and true to our ideals, it contributes to an overall culture of personal accountability that is desperately needed for a fully functional democratic society.



**"THE HUMAN SPIRIT  
MUST PREVAIL OVER  
TECHNOLOGY."**

ALBERT EINSTEIN



# SELF-CONTROL



### The Principle of Self-Control

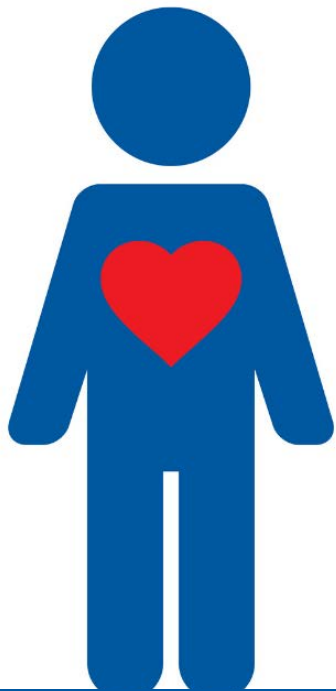
*We understand the need to pause and reflect before responding in online spaces.*

Self-control is the single most important quality for achieving any kind of mastery, and this includes our ability to lead others online. Without it, we are unable to demonstrate the kind of clarity, consistency and purpose that inspires others to action.

But our human nature, combined with the highly engineered platforms where we spend our time online make it extremely difficult to practice self-control. Flame wars erupt in seconds between otherwise reasonable people; impulse purchases happen with 1-click; relationships are destroyed, reputations ruined, jobs lost and lies spread with almost no thought often because we haven't trained ourselves to pause and think before we react.

To avoid these kinds of disasters requires us to be aware of our own triggers and limitations, and to be willing to practice the kind of discipline that builds our self-control like a muscle, over time.

How do we build self-control in our online communications? In the same way that we do when building strength and flexibility in our physical fitness. We set goals for ourselves, practice constantly, measure our progress, and seek out feedback and support from others who have committed to the practice.



# SELF-CARE



## **The Principle of Assertive Self-Care**

*We understand that how we treat ourselves is how we will treat others. We limit our use of digital media when it interferes with our effectiveness online or offline.*

Everyone knows about the 'oxygen mask rule' but how many of us really practice it when it comes to our engagement with the internet? We know that we're being taxed - physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually - when we come to these spaces. We know that being 'extremely online' can have a negative impact on our health and our relationships. We know that the platforms we use are designed to make balance and self-regulation difficult.

Which is why we must practice assertive self-care. That is, we have to build self-care into our digital lifestyles, planning ahead for it and making a commitment to do the things that keep us from falling into the bad habits that make us ineffective and unable to engage with others in a healthy manner.

Digital life can be a wonderful - even essential part of our existence. But we have evolved over millions of years with very specific needs for physical connection, and we would ignore this at our peril. We also need to keep in mind that we haven't had much time to adapt to online spaces, and we are far more vulnerable out here than we realize.

It's up to each of us to honestly look at ourselves and determine if we're really benefitting from when, where and how we spend our limited time and energy online and to protect our long-term health, happiness and productivity.



# COURAGEOUS DETERMINATION



## **The Principle of Courageous Determination**

*We recognize that hate and vitriol will inevitably be directed towards us when we lead in online spaces, but we remain committed to building community and promoting healthy communication even in the face of others' cruelty and antagonism.*

Mature leaders maintain a commitment to our values regardless of what others around us are doing. We hold ourselves to high standards, refusing to allow our speech and actions to be dictated by the lowest common denominator in our environment.

To show up day after day, working publicly for something that others may not value, and in ways that run counter to prevailing cultural norms, is the task of anyone seeking to make a positive change in the world. This takes enormous fortitude and determination.

No one who has undertaken the responsibility of leadership can afford to labor under the impression that they will always be supported. In fact, we know we will face hate, unkind and unhelpful criticism, vitriol and attacks - regardless of whether we do everything right or not. This seems especially true online, where the dehumanization of digital spaces and the lack of accountability makes people feel free to say and do things they might otherwise not if they were staring us directly in the face.

The Principle of Courageous Determination is the commitment to remain steadfast in our principles, modeling the best behaviors we know, learning from our mistakes and improving ourselves all the time - even if others fail to do so. Does that mean we must put up with abuse? Or that we're required to tolerate hate without taking action? Not at all. But it does mean that even when addressing the worst that humanity has to offer, we refuse to back down from our mission to do good, and continue on in a way that reflects our highest ideals for human engagement.

# THE NEED TO LEAD

## THE INTERNET NEEDS YOU

Cultural changes happen when leaders model the kinds of behaviors that resonate with others, allowing them to envision themselves in a new way. That means a healthy, productive digital civic culture will require a form of online leadership that exists in online spaces and positions the leader at the center of the diverse community of people to whom they are related.

This must be a conscious effort by dedicated individuals to reshape public discourse and to set high standards for digital communications across a broad range of subjects and issues.

IDCC identifies leaders who have a vested interest in online culture and the emotional intelligence needed to navigate these spaces to accomplish good work. We provide training, tools, and a network of program alumni and mentors to support them in their respective communities and organizations. Find out more about the IDCC and how you can become part of our movement for a better Internet at [idconline.com](http://idconline.com).

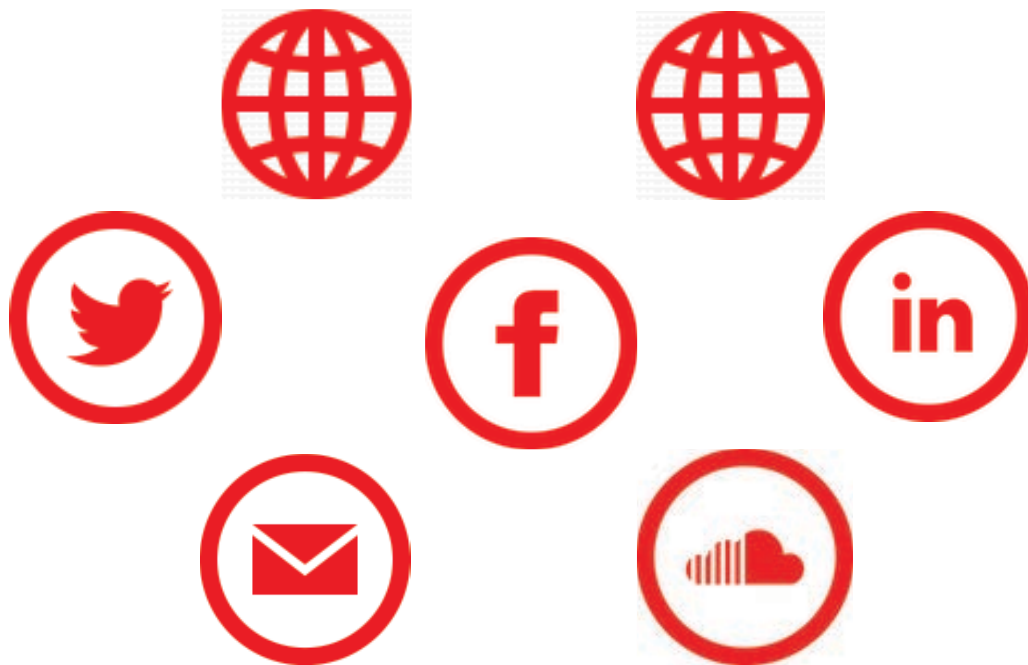
**BETTER ONLINE ENGAGEMENT IS POSSIBLE.**





# INVITATION TO CONNECT

Connect with IDCC online and let us hear from you!  
(Click on the icons.)



[LEARN MORE AT IDCCONLINE.COM](https://idcconline.com)

**"SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
REVOLUTIONIZE OUR LIVES,  
BUT MEMORY, TRADITION  
AND MYTH FRAME OUR  
RESPONSE."**

ARTHUR M.  
SCHLESINGER