CONCEPT PAPER: **Collaborative Research Advancement Program, Pilot Grants**
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Project Title: *Open-Source Discourse*
Impact Area: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE: *Open-Source Discourse* (OSD) responds to a pressing need for public discourse alternatives to the current echo chambers of ideology dominating most social media platforms. Admittedly, the polarization of public discourse is a vast issue; therefore, we focus on a discrete aspect of community dialogue, *cognitive empathy* (Small, 2017, 2018), through cross-disciplinary approaches that can be scaled and generalized.

Problem: Current civic discourse is not "open-sourced" but is circular, reflecting and reinforcing ideologies; few opportunities exist for public engagement in critical, experimental dialogues. **Proposed Action:** OSD will facilitate inclusive, conversational arts-based *intra-actions* (Fox & Alldred, 2015) among people with divergent viewpoints, individuals often silenced, or those reluctant to participate in community discourse. **Outcomes:** Using arts-based, AI processes informed by object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2013) and the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959), OSD will facilitate novel forms of interaction among individuals. These engagements will support cognitive empathy development by producing visual and experiential evidence of participants' partnerships in sense-making processes occurring within and around art experiences. **Significance:** Breaking new ground in AI-assisted civic discourse, OSD transcends simple archive development by "training" AI with didactic and interpretative art and culture texts to promote responsive engagement and sensitivity to intra-actions among people, objects, and affects.

BACKGROUND INCLUDING PRIOR APPROACHES/RELEVANT LITERATURE: *Open-Source Discourse* emerges within the context of a polarized public square debilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and battered by divisive and violent political discourse. Despite a plenitude of communication tools and social interaction platforms, there are few opportunities for citizens to engage in creative, communal, low-stakes exploration and ideation around high-stakes social issues. While artist-led social/civic discourse initiatives exist (Korza, Assof, & Bacon, 2002; Romney, 2005), our cross-disciplinary approach brings new perspectives and methodological tools to address an existing gap in community dialogue development (Barthold, 2020). **Digital scholarship methods** include topic modeling to identify themes, document discovery and exploration of large, unstructured datasets, linguistic analysis, and cluster evaluation processes (Wu, et al, 2021). **Philosophical-theoretical perspectives** are drawn from new materialist scholarship (Barad, 1997, 2003; Braidotti, 2012; Fox & Alldred, 2015), object-oriented ontologies (Harman, 2013), and **fine art discourse and critique theories** (Barrett, 2002). What distinguishes OSD from other arts-based civic discourse methods and platforms is a novel approach of conceptualizing discourse as relational intra-actions of humans and non-human/material entities. In the OSD platform, art making, art sharing, conversations, people, and individuals' affective responses are all "data" that create new possibilities for knowing one another and the world in new ways.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: *Open-Source Discourse* (OSD) is a SOA-DAAP and Digital Scholarship Center collaboration that addresses the complex interconnectivity, rapid pace, and polarization of current civic discourse. *OSD is an interactive web-based platform and database that establishes a distinctive paradigm of research-creation by integrating AI and real-time human interactions among, within, and beyond the academy.* **PROPOSED APPROACH:** Using art objects and didactic texts as primary inputs, OSD will leverage collaborative pairings to co-create texts, objects, or experiences that center OSD participants in critical civic discourse within the paradigm of cognitive empathy.

Context: Art making and critical responses to art are the instrumental metaphor guiding this project. These activities hold a unique place in our social fabric, engendering confidence, curiosity, attention, and surprise while teaching patience for ambiguity. Fundamentally, art making processes are validated by the belief that the thing that one is making will be a viable and meaningful contribution to a broader social discourse. *Specifically, collaborative sense-making processes within and around art are a metaphor for a collaborative public discourse whose messiness, dead-ends, misunderstandings, and discoveries represent a real and tangible form of sociological imagination that did not previously exist.*

Goals: Using Human-AI Interaction to facilitate collaborations among the participants of OSD, we aim to decentralize the phenomenon of academic discourse with a platform that invites new modes of sociocultural criticism through creative, exploratory dialogic intra-actions among a diversity of people, objects, and ideas. OSD will establish a distinctive paradigm of research-creation by integrating AI and real-time human interactions among, within, and beyond the academy. Reframing the sociological imagination within new materialist and performative terms OSD will engage art processes, AI technologies, language and communication to perform new modes of civic thinking-being-acting.

Significance: OSD reimagines civic discourse as a creative, exploratory, and community-sustaining act. OSD is unique in that it 1). emerges from a cross-disciplinary collaboration of scholars whose individual expertise not only engenders a creative partnership but also functions pragmatically to address the distinctive demands of a multidisciplinary collaboration; 2). uses art making process as a foundational metaphor for the development of civic discourse; 3). utilizes AI to parse data in making human-verified recommendations, thus encouraging direct collaboration and critical discourse toward the development of *cognitive empathy* among participants; 4). is informed by new materialism and object-oriented ontology, offering a novel perspective on civic discourse hierarchies by conceptualizing society as an *assemblage* of non-human materialities and human relations (Barad, 2003; Fox & Alldred, 2015).

BROADER IMPACTS: *Open-Source Discourse's* broader impacts are varied, scalable, and diffuse. Essentially, we seek to reframe civic discourse as a creative act and novel method of informing public policy (Barthold, 2020; Romney, 2005). OSD will facilitate participation equity by empowering people from all societal sectors to construct meaning together through reflective processes of discussing and creating artworks and discursive texts (Stains, 2012).

Art making inspires the philosophical questions that drive human sensemaking and forge understandings of what it means to exist in a world (Greene, 1977, 1995). OSD empowers the articulation of personal and communal sensemaking processes through creation and sharing of artworks (images, texts, video, music, etc.) and articulating responses to these artworks. By providing a platform for co-construction of knowledge through artmaking and discussion, OSD will emphasize the creative processes inherent in building civic discourse and demonstrate the necessity of each person's contribution to dialogues about issues of communal importance while also acknowledging the value of each *body* in the body politic.

To this end, OSD will:
- Empower project participants to be creative and meaningful contributors to critical civic discourse through art/sensemaking, collaboration, and research.
- Demonstrate the productive, tangible potential of Human-AI Collaboration in the formation of critical collaboratives resulting in research outcomes.

ANTICIPATED RESULTS/OUTCOMES: Anticipated outcomes of the above impacts include:
- Create a collaborative praxis through arts-based dialogue by forming new interpersonal connections across the city who may have similar concerns and interests - whether in agreement or disagreement and providing them the time and space to flesh out and publish these ideas.
- Train the AI to analyze the participants' inputs and provide feedback based on these analyses to encourage civil discourse toward the development of cognitive empathy, a core component of qualitative literacies (Small, 2018).
- Develop a more robust engagement with critical and civic discourse outside of academia by amplifying "non-expert" voices and perspectives.
- Move towards an "interpretive" AI that leverages our database and human-AI interaction to develop a data set to parse image symbols, references, and non-didactic visual cues.
- Create a research-based collaborative course/lab between DAAP and the DSC to engage students in this project and prepare OSD for nationwide launch.
- Co-author and publish peer-reviewed articles in *Theory, Culture, and Society*, *Futures*, *The Harvard Data Science Review*, and/or *Plos One*.
- Secure external funding through the NEA and/or the NEH to expand *Open-Source Discourse* into a NEA Research Lab for a nationwide audience.

PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY/FOLLOW-ON FUNDING: We are currently in the process of developing the project for a **NEA Research Grant**, and in 2022, a **NEA Arts Research Lab**. In addition to the NEA funding, we plan to apply to both the **NEH Collaborative Research Grant** as well as the **NEH Digital Humanities Advancement Grant**. Once established, the *Open-Source Discourse* platform will provide a pathway for the reification of *cognitive empathy* by **leveraging existing partnerships with Cincinnati City Council** (Councilmember Chris Seelbach and Mayor John Cranley) to launch a **Citizen Discourse Development Program** in the Cincinnati region. For long term sustainability, we could partner with Arts Organizations, or City Councils to share operating costs of ODS. **Startup funding for OSD research assistants** has already been allocated through the DSC Mellon Grant and the School of Art.