

## **THE CASE FOR OUR PROJECT**

### **Context**

Given the deep demographic diversity of the US population, we must find ways to counteract and reverse dangerous growth in social fragmentation and toxic polarization that poses an immediate existential threat to US democracy. A wide range of political, social, economic, and technological factors have combined to create this problem. As noted in our response to the first question, we believe that the hard work of democracy is in the conversations we have before and after we vote. And that our ability to connect with each other and have constructive conversations has been damaged badly by political, media, and technological forces that have driven us into isolated, like-minded camps hostile to outside views and ripe for the spread of misinformation, mischaracterization of others, “cancellation,” hateful discourse, and even violence.

Our focus – grounded in our extensive experience with social media and civic design – is to develop a new communication platform designed to strengthen democracy through constructive conversation.

### **The Case for Constructive Communication**

The case for constructive conversation, broadly, starts with the assumption that if we could better understand each other’s lived experiences, we could push past some of the boundaries (of identity, culture, class, etc.) that divide us. It’s relatively easy – and technology has made it even more so – to categorize and react to another person based on a representation or image of that person as opposed to a relational understanding of their experience.

Our project designs and creates space for understanding and for connection across experiences through conversation. In our system, the understanding/connection may happen within a conversation among participants. It may happen across conversations (when a highlight from one conversation is shared in another).

And, as demonstrated by our project, understanding/connection may happen at scale – from analysis of many conversations, with voices, patterns, and themes surfaced and amplified for organizations to share, for people to hear and see, and for leaders to incorporate in their decision making.

### **The Case for Our Project in Constructive Communication**

The case for our constructive conversation project, specifically, rests on the idea that surfacing and amplifying voices, patterns, and themes about people’s lived experiences at scale will strengthen democracy in two directions.

1] “Laterally,” by improving listening and learning within and across the political/social/cultural/moral divides that are isolating us from each other. This is listening/learning that social media platforms have proven unable and unwilling to provide. We expect the outcome of this to be a healthier public sphere where it’s harder for misinformation, hateful discourse, and violence to be sustained – and where new forms of civic energy and participation will emerge.

2] “Vertically,” by informing the policy- and decision-making of those in power with community input grounded in lived experience and inclusive of often-underheard voices. This is community input that

public opinion research is unable to provide with the authenticity, nuance, and transparency our “public experience research” approach offers. We expect the outcome of this to be public policies and decisions that reflect the full diversity of lived experiences in the community.

### **Why Our Approach Is Unique**

There are thousands of organizations across the US focused on bridging divides through human conversation and community building (see [Princeton’s Bridging Divides Initiative](#)). There are many other research organizations focused on AI-based NLP sense-making analytics. And there are many social platforms and apps focused on connecting people and groups with each other for countless purposes.

We believe we have a unique and sensible plan – as detailed previously – for bringing constructive conversation methodology (LVN) together with a social network (Blink) and AI-based sense-making analytics. Importantly, this approach recognizes that constructive dialogue has always been valuable, that new communication technologies have undermined that value, and that what we’re really doing in this project is reorienting and retooling communication technology to center on what humans have always known is important.

Current social media platforms have not, on balance, been good for democracy. The loudest, most emotionally provocative voices tend to dominate, which systematically warps perception of others and pushes people apart (see: Chris Bail and Cass Sunstein’s work). And as our own research has demonstrated, false news tends to spread faster on social media than “true” news (see: Vosoughi, Roy, Aral in [Science](#)). Generally, we see the dominant social platforms as ill-designed for important democratic functions (seeking community input in public processes; awareness and understanding of others in a pluralistic society).

We also see the power of social media technology, if reoriented, to bring people together for the kinds of constructive conversations we imagine. [Zencity](#), for example, is using social media to engage communities in building better local government. We share their belief that a combination of high-quality digital design and powerful machine learning models can create highly engaging user experiences at scale.

### **Our Path to Scale**

As noted above (e.g., the Princeton initiative), thousands of organizations are hosting bridging conversations in small-to-large ways and different designs. With continued improvement of LVN, integration of advanced AI sense-making tools, and addition of the Blink app to scale gathering/holding conversation, we will be positioned to serve as a “plug-and-play” platform for these organizations to use in the work they are already doing. In fact, we have already received inbound interest from several of these organizations in pilots.

We are designing our technology to support repeatable use cases. Our Freeport (Maine) High School project represents a path for youth usage that could occur through school systems and many other youth organizations across the country.

Finally, we believe there is a possibility that usage via the Blink app could catalyze network effects, especially as we create features in the platform for people and organizations hosting conversations to become aware of one another, begin to see this as something bigger, and learn from one another (e.g., sharing organizing tactics, conversation designs, sensemaking codebooks, etc.).