

Better Ballot Campaign Program Evaluation

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Introduction

Increasingly unsatisfied with the lack of civility in local and federal politics, a group of innovators came together in 2018 in Guelph, Ontario to develop a campaign that aims to positively influence the political climate. The Better Ballot Campaign (BBC) was launched on September 11, 2018 in Guelph, Ontario. The BBC promotes civil discussion and debate in politics, through education and outreach and by encouraging voters and candidates to sign the Better Ballot Pledge.

The group developed two pledges, one for voters and one for candidates. The pledges address three aspects of political engagement:

- Supporting positive, issue-based campaigns
- Never personally attacking any candidates or citizens and,
- Not supporting people or organizations who attack anyone with comments based on gender, race, appearance, religion or status (The Better Ballot, 2020)

After a successful BBC through the Guelph municipal elections in late 2018, organizers launched a second campaign for the 2019 Canadian federal election. Several localized BBC's were organized and run in a number of Canadian ridings, those representing Guelph, Wellington, Orangeville, Nelson and Halifax.


The steering committee of the BBC partnered with the Research Shop of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute at the University of Guelph to conduct a program evaluation of their 2018 and 2019 campaigns respectively. The purpose of the evaluations is to gage the successes, challenges and lessons learned and to explore potential future directions for the campaign.

Background

Negativity in Politics

Negative campaigning has been part of electoral processes and broader political landscapes for centuries (Geer, 2006; King & McConnell, 2003; Mark, 2009). Negative campaigning involves repetitively telling a damaging story, honing in on an opponent's weakness or constantly playing the victim (Mark, 2009). Candidates may decide to use negativity as a strategic tool when running for office in order to minimize the likelihood that the public vote for the opposition (Fletcher & Slutsky, 2010; Mark, 2009) and increase their chances of winning the election (Fletcher & Sutsky, 2010; King & McConnell, 2003).

Despite the persistent use of negativity in campaign ads, research suggests that voters in Canada are displeased with negativity in politics and feel that it reduces the quality of political debate and discourse. Specifically, voters find such tactics unfair, unprofessional and would rather learn about policy issues rather than being subjected to constant and senseless attacking



of opposing candidates (Austin & Pinkleton, 1995; Crotty & Jacobson, 1980; Dionne, 1991; Garramone, 1984; Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991).

Negative campaigning has the potential to impact voter perceptions of candidates running for office during campaigns and sway initial understandings of important policy issues (Garramone, 1984; King & McConnell, 2003; Krupnikov, 2011). Furthermore, news media and the Internet have contributed to how negative campaigning has evolved over the years and allow candidates to reach vast and diverse audiences with this type of messaging (Austin & Pinkleton, 1995, Mark, 2009). Some scholars and political constituents believe that negative campaigning will persist, with radical positions such as Mark (2009) noting that negative campaigning will never desist.


Striving for Civility

Despite the negative political climates that usually take place during campaign periods, a more civil and respectful environment is desired by voters and candidates in order to increase the quality of political discourse and public trust in the democratic system (Mutz, 2006; Sinopoli, 1995). According to Sinopoli (1995), “The norm of civility helps define a standard of conduct that individuals can expect from others” (pg. 612). Mutz (2006) supports this position and claims that people need to learn how to engage in discussion with each other when there are political differences, given that there will always be controversial topics and debates that exist. Therefore, it is important to place emphasis on how candidates and voters can engage in healthy debate about divisive issues without attacking their opponents.

To ensure an enhanced level of civility during electoral periods, there needs to be emphasis on educating voters and offering opportunities to build skills that lend themselves to upholding a civil environment. Friedman (2011) asserts that the public has to be educated on the impact and benefit of civility, as opposed to simply being exposed to punishment of incivility and applause of civility. Similarly, voters and candidates need to be provided opportunities to rebuild skills of civility, including active listening, fostering a healthy competitive attitude and embracing compromise (Florida Bar News, 2013). Ensuring that the public is well educated in healthy political expectation can help voters and candidates not only tolerate differing viewpoints, but also affirm the worth of others who hold differing perspectives. With the increase of civility, Stuckey (2014) reassures that there will also be a strengthened democratic community that is produced, where members can trust each other to act in good faith and where there is honesty and a willingness to listen within all political discussions.

Gender and Diversity

The gender of political candidates has been one of the most heavily studied factors when examining the nature and experiences of political campaigns (Enns-Jedenastik, Dolezal & Muller, 2017). Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing number of women in national-level political offices (Proctor, Schenck-Hamlin & Haase, 1994). Specifically, male and female candidates differ in their campaign strategies (Kahn, 1993) and their use of negativity in their campaign advertisements (Krupnikov & Bauer, 2014; Proctor, Schenck-Hamlin & Haase, 1994). According to Khan (1993), while male and female candidates in the United States both preferred to focus on policy matters in their candidate-oriented appeals, men tended to concentrate on economic issues, while women were much more likely to discuss social issues such as



education and housing. Recognition diversity in politics in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other factors is important to acknowledge because the demographic composition of politics shapes relevant policies and practices (Hero, 2000).

Methods

Data was collected for this program evaluation through the period of September 2019 to January 2020. Two online surveys were created – one for voters and one for candidates - and distributed widely to pledge signers, community members and key contacts. Following limited uptake of the survey, long form interviews were scheduled with key contacts, including individuals involved in the BBC campaign and/or individuals involved in local politics in the Guelph, Orangeville and Wellington regions. Interview questions remained relatively consistent throughout, however were adapted slightly depending on the context of the individual's involvement (I.e. if they were a candidate or voter, geographic regions etc...) In total, 20 interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed.

In addition to the survey and key interviews, data was collected by researchers through a media and document scan, analytics from the BBC website, and through researcher observation. Researcher observation occurred throughout the research process, primarily while attending community events and while engaging with partners at regular meetings.

Results

The following sections provide a summary of the results of the qualitative and quantitative data collection for the Better Ballot Campaign program evaluation. Key questions are addressed, including how people are hearing about the BBC, who is signing the pledge, and how principles are being interpreted.

How are people hearing about the BBC?

The majority of those interviewed and those who filled out the online survey heard about the BBC through word of mouth, primarily through connections with the Canadian Federation of University Women (CFUW) (at least 28 respondents). Many people also heard about the campaign through social media (primarily Facebook), and one person stated that they heard about the campaign through an advertisement. None of those interviewed or surveyed learned about the campaign through the website.

Who is signing the BBC pledge?

Overall, there were significantly more pledges signed during the 2018 municipal campaigns (50 candidates and 250 voters) compared to the federal campaigns (18 candidates and 96 voters) - see Table 1. However, the geographic spread of pledge signers was much farther reaching during the federal campaigns, with pledge signers located in Ontario, Nova Scotia, Alberta and British Columbia, indicating some success in starting a nation-wide BBC (see Table 2).

Table 1. Pledges signed in the 2018 municipal campaigns

City	Mayoral Candidates	Councilor Candidates	School Board Trustee Candidates	Voter
Guelph	1 out of 2	19 out of 35	14 out of 26	221
Wellington		2 out of 17		14
Orangeville	2 out of 3	11 out of 13		11
Other				4

Table 2. Geographic spread of pledges signed in 2019 (candidates and voters)

Riding	Pledges Signed (Voters)	Pledges Signed (Candidates)
Bay of Quinte	1	
Calgary Heritage	1	
Central Okanagan–Similkameen–Nicola	1	
Courtenay-Alberni	1	
Dartmouth-Cole Harbour	1	
Dufferin Caledon	18	6 (100%)
Edmonton-Centre	1	
Etobicoke Lakeshore	1	
Guelph	32	4 (44%)
Halifax	4	
Kamloops–Thompson–Cariboo	1	

Kitchener South-Hespeler	2	
Kootenay-Columbia	13	2 (33%)
Mount Royal	1	
North Okanagan–Shuswap	1	
Ottawa West-Nepean	1	
Renfrew-Nipissing-Pembroke	1	
Saanich-Gulf Islands	1	
Simcoe North	6	4 (67%)
Simcoe-Grey	1	
South Okanagan–West Kootenay	1	
Spadina-Fort York	1	
Wellington-Halton Hills	5	1 (20%)
Windsor-Tecumseh	1	

How are the BBC principles being interpreted?

In general, participants agreed that the central goal of the BBC is to remove personal attacks from politics and increase the level of civility in political debates and discourse. For instance, one respondent explained that the goal of the BBC is to “encourage civil discourse during election campaigns with the focus on issues and not personal attacks.” Similarly, another respondent stated that “it’s to take personal attacks out of the election process, to focus on policy instead of individuals.” Some respondents felt the BBC went one step further, to encourage more diverse representation in politics. For instance, one respondent stated that “the biggest goal was to have better representation in political office, hence supporting women to run,” while another stated that the goal is “to include people who may be turned off by the rough and tumble world of politicking.”

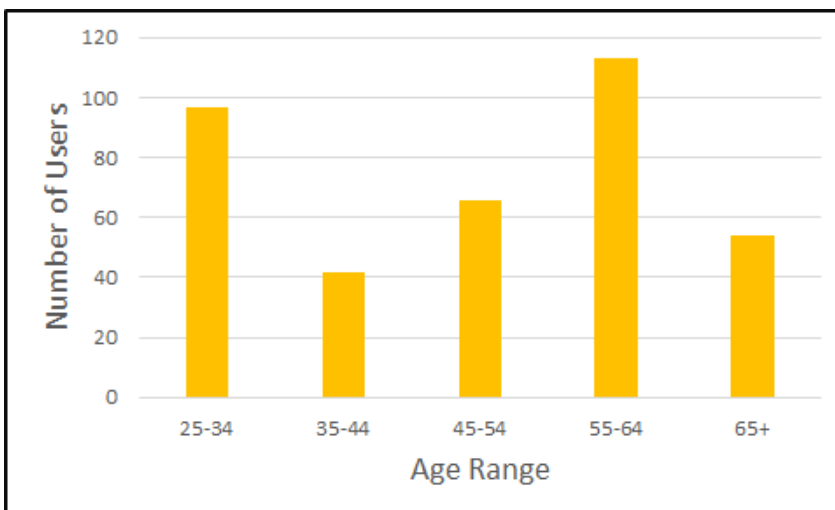
Promise and potential of the BBC

Many participants expressed that given the BBC is still relatively new, that outcomes may still be forthcoming and that in terms of successes, it might still be “too early to tell.” In general, respondents felt that the principles of the campaign were accessible and that they were clearly communicated by organizers. In general, the respondents felt positively about the potential of the campaign – for instance, one respondent stated that “I think [the BBC is] tremendous and makes so much sense and just makes things that much more civil, which we definitely need to strive for. And so, I truly believe it is important and should continue.”

Who uses/used the BBC website?

Between the period of September 1st - November 1st, 2019 (coinciding with the 2019 federal election), a total of 592 independent users visited the BBC website. Most users were from Orangeville, Guelph, and Toronto regions, followed closely by Caledon, Kitchener and Nelson. In terms of demographics, users were mostly in the 25-34 age range and the 55-64 age range (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Website Engagement by Age



Key themes

Several themes emerged through the analysis of documents, media articles, the website, surveys and interviews. Each theme is addressed in the paragraphs that follow, along with key suggestions.

Role of moderator

The role of the moderator was frequently identified as a key theme in the success of the BBC. The moderator is the individual who moderated the Town Hall events and debates. The moderator is not affiliated with any candidate or party. The consensus was that the moderator has a very important role in ensuring the BBC principles are implemented and it was suggested that the moderator should have a larger role in the BBC campaign. Some moderators announced the BBC principles ahead of the debate which was seen to be effective. Many participants suggested that it is important to get all moderators to participate especially at the federal level. The moderators should receive training ahead of the debate to ensure they are well equipped to control the discussions and the debates. The training should also include how to react to personal attacks during the debates. However, despite the current lack of training, moderators were perceived as being effective at interjecting when it was required.

Key Suggestion: Increase the role of moderators within the BBC campaign. This could include creating moderator workshops, training moderators instead of local celebrities and encouraging prior communication between candidates, organizers of the debate, and moderators.


Power of (social) media

Social media and the local press were identified as a challenge and success of the BBC campaign. The campaign used a website videos, public relations press statements and social media to spread its message. The use of media and social media was seen to make the campaign more accessible and disseminate knowledge about respectful dialogue effectively. There was significant engagement between candidates and voters on social media and this encouraged voters to become more informed. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for voters to engage with each other. The use of social media seemed to be positive and an effective way of encouraging voters to hold candidates accountable. It also appeared to hold voters more accountable for their actions. Many participants suggested that social media can be used to silence negative messaging on the internet. One challenge faced by the organizers was the difficulty of promoting the BBC through social media, due to many people's lack of familiarity with online platforms. While using media can help amplify the BBC message, this can also be challenging given the media's structure as a business focused on increasing viewership. Viewers tend to be drawn to dramatic and negative messaging, making it challenging to use the media as an outlet to promote respectful dialogue.

Key suggestions: Use more than just social media for the campaign to make it accessible to everyone and encourage voters to press the media for respectful dialogue.

Format of Election Forums

There were various election forum formats in different ridings. For example, Dufferin-Caledon used a Town Hall format that was a Q&A session whereas, Guelph Wellington had a more traditional debate format. At several election forums preceding the 2019 election, the BBC principles were announced as the standard of conduct. These elections forums tended to follow



a more structured format that was described by participants in both positive and negative ways. The new format was perceived as being more informative with fewer personal attacks however, they were also described as being less engaging and even boring at times. Many participants said that people do not know how to debate anymore and without the negative attacks against the opposition the debates are not interesting. The election forums were described as too scripted with a lack of rebuttal. Participants often assumed that the promotion of civility meant that there would automatically be less eventful discussion. However, several participants believed that it is still possible to have a respectful, healthy debate that is still engaging and focused on the contentious and divisive issues. This would also involve respectful rebuttal that is focused on the issues and not the person running for office.

Key suggestions: Encourage a more flexible election forum format to include more respectful rebuttal with less scripted answers and train the audience to encourage and foster more positive political debate. Also, have the BBC pledge and principles explained prior to each election forum.

Accountability

When asked if participants had any strategies to hold people accountable to the BBC, there were contradicting suggestions. Most participants agreed that there is no purpose in signing a pledge if people are not going to be held accountable. Some participants suggested that it is easier to hold candidates accountable than voters. Other participants disagreed and said it is important to hold voters accountable first, so that they do not encourage the negative campaigning of politicians.

There were conflicting opinions on whether the role of the BBC is to enforce a higher standard of conduct or to encourage civility, more broadly. One participant said, "I think part of the BBC program could be to encourage more candidates to refer to the BBC to show that there is a reason we are not following the standard attack mode." Some participants questioned whether it is ethical to call people out for mudslinging, suggesting it may be better to praise good behavior and ignore bad behavior. Other participants disagreed, suggesting that calling people out on social media and using peer pressure is useful for holding candidates accountable. One participant said, "the BBC could be a strong voice in saying when something has contravened the pledge or civil discourse."

Participants were also asked if they hold themselves to a higher standard of conduct since signing the pledge. Most participants said the BBC sets a higher behavioral standard and encourages respect for different views. As a result of signing the pledge, several candidates and voters stated they were more conscious of how they spoke. Candidates acknowledged that debates are not meant to be attacks but instead should focus on policy issues. However, some participants did mention that they were already going to run a positive campaign, regardless of signing the pledge. One participant said that they struggle with the notion of a higher standard because they believe this should already be the standard that is followed in politics.

Key suggestions: Establish how candidates and voters are going to be held accountable for signing the pledge and establish whether accountability should be the responsibility of the campaign.



National versus local

There was significant discussion in interviews and surveys about the differences and challenges with rolling out the BBC at the national and local levels. In general, participants agreed that there is a need for the BBC to be rolled out at the national level. Throughout the federal 2019 national campaign, many participants recognized that although the debates were respectful at the local level, there was far less respect and civility during the national debates. Local debates were described as civil whereas national debates were described as aggressive. One problem that was established was the lack of consistency between moderators at the federal level. Often, the moderators would not control the attacks and hold people accountable. One participant said “Federally, I’m very, very concerned with regard to how our democracy is in place and maintained, and democracy being having a robust conversation about different ideas and how to govern the country.”


Many participants suggested this makes the BBC hypocritical because the local candidates are committing while also benefiting from the negative attack advertisements produced at the national level. Additionally, local candidates were hesitant to sign the pledge if they knew the federal leader party was operating on a campaign strategy that was not civil. Therefore, it would be beneficial to press federal candidates to sign the pledge to encourage civility at the federal level and relieve the pressure placed on local candidates. Although most participants agreed that the campaign needed to be rolled out federally, there was disagreement as to the most effective way. Some participants suggested that each CFUW club should organize the campaign in their area whereas others suggested it needed to be organized nationally so that all clubs are unified in the approach taken.

Key suggestion: Develop a strategy for a nation-wide campaign that include political leaders, personalized relationships with candidates and more media coverage. It is recommended the BBC meet with all candidates prior to the election to speak about the campaign and ask the candidate to sign the pledge.

Messaging

The BBC had a clear message and the principles of the campaign were communicated clearly and the goal of the campaign was understood. However, many people had different interpretations of the campaign which created challenges for creating a unified message. The different interpretations were extreme and even included who the campaign is meant for (candidates, voters or both). The principles were clearer to candidates than voters and there were areas that were confusing for all participants. There needed to be clear definitions and goals for the campaign. For example, there was no definition as to what was considered a personal attack. The pledge was also seen as being too wordy, and respondents felt that it needed to be simpler and more straightforward.

Additionally, people had different opinions about whether the primary goal of the campaign should be to promote civility or diversity. There was a point of contention between participants about whether civility can lead to diversity. This was controversial as some participants saw a direct connection while others suggested there is no connection. Additionally, some participants suggested that there is not enough about diversity in the campaign while others argued there



was too much. Some participants were also unclear of the definition of diversity (whether it was referring to marginalized groups or underrepresented parties). Many participants did agree that civility is more feasible and important to establish prior to increasing diversity.

Another challenge was that some respondents felt that because the BBC's messaging is connected to the CFUW, an established women's group, that there is an inherent underlying message that people should support women in politics. While the campaign is designed to be non-partisan, it was not always perceived in this way by respondents because of its inception and its general perception as being a "leftist campaign."

Finally, the BBC should have a role between the elections to maintain interest and continue to raise awareness. Maintaining a presence throughout the year prevents the BBC from having to start over each election period. This could also help to reaffirm the nonpartisan element of the campaign. Having the campaign continued throughout the year means that "we don't have to start building bridges again."

Key suggestion: Have a clear definition and focus for the campaign to make it more accessible and show the audience who it supports. It is also recommended the BBC hold a campaign school and mock debates to maintain a presence throughout the year.

Engagement


There was a lot of engagement from both voters and candidates connected to the BBC. Many respondents stated that they felt more informed and educated on the political issues. One participant said "I actually went to all the websites (even those of a party whose reputation I was very upset about) to read their platform for myself, rather than listening to gossip. It was very informative." Additionally, participants seemed interested, engaged and receptive to the BBC and the message being put forward. Many people recognized that there is a clear need for this type of campaign and understood the overall purpose of the campaign.

Participants also stated that there was positive discussion overall between candidates and voters. Although there was positive discussion, it was established that there is still room for improvement as some participants felt there was still not enough. The campaign also needed more advertising as there was a general lack of awareness about the campaign. Some people did not know the campaign existed and others were unaware there was a pledge to sign. One challenge that was frequently expressed was the lack of promotion and the fact that the Facebook page was only accessible by invitation.

Key suggestion: Increase discussions about the BBC between elections and encourage more discussion between candidates and voters.

Social movement

The respondents were asked if they think the BBC is tied to a wider social movement of fostering positive political debate. Most respondents agreed that it is related to a broader social movement of creating civility because people are tired of negative attacks in politics. One participant said "I



absolutely do not want to hear what 'the other guy' is doing... I expect to hear what good/benefit/opportunities the candidate, and their party stands for. Nothing more." Some participants knew of other groups or similar organizations to the BBC, however, stated that the connection to the broader social movement could be outlined more clearly.

Participants recognized that these conversations are happening everywhere, and people are becoming more concerned about negative campaigning. For example, one participant stated that "politician sounds like a swear word" and they do not like being called a politician. Most people acknowledged that Canadians are ready for a change because they are tired of the "silliness" in elections. It was also suggested that for the BBC to be successful, there needs to be more partnerships between organizations and that the CFUW may not have the necessary contacts as they are not a political group. Additionally, it was recognized by participants that because the BBC is attributed to a wider social movement, it cannot take full credit for transforming the political climate.

Key Suggestion: Make a clear connection between the wider social movement and the BBC and develop partnerships with similar organizations.

Resources


The BBC faced many successes and challenges related to the availability of resources to effectively roll out the campaign. To begin, the campaign was successful in obtaining volunteers and support from different businesses. There were businesses that donated both time and resources to further the success of the campaign. Additionally, there were volunteers that supported the campaign throughout the entire process. There was also interest shown throughout the country.

However, there were challenges with resources that limited the campaign. The BBC needs more funding to roll out the campaign nationally. Additionally, the timing (in particular of the national campaign) was challenging as it was last minute due to the fact most CFUW clubs do not meet until September, which meant that there were less volunteers than originally anticipated. This may have also been the reason for the lack of support from local CFUW clubs across the country. Finally, there is a need for more consistency across clubs for the roll out of the campaign. This would likely include a toolkit or downloadable resources, so everyone is presenting information uniformly.

Key suggestions: Increase partnerships with politically active groups and apply for funding to help support the costs of the BBC. Also start campaigning earlier to increase awareness of the campaign and create a toolkit package to help clubs interested in participating.

The Dufferin-Caledon case study

The federal riding of Dufferin-Caledon, including the towns of Orangeville and Caledon, was included as a case study because it was identified as a large success, as all candidates did sign the pledge. Much of the success of the 2019 campaign was due to local familiarity with the



impact of the 2018 campaign, which saw a complete change of municipal council (with 100% pledge-takers). There was an increased level of respect within the election in Orangeville particularly because of the transparency of who signed the pledge. This created a consistent standard of behavior that both candidates and voters could anticipate in debates and the broader political climate. It was noted that candidates were able to share their perspective solely regarding policy issues instead of engaging in personal attacks. Voters felt that they were voting for the best person for the job regardless of their past or character. The success of the BBC campaign in Orangeville offers a few strategies that other electoral districts can utilize in their future BBC campaigns. There were three main strategies identified that helped create a successful BBC campaign. Firstly, utilizing a public relations expert allows for consistency in marketing, further connections and a stronger outcome. Secondly, having a clear communication strategy throughout the campaign with clear messaging allows for the message to reach as many people as possible. Also, utilizing the people or groups who are well established to further the message of the campaign. Thirdly, ensuring all candidates are well informed and encouraged to be involved throughout the campaign. This should include signing the pledge and advocating for the principles throughout the election period. The Orangeville campaign can be used to develop a toolkit of resources for future BBC campaigns.

Key Strengths

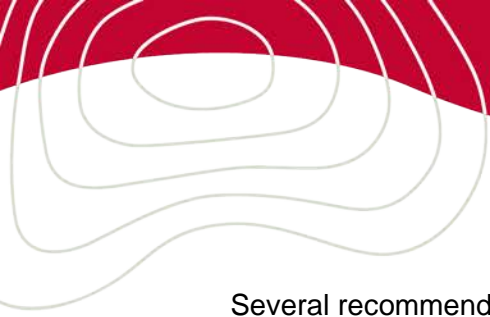
- The campaign successfully held candidates accountable using social media and encouraged respectful debate by increasing media coverage
- The political environment during the election was respectful and civil. The candidates supported each other and there were no personal attacks
- There was a large amount of support from voters
- Utilize partnerships with community members
- Meeting one on one with candidates to address concerns and make it a more personalized process. As a result, all candidates signed the pledge.

Main Challenges

- There is an unintentional risk to influence the election outcome
- One initial challenge was handling the reluctance of candidates to sign the pledge when it was first brought to their attention; although they were on board in principle, candidates gave careful consideration to whether publicly taking the pledge would impact their candidacy within their respective parties
- There is a need to ensure constant emphasis on civility instead of diversity to make it a campaign for everyone
- The campaign started later than desired, and the website launch was delayed

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report provides a snapshot of the strengths, challenges and areas of improvement for the BBC as it moves forward at the local and national levels. The 2018 and 2019 campaigns demonstrate that there is interest, need and potential for a nation-wide BBC, however, several challenges still need to be overcome.




Several recommendations emerged through this process:

- Increase the role of the moderator
- Make use of (social) media
- Encourage more flexible debates based on BBC principles
- Create strategies for holding pledge signers accountable
- Develop a strategy for nation-wide roll out
- Develop a clear definition and focus for the BBC, even in between election periods
- Develop partnerships with aligned organizations
- Explore opportunities for acquiring stable funding and support

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