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Web-based schemes to encourage broad participation in any of a range of activities have had considerable success. The idea of encouraging these under a National Initiative for Social Participation is therefore very promising.

However, past experience with efforts to encourage broad participation have also led to problems, such as vandalism, vote manipulation, and other forms of mischief. To take one well-known example, Wikipedia has experienced a variety of editing wars and related problems, particularly for controversial topics (although Viegas et al, 2004, reported such editing wars for the seemingly innocuous entry "chocolate"). This led to the creation of various enforcement mechanisms, including locking items from further editing or disallowing specific persons.

One of the current initiatives under development is MIT's Climate Collaboratorium. I have signed on to assist with the study and evaluation of this venture. The goal of the Collaboratorium is to encourage broad participation on issues of global warming and climate change. Various climate models will be available, and discussion of specific actions or policies will be discussed and evaluated through votes. The Collaboratorium will be open to anyone interested in the topic. Various efforts are underway to in addition engage specialists or experts.

Climate change is itself a controversial topic, and there are many individuals or groups that have strong, vested interests in matters pertaining to it. For instance, there are skeptics who don't believe there is unequivocal evidence for future climate change. There are special interests such as energy companies who are likely to resist efforts to change people's behavior with respect to their commercial products. Different regions of the world are reacting in varying ways to proposals to adopt policies on, for instance, greenhouse gases. The developing world in particular is reluctant to suppress economic development that might be a step backward for their citizens.

It is difficult to envision how such varying interests might behave on the Climate Collaboratorium. Crude attempts to interfere with open deliberation and education would be easy to detect, but there is also the possibility of very subtle ways in which the Collaboratorium's activities could be manipulated. I have discussed these matters with Tom Malone and the others at MIT who are developing the Collaboratorium. We reached no real conclusions about how to handle such matters, but at least we are proceeding with our eyes open.

The Climate Collaboratorium is an easy case for these issues, since it is in an already controversial area. But other broad participation projects need to be vigilant about such matters as well.

Viegas, F.B., Wattenberg, M., & Dave, K. (2004) Studying cooperation and conflict between authors with history flow visualizations. Proceedings of CHI 2004. NY: ACM Press.