

# Agora

## Subtleties of Implementation

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### 1 Introduction

When casting into doubt an institution as venerable as representative democracy, you better have some good ideas regarding how to make it all work.

### 2 Important Details

#### 2.1 Agora maintains quality.

Agora maintains quality. The first question that comes to mind: how would you keep this from becoming another anonymity-fueled Internet trollathon? All users of the platform will sign up using real identities and real addresses to be checked against the registered voter records, which are publically available most cities and towns. This verification step enables government officials to treat any activity on the platform as representative of their constituency. This step alone differentiates Agora from 95% of Internet civic startups that have existed in the past 25 years.

#### 2.2 Agora encourages communication.

Specifically, it encourages asynchronous, continuous feedback to the government via the medium of ideas. Proposals like “start a 4th of July parade in our town,” “install signal mirrors on blind corners,” and “expand our bike lanes” will be given the attention they deserve. All ideas posted to the website are filtered using tried-and-true methods like Reddit’s karma and an upvote-downvote system. By looking at the supporters of an idea, we can determine statistically which ideas are most popular within various demographic or geographic groups. For instance, if 90% of users that live within a given neighborhood upvote a proposal, clearly it fills a pressing need for that population. By asking for information specific to some proposal (“Do you ride your bike regularly?”), we can find proposals that fill the most pressing needs of any arbitrary sub-community (like the cyclists of Los Angeles).

#### 2.3 Agora solves the faction problem.

As described, this system may be vulnerable to injections of votes by certain interest groups. The membership of an activist group could sign up en masse and support a proposal. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but our system

need to have some indicator for this occurrence. This is where Reddit's karma comes into play. Though a publically visible reputation metric doesn't jive with the one-person-one-vote philosophy that underlies democracy, it makes sense to weight votes based on the quantity and quality of a user's previous involvement on Agora. This heuristic, and other analytics on the mountain of data generated by Agora, will effectively solve the faction problem.

## **2.4 Agora gets shit done.**

As part of the strategy for launching Agora, we will forge relationships with lawmakers, town councilors, and the mayor before ever launching in a town. In this way, the proposals with the most merit are handed directly to the movers and shakers in government. Not only that, we give them the data and analytics they need to confidently move towards a resolution. This step, and the voter verification, will make launching Agora a slow process, but it is necessary to build a lasting system.

## **2.5 Agora stops the buck.**

We will encourage transparency in decision making by giving government representatives official accounts on the platform with which to publish responses to ideas. Undoubtedly there will be some proposals that get through Agora's vetting process that are just infeasible. In this case, the government needs to explain the situation clearly to the citizenry. With official accounts, ideas on Agora can be resolved productively, no matter what. Perhaps the mayor will write an official statement explaining the budget restrictions or zoning laws that make some idea intractable. Or maybe the mayor will write a letter praising those who supported the idea and proposing a piece of legislation.

## **2.6 Agora brings ideas together.**

Many problems, like the scarcity of quality bike lanes in LA, have a cut and dry solution. The only obstacles to overcome are ignorance and a lack of government proactivity, which are solved with an effective implementation of the platform I've described above. But there is an entire universe of problems that don't fit this model: complex, large-scale problems without a silver bullet. In this scenario, we need to transcend the concept of an idea and think about building a framework with which to approach the problem. The wild diversity of ages, backgrounds, professions, and experiences contained within a single medium-sized town has a collective consciousness that can solve problems no single person ever could.

Here's an example. In the city of Cambridge, MA, housing prices have been steadily rising for a decade. This is partially because the population density in the town is rising and MIT/Harvard are attracting more wealthy corporations (largely biotech companies). As a result, the poor, the lower-middle class, and the grad students are being driven further from the city (and their workplaces) in search of affordable housing. It is exceedingly likely that there is a combination of policies out there that will ease the financial burden on these families. Perhaps the government should subsidize housing developments, tax real estate by square footage, disincentivize large private homes in the middle of the city,

and improve access to mass transit in the outskirts. There are hundreds of ideas that could put a dent in this problem. We need to merge the network of ideas and observations in the head of every citizen to build a functional Gestalt.

How would this be implemented in a website? There will be two buttons next to every proposal listed on the site: “Propose complementary solution” and “Propose alternative solution.” This simple relationship between ideas can be leveraged to construct webs of ideas, all solutions the same problem. With this feature, we make the discussion problem-centric instead of solution-centric. Instead of disembodied ideas, we have designed something bigger than ourselves from the building blocks of individual observation and experience. It is the crowdsourcing of wisdom.

## **2.7 Agora can work.**

Even after pondering Agora and pitching it to MIT professors and Cambridge city councilors, I wasn’t sure if Agora was possible. How can I maintain high standards of quality on the site? How do we keep people coming back? It occurred to me that, as in the hard sciences, initial conditions are key. I will take Agora directly to the people I envision using it: people with problems who care about the community. That means pitching it to parent-teacher associations, community centers, outreach organizations, political groups, even Scout troops. All these organizations self-select members with high regard for good citizenship. By nucleating the user base with these people, we cement Agora’s legitimacy and quality standards.