

Opinion **Tech start-ups**

Meet the start-up that wants to sell you civilised debate

Kialo is a strange proposition in an age of Trumpian tweeting

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Socrates: the Greek philosopher might have signed up if he were alive today © Getty

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[A classic Monty Python sketch](#) involves Michael Palin going to a clinic where customers pay for an argument. He is sent to see John Cleese, whose technique is to contradict everything Palin's character says.

Exasperated, Palin wails, “An argument is a connected series of statements to establish a proposition.” Cleese's reply: “No it isn't!”

That sketch was filmed in 1972. Almost 50 years later, someone is trying to start a real-life argument clinic. Well, nearly.

[Kialo](#) — Esperanto for “reason” — is a website that wants to be a hub for civilised debate — no shouting, rudeness or irrationality allowed.

The site, based in Brooklyn, New York, and Berlin, has been running for four months, and has more than 30,000 followers on social media. It will not reveal how many are signed up as debaters. But some are not only reading its mannerly discussions on topics of the day, but also taking part.

[A debate](#) on whether the US should remove Confederate memorials, flags and monuments from public spaces has attracted more than 3,000 contributors. Another discussion, on Catalan independence and conducted in Spanish, scored 1,000.

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Contributions are concise and sharp. Mere comments that do not make a constructive point are not allowed

Among other subjects hotly — or gently — in contention: “Is *The Last Jedi* one of the weakest Star Wars movies so far?” and “Will sex robots advance sexual liberation?”.

High-school teachers and professors at universities including Harvard and Princeton are already using private areas of Kialo for class discussions and exercises in critical thinking and reasoning. For everyday debaters and for schools and universities,

access is free.

When I met Errikos Pitsos, Kialo’s founder and chief executive, I was struck by his claim that he may be close to monetising Kialo, turning measured debate into something like a commodity. The site does not carry advertisements and he says it does not sell data.

It is very early days for this venture, and many would call it an optimistic business proposition in an age of Trumpian tweeting. So how does this son of two philosophy academics hope to make money?

Mr Pitsos admits he would have struggled to convince a venture capitalist of the business case — not least because building the site has been a six-year job. Kialo is self-funded and there are 50 employees on the payroll.

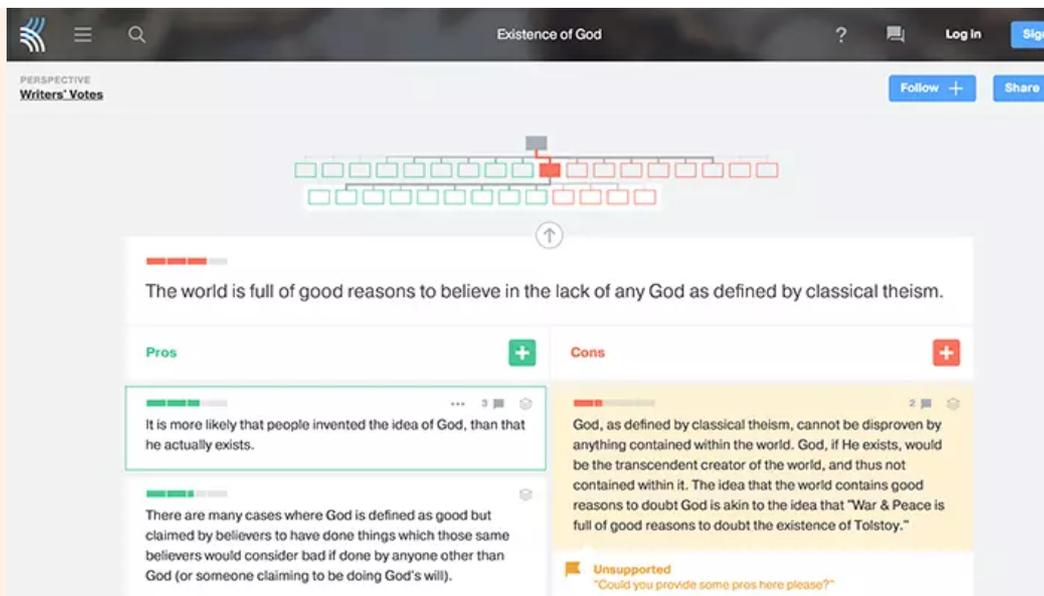
But he says he has already been contacted by companies and government organisations wanting to license the clean, intuitive debate software for internal discussions and decision-making.

“It works far better in a corporation than meetings and lengthy email chains,” Mr Pitsos says. Discussions are presented in structured argument “trees” that allow others to understand quickly why a decision was made, and who was swayed which way.

Contributions are concise and sharp. Mere comments that do not make a constructive point are not allowed. Anyone trying to post in that way is picked up by other users and moderators.

“It’s not a commenting site. To say, ‘I agree’, or ‘They’re all like that’, or ‘Hahaha’ doesn’t really contribute,” says Mr Pitsos.

The novel unit of currency on Kialo is a “claim” rather than an argument. Contributors making claims often write the counterpoints to their own contribution. In one example, a user who started a debate on the existence of God posted a contrary view.



Polite: a Kialo debate on the existence of God

There is a ranking system for contributors to vote on claims and counterclaims, but the aim is to judge their impact on the claim, not on their amusement or outrage.

What motivated the 41-year-old to put in six years' work and an undisclosed amount of his own money?

"I grew up from age four surrounded by spirited debate about religion, politics and every other subject," says the German-born entrepreneur. "But the discussion was friendly. I'd see people could fight vigorously, while still laughing and eating and hugging."

In the early 1990s, before the world wide web, he noticed discussion on forums and chat groups was horribly shouty.

"The web became ideal for bad conversations, with prominence given to the most outrageous conversations," he said. "I wondered if there wasn't a better method of online discourse."

He believes Kialo does not compete with other websites, because a "collaborative reasoning tool" is a new category of online product.

"It's idealistic. The mission is to empower reason and to make the world more thoughtful."

There would seem to be no arguing with that.

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