

*The Digital Civil Society Lab presents*

# *Reclaiming Digital Infrastructure for the Public Interest: Possibilities*

*October 20, 2020*

**Discussion Synthesis: Prepared by Lucy Bernholz**

**Discussants: Janice Gates, Katy Knight, Sabelo Mhlambi, Marietje Schaake, Ethan Zuckerman**

The logics that inform our approach to infrastructure matter. Current social media infrastructure is built on the logic of surveillant capitalism. This first conversation in the series focused on alternative logics and where they might lead us.

Social media informed by civic logic as posited by Ethan Zuckerman and built on by panelists could include:

- Infrastructure includes physical, digital, and social components ([reference](#))
- Many platforms with 20-20,000 users.
- Different affordances for different users (w/r/t geography, community need, etc)
- Communities set the rules; self-governed networks
- Interoperable with existing networks
- Many revenue models – subscription, subsidy, 1% tax on surveillance advertising
- Owned by communities, cooperatives, existing civic entities

The discussion further noted that:

- The current digital infrastructure was not built for much of the world to thrive. It is a colonizing force, so this work is not about reclaiming but about “claiming it” in the first place. This is the work of decolonizing infrastructure and starting anew.
- Human dignity, racial justice, and healthy societies are both starting places and end goals. These logics go beyond governance: they put communities in charge of purpose, design, implementation, use, maintenance, and governance.
- There are many examples of community-generated and led platforms, [see the resource list](#), which was pulled from the chat log of the conversation.
- Governments and regulators can (and should) make space for multiple approaches; doing so proactively protects values of pluralism, agency, control, and privacy.
- Infrastructures built in these logics are alternatives - they are *additional* strategies to breaking up the control and power of centralized corporations, should be considered in the context of other strategies such as different regulation, litigation, and market-based efforts.
  - There are many perspectives and questions about how these alternatives can or should or must influence the dominant models. See [the resource list](#) for suggestions from participants.
- Scale takes on different meanings in the context of alternative logics - what matters is the scale of trust and community. Figuring out how to address the countervailing power of the large companies is a big question - but scaling individual community efforts isn't the answer. Need to connect them, scaffold them, create coalitions that offer alternatives to the dominant market shapers.

## **Moderator Reflections:**

This first session focused on the internet and social media/search as “infrastructure,” with some discussion of SMS. There are many other elements of digital infrastructure (e.g. hardware, data centers, telecommunications physical materials and law) that intersect with issues of human dignity, environmental justice, public safety, and participation. How do we prevent a focus on software as digital infrastructure (an area within the realm that civil society/philanthropy can influence) from distracting from key physical elements of digital access?

The logics discussed as alternatives to centralized, corporatized, extractive logics are evocative of the most just, democratic logic of civil society - pluralistic, community-controlled, self-governed, independent and interconnected subsets of society. The values are in sync. This should lead us to see great opportunities for digital infrastructure created within, for, and by civil society. However, the logic alignment should also make us alert to the ways in which our “just and democratic” aspirations for civil society fail and ask how might those failures be replicated in digital infrastructures built on the same logic. For example, civil society is home to extremist ideological communities; it can be readily captured by external funding sources; it has often been and continues to be a means of state capture, both transnationally and within countries; and it is itself, in many constructions, a colonizing force.

## **Participant Questions:**

### **Advocacy/Awareness Raising/Organizing for change**

What could we do to turn power players in the current system into allies for positive change?

What narratives do the panelists find effective, in bridging the explanatory gap between technical capability of digital tools, and the actual influence they have on people’s real life?

I’m interested in the failure of imagination and the role of imagination in the public sphere. The other question is not how to pay for this but how to cultivate imagination--how to enhance collaboration between humanities and computer sciences?

Perhaps on some level for youth and teens, comics have a role to help bridge the gap for digital literacy. We’re working on this for students and teachers now at weirdenough.com, but would love to hear feedback in this realm of community tech.

### **Governance/Ownership**

My question is how are data cooperatives or data stewardship ensure that individual data generators trust them as intermediaries, which is currently lacking in large platforms?

What do you mean by individual space of choice on their own data? Would this include having individuals claiming moral rights and authorship rights over their data?

What would it take to harness spectrum auction royalties for digital infrastructure?

I’m working to build community-led broadband/Digital Stewardship projects in collaboration with several US communities. We often see the incumbent telecoms swiftly shut down start-up efforts operating on logics of smaller scale and community values. New market entrants must interoperate with existing infrastructure (it’s impossible to avoid given scale/interconnection demands) – we literally have to purchase upstream bandwidth from big Tier 1 internet companies. How can we push back with our values-driven efforts AND cooperate as needed with existing players when it runs against the interest (and outsized power) of the big companies?

As you think about infrastructure, how do you think about data as Internet infrastructure? And how do you put data into the hands of folks so they can build and allow people to shape their own systems - cutting the stranglehold of the big tech players?

## **Alternative System/Infrastructure Design**

Might we imagine a design goal for social-digital-public infrastructure that privileges SLOWing people down as opposed to SPEEDING up and FAST processing of everything with minds under constant pressure of attention? Newsfeeds currently incentivize “fast thinking” a la Kahneman, implicitly.

Might we imagine a new construction of **\*\*journalism\*\*** as a public transport system for social communication that carries information, views, voices, expression, power?

For e.g. current UGC streams, I feel, are like cars polluting the public physical sphere with emissions (toxic speech); what is a “public transport” system for healthy and pro-democratic information flow? Journalism’s older gatekeeping privileges are dead, long live that. Even those are unjust. What new journalism (news values) can be co-imagined with digital public infrastructure?

What are some key strategies for the kind of successful, citizen-led co-design that you work on at EII?

In addition to decolonization, dignity and local participatory design -- are there other public or civic values we could/should counterpose to dominant logics of "scale" and "autonomy"?

## **Funding/Markets**

I’m a technologist who has worked with many civic institutions: I’m interested in any org that isn’t institutionally based on capitalist ownership. For me this includes political parties/groups, trade unions, co-ops, resident associations, religious groups, charities, even orgs like the scouts or neighbourhood watches. My fear is that *\*none\** of these are going to survive the digital revolution without radical transformation, which so far I haven’t seen to relieve these fears. What do we do with these existing organisations? Replace or transform? This is also my contribution to the question of “what do we do with funding?” - assume these existing orgs won’t survive - what gaps will they leave? how do we replace that? what can we learn from their founding stories?

I’m curious about what pieces of digital infrastructure you think are appropriate for outsiders / donors to fund. I’m thinking about the U.S. government's Open Technology Fund, which focuses on funding tools to counter government surveillance and censorship. Could something similar work for bootstrapping digital infrastructure? What caveats would you have about a government playing a role in creating this infrastructure?