Roadmap Civic Social Medi

Building a safe, trusted, responsible, and sover
social media landscape.

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Introduction

We need social media that is safe and trustworthy, accountable, and sovereign.

Our current use of social media poses a number of major risks to society. Social fragmentation, polarisation and the spread of misinformation are harmful to democracy and our social resilience. The addictive effect of social media can be detrimental to our well-being. The dependence on large foreign tech companies, which consider shareholder profit more important than safeguarding public values, undermines our digital sovereignty and control over important communication channels.

Society would benefit from a landscape of ***civic social media*** where participants feel welcome, can treat each other with respect and can trust the information provided. A landscape in which social interest and public values take precedence over commercial gain. And in which privacy is guaranteed and communities themselves have control and say over the design of the online platforms they use.

We speak of civic social media here, because we focus on the function of these social media in society from a policy and design perspective: facilitating communities, care, exchange and debate. In a democratic society, a healthy ***civil society*** of active citizens and social organisations plays a crucial role. Civil society is the sphere in which people organise themselves around social themes, commit themselves to the collective well-being, offer each other support and inspiration, contribute to the development of knowledge and culture, and debate both with each other and with their institutions about the future direction of society.

There are also alternative terms, such as ***public social media*** and ***values-driven social media***, where the name emphasizes the public values that underlie them. The term ***digital commons*** emphasizes the role of the communities themselves in managing them. And there are more terms in circulation that point in the same direction with a slightly different emphasis: the need for an alternative landscape for social media, based on public values and collective well-being.

This document can be seen as an agenda or a ***road map***: an exploration of the path that society needs to take to realize such a landscape of civic social media. Developing it goes beyond just designing an app or a website. It also requires new business models, design

What is needed first and foremost is a shared vision and a clear direction that various parties can work towards together. We hope this roadmap will serve as a compass—for ourselves and for others in the field—helping to chart the next steps and to underline the importance of this journey within the broader social debate.

What are civic social media?

Civic social media are digital platforms where **members of communities** can communicate, collaborate, and share information in a **safe, trusted way**.

These platforms are developed **responsibly**, based on **public values.**

They are managed in a **sovereign manner** by organisations and initiatives with a **social mission**.

COMMUNITY-CENTRED

SA

SOVEREIGN

Core values

How do civic social media differ from other social media? Or, what makes social media “civic”? Civic social media are...

Community-centred

Civic social media are designed for communities whose members want to engage with one another, prioritising the well-being of these communities and their members.

They are not optimized for individuals but are designed for collaboration, dialogue, and exchange within collectives.

Safe and trusted

Civic social media platforms should be a place where participants feel at home. Where you can be who you want to be and where is a culture of respectful interaction with each other. Your data and identity are protected, and there are mechanisms to prevent the spread of disinformation.

Responsible

Civic social media are designed based on public values: autonomy, openness, transparency, sovereignty, people-centered, sustainable. In the design and management of the platform social interest always comes before commercial interest.

Sovereign

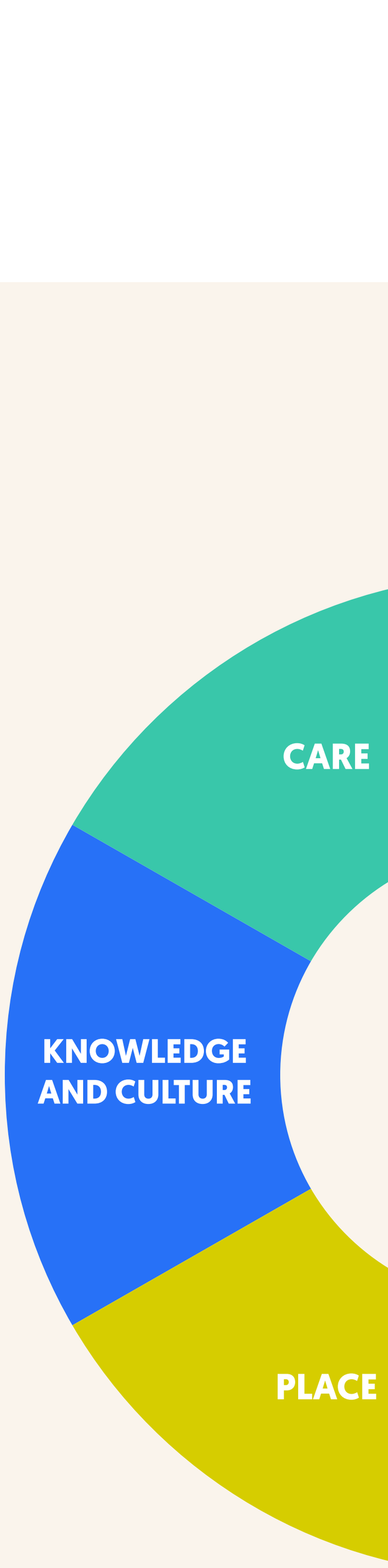
Civic social media are developed and managed by communities themselves, or by an organisation or company with a social purpose that wants to commit itself to one or more communities or collectives based on its mission. These management organizations are responsible for safeguarding public values on the platform and are accountable for this.

Divers ecosysteem

Civic social media are part of a broader, interconnected media landscape. It is not about designing a single *killer* app to replace existing social media platforms. Civic social media consists of a range of initiatives, tailored to the needs of specific communities and organizations. To maximize social impact, they choose to build on each other by being open source by design and sharing underlying protocols.

Six archetypes of communities on civic social media

Civic social media focuses on the needs of communities. What these needs are exactly and which functionalities are required for them, differs per community. To get a better grip on this, we distinguish six archetypes of online communities. They overlap partly, but together they provide an image of the types of communities that can flourish on civic social media platforms. These archetypes can help in thinking about what kind of platforms should be developed and which infrastructure, social conditions and functionalities are required for this.



Communities of care

Communities of care are support networks—groups of peers with shared struggles, ambitions or experiences—who come together to support one another, offer guidance, and exchange experiences.

Examples include: patient associations, expat communities, minority networks focused on professional development.

Communities of knowledge & culture

Communities of knowledge & culture are communities of people with shared interests who develop knowledge and insights together, or jointly create or design something, and share their creations with each other.

Examples include: hobby groups where members share patterns or photos of their work, citizen science projects, local heritage associations, book clubs.

Communities of intent

Communities of intent are groups of people who actively work together to achieve a common goal, whether or not through political influence or social campaigns.

Examples include: activist networks, energy communities, commons initiatives, ‘friends of...’ organisations, volunteer organisations, NGOs.

Communities of place

Communities of place consist of people who live together in a neighborhood, city or region and want to stay informed about what is happening in their neighborhood and/or want to share practical tips and requests with each other.

Examples of these are: neighborhood communities.

A roadmap for civic social media

How do we create an environment in which civic social media can flourish?

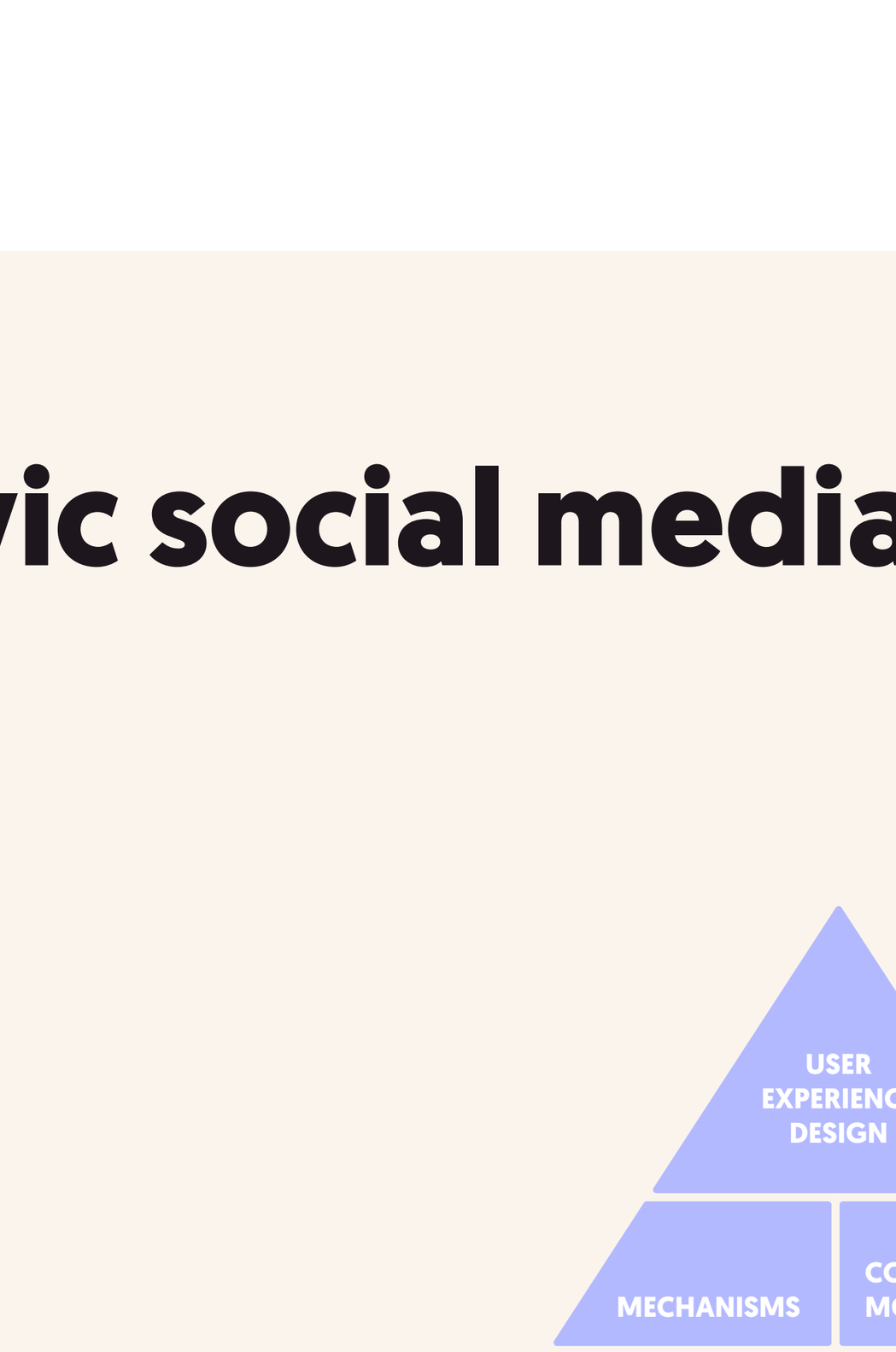
The development of civic social media requires action in various domains.

Cultural

A solid foundation is essential for the development of civic social media. Why – and based on which principles and public values – are civic social media important for democratic societies? And how might we inspire organizations, citizens, and policy makers to embrace civic social media as an alternative to existing social media practices that undermine public values? What kind of media literacy is needed in this context?

Systems

Civic social media are part of a broader technological infrastructure of telecom networks, cloud services, digital identities, and protocols. How can this infrastructure be (re) developed to uphold public values at every level and to support civic social media platforms—for example, by ensuring interoperability?



In addition to a technological infrastructure, civic social media are also part of a broader media landscape governed by various laws, regulations, and policies. How can regulation and policy support the further development of civic social media?

Organisation

To develop civic social media, two types of organizations are needed. First, organizations that develop and distribute software. Second, organizations that act as stewards for specific communities, who manage civic social media platforms based on their social mission—for example, broadcasters, libraries, or other cultural or social organizations.

Both types of organizations can build on existing practices from civil society, but new professional roles and responsibilities will also need to be developed. Sustainable business models must also be created to support these activities long-term.

Application

Civic social media applications include the front-end interface and user experience, the back-end for management and moderation, and the mechanisms for regulating access and filtering contributions according to a certain logic (including identity management, metadata management, and algorithms). How can these three be designed in an integrated way, in line with the needs of the different types of communities that use civic social media?

Actors

Who can contribute to the development of civic social media and in what way?

A variety of actors play a role in designing and promoting civic social media.

The government, as the guardian of democracy, can help create the conditions for a thriving civic social media landscape through both regulation and active support. It can also promote the development and use of the underlying public digital infrastructure. In its role as a ‘launching customer’, the government can lead by example—actively using and developing civic social media to communicate with citizens, and refraining from using platforms that conflict with public values. Finally, it can make legal adjustments, for example in procurement regulations and subsidy criteria, to further support this shift.

Citizens can choose to use civic social media platforms, or take an active role in their management and development.

Public, cultural, or societal organizations may choose to use civic social media platforms in carrying out their mission and play an active role in managing civic social media as community stewards.

Businesses can develop services around civic social media, such as hosting, template design, management or advice. Businesses can also play a role as developers of civic social media, provided they develop a business model that is in line with the public values on which civic social media are based.

Foundations and other organizational structures can be set up for the development and stewardship of civic social media, or for its promotion.

Designers and programmers can develop or specialize in civic social media and the values-driven way of working that goes with it.

Knowledge institutions in fields such as design, technology, journalism, social work, organization, and business can educate students to work in a values-driven way on the development and implementation of civic social media. In primary and secondary education, media literacy can be given a more prominent place in the curriculum.

Culture

CULTURE

Value framework media and dem

In addition to being a practical, technical and organizational task, civic social media is first and foremost a concept. Civic social media offer a specific lens for the development and use of digital media for contact between members of communities. This way of looking at things is grounded in theories about democratic society, the role of civil society in it and how it can contribute to collective well-being. This grounding also provides the legitimacy for the involvement of governments, social organizations and citizens in the development of civic social media. Why are civic social media important? Why is it responsible to invest time, resources and energy in this? What role does civic social media have for democracy and civil society?

Key drivers

- Awareness: There is growing attention and evidence for the negative impact that big tech platforms can have on democracy and the collective and individual well-being of citizens. The need for alternatives is increasing. Design, policy and legislation for this need grounded concepts and understandings that provide guidance and direction.

Tasks, including:

- Further grounding of civic social media in theories of democracy and media and linking it to policies in the areas of media, communication and infrastructure.
- Deepening of value frameworks that should guide the development of civic social media, including possible tensions between them. Fo example in the areas of safety, accessibility, openness, inclusivity.
- Further development of a shared conceptual framework that clarifies what is meant by civic social media, including the necessary preconditions in terms of regulations, conditions and financing. Avoiding silos and opening up networks is not only a technical starting point, but also a matter of speaking the same language and using the same values

CULTURE

Storytelling

To make civic social media a success, it is important to further develop the narrative and to bring its urgency to the attention of a broad audience. How can we convincingly invite organizations and citizens to start using civic social media?

Network effects play an important role in social media: people use the platform where their peers can be found. Switching or using an additional network is therefore not self-evident. This is also an important threshold for organizations to make the switch.

An important aspect of the transition to civic social media is therefore raising awareness among users. “If you’re not paying for it, you’re not the customer, you’re the product being sold.” This is a common saying for many professionals, but many social media users will hardly be aware of it. Communication, marketing and storytelling are therefore inextricably linked to a transition to social media driven by public values. At the same time, the importance of civic social media can also be brought to the attention of policymakers and social organizations.

Key drivers

- There is now a broader societal debate about the role of social media in society, and the role of big tech in democracy. There is attention for alternative platforms such as Signal and BlueSky and campaigns such as Make Socials Social Again. How can we further stimulate this discussion and make it easier and more attractive for citizens and organizations to switch?

Tasks, including:

- Organizing a targeted lobby towards policy makers, financiers and social organizations to draw attention to the importance of civic social media.
- Strengthening the role of governments as partners and examples.
- Activating existing (online/offline) networks (such as libraries, schools, broadcasters) as ambassadors and distributors of civic social media.
- Formulating guidelines for organizations on which social media they use for which purposes and under which public conditions.
- Initiating a broad citizen movement that stimulates the use and awareness of civic social media.

Systems

SYSTEMS

Policy and legislation

Policy and legislation can play an important role in building a sovereign, public digital infrastructure and facilitating civic social media. Social media regulation has a significant impact on the way platforms operate and interact with users.

Until now, legislation has mainly focused on countering the negative effects of social media such as disinformation and hate. In particular, more far-reaching regulations have been developed from Europe, such as the GDPR to safeguard the privacy of users of digital platforms and the Digital Services Act (DSA) to prevent the online distribution of illegal content and protect the fundamental rights of users.

The Digital Markets Act (DMA) was developed to increase competition in European digital markets, prevent large companies from abusing their market power, and create space for new players to enter the market. This last point is particularly relevant for the development of civic social media. The EU aims to encourage greater interoperability between social media platforms, making it easier for users to communicate across different platforms. This approach opens the door for smaller providers, who currently struggle to compete with the technical and financial dominance of Big Tech.

Beyond regulation, the government could also take a more central and active role in facilitating digital public infrastructure and supporting civic social media. This includes involvement from policy domains such as infrastructure, communication, media, health and welfare, and democracy. The government could delegate responsibility—including funding—for civic social media to independent organizations that operate at arm's length from the state. For example, the public broadcaster is currently tasked with ensuring a pluralistic media landscape, and public libraries are tasked with facilitating meetings and public debate. How might these responsibilities be extended into the online realm through civic social media—and which organizations are best positioned to take on this role?

Key drivers

- European regulations around GDPR, DSA and AI play an important role in the development of the digital media landscape. How can this momentum be used to further anchor public values and digital sovereignty around digital public infrastructures and civic social media?

SYSTEMS

Policy and legislation

Tasks, including:

- Further develop the vision on government responsibility for stimulating digital public infrastructure, including civic social media as social infrastructure.
- Connecting this role with policy themes in the areas of security, sovereignty, welfare, media and communication.
- Develop a legal foundation for financing digital basic infrastructure. Compare for example the role of television and radio fees and road tax.
- Mapping which legislation affects civic social media and which legislation is (additionally) required; at which level should legislation be set up?
- Develop concrete policy on sub-topics, for example around digital identities and interoperability.
- Develop policies to protect children and young people on social media platforms.
- Further development of vision on supervision of social media platforms with regard to freedom of expression, discrimination, hate speech and dis/misinformation.
- Further development of procurement law: what is the government allowed to do and where should governments be active, where do regulations get in the way?
- Further development of the subsidy system and financing conditions: what requirements must public organisations meet when it comes to the use of social media platforms in order to receive public funding?
- Develop or tighten legal frameworks to enable new business and organizational forms that can anchor public values in media management (e.g. steward ownership in legal framework).

SYSTEMS

Technological infrastructure

Civic social media do not exist in isolation. They depend on a broader infrastructure consisting of communication networks, cloud services, digital identities and protocols that enable further development of and collaboration between different civic social media. A large part of this infrastructure is now in the hands of foreign big tech companies over which Dutch governments and organisations have little or no say. The social media platforms themselves are also highly centralised at the moment: a commercial organisation manages the entire infrastructure of the network.

To achieve a more local and values-driven network of collaborating platforms, a different infrastructure is needed: one that is organised in a decentralised manner and whose underlying networks and services are also based on public values and sovereignty.

There are now several initiatives that support this goal, such as ActivityPub (the decentralized protocol on which services such as Mastodon operate) and Matrix (the protocol used by the Dutch network PubHubs).

Key drivers

- Geopolitical developments have made more people aware that our technological infrastructure is largely in foreign hands, and that we therefore have little or no control over these essential services. There is a lot of work being done to develop European and national (open source) alternatives, including cloud services and (European) systems for digital identities. There are now various promising initiatives in the field of public digital infrastructure and digital sovereignty, including ideas for a EuroStack. This is not only important from the perspective of digital strategic autonomy, but also from the perspective of economic growth, innovation and competitiveness.
- Specifically with regard to alternatives to existing social media, there are many developments in the area of the Fediverse – the development of an infrastructure of protocols that should enable development of and exchange between social media networks.

SYSTEMS

Technological infrastructure

- Further elaboration of the role of government. How does the role of government translate into the technological infrastructure – networks, identity management, data portability, etc. – and its organization?

Organisation

ORGANISATION

Stewardship

The proliferation of civic social media requires two types of organizations. The first consists of organizations that stimulate the development of (open source) software and can act as ‘stewards’ for this. These software stewards are committed to the management and development of a collective good, and ensure its quality. The second type consists of organizations that manage a civic social media platform and act as stewards for their communities.

Software-stewardship

For organisations that act as software stewards, a legal form must be sought that fits the anchoring of public values. Further thought must also be given to the development of various licensing models in which responsibilities between the developing organisation and the users are regulated, for example in the area of safeguarding public values in the event of alienation. This also includes agreements on data ownership and management, to prevent data becoming a profit model that undermines public values.

An ecosystem of companies can develop around the development of the software itself, offering a variety of services to the management organisations, from hosting and consultancy for its set-up to the design of templates.

At the organizational level, civic social media require the development of new revenue or funding models: how can the development and management of software be funded? The (continued) development of civic social media platforms should not be funded from advertising revenues and trading of user data. Alternatives could include subscription fees, licensing revenues, donations, funding from public funds or a combination of these.

Key drivers:

- Various initiatives have emerged worldwide for the development of civic social media initiatives, often (but not always) with an open source character. From the Dutch PubHubs, Gebied online, KennisCloud or Open Stad via the Spanish Decidim and the Taiwanese Pol.is to the various Fediverse networks such as Mastodon and Lemmy. From an organizational perspective, the financing and management thereof are important issues that are in full development.

ORGANISATION

Stewardship

comparable to initiatives by, for example, the NVJ, the Dutch Journalism Council or the Dutch Media Authority.

- The development of an ecosystem of diverse companies that can provide support services such as hosting or design and implementation for civic social media.
- The search for a sustainable funding model for the development of civic social media. Including the development of hybrid forms of funding, such as combinations of public resources, membership models and social investments.
- Exploring mechanisms for public procurement or governmental funding of civic social media as digital public infrastructure.
- Exploring coalitions between civil society organizations, governments and private parties to enable the joint development and maintenance of civic social media.
- The development of licensing models in which conditions are laid down for the use of civic social media by organisations and individual users.

Community-stewardship

Civic social media are managed by social organizations, companies or initiatives that want to enable communication with or between people in communities. They act as stewards for the communities. The use of civic social media from their mission requires new skills and roles of its employees, and in some cases a change in the organization itself, or the organizational culture. Managing organizations will have to take responsibility in one way or another for a safe and trusted culture on the platform, so that participants can feel at home. They also have to think about strategies to prevent the spread of disinformation. This can partly be done technologically in the development of the mechanisms and UX of the application, partly new roles and protocols will have to be developed for this, for example in the area of moderation and the role of users themselves.

Key drivers:

- Governments, social organizations and citizen initiatives are looking for public values-based platforms for their communication and need more structural knowledge about what is involved in

ORGANISATION

Stewardship

- Determining the organizational structure and responsibilities with regard to safeguarding public values and the coordination between community members and the organization that provides them with a platform.
- Developing professional protocols within organizations, including instruments such as editorial statutes, moderation rules, training and the promotion of appropriate attitudes.
- Embedding civic social media into broader organizational processes.

Application

Applications

Civic social media are ultimately primarily used on specific, concrete digital platforms. For the design of these, we distinguish three important elements:

User Experience

The User Experience (UX) is the experience that users have when they visit a civic social media platform. It includes the onboarding and login procedures, the navigation, the aesthetic experience, the presentation of the content, and the various possibilities to make contacts or contribute. Of course, ease of use is of decisive importance here. At the same time, civic social media require a different approach in application design than ‘traditional’ social media, which often aim to keep the attention of users as long as possible. The experience of civic social media is mainly about making the community and the collective goals or experiences visible and should invite collaboration, discussion, empathy and connection.

Redactie en moderatie

The back-end with editing and moderation tools. Civic social media administrators also need user-friendly ‘back-ends’ where they can perform their roles in a clear manner.

Mechanismes

The underlying mechanisms including algorithms, reputation systems, identity management that provide (partial) access to the platform, and organize, search or recommend information. On the basis of which principles are these mechanisms designed? For example, does a platform mainly recommend similar content to users? Or does it invite them to explore new perspectives? Does it seek similarities in debate or does it emphasize differences?

Key drivers

- An international community of designers and programmers is emerging that focuses on civic social media. This creates more knowledge about design patterns or design approaches and attitudes with which civic social media can be shaped. Often there is an emphasis on technological design, while the user experience can be further enhanced.

Applications

- Developing patterns for curation, selection and filtering, striking a balance between personalization and connection, depending on the needs of the user and community at different moments.
- Developing user-friendly onboarding and login practices focused on data protection, for example through attribute-based authentication procedures.
- Developing patterns for visibility of people and information. What is presented to whom and when?
- Creating conditions for age limits and parental supervision to protect younger users.
- Designing the relationship between online and offline interaction, for example as applied in initiatives such as KennisCloud.
- From memos to demos: Develop concrete applications around a specific theme. In the short term, there are great opportunities for the theme of mental health for example.

Background

This roadmap is the result of a collaboration between the Civic Interaction Design Lectorate at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, PubHubs, PublicSpaces, the City of Amsterdam and the Universities of Nijmegen and Utrecht on the development of a UX design and Use Cases for PubHubs. This research was made possible by a financial contribution from the SIDN-fund. PublicSpaces took the lead in developing the Roadmap.

The themes in this roadmap emerged from desk research into recent developments in the field of social media and the broader design research trajectory of the AUAS into the User Experience and Use Cases for PubHubs. The focus was on the design of what we have come to call Civic Social Media, and that design angle has also colored this roadmap. Specifically for this roadmap, two additional workshops were organized in which project partners and representatives of various organizations such as Waag, Ypsilon, Rathenau Institute, KennisCloud and the Dutch Ministry of Internal Affaris and Kingdom Relations provided input.

Various other research agendas, manifestos and research reports have inspired us, such as the work of Waag on the Public Stack; the Tech Radars van de Gemeente Amsterdam; of the Municipality of Amsterdam; the Rathenau programme Inclusive Social Media; the Rathenau reports on safeguarding public values in the digitalisation of society; the WRR advice on Media and democracy and AI; and the work of the Commons Network on digital community goods. We identified GebiedOnline and Openstad as concrete examples in the Netherlands, among others. I In the recent public debate we find connections with the activities around the campaign Make Socials Social Again and various manifestos and position papers that have been published, such as Bert Hubert's Manifesto Big Tech Alternatives: What should be better. Internationally the work around New Public, Decidim and Pol.is was a source of inspiration as well as the recent discussions around the Euro Stack, the Nesta report Towards public digital infrastructure, and the work of Open Future.

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