Digital public spaces are essential to democracy but have eroded

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Public spaces are the basis of democracies. They ideally host the *public sphere*, *agora*, or *commons* where civil discourse takes place and democracy is manifested.[1] As shared resources, public spaces exist outside of the constraints of private ownership, allowing people to exercise their rights and liberties more fully as members of society rather than having those rights and liberties curtailed by the terms of a private owner. The 'public sphere' manifests itself in physical spaces like libraries, cultural venues, parks and squares, as well as in mediated spaces like publications and public broadcasting.

The entanglement of these traditional spaces with the internet has brought a transformative shift in how the public sphere functions. In order to have public spaces in the physical world, the technology embedded in those spaces must itself also be public. The relation to audiences, the distribution of content and the facilitation of debate and dialogue are all affected by the values embedded in the technology we use. Whereas in its early days the internet was a public space, based on reciprocity and open exchange, we are now faced with an extreme privatisation of the digital sphere. Our conversations, social exchanges and political debates online are defined by the rules of Big Tech. Disinformation, surveillance, and and dark patterns influence our interactions. The traditional cultural and societal institutions that 'hosted' the public sphere are digitally present, but are not able to take responsibility for the underlying rules for social interaction and civic discourse in the digital domain. We are trapped in the business model of Big Tech and we face the consequences of that on a daily basis.

The biggest threat faced by digital public spaces is their erosion and the widespread belief that the status quo cannot change. This erosion has been so thorough that it is nearly impossible to find real public spaces online.[2,3] Meanwhile, the fatalistic assumption that democratic incompatibility is inherent to technology – and that there is no alternative to Big Tech – reinforces a self-fulfilling prophecy that continues to widen the gap between technology and public values.

To challenge this notion, we demonstrate that digital public spaces (and more generally, digital technology) and their development can indeed align with European values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, and human rights.[4] We do so first by introducing the

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[1] Habermas

[4] https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/principles-and-values/aims-and-values_en

notion that technology is not neutral but rather is loaded with values that have a tangible impact on the lived experiences of people and the planet: It is within our power to shape. We discuss how, historically, technology and public values have not been so at odds with one another and introduce examples of better alternatives from today. The main takeaway is that the development of digital public spaces that align with democratic values needs to take place on a number of layers. We introduce a 'public stack' lens for approaching the development of digital public spaces, in which shared public values inform development processes, technology, and the impact that the whole stack of layers has upon people and the planet. Core aspects of this vision include commons-based governance, open source, participatory development, privacy-by-design, decentralisation, privacy protection, and user consent.

This piece also specifies various ways in which the current values embedded in dominant proprietary technology are not compatible with democracy. These democratic incompatibilities are most readily found in 'surveillance capitalism'[5] and other prominent business models underpinning the majority of tech development today. In addition to specifying these current challenges, we also advocate for digital public spaces that *are* compatible with democracy and introduce key building blocks for doing so.

The definition and essence of digital public spaces is a contentious topic that spans a wide continuum. On one side of the continuum, digital public spaces may be narrowly considered as publicly or community owned and governed digital platforms that facilitate deliberation and discourse of the public sphere amongst citizens in a democracy. On the other side of the continuum, digital public spaces may be widely understood as any contribution to an open or public digital infrastructure, including components and software that support the digital public ecosystems' functioning.

Definitions of what constitutes a digital public space may also focus on ownership. Given the range of the term 'digital public space', it is helpful to consider access and appropriation – who actually runs them, who uses them, and how. We may thus imagine digital public spaces as serving various interests of the public, which are defined by the needs and values of that public and driven by their participation. Such spaces may serve several needs including but not limited to the facilitation of discussion, expression, and other forms of social interaction.

The endeavour to build digital public spaces is at the core of protecting democratic institutions. As noted by previous research at Waag Futurelab, "Creating such digital public spaces is an ongoing challenge, as the internet is a vast socio-technical system with numerous stakeholders, resources, and interests".[6] It is a shared responsibility of civic society, academia and governments. It is not something that is 'nice to have', but something we 'need to have' to strengthen and secure the basis of our democracies: The creation of digital public spaces needs to be one of Europe's highest priorities.

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[5] Zuboff

[6] https://publicstack.net/digital-public-spaces/