Reimagining Digital Public Spaces: Co-creating Use Case Scenarios for Digital Infrastructure Grounded in Public Values

(717 words excl. references)

In an era dominated by what Zuboff (2019) terms "surveillance capitalism," public organizations across Europe find themselves increasingly reliant on commercial tech giants for community engagement. This dependence raises critical questions about the preservation of public values in digital spaces. In 2021 Professors José van Dijck and Bart Jacobs, in collaboration with PublicSpaces (see https://publicspaces.net/), started the pioneering Dutch initiative PubHubs, aiming to establish a non-profit community network grounded in public values. PubHubs aspires to provide moderated conversation spaces and trusted information exchange tools, coupled with robust digital identity management (see Jacobs and Van Dijck, 2023; Jacobs et al, 2023).

Whereas trustworthy identity management and decent governance are pivotal to the success of PubHubs, these elements alone do not ensure that civic organizations in the Netherlands will adopt this platform. Further, different types of public organizations and online communities have different needs and envision their public digital spaces in various ways.

This research project operationalizes the concept of digital public infrastructure by developing concrete use case scenarios for different types of online communities fostered by civic organizations. It seeks to answer the question what kind of online spaces are desired by civic society and what this means for the design of these spaces. We do this through a series of co-creation workshops, interviews, and focus groups with partners from the Dutch PublicSpaces coalition.

Working with different types of organizations helps us to describe value tensions arising in the development of public digital infrastructure and reveals diverse choices that can be made therein. For example, we see that the very safe environment that can be created using the attribute-based authentication central to PubHubs also puts up barriers clashing with the public values op openness and accessibility of, for instance, libraries and public broadcasters.

With this research we contribute directly to the UX design of PubHubs, and to the broader debate on public digital infrastructure.

Methodology and approach
Our research employs a participatory design methodology, emphasizing the active involvement of societal partners and end-users throughout the process. Designing for civic society should entail designing with civic society.

This co-creation process involves three phases:
1. Needs assessment: in-depth interviews and focus groups with representatives from libraries, municipalities, cultural institutions, and an online community for

patients, to identify current challenges in digital communication and community engagement.
2. Scenario development: collaborative workshops to envision potential use cases, exploring activities such as public debates, citizen science, and community self-organization.
3. Defining three use cases: in-depth co-creation workshops to define three specific use cases, including UX design sessions gathering feedback on usability, functionality, and alignment with public values.

Expected findings

This research project will run until January 2025. In April we will thus be able to present the complete outcomes of this project. We propose to present the following:

- A brief introduction of PubHubs and PublicSpaces.
- A brief introduction of the public values that are central to PubHubs and the use case scenarios we are developing.
- Three comprehensive use case scenarios for public digital platforms. These use cases will focus on needs and desires of the three involved public organizations: an online community for patients, a platform for the Dutch Public Broadcaster, and a neighborhood community. With these scenarios we provide an impression of what PubHubs could be, yet also give a broader perspective on types of public digital infrastructures and platforms that fit Dutch civic society.
- A reflection on our applied research approach and what co-creation and UX design research can bring to the broader academic discussion on public digital infrastructures.

Conclusion

With this work we bring an applied research perspective that integrates infrastructure and platform studies, aligning with Plantin et al.'s (2018), highlighting the need to consider both technical and social aspects in developing digital public spaces. Our research demonstrates the critical importance of co-creation and the involvement of civic society in developing public digital spaces. By closely aligning technological development with the needs and values of public organizations, PubHubs and similar initiatives have the potential to reshape the digital landscape of civic engagement. As we move forward, continued collaboration between researchers, developers, public organizations, and policymakers will be essential to realize the full potential of these kind of initiatives. Moreover, by working in this way we aim to contribute to further shaping the future of public values in an algorithmic society.

References

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