

THE PUBLIC SQUARE PROJECT

*The case for building public digital infrastructure
to support our community and our democracy*

*With majority support from Australians on curbing
Facebook's influence and role on our civic spaces,
it is time to create an alternative social network
that serves the public interest*

Research report

Jordan Guiao
Peter Lewis

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*ALTERNATE SOCIAL NETWORKS OVER TIME***

The public square is a place where citizens come together, exchange ideas and mediate differences. It has its origins in the physical town square, where a community can gather in a central and open public space. As towns grew and technology progressed, the public square has become an anchor of democracy, with civic features like public broadcasting creating a space between the commercial, the personal and the government that helps anchor communities in shared understanding.



In recent times, online platforms like Facebook have usurped core aspects of what we expect from a public square. However, Facebook's surveillance business model and engagement-at-all-costs algorithm is designed to promote commercial rather than civic objectives, creating a more divided and distorted public discourse.

This discussion paper aims to initiate a focused discussion around the type of digital infrastructure we want to power our public square.

Recent polling from The Australia Institute has shown that Australians believe Facebook has too much power (57%) and are ready to see better alternatives (61%).¹

Looking at different research, as well as analysing the trajectory of alternative social networks reveal that Facebook's continued role in our information ecosystem is not a given, and that new ideas are developing which proposes new ways of connecting online.

In re-imagining a new public square, this paper proposes an incremental evolution of the Australian public broadcaster, centred around principles developed by John Reith, the creator of public broadcasting, of an independent, but publicly-funded entity with a remit to 'inform, educate and entertain' citizens.²

This new public square will be underpinned by three pillars designed to serve democratic and community interests:

- **Communities around existing content** where the public can gather around topics of shared interest in a safe, respectful and surveillance-free environment
- **Community generated content** where the public can create and share their own content and contribute to engaged communities of interest
- **Community input into government** where the public can have meaningful exchange with government to better inform decisions that impact on them.

Addressing considerations around the technical, cultural, political, and operational elements of building this new network, this paper proposes what is feasibly needed to build such a public social platform.

Over time, these pillars would support a publicly funded civic platform that would be:

- driven by public interest algorithms and ethical network designs
- supported by passionate public community builders
- integrated with government service delivery
- supportive of a vibrant and independent media ecosystem

The Centre for Responsible Technology is seeking feedback from engaged stakeholders on this discussion paper who would like to participate in developing this project further.

¹ Australia Institute (2021), *State of Technology poll*

² UK House of Lords (2016), *BBC Charter Review: Reith not revolution*, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcomuni/96/96.pdf>

INTRODUCTION

How the public come together in a shared space is in constant flux, shaped by technology and culture. Benedict Anderson describes the public square as 'an imagined community',³ made up of the stories that can bind people who have never met with a 'deep, horizontal comradeship'.⁴ The great empires of Antiquity were organised around open spaces where commerce, culture and politics coalesced. The Greek city-states had the agora, the Roman Empire the forum, places where laws and justice and power were mediated, groups of citizens given the chance to debate, discuss and decide their own destiny. The public square became the standard of a functioning community. Each technological advance has driven a re-adaption of how this space exists. Print media provided the catalyst for the mass production and distribution of ideas. Radio spectrum allowed the immediate sharing of information in the public interest. Network technology offered a new forum of shared space.

One of Facebook's key benefits is its ability to facilitate people's desire to connect, share information and engage in a public forum. As Facebook encouraged news media and publishers to grow their presence on the platform, the idea of Facebook as a public square became more and more entrenched. But this has been challenged in recent years as the platform prioritised the commercialisation of user data over the quality and civility of discourse on the platform. The revelation that political influencing firm Cambridge Analytica had harvested Facebook data to assist with the campaigns of Donald Trump and others was a sign of how social media data could be repurposed to manipulate users.⁵ More recently, Facebook's reticence to take responsibility for the harmful content on its platform has reinforced the impression that this is a not a platform suitable to house Australia's public discourse.⁶



³ Anderson (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Granville (2018), *Facebook and Cambridge Analytica: What you need to know as fallout widens*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/19/technology/facebook-cambridge-analytica-explained.html>

⁶ Brown (2021), *Facebook wants us to fix its misinformation problem*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2021/04/01/facebook-wants-us-to-fix-its-misinformation-problem/?sh=753672de4df2>

The sense that Facebook is not a 'fit for purpose' public square was reinforced by recent attempts by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to encourage it to negotiate fair compensation for the use of public interest journalism on its platforms. The ACCC encouraged voluntary negotiations between the advertising monopolies Google and Facebook and media companies. When Facebook and Google refused, the ACCC moved to a mandatory code to determine the fair value for fact-based news. At every step Facebook resisted and tried to undermine the legislation.⁷

Facebook's move to block Australian news and public service profiles in February 2021 was a commercially motivated attack on Australian democracy. To resist a multi-partisan effort to regulate its use of public interest journalism, Facebook withdrew access to profiles of news organisations, civil society groups and essential government services.⁸

The impact of that decision on hundreds of pages, including The Bureau of Meteorology and Fire and Rescue NSW highlighted the level of reliance Australia has come to place on a single network.⁹ Facebook boasts a popularity with Australians few other online platforms can match. With over 16 million Australians accessing it daily,¹⁰ it is the most popular social network in Australia. About a third of Australians use it as their primary news source,¹¹ and it has become a key part of many Australians' lives.

Facebook's business model has fueled an increasingly angry, confrontational and at times delusional public discourse. By building algorithms to maximise 'engagement', Facebook privileges emotion over civility, fiction over fact, creating a series of competing realities for users.¹² Facebook has been dismissive of the consequences of its business model, refusing to take responsibility for the damage it has caused and resisting attempts to regulate.¹³

During the Facebook Australia news ban many were forced to ask 'what is the alternative?', and were confronted by the answer of 'none'.

It has become urgent then, that Australians take steps to mitigate the risks of relying on Facebook as their preferred public square. This paper proposes that Australians re-imagine what an online public square can be, one that values community and democracy, one that is independent of profit incentives, one that does not monitor participants for commercial ends, and one that is accountable to the Australian public.

⁷ Purtill (2021), *Facebook thinks it won the battle of the media bargaining code – but so does the government*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2021-02-26/facebook-google-who-won-battle-news-media-bargaining-code/13193106>

⁸ Groch (2021), *Why has Facebook banned news and what does it mean for you?* <https://www.smh.com.au/national/why-has-facebook-banned-news-and-what-does-it-mean-for-you-20210218-p573o4.html>

⁹ Yosufzai (2021), *'Irresponsible': The Facebook news ban has blocked official health information and domestic violence services*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/irresponsible-the-facebook-news-ban-has-blocked-official-health-information-and-domestic-violence-services>

¹⁰ ACCC (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/inquiries-finalised/digital-platforms-inquiry-0/final-report-executive-summary>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Applebaum, Pomerantsev (2021), *How to put our democracy's dumpster fire*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/the-internet-doesnt-have-to-be-awful/618079/>

¹³ Heer (2021) *Facebook remains a threat to democracy*, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/facebook-regulation-democracy-australia/>

It is important to realise that this isn't the first time seemingly transformative technology has turned harmful. In the early 20th century radio heralded a new era of communication and community in a similar vein to the Internet. Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov expressed that radio will "fuse together all mankind" in the 1920s,¹⁴ sounding a lot like Mark Zuckerberg's regular declarations of Facebook "making the world more open and connected".¹⁵

Just like Facebook, a group of authoritarians eventually learned how to use radio for propaganda and social control. In the Soviet Union, radio was used to spread Communist teachings, and the Nazis broadcast Hitler's speeches en masse.¹⁶ In the US, a different form of social control was being enacted, as radios were dominated not by the state, but by private commercial companies and individuals, who gave a platform to loud voices of hate including anti-Semitic broadcasts.¹⁷ These examples are mirrored today in the American capitalist and individualistic Internet vs. the Chinese state-run and censored Internet.

As the threats to democracy grew, in Britain, a visionary figure imagined a different type of mission for radio in pursuit of the common good. John Reith imagined radio that served neither state-run propaganda, nor polarising, profit-driven private companies. Reith imagined a public broadcaster, one that was publicly funded, but independent from the state. The 'Reithian principles' as they have become known, were 'to inform, educate and entertain'.¹⁸ This radio would be designed to explicitly serve the public interests, and would herald the birth of public broadcasting and the British Broadcasting Corporation, where Reith served as its first director general.

While not without its faults, the BBC continues to be a leader in public broadcasting today and has been emulated in many countries globally, including in Canada and here in Australia. Public broadcasting provides public goods which would not be delivered in a purely commercial environment. These include the provision of high-quality local news, educational content and services and covering topics the private sector may neglect or not have the capacity to provide, like controversial and divisive topics.¹⁹

Local news services in particular, are crucial elements of a vibrant public square and a functioning democracy. Without high-quality local news coverage, it was found in the US and the UK that voters were shown to be less informed,²⁰ politicians less engaged,²¹ there were declines in voting and civic engagement overall,²² less social cohesion,²³ increased polarisation,²⁴ increased government and public service waste,²⁵ and worse environmental conditions and a loss on economic benefits to local communities.²⁶

These echo the findings of the ACCC Digital Platform Inquiry in Australia, where the decline in public interest journalism due to the dominance of online platforms like Facebook has resulted in a less stable information environment.²⁷

As early as 2013, Professor Mark Andrejevic from Monash University who is also an associate of the Centre for Responsible Technology was calling for a rethink of social networks. Andrejevic saw a role for public service media as a host for public social networks, search engines and other applications. He foreshadowed that the commercialisation and privatisation of digital platforms, which ironically originated from a government funded service, would threaten the 'commons' - knowledge and services for the public good, and would increasingly be a challenge for public interest journalism to hold power to account.²⁸

Andrejevic imagined an alternate to Facebook:

Why not consider the possibility of a public service social networking platform - one freed from the commercial imperatives that require Facebook to engage in detailed tracking practices that greatly expand its infrastructure needs, which in turn require it to more aggressively 'monetise' its user base?²⁹

He called for an alternate model of the internet not based on surveillance and monetisation. Instead of trying to treat key online platforms as public utilities, he advocated for a larger online ecosystem of public services, with interconnections between public broadcasting, libraries, museums, community centres and so on, as an information system designed to serve the public good.³⁰

Ethan Zuckerman is also a proponent of this concept and built the Institute for Public Digital Infrastructure at the University of Massachusetts Amherst around this very idea. Like Andrejevic, he questions the 'default' business model of the current dominant Internet players like Google and Facebook, and reminds us that this does not need to be the only way to build online platforms. Zuckerman emphasises that:

*The lesson is that a particular business model is not inevitable but the product of political, economic and cultural forces.*³¹

Zuckerman explained "three models of the Internet", just as Reith observed in the early 20th century, with the capitalist American model as one model, and the censored Chinese Internet model on the other side.

A failure of imagination is that Internet models must follow only one of these two binaries. Any critique of the capitalist advertising and American model is deemed communist and repressive, while assumptions of the Chinese Internet is as a sterile, dull and apolitical environment. Both assumptions are wrong.³²

Zuckerman advocates for a third model, situated somewhere in the middle of the profit-driven surveillance model, and the state-run censorship model. This third model has examples in Wikipedia, global in scale, run by an army of volunteers with no profit or censorship incentives. He sees Wikipedia as exemplifying a form of "public service media"³³ driven by values championing open access to knowledge and information that would be considered market failures in a capitalist economy.

While public media and the BBC public broadcasting model is an easy metaphor, Eli Pariser of New Civic Signals has chosen to go further. Pariser, who identified and popularised the term "filter bubbles" (a state of intellectual or ideological isolation that may result from algorithms feeding the public only information they agree with),³⁴ has imagined online spaces that are more like public parks, spaces that were set up to serve the public good explicitly. Pariser saw parks as:

*Spaces to celebrate individuality and build collective identity. Public parks...could help weave a greater, more egalitarian "we".*³⁵

Importantly Pariser sees parks as spaces where disagreements and common ground meet and differences are hashed out. He describes how parks are often rallying points for protests and demonstrations, a safe space for "conflict and contestation" which are key to healthy democracies.³⁶ Parks regularly allow friction and serendipity to occur, where surprise encounters are still possible, in stark contrast to the hyper-individualised social feeds we get now where our differences are prized over our commonalities. Parks, like all great public spaces, are also owned by everyone, emphasising community and commonality.

Critically, Pariser argues parks are also actively maintained by skilled stewards. There are active processes to ensure parks are kept safe, clean and healthy for the entire community, in stark contrast to the often toxic, unkempt wilderness of commercial social networks. Pariser's organization Civic Signals has continued to advocate for a reimagining of our digital spaces for more community benefit, in a similar way we build physical, offline spaces for community benefit.³⁷

¹⁴ Knight (1975), *Past, Future and the Problem of Communication in the Work of V V Khlebnkov*, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Past_Future_and_the_Problem_of_Communication_in_the_Work_of_V_V_Khlebnkov

¹⁵ Constone (2012), *Zuckerberg receives hoodie, says "Our mission isn't to be a public company" in pre-IPO remarks*, <https://techcrunch.com/2012/05/18/zuckerberg-opening-remarks/>

¹⁶ Applebaum, Pomerantsev (2021), *How to put our democracy's dumpster fire*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/the-internet-doesnt-have-to-be-awful/618079/>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ UK House of Lords (2016), *BBC Charter Review: Reith not revolution*, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcomuni/96/96.pdf>

¹⁹ Martin (2021), *Can public service broadcasting survive Silicon Valley?* <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160791X20312549>

²⁰ Mondak (1996), *Nothing to read: newspapers and elections in a social experiment*, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.390150385277>

²¹ Snyder, Stromberg (2010), *Press coverage and political accountability*, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/652903>

²² Barthel et al. (2016), *Civic engagement strongly tied to local news habits*, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/11/03/civic-engagement-strongly-tied-to-local-news-habits/>

²³ Yamamoto (2011), *Community newspaper use promotes social cohesion*, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/073953291103200103>

²⁴ Darr et al. (2018), *Newspaper closures polarize voting behavior*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy051>

²⁵ Gap et al. (2018), *Financing dies in darkness? The impact of newspaper closures on public finance*, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WP44.pdf>

²⁶ Campa (2018), *Press and leaks: Do newspapers reduce toxic emissions?* <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0095069616301371>

²⁷ ACCC (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/inquiries-finalised/digital-platforms-inquiry-0/final-report-executive-summary>

²⁸ Andrejevic (2013), *Public service media utilities: rethinking search engines and social networking as public goods*

²⁹ Andrejevic (2013), *Public service media utilities: rethinking search engines and social networking as public goods*

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Zuckerman (2020), *The Case of digital public infrastructure*, <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/the-case-for-digital-public-infrastructure>

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Fletcher (2019), *The truth behind filter bubbles: Bursting some myths*, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/truth-behind-filter-bubbles-bursting-some-myths>

³⁵ Pariser (2020), *To mend a broken internet, create online parks*, <https://www.wired.com/story/to-mend-a-broken-internet-create-online-parks/>

³⁶ Pariser (2020), *To mend a broken internet, create online parks*, <https://www.wired.com/story/to-mend-a-broken-internet-create-online-parks/>

³⁷ Ibid.



Some key themes emerged in the available research concepts:

One // That the current dominant business model of surveillance advertising which powers giants like Google and Facebook is not the only way to build online platforms today and in future.

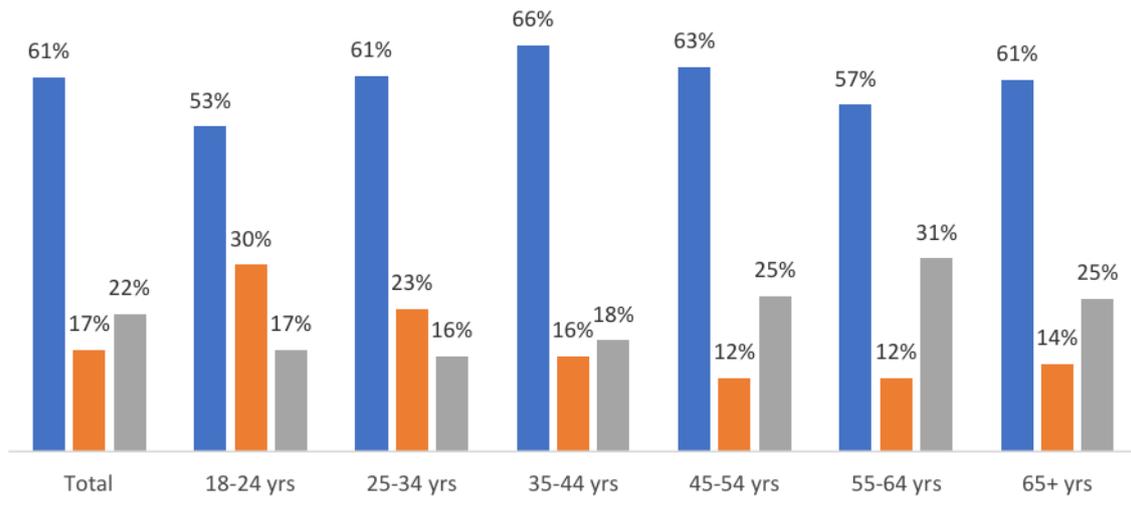
Two // That conceiving of an online model that empashises the public good, community, commonality and public interests is a much healthier and more beneficial experience in contrast to the surveillance model.

Three // That thinking of online platforms from a collective public filter, and evolving public service media models that inspired public broadcasting, is a rational and very sensible example of a better online public square.

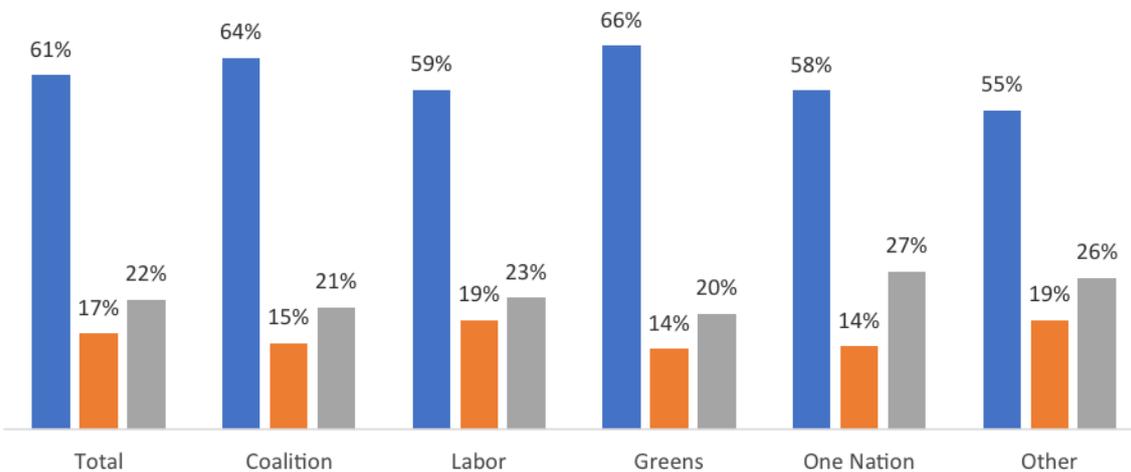
Figure 1. Poll asking the question “I would like to see better alternatives to online platforms like Facebook” across age ranges and voting intentions:

■ Total agree ■ Total disagree ■ Don't know / Not sure

Across Age Ranges



Across Voting Intentions



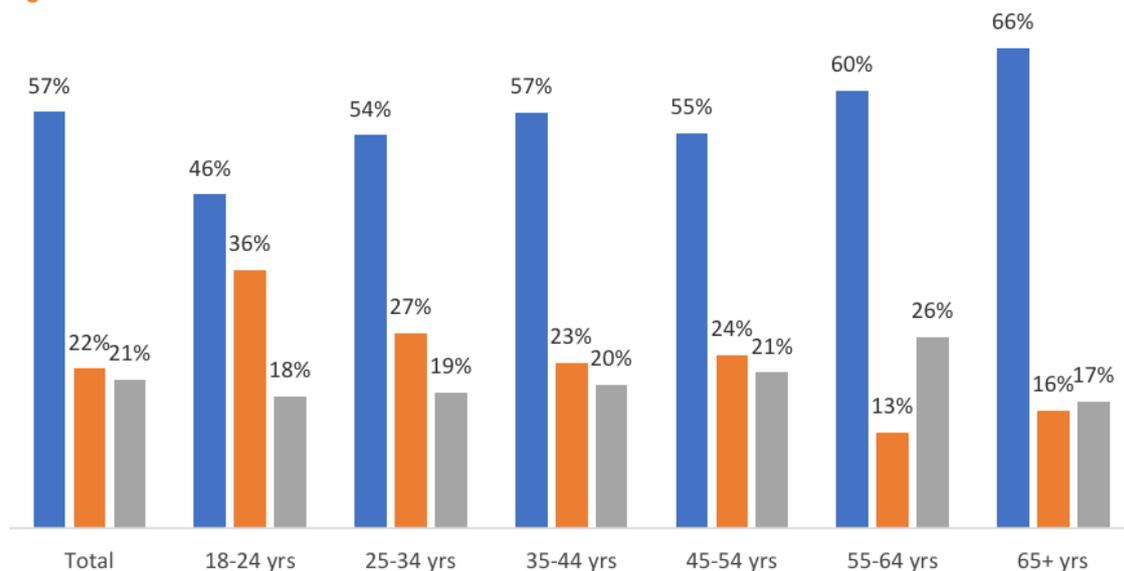
Recent polling showed that there is majority support among Australians who are looking for better alternatives to Facebook’s current dominance (61% as shown in Figure 1) and agree that Facebook has too much power and influence (57% as shown in Figure 2).³⁸ This indicates a growing awareness of the need for an alternative technology platform, just as Reith developed. The dominance of Facebook is a clear and present threat that can only be ameliorated by giving the Australian public a viable alternative that serves public interests.

³⁸ Australia Institute (2021), State of Technology poll

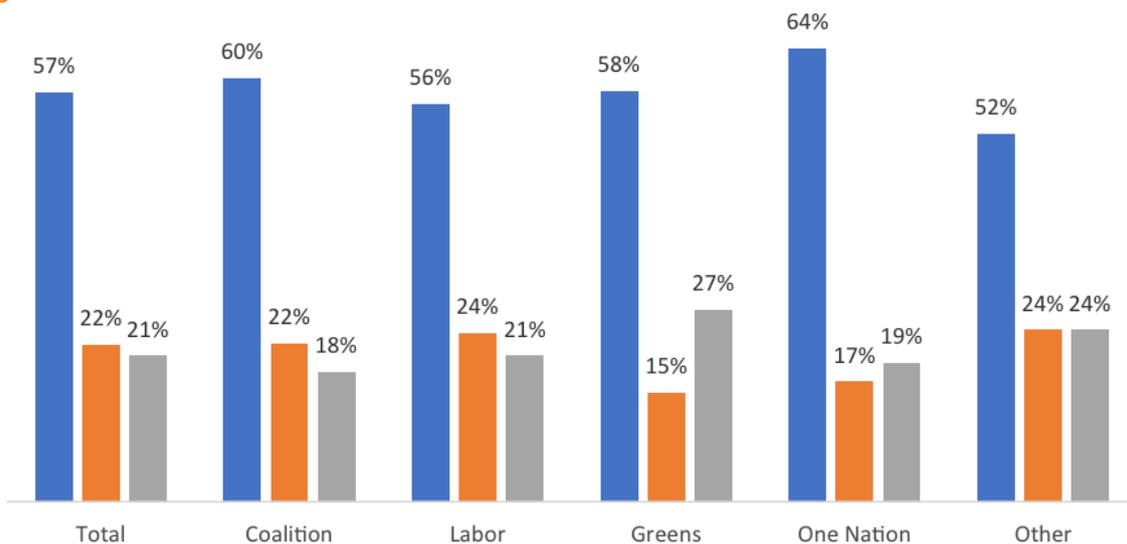
Figure 1. Poll asking the question “The largest online platforms like Facebook have too much power and should be broken up” across age ranges and voting intentions.

■ Total agree ■ Total disagree ■ Don't know / Not sure

Across Age Ranges



Across Voting Intentions



A new public digital infrastructure must be designed for the public good from the outset.

There is existing infrastructure in Australia that a public social network could immediately apply to. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation enjoys high levels of public trust, is independent from the government but is charged with working in the public interest, and has a history of managing technological change in the public interest, with a strong foundation of digital systems to draw from. It is useful then, in imagining what an evolution of a new public network would be, to apply it to a working, functioning organisation which could realistically take up this mantle. Australia's second public broadcaster the Special Broadcasting Service, with its specific focus on serving diverse communities, could also be applicable for this exercise.

The ABC does not need to be the ultimate host to this new platform, and we would welcome any feedback on realistic applications to this concept. However for the purposes of this paper, we will use the ABC as the example to build from.

There are three pillars needed for a public social network that we explore in this paper:

- 1) Communities around existing content
- 2) Community generated content
- 3) Community input into Government

Pillar One: Communities around existing content

The ability to comment, share and discuss on content pages is a common characteristic of social networks. Many websites and publishers have this functionality available. This facility requires three main features:

- 1) Profile management (ideally just one across an entire network) which allows users the ability to create their profile, verify it as their own unique identity, and manage the information in it. A social network also has the ability for users to have a feed or information hub/profile page centred around each user profile, which collates the activity of that user across the network, rather than distributed across content pieces.
- 2) The ability to engage with content (including each other's content): through functions like commenting, 'liking' and sharing across content pieces using a verified profile, including the ability to comment and interact on each distinct user profile pages.
- 3) Provision of a content feed based on user activity but with explicit consent and without unsolicited surveillance.

This is a basic function of interactivity available on many websites. However, at scale, there are issues of moderation, curation and management that can make this task challenging. Moderation is the largest issue, with the governance of content and comments across millions of profiles and content pages prohibitively labour intensive.

Because of these issues and due to internal policy, the ABC has opted to disable the ability to comment and interact across the ABC network, instead choosing to outsource these online community functions in third party social networks like Facebook, where millions of ABC users discuss, interact and share content and conversations relating to ABC programs and properties. Facebook's recent announcement that pages can now disable comments further validates the need for alternative spaces where comments and discussions can be conducted in a managed and moderated way.³⁹

The ability to facilitate and nurture content communities must be a core pillar of a public social network, where instead of keeping the discussions at arms' length in third party platforms, it is instead moderated and facilitated through publicly-owned platforms like their central websites.

³⁹ Taylor (2021), Facebook now lets users and pages turn off comments on their posts, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/mar/31/facebook-turn-off-comments-on-post-limit-restrict-disable-comment-posts-moderation-control-tool>

Pillar Two: Community generated content

Another core pillar of an online community is the ability to volunteer content, or 'User Generated Content' around topics of interest or 'passion communities' – specific groupings gathered around particular interests.

There is a strong foundation for this already within the ABC of open-source communities around Australian local music via Triple J Unearthed where unsigned musicians are able to showcase their work as part of a content library, and supporting regional youth in developing their own stories like Heywire. The decommissioned ABC Open was a very successful UGC community around photography and the arts in regional areas.

There are countless untapped, dormant passion communities that would be easily activated online – around topics of interest like sport, gardening, the arts, faith, and entertainment.

Just as groups can gather around ABC programs and content which interests them, community groups who have shared interests can actively develop content for the ABC/a public social network.

Discussion: Are these the appropriate pillars to build a public social network? Are there any gaps in thinking?

Pillar Three: Community input into Government

Public broadcasting facilitates civic participation by engaging the populace around news and current affairs, including political matters at all levels – local, state and federal. Currently there is passive engagement with audiences where the ABC publishes content for consumption, and the resulting conversation, engagement and discussion are not actively captured and processed in the public interest.

There may be moments of public interest and pressure created by programs (e.g. issues raised by Q&A which feed the weekly news cycle that the government addresses, or The Four Corners investigation into Aged Care, which was the result of community engagement with more than 4,000 submissions received) that become of significant political interest, however these are not necessarily coordinated.

An extension of this facility within a public social network would be to turn this episodic civic engagement into a more active one, with areas of the new platform dedicated towards encouraging and recognising direct feedback on relevant issues which can be provided back to the government as public insights. This could take the form of national surveys, polls, community town halls, specific commissions for community insights and citizen gatherings and juries. An online platform that's actively managed could host virtual forums and online discussion groups specifically around feedback on policy, local matters, elections and other civic initiatives.

Rather than the government paying for specific community consultations, this exercise could be sourced directly from an engaged citizenry captured across this new network. There are building blocks that could be extended like the Australia Talks program which seeks public feedback on specific national concerns.

CONSIDERATIONS IN BUILDING PUBLIC DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

We first explored the idea of a public social network in October 2020 as part of our 'Tech-xit' report.⁴⁰ This was discussed widely and drew significant conversation and debate, both from supporters and critics of the concept.

The main feedback related to several themes, including technical, cultural, operational and political considerations, and specifically in the ABC's ability to meet considerations within these themes. We address these points and propose some solutions, both new and existing.

Technical

Technical features that may be required include:

Identity Management/Universal single sign on with profile management — there is already the facility to log on to an ABC profile (e.g. iview). This feature needs to be standardised and authenticated across the network so that a single profile sign-on can be used network-wide. Profiles should also have individual profile pages which curate user activity and allow other members to comment and interact on those profile pages.

Community features — the ability to comment (as a logged in verified user), share content, and vote is required. This is a standard feature in most live websites today. It requires either an in-house commenting feature, or a vendor/plugin (e.g. Disqus). This is currently disabled at the ABC but can be activated easily.

Machine learning — there are concerns that getting into the algorithm game will inevitably be a bad thing, however any machine learning developed for a public social network would be managed by ABC staff that is accountable to the public. This would use a combination of editorial input, human curation and proprietary software development. The code base can be open source if required or at a minimum be guided by a policy that has been approved and vetted by public officials.

Audience segmentation — using the human managed machine learning audience segmentation will be used to power recommendations and categorise users into topics and interests related to them. Again, this will be constrained only to activity generated within the ABC network, and for which users will have been educated on and actively consented. There is no need for microtargeting because behavior will be contextualised only within content categories, and there is no profit imperative to drive engagement at all costs.

Content Hosting — This can be either a proprietary system or one of many software platforms designed for this purpose like Khoros, Sprout Social, or Hootsuite. These platforms often provide hosting of content, profile features, and interactive features like ranking and voting systems. Already there are instances of these decommissioned platforms within the ABC, and current existing ones, which may just need to be updated to a later version or one which can manage more content uploads.

Discussion: Are there other critical technical features required in running a public social network? What are they?

⁴⁰ Guiao (2020), *Tech-xit: Can Australia survive Google and Facebook?* <https://apo.org.au/node/308928>

Skills Required

To enable community and interactivity features requires two main capabilities – digital specialists and community managers. Software requirements, including the technical features listed above would need a team of product managers, designers, developers, and testing analysts. The ABC currently have digital specialists who would have the skills needed in implementing community features into the network.

The scope of the moderation and community management will need to be fully fleshed out, with rules of engagement clarified, policies updated, and staff acquired or redeployed from other areas. Content moderation is one of the biggest challenges of the open internet and is a persisting issue within commercial social networks. A public social network must be actively managed, so that harmful content and inappropriate behaviour is addressed. Active content moderators and community managers will need to be invested in. The decommissioned ABC Open had over 50 multimedia producers who actively nurtured the community and encouraged the development of art and photography.

There are of course different models of moderation, including Wikipedia, where members and volunteers are empowered to make edits, and at scale, an equilibrium of content and accuracy is achieved. Volunteer or public moderators should also be considered so that the public truly feel that the network is theirs and that they are responsible for it. This tactic is used successfully in networks like Reddit for example, where each subreddit is actively managed by volunteer community moderators. Public moderation tools, like up/downvoting of comments could also assist in managing interactivity at scale.

Discussion: What are the skills required in order to develop a national online network that is dynamic, but maintains civility? Can other models like Wikipedia's volunteer network be adopted?

User Adoption

User adoption is critical in scaling a social network successfully. Users can be notoriously fickle but once a network threshold is achieved, the network effect successfully keeps users and their groups within platforms. Therefore the advantage of building a public social network from an existing organisation like the ABC is a much better way to build a platform than by creating one from scratch.

The ABC already reaches a majority of the Australian population and the ABC News online network is regularly the number one news website in the country.⁴¹ For several days, when Facebook banned news from its platform, the ABC News app became the number one downloaded app in the country.⁴² This demonstrates that the ABC can mobilise the majority of Australians online towards new functions if necessary.

Community and interactivity features like commenting and sharing are considered standard features from other websites and users would not need to be educated on these features.

In the spectrum of social media actions, liking and commenting are the easiest to do, sharing takes a bit more effort, and actively creating content requires the most effort. This is why “creators” often become quasi-public figures as they gather followings and an audience who would prefer to consume, rather than create.⁴³

A community that generates content therefore, requires active stewardship by community managers who nurture and encourage these communities. These active creators would still be already within the ABC audience groups, but may require more active engagement to turn them from consumers to creators, as these functions go online.

User education campaigns would be required for new capabilities – like a distinct user profile/feed, new privacy and data policies, and new government and policy feedback features.

Discussion: What would it take for existing ABC users to use the network in this new way? What would it take for non-ABC users to go to the network for this?

⁴¹ Mediaweek (2021), *ABC News websites continue to top digital news rankings as Nine overtakes news.com.au*, <https://www.mediaweek.com.au/abc-news-websites-continue-to-top-digital-news-rankings-as-nine-over-takes-news-com-au/#:~:text=ABC%20News%20websites%20retained%20the,unique%20audience%20of%2010.4%20million>.

⁴² Campbell (2021), *Australia's ABC News shot to the top of the App Store charts following Facebook's news ban*, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/2/19/22291406/abc-news-app-top-charts-facebook-ban-australia>

⁴³ Bergendorff (2021), *From the attention economy to the creator economy: A paradigm shift*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/claralindhbergendorff/2021/03/12/from-the-attention-economy-to-the-creator-economy-a-paradigm-shift/?sh=2d5c645d7aa7>

Cultural

To date, the ABC has seen itself as a broadcast and news generation outlet. Given the environment of budget cuts, it may seem odd to some internal members to invest more in community roles rather than employ more journalists. This zero-sum mentality is difficult to discourage given the unstable budget environment. But ultimately ABC staff and supporters must overcome limited perceptions of the ABC as just a news generating broadcaster, but more towards a community gathering public service if this project is to succeed.

Some connections can be drawn from initiatives that focus on hyper-local news – which engage with local communities in this way, whether they deliberately intended to or not. The ABC has extensive regional coverage which engages local communities on local issues. Inevitably these local regional staff provides more than just a broadcast service, as they engage with local communities on their issues and topics of concern. There are more recent experiments with hyper-local newsgathering and community engagement – with ABC Radio announcing a ‘pop-up’ local newsrooms in Sydney’s suburb of Liverpool,⁴⁴ focusing on hyper-local stories and issues.

Other internal detractors may also resist this evolution. To date, the ABC Marketing team continues to actively engage Facebook, YouTube and other third parties in outsourcing community engagement online with community features. This betrays a fundamental failure in strategic thinking and risk management, especially as recent events should have clarified the danger of relying on third-party distribution. Millions in taxpayer funded dollars continue to be used to spend advertising on platforms like Facebook, while Facebook continues to undermine the ABC’s capabilities and the public square.⁴⁵

Discussion: Is it too much of a cultural stretch for a broadcast news organisation to think of itself as more of a community service? What’s the best way to ensure the right type of community strategy is enacted internally?

Political/Independence/Governance

From a user perspective, the ABC’s independence and charter is crucial in enabling the idea that a publicly run social network will have the Australian public’s best interest at heart. Clear editorial policies, of which the ABC has and continues to manage meticulously is critical in the ability to moderate and account for the country’s content and communications.

Any editorial decision, including moderation of content, must be backed up with clear editorial policies and relevant staff who actively account for those policies to ensure the public trusts that content is/will be safe, and content decisions are publicly accountable and trustworthy.

Specialist resources who can address privacy and data collection concerns also need to be developed and empowered. It is heartening to see roles like “Privacy and Information Officer” already exist within the ABC who are primarily concerned with the protection of user privacy.

There will also likely be a mixture of opinions about which communities to invest in. Given the ABC’s wide coverage across many genres and categories of interest – for example, across arts, sport, religion, science, technology, music, entertainment, education, etc., there will need to be a considered and transparent process over which communities will be chosen to be developed over others. Ideally, budgetary, and operational capabilities would allow for all material communities of interest to be supported, but likely some will need to be chosen over others.

Similarly, the government/s involved would need to accept the legitimacy of this new capability (especially the input into government pillar) and need education on why it would benefit them to engage with this capability versus their usual way of conducting business. This is essentially an issue of scope in terms of the size and ambition of this capability. It could start as simply more regular and standardised engagement with citizens on national surveys and polls for example, then over time, extend this towards more formal meetings and gatherings like town halls and citizen juries.

⁴⁴ ABC (2021), *Your ABC comes to Liverpool*, <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/sydney/abc-comes-to-liverpool/13259894attention-economy-to-the-creator-economy-a-paradigm-shift/?sh=2d5c645d7aa7>

⁴⁵ Wilson (2020), ABC annual report reveals \$11.8m loss, double previous year’s advertising spend, <https://mumbrella.com.au/abc-annual-report-reveals-11-8m-loss-double-previous-years-advertising-spend-650596>

Cost

It is impossible to discuss evolving the ABC to provide a public social network without addressing issues of cost. The decline of the public square is a critical issue for the government to address, and as an increasing risk to national sovereignty. Whether through the usual communications and media lens, or a more cyber security/national security filter (e.g. the National Cyber Security fund), more funds need to be given towards public broadcasting and resolving our weakening information ecosystem.

There have also been numerous and ongoing attempts at enhancing local public services in the digital world at different levels of government (e.g. NSW department of customer service initiatives), of which this project could qualify.

France's *Tchap*⁴⁶ and Taiwan's *Join*⁴⁷ show how different governments globally are finding new ways of strengthening their digital infrastructure through public funds and managed as public networks.

Others like Ethan Zuckerman have proposed a tax on digital advertising for the Big Tech giants – like Facebook and Google who have contributed to the decline of the public square.⁴⁸ Importantly the idea of making these companies pay for the act of highly surveillant advertising is a concept that should be explored in general. Any funds generated from this tax would make sense to be contributed towards initiatives that rebuild the public square – like this project. Indeed, the tax breaks and loopholes Big Tech companies employ result in them minimising their tax responsibilities in Australia, which should be corrected.⁴⁹

Given the Big Tech platforms' role in undermining the public square, it makes sense that they at least in part be made to pay for an alternative framework.

The ACCC has also recommended a fund specifically to assist public interest journalism as part of their Digital Platform Inquiry.⁵⁰ While this project is not explicitly considered public interest journalism, it facilitates a similar benefit which is a robust public square that helps democracy and civic engagement.

The community consultations and feedback facilitated by this project would also result in significant savings for the government in overhead costs for community consultations, with this platform instead providing a much lower cost online alternative.

Gathering different community groups could likewise result in vendor precincts or organic markets, where vendors pay to access specific communities of interest. Specific groups – whether sports, or arts and culture, could open eligibility for cultural or sporting grants as well as paid activities from external organisations seeking to engage these community areas.

Discussion: What would make this new capability more palatable to various governments? How does the ABC's current Charter help or hinder this concept?

Discussion: What other avenues of funding could be available to fund this project?

⁴⁶ Dussoutour (2020), *French government launches in-house developed messaging service, Tchap*, <https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/collection/open-source-observatory-osor/document/french-government-launches-house-developed-messaging-service-tchap>

⁴⁷ Tang (2019), *Inside Taiwan's new digital democracy*, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/03/12/inside-taiwans-new-digital-democracy>

⁴⁸ Zuckerman (2020), *The Case of digital public infrastructure*, <https://knightcolumbia.org/content/the-case-for-digital-public-infrastructure>

⁴⁹ Mason (2020), *Facebook pays less than \$17m in tax in Australia*, <https://www.afr.com/companies/media-and-marketing/facebook-pays-less-than-17m-in-tax-in-australia-20200531-p54y1z>

⁵⁰ ACCC (2019) *Digital Platforms Inquiry Final Report*, <https://www.accc.gov.au/focus-areas/inquiries-finalised/digital-platforms-inquiry-0/final-report-executive-summary>

Over time the public social network being proposed could become the independent interface between Australians and their communities, and between the public and the government. As the network grows and consolidates, it could become a platform for deeper public interest interactions, anchored in the same Reithian principles that guided the development of public broadcasting nearly a century ago. This reimagining of the public broadcaster to a public network would become a home for a citizen's civic engagement, with a user experience designed to support civility and community.

This will require the evolution of capabilities within the public network.

Public Service Algorithms

In contrast to commercial social media algorithms, which prize engagement at all costs leading to harmful surveillance models, public service algorithms would be designed to promote civility and respectful, fact-based interactions, prizing a diversity of information and diversity of interactions.

This could include:

- News feeds designed to provide a diversity of content, making sure they are from credible and fact-based sources, and representative of a diversity of community members
- News feeds that promote serendipity, discoverability and challenge – promoting a balanced information diet for community members
- In-built fact-checking and information quality controls
- In-built real-time feedback loops and input mechanisms to disrupt possible dark/harmful patterns
- Employ human rights principles and community approved ethical principles into algorithm development
- Complete transparency in the design, code and management of algorithm development
- Management and measures of success based on more qualitative metrics of user education and well-being, and quality of information/ quality of life, rather than reach, speed, traffic and efficiency.

Ethical Network Design

Ethical network design would employ approved human rights principles as building blocks of the entire network (including the public service algorithm). A commitment to ethical network design would ensure no problematic or harmful technology would be employed (e.g. deepfakes, biased artificial intelligence and surveillance platforms like Facebook).

Ethical network design would involve citizens and community members in a participatory manner to co-design key initiatives so that network building is not an isolated exercise and includes representatives of the public.

Ethical network design would provide a balance between seamless and friction within a network, ensuring its members have enough time, and have the right tools to make thoughtful decisions on network interactions (e.g. not encouraging thoughtless sharing and clicking).

Ethical network design could develop engagement features and choice architecture that 'nudge' the public towards beneficial public health outcomes – e.g. towards up to date and accurate information on vaccines during outbreaks, towards emergency and community updates during national disasters, and towards public services that encourage participatory democracy.

Digital Community Building

Just as the real world has community workers to support communities thrive, so too should public digital community builders engage in communities of content to build greater public utility.

This would see an extension of traditional facilitation/moderation roles, to active and targeted briefs to support agreed public priorities, which could include:

- identifying and supporting online community leaders
- integrating online communities with public service delivery initiatives
- curating special interest events – both real world and virtual – to deepen the ties across the network
- and actively nurturing the behavioural standard and conduct of the network.

Digital community building would be the overall aim of the pillars described in earlier sections.

International Consortium

The Dutch Public Spaces Coalition demonstrate how a network of public services can leverage each other's capabilities into a more valuable community service for citizens.

An international consortium of public broadcast networks, all facing similar challenges of digital disruption and all needing to transform their capabilities could collectively evolve their network and develop a coalition to leverage each other's informational and technical resources. Other independent public broadcasters like the British Broadcasting Corporation, The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the Public Broadcasting Service, and National Public Radio have similar heritage and missions, which is to provide services for public and community benefit.

An evolved global public network would strengthen and diversify services and value for citizens. This could have particular regional impacts, for example for small countries that rely on commercial social networks because they have limited resources to invest in their own public network solutions.

Public Interest Journalism

As the public network expands there would be an inevitable tension between the platform as a community service and the provision of content, particularly news and current affairs.

Over time, there may be a case for the structural separation of the two, with the ABC continuing to play an important, though not exclusive role in providing content to the network.

One option would be a model where a statutory body like the Australian Communications and Media Authority determines access for Public Interest Journalism producers to the network. This could be similar to the role they have been given in determining access to the News Media Bargaining Code.

This would allow local regional micro-publishers to access the network providing them with the audience to grow and thrive.

Other specialist news services could also add to the depth of the network, filling gaps the ABC is not able to cover.

A public network would also countenance other commercial news media organisations having access, ensuring there is the diversity of views that will make the public network richer and stronger.

Discussion: What other characteristics and public benefits should be considered in the design of a public network?

Discussion: What should the standards for access to the public network be? What is the appropriate accreditation body?

CONCLUSION



The reimagining of a public square for Australia is urgent. Every year that Facebook embeds itself deeper into civil society and its central role in our information ecosystem is a year where the prospect of an alternative model becomes harder.

A public interest, publicly funded social network is best suited to serve the national interest online, as an alternative to commercial or state-run models.

This paper shows that many of the elements required to build a new public digital infrastructure are already available.

Public broadcasters like the ABC are obvious places to start when exploring the feasibility of building a public social network, with existing infrastructure, systems and, critically, a network of users which can be immediately applied towards this concept.

Investigating requirements across technical, operational, political, and cultural considerations demonstrate that there are big challenges in this undertaking, but they are not insurmountable.

Our public square is too important to be outsourced to a foreign corporation, or to expect our national broadcaster to develop these functions in isolation.

What is now required is a good faith process of co-designing a solution involving decision makers in industry, academia, civil society, government and citizens to develop these ideas.

Other Social Networks over time

Facebook is not unique as a social network that has gained wide popularity. There have been many attempts and many that were extremely popular before Facebook became the household name that it is today. What is unique is that Facebook's model and governance style has seen it dominate and, in many cases, replace other once popular social networks.

It is worth reflecting on what some of those social networks were/are and how they compare. This is not an exhaustive list but gives a solid showcase of some of the most successful social networks of its day, and some with very uniquely different approaches to Facebook.

In imagining a new social network, it's worth reflecting on past and different networks to see if some patterns or lessons can be learned.

Pre-Facebook

Friendster The original modern social network, Friendster shared a similar origin story to Facebook in that it was originally conceived of as something of a dating site. It reportedly signed up 3 million users in its first 3 months. At its peak, Friendster had over 100 million users globally.⁵¹ Its demise was widely believed to have been the result of a failed redesign and persistent technical issues, which saw many users flock to a fledgling Facebook. Friendster famously turned down a \$30m acquisition offer from Google.⁵²

MySpace followed Friendster as the next most popular social platform, with a focus on profile customisation and music. At one stage, MySpace had bigger traffic than Google. News Corporation bought MySpace for \$580 million in 2005 and the site suffered soon after,⁵³ with its custom designs proving too messy as people abandoned it for the sleek, clean interface of Facebook. It was also believed that changing consumer tastes generally contributed to its demise.

Flickr was a pre-smartphone runaway success. It could be considered as the early 00's version of Instagram without the filters and the mobile interface, a photo-sharing site with a creative and visual focus. The site had an engaged and creative userbase, top-notch storage and innovative social tools. As with MySpace, its acquisition by Yahoo in 2005 was the beginning of its downfall.⁵⁴ There were reports that the Flickr team were forced to integrate into the broader Yahoo team systems, and the clash of cultures and priorities saw Flickr being hampered by a slower, bigger company and deprioritised in staffing and systems. Yahoo also clumsily fumbled community management, as broader integration with Yahoo saw a mass forced migration of general Yahoo users that didn't understand the culture and etiquette built up by the Flickr community. Flickr is still technically live today but it's a shadow of its former self.

LinkedIn Many would be surprised to find out that LinkedIn is older than Facebook,⁵⁵ and that it continues to be a success to this day. In Australia LinkedIn is the 7th most popular social platform, boasting a healthy 5.5 million monthly active users.⁵⁶

LinkedIn is a great example of a platform that leads with a specific culture, which permeates the behaviour and audience value of the platform. Because it is used for professional purposes, most people stay well-behaved on LinkedIn, given that content they post could plausibly get them fired from their jobs. This very real, very clear incentive structure has made LinkedIn one of the cleanest and safest platforms today.

Even after Microsoft acquired the platform in 2016,⁵⁷ which has been the death knell of other platforms like MySpace and Flickr, LinkedIn endures, proving that you can maintain a successful platform that doesn't need to devolve into misinformation and bad behaviour.

During their time networks like MySpace and Friendster were the dominant platforms, and it is worth reflecting that Facebook's continued dominance is not a foregone conclusion. Further, older platforms like LinkedIn have shown that catering to a focused niche with a strong culture proves Facebook's one-size-fits-all approach to the entire global online ecosystem is not the only recipe for success.

⁵¹ MIT (2013), *An autopsy of a dead social network*, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2013/02/27/253657/an-autopsy-of-a-dead-social-network/>

⁵² McMillan (2013), *The Friendster Autopsy: How a social network dies*, <https://www.wired.com/2013/02/friendster-autopsy/>

⁵³ Chokshi (2019), *MySpace, once the king of social networks, lost years of data from its heyday*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/business/myspace-user-data.html>

⁵⁴ Honan (2012), *How Yahoo killed Flickr and lost the internet*, <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2012/05/how-yahoo-killed-flickr-and-lost-the-internet/>

⁵⁵ Lee (2009), *LinkedIn's startup story: Connecting the business world*, https://money.cnn.com/2009/06/02/small-business/linkedin_startup_story.smb/index.htm

⁵⁶ Social Media News (2020), *Social Media Statistics Australia - January 2020*, <https://www.socialmedianews.com.au/social-media-statistics-australia-january-2020/>

⁵⁷ Feller (2016), *This is the real reason Microsoft bought LinkedIn*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/grantfeller/2016/06/14/this-is-the-real-reason-microsoft-bought-linkedin/?sh=77926b60f04a>

Post-Facebook

Path was founded by an ex-Facebook product manager and ex-Napster staff. Its unique proposition was that it restricted your friends list to only 50 people, although this was later increased. It was a solid alternative to Facebook's loose and unlimited 'friend' connections. It peaked at around 50 million users with a valuation of half a billion. Google, the uber-acquirer, tried to buy it for \$100 million. Path was of course noticed by Facebook, and applied its trademark of aggressively plagiarising features from competitors, which saw Path start to lose differentiation. Path ultimately closed down in 2018.⁵⁸

YikYak enjoyed viral success across university campuses around 2013/14, as it focused on the young student population with active campus recruiters and promoters. Like Facebook, it was originated as a network for university students, but unlike Facebook, it never broadened outside of that group. Its unique proposition was that it was anonymous, presenting a kind of collective confessional and group therapy platform for angst-ridden and stressed out university students. This premise was too weak to sustain, as the anonymity gave way to bullying and toxicity, and the concentrated nature of the audience was not able to scale further.⁵⁹

Ello was an early innovator of a more privacy focused social network in 2014. Ello was an invite-only platform that encouraged a community of creatives. It was minimalist and stylish, more like an Instagram alternative than a direct Facebook competitor. As Facebook started getting embroiled in surveillance and privacy scandals, Ello capitalised on this and generated a flurry of user migration, generating peak sign-ups of about 45k per hour and about 4.5 million users.⁶⁰ Ello is still technically live but has not been able to maintain consistent engagement from users or further growth.

Diaspora is a technical social platform that prizes decentralisation. User data isn't centrally collated but instead distributed by the users themselves through pods, which effectively functions as distinct

servers. Diaspora only has about 750,000 users but has found a fanbase in a more tech-savvy group who wants to take back control of their data through their own managed networks.⁶¹

Mastodon is purported to be a "nicer version of Twitter".⁶² It is unlikely to generate a huge audience, given its distinct platform design, but is a unique experiment in large scale, open source and distributed social networks. It is a significant attempt at trying to build a different type of social platform. There are no fees, ads or data mining, and there are powerful privacy tools and unique designs in the platform. It would be intimidating for many new users with no handholding or induction of any kind. One of Mastodon's distinct qualities is that its codebase is open-source and distributed.

NextDoor takes the idea that the closer your online identity is to your offline identity, the more you will behave and get value out of that experience. Using your physical home address as the unique profile identifier, it is a hyper local social network designed for you and your immediate neighbours who share your physical address. This level of identification is unique in the social platform world, where there are still many levels of anonymity allowed. Nextdoor incentivises good behaviour by exposing you to your neighbourhood, and so you know that the people you're interacting with are your real life neighbours. While there has been some controversy in the US with racial profiling,⁶³ the Australian version found new success during the pandemic, as forced lockdowns made people retreat and find solace in trying to replicate a local community environment online.⁶⁴

Like LinkedIn, Nextdoor forces a certain culture and etiquette in the platform by insisting on real world impacts and verification of user identities.

WT.Social Wikipedia is widely touted as a successful example of an open web platform with a unique culture that does not invade user privacy and is designed for the common good. WT.Social is Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales' attempt at an alternative news feed platform that does not generate disinformation and conspiracy theories.⁶⁵ It is still a relatively new platform with a very limited

⁵⁸ Russell (2018) *Mobile social network Path, once a challenger to Facebook, is closing down*, <https://techcrunch.com/2018/09/17/rip-path/>

⁵⁹ Mannes (2016), *Fading anonymous social network Yik Yak is laying off most of its employees*, <https://techcrunch.com/2016/12/08/fading-anonymous-social-network-yik-yak-is-reportedly-laying-off-most-of-its-employees/>

⁶⁰ Hughes (2017), *Remember Ello? It didn't go anywhere*, <https://thenextweb.com/socialmedia/2017/11/21/remember-ello-it-didnt-go-anywhere/>

⁶¹ Bielenberg et. al. (2012), *The growth of Diaspora - A decentralized online social network in the wild*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254031130_The_growth_of_Diaspora_-_A_decentralized_online_social_network_in_the_wild

⁶² Robertson (2019), *How the biggest decentralized social network is dealing with its Nazi problem*, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/12/20691957/mastodon-decentralized-social-network-gab-migration-fediverse-app-blocking>

⁶³ Simon (2018), *How Nextdoor addressed racial profiling on its platform*, <https://hbr.org/2018/05/how-nextdoor-addressed-racial-profiling-on-its-platform>

⁶⁴ Lee (2020), *Nextdoor allows business to reach out about pandemic relief efforts*, <https://au.news.yahoo.com/2020-04-01-nextdoor-business-coronavirus-relief.html>

⁶⁵ Bacon (2019), *WT.Social is interesting, but can it work? Well. Maybe*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonobacon/2019/11/18/wtsocial-is-interesting-but-can-it-work-well-maybe/?sh=299ba5804790>

invite rollout on release in 2019. Wales appears to be taking his time with the overall development of the platform, not interested in rapid scale and growth. It is an interesting response to Facebook's approach of growth at all costs which has resulted in a problematic information ecosystem.

These alternative social networks have been born out of a desire to offer something different from Facebook, and to attempt alternative operational and business models.

There is no doubt that Facebook's ruthless plagiarism of competitor features, and laser focus on growth and engagement have made them dominant, but this has also come at the (too-high) cost of disinformation, privacy breaches and more.

What these other social networks demonstrate is that starting a social network from scratch is met with mixed success, but that alternatives are possible and niche products with specific communities can be valuable additions.

International

It is also worth looking at some International examples of social networks. After all, the world is a very diverse place with different communities and cultures. Part of Facebook's failure is that it tries to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to the world's diverse communities. International social networks can show whether Facebook's dominance is consistent globally and whether other countries have found different ways of operating online.

China

Weibo Considered China's version of Twitter, Weibo is used by approximately a third of Chinese Internet users.⁶⁶ It is popular with Chinese celebrities and public figures, however cooperates with the Chinese government's policy of internet censorship. Weibo blacklists specific keywords and reportedly employs staff who constantly monitor the platform to comply with censorship regulations.⁶⁷

RenRen is China's version of Facebook, with a high-profile IPO in 2011. However the smartphone revolution saw RenRen start to fall out of favour among younger users who flocked to the microblog Weibo and other mobile apps like WeChat. Its users peaked at about 57 million in 2013.

Russia

Vkontakte is considered an overt Facebook clone, with many of the same features as Facebook. However, it beats Facebook by market share in Russia, capturing about 54% of online Russians. Vkontakte allows streaming of music and movies, therefore capturing a very high engagement rate from users consuming media. Vkontakte founder Pavel Durov was once involved in a high-stakes battle with the Kremlin which requested personal data of specific users involved in Ukrainian related protests.⁶⁸ The platform continues to struggle with the overall Russian policy of state-run surveillance and censorship.

Latin America

Taringa is an Argentine social network mostly focused on link sharing. It commands about 27 million users across Spanish speaking countries like Argentina, Spain, Colombia and Chile.⁶⁹ At its peak it was second only to Facebook in its region, but has since seen a dramatic decline in user traffic.

Japan

Mixi was one of Japan's most popular social networks. However its strategy of focusing on local Japanese citizens (it requires a Japanese mobile number to activate, and it's only in-language) saw it get overtaken by global Western networks like Facebook and Twitter.⁷⁰ Mixi continues to operate with a loyal local user base despite its top spot being overtaken.

South Korea

Cyworld was South Korea's most popular social platform once boasting approximately 32 million users at its peak. It struggled to maintain users as smartphones became a more popular way of accessing social networks than desktop. Cyworld had a significant influence over South Korea's popular culture, with many profiles becoming important editorial and curation points for celebrities and public figures. Cyworld has declined mostly due to Facebook and other Western social network's dominance.⁷¹

There have been other international social networks that were once hugely popular that have now been

⁶⁶ Statista (2021), *Number of daily active users of Sina Weibo in China from 4th quarter 2017 to 3rd quarter 2021*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1058070/china-sina-weibo-dau/>

⁶⁷ Feng (2020), *Can 'China's Facebook' win back its millennial users with nostalgia?* <https://www.techinasia.com/renren-win-millennial-users>

⁶⁸ Myles-Primakoff & Sherman (2020), *Russia's Internet freedom shrinks as Kremlin seizes control of homegrown tech*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/26/russia-internet-freedom-kremlin-tech/>

⁶⁹ Smith (2019), *Top international social networks you didn't know existed*, <https://www.intechnic.com/blog/top-international-social-networks-you-didnt-know-existed/>

⁷⁰ Kashiwagi (2009), *Mixi faces challenges as competition grows*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2009/06/24/digital/mixi-faces-challenges-as-competition-grows/>

⁷¹ Byung-yeul (2019), *Cyworld faces business shutdown*, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2019/10/133_277039.html

discontinued, like Orkut, and many listed that have declined significantly in user numbers.

Notably, international networks with specific in-language features have declined significantly in favour of Western platforms that have improved their in-language capabilities.

There is correlation between the dominance of Facebook and a decline in more niche and geographically-centred networks.

It would not be spurious to argue that as monopoly companies like Google and Facebook retain and increase their growth, more diverse and distributed networks globally faced a decline, curbing the overall diversity and dynamic nature of the social media industry.

Attempts at public digital infrastructure

There has been an interesting mixture of past and present social networks that either preceded Facebook or are trying to develop different ways of engaging online. These have largely been commercial, private networks.

There are a small number of players who have attempted public/non-profit community-based networks that were explicitly designed to be for the public good and they are worth considering.

In the US, Vermont based Front Porch Forum is essentially an actively moderated local email list centred around local community issues and discussions.⁷² It is akin to a 'listserv' - pre-Web 2.0 networks that were commonplace before the commercial social networks of today took over. It has been slowly and carefully managed over the last 20 years (eons in Internet time) with some very tightly managed rules of engagement, and an actively controlled culture. Even so, the majority of residents use and enjoy the forum to this day.

In Taiwan, digital minister Audrey Tang took inspiration from citizen hacktivists and put online collaboration at the core of its digital governance. Taiwan is a country with a history of authoritarian power, and so giving voice to its citizens in an online platform is a truly democratic system of participation. The official national online platform, called Join has over four million citizens participating and is a central platform to discuss official government policy.⁷³ It is used to harvest feedback from citizens, and organise collaborative meetings where stakeholders are asked to find solutions to policy and local issues. Where the Join platform is run by the government, a citizen run platform, called vTaiwan (virtual Taiwan) focuses on grass roots citizen engagement, with debates on the platform influencing real world policy like the legal status of Uber in the country.⁷⁴ At a time when the public square is being threatened in developed democracies, new democracies like Taiwan are paving the way in rethinking governance with a digital system at its core, empowering new ways of civic and public engagement.

It is not just communities that have begun to over-rely on Facebook either, increasingly government and public services are using infrastructure from Big Tech companies like Facebook, Google and Amazon to reach citizens and as platforms for governance. A desire for a secure, encrypted communication tool that was only available to French government agents led to the French messaging app called Tchap.⁷⁵ The French have a history of encouraging open source software as part of public policy and public service development. Tchap is restricted to French officials but is built using open source code available to the public. This approach was designed to be cost efficient, with secure systems managed within France (and not overseas), and transparent code not built as a private proprietary solution. By March 2020, Tchap had approximately 80,000 daily active users, making it one of the world's largest deployments of a collaboration tool.⁷⁶

⁷² Liptak (2019), *How a Vermont social network became a model for online communities*, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/1/24/18129437/front-porch-forum-vermont-social-network-listserv-local-online-community>

⁷³ Tang (2019), *Inside Taiwan's new digital democracy*, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2019/03/12/inside-taiwans-new-digital-democracy>

⁷⁴ Miller (2020), *How Taiwan's 'civic hackers' helped find a new way to run the country*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/27/taiwan-civic-hackers-polis-consensus-social-media-platform>

⁷⁵ New Statesman blog (2020), *Inside the French government's mission to develop an encrypted messaging platform*, <https://tech.newstatesman.com/in-partnership-with-element/inside-the-french-governments-mission-to-develop-an-encrypted-messaging-platform>

⁷⁶ Dussutour (2020), *French government launches in-house developed messaging service, Tchap*, <https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/collection/open-source-observatory-osor/document/french-government-launches-house-developed-messaging-service-tchap>

Amsterdam-based Public Spaces Coalition is a network of public broadcasters, filmmakers and the Dutch arm of Wikimedia on an ambitious project to enable community discussion and engagement using open source technology with a public model. Their mission is to provide “an alternative software ecosystem that serves the common interest and does not seek profit”.⁷⁷ The coalition defines its contribution as a “component provider”⁷⁸ — providing online functions like user accounts as an alternative to Google and Facebook logins, content rating systems, and content management systems. The aim is to make the services provided by coalition members available as open source services to the Dutch public. It plays on the network effect which has captured audiences of Facebook by allowing a local alternative of connected public providers.

Majal is an Arabic social network that fulfilled the heady promise Facebook and other platforms have claimed over the years – that is, Majal has successfully connected and empowered marginalised communities. Based in the Middle East and Africa Majal members include Kurdish civic groups, women and the queer community. In a region that’s highly surveilled and persecuted, Majal allows anonymity, security and a platform to connect and organise, focusing on “amplifying voices of dissent” throughout the region.⁷⁹

This diverse group of examples demonstrate global attempts at reimagining the public square that’s dominated by Western, for-profit surveillance models.

There are examples of niche hyper-local groups, official government platforms and tools, and a network of public service providers which show a breadth of thinking and different interpretations of what it means to engage citizens online.

Reflecting on past social networks, current alternatives and new examples of public digital infrastructure help us realise that there are opportunities in reimagining the public square, and the idea of public digital infrastructure is being thought of globally in different ways.

⁷⁷ PublicSpaces (2021), *Manifesto*, <https://publicspaces.net/manifesto/>

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Migne (2019), *Majal: Giving voices to minorities*, <https://the-inkline.com/2019/02/02/majal-giving-a-voice-to-minorities/>

