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To Mend a Broken Internet, Create Online Parks

We need public spaces, built in the spirit of Walt Whitman, that allow us to gather, communicate, and share in something bigger than ourselves.



ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

AS WE HEAD into the most consequential, contentious election in our history, it's time to fix some of the structural problems that led us to this moment.

Let's face it: Our digital public sphere has been failing for some time. Technologies designed to connect us have instead inflamed our arguments and torn our social fabric.

It doesn't have to be this way. History offers a proven template for how to build healthier public spaces. As wild as it sounds, part of the solution is no further than your nearest public park.

WIRED OPINION

ABOUT

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For my family, that's Fort Greene Park, a 30-acre square of elm trees, winding paths, playgrounds, and monuments in Brooklyn. The park serves as an early-morning romper room, midday meeting point, festival ground, and farm stand. There are house-music dance parties, soccer games during which you can hear cursing in at least five languages, and, of course, the world-famous Great Pupkin Halloween Dog Costume Contest. In short, the park allows very different people to gather, see each other, and coexist in the same space. When it's all working, Fort Greene Park can feel like an ode to pluralistic democracy itself.

That's not a coincidence—it's by design. In 1846, Walt Whitman envisioned Fort Greene Park to serve this precise purpose. New York City had no public parks at the time—only walled commercial pleasure gardens for those who could afford to enter. Whitman, then an up-and-coming newspaper editor, used the *Brooklyn Eagle's* front page to advocate for a space that would accommodate everyone, especially the working-class immigrants crowded into shanty towns along nearby Myrtle Avenue.

Whitman saw public spaces as critical elements of the new American democracy. They were spaces to celebrate individuality *and* build collective identity. Public parks, he argued, could help weave a greater, more egalitarian “we.”

In Fort Greene Park, this project—the building of a collective identity, the weaving of a social fabric—is ongoing. That the park was the rallying point for one of New York's first major Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder is not incidental. Conflict and contestation are important parts of how healthy democracies progress, as long as there are structures that facilitate it. Functional public spaces are central to this work. They allow us to assemble, to share common experiences, and to demonstrate that what might have seemed like individual struggles are actually the result of unjust systems that demand correction.

Now, accelerated by the pandemic, we spend much of our time living and conversing with others in a different location: digital space. But social media and messaging platforms weren't designed to serve as public spaces. They were designed to monetize attention.

MUCH OF OUR communal life now unfolds in digital spaces that *feel* public but are not. When technologists refer to platforms like Facebook and Twitter as “walled gardens”—environments where the corporate owner has total control—they're literally referring to those same private pleasure gardens that Whitman was reacting to. And while Facebook and Twitter may be open to all, as in those gardens, their owners determine the rules.

Venture-backed platforms make poor quasi-public spaces for three reasons.

First, as the legendary venture capitalist Paul Graham put it, “startups = growth.” The focus on growth—of users, of time spent, and then of revenue—is the defining trait that has made Facebook a \$750 billion company. And the key to rapid growth is optimization to create a “frictionless” experience: The more relevant the content you see, the likelier you are to click, return to Facebook, and bring your friends.

But friction is essential to public space. Public spaces are so generative precisely because we run into people we’d normally avoid, encounter events we’d never expect, and have to negotiate with other groups that have their own needs. The social connections that run-ins create, social scientists tell us, are critical in binding communities together across lines of difference. Building a healthy community requires the careful generation of this thick web of social ties. Rapid growth can quickly overwhelm and destroy it—as anyone who has lived in a gentrifying neighborhood knows.

Second, “blitz-scaling”—explosive, aggressive growth—generally requires command-and-control leaders who make fast decisions. Once the territory is conquered, blitz-scaling commanders naturally become Boy Emperors with huge blind spots. One of the reasons Twitter, for example, has been a hostile space for women and people of color for so long is that the company’s white male decisionmakers simply don’t get harassed in the same way. A world with a “public square” designed by a small group of white dudes of a certain age is not going to serve everyone equally or well. (This is why other empires have, historically, not worked out very well either.)

Great public spaces are owned by everyone and therefore ought to be designed for everyone. Community board meetings and governance processes can be slow, annoying, and *very* frictional. But—when they’re working properly—they force designers to contend with and listen to the communities they ostensibly serve.

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The third and biggest problem with private ownership of quasi-public space is that public spaces require constant, active care and maintenance by skillful stewards. Scholars like Sarah Roberts have pointed out that the nuanced labor of governance and maintenance—finding the balance between welcoming everyone and providing safety and comfort for everyone—is critical to the health of online communities.

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Any librarian can tell you that running a space that is truly welcoming to everyone is difficult and messy under the best of circumstances. Libraries would fail without librarians who are experts at diffusing tensions while serving a clientele that can range from young families to people with serious mental health vulnerabilities. And what librarians are to libraries, moderators and editors are to the realm of public ideas and discourse: balancers of freedom, inclusion, and safety.

But while this work is essential, it’s also both undervalued and costly. As [the Maintainers](#) have argued, building shiny new edifices tends to be seen as a masculine pursuit and lionized, whereas the work needed to keep spaces functional and

livable over time is often seen as boring, feminine, and, as a result, uncompensated and sidelined. The cost of this labor also doesn't scale the way techies like; the more people in a space, the more labor is required, and the greater the expense.

Private spaces and businesses are critical for a flourishing digital life, just as cafés, bars, and bookstores are critical for a flourishing urban life. But no communities have ever survived and grown with private entities alone. Just as bookstores will never serve all the same community needs as a public library branch, it's unreasonable to expect for-profit corporations built with "addressable markets" in mind to accommodate every digital need.

Alongside and between the digital corporate empires, we need what scholars like Ethan Zuckerman are calling "digital public infrastructure." We need parks, libraries, and truly public squares on the internet.

TO BUILD THE thriving digital public spaces we need, we must address three surmountable challenges.

First: money. While the internet started out as a publicly supported network, digital spaces in the last 20 years have been mostly funded by venture capitalists who are looking for enormous returns on investment. Scaling a product so that millions of people know about it and can use it fluidly can cost billions.

While a multibillion-dollar price tag seems massive, we implicitly value our physical public infrastructure at many times that. Central Park's land value alone is, by one calculation, \$37 trillion. (That's more than 50 Facebooks, if you're keeping score.)

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History suggests that a guilty-but-loaded tech mogul could step up and solve the funding problem, becoming the Andrew Carnegie of the 21st century. But philanthropic money often comes with strings attached. That's why it's worth investing in the more radical notion recently proposed by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' report on American citizenship. The Academy suggests taxing targeted advertising and using those funds to shore up democratic functions that the big tech platforms have eroded, such as local journalism. Public digital infrastructure could also be funded in this way.

Second, there's a talent and research problem. People outside of tech generally underestimate how hard it is to build something seamless, intuitive, and irresistible that allows millions of people to interact. We need to rally a diverse, representative generation of builders to this cause. And given that digital products live and die by metrics, we need to identify signals that correspond to flourishing public digital spaces.



Finally, there's a problem of public imagination. Fixing our ability to connect and build healthy communities at scale is arguably an Apollo mission for this generation—a decisive challenge that will determine whether our society progresses or falls back into conspiracy-driven tribalism. We need to summon the creative will worthy of a problem of this urgency and consequence.

We have tackled problems of this magnitude before. The public park is only one of many institutions that was created to enact America's egalitarian values. At the turn of the 20th century, public libraries opened nationwide to help foster literacy. In the 1910s, a few communities in the Midwest embraced the radical notion of free, universal secondary education: high school.

In times like these, it's hard to remember that, together, we can do big things. With imagination and will, we can build spaces where we flourish together. After all, we've done it before.

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