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Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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What we're thinking about

There is just so. much. going. on.

Elections. Elon. Big Tech layoffs. New platforms. Dancing politicians on TikTok.

How do you keep up? You can't (and that's part of the problem), but we sat down with [Eli Pariser](#), Co-Director of [New Public](#), an Unfinished Network Partner, to help us understand the current reality and future of digital public spaces. Eli is a wise, clairvoyant voice in our moment when the tectonic plates beneath our technology and our democracy are shifting.

This interview has been gently edited for length and clarity.

New_ Public talks about “digital urban planning.”

How can we apply urban planning to digital spaces?

Urban planning is not an exact science, and we haven't figured out physical cities perfectly yet. But there is a wealth of knowledge about how humans co-occupy space in public that we can draw from to inform how we think about digital spaces. In the design of cities and towns, it's clear that we have a rich mix of public and private spaces and institutions. Coffee houses, restaurants, and bookstores are important, but so are libraries, parks, and schools. When we have all of those spaces working together, we have a place that coheres and serves a community and everyone in it. The problem is digitally, we are over-indexing on the for-profit side of things.

As digital urban planners, how do we increase inclusion and participation in our digital spaces?

If a one-on-one, intimate Facetime call is on one side of a spectrum of human connection and scale, and the passively consumed mass media of a TikTok platform is on the other side of that spectrum, then we can map different social spaces along that continuum. Generally, my bias is that social media environments where people are incentivized to passively-consume things that other people have said are bad for people and societies. How do we move people along that spectrum back towards spaces where they feel comfortable and able to participate? This is a question of scale: it's hard to have a million people talking to a million people, but it's easier for eight people to be talking to each other. Mastodon, a decentralized platform that many Twitter users are migrating to, is interesting because it is creating a federation structure of smaller platforms that solves this problem, while not fully sacrificing scale.

You wrote in WIRED recently about the move to smaller, more governable public spaces like DAOs and Discord channels. How are these better?

I've learned from my political science friends that belief in democracy doesn't come from a civics class. It never really has. It comes from participating in some kind of space. It doesn't have to be voting; it can be a part of a membership organization or a union. When you get together with other people and come up with an idea and you do it, you feel some sense of power and agency. This is the experiential onramp to democracy. If you want to maintain a democratic culture, then you need to find a way to do that. Originally, social media seemed like it was going to offer that because on the surface it does offer the ability to speak. But it doesn't offer the feeling of influence or power because everyone is speaking into the void or to everyone else, all at once. I think we will look back at this era of social media (which I believe is coming to a close), and be almost amused in a sad way that we ever thought that one kind of algorithm or design pattern could fit billions of people across the world. When you scale down, then you can create some real sense of governance, and then you can begin to think about how to link those platforms together.

If our current platforms aren't good examples of digital public squares, then what are? Do they exist yet?

We don't have perfect examples yet, but we have some of the pieces coming into view. We can think about it in three ways: incentives, technical architecture, and social/community infrastructure.

Incentives: There are glimmers of what public conversations can look like when they're not run by engagement-maximizing, advertising-driven companies. It's useful to illustrate what you can do when you're not trying to optimize for engagement. If you're only going to publish once a day, then the quantity of posts goes down, but the quality goes up. This creates different opportunities to moderate. If you don't have to moderate in real time, all the time, then that's a very different kind of task. For example, in Vermont you have [Front Porch Forum](#), a space for public conversation at a local level that is high quality and well-utilized across urban-rural and class divides.

Technical architecture: You have the emergence of Mastodon and other open-source protocol-driven spaces like [Project Liberty](#) that are trying to envision the technical architecture on which to build these spaces. We are in a moment where there is a need for massive experimentation in technical infrastructure, and Project Liberty could open up an opportunity for further experimentation.

Community or social infrastructure: As soon as you get into a digital space (whether it's Discord or Facebook or Mastodon or some new platform yet to be developed), then a number of questions emerge about how we want to govern ourselves. We will need processes and tools and people to answer these questions, and all of this is being experimented with, as well.

Can you share more of what you're working on at New_Public?

What we are trying to do with New_Public is learn together about what digital spaces can be. We are actively thinking about how to build prototypes that demonstrate the promise of what digital public spaces look like, and we're looking for collaborators. The best way to follow along is with our [newsletter](#). Plus, they're [hiring](#)!




Other notable headlines





How Political Campaigns Use Your Phone's Location to Target You:

It's no secret that political campaigns have leveraged voter data about where voters get their news, how much money they make, and how they've voted in the past to sharpen their campaigning strategies. But increasingly, according to [The Markup](#), political campaigns are tracking our very movements by harnessing our phone's location to better capture our attention. Political operators have used this technology to target people based on church

attendance, visits to specific government buildings, and even the captive audiences in line to vote on election day. Political tracking firms are also able to circumvent privacy controls on smartphones by using tracking from the device's web browser to pinpoint a voter's location.

 In the lead up to the 2020 election, **a group of donors came together and pledged \$100 million over the next decade to fight polarization** by forging deep personal connections between people across lines of difference. According to [The New York Times](#), the donors called themselves the **New Pluralists**, and their vision is nothing short of shaping American culture by focusing on the idea of pluralism (their website says, "To become a politically vibrant, multi-racial, multi-faith democracy, we must renew the promise of pluralism in America by ushering in a new pluralism"). This past summer, they released a request for grant proposals, and they received over 800 submissions.

 **Politicians are recognizing that they need to become content creators on platforms like TikTok to resonate with younger voters.** [The Verge](#) reports how the short-form video format popularized by TikTok has pushed politicians to be more organic and authentic than the traditional social media advertising playbook. Politicians like Pennsylvania's senator-elect John Fetterman have depended on Gen Z staffers in their campaigns to run their TikTok accounts, elevating them to TikTok stardom.

 **How Online Mobs Act Like Flocks of Birds:** The term "murmuration" refers to the ways a flock of birds gathers and undulates in the sky, veering upward and then to the side. In a murmuration, a bird is responding to the movements of the seven birds closest to it, and it responds accordingly. A flock of birds moves and turns without any top-down direction, instead being propelled by the behavior of the network. According to [Noema Magazine](#), new research is finding that human behavior on online social media platforms behaves strikingly similarly to murmurations of birds or schools of fish: the behavior of the people in our feed shapes our own individual behavior, which then shapes the behavior of those around us, and ultimately shapes the behavior of the entire network.

Unfinished Network Partner News

[History Communications Institute](#), an Unfinished Network Partner, has published a [first-of-its-kind report](#) that looks at how TikTok is shaping how we learn history.

The [Center for Humane Technology](#) has launched a free, self-paced [course](#) on the core tenets of how to build humane tech (tech background not required -- this is designed for researchers, academics, students, and more).

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#) on Twitter and [@thisisunfinished](#) on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

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