

Pluralism in Digital Communities

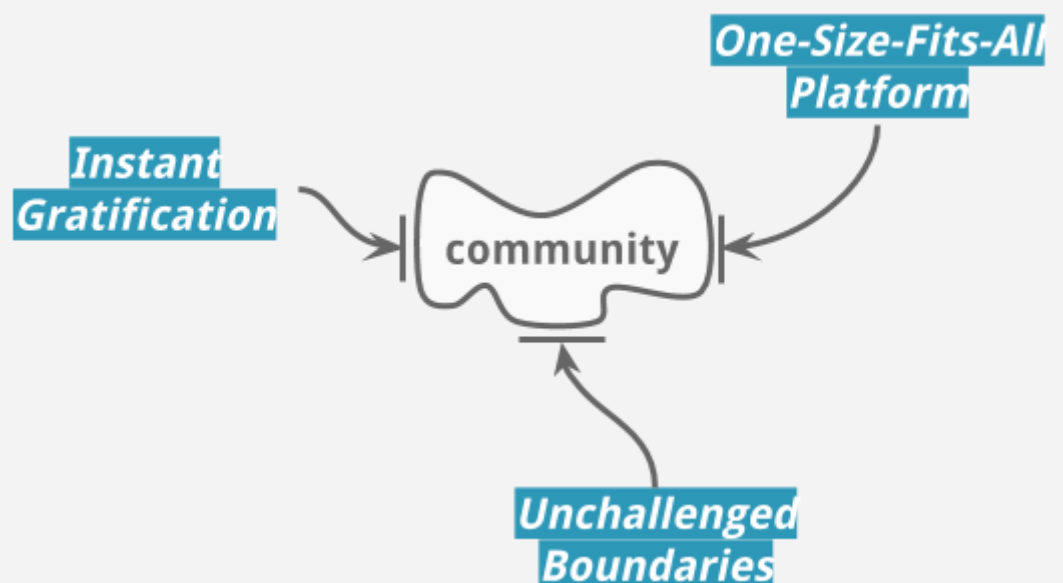
November 2018 Report

Interviews and Analysis

Participants: Emily Bitze, Jessa Lingel, Geert Lovink, Karl Schroeder, Alexandra Stiver, Clare Sullivan, Violette Suquet

Introduction by Christophe Bruchansky & Shane Saunderson

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a plural
world**

Pluralism in Digital Communities

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Introduction

**by Christophe Bruchansky
& Shane Saunderson**

Social media is undergoing an existential crisis. It was generally thought that social media platforms would promote a more open, pluralistic society, where everybody could freely express their opinions and build their own communities. But the same platforms, from Facebook to, on a lesser scale, Twitter and YouTube, are now accused of exacerbating fear of the other, promoting extremes, and disinformation. These concerns can only accelerate a trend among some groups and communities to distance themselves from social media, use more traditional forms of communication, such as newsletters and direct messaging, and reinvest in analogue community activities.

With the increase of personal data breaches, the rise of fake news and, equally worryingly, AI assisted censorship occurring on social media

platforms, it seemed to us appropriate to ask the question: is social media really the future of digital communities? And if not, what factors are preventing digital communities from flourishing in all their diversity?

For this report, we have interviewed experts in a wide range of digital communities - social media, the sharing economy, civic social networks - and asked them what their impact is on individual choices and, more globally, pluralism. Our interviewees are researchers, activists and entrepreneurs deeply involved in digital communities. Some of these communities are fairly well established, such as crowdfunding communities and those running on social media, while others are still emerging, such as e-nations and blockchain communities. By drawing on such a diverse panel, our aim is to allow the reader to grasp the multi-faceted role of digital communities in society, and their wider impact on individual choices.

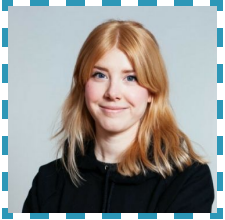
To help frame our investigation, we broadly define a community as “the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common”^[1]; location can define a community, as can shared ownership or political views and similar lifestyles. We define digital as “using or relating to digital signals and computer technology”^[2].

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Interviews

Emily Bitze



**Founder of Bunz,
Canada**

Shane Saunderson: How do you define Bunz in terms of the sharing economy movement?

Emily Blitz: Bunz is a digital community that facilitates and encourages in person meet ups for the purpose of exchanging of items one no longer wants to acquire something they need. Objects and services are used as an alternative to currency.

Shane: What was your intention in founding Bunz, vis-a- vis the creation of a community, digital or otherwise?

EB: My intention was to find a way to acquire things I needed without having to spend money. It was also my intention to reduce the amount of items that people considered throwing out and ultimately ending up in our landfills. The purpose of the Bunz App was to help legitimize the trading economy, help facilitate exchanges and encourage reuse and recycle behaviour while creating community in the city. Bunz is as much about connecting people as it is about exchanging goods.

Shane: What choices have sharing platforms such as Bunz enabled for digital communities that might have been impossible otherwise

without certain technologies?

EB: It's helped give people a choice when throwing something away. That they could get something in return for it. Being a digital platform we could allow individuals to choose who they want to meet up judging by the person's profile and reviews. They can also choose to give feedback and be held accountable for their behaviour as well. In analogue communities, you can't rate your interaction with somebody. It also gives Bunz as a company the choice to introduce new ideas that don't exist yet with the technology we build.

Shane: Why are these choices important and what has Bunz brought to people's lives?

EB: These choices are important because people need to know they have alternatives. Most of the sharing platforms are all looking for ways to help people get what they need in a non traditional way. From a community standpoint it's important for people to feel like they belong to something, have a support system. In a time when so much value is put on a person's digital presence Bunz has brought meaningful in person interactions to people who may not have always been open to meeting a stranger.

Shane: What choices have the sharing economy potentially taken away, or do analogue communities have that may not be available in digital communities?

EB: With a lot of digital sharing platforms there is a focus on efficiency, everything faster, easier, better. So in those cases it can eliminate the choice to actually engage with somebody. In digital communities that don't include an in person encounter there can often be a lack of

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accountability and commitment. As the internet becomes a more integral part of our lives it can also remove choices for people who don't want to engage digitally and have to conform somehow to get the things they need or want. Most of us now have to consider ourselves digitally and that can change the way we understand ourselves and our interactions with others. analogue communities give people a sense of realness that is not present digitally.

Shane: How might future technological developments and the evolution of digital communities change the aforementioned choices and restrictions?

EB: Technology can empower communities by connecting people in new and meaningful ways - a very current example of this is what's happening with cryptocurrencies and decentralization. There are so many ways new technology can change how we connect with each other. In the case of decentralization and crypto currencies, the technology can be used to dis-intermediate large monopolies that profit from communities and pass that benefit back to the people who use the system - that's a powerful idea which can benefit everyone and would be inline with the ethos of Bunz, but it's just one example of many. My opinion is that it's prudent that as we leverage new technologies, we ensure that we look past profit to benefiting everyone - it starts to really become about something bigger, it has to be about coming together as people to make positive change.

Shane: Do you believe that the sharing economy and digital communities in general encourage the development of a pluralistic society?

EB: I think that it does and can encourage more

tolerance and diversity by allowing any individual to exchange ideas and different perspectives. However, the real engagement and commitment to learning is not always acted upon in a strictly digital community and can often breed hostility and a lack of accountability. This also depends on the intention of the platform (or corporation) that offers the service.

Overall, I do think the sharing economy encourages pluralism as it generally involves a peer to peer interaction. Two people who may not have ever met and come from different backgrounds/life experiences have the opportunity to offer knowledge and take knowledge from that encounter and it has a greater potential for it to be genuine because it's based in reality. People in general can become naturally more committed to these types of relationships and encounters and diversity as they become more accustomed to engaging in digital communities and peer to peer meetups.

Shane: In your opinion, will there always be a place in people's lives for purely analogue communities and how will the interplay between digital and analogue communities impact their choices in life?

EB: I think there will always be a place for purely analogue communities and who knows, maybe more people will crave it in the future, but I think engaging digitally will become more and more inevitable in many aspects of one's life. I think that the interplay between the two communities can equally give and take away choices for people. As mentioned before I think this will depend on the intentions of the platforms and communities involved.

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Professor Jessa Lingel



**Assistant Professor
Annenberg School for
Communication, University
of Pennsylvania**

Christophe Bruchansky: In “Digital Counter cultures and the Struggle for Community”, you challenge commonly held assumptions about online technologies, for instance that the Internet is a platform for authenticity and self-exploration. Could you give an example of when it is not?

Jessa Lingel: We see a lot of platforms that are based in normative claims about identity. Speaking broadly LinkedIn is a platform that prescribes neoliberal visions of self-promotion, NextDoor reinscribes middle class suburban homogeneity, Instagram supports conspicuous consumption. The thing is, every platform can be subverted, so even if these platforms tend to promote some users and uses over others, there are also constant opportunities for rupture and reappropriation.

Christophe: In your book, you describe tactics that body modification, punk music, and drag queen communities have used online to oppose mainstream values and norms. Overall, would you say that online social networks have reinforced mainstream values and norms, or that they have increased the number of tactics to challenge them?

JL: The thing is, there isn't really one internet, there are many internets. So it's impossible to generalize about whether they've reinforced

mainstream versus countercultural values. I do think that more and more people are accessing the internet from a smaller number of sites – so Google and Facebook control an increasingly large share of how people access web-based content. These are private industry rather than government, and publicly traded meaning that they're beholden to shareholders rather than users. They're also largely unregulated. There will always be weird, countercultural and heterogeneous content on the web, the question is, will it become increasingly difficult for everyday users to access it?

Christophe: In the three communities that you have studied, what fundamentally brought them online? What objectives could they pursue online that could not be attained otherwise?

JL: Most of the countercultural groups I've studied are always already online, for the same reason that most people are online – it's a powerful communication tool that connects people to each other across distances and to build affinity. For people with countercultural or marginalized interests, the internet can help forge connections that would otherwise be difficult to build, whether because of geographic or other social/cultural barriers.

Christophe: On the back side, from all tactics counterculture communities deploy offline to retain a sense of identity and alterity, would some be impossible to replicate online?

JL: All of the groups I study have important relationships that are built online, and also important relationships that are built offline. Particularly as people access the web via mobile

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devices, an online/offline divide makes less and less sense as a meaningful binary of people's relationship to technology, and for that matter, people's relationships to each other.

Christophe: How might future developments of mainstream social networks affect the aforementioned online tactics? Are you feeling concerned or optimistic about some specific developments?

JL: I think we'll see an increasing fragmentation of platforms as people invest time in multiple platforms, and platforms emerge to serve niche groups. My guess is that we will look back at the period of Facebook and Twitter dominance as a rare moment of concentration of users in a small number of platforms.

Christophe: Under what conditions are digital communities encouraging the development of a pluralistic society?

JL: At their best, digital communities can support meaningful dialogue between diverse groups of people. This is precisely why we need to work towards about digital literacy and regulation of media production and distribution to address the politics and bias of algorithms. Social media platforms can be designed in ways that support some kinds of community building and discourse over others. We need to encourage platforms to work towards equitable, inclusive and diverse perspectives.

Christophe: In your opinion, will there always be a place in people's lives for purely analogue communities and how could the interplay between digital and analogue communities impact pluralism?

JL: Again, I see the online/offline binary as less and less productive for talking about relationships between people and technology. The internet is increasingly embedded into our everyday lives, without firm distinctions between online and offline. That said, I believe that people will always need and value offline forms of community. In terms of pluralism, I think it's fair to say that one of the most productive dynamics takes shape when online tools can put us in touch with more diverse and heterogeneous networks that can manifest both online and off.

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Geert Lovink



Founding director of the Institute of Network Cultures. Research Professor of Interactive Media at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam.

Christophe Bruchansky: In your 2016 book *Social Media Abyss: Critical Internet Cultures and the Force of Negation* you draw a distinction between social media platforms and organized networks. Can you explain what the difference is?

Geert Lovink: These two concepts are worlds apart. Social media is the digital reality of the connected multitudes. Billions of people depend on these centralized platforms for their daily communication with customers, relatives, friends and lovers. Organized networks, on the other hand, is not more than a proposal, a concept developed by me and my Sydney friend Ned Rossiter, back in 2005. The idea is simple. Let's put against the exploitative 'weak links' model of social media, the 'minor' practice of 'strong ties' in which we focus on small units that specialize in getting things done. Facebook and others have never been interested in facilitating its users with pragmatic online spaces that can be shielded off. Instead, we to 'like' products and keep up with an ever-expanding blurry 'newsfeed' with a way too big, amorphous audience of 'friends' . Instead of giving users concrete collaborative tools, Facebook allowed third parties to 'harvest' their site with the latest data analytics tools. The disaster of that basic choice is now becoming visible for all to see in the unfolding Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Christophe: At its origin, the field of new media was raising many hopes. What was the original promise of social networks? And why, in your view, did it not materialize?

GL: I am not nostalgic. Internet beginnings were clumsy and culturally specific. It was a US-American space of military origin, built by male engineering, filled with hippie ideals that sounded self-evident and are now straight out alien. Take Douglas Schuler's book from 1996, *New Community Networks, Wired for Change*. The title of chapter one comes as a total surprise: "Community and Technology—A Marriage of Necessity". What? These days, no one talks about community anymore (or of networks, for that matter). Ever since 'social networks' turned into 'social media' the a priori is the user-profile centric model in which the individual customer is the central category. The original promise was the networks themselves. Once marketing and advertisement took over, and infrastructure and ownership were centralized, groups were no longer an interesting category. It is much harder to make money out of anonymous users that operate in 'swarms'. The corporate focus shifted towards targeting individuals, provoking them to tell even more about themselves and their preferences through 'likes'.

Christophe: Why was the original promise of social media important for people, and society as a whole, in terms of choice, personal agency and pluralism?

GL: Social media no longer promise anything. They don't need to advertise themselves and instead behave like benign invisible facilitators. Social media are the end stage of a certain development. The removal of the word 'network' happened with a purpose. Social media lock-in billions of users

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who from now on depend on these platforms for their information and social survival. Ten or twenty years ago a tiny part of the world population called 'early adopters' arguably had a choice and some agency (and with it, a historical responsibility, which they, or we, blew). This is no longer the case. We're not free to leave as this is considered 'social suicide' towards family and friends. In these precarious times it is an act of 'civil courage' to destroy one's future opportunities. Social media are necessary routines, part of our busy lives.

Social apps are ambivalent companions. When we check the phone, the apps take us briefly elsewhere, yet lock us into the same old. If only our devices would really take us elsewhere, into a space-time machine, to other possible worlds. This is a potential our current corporations never tapped into. Zuckerberg must detest dream machines.

Dopamine satisfies us for a second--and then quickly bores us, like any other drug. We put away the phone and come back to it to look for the same old (message). We need confirmation from others and demand equal amounts of affirmation back. We're precisely not seeking pluralism and 'difference'. All the literature confirms that we are caught in echo chambers of like-minded people. This is a product of certain design choices. We are made to search for the known and the familiar. The pluralist approach is precisely missing today and would be great alternative narrative for 21st century. We need to open ourselves to the trolls and misfits. If you think that filtering out dissidents is the way to go, you will sooner rather than later pay the price for this act of segregation.

Let's open ourselves to unexpected experiments. Imagine dating sites where you're confronted with

the radical Other, search engines that deliberately put you off the track, social media that connect you with the workers in China that produced the product you just purchased. Let me not get carried away with my own digital exoticism, you can dream up your own examples how we can rewire the world.

Christophe: You argue that social media lead to a state of "interpassivity", a term coined by Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek. The platforms "recreate the community feelings of a lost tribe in computer-generated informality." What choice or agency have we lost with the current social media platforms?

GL: We lost the collective ability to demand that another world is possible. We no longer have agency towards the technology itself, even though all these environments are high fluid and can easily be programmed, both by system operators as well as the users themselves. We can only regain agency if we demand to get back the toolbox function. Silicon Valley chose not to make money with tools. Most software tools are instruments for something else: collaboration, cooperation, peer-to-peer exchanges in which intermediates cannot get in between in order to extract value. In order to get there, we might have to forget the platform as a technical synthesis of human interaction altogether and further develop the 'network of networks' idea. How can undermine the upscaling effect that seems so inevitable? The network effect ultimately eliminates the very notion of the network itself. We all saw the mechanism unfolding itself (roughly speaking ten years ago) but no one was able to stop it. Before we move on we need to understand why happened, otherwise history will repeat itself.

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Christophe: You describe how the ideology of a certain tech elite lead to the current situation. But don't we have a collective responsibility in this?

GL: Yes, but what precisely upsets you in the critique of the Californian Ideology? This is not any elite. Do they have a natural right to control and exploit us, simply because we didn't figure out their methods and intentions soon enough? Let's talk about the 'friends' logic as an example. This mono-dimension create a vast field in which people can be linked. Image if 'we' would have sabotaged the 'friends' logic from day one? I bet the micro-targeting of Cambridge Analytica would not have been possible.

Christophe: How might future social media developments affect digital and analogue communities?

GL: Let's politicize this. There is a lot of turmoil happening around 'social media,' as we speak. As always it is dangerous to predict the future. Is there any future for social media? The unprecedented centralization and ease of use of these platforms might be turn out to be a historical anomaly. We could read the current phase of the media development as a naïve stage, a happy and somewhat childish period, a dreamy state of global ignorance on the side of both users and nation states.

This is, of course, not the case in authoritarian countries (who know better), such as China, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi-Arabia, but also think of other no quite naïve players such as the Israeli infowar complex, the world of Russian state hackers and secret services worldwide. To some extend a bunch academics, critics and investigate

journalists already knew about the state of affairs and welcomed the revelations, from Manning to Snowden to Wylie, as evidence.

'Informational dominance' will have to be operated in a different way, the Facebook way is bankrupt, over and out. What's next is the breakdown of the advertisement model of Google and Facebook. They will need other business models. The social media question boils down to the social contract of our times: we give you the online service for free and in exchange gather and resell your data to third parties. Future models will need to monetize through subscriptions or otherwise, with or without blockchain elements. On our side of the story, we need to understand how to untangle and decentralize the 'stack', and Europe will have to take the lead. This is not going to come from Trump's Make America Great Again.

Christophe: You advocate the creation of decentralized alternatives to existing social networks; social networks that would be much more value-based and politically engaged. What could be done to encourage their creation?

GL: Since 2011, the year of Arab Spring, the movement of the squares and Occupy, our Institute of Network Cultures has been trying to coordinate the building of social media alternatives through an initiative called *Unlike Us*. I can't say this was very successful so far. The network still exists. The support in Europe wasn't overwhelming. EU research funding schemes never prioritized social media alternatives. Calls remain abstract and technical and refuse to address the real issues where Europe really needs to step in. After the French-German disaster of building an alternative search engine there might be a trauma out there... Some believe in

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regulation but that takes decades (see Google). The idea that Europe needs to build up its own parallel industry perhaps has too much resemblance with the Chinese Communist Party approach? Is Europe a US backyard after all? Why can we have a European aerospace business but proclaim ourselves unable to compete when it comes to social media applications? I can give multiple historical explanations of this but that doesn't help us in this crucial period. It is not yet too late. The uptake can be swift. Getting rid of Facebook and Google in Europe is entirely possible, we just need the political will to act.

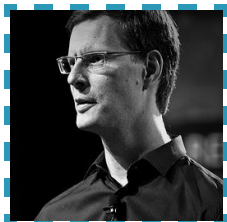
Christophe: Will there always be a place in people's lives for purely analogue communities and how will the interplay between digital and analogue communities impact their choices in life?

GL: Offline romanticism in Europe occupies me. We can deconstruct its discourse, understand its psychology and Nietzschean drive to master the tools. We can look at it from a medical/health perspective and promote correctional measures to heal our backs, postures—and brains. This is all necessary. Yet, what's most needed is the collective will to build and own our platforms that are local, democratic utilities to facilitate the needs of everyone. Let's disrupt the logic of extraction and go for non-addictive design principles. I do not believe there are analogue communities. What we can do is facilitate that people can come together in public spaces that are safe, without surveillance. Let's undermine fear mongering and the policing of the city and public discourses. If this can be done by going offline for a while, go for it. We have the right to forget Facebook. Let's make it happen.

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Karl Schroeder



**Futurist and
science fiction author,
Canada**

Shane Saunderson: How do you see the types of social technologies (inscape, animas, deodands) you play with in books like *Lady of Mazes* emerging in the near term?

Karl Schroeder: I see two related drivers: climate and human migration. In particular, I'm trying to reimagine the refugee crisis; instead of seeing it as people leaving the protection of their home nation, why not view it as them joining a new political entity? With the pervasiveness of mobile phones, it's now possible to imagine a "nation" that is a set of mobile apps designed to assist stateless people in finding food, shelter, medical aid, etc. With climate change and ecosystem collapse, billions of people may become stateless in the near future. I can easily see this vast constituency creating/adopting tools to act as a unified political entity, a new kind of nation.

Shane: What major choices are enabled by these advancements that might have been impossible without these technologies?

KS: I leave it to others to track trends and changes within known systems; I look for irruptions of change that we don't have language for yet. One such critical change involves the capacity of new technologies to give human-like agency to non-human entities. A simplistic version of this is the notion of the autonomous AI, but that's not necessarily an interesting case. More relevant to

our situation is the movement to give personhood to natural systems, such as rivers or forests. This represents a watershed moment when nonhuman entities, external to humanity, start engaging in political and economic conversations that previously only happened between humans. Limiting the idea of what these entities could be to robot-like artificial intelligences is naïve; they could be, eg., economic externalities or ecosystems, given voice via AI, blockchain technology, and smart contracts.

Shane: Why do you feel these choices are important and how could they change the way people live their lives?

KS: We are in the denial phase of an understanding that humanity is not actually able to solve the critical problems that face us today. We lack institutions capable of managing transnational, multi-generational and scale-related issues such as climate change. Most of us can't even think about them. Literally, we cannot do this on our own. Lacking an invasion of benign and superior aliens, our only recourse is to create systems that can supplement or replace our leadership in such areas. What this amounts to is us as people and societies entering into a new pact with the natural world, not metaphorically but literally, by creating political and economic representatives of it that are not themselves human, but can deal with humans.

Shane: What choices could the emergence of these technologies or futures potentially take away, or might 'traditional' communities have that those embracing tech would not?

KS: The scale of our current governance systems is inappropriate to the problems we face. The

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nation-state is not the political unit that is capable of dealing with global problems, and our biggest problems are all global. This doesn't mean that a global political actor will just be a "world government" that is a larger instance of the nation-state. It means a new kind of political actor is necessary. I don't think this necessarily means that we as individuals will lose autonomy or power, but governments and corporations might.

Shane: How might future technological developments prohibit the evolution of digital communities towards the aforementioned choices and restrictions?

KS: We are inching toward a global oligarchy built on surveillance capitalism. This will be the form of our "world government," but it resembles the mafia more than a democracy. This system depends on an unbridled ability to declare externalities, i.e., the ability to push waste and side-effects off on somebody else. It will do this as long as it can, but the problem is that the planet is finite. We are already soiling our own yard. Thus the system has two characteristics: A) it relies on destructive growth; and B) growth is no longer possible. The short-term response to this will be a ruthless attempt to control everything, and "grow" into every aspect of our lives. AI and Big Data are likely to be harnessed to this strategy rather than the ones I mention above.

Shane: Do you believe that these digital communities encourage the development of a pluralistic society, where people are more diverse and tolerant of each other? Why?

KS: The big lesson of the social design experiments of the last century is that you cannot remake human nature in the image of your ideals. You

cannot make people more tolerant. What we can do is build the social equivalent of eyeglasses: communications and governance systems that correct for the stigmatism of human biases. The media of the mid-to-late 20th century worked this way; the model for understanding why is McLuhan and Media Studies rather than systems or IT thinking. Whatever media people use to relate to one another in the 21st century and beyond, they have to correct for, rather than trying to eliminate, our differences.

Shane: In your opinion, will there always be a place in people's lives for purely analogue communities and how will the interplay between digital and analogue communities impact their choices in life?

KS: My dentist once told me that the purpose of dentists is to make themselves unnecessary. The purpose of digital technology should be to make itself unnecessary, or at least invisible. Langdon Winner, in his book *Autonomous Technology*, suggested that "technology is legislation." It mediates our experiences, including our experience of one another. We cannot eliminate that mediation, but we can design our societies, economics and accommodations to the natural world to more closely match the way we evolved to live. Rather than just invent new kinds of happiness, I hope we'll recover old ones, albeit in new clothes.

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Alexandra Stiver



**Anthropologist and
researcher,
United Kingdom**

Shane Saunderson: You've previously written about crowdfunding and crowdsourcing not being new models (Briarpatch, 2015), however, what about these movements is unique?

Alexandra Stiver: Although the mechanisms of activity driving crowd work are not new, the use of digital technologies enables the potential for an expanded range of community reach, scale and action. The online space allows for dispersed communities – for example: niche interests, specific health conditions, diaspora groups - to identify themselves, to interact, and to coordinate activity. Digital communities can also make use of a variety of channels for communication and collaboration, tailored to different needs and contexts. Furthermore, technology enables a degree of immediacy, even at a distance, for crowdfunding, through the online transfer of funds.

Shane: What choices do crowdfunding / crowdsourcing platforms enable within digital communities?

AS: Crowdfunding platforms facilitate several categories of choices for digital communities. First, through the use of platforms, community members have the ability to engage with a broader range of projects and to engage based on degree of interest, unconstrained by geographic proximity. Second, platforms enable coordinated

activity – both financial and non-financial – across a dispersed community (or several communities). Finally, platforms provide various options for online communication – public, private, and semi-private – offering community members choices for participation and presentation.

Shane: Why do you feel these choices are significant in how communities interact?

AS: Common to communities is a degree of attachment, or 'connectedness', as well as shared goals leading to collective, not purely individual, action. The choices facilitated by the platforms are significant to developing and sustaining community due to their ability to bring together individuals predisposed to both an emotional and a behavioural commitment. Platforms help identify networks, topics, and projects of interest, and then also create a designated space for engagement. Platform design tends to foster community-generated bottom-up content, rather than top-down, or moderated, communications. This organic and discursive communication style is both a key indicator of presence of community, and an element helping to sustain it. Engagement / community-generated content (bottom-up vs. top-down communication)

Shane: What choices have crowdfunding / crowdsourcing taken away, or do analogue communities have access to that may not be available to digital communities?

AS: A pervasive issue in crowdfunding continues to be that of trust. This trust refers not only to the issue of online payment, but also to the broader project and to the individual project creator. Trust issues are less common within analogue

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communities due to, in many cases, in-person accountability and longer-standing relationships preceding crowdfunding. Platforms, in response, have an opportunity to address this gap for digital communities through cues and signals of 'verifiability' such as developed profiles, pictures, and project affiliations with reputable organisations.

Shane: How might future technological developments and the evolution of digital communities change the aforementioned choices and restrictions?

AS: Increasingly crowdfunding platforms are incorporating features to promote online-offline (and vice versa) community transitions, having recognised that these can be reinforcing rather than necessarily distinct. This represents a major shift. As a result, many platforms now offer the ability to filter by both interests and location, a choice that simultaneously capitalises on a strength of the digital space while addressing one of its limitations. These developments articulate themselves in online-offline transitions, such as communities coordinating online through a platform for project-related activity in a physical location offline. Developments also support offline-online transitions, in the case of existing offline communities establishing an online presence to tap into larger sources of community support online.

Shane/ Do you believe that crowdfunding / crowdsourcing encourage the development of a pluralistic society? Why?

AS: Crowdfunding has the *potential* to encourage pluralism, but it can easily also run the risk of creating fairly homogeneous silos of interest.

Crowdfunded projects, or crowdsourced problems, often either attract or create highly specialised communities. Furthermore, in the space of civic crowdfunding, a valid concern is that the process benefits wired populations, and therefore might support projects that exclude important populations. This concern is being addressed, however, as illustrated in the case of community development and fundraising initiatives that carefully solicit stakeholder input and use crowdfunding platforms as one piece of a larger strategy.

Shane: In your opinion, will there always be a place in people's lives for purely analogue communities and how will the interplay between digital and analogue communities impact their choices in life?

AS: When communities are linked through a shared geography, research shows that activity often begins offline and then transitions online. By contrast, connections forged in digital communities can often flow – through formal or informal channels – towards in-person interactions and activity. Social scientific research on communities increasingly acknowledges the bi-directionality of online and offline, and the fluidity between digital and analogue. Across examples of crowdfunding, digital and analogue community activity has generally proven to be positive, and reinforcing. There will always be communities that develop offline and are predominantly analogue, but I think it will be increasingly rare to encounter ones classifiable as “*purely analogue*”. This raises practical, as well as definitional, questions yet unanswered: how will we to identify, to understand, and to support these ‘hybrid’ communities?

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Professor Clare Sullivan



**Cyber-lawyer specializing in digital identity, international privacy and cybersecurity
Georgetown University
Washington D.C.**

Christophe Bruchansky: In “E-residency and blockchain”, you speak extensively about Bitnation: an implementation of blockchain technology that aims at establishing viable alternatives to sovereign jurisdictions. From a citizen’s perspective, what would be fundamentally different between belonging to a digital nation based on blockchain technology and belonging to a traditional nation-state?

Clare Sullivan: The legal implications. At present there is no formal recognition of a digital nation under international law. Citizens of digital ‘nations’ do not have any recognized, enforceable legal rights such as would usually be available under traditional domestic legal systems.

Christophe: In your view, could digital nations extend civil liberties, and how?

CS: They could extend them but it would not have any legal standing. A same sex marriage on the Bitnation blockchain would not be recognized as valid by a formal legal system.

Christophe: On the back side, you mention the right to identity under international law and how it might be threatened by projects such as Bitnation and the Estonian e-residency. In simple terms, could you explain what the right

to identity is and how it could be compromised?

CS: I haven’t said that Bitnation or e-Residency threaten the right to identity. They do not, necessarily.

There is a right to identity under international law that applies to children. Arguably that right extends to a digital identity and since identity is established at birth it can be argued that it continues into adulthood. Considering the importance of digital identity to an individual being recognized and being able to transact in the digital age, the argument is that every individual has a right to an accurate, functional digital identity.

Christophe: However, one might argue that the right to identity (and of self-determination) should lead first and foremost to the right to choose one’s nation, because nations play a fundamental role in how people build their identity. In that sense, projects such as Bitnation would constitute a progress and not a regression because they would allow people to choose more easily their nation. Could this interpretation stand a chance under any existing legal framework or international institution?

No.

Christophe: Could the two interpretations be conciliated: the right to get identity information accurately recorded, and the one to choose freely one’s (digital or traditional) nation? And if not, on what (legal) ground should one take precedence over the other?

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CS: There is no such right to freely choose one's nation so the question becomes a nonsense.

Christophe: Could future blockchain developments help resolve this dilemma, and how?

CS: No. There is not a dilemma. There is no legal right to choose one's nation in this sense.

Christophe: Do you believe that digital nations would encourage the development of a more diverse international community? Or that they would lead to the standardisation and commodification of public services and national identities?

CS: A digital network as established by Estonian e-Residency is diverse but this is a network not a nation, in its strict legal sense. I don't understand exactly what you are asking in the second part of the question regarding commodification. As to standardization, there is already a high level of standardization across the world in terms of the legal procedures required to establish a person's identity for transactional purposes such as to open a bank account and engage in particular forms of business, for example. This is not due to digital nations. It is largely a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and part of an international effort to address money laundering and terrorism financing.

Christophe: In your opinion, will there always be a place for traditional nations and how could the interplay between digital and traditional nations impact international institutions?

CS: There will always be a place for traditional nations. International law is based on traditional nations i.e. nations with geographical borders. At present there are no digital nations that have formal legal standing or recognition, and it is highly unlikely that a digital nation will be recognized by other nations and the U.N., for example. Under the DSM there will be mutual recognition by E.U. member nations of the e-IDs of citizens and this is designed to improve economic efficiency. The DSM is a market initiative. It does not have anything to do with digital nations.

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Violette Suquet



Ciwik co-founder and artistic director, France

Christophe Bruchansky: Violette Suquet, you're a co-founder of Ciwik, described as "the social network of civic life". Why do you talk about a social network and not community (or communities)? What's the difference?

VS: Hi Christophe, you're right, network is a common word used in France when we talk about interaction between people online (like on Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.). In the case of Ciwik, I think that "network" describes it better because of its aim: to connect citizens to their elected representatives and local authorities but also to connect citizens to each other, so they can share their opinions and debate on the improvements we can make to our society. It's WORK enabled by the NET, so, I guess it's appropriate. The term communities can be used to describe a group with points in common. In Ciwik, people can debate without it. That's its strength.

Christophe: Ciwik's motto is to "(re-)connect citizens with their elected officials, candidates and local authorities". In your view, why was this connection lost in the first place?

VS: I'm not sure. Society doesn't teach us how to take care of each other. We learn how to be competitive, not how to be empathic. And we are so afraid about the lack of... everything. It's difficult to take action in this context. That's the short answer.

And, to be more specific, these days everyone can see and hear officials and candidates on TV, in the newspapers, on the radio, but you can't meet them directly. First because they are really busy, and second because in your everyday life you're pretty busy too! Who asks for an appointment with their mayor? You have to imagine Ciwik as a "non-time consuming" way to be in touch with your elected officials. You can compare Ciwik to a situation where you have the private phone number of your mayor and you text him to submit a great idea for the improvement of your fellow citizens.

Christophe: Why is it so important to "(re-)connect" citizens?

VS: Why? Really? Because this is the foundation of every society, and, more ideally, of the world. Let's talk about it. The world. We know now that it's going to change a lot in the next fifty years and not for the better. So, I guess, we need to stick together!

And create a society (and a world) based on democracy and collective happiness.

In everyday life, people are less and less in contact with their surroundings. We don't practice the "slow living" which might be necessary to help us create contact between each other.

By giving citizens the opportunity to suggest ideas and improvements to society, share them, debate them, compare them, evaluate them, people will work together, neighbors will build improvements together. People will reclaim their civic role and responsibilities with the goal of managing our society.

Christophe: The Ciwik app mostly replicates existing civic roles: ordinary citizens, local

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elected officials, etc.. What about brand new players in the political debate: digital activists who do not fit into any pre-existing category? Have you seen those types of new players emerge on Ciwik? And what's fundamentally different about digital communities that encourages their civic engagement?

VS: Digital activists are citizens like us. They have a citizen profil if they want to. I don't know if a profile like this has already emerged on Ciwik, but we have created a feature to help them. Every profile/user can support everyone with a simple click. When you think that a citizen is involved in public life and you agree with him, you can support him. He will therefore discover that his ideas meet with success, which will maybe give him the courage and the desire to stand for election, whatever the ideas apply to.

Ciwik and other digital communities support this kind of civic engagement in their own way. Whatever the process, the result is the same and is significant. The only difference on Ciwik is that you can access officials' profiles and talk to them and evaluate their actions to help them and improve their work for society.

Christophe: On the flipside, can you think of any type of civic engagement that could only happen in the analog world?

VS: Something that the digital world will never replace is real contact between people and the feeling it produces. The crowd's enthusiasm during a demonstration, for example, or the sadness of a nation during national mourning on the streets. People feel like they belong to the same country or the same family, you know? Everybody needs to feel that once in their life. So

maybe demonstrations will never be virtual, and I think it's a good thing, as a true French woman!

Christophe: How can we make sure that a digital community encourages the expression of a variety of ideas and opinions, and does not lead to political polarization?

VS: I have no idea.

I am a technical woman with a scientist dad, I believe what I see. I think the polarization of opinions is part of a variety of ideas, so we'll see. Ciwik is a project for everyone. We can't predict certain behavior, we can just anticipate! And that's super exciting.

Christophe: How might future technological developments affect political debate? Can you think of a specific technology that could fundamentally change the democratic process?

VS: Yes, Ciwik!

Political debate is the reflection of society, it is supposed to translate evolutions and changes into law and amendments. So of course technological developments affect it.

How? First, a new way to open up democratic debate will be with open data, to enable policy monitoring and transparency. Second, getting a candidate to emerge via Ciwik to circumvent the nomination system backed by a political party. [Laprimaire.org](http://laprimaire.org) was the precursor. And finally, cryptography and blockchain technology should make it possible to organise votes whose results will not be falsified.

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Christophe: In your opinion, will there always be a place for purely analog political activism and how will the interplay between digital and analog activism impact democracy.

VS: I think that to have an overview of how digital and analog activism will evolve in the near future, we just have to take a quick look at how our officials (presidents included) use tools like Twitter. Today, if you're a political activist and you want to gain visibility without using social media, you should stop right away.

But they are complementary. Look at the mobilisation for the railway workers' status these days in France.

Digital activism already has a big impact on our democracy, with online petitions, for example, and with the massive sharing of society and political news and articles online. But the social contact during any demonstration is primary. It is said that 70% of communication is nonverbal. We therefore have to see each other to understand each other. Other messages are conveyed by the body, the attitude.

With digital, governments can't sweep what is written, shared or commented online under the carpet. If they want to survive politically, they must take into consideration what happens online. Who knows, maybe in ten years' time presidential elections will be done from your smartphone? In the Ciwik team, we are firmly convinced that it would be a fantastic step forward in the process of enhancing our democracy.

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More Information

Learn more about our methodology at <https://plural.world/digressive-approach/>.

For any question about this report and our analysis, please contact either Christophe Bruchansky or Shane Saunderson: <https://plural.world/about/>.

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