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# Our Rules. Not Theirs.

## Communicating About Digital Public Spaces

Summer 2021



**waag**  
technology & society

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# Summary

This document is intended for those working to develop digital public spaces in Europe and presents a strategy for how our decentralized movement can **communicate** about our work and progress. It was written by **Waag** as part our **Public Stack** initiative which researches the values, design processes, technology, and people that contribute to building **digital public spaces**. Along with you, our goal is to build digital public spaces in Europe that are open, democratic and sustainable.

Right now, there a widespread group of people around the field of 'ethical tech' all telling competing versions of the same 'full story' about ethical technology and digital public spaces.

We need to change this and enable ourselves to combine forces rather than compete. Organizations advocating for digital public spaces should share their work with each other and share each other's work. Individual voices should focus on developing refined messages tailored to specific topics and target audiences.

This requires collaboration, trust between core allies, and the development of a shared core narrative which can be adapted by different allies and to different audiences while maintaining the same spirit and message; can be agreed to and referred to by core allies; and distinguishes digital public spaces from other potential competitors (big tech firms touting privacy, especially).

We propose **'Our Rules. Not Theirs.'** as a narrative that can serve this purpose at multiple levels. Next immediate steps are to discuss and agree on communications strategies; agree on roles with our core partners; and identify who from our core allies will reach out to which particular audiences.

Waag sees its own role as 1) helping to coordinate this strategy and 2) to engaging the general public through public research campaigns and co-creative development of digital public spaces (along with citizens and governments). Efforts in communications and narrative will stay closely aligned with technical, legal, research and other 'real world' developments as the movement towards digital public spaces progresses.

# Introduction

If you're reading this, you've probably encountered the problems of trying to communicate about digital public spaces. *There is so much to tell, but we want to capture a short message. We have to be nuanced and clear, but also simple and concise. We have to speak with a wide range of experts, policymakers, and citizens, but we need to keep a target audience in mind. We need to provide the right level of background information, and we need to get to the point.*

How to share the story about digital public spaces? People have repeated, tried, and struggled.

## Pasta sauce

Let's take a short detour to talk about pasta sauce. In [On Spaghetti Sauce](#), Malcolm Gladwell tells the story of a company that wanted to find the perfect tomato sauce recipe. Instead, they found that no single recipe was the best – instead, there were clusters of people who like their sauce sweet, others chunky, others spicy, and so-on. According to Gladwell, this approach is now a food industry standard – to develop different recipes for different tastes.

**“Develop different recipes for different tastes”**

Many of us have tried to capture the narrative around digital public spaces: We need to fight the accumulating power of Big Tech companies that make the rules online. We need to apply our existing laws in the digital world. We need to be sovereign. We need open source technology! We need to build based on values, because right now your privacy is constantly violated and your digital identity is out of control.

We run into the same phenomenon as the pasta sauce producers: There is not one message to tell, but many messages that each need to be specific to their own target audience, content, and area of focus.

## Towards specialized narratives

We have to identify groups of people we want to communicate with; understand their ‘tastes’; and develop a message or strategy that is suited to them. This is an opportunity to make sure that we address many areas of society in our work, especially those at the margins who may often be ignored in debates on society and technology.

At Waag, we have begun this process by identifying various groups and subgroups who are relevant to the conversation about digital public spaces. Through interviews, consultation, and conversations with people from across these groups, we present a more detailed understanding about how to communicate with them.

# General Findings

The diverse conversations and collaborations that informed the information in this document also revealed a number of findings relevant for those of us who are working together to communicate about digital public spaces.

## **Difficulties in creating a narrative for a decentralized movement**

Our current approach carries a lot of risks, many of which play out already:

- Everyone has their own focus and priorities, and many want to lead. We all need to be willing to compromise on our individual (not shared) ambitions, and willing to trust the work of our allies.
- We risk confusing the public, lawmakers, and all those who are not deep into the subject of ethical technology if we send similar yet different messages.
- We risk duplicating each other's work and efforts.

**“We all need to be willing to trust the work of our allies”**

## **Benefits of creative a narrative as part of a decentralized movement**

With coordination, flexibility, and trust, it is possible for our decentralized movement to succeed, and to reap many potential benefits of a healthy thriving network:

- A non-competitive environment (at least not with each other) allows us to make the most of each other's work. This is something we need to do more of, and better. Too often, we act as competitors instead of being collaborators, when in reality we have a valuable opportunity to build off of, share, and amplify each other's work. Remember: You almost never have to work alone, and you almost never have to start from scratch.
- We can specialize and not have to tell ‘the whole story’ of digital public spaces ‘to everyone’. Instead, we can focus on how to tell that story in our own ways, to the people who are in our own proximity, network, or area of interest.

### Other lessons learned

- Among all groups, listening and co-creation are valuable communications strategies that we should continue to make use of. 'Narrative' and 'communications' are often thought of as a one-way street - something that one person sends and another receives. We are searching for something akin to a dialogue, a conversation, and a collaboration.
- Technical development and communications are ideally closely linked, not separate. In particular, technical development alongside communities (through co-creation and smart citizen approaches) and communications efforts that involve people directly can help to make the narrative and technical progress enmeshed with one another. We can draw inspiration from previous successes, for example the campaign at [policylab.waag.org](http://policylab.waag.org).
- The question 'who writes the rules' is of major concern amongst all groups, and a distinguishing aspect of digital public spaces. Most generally, 'who writes the rules online' is a way to understand this question. But it can also be applied to our own movement: Who writes the rules for it? How can we meaningfully make technology that is public? What does democratic technology look like in practice? The notion of a public stack can help us to frame this question, and again points to the importance of an open and co-creative development processes that blends communication and development. (Further research into governance of digital public spaces can be found at [publicstack.net/digital-public-spaces/](http://publicstack.net/digital-public-spaces/).)

# Groups

Putting people into groups inherently sucks. It is an imperfect and crude way to understand the world, and risks all kinds of unintended assumptions and consequences. We have to acknowledge this when we discuss groups of people. The following groups are not definitive, tangible, or real in any sense outside of this consideration. A person likely fits into multiple groups, or even none at all. It's nuanced, vague, and blurry.

**“It’s nuanced, vague, and blurry”**

Nonetheless, we do need have different strategies for approaching people depending on their current proximity to the topic of digital public spaces. With all of this in mind, we can broadly consider three groups for communication about digital public spaces:

- **Group 1:** Core allies
- **Group 2:** A coalition of concerns
- **Group 3:** The general public

## Group 1: Core allies

### People

‘Core allies’ are consciously working towards digital public spaces. If you are reading this brief, you are likely in this group. These people are probably working for and/or aware of organizations that deal with things like open source technology, ethical technology, and regularly engage in related topics in our work. There may be different schools in this group, like the ‘open’ movement and the ‘digital rights’ folks; there may also be people of different professions, like journalists, politicians, or researchers. It is a diverse coalition with a shared goal.

**“A diverse coalition with a shared goal”**

### ‘The Ask’

We want to collaborate with them (you!) on executing a shared communications strategy.

### Process

- We communicate directly and coordinate work with others in this group through:
  - conferences (Public Spaces)
  - meetings (SDEPS meetings, Public Spaces consortium, Digitale 4, etc)
  - Matrix rooms and email
- We have also held a series of one-on-one interviews with people in this group, as well as with people more closely aligned with group 2.

- During the Public Spaces conference, we created a map of the network of people and organizations working towards digital public spaces.

### Findings

- People in this group tend to agree on the need for digital public spaces that are open, democratic, and sustainable. They often support open source and privacy by design approaches – more generally, they support development based on shared values’.
- Our core allies are sick of talking and want to make progress as the necessity is finally felt by institutions that are in a position to make a significant change. Progress they hope to see seems to be both in terms of narrative and building a movement as well as in terms of developing technology and infrastructure. In short, they actually want to make digital public spaces. Don’t be afraid of prototypes, test runs, or making things that aren’t perfect. We all want to see tangible, concrete progress.
- They generally favor open processes, given that we are mindful and considerate of our processes – Who is involved in which parts of development, and when? Over-deliberation and lack of progress are the two biggest associated feared outcomes of an open process.
- There is a call for digital public infrastructure, not just digital public spaces within the existing private infrastructure.
- People want to move past dichotomies, such as ‘public vs private’ and towards more open considerations of what is possible, such as a multistakeholder development approach where citizens play a more prominent role than they currently do.
- Core allies tend to view digital public spaces not as a product or outcome, but as a process and goal that need to be continuously supported, trained, and defended (as is the case with matters of democracy and human rights).

### Next steps

- Internal coordination of a communication strategy can be taken by groups who have highly aligned goals and processes:
  - SDEPS coalition,
  - Digital 4,
  - Public Spaces,
  - Amsterdam 750
 We can identify areas of overlap and duplication, develop areas of focus, and bring together other groups and efforts where helpful.
- We will continue to build upon our map of the digital public spaces network.
- We will host shared conferences and events, for example the next Public Spaces Conference.

## Group 2: Coalition of concerns

### People

These people are ‘one step away’ from being directly involved with the development of digital public spaces. They may be legislators or public officials; human rights advocates who specialize in something other than technology but who would benefit from digital public spaces; teachers who want to get Google out of their classrooms; or developers who work for large private firms but sympathize with the need for digital public spaces. With these people, we aim to understand how they feel about digital public spaces and learn how to make connections between digital public spaces and their area of concern, work, or life.

**“Learn how to make connections between digital public space, work and life”**

### ‘The Ask’

Ultimately, we would like to see the development of a ‘coalition of shared concerns’ around digital public spaces, represented by people in a number of (not-directly-related) areas. We want to understand how their areas of concern are related to digital public spaces, and how we can make these connections stronger.

### Process

We considered who may form such a coalition, and reached out to people in media, ministries, academia, and law. We held interviews with those who responded (in general, responsiveness decreased as we approached people who were less directly involved in digital public spaces). Interviews generally asked what they understood by ‘digital public spaces’; whether and why we need digital public

spaces; whether and how they could help or be helped by digital public spaces; and what their message is for others in their field about digital public spaces.

### **Findings**

- This group is difficult to define and not driven primarily by the issue of digital public spaces. Unsurprisingly, their ideas about and perceptions of digital public spaces vary widely. More granularity is needed in specifying the branches of this coalition.
- This group is critical to the success of digital public spaces in becoming widely adopted as a mainstream issue (rather than the specialized one it is now). People in this group also have a lot to teach us about what can and should be possible in digital public spaces; specialized experience in their own fields; and the opportunity to enmesh digital public spaces with other fundamental topics in society like human rights and environmentalism.

### **Next steps**

We want to make coalition building a key aspect of future communications efforts. Specifically, next steps for building a coalition of concerns are to:

- Map out areas, organizations, and people to reach out to.
- Understand 'who talks to who' – appoint ambassadors to know which core allies will reach out to which areas.
- Identify people to contact through our network.
- Continue to have one-on-one conversations to understand what matters to different people.
- Document outcomes of conversations; consider overlap, differences, and strategies for unifying this broad coalition.
- Tailor specific communications strategies to specific communities within this coalition.

## Group 3: The public, the citizens, the people!

### People

We're all people, after all! This group refers to anyone who is interested (or potentially interested) in digital public spaces. It could be someone who worries about their privacy online; someone who has a political opinion to share but doesn't want to share it on Facebook; someone who scans the front page of Wired on occasion; someone who occasionally writes to their representatives; or even someone who has never thought about digital public spaces before. Ultimately, these are the majority of people who will ideally use and benefit from digital public spaces.

### 'The Ask'

Ultimately, this is a group of people to be active with: to inform and learn from (in terms of needs, concerns, potential use cases); to listen to (through formal channels like debates, public programs, [digital] fora); and ultimately to collaborate with in the development and use of digital public spaces.

### Process

The process we see for involving the general public moves in stages:

### Aware → Informed → Active

We are mostly focused on those people who are already aware of the problems with our current digital landscape; that privacy has gone out the window, that choices about technology are out of their hands, and that all of this threatens individual autonomy and social cohesion. Our goal is no longer to make people aware of these issues. Instead, we should (actively) inform them about what technical options exist; about what we are working on; and about what is possible. We need to show that there is a better way - a way out and a way forward. This means developing shared spaces to showcase progress in our field, and putting effort into communicating accessibly. Our message has to be findable, tangible, and relatable so that people can see why we need digital public spaces and how we can (and are) building them.

**“We need to show that there is a better way - a way out and a way forward”**

### Findings and next steps

- We propose a narrative approach to the general public, which is presented in the following sub-chapters.

- We would like to refine and develop these concepts further along with our core allies; and execute a public communications strategy that makes use of multiple avenues for informing and educating the public about digital public spaces. Possibilities include:
  - Have an active website where core allies can share updates and progress in our field to the general public.
  - Carry out an online engagement strategy using either our own platform (a proto- digital public space) and/or utilize existing platforms (pointing out the issues with these platforms which are not open, democratic and sustainable; and highlighting ethical alternatives where relevant).
  - Perform a ‘real world’ campaign utilizing physical public spaces which advocates for digital public spaces.
  - Actively co-create (in shared physical spaces where possible) digital public spaces.

# Narrative Development (focused on the public)

## Considerations and background

We worked with creative strategists Gus and Joe to help us clarify our narrative approach to the general public. Who do we want to reach? What do we want to share with them? What do we want in return? And how do all of these questions turn into a concrete narrative strategy, in action in real life?

- The 'Aware » Informed » Active' journey helps to inform the 'who'. Who do we mean by the general public? We are interested in helping people who are concerned about technology to learn why public spaces are a viable way forward.
- We want to share knowledge, possibilities, progress, and perhaps most importantly, process.
- In return, we want people to better understand the absence and possibilities of digital public spaces. Beyond that, and based on someone's interest, we'd like to create avenues for people to actively participate meaningfully, whether through co-creation, political involvement, or use of the digital public spaces.

We decided to clarify our language to be as simple and direct as possible while still being specific to the cause of digital public spaces. Options were considered to focus on privacy or the hidden costs of modern technology, but neither of these got to the core of the issue. For example, there is more to digital public spaces than privacy; and it's important to distinguish digital public spaces from other current media campaigns by Apple and other large tech firms to push a narrative that they (the company) can, will, and should be the privacy-protectors and rule-setters.

**“There is more to digital public spaces than privacy”**

## Our Rules. Not Theirs.

We developed 'Our Rules. Not Theirs.' as the core of our narrative strategy for the general public.

**Our Rules.**

**Not Theirs.**

**Public spaces are ours  
Not theirs**

**We make the rules  
Not them**

**We write the terms  
Not them**

**If we don't like it  
We vote for change**

**But it doesn't work this way online  
Not yet**

**Support digital public spaces**  
**Our Rules**  
**Not Theirs**

### **Building upon ‘Our Rules. Not Theirs’ and applying to other groups**

‘Our Rules. Not Theirs.’ lends itself to being adapted, expanded, or tailored to different contexts. For example, similar messages can be seen in high-level European politics (for example, ‘Big Tech is trying to take governments’ policy role’ by Marietje Schaake). It remains to be seen whether or how this message might be tailored to other groups, like those who will form a coalition of concerns. In general, we see ‘Our Rules. Not Theirs’ as a simple message that conveys the core what we are doing in building digital public spaces. Specific campaigns can use, change, or build from it.

# Outstanding Questions

Outstanding questions revolve around the question of how to define this movement towards digital public spaces. How is it funded? How do we know who is a part of it? How is it governed? These fundamental questions are bigger than the narrative strategy, but they do indeed have a large influence upon how we communicate with ourselves and others.

- The Name - What to call this loosely-defined network (those of us who are working towards digital public spaces and reading this document)? Who gets to own the name? Do we even want a name? Once 'it' has a name, it is an entity - So who is and isn't a part of that entity, and how is it defined? This is an initial question related to how to govern a diverse, decentralized group and is also practical question that we have now.
  - Existing names like 'DEPS' and 'SDEPS' are not viable long term options. They also exclude - we don't want people to think 'oh, that's not my initiative.' We propose something more generic, like 'digital public spaces' that is both an official name for this movement (we bought the URLs) and a general way in which people can refer to the topic.
- The core message - Again, who defines this? We can (and do, in this document) share our opinions about this, but it is up to allies to decide what they take, adapt, or leave behind from this strategy. Our proposal for this core message is 'Our Rules. Not Theirs.'
- Who gets to decide and agree on what to do next? - We can only share our work, make propositions, listen to your thoughts and feedback, and share our progress with you. We cannot dictate what others in this movement will do, but we do indeed warmly invite them to join us.

**“Who gets to decide on what to do next?”**

# Next Steps

## Waag's role

We can imagine a few roles to take on in our future work communicating about digital public spaces:

- Most importantly, we want to create meaningful links between technical development and communication. We can deliberate, design and co-create protocols, and build prototypes of digital public spaces with all of the groups mentioned in this document together.
- With Group 1 (core allies), we refine narrative into easy-to-understand resources at all levels.
- With Group 2 (coalition of concerns), we assist the development a coalition of concerns and identify which specific areas of this coalition Waag can involve.
- With Group 3, we involve the general public through:
  - messaging, campaigns, and digital educational resources.
  - live events and workshops.
- Other roles include conducting active public research into digital public spaces and working to connect the local level (Amsterdam), national level (Netherlands) and international level (Europe) both in narrative and in practice (through tech development).

## Other partners' roles

Of course, your own role is up to you. We would like to have your help in identifying further roles. Some initial ideas include:

- Identifying relevant technologies, updates, and tangible (technical, legal, social) progress towards digital public spaces that we can share and communicate with our audiences.
- Identifying relevant discussions in political science, technology, philosophy, to inform our methods and root our narrative in the present.
- Sharing, duplicating, and magnifying efforts (informing others in 'group 1' about what you are doing; sharing others' work and encouraging them to share yours).
- ...and many other opportunities that we'd like to hear from you about further.

# Options for Moving Forward

- Create a shared space for sharing content. Perhaps this is an existing space. Perhaps it's a totally new space that we make as a prototype of digital public spaces. Perhaps it makes use of multiple platforms. Whatever the case, we have to show our progress. This requires an organized (perhaps by target audience or subject) method for gathering and sharing each other's work towards digital public spaces. Eventually (and soon!) we will need something more publicly accessible.
- Take a co-creative approach building digital public spaces. This is primarily a design strategy, but it also serves a narrative function.
  - With citizens and policymakers (for Waag, locally in Amsterdam and sharing our practices with others in Europe). Options include co-creative sessions to develop the rules for digital public spaces; or open coding events where citizens and public employees collaborate to design or code digital public spaces.
  - With targeted audiences – for example, with developers who are 'sick and tired of writing someone else's rules' and invited to contribute to building digital public spaces.
  - With lawmakers – to help them understand how digital public spaces can work and how to implement policies and practices accordingly.
- Execute a narrative campaign around 'Our Rules. Not Theirs.' There are a number of ways this could play out. It would certainly be closely aligned with co-creative efforts and could include:
  - Online campaigns to gather people's perspectives on digital public spaces.
  - Poster or other 'physical world' campaigns, especially those that make use of public spaces reopening after the Covid pandemic. For example, signs around parks or other public spaces asking 'Why aren't there public spaces online?'
- Develop a coalition of concerns that links digital public spaces (and us) with efforts in related areas, outside of the 'regular players' in ethical technology.
  - This requires coordination. A first step could be to co-creatively map this coalition together. Who do we imagine will be involved? Who can we connect with? And which of our core allies is responsible for connecting with which groups? We can already start answering some of these questions and move forward into snowballing our coalition.

# Closing

This document should be considered as iterative - it is non-final and not set in stone. Instead, it presents concrete options for how we communicate about our shared goals and progress. It is the start of a conversation, and hopefully the start of collaborations together towards stronger communication about this topic that we all care about. If you have any questions, concerns, thoughts, ideas, or just want to have a chat, feel free to contact the authors of this report at [publicstack@waag.org](mailto:publicstack@waag.org).

Thanks for reading, and talk to you soon.