I'm Eli Pariser, Co-Director of New_ Public, a nonprofit R&D reimagining social media. I delivered this speech at Pope Francis' Jubilee of the World of Communications at the Vatican, on January 27, 2025. Read more about this speech in our newsletter, or watch the video.

We shouldn't close the door — there's hope for the Internet yet.

It's a great honor to be with you this morning, and I have to confess that as a Jewish agnostic from a small town on the ocean in the northern United States, the Vatican wasn't a place I ever imagined I would be invited.

But when I received the invitation to speak, I began reading more closely about Pope Francis's work on digital life, and I was struck by the degree to which this Pope understands and cares about the way that every aspect of our life — from the mundane to the holy — is now enmeshed in the digital.

So I read the brilliant pastoral reflection "Towards Full Presence," and then I joined a Zoom with some of the members of the Dicastery for Communication to see what I might be able to contribute.

And one of the women on the Zoom said in beautiful, Italian-accented English I won't try to imitate, there is a lot of despair about online life, Eli. We want you to give people some hope. And then, she said, "the question we want you to help answer is, "why should we not close the door and go back to the age of stones?"

This is a good question. I'll be honest: there are mornings these days where I feel like the age of stones seems like a pretty good place to be.

There is a lot of suffering in the digital world we inhabit today. We're afraid. We're angry. We scroll to distract ourselves, slipping into a kind of drugged amusement,

and then get shocked awake by the graphic ugliness of the worst of human behavior.

We're lonely. We're constantly on guard for manipulation, for extraction, for surveillance, or else we're numb to it. We're disconnected from each other, from ourselves, and from whatever we might see as God.

We suffer, and societies suffer, from the current digital architecture because in many ways it is an architecture of despair — one which makes the worst parts of us the loudest and makes it hard for the best parts of us to speak at all.

But despite this current dystopia I'm here because I actually have a great deal of hope for our digital future. And I want to tell you why we shouldn't close the door.

I'm going to argue that we must build digital spaces that invite our full humanity, and that we can. That it's not outside our power — that the opportunity is, in fact, right in front of us.

And that it's incumbent on all of us to seize this opportunity to fashion a better digital world, today.

I'm going to explain why this work is critical not just for ourselves, but for our societies. Because when we make new kinds of digital spaces they can help heal the divides that are tearing apart our communities, our families, our selves, and offer us a better way forward together.

It's important to imagine the Internet as a set of spaces, because 1) that helps us think in social terms and 2) it allows us to tap into the wisdom and science of space design.

And to start in the right place, we need to start with the right metaphor for digital life.

The way most of us have been taught to imagine digital life is as a series of 1s and 0s flying around from computer to computer, person to person, mind to mind. We tend to picture the Internet as a network graph, with a set of points representing people and lines between them tracing the flow of information.

This is a satisfying way to represent the movement of data. But it's a fundamentally limiting and flawed way to represent the complexity of the human dynamics that

occur online. From the start, it suggests that all we humans are is rational information processing machines.

I think it's critical, when we imagine the Internet, to imagine not nodes and networks but, as the Church has suggested also, a series of spaces. Because spaces help us conceive of the dimensions of humanity and social interaction, social connection, beyond our rational minds.

What we know about physical spaces is that the shape and design and dynamics of the spaces we're in has a big impact on how people relate and behave in them, in ways that extend beyond the exchange of bits of rational information. When we imagine a group of people in a space, we start to imagine the way some people cluster together and others stand at a distance. We imagine the body language of the people, the glances and microexpressions and all of the dynamic nonverbal ways they communicate. In short, we start to attune to all of the ways we are emotional, embodied, and fundamentally social beings.

So much of human behavior is built around the social, how we understand and relate to the group, our tribe, and the other tribes that we perceive. And this is just as true — maybe more true — in digital space as it is in physical life. So as I'll show, we can use the lens of spaces to help us understand how our social behavior is shaped by the design of the platforms we're in.

The internet is best imagined as a series of spaces, because that's how we inhabit it. And while digital life is a relatively new development, we actually know a lot about how human beings gather in spaces. As a species, we've been designing spaces for human beings to come together for thousands of years, from campfires and village commons to beer halls, cathedrals and city squares.

So when we understand the Internet as a series of spaces, knowing that spaces shape behavior, we can draw on all of our knowledge and wisdom about space design, about how spaces shape behavior, to understand how online spaces are shaping us now, and then, to modify or build new ones that can, well, invite our full presence.

There are generations of wisdom about space design that we can tap into. And there's also science, more recently, that helps us understand empirically why and how spaces shape behavior.

So before we get deep into the Internet of today or tomorrow — and we will! — I want to take some time to tell you what this research says.

Spaces have a profound impact on how human beings behave, in two important ways.

Spaces shape behavior by inviting particular parts of ourselves.

First, spaces shape how we behave by inviting particular parts of ourselves to show up.

The great urban planner Jan Gehl uses the word "invitation" to describe how designs gently call for certain kinds of behavior. "If you invite more cars, you get more cars. … If you invite people to walk more and use public spaces more, you get more life in the city. You get what you invite."

And I would say, actually, you get the parts of people, of ourselves, that you invite.

There's a growing consensus across many fields — from religious and philosophical traditions to neuropsychology and even AI — that the self is best conceived of not as one singular entity, but as a collection of many complex, semi-autonomous parts, sub-personas that are responsible for different goals and roles. This is what Walt Whitman was talking about when he said we "contain multitudes."

Some parts of us aim to protect us, others work to keep us attached to the group we're part of, some seek rest or pleasure, some seek status. Biologically, socially, and even metaphysically, these parts are all important for us to both live everyday life well and realize our full human potential.

The design of a space lets us know which of these parts of us are invited and which ones are not.

I grew up in a small town on the ocean with a small mountain nearby, and sometimes in high school we would hike up onto that mountain at night and look down at the lights of our town. The conversations we had there were always a little different, more long-term, big picture, more *elevated* than the conversations we'd have wandering around on main street below. The sidewalks of Main Street almost inherently invite the prosaic, the everyday. And I think the quiet and beauty of that overlook allowed the parts of us with dreams and vision to more easily emerge.

This is why the question of communicating which parts of ourselves to invite is one of the primary functions of space design.

A library, through its comfortable chairs and desk lamps and reading tables, through its design, explicitly and implicitly invites the quiet reader in me. A bar, with stools close together with no barriers, invites the rowdy, convivial patron.

Sometimes these design attributes are obvious, and sometimes they're more subtle. Fast food restaurants, for example, legendarily design their seating to be comfortable only for 15 minutes — to encourage turnover.

A couple arguing in a loud cafe might escalate their conflict because the clatter and commotion of the space invites loudness. And they might find that they're better able to understand and sympathize with each other when they move the conversation to a park bench, because in quiet and privacy the self-reflective and vulnerable parts of themselves are more invited there.

Two students, who otherwise like each other, might debate viciously and harshly in a classroom in front of their peers, because what is invited at a seminar table is to score points in front of other students and a figure of authority, the teacher.

So why do spaces have this effect?

The design of a space helps our brains quickly understand what our options are, what we can do, by cuing what social psychologists call a "situation."

This is, in fact, one of the most important purposes of the brain! One of the main things our minds are built to do is to reduce the extraordinary complexity and chaos of the world into a tangible and limited set of options. The number of things we can conceivably do at any given moment is too vast and overwhelming to choose between. So our brains try to reduce this list to something manageable that we can exercise conscious control over.

And to do that, our brains ask, "what kind of situation is this?"

One of the purposes of space design is to immediately communicate the answer to that question, consciously and subconsciously.

Decades of research now demonstrate that the way we understand situations — that's the technical term — has a profound impact on how we behave. In fact, one of the most important books in social psychology is called The Person and the

Situation. The big conclusion it reaches, the result of hundreds of experiments, is that situations shape what we do more than our own character does.

It's interesting to note that "Towards Full Presence" focused so heavily on the story of the Good Samaritan, because the Good Samaritan parallels the classic experiment that *The Person and the Situation* begins with.

In this experiment, Students took a psychology assessment to determine how generous or stingy they were, and then were asked to complete a task that involved fetching something across the campus. Some of them were urged to complete it quickly, while others could take their time.

And along the way was a person on the side of the path, seeking help.

And what the scientists found was, the generous students who were in a rush were less likely to stop to help him than the stingy students with time on their hands. It wasn't close.

Why? Because when you're put in the situation of completing a task under pressure, in a rush, the part of you that is focused on minimizing distraction and maximizing efficiency grabs your internal steering wheel and shoves the generous part of you into the back seat. That part of you doesn't have time for noticing distractions like the man on the side of the campus road, much less stopping to help him.

So, situations shape behavior.

And what architects do, fundamentally, is try to indicate what the situation is, in spacial terms — what options they want people to be thinking about. When you enter the space of a cafe, your mind cues the "cafe situation" and you immediately intuit that your options are "get coffee" or "sit" — and not, do a dance, exercise, or fall to the ground in prayer.

So let's recap where we are so far.

Spaces shape the situations we understand ourselves to be in, which in turn invite particular parts of ourselves to step forward. The spaces we're in limit and clarify the options that we have and which parts of ourselves are invited.

And all of this has a big impact on what we then do.

Spaces shape behavior by shaping our understanding of the collective.

I said spaces shape our behavior in two ways. Spaces shape our behavior first by helping us understand, "who am I in this place"? But the second is this: they also help us understand who *we* are in this place.

Stepping into a church or synagogue isn't just about your own individual devotion — the design, with seats facing an altar or a dias, says, "we are a congregation."

Similarly, a room with a panel sitting up on a stage in the lights and people seated in the darkness underscores a transfer of information and authority from the people on stage and says, "we are an audience."

And if the seats are instead placed in a circle, with the lights on, we understand that "we" are now active discussants and participants, not just an "audience."

These different "we"s contain different ideas about how a group of people connect to each other and how they relate to everyone else — and when we talk about these kinds of group dynamics, we are talking about power.

The political scientist Langdon Winner once wrote that "artifacts have politics." He described how the power structure of a large seafaring ship was literally built into its physical shape — it required a captain with a strong hand and a top-down hierarchy, because when and how to lift and angle the sails wasn't something that could be done by anarchic consensus and required a lot of specialized roles.

Spaces have politics, too: They tell us how we relate to each other, who has power and who doesn't.

When the French built their first parliament building, they built a set of bleachers/steps for each party, one on the left, and one on the right. And what this meant is that you could have a thoughtful conversation in a normal voice with the people in your own party. But to speak to the other side meant you had to yell. And in fact, this is where we get the word not just for left-wing and right-wing, but for partisan, for partisanship.

There's an interesting feedback loop here: The polarization of the time informed how the physical structure of the space was built, which in turn amplified that polarization.

To give another example, imagine that there's a microphone in the front of this room, and after the talk anyone can come and ask a Q&A question. How does that structure behavior?

This spatial design means that to ask a question, you have to get up in front of everyone and make your way to the microphone. So it invites those who are the most strongly opinionated, the people with the hustle to get to the front of the line.

But it does more than that. As recent research describes, it also sets off a different kind of polarization cascade.

One of the things we human beings fear the most is being shunned so there are parts of us that are constantly trying to figure out how to avoid being cast out of the group. To do that, these parts need to understand where the center of gravity of the group is — what the group thinks and feels.

When that first, highly-motivated person starts speaking, we tend to assume that he or she — but let's be honest, mostly he — is representative of the group, and immediately people are a little more shy about disagreeing with him.

This in turn means that only someone who very much disagrees, and has the self-confidence and hustle to express it, is going to be inclined to voice disagreement. And when that person speaks, our imagination of the body of the opinion room is now effectively polarized: There are two tribes, and you have to decide which you want to belong to.

What's fascinating about these studies is that this happens even in rooms where the actual distribution of opinion is very broad, and clustered in the middle. The parts of us that are trying to keep us safe from being shunned are hyper-aware, and make these big, often wrong inferences in service of that goal — and these parts are called up for duty by this kind of design.

But, just as spaces can be built to drive us apart, they can also be built to bring people together.

Here's a fun example: How many people here have heard of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table? A lot of us.

So how many of you have thought about why we're still talking about the shape of his table? Are there any other kings who are known by their table shapes?

It turns out that the table was a revolution in the way kingly power was expressed. For centuries, for millennia, most sovereigns, if they sat at a table at all, sat at the head of a long, rectangular table. By being at the head, it was clear who was boss, whose voice was most important. And to be seated near the king meant you had more sway, more power.

The reason we remember the shape of King Arthur's table is that he had a radical new idea for how to structure his knighthood — a way of talking where all of the knights' voices were equal. And today, we all know how different it feels to sit at a round table, versus one with someone in power at the head. Changing the shape of the table changes both who feels empowered to speak, what we say, how we converse.

So let's summarize where we are so far.

We can imagine the Internet as a series of spaces, and we know that spaces can be designed to invite particular parts of ourselves, and particular conceptions of the "we," the "us."

So with that grounding, we can turn to a key question: What selves, what "us" do our current online spaces invite? And why?

Why are the platforms we have today more likely to invite our demons than our angels to the table?

Our online spaces often invite our worst selves and our worst "us" because that's an easy way to make money. And they are encoded with a set of power relationships that's about monarchy, not democracy.

The short answer: money, and power. Let's take money first.

Unlike the spaces we live in in our physical lives, the spaces we live in online today are almost all commercial. They're designed to extract and make money. And that has consequences.

I remember meeting with a very senior designer at a very large platform who in every way looked the part. He had the cool square glasses and a very sleek,

expensive coat, and he sat behind his desk as my colleagues and I presented some of our research.

And then he said, the thing I've always wanted to do here, at this platform, that I've never been able to do, is to plant a tree. There's no room in these apps for trees, for something that's beautiful and alive just for the sake of it. Ultimately, if it doesn't move one of our key metrics, it doesn't happen — and trees don't move our key metrics.

The net effect of this is that we've built a digital world hyper-optimized for spectators and consumers. What shopping malls are to the offline world, the big digital platforms of today are to our digital world.

We're all familiar, by this point, with the idea that "if you're not the consumer, you're the product being sold," — that digital platforms encourage us to keep clicking and keep scrolling so that they can sell our attention to advertisers.

But over the last 20 years, the designers of our digital spaces have moved to more even more deeply integrate the design and purpose of platforms with the needs of advertisers.

Let's look at Instagram, which recently surpassed the Facebook app to become the biggest revenue generator for Meta, at $32B a year. Instagram is an extraordinary machine for the aggregation of attention, but it's more than that, and it's fundamentally different than, say, Google or Reddit. What Instagram the product is, is a machine for attracting and feeding the parts of us that desire. We're invited to wish we had a more attractive body, a luxurious life, because there's no better audience to advertise to than one that is already whipped up into a frenzy of dissatisfaction with what we have and desire for what others have. Ultimately, we are trapped in a very narrow, desirous part of ourselves — but for that part, it's all you can eat.

If Instagram is the hyper-optimized equivalent of a mall, X, formerly Twitter, might be best conceived of as a pro wrestling stadium — or, since we're in Rome and I went there yesterday, perhaps a Colosseum. It's a place for the performance of fighting, a place that invites the part of us that likes to watch conflict and root for a side.

And indeed, the space is shaped for that purpose: the way you get noticed and get followed on X is to beef with other people with followers.

But like pro wrestling it's an entertainment about dominance and power where the real power isn't in the ring. And it's an exercise in monetizing the audience that shows up to cheer the fighters.

In this context, it's worth noting that the head of the Ultimate Fighting Championship just joined Meta's board.

The point is that nearly all of the big digital platforms we have today — Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snap — are spaces that were designed with this very particular set of goals: To serve ads and advertisers.

And as a result, they're built to create a very specific set of situations and serve a very narrow set of parts of our selves: The parts of us that want to fight (because this entertains others), and the parts of us are susceptible to feeling envious and not good enough.

Because people who are wanting, are great people to advertise to.

They call out in us a very particular we, the dysregulated, us-versus-them "we" that happens when you're in a fight in a crowd, and that emerges from a group of covetous and insecure selves.

And it follows that if you're trying to serve those selves and that us, you build an online environment where all that exists are malls and wrestling rings.

So that's money. Now let's talk about power. When we look at the politics of these spaces, they are very clear. Ultimately these spaces are monarchies. At the top is a king, a Mark Zuckerberg, an Elon Musk, who gets to make the rules and change them whenever they like — as both have done recently and erratically, especially since the last American election. If you don't like it, too bad — there is no appeal.

The spaces we have are the way they are not because the people who are building them are bad people, or are deliberately trying to make things bad. I've talked to lots of people in these companies who are very earnestly trying to do good things.

But I can also tell you that the story I hear from these people over and over is that when a decision had to be made about whether to build things that help people communicate better or get along, or to build things that grow users and grow attention and grow revenue — that latter set of things wins out. And that's because they are ultimately subjects of our digital kings, in a setting of commerce.

It's almost funny. Here we are, in the 21st century, with AI robots and self-driving cars, and in the way power works in our online spaces, we're reliving the Middle Ages. It seems almost too obvious to say but:

This way of architecting our digital lives isn't good for us. And it's not good for our societies.

Only serving the consumer in us — the gawking audience member, the combatant — diminishes us, squeezes us down to that size, and excludes many of the most important parts of ourselves.

We deserve better. We deserve spaces that dignify us, that embrace and welcome our highest, best, most connective selves — and that can't happen if the only spaces that exist are money-extracting enterprises that are run from the top down.

It doesn't have to be this way. Let's build parks and libraries for the digital world.

So what I want to tell you — one of the reasons I think we shouldn't close the door and go back to the age of stones — is that it does not have to be this way.

We don't have to let money and Silicon Valley's kings determine how we live our digital lives.

We can choose to build things differently. Because for human communities to thrive, malls and boxing rings and amusement parks aren't enough.

In physical communities, we have bookstores and we have libraries, and they're both valuable. But bookstores tend not to have meeting rooms and public computer access and lend you books because they're fundamentally interested in the book-buying part of you, the individual consumer, not the collective community member. Which is why libraries are so important.

We need libraries, because bookstores are great but they'll never help everyone get the information we need. We need parks, because many people can't afford private gardens and fresh air and sunlight is good for people, and also because it turns out that putting people in physical proximity, having fun in the sun, is a great way to encourage us to see the light in each other, and to build the bonds that lead to strong communities and neighborhoods. We need monuments to remind us of the

great acts of our ancestors and to remind us that we're still the beneficiaries of them. And community centers, and churches.

These places call to different parts of us than the malls and amusement parks, and they remind us we're part of a different kind of we, not the tribal we that forms in a fight, not the consumer we that forms in a mall, but the we of community, of communion.

So, how can we build the parks and libraries of the online world?

How? We discovered patterns that point to what works.

This is, in my opinion, the key question. And it's why five years ago, I got together with a brilliant researcher, Talia Stroud, and a Facebook escapee, Deepti Doshi, and started a nonprofit organization, New_ Public, to help answer it.

We're now a team of 20 researchers and product designers and engineers and communicators who wake up every day to build this better online world. We've been on a journey to answer this question, to find out.

So first we asked ourselves, what can we learn from the positive pockets of the online world?

And as we collected data and explored platforms and read up on the research from scholars in the field, we started to understand some really interesting patterns.

We saw that it's a lot easier to maintain a sense of curiosity and respect in smaller spaces than in huge ones. And this makes sense. We're not used to, as humans, being in billion-person contexts. It's not even clear if a space that fits a billion people is really one space.

Smaller spaces, to use a phrase I learned from the media studies scholar Nathan Schneider, are more "governable" because there's a sense of collective investment, and a sense of connection to the "we" that feels more intimate, more know-able. We're less inclined to misbehave because it's ours in a way that feels tangible.

What's more, in smaller spaces the cost of misbehaving is a bit higher because you lose more by being kicked out — there's a cost to losing that particular group of people, versus the negligible impact of being blocked by a few of the millions of people on an X.

This is one of the reasons that the "global town square" metaphor has always annoyed me — not just because the platforms that describe themselves this way aren't town squares but pro wrestling theaters, but also because town squares very specifically are not global! They're located in a particular place, a particular setting for a particular place-bound "we."

Second, the spaces that we looked at that are working well almost always had a clear — and usually explicit — set of expectations about what kind of behavior is wanted in them. Sometimes these were simple: "Don't swear." Sometimes they were more complex: "If someone does something that violates the rules, put a picture of a grumpy cat in the thread."

Interestingly, it turns out that saying what the norms should be in a space also makes it more inclusive. The researcher J. Nathan Matias found that when a big subreddit, r/science, explicitly posted the post guidelines, many more women and people from marginalized communities joined the conversation. One of the worst kinds of censorship online is self-censorship, and when people who don't have a lot of power feel like there are unspoken guidelines they don't understand, they tend to keep quiet. Being transparent about these guidelines gave them the confidence to speak up.

Good rules are part of good design — they help us understand the *situation* that we're in. But making the rules of a space vivid and easy to understand is also exactly the kind of feature that doesn't get prioritized when spaces are built for advertising and consumption. Here's something that is so simple and there's strong research to support it, but at best we get a long list of rules when we sign up for something.

And finally, we noticed that in the smaller contexts where things were going well, there were almost always people involved who had *taken on the job of making those spaces good* — community gardeners of the Internet. Sometimes these people had official titles like "admin" or "moderator" but we call these people stewards, because what they do is bigger than just letting people in or kicking them out, bigger even than setting the norms or enforcing them. They coax people into the kinds of conversations that are needed. They sidebar with people who are getting into arguments.

These people are unsung heroes of the good Internet — the people who are bringing joy and connection to a space that fundamentally wasn't architected to deliver those ends. Stewards are to these spaces what librarians are to libraries, and like librarians they don't just impose order, they're also skilled and emotionally

intelligent navigators and facilitators of the many different kinds of people who need to co-occupy this same space.

The first imperative: Be a steward.

So from doing this research for the last five years, let me suggest that, to begin with, there are two important tasks ahead of those of us who want to build better digital spaces online, two ways to join this movement. We can work to reshape and repurpose the spaces we have now — to arrange the chairs differently, to set up a living room in the shopping mall, as it were.

And then we can work to build spaces that function entirely differently.

Let's talk about that first path first, the path of stewardship. Appropriate a space — a Google group, a WhatsApp thread — structure it towards a different set of outcomes, and invite people into it.

In doing this, you are creating a new situation. A different kind of space in the online world — on the platforms that we already have. Being a steward can be a thankless job at times, but the gift of creating space for other people to connect is a tremendously exciting one.

To be a good steward is its own expertise, but it's not hard to start, and holding space for people is a very rewarding experience.

Identify a set of needs that are unmet, the "me" and "we" that you want to speak to. Establish a clear purpose, and make sure everyone you invite knows what it is. Think not just about what you want people to say and not say, but what you want people to feel and not feel.

Build a set of norms that define the situation you're inviting people to — or better yet, co-create it with some of your first participants.

Invite and welcome people to the space — not just with a link, but as a host — make them feel welcome, encourage them to speak up. Help people overcome their urge to self-censor, let them know that their voice is actually invited and heard.

Invite people to take on roles that give them ways to participate in the stewardship — welcoming people to the space, helping them connect with others, introducing

and guiding the conversations that you're eager to seek, and helping to mediate conflict when it occurs.

With this, you're off and running, but we have a more detailed guide for the stewards of local digital spaces with a lot of ideas that apply here on the New_ Public website, and we'd love to hear what you're learning too.

The second imperative: Join the movement building an architecture of hope.

So now to that other path, the big lift. This path is the ambitious, important goal of actually building new digital platforms that center values other than money and top-down power.

The town squares, or the churches, or the libraries that really encode the ethos and purpose and politics of public and civic and soulful spaces into their design.

And while this is a big lift, I'm here to tell you that it's not just possible, people are actually making it happen.

In Vermont, a small state in the northeast of the United States, people use Facebook and TikTok but town conversation mostly doesn't happen there. They have something more like an actual digital town square — a home-grown social network called Front Porch Forum built specifically for the purpose of allowing towns to have good discussions.

Front Porch Forum has never taken venture capital and isn't seeking to make a ton of money from advertisers. In fact, it's a public benefit corporation that is not intended to make more money than is required to sustain itself. It's always been built not for advertisers but to serve communities in Vermont first. And as a result, it can do conversations differently.

Because it doesn't need to worry primarily about advertisers or engagement, instead of optimizing for the most posts possible, FPF optimizes for thoughtfulness — by updating only once a day. It's a bold statement that says: slow down. Think about what you're saying. And say something meaningful. And among other things, it makes having a flame war really arduous, because you have to be willing to carry it on for days at a time.

One of the things that FPF shows us is that these aren't places we need to spend a lot of time for them to change us and foster stronger communities.

In our offline lives, places of worship are a great example of this: Even among the faithful, there are few that spend a large proportion of our time literally inside a church or synagogue or mosque or temple. But the parts of us that are nourished by these spaces remain fortified when we leave.

The same is true of the digital public spaces — we don't need to vanquish Meta or TikTok entirely to make digital space building worth doing. People use Instagram in Vermont too… but FPF adds to their lives.

Front Porch Forum also puts its money where its mouth is when it comes to stewardship — in fact, while only a tiny fraction of people at TikTok or Meta work as moderators, at the 40-person organization of Front Porch Forum, *half* of the employees are paid moderators.

With this ratio of stewards to content, every single message can be read before it reaches everyone else to make sure it conforms to the very clear and thoughtful set of norms that have been co-developed over 20 years with community members. And when messages don't — which happens sometimes — they don't just disappear. Instead, you get a friendly note from one of the stewards asking you to phrase things differently.

And so, conversation goes better. People know their neighbors better. Communities are healthier. We conducted survey research on Front Porch Forum's impact and found that not only did people across the political spectrum and across demographics like it much more than Facebook or Nextdoor, they also got more involved in the life of their town and were more committed neighbors as a result.

Of course, Front Porch Forum only exists in one small state in the United States. In most places around the country and the globe, these local conversations happen in forums like Facebook Groups and Nextdoor that are much less well designed for this purpose. But at New_ Public, the nonprofit R&D lab I run, we think Front Porch Forum is on to something big.

As newspapers and other local media sources fail, people are turning to local digital groups in record numbers to find out what's going on around them and connect with neighbors.

So local community conversation points us to an exciting place to consider how to build digital public spaces at scale, because the need is there, because Front Porch Forum has demonstrated how solvable the problem is, and because it's a type of conversation that the large scale platforms don't have a great strategy for monetizing.

At the other end of the spectrum of geographic scale, we're seeing increased interest in this work from large public media organizations, which are already in their DNA more well-positioned to support digital parks and libraries, because they are built to serve the public, to serve everyone, not advertisers or consumers.

New_ Public has come together with some of the biggest public media organizations on the planet — from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to ZDF and ARD in Germany, RTBF in Belgium, SRG in Switzerland, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation — in an unprecedented incubator to re-imagine how public conversation can work when it's built around public service rather than engagement.

Remember the "microphone at the front of the room" problem we talked about earlier? That's essentially how online comments work on most websites, with the most eager partisans rushing to comment first and crowding out more reasonable or moderated voices. So as part of this partnership, we've co-developed something called Comment Slider — a way that people can "see who we are" before they comment, and understand where they fit into it.

In Comment Slider, you're invited to start by placing yourself on a spectrum of opinion — from, for example, "AI is good" to "AI is bad" and seeing a graph of where everyone else stands. Then you can add commentary and see others'. This way, the opinions of the group are pulled forward. It's almost literally making the digital conversation spatial.

Comment Slider is one of a number of novel ideas that we'll be testing in the coming months — with the potential that as these ideas resonate, they can provide the basis for better conversations for the hundreds of millions of people who use these media sources today.

Of course, these big national public media companies are still tied to geography. So how might we build digital architectures that really reject that monarchical view of online power, at a global scale?

We're seeing a new architecture emerge today that might make that possible, in the form of a network called Bluesky.

To the average user, Bluesky looks almost exactly like Twitter (before it became X). And today, 25 million people use it for that purpose.

But in the way it's built, Bluesky is fundamentally different from X or Meta or Instagram. At the core of Bluesky's philosophy is the idea that instead of being centralized in the hands of one person or institution, the way our current social media monarchies are, social media governance should obey the principle of subsidiarity — that problems should be solved at the most local possible level.

To do this, like email, Bluesky sits on top of an open protocol.

This means that your community could, if it wanted, make its own algorithm. Could make its own moderation decisions. And as more people start to build out an ecosystem around this protocol, it means that no CEO-king can single-handedly decide who gets to speak and who doesn't. The promise here is something that's truly billionaire-proof — not able to be bought, not able to be controlled by one random person.

This is fundamentally different from the dominant, centralized social media that has come before.

And it lays the groundwork for a vision of social media where people and specific communities have more control over the design of our own town squares — rather than having to hold town meetings in the middle of someone else's pro wrestling ring.

I want to be honest: I don't pretend that this is an easy task. The scale of users and of capital that flows through these companies is immense.

What I can tell you that around the world, people are starting to grow different kind of spaces. People like Maria Ressa at Rappler are doing it. Bluesky and networks like ActivityPub are doing it. Front Porch Forum is doing it.

In fact, there's a whole worldwide movement of people giving voice and space to the parts of the self, to parts of collective life that these lumbering capitalist infrastructures won't and can't. That is fertile ground for something new, outside of the corporate monoculture of Meta and the fickle billionaire control of places like X.

Don’t close the door.

We are so used to living in an online environment fundamentally structured to serve sensationalism rather than the soul. But at long last we are beginning to see real evidence and use of spaces that do things different. Spaces that do, as the designer said, have some fertile soil for trees, for beauty. Spaces that center comfort, that center dignity, that bring us together and create connection rather than driving us further apart. Spaces that we shape together rather than having them foisted on us by kings from afar.

And I want to say that because as I conclude, I want to remind you that there are a lot of powerful people and powerful interests that do not want you to see what is possible.

They want us to believe that the Internet we have now is the best that humanity can do. They want you to believe that this grey, dehumanizing, greed and despair-inducing centrally controlled architecture is as good as it gets.

And what I want to tell you is: Don’t fall for it. Do not let them tell you it’s impossible to do better. It’s a kind of funny thing for me, the agnostic Jew, to come to the Vatican and say, but: Let’s have faith.

Remember that we are just 30 years into this whole Internet thing. We’re still at the beginning of the story and there is much left to build and create. And when we humans are inspired and hold onto a vision and a set of values we can invent truly amazing things for ourselves. Where there are humans, there is hope for humanity.

Hundreds of years ago, when the first industrial revolution happened and people were living in those coal/smoke/smog-filled, polluted streets, there were people who said that lives of poverty and sickness were inevitable, un-fixable. And then there were people who envisioned and demanded and planted public parks so that no matter who you were you could have access to sunlight and fresh air.

And when being able to read and do math became the great gateway to middle class prosperity decades later, there were people who said the illiterate masses were hopelessly, unteachable, genetically dumb, and then there were those who started to evangelize for this radical idea of public libraries and public schools, so that everyone would have access to knowledge and the opportunity to learn and grow.

This is something we've done before — something we know how to do — to reject the grim premise that this is the best we can do, and build something beautiful, maybe even something holy.

So be a steward! Be a gardener! Circle some chairs and make something new. Build a space, or help build one of the spaces that is growing! Shift your time and attention to the places — the situations — that make you feel more whole, more human. And bring your communities along!

This work is hard but it's urgent, because these networks are critical to solving the big world problems in front of us, —and wow are they big. Only by bringing our full presence, a greater "we," can we solve them.

Don't close the door. Don't go back to the age of stones. Let's build something better than the Internet we have — together — so that we can walk through that door into parks and blooming gardens and cathedrals, broad town squares and libraries. With faith, with hard work, with creativity, we can build ourselves the spaces worthy — of all of the spectacular parts — of our shared humanity.