

**White Paper**  
**ABC, ARD, CBC/Radio-Canada, New\_Public, RTBF, SRG-SSR, ZDF**

**Civility by Design:**  
**The Public Spaces Incubator (PSI)**

**Purpose**

This white paper outlines the results of the Public Spaces Incubator (PSI), a multinational digital design project. It covers work conducted between June 2023 and March 2025, and outlines future work into 2027.

**Introduction**

Today, online discourse is dominated by large social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok and X/Twitter. It is well documented that these platforms promote polarization and fuel toxic interactions, as well as traffic in disinformation, with harmful outcomes for mental health, civil society and democratic life.

Public service media organizations (PSMs) are dedicated to serving their citizens with trusted news, entertainment and culture. They are public and mission driven institutions that reflect their societies, protect and promote their unique cultures and democratic life, and bring people together. However, for nearly two decades, PSMs have generally outsourced online conversations to private social media platforms. This practice is no longer sustainable.

In an effort to re-engage with citizens and provide alternatives to private social media platforms, PSMs have joined forces to research, design and develop for better interactive conversational spaces. This is the goal of the Public Spaces Incubator (PSI), launched in 2022 by four public service media organisations and New\_Public.

The incubator has completed the initial phase of research and development and is currently testing prototypes.

The final PSI toolkit will be made available publicly as open-source software by 2027.

**The Problem: Design for Fighting**

The dominant social media platforms have been designed for specific business outcomes, notably revenue generation. More engagement (likes, shares, comments, clicks) leads to more time spent and ultimately more revenue. Controversial, sensational, and emotionally charged content is promoted over nuanced or thoughtful discourse. These platforms run on algorithms that stoke adversarial behaviour. The result is more like a fight or a gladiatorial event, than what happens in town-halls or public squares and parks.

The important thing to understand is that this behaviour is designed by the social media platforms. It is a feature, not a bug. This is the reason moderation generally fails on social media platforms: because the rules of engagement and conversation are designed for adversarial conflict..

## **The Solution: Public Service Media and Civility by Design**

Civility is all around us. In public squares, in schools, universities, shopping plazas, town halls, most public spaces. Brawls in public are not normal; they are exceptions. It is a fundamental error to accept that digital interactions are “naturally” hostile and toxic, when these are features of their design.

The PSI project is focused on designing for different experiences, to encourage different behaviours and outcomes - more city council than brawl and knife fight outside the tavern.

[Starting in 2023](#), four PSMs from Canada (CBC/Radio-Canada), Belgium (RTBF), Switzerland (SRG SSR) and Germany (ZDF) joined forces and formed a design group for digital products that seek to improve citizen engagement and democratic discourse online. These four PSMs partnered with New\_Public, a nonprofit organisation dedicated to digital product design for civic engagement.

PSI began work by researching what people are doing in their social interactions and discovered that many resist participating online because of its generally toxic feature. Most people are seeking alternatives, some of which are private messaging; but many want public alternatives to the dominant social media platforms.

Based on this research, the PSI project moved to design alternatives to existing features on social media platforms. Focus was aimed to reduce “binary” interactions and constructed groupings of sentiment, such as the thumbs and down and hashtags, which are now common online.

The aim is not to create a new “platform” that competes with Facebook or Twitter, but to augment the existing digital services operated by PSMs. These new interactive and conversational tools aim to foster “civil” discourse and debate. This “civility by design” approach borrows from other mission-driven design principles, such as “privacy by design”.

During 2023 and 2024 over 100 prototypes were produced in design sprints. Many of these were tested as low-fidelity prototypes, and a couple of dozen as higher-fidelity prototypes. From this data, a dozen features were coded. These are being tested in private and public betas on PSM platforms in Europe and Canada.

Some of the prototypes being tested include:

### **Topic of the Moment**

Meetings, whether in town halls or business, are structured by agendas, with topics. It is not best to just turn on comment features on articles, for example, and then walk away and expect civil interactions. In society, conversations are usually structured

around themes and topics. “Topic of the Moment” mimics this common aspect of social interactions. It also returns editorial leaders to online conversations. With the “Topic of the Moment” prototype users are invited to connect directly with hosts, editors, journalists and experts about topics of interest. Think of this as an online version of what is done with radio call-in shows, which are programmed by topics and themes. It is similar to the “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) feature on Reddit.

### **Contextual Entry Points**

This prototype invites users to enter conversations from different stories or articles online. It gives more context and broadens interactions with more perspectives. It overcomes the atomizing effect of commenting only on a single article and allows for updates on topics that keep conversations going over time, beyond a headline or story of the day or individual show.

### **Comments Slider**

Rather than limiting users to binary feedback (thumbs up/down), this feature breaks this mold for online interaction by allowing users to respond along a spectrum of more nuanced positions. By design, this is less polarizing. It also mimics what we experience in conversations, when people express doubt or interest or want more information to learn about a subject or form a viewpoint.

### **Representing Perspectives**

Usually when we converse in society people are aware of each other, where they come from, whether they are a teacher or student or parent. Indeed, “who are you?” and “what do you do?” are questions people ask of each other, before deepening their conversation. This prototype generates the same information. It asks users to identify themselves in terms of their relationship with a topic (e.g. “I’m a teacher”, “I’m a student”). This makes comments less abstract to others, and broadens perspectives brought to discussions. It allows editors, hosts, program producers to select perspectives they want to elicit in topics of conversation.

### **Reaction Types**

In conversations, people nod, wink, roll their eyes, raise their hands, gesticulate. Communicating by body language is part of being human. This prototype feature aims to humanize conversations with quick-reaction messaging, like emojis.

### **Video Voting Tool**

All PSMs are broadcasters. This feature opens interactions in broadcast feeds, and invites viewer participation with polls in a fun, game-like format before entering a conversation. Tests are showing that game-like initiation to conversations lead to more civil interactions from participants.

### **Conversation Helper**

This feature uses an AI assistant to monitor the sentiment of conversations and nudges users about the norms and rules of debate. Rather than banning users for bad behaviour, this prototype operates like a teacher or chairperson, to de-escalate conflict.

### **AI Moderation**

This works along with “Conversation Helper” and uses AI to intervene when toxic comments are made, and nudges users towards constructive language. It seeks to avoid the extreme measure of banning users. It is a step before sending questionable comments to be triaged for final consideration by moderators. Think Mary Poppins instead of Robocop.

### **Next Steps: PSI Phase 2 and Open-Sourcing**

In [late 2024](#), a second phase was announced for the PSI project with additional financing. ARD in Germany and the ABC in Australia joined the PSI collective. Broadcasters from the Netherlands will begin testing prototypes.

The current project remains a collaborative project, run by the members as an inner-source project for testing on their respective digital platforms. The members plan to continue releasing results and updates on the work, as it [has in the past](#).

The PSI project is funded until March 2027. During this period, prototypes will be refined and made into market-ready features. The entire PSI toolkit is planned for release as open-source software in or before 2027.

### **Learnings**

PSI is a major multinational design project involving PSMs and dozens of experts in content and format development, digital user experience research and design, and product and software development. It’s a project focused on the tools for hosts, editors, journalists and producers to engage audiences and citizens in civil conversations, often linked to programs.

In this regard, the products are not stand-alone or designed to turn on and forget. They are products designed to be part of editorial and program workflows, being used by multiple departments: editorial, programming, marketing, social media management, digital strategy and product, research and development.

Some key learnings from PSI include:

1. We don’t have to accept social interactions as defined by the major social media platforms.
2. We don’t need to re-invent large platforms to provide alternatives; we can create digital spaces for audiences on PSM platforms that follow different design principles.
3. User behaviour is a function of design. PSMs can design for civility rather than to encourage fights in the public sphere.

4. Civil digital conversations are best produced as part of production workflows, with topics chosen and animated in ways similar to call-in programs. They should focus on engaging audiences. This requires multiple roles: programing and editorial, marketing, digital product strategy and development, research, and audience relations.
5. PSMs can collaborate to innovate. PSMs can co-design and co-produce digital products to better serve citizens. They must first agree and focus on a common problem. Collaboration allows pooling their resources, sharing the risk, products and learnings.
6. Small, dedicated teams work best in an incubator, when the work is facilitated by outside parties and experts (e.g., organisations like New\_Public). This creates an “innovation space” for organisations.
7. The PSI model can be replicated to tackle other digital challenges.

## Resources

Announcements and updates previously published:

- Project launch, [8 February 2023](#).
- Updates on development with initial concept designs, [7 May 2024](#); and [concept details](#).
- Phase 2 launch and new members, [9 October 2024](#).