

Pluralism in Digital Communities

September 2018 report - Plural think tank

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 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.

References

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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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