European Public Open Spaces (EPOS)

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EPOS is a project for conceptualizing public open spaces in the digital networked public sphere – spaces in the public interest, free of state and market influence and with a European scope. While the project is open-ended, it starts from an initial concept sketch derived primarily from current debates on Public Service Media (PSM). While PSM are under pressure from multiple angles, they remain one of the most important sites for public culture and integration.

The initial sketch envisages four constitutive elements of EPOS: **PSM**, public knowledge institutions like Europeana, civic knowledge institutions like Wikipedia and citizens. The BBC had announced (in 2015) that it will open its online platform to others, starting with **public culture, cultural heritage and scientific institutions**, and it launched the beta-version of this Ideas service in January 2018. Dörr/Holznagel/Picot (2016) added NGOs and user participation to the mix and coined the term "Public Open Space". Civic **knowledge commons communities** like Open Access Science, Free Software, Wikipedia and Open Educational Resources are committed to quality-controlled, relevant, sourced knowledge for the public good and to free and universal access – like PSM. **Citizens**, the fourth pilar, participate in EPOS through comments, recommendations, curation, content production as well as governance. There have been calls for a non-commercial Youtube (Hündgen 2013). Successful examples are Australian Broadcasting Corporation's ABC Open and the video curation platform Network Awesome. Participation is crucial for societal integration by bringing communities into conversation again. The four constituent groups provide both content and governance. They 'own' EPOS.

While these ideas resonate in the national debates across Europe, what is strikingly lacking is the **European dimension**. Even for pan-European political campaigning there seems to be no alternative to Facebook. Project Europe needs a European public sphere, in its current dire straits more than ever. The EPOS project is therefore pan-European from the start.

What **shape** EPOS takes remains open. It could be a single Europe-wide platform providing all content and functions in 24 official languages for all to filter or several thematically distinct platforms. It could be a meta-site aggregating and curating content from thousands of federated partner sites like Europeana or a network of decentralized production and distribution like Investigate-Europe.eu. It could take no form of its own but consist in strengthening European digital capacities in existing national and regional media.

The **functions** of EPOS include but are not limited to providing information, education, culture in line with the traditional PSM remit, providing access to the stores of cultural heritage and to current culture and knowledge production in festivals, universities, civic education etc., supporting P2P curation and production of knowledge and software and providing a space for civic deliberation.

The project EPOS can obviously not attempt to build the actual platform(s). Rather it envisions and explores it through three strategies: research, working groups and prototyping. 1.) **Research** on the issues involved will be conducted from the perspectives of different disciplines looking at communications and media, policy, organization and regulation, sociology, law, Open Access and Open Data. 2.) The project engages stakeholders from the four constituents in (online) **working groups** and symposia, addressing the issues involved in building EPOS and facilitating sharing among all partners. 3.) The project strives to develop functional **prototypes**, demos, sketches and mockups in barcamps and hackathons that make components and features of EPOS tangible.

The first manifestation of EPOS was a HERA **research proposal** of 5 research teams in 4 countries with 9 partners in October 2017 which was not successful. Search for research funding is ongoing. Its second manifestation was the **EPOS Kickoff Roundtable** with a dozen stakeholders at Wikimedia Germany in Berlin on 5/6 April 2018 from which an infrastructure for the online working groups and plans for growing the network are emerging.

EPOS attempts to find answers to challenges facing media, citizens and democracy:

- The public sphere and democracy have been eroded by fake news and hate speech, science deniers and conspiracy theorists, algorithms and personalisation that reinforce filter bubbles and polarisation, by strategies of systematically undermining truth and replacing it by affects like patriotism and strong leaders.

- PSM, like the public sector in general, see their legitimacy challenged by neoliberal and rightwing voices arguing that the state should only act in case of market failure. In Orbán's Hungary und Kaczyński's Poland, PSM have been turned into organs of the state. Also other countries switched from broadcast fee to tax funding bringing PSM under direct political control.

- PSM see the need to disseminate their content where particularly young citizens inform themselves: on third-party platforms like Youtube and Facebook. At the same time they are very unhappy about having no control over the context of their content, being subject to changes of technical functions, ranking and contractual terms, making it difficult for PSM to comply with their requirements, and being criticized for subsidizing commercial platforms to which in the end users attribute PSM content, blurring the identity and recognisability of public media. Calls for non-commercial platform alternatives have increased in urgency in the current Facebook scandal.

- Proposals for public-private partnerships of PSM and commercial media have been vigorously criticized from both sides. In contrast, EPOS joins four groups which each in their own right are obligated to serve the public interest. While public and commons knowledge are categorically different, the two share fundamental values and orientations and are significantly different from commercial media, which makes them natural allies.

- The Internet has become a largely commercial space that has not fulfilled the hopes for democratizing the public sphere. A Habermasian model of deliberative democracy depends on spaces that are free from state and market influences. Media scholars have suggested that a „Civic Commons Online" is needed and that PSM are uniquely positioned to establish such a deliberative space complementing both public sphere and parliamentary debate (e.g. Bua 2009; Ramsey 2013).

At the same time, EPOS does not set out to solve problems, but wants to **think out-of-the-box** without limiting itself by real-political concerns, develop an ideal public value service in the networked public sphere from the eigenlogic of the Internet, imagining the unthinkable, at the same time building and expanding on existing cooperations and focussing on low-hanging fruit that can demo the power of the vision early on.

EPOS is a chance for a **triple-win-situation**: PSM and the other partners would make publicly funded knowledge in the public interest visible as distinct from commercial media and gain in recognition, reach and legitimacy. Citizens would gain a one-stop portal for reliable, high quality information and debate, for current and heritage culture, offering orientation in times of post-truth and hate speech. Finally, European democracy would benefit from a space free from state and market interests, a space of pan-European exchange, opinion forming and deliberation.