



MEDIA AS BRIDGES

UNDERSTANDING
MEDIA DEVELOPMENT
TEAM

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From ego- to eco-system awareness—building the collective capacity for societal transformation

THE PERCEPTION GAP

The 2024 UN Human Development Report features an interesting set of numbers. Titled "Breaking the Gridlock," the report finds that 69 percent of people around the world are willing to sacrifice some of their income to contribute to climate-change mitigation. But only 43 percent of people believe that others would do the same.¹

This 26 percent perception gap is a significant indicator of how we perceive each other in today's world. Although a majority are willing to tackle environmental challenges, many believe they are alone in this effort, doubting their neighbours would do the same.

This disparity in perception affects our identity as citizens and shapes our understanding of our society. It also influences our collective assumptions about the future we are heading towards. Wilhelm Ernst Barkhoff, a co-founder of GLS Bank in Bochum, stated, "We can only overcome our angst of a future we fear, with a vision of a future we want." However, if our collective vision of the future is distorted by misperceptions of those around us, we risk moving in the wrong direction.

DIVIDING VOICES POLARIZING PUBLIC SPACES

Where are these images of our current reality and possible future shaped? One important arena are the public spaces we inhabit, including different social media channels built by a trillion-dollar industry, much of which is located on the West Coast of the US. The public spaces these media giants create operate on a business model that actively engages in polarization and division to capture our attention. Fear and hate are important psychological drivers in keeping our eyes on posts and leaving us engaged. While sensational and fearful news have always been a source of profit for media outlets, social media accelerates its impact by creeping into our personal and private spaces to a degree unimaginable just a few decades ago. The consequences of these negative public engagements are profound, leading not only to serious mental health issues, particularly among younger users, but also to a perpetuation and amplification of societal polarization. The aforementioned 69 percent of people who are willing to give some of their income to address the environmental challenges we are facing are becoming invisible in these arenas while extreme and dividing voices take the center stage.



1 UN Human Development Report 2023/24: Breaking the Gridlock—Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World

A DIFFERENT SOCIAL REALITY— LESS LOUD AND LESS VISIBLE

At the same time, the figures in the Human Development Report reveal a quieter, less visible social reality. This alternative narrative aligns with our experiences at the Presencing Institute. Each day, we collaborate with inspiring change agents worldwide who develop innovative solutions that remain outside the public spectacle. This narrative represents a movement of individuals who are less prominent on social media but are dedicated to creating positive change, addressing some of the most pressing challenges of our time, and envisioning a different relationship with the planet and each other. We describe this movement as a shift from ego- to eco-system awareness.

»Bridging the gap between our societies' potential for collective action and the current reality of individualism and polarization is one of our greatest challenges today. To this end, we must innovate public spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and awareness.«

CHANGE AGENTS

One example is our work with the Global Alliance for Banking on Values (GABV), an association of over 70 banks around the world that use finance as a tool for addressing social and ecological challenges. Founded in 2006, member banks of the GABV successfully demonstrate that a bank can operate as a for-profit business while being a vehicle for positive change. These financial institutions align profitability with a positive social and ecological impact. Take, for instance, BRAC Bank, ranking third in Bangladesh today. Founded by the world's largest NGO, BRAC, this bank serves small businesses whose owners are often illiterate. Loan officers are trained to step into a small market or shop and provide financial services designed for individuals who never had an account. This allows them to grow, to hire and to thrive. Or Quipu Bank in Colombia. Aiming to help the informal economy in Latin America, Quipu Bank developed an AI-based credit scoring tool that allows small business owners excluded from the mainstream economy to access the financial means they need to build their business. Yet another example: Xac Bank in Mongolia, which formed an alliance between non-profits and heating-product businesses and reduced the carbon emission in the coldest capital in the world, Ulaanbaatar, by upgrading housing units in low-income communities.

And these are just some of many examples that we have seen across sectors, from agriculture to health, education, or business. Over the past seven years, we have created an activation platform for change agents, with free access to tools and methods of transformation and a community of other change agents. Over 260,000 users have signed on with the intent to apply these tools to the local challenges they are facing.

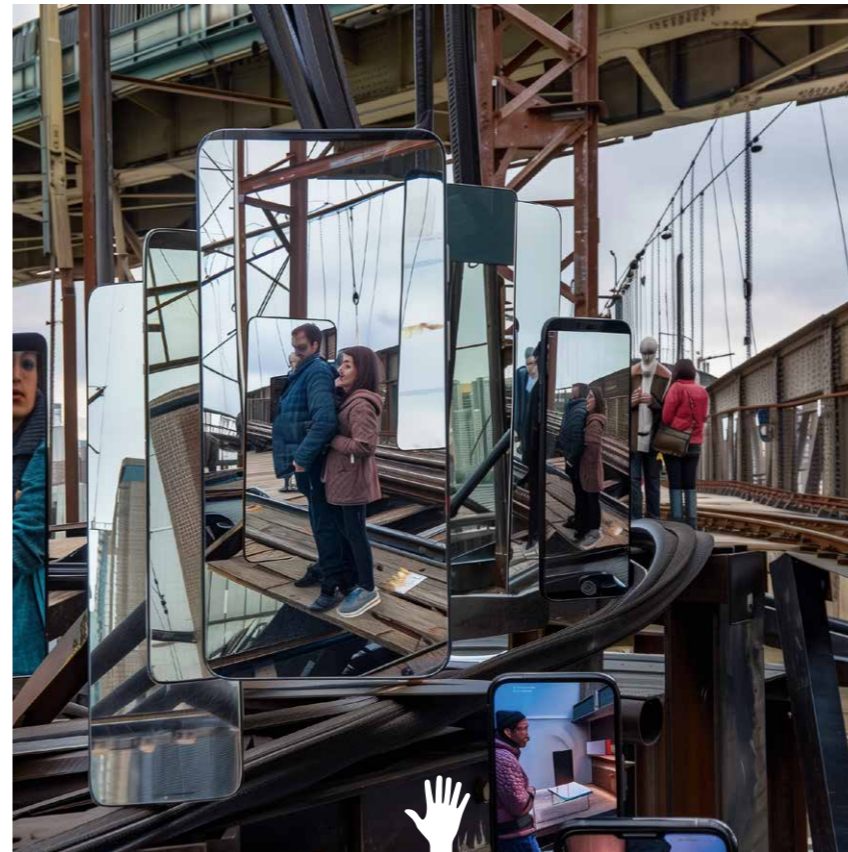
PUBLIC SPACES FOR COLLECTIVE TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION

But a movement that does not see itself as a movement cannot become a historical force. What is missing are spaces that allow these change agents to articulate the future that they want to see and help co-create.

The difficulties in meeting today's global challenges are not caused primarily by a knowledge gap. For example, many of the technical solutions for addressing the climate crisis or inequality are known. What is missing is our ability to collectively act on this knowledge. This is sometimes referred to as the "knowing-doing gap". In most societal systems, we collectively create results that (almost) nobody wants. Most people do not get up in the morning with the goal to destroy the planet or make other people's lives miserable. So, why are we unable to address these challenges collectively? It appears that one missing piece are public spaces of resonance that allow us to see our collective possibilities.

In his 1927 book "The Public and Its Problems", John Dewey argues that democracy is not merely a technique of governance but requires continuous citizen engagement. A democracy evolves with its citizens; how they learn, grow, and engage directly impacts the quality of governance. Democracy is a collective project of engagement and co-creation. This raises critical questions about where this engagement occurs and who provides the necessary public spaces. Moreover, it prompts us to consider how these spaces can be designed to foster meaningful, co-creative participation.

If democracy requires its citizens to engage, grow, and learn, the quality of public spaces becomes crucial. Do these spaces facilitate engagement and listening, or do they, as is often the case with many digital interactions, foster toxicity and conflict driven by profit-oriented business models? The quality of listening, dialogue, and the underlying relationships in these public spaces profoundly affects the health of our societies and potentially the survival of our democracies.



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→ The Community Innovators Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology



→ Presencing Institute



→ Katrin Kaeufer and Lillian Steponaitis: Just Money. Mission-driven Banks and the Future of Finance. Cambridge: MIT Press 2021.

MEDIA AS MIRRORS AND BRIDGES FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Media, in all its forms, chronicles the events within our societies, creating a resonant space that allows us, as citizens, to gaze into a collective mirror. This mirroring process influences how we define our roles as citizens and, consequently, impacts our actions. Thus, it is crucial whether the media is diverse, trusted, and transparent, or whether it operates through lies, fear, and division. In this context, media literacy emerges as an essential skill for citizens in a democracy, enabling them to navigate and critically engage with the information landscape.

In times of crisis, such as when floods endanger our neighbors' and our own homes, we instinctively know how to respond, collaborating and stepping up to the challenge. The key to this response lies in our awareness of our surroundings and the needs that arise, forming a bridge we call "action confidence." This confidence emerges when we see ourselves as part of a larger whole, when we experience the system we are co-creating and enacting. Bridging the gap between our societies' potential for collective action and the current reality of individualism and polarization is one of our greatest challenges today. To this end, we must innovate public spaces for collaboration, dialogue, and awareness. These spaces require social infrastructures and technologies that foster the quality of relationships necessary for co-creation. Media plays a central role in this endeavor. Shifting from an ego-centric to an eco-centric awareness requires the development of these social infrastructures for public spaces characterized by high relational qualities.