

A Federated Social Web for Peace

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"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

-- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Abstract

Closely linked to the ideal of peace, the concept of civil society has a long history as a third actor besides the state and the economy. It is a nonviolent "zone of civility" that can debate and address war and other problems. In today's interconnected world we see the emergence of a "global civil society", which transcends national borders and attempts to solve global challenges that established institutions fail to address. This global civil society is organized like a network, just like the global communication networks that produced it are also organized like a network. However, while popular social network services such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube are often said to be powerful tools for peace and democracy, they are in fact highly centralized services operated by for-profit companies. For a global civil society to truly work, both the architectural structure and the governance mechanisms of its communication channels must be based on civil society principles itself. This paper argues that the main promise of the Federated Social Web – in addition to the obvious advantages of improved privacy, control and resistance to manipulation – will be a network structure that deep at its core resembles civil society and is therefore a powerful instrument for a more peaceful world.

Introduction

During the opening ceremony of the World Summit on the Information Society's second phase in 2005 in Tunis, the then Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan articulated the desire to use ICTs for working toward the ideal of peace. He declared that

"While most other conferences focus on global threats, this one will tell us how to best use a new global asset".

In a similar manner, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in her "Remarks on Internet Freedom"¹ in 2010 that

"Once you're on the internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society."

And during the LeWeb'09 in Paris, Queen Rania Al Abdullah of the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan said that

"Digitizing ourselves has heightened our instinct to be selfless."

Indeed, ICTs can be used in numerous ways to promote a more just, democratic and peaceful world. They can be used by governments, international organizations and NGOs

¹ See <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>

to perform their important work more effectively. They can be used as organizational tools by nonviolent, popular movements to overcome authoritarian regimes. They can be used to provide education and specialized knowledge in underprivileged regions and parts of society. They can be used for economic opportunities and for development, in order to improve living conditions and the overall well-being of humans.

But besides the above rather obvious ideas, most importantly, ICTs also empower individuals all around the world to connect to each other, to engage in dialogue, to learn from each other and about each other, to build peace in the minds of individuals, to overcome cultural differences and to discuss and solve global challenges. In short, ICTs are the key enabling factor for a global civil society which transcends national borders.

The Prince, the Merchant and the Citizen

The concept of civil society refers to the social space in which individuals and groups of individuals who are unaffiliated with hierarchical state structures and market-based economic structures take collective action in order to advocate their shared values and interests. In doing so, they act not because they seek political power or profit, but because they care enough about something. This idea may be best described using the metaphors of the Prince (representing the state), the Merchant (representing the economy) and the Citizen, who represents the ideas and actions of citizens outside of either state or economy. The relationship between them is complex. The boundaries are blurred rather than sharply defined. There is competition within as well as between the three actors, and they also have obligations toward each other.

The space in which the actors of civil society operate is a public arena which is open to anyone, where diverse interests collide and compete for attention. This space is sometimes also referred to as the public sphere, which is a concept that goes back to ideas from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment as well as early civil rights documents such as the American *Bill of Rights* and the French *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*.

Civil society processes take place within this public sphere. They are characterized by self-organization, self-motivation, spontaneity, pluralism, by their independence from state and economy and by their aspiration to freedom and democracy.

Network Structures

One major characteristic of civil society that distinguishes it both from the state and the economy is its internal organizational structure. While a state has a strictly hierarchical form, and the economy is based on markets, civil society is organized like a network. When considering the implications of this realization, it is important to note that the concept of networks is a trans-disciplinary one which has been applied to many practical situations and academic theories both in the natural and social sciences². In the social sciences for example, the idea of networks has been applied to many fields of study, such as the structures of corporations, international relations, terrorist organizations, and indeed also civil society.

When contrasting networks with other forms of organization such as hierarchies or markets, it becomes obvious that each one has strengths and weaknesses. In the case of networks, all their strengths and weaknesses can be directly traced back to their decentralized nature and lack of central authority.

² For example, see (Powell, 1990)

Perhaps the most important advantage of networks lies within their resilience against disruptions and attacks. Whereas hierarchical structures contain potentially weak points that offer attractive targets for attackers, networks are less likely to contain such weak spots. Even when disruptions occur, networks are more effective in repairing topological damages due to their redundant and easily readjustable links. The ability to easily add and remove new links also makes networks highly scalable, i.e. makes it possible to recruit and integrate new members into the network at any time, or even join separate networks together.

Another well-documented strength of networks is their ability to transmit and process messages in a very efficient way, bypassing hierarchies that may cause obstruction and delays, and getting information directly to the member(s) that needs it. Links between members can dynamically be optimized, and resources or communication channels that are found to be valuable can immediately be used again.

However, although network structures offer several potential advantages, there are weaknesses as well. In fact, the two most often cited advantageous properties of networks – their decentralized nature and lack of central authority – can simultaneously also be seen as the source of weaknesses. Basically, the absence of a central structure can make it hard to make decisions, hard to resolve emerging conflicts within the network, hard to locate and contact members and resources within the network, hard to agree on joint initiatives and hard to control the implementation of such initiatives. While a network is flexible in providing logistical resources to its members, it can be difficult or impossible to coordinate members and to concentrate the resources of the entire network for a larger, joint operation. Another disadvantage is that participation in networks is usually voluntary, and that there are no orders and no or hardly any notion of personal obligation and accountability, therefore making it hard to implement long-term project that would have to rely on more permanent structures.

Global Crisis

One reason for the contemporary popularity of the concept of civil society is that it is accompanied by hopes that it can address a perceived global crisis, the solution to which requires the establishment of new processes at the global level. Early well-known predictions and analyses hinting at this emerging global crisis include the Club of Rome's reports on the "limits of growth"³ and on "mankind at the turning point"⁴. Since history is full of conflict and peace, problems and solutions, crises and recoveries, it might be debatable whether humankind at this particular time is indeed confronted with a global crisis that is of a significantly greater magnitude than others at other times in history. But issues such as global warming, transnational terrorism and the financial crisis do indicate that today, we as a species are for the first time confronted with highly threatening problems that we can only attempt to solve together.

(Held, Kaldor, & Quah, 2010) even speak of a "hydra-headed crisis", arguing that individual catastrophic events such as the Haiti earthquake, the famine in East Africa, the Taliban attack on Kabul, the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the Boxing Day Tsunami or Hurricane Katrina are brought to our attention at a such quick, successive way that it appears as if new ones pop up as soon as another disappears. To some extent, the evolution of modern ICTs has simply led to the fact that today we are more aware of such events than in the past. But ICTs have also resulted in a fundamental

³ See (Meadows, Meadows, Randers, & William, 1972)

⁴ See (Mesarovic & Pestel, 1974)

transformation of our political, economic and social relations that may very well be the root cause of some of the individual crises that make up the global one.

In the face of unresolved global problems referred to as the global crisis, it might be the “third system” – civil society – which steps in to fill the void created by the inability of established governmental and economic structures to effectively deal with them. Today, this civil society is no longer confined to the territorial state. According to (Kaldor, 2003), the “global civil society” is both an outcome and an agent of global interconnectedness, and it reflects a new reality enabled by the fusion of the terms “civil society” and “globalization”. Individuals and groups of individuals communicate across borders, and their primary identifying factors are often no longer the nation-state, but the values and causes they share and care about. A global civil society therefore promises to apply a global, holistic approach to global challenges, unlike nation-states, which are mostly concerned with their own spheres of influence, and international organizations, which often turn out to be politically paralyzed by conflicting political interests of their members.

According to (Keane, 2003, p. 1), the term “global civil society” was born in the 1990s out of seven overlapping streams of concern: The revival of the old language of civil society, after the military crushing of the Prague Spring; a rising influence and availability of modern ICTs; a new awareness of a fragile world system, stimulated by the peace and ecological movements; the perception that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new world order would emerge; the world-wide growth of neo-liberal and market-capitalist economies; the disillusionment with the broken and unfulfilled promises of post-colonial states; and the rising concern about dangerous vacuums opened up by the collapse of empires and states and the outbreak of uncivil wars.

The Federated Social Web

The role of ICTs has been and continues to be crucial to the development of an effective and beneficial global civil society, since they enable the necessary interconnectedness across borders, the free flow of ideas, exchange of thoughts and consensus building processes which are the backbone of a civil society of global scope. One obvious and straightforward prerequisite for this to work is the fulfillment and protection of human rights in online communication systems, in particular regarding the availability of ICT infrastructure, the protection of privacy, the right to freedom of expression, and the guarantee of non-discrimination. In each one of these fields, there is much work that remains to be done. The Digital Divide is far from being closed, meaning that different parts of the world’s population have unequal access to the opportunities of ICTs⁵. Also, the right to freedom of expression online is restricted to various extents in many countries⁶.

It is important to keep in mind that sometimes what appears to be civil society is actually driven by state or economic actors. In the context of ICTs, one example for attempts of disguising political or economic interests as civil society initiatives is the concept of paid blogging, i.e. the spreading of favorable opinions via weblogs for money. This strategy has been used by the Chinese government to post comments favorable

⁵ For example, see these statistics from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU): <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/index.html>

⁶ For example, see the (Freedom House, 2011) report.

toward its policies, in an attempt to influence public opinion on the Internet⁷. As another example, in the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, the U.S. military has started using software that allows it to create multiple, fake online profiles, also known as "sock puppets" or "virtual armies" to sway public opinion, using tactics like posting fake comments on blogs⁸. And as (Castells, 2007) notes, corporations are investing heavily in using social networks to extend their influence. This can range from individual companies to open their own Youtube channels, to the acquisition of entire social networking platforms by large media corporations.

But there is another challenge when building ICTs that can effectively serve a global civil society. This challenge, which is much more subtle and goes beyond the above basic considerations, is to develop social networking services and communication structures which themselves – in their fundamental technical network architecture – reflect the organizational form of the global civil society they will enable. This means a decentralized and democratic network structure where data and messages flow directly between individuals and where network connections adapt dynamically according to the actual communication processes which they are serving. Current popular online services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube – even though they are often praised as having the ability to connect people across borders, to facilitate intercultural dialogue, and to bring peace and democracy to the world – are based on quite the opposite approach. They are highly centralized services with single points of authority that are operated by for-profit corporations, and they have the potential to exert control over the personal data and the entire set of all communication processes between their participants. Therefore, even though one may think of today's popular ICT applications as serving the interests of the Citizen, they do in fact resemble the structure of the Prince, and are governed by institutions of the Merchant, both of which is highly paradoxical and counter-intuitive. For a global civil society to truly work, both the architectural structure and the governance mechanisms of its communication channels must be based on civil society principles itself.

What French philosopher Frantz Fanon, known for his work on decolonization and his influence on national liberation movement leaders from Malcolm X to Ernesto Che Guevara, once said about colonialism also holds true in the quest to finding the right communication technologies to establish a truly free global civil society:

"A community will evolve only when a people control their own communication."

The Federated Social Web⁹ is a concrete technological initiative which is working toward this goal. Its objective is to create a world-wide, interconnected network of data, messages and social connections, where individuals are at the center of the technical architecture. In this system, participants can freely choose between different service providers, arbitrarily switch between them, or even act as their own, independent node in the network. The most obvious and most often-cited advantage of this idea of basing ICTs on decentralized network structures is that nobody is dependent on any single central authority, which contributes to the desirable goals of putting individuals in control, to improve privacy, and to provide resistance against disruptions, censorship, surveillance and abuse of personal information.

⁷ The online commentators engaged in this activity are sometimes called the "50-cent party". See (Bristow, 2008).

⁸ See (Olson, 2011)

⁹ See <http://www.w3.org/2005/Incubator/federatedsocialweb/>

But beyond these obvious benefits, what decentralized networks will really enable is a global civil society that offers a wealth of powerful new characteristics which can truly serve the participants' communication needs, and which is able to dynamically adapt its structure according to arising challenges and opportunities. This will be an approach which does not simply re-create and re-enforce old communication channels, but which is instead flexible and courageous enough to also offer new patterns of exchanging ideas and thoughts. In such a system, communication may follow a more random rather than static pattern. Good ideas may reach recipients that would normally be neglected, malicious messages may be sorted out, and decision making processes may be facilitated in intelligent ways.

It is these above properties of decentralized social networking services which will have the potential to create a well-functioning global civil society, a global public sphere which is able to effectively host the discourses to approach and solve the big global problems of our time.

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