Interview series with blockchain influencers — Part 1

Can blockchain transform the world? 8 influencers weigh in on its value

June 21, 2017 Gabriela Motroc

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Douglas Adams (http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/386162.The_Hitchhiker_s_Guide_to_the_Galaxy) got it all wrong, it seems. The answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything is not 42 — it's blockchain, some will argue. Can the technology behind Bitcoin transform the world or should we take it with a grain of salt? We invited eight blockchain influencers to weigh in on its value and look beyond the hype.

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What is blockchain technology?

If you want to learn more about the blockchain, the technology behind Bitcoin, there is no one more qualified than Don Tapscott (http://dontapscott.com/), CEO of The Tapscott Group and one of the world's leading authorities on the impact of technology on business and society, to teach you how this technology works. He calls the blockchain "the second generation of the internet (https://www.ted.com/talks/don_tapscott_how_the_blockchain_is_changing_money_and_business)" and claims that it "holds the potential to transform money, business, government, and society."

Have a look at his TED talk and then we'll dive deeper into this technology's potential and how it can transform our lives.

asap

The heart of the blockchain matter

Now that you found out what the blockchain is and how this technology works, it's time to get down to the heart of the matter and answer the following questions: Is the blockchain over-hyped (https://jaxenter.com/looking-beyond-blockchain-hype-133589.html)? Can it transform the world (https://jaxenter.com/bitcoin-flipping-world-economic-forum-believes-blockchain-future-fintech-128449.html)? How can we measure its performance (https://jaxenter.com/bitcoin-flipping-blockchain-will-outgrow-bitcoin-interview-127832.html)? Should we list it as a skill (https://jaxenter.com/its-up-to-the-developers-how-soon-blockchain-goes-mainstream-129142.html)? What's in it for us?

We invited eight influencers to weigh in on the facets of the blockchain and explain why the industries that make the world go round see tremendous potential in this technology. This series consists of four parts that dissect the purposes and benefits of the blockchain and shed some light on the main concerns and obstacles.

In the first part of this interview series, we invited our blockchain influencers to talk about the blockchain's impact on our lives and to weigh in on the importance of the legal factor in the blockchain's healthy development.

8 answers: According to a recent report (http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/581948/EPRS_IDA%282017%29581948_EN.pdf by the European Parliament, the blockchain could change the lives of EU citizens [and not only]. What's your take on that? What is its potential impact?

Meet the Influencers

Chitra Ragavan is the Chief Communications Officer at Gem, a Los Angeles-based blockchain startup.

Kathryn Harrison is a Blockchain Offering Leader at IBM, responsible for bringing IBM Blockchain products to market.

Conor Svensson is the founder of blk.io, a provider of enterprise blockchain platform based on Ethereum, and author of web3j. Twitter: @blk_io

Stephen DeMeulenaere is one of the founders of Coin Academy.

Marta Piekarska is the Director of Ecosystem for Hyperledger.

Eoin Woods is CTO at Endava, an author, a conference speaker and an active member of the London software engineering community.

Dawn Newton is the co-founder and COO of Netki, a blockchain solutions provider focused on digital identity and regulatory compliance.

Perianne Boring is the founder and president of the Chamber of Digital Commerce, the world's

Chitra Ragavan: Blockchain technology has the potential to be transformative not only in the EU but throughout the world in coming years. In part, it's because of the data rights movement that emerged in Europe and is rapidly growing in other countries. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) due to take effect in the EU on May 25, 2018, has huge financial implications in the form of fines (Up to four percent of global revenues) for multinational companies that fail to protect their customers from privacy and data breaches. This applies not just to European companies but to any company that's processing the data of EU residents, no matter where these companies are located.

Blockchain technology is one way that these multinational companies can protect their bottom line — by securely managing customer data using blockchain's core features of transparency, auditability, and accountability. As the data rights movement picks up steam, as more and more individuals decide to take control of their data back from centralized stakeholders that are largely profiting from the data of others, you will see the benefits of blockchain technology becoming more and more realized.

Kathryn Harrison: I agree — blockchain has the potential to revolutionize government /citizen interactions by building trust and minimizing bureaucracy.

> ***We currently live in a world where companies have become custodians of personal data.***

Conor Svensson: The privacy implications of blockchain are significant. We currently live in a world where companies have become custodians of personal data. When someone signs up for a service, they provide information about themselves partially to identify themselves, but also for the company's benefit to understand more about them.

Public blockchains allow individuals to have a secure trusted identity, where they can control how much information about themselves to make available to others. I.e. you do not need to prove who you are in order to transact with another party – you simply need to be able to prove that you hold the private key associated with a public key as per traditional public key cryptography. This enables you to control what information you are willing to share with other parties, helping retain control over your information.

SEE ALSO: Brian Behlendorf explains the DevOps of Blockchain (https://jaxenter.com/brian-behlendorf-devops-blockchain-131773.html)

For example, where traditionally you may have provided your name, date of birth and address to identify yourself. With an identity on a public blockchain, a public key (or address derived from it) becomes your online identity, and you can choose whether to tie that public key to personal details when you transact with another party.

This turns the existing model on its head where you can become the custodian of your own data, where you can control what data you make public or provide to companies in a more transactional manner than is currently the case.

largest trade association representing the blockchain industry.

Stephen DeMeulenaere: I would say that blockchain technologies will significantly change the lives of EU citizens. From improved citizen ID and voter registration systems to improved and simplified voting, registrations and payment of taxes, blockchain technologies will improve citizen-government integration in many ways.

Marta Piekarska: Blockchain has revolutionized the way we think about trust. Until the technology was introduced on a large scale in IT, the concept of trust was enforced on parties that usually had absolutely no reason to have confidence each other or the anointed trust authority.

As a privacy researcher quite often I heard from users “In the real world, I build relationships over time. In the virtual reality, I am forced to trust someone I never saw in my life to give them my most private data”. This is not the case with blockchain technology anymore: today we put things on a distributed ledger and no trusted third party is involved.

> ***This is a revolution: Finally, a technology that helps an everyday person.***

As long as we stick to the principles and the original design the security principles hold. If you think about it, this is a revolution: Finally, a technology that helps an everyday person. Technology that works in the background to improve lives and one that users don’t need to understand, it can be part of solutions they use.

Eoin Woods: Blockchain has the potential to bring trust and transparency to many types of record and transaction. This could bring real benefits to public life across the EU and beyond.

Dawn Newton: Currently large financial institutions are looking at blockchain technology to address existing pain points such as the costs associated with correspondent banking. Additionally, they are looking at recapturing a portion of the $600 billion (http://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/trends-remittances-2016-new-normal-slow-growth) dollar international remittance market. In the short term, we are seeing a focus on cost savings for existing processes as this enables the financial institutions (FIs) to execute on these projects rather quickly due to the fact that these processes are well established and well documented. This enables them to focus on creating the exact specifications needed for choosing the appropriate blockchain, perform a clear evaluation of blockchain technology as a whole, and evaluate their blockchain deployment. In the longer term, FIs are interested in creating new markets for their businesses but these endeavors entail a significantly higher amount of work as market analysis, risk assessments, and compliance considerations must all be taken into account.

One of the biggest claims has been around financial inclusion. The European Savings and Retail Banking Institute states that over 37 million (https://www.wsbi-esbg.org/press/latest-news/Pages/Close-to-40-million-EU-citizens-outside-banking-mainstream.aspx) European citizens are not participating in the mainstream banking systems. They found during their research that 2 of the 4 reasons for this are cost and physical access. Blockchain technology has the ability to significantly drive down costs for banks which would enable them to service more accounts. Additionally, utilizing cell phone based onboarding will enable banks to set up a new client’s accounts in minutes via their phone and get rid of the requirement for an individual to have to be present to open and utilize an account.

Netki recently partnered (http://www.banklesstimes.com/2017/05/24/netki-bitt-unveil-central-bank-production-platform/) with Bitt for one such product. Bitt is working directly with Central Banks in the Caribbean to enable direct island-to-island currency exchange (currently all transactions route through either the US or Canada). Bitt’s blockchain based wallet service provides an effective means for all people, including underbanked individuals to engage in the global economy through the use of digital payments that are low cost, secure, easy to use, and highly efficient.

> ***People often ask what’s the “killer app” of bitcoin – we’re seeing it develop right in front of our eyes, it’s crowdfunding.***

Perianne Boring: Blockchain is already changing the lives of many around the world via a variety of applications. Starting with currency and payments, blockchain eliminates the need for third parties to facilitate financial transactions. For the first time in history, we can exchange value peer-to-peer, as easily as sending an email or a text message. So, for those who are unbanked or underbanked, or maybe don’t have credit to get a credit card, they instead are able to have access to the financial system with bitcoin and other digital currencies. From a financial inclusion perspective, this is a very powerful use case. The Chamber (https://digitalchamber.org/) has a white paper available on our website, commissioned with Georgetown University, that’s dedicated to how blockchain can be used to address such issues of financial inclusion.

Another way in which we’re already seeing blockchain impact our lives is through fundraising or crowdfunding. We’re seeing token sales that are taking off around the world, where anyone using blockchain technology can access basic crowdfunding tools to raise money for their business. People often ask what’s the “killer app” of bitcoin – we’re seeing it develop right in front of our eyes, it’s crowdfunding. We’re seeing multiple projects which are raising multi-millions, if not hundreds of millions, of dollars in incredibly short periods of time. This is the unbundling of financial services and it’s also leveling the playing field in terms of being able to invest or being able to access investor capital to start a new company.

> ***It is very important that we don’t try to regulate this technology too early because it’s still developing – we don’t really know what it’s going to be when it grows up yet.***

Europe — A positive component of the EU regulatory regime is their ability “passport” licenses obtained in one country to another. We have a member called Bitstamp, that received their license in Luxembourg and was able to passport it into all 28 EU countries. As a result, Bitstamp is fully licensed across the EU and serve as a virtual currency exchange to all European consumers. This is very different from the US, where states do not offer the ability to passport licenses between states, and we don’t have any virtual currency exchanges that are accessible across the entire US. That’s one area from a regulatory perspective where the EU has been a lot more effective at getting companies to market.

The author of the report states that “since other applications can ‘piggyback’ the Bitcoin blockchain, the biggest impacts of Bitcoin may be found outside the currency domain.” Do you agree with this statement?

Chitra Ragavan: It’s true that while blockchain technology enabled the birth of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, the non-FinTech uses of blockchains are galvanizing companies throughout the world.

Blockchains are particularly powerful in healthcare (creating patient-centric healthcare records which offer a unified lens into a patient’s journey through the healthcare system), supply chain (ensuring that medicines are not counterfeit or tampered with, that patients are notified in the event of drug recalls, and avoiding shortages), and aviation (ensuring counterfeit parts don’t end up on airplanes). There are other transportation use cases such as using IoT data/telematics to track the “health” of cars and planes and enabling fractional insurance based on partial or shared vehicle usage.

> ***The non-FinTech uses of blockchains are galvanizing companies throughout the world.***

Even in the creative world, blockchains can be used to track and protect patents and the intellectual property of poets, writers, musicians, and artists. Enabling automation and logic and smart contracts in all of these use cases can maximize efficiency and profits and minimize waste, fraud, and abuse. The possibilities are endless.

Kathryn Harrison: I absolutely agree. The blockchain is far more than just Bitcoin or even a currency use case. Blockchain makes sense in any scenario where there are multiple participants in a business network who need to exchange goods or services and currently lack fundamental trust and need to have a clear record of all of the transactions occurring across the network. We are already seeing significant interest in blockchain in fields like supply chain and retail, in addition to financial services.

SEE ALSO: “People cannot just adopt blockchain on their own” (https://jaxenter.com/blockchain-interview-le-hors-134841.html)

Conor Svensson: There’s truth in this statement. It’s often the less obvious applications of a technology where the most utility is found. For instance, decentralized storage is emerging as another application of this technology, where computers providing storage capacity on the network are paid with a token for their contribution.

Then, of course, there’s the ability for companies to raise capital via initial coin offerings (ICOs), although this is not that far removed from the currency domain.

It’s likely over the coming years as this space matures, a lot of further innovations will come to light.

> ***I strongly believe that Bitcoin was and continues to be a very interesting and strong application of blockchain technology.***

Stephen DeMeulenaere: I believe that both the currency and non-currency aspects of blockchain technologies will impact European society, economy, and governance. The Euro currency is in crisis, and the support of additional currencies, whether digital, regional, municipal or local will rise to meet the needs of trading. Regional and National Governments and the European Union should be encouraging this.

Marta Piekarska: I strongly believe that Bitcoin was and continues to be a very interesting and strong application of blockchain technology. It continues to be extremely secure blockchain due to its size, purity in implementation and number of eyes looking at the code. I also think that blockchain is a tool and should be seen as such: we should search for domains where it can become part of bigger solutions in other areas.

I don’t necessarily think that Bitcoin’s blockchain, or the blockchain, should b the basis for these solutions as it has a lot of limitations that originate from the same place as its strengths: it is slow, inflexible and not applicable to most use cases. But I would see it as a reference blockchain implementation.

Eoin Woods: Absolutely. We can see this already with systems like Everledger, Genecoin, Provenance and Civic using the Bitcoin blockchain for applications from tracking diamonds to providing secure personal identities, I think this is already happening, and you can see it happening even more on other blockchain platforms like Ethereum that were specifically built as distributed application platforms.

It’s hard to know if Bitcoin’s impact will be bigger as a currency or a platform, but its use as a platform is already an established fact.

> ***Bitcoin as a currency will be one of the most significant impacts of blockchain technology as it is utilized for remittance, financial inclusion, trading, etc.***

Dawn Newton: Back in the early days of the Internet, those of us working on it thought email was going to be “the killer app” that would make it go mainstream. It made perfect sense, everyone hated to fax as it was horrifically time-consuming and phone calls were still expensive. However, it was being able to look at photos via web browsing that caused the Internet to really take off. While email did indeed become a highly utilized application what we did not see coming were the truly transformative applications like Uber, AirBnB, Facebook, and others.

Bitcoin as a currency will be one of the most significant impacts of blockchain technology as it is utilized for remittance, financial inclusion, trading, etc. Other promising use cases cited in the EU report include land registry, supply chain, and identity management. Determining which will have the most impact is difficult to predict as it will greatly depend upon adoption rates rather than product value.

SEE ALSO: World Economic Forum believes blockchain is the future of FinTech (https://jaxenter.com/bitcoin-flipping-world-economic-forum-believes-blockchain-future-fintech-128449.html)

Perianne Boring: Absolutely. Currency is just one application of the blockchain. The first application of the blockchain was through bitcoin as a currency, but as the industry has more opportunities to develop blockchain-based technologies, we are seeing more complicated use cases beginning to come to fruition. However, it will take time – the more complicated the use case, the more time it's going to take code and to test and to ultimately bring to market.

There are a lot of applications above and beyond payments. One that I'm very excited about is in the healthcare industry, the concept of creating patient-centered health data, where the patient would actually own and control their records. These records could be transmitted and secured with blockchain-based technology and would facilitate individual control over their electronic health records.

> ***Currency is just one application of the blockchain.***

Other use cases that we're looking at include supply chains and the insurance industry – especially with the use of smart contracts in applications such as claims processing. This development would have huge implications toward driving paper-based systems to digital applications. There's really a myriad of use cases that we're seeing and that our members are developing that are above and beyond currency.

One thing I'd like to point out is that it is very important that we don't try to regulate this technology too early because it's still developing – we don't really know what it's going to be when it grows up yet. We've seen a lot of growth in just the past few years, and we're going to continue to see a lot of growth over the next decade. This industry needs some runway to develop before we can define the parameters of regulatory policy.

How important is the law in this context? Does the development of the blockchain depend on it?

Chitra Ragavan: It's very important the regulators and lawmakers not be prescriptive and stifle innovation in shepherding this foundational technology. Instead, they should seek the expertise of industry and technical experts and offer a path through which the technology can blossom and grow, to the benefit of all citizens. Too often, lawmakers, often at the behest of powerful lobbies, are tempted to dictate how technologies should and should not be used and that only has the tendency to create data silos and crush competition particularly from small startups where the biggest technology innovations occur but who have the least political clout.

> ***The need for support via law will not go away.***

On the flip side, blockchains are a powerful enabler of laws and regulations. For instance, in the healthcare space, blockchains can enable secure, permissioned, sharing of data between providers, patients, insurance companies and banks because of the distributed nature of the technology, all the while protecting the privacy of patients and their data. Similarly, with supply chain laws, blockchains can enable the tracking of pharmaceutical data as required by federal track and trace law to help prevent drug thefts, counterfeits, or drug shortages in the marketplace or speed up drug recalls. The bottom line is that governments should encourage innovation without being prescriptive and blockchain companies should find use cases that help governments enforce important regulations and laws. There's a synergy there that's often missed. It's not an either/or scenario.

Kathryn Harrison: I think it is really important that projects that use blockchain operate within the existing laws that govern business and industry. If blockchain transactions flout these existing rules and thus create systemic risk, then regulators will have no choice but to shut these companies and approaches down. That said; while innovation is ongoing, as long as blockchain-based companies are operating within the existing rules, I think less regulation is advantageous so that we can fully explore the possibilities of this technology and understand the opportunities and challenges it presents.

> ***If the law hinders this development, the technology will find ways around unjust or unhelpful laws.***

Conor Svensson: The development of blockchain does not depend on it, however, the enforcement when dealing with assets that are not entirely digital will always require common law to prevail.

No smart contract could cover every eventuality, and when trying to enforce real-world actions digitally, there will always be room for error or misinterpretation, hence the need for support via law will not go away.

Stephen DeMeulenaere: The law is very important in this context to give guidance on how these systems will benefit citizens most. If the law hinders this development, the technology will find ways around unjust or unhelpful laws.

Marta Piekarska: I believe that the move towards recognizing blockchain technology in law is important. Mostly because it can dramatically improve many of the areas that touch on the legal field: healthcare, wholesale banking, education, certification, proof of provenance, legal contracts. While development of blockchain or rather success of blockchain technology is not reliant on being recognized in law, it can still be applied to solutions in other fields, it should be said that the domains mentioned above will significantly benefit from using blockchain technology removing the trusted third party, introducing decentralization, clear auditability and immutability.

Eoin Woods: So far this hasn't been a major factor in the development of blockchain, but clearly, that is changing. Nearly all financial services regulators are investigating blockchain as an enabling technology and as regulators and large enterprises start using it for real, legal underpinnings for blockchain transactions will become important.

> ***Technology must exist inside of current legal structures while at the same time challenging them to change.***

Dawn Newton: Governance and rule of law are critically important whenever a global transformative technology is released. In the early days of the Internet, the United States Congress had language in a bill that would have removed anonymity and forced every Internet Service Provider (ISP) to KYC (Know Your Customer) all of their users and every user would have to disclose their real name rather than a persona. While their intentions were good, as they were trying to reduce the amount and cost of SPAM, their solution would have crippled this groundbreaking technology. Instead, the Internet Service Providers Forum worked directly with Congress to change the bill to ensure that consumers were protected while enabling the technology to flourish.

We are at a very similar juncture at present. Governments worldwide are trying to figure out what their regulatory policies will be regarding blockchains. Furthermore, in larger countries, the government entities themselves are not even in sync. Policy makers need to be open to hearing from technologists about what will and won't work from a policy perspective and technologists need to make the time to educate the policy makers. This is what ensured the Internet Freedom Act and a plethora of other legislation to be sound rather than constraining and onerous.

Technology must exist inside of current legal structures while at the same time challenging them to change. Hopefully, much of the industry will self-regulate before heavy handed, more intrusive regulation and legislation is created.

Perianne Boring: Legal implications are incredibly important in the context of growing an industry, and constitute what I consider one of the biggest risks to mainstream adoption of blockchain. If the government does not get this right, it could stifle innovation. This is why I founded the Chamber. As a former U.S. Congressional analyst, I have seen the devastating impacts bad policy can have on the economy and the markets.

The first blockchain use case was bitcoin or currency, but if we legally define blockchain technology from a currency perspective, that could stifle other, more advanced use cases from coming to market.

Another key legal development is development and use of smart contracts. One of the biggest issues that our Smart Contracts Alliance is looking at is where smart contracts fit within the law. Are they legally enforceable or binding? Are they really contracts?

In the second part of the interview series, our blockchain influencers express their concerns regarding the blockchain technology, talk about its obstacles and the industries that *cannot* be disrupted by the blockchain.

If you'd like to know more about the blockchain and meet the top movers and shakers in the global blockchain scene, join us in London in October.

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Gabriela Motroc is an online editor for JAXenter.com. Before working at S&S Media she studied International Communication Management at The Hague University of Applied Sciences.

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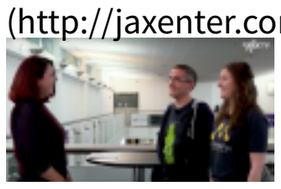
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S&S MEDIA

JAXenter.de (http://jaxenter.de/)

JAX Finance (http://jax-finance.com/)

JAX London (https://jaxlondon.com/)

JAX Germany (https://jax.de/)

DevOpsCon (http://devopsconference.de/en/)

Developer.Press (http://developerpress.com/)

International PHP Conference (https://phpconference.com/2014/en)

Webinale (https://webinale.de/2015/)

WebMagazin (https://webmagazin.de/english)

S&S Media (http://sandsmedia.com/en)