

Note: This post is a bit more philosophy than protocol wizardry. It may be all wrong. I also caution the reader - I reference some American political campaigns to illustrate a point. I wrote this after reading a number of Ehud Shapiro's work on grassroots protocols. I welcome all feedback.

Introduction

Is there something fundamental to a global public square or a global meeting/ information dissemination point?

There are many emergent technologies which will allow for greater coordination at the local levels, which could in the future lead to a status quo of local communities and trust graphs defined by their chosen interactions which can interoperate with other networks. However, it remains to be seen or known if this is what people want. Life today is global. In the morning when you wake up, often the first thing you do is check social media platforms for updates to the groups which are relevant to you. You may not care about other echo bubbles, which can simply be defined as the groups coordinated by your local view of a trust graph. However, you may want to interact with others and get exposure to the "trendy" topics. Is there anything here that a [grassroots dissemination protocol](#) could not address?

Probably not in the sense that trust graphs that are relevant to you today can be just as relevant in grass roots settings. However, there is somewhat of a fear of missing out that somehow if you are not on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, where you are globally discoverable and can interact with whomever, whenever you want, you will be missing out on something that others in your social groups find particularly relevant; even if its just memes (especially then).

But the global social applications as constructed today turn users into their main products. They collect all relevant meta-data, which is leaked every-time a user interacts with the application. The operators then catalog the data into relevant bits and auction it off to the highest bidder, sometimes even price-fixing their own auctions (see google). There is no recourse or remuneration for the users who sometimes in the case of twitter pay to access the application. Indeed, some nefarious applications act as malware that covertly spies on a user's behaviors on their own devices without explicit permissions. And from a general user experience, often targeted adds are either irrelevant or offensive. This business model is not only invasive, but its morally bankrupt and locks ethical fiber.

That said, getting users to switch to decentralized networks where they own their own trust graphs and can port their identities across applications as they choose, is a Herculean task. I postulate there are two paths alone that can get users to switch from the current centralized dystopian social applications to permissionless, open, user owned, and operated applications with low switching costs. Low switching costs is perhaps the most relevant ingredient. If I as a user can take my twitter following to another application, then I don't care if the application owner happens to change the user interface and rules that govern the protocol. I can simply take my data and port it to another application without losing any reputation gained from years of twitter. If this can be fixed users would happily switch applications that align with their values and or provide better information flow control guarantees for example.

Zooming back out, we need to address the path to achieve this future of low-switching costs and user owned data. Let's outline the two paths of user conversion to grassroots social applications.

One

The first approach requires a campaign or a grassroots movement. You need a minority of ardently passionate and frequently loud supporters who will carry the narrative until the next wave of acolytes are indoctrinated. This is very difficult and can take years. If we look at the political movements of the Sanders campaign, you can see an illustrative example. Sanders spent years organizing and collaborating with a handful of key progressive [grassroots movements](#) to get his message out.

These organizations aggressively recruited values aligned people that fit a particular age demographic. In addition, Sanders and the orgs created a number of catchphrases and memes playing off previous Labor or proletariat driven organized uprisings against the controllers of capital. Many people found themselves framing wealth and income inequality as a 99% vs. 1% thing, instead of a political divide of red vs. blue. And while this evoked shades of populism rooted with a rich history with many worldwide examples, it served the purpose of getting middle-class and low-income populations motivated and excited to spread the memes of production. And while Sanders did not win an election, his org certainly played a role in the election of other like-minded progressives, as well as tipping the scales for Biden's 2020 election campaign.

This path is difficult because it requires an obsessive amount of coordination and communication. This is the type of movement at scale which would be required to get people to consider switching social media realities from permissioned centralized dystopian applications to grassroots networks.

Two

The second approach requires no less work, but perhaps is a bit more subtle in terms of requiring the existence of a grassroots movement that makes waves globally. Simply, provide an elite user experience that is better than the status quo. Empirically, one of the reasons some folks prefer Signal to iMessage, aside from the main benefit of privacy, is that it provides a better or as good a user experience as iMessage. This almost seems like an impossible feat, but it happened and the application lives and thrives on user donations without the attachment to large conglomerate who makes their money by monopolistic rent-seeking. Apple controls and application store and takes a hefty cut of profits for applications who list their

software there ~ 30%. In addition, Apple holds a monopoly on hardware compute and cell phone devices with close sourced software and patent protected hardware. They have every advantage in the world yet Signal still provides a great user experience which is compelling enough to motivate users to switch messaging applications.

In open-source software development or web 3 this seems like a viable path. It's not full proof, however, because you still need a word of mouth. So if you are competing at the margins with twitter, your product must be significantly better, perhaps one order of magnitude at minimum, to entice otherwise unmotivated users to switch.

Synthesis

Ideally, you can do both one and two. Some people believe that if you say something is true long enough that when it eventually comes true you have a mind share lock in that allows for quick network effects. Conspiracies are a great example of this. If a group of people believe in a particular conspiracy for multiple years and then find out said conspiracy is true it immediately spreads the former conspiracy like a virus. I say this because it seems obvious to anyone considering developing a grass roots social networking application to simply focus on user experience. It is something a developer can control. However, building a movement should also not be neglected, especially if the movement is a values based one that plays on emotions evangelizing new supporters into the movement.

You can spread your attention thin, focusing on one or the other. I think teams building these types of applications would do well to deploy movement builders and UX architects in parallel to the systems engineers. If successful in developing a strong values aligned movement even at its infancy, giving them a tool with an elite UX will cement their loyalty and motivate them to spread the word via informal methods that don't require even .05 of marketing/ advertising dollars.

Conclusion

Grassroots social networks have a place in the [Heterotopian](#) future of society. They are necessary. As the physical and digital world blend, GSNs can empower communities to own their digital trust graphs while maintaining interoperability with new agents in who want to join. Users can port their identities, inclusive of reputations and trust graphs from one application to another without surrendering their digital sovereignty.

Converting people from existing centralized social networks is a difficult task that requires the combination of an elite user experience and a directed grassroots movement. Studying grassroots political movements and network effects of new dominant technologies throughout history may provide builders of these next-generation communication devices with a glimpse into the archetypes of capturing human attention.