Community + Culture features practitioner perspectives on designing technologies for and with communities. We highlight compelling projects and provocative points of view that speak to both community technology practice and the interaction design field as a whole.

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Considering the Rights (and Wrongs) of Community Technology

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In the past year, a number of landmark events have underscored some of the fundamental changes occurring in how we construct and interact as communities, and in the diversity of various sites for civic action. Social media has been tagged as a great instigator and supporter of movements like the Jasmine Revolution, the widespread civil unrest in the U.K., and the Occupy movement across the U.S. The scale and breadth of these events have led many to focus, with new energy, on the role that communication technologies play in our communities. The rise and pervasiveness of social media have engendered new means of organizing social movements, enabling massive local action while affording a level of transparency and global awareness that were novel, and in some cases, literally revolutionary. One of the consequences of these events was renewed advocacy to consider access to the technologies that amplified and made visible these social movements a *right*—in particular, to consider Internet access a basic human right.

Vint Cerf took up this very topic in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* last January [1], where he made the case that Internet access should not be considered a right, neither human nor civil. Although the Internet may be an increasingly necessary tool for leading a meaningful and productive life, he argues, a century ago a horse was likewise indispensable for a productive livelihood—neither should be considered a human right, as Internets and horses are simply means to ends (in Cerf's analogy, the focus is on the economic ends of livelihood). For Cerf, technology, in whatever shape it takes at a moment in history, is simply a tool, and human rights advocacy should be focused on guaranteeing ends rather than on the means of achieving them. Cerf goes on to point out that Internet access should also not be enshrined with the status of civil rights, those social contracts enforced by law, for much the same reason: Our focus should be on a core set of social values to which we aspire rather than on the tools through which we might enable those aspirations.

Leaving aside the dramatic regulatory reconfiguration that would happen for Cerf's current employer, Google, if Internet access should make the list of either human or civil rights, his distinction between means and ends is a useful test (even if his reduction to economic considerations ignores the social value created by the Internet). It is on that distinction that I would like to focus, as it provides a way to think about the role of interactive technologies in our communities—not just the Internet, but the multitude of applications, sensors, and technical capacities we are currently building within the aesthetic of always on, ever connected. The specific question I would ask: What is the gap between means and ends in our formulation of basic human rights and the shape of the Internet today? To be sure, many of the rights enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights [2] operate on different registers than something like Internet access; however, if we look at some of those rights, we begin to find places where the Internet is closing the gap between means and ends. For example, "Article 19—Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference

and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." We see that the Internet is present here under the broad label of media. Under this article, the Internet begins to asymptotically approach a right, particularly because the distinction between ends and means becomes vanishingly small when the most impactful expressions of opinion occur via the Internet, and the content one might seek is likewise mediated by Internet technologies via search and social networks.

An element of this was present in the uprisings throughout last year: The internal organization and the external visibility of the Jasmine Revolution was amplified by social media and text messaging; the spread of civil unrest in the U.K. was similarly mediated through text messaging and BlackBerry's messaging service. Both exemplify how Internet technologies were instrumental in enabling and instigating these incidents of free expression. To remove Internet technology from this, we would be reducing free expression to crying in the town square—a mode of expression as anachronistic as Cerf's example of horse ownership.

Arguably, one's ability to express his or her opinion is not quashed in the absence of technology, but it is certainly limited, both in its visibility and in the scope of action that might be marshaled. But let's take another example: "Article 21—(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country." Here, access to technology becomes more of a pernicious

Photograph by Rowan El Shimi

▸ Facebook and other social media channels played a role in organizing and inspiring the Egyptian revolution and other Arab Spring movements.

problem in the face of calls for developing "digital democracy" [3]. We are in the midst of reinventing civic participation and the ways in which citizens and the state interact with each other. This is, as it should be, an exciting time for thinking about civic engagement and how the Internet and its attendant technologies can empower people to self-organize and effect change in their communities. The challenge, though, is when the relationship between citizen and government takes on a digital form: How do we ensure inclusion of all citizens when services are mediated by online registration and eligibility verification? What can we do to address issues of accuracy in digital representation when personal identities and histories are kept in databases that may, and often do, contain errors? When governments listen to their citizens through digital channels, how are individuals without access (by choice or circumstance) heard? How do we manage to provide access for all when the relationships of communities to local, state, and national government are reduced to online and data-driven models of interaction that do not—and perhaps cannot—account for how different communities and subcultures relate to these enabling technologies and to state and social institutions?

This brings us to the issue of civil rights, and how Internet access might be constructed as an obligation the state—in one or more of its forms—has to its citizens. Cerf is more sympathetic to this position, as it has a near precedent in the way the U.S. has made provisions for subsidizing telephone access to all of its citizens through "universal service." Here, though, are the issues of scale and impact that make parallels to the telephone inadequate. The Internet has transformed, and will continue to transform, how we interact with one another in more wide-reaching ways. While the telephone certainly revolutionized personal communication, the Internet is an order of magnitude (or two, or three) more transformative: It is more pervasive, it is more comprehensive, it is less forgetful. It is the thing we are embracing to shape how communities relate to one another and how citizens interact with the government. There is a belief that the Internet will make government more effective—more democratized. From electronic voting (as problematic as that has turned out to be), to engaging citizens in discourse around issues, to developing tools to transparently and jointly collect and analyze data at large to massive scales, there is a received wisdom that all of this will lead to better government and governance through more robust civic engagement mediated by the Internet.

All of these issues indicate that the means and ends are starting to blur; in fact, the term *digital democracy* itself suggests the means of participating are being merged with the ends of participation.

We must be mindful of the fact that the Internet is not democratizing in and of itself; democracy,

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and participation, for that matter, are not qualities of a thing, but rather are the result of access, action, and inclusion. Reducing democracy—or any form of government or community structure—to a technical problem misses the rich social interaction that drives these things. And although we can aspire to open access to information and the inclusion of all voices, the "openness" of the Internet is contested, and the reality of inclusion within Internet-mediated forums often falls short of the rhetoric of democratization and is, at a minimum, far more nuanced. Furthermore, the push for big data reduces analysis to a mere technical problem, producing algorithmic outcomes that are difficult or impossible to contest—where the voice of the community is oppressed by the hegemony of the data.

And this is where we come to the role of designers, artists, community organizers, activists, and, ultimately, individual community members in taking ownership of and shaping how technology will be designed for, appropriated by, and incorporated into the multiplicity of communities not just in the U.S. but around the world. Thinking about whether access to a technology is a right is one way of examining the roles and relations inhabited by different groups; as Cohen noted in an article several years ago, we need to examine our assumptions of the "whos"—that is, the communities involved—and the "whats"—the forms of interactive systems we produce [4]. We also need to look at the convergence of means and ends. I think some of Cerf's assessment of the Internet as a human right are wide of the mark and fail to account for how means and ends are already blurring. However, his call for awareness of these issues among the ranks of professionals who design the infrastructure upon which the Internet is based is well placed. I would echo that call and further argue that the broad field of interaction design can bring to bear an interesting and indispensable perspective, because it is often our job to design the interfaces and experiences where means and ends meet. We identify and create the whos and the whats.

When the Community + Culture forum was created last year, then editor Tad Hirsch set an agenda to engage with issues of community-focused design. He pointed to four dimensions along which we might consider communities: agency, scale, identity, and difference [5]. As the new forum editor, I want to continue to think about these dimensions and engage with the role of interactive technology (the Internet in its many forms) as a cultural object. It means thinking about technology not just as a tool, a means to an end, but as an artifact and experience that in some cases may be indistinguishable from that end. It means considering the invisible—the people who may be left out or muted—and the social consequences of design decisions. It means posing for ourselves design and thought experiments that allow us to speculate on alternate ways in which the world might be organized and how we are connected to the world and to one another through interactive experiences and technologies.

In the coming issues, I will be inviting a range of scholars, practitioners, and community advocates to present their work and perspectives in this forum. It will be an opportunity to explore how different communities are coming into contact with technology, and how social and civic media are being marshaled in different contexts.

ENDNOTES:

1. Cerf, V.G. Internet access is not a human right. The *New York Times* (Jan. 4, 2012); http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/opinion/internet-access-is-not-a-human-right.html

2. United Nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/

3. President's Council of Advisers on Science and Technology (PCAST); http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/pcast-nitrd-report-2010.pdf

4. Cohen, K.R. Who we talk about when we talk about users. *EPIC '05: Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings.* 2005, 9-30.

5. Hirsch, T. Productive tensions: Approaching community technology design. *interactions 18*, 2 (March + April 2011), 24-27.

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