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CITIZEN MEDIA

PRESERVING THE VALUES OF FULL INFORMATION CITIZENSHIP

AN ARCHITECTURE FOR FULL INFORMATION CITIZENSHIP

SEEDING VALUE – WHILE PRESERVING
OLD VALUES

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An explosion of innovation in the knowledge realm has driven us closer than at any point in history to a world where everyone has access to the information they need to be effective, change-making citizens. But it also has seeded growing dysfunction. Ashoka's News & Knowledge program director wonders: How do we accommodate technology and advance user needs while preserving freedom, access, quality, and privacy?

When we launched the Changemakers Citizen Media project, we publicly admitted that we didn't know what to expect. Surprise us, we said. But we actually had a pretty good grasp of the long-term goal. We called it "full information citizenship":

Full information citizenship is central to Ashoka's vision of an Everyone a Changemaker world. This is as true and as profound for remote Peruvian villagers and displaced persons in Sri Lanka as it is for Web-savvy American teens: All people must be able to engage freely and powerfully with information to advance their own lives and society. In a rapidly changing world, news and knowledge is the basis of action – the currency that gives one standing; reveals the horizon of what may be possible in a world where everyone is a change maker; and determines how we interact with others.

So, let's unpack that a bit. In the last decade-plus, we have witnessed an explosion of innovation in the knowledge realm. We are, arguably, closer than at any point in history to a world where everyone has access to the information they need to be effective, change-making citizens.

INFORMATION DEMOCRATIZATION

In part, of course, this is a function of tectonic technological shifts, which have changed forever the way we create, deliver, and consume news and knowledge—upending the traditional economics and politics of the field. The explosion of new media, and the low cost of distributing data via those media, have made the reins of information available to all — no longer the exclusive domain of large media organizations and knowledge professionals. Social networking technologies have connected people in myriad new ways. And centralized, one-to-many media now competes head-on with many-to-many, as the crowd becomes its own channel.

This shift is, per se, a democratizing phenomenon: more people than ever have access to more information than ever, from more sources than ever. Content has become accessible to many previously information-marginalized by geography, economics, and culture — in multiple forms on the web, but also on mobile phones and radio. And the uber-availability of information has diminished the ability of governments and other centralized institutions to determine/limit what citizens know about the world — and forced them to reckon instead with the promise of much greater transparency. Today, thanks to Abgeordnetenwatch.de, German citizens not only know how their representatives in Parliament have voted, they can ask them directly about that vote and reasonably expect a

public response. Tribal peoples in incredibly remote areas of India can get and report news via a phone-based service called CGNet Swara.

At the same time, independent of technology, we recognize that user needs are changing, as citizens graduate from passive consumers of information to active information users. People are no less interested in getting information about their world — but they are less interested in traditional



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information sources of and pathways. As they form ever-evolving communities rooted in a multitude of shared interests (physical geography only one among them), the "mass" that historically consumed "mass media" is splintering into ever more narrow audiences defined by diverse and often momentary needs. On the other hand, as people confront a new norm of logarithmically escalating change, there is a shared need, more intense than ever, for news and knowledge that help them master the skills — empathy, teamwork, e.g. — needed to become effective participants in society.

What's permanent and true amid this rapid flux is the foundational connection between effective flows of information and effective citizenship. People who know what is happening around them, who fully understand the workings of government, the power of business, the challenges faced by society and the environment, and the resources at their disposal are equipped and empowered to make change.

A QUESTION OF VALUES

The question is not how we preserve traditional media institutions, but how we invent new ones — anchored both in a continuous stream of innovations and in values that democratic society historically has embraced. Full information citizenship, we believe, is realized only if these values are sustained and advanced:

Freedom: Even as technology has dramatically expanded the supply of information, it also has provided new weapons to people and institutions that oppose freedom of expression and the press. It is easy to author and distribute news and commentary — and it is equally easy to monitor and censor

that information. What emerges is an escalating, high-stakes cat-and-mouse game with (so far) no clear winners, as individuals, corporations, and governments vie for power in a chaotic information realm.

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Efficiency: Today, more people than ever can get more information than ever at lower cost than ever. Broadband Internet and new social and mobile communications technologies are expanding access to historically disconnected or marginalized groups and disrupting longstanding hierarchical institutions and industries. But we also know that, historically, periods of decentralized innovation in industry have tended to yield to institutional consolidation — which would threaten access.

Quality: Information can only drive change to the extent that it is accurate, relevant, and trustworthy. In an everyone-a-content-creator world, access to information has expanded — but quality has suffered. More and more, the news and knowledge we engage with depends on the editorial mechanisms, explicit or implicit, of our networks. But those mechanisms are inconsistent and often suspect, leaving us hard-pressed to decide which information to trust.

Privacy & Security: Citizens must know that their participation in information systems will not compromise their right to privacy or security. Globalization, mobile phones, social media sites, technological entrepreneurship, and emerging markets have increased the flow of information — but have hit up against antiquated privacy law and a patchwork of local cultural preferences. How will our understanding of the right to privacy change? What is the appropriate balance between that individual right and the use of personal data to enhance society?

Here's the challenge: The forces that help us engage with information as never before — new technologies, rapidly changing needs of information users, and entrepreneurial

strategies that seize on market opportunities — also seed growing dysfunction. The emerging mechanics of a new sort of information citizenship, more literate, more engaged, and better prepared to participate, are in tension with our historic values.

We know that change will persist in the knowledge marketplace. We can't predict exactly what it will be, but we can predict that the values will, in one way or another, perpetually be at risk. That's troubling, because full information citizenship cannot be realized if the values are compromised. The promise of free speech, of efficient access to quality information, and of privacy are tantamount to participative, change-making citizenship.

ARCHITECTURAL RENDERING

This line of reasoning leads to our “money” question: As the world moves from centralized, hierarchical institutions toward a network of networks, we will need very different, more powerful sorts of information systems. Can we imagine a new, self-correcting information marketplace? An architecture for news and knowledge that adjusts effectively to whatever change happens? Such a system would ensure appropriate incentives for innovation while preventing dysfunction; keep innovation and core democratic values in productive tension; and balance entrepreneurial reward with the social good. It would be a long-term proposition, as resilient and responsive as the common law system.

That big question begets others: What combination of policy change and technology advances will safeguard privacy as a human right while ensuring the free flow of information? What incentives will ensure that information publishers balance privacy with profit, and that people productively share information rather than hoard it? What new mechanisms will live up to or surpass the job that traditional media organizations played in the 20th century — as gatekeeper, agenda-setter, and watchdog? And how will we guarantee that quality solutions never compromise the freedom of information (a tension playing out most visibly now in China and Thailand, among other places).

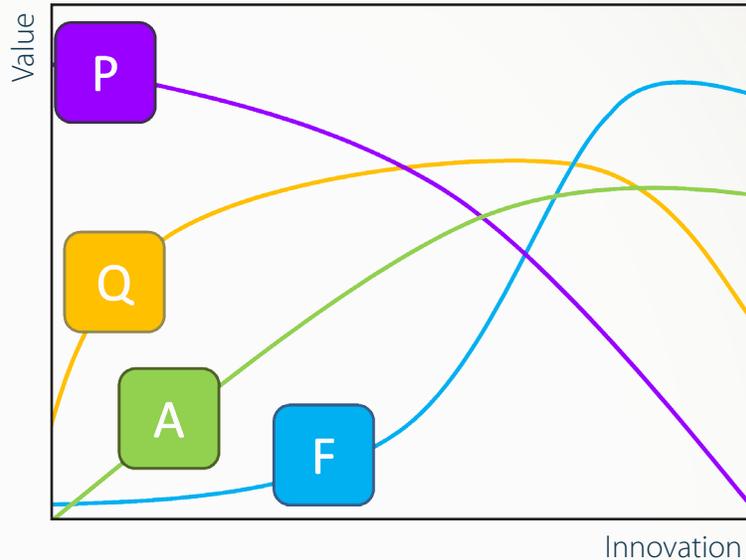
Through our Citizen Media competition, we've seen some intriguing tools and entrepreneurial strategies that could become part of this emerging architecture. FreedomBox is a suite of hardware and software technologies that may provide an accessible solution to the privacy problem, preventing governments and companies from mining personal data. The Serval Project represents an attempt to build a resilient, stand-alone communications system that can keep information flowing in the face of disaster.

TRENDS: INNOVATION & VALUES

Current Trends

Over time, certain innovations may advance access and freedom while compromising quality and privacy. In fact, the values are regularly in conflict with each other. The adjacent graph sketches the current aggregate impact of innovations on traditional values.

Figure 1



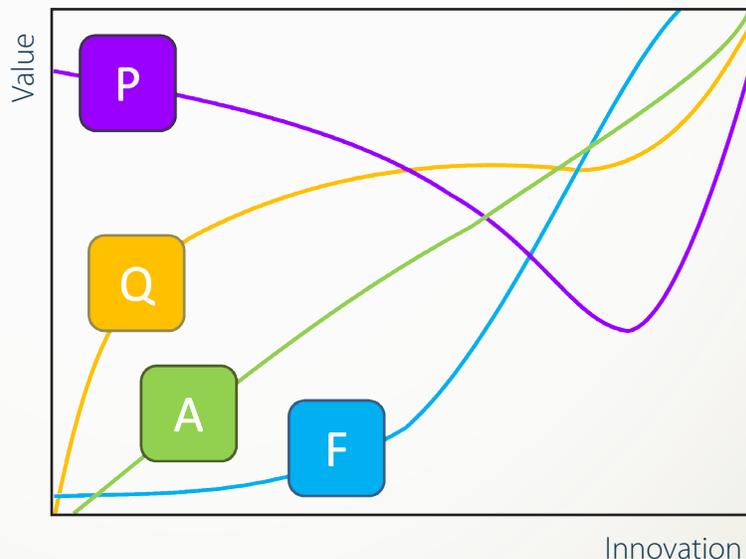
Each line represents a value: "P" is privacy; "Q" is quality; "A" is access; "F" is freedom



Future Goal

The most innovative solutions in Citizen Media will help usher in an information environment where the values can be maintained in the face of disruptive technologies. The adjacent graph sketches the ideal aggregate impact of innovations on traditional values.

Figure 2



Each line represents a value: "P" is privacy; "Q" is quality; "A" is access; "F" is freedom

Figure by Jon Camfield

NEW PLAYERS, NEW RULES

We expect that, in the near future, these sorts of solutions increasingly will be integrated with each other, and with new policies that keep innovation and values in productive tension. This will get complicated. We see, example, the need

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for systemic regulatory structures to ensure that dynamic innovation is true to permanent values. These structures may be governmental or not. But how do you create effective economic incentives or penalties when the corresponding revenue streams are diffuse – especially in emerging social media, where the most valuable data, by implication, are those about our connections and affiliations?

We also envision new sorts of market participants. Now that information can come from anyone, anywhere, a new class of intermediaries is emerging – from social media sites to everyone who sends you links. Just look at CrowdVoice.org, a new vehicle for aggregating reports from conflict areas around the world; or Meedan Swift, which brings citizen reporters and professional journalists in Egypt into the same digital newsroom. Social impact and economic value increasingly will be associated with this changing market intermediary role.

Finally, we believe it will be crucial to rebuild demand. If people understand that engaging with quality information about their world is important; if they appreciate the historical values; if they are equipped to engage with information effectively, then they provide a needed check/balance on entrepreneurs. This is what approaches like Amauta's in Costa Rica and the Local Activity Stream Tracker are all about – providing citizens the skills and perspective to realize and activate their information citizenship.

And that, of course, is the real prize. There is a critical linkage between sense-making and action, between media and movement. A self-adjusting architecture will, we expect, create a foundation for sustainable information strategies as society makes the structural transition from centralized, hierarchical institutions to a network of networks. In the face of unpredictable technological, political, and social

currents, it will preserve and advance the historic values of freedom, efficiency, quality, and privacy and security. It will, ultimately, beget world of citizens cognizant of the power of information; equipped to act on the information they get; and empowered to make change. ■

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Full information citizenship is central to Ashoka's vision of an Everyone a Changemaker world. Over the next five years, Ashoka's News & Knowledge program will create a dynamic community of hundreds of information entrepreneurs whose innovations cut across media, strategy, and field – news, education, science, finance, energy – around the world. We will leverage resources and strategies from Ashoka's global network of networks to advance information citizenship for hundreds of millions of people. For more information contact Keith Hammonds at khammonds@ashoka.org.



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